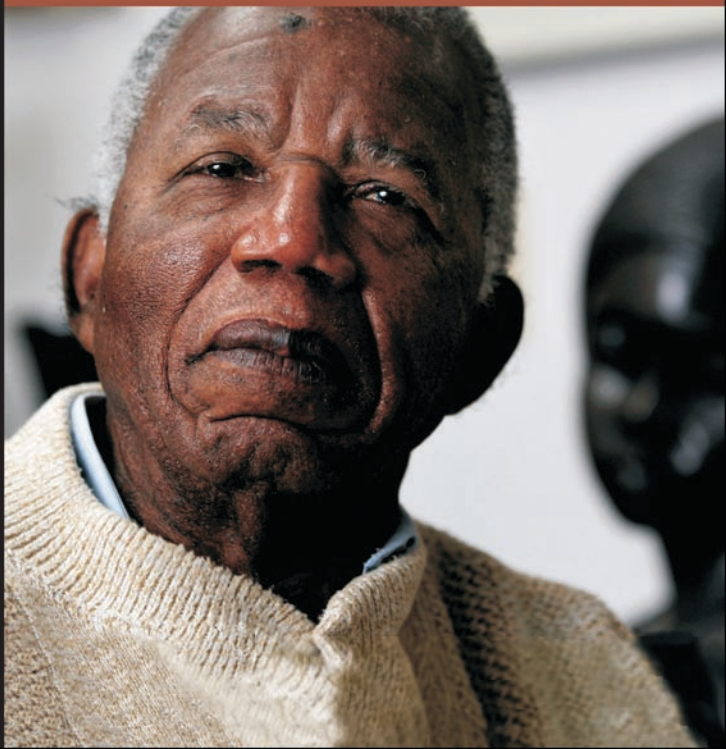


MAGILL'S SURVEY OF



W O R L D  
L I T E R A T U R E



**MAGILL'S SURVEY OF  
WORLD LITERATURE**

*Revised Edition*





# MAGILL'S SURVEY OF WORLD LITERATURE

*Revised Edition*

## Volume 1

Abe—Carey

*Edited by*

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*University of Texas, San Antonio*

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Magill's Survey of World Literature* offers profiles of major writers outside the United States from all time periods, accompanied by analyses of their significant titles of fiction, drama, poetry, and nonfiction. Originally published in 1993 with a 1995 supplement with Marshall Cavendish Corporation, this revised six-volume edition covers 380 writers at the heart of literary studies for middle and high school students and at the center of book discussions among library patrons. It is currently the only set from Salem Press that brings together information on the lives and works of writers from around the world in all genres. Its companion set, *Magill's Survey of American Literature*, was published in 2007 to wide acclaim and named an Editor's Choice by *Booklist* and a Best Reference, 2007, by *Library Journal*.

### EXPANDING THE SCOPE

For this edition of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*, 87 new authors were added to the 293 already profiled, including Douglas Adams, Julian Barnes, Roberto Bolaño, Mikhail Bulgakov, Paul Celan, Roald Dahl, Rubén Darío, Roddy Doyle, Buchi Emecheta, Laura Esquivel, Helen Fielding, Gao Xingjian, Seamus Heaney, James Herriot, Primo Levi, Malcolm Lowry, Ian McEwan, A. A. Milne, Haruki Murakami, Ben Okri, J. K. Rowling, Françoise Sagan, Zadie Smith, Rabindranath Tagore, and Irvine Welsh. These new writers span both the globe, representing forty-five different countries, and time, from the sixth century B.C.E. to the twenty-first century. An effort was also made to add more women writers and authors of children's and young adult literature.

### BRINGING THINGS UP TO DATE

All the original essays were evaluated for their currency, and 71 were given substantial revision, in many cases by the original contributor. The "Biography," "Analysis," and "Summary" sections were updated to include recent developments: new titles or awards, changes in residence or employment, and alterations in critical and popular reception. For these essays, one or more sections on

specific works (novels, poems, short stories) were added. For all essays, the bibliographies—lists of the author's works and sources for further consultation—were revised to provide readers with the latest information.

A new feature for this edition is a sidebar in each essay called "Discussion Topics." They may address the writer's body of work, specific works, or life as it relates to his or her literature. Aimed at students, teachers, and members of reading groups, they can be used as paper topics or conversation points.

In addition, phonetic pronunciation is now provided for a profiled author's foreign-language or unusual last name upon its first mention in the main text—for example, Aeschylus (EHS-kuh-luhs). A Key to Pronunciation appears at the beginning of all six volumes.

### FORMAT AND CONTENT

*Magill's Survey of World Literature* is arranged in an A-Z format, beginning with Japanese novelist and playwright Kōbō Abe and ending with French novelist Émile Zola. The essays vary from approximately six to thirteen pages in length. Each one begins with a block of reference information in a standard order:

- Name by which the author is best known
- **Born:** place and date
- **Died:** place and date
- A statement explaining the writer's literary importance

The main text is divided into the following sections:

- **Biography**—a chronological overview of the author's life, in many cases with a phonetic pronunciation of the author's name
- **Analysis**—a discussion about the author's style, dominant themes, and literary characteristics
- **Works**—profiles of one or more individual titles (novels, novellas, plays, poems, short stories, essays)



- **Summary**—one or two brief paragraphs summarizing the author's legacy

Each title section lists the year in which the work was first published. For short stories, poems, essays, or other short pieces, a collection of the author's works in which the reader can find the title is also indicated.

Every essay ends with a bibliography listing both the author's works in all genres (**By the Author**) and sources for further study (**About the Author**) and contains the thought-provoking "Discussion Topics" sidebar. All essays include the byline of the expert who wrote the entry. In addition, hundreds of author portraits and thumbnail photographs of book covers illustrate the text.

## REFERENCE FEATURES

At the beginning of each volume are the Table of Contents for that volume, including the works featured in the title sections, and a Complete List of Contents for the entire set.

Five reference features can be found at the end of volume 6. A Glossary defines crucial literary terms for the reader, with examples from world literature. A Category List groups authors by genre, gender, and identity:

- Children's and Young Adult Literature Writers
- Gay or Bisexual Writers
- Jewish Writers
- Mystery and Detective Writers
- Nonfiction Writers
- Novelists
- Playwrights
- Poets
- Science-Fiction and Fantasy Writers
- Screenwriters
- Short-Story Writers
- Women

A Geographical List groups authors by country. The Title Index lists all featured works, while the Author Index lists all authors profiled in the set, along with their profiled works.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our Editor, Steven G. Kellman, professor of literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio, for his invaluable expertise. We also owe our gratitude to all the outstanding writers who contributed material for this *Revised Edition* of *Magill's Survey of World Literature* and for the original set and its supplement. A list of their names and affiliations can be found in the front of volume 1.

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## KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

Foreign and unusual or ambiguous English-language names of profiled authors may be unfamiliar to some users of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*. To help readers pronounce such names correctly, phonetic spellings using the character symbols listed below appear in parentheses immediately after the first mention of the author's name in the narrative text. Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, and syllables are separated by hyphens.

### *Vowel Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
a	answer (AN-suhr), laugh (laf), sample (SAM-puhl), that (that)
ah	father (FAH-thur), hospital (HAHS-pih-tuhl)
aw	awful (AW-fuhl), caught (kawt)
ay	blaze (blayz), fade (fayd), waiter (WAYT-ur), weigh (way)
eh	bed (behd), head (hehd), said (sehd)
ee	believe (bee-LEEV), cedar (SEE-dur), leader (LEED-ur), liter (LEE-tur)
ew	boot (bewt), lose (lewz)
i	buy (bi), height (hit), lie (li), surprise (sur-PRIZ)
ih	bitter (BIH-tur), pill (pihl)
o	cotton (KO-tuhn), hot (hot)
oh	below (bee-LOH), coat (koht), note (noht), wholesome (HOHL-suhm)
oo	good (good), look (look)
ow	couch (kowch), how (how)
oy	boy (boy), coin (koyn)
uh	about (uh-BOWT), butter (BUH-tuhr), enough (ee-NUHF), other (UH-thur)

### *Consonant Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
ch	beach (beech), chimp (chihmp)
g	beg (behg), disguise (dihs-GIZ), get (geht)
j	digit (DIH-juht), edge (ehj), jet (jeht)
k	cat (kat), kitten (KIH-tuhn), hex (hehks)
s	cellar (SEHL-ur), save (sayv), scent (sehnt)
sh	champagne (sham-PAYN), issue (IH-shew), shop (shop)
ur	birth (burth), disturb (dihs-TURB), earth (urth), letter (LEH-tur)
y	useful (YEWS-fuhl), young (yuhng)
z	business (BIHZ-nehs), zest (zehst)
zh	vision (VIH-zhuhn)



**MAGILL'S SURVEY OF  
WORLD LITERATURE**

*Revised Edition*





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# MAGILL'S SURVEY OF WORLD LITERATURE

*Revised Edition*

## Volume 2 Carpentier—Fugard

*Edited by*  
Steven G. Kellman  
*University of Texas, San Antonio*

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## KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

Foreign and unusual or ambiguous English-language names of profiled authors may be unfamiliar to some users of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*. To help readers pronounce such names correctly, phonetic spellings using the character symbols listed below appear in parentheses immediately after the first mention of the author's name in the narrative text. Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, and syllables are separated by hyphens.

### *Vowel Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
a	answer (AN-suhr), laugh (laf), sample (SAM-puhl), that (that)
ah	father (FAH-thur), hospital (HAHS-pih-tuhl)
aw	awful (AW-fuhl), caught (kawt)
ay	blaze (blayz), fade (fayd), waiter (WAYT-ur), weigh (way)
eh	bed (behd), head (hehd), said (sehd)
ee	believe (bee-LEEV), cedar (SEE-dur), leader (LEED-ur), liter (LEE-tur)
ew	boot (bewt), lose (lewz)
i	buy (bi), height (hit), lie (li), surprise (sur-PRIZ)
ih	bitter (BIH-tur), pill (pihl)
o	cotton (KO-tuhn), hot (hot)
oh	below (bee-LOH), coat (koht), note (noht), wholesome (HOHL-suhm)
oo	good (good), look (look)
ow	couch (kowch), how (how)
oy	boy (boy), coin (koyn)
uh	about (uh-BOWT), butter (BUH-tuhr), enough (ee-NUHF), other (UH-thur)

### *Consonant Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
ch	beach (beech), chimp (chihmp)
g	beg (behg), disguise (dihs-GIZ), get (geht)
j	digit (DIH-juht), edge (ehj), jet (jeht)
k	cat (kat), kitten (KIH-tuhn), hex (hehks)
s	cellar (SEHL-ur), save (sayv), scent (sehnt)
sh	champagne (sham-PAYN), issue (IH-shew), shop (shop)
ur	birth (burth), disturb (dihs-TURB), earth (urth), letter (LEH-tur)
y	useful (YEWS-fuhl), young (yuhng)
z	business (BIHZ-nehs), zest (zehst)
zh	vision (VIH-zhuhn)





**MAGILL'S SURVEY OF  
WORLD LITERATURE**

*Revised Edition*



# MAGILL'S SURVEY OF WORLD LITERATURE

*Revised Edition*

## Volume 3 Gallant—Lagerkvist

*Edited by*  
Steven G. Kellman  
*University of Texas, San Antonio*

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# KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

Foreign and unusual or ambiguous English-language names of profiled authors may be unfamiliar to some users of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*. To help readers pronounce such names correctly, phonetic spellings using the character symbols listed below appear in parentheses immediately after the first mention of the author's name in the narrative text. Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, and syllables are separated by hyphens.

## *Vowel Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
a	answer (AN-suhr), laugh (laf), sample (SAM-puhl), that (that)
ah	father (FAH-thur), hospital (HAHS-pih-tuhl)
aw	awful (AW-fuhl), caught (kawt)
ay	blaze (blayz), fade (fayd), waiter (WAYT-ur), weigh (way)
eh	bed (behd), head (hehd), said (sehd)
ee	believe (bee-LEEV), cedar (SEE-dur), leader (LEED-ur), liter (LEE-tur)
ew	boot (bewt), lose (lewz)
i	buy (bi), height (hit), lie (li), surprise (sur-PRIZ)
ih	bitter (BIH-tur), pill (pihl)
o	cotton (KO-tuhn), hot (hot)
oh	below (bee-LOH), coat (koht), note (noht), wholesome (HOHL-suhm)
oo	good (good), look (look)
ow	couch (kowch), how (how)
oy	boy (boy), coin (koyn)
uh	about (uh-BOWT), butter (BUH-tuhr), enough (ee-NUHF), other (UH-thur)

## *Consonant Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
ch	beach (beech), chimp (chihmp)
g	beg (beg), disguise (dihs-GIZ), get (geht)
j	digit (DIH-juht), edge (ehj), jet (jeht)
k	cat (kat), kitten (KIH-tuhn), hex (hehks)
s	cellar (SEHL-ur), save (sayv), scent (sehnt)
sh	champagne (sham-PAYN), issue (IH-shew), shop (shop)
ur	birth (burth), disturb (dihs-TURB), earth (urth), letter (LEH-tur)
y	useful (YEWS-fuhl), young (yuhng)
z	business (BIHZ-nehs), zest (zehst)
zh	vision (VIH-zhuhn)





**MAGILL'S SURVEY OF  
WORLD LITERATURE**

*Revised Edition*



# MAGILL'S SURVEY OF WORLD LITERATURE

*Revised Edition*

## Volume 4 Lagerlöf—Ondaatje

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| Stéphane Mallarmé . . . . . 1636              | <i>Winnie-the-Pooh</i>                |
| <i>The Afternoon of a Faun</i>                | <i>The House at Pooh Corner</i>       |
| <i>Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé</i>       | Czesław Miłosz . . . . . 1717         |
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| Osip Mandelstam . . . . . 1642                | "In Milan"                            |
| "The Age"                                     | John Milton . . . . . 1723            |
| "The Horseshoe Finder"                        | "Lycidas"                             |
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| Thomas Mann . . . . . 1648                    | <i>Areopagitica</i>                   |
| <i>The Magic Mountain</i>                     | Yukio Mishima . . . . . 1732          |
| <i>Doctor Faustus</i>                         | <i>Confessions of a Mask</i>          |
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| "Miss Brill"                                  | "We Were All to Be Queens"            |
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<i>A Fanatic Heart</i>	<i>The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám</i>
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## KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

Foreign and unusual or ambiguous English-language names of profiled authors may be unfamiliar to some users of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*. To help readers pronounce such names correctly, phonetic spellings using the character symbols listed below appear in parentheses immediately after the first mention of the author's name in the narrative text. Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, and syllables are separated by hyphens.

### *Vowel Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
a	answer (AN-suhr), laugh (laf), sample (SAM-puhl), that (that)
ah	father (FAH-thur), hospital (HAHS-pih-tuhl)
aw	awful (AW-fuhl), caught (kawt)
ay	blaze (blayz), fade (fayd), waiter (WAYT-ur), weigh (way)
eh	bed (behd), head (hehd), said (sehd)
ee	believe (bee-LEEV), cedar (SEE-dur), leader (LEED-ur), liter (LEE-tur)
ew	boot (bewt), lose (lewz)
i	buy (bi), height (hit), lie (li), surprise (sur-PRIZ)
ih	bitter (BIH-tur), pill (pihl)
o	cotton (KO-tuhn), hot (hot)
oh	below (bee-LOH), coat (koht), note (noht), wholesome (HOHL-suhm)
oo	good (good), look (look)
ow	couch (kowch), how (how)
oy	boy (boy), coin (koyn)
uh	about (uh-BOWT), butter (BUH-tuhr), enough (ee-NUHF), other (UH-thur)

### *Consonant Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
ch	beach (beech), chimp (chihmp)
g	beg (beg), disguise (dihs-GIZ), get (geht)
j	digit (DIH-juht), edge (ehj), jet (jeht)
k	cat (kat), kitten (KIH-tuhn), hex (hehks)
s	cellar (SEHL-ur), save (sayv), scent (sehnt)
sh	champagne (sham-PAYN), issue (IH-shew), shop (shop)
ur	birth (burth), disturb (dihs-TURB), earth (urth), letter (LEH-tur)
y	useful (YEWS-fuhl), young (yuhng)
z	business (BIHZ-nehs), zest (zehst)
zh	vision (VIH-zhuhn)





**MAGILL'S SURVEY OF  
WORLD LITERATURE**

*Revised Edition*



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# MAGILL'S SURVEY OF WORLD LITERATURE

*Revised Edition*

## Volume 5 Orwell—Singer

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*University of Texas, San Antonio*

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## KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

Foreign and unusual or ambiguous English-language names of profiled authors may be unfamiliar to some users of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*. To help readers pronounce such names correctly, phonetic spellings using the character symbols listed below appear in parentheses immediately after the first mention of the author's name in the narrative text. Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, and syllables are separated by hyphens.

### *Vowel Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
a	answer (AN-suhr), laugh (laf), sample (SAM-puhl), that (that)
ah	father (FAH-thur), hospital (HAHS-pih-tuhl)
aw	awful (AW-fuhl), caught (kawt)
ay	blaze (blayz), fade (fayd), waiter (WAYT-ur), weigh (way)
eh	bed (behd), head (hehd), said (sehd)
ee	believe (bee-LEEV), cedar (SEE-dur), leader (LEED-ur), liter (LEE-tur)
ew	boot (bewt), lose (lewz)
i	buy (bi), height (hit), lie (li), surprise (sur-PRIZ)
ih	bitter (BIH-tur), pill (pihl)
o	cotton (KO-tuhn), hot (hot)
oh	below (bee-LOH), coat (koht), note (noht), wholesome (HOHL-suhm)
oo	good (good), look (look)
ow	couch (kowch), how (how)
oy	boy (boy), coin (koyn)
uh	about (uh-BOWT), butter (BUH-tuhr), enough (ee-NUHF), other (UH-thur)

### *Consonant Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
ch	beach (beech), chimp (chihmp)
g	beg (beg), disguise (dihs-GIZ), get (geht)
j	digit (DIH-juht), edge (ehj), jet (jeht)
k	cat (kat), kitten (KIH-tuhn), hex (hehks)
s	cellar (SEHL-ur), save (sayv), scent (sehnt)
sh	champagne (sham-PAYN), issue (IH-shew), shop (shop)
ur	birth (burth), disturb (dihs-TURB), earth (urth), letter (LEH-tur)
y	useful (YEWS-fuhl), young (yuhng)
z	business (BIHZ-nehs), zest (zehst)
zh	vision (VIH-zhuhn)



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WORLD LITERATURE**

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# MAGILL'S SURVEY OF WORLD LITERATURE

*Revised Edition*

## **Volume 6**

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*Edited by*

**Steven G. Kellman**

*University of Texas, San Antonio*

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## KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

Foreign and unusual or ambiguous English-language names of profiled authors may be unfamiliar to some users of *Magill's Survey of World Literature*. To help readers pronounce such names correctly, phonetic spellings using the character symbols listed below appear in parentheses immediately after the first mention of the author's name in the narrative text. Stressed syllables are indicated in capital letters, and syllables are separated by hyphens.

### *Vowel Sounds*

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
a	answer (AN-suhr), laugh (laf), sample (SAM-puhl), that (that)
ah	father (FAH-thur), hospital (HAHS-pih-tuhl)
aw	awful (AW-fuhl), caught (kawt)
ay	blaze (blayz), fade (fayd), waiter (WAYT-ur), weigh (way)
eh	bed (behd), head (hehd), said (sehd)
ee	believe (bee-LEEV), cedar (SEE-dur), leader (LEED-ur), liter (LEE-tur)
ew	boot (bewt), lose (lewz)
i	buy (bi), height (hit), lie (li), surprise (sur-PRIZ)
ih	bitter (BIH-tur), pill (pihl)
o	cotton (KO-tuhn), hot (hot)
oh	below (bee-LOH), coat (koht), note (noht), wholesome (HOHL-suhm)
oo	good (good), look (look)
ow	couch (kowch), how (how)
oy	boy (boy), coin (koyn)
uh	about (uh-BOWT), butter (BUH-tuhr), enough (ee-NUHF), other (UH-thur)

### *Consonant Sounds*

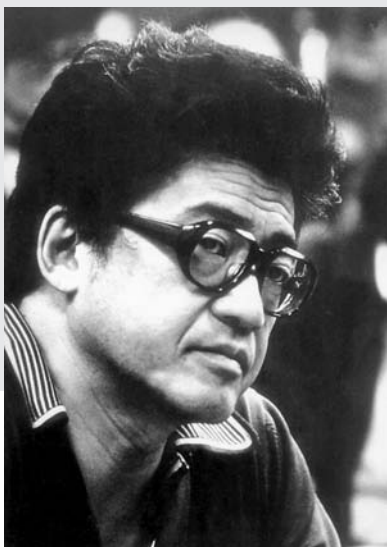
<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Spelled (Pronounced)</b>
ch	beach (beech), chimp (chihmp)
g	beg (behg), disguise (dihs-GIZ), get (geht)
j	digit (DIH-juht), edge (ehj), jet (jeht)
k	cat (kat), kitten (KIH-tuhn), hex (hehks)
s	cellar (SEHL-ur), save (sayv), scent (sehnt)
sh	champagne (sham-PAYN), issue (IH-shew), shop (shop)
ur	birth (burth), disturb (dihs-TURB), earth (urth), letter (LEH-tur)
y	useful (YEWS-fuhl), young (yuhng)
z	business (BIHZ-nehs), zest (zehst)
zh	vision (VIH-zhuhn)



**MAGILL'S SURVEY OF  
WORLD LITERATURE**

*Revised Edition*





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## KŌBŌ ABE

**Born:** Tokyo, Japan  
March 7, 1924

**Died:** Tokyo, Japan  
January 22, 1993

*Among the outstanding literary figures of modern Japan, Abe is a novelist and playwright of international recognition who is an observant commentator on contemporary life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Kōbō Abe (ahb-eh) was born on March 7, 1924, in Tokyo, Japan, during an interval when his Japanese father, a physician associated with the Manchurian School of Medicine in Mukden (later Shenyang), China, was in Japan on a research assignment. The family went to China shortly after the child was a year old. Abe remained in Mukden until he was sixteen. The experience of living outside his native country appears to have had a deep and lasting effect on Abe. The idea of one's homeland, traditionally very deeply ingrained in the Japanese, seems to have scarcely existed for Abe, according to his own comment about his early years. As a matter of fact, official family documents show him to have registered as a native of Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan. It is true that he lived in Hokkaido for several years, but Tokyo was indisputably his birthplace. Thus, Tokyo, where he was born, Mukden, the principal place where he was reared, and Hokkaido, the place of his family's origin, seemed to have little connection in the writer's mind. Abe himself is said to have commented that he was a "man without a hometown."

In 1941, Abe's parents sent him to Tokyo for school and for military training. His academic achievements there were not particularly noteworthy. When World War II broke out, Abe had ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, he found fas-

cism and militarism to be utterly repugnant; on the other hand, the sense of patriotism triggered within him a desire to be identified with defending his country. When the time approached for Abe to make important decisions regarding his higher education, Abe enrolled as a medical student at the Tokyo Imperial University in 1943. He was not highly interested in becoming a physician, but he had no driving ambition to enter any other field either. Furthermore, his family applied pressure on him to follow in his father's footsteps, so he yielded to their wishes. While in medical school, he elected to specialize in gynecology. Not having been highly motivated to become a physician, he was bored by his studies, and on his first attempt he did not do very well on his examinations. When his professor learned that Abe did not plan to practice medicine, however, he was given a passing grade.

As a young man, Abe was interested in mathematics, in collecting insects, and in reading Japanese translations of such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Fyodor Dostoevski, Franz Kafka, and the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. He made the decision to pursue literature as a career while he was still a medical student. Abe's medical background has influenced his writing. He has, for example, written science fiction. One of his science-fiction novels is *Daiyon kamyōki* (1958-1959, serial, 1959, book; *Inter Ice Age 4*, 1970).

Abe had a collection of poems privately printed in 1947. His first published fiction, *Owarishi michi no shirube ni* (as a signpost for the road), appeared in 1948, the same year he was graduated from med-



ical school. Abe was not only a gifted novelist and short-story writer; he was also a playwright and producer. His own theatrical company often produced his plays.

As do many writers, Abe makes literary use of experiences and facts of his own life. For example, in Manchuria, where he was reared, deserts were familiar to him, and the shifting sands of *Suna no onna* (1962; *The Woman in the Dunes*, 1964) show the writer's knowledge of life amid the sands.

While Abe was still a medical student, he married an accomplished artist and stage designer; the couple followed independent careers. They had one daughter, Neri. Machi, his wife, has provided superior illustrations for many of her husband's works.

Abe died of heart failure in Tokyo on January 22, 1993. One of the foremost writers in Japan, he received several literary prizes: One short story, "Akai mayu" (1950; "Red Cocoon," 1966), won the Postwar Literature Prize. The play *Tomodachi* (pr., pb. 1967; *Friends*, 1969) was awarded the Tanizaki Jûn'ichirô Prize.

## ANALYSIS

While numerous themes are developed in Kôbô Abe's works, few of them fail to incorporate aspects of alienation and loss of identity. Sometimes, his characters are alienated from other persons or from society. On other occasions, his characters are alienated from their own emotions, as in the story "Suichû toshi" (1952; the city under water), in which a character asks himself how he feels, only to find that his answer turns into a "hard substance." This concern with the effects of isolation is a central theme in Abe's best-known novel *The Woman in the Dunes*. In the work, a schoolteacher who is an amateur insect collector leaves the city to look for beetles in an area of sand dunes. He becomes trapped at the bottom of a deep hole, where a woman lives. She and the members of a village in the dunes keep him prisoner. Survival of the group depends on their daily success in battling the encroaching dunes. While he resists captivity at first, he gradually comes to the realization that his perceived prison of sand offers a kind of freedom that the city never offered him.

Trying to escape from stifling urban life is also thematically important to Abe, who sees modern humanity as lost in the urban setting. Abe com-

pares the city to a labyrinth, because people in it are always seeking, but never finding, a key to freedom. *Hako otoko* (1973; *The Box Man*, 1974) is an absurdist novel in which the protagonist cuts himself off from his fellows by taking up residence in a box that provides an anonymity and freedom denied him in everyday life. In *Tanin no kao* (1964; *The Face of Another*, 1966), the hero endeavors to fashion a new identity by concealing himself with a mask that hides his badly scarred face. In all three of these novels the heroes are alienated from contemporary life as a result of smothering urbanization. Abe's message—that the business world fragments and compartmentalizes human life, depriving people of human contact and causing an overwhelming degree of frustration—is clear in these novels and in most of his work.

Themes related to the loss of identity are frequently developed through metamorphoses. It has been suggested that metamorphosis in Abe's works are of two types, depending on the effects of the transformation on the character. In one type, the change is ultimately positive and allows a character to make a fresh start. In the other, the metamorphosis is negative because it is destructive. Several of Abe's early stories are of the first type. Of the second type, "Red Cocoon," whose title reveals the kind of change that takes place, is typical. The prizewinning *Kabe* (1951; the wall), in which a man changes into a section of a thick wall, is also an example of the second type. These transformations also serve as symbols of the inability to communicate. In a three-act play *Bô ni natta otoko* (pr., pb. 1969; *The Man Who Turned into a Stick*, 1975), people turn into sticks, and in so doing, they are deprived of language and sounds. This is a common theme in Abe's work.

Another common theme is the feeling of homelessness or ambivalence about where home is, which reflects Abe's life experience. In *Kemonotachi wa kokyô o mezasu* (1957; the beasts go homeward), the wilderness of Manchuria provides the setting. The search for the roots of existence that will serve to ground one's identity and the conflict between two kinds of homeland shed light on Abe's own conflict in being born in Japan but living in China during his formative years.

Along with metamorphosis and absurdity, another of Abe's preferred literary devices is turn-about or inversion of roles. For example, in *The*

*Woman in the Dunes*, the insect collector who catches beetles and pins them to a board is himself caught by the villagers, forced into a hole in the sand, and observed in much the same way that he has observed his insects. Similarly, in *Moetsukita chizu* (1967; *The Ruined Map*, 1969) a detective who undertakes to trace someone's missing husband not only fails to find the man but also ends up missing himself.

Perhaps more than any other writer, Abe has been compared with Franz Kafka. Some of the Kafkaesque characteristics of Abe's writing include the mixture of realistic detail with fantasy and the juxtaposition of accurate, concrete detail with fantastic and nightmarish settings or situations. Such combinations have led to Abe's being termed an absurdist novelist. There is a tone of realism in otherwise fantastic works, and the style is objective and logical.

## THE WOMAN IN THE DUNES

**First published:** *Suna no onna*, 1962  
(English translation, 1964)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Searching for his identity in a world of shifting sands, Niki Jumpei comes to terms with himself.*

*The Woman in the Dunes* is Abe's most popular novel, no doubt in part because it was made into a film in 1963. The film was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1964. The story begins with the disappearance of Niki Jumpei, a young teacher. It traces Niki's difficult journey into his own consciousness and his finding his identity. The sand dunes, with their sands constantly encroaching upon the residents of the village that abducts Jumpei, are a powerful metaphor of one's struggle to discover one's identity.

Niki Jumpei likes to collect insects, so he goes one day to the sand dunes in a remote area, hoping to find some unusual ones for his collection. Once there, he becomes trapped at the bottom of a sand pit, only to discover that a woman lives there. She

appears to think of him as a substitute for her dead husband.

Although there seems to be little meaningful life there, in order to survive at all, Niki must, daily, shovel away the sand that accumulates. Abe skillfully uses minute detail to make the reader remain ever aware of the completely invasive nature of the sand into every part of daily existence. After adapting somewhat, Niki then rejects this absurd life and fights to escape. During this period, he often abuses the woman with whom he shares the sand-pit home because she accepts so passively what he is fighting to escape. Ultimately, however, Niki not only comes to terms with the strange kind of freedom that he finds in the dunes but also condones this life and opts for it over returning to the city in which he felt alienated. The ever-changing forms of the sand provide a parallel to the shifting realities of Niki's life. The absurdity of the sandy village is like that of his own personal world. One fantastic and improbable event after another occurs, but Abe's description of them is so accurate and so detailed that even the most unrealistic of them is made believable.

One of Abe's best novels, *The Woman in the Dunes*, illustrates most of the themes and literary methods that he uses in his work. In addition to the methods already discussed, another is the use of metaphor. In the novel, settings and characters are metaphors of human alienation. Another literary technique is Abe's frequent use of irony, which may also be found in *The Woman in the Dunes*. For example, the schoolteacher, after being captured, finds his treatment "outlandish." After all, he is an employed, taxpaying, productive person. *The Woman in the Dunes* is not completely grim, however. Abe uses humor and commentary on some of the qualities of human nature to relieve the tone of despair that might otherwise pervade the novel.



## THE FACE OF ANOTHER

**First published:** *Tanin no kao*, 1964 (English translation, 1966)

**Type of work:** Novel

*When a laboratory accident disfigures a chemist's face, he discovers that substituting a mask does not work.*

The theme of alienation and lost identity, so common to Abe's work, is the focus of his novel *The Face of Another*. In a laboratory accident, a chemist sustains facial disfigurement so severe that he never appears, even at home, without bandages. In time, because of his lack of communication with his wife, he decides to get a lifelike mask in an effort to recover what he believes is his lost identity. A plastic surgeon agrees to make a mask, but he reminds the chemist that the mask, however perfect technically, will impose a new personality on him.

The novel contains numerous ironies. For example, it is precisely because of the unfortunate disfigurement, causing the chemist to wear a mask, that he is able to discover that one's face is not, in fact, one's real identity. The normal face, in fact, is as unreal as the mask, for it can conceal a self that is as ugly as a face that the mask might conceal. While it is true that initially the mask affords the chemist a new and more confident independence, he soon realizes that there is a negative side to having the mask as well. His need for a more normal relationship with his wife spurs him to test her love for him by trying to seduce her while wearing the new mask. He arranges for a clandestine meeting with his wife in a house other than his own, and the novel actually begins with an account of his waiting for her arrival. Meanwhile, he has been keeping notes in his diary of events related to the mask and his reactions to them, and he leaves the diary at home where his wife can find and read the entries. It turns out, how-

ever, that his wife was never deceived at all. She does not show up at the planned rendezvous. Instead, she leaves a note for her husband to find when he returns home, accusing him of being totally selfish in trying to manipulate her. She suggests that he needs a mirror, not her. The chemist refuses to accept her evaluation. He believes that thinking of oneself is always a result, not a cause, defending his belief by pointing out that it is the outside world that passes judgment on a person's value and "guarantees him the right to live." As the book ends, the chemist dons his mask and goes out into the streets.

A central message of the novel is that a mask is false and can no more be a person's identity than can the face with which that person is born. Ironically, however, using a mask enables one to look inward and realize that one's real self may be ugly, lonely, and alienated with or without a mask, and that an ideal self does not exist.

## FRIENDS

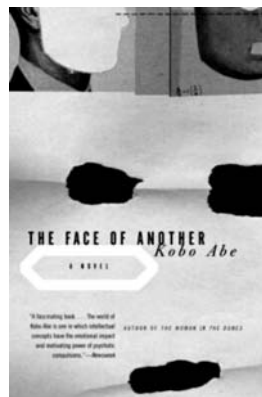
**First produced:** *Tomodachi*, 1967 (first published, 1967; English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Play

*When a family moves in with a young bachelor to save him from loneliness, they succeed only in destroying him.*

*Friends* shows anything but friendship, which is the point of Abe's absurdist play. Though best known for his novels, he is a masterful surrealist playwright. Abe's plays have been compared to those of Edward Albee and Samuel Beckett. One critic has commented that in this play there is an inversion of the Golden Rule, which admonishes one to treat others as one would like to be treated. In *Friends*, a family, whose mission in life is rescuing lonely people, suddenly appears and moves in on a thirty-one-year-old bachelor in his apartment. Utter strangers, the family consists of an eighty-year-old grandmother, a mother and father, two sons, and three daughters.

The man is unsuccessful in getting the intruders to leave. He finally calls the police, who insist that



he has no proof that they are trespassing, and because there is no visible sign of physical violence, they are not considered dangerous. The sweet smiles pasted on the family's faces lead the policemen to infer that perhaps the man is suffering from a persecution complex. Once the policemen are gone, the family members resume their mental torture of the man. Throughout the play, the image of a broken necklace has important symbolic associations. The family consider themselves called to mend lonely hearts in the same way that a string holds the beads of a necklace together. Almost all the family members comment on their being the string for the necklace.

Soon, the eldest daughter tries to seduce the bachelor; however, it is really one of her younger sisters who at least thinks she is in love with him. Within only a few days, the man loses his fiancé when she is won over by the family, who succeed in making the man look foolish and weak. Deliberately and systematically, they break his spirit and take away his freedom. Ultimately, they put him into a cage. He begins to behave like an animal, and, as his mental condition deteriorates, he assumes a fetal position and soon dies. Only the

middle daughter shows any grief, and even she considers that the young man has turned against them. This social satire on sentimentality and on family life is filled with dry humor, which contributes to its bizarre tone.

### SUMMARY

Displacement is a key theme of Kōbō Abe's works. This displacement can take the form of a person's being forced out of his or her home, as happens to the young man in *Friends*. It can also take the form of one's being displaced from one's own identity, as happens in many of Abe's works, including *The Face of Another*. Perhaps most memorably, Abe's works often present a displacement of the rational, whereby the absurd, the illogical, and the surreal invade and distort everyday reality. In many of Abe's works, people become such things as sticks, cocoons, or walls; they are placed in situations that their rational minds tell them cannot be happening. Such displacement is, in Abe's works, the result of modern society's rationalized, ordered, and imposed understanding of the human experience.

Victoria Price

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- Mahō no chōku*, 1951
- Kiga dōmei*, 1954
- Kemonotachi wa kokyō o mezasu*, 1957
- Daiyon kamyōki*, 1958-1959 (serial); 1959 (book; *Inter Ice Age 4*, 1970)
- Ishi no me*, 1960
- Suna no onna*, 1962 (*The Woman in the Dunes*, 1964)
- Tanin no kao*, 1964 (*The Face of Another*, 1966)
- Moetsukita chizu*, 1967 (*The Ruined Map*, 1969)
- Hako otoko*, 1973 (*The Box Man*, 1974)
- Mikkai*, 1977 (*Secret Rendezvous*, 1979)
- Hakobune sakura maru*, 1984 (*The Ark Sakura*, 1988)
- Kangarū nōto*, 1991 (*The Kangaroo Notebook*, 1996)
- Tobu otoko*, 1994

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Kōbō Abe was twenty-one years old when the atomic bombs were exploded in two Japanese cities. What effects of this experience do you detect in his literary works?
- In *The Face of Another*, to what extent is the chemist's attempt to test his wife's love for him unfair to her?
- Does the humor in *The Woman in the Dunes* successfully relieve the tone of despair? Justify your answer.
- Compare Abe's use of such devices as a man who turns into a wall or a stick with some of the transformations in Franz Kafka's fiction.
- How does Abe understand the concept of freedom?

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*Imeji no tenrankai*, pr. 1971 (pr. in the U.S. as *The Little Elephant Is Dead*, 1979)  
*Mihitsu no koi*, pr., pb. 1971 (*Involuntary Homicide*, 1993)  
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*Ue: Shin doreigari*, pr., pb. 1975  
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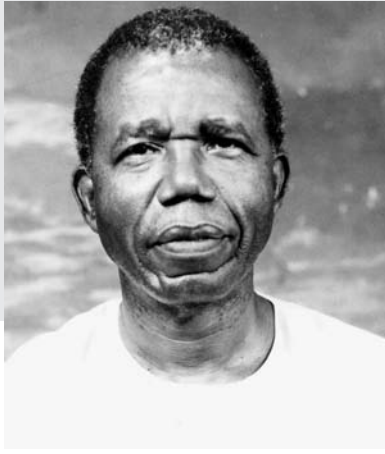
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Rocon/Enugu, Nigeria

## CHINUA ACHEBE

**Born:** Ogidi, Nigeria  
November 16, 1930

*The first African writer to win broad critical acclaim in Europe and America, Achebe has shaped world understanding of Africa and its literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Chinua Achebe (ah-CHAY-bay) was born in Ogidi, in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, on November 16, 1930, to Isaiah and Janet Achebe, who christened their son Albert Chinualumogu—the former name after Queen Victoria’s beloved consort and the latter a powerful name in Igbo—suggesting that strong inner forces stand aligned to fight for him. Isaiah Achebe, a catechist for the Church Missionary Society, and his wife traveled through eastern Nigeria as evangelists before settling in Ogidi, Isaiah’s ancestral Igbo village, five years after Chinua Achebe’s birth. Growing up in Ogidi, Achebe had contact with both Christian and Igbo religious beliefs and customs, but he developed a special affinity for his pagan uncle and his family.

Achebe’s first lessons were in Igbo at the church school in Ogidi, but he began studying English at age eight. An avid reader and outstanding student, fourteen-year-old Achebe entered Government College, a highly selective secondary school in Umuahia taught in English; many of his classmates went on to become prominent figures in Nigerian public life, including the poet Christopher Okigbo, who later helped Achebe found the Citadel Press and who died in the civil war. Upon graduation, Achebe accepted a Major Scholars medical scholarship to University College in Ibadan (an associate college of the University of London), a highly prestigious award resulting from his having attained the top African scores on the colonial examinations, but after one year he switched to En-

glish literature, forfeiting his scholarship but receiving financial assistance from his older brother John and other relatives.

Achebe and the Yoruban playwright Wole Soyinka, later Nigeria’s best-known authors, were undergraduates together at University College, each publishing his first work as undergraduates. Achebe’s first published fiction, “Polar Undergraduate,” later collected in *Girls at War, and Other Stories* (1972), satirizes student behavior. In his third year he edited the *University Herald*. The short stories produced while in school include “The Old Order in Conflict with the New” and “Dead Man’s Path.” After graduation in 1953, he took a producing position for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC).

Achebe had sent his only copy of *Things Fall Apart* to a British typist, who set it aside without a glance, but his NBC superior Angela Beattie rescued it. *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958 and won the Margaret Wrong Memorial Prize in 1959 for its contribution to African literature. If Achebe had never written anything else he would still stand as an acclaimed author because of the power and influence of that single volume, translated into fifty languages and selling more than eight million copies. In 1960, the year of Nigeria’s independence, Achebe published *No Longer at Ease*, winner of the Nigerian National Trophy. He spent the remainder of 1960 and part of 1961 traveling through east Africa and interviewing other African writers. Back in Nigeria, he held a number of offices with the Nigerian Broadcasting Company, including talks director, controller, and director of the Voice of Nigeria in Lagos. He married Christie Chinwe Okoli, with whom he fathered two sons, Ikechukwu and Chidi,

and two daughters, Chinelo and Nwando. His own children inspired his children's stories.

In 1962, Achebe became the founding editor of Heinemann's African Writers series, and in 1963, he traveled in the United States, Brazil, and Britain on a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization) fellowship. Achebe published *Arrow of God* (1964), receiving the Jock Campbell Award from *New Statesman* in 1965 for his accomplishment. Publication of the prophetic novel *A Man of the People* (1966) was followed by successive military coups, massacres of Igbos, and the secession of Biafra in 1967. Forced to leave Lagos after the second coup, during the Nigerian civil war Achebe became a spokesperson for the Biafran cause in Europe and North America and served as a senior research fellow at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, renamed the University of Biafra during the war.

After three years of bitter struggle, Biafra surrendered, and Achebe, more dedicated than ever to preserving Igbo culture, began editing *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*. He published his literary response to the war in *Beware, Soul Brother; and Other Poems* (1971) and *Girls at War; and Other Stories*, winning the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1972 for *Beware, Soul Brother; and Other Poems*, published in the United States as *Christmas in Biafra, and Other Poems* (1973).

From 1972 to 1976, Achebe taught at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where his wife earned a doctorate, and at the University of Connecticut. After the 1976 assassination of Nigerian President Murtala Mohammed, for whom Achebe had great respect, the author returned to teach at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. In 1979, Achebe was elected chairman of the Association of Nigerian Authors and received the Nigerian National Merit Award and the Order of the Federal Republic. In 1982, he and Obiora Udechukwu edited *Aka weta: Egwu aguluagu egwu edelu* (1982; aka weta: an anthology of Igbo poetry).

Disillusioned by President Shehu Shagari's failure to fight the corruption impoverishing Nigeria and saddened by the death of Mallam Aminu Kano, the leader of the People's Redemption Party (PRP), Achebe served as deputy national president of the PRP in the election year of 1983. In a small pamphlet, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), he presented his political prescription for improving Ni-

geria. After Shagari's reelection and removal from office by a subsequent military coup, Achebe once again concentrated his energies on artistic and cultural projects, editing the bilingual *Uwa ndi Igbo: A Journal of Igbo Life and Culture*. In 1986, he was appointed pro-vice chancellor of the State University of Anambra at Enugu.

Nigeria's Civil War and resultant political conflicts so horrified Achebe that he could not write long fiction. Believing that art must guide readers to examine moral issues and offer lessons to lead them to better lives, he feared whatever he said might be turned to the service of destruction, oppression, or evil. Finally, in 1987 he published his first novel in more than twenty years, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), and he returned to teach at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst (where he met author James Baldwin), the City College of New York, and Bard College. In 1988, he published a collection of essays titled *Hopes and Impediments*. In 1990, a serious car accident on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway and the lag time between injury and medical care left Achebe paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair.

In 1992, Achebe, threatened with imprisonment, fled the repressive Nigerian regime to Europe, only to return to serve as president of the Ogidi town union, an honorary position recognizing his dedication to his ancestors' ancient stories. He then served as the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College for fifteen years. In the meantime, Biyi Bandele converted *Things Fall Apart* into a play, produced in 1997 by the Performance Studio Workshop of Nigeria and presented as part of the Kennedy Center's African Odyssey series the next year. In 1999, Achebe was appointed goodwill ambassador to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), encouraging family planning and reproductive health worldwide. In *Home and Exile* (2000), Achebe evaluated the past seventy years of African literature, his lifetime. The same year, fellow Igbo, novelist, and critic Phanuel Egejuru collected tribute names for her authoritative biography *Chinua Achebe: Plain and Simple* (2001), in which other Africans praised Achebe as both "teacher" and "double eagle" in recognition of his bridging two worlds: Africa and the West.

In 2003, Kenyan Catholics tried to ban *A Man of the People* from their school curricula; in 2004,

Achebe rejected an award from the Nigerian government to protest its tyranny. Achebe won the 2007 Man Booker International Prize for fiction. In 2008, he was working on a short novel on ancient myths to be part of The Canongate Myth Series. That year also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, which was celebrated by conferences and tributes worldwide.

## ANALYSIS

Achebe establishes a human context for understanding modern Nigerian history. *Things Fall Apart* describes the devastating first contacts between European and Igbo cultures at the beginning of the twentieth century and bends over backwards to demonstrate good and bad on both sides. The subsequent institutionalization of European religious and political structures is examined in *Arrow of God*; the uneasy years immediately preceding independence are explored in *No Longer at Ease*; the excitement and disappointment of Nigeria's First Republic are the subjects of *A Man of the People*; the suffering produced by the Nigerian civil war is the theme of *Girls at War, and Other Stories* and *Beware, Soul Brother, and Other Poems*; and the corrupt authoritarianism that has characterized Nigeria's Second Republic is the focus of *Beware, Soul Brother, and Other Poems* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Indeed, the title of his commentary, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, identifies a concern central to his entire canon.

As a corrective to European literature's stereotypical portraits of Africans as unvaryingly backwards, Achebe demonstrates the value and viability of traditional Igbo culture, describes Nigerians as complex human beings with a strong sense of community and tolerance, and establishes the independence of African literature. In "The Role of a Writer in a New Nation," he identifies his first priority: to inform the world that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless . . . that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity." Achebe, however, does not idealize the precolonial past, for he knows that it could not have survived unaltered in a modern world; instead, he shows built-in systems for communities and individuals and explores continuities with the past that can co-exist with modern society.

Achebe's conflicted protagonists, torn between

self-realization and social responsibility, demonstrate the difficulty of attaining such a balance. The destructive pull of individual pride thwarts each character's movement toward communal acceptance. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo overcomes personal humiliation to win community respect, but his inflexible refusal to accommodate himself to the increasing influence of colonial government and Christianity alienates him from his clan and drives him to violence that necessitates personal sacrifice. In *Arrow of God*, the priest Ezeulu earnestly wishes to be a good religious leader, but his proud refusal to adapt religious dictates to the necessities of circumstance leads to Christian dominance in his village and to his own madness. In *No Longer at Ease*, the idealistic Obi self-righteously resists the corruption of government service, alienating himself from his fellow civil servants and the clan members who funded his education (Achebe's touch of self-deprecating autobiography); yet when his proud need to maintain an expensive lifestyle leads him to accept a bribe, his amateurish attempt results in his arrest. In *A Man of the People*, the cynical Odili, who collaborates in Nanga's political manipulation of rural people, learns to see the corrective value of traditional beliefs. *Anthills of the Savannah* offers the most hopeful view, with Beatrice showing that traditional values can exist in altered but viable forms in the present.

In his fiction, Achebe opposes interpersonal, political, cultural, and linguistic forms of authoritarianism. He associates inflexible refusal to recognize the validity of multiple viewpoints—the central flaw of his protagonists—with the cultural arrogance of colonial powers and the cynical greed of Nigerian officials. Stylistically, Achebe refutes this myopic authoritarianism through multiple perspectives and irony. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, he repeats the Igbo proverb, "Where something stands, there also something else will stand," to indicate his belief in the fluidity of perception, the duality of existence, and the adaptability of Igbo culture. He represents this fluidity in his fiction by mixing literary English, pidgin English, and a colloquial English that approximates the rhythms of Igbo speech; he also mixes Igbo proverbs, songs, and rituals with allusions to European literature and uses irony and unreliable narrators to question authoritarian voices. To create an open, nonauthoritarian view, Achebe balances one novel against



another; thus, the naïvely idealistic Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease* is a tragicomic version of his grandfather, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's decision to write in English instead of his native Igbo broadened his work to include a worldwide audience but brought criticism that he was assisting in the destruction of Igbo culture. He, in turn, blamed the missionaries' mangled translations of the Bible for destroying the Igbo language, but he has since moved toward greater use of native languages by editing the Igbo poetry anthology *Aka Weta* and the bilingual journal *Uwa ndi Igbo*.

Achebe has been an active, visible public figure in Nigeria since the 1950's, and, not surprisingly, his writings parallel his personal experiences. His early sympathetic portrayals of traditional Igbo culture were, in part, gestures toward expiating his own guilt over the rare educational privileges that he enjoyed. His skillful satire of the abuse of power and language in books such as *A Man of the People* mocks his own involvement in the development of Nigeria's mass media. After the Nigerian civil war, in which Achebe and many other Igbo writers took an active part, his writings became more directly utilitarian and political. After teaching in the United States made him realize that the most widely taught book concerning Africa was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899, serial; 1902, book), Achebe became more sympathetic to African authors who renounced the use of colonial languages and more aware of the extent to which Americans and Europeans misunderstand and ignore Africa's problems.

## THINGS FALL APART

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Novel

*A warrior opposing colonialism's threat to Igbo culture strikes back and must sacrifice himself and his reputation to save his village and achieve personal balance.*

Achebe's title from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" invokes an ironic, apocalyptic vision warning of a new order from Africa that will destroy the status quo; thus, the novel describes

the European destruction of Igbo culture but suggests a potential future shift of power reinvigorating Africa, a theme in Achebe's later work *Home and Exile*. *Things Fall Apart* disproves white stereotypes of Igbo as primitive savages, amoral and unsophisticated, and asserts the viability of prequest Igbo culture through the tragic story of Okonkwo and his village. A warrior determined to counter the reputation of his lazy imprudent father, Okonkwo wins community respect and titles for his hard work, public service, and martial courage. However, this hero, like William Shakespeare's Coriolanus, is flawed. His obsessive fear of repeating his father's failures drives him to extremes in a culture proud of its balance. Humorless and short-tempered, he beats his wife in the Week of Peace, alienates his son with reprimands, joins the ritual killing of a boy he considers a son just to appear manly, and accidentally shoots a youth, resulting in his seven-year banishment to his mother's village.

This period of separation distances him from the communal life of Umuofia, so while still ambitious after his return, he now appreciates the bonds of kinship and the comfort of a community speaking with one voice. Unfortunately, he fails to understand the inroads the British have made on his community. Christianity in particular divides families and undermines traditional systems of government, justice, and religion. His eldest son's conversion to Christianity separates Okonkwo from his lineage, and when another convert desecrates a traditional totem, Okonkwo leads the Umuofians in destroying the missionaries' church. Like Okonkwo, the Umuofians face separation from their past and a future requiring difficult compromises; yet Achebe carefully shows that the decentralized structure of Igbo society allows for such change.

Okonkwo, personally unwilling to adapt to cultural change and believing that his fellow Umuofians will wage war against the whites who have insulted their representatives, murders the district commissioner's messenger. However, the village



understands that this act will bring retaliation, possibly the deaths of everyone in the village, as happened to neighboring Abame. At the end of the novel, Okonkwo proves his worth and restores balance to his life and to his village by committing a womanly act, suicide, that renounces everything he has stood for but protects his people. His friend, Obiarta, calls Okonkwo the best man among them, for he has given up his place in the memories of his people so they will not suffer from his act. He is an exceptional individual whose final act both restores him to his clan and forever alienates him from it. Okonkwo's Christlike sacrifice confirms that Umuofia is a living culture capable of adapting to meet new challenges.

The central theme of all Achebe's novels is the tragedy created by the British contempt for African religion, law, culture, and people, yet Igbo accommodation to change remains a survival mechanism enabling Africans to endure untold hardships. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe effectively refutes European stereotypes of African culture, offering instead a complex, fluid portrait of Igbo culture as essentially democratic, pluralistic, tolerant, and community-centered. It is, however, a society whose acceptance of difference within its community assured dramatic future change after English hegemony.

## NO LONGER AT EASE

**First published:** 1960

**Type of work:** Novel

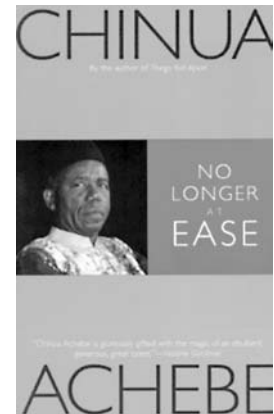
*An idealistic young Nigerian bureaucrat, trapped between his traditional background and his European education, succumbs to the corrupting influences of government service.*

Achebe's title *No Longer at Ease* from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" suggests that like the wise men in Yeats's poem, Obi Okonkwo, a young civil servant in the colonial Nigerian government, and his nation are trapped between two eras. Like his grandfather Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, who stands for the vanishing traditional African, Obi stands for the vanishing idealist in a world of compromise. Ironically, *No Longer at Ease* opens and

closes at Obi's bribery trial. The novel provides a retrospective look at Obi's progress from the remote village of Umuofia to an English university and then to a position with the Nigerian civil service in Lagos, where he finally succumbs to the prevalent practice of bribery and is caught. A diminished version of his grandfather, Obi is crushed by cultural forces beyond his control, but the pettiness and ineptitude of his crime make him a paradoxical tragicomic hero. His innocence makes him a criminal; his coveted education does not provide him with wisdom; and the support of his clanspeople increases his sense of loneliness.

Obi is the first from his village to receive a European education, his expenses paid by clan members hoping to enhance the status of their village and reap future economic dividends. However, idealistic romance and failure to manage his finances complicate Obi's life. He falls in love with a woman marked by a traditional, hereditary taboo that Obi rejects as primitive superstition, but his naïve determination to be thoroughly modern places him in direct conflict with family and clan. At first, he eschews the customary practice of accepting bribes, self-righteously viewing doing so as anachronistic behavior that the new generation of educated, idealistic civil servants will eradicate, but his obligation to repay the clan and his determination to maintain a lifestyle commensurate with his civil service position eventually lead him to accept payments. When he succumbs to custom, he handles the bribery so amateurishly that he is caught and convicted.

Although Obi has been shaped by the traditional Igbo culture of Umuofia, the Christianity of his father, the idealism of English literature, and the corrupt sophistication of Lagos, he is at ease nowhere. As a child, he dreamt of the sparkling lights of Lagos. In England, he writes pastoral visions of an idealized Nigeria. Disillusioned by the corruption of Lagos, he returns to his home village



only to witness a truck driver attempting to bribe a policeman and to have his parents' reject his proposed marriage. Obi naïvely tries to maintain the idea of his own integrity as a detribalized, rational, thoroughly modern man, but his reintegration into Nigeria fails because he cannot assimilate successfully any of the competing cultures through which he passes. He finds it impossible to mediate the conflicting duties thrust upon him, and his steady progress in the novel is toward despair and withdrawal.

*No Longer at Ease*, set in Lagos on the verge of Nigeria's independence, depicts an urban jungle that combines the worst of European and African cultures. Centralization has led to inefficiency and corruption; traditional Igbo communalism has devolved to the narrow pursuit of advantage. Having learned the Western desire for material goods without having sufficient income to satisfy them, Obi, like the nation, must choose between corruption and bankruptcy.

## HOME AND EXILE

**First published:** 2000

**Type of work:** Essays

*Achebe surveys his life experiences as he defended Nigeria and Nigerians, countering imperialist assaults on that home with Nigerian perspectives, finding balance even in exile.*

The title *Home and Exile* summarizes the essence of this work: Achebe's discovery of Igbo values and ways as his true home, despite years abroad, an exile paralleling the Igbo experiences with oppressive European literature undermining their sense of worth, defining them as primitive savages, and justifying European ways as superior. The book consists of three lectures delivered over a three-day period, December 9-11, 1998, at Harvard University: "My Home Under Imperial Fire," "The Empire Fights Back," and "Today, the Balance of Stories."

The first essay records Achebe's youthful discovery of Nigeria as his spiritual and intellectual home when his missionary family retired and returned to their ancestral home. Achebe developed a love of

Igbo ways and a deep-seated desire to attack denigrators. He rejects the word "tribe" as a racist misnomer, asserting that the Igbo are neither "primitive" nor bound by blood ties, with their language complex, including major and minor dialects, and their sociopolitical identity purposefully defined by disdain for the concept of a single ruler. He finds the term "nation" more appropriate for a loose federation of people with strong individual identities, loyalty to independent towns or mini-states, a love of competition and controversy, and a marketing network for disseminating goods and news. He emphasizes the Igbo love of song, dance, proverbs, and storytelling and so deep-seated a tolerance of difference that they refuse to impose their religious beliefs even on outsiders seeking to join them. He depicts his formal education as Eurocentric but describes a landmark rebellion when, in 1952, a class of Nigerian university students rejected as absurd author Joyce Cary's derogatory racial stereotyping in *Mister Johnson* (1939). This rebellion led the young Achebe to scrutinize the connection between the slave trade and literature written to justify it and to recognize the appropriation of his homeland by imperialistic propaganda.

Achebe's second essay, "The Empire Fights Back," explores his outrage at racist depictions of his people and home, his decision to fight back in novels providing Nigerian perspectives, and his willingness to face considerable trouble to tell worthy stories. He contrasts the works of Joseph Conrad and Elspeth Huxley with F. J. Pedler's call for authentic African literary voices in *West Africa* (1951), and he deplores the mind-set that led British-educated Africans to mock Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (1952) for presenting an African perspective. For Achebe, the launching of Heinemann's African Writers Series marked the turning point in African literature, rejecting imperialist voices in favor of true Africans. He ends with Jomo Kenyatta's parable of British imperial practices, "The Gentlemen of the Jungle," to demonstrate African writers fighting back.

The final essay praises Salman Rushdie's description of postcolonial literature as "The Empire Writes Back," W. E. B. Du Bois's hopes for racial parity, and Ama Ata Aidoo's sympathetic tales of the afflicted poor, but it criticizes V. S. Naipaul's im-

perialist rejection of impoverished peoples and Rushdie's assertion that literature can exist apart from a writer's national roots. Achebe concludes that African literature has found its voice since the 1950's and that such literature finds its worth, not in a universal civilization, but in a writer's home. African writers long exiled from their heritage by literature justifying imperial conquest have found their literary home in Africa, whether they live there or in exile from it.

## SUMMARY

A socially and politically committed storyteller and writer who has garnered worldwide critical acclaim, Chinua Achebe has, more than any other African author writing in English, redefined modern African literature and helped the world value Afri-

can culture without ignoring the difficult problems postcolonial African nations face. For a lifetime, he has battled the corrosive effects of racism on individuals and on Africa as a whole. He writes about Africa for Africans, bridging three periods: from the colonial era of his birth, to the years of nationalist protest of his youth, to the modern age of Nigerian independence and the oppressive regimes that have dominated his country. His novels examine more than one hundred years of Igbo culture. *Things Fall Apart* will undoubtedly remain Achebe's best-known work, but his entire canon makes a consistent and central contribution to the world's literature.

*Carl Brucker; updated by Gina Macdonald  
and Elizabeth Sanders*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine Chinua Achebe's ideas about conflict, violence, and war in at least two of his works. What do humans do to other humans, and why? Who or what do people blame for things going wrong? Provide examples to support your assertions.
- According to Achebe, the traditional African way of life fell apart and Africa is now a corrupt imitation of European systems, religions, and manners. What things "fell apart" with the coming of the Europeans? What valuable aspects of African culture have been lost?
- Examine the nature of Achebe's heroes. For example, what makes Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* or Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* tragic heroes? Are they heroes in the Western tradition?
- How does Achebe depict the role of women in Igbo culture? What is the significance of the proverb "Mother is supreme"? Consider how Okonkwo's attitudes toward women help bring about his fall or their invention of a new kind of storytelling in *Anthills of the Savannah*.
- Outline the structure of one of Achebe's novels or chapters. Is it loose or tight? What role does repetition play? Can topic ideas be readily identified or are they buried in the text? How does the structure relate to his message and/or goals?
- What parallels do you find between the fictional state of Kangan in *Anthills of the Savannah* and Idi Amin's Uganda? Why would Achebe create a fictional African state rather than write directly about Nigeria or Biafra?
- In stories like "Dead Man's Path," Achebe pits traditional ways and beliefs against European ways and attitudes. Provide examples of such conflicts from his works.



## DOUGLAS ADAMS

**Born:** Cambridge, England  
March 11, 1952

**Died:** Santa Barbara, California  
May 11, 2001

*Adams was a pioneer in both humor and science fiction and was among the first to combine the two genres, creating *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and other popular novels.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Douglas Noel Adams was born in 1952 in Cambridge, England, where he spent much of his early life and his years of education. Adams's signature trait was unpredictability. He was master of the unexpected—when his life story trudged toward the usual university chapter, Adams set off on a hitchhiking trip through Europe that stimulated one of his most innovative ideas: a hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy.

The years at Cambridge University for Adams were centered not so much on studying English as on Footlights, the undergraduate comedy society that he shared with his lifelong comedic hero John Cleese, a member of the Monty Python comedy troupe. Like many Footlighters, Adams attained fame in the comedy world, contributing to episodes of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and the science-fiction series *Dr. Who*. He was inspired by such popular icons as his literary favorites P. G. Wodehouse and Kurt Vonnegut and was influenced even more by the Beatles.

Adams's career took off with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979). The popular series started out as a radio program for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that aired from 1978 through 1980; he adapted the program as a book in 1979 and a television series in 1981, and it later was used as the basis of an animated film, a computer game, and a feature-length film. He extended the Hitchhiker's series with *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980); *Life, the Universe, and Everything* (1982); and *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* (1984). This popular success secured Adams's fame in the world of comedy and ushered him

into the world of science fiction. Adams attended science-fiction conventions, campaigning for humor there at the same time that he promoted science fiction to humor fans.

Adams went in a new direction in his next novel *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (1987), the story of a private detective with a holistic approach to solving his cases; he followed it with a sequel, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, in 1988. He returned to the Hitchhiker's series in his final novel, *Mostly Harmless* (1992).

Adams married Jane Elizabeth Belson in 1991, and the couple had a daughter, Polly. An atheist, Adams was so opposed to the christening of his daughter that he invented his own naming ceremony. He placed his faith in science, not in religion. Science was his way of making sense of the universe: He tried to understand the universe better so he could better display it to his readers from his eye-opening perspective.

To the ongoing chagrin of his publishers, Adams rarely met a publication deadline. At one point, a frustrated publisher insisted that he end the sentence he was writing and send in a manuscript. The book was published, as was a sequel that tied the loose ends that the half sentence created.

In 2001, Adams was in Los Angeles to adapt *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* for a feature film. He suffered a heart attack and died in Santa Barbara, California, on May 11, 2001, at the age of forty-nine. Adams had produced some of the most innovative, most enjoyed, and—in their own way—most inspiring works to come out of twentieth century England.

## ANALYSIS

Humor is the keystone of Douglas Adams's fiction. His sense of humor is decidedly understated, influenced by the deadpan Monty Python school of laughs. He has a knack for distilling something as impossibly complicated as the Ultimate Answer to the Universe into a two-digit number. He can take something as simple as a bath towel and instill it with such cosmic significance that readers may want to meditate on their linen closets. His style of humor relies on unexpected narrative turns delivered by means of witty twists of the English language. His linguistic deftness and narrative adroitness enable Adams to make readers regularly laugh out loud.

His innovative views of the universe allow readers to step back from the status quo and look at things from a different perspective. Both reader and protagonist are provoked into viewing life afresh on virtually every page of his novels through delightfully unnerving story lines that tend to make readers smile and the protagonist scratch his head wondering where he can find a good cup of tea.

Adams pokes fun at virtually everyone. He satirizes governments, bureaucracy, business, technology, philosophers, dictionaries, airports, politicians, bad poets, queues—anything in which he can place his cosmic comic barbs. He is an equal-opportunity satirizer, pointing out the flaws of almost everything while simultaneously dramatizing its unrealized potential.

Adams's fiction is replete with imagined technology—technology that pretends to improve life while actually complicating it. Characters in this fiction may find themselves battling some computer program or automated coffee maker to complete a simple task. Adams was a fan of cutting-edge technology who saw that newfangled gadgets could make life more difficult. The familiarity of that disillusionment may be why readers can easily relate to the many absurd situations that Adams's characters experience.

Religious disbelief shows up frequently in Adams's works in the form of philosophical questions. Characters constantly search for the meaning of life, always unsuccessfully. The nihilistic Adams depicts humankind's utter insignificance in the vast realms of the universe. His whimsical evidence for the existence of God tends to make the possibility

of the divine disappear altogether. He negates not only God and humanity but the universe itself, describing the destruction of the cosmos as the “gnab gib,” the opposite (and reverse spelling) of the “big bang,” in which the universe was created.

Adams's novels tend to be episodic, following colorful characters around the universe as they battle illogic, gravity, and deadlines. His picturesque and picaresque characters grandly traverse time and space in interstellar slapstick adventures. He often features an Everyman character with whom readers can readily relate, a normal human being from Earth. This unlikely hero is thrust into extreme circumstances, forced to deal with crises ranging from zero gravity to galactic protocol to depressed robots. These Everyman heroes are not extremely intelligent, not particularly good-looking, not even skilled with automatic firearms; the typical Adams protagonist experiences his biggest thrill when walking to his mailbox.

Adams places his characters in outlandish plots. For example, the mailbox might explode at the moment the protagonist goes to open it or a character might find himself unsuspectingly teleported into a passing spaceship and a cascade of increasingly improbable events that render him confused and vulnerable. The predicaments of these characters make readers realize that they are not the only ones in the cosmos who are overwhelmed; readers share awkward moments with Adams's protagonists, who are subjected to situations that test their abilities to adapt.

## THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

**First published:** 1979

**Type of work:** Novel

*Arthur Dent, with his towel and his alien friend Ford Prefect, begins an intergalactic journey by hitchhiking off the soon-to-be-demolished planet Earth.*

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is the first book of the five-volume series (which Adams humorously called a “trilogy”) based on Adams's successful radio series of the same name. An immedi-

ate best seller, it has remained popular for more than a quarter century.

In a quiet suburb of London, Arthur Dent is minding his own business when his morning is interrupted by bulldozers and wrecking machines coming to destroy his house. The home, which blocks the path of a new bypass, is slated to be torn down. Things go from bad to worse when Arthur's friend, Ford Prefect, who has drunk too much at the nearest bar, enlightens Arthur about the imminent destruction of Earth. Ships from the Vogon Constructor Fleet surround the planet, commissioned to destroy it to make way for the new hyperspace express bypass, whose path Earth is blocking. Soon Arthur's house, along with the rest of the planet, is drifting through space in tiny particles of recently vaporized matter.

Fortunately for Arthur, Ford turns out to be an experienced intergalactic hitchhiker who manages to smuggle the two of them aboard a Vogon craft moments before the end of the Earth. As punishment for their hitchhiking, the Vogons submit the stowaways to the torture of listening to poetry—Vogon poetry is widely regarded as the universe's worst. When the hitchhikers miraculously survive this death sentence, the Vogons eject them into outer space to a more certain death by asphyxiation.

During the painful poetry reading, Zaphod Beeblebrox, president of the Imperial Galactic Government, steals a remarkable spacecraft powered by the new Infinite Improbability Drive. As he pilots the craft, the *Heart of Gold*, away from the intergalactic police, he improbably picks up Arthur and Ford exactly one second before their inevitable deaths, the first of many improbable things that regularly occur in the vicinity of the spaceship.

The hitchhikers are greeted by Zaphod and two other travelers, Marvin and Trillian. Trillian, formerly known as Tricia McMillan, met Arthur at a London party a few years before; Marvin is a chronically depressed robot. The group determine to band together to aid Zaphod's flight from the intergalactic police.

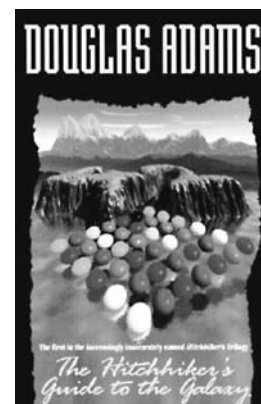
They travel to Magrathea, where customized planets are produced. Long ago, Magratheans con-

structed a massive computer planet in a quest to find the Ultimate Question to Life, the Universe, and Everything. The Ultimate Answer had already been discovered to be forty-two. That computer planet, the travelers realize, is none other than Arthur's own Earth. Unfortunately, the vast computer with its intricate organic program was destroyed by the bureaucratic blundering of the Vogons precisely five minutes before completing its ten-million-year calculation.

Arthur and Trillian carry enough of Earth within them to complete the crucial calculation. They are less than happy to contribute to that cause, however, as the calculation will damage their brains and make them unusable. After a near-fatal stay on Magrathea, the travelers escape the planet, heading off into the sunset toward the Restaurant at the End of the Universe.

Adams's uniquely humorous style contains creative descriptions of the universe and even such unlikely insights as glimpses into the thought processes of a sperm whale. The story is persistently interrupted and enriched by entries from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* describing phenomena the characters have recently encountered or are about to experience. Readers learn about Vogons, poetry, towels, and much else. At first glance, it appears that these entries have little to do with the plot's development, but Adams manages to tie seemingly random and insignificant trivia into the story line.

The book sets itself up marvelously for a sequel, and Adams wrote four more novels in which Arthur, the commonplace English protagonist—still wearing his bathrobe, carrying his trusty towel, and driven by his unquenchable thirst for tea—quests for his lost planet through hilarious cosmic adventures.





## THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*The sequel to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy follows the hitchhikers to the end of the universe in quest of the meaning of life and good food.*

*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* continues the story of Arthur Dent; Trillian, his sometime girlfriend; Zaphod Beeblebrox, president of the Imperial Galactic Government; Marvin the depressed robot; and Ford, his longtime hitchhiking companion. *The Heart of Gold* is speeding away from Magrathea, the adventurers having barely escaped there with their lives at the end of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Arthur inadvertently overloads the computer's systems by asking for a good cup of English tea. When the approaching Vogon ship, sent to kill Arthur and Trillian because of their ties with Earth, opens fire on the *Heart of Gold*, the computer is so focused on brewing a pot of tea that it cannot devote the needed resources to provide an adequate defense. The characters once again narrowly escape what appears to be certain death when Zaphod manages to summon his great-grandfather to bail them out.

As a result of that rescue, Zaphod and Marvin mysteriously disappear from the ship, finding themselves in the offices of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the self-proclaimed repository of all knowledge. After Zaphod and Marvin make it past the existential elevator to find the office of Zarniwoop, Zaphod realizes why his great-grandfather sent him there—he was reminding Zaphod that he is in fact searching for the man who runs the universe.

Zaphod is transported to Frogstar World B, the most evil planet in the universe, and subjected to the Total Perspective Vortex. The Vortex reveals to its

victims the entire scope of the universe and the excruciatingly small part that they play in it. It invariably destroys the viewer, demonstrating the high moral lesson that in order to survive as a sentient being one must not have too strong a sense of proportion. Yet Zaphod learns he is not the least but the most important thing in the universe because his universe was created especially for him by Zarniwoop. The two together continue the search, in the real universe, for the man who rules the universe.

Zaphod, Trillian, Arthur, and Ford end up, astonishingly, in Milliways, the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, an entertainment emporium that takes advantage of deep pockets and cataclysmic upheavals of matter. It and its counterpart, the Big Bang Burger Bar, use time travel to provide customers with the experience of the two biggest events in the history of the universe: its creation and its demise. After dinner and a brief brush with death, Zaphod and Trillian materialize back on the *Heart of Gold*, now piloted by Zarniwoop. They travel across space propelled by the ship's Infinite Probability Drive and land on the planet of the ruler of the universe. After a disappointing chat, they leave Zarniwoop behind to cope with the unimpressive ruler.

Arthur and Ford find themselves in a strange spaceship peopled with the unwanted exiled third of a distant planet's population. After crash-landing with the outcasts, they wander around for a while, meeting some creatures clearly in need of evolution's guiding hand. Arthur and Ford eventually recognize that they are on prehistoric Earth. The outcasts quickly create committees, subcommittees, documentaries, and management meetings which enable them to declare war on an uninhabited continent and declare tree leaves legal tender. Ford realizes that the prehistoric people are sadly dying off, leaving the crash-landed bureaucrats as the sole ancestors of the human race.

The book concludes with Zaphod and Trillian chatting purposelessly with the ruler of the universe, Arthur and Ford celebrating with humankind's ancestors at a management party, and Marvin missing and unaccounted for.

## THE LONG DARK TEA-TIME OF THE SOUL

**First published:** 1988

**Type of work:** Novel

*Dirk Gently, “holistic detective,” is caught between Norse gods, an angry eagle, his murdered client, his annoyed girlfriend Kate, and a frighteningly dirty fridge.*

*The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* is a sequel to the original Dirk Gently novel *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency*. Gently makes his living as a “holistic” detective, basing his detective work on “the absolute interconnectedness” of all things. This leads to interesting investigative strategies. Gently rejects Sherlock Holmes’s idea that whatever is left after ruling out all impossibilities must be the truth. Instead, Gently insists on not rejecting a possibility merely because of its complete impossibility. His faith in the impossible proves a remarkably successful detection strategy.

Kate Schechter is on her way to Norway to visit a friend. Kate gets delayed in line at the airport behind a large Norse-looking man who has no passport, credit card, or birth certificate. This disregard for red tape makes the bureaucratic check-in girl increasingly inflexible and rude. Kate ends up missing her flight and on her way out of the airport gets rocked by an explosion that causes the check-in girl to vanish mysteriously.

Meanwhile, Dirk Gently has just remembered an appointment. His morning to this point has featured luxurious sleeping, a protracted staring contest with his refrigerator, and wishing he had a rich client—a wish which finally reminds him of his appointment. He hurries, five hours late, to the client who has complained of death threats from a green man with a scythe. When Dirk at long last arrives at his client’s house, he finds police cars surrounding the home and his client sitting in a chair, his severed head spinning on a record turntable. The green man with the scythe appears to have gotten to Dirk’s client before Dirk did.

In the meantime, Kate visits an unusual medical institution, where she looks for the large Norse man who thwarted her plans for a holiday in Nor-

way. She meets a number of patients with strange ailments but cannot locate the man, whom she ultimately discovers to be Thor, the Norse god of thunder. On the way from the hospital, Kate’s car is rear-ended by Dirk, who is following her because he is lost. Dirk gets lost so often he has devised a system in which he follows anyone who seems to know where he or she is going. Dirk maintains that this counterintuitive process usually gets him where he needs to be, though seldom where he thought he was going.

Dirk and Kate realize that their paths have led them both on a collision course with Thor. Kate drives home to find Thor waiting for her; Thor found her house because she had given him her address at the airport in an attempt to help him make his flight. She aids him again, removing floorboards embedded in his back from his father’s recent punishment. They fly off together, clinging to Thor’s thrown hammer, toward Valhalla, where Thor plans to confront his father about some vast, vague injustice.

Dirk makes it home to discover an angry eagle on his doorstep who seems to be trying to tell him something. When the eagle threatens him, Dirk escapes from the house on a quest for a cigarette, a pursuit which leads him eventually to follow a group of beggars through a secret passageway into Valhalla. There he meets the Draycotts, a couple who have drafted a contract which exchanges the gods’ powers for cash. Odin, canny but sleepy leader of the gods, signed the contract against the will of his son Thor, triggering the thunder god’s angry reaction.

The book ends with the deaths of the Draycotts in a freak accident with a fighter jet, annulling their contract. Thor manages to straighten out most of the problems that he has created. Dirk, having experienced difficulties with a sofa impossibly stuck on his staircase and

a saltcellar that cannot possibly work the way it does, returns home to his shiny new fridge.



## SUMMARY

Douglas Adams's innovative narrative and inimitably warm humor earned him a place among the best-loved British authors. His science fiction may lack the usual rapid-fire action plot, but his novels are filled with creative descriptions, witty wordplay, and charming characters.

Steven C. Walker

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*Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, 1987  
*The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, 1988  
*Mostly Harmless*, 1992

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Douglas Adams was among the first to combine the genres of science fiction and humor. What effects did this new combination have on the science-fiction genre? The humor genre?
- How do Adams's Everyman characters draw readers into the story?
- What does the immense popularity of the Hitchhiker's series suggest about the sort of books readers enjoy?
- What role does the persistent emphasis on food play in Adams's novels?
- What advantages and disadvantages of high-technology gadgets does Adams highlight?
- How does Dirk Gently's style of detective work differ from the detective work to which most readers are accustomed? What is the effect of this unusual approach to the genre?
- Marvin the paranoid android came into being around the same time as the droids of *Star Wars*. What besides paranoia separates him from his counterparts in the *Star Wars* films?
- Adams was a devout atheist, yet many of his books deal directly with deities. Why?

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Library of Congress

## AESCHYLUS

**Born:** Eleusis, Greece

525-524 B.C.E.

**Died:** Gela, Sicily (now in Italy)

456-455 B.C.E.

*The earliest of the three great tragedians of ancient Athens, Aeschylus wrote grandiose and highly religious trilogies in which all three plays dealt with a single legend.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Throughout most of the ancient world, the city of Eleusis, fourteen miles northwest of Athens, was known primarily as the site of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Mysteries, in the religious sense, are sacred rites of initiation. The Eleusinian Mysteries honored the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, told the story of Persephone's abduction by Pluto, the god of the underworld, and offered their initiates a blessed afterlife. By the late sixth century B.C.E., the Eleusinian Mysteries were known in all parts of the Greek world, attracting worshipers both from Athens and from distant cities across the Aegean Sea. In 525-524 B.C.E., in this village filled with shrines, pilgrims, and the votive offerings of the faithful, there was born a playwright who was to re-interpret the ancient legends of his people from a profoundly religious perspective. He was the poet Aeschylus (EHS-kuh-luhs).

Aeschylus was a member of the Eupatridae, the ancient nobility that had once ruled Athens and all the cities of Attica. The Eupatridae were not a single family but rather a loose alliance of families, related by intermarriage, who shared an interest in preserving their wealth and aristocratic privileges. Aeschylus's father, Euphorion, had at least four sons: Cynegeirus, Ameinias, Euphorion the younger, and Aeschylus himself.

In 499 B.C.E., at the age of twenty-six, Aeschylus presented his first set of tragedies at the Festival of Dionysus (called the Great Dionysia) in Athens.

The titles of these early tragedies have not been preserved and do not appear to have been among the poet's most successful works. During the fifth century B.C.E., prizes were awarded to playwrights who, in the opinion of ten judges, composed the finest tragedies performed during that year's festival. Aeschylus did not win the tragedy award in 499, and, indeed, he would not receive this prize until he was already forty years old.

From that time onward, however, Aeschylus would be victorious in tragedy competitions twelve more times. His works were also frequently revived, and frequently successful, after his death. That was a singular honor since few Greek playwrights had their tragedies revived until much later.

At about the same time that Aeschylus first began writing plays, the Greek cities of Ionia (the west central coast of Turkey) rebelled against the Persians, who had ruled them since 546 B.C.E. The rebellion of the Ionians received support from Athens, and that prompted the Persians to launch an extended series of punitive invasions into Greece. These invasions are known collectively as the Persian Wars. After reconquering Ionia in 494 and unsuccessfully attempting a northern invasion of Greece in 492, the Persians landed a huge army at a bay off the plain of Marathon, only twenty-six miles from Athens itself, in the late summer of 490. The Battle of Marathon became a source of Athenian pride for more than a century. In this battle, a small group of Athenians and their Plataean allies, together outnumbered ten to one by the Persians, inflicted a humiliating defeat upon the enemy. The Spartans, arriving too late for the



battle, were amazed at the extent of the Greek victory. A total of about 6,400 Persians were killed at the Battle of Marathon, while only 192 Athenians lost their lives.

One of the Athenians who died at the Battle of Marathon was Aeschylus's brother Cynegirus. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, Cynegirus was killed during the fierce fighting around the Persian ships. Aeschylus, too, fought at Marathon, though he survived to participate in other battles of the Persian Wars. One of these battles, at Salamis in 480 B.C.E., was later commemorated in Aeschylus's tragedy the *Persai* (472 B.C.E.; *The Persians*, 1777), the only surviving Greek tragedy to deal with a historical, rather than a mythological, event.

The trilogy that contained *The Persians* won the award for tragedy for its year. Sometime later, the poet Sophocles won his first competition against Aeschylus. In the number of his tragedy victories, Sophocles was to become the most successful tragic playwright of the fifth century. Nevertheless, in about 429 B.C.E., when Sophocles' masterpiece *Oidipous Tyrannos* (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715) was first performed, Sophocles did not receive the first prize. That victory was awarded to Philocles, a nephew of Aeschylus, whose works have not survived.

An obscure passage of Aristotle's *Ethica Nichomachea* (335-323 B.C.E.; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1797) states that Aeschylus defended himself against the charge of divulging the mysteries by saying that he did not know that these were secrets. Clement of Alexandria interpreted that to mean that Aeschylus had unintentionally written a passage in one of his tragedies that resembled a sacred hymn of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Moreover, Clement suggested that Aeschylus had defended himself from the charge of exposing these secrets by proving that he had never been initiated. Nevertheless, a passage in the *Batrachoi* (405 B.C.E.; *The Frogs*, 1780) by the comic poet Aristophanes does seem to imply that Aeschylus had participated in the sacred rites of his native town (lines 886-887). The meaning of Aristotle's remark thus remains unclear.

In the years before his death, Aeschylus made at least two, possibly three, trips to Sicily. For one of these trips, around 472 B.C.E., Aeschylus composed the tragedy *Aetnae*, honoring the foundation of the new city of Aetna by Hiero, the tyrant of Syracuse.

In 456-455, during the last of these journeys, Aeschylus died in the city of Gela on Sicily's southern coast. The legend that arose concerning the death of Aeschylus is bizarre and almost certainly the invention of a later comic author. According to this legend, Aeschylus died when he was struck on the head by a tortoise that an eagle had been carrying off as prey. The eagle, it is said, had been searching for a place to smash the tortoise's shell and had mistaken Aeschylus's bald head for a stone.

The Greek traveler Pausanias states that Aeschylus composed his own epitaph, which, remarkably, contains no mention of his tragedies. "Beneath this monument lies Aeschylus of Athens, the son of Euphorion, who died in wheat-bearing Gela. The grove at Marathon could speak of his famed courage as could the long-haired Persians who learned of it there." Aeschylus left behind a number of relatives who also went on to become successful tragedians. In addition to his nephew Philocles, Aeschylus's sons Euphorion (who won first prize at the tragic festival of 431 B.C.E.) and Euaeon were famous dramatists.

## ANALYSIS

In Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs* (lines 1019-1029), the poet Euripides challenges Aeschylus to explain what he did in his tragedies to make his audience more valiant and heroic. Aeschylus replies that he composed the *Hepta epi Thēbas* (467 B.C.E.; *Seven Against Thebes*, 1777), a play that filled everyone who saw it with a martial spirit. Aristophanes then goes on to say that Aeschylus's *The Persians* inspired young Athenians to imitate their elders' thirst for victory and contained a startling dramatic spectacle by bringing onstage the ghost of Darius, the dead king of the Persians.

These three elements—a spirit of heroism, a didactic tone, and lavish spectacle—were understood by Aeschylus's contemporaries to be the central features of his dramatic style. That style is already present in *The Persians*, the play that is considered to be the earliest of Aeschylus's seven extant tragedies. In *The Persians*, the Greeks' courageous defense of their homeland is coupled with a surprisingly sympathetic view of the Persians themselves. Moreover, while the Persians' defeat is presented in that play as due to the valor of the Greek warriors, Aeschylus attributes the Greek victory even more to the Persians' own hubris (excessive

pride, over-confidence, and insolence). The didactic message of this play thus has meaning for the Greeks, as well as for their enemies: Pride can cause even a victorious army to be humbled; moderation is the safest path, even in success. That was a lesson that the Athenians would need to learn repeatedly throughout the fifth century B.C.E.

The lavish spectacle of Aeschylus's *The Persians* was due, in large part, to the magnificent costumes worn by the actors. In other plays, Aeschylus carried his interest in vivid spectacle even further. According to legend, at the first performance of the *Eumenides* (458 B.C.E.; English translation, 1777), pregnant women miscarried and children fainted at the horrifying appearance of the Furies. In the *Choēphoroi* (458 B.C.E.; *Libation Bearers*, 1777), the blood-drenched bodies of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra were displayed to the audience, and the robe in which Clytemnestra had entangled Agamemnon was unfurled in full view. These striking visual images, combined with the verbal imagery of Aeschylus's text, made these tragedies exceptionally vivid, at times even shocking, when they were first performed.

Aeschylus was also responsible for several important innovations in the staging and design of Greek tragedy. Born less than ten years after the victory of the tragic poet Thespis at the first Great Dionysia, Aeschylus invented many features that later ages would view as essential to Greek tragedy. Aristotle says in the *De poetica* (c. 334 B.C.E.-c. 323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705) that Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two, reduced the size of the chorus, and made dialogue prominent in his plays. Before Aeschylus's time, tragedy consisted of a single actor whose role was limited to exchanges with a large chorus. The introduction of a second actor permitted Aeschylus to explore different points of view, report new information from offstage, and create a more natural flow of dialogue. The character played by the second actor could question the protagonist about why a certain course of action was chosen. The second actor could also respond, either rationally or emotionally, to what the protagonist had said.

This questioning and interchange between the first and second actors was central to the dramatic purpose of Aeschylus. Unlike later playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides, Aeschylus was interested in sweeping historical and religious forces

more than in individual characters. This concern is also why Aeschylus preferred to write connected trilogies where a single theme or story was traced through all three plays. (The "trilogies" of Sophocles and Euripides were not trilogies at all in the modern sense. They were simply three plays sometimes performed on a single occasion.) In the *Oresteia* (458 B.C.E.; English translation, 1777), for example, Aeschylus traced the fulfillment of a curse through several generations of the same family. In the trilogy that contained the *Prometheus desmōtēs* (date unknown; *Prometheus Bound*, 1777), Aeschylus explored the nature of power and the development of justice among the gods.

Great theological questions, such as Why do people suffer? and How can a supremely good and supremely powerful deity permit evil in the world?, were never far from Aeschylus's mind. At times, the chorus deals with these issues explicitly as it comments upon the action of the play. At other times, the question is raised through the development of the plot itself.

Aeschylus's view is always panoramic, dealing with difficult questions and eschewing simple answers. While Euripides would later be criticized for his fascination with disreputable human impulses, Aeschylus could reinterpret even a base or primitive myth so as to give it a lofty religious and moral tone. In Aeschylus's treatment, for example, the slaying of Agamemnon and its consequences are transformed into an examination of retributive justice and its limits. In the *Seven Against Thebes*, the moral ambiguity of the encounter between Eteocles and Polyneices is eliminated: To Aeschylus, the defender of Thebes was right and the traitor to Thebes was wrong, and their situations were not at all comparable. As Aristophanes has Aeschylus say in *The Frogs* (lines 1053-1054, 1056), "It is the duty of the poet to hide the base, not to teach it or to display it in dear view. . . . Most of all, it is our duty to discuss what is noble." That is a value which may be seen in each of Aeschylus's plays.

Aeschylus's panoramic vision and his eagerness to address complex issues may also be seen in his frequent dramatic use of the "double bind." A double bind occurs when a character is doomed to failure no matter which alternative action is chosen. Nearly every Aeschylean tragedy presents at least one character who is caught in this type of situation. Thus, Orestes must either kill his mother or

leave his father unavenged, Eteocles must either face his own brother in battle or doom Thebes by leaving one of its gates undefended, and Pelasgus in the *Hiketides* (463 B.C.E.?: *The Suppliants*, 1777) must either face war with the Egyptians or permit the Danaids to pollute his sanctuary with their suicide. In each of these cases, there is no simple solution, no solution at all that will avoid great suffering to the central characters. Yet the moral problems that interested Aeschylus were always ones in which this type of dilemma must be faced and somehow resolved.

The human characters of Aeschylus's plays seem entangled in forces far larger than themselves, in insoluble paradoxes, great curses, and divine plans that may take several generations to be understood. This grand design of Aeschylean tragedy has also affected the language of his plays. Aristophanes has Aeschylus say in *The Frogs* (lines 1059-1061) that, "the poet must choose words equal to his great thoughts and ideas. Godlike men should use more majestic words than ordinary men, just as their cloaks are more splendid than ours." As a result, the language used by Aeschylus is rich in compound words and difficult grammatical structures. For example, in the long opening chorus of the *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.E.; *Agamemnon*, 1777), the two sons of Atreus are described as "twin-throned and twin-sceptered" (line 43), the expedition to recover Helen of Troy is termed "a woman-avenging war" (lines 225-226), and the gag that bound Iphigeneia before her sacrifice is called "the guardian of her fair-prowed mouth" (line 235). Similar examples may be found in any of Aeschylus's tragedies. These difficult, often ponderous terms help maintain the spirit of grandeur that the poet is trying to evoke and elevate his language over that of everyday speech.

## SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

**First produced:** *Hepta epi Thēbas*, 467 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1777)

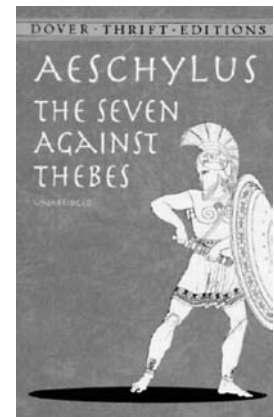
**Type of work:** Play

*A curse upon the ruling house of Thebes is fulfilled as the king must do battle with his own brother, who is one of seven generals attacking the city.*

*Seven Against Thebes* was the third play in a 467 B.C.E. trilogy that also included the tragedies *Laius* and *Oedipus*, both of which are now lost. At its first performance, *Seven Against Thebes* would have provided a climax, summarizing themes that the poet had been developing through two previous tragedies. In this way, *Seven Against Thebes* would have been similar to the *Eumenides* (458 B.C.E.; English translation, 1777) in presenting the final results of a curse that had long afflicted a particular family.

The political situation of Athens in Aeschylus's own day had an important effect upon *Seven Against Thebes*. First, though the tragedy is set in Thebes and deals exclusively with Theban characters, neither the word "Thebes" nor "Thebans" appears anywhere in the tragedy. Aeschylus is careful always to replace these terms with the Homeric expressions "city of Cadmus" and "Cadmeans," recalling the name of the mythical founder of Thebes. Aeschylus did that because Thebes had gone over to the enemy in the Persian Wars. Direct reference to the city was thus likely to offend his audience. The recent end of the Persian

Wars also helps to explain why the chorus refers to the invading army as "foreign-tongued" (line 170, one of Aeschylus's characteristic compound adjectives), even though, according to legend, this army was composed of Argives and Thebans. Athens had recently emerged victorious over a "foreign-tongued" enemy, and the audience would naturally associate an invading army with alien speech.





The passions roused by the Persian Wars explain why Aeschylus sees the conflict between Eteocles and Polyneices as less morally ambiguous than did his successors. Both Sophocles, in the *Antigonē* (441 B.C.E.; *Antigone*, 1729), and Euripides, in the *Phoinissai* (409 B.C.E.; *The Phoenician Women*, 1781), presented the two brothers as each having right on their sides, at least to some degree. Yet Aeschylus had fought in a battle caused by the treason of Hippas, the exiled tyrant of Athens who had led the Persians to Marathon. Unlike Sophocles and Euripides, therefore, Aeschylus could not present treachery to one's native city as justifiable for any reason. That is why only Eteocles' point of view is presented in this play and the audience is shown only the tragedy of a warrior who dies defending his country.

Since the original audience's memories of the Persian Wars were still fresh, the issues addressed by the *Seven Against Thebes* would have been particularly interesting when the play was first performed. Those issues, and the sheer grandeur of Aeschylus's language and the costumes worn by his characters, would also have made the play seem less "static" than they do when it is read today. It is sometimes said that the central episode of this tragedy, in which each of the seven generals of the invading army is first described and then paired with a defender of the city, resembles the catalog passages of epic poetry rather than the tense drama of most Greek tragedy. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that there is tension in this scene as Eteocles misses one opportunity after another to avoid meeting his own brother in battle. It should also be remembered that Greek audiences, far more than later audiences, enjoyed vivid description for its own sake and would have delighted in Aeschylus's account of the armor and blazons of the seven enemy generals.

## ORESTEIA

**First produced:** 458 B.C.E.; includes

*Agamemnōn* (*Agamemnon*, 1777);  
*Choēphoroi* (*Libation Bearers*, 1777);  
*Eumenides* (English translation, 1777)

**Type of work:** Plays

*As this trilogy begins, Agamemnon, king of Argos, is slain by his wife, Clytemnestra, after returning from the Trojan War; his son, Orestes, avenges the death by killing Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus; haunted for this crime by the Furies, Orestes is freed when a new court is established at Athens.*

The *Oresteia* is the only ancient Greek trilogy to survive. (Sophocles' Theban Trilogy consists of three plays that were actually written many years apart and never performed together during the poet's lifetime.) The three plays of the *Oresteia* are the *Agamemnon*, the *Libation Bearers*, and the *Eumenides* ("kindly ones" or "furies"). The *Proteus* (458 B.C.E.), the *Oresteia*'s satyr play (a humorous work traditionally performed at the end of a trilogy), has been lost; it is unclear whether the *Proteus* would have continued the plot of the *Oresteia* or, as is more likely, dealt with the encounter of Odysseus and Proteus described in the *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614).

A central motif of the *Oresteia* is the curse that has afflicted Agamemnon's family for several generations. Tantalus, Agamemnon's great-grandfather, had slaughtered his own son, Pelops, after divulging the secrets of the Olympian gods and stealing from them the nectar and ambrosia that conveyed immortality. Pelops, whom the gods later restored, betrayed and killed the charioteer, Myrtilus, by pushing him from a cliff. As Myrtilus fell to his death, he cursed Pelops and all of his descendants; that was the origin of the curse upon this household. Pelops's son, Atreus, butchered the children of his brother, Thyestes, and tricked Thyestes into eating the flesh of his own sons. When Thyestes learned what he unwittingly had done, he cursed Atreus and all of his children; the curse upon the house of Atreus was thus renewed. Atreus's son, Agamemnon, after whom the first play in this trilogy was named, sacrificed his own daughter, Iphige-

neia, in order to obtain winds necessary to carry him to Troy. There, Agamemnon was responsible for the defeat of the Trojan army and the slaughter of many innocent victims.

This entire line of bloodshed, crime, and curse all devolves upon the single figure of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon who gives his name to the trilogy. Orestes must put an end to the curse, and he can do so only with the help of the gods. Moreover, Orestes stands at the end of another line, a line not of kinship this time but of vengeance or retributive justice. The Trojan War began when Paris, the son of the Trojan king Priam, abducted Helen, the wife of Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus. To avenge this crime, Agamemnon and Menelaus were responsible for the deaths of many innocent victims, including Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigeneia. To avenge her death, Agamemnon is killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, in the first play of the *Oresteia*. Orestes is then bound by duty and honor to avenge his father, but to do so would entail killing his mother. Caught in this "double bind," Orestes can escape only with the gods' help. To end the cycle of retribution, the gods Apollo and Athena must intervene and create a new institution, a court that for all future time will replace endless reprisals with divine justice.

Seen from one perspective, therefore, the *Oresteia* traces the development of law from the time when its enforcement rested with the family to the poet's own day, when the enforcement of law was overseen by the courts. The Areopagus, the court that Athena establishes in the *Eumenides*, was still operating in Aeschylus's lifetime. Though the court's charter had been restricted by the liberal statesman Ephialtes only four years before the *Oresteia* was first performed, the Areopagus still had jurisdiction in most murder trials, as Aeschylus suggests.

The development of the Athenian court is presented in the *Oresteia* as a necessary step in human progress. Without the court, justice would not be possible since law would be enforced according to the dictates of individual families, not the will of the city as a whole.

Aeschylus's religious perspective meant that the removal of the curse and the creation of the Athenian court were possible only through the intervention of the gods. Only a divine power, Aeschylus argues, has the perspective necessary to see larger

issues at work. Ordinary mortals, living for only a single generation, are limited in terms of the experience upon which they can base their judgments. The gods, however, are detached from the passions that afflict the mortals in these plays. They can maintain a proper perspective, see "the big picture," and develop solutions that would never have occurred to the protagonists themselves. By writing connected trilogies such as the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus sought to convey some of this larger perspective to his audience, to encourage them to think, not merely in terms of their own time, but in terms of all of human history.

In order to provide some unity to sprawling trilogies such as the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus used repeated patterns of imagery that could remind the audience of earlier episodes. For example, in the opening scene of the *Agamemnon*, the image of light rising out of darkness is used repeatedly. The watchman is lying upon the roof of the palace at dawn, when a new light appears in the east. Rather than the rising sun, however, it is the beacon fire, arranged by Clytemnestra, which signals the end of the war at Troy. This "false dawn"—literally false, since the fire is man-made and not a natural light—creates a sense of foreboding that is soon fulfilled. The promise of a new dawn of peace goes unkept when Agamemnon, who survived ten years of fighting at Troy, is slain by his own wife upon his return home. This imagery of light and darkness occurs again at the very end of the trilogy when torches are lit for a procession guiding the Eumenides back to their subterranean home. The hope is that, this time, the "new dawn" really will bring peace to Argos and end the curse upon the house of Atreus. The Eumenides, addressed as the "children of night" (*Eumenides*, line 1034), are asked to bless all the earth and ensure that the long-awaited dawn of peace truly has arrived.

Another common source of imagery in the *Oresteia* is the imagery of blood. In Greek, as in English, the word "blood" (*haima*) has a number of different connotations: It may be used to symbolize the family ("bloodline," "blood relation"), violence ("bloodshed," "blood bath"), or miasma ("blood-stained," "bloodguilt"). The loss of blood may be seen as medicinal ("bloodletting") or violent ("blood spilling"). Because of these different impressions conveyed by the word "blood," Aeschylus uses this root repeatedly in describing the house of

Atreus, a family afflicted by violence and miasma, a family where those related by blood so frequently shed one another's blood.

Imagery of animals also appears in the *Oresteia*, with many different connotations. For example, in the *Agamemnon*, the attack upon Troy by Agamemnon and Menelaus is compared first to an attack of eagles shrieking for their lost young (lines 49-51), then to birds of prey brutally seizing a pregnant hare (lines 114-120). Similarly, Orestes in the *Libation Bearers* refers to himself and Electra as "the orphaned offspring of their father, the eagle" (line 247). These images are useful in that they associate Agamemnon with both the regal splendor of the eagle and this bird's ferocious savagery. Other animal imagery is also common in the *Oresteia*: The watchman lies upon the palace roof "dog-like" (*Agamemnon*, line 3); Helen of Troy is like a lion cub who causes grief for those who had nurtured it (*Agamemnon*, lines 716-736); Aegisthus is a "powerless lion who rolls in his master's bed" (*Agamemnon*, line 1224); Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are twin snakes who have been slain by a single stroke (*Libation Bearers*, line 1047); and the god Apollo contemptuously calls the Furies "a herd of goats who lack a herdsman" (*Eumenides*, line 196). In this way, Aeschylus uses imagery of animals both to reinforce the nature of his characters and, by repeating and developing certain images, to provide a sense of continuity throughout his extended trilogy.

## PROMETHEUS BOUND

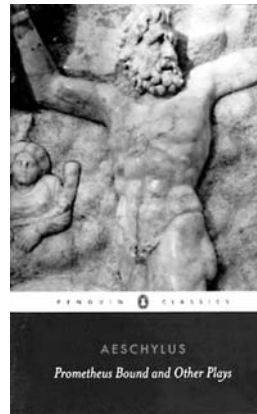
**First produced:** *Prometheus desmōtēs*, date unknown (English translation, 1777)

**Type of work:** Play

*At the order of Zeus, the Titan Prometheus is bound to a rock in the Caucasus as punishment for aiding humankind.*

*Prometheus Bound* was the first work in a trilogy that also included the plays *Prometheus Lyomenos* (*Prometheus Unbound*) and *Prometheus Pyrphoros* (*Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*), neither of which has survived. Since the final two dramas of the trilogy have been lost, it is difficult to determine Aeschylus's original intention for the work as a whole.

This problem is intensified since the date of the trilogy is unknown. A reference (lines 363-372) to the eruption of Mount Aetna in 479 suggests that



*Prometheus Bound* may date later than this event. Aside from that, however, scholars cannot agree whether the play was written early or late in Aeschylus's career or even whether it is a genuine work of Aeschylus.

The theme of *Prometheus Bound* is the conflict between force and justice. The supreme god Zeus has recently assumed control of the universe from the Titans and is ruling

like a petty tyrant. He has bound Prometheus to a rock in a remote corner of the earth because Prometheus gave the gift of fire to humankind, a race whom Zeus had sought to destroy. To the original Athenian audience, which had expelled the tyrant Hippias only in 510 B.C.E., Aeschylus's references to tyranny in this play would have been topical. Moreover, it is surprising to find that these references are applied to the god Zeus, usually depicted in Aeschylean tragedy as the defender of justice and the patron of civil law.

The reason for the strange image of Zeus in this play was probably made clear in parts of the trilogy now lost. Justice, in Greek society, was frequently seen as a balance or a sense of proportion among conflicting demands. In the *Prometheus Bound*, Zeus, early in his reign, has not yet attained that balance. As the trilogy progressed, a sense of proportion must have been found between Zeus's excessive desire for order and Prometheus's extreme desire to benefit humankind. (Indeed, Prometheus is described as bestowing honors upon mortals "beyond what was just," at line 30. In the last line of the play, Prometheus states that Zeus has punished him "beyond what was just," line 1093.) Justice can only occur when there is a complete proportion of all things, including both discipline and mercy.

Like the *Seven Against Thebes*, *Prometheus Bound* has been criticized as being a "static" play. Indeed, once Prometheus has been bound to the rock in

the opening moments of the tragedy, nothing “happens” on stage for the duration of the drama. Oceanos and his daughters arrive to give comfort to Prometheus. Hermes brings additional threats from Zeus. Beyond these, however, there is no movement in the tragedy. In the *Prometheus Bound*, this lack of movement intensifies the audience’s sense of Prometheus’s punishment. The drama becomes as motionless as the captive protagonist himself, and, even at the end of the tragedy, it is unclear how additional progress may be possible. The way in which Aeschylus solved this problem would only have been revealed in the next two plays of the trilogy.

### SUMMARY

The tragedies of Aeschylus are dramas of incredible grandeur. Their language is intentionally elevated over the common speech of everyday life. Their focus is upon the great struggles of gods and

heroes from the remote past. Their interpretation of Greek mythology presents sweeping historical or religious patterns rather than dwelling upon individual characters. Unlike Sophocles, who focused upon individual heroes in his dramas, or Euripides, who sought to bring even the gods down to the level of ordinary mortals, Aeschylus presented figures who were larger than life, figures who were entangled by forces even greater than themselves.

One of the sweeping historical patterns frequently encountered in Aeschylean tragedy is that of the “double bind.” In this situation, characters find that they are doomed no matter what they do. In some cases, as in the *Seven Against Thebes*, the double bind arises because of a curse placed upon the hero’s family. In other cases, such as in the *Oresteia*, the intervention of the gods is necessary in order to prevent the hero’s destruction and to see that justice is restored to the world.

Jeffrey L. Buller

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Of the more than eighty known plays of Aeschylus, only seven tragedies survive in more or less complete form.

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What aspects of Aeschylus’s background prepared him to be the first major tragic dramatist in ancient Athens?
- What sets *The Persians* apart from other Greek tragedies?
- Explain Aeschylus’s contributions to the staging of tragedies.
- What does it mean to assert that Aeschylus’s view was “panoramic”?
- Aeschylus’s plays are probably performed less often for modern audiences than those of Sophocles and Euripides. Considering the merits of his work, what might account for this situation?
- Speculate: Why does only the *Oresteia* survive as an ancient Greek trilogy?

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## SHMUEL YOSEF AGNON

**Born:** Buczacz, Galicia, Austro-Hungarian Empire  
(now Buchach, Ukraine)  
July 17, 1888

**Died:** Rehovoth, Israel  
February 17, 1970

*Agnon's use of fiction contributed significantly to the development of Hebrew as a secular, literary language.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes was born in Buczacz, Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the eldest of five children born to Shalom Mordecai Halevi Czaczkes and Esther Farb-Hacohen. His Jewish roots remained part of him; his lessons in the Talmud, Jewish folklore, and other Judaica inform the body of his works. He began writing at the age of eight, published his first poem in 1903, and then began regularly publishing both poetry and prose in Cracow, Poland. In 1906 and 1907, his works in both Hebrew and Yiddish appeared in Galician periodicals.

He moved to Jaffa, in Palestine, in 1907, became a Jewish court secretary, and served on the Land of Israel Council. Although he held Zionist ideals, his affinity was for the older, established Jewish population rather than for the newer arrivals. He describes the Jaffa of the early twentieth century in *Shevu'at emunim* (1943; *Betrothed*, 1966). He adopted the surname Agnon (AHG-nahn), became established as a writer, and began to write only in Hebrew. Like many of his colleagues, Agnon had one foot in the spiritual world of the shtetls of Europe and one in the modern life evolving in Israel.

In 1913, Agnon moved to Germany and read widely in German, French, and Russian literature and philosophy. He remained in Germany until 1924, working as a tutor and an editor. In Berlin, Leipzig, Wiesbaden, and Hamburg, he became ac-

quainted with Jewish writers, scholars, and Zionists, among whom were Gershom Scholem, the scholar of Jewish mysticism, and Martin Buber, the theologian and philosopher in whose journal, *Der Jude*, Agnon was published. The publisher Salman Schocken pledged Agnon a stipend for life to enable him to pursue his literary career. Agnon married Esther Marx in 1919 and had two children, Emuna, a daughter, and Shalom Mordecai Hemdat, a son. In 1924, he returned to Jerusalem after their home was burned, destroying Agnon's library of about four thousand rare works and manuscripts as well as the only copy of a novel on the verge of publication. During this period, he had gained a wide readership for his short stories, which were published in three different collections in 1921.

Agnon remained in Jerusalem for the rest of his life. His literary reputation was firmly established by the beginning of the 1930's. The *Sefer hama'asim* (the book of deeds) was published in 1932; *Sipur pashut* (*A Simple Story*, 1985) was published in 1935. A collection of short stories, two nonfiction works, and a collection about writing, *Sefer, sofer, vesipur* (1938; book, writer, and story), were followed by a short-story collection, *Elu ve'elu* (these and those) in 1941. *Oreah nata lalun* (1939, 1950; *A Guest for the Night*, 1968), a semiautobiographical work, marks the manifestation of Agnon's tragic, epic perspective, in which the perceiving mind chronicles the desolation of a world. In 1945, he published *T'mol shilsom* (*Only Yesterday*, 2000), a novel marked by its time: World War II and the Holocaust. It is said to be his best novel, marking a new phase of modern Hebrew literature.

He published prolifically throughout his lifetime, with his works being reissued and translated frequently. In addition to imaginative literature, he published works on religious themes. He received the Israel Prize twice, in 1954 and 1958, and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966.

## ANALYSIS

Agnon wrote from experience of a cultural world that was disappearing. It was the world of the European shtetl. Much of his writing deals with the conflict of one who lives in two worlds, one being the old world, a world of faith and miracles, and the other being the new world, a world of reason but also of alienation. His writings, which in publication dates alone span the first three-fourths of the twentieth century, tell the modern epic story of the Jewish people as they moved from their Eastern European shtetlach to Israel, from the empire of Franz Joseph to the Israel of David Ben-Gurion.

This major theme of Agnon's work—the ability of the individual rooted in a tradition to maintain that attachment in the modern world—clarified itself in most of his works. It is reflected in his many short stories and in his novels.

His narratives move seamlessly between the fantastic and the realistic. He also adapts images and stories from Jewish folklore and religious literature to serve as modern symbols. Throughout his works, there is a consciousness of the presence of Jewish tradition and teaching, and there is a display of that awareness. He is obviously well versed in the biblical, postbiblical, and medieval texts of Jewish law, lore, and literature, as well as of other Western texts. Agnon chose to write in Hebrew, but not in a purely modern idiom—rather in a more elevated diction, somewhat akin to medieval Jewish texts.

Agnon's use of allusion, especially allusion to the Old Testament Bible and other works of Judaica, is not straightforward. His allusions are for literary effect and are often playfully comic, ironic, or satiric. His settings are Buczacz, Galicia, Jaffa, Jerusalem, the state of Israel, and pre-World War II Germany. Agnon's protagonists are often cut off from a sense of community, and the experience of a spiritual void or an existential angst causes them to rely upon religion for substance and direction.

It is difficult to tell exactly what Agnon's attitude is toward his themes and characters. For example,

one's understanding of *A Simple Story* depends upon one's understanding of Agnon's attitude toward the novel's protagonist, Hirshel Horovitz. Agnon's style makes an exact reading impossible. This purposeful ambiguity, however, creates richness and texture, and it allows irony to resonate on several levels.

While a few of Agnon's short stories can be enjoyed merely as tales, his art demands a more involved reading. For example, "Agunot" (1909; English translation, 1970), may be taken to contain the kernel of Agnon's metaphysics. Agnon took his surname from the word *aguna*, a married woman whose husband is not with her for one reason or another. The word's meaning, in a larger sense, refers to all those who cannot be with the person with whom they belong or in the place where they belong. They are the alienated. "Agunot" concerns a young woman who falls in love with a young man but who has been betrothed to another, who in turn is in love with yet another. These lovers are all alienated from one another by social forces; on one level, they represent the Jewish people, dispersed and alienated. All people, to one degree or another, are *agunot*.

In *Only Yesterday*, Agnon displays mastery of the surreal: In a world that has fallen apart, the narrative begins to come out of the mind of a dog. All dreams are not nightmares, however, and some vary from the bizarre event to the understandable working out of a real-life situation.

While Agnon provides a miraculous explanation for the events in his fiction, he at the same time gives a natural explanation. In *Hakhnasat kala* (1931; *The Bridal Canopy*, 1937), for example, Reb Yudel's wife, Frummet, and their daughters discover hidden treasure at the moment when the existence of their family's world depends upon finding the dowry. On one level, this is a miracle, but on another, explicable, for the treasure had been hidden by noblemen escaping in war.

Agnon's work, taken at once, is rather like an epic of a civilization about to disappear. He remains reverential toward the values of his ancestors, and it is perhaps this characteristic that separates him from many of his contemporaries. Whereas most of his works either completely satirize or completely romanticize shtetl life and values, and often present a vision of despair, Agnon implies that within alienation is some ultimate vi-

sion of hope, a vision usually grounded in traditional belief.

While Agnon takes a variety of stances toward his themes and his characters, ranging from the tender and nostalgic to the ironic and satiric, his oeuvre overall maintains that there is transcendent meaning for which the fragmented twentieth century consciousness searches. This meaning is not necessarily rooted in Eastern and Central Europe. The ideal of Jerusalem is ubiquitous in his work.

Agnon's use of the first-person narrator allows him to draw the reader into a relationship with his narrators with great immediacy. Characters lead the reader on their epic journey, personally showing the reader the ordered ways of the old country and the way into the twentieth century and modernity.

## THE BRIDAL CANOPY

**First published:** *Hakhnasat kala*, 1931  
(English translation, 1937)

**Type of work:** Novel

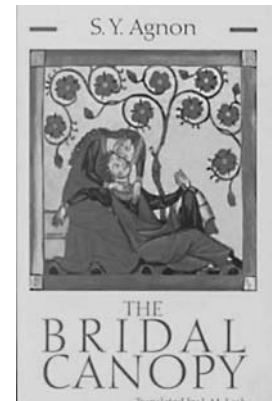
*Reb Yudel Nathanson has three daughters for whom he must find enough money for dowries. By a miracle, his family finds hidden treasure.*

*The Bridal Canopy*, a major work in Hebrew literature, has been compared to Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615). On the surface, Agnon's work seems a simple tale set in early nineteenth century Galicia. On another level, the story is not simple. It treats Agnon's all-but-simple themes: good and evil, loss of faith, marriage as the fulfillment of a divine command, divine providence, the centrality of the Torah, and the return to Israel. The surreal scenes often concern the separation of the Diaspora Jew from the Holy Land and from the Torah. On one level, the story is charming and naïve, like a folktale, but on another level, it critiques its own naïveté.

*The Bridal Canopy* is a comedy, with Nuta, a wagoner and Reb Yudel's traveling companion, playing the foil. It evolves through parody, the creation not of Agnon the nineteenth century Eastern European Hasid, but of Agnon the twentieth century Israeli writer. An observant Jew, Reb Yudel is re-

sponsible for marrying his daughters and finding their dowries, or "bringing them under the bridal canopy" (as the Hebrew title indicates). His wife Frummet moves him to action, and, with the counsel of the Rabbi of Apta, he sets out on a wagon journey to fulfill his obligations. This sets the picaresque plot in motion, with Reb Yudel, Nuta the wagoner, and talking horses telling stories.

The first part of the story ends as Yudel sends Nuta home. He plans to wait for God to send a bridegroom. The comic device of mistaken identity comes into play. Although he is poor, he is mistaken for a wealthy man. A match is made for his daughter with the son of a family as wealthy as they mistakenly think Reb Yudel to be. When the family is despairing that they will never come up with a dowry appropriate to this financially ill-matched engagement, a miracle happens. Reb Reveille, the rooster, in escaping from being served to the potential in-laws, leads Frummet and the daughters to a hidden treasure, enough to supply huge dowries for all three daughters. Filled with gratitude, Reb Yudel and his wife go to Israel. The devices of comedy inform the artist's gentle attitude.



## A SIMPLE STORY

**First published:** *Sipur pashut*, 1935 (English translation, 1985)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Triangles of unrequited love provide the irony in this romance, in which the forces of community win over those of romantic love.*

Agnon's irony begins with the title of *A Simple Story*. Nothing in this simple story is as it seems, aesthetically or thematically. Like many of Agnon's works, it is set in a shtetl in Galicia during the first decade of the twentieth century. Bluma Nacht is or-



phaned and taken to Shishbush, where her aunt, Tsiril Horovitz, and her uncle, Baruch Meir Horovitz, take her in but require that she serve as their maid. Bluma is a romantic figure, an unconstrained spirit. Heartbreak complicates the plot when Hirshel Horovitz, Bluma's cousin and in spirit her direct opposite, falls in love with her. Socially awkward and especially inept at romance, Hirshel is railroaded into a marriage with Minnah Tzeimlich, someone more appropriate to his station. Even this triangle seems simple compared to what is revealed when Bluma leaves the Horovitz household and goes to work for Akavia Mazal, who had, earlier in life, also been kept from marrying his love for economic reasons as had, incidentally, Baruch Meir Horovitz and Bluma's mother, Mirel.

Just as Hirshel could not oppose his mother and the matchmaker, so he cannot assert control over anything else in his life. Like the other characters, he does not have the religious faith of the world of *The Bridal Canopy*. Things are done in certain ways merely because that is the way they are done. Empty ritual provides no meaning. His frustration is turned inward, and he descends into madness, as have others in his mother's family, purportedly as the result of a curse. Hirshel in his madness is unable to speak, instead crowing like a rooster and

croaking like a frog. Just as Hirshel's psyche fragments, so does the society in which he lives. As Minnah's mother says, everyone's troubles (including madness) can be attributed to the fact that "belief has been weakened."

Married to Minnah, Hirshel longs for Bluma. Agnon's gift for haunting ambiguity is manifested in plot and theme. If this

were, in fact, a simple story, the theme would be that the good of the individual is served by that individual's serving his or her society. It is not a simple story, however, and Agnon's is not a simple consciousness.

Hirshel does not descend into complete madness, nor does he possess the object of his obsession. He is cured by Dr. Langsam and takes his ap-

propriate place within his marriage and his society. Bluma, a sympathetic character, disappears from the narrative. Her story remains open-ended. The narrator says that the ensuing events of her life "would fill another book." The narrator seems to see the other characters as mediocre and plodding, but theirs is the world that remains intact. Ritual, whether meaningless or not, provides for tranquility and stability.

## A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT

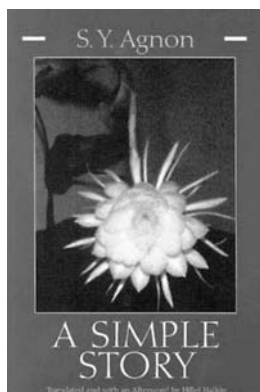
**First published:** *Oreach nata lalun*, 1939, 1950 (English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Returning to visit his childhood home in Galicia, the narrator realizes that his authentic existence can only be lived in Israel.*

Initially serialized (1938-1939) in the Tel Aviv newspaper *Ha-Aretz*, *A Guest for the Night* is a first-person narration of the disappearing world of Galicia and of one individual's relationship to two places and two times: Shishbush and Israel, before and after World War I. On one level an autobiography, the novel grew out of Agnon's brief visit in 1930 to Buczacz. Like Agnon, the narrator loses home and library and is separated from his family. The story moves beyond autobiography, however, as the narrator describes how World War I has all but ended the old way of life in Galicia. The artfully articulated characters reflect different aspects of the narrator's perception of his own situation.

He returns to visit Shishbush on Yom Kippur. In contrast to what he expected, he finds himself a stranger. Shishbush seems very quiet, as if spiritually deserted, bearing the evidence of the ruins of war and of the pogroms that followed. The people he meets are crippled physically and emotionally, including the narrator's companion, Daniel Bach, whose brother has recently been killed by Arabs near Jerusalem and who has himself seen a corpse, wrapped in a prayer shawl, blown up. In the post-war decay, the scenes in the synagogue are haunting: Because of the war, there are no prayer shawls, no adornment for the sacred scrolls. The entirety of the novel, however, is not so bleak.



Everyone is going to leave Shibush, so the narrator is given the key to the *bet midrash* (house of study and worship), the only place of wholeness and tranquillity for the narrator. He loses it, replaces it, and, when he uses it to close the *bet midrash* for the last time, gives the key to the first baby born in Shibush in four or five years. In Israel, the narrator discovers in his suitcase the lost key. A legend states that all Jewish houses of prayer and of study in the Diaspora will relocate themselves in Palestine. When the *bet midrash* of Shibush relocates, the narrator will be able to enter.

The narrator says to Hanokh, a wagoner, “without the power of imagination the world would not go on living.” Ironically, the narrator’s problem with Shibush is not that it is in decline or that it is ravaged by war, but that he came seeking the Shibush of his imagination—as it was when he was

a child, and as it has been constructed in his remembrance. He dreams also the dream of redemption in the Holy Land. In a sense, the people in Galicia, those who remained and those who returned, stopped being able to imagine, and therefore stopped living, while those in the land of Israel had to imagine in order to survive.

## SUMMARY

Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s work tells the story of his protagonists, who are not only the Jewish people but also humanity in general. His works resonate with themes typical of the twentieth century: the search for meaning and truth, the breakdown of traditional values, alienation, and the necessity of hope for the future.

Donna Berliner

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*Sipur pashut*, 1935 (*A Simple Story*, 1985)  
*Oreach nata lalun*, 1939 (reprint 1950; *A Guest for the Night*, 1968)  
*T’mol shilsom*, 1945 (*Only Yesterday*, 2000)  
*Shirah*, 1971 (*Shira*, 1989)  
*Bachanuto shel Mar Lublin*, 1974

#### SHORT FICTION:

“Agunot,” 1909 (English translation, 1970)  
 “Vehaya he’akov lemishor,” 1912  
*Me’az ume’ata*, 1931  
*Sipure ahavim*, 1931  
 “Ha-mitpahat,” 1932 (“The Kerchief,” 1935)  
*Sefer hama’asim*, 1932 (reprints 1941, 1951)  
 “Pat Shelema,” 1933 (“A Whole Loaf,” 1957)  
*Beshuva vanachat*, 1935  
*Elu ve’elu*, 1941  
*Shevu’at emunim*, 1943 (*Betrothed*, 1966)  
*Ido ve’Enam*, 1950 (*Edo and Enam*, 1966)  
*Samukh venir’e*, 1951  
*Ad hena*, 1952  
*Al kapot hamanul*, 1953

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is the relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, and what might be the reasons for Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s composing in both languages early in his career?
- What is a shtetl and why was this kind of setting suitable for Agnon?
- What makes the key an important symbol in *A Guest for the Night*?
- Discuss the effects of unusual points of view in Agnon’s fiction.
- How do Agnon’s works illustrate the theme of going home?

*Shmuel Yosef Agnon*

*Ha'esh veba'etsim*, 1962

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*Selected Stories of S. Y. Agnon*, 1970

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*Yamim nora'im*, 1938 (*Days of Awe*, 1948)

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## ANNA AKHMATOVA

**Born:** Bol'shoy Fontan, near Odessa, Ukraine, Russia (now in Ukraine)  
June 23, 1889

**Died:** Domodedovo, near Moscow, Soviet Union (now in Russia)  
March 5, 1966

*Twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Akhmatova contributed significantly to twentieth century poetry in spite of constant censorship and threats to her existence by the Soviet regime.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anna Akhmatova (ak-MAH-tuh-vah), the third child of Andrey and Inna Erazovna, was born Anna Andreyevna Gorenko on June 23, 1889, in Bol'shoy Fontan, Russia. Her mother and younger sister Irina suffered from tuberculosis; at four years of age Irina died from the deadly disease. Only a year older, Anna felt as if a great shadow covered her entire childhood as a result of the death of her younger sister.

Moving north eleven months after Anna's birth, the Gorenkos settled in Tsarskoye Selo, the czar's village, where Anna spent most of her childhood. The aspiring poet found little support from her father, who, when hearing of her poetry, asked her not to bring shame upon his name. Anna Gorenko therefore became Anna Akhmatova at the age of seventeen, taking the name of her maternal grandmother.

In early childhood, Akhmatova became ill with what was later diagnosed as smallpox. Near death, she ultimately recovered and was deaf for a limited time as the result of her illness. Following her recovery, she began to write poetry, forever linking her writing with her life-threatening illness.

At around the age of fourteen, Akhmatova met Nikolay Gumilyov, a young Russian poet, who fell madly in love with the thin young girl with large solemn eyes and long dark hair. Even after she left Tsarskoye Selo, following her parents' divorce, to finish her schooling in Kiev, he persistently courted the young poet. By 1910, following her first rejection of his marriage proposal and his subsequent suicide attempt, Akhmatova married Gumilyov near Kiev, with a honeymoon in Paris.

The young poets enjoyed a literary life, forming a poets' guild with others who were seriously writing poetry. In 1912, Akhmatova published her first collection of poetry, *Večer* (evening). That year she also gave birth to her son Lev Nikolayevich. With the publication of her second collection, *Chetki* (1914; rosary), she became enormously popular. Tragedy followed closely behind. Her husband enlisted in the military and was sent to the front upon the outbreak of World War I. Soon after, her father died, and she was hospitalized briefly for tuberculosis.

Akhmatova, however, continued to write, meeting other prominent Russian poets as her popularity increased. In 1917, the Russian Revolution broke out and was closely followed by the Bolsheviks' seizing power. The Gumilyovs divorced and Akhmatova married Vladimir Shileiko, a historian of ancient Assyria and Babylonia. Russia's civil war and its terrorism created a climate of fear for many poets. The civil war ended in 1921, but civil unrest continued. In addition, Akhmatova suffered another loss when her former husband Gumilyov was executed for conspiracy against the new regime. She published three more collections during these difficult times, including *Belaya staya* (1917; white flock), *Podorozhnik* (1921; plantain), and *Anno Domini MCMXXI* (1922), and for her efforts was publicly denounced by poets politically aligned with the Soviet regime. In spite of advice from friends to flee Russia, she found herself bound to her country even though she was forced to suffer numerous hardships. With the solidification of Communist power by Joseph Stalin, Akhmatova was not allowed to publish and subsequently was expelled from the Soviet Writers' Union.

Residing with friends following her second divorce, she endured the frequent arrests of her son Lev, one of the many to fall victim to Stalin's purges of 1935 to 1938. Millions of people were sent to prisons for political infractions. Lev spent approximately seven years in prison, leaving his mother to agonize over his fate. Along with her son, friends of Akhmatova faced similar fates. The ban on publication of her work was briefly lifted in 1940. The book *Iz shesti knig* (1940; from six books) was withdrawn from sale and from libraries within the year.

Her health failing, Akhmatova suffered a heart attack in 1940. In the following years she contracted and recovered from typhus while giving poetry readings in hospitals. Despite these setbacks she published a much-censored collection, *Izbrannyye stikhotvoreniia* (selected poems), in 1943. While in Moscow, she gave a poetry recital and was greeted with a standing ovation. Rather than feeling elated, she was fearful of political repercussions.

In Leningrad, she was followed by the Soviet police and her room was bugged. The Communist Party censured one magazine and closed another for publishing the works of Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko, another Russian poet. According to the decree banning their works, the poets were responsible for "poisoning the minds of Soviet youth." Following another arrest of her son, Akhmatova published a cycle of propagandist poems in 1950 in hopes of helping her son. He was not released until six years later, following the death of Stalin. During Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, Akhmatova's works were published but censored. She was allowed to travel to Europe to accept an Italian literary award and an honorary degree from Oxford University in England. After almost sixty years of writing poetry, she died on March 5, 1966, near Moscow.

## ANALYSIS

The challenge of articulating in poetic form the human experience of young love, the pains of love, and the love of country is inherent in much of Akhmatova's poetry. Her love for the Russian people, as shown in her collections *Rekviem* (1963; *Requiem*, 1964) and *Poema bez geroya* (1960; *A Poem Without a Hero*, 1973), made her one of the most admired figures of modern Russia. Most of all, it is her resilient, individualistic spirit that all readers embrace. Whether in the romantic persona in *Belaya*

*staya* or in the melancholy persona of *Chetki*, Akhmatova gave her voice to the Russian people during a tragic period in their history.

Akhmatova uses concrete imagery to convey the themes of passionate, young love in her first collections. Unlike the Russian Symbolists of the early twentieth century, she sought to describe the experience of love using concrete, natural images, not religious, imaginary ones. The Acmeist literary movement, of which the poet was a part, dramatically influenced Akhmatova's earlier works. The Acmeists insisted on clarity of expression. Akhmatova used objective, concrete things to convey strong emotions. For example, in one poem, the wind, given the human attribute of recklessness, conveys the poet's emotional state to the reader: "And we observe the rites of our bitter meetings,/ When suddenly the reckless wind/ Breaks off a sentence just begun."

In her later works, as Akhmatova faced the challenges of adulthood and as her country experienced the pains of World War I and a subsequent civil war, her poetry adopted a more mature voice, and her literary devices became infused with her individual style. From *Anno Domini MCMXXI*, the following illustrates her more experienced persona:

Seven days of love, seven terrible years of separation,  
War, revolution, a devastated home,  
Innocent blood on delicate hands,  
Over the rosy temple a gray strand.

The images of love and death became linked in her poetic vision as they were in her experience.

By 1922, Akhmatova's political difficulties had become unrelenting and her poetry was banned from publication. Although she was officially denounced by the government, people continued to read her poetry, passing copies of her poems among themselves. In addition, Akhmatova continued to write, dramatizing her personal tragedies. Intensely personal, her poetic voice reveals itself without the objective distance of earlier poems. Her poetic voice resonates with the knowledge that she speaks for more than herself: "I somehow sense the groaning and the sorrows/ Of unrecognized, imprisoned voices."

In addition to articulating the agonized voice of her people, Akhmatova sought to capture the es-



sence of the art of writing poetry. In one poem she writes: “it carves, it shifts, it weaves,/ And slips through my hands alive.” The difficulties of writing, of holding on to the muse, become a source of inspiration.

*Requiem* announces the birth of a national poet, capable of giving voice to the horrors imposed on the Russian people by Stalin’s regime. In the preface of the work, she greets a woman who, like her, is standing outside a Leningrad prison waiting to hear the fate of a loved one. The woman asks the poet: “Can you describe this?” The poet answers: “Yes, I can.” Amanda Haight, who interviewed Akhmatova during the last few years of Akhmatova’s life, describes the poet as experiencing a personal resurrection in the final poems of *Requiem*. Further, she characterizes the poet as accepting her place in life and in history, no matter what the price. Accepting her suffering as part of her fate, the poet began to take stock of the past. The poetic voice is intensely personal yet dramatically universal. Akhmatova uses biblical allusions to accentuate the universality of her suffering. For example, in the poem “Crucifixion,” she describes the mother of Christ as the ultimate symbol of suffering. Ultimately, the brief epic describes the individual’s experience as it represents a moment in the history of a nation. The poet gives voice to not only a personal but also a national tragedy:

I remember them always and everywhere,  
And if they shut my tormented mouth,

Through which a hundred million of my people cry,  
Let them remember me also. . . .

## “CONFUSION”

**First published:** “Smyatnie,” 1914 (collected in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, 1997)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Describing a painful meeting between two former lovers, the poem dramatizes the melancholy acceptance of love forever lost.*

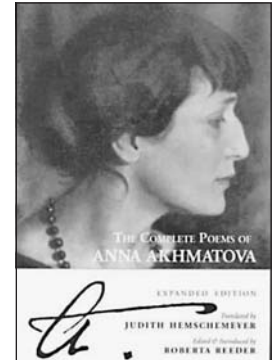
“Confusion,” included in Akhmatova’s popular collection *Chetki*, captures the tone of the entire

work, which focuses on the meetings and separations of lovers and former lovers. The poet describes the painful meeting as draining, yet necessary, because it provides closure for the relationship that has left her hanging on during “Ten years of cries and trepidation.” As she looks into her former lover’s face, she does not see in him the intense emotion that she feels. She sees only the “simple civility” reflected in his kiss of her hand. At the conclusion of the poem, her soul is both “empty and serene.”

The feeling of love’s being both painful and exhilarating permeates every line. Concrete imagery and physical descriptions represent the intense emotion felt by the poet. The lines “a mist clouds my eyes” and “with a kiss you brushed my hand” characterize these literary devices. This use of concrete imagery is common throughout most of her earlier works. Also representative of the poet’s craft is her dramatization of the moment. She sketches as if it were a painting in motion, the lyrical quality of her verse reflected in the lines: “And I can no longer fly,/ I who was winged from childhood.”

Further exemplified in the poem is the poet’s reliance on the narrative form to provide movement. In addition, the fluidity of the poem illustrates that confusion is as much a part of life as are love and loss. The realization of this is demonstrated by the persona’s recognition that her soul is now serene for the first time in ten years after “all my sleepless nights.” Out of her confusion she has found an inner peace that would not have come if she had not loved and lost.

Amanda Haight, Akhmatova’s biographer, describes *Chetki* as representing a poet who is “beginning to know how to survive” lost love and abandonment. Haight concludes that finally poetry now plays a positive role in the poet’s life, allowing her a sense of freedom and individuality. In addition, *Chetki* marked the beginning of Akhmatova’s popularity as a poet and the maturation of her adult poetic voice.



## “DARK DREAM”

**First published:** “Chernyy son,” 1922  
(collected in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, 1997)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In six parts, the poem chronicles the suffocating bondage of the relationship between a husband and wife.*

From the collection *Anno Domini MCMXXI*, the poem “Dark Dream” unifies two of Akhmatova’s important themes: her strength and her individuality. Moreover, it laments not only a personal loss of love but also the conflict of ideal love with the realities of a husband and wife’s relationship.

The poet laments the slow death of the marriage bond. Although it is on “the edge of the stage” she struggles to hold on to it despite its exacting cruelty: “You forbid singing and smiling// As long as we don’t separate,/ Let everything else go!” The poet learns that the love is too painful; in part 3 she describes the love as blood, gushing “from my throat onto the bed.” The fourth part is all coldness and numbness. The lover is beyond feeling pain, beyond feeling love or passion, as exemplified in the following: “If necessary—kill me// Everything your way: let it be!” The concluding part is a rebirth of the persona’s strength as she tells her husband that she will not be submissive to him. “You’re out of your mind,” she chides, to think that she will submit to his will. Ultimately saying good-bye to her husband, she resolves that they are no longer bonded together, but she feels compassion for him “because you let this pilgrim into your home.”

The poet anguishes over the death of her marriage and laments its passing in stages. By the end of the narrative, she has let go of a part of herself, a form of death, and given birth to the artist once more, who loves singing and freedom. Moreover, she is one who no longer will submit to the “hangman” and his “prison.”

The poem ends with hope as the poet says good-bye to her husband and concludes that she now has peace and good fortune, as should he for having taken her in. The bitter tone of much of the poem is replaced with one of acceptance of the end of their relationship.

## REQUIEM

**First published:** *Rekviev*, 1963 (English translation, 1964)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A series of poems, in the form of a short epic, tells of a suffering mother who longs to know the fate of her imprisoned son.*

*Requiem*, never published in the Soviet Union, describes an intensely personal and national struggle for survival. The preface, dedication, two epilogues, and the intervening series of poems combine to form a brief epic about the grieving mother of a prisoner and her fellow sufferers who stand in the prison lines of Leningrad. Although never acknowledged, the first-person-narrator “I” leaves little doubt of the directly autobiographical nature of the poem.

The preface, “Dedication,” and “Prologue” provide the exposition for the work, establishing the historical scene and providing the introduction to the persona—a grieving mother longing to know the fate of her imprisoned son. In the preface the narrator answers, “Yes, I can,” to a woman’s inquiry about her ability to describe the awful terror of “where, unhappily, my people were.” She identifies the cars of the secret police as the dreaded symbols of death and despair, as carrying people, including her son, away at dawn.

The literary devices of her previous works form a multilayered journey into a terrifying time in human history. Akhmatova uses concrete imagery and symbolism, both universal and biblical, to convey the significance of the story she has to tell. For example, when she addresses death, she uses a series of similes to dramatize the various forms it may take: “like a bandit,” “like a typhus-germ,” or “like a fairy tale of your own invention.” (This last simile alludes to the imaginary crime that was often used to convict a political prisoner.) In addition, physical descriptions capture the terror of the time: “There I learned how faces fell apart/ How fear looks out from under the eyelids.”

In addition to imagery and symbolism, she utilizes biblical allusions to dramatize the stages of the mother’s suffering as they coincide with the stages of Mary’s suffering for Christ. Christ was taken away, wrongly convicted, then crucified in front of

his mother. The persona's son proceeds through the same steps. Moreover, as the poet becomes a symbol of Mary's suffering, so does she represent her people's suffering. *Requiem* speaks of not only one person, but a people, in torment.

Like an epic hero, the poet does not give in but lends courage to her people through her poetry: "I see, hear, touch/ all of you." She, essentially, becomes them. In the final lines of the poem, she wishes to become a bronze monument placed in front of the Leningrad prisons, where she waited with millions like her.

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## SUMMARY

Anna Akhmatova is one of the major literary figures of the twentieth century because of her lyrical artistry and universal themes. Her own personal struggle to maintain artistic integrity and independence in the face of death embodies the spirit of the artist. Amanda Haight, her biographer, describes Akhmatova as "the instrument of a higher power" who accepted her function as poet to describe "this drama that is life." With her death her work was completed, but the primary purpose for her life remains with readers forever in her poetry.

Cynthia S. Becerra

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Anna Akhmatova's early illness helped her to become a poet. Did her preoccupation with illness needlessly limit her range of subject matter?
- Despite the horrors of her life under Soviet Communism, especially under the rule of Joseph Stalin, Akhmatova continued to live in the Soviet Union. Was this decision a mistake?
- How do you explain a person of such individualistic spirit being reconciled to the oppressiveness of the society in which she lived?
- Is Akhmatova's notion that confusion is a part of love true? Is it an unhappy truth?
- Investigate the word "requiem" and its appropriateness as the title of her poems that are considered to be a short epic.
- Was Akhmatova a hero as well as a great poet?



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# RYŪNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA

**Born:** Tokyo, Japan  
March 1, 1892

**Died:** Tokyo, Japan  
July 24, 1927

*Considered the father of the modern Japanese short story, Akutagawa was a superb stylist whose carefully composed tales explore the subtle shadings of human morality in the perennial battle between good and evil.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (ahk-ew-tah-gah-wah)—or Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, in the surname-first Japanese custom—was the pen name of Niihara Shinhara, who was born on March 1, 1892, in the Kyobashi district of Tokyo, Japan. Born into an educated family that once had a centuries-old tradition of service in the imperial court's tea ceremonies, he was the son of dairy owner Toshizo "Binzo" Shinhara. His mother, Fuku Niihara, became mentally ill soon after her son's birth; she died, insane, in 1902. His father, unable to provide for the infant, put his son into the care of a maternal uncle, Michiaki "Dosho" Akutagawa, from whom the future author's surname was derived. The author later adopted the familiar name of Ryūnosuke (dragon son), claiming he was born in the hour, month, day, and year of the dragon, according to the Chinese calendar.

A lonely child with few friends, Akutagawa became absorbed in classical Chinese literature and popular Japanese fiction, particularly the work of Japanese authors Mori Ōgai and Sōseki Natsume. Akutagawa also was an avid reader of Western fiction. Beginning in 1910, he attended First High School, where he cultivated friendships with classmates Kan Kikuchi, Yūzō Yamamoto, Kume Masao, and Tsuchiya Bunmei—all of whom would become well-respected writers in Japan.

In 1913, Akutagawa, who would prove to be a brilliant student, was admitted to Tokyo Imperial University, where he majored in English literature. He concentrated on such authors as Edgar Allan Poe, William Morris, Jonathan Swift, Robert Browning, and Ambrose Bierce, many of whom

would influence his work. He began writing soon after entering the university, where he and some high school friends published a literary magazine, *Shinshicho* (new currents of thought), featuring translations of English-language poems and fiction, as well as original works. Akutagawa's first published writings in *Shinshicho* were his translations of works by William Butler Yeats and Anatole France. During his tenure at the university, Akutagawa proposed to a childhood sweetheart, Yayoi Yoshida. His adoptive parents, however, disapproved of his choice of mate, and the two did not marry.

Akutagawa published his first short story, "Rashōmon," in 1915 (English translation, 1952) in the journal *Teikoku Bungaku* (imperial literature), where it was noticed and praised by Natsume, who became the budding author's mentor. Akutagawa also began publishing haiku poems under the pseudonym Gaki and wrote numerous essays. Akutagawa was highly productive during his university years and in the period immediately following, turning out some of his most memorable work from 1916 through 1918, including the short stories "Hana" (1916; "The Nose"), "Gesaku zanmai" (1917; "A Life Devoted to Gesaku"), "Karenō-shu" (1918; "O'er the Withered Moor"), "Jigokuhen" (1918; "Hell Screen"), and "Hokunin no shi" (1918; "The Death of a Christian").

After receiving his degree in 1916, Akutagawa taught English at the Naval Engineering College in Yokosuka from 1916 through 1917. In 1918, he married Fumiko Tsukamoto, to whom he had become engaged two years earlier. The couple had three sons: Hiroshi, born in 1920, who became an

actor; Takashi, born in 1922, who was killed during World War II; and Yasushi, born in 1925, who became a composer.

Although he was invited to lecture at the universities of Kyōto and Tokyo, Akutagawa gave up teaching in 1919 to devote himself to full-time writing. While his fiction was based on tales from Japanese history, folklore, and mythology, it was told in modern language and reflected contemporary sensibilities. In 1921, in order to support his family better, Akutagawa traded his career in fiction for a stint as a foreign correspondent for an Ōsaka newspaper. Though he wrote one of his best-known stories, “Yabu no naka” (1922; “In a Grove,” 1952), during this time, the reporting venture was a disaster. While traveling for several months in China and Russia on assignment, Akutagawa contracted a variety of ailments, from which he never fully recovered and which greatly affected his later work.

The last five years of Akutagawa’s life and career were characterized by a decline into physical and mental illness, marked by frequent nervous breakdowns, alienation, and drug addiction. His writing during this final phase—evident in such works as “Haguruma” (“Cogwheels”), “Aru ahō no isshō” (“A Fool’s Life”), and “Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na” (“Literary, Much Too Literary”), all published in 1927—turned increasingly autobiographical, as he sank into depression and became obsessed with the idea that he had acquired the schizophrenia that had unhinged his mother. At the end of his life, Akutagawa experienced visual hallucinations, grew ever more uneasy about his mental state, and became determined to kill himself. He attempted suicide early in 1927 but did not go through with it. His second attempt was long contemplated, carefully planned, and prompted by a sense of anxiety regarding his future. He took an overdose of drugs, theorizing it was the least painful method of ending his life and the least upsetting to his family. This time he was successful, and Akutagawa died of an overdose of barbiturates at the age of thirty-five on July 24, 1927.

Akutagawa did not write any novels but wrote more than two hundred short stories, as well as novellas, poems, and essays, many of which were published posthumously. Akutagawa is Japan’s most translated writer and is among its most controversial literary figures. Eight years after the author’s suicide, Kan Kikuchi initiated the Akutagawa Prize

in memory of his former high school friend. One of Japan’s most highly regarded literary awards, the annual Akutagawa Prize is given to promising new writers.

## ANALYSIS

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s short stories have the quality of fine jewels created by a master gemologist. They are crafted with great care and attention to detail; they are multifaceted, glimmering from a variety of viewing angles; they have hidden depths of meaning that are revealed upon close scrutiny; and they have a polish that makes their brilliance linger in readers’ memories. The subject matter of Akutagawa’s body of work can be divided loosely into three groups.

His earliest phase is represented by such stories as “Rashōmon,” which concerns self-interest for the sake of survival; “Imogayo” (1916; “Yam Gruel”), which deals with gluttony; and “The Nose,” a study in vanity. In his early works, Akutagawa retold stories from Japanese history and legend in modern language and from a contemporary psychological perspective. These tales were intended to demonstrate humankind’s eternal conflict between noble and base instincts, and they generally serve to ironically illuminate less savory motivations that lead to socially unacceptable forms of behavior.

In the second group of stories, Akutagawa’s emphasis shifted to realism to examine the nature of art and art’s effects on life. Stories such as “Hell Screen,” in which a medieval painter sacrifices his daughter to death by immolation in order to capture her agony for art’s sake, and “Seika no ichi” (1922; “The Garden”), in which a modern man sacrifices his own health to restore a dilapidated Japanese garden to its pristine splendor, are emblematic of this period.

The final group, characterized by stories like “Cogwheels,” a harrowing hallucination, and “A Fool’s Life,” a series of vignettes that encapsulate the author’s mental deterioration, consist of intimate personal documentation of the author’s absorption with his descent into insanity, which culminated in his suicide.

Many of the stories Akutagawa wrote throughout his career were overt examinations of faith, such as “Hōkyōnin no shi” (1918; “The Martyr”) or “Nankin no Kirisuto” (1920; “Christ in Nanking”). Other stories contain religious undertones or in-

corporate elements of superstition and the supernatural. An early opponent of the self-confessional naturalism that held sway in Japanese literature during the time he flourished, Akutagawa seamlessly blended aspects of Eastern and Western philosophical thought. A well-integrated product of his Asian heritage and his English-oriented education, Akutagawa simultaneously combined the stoicism and fatalism of the one culture with the exuberance and spontaneity of the other.

In his scores of stories based upon historical material, Akutagawa was especially interested in three distinct eras from Japan's past. Of primary interest is the Heian (meaning "peace" or "tranquillity") period, an era that stretched for nearly four hundred years, from 794 to 1185. During this period, the Japanese capital was moved to Kyōto, such Chinese influences as Confucianism dominated, and the samurai class came to power. Equally important, art and literature rose to prominence in the Japanese imperial court. The world's first novel, Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari* (c. 1004; *The Tale of Genji*, 1925-1933), and Sei Shōnagon's court exposé *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*) were written during the Heian period, as were the words to Japan's national anthem. Akutagawa's most widely recognized stories, "Rashōmon" and "In a Grove," are set in this historically significant age.

A second era of interest is the Edo period (1603-1868), particularly the late Tokugawa Shogunate (1853-1867). This was a time of great upheaval, when Japan struggled to move from an isolated feudal culture to a modern society in step with the Western world. Akutagawa's "The Assassination of a Culture" (1918) is one of his stories set in this period.

The third era of concentration is the time in which Akutagawa came of age, the Meiji period (1868-1912), when Japan began to modernize and become a world power, and the succeeding Taisho age (1912-1926). These periods were marked by many economic and societal reforms; Japan embraced Western technology and expertise that allowed the country to triumph in such military engagements as the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), to be-

come a partner of the Allied effort in World War I, and ultimately to embark on an ill-fated expansionist program leading to utter defeat in World War II. An example of Akutagawa's stories set in this period is the humorous "Negi" (1919; "Green Onions"), in which a Japanese waitress believes she resembles an American silent film star and acts accordingly.

During any phase of Akutagawa's productivity and regardless of his focus, his stories exhibit distinctive stylistic and literary characteristics. Chief among these is Akutagawa's skill in the precise, economical selection of deceptively simple, unambiguous words that nonetheless allow for multiple interpretations of meaning—though such subtleties are frequently lost in translation. Other stylistic characteristics are his satirical, sometimes cynical, outlook; his fondness for such literary devices as symbolism and metaphor; and his tendency (except for his later first-person autobiographical material) to present even horrific or gruesome information from a detached, third-person reportorial viewpoint. Despite the typically downbeat subject matter, there is often a sly wit and always a keen intelligence at work that uplifts the tales from merely morbid studies of depravity, corruption, or immorality to timeless fiction. Akutagawa does not telegraph his intentions or provide handy morals in his stories but lets his readers decide what to make of his often disturbing fiction.

A constant experimenter in form and presentation, the versatile and prolific Akutagawa structured his stories in a wide variety of ways. His fiction features confessions told from multiple viewpoints, straightforward narration, pseudoscreenplays, dialogue-heavy tales, and interior monologue. Characterization is a particular Akutagawa strength: He presents a complete panoply of human types—the braggart, the coward, the glutton, the envious, the lustful, and the greedy—and imparts to each an individual spin that stamps him or her as an original character. A master craftsman in the often underappreciated short-story form, Akutagawa is the embodiment of Seneca's proverb *Vita brevis est, longa ars*, or "Life is short, art is long."

## “RASHŌMON”

**First published:** 1915 (collected in *Rashomon, and Other Stories*, 1952)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A discharged samurai's servant takes shelter in Kyōto's Rashōmon Gate, where he discovers an old woman stealing the hair from an abandoned corpse to make a wig she will sell in order to buy food.*

One of Akutagawa's best-known stories, “Rashōmon” tells of a nameless servant in Kyōto who has been laid off by his samurai master after an economic decline in the Heian period. The servant takes shelter from a rainstorm in the Rashōmon Gate. Once a proud, multistoried structure decorated with crimson lacquer, the gate has fallen into disrepair and now serves as a den for wild animals, a hideout for thieves, and a dumping ground for unclaimed corpses.

As the servant sits considering whether to starve to death—an honorable course of action—or to dishonorably survive by becoming a thief, he sees movement on the steps above and creeps upward with his hand on his sword. He finds an old hag plucking the long, black hair from the head of the abandoned corpse of a woman. Disturbed by her ghoulish behavior, the servant confronts the hag. She claims she is stealing the hair to construct a wig she will sell for food in order to survive. The hag asserts her action is fitting because while the dead woman was alive, she survived by less than honorable means—cooking snake meat for sale and passing it off as fish.

Caught up in the logic of this argument, the servant succumbs to his instinct for survival. He, too, becomes a thief; he overpowers the hag, rips the shabby clothing off her body, and leaves her alive among the scattered corpses. Clutching his ill-gotten booty that he will sell to live for yet another

day, he runs off into the night, leaving the hag to fend for herself as best she can.

## “IN A GROVE”

**First published:** “Yabu no naka,” 1922  
(collected in *Rashomon, and Other Stories*, 1952)

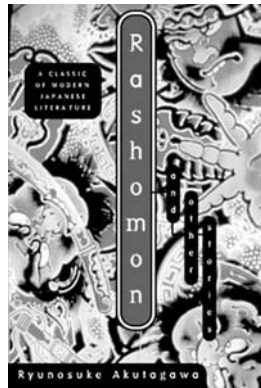
**Type of work:** Short story

*A number of individuals give conflicting testimony to a high police commissioner regarding a crime that occurred in a grove—the alleged murder of a samurai and the rape of his wife.*

“In a Grove” (sometimes translated as “In a Bamboo Grove”) gained worldwide renown for serving as the basis for director Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashōmon* (1950), which won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. A Heian era morality tale that in message—what should be considered good or evil depends upon the circumstances—“In a Grove” echoes Akutagawa's earlier story “Rashōmon.” “In a Grove” was probably inspired by some or all of several sources. They include an early Japanese story, “The Tale of the Bound Man Who Was Accompanying His Wife to Tanba” (twelfth century), which deals with a man forced to witness the rape of his wife; Ambrose Bierce's short story “The Moonlit Road” (1893), which concerns the use of a medium to obtain the account of a dead woman regarding her murder; and Robert Browning's long narrative poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869), which presents a murder from twelve points of view.

It is to Akutagawa's credit that whatever his inspiration, he constructed a short fictional piece uniquely his own. In the process, he devised a clever, intriguing, and memorable mystery story, which anticipates the modern law enforcement precept of the unreliability of eyewitnesses.

The three-thousand-word story consists solely of the verbal testimony of seven different individuals—a woodcutter, an itinerant Buddhist priest, a policeman, an old woman, the confessed thief and murderer (Tajomaru), the woman who was assaulted (Masago), and a dead man (Takehiko, summoned through the assistance of a medium)—





regarding the supposed murder of a man, the alleged rape of his wife, and the presumed theft of their belongings. Each deposition, given in a distinctive voice that by its style helps identify the speaker, adds details to the previous account, which seems to clarify the sequence of events but actually serves to confuse the issue. Discrepancies and contradictions abound; several people admit to various crimes, and many pertinent questions remain unanswered. Since each individual brings a personal agenda to his or her report, has a particular perspective on events, notices different details, and has difficulty being objective, none of the statements can be fully trusted. Takehiko is certainly dead, and Tajomaru was definitely found in possession of stolen goods, but beyond those scant facts lurks a host of unknowns.

### SUMMARY

In his short stories, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa explores the depths of human behavior, particularly in times of stress—a reflection of the tension that consumed him throughout his short but productive life. A brilliant, if neurotic, writer, Akutagawa built suspense through the use of believably flawed characters placed in plausible situations, whose actions are described in crisp, simple language layered with symbols that give an extra dimension to

his prose. In much of his work, Akutagawa remained detached from his unflinching narratives as a counter to the self-indulgent naturalism that prevailed in Japanese literature during his heyday. The author's bleak perspective can be seen as an extension of his inner turmoil related to the growing conviction that he was sinking hopelessly into inherited insanity. Dark as they are, Akutagawa's stories illuminate by example the principle that human beings in every time and place are linked by identical motivations, common concerns, and inevitable fates.

Jack Ewing

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's story "Rashōmon," there is a wealth of animal imagery, including a cricket, fox, crow, dog, cat, lizard, monkey, snake, fish, chicken, and bird of prey. What do these animals symbolize in the story?
- What is the significance of the "red, festering pimple" on the servant's cheek in "Rashōmon"?
- In "Rashōmon," Akutagawa seems to support the notion that survival takes precedence over honor. Do you agree or disagree with this point of view?
- In the story "In a Grove," what crimes were truly committed, what were the motivations for the crimes, and who is/are the primary suspect(s) for each crime?
- The individuals who give testimony in "In a Grove" often contradict one another. Compare their accounts, set up a timetable of events, and discuss the inconsistencies.
- Why do you think Akutagawa structured "In a Grove" as a series of verbal statements? Why did he select the particular individuals to give testimony?
- From their portrayals as characters in "Rashōmon" and "In a Grove," extrapolate Akutagawa's attitude toward women.

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## SHOLOM ALEICHEM

**Born:** Pereyaslav, Russia (now Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky, Ukraine)

March 2, 1859

**Died:** New York, New York

May 13, 1916

*Through his often comic stories, Aleichem depicted the difficulties confronting Eastern European Jews as they faced threats to their traditional way of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Sholom Aleichem (ah-LAY-keh-m) was the pen name of the Russian Jewish writer Sholom (or Solomon) Rabinovich. He was born in the Ukrainian town of Pereyaslav, but the family soon moved to nearby Voronko, the model for the fictional town of Kasrilevke in his writings. For a dozen years the young Sholom lived a comfortable life as the son of a wealthy and respected merchant, Menachem Nahum Rabinovich. However, his father suffered a financial reversal when Sholom was not yet thirteen, and soon after that Sholom's mother died of cholera. His father remarried, and the sharp tongue of his new wife gave rise to Sholom's first literary production, a collection of his stepmother's Yiddish curses.

His next literary production was a Hebrew-language novel written while attending a Russian-language high school in Pereyaslav. After high school Sholom found a position as a tutor for the daughter of a wealthy Jewish landowner. He promptly fell in love with his pupil, and her father sent him away. He eventually found an administrative position in the town of Lubny and while employed there began writing articles in Hebrew for various periodicals on social and educational issues.

He and his former pupil, Olga, reunited and were married in 1883. Now reconciled to the match, Olga's father invited his new son-in-law

back to his estate and supported him while he devoted himself full time to writing. That same year he published his first story in Yiddish, "Tsvey Shteyner" ("Two Stones"), and adopted the name Sholom Aleichem, which in Hebrew means "peace unto you" and is a traditional Jewish greeting.

Aleichem's first literary success was with the story "Dos Messerl" ("The Penknife") in 1886, one of many stories he wrote about children, this one focusing on a young boy's guilt over stealing a penknife. He also produced several full-length romantic novels in this period, but they were not successful. More significant was his work editing an annual anthology of Yiddish writing.

When his father-in-law died in 1885, Aleichem inherited his wealth, but he lost all the money in a stock market crash in 1890. For the rest of his life, Aleichem had to struggle to support himself and his family through the income from his writings and lecture tours.

In 1892, Aleichem published the first of his Menachem-Mendl letters, a series that would continue throughout the decade. In 1894, partly inspired by a milkman he met, he began publishing his sketches about Tevye the Dairyman. He also wrote a series of stories set in the fictional town of Kasrilevke and a satire called *Der farkishnefter Shnayder* (1900; *The Bewitched Tailor*, 1960).

In 1905, after a failed revolution in Russia, anti-Jewish pogroms, or riots, broke out throughout the country. In the wake of these, Aleichem decided to leave Russia, traveling first to central Europe and



then to New York City. He was well received wherever he went; by this time was considered the world's leading writer in Yiddish and sometimes referred to as the "Jewish Mark Twain." However, he could not support himself in New York and returned to Europe, settling in Geneva, Switzerland.

In 1908, he fell ill with tuberculosis, after which he spent much of his time in European sanatoriums. He was declared cured in 1913, and when World War I broke out he and his family again traveled to the United States. His two visits to the United States inspired him to write his sketches about Mottel, the cantor's son. In this period he also wrote a series called *Ayznban geshikhtes* (railroad stories), published in periodicals from 1902 through 1911 and included in the English translation, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* (1987). He also wrote several more novels.

He fell ill again in New York while still working on his Mottel sketches, and he died there on May 13, 1916. Thousands came to pay their respects, and after his death his reputation grew among literary scholars. He also indirectly reached a larger, non-Jewish audience through the 1964 Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on his Tevye stories; the musical was later adapted for the screen.

## ANALYSIS

Like Mark Twain, to whom he is often compared, Aleichem was both serious and comic. Beneath a comic veneer he addressed serious issues about the situation of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe at a time of transformation and crisis. In Aleichem's day the traditional Jewish shtetl, or small town, was breaking down in the face of the forces of modernization and because of anti-Jewish laws and pogroms. Some Russian Jews fled to the cities, even though they could not legally live there, hoping to make a living in the new world of modern commerce and finance. Others fell victim to the anti-Jewish rioters, others emigrated, primarily to the United States, and some remained in Eastern Europe, trying to balance tradition and modernization.

Aleichem explores all these responses to the pressures of modernization in his major works, expressing a complex set of attitudes despite his accessible, colloquial writing style. Writing in Yiddish, the language of the Eastern European Jews, rather than in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish

elite, he seeks to explore the everyday experiences of ordinary Jews from a sympathetic viewpoint, even while reserving the right to stand back and sometimes laugh at them.

Not only does he write in Yiddish, but Aleichem also hands over the narration of his major works to ordinary people with very little pretense to learning. Tevye the Dairyman's frequent quotations from the Bible notwithstanding, Aleichem speaks to his readers through the voice of Tevye or through Mottel, a mere child, or through Menachem-Mendl, the naïve investor, and his wife, the uneducated Sheineh-Sheindl. At times he uses a gentle irony at the expense of these characters, revealing their lack of understanding of the situations in which they find themselves; for instance, neither Menachem-Mendl nor his wife truly understands the world of speculators and brokers in which Menachem-Mendl seeks to make a living. Aleichem, however, does not mock his characters but seeks to reveal the struggles they are undergoing as they deal with their various situations, all of which in a sense are the same situation: the fate of the Eastern European Jews at the end of the nineteenth century.

## THE ADVENTURES OF MENACHEM-MENDL

**First published:** *Menachem-Mendl*, 1895  
(English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Menachem-Mendl and his wife exchange letters in which he describes his foolish business projects and she keeps telling him to come home.*

Originally published as independent pieces, the Menachem-Mendl letters were gathered into a collection published in 1895, at which point Sholom Aleichem revised and expanded the stories to form a coherent whole. In this final form they constitute an epistolary novel of sorts—a novel in which all of the narration is done through letters.

In his first letter, Menachem-Mendl writes from the city of Odessa to tell his wife, Sheineh-Sheindl, who lives in the small town of Kasrilevke, how well he is doing as a currency speculator. He exagger-

ates so much that the reader is immediately skeptical, as is his wife, who wants him to provide more details. Throughout these letters Sheineh-Sheindl will continually ask for more details of her husband's business ventures, while Menachem-Mendl will continually say he has no time to write.

Menachem-Mendl's reluctance to say more is perhaps part of his struggle for independence from the shtetl life in Kasrilevke. In the opinion of literary critic Dan Miron, Menachem-Mendl is trying to break free of traditional life. He has escaped to the city and is never going home, despite his wife's desire that he return. At the same time, he does keep writing her, suggesting that he cannot fully free himself; he wishes to maintain some contact with the traditional life he has left behind, even while seeking to throw himself into a more modern existence.

Part of the comedy, which is also tragic, derives from Menachem-Mendl's inability to fully understand the modern life in which he is trying to participate. Sheineh-Sheindl understands it even less, and there is humor in her misunderstanding his references to coffee shops (she thinks they are the names of women) and her confusion over what her husband is doing. She keeps wanting to know the size and weight of the currency and stocks he is investing in, as if they were solid objects.

Part of Aleichem's point is that these are not solid objects, but mere air, as Sheineh-Sheindl says at one point, and without anything solid beneath him, Menachem-Mendl perpetually falls. Thus, he eventually loses everything in his currency speculations and has to start again with nothing. He does, however, persist in starting over and over again, trying one business venture after another, moving from currency speculation to being a commodity broker, to discounting, to investing in real estate, forests, sugar mills, and mines, and to trying his luck as a writer, a marriage broker, and an insurance agent. Unfortunately, he has no luck at all, and though he is resolutely upbeat in the earlier letters, by the end he sometimes gives way to despair before deciding he should immigrate to the United States.

Another source of humor is the repeated contradiction between the flowery, conventional way both Menachem-Mendl and Sheineh-Sheindel begin their letters and the actual content that follows. Presumably they have learned the "proper"

way to start a letter, which for Sheineh-Sheindl always involves thanking God that everyone is in good health. This is usually followed, however, by her writing that she or the children are ill. She also invariably signs off as Menachem-Mendl's devoted wife, but this usually comes after a tirade against his foolishness and a demand that he end his speculations, stop ignoring his family, and come back to her. On the surface there is an attempt to maintain the forms of propriety and well-being, but underneath there is trouble and dissatisfaction.

Religion is notably absent from these letters. It is an absence brought to readers' attention early on, when Menachem-Mendl notes that trading goes on in Odessa until the time when evening prayers are said in Kasrilevke. Menachem-Mendl seems too busy with business to attend to prayers and religion; business, in fact, seems to be his new religion, as well as a way to break free from his traditions. Also notable is the fact that Menachem-Mendl's lodgings remind him of a jail. He is seeking freedom from the shtetl, but he seems to have found not freedom but a new sort of bondage, which includes perpetually avoiding the police, who might arrest him at any moment for living illegally in a city where Jews are forbidden to reside.

After his currency business fails, Menachem-Mendl moves to a new city, Yehupetz, a fictionalized version of Kiev. Sheineh-Sheindl becomes increasingly impatient, having expected him to return home after his first failure, and she begins to talk of her troubles at home. The author Hillel Halkin has suggested that Sheineh-Sheindl's inclusion of more news from home may indicate that she subconsciously realizes that the only communication and intimacy possible with her husband will be through these letters. Also, since the news from home is usually negative, involving illness, death, broken engagements, fires, and bankruptcies, the total effect is of failure everywhere: Menachem-Mendl is a failure in the big city, and in the small town nothing goes right.



## TEVYE THE DAIRYMAN

**First published:** *Tevye der Milkhiger*, 1894–1914 (English translation, 1949 as *Tevye's Daughters*; also known as *Tevye the Dairyman*)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*After a cheerful Tevye tells how he struck it rich in the dairy business, a sadder Tevye tells the stories of his daughters' marriages.*

Like the collection of Menachem-Mendl's letters, the stories in *Tevye the Dairyman* were originally published separately and then collected and published in book form. The stories are all monologues, in which Tevye is supposedly addressing Sholom Aleichem himself, and in them Tevye presents himself as a folksy philosopher, frequently quoting the Bible and other religious texts, although his references are always connected to the concerns of everyday life.

The first Tevye episode is the sunniest, as indicated by its title, "Dos groyse Gevins" ("Tevye Strikes It Rich"; also translated as "The Jackpot"), in which an impoverished Tevye goes into the dairy business by pure happenstance. He offers a ride to two women lost in the forest and as a reward receives money and a cow. This almost magical encounter makes Tevye and his wife, Golde, happy, and when he speaks about it eight or nine years later, Tevye is able to be philosophical about his earlier poverty. It is all up to God, he says; the main thing is to work hard, have confidence, and leave things to God. Throughout the stories, Tevye talks about God in a familiar way; he even seems to be mocking Him at times, as when he says that in his days of poverty his family went hungry three times a day with God's help.

Still, in this first episode Tevye seems happy in his faith, something that will change in the later episodes, in which Tevye suffers tragedy after tragedy and begins to compare himself to the biblical Job. Like Job, he demands an explanation from God and also seems to lose his faith. However, in the earlier episodes he is still cheerful, even when he loses money through a foolish partnership with Menachem-Mendl. Man plans and God laughs, says Tevye, but not bitterly, more philosophically.

In the next episode Tevye has a chance to marry his eldest daughter, Tsaytl, to the town's wealthy butcher, Layzer Wolf, but Tsaytl wants to marry the poor tailor, Mottel Kamzoyl. At first Tevye is resistant, not just because Layzer Wolf has more money but also because the parents traditionally decide whom their children should marry. In the end, however, Tevye lets Tsaytl marry the tailor, and the result is more or less happy because she gets to marry the man she loves. The situation does, however, prompt Tevye to complain to God about the lack of justice in the world: Why should others be rich and he not? It also makes him wonder what the world is coming to when children make the decisions.

The next four episodes all concern marriages or proposed marriages that in some way undermine tradition. First there is Hodl, Tevye's second-oldest daughter, who wants to marry a revolutionary activist. Again, one of the issues is who decides, but

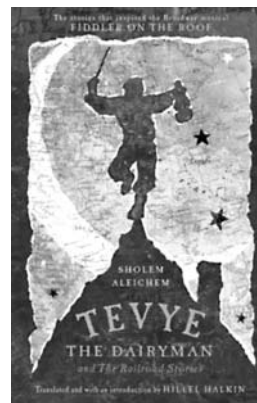
there is also the clash between traditional ways and revolutionary ideas. Tevye again goes along, but this time the result is less happy; Hodl's new husband is arrested and sent to Siberia, and she follows him there.

In a heartbreaking episode, Tevye's daughter, Chava, falls in love with a non-Jewish boy, whom she wants to marry. This Tevye cannot accept. He

has gone a certain distance in accommodating modern ways, but the traditional Jewish insistence on marrying within the Jewish faith is not something he is prepared to violate. When Chava insists upon marrying the Gentile, Tevye disowns her.

In the next episode, his daughter Shprintze falls in love with the son of a rich Jewish family. This pleases Golde, but Tevye is wary. People like money too much, he says, moving away from his earlier desire to be rich. He also thinks the rich family will oppose the match, and he is right. They spirit their son away, and Shprintze drowns herself in despair.

In the last marriage episode, Beilke, out of concern for her father, agrees to marry a rich man she does not love in order for her family to have some



money. She marries the rich man, but instead of making Tevye happy, the marriage leaves him feeling that his daughter has sacrificed her own happiness. He now seems even more opposed to the pursuit of money; it just brings unhappiness.

In the final episode, a pogrom breaks out, forcing Tevye and others to flee, and though the pogrom is presented comically, it seems like a grim conclusion to an increasingly dark tale.

## THE ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL, THE CANTOR'S SON

**First published:** *Mottel, Peyse dem Khazns*,  
1907-1916 (English translation, 1953)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*After the death of his father and the failure of various business ventures, Mottel, his family, and their friend Pinye set out for America.*

*The Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son* is another collection of Sholom Aleichem's stories. This time the stories are told by a young child, Mottel, whose father is dying. Despite this imminent death, or perhaps because of it, Mottel seems exuberantly happy. When his father dies and he becomes, according to the terminology of the shtetl, an orphan, he is even happier because it means everyone treats him nicely and he is excused from attending school. The critic Dan Miron suggests that the deeper reason for this happiness is that Mottel wishes to break free of the shtetl's restrictions, which are represented by his father. However, in the opinion of critics Frances Butwin and Joseph Butwin, Mottel's happiness is an Oedipal victory for the son over the father, avoiding the father-son conflict found in other stories by Aleichem.

Mottel spends as much time as he can outdoors, playing with a neighbor's calf or going fishing. He also steals fruit from a garden, which lands him in trouble. He has a nightmarish experience staying with an old man, who first tries to read him a book by the medieval scholar Moses Maimonides and then threatens to eat him, perhaps suggesting that looking back into the past may be dangerous.

Mottel mainly looks forward and wants to have

adventures. He is thus quick to join his brother Elye in various business ventures, such as manufacturing soft drinks, producing ink, and working as exterminators. Elye, who has a book suggesting all these projects, is sometimes compared to Menachem-Mendl; like Menachem-Mendl, all Elye's projects come to nothing. Moreover, as Miron notes, all of Elye's projects involve poison; it is as if such business ventures are poisonous, at least if they remain connected to the Old World. Only when the family escapes to the New World do their business ventures begin to succeed. America, it seems, is the Promised Land, where everything will finally work out.

The family experiences difficulty in getting to America, including a brush with thieves and murderers at the Russian border. Once out of Russia they encounter further problems, most notably getting medical clearance to enter the United States. Mottel's mother, who is still attached to the shtetl they left behind, cries continually, and the others warn her that this will hurt her eyes so she will be unable to pass the medical examination. This turns out to be true; as Dan Miron says, this nostalgic attachment to the shtetl, manifested through tears, becomes a disease and an obstacle to emigrating. Thus, the family must find another way to free themselves from the Old World.

Meanwhile, Mottel develops a talent as a caricaturist and is always doodling, prompting his brother to slap him repeatedly, perhaps because drawing likenesses is a violation of Jewish tradition. Mottel is continually trying to break free of tradition and continually slapped down for it, but he remains cheerfully exuberant throughout, eagerly looking forward to the hustle and bustle he expects to find in New York.

Once the family arrives in America, Mottel celebrates it as a place for the underdog, while the family's friend Pinye praises its freedom and democracy and the opportunity it provides to get ahead economically. Some of the family members are reluctant to seize this opportunity because it involves beginning at the bottom as manual laborers, and they see such work as demeaning to the family of a deceased cantor. Pinye, however, pushes them forward and they get jobs, ignoring the hierarchical rules of the Old World. They also immerse themselves in American culture, from chewing gum to film houses to learning English.

Left unfinished when Aleichem died, the Mottel stories end with the family moving on from factory work to operating a street stand to planning to open their own store. They are also planning to move; moving, indeed, is what Mottel loves about America. Throughout the book he is a force for movement, action, and adventure, and for breaking free of old ways.

### SUMMARY

In his short stories, Sholom Aleichem examines the life of Russian Jews, forced to live in the shtetls, from several different angles. Menachem-Mendl seeks to escape from traditional shtetl life by throwing himself into the pursuit of money, but this leads him nowhere. Menachem-Mendl's wife, Sheine-Sheindl, remains in the shtetl, demanding that Menachem-Mendl return. Her life seems to be one long litany of woes. In the Menachem-Mendl letters, therefore, Aleichem seems to suggest that nei-

ther staying in the shtetl nor rejecting it for a life spent pursuing wealth will offer happiness.

The sympathetically presented Tevye offers another approach to the problem. He tries to balance traditional shtetl life with the forces of modernity represented by his independent-minded daughters. This approach does not work either, ending in death, separation, and expulsion.

Then there is Mottel, who exuberantly flees to America, embracing freedom, democracy, and economic opportunity. Mottel, along with Pinye, reaches for more than just money in the manner of Menachem-Mendl; they seek a whole new way of life, and this approach seems to work. For Aleichem, it seems that the way out of the dilemma posed by the clash of tradition and modernity is to immigrate to America, where the Eastern European Jews can begin life anew.

Sheldon Goldfarb

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss Sholom Aleichem's presentation of the clash between tradition and modernity in the Jewish community.
- What is the role of religion in Aleichem's works?
- How does Aleichem portray America in his works?
- At the end of *Tevye the Dairyman*, Tevye asks God to explain the meaning of life. What answer, if any, does Aleichem provide to this question?
- How does Tevye's attitude toward money change, and why?



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## ISABEL ALLENDE

**Born:** Lima, Peru  
August 2, 1942

*Known for works about the social and political heritage of South America, Allende is the first woman Latin American novelist to receive international recognition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Isabel Allende (ahl-YEHN-dee), daughter of Francisca Llona Barros and Tomás Allende and niece of former Chilean president Salvador Allende Gossens, was born in Lima, Peru, where her father was serving as a diplomat. When she was three years old, her parents divorced and her mother took her home to Santiago, Chile.

She spent her childhood in the home of her maternal grandparents Isabela and Agustín Llona. Along with her mother, who encouraged her storytelling, they greatly influenced her understanding of people and love of writing. Her grandmother, a spiritualist, believed the supernatural was an integral part of everyday living, and she routinely held séances and used tarot cards. Her grandfather, a conservative landowner, was a moody and domineering man. It was this couple and their home from which she drew material for her first novel, *La casa de los espíritus* (1982; *The House of the Spirits*, 1985). The household also included an uncle who filled the house with books, and as a child she read widely in the literatures of many countries. Though her contacts with her father ceased, she remained close to his family, especially to his brother Salvador Allende Gossens, a doctor and socialist politician.

Allende attended private schools in Santiago, and following her mother's remarriage to another diplomat she lived abroad. When she was fifteen, she returned home. A year later she left school to

take a job as a secretary for the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization in Chile. Her work involved contacts with journalists, and it was not long before she began her journalism career.

For more than ten years, Allende's life and career proceeded smoothly. In 1963, she married an engineer, Miguel Frias, and they had two children: Paula and Nicolas. From 1967 through 1974 she served as writer and editor for the feminist magazine *Paula*. During this time she met the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who told her that her real talent lay in storytelling. From 1970 through 1975 she worked for television channels 7 and 13 in Santiago, where she acquired popularity by conducting interviews and hosting a comedy program. In the early 1970's, she also gained recognition for her involvement in making documentaries and for writing plays and stories for children. Her uncle, meanwhile, continued his political career, and in 1970, Salvador Allende Gossens became the first freely elected socialist president in Latin America.

Her life abruptly changed on September 11, 1973, when General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte led a military coup that led to the death of her uncle and overthrew his socialist government. "I think I have divided my life [into] before that day and after that day," Allende told *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Amanda Smith in 1985. "In that moment, I realized that everything was possible—that violence was a dimension that was always around you." Not believing that a dictatorship could last in Chile, Allende and her family remained there for more than a year. Her efforts to help the opposition, however, soon made life too dangerous for them, and in 1975, the family moved to Caracas, Venezuela.

Even though she was a known journalist in Chile, Allende did not find a journalism position, nor did she do much writing when she first moved to Caracas. From 1979 to 1982, she worked as a school administrator. In 1981, her grandfather in Chile told her that he was dying. To keep the past alive, she began a letter to him that evolved into *The House of the Spirits*.

She finished the book in 1982, but because Latin American editors were prejudiced against women writers and were used to reading shorter works, finding a publisher was difficult. Eventually a literary agent in Spain placed the work with a Barcelona publisher, and the book was published in 1982. In 1985, it appeared in English translation. The book was later made into a film in English. As this process evolved, Allende published a children's book, *La gorda de porcelana* (1984; *The Porcelain Fat Lady*, 1984).

Allende, fluent in English, left Venezuela in the spring of 1985 to teach for a semester at Montclair State College in New Jersey. Back in Caracas, her weekly column appeared in the newspaper *El Nacional*. Her second novel, *De amor y de sombra* (1984; *Of Love and Shadows*, 1987), also explores themes of political repression. Her third novel, *Eva Luna* (1987; English translation, 1988) follows a venerable literary form—the picaresque novel—in its exploration of redemptive love and resistance to political terror.

Following the publication of her third novel, she began work on a collection of stories that used the narrator of *Eva Luna* as a storyteller. In 1987 she was divorced. The next year she spent the fall semester as Gildersleeve Lecturer at the University of Virginia and the spring semester as a guest lecturer at Barnard College. In the spring of 1989 she taught creative writing at the University of California at Berkeley and that same year met Willie Gordon, a lawyer from California who admired her books. The two were married and settled in San Rafael, California. *Cuentos de Eva Luna* (1990; *The Stories of Eva Luna*, 1991) met with critical and popular acclaim equal to that of her earlier works. Allende's fourth novel, *El plan infinito* (1991; *The Infinite Plan*, 1993), charts the social upheavals not of Latin America but of the United States.

In 1992, her daughter Paula, who was born in 1963, died after a porphyria attack that sent her into a year-long coma. During that year, Allende

wrote an autobiographical letter for Paula, which became the memoir entitled *Paula* (1994; English translation, 1995). Allende's official Web site calls this publication an autobiography, whereas the publisher labeled it a novel. In memory of Paula, on December 9, 1996, Allende founded the Isabel Allende Foundation, an institution that provides grants for programs working to advocate and maintain the basic rights of women.

In the last years of the twentieth century, Allende published the nonfiction work, *Afrodita: Cuentos, recetas, y otros afrodisiacos* (1997; *Afrodite: A Memoir of the Senses*, 1998); the critically acclaimed novel *Hija de la fortuna* (1999; *Daughter of Fortune*, 1999); and *Portrait sépia* (2000; *Portrait in Sepia*, 2001), a novel about the granddaughter of Eliza Sommers, the protagonist in *Daughter of Fortune*. Typical of Allende's fiction, both of these novels touch on the themes of political and social strife, self-discovery, and self-acceptance. In addition, she was awarded the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize in 1998 for contributing to the beauty of the world.

She subsequently published three novels for young adults: *Ciudad de las bestias* (2002; *City of Beasts*, 2002), *El reino del dragón de oro* (2003; *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon*, 2004), and *El bosque de los pigmeos* (2004; *Forest of the Pygmies*, 2005). Along with these books, she published *Mi país inventado* (2003; *My Invented Country: A Nostalgic Journey Through Chile*, 2003), a memoir that has similarities to the letter that she began writing for her grandfather, which was the inspiration for *The House of the Spirits*. She followed this with a retelling of the Zorro legend in the novel *Zorro* (2005; English translation, 2005) and *Inés del alma mía* (2006; *Inés of My Soul*, 2006), a work of historical fiction about Inés Suarez, a sixteenth century Chilean pioneer from Spain. Among several other international honors she has received throughout her career, Allende was named ambassador to the Hans Christian Andersen Foundation in 2004.

## ANALYSIS

Since her appearance on the international literary scene, Allende has been known as a writer who blends Latin American political and social issues into compelling narratives that have popular appeal. However, limiting comments about her to that narrow scope neglects Allende's other literary



talents. Not only does she have a tremendous storytelling ability; she is also adept at weaving many characters into plots that cover generations and at creating strong, memorable female characters. She is thoroughly proficient at adding the dimension of Magical Realism to her otherwise historically realistic novels. All these elements combine to illustrate her main theme: that to be human requires insight into injustice and recognition of the power of love.

Allende's female characters are at the heart of her novels and short stories. In *The House of the Spirits*, Alba, granddaughter of the domineering Esteban Trueba, suffers rape and torture at the hands of the military government. Through her courage, she is able to withstand the horrors. She is also helped by other strong women who are equally brutalized. In *Of Love and Shadows*, Irene risks death to escape from those who would kill her for her work with underprivileged classes. Her strength comes from interacting with poor women and seeing their strength. In *The Stories of Eva Luna*, Belisa Crepusculario makes her living selling words, strong messages that have power. In *Daughter of Fortune*, Eliza—the motherless daughter who is adopted by her wealthy English immigrant relatives—risks her life as a stowaway on a Dutch ship sailing from Valparaíso, Chile, to San Francisco; she also survives the brutal chaos of northern California during the 1849 gold rush in an attempt to reclaim a love that was forbidden in Valparaíso. Inés Suarez of *Inés of My Soul* is also a brave woman who is in search of a lover in a chaotic “new world” and finds her own strength and independence in the process. These women come from diverse backgrounds, but they all use their strength, creativity, and courage to resist oppression. Furthermore, these women embody the traits important to Latin American women and women everywhere who keep inspiration and hope alive.

Allende sets these characters into plots with many minor characters. One of her talents lies in skillfully weaving all of their stories together. *The House of the Spirits* and *The Infinite Plan* cover three generations and include the lives of at least fifteen characters. *Of Love and Shadows*, *Eva Luna*, and *Daughter of Fortune* have fewer characters but also focus on storytelling. In her works, something is always happening; there is always plot. The pages are rich with characters and events.

Allende's stories have an added dimension: Magical Realism, a literary technique in which the fantastic and the realistic are both present and described with equal equanimity. According to Allende, Magical Realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, and history. She believes that this view of life is not unique to Latin American writers but instead belongs to the literatures of all developing countries where the sudden accelerations of change juxtapose the old and the new. According to Allende, Magical Realism is the capacity to see and to write about all dimensions of reality, not just the realistic.

In *The House of the Spirits*, the magic of Clara (modeled after Allende's grandmother) adds another dimension to one's understanding of the world. Clara has a remarkable clairvoyant ability, having known the spirit world since childhood. Spirits tap on tables or play Chopin on the piano in order to bring her messages about where to search for lost items. In *The Infinite Plan*, Allende includes fewer elements of Magical Realism, perhaps because it is set in a country that puts little faith in things that are not subject to analysis. In *Daughter of Fortune*, Magical Realism is displayed by the character Mama Fresia, who often mixes a sort of Santoria with unorthodox worship of the Catholic saints to cure or mollify mental and physical maladies and who takes the young Eliza to a fortune teller who predicts her fate and destiny: both will be consequences of her love.

This literary style amounts to a strong thematic statement on the limitations of reason and analysis. Magical Realism and spirituality allow Allende to emphasize her main theme, the power of love. She has said many times that she believes so strongly in the power of love, generosity, and justice that she is not bothered that some critics call her sentimental. Love empowers a person to overcome personal tragedy. Love also allows a person to see injustice and do something about it. At the end of *The House of the Spirits*, Alba's love helps Esteban Trueba realize that his politics destroyed his own family. In *The Infinite Plan*, Gregory, with the love of the woman who records his story, sees the injustice he is perpetrating upon his family and turns his efforts toward renewing himself. In *Daughter of Fortune*, the pursuit of love allows Eliza to understand her identity,

establish personal freedom, and potentially end a cycle of denial and cognitive dissonance among her family members.

Allende has said that she writes to speak for those who have no political power. Her work is a record of her attempts to preserve the memories of Latin America, including the injustices, the hopes, and the women heroes about whom one rarely hears. Her writing is her commitment to her fellows, and an act of love. In her works, the personal becomes the political.

## THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

**First published:** *La casa de los espíritus*, 1982  
(English translation, 1985)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Memories of three generations reveal the turbulent personal, political, and social realities of Latin America.*

In 1981, several years after Isabel Allende had fled her native Chile to settle in Caracas, Venezuela, her grandfather, with whom she had lived as a child, told her that he was nearing one hundred years old and was going to die. He reminded her of his belief that as long as people live in memories, they do not really die. To keep alive all the people and places she had to leave when exiled from Chile, Allende began a letter to him that recalled the past.

The letter was never sent, but instead became the manuscript for Allende's first and best-known novel, *The House of the Spirits*. In it, she re-creates her own past by interweaving the stories of three generations of the fictional Trueba family. Throughout the book, but especially in the early chapters, she uses the literary technique of Magical Realism, a blending of realistic and fantastic detail, which adds an emotionally resonant dimension to the characterizations and to the theme of self-discovery through love.

The story is told by Alba, granddaughter of the central character Esteban Trueba, as a way of coming to terms with the horrors of her life. Though many other characters appear, the plot focuses upon Esteban Trueba, who, as a young peasant,

sees the young and beautiful Rosa, daughter of a senator, in the street one day and vows he will marry her. Rosa possesses special spiritual qualities. Like her grandmother, she is able to make objects move, see into the future, and recall the dead. Nine years later Esteban has become rich, but because Rosa is dead, he marries her sister Clara and builds the magnificent house that becomes the house of the spirits and the setting for much of the novel.

Clara is the link with the spirit world and is the opposite of her domineering, possessive, willful husband. As he moves further and further into worldly events and pleasures, she retreats into a world of silence and spiritual insight. Their children grow in this weird atmosphere of the abstracted silent mother and the possessed father who alternates between intense love and intense wrath. His rages reach their peak when he finds out that his daughter Blanca is pregnant.

It is through Alba, Blanca's daughter, that he finally gains some humanity. Alba's affair with a rebel leader results in her being taken prisoner and tortured and raped by the military government that her grandfather supports. In jail she records her family history from her grandmother's diaries. These memories enable her to transcend her suffering and to love Esteban, who has lived by exploiting others. When she is released and reconciled with her grandfather, he realizes the power of love and looks for a chance of fulfillment with her child, whose uncertain parentage (he is either the child of her lover, the rebel leader, or of brutality—the rapes she suffered in prison), represents a culmination of the family's history.

The plot structure of the book is circular. At the end, another generation of Truebas is to be born. It too will be tied to the past by memories, while facing a present full of violent social and political struggles. Throughout the many tragedies, the power of love will enable them, as it has their ancestors, to survive.



## “AND OF CLAY ARE WE CREATED”

**First published:** “De barro estamos hechos,” 1990 (collected in *The Stories of Eva Luna*, 1991)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A television journalist finds his life changed by the death of a thirteen-year-old girl buried in debris from a volcanic eruption.*

“And of Clay Are We Created,” the last short story in Isabel Allende’s collection *The Stories of Eva Luna*, is based upon a real event. Omayra Sanchez was a young victim of the 1985 earthquake in Colombia. The story is told by the heroine of Allende’s third novel *Eva Luna*, whose lover, Rolf Carlé, is the main character. With a carefully crafted plot and delicate images, Allende illustrates the theme of self-discovery through love, the same theme that runs through all the stories in this volume.

The story’s first line, “They discovered the girl’s head protruding from the mudpit, eyes wide open, calling soundlessly,” not only begins the action and sets the story but also establishes the image of the eyes and the theme of insight. The last sentence of the paragraph foreshadows the ending: “Rolf Carlé . . . never suspect[ed] that he would find a fragment of his past, lost thirty years before.”

Rolf finds that past; the girl, Azucena, enables him to close the gap between his experiences and his feelings so he can confront it. Azucena is one of twenty thousand victims of a volcanic eruption that has wiped out an entire Latin American village. Arriving by helicopter, Rolf, a maker of television documentaries, finds himself first on the scene filming the volunteers trying to reach the girl, who is buried up to her neck in quicksandlike mud. Within minutes, the girl’s plight is broadcast throughout the world.

Rolf remains by her side. Throughout the night he tells stories of his adventures as a newsman to keep up her courage. Miles away, the narrator, Eva Luna, watches television and feels the pain of both Azucena and Rolf. She tries to get a pump sent to the site, but her efforts are futile. She even tries to help Rolf through her “force of mind.”

Later she watches the morning broadcast.

Things have degenerated, but Rolf, now near exhaustion, still tries to keep the girl’s spirits up. More cameras and equipment arrive, and the worldwide focus on the young girl intensifies, making the scene so real to Eva that she envisions herself by their side using her love to help them endure the suffering.

On the second night, Rolf begins to talk of his life, speaking with an intensity like that of the volcano that has caused this tragedy. Beginning with the horrors of the concentration camps in Germany, he goes back even further to recall the abuse of his childhood by an evil father and his guilt over the fate of his retarded sister. As he finishes, he is in tears, ironically consoled by the dying Azucena.

In the morning, the president arrives and positions himself for the cameras beside the buried child. Rolf keeps his vigil throughout that day. Eva recalls the moment when, despite the president’s promises of help, the two give up hope. The strength of her love enables her to empathize with them as they accept the things that cannot be changed. On the night of the third day, with the cameras focused upon her, the girl dies.

Returning to Eva, Rolf is a changed person. He has set aside his cameras. Now able to see things clearly, he needs time to heal the wounds in himself just as the mud will cover the holes in the earth. The story ends with a thematic connection to the beginning sentence.

## THE INFINITE PLAN

**First published:** *El plan infinito*, 1991  
(English translation, 1993)

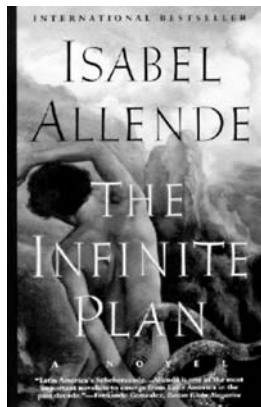
**Type of work:** Novel

*One man’s search for love and self-esteem leads him through struggles symbolic of those facing a generation of Americans.*

In Allende’s fourth novel, she exchanges the Latin American setting and memorable heroines of the previous three books for an American setting and a male protagonist. *The Infinite Plan* tells the story of Gregory Reeves, son of an itinerant preacher. In it, Allende relies on realistic detail rather than elements of Magical Realism. She con-

tinues to use her skillful narrative techniques to interweave the lives of many characters who represent twentieth century American lifestyles.

Gregory, his mother, sister, and a family friend travel around the country in the 1940's with his father Charles, who tries to win converts to the infinite plan, his peculiar doctrine of destiny and salvation. When Charles becomes ill, the group settles in a Hispanic barrio of Los Angeles, where Gregory finds that life is even harder than on the road. As a white misfit, he suffers the pains of being an outsider as well as the usual pains of adolescence. These are somewhat eased by Pedro and Immaculada Morales, who become his surrogate parents, and by their daughter Carmen, who becomes a lifelong friend.



In addition to the Morales family, Gregory has other mentors. They help him cope as his family life deteriorates. His father dies, his mother withdraws into the world of the infinite plan, and his sister eats to avoid her problems. Gregory is initiated into sex by Olga and into the life of the mind by Cyrus, a communist elevator operator at the public library. These people, like others Gregory meets throughout the novel, are not developed in depth but represent an array of desires, fantasies, and stupidities.

Graduating from high school, Gregory leaves the barrio for Berkeley to begin his search for himself in earnest. There he enthusiastically encounters the 1960's hippie scene and begins another succession of adventures that represent a generation of Americans in their own social, political, and spiritual journeys. After a few years, the Berkeley scene leaves him empty and he ends up going to Vietnam to find himself as a man. Allende's description of the Vietnam War emphasizes its horrors and their effects on Gregory.

Gregory returns from Vietnam determined to become a rich lawyer and to embrace the yuppie ethic of success. These values also fail to bring him happiness or self-esteem. He marries twice; both marriages are disasters resulting in two neurotic

children, one a daughter who becomes a drug-addicted prostitute and the other a hyperactive son. Throughout all this misfortune, Gregory continues to rely upon his childhood friend Carmen, who has since become a world-renowned jewelry designer and successful single mother, having adopted the son of her dead brother and a Vietnamese woman. At the end of the novel, Gregory begins to face the mess of his life rather than run away and, with a multicultural cast of characters, begins to pick up the pieces.

Gregory tells his story to an anonymous woman with whom, the reader assumes, he will form some relationship. The plot progresses by alternating between his and her point of view. Using this technique, Allende succeeds in exposing the reader to many of the social and political problems, and their solutions, of the late twentieth century United States. When Gregory is in his late forties, he realizes that there are no quick fixes.

## DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE

**First published:** *Hija de la fortuna*, 1999  
(English translation, 1999)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Prejudice and hypocrisy caused by an oppressive system of social stratification in nineteenth century Chile push a beloved daughter away from her family and toward self-knowledge and freedom.*

*Daughter of Fortune* introduces readers to a young woman named Eliza Sommers, who, shortly after being born, was placed on the doorstep of Rose and Jeremy Sommers's home in Valparaíso, Chile. Even though Eliza was an orphan, Miss Rose brought her up as if she were her own daughter and assured her that she was of British blood, as were all the Sommerses. Rose and Jeremy were unmarried siblings who came to Valparaíso when Jeremy acquired a position as the director of the British Import and Export Company. Rose supported this claim of British heritage with a story about the day they found Eliza on the doorstep. According to Miss Rose, Eliza was found in a beautifully adorned basket beneath an intricately handwoven blanket

that only wealthy people could afford. Eliza, who has a memory of magical proportions, remembers being found in a soapbox covered with a wool sweater that smelled of cigar and the sea. Mama Fresia, the Sommers's cook, Eliza's first friend, and her companion in the world of Magical Realism, verifies Eliza's version. However, Rose's version turns out to carry some validity as well.

It is not long before Eliza falls in love with Joaquin Andieta, a Hispanic clerk who works for Jeremy's company. Their love affair is filled with angst, secret meetings, and clandestine plans; this is because the social order places Hispanic people well below those of pure European ancestry, keeping them in destitute poverty and just above the native South Americans, who are not seen as people at all. Rose was grooming Eliza to marry a wealthy man of European descent; therefore, Eliza's relationship with Joaquin is taboo. Eliza, however, puts all of her faith in Joaquin, who seems to love his socialist ideals more than he loves her. He soon embezzles money from Jeremy's company and heads off to San Francisco, where he thinks he will make his fortune by finding gold during the 1849 gold rush.

Eliza follows him to California after meeting Tao Chien, the cook on her "Uncle" John Sommers's ship. Tao helps her stow away aboard a vessel on which he also serves as cook. After barely surviving this trip, Eliza takes the identity of a boy, more specifically Tao Chien's little brother, in order to survive in California. Her brave journey in California in search of Joaquin is the catalyst that forces the Sommers family to admit to hypocrisy, deception, and human weakness. It is one of many examples in Allende's fiction that illustrates how the power of love can unravel systematic injustice.

The major characters in Allende's novels often include a patrician family who hide secrets in order to maintain their status at the top of the social order. In this case, Jeremy and Rose's obsession with keeping up appearances in order to avoid being ostracized by their own kind causes a potential cycle of self-abuse and an eventual breakdown of the

family. They set a standard for civilized behavior that is not achievable. Consequently, they place those standards upon Eliza, which drives her away. The secrets that Jeremy, Rose, and John Sommers hold could free Eliza from the guilt and pain that may cause her demise, but they selfishly hold on to their false sense of social status, even though Eliza is suffering and lost.

The women in Allende's fictional families often pay the greatest price for this hypocrisy. Even when raised by a wealthy family, the daughters are intended to be breeders. Many of Allende's female characters rise above this limitation, but they often have to separate themselves from mainstream society and their families to accomplish this, as does Eliza. This oppressive atmosphere is also negative for the most romantic male characters in Allende's novels. If they truly love a woman, they are caught in the trap of cognitive dissonance. Their cultural beliefs do not match their actions, which causes some male characters, such as Tao Chien, to function on the brink of nihilistic insanity. Allende shows time and time again that if one truly loves another, then systematic oppression by gender or race becomes a terrible mistake that could not only damage individuals and families, but also entire governments and nations.

## **SUMMARY**

Isabel Allende has commented that when people lose their homeland and become detached from their past, memories become more important. Those memories of Chilean and Hispanic people and places are Allende's subjects. Her themes, the search for love and self-knowledge, are universal. Using rich plots interwoven with a kaleidoscope of characters, she examines the tumultuous social and political heritage of Latin America. Her Magical Realism produces a blend of the real and the supernatural that adds a fuller landscape to the worlds she creates. These qualities have made her one of the best-known writers of Latin America.

*Louise M. Stone; updated by Troy Place*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Some characters in Isabel Allende's books value money and power over human dignity. What happens to these characters? Why?
- Define Magical Realism. Discuss examples of Magical Realism in any Allende novel.
- Define irony. Using any Allende novel, discuss practical examples of this literary technique.
- How does love change the characters in Allende's fiction? What does the pursuit of love make them do? What are the benefits and drawbacks of love in Allende's books?
- What causes political unrest in Allende's novels? Are the causes and effects of political problems in her stories similar to the causes and effects of political strife in reality?
- Allende has expressed her value of the Hebrew saying, "The story is truer than true." What does this mean? Does it have anything to do with justice, human potential, and the unseen and often unnoticed power of love?
- Can we learn anything about reality from a fictional tale? How so?
- What do women have to do to overcome oppression in Allende's books?
- How does the oppression of women negatively affect men in Allende's novels? It seems that there is often a "boomerang" effect.
- Most families in Allende's books have hurtful secrets. How does burying truth and shirking responsibility damage a family's offspring?

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## JORGE AMADO

**Born:** Ferradas, near Ilhéus, Bahia, Brazil  
August 10, 1912

**Died:** Salvador, Bahia, Brazil  
August 6, 2001

*The author of numerous internationally famous novels, Amado became the representative of Brazilian literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jorge Amado (uh-MAH-doo) was born on a cacao farm in the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia. When Amado was a year old, his father was wounded in a murder attempt. A year later, a flood devastated the family farm and the Amados were forced to move to the town of Ilhéus. The family recovered from its financial losses and soon purchased a new farm, as well as a second home in Ilhéus. At age ten, Amado entered boarding school, where he was introduced to literature. His father denied his request to transfer to another boarding school, and Amado left school and wandered through Bahia before making his way to his paternal grandfather's home. Following a stay at another boarding school, where he immersed himself in literature, Amado worked, at age fifteen, as a reporter. He had already begun writing fiction. He joined a writers' group. His first novel, *O país do carnaval* (the land of carnival), was published in 1931, when Amado was nineteen.

Amado entered law school in 1931, and though he would eventually earn his degree, he was more interested in writing and things literary. Following the publication of his second and third short novels, Amado's first full-length novel, *Jubiabá* (English translation, 1984), appeared in 1935. It was an immediate success. Two other novels, including the award-winning *Mar morto* (1936; *Sea of Death*, 1984), followed quickly.

Amado was becoming known for the leftist nature of his novels and was imprisoned briefly by the Getúlio Vargas regime in 1936. Afterward, he embarked on a trip that took him all over Latin America and North America and during which he had

contact with numerous writers, artists, and social activists. He returned to Brazil the following year, only to be arrested once again and to see his books banned and burned publicly. Released soon thereafter, Amado remained in Brazil until 1941, when, as a result of the oppressive nature of the Vargas regime, he took up residence in Argentina. He returned to Brazil in 1942, was arrested again, and was released on the condition that he remain in Salvador, the capital of his native state of Bahia. In 1942, he published *Terras do sem fim* (*The Violent Land*, 1945). He separated from his wife Matilde, whom he had married in 1933 and with whom he had a daughter, in 1944, was elected vice president of the First Congress of Brazilian Writers in 1945, and married his second wife, Zélia Gettai, in the same year. When the Vargas regime fell in 1945, Amado was elected to the Chamber of Deputies as a Communist. The Communist Party in Brazil was outlawed in 1947, however, and Amado went into voluntary exile the following year, spending most of the next several years in Europe.

Amado's political activities and his travels had, except for relatively small exceptions, taken him out of the literary spotlight since 1946. He returned to the forefront of Brazilian fiction, however, in 1958, with the publication of *Gabriela, cravo e canela* (*Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*, 1962), an award-winning, best-selling novel that was shockingly different (humorous and sensual as opposed to dogmatic and heavy-handed) from his earlier works. *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* marked the beginning of a new and more popular Amado.

The 1960's saw Amado's nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature, his election to the Brazilian



Academy of Letters, the installation of a military dictatorship in Brazil, and the publication of several of the writer's most famous works, among them *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro D'água* (1961; *The Two Deaths of Quincas Wateryell*, 1965), which had actually first been published in 1959 but was now reissued in a volume with another short novel. *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (1966; *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, 1969) is perhaps Amado's most internationally famous novel. *Tenda dos milagres* (1969; *Tent of Miracles*, 1971) also appeared in what for Amado was a prodigious decade.

In 1971, Amado traveled with his wife to North America, where he spent two months as a writer-in-residence at Pennsylvania State University. This decade also saw the publication of several of the author's important novels: *Tereza Batista cansada de guerra* (1972; *Tereza Batista: Home from the Wars*, 1975), *Tiêta do Agreste* (1977; *Tieta, the Goat Girl*, 1979), and *Farda, fardão, camisola de dormir* (1979; *Pen, Sword, and Camisole*, 1985). A number of film versions of Amado's novels premiered during the 1970's, chief among them *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*.

Amado continued to write and travel in the 1980's and 1990's. His *Tocaia Grande: A face obscura* (*Showdown*, 1988) came out in 1984, a year prior to the return of civilian government to Brazil. The Jorge Amado Cultural Foundation was established in Salvador in 1987. Amado's twenty-second novel, *Capitán de altura*, was published in 2000, sixty-nine years after his first. He died of heart and lung failure on August 6, 2001, four days before his eighty-ninth birthday.

## ANALYSIS

Jorge Amado was the most illustrious Brazilian novelist of the twentieth century. Within Brazil, Amado was seen as a national treasure, while abroad he was considered by many readers and critics to be almost the personification of contemporary Brazilian letters. Many of his novels have become classics of Brazilian literature; several have found an international audience. His novels have been made into films, and almost all of Amado's novels have been translated into numerous languages. Amado's novels, however, are not without controversy.

Amado's career can be divided into two basic phases: the pre-1958, or pre-*Gabriela, Clove and Cin-*

*namon* phase, and the post-1958, or post-*Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* phase. In general, Amado's pre-1958 novels are gritty and proletarian. In these works, Amado chronicles the struggles of the downtrodden and oppressed, and he champions their causes. The author's sympathies, as reflected both in the description and the actions of his characters, are clearly on the side of the underdog. His rather one-dimensional, rebellious, proletarian heroes speak the language of the masses and show themselves to be more virtuous than their oppressors. Amado, through virtually every element of these frequently heavy-handed works, leaves no doubt as to the message he wishes to communicate.

This is not to say, however, that Amado's pre-1958 novels are not worthy of praise. The novels of this period have been lauded for how vividly they portray the Brazilian underclasses and for, in many cases, their inclusion and equally vivid depiction of Brazil's Afro-Brazilian culture (in *Jubiabá*, for example). Even with their heavily politicized content, some of these novels present love stories, or at least love subplots, the treatment of which borders on the lyrical. Virtually all the pre-1958 novels, from the best (the consensus choice being *The Violent Land*) to the weakest, show the aspect of Amado's fiction that most readers and critics alike consider to be the author's greatest strength. He is, quite simply, a master storyteller.

Had Amado quit writing prior to 1958, he would have been considered a major writer of the so-called novel of the Brazilian northeast and his fame within Brazil would have been assured. It is the works he published beginning in 1958, *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* being the first of these, however, that won him international fame.

The Amado of *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* and that of subsequent novels was in many ways a new Amado. The change was not one of political conviction but of approach. Amado's post-1958 novels continued to expose and denounce social injustice. The realism and proletarian directness of his earlier novels had been replaced, however, with irony, picaresque humor, parody, and satire. The new Amado still favored the lower classes, clearly, but his support of them and his antipathy toward the privileged classes no longer came across in heavy-handed fashion. Rather, there is an exaltation of the former and parody of the latter. Correspondingly, while the pre-1958 Amado novels are

very serious works, the post-1958 Amado novels are frequently downright funny, with the upper classes almost always the butt of the joke. Amado's social message still gets through; it is merely conveyed in a more entertaining and an artistically subtler package.

The post-1958 novels are also frequently more sensual and freer in general with respect to social mores. In these novels, Amado celebrates the freedom to pursue a life unrestricted by bourgeois values. His colorful characters—from rum-swilling bums to sexually uninhibited young women to naked ghosts—with whom Amado consistently sympathizes, flout Brazil's proper and regulated middle- and upper-class society.

Amado's pre-1958 novels and his post-1958 novels do have more in common, however, than the author's sympathy for the downtrodden. One element found in both phases of Amado's career is his celebration of Afro-Brazilian culture, and, in fact, this element appears even stronger in the post-1958 Amado. Amado continues to be the master storyteller in his second phase; in fact, he appears to have only gotten better in this area.

Amado's works are not without controversy. He has been criticized for exploiting the misery of the lower classes and for romanticizing and even, in his second phase, idealizing and trivializing their lives. He has been criticized as well for promoting racial and cultural stereotypes, for bordering (in post-1958 works) on the pornographic, for demeaning women (this despite the fact that many of his strongest and wisest characters are women), for repeating episodes and characters, for stylistic sloppiness, for being technically uninnovative, for being superficial, and for being too popular. All of this combined has led several critics to decry the quality of Amado's works and to challenge his place in Brazilian literature. Despite the controversy surrounding his works, however, Amado remains one of the most widely read and most internationally famous Brazilian novelists.

## GABRIELA, CLOVE AND CINNAMON

**First published:** *Gabriela, cravo e canela*, 1958  
(English translation, 1962)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The sensual love story of Gabriela and Nacib is set against the backdrop of a changing Brazil.*

Gabriela is a beautiful, uneducated, young mulatto girl who, escaping the droughts in the Bahian backlands, walks into the town of Ilhéus in the 1920's in search of a better life. She is hired as a cook by Nacib Saad, the Syrian owner of a bar named Vesuvius, and her cooking skills and her beauty soon make the bar a major attraction. Nacib and Gabriela become lovers, and Nacib soon marries this girl of the cinnamon-colored skin who always smells of cloves. Nacib's attempts to make Gabriela a respectable, middle-class wife fail, however, and he soon finds the sexually free Gabriela in the bed of another. He does not kill her, however, as Brazilian tradition at the time suggests he do. He instead annuls the marriage and dismisses her as his cook at the bar. With the absence of Gabriela and her culinary delights, business at the bar quickly falls off, and Nacib, too, realizes that he still loves Gabriela. At the end of the novel, he has taken her back both as his cook and, this time, as his mistress.



The story of Gabriela and Nacib is but the foreground of this novel. *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* is, above all, about social, political, and attitudinal change in a small Brazilian town during the 1920's. Much of the novel centers on the efforts of a young, Rio de Janeiro-born businessman named Mundinho Falcão to bring social and economic progress and political reform to Ilhéus and the local old guard's efforts, including an assassination attempt on one of Falcão's supporters, to combat such changes. Change clearly wins in the novel,

however, as Falcão's side wins in the local elections, and a powerful local planter, a colonel, whose murder of his unfaithful wife and her lover opens the novel, is sent to prison for his crime, something that would not have happened in the old Brazil. Even Nacib's annulment of his marriage with the unfaithful Gabriela, as opposed to his exercising his tradition-dictated right to kill her, reflects a new social attitude, an attitude that promotes a freer, less restricted society, the spirit of which is symbolized in the carefree, uninhibited Gabriela.

This novel marks the beginning of the second phase of Amado's career. Like its predecessors, it still conveys a social message, but it does so within the context of a sensual and always entertaining story that makes the message both more subtly presented and easier to take.

## THE TWO DEATHS OF QUINCAS WATERYELL

**First published:** *A morte e a morte de Quincas Berro Dágua*, 1961 (English translation, 1965)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A man dies and is visited by his drunken cronies. The group sets out for one more night on the town together.*

*The Two Deaths of Quincas Wateryell* tells the story of Joaquim (or Quincas) Soares da Cunha, a respectable, middle-class man who left his nagging wife, his equally nagging daughter, his spineless son-in-law, and his job as a petty bureaucrat to become a rum-guzzling vagabond on the streets of Salvador, Bahia. His surname became Wateryell the day that he mistakenly drank water instead of his usual white rum and let out a yell of "Waaaaaater!" that was heard for blocks. As the short novel opens, Quincas has died. His family is notified, as are his street cronies. The family, embarrassed that Quincas's death may open up questions among family and friends concerning his life since his leaving home, comes to sit with the body in Quincas's small room in the lower-class section

of Salvador. Quincas's street companions, four of the most colorful and comic characters to be found in Amado's works, come to pay their respects and spell the family in their vigil. Soon after Quincas's friends are alone with his body, they hear Quincas speak, prop him up in the casket, and begin to share drink with him. They soon decide that they should have one more night on the town together. Quincas and his friends head out to the streets and visit Quincas's girlfriend. They later stop in a bar, where Quincas starts a fight. They finally make their way to a friend's boat, where they get caught in a storm and Quincas, yelling out his last words, dives into the sea, dying as he always wished he would, at sea rather than on land. (Regarding the novel's title, this last death may even be Quincas's third death, his first one being a symbolic one when he left home, his second coming at the beginning of the story. How many deaths Quincas endures depends on one's interpretation of the story.)

Some readers consider this book to be Amado's masterpiece, both because of its entertaining story and because of the way in which it makes deliberate use of ambiguity. The work is a commentary on the importance of appearances and the materialism of the middle class, as opposed to the *joie de vivre* and fidelity of friendship of the lower classes. It is also a treatise on the nature of reality and the ability of language to capture (or deliberately avoid capturing) it. Virtually every aspect of the presentation of Quincas's story, told by a narrator who has pieced the story together from various witnesses, many of whom were drunk and anything but reliable, leaves open the question of what really happened to Quincas Wateryell once he expired alone in his room. A case can be made both for his temporary resurrection and for his body being dragged from the casket and down the street by his drunken friends, only to be flung into the sea as the storm tossed the boat about. Amado, through both his questionable narrator and his descriptions of Quincas's "actions," deliberately provides no concrete answers. In fact, Amado seems to go to considerable lengths to eliminate the possibility of definitive conclusions, which, of course, supports the theme of the ability (or lack thereof) of language to capture reality.

## DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS

**First published:** *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*, 1966 (English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A woman's unfaithful, gambling husband dies and then returns, naked and visible only to her, soon after she has married his exact opposite.*

The novel opens during Carnival in Salvador, Bahia. Dona Flor's first husband, Vadinho, has just died while dancing the samba in the streets, dressed as a woman. Dona Flor holds a wake and the popular Vadinho's numerous friends, including everyone from political heavyweights to prostitutes, come to pay their respects and reminisce about their carousing, sexually promiscuous, and gambling friend. Vadinho's funeral is even better attended than his wake. Afterward, however, the young, respectable Dona Flor is alone, her life empty. She deeply misses Vadinho, who, though he was unfaithful to her, came and went at all hours, and gambled away their money, was a passionate and spontaneous lover. Flashbacks tell of the couple's life together.

Dona Flor decides to move on with her life. She meets and marries, following a very proper courtship, Dr. Teodoro Madureira, a local pharmacist. He is everything Vadinho was not: faithful, respectable, formal. He is also not the lover that Vadinho was. This becomes apparent on the couple's honeymoon. Still, Dona Flor is happy because her life is stable, her place in society a respectable one. Dona Flor's stable, if rather boring, existence changes radically, however, when, on the night of her first wedding anniversary with Teodoro, she finds a naked Vadinho lying on the couple's bed, returned

from the dead and visible only to Dona Flor. His only interest is in making love to Dona Flor. Dona Flor fights off Vadinho's advances and her own desires for some time, during which Vadinho visits his old friends (who, unlike Dona Flor, cannot see him) and makes considerable fun of Dona Flor's new husband. Afraid that she will no longer be able to resist her own urges to give in to Vadinho's advances, she asks that one of the Afro-Brazilian gods take Vadinho away, only to change her mind at the last minute. As the novel ends, Dona Flor, content to live with both Vadinho and Teodoro, walks down the street with her second husband on one arm and her first husband, still naked and visible only to her, on the other.

This comic and sensual novel shows the struggle between the respectable and passionate sides of Brazilian society and the difficulty a person, and particularly a woman, faces in fusing both sides in order to find happiness. *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* is another example of Amado's ability in his post-1958 phase to communicate a serious social message in an entertaining form.

### SUMMARY

Through both hard-hitting social novels, in his pre-1958 phase, and humorous and sensual novels, in his post-1958 phase, Jorge Amado earned a reputation as a master storyteller whose sympathies always lie with Brazil's underclasses. His works won for him fame both within Brazil and without.

Keith H. Brower



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Jorge Amado celebrates Afro-Brazilian culture. What similarities are there between Afro-Brazilians and African Americans?
- Explain the basis for your judgment as to how many deaths Quincas suffered.
- Defend Amado against one of the following labels that have been applied to him: antifeminism, stylistic sloppiness, superficiality.
- What facts in Amado's life seem to have led to his leftist philosophy?
- Does the great rise in Amado's reputation during the 1960's owe more to changes in his writing or to changes in his society?
- Consider the features of Amado's later work that have led critics to call it more artistic.



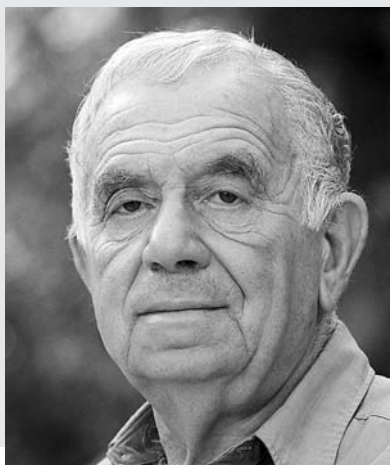
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## YEHUDA AMICHAH

**Born:** Würzburg, Germany  
May 3, 1924

**Died:** Jerusalem, Israel  
September 22, 2000

*Amichai's poetry, fiction, and drama chronicle the twentieth century Israeli experience as masterfully as do the works of any figure in Hebrew literature. As Israel's first major poet, Amichai explored—with a prescient authenticity and remarkable stylistic control—the triumphs and tragedies that have come to characterize a nation.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Yehuda Amichai (ah-mee-KI), deemed by countless critics and scholars to be Israel's master poet of the twentieth century, was born in Würzburg, Germany, in 1924. He immigrated with his family to Palestine in 1936, where they sought refuge from the persecution of the Nazis. Amichai was educated in provincial Hebrew schools and became a teacher in them after graduation. In World War II, Amichai served as a soldier with the British in Europe, an experience that provided inspiration for many of his writings. Shortly after the war, Amichai was once again called to military service, joining the fight for Israeli independence. Initially, he enlisted as a member of the Palmach (commando troops) of the Haganah, an underground Jewish militia. Later he saw active duty as an Israeli soldier, both on the Negev front and in the battle for Sinai, both major campaigns in the Arab-Israeli war of 1947-1948. Shortly thereafter, Amichai became an Israeli citizen.

Having grown up in a strict Orthodox Jewish household, Amichai obtained a solid background in Hebrew language, theology, and culture that strongly informs his writing. After completing military service, he embarked on a career as a writer, determined to contribute his distinctive voice to the fledgling Israeli literary movement. Even though his English was impeccable, he opted to write exclusively in Hebrew, a gesture of reverence to both Jewish faith and culture. Because of his

strong early ties—both intellectually and politically—to Great Britain, Amichai's early work shows the pronounced influence of the British metaphysical school. Many of his early poems pay homage to the elaborate metaphorical conceits and precise, ornate diction of seventeenth century English masters George Herbert and John Donne. However, his penchant for linguistic concision and emphasis on imagery in his poems clearly reflect the influence of English and American modernists such as W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound.

Despite his English-language influences, Amichai was first and foremost a Hebrew writer. By 1962 he had already published two volumes of poetry in Hebrew, *Akshav u-ve-yamim aherim* (1955; now and in other days) and *Baginah ha-tsiburit* (1958; in the park), as well as a collection of short stories and a play. By the mid-1960's he was already enjoying the reputation among his contemporaries in Israel, to quote *The New York Times Magazine* critic Robert Alter, as "the country's leading poet." The English translation of his 1963 novel *Lo me'akshav, lo mi-kan* appeared in 1968 as *Not of This Time, Not of This Place* and increased public knowledge of the Israeli writer in the United Kingdom and the United States. The novel chronicles the experiences of a former Israeli soldier who, after World War II, struggles with the question of whether to return to his native Germany or to remain in Jerusalem to build a new life. Because of

the novel's poignant subject matter and provocative autobiographical elements, it was well received by critics in both the United States and the United Kingdom. By the end of the decade, Amichai's position as a key figure in contemporary Jewish literature was firmly established.

In addition to the English-language publication of *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*, 1968 also saw the appearance of Amichai's first major English-language poetry collection, *Selected Poems*, translated by Assia Gutman. Gutman, Harold Schimmel, and British poet Ted Hughes contributed translations of Amichai's work to his next English-language collection, *Selected Poems of Yehuda Amichai* (1971). Other English translations of Amichai's poetry include *Songs of Jerusalem and Myself* (1973), *Travels of a Latter-Day Benjamin of Tudela* (1976), and *Amen* (1977), the latter volume translated by Hughes. The two most definitive compilations—both published by Harper—are *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (1986) and *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry, 1948-1994* (1994).

Amichai's works also enjoy a prestigious international reputation. His poems have been translated into almost forty languages, including French, German, Swedish, Spanish, and Catalan. Critic Stephen Kessler has praised Amichai as "one of the planet's preeminent poets. . . . Jewish down to the bones, his humanity . . . broadly universal," while poet and essayist C. K. Williams noted in *The New Republic* in 2000 that Amichai's writings embody "the shrewdest and most solid of poetic intelligences." Preeminent American critic Edward Hirsch has likened Amichai's poetry to the works of seminal English Romanticist William Wordsworth, while also noting its stunning similarities to the works of key modernist William Carlos Williams. Hirsch has called *Travels of a Latter-Day Benjamin of Tudela* a "miniature Jewish version of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*" and described Amichai as "a representative man with unusual gifts who in telling his own story also relates the larger story of his people."

*Patuah sagur patuah* (1998; *Open Closed Open: Poems*, 2000) is generally regarded as Amichai's magnum opus. *Publishers Weekly* praised the book as one of the major poetic works of the decade, and in his obituary for Amichai, C. K. Williams eloquently reflected that:

To sojourn with Amichai in the vast, rugged, sympathetic domain of his imagination is to be given leave to linger in one of those privileged moments when we are in a confidential and confident engagement with our own spirits, when we know with certainty that such a process of imaginative self-investigation is proper and just.

## ANALYSIS

Early in his literary career, Amichai decided to write exclusively in Hebrew. Although he could have just as easily chosen to write in English or German, Amichai's decision to compose in his native tongue may be described as no less than deliberate. The fact that much of his poetry deals with overtly political subject matter is reinforced by the awareness that its language of origin is Hebrew. Steeped as he was in the Western tradition, Amichai doubtlessly knew that to reach an audience outside of Israel his works would eventually have to be translated. However, it is clear that he opted nonetheless to write in Hebrew in order to make a statement. Amichai chose Hebrew not only because it was his first language but more important because an awareness of the choice adds legitimacy and urgency to the cause and plight of his people—the most prevalent theme in his work. Readers in other languages are forced to consider that they are approaching Amichai's delicate syntaxes and nuanced metaphorical conceits in translation, not in their intended language. To adequately explore the depths of Amichai's writings, readers must either learn Hebrew or at least place their wholehearted trust in a good translator—both of which draw increased attention to the language and to the cultural legacy with which it is inextricably entwined.

Amichai's works are characterized not only by a brazen and unapologetic sense of nationalism but also by an amazing gift for metaphor. Rich, allusive, and complex as they often are, Amichai's metaphors seek to immerse his reader in a universe of lush, profound, sometimes even elusive conceits. Imaginatively speaking, Amichai often asks much of his readers—but he gives them a great deal in return. One cannot step away from his poems in particular without thinking that their idea of what can be imagined, compared, or even contemplated has not been stretched to its limits by a reading experience that is both enriching and informative.



Stylistically, Amichai's poems are perhaps best described as economical if not minimalistic. Decidedly sparse and devoid of all but the most essential exposition, Amichai's poems rely instead on the originality and depth of his figurative language for their energy and focus. Just as likely to draw attention to the nature of readers' responsibilities to their community, nation, or world as they are to the state of their souls, Amichai's metaphors often seem to do the impossible—they simultaneously navigate the topographies both of state and of spirit.

Although noted for his terse, often enigmatic, lyric poems, Amichai showed his versatility by working in a broad variety of literary forms. Works like "Yerushalyim 5728" ("Jerusalem 1967") and *Travels of a Latter-Day Benjamin of Tuleda* reveal the more expansive and epic dimensions of his poetry, while his novel *Not of This Time, Not of This Place* displays Amichai's talent as a boldly polemical and stylistically innovative prose fiction writer. He also wrote a number of perceptive critical pieces for various magazines and journals, and his play *Masa' le-Ninveh* (pb. 1962, pr. 1964) was first produced in Israel in 1964. He translated a number of works from German into Hebrew, showing his prowess not only as a writer but as a gifted linguist as well.

### "MY FATHER'S DEATH"

**First published:** "Mot Avi," 1955 (collected in *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry, 1948-1994*, 1994)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Through the playful language of a child's nursery rhyme, a grieving son recounts his father's passing and describes his own attempts to deal with the aftermath of this profound loss.*

Initially included in his first volume of poetry, *Akshav u-ve-yamim aherim*, the deftly concise but remarkably incisive poem "My Father's Death" deals with one of Amichai's most pervasive themes—the labyrinthine implications of death on the experi-

ence of life. The brilliant translation of the poem included by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav in their definitive retrospective, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry: 1948-1994*, preserves the whimsical, childlike diction of the Hebrew version but also reveals a poem that is remarkably seasoned and deeply introspective.

Rhyme schemes are rare in Amichai's poetry, which, generally speaking, is pointedly modernistic in its avoidance of traditional poetic devices. However, "My Father's Death," although ominous in theme, employs a series of rhymes, such as "places/ spaces," "bow/ now," "soon/ moon," and "endeavor/ forever," that are more evocative of Mother Goose than of William Carlos Williams. Nonetheless, the effect is both stunning and appropriate; Amichai masterfully uses a child's language to disarm his readers of their adult defenses. He then proceeds to reinform those readers' reckoning of one of life's most tragic but inevitable experiences—the death of a father—in deft and startlingly perceptive terms. Of himself and his grownup siblings, all struggling to make sense of their father's passing, the speaker remarks "We went to call [our father's] God, to bow:/ May God come and help us now."

Although the language of the poem is remarkably childlike, its insights are the exclusive domain of the adult. Seeking to understand the profundity of the idea that an all-wise and all-knowing God has called his father away to Heaven, the speaker is utterly at a loss to express himself in adult terms. Instead he opts for a language that has never failed him, that of the heartbroken child. Of the God who has mysteriously taken his father, the speaker reflects "And God takes pains, is coming soon," and in both a profound and conciliatory attempt to comprehend God's omnipotence can say only that after returning to paradise God "hung His coat on the hook of the moon." By the final couplet of the poem, the speaker remains admittedly inept in his ability to adequately understand either his father's death or God's purpose in authoring it. Death, like life, is ultimately viewed as a miracle because of its oblique power and indisputable finality: "But our father, who went out on this endeavor—/ God will keep him there forever."

## “OUT OF THREE OR FOUR PEOPLE IN A ROOM”

**First published:** “A-mach a triuir no ceathrar,” 1958 (collected in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This early but significant poem offers a terse but perceptive meditation on war, indifference, and the sense of isolation with which all people must inevitably contend.*

Although not blatantly political in focus, “Out of Three or Four People in a Room” is clearly informed by Amichai’s experiences in war. Both of its stanzas open with the same refrain: “Out of three or four people in a room/ One always stands at the window.” However, each stanza regards the figure of which it speaks, the “One,” in unique but related terms.

In stanza one, the figure, here deliberately unnamed, gazes from a window on the ravages of a just-concluded battle. The figure witnesses “the evil among thorns/ And the fires on the hill,” left only with an emptiness that appears to be the only tangible result of the carnage. He observes that before the battle “people . . . went out whole,” only to return after the conflict “Like small change to their homes.” Clearly, Amichai’s metaphor expresses the ambiguity many Israelis felt in the wake of their “victory.”

By stanza two, the poem’s political imagery becomes even more blatant. No longer faceless, the poem’s central figure takes on both a face and a gender. “His hair dark above his thoughts,” the figure adopts the identity of a soldier, complete with “kit bag” and “rations.” He seeks a reason for fighting, but, like his desperate and disillusioned cohort in the opening stanza, is ultimately left only with hollow epithets to console him.

## “A PITY. WE WERE SUCH A GOOD INVENTION”

**First published:** 1967 (collected in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this poem about the breakup of a marriage, the speaker attempts to reconcile himself with his ambivalence about the split. Although he acknowledges that the relationship’s end was inevitable, he admits its value as a vital stage in his and his former spouse’s emotional growth.*

Lauded for its startling directness and austere language, “A Pity. We Were Such a Good Invention” in many ways epitomizes the stylistic tendencies for which Amichai’s poetry is best known. Notably minimalistic, the original Hebrew version contains a mere eleven lines and thirty-five words. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav’s English translation is only slightly more expansive at seventy-two words. Still, the poem contains a wealth of insight about the nature of human relationships.

A number of critics have noted the pronounced influence of the English metaphysical school, particularly of John Donne and George Herbert, in Amichai’s poetry. Critic Edward Hirsch compares “A Pity. We Were Such a Good Invention” to the classic Donne works “The Good-Morrow” and “The Canonization,” citing its incisive attempts at combining erotic, religious, and political imagery to characterize the nature of matrimony. For example, in the poem’s remarkably imaginative central conceit, the speaker compares his betrothal to his wife to an amputation. The ensuing consummation of the marriage is likened to “An aeroplane made from a man and wife.” The poem’s closing lines beautifully describe the ambivalence of their tragic, brief union as a period in which they “hovered,” albeit like a malfunctioning aircraft, “a little above the earth.”

In the manner of Donne, Amichai chooses to draw original and enormously provocative comparisons between things that are seemingly unlike, such as marriage and amputation, divorce and airplane flight.

## NOT OF THIS TIME, NOT OF THIS PLACE

**First published:** *Lo me-'akshav, lo mi-kan*, 1963 (English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An émigré from Germany to Palestine struggles with the question of whether to return to Germany or remain in Jerusalem in the aftermath of World War II.*

The highly autobiographical novel *Not of This Time, Not of This Place* recounts the struggles of its protagonist, Joel, over the question of whether to return to his native Germany or to remain in Jerusalem, where he has found himself after the end of World War II. Jerusalem appeals to Joel because of the stimulation he derives from its exotic locale. A young archaeologist at the city's Hebrew University, Joel dreams of staying in Jerusalem because of the vague promise of discovering a new lover. Although he is married, he is only tentatively loyal to his wife and views the prospect of an illicit love affair as a chance to embark on a new life in a new country.

In contrast, the "old" aspects of Germany, with much of the nation reduced to ruin, offer Joel little incentive to return. However, there is one compelling reason to go back: Joel feels morally obligated to return to Germany and confront the former Nazis who murdered his close childhood friend. Another friend enigmatically suggests that Joel both remain in Israel and return to Germany. But how is he to live two lives at once, in two completely different countries?

At this point, the novel embarks on a brave stylistic experiment; it splits into two parallel but alternating narratives, one told in the third person and the other told in the first person. In the third-person narrative, Joel remains in Jerusalem and enters into an obsessive love affair with an American woman. Seeking to reinvent himself, Joel experiences a series of events that reveal new sides of himself. Ultimately, he realizes he can never completely shake off his past, but he does find that he can at least dim its memory by immersing himself in the quixotic landscapes Jerusalem offers. In the alternate first-person narrative, Joel returns to Ger-

many. In literal terms, he seeks understanding of and vengeance for his former friend's murder. Figuratively, he likewise seeks reconciliation with his nebulous but undeniable past.

Some reviewers have criticized the parallel narratives for being uneven, finding the Jerusalem passage more energetic and metaphorically lush than the episodes set in Germany. However, it is important to keep in mind that the novel's central purpose is to seamlessly merge style with substance. The Jerusalem narrative embodies hope, fancy, and the pursuit of a bigger and brighter future that can and sometimes does shelter people from their unresolved pasts. Naturally, such subject matter calls for the wistful, quixotic depictions that Amichai grants it. The German narrative, on the other hand, is driven by a different purpose. It tells the story of Joel's direct reconciliation with his ominous and unresolved past, one that must be related in more Spartan, less fanciful imagery and language. With commendable precision, Amichai seamlessly weaves the two narratives into a provocative and innovative whole.

## "JERUSALEM 1967"

**First published:** "Yerushalyim 5728," 1967 (collected in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 1996)

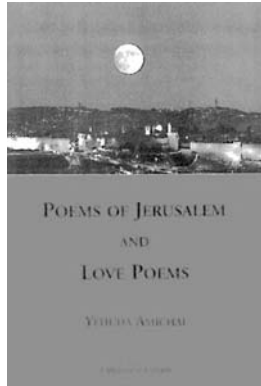
**Type of work:** Poem

*This twenty-two-section poem is a major meditation on Jerusalem, capital city of Israel, almost twenty years after statehood was won. It reflects upon the city's triumphs and follies in the wake of a generation of independence.*

Perhaps the most unique characteristics of "Jerusalem 1967" are its length and figurative expansiveness. Known primarily for his distinctly concise lyric poems, here Amichai opens up and for once allows himself the space and abandon requisite of such a portentous subject. In a sense, Jerusalem serves both as the capital of Israel and the capital of the poem. Throughout its twenty-two thematically varied but stylistically cohesive sections, Amichai explores the countless notions—political, spiritual, and personal—that his adopted homeland

and its luminous capital have come to embody in the two decades that it has been the poet's home.

"Jerusalem 1967" does not attempt to define the city; Amichai never implies that such a feat is even possible. However, through a series of colorful vignettes he does attempt to evoke all of its vibrancy, complexity, and mystery.



The opening stanzas of the poem describe Jerusalem as a place of refuge, its speaker exuberantly observing that "A person returning to Jerusalem feels that places/ That were painful no longer hurt." By the middle sections, Jerusalem is paradoxically transformed into a haven of moral ambiguity, a place of "children growing half in the

ethics of their fathers/ And half in the teachings of war." In the concluding section of the poem the speaker is somehow able to reconcile himself to the fact that such an ancient and monolithic city cannot be summed up in a series of mere metaphors, no matter how bold or illustrative. Instead, all he

can conclude is that Jerusalem "is built on varied foundations/ Of restrained scream." It is indeed the city's restraint, its silence, its stoic and unflinching obstinacy that makes it the evasive totem of awe that "Jerusalem 1967" purports it to be.

### SUMMARY

Several critics and scholars have lauded Yehuda Amichai as perhaps the most significant Hebrew poet of his, or maybe any, generation. His writings possess an unmistakable resonance and undeniable skill that have won him the adulation of readers throughout the world. In addition to scores of other accolades, Amichai won the prestigious Israel Prize in 1982 and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature on multiple occasions. However, Amichai never received the Nobel Prize. Some have attributed this to the outspoken political nature of his work, suggesting that his ideology was perhaps too audacious to curry favor with the selection committee's more conservative members. However, even if one finds Amichai's politics too overt or dogmatic, it is difficult to dispute his compelling and exceptional poetic gifts. It is indisputable that Amichai is one of the key figures of twentieth century poetry.

Gregory D. Horn

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Although many readers find Yehuda Amichai's poetry to be "political," is political ideology actually the central concern of his poetry? If so, does it enhance or detract from his appeal?
- In what ways do Amichai's life and works intersect? To what effect does he use his own experiences—as a soldier, scholar, writer, and believer—to add resonance and power to his writings?
- Do you find Amichai's preoccupation with brevity and conciseness to be positive or a negative feature of his poems?
- The narrative technique employed in Amichai's novel *Not of This Time, Not of This Place* is unconventional. Do you find it effective? Why or why not?
- Because Amichai wrote exclusively in Hebrew, his poems have presented problems for English translators. Compare the available English translations of his poems. How do the variations from one translation to the next affect your interpretation of Amichai's poems?





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## KINGSLEY AMIS

**Born:** London, England  
April 16, 1922

**Died:** London England  
October 22, 1995

*One of England's most gifted and versatile contemporary writers, Amis distinguished himself as a poet and as an essayist but above all as a seriocomic novelist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Kingsley William Amis (AY-mihs) was born in London on April 16, 1922. His father, William Robert, worked as a senior clerk in the export division of Colman's Mustard and fully expected his only child to enter commerce. His son's intention, however, was to be a writer—a poet, really—though it was not until the publication of his rollicking and irreverent first published novel, *Lucky Jim* (1954), that Amis received worldwide recognition, winning the W. Somerset Maugham Award in 1955. By Amis's own account, he had been writing since he was a child, but without notable success. To read his early poetry is an embarrassment for him, he has said; his first novel, "The Legacy," written while he attended St. John's College, Oxford, and rejected by fourteen publishers, was later abandoned altogether because it was boring, unfunny, and loaded with affectation. He also considered the novel derivative: He felt that he was writing someone else's book, while what he wanted to say needed a new story and a new style.

Several factors influenced Amis's development into a writer whose novels and style are unique and universally recognized. His comic proclivities were encouraged by his father—a man with "a talent for physical clowning and mimicry." Amis described himself as "undersized, law-abiding, timid," a child

able to make himself popular by charm or clowning, who found that at school he could achieve much by exploiting his inherited powers of mimicry. That was true not only at the City of London School—where he specialized in the classics until he was sixteen, then switched to English—but also at Oxford, where he earned his B.A. (with honors) and M.A. degrees in English.

School friends testified to Amis's capacity for making others laugh. Philip Larkin's description of their first meeting in the introduction to his own novel *Jill* (1946, 1964), suggests that it was Amis's "genius for imaginative mimicry" that attracted him: "For the first time I felt myself in the presence of a talent greater than my own." The novelist John Wain recalled how, in the "literary group" to which both of them belonged, Amis was a "superb mimic" who relished differences of character and idiom. Later as a writer, like Charles Dickens, Amis sometimes acted out with his face and his body the appearances and the actions of his characters while creating them. More important, many of his fictional people would appear as fine mimics themselves, using masquerades, role playing, practical jokes, and faces of all kinds for sheer enjoyment, to cover up certain insecurities, or to defend themselves from boredom and other unpleasantness in their lives.

This period of "intensive joke swapping," as Larkin called it, continued when Amis entered the army in 1942. He became an officer, served in the Royal Signals, and landed in Normandy in June, 1944. After service in France, Belgium, and West Germany, he was demobilized in October, 1945.

He later recalled how he and a friend wrote part of a novel based on “malicious caricatures” of fellow officers. This period also was to provide material for stories such as “My Enemy’s Enemy,” “Court of Inquiry,” and “I Spy Strangers”; its immediate effect, however, was to open his eyes to the world, to all sorts of strange people and strange ways of behaving.

Amis’s status as an only child also added to his development as a writer, for at an early age he found himself seeking “self-entertainment.” He read adventure stories, science fiction, and boys’ comics. During these years, Amis also became interested in horror tales. After seeing the Boris Karloff version of *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Mummy* (1932), Amis became interested in what might be called the minor genres for reasons of wonder, excitement, and “a liking for the strange, the possibly horrific.” He became aware that the detective story, various tales of horror or terror, and the science-fiction story provided vehicles both for social satire and for investigation of human nature in a way not accessible to the mainstream novelist.

In view of his early tastes in reading, then, it is not surprising that Amis went on to write genre novels of his own. In *The Green Man* (1969), for example, he would turn the ghost story into an examination of dreaded death and all of its imagined horrors. In *The Riverside Villas Murder* (1973), he would use the detective story to explore how a child perceives the world: The detective analogy lies in the idea that the world of the senses is a series of clues, from which people try to piece together reality. In *The Alteration* (1976), he would use the counterfeit world of science fiction to dramatize a boy’s attempt to comprehend the consequences of adulthood and of his possible failure even to experience that stage in the sexual sense. In these instances and others, Amis would use contemporary literary genres as a means of exploring a world both absurd and threatening.

Along with his natural comic gifts and his interest in genre fiction, Amis’s development was affected by his initial exposure to an English tradition that resisted the modernist innovations influential in America and on the Continent. His dislike for experimental prose, for mystification, is attributable in part to the influence of one of his Oxford tutors, the Anglo-Saxon scholar Gavin

Bone, and to Amis’s readings of certain eighteenth century novelists, whose ability to bring immense variety and plentitude to their work without reverting to obscurity or stylistic excess Amis found appealing.

Amis attributed his personal standards of morality to his readings in Charles Dickens, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson and to the training in standard Protestant virtues that he received as a boy at home. Both of his parents were Baptists, but in protest against their own forceful religious indoctrination, their visits to church became less frequent as they grew older. Any reader of Amis’s works—for example, *Russian Hide-and-Seek* (1980) and *The Old Devils* (1986), for which he won the Man Booker Fiction Prize—soon becomes aware that there is in his writings a clear repudiation of traditional Christian belief. Nevertheless, from his parents he received certain central moral convictions that crystallized a personal philosophy of life and art. Hard work, conscientiousness, obedience, loyalty, frugality, patience—these lessons and others were put forward and later found their way into his novels, all of which emphasize the necessity of good works and of trying to live a moral life in the natural—as opposed to the supernatural—world.

Amis was knighted in 1990. In August, 1995, he had a fall, which may have been the result of a stroke. He died in London on October 22, 1995.

## ANALYSIS

Like most novelists, Amis was interested above all in human nature, and for most of his life he trained both eye and ear upon the exploration of that subject in all of its fascinating dimensions. From that exploration a primary theme emerged, one to which Amis himself referred when writing about G. K. Chesterton, whom he greatly admired, and Chesterton’s novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). In that book, Amis sensed “a feeling that the world we see and hear and touch is a flimsy veil that only just manages to cover up a deeper and far more awful reality.” It is a feeling that the reader encounters in Amis’s work as well, for the assumption underlying his novels is that people live in a broken world. The ever-increasing erosion of traditional values, the breakdown of communication everywhere, the seeming absence of any spiritual reality, the impossibility of the existence of any heroic fig-

ures—these are some of the painful conclusions following an imaginative investigation into the world as seen by Amis.

These bleak realities are not, of course, new to the evolution of the novel. What distinguishes Amis is that he communicates what could be an otherwise overwhelmingly black vision in such an engaging, entertaining, and readable way. His wit, his sense of style, his devotion to language and its revelation of character, the range of emotions that he elicits from his reader, and the richness of his invention all compel respect and critical attention.

Although at times his vision is bleak, his novels rarely make for bleak reading. For always, beneath the entertainment and eighteenth and nineteenth century fictional techniques for which he is known, there runs a consistent moral judgment that advocates the virtues of hard work, responsibility, decency, faith, and love—an enduring, if beleaguered, value system that defends the English language, traditions, customs, and freedoms against all of their assorted enemies.

The first public manifestation of his moral vision appears in *Lucky Jim* (1954). From that point, its development is clear and consistent. In his early novels—*Lucky Jim*, *That Uncertain Feeling* (1955), and *I Like It Here* (1958)—his fictional world is filled with verbal jokes, amusing or disturbing role playing, and outrageous incidents. Detached from political causes and the progress of their own lives, the protagonists of these stories are part rebels, part victims, part clowns who seek to compromise with or to escape from such facts of life as boredom, hypocrisy, and ignorance. Although each novel carries a serious moral interest, the mishaps encountered and sometimes caused by its unlikely heroes generate laughter instead of tears, because the reader is led to believe that through all of this chaos there is an ordering of events that will ultimately bring security and happiness.

Beginning with *Take a Girl Like You* (1960), however, Amis's view of life grows increasingly pessimistic. Now the world is an opportunistic, self-centered one in which the heroine must fend for herself; life for this character is more serious, more precarious, and less jovial. In *One Fat Englishman*

(1963), *The Anti-Death League* (1966), and *I Want It Now* (1968), life is often an absurd game in which the characters are suffering, often lonely individuals, with little chance for leading the good life, a life free from anxieties, guilts, and doubts.

In his next four novels, Amis's characters live on a darkling plain in a nightmare world in which both young and old are victims of a predominating malevolent presence. *The Green Man* (1969), *Girl, 20* (1971), *The Riverside Villas Murder* (1973), and *Ending Up* (1974) are exemplars of Amis's increasing concern with the question of human depravity, the ambiguity of perfidy, and the existence of evil forces in a world that is driven supposedly by the forces of good.

The potency of evil, the destructiveness of guilt, the often uncertain quest for identity and peace of mind, the perils of old age—these are some of Amis's central philosophical concerns in *The Alteration* (1976), *Jake's Thing* (1978), and *Russian Hide-and-Seek* (1980). Amis once again finds a great many ways to convey the message that human beings suffer, life is difficult, and comic masks conceal great anguish. Only occasionally is this grim picture relieved by some sort of idealism, some unexpected attitude of unselfishness and tenderness. In these novels, the social fabric has given way completely, so that the old mores no longer apply and, indeed, have either been replaced by depraved ones or not replaced at all, leaving a moral vacuum.

Finally, in *Stanley and the Women* (1984), *The Old Devils* (1986), *Difficulties with Girls* (1988), and *The Folks That Live on the Hill* (1990), Amis moves away from the broad scope of a society plagued by trouble to examine instead the troubles plaguing one of that society's most fundamental institutions: marriage. His characters are not going to regain the old sense of security that their lives once held, and Amis does not pretend that they will. What success they manage to attain is always partial. What, in the absence of an informing faith or an all-consuming family life, could provide purpose for living? More simply, how is one to be useful? This is the problem that haunts Amis's characters, and it is a question, underlying all of his novels, that now comes to the forefront.



## LUCKY JIM

**First published:** 1954

**Type of work:** Novel

*In this satire on life in an English provincial university, a young lecturer lives a highly comic secret life of protest against the hypocrisy and pseudointellectualism of certain members of the British establishment.*

*Lucky Jim* belongs to the genre of fiction known as the picaresque novel—with its episodic lurchings, its opportunistic hero, and its emphasis on satirizing various English character types. Although resourceful, the picaro is by tradition simple, a naïf who reveals, by his simplicity, the tattered moral fabric of a society based on pretension. It is Amis's great achievement in *Lucky Jim* that he has taken the ramshackle form of the traditional picaresque novel, centralized his moral theme (the firm value of being one's own person), and added the conventional plot element of lovers separated by evil forces.

To develop his moral stance in *Lucky Jim*, Amis divides his characters into two easily recognizable groups: generally praiseworthy figures, the ones who gain the greatest share of the reader's sympathy, and evil or at best worldly and corrupt characters who obstruct the fortunes of the good ones. Jim (the awkward outsider), Julius Gore-Urquhart (his benefactor or savior), and Christine Callaghan (the decent girl who accepts Jim despite his faults) are distinguished by moral honesty, personal sincerity, and a lack of pretense. Among the antagonists are Professor Welch (Jim's principal tormentor), Bertrand Welch (the defeated boaster), and the neurotic Margaret Peel (the thwarted "witch"), all of whom disguise their motives and present a false appearance. Gore-Urquhart functions as a mediator between common sense (Jim) and excess (the Welches), providing the norm by which to judge other frequently unstable personalities.

As the protagonist, Jim Dixon's character is established immediately with the description of his dual predicaments: He has a job that he does not want but for financial reasons is trying hard to keep, and he has become involved, without quite knowing why, with Margaret, a younger but better-

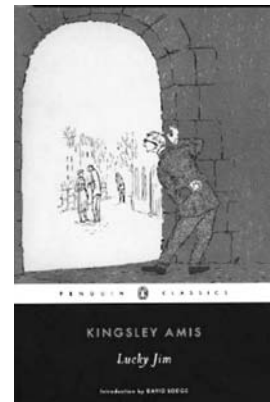
established colleague. It becomes immediately apparent that academic life for Jim is little more than a running duel with his superior, a never-ending speculation as to whether he will be dropped at the term's end or continued on probation for another year.

The picaresque novel is commonly a novel of quest, and Jim's standby and salvation through his own journey is a strong sense of humor that enables him to make light of much very real distress and disaster. Although he hates the Welch family, he knows that deference to them is essential if he is to retain his job. In order to maintain self-respect, however, he resorts to a comic fantasy world in which he can express rage or loathing toward certain imbecilities of the social group that the Welch set represents. His rude faces and clever pranks serve a therapeutic function—a means by which Jim can express token resistance that will not seriously endanger his always-tenuous position.

Late in the novel, Jim is to deliver an important public lecture at the college honoring Welch. Once again, Jim is underwhelmed by the absurdity of the situation. He gets drunk, perfectly parodies Welch's mannerisms to the glee of some onlookers and the dismay of others, and passes out in front of the whole assemblage. The lecture could have been Jim's ticket to a secure future. Instead, it is somewhat less than Jim's shining hour.

Yet just when it seems that Jim's career is at its nadir, his horizons expand. He is offered a job as secretary to Christine's uncle, Julius Gore-Urquhart, a wealthy patron of the arts. When Christine breaks off with Bertrand, she and Jim are free to begin a new romance with the magical attractions of London before them. In the end, the novel affirms the importance of common decency over pretension, of honesty over duplicity, of good intentions over bad. Jim makes his own luck, it seems, through kindness, decency, and good humor in the face of great distress.

The imaginative core of the novel, then, is not the fact that Jim rebels or that he wins, but in the



way that he rebels and wins. The ending is a satisfying conclusion to all the comic injustices that have occurred earlier. This happy ending is not contrived; it comes about naturally and can be explained in part as a convention of the novel, in part as the protagonist's wish-fulfillment, in part as his final nose-thumbing at the spiteful and malicious people whom Amis brings to life. The ending is based on the affirmation of a moral order, and as such it is both acceptable and laudable.

## THE GREEN MAN

**First published:** 1969

**Type of work:** Novel

*A seduction, an orgy, a homosexual parson, two exorcisms, and a monster are features of this powerful and moving parable of the limitations and dismay inherent in the human condition.*

The Green Man is a medieval coaching inn at Fareham, Hertfordshire, and fifty-three-year-old Maurice Allington is its landlord. Plagued by anxiety, fears, depression, discontent, and an inner emptiness, Maurice seeks peace of mind under conditions that militate against it. His principal reaction to this unhappiness is to immerse himself in the mundane activities of life. There, the reader meets Maurice as a man on the run—from himself. Drink, women, and the tedious minutiae of the innkeeping business offer more satisfying—if only temporary—escapes. Add to this disquiet and revulsion the ever-growing urge toward self-destruction, and there begins to be felt in this novel a truly contemporary pulsebeat. Like the typical protagonist in the works of Albert Camus, Maurice emerges most convincingly as a complicated, self-divided, haunted man in a world that does not make sense.

Unlike Jim Dixon, Allington is given the unique opportunity to make sense of the world through supernatural intervention. The Green Man has its own special ghost, the wicked Dr. Thomas Underhill, who used his knowledge of the black arts for various evil deeds, including the conjuring of a powerful monster, the novel's other "green man," a creature of branches and twigs and leaves capable

of rending an ordinary man. Underhill's final triumph is to reveal his power beyond the grave in pursuit of Maurice and his daughter.

While other characters cannot believe in the ghost, the intensity of Maurice's belief invites the reader to suspend that disbelief. Amis eases his readers into an acceptance of the supernatural by means of a variety of elements: the common sense and worldly character of the narrator, the characterization of the guests, the skillful use of incidental details to create the air of reality. People eat, drink, argue, reconcile, read, share, and make love with little or no expectation that anything out of the ordinary will (or can) happen.

As the tension grows, so does Maurice; he passes through various stages of awakening to the truth of himself and another world. Underhill, as a *doppelgänger*, is evidence that evil is a real and active presence in the world and not just a concoction of the mind. His ghost is also a means by which Amis can credibly account for the forces that seek Maurice's destruction—all that afflicts, mystifies, and weighs on him.

The discovery of Underhill's power brings Maurice to a deeper consideration of the question of survival after death and prepares him for a conversation with still another supernatural agent, of quite a different kind from Underhill. Amis personifies God as a character in his own right, in the guise of a young man who expresses puzzlement and a certain degree of helplessness over the events unfolding in the world of his creation. Maurice's transformation from an alienated man to an unwitting hero who chooses to take on the responsibilities of an absentee God forms the dramatic core of the novel.

In his pursuit and eventual destruction of Underhill and the monster, Maurice gains self-knowledge. He begins to realize that his "affinity" to Underhill has taken many guises. Maurice has reduced people to mere objects, beings manipulated and controlled by a more powerful master, just as Underhill controlled his monster. For Underhill, further, sex and aggression and striving for immortality are all bound up together; it becomes clear, as Maurice struggles with the evil spirit, that the same holds true for him.

When the terrifying battle is finally over and the selfish Maurice has been softened by the closeness of disaster, he recognizes and responds for the first

time to the love of his daughter, who agrees to look after him. Thus, the book is about moral education. Although the haunting was a terrifying experience, for Maurice it was also a rewarding one, for he has changed; he wants hereafter to be kind, not because social mores (in the shape of family and friends) tell him to do so, but because he has learned from facing his own potential for wickedness how destructive evil can be in any form. In exorcising Underhill and the monster, he has also exorcised the evil potential in his own character. The experience has ennobled him. He accepts the limitations of life and, most important, comes to an appreciation of what death has to offer—a permanent escape from himself.

## JAKE'S THING

**First published:** 1978

**Type of work:** Novel

*Jake Richardson holds a grudge against the world, a world of change and instability that is reflected on a personal level in his impotence.*

In *Jake's Thing*, much more is going on with Jake Richardson than his loss of sexual control; the society in which he lives, the London and the Oxford of 1978, has also moved, subtly but surely, out of his range of understanding and/or desire, and Jake has responded by becoming bitter and cynical. A fifty-nine-year-old Oxford don, neither his career nor his other activities stimulate much interest in him, so that his desires—social, professional, emotional—have become as stultified as his sexual ones. Perhaps it is not coincidental that Jake's impotence comes at a time when Comyas College is debating the question of admitting women to its hallowed, previously all-male-inhabited halls. Jake, who is fighting for his psychic life on several fronts, inadvertently exposes his deep hostility to the project during a college meeting, where his colleagues had expected him to "speak for the ladies." At the end of his travail, and after nearly three hundred pages of unrelenting exposure to the incompetence and stupidity of professional therapists and the institutions that sustain them, Jake's desire for sex is gone, his dislike for women has intensified,

and he decides that he would just as soon remain impotent.

Like Jim Dixon, Jake Richardson is an academic misfit who likes to drink, has a keen eye for hypocrites and phoneys, writes articles that bore even himself, copes with ferocious inner monologues on his own prejudices and irrational likes and dislikes, has a rollicking sense of fun, plays practical jokes, enjoys puns and wordplay, and talks to himself in voices that parody types whom he has encountered in books, television, films, the army, and the academy. Like Jim, he suffers from the undesired attentions of a neurotic woman who stages a fake suicide attempt. Both characters manage to reconcile inner thoughts and outer statements in a public denunciation of a cause, delivered while they are drunk.

Many of the comic set pieces in *Jake's Thing* are reminiscent of some of the classic scenes in *Lucky Jim*, in that they serve to set the protagonist's role as an outsider to the contemporary world. That alienation often serves to parody the protagonist himself. Like Jim Dixon, Jake is caught in a snare of his own devising; his readiness to do battle with his foes and his gift for running into squabbles, fights, and embarrassments increases the chaos in a life that is already frustratingly out of control. Those frustrations are many, as they were for Jim, and signify the social and cultural impotence that Jake feels. The world around him is no longer to his liking, and everyday incidents painfully amplify that effect. Jake is no longer at home on his own turf, and that sense of foreignness compels him to withdraw further and further from the contemporary world. Jim's problems with his department chairman, with some of his students, and with a potential publisher for his essay on shipbuilding techniques are, of course, similar sources of frustration and outward signs that he is a man out of sync, immersed in the wrong culture for his personality.

In spite of the resemblances between the two novels, however, there is in fact a great conceptual jump from one to the other. Suffering from a general weariness, of which his loss of libido is but one indication, Jake has definite feelings about the modern world: He does not like it. There is no equivocation, no attempt to be "fair," to look at things from other angles as Jim was inclined to do. The world is going from bad to worse, changes that infuriate and baffle Jake. Included on his list of per-

sonal dislikes are airplanes, American tourists, psychologists, the working class, the young, strangers, sloppy language, wealthy Arabs, cocky youngsters, advertisements, telephones, architecture, cuisine—in other words, all facets of present-day England. Above all, he discovers that he despises women. His only real pleasure is in finding his expectations of dirt, decay, inefficiency, and boring and stupid behavior fulfilled. Amis's use of Jake's seething narration, his scathing internal commentary, and his sometimes vicious dialogue are instrumental in creating the universe of misogyny, prejudice, and dissatisfaction.

While *Lucky Jim* ends with a triumphant revelation to Jim of a new life, a new world, *Jake's Thing* ends with a closing down, a spurning of the world for which Jake feels at best indifferent—a retreat into TV dinners and TV films. By the end of the novel, Jake has arrived at a stage of rejecting everything. Evidence points to a deepening misanthropy in Jake as he agonizes over his spiritual isolation, vainly attempts to recover his interest in sex, and learns to come to terms with impotence and acedia, the deathlike condition of not caring. In the end, readers see in Jake a gesture of impotence, puzzlement, anger, and eventual retreat from the contemporary world. All of this gives the novel an overall mood of defeat and confusion far removed from the light comedy so much in evidence in *Lucky Jim*. Amis has come from the notion that one can choose to be happy (as in *Lucky Jim*) to the statement that there is no happiness possible in this world and one must accept powerlessness as a natural state.

## THE OLD DEVILS

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*Through a microcosm of failed human relationships, Amis depicts the culmination of the decay of contemporary life.*

*The Old Devils* tells of Alun Weaver, who has chosen to retire from his successful television career in London as a kind of “professional Welshman” and third-rate poet and return after thirty years with his

beautiful wife, Rhiannon, to South Wales. The novel explores over a span of a few months the effect of this return on their circle of old friends from university days.

The old devils—a group of Welsh married couples all in their sixties and seventies—are retired. They do little else than reminisce about lost opportunities and a grander Wales and grumble about slipping dentures, dietary restrictions, and dwindling physical energies while drinking steadily, ignoring the large role alcohol has played in the mental, physical, and spiritual decay about which they complain. The men, however, are not alone in their reverence for the bottle. At the same time, their spouses gather elsewhere, ostensibly to drink coffee but more often to consume bottle after bottle of wine, to chain-smoke, and to pursue conversations about their marriages, sex, and assorted other topics in an atmosphere reeking of alcohol fumes and stale cigarettes.

The physical ill health these cronies worry about extends to the spiritual health of their marriages. With one major exception, the women in this novel are not only plain, hard, sharp, critical, or cross but also lack any reasonable relationships with their husbands that would make significant communication possible. Only Alun and Rhiannon, married for thirty-four years, seem still to have an appetite for life and love as well as drink, and most of their misunderstandings lead only to teasing, not to disaster. Yet their arrival arouses conflict among their old friends.

The conflict comes in part because their return revives memories of various youthful liaisons and indiscretions, and also because the egotistical Alun immediately sets out to re-woo the three women with whom he had affairs in the old days. Alun plays at adultery as if it were an idle pastime: His casual tone, however, is a poor disguise for the emptiness and pain felt by his objects of attention, or by his wife, Rhiannon, who tolerates his philandering, or by the husbands, who either suspect it or know of it yet are resigned to doing nothing about it. Near the end of the story, Alun chokes on his whiskey and water and falls forward, dead of a stroke. Given his reputation, it is not surprising to find that there is no sadness over his death—only surprise, and a thought or two that are quickly brushed aside by the others as a minor inconvenience.

*The Old Devils* is about more than an aging pres-

ent; it is also very much about the past and its impingements upon everyone. Many of the characters in *The Old Devils* are carrying scars from bitterness and regret because of something that happened in their lives long ago, something they hide carefully from the world but on which their conscious attention is fixed. Past choices weigh heavily on all of them. These old devils are bedeviled by worries and fears of all kinds that deepen their uncertainty about life and increase their preoccupation with the past. Indeed, Amis points out that one of the reasons old people make so many journeys into the past is to satisfy themselves that it is still there. Yet when that, too, is gone, what is left? In this novel, what remains is only the sense of lost happiness not to be regained, only the awareness of the failure of love, only the present and its temporary consolations of drink, companionship, music, and any other diversions that might arise, only a blind groping toward some insubstantial future. Neither human nor spiritual comfort bolsters the sagging lives and flagging souls of the characters.

As in earlier novels, Amis finds in the everyday concerns of his ordinary folk a larger symbolic meaning, which carries beyond the characters to indict a whole country. In this story, unemployment is high, people lead purposeless lives, and the culture is dying. Buses are always late. Businesses suffer from staff shortages. There is an obvious absence of trade and enterprise, mines are closed, docks are dead. A local chapel has been deconsecrated and turned into an arts center; another has been converted into a two-screen pornographic

theater, two extremes that underline the uselessness of the spiritual and its transformation from the divine into the mundane. Thus, the novel examines an often debilitating process of moral and spiritual decay, a lessening of these people as human beings as life goes on and how their hopes have dimmed along with their physical and mental powers.

## SUMMARY

In all of his novels, Kingsley Amis tries to understand the truth about different kinds of human suffering and then passes it on to the reader without distortion, without sentimentality, without evasion, and without oversimplification. Underlying all Amis's novels is the hero's quest for happiness, for meaning, for a life of morality and common sense in an ever-darkening world. In thirty-six years, he moved from fundamentally decent people who choose to act in a manner that has at least some significance, to utterly depraved ghosts, to people young and old stripped of their humanity, impotent and mad. The objects of his humor have broadened and deepened over the years, too.

No one can deny Amis's great technical gifts. He has never forgotten that the traditional first aim of most writers has always been to please the reader. The popularity of his art, the impressive body of critical literature, the review attention and honors given him—all testify to his continuing hold on the popular imagination. He is a writer for difficult, changing times.

Dale Salwak

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- As a boy, Kingsley Amis did much clowning. How does a knack for clowning help a writer?
- Amis was one of the British writers of the post-World War II era called "angry young men." Was he correct to reject that characterization, as he did?
- What makes *Lucky Jim* an affirmation of the moral order?
- What evidence do you see in favor of the suggestion that detective and horror stories can help a writer understand human nature?
- Consider the following: Like Charles Dickens, Amis is seen as a novelist whose works over the years grew less humorous and more pessimistic.
- How is one to be useful? Determine why an older writer, like Amis in his later years, should be concerned with this topic.

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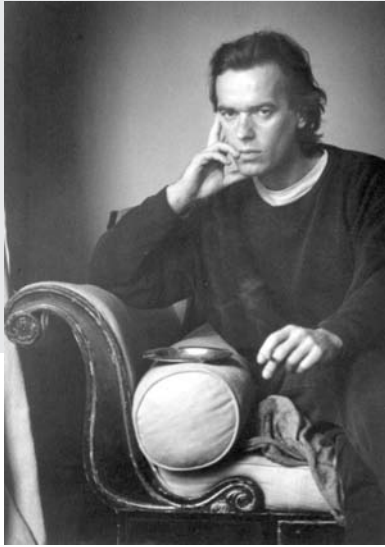
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Cheryl A. Koralik

## MARTIN AMIS

**Born:** Oxford, England  
August 25, 1949

*Amis established himself as a master of satire by revealing the grotesque distortions of a world destroying itself with drugs, sex, crime, ethnic and religious hatred, and environmental destruction.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Martin Louis Amis (AY-mihz) was born on August 25, 1949, in Oxford, England. He is the son of Kingsley Amis, the famous novelist, and Hilary Amis, daughter of a shoe-manufacturing millionaire. These parents would soon plunge young Martin into a kind of nomadic existence as they moved from one place to another, an odyssey that would require him to attend no fewer than fourteen different schools and live in at least three different countries. This heterogeneous background, in fact, may well account for his uncanny ability to appreciate various cultures, classes, and occupations.

Martin Amis, along with his older brother Philip and younger sister Sally, spent his early childhood years in Swansea, southern Wales, where the elder Amis held a teaching position at Swansea University. While in Swansea, Kingsley Amis published his most famous novel, *Lucky Jim* (1954), and the instant success of that novel initiated a string of new teaching appointments, including a crucially important year (1959) in Princeton, New Jersey. During that year, the ten-year-old Martin began to acquire his lifelong fascination with the exuberance of American slang, as shown much later in his brilliantly comic masterpiece *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984), which is set in both New York and London.

In 1960, the Amis family settled once more in England, this time in Cambridge, but the family

unity was shattered the next year, when Kingsley and Hilary Amis were divorced. Young Martin spent the next year, 1962, on the island of Majorca, Spain, in the company of his mother, sister, and brother. There he attended an international school with a wide variety of students. In 1963, he returned to England and briefly became a professional actor by landing a role in the film production of *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965). During the next year, he attended school in London, where the primary focus of his life was social not academic, for he spent the bulk of his time investigating the lowlife of the city, not unlike the feckless ne'er-do-wells of his novel *London Fields* (1989).

Around 1965, possibly under the influence of his stepmother, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, Amis began to read serious literature and prepare himself for a university career by attending a series of "crammers" or preparatory schools. In 1968, he was admitted to Exeter College, Oxford; in 1971, he received a B.A. with first-class honors in English.

Amis began his career as a man of letters in 1971, although at first he was operating strictly behind the scenes as a book reviewer for *The Observer* and as editorial assistant and fiction and poetry editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Simultaneously, public acclaim attached itself to his name after the appearance of *The Rachel Papers* (1973), a detailed and largely autobiographical work about the sexual exploits of a student named Charles Highway. Even though *The Rachel Papers* was Amis's first novel, it received unusually lavish praise from the demanding British reviewers and won the prestigious Maugham Award in 1974, exactly twenty



years after his father had won the same award for *Lucky Jim*.

In 1975, Amis became the assistant literary editor of the *New Statesman*, a magazine with which he would remain closely associated after becoming a full-time writer for that publication. In 1975, Amis also wrote his second novel, the controversial *Dead Babies* (1975), which explores the effects of drugs in a communelike setting that is destroyed by horrifying violence. This gruesome and realistic treatment of drug-induced madness caused the second American publisher to change the title to *Dark Secrets* (1977).

*Success* (1978), Amis's third novel, continued his preoccupation with sexual excess, as well as with autobiographical elements. Certainly it can be no coincidence that the narrative plot of *Success* revolves around the lives of two brothers, Terry and Gregory Ridging, and one sister, Ursula. The additional element of incest caused quite a few reviewers to find the book repugnant or brutish, even though it clearly deals with the larger theme of old and new money and of class warfare in Britain.

In 1980, Amis became embroiled in a strange and celebrated case of literary plagiarism when he discovered that the American essayist and novelist Jacob Epstein had plagiarized some fifty passages from *The Rachel Papers* while composing *Wild Oats* (1980). Epstein later conceded his guilt, but the exact number of passages used was never established to Amis's complete satisfaction. Nor was Amis completely pleased by the revised edition of *Wild Oats*, with all of the plagiarized passages excised. It is worth noting that Amis took no legal action against Epstein; his primary concern, as always, was his integrity as an author.

Amis's fourth novel, *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), bears a close resemblance to *Success* in its use of the doppelgänger or "double" motif, a pattern that has been underscored by scholars and critics of Amis's work. Instead of closely related brothers, *Other People* features the closely related sides or "halves" of a woman whose personality is split into two beings, one called Mary Lamb, the other Amy Hide.

Amis married Antonia Phillips, an American professor specializing in aesthetics, in 1984. That same year he published *Money*, an extravagant, witty, and linguistically inventive book that began to reveal the extent of his maturing talent. The

hero, John Self, an alcoholic self-abuser, looms as an obese figure of comic pathos. Yet his story is also the story of the failure to make art, even bad art, in the form of a pornographic movie in a culture of pure greed. One of the "characters" in *Money* happens to be a young British novelist named Martin Amis.

After the publication of *Money*, Amis turned his attention to collecting and publishing various essays and occasional short stories he had written for periodicals and newspapers. *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (1986) and *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) were the well-received results. *London Fields*, his biggest and most ambitious novel, somehow manages to combine journalistic precision with the kinds of literary invention that have made Amis a significant presence on the literary scene.

With the critical success and considerable sales of *London Fields* and given his charismatic status as England's enfant terrible of letters (although Amis by this time was in his forties), for the next decade Amis both endured and exploited his rock star status as a celebrity. Amis's private life, including several romantic breakups, reports of an illegitimate daughter, the death of his father in 1995, and a national fascination with the exorbitant advances he commanded, were all part of tabloid coverage. Despite such distraction during the decade, Amis completed his most technically daring and thematically provocative works. Early on there was his experimental tale of the Nazi Holocaust, *Time's Arrow; Or, The Nature of the Offense* (1991), which was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize. It was essentially a story told in reverse, as a doctor in an American hospital recounts his narrative life story backward, moving with inexorable horror toward his early life as a doctor in the concentration camps. *The Information* (1995) is a caustic insider's look at the dark underside of London's prestigious publishing scene, particularly the pettiness and envy of the contemporary writer, which centers on the midlife crisis of a once-promising novelist who cannot stomach the success enjoyed by a fellow writer whose talents he deems far below his own. Two other novels—*Night Train* (1997) and *Yellow Dog* (2003)—immersed the reader in Amis's characteristic night world of violence and mayhem, the first a police procedural about a mysterious suicide, and the second a bizarre Jekyll-and-Hyde tale of a per-

fect husband who after a blow on the head reverts to violence, lust, and anger.

Increasingly, Amis, who had published a steady stream of reviews and essays in a variety of prestigious journals and magazines and had collected them in several well-received volumes, turned to nonfiction. It was the 2000 publication of *Experience*, a nonlinear memoir of his difficult relationship with his father and of his own literary evolution, that garnered Amis considerable critical admiration, as well as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. A subsequent work, however, embroiled Amis in contentious public debates. *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002), a kind of meditation on the evil of Joseph Stalin's reign of terror and its comparative neglect in historic memory against the far more widespread outrage expressed over Adolf Hitler, examined in part why Communism proved such an attractive ideology for leftist intellectuals in the early twentieth century, among them, of course, Amis's own father. Although historians took issue with Amis's liberal reading of Stalin's reign, that research led to Amis's triumphant return to fiction in *House of Meetings* (2006), a complex psychological study of two brothers in Moscow who both fall in love with the same Jewish girl on the eve of Stalin's pogrom.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, Amis emerged as an outspoken commentator on the implications of the events. He was appalled by the actions, publishing broadsides and giving dozens of interviews that spelled out his opinions. He maintained that the attacks revealed the depth of the hatred the disenfranchised Islamic culture felt toward the United States, and that fanaticism could never be logically understood, that it was a death cult like Nazism, and that such toxic logic could only be fostered by the perverted thinking of organized religion. That argument, collected in essays published in *The Second Plane: September 11, Terror and Boredom* (2008), provoked widespread response and positioned Amis where he long wanted to be: at the center of an international firestorm of debate.

Amis continued to live in London and taught creative writing at the University of Manchester. He has evolved through being a hip bad-boy rock-star celebrity writer to establishing a significant

position as the defining voice of British letters—audaciously experimental, relentlessly controversial, uncompromisingly Swiftian in his anger, and supremely a careful and deliberate wordsmith of extraordinary power.

## ANALYSIS

On first reading Amis's books, the reader will probably hear echoes of many twentieth century novelists. One perceives the zany, scatological world of Philip Roth, the skewed universe of Truman Capote, the meditative voice of Saul Bellow, the complicated plot lines of Thomas Pynchon or Kurt Vonnegut, and the high-voltage linguistic displays of Tom Wolfe, Vladimir Nabokov, and Anthony Burgess. Yet even though Amis has written about many of these famous novelists (especially in *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America*), he remains stylistically unique. There is a certain blending of choppy British street slang, complicated literary allusions, playful puns or witticisms, and outrageously irreverent names that collectively brand each piece of fiction as belonging only to Amis. To read Amis is to experience the literary equivalent of skydiving or deep-sea diving, where the most familiar objects become strange and surreal and where time itself slows down or speeds up in a fashion that is altogether unnerving.

Style ultimately means the way an author invents and manipulates language to suit his or her particular requirements. In Amis's satiric universe, the intent is always to poke fun at the colossal moral and social breakdown of the twentieth century. Like all good satirists, Amis is making the reader laugh at outrageous and illogical events that might otherwise be taken for granted. If Amis writes about sexual degradation, greed, trickery, and lying, he is not glorifying but denouncing these low points of human behavior. One of his favorite devices to evoke laughter is to create ridiculously appropriate—or inappropriate—names, as did the great British novelist Charles Dickens when he created such memorable figures as Pip, Scrooge, and Tiny Tim.

In *Money*, for example, a novel-length parable on greed and self-absorption, Amis gives these pecuniary names to certain appropriate characters: Buck Specie, Sterling Dun, Lira Cruzeiros, and Anna Mazuma. In this monetary madhouse, automobiles have a high visibility and high status value

and so receive names such as Torpedo, Boomerang, Culprit, Alibi, Jefferson, Iago, Tigerfish, Autocrat, and Farrago. The hero, improbably named John Self, drives an ultraexpensive Fiasco, which is perpetually breaking down and requiring more and more expensive parts. John Self is engaged in hiring actors for his new film, and again the satiric creativity of Amis produces such actors' names as Nub Forkner, Butch Beausoleil, and Lorne Guyland. The technical crew is composed of Micky Obbs, Kevin Skuse, and Des Blackadder. All of these characters calm their nerves with the angelic tranquilizer Serafim. Amis actually makes a guest appearance in his own novel, and as the character "Martin Amis" reminds John Self near the end of the narrative, "Names are awfully important."

These unforgettable and oddly appropriate names are perhaps the most distinctive stylistic trait in all of Amis's novels: Charles Highway in *The Rachel Papers*, Terry Service in *Success*, Mary Lamb in *Other People*, and the gallery of characters in *London Fields*, including Guy Clinch, Nicola Six, Keith Talent, Lizzyboo, Marmaduke, Chick Purchase, and Trish Shirt, among others. Names are indeed important to Amis's artistry.

Closely akin to the making of names is the making of new words, or neologisms, and Amis delights in coining new terms or concocting hyphenated phrases in a manner that outdoes Tom Wolfe or Anthony Burgess. The antihero of *Money*, for example, crisscrosses the vast space over the Atlantic Ocean as he shuttles back and forth between London and New York, leaving behind a wake of "jetslime." In the latter portions of the narrative, this same peripatetic John Self begins to perceive the hollowness of his own existence and castigates himself for being no more than a "cyborg" or "skinjob."

When Amis is not inventing new words, he feels free to push every key on the linguistic keyboard, from technical, scholarly, academic, and literary English all the way down the scales to American and British slang. In all of his books, vulgar words abound, as do slang terms such as "yob" (lower-class person), "bim" (short for "bimbo," an unflattering term for a woman), "rug" (hair), and "snappers" (teeth). Amis delights in any kind of linguistic artifact, especially those that help to define a culture or a character. He is amused by the American tendency to misspell just about everything, to

use apostrophes with plural nouns ("light's" for "lights"), or to enclose nouns in unnecessary quotation marks.

This obsession with language allows Amis to develop memorable characters, like John Self and Keith Talent, because their personality is equivalent to the way they speak and write. This same preoccupation with language also facilitates the development of larger themes that organize the many strands of Amis's narrative designs. He tends to work with a small number of basic themes that he explores in different ways and at different levels of complexity in all of his novels.

The critic Karl Miller, in his important study *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (1985), identified the principal theme in Amis's work as "doubling." Plot lines, characters, and situations always tend to be echoed in the universe according to Amis, such as the two brothers in *Success* or the characters "Martin Amis" and "Martina Twain" in *Money*. The two other major themes in Amis's work are planetary decay and the muselike woman. *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America*, *Money*, and *London Fields* all presuppose a world on the brink of ecological disaster. In this world there is always a magnetic feminine presence, such as Selina Street or the inscrutable Nicola Six, whose blandishments and seductions literally keep the men moving through a world of smog, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), and gamma rays.

Amis's moral sensibility and his penchant for literary experimentation continued to contest for predominance in his work after *London Fields*. The works that defined Amis's emergence into his maturity—most notably *Time's Arrow*, *Experience*, *Koba the Dread*, *House of Meetings*, and *The Second Plane*—extended his early fascination with foregrounding literary concerns in narratives that examine difficult and thorny moral issues and sustain a tension between ethical commentary and formal experimentation. By taking on some of the most controversial and provocative subject matter available to a writer in the late twentieth century—many incendiary public issues, including religious fanaticism, corporate greed, humanity's taste for violence, the corruption of sexuality, and mass-scale ethnic cleansing, as well as far more personal concerns, including the ego of the writer, the evolution of the writer, and the influence of family and friends—

Amis continued to extend the range of traditional linear narration, inevitably posing in the minds of his harshest critics questions about the appropriateness of such literary experiments given the heft and gravitas of the issues. In addition, Amis developed into one of the finest and most careful prose stylists since George Orwell, the cadence and music of his prose always assuming a far more distinctive place than the moral and ethical outrage he investigates. Thus, Amis has emerged as a contested presence in British contemporary letters, admired for his precise and vital prose and his nervy formal inventiveness and both reviled and endorsed for his uncompromising moral views, a provocative sense of outrage, Swiftian in its dimensions, that has not subsided across nearly three decades of writing.

What has emerged, however, over Amis's works in the 1990's and after September 11, 2001, is a new and profound interest in the poignancy of extraordinarily ordinary lives, a sympathy that really had little place in the abrasive works before *Time's Arrow*. This sympathy is felt in the poignant descriptions of his own childhood in *Experience*; in the moving account of the doomed children in the concentration camps in *Time's Arrow*, and in the psychological complexities of the narrator in *House of Meetings*, sentenced to ten years in Stalin's labor camps, making his peace with his own violent past and coming to terms with his brother, a pacifist and poet. That interest in psychological depth and a Dostoyevskyan sense of the difficult ambiguities of moral behavior lend a level of complexity to Amis's later fiction.

## MONEY

**First published:** 1984

**Type of work:** Novel

*English film director John Self tries unsuccessfully to launch a pornographic film in New York and in the process goes bankrupt.*

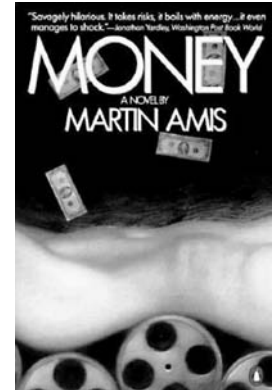
*Money: A Suicide Note* (and its successor, *London Fields*) allows Amis to introduce a new kind of character, the corrupt or profane artist figure. In *Money* the would-be artist is John Self; he is echoed in *Lon-*

*don Fields* by the figure of Keith Talent. Having made his mark by producing and directing pornographic commercials for British television, John Self, a rapacious and epically greedy human being, is approached by Fielding Goodney, a bisexual financier who volunteers to underwrite the full production costs of a new film to be made by Self in America. Goodney's proposal, of course, is an elaborate ruse, the first of many traps into which the obese Self will fall without any conscious deliberation.

In reality, Goodney is using Self's credit line to finance the entire project in New York, just as Self's partners in a London advertising agency are essentially living off Self's earnings. In the end, his credit cards become useless, he is evicted from a New York hotel, and he flies back to London, where he is evicted again, this time from his flat. Even his beloved Fiasco, a car as unreliable as all the people in his life, finally falls apart and refuses to run.

Before this collapse occurs and before he fails even in his own suicide, the pill-popping, alcoholic Self takes the reader on a grotesque binge of transatlantic hopping, slumming in New York's topless clubs and striptease joints, drinking impossibly large amounts (in taverns, bars, hotel rooms, and airplanes), and eating innumerable greasy American hamburgers and hot dogs (his favorite foods). The embodiment of greed, Self "feeds" on everything; he is never satisfied. Ultimately, he feeds upon himself and engineers his own destruction. Amis seems to be saying that John is a Self that has no "self" outside alcohol, drugs, sex, and money. He is the consummate consumer, an Everyman for twentieth century New York and London.

New York and London are depicted as polluted cities on both the spiritual and physical planes, and if the smog and drugs are not enough to confuse Self, there are doubles everywhere. Fielding Goodney doubles as a transvestite who follows Self everywhere. London and New York are the double locales of the book, and even the Muse-woman is





doubled, taking the forms of slutty, conniving Selina Street and cultured, elegant Martina Twain. Street satisfies the grossest physical needs of Self, but she, too, is greedy. While living with Self, she somehow manages an affair with Ossie Twain, an undertaking that makes virtually everyone unhappy. Only “Martin Amis” and Martina Twain tell Self the truth, namely that his film *Good Money* is abominable, just like his life. The tenderest and funniest moments in *Money* occur when Martina tries to reform John by taking him to concerts and introducing him to the work of George Orwell. Yet since he is only half an artist, Self can never fully appreciate genuine art.

## LONDON FIELDS

**First published:** 1989

**Type of work:** Novel

*Nicola Six, an inscrutable temptress, involves three men in a complex scheme to make her suicide as artistic and destructive as possible.*

Set in Margaret Thatcher’s London, replete with smog, skinheads, and strange weather (the product of El Niño and other meteorological disturbances), *London Fields* is a grand novel that combines Amis’s mature themes into a compelling synthesis that might be taken as a kind of parable for urban life. Artist figures abound, including Sam, the American narrator who occupies the flat of an absent British writer named Mark Asprey; Keith Talent, the con man and philanderer extraordinaire who treats dart throwing as high art; and the Muse-woman, Nicola Six, who believes she will be murdered on her thirty-fifth birthday, which will occur on November 6 (hence her name, Nicola Six). Nicola is a jaded, listless symbol of the kind of dead end to which glitzy, urban life inevitably leads. She is bored by everything, even by sex, which was once her forte, as documented in photographs once taken by Asprey and later discovered by Sam. Nicola doubles, triples, and quadruples herself in *London Fields*, adopting various disguises (social worker and groupie at a darts tournament) and playing different roles (demure virgin, schoolteacher, and whore), all the while manipulating

the three men who come into her life at the Black Cross pub: Talent, Guy Clinch, and Sam.

Nicola and Keith conspire to defraud Guy, a rich businessman who is snugly ensconced in a world of upper-class privilege with a wife named Hope, a sister-in-law named Lizzyboo, and an obnoxious baby boy named Marmaduke, a veritable demon of the playpen. Keith prides himself on being a “cheat,” a petty criminal who steals directly and indirectly from everyone, even his wife, who faithfully tends their daughter while Keith conducts open affairs with Nicola and a string of women with names such as Debbie, Trish, Analiese, Fran, Iqbal, and Petronella. Keith Talent is one of Amis’s supreme fictional creations, a lewd but dazzling figure who tries to write a book on darts and keep a journal even though he can barely spell. As Martina Twain did with John Self, Nicola Six does with Keith Talent, teaching him how to read John Keats, the true artist of love and beauty. In the end, the only artistry Nicola experiences is that of Sam, who turns murderer and dispatches her in the front seat of his car on November 6, exactly as she predicted.



## TIME'S ARROW

**First published:** 1991

**Type of work:** Novel

*When Odilo Unverdorben, an American doctor going by the name Tod T. Friendly, dies, his soul journeys back to birth, in the process revisiting his experiences as an Auschwitz doctor.*

To explore the moral horrors of the Nazi Holocaust in a way that would ultimately implicate the reader in a most unnerving immediacy, Amis devised an intricate narrative device in which the narrative is told in reverse, based on the scientific theory, one widely exercised in speculative fiction,

that time actually moves backward. The narrative is concise, barely 150 pages, with Amis recognizing the difficulties and demands of such a narrative strategy. To tell the narrative, Amis creates a kind of talking soul that comes into existence at the moment when its host body, a retired German-American doctor in upstate New York named Tod T. Friendly, dies after a car accident. Within this narrative device, this soul acts as a witness-narrator (the voice can only watch and cannot interfere) as Dr. Friendly's body begins to reengage his life, although this time he lives it backward, moving with furious momentum back to his life as an intern in New York City. At first reading, of course, the reader puzzles (much as the narrator-witness) over the implications of Dr. Friendly's life: his struggle with alcohol, his dispassionate preoccupation with the human body, his inability to give himself emotionally to his numerous liaisons, and, most disturbing, his grim dreams about babies and children.

The narrator tunes into an inexplicable sense of some ghastly secret that pulls at the events, a secret offense; the book's subtitle, *The Nature of the Offense*, is taken from the agonized memoirs of concentration camp survivor and novelist Primo Levi. In deftly handling the intricacies of a reverse narrative, Amis maintains the narrative suspense by developing the sense of foreboding, the sense of imminent revelation, as the doctor boards a ship bound for Spain and from there makes his way through a series of hiding places, even as his German accent becomes more pronounced. In the harrowing sections where the doctor, now known as Odilo Unverdorben, participates in the ghastly experiments and mass killings at the Auschwitz concentration camp, the reverse narrative creates an unsettling experience. Dead bodies in the crematoria return to flesh and walk out of the gas chamber, and the narrative follows as the Jews grow fat in the camps and eventually board trains that take them home.

Here Amis risks diminishing the horrors of the concentration camps by deploying a gimmicky, narrative trick; indeed, Amis was criticized for placing narrative experimentation above history and at the expense of outrage. However, this narrative device occasions an interactive experience: The narrator-soul misses the point of the horror and delights in identifying with the doctor, given the apparent movement toward happiness. It is the readers who must understand the magnitude of the brutality that appears to be erased so casually: From the vantage point of a half century later, readers understand the savage irony of watching the doomed Jewish people depart the camps. Amis compels his readers to act as the narrative's conscience. As the life of Odilo Unverdorben (ironically German for "uncorrupted") continues its reverse path back to childhood, back to the arms of his own mother, and ultimately back to his own birth, readers understand the implications of the narrative device. Unverdorben is offered as that most terrifying figure of twentieth century history: a creature without a soul. Thus, the occasion of his death alone engenders a moral conscience that must helplessly watch the consequences of such inhumanity.

## SUMMARY

Although surely one of the most cerebral and intellectually engaged writers of the fin de millenium and one its most compelling moral satirists, Martin Amis disdains didacticism in literature and rejects the so-called novel of ideas as a remedy for human behavior. He does not believe that literature can fix its culture. Rather, Amis is supremely a satirist who uses the technology of language, particularly the exquisitely turned phrase, the experimental narrative structure, and caustic irony, to expose with abrasive and uncompromising honesty the greed, cruelty, obsessions, and soullessness of late-century humanity.

*Daniel L. Guillory; updated by Joseph Dewey*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Given Martin Amis's unforgiving and obvious contempt for his own culture's violence and greed, what is the value of his satire? Can satire fix social problems by raising awareness?
- Amis is often accused of lacking compassion, particularly in his creation of often stereotypical female characters and the lack of convincing love stories. How important is that sort of emotional argument to the work of serious fiction?
- Is it appropriate for a novelist to experiment with form and methods of telling a story when dealing with controversial issues such as terrorism and the Holocaust?
- Although Amis is a distinctly moralistic writer, he has contempt for organized religion. Trace the elements of his discontent with religion.
- How does the narrative technique of using character doubling, doppelgängers, and twins help Amis explore the complicated moral nature of the human soul?
- Amis's vision is distinctly urban. Assess his vision of the contemporary turn-of-the-century cosmopolitan scene.
- Does Amis's fascination with aberrant behavior, his graphic depictions of violence, his interest in drugs and decadent sex, and his use of obscene language detract from his moral vision or enforce it?



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## HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

**Born:** Odense, Denmark

April 2, 1805

**Died:** Rolighed, near Copenhagen, Denmark

August 4, 1875

*Andersen is a world-renowned writer of more than 150 tales for children and adults.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Hans Christian Andersen was the only child of Hans Andersen, a poor cobbler, and his wife, Anne Marie, who was fifteen years her husband's senior. Hans was born only two months after the marriage of his parents. The couple was ill-matched in many ways. His father was somewhat educated and a free thinker, his mother almost illiterate and a superstitious believer. Both were loving parents, however, determined that their son should do better in life than they.

After his father's death, when Andersen was eleven, his mother became a washerwoman and sent the boy to work in a local cloth mill and then a tobacco plant. It seems that his work in both places consisted of entertaining the other workers by telling stories and improvising songs. His mother remarried after two years of widowhood, this time to a more successful shoemaker, and life improved materially for the boy.

From his earliest years the lonely child had played with his homemade puppet theater, devised little plays and poems, and dreamed of a career in the theater. With little money and no prospects, the gangling fourteen-year-old left Odense, Denmark, and set out for Copenhagen. In response to his mother's fears, he confidently replied, "I shall become famous; first you go through a cruel time, and then you become famous." As Andersen was

fond of pointing out in later years, his youthful assessment was quite accurate.

Andersen's attempts to work in any capacity at Copenhagen's Royal Theater came to little, but he refused all advice to return to Odense and be apprenticed in some trade. Reduced almost to begging for enough money to stay alive, in 1822 he submitted a play, "Alfol," which persuaded Professor Rahbek, one of the theater's directors, that Andersen had talent, but needed an education. Rahbek then sent Andersen to Jonas Collin.

Collin was not only a director of the Royal Theater but also a powerful man in the government, one of the king's chief advisers. Persuaded by Collin, the theater directors agreed to pay for Andersen's education and support him until graduation. He was sent away to Slagelse Latin School, where he was shocked to be put into a class with boys half his age. In addition, the rector, Simon Meisling, an insensitive man, made his life in the classroom very unpleasant, and he was further upset by Mrs. Meisling's repeated attempts to seduce him.

The youth was very grateful to his patron, Collin, but at the same time, as Signe Toksvig points out in *The Life of Hans Christian Andersen* (1933), his pride made it difficult for him to ask for such things as replacements for worn-out clothing. All his effort at school culminated in his passing the university entrance examinations in only five years. During that time he went from serious self-castigation to self-adulation, in an almost manic-depressive cycle. These severe mood swings continued throughout most of his life. As Andersen put it in a letter to Collin: "I know I am much too childish; a smile only, a kind word, fills my soul with



joy, and a cold look can awaken complete despair in me.”

Returning to Copenhagen, relieved to be clear of the Meisling family, Andersen was taken into the Collin household, which provided a welcome contrast. He could then have entered the university but decided instead to pursue his career. He started with a simple piece, *Fodreise fra Holmens canal til Østpynten af Amager* (1829; a journey on foot from Holman’s canal to the east point of Amager), which contained reveries of his past, images of a future in which airships would make world travel easier, and much stream-of-consciousness writing. It was a success.

At this time Andersen fell in love, for the first time, with Riborg Voigt, the sister of a friend. She became engaged to someone else before he declared himself. Riborg was the first of a number of women who might have provided what Andersen always said he wanted—a family life—but he remained a bachelor who sublimated his feelings by weaving them into his stories.

Andersen’s relationship with Collin’s daughter, Louise, began with the deserted lover confessing his feelings to the sympathetic young woman. It ended with his believing he was in love with Louise. She, however, loved and married someone else, so it was fortuitous that her father made a successful appeal to the king for a two-year travel grant for the budding author. He visited twenty-nine countries in Europe, keeping copious diaries, and coming home to publish a successful novel.

At the same time, in an attempt to earn additional money, he published his first four tales, augmented thereafter in annual volumes, totaling 168 tales by the time of his death. As his second novel, *O.T.* (1836; English translation, 1845), and translations of all of his work began to appear in Germany and Sweden, he felt slightly more secure financially. International copyright law left much to be desired, however, in matching his increasing fame with his royalties. Also, he still wanted to be seen as a renowned playwright, a desire fulfilled when his play *Mulatten* (pr. 1840; the mulatto) was well received at the Royal Theater in early 1840.

Although he was nervous about fire in strange places and always carried an escape rope with him, Andersen continued to travel widely, visiting many famous literary people, including his idols Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. He received many

honors and decorations in Denmark and other European countries, and his tales became the most widely translated literature in the world except for the Bible.

The final love of his life was the celebrated Swedish singer, Jenny Lind, but that romance also was not consummated. Always aware of his unusual appearance—he was very tall with long arms and big feet—Andersen was never completely certain that people looked beyond these ungainly aspects of his appearance to find him a fascinating person. He also never realized how his 70 pencil sketches, 250 ink drawings, and more than 1,500 unique paper cutouts would be collected as art after his demise.

The climax of Andersen’s life came on December 6, 1867, when Odense made him an honorary citizen, amid great celebration. Schools were closed; there was a torchlight procession, and the whole city was illuminated in his honor.

The intimate friends of his last years were Moritz Melchior and his wife, Dorothea, who provided him with loving care to the end. He died of cancer of the liver at their estate, on the outskirts of Copenhagen, four months after his seventieth birthday.

## ANALYSIS

Andersen is frequently mislabeled a gatherer of tales, like the Grimm brothers, or Asbjørnsen and Moe, Norwegian collectors of folktales, but he is quite different from these collectors, his contemporaries. Some of his early tales are based on traditional Danish stories that he had heard as a child, but he was a creative writer who added and altered characters, changed incidents, and above all, wrote in his completely unique style.

Furthermore, as his diaries show, many of the tales were based on his personal experiences. For example, in one of his best-known pieces, “Den grimme ælling” (“The Ugly Duckling”), Andersen is easy to identify as the duckling, the outsider, the different one who triumphs after hardships.

There are other flattering self-portraits. In “Svinedrengen” (“The Swineherd”) he is a prince, spurned by the silly princess, and in “Den standhaftige tinsoldat” (“The Steadfast Tin Soldier”) he is the loyal lover. There are also some negative self-views. In “Grantræet” (“The Little Fir Tree”) the artist is always discontented; in

"Fyrtøiet" ("The Tinderbox") the fortune-hunter stops at nothing to gain his goal.

Since so much of Andersen's work is closely related to his life experiences, it is important to separate, to the extent possible, fact from the account Andersen gives in his autobiographies. For example, although he freely admits in his accounts of his life to his humble beginnings, he is loath to admit his fears of becoming mentally unbalanced like his paternal grandfather, or of being embarrassed, as a successful adult, by an unsolicited contact with his older half sister.

Possibly the greatest barrier to a complete understanding of his work is that he wrote in Danish, a language not familiar to many people. Often his stories were translated first into German, sometimes imperfectly, and then from German into English. Inaccurate translations were frequent. Mary Howitt, responsible for the first English version (1846) of his tales, committed elementary mechanical errors. Charles Boner elevated Andersen's language. Caroline Peachey embellished and bowdlerized the tales.

Another barrier to understanding is that some critics have incorrectly assumed that Andersen wrote only for children. His tales, however, were meant to appeal to readers of all ages. They are replete with colloquialisms, Danish puns, and irony. His conversational tone is a conscious stylistic device, not the result of careless composition.

Andersen does not point out a moral at the end of each tale, but rather allows the allegorical and ironic levels of the narrative to speak for themselves. This is also indicative of the tales' value as literature. There are, however, pure fairy tales, such as "Tommelise" ("Thumbelina"), in which animals and flowers are personified. There are science-fiction stories, such as "Om aartusinder" ("In a Thousand Years"), in which Andersen foretells air travel and concludes that "America's youth will visit old Europe, seeing it all in eight days" when they can fly. There are simple, realistic stories, such as "Vanddraaben" ("The Drop of Water"), in which Andersen likens the voracious organisms visible under a magnifying glass to the citizens of Copenhagen, who devour one another without reason.

Some of his tales, such as "Den lille pige med svovlstikkerne" ("The Little Match Girl"), "Hun duede ikke" ("She Was No Good"), and "Gart-

neren go herskabet" ("The Gardener and the Lord and Lady") are critiques of the society of his time, in which a child could freeze to death on the street, a good woman could be exploited, then relegated to a pauper's grave, and an aristocratic couple could fail to appreciate the superior knowledge of their faithful gardener.

His themes frequently include a quest for fame and fortune, as in "The Tinderbox," or "Sommerfuglen" ("The Butterfly"), in which the bachelor does not find a wife because he is indecisive about which flower he prefers. In some stories there is a philosophical quest—for example, a search for God, as in "Klokken" ("The Bell"), in which two young boys, a prince and a poor lad, are both called by the ringing of an unknown bell and the promise of revelation.

Sometimes Andersen writes of the triumph of the artist, as in "Sneglen og rosenhækken" ("The Snail and the Rose"), his answer to Søren Kierkegaard's critique of his novel *Kun en Spillemand* (1837; *Only a Fiddler*, 1845). Sometimes he writes about the defeat of the creative person, as in "Skyggen" ("The Shadow"), in which a crass imitation is venerated above the genuine. Some of the tales, such as "Lille Claus og store Claus" ("Little Claus and Big Claus") are quite violent (in a fairy-tale way), but more deeply frightening is the haunting "De røde sko" ("Red Shoes"), the story of a young girl who must keep dancing until she dies.

Andersen emphasizes familiar, homelike settings in most of his tales, even when on the surface it may seem otherwise. For example, in "Historien om en moder" ("The Story of a Mother") a woman searches for her missing child. The realm of the dead is described as a greenhouse, a familiar sight in Denmark. In the same way, Andersen's royal characters seem more domestic than regal, with the king opening the door of the castle in "Reisekammeraten" ("The Traveling Companion") and the queen making up the bed for a visitor in "Prindsessen paa ærten" ("The Princess and the Pea").

Much of Andersen's work is optimistic but almost as much is distinctly pessimistic—a dichotomy accurately representing Andersen himself. There is no doubt that knowledge of his life makes his writing more impressive. His stories and tales have long been cherished, however, by children and adults who do not have any special knowledge

of the author. This signifies that at least the best of his work has the quality of universality that makes it stand the test of time.

## “THE LITTLE MERMAID”

**First published:** “Den lille havfrue,” 1837  
(collected *The Complete Stories*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A beautiful mermaid falls in love with the prince she has rescued, but fails to win him and must die.*

Andersen begins this tale with such a detailed description of the watery world, home of the sea king and his family, it becomes a very real setting. In his magnificent palace, the king, a widower, lives with his aging mother and his six mermaid daughters. Each princess has her own garden, planned with individuality, with the youngest princess wanting only rose-red flowers and a beautiful marble statue of a handsome boy, the remnant of a shipwreck.

The king and his mother have been to the surface many times, and the princesses are intrigued with their stories of the world above. As each mermaid becomes fifteen years old, she is allowed to go up and look around for herself, and each returns to tell the others what she has seen of cities, nature, and humans. These descriptions also are written very imaginatively, so that the reader may believe that one princess is frightened by a small dog, another floats on an iceberg, and a third plays with dolphins and whales. At last the youngest mermaid becomes fifteen and makes the journey to the surface.

She sees a three-masted ship, on which a party to celebrate a prince’s sixteenth birthday is taking place. The little mermaid watches the handsome prince, whom she decides she loves. There is a severe storm; the ship is wrecked; the unconscious prince is left floating amid the rubble. The little mermaid manages to rescue him before returning to her undersea home but says nothing at first to her family about her experience.

Finally, she tells her sisters of her love, and they rise to the surface and show her his palace. She spends each evening gazing at her prince, although he is unaware of her. When she questions her grandmother about humans, she learns that they have a shorter life expectancy than sea people but that they do have eternal souls.

She then goes to an evil witch, who tells her how she can win the prince and acquire a soul. It is a hard bargain, because she must become mute. The sea witch cuts out her tongue. The mermaid drinks a magic potion that changes her tail to legs. If the prince marries her, she will acquire a soul. If he marries someone else, on that day she will turn to foam on the sea.

The prince becomes very fond of the little mermaid, but he does not think of her as his bride. He marries someone else. On the night of his wedding, the mermaid’s sisters rise from the sea to save her. They have given all their hair to the witch in exchange for a knife that the little mermaid must drive into the heart of the prince as he sleeps. This she refuses to do. As she hurls herself into the dissolving foam, she is borne aloft by the daughters of the air, who explain to her that they earn their immortal souls by their good deeds, and she becomes one of them.

At the time of its publication, there was conjecture about the ending’s being contrived, but in a letter, Andersen seems to indicate that he planned it from the beginning, having originally titled the story “Daughters of the Air.” Andersen’s feelings about religion may have made it difficult for him to condemn the loving mermaid with no possibility of acquiring an immortal soul. Andersen, who was not successful in love, perhaps identified with the little mermaid.

The famous bronze statue of the Little Mermaid by Edvard Eriksen was set up on the harbor promenade of Copenhagen in 1913.



## “THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES”

**First published:** “Kejserens nye klaeder,” 1837 (collected in *The Complete Stories*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Short story

*An emperor is hoodwinked by two dishonest men who pretend they can weave magic cloth, seen only by the wise.*

Based on a Spanish story from the fourteenth century, this tale was so cleverly altered by Andersen that it is still cited as an example of the foolish behavior of those in authority. He changed the Moorish king to an emperor. He reduced the number of swindlers from three to two. Most significantly, he changed the magic quality of the cloth so that those who could not see it were presumed either “unfit for their posts or hopelessly stupid.”

The vain emperor spends his time and money on his only interest—his wardrobe. Along come two men who claim to be able to create a magic cloth. They are given money, silk, and gold thread without limit to complete this marvelous fabric. The fabric will be made into clothing for the emperor. The two men work on an empty loom, pretending to weave, while pocketing all the money and supplies.

Curious about the enterprise, the emperor first sends his honest prime minister to report on the progress, but when the old man sees nothing, he is afraid to tell the truth for fear it means he is unfit for his post or hopelessly stupid. The prime minister repeats to the sovereign what the swindlers tell him about the glorious design and wonderful colors of the cloth. Next, the emperor sends a second official with the same result.

At this point the emperor decides to see the fabric for himself, but both the emperor and the courtiers with him are afraid to say that they see nothing but an empty loom. When the day comes for the emperor to don the suit made from the nonexistent cloth, everyone pretends that it is real. The emperor heads a public procession in his underwear, with the crowd continuing the pretense.

Then, in innocence, a little child speaks: “But he hasn’t anything on!” This fact is whispered from

person to person; all the spectators shout the truth. The emperor says to himself: “I must go through with it, procession and all,” and, drawing himself up still more proudly, he continues to walk with his chamberlains following—carrying the train that is not there.

It is only the child who has not yet become corrupted by the world who will tell what he or she sees. Another implicit moral lies in the emperor’s knowing that he has been swindled, but refusing to acknowledge his error publicly.

## “THE NIGHTINGALE”

**First published:** “Nattergalen,” 1844 (collected in *The Complete Stories*, 2005)

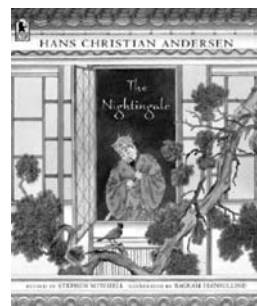
**Type of work:** Short story

*A Chinese emperor is given a bejeweled mechanical nightingale to replace a live one, but the real bird returns to save him from death.*

The story begins as the Chinese emperor reads in a book about the best thing in his empire being a little nightingale that sings in a wood. He then demands that the bird be found, and after all the royal minions have failed, an assistant kitchen maid leads them to the bird.

The little nightingale is brought to the court, given a golden perch, and sings so beautifully that tears come to the eyes of the emperor. That is enough reward for the bird, who declines the gift of a golden slipper. The nightingale is put in a golden cage. Its daily walks are monitored by servants, and the bird believes that its freedom is gone.

The emperor of Japan sends a gift of a magnificent bejeweled mechanical nightingale to the Chinese court. A duet is arranged between the live bird and the mechanical one. The live nightingale is, after the failed duet, banished. The artificial bird, thought to be superior, is placed next to



the emperor's bed. It plays the same song over and over, and in time, a wheel in its workings breaks. Even after repair, the bird can sing only once a year.

Five years pass, and the emperor is mortally ill. As the author puts it, "Death was sitting on his chest and had put on his gold crown and held in one hand the imperial gold sword, and in the other, his splendid banner." The emperor's good and wicked deeds come as troublesome images. A replacement emperor has been chosen. The emperor cries out to the mechanical bird to sing, but there is no one to wind it up.

The live nightingale returns to a branch outside the window and makes a bargain with Death—a song for the gold crown, a second for the gold sword, and a third for the splendid banner. As the bird sings about the quiet graveyard, Death's garden, watered by mourner's tears, Death drifts away in a cold white mist.

The emperor, fully recovered, understands when the nightingale tells him that he must fly free and "sing of good and evil which is kept hidden from you."

Written as both an allegory and a tribute to Jenny Lind, this tale is frequently cited as Andersen's best. It contains ironic references to the hierarchical social system; it has humorous touches; it speaks to the superiority of nature over mechanical, artificial copies of reality; and it appeals to all ages.

## SUMMARY

A prolific artist, Hans Christian Andersen wrote diaries, letters, travel books, novels, plays, poems, and the tales on which his fame rests. His range was broad, not only in terms of the genres in which he worked but also in the variety of styles he employed. Hypersensitive, sometimes lonely and sad, he always sought approval and basked in the glow of any positive response, whether it came from friends, prominent literary figures, royalty, or the children to whom he read his tales aloud. He summarized his method of creating thus: "I seize an idea for older people—and then tell it to the young ones, while remembering that father and mother are listening and must have something to think about."

Edythe M. McGovern

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How is Hans Christian Andersen's extreme emotional sensitivity reflected in "The Ugly Duckling"?
- In a letter to his mother, Andersen wrote: "First you go through a cruel time, and then you become famous." This process does not always work; what caused it to work with Andersen?
- How did Andersen take advantage of the nickname "the Swedish nightingale" of the famous singer Jenny Lind?
- What might be gained from reading more than one translation of an Andersen story?
- In injecting material for people of all ages into his stories for children, was Andersen like many writers today?
- What moral lessons do you see in Andersen's tales other than the ones pointed out at the end of his stories?
- Obtain and watch the 1952 film *Hans Christian Andersen*. Determine how closely this filmed version resembles the facts of his life.



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## IVO ANDRIĆ

**Born:** Dolac, Bosnia, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in Bosnia and Herzegovina)  
October 10, 1892

**Died:** Belgrade, Yugoslavia (now in Serbia and Montenegro)  
March 13, 1975

*In his short stories and novels, Andrić concentrates on the life of the people of Bosnia, who have suffered long occupations by foreign powers and struggled for self-identification amid attempts by those powers to assimilate them.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ivo Andrić (AHN-dreech) was born on October 10, 1892, in Dolac, a small town near Travnik in central Bosnia, at that time a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both of his parents were Catholics, which led to a long-standing controversy about whether he was a Serbian or a Croatian writer. After his father's death, his mother moved with Ivo to Višegrad, a town on the Drina River with its famous bridge built in the sixteenth century. Andrić attended elementary school in Višegrad, high school in Sarajevo, and universities in Zagreb, Vienna, and Krakow. As a student, he developed strong nationalistic feelings and joined Young Bosnia, a revolutionary movement that opposed the Austrian occupation of Bosnia. His political activism resulted in his being sentenced to a three-year term in prison, but he was released in 1917 because of poor health.

While in prison, he started his literary career by writing a book of prose poems, *Ex Ponto* (1918). Two years later, he published another book of prose poems, *Nemiri* (unrest). After World War I, Andrić entered the diplomatic service of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In 1923 he was a vice consul in Graz, but his position was endangered because he had not finished his graduate work at the University of Sarajevo. He enrolled at the University of

Graz and received his doctorate after writing his dissertation in German, *Die Entwicklung des geistigen Lebens in Bosnien unter der Einwirkung der türkischen Herrschaft* (1924; *The Development of Spiritual Life in Bosnia Under the Influence of Turkish Rule*, 1990). He remained in diplomatic service in various capitals until 1941. Andrić continued to write during this time, primarily short stories, and was praised by many critics as the best Serbian short-story writer in the period between the two world wars.

At the beginning of World War II, Andrić was a Yugoslav ambassador in Germany. It was a very difficult position, for he had to represent his country against Adolf Hitler's aggressive policy, which eventually led to the German attack and occupation of Yugoslavia in April, 1941. Andrić resigned his position because the Yugoslav government had joined a military pact with Germany and the other Axis powers. He was sent back to Belgrade, where he spent the entire occupation, writing his major novels but refusing to join any side in the struggle between the Communist and nationalist forces for supremacy. After the war, Andrić accepted the new Communist regime, started publishing his novels, and participated in the literary life of the new Yugoslavia. He was honored as the best living Serbian writer and received numerous awards, culminating in the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1961.

Andrić continued to write, primarily short stories, brief novels, and essays. He was also working on the continuation of his Bosnian historical nov-

els, which, unfortunately, remained unfinished. He died in Belgrade on March 13, 1975, hailed as the most important contemporary Serbian writer and the only southern Slav to win a Nobel Prize in Literature.

## ANALYSIS

Ivo Andrić is considered to be the best Serbian writer of the twentieth century and not necessarily because he won a Nobel Prize. His books of prose poems, *Ex Ponto* and *Nemiri*, were not particularly impressive and he later refused to republish them. It was in the short story, however, that he excelled in his early career, becoming a leading short-story writer between the two world wars. In his stories he employed several themes that would reverberate throughout his writing career. Among them are characters who dwell on the distant past; characters displaying acute loneliness, who have difficulties reaching an understanding with others; the world as a reflection of the tragic elements in human existence; an immense capacity for suffering; the limited opportunities provided by his characters' surroundings, as in "Put Alije Djerzeleza" ("The Journey of Alija Djerzelez"); fear of life, as in "Prozor" ("The Window"); feelings of guilt, as in "Mila i Prelac" ("Mila and Prelac"), "Anikinavremena" ("Anika's Times"), and "Smrt u Sinanovoj tekiji" ("Death in Sinan Tekke"); the divergence of two worlds in an individual, as in "Ćorkan i Švabica" ("Ćorkan and a German Woman"); and hatred, sometimes reaching pathological proportions, as in "Mustafa Madjar" ("Mustapha Magyar") and "Pismo iz 1920" ("A Letter from 1920").

Andrić is not negating life, despite its shortcomings. For him, there is still hope in the struggle against evil and in life, and this is stronger than the forces that threaten to destroy life. One of the recurring metaphors Andrić uses to express this hope and optimism is a bridge connecting two opposites, as in the story "Most na Žepi" ("The Bridge on the Žepa") and especially in his novel *Na Drini ćuprija* (1945; *The Bridge on the Drina*, 1959). Thus, his short stories can be considered a preparation for his later, longer works, although his stories have their own intrinsic values, especially in their artistic qualities, such as the concision of style and purity of language.

The enforced quiet life during the German occupation, albeit stressful and dangerous, allowed

Andrić to write his three novels, *The Bridge on the Drina*, *Travnička hronika* (*Bosnian Story*, 1958; better known as *Bosnian Chronicle*), and *Gospodjica* (*The Woman from Sarajevo*, 1965), all published in 1945. Although his short stories had touched upon many aspects of life in Bosnia, it was in *The Bridge on the Drina* that he gave them a full force. This novel established Andrić as a master of historical and semihistorical writing. The beautiful bridge over the Drina in Andrić's hometown, Višegrad, became one of the greatest symbols in all of Balkan literature.

*The Bridge on the Drina* covers life in Višegrad and its surroundings from the sixteenth century to World War I. It deals with various customs, most important of which is the "blood tribute," by which young Serbian children were taken to Turkey and raised as *janissaries*, or Turkish soldiers. One of these is Mehmed-Pasha Sokolović, a vizier, or Turkish consul, who built the bridge in Višegrad as a tribute to his home country. From then on, the life of the people of Višegrad and other Bosnians centered around the bridge. The slave-labor peasants who were conscripted in the nearby villages resented the Turkish might represented by the bridge and were punished by the impaling of a peasant accused of sabotaging the bridge's construction. Andrić, however, saw the beautiful bridge as representing several symbols, the main one being a means of connecting separate halves, not only in a physical sense but also as linking various races, nationalities, and cultures. Everything that happened to the people of Višegrad had an echo on the bridge, where the people converged and commented on happenings around them.

Decades passed and things changed, at times drastically. Christians, Muslims, and Jews mingled more with one another. When the Turks gradually withdrew, the Austrians took over. Amid all the changes one thing remained constant—the bridge, which survived even the bombing in World War I. The new generation of Bosnians continued the tradition of gathering on the bridge, this time discussing the more important changes, such as the rise of Serbia to the east and the awakening of the young Bosnians facing the approaching conflagration. Yet, throughout these discussions, the bridge continued to stand in all its glory, reminding the inhabitants of the need for peace and togetherness. Thus the bridge, through its long life



and seeming indestructibility, symbolizes the permanence of all life. The additional symbolism of the bridge can be seen in its spanning of the two shores and as a thing of beauty humankind always strives to achieve. *The Bridge on the Drina* is a semihistorical novel written in a highly artistic manner and is a good source of general information about Bosnia, although not a substitute for a scholarly history.

*Bosnian Chronicle* is also a semihistorical novel, but it deals only with a short period of the Bosnian past, the first decade of the nineteenth century. However, as in many of his works, Andrić reaches for universal meanings, in this case examining the evils of foreign subjugation. The novel also expresses the author's visceral attachment to his origins, which lasted throughout his life.

The third novel, *The Woman from Sarajevo*, is artistically at a somewhat lower level than the other novels, but it is still an important achievement. The book tells the story of Rajka, a spinster who spends almost all of her life shunning relationships with men and worrying about money matters, traits she inherited from her father, who warned her about unscrupulous men. She once allowed herself to have a close relationship with a young man, but she was damaged by the experience. Her painful life leads to excessive egotism, selfishness, miserliness, an insensitivity to the needs of others, an absence of normal human drives, and, finally, an insecurity complex and persecution mania, ending in the ruin of herself and everyone with whom she is associated. Andrić shuns deeper philosophical or historical issues, concentrating on creating the character of Rajka, one of his best characterizations. The archetypal literary theme of miserliness, found in many other literatures, such as the works of Plautus and Molière, is handled somewhat differently by Andrić. Raja is the only miser who is a woman, and she still has some redeeming qualities, having been developed fully as an individual.

Of other works by Andrić, a novella or short novel *Prokleta avlija* (1954; *Devil's Yard*, 1962) deserves special attention. In a Turkish prison in Istanbul, the clash between a brutal warden and a young, freethinking scholar ends in the scholar's death. However, the scholar emerges as the moral victor of spirit over force. Again, the universal meaning employed here is that evil can be conquered, even within the walls of imprisonment.

Though life may be accursed and walled in, its creative forces emerge as much stronger than the adversities or the adversaries. This message may be considered as the most succinct philosophy of Andrić's works.

## BOSNIAN CHRONICLE

**First published:** *Travnička hronika*, 1945  
(English translation, 1958; also known as *Bosnian Story*)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the provincial Turkish capital in Bosnia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the three consuls situated there—Turkish, French, and Austrian—carry on their duties amid the clash of cultures and diplomatic interplay.*

According to some critics, *Bosnian Chronicle* is Ivo Andrić's best work. Although not as popular as *The Bridge on the Drina*, it contains many basic features of Andrić's writing. Perhaps for that reason, it was translated three times into English: as *Bosnian Story*, translated by Kenneth Johnstone in 1958, with a revised edition in 1979; as *Bosnian Chronicle*, translated by Joseph Hitrec in 1963; and as *The Days of the Consuls*, translated by Celia Hawkesworth and Bogdan Rakić in 1992. Andrić assiduously studied archives and other historical sources for this and his other major works, both complete and unfinished.

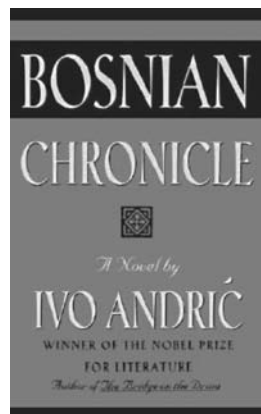
The events in the novel take place in the first decade of the nineteenth century, primarily in Travnik, a consular town in central Bosnia. Travnik, as well as most of Bosnia, was occupied by the Ottoman Empire following centuries of conquest of Balkan lands. The French had just occupied nearby Dalmatia and were concerned with the Turkish presence in Bosnia; the Austrians had always regarded neighboring Bosnia as a territory of their utmost concern. A combination of these three factors made a fertile ground for intrigues, in addition to executions of foreign policy matters of the three states extremely active in European affairs at the time. The consulate in Travnik was situated at the westernmost border of the Ottoman Empire and was the residence of a vizier. Since

France established its presence in the vicinity and the Turks were forced to retreat from Hungary, Travnik had acquired a significance beyond its strategic and political value.

Although the development of the novel's protagonists to a large degree was influenced by historical events, *Bosnian Chronicle* is more of a study of its characters than an historical novel. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, there were three Turkish consuls, or viziers, in Travnik, all three different in nature yet all conducting their duty for the advantage of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmed-Pasha, a former slave from Georgia, never forgets the state he serves with a friendly face and a smile, which makes it easier for other consuls to work with him. Ibrahim-Pasha is the opposite; he and his assistants and servants, a "museum of monsters," as the local people call them, make it difficult for him to work with the consuls. Ali-Pasha is the worst of the three. Efficient and merciless, he immediately executes all common criminals, believing that the Ottoman Empire must rule foreign territories with an iron fist.

The viziers are confronted by the French consul Daville, a well-educated and cultured man who writes classical poetry and admires Napoleon I. He has the difficult task of upholding the civility he is accustomed to in a primitive Balkan backwater. Needless to say, he often ends up on the short end in the struggle. To make matters worse, he is often shortchanged by the Austrian consul, von Mitterer, a cunning diplomat, who is interested primarily in taking advantage of the two adversaries' confrontations.

The demise of Napoleon I cuts short Daville's career, as well as the attempts of the French and Austrian consuls to bring some civilization to a primitive society. A mitigating force in this gloomy ambience is the role of women in the novel, especially Daville's wife. A deeply religious and emancipated woman, she helps her husband function in a manner corresponding to their upbringing.



There are several themes in *Bosnian Chronicle*. The difference between the East and the West is sharply pointed out. Fatalism, resignation, mistrust of foreigners and everything foreign, and disregard for the rights of individuals are contrasted by the comparatively enlightened world of France and Austria. The Westerners are mistrusted not only by their diplomatic opponents but also by the populace at large, which points to the way of life and thinking of the two worlds. Andrić does not treat this phenomenon as a matter of historical truth but as the personal experiences in the interplay of the main characters and the people at large. This makes *Bosnian Chronicle* not exactly a historical chronicle but rather a collection of human dramas and deep-seated conflicts. The important historical events at the beginning of the nineteenth century throw only a long shadow over the lives of the individual people of Bosnia.

Another theme found in the novel is the role of women. In addition to the aforementioned activity of Daville's wife, other female characters point to different kinds of women. Here Andrić compares the Asian women, who are little more than the objects of men's pleasure, to the Western women, who are more like partners to their men. In addition, *Bosnian Chronicle* also confirms the optimism expressed in many of Andrić's works that evil must be fought at all levels and a ray of hope is more than just that. The novel is thus raised to the level of universality, as is Andrić's wont.

As he does in in other works, Andrić uses this novel to express his own thoughts on life and history. His main idea is that, despite all the bleakness and backwardness, life throbs beneath the surface and human beings continue to strive toward a better life. Although it is difficult to say whether the bleakness and backwardness in this novel are caused by the Turkish rule of an iron fist or by the Westerners' lack of goodwill and pursuit of their own interests, human beings, even in such a backward state, can hope. Herein lies the universal meaning of *Bosnian Chronicle*.

## SUMMARY

In describing life in Bosnia, Ivo Andrić transcends the real and the obvious and elevates the question of the meaning of human existence to the level of universality. Life as depicted by Andrić may be hard, bleak, and tortuous, but it is not Søren

Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death." One of the main messages from *The Bridge on the Drina* confirms Andrić's basic faith in the inviolability of life: "Life is an incomprehensible miracle because it is constantly being consumed and eroded and yet it lasts and stands firmly like the bridge on the Drina."

Vasa D. Mihailovich

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*Travnička hronika*, 1945 (*Bosnian Story*, 1958; better known as *Bosnian Chronicle*)  
*Prokleta avlija*, 1954 (novella; *Devil's Yard*, 1962)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*Pripovetke*, 1924, 1931, 1936  
*Nove pripovetke*, 1948  
*Priča o vezirovom slonu*, 1948 (*The Vizier's Elephant: Three Novellas*, 1962; includes *Priča o vezirovom slonu* [*The Vizier's Elephant*], *Anikina vremena* [*Anika's Times*], and *Zeko* [English translation])  
*Odabrane pripovetke*, 1954, 1956  
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*The Pasha's Concubine, and Other Tales*, 1968

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is the main theme in Ivo Andrić's novel *Bosnian Chronicle*? How does Andrić treat the conflict of foreign powers over Bosnia? Who seems to be victorious in that conflict?
- What is Andrić's view of religion as presented in *Bosnian Chronicle*?
- What are the symbolic meanings that can be perceived in Andrić's works?
- What are Andrić's views on history as extrapolated from his works?
- What do *Bosnian Chronicle* and *The Bridge on the Drina* have in common?
- Does Andrić view the Bosnians' quest for independence as viable?

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French Embassy Press & Information  
Division, New York

## GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

**Born:** Rome, Italy

August 26, 1880

**Died:** Paris, France

November 9, 1918

*Perhaps the foremost French lyric poet of his generation, Apollinaire merged experimentation, tradition, and wild flights of imagination.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Guillaume Albert Wladimir Alexandre Apollinaire (uh-pah-luh-NEHR) de Kostrowitzky was born August 26, 1880, in Rome, the firstborn, illegitimate child of an aristocratic Polish adventuress and an Italian army officer. Apollinaire would later profess total ignorance of his paternity, in part because it suited his artistic purposes to do so. Born Angelica Kostrowicka in 1858, the boy's mother adopted the French spelling, Kostrowitzky, when recording his birth. She addressed him as Wilhelm, nevertheless. A second son, Albert, who presumably shared the same father, was born in 1882.

Inclined toward exotic tastes and (possibly compulsive) gambling, Angelica no doubt seemed less than an ideal match for the boys' supposed father, Francesco Flugi d'Aspermont, who, in addition, was old enough to be her father. Francesco's family, led by his elder brother Don Romarino, a prominent Roman Catholic cleric, spared no effort to keep the couple apart, in time sending Francesco, by then nearly fifty, into apparent exile in the United States. Not long thereafter, Don Romarino saw fit to compensate Angelica by providing for the education of her sons, initially at a parochial school recently founded in Monaco, adjacent to the French Riviera. Thus did the future poet, of chiefly

Italian ancestry (Angelica herself had an Italian mother), come to be schooled mainly in French, acquiring a strong sense of the French lyric tradition to complement his vivid imagination. In 1887, Angelica and her sons managed to survive a devastating earthquake that hit Monaco, spending several weeks in a rescue tent until suitable lodgings could be found. A number of Apollinaire's commentators have seen in the earthquake, and in the doomsday mentality that prevailed among the survivors, an early thematic source for Guillaume's often apocalyptic verse.

Following the closing of the Monaco school in 1896, the budding poet, known as Kostro to his classmates and friends, attended secondary classes, first in Cannes and later in Nice, but he abandoned his studies without receiving a diploma. His schooling, however, never interfered with his voracious reading, often in subjects never taught in class, nor with his first attempts at writing. It has been suggested that the d'Aspermont family might well have supported him in further studies, had he sought to pursue them, but frowned upon his chosen career as a writer. So too did Angelica, who clearly preferred her younger son Albert, who was sedate, even stodgy in manner, perhaps because she and Wilhelm were too much alike. In any case, he soon had to fend for himself, initially at the lower levels of journalism and ghostwriting, with other jobs thrown in to make ends meet. At one point, he took a job as a bank clerk, incidentally the chosen vocation of his brother Albert. In time, however, literary hackwork (including the writing of pornographic texts) would become his main oc-

cupation, allowing him access to the bohemian circles of Paris, where his family had settled at the beginning of the twentieth century. His personality, intense and outgoing, soon attracted a wide range of friends and associates in a literary and artistic adventure that would be talked about and written about long after.

Apollinaire's singular gift as a person, apart from his talents as poet and promoter, was that he was at once observant and dramatic, neither so self-absorbed that he was blind to his surroundings nor unable to communicate his observations and enthusiasms to an audience, large or small. It is thus hardly surprising that, like Charles Baudelaire before him, Apollinaire soon emerged both as poet and as art critic. Apollinaire appreciated the visual arts; in them he saw the immediacy for which poets always strive. Years after his death, Apollinaire's biographers and commentators were still arguing over just how much he actually knew about painting, but by then his work was long since done. With contagious enthusiasm, in recognition of kindred spirits, Apollinaire managed to showcase the artistic movement known as cubism, which included such tremendous talents as Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. Before the end of Apollinaire's short life, he also managed to introduce the word "surrealism," by itself a great contribution to the understanding of the human experience.

By the time he settled in Paris, calling himself Guillaume Apollinaire, the gregarious young writer had already begun writing striking, haunting poetry, often employing arresting references to history, religion, and the occult. A trip to Belgium with his mother, her current lover, and Albert in 1899 yielded brilliant, memorable images, as did his time spent in the Rhineland the following year as tutor to the daughter of the rich French widow of a German nobleman. Although by no means the first muse to inspire Guillaume's poetry, the girl's British governess, Annie Playden, became the best known of his early loves, immortalized in verses written both during and after what may or may not have been a full-fledged affair. It is known in any case that Apollinaire proposed to Playden while climbing a mountain, threatening to throw her over the side if she refused, and that Playden retracted her acceptance as soon as her feet were back on flat land. Years later, after World War II,

Playden expressed amazement when literary critics sought her out for interviews, supposedly quite unaware that the youth she had known had become a major French poet. The poems that Playden inspired nevertheless remain among the most innovative and memorable of those published in *Alcools: Poèmes 1898-1913* (1913; *Alcools: Poems, 1898-1913*, 1964). Apollinaire's next significant affair, at least in literary terms, was with the young painter Marie Laurencin, who, unlike Playden, shared her lover's artistic interests. Their often stormy relationship would last until the fall of 1912, generating many fine poems along the way. "Le Pont Mirabeau" ("Mirabeau Bridge"), written shortly after the breakup, is perhaps the best known and most frequently anthologized of all Apollinaire's poems. It is at once universal, ambiguous, and lyrical. The poem is a memorable addition to the poetic literature of lost love.

In 1911, in part because of a careless choice of friends and associates, Apollinaire, already famous as a champion and critic of the arts, was arrested and briefly incarcerated as a suspect in the theft of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre, a crime later found to be the work of some misguided Italian patriots. Although innocent of the charges brought against him, his detention at the infamous Santé prison in Paris hastened his rupture with Laurencin and brought forth a spate of despair and self-loathing duly recorded in his poetry. *Alcools* includes poems about these experiences. *Alcools* also contains the truly groundbreaking "Zone," among the most remarkable of modernist lyrics. The specter of having been accused of theft came back to haunt Apollinaire; he was suspected by some of his friends of having plagiarized "Zone" from Blaise Cendrars. By 1914, Apollinaire sensed that the long cultural party he had hosted was over.

When Apollinaire was thirty-four, World War I began. He was surely too old to be drafted, even had he been a French citizen. Although a native of Italy, he was in fact a stateless person, suspected by some of his detractors of being an Eastern European of Jewish ancestry despite his hereditary Roman Catholicism. He sought and eventually received citizenship in order to serve in the French army. Judging by the evidence of his actions, Apollinaire was aware that the world was changing and saw fit to take part. As he prepared for service,



he found another mistress destined to be immortalized in his poetry. Louise de Coligny, an aristocrat drawn to Apollinaire by their shared sensuality, could not have cared less about his writing or his growing fame. If Annie Playden was simply unaware of his work, de Coligny was openly contemptuous of it. In addition, she often treated Apollinaire as her social inferior, which he was. Still, the poems addressed to “Lou,” most not published until after World War II, are notable for their vivid imagery and sensual intensity. The affair with de Coligny was too turbulent to last for more than a few months, and before long Apollinaire was engaged to Madeleine Pagès, a young schoolteacher he had met on a train a year or two earlier and with whom he had corresponded. Mobilized on Easter Day, 1915, Apollinaire wrote to both women about his war experiences, his letters often interspersed with verse that was later published. In March, 1916, Apollinaire was sitting in a trench reading a magazine when a shard of shrapnel struck him in the head, piercing his helmet. Given the primitive state of brain surgery at the time, it is perhaps remarkable that he survived at all, although changes in his personality soon became painfully evident, as would changes in his looks later. The injury may have obliterated Pagès from his consciousness; he never wrote to her again, and in time he took up with the redheaded Jacqueline Kolb, whom he nicknamed “Ruby” and eventually married. It is to her that he wrote one of his finest late poems, “La Jolie Rousse” (“The Pretty Redhead”), the last poem in *Calligrammes* (1918; English translation, 1980). Having been disqualified from further military service, Apollinaire was as active in the artistic circles of Paris as his health would allow. In his weakened state, he fell victim to the international influenza epidemic of 1918, dying only two days before the end of World War I.

### ANALYSIS

It might well be said of Guillaume Apollinaire that, had he never existed, he would have had to invent himself, as in many respects he did. Exploiting the “freedom” of being illegitimate (already a frequent theme in French literature), Apollinaire would proceed to explore his sense of self in a variety of poetic forms, exploring the fragmentation and reintegration of the self.

Although Apollinaire wrote plays and prose, it is

as a poet that he made his strongest and most enduring literary statement. Uncertain of his nationality as well as of his paternity, Apollinaire was, in a sense, afloat in time and space, fatherless and free. Growing up in Mediterranean France, coming of age in the time of the first triumphs of modern technology, Apollinaire had a double fascination with applied science and with the mysteries of human identity; like his older contemporary Marcel Proust, Apollinaire seemed in many ways to anticipate, or even to predict, pending developments and discoveries in the field of psychology. His earliest writings show a vivid imagination fertilized by voracious reading in a wide variety of fields, some of them profane and obscene, most of them esoteric. Science fiction, offbeat prophecy, political theory, and occasional mysticism joined the teachings of the Roman Catholic church in Apollinaire’s suggestible mind. Even his earliest poems, derivative of the Symbolist movement then in vogue, depict his experience as fragmented, distorted, and rearranged. Like those seen through a kaleidoscope, Apollinaire’s images at first appear hard to decipher, yet with time and attention they yield both familiarity and beauty. Apollinaire’s work, prose and verse, has been described as a letter to the world; it is intensely personal. Using creative distortion, he turned the mundane into the surreal.

Like Baudelaire before him, Apollinaire often sought, and found, beauty in the most unlikely places. Just as Baudelaire found in the rotting carcass of a dog an image for decomposed love, so would his successor as poet and art critic describe, in well-rhymed, unpunctuated quatrains, a grotesque banquet in which fragments of his own mind are served up, with the finest of sauces and preparations, to an assemblage of distinguished guests. The poem in question, “Le Palais” (in French, both “palace” and “palate”; English translation, “Palace”), derives also from the legend of Rosamond Clifford, alleged mistress of Henry II of England, who was married to Eleanor of Aquitaine. According to legend, Eleanor found the thread leading to Rosamond’s secret castle and followed it to poison her. “Palace,” denounced by some of Apollinaire’s critics and admired by others, combines sex, violence, esoteric erudition, and lyrical beauty to evoke the poet’s personal sense of fragmentation and self-loss. Supposedly inspired by



Apollinaire's often competitive friendship with his fellow poet Max Jacob, "Palace," although far from the best of Apollinaire's poems, is at once typical and transitional. Probably composed around 1902, it shows Apollinaire moving beyond Symbolism toward the new spirit that he soon claimed to share with the cubist painters.

As Apollinaire himself states in one of his last poems, "The Pretty Redhead," his entire career as a poet was about the conflict between order and adventure, between tradition and experimentation. Characteristically, even the tradition that he alternately sought and rejected—the French lyric tradition beginning with François Villon in the fifteenth century and ending with Paul Verlaine at the end of the nineteenth—was acquired rather than inherited, as was Apollinaire's French citizenship. Often, what appears to be experimentation turns out, upon examination, to be tradition in disguise. It is well known that the decision to omit punctuation from the poems in *Alcools* was made at the last minute, and that all but a few of the poems had originally been composed in more or less traditional form. The removal of punctuation provides more than the mere appearance of modernity; it frees the individual lines in order to permit a variety of interpretations. Nowhere is such freedom more evident than in the case of what has become his most famous poem, "Mirabeau Bridge," in which the lack of punctuation reinforces the effects of flowing water, time, and change. Even with traditional punctuation, "Mirabeau Bridge" would still be a remarkable lyric, in the tradition of Villon and Verlaine, but the absence of traditional "framing" frees it from the constraints of logic.

By the time *Alcools* was published, Apollinaire was already at work on the poems to be published in *Calligrammes*, some of which seem no more experimental than those in the earlier volume. Others, however, spread type over and around the page in visually arresting forms, often in frank imitation of drawing or painting, and it is those efforts that provided the volume with its title. Once again, however, the appearance of innovation is often no more than an appearance. Many of the verses, if rearranged on the page, turn out to be quite traditional in versification and rhyme scheme. For all of his interest in the plastic arts and in providing visually interesting poetry, Apollinaire never lost sight—or perhaps one should say hearing—of the

lyric poet's primary vocation. Some of the poems may look strange but, when read aloud, they tend to sound quite right.

Although some of Apollinaire's wartime poems were published in *Calligrammes*, others, including many addressed to Louise de Coligny, were not published until after his death. They also are notable for their lyricism and typically vivid imagery. With a few notable exceptions, however, the poems released posthumously did little to enhance Apollinaire's reputation as a poet, which tended to fluctuate somewhat over the six decades between his death and the centennial of his birth in 1980. From 1950 to around 1965, there was much critical and historical interest in Apollinaire's life and work, with a number of significant books and articles to show for it. Yet by the time of Picasso's death in 1973 it seemed that Apollinaire's career, both as poet and as critic, had faded somewhat into the background. His reputation as a poet, although secure, fell somewhat short of what might have been predicted at the time of his death, when he appeared to be a herald of the future rather than the product, however self-invented, of his times.

## ALCOOLS

**First published:** 1913 (English translation, 1964)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*Apollinaire's first, and perhaps best, poetic statement, Alcools includes verses written as early as 1898.*

*Alcools*, a book of poems, is notable for its lack of chronological order. The long poem that opens the volume, "Zone," was in fact one of the last composed before the book's publication. The title of the volume, although evocative of alcohol, in fact has more to do with distilled essences. An earlier working title, "Eau de Vie," suggests clear beverages, presumably alcoholic. Both titles also suggest something strong yet rare and fleeting.

By presenting his poems in apparently random rather than chronological order, Apollinaire was in fact making a statement, stressing product over process. He did not claim to have moved beyond

his early work, but rather to be still present in it. Regardless of chronology, the poems differ widely in length, form, and content. Yet they are all of a piece. "Zone," in particular, is a remarkable piece of work, a de facto preface to the entire collection. Borrowing in part from cinematic technique, Apollinaire, in "Zone," frequently shifts viewpoints, alternately addressing himself in the first and second person, as if training a camera on himself. Recent inventions, such as cars and airplanes, figure prominently in "Zone"; yet the speaker seems to need no such transportation for his travels throughout Europe, from Paris to Prague to the Mediterranean.

Also included in *Alcools* are the "Rhenish" poems, composed during or just after Apollinaire's residence and travels in the Rhineland. Although technically stateless, the poet regards things German with the ironic detachment of a Frenchman, even as he shows some affinity for the German Romantic tradition. Some poems record overheard conversations, prefiguring later experiments to be published in *Calligrammes*. A Rhenish poem, "Schinderhannes," recalls with macabre humor the career of a German outlaw put to death a hundred years before the poet's German sojourn. The poems inspired by Annie Playden comprise a significant portion of *Alcools*, both in quality and in quantity; "La Chanson du mal-aimé" ("The Song of the Poorly Loved") is perhaps the most ambitious of the Annie poems, intensely lyric in assonance and rhythm, yet full of arcane references that have, over the years, demanded (and presumably repaid) close attention from critics. Anticipating both "Zone" and "Mirabeau Bridge," "The Song of the Poorly Loved" drifts on memories and sensory impressions, beginning on the streets of London where the speaker meets a street urchin who may well be

Playden's double, or perhaps his own; thereafter he wanders back to Paris and his still-divided self. "L'Emigrant de Landor Road" ("The Emigrant from Landor Road"), likewise inspired by his rup-

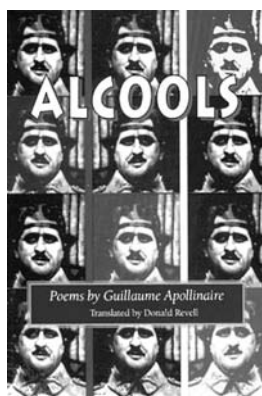
ture with Playden, contains a number of striking conceits and images.

The apparently random order of the poems in *Alcools* becomes clear only at the end, when "Vendémiaire" closes the collection that "Zone" may well have expressly been designed to open. "Vendémiaire" ("The Harvest Month"), designating the last drink before closing time and thus consistent with the title *Alcools*, may well have been written as early as 1909. It anticipates the disturbances that lay ahead in 1913. Allusions to recent Franco-German wars and wry political commentary about Paris as the center of France infuse Apollinaire's love song to his adopted city. The poem is prophetic of what was soon to follow. Ostensibly structured around a night of pub crawling in Paris, "The Harvest Month," like "Zone," declares and demonstrates the author's ambitions and talents, at once lyrical and thoughtful, striving toward, and sometimes reaching, poetic immortality. Some even finer verses and images occur in *Calligrammes*, which, however, is a less complete and satisfying collection than *Alcools*. The ironically titled "Merveille de la guerre" ("Wonder of War") applies Apollinaire's vivid imagery to the immediacy of combat, asserting also the poet's visionary mission. "Tristesse d'une étoile" ("Sorrow of a Star") uses arresting conceits in dealing with the poet's combat injury. "The Pretty Redhead," which fittingly closes *Calligrammes*, harks back to "Zone" in its sweep and technique, serving also as a fitting literary testament in honor of the poet's young bride. *Alcools* nevertheless remains Apollinaire's strongest poetic statement, best demonstrating the range and the scope of his singular talents.

## SUMMARY

Often categorized as the first twentieth century French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire welcomed the new century with his arresting imagery and experimental verse forms, finding in the cubist and other modernist painters the visual counterpart to his own innovations. Ironically, the work of the painters Apollinaire promoted appears to have outlasted his own, which now appears less visionary than his contemporaries might have supposed. *Alcools*, nevertheless, contains a number of memorable, striking verses, frequently read and admired by later generations of poets.

David B. Parsell



ture with Playden, contains a number of striking conceits and images.

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Was Guillaume Apollinaire's complicated early family life an advantage or disadvantage to him as a writer?
- Did Apollinaire have to have many love affairs to generate the love poems he wrote?
- What did Apollinaire mean by "surreal"?
- Consider whether Apollinaire's elimination of punctuation from the poems in *Alcools* is beneficial or an unnecessary distraction to the reader.
- What features of Apollinaire's poetry might be most likely to bring about a revitalization of his reputation?



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## AHARON APPELFELD

**Born:** Czernowitz, Bukovna, Romania (now Chernovtsy, Ukraine)  
February 16, 1932

*An escapee at age eleven from a Nazi detention camp, Appelfeld made his way to Palestine and began to write books that chronicle both the pre- and post-Holocaust periods.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aharon (also rendered “Aron”) Appelfeld was born on February 16, 1932, in Czernowitz, Romania, which is now Chernovtsy, Ukraine. During the period between the two world wars, most of the Jews in his birthplace were assimilated. The Appelfeld family spoke German and made little effort to preserve their Jewish identity.

Czernowitz was overrun by German forces in 1939. Before long, the occupying intruders killed Appelfeld’s mother. The boy and his father, along with other members of his family, soon were sent to the Ukraine, where father and son were interned separately in the Transnistria concentration camp. The train on which the frightened, blond-haired boy was taken to Transnistria was to become a pervasive symbol in Appelfeld’s writing. Alone and too young to understand the political implications of his displacement, Appelfeld was sucked into the forbidding freight car like a grain of wheat, a symbol that pervades his later writing, obviously reflecting the helplessness the boy felt at having his life snatched away from him for reasons that he failed to comprehend, a helpless object in the hands of a malevolent government.

For the next three years, Appelfeld lived at the whim of his captors in a setting in which people dislocated solely on the basis of their ethnicity were robbed of their dignity, their self-determination, and, in many cases, their lives. The sensitive youth

saw how cheap life became in such situations. Yet he thought deeply about how his people could have come to such a pass in a country that was seemingly civilized. Such musing became the basis for his later writing about how European Jews, by encouraging assimilation and by acceding without protest to the growing inroads the government was making upon them, probably were unwitting parties to their own destruction.

When Appelfeld escaped from Transnistria in 1943, he did not emerge into a welcoming society. The Ukrainian peasants among whom he found himself were as anti-Semitic as the Nazis who controlled the area. Appelfeld, however, used his blond hair as a badge of Aryan lineage, albeit a misleading one. He took whatever work he could find, sometimes as a farmer, sometimes as a shepherd. His adult friends consisted mostly of thieves and prostitutes. His younger friends were orphans enduring dislocations similar to his own, youths whose lives were perpetually in danger.

When Germany surrendered in May, 1945, Appelfeld was the youngest in a band of boys who made their way to Italy, where he was again able to pass as a Gentile. For a while, his group sought sanctuary and was permitted to live in a Roman Catholic church, where Appelfeld sang in the choir.

Soon the boy, remembering his ethnicity, went with his group of refugees to Naples, Italy, where they came into contact with the Youth Aliya, a group that urged Appelfeld and his companions to go to Palestine, which was to become Israel in 1948. In Palestine, Appelfeld spent mornings working in the fields and afternoons studying Hebrew, which

he had to learn in order to succeed in his adopted country.

In 1948, he was conscripted into the Israeli army, in which he served until 1950, when he was deemed physically unfit for further service. He then passed his entrance examination for Hebrew University and was able to enroll there in 1950. He received both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Hebrew University, with a specialty in Hebrew literature.

After studying briefly in Zurich, Switzerland, and at the University of Oxford in England, Appelfeld returned to Israel to teach Hebrew literature at Ben Gurion University in the desert town of Beersheba. During the 1950's, he wrote prolifically, sending his poetry to an editor in Jerusalem, who, for three years, regularly rejected it. Appelfeld, however, refused to be discouraged and continued writing.

In 1960, Appelfeld married an Argentinean woman, Yehudit. Along with their two sons and one daughter, they eventually settled in Jerusalem. In the year Appelfeld married, his father emigrated to Israel but declined to recognize Appelfeld as his son.

Appelfeld's rise as an Israeli writer was becoming evident in the early 1960's, although his work had not yet been translated into English. In 1960, he won his first notable Israeli prize for poetry. Two years later, his first collection of short stories was published in Hebrew and, despite distribution problems, received favorable critical attention from a small but devoted cadre of readers.

He gained recognition from readers outside Israel when he won Israel's Bialik Prize in 1978 and the Israel Prize for Literature in 1983, by which time his *Badenheim, 'ir nofesh* (1975; *Badenheim 1939*, 1980), *Tor-ha-pela'ot* (1978; *The Age of Wonders*, 1981), and *Kutonet veba-pasim* (1983; *Tzili: The Story of a Life*, 1983) had appeared in English translation.

The air of doom that pervades much of Appelfeld's work stems from the horrors and uncertainties of his formative years, although he does not write directly about the Holocaust but rather about what preceded and followed it. He is passionately concerned with what can happen to a people if they allow their identities to be co-opted and their civil rights eroded. Appelfeld is prolific, having produced more than a dozen novels in Hebrew, several collections of his more than three hundred

short stories, collections of essays, and a memoir, *Sipur hayim*, 1999 (*The Story of a Life*, 2004).

## ANALYSIS

It has been said that most fiction is at its heart autobiographical. Appelfeld's work is almost wholly a retelling of his life story. The overriding concern in nearly everything he has written is the Holocaust, although he never writes in detail about it. Rather, it lurks as a constant presence, the more horrible because it is not broached directly or in detail. Much as the horrors in Greek tragedies occur off-stage, so are Appelfeld's depictions of the horrors of the Holocaust left to his readers' imaginations. Anyone with a sense of history can fill in the grisly details that Appelfeld purposely omits.

Although he draws from the same factual base for most of his work, his writing is not boringly repetitive. He is able constantly to reshape images and details in fresh and novel ways. He is a master of restraint and verbal economy, exhibiting a minimalism that allows him to make his most salient points vividly and poignantly through understatement.

Appelfeld exhibits a consistently controlled objectivity about matters that are, in essence, highly subjective. He writes about the Holocaust by not writing about the Holocaust. He depends upon his readers' memories of its horrors to supply details too painful to relate overtly. He writes about what led to this cataclysm and about its aftermath or the gruesome events of this horrendous catastrophe that resulted in the deaths of some six million European Jews between 1939 and 1945.

Realizing that the dimensions of the Holocaust are so huge that they challenge the human imagination, Appelfeld elects to write around, rather than directly about, this historical event. He constantly searches for an answer to the recurrent question, "How could any such disaster have happened?"

He finds his answer in the major split he detects in Jewish society, one that surfaces in his stories. The rift lies between the intellectual Jews, who attached themselves to the mainstream culture of their societies by shedding most of the vestiges of their Judaic backgrounds and language, and the so-called *Ostjuden*, Jews from Eastern Europe, notably Poland, who were essentially philistines, merchants, and businessmen. They preserved Jewish



traditions but were so bent on their remunerative business pursuits that they did not object to being excluded from the genteel and powerful social milieus of their countries. They traded exclusion for prosperous existences.

Both kinds of Jews were easily duped during the rise of Nazism in Germany and in Eastern Europe. The intellectuals wanted to be part of the mainstream culture, so they did not object when Nazism began to limit their freedoms. The *Ostjuden*, on the other hand, not wanting to jeopardize their financial security, overlooked the policies that gradually made them second-class citizens and, for the few who survived, stateless people.

The two classes of Jews that Appelfeld identifies have little use for each other, so the solidarity that might have been their salvation in the most critical time in their history was absent. It was into such an environment that Appelfeld was born. Among his earliest memories is one fundamental to *Badenheim 1939*, in which the Austrian resort being depicted is soon to be crowded with summer visitors. Dr. Pappenheim is to provide musical entertainment during the resort's high season. Appelfeld uses Trude, the Jewish wife of the local pharmacist, who is not Jewish, metaphorically. She is manic-depressive, driven to distraction by her perception of the sick world that surrounds her and that she fears threatens the welfare of her daughter. There is about this book an air reminiscent of the atmosphere with which Thomas Mann infused *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The Magic Mountain*, 1927), although the implications of the disease that Trude senses in the environment are much broader than were those posed by Mann's novel.

In *Badenheim 1939*, one also finds persistent overtones of paranoia like those found in Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (1925; *The Trial*, 1937), a work with which Appelfeld acknowledges familiarity. In *Badenheim 1939*, the Sanitation Department erects fences and raises flags, steadily becoming an increasingly authoritarian factor in the lives of citizens, particularly of Jewish citizens. Against a backdrop of Rainer Maria Rilke's death poetry comes an announcement that all Jews must register with the Sanitation Department, presumably as a first

step toward "sanitizing" the country of its Jewish citizens.

The intellectual Jews have disagreements with the *Ostjuden* about who has to register, while the Sanitation Department works covertly to collect dossiers on all the Jews in Badenheim. The department forbids entry into or exit from the town and quarantines the Jews who are within it. Appelfeld writes of the "orange shadow" that hangs over the town, a symbol that he uses frequently. Trude's delusions become realities as the Jews become a marked people. When trains arrive to relocate the captive Jews, Dr. Pappenheim speculates optimistically that they probably will not be taken too far because the boxcars in which they are to be transported are so filthy. The hapless Jews board the train, still thinking that their deportation to Poland is a transitional step, trying to minimize the import of what faces them.

Similar themes pervade most of Appelfeld's writing. He is obsessed with what the decadence of European Jews resulted in once Adolf Hitler came to power. Both groups of Jews about which he writes, the intellectual Jews and the *Ostjuden*, lapsed into decadence and sold out for their own gain. Both groups, in Appelfeld's view, felt an underlying self-hatred as Jews, ever alienated, ever shunned. In this self-hatred, fed by the dominant society, were the seeds of the destruction that was inflicted upon most Jews east of France from the late 1930's until the end of World War II.

Appelfeld writes of the dispossessed, the abandoned, those who hide, fearing for their lives, those who run from all that is dear to them because running is their only hope. He writes about dead mothers and unsympathetic fathers, about indifferent societies and vindictive institutions within those societies. Mostly, however, Appelfeld writes about complacency and the price it exacts in situations like that brought about by fascist rule in the decade between 1935 and 1945. He places some of the responsibility for the Holocaust squarely on the shoulders of a passive Jewish community that might possibly have saved itself had it rallied in a united way when the ethnic outrages of the period began.

## TZILI

**First published:** *Kutonet veha-pasim*, 1983  
(English translation, 1983)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Tzili, daughter of a Jewish family that tries to deny its Jewishness, sustains her tie with her historic past and survives the Holocaust.*

In *Tzili: The Story of a Life*, Tzili Kraus is in some ways Appelfeld's female counterpart. As the story opens, she is the least favored of her parents' children because she, unlike her older siblings, is a poor student, something not to be encouraged in a Jewish-Austrian family with intellectual pretensions. The family, turning its back on its Jewish heritage, glories in its assimilation.

Tzili, a taciturn child, plays on the small plot behind her parents' shop, ignored by parents and siblings. She is abused because of her poor academic performance and is viewed as retarded. Her parents employ an old man to give their unpromising child lessons in Judaism, but she does poorly even in these lessons.

When it is apparent that fascists are about to enter their town, the Krauses leave, but Tzili stays behind to guard their property. She sleeps through the slaughter that ensues, covered by burlap in a remote shed. Now Tzili, on her own, must live by her wits. Part of what Appelfeld seeks to convey is that her inherent instinct for survival will serve her better than her family's intellectuality serves them. The family disappears, presumably victims of the Holocaust.

Appelfeld makes Tzili the symbol of a Judaism that survives through sheer pluck during a time of overwhelming difficulty. She consorts with prostitutes, works for peasants who physically abuse her, and struggles to hang onto what little hope there is. In time she links up with Mark, a forty-year-old who has left his wife and children in the concentration camp from which he escaped.

Like Appelfeld, Tzili looks Aryan and is relatively safe from identification as a Jew. She and Mark live by bartering, using some of his family's clothing as a trading medium for food. By the time Mark, now guilt ridden, defects, the fifteen-year-old Tzili is pregnant. She trades the clothing that

Mark has left behind for food. When this source of sustenance is exhausted, the pregnant Tzili finds work with peasants, some of whom beat her unmercifully.

With the armistice, Tzili joins a group of Jews freed from their concentration camps and goes south with them. She delivers her baby stillborn near Zagreb, but she survives—and with her survives the Judaism that nothing can extinguish. As the novel ends, Tzili and Linda, a woman who had earlier saved her life, are on a ship presumably heading for Palestine.

The theme of this story is survival in the broadest sense—the survival of one woman to symbolize the survival of the Jews and their philosophy. Tzili survives because she has not allied herself with the Jews who allowed assimilation or with the *Ostjuden* and their mercantile ambitions. Tzili lives because her instincts, her sheer intuition in time of crisis, serve her better than the artificial intellectuality of those who early shunned her and made her feel as though she was not part of her own family.

## THE HEALER

**First published:** *Be'et uve'onah ahat*, 1985  
(English translation, 1990)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Helga Katz, the daughter of a Jewish family in Vienna, suffers from an illness that leads the family to a healer in the Carpathian Mountains*

In *The Healer*, the Katzes are bourgeois Jews who live in Vienna. When their daughter Helga begins to suffer from psychological problems, they seek help from every doctor available, but the treatment she receives brings no permanent improvement. Hearing of a healer in the Carpathian Mountains, the parents, Felix and Henrietta, decide they must take Helga there in a desperate attempt to restore her health. Their son Karl accompanies them when, in October, 1938, they take Helga to the Carpathians for six months of treatment.

The story's ironies are not inherent but are a product of what readers know about the history of the period. This is the last year Eastern Europe will be free from a fascist tyranny that will lead to the



annihilation of most of the people involved in Appelfeld's story.

As the story develops, one realizes that the healer, the innkeeper, his Yiddish-speaking wife, and the Katzes themselves are marked for destruction. They perform their daily tasks, engage in their petty conflicts, fill their lives with small details that in the long run have little meaning. Hovering darkly above the entire narrative is the specter of what is soon to happen to Eastern Europe and to every Jew who lives there.

In this story, Appelfeld reiterates the notion of self-hatred that he is convinced helped lead to the downfall of European Jews during the Holocaust. This theme emerges in a discussion Henrietta has with the healer about Helga's name. Henrietta had wanted to name her daughter Tsirl, after the girl's grandmother, who was born in this rural region. She decided, however, that she could not give her daughter that name because of the ridicule that it would bring. Yet Henrietta, conditioned to the deceptions that Viennese society imposed upon its Jewish populace, does not rail stridently because she cannot give her daughter a Jewish name, saying merely that the name is "unusual" and would have caused people to laugh at the girl. In this exchange, Appelfeld clearly expresses the insidiousness of the Jews' overwhelming repression of their traditions and their acceptance of the conditions that would ultimately annihilate them.

## KATERINA

**First published:** *Katerinah*, 1989 (English translation, 1992)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A retrospective look at the growing anti-Semitism in Europe preceding the Holocaust from the point of view of Katerina, a seventy-nine-year-old Ruthenian peasant.*

Seventy-nine-year-old Katerina, imprisoned for many years during the Holocaust, has returned to her Ruthenian origins in a fiercely anti-Semitic territory that has belonged intermittently to Romania, Moldavia, and Ukraine. When Katerina returns following the Holocaust, Ruthenia has been

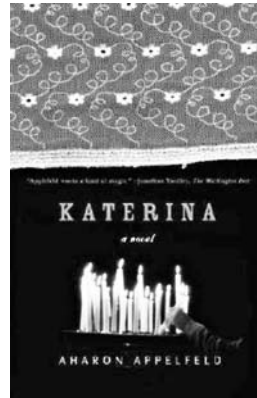
purged of nearly all its former Jewish population. A Gentile, Katerina has been imprisoned for murdering Karil, a fiercely anti-Semitic hoodlum who murdered her infant son, Benjamin, years earlier.

A social outcast, Katerina feels a greater affinity to Jews than to Gentiles. Her murdered son was fathered by Sammy, a fifty-year-old Jewish alcoholic. Despite the anti-Semitism that causes people in Ruthenia to avoid any outward signs of being Jewish, Katerina seeks out a *mohel*, the Jewish dignitary who performs circumcisions as dictated by Mosaic law, to circumcise her son.

When Katerina goes back to Ruthenia after an absence of sixty-three years, she lives in a squalid hut on the property where she was born and where she lived during her early years. Katerina has been sheltered from the Holocaust by being imprisoned for the forty years that marked Adolf Hitler's rise and eventual collapse.

The only suggestion of what has been happening during this period are the boxcars filled with Jews that rattle past Katerina's prison on their way to concentration camps, the trains leading inevitably to places of doom. Some clothing and other items confiscated from the doomed Jews are eventually distributed to the prisoners, but the actual horrors of the Holocaust are never spelled out: Appelfeld depends upon the memories of his readers to supply the gruesome details of what happened to six million European Jews between 1939 and 1945.

In *Katerina*, Appelfeld creates parallel worlds, that of the prison where Katerina is incarcerated and that of the Holocaust from which she is removed by prison walls. Before Hitler's rise to power, Katerina was employed by Jews to look after their children. These children taught her to read Hebrew and to speak Yiddish. When she was incarcerated for killing Karil, she was abruptly removed from the society in which the Holocaust took place.



## THE STORY OF A LIFE

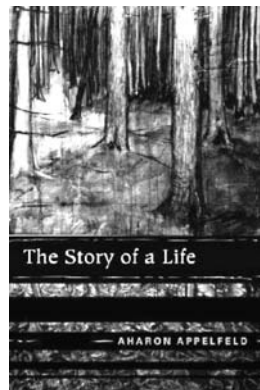
**First published:** *Sipur hayim*, 1999 (English translation, 2004)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*A succinct, well-controlled memoir in which Appelfeld relates the course of his life over seven decades, one of which includes the Holocaust.*

Until age seven or eight, Aharon Appelfeld led a privileged existence in the Ukraine, the only child of two doting parents. Suddenly his comfortable world was shattered. His mother was shot. He did not see her die, but he heard her screams as she was murdered by anti-Semites. Soon other members of his family also were annihilated. Finally the young boy and his father were forced to march for two months to a displacement camp, where they were held as prisoners. They marched in mud so deep that young children who were part of the march drowned in it.

The boy was separated from his father, but he was resourceful enough to escape after three years into the Eastern European forests that surrounded the camp. There, usually alone, sometimes with another escapee, he stayed until the end of the war, living as best he could. In the forest, he spent considerable time reflecting on the life he had once lived, especially the happy parts of it, memories of holidays with his parents and grand-



parents in the Carpathians. In this memoir, he captures many elements of his past life in a dreamlike way, perhaps the product of his musings during his time spent hiding out in the forest.

Because many of the events of his early life are too horrible to remember, Appelfeld represses them, but reading between the lines, one can glean some of the horrors that he has endured. He spent his early years lonely and threatened by forces of which he had reason to be terrified.

At war's end, the young man made his way to Palestine. He needed to learn Hebrew, a difficult task for him. His years of isolation had limited his ability to use language, and soon his use of German, his mother tongue, declined. He began to feel as though he had no language of his own, and with this feeling came a sense of his losing his identity. He also was learning to use language with the verbal economy for which his writing has received favorable notice.

### SUMMARY

With masterful restraint, Aharon Appelfeld works consistently to make his point: The Holocaust was as much attributable to Jewish passivity as it was to fascist activism. He presents the various faces of self-hatred that afflicted many European Jews during the rise of Nazism.

Jews of the period blinded themselves to such discomfiting indignities as forced registration with the authorities and mandatory relocations, which resulted in the deportation of millions of Jews to concentration camps. They refused to admit the realities that surrounded them, and by the time that they were conscious of the implications of these realities, it was too late for them to save themselves.

*R. Baird Shuman*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What essential differences exist between the intellectual Jews and the *Ostjuden* that Aharon Appelfeld depicts?
- Discuss specific instances of self-delusion that pervade Appelfeld's writing and that help to depict the position of Jews in a society that has turned against them.
- It has been said that people believe what they want to believe. Do you find instances in Appelfeld's writing that support this statement? Be specific.
- To what extent are Appelfeld's depictions of Jews objective? Subjective?
- Discuss the theme of dislocation as it applies to Appelfeld's fictional characters.
- How would you depict Appelfeld's attitude toward intellectuality?
- How specifically does Appelfeld's depiction of some of his characters that are used metaphorically relate to the broader context of Jewish society?

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## LUCIUS APULEIUS

**Born:** Madauros, Byzacium (now near Mdaourouch, Algeria)  
c. 125 C.E.

**Died:** Possibly Carthage (now in Tunisia)  
After 170 C.E.

*Apuleius wrote the novel *Metamorphoses* and other works that reflect the major intellectual tendency in the Roman Empire of the second century C.E.: a desire for uncommon or even secret knowledge.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Relatively little is known about the life of Lucius Apuleius (ap-yuh-LEE-yuhs). Since no ancient sources report “Lucius” as Apuleius’s first name, it may be a guess by some Renaissance scholars, based on his use of it for the main character of *Metamorphoses* (second century C.E.; *The Golden Ass*, 1566). Aside from his place of birth, the earliest information known about him is that his father, a wealthy magistrate in Madauros, Byzacium (now near Mdaourouch, Algeria), left him a large inheritance, which Apuleius spent on education, including initiations into mystery religions, probably including those of the gods Dionysus and Isis. Even these details, along with almost all other biographical information, come from his own report of his trial, which is not the most reliable source. His defense, however, does demonstrate how he wished to be seen: a handsome, profoundly knowledgeable, aristocratic young philosopher, educated at Carthage and Athens and with legal experience in the courts of Rome.

Apuleius was tried for marrying the widow Aemilia Pudentilla, aged about forty, when he was presumably in his early thirties. Not only was this marriage unconventional for the time, but his wife’s relatives charged that she was more than sixty years old and thus forbidden to wed by Roman law. He also was accused of marrying her for her money after bewitching her—a serious crime, punishable by death, if he were convicted. The best evidence that he won the case is that he circulated his defense, *Apologia* (158-159 C.E.; English translation, 1909), as proof of his rhetorical skills, something he could not have done if he had lost.

In his *Apologia*, Apuleius relates how he was traveling near Oea (now Tripoli, Libya), when he became ill and his former fellow student, Sicineus Pontianus, invited Apuleius to convalesce with him. Pontianus also suggested that Apuleius marry his (Pontianus’s) mother, Pudentilla. Pontianus later became violently opposed to the match, although his will provides evidence that he eventually reconciled himself to it. The original accusation against Apuleius charged that he had murdered Pontianus, but that claim was dropped by the time of the trial.

Little is known of Apuleius’s life after his trial. His works, *De mundo* (second century C.E.; concerning the world) and *De Platone et eius dogmate* (second century C.E.; concerning Platonic doctrine), mention a son named Faustinus, but whether this was a literal son and whether Pudentilla was the boy’s mother are matters for speculation. By the nature of Apuleius’s writings, he most probably was a lawyer and teacher in North Africa, active in literary, religious, and perhaps occult circles.

The lack of information makes it difficult to date his work, and scholars are particularly interested in determining when he composed his novel, *Metamorphoses*. That he does not refer to it in his *Apologia* may mean that the novel had not yet been written, since it would have been significant evidence of his interest in magic. If, however, his accusers were as barely literate as Apuleius makes them out to be, they might not have known about the novel. At the very least, then, the novel was not yet famous. Although its vigor and often scandalous subjects suggest a young author, its complexity could mean that he wrote it near the close of his ca-

reer. Allusions in the *Florida* (second century C.E.; English translation, 1853), a collection of passages from his speeches, date the *Florida* to the late 160's or early 170's, and his description of his writings therein does not mention his having composed a novel. If his trial occurred between 158 and 159 C.E., if Faustinus was born thereafter and had grown old enough to be addressed in *De mundo* and *De Platone et eius dogmate* as a reader of those treatises, and if *Metamorphoses* was composed as the culmination of Apuleius's works, the author could not have died much before 170 C.E. During his lifetime, at least three cities erected statues in his honor.

In addition to the extant *Apologia*, *Florida*, *De Deo Socratis* (second century C.E.; *The God of Socrates*, 1852), *De Platone et eius dogmate*, *De mundo*, and *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius composed various lost works, including hymns in Greek and Latin to Aesculapius, god of medicine, as well as treatises on astronomy, astrology, and medicinal herbs. Apuleius lived at a time when medicine, science, religion, and magic were intertwined. Various other works, notably *Asclepius*, a treatise on hermetic philosophy and magic, have been ascribed to him.

After his death, Apuleius gained a reputation not only as a philosopher and novelist but also as a wizard. During his trial, he had refuted the charge that he was a wizard, while at the same time making numerous references to his knowledge of the occult. His accusers may have felt doubly uneasy: first, because they lost the case against him, and, second, that if they were correct in their allegations, Apuleius was not just a skilled speaker and writer but also an angry sorcerer.

## ANALYSIS

Apuleius is now remembered as a rhetorician and author of a highly rhetorical novel, *Metamorphoses*. Typical of his writings, the novel's style overflows with literary embellishments, particularly archaic words and allusions, all displaying his uncommon education. His prose is rhythmically hypnotic, even to the occasional use of rhymes, so that it resembles the incantations of magicians.

The complexity of his style lends a basic ambiguity to the novel's tone. When he is at his best, as in the *Apologia*, the *Florida*, and the *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius's jokes manage to be simultaneously self-deprecating and boastful, as demonstrated in a

long and humorous passage defending how he brushes his teeth, an unconventional practice at the time. The *Metamorphoses* shifts between worldly cynicism and otherworldly idealism, as well as between playful pornography and serious preaching. Apuleius's actual attitudes thus remain hidden—appropriately, considering that his subject is the need for secrecy in magic and religion.

In the *Apologia*, he answers the charge that he possessed an implement of dark magic by saying that the object actually belonged to a mystery religion, and for this reason he is forbidden to reveal what it was. His emphasis on ironic masking and general concealment is typical of second century Latin literature; in this age, the tyranny of the Roman Empire often forced intellectuals to defensively hide or disguise their beliefs in allegories and other coded references.

Apuleius's early works trace the development of his duplicitous style and chart his literary development, which reached its most advanced state in the *Metamorphoses*. *De mundo* and *De Platone et eius dogmate*, both largely translation or paraphrase, mix Platonic concepts and other later ideas that are found in the *Metamorphoses*. More interestingly, the *Apologia* demonstrates his ability to write charming, first-person narration and his willingness to make fun of himself in small ways that win the readers' sympathies. For instance, his discussion of his erotic poems in *Apologia* shows courage and is similar to *Metamorphoses*'s first-person narrator, Lucius, who also admits his sexual embarrassments. By demonstrating the similarities of Apuleius's and Plato's love poems in *Apologia*, Apuleius implies that he simply follows a model for writing rather than creating poetry that discloses his private life. Similarly, conventional elements in the *Metamorphoses* cloak the autobiographical nature of the work.

Another parallel between the *Apologia* and the *Metamorphoses* is his attraction toward grotesque humor. In the accusations against Apuleius, for example, a slave and one of Apuleius's medical patients were allegedly bewitched into convulsions. In a flurry of puns, Apuleius claims the two men were epileptics; thus, keeping them from convulsing would have required him to perform magic. The *Metamorphoses* carries such nightmarish imagery further, with its sadistic violence and numerous transformations of humans into animals.



Like the *Metamorphoses*, the *Florida* evidences Apuleius's taste for the exotic, such as his description of a parrot from the Far East. Of all his works, however, *The God of Socrates* comes the closest to the *Metamorphoses*. The title, *The God of Socrates*, derives from Plato's having written that, from time to time, Socrates heard a voice dissuading him from various actions. Today, this might seem to mean that Socrates paid attention to his unconscious, but Apuleius makes it the pretext for discussing the idea that demons, the supposed source of this voice, were intermediate beings between people and gods. These demons included former human beings and lesser gods. Consequently, much of the supernatural cast of the *Metamorphoses*, including Cupid, Psyche, Isis, and Osiris, might be classified as demons.

Demons were the spirits particularly invoked by wizards. After discussing this supernatural world at length, Apuleius advocates an ethical life, so that people may become good demons, or lares, after their death; this passage of *The God of Socrates* is comparable to the immortality Lucius expects to attain at the close of the *Metamorphoses*. Since in psychological terms Apuleius's supernatural world represents the unconscious, *The God of Socrates*, and, even more, the *Metamorphoses*, have been favorites of psychologists, particularly those of the Jungian school, which considers gods and demons to be metaphors for deeply buried instincts, or "archetypes."

## METAMORPHOSES

**First published:** Second century C.E.  
(English translation as *The Golden Ass*,  
1566)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Desirous of learning magical secrets, Lucius seduces a servant girl into giving him one potion, but, unluckily, he receives another, which transforms him into a donkey until he can eat roses and return to human form.*

In the fourth century, Saint Augustine called *Metamorphoses* "The Golden Ass," and since then this name has become better known than the book's actual title. The phrase "golden ass" may de-

rive from the golden, or esteemed, status the book achieved; it may also contrast the opposite connotations of "golden" and "ass," since the donkey had an ignominious reputation in Apuleius's time, being associated in the Egyptian religion with the evil god Seth, an enemy of the god Isis.

Typical of second century authors, Apuleius does not invent his basic plot but shows his education by taking it from a Greek work, probably one written by Lucian, who was rewriting a tale by Lucius of Patrae or an earlier Greek author. Consequently, Apuleius begins by depicting his character Lucius as a Greek, who apologizes for his unfamiliarity with Latin. Such an apology also allows Apuleius to excuse any foreign—in his case, African—idioms that might have found their way into his novel, but its intention most probably is to make the readers wonder at his highly rhetorical mastery of the language and to serve as a disguise for him. Near the end, however, his narrator Lucius describes himself as a "Maudauran," a reference to Apuleius's birthplace, as if Apuleius were revealing himself to be the narrator, but just briefly enough to leave readers wondering if the word, inappropriate to the character Lucius, might be a scribal error.

Even if, as Saint Augustine presumed, the protagonist Lucius were a self-portrait of the book's author, Apuleius still manages to distance himself from most of the book, which consists of stories told to Lucius. These stories serve as parallels for the main narrative, since, like it, the stories are tales of suffering that lead to knowledge about the supernatural. In a general way, then, they resemble what was known about the mystery religions of the time: These religions were institutions with harrowing initiations that allegedly brought their initiates enlightenment.

*Metamorphoses* begins with Lucius traveling to Thessaly, the land of his mother's family and an area famous for witchcraft. This introduces the pervasive theme of the novel—a connection of the feminine (particularly the maternal) and magic. Lucius hears a tale about a man named Socrates, who, like the philosopher Socrates, is rendered miserable by a shrewish woman, but in this case through her sorcery, which kills him when he reveals that she is an old witch. Although this story ought to frighten Lucius away from prying into magic, it incites his curiosity, as it may the readers'.



Thereafter, despite warnings, Lucius seduces Fotis, a servant of the witch Pamphile, to learn the witch's secrets. Lucius wishes to turn himself into an owl (symbolic of wisdom) but instead becomes a donkey (symbolic of ignorance), since he has stolen the witch's magic. Tantalizingly, several times during the narrative, Lucius comes in close contact with roses, the antidote needed to transform him back into his human form; roses were associated with the grace of various mother goddesses. Not until the novel's end, however, does he have an opportunity to eat roses and return to human form. Most of the other characters are punished by divinely powerful maternal figures, including the goddesses Isis, Venus, and Fortune, as well as by witches, who are said to control the heavens.

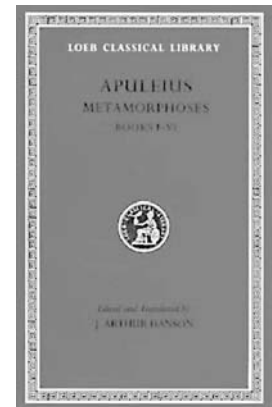
Captured by bandits, Lucius hears an old woman tell a tale to comfort the kidnapped girl Charite (grace). In the tale, Psyche (soul) is kidnapped by Cupid (the god of love), who was supposed to punish her for offending the goddess Venus, but Cupid instead falls in love with Psyche. Psyche has never actually seen Cupid, since the two met in a darkened room. At the instigation of her jealous sisters, Psyche breaks the taboo against seeing Cupid and takes a look at him. He flees and she pursues him, coming at last into the service of Venus, who requires Psyche to perform seemingly impossible tasks. With supernatural help, Psyche performs them, only to eventually fail because her curiosity causes her to look into a forbidden box. Cupid, however, obtains the help of the god Jupiter. Through this assistance, Psyche becomes immortal and gives birth to Voluptas (joy). The comforting import of this story about a miraculous rescue prefigures two later plot developments in the novel: Charite is saved by her lover and Lucius finds his salvation through Isis.

Before his salvation, Lucius encounters mortals at their worst; they torture him and one another in a series of sadistic escapades. Thus, the book is not just an initiation into heavenly secrets but also into terrifying and perversely sexual knowledge. Initiations into the mystery religions, however, tended to employ multifaceted imagery of the sexual and the terrifying, so the *Metamorphoses* has often been considered a glimpse into these. In addition, one of Lucius's first warnings against stealing knowledge was seeing a statue of Actaeon changed to a stag and killed by the disrobed goddess Diana for spy-

ing on her. Similarly, Psyche was punished for looking upon naked Cupid after he had forbidden her to do so. Apuleius repeatedly associates this theme of forbidden secrets with voyeurism and theft, sins that bring the perpetrators to the condition of animals, as with a thief slain while disguised as a bear.

If given freely, however, spiritual knowledge is restorative and healing. Without at first knowing to whom he should pray, Lucius prays, and Isis graciously appears, bringing deliverance and a direction for his life. In a procession of her worshippers, one of her priests enters, allows Lucius to eat roses, and explains how his former sufferings, due to blind Fortune, will now change to beatitude under the protection of Isis, described as a sighted Fortune. Once mystery initiations have taught religious secrets, Lucius's new awareness will be reflected by the universe, under the guidance of Isis and her husband Osiris. Having partaken of this new understanding, symbolized by the roses, Lucius returns to human form and will neither behave like an animal, governed by base appetites, nor be treated like one. He becomes a priest, and, like Apuleius himself, a lawyer. In a dream, Osiris assures Lucius that despite rivals' envy of his learning and of his profound, new knowledge, he will be raised to legal success and the higher echelon of the priesthood.

Some scholars assume that this ending recruits readers into the worship of Isis and provides the best available glimpse of her mysteries. Others argue that it is satire, since its piety seems at odds with the preceding cynicism. At the conclusion, Lucius revels in a celibate life and a bald head—both ridiculous to average Roman readers. One of the initiatory priests is named Mithras, the god of different mysteries than Isis's. Is Mithras, who is Isis's priest, a humorous figure, or is he a hint that all the gods are ultimately Isis's servants? The book may be a joke and/or a profound paradox, encompassing both the ideal and grotesque aspects of life.



## SUMMARY

Because in the second century, writing itself seemed magical to a largely illiterate public, Lucius Apuleius was one of the intellectuals playing with a situation that allowed the literate to serve as physicians, philosophers, counselors, and storytellers—roles for which the earliest models were medicine men and magicians. Particularly in *Metamorphoses*, this playfulness skillfully rouses his audience's desire for secret knowledge, even while showing how dangerous such a desire may be, thereby making reading all the more exciting. Especially as the earliest extant source for the story of Cupid and Psyche, *Metamorphoses* was a major influence on many later works, including Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *Ni amor se libra de amor* (pb. 1664; love enslaved to love), Thomas Heywood's play *Love's Mistress* (pr. 1634, pb. 1636), Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurian: His Sensations and Ideas* (1885), and C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (1956).

James Whitlark

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does the story of “Cupid and Psyche” differ from some version of *Beauty and the Beast* or of the film *King Kong*?
- In *Metamorphoses*, what is Lucius Apuleius's attitude toward women?
- In *Metamorphoses*, what is Apuleius's attitude toward magic?
- Discuss religious allegory in *Metamorphoses*.
- Does Apuleius seem to be a sincere religious teacher, a con man, or some combination of the two?
- In *Metamorphoses*, what does Lucius learn?
- How does the dark humor in *Metamorphoses* fit into (or work against) its religious purpose?

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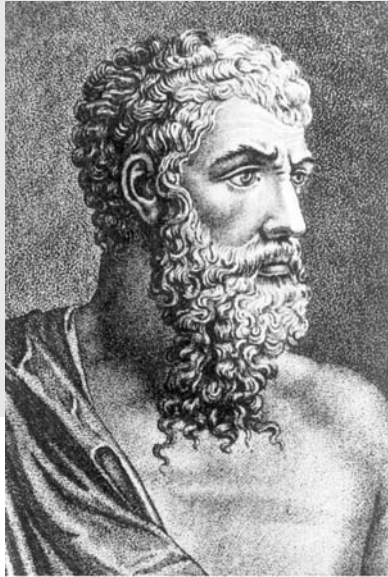
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## ARISTOPHANES

**Born:** Athens, Greece  
c. 450 B.C.E.

**Died:** Athens, Greece  
c. 385 B.C.E.

*As sole surviving examples of Athenian Old Comedy, the eleven complete plays by Aristophanes provide the best clue to the nature of literary comedy as it developed and reached fruition in the later fifth century B.C.E.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aristophanes (ar-uh-STAHF-uh-nee-z) was born in Athens, Greece, around 450 B.C.E., to parents Philippos and Zenodora. The date of Aristophanes' birth assumes he was at least nineteen years old when his first play, *Daitalēis* (banqueters), was produced in 427 B.C.E. by Kallistratos; he would have had to be that age to understand the requirements of the competition and to develop the requisite writing skill. That he was not yet old enough to have produced that play himself, a task assumed only in 424 B.C.E. with the production of *Hippēs* (*The Knights*, 1812) after several successful plays, would seem to vouch for the assumption. Admittedly, for reasons no longer clear, several other plays, aside from those written earliest and latest in his life, were produced by others: in 414, the *Ornithes* (*The Birds*, 1824), again produced by Kallistratos, and the nonpreserved *Amphiaraos*, produced by Philonides. Aristophanes was already bald, however, when the *Eirēnē* (*Peace*, 1837) was produced in 421 B.C.E. (line 771).

Though born in Athens, Aristophanes had lived in Aigina, where his family presumably acquired property after the Athenian seizing of that island in 431 B.C.E. He was of the tribe or greater "district" of Pandionis, one of ten such districts created by the Athenian politician Cleisthenes with the constitu-

tional reform of 508-507 B.C.E., and of the much older *deme*, the local or village "ward," of Kydathenaeus within the city. That was the same local ward of the famed politician Kleon, who receives considerable parody in *The Knights* and the *Sphēkes* (*The Wasps*, 1812) of 422 B.C.E. *Acharnēs* (*The Acharnians*, 1812) of 425 implies that subsequent to his earlier prizewinning play, the *Babylōioi* (Babylonians) of 426, Aristophanes has been prosecuted by Kleon for anti-Athenian propaganda. While that trial was unsuccessful at its legal level, Aristophanes' reputation as comic playwright was established, and in Kleon and the political structure of Athens, he had ample material for his buffoonery. That factor is particularly noteworthy considering the Peloponnesian War among the Greek city-states, especially Athens against Sparta, which dominated the historical epoch from 431 to 404 B.C.E.

Aristophanes was married, though his wife's name is not known. He had at least three sons, Araros, Nikostratos, and Philetairos, each of whom also wrote plays that were staged during the Middle Comedy era in the fourth century B.C.E. Aristophanes had produced a play named *Ploutos* in 408, though it is not the one that survives under that name. Rather the surviving *Ploutos* (*Plutus*, 1651), often considered the final example of Old Comedy, is a play staged in 388, though the occasion and achievement is not known; that play was produced by his son, Araros, who staged two other plays by his father, neither of which survive: the *Kōkalos* at the Greater Dionysia, and the *Aiolosikōn*,

both of which were produced about 385. Aristophanes died in Athens sometime around 385 B.C.E.

### ANALYSIS

Aristophanes' plays can be studied as sources for political or social history, as works of literature, and as dramatic works. In antiquity, Plato recommended them to Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse, when the latter wished to learn more about Athens; in the twentieth century, Viktor Ehrenberg employed them to write "a sociology of Old Attic Comedy." The distinction between the plays as literature and as drama rests upon the separation of poetic form from techniques of staging. Comic plays were usually produced only once: thereafter, they might be disregarded or studied as literature but were not "seen" again. The absence of staging instructions within the plays, as well as a frequent failure to differentiate the speakers clearly, meant that readers could become confused by the poetic content. It is no wonder that these masterpieces generated such an intensive study, since the comic poet was also a source of original and distinctive vocabulary needing clarification. The Greek biographer Plutarch, distinguishing the preferences of an elite, educated man from those of an ordinary, uneducated one, claims that Aristophanes suited the latter but not the former by virtue of "the vulgarity in speech," "the spectacle," and "the habits of a common laborer." The reader or student of Aristophanes must be prepared to enter a world filled with such material. Yet Plutarch's preferences also illustrate the changing tastes of another epoch and the lack of historical consideration for the development of comedy, as well as for the particular genius of Aristophanes.

In contrast to Plutarch, the observation made of Aristophanes by a fellow competitor speaks highly of his role. The Greek playwright Kratinos notes that "Aristophanes resembled Euripides in his concern for verbal precision and dexterity." The oldest manuscripts of Aristophanes date from the Byzantine empire of the tenth century C.E. An intensive study of the plays in the twelfth century noted his purity of language and quintessential example of the Attic dialect of the fifth century B.C.E. In spite of the changed environment of a Christianized Greek East, the coarseness of his humor is considered less a detriment than the positive value accorded to his opposition to war.

The obscenity charges against Aristophanes so frequently leveled by the literary critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are properly understood as reflections of changing societal tastes in different eras, as well as a failure to understand social history and satire, rather than actual indecency on the part of the comic poet. War and political machinations against people were the obscenities, not explicit sexual or scatological vocabulary; this truth is what Aristophanes knew. In his time the only thing forbidden in comedy was to resemble tragedy.

To understand specifics requires some attention to the history of comedy within Athenian life. The Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *De poetica* (c. 334-323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705), provides a short history of the poetic arts. According to Aristotle, the "more serious writers" of dramatic tragedy imitated illustrious events involving illustrious persons. The "lighter-minded" imitated the more ordinary events and persons. He qualifies this general point by specifying that comedy does not include the full range of "badness," but that to be "ridiculous" or to be made ridiculous points to a kind of deformity: "The explanations of laughter are errors and disgraces not accompanied by pain, or injury." Thus, for Aristotle, the comic mask, by which the characters in the play are identified and differentiated, is one of "deformity and distortion" within the proprieties required by the staging. Aristophanes was a master of the use of masks, though they also functioned to permit a rapid switch of character onstage as required by the limitation of three speaking actors.

While Aristotle could identify some of the development through which tragedy had passed, he wrongly concludes that "there are no early records of comedy, because it was not highly valued." Archaeological investigation has uncovered lists of the prizewinners within the history of the comedies. These lists evidence the connection of comedies to the history of festivals in the state and to the gods of the state. As Aristotle knew without exact chronological detail, "it was a long time before comic dramas were licensed by the magistrate; the early comedies were produced by amateurs." Yet he also knew that these productions were the outgrowth of phallic performances, which explains the perennial costuming within the plays.

From the remote past of the Greek world came



winemaking and celebrations of its accomplishment, associated with the god Dionysos. Specific developments are best understood within Athenian definitions. In the month Poseidion (December-January), following the picking of the grapes and their initial pressing, there was held the “Rural Dionysia.” An explicit example from the Rural Dionysia, but slightly parodied, is preserved in *The Acharnians* (lines 237-279). In the next month, Gamelion (January-February), festivities (the “Lenaia”) with phallic processions carrying the new wine shifted to the sanctuary within the city, where it was stored, and to the theater, where it was celebrated. Initially, “revelling songs” were part of the processions, from which evolved the more complex examples seen in the competitive series of comic plays, normally five except in some wartime years.

Festivities of the next month, Anthesterion (February-March), focused upon the tasting of the new wine and involved a great procession to the coastal marshes, where the god’s arrival by ship, personified in the person of the king-archon, was dramatized. This event was followed in the month Elaphebolion (March-April) by further phallic processions from the walls of the city to a shrine and then back into Athens directly to the theater for the seasonal complex of plays (called “the City Dionysia” or the “Greater Dionysia”). This complex involved competitive trilogies of tragedies with a satyr play, plus another series of comedies. Remnants of the entering and exiting processions, with their accompanying costumes, are embedded within examples of the surviving comedies.

Recovered inscriptional lists from the festivities and the City Dionysia provide a sequence as far back as 487 B.C.E., associating many details with the particular festival and giving the names of competitors, their plays, and the winners. For fifth century Old Comedy, at least 57 competitors have been identified, along with 374 lost play titles. Of the latter, thirty are ascribed to Aristophanes, in addition to the eleven plays that survive in their complete form.

The form of the comedy involves five elements, each with its own complexity: prologue, parodos (entrance of the chorus), episodic agon (formal “contest” or “debate”), parabasis (choral interlude), and exodos (final scene and exit). Insofar as comedy got beyond burlesque or slapstick, which

never completely disappeared, these elements constituted the structural integrity to which Aristotle gave the name “plot” and by which he evaluated the success of the poet.

Beyond these basic elements, Aristophanes employed a numerous variety of technically defined poetic meters and rhythms with brilliant skill. They are exceedingly difficult to reproduce in English, or in any other translation.

## THE CLOUDS

**First produced:** *Nephelai*, 423 B.C.E. (English translation, 1708)

**Type of work:** Play

*This play, a parody of the kind of intellectual development associated with Socrates, places such thinkers and their thoughts within the rarefied atmosphere of the “clouds.”*

*The Clouds* was staged at the City Dionysia of 423 B.C.E. and was awarded third place among the three competitors. Having taken first place with *The Acharnians* and *The Knights* at the Lenaia, respectively in the two preceding years (425 and 424), Aristophanes was very disappointed. The preserved text is a revision of the original as staged, building in a variety of ingredients reflecting his effort not only to revamp the failure but also to incorporate observations on that failure. Lines 521-525 make the point specifically: “I thought you were a bright audience, and that this was my most brilliant comedy, so I thought you should be the first to taste it. But I was repulsed, worsted by vulgar rivals, though I didn’t deserve that.”

Aristophanes takes as his theme the contrast between an older educational mode and the new interrogative style, associated with the name of Socrates. Apparently his first play, the *Daitalēis*, had already exploited a similar theme. *The Clouds* begins with a prologue (lines 1-262), which introduces the two principal characters, Strepsiades (“Twister”), worried by the debts accumulating because of the propensity for chariot racing of his long-haired son, Pheidippides (“Sparer of Horses,” or “Horsey”). The idea occurs, with the assistance of “a student,” to have the son enter the school

("Think-shop") next door, operated by Socrates, wherein by the logic of the sophists one should be able to learn how to talk so as to evade one's debts. When the son refuses to attend, lest his suntan be ruined, the father goes instead. He finds Socrates suspended in a basket from the roof, wherein rarefied thinking can be more appropriately done in the atmosphere of the clouds.

The parodos finally erupts with the entrance of the chorus of "clouds" singing and dancing (lines 263-509), following the incantations and chanted prayers of Socrates, to the alarm of Strepsiades. In brilliant repartee, the chorus is introduced as the goddesses, who, with wind, lightning, and thunder, patronize intellectual development. Yet the buffoonery that follows indicates that it is some weird intellect, for Socrates, in answer to questions about rain and thunder, assures Strepsiades that there is no Zeus but only clouds displaying analogies to the human bodily functions of passing water or gas. Strepsiades is convinced, and the parodos ends with his agreeing to become a student. A sequence of two parabases and two agon follow (lines 510-1452). The first parabasis (lines 510-626) provides the best evidence that the play in its present form has been rewritten; the second (lines 1113-1130) addresses the judges asking for the prize. Their function is typical, though they also serve as interludes between the episodic agon or scenes, and, whatever their present content, some similar kind of witty poetry addressed outside the play would have been present.

The first episode is the longer one (lines 627-1112). Strepsiades proves incompetent as a student, for he cannot memorize what is required but only wants to learn how to outwit creditors. Subsequent to his own dismissal, he forces Pheidippides to enroll under threat of expulsion from home. Included is the first agon (lines 889-1112), wherein Pheidippides is exposed to the debate between "Right" ("Just Logic") and "Wrong" ("Unjust Logic"), from which it is obvious that the argument of the latter will prevail.

The second episode is relatively short (lines 1131-1452). When Strepsiades learns the result of his son's education, though assured of its great success, he discovers that success means that his son now knows how to whip him. The second agon (lines 1321-1452) argues for the validity of that action, making reference, as the comic poets'

tended, to the tragic poets, the father preferring the older Aeschylus, characterizing older virtues, and the son siding with Euripides, whose newer notions are caricatured as immoralities. There are amusing anecdotes concerning child development in Strepsiades' argument to Pheidippides, but Strepsiades has been defeated by his own intentions.

The brief exodos (lines 1453-1510) involves Strepsiades getting revenge for his own sake by setting fire to the "Think-shop" next door.

## THE WASPS

**First produced:** *Sphēkes*, 422 B.C.E. (English translation, 1812)

**Type of work:** Play

*In the midst of war and without definitive leadership, a democracy can be pulled this way, then that, eliciting a lampooning of its very structure.*

Having failed in 423 B.C.E. with his intellectual parody, *The Clouds*, Aristophanes returned to the more vulgar arena of politics. Considered to be the most perfectly structured of Aristophanes' plays, *The Wasps* took second prize at the Lenaia. It provides a complete pattern against which other plays can be measured.

The prologue (lines 1-229) begins on an early morning before the house of Philokleon ("Lover of Kleon") and his son Bdelykleon ("Hater of Kleon"), with two of their slaves, Sosias and Xanthias, discussing the peculiar illness of Philokleon, who has an obsession to serve daily on juries within the law courts—spelled out in a lengthy monologue (lines 85-135) by Xanthias—from which Bdelykleon is equally determined to prevent him. To get out of the house, Philokleon climbs the chimney pretending to be smoke, while Bdelykleon appears on the roof to stop him. The theme for the subsequent action is stated in lines 158-160: Philokleon fears the gods will punish him if any guilty defendant goes unpunished.

The arrival of the chorus in the parodos (lines 230-315), spectacularly costumed as "wasps" so that they may "buzz" around, over which are the garb of



the jurors whose action often “stings,” signals the beginning of the play’s action. They are exclusively old men of Philokleon’s generation.

The agon is twofold: In a scene interlayered with an irrelevant lyric that plays upon the nature of the wasp, the issue is defined (lines 316-525) by Philokleon and the leader of the chorus and formally debated (lines 526-727) by Philokleon and Bdelykleon before the chorus. Bdelykleon’s argument prevails, convincing not only the chorus but also, intellectually if not emotionally, his father. The episode is extended (lines 728-1008), again with interlayered lyric, by dramatizing the agon, in a pretended domestic litigation intended to cure Philokleon of his illness by having him acquit a defendant. The context provides occasion to pan the actual politician Kleon, presumably in the audience.

The lengthy parabasis (lines 1009-1121), balanced between the leader and his chorus, and displaying the particular requirements of Attic lyric style with its highly technical linguistic components, serves to narrate the conflict that the playwright has had with his judges and audiences on previous occasions, upon which they have failed to understand him. Considerable insight into biographical matters emerges.

The play intentionally breaks down in the episodes that follow, for much buffoonery and satire occur. Philokleon warns of excessive drinking (lines 1122-1264), anticipating his own drunkenness, illustrated in the final scene (lines 1292-1449). In between comes the second parabasis (usually lines 1265-1291), wherein Aristophanes places in the mouth of the chorus leader, who is wearing a mask to represent the author, his bitter diatribe against Kleon for that earlier prosecution. Some translators prefer to switch this parabasis with the choral ode (lines 1450-1473) that would otherwise conclude these episodes, wherein Philokleon, apparently before his intoxication, could be envied for his change of character and his son praised for his wisdom. Others think that the intentional diabolical irony of Aristophanes would be best served by leaving the two sets of lines in their traditional places. Either way, the exodos (lines 1474-1537) is also a dance routine, with Philokleon executing a burlesque solo parodying those of various tragedies, including that of Euripides’ *Kyklōps* (c. 421 B.C.E.; *Cyclops*, 1782).

## THE BIRDS

**First produced:** *Ornithes*, 414 B.C.E. (English translation, 1824)

**Type of work:** Play

*With the Peloponnesian War in an apparent mode of Athenian victory, occasion for complex fantasy seemed in order, and this genius of a spectacle resulted with its utopian “cloud-cuckoo-land.”*

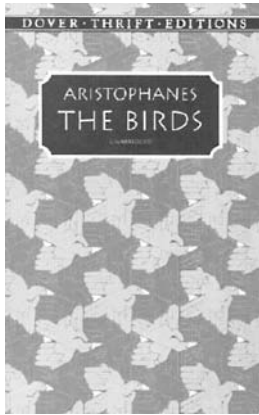
The longest of the surviving comedies by Aristophanes is *The Birds*. It was entered at the City Dionysia, where it was awarded second prize. It is without a doubt Aristophanes’ singular achievement of dramatic spectacle. The play’s brilliantly plumaged chorus of birds appears to be based on a genuine knowledge of birds in their great variety, for beginning at line 268 Aristophanes introduces each different bird in the chorus, commenting upon its respective dress.

Peace had been the concern of the state in the preceding decade, and *Peace* had been the theme of Aristophanes’ play that took second prize at the Greater Dionysia in 421 B.C.E. Yet peace had not come in the continuing war between Athens and Sparta. While *The Birds* was presented in a moment of impending success, for Athens it was merely a matter of months before the most disastrous events of the war. It is hard to be certain how perceptive the poet was, yet there is a haunting underlying mood.

The prologue (lines 1-259) begins with Athenian citizens Peisthetairos and Euelpides having abandoned the city, with its incessant penchant for litigation, earlier satirized in *The Wasps*, in search of some quieter country. Having been guided in their journey by birds, respectively a crow and a jackdaw, they call upon the mysterious Tereus, who, according to a tragedy by Sophocles, had been turned into a hoopoe, a multicolored bird with a large crest. After some explanatory conversation, Peisthetairos has the idea that the birds should build a city-state between heaven and earth, where they can intercept the sacrificial smoke of offerings made by humans to the gods, reestablishing the original supremacy of birds over both. The prologue ends with the hoopoe’s song, full of marvel-

ous plays upon birdcalls, summoning the other birds.

A long parodos follows (lines 260-450), wherein the chorus of birds enters upon the stage one by one, to be introduced, to be descriptively identified, and to receive comic association with leading personalities of the day. Since humans regularly eat birds, the initial reaction by the birds is hostility, but the hoopoe intervenes. The parodos concludes with the hoopoe's instruction to Peisthetairos to explain his idea to the birds.



The agon (lines 451-675) provides the extended conversation involving the hoopoe and the chorus leader, a partridge, as the idea is expounded. The birds are gradually convinced. The establishment of the new land will require human

assistance for structural details, but for the humans to participate in the construction enterprise it would be best if they grew wings. The agon ends with the hoopoe giving the humans a root to chew on that will produce wings, thereby preventing any threat that other birds might have against their former adversaries.

Parabases alternate with episodes. In the initial relatively brief parabasis (lines 676-800), the chorus of birds addresses the theater audience on the origin of birds and their value to humankind, concluding with an invitation to come live with them and an explanation of the advantage of having wings. The shorter first episode (lines 801-1057) brings back Peisthetairos and Euelpides, now with wings, of which they remain somewhat self-conscious. Yet it proceeds to the building of *Nephelo-kokky-gia* ("Cloud-cuckoo-land"), with Peisthetairos completely in charge. Both Euelpides and the hoopoe disappear from the play—a necessity of the limitation upon the number of speaking actors and of the large number of roles required in the two episodes. Various human personality types and bureaucratic functionaries appear looking for jobs in the new city-state, only to be driven off, with much good humor suggestive of the role that comedy

had in the parodying of the pompous nature of local government. The second parabasis (lines 1058-1117) sees the chorus of birds proclaiming its divinity, reflecting upon the carefree life it leads, but concluding with the appeal to the judges to award the prize to it.

A long second episode (lines 1118-1705) follows. After a description of the completed structures, it becomes evident that the Olympian gods are being warned of this new competition, and there follows, with plays upon the control of opposition within the democratic political process, the necessity to effect some kind of truce with the gods. Prometheus, the well-known opponent of Zeus, assists Peisthetairos in the negotiations; Poseidon, Herakles, and a Triballian god who speaks an unintelligible form of Greek represent the peace envoys from Olympus. When terms are finally established, preparations are made for the wedding of Peisthetairos to Basileia ("Miss Sovereignty"), Zeus's housekeeper, who together will reign over all from the palace of Zeus.

The exodos (lines 1706-1765) combines the wedding hymns, sung by the adoring chorus of birds, with the departure of the royal couple to assume their regnal place.

## LYSISTRATA

**First produced:** *Lysistratē*, 411 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1837)

**Type of work:** Play

*As the Peloponnesian War relentlessly continued, Aristophanes toyed with the notion that the women, by withholding their sexual favors to their men, might elicit peace.*

One of the shorter plays, *Lysistrata* appears to have been produced at the Lenaia, with no surviving indication of its achievement. The most outrageously notorious scenes in all drama could only have been staged in the Greek theater, with its base in the phallic-oriented festivals of the city-state cult.

The play also is famous for the role given to women, particularly noteworthy since there is no evidence for women attending Athenian theater, and since it entailed the somewhat comic difficulty

of having men, already in their phallic-oriented costumes, play the roles of the women. Yet that same year, 411 B.C.E., Aristophanes appears to have submitted for the City Dionysia the *Thesmophoriazousai* (*Thesmophoriazusae*, 1837), another play with women as principal characters, and he returned to this theme several other times in subsequent plays.

The prologue (lines 1-253) introduces Lysistrata, an Athenian woman who seeks to achieve peace from prolonged warfare among the city-states, which the men have been unable or unwilling to accomplish. Her idea is to withhold all sexual relations from husbands or lovers until they agree to peace terms. In the opening scene,

she must first persuade diverse women, some of whose discourse provides marvelous examples of what else women of the time had within their duties, as well as upon their minds. The scene closes with the women convinced. In agreement, they seize the Akropolis, site of Athena's temple.

Aristophanes employs two half-choruses for this comedy, one of old men,

the other of old women, to play off one another and as contrasts to the youthful feminine protagonists. The parodos (lines 254-386) involves their separate and successive entrances, first of men and then of women, each arriving to perform intended functions related to the war.

The episode (lines 387-466) begins with the abrupt entrance of the official magistrate, who learns first from the chorus of men and then from Lysistrata and her companions what is transpiring. That leads into the agon (lines 467-613) between Lysistrata and the magistrate, where the women's perspective upon war is made clear against the patriotic zeal of the government.

The parabasis (lines 614-705) juxtaposes in unusual fashion the two choruses against one another: the old men crying "tyranny," the old women responding "rights," even to advise the state. This interlude is designed to imply the passage of time, without which the subsequent episodes would be unintelligible.

In the first episode (lines 706-780), there is the threat to the movement by potentially disaffected women confronting their sex-starved men with permanent erection of their costumed phalluses. A choral interlude (lines 781-828) displays hatred of one another verbally and physically in the described actions. The second episode (lines 829-1013) magnifies the first with specific focus upon the married couple, Myrrine and her soldier-husband, Kinesias. As he, unsatisfied, exits, a herald from Athens's enemy, Sparta, arrives to report that the situation in his land goes badly in the same vein as in Athens. As a master of dialect, Aristophanes plays the two forms of Greek off each other; British translators have often relied on the ability to contrast English for the Athenians with a Scottish brogue for the Spartans.

A second parabasis (lines 1014-1042) allows the choruses to be reunited with considerable sentiment in the lyric, first separately and then together addressing the audience. Throughout the remaining episodes, interlayered with lyric (lines 1043-1246), the chorus continues to tease the audience, while ranking delegates from Sparta and Athens agree to peace. Lysistrata makes the speech of reconciliation (lines 1112-1157) in such nearly tragic style that it has been hard for many critics to reconcile her speech with the bawdiness of the play as a whole. Yet this is Aristophanes, perhaps at his best, suggesting to old enemies their more ancient common roots in Hellenism and their mutual obligations to one another.

The play ends with an exodos (lines 1247-1322) full of dancing revelry, yet with hymns of great beauty, even allowing the Spartan in his dialect to have the final song before all join in a four-line ode to Athena.

## SUMMARY

Over a forty-year period, Aristophanes wrote at least forty plays whose titles are known, and in five instances he rewrote earlier plays. Of this number, only eleven plays survive in their complete form. Yet within these complete plays are some of the finest examples of Greek lyric, so that alongside his contemporary, the tragic poet Euripides, Aristophanes is remembered as a master of Attic poetry.

Clyde Curry Smith



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### By the Author

#### DRAMA:

Aristophanes wrote at least forty plays whose titles are known; of this number, only eleven survive in their complete form, as follows:

*Acharnēs*, 425 B.C.E. (*The Acharnians*, 1812)

*Hippēs*, 424 B.C.E. (*The Knights*, 1812)

*Nephelai*, 423 B.C.E. (*The Clouds*, 1708)

*Sphēkes*, 422 B.C.E. (*The Wasps*, 1812)

*Eirēnē*, 421 B.C.E. (*Peace*, 1837)

*Ornithes*, 414 B.C.E. (*The Birds*, 1824)

*Lysistratē*, 411 B.C.E. (*Lysistrata*, 1837)

*Thesmophoriazousai*, 411 B.C.E. (*Thesmophoriazusae*, 1837)

*Batrachoi*, 405 B.C.E. (*The Frogs*, 1780)

*Ekklesiazousai*, 392 B.C.E.? (*Ecclesiazusae*, 1837)

*Plutos*, 388 B.C.E. (*Plutus*, 1651)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What do we need to know about comedy in Athenian life of Aristophanes' time to understand his plays?
- Plays in ancient Athens were performed competitively. According to modern critics, one of Aristophanes' best plays, *The Clouds*, did not win. How can we have a better idea of the value of a play than the people who originally saw it?
- One character in *The Clouds*, a rather foolish one, is the philosopher Socrates. To what extent could a playwright do a similar thing with a philosopher today?
- Consider the appropriateness of the title *The Wasps*.
- Aristophanes' plays were musical comedies, but we do not have the music. Can we properly judge his plays without knowing the music?
- Offer some possible reasons for the popularity of the play *Lysistrata* today.



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## ARISTOTLE

**Born:** Stagirus, Chalcidice, Greece  
384 B.C.E.

**Died:** Chalcis, Euboea, Greece  
322 B.C.E.

*Known throughout the Middle Ages simply as “The Philosopher,” Aristotle made significant contributions to a wide range of scientific, political, and philosophical topics.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aristotle (ar-uh-STAWT-uhl) was born in 384 B.C.E. in Stagirus, a small colonial town on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea, in Chalcidice, Greece. His father, Nicomachus, was a physician to the court of the Macedonian king Amyntas II. There is some speculation that being born into a physician’s family led to Aristotle’s later interest in biology, but that is at best only a partial account; both his parents died when he was quite young, and he was reared by an official in the Macedonian court.

At eighteen, Aristotle traveled south to Athens, where he became a member of Plato’s Academy, where he spent the next twenty years. Many scholars have suggested that during these years in close association with Plato, Aristotle imbibed his master’s otherworldly and idealistic philosophy and that Aristotle was only able to develop his own naturalistic and empirically based philosophy when he left the Academy after Plato’s death. Other scholars have argued that when Aristotle arrived at the Academy, it was already a large and world-famous institution engaged in all forms of intellectual and scientific investigation. While scholars can be sure that Aristotle spent much time working on a wide range of intellectual topics during his twenty years at the Academy, it is uncertain who influenced him. When Plato died in 347 B.C.E., Aristotle left the Academy. He spent the next five or six years teaching and conducting biological research across the Aegean.

In 343 B.C.E., he received and accepted a request to return to Macedonia and tutor the young Alexander the Great. The relationship between the man who would be called simply “The Philosopher” throughout the Middle Ages and the future conqueror of the world was already an item for speculation when Plutarch wrote his profile of Alexander, which appears in *Bioi parallelai* (c. 105-115 C.E.; *Parallel Lives*, 1579), in the first century. Yet the political ambitions and ideals of the two men were so diverse that, whatever their personal feelings toward each other, it seems clear that Aristotle’s three years of tutoring had little philosophical influence.

Once again he returned to Athens, and once again he was passed over when the presidency of the Academy became vacant. This time he opened a rival institution in the Lyceum, or gymnasium attached to the temple of Apollo Lyceus. Aristotle’s reputation as a scholar was already sufficient to attract enough students and even some teachers from the Academy, so that the Lyceum became the second viable institution of scientific and philosophical research in the West.

With Alexander’s death in 323 B.C.E., a brief but intense anti-Macedonian mood swept through Athens. Aristotle’s Macedonian origins and connections were well known. Being an astute judge of human nature, Aristotle knew that his life was in danger. Not wanting Athens to “sin twice against philosophy”—a clear allusion to Athens’s execution of Socrates on the same charges many years before—Aristotle withdrew to his native province. He died the following year, in 322 B.C.E., in Chalcis, Greece.



## ANALYSIS

At the very heart of Aristotle's philosophy is the conviction that all things are teleologically ordered. There are two fundamentally different ways in which people explain events or things (understood in their broadest sense). Something is explained teleologically when its purpose or intention is made known. For example, a chair can be explained as an object made for sitting and a person's raised hand as an attempt to attract the teacher's attention. Alternately, something is explained causally when its physical antecedents are made known. For example, the crack in the brick wall can be explained as the result of a prior earthquake.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a strong reaction against teleological explanations because it was believed that all real knowledge gives power and control over nature. Since teleological explanations of nature do not typically help to prevent or predict natural phenomena, they were deemed to be sterile, as was Aristotle's philosophy as a whole. This period's rejection of Aristotle, however, was based largely on a misreading of his works. Aristotle did not ignore physical causes. The majority of Aristotle's work deals with topics and issues that today are considered scientific. Moreover, Aristotle's scientific investigations reveal a great care and concern for thorough observations and the collection of empirical evidence before reaching any conclusions.

Though Aristotle himself never ignored or belittled the investigation of physical causes, his view of nature and the modern scientific view of nature are quite different. The tendency today is to follow the seventeenth century's view of science as primarily an attempt to control nature. Aristotle, instead, emphasized science's attempt to understand nature, and that, he steadfastly insisted, would include both kinds of explanations. In his work *De anima* (335-323 B.C.E.; *On the Soul*, 1812), Aristotle notes that some of his predecessors have tried to explain anger in terms of physical causes, while others have tried to explain it in terms of a person's intentions to seek retaliation. When asked whose

explanation was better, Aristotle responded, "Is it not rather the one who combines both?"

According to Aristotle, an explanation is complete only if it has a place in a systematic and unified explanation of the whole of reality. The incredible range of topics on which Aristotle wrote is not simply the result of his wide interests. Rather, it is also the result of his conviction that all complete explanations must have their place in a systematic whole.

The goal of the special sciences—biology, physics, or astronomy, for example—for both Aristotle and modern scientists is to deduce an explanation of as many observations as possible from the fewest number of principles and causes as possible. Yet Aristotle would add that the scientist's work is not complete until those principles and causes are themselves explained. If the "first principles" of a discipline are simply assumed to be true, then the whole discipline is left hanging in midair.

Aristotle's method of justifying first principles begins with the notion of dialectic. Aristotle's principal works start with a discussion of what his predecessors have said on the topic being studied. While such a review would always include conflicting opinions, Aristotle believed that if conflicting opinions are forced to defend themselves against their opponent's objections, the result is typically a distinction that allows the two partial truths to be unified into a larger and more complete truth.

Though Aristotle was always seeking to find some truth in conflicting opinions, he was neither a skeptic nor a relativist with regard to scientific or moral knowledge. He was never reticent to point out his predecessors' mistakes, and he often was convinced that his arguments demonstrated where these predecessors made their mistakes in such a way that all rational people would agree. Aristotle's *Organon* (335-323 B.C.E.; English translation, 1812) contains the tools of such demonstrations and, as such, is the first systematic formulation of the principles of deductive and inductive logic. While contemporary logicians have increased the power and versatility of Aristotle's logic, his analysis of fallacious reasoning has never been shown to be in error.

## METAPHYSICS

**First published:** *Metaphysica*, 335-323 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1801)

**Type of work:** Philosophy

*This work is an analysis of what it means to exist and a determination of the kinds of things that actually exist.*

Twentieth century philosophers have distinguished between descriptive metaphysics and revisionist metaphysics. Aristotle's metaphysics is clearly an attempt to describe, analyze, and justify the common beliefs about humanity and the world, not an attempt to persuade people to revise their prephilosophical views of the world in some radical fashion. Unless the revisionist metaphysics of Aristotle's contemporaries is understood, however, it is impossible to understand Aristotle's own accomplishment.

Previous philosophers, such as Heraclitus, argued that the only source of knowledge is that which is observed through one of the five senses, and since the testimony of the five senses reveals a continually changing world, it follows that absolutely nothing remains the same. A rock or a mountain may at first seem fairly stable, but close examination reveals that they, too, are continually being diminished by the winds and the rains. As Heraclitus said, it is impossible to step into the same river twice. Rocks and mountains may not change as quickly, but they change no less surely.

To be told that rivers, rocks, and mountains are continually changing appears to be relatively innocuous. Yet the logic of Heraclitus's argument makes it impossible to stop there. If the only source of knowledge is through the senses, then absolutely everything must be in a continual state of flux. A person who robs a bank, for example, can never be caught because whoever is charged with the crime is necessarily a different person than the one who actually committed it. Heraclitus's philosophical conclusions are clearly in radical opposition to the commonsense view of the world.

Other philosophers, such as Parmenides, argued for the exact opposite conclusion, namely, that all change is illusory. While Heraclitus appealed to empirical data, Parmenides appealed to

reason. Consider everything that really exists in the entire universe precisely as it is at this particular instance, he believed. Whatever that "everything" is, it is by definition the Real, and anything else must therefore be unreal. Now if the Real were to change, it would become something that it is not, that is, it would become unreal. Yet the unreal does not exist. Thus, for anything to change is for it to become nonexistent. All change must therefore be unreal.

The radical opposition of Parmenides' philosophical conclusions are obvious from the start. What is not so obvious is exactly where his reasoning is mistaken. While the common people will be able to continue their daily tasks without ever addressing either Heraclitus or Parmenides' arguments, it would be inconsistent for Aristotle to insist that first principles must be dialectically justified and then simply ignore these revisionist arguments. Commonsense assumptions must be justified.

The three assumptions that Aristotle seeks to justify are, first, that things exist; second, that some things move and change; and finally, that the things in this universe that exist, move, and change are not totally unintelligible. The common element of all three beliefs is the notion of a "thing." What is a thing? Aristotle says that things have being (existence) and that a metaphysician's task is to make clear exactly what being is. In fact, he often defines the subject matter of metaphysics as the study of all things insofar as they exist.

Compare this definition with the definition of other disciplines. The subject matter of physics, says Aristotle, is things insofar as they are moving or changing objects. The subject matter of biology is things insofar as they are alive. The subject matter of ethics is things insofar as they are able to make rational choices between competing goods. One notices how the various subject matters of different disciplines constitute a hierarchical series from the particular to the general. Thus, a single person can be studied on at least three different levels. First, her or she can be studied by the moral philosopher as a "thing" capable of making rational choices. At a more general level, he or she can be studied by the biologist as a "thing" that is alive. At an even more general level, her or she can be studied by the physicist as a "thing" that moves.

The crucial metaphysical question for Aristotle



thus becomes the following: Is there any more general level at which one can study things than at the level of the physicist? Aristotle thinks that there is, namely, at the level at which things are studied simply insofar as they exist. This way of defining the different disciplines ensures that no important questions are begged. In particular, it leaves open the question of whether anything exists apart from space and time. One of the important conclusions in the *Metaphysics* is that such a being, the unmoved mover or God, does exist. Yet before addressing such interesting and difficult theological questions, Aristotle wisely directs his attention to the more mundane, but almost as difficult, question, What is a thing?

Aristotle begins by cataloging the ordinary sorts of things that exist in this universe. There is this particular rock, that particular tree, and his friend Theaetetus. The point of any catalog is to organize different things into classes where all members of a class share something in common. People do this sort of thing all the time. The very act of speaking constitutes a kind of ordering of objects into classes. To say, “Theaetetus is snub-nosed,” is to place a particular individual into one class of things as opposed to a different class. This ability to speak, and hence, classify, is grounded in two basic facts.

First, there are two fundamentally different sorts of words—substantives and words that describe substantives. In Aristotle’s terms, there are subjects and predicates. Certain words or phrases are always subjects, and others are always predicates. For example, it makes sense to say, “This tree is tall,” but it makes no sense to say, “Tall is this tree” (unless this statement is understood simply as a poetic way of saying, “This tree is tall”). This fundamental fact of language leads to Aristotle’s distinction between form and matter. In the above sentence, “this tree” refers to some matter that one can see, touch, and perhaps even smell, and “is tall” refers to the shape or form of the matter. Pure matter, however, is inconceivable. No matter what one tries to picture, it always has some shape or form. Therefore, considered by itself, matter is mere potentiality as opposed to actuality.

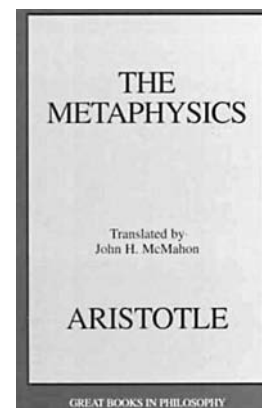
Can one, then, conceive of pure form? That is difficult, though nonetheless possible according to Aristotle. It is possible, for example, to conceive of a particular song’s melody without actually hearing the song. In fact, Ludwig van Beethoven conceived

and composed his ninth symphony after he became totally deaf. In Aristotelian terms, he knew its form without ever experiencing its matter. Though Beethoven’s is a special sort of case, it does help Aristotle make sense of God as pure form. In the vast majority of cases, though, Aristotle maintains that the matter and form of a thing always constitute a real unity and that they can only be separated conceptually.

People’s ability to conceptually separate a thing’s matter and form explains a second basic fact about language. A capacity with which all normal human beings are born is the ability to observe an incredible array of different sized, shaped, and colored objects and realize that they are all trees. Of course, the capacity to know that something is a tree presupposes much experience and instruction, but the fact remains—normal human beings are able to learn what makes an object a tree. Aristotle draws two conclusions from this fact. First, normal human beings are endowed with a capacity (*nous*) that enables them to abstract forms from matter. Second, nature is divided into natural kinds that humans discover and name when they abstract a thing’s substantial form.

This last point leads to one final distinction—the difference between a thing’s substantial form and what Aristotle calls its accidental form. A substantial form is that which makes a thing what it is. Change a thing’s substantial form, and the thing becomes something else. Cut down an actual tree, and the mass of matter is no longer a tree but is potentially a house, firewood, or compost, which will eventually turn to dirt. Yet a tree can undergo many changes and still remain a tree. Prune a limb from a tree or pick its fruit and the accidental form of the tree changes. Yet the tree remains a tree.

With these distinctions, Aristotle believes that he is able to justify commonsense beliefs about the world in the face of Heraclitus’s arguments. While it is true that the five senses reveal that the acciden-



tal forms of things are continually changing, it is not true that a thing's substantial form is always changing. Thus, while there is a sense in which Heraclitus is correct, his failure to distinguish between matter and form, actuality and potentiality, and substantial forms and accidental forms invalidates his radical conclusion that everything is in a continual state of flux.

Having demonstrated that some things can remain the same, it remains for Aristotle to answer Parmenides and demonstrate how things can change. Aristotle begins by distinguishing two quite different uses of the verb "to be." To say, "The table is" (that is, "the table exists") says something quite different from saying, "The table is white." The former "is" asserts the existence of a thing; the latter "is" does not. "Whiteness" does not name a substantial form that itself exists; it only names an accidental form that cannot exist apart from actual things. While a table is actually white, it is also potentially red. Furthermore, if someone paints the table, and it becomes actually red, the table itself does not cease to exist while another table suddenly begins to exist. Parmenides' failure to distinguish between actuality and potentiality leads to his radical conclusion that nothing changes.

Aristotle is now in a position to analyze the commonsense notion of change by elucidating four ways that people use the word "cause." Consider, for a moment, a bronze statue. There are four different replies to the question of what makes that thing a statue: because it is made of bronze (material cause); because it is in the shape of a man (formal cause); because an artist shaped the matter the way that he did (efficient cause); or because an artist wanted to make a beautiful object (final cause). All four statements are true, yet no single one gives a complete explanation of the statue. According to Aristotle, any complete explanation of what a thing is, or why a thing changes, must mention all four kinds of causes.

The need for a final cause in all complete explanations has been the topic for much controversy, though there is no controversy that final causes play a central role in all Aristotle's thought. His ideas about causation are discussed in book 12 of the *Metaphysics*. Here, Aristotle repeatedly says that an infinite series of causes is impossible, but his words are somewhat misleading. He does not mean to assert that there is no infinite series of causes and

effects. In fact, he believes that the universe itself must be infinite. What Aristotle means by his claim is that if such an infinite series of causes exists without a first cause, then the series as a whole is itself unintelligible. In any series of causes, until the stopping point can be ascertained, one cannot really determine who or what is responsible for any member of the series. Yet since Aristotle believes that the universe always existed in some form, its first cause cannot exist at some point of time prior to all others. Instead, the first cause must be conceptually first.

Not all answers to the question, Who or what is responsible for the some particular thing or movement?, refer to something that exists temporarily prior to the thing or movement being explained. A large bowl of food will cause a hungry dog to run toward it. In such a case, it is sufficient, says Aristotle, that the cause (the bowl of food) and the effect (the dog's running) exist simultaneously; the cause does not have to exist before the effect. Similarly, Aristotle argues that God's existence as the most perfect of beings is the final cause or end of all motion, even though both God and the universe have always existed.

Furthermore, the fact that God moves the universe as a final cause, rather than as an efficient cause, explains why God Himself does not require a cause. In Aristotle's metaphysics, God is an unmoved mover. He is thus ultimately responsible for all movement and change in the universe without Himself moving. It makes no more sense to ask, "What moves God?" than it does to ask, "Why is a vacuum empty?"

## NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

**First published:** *Ethica Nicomachea*, 335-323

B.C.E. (English translation, 1797)

**Type of work:** Philosophy

*Aristotle argues that happiness is the result of distinctly human activities performed well.*

Aristotle believed that ethics was more a matter of character than of following rules. He was more concerned with what a person was than what he did. He realized that to a large extent a person's

character is created by his actions. Yet making one's actions conform to rules was not the goal of morality. A person can obey all the rules of chess without being a very good chess player. So too, a person can follow all the rules of morality—never lie, steal, murder, or commit adultery—without being an especially good person.

The goal of morality, according to Aristotle, is human happiness. One of the questions that has received much attention from modern moral philosophers—Why be moral?—never arose for Aristotle because he simply assumed that achieving a stable and lasting happiness was everyone's goal.

Of course, Aristotle understood that there is a wide divergence of opinion among people as to what constitutes happiness—some say it is wealth, others say it is power or honor, still others say it is pleasure. People will only know which of these, or which mix of these, really leads to a life well lived, says Aristotle, by first determining the proper work or function of a person qua person.

The function of a carpenter is to build houses, and the function of an author is to write books. Given these distinct functions, it is not unreasonable to assume that a carpenter would feel frustrated if forced to write a book, and conversely, that an author would feel frustrated if forced to build a house. Each of these would rather be doing that which he or she is uniquely suited to do. Aristotle takes this argument one step further and argues that human beings are happiest when they are acting in accordance with their essential nature.

The essential nature of anything is the thing's work or function, that is, that which it does better than anything else. Observation reveals that humans are superior to all other animals in two areas, reasoning and social organization. Aristotle does not say that only humans are capable of reasoning. A dog can infer from his master's facial expression that he is about to be punished. Yet dogs cannot discover, or understand, what is common to all punishments because they cannot know (*nous*) the essence of punishment. Dogs may be able to communicate with a series of growls and barks, but they are not able to create a language that defines and categorizes things according to their essential natures.

Similarly, while dogs live in packs and exhibit a rudimentary social nature, that social structure is

determined by instinct. This tendency is evident by the invariant nature of that organization within a single species. Human social organizations are voluntary, and thus, they exhibit a wide variety of political structures ranging from the monarchical to the democratic.

Aristotle now becomes more specific as to exactly how human beings flourish. Since they are by nature rational, humans have a need and desire for knowledge. Only when this natural desire is fulfilled can humans be truly happy. Second, the nature of a person as a social animal means that men and women have a natural need and desire for friends. The *Nicomachean Ethics* devotes a fifth of its chapters to the nature and value of friendship.

In Aristotle's philosophy, a human being's rational and social nature feed and nourish each other. Their rational capacities, for example, must be developed by good parents and teachers, and good parents and teachers are only found in well-ordered societies. Conversely, well-ordered societies presuppose knowledgeable citizens. Thus, knowledge and virtue go hand in hand.

Aristotle defines virtue as "the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it." He explains himself with an example. Consider, he says, the different caloric needs of a heavyweight boxer in training and of a teacher during spring break. What may be too few calories for the boxer may very well be too many for the teacher. There is no set number of calories that all people ought to ingest. Similarly, consider the virtue of liberality. What may be a stingy contribution to charity by a rich man may be an overly generous contribution by a person of moderate means with a family to support.

Yet Aristotle is not a moral relativist. He is not saying that, since people in different cultures have different beliefs about what is right or wrong, there are therefore no moral absolutes. There is nothing in Aristotle's ethic that makes mere difference of belief a morally relevant factor in the determination of the mean. A society that believes that wealth is largely the result of individual initiative might believe that contributing 2 percent of one's income to charity is a worthy goal. A different society that believes that wealth is largely a gift of nature might believe that giving only 2 percent

of one's income to the less fortunate would be unthinkable tight. Though these two cultures have different beliefs, that in itself, Aristotle would say, is morally irrelevant in determining the morally proper mean.

While the caloric needs of different people vary, what those needs are is not determined by majority opinion, but by the nutritional expert. So too, the mean in moral matters is not determined by popular opinion. Rather, it is determined by a rational principle, and that rational principle is in turn determined by the man or woman of practical wisdom.

The healthy individual has a desire for exercise and proper food. Regardless of what others say, his judgment in these matters is correct because of the obvious effect of his wholesome practices on his own life. According to Aristotle, one ought to reason similarly in ethical matters. Just as people know a physically healthy person when they see one, they also know a happy person when they see one. Of course, when Aristotle says a person is happy, he is not referring to an emotional state of someone who wins the state lottery. Such a condition is the result of external conditions and not the result of voluntary action. Rather, when he speaks of the happy woman, he is speaking of the woman who is happy largely as a result of what she has herself done. Her happiness is stable because it "feeds on itself" in the same way that a winning college basketball team continues winning year after year because it is able to recruit the best high school players. Similarly, a happy person is one who succeeds in the worthy things that she sets out to do. When she does, she receives satisfaction, and this in turn encourages her to set out to accomplish other worthwhile goals. That causes the cycle to repeat. It is this sort of person that Aristotle says determines the "rational principle" in moral matters.

## POETICS

**First published:** *De poetica*, c. 334-323 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1705)

**Type of work:** Literary criticism

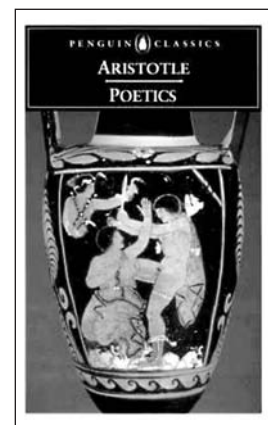
*This is a work of theoretical and practical literary criticism, especially with regard to tragic drama.*

Aristotle's *Poetics*, though short, has been widely influential outside philosophical circles. Yet it is doubtful that it can be fully appreciated outside Aristotle's philosophical system as a whole.

Central to all Aristotle's philosophy is the claim that nothing can be understood apart from its end or purpose (telos). Not surprisingly, the *Poetics* seeks to discover the end or purpose of all the poetic arts, and especially of tragic drama. Understood generally, the goal of poetry is to provide pleasure of a particular kind. The *Metaphysics* begins, "All men desire to know by nature," and the *Nicomachean Ethics* repeatedly says that the satisfaction of natural desires is the greatest source of lasting pleasure. The *Poetics* combines these two with the idea of imitation. All people by nature enjoy a good imitation (that is, a picture or drama) because they enjoy learning, and imitations help them to learn.

Of particular interest to Aristotle is the pleasure derived from tragic drama, namely, the kind of pleasure that comes from the purging or cleansing (catharsis) of the emotions of fear and pity. Though the emotions of fear and pity are not to be completely eliminated, excessive amounts of these emotions are not characteristic of a flourishing individual. Vicariously experiencing fear and pity in a good tragedy cleanses the soul of ill humors.

Though there are many elements of a good tragedy, the most important, according to Aristotle, is the plot. The centrality of plot once again follows



from central doctrines of the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the former, Aristotle argues that all knowledge is knowledge of universals; in the latter, he states that it is through their own proper activity that humans discover fulfillment.

For a plot to work, it must be both complete and coherent. That means that it must constitute a whole with a beginning, middle, and end, and that the sequence of events must exhibit some sort of necessity. A good dramatic plot is unlike history. History has no beginning, middle, and end, and thus it lacks completeness. Furthermore, it lacks coherence because many events in history happen by accident. In a good dramatic plot, however, everything happens for a reason. This difference makes tragedy philosophically more interesting than history. Tragedy focuses on universal causes and effects and thus provides a kind of knowledge that history, which largely comprises accidental happenings, cannot.

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*Ethica Nicomachea*, n.d. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1797)

*Metaphysica*, n.d. (*Metaphysics*, 1801)

*Organon*, n.d. (English translation, 1812)

*Physica*, n.d. (*Physics*, 1812)

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## SUMMARY

Aristotle's philosophy is not flawless. Even his most vigorous contemporary defenders are quick to point out his errors—for example, his belief that some people are slaves by nature and that women are naturally inferior to men. Many people today would argue that such pronouncements, made with complete confidence at the time, prove that what is true for one person may not be true for someone else. Rather than being patronized by those who would excuse his errors by relativizing truth, however, Aristotle would much prefer simply to be refuted with good arguments and careful observations. These are much more central to his philosophy than any particular conclusions that he reached on any particular topic.

Ric S. Machuga

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Aristotle was Plato's student. Is it surprising that he disagreed with Plato in so many ways?
- Aristotle believed that all things are teleologically ordered. Does it seem that we believe in teleological explanations today?
- Aristotle taught in a "gymnasium" called a "lyceum." What do these two nouns mean today? Do these institutions have anything important in common?
- Educated people today find fault with many of Aristotle's ideas. Why do they find a need to study this man nearly two and a half millennia after his time?
- Explain in your own words Aristotle's argument about what causes happiness.
- In Aristotle's *Poetics*, he considers that tragedy brings about the catharsis of the emotions of fear and pity. What makes "catharsis" an effective metaphor?

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## MATTHEW ARNOLD

**Born:** Laleham, England  
December 24, 1822

**Died:** Dingle Bank, Liverpool, England  
April 15, 1888

*Arnold is preceded only by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Robert Browning as an important poet of Victorian England. His critical essays, emphasizing the role of literature in the amelioration of society, had a profound influence on twentieth century literary criticism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Arnold was born in Laleham, England, on Christmas Eve, 1822, the second child and first son of Dr. Thomas and Mary Penrose Arnold. In December, 1827, Thomas Arnold was elected headmaster of Rugby School, where the family began residence in August, 1828. It was the beginning of an auspicious career for Thomas Arnold, who would distinguish himself as the foremost educational reformer of the English public school. In addition to a general enhancing of academic quality, Dr. Arnold's reforms for his new students specifically included the introduction of modern languages and mathematics into the center of the curriculum, the fostering of a higher moral tone, and the inculcation of a greater sense of social responsibility among the privileged Rugby students toward the lower classes of English society. Dr. Arnold's social and intellectual perspective had a pronounced influence on his son, who, although he did not begin studies at the school until 1837, lived at the center of the Rugby community.

Enrolled at Winchester School in August, 1836, for one year of preparatory study, Matthew Arnold subsequently entered Rugby in late summer of the following year. He was a desultory student, frequently late for class and poorly disciplined in his approach to his studies. It was an attitude that caused considerable concern for his parents, particularly his father, whose kindly but intimidating presence was clearly part of the problem. By 1840, his final year, Matthew had done much to redeem

himself. He won the school poetry prize for "Alaric at Rome" and was successful in competition for a coveted scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford.

At Oxford, Arnold deepened his friendship with the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, who had been a friend of the family and a student of Dr. Arnold at Rugby. They frequently disagreed on many of the leading issues of the day, but Clough, until his death in 1861, proved a steady and important influence. Their relationship is commemorated in Arnold's elegiac poem "Thyrsis," in which the poet reviews and reexamines the ideals, both spiritual and literary, that the two young men shared as Oxford undergraduates.

Although something of a dandy, much preoccupied with fashionable dress and demeanor in his undergraduate years, Arnold managed to take a second-class honors degree in 1844 and, a year earlier, to win the coveted Newdigate Prize for his poem "Cromwell." In the following year, he won a fellowship to Oriel College, Oxford, which at the time was the storm center of the Tractarian controversy—the celebrated Oxford Movement—led by John Henry Newman. Along with Clough and Thomas Arnold, Newman was the third contemporary figure to have an important effect on the direction of Matthew Arnold's thinking. Although Arnold was now a firm adherent to the theological liberalism of his father, he nonetheless approved of many of the more salient points of Newman's conservative position, particularly the need to intensify religious feeling and sincere spiritual con-



viction and to counteract ambiguous religious liberalism.

In 1846, Arnold traveled in France and Switzerland, and he returned to England the following year to settle into gentlemanly employment as private secretary to Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, marquis of Lansdowne. It was an undemanding position, offering considerable time for writing new poems and editing others. Between 1849, when he published his first collection, titled *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems*, and 1855, the year that marked the appearance of *Poems, Second Series*, Arnold submitted to the world most of the poetry that he would write in his lifetime. In 1857, he was elected to the chair of professor of poetry at Oxford, a position that he held for the next ten years. His tenure at Oxford culminated in the publication of his final volume of verse, *New Poems* (1867), which contained the remarkable "Dover Beach." The position paid a small stipend and required only three lectures per year. Following a government appointment as inspector of schools in April, 1851, a position that he would hold simultaneously with the Oxford Poetry Chair, Arnold married Frances Lucy Wightman, daughter of Sir William Wightman, a judge of the Court of the Queen's Bench.

From the 1860's through the 1880's, Arnold's creative efforts shifted from poetry to prose. He concentrated on literary and social criticism and gave considerable attention to the improvement of public education in England. Much was to be learned, he believed, from a study of educational methods and procedures on the Continent. Toward this end, he toured in his official capacity the schools of France, Germany, and Switzerland and published his findings and observations in a series of essays: "The Popular Education of France"; "A French Eton"; and "Schools and Universities on the Continent." His literary criticism of the 1860's, particularly extended essays such as *On Translating Homer* (1861), *Essays in Criticism* (1865), and *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), largely comprised lectures delivered at Oxford. *Culture and Anarchy*, his extended study of the ills of a materialistic, contemporary society, appeared in 1869. From October, 1883, until March, 1884, Arnold traveled in the United States and gave a series of lectures, which were published in 1885 under the title *Discourses in America*. In 1886, he made a second trip across the Atlantic to give additional lectures but returned to

England that same spring, resigned his inspectorship, and effectively retired from public life. On April 15, 1888, Arnold died in Liverpool of a sudden heart attack. He was sixty-five.

## ANALYSIS

Although great poetry should transcend the limits of time, Arnold's poetry must be read in the context of his turbulent age if it is to be understood fully. He is a post-Romantic coming into full conflict with the British empire at the height of its expansion and industrialization. The effects of this conflict comprise the themes of his poetry: spiritual stasis and enervation, humankind as an alien figure in the cosmos, the absence in the modern world of spiritual and intellectual values, values largely subsumed by industrial growth and materialism. Arnold's poetry, however, offers no solutions, nor is it particularly articulate on the exact nature of the dilemma. Among the English poets, his mentors were William Wordsworth and John Keats, both of whom influenced his style and aesthetic perspective. His best work, exemplified in poems such as "Dover Beach," "The Scholar-Gipsy," "Rugby Chapel," "Thyrsis," "The Buried Life," and "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," is outwardly calm and lucid, containing the same sincerity, dignity, and restraint that characterized his Romantic predecessors. It also pursues the same elusive serenity. It is a pursuit inherently complicated by the resulting tension between the temporal or "real" world of distracting sensory phenomena and the transcendent realm of the ideal.

Three social factors in the "real" world were largely responsible for the intellectual and spiritual division that Arnold felt so keenly and expressed in his poetry. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) brought new, scientific knowledge to the forefront, all but eclipsing the established authority of traditional beliefs. The Oxford Tractarians, following the lead of Newman, sought to bring English Christianity back to a more universal, conservative view, away from the "broad church" liberalism that, for many, threatened to become the secular bulwark of British Protestantism. The "Chartist" reform movements of 1832 and 1867, with recurrent calls for the expansion of suffrage, entailed a broadening of democracy that, for many, threatened the traditional stability of government guided by aristocratic values. In litera-

ture, the long popular Romanticism of novels by writers such as Sir Walter Scott, who extolled chivalric heroism, legend, and tradition, was gradually forced to give way before the realism of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope.

To all of this Arnold responded with a poetry of general lament for the divisions of modern life, for the sense of fragmentation that now pervaded the age. In “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse,” Arnold describes himself as “Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born.” The “dead” world of innocence and natural joy was the freely received gift of nature, a world in which emotion and intellect remained counterpoised on either side of a spiritual fulcrum. “We had not lost our balance then,” he has the title character say in “Empedocles on Etna,” “nor grown/ Thought’s slaves, and dead to every natural joy.” The world into which the poet is “powerless to be born” is a world of serenity characterized by unity and order. Its genesis lies in the pursuit of “culture,” which Arnold defines in *Culture and Anarchy* as “a study of perfection, harmonious and general perfection which consists in *becomings* something rather than *having* something.” The optimistic quest for perfection is an objective with which Arnold deals extensively in his critical essays, but in his poetry he remains immersed in melancholy. What little hope there is for the future lies in a vaguely intuitive recognition of truth, which is stimulated by those elements of culture that awaken humankind and enrich the human condition.

In his prose, Arnold examines the issue of England’s societal malaise in even greater detail. Having all but abandoned poetry after the 1850’s, he devoted the last thirty years of his life to prose criticism. His essays addressed four general areas: education, religion, literature, and society. His writings on education dealt with contemporary issues and are of interest primarily to historians concerned with curricula in English and Continental schools of the nineteenth century. On religious issues, Arnold produced four books: *St. Paul and Protestantism, with an Introduction on Puritanism and the Church of England* (1870), *Literature and Dogma* (1873), *God and the Bible* (1875), and *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877). All are responses to the various religious controversies that swept through Great Britain in the latter half of the nineteenth century,

which were spurred in part by the ferment caused by the Oxford Movement and the evolution theories of Darwin.

Of much greater interest to posterity than Arnold’s writings on education and religion have been his critical examinations of society. In *Culture and Anarchy* and *Friendship’s Garland* (1871), he expresses his growing concern with the suspect values of a Victorian middle class. This middle class, which he termed “Philistines,” was, in Arnold’s view, puritanical, inflexible, and selfishly individualistic. In short, it was wholly unprepared to confront the problems inherent in the combination of a growing industrialism, an expanding population, and an increasing and clamorous call for widespread democracy. To transform society, it would be necessary to eliminate the classes that divide it, an objective to be achieved through universal education. Central to this universal education would be the promotion and encouragement of culture.

The pursuit of culture is understandably at the center of his literary criticism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his *Essays in Criticism*. It is in the first essay, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” that Arnold offers most succinctly his critical manifesto. Criticism, as he defines it, is “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” It is this awareness, he further states—which the critic discerns and shares with the reader who pursues culture—that will nourish humanity “in growth toward perfection.”

## “DOVER BEACH”

**First published:** 1867 (collected in *New Poems*, 1867)

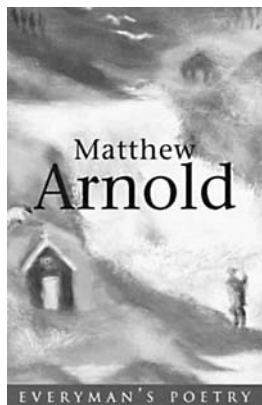
**Type of work:** Poem

*As traditional beliefs are undermined by nineteenth century “progress,” even the aesthetic verities of Love and Beauty are overwhelmed by doubt and despair.*

“Dover Beach” is a brief, dramatic monologue generally recognized as Arnold’s best—and most widely known—poem. It begins with an opening stanza that is indisputably one of the finest exam-

ples of lyric poetry in the English language. The topography of the nocturnal setting is a combination of hushed tranquillity and rich sensory detail. It is the world as it appears to the innocent eye gazing on nature: peaceful, harmonious, suffused with quiet joy. The beacon light on the coast of Calais, the moon on the calm evening waters of the channel, and the sweet scent of the night air all suggest a hushed and gentle world of silent beauty. The final line of the stanza, however, introduces a discordant note, as the perpetual movement of the waves suggests to the speaker not serenity but “the eternal note of sadness.”

The melancholy strain induces in the second stanza an image in the mind of the speaker: Sophocles, the Greek tragedian, creator of *Oidipous Tyrannos* (c. 429 B.C.E.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715) and *Antigone* (441 B.C.E.; *Antigone*, 1729) standing in the darkness by the Aegean Sea more than two thousand years ago. The ancient master of tragedy hears in the eternal flux of the waves the same dark note, “the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery.” Thus, the



speaker, like Sophocles before him, perceives life as tragedy; suffering and misery are inextricable elements of existence. Beauty, joy, and calm are ephemeral and illusory. The speaker’s pessimistic perspective on the human condition, expressed in stanzas two, three, and four, undercuts and effectively negates the positive, tranquil beauty of the opening stanza; the reality subsumes the misleading appearance. In the third stanza, Arnold introduces the metaphor of the “Sea of Faith,” the once abundant tide in the affairs of humanity that has slowly withdrawn from the modern world. Darwinism and Tractarianism in Arnold’s nineteenth century England brought science into full and successful conflict with religion. “Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar” suggested to Arnold the death throes of the Christian era. The Sophoclean tragic

awareness of fate and painful existence had for centuries been displaced by the pure and simple faith of the Christian era, a temporary compensation promising respite from an existence that is ultimately tragic.

The fourth and final stanza of “Dover Beach” is extremely pessimistic. Its grim view of reality, its negativity, its underlying desperate anguish are in marked contrast to the joy and innocent beauty of the first stanza. Love, the poet suggests, is the one final truth, the last fragile human resource. Yet here, as the world is swallowed by darkness, it promises only momentary solace, not joy or salvation for the world. The world, according to the speaker, “seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams,” offering at least an appearance that seems “So various, so beautiful, so new,” but it is deceptive, a world of wishful thinking. It is shadow without substance, offering neither comfort nor consolation. In this harsh existence, there is “neither joy, nor love, nor light,/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.”

Arnold closes the poem with the famous lines that suggest the very nadir of human existence; few poems have equaled its concise, sensitive note of poignant despair. Humanity stands on the brink of chaos, surrounded in encroaching darkness by destructive forces and unable to distinguish friend from foe. The concluding image of the night battle suggests quite clearly the mood of the times among those who shared Arnold’s intellectual temperament, and it is one with which they were quite familiar. Thucydides’ *Historia tou Peloponnesiacou pole mou* (431-404 B.C.E.; *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1550) describes the night battle of Epipolae between the Athenians and the Syracusans. Dr. Thomas Arnold, Matthew’s father, had published a three-volume translation of Thucydides’ text in 1835; it was a favorite text at Rugby. Another ancillary source was John Henry Newman, who, in 1843, published a sermon, “Faith and Reason, Contrasted as Habits of Mind,” in which he alludes to the growing religious controversy of the time, describing it as “a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friend and foe stand together.”

## “THE SCHOLAR-GIPSY”

**First published:** 1853 (collected in *Poems*, 1853)

**Type of work:** Poem

*An Oxford student resists the increasingly materialistic emphasis of traditional university education, seeking instead inherent truths in the beauty of nature and in intellectual idealism.*

For the central premise of “The Scholar-Gipsy,” Arnold draws upon a legend of the area surrounding the university city of Oxford. The legend tells of a wandering scholar who rejects the material world of the academy to pursue a vague and idealistic objective. Arnold uses this story as a metaphor for his indictment of a world that is obsessed with materialism and individual advancement but is largely indifferent to culture and the pursuit of the ideal. In 1844, Arnold had purchased a copy of Joseph Glanvill’s *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661). Glanvill’s book recounts the tale of an Oxford student who, with neither patron nor independent financial means, was forced to discontinue his studies and to make his way in the world. Increasing poverty leads him to join a band of roving gypsies, with whom he begins a new and very different education. From these vagabonds, who roam at will following rules and traditions that in no way answer to the world of “preferment,” he discovers the power of the imagination stimulated by nature. Gradually he rejects the world of humanity and materialism. As the years become centuries, the increasingly mysterious scholar-gipsy continues his quest, a solitary figure always seen at a distance, carefully avoiding any contact with the corruption of modern civilization.

“The Scholar-Gipsy,” with its bucolic setting, has many of the characteristics of the traditional pastoral elegy. These characteristics are clearly apparent in the first stanza. As, for example, John Milton does in “Lycidas” (1638), Arnold addresses the young poet, casting him in the role of the shepherd who has abandoned the “quest,” the pursuit of the ideal, to go forth into the world of political change and turmoil. In 1848, Arnold’s close friend, the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, left his post at Oxford in order to become more directly involved in the

revolutionary social changes that were then restructuring all of European society. In the first stanza, the speaker calls upon the poet-shepherd to return, when the turmoil has settled, from leading the “sheep” of restless England. Return, he importunes the shepherd-poet, when “the fields are still,/ And the tired men and dogs all gone to rest.” The speaker (Arnold) and his fellow poet will remain behind, in the natural setting, away from the din of the city. The third stanza is almost purely descriptive. It presents the speaker reclining amid the beauties of nature, which Arnold renders with true Keatsian sensuality.

In the fourth through the seventh stanzas, Arnold relates the legend of the scholar-gipsy, drawn from “Glanvill’s book.” The secrets of the “gipsy-crew,” the ultimate truth to be drawn from nature, remain elusive, the wandering scholar tells some former fellow students whom he encounters in the early days of his quest. When he has fully discovered that truth, he will impart it to the world; the skill to do that, however, “needs heaven-sent moments,” divine or noumenal inspiration that lies beyond the knowledge and intellectual skills that one might develop at Oxford.

After the encounter with his former fellow students, the scholar-gipsy becomes a ghostly figure. He is occasionally sighted, but as one draws close he disappears, becoming, as the years pass, more an enduring illusion than a tangible reality. Gradually, only those who inhabit the country, those associated with the outdoors and the rural life beyond the civilization of cities, see the scholar-gipsy.

In stanzas 10 through 13, Arnold traces the scholar’s gradual integration with nature through the passage of seasons. The country people who encounter him at different times and in different places throughout the year remark upon his “figure spare,” his “dark vague eyes and soft abstracted air.” The scholar, on his singular mission, has forsaken the world of humanity and is gradually fading from humanity into the countryside that he inhabits. He seeks an ultimate truth that lies somewhere beyond the confines of university walls and the politics of modern society.

The scholar-gipsy’s quest is presumably the same pursuit of the ideal that was so much a part of Romantic poetry in the early nineteenth century. While John Keats and William Wordsworth had a very pronounced influence on Arnold, the influ-



ence of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge should not be discounted. An important common element among these early nineteenth century poets was the concept of the division between the real and the ideal, between the tangible world of sensory phenomena and the noumenal, “ideal” world. The Romantic poet seeks to transcend the distractions, the demands, the profound limitations of the world “enclosed by the senses five,” as William Blake termed it. He or she seeks to encounter, through the powers of the imagination, the world of synthesis, harmony, unity, and ultimate truth in a world that is also beyond the limits of time and space. It is that transcendent condition, according to Wordsworth, when the poet is able to see “into the life of things,” to perceive what Wordsworth calls “the hour/ Of Splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower.” For the Romantics, the quest was continually interrupted by the demands of the material world. The poet inevitably plummets back to reality, falling, as Shelley said, “upon the thorns of life.”

Arnold’s pantheistic wandering scholar pursues the moment of Romantic inspiration and insight, waiting, as Arnold says in stanzas 12 and 18, for “the spark from heaven.” In stanzas 15 through 17, Arnold praises the scholar-gipsy’s single-mindedness, his pursuit of “one aim, one business, one desire.” The legend has become the symbol for fidelity in the pursuit of a higher reality. The scholar-gipsy has not felt “the lapse of hours” but has become, like Keats’s Grecian urn, “exempt from age.”

In stanzas 20 through 23, Arnold characteristically gives full vent to his pessimistic view of the modern world. Life is “the long unhappy dream,” one that individuals “wish . . . would end.” Similar to the mood at the conclusion of “Dover Beach,” this poem sees the mid-nineteenth century as a time when individuals “waive all claim to bliss, and try to bear.” The aversion intensifies to the point where modern life is a contagious miasma, a veritable plague. The scholar-gipsy is right to avoid all social contact, to avoid “this strange disease of modern life/ With its sick hurry, its divided aims.” He is warned to fly “our feverish contact,” to save himself from the “infection of our mental strife.” Not to heed this warning would mean that “thy glad perennial youth would fade,/ Fade, and grow old at last, and die like ours.”

“The Scholar-Gipsy” effectively blends the Ro-

manic sensibility of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the Victorian reaction to the rapid growth of industrialism. It is one of Arnold’s many poetic commentaries on a time when the “machinery” of the mind threatened the annihilation of both the soul and the artistically creative imagination.

## CULTURE AND ANARCHY

**First published:** 1869

**Type of work:** Essays

*As widespread democratic reform follows technological progress and a growing emphasis on materialism, Arnold addresses the potential danger in the loss of traditional cultural values.*

*Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold’s masterpiece of social criticism, was the direct result of the turbulence leading up to the second reform bill of 1867. The book comprises six essays, which were published serially in the *Cornhill Magazine* between 1867 and 1868 under the title “Anarchy and Authority.” At the time that Arnold was preparing these essays, anarchy in English society was very much in ascendancy. From 1866 through 1868, there were a variety of social disturbances: riots in Trafalgar Square, Fenian and trade union demonstrations, anti-Catholic rallies, and suffrage protests in the industrial cities of Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

There was a rising tide of anarchy in England, and for Arnold it seemed that the entire country was in a general state of decline. Chief among the faults leading to this condition was an appalling smugness and insularity in the English character. As Arnold saw it, the typical English citizen was narrow and circumspect in the appreciation of the higher qualities and virtues of life. The cities in which he or she lived and worked expressed no beauty in their architecture; they were sprawling, industrial conglomerations. People were smug and cantankerous, loud in their assertions of individualism and personal liberty and adamant in their dislike of centralized authority, church or state. They were, however, obsequious in their respect for size and numbers in the burgeoning British empire

and in their acquiescence to the “machinery” of its ever-expanding bureaucracies. Arnold’s “typical” English citizen worshiped the materialism that generally determined societal values, but in religious matters he or she emphasized the “protest” in Protestantism and generally abhorred centralized spiritual authority. The English citizen was puritanical and inflexible.

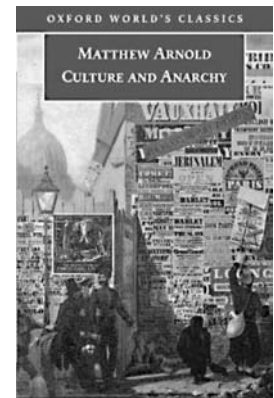
The character of the Victorian middle class, in Arnold’s view, was woefully inadequate to meet the problems it was currently facing, problems such as a rapidly increasing population, the unchecked rise of industrialism, and the continued spread of democracy. In addition to the middle class, which Arnold identified as “Philistines,” there were two other classes to be considered: the aristocracy, identified as the “Barbarians,” and the lower classes, termed the “Populace.” All in varying degrees were in need of culture, which Arnold defines as the pursuit “of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters that most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.” Culture is the means by which to achieve the general amelioration of English society and the general improvement of English character.

Central to the universal apprehending of “culture” are two elements that Arnold terms “Sweetness and Light,” the title of the first chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*. These terms, borrowed from Jonathan Swift’s “The Battle of the Books,” are rather vague and abstract, but they suggest an analogy to beauty and truth as they are used by Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” “Sweetness,” as Arnold uses it, is the apprehension and appreciation of beauty, the aesthetic dimension in human nature; “Light” is intelligence, brightened by open-mindedness, a full awareness of humankind’s past, and a concomitant capacity to enjoy and appreciate the best works of art, literature, history, and philosophy. They are linked entities, aided in their development within the individual by curiosity and disinterestedness, the essential impartiality that dispels prejudice.

The successful infusing of Sweetness and Light into the individual and general character also requires a coalescence and a balance of two elements that are integral to the history of Western civilization. Arnold terms these elements “Hebraism and Hellenism,” the title of chapter 4. Hebraism is the intellectual and spiritual heritage that is the basis

of a Semitic and subsequently Judeo-Christian tradition. It is from the Hebraic influence that Western civilization derives a sense of duty, a work ethic, the value of self-control, and the importance of obedience to the will of God. This value of obedience is enforced by a strictness of conscience, a sense of imperfection rooted in a shared stigma of Original Sin. Hellenism, on the other hand, is an Indo-European rather than a Semitic heritage. Its worldview is largely the opposite of Hebraism. From Hellenism, humanity derives an open “philosophic” perspective, an ardor for thinking and knowing. It is characterized by a striving for an unclouded clarity of mind, an unimpeded play of thought among the questions of the universal order. It stresses a clear intelligence and a seeking to apprehend. In opposition to Hebraic strictness of conscience, Hellenism emphasizes a spontaneity of consciousness, a total intellectual and spiritual freedom in the pursuit of perfection. An inevitable collision, Arnold explains, occurred in the Renaissance, the period when Europe rediscovered Hellenic ideas and perspective. The result of this proximity and subsequent collision was the Hebraistic view that identified Hellenism with “moral indifference and lax rule of conduct.” Hellenism, from the Hebraic perspective, was associated with a loss of spiritual balance, a weakening of moral fiber. The reaction solidified into Puritanism, bringing an end, in the seventeenth century, to the Renaissance in Europe.

Arnold’s leaning in *Culture and Anarchy* is clearly toward Hellenism and away from the dominance of Hebraism; but he recognizes that the path to perfection, the theme and purpose of the book, is to be found in a coalescence of the two, an extracting of the best of both elements. Neither Hebraism nor Hellenism is a law of human development, but each is a contribution. He advocates a reintroduction of Hellenism to counteract the static inflexibility of Puritan influence in the English character. What is needed is a Hebraic-Hellenic central au-



thority, the establishment of the state as an organ of society's collective "best" self. This authority would be guided by Sweetness and Light and "right reason," Western civilization's Hellenic legacy. Such a central authority would check self-serving, solipsistic individualism, encourage culture, and eventually transform society.

It is important to recognize that Arnold does not offer *Culture and Anarchy* as an active blueprint for the reconstruction of society. He was, in the strictest sense of the word, apolitical. The book is intended as a spiritual awakening, but spiritual in a far broader context than a strict adherence to the "machinery" of organized religion. There is a better self that lies within collective humanity that Arnold urges his readers to rediscover. To avert anarchy, humankind must pursue culture, must keep as an essential objective the achieving of perfection. In such pursuit alone lies the eventual salvation of humanity and society.

## SUMMARY

Matthew Arnold's poetry and prose criticism are devoted to the themes of spiritual stasis, the absence of intellectual values, and the general diminution of humankind in the face of growing materialism and expanding industrialism. Arnold was not a social scientist and made no pretense of offering practical solutions to real problems. His responses are high-minded at best, often vague and idealistic to a fault. In a world that is fragmented and divided among many creeds and material objectives, he laments both the loss of and the failure to reach a world of serenity characterized by unity, order, right reason, and culture. In addition to his accomplishments in poetry, Arnold's remarkable achievements lie in the standards set by his literary criticism and in his perceptive analysis of England's social malaise in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Richard Keenan

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Thomas Arnold, Matthew Arnold's father, was considered a fine schoolmaster. What might have caused the son to have so much trouble at Rugby School?
- Discuss the appropriateness of the phrase "eternal note of sadness" in "Dover Beach."
- What makes "Dover Beach" relevant today?
- Are there "scholar-gipsies" today? If so, who are they?
- Was Arnold too negative in his views of Victorian Englishmen in his *Culture and Anarchy*?
- Do Arnold's works show him to be an elitist? If so, is there any value in his elitism?
- Evaluate Arnold's statement that perfection is a matter of becoming, rather than having, something.



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## MARGARET ATWOOD

**Born:** Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
November 18, 1939

*Canadian writer Atwood, who has focused on political themes such as feminism, censorship, and human rights, has achieved an international reputation as a novelist and poet.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, on November 18, 1939, the daughter of Carl and Margaret Killam Atwood. In 1945, her father, who was an entomologist specializing in forest insects, moved the family to northern Ontario, the bush country that is featured in many of her works. Though the family returned a year later to Toronto, Atwood in later years would often visit the rural parts of Ontario and Quebec and spend a considerable amount of time at her country place. She attended high school in Toronto, and when she began writing at the age of sixteen, she had the encouragement of her high school teachers and one of her aunts. While attending Victoria College of the University of Toronto, she read Robert Graves's *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), which she claims "terrified" her because, while women are at the center of Graves's poetic theory, they are inspirations, not creators, and are alternately loving and destructive. This view of women writers did not daunt the aspiring writer, who has since helped to "correct" Graves's view and has focused much of her writing on women's issues and the themes of identity and empowerment.

After graduating from Victoria College in 1961, the same year that *Double Persephone* (1961), her first volume of poems, appeared, she attended Radcliffe College, receiving her M.A. degree in

1962. She has also done graduate work at Harvard University, but she remains resolutely Canadian, and the United States and its citizens are frequent targets in her writing. After her graduate work, she worked briefly as a cashier, waitress, market research writer, and screenwriter, and her work experiences have been transformed into her fiction. Atwood's work is often autobiographical. She also taught at Canadian universities during the 1960's and later in her career served as writer-in-residence at such diverse institutions as the University of Alabama, Macquarie University in Australia, and Cambridge University.

In the 1960's, Atwood primarily wrote poetry, although she did write an unpublished novel before *The Edible Woman* (1969) appeared. In *Double Persephone* and *The Circle Game* (1966), Atwood establishes the images and themes that characterize all of her poetry. She uses images of drowning, journeys, mirrors, and dreams to develop the contrast between life and art and between humanity's creation and nature. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood develops the theme of gender politics by focusing on the plight of an engaged young woman threatened by her consuming fiancé, who wishes to fix and limit her role. Although gender pervades Atwood's poems, her novel provides an early statement about women's rights and has established her as a somewhat reluctant spokesperson for feminism.

In the 1970's, despite the publication of several volumes of verse, Atwood's most significant works were novels. *Surfacing* (1972) is widely regarded as one of her best novels and has been the subject of numerous critical studies. As a story of a woman who returns to the past to heal herself, the novel

uses myth and psychology as it explores the issues of language, family, love, and survival—issues that also appear in her poems. *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Life Before Man* (1979) also concern relationships, but they are notable for their humor, which is by turns satiric, parodic, wry, or broadly comic. Atwood's other prose achievement in the 1970's is her controversial *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), a literary history of Canada that stresses the negative image of the victim in Canadian literature.

By the 1980's, Atwood's reputation was established; she had written several novels, more than a dozen volumes of poetry, a collection of short stories, and a literary history. In addition, she had written poems, received numerous prizes, and become active in the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. In short, she had become, for the non-Canadian reading public, the most notable contemporary Canadian writer. During the 1980's, she published several more volumes of poetry, but her literary reputation during this decade rests on her fiction, notably *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and *Cat's Eye* (1988). While in *Bodily Harm* Atwood uses the *Surfacing* pattern of alienation and subsequent healing through a journey into a more primitive, natural state, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a radical break from the earlier novels. It is a dystopian science-fiction tale set in a future America, but it is also fiction that derives from Atwood's reading of contemporary totalitarian tendencies. With *Cat's Eye*, Atwood returns to her Canadian materials and themes as her painter-narrator journeys back to Toronto to rediscover herself. Some critics see the narrator as Atwood and regard the novel as her midlife assessment, a guide to her own work, and as one of her best novels.

Since 1980, Atwood has also published two major volumes of short fiction: *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *Wilderness Tips* (1991). Her short stories, which resemble her novels in content and style, are themselves of such quality as to assure her a prominent place in Canadian literature. Atwood has become, however, more than a successful writer; she is a spokesperson for her causes and, as an editor, an arbiter of what constitutes good literature. In her work for PEN International and Amnesty International, she has vigorously opposed censorship, and, as an editor of volumes containing the "best" American and Canadian short stories, she

has shaped the standard of good writing. The many writing awards she has received attest to her literary reputation, and her Woman of the Year award from *Ms.* magazine (1986) reflects her political importance to the feminist cause. As editor, writer, critic, and political activist, she is without peer in North America. Her awards include the Governor-General's Award, Canada's highest literary honor, for *The Circle Game* in 1966; the Bess Hokin Prize for poetry in 1974; the Canadian Booksellers Association Award in 1977; and the Radcliffe Medal in 1980.

In 1993, the year she published *The Robber Bride*, she was named Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. Her novel *Alias Grace* (1996), a fictionalized version of historical events, won the Giller Prize. Two years later she published another volume of poetry and received an honorary doctorate from Oxford University. Cambridge University (2001), Harvard University (2004), and the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle (2005) also awarded her honorary doctorates. Her *Oryx and Crake*, a dystopian novel about genetic engineering, was published in 2003. In 2004 she was honored at the University of Ottawa by having an international symposium, Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye, conducted on her work. *The Tent*, a collection of previously published poems, essays, and short pieces, plus her own accompanying drawings, appeared in 2006.

## ANALYSIS

Although she has written poetry, short stories, screenplays, and novels, Atwood's work is remarkably consistent in content and theme. In spite of her international reputation, she remains resolutely Canadian in residence and in temperament. She has become more political and certainly is a writer of ideas, but, with the notable exceptions of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, she is not propagandistic and heavy-handed. Regardless of the genres in which she writes, Atwood is analytical, almost anatomical, in her dissection of characters and relationships. For the most part, hers is a landscape of the mind, although her writing is also rooted in geography, whether it be Toronto, the Canadian wilderness, or futuristic settings. In many ways, *Survival*, her literary criticism of Canadian literature, is a key not only to Canadian writers but also to Atwood herself. Much of her work is related

to survival in an environment or relationship at once native and alien because, while ostensibly familiar, such contexts are also foreign to a character's sense of wholeness. For the most part, her characters live defensively, creating superficial, ordered lives that enable them to live in modern urban settings, but there is another, darker side that they repress. That darker, irrational self is associated with the wilderness, with nature, in an almost Emersonian sense.

In her novels, Atwood's protagonists are usually young women who have roots in the wilderness but who currently live in an arid urban (or suburban) environment characterized by materialism, consumerism, exploitation, and male chauvinism, all of which are seen as products of the United States. The landscapes, both literal and symbolic, of her novels shape the lives of her female characters, who are both women and products, objects in a society where everything is for sale. Ill at ease, uncomfortable, half-aware of their problems, they leave a society that ironically seems safe, despite the psychological and spiritual threats that it poses, for another environment, a more primitive and dangerous one; it is, nevertheless, a healing environment, because the journey, in Atwood's novels, is mythical, psychological, and literal. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist travels to a wilderness island; in *Bodily Harm*, she goes to the Caribbean. In both cases, the new environment seems alien or foreign, but in the new environments the characters confront the realities that they had repressed and emerge or "surface" as re-created people. The healing process is spiritual, usually related to a culture seen as more primitive. In *Surfacing*, the Native American culture aids the heroine.

Part of the healing process concerns regaining control of one's body and one's language. In *Edible Woman*, the protagonist sends her lover a woman-shaped cake as a substitute for herself; in *Surfacing*, the narrator uses her lover to replace the baby she had aborted; and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred flees her role as breeder. In the novels, Atwood equates language with power, and the protagonist must articulate her feelings in gender-bound language. For example, in *Surfacing*, language erodes as the narrator returns to the primitive, irrational side of her nature. By "reporting" their experiences, her protagonists gain power and expose the ruling culture.

In her fiction, Atwood uses language as a poet would; she uses puns ("Offred" is "of Fred," but also "off red" with many meanings in *The Handmaid's Tale*), images (particularly water), and recurrent motifs. Moreover, she is aware, and hence suspicious, of the limits of language, of the problem of narration and voice. Her *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* (1983) explores the issue of writing and the relationship between writer and reader (in 2002 she addressed the nature of writing in her *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*), but it also reflects the ease with which she moves from poetry to short fiction and blurs the distinction between the two genres. In fact, her short stories, as a group, are poetic in the way that she uses images and experiments with form to explore human relationships.

Atwood's poetry also concerns human relationships that are played out against geographical and psychological landscapes. Her early poetry volume *The Circle Game* establishes the garrison mentality of adults under emotional siege; they construct abstract patterns or maps that appropriate reality and keep others at a safe distance. The volume also develops the images of water and drowning suggestive of the descent into one's repressed self, of mirrors that entrap those more concerned with image than reality, and of violence that characterizes human relationships. In *Power Politics* (1971) she makes explicit the themes developed in *The Circle Game*; the myth of romantic love is exposed as a sham. Love is a power struggle in which partners victimize, exploit, and consume (as in *The Edible Woman*) each other. The "Circe/Mud" poems of *You Are Happy* (1974) reinforce the idea of exploited women, who are shaped, like clay, to suit their lovers.

The feminist politics of *Power Politics* and *You Are Happy* become more global in *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) and in *True Stories* (1981). In "Two-Headed Poems," Atwood uses two speakers to explore Canadian complicity in the "Americanization" process, and in *True Stories*, she attacks national "circle games" that enable Canadians to shield themselves from the harsh realities of international famine, violence, and terrorism. Atwood's poetry, like her fiction, has become increasingly political, but in neither form has she abandoned literature for propaganda. She remains committed to form and to experiments with narrative and language; she also

has the ability, despite the seriousness of content, to use humor, ranging from puns to irony, to convey her vision of human relationships.

## SURFACING

**First published:** 1972

**Type of work:** Novel

*In her search for her missing father, the narrator retreats to the literal and psychological wilderness of northern Quebec, where she reexamines her life and symbolically re-creates herself.*

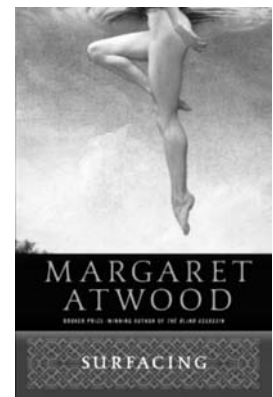
*Surfacing*, Atwood's second novel, recapitulates many of the themes and images from both her poems and *The Edible Woman* (1969), her first novel. In both novels, for example, a young woman finally rebels against a technological society that would mold and shape her life and then experiences a psychological breakdown before emerging as a survivor with an integrated or whole personality. *Surfacing*, however, is a richer, denser novel because the journey that the unnamed narrator undertakes is literal, psychological, and mythical; the novel is further complicated by the unreliable narrator, who not only acknowledges fictionalizing her story but also must use the very rational language that she comes to distrust because it is the language of the Americanized culture that she rejects.

In the first part of the novel, the unnamed narrator (her lack of a name suggests a lack of real identity and implies that she does not belong in her culture) leaves the city and travels to the Canadian wilderness to find her missing father, who is perhaps dead. Her companions are David, a would-be cinematographer; Anna, his passive doll/girlfriend; and Joe, the narrator's shaggy lover and a frustrated potter. As they travel north, the narrator suggests that "either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am" and calls her "home ground" a "foreign country." When she later adds, "I don't know the way any more," it seems clear that she has become alienated from her parents (she also did not attend her mother's funeral) and from her past. She also is alienated from "them," the companions whom she comes to see as exploitive

"Americans" with the technology, pollution, and violence that slowly creep northward. As she narrates the story, she mentions her husband and a child, as well as a drowned brother. The brother, however, is not dead; he "surfaced," foreshadowing her own surfacing. The husband and child are also part of her fiction; she aborted the baby she conceived with her married lover, and that abortion, cutting her off from nature, still haunts her. She is an incomplete person, a point that Atwood makes by having her mention that Anna thought she was a twin; later, the narrator states, "I must have been all right then; but after that I'd allowed myself to be cut in two," obliquely referring to the abortion.

The narrator returns to the divided self at the beginning of part 2 and maintains that the language that divided the body and the head is "wrong," that she is "translating badly, a dialect problem." Atwood's concern with the limitations of language continues throughout the novel and reflects the growing distrust of the rational and the embracing of less conscious, more instructive modes of knowing. What the narrator comes to know is that David and Anna are in a mutually destructive relationship, which David attempts to capture on film, thereby defining Anna as object rather than person. The narrator, who had believed that she and David were similar in their lack of love, comes to understand that he is incapable of surfacing or becoming real: "He was infested, garbled, and I couldn't help him; it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape him down to where he was true." (This understanding occurs in part 3.) David is an exploiter, like the "Americans,"—ironically, real Canadians, who shot a heron "to prove they could do it," who wish to develop her father's island property, and who want to flood the area. In fact, part of David's problem is that, despite his clichéd attacks on the Americans, he has himself become "Americanized."

As time passes, the narrator discovers her father's drawings and her mother's scrapbook, two





guides that lead her to the cliff where she hopes to find the Native American paintings and clues about her father's fate. When she dives, she finds instead "a dark oval trailing limbs," a vision that makes her confront the truth about her abortion. Since she describes the vision as a "chalice, an evil grail," the narrator's vision or epiphany becomes the answer, the end of the mythical quest or journey, although she cannot yet interpret it correctly. The vision, however, does radically alter her, setting her apart from her companions, who have "turned against the gods" and yet would persecute her for "heresy." "It was time for me to choose sides," she writes, but her choice is seen ironically as "inhuman." Part 2 concludes with her decision to immerse herself "in the other language," the language not associated with the dominant culture.

Part 3 of the novel begins with the narrator being impregnated by Joe, who has already been described as more "animal" than David or Anna and hence is the appropriate father foreshadowed in her childish picture of the moon-mother and horned man. While their union might reinforce the stereotypical gender roles that she has rejected, the narrator's description of their coupling is devoid of feeling; he is only a means of restoring the "two halves" separated by her complicity in the abortion: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me." She then unwinds the film, symbolically denying David and Joe the power to capture their vision of reality and freeing Anna from her passive celluloid image, though Anna remains trapped in her compact, which shapes her appearance and life to the masculine will. The narrator hides when the others leave, turns the entrapping mirror to the wall, discards her wedding ring and clothes, leaves the cabin, and enters her parents' world. Language breaks down as she breaks "down" and then "through"; she sees both parents, who then return to nature, one as a jay, the other as a fish. When she wakes the next morning, the ghosts have been exorcised and she is free. At the end of the novel, she states that the most important thing is "to refuse to be a victim," but she must decide whether or not to go back with Joe. If she does, her description of him as "half-formed" implies that she, not he, will be the creator and shaper.

## THE HANDMAID'S TALE

**First published:** 1985

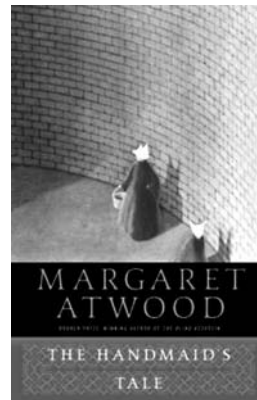
**Type of work:** Novel

*In a postnuclear war society governed by repressive, puritanical men, a young woman recounts on tape her survival and escape.*

Set in the near future, a time just prior to the year 2000, *The Handmaid's Tale* is science fiction but also an indictment of the present, since Atwood's future is the reader's present. It is an atypical Atwood novel, her only novel not rooted in Canada and the only one to be so blatantly propagandistic. In it, she fulfills the promise of her narrator protagonist in *Lady Oracle* (1976): "I won't write any more Costume Gothics. . . . But maybe I'll try some science fiction." Atwood prefers the term "speculative fiction" because of the blending of future

and present and maintains that all the events in the novel have a "corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact." Since the novel is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Atwood also indicts the American culture, which contains the "corresponding reality."

The novel begins with a quotation from the book of Genesis about a barren Rachel encouraging her husband Jacob to have children by her maid, Bilhah. In the aftermath of nuclear war, a new North American republic called Gilead (another biblical reference to fertility) attempts to correct a declining birthrate, caused by nuclear radiation and pollutants, by relegating fertile women to the role of Bilhah-like Handmaids, the breeders of society. (In fact, all Gilead women are assigned to one of eight roles, each distinguished by its own uniform.) In such a patriarchal society where religion, state, and military are combined, women's identities are controlled by men. Offred, the narrator, has lost her real name; she is "of Fred," in reference to the com-



mander whom she services in a perverse, impersonal sexual coupling with his wife, Serena Joy, at the head of the bed. At the beginning of the novel, Offred recounts her training under the aunts—also a perverse parody of the training that nuns and sisters undergo; Offred’s uniform, though red, resembles a nun’s habit.

Despite her indoctrination, Offred chafes under the repressive regime, and, when her commander gives her access to his library, a male preserve—reading is dangerous for women—she becomes even more rebellious. She meets Moira, an old friend, at a brothel where the males circumvent their own repressive sexual roles and discovers that there is a revolutionary organization named Mayday, which suggests fertility and anarchy. Her rebellion is fueled by her illegal affair with Nick, the chauffeur, who restores her identity (she tells him her real name), liberates her sexually, and ultimately aids in her escape via the Underground Femaleroad, reflecting, through its parody of the slave underground railroad, the slavish position of women in Gilead.

Offred survives to tell her tale, not in traditional epistolary form but in tapes that have been edited by scholars in the year 2195. Atwood’s account of the tapes, similar to traditional accounts about finding ancient manuscripts, is appended as “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*” to the text of the novel, but, in suggesting that two centuries have not altered female/male relationships, the notes continue the novel’s indictment of current culture. In keeping with utopian tradition, Atwood’s site for the scholarly proceedings is the University of Denay, Nunavit (or the university of deny, none of it). Atwood’s wry denial of the validity of the proceedings calls into question the male editing of female discourse; Professors Pieixoto and Wade have arranged “the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go.” Since Offred frequently alludes to the problem of articulating her feelings and experiences, the professors’ presumptuous efforts are open to question.

While the proceedings are chaired by a woman, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon (perhaps a criticism of academic tokenism), the keynote speaker is a man, Professor Pieixoto, whose comments hardly represent an improvement over current male chauvinism. In his opening remarks, he alludes to “enjoying” Crescent Moon, “the Arctic

Chair.” His further comments about the title of the book (the “tale”/“tail” being a deliberate pun by his male colleague) and his joke about the “Underground Frail-road” reveal the same chauvinistic condescension that characterizes current academic discourse. His unwillingness to pass moral judgments on the Gileadean society, because such judgments would be “culture-specific,” reflects not scientific objectivity, which he already has violated by his editing, but his moral bankruptcy.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* does survive, however, despite the male editing, as a “report” on the present/future; similarly, in *Bodily Harm*, the radicalized protagonist becomes a “subversive,” who vows to “report” on the repressive society. The novel, like *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), serves as an anatomy, an indictment, and a warning about current society. Among Atwood’s targets are religious fanaticism, nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist practices. Like other utopian novels, however, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is weakened by its political agenda, which creates one-dimensional characters and somewhat implausible events; the propaganda, however, also gives the novel its power, relevance, and appeal. Because of its popularity, it was adapted to film in 1990.

## “THE CIRCLE GAME”

**First published:** 1964 (collected in *The Circle Game*, 1966)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The speaker explores the emotional barriers that children and adults erect to remain separate and alienated.*

The title poem of Atwood’s *The Circle Game* (1966) develops the circle motif that pervades her poetry and represents the patterned, structured world that both controls and shelters individuals who seek and fear freedom from conformity. The seven-part poem juxtaposes the children’s world and the adult world but suggests that childhood circle games, ostensibly so innocent, provide a training ground for the adult circle games that promote estrangement and emotional isolation. In the first part of the poem, the children play ring-



around-a-rosy; but despite the surface appearance of unity, each child is separate, “singing, but not to each other,” without joy in an unconscious “tranced moving.” As they continue going in circles, their eyes are so “fixed on the empty moving spaces just in front of them” that they ignore nature with its grass, trees, and lake. For them, the “whole point” is simply “going round and round,” a process without purpose or “point.” In the second part, the couple plays its own circle games as the lover remains apart, emotionally isolated despite sharing a room and a bed with the speaker. Like the children, his attention is focused elsewhere, not on the immediate and the real, but on the people behind the walls. The bed is “losing its focus,” as he is concerned with other “empty/ moving spaces” at a distance or with himself, “his own reflection.” The speaker concludes that there is always “someone in the next room” that will enable him to erect barriers between them.

Part 3 moves from the isolation of part 1 to an abstract defensiveness that unconsciously enforces that isolation. The innocent sand castles on the beach are comprised of “trenches,” “sand moats,” and “a lake-enclosed island/ with no bridges,” which the speaker sees as a “last attempt” to establish a “refuge human/ and secure from the reach/ of whatever walks along/ (sword hearted)/ these night beaches.” Since the speaker has earlier equated “sword hearted” with the adult world, she implies that the adult world poses the real or imagined threat. Protection from “the reach” becomes the metaphor for the lover’s unwillingness to have her “reach him” in part 4 (part 2 described her as “groping” for him). The lover’s fortifications are more subtle verbal and nonverbal games (“the witticisms/ of touch”) that enable him to keep her at a “certain distance” through the intellect that abstracts and depersonalizes reality. As the lover has been a “tracer of maps,” which are themselves the abstraction of physical reality, he is now “tracing” her “like a country’s boundary” in a perverse parody of John Donne’s map imagery in his Metaphysical love poetry. For the lover, she becomes part of the map of the room, which is thus not real but abstract, and she is “here and yet not here,” here only in the abstract as she is “transfixed/ by your eyes! cold blue thumbtacks,” an image that suggests distance, control, and violence.

The last three parts of the poem draw together

the children’s world and that of the adults. In part 5, the speaker observes the contrast between the children’s imaginative perception of violence (the guns and cannons of the fort/museum) and the adult perception of the domestication of that violence as the “elaborate defences” are shifted first to the glass cases of the museum and then, metaphorically, to their own relationship. The defenses become the “orphan game” of part 6, in which the lover prefers to be “alone” but is simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the family games in which parents “play” their roles. Metaphorically, he is on the outside looking in, observing but separated by the window barrier. In the last part of the poem, it is “summer again,” itself a circle of the seasons, and the children’s outside circle games are again mirrored by the adult’s inside circle games. The earlier images—the “observations,” the noises in the next room, the maps, the “obsolete fort”—resurface as the couple are neither “joined nor separate.” The speaker, “a spineless woman in/ a cage of bones” (another image of entrapment), wants to break the circle, to erase the maps, to break the glass cases, to free herself from his “prisoning rhythms.” The speaker recognizes and articulates the problem, but she cannot free herself of the circles.

## “TWO-HEADED POEMS”

**First published:** 1978 (collected in *Two-Headed Poems*, 1978)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Two speakers conduct a “duet” about the complex love-hate relationship between Canada and the United States.*

The title poem of *Two-Headed Poems* is, according to the speaker, “not a debate/ but a duet/ with two deaf singers.” In fact, the poem concerns the problems of being a Canadian neighbor to a world power whose corrupt values are expressed in the “duet.” Like the Siamese twins, described as “joined head to head, and still alive,” the United States and Canada are awkwardly joined: “The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes/ together, sometimes alternately within a poem.” At times, it is clear which country speaks, but not al-

ways, for the two countries do share, however reluctantly, some characteristics. The leaders of both countries are criticized, though the leader who “is a monster/ sewn from dead soldiers” is an American president of the Vietnam era, a recurrent motif in the poem. Yet Atwood is as concerned about language as she is with actions, the nonverbal gestures. One “head” asks, “Whose language/ is this anyway?” The corruption of Canadian English, itself a political act, stems from the passive nature of a people content to be Americanized, to shut down “the family business” that was “too small anyway/ to be, as they say, viable.” The Canadians whose identity comes from “down there” in the United States are associated with “nouns,” but they are also hostile (the candy hearts become “snipers”) and impatient to act on their own:

Our dreams though  
are of freedom, a hunger  
for verbs, a song  
which rises double, gliding beside us  
over all these rivers, borders,  
over ice and clouds.

The Canadian head calls for action to complete the sentence by combining with nouns, and the resultant language should not be a political statement, but a celebratory song, a “double” that transcends borders. The dreams of freedom are, however, only futile dreams, and the closing images are of being “mute” and of “two deaf singers.” Communication between the two “heads” is, by definition, impossible, and Atwood clearly implies that the American/ Canadian coupling that impedes both countries is an aberration of nature.

## ALIAS GRACE

**First published:** 1996

**Type of work:** Novel

*Atwood creates a fictionalized account of the life of Grace Marks, a nineteenth century Canadian woman who was convicted of killing her employer and his mistress.*

Atwood read about Grace Marks, the convicted murderess of her employer Thomas Kinnear and

his mistress, Nancy Montgomery, in Susanna Moodie’s *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853), but she soon realized that Moodie’s account was fictionalized. Grace added to the confusion by offering three different versions of the murder; James McDermott, who was hanged for his role in the murders, provided two more versions. Atwood had all this information, plus numerous newspaper accounts, when she wrote *Alias Grace*, to which she added prefatory materials and an “Author’s Afterword.” Despite the wealth of information, Grace’s role in the murders remains, as Atwood put it, “an enigma.”

Grace, the first-person narrator, tells two stories in the novel, one a stream-of-consciousness rendering of her thoughts and the other the story she tells Dr. Simon Jordan, a well-meaning psychologist who interviews Grace in prison. Aware of her situation, Grace tells Jordan what she thinks he wants to hear. Jordan, who dreams of establishing his own clinic, is bent on unlocking the “box” (the truth) but admits he does not have the key. He and Grace play a cat-and-mouse game, which she wins. A series of events leads Jordan into an affair with his landlady, who attempts to persuade him to help her murder her husband, who returns unexpectedly; this plot provides an ironic counterpart to the Kinnear and Montgomery murders. Jordan’s reminiscences about the servant girls in his parents’ home, and his fantasies about prostitutes indicate that he, not Grace, is obsessed with sex. After he rejects his landlady’s plan, Jordan flees Canada, returns to his home in the United States, enlists in the Civil War, and then receives a head wound, which conveniently provides him with the amnesia that makes him forget his Canadian experiences.

In addition to the murders and the planned murder, the novel also recounts the sexual exploitation of a woman by a man. Mary Whitney, a friend and confidant of Grace’s. Mary is seduced by a wealthy young man, whose parents are Mary’s employers. He later rejects the pregnant Mary, whose subsequent death from a botched abortion is hushed up by her employers. Atwood’s novel also includes marriages in addition to the one between Jordan and Faith Cartwright, a young woman chosen by Jordan’s mother. Lydia, the prison governor’s daughter, who has designs on Jordan, is married off to Reverend Verringer after Jordan’s flight in order to preserve her reputation. Whether it is

the exploitation of servant girls by their masters or the conventions of society that dictate the behavior of upper-class young women, women in this novel are not in charge of their lives.

In addition to the unreliable narrator, a staple of Atwood's fiction, *Alias Grace* contains other familiar elements, many of them gothic: murder, demonic possession, madness, secrets, supernatural elements (including hypnosis), and a fear of women and their power. Atwood uses the epistolary form (letters between Jordan and his dominating mother) and includes a ballad she wrote in a nineteenth century style. All of these elements are used to question not only the nature of truth but also the notion of colonial innocence in English Canada.

## ORYX AND CRAKE

**First published:** 2003

**Type of work:** Novel

*In a dystopian future of unlimited biotechnological progress, a young man and a laboratory-created "people" survive a global disease.*

*Oryx and Crake* also uses an unreliable narrator, the Snowman (his real name was Jimmy), an outcast and survivor of a global disease created by his friend Crake. In this dystopian novel, Snowman recounts what led to the disaster and what is happening in the present. When the novel begins, Snowman is in the present, foraging for food and instructing the Crakers, "people" created by Crake. Crake and Jimmy were childhood friends with different interests: Jimmy was a "word person"; Crake was a "numbers person." Both lived with their parents in the Compound, a gated community of people who work for biotech corporations. After graduation, the friends drifted apart, Crake to the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute and Jimmy to the run-down Martha Graham Academy. The schools reflect the relative importance of the sciences (numbers) and the arts (words).

When they enter the job market, Crake works as a scientist for the biotech companies, and Jimmy becomes not a "wordsmith" but a "wordserf" in ad-

vertising. Eventually, Crake lures Jimmy to Watson-Crick, where Crake shows Jimmy the hybrid animals that the scientists are creating. Jimmy also learns that the scientists, who have cures for the known diseases, are creating new diseases and their cures to continue to make money. Crake's own department is ironically named Paradise, and its work involves creating populations with "ideal" characteristics, such as beauty and docility, because "several world leaders had expressed interest in that." The Crakers, as they come to be called, were programmed not to be racist, aggressive, sexually charged, or religious. Like other animals, they came into heat at regular intervals and urinated to mark their territory, but unlike other animals, they recycled their own excrement. Such "people" would therefore not experience the modern problems of "real" people.

Despite his aversion to modern problems, Crake falls in love, an emotion that leads to possessiveness and violence. Unfortunately, Jimmy is also in love with Oryx, a sexual waif he had seen on television when he was a child. She reappears as Crake's lover, after having been the victim of white slavery and pimps. Jimmy exhibits all the symptoms of romantic love: sleeplessness, jealousy (demanding information about Oryx's sexual past), and possessiveness. Oryx, however, is rooted in the present as the instructor of the Crakers. She also acts as a salesperson for the drugs that Crake's company is manufacturing. The drugs are programmed to cause instantaneous suffering and death, which occurs on a global scale. At Crake's instructions, Jimmy clears Paradise of all other personnel, which leaves him alone as an insulated, protected being. When Crake and Oryx appear at Paradise's door, Jimmy kills them.

Jimmy/Snowman, who believes that he is the sole "human" survivor of the disease Crake has unleashed (Crake had thoughtfully provided him with the antidote), carries on the instruction Oryx had begun. Because of his love/hate relationship with Crake, he provides the Crakers with a mythology that includes Crake as the Creator/God and Oryx as the Earth Mother. He pretends to correspond with Crake through a wristwatch with a blank face, suggesting that he and the Crakers are suspended in time. Eventually, he has to travel from the "pleeblands" back to Paradise to get supplies, but in the course of his journey he recalls past

events and keeps uttering random words, almost as if his existence depended upon language. In the present, however, his journey is threatened by the hybrid animals that Crake created. When he returns from Paradise to the Crakers, he discovers that despite Crake's efforts, the Crakers are beginning to gain notions of ambition and hierarchy, notions that will lead to the problems Crake sought to prevent. Snowman also discovers that there are three other human survivors. Armed with a weapon, he tracks them down, but cannot decide what action to take, and the novel ends at "zero hour."

### SUMMARY

As novelist, poet, literary critic, editor, and spokesperson for women's rights, Margaret Atwood is an international figure whose ideas and be-

liefs about consumerism, environmental damage, censorship, militarism, and gender politics pervade her writing. Though most of her work is set in Canada and reflects the survival theme that she claims is distinctly Canadian, her dissection of human relationships transcends national boundaries. She focuses on geographical and emotional landscapes in which her protagonists journey, usually to nature or to the wilderness, in order to shed civilization's influence, confront themselves, rediscover their true identities, and survive. Atwood's style, regardless of the genre, is poetic in that her delight in language is revealed through puns, metaphors, allusions, and ambiguous words and phrases that resonate with meaning. Though there is pessimism and despair in her work, there is also a wry sense of humor that is almost inevitably satiric.

Thomas L. Erskine

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Margaret Atwood's works always seem to involve a journey of some kind—literal, emotional, or both. What initiates the journeys, what impedes them, and how do the journeys end, if they do?
- Often in an effort to improve society, authorities resort to repressive measures. Discuss the motivations, expressed or covert, behind such efforts in Atwood's novels, especially *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.
- Prisons, metaphorical and literal, play a large role in Atwood's works. Discuss the effect of both kinds of prisons on the characters in her works.
- Identity or the obfuscation of identity is a theme in many of Atwood's works, especially her novels. Not only do characters' names change, but they change with their names. Discuss Atwood's use of names and the problem of identifying just who some of her characters are. Why do you think Atwood uses this theme?
- Identify some positive or semipositive male characters in Atwood's fiction. What appear to be their flaws and what do their flaws disclose about the society and the nature of male/female relationships?
- Atwood uses unreliable narrators in many of her novels. To what purpose? How are the narrators related to the nature of truth in her novels?

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## W. H. AUDEN

**Born:** York, England  
February 21, 1907

**Died:** Vienna, Austria  
September 29, 1973

*Auden's considerable body of work is remarkable for its uniqueness. He employed the poetic forms of a wealth of literary periods, and no other twentieth century poet so successfully blended, and stood apart from, prevailing modernist styles.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Wystan Hugh Auden (AWD-ehn) was born on February 21, 1907, in York, England. He was the youngest son of George and Constance Auden. His father and mother belonged to a very distinct niche of early twentieth century Edwardian society—that of the politically liberal, scientific intelligentsia. He came, nevertheless, from a very devout Anglo-Catholic home, and his early experiences with the Church would remain with him when he returned to it later in life. As a child, he was fascinated by the “magic” of Church of England rites, and this enchantment with the magical and the mystical also remained a lifelong characteristic. Auden’s father was a distinguished physician and professor of medicine; his mother was a nurse. By all accounts, his family environment was loving, intelligent, clear-thinking—traits that were foremost in Auden as an adult. He received the standard schooling of an upper-middle-class male child in early twentieth century England. Beginning his education at St. Edmund’s preparatory school at eight years of age, he attended Gresham’s School at age thirteen.

At first, Auden intended to become a scientist, like his father. He was principally interested in both engineering and biology and planned to become a mining engineer. This career path was soon overtaken by another, however; while he was still at Gresham’s, he began to write poetry. His first poem

was published when he was seventeen. This early publication foreshadowed the fame that would come to him just a few years later while he was still in college. He entered Oxford in 1925 and very soon afterward had acquired a faithful clique. Those who knew him during his university years remember him as a rising star, someone who would clearly make a name for himself as a poet and thinker. A group of men who would later also be important poets formed around him—Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. Spender privately printed the first collection of Auden’s poems in 1928, the year that Auden graduated from Oxford.

After graduation, he spent a year abroad, the traditional *Wanderjahr* of upper-class young Englishmen. When his parents asked in which European city he would like to spend his year, Auden surprisingly answered that he wanted to live in Berlin. Germany in the years of the Weimar Republic, before Adolf Hitler came to power, was an exciting place—stimulating, racy, intellectually bold. There, Auden became acquainted with the politically charged plays of Bertolt Brecht and the sexy, witty songs of the Berlin cabarets. He perfected his German during his year abroad, and throughout his life he would be influenced by German literature, both classical and modern.

When he returned to England, he became a schoolmaster, first at Larchfield Academy, in Scotland, then at Downs School, near Malvern, England. At the same time, however, his literary reputation was growing. His *Poems* appeared in 1930,



firmly establishing his reputation as the most brilliant of England's younger generation of poets. Perhaps under the influence of Brecht, he had begun writing works that were broadly "dramatic." *Paid on Both Sides: A Charade* (pb. 1930, pr. 1931) reinforced the literary world's opinion of Auden as an important young writer.

Auden's adult life has frequently been divided into four segments, a division suggested by the poet himself in an introduction to his *Collected Shorter Poems, 1930-1944* (1950). The first segment runs from his undergraduate days through 1932, the second comprises the period from 1933 to 1938, and the third extends from 1939 to 1946; the fourth segment began in 1948. The first segment entails the period of his early fame—his notoriety as a brilliant, precocious undergraduate and the publication of his first important poems. This era of Auden's life might also be viewed as his "Freudian period"; in part, he viewed the work of this era as a kind of therapy, giving free play to fantasy and uncovering hidden impulses. Yet even this early poetry shows the social and political awareness that would infuse his poems throughout the 1930's.

By 1933, partly under the influence of Brecht and in reaction to the collapse of his beloved Weimar Republic, Auden became an outspoken critic of the political establishment—his life's second, political, segment. He became increasingly committed to left-wing causes and in 1937 journeyed to Spain as a stretcher-bearer in the struggle of the Loyalist Left against the forces of fascism. He also made use of theater as a way to gain wider public expression of his beliefs; he was a cofounder of the Group Theatre in 1932 and collaborated with Christopher Isherwood, a longtime friend, on several dramatic works. Moreover, he wrote film scripts for the General Post Office film unit, a government-sponsored creative effort that, among other subjects, frequently made films about working-class life in Britain.

Auden traveled widely during the 1930's, not only to Spain but also to Iceland (his family name, as "Audun," is mentioned in the Icelandic sagas), China, and the United States. His experience with the Spanish Loyalist armies had left him disillusioned with the Left, and his fame in England apparently meant little to him by this time. Thus, in 1939, he moved to the United States, marking the third period in his life story. Once again, he be-

came a teacher—this time on the university level, as a member of the faculties of the New School for Social Research, the University of Michigan, and Swarthmore, Bennington, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard colleges. During the war years, Auden turned inward; he returned to the Anglo-Catholicism of his youth and wrote several long poems that explore his newly found meditative introspection. The last of these, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1948.

During the last period of his life, from 1948 until his death in Vienna on September 29, 1973, Auden divided his time among the United States, Italy, and Austria. Eventually, in 1972, he established residence in Oxford, where he had earlier been named professor of poetry. He continued to write prolifically, although no long poems appeared after 1948. He published two volumes of prose, *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (1962) and *A Certain World* (1970), translations, and he collaborated on the librettos of several operas.

Many students of Auden's biography are struck by the series of enthusiasms that colored his life. Marxist, Freudian, Anglo-Catholic—a lover of Icelandic sagas, William Shakespeare, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—Auden continued until his last years to hold strong beliefs that are often central to his poetry. However, he was also a very private, introspective man. His love lyrics are among the twentieth century's most celebrated. His later Anglo-Catholicism revealed a powerful inward-turning element in his character, and his religious poems are obviously the result of much soul-searching.

## ANALYSIS

Having come to fame early, Auden had the close attention of critics throughout his adult life, far longer than most poets. Being in the literary spotlight from young manhood clearly affected his own perspective on his work; in fact, in his later years, he rewrote, abandoned, and cannibalized many of his earlier poems because he felt this youthful work was "untrue." Essentially, he attempted to remake the outlines of his own body of poetry. Another effect of his early fame—or notoriety, as the case may be—was his fairly substantial audience (for a poet). Conscious of this loyal readership, he broadcast his political and social ideas throughout the 1930's. The effort was made in good conscience: He was

only attempting to persuade his readers of what he felt was right. Yet perhaps in reaction, as the 1930's drew to an end, Auden withdrew from the spotlight. Having come to literary fame early, he tired of it; having spent nearly a decade fighting for a just society, he turned inward.

That is not to say that Auden's poetry lacked a strong streak of inward-turning from the outset. The early poems often have as their setting a wild, make-believe landscape concocted from a rich variety of sources: Icelandic sagas, Old English poetry, boys' adventure stories, and surreal fantasies that he had found in reading the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. Throughout Auden's poetry, during all four literary states into which he divided his career, his work would have this same curious division between a highly personal mythology and the clear, logical setting forth of an argument. Many readers find the introspective level of Auden's poetry very obscure, although his poems are no more difficult than those of other twentieth century masters such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or Wallace Stevens. Throughout his career, Auden was clearly fascinated by dreams and imaginative fantasies, and the drive to express this highly personal inner world contributes to his poetry's thorniness.

At the same time, Auden's poetry consistently presented to the world another outward face. Like any intelligent, sensitive young person, Auden lamented social and political injustice. In response, his work at this time is apocalyptic. The landscape portrayed in his early dramatic work *Paid on Both Sides* is a violent, confused one, populated by vindictive raiding parties armed with up-to-date weaponry and a medieval siege mentality. Critics at the time noted Auden's thorough familiarity with contemporary ideologies such as Marxism and capitalism, Freudianism, sexual freedom, and feminism. His youthful work attempts to employ these schools of thought to diagnose a diseased society, but, most scholars agree, the results are often confusing and amateurish. His short lyric poems, such as "Since You Are Going to Begin Today," remain his most lasting work of this period, a harbinger of the gifted lyric voice that he sustained throughout his career. The lyric poetry is open, candid, heartfelt, showing a young man alive to the world and to himself.

Actually, Auden was typical of many authors during the late 1920's and early 1930's, as writers

moved from creating introspective works bound by personal symbolism toward socially committed poems, novels, and stories. The shift was natural: Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin had risen to power during this period, and the world was once again threatened by world war. Economically, too, the international community was entering a severe depression; while smaller nations continued to suffer poverty, the great powers also began to see widespread deprivation. Thus, it was natural for Auden, already politically aware, to strive, through poetry and drama, for a better world. He began consciously to aim his verse at a wide readership, chiefly through the poetic dramas staged by the Group Theatre. The 1930's saw the production of several Auden plays, of which the three most important—*The Dog Beneath the Skin: Or, Where Is Francis?* (pb. 1935, pr. 1936), *The Ascent of F6* (pb. 1936, pr. 1937), and *On the Frontier* (pb., pr. 1938)—were written with close friend Isherwood. Although spoken in verse, these plays were similar to the songs and skits of English music halls and German cabarets and sought to stir a large audience to action.

His poetry of the 1930's breathes fellow feeling, an eager love for humanity, and a conviction that universal harmony was not far away. Yet throughout the decade he continued to write personal poems, often love lyrics contemplating the brevity and fragility of emotions. A celebrated example is "As I Walked out One Evening," which uses the well-worn rhythms and phrases of popular love songs to picture love's uncertainty. Even a poem such as *Spain 1937* (1937), which offers a panorama of the people engaged in civil war, has an introspective side; at the same time as the speaker explores each person's social motivation, he also looks forward to a peaceful future where the participants may rediscover "romantic love." Although it would be inaccurate to say that Auden had been "embittered" by his experience in the Spanish Civil War, by 1939 he had, however, begun to express weariness with the state of the world. He had moved to the United States, and in "September 1, 1939," he sits in "one of the dives" on New York's Fifty-Second Street, watching as the "clever hopes expire/ Of a low dishonest decade." In "The Unknown Citizen," written a few months earlier, his tone is bitterly sarcastic as he describes the faceless, obedient automaton-citizen of the modern state.

In 1940, Auden to an extent put aside his political commitments and embraced religious and purely artistic ones. He returned to the Church of his boyhood, and his Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being* (pb. 1944, pr. 1959), expresses this spiritual culmination. He also returned to his English literary roots through a careful study of William Shakespeare. The long poem *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944) explores the meaning of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623) as a parable of the artist and his creations. Finally, *The Age of Anxiety* investigates the psychic landscape of the postwar years, as Western culture struggled to recover from the traumas of the 1930's and 1940's. These later, longer poems are unquestionably difficult in language and theme, a far cry from the accessible, socially committed verse plays of the preceding decade.

By 1950, Auden was widely recognized as one of the two or three most important poets writing in English. Among his many other honors, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1948, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1954, and the National Book Award in 1956. The poetry of his later years is brief, highly symbolic, but still recognizably his own—the old concerns with society are there, but filtered through an intensely personal lens. During the 1950's and 1960's, Auden also produced a number of translations from many literatures, including works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Bertolt Brecht, St.-John Perse, and the young Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky.

## SPAIN 1937

**First published:** 1937

**Type of work:** Poem

*The Spanish Civil War signals the imminent collapse of the peacetime world—its art, learning, culture—and the ordinary lives of men and women.*

*Spain 1937* tells a story that is partly autobiographical. As a sympathizer with the socially progressive forces of the Spanish Loyalists, Auden had gone to Spain to participate in the war as a stretcher-bearer. Once there, he witnessed the viciousness of civil conflict, not only between the op-

posing armies but also among the Loyalists themselves. He returned to England embittered with politics, especially the European variety, and would soon leave to establish residence in the United States.

Yet the tone of *Spain 1937* is generally elegiac—sad and wistful. In the poem's first six stanzas, Auden recalls the often-glorious history of this peninsular country, surveying its ocean-borne exploration of the world, its expansion of global trade, and its building of cathedrals. In the more recent past, he notes the more obvious "advances" in Hispanic civilization, the engineering of machines and the building of railroads. At the same time, he does not ignore Spain's darker past, such as the "trial of heretics" during the Inquisition. The distant past of discovery and religious feud and more recent signs of progress are erased, however, by the coming conflict: "But today the struggle" overtakes Spain. In stanzas 9 through 11, Auden suggests the causes of war, or at least the condition of the country as war begins. He pictures Spain's impoverished citizens in their "fireless lodgings" as they read the evening news and realize that they have nothing left to lose. Emboldened by the promises of Marxism, the poor invest their hope in the action of history and the forces of change. In response, the forces of reaction, the "military empires," "descend" on the fledgling progressive nation.

Yet Auden avoids portraying the Spanish Civil War as a simple struggle of good against evil. He foretells that this particular conflict will symbolize a greater horror to come. In stanzas 12 through 14, "life" answers the combatants, saying that it is their servant and it will shape itself to fill their desires, whatever these may be. Auden personifies the common life of the Spanish nation—and by implication the nations of the world—as a "bar-companion," willing to go along with anything. According to the personified life, the peoples of Europe propose the building of the "just city" in Spain, a free and equal commonwealth. Life, however, knows that the proposal is based on illusion, a kind of "suicide pact" born of romanticism. Nevertheless, it accepts the people's decision.

Driven by this romantic vision, people from all over flock to the civil war. In Spain itself, they "migrate" to the struggle like birds; in Europe, they rush to war on express trains; others farther away

“float” over the oceans. All are drawn to Spain like moths to the flame, which Auden imagines as a giant “arid square” rather “crudely” slapped onto Europe. As people arrive to give their lives to the cause, to the ideology of Loyalist or Rebel, their bodies become the guarantees of their beliefs. Their emotions are now all channeled into warfare, and even their “moments of tenderness blossom/ As the ambulance and the sandbag.”

Mirroring the poem’s opening stanzas, the last seven stanzas also survey time—in this case, however, the future. Auden imagines the harmless, even slightly silly activities of humankind during peacetime: dog-breeding, bicycle races, or walks by the lake. This sort of “fun” is in desperate contrast to the present, where idealistic young people “explode like bombs” and pleasures are limited to badly rolled cigarettes and quick sex. The result is a debacle of which even the animals are ashamed: They look away from human evil. Meanwhile, the history that the poor hoped would redeem them may or may not turn in their favor. In any case, although history may lament those defeated in the war, it does not have God’s power to pardon the evil that people do.

### “AS I WALKED OUT ONE EVENING”

**First published:** 1940 (collected in *Another Time*, 1940)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Telling his story in a ballad, the poet overhears a lover’s song, which begins traditionally enough with vows of eternal fidelity but soon turns to stranger, less hopeful images.*

Most readers of “As I Walked out One Evening” will quickly notice something familiar about the rhythm of this poem: Auden has chosen to tell this apparently simple story in a simple, traditional poetic form, the ballad. The poem’s rhythm and the rhyme strongly echo folk songs, and, in fact, the work’s first line is a standard opening phrase in scores of variations on this old English and American love ballad. Yet right from the start, the poet suggests that this poem will not be as conventional

as one may think: As he takes his evening walk among the London crowds, the people seem like a field of wheat—a comparison not likely to be found in the ordinary folk song. In the poem’s second stanza, though, the image is once again typical: The poet overhears a lover singing under a railway arch and reproduces the song for us.

In stanza 3, the first stanza of the repeated song, the lover makes the age-old lover’s commitment: He (or perhaps she) will remain faithful for eternity, until the impossible comes to pass—“till China and Africa meet,” until “the ocean/ Is folded and hung up to dry.” Some of the images are whimsical and original; salmon “sing in the street” and the “seven stars go squawking/ like geese about the sky.” These curious figures suggest that this lover is not like the usual ballad singer; he seems to have a quirky imagination. In any case, he is unafraid of time because he holds “the first love of the world” in his arms throughout the ages. The lover’s song ends, and the poet hears the “whirring” of London’s clocks, replying to the lover’s grandiose claims about time. “You cannot conquer Time,” the clocks warn the lover. The clocks describe a sinister Time, one that lurks in shadows and nightmares and carries cruel justice.

In stanza 8, the clocks portray life as it is actually lived; life, they say, is “leaked away” in worry and “headaches.” Time’s chief purpose, they stress, is to banish life’s springtime pleasures, to disrupt the dance of love. It is better, they counsel, to “plunge your hands” in cold water and wake up to reality. The clocks, who know how time works better than the lover, say that the real image of eternity is the “glacier,” whose presence is always near, as near, in fact, as the kitchen cabinets, where it “knocks on the cupboard” door. Real life is grim, the clocks say, and love is, as often as not, merely sex. Love is not a fairy tale. In actual day-to-day existence, the fairy-tale hero, Jack, is actually attracted to the cruel giant, and Jill is nothing more than a prostitute. Take a look in the mirror, the clocks advise the lover, and understand life’s sadness.





Strangely, they say, “life remains a blessing,” nonetheless, even though human beings eventually find it difficult to bless their existence. True redemption comes from loving one’s disreputable neighbor, despite the neighbor’s flaws, because both the lover and the neighbor are equally “crooked,” equally wounded by time.

The last stanza is left to the poet to speak. By now it is very late, and the lovers have departed. Even the clocks have ceased their “chiming,” and he perhaps feels as though time itself has finally stopped. Yet even so, the river continues to run beside him, reminding him of the impersonal passage of the hours.

### “MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS”

**First published:** 1939, as “Palais des Beaux Arts” (collected in *Another Time*, 1940)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A painting by an old master of the fall of Icarus sparks an appraisal of its theme by the poet-viewer: These painters knew all about life, especially the role of human suffering.*

The much-anthologized “Musée des Beaux Arts,” whose main subject is a painting by Bruegel, is itself a small “portrait,” a tightly bound image of how people react to the suffering of others. The dramatic situation in the poem is easily imaginable: The poet is visiting an art gallery, the “musée” of the title, and has drawn to a halt in front of *Icarus* by the early Renaissance Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel (the Elder). The speaker has very likely just viewed a series of other paintings by old masters, in which traditional subjects, such as the Crucifixion or a saint’s martyrdom, are prominent. *Icarus*, however, gives him pause: After he has studied it for a while, one may imagine, he reveals his thoughts.

Although the painting’s theme is drawn from Greek mythology—the flight of Icarus too near the sun and his subsequent fall—the treatment is typical of Bruegel. This early modern painter delighted in the depiction of rural people in real-life settings; many of his works show peasants farming, going to market, or celebrating the harvest. Brue-

gel’s people are hardworking, not too pretty, and full of life. Renaissance painters, of course, devoted thousands of canvases to imagined scenes from Greek myths, like the one the Flemish artist has chosen for this picture. Ordinarily, however, a painter of this period would have placed Icarus in a restrained, “classical” setting, showing the noble tragedy implicit in the story. The myth relates how the inventor, Daedalus, and his son, Icarus, are imprisoned and escape using two sets of wings constructed by Daedalus of wax and feathers. Icarus, in his joy and pride, flies too near the sun, the wax melts, and he plunges into the sea. Thus, there is an irony implicit in Bruegel’s painting; this grand, classical theme is placed in a humble, contemporary setting. Moreover, as Icarus falls into the sea in the background, everyone else continues going about his or her business.

The speaker finds great truth in this contrast between high tragedy and everyday life. As he contemplates the painting, he concludes that the old masters, Renaissance painters such as Bruegel, had a profound knowledge of human experience. The central fact of that experience, the masters show, is life’s enormous variety: There are so many people in the world, feeling so many emotions and doing so many things, that moments of great significance pass by unnoticed. In another painting the speaker has seen, for example, the “aged” Magi “reverently, passionately [waiting] for the miraculous birth” of Christ. Yet at the very same time, children are playing nearby, oblivious to the impending Event. In another painting, a holy person is martyred in the foreground while a dog wanders in the background and a horse rubs against a tree.

Similarly, in *Icarus*, life continues while the young man drowns. The fall of Icarus takes place in the background—it is only one event in a very busy canvas. A peasant, for example, continues to plow his field, even though he may have heard Icarus’s faint cry. The people on a “delicate” ship think that they may have seen something amazing—a “boy falling out of the sky”—but they are not sure, and, in any case, they have to be on their way. The point of the painting is not that people are cruel or even particularly indifferent. Rather, Bruegel, the speaker says, wants to show how suffering and death, which is understandably center stage in the life of the people to whom these things happen, are really merely trivial episodes in the greater scope of

human existence. Is this how things must be? The speaker refrains from saying; his interest is not really in passing judgment on human conduct. Instead, he simply wishes to praise the unerring eye and wise judgment of masterful painters.

## THE SEA AND THE MIRROR

**First published:** 1944

**Type of work:** Poem

*The characters and situations from William Shakespeare's play The Tempest are used to cast a new light on this drama's themes.*

Beginning where Shakespeare's play ends, *The Sea and the Mirror* exploits the ironic vein implicit in the drama. In the Shakespearean work, the magician Prospero is about to leave his exile on an island in the New World. The old man and his daughter, Miranda, had been cast adrift by his brother, Antonio, and left to die. The castaways reach an island inhabited by Ariel, a fairylike spirit, and Caliban, who is half human, half brute. Years later, King Alonso of Naples and his followers, including Antonio, are shipwrecked by Prospero's magic. His son, Ferdinand, falls in love with Miranda, Caliban plots with other followers to assassinate Prospero, and various other subplots arise. Yet Prospero is reconciled to his brother in the end; Ferdinand and Miranda are married; Ariel, who has been held captive, is freed; and Caliban is left "ruler" of the island.

It is at this point that Auden's long poem commences. The work begins with the play's stage manager addressing unnamed "critics." The manager points out that, although there are reasonable, scientific explanations for many human motives, only art can truly mirror the mystery of life. He suggests in the last stanza of the preface that Shakespeare was a supreme master of this truth.

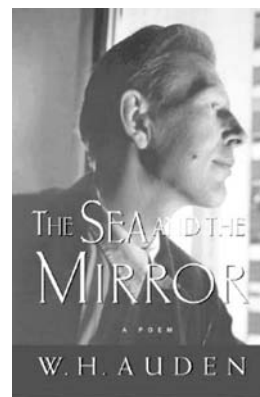
In the poem's second section, Prospero bids good-bye to his spirit-servant, Ariel. His learning and the arts of magic now seem futile to him as he prepares to leave his solitude. He knows that he will soon return to "earth"; death is near. The aged magician reveals himself as something of a cynic, but he is critical of no one more than himself. He even

forgives the treachery of Antonio. He realizes that his own treatment of Caliban and Ariel, holding them as spiritual slaves, is unforgivable. Still, his mood is thoughtful and even mellow. Although he is happy that he is too old to feel the extremes of romantic love, he can view the love between Miranda and Ferdinand with equanimity.

In the second section, several of the "supporting cast" from the play speak soliloquies, beginning with Antonio. As the ship carrying them moves out to sea, he notes how contented everyone is—the result, he claims, of Prospero's spell. Yet he remains embittered and resists his brother's enchantment. Ferdinand's speech is to Miranda, his bride. He emphasizes his joy and their oneness. In the final italicized stanza—a device that will be repeated at the end of all the speeches to come—Ferdinand asserts his individuality to Prospero while contrasting his own identity with Antonio's. Stephano, the drama's drunken butler, declares his allegiance to his "belly," to things of the flesh. He concludes that his "nature" is "inert," and, like Ferdinand, he cannot know Antonio's kind of solitude. Gonzalo, the king's honest counselor, analyzes his own failure to understand the passions of the other characters.

In his final stanza, he acknowledges that at least the power of the word, his "language," is "his own," even though he cannot understand the subtleties of Antonio's interior dialogue. King Alonso addresses his son, Ferdinand. He explains the pitfalls and complexities of rule. His individuality is in his worldly "empire." Two sailors, the Master and the Boatswain, then describe their lives at sea, their homesickness and their simultaneous need to explore. Sebastian and Trinculo, two relatively minor characters, deliver similar speeches. The last short monologue is Miranda's. Prospero's daughter rejoices in her love for Ferdinand and her departure from her father's enchanted island.

Part 3, the poem's longest section, is an address by Caliban to the drama's audience. In Shakespeare's play, Caliban is virtually subhuman; in the



world of this drama, he is clearly fitted to be a slave. Yet like many slaves, he revolts and tries to kill his master. Thus, the Shakespearan Caliban is crude, murderous, beastlike. In contrast, Auden's Caliban, as he reveals himself in this soliloquy, is erudite, subtle, even perhaps overly intellectual. He is also inexplicably modern; throughout his monologue are references to the twentieth century, such as fighter pilots or contemporary home furnishings. In fact, Caliban recalls Shakespeare's play as at once a distant part of his own life and a quaint, old-fashioned relic. Nevertheless, he draws the audience's attention to the parallels between his former situation and the modern world's grim conflicts; "whipping," slavery, and torture of the kind that he received at the hands of Prospero have not vanished. Instead, these things have become institutionalized and government sanctioned. Caliban's final message is grim: "There is nothing to say. There never has been."

The poem's final section, a postscript, is spoken by Ariel to Caliban. Now that Prospero, Miranda, and the other alien intruders have left their island, these two strange beings can reveal their true feelings. Ariel announces her love for Caliban and accepts him as he is; she loves him for his flaws, those same flaws that Prospero used as an excuse to en-

slave him. Now that the play's busy, complex characters are gone, presumably to continue with their mixed motives and subplots, Ariel and Caliban can return to a kind of motiveless paradise until their spirits are mixed in "one evaporating sigh."

### SUMMARY

W. H. Auden's work in many ways contradicts the Romantic view that a poem should be an emotional outpouring, a sincere expression of pure subjectivity. Instead, he said, poetry is a "game of knowledge," a clear-eyed way of approaching objective truth.

In his own poems, this truth often adopted a moral or social guise. "Poetry," Auden wrote, "is a way of extending our knowledge of good and evil." Many of his poems are intended to help men and women make good moral choices, even though the way by which the poems do this is not always clear. Nevertheless, the body of Auden's poetry is exemplary for its vivid and strongly felt social conscience. His work also is marked by his fine ear and his instinct for rhythm, structure, and sound. This seamless joining of intelligence and verbal music signals that Auden is one of the master craftsmen of modern poetry.

John Steven Childs

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Determine the characteristics of “anxiety” in the phrase W. H. Auden made famous in the title *The Age of Anxiety*.
- Are Auden’s strongly asserted political beliefs and his tendency to inwardness contradictory?
- Show how “As I Walked out One Evening” is not a traditional love poem.
- Why did Auden, much more a student of German culture, focus his attention on Spain at the time of its civil war?
- With respect to “Musée des Beaux Arts,” how would you answer the question: “Is this how things must be?”
- Explain whether *The Sea and the Mirror* is or is not an attempt to modernize William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623).

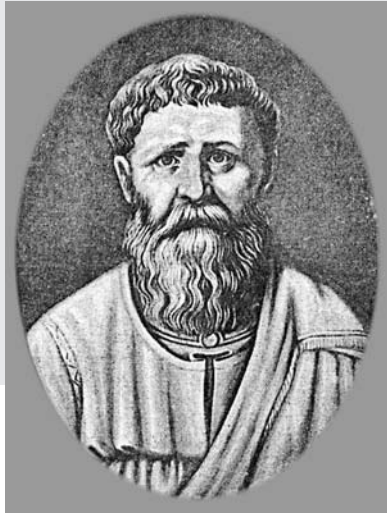
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## SAINT AUGUSTINE

**Born:** Thagaste, Numidia (now Souk Akras, Algeria)  
November 13, 354

**Died:** Hippo Regius, Numidia (now Bone, Algeria)  
August 28, 430

*Augustine was one of the Fathers of the Church whose writings played an important role in explaining and developing the concepts of Western Christianity.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Saint Augustine's *Confessiones* (397-400; *Confessions*, 1620) describe his life to 387, the year he converted to Christianity. Born in a North African province of the Roman Empire, his name in Latin was Aurelius Augustinus. His father, Patricius, a farmer, local official, and a pagan, later converted to Christianity. His mother, Monica, a devout Christian, who was canonized a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, prayed and struggled for her son's conversion. She raised him as a Christian, but following the church practice of the day he was not baptized until adulthood. Augustine began his education in Thagaste, Numidia (now Souk Akras, Algeria), and when he was eleven or twelve, his parents sent him to school in nearby Madauros (now near Mdaourouch, Algeria).

In Madauros, Augustine studied classical languages and literature, as well as music, mathematics, and natural sciences. He rapidly gained eloquence in his native Latin, as well as Punic, a dialect of the ancient Phoenicians. The Roman poet Vergil made a lasting mark on his thought and expression. His immersion, both inside and outside the classroom, into pagan myth and literature, with all its moral and religious ambiguities, caused him to set aside his Christian upbringing, for a while becoming a pagan. He sought pleasure in lust, mischief, and notoriety for his indiscretions.

When Augustine returned to Thagaste in 370, his father Patricius wanted him to pursue rheto-

ric—public speaking, the art of writing effective prose, and the study of grammar and logic. His father sent him to the great city of Carthage, near present-day Tunis, Tunisia, to complete his training to become a teacher. A businessman, Romanianus, assisted Patricius in financing Augustine's education in Carthage. At this time, Augustine met a Catholic woman who bore his child, Adeodatus, in 373; he lived with his son and common-law wife for nearly fourteen years.

In Carthage, Augustine studied rhetoric from 371 to 374. He adopted the teachings of Mani, a Persian who declared himself a prophet in 240. Mani taught a conflicting dualism of light and dark, good and evil, which was said to explain all facts, processes, and events. Augustine, trying to find an explanation for the problem of evil, thought Manicheanism a rational alternative to Christianity. Manicheanism accounted for evil by making God's power equal to the power of evil and by making God a material rather than a spiritual being. Augustine also was influenced in his quest for truth by reading Cicero, the Roman orator, statesman, and philosopher.

In 375, Augustine resumed teaching in Thagaste but the following year returned to Carthage. There, he started a school of rhetoric and renewed his association with the Manicheans, although doubting their teachings. In 382, he abandoned Manicheanism.

The next year, Augustine moved to Rome and later to Milan, where he became a professor of rhetoric. With much sorrow, he separated from his common-law wife. He studied the neo-Platonic phi-

losophers Plotinus and Porphyry. Eventually, he learned of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan who would later attain sainthood. Ambrose's writings and sermons, as well as the conversion accounts of others, moved Augustine to rediscover Christianity. In 387, on Easter eve, he and his son were baptized by Ambrose. In 388, Augustine and his son returned to Africa, though his son died later that year.

In Thagaste, Augustine founded a lay monastery, an effort that led to the Rule of Augustine, the basis of several Augustinian religious orders. While visiting the neighboring port city of Hippo, he was called upon by its Catholics to be their priest, but he felt unworthy. He was ordained in 391 and consecrated a bishop in 395. As bishop of Hippo, Augustine defend Christianity from heresy and schism for forty years, formalizing fundamental Church doctrines. His comprehensive and detailed explanation of Christianity—the Gospel of faith, hope, and love—was unparalleled in his time. His constant and courageous actions on behalf of the Church earned him immense influence. He died in Hippo in 430, during a siege by Vandal armies.

Augustine was considered a saint by popular recognition before he was formally canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, instituted between 1000 and 1200. Within a year of his death, he was honored as a teacher by Pope Celestine I, the first of many popes to confer solemn tribute upon him. In 1298, he was proclaimed a doctor of the church, and his feast day is August 28.

## ANALYSIS

Saint Augustine belongs to a group of ecclesiastical writers from the Patristic Age, called Fathers of the Church, who wrote from the end of the first century to the close of the eighth century C.E. Augustine's writings involve many spiritual and intellectual subjects and are written in many different forms; no one work conveys all of his views. His writings are theocentric or God-centered, often focusing on God's relation to human beings. For example, in accordance with Genesis 1:26, he asserts that each human being is made in the image of God; each person's equality, freedom, and dignity are bestowed by God and are thus inalienable.

Augustine assumes the existence of God as self-evident because it cannot be proven rationally. Life

holds more than what can be shown with absolute certainty. Knowledge of God derives from faith, which, in turn, seeks understanding. Augustine declares that God is omnipotent and has the ability to do anything: God created all things out of nothing and is beyond all things. God exists from all eternity and is infinite. God, then, is outside the scope of all categories of thought, logic, language, number, or perception. In addition, God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-holy, and all-worthy of full love, adoration, and obedience. God is also provident, guiding the course of history and the course of each individual's life.

The subject of God—a boundless, supernatural mystery—cannot even be glimpsed by the mind without the assent of the will and the heart and without the assistance of God's grace. Faith needs divine authority—the disclosure of Christ found in scripture as illuminated by the Holy Spirit. The vision of truth also requires the humility to learn and the diligence to strive and pray in the face of pain and sorrow. Humble faith attains what presumptuous knowledge cannot. One must possess the love that seeks, that reveals, and that brings confidence in what is revealed.

Augustine describes phases in the soul's enlightenment, echoing 1 Corinthians 13:12 and 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4. The soul will rise from knowledge obtained through the senses, to knowledge obtained through imagination, and to knowledge obtained through spiritual, intelligent intuition, a vision of the immaterial realm of God. The human mind can construct indirect analogies of this realm but cannot understand it by using temporal categories of time, space, and matter. The simplicity of God and the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are transcendent spiritual qualities. God's inner light allows the soul to recognize those qualities. The soul will know what it is seeing, and the knowing will transform the soul. As Augustine indicates in *Confessions*, the soul is the place for dialogue with God, where God's illumination occurs. He anticipates modern philosophers by making the inner life—the capacity to think, doubt, and believe—the starting point for knowledge.

Augustine writes that human beings cannot understand themselves other than through their relationship to God. They are a force directed toward God and will never find fulfillment until they turn to God. Although they have free will, human be-

ings depend upon God, at once eternal and active. In *Confessions*, Augustine demonstrates these concepts through his own experience; in *De civitate Dei* (413-427; *The City of God*, 1610), he demonstrates these ideas through human history.

## CONFESSIONS

**First published:** *Confessiones*, 397-400  
(English translation, 1620)

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*Using literary devices in new ways, Augustine describes how the experiences of his own life led to the assured and transformative love of God.*

Augustine wrote *Confessions* when he was in his mid-forties, after he had joined the Church. He writes openly about his experiences, undaunted by those who, remembering his past life, would challenge the sincerity of his convictions. He traces how the power of God's word can give victory over sin, closely following St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*.

In titling his book *Confessions*, which he intends to be plural, Augustine drew upon Latin words signifying more than the word "confession." For him, confession means the admission or confession of sin; the profession, demonstration, or conviction of faith; and the praise of God. It also implies the sense of agreement that results when the believer accepts what the Bible says about sin and salvation. Augustine's book registers confession, testimony, or witness in all of these ways.

In composing his *Confessions*, Augustine drew upon Roman and Greek literary forms, including the meditation, a personal and philosophical or spiritual reflection and self-examination, in the manner of the meditation written by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Augustine also drew upon the dialogues of the Greek philosopher Plato and the Roman dialogues of Cicero.

In addition, Augustine includes qualities of prayer as a direct expression of an individual's heart and mind to God, like David in the Psalms and Christ in the Gospels. He imparts a sense of spontaneous utterance or unstudied outpouring, moving from topic to topic and implying qualities of cross-examination. He depicts faith seeking un-

derstanding, with each having its own role, in harmony with the other. Augustine's address to God proclaims how his confusion and despair were altered into the very means by which he is to see himself clearly for the first time before God and how God's providence protected him.

Augustine puts readers in the position of hearing a soliloquy, a word he may have invented; it involves preestablished terms of conflict regarding characters and events associated with other times and places. Readers participate with Augustine in his questioning, there being no knowledge without it.

Moreover, in *Confessions* Augustine combines features of prose and verse. He uses poetic devices—simile, metaphor, rhythm, and literary vocabulary—to convey concentrated imaginative experience. Still, he writes with a quality of realism, of fidelity to fact, in a style close to everyday speech, as in a letter to a friend—in this instance, to God. As a prose poem, *Confessions* conveys a multitude of meanings, its language permeated by the language of the Bible.

Augustine's blend of literary forms, patterns of thought, feeling, and action, paganism and Christianity, resulted in a new literary category: the spiritual autobiography, an account of the individual's relation to God and how God's word, through Jesus Christ, becomes a living actuality in a believer's heart and mind. *Confessions* declared the importance of the individual soul and its relation to God. In addition, Augustine's book, the first ancient autobiography, includes the first detailed account of childhood. It also is one of the great documents in the study of memory and imagination.

Books 1 and 2 of *Confessions* concern Augustine's life prior to his arrival in Carthage. He describes his infancy and the recurring question of beginnings, his fascination with language, his boyhood, and his conflicting attitudes toward Christian and pagan wisdom and truth. He also describes his school days at Thagaste and Madauros,





his adolescence, friendships, faults, and chaotic in-direction.

Books 3, 4, and 5 recount his life in Carthage, his brief stay in Thagaste, his return to Carthage, and his years in Rome and Milan. While pursuing worldly ends, he leads the life of a seeker of truth, hoping to grasp it with the force of reason alone, endlessly curious. He studies theological and philosophical aspects of human free will and sin and ways in which the physical order of nature, the science of his day, reveals the spiritual order of God. Although the teachings of Plato and his contemporary followers, the neo-Platonists, have a strong impact on him, he is ultimately inspired by Ambrose's sermons to reconsider Christianity.

Books 6, 7, 8, and 9 focus on Augustine's life in Milan, his career goals, and his conflicts with physical desire. He struggles to understand how God, a spiritual entity who, while absolutely good, allows the existence of evil. He decides that evil has its origins in the weak will of human beings, owing to the Fall of Adam and Eve, which corrupted human ability to know or to will the good. He contemplates the necessity of divine grace through Christ as mediator between God and humankind. He feels his accumulating experience preparing him to understand how all things are from God, and, if not perverted by evil, will return to God. In July or August, 386, while in grief and agony, he hears a child's voice telling him to read scripture. At first he thinks he overhears children at play but concludes the command is divinely inspired and meant for him. He opens the Bible and reads the first words his eyes fall upon, Romans 13:13, and then a friend asks him to read the next verse. The light of conversion and conviction fills his soul, revealing the untold horizons of God. Later, through baptism, Augustine "puts . . . on the Lord Jesus Christ." He prepares to return to Africa. His mother, who has joined him in Milan, dies. He retells her life story and recounts their last conversation. His autobiography ends, having shown God's power and concern for him and for others.

In book 10, Augustine inquires into the nature of memory and self-awareness. He studies how the mind can transcend the sequence of time—past, present, and future—and how it can move in and out of these states in any order as desired, and thereby find evidence of God.

In books 11, 12, 13, Augustine explores the

meaning of time, creation, and Genesis 1. He explains the simultaneous emergence of space, time, and matter; God's words bring immediate fulfillment, as well as sequential or interactive, cumulative development. God sustains creation as it embodies change, and though God himself remains changeless, creation moves toward its appointed end, as Augustine elaborates in *The City of God*. Augustine records his experiences in *Confessions* to help others find the path toward God and reach the goal, or at least find consolation, and readers for centuries have found both Christian faith and comfort in his book.

## THE CITY OF GOD

**First published:** *De civitate Dei*, 413-427  
(English translation, 1610)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Initially countering the pagan explanation for the decline of Rome, Augustine describes the drama of God's plan of salvation, the struggle of all people throughout history.*

Augustine's *The City of God*, its title deriving from Psalms, as in 46:4 and 87:3, depicts a Christian world order guided by God's providence, as presented in the Bible. The Visigoth sacking of Rome on August 24, 410, one of the increasing number of attacks upon the Roman Empire, prompted many citizens, Christian and pagan, to account for these events. Augustine, now bishop of Hippo, was asked to explain. While the Roman Empire worshiped pagan gods, the empire grew to dominate the world; now, almost one hundred years after Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion in 312, the empire is failing.

In books 1 through 9, Augustine examines Roman polytheism. He indicates, for example, that Rome had suffered defeats long before the Christian era and had endured catastrophe. Pagan deities provided no protection then, even though Rome was believed to be partners with these gods. At one time, Romans demonstrated great human virtues, and God's providence allowed Rome to prosper, but its reward extended to the earthly realm and is subject to change. Moreover, Rome's

transition from a republic to an empire resulted in declining moral standards and few checks upon its government. Emperors, assuming sacred status, undertook any manner of activity; even a Christian emperor could not dedicate the empire to Christ. That Rome attained an empire beyond its control resulted more from continual warfare and the quest for glory and renown than it did from the effort to improve the lives of its citizens. In addition, pagan deities, having their own areas of responsibility, could bring no stability or lasting happiness; they could only provide gratifications of the moment, empty gestures toward the unknown. Some of these pagan deities included local gods from the nations Rome had conquered, and the resulting mix of deities defied each others' morality and rationality.

Augustine explains that pagan deities, evil spirits, fallen angels, or mere glorified humans represented an attempt to imitate God. The once-official paganism of imperial Rome signified dangers. Roman emperors, along with their subjects, wanted flattery and comfort, not facts. As a whole, Romans did not understand that the coming of Christ marked the purpose toward which all creation draws. The Roman Empire could be a means of God calling all people—Romans, as well as Hebrews, Greeks, and barbarians—to Christ, whose kingdom, not of this world, demanded prior allegiance.

Augustine also indicates that worldly life affords no protection from evil, sorrow, and death. Still, adversity can hold treasures; what the world calls downfall and disaster often prove to be a blessing. God can bring good out of evil, though the loss is real.

In books 10 through 14, Augustine develops the Christian scheme of cosmic history and contrasts it with the alternative. He draws upon the account in Genesis of the Fall of Adam and Eve and the doctrine of Original Sin and Redemption. All human beings share in the sin of Adam and Eve and suffer the consequences: exile, pain, struggle, and death. Christ, however, triumphed when human beings were defenseless and brought salvation. Human beings are thus dependent upon divine grace; humankind's merits are God's gifts.

The Fall and the deeds of Christ gave rise to two cities: the Celestial City or the City of God, and the city of this world—the Earthly City or the city of the

devil. Augustine uses the word "city" figuratively, referring to people of all times and places who do or do not love God as manifested in Christ. The conflict between these two cities is universal, which puts the situation in fifth century Rome within the context of eternity. The two cities offer opposing choices of the will, as with the fallen angels who sought to defy God. The love of God draws human beings outside and beyond themselves, upward toward eternal life; the love of the things of this world draws human beings inward and downward toward death.

Human beings define themselves through their commitments, and their commitments, as social beings, produce two distinctive cultures—one of God and the other of the devil. One culture lives by God's word; the unselfish love of God and of other people in God unites this culture. The other culture lives in contempt of God's word; selfish love, although self-defeating, unites this culture. The state or government reflects these contrasting commitments. Government can and should bring ideals of justice and peace into a sinful world, although life will seem to reward the wicked and punish the good.

Books 15 through 18 trace the temporal destinies of the two cities, their achievements, and how they intermingle and coexist. Augustine describes human life as a pilgrimage from the Earthly City to the Celestial City, a version of the theme of exile, wandering, and banishment. The faithful, exiled through the Fall of Adam and Eve from their true home with God, struggle to return. Spiritual priorities, driven by attachment to the goods of the Celestial City, must predominate over attachment to the goods of the Earthly City. Although living in both cities, the faithful must maintain a certain detachment from the Earthly City. If they persist, they will perceive the higher order of God and eventually enter the Celestial City; nothing can separate them from God's love. The saved, chosen from the City of God as it existed throughout time, are known to God only. Others, bound by the limits of the Earthly City, where all things end, will find no fulfillment; they duplicate the sin of the devil, rejecting God.

Books 19 through 22 describe the final destiny of the two cities and Christian teachings about death, judgment, heaven, and hell. At the end of the world, God will identify those who belong to



the City of God and those who belong to the city of the devil. Their respective inhabitants will include both angels and the souls of human beings whose fates will be sealed eternally. Justice will reach from the deepest past to the farthest future. Christ will fulfill the purpose of creation—life in the City of God.

### SUMMARY

Both Catholic and Protestant leaders have regarded Saint Augustine as an originator of the doctrinal traditions of Western Christianity. He put the Church on a spiritual footing that enabled it to survive the fall of the Roman Empire and to endure through the ages. In addition, the explanatory power of his philosophical, historical, and literary writings has had immeasurable consequences. For example, he developed a developed a literary tradition that includes such poets as Dante, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Milton.

Timothy C. Miller

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Saint Augustine describe God's word as a living actuality in the hearts and minds of believers?
- What do Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* indicate about the overall situation of human beings and their particular situations?
- How might those two works be explained as a process of vision—of spiritual, intellectual, and intuitive seeing?
- For Augustine, how does God speak in the events of history and in the personal lives of believers?
- How does Augustine provide multiple perspectives on human life, and how does he set it in the widest of all contexts?
- Describe Augustine's treatment of the theme of exile, of life as pilgrimage.

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## JANE AUSTEN

**Born:** Steventon, Hampshire, England  
December 16, 1775

**Died:** Winchester, Hampshire, England  
July 18, 1817

*One of English literature's greatest writers, Austen captures the subtleties of human nature and social interaction with satiric wit and a precise, elegant style.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jane Austen (OWS-tuhn) was born on December 16, 1775, in the tiny village of Steventon, where her father, the Reverend George Austen, served as the town rector. Her mother, Cassandra Leigh Austen, was herself the daughter of a rector, and Jane was the seventh of the couple's eight children. An older brother, George, suffered from epilepsy and did not live with the family, and the couple's third son, Edward, was adopted by wealthy, childless relatives who took a strong interest in the boy throughout his childhood. The remaining six children, however, lived with their parents in the plain, comfortable village rectory.

George Austen was a scholarly man, and the household included a large library, from which Jane read extensively throughout her life. Much of the children's education took place under their father's tutelage, with two of Jane's brothers, James and Henry, both of whom attended the University of Oxford, assisting their father with the younger children's periods of schooling at home. Jane and her sister Cassandra received several years of formal education, first at private schools in Oxford and Southampton and later at the Abbey School in Reading.

The Austens were a lively, close-knit family. Literature was a shared family interest, and evenings in the rectory were often spent discussing works by the leading novelists of the day. Among Jane's favorite authors were Henry Fielding, Samuel Rich-

ardson, and Fanny Burney, and references to their work appear in both her letters and her own novels. Amateur theatricals were also a much-loved family pastime, and friends and neighbors were frequently recruited to participate in plays staged in the rectory barn. This interest, too, later found its way into Austen's work, most notably in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Indeed, family life itself is a frequent theme in Austen's work, and her heroines' relationships with parents and siblings are as fully developed as the romantic alliances on which their stories turn.

Jane's closest ties within her family were to her adored older sister, Cassandra. Three years apart in age and the only girls among the eight children, the two were close companions from childhood onward. Although Cassandra was engaged once, to a young man who died of yellow fever, and Jane entered into several brief romantic attachments, neither sister married, and the two lived together with their mother until Jane's death in 1817. Many of Austen's wittiest, most informal—and therefore most revealing—letters were written to Cassandra during their occasional separations, and it was Cassandra who most often had early glimpses of Jane's novels in progress. A less fortuitous result of the sisters' close bond, however, was Cassandra's decision following Jane's death to edit or destroy any of her sister's letters and papers that she feared might cast Jane in an unfavorable light. For Austen scholars, Cassandra's loyalty has been a source of much speculation and regret.

In 1801, George Austen retired as rector of Steventon and moved with his wife and two daugh-

ters to Bath, where he died in 1805. The family's years in this city were difficult ones; in addition to Mr. Austen's death, Mrs. Austen suffered a serious illness, and Jane herself is thought to have begun a romance with a man who died soon afterward. Following her husband's death, Mrs. Austen moved with her daughters to Southampton. In 1809, Jane's brother Edward, who had inherited the estates of the wealthy relatives who had adopted him years before, offered his mother and sisters a permanent residence at one of his properties, a house in the village of Chawton. It was there that Jane Austen would live until her death, from what is believed to have been Addison's disease, at the age of forty-one.

Austen's writing life is less easily chronicled. Inspired by her own love of reading, Austen began writing at the age of twelve. Now termed "the Juvenilia" by Austen scholars, three volumes of her early writings, dated between 1787 and 1793, remain in existence. Her first mature work, an epistolary novella titled *Lady Susan*, was written in 1794 or 1795 and published in 1871. Around that same time, she also began work on a second novel of letters, "Elinor and Marianne" (completed between 1795 and 1797), which she would rewrite two years later as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Between the two versions, Austen wrote a third epistolary novel, "First Impressions," which would later become *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). In 1798 or 1799, following the initial rewriting of "Elinor and Marianne," Austen began work on "Susan," which would later be retitled and published as *Northanger Abbey* (1818), her satire on gothic novels. Because of the frequent lapses in time between each novel's earliest drafts, completion, and eventual publication, the publication dates of Austen's work are no indication of when the books were actually written.

In 1803, two years after the move to Bath, "Susan" was sold to the publishers Crosby and Company for ten pounds. The book was never published, however, and Austen bought it back for the same amount six years later. Austen also began *The Watsons* (1871, fragment) in 1803, a novel she put aside and did not resume after her father's death two years later. In the difficult years following her father's death, Austen appears to have abandoned her writing entirely, resuming it only after 1809, when the family was at last settled at Chawton, where she embarked on a period of tremendous productivity.

Austen devoted the years between 1809 and 1811 to *Sense and Sensibility*, and in 1811 the book became her first published work. That same year, she began work on *Mansfield Park*, which continued throughout the next two years. The following year, 1812, Austen began extensive revisions on "First Impressions," abandoning its epistolary form for that of a traditional novel. The book was published in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*. *Mansfield Park* appeared the following year, shortly after Austen began work on *Emma*, which was published in 1815. Over the next two years, Austen wrote *Persuasion* (1818) and began work on *Sandition* (1925, fragment), which remained unfinished at the time of her death on July 18, 1817, in Winchester, England. Both *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously in 1818.

## ANALYSIS

In a letter written to her nephew several months before her death, Austen referred to her writing as "the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush," a description of her work that conveys its essence with remarkable precision. Austen is not a writer whose books are characterized by sweeping dramatic action unfolding against a vivid historical backdrop; nor are her novels treatises on social ills or controversial contemporary issues. Austen wrote instead about the world she knew—a world of country villages, of polite middle-class society, of family life, of love and courtship—and her books offer a portrait of life as it was lived by a small segment of English society at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

Yet so great is her talent and her insight into the complexities of human nature that the seeming simplicity of her books belies the universality of their perceptions. In turning her writer's gaze on the world around her, Austen reveals deeper truths that apply to the world at large. Her portraits of social interaction, while specific to a particular and very carefully delineated place and time, are nevertheless the result of timeless human characteristics. If one looks beneath the details of social manners and mores that abound in Austen's novels, what emerges is their author's clear-eyed grasp of the intricacies of human behavior.

What is also readily apparent is that human behavior was a source of great amusement to Austen.

Her novels are gentle satires, written with delicate irony and incisive wit. The famous opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* capture her style at its best: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Courtship and marriage are the subject of all six of Austen’s completed novels, and she treats the topic with a skillful balance of humor and seriousness. The elaborate social ritual of courtship and the amount of time and energy expended on it by the parties involved provide Austen with an ideal target for her satirical portraits. Dances, carriage rides, and country walks are the settings for the romances that unfold in her books, and the individual’s infinite capacity for misconceptions and self-delusions provide the books’ dramatic structure. Her heroes and heroines misjudge each other, misunderstand each other, and mistake charm for substance and reserve for lack of feeling with a determination that seems likely to undermine their chances for happiness—until at last they find their way through the emotional mazes they have built for themselves and emerge with the proper mate.

Yet while Austen is happy to amuse her readers with her characters’ foibles and missteps, she brings an underlying empathy to her creations as well. Her heroines are never figures of fun—that role is left to the stories’ supporting characters—but are instead intelligent, sensitive, amiable young women who are eminently likable despite the flaws they may exhibit. It is human nature in all its complexity that fascinates Austen, and she is capable of providing her novels with interesting, well-developed central characters who are believable precisely because they are flawed. Her amusement is not scorn but rather a tolerant awareness of the qualities, both good and bad, that constitute the human character. It is this awareness that lends Austen’s work its relevance and contributes to her stature in the hierarchy of English literature.

Also central to the high critical regard in which she is held is Austen’s extraordinarily eloquent and graceful literary style. Austen’s use of language is as sure and as precise as her character development; indeed, the two are inseparable. Whether she is depicting the selfish, greedy Mrs. John Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, who says of a proposed yearly allowance for her widowed mother-in-law, “people always live forever when there is any annuity to be paid them,” or characterizing Edmund Bertram’s

pursuit of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* with the observation, “She was of course only too good for him; but as nobody minds having what is too good for them, he was very steadily earnest in the pursuit of the blessing,” Austen sketches her characters and relates their stories with the elegance and wit that are the unmistakable hallmarks of her style.

Austen’s work offers ample proof that, in the hands of a gifted writer, stories of ordinary lives filled with everyday events can transcend their outward simplicity and capture the intricacies of human nature. Austen’s ironic portraits of the world she knew are both a revealing look at her own time and a perceptive examination of the workings of the human heart and mind.

## SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

**First published:** 1811

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two sisters, very different in nature, face obstacles as they find love.*

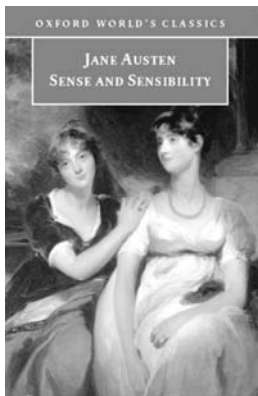
*Sense and Sensibility* is a novel that is best understood within the context of the era in which it was written. Austen lived in that period of English history when eighteenth century rationalism was giving way to the increasing popularity of nineteenth century romanticism, as typified by William Wordsworth and the Romantic poets. The open embrace and deliberate cultivation of sensibility—deep feelings and passionate emotions—were perhaps a natural reaction to the admiration of reserve and practicality that had typified the preceding decades.

Austen’s novel, her first published work, offers a portrait of two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who embody the two qualities set forth in the title. Elinor, the elder of the two, is intelligent, loving, and wise enough to see the potential folly in failing to temper emotion with good sense. Marianne, although sharing many of these qualities, lacks her sister’s wisdom; she is, as Austen describes her, “everything but prudent.”

Marianne’s insistence on giving her emotions free rein leads her into an unhappy romance with the fortune-hunting Willoughby when she mistakes his false expressions of sentiment for love. Al-

though Marianne's own excessive displays of emotion spring from genuine feeling, they blind her to the realization that less fervently expressed emotions may also be heartfelt and true. Waiting patiently throughout the book is the quiet, steadfast Colonel Brandon, a man of deep but reserved feelings who loves Marianne and whose true worth she comes to recognize only after she is forced by her failed romance with Willoughby to reassess her views.

Elinor remains her sister's mainstay throughout her unhappy first love, assisting her toward maturity with patience and tenderness. She, too, is in love, with her selfish sister-in-law's brother, Edward Ferrars. Both are restrained in their expressions of their feelings, Elinor out of modesty and a sense of propriety and Edward because he is secretly and unhappily engaged to another woman favored by his snobbish mother. Yet adherence to principles of rational thought and good sense does not prevent Elinor from suffering greatly when she believes that her hopes of marrying Edward are impossible. Their eventual union is as happy and full of emotion as that of any two people in love.



Although her own sympathies are perhaps most closely aligned with those of Elinor, Austen writes with affection for both sisters and her message is one of compromise. She is careful to show that a balance of both heart and intellect is necessary for a full life—a blending of sense and sensibility that both Elinor and Marianne possess by the novel's close.

## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

**First published:** 1813

**Type of work:** Novel

*A man and woman must reassess their first impressions of each other before they are able to find love.*

*Pride and Prejudice* is the best known of Austen's six novels and ranks among her finest work. As in *Sense and Sensibility*, its story centers on two sisters, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. Jane falls in love early in the book with the amiable, wealthy Charles Bingley. Bingley returns her sentiments but is temporarily persuaded to abandon the romance at the urging of his friend, Mr. Darcy, who does not detect love in Jane's discreet manner.

The book's true center, however, is the complex relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy. Both are intelligent and forthright, but their initial impressions blind them to the qualities in each other that will eventually form the basis for their love. Darcy is indeed proud and feels himself above the less refined country families in whose company he finds himself during his visit to Bingley. Elizabeth's mother, a vain, silly woman who is often a source of embarrassment to her daughter, is also an object of Darcy's scorn. When she overhears Darcy's assessment of her and her family, Elizabeth's own pride is wounded; she dismisses him as a proud, disagreeable man and is more than willing to believe the lies she is told about him by the charming, deceitful Wickham. For his part, Darcy's pride in his position and his family cause him at first to resist his attraction to Elizabeth and later to propose to her in a manner that she finds even more offensive than his initial hauteur.

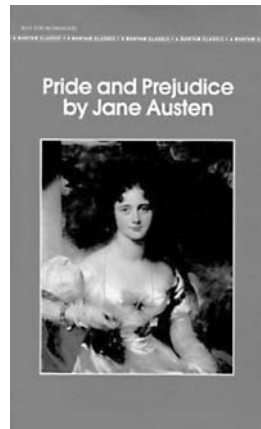
Yet as time passes and their interest in each other continues, both Elizabeth and Darcy begin to see beyond their original judgments of the other's personality and character. Both possess a measure of pride and prejudice that must be overcome before they will fully understand one another, and Elizabeth's younger sister, Lydia, is unintentionally a catalyst for the change. Foolish and headstrong, Lydia runs away with Wickham, and it is only through Darcy's intervention that the two are married and the Bennet family is saved from disgrace.



Elizabeth has already learned the truth behind Wickham's slander toward Darcy, and Darcy's willingness to help her family despite her own stinging refusal of his proposal offers her a glimpse of the true nature of his character. Darcy, too, has changed, losing some of the stiffness and pride that accompanied his wealth and social standing.

The substantial emotional shift experienced by Darcy and Elizabeth is indicated by Mr. Bennet's reaction to the news of Darcy's second proposal: "Lizzy," said he, "what are you doing? Are you out of your senses, to be accepting this man? Have you not always hated him?" Mr. Bennet's reaction is understandable, given the disdain with which Elizabeth had expressed her initial reaction to Darcy. What her father has not been witness to—and the reader has—is Austen's gradual revelation of the qualities that Darcy and Elizabeth share and the manner in which each has come to appreciate these qualities in the other.

That theirs is a meeting of the mind and heart is clear, and those qualities that at last draw them to each other and impel them to overcome their early misunderstandings will form the basis for a strong and happy marriage.



## MANSFIELD PARK

**First published:** 1814

**Type of work:** Novel

*A timid young girl living with wealthy relations falls in love with her cousin.*

There are several points that set *Mansfield Park* apart from the rest of Austen's work. Chief among them is Austen's depiction of her heroine, Fanny Price, a frail, quiet young woman who has none of the high spirits or wit of Elizabeth Bennet or Marianne Dashwood. Reared from the age of ten

among wealthy relatives, Fanny is an unobtrusive presence in the household at Mansfield Park, useful and agreeable to everyone and steadfast in her secret affection for her cousin, Edmund Bertram.

Fanny's manner contrasts sharply with the livelier, sometimes careless behavior of her cousins and their friends. Only Edmund spends time with the gentle Fanny, although his own affections have been captivated by the sophisticated Mary Crawford. With Fanny's uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, away on an extended stay in the West Indies, the cousins and their friends decide to put on an amateur theatrical production of a scandalous French play. Only Fanny refuses to participate, out of natural modesty and a certainty that her absent uncle would not approve. Sir Thomas returns unexpectedly and does not approve, much to his children's chagrin, but Fanny quickly falls from his favor when she refuses the proposal of Mary Crawford's brother, Henry, who had begun an unwelcome flirtation with her after Fanny's cousin Maria married another man.

Distressed by her uncle's disapproval, Fanny visits her parents and her eight brothers and sisters, only to discover that her years at Mansfield Park have left her unable to fit easily into her noisy, often vulgar family. She is summoned back by Sir Thomas when Maria leaves her husband for Henry Crawford and Maria's sister, Julia, elopes. Now fully appreciated by her uncle, Fanny comes into her own, winning the love of Edmund Bertram.

Because Austen's novels often adopt the tone of their heroines, *Mansfield Park* is a more somber, less satirical book than *Pride and Prejudice*. Fanny is a young woman who has been shaped by both her separation from her family and her awkward position as a poor relation in a wealthy household. Yet, it is her alienation from her cousins that has perhaps saved her from taking on their faults. They have been spoiled while she has been grateful; she has grown in sensitivity and moral strength while they have been indulged. In Austen's world, true worth is always recognized in the end, and Fanny's resistance to the more worldly pursuits of her cousins and their friends wins for her the love of her adored Edmund.

Fanny is also alone among Austen's heroines in her uncertainty as to her position in society. Catherine Moreland of *Northanger Abbey* may visit wealthy friends, but she enjoys a secure place in her



own family, as do the Dashwood and Bennet sisters and Emma Woodhouse of *Emma*. Only Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, unappreciated by her self-centered father and sister, somewhat approximates Fanny's experience. It is a situation that lends great poignancy to Fanny's experiences and one which Austen conveys with great feeling and perception.

*Mansfield Park* is perhaps the most controversial of Austen's novels. While some critics fault its author for abandoning the irony and elegant wit that characterize most of her work, others praise her for her willingness to undertake a variation on her usual themes. In Fanny Price, Austen has created a heroine who must engage the reader through her gentleness rather than her spirit, and Fanny does that with admirable success.

## EMMA

**First published:** 1815

**Type of work:** Novel

*A good-hearted but indulged young heiress misguidedly plays matchmaker for her friends.*

The forces that shape the dramatic action in *Emma* are described by Austen in the book's opening paragraphs; they are the qualities possessed by Emma Woodhouse herself. In this novel, Austen turns her satiric talents to a portrait of a wealthy young woman with "a disposition to think a little too well of herself," who has yet to acquire the sensitivity to realize that the emotional lives of her companions are not toys for her own amusement.

With an adoring, widowed father and an indulgent companion, Emma has reached early adulthood secure in the belief that she knows what is best for those around her. When her companion marries, Emma replaces her with Harriet Smith, an impressionable young girl from a local school, and quickly decides that the girl's fiancé, a farmer, is beneath her. Persuading Harriet to break off the engagement, despite the misgivings of Emma's admiring friend, Mr. Knightley, Emma sets in motion a chain of romantic misunderstandings that will come close to ruining Harriet's chances for happiness. After playing with the romantic futures of several of her acquaintances, Emma at last recognizes

the dangers of her interference and realizes that her own chance for happiness has existed within her grasp for some time in the person of Mr. Knightley.

*Emma* is one of Austen's best novels, with some critics holding it in higher regard than *Pride and Prejudice*. In Emma Woodhouse, Austen has created one of her most memorable heroines, a willful, headstrong, yet fundamentally well-intentioned young woman whose intelligence and energy need the tempering of experience before she can be judged truly mature. She gains this experience through her relationship with Harriet when her manipulations backfire and she finds that Harriet believes herself to be in love with Mr. Knightley. With the force of a revelation, the truth of what she has done comes to Emma, along with the realization that she loves Knightley herself. As Austen writes, "Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes." Seeing herself and her actions clearly for the first time, Emma is forced into difficult but necessary self-doubt and self-examination, a new but ultimately valuable experience for a young woman who has never before had cause to doubt her own judgment.

That Emma will learn from her mistakes is clear, and her happiness with Knightley, who has known and admired her since childhood, seems assured. *Emma* is Austen's commentary on how little anyone knows about the workings of another's heart and affections, and her heroine's painful lesson is evidence of her creator's wisdom.

## SUMMARY

Although she completed only six novels, Jane Austen has retained a position of great critical acclaim among English novelists. A writer of great wit and elegance of style, she depicts her characters' strengths and weaknesses with tolerance and sympathy.

Finding, as she once noted in a letter to her niece, that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on," Austen examines the world she knows with delicate irony and wry humor, revealing in the process a grasp of the subtleties of human nature that transcends her books' deceptively ordinary settings and events.

Janet Lorenz

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain how Jane Austen, working in a narrow social range and with limited experience of the world, could succeed so brilliantly as a novelist.
- Distinguish the main characteristics of her novels that differentiate them from the eighteenth century novels that made up a great deal of her literary background.
- How does Austen help her readers to become better readers?
- In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor develops sympathy for the incorrigible Willoughby. Determine whether or not that is a flaw in Elinor's personality.
- *Pride and Prejudice* begins with Mr. Bennet's problem of finding suitors for his five daughters. Explain Austen's avoidance of making his problem the theme of the novel.
- How does one explain the popularity of Austen's novels with filmmakers?

## ISAAC BABEL

**Born:** Odessa, Ukraine, Russian Empire (now in Ukraine)

July 13, 1894

**Died:** Butyrka prison, Moscow, Soviet Union (now in Russia)

January 27, 1940

*Using simple, colloquial language, Babel captured a vision of two worlds—the Cossacks and the gangsters of Odessa—which would not long survive the Soviet regime.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Isaac Emmanuelovich Babel (BA-byihl) was born in the Moldavanka, the Jewish quarter of Odessa, then a part of the Russian Empire, on July 13, 1894. His parents Emmanuel and Fanya Babel were firmly middle class and not entirely comfortable with this lively cosmopolitan city full of foreigners and colorful gangsters. As a result, they moved to Nikolaev, about eighty miles up the coast, shortly after Isaac's birth. Ever the compulsive mythologizer, Babel would later conveniently forget this detail of his upbringing, just as he brushed over his father's prosperous agricultural machinery business and depicted him as a simple shopkeeper. To be fair to Babel, however, he was writing in the Soviet Union at a time when it was often expedient to soft-pedal bourgeois origins and emphasize one's closeness with the working people.

In any case, his family's modest wealth could not insulate them from the fact they were Jews in a virulently anti-Semitic society, where pogroms, or riots, broke out with alarming regularity. His granduncle was murdered during the pogrom of 1905, and Babel had to watch his own father kneel in supplication to a Cossack officer. However, that act of self-abasement did not spare the family business from a mob of looters or consequent financial ruin. Upon the family's return to Odessa in 1906, Isaac himself had to struggle to be admitted to the Russian-language commercial school, since the regular Russian-language high schools had a harsh quota limiting the number of Jewish students they would admit.

At this time, Babel's literary interests began to

flower, but not in the way one might have expected for a young man of his background. He had little interest in either Hebrew or Yiddish literature, instead preferring the great Russian writers of the era, including Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov. He also developed a strong interest in Western literature, particularly French writers such as Guy du Maupassant and François Rabelais. In these authors, Babel found a vision and power in marked contrast to the resignation and frequent self-pity of his coreligionists' writings.

His literary yearnings led him to the imperial capital, St. Petersburg, where he lived in defiance of restrictions against Jewish settlement. Although this course of action exposed him to considerable hardship, it also put him in contact with writer Maxim Gorky, who enabled Babel to get his first stories published in 1917. The stories proved controversial enough to get Babel indicted for obscenity by the imperial government. However, the government was overthrown in the Russian Revolution, and as a result Babel was never tried for these charges.

Babel served in the army under the provisional government, and when the Bolsheviks took over he flung himself into work on behalf of the new government. He was attached to the *konarmia*, or "mounted army," under Semyon Budyonny, the semilegendary Cossack fighter who would become a marshal of the Soviet Union. For a Jew to ride among Cossacks was somewhat akin to a fox running with hounds or a mouse playing with cats, so Babel adopted the revolutionary pseudonym of Kiril Lyutov to enable him to work as a war correspondent for the army newspaper, *Krasny Kav-*

alierist (Red Horseman), during the Russian Civil War and the subsequent war with Poland.

After the war, Babel spent a few years sorting out his experiences and finding the proper voice in which to put them down on paper. In 1923, he published his first sketches of events in the Polish campaign, which would later become the collection *Konarmia* (1926; *Red Cavalry*, 1929). His frank portrayals of violence and cruelty earned him the enmity of Budyonny, who considered Babel to have libeled the troops.

The success of *Red Cavalry* emboldened him to follow it up with another book, *Odesskie rasskazy* (1931; *Tales of Odessa*, 1955), a collection of stories about his early life in that city's Jewish community. However, things were rapidly changing in the Soviet Union. The heady days of Vladimir Ilich Lenin's new economic policy were coming to a close. Lenin's death was followed by a quick and brutal power struggle, which brought Joseph Stalin to the forefront. Stalin progressively crushed all dissent and every breath of individuality in the arts.

In response, Babel almost ceased to publish altogether, and in 1934 he delivered a speech to the Writers' Congress, the trade union to which all writers in the Soviet Union were required to belong, in which he talked about developing a "genre of silence." He was permitted to travel abroad, where he experimented with writing in French, but as soon as he returned to the Soviet Union and the growing atmosphere of terror, his inspiration ran dry.

Babel also began to develop dangerous friendships. His marriage had failed, and he had an affair with Yevgenia Gladun, later to become the wife of Nikolai Yezhov, an up-and-coming member of the Soviet secret police, the Cheka or NKVD. He developed a working relationship with Genrikh Yagoda, the NKVD chief who became the first executor of Stalin's Great Terror, and wrote a fictionalized history of the Soviet secret police. After Yagoda was removed from his position for having been inadequately enthusiastic in pursuing Stalin's enemies and replaced by Nikolai Yezhov, Babel maintained his friendship with the Yezhavs. Even when it became obvious that Yezhov was losing Stalin's favor, Babel continued to visit.

In 1939, Yezhov was arrested, and not long afterward Babel received his own knock on the door. His manuscripts were confiscated, and many of

them vanished forever, very likely destroyed by the secret police when they proved of no use in implicating further victims. Babel was held at secret police headquarters for some time before he was shot on the morning of January 27, 1940. Only after Stalin's death and subsequent denunciation by Nikita S. Khrushchev could Babel's writings once again be discussed freely in the Soviet Union, but even then the truth about his death was hidden by layers of secret police obfuscation. The true story of Babel's last days and death did not emerge until Mikhail Gorbachev's program of glasnost in the 1980's and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union.

### ANALYSIS

The famed Victorian English dandy and writer Oscar Wilde once said of his writing that he had spent an entire morning taking a comma out and the afternoon putting it back in. Isaac Babel showed much of the same meticulousness in his writing. Each of his sketches was a tiny work of brilliance, agonized over for days in order to produce a perfect image that would burn in the reader's mind. He once showed an interviewer a thick sheaf of paper which proved to be no fewer than twenty drafts of one of his stories, "Liubka Kazak" ("Lyubka the Cossack").

Babel's prose was far removed from any sort of Victorian ornateness. He preferred to employ a spare, even severe language that eschewed any excess. There was no room for extended description or explanation in his stories. Instead, Babel preferred to rely upon sharp, well-chosen images of the story's events in order to develop his characters' relationships and actions. As a result, the events and characters of his stories have considerable power to remain in a reader's mind long after the story is finished and the book is returned to the shelf. One cannot quickly forget the Cossack commander Savitsky or the Jewish gangster Benya Krik, men fairly bursting with energy, ready and willing to take what they want.

Babel's approach to the literary portrayal of violence has been one of the most controversial aspects of his writing. Unlike his prerevolutionary predecessors, Babel was unsparing in his portrayal of the darker side of human nature, particularly in the war-torn Poland of *Red Cavalry* but also among the seamy underside of Odessa. He dared to show these places in all their gritty reality, depicting

rape, torture, and murder in a carefully chosen and spare prose that captures the lolling of a corpse's head as skillfully as it describes the light slanting down on the sacred art of a church located just behind the battle lines.

However, realistic portrayals of violence were not the only characteristic of Babel's writing that set him apart from previous authors and made him part of a new literary movement. He was also fascinated with the speech of the ordinary people, and he used rough colloquial language not only in the characters' dialogue but also in the narrative, capturing the distinct nature of his characters' points of view. Although this technique, known as *skaz* from the Russian word *skazit'*, meaning "to say," could easily have become an excuse for carelessness in a lesser writer, Babel adopted it with a sure and poetic mastery of tone. The reader can tell that Babel himself is quite aware of the strictures of standard literary Russian and is departing from them as a deliberate artistic choice, in a controlled fashion, to bring the reader closer to the ordinary people and the manner in which they actually speak.

## RED CAVALRY

**First published:** *Konarmia*, 1926 (English translation, 1929)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Babel depicts the battles between the Russian revolutionaries and the Poles with a raw energy and vividness.*

*Red Cavalry* (or *Konarmia* in Russian) is a collection of short stories firmly planted in the birth trauma of the Soviet Union. To the Russian reader of the 1920's, *Red Cavalry* had the sound of the new language of the new regime. The very word *konarmia* was a coinage of the Russian Civil War, a joining of the Russian words for "horse" and "army," and was used to replace the old word for cavalry, with its associations of elite regiments staffed by aristocrats. However, the English translator did not attempt to capture that sense, instead choosing the more descriptive title *Red Cavalry*. Even in translation, however, *Red Cavalry* loses little of the raw energy of the original Russian.

This collection of short stories begins with a bang in "Perekhod cherez Zbruch" ("Crossing into Poland"), with the news that Novograd-Volynsk has been captured. The narrator describes how he crosses the Zbruch River, followed by an encounter with a Jewish family in the house where he is to be billeted for the night. Each of the stories follows a similar pattern, with the first-person narrator, Kiril Lyutov, having various encounters with the Cossacks and with the Poles and Jews in the territories through which the army rides. Almost all the encounters are violent, and each is vividly limned with strong, active words.

Although there is no obvious continuing between the chapters and each story can be read as a stand-alone tale or vignette, together the stories add up to a plot line that is more than the sum of its parts, making the book resemble a novel rather than merely a collection of unrelated short stories. The overall theme of the book is Lyutov's acclimation to life among the fierce and wild Cossack horsemen. Through rough and often bitter experience he learns to accept violence with an approximation of the casualness with which the Cossacks approach it. When he goes into battle with an unloaded weapon and his deception is discovered, the Cossacks curse him as a coward, venting their disgust at cowardly, bespectacled intellectuals in general. Yet at the same time they depend upon him to read them their unit newspaper and to write letters home to their families, for they are almost entirely illiterate. It is a curious and awkward symbiosis, but Lyutov begins to adapt, until in "Moi pervyi gus" ("My First Goose") he is able to appropriate and kill a gander he finds waddling about the barnyard of an old woman with whom he argued over recompense for quartering. For the first time he gains a measure of real respect from the Cossacks because he has proven himself capable of the same sort of unthinking violence they practice so casually. His experience also gives him new insight into the values of the Cossacks, as can be seen in the story of the death of Commander Trunov.





This fearless Cossack, knowing full well that he will die in taking on an enemy aircraft, hands over his boots so some other soldier can use them, since they still have plenty of wear in them.

Yet even in the final story, Lyutov remains a man apart, never able to see the world in the casual manner of the Cossacks, who view life as a green meadow upon which women and horses walk. In this final image, *Red Cavalry*, which is meant to be an unsparingly realistic portrayal of warfare, still retains some of the idealism of the Romantics, in particular the concept of the Noble Savage, whose naturalness has not been warped by civilization's hypocrisies.

## TALES OF ODESSA

**First published:** *Odesskie rasskazy*, 1931  
(English translation, 1955)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Babel writes about life in the Jewish ghetto of Odessa, including tales featuring Benya Krik and other local gangsters.*

Like *Red Cavalry*, each story in *Tales of Odessa* can stand on its own, but together the stories create a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. However, in this collection the elements of violence, while still present, are less overwhelming than the wholesale destruction of the war-torn countryside during the Polish campaign of 1920. The cruelties of Odessa are smaller, more subtle, but they still have the power to destroy. At times, as can be seen in "Istoriia moei golubiatni" ("The Story of My Dovecote"), one of Babel's earlier stories that was not included in *Tales of Odessa*, they can erupt into an anti-Semitic pogrom different only in the scope and degree to which the perpetrators are sanctioned by the central government.

Jewishness and anti-Semitism are the major themes of *Tales of Odessa*. Although Babel wrote in Russian for a Russian audience, there is a deep thread of similarity between the *Tales of Odessa* and the body of Yiddish literature that was produced by Odessa's Jewish community in the years before the Russian Revolution, particularly the work of Sholom Aleichem, who wrote stories about the Jew-

ish community as both an enclosed society and a vulnerable group surrounded by hostile Gentiles. Babel, however, did not take quite the same indulgent attitude toward his coreligionists. His attitudes and mind-set had been reshaped by his experiences riding with the Cossacks, and as a result he was more willing to criticize the flaws and weaknesses of a Jewish society whose members often tried to survive by keeping its collective head down in the face of hostility.

Thus, his heroes are not meek and submissive Jews but the nearest approximation he could find to the Cossacks. Like those fierce horsemen, Benya Krik (literally, Benny the Shouter) and the gangsters of the Jewish ghetto are quick with their fists, fearless in the face of danger, and unwilling to allow anyone to place limitations on their freedom to experience life to the fullest. When the police try to raid their gathering during a wedding ceremony, they burn down the police station. Benya both fights and cons his way through life, using his fists or his glib tongue depending upon which can gain him the best advantage. However, there always is more than a little self-mocking in the humor of these stories, with Babel poking fun at the very concept of the grand, the epic.

Because *Tales of Odessa* was published after *Red Cavalry*, most critics generally assumed that the stories in *Tales of Odessa* were written after those in *Red Cavalry*, even though the stories in *Tales of Odessa* are in many ways weaker. As a result, there has been a sense that Babel somehow exhausted his creative capacities in writing *Red Cavalry*, and *Tales of Odessa* represented a diminishment of his ability. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, literary historians have been able to examine many of the obscure regional journals in which the Odessa stories originally appeared in 1922 and 1923, and thus have demonstrated that, far from representing a decline, the stories show the development of an author who was still working on perfecting the stories that would become *Red Cavalry*. Only with the success of that book did Babel go ahead and collect the earlier set of stories in *Tales of Odessa*.

## SUMMARY

Isaac Babel's continual focus upon characters at once grim and colorful, combined with the peculiar way in which he died, served to make his writings a highly desirable "forbidden fruit" in the

Soviet Union for many decades. Even after his rehabilitation in the 1960's, the official editions of his works, carefully edited to remove references that were still politically problematic—such as an appearance by Leon Trotsky at the end of the segments that make up *Red Cavalry*—were printed in very small editions and thus nearly impossible to

acquire if one did not have the appropriate connections. Even in the West, Babel remained largely unknown because many scholars felt awkward about approaching stories that were so unsparing in their portrayals of the cruelty of war.

Leigh Husband Kimmel

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did Isaac Babel's riding among the Cossacks of the Mounted Army and his close association with Nikolai Yezhov during the Great Purges reflect a persistent desire to toy with danger?
- How does Babel's portrayal of the Cossacks in *Red Cavalry* reflect the Romantic ideal of the Noble Savage?
- Although the Cossacks are the nominal heroes of the *Red Cavalry* stories, Babel's portrayal of the Polish Jews shows surprising elements of sympathy alongside negative images of filth and poverty. To what degree does this reflect Babel's own ambivalence about his origins?
- How are the Jewish gangsters of the *Tales of Odessa* similar to the Cossacks of *Red Cavalry*?
- How does Babel use humor in his portrayal of the gangsters in *Tales of Odessa* to mock concepts of heroism?



## BERYL BAINBRIDGE

**Born:** Liverpool, England  
November 21, 1933

*English writer Bainbridge has achieved popular and critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic for her darkly funny and sometimes tragic novels featuring sharply drawn characters, often from the lower classes, who struggle with the ironies and disappointments of life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Beryl Bainbridge was born on November 21, 1933, in Liverpool, England, during the depths of the Great Depression. She was raised in the town of Formby, not far from Liverpool. Her parents, Richard and Winifred Baines Bainbridge, encouraged Beryl and her older brother to read and write. The family, however, was not a happy one. Richard Bainbridge was prone to emotional instability and his violence colored Bainbridge's youth. Writing became a means of escape from her difficult home environment. At ten, she produced her first book, but she destroyed it. Her next literary work was called *Filthy Lucre: Or, The Tragedy of Andrew Ledwhistle and Richard Soleway*, completed when she was about thirteen but not published until 1986.

Bainbridge was expelled from school at age fourteen when she was discovered with a lewd note. Subsequently, at age sixteen and with her mother's encouragement, she joined the Liverpool Playhouse Company to study acting and work as assistant stage manager. She remained there until 1952; her experiences formed the basis of her later novel *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989).

In 1954, Bainbridge married artist Austin Davies. The couple had two children, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1959. Throughout her marriage and thereafter, Bainbridge continued to write. In 1958, she completed a novel that would be published in 1972 as *Harriet Said*, the account of two girls who ultimately commit murder. After her divorce, she was briefly married again to writer Alan Sharp, by whom she had a third child. During this period, she also produced her third novel, *A Weekend with Claud*, published in 1967. In a pattern that she would follow in later life, Bainbridge radi-

cally revised this novel for republication in 1981, cutting the story to the bare bones and renaming it *A Weekend with Claude*. Likewise, *Another Part of the Wood* (1968) was revised and republished in 1979.

Bainbridge often used her own memories and family members as the basis for her books. *The Dressmaker* (1973; published in the United States as *The Secret Glass*, 1973) was based on her two aunts' experiences during World War II while living in Liverpool. In addition, *The Bottle Factory Outing* (1974) was based on her own employment at a bottling factory in the late 1960's. In this black comedy, one of the main characters is murdered at a picnic she has planned for the workers of a bottle factory, who ultimately throw her body into the ocean. While reviews of this novel were mixed, it garnered for Bainbridge her first Man Booker Prize nomination and won the *Guardian* Fiction Award in 1974. Bainbridge followed this novel with *Sweet William* (1975), *A Quiet Life* (1976), and *Injury Time* (1977), which won the Whitbread Award that year.

In 1978, Bainbridge briefly left the autobiographical subject matter of her earlier work and turned to history for her next endeavor. Her novel *Young Adolf* (1978) imaginatively recreated a visit to Liverpool by Adolf Hitler in 1910, demonstrating the events in his life that turned the young man into a psychopathic dictator bent on world domination. The work was well received, and in 1978 she was named a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She also began working on teleplays and screenplays of some of her earlier novels.

After the publication of the 1980 novel *Winter Garden*, Bainbridge made a series of documentaries for the British Broadcasting Corporation

(BBC) based on literary subjects before turning to a historical subject once again with *Watson's Apology* (1984). In this novel, she reimagined the life of writer John Selby Watson, who murdered his wife. Again, reviews were mixed. She followed the novel with a volume of short stories, *Mum and Mr. Armitage: Selected Stories of Beryl Bainbridge*, published in 1985.

In 1989, Bainbridge published one of her best-known and best-loved novels, *An Awfully Big Adventure*. For subject matter, she returned to her youthful experience of working as an assistant stage manager in Liverpool during the post-World War II years. She again created characters who need but are unable to give or receive love. *An Awfully Big Adventure* earned for Bainbridge yet another Man Booker Prize nomination in 1992. Bainbridge also attracted new readers for her work after the release of the 1995 film based on the novel.

Returning to her pattern of alternating autobiographical material with historical sources, Bainbridge based her 1991 novel, *The Birthday Boys*, on the ill-fated expedition of Antarctic explorer Robert Scott. Scott's journals, recovered after his death while attempting to reach the South Pole in 1912, were Bainbridge's primary sources, as were the memoirs of one of the survivors of the trip.

Over the next several years, Bainbridge occupied herself with a collection of newspaper columns published as *Something Happened Yesterday* in 1993 and with a second volume of short stories published in 1994. In 1996, Bainbridge turned to one of the biggest historical events of the twentieth century for her next novel: the sinking of the ocean liner *Titanic*. That novel, *Every Man for Himself*, was nominated for a Man Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Novel Award. Her 1998 novel, *Master Georgie*, a story set during the Crimean War, was yet another contender for the Man Booker Prize. Although it did not win that award, it was the winner of the W. H. Smith Literary Award and the James Tait Black Prize. Bainbridge's love of the theater reemerged during the late 1990's, when she began contributing a column to the monthly theater magazine *The Oldie*. A collection of those columns, *Front Row: Evenings at the Theatre, Pieces from "The Oldie,"* appeared in 2005. Meanwhile, Queen Elizabeth II recognized Bainbridge as a Dame of the British Empire in 2000 for her creative contributions to the United Kingdom.

According to Queeney (2001) once again found Bainbridge visiting a distant historical period. The novel traced the relationship between Samuel Johnson, the well-known dictionary writer, and Hester Thrale, the wife of a wealthy brewer. Bainbridge used the character of Queeney, Hester's eldest child, as the narrator, interspersing episodes with letters written by Queeney much later as a plot device.

The assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 served as the backdrop for Bainbridge's novel *The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress*, scheduled to be released in late 2009. Bainbridge took her title and subject matter from a small detail in the police report regarding the event: Several witnesses recalled having seen a young woman wearing a polka-dot dress who was nowhere to be found when the police arrived.

Bainbridge continued to live in England, where she was considered to be a national treasure. Her work has earned both critical and popular acclaim for more than forty years.

## ANALYSIS

Bainbridge's novels, while all very different from one another in subject, share certain characteristics. Certainly, the setting is extremely important in each of the books; indeed, the setting becomes almost another character in many of the novels. For example, a number of the novels are set during World War II or immediately thereafter in Liverpool, England. Liverpool, a dirty, industrial city, was heavily bombed during the war, and its residents lived through extreme deprivation during this time. In Bainbridge's novels, the lower classes in particular have a difficult time putting food on the table and simply staying warm. In addition, there is a clear depiction of class-consciousness throughout all of the novels set in mid-twentieth century England. Likewise, Bainbridge's historical fictions also offer realistic and factual details about the times and places in which they are set.

Bainbridge's characters often share a need for intimate relationships. They are looking for love, but few can find even affection. In particular, Bainbridge's use of sexual scenes in her books borders on the disturbing. The encounters are never tender, but rather are often darkly humorous, violent, or simply sad. While body parts engage in intimate behavior, it is as if the hearts and minds of the char-

acters are elsewhere. There is a callousness to human interaction in Bainbridge's novels that is at once heartbreaking and compelling.

Bainbridge's novels also display a dark humor. Amid the often macabre story lines, she inserts ironies that are funny in spite of their tragic consequences. For example, in *An Awfully Big Adventure*, Stella plays Tinker Bell in a production of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (pr. 1904, pb. 1928) by holding a flashlight. She hears of the death of a man she is having an affair with just as Peter asks the children in the audience to clap to bring Tinker Bell back to life. Stella drops the flashlight, in effect killing Tinker Bell, and traumatizes the children. Likewise, in *The Bottle Factory Outing*, it is ironically the character who has planned the outing who winds up murdered. The response of the rest of the characters to the death is both comic and dreadful.

Finally, from Bainbridge's early novel *Harriet Said* to her 2001 novel, *According to Queeney*, the writer has pushed the edges of narrative reliability. She does so in several ways. For one, she pares away all but the most essential details of her stories; in fact, there are times when critics have suggested that she has pared too much away, leading to ruptures in the narrative. Moreover, characters in the novels often see the same events in very different ways. The reader, then, is left in a place of indecision. In *The Birthday Boys*, for example, the same story is told by explorer Robert Scott and four members of his team. Of the five, who is the most reliable? Which version of the story is to be believed? The use of flashbacks as a structuring device also impacts narrative reliability. Characters who earlier participated in an event will later remember the event in different ways. Thus, which account should be trusted, the "present" interpretation or the flashback? Finally, Bainbridge often uses historical figures as fictional characters. Consequently, each reader will bring to the novel previous knowledge that will butt up against the fictional representation. In novels such as *Young Adolf*, Bainbridge attempts to create a past for one of the most infamous people in history, Adolf Hitler. That readers find some sympathy for the young Adolf is a tribute to Bainbridge's skill as a writer. It also demonstrates just how far a narrative can be stretched.

Few contemporary writers are as prolific as Bainbridge, and even fewer can claim the overwhelm-

ing critical and public acclaim. Eccentric, innovative, creative, funny, and disturbing, Bainbridge's work defies simple classification.

## AN AWFULLY BIG ADVENTURE

**First published:** 1989

**Type of work:** Novel

*A strange, motherless teenager attempts to find her way amid the colorful characters of a local repertory theater staging Peter Pan in 1950's Liverpool.*

*An Awfully Big Adventure* is one of Bainbridge's best-known novels. A film adaptation of the book, directed by Mike Newell and starring Alan Rickman, Hugh Grant, and Georgina Cates, was released in 1995. Bainbridge used her own experiences as a young assistant stage manager in a local Liverpool repertory theater as the backdrop for the story of Stella, a troubled teenager who affects each of the other members of the troupe without realizing it.

The setting of the novel is grim; lower-class life in Liverpool after World War II is depicted as gritty and hard. Stella lives with her uncle and her uncle's girlfriend, who do their best to care for the young woman who was abandoned by her wild mother some sixteen years earlier. Uncle Vernon wants to save Stella from the fate of so many young women who find themselves working in factories or restaurants when they leave school, and he calls in many favors to secure her a spot at a repertory theater.

The book opens by dropping readers into a scene that they will not understand until much later in the book. Clearly, something is very wrong; Meredith Potter, the troupe director, finds a girl in the props room, a girl who turns out to be the story's protagonist, Stella. After a brief but angry encounter, Stella runs from the theater, taking refuge in a phone booth outside.

The novel then flashes back to the story of Stella's first day at the theater and follows through chronologically until it returns to the opening scene. Because the reader knows from the opening pages that something dreadful will happen before the book ends, the entire story is told under a pall.

Each member of the company has his or her own secrets. Stella, who is by all accounts an odd young woman, has a knack for delivering knockout blows without even being aware of it through casual remarks or thoughtless actions. Moreover, each of the characters is in love with the wrong person. Stella, for example, has a crush on Meredith. Although the rest of company knows that he is a homosexual, Stella does not. When Meredith does not return her advances, she has an affair with O'Hara, an older, legendary actor. The affair is meaningless to her, but it has dire consequences for O'Hara, who recognizes in Stella, too late, a woman he loved some sixteen years earlier.

Indeed, the consequences of earlier choices flood the end of the novel. Not one of the characters escapes unscathed from the troupe's production of *Peter Pan*. In the final scene, Stella stands in the telephone booth, speaking to a recording of the time she calls "Mother."

## ACCORDING TO QUEENEY

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*The later years of Dr. Samuel Johnson, the famed lexicographer and writer of the eighteenth century, and his relationship with the married Hester Thrale are narrated many years later by Hester's daughter Queeney.*

Most contemporary readers know about Dr. Samuel Johnson through two works: Johnson's own *A Dictionary of the English Language: To Which Are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar* (1755) or James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1791). Johnson enjoyed fame and notoriety during his own lifetime and continues to be remembered as one of the most important writers of the eighteenth century. In *According to Queeney*, Bainbridge imaginatively re-creates Johnson's later years, when he was closely connected to Hester Thrale, the wife of a wealthy brewer.

Bainbridge structures the novel through two narrative voices. The first is a third-person autho-

rial voice that details specific events in the lives of the characters. At the close of each section, a second narrative voice enters, that of Queeney, Hester Thrale's eldest child. These sections are in the form of letters written long after the described events. Queeney's interpretation of events is often at odds with the section the reader has just completed. As a result, it is difficult to construe "the truth" of the event. By so constructing her novel, Bainbridge both gives and takes away: Just as the reader settles into the story, the subsequent epistle undermines the narrative itself. Bainbridge thus calls into question the whole notion of historical truth. Rather, she seems to suggest, there are only interpretations.

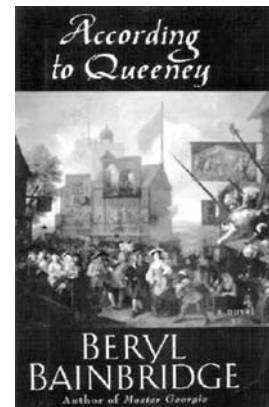
The Samuel Johnson who emerges from *According to Queeney* is one beset with emotional difficulties. He clearly suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as mind-robbing depression. At the same time, he shows sympathy and love to young Queeney, something seriously lacking in her life.

Hester Thrale, a woman who bears some ten children, only to lose most of them, is also an enigma. Viewed through Queeney's eyes, she is a bitter, vicious woman, devoid of any maternal instinct. Readers, however, may find in her a fear of intimacy brought about by her loss of so many of her babies. Her problems with Queeney may stem not from loving her too little but from loving her too much.

The major parts of the novel trace the travels of Johnson and the Thrales across England and throughout Europe. By the end, Johnson has been abandoned by Hester, who has married a young Italian voice teacher after the death of her husband. Johnson dies without seeing her again.

## SUMMARY

Whether she is writing about memories from her personal past or using historical events as the basis of her fiction, Beryl Bainbridge creates



memorable characters and spot-on dialogue in her many novels. While some critics find her writing to be too spare, most acknowledge her deftness of plot and her skill in structuring highly inventive and creative works. Her novels often traverse the ground between comedy and tragedy. Often eccentric, always innovative, Bainbridge's novels call into question notions of history, truth, love, and fate.

*Diane Andrews Henningfeld*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What techniques does Beryl Bainbridge use to make her characters come alive for readers?
- What role does the setting play in each of Bainbridge's novels?
- What are some examples of irony in Bainbridge's novels, and how does she use irony as a plot device?
- What is black humor and how does it function in *An Awfully Big Adventure*?
- Bainbridge has written a series of historical novels, including events such as the Crimean War, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the doomed Antarctic expedition of Robert Scott. What do her novels tell readers about the nature of history and the nature of narrating history?
- In *According to Queeney*, Bainbridge uses an innovative structure by having a section of straight narration concerning some event in Samuel Johnson's life, only to follow it by a letter from the adult Queeney that refers to the event. How do the letters undermine the flow of the narration? Do the letters clarify or complicate the picture the novels paint of Johnson?
- In *An Awfully Big Adventure*, how does Stella affect each of the other characters? What is the result for each of them of her presence in the troupe? Is Stella aware of the consequences of her actions and comments?



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## HONORÉ DE BALZAC

**Born:** Tours, France  
May 20, 1799

**Died:** Paris, France  
August 18, 1850

*Balzac developed the novel into a superb instrument for the realistic depiction of contemporary life and created a gallery of characters that have become part of the mythology of French culture.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Honoré de Balzac (BOL-zak) was born in Tours, France, on May 20, 1799. His father, Bernard-François, was a government official of peasant origin. His mother, Anne-Charlotte-Laure Sallambier, from a family of similar background but higher status, was twenty-two years younger than her husband. Honoré, the first of their four children, felt closest to his sister Laure in his childhood and early youth. Educated at boarding schools, he was a voracious reader and showed an early interest in philosophy. In 1814, the Balzac family moved to Paris.

From 1816 to 1818, Balzac attended the Sorbonne, studying law and philosophy. He was apprenticed to a lawyer but resolved to pursue literature as his profession. For seventeen months between 1818 and 1820, supported by his parents, Balzac lived in a tiny garret in Paris and dedicated himself to learning the craft of writing. The first product of this apprenticeship was a five-act tragedy, *Cromwell* (wr. 1819-1820, pb. 1925), inspired by the neoclassical dramas of Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine. The verdict of both family and outsiders was unanimous: Balzac should give up writing. He left his garret and returned to his family but continued to write.

Balzac now experienced a second literary apprenticeship, producing numerous anonymous potboilers and writing popular fiction and self-

improvement manuals in collaboration with pulp novelists and journalists. He did not, however, neglect the cultivation of more serious literary interests; even the potboilers show the growing influence upon Balzac of his great predecessors François Rabelais, Molière, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as the leading writers of the Romantic movement, whose early growth paralleled Balzac's lifetime. A watershed year for this movement was 1830, which saw revolutionary upheavals across Europe and the ascendance of such Romantic luminaries as Victor Hugo, Stendhal, George Sand, and Alfred de Vigny.

In 1824, Balzac's parents left Paris, and he was on his own again. He experienced a renewed interest in philosophy, meditated on politics and religion, and absorbed the new literary trend toward satirical and topical realism. Yet he still lacked recognition as a writer and was regarded as a man without a real career. His parents urged him to plunge into the world of business with their financial backing. Thus between 1825 and 1828, with ingenuity and enthusiasm but little patience for detail, Balzac pursued the commercial side of book production. All of his investments in publishing, bookselling, and printing went bankrupt. The experience, however, bore fruit in his understanding the economic forces of society, thus enriching his novels though not his bank account.

In 1828, Balzac rededicated himself to writing and at last had a modest success with the first novel to which he later signed his name, *Les Chouans* (1829; *The Chouans*, 1885). For the next nineteen years, Balzac wrote steadily and enjoyed a growing



success, and by 1831, his self-confidence led him to add “de” to his name. By 1831, Balzac had the concept, put into effect later, of intertwining most of his works into *La Comédie humaine* (1829-1848; *The Comedy of Human Life*, 1885-1893, 1896; also known as *The Human Comedy*, 1895-1896, 1911).

The novels of this cycle that have become an integral part of French culture, their heroes and heroines seen as virtual archetypes, include *La Peau de chagrin* (1831; *The Wild Ass's Skin*, 1888), *Le Médecin de campagne* (1833; *The Country Doctor*, 1887), *Eugénie Grandet* (1833; English translation, 1859), *Le Père Goriot* (1834-1835; *Daddy Goriot*, 1860, also as *Père Goriot*), *La Cousine Bette* (1846; *Cousin Bette*, 1888), and *Le Cousin Pons* (1847; *Cousin Pons*, 1880).

Even more than most writers, the concrete and sensual Balzac felt that his talent was nourished by beautiful, exotic, and delicious things. His pursuit of social success showed a thirst for the sumptuous and aristocratic—not out of simple materialism but rather to satisfy an appetite for what he called the “Arabian nights” atmosphere of Parisian high life. Thus his extravagances outstripped his income, and debt was a constant goad both to produce more and to improve his social contacts. He was fortunate in his friends and protectors, above all Mme Laure de Berny, his most important woman friend.

Beginning in 1832, almost two years before actually meeting the Polish-born Countess Eveline-Constance-Victoire Hanska (née Rzewuska), Balzac conceived an idealized passion for her in the course of an exchange of letters that she had initiated. Their eventual meeting and liaison were complicated by the necessity that Balzac stay on good terms with Hanska's husband. When Hanska became a widow in 1847, the planned marriage with Balzac was postponed until Hanska's affairs could be put in order. Marrying a foreigner meant that Hanska had to transfer ownership of her huge estate at Wierzchownia, located in the Ukraine, to her daughter. That she was willing to do, as Hanska, like Balzac, greatly preferred Paris.

In 1848, numerous misfortunes struck at once. New revolutions flared across Europe. Apart from more serious destruction, the sale of books virtually ceased at the very moment when Balzac was most in need of money. Also at that time, Balzac's health, long abused, collapsed. His heart and di-

gestion were beyond repair. He enjoyed a few months of happiness on Hanska's estate, whose beauty he began to describe in unfinished notes called the “Lettre sur Kiev” (1847). Thereafter, his health rapidly declined. On March 14, 1850, Balzac and Hanska were married in Berdichev, Ukraine. With Balzac gravely ill, he and Hanska made an excruciatingly difficult journey back to Paris, where Balzac died days later on August 18, 1850.

## ANALYSIS

The fullest expression of Balzac's vision is *The Human Comedy*. Although it comprises more than ninety novels and stories, it was never completed. Enough is in place, however, to allow one to grasp the outer limits and inner workings of a complete universe. As Napoleon I set out to conquer Europe—a parallel of which Balzac was well aware—Balzac set out to conquer the world that he envisioned by capturing it in words. Province by province and realm by realm, Balzac added to his universe of human types, occupations, and conditions.

The idea of using recurring characters—coming to the foreground in some works, receding to the background in others, thus creating an effect of multidimensional reality—came to Balzac spontaneously, indeed as an organic outgrowth of his work. Yet he found philosophical support for his method in the thinking of French naturalist Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire regarding the unity in diversity of all creation.

Balzac bases his compelling vision upon portraits of physically and psychologically convincing individuals. The reader is made to care enough about Balzac's individual characters to absorb even the most prosaic details of their occupations and, eventually, the workings of the social forces that buffet them.

One of Balzac's most moving characters is Père Goriot, in the novel of the same name. At first, Balzac reveals little more of him than that he is a retired pasta maker, a thoroughly prosaic profession. Before the story began, when Goriot had first moved to Mme Vauquer's boardinghouse, he was rotund and portly and wore a coat of cornflower blue. Then Goriot goes into a decline, which is depicted only through humble, concrete details. Both the reader and Goriot's fellow boarders are brought to an extreme pitch of suspense as Balzac withholds all explanation. At last, clues surface that

suggest a hypothesis: A girl comes to visit Goriot, gliding into his room like a snake, with “not a speck of mud on her laced cashmere boots.”

Balzac was one of the first great literary realists of the nineteenth century to discover that the most prosaic details of real life are themselves poetry. It requires an unobtrusive mastery and poetic inspiration to make such unlikely material as “laced cashmere boots” speak to the reader’s emotions. Yet while Balzac could have created beauty with an unrelieved inventory of prosaic details, he does not limit himself in that way. His portraits of girls and young women shine with a luminous charm. In creating such portraits, which always have an element of the ideal, Balzac combines realistic detail with metaphor. His range of memorable characters includes the spiritual Eugénie Grandet and the worldly but noble Mme de Beauséant.

An important organizing element of Balzac’s world, one which raises it to a higher aesthetic pitch than the real world it resembles, is contrast. The author shows wealth side by side with poverty, the ascetic beside the profligate, beauty beside ugliness, the ideal and the cynical, the urbane and the rustic, virtue and vice. Such contrasts abounded in his own life and in the city that he loved—Paris, the “ocean that no line can fathom,” the world within a world. Just as no quality can exist without its opposite, proud Paris cannot exist without the provinces. Yet, paradoxically, the extremes can sometimes change places or masquerade in each other’s raiment.

Balzac, who began his literary career by following the tragedies of Racine and Corneille, reached for a higher insight in *The Human Comedy*. If Dante’s *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802) had provided a guide to Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, then Balzac would write a no less comprehensive account of this world. To call it “comedy” was not a facile decision, though “tragi-comedy” might have been more accurate; time and again, Balzac’s heroes make great sacrifices that are unnecessary, unappreciated, misunderstood, or, worst of all, drive out of reach the very goal that they are seeking. The “human” side of Balzac’s epic is in the universals of human nature that he reveals. In a world where the real and illusory are intertwined, simple human love endures as the great, and only nonillusory, value.

While Balzac’s psychological insight is the foun-

dation of his realism and enduring interest for the reader, his understanding of the political and economic workings of his society adds depth to the picture. Ideologically, Balzac was Roman Catholic, conservative, and at times an avowed monarchist. He was too keenly aware of the opportunism in human nature to put much faith in radical political ideology. He also expressed an almost visceral aversion to the “mud” in which the lower classes lived and with which his heroes dread being spattered. Yet in the heyday of Romantic contempt for the “Philistine” (in other words, everyone who was not an artist, from the humblest tradesmen to upper-class professionals), Balzac had a generous, democratic acceptance of so-called ordinary people. A human being, to Balzac, was by definition never ordinary, and the distinctions of class had no effect on the universal human dilemmas of how to live, whom to love, and what choices to make.

Despite his humanistic spirit, Balzac was acutely aware of the pervasive role of money throughout the French society of his day. It was a glue binding all together, from the lowest to the highest. Its power to corrupt provides the saddest, most pessimistic, and most ironic pages of *The Human Comedy*.

With Balzac, creative fiction comes of age, and the outer parameters of the realistic novel are clearly indicated even if Balzac did not live to fill them in completely. Later novelists who proudly acknowledged their debt to him include Fyodor Dostoevski, Henry James, and Balzac’s compatriots Guy de Maupassant and Marcel Proust.

## THE WILD ASS’S SKIN

**First published:** *La Peau de chagrin*, 1831  
(English translation, 1888)

**Type of work** Novel

*Balzac contrasts the exercise of will and calm wisdom, dissipation and asceticism, involvement in life with all its delights and pains and withdrawal.*

Inspired by Balzac’s contrasting ideas about the nature of the will and the expenditure of necessarily finite vital force, *The Wild Ass’s Skin* is the first and probably the greatest of Balzac’s “Philosophi-

cal Studies,” a subdivision of *The Human Comedy*. Raphaël de Valentin has run out of money and decides to throw himself in the River Seine. Waiting for nightfall, he enters an old curiosity shop, where an old man offers him a magical wild ass’s skin, *un peau de chagrin* (in French the latter word means both “shagreen,” or wild ass’s skin, and “grief” or “vexation”). The wishes of its possessor will be fulfilled but the skin will shrink in proportion to the number and strength of those wishes. When it has shrunk into nothing, its owner will die.

The old man has lived to a great age by avoiding desire and its turmoil; Raphaël declares that he wants to live to excess. Rushing from the shop, he falls in with friends who take him to an orgy. There he recounts at length to a fellow guest how years of contented denial and scholarly work in a garret were followed by the agony of his love for the heartless Countess Foedora, for whom he had squandered money earned by writing and gambling. The morning after the orgy, Raphaël learns that he has inherited the vast wealth he had wished for but sees that the skin has perceptibly shrunk. He realizes that he can do whatever he wants, but he wants now to do nothing and therefore husband his life.

He organizes a regime in which he is never obliged to express a wish. Cut off from almost all human contact, he effectively abdicates from life for the sake of going on living, constantly attempting the impossible task of repressing the slightest desire.

Raphaël again meets Pauline, the daughter of his former landlady, who had always loved him. Now she is rich and conforms to his idea of the perfect society lady. He is overwhelmed by her beauty and goodness, and he returns her feelings. There follow days of ecstasy. Sometimes Raphaël feels that love is worth its cost, but in fear he eventually flees Pauline. When she finds him he cannot control his desire, which causes the disappearance of the final remnant of the ass’s skin and therefore his death.

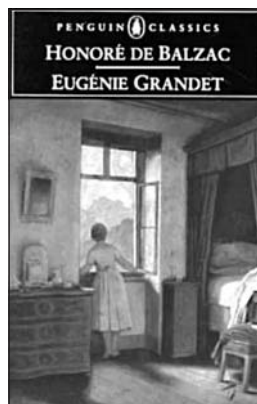
## EUGÉNIE GRANDET

**First published:** 1833 (English translation, 1859)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The selfless goodness of Eugénie Grandet survives the harshness of her miserly father and the treachery of her lover, but her moral triumph is not accompanied by any hope of happiness.*

*Eugénie Grandet* shows Balzac at his most idealistic. He presents three characters who are completely incorruptible in the face of the greed that surrounds them. Eugénie Grandet, her mother, and their servant Nanon all lead lives that are virtually monastic in their self-denial. Despite the fabulous wealth that has been accumulated by the shrewd and unscrupulous winemaker, Monsieur Grandet, his family lives in a wretched house, under strict and despotic rules enforced by him.



While Grandet, a miser who doles out candles and sugar cubes one at a time, keeps his wife and daughter ignorant of their enormous fortune, the local townspeople are very well aware of it. Indeed, talk of Grandet’s millions is the chief subject of gossip. While everyone in town is well aware that Grandet is a most unsavory character, he is regarded with awe and forgiven every trespass because of his millions of francs. As Eugénie turns twenty-three, her father assumes that he will marry her off to the candidate of his choosing. Two local figures vie for her hand, with no thought of anything but her father’s money. As all the principals are gathered for Eugénie’s birthday, an unanticipated guest arrives from Paris like a magnificent peacock descending on a barnyard.

The peacock is Eugénie’s cousin Charles, the son of Old Grandet’s younger brother. Young Charles is visiting the poor country cousins to humor his father, from whom he is bringing a letter to Old Grandet. Unbeknown to Charles, the letter

contains news of his father's bankruptcy and intended suicide.

In the few days that the young man is allotted to mourn, before he is sent to "the Indies" to make his fortune, he and his cousin fall in love. The worldly Charles has loved before; but as Balzac describes this first love of Eugénie, it is as if she were truly seeing the world for the first time. Eugénie is constantly accompanied by the imagery of light. As light is the first thing that people love, asks Balzac, then is not love the very light of the heart?

In one of many plot ironies anticipating the stories of Guy de Maupassant, Eugénie gives Charles all of her gold coins, mainly gifts from her father. As a pledge of both his own and the money's return, Charles gives her a golden case with two exquisite portraits of his parents. Charles, however, uses Eugénie's money to pursue trade yielding the quickest profit, including traffic in slaves. He stays away for seven years, forgets all about her, and becomes utterly corrupt and cynical. Eugénie has to face a terrible day of reckoning when her father, who craves the sight of gold as if addicted to it, discovers that she has given all of her coins away. She refuses to tell her father anything.

The struggle of wills between father and daughter is as epical, in its own way, as any struggle in the House of Atreus (Balzac's analogy). Drama is created not by the object of contention but by the clash of principles. On Grandet's side, there is the individual's sense of absolute ownership, mastery, will, and desire. On Eugénie's side, there are moral and religious principles: fidelity, charity, pity, respect for family bonds, and love. Eugénie's mother, long ago reduced to psychological slavery by Grandet, is crushed by Grandet's harshness and suffers a decline that results in her death.

Grandet's obsession with self-enrichment and the physical possession of gold never flags. Balzac's ultimate miser differs significantly from Harpagon, Grandet's great seventeenth century French predecessor in *L'Avare* (pr. 1668, pb. 1669; *The Miser*, 1672) of Molière. Molière used his archetype to provoke ridicule and pity. Yet Grandet, who has his own sardonic sense of humor, dupes others to the very end and dies almost contentedly, with his millions intact. The contrast between Grandet and his daughter can be compared to that between Shylock and Portia in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (pr. c. 1596-1597, pb. 1600); it is

more stark than that between Molière's miser and his children.

## PÈRE GORIOT

**First published:** *Le Père Goriot*, 1834-1835  
(English translation, 1860)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young provincial makes his choice to pursue the vanity of the world, while an old man sacrifices himself so that his two daughters may have a glittering life.*

*Père Goriot* is a novel of beautifully balanced ironies. A young provincial, Eugène de Rastignac, comes to Paris and finds lodging in the same boardinghouse as a decrepit former pasta maker, Père Goriot. While the other lodgers make Goriot the butt of their jokes, Eugène feels an instinctive sympathy for him. Goriot, formerly wealthy, has inexplicably fallen upon hard times; for no visible reason, his fortune has melted away. He bears his humiliation with a seemingly imbecilic meekness. Another mysterious lodger, Vautrin, takes a liking to young Eugène and shocks him with a cynical offer to help him escape poverty. Vautrin eloquently states the philosophy that the ends always justify the means.

The setting is Balzac's Paris, a semimythic place that foreshadows the Paris of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857, 1861, 1868; *Flowers of Evil*, 1931). The evil and the angelic live side by side and wrestle in this setting. Evil, with the unbri-dled power of money on its side, appears to have the upper hand. Eugène, from motives of wishing to help his family, espe-

cially his two sisters, decides to put aside the drudgery of his law studies and apprenticeship and take a shortcut to easy wealth. He persuades his mother, back home in the provinces, to sell her jewels and asks his sisters for their savings in order to outfit





him for his great adventure of storming high society. While only a poor relation, he wishes to exploit his family connection with the socially powerful Mme de Beauséant.

Meanwhile, it comes to light that Père Goriot has sacrificed all that he had, down to the last silver memento from his late wife, in order to keep his two spoiled daughters in a blaze of glory. In particular the elder daughter, Mme Anastasie de Restaud, has exploited Goriot in order to pay the bills run up by her young lover, Maxime des Trailles. She haughtily rejects Eugène, who tries to insinuate himself into her good graces, being himself irresistibly drawn to the luxury for which she has sold her father.

Goriot's only slightly less ruthless younger daughter, Delphine, then becomes the object of Eugène's relentless pursuit, initially in order to spite Anastasie and Maxime. Eugène, however, falls in love with Delphine. Like her adoring father, Eugène sees Delphine's total selfishness but is blinded by her goddesslike beauty and the need to feel that he pleases her. Rather than being able to make use of them, Eugène becomes as much the sisters' victim as their old father.

With no more left to give, Père Goriot, as pitiful as King Lear, is dying. He is barred from both his daughters' homes. In any event, they have been so profligate that they have not the wherewithal to help him. Yet so long as he is allowed simply to love them, Goriot experiences happiness. Eugène uses the last of the money that he has received from home to pay for Goriot's burial. Then he heads for the house of Delphine, still dreaming of his future conquest of society.

## COUSIN BETTE

**First published:** *La Cousine Bette*, 1846  
(English translation, 1888)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A hate-fueled poor relation plots against the family she sees as having slighted her; with the obsessive philandering of its head aiding her machinations.*

A brilliant and vivid portrait of the Paris of Louis-Philippe, *Cousin Bette* is a portrait of hidden

rage and hatred directed against a prominent but vulnerable family. Hector Hulot has done well during Napoleon I's wars, proving himself an efficient chief transport officer and winning the beautiful and noble—if peasant—Adeline Fischer as his wife. Adeline and her sister, the jealous Lisbeth, thin, dark, and ugly, are taken by Hulot to the Paris of the Emperor Napoleon, where Bette, as she is called, nurses her hatred and resentment of her sister. Bette saves Wenceslas Steinbock, an expatriate Polish count and talented sculptor, from suicide. She forms an odd half-maternal relationship with him, and she responds with carefully concealed rage when Hulot's daughter, Hortense, wins the handsome Pole as husband. Bette then forms a pact with mercenary Valérie Marneffe, recently installed mistress of the aging Baron Hulot, against the Hulot family. If Valérie can be compared with Becky Sharp in English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848), then Bette is a portrait of venomous malice whose only parallel is William Shakespeare's Iago in *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622, revised 1623). She sets out to destroy the family that has patronized and slighted her.

Like Père Goriot and Eugénie Grandet's father, Hulot is a monomaniac. His obsession is women, who are more important to him than even the necessities of life, his honor, and the happiness of his family. Valérie persuades him that he is the father of her child. Steinbock, now also Valérie's lover, is told he is the father, too, as are the rich retired businessman Célestin Crevel and Montès de Montéjanos, a Brazilian aristocrat and Valérie's first love. Hortense accidentally learns of her husband's infidelity, leaves him, and weeps with Adeline, to the secret joy of Bette.

Hulot asks his wife's uncle, Johann Fischer, to go to Algeria, now in the process of colonization by the French, and take grain from the Algerians in order to sell it to the French army at considerable profit. However, instead of sending Hulot the money he had anticipated, Fischer is obliged to ask for 200,000 francs to avert disgrace when the plot is discovered. Financially broken, asked to shoot himself by his superior in the War Department, and ostracized by his upright brother who dies of the disgrace, Hulot leaves his home to avoid creditors.

He hides himself in obscure quarters of Paris

and lives with a succession of working-class mistresses, occasionally accepting money from Bette, who keeps her knowledge of his whereabouts from Adeline. His wife, however, accidentally finds him in the course of her charitable work and the two are reconciled. Bette dies of a combination of tuberculosis and grief, mourned by all as the family's good angel.

The senescent baron, however, is soon pursuing the kitchen maid, whom he makes a baroness after Adeline dies of the shock of the discovery. Meanwhile, Valérie has been poisoned by the betrayed Montéjanos and Steinbock has returned to Hortense.

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*Physiologie du mariage*, 1829 (*The Physiology of Marriage*)

*Gobseck*, 1830 (English translation)

*La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, 1830, 1869 (*At the Sign of the Cat and Racket*)

*Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, 1831 (*The Unknown Masterpiece*)

*La Peau de chagrin*, 1831 (*The Wild Ass's Skin*, 1888, also as *The Magic Skin* and as *The Fatal Skin*)

*Sarrasine*, 1831 (English translation)

*Le Curé de Tours*, 1832 (*The Vicar of Tours*)

*Louis Lambert*, 1832 (English translation)

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*Le Médecin de campagne* 1833 (*The Country Doctor*, 1887)

*Eugénie Grandet*, 1833 (English translation, 1859)

*La Recherche de l'absolu*, 1834 (*Balthazar: Or, Science and Love*, 1859; also as *The Quest of the Absolute*)

*Histoire des treize*, 1834-1835 (*History of the Thirteen*; also as *The Thirteen*; includes *Ferragus*, *chef des dévorants*,

## SUMMARY

Honoré de Balzac is an almost pure example of the creative impulse at work. Founded in the author's broad knowledge of society, his characters grow, interact, and pursue their trades as if they had a life of their own. Balzac acknowledged their autonomy, which he believed was limited only by the basic laws of his lifelike world. While a higher justice occasionally intervenes in Balzac's world, it is primarily human choices that determine the ironic course of the myriad individual lives in *The Human Comedy*.

*D. Gosselin Nakeeb; updated by M. D. Allen*

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the monomania evidenced by some of Honoré de Balzac's most important characters: the miserliness of Old Grandet, the paternal love of Père Goriot, the hatred of Bette, and the erotomania of Baron Hulot.
- Balzac describes Père Goriot as a "Christ of paternity." How accurate or helpful is this characterization?
- One critic describes the loving Adeline Hulot as a "sublime sheep." Is her apparently infinite capacity for forgiveness admirable, or is it the reverse?
- Consider *Père Goriot* and *Cousin Bette* as portraits of Restoration Paris (1816-1830) and the Paris of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848). What forces dominate society in each case?
- Discuss *Eugénie Grandet*'s depiction of provincial France.



## Honoré de Balzac

1834 [*Ferragus, Chief of the Devorants*; also as *The Mystery of the Rue Solymane*]; *La Duchesse de Langeais*, 1834 [*The Duchesse de Langeais*]; and *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, 1834-1835 [*The Girl with the Golden Eyes*]  
*Le Père Goriot*, 1834-1835 (*Daddy Goriot*, 1860; also as *Père Goriot*)  
*Melmoth réconcilié*, 1835 (*Melmoth Converted*)  
*Le Lys dans la vallée*, 1836 (*The Lily in the Valley*)  
*Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau*, 1837 (*History of the Grandeur and Downfall of César Birotteau*, 1860; also as *The Rise and Fall of César Birotteau*)  
*Illusions perdues*, 1837-1843 (*Lost Illusions*)  
*Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, 1838-1847, 1869 (*The Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans*; includes *Comment aiment les filles*, 1838, 1844 [*The Way That Girls Love*]; *À combien l'amour revient aux vieillards*, 1844 [*How Much Love Costs Old Men*]; *Où mènent les mauvais chemins*, 1846 [*The End of Bad Roads*]; and *La Dernière incarnation de Vautrin*, 1847 [*The Last Incarnation of Vautrin*])  
*Pierrette*, 1840 (English translation)  
*Le Curé de village*, 1841 (*The Country Parson*)  
*Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, 1842 (*The Two Young Brides*)  
*Une Ténébreuse Affaire*, 1842 (*The Gondreville Mystery*)  
*Ursule Mirouët*, 1842 (English translation)  
*La Cousine Bette*, 1846 (*Cousin Bette*, 1888)  
*Le Cousin Pons*, 1847 (*Cousin Pons*, 1880)

### SHORT FICTION:

*Les Contes drolatiques*, 1832-1837 (*Droll Stories*, 1874, 1891)

### DRAMA:

*Cromwell*, wr. 1819-1820, pb. 1925  
*Vautrin*, pr., pb. 1840 (English translation, 1901)  
*La Marâtre*, pr., pb. 1848 (*The Stepmother*, 1901, 1958)  
*Le Faiseur*, pr. 1849 (also as *Mercadet*; English translation, 1901)  
*The Dramatic Works*, pb. 1901 (2 volumes; includes *Vautrin*, *The Stepmother*, *Mercadet*, *Quinola's Resources*, and *Pamela Giraud*)

### NONFICTION:

*Correspondance*, 1819-1850, 1876 (*The Correspondence*, 1878)  
*Lettres à l'étrangère*, 1899-1950  
*Letters to Madame Hanska*, 1900 (translation of volume 1 of *Lettres à l'étrangère*)

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# JOHN BANVILLE

**Born:** Wexford, Ireland  
December 8, 1945

*Banville is considered one of Ireland's best contemporary writers for his philosophical novels that treat the lack of clarity in human perception and the inevitable alienation of the individual.*

## BIOGRAPHY

John Banville (BAN-vihl), who was born in Wexford, Ireland, is one of that country's most revered living writers. His father, Martin, worked in a garage, while his mother, Agnes, worked at home caring for Banville, his brother Vincent, and his sister Vonnie. He was educated by the Christian Brothers, who are known throughout Ireland as strict disciplinarians, and also attended St. Peter's College in Wexford. Banville decided to forgo a university education to avoid being dependent upon his family and worked instead as a computer operator for Ireland's national airline, Aer Lingus, a job that facilitated his desire to travel. He lived for a year in the United States in the late 1960's and met his wife, Janet Dunham, an American textile artist, in San Francisco. They married in 1969 and had two sons. Banville also had two daughters with Patricia Quinn, the former head of the Arts Council of Ireland.

After his return to Ireland in 1970, Banville accepted a job as a junior editor at the Irish Press. He published a short-story collection, *Long Lankin*, in 1970, and his first novel, the metaphysical *Nightspawn*, appeared the following year. His second novel, *Birchwood* (1973), a gothic fantasy about a diminished Irish family, has been compared to Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-1853).

*Doctor Copernicus* (1976), the first novel in what would become his scientific tetralogy, cast Banville into the international limelight. The series of novels deal with mathematics and astronomy as a means of perception. In the first novel, Nicolaus Copernicus, the sixteenth century Polish astronomer and first European to formulate the model of the solar system, is plagued with self-doubt, as is the astronomer in Banville's next historical novel, *Kepler* (1981), which is based on the life and findings of Johannes Kepler, the seventeenth century German scientist who described planetary motion. The British mathematical genius Sir Isaac Newton, Banville's next scientific subject in the series, similarly deals with recurring self-doubt and the human imagination in *The Newton Letter* (1982). The final scientific novel, *Mefisto* (1986), is about a fictional mathematical prodigy, Gabriel Swan, who is engaged in a Faustian battle to save his soul. In this series, Banville equates this overwhelming self-doubt with the self-doubt experienced by writers.

In 1984, Banville was selected for membership in the highly prestigious Aosdána, an association of distinguished Irish artists who are entitled to a form of financial support from the Arts Council of Ireland, which allows them to work full time in their chosen field. Because memberships are limited, Banville resigned in 2000 to enable another artist to receive the stipend.

In 1989, Banville published the *The Book of Evidence*, the first book in a trilogy. This murder mystery gained him popular appeal as an author; it also was short-listed for Britain's prestigious Man Booker Prize and won Ireland's highly esteemed Guinness Peat Aviation Award. In the novel, protagonist Freddie Montgomery murders a Dublin servant named Josie Bell during an attempted art robbery. Banville followed this novel with *Ghosts* (1993), which once again features Montgomery, this time after his release from prison, when he is living on a desolated island and cataloging works of art. The third novel in Banville's trilogy, *Athena* (1995), has a protagonist named Morrow, who may actually be Montgomery in disguise.

In 1995, the Irish Press halted production and Banville lost his job. He accepted a position as a

subeditor at the *Irish Times*. In 1998, he became the newspaper's literary editor, a position he held until the following year, when the newspaper was facing economic difficulties and offered Banville a financial settlement in returning for giving up his job.

In 1997, Banville published *The Untouchable* (1997). By entering the mind of protagonist Victor Maskell, a character based on real-life art curator turned spy Anthony Blunt, the novel examines self-abnegation and betrayal. In 2000, Banville turned to gothic suspense in *Eclipse* and continued this literary style in *Shroud* (2003). In the twenty-first century, Banville adopted the pseudonym Benjamin Black to write more mainstream mystery novels, using this name to publish *Christine Falls* (2006), a novel that received both critical and popular approval. Set in the dreary Roman Catholic Dublin of the 1950's, it relates how amateur sleuth Dr. Garret Quirke investigates the suspicious death of an unwed mother and the disappearance of her infant. Banville subsequently wrote two other mystery novels, *The Silver Swan* (2007) and *The Lemur* (2008), under the Benjamin Black pseudonym.

Banville has received numerous awards for his work, including the Allied Irish Banks Prize for *Birchwood*, a Macaulay Fellowship from the Irish Arts Council, the American-Irish Foundation Literary Award for *Birchwood* in 1976, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *Doctor Copernicus* in 1976, and the *Guardian* Prize for Fiction for *Kepler* in 1981. In 2005, he received the Man Booker Prize for his novel *The Sea* (2005).

## ANALYSIS

A master of intricacy, Banville is highly regarded for his experimental, precise—some would say detached—prose style that has been described by critics as beautiful, lyric, innovative, original, haunting, dazzling, acute, clear-running, and flawlessly flowing. He often presents a series of interwoven narratives, instead of the more traditional chronological linear form, to unravel an intricate plot line that invariably has an unpredictable ending; for this reason, Banville has been compared to such illustrious Irish authors as Samuel Beckett and James Joyce. His plot structures are evocative of complex paintings wherein one must look beyond the surface time and time again to decipher the meaning. Indeed, many of Banville's characters are in some way connected with painting, a meta-

phor Banville uses as one of his numerous intertextual repetitions from novel to novel. For example, Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* becomes an art thief obsessed with a seventeenth century Dutch painting, Victor Maskell in *The Untouchable* is an art curator, and Morrow in *Athena* is an art historian, as is Max Morden in *The Sea*.

Banville, whose novels thematically deal with deep personal loss, destructive love, and the excruciating psychic pain that accompanies freedom, has been called a postmodern writer for his play on words, his chronologically inconsistent narration, and his unnerving blurring of the truth. He insists that his writings have a greater chance of being fully understood if they are treated as a form of metafiction in the style of Beckett, the existentialist Irish author who haunts Banville's works. A master of irony, above all Banville is concerned with the relationship between fiction and reality. Although at times the reader can believe what Banville's first-person narrators are telling them, they are later jerked back into the reality that they are reading a work of fiction, and that the narrator is not only unreliable but quite possibly mad, or at least in a state of deep denial.

Like Beckett, Banville remains fluid in his evocative descriptions of landscapes and flows throughout a variety of settings and historical times that initially seem to be unrelated. As in the work of Beckett, everything is unpredictable and often what is passed off as narrative truth is distorted, or indeed a lie. One of the author's overarching concerns is the idea that despite readers' belief that everything they read is indeed real, they simultaneously understand that fiction is also "a parcel of lies." In this regard, readers learn quickly not to trust Banville because what he confides in his readers is not necessarily the truth, and the truth is something they may not learn until they turn the last page of the book.

Banville has often been compared to the novelist Vladimir Nabokov for his depiction of darkly introspective protagonists, similar to Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), who kidnaps his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter and inadvertently gets tangled up in a murder. Instead of being heroes, Banville's protagonists tend to be dark, brooding antiheroes who almost invariably appreciate art. For instance, in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery is a failed scientist without a

conscience who abandons his wife and child in Greece and murders a woman simply because she got in his way. Max Morden in *The Sea*, whose name is reminiscent of the word “mordant,” is caustic, conceited, and downright mean.

Banville’s works are dense in literary and philosophical allusions, with the author paying particular homage to Marcel Proust, Joyce, Fyodor Dostoevski, and the philosopher Immanuel Kant. For example, in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery catalogs the things that bother him about prison, in particular the smell and the food. In this, Banville hails the French writer and philosopher Proust, who wrote about the interplay of meditation on the relationship between memory and imagination in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927; (*Remembrance of Things Past*, 1922-1931, 1981). The restless wandering Freddie describes is evocative of Ulysses returning home to Ithaca, and, one removal from that allusion, Leopold Bloom’s wandering around Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). The murder scene and Freddie’s subsequent descent into madness are evocative of Dostoevski’s *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye* (1866; (*Crime and Punishment*, 1886), in which Raskolnikov murders the old pawnbroker in a botched theft. Like William Shakespeare’s character Lady Macbeth, Freddie scrubs and scrubs but cannot remove Josie Bell’s blood. Freddie also remarks how he feels like a dangerous and unpredictable stranger, like the murderer in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Throughout *The Book of Evidence*, Banville also invokes philosopher Kant’s “thing-in-itself” in his numerous references to Freddie’s “other self.”

## THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE

**First published:** 1989

**Type of work:** Novel

*This mystery novel examines the mind of a deranged drifter, who writes an account of the murder he committed and the mental consequences of his crime.*

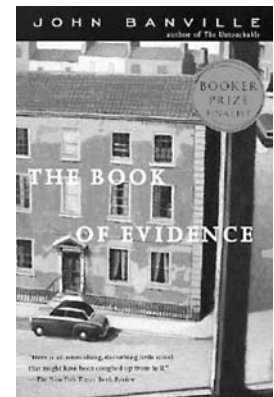
After abandoning his wife and son, thirty-eight-year-old Freddie Montgomery has returned to his

native Dublin, committed a yet-to-be-revealed and heinous crime, and finds himself incarcerated, awaiting trial in a dark and dirty Dublin jail. The novel, which is partially based on an actual unsolved case of art theft and murder in Britain, begins as Freddie, the first-person narrator, starts to write his confession, or his book of evidence. This beginning forces such questions as what crime did Montgomery commit, or indeed whether or not he actually committed a crime. What are his reasons for abandoning his family? Why did he return to Ireland? What happened to his career as a scientist? What is his purpose in writing this book of evidence? How did he come so far down in the world?

After a few moments spent in the company of his eerie, somnambulant voice, the reader begins to wonder whether or not Freddie Montgomery is even sane. As an antidote to uncertainty, Freddie believed that science would provide answers, only to find greater uncertainty. Since the story is revealed out of chronological order, in a sort of interior meditation before a flashback, the reader is forced to read the “evidence,” as would a judge, bit by slow revealing bit.

Freddie writes of his travels to the United States to complete his scientific studies and how he meets Daphne, who accompanies him to Spain, where he falls in with a rough drug runner named Randolph. After ten years, he flees Spain and returns to Dublin. Upon his return, he gravitates to a notorious pub named Wally’s, where he encounters an old friend, Charlie French, from whom he learns of his father’s death. In need of money, Freddie wonders what happened to the paintings his father collected and is particularly concerned about a painting by Jan Vermeer. He makes his way to Coolgrange to see his mother, but he is not welcome. His mother realizes Freddie is only interested in selling the paintings. He is furious when he finds them missing.

During a visit to the estate of his friend, Anna Behren, Freddie spies the Vermeer painting, *Por-*



*trait of a Woman with Gloves*. He returns to the estate to steal the painting but bungles the theft, kills a female servant, and subsequently hides out in Charlie French's house, where the vision of the bloodied Josie Bell soon begins to haunt him. He questions how he came to be trapped inside a body not his own. Readers should keep in mind that Freddie is not trustworthy, and thus what he is writing in his book as evidence for his case cannot be trusted.

Visitors to Charlie's house more than likely inform the police of Freddie's whereabouts and he is sent off to jail. His lawyer wants him to plead guilty to manslaughter but Freddie is insistent that he must admit his guilt. His book of evidence then becomes a tool for redemption, a way for Freddie to expiate his soul. However, the final line of the novel, written in response to the police inspector's question about whether the content of the book is true, and Freddie's chilling response that all of it and none of it and "only shame," should be considered before the reader passes judgment.

In a subsequent Banville novel, *Ghosts*, Freddie reappears on a desolated island to welcome a shipwrecked community, in the style of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623). In *Athena*, the reinvented Freddie has moved from scientist to art thief to an art historian named Morrow.

## THE SEA

**First published:** 2005

**Type of work:** Novel

*An aging man attempts to forget his present unpleasant circumstances by escaping into his past.*

At the beginning of *The Sea*, first-person narrator Max Morden, an aging art historian, stands looking out to sea, which throughout the novel acts as an anchoring point between the past and the present. After losing his wife Anna to cancer, Max feels the compulsion to return to Ballyless, the site of an important childhood summer. It was in this seaside village that he first encountered the sophisticated Grace family and fell in love with both daughter and mother. The children, web-footed Myles and Chloe Grace, are psychically connected

twins. Their mother, Connie Grace, is beautiful, and their father, Carlo Grace, represents the god Bacchus—drunk, fat, all-seeing, and fully aware that the pubescent Max is smitten with his wife. The family travels with a teenage governess named Rose. Since Max's own home life is a shambles, he spends every minute he can with the fascinating family. Sandwiched in between his recollections of his distant past are Max's memories of a more recent event, the prolonged death of his wife Anna.

After fifty years, Max finds that the Grace's summerhouse, called the Cedars, has become a boardinghouse run by a Miss Vavasour. In an attempt to grapple with his memories and mourn his loss, he rents a room there. Despairing of ever finishing his monograph on the artist Pierre Bonnard, he has come to live among the rabble of his past, as he puts it, and ponder the idea that by devoting as much time as possible to recollection, he can perhaps live his life over. He drinks heavily.

Max soon realizes that the past is indeed not wholly what one remembers, the present is not entirely what one thinks, and the line between remembrance and creation is thin. Banville insists that memories are illusions. Like many of Banville's narrators, Max says that everything is something else, and he is correct. In time, Max realizes that his memories are mere perceptions and are recalled invariably in error. He recollects the first kiss he shared with Chloe; the surging sexual excitement when her mother opened her lap; the sad events surrounding the Graces when the twins drowned. He also understands that his life with his photographer wife Anna also was fraught with illusion.

In time, it becomes clear that Miss Vavasour is really the teenage governess Rose and that the affair Max imagined between Mr. Grace and Rose was really an affair between Mrs. Grace and Rose. For Max, everything in his life has been something else, which explains his failure, or perhaps his inability, to ever fully connect with another person.





**SUMMARY**

Considered among the best of Ireland's novelists, John Banville is highly regarded for his beautiful, precise, and lyrical prose style, his clever use of literary allusion, his dark humor, and his evocative philosophical ideas. His novels address deep personal loss, destructive familial love, the intense psychic pain that accompanies freedom, the illusionary aspect of human perception, and the inevitable isolation of the individual.

M. Casey Diana

**BIBLIOGRAPHY****By the Author****LONG FICTION:**

*Nightspawn*, 1971  
*Birchwood*, 1973  
*Doctor Copernicus*, 1976  
*Kepler*, 1981  
*The Newton Letter*, 1982 (novella)  
*Mefisto*, 1986  
*The Book of Evidence*, 1989  
*Ghosts*, 1993  
*Athena*, 1995  
*The Untouchable*, 1997  
*Eclipse*, 2000  
*Shroud*, 2003  
*The Sea*, 2005  
*Christine Falls*, 2006 (as Benjamin Black)  
*The Silver Swan*, 2007 (as Black)  
*The Lemur*, 2008 (as Black)

**SHORT FICTION:**

*Long Lankin*, 1970, revised 1984

**DRAMA:**

*The Broken Jug*, pb. 1994 (adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*)  
*God's Gift*, pb. 2000 (adaptation of Kleist's *Amphitryon*)

**SCREENPLAYS:**

*Reflections*, 1984 (adaptation of his *The Newton Letter*)  
*Birchwood*, 1986 (adaptation of his novel)  
*The Last September*, 1999 (adaptation of Elizabeth Bowen's novel)

**TELEPLAY:**

*Seaview*, 1994

**NONFICTION:**

*Prague Pictures: Portraits of a City*, 2003

**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- As readers we are primed to believe everything the narrator tells us. Consider whether the first-person narrator in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* is reliable. Can we believe his story?
- Banville's *The Book of Evidence* has been compared to Fyodor Dostoevski's *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye* (1866; *Crime and Punishment*, 1886). Compare Freddie Montgomery to Raskolnikov in their mental anguish, moral dilemma, and descent into madness following their crimes.
- How does self-doubt enter into the minds of narrator-protagonists Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence* and Max Morden in *The Sea*?
- Banville's first-person narrators have difficulty recollecting past events with precision. Discuss the idea of remembering versus creating.
- What, if any, are the similarities between Max Morden, the protagonist of *The Sea*, and Freddie Montgomery, the protagonist of *The Book of Evidence*?
- To what effect does Banville use literary and philosophical allusions?



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## JULIAN BARNES

**Born:** Leicester, England  
January 19, 1946

*Barnes, described as a postmodernist with nineteenth century sensibilities, writes novels that use nontraditional forms to examine complex ideas.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Julian Barnes was born in Leicester, England, on January 19, 1946, to Albert and Kaye Barnes, who were French teachers and avid gardeners. He and his older brother Jonathan were raised in a very controlled environment, with no parental arguments, a mild interest in politics and none in religion, and a daily reading of *The Times* by their tight-lipped father. There were no spontaneous outbursts of any kind and few displays of affection. Childhood enthusiasms were sometimes doused by measured responses, and even efforts to gain approval for literary accomplishments in later years were stymied by terse acknowledgments.

Barnes initially attended schools in the Leicester area. When he was ten years old, the family moved to a London suburb and he won a scholarship to a private boys' school. For seven years, he took the forty-five-minute train ride into the city, spending his commuting time doing his homework. He went on to study French and Russian at the City of London School and then psychology and philosophy at Magdalen College, Oxford, earning his B.A., with honors, in 1968.

At the time of his graduation from Oxford, Barnes was undecided about a career path. Inherent restlessness led him to intersperse several jobs with additional studies in contract law, but he doubted that the legal profession would engage

him for long. In 1969, he accepted a job as a lexicographer for the supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a position he found both fascinating and tedious. He joked that as one of few males in a female-dominated office, he was often relegated to writing entries on sports references and on unpleasant or suggestive words. One of his greatest delights was in reading through earlier entries and finding humor in the work of fellow lexicographers. For example, the definition of "net" was "an expanse of holes held together with string."

After three years, he was tired of his job and ready for a change. He devoted his days to writing, accepting freelance assignments when the opportunities arose. In 1977, he became assistant literary editor and television critic for the *New Statesman*, serving in the latter capacity until 1981. From 1979 until 1981, he was deputy literary editor for *Sunday Times*, and from 1982 until 1986, he was a television critic for *The Observer*. In 1990, he was hired as the London correspondent for *The New Yorker* magazine, staying in that position until 1995. He married a highly successful literary agent, Pat Kavanagh, in 1979.

Barnes is reticent and guarded about the personal details of his life. He prefers to be judged on his work rather than on his personality or way of living. Comments from fellow writers and friends, however, give some idea of his personal life. Barnes conveys an image of a strong, silent man, private and reserved, but he sometimes becomes raucous during sporting events. He loves most forms of competition and is particularly avid about football. His college years were not particularly happy because of his shyness and unwillingness to join in the drunken rowdiness often expected of undergradu-

ates. Domestic life, on the other hand, suits him well. He and his wife have created a home that resembles the orderliness of his childhood upbringing. While his wife and a gardener work on the flowers, he grows vegetables, often exotic ones. The couple entertain frequently, serving their guests favorite bottles from their wine cellar and asking that guest book signatures include sketched self-caricatures.

Barnes has received awards for his short and long fiction, as well as journalism. In the same year that he won the Somerset Maugham Prize for *Metroland* (1980), he also produced the first of four crime novels under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh that chronicle the exploits of a slightly sleazy, marginally racist, bisexual detective named Duffy. While not ashamed of this genre, Barnes confessed that the character of Duffy comes from a darker side of his brain and that he changed location and used a different typewriter when working on those books.

His second novel written under his own name, *Before She Met Me* (1982), met with some success. It was the third novel, however, that launched him on a long and distinguished career as one of England's major contemporary novelists. *Flaubert's Parrot*, published in 1984, was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. Additionally, Barnes had the honor of becoming the first English writer to win the Prix Médicis, a French literary award. He went on to receive the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1986, the Prix Gutenberg in 1987, the Premio Grinzane Cavour in 1988, the Prix Fémina for *Talking It Over* (1991) in 1992, and the Shakespeare Prize from the Alfred Toepfer Foundation in Hamburg, Germany, in 1993. In 1995, France honored him as an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres. His novels *England, England* (1998) and *Arthur and George* (2005) were short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, and *Talking It Over* and *Metroland* were adapted for film. Barnes even has a cookbook, *The Pedant in the Kitchen* (2003), to his credit.

## ANALYSIS

Julian Barnes has said that he writes fiction "to tell beautiful, exact, and well-constructed lies which enclose hard and shimmering truths," adding that "some people don't like finding ideas in a

novel" and have reacted "as if they've found a toothpick in a sandwich." He likes to leave his plots open and unresolved. His reputation for writing outside the bounds of tradition has earned him the label of being a postmodernist with nineteenth century sensibilities. He likes to experiment, seeing how much he can get away with before losing the thread of his story or the interest of his readers. The plot is always central but is often at the center of a web that includes many of the great social dilemmas, such as fidelity and infidelity, originality and imitation, reason and nonreason, art and life, and the past and the present. His books always question the reliability of memory and of historical truths purportedly gleaned from a past that is irretrievable. In Barnes's opinion, even autobiography is not much more than fiction, given its reliance on imperfect memory.

He explores opposites, believing that very little can be taken as true considering the constraints of what people are able to learn. Some things may be known, but what about the details that are not included—the small fish that escape the net of research? History is no less amorphous than memory. Even an "objective" historian selects parts of the past, and history, as well as memory, is always changing. Barnes hopes to bring about an awareness of the past as past, as irretrievable, and an acceptance of how ideas about the past have molded the present, which is the only reality, the only truth.

Barnes's novels cover a broad spectrum, from tales of escape and obsessions to weighty contemplations on the nature of art, death, religion, politics, and ethics. He views each new work as a separate entity, with its own characteristics and intent. He has said that at the start of any work, a writer has to be convinced that the enterprise is a departure for both the author and for the genre in general. He claims not to be overly concerned with wide acceptance or readership, though he appreciates being understood, having readers "get" him. Sometimes reading his works is a struggle, as they often encompass literary criticism, history, and psychology, in addition to telling a story. While it is possible to pinpoint certain themes in his works, Barnes resists the notion of having produced an oeuvre, joking that to be said to have one would mean that he is dead. He just writes one book after another. He rejects attempts on the part of critics to see what his books have in common.

Still, careful analysis yields some similar threads: obsession, in all its forms, love, infidelity, jealousy, the vagaries of the human heart, passions, inconsistencies, betrayal, and a search for authenticity in art and love and for constants in human relationships. He is often linguistically playful, experimenting with nontraditional narrative.

Many of his characters are driven by a need to seek answers to questions that might best be left unasked, to delve into the past, or to resolve real or imagined problems. Many of them are annoying, self-serving, unlikable. Barnes allows readers to be alone with his characters, to interact and roam freely through the narrative and then make up their own minds. He likes to stay out of the picture, tries to avoid mediating, and may not even have a narrator introduce a character. He keeps an authorial distance throughout.

## FLAUBERT'S PARROT

**First published:** 1984

**Type of work:** Novel

*A widowed, retired doctor yields to an obsession with Gustave Flaubert, in part to draw close to the French writer but in actuality to escape confronting his own personal failures.*

Barnes's first novel of note, *Flaubert's Parrot*, is a fictional biography of Gustave Flaubert, but only in the sense that it exposes the reader to some aspects of the French writer's personality and achievements. Barnes has likened his approach to the uncovering of an ancient tomb, where random holes are tunneled into the earth covering in an attempt to get a sense of the tomb before excavating and unsealing it. Barnes feels that such an approach might give the reader greater insight into the subject of the biography than a more traditional technique.

In large part, this novel follows the thoughts of the main character, Geoffrey Braithwaite, as he embarks on his mission to uncover the life of the esteemed Flaubert, attempting to separate fact from fiction, sometimes interpreting his findings to fit his own needs. Just as the human mind wanders, so does the narrative, with Braithwaite ruminating

about the problems inherent in writing biography, imagining arguments with Flaubert's critics, recalling rumors and innuendo about his subject, creating a few of his own scenarios, and gathering research materials, as well as telling the novel's story.

The book is a prime example of a story holding together seemingly disparate elements. It is divided into fifteen chapters, each a separate entity, but each shedding some light on either Flaubert or Braithwaite. It combines reality and fantasy, the natures of literary criticism and historical research, weighty ideas concerning the amorphousness of memory, and the impossibility of ever creating true history, all with an undercurrent of the main character's desperation as he attempts to explain his wife's faithlessness and suicide.

The first chapter sets up the premise of the novel, introducing Braithwaite, a doctor and amateur Flaubert scholar, who goes to France in search of the stuffed parrot that Flaubert was purported to have perched on his desk as a source of inspiration, his own personal muse, while writing "Un Coeur simple" ("A Simple Heart"). Braithwaite hopes that this talisman will bring him closer to the man who has figured heavily in his life, but to his dismay he learns of multiple "authentic" parrots. Still he perseveres in his mission.

Chapter 2 is a kind of free fall into the very nature of biography, or rather into the process of gathering and thinking about biographical materials. It has three chronologies, the first detailing Flaubert's triumphs, the second giving an account of his failures and disappointments, and the third listing the author's metaphorical references in his books. In another chapter, Braithwaite takes on literary critics who sometimes treasure small inconsistencies or mistakes in a work and create more furor than is warranted. He is particularly annoyed with one critic who faults Flaubert for changing Madame Bovary's eye color at least three times, not taking into consideration the impact of mood or temperament on eye intensity and shade.



Subsequent chapters deal with a mistress's accounting of her affair with Flaubert, an imagined train ride with the author, and the effects of the obscenity charges against him for writing *Madame Bovary* (1857; English translation, 1886). There are also two chapters on Braithwaite, one entitled "Dictionary of Accepted Ideas," and another in which he finally fulfills his awkward and hesitant promises to let the reader in on his full story. He acknowledges that in following his obsession, he may have been avoiding thinking about his wife, her many infidelities, and her suicide. The last chapter is an impossibly convoluted and all-encompassing final examination on Flaubert, his times, and prevailing philosophies, to be administered to students and collected at the end of three hours. Thus, Barnes ends the book with a last laugh.

## ENGLAND, ENGLAND

**First published:** 1999

**Type of work:** Novel

*An entrepreneur who wants to have one last stab at everlasting fame creates a virtual England, a kind of Disneyland where replicas of all the tourist attractions are featured in close proximity, in a pristine setting, to make the British experience much nicer for tourists.*

Another well-received novel, this one more traditional than *Flaubert's Parrot*, *England, England* deals with the themes of what is authentic, what is unreal or a replica, what the nature of "Englishness" might be, and with the idea that anything can become a commodity, even history. It is an angry satire in three distinct parts. The opening and closing segments deal with Martha Cochran, first as a young girl of promise and later as a beaten-down, tired, disillusioned woman returned through a fablelike set of circumstances to preindustrial England.

The middle section depicts Martha when she is an ambitious manager, working for Sir Jack Pitman, a billionaire who is making one last bid for immortality, having already gained everything he needed in life. He is counting on adding to his fortunes to sate his need for power and wealth. He

purchases the Isle of Wight and constructs a theme park, a regional Disneyland that has all the major and cultural attractions of England: Buckingham Palace in half-scale, Robin Hood confined to a single forest (his bad deeds taking a backseat to his good ones), a double-decker bus, a black cab, warm beer, Anne Hathaway's cottage, Devonshire cream teas, the Manchester United soccer team, the white cliffs of Dover, and the Battle of Britain reenacted at regular intervals. Visitors can go to the Tower of London and stop for shopping and lunch at Harrod's department store on the top floor.

The park makes inconvenient locales more convenient, with no wasted money, no long-distance travel, no ill-kempt people, streets, or buildings to offend the affluent traveler. It is a place where actors are much gentler than their real counterparts. The featured lunch with Samuel Johnson is scrapped when the actor who depicts Johnson proves to be too closely modeled after the original in a certain boorishness of personality. He smells, has poor table manners, is depressing, irritable, asthmatic, makes fun of participants' homelands, and sulks.

In constructing this England, the architects need to deconstruct. Pitman's intent is to create a past that is more palatable to modern tastes by making everything more pleasant, conveniently located, easier to experience. He believes that replicas become more real than the actual thing. People are happy as long as they are never subjected to something they do not already know. The park is more in tune with the conventions of the day, having a well-balanced ethnicity, no gender bias, and no offensive inhabitants. In other words, the replica becomes the real, the preferred history. This is history remade; simulacra takes the place of reality and copies supplant originals.

## SUMMARY

Julian Barnes's writing is precise, playful, always intelligent, always presenting opposites, and always



intended to present readers with ideas rather than answers. He attempts to stay outside of the picture—an absent observer of his characters' interplay. He finds this distance essential to his stated goal of having his readers identify with and assume a one-on-one relationship with his characters. He has said there is a thin membrane between the reader and his characters, and he hopes with each new work to make that separation thinner.

In being both traditional and very much outside the norm, Barnes is difficult to classify and has gained respect as an intellectual, a commander of language, an artist with astute vision of life's absurdities, and an original. He is derivative of no one, least of all himself.

Gay Pitman Zieger

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Julian Barnes wants readers to become involved with his characters. What methods does he use to break down the gap between readers and the book they are reading?
- Barnes attempts to maintain authorial distance in his works. What is his reason for doing this?
- Support the claim that Barnes is a post-modernist with his heart in the nineteenth century.
- What effect does Barnes aim to achieve in his nontraditional approach to fiction?
- Barnes is an intellectual, a novelist of ideas. In what ways do his books show his proclivity toward dealing with real problems?
- Barnes deals with opposites, with the two sides to every story. What impact does he hope this duality will have on his readers? What response is he hoping for?



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## CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

**Born:** Paris, France

April 9, 1821

**Died:** Paris, France

August 31, 1867

*Baudelaire's innovative use of poetic imagery in Flowers of Evil laid the stylistic groundwork for the Symbolist poets, while his prose poems expanded the form of poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (boh-d-LEHR) was born on April 9, 1821, in Paris, France. His father, François Baudelaire, was thirty-four years older than his mother, Caroline Dufayis. Born in 1759, François was ordained a priest prior to the French Revolution but was compelled to renounce his clerical order in 1793, the year of the most intense persecution of the clergy. François was already sixty years old at the time of his marriage to Caroline and he died in 1827 when their only child, Charles, was not yet six years old. The poet's father left him a heritage of Catholic faith that may have influenced both the moral preoccupations and the choice of imagery in Charles's later work and a financial inheritance that would come into Charles's control when he turned twenty-one. This money guaranteed the poet minimal subsistence in his adult years but became the source of a bitter dispute between him and his family.

After a year during which she devoted herself largely to her son, Caroline remarried in 1828. Her husband, Jacques Aupick, was very successful in his military career, rising eventually to the rank of general, but had virtually nothing in common with Charles, who resented Aupick's relationship with Caroline. Perhaps in rebellion against the authoritarian Aupick household, Baudelaire led an increasingly bohemian lifestyle in Paris. He had won

prizes for his studies at the Collège Louis-le-Grand but was dismissed from it on disciplinary grounds. After earning his *baccalauréat*, he was supposed to study law but turned instead to the various temptations of Paris.

Fearing that when Baudelaire came into his inheritance in 1842 he would quickly squander it, his family sought to separate him from his Parisian companions. In May, 1841, he was forced to embark from Bordeaux on a voyage that would keep him out of France until the following February. The ship aboard which Baudelaire took passage was bound for India, but after a particularly rough rounding of the Cape of Good Hope, he abandoned it at the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. After two months on this island and the neighboring Reunion, Baudelaire found passage on a ship returning to France. While this trip had been involuntary and Baudelaire returned from it as soon as possible, the exotic, tropical images he had encountered would play a central role in his subsequent poetry.

Back in France, Baudelaire justified his family's fears. During the two years following his coming-of-age, he spent much of the money that his father had left him and contracted numerous debts. To protect him from absolute poverty, his family instituted a legal procedure to have him effectively declared a minor and incapable of handling his own financial affairs. While this arrangement did preserve for Baudelaire a modest income from his remaining funds, he greatly resented this curtailment of his freedom. His correspondence for many years is filled with bitterness toward the law-

yers administering his estate and pleas to his mother for additional money.

Soon after his return from his travels, Baudelaire began a lengthy affair with Jeanne Duval, a onetime actress of mulatto Caribbean origins, whose exotic appearance may have reminded him of his memories of Africa. Given his mother's ardent opposition to this relationship, there was no question of Baudelaire marrying Jeanne. They stayed together for a number of years, but even after their eventual separation, Baudelaire sent money to Jeanne when his meager resources permitted it. Duval survived Baudelaire. The last record of her comes from a friend of Baudelaire's, who recorded seeing her on a Paris street in 1870, obviously suffering from poverty and ill health. She was probably crippled by the same venereal disease that Baudelaire had contracted even before his departure for India.

How much of Baudelaire's physical suffering came from his syphilis and how much from the unhealthy conditions in which he lived is impossible to determine. Indeed, the two causes were linked because, unlike his contemporary, the novelist Gustave Flaubert, who suffered from the same illness but had numerous medical contacts, Baudelaire was never able to afford treatment for his disease. The chief form of his suffering, documented in his letters, concerned digestive complaints. His diet, however, was never healthy and often simply inadequate.

Living on what he regarded as a pittance from his inheritance and only occasional income from his writings, Baudelaire could afford no more than a series of rooms in residential hotels. He moved often, at one point six times in the course of barely a month, to avoid his creditors. In addition, Paris at that time lacked central heating, and there was often no money for firewood. Baudelaire wrote of one three-day period during a particularly cold December, when he spent the entire three days in bed as the only means of warming himself. Restaurants would extend only limited credit, and he had no other access to food. Even when he had money for food, however, much of it went to buy wine or opium.

Given the circumstances of his life, Baudelaire's ill health is understandable. What has amazed his readers is that, amid this stress and discomfort, he was able to produce a literary work that stands as a

milestone in modern literature. His poetry was not initially accepted. While a number of individual poems had been welcome in periodicals, the first collected edition, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857, 1861, 1868; *Flowers of Evil*, 1931), was suppressed in 1857 when a famous lawsuit attacked its immorality. Eventually, all but six of its poems reached the public in a second edition of 1861, together with a large number of new works that have made the second edition the standard version now generally reprinted with the censored poems as an appendix.

Baudelaire yearned for acceptance as a poet, but during the height of his poetic productivity, he was read as an art critic for his commentaries on the annual Salons, the art exhibitions. When he died in Paris on August 31, 1867, at the age of only forty-six, his fame and influence were just beginning.

## ANALYSIS

In terms of the evolution of literary style, Baudelaire was very much a man of his time, but his time was one of transition. The Romantic poets of the generation before him had taken the essential first steps to free poetic expression from neoclassical constraints. Victor Hugo declared in his 1829 preface to *Les Orientales* (1829; *Les Orientales: Or, Eastern Lyrics*, 1879) that "the poet is free." Hugo linked poetic expression to political liberty, a public dimension of the poet's role that Baudelaire would not follow, but he also adopted the varied poetic forms and wide range of nature images that would provide Baudelaire with the building blocks of his own style. Later, Symbolist poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé would in turn draw on Baudelaire's work to create a more complex and abstract poetic style. Later still, after Sigmund Freud transformed the view of the human mind, psychologists would explore subjective resonances of the images that Baudelaire had raised to the role of symbols. Baudelaire provided the link between two very distinct forms of expression.

The concept of "symbol," as it was to evolve in the works of the Symbolist poets, differs greatly from the allegorical use of an image to represent one, specific, other idea. Allegory has been a rich form of expression since even before Christian tradition began to posit a link between bread and wine (the objects) and the body and blood of Christ (the idea represented). With the effusive nature

description of the Romantic poets, quantities of images multiplied, but their applications remained simple. Alphonse de Lamartine's poem "Le Lac" ("The Lake") repeatedly invoked nature through lists of images—"Oh lake! mute rocks! grottoes! shadowy forest!"—but these objects represented only their own role in the scene that he described.

With his sonnet "Correspondances" ("Correspondences"), Baudelaire defined a new way of seeing objects in nature. The poem opens with the assertion that a voice within nature speaks: "Nature is a temple where living pillars/ Sometimes let forth confused words." Although the description of nature as a temple posits some form of religious revelation, the "confused words" that issue forth from it are not at once intelligible. They are symbols that must be interpreted: "Man passes through forests of symbols."

The reader is left to wonder how to interpret the mysterious symbols, but in these lines Baudelaire has provided a key. The image of the forest joins the "living pillars" of the first line to clarify that the living trees of the forest provide the pillars of nature's temple. Images that share a physical resemblance, trees and pillars, fuse to form a new concept, that of the place of worship displaced to the outdoors. The "correspondences" of the poem lie in the ways that various things resemble one another. The poet, who can perceive these affinities, can understand the mysterious unity of nature: "Like long echoes that fuse in the distance/ Into a dark, deep unity." The first similarity noted in the poem, that of trees and pillars, is based on their visually observed forms. Now, Baudelaire changes to a fusion of sounds as the echoes merge, and the sestet of his sonnet finds affinities in perfumes. This appeal to diverse senses characterizes Baudelaire's verse, where perfumes, especially, play a major role.

The most important function of the senses, however, lies in their interrelationships: "Perfumes, colors and sounds answer each other." The verb "to answer," with its implication of spoken language, recalls the "confused words" through which nature originally communicated. In the sense in which "response" implies exchange between participants, however, the verb posits a similarity between the messages of the senses. Thus, with "there are

perfumes as fresh as the flesh of children/ Sweet as oboes, green as fields," the perfumes are in turn likened to the texture of children's skin, the sound of oboes, and the color of fields. For Baudelaire, the perception of these messages of the senses, messages "containing the expansion of infinite things," allows the poet to understand mysteries hidden to the casual observer.

The role of the poet at this point is crucial. Baudelaire shared with many of his contemporaries the concept of the poet as a person of uncommon insight, whose perceptions went far beyond those of the masses. Attaining this vision, however, resulted from painful experience. Baudelaire's version of this suffering closely parallels the Fall of Man, as the poet, led astray from the beauties of the world largely by temptations associated with women, discovers that he has lost his transcendent vision.

A second sonnet much later in *Flowers of Evil*, "Obsession," returns to the images of "Correspondences" but in a much more negative context. The temple of nature remains, but it terrifies the poet: "Great woods, you terrify me like cathedrals." Conscious of his fallen state, the poet now flees those elements in nature that offer meaning: "How you would please me, oh Night, without these stars/ Whose light speaks a known language." The language of the stars testifies to what he has lost. Another sonnet documenting the poet's recognition of his fall places the reason for it clearly on his own debauchery. In "L'Aube spirituelle" ("Spiritual Dawn"), the enlightenment of his spirit corresponds to dawn awakening a reveler: "When in the house of debauchery the white and crimson dawn/ Enters together with the gnawing Ideal." The memory of the Ideal torments him, because it has now become "the unreachable azure."

The contrast between the spiritual ideal and fallen man parallels the radiant imagery that Baudelaire adopted from his trip of 1841 set against the depression of his life in Paris. Opposing images contrast the two ideas: "The sun has blackened the flame of the candles" (from "Spiritual Dawn"), but the dynamic element is the interaction between the two. The sun of the Ideal serves to darken the candles that light the debauchery.

## “THE TRIP”

**First published:** “Le Voyage,” 1861  
(collected in *The Flowers of Evil*, 2006)

**Type of work:** Poem

*After retracing the frustration of the journey of his life, the poet posits the ultimate new beginning in the departure of death.*

Baudelaire wrote “The Trip” in 1859, and in 1861 he added this poem to the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*; he found in it the ideal poem with which to conclude this work. The overall structure of *Flowers of Evil* is loosely autobiographical, beginning with the birth of the poet in the initial “Bénédiction” (“Benediction”) and progressing through the emotional; the work also addresses the spiritual experiences of his life. “The Trip” begins again with the poet’s childhood and serves as a final summary of the work before it offers a new, concluding hope.

The initial image is that of the child who can travel only in his imagination: “For the child who loves maps and engravings/ The universe satisfies his vast appetite.” Yet immediately, the voice of the poet’s experience intrudes to declare that this naïve enjoyment surpasses the reality of actual travel: “Oh how big the world is in lamplight/ How small the world is in the eyes of memory.” The contrast of the vast and narrow perceptions of the world coincides with Baudelaire’s dual vision. The poet perceives the vastness, while the fallen man sees the world close in around him.

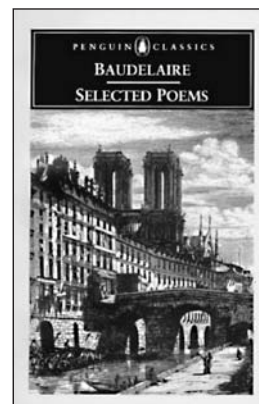
The first section of the poem narrates a joyful departure: “One morning we leave, our minds enflamed.” While the experience seems quite comfortable, the travelers find their will lulled to sleep: “Rocking our infinite nature on the finite seas.” The physical limits of the ocean are contrasted this time with the unlimited potential of the human soul, lulled into unconsciousness. Baudelaire’s choice of the verb “to rock” recalls his prefatory poem to *Flowers of Evil*, “Au Lecteur” (“To the Reader”), where the devil rocks the human soul before seducing it down to hell. As if this analogy were not warning enough, the following quatrain introduces the image of Circe, the seductress who sought to lure Ulysses to his doom in Homer’s *Ody-*

*sey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614). In “The Trip,” however, Circe represents the danger inherent in all women, as men are “drowned in the eyes of a woman/ Tyrannical Circe with her dangerous perfumes.”

A technique basic to Baudelaire’s symbolism involves the progressive refinement of the definition of his central images as the same object or idea is repeated in varied contexts. In this final poem of his collection, much of the vocabulary has already acquired multiple connotations through previous usage. Thus, the woman’s eyes and dangerous perfumes have become negative in the sense of contributing to the poet’s seduction but remain positive in the appeal of their beauty. Such ambiguities caused the confusion that led the poet to lose sight of his ideal.

The travelers recognize the danger inherent in Circe, and “so as not to be changed into beasts, they become drunk/ On space and light and burning skies.” To avoid the woman’s domination, the “being changed to beasts” that threatened Ulysses and his crew, they become drunk. Yet this drunkenness, too, has been predefined in Baudelaire’s lexicon as a source of danger. Already in “Benediction” the child-poet “disinherited becomes drunk on sunlight” as he enters the hazardous world, and the clustering of images of sun and drunkenness has been in several poems linked to dangers. Thus, while “The Trip” recapitulates to some extent the life of the poet, it draws on the poems that have gone before to give very precise definitions to its terms.

The central segment of the poem narrates the voyage, first, in part 2, still in Baudelaire’s voice, and then in parts 3 through in a dialogue between the naïve child and the experienced travelers. In response to the child’s repeated questions, the travelers finally declare that all that they have seen has been “the boring spectacle of immortal sin.” Again, the language carries multiple meanings. While sin, especially oft-repeated, may indeed be boring, “Boredom” was also the name of the mon-





ster who, in “To the Reader,” seduced men into losing their souls. Parts 7 and 8 return to the poet’s own voice, providing in these two final sections a symmetry with the two opening sections of the poem. Baudelaire’s conclusion concerns that “bitter knowledge that is gained from travel,” and he compares the long frustration of travel to the story of the Wandering Jew. After relying on his own symbol vocabulary in the earlier parts of the poem, Baudelaire now expresses himself through traditional myth.

His last scene, paralleling the earlier use of Circe, is that of the Lotus Eaters, another of the perils that faced Ulysses. Their song invites the poet once again, “Come to get drunk,” but he recognizes the danger: “By the familiar accent we recognize the specter.” This ghost is that of the seductive woman: “Swim toward your Electra! / Says the woman whose knees we used to kiss.”

The voyage ends with the poet seemingly alone, though he still speaks in a plural “we” that potentially incorporates all humankind. In the final section, composed of only two quatrains, the poet invites death: “Oh Death, old captain, it is time! raise the anchor! / This country bores us, oh Death! Let us set sail!” The maritime imagery redefines death. It will be a departure like any other, and as such it is nothing to be feared.

The vocabulary continues to draw on Baudelaire’s previous usage, where sea voyages have been numerous and “boredom” has acquired multiple associations. Similarly, the next lines draw on the contrasts of light and darkness that have characterized Baudelaire’s dual view of the world—“If the sky and the sea are as black as ink, / Our hearts, you know, are filled with light”—and his call for poison in the last quatrain repeats another recurring motif. This repetition of the familiar seems to reassure the reader that there is nothing new in this latest voyage.

## “BY ASSOCIATION”

**First published:** “Parfum exotique,” 1857  
(collected in *The Flowers of Evil*, 2006)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A woman’s perfume inspires the poet to see a vision of an earthly paradise.*

“By Association” details one of the many forms of departure that tempted Baudelaire throughout *Flowers of Evil* prior to his ultimate departure in “The Trip.” The poem was published in the 1857 edition of *Flowers of Evil*, as well as in the 1861 edition, where it was situated between two other poems, “Hymne à la Beauté” (“Hymn to Beauty”) and “La Chevelure” (“The Head of Hair”), on the general subject of the beauty of women. “By Association” also exemplifies Baudelaire’s technique of developing both ideas and imagery through a sequence of related poems.

“Hymn to Beauty” addresses beauty in general, though clearly in female form, and reflects the dualism that Baudelaire recognized in this subject. The opening lines, “Do you come from deep heaven or from the abyss / Oh Beauty?” recognize the danger of woman. Yet by the end of the poem, the poet willingly takes whatever risk that he must: What does it matter, if you—velvet-eyed fairy / Rhythm, perfume, light, my only queen—you make the universe less ugly and time less heavy?” The attributes that Baudelaire ascribes to the woman reflect her duality. The allusions to “rhythm, perfume, light” recall the multiple sensory stimuli that contributed to the poet’s vision in “Correspondences.” Yet the reference to her eyes, the instruments by which women often overpower the poet elsewhere in *Flowers of Evil*, alludes to her potential dominance and links this poem to the one that is to follow.

“By Association” begins with the poet’s eyes closed, in contrast to those of the woman, which are presumably open: “When with closed eyes on a warm autumn evening / I breathe the odor of your warming breast.” The poet’s closed eyes imply that he is abandoning himself to the sensations provided by the perfume, sensations that still evoke, as they had in “Correspondences,” a visionary experience: “I see stretched out before me happy shores /



Dazzled by the fires of a monotone sun.” The vision, drawing on the suggestion of “exotique” in the title of the sonnet, conjures a setting frequent in Baudelaire’s imagery. The “shores” suggest a sea voyage, while the dazzling sun suggests a tropical destination.

Dangers lurk even in this idyllic landscape. The sun described as “monotone” recalls Baudelaire’s negative “boredom,” and the second quatrain describing “a lazy island” anticipates the Lotus Eaters of “The Trip.” The island is also inhabited by “women whose eyes astonish by their frankness.” Yet the poet does not take warning from the power expressed in the women’s eyes. The sestet describes an earthly paradise to which he is “guided by your perfume.” In describing this paradise, Baudelaire briefly abandons the contradictory images that have rendered many of his visions ambiguous: “While the perfume of the green tamarind trees/ That circulates through the air and widens my nostrils/ Combines in my soul with the song of the sailors.” The fusion of perfume and music returns to the experience of “Correspondences.” This imaginative departure inspired by the woman continues in the following poem, “The Head of Hair,” where the perfume of her hair carries the poet as far as “languorous Asia and burning Africa.” Yet in the following, untitled poem “I adore you as the vault of night,” the danger of passion reappears, as Baudelaire realizes that his experiences with the woman “separate my arms from the blue immensity.”

Baudelaire’s linking of themes and development of ideas from poem to poem through *Flowers of Evil* invites the reader to approach the work as a unit, both for the story that it traces of the poet’s life and for the progressive development that it makes possible for his slowly evolving symbols.

## “THE SWAN”

**First published:** “Le Cygne,” 1861  
(collected in *The Flowers of Evil*, 2006)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Images of exile cause the poet to meditate on his own solitude.*

In “The Swan,” a poem appearing much later in *Flowers of Evil* than “By Association,” Baudelaire’s perspective has considerably evolved. Numerous disappointing experiences with women and other distractions have persuaded him that what he has lost through his dissipation has been of more lasting importance than what he has enjoyed. He now finds himself removed from his once-clear vision of his ideal.

The imagery of “The Swan” functions on two levels of complexity. The surface meaning remains deceptively simple. Baudelaire enumerates several examples of exile—Victor Hugo, Andromache, and the swan—and proposes them as simple analogies for his own separation from “old Paris.” Hugo’s name appears only in the dedication, but it would have been sufficient to remind the readers of Baudelaire’s time that Hugo was in exile on the island of Guernsey. Andromache appears in the poem as she was after the fall of Troy, widowed and captive in a strange land: “Andromache, I think of you! This little river/ Poor, sad mirror where once shone/ The immense majesty of your widow’s pain.” The sad mirror of the river reflects not only Andromache’s present suffering but also her former, happier life. The analogy of the river with the Seine, by which Baudelaire stands, “Suddenly fertilized” his “fertile memory,” and he regrets, as he walks by the place du Carrousel near the Louvre, that the city of Paris is changing around him. As he passes a place where “animals were once sold,” he meets “a swan that had escaped from its cage.”

With the appearance of the swan, the complexity of the imagery changes. The bird suffers superficially because, in strange surroundings not adapted to its needs, it cannot find water to drink: “Rubbing the dry pavement with his webbed feet/ On the rough ground dragged his white plumage/ By a dry gutter the beast open[ed] his beak.” Yet the wings dragging on the pavement convey the de-

gree to which this animal is out of place in its surroundings. Baudelaire imagines the emotions of the swan, “his heart filled with the beautiful lake of his birth.” The water that he needs is not merely what is necessary to drink but that of his homeland. The swan thus becomes the “strange and fateful myth” that figures Baudelaire himself. Yet Baudelaire remains in his native Paris. The nature of his exile becomes clear only through suggestions begun with the exotic webbed feet and “beautiful lake of his birth” of the swan that suggest the more tropical climates emblematic of Baudelaire’s ideal.

Baudelaire sees himself like “the man in Ovid,” an allusion to Ovid’s distinction that man looks toward heaven and animals toward earth. Yet he looks at “the ironic and cruelly blue sky,” cruel because it now mocks the poet’s futile aspiration. In the second part of the poem, Baudelaire repeats this revelation, detailing the suffering of each creature in exile and adding the image of the Negress: “I think of the skinny and consumptive Negress/ Tramping in the mud, and seeking, with haggard looks/ The absent coconut trees of proud Africa.” The plight of the woman, perhaps inspired by the example of Jeanne Duval, reinforces the haunting presence of tropical nature contrasted at the end of the poem with “the forest where my Spirit is exiled.”

### “A VOYAGE TO CYTHERA”

**First published:** “Un Voyage à Cythère,”  
1861 (collected in *The Flowers of Evil*,  
2006)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A traveler sees on the island of Cythera an  
emblem of his own fate.*

“A Voyage to Cythera” shows the full evolution of the motif of departure in Baudelaire’s work. In earlier poems, the poet shared the innocence exemplified by the child at the opening of “The Trip.” Thus, in “By Association” he saw no reason not to abandon himself to the imagined departure inspired by the woman’s perfume. “The Swan” reflects his recognition of separation from the ideal, but in a context of sadness rather than despair. The

images of death in “A Voyage to Cythera” finally document the extent of the poet’s fall.

Baudelaire borrowed the circumstances of this poem from a story that Gérard de Nerval had told of his own visit to Greece in his *Voyage en Orient* (1851; *Journey to the Orient*, 1972). The poem opens with the familiar scene of a happy sea voyage: “My heart, like a bird, fluttered joyfully/ And soared freely around the rigging.” The joyful bird representing the poet’s heart recalls the use of the same image in “Elévation” (“Elevation”), a poem at the beginning of *Flowers of Evil*, and serves to show from what heights the poet has fallen. Immediately, the imagery of this joyous scene suggests the fall: “The ship rocked under a cloudless sky/ Like an angel drunk on radiant sunlight.” The negative implication appears, not in the literal meanings of the words, but in special nuances that Baudelaire has attached to them. The rolling ship echoes the rocking action by which “Boredom” rocked humanity’s will, and the drunken angel recalls the angel of “Benediction” who observed the child’s drunkenness.

When the island of Cythera, once sacred to Venus, becomes visible to the travelers, it is devoid of its former charms, “proud ghost of the antique Venus.” Baudelaire recalls the island’s past, “Where the sighs of adoring hearts/ Roll like incense on a rose garden,” and the perfume recalls Baudelaire’s own seduction. Like Baudelaire, the island has changed. On its banks now stands a gibbet, upon which hangs the body of a man already being devoured by beasts of prey. Faced with this grotesque image, Baudelaire recognizes in it the emblem of his own condition: “On your island, oh Venus! I found standing/ Only a symbolic gibbet where hung my own image.” His spiritual death was linked to women, even as this man’s death was to the island that represented love. In his fallen state, the poet can only reach out to God: “Oh Lord! give me the strength and courage/ To contemplate my heart and body without distaste.” The strength for which he prays may indeed provide the courage with which he will face death in his ultimate departure in “The Trip.”

### SUMMARY

Charles Baudelaire’s personal evolution paralleled the evolution of his language. He came to recognize within his own life the signs of his spiritual

fall, and the reader learns to attach special nuances to his often-repeated images. These evocative emblems finally become complex literary symbols. Baudelaire's major achievement lay in part in the creation of this symbol vocabulary through which each object may convey much more than simply its own identity.

The corollary to Baudelaire's symbol system was to become as important as the symbol itself. He persuaded his readers to analyze meaning in a new way, a process that would become fundamental to modern poetry.

Dorothy M. Betz

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Consider the aptness of Charles Baudelaire's metaphor "forests of symbols."
- Baudelaire was very interested in the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Which seems more important to Baudelaire, Poe's musicality or his own use of symbols?
- How evil are Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*?
- How does a symbol differ from an allegorical image?
- The idea that nature is a temple is often found in the work of early nineteenth century poets. Distinguish Baudelaire's natural temple from those of American poets such as William Cullen Bryant and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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Archive Photos

## SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

**Born:** Paris, France  
January 9, 1908

**Died:** Paris, France  
April 14, 1986

*De Beauvoir was one of the twentieth century's most influential women, widely admired by feminists for her pioneering work, *The Second Sex*. She also was a distinguished essayist and memoirist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Simone de Beauvoir (duh boh-VWAHR) was born to an illustrious family that fell on financial hard times, with her father failing in a succession of business ventures. She grew up an awkward, bookish, and compulsively diligent adolescent. As a young woman she rebelled against both her mother's devoutly Catholic faith and bourgeois morality in general. At the Sorbonne she became a star student in philosophy and literature. Attending lectures at the École Normale Supérieure, she met Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom she formed a relationship that lasted until his death in 1980.

De Beauvoir and Sartre became not only lovers but also firm friends and literary, philosophic, and political partners. They initially decided on a "two-year lease" for their liaison, then renewed it for their lives. Each was free to take other lovers, but de Beauvoir availed herself sparingly of that privilege. Not so Sartre, for whom every woman was fair game. From the mid-1930's to the ends of their lives, de Beauvoir and Sartre were leaders of a changing group of students, friends, and lovers—a chosen rather than genetic family.

Through the 1940's and 1950's, existentialism was the most vital intellectual current in France, and Sartre and de Beauvoir were its chief proponents. She invariably went over his writing with him, arguing and clarifying ideas. In his appear-

ances around the world she was nearly always beside him, even in his later years, when they had moved somewhat apart emotionally and totally apart physically. Despite the frequent brilliance of her own writing, Parisian wits would call her *La Grande Sartreuse*. It may be argued that she derived her intellectual identity and self-esteem largely from their association, which established them as intellectual icons.

De Beauvoir's own production as a writer was prodigious. She published several novels, a play, philosophical texts, several volumes of memoirs, collections of essays, travel diaries, numerous periodical articles, and many introductions to books by others. Her novels are unimaginative and based on her own experiences; her philosophical works are provocative but sometimes lack originality; her accounts of her travels show the marks of haste and superficial knowledge of the countries visited; her self-exploratory series of autobiographies, however, are often eloquent and moving, as are her books on Sartre's declining years, *La Cérémonie des adieux* (1981; *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, 1984), on the onset of old age, *La Vieillesse* (1970; *The Coming of Age*, 1972), and on her mother's death, *Tout compte fait* (1972; *All Said and Done*, 1974). Her crowning achievement is her treatise on the oppression of women, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; *The Second Sex*, 1953).

De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* during her celebrated though intermittent affair with the American novelist Nelson Algren, her one great amorous passion. They met in 1947, when she was on a long

visit to the United States and while Sartre was conducting an intense involvement with a woman whom de Beauvoir detested. For several years de Beauvoir and Algren exchanged transatlantic visits. Yet Algren felt himself an alien in Paris, and de Beauvoir could not conceive of residing permanently in Chicago. Finally, fidelity to her primary relationship with Sartre won. After her breakup with Algren, she embittered him by describing their intimacy in her novel *Les Mandarins* (1954; *The Mandarins*, 1956), which she dedicated to him.

In 1952, after de Beauvoir and Algren had renounced their romance, she began a long liaison with Claude Lanzmann, seventeen years her junior, an ambitious journalist who later became a distinguished film director. Their bond, never as strong as that between her and Algren, survived as a friendship, with Lanzmann making the funeral arrangements after de Beauvoir's death.

In 1965, Sartre decided to adopt a young Algerian student, Arlette Elkaïm, without first having consulted de Beauvoir. The adoption conferred French citizenship on Elkaïm, making her immune to deportation, and made her the executor of his literary estate. De Beauvoir was enraged and humiliated. After Sartre's death, she and Elkaïm fought bitterly. Elkaïm once sent a letter to a journal in which she disparaged de Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre. The two women engaged in publishing duels over Sartre's notebooks (edited by Elkaïm) and his letters to de Beauvoir (issued by de Beauvoir).

De Beauvoir devoted the years after Sartre's death largely to traveling with her closest woman friend, Sylvie le Bon, and to writing a generous memoir of the last decade of Sartre's life. On March 20, 1986, she was hospitalized, suffering from cirrhosis of the liver, pulmonary edema, and pneumonia. On April 14, she died, one day short of six years after Sartre's death.

## ANALYSIS

France has a long tradition of women writers, such as Madame de La Fayette, Madame de Staël, George Sand, Colette, and Marguerite Duras. Simone de Beauvoir's work is perhaps most like that of Staël and Sand in terms of her preference for a large readership among her contemporaries and of her admission to the literary canon. De Beauvoir considered herself not to be a woman

writer but a writer who happened to be a woman. She never sought to develop a particularly feminine language and was more influenced by Émile Zola and Ernest Hemingway than by Colette or Virginia Woolf. Indeed, she defined herself largely by her differences from bourgeois women: She insisted on not becoming a wife, mother, homemaker, or follower of fashion.

Yet de Beauvoir wrote on, and did political work for, women's issues. She showed that a woman could perform with distinction in the areas of philosophy and political theory, fields traditionally dominated by men. She insisted that women should become linked to their work, just as men always had been. In her fiction, from *L'Invitée* (1943; *She Came to Stay*, 1949) through *Les Belles images* (1966; English translation, 1968), she dramatized situations in which women deny their freedom to be their authentic selves, using their sex as an excuse and distorting their sense of themselves in relation to husbands and lovers. While *Les Belles Images* and *La Femme rompue* (1967; *The Woman Destroyed*, 1969) have female protagonists, her early work includes central characters of both sexes, and in her long and ambitious novel *The Mandarins*, the four most important characters are three men and one woman.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir used existential notions of people's need to establish their freedom in a purposeless, absurd universe to encourage women to resign themselves no longer to the role of the weaker and inferior person in relation to a man. She sought to show that false myths concerning women's nature had been created by both men and women. This book has acquired landmark status, inspiring women's movements throughout the world and making de Beauvoir one of the symbolic leaders of contemporary feminism. In this book and in many other essays and interviews, she tirelessly addressed issues of concern to women, advocating equality with men and total sexual freedom. When she visited Egypt in 1967, de Beauvoir criticized the Egyptian government's failure to put into practice the sexual equality decreed by its constitution. When in Israel, she noted that Israeli women had equal responsibilities during the nation's wars but were largely relegated to lower-paying, menial jobs in peacetime. She did not hesitate to incur displeasure among her compatriots by hailing the humiliating French defeat by the North Vietnamese



at Dien Bien Phu, which ended France's role as a power in Indochina.

She asserted over and over again that her goal was to strip away the hypocrisies, prejudices, lies, and mystifications that prevented people from perceiving the truth. She sought to contribute to the intellectual and ethical elevation of humanity.

## THE SECOND SEX

**First published:** *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949  
(English translation, 1953)

**Type of work:** Treatise

*In a massive treatise, de Beauvoir describes women's historic victimization and advances feminist theories to establish women's equality with men.*

The text is divided into two parts. In part 1, the more academic section, de Beauvoir discusses instances of women being oppressed throughout history, from early nomadic societies until the surprisingly late grant of suffrage in France in 1947. She draws impressively from a wide range of disciplines, including biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, and, of course, history. She attempts to assess women's biological and historical circumstances and the myths by which these have been explained, denied, or distorted. She recognizes that men have been able to maintain dominant roles in virtually all cultures because women have resigned themselves to, instead of rebelling against, their assigned subordinate status.

*The Second Sex* has two major premises. First, that man, considering himself as the essential being, or subject, has treated woman as the unessential being, or object. The second, more controversial premise, is that much of woman's psychological self is socially constructed, with very few physiologically rooted feminine qualities or values. De Beauvoir denies the existence of a feminine temperament or nature—to her, all notions of femininity are artificial concepts. In one of her most telling aphorisms she declares, “One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes one.”

De Beauvoir derives her chief postulates from Sartre's philosophic work, *L'Être et le néant* (1943;

*Being and Nothingness*, 1947). In existentialist fashion, she argues that women are the sum of their actions. To be sure, a woman's situation is partly determined by menstruation and childbearing. She becomes human, rather than a “mere animal,” to the extent that she transcends her biological characteristics and assumes her liberty in a social context.

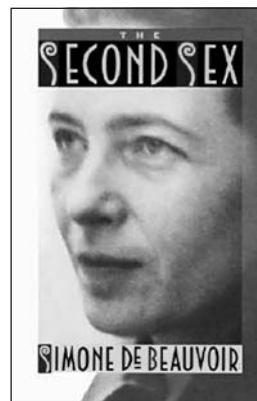
In part 2, de Beauvoir undertakes a sociological and psychological survey of women in the mid-twentieth century, concentrating on France and the United States. She analyzes the roles women widely adopt, seeing many of these roles (wife, mother, prostitute) as images that men have imposed on women. She deplores most marriages as demeaning to women, enslaving them in child-rearing and housekeeping tasks. Prostitution is a state of female enslavement. Only “kept” women—mistresses—have occasionally asserted free choices.

De Beauvoir describes her vision of a free woman who will find emancipation through meaningful work, thereby gaining equal standing with men. Economic freedom is, for de Beauvoir, the key to woman's emancipation. Unless a woman can

affirm her freedom by doing constructive work, she lives only marginally. The total liberation of women will come about, de Beauvoir insists, only with the establishment of an authentically socialist society as conceived by Karl Marx, since capitalism prevents proletarian women from finding satisfaction in their labor.

*The Second Sex* has received considerable negative

criticism for its bias against marriage and motherhood, its Marxism, its rejection of psychoanalysis, and its oversimplifications based on careless use of data. The study has nevertheless proved to be an inspirational text for countless women throughout the world and may well be the most powerful argument for women's rights to have appeared in the twentieth century.



## THE MANDARINS

**First published:** *Les Mandarins*, 1954  
(English translation, 1956)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This panoramic novel tells of a small group of leftist French intellectuals trying to remake their country between 1944 and 1950.*

This long, intricate novel, for which de Beauvoir received the prestigious Goncourt Prize in 1954, was her favorite. The book is part autobiography, part social and political history, and part love story. It is in many respects autobiographical, with the psychiatrist Anne Dubreuilh standing in for de Beauvoir. Anne has been married for twenty years to an older man, Robert (Sartre), an author who has assumed the role of a good, dependable friend. Anne also has a passionate affair with an American writer, Lewis Brogan (Nelson Algren). She has a troubled relationship with an adult daughter, Nadine, a composite of two of Sartre's young mistresses. Then there are the journalist Henri Perron (Albert Camus) and a dislikably truculent writer, Scriassine (Arthur Koestler).

The novel's complicated plot covers a wide range of personal and ideological issues and is too dense with events for a detailed summary. It begins by dramatizing the rapturous joy with which French intellectuals welcomed the liberation of Paris in 1944. Robert, Henri, and Anne soon become conscious of the political complexities of the postwar situation, and their ardent hopes of a better world are shattered in the next six years. Friendships that flourished during the German Occupation founder on ideological and personal recriminations as the Cold War begins to dominate European politics. Perron, editor of a liberal newspaper, hopes to remain unattached to any political party. Yet Robert Dubreuilh has founded an existentialist-revolutionary party and seeks the support of Perron's paper for his organization.

As the clear-cut choices of wartime give way to the ambiguous options of peacetime, several of the leading personages are drawn into dilemmas in which a simple ethic of right or wrong no longer holds valid. Perron, for example, perjures himself in court to save a woman of whom he is enamored

from being exposed as the former mistress of a Nazi officer—even though Perron is a Resistance hero. Robert Dubreuilh and Perron hold long conversations during which the formerly close friends find themselves increasingly polarized (as Sartre and Camus did), separated by Perron's militant anti-Stalinism and Dubreuilh's adherence to left-wing solidarity. Political power eludes these friends as they find themselves on the edge of social events instead of at their hub. Clearly the title, *The Mandarins*, can only be taken ironically.

Interwoven into the work's stories are several liaisons, of which the one between Anne Dubreuilh and Lewis Brogan is the most important. Based on the de Beauvoir-Algren attachment, it is not factually rendered. After Anne's affair with Lewis ends, she falls into deep depression and almost commits suicide. Through Anne's travails de Beauvoir seeks to depict a woman's problems of personal responsibility—to her husband, daughter, lover, profession, and self. These problems translate the intellectual and political difficulties of the male characters into emotional terms.

The novel falls short of its grand design because de Beauvoir lacks sufficient imaginative intensity and command of dialogue, tone, and style to enable her to transform her ideas into convincing art. Yet her high intelligence and breadth of historical perspective deserve praise.

## THE PRIME OF LIFE

**First published:** *La Force de l'âge*, 1960  
(English translation, 1962)

**Type of work:** Memoir

*This intellectual memoir describes de Beauvoir's life from 1929 to 1944.*

This is the second installment of de Beauvoir's autobiographical series. It begins on a note of relief at her emancipation from her rigidly conservative family and ends on an even higher note of joy at France's deliverance from German Occupation. Dominating the work is de Beauvoir's friendship and alliance with Jean-Paul Sartre.

In July, 1929, she was a philosophy student at France's most distinguished university, the École

Normale Supérieure, when she met Sartre, a fellow student, while preparing for comprehensive orals. By the fall they had begun a friendship that was to become a lifelong union. They agreed that, while theirs was an “essential” love, it should not be allowed to degenerate into constraint or mere habit; nor should their partnership prevent them from experiencing contingent affairs with others. By the mid-to-late 1930’s they had become the core couple, while teaching philosophy in Paris, of a group they termed “the Family.” This was a social network of current and former students, friends, and lovers. It took the place of marriage and children for de Beauvoir and Sartre.

The 1930’s were extremely active for de Beauvoir. She read voraciously in literature as well as philosophy and frequented, usually with Sartre, theaters, cinemas, art galleries, cafés, jazz clubs, and many lively, long-lasting parties. Often to the urban Sartre’s discomfort, she loved to hike and climb rocks, touring most European countries. As World War II approached and then engulfed her, Sartre, and their friends, she and Sartre abandoned their apolitical individualism. Nazi atrocities convinced them, by mid-1939, that they needed to commit themselves to political action and social concerns. After some largely unsuccessful Resistance work, however, they decided to concentrate on their writing and made their literary reputations during the German Occupation. With the Allies’ entry into Paris in the summer of 1944,

de Beauvoir ends her book by expressing an ardent appetite for further challenges that the world may offer her.

At its best, *The Prime of Life* is a hymn to individual freedom and to the importance of the intellectual life. The dominant note of de Beauvoir’s book is her uncompromising honesty about herself. She reveals her many extraordinary virtues: a splendid mind, acute sensitivity, high moral principles and conduct, courage, and a zest for virtually all experiences. She also displays her flaws: a lack of humor, wit, or tolerance, a tendency to intellectualize all behavior, and an inclination to sermonize. The book is an admirable testimony to crucial stages in the life of a great woman.

## SUMMARY

As great as Simone de Beauvoir’s writing is, her life was her prime achievement. Apart from the importance of *The Second Sex*, her documentary and philosophical writings have no lasting value and her fiction is unimaginative, limited by its direct confinement to her own milieu. De Beauvoir’s memoirs, however, are a permanent addition to the literature of autobiography. They have considerable value as accounts of the intellectual, artistic, social, and political life of her time. They have even greater value, however, as establishing her personal myth as a woman who took bold risks to find a path for the free and full use of her life.

Gerhard Brand

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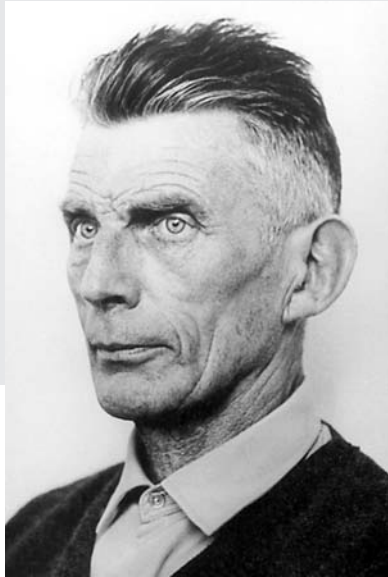
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What aspects of Simone de Beauvoir's work stand apart from her relationship to Jean-Paul Sartre?
- Did de Beauvoir learn more from men or from other women? Explain your conclusion.
- Is de Beauvoir correct in her belief that the self is "socially constructed"? If she is correct, does not that view reduce the realm of qualities that might be called "feminine"?
- De Beauvoir was essentially more of a philosopher or social critic than a literary person. Support or challenge this statement.
- Did de Beauvoir write too much? Could she have been more successful as a deliberate and painstaking artist?



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## SAMUEL BECKETT

**Born:** Foxrock, near Dublin, Ireland

April 13, 1906

**Died:** Paris, France

December 22, 1989

*Writing in both English and French, Beckett emerged during his forties as a master of both drama and fiction, his bleak vision of humanity often offset by the beauty of his prose.*

### BIOGRAPHY

In 1906, Good Friday happened to fall on the thirteenth day of April, bringing religion and superstition into rare conjunction. Samuel Beckett, whose writings contain more than their share of both, favored that date when citing his birth, although several of his biographers and commentators suggest a more likely birthdate later in the spring, citing a midsummer baptismal certificate as evidence. In any event, Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in the “comfortable” Foxrock district of Dublin sometime during the first half of 1906, the second son of William Beckett, who had prospered as an estimator of construction costs, and the former Mary Roe. William Beckett, born in Ireland of French Huguenot stock, thus bequeathed to his sons a mixed heritage that Samuel would often return in kind through his works, resulting in perplexity on both sides of the Channel.

Privately educated at Earlsfort House School, Portora Royal School, and Trinity College, Dublin, in keeping with his Protestant background, Samuel Beckett emerged during adolescence as a skilled student athlete, showing talent also in those academic areas that happened to interest him. It was not until his years at Trinity, however, that he truly distinguished himself as a student, having discovered French literature and thought under the

tutelage of Trinity’s Professor Thomas Rudmose-Brown. Graduating first in his class of 1927, apparently destined to succeed Rudmose-Brown at Trinity, Beckett received an exchange fellowship for 1928 to 1930 at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris. Before leaving for Paris, Beckett taught briefly at a boys’ boarding school in Belfast, finding teaching a bore but not yet prepared to abandon his plans for an academic career. During the summer of 1928, Beckett visited relatives then vacationing in Germany, falling briefly and somewhat disastrously in love with his first cousin Peggy Sinclair, who, destined to die young of tuberculosis, would figure prominently in such later Beckett works as *Krapp’s Last Tape* (pr., pb. 1958).

Already acquainted with most of the serious artists and writers then living in Dublin, who accepted him as their equal, Beckett lost little time developing similar acquaintances upon his arrival in Paris, helped by the friendship and connections of the writer Thomas McGreevy, the Trinity Fellow whom he had technically been appointed to replace. Mingling freely among French and expatriate writers, Beckett soon joined the circle of would-be writers surrounding Paris’s most famous Irish expatriate of the period, James Joyce, who was then putting the finishing touches on the “work in progress” soon to be known as *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Although the exact extent and depth of Beckett’s involvement in Joyce’s life and career remain in dispute among both men’s various commentators, it is clear in any case that the older writer, Joyce, influenced and inspired the younger one, Beckett; it is a



matter of record, also, that Beckett was the object of a postadolescent crush on the part of Joyce's emotionally disturbed daughter Lucia, one year younger than Beckett. During the course of his two-year fellowship, involving minimal teaching duties, Beckett tried his hand at both poetry and prose, attracting the attention of several publishers and "little magazines" then serving English-speaking expatriates in Paris. By 1930, he had a contract from Hours Press to prepare a brief monograph on the Parisian novelist Marcel Proust, who, then as later, ranked with Joyce as a master of the modernist novel; significantly, Beckett's study of Proust would often be reprinted over six decades to follow, of interest to students of Beckett as well as to students of Proust.

Returning as planned to Trinity College after his fellowship ran its course, Beckett soon decided once and for all that teaching did not agree with him, claiming both that his students (mostly female) knew nothing and that he himself knew even less. While returning to the Continent in a sort of panic, he sent in a letter of resignation from Germany, thus sparing his mentors the unpleasant task of firing him for inattentive or, at best, eccentric teaching. Following the death of his father in 1933, Beckett moved to London, where he may or may not have undergone psychoanalysis, living on the proceeds of a share in his father's estate while working on the manuscript of *Murphy* (1938), his first completed novel. Beckett then traveled the British Isles and the Continent for two years in search of a publisher for the novel, finally finding one in 1937, the year that he settled permanently in France.

Barely surviving on commissions from writing and small portions of the family heritage sent to him from Dublin, Beckett soon blended in among the artists and writers then at work in Paris, and by late 1937 he had begun an amatory affair with the American heiress and art dealer Peggy Guggenheim. Early in 1938, Beckett, returning to his lodgings late at night, was accosted and stabbed by a local hoodlum whom he recognized on sight and who apparently was out to beg, borrow, or steal money that Beckett denied having on his person. The stabbing might well have proved fatal: Beckett spent weeks in the hospital, his lungs permanently damaged and susceptible to illness; only his thick, old overcoat had prevented the blade from reaching his heart. His rescuer on the scene was the mu-

sician Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, who applied first aid and arranged for his transportation to the Hôpital Broussais, where she later visited him. Before long, Suzanne, like Peggy Guggenheim some seven years Beckett's senior, would displace Guggenheim as the writer's companion of choice and would remain in that position for life, eventually becoming the first and only Mrs. Samuel Beckett.

Visiting his relatives in Ireland when war broke out on the Continent in 1939, Beckett returned home in haste to Paris out of loyalty to French and Jewish friends, a recent trip to Germany having confirmed his worst suspicions about Nazism. By late 1940, he was actively engaged in espionage activities with the French Resistance, working not for the French, as he later made clear, but against Adolf Hitler and all that he stood for. For the rest of his life, Beckett would remain resolutely apolitical, tending to downplay his Resistance activity as simple "Boy Scout stuff," keeping secret even from his closest friends the Croix de Guerre awarded to him in 1945 on the basis of his Resistance activities.

Late in the summer of 1942, after several close calls, Beckett and Suzanne (who by then was a Resistant herself) learned that their room had been infiltrated and that arrest was imminent. Little more than one step ahead of their pursuers, the two fled Paris with only the clothes on their backs, eventually finding their way to the small southern town of Roussillon, where they would wait for the war to end and where Beckett, facing enforced idleness, would write the novel later published as *Watt* (1953). After the war, Beckett returned to Ireland to check on his aging mother and other relatives, only to run into problems reentering France as a resident alien. In time, he found a workable solution, attaching himself as interpreter-storekeeper to an Irish Red Cross unit dispatched to the bombed-out city of St. Lô in Normandy. After several months of service, Beckett found his way back to his old apartment in Paris, where he soon embarked upon the most productive phase of his literary career. With Suzanne to look after his daily needs and, in general, to protect his privacy, Beckett soon produced the three novels known as *The Trilogy*, starting with *Molloy* in 1951 (English translation, 1955). By that time, Beckett had already written *En attendant Godot* (pb. 1952, pr. 1953; *Waiting for Godot*, 1954), which would bring him



worldwide recognition almost immediately after its first performances early in 1953. From that point, Beckett lived and wrote as a rather reluctant celebrity, finding even his lesser works received with enthusiasm by scholars and critics. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969, Beckett died shortly before Christmas, on December 22, 1989, in Paris, having left instructions in his will that news of his death not be released until a week or so thereafter.

### ANALYSIS

"I can't go on, I'll go on." Those last words of *L'Innommable* (1953; *The Unnamable*, 1958), the final volume of *The Trilogy*, tend to summarize the author's mature output both in prose fiction and in drama, in which human life and aspirations are reduced to bare essentials; in the short novel *Comment c'est* (1961; *How It Is*, 1964), two characters, presumably the last remnant of the human species, crawl toward each other through mud, subsisting on a diet of canned sardines left behind by a now-vanished civilization. In the memorable "*Fin de partie*," suivi de "*Acte sans paroles*" (pr., pb. 1957; *Endgame: A Play in One Act; Followed by Act Without Words: A Mime for One Player*, 1958), a Beckettian mime tries all possible human options, including suicide, only to end in apathy, waiting—for what? It is perhaps no accident that Beckett's creative "breakthrough" came in midlife with the first performances (in Paris) of *Waiting for Godot*, a visible illustration, three-dimensional when staged, of the "waiting" that, in Beckett's developing vision, was characteristic of all human life. Is all of humanity, as one of his characters would later say in *Endgame*, waiting for "it," meaning life, to end? If not, then what is humankind awaiting?

Born with the verbal instincts of the traditional Irish poet, Beckett defined himself early in life as a writer and apprenticed himself to James Joyce, arguably the outstanding Irish writer of his own time or any other and a leading exponent of high modernism. Unfortunately, Beckett's early work remains not only hopelessly derivative of Joyce but also quite immature in its convoluted jokes, puns, and mannerisms. Indeed, it was not until after World War II, when Beckett began writing originally in French, that he would discover and assert a truly original talent that would forever distance him from Joyce's direct influence.

When asked, the normally reticent, even taci-

turn Beckett would give various cryptic explanations for his choice of writing idiom, perhaps the best-remembered of which is that it was easier for him to write "without style" in French. At the very least, the works composed originally in French are notably spare and deceptively simple, refreshingly free of the mannerisms that had marred Beckett's early works in English. Significantly, the new spareness of style would carry over into Beckett's own English versions of his works, as well as into those few later efforts, most notably *Krapp's Last Tape*, composed originally in English. Arguably, the evolution of Beckett's mature style had as much to do with his wartime experiences as with his change of language. *Waiting for Godot*, although set at no specific time, was assumed by many early commentators to be taking place in France during the Nazi occupation; indeed, the moral and psychological landscape of his late work suggests the "ground zero" of a world laid waste by postatomic war.

At once simple and complex, Beckett's plays and novels of the 1950's attracted many would-be interpreters; by the time Beckett won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969, his work had spawned a major academic industry, with dozens of books and articles already in print and dozens more to follow. Not infrequently, the various readings of Beckett tended to contradict one another; Beckett himself, maintaining a nearly reclusive silence that may or may not have been a pose, refused most requests to discuss or to explain his work, allowing critics of all persuasions to interpret his texts however they chose. By his middle sixties, Beckett, renowned as the creator of antiheroes for the stage, had himself become an anticelebrity of sorts, rarely seen, heard, or photographed yet assured that even the slightest of his new publications would attract enthusiastic attention. By the time of his death at eighty-three, only twenty years after he had received the Nobel Prize, Beckett's work and the legend generated by his reputation had become inextricably fused, making it more difficult than ever to separate, as his character Krapp had said, "the grain from the husks."

Although Beckett had written and published several volumes of prose fiction before the publication and performance of *Waiting for Godot*, it is doubtful that his "novels" would have drawn much attention, critical or otherwise, were it not for the runaway success of that first completed play; the

subsequent successes of *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* would prove that *Waiting for Godot* was no fluke. Readers and spectators attracted to Beckett by his plays would then begin to discover his prose, in which the form of "the novel" is repeatedly questioned and tested. To be sure, most of the themes and concerns common to Beckett's plays are also to be found in his fiction, albeit in more concentrated, less readily accessible form: The narrator(s) of *The Trilogy*, for example, can be seen as one or more of the stage tramps in stationary pose, quite literally composing himself/themselves offstage, facing only a blank sheet of paper. Fortunately or unfortunately, the physical demands of the stage would force Beckett to be somewhat less cryptic in his dramatic efforts than in his fiction, and his plays continue to attract a somewhat wider audience.

In theater and fiction alike, Beckett stresses the essential solitude of humankind, whose efforts to discern meaning in life vacillate between pathos and bathos, often approaching a kind of grim humor. Most of Beckett's characters, whether on the stage or on the page, tend to share their creator's intense, even perverse preoccupation with mathematics and measurement, a concern that many commentators have traced back to Beckett's close study, during his fellowship years in Paris, of the life and career of the philosopher-scientist René Descartes and of Descartes's Belgian disciple Arnold Geulincx. The urge to count and to measure, leading as it does toward science and technology, may be seen as one of humankind's earliest and most abiding responses to the apparent chaos of the human condition, an effort to establish order. Hugh Kenner, in the first of his reliable studies of Beckett's work, isolated the theme and symbol of the "Cartesian centaur"—a man on a bicycle—as central to nearly all the author's basic texts. The bicycle, combining humankind's upright stance with the invention of the wheel, yet subject to frequent breakdowns and flat tires, shows both the ingenuity and the limitations experienced by Beckett's most memorable characters.

Even with technology (as represented by the bicycle), Beckett's human figures remain thwarted in their hopes and desires, more often carrying or pushing the bicycle than using it for extended locomotion as originally planned. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, the two wheels of a bicycle become the two reels of an early tape recorder, on which the striving but

failed writer known only as Krapp had attempted to extend his mental locomotion, keeping track of time—and memory——through technology. Inevitably, he fails, falling back on the unreliable human memory that he abandoned years before. "What's to say?" he wonders aloud, preparing a "fresh" tape. "Not a squeak." Yet he keeps speaking, or squeaking, into a machine that has already failed him and will surely do so again.

## WAITING FOR GODOT

**First produced:** *En attendant Godot*, 1953  
(first published, 1952; English  
translation, 1954)

**Type of work:** Play

*Two tramps wait by the roadside for someone who never appears, meeting instead a peculiar "master" and his equally strange "slave."*

Arguably, *Waiting for Godot* provides an optimum point of entry not only into Beckett's enigmatic body of mature work but also into the antirational theater that emerged on the European continent during the decade following World War II, permanently altering the expectations of spectators (and playwrights) all over the world. In Beckett's first performed and published play, as in contemporary (but quite different) plays by Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Max Frisch, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, plot is all but discarded as a necessary element of drama, the tension residing instead in metaphysical concerns and in interaction (or noninteraction) among the characters.

The play is set on a desolate roadside, requiring little in the way of scenery. Two aging tramps, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), reminiscent of the film comics Laurel and Hardy gone to seed, exchange desultory conversation as they wait for the arrival of a man called Godot, who in fact never appears. Vladimir, like Laurel, is spare of build; Estragon, like Oliver Hardy, considerably stouter. "Nothing to be done," says Estragon in the play's first line, which in fact summarizes all the ensuing dialogue and action, although Estragon, at that moment, refers only to the act of taking off his shoes. Beckett's lines, even when translated into

English from the original French, tend thus to send ambivalent messages and meanings that continue to reverberate long after the curtain falls. Like most of Beckett's marginal characters in both plays and fiction, Didi and Gogo, as they address each other with childlike nicknames, have obviously known far better days; both are well educated, as their dialogue soon makes clear, yet education proves to be of little help in their current predicament.

Shot through with philosophical speculations and learned references to Holy Scripture, the prolonged interchanges between the two tramps have prompted many commentators to find in the play religious overtones that may or may not have been intended; more to the point, it seems, is the simple act of waiting, and the basically human instinct to talk (or keep busy or both) in order to stave off boredom.

Divided into two approximately equal acts, the action of *Waiting for Godot* twice relieves Vladimir and Estragon of boredom through encounters with two additional characters, the arrogant, autocratic Pozzo and his mute (or at least tongue-tied) manservant Lucky, attached to Pozzo's body with a rope. Pozzo, like Estragon, is portly of build; Lucky, like Vladimir, is almost painfully thin. All four of the main characters are well past middle age, with ailments and impediments to suit. Pozzo, a caricature of the self-important rich man, will have lost his sight between his first and second encounters with the tramps; Lucky, although mute, will suddenly deliver himself, toward the end of act 1, of a learned but incomprehensible monologue that, for later generations of spectators, would recall the printouts of an ill-programmed computer gone berserk.

Apparently unexpected and quite unpredictable, *Waiting for Godot* would soon achieve landmark status in the history of Western drama, drawing upon the familiar (stock characters from silent film or British music hall, bowler-hatted and stiff-gaited), yet leading toward unexplored territory,

in concept as well as in location. Still contemplating suicide, as they have more than once in the past, Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave because Godot has yet to show himself. As the curtain falls, however, they are both still in place, waiting.

## ENDGAME

**First produced:** *Fin de partie*, 1957 (first published, 1957; English translation, 1958)

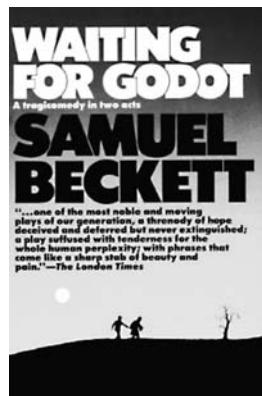
**Type of work:** Play

*Four characters wait for the end of the world in an isolated room that resembles the inside of the human skull.*

If *Waiting for Godot* recalls France during the Nazi occupation, where people waited in desolate spots for others who might or might not appear, *Endgame* recalls a bizarre bomb shelter in the wake of Hiroshima and worse disasters, or perhaps the post-Freudian human skull. In the center, at his own request, sits Hamm, a ham-actor or failed Hamlet, often confusing himself with King Lear, now blind and immobile, confined to a makeshift wheelchair that more closely resembles a throne mounted on casters. Downstage, contained in trash cans, are Hamm's parents Nagg and Nell, left legless after a tandem-bicycle accident years earlier in the Ardennes. The only character left standing is Cloy, who suffers from an ailment that keeps him from sitting down and who may or may not be Hamm's son.

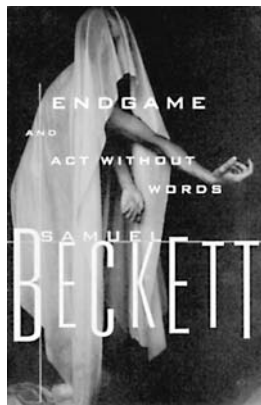
In many ways, Hamm recalls Pozzo of *Waiting for Godot*. Used to the exercise of power, turning blindness to his own advantage as he spins his dreams and memories into delusions of grandeur, Hamm rules his shrinking domain with the endless "mind games" alluded to in the play's title, drawn from the game of chess. "Me to play," says Hamm in the first line of the English version, delivered after nearly five minutes of illuminated stage business on the part of Cloy. Using his own French original, Beckett might better have translated the line as "It's *my* turn, now," to be delivered in a childish, churlish tone.

Throughout the action of *Endgame*, Hamm does



indeed take his turn, doing most of the talking and insisting on a “turn” around the room, in his chair pushed by Cloy, after which he must return “to the center.” A seemingly endless monologue, interrupted only by the nagging of his father, Nagg, recalls or imagines a time when Hamm, like Pozzo, was truly in control, sufficiently rich and influential to control far more than the space to which his questionable influence is now limited. There are no more bicycle wheels, indeed no more bicycles, a luxury that Hamm never afforded Cloy as a boy. “The light is sunk,” planted seeds will never sprout, and Hamm is looking at “the end” even as Cloy jauntily seeks to make “an exit.”

Even more self-conscious of the stage than *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* is still—for good or for ill—considered by many of Beckett’s commentators to be his finest play, perhaps more satisfying for actors than for spectators. Technology, although much in evidence—the makeshift wheelchair, an invis-



ble telephone long past usefulness, the defunct bicycles, a key-wound alarm clock that still rings loud enough “to wake the dead” but not the deaf—offers no exit or salvation to those held captive in the “end game,” perhaps the game eternally played inside one’s own skull. At the end of the play, with Hamm having staged his own death—but perhaps having really died—and

his parents presumed dead, Cloy, bags in hand, moves downstage as if to make good on his threat or promise. Like Vladimir and Estragon, however, he remains poised but, as the curtain falls, still does not move. Where, indeed, would he go?

## KRAPP’S LAST TAPE

**First produced:** 1958 (first published, 1958)

**Type of work:** Play

*A failed, aging writer replays a “memoir” taped thirty years earlier, finding neither the truth nor the beauty for which he had aimed.*

No doubt the best known of Beckett’s mature efforts written originally in English, *Krapp’s Last Tape* carries his theatrical experiment one step further, reducing the cast of characters to a single human actor, supplemented by a tape recorder playing back the same voice at a much earlier age, with references to still earlier recordings. Going well beyond the usual dramatic monologue, the interaction of the aging Krapp with his former self (or selves) raises *Krapp’s Last Tape* to the dimension of full-scale theater.

Set “in the future”—tape recorders being relatively new at the time of the play’s composition—*Krapp’s Last Tape* presents the title character under the strong, merciless light of his workspace, light demanded by his increasingly poor eyesight. Light and shadow, sight and blindness figure prominently in Beckett’s attempt to examine, and possibly correct, Marcel Proust’s often-misinterpreted concept of “involuntary memory.” Krapp has apparently intended to surprise himself with memories kept “fresh” on tape, but there are few surprises to be found. Krapp, like Proust, is a writer by choice, albeit a most unsuccessful one whose major publication has only sold seventeen copies, “to free circulating libraries beyond the seas.” He is also, like Hamm and Pozzo, something of a poseur whose carefully phrased speeches, here recorded solely for his own benefit, ring hollow when heard across the gulf of time.

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Krapp is rather clownish in appearance and dress, prone to a variety of ailments no doubt inflicted by his lifestyle. A heavy drinker who interrupts the tape more than once to take a nip offstage, Krapp is also hopelessly addicted to bananas, despite chronic constipation. While onstage, Krapp eats at least two bananas and starts to eat more, stuffing them absently into his pockets as he prepares to leave the room. Both scatological and sexual in their symbolism, the ba-



nanas serve also to generate much interesting stage “business,” as does the nearsighted Krapp’s continual fumbling with keys, locks, reels of tape, and ledgers. Even when he can read his own writing in the ledger where he has cataloged his tapes, the cryptic notations make little or no sense to him. Choosing spool five from box three, Krapp must play the tape through in order to make sense of such references as the “black ball” and the “dark nurse.” It soon becomes clear, though, that he has chosen that particular tape because of the final notation, “farewell to love.”

Recorded some thirty years earlier on the occasion of his thirty-ninth birthday, the tape that occupies Krapp’s attention on the evening in question itself refers back to even earlier tapes that the younger Krapp played just before recording his latest message to himself. His taped “journals,” an evident attempt to subvert the fallibility of human memory through the “wonders” of modern technology, prove even more fallible than his own failing memory, which holds fast to a narrated love scene involving himself and a girl in a boat, no doubt the “farewell to love.” Increasingly drunk and dispirited, Krapp will keep replaying that portion of the tape, fast-forwarding past sequences in which his thirty-nine-year-old self proudly holds forth on his literary ambitions and career. Clearly, the girl in the boat soon fell victim to those same ambitions, abandoned in favor of Krapp’s “vocation.” During the course of the play, however, Krapp becomes painfully aware that he has managed to save neither career nor memories, and that love has managed to pass him by, if only because he sidestepped it at the time. In his French version of the play, *La Dernière Bande*, Beckett substitutes a sexual allusion—implying arousal—for the scatological one implicit in the English title. Both elements are foregrounded in the play itself, leaving little doubt that Krapp has selfishly, if unconsciously, chosen the excremental over the erotic, and in old age has little choice but to lie in the bed that he has prepared for himself. Abandoning his attempt to record a fresh tape, the old man replays the love “scene” again, gazing blankly toward the audience as the tape continues, in silence.

Despite its unorthodox form, *Krapp’s Last Tape* remains among the more explicit and accessible of Beckett’s works, yet somewhat more complex than it appears at first glance or hearing. In this work,

more than in any other, Beckett seriously questions the interrelationship of life and art, wondering aloud if art is worth the candle, or the ultimately blinding light above Krapp’s table, described on his earlier tape as “a great improvement” that makes him feel “less alone. In a way.”

## THE TRILOGY

**First published:** *Molloy*, 1951 (English translation, 1955); *Malone meurt*, 1951 (*Malone Dies*, 1956); *L’Innommable*, 1953 (*The Unnamable*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Novels

*A narrative consciousness writes itself into—and out of—existence, calling into serious question the convention of the “novel” as known to the reader of the 1950’s.*

“I am in my mother’s room. It is I who live there now. I don’t know how I got there.” The narrative voice first known as Molloy calls himself into existence with such utterances and tries to sustain the reader’s interest as he describes his observation of two possible pursuers noted only as A and C (Abel and Cain, perhaps). He directs his faltering moves back toward his elderly mother, with whom he can communicate only with knuckle-blows to the head, one number for yes, another for no, yet another for “money.” “Composing” himself as he writes, or speaks, Molloy recalls a ritual of sucking pebbles, careful to rotate each of the small rocks through the pockets of his seedy overcoat so as not to suck the same one twice in one day. On another occasion, Molloy pulls from his pocket a miniature sawhorse in silver or silverplate with no recollection of its intended function as a knife-rest at formal dinners in a long-gone bourgeois society.

Riding with increasing difficulty on a bicycle possibly less functional than himself, Molloy runs down a small dog belonging to a woman known only as Lousse, who then detains him for reasons unspecified. Not long thereafter, the narrative viewpoint shifts to that of a certain Jacques Moran, whose fruitless search for Molloy will constitute the second half of the novel. Like Pozzo and Hamm, Moran is authoritative, even cruel, treating his ado-

lescent son much as Pozzo treats his slave, Lucky. Just as Pozzo loses his sight between the acts of *Waiting for Godot*, so, too, will Moran lose his mobility and equilibrium during the course of his search, in effect becoming Molloy, or Molloy's double, carried about on the handlebars of the bicycle that Molloy once rode. The final sentence of Moran's narrative neatly negates the first, and incidentally all that has passed between.

"Malone is what I am called now," says the narrator at the start of *Malone Dies*, implying soon thereafter that the various Murphys, Molloy's, and Morans were creatures of his own imagination, brought to life, abandoned, or killed at will. Like Hamm, the octogenarian Malone is a compulsive storyteller, calling to life a father and son known as Saposcat (Sapo for short), later to be known as Macmann. Alone in a room save for the creatures of his own devising, the invalid Malone dreams of poling his bed down a circular staircase as one would pole a raft downriver; regretting his eventual inability to record his own death, Malone contents himself with "killing off" characters in his endless narrative, meanwhile dropping hints that he might actually have committed murder at an earlier stage of his life. Malone presumably dies as his recorded

monologue trails off into nothingness; yet in *The Unnamable* the narrative continues, presumably delivered by a legless man confined to a jar, just as Nagg is confined to a trash can in *Endgame*. The narrator may or may not be called Mahood, or perhaps Mahood is yet another "fictional" creature summoned into existence in order to be discarded at will. The narrative runs on and on as if self-driven, almost without punctuation, proceeding toward—and perhaps beyond—the outer limits of the fictional form.

## SUMMARY

Although first expressed in the experimental fiction that he continued to write until his death, Samuel Beckett's lyrical pessimism found its strongest and most memorable expression in his plays, which represent both a landmark and a turning point in the history of world drama. Notable for their accessibility despite an apparent complexity, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* remain in the worldwide dramatic repertory decades after they were first performed, challenging actors and audiences alike with their haunted, haunting humanity.

David B. Parsell

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*Happy Days*, pr., pb. 1961

*Play*, pr., pb. 1963 (English translation, 1964)

*Come and Go: Dramaticule*, pr., pb. 1965 (one scene; English translation, 1967)

*Not I*, pr. 1972, pb. 1973

*Ends and Odds*, pb. 1976

*That Time*, pr., pb. 1976

*Footfalls*, pr., pb. 1976

*A Piece of Monologue*, pr., pb. 1979

*Rockaby*, pr., pb. 1981

*Ohio Impromptu*, pr., pb. 1981

*Catastrophe*, pr. 1982, pb. 1983

*Company*, pr. 1983



Samuel Beckett

*Collected Shorter Plays*, pb. 1984  
*Complete Dramatic Works*, pb. 1986  
*Eleutheria*, pb. 1995

TELEPLAYS:

*Eh Joe*, 1966 (*Dis Joe*, 1967)  
*Tryst*, 1976  
*Shades*, 1977  
*Quad*, 1981

RADIO PLAYS:

*All That Fall*, 1957, revised 1968  
*Embers*, pr., pb. 1959  
*Words and Music*, pr., pb. 1962 (music by John Beckett)  
*Cascando*, 1963 (music by Marcel Mihalovici)

SCREENPLAY:

*Film*, 1965

LONG FICTION:

*Murphy*, 1938  
*Molloy*, 1951 (English translation, 1955; with *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* known as *The Trilogy*)  
*Malone meurt*, 1951 (*Malone Dies*, 1956)  
*L'Innommable*, 1953 (*The Unnamable*, 1958)  
*Watt*, 1953  
*Comment c'est*, 1961 (*How It Is*, 1964)  
*Mercier et Camier*, 1970 (*Mercier and Camier*, 1974)  
*Le Dépeupleur*, 1971 (*The Lost Ones*, 1972)  
*Company*, 1980  
*Mal vu mal dit*, 1981 (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, 1981)  
*Worstward Ho*, 1983

SHORT FICTION:

*More Pricks than Kicks*, 1934  
*Nouvelles et textes pour rien*, 1955 (*Stories and Texts for Nothing*, 1967)  
*No's Knife: Collected Shorter Prose, 1947-1966*, 1967  
*First Love, and Other Shorts*, 1974  
*Pour finir encore et autres foirades*, 1976 (*Fizzles*, 1976; also known as *For to Yet Again*, 1976)  
*Four Novellas*, 1977 (also known as *The Expelled, and Other Novellas*, 1980)  
*Collected Short Prose*, 1991

POETRY:

*Whoroscope*, 1930  
*Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates*, 1935  
*Poems in English*, 1961  
*Collected Poems in English and French*, 1977

NONFICTION:

*Proust*, 1931

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What might be the reasons for Samuel Beckett's dismissing his anti-Nazi activities as "Boy Scout stuff"?
- Is *Waiting for Godot* political? Explain the basis of your conclusion.
- The word "endgame" is taken from chess but pertains to the stage of a game before a decision is actually reached. What implications does this word have as the title of Beckett's play?
- To what extent are Beckett's puns and jokes important in his mature novels and plays?
- English is considered a large and resourceful language, but Beckett often wrote in French. What characteristics of English seem to be contrary to his writing habits?
- In *Molloy*, there is a scene about sucking pebbles. Does it have reference to the story of Demosthenes, who thereby developed his oratorical powers, or is it about a man trying to solve a problem of rotation, or is it something else entirely?
- Does James Joyce's influence continue to pervade Beckett's mature work, or has he by this time succeeded in overcoming that influence?

TRANSLATION:

*An Anthology of Mexican Poetry*, 1958 (Octavio Paz, editor)

MISCELLANEOUS:

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## BRENDAN BEHAN

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland  
February 9, 1923

**Died:** Dublin, Ireland  
March 20, 1964

*Behan brilliantly combined humor and pathos in his plays and autobiographical novel.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Brendan Behan (BEE-uhn) was born in Dublin, Ireland, on February 9, 1923, to Kathleen Kearney and Stephen Behan. He was the oldest child of that marriage, but Kathleen, widowed by her first husband, had older children. Behan claimed his background was the slums of Dublin, but that, like so much he related, was a half-truth. His mother had grown up relatively poor but came from a musical and literary family; her brother wrote the Irish national anthem and was the stage manager at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. Behan's father spoke both French and Latin and read to his children from the works of Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, John Galsworthy, and Guy de Maupassant. Behan's grandmother, Granny English, was a particular influence, not always for the best: With her knowledge, Behan was sipping porter and whiskey by the age of eight.

Another influence on the young Behan was the Irish Republican Army (IRA). His father was in prison during the Irish Civil War when Behan was born, and the family was committed to the dream of a unified Irish republic. When Behan was a boy Ireland was neither unified nor a republic. Caught up in the romantic aura of violence associated with the outlawed IRA, he joined its youth organization as a boy and later became an IRA courier. In 1939, he was arrested in Liverpool, England, in possession of bomb-making materials. He was not on an approved IRA mission, and his actions were amateurish at best. Only sixteen, he served less than two years, from February, 1940, to December, 1941, in the Borstal, or juvenile reformatory prison. His incarceration eventually became the subject of his autobiography, *Borstal Boy* (1958).

Returning to Dublin, Behan was again soon in jail, this time for shooting at a policeman during a political demonstration. Sentenced to fourteen years, he served in various prisons, where he acquired material he later used in his first successful play, *The Quare Fellow* (pr. 1954, pb. 1956). Popular among the other inmates for his wit and singing ability, Behan began writing. "The Experiences of a Borstal Boy," a short article, was published in 1942. He also mastered the Irish language; several of his works were first written in Irish. He was released from prison at the end of 1946.

Behan quickly became involved in Dublin's postwar literary scene, where he drank, talked, laughed, argued, and fought with other writers and artists. A fictional portrait of Behan is found in J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (1955, 1965) as the character Barney Berry. Behan was also attracted by a different world—the Gaelic west—one that exerted its influence on J. M. Synge, among others. Behan's troubles with the authorities continued. In 1947, he spent four months in jail in Manchester, England, and the following year was arrested in Dublin for assaulting a policeman. In subsequent years he was arrested numerous times, but for violence committed while drunk rather than for political acts.

The late 1940's found Behan in Paris. He began to think of himself as a serious writer, something difficult in the pub-centered, drink-and-talk atmosphere of Dublin. During the following decade Behan turned out a significant body of work—radio and stage plays, a newspaper column, and his major prose piece, *Borstal Boy*, published in 1958. *The Quare Fellow* was first produced at Dublin's small Pike Theatre in 1954, becoming a major suc-

cess in London in 1956. *An Giall*, written in Irish and later in English as *The Hostage* (pr., pb. 1958), was produced in 1958. Unfortunately, the fame and fortune that resulted from his successes as a writer contributed to Behan's early death by alcoholism. Although he remained a relatively disciplined writer for a few years after his marriage to Beatrice Salkeld, his propensity for alcohol continued. His public appearances were notorious and popular in Dublin, London, New York, and elsewhere. Behan played the role of the drunken, bad-boy writer all too well. His final literary works, such as *Brendan Behan's Island: An Irish Sketch-Book* (1962), *Brendan Behan's New York* (1964), and *Confessions of an Irish Rebel* (1965), are relatively minor pieces. He died in March, 1964, at the age of forty-one. Thousands lined the streets of Dublin for the funeral cortege, a ceremony orchestrated by the IRA.

#### ANALYSIS

The militant republicanism that he inherited from his family and the years of imprisonment both in England and Ireland are the influences most apparent in Behan's writings. If Behan had not been sent to the juvenile reformatory after his arrest in Liverpool, there would have been no autobiographical *Borstal Boy*. It was in Ireland's prisons where he first began *The Quare Fellow*, which tells of the last few hours before the subject, the quare fellow, is to be hanged. *The Hostage*, Behan's other major drama, relates the saga of an English soldier kidnapped by the Irish Republican Army.

Early political commitments and years in prison made Behan more than merely a bitter reporter of his experiences. Anger is a major aspect of his writing. He is antiestablishment, as might be predicted, but not anti-English. His attitudes were far from knee-jerk Anglophobia; Dickens was one of his favorite authors, and his years in the Borstal exposed him to the sum of human types, from cruel authoritarianism to friendly camaraderie among his fellow prisoners, most of whom were English. Behan was a Catholic, steeped in that tradition, but a chief villain in *Borstal Boy* is a Catholic prison priest who excommunicates Behan for his IRA membership, thus sundering him from the sacraments and consolations of his church. In Behan's last major play, *The Hostage*, the least sympathetic character is the pompous and arrogant IRA offi-

cer in charge of the kidnapped English soldier. Behan's political ideology may be summed up in the following statement in the introduction to the program of *The Hostage*: "I respect kindness to human beings first of all, and kindness to animals. I don't respect the law; I have a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer, the beer stronger, the food cheaper, and old men and old women warmer in the winter, and happier in the summer."

Although Behan's plays were first produced in Dublin, he had greater success and recognition in London. His English fame coincided with the time of the "angry young men" such as John Osborne and his *Look Back in Anger* (pr. 1956, pb. 1957), and critics often categorized Behan as belonging to that theatrical movement. Behan's anger was not the same as Osborne's. Behan's writings, even the most serious, are generally imbued with humor—sometimes slapstick, sometimes satiric, usually both. He once claimed that he would laugh at a funeral as long as it was not his own. Generally his humor, no matter how broad, had a sharp point, and poignancy and desperation underscored it. In *The Quare Fellow* two inmates are to be hanged, convicted of murder. One has chopped up his brother; the other has killed his wife with a silver-headed cane. The latter is reprieved; the former, the quare fellow, is not. Behan's implication that wife-killing, especially with a silver-headed cane, is acceptable suggests something about both the value society gives women and the importance of class differences.

Although humor suffuses Behan's writings, his characters are inevitably trapped in desperate situations (prisons, for example) from which there is no easy escape. *Borstal Boy* is one of the great works of prison literature, and the account of his arrest and life in prison portrays a closed and brutal world. In *The Quare Fellow* it is not only the prisoners who are captives but also their guards and prison authorities. There is no formal prison in *The Hostage* but the setting is a brothel, which is another type of prison, not only for the British soldier but also for his IRA guards and the other inhabitants of the brothel, both sellers and buyers. Even history can be a prison. The Monsewer, the owner of the house, is an old Irish revolutionary, who has become a prisoner of his own biography and Ireland's past. In Behan's short story "The Confirma-

tion Suit,” a young boy is forced to don a suit for his confirmation made by a Miss McCann. The suit, however, has narrow lapels and large buttons, but in spite of his shame the boy is constrained to wear it to his first communion. There is no escape.

In Behan’s world, nevertheless, there is always the possibility of freedom. After the boy’s mother tells Miss McCann that he hates the suit, the boy discovers Miss McCann with head bowed, shaking with tears. Following her death, as an act of contrition he willingly wears the despised suit to her funeral. It is an act of homage to Miss McCann, but also a liberation of himself. In *The Hostage* the British soldier is accidentally killed when the Irish authorities storm the brothel in an attempt to free him. Even death, however, sometimes has no dominion. At the end of the play the soldier rises and sings.

## THE QUARE FELLOW

**First produced:** 1954 (first published, 1956)

**Type of work:** Play

*The Quare Fellow is the story of prisoners and guards in an Irish prison on the eve of the execution of a murderer, the title figure.*

*The Quare Fellow* was Behan’s first major theatrical success, originally playing in Dublin’s Pike Theatre in 1954 and then produced by Joan Littlewood in London in 1956. It opens in a prison on the eve of an execution, shortly after one condemned prisoner, who murdered his wife, has been pardoned, but not the other. “Quare fellow,” in the setting of the play, is the colloquial term for someone under the death sentence. The quare fellow of the title has been sentenced to die for murdering his brother with a meat cleaver. The play ends the following morning with the execution. Although the quare fellow, or rather his imminent execution, is the centerpiece of the play, the play is not about him. There is no question that he is guilty, and there is never any expectation he will be reprieved. He is not a likable figure, and there is no sympathy for him even from his fellow convicts—except for the fact that he is to be executed. The quare fellow never appears and utters no words.

The play relates not the effect of the execution upon the person to be “topped,” or hanged, but the effect upon all the others—prisoners, guards, the hangman—involved in the event.

As a drama it is straightforward, with little to surprise the reader or audience; there is no doubt that the quare fellow will be hanged in the morning. Behan’s brilliant dialogue—in part the result of his many years in prison—and his ready gallows humor propel the play despite the lack of plot. Behan’s antiestablishment attitude focuses upon Holy Healey, the elegantly dressed prison visitor. Healey notes at one point that since condemned prisoners have access to a priest they will “die holier deaths than if they had finished their natural span.” The warder responds that “We can’t advertise ‘Commit a murder and die a happy death,’ sir. We’d have them all at it. They take religion very seriously in this country.” Another prisoner wishes to get in touch with a friend who might post bail. The response is “Get a pail and bail yourself out.” The events of the execution are told to the audience by one of the prisoners, in the terms of a horse race, with puns and verbal play relaying the step-by-step process of a hanging. Afterward, the prisoners bury the quare fellow, and although his last letters are supposed to be tossed into the grave instead of sent to his family, the prisoners take them—to be sold to one of the Sunday papers. Nothing is sacred, not even death.

## BORSTAL BOY

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*A sixteen-year-old Irish boy is charged with political terrorism and is sentenced to a Borstal, an English reformatory.*

In 1939, Behan was discovered in Liverpool with bomb-making materials and arrested as an IRA terrorist. Sixteen years old, he was treated as a juvenile and sentenced to three years in a Borstal. *Borstal Boy* is the autobiography that resulted from his experience. It belongs both to the genre of prison literature and to the long history of Irish-English relations, or animosities. It is also a coming-of-age

story, similar to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Additionally, it is a great comic work. Finally, as a work reflecting prison life it bears comparison with *The Quare Fellow*.

The dialogue and use of dialect in both are superb, although the longer scope of *Borstal Boy* allows for greater digression, sometimes too much. The book, particularly the latter part, is often episodic. Behan, associated with the IRA and in possession of explosives when he was arrested, nevertheless quickly developed friendly relations with most of his guards and the other authorities as well as his fellow prisoners. Undoubtedly that was a result of Behan's exuberant personality, but it also says something about Behan's awareness of, and sympathy for, the universality of human experience. He was able to separate the English as a people from the policy of their government toward Ireland, which he deplored. In fact, young Behan, the urban Dubliner, often identified more with London cockneys and working-class boys from Liverpool than he did with rural Irishmen.

Behan experienced pain, fear, and brutality, particularly before he arrived at the Borstal, but what remains in the reader's memory is the humor. Behan could make himself the butt of this humor: On one occasion he was sentenced to solitary confinement for twenty-four hours, restricted to bread and water. During that short period he noted that if a warder had requested that he sing "God Save the King" in exchange for a piece of roast, he, an IRA terrorist, would have immediately complied.

The Borstal to which Behan was sent was organized more like an English public school than a punitive jail (if the distinction is not too fine). The boys had work assignments, but often considerable freedom. During the summer Behan and his "chinas"—best friends—were able to sneak away to the nearby seashore. More than anything else what made the Borstal bearable were the friendships that developed among the boys. On occasion relations were

more intimate than simple friendship. In *Borstal Boy* Behan generally only alludes to the subject of homosexuality; in some of his other writings he was more explicit. As a result of the book's language, which was profane but realistic, because of the book's attitude toward the priest who denied Behan the sacraments, and possibly because of the homosexual allusions, *Borstal Boy*, critically acclaimed in the United Kingdom and the United States, was banned in Ireland. Many other Irish writers' works were banned as well. Perhaps Behan thought that the banning put him in good company.

## THE HOSTAGE

**First produced:** 1958 (first published, 1958)

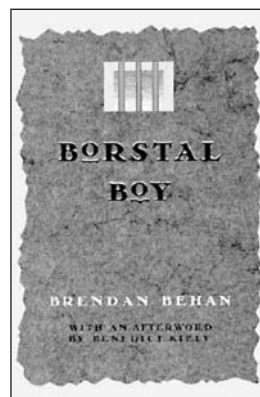
**Type of work:** Play

*An English soldier is captured and held hostage in a brothel in reprisal for the imminent execution of an Irish rebel by the British.*

The critics were enthusiastic about Behan's *The Hostage*, though they found it difficult to describe. On its surface, the story appears to be serious drama. A young English soldier, Leslie Williams, is kidnapped by the IRA on the eve of the execution of an Irish terrorist by the British. If the latter is executed, Williams will be murdered in retaliation. The setting is a brothel in Dublin. *The Hostage* is also a comedy of slapstick and satire as well as a musical production, with references to topical events.

The play is populated by the bawdy, the fanatical, the cynical, the corrupt, and the insane. The latter, the Monsewer (Monsieur), owns the building and was a republican patriot back in the glory days of Easter 1916. The house is run by Pat, also of the old IRA, who has lost his enthusiasm for the cause. There are prostitutes—straight and gay—and assorted clients, as well as a minor civil servant who turns out to be a secret agent for the Irish police. Into this mélange Leslie is brought by the IRA, led by a fanatical officer. Even the house, like so many of the characters, has seen better days; the former luxurious mansion has become a whorehouse.

The English soldier and the Irish servant, Teresa, the play's two innocents, fall in love. They are both orphans, without family ties to the history





that has led to the perversions—political, mental, and sexual—of the other characters. In *The Hostage*, the antiestablishment Behan takes on all orthodoxies. It is a typically Irish play in its concentration upon the tyranny of history. In Behan's hands, however, there is more farce in the grim story than there is tragedy. Song and slapstick are more prevalent than sorrow and tears, and although Leslie gets killed, it is not because of ruthless reprisal by the IRA but because he is accidentally caught in a comedic crossfire when the police arrive.

At the end of the play, however, first Leslie and then the rest of the cast sing, "O death, where is thy sting-ling-a-ling,/ Or grave its victory." Does Leslie represent the heroic figures of Irish myth, or is Behan suggesting that, like Christ, he has died for others' sins and risen again? Or is Behan mocking the realism of traditional theater? That is what

makes *The Hostage* so fascinating: The theme is serious, or perhaps not; the ending is dramatic, yet farcical.

### SUMMARY

Brendan Behan is an important writer but is not among Ireland's greatest authors. His major works are only three: *The Quare Fellow*, *Borstal Boy*, and *The Hostage*. He also wrote some excellent poetry in Irish and several fine short stories. His other writings are, for the most part, ephemeral. The major works, for all their brilliance, are not fully crafted. The years of disciplined writing were too few; his serious work ended several years before his early death in 1964. Nevertheless, to produce three near-masterpieces is a notable legacy.

Eugene Larson

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#### DRAMA:

*Gretna Green*, pr. 1947

*The Quare Fellow*, pr. 1954, pb. 1956 (translation and revision of his Gaelic play "Casadh Sùgáin Eile," wr. 1946)

*The Big House*, pr. 1957 (radio play), pr. 1958 (staged), pb. 1961

*The Hostage*, pr., pb. 1958 (translation and revision of *An Giall*)

*An Giall*, pr. 1958, pb. 1981 (in Gaelic)

*Richard's Cork Leg*, pr. 1972, pb. 1973 (begun 1960, completed posthumously by Alan Simpson, 1964)

*The Complete Plays*, pb. 1978

#### RADIO PLAYS:

*A Garden Party*, 1952

*Moving Out*, 1952

#### LONG FICTION:

*The Scarperer*, 1964 (1953 serialized, as by Emmet Street)

*The Dublin Man*, 1997 (serialized 1954-1956)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*After the Wake*, 1981

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Like several other Irish writers, Brendan Behan seemed to contemplate Ireland best when he was away from it. What might be the reasons for being away in order to capture the essence of one's homeland?
- Is Behan's introduction to *The Hostage*, in which he writes about not respecting the law and "irreverence" to society, simply irresponsible or useful to his literary art?
- Behan liked to express his dislike of the English, but offer indications of his fiction that reflect tolerance toward the English.
- Explain how Behan's ironical wit counteracts his apparently outrageous ideas, such as the belief that wife-killing is acceptable.
- What are the paradoxes, the apparent contradictions, in Behan's depiction of prison life?

NONFICTION:

*Borstal Boy*, 1958 (autobiography)  
*Brendan Behan's Island: An Irish Sketch-Book*, 1962  
*Hold Your Hour and Have Another*, 1963  
*Brendan Behan's New York*, 1964  
*Confessions of an Irish Rebel*, 1965  
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MISCELLANEOUS:

*Poems and Stories*, 1978  
*Poems and a Play in Irish*, 1981 (includes the play *An Giall*)

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Library of Congress

## APHRA BEHN

**Born:** Kent, England  
July 10, 1640 (baptized)  
**Died:** London, England  
April 16, 1689

*Behn, England's first professional woman writer, produced popular Restoration dramas and made noteworthy contributions to the development of prose fiction.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Concerning the family background and early life of Aphra Behn (bayn), virtually nothing is known with certainty. The sparse information that exists is usually contradictory. A parish register in the town of Wye shows that a baby named Aphara Amis was baptized in that town, in the county of Kent, England, on July 10, 1640. It is likely that she was born in the same year and in the same county, and Aphara Amis probably became Aphra Behn. While her literary works show that she was widely read, with a knowledge of several languages, nothing is known about her education. Early in life, she traveled to Surinam (modern Guyana), where she remained for a few months; the trip left an enduring impression and provided materials for her prose fiction and drama. She married a Dutch merchant engaged in business in London, a man who seems to have dropped out of her life by 1665. Scholars have suggested that he perished during the London plague of 1665.

In July, 1666, during the Anglo-Dutch War, she was sent to Antwerp, Belgium as an intelligence agent, a position she held until the end of December, 1666. Using the code name "Astrea," she posted numerous letters to her superiors in London, providing information she had gleaned about Dutch intentions and pleading for more money to meet her mounting expenses. The letters suggest that, like many agents of King Charles II, she was

left to fend for herself. In one letter she reported that the Dutch had devised a plan to send warships up the Thames and attack the English navy. This account was ignored as too improbable. As a consequence, England experienced its most humiliating naval defeat in history. On June 13, 1667, Dutch warships sailed up the Thames River, cut the chain protecting the English fleet, destroyed several warships, and towed away the *Royal Charles*, the English flagship.

After Behn returned to London in 1667, she was imprisoned for debt, despite repeated appeals for relief to King Charles II, whom she had faithfully served. Presumably she eventually did receive support from Lord Arlington, the cabinet member in charge of intelligence, or his agent Thomas Killigrew (1612-1683), himself a dramatist, for she was released after a few months.

After her return to London, she turned to writing plays as a means of earning a living. Beginning with *The Forced Marriage: Or, The Jealous Bridegroom* (pr. 1670, pb. 1671), she wrote more than fifteen plays, of which many were highly successful. As a writer for the Duke's Company, she created dramas that were performed by the most talented actors and actresses of the time, including Anthony Leigh, James Nokes, Charles Hart, Elizabeth Barry, and Anne Bracegirdle. Following her success on the stage, Behn turned to prose narrative, translation, and poetry, producing several prose titles well-known in their time. Through her writings, she involved herself in the political controversies of the day, siding with the Tory cause in support of the Stuart monarchy. Plays such as *The Roundheads: Or,*

*The Good Old Cause* (pr. 1681, pb. 1682) included satire of the king's Whig opponents.

The life of an author during the Restoration was precarious unless revenues from the writings could be supplemented by generous and reliable patrons. Indications are that Behn endured periods of financial hardship throughout her life, and her health and fortune declined as the Stuart monarchy approached its demise. Unswerving loyalty to two Stuart kings did not assure even her safety; she was imprisoned in 1682 for satire directed against the Duke of Monmouth, King Charles's illegitimate son. In failing health, she found it necessary to continue working just to provide the necessities of life. She died April 16, 1689, and was buried in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

### ANALYSIS

For an author whose career lasted less than twenty years, Aphra Behn was exceptionally prolific. Her canon contains at least seventeen dramas, and perhaps as many as twenty-one attributions are included. It also includes numerous occasional and lyric poems, fourteen titles in prose fiction, and a handful of translations. She launched her literary career with drama, a natural beginning for an aspiring writer of her time since the theater provided more secure financial rewards than publication. Her plays are exceptionally varied, including tragicomedies, comedies of wit and intrigue, and political satires. Like many authors of her time, she drew upon previous dramatists for plots and characters. For her portrayal of character, conflict, and setting, she is particularly indebted to earlier Jacobean dramatists, such as Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Thomas Middleton, Richard Brome, and John Marston. In addition to earlier plays, her sources include Spanish and French novellas and, for one drama, *The Widow Ranter: Or, The History of Bacon of Virginia* (pr. 1689, pb. 1690), a contemporary account of the Virginia colony.

Although her plots are often complex, she is noted for sprightly action and for colloquial, witty dialogue. These qualities appealed to her audience and led to theater revivals of some of her dramas well into the eighteenth century. A recurring theme is young love overcoming obstacles imposed by the lovers' society and elders. A related theme is the necessity for women to make their own choices in marriage.

In addition to drama, she wrote numerous works of prose fiction, ranging in length from short story to novel. Most of these were written late in her career, after 1684. Though normally classified as novels, the longer works are not true novels but rather antecedents of the genre. Her narrative technique includes numerous details to ensure a realistic effect. Frequently the narrator assures the reader that he or she has witnessed the events firsthand, lending a touch of realism. Yet the works lack the psychological realism of true novels, and coincidence is too frequent and too substantive for the settings that Behn creates. The sources are often French and Spanish romances, though many depend on English settings or contemporary events.

Her longest prose work, *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1683-1687), is a roman à clef based upon a scandalous contemporary romance between a nobleman and his sister-in-law. Written in three parts, it enjoyed popular success despite a length of 200,000 words. Its significance lies in Behn's early use of the epistolary narrative technique, foreshadowing the eighteenth century novels of Samuel Richardson.

Romantic love, the dominant theme of Behn's fiction, often reaches heroic proportions. Stories such as "The Unfortunate Happy Lady" (c. 1697) and the novel *The Adventure of the Black Lady* (1698) depict success in love as a combination of forgiveness, intense passion, and endangered but inviolate virtue. This tendency to develop the theme of heroic love reaches its height in her best-known prose work, *Oroonoko: Or, The History of the Royal Slave* (1688), a narrative featuring an exotic setting and a hero who embodies love and honor. Even in a novel featuring the femme fatale like *The Fair Jilt: Or, The History of Prince Tarquin and Miranda* (1688), love is uncritical and entirely forgiving.

Among her poems, Behn wrote numerous lyrics, occasional verses, panegyrics, songs, prologues, epilogues, and a few satires. In her elegy on Edmund Waller, a poet prized for his polished verses, she professes that she learned the art of English poetry from studying his poems. The acknowledgment is noteworthy, for her heroic couplets reflect the idiomatic fluency and smoothness that one associates with Waller's poetry. She achieves the limpid diction and polish that marked the style of the best writings of her times though her poems lack the insouciant tone and sharp-

edged satire of witty writing at its best. Her love poems often invoke the idyllic setting of the pastoral mode, and her finest love poetry achieves an effect that is simple, rhythmic, and eloquent. Two of her best-known lyrics, “Love Arm’d” and “Song” (“’Tis not your saying that you love”), are on the theme of unrequited love, perhaps a result of her ill-fated affair with John Hoyle, a London rake. The final stanza of “Song” illustrates the stylistic purity and earnest tone that the poems achieve:

But if I fail your heart to move,  
And ’tis not yours to give;  
I cannot, wonnot cease to love,  
But I will cease to live.

Among her occasional poems are numerous prologues and epilogues that were published with her plays. Like other poems of this type, they appeal to the audience for approval or at least indulgence. These prologues and epilogues are written in heroic couplets, the dominant verse form of the age.

By 1680, Behn had begun working as a translator, producing poetry and prose of popular works. Her translations are from Latin and French, and the diversity suggests that she turned to translation not because she found the works congenial, but because she needed to supplement her income. By modern standards, her translations take excessive liberties with the originals, but her practice accorded well with the theory of translation put forth by John Dryden, the dominant literary figure of her time. His theory accepted paraphrase and alterations to accommodate the tastes and understanding of the audience.

## THE ROVER: OR, THE BANISHED CAVALIERS

**First produced:** Part I, 1677 (first published, 1677)

**Type of work:** Play

*In Naples, exiled English cavaliers seek  
pleasure and find suitable marriage partners.*

Willmore, the Rover, arrives in Naples where he meets his fellow exiles Blunt, Frederick, and

Belville. They begin rather aimless adventures in quest of pleasure. Although Willmore is an example of the appealing, energetic Restoration hero of wit, it is the women characters who, indirectly, control the action. Hellena, destined by her father for a convent, wishes another kind of life and is willing to venture into the carnival setting to seek it. Once she has seen Willmore, she decides to make him her husband, even if she must pursue him in disguise. In order to thwart his affair with Angelica, an aged former mistress of a Spanish general, she disguises herself as a page. Her sister Florinda has been promised, against her will, to Antonio. Florinda has been in love with Belville since he saved her life and that of her brother Don Pedro during a battle. Despite numerous mishaps and mistakes that endanger her, she manages to win Belville in the end. Both women achieve marriages that will assure financial independence and compatibility and will not require excessive emotional commitment.

Not all pleasure seeking, however, achieves its ends. Behn implies that the persons must possess some attractive qualities and panache. Blunt, crudely direct in his hedonism, finds himself deceived and robbed by a courtesan. He represents the naïve country squire of Restoration comedy, who becomes the butt of farcical humor. On the other hand, Willmore’s excesses—drunkenness, brawling, and promiscuity—are redeemed by his wit, savoir faire, and overall good nature.

The drama possesses an abundance of humor, sprightly wit, and farcical adventures. Although the celebration of loyalty may have been its greatest appeal for the Restoration audience, the drama is also noteworthy for its portrayal of strong-willed heroines who choose their own future and act to bring it about. The sequel, *The Rovers: Or, The Banished Cavaliers, Part II* (pr., pb. 1681) is generally regarded as inferior to the first part, although it is noteworthy for its use of two figures from commedia dell’arte: Harlequin and Scaramouche.





## THE FAIR JILT: OR, THE HISTORY OF PRINCE TARQUIN AND MIRANDA

**First published:** 1688

**Type of work:** Novel

*Miranda, a beautiful but amoral femme fatale, leads admirers into crime and destruction, but love and forgiveness restore most of the losses.*

*The Fair Jilt* introduces the beautiful femme fatale Miranda, whose unconcerned and unrestrained pursuit of romance and pleasure jeopardizes the lives of others. The narrative divides into two loosely intertwined parts, one involving the heroine's love for an exiled German prince, Henrick, and a second involving her marriage to Tarquin, the only son of a wealthy Dutch merchant. Miranda, joint heiress with her younger sister to a large fortune, enters an Antwerp convent following the death of her parents, though she has no intention of making permanent vows.

In retaliation for Miranda's numerous shallow flirtations, the God of Love imposes upon her a deep, genuine love for a young Franciscan friar, who is devoted to his vocation and his vow of chastity. After learning that he is a German prince named Henrick (complete with a tragic past), Miranda begins pursuing him through letters and calculated meetings, offering herself and her inheritance and imploring him to elope with her. He steadfastly refuses all of her advances. Unable to comprehend that he would refuse her because of his religious devotion, she accuses him of rape and sees him sentenced to death, a sentence commuted to life imprisonment after some of her letters to him have been released.

In the second episode, she meets and marries the young Tarquin, whose love for her exceeds anything she feels for him. Having inherited her fortune and having become guardian for her sister's portion, she lives with Tarquin on a lavish scale in Antwerp, freely spending her sister Alcadiana's portion while discouraging would-be suitors. When Alcadiana asserts her independence and demands her inheritance, Miranda induces a page to murder her, but the effort at poisoning fails. The page is apprehended, tried, and hanged, while Miranda

herself is judicially humiliated by being forced to stand at the foot of the gallows. Still undeterred, she later persuades her devoted husband to shoot Alcadiana as she enters the theater. The bullet passes harmlessly through her garments, but Tarquin is apprehended and condemned to death. Miranda is sent to the prison where the princely friar is incarcerated. Upon release, the friar pleads for Miranda's freedom, and Tarquin is spared when the executioner wounds instead of kills him. After his recovery, Tarquin joins Miranda in Holland, where, having lost all Miranda's fortune, they are supported by the wealth of his father.

Behn portrays Miranda as an example of role reversal in love. Bent on dominance and self-assertiveness, she moves from tyrannizing over the friar to tyrannizing over her sister. Yet even she can be rescued from her excesses, and the book suggests that she has lived in quiet retirement with Tarquin until his death.

The story also admirably depicts Behn's concept of love as totally self-sacrificing and forgiving. Smiten by her beauty and charm, the other characters are putty in Miranda's hands. Yet willingness to forgive means that the worst evils can be remedied. Tarquin harbors no lasting resentment for the calamities she has brought upon him, and Prince Henrick, despite his two years' imprisonment on a false charge, is eager to beg mercy on her behalf. The limited suffering in the denouement, however, depends upon extravagant improbabilities and astounding coincidence. Despite a wealth of concrete detail and authorial testimony, the story lacks genuine realism, although realism was not a standard for judging long fiction in Behn's time.

## OROONOKO: OR, THE HISTORY OF THE ROYAL SLAVE

**First published:** 1688

**Type of work:** Novel

*Oroonoko, a heroic African prince, dies in an attempt to free himself and others from slavery.*

*Oroonoko: Or, The History of the Royal Slave*, Behn's most significant novel, resembles *The Fair Jilt* in that



she attempts to achieve verisimilitude by first-person commentary and an abundance of concrete detail. She asserts at the outset that the story is factual and claims to have known the characters and witnessed much of the action. She injects numerous details to enhance the realism, foreshadowing the narrative technique of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift. She describes, for example, South American creatures such as the armadillo and the anaconda, and her account of the indigenous tribes idealizes their primitive and simple lives in the wilderness.

The narrative has two distinct parts. The first, set in the African country Coramantien, introduces the young prince Oroonoko, grandson of the country's aged king. Oroonoko is a Restoration love-and-honor hero, capable of intense passions. In love, Oroonoko knows no half measures, for Behn embraces the assumption of heroic love that great love implies a great soul. A man of natural nobility, he is not a primitive, but a well-educated, charismatic youth who can read Latin and French and speak English. He achieves rapport with all types of people, including the natives of the New World.

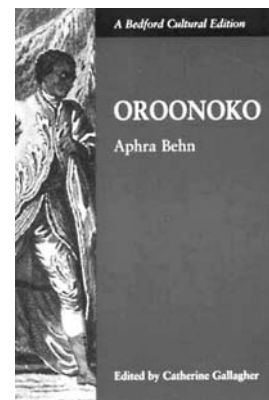
Trouble in his native land begins when he falls in love with Imoinda, the beautiful daughter of a general who has sacrificed his own life in battle to save Oroonoko's. After Oroonoko has secretly married Imoinda, his aged grandfather, king of Coramantien, decides to make her his wife and summons her to the palace. Deprived of his wife for months, Oroonoko conspires with friends at court to arrange a clandestine meeting. When the king discovers this, he decides to sell Imoinda into slavery because of the betrayal and tells Oroonoko that she has been put to death. The king refrains from taking action against Oroonoko because he is too powerful and too valuable.

Oroonoko, reminiscent of Achilles, withdraws from his role of military leader, depressed over his loss, until an attacking force endangers the country. He throws himself into the conflict and leads the king's forces to victory. Shortly thereafter, he is enslaved by a treacherous English captain, who lures him and his companions aboard a slave ship under pretext of holding a celebration. During the voyage across the Atlantic, the captain shows himself capable of other treachery and duplicity.

Oroonoko is sent to the English colony Surinam and assigned to a plantation supervised by Trefry, an educated Englishman. When he reaches the plantation, Oroonoko discovers to his amazed delight that Imoinda is living on the same plantation. The two are reunited and live in happiness together for a time. When Oroonoko learns that Imoinda will bear his child, he decides not to permit the child to be born into bondage. A natural leader, he persuades other slaves and their families to flee with him by night into the jungle. A militia pursues and either captures or kills most of the unarmed slaves. Last to be captured are Oroonoko and Imoinda. Their captors vacillate about their punishment. Trefry is inclined to be merciful, but Byam, a cruel master, is unforgiving and punitive. When Oroonoko realizes that he will have to endure further punishment, he kills Imoinda and afterward is captured in a paroxysm of grief. He recovers from his own attempted suicide and stoically endures slow death by dismemberment at the hands of his captors.

*Oroonoko; Or, The History of the Royal Slave* remains significant in the development of the novel for its narrator persona and for its use of concrete details to enhance realism. The narrator assures the reader that all the account is true and claims periodically to have encountered Oroonoko personally at specified points in the action. The abundant details are highly specific, though sometimes inaccurate, as when Behn attributes a length of thirty-six yards to an anaconda or describes tigers in Surinam.

Thematically the work touches on values that are typical of Behn's fiction, including the right of women to select their spouses, opposition to slavery, and condemnation of the slave trade. The work also includes a celebration of the primitive, though this celebration is qualified. The indigenous people of Surinam are admirably adjusted to life in their environment, but they are not so adaptable as the highly educated protagonist. Above all, the novel is an account of the hero who upholds



the ideals of civilization among Europeans who are, for the most part, evil.

### SUMMARY

Aphra Behn was the first woman in the history of English literature to earn her living as a writer. Behn's plays reflect the exuberant spirit of Restoration drama and succeeded with audiences of her time; some were regularly performed into the eighteenth century. Her primary significance to literary history, however, lies in her prose fiction. She is an important figure in the transition from the prose romances of the Renaissance to the modern novel. Her narrative art assures her interest to literary historians, and her humanitarian themes endow her works with lasting relevance.

Stanley Archer

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How do Aphra Behn's dramas differ from representative Restoration plays?
- What traits of Behn's fiction anticipate eighteenth century English novels?
- What does Behn's experience as a spy contribute to her writings?
- It cannot be established whether Behn visited South America. How convincing of such a visit are the details in *Oroonoko*?
- Support the assertion that Behn was an extraordinary woman.
- What significance do you see in Behn's frequent habit of giving two titles to her works?

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*Aphra Behn*

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## ARNOLD BENNETT

**Born:** Shelton, near Hanley, Staffordshire, England  
May 27, 1867

**Died:** London, England  
March 27, 1931

*Bennett's reputation rests upon his novels of "the Five Towns," a re-creation of the Staffordshire of his youth, as well as on his later, intensely realistic portrayals of English life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Enoch Arnold Bennett was born in Shelton, near Hanley, Staffordshire, on May 27, 1867, the son of Enoch and Sarah Ann Longson Bennett. The eldest of nine children, Bennett descended from a long line of Methodists whom he portrayed in his novels *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) and *Clayhanger* (1910). His father, after working long days as a master potter, draper, and pawnbroker and spending his nights studying the law, qualified as a solicitor at the age of thirty-four, when Arnold was nine. The wealth of precise notation about such occupations in Bennett's novels seems to stem from his early years. He was also fortunate enough to observe the interaction of different social classes as his family's status steadily improved under the sway of his father's autocratic direction (depicted in *Clayhanger*) and his mother's pliable consent.

Bennett attended local schools, but his father determined that his son should be a clerk, and thus he had to forgo the opportunity of a college education. Almost immediately, Bennett resolved to get out of this clerkship, chafing at the life of the "Pottery towns," the filth and provincialism he delineates in *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) and in other novels.

Bennett's first literary efforts were gossip notes that appeared in the *Staffordshire Sentinel* while he was educating himself by reading English, French, and Russian authors. He eventually began a job as a clerk with a firm of lawyers in London, where he escaped forever the towns of his youth.

The sometimes gloomy and temperamental Bennett did not like the law, and to supplement his poor pay he turned to secondhand bookselling, which he put to good use in his evocation of Henry Earlforward in *Riceman Steps* (1923). Soon he established a circle of friends, organizing musical evenings in which he would sing without a trace of the stammer he could not otherwise control. Honing his schoolboy French, he began to consort with artists, musicians, and writers and to publish stories in prestigious London literary magazines. He found his first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898), an agony to write and a commercial failure.

Enoch Bennett's purchase of shares in a periodical, *Woman*, provided Arnold with an assistant editorship, and under the pseudonym "Barbara" he published weekly reviews. As "Marjorie," he supplied gossip and advice in "Answers to Correspondents," later crediting this assignment as contributing to his knowledge of women's apparel, housekeeping, and their most intimate thoughts. Advancing to the position of editor, Bennett managed also to write reviews for other important journals and to thrust himself into the fads of his age: cycling and painting watercolors.

Perhaps because of his experience with so many different sorts of newspapers and journals, Bennett quickly showed his mastery of both serious and superficial literature, producing in the same year (1902) *Anna of the Five Towns*, one of his best novels, and *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, a slight but enjoyable comic thriller, published in the United States as *T. Racksole and Daughter*. The latter formed part of a series of novels that did nothing to enhance Ben-

nett's literary stature, but they enabled him to earn enough money to satisfy his long-held ambition of living in Paris, where he moved in 1903.

Paris was the center of Bennett's literary universe, where he could commune with fellow writers and openly address subjects—particularly sex—that were prohibited in London. There was also the *demimonde* of Paris, the world of the theater and of women who were much freer in their sexual habits than those he had known in England. A young American woman rejected his marriage proposal, but in 1907 he married Marguerite Soulié, a proprietor of a dress shop who was previously connected with the theater. The early years of the marriage in Paris may have been Bennett's happiest, for it is where he conceived and wrote most of his masterpiece, *The Old Wives' Tale*, drawing quite directly on his experience of provincial England and cosmopolitan France.

Bennett continued his prodigious output into the next decade. He published short fiction: *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* (1907); novels: *Clayhanger*, *The Card* (1911; published in the United States as *Denry the Audacious*, 1911), and *The Price of Love* (1914); plays: *Milestones: A Play in Three Acts* (pr., pb. 1912) and *The Great Adventure: A Play of Fantasia in Four Sets* (pr. 1912); nonfiction: *The Human Machine* (1908) and *Mental Efficiency, and Other Hints to Men and Women* (1911); and criticism: *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch* (1908-1911). As he drove himself relentlessly, his income increased and his health deteriorated. He experienced sleeplessness, exhaustion, and intermittent depression. After bouts of gastroenteritis, Bennett would dose himself with various pills and nerve tonics. Yet he had an enviable reputation as a sweet-tempered and generous man, which is somewhat belied by his later relations with his wife, from whom he separated in 1921.

During World War I, Bennett worked hard and without pay at a five-day-a-week schedule in the Ministry of Information, later basing an important novel, *Lord Raingo* (1926), on his experience. Continuing to write journalism, novels, and other books that would swell his total output to more than eighty titles, Bennett was lionized, feted, and offered titles he refused—always careful to remember his social roots, eschewing snobbery, and taking a line sympathetic to working men and women.

Toward the end of his career, he was often re-

garded as a relic. His reputation in eclipse after coming under the heavy literary guns of Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West, Bennett died on March 27, 1931, in London, a prosperous writer mourned even by his severest critics, who noted the power of his kind and sympathetic personality and art.

## ANALYSIS

Bennett's highest literary ambition was to become the English Flaubert. Profoundly influenced by Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1857; English translation, 1886), Bennett set out to record a faithful, intensely accurate, and scrupulously realized account of English provincial life in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Flaubert had shown that the single most important factor in literature was the writer's imagination, his ability to plumb the milieu and the minds of his characters. Rendering their worlds in meticulous detail, creating the canvas of human nature, would yield a godlike mastery of social reality and individuality and issue into an art that could stand by itself.

Flaubert's appeal to Bennett is obvious, for here was a man who wanted to transcend his place in the dirty pottery towns of the north of England, who in his early years had to bow to the authority of his strong-willed father. To create his own world for himself and to project that world into literature seemed to him to be the noblest and most exciting goal he could conceive.

The key to Bennett's success lay in his efforts to amass a densely organized and detailed view of social reality. In his best work he set a geographical boundary to his fiction, the territory of the five towns in Staffordshire—Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, and Longton—that he called in his fiction Turnhill, Bursley, Banbridge, Knype, and Longshaw. Within these environs, Bennett could map and plot and analyze human character and society with virtually exhaustive completeness. Thus in a "Five Towns" novel he could describe in riveting detail the transportation network, the items in the shops, the dress of men and women, the character and quality of their furniture, the local politics, the announcements and gossip in the newspapers, and the seemingly glacial, reluctant emergence of these provincial places into the modern world.

If Bennett found his first novel painful to write,



it is not difficult to see why. His novels are stocked with a profusion of data about social mores and material culture that are almost anthropological in their completeness. When Bennett describes the interior of a home, there is no doubt that he has fully imagined these features and must have found the creation of them arduous. The discipline of a mind capable of such extraordinary specificity, however, produced a magnificent storehouse of imagined environments that Bennett could quickly call upon, for he wrote his greatest and one of his longest works, *The Old Wives' Tale*, in less than a year.

Although Bennett's prodigious output varies in quality, even his least accomplished novels, plays, and criticism reflect his incredible inventory of subjects, which he would recycle throughout his long career. Thus *The Grand Babylon Hotel* initiated his writing about hotels, a characteristic that would appear regularly throughout his fiction. A miser appears in *Anna of the Five Towns* and then is given definitive treatment in *Riceman Steps*. His women tend to split between the homelike and the unruly—Constance and Sophia in *The Old Wives' Tale*, Alice Challice and Hilda Lessways in *Buried Alive* (1908). Knowing Paris almost as well as his Five Towns, he turned to it in *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Pretty Lady* (1918), and *Lilian* (1922).

Bennett's understanding of human nature is founded on the strong material basis of his fiction. His characters' minds and hearts are as plentifully filled as his houses, shops, and streets. A character's mind in Bennett's imagination has as much of a geography as does the locality in which he or she resides. For example, Constance in the *The Old Wives' Tale* has a mind like the draper's shop in which she was reared. She is dull, used to the dirt in the square that invades her household, and positively panicked by her sister Sophia's proposal that they live abroad. Constance has outfitted her life to suit the narrow confines of her provincial setting and knows that the strength and interest she can muster depends upon her devotion to local values.

## THE OLD WIVES' TALE

**First published:** 1908

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines, choose opposite ways of life, accepting and rejecting their provincial roots, and reunite in their difficult, yet happy, last years.*

*The Old Wives' Tale* is generally considered to be Bennett's masterpiece. It captures both the provincial and cosmopolitan worlds that were the basis of both his life and his fiction. In this work, Bennett attained an exquisite balance between his two homes, England and France, and between his romantic and realistic sides that are mirrored in the lives of his two heroines, Constance and Sophia.

Constance and Sophia are the daughters of a well-known draper in Bursley. Constance finds it no trouble at all to accustom herself to the drab atmosphere of the shop, to obey her mother in every respect, and to wait upon her invalid father. The beautiful Sophia dreads commerce and is bored by it, preferring a career as a teacher, which her parents strictly forbid her to pursue. Of a romantic disposition, Sophia is quickly taken with Gerald Scales, a traveling salesman who persuades her to elope with him.

Book 1 of the novel is finely balanced between Constance and Sophia, so that the claims of the family and the desires of the individual are both given their due. The characters of Sophia and Constance come to the fore in a hilarious scene involving Samuel Povey, the chief assistant of the shop, who has fallen into a stupor induced by the drug he has taken to deaden the pain of an aching tooth. As his mouth drops open, Sophia deftly inserts a pair of pliers, extracting what she deems to be the offending tooth, only to discover that she has pulled the wrong one. Naturally, Constance is shocked by her sister's boldness, for she cannot imagine taking



PENGUIN CLASSICS

ARNOLD BENNETT  
*The Old Wives' Tale*



such liberties or behaving so recklessly. She can be neither as assertive nor as certain as her sister.

Book 2 is devoted to Constance's life, her marriage to Samuel Povey, the birth of her darling son, her management of the shop after the death of her parents, and her retirement to the rooms above the shop when she is bought out by a female assistant and her new husband, the family's dour attorney, Mr. Critchlow. Sophia largely disappears as a character, with Constance receiving only a few postcards that tell her that Sophia is still alive. It is to Bennett's credit that he manages to make Constance an interesting character when her personality is so clearly drab in comparison with her sister's. Bennett is successful because he is so well informed about the details of Constance's life and can show her inner feelings, making what would appear trivial matters to an outside observer important events in Constance's inner life. Bennett demonstrates how Constance makes her marriage and her career in the shop successful, so that within her limitations she performs admirably and heroically. At the same time, the intermittent mentions of Sophia whet the curiosity. What has she made of her life?

Book 3 shifts to Sophia, showing that Gerald Scales never meant to marry her. A spoiled young man with an inheritance, he planned only to make sport with Sophia, but her stolid refusal to have an affair with Scales forces him to marry her. Yet the marriage is a failure, a fact that Sophia prudently acknowledges when she takes advantage of her husband by stealing several hundred pounds to set aside for the day he leaves her.

After recovering from a serious illness occasioned by Gerald's departure, Sophia finds that she is a Baines after all; that is, she has a gift for business, setting herself up with a pension and gaining a reputation as an industrious, no-nonsense proprietor. She rejects various male suitors, saving both her money and her energy for business, paying little attention to the Paris to which her husband has taken her and in which she expects to remain, having given up all thoughts of contacting her family.

At fifty, life changes for Sophia when she is recognized by a family friend who is visiting Paris. Contact is initiated by Constance, who overwhelms Sophia with her sweetness. Sophia is impressed and gratified by her sister's generosity and her complete lack of criticism. Constance, in short, wel-

comes her sister home, and Bennett shrewdly conveys the way in which each must adjust to the habits of the other, sharing the Baines propensity for efficient household management but remaining divided on their views of the best way of spending their remaining years.

Book 4, titled "What Life Is," sums up what the novel is ultimately about: how the sisters come to terms with their mortality and measure the way they have lived. Constance dies, appropriately enough, by exhausting herself in a long walk to the polling booth to vote against the referendum that would unite the five towns and put an end to the provincial life she has treasured. Sophia dies at the shock of seeing her presumably dead husband, who has finally returned home in penury, a feeble old man whose presence floods her with memories of her youth, of her wayward romantic feelings that have given way to a much safer, if narrower, life.

## RICEYMAN STEPS

**First published:** 1923

**Type of work:** Novel

*Henry Earlforward, proprietor of a secondhand bookshop, gradually allows his miserly habits to overwhelm his life, causing the death of himself and his wife.*

*Riceyman Steps* is a bleak novel about a miser. It is a tribute to Bennett's art that the novel is both enjoyable and moving. There is something about knowing a character so well that there is no human fault that cannot be sympathetically understood, if not condoned. So it is with Henry Earlforward, a neat, mild, and fastidious man. When he marries Elsie Sprickett, an equally fastidious and shrewd shop owner, he defeats her efforts to behave more generously and to spend more on life, and though she rails at him, she loves him, softening to his tender voice and his obvious devotion to her.

Bennett contrives a plot and a setting that mercilessly bear down upon the characters yet give them full play to express their individuality. They are not merely the victims of circumstances, but they are also not quite strong enough to alter their lifelong habits and prejudices. There is no area of life, for

example, that Henry does not submit to his austere notions of economy. When Elsie attempts to surprise him by having his shop and home cleaned on their honeymoon day (they have agreed it is to be only one day), he insists on cutting the honeymoon short, not wanting to spend more money on what he sees as the extravagance of dinner and a motion-picture show. When they return home and he discovers the vacuum cleaners, he interviews one of the workers, asking him what they do with the dirt. Does it have a market value? Henry wants to know.

Henry denies himself and his wife food, trying to live without heat and light in his home as he does in his business. His mind measures virtually every act by what it costs, so that eventually he turns his own body into an emaciated version of his parsimonious temperament. Where he lives, *Riceyman Steps*, is but the external manifestation of Henry's reluctance to live a full, expended life. It is a neglected part of London that has not kept pace with the present and has little to recommend itself in the way of culture. Having inherited the book business from a relative, T. T. Riceyman, Henry becomes known by the place he inhabits: He is Riceyman, the human representation of the square, and the twenty Riceyman steps that mark the limit of his enterprise.

Neglecting himself and his wife, Henry does not see the signs of their physical deterioration. He will not spend money on a doctor, attributing his increasing pain to indigestion and his wife's ill health

to needless worry when in fact he is suffering from cancer and she will eventually die following an operation.

*Riceyman Steps* is perhaps Bennett's final word on the extremity of a certain kind of provincial mind that so starves itself that it cannot recognize the approaching death of the mind and the body. Yet Henry, like so many of Bennett's provincial characters, is likable, for he has an inner harmony, a fullness within the context of his own limitations, such as his full, almost sensual lips—a surprising feature in such a deprived figure.

## SUMMARY

For all of his criticism of the provincial character, Arnold Bennett's fondness for figures such as Constance Baines and Henry Earlforward is apparent, for they are presented in loving detail and often exhibit a stalwart, dependable integrity that he much admires. They also represent the power of the past, of the status quo, and of the masses of people who content themselves with life as it is. Though Bennett himself did not choose to live a conventional life, he understood and sympathized with those who made such decisions, because he realized that there were certain compensations for them—chiefly, a sense of comfort and security that his more flamboyant and romantic characters could not achieve.

Carl Rollyson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Virginia Woolf, a great novelist, wrote that Arnold Bennett's novels leave the reader with "a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction." Is she correct?
- What enables Bennett to write so well about provincial towns, like the one depicted in *The Old Wives' Tale*?
- Did Bennett write too many books, or does his work exemplify the value of ceaseless work to improve a writer's chances of succeeding some of the time? Explain your response.
- Consider the wisdom of Bennett's restricting his settings to five towns in one English shire.
- In *Riceyman Steps*, what traits of the miser make him likable?

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Courtesy, Teos

## THOMAS BERNHARD

**Born:** Heerlen, the Netherlands

February 9, 1931

**Died:** Gmunden, Austria

February 12, 1989

*Bernhard's postmodernist fiction, formally bearing close resemblance to the interior monologues of Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett, reveals the tortured souls and minds of his self-absorbed protagonists and narrators, striving in vain and often fatally for perfection in a world indifferent and even hostile to their artistic and intellectual ideals.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Bernhard (BEHRN-hahrt) was born Nicolaas Thomas Bernhard, the illegitimate son of Hertha Bernhard and Alois Zuckerstätter. When he was young, his father walked out on him and his mother. Bernhard never forgave his father for this desertion, nor could he forgive his mother for constantly blaming him for her misfortunes. Hertha Bernhard had to move from one menial job to another, even after she remarried in 1936. The only stability in the young boy's life was provided by his maternal grandfather, a writer, who took over his early education by taking him on long walks and holding forth on his own favorite writers and philosophers, among them Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, which surely contributed to Bernhard's own existential pessimism in his later years.

Formal education was a traumatic experience for the young boy, as he attended a school formerly run by the Nazi government that was taken over by the Catholic Church after World War II. Bernhard claimed the transition was so smooth that he did not notice any difference between the two authoritarian regimes. At the age of sixteen, he apprenticed himself to a grocer in a blighted area of Salzburg, Austria. Much of Bernhard's dramatic and narrative work exhibits his hatred and con-

tempt for the Catholic Church and for Austria's denial of its unconquered Nazi past.

The young man's dreams of becoming a singer were brought to an abrupt halt when he was diagnosed with a serious lung disease that brought him to the brink of death and forced him to spend considerable time in hospitals and sanatoriums. Bernhard's novels abound with characters who are obsessed with real or imagined illnesses, and the imagery of disease informs his view of Austrian society and the human condition in general. Against all odds, Bernhard survived to complete his studies in music and performing arts in Vienna and Salzburg in 1956.

After publishing four little-noticed volumes of poetry, the appearance of his first novel, *Frost* (1963; English translation, 2006), catapulted Bernhard to literary fame. The work already shows most of Bernhard's main thematic and stylistic traits; however, instead of the interior monologue form of his later novels, *Frost* is an epistolary novel. His notion of a congenital disease that affects Austrian society and the image of the cold that gradually increases and deadens human relationships is reminiscent of the apocalyptic novels of Samuel Beckett. His subsequent novels, including *Verstörung* (1967; *Gargoyles*, 1970); *Das Kalkwerk* (1970; *The Lime Works*, 1973); his acknowledged masterpiece, *Korrektur* (1975; *Correction*, 1979); and *Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall* (1986; *Extinction*, 1995), repeat with minor variations the dominant themes first contained in *Frost*.

With his reputation as one of Austria's foremost novelists of the twentieth century firmly established, Bernhard began a second and concurrent career as a playwright in the 1970's, starting with *Ein Fest für Boris* (pr., pb. 1970; *A Party for Boris*, 1990) and ending with *Heldenplatz* (pr., pb. 1988), which created an artistic scandal and a political uproar in Austria.

The recipient of many literary prizes, Bernhard had a love-hate relationship with his country that led him to offend many leading Austrian politicians, fellow writers, artists, and interviewers. This ambivalent attitude was evident when Bernhard's will was made public after his clandestine burial in Vienna on February 16, 1989, four days after his death. The will stipulated that nothing he had written, including any papers or documents that might be found, could be published or performed within the borders of Austria while the legal copyrights were in force. The executors of his will, primarily his half siblings, controversially lifted this ban after ten years, resulting in the performance of some hitherto unperformed plays under the direction of his longtime collaborator and friend Claus Peymann.

## ANALYSIS

Thomas Bernhard's syntactically difficult prose can be made accessible to the reader by reference to his life, particularly his early years, and thus by a careful reading of his collected memoirs, *Gathering Evidence* (1985), the English translation of five German-language autobiographies published from 1975 until 1982. His illegitimate birth, the fact that he never knew his biological father, his strained relationship with his mother, his apparently ambiguous relationship with his stepsister, and particularly the chronic lung ailments that brought him to the brink of early death and dogged him all his life—all these would serve to explain the bleak outlook on life of his narrators and protagonists. His early acquaintance with the works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as his negative experiences with the Catholic religion and the Austrian bureaucracy, particularly the national health system and its iniquities, could offer an ample explanation for the curmudgeonly alter egos in his novels. Most of Bernhard's protagonists are obsessed hypochondriacs, trying to isolate themselves in pursuit of unobtainable ideals, and blaming women, politicians, the unsupportive cultural and intellectual climate

of their homeland, and other imaginary distractions for their inability to act.

Such a biographical approach can yield much insight into Bernhard and his work, but it will be only of superficial and limited usefulness. Bernhard's prose has its sources in a venerable literary tradition, which it simultaneously rejects and refines. In many ways, Bernhard's novels are literary illustrations of his personal debates with artists and philosophers, past and present. Besides Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, there are intertextual references to Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Fyodor Dostoevski, Samuel Beckett, and French existentialist philosophers, as well as to many German and Austrian authors that prove Bernhard to be much less the self-created genius he pretended to be.

While some of Bernhard's early novels use the more traditional form of the epistolary novel and the fictional diary, his mature works are modeled on the irascible and lonely monologists of Beckett's novels and the hypochondriac rant of Dostoevski's *Zapiski iz podpolya* (1864; *Notes from the Underworld*, 1913; better known as *Notes from the Underground*). At the end of most of Bernhard's novels, the narrators, after an uninterrupted and often frantic monologue in which they try to explain and justify themselves, fall silent or listen to music, since language is not adequate for expressing their thoughts. This confirms and illustrates the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein and his famous dictum that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Bernhard believes that music is the medium which can rise above the limitations of verbal communication. Several critics have pointed out that Bernhard's novels, in particular *Der Untergeher* (1983; *The Loser*, 1991), are not constructed according to traditional principles of novelistic plot structure but follow the formal parameters of contrapuntal musical compositions, principally that of the fugue. Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (1741) have been shown to serve as the formal basis for *The Loser*; Bernhard's novel about pianist Glenn Gould.

Considering this structural principle, it is no surprise that Bernhard's mature novels are all repetitions and variations of the same themes. An eccentric loner, a man of high social standing, education, and intellect but always afflicted by a real or imaginary disease, is engaged in a project that will



produce a perfect masterpiece. This project can be literary, critical, architectural, or musical; in every instance, the protagonists-narrators find themselves incapable of completing the project because they are hindered by their environment, frequently by a sister they accuse of being intrusive and interfering. The main reason for their procrastination, however, appears to be their subconscious awareness that their project will not live up to their own lofty expectations of perfection, even if they did complete it, but completion is impossible since it cannot be complete unless it is perfect. This desperate paradox leads some of the protagonists to suicide; others, facing the same dilemma they observe and describe in their friends, finally come to the realization that such perfection is not possible, but that human existence is made meaningful by persevering in the attempt to attain perfection, even though it is inevitably doomed.

In addition to this fundamental existential anguish that pervades Bernhard's novels, there is the more obvious and sometimes shrill dissatisfaction with the cultural and political state of affairs in the author's native country, Austria. The author never missed an occasion—even when the Austrian government awarded him prestigious and lucrative prizes and stipends—to revile his countrymen for their unwillingness to face their fascist past, their political opportunism, their adherence to outmoded social and artistic models, and their disdain and lack of support for contemporary art that questions their petite bourgeois tastes. Bernhard's dyspeptic narrators become virtual mouthpieces for his criticism of Austria and its political and cultural institutions. In some cases, his characters' diatribes against leading politicians and fellow artists were so transparent that legal action was taken against him and attempts were made to prevent the performance of one of his plays.

Bernhard was quickly recognized as one of the leading prose writers of the twentieth century by fellow writers and critics; despite their complexity, his novels found a wide readership in Europe. Readers in England and the United States were somewhat more reluctant to accept him, but the increasing praise of his prose by British and American critics has increased the readership in these countries, and excellent translations of almost all his prose works are now readily available. His compatriot, Elfriede Jelinek, who won the Nobel Prize

in Literature in 2004, compellingly argues that all future German and Austrian novelists will have to measure themselves against the high standards set by Thomas Bernhard.

## CONCRETE

**First published:** *Beton*, 1982 (English translation, 1984)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An ailing would-be musicologist once more fails to start his study of the composer Felix Mendelssohn and relives a troubling experience from his past on the island of Mallorca.*

Like all of Thomas Bernhard's mature novels, *Concrete* is written as one long paragraph representing a continuous interior monologue. In this novel, the monologue is in the form of a manuscript perused by an anonymous narrator, possibly after the death of the manuscript's author, Rudolph. The unnamed narrator is noticeable only by brief editorial references, such as "writes Rudolph," or "so Rudolph," which appear mainly at the beginning and the very end of the novel.

At the outset, Rudolph, who fancies himself a musicologist, once again attempts to start his magnum opus, a study of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, as he has done several times for the past ten years without ever writing a line. Convinced that he has only a few more years to live because he suffers from sarcoidosis, a usually nonfatal lung disease, he is determined to start writing. He attributes his inability to begin to the constant interruptions of his sister, whom he depicts as an anti-intellectual but apparently very successful business woman. Further excuses for his procrastination are the adverse cultural conditions in Austria, his health, and the climate, but the reader senses that the very completion of his project would deprive him of any reason to continue living—the completion of his life's work would also be the end of his life.

After a long rant about these obstacles that takes up two-thirds of the novel, Rudolph decides to follow his sister's advice to go to Mallorca for a change of scenery. However, shortly after arriving there, he remembers a young German woman, Anna Härdtl,

whom he had met by chance in the same place two years before. At that time, Anna told him that her husband had just fallen from their hotel balcony, either by accident or by committing suicide due to the failure of their business, for which he had no talent. Rudolph had helped Anna find her husband's grave, which turned out to be in a huge concrete bunker he shared with a woman who was a total stranger. The self-absorbed Rudolph had left Mallorca and the young woman behind and returned to Austria. Now, two years later, Rudolph is seized by curiosity and possibly feelings of guilt. He revisits the grave site and discovers that Anna is now buried in the same concrete grave bunker as her husband. He finds out that Anna has committed suicide, news that leaves him in a state of extreme anxiety at the end of the novel.

*Concrete*—the title is obviously taken from the concrete grave that becomes Anna Hårdt's final resting place—is Bernhard's most accessible novel. The protagonist, a self-absorbed intellectual wracked with doubt and self-loathing, incapable of decisive action, is the prototypical Bernhard "hero." His long monologue, written to explain and to justify himself, is full of contempt for practical people who are capable of acting, if only in a sphere the narrator finds vulgar, but at the same time he envies people like his sister and Anna who actively take charge of their lives, even when that means committing suicide. The reader is left to ponder whether Rudolph's most recent epiphany will lead him to also act decisively, but it is more likely that his extreme state of anxiety will lead only to further excuses and procrastination.

## CORRECTION

**First published:** *Korrektur*, 1975 (English translation, 1979)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An anonymous narrator sorts through the posthumous papers and manuscripts his friend Roithamer left after killing himself and tries to find an explanation for the suicide.*

Most critics consider *Correction* to be Thomas Bernhard's masterpiece. On the surface, the novel

is very similar to *Concrete* and *The Loser*; indeed, one could call the three novels a trilogy on the dangers of striving for perfection. Whereas the other two are long interior monologues presented as one single paragraph, *Correction* is divided into two sections with individual headings. The first section is entitled "Hoeller's Garret," while the second part is called "Sifting and Sorting" and is noticeably different from the first part in style and content.

In the first section, the narrator—an intellectual afflicted with a lung disease—moves into the garret of a friend's house (the name Hoeller strongly evokes the German word *Hölle*, meaning "hell") to take charge of the papers of his longtime friend Roithamer, who has recently committed suicide. A note found on his body requested the narrator to become the executor and editor of his papers, especially of three versions of an essay that tries to explain the reasons for Roithamer's failed utopian plan to construct a cone-shaped building in the middle of a forest, intended as the perfect abode for his beloved sister. In some unexplained way, however, the building led to the death of his sister shortly after he installed her there, and Roithamer then hanged himself in a nearby forest clearing.

The title of the novel is taken from the corrections Roithamer has made to the essay, with each correction an attempt at condensation and reduction in order to clarify his concept of the conical building. The essay was written in the same garret where the narrator reads it, and this location leads the narrator to recall a stream of memories of his and Roithamer's common past, during which the reader discovers that the two men's backgrounds are remarkably similar.

In the second section, which deals with the narrator's sifting and sorting through Roithamer's papers, the original narrative voice increasingly disappears and the section is an apparently random perusal of the large number of Roithamer's papers the narrator has spilled out in the garret. For the most part, the dead man is allowed to speak from his papers without any attempt at editing or interpreting, although it is clear from the last phrases quoted from the papers that Roithamer had realized that he had pursued an impossible goal: trying to achieve perfection. By this single-minded quest he has killed his sister and set himself up for disappointment and despair, leading him inexorably to the clearing where he hanged himself.

Critics have commented extensively on the similarities between Roithamer and the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, including a strong attachment to their sisters, the construction of eccentric houses, suicidal tendencies, and a growing despair in the power of language to adequately express complex ideas. The narrator begins to see how much he and Roithamer are alike and grows increasingly fearful that an interpretive understanding of Roithamer's papers might push him to the same fate. Therefore, he allows Roithamer to speak for himself through his papers, which he scans without any editorial plan. This seemingly unscholarly lack of method is the narrator's salvation. He has grasped that the process of sifting and sorting itself is healthy and productive, and the futile attempt at perfect understanding and expression is impossible, even with an infinite number of "corrections," and inevitably leads to "the clearing."

## THE LOSER

**First published:** *Der Untergeher*, 1983  
(English translation, 1991)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A concert pianist turned philosopher and writer has come to sift through the papers of his friend Wertheimer, who has recently committed suicide, and he reflects on the impact their former friend, piano virtuoso Glenn Gould, has had on their lives.*

Written almost twenty years after *Correction*, *The Loser* strikingly resembles the earlier novel in both form and content. Whereas *Correction* deals with a character representing the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and his pessimistic language philosophy, *The Loser* focuses on a highly mythologized Glenn Gould—some of his biographical data are intentionally wrong—and his quest for the perfect piano performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

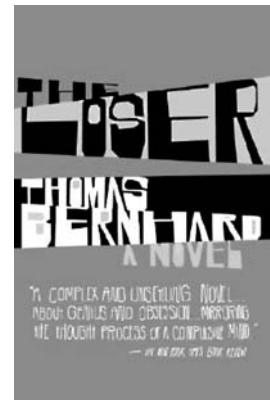
Like most of Bernhard's novels, *The Loser* is a one-paragraph interior monologue. In this novel's monologue, the narrator is moved to reflect back thirty years, when he, Wertheimer, and Gould were

studying to become concert pianists in Salzburg. As in Bernhard's previous novels, all three main characters are afflicted by a lung disease and prone to self-absorption and self-doubt. Wertheimer has recently killed himself, and the narrator, who has been making little progress on his presumed magnum opus, a study entitled *About Glenn Gould*, has come to take charge of Wertheimer's papers, which would presumably shed light on the reasons for his suicide. Almost the entire stream-of-consciousness monologue is delivered during the brief time the narrator waits in a country inn near Wertheimer's house for the innkeeper to show him to his room.

The narrator conjectures that Wertheimer's suicide is tied in some way to the recent death of Gould. Both the narrator and Wertheimer had given up piano playing when they were confronted with the fact that they would always be second-rate compared to Gould. However, Wertheimer sought to become and to be Gould, thus "losing" his own identity. The German title of the novel cleverly hints at this misguided ideal; an *Untergeher* is a person who sinks or submerges himself, and the word also connotes "decline." Wertheimer's "loss" is that he cannot stand being himself but tries in vain to lose or submerge himself in Gould, who very perceptively gave him his nickname, The Loser, thirty years ago.

Wertheimer has not been able to overcome his disappointment for thirty years, in contrast to the narrator, who has turned his energies away from trying to become Gould and now merely tries to describe Gould's genius, an almost equally impossible task which nevertheless keeps him from despairing like Wertheimer.

In *The Loser*, Bernhard's diseased intellectual protagonist has been split into three variations of the same type. There is Gould, who realizes the impossibility of the perfect concert piano performance and turns to the recording studio and its technological possibilities to achieve the impossible; the narrator, who realizes his limitations early



and turns his energies to the equally impossible quest of describing Gould's genius; and Wertheimer, who destroys himself by stubbornly refusing to live within his limitations, and in his attempt to achieve his ideal of becoming someone else, loses, or annihilates, himself. It is inevitable, therefore, that the narrator discovers that Wertheimer has burned all his papers after one last grotesque attempt at becoming Gould before killing himself. The narrator is left speechless, listening to Gould's famous recording of the *Goldberg Variations*.

## SUMMARY

Thomas Bernhard is one of the most original postmodernist writers in the German language. His novels, written in the form of long monologues, portray disaffected and alienated intellectuals trying to come to terms with their increasing

isolation in anti-intellectual, materialistic societies. While their harangues appear to be mostly directed against their social, political, and cultural environments, they frequently reveal their disappointment and frustration about their inability to achieve unrealistically high goals and the failure to find a common ground with their surroundings.

Bernhard, himself an iconoclastic loner, appeared to project much of himself into his narrator-protagonists, but it is also clear that he was not trying to make them antiestablishment heroes. His own fraught relationship with Austria was as schizophrenic as that of his protagonists: he loathed his native country for its past, its small-mindedness, and its conservatism, but he loved it enough to continue living there and to point out its flaws, realizing he could not expect any gratitude in return.

Franz G. Blaha

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- Watten: Ein Nachlass*, 1969 (*Playing Watten*, 2003)
- Gehen*, 1971 (*Walking*, 2003)
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- Der Stimmenimitator*, 1978 (*The Voice Imitator*, 1997)
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POETRY:

*Auf der Erde und in der Hölle*, 1957  
*In hora mortis*, 1957 (English translation, 2006)  
*Unter dem Eisen des Mondes*, 1958  
*Die Irren-die Häftlinge*, 1962  
*Contemporary German Poetry*, 1964 (includes selections of his poetry in English translation)

DRAMA:

*Der Rosen der Einöde*, pb. 1959 (libretto)  
*Ein Fest für Boris*, pr., pb. 1970 (*A Party for Boris*, 1990)  
*Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige*, pr., pb. 1972  
*Die Jagdgesellschaft*, pr., pb. 1974  
*Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, pr., pb. 1974 (*The Force of Habit*, 1976)  
*Der Präsident*, pr., pb. 1975 (*The President*, 1982)  
*Die Berühmten*, pr., pb. 1976  
*Minetti: Ein Porträt des Künstlers als alter Mann*, pr. 1976, pb. 1977  
*Immanuel Kant*, pr., pb. 1978  
*Der Weltverbesserer*, pb. 1979, pr. 1980 (*The World-Fixer*, 2005)  
*Vor dem Ruhestand*, pb. 1979, pr. 1980 (*Eve of Retirement*, 1982)  
*Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh: Ein deutscher Dichtertag um 1980*, pb. 1981 (*Over All the Mountain Tops*, 2004)  
*Am Ziel*, pr., pb. 1981  
*Der Schein trügt*, pb. 1983, pr. 1984 (*Appearances Are Deceiving*, 1983)  
*Der Theatermacher*, pb. 1984, pr. 1986 (*Histrionics*, 1990)  
*Ritter, Dene, Voss*, pb. 1984, pr. 1986 (English translation, 1990)  
*Elisabeth II*, pb. 1987, pr. 1989  
*Heldenplatz*, pr., pb. 1988  
*Histrionics: Three Plays*, pb. 1990

SCREENPLAY:

*Der Italiener*, 1971

NONFICTION:

*Die Ursache: Eine Andeutung*, 1975 (*An Indication of the Cause*, 1985)  
*Der Keller: Eine Entziehung*, 1976 (*The Cellar: An Escape*, 1985)  
*Der Atem: Eine Entscheidung*, 1978 (*Breath: A Decision*, 1985)  
*Die Kälte: Eine Isolation*, 1981 (*In the Cold*, 1985)  
*Ein Kind*, 1982 (*A Child*, 1985)  
*Wittgensteins Nefte: Eine Freundschaft*, 1982 (*Wittgenstein's Nephew: A Friendship*, 1986)  
*Gathering Evidence*, 1985 (English translation of the five autobiographical works *An Indication of the Cause*, *The Cellar: An Escape*, *Breath: A Decision*, *In the Cold*, and *A Child*)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Almost all of Thomas Bernhard's protagonists are afflicted by one disease or another. Is this merely a reflection of Bernhard's own lifelong bouts with illness, or does disease function as a metaphor in his novels?
- Most of Bernhard's novels are one-paragraph interior monologues by often eccentric characters. How reliable are these narrators? Can we take everything they say as fact?
- Bernhard has been called a "misogynist," or a hater of women. Is there evidence for that in his novels? Is there another possible explanation for the absence of female narrators in his novels?
- Most Americans associate Austria with images from the Hollywood film *The Sound of Music* (1965). Contrast and compare these images to Bernhard's portrait of Austria.
- In his novels, Bernhard frequently presents famous artists and thinkers, among them Glenn Gould and Ludwig Wittgenstein, but he falsifies easily verifiable biographical facts about them. Assuming that this is intentional, what might be his purpose?
- Some critics have discovered signs of comedy in Bernhard's novels. Can you find incidents or passages that would support this claim?

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## JOHN BETJEMAN

**Born:** London, England

August 28, 1906

**Died:** Trebetherick, Cornwall, England

May 19, 1984

*Dedicated to making poetry accessible to, and understood by, the general reading public, Betjeman, with his indelible portraits of English towns, villages, and people, is a significant, modern literary voice.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in London, England, on August 28, 1906, John Betjeman (BEHCH-uh-muhn) was the only child of Mabel Bessie Dawson and Ernest Betjeman, a prominent businessman of Dutch ancestry and supplier of fine furnishings for exclusive shops. Betjeman's early years, especially those of his childhood, are recounted in his verse autobiography, *Summoned by Bells* (1960). Growing up in the North London Edwardian suburbs, Betjeman became painfully aware of class differences, the seemingly small but inexorable distinctions of income and status. He developed, even at an early age, a profound sensitivity to subtle forms of snobbery. Betjeman's family relations were somewhat strained, even perverse. His father, from whom the author later became estranged, figured into his poetry as a formidable reminder of his son's inadequacies, not only because the younger Betjeman did not enjoy hunting and fishing, as his father did, but also because he refused to continue in the family business. Betjeman's guilt for disappointing his parent was obsessive, extending to his imagining that he also had disappointed his father's employees.

Feeling the magnetic draw of poetry, Betjeman recognized even as an adolescent that his future lay in verse: "I knew as soon as I could read and write/ That I must be a poet" (*Summoned by Bells*). The young poet attended preparatory school at Highgate, London; his teacher there, T. S. Eliot, was a profound force in modern poetry. To Eliot, the young Betjeman would bind and submit his first poetic attempts in a volume titled "The Best of Betjeman." Eliot never commented, however, upon

the schoolboy's verses. At Marlborough public school, which Betjeman entered in 1920, bullies teased and terrorized the youngster. One of Betjeman's classmates mocked his poem about a city church, thus humiliating the already sensitive and lonely adolescent. This experience traumatized the fifteen-year-old and contributed to his antipathy toward abusive criticism.

In 1925, Betjeman entered Magdalen College, Oxford, with plans of earning a degree in English, but, to his father's disappointment and to his own dismay, his irresolute lifestyle prohibited him from attaining academic success: "For, while we ate Virginia hams,/ Contemporaries passed exams" (*Summoned by Bells*). However, most of Betjeman's memories of Oxford were pleasant. There, he developed many friendships, most notably with Evelyn Waugh, who later became one of England's most prodigious novelists. Betjeman's talents did not go unnoticed at Oxford. C. W. Bowra, a renowned scholar, applauded Betjeman's verse, as well as his knowledge of architecture. Despite Bowra's admiration and affection, Betjeman was not showered with accolades at Oxford. Having neglected his studies, Betjeman won the distaste of his tutor, C. S. Lewis, a distinguished critic and author whom the poet later satirized in some of his poems. Failing repeated attempts to pass a simple qualifying exam, Betjeman was forced at last to leave Oxford. Stunned and saddened by his failure, the poet left college disillusioned, having fallen short of his dream of becoming a university don: "Reading old poets in the library,/ Attending chapel in an M.A. gown/ And sipping vintage port by candle-light" (*Summoned by Bells*). Despite his aversion to

sports, Betjeman obtained, and held for a short time, a teaching post at Heddon Court School, in Barnet, Hertfordshire, a post secured, ironically, under the auspices of his mastery of cricket.

The 1930's saw Betjeman's popularity increase as he gained visibility and recognition. In 1931, the poet published his first book of poetry, *Mount Zion: Or, In Touch with the Infinite*, whose poems contained many of his major themes and revealed his interest in topography. That same year, Betjeman became assistant editor of the *Architectural Review*, a position that granted him exposure to many of England's prominent architects and architectural historians of the day. Betjeman left his position in 1933 and began editing a series of topographical guides to Britain. To her mother's chagrin, Penelope Chetwode, daughter of Field Marshal Sir Philip Chetwode, the commander in chief of India, accepted Betjeman's proposal of marriage in 1933. The couple had two children, Paul and Candida. In a few short years, Betjeman's second volume of verse, *Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgeois Verse* (1937), with its light and whimsical tone, appeared and immediately enjoyed success. Betjeman, however, wanted to be regarded as a serious poet, not merely a popular one, though the ambiguity of some of his best images and the complexity of his tone lay buried beneath his copious iambs. Nonetheless, the public flocked to buy his unpretentious verse. Not since Lord Byron and Alfred, Lord Tennyson had a poet been so embraced by the masses.

When World War II broke out, Betjeman's penchant for writing found various forms of expression. He served as a press attaché in Dublin for the United Kingdom Press, he functioned as a broadcaster for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1943, and he worked in the books department of the British Council from 1944 to 1946. These years saw the publication of *Old Lights for New Chancels: Verses Topographical and Amatory* (1940), as well as a new collection of poems, *New Bats in Old Belfries* (1945). Partly because of his enormous success as a writer of books on topology and architecture, such as *Ghastly Good Taste: Or, A Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture* (1933), *An Oxford University Chest* (1938), *Antiquarian Prejudice* (1939), and *English Cities and Small Towns* (1943), Betjeman's widespread reputation as a poet seemed almost overshadowed by his prose. Indeed, he had become a spokesperson for the preservation of

English architecture, especially Victorian architecture. When the war ended, Betjeman resumed his journalistic career, extending it to the increasingly popular medium of television, at which he won further notoriety.

The poetry of Betjeman's last forty years, though more overtly pessimistic than his previous work, reiterates many of the author's earlier themes, as exemplified in his volume *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* (1954). His continued acclaim, however, as a poet, broadcaster, and critic of modernity gained him widespread recognition, precipitating his being knighted in 1969 and appointed poet laureate in 1972, a position that he held until his death on May 19, 1984, in Cornwall, England.

### ANALYSIS

In contrast to the erudite and often enigmatic verse of many of his contemporaries, Betjeman's poetry seems simple and natural. It lacks the features of fragmentation and austere intellectualism that typify much modern poetry, although Betjeman does recurrently embrace the common twentieth century themes of alienation and guilt. Eschewing obscurity, Betjeman embraces a conversational style, replete with narrative elements, and utilizes traditional meter and rhyme, though occasionally he employs metrical variations or substitutions. He borrows his forms especially from his nineteenth century predecessors. Because his verse is so natural, in fact, most critics fail to notice his penchant for ambiguity, evident in some of his better poems, such as "The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel," in *Mount Zion*, or "On a Portrait of a Deaf Man," in *Old Lights for New Chancels*. Betjeman's major themes underscore the defects of modernity, with its disregard for the aesthetic and its disrespect for the environment. They also highlight the author's spiritual doubt, his obsession with class, with guilt, and with death, as well as divulge his affinity for topography.

The verses of *Mount Zion* demonstrate the young author's interest in topography, especially English suburbia, with such memorable sketches as "Croydon" and Oakleigh Park of "The Outer Suburbs," with its "blackened blocks" and stained-glass windows. Betjeman's verse fuses reds and greens, oranges and blacks on his canvas of neighborhood sidewalks, churches, railways, and trams. *Mount*

*Zion* also reveals Betjeman's genius for mild satire and for humor, perhaps most noticeable in "The 'Varsity Students' Rag."

Though Betjeman figures as a significant modern poetic force, his exceptional prose writings are also a hallmark of his enormous productivity: works on England's cities and towns, churches and architecture, even a book on his friend, abstract painter John Piper. These prose works, like Betjeman's poetry, are marked by their readability and friendly, intimate tone.

Most of what is known of Betjeman's childhood, through his stay at Oxford until the beginning of his first teaching position, is captured in his blank-verse autobiography, *Summoned by Bells*. This work, written toward the middle of Betjeman's career, not only demonstrates the poet's proclivity for detail but also reiterates many of his earlier themes and preoccupations. Sharing some similarities with the confessional poets of the mid-twentieth century, Betjeman's verse in this volume is surprisingly candid, revealing the poet's fears and embarrassments, his defeats, as well as his victories.

Many of Betjeman's later volumes of verse, notably *A Few Late Chrysanthemums*, *High and Low* (1966), and *A Nip in the Air* (1974), deal, in part, with the present impinging upon the past and the results of that friction. Edwardian drawing rooms are replaced by abstruse monstrosities. Thus, Betjeman often establishes a series of antitheses, not only of artificial cities, belted in concrete, but also of artificial people, who, in the name of progress, awkwardly tread on the beautiful and the sacred, in flagrant abandon. The poet frequently illustrates this abrasive combination humorously, as in "Inexpensive Progress," from *High and Low*:

Encase your legs in nylons,  
Bestride your hills with pylons  
O age without a soul;  
Away with gentle willows  
And all the elmy billows  
That through your valleys roll.

Betjeman likens the industrialized present's encroachment upon the landscape of the past to the human body, stripped of the gentle curves that signal its beauty, inevitably resulting in barrenness and ugliness. In the above passage, Betjeman shows his keen faculty even for spacing of the lines:

The indentations of the third and sixth lines imitate the once-rolling hills and gentle breezes that soon will vanish. Emphasizing the passing of a lifestyle that is continuously eroding, the poet's images of modern impatience and disregard are typically characteristic of his verse, perhaps best epitomized in the picture of the "Executive," from *A Nip in the Air*: "I've a scarlet Aston-Martin—and does she go? She flies!/  
Pedestrians and dogs and cats—we mark them down for slaughter./ I also own a speed-boat which has never touched the water." In this light social satire, the poet plays with the ambiguous image of the speedboat, whose acceleration seemingly allows it to defy gravity. Simultaneously, the image speaks of the artificiality of an age whose leaders relish acquiring material goods for the sake of appearance, rather than for their intrinsic value or usefulness; the boat, after all, "has never touched the water."

Though the verdict on Betjeman's importance as a poet is still yet to be determined—he has spawned no imitators—his artistry has been appreciated by a generation of readers and poets alike. Poets such as England's Philip Larkin have lauded his verse, whereas his critics have complained of its sentimentality. Perhaps his greatest tribute has been the English poet W. H. Auden's dedication to him in *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), a verse dialogue reflecting man's isolation.

### "ON A PORTRAIT OF A DEAF MAN"

**First published:** 1940 (collected in *Old Lights for New Chancels: Verses Topographical and Amatory*, 1940)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem wryly contrasts the reality of death's putrefaction with a dead man's lifelong exuberance.*

"On a Portrait of a Deaf Man," written in ballad stanza form (four-line stanzas of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhyming *abcb*) and published in *Old Lights for New Chancels: Verses Topographical and Amatory* (1940), exemplifies Betjeman at his best. Approaching the theme of death

through images of the five senses, the persona juxtaposes the dead man's past vitality and productivity with his present idleness and deterioration, "his finger-bones/ Stick[ing] through his finger-ends." The poet blithely blends understatement, ambiguity, and paradox, revealing death, the eternal silencer, as the ultimate sign of "deafness":

And when he could not hear me speak  
He smiled and looked so wise  
That now I do not like to think  
Of maggots in his eyes.

The comic, yet tragic, portrait of the man may be that of Betjeman's own father, whom he once described as "deaf" in *Summoned by Bells*.

Pointing out the dead man's peculiarities, including his fondness for "potatoes in their skin," "old City dining-rooms," the smell of the Cornish air after a rain, and even his penchant for knowing "the name of ev'ry bird," the poet wryly juxtaposes images of life's activity with death's passivity. The allusion to the man's preference for potatoes is more complex than might initially appear. Betjeman's father reportedly got angry if his potatoes were not cooked until tender. Ironically, now the man has become, metaphorically, a sort of "potato" in his "skin," the mush of his decaying body only loosely encompassed by his exterior layer of skin: "But now his mouth is wide to let/ The London clay come in." Betjeman's fusion of the macabre with the comic seems a bit perverse, yet frightfully funny, nonetheless. The image of humanity in this vegetative state bears some kinship to Andrew Marvell's lady in "To His Coy Mistress" (1681), whose virginity ultimately will be violated by worms in the grave.

Betjeman wants his reader to appreciate the incongruity of humanity's seeming importance with its final insignificance. Though the tone of the poem, on the surface, appears light and humorous, it is not without seriousness. The reader comes to realize, paradoxically, that the dead man, who

appeared so vivid and alive, was "deaf" even in life, having failed to "hear" the voice of the persona and the "song" of the bird.

## SUMMONED BY BELLS

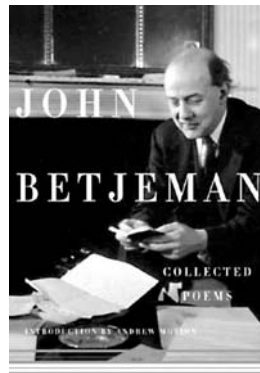
**First published:** 1960

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this autobiographical verse, spanning Betjeman's youth up to and including his leaving Oxford and securing a teaching position, the poet recollects his experiences.*

*Summoned by Bells*, a blank verse autobiography, recollects Betjeman's childhood, marred by the abusive treatment of a nursery maid, Maud, who instilled in him the dread of damnation, more terrifying than any fiery rhetoric from any preacher's pulpit. It was she who preached to him about hell, rubbed his face in his own messes, and punished him for his tardiness: "You're late for dinner, John.' I feel again/ That awful feeling, fear confused with thrill,/ As I would be unbuttoned, bent across/ Her starched apron." Surprisingly, Betjeman's choice of meter, unrhymed iambic pentameter, heightens, rather than diminishes, the tension of the scene. The regular iambic rhythm with which the nurse delivers her matter-of-fact remark exposes her inflexibility. Maud's influence on Betjeman's themes of guilt and fear of death should not be overlooked.

Though the abusive relationship with Betjeman's nurse is easily discernible, more complex is the mental torment that the author suffered as a result of his relationship with his father. The poet admits that he could never please his "dear deaf father," especially after refusing his request to continue the family business: "Partly it is guilt:/ Following in Father's footsteps' was the theme/ Of all my early childhood." With each glance, Betjeman's father's eyes accused his son of failure. Even to his dying day, the elder Betjeman had a gaze that seemed to assail the poet, smarting like stinging nettles. Not surprisingly, Betjeman recounts his childhood years as being lonely. His remembrances include lost loves, childhood betrayal, insensitive remarks of a teacher who called him



“common,” and childhood bullies at his various schools. Trapped and beaten by two “enemies” at Highgate Junior School, then hurled into the bushes, the adolescent Betjeman emerged from the attack humiliated.

There in the holly bush they threw me down,  
Pulled off my shorts, and laughed and ran away;  
And, as I struggled up, I saw grey brick,  
The cemetery railings and the tombs.

The reader need not be a psychologist to understand from this episode Betjeman’s interconnected associations of fear, pain, and death; yet the poet’s stance in relaying this experience appears neutral, that of an unbiased observer.

It would be incorrect to assume that *Summoned by Bells* contains merely embarrassing or tragic accounts of Betjeman’s early life. For the most part, the book is a kaleidoscope of colorful topographical portraits of English landscapes and seashores, of city and country dwellings, and of the English people. Nor does Betjeman’s volume lack good nature or compassion. When, as a child, the author fabricated an excuse to avoid fighting a fellow schoolboy, pleading that he had “news from home” that his “Mater was ill,” his would-be combatant, Percival Mandeville, gingerly clasped him on the shoulder comfortingly and said, “All right, old

chap. Of course I understand.” This touching account, revealing the ease and spontaneity with which young boys may reverse their adversarial positions and exhibit signs of friendship, is one of the most memorable portraits of *Summoned by Bells*. The book is not without humor, either. In describing his mother’s complaints about her tooth pain, Betjeman presents Mrs. Betjeman comically, as she charges that her infection is “just the same” as Mrs. Bent’s, who “nearly died” of the disease, though the other lady’s infection was “not, of course, so bad” as Betjeman’s mother’s own ailment.

### SUMMARY

Ironically, John Betjeman’s local color, his greatest strength, is the aspect of his poetry most often criticized: His lyrics are decidedly English, not universal. Whether he explores the mystery of faith, satirizes the imperfections of himself, his family, or the middle classes, or whether he nostalgically describes the countryside of Cornwall or a bath at Marlborough, Betjeman exhibits his wry compassion and demonstrates his facility for strict observation. Betjeman, the deliberate traditionalist, presents a discerning, not myopic, view of the world, his world, England. Indeed, his triumph lies in his partisanship.

Linda Rohrer Paige

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- List several obstacles to his career that John Betjeman overcame.
- What is meant by the term "copious iam-bics" as a means of describing Betjeman's poetry? Why might this form of poetry tend to curtail the effect of his verse?
- Explain the value of topography to a poet like Betjeman.
- By what means does Betjeman generate interest in his subject in "On a Portrait of a Deaf Man"?
- Comment on the suggestiveness of the title of the autobiographical poem *Summoned by Bells*.
- What is the theme of *Summoned by Bells*?





Courtesy, Overlook Press

## MARIE-CLAIRE BLAIS

**Born:** Quebec City, Quebec, Canada  
October 5, 1939

*Only nineteen when she published the first of more than twenty novels, Blais is one of the most prolific and important French Canadian authors.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Marie-Claire Blais (blay) was born on October 5, 1939, in Quebec City, Quebec, Canada, the first of five children of Fernando and Veronique Notin Blais. She began writing at the age of ten, an obsession that was discouraged both at home and at school. As the oldest child in a large working-class family, she was burdened by the need to help her family financially. She began her secondary education at a Catholic convent school but left at the age of fifteen, at her parents' request, to attend a secretarial school. From the age of fifteen to age eighteen, Blais worked as a stenographer for many different employers. Writing, though, was her passion and solace, and she continued to work in the evenings at her parents' home, which was always crowded and noisy. At nineteen, Blais moved to a rented room in Quebec City. She studied French literature at the Université Laval, reading Honoré de Balzac, Marcel Proust, Jean Genet, and the Surrealists and Symbolists, such as Arthur Rimbaud. She also made the acquaintance of Jeanne Lapointe and Père Georges-Henri Lévesque, both of whom would be instrumental to the success of her literary career.

Lévesque was impressed with Blais's early stories and urged her to continue writing. Blais completed *La Belle bête* (1959; *Mad Shadows*, 1960), and through Lévesque's influence and belief in her

promise as a writer, Blais's controversial novel was published in Canada. Because she was so young at the time of her first success, Blais was considered something of a precocious schoolgirl. *Mad Shadows* elicited both admiration and outrage in Quebec. A nightmarish fable, the violent emotions of envy and hatred and the consequences of the failure of maternal love are vividly dark and poetic. *Tête blanche* (1960; English translation, 1961) is another story embracing the theme of a childhood of isolation and despair, told in rich, poetic language.

Blais received a fellowship from the Conseil des Arts du Canada in 1960 and spent the following year in Paris, where she continued her education through literature and film. In 1962, she returned to Quebec and completed *Le Jour est noir* (1962; English translation published in *The Day Is Dark and Three Travelers: Two Novellas*, 1967). In 1963, with the support of the highly respected American critic Edmund Wilson, she was awarded the first of two Guggenheim Fellowships, which allowed her to move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she lived and wrote for several years. While in Massachusetts, Blais wrote *Les Voyageurs sacrés* (1966; English translation published in *The Day Is Dark and Three Travelers: Two Novellas*), an attempt to combine music, poetry, and sculpture. *L'Insomnie* (1966; *The Fugitive*, 1978) chronicles the disintegration of a family; *David Sterne* (1967; English translation, 1973), influenced by her feelings about the Vietnam War, is a cry against violence. Neglected by critics, these novels reflect the troubled decade of the 1960's, a time when Blais's vision moved from the tormented inner world to the outside political and social realm.

In Cambridge, Blais met the painter Mary Meigs.

A deep friendship developed, and Blais moved to Wellfleet, Massachusetts, to form a community with Meigs, who was living with her companion Barbara Deming. Meigs's lifestyle and work were to have a profound effect on Blais; at the refuge in Wellfleet, she produced *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965; *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel*, 1966). Translated into thirteen languages, it established her international reputation and was considered her most original and important work. It is a bleak, often humorous story about the lives of damaged children in church-dominated, impoverished, rural Quebec, and in 1966 Blais was awarded both the Canadian Prix-France Quebec and the French Prix Médicis for *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel*.

She received critical acclaim again in 1969, when she won her first Governor-General's Literary Award and *Livres et Auteurs Canadiens* magazine's Best Book Award for *Manuscripts de Pauline Archange* (1968; *The Manuscripts of Pauline Archange*, 1970). During the same year, she published her play *L'Exécution* (pb. 1968; *The Execution*, 1976).

Deeply troubled by the Vietnam War, Blais and Meigs moved to France in 1971, where they lived for four years. Dividing her time between Montreal and Paris, Blais explored homosexual love as a literary theme. In *Le Loup* (1972; *The Wolf*, 1974), she explores love and cruelty in her young male characters' homosexual relationships. She returned to the theme of homosexual love with *Les Nuits de l'underground* (1978; *Nights in the Underground*, 1979), in which she explores the sacred, self-liberating aspects of lesbian love.

During the 1970's, Blais's themes shift focus again, from the inner world of emotions and the suffering of individuals to the conflicts of national identity, long a struggle in provincial Quebec. While in France, she wrote *Un Joualonnais, sa joualonie* (1973; *St. Lawrence Blues*, 1974); it is written in *joual*, Montreal's French street slang. She continued to explore these political themes in *Une Liaison parisienne* (1975; *A Literary Affair*, 1979). *Le Sourde dans la ville* (1979; *Deaf to the City*, 1980) earned Blais a second Governor-General's Literary Award. Part poetry, part prose, it is another study of anguish and of art as a means of salvation. Continuing to move her vision outward and to combine poetry and prose, Blais produced *Visions d'Anna: Ou, Le vertige* (1982; *Anna's World*, 1985). Another dark vision of the modern world, *Pierre, la guerre du*

*printemps quatre-vingt-un*, appeared in 1984 (*Pierre*, 1993). Blais's work centers on the complexity and inherent pain of human life as she searches for a vision of the ideal, exposing the harshness of the reality that she has lived and observed. Blais was awarded the Prix David in 1982 in recognition of the major contribution she has made to the literature of Quebec.

In 1989, Blais published *L'Ange de la solitude* (*Angel of Solitude*, 1993), in which she portrayed lesbian love. Then in 1995, she published *Soifs* (*These Festive Nights*, 1997), for which she received another Governor-General's Award. This novel was the first work in her trilogy, which also includes *Dans le foudre et la lumière* (2001; *Thunder and Light*, 2001) and *Augustino et le chœur de la destruction* (2005; *Augustino and the Choir of Destruction*, 2007).

Blais was chosen Cambridge International Woman of the Year (1995-1996) for her contributions to literature and creative writing. In 1997, she was the recipient of the American Biographical Institute Decree of International Letters for Cultural Achievement. In 1999, she received the Prix d'Italie, in 2000 the W. O. Mitchell Literary Prize, and in 2002 the Prix Prince Pierre de Monaco. In addition to her fictional works, she has published *Parcours d'un écrivain: Notes américaines* (1993; *American Notebooks: A Writer's Journey*, 1996) and her autobiography *Des Rencontres humaines* (2002). Blais continues to be recognized as one of Canada's most significant and talented writers and as a writer of international importance.

## ANALYSIS

The power of Blais's early fiction lies in her thematic obsession with the forces of evil and the suffering of children. Blais treats her characters with tenderness in their solitude, and they find, as she did in her own life, that art is the only escape from madness and death. Her writing has been characterized as bold and inventive, but her vision is profoundly bleak. Her work is in the tradition of the existentialists, who explore the consequences of psychological abandonment and abuse of the young as the crucible in which evil is created.

Her characters' capacity for evil and cruelty, and particularly the pathological relationships between mothers and children, shocked critics in the late 1950's. Although it was less of a sensation elsewhere, *Mad Shadows*, Blais's first book, created a fu-

ror of both admiration and outrage in Quebec because of its macabre and violent story. The theme of both *The Day Is Dark* and a novella, *La Fin d'une enfance* (1961), is the suffering and powerlessness of children trapped in emotional and spiritual isolation, even when surrounded by family and dominated by the cult of religious authority. The overbearing influence of religion, always negative and suffocating, is perceptible in the lives of all Blais's characters; the awakenings of adolescent sexuality, sensuality, and curiosity are the beginnings of an irrevocable "fall from grace." Poor families, however devout, are overburdened with many children and live in depravity, lovelessness, and intellectual and creative starvation.

Her subsequent novels, especially *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel*, have been described as "typically Canadian" in their evocation of rural poverty and hopelessness, of the harsh northern winters, and in the sense of dislocation in a country populated by a defeated people. Her passionate, poetic voice is original in its relentlessly realistic exposure of a repressed, dispirited, and intellectually deprived underclass.

Although her first work was dismissed by many American critics as the exaggerated fantasy of an adolescent author, it was regarded as a great phenomenon in France. Edmund Wilson was responsible for bringing Blais to the American literary audience. The most ardent and outspoken of her American supporters, Wilson included Blais in his study *O Canada: An American's Notes on Canadian Culture* (1965):

Mlle Blais is a true "phenomenon"; she may possibly be a genius. At the age of twenty-four, she has produced four remarkable books of a passionate and poetic force that, as far as my reading goes, is not otherwise to be found in French Canadian fiction.

Wilson wrote the foreword for *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel*, a disjointed, often humorous story with a constantly changing point of view about the material and emotional poverty of a large, Catholic, lower-class, Quebec farm family. All the children are devastated by the evil in the adult world. Their innocence is betrayed by predatory priests, and they are brutalized by their family and crushed by the dreary lives to which they are resigned.

Blais was disappointed when many reviewers of this novel focused on its bleakness and the depravity of its characters, missing its ironic humor. She treats her characters with tenderness as they struggle, some with great vitality and creativity, against the wretchedness of their lives. Her style is greatly influenced by the French Surrealists and Symbolists and was regarded as a great phenomenon by the French critics.

Deeply affected by the political climate in the United States during the Vietnam War, Blais found it troubling that people could not see or take action against the clear dangers arising in the world's social conflicts and ecological disasters or the destruction of the earth. In the 1970's, Blais's landscapes changed from those of an undefined time and place to a world inhabited by real people who are struggling to find their vision in contemporary society. Her art is a prophetic cry for sanity and peace in a violent world.

During her time in France, Blais wrote two books exploring and celebrating homosexual love. *The Wolf* is a study of cruelty and love in male relationships, and *Nights in the Underground* concerns the sacred and self-liberating aspects of lesbian relationships. Blais drew her characters from life in the gay bars and the streets of Montreal and Paris. They live for love and sex and talk about both without inhibition or shame, celebrating this freedom in otherwise unhappy lives.

Moving further from the gothic inner world of *Mad Shadows* and some of her earlier works, Blais addressed the condition of Quebec as a "colony" of France and the need for a separate French Canadian national identity in *St. Lawrence Blues*. Written entirely in *joual*, a form of French street slang, *St. Lawrence Blues* is a satiric novel about an illegitimate orphan's life among outcasts in Montreal's down-and-out working class. Dedicated to the memory of Wilson, it was regarded by American critics as her best work to date when the English translation was published in 1974. Quebec critics were less impressed and were especially hostile toward her use of a literary form of *joual* as an expression of "nationalist pride."

*Deaf to the City* is an observation of travelers and exiles suffering yet surviving through art. It is another experiment with language, written as a long paragraph in wild poetry and prose. Blais again fused these two styles in *Anna's World* in the

drugged, suicidal torment of a young woman living in an uninhabitable world. Blais's vision of the world as a truly terrifying and desperate place is also the subject of *Pierre*, which was critically acclaimed.

In her trilogy consisting of *These Festive Nights*, *Thunder and Light*, and *Augustino and the Choir of Destruction*, Blais once again explores themes addressed in her earlier novels. Children damaged by lack of their mother's love, the effects of overwhelming poverty, homosexual love, the anguish of living, and art as escape all appear in the novels. However, she also treats new themes, including lack of justice and capital punishment, the plight of women and nature, and animals as images of innocence and joy, as well as materialism as an escapist measure. The trilogy attests to Blais's ability to create prose embodied with a poetic force that transforms it into a song.

## MAD SHADOWS

**First published:** *La Belle bête*, 1959 (English translation, 1960)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A surreal tale of tortured relationships between a mother obsessed with her son's beauty and the unattractive daughter doomed by envy and the shallow nature of her mother's love.*

*Mad Shadows*, Blais's first published work, created considerable controversy in Quebec. Many Canadian critics disliked it intensely; others thought it was astonishingly original and brilliant. Set in an unidentified time and place, the story begins on a train, as a young girl watches strangers become captivated by her brother's beauty. The grotesque, erotic pleasure that the mother takes in her son's physical beauty is matched only by her indifference toward her daughter, and it sets the tone for the tortured relationships that develop. In *Mad Shadows*, Blais explores what will become a theme in much of her later work: the creation of evil and the suffering of children caused by the failure of maternal love.

The world that Blais's characters inhabit is dark and loveless. The first critics and readers were shocked by the utter depravity of the relationships

between the mother, her lover, and her children and the starkness of the young author's vision. Yet the power of her vision and poetic style were undeniable; she was awarded the Prix de la Langue Française from L'Académie Française for *Mad Shadows* in 1961.

The mother, Louise, an attractive, vain widow, adores and spoils her simple-minded son, Patrice, a reflection of herself. Dimly aware of his own beauty, Patrice seeks his unformed self in every mirrored surface, pond, and window. His sister, Isabelle-Marie, is not beautiful; wounded by her mother's indifference, her feelings of envy toward her brother begin to overwhelm her. Louise is afflicted by a lesion on her face, a cancerous growth symbolic of the malignancy of her soul. She meets Lanz, an elegant, declining dandy, who becomes her lover; her attentions and affection now go to him, and Patrice, abandoned, rides his horse in a frenzy of jealousy, killing Lanz. In death, Lanz's shallowness is revealed as his wig and false beard disintegrate around him. Even so, Louise feels little rancor toward her son, the "beautiful beast."

Among Blais's recurring themes is the end of innocence and the fall from grace inherent in sexual awakening. For her characters, all consequences of love are tragic; in *Mad Shadows*, there is a sense that human beings are doomed at the moment of awareness and that happiness is illusory. For a short time, miraculously, Isabelle-Marie finds happiness in the love of a young blind man, Michael. Sight, symbolic of truth, would not allow the illusion of love to survive in Blais's nightmarish world; fearing rejection, Isabelle-Marie deceives Michael into believing that she is beautiful. They marry and have a daughter, Anne, and for a time enjoy a kind of simple happiness. When his sight suddenly returns, Michael discovers his wife's deception. Unable to hide his anger, he cruelly abandons Isabelle-Marie and their child, and, in misery, they return to Louise's farm.

Driven by her rejection and envy, Isabelle-Marie disfigures her brother by pushing his face into a pot of boiling water. No longer a beautiful object, Patrice is rejected by his mother and sent to an asylum, proving the shallowness of her love. Seeing his grotesque face in a lake's surface, Patrice is horrified and drowns in his own reflection. His suffering gives Isabelle-Marie some satisfaction, but even this does not bring her peace. *Mad Shadows* ends in a fi-



nal act of suicidal despair, as Isabelle-Marie sets her mother's farm on fire and waits to throw herself under a train, leaving her young daughter to wander alone on the tracks.

## A SEASON IN THE LIFE OF EMMANUEL

**First published:** *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, 1965 (English translation, 1966)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Newborn Emmanuel, the sixteenth child of an impoverished Quebec farmer, is witness to the suffering of his siblings and the ways in which each rebels against fate.*

*A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* was declared by critics to have been both "written by the devil" and among the best French Canadian novels. Blais moves her character from an earlier imaginary, gothic world into the recognizable world of French Canadian culture. The story takes place during the first year in the life of Emmanuel, the sixteenth child of a materially and emotionally impoverished farm family. Bleak, disturbing, and full of biting humor, this depiction of Quebec's church-dominated lower-class life is considered Blais's masterwork.

Blais begins the story with a constantly changing point of view, as the mother of this brood of children, some called only by their birth order number, gives birth to Emmanuel and then returns to work in the fields. The strongest influence in the lives of the children is their grandmother, the rigid and traditional caretaker of their futures. The mother has no name, no presence in the book, though her absence and failure are clearly felt as she moves through life exhausted and resigned to her wretched state. Maternal failure is a theme common to Blais's work, which often presents a

world where children are limited and defined by their emotional and physical deprivation.

The main character in this novel is not Emmanuel but four of the older children. It is through his eyes that one sees their suffering, and none escapes the evil in the world. Heloise, believing that the sensuality that she experiences in adolescence is a religious calling, goes first to a convent, then to a brothel. Two of Heloise's brothers are sentenced to life in a reformatory, where they are molested by predatory priests and then made to suffer the stupefying life of factory work, accepting the inevitability of their fate. Jean-Le-Maigre, the most alive and creative of the brood, ends his short life in a sanatorium; his journal is the only evidence of his existence, as his death, like his life, becomes nothing more than another family burden.

Obsessed with death, the repression of children, and the perversion of religious authority, Blais's vision is one of stifled lives and the responses of suffering children, suffering sometimes with great joy and grace to the constant evil that they encounter in the adult world. Her realistic style fascinated French critics in particular. Playing with language, often with ironic and biting humor, she renders both depravity and grace with naturalistic detail, which is especially poignant in the emotional expression of the suffering of fragile children.

For many of Blais's characters, as in her own life, language and the act of writing are symbolic paths to salvation, forestalling spiritual death and madness. The humorous and touching autobiographical writings of Emmanuel's brother Jean-Le-Maigre are part of the structure of the book. Dying of consumption, his poems express his vitality and symbolize his rebellion against fate.



## THESE FESTIVE NIGHTS

**First published:** *Soifs*, 1995 (English translation, 1997)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Characters from different socioeconomic classes participate in a three-day-and-night celebration while trying to escape from and come to terms with the human condition.*

In *These Festive Nights*, Blais combines the technique of stream of consciousness with an omniscient narrator, permitting her to take the reader from the mind of one character to another in a continuous flow of thought and language. She uses repetitive images and descriptions of the characters to make the shifts without interruption to her text or confusion for the reader. Long sentences, often multiple pages in length, broken only by commas, reinforce the ceaseless flow of the work.

The novel depicts a disparate set of characters, all of whom are in some way interconnected, yet all living very different lives socially, economically, and intellectually. There are the wealthy, well-educated (Renata, Claude Mère, and Melanie, Daniel, and their children Samuel, Vincent, and Augustino); the intellectuals and artists (Jacques, Charles, Frédéric, Jean-Mathieu, Caroline, Suzanne, and Adrien); the ill or dying (Renata, Vincent, Jacques, Frédéric, and Jean-Mathieu); the aging (Mère, Renata, Charles, Frédéric, Adrien, Suzanne, Caroline, and Jean-Mathieu); the refugees (Julio, Eduardo, Jenny, and Marie-Sylvie and her brother); the poor African Americans (Pastor Jeremy, Mama, Carlos, Le Toqué, Venus, and Uncle Cornelius); and the homosexuals (Jacques, Tanjou, Luc, and Paul). The characters portray variants of the human condition, all tainted by suffering and death, and attempt to escape, to find happiness or at least peace in life.

The novel is structured on the juxtaposition of opposites. The setting of the story is an island in the Gulf of Mexico. Surrounded by the sea, it is a natural paradise filled with beautiful plants, birds, animals, and pleasant weather. However, danger, death, and suffering are ever present. The sea provides beauty and pleasure but can kill. The en-

closed estate of Daniel and Melanie assures safety from predators within its confines, but just outside the estate, hooded figures prowl and hiss. The life of Samuel, who has everything material, contrasts sharply with the life of the impoverished Carlos. However, both suffer from a lack of true affection from either father or mother. For his parents, Samuel is “something” to be exhibited; Carlos’s parents view him as no good.

Illness, old age, death, and impending death play significant roles in the novel. Characters are haunted by images of death: families lost at sea, war atrocities, bombings, mutilations, hangings, and executions in the electric chair and by lethal injection. Both Jacques, who is dying from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), and Frédéric, incapacitated by old age, can no longer care for themselves. Frédéric and Mère have memory loss.

Through the characters of Mère and Renata, Blais examines the particular problems confronting women in a patriarchal society. Both Mère and Renata have experienced rejection by their husbands because they no longer possessed the attractiveness of youth. Renata speaks of herself as a vagabond, running away from fate. For her, injustice will always be a woman’s fate, and a woman will always be seen as guilty for causing her own misery. Mère is obsessed with the need for women to become leaders, to change the world.

The novel ends with Mère listening to Venus and Samuel singing “O may my joy endure.”

## THUNDER AND LIGHT

**First published:** *Dans la foudre et la lumière*, 2001 (English translation, 2001)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The sequel to These Festive Nights, the novel probes deeper into the torments of the human condition and the difficulty of escaping it.*

In *Thunder and Light*, Blais continues the stories of many of the characters that she introduced in *These Festive Nights*, but here she concentrates more on what actually happens to the characters than on what they are thinking. She also adds characters



drawn from or based upon actual events recorded in news reports.

The novel begins with Carlos running with his dog Polly. Carlos is determined to get even with Lazaro, an Egyptian immigrant who used to be his friend. Carlos intends to frighten him with an unloaded gun, but as fate will have it the gun is loaded and Carlos shoots Lazaro in the knee. He becomes what Pastor Jeremy and Mama always said he would—a no-good and a criminal.

Through the characters of Lazaro and Caroline's companion Charly, Blais addresses the problem of the ever-recurring cycle of violence in the world. Lazaro swears to have revenge for Carlos's act. His mother unsuccessfully tells him he must forgive Carlos, otherwise all of her actions have been pointless. His mother had rebelled against the unjust religious law that permitted her Muslim husband to confine and beat her. Lazaro, however, refuses to listen and rejects his mother. He was born Muslim and male and his heritage calls for vengeance. Charly, a Jamaican descendant of slaves, voices the same desire for revenge based on heritage. Carlos's sister Venus is also victimized by the circumstances of her birth. Venus had escaped a life of poverty by marrying a rich drug dealer, Captain Williams, but the captain has been killed and she now finds herself at the mercy of the captain's estate manager, Richard, who has her trapped in the house.

In this novel, Blais deals at length with the impossibility of eliminating suffering and anguish from human life. She juxtaposes characters who try to relieve suffering and characters who escape from it in art, creativity, and beauty. Asoka is a monk who every day witnesses the anguish and death of innocent people, especially children, as he ministers to the victims of war, while his brother Ari devotes himself to sculpting. Caroline, a photographer, has always photographed only beautiful people and objects. She refuses to record images of the victims of violence, war, and starvation, in con-

trast to the photojournalists, who with their photographs stamp these images into the minds of their readers.

The memorial service for Jean-Mathieu returns to the problem of mortality and God in a suffering world. Caroline muses on the death of her friend, on the exile of each person from the sensual world, and on the sense of loss and absence that comes to each individual.

Blais returns to the stream-of-consciousness technique she employed in *These Festive Nights* in her analysis of the impossibility of justice in the world and the cruelty of capital punishment. Tormented by the willingness of most judges to pronounce the death penalty, Renata thinks of nothing else as she prepares for a conference on the topic.

## SUMMARY

Marie-Claire Blais has said that life for her would be unbearable without the solace of writing. The characters in her novels suffer so deeply that escape is possible only through death of the body or through salvation in the language of art. Her love of language and experimentation with form and style are a unique expression of her passionate, poetic vision of the suffering in a bleak and terrifying world.

The sum of Blais's work is a complex expression of the subjects that obsess her. Sometimes with the cold eye of a realist, often with ironic humor and great compassion, she writes in an unmistakable voice, in pursuit of the intangible.

*Margaret Parks; updated by Shawncey Webb*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What role do political and social themes, such as poverty, discrimination, and racism, play in Marie-Claire Blais's work?
- How does Blais use repeated images in her work to reinforce continuity?
- How does Blais depict animals in her novels and what do they represent?
- How does Blais address the problem of God in a suffering world?
- Compare and contrast the lives of Samuel and Carlos in *These Festive Nights*.
- Discuss the mother-child relationship in Blais's novels.
- Blais uses vernacular in her dialogue, unique punctuation, and Surrealist images in her works. What is their affect on the reader's experience of reading?

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## WILLIAM BLAKE

**Born:** London, England  
November 28, 1757

**Died:** London, England  
August 12, 1827

*Blake's unique work combines poetry and painting in a compelling vision of humanity attaining its most blissful, creative, and enlightened condition. His work exemplifies the goals of the English Romantic movement.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Blake was born on November 28, 1757, in London, the second of five children of James Blake, a hosier, and his wife, Catherine Blake. Blake was schooled at home until he was about eleven, after which he was sent to a drawing school, where he studied until 1772. He was then apprenticed for seven years to James Basire, a well-known engraver. In 1779, Blake began to study at the Royal Academy and also did commercial engravings for the bookseller Joseph Johnson. In 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher, the illiterate daughter of a market gardener. Blake taught her to read and write, and eventually she helped him color his designs.

Blake had been writing poetry since the age of twelve, and by the early 1780's he was beginning to acquire a reputation among his friends as a poet and painter. Two friends, John Flaxman and the Reverend A. S. Mathew, paid the expenses for the publication of Blake's first volume, *Poetical Sketches*, in 1783. The following year, Blake wrote "An Island in the Moon," a satire on contemporary ways of thinking, but it was never published.

Three years later, Blake suffered a major blow when his younger brother Robert, to whom Blake was devoted, died of consumption at the age of nineteen. Blake, who from his childhood had revealed a capacity for visionary experience, said

that, at the moment of death, he saw his brother's spirit ascending, clapping its hands for joy. Blake felt that Robert's spirit remained with him throughout his life. Indeed, it was Robert, Blake claimed, who gave him the idea for an original method of engraving, in which he etched poems and illustrations together on a copper plate, then printed them and colored them by hand.

His first experiments in this new method of illuminated printing were in the form of three tracts, in two versions, titled *There Is No Natural Religion* (1788) and *All Religions Are One* (1788). About this time, Blake first came under the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist turned mystic philosopher. Blake attended the first General Conference of the Swedenborgians' New Jerusalem Church in London in April, 1789.

In the same year, Blake published his first masterpieces in illuminated printing, *The Book of Thel* (1789) and *Songs of Innocence* (1789). The latter celebrates a childlike state of spontaneity and joy, in which the divine world interpenetrates the natural world. The following year, 1790, Blake began work on his great satire *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), which is at once a spiritual testament and a revolutionary political manifesto in support of the French Revolution.

Throughout the 1790's, Blake continued working as a commercial engraver, as well as completing artistic commissions from his patron, the civil servant Thomas Butts. For the most part, Blake saw this work as daily drudgery, undertaken solely to provide for his few worldly needs; his real interests

lay in giving form to his own creative vision, which he did in a stream of illuminated books: *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *America: A Prophecy* (1793), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Song of Los* (1795), *The Book of Los* (1795), and *The Book of Ahania* (1795). In 1797, he commenced an ambitious long poem, *Vala: Or, The Four Zoas* (wr. 1795-1804, pb. 1963), which he kept revising over a ten-year period, retitling it *The Four Zoas* but eventually abandoning it unfinished. Few people, if any, in Blake's time understood these obscure books, and they attracted almost no buyers. This lack of public recognition set a pattern for the remainder of Blake's life. His one-man exhibition of sixteen of his paintings in 1809 and 1810 was a complete failure. Although he was embittered by his inability to find an audience, he did not allow his disappointment to weaken his dedication to his art.

Blake spent all of his life in London, except for the period from 1800 to 1803, when he lived at Felpham, a village on the Sussex coast in southern England. There, he was under the patronage of William Hayley, a minor poet who was also, in his time, a well-respected man of letters. Hayley provided Blake with some hack work, but Blake resented his patronizing attitude and eventually the two men quarreled. Blake's stay at Felpham is also notable for an incident in which Blake evicted a drunken soldier from his cottage garden. The soldier then accused him of uttering threats against the king. Blake was charged with sedition, tried, and acquitted in 1804. Blake had returned to London the previous year, 1803, and, in addition to working on some watercolors for one client and some designs for Hayley's *A Series of Ballads* (1802), he began work on his two lengthy masterpieces, *Milton: A Poem* (1804-1808) and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804-1820). These were years of increasing obscurity for Blake, although in the last period of his life he gathered around him an admiring group of young painters, who recognized his genius. Blake's last great works were his engravings in *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825) and his *Illustrations of Dante* (1827), on which he was still working at his death on August 12, 1827, in London.

## ANALYSIS

Blake stated his poetic and philosophical principles early in his career and never wavered from them, although there were some changes of emphasis as his work developed. He formed his imaginative world in opposition to the prevailing materialist philosophy, which he saw embodied in three English thinkers: Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. Bacon was one of the founders of modern experimental science, but Blake detested this method of acquiring knowledge because it relied solely on objective criteria and encouraged the principle of doubt. In "Auguries of Innocence," Blake points out that this is not the way that the rest of the universe functions:

He who Doubts from what he sees  
Will ne'er Believe do what you Please  
If the Sun and Moon should doubt  
Theyd immediately Go out.

In Locke, the philosopher who exerted an extremely powerful influence on eighteenth century thought, Blake found another opponent. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke argued against the belief that there are in the human mind "innate ideas," universal truths stamped on the mind at birth. For Locke, the mind was a *tabula rasa*, a blank tablet. Knowledge was gained only through sense experience and the mind's reflection on the data provided by the senses. Locke's views were anathema to Blake, for whom the first principle of knowing was not through the senses but through the mind. The mind is not a *tabula rasa*; it is fullness itself, the Divine Imagination, the eternal container of the permanent realities of existence. As Blake put it when he annotated the *Discourses* (1769-1791) of Sir Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy, who attempted to apply Lockean principles to art: "Reynolds Thinks that Man Learns all that he knows. I say on the Contrary that Man Brings All that he has or can have Into the World with him. Man is Born Like a Garden ready Planted and Sown. This World is too poor to produce one Seed."

For Blake, it is the mind that shapes the way that one perceives the object. He called this seeing through, not with, the eye. Different minds see in different ways:

The Sun's Light when he unfolds it  
Depends on the Organ that beholds it.

This is a key idea in Blake, and he repeats it again and again. For Blake, the more imagination that is applied to the act of perception, the more true the perception will be. The world of sense, by itself, is illusory. Only the imagination, the formative power of the mind, can penetrate beyond surface appearances to the divine nature of existence, which permeates this “Vegetable Glass of Nature” and is also the true nature of the human self.

That was Blake’s answer to the third member of his unholy trinity, Newton, the great seventeenth century scientist who not only discovered gravity but also synthesized many other contemporary theories into a grand system that appeared to explain all the laws that governed the physical universe. The problem with Newton’s philosophy of nature, from Blake’s point of view, was that it made the universe into a vast and impersonal machine that had no vital connection with human consciousness. By creating a split between subject and object, it had left humans alone and isolated in a universe over which they had no control. Against this dehumanizing tendency of natural philosophy, Blake opposed a universe in which joy, delight, and bliss are the essential constituents of both the human and nonhuman world. In his poem “Europe,” for example, in answer to the poet’s question, “what is the material world, and is it dead?” a fairy sings, “I’ll chew you all alive/ The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy.” In such a universe humanity is not subject to an impersonal, mechanical order, presided over by a God who sits in judgment on it beyond the skies. On the contrary, when humanity exercises its imaginative powers to the full it becomes the Divine Humanity, the creator of a visionary time and space that reveals rather than obscures the eternal, immaterial essence of life. The universe becomes as close to humankind as its own heartbeat, as precious to it as its own blood.

Armed with this vision, Blake set himself the task of waging war on ignorance, on everything that he believed diminished or obscured the Divine Humanity. He developed a complex mythology, pieced together not only from his own visionary experiences but from a wide variety of sources. In addition to the Bible and the works of John Milton, which were a constant inspiration to him, he delved deeply into the Western esoteric tradition, including Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah,

and individual mystical thinkers such as Swedenborg and the seventeenth century German seer Jacob Boehme. However, Blake was never a slave to the thoughts of others; whatever he borrowed from his sources was put through the crucible of his own imaginative power and transformed into a vision that was uniquely his own.

## AMERICA: A PROPHECY

**First published:** 1793

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem celebrates the American Revolution, which is seen as a victory over British tyranny and the birth of a new age of freedom for humanity.*

*America: A Prophecy* was Blake’s first attempt to present historical and contemporary events in mythological form so as to draw out their universal significance. The prelude introduces two mythological characters, the “shadowy daughter of Urthona,” who is nature in an unfruitful time, and Orc, who embodies both the life-giving return of spring and the liberating, revolutionary energy that is about to be unleashed in the world through the American Revolution. Since Orc’s birth fourteen years previously, the shadowy female has been bringing food to him. Throughout this period Orc has been chained to a rock, although his spirit soars and can be seen in the forms of eagle, lion, whale, and serpent.

Having reached the age of sexual maturity, Orc breaks free of his chains and seizes and ravishes the shadowy female. She erupts in joy, exclaiming that she recognizes him—Orc stimulates the periodic renewal of earth’s procreative power—and declares him to be the image of God that “dwells in darkness of Africa” (perhaps an allusion to Swedenborg’s belief that the Africans understood God better than the Europeans). The shadowy female then says she sees the spirit of Orc at work in America, Canada, Mexico, and Peru—places that had seen recent outbreaks of rebellion against established authority.

The poem itself begins on Plate 3. As war-clouds, fires, and tempests gather, some of the leading



American rebels—including George Washington, Tom Paine, and Benjamin Franklin—gather together. Washington makes a speech warning of the dangers the colonists face, and as he finishes, King George III and the British government—referred to as the Guardian Prince of Albion, or Albion’s Angel (Albion is the ancient name of England)—appear to the rebels as a fiery dragon rising up from England. However, this apparition is countered by the appearance of Orc over the Atlantic Ocean. In Plate 6, in one of the most impressive passages in all of Blake’s work, Orc announces the imminent outburst of freedom at all levels: political, spiritual, and cosmic.

Albion’s Angel responds by denouncing Orc as a “Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of God’s law.” Orc replies that he is the “fiery joy” of life itself, which Urizen (the fallen god of reason in Blake’s mythology and similar in function to the God of the Old Testament) imprisoned at the proclamation of the Ten Commandments. Now these commandments are to be abrogated.

In Plate 9, Albion attempts to rally support from his “Thirteen angels” (the colonial governors), but they refuse to respond to his call. “Boston’s Angel” makes a speech in which he refuses to continue obeying an unjust system. In Plate 13, war breaks out and the British suffer defeats. Albion’s Angel responds to these reversals by dispatching a deadly plague to America, but driven by the flames and fiery winds of Orc, the plague recoils upon the sender. The effects on England are devastating. Soldiers desert, rulers sicken, and priests are overthrown. In Plate 16, Urizen weeps as he beholds his world crumbling. For twelve years he manages to restrain the energies of Orc, until Orc breaks free once more in the French Revolution. The thrones of Spain and Italy shake; the restrictive moral law is burnt up by Orc’s fires and a new age begins.

## THE [FIRST] BOOK OF URIZEN

**First published:** 1794

**Type of work:** Poem

*This work is a myth of Creation and the Fall as a result of the limiting activity of the rational intellect, embodied in the figure of Urizen.*

*The [First] Book of Urizen* is an unorthodox version of the Creation and the Fall, written to satirize the traditional accounts in Genesis and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). In *The [First] Book of Urizen*, the creator, Urizen, is neither all-powerful nor benevolent; his creation is not “good” as in Genesis, but flawed from the beginning. As a product solely of the unenlightened rational intellect, his world is incomplete. Cut off from the creative power of the imagination, which is personified in the poem by Los, Urizen can only create a world full of suffering and death.

*The [First] Book of Urizen* begins with a prelude, in which Blake gladly accepts the call of the Eternals to dictate their story. The poem is then divided, like Genesis, into chapter and verse. Chapter 1 describes Urizen’s activity in wholly negative terms. He is “unknown, unprolific,” and “unseen”; he broods introspectively; he is “self-clos’d” and a “self-contemplating shadow.” That is exactly the withdrawn, abstract type of mental activity that, in Blake’s view, was responsible for many of the ills that he saw in contemporary society. By retreating into a void within himself, Urizen is beginning to close himself off from the primal joy of existence.

In chapter 2, it transpires that Urizen’s activity is taking place before the creation of the world, before the existence of death, and before there are any material restrictions placed around the fiery delights of eternal existence. Urizen now reveals himself as the lawgiver, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, whom Blake associated with tyranny. Because Urizen cannot enjoy the free-flowing and joyful clash of opposite values in eternity, he attempts to create for himself “a joy without pain,/ . . . a solid without fluctuation.” To his eyes, the Eternals live in “unquenchable burnings,” when in fact these are the fires of the creative imagination as it constantly fulfills its desires. Failing to understand this, Urizen tries to fight with the fire and sets himself

up as lord over all the other faculties. With his laws of “One command, one joy, one desire,” he attempts to impose a false unity on the infinite diversity of existence. For Blake, this is the sign of a tyrant.

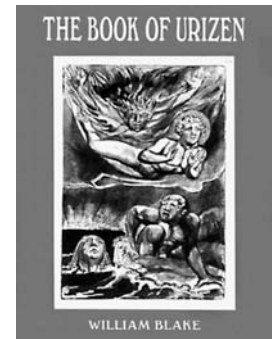
Throughout the poem, the Eternals are horrified by Urizen’s self-defeating actions, which open up a series of separations between Urizen and eternity: “Sund’ring, dark’ning, thund’ring,”/ Rent away with a terrible clash,/ Eternity roll’d wide apart.” As Urizen is forced out of (or expels himself from) eternity, he undergoes a gradual process of materialization. In a parody of the seven days of creation in Genesis, Urizen acquires a material body, which is also the material world. His awareness of eternal life vanishes. Horrified at what is taking place, Los, the creative imagination, watches the process, throws nets around Urizen, and binds him with chains to stop him from descending even further into the darkness of ignorance. In his later work, Blake regarded creation as an act of mercy because it put a limit to the Fall and so allowed the possibility of redemption.

In this poem, however, the emphasis is entirely on the pervasive negative consequences of Urizen’s acts, which also affect Los, Urizen’s counterpart in eternity. Los forgets his true creative function and allows himself to feel pity for Urizen, which in Blake’s work is usually a negative emotion (“For pity divides the soul”). Los, like Urizen, is now a divided being, and the female portion of himself (which Blake calls the emanation) now takes on an independent life, separate from him. This first female form is named Enitharmon. The Eternals, who are androgynous beings, are appalled at this division into sexes, which is yet another sign of the Fall—an idea that Blake borrowed from his spiritual mentor, the German mystic Jacob Boehme.

In chapter 6, Los and Enitharmon give birth to a child, Orc, who elsewhere in Blake’s work symbolizes revolutionary, redemptive energy. Los becomes jealous of Orc, and in an act that suggests at once the Crucifixion of Christ, the binding of Isaac by Abraham, and the chaining of Prometheus, Los and Enitharmon chain Orc to a mountain.

In the next chapter, Urizen explores his grim new world, trying to understand it by dividing and measuring, which is all that the rational intellect, cut off from the unifying power of the imagination,

can do. Urizen can only discover “portions of life.” Nothing is whole or healthy, and Urizen sickens at the sight of it. As he traverses the cities of earth, he curses his creation and realizes that no being can keep his “iron laws one moment.” A net stretches out behind him, born from the sorrow in his soul. Everything in creation is trapped by this net, which is named the net of religion. This image expresses Blake’s dislike of conventional religion, based on moral laws and human reason alone. As Urizen’s religion spreads across the earth, human beings find their senses, which in eternity are expansive—humans are able to perceive delight in everything—narrowing and shrinking, until, like everyone else in this poem, they “forgot their eternal life.”



## MILTON: A POEM

**First published:** 1804-1808

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this epic poem, Blake corrects the errors of his predecessor, John Milton, and assumes the Miltonic mantle of poet and prophet of England.*

In *Milton: A Poem*, Blake continues the argument with Milton that he had begun in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). In that book, Blake had identified the Christ of *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) with the restrictive values of reason and conventional morality, and Milton’s Satan, whom Christ casts out, with the passionate energies of humankind, which to Blake were the sources of creativity. Blake thought that, although Milton was a great poet, he had put himself in service of a bad theology, and this had divided him against himself. In *Milton: A Poem*, which was written more than one hundred years after Milton’s death, Milton is in heaven but unhappy. He decides to return to earth to redeem his errors and be reunited with his “six-fold emanation,” the feminine aspect of himself,

which is still wandering in torment in the earthly sphere. Historically, the emanation represents Milton's three wives and three daughters; symbolically, they are the aspects of his creative imagination that he repudiated in his earthly life.

Milton's decision to return to earth is prompted by his hearing of the Bard's Song, a key passage that occupies Plates 3 to 13 of this forty-three-plate, two-book poem. It is based on an episode in Blake's life, when he was living at Felpham under the patronage of William Hayley. Hayley urged Blake to pay more attention to earning a living, to put his artistic talents in the service of the commonsense world of "good taste." Blake thought that Hayley was a spiritual enemy who was trying to deflect him from his true artistic and prophetic path. In *Milton: A Poem*, Blake creates a cosmic allegory out of the conflict between them. Hayley becomes Satan; Blake is Palamabron, one of the sons of Los, the imagination. When the quarrel is brought out into the open, Hayley/Satan, whose crime is to assume a role that is not his own, reveals the tyrannical and arrogant self that hides behind his surface appearance of benevolence. He is the enemy of true poetic inspiration.

When Milton hears the Bard's Song, he recognizes himself in Hayley/Satan and resolves to return to earth, to cast off this false selfhood in an act of "self-annihilation." He passes through the different levels of Blake's cosmology, from Eden, the highest realm of imaginative activity, to Beulah, a feminine, sexual paradise, to the abyss of Ulro, the material world. There, in Plate 19, he encounters Urizen, the personification of the unenlightened rational intellect, who attempts to freeze Milton's brain. As they struggle with each other, Milton works like a sculptor, creating new flesh on the bones of Urizen; the shaping, enlivening vision of the artist strives to impart life to the Urizenic death principle.

A crucial moment now follows: The spirit of the descending Milton, like a falling star, enters Blake's left foot one day as he binds on his sandals. Blake becomes aware that in this tremendous instant,

Los, the imagination, has also entered and taken possession of him, and he knows that he is ready to fulfill his destiny as the poet-prophet of England, the seer whose task it is to awaken his country to the reality of the divine, and fully human, life. Much of the remainder of the first book of the poem is devoted to a transfigured vision of the time and space world, seen as the creative work of Los, whose task is accomplished in the single, eternal moment of poetic inspiration.

In book 2 of *Milton: A Poem* a female character named Ololon descends from Beulah to Ulro. It later transpires that she is Milton's emanation. She descends to Blake's cottage in Felpham, and he perceives her as a young girl. Ololon's sudden appearance in what Blake calls the Mundane Shell (the physical world) is another crucial moment in the poem. Like Blake's union with Milton and Los in book 1, it occurs in a timeless moment of mystical illumination, which Blake associates with the song of the lark and the odor of wild thyme. In this moment of heightened perception, eternity streams into time, and the effect is so powerful that it cancels out all the mistakes and perversions of the entire span of Christian history. A new era is at hand.

All the remaining events of the poem take place in this one instant. Milton, still continuing his descent into the physical world, appears in Blake's garden as the Covering Cherub, a symbol derived from the Bible that, in Blake's mythology, signifies the final manifestation of all the errors of the Christian churches. The Covering Cherub is closely linked with Satan the selfhood, who also now appears; the inspired Milton, who is hidden within the Covering Cherub, recognizes the false selves to which he formerly surrendered. In a great speech in Plates 40-41, he casts them off in an act of self-annihilation, giving his allegiance solely to the truth of poetic inspiration. Hearing Milton's speech, Ololon is cleansed also, and in a purified form she is able to unite with Milton. The poem ends on a note of apocalyptic hope for the reawakening of the entire humanity.

## “THE TYGER”

**First published:** 1794 (collected in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1794)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In awe, wonder, and puzzlement, the speaker asks a series of questions about the nature of the being who could create such a fearsome beast.*

“The Tyger,” from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), is probably Blake’s most famous poem. Its artful simplicity and pounding repetitions make a strong impression when the poem is read aloud. The meaning of “The Tyger,” however, is not so easy to ascertain, and it has provoked a wide range of interpretations. The poem consists of six quatrains, each of which asks at least one question about the nature of the tiger’s creator. None of the questions are answered. The central question of the whole poem appears in the fifth quatrain, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” This question recalls the poem “The Lamb,” from the same collection, in which the question, “Little Lamb, who made thee?” is answered clearly. The lamb is made by Christ and is an obvious symbol of the mild and gentle aspects of Creation, which are easy to associate with a God of love. However, what about the more fearsome, destructive aspects of Creation, symbolized by the tiger? Do they proceed from the same God? Under what circumstances? Is the tiger only a product of the Fall of humankind? Or are there, perhaps, two Gods?

Crucial to interpretation are the first two lines of the fifth quatrain: “When the stars threw down their spears,/ And water’d heaven with their tears.” This event appears to take place, from the evidence of the following line (“Did he smile his work to see?”), at the moment of the tiger’s creation. It may be a reference to the fall of the rebel angels in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “they astonished all resistance lost,/ All courage; down their idle weapons dropped.” In Christian tradition, the stars are said to be the tears of the fallen angels. In *The Four Zoas*, Blake uses a phrase almost identical to the one in “The Tyger” in the context of Urizen’s account of the Fall: “The stars threw down their spears and fled naked away/ We fell.” In Blake’s mythology, the immediate result of the Fall was the creation of the physical world. This cluster of associations sug-

gests that the tiger is a product only of the Fall, a suggestion that is strengthened by the phrase “forests of the night” in the first quatrain, which symbolizes Blake’s fallen world of Experience.

Yet this does not seem to provide the whole answer to the riddle of the poem. The fire that burns brightly, if destructively, in the state of Experience is still the divine fire, the stupendous creative energy that can frame the “fearful symmetry” of the tiger. In the fallen world, however, it cannot be fully appreciated for what it is. In quatrain 3, for example, the awestruck speaker lapses into incoherence as he tries to fathom the mystery of the fierce aspect of Creation. As Blake puts it in one of the proverbs in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity, too great for the eye of man.” The speaker in “The Tyger” cannot understand that, if there is a lamb, there must also be a tiger; opposites are necessary for the full manifestation of divine creativity.

Yet another possibility is that Blake was drawing on the teachings of the Gnostics, who flourished in the early years of the Christian era. For the Gnostics, the created world was a dark prison; it was not created by the true God but by an inferior power, the demiurge, who was often likened to the God of the Old Testament. If Blake indeed had this in mind—and elsewhere in his work he expresses a very similar view—the answer to the poem’s central question, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” would be “no.” The tiger would then be associated with the Old Testament God of fire and judgment, not the New Testament God of love, embodied in Christ.

## SUMMARY

Ignored in his own time, William Blake came into his own in the twentieth century, and his status as one of the six greatest English Romantic poets is unlikely to be challenged. His intense spiritual vision, embodied alike in simple lyrics and complex prophetic books, amounts to a manifesto of the art, psychology, philosophy, and religion of human enlightenment. Creating his own mythology of the Creation, Fall, and Redemption of humankind, Blake offers a vision of the “Human Form Divine” that transcends the conventional wisdom regarding the nature of the human condition.

Bryan Aubrey

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Show how central William Blake's visual artistry is to his success as a poet.
- What is the relationship between Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*?
- Given the power and the simple language of some of his best poems, how does one explain Blake's difficulty in finding an audience?
- What is the basis of Blake's rejection of such notable English thinkers as Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton?
- What qualities of *America: A Prophecy* would have attracted Americans in Blake's time? What aspects of the poem do you think they would not have appreciated?
- Why do you suppose Blake found it necessary to "correct" John Milton a century after his death?
- Why, in "The Tyger," should symmetry be called "fearful"?
- Blake is sometimes called a mystic. What is mystical about him?

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## GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

**Born:** Florence or Certaldo (now in Italy)

June or July, 1313

**Died:** Certaldo (now in Italy)

December 21, 1375

*Although an erudite Latin humanist, Boccaccio is known primarily for The Decameron, which reflects the medieval world, influenced such writers as Geoffrey Chaucer, and was a precursor of Renaissance thought.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Giovanni Boccaccio (boh-KAH-cheeh) was born in June or July of 1313 in Florence or Certaldo (now in Italy), the illegitimate son of Florentine merchant Boccaccio di Chellino. The identity of his mother is uncertain. He spent his early childhood in Florence, but in 1327 he moved with his father to Naples, where he studied banking, trade, and canon law. Boccaccio eventually abandoned his pursuit of a vocation in commerce and law for a literary life.

The years spent in Naples were crucial to Boccaccio's social, intellectual, and literary development. Because of his father's connections with the aristocracy of Naples, Boccaccio enjoyed the carefree and privileged lifestyle of the court of King Robert of Anjou. There, his passion for poetry and his superior aptitude in literature, both classic and medieval, flourished and formed the basis of his literary works. It was there that he began his early original poetry, which evidences a gift for narration: *Il filocolo* (c. 1336; *Labor of Love*, 1566), *Il filostrato* (c. 1335; *The Filostrato*, 1873), *Teseida* (1340-1341; *The Book of Theseus*, 1974).

In this body of work, Boccaccio introduces a female character, Fiammetta, whose charms are extolled throughout his early poetry. His first encounter with her is described in *Labor of Love*, where the poet sees her for the first time on Easter

Sunday in the Franciscan Church of San Lorenzo in Naples. It is notable that the manner in which this encounter is described is consistent with Italian poet Dante's description of Beatrice, and is also remarkably similar to the reported meeting of Boccaccio's revered idol, Petrarch, and his beloved Laura.

During this period, Boccaccio encountered a man who would influence his life and his work considerably. While studying the law, he met Cino da Pistoia, a prestigious lawyer of the time, who was also a friend of Dante, author of *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802). Cino da Pistoia was a poet in his own right and a disciple of *il stil nuovo*, the "sweet new style," a school of poetry in the Tuscan idiom. Cino da Pistoia became a link to Dante, and through him Boccaccio acquired an appreciation for poetry in the vernacular. Similarly, Boccaccio made the acquaintance of Dionigi da Borgo san Sepolcro, who had close ties with the Italian poet Petrarch. Petrarch was to become something of a mentor to Boccaccio, and his influence is evident throughout his works. During this time, Boccaccio was also surrounded by scholars who inspired a reverence for classical literature and a fascination with Greek culture, which would influence many of his future literary works. This appreciation of the classics would become one of the salient characteristics of the imminent Humanist movement.

Boccaccio's years in Naples were his happiest, and it was against his will that he returned to Florence in 1341 because of his father's financial diffi-

culties. During the first years in Florence, Boccaccio sought work and contact with the northern aristocracy, while continuing to write more mature literary works such as *Il ninfale fiesolano* (1344-1346; *The Nymph of Fiesole*, 1597), and the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (1343-1344; *Amorous Fiammetta*, 1587, better known as *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*), which reflected cultural and spiritual situations of the era.

In 1348, Boccaccio was in Florence when it was struck by the Black Death, an event that inspired the writing of *Decameron: O, Prencipe Galetto* (1349-1351; *The Decameron*, 1620). His father, stepmother, and many friends died during this horrifying episode, and Boccaccio offers a vivid description of this deadly plague in the introduction to the work. The bulk of his writing on *The Decameron*, considered his masterpiece, was completed in the years during which Boccaccio was compelled to remain in Florence to administer his father's estate.

In 1350, Boccaccio finally had the opportunity to cultivate a deep, long-standing personal friendship with his most revered contemporary literary figure, Petrarch. When Boccaccio learned that Petrarch was expected to visit Florence, he arranged to welcome the poet to the city personally. A strong personal bond developed between the two men, which lasted until Petrarch's death in 1374. It has been said that, in his later years, Boccaccio questioned the validity of *The Decameron* and that it was Petrarch who persuaded him not to destroy the manuscript.

The last twenty years of Boccaccio's life are characterized by profound introspection, reflection on moral values, and his spiritual evolution. He shared with Petrarch the belief in the spiritual value of poetry and classical literature as being the highest expression of human civilization. During these years, Boccaccio composed his most erudite Latin treatises, which earned him fame as one of the great scholarly Humanists of the fourteenth century: *De mulieribus claris* (c. 1361-1375; *Concerning Famous Women*, 1943), *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (c. 1350-1375; genealogies of the Gentile gods), and *De casibus virorum illustrium* (1355-1374; *The Fall of Princes*, 1431-1438).

Following the political downfall and consequent exile of some of his most powerful friends in Florence in 1360, Boccaccio spent most of the last thirteen years of his life on his farm in Certaldo. He

made two return visits to Naples and several trips to see Petrarch. After his last trip to Naples in the autumn of 1370, Boccaccio returned home to recopy and revise *The Decameron*. At the invitation of the city of Florence, he also gave public lectures on *The Divine Comedy*. He retired to Certaldo in 1374, where he died after a long illness on December 21, 1375.

## ANALYSIS

An appreciation of the numerous and varied works of Boccaccio must begin with an understanding of the historical and cultural milieu in which they were conceived. Boccaccio was an innovative artist whose development as a writer sprang from a solid foundation on traditional medieval rhetoric and classical models. Evidence of medieval philosophy and literary devices, as well as those of ancient classical writers, pervades all of his works. Boccaccio was also engaged, however, in a new endeavor: the development of an Italian literary language comparably suitable for literary purposes, as Latin had been. Although vernacular Italian had been developed and used in the poetry of such authors as Dante and Petrarch, Boccaccio was the first Italian writer to employ the models of past classical traditions and style to develop a rich vernacular prose for fiction. This singular achievement, coupled with his masterful development of the narrative, places him among the greatest of Italian writers. His remarkable skill in characterization and his unparalleled status as a consummate raconteur influenced writers throughout the world.

A summary glance at the works of Boccaccio tempts the novice to categorize his literary efforts simply into three distinct phases. His first works, both poetry and prose, clearly reflect the conventional medieval treatment of the subject of idealistic courtly love. Characteristic emphasis on rhetorical eloquence, the heavy use of allegory and theological symbolism, and the ever-present influence of Dante as well as classic Greek writers are common threads throughout the writings preceding *The Decameron*.

At least superficially, *The Decameron* itself seems to stand out among the works of Boccaccio as an anomaly. This period in his life as a writer is markedly distinct from any other. In his later years, scholarship replaced creativity in the author, and the object of his efforts was to service the needs of

those devoted to erudition. *The Decameron*, however, was neither the exposition of ideals of a romantic young poet nor work written for the consumption of scholars. Rather, it served, by the author's own admission, as a diversion for the new flowering class of the bourgeois public, particularly women. It is a unified collection of tales, many comic, some rather bawdy, written strictly to delight from the perspective of an open-minded realist, with winking tolerance of the flaws of human nature that motivate the actions of his various colorful protagonists.

An adequate analysis of Boccaccio's works must also address the fruits of his labor in an integrated manner. Numerous stylistic, thematic, and structural traits unique to the times and the author himself appear throughout his youthful works as well as his most advanced literary endeavors. The influence of Dante, Petrarch, and other poets who claimed allegiance to *il stil nuovo* (the sweet new style), a popular style of poetry of the time, is evident in the majority of Boccaccio's works, as well as the use of "tertiary rhyme," a rhyming device popularized by Dante. Also borrowed from these poets were the conventional themes of courtly love, the dedication to a particular lady and her heavenly beauty, and the ennobling power of love.

Perhaps the most significant Dantean influence in the works of Boccaccio is the use of allegory, whether under the guise of fictitious narrative, portraying a moral (*Amorous Fiammetta* and *The Decameron*), or as a representation of the refining effects of sensual love (*The Filostrato*, *The Book of Theseus*, and *The Decameron*). Erotic allegory and the use of history as allegory were also characteristic of Boccaccio's early works.

Boccaccio, like his colleagues, inherited and utilized the thematic resources of Old French ballads and traditions, as evidenced by *Labor of Love*, *The Filostrato*, and *The Decameron*, with their themes of star-crossed lovers confronting adversity in the form of social or class distinctions and consequent disapproval.

Although Boccaccio incorporated into his writings the vast legacy of literary forms and devices provided by his predecessors, he fashioned these elements into a new style, a new perspective, and created an art form that was to become uniquely his own. Boccaccio's greatest distinction lies in his vivid narrative style and strategy in his prose fiction.

It is first evidenced in embryonic form in *Labor of Love*, which is considered a plot model for *The Decameron*.

It is notable that, in both works, the author himself intrudes to explain his purpose in writing the book: to please the fair sex. *Labor of Love*, like *The Decameron*, begins with a group of characters who escape unpleasant reality by fleeing to a world of fantasy. The stories are told within a certain structure. As in *The Decameron*, there is a presiding officer to order and control the episodic events and certain problematic questions to be addressed and established at the outset.

The technique of writing a narrative that contains within it many narratives is characteristic of Boccaccio. It is present in *The Decameron* and *Labor of Love*; hints of it had also appeared in such earlier works as *The Nymph of Fiesole* and the *L'amorosa visione* (1342-1343; English translation, 1986). Numerous dominant themes and motifs so richly portrayed in *The Decameron* were cultivated in his earlier writings. The pathetic, abandoned, or scorned lover is one such figure; it inhabits *The Decameron* but was introduced in such early works as *The Filostrato*, *Amorous Fiammetta*, and *L'amorosa visione*. The theme of adultery is present throughout Boccaccio's writings, without necessarily a moral judgment.

*The Decameron*, however, views such things from a totally new perspective for the Middle Ages: a perspective that shrugs at human indecencies and failings and portrays them in a comic light. It is this unique, delightful perspective that has prompted literary critics to compare *The Decameron* to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

## THE DECAMERON

**First published:** *Decameron: O, Prencipe Galetto*, 1349-1351 (English translation, 1620)

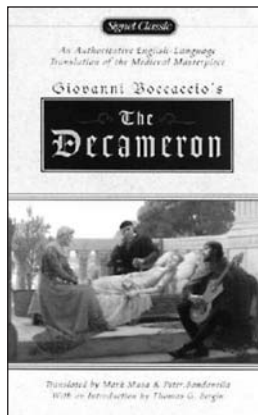
**Type of work:** Novel

*Ten young people escape the city of Florence together during the Black Death and amuse each other by telling stories.*

Contemporary Florence, during the terrible Black Plague, is the setting chosen by Boccaccio for

*The Decameron*, which historians generally agree was written between 1349 and 1351. A desire to escape the horrors of the city prompts a group of ten young people (seven women and three men) to retreat to a country villa. There, they amuse themselves by telling each other stories.

The structure of *The Decameron* begins with a frame. The author addresses his readers, whom he presumes to be women, in his prologue, declaring his intent. He offers *The Decameron* as a pleasant distraction to those tormented lovers whose woes are more difficult to endure. He then apologizes to the “charming ladies” for the book’s unpleasant but necessary beginning. A graphic description in realistic detail of the devastation of the plague in the city of Florence follows.



The device of the frame was used by Boccaccio in earlier works, but on a smaller scale, as in *Labor of Love*. The frame in *The Decameron* provides a specific location and date to the story, while offering a realistic and reasonable explanation for such a collection of unchaperoned young people in a remote

place. It further serves to unify what would otherwise be a loose collection of seemingly unrelated tales. The frame characters are the ten narrators, each endowed with intelligence, breeding, charm, and some distinguishing feature. Once settled in their country villa, it is proposed that each of the ten preside as queen or king for one day, choose a topic for that particular day, and invite everyone to recount an appropriate tale: thus, the significance of ten by ten, or one hundred stories, which explains the title and also satisfies medieval numerology.

The first day is ruled by Pampinea, the oldest, who assumes throughout the book a somewhat mature, motherly stance. There is no appointed topic of the day, but many of the stories told represent the tenor of the book as a whole. The tale of the debauched and irreverent Ciappelletto, who confesses falsely on his deathbed with such seemingly deep contrition to sins so minor as to render him a saint in the perception of those around him, is one

of the most famous stories in *The Decameron*. Vice and virtue intertwine in the work as in life, and Boccaccio chooses to begin with a symbol of ultimate evil.

Filomena rules the second day, and her theme is those who overcome adverse fortune to their advantage. Representative is the story of Andreuccio, a simple-minded horse trader from Perugia, whose misfortunes in the city of Naples teach him to sharpen his wits—an apt lesson for any merchant.

The third day, under the reign of Neifile, is dominated by stories of lust, although the proposed theme is the successes of people who seek to achieve through their own efforts. The use of ingenuity and guile to achieve seduction is common to most of the stories of the day, and members of the clergy are not spared as protagonists in this collection of characters.

The theme of the fourth day, ruled by Filostrata, is in striking contrast to its predecessor. The theme of unhappy loves is designated, and the stories that follow are, for the most part, of a pathetic, if not tragic, nature. One example is the story of Ghismonda, who eloquently defends her love of a man of low breeding to her disapproving father by stating that his is the only true nobility, one of character. Ghismonda ultimately kills herself after her father has the lover’s heart cut out and sent to her in a goblet.

The fifth day is ruled by Fiammetta, who calls for stories of lovers whose trials have ended happily. The most moving story is that told by Fiammetta herself: the tale of Ser Federigo and his beloved falcon, which he ultimately sacrifices to please his lady. The focus in this episode is utmost chivalry, a reminder of the traditions dominating contemporary literature, and perhaps a personal comment on nobler times.

The theme for the sixth day, announced by Elissa, is the use of clever retort as a means of avoiding danger or embarrassment. The witty Filippa, who avoids the death penalty for adultery by eliciting an admission from her husband that he was never denied her charms and by exclaiming that she should not be punished for donating her leftovers to others, is exemplary.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth days, ruled by Dioneo, Lauretta, and Emilia, are devoted to tricksters: women who try to fool their husbands or men who play tricks on others. Human astuteness is

praised, even if the emphasis seems to be on the comic. Many of the tales concern the Bruno-*Buffalmacco* pranksters, who never tire of victimizing their simple-minded companion, Calandrino, who is even duped at one point into thinking that he is pregnant.

The stories of the tenth day, according to Panfilò, are to be of those who acted liberally or magnanimously, in love or other matters. The theme on the tenth day is to treat only those actions motivated by generosity or lofty ideas. The last story is that of Griselda, who appears as a symbol of womanly virtue, of humility and goodness, and who thereby offers a poignant contrast to the very first tale and the figure of Ser Ciappelletto.

Viewing *The Decameron* as a whole, it is not surprising that critics have referred to it as “The Human Comedy” while comparing it to Dante’s masterpiece. Human nature is examined and reexamined throughout, from the tragic to the comic,

from noble to base, but always with a tolerance that is the force behind the comic spirit that only Boccaccio could create.

## SUMMARY

Although influenced by past literary traditions and the classics, Giovanni Boccaccio developed a style and language uniquely his own in the area of prose fiction. A review of his earlier works reveals his gradual development toward the skilled use of vernacular Italian in narrative prose form. His masterpiece, *The Decameron*, was written at the pinnacle of his career as a literary artist, displaying without restraint his refined gifts for narration and rich characterization. *The Decameron* not only was an innovation in Italian literature but also became a fertile source of reference for authors throughout the world for centuries to come.

Victor A. Santi

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*Il filocolo*, c. 1336 (*Labor of Love*, 1566)

*Teseida*, 1340-1341 (*The Book of Theseus*, 1974)

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*Buccolicum carmen*, c. 1351-1366 (*Boccaccio's Olym-pia*, 1913)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many of the great Italian writers and artists of medieval and Renaissance times were essentially men of Florence. How did Giovanni Boccaccio, a native Florentine, profit from his life in Naples?
- In what way did the combination of literary works by Dante and Petrarch influence Boccaccio?
- What was Boccaccio's contribution to Italian vernacular literature?
- Investigate the differences between Dante's and Boccaccio's use of allegory.
- Does there appear to be any plan involved in the succession of themes in the ten sections of *The Decameron*?



*Corbaccio*, c. 1355 (*The Corbaccio*, 1975)

*De montibus, silvis, fontibus lacubus, fluminibus, stagnis seu paludibus, et de nominibus maris*, c. 1355-1374

*De casibus virorum illustrium*, 1355-1374 (*The Fall of Princes*, 1431-1438)

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## ROBERTO BOLAÑO

**Born:** Santiago, Chile

April 28, 1953

**Died:** Barcelona, Spain

July 15, 2003

*Although his career was brief, Bolaño breathed new life into Hispano-American literature with novels, often epic in scope, that portrayed the equivocal relation of literature to life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Roberto Bolaño (boh-LAHN-yoh) Ávalos was born on April 28, 1953, in Santiago, Chile. His father was a truck driver and amateur boxer, his mother a mathematics teacher. Although dyslexic and nearsighted, Bolaño was an enthusiastic reader as a child. The family lived in a series of small cities in south central Chile before moving to Mexico City in 1968.

Bolaño thrived in the Mexican capital, reading voraciously and eclectically, and he dropped out of school to immerse himself in the political and literary culture. He was especially devoted to poetry. Very much in the spirit of the hippie era, Bolaño grew his hair long and had a permanently hungry look. He joined the Trotskyite faction of Mexican communism and traveled to El Salvador to take part in the leftist movements there. In 1973, he returned to Chile to support the socialist government of President Salvador Allende. Not long afterward, General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte staged a coup, and Bolaño worked as a courier in the resistance to the military regime. He was arrested and spent eight days in jail as a political prisoner.

In 1974, Bolaño was again in Mexico City. There, with his friend Mario Santiago, he formed a reactionary literary movement, *Infrarealism*, influenced by Dadaism and the French Surrealist poet André Breton. Intent upon disrupting the staid establishment poetry of such figures as Octavio Paz (who won the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature), Bolaño and Santiago soon became notorious for disrupting poetry readings by shouting out their own poetry from the audience. His first book of poetry was published in 1976, entitled *Reinventar el*

*amor* (reinventing love), and a similar volume appeared shortly afterward.

*Infrarealism*, however, proved short-lived, and a failed romance moved Bolaño to leave Mexico in 1977. After a year traveling through France, Spain, and North Africa, he lived for a while in Barcelona. He worked as an itinerant laborer in a variety of jobs, such as salesman, night watchman, dock worker, and grape picker, and continued to write poetry. He was also struggling with heroine addiction. He overcame it and in 1982 married Carolina Lopez, a Catalanian. He finally settled in the resort town of Blanes on the Catalanian coast and in 1984 published his first novel, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (advice of a disciple of Morrison to a Joyce fanatic), written with Antoni García Porta.

In 1990, he and his wife had a son, Lautaro, and later a daughter, Alexandra. To earn a living for his family, which he called his “only motherland,” Bolaño concentrated on writing fiction. Able to devote himself to writing for long periods, he was prolific. By 1996, he was publishing at least one novel every year, as well as poems, essays, and newspaper columns.

It was the publication of *Los detectives salvajes* in 1998 that made him a sensation among Hispanic readers, as did its 2007 translation, *The Savage Detectives*, for English readers. In 1999, the novel earned him the Rómulo Gallegos Prize, the Spanish equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, as well as the Herralde Prize the same year. He also won the Municipal Prize of Santiago for an earlier novel, *Llamadas telefónicas* (1997; phone calls). He published three volumes of poetry, and his nonfiction is collected

in *El gaucho insufrible* (2000; the insufferable gaucho) and *Entre paréntesis: Ensayos, artículos, y discursos, 1998-2003* (2004; in parentheses: essays, articles, and discourses, 1998-2003).

Widely considered a major new writer, Bolaño remained a maverick, outspoken and often caustic. He disaffected mainstream writers, ridiculing, for instance, the Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez and the Chilean writer Isabel Allende. Nevertheless, his reputation steadily grew. At the same time, his health declined. Aware that he was dying, he rushed to complete a series of five interrelated narratives in order to ensure financial security for his family. He died on July 15, 2003, in a Barcelona hospital while awaiting a liver transplant. A year later these last fictional works, edited by his literary executor, were published as a single book, cryptically titled *2666* (2004; English translation, 2008), more than 1,100 pages long. It was an immediate success, hailed by some critics as the most important book in a generation.

## ANALYSIS

Roberto Bolaño was a writer's writer. Literature was his subject matter. The fictions that people make out of their own lives constitute his primary theme, and the dangers of those fictions, especially as manifest in obsession, ambition, and self-deception, provide the narrative suspense of his plots. Moreover, he readily displays his debt to his favorite authors: Chilean writer Nicanor Parra, Argentine writers Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar, American writer Thomas Pynchon, and Irish writer James Joyce. Scores more are mentioned in his works, as well as literary movements, aesthetics, contests, prizes, and films. Each novel opens a panorama on modern literature, and many novels are interrelated.

Bolaño himself frequently appears as a character in his fiction, named directly or as "B" or as his alter ego, Arturo Belano. In fact, he draws much of his material from his own experience and that of people he knew. *The Savage Detectives*, for instance, borrows from his times with his friend Santiago, so much so that its second section is practically a roman à clef. This foundation in actual history helps give his fiction its exuberant immediacy and restlessness. Nearly all characters live wandering existences, and the hint is that those who settle down lose the vitality that sets them apart, for better

or worse. Many fictional characters also appear in more than one of Bolaño's novels, and passages in some novels give rise to later novels, as is the case with *Estrella distante* (1996; *Distant Star*, 2004), which expands on the ending of *La literatura Nazi en América* (1996; *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 2008).

Bolaño makes use of several genres, mixing them, so that his narratives emerge from literary conventions but are not bound by them. Detectives and the pursuit of a mystery are central to his plots, either actual detectives like Romero in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, amateur detectives like Belano and Lima, or scholars like those in the first section of *2666*. There are also scenes appropriate to satire, crime thrillers, romantic comedy, and the coming-of-age novel. Many stories are told by first-person narrators. This technique intensifies the immediacy of the narratives, but additionally Bolaño creates a prismatic effect in such novels as *The Savage Detectives* by using dozens of narrators, so that a story is not so much told as pieced together from every possible viewpoint.

Neither the intense literariness of the novels nor their manipulation of popular genres are ends in themselves. Quite to the contrary, Bolaño undermines conventions and foils the expectations of genre. His protagonists end up antiheroes, usually near death or left in fear and doubt at a novel's end. The effect is to remove literature from its usual status as an artifact, an entertainment created by satisfying typical plot and character patterns, and to impel readers to see the characters not as simply literary creations but as possible lives. In other words, when a fiction is not conventional, it seems more individual and lifelike. His innovation appears most strikingly in his refusal to offer neat resolutions for the conflicts that power his narratives, leaving unclear, for example, the fate of central characters or the truth about a mystery. This is a crucial quality to Bolaño's work, which Spanish critic Ignacio Echeverría termed the "poetics of inconclusiveness." Much of previous Western literature, especially that of Latin America, has been criticized for becoming moribund because writers are content to satisfy the generic norms for closure or are obsessed with the aesthetics of aging literary movements. Bolaño makes a departure. Because he does, his stories appeal more to readers' knowledge of life rather than to their understanding of literary traditions.

Accordingly, Bolaño's fiction expresses human relationships and thereby reflects society, particularly politics. Having himself lived through political turmoil, he investigates the mechanics of moral failure and competition for power under the guise of ideology. To one of his translators, Chris Andrews, Bolaño's novels are an anatomy of social evil. Andrews distinguishes "four faces" of turpitude among Bolaño's characters: dictators, because they seek superiority; administrators, because they are concerned only with their own advancement within a system; accomplices (those who simply go along with events), because fear governs them; and sociopaths, because they care only for themselves. In a complementary approach, critic Siddhartha Deb argues that Bolaño's novels break down the distinctions between the past and the present, the imagination and experience, and the conscious and subconscious. Above all, Bolaño possesses a superior power among experimental writers to involve readers in the chancy, vital world of his stories.

## THE SAVAGE DETECTIVES

**First published:** *Los detectives salvajes*, 1998  
(English translation, 2007)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An avant-garde movement in Mexico colors the lives of a disparate group of poets, revealing the symbiosis between society and literature.*

*The Savage Detectives* recounts the history of avant-garde poets from 1975 in Mexico City until 1996 in Africa. Their literary movement, visceral realism, begins with a mischievous revolutionary fervor but later spins apart through jealousy, murder, flight, despair, insanity, and, in a very few cases, self-discovery. Although the underlying plotline is straightforward, the narrative structure and multiple points of view belong uniquely to this novel. It is divided into three sections that present the story out of chronological order.

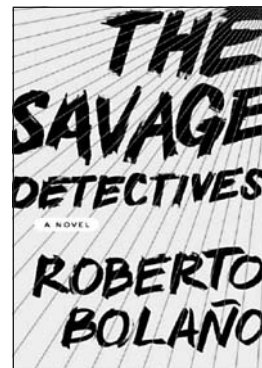
"Mexicans Lost in Mexico" concerns the last two months of 1975 and takes place wholly in Mexico City. It is told through the diary entries of Juan García Madero, a seventeen-year-old whose ambi-

tion is to study literature and become a poet. He encounters two older poets, Arturo Belano and Ulysses Lima. Belano and Lima are *poètes maudits*, the founders of visceral realism, which is defined mostly by its vigorous opposition to mainstream Mexican literature. They gather about them a variety of younger poets, painters, and dancers, publish magazines, organize or invade poetry readings, and migrate from one dive to another in endless discussion. To finance their literary work they peddle marijuana. By chance, the pair discovers that a previous poet also used the term visceral realism to describe a literary movement. This poet

is Cesárea Tinajero, a shadowy figure from the 1920's known for a single published poem. Belano and Lima decide to track her down.

Meanwhile, García Madero helps rescue a young prostitute, Lupe, from her pimp. As the section draws to a close, the pimp threatens violence if Lupe is not returned to him. With the timely help of Belano and Lima, García Madero and Lupe barely escape a shootout. The four flee Mexico City, heading for Sonora and the last known location of Tinajero.

The long middle section, "The Savage Detectives," leaps forward in time. Belano and Lima have fled to Europe; no mention of García Madero or Lupe occurs until the last pages. The section comprises a series of testimonies about Lima and Belano told by former visceral realists and some others whom the pair interviewed about Tinajero. Although there is much humor (often bitterly ironical), sex, emotional and situational drama, literary and political quarreling, and historical anecdotes, the tone of these testimonies is curiously flat, as if they are legal depositions. With occasional exceptions they are presented in chronological order from 1976 until 1996. As each person tells a story, the reader gradually accumulates information about Belano and Lima. The reader learns that something bad has happened to them, and they live like lost souls, bouncing from one place to another in Nicaragua, France, Spain, Austria, and Is-



rael. Lima eventually turns up in Mexico City again, years later, a broken man. Belano continues to write, makes a modest living for himself in Barcelona, marries, has a son, divorces, falls desperately sick with pancreatitis, and slides into despair. Knowing that he is dying, he goes to Africa as a correspondent, hoping to be killed in action. He is last seen near Monrovia, Liberia, trying to evade a rebel army.

"The Sonora Desert" reverts to García Madero's diary, which records the events of the first six weeks of 1976. Belano, Lima, Lupe, and García Madero speed north in a borrowed car, pursued by Lupe's pimp and his henchman. Searching throughout Sonora, Belano and Lima at last succeed in their detective work: They find Tinajero working as a washerwoman in a border town of down-and-out killers. Although her life has been a long decline into poverty, she has filled notebooks with her writing. Just as the four fugitives contact her, the pimp finally catches up. In a scene that bursts from tranquility into violence, Belano and Lima kill their pursuers with Tinajero's help, and she is killed in the process. In a cuttingly ironical twist, they never have a chance to talk to her about visceral realism. The four fugitives then split up. The final pages concern García Madero and Lupe, who have become lovers. He finds Tinajero's notebooks and reads them. Although he does not describe their contents in his diary, he refers to them as if they are a disappointment. He is forced to see beyond his ambition to become a poet, and the future looks as bleak as the desert that he and Lupe continue to roam.

Like García Madero, the antitype of Belano, Belano himself comes to recognize that the frame of his literary interest—visceral realism or any literary program—affords too narrow a perspective on what is really visceral in a person's experience. As a character remarks about one seriocomic episode, "It gave us a glimpse of ourselves in our common humanity. It wasn't proof of our idle guilt but a sign of our miraculous and pointless innocence." That is the real savagery of *The Savage Detectives*.

## BY NIGHT IN CHILE

**First published:** *Nocturno de Chile*, 2000  
(English translation, 2003)

**Type of work:** Novella

*On his death bed, a priest and literary critic seeks to justify his life, a life that is emblematic of Chile.*

*By Night in Chile* opens with Father Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, a celebrated literary critic and poet, on his deathbed confessing to the reader that although once at peace with himself, he no longer is. He is tormented by accusations from a mysterious "wizened youth" and struggles to justify his life. What follows, printed in a single paragraph, is a turbulent montage of images, anecdotes, stories, allegories, laments, and delusions.

Who the wizened youth is and the exact nature of his accusations provide the tension. There are hints of illicit sexuality, beginning with Urrutia's own father, who is remembered only in shadowy, phallic imagery, yet sex is but one of several diversionary leitmotifs. Urrutia enters the seminary at age thirteen, against his father's will, and soon after graduation in the late 1950's decides to become a literary figure. He allies himself to Chile's preeminent literary critic, who writes under the pen name Farewell. The mentor is indeed an old-fashioned

example of the Western literati, effete, independently wealthy, and sterile. Through Farewell, young Father Urrutia socializes with the cultural elite, meeting such luminaries as poet Pablo Neruda and eventually becoming a prominent critic and university professor himself.

However, as he seeks to foster Chilean literature in the patronizingly

European mode of his mentor, Urrutia himself is suborned by politics. A conservative, he joins Opus Dei and is recruited by a Mr. Raef (fear) and Mr. Etah (hate) on a secret mission to save



the great churches of Europe from deterioration. There follows black comedy, variously hilarious, touching, and outraging, as Father Urrutia travels through Europe and discovers that the greatest danger to the physical church is from the excrement of pigeons and doves, traditional symbols of peace.

Father Urrutia returns to Chile in time to witness the coup by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte and the subsequent rule by a military junta. Again, Mr. Raef and Mr. Etah recruit him on a secret mission, this time to lecture the ruling generals on the fundamentals of Marxism, so that they better understand the mentality of their enemies. Another episode of dark comedy ensues as the generals behave like teenagers.

Meanwhile, Father Urrutia has to cease publishing his own poetry because he discovers, to his own horror, that themes of desolation, heresy, and despair irrepressibly emerge. At this point in his recollections, Father Urrutia comes to recognize that like many of his literary compatriots, his appreciation of Chile's underlying culture is selective, often precious, and self-deceiving. It is the Catholic Church and the voracious, militant conservatism of people such as Pinochet Ugarte that represents the real motive force in society. "Is it *always* possible for a man to know what is good and what is bad?" he asks piteously, understanding at last that the answer is no and that he, like other intellectuals, has let himself be used, out of vanity, by those in power for the maintenance of power. Two final recognitions come, both devastating to the priest: that "what we call literature" is simply a means to avoid a collapse into barbarity and that his mocking nemesis, the wizened youth, is his own conscience.

## NAZI LITERATURE IN THE AMERICAS

**First published:** *La literatura Nazi en América*, 1996 (English translation, 2008)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A faux biographical encyclopedia, this novel satirizes fascist literature, whose violent milieu entangles the central character, the author himself.*

*Nazi Literature in the Americas* has the appearance of a biographical encyclopedia. The entries, varying in length from half a page to nearly thirty pages, discuss writers from throughout the two continents and from early in the twentieth century to as late as 2029, with Argentina receiving the most attention (eight entries) and the United States placing second (seven entries). There are writers of nearly all genres. Through most of the book the tone is detached, judicious, and scholarly. Gradually, however, as the author discusses thirty-one authors with fascist sensibilities under thirteen headings, it becomes clear to the reader that he is far from detached and that his purpose is ridicule. Moreover, he becomes involved in their world despite himself.

The headings provide a major clue to the author's attitude. The first is benign, "The Mendiluce Clan," about a wealthy poet and essayist who becomes a friend of Adolf Hitler, and, along with her daughter and son, are doyens of nationalistic, conservative literature in Argentina. As the book progresses, the headings turn increasingly sinister, for instance, "Poètes Maudits," "The Aryan Brotherhood," "The Infamous Ramírez Hoffman," and finally the "Epilogue for Monsters," which lists secondary writers, publishing houses, and books. The writers themselves, despite their varying styles and genres, reflect a reactionary vision of utopia, using such jingoist jargon as "golden age," "new order," "American awakening," "will," "new dawn," "rebirth of the nation," "resurrection," and "the absolute." Their underlying yearning is for autocracy based, variously, on race, creed, ideology, or class.

While espousing "family values" and other standards of conduct, few of the writers practice what



they preach. Herein lies the book's mordant humor. These writers are violent (soccer thugs, mercenaries, torturers, and murderers), sexually promiscuous and deviant, sometimes ignorant, and treacherous. As the author comments about one writer, "Real life can sometimes bear an unsettling resemblance to nightmares." About Max Mirabilis, a writer who plagiarizes and lies shamelessly, the author observes that he learned two methods to achieve what he wanted—through violence and through literature, "which is a surreptitious form of violence, a passport of respectability, and can, in certain young and sensitive nations, disguise the social climber's origins." A coward, Mirabilis chooses literature. Others are lunatics, such as the Chilean Pedro González Carrera, who reports having been visited by "Merovingian extraterrestrials" and admires the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

The last writer is a figure of horror. A Chilean, Carlos Ramírez Hoffman is an air force pilot who creates poetic skywriting over Santiago. He is also a member of a death squad, murders a series of people, tortures others, then disappears. At this point the author, Bolaño, enters the novel as a character. Abel Romero, a private investigator on the trail of Ramírez Hoffman, asks for Bolaño's help. Together they track him down, but Bolaño begs Romero not to kill Ramírez Hoffman: "He can't hurt anyone now, I said. But I didn't really believe it. Of course he could. We all could. I'll be right back, said Romero." The ending insists that litera-

ture, even literature written by the lunatic fringe, has a way of turning personal.

## SUMMARY

Toward the end of the twentieth century critics began to recognize in Roberto Bolaño a writer of force and invention beyond any other in Spanish-language literature. He is regularly called a genius, a trailblazer, the premier novelist of his generation, and a writer for the new era. Although his roots in the last century's Latin American literature are pronounced, Bolaño had no interest in imitating the Magical Realism of such writers as García Márquez or the nationalism of the "boom" of the 1960's. Because of that, Bolaño's work is refreshing, and it became a central influence in Latin American literature.

Nevertheless, to call Bolaño a Latin American writer, however much the continent flavors his fiction, is misleading. Much of his work takes place in the United States, Europe, or Africa. It is more accurate to consider his Latin Americanism as the impetus for his vagabond-like explorations of experience than as a regional or racial mentality. As another of his translators, Natasha Wimmer, notes in her preface to *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño's appeal has been broad because he was not really from any one place, although he had ties to Chile, Mexico, and Spain; instead, he wrote postnationalist fiction. It is appropriate to an era when the status of nations is changing in the globalization of culture.

Roger Smith

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Define "visceral realism" in *The Savage Detectives*. Is it a literary movement, a way of life, a fraud, an affectation, or a mixture of these?
- Roberto Bolaño's novels frequently have a central mystery or shadowy character that appears to motivate the plot, but they are never themselves completely elucidated. Why?
- Bolaño employs multiple points of view and narrative voices in some of his novels. Discuss how this technique builds suspense in *The Savage Detectives*. Does it lead to a resolution?
- Is Father Urrutia's attitude toward literature in *By Night in Chile* similar to Bolaño's?
- What details in *Nazi Literature in the Americas* suggest that it is fiction instead of a reference work? Discuss their effect, such as humor, satire, and political or literary critique, among others.



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## HEINRICH BÖLL

**Born:** Cologne, Germany  
December 21, 1917

**Died:** Merten, West Germany (now in Germany)  
July 16, 1985

*A Nobel laureate in literature, Böll was known worldwide as the conscience of postwar Germany, attacking evils and advocating the humane through his speeches, essays, short stories, and novels.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Heinrich Theodor Böll (buhl) was born December 21, 1917, in Cologne, Germany, to Victor and Marie Hermanns Böll, solidly middle-class, liberal Catholics from old Rhineland families. Böll's native region, the time of his birth, his parents' class, and their moral and religious convictions all were strong influences on his character and works. Although his parents suffered from the inflation of the 1920's and the Depression of the 1930's, so that Böll sometimes identified his background as middle-class, other times as proletarian, the Bølls provided their children with security, understanding, and freedom but did not hide social problems from them. Devout but independent-minded Catholics, the elder Bølls taught their children the tenets of Christian love but never forced formal practices on them. Consequently, young Böll realized the injustice when many of his proletarian friends could not attend *Gymnasium* (college preparatory school) with him.

An adolescent in the 1930's when Adolf Hitler rose to power, Böll never embraced Nazi teachings or activities, mainly because of the influence of his family. After *Gymnasium*, Böll worked in a bookstore, where he read such proscribed thinkers as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, until he was conscripted for compulsory labor in 1938 and 1939.

Later in 1939, shortly after entering the University of Cologne (with difficulty, since he was not a Nazi Party member), he was drafted into the army. Always opposed to war and Nazism, Böll suffered wounds three times; he deserted, forged passes, and devised his capture by Americans. He witnessed atrocities of Hitlerism but also enough incidents of compassion to reject the doctrine of collective guilt.

Returning to a bombed-out Cologne in November, 1945, Böll reentered the university to acquire a ration card, worked in the family carpentry shop and, later, for the city, and wrote; but his wife, Annemarie Cech, an English teacher whom he had married in 1942, virtually supported the family. A voracious reader, Böll had written six novels before the war. In 1947, he began publishing stories in periodicals. Two of these stories, about the difficulties of the postwar years, led Middelhaue, a publisher of technical books, to contract for Böll's fiction. In 1949, Middelhaue published the novella *Der Zug war pünktlich* (*The Train Was on Time*, 1956) and in 1950, *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa . . .* (*Traveller, If You Come to Spa*, 1956), short stories about wartime and postwar dreams of a better world.

In 1951, *Wo warst du, Adam?* (*Adam, Where Art Thou?*, 1955), a novel about the absurdity of war, established Böll with critics. The same year, Gruppe 47, a prominent coterie of writers who met to read, criticize, and encourage one another's work, awarded its annual prize to Böll's humorous story "Die schwarzen Schafe" ("The Black Sheep"). In 1952, with a new publisher, Kiepenheuer and

Witsch, and a new novel about postwar poverty, hypocrisy, and bigotry, *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* (1953; *Acquainted with the Night*, 1954), Böll achieved financial and popular success. Throughout the 1950's, he produced a steady stream of novels, stories, radio plays, essays, humor, satire, and the pleasant *Irisches Tagebuch* (1957; *Irish Journal*, 1967), an account of his visits to Ireland, which he admired for its genuine Catholicism and its anti-materialism. These works won a steady stream of literary prizes.

*Billard um halbzehn* (1959; *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*, 1961) and the 1963 best seller *Ansichten eines Clowns* (*The Clown*, 1965) contrast the evil, materialistic, institutional, opportunistic "buffaloes" with the persecuted, sensitive "lambs." *The Clown* shows the influence of American novelist J. D. Salinger, whose *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) Böll had translated in 1962. In the 1960's, Böll was also active in public life. His *Brief an einen jungen Katholiken* (1961; letter to a young Catholic) criticizes the position of the Church in Nazi and postwar Germany. In four lectures given at the University of Frankfurt in 1963 and 1964 and published in 1966, Böll identifies love, language, and commitment as defining human qualities and advocates an "aesthetic of the humane." In 1968, having witnessed the invasion of Czechoslovakia while visiting writers in Prague, Böll protested Soviet policies. In 1969, he campaigned for Willy Brandt and the Social Democrats against the authoritarian government of Konrad Adenauer's Christian Democrats.

Elected president of PEN, an international association of writers, in 1971, Böll in this position aided a number of Soviet dissidents, among them the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In 1972, the Swedish Academy gave Böll the Nobel Prize in Literature, citing especially *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (1971; *Group Portrait with Lady*, 1973), a recapitulation of the social and moral criticism that had filled his earlier works.

Although in poor health, Böll remained active in the 1970's and 1980's. His advocacy of due process for the terrorist Baaden-Meinhoff gang, which had been tried and condemned in the press, initiated a long controversy between Böll and the establishment. Böll's novels *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum: Oder, Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann* (1974; *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum: Or, How Violence Develops and Where It Can*

*Lead*, 1975) and *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* (1979; *The Safety Net*, 1982) depict, respectively, the "public violence" of journalistic slander and the horrors of both terrorism and systematic protection. In 1981, Böll joined the Bonn peace demonstration, a last straw, perhaps, that made Christian Democrats oppose making the social critic, but not the "great writer," an honorary citizen of Cologne. Böll responded that the two were one.

Böll died in Merten, West Germany, on July 16, 1985. *Frauen vor Flusslandschaft* (1985; *Women in a River Landscape*, 1988), about life in West Germany's capital, was published the next month.

## ANALYSIS

In an interview given in 1976, Böll remarked: "There are authors whose immediate impulse to write is political. Mine was not." Indeed, he asserted, perhaps denying the salutary effects of didactic literature, perhaps denying the effects of circumstances on character, "I am of the conviction that what comes to one from outside does not change one very much. . . . Everything history throws at one's feet, war, peace, Nazis, communists, the bourgeois, is really secondary." Nevertheless, sociopolitical criticism, even satire, plays a primary part in his writings—so much so that Böll-scholar Robert Conrad warns critics against denying that Böll's work is "motivated by the challenge to gain aesthetic control over the experience of Nazi Germany, postwar guilt, and the inadequacies of West German democracy." Moreover, at the end of *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, Böll's narrator affirms, though ironically: "Art still has a social function."

Böll's art indeed has a social function. In the early war story *Traveller, If You Come to Spa*, Böll discredits classical education that encourages war by emphasizing the martial: A mutilated soldier evacuated to his old *Gymnasium*, now a field hospital, observes the schoolroom ornaments—statues of a hoplite, Julius Caesar, Frederick the Great—and a war memorial. *Acquainted with the Night* shows the inequities in the currency revaluation and the Economic Miracle: A middle-aged husband working full-time cannot earn a decent living for his family. *Das Brot der frühen Jahre* (1955; *The Bread of Our Early Years*, 1957), shows another side: An up-and-coming young employee, whose former poverty has made him acquisitive, at last rejects the capital-

ist system, its excess profits, and its callousness, which is manifested in his fiancé, the boss's daughter. *Haus ohne Hüter* (1954; *Tomorrow and Yesterday*, 1957) shows poverty almost naturalistically determining the choices of one war widow, whereas another lives in inherited wealth not redistributed in the postwar democracy. *The Clown* castigates the co-operative establishment—the government, economic system, and Church—which lacks concern for the little people. *Group Portrait with Lady* criticizes the Communist Party for failure to live by its principles and Christian Democratic capitalism for its very tenets: profit, private ownership, self-interest, the exploitation of natural and human resources. The novel offers an alternative: direct antiexploitation action, rejection of excess profit taking, moderate work, and informal socialism. Böll's last book, about corruption in the Bonn government, "the only state we have," is certainly political.

Böll also said that he considered writing primarily a craft, but some critics have found his diction flat and his narration neither craftsmanlike nor inspired. Most, however, have recognized that Böll, like Günter Grass and other contemporaries, solved the problem of writing with a language that Nazi usage had made depraved and untruthful, by using elementary diction and syntax to reflect elemental or indifferent conditions, by playing ironically on Nazi perversions of the language, and by "bring[ing] something from a foreign terrain" into German by translating foreign literature. Böll has proven able to use diction and syntax to create many individual voices in his complex and sophisticated narrative structures.

In Böll's style and structure, critic J. H. Reid has found a number of the "marks of modernism": the disappearance of the "'omniscient,' commenting narrator" and his assumed audience; the reduction of chronological plot; "a tendency to spatialize . . . through montage, leitmotifs, and the reduction of narrated time." In *Acquainted with the Night*, for example, the husband and wife narrate alternate chapters, apparently as interior monologues with no communication between the two or with the reader. Though the narration of *Tomorrow and Yesterday* and *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* is in the third person, the narrator is rarely apparent; both novels are told from multiple viewpoints of unreliable characters, in two cases those of confused adoles-

cents. In *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*, the account of three generations of a German middle-class family is refracted in the characters' memories in the course of ten hours. One character's daily billiard playing serves as a leitmotif; his random creation of geometric patterns by rolling the balls over the table symbolizes the apparently random structure of the novel. (Böll, of course, had to plan the structure carefully; he often did so with complex spatial color graphs.)

These practices create an autonomous aesthetic structure detached from literary traditions and, in many modern novels, an autonomous subjective world detached from the external world. In *The Clown*, for instance, the world is presented exclusively as Hans Schnier understands it. Yet, in *The Clown*, as in most of Böll's works, the real world and real time are the objects of the narrator's perceptions, and Böll's social criticism seldom gets lost in the narrator's psyche.

In his later works, Böll employs numerous postmodern (or premodern) techniques, as in *Entfernung von der Truppe* (1964; *Absent Without Leave*, 1965). Commentator Hans Magnus Enzenberger has enunciated the duty of the postmodern writer to take direct action or to document the struggles of the oppressed; Böll did both.

## THE CLOWN

**First published:** *Ansichten eines Clowns*, 1963  
(English translation, 1965)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In postwar Germany, a professional clown condemns materialism, opportunism, hypocrisy, and the Church and society's subordination of people to regulations.*

Although both its artistry and its themes have drawn contradictory evaluations, *The Clown* artfully reveals the perceptions of the title character, Hans Schnier. Hans's past-tense narration of three crucial hours creates the immediacy of stream of consciousness, punctuated with telephone conversations that trigger Hans's opinionated memories of his childhood in World War II and his life as an outsider in the postwar period.

Returning to his Bonn apartment, drunken, failed, and penniless after an injury on stage, Hans, the scion of the “brown-coal Schniers,” who has separated himself from his wealthy family and their values, grieves that his companion, Marie Derkam, the Catholic daughter of an old socialist, has left him after seven years to marry Heribert Züpfner, a Catholic lay functionary. Hans telephones his family and Marie’s circle of Catholics to seek money and news of Marie. In conversations with the Catholic officials, Hans espouses the spiritual and sensual marriage in which the lovers “offer each other the sacrament” and rejects the validity of legal and ecclesiastical marriage if it lacks reciprocal grace. Denying the virtue of Hans’s relationship with Marie, the Catholics defend submission to “abstract principles of order” and reveal that Marie and Züpfner are honeymooning in Rome.

A call to Hans’s socially prominent mother, a nationalist racist who in 1945 urged a last stand of children against the “Jewish Yankee” but now directs the Societies for the Reconciliation of Racial Differences, points up the hypocrisy of many rehabilitated Nazis in postwar Germany—as do Hans’s recollections of Herbert Kalick, his Hitler Youth leader who has been decorated for popularizing democracy among the youth of postwar Germany. Hans cannot forget or forgive Kalick’s responsibility for the death of a little orphan boy. Nor can Hans forgive his mother’s sending her adolescent daughter, Henrietta, to death on antiaircraft patrol in the last days of the war.

Informed that Hans is in Bonn, his father, the industrialist whose fine looks and manner have made him a television spokesman for German economic renewal, visits the apartment and offers to support Hans if he will train with a “famous” mime recommended by a “famous” critic. Hans rejects his father’s philistinism and his reverence for “money in the abstract.” Although he remembers gratefully his father’s having saved two women from execution in 1945, Hans rebuffs the old capitalist who accommodates himself to whatever political and social authority is current.

In other telephone conversations and memories, Hans condemns a popular preacher, Somerwild, and through him the Church, for pseudointellectualism, sophistry, and worldly self-aggrandizement. His brother, Leo, a seminarian, resists breaking curfew to bring Hans companionship and money—

further evidence of legalism’s inhibiting the Church’s mission of consolation and charity. In reverie Hans foresees a stultifying conventional middle-class life for Marie and Züpfner.

A call from his agent and meditations on his profession, especially his memory of having refused to play satires on the West German democracy in East Germany, reveal Hans to be an artist in the tradition of the German cabaret clown: an entertainer whose satire reveals society to itself. After the three hours’ traffic that passes in his mind, Hans, integrity intact but completely isolated from both groups and individuals, returns in cracked white face to the train station. There, still looking for a few coins and Marie, he sings a ballad of Catholic politics in Bonn with small hope that his performance may yet make church and state see itself. Yet if Marie, he says, sees him like this and remains with Züpfner, then she is dead and they are divorced. Institutional religion will have killed reciprocal love.

## GROUP PORTRAIT WITH LADY

**First published:** *Gruppenbild mit Dame*, 1971  
(English translation, 1973)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An investigator researches the life of a naïve, sensual, generous woman who survives the vicissitudes of German history from 1922 to 1970.*

*Group Portrait with Lady*, the comprehensive novel that earned for Böll the Nobel Prize, is written as the report of an investigator, identified only as the Author (“Au.”), on the lady, Helene Marie (“Leni”) Gruyten Pfeiffer, forty-eight in 1970, who has lived in but not with the Third Reich, the occupation, and the growth of the Federal Republic in Cologne. Au.’s informants and others whose lives touch Leni’s constitute the 125-member group in the portrait. Although Au. professes to be an absolutely objective seeker of facts, he appears instead to be an advocate of Leni as a contemporary humanist saint, an alternate to the ambition-driven heroes of “Christian” capitalism.

Although the first half of the book recounts



Leni's life chronologically from 1938 to 1945, it is distractingly composed of short testimonies from the informants and the longer analytic commentary of Au. Named "Most German girl" in her elementary school for her blondness, Leni, mystically sensual but not cerebral, leaves convent school in 1938 at sixteen to work for her father, a building contractor. In 1940, when her brother and her sweetheart, Cousin Edward, are executed for selling an antitank gun to the Danes in reaction to serving in Hitler's army, Leni grieves terribly. Yet the next year she marries Alois Pfeiffer, a crude soldier whose lewd dancing she has mistaken for sensual love. When he dies in battle, she does not grieve but renews her association with the sensual, mystical Jewish nun from her convent school, Sister Rahel. In 1942, Sister Rahel dies of malnutrition; Leni's father is imprisoned for defrauding the government and distributing wealth by means of a dummy company, and all of his property, except Leni's house, is confiscated. Making an easy transition from middle class to proletarian, Leni in 1943 takes the job that she will hold for twenty-seven years. Indifferent to social class, race, or nationality, Leni makes wreaths in a microcosm: Pelzer, the nursery owner, is an opportunist forgivable because of terrible memories of childhood poverty; Leni's fellow workers include Nazis, neutrals, a disguised Jew, a Communist, and a Russian prisoner of war.

The structural and thematic center of *Group Portrait with Lady* recounts the love of Leni and Boris, the joyful Germanophile Russian prisoner. It begins with Leni's spontaneous act of humanity: On his first day in captivity, she offers Boris a cup of her precious coffee. The ecstasy of their first touch, hand on hand, illustrates spiritual sensuality. Their lovemaking in the cemetery during air raids demonstrates the power of life in the face of death; their fidelity, the true marriage that occurs when the lovers offer each other the sacrament.

With the birth of Boris and Leni's son, Lev, during the Allies' nine-hour raid on Cologne, the mode of narration changes. Au. records fluent accounts of 1945 in the words and voices of the informants: Boris in German uniform is captured by the Allies and dies in Lorraine; Leni, a natural commu-

nist who instinctively shrinks "from every form of profit-thinking," wants to join the Communist Party, but the institution cannot understand her.

Having sold her house for a pittance to Otto Hoyser, her father's old bookkeeper, Leni from 1945 to 1970 rents an apartment in it and sublets rooms to old acquaintances and foreign "guest workers," each according to his needs, and charges each even less than his ability to pay. When the Hoyseres try to evict Leni in the name of progress, a committee sends a blockade of garbage trucks to delay the evacuation until the eviction order can be reversed. A model of classless solidarity, the committee includes a music critic, civil servants, a small-business owner, German and foreign laborers, and Au. himself.

Although in the span of the book Leni and members of the group portrayed have suffered dictatorship and war, and capitalism and evil have often triumphed, Au.'s report ends as a saint's life should: with a miracle. Leni's lodgers are secure. Leni herself is pregnant by a Moslem guest worker. Her brilliant son Lev, a garbage collector who practices "deliberate underachievement" to combat capitalism's excesses of ambitious overachievement, will soon join her. Even Au. has found happiness with a former nun. At least temporarily, "that which society has declared garbage" has triumphed over capitalistic exploitation.

## SUMMARY

Although Heinrich Böll insisted that his characters were "compositions," not psychological creations, they have psychological reality. Hans, the reification of the clown metaphor, is actually an opinionated, sensitive, sentimental, narcissistic, nonintellectual man. Leni, an archetype, is real in generosity, sensuality, and will. "As an author," said Böll, "only two themes interest me: love and religion." With a dichotomous cast of "compositions," the evil self-servers and the persecuted pure, a contemporary sociopolitical setting, and a repertoire of symbols, Böll condemned the sin of exploitation wherever it occurred and preached a religion of love made manifest in forbearance, generosity, and grace.

Pat Ingle Gillis



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did the course of German history affect the early life and early career of Heinrich Böll?
- To what extent was it impossible for Böll to evade politically motivated literature?
- Consider the possibilities of Böll's writing that are beneficial to American writers who are themselves antagonistic to the course of American sociopolitical developments in the early twenty-first century.
- Explain the significance of Böll's use of unreliable narrators.
- What characteristics make clowns perceptive critics of social and moral deficiencies?
- In *Group Portrait with Lady*, does Leni defy or fulfill the implications of having been chosen "most German girl" in school?
- Discuss Böll's distinction between characters as "compositions" and characters as psychological creations.

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## JORGE LUIS BORGES

**Born:** Buenos Aires, Argentina

August 24, 1899

**Died:** Geneva, Switzerland

June 14, 1986

*Borges's labyrinthine, esoteric short fiction and his innovative style have earned him an international reputation as one of the most significant contributors to twentieth century literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on August 24, 1899, to Jorge Guillermo Borges and Leonor Acevedo de Borges, Jorge Luis Borges (BAWR-hays) belonged to a well-off family. His father was of English descent. The young Borges appears to have enjoyed a relatively happy childhood and the security of a close-knit Latin American family. Under the nurturing influence of his family, Borges began to write at a very early age. He read voraciously from his father's personal library, which was rich in adventure tales by English authors such as Rudyard Kipling. Stories about distant lands and wild animals of the East shaped Borges's childhood imagination. This curiosity was later to develop into more serious pursuits of study in the areas of Eastern religions and philosophies. Borges was introduced to the benefits of private study from the beginning, not receiving any formal public education until the age of nine. This faith in self-education was to remain with him until he died.

In 1914, the Borges family was traveling in Europe when World War I began and was forced to extend its stay in Geneva, Switzerland, for four years. It was there that Borges attended secondary school and was first introduced to French and German languages and literatures, as well as to the works of European authors such as Heinrich Heine, Charles

Baudelaire, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Between 1919 and 1921, Borges and his family spent much of their time in Spain, where Borges produced his first poems and also met a group of young Spanish writers and poets who called themselves the Ultraístas. The Ultraístas, reacting against the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, had formed their own literary movement known as Ultraísmo. This movement was to be of some influence both in Borges's own career and in Argentina's literary growth during the 1920's. In 1921, the family returned to Buenos Aires, where Borges resumed his writing career. His early publications consisted mainly of poetry, manifestos, literary reviews, and a collection of essays. Some of these works exhibit traces of the tenets of Ultraísmo, such as the central use of metaphor, an art-for-art's-sake attitude, and an apolitical public stance, which Borges espoused for most of his life.

In the mid-1920's, Borges was closely associated with another avant-garde literary group known as the Martinferrista group. Like the Ultraístas, this new group professed a disengaged aesthetic attitude, viewed literary activity mostly as an intellectual game, and was opposed by a more committed, leftist group of writers. Although Borges seems to have maintained an aloofness from political events, there is not enough evidence available to prove that he was personally detached from political reality, since he exhibited a characteristic reserve and shyness in discussing personal or political subjects.

Throughout the 1920's and the 1930's, Borges continued to write and publish poetry and essays.

At this time the subjects that seem to have absorbed him most are love, time, and memory, and some of his early poems are nationalistic and romantic in flavor. The economic depression of the early 1930's and the major political changes that were sweeping Argentina under a conservative regime, however, seem to have left their mark on Borges. He dealt with the crisis by developing an art that was self-absorbed and evasive of political reality. His writing became increasingly intellectualized and esoteric, and at the same time he grew interested in mystic belief systems such as Gnosticism and the Kabbala. Through his study of these systems of thought he developed a personal ethos of philosophic mysticism, which is often reflected in his fiction.

The 1940's are probably the most significant decade in Borges's career, for it was during this period that he published much of the short prose fiction that was to bring him international fame in his later years. His first collection of stories arrived in 1941 and was later included in a larger anthology, *Ficciones, 1935-1944* (1944; English translation, 1962). The short stories (some critics prefer the term "essayistic fiction" to describe Borges's short fiction) for which Borges is now renowned are to be found in *Ficciones* and in a later collection, *El Aleph* (1949, 1952; translated in *The Aleph, and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, 1970).

Because of a difference of views with the Juan Perón regime that had come into power in 1946, Borges lost his job as a librarian in Buenos Aires and was forced to spend the following decade as a teacher and lecturer at private institutions. Once Perón was removed from power in 1955, Borges's career opportunities improved considerably. He was offered the directorship of the National Library in 1955 and in 1956 was appointed professor of English literature at the University of Buenos Aires. In the same year he also was awarded the coveted National Prize for Literature; in 1961, he won the Fomentor Prize, which he shared with Samuel Beckett in a tie. By the mid-1960's he had won worldwide acclaim, and his work was being widely published in translation. In 1968, Borges returned from his travels abroad to life in Buenos Aires and was married for a period of three years to Elsa Astete Millán. The marriage ended in a divorce in 1970.

In 1960, Borges had embarked on a new phase

of his career with the publication of a collection of prose and poetry called *El hacedor* (1960; *Dreamtigers*, 1964). Throughout the 1960's and the 1970's, Borges repeatedly turned to poetry as a medium of expression and published a number of collections of both poetry and prose. His literary production began to wane during the last decade of his life, but he continued to travel and lecture. In 1984, he again visited Europe, this time accompanied by his traveling companion, Maria Kodama, whom he married in 1986. Already suffering from almost complete blindness, he had developed cancer of the liver as well. He died in Geneva on June 14, 1986.

### ANALYSIS

Borges is often included among writers described as postmodernists. Postmodernism, a literary movement whose influence has steadily increased since the middle of the twentieth century, is characterized by literature that meditates upon the processes of its own construction. Because of their inherent self-reflectiveness and circularity, Borges's stories provide a good example of such "metafiction." Borges is also known for his innovative literary techniques and an austere, polished craftsmanship.

The avant-garde intellectuals of early twentieth century Argentina, including Borges, conceived of literary activity as intellectual play. In Borges's "La lotería en Babilonia" ("The Babylon Lottery"), for example, the lottery is an intellectual construct, conceived by an unknown brain, which seduces people into risking their fates by playing with chance. Stories such as this one seem to emphasize that life—like its fictional counterpart, literature—is an arbitrary construction based purely on coincidence. Many of Borges's detective-type stories, such as "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of Forking Paths") and "La muerte y la brújula" ("Death and the Compass"), emphasize equally the gamelike nature of everyday reality by their insistence on a mysterious relationship between life and accident. In such stories, Borges spoofs spy fiction and parodies other literary genres.

Borges repeatedly draws attention to the fact that literature is imitation and can be nothing but inventive repetition. In a typical story, "Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain" ("An Examination of

the Work of Herbert Quain”), the narrator discusses the work of a fictitious writer whose experiments lead him to invent plots that repeat themselves in symmetrical structures. Borges uses stories such as this one in a dual way: He displays his interest in symmetry, invention, and the story-within-the-story structure and at the same time adopts a tongue-in-cheek critical attitude toward academic critics by mimicking them through his erudite, pretentious narrators. He thus combines serious meditations on the nature of fiction with a subtle and refined sense of humor.

In a more serious vein, Borges explores the relationship between the real world and its more fabulous counterparts. Two major metaphors that allow him to intermingle reality with imagination are the labyrinth and the mirror. Both of these appear in many of the stories included in *Ficciones* and *The Aleph, and Other Stories*. In “Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos” (“The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths”), which appeared in *The Aleph, and Other Stories*, the labyrinth is both a maze and a desert—a space within which one can lose one’s way, or perhaps an intellectual problem that can be resolved only with great difficulty.

While the labyrinth suggests artifice, the mirror invokes duplication. In one of the stories from *Ficciones*, “La biblioteca de Babel” (“The Library of Babel”), a large library becomes an allegory of the universe. At the entrance to the library hangs a mirror, which may suggest the illusory nature of the universe or the possibility of having access to a duplicate world such as that of fiction. Such aspects of Borges’s stories point to the influence of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, in which the world is viewed as “Maya” or delusion, something ephemeral that can be shattered at any time.

What is paradoxical about much of Borges’s philosophy is that it offers a two-pronged system of conception. On the one hand, Borges insists that twentieth century writers can do nothing but repeat ideas and plots that have already been presented in one form or another. Like literary activity, reality is for Borges both repetitive and cyclical. Paradoxically, however, repetition does not imply monotony, for the human being has the ability to be infinitely inventive in the rearrangement of previously acquired patterns of knowledge. Therefore, the possibilities available in any one lifetime are rich and multitudinous, even though the

choosing of any one path may imply the foregoing of others.

The cyclical nature of the universe and of time is represented in many of the stories in *Ficciones*. In “Las ruinas circulares” (“The Circular Ruins”) the protagonist discovers that the reality in which he envisioned another being is in fact a dream in which he himself has been projected by some greater dreamer. Such patterns of infinite regression are represented through the idea of the Creator-behind-the-Creator. In “El acercamiento a Almotásim” (“The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim”), the narrator’s search for an omniscient God leads him to the idea that “the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and *that* Someone in search of some superior Someone (or merely indispensable or equal Someone), and thus on to the end—or better, the endlessness—of Time, or on and on in some cyclical form.”

Borges’s fascination with dreams and magic and with their power to lend a mythic quality to reality is not surprising, since he is the inheritor of a Latin American literary tradition that has had an ongoing interest in the fantastic as well as the occult. Concurrently, Borges’s fiction has had its impact on other major Latin American writers, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar, as well as on writers as far removed geographically from Borges as Salman Rushdie. Borges’s interest in the occult was more than a playful diversion. He undertook serious study of mystic belief systems such as the Kabbala and Gnosticism and adopted many of these ideas in his own writing. In Borges’s fiction, the world of the fantastic duplicates and interrupts the real world. Yet he never lets the reader lose sight of the fabricated quality of fiction and, by extension, of reality. The intellectual and sometimes esoteric density that is thus created forces the reader to participate actively in the process of fabrication.

Finally, for Borges myth and mystery are never very far from philosophy. The allure of some of the mystical aspects of Middle Eastern and Eastern traditions seems to lie in the fact that they reinforce his own conception of the universe as a chance happening. Such a universe has all the qualities of a well-constructed dream and, like a dream, is susceptible to disappearance if left to the whims of a capricious God.



## “TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS”

**First published:** 1940 (collected in *Ficciones*, 1962)

**Type of work:** Short story

*An imaginary universe called Tlön, based on an idealistic philosophy, begins to rule everyday reality.*

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” which first appeared in the literary magazine *Sur* in 1940, is one of Borges’s best-known stories. Because of its documentary style, which provides detailed “facts” about an imaginary universe, the text defies the term “short story” and, like many of Borges’s other texts, verges on essayistic fiction. The story begins with the first-person narrator describing a conversation that he has had with his friend, Bioy Casares, during which his friend mentions a place called Uqbar, presumably discussed in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, a reprint of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. After some futile searching, the unusual article is found in a deviant and pirated copy of the same encyclopedia. The description of Uqbar, a mysterious city supposedly located in Asia Minor, seems deliberately vague. The narrator and his friend fail to establish whether such a place really exists, and the problem remains unresolved for two years. After this period, the narrator comes across another, equally mystifying encyclopedia that tells of a planet called Tlön, describing in some detail its culture, philosophy, language, and literature.

In the description of the planet and its idealistic philosophy, the reader can find some typically Borgesian ideas. The language spoken on Tlön includes verbs and adjectives but no nouns, because the existence of nouns would point to a materialistic and empirical conception of the universe, something that is anathema to the inhabitants of Tlön. Because the inhabitants also deny the possibility of reduction or classification, the only science that flourishes on the planet is psychology. Similarly, various schools of thought have redefined the notion of linear time, either rejecting it completely or injecting a fantastic aspect into it. One school of thought conceives of time as a vague memory of the past, while another insists that all people live in

two duplicate time zones simultaneously. In many such examples, Borges is playing with some of the idealistic notions proffered by the eighteenth century philosopher George Berkeley. As is usual in any reading of Borges, the seriousness of these ideas is undercut through the use of irony and playfulness.

An idea that appeals especially to Borges is the possibility of creating objects through force of imagination, which is what the people of Tlön are able to do. These objects, or “hrönir” as they are called, at first the products of absentmindedness, are later deliberately created in order to modify reality. Through the concept of the “hrönir” Borges delves into the powers of intellectual activity. By imagining objects, the people of Tlön are able to transform their environment to suit their idealistic conception of reality. This activity, then, is very similar to that of writers, who also create fantastic environments that supplement the one available in the real world.

This association between the inhabitants of Tlön and writers of fiction becomes apparent in the postscript to the story. In this final summation the narrator describes how, some years later, forty volumes of an encyclopedia of Tlön are discovered. Among the facts revealed is that Tlön is the fabulous brainchild of a seventeenth century secret society, which has circulated the idea of Tlön’s supposed existence through literature. In nineteenth century North America, an atheistic millionaire named Ezra Buckley expands on the original idea of a utopian city and turns it into an entire planet. Through these documentary details the narrator disassembles the mystery of Tlön and the various encyclopedias. In a typically Borgesian conceit, however, one enigma is unveiled only to posit another. For the dissemination of rational explanations occurs simultaneously with the discovery of certain mysterious objects that have secretly entered the real world. These include a magnetic compass from Tlön found among the table service of a princess and a heavy metal cone discovered by the narrator himself. The thought products or “hrönir” of a fictional world have begun to impinge upon the smooth rationalism and empiricism of reality. Finally, fiction and reality merge, first because it is impossible to keep them distinct, but second because reality welcomes the intrusion of an idealized world into its seamy present.



## “THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS”

**First published:** “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” 1941 (collected in *Ficciones*, 1962)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In this spoof of a spy story, the labyrinthine plot becomes the symbol of a mazelike universe where multiple time zones and destinies coexist.*

In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Borges indulges in one of his common literary pastimes, the writing of spoof detective fiction. The story has all the necessary elements of a spy story: secret agents, guns, murder, mystery, drama, and an intricate plot that rushes the reader toward the resolution of the puzzle. Borges, however, is not as concerned with writing good spy fiction as he is with showing how an imitation of a spy story can be used for purposes other than the final demystification of the plot.

The plot concerns the escapades of its Chinese protagonist, Yu Tsun, a German spy. His task, while on a secret mission in England in the middle of World War I, is somehow to communicate to his German chief the name of a British town that is to be targeted by the Germans. Yu Tsun devises a clever plan that leads him to murder a man by the name of Stephen Albert, the last name of the murdered man being the name of the British town to be bombed. Pursuing Yu Tsun is a British agent, Richard Madden, who arrests him immediately after the murder but is unable to prevent the information from reaching Berlin.

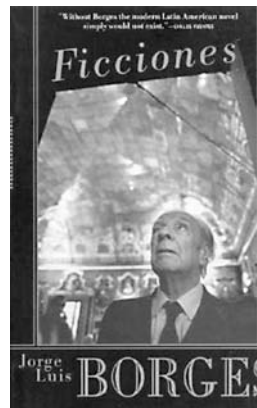
Most of the story is told in the first person by the narrator, Yu Tsun, who is awaiting his execution at the end of the story. What adds to the intrigue of this interesting scheme of events are a series of coincidences and a labyrinth to be found at the heart of the story. Albert, the victim of the plot, happens to be a sinologist who lives in surroundings reminiscent of China. When Yu Tsun reaches his house in the countryside, he is mistakenly identified by Albert as a Chinese consul and so welcomed inside the house. Albert also happens to have occupied himself with unraveling the mystery of a labyrinth, whose construction is credited to Ts’ui Pen, an il-

lustrious writer and the ancestor of the narrator. Albert has resolved the enigma of the maze by discovering that the maze is not a building but the large, chaotic novel authored by Ts’ui Pen. In this novel, characters live not one but multiple destinies. Refuting the fact that every choice presented to the human being in one lifetime presumes the abandoning of all other alternative choices, the Chinese writer has tried to create a work in which all possibilities coexist in a multiplicity of time zones. The inspiring image for the novel is a garden of forking paths, in which bifurcating paths lead to different places but also sometimes converge.

Both the labyrinthine book and the garden become symbolic of a chaotic universe in which all

possibilities are available. Various destinies are realized in overlapping time zones. The metaphor of the labyrinth is a central one in much of Borges’s fiction. It represents the idea of wandering and being lost in an unfathomable universe, sometimes following paths that converge with those already known, at other times re-treading previously familiar tracks. The laby-

rinth incorporates the richness of endless possibilities available in infinite lifetimes. Seemingly dissatisfied with the definition of time as uniform and absolute, Borges attempts in this story, as he does in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” to dwell on other possible ways of conceiving of it. The plot of Borges’s own story is also a maze. The reader resolves the puzzle by following at the heels of the narrator and the writer of the tale. These cerebral journeys that make up literary activity form the backbone of Borges’s aesthetic.



## “PIERRE MENARD, AUTHOR OF THE *QUIXOTE*”

**First published:** “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” 1939 (collected in *Ficciones*, 1962)

**Type of work:** Short story

*This work is a tongue-in-cheek story about a fictitious twentieth century writer who uses memory and imagination in his attempt to rewrite Don Quixote de la Mancha in its original form.*

In “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” Borges combines a sophisticated sense of humor, directed toward the scholasticism of the academic, with one of his favorite images—that of the simulacrum. The story begins as a eulogy written in the first person and dedicated to the memory of an admirable French author, Pierre Menard. The narrator first provides a list of the author’s visible works in a rather pompous, academic style; the narrator often invokes his literary authority by dropping names of famous writers or providing documentary proof through the citation of very real authors or journals in his footnotes. The insertion of footnotes for the purpose of creating an impression of assumed authority is a much-used technique in Borges’s stories. In this story the footnotes add to the general irony, since Borges uses them to mock academic critics. He mimics the style of bookish scholars who catalog literary works and associate themselves with reputable names in order to give themselves some stature as literary critics. Borges implies that such critics remain well on the outskirts of literary activity. Through such spoofs of literary techniques and genres, he invites the reader to participate in a playful activity that exposes the pretentiousness of some brands of scholarship.

From the imitation of bombastic critics and styles, Borges proceeds to another form of imitation. Menard, the eulogized writer, is credited with another set of “subterranean” works, one of which is an attempted imitation of Miguel de Cervantes’s *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615; *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1612-1620). The reader is led to another typically Borgesian idea.

Since, according to Borges, everything that seeks to amaze has already been said before, there are no longer any new stories left to narrate. Rearrangement of old plots in new patterns is the only available type of creativity that writers in the twentieth century can enjoy. Therefore, he suggests the fabrication of simulacrum, or copies, of original tales. These copies will be different from the originals because they will rearrange facts, color them, or throw a new light on them through the use of an ironic or humorous tone.

The fictitious French author, Menard, who decides to rewrite *Don Quixote de la Mancha* three hundred years after its original publication, takes this Borgesian device even further. Menard does not want to rearrange the story of Quixote or to imitate its style in a modern tale. Rather, he wants to succeed at creating an identical story, a book that will duplicate the original in every minute detail. Any thought of creating a mechanical transcription is of course rejected at the outset. At first, Menard conceives the plan of immersing himself completely in the seventeenth century world of Cervantes. He decides to learn Spanish, become a Catholic, and fight the Moors and the Turks—in other words, experience the life of Cervantes in order to become Cervantes. This plan, however, does not seem challenging enough to the rather eccentric French writer, who then conceives an even more difficult method. Since by being Cervantes it would be relatively easier to write the book that Cervantes had written, Menard undertakes the task of creating a copy of the original work while he remains Pierre Menard. Having read the original work in childhood, he will depend entirely on his hazy memory of the work and his imaginative powers to reconstruct *Don Quixote de la Mancha* word for word. He succeeds, according to the narrator, at creating an exact replica of two complete chapters and a fragment of a third one.

The narrator then provides excerpts from Menard’s and Cervantes’s works and comments that Menard has created a new text that is infinitely richer and subtler than the original. Considering the fact that Menard’s sentences are exact duplicates of those of Cervantes, the suggestion that Menard’s work differs so radically from the original is funny yet not completely gratuitous. Although the passages to be compared are identical, the narrator draws the reader’s attention to the fact

that the more recently composed text is the work of a man who was culturally, geographically, and historically removed from his predecessor. The same words, written in the twentieth century, are bound to lead to new critical interpretations as well as the presumption of different authorial intentions. The narrator, placed in the role of a reader, is thus able to perceive subtle differences between excerpts that on the surface are exact replicas of each other. The reader's perception and interpretation, then, is as important a tool in the construction of fiction as the ability of the writer to fabricate these texts. In this very postmodern story, Borges undoes the traditional opposition between reader and writer, showing how both can achieve new variations of a text and how both play a role in the creation of fiction.

### "FUNES, THE MEMORIOUS"

**First published:** "Funes el memorioso,"  
1944 (collected in *Ficciones*, 1962)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The relationship between memory and abstract thought is invoked through a character who develops an infallible photographic memory.*

Ireneo Funes, in the short story "Funes, the Memorious," is a young Uruguayan lad with an unusual gift. Known to be rather eccentric in his personal lifestyle, Funes is also famous in his province for always being able to tell the exact time without looking at a watch. After an accident in which he slips from his horse and sustains a concussion, Funes is crippled. This tragic loss of his physical capacities, however, does not seem to bother him, because he has been compensated in a rather amazing way. After his concussion, Funes develops the startling intellectual capacity for memorizing an infinite number of facts, names, and images that he has seen or read. This photographic memory includes the ability to reconstruct his own dreams in minute detail. In other words, Funes is unable to forget anything that his mind has observed even once.

The powers of his infallible memory are recounted to the first-person narrator when the nar-

rator visits Funes in order to reclaim several Latin texts that he had earlier lent to Funes. With absolutely no prior knowledge of Latin, Funes is able to read and memorize the texts in their entirety. He provides other prodigious examples of his gift: He can perceive and remember exact changes in moving scenes—a herd of cattle in a pass, an innumerable number of stars in the sky, all the details of a stallion's mane, every leaf on every tree that he has ever seen. The burden of such an infinite memory, however, turns Funes into an insomniac. Although he can remember every precise detail from his past experience, he is unable to generalize about facts or to abstract himself from reality in any way. Finally, the narrator relates that Funes, who used to spend most of his time lying on a cot in a dark room, meditating upon his marvelous memories, dies of a pulmonary congestion.

Through the strange character of Funes, Borges dwells on the nature of language and the relationship between memory and thought. Funes's ability to remember everything presupposes his inability to forget anything. The gift of memory is thus at once a curse, its ominous aspects suggested through the funereal and unfortunate associations of the name "Funes." Borges indicates that imagination and creativity begin with the ability to think in abstract terms, to rise above precise details, and to condense impressions into thought. These things Funes is never able to do, for his photographic mind keeps him firmly entrenched in detail. He is unable to perform reductions, to idealize or to abstract other realities from the ones at his disposal. In fact, he compares his own mind to a garbage bin into which all kinds of useful and useless facts get thrown together. Borges suggests that in order to be able to create, one must first be able to select certain items and forget others, so that imaginary situations can be posited. It is thus an imperfect memory that lets the writer become a fabricator, someone who can forget and, subsequently, create.

### SUMMARY

Combining some unusual literary techniques with a refined wit, Jorge Luis Borges insisted on the fictionality of fiction—something fabricated and artificial. Many of Borges's stories are true "artifices," carefully wrought intellectual exercises that involve clever conceits. Borges is thus a truly post-

modern writer, as interested in the process of construction as in the final product itself. Through the use of metaphors such as the labyrinth and the mirror and a highly cerebral style, Borges offers the reader a unique philosophy that denies the division between the real and the unreal worlds.

Anu Aneja

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain why some critics call Jorge Luis Borges's short stories "essayistic fiction."
- In what ways does the postmodernistic concern with the processes of literature's construction resemble the manner in which other activities are studied today?
- Are Borges's labyrinths constructed difficulties or a reflection of the complexities of modern life? Give reasons for your answer.
- Elaborate either a positive or negative response to the following: Playfulness, one of the qualities of Borges's fiction, is an impediment to success in serious literary work.
- Consider whether the discussions of Borges's fiction assist the reader in also understanding his poetry.

Jorge Luis Borges

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## ELIZABETH BOWEN

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland

June 7, 1899

**Died:** London, England

February 22, 1973

*Known best for her novels, Bowen was an astute and subtle student of human nature, especially in conflicts between young people and adults.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen (BOH-uhn) was born in Dublin, Ireland, on June 7, 1899. Her parents were Henry Cole Bowen and Florence Isabella Pomeroy (Colley) Bowen. Both of them were Anglo-Irish, giving Elizabeth a Protestant, land-owning heritage. Her father, a barrister, inherited Bowen's Court, which was built in the eighteenth century and in which Elizabeth lived as a young girl. In 1930, upon the death of her father, she inherited the family estate. When Elizabeth was thirteen years old, her mother died. After her father's health deteriorated, she spent several years living with various relatives. Her mother's death, her father's precarious health, and her lack of a permanent, stable home all had a strong impact on the way that Bowen developed, both as a person and as a writer.

Bowen's education began at Downe House, Kent, England. She also studied at the London County Council School of Art, and she soon began to write short stories. Her first collection, *Encounters*, was published in 1923. In the same year, she married Alan Charles Cameron, a graduate of Oxford and a World War I veteran. He began a long career in educational administration through his appointment, in 1925, as secretary for education in the city of Oxford.

By 1927, Bowen was an established writer and

spent part of each year in one of her three residences: London's Chelsea section, Bowen's Court, and a home in Italy. In addition to writing ten novels and several collections of short stories, Bowen lectured and taught in Italy, England, and the United States. She also wrote literary criticism, book reviews, radio scripts, and autobiographical pieces, while also working for the Ministry of Information and as an air-raid warden in London during World War II.

Bowen's novels include *The Hotel* (1927), *The Last September* (1929), *Friends and Relations* (1931), *To the North* (1932), *The House in Paris* (1935), *The Death of the Heart* (1938), *The Heat of the Day* (1949), *A World of Love* (1955), *The Little Girls* (1964), and *Eva Trout* (1968). Among her short story collections are *Encounters* (1923), *The Demon Lover* (1945; published in the United States as *Ivy Gripped the Steps, and Other Stories*, 1946), and *A Day in the Dark, and Other Stories* (1965). Her nonfiction work includes *Bowen's Court* (1942), *Seven Winters* (1942), *English Novelists* (1946), and *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* (1962). Most of Bowen's works were published in the United States shortly after they appeared in England.

Some of the many honors that she received include being named Commander, Order of the British Empire, receiving honorary degrees from Trinity College, Dublin, and from Oxford, and being designated a Companion of Literature of the Royal Society of Literature.

Having returned to Ireland after the end of World War II, Bowen and her husband lived at Bowen's Court for only a brief time. Alan Cameron

died in 1952. Bowen continued to live at Bowen's Court for a few more years and wrote *A World of Love* there. She could not afford to maintain the old place, however, and returned to England in 1960. She died on February 22, 1973, in London, after one last trip to Ireland in 1973.

During her lifetime, Bowen enjoyed generally favorable, although by no means unanimous, critical acclaim. Rose Macaulay, reviewing *A World of Love*, wrote that it was "rather fascinating, though not to everyone." Many critics thought *The Death of the Heart* was her best novel; some even considered it one of the best English novels of the twentieth century. Victoria Glendinning, who wrote a biography of Bowen in 1978, thought she was one of the ten most important fiction writers in English. Even before her death, however, Bowen's popularity had begun to decline and her books were hard to find. In the 1970's, however, they were reissued in paperback, and a new generation of readers found at least some of them fascinating and entertaining.

### ANALYSIS

In Bowen's novels and short stories, certain subjects and themes are represented, though with a variety of viewpoints and plots. Bowen was interested in the ways in which persons and events from the past can affect, control, and even destroy the living. Her Anglo-Irish heritage gave her a special understanding of this subject. She was particularly sensitive to displacement, a feeling of alienation, a helplessness in the face of what has occurred before. Bowen's "romances" contained the usual elements of love, conflict, and mystery, but the dramas that unfold in her works contain both tragedy and comedy.

Adolescence is a frequent subject in Bowen's fiction; many of her characters are young persons struggling to become adults and often struggling with adults, who represent the past. The older generation has usually come to terms with the past and attempts to impose its own worldliness on those who are yet in a state of hope and faith, in the kind of innocence that Bowen describes in *The Death of the Heart*. At one point, she says that the innocent are "incurable strangers to the world, they never cease to exact a heroic happiness." That could also be said of Jane in *A World of Love* and of the young characters in Bowen's other novels.

Bowen's use of houses and landscape is a pre-

dominant feature of her narratives. The ramshackle house in *A World of Love* is exactly the right setting for the unfolding of this romance, which is almost a ghost story, in which the past imposes itself on all the main characters. In *The Death of the Heart*, two sharply contrasting houses form the essential background for Portia's struggle. The elegantly furnished, immaculate house in London is a place where feelings are unexpressed and where frank, open communication is unknown. In sharp contrast is Waikiki, the seaside house to which Portia has been sent while Thomas and Anna take an April holiday in Capri. Life at Waikiki is noisy, spontaneous, and as common as the life in the London house is formal and aristocratic. In both houses, Portia is an outsider; her separateness is emphasized by the alien atmosphere of each house.

In Bowen's books, the characters talk to one another rather than act; there is very little real action in her fiction. Rather, through conversations that are often ambiguous and restrained, hiding as much as they reveal, the story unfolds with a delicate subtlety that challenges the reader to discover what the story really means. Irony is another characteristic of Bowen's style. The wit and humor in her novels depend on the discrepancies between what the characters think and say and what other characters reveal about them. There is irony, too, in what they expect and what they receive. For example, the cruel irony of Eddie's betrayal of Portia is typical of the way that Bowen resolves her characters' fates. She does not, however, always use irony to highlight disappointment. In *A World of Love*, Jane gives up her ghostly lover just before falling in love with a real young man when she least expects that to happen.

Bowen's style is highly descriptive; her scenes are visible, and the atmosphere in which they take place is palpable. Objects are important images of the emotions being felt but not expressed. At Montefort, the setting of *A World of Love*, rooms are described meticulously and vividly, not in long passages but in carefully selected and telling details.

Another aspect of Bowen's style is her occasionally convoluted sentence structure. Her tendency to twist syntax was a delight to some of her readers and an affectation and annoyance to others. For example, in *A World of Love*, the author, in describing Maud, the younger sister, says, "Nothing, or al-

most nothing, made Maud not young, not a child throughout." That is the kind of sentence that may leave the reader confused as to what the author means. On the other hand, Bowen's work has a poetic quality that many critics and other readers have noticed. Her language is allusive, precise, suggestive, and highly dependent on the implied, the unspoken but intensely felt truth.

The psychological insight that is perhaps Bowen's most notable characteristic is suggested by a remark made by St. Quentin, a Bowen character and a novelist, quite obviously speaking for Bowen, the novelist: "I swear that each of us keeps, batten down inside himself, a sort of lunatic giant—impossible socially, but full-scale—and that it's the knockings and batterings we sometimes hear in each other that keeps our intercourse from utter banality."

## THE DEATH OF THE HEART

**First published:** 1938

**Type of work:** Novel

*An orphaned sixteen-year-old girl goes to London and, through cruel betrayal, loses her innocence.*

Portia Quayne is the sixteen-year-old heroine of *The Death of the Heart*, which begins soon after she arrives in London. Her father and mother having died within a few years of each other, Portia must now live with her father's son, Thomas Quayne, and his wife Anna. Thomas is a middle-aged, successful, reserved businessman who is unable to form close personal relationships with anyone, although he does love his wife in his own aloof and undemonstrative way. Anna is a stylish, elegant woman whose principal interest is making herself and her house beautiful. She entertains frequently, but she, too, has no close relationships, though she appears to have a certain cool, impersonal attachment to her husband. Both are embarrassed and uncomfortable at the appearance of Portia, the child of the elder Quayne's disgrace and second marriage.

Into this house comes Portia, who does everything that she can to please the Quaynes, being

obedient, well-mannered, and quiet. She observes them minutely and records in a diary her thoughts about them, as well as the uninteresting events of her life, which consist primarily of attending an expensive, exclusive establishment where French lessons, lectures, and excursions are offered to a small group of girls. Portia does not know that Anna has discovered her diary. Worse, Anna discusses the diary with St. Quentin, a novelist and one of her several bachelor friends. Anna is upset by Portia's insights and candid observations, but she is too resentful of the slight disruption caused by Portia's presence to feel any real pity or concern for her.

Portia is bewildered by the lack of open, shared feeling in this household. She believes that she is the only one who does not understand what is beneath the genteel, snobbish surface of the Quaynes' lives. Two other characters add to Portia's puzzlement. One is Matchett, the housekeeper, a woman who worked for the first Mrs. Quayne and who knows a considerable amount about the family but who reveals only as much as she chooses to reveal in response to Portia's attempts to make a connection with the only family left to her. Matchett is a perfect servant—conscientious, discreet, authoritarian, and snobbish. Her principal interest is the house and maintaining it in perfect order as she has always done. Like the Quaynes, she does not open herself to receive the affection of the lonely, seeking girl. The other character who is important to Portia, and who also disappoints her by being too self-centered and manipulative, is Eddie. At twenty-three, he recognizes Portia's innocence but is unmoved by her need for love; he has too many needs of his own.

Portia encounters a very different household when she is sent to Seale-on-Sea to stay with Anna's former governess while Thomas and Anna escape to Capri. Mrs. Heccomb is kind and her two stepchildren, young adults Dickie and Daphne, are as cool and self-centered as the Quaynes and Eddie are, but at Waikiki life is full of events, and Portia is



allowed to participate in the activities of the family. She shops and goes to church with Mrs. Heccomb; she goes walking, dancing, and to the films with the two young people. When Eddie comes, quite surprisingly, to visit Portia at Waikiki, he is immediately accepted by the others, but Portia is still just an observer. Just as she is imagining that her love for Eddie is reciprocated, she observes him holding hands with Daphne at the movies. Disillusioned, she returns to London, where she is further betrayed by learning that Anna has not only read her diary but also discussed it with St. Quentin; in fact, it is he who tells Portia about this duplicity.

The betrayals by Eddie and Anna push Portia to run away from the Quaynes. She goes to the hotel of Major Brutt, another bachelor friend of Anna; he is an honorable, sensible, responsible man and convinces her that he must let the Quaynes know where she is. Whether or not she will return to them, she says, depends on what they do. They send Matchett in a cab to retrieve her, and the book ends as Matchett arrives at the door of the hotel.

The reader is not told what Portia decides, but one can assume that she will return because she has nowhere else to go. The question of what will eventually become of Portia is also left unanswered. The real point of the story is that Portia's ignorance of the world—her innocence—has ended. It remains only for the reader to discover the meaning of the novel's ambiguous title. One can be fairly sure that Portia's heart is not "dead," for her sense of hurt and disillusionment is too intense to suggest that she no longer yearns for understanding and love. On the other hand, one can easily see that the adults around her *have* undergone a "death of the heart." Each one has shut himself or herself off from others, has refused to acknowledge the deep needs of others, is self-protective and deceitful. These people—Thomas, Anna, Eddie, St. Quentin, and Matchett—have all played a part in what happens to Portia, and one can only speculate on whether the damage that they have done to her through their lack of real concern and caring will result in Portia becoming like them.

## A WORLD OF LOVE

**First published:** 1955

**Type of work:** Novel

*In a small country house in Ireland, five related characters live in a world of illusion and fantasy dominated by a ghostlike presence.*

Bowen wrote *A World of Love* a few years after returning from England to Bowen's Court, her ancestral home in Ireland. A dilapidated and deserted farmhouse nearby served as a model for Montefort, the setting of *A World of Love*. The owner of Montefort is Antonia Montefort, a photographer in her fifties, who lives in London and only occasionally visits the house that she inherited from her cousin Guy. Killed in World War I when he was twenty, Guy had been loved by Antonia as well as by Lilia, his seventeen-year-old fiancé, and quite possibly by one or more other women. Out of pity for Lilia, who should have inherited the house, Antonia arranged Lilia's marriage to Fred Danby, an illegitimate cousin of Guy and Antonia. Feeling responsible for this marriage, Antonia gave Lilia and Fred the use of the "manor" in return for its maintenance, an obligation that Fred diligently though not very successfully tries to fulfill. Meanwhile, Lilia, ostensibly the housekeeper, dreams of escaping from her dull, discontented, and stifling life. The Danbys have two children, both girls. Jane is now twenty and Maud is twelve.

The action of the novel takes place during two days in the summer of the early 1950's. Life in this isolated, seemingly half-asleep house is dreamy, unreal, and filled with fantasy, especially to Jane and Maud. They are not alike or close to each other, but they share a tendency to live in their imaginations, and the house gives them plenty of material with which to get through the uneventful days. Jane, who has completed her education under Antonia's sponsorship, is uncertain what she will do next. In the attic one day, she finds a bundle of love letters written by Guy to an unnamed lady. There is also a beautiful Edwardian dress, which Jane wears as she wanders in and out of the house, reading the letters, imagining that she is the one to whom they were addressed. This fantasy is the central "event" of the novel, affecting each of the three women at

Montefort in terms of their relation to Guy. Their relations with each other and with the past form the subject of the book.

The sense of Guy's presence dominates the lives of Antonia, Lilia, and Jane in the days after Jane's discovery of the letters. Jane's imagined love of Guy

becomes more real to her than the life that actually surrounds her. When she goes to a dinner party at a neighboring castle, she gulps her first martinis and then, seeing a spare place at the table, imagines that Guy is sitting there. To her, Guy is more real than the hostess and the guests, who seem to be merely actors in a drama performed for her benefit. Jane returns to reality when she learns

that Guy did not write the love letters to her mother, as she had suspected, nor to her, as she had imagined.

Guy also appears to Antonia, who experiences a moment when Guy seems to be near her, thus restoring to her an awareness of herself; that, in turn, gives her the ability to make her presence felt by the others in the house, restoring to her a sense of importance that she had lost during her years of feeling abandoned by her beloved cousin. She now feels reunited with Guy instead of separated from him. The moment does not last, of course, but its effect does.

Lilia, whose life was made most uncertain and dependent by Guy's loss, also has a moment when she senses that Guy has returned. The house has been pervaded by this feeling that an apparition is present. When she goes out to the garden to meet him, she finds her husband, Fred, who, by handing her Guy's letters, makes it possible for her to renounce her dead and faithless lover and accept a real love.

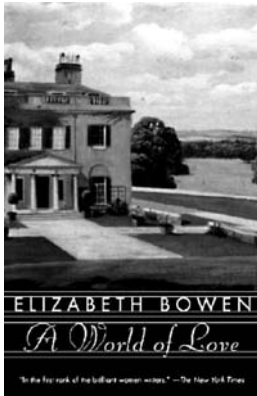
Even Maud falls under the spell for a while. With her ever-present imaginary companion, Gay David, Maud unconsciously parodies the experiences of the three women. By stealing the letters from the place where Jane has hidden them, Maud sets the course of the novel back toward reality, which is fully realized when the two girls are driven by a chauffeur to meet a young man, a friend of the neighboring Lady Latterly, who gave the dinner party. Maud is very much in present reality as she sees for the first time an airplane landing. Yet it is left to Jane to go beyond the present moment and, without realizing it, into the future, as she and the young man catch sight of each other and immediately fall in love.

### SUMMARY

Elizabeth Bowen was a prolific writer from the time that she published her first fiction. She was considered an important and original author by readers who shared her taste for the understated and the poetic. They admired her patient probing of the psychological aspects of her characters. Speaking through her characters, she revealed her insights through such images as "the lunatic giant" mentioned by St. Quentin in *The Death of the Heart*. That noisy, crazy, internal figure is the one to which Bowen paid the most attention.

The American scholar and critic Edwin J. Kenney pointed out that all Bowen's books deal with the isolated and self-destructive capacities of innocent heroines in disordered circumstances. The crisis of identity recurs in all of her work and makes a unified whole of the novels and short stories. A somewhat eccentric and oblique style set her apart from all but a few writers of her time, notably the novelists Virginia Woolf and Henry James. Her affinity with them in style, structure, and subject matter placed her in very distinguished company, among the outstanding writers of the twentieth century.

Natalie Harper





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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How might Elizabeth Bowen's sensitivity to the complexity of Irish social history be accounted for?
- Consider how Bowen's skill at dialogue, rather than action, helps move the plot along in *The Death of the Heart* or in one of her other novels.
- Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of Bowen's grammatical and syntactical challenges to the reader.
- Explain why, in *The Death of the Heart*, Matchett's qualities make her "a perfect servant."
- Biographer Victoria Glendinning ranked Bowen as one of the ten most important fiction writers in English. Challenge or defend this ranking by comparing Bowen with other fiction writers in English.



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## BERTOLT BRECHT

**Born:** Augsburg, Germany  
February 10, 1898

**Died:** East Berlin, East Germany (now Berlin, Germany)  
August 14, 1956

*Brecht was Germany's leading modern dramatist and a central influence on Western drama after World War II.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Even though Bertolt Brecht (brehkt), born Eugen Berthold Brecht, composed several ballads in his early twenties that told of his having been descended from shrewd, ruthless peasants, his genealogy was solidly middle class and could be traced back to the sixteenth century. He was born on February 10, 1898, in Augsburg, Germany. His father, Berthold Friedrich Brecht, was managing director of a paper mill in Augsburg. The father was Catholic, and his wife, Sophie, was Protestant; both Bertolt and his younger brother, Walter, were reared in their mother's faith and primarily by her. Brecht's boyhood and adolescence were marked by self-confidence, quick-mindedness, cunning, and vitality—all characteristics that kept him in good stead throughout his life. His skill in manipulating people and his suppleness in pursuing his goals were also evident from his youth.

During World War I, Brecht began medical studies at the University of Munich to delay an early conscription call-up; however, the only medical lectures that he attended were those dealing with venereal diseases. Instead, he studied theater history and met Frank Wedekind, who not only wrote notorious, expressionistic plays advocating sexual liberation but also composed and sang ballads with aggressive bravado. Imitating Wedekind, Brecht performed his own ballads in the coffeehouses and cabarets of Munich. In 1922, he wrote a play, *Baal* (wr., pb. 1922, pr. 1923; English translation, 1963), about an amoral, bohemian bard-balladeer who cruelly exploits, and then discards, friends and lovers of both sexes. Baal's only care is for the natural world, whose beauty he celebrates in raw, eloquent

lyrics. That same year, Brecht also wrote *Trommeln in der Nacht* (wr. 1919-1920, pr., pb. 1922; *Drums in the Night*, 1961), a powerful pacifist drama whose protagonist is a disillusioned veteran returning to a Berlin dominated by war profiteers.

Perhaps the best of Brecht's early works was *Im Dickicht der Städte* (pr. 1923; *In the Jungle of Cities*, 1960). Two men, Shlink and Garga, engage in a seemingly motiveless duel of wills. Shlink, a Malaysian lumber dealer, seeks to buy Garga's soul but is himself shown to be a victim—one whose skin has been so toughened by life that he can no longer feel. He stages his battle with Garga to penetrate his own shell of indifference.

Brecht moved to Berlin in 1924 and became a celebrated personality in that city's culturally brilliant postwar jungle. He shortened his first name to "Bert" and established for himself a part-intellectual, part-proletarian persona. His trademarks were a seminarian's tonsorial haircut, steel-rimmed spectacles, two days' growth of beard, a leather jacket, a trucker's cap, a cheap but large cigar, and chronic rudeness. People found him either charismatic or repulsive; many women found him irresistible. He charmed the beautiful singer-actress Marianne Zoff in the early 1920's. They married in November, 1922, had a daughter in 1923, but separated that year and divorced in 1927. He was to have many mistresses, of whom the most cherished were Elisabeth Hauptmann, Margarete Steffin, and Ruth Berlau.

The most important woman in Brecht's life was the Vienna-born actress Helene Weigel. She was Jewish, strongly Marxist, and staunchly feminist. They met in 1923, married in 1929, and had a son,

Stefan, in 1924, and a daughter, Barbara, in 1930. Weigel's marvelously expressive face and superbly disciplined acting skills caused many theater critics to call her the best actress of her time on the German-speaking stage. Her greatest successes were in the title roles of Brecht's *Die Mutter* (pr., pb. 1932; *The Mother*, 1965) and *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (pr. 1941, pb. 1949; *Mother Courage and Her Children*, 1941).

A central problem for students of Brecht is his adherence to Communism and its effect on his work. Clearly, from youth onward, he revolted against the middle-class values that led Germany to a wasteful war, bitter defeat, extreme socioeconomic disorder in the 1920's, and Adolf Hitler's rise to power in the early 1930's. What drew Brecht to Marxism was largely its antagonism toward Germany's business and military circles. His adherence to Communism remained, nonetheless, consistently idiosyncratic—equally distasteful to the official Soviet cultural apparatus, to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and to the rigid party-liners who ran East Germany after World War II.

In his best plays, Brecht rises above his mixture of cynicism-cum-Communism. For example, in *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (wr. 1938-1940, pr. 1943, pb. 1953; *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, 1948) the heroine, Shen Te, is naturally loving, selfless, and motherly; she finds fulfillment in giving and thrives on sharing her feelings and goods. Unfortunately for her, the world repays her virtues with greed, betrayal, envy, spite, and ruthless exploitation. Hence she needs to call, with increasing frequency, on the services of her calculating male "cousin," Shui Ta, who meets the world on its own level of meanness and deception. Shui Ta turns out to be Shen Te masked, the other half of her personality, which she needs to protect her interests, yet also the half that denies Shen Te her essential identity.

When the National Socialists, commonly called Nazis, took over Germany's regime in 1933, Brecht had to flee for his life. In fifteen years of exile, he, his wife, their two children, and always at least one of his mistresses lived in various Central European countries, then in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and, from 1941 to 1947, Southern California's Santa Monica. Remarkably, wherever he was and however scant his circumstances, Brecht continued to produce plays and occasional poems at full pres-

sure. He dragged his ménages after him, ruthlessly exploited the devotion of his intimates, cut his losses, and wrote his most masterful plays in exile: *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht, Matti* (wr. 1940, pr. 1948, pb. 1951; *Mr. Puntila and His Hired Man, Matti*, 1976), *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (wr. 1944-1945, pr. 1948 in English; pb. 1949, pr. 1958 in German; *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1948).

By and large, the United States failed to impress, let alone inspire, Brecht. He frequented a narrow circle of German and Austrian refugee writers and performers and made only two important friends outside that orbit: the British-born actor Charles Laughton, who collaborated closely with him on a revised version of *Leben des Galilei* (first version wr. 1938-1939, pr. 1943; second version, in English, wr. 1945-1947, pr. 1947; third version, in German, pr., pb. 1955, revised pb. 1957; *The Life of Galileo*, 1947), and the critic-scholar Eric Bentley, who became the authorized American translator and occasional director of Brecht's works. In October, 1947, Brecht was forced, by way of a subpoena, to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Accused of having composed Communist poems, he was cleared of pro-Communist charges by the committee. A few days later, Brecht returned permanently to Europe.

Arriving there as a stateless radical, he soon surrounded himself with safeguards: Austrian citizenship, a West German publisher, and a Swiss bank account. Then he accepted the leadership of the East Berlin repertory troupe the Berliner Ensemble and fashioned it into possibly the world's finest theatrical company of the late 1940's and 1950's. Brecht supervised a unit of more than 250 actors and supporting staff and directed his own plays in productions rehearsed from three to five months. He became the grand old man of East German culture.

On June 17, 1953, workers in East Berlin demonstrated against increased production norms; Russian tanks quickly quelled the unrest. Brecht thereupon wrote a letter to Walter Ulbricht, first secretary of the East German Communist Party, generally siding with the strikers but also declaring his fundamental loyalty to the Communist regime. Ulbricht published only the sentence expressing Brecht's attachment to the party, thereby causing

Brecht to be widely attacked in the West as a burned-out coward of questionable integrity. Increasingly disillusioned with East Germany's course, worn out by the enormous strains to which he was subjected, Brecht died of coronary thrombosis on August 14, 1956, in East Berlin.

### ANALYSIS

Brecht's status as Germany's greatest twentieth century playwright is by now securely established. He joins the pantheon of his country's most commanding dramatists, which includes Friedrich Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Georg Buechner, and Gerhart Hauptmann. Moreover, he is also a distinguished poet, with an astonishingly wide lyric range spanning folk ballads, Rimbaudesque prose poems, political epistles, and luminously concrete sonnets. Additionally, he is a provocative theorist of drama, whose concept of theatrical presentation has had enormous influence.

To address Brecht's dramaturgy first: He had nothing but contempt for what he called illusionist, bourgeois, Aristotelian theater. He scorned all devices of composition and production that sought to seduce an audience into responding empathically to the events on stage, into identifying with one or more of the characters. He sought to produce the opposite effect, one of estrangement or distancing, which he called *Verfremdung*, the process of alienating. He wanted the audience not to identify strongly with the characters, not to be transported emotionally by the actions on stage. Instead, he wished to initiate contemplation and critical judgment in his spectators, to have them remain aware that they were witnessing "nothing but" a play on whose meaning they were invited to exercise their critical intelligence during the performance rather than after it.

To deliver his audience from what he regarded as the captivity of illusion and bring it to a state of social reform, Brecht rejected many of the hitherto unquestioned criteria of dramatic art. He sought to avoid a firmly coherent and climactic structure in his plays, instead unfolding the action in numerous loosely connected episodes that he termed "epic form." He instructed his actors to remain detached from the personages that they portrayed, instead telling them to play openly to the public in the theater, making their roles commentaries rather than

representations. He had brief synopses, often songs, at the beginning of each scene; they were intended to empty the following action of suspense. Instead of eliciting strong emotions to purge the spectators of pity and terror, Brecht sought to stress the unheroic, the grotesque, and the farcical, with his characters often speaking in colloquial, and even low, language.

Nonetheless, despite Brecht's intense efforts to achieve distance and estrangement, to make his theater a school for educating the audience to revolutionary acts, he usually succeeded as a dramatist in proportion to his failure as a didactic theoretician. The differences between illusionist and epic theater turn out to be ones of degree rather than direct opposition. After all, in no theater does complete identification of the spectators with the characters occur, or they would rush on stage to save Desdemona from Othello. In no theater can there be complete detachment of the spectators from the drama, or they would doze off or walk out.

Brecht's plays, despite his strenuous efforts to circumvent the emotional response of his audience by the negation of illusion, are charged with the energies of his moral and political passions. They have the effect of entralling and, at best, deeply moving those who witness them. In his finest dramas, though he wished only to hone his audience to critical keenness, he also moved it to tears and wonder and laughter. Though he sought to shock his audience with sardonic humor and savage indignation, he could not help letting his compassion flood through self-imposed dikes of ferocious cynicism. Though he concentrated on such vices as greed, envy, brutality, and disloyalty in many of his works, he also rose above these pessimistic indictments. In such great achievements as *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *The Life of Galileo*, he presented immortal images of vulnerability, decency, and sacrifice; he dramatized a world where sold souls do not always stay sold, and where the promptings of humaneness sometimes conquer the dictates of ideology. The disproof of much of Brecht's theorizing, then, came through his art as a playwright—an art that richly gratified the audience's hunger for sympathy, identification, and, thus, illusion.

Brecht is a divided, often enigmatic, writer whose works, for all of their extreme left-wing ide-

ology, remain enticing and elusive. His basic vision of life is harrowing, fascinated by, in his early plays, cruelty, determination, bestiality, irrationalism, and blind instinctualism. A hysteria of violence hovers at the margins of his early dramas (as well as poems), an awareness that humankind's will is weak and malleable and that its nature is savage, brutal, and often uncontrollable. Should a character speak of love, loyalty, friendship, honor, progress, or religion, the chances are that he is merely masking a corrupt and greedy deal.

Yet Brecht's works also often have a raffishly humane aspect that charms and beguiles his public. Almost all of his characters find themselves repelled by their base instincts and seek a state of calm beyond the turmoil of their appetites. All of Brecht's later characters, such as Galileo, Courage, Shen Te and Shui Ta, the two Annas in *Die Sieben Todsünden der Kleinbürger* (pr. 1933, pb. 1959; *The Seven Deadly Sins*, 1961), and Puntila drunk and Puntila sober, are split, vacillating between reason and instinct, the true self and the pseudoself, survival and self-sacrifice. The mature Brecht often shows human impulses as healthy, kindly, courteous, and loving, while reminding the audience that society is selfishly competitive and ultimately evil.

## THE THREEPENNY OPERA

**First produced:** *Die Dreigroschenoper*, 1928  
(first published, 1929; English  
translation, 1949)

**Type of work:** Play

*This work is a Marxist reinterpretation of  
John Gay's ballad opera, starring a businessman-  
gangster.*

*The Threepenny Opera*, written exactly two hundred years after John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (pr., pb. 1728), follows its model closely in plot and in the names of its characters. Like Brecht's Berlin, Gay's eighteenth century London underwent a period of expansion and consolidation, with a Whig government rotten with corruption. Gay's opera chiefly satirizes the aristocracy's manners and morals, although it also mocks marriage, politics, theatrical conventions, the prison system, and

many professions. By providing the highwayman Macheath with the dash of a courtier, and whores with the grace of ladies, Gay indicts the vices of the upper class without needing to bring a single upper-class personage on stage.

Brecht adopts Gay's ironic inversion of high and low life but aims, in place of the no-longer-vital aristocracy, at Germany's triumphant, smug, powerful bourgeoisie. The criminal highwayman Macheath is called "Mac the Knife" (Mackie Messer), and while he is a thief, arsonist, rapist, and murderer, he also has the habits of a middle-class entrepreneur, keeping books, worshiping efficiency, and insisting on business discipline by his gang. His thieves are in competition with big business and the banks; they are defeated by the more predatory, shrewder, better-financed Jonathan Peachum. As he stands before the gallows, in what seems to be his farewell address, Mackie laments that he is a small fish about to be swallowed by a bigger one:

Ladies and gentlemen. You see before you a declining representative of a declining social group. We lower-middle-class artisans who work with humble jemmies on small shopkeepers' cash registers are being swallowed up by big corporations backed by the banks. What's a jemmy compared with a stock certificate? What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?

In Brecht's cynical, Marxist equation, the petty bourgeois equals the petty larcenist, while the tycoon finds his counterpart in Peachum, who licenses all the beggars in London and forces them to pay him 70 percent of their weekly take. Peachum transforms healthy men into deformed and pitiful creatures through the application of artificial limbs, eye patches, and the like—all carefully calculated to evoke the limited charitable impulses of the rich. Thus, if Mackie exemplifies the relationship between crime and business, Peachum highlights the relationship between the selfish capitalist ethic and the sacrificial morality of Christianity. Both Mackie and Peachum agree, in one of Brecht's most famous statements, that eating comes first, then morality. Brecht suggests that Christianity and capitalism are really in the same ultimately corrupt league.

Brecht's satiric attack on the bourgeoisie extends to its conventions of marriage, romantic



love, and male camaraderie. Mac the Knife's wedding to Polly Peachum is a typical middle-class banquet, featuring toasts, gifts, bad jokes, and gorging guests—except that it takes place in a stable and all the furnishings are stolen. Romantic love is reduced to lust and betrayal, with the relationship of Mackie and Jinny Jenny replete with pimping, whoring, sexual disease, and betrayal.

The play's action follows a complicated network of double crosses: Macheath betrays Polly, Lucy Brown, and his gang; the whores betray Macheath twice; Peachum not only informs against Macheath but also sabotages his daughter's chances for romantic bliss; and the plot climaxes with Mackie's betrayal to the authorities by his supposed friend, the high sheriff of London, Tiger Brown. The Brown-Macheath friendship, added by Brecht to Gay's plot, features a Kiplingesque ballad of their army bonding but is actually based on commercial advantage: Mackie gives Brown the goods on other

criminals, while Brown, collecting a third of the reward, in turn provides police protection for Macheath.

Brecht sees every individual betrayed by an aggregation of other individuals, as well as by his own nature. Mackie, after all, commits consistent self-betrays by following his compulsive libido and is brought down by his womanizing.

*The Threepenny Opera* is a second-rate achievement on Brecht's part: Macheath is too winning a charmer to persuade the audience that he is a reprehensible criminal. More significantly, Brecht's play fails to resolve a fundamental dilemma: Does human evil stem from an evil system (capitalism), or are there fundamental evils in human nature that systems merely reflect? The work's glory is Kurt Weill's brilliant music, which displays a high level of wit and rhythmic vitality. Thanks mainly to Weill, *The Threepenny Opera* is probably Brecht's most frequently mounted play.



## MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

**First produced:** *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, 1941 (first published, 1949; English translation, 1941)

**Type of work:** Play

*Anna Fierling, nicknamed Mother Courage, lives by the war as a small trader but pays her dues by losing all three of her children.*

Brecht completed *Mother Courage and Her Children* in November, 1939, with its theme of the harrowing and devastating effects of a European war paralleling the outbreak of World War II in September of that year. Its world premiere did not take place until 1941, in Zurich, Switzerland, starring the fine actress Therese Giehse. In 1949, an even finer actress, Brecht's wife Helene Weigel, assumed the central role for what was to be her most celebrated triumph. The work's subtitle, *A Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War*, indicates that it deals with the feast of death that bore down on much of Europe from 1618 to 1648, solving no problems and settling no issues.

Having identified business with gangsterism in *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht now identifies business with war. He seeks to present a relentlessly Marxist indictment of the economic causes of war. In his production notes, he states that the work is designed to demonstrate that "war, which is a continuation of business by other means, makes the human virtues fatal even to their possessors." In the drama's atmosphere of rape, pillage, and meaningless killing, with Protestants and Catholics slaughtering one another for a generation, all human ideals degenerate into hypocritical cant, while heroism shatters into splinters of cruelty, madness, greed, or absurdity. The play is bitterly pacifist, with all the featured characters living off the war yet remaining blind to the penalties that it demands, as most of them pay with their lives.

The play's protagonist, Anna Fierling, is a canteen owner known more familiarly as Mother Courage. Brecht took the name from a character who appeared in two novels, *Der abenteuerlich Simplicissimus* (1688; *The Adventurous Simplicissimus*, 1912) and *Lebensbeschreibung der Ertzbetrügerin und Land-*



*störtzerin Courasche* (1670; *Courage: The Adventuress*, 1964), both written by the German novelist Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen. Whereas Grimmelshausen's heroine is a seductive, hedonistic, childless harlot of illegitimate but aristocratic birth, Brecht's *Courage* is a salty, opportunistic, self-serving businesswoman, a shameless profiteer who cashes in on the troops' needs for alcohol and

clothing; another character calls her "a hyena of the battlefield." Shrewd, sardonic, and skeptical, she is a full-blooded personification of her creator's antiheroic view of life.

During twelve scenes that take place from 1624 to 1636, the reader/spectator follows Anna Fierling's wagon as she makes her living from the war yet believes she can keep her grown children out

of it. Each child is by a different father, and each represents one virtue in excess and is consequently killed by it. Swiss Cheese, honest but stupid, is entrusted with the cashbox as paymaster of a Protestant regiment; when he is captured by the Catholics, he refuses to surrender the money and is riddled by eleven bullets. His mother could have saved him, but only at the price of pawning her wagon, on which she and her daughter depend for their livelihood. The mother concludes prolonged bouts of bargaining with the realization, "I believe—I haggled too long."

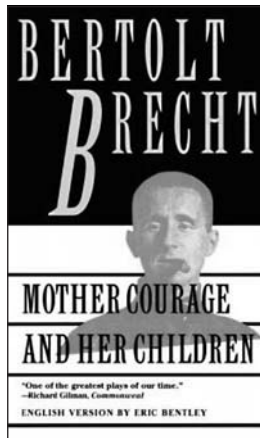
The other son, Eiliff, is brave—a virtue in wartime but a liability during an interlude of peace, when he murders innocent peasants who wished only to protect their cattle. He discovers that law and morality are relative, shifting their ground to accommodate society's needs.

Fierling's daughter, Katrin, mute and disfigured, is the incarnation of kindness, compassion, and love, achieving allegorical grandeur. Yet in this merciless war she is shot down from the wagon's roof by soldiers attempting a surprise attack, as she beats her drum to warn the besieged town and thereby save children's lives. Her grand gesture succeeds, but at the cost of her life. The scene dra-

matizing Katrin's heroism has the prolonged excitement and suspense of melodrama, substituting passionate persuasion and spectator empathy for Brecht's satiric dialectic and strategy of distancing.

*Courage* herself is one of Brecht's most contradictory and perplexing characters. She is in turn admirable and despicable, with more extreme traits than any other of his protagonists. As Eric Bentley has pointed out, she is tough, honest, resilient, and courageous, but also cold, cunning, rigid, and cowardly. She concludes business deals in the back room while her children die, yet all of her transactions are undertaken for their sake. Her philosophy is to concede defeat on such large issues as the war itself, while trying to prosper as a small business entrepreneur. Brecht intends her as a vice figure in a morality play but cannot control his affection for her as she transcends his design. He tries to condemn her as a vicious Falstaff, yet his drama stresses her single-minded determination to survive.

While it is true that *Courage* has haggled while her children die, it is also true that her loss of them is desolately tragic. A pathetic victim of wrong dreams, she must end the play by harnessing herself to her inhuman fourth child—her wagon—to trudge after the troops as the stage begins to turn in an accelerating vortex of crazed misery. Both her smallness and her greatness are memorable in the last scene of this masterpiece.



## THE LIFE OF GALILEO

**First produced:** *Leben des Galilei*, 1943 (first published, 1955; English translation, 1947)

**Type of work:** Play

*One of history's greatest scientists exhibits both admirable strengths and deplorable weaknesses.*

*The Life of Galileo* is the most heavily reworked of Brecht's plays, occupying his interim attention during the last nineteen years of his life. He began writing it in German in 1938 while in Denmark, with the great physicist Niels Bohr checking the accuracy of Brecht's astronomical and physical descriptions. This version was the one produced in Zurich

in 1943. After he had moved to Southern California, Brecht befriended the actor Charles Laughton, and from 1944 to 1947 they collaborated on a new version in a unique mixture of mostly German and some English. This new text changes Galileo's character from that of a guileful hero who recants to safeguard his scientific discoveries to a coward who betrays the truth and later castigates himself for having compromised his scientific calling. The explosion of the first nuclear bombs over Japanese cities strongly affected Brecht's characterization of his protagonist. The Laughton version, starring Laughton in the central role, was produced in Los Angeles and then in New York in 1947, though with small success. In 1953, Brecht and some members of the Berliner Ensemble created a third version in German, using what they considered to be the best portions of previous texts. This construction was the one staged in 1955; it is generally regarded as the standard text.

*The Life of Galileo* is written in chronicle form, with fifteen scenes taking the scientist from 1609, when he is forty-five, to 1637, when he is seventy-four. In the first scene, he is a lecturer at the University of Padua, living with his daughter Virginia and housekeeper, Mrs. Sarti, whose intelligent son, Andrea, becomes his favorite pupil. Frustrated because he is underpaid, Galileo accepts better conditions at the court of the Medici in Florence. There his findings tend to prove the heliocentric theories of Nicolaus Copernicus, while the Church insists on adhering to the earth-centered Ptolemaic cosmology. The Holy Office forbids Galileo to pursue his research, but when a liberal mathematician becomes the next pope, Galileo resumes his work. His hopes for the dissemination of his theories are short-lived: He is summoned before the Inquisition, is threatened with torture, and recants his views. For the rest of his life, Galileo remains the Holy Office's prisoner. When Andrea Sarti visits him in 1637, however, Galileo gives him the "Discorsi" to smuggle out of Italy, while also bitterly denouncing himself for his cowardice.

Galileo tells Andrea that, had he resisted the Inquisition, "scientists might have developed something like the physicians' Hippocratic oath, the vow to use their knowledge only for the good of mankind." This unequivocal self-condemnation sharpens the split nature of the great scientist. For Brecht, Galileo is not only a masterly scholar and

teacher, an intellectual locksmith picking at rusty incrustations of Ptolemaic tradition, but also a self-indulgent sensualist who loves to gorge himself with food and wine. After his recantation, his disciples are disillusioned with their master. Responds Galileo drily, "Unhappy the land that needs a hero." Such a view echoes Brecht's own sentiments, and his Galileo is in important respects a canny self-portrait. Like Galileo, Brecht employed all of his cunning and compromised with the authorities so that he could persist in his work. Moreover, the Galileo who lashes himself for his failure of nerve may represent Brecht's self-evaluation and self-condemnation. For one brief stage in his foxy life, Brecht may have been seized by the seductive notion of absolutely intransigent morality. It did not last.

*The Life of Galileo* is the subtlest of Brecht's dramas, challenging readers and audiences with its muted, yet constrained, force and its divided focus: It is a play about both the suffocation of free intellectual inquiry and the alleged sociopolitical irresponsibility of purely scientific inquiry. Next to *Courage*, Galileo is the most complex of Brecht's characters, compassionate to his students yet brutal to his pious daughter, brilliantly charismatic yet also selfishly opportunistic, driven by a Faustian passion for knowledge yet gluttonous for personal comforts. The play is marvelously organic, with each scene serving an indispensable purpose, each character integrated meaningfully into its structure, while the language unites historical accuracy with elegant irony. It is one of the wonders of the modern theater.

## THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE

**First produced:** 1948 (first published, 1949; first produced in German as *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Play

*In this mellow morality play, virtue and justice triumph in an otherwise harsh world.*

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is Brecht's most cheerful and charming play, offered as a moral lesson

with deference to the techniques of both the Oriental and the Elizabethan theater. Its structure is intricate, and more distanced, or epic, than that of any other Brechtian play. Several plots run through it, all merging at the end.

Plot 1 is set in the Russian province of Georgia, where members of two collective farms meet to resolve a dispute about a tract of land. Plot 2 is a story of flight. The peasant Grusha is forced to flee a Caucasian city as a result of usurpation and revolt. Having saved the abandoned child of the dead governor's wife, she risks her life for her maternal instinct, passing over dangerous bridges, marrying an apparently dying man (who then revives to plague her), and almost sacrificing her lover, Simon, who is returning from the civil war. After two years, a counterrevolt returns the governor's party to power, and the governor's widow claims her estate, which she can obtain only as the mother of the legal heir. Her soldiers find Grusha and the infant and bring them to trial. As the storyteller, who distances the text in epic fashion, sings, "She who had borne him demanded the child./ She who had raised him faced trial./ Who will decide the case?"

The judge is Azdak, one of the finest rogues in dramatic literature. Plot 3 features him as a brilliant Lord of Misrule. Having been appointed magistrate as a consequence of a prank, he used bourgeois, Marxist legal chicanery to pass down antibourgeois, Marxist legal decisions. He is a drunk, lecher, and monumental bribe taker, yet he always manages to arrive at humane and fair decisions, acting according to the spirit of justice while ignoring the letter of the law.

In plot 4, the play's separate actions neatly converge, finding their moment of impact in a marvelous courtroom scene. Azdak awards Grusha the child in a chalk-circle test that enacts the biblical legend with inverse results: The woman who has been a nurturing mother obtains custody rather

than the biological but unfeeling mother; moreover, Azdak divorces Grusha from her husband so that she and Simon can marry. The disputed land is awarded to the fruit growers, who can use it better than its previous, goat-breeding owners.

The play is a parable that poses and resolves a set of basic issues: legal justice versus practical justice, morality versus expediency, reason versus sentiment, and, as stated, the claims of the adoptive mother versus those of the natural mother. Yet the work is singularly lacking in didacticism and offers a wealth of theatrically striking episodes, while the lyrical language of the storyteller's narration is suitably balanced by starkly realistic, earthy idioms.

## SUMMARY

Like his greatest characters, Shen Te, Grusha, Azdak, Puntila, Courage, and Galileo, Bertolt Brecht is a survivor. He survived fifteen years of exile in the 1930's and 1940's; he survived harrowing stresses of migration, poverty, personal crises, grubby internecine rivalries, the bitter pathos of Adolf Hitler's demonic enmity toward culture, and Joseph Stalin's betrayal of left-wing idealism. Wherever he was, however sour his circumstances, he managed to produce an impressive volume of distinguished plays, poems, and provocative essays on dramaturgy at full steam. Like his literary/scientific alter ego, Galileo, he employed his sly tenacity to persist in his work.

No theatrical writer since Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov has achieved as many masterpieces as Brecht: *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *The Life of Galileo* are assuredly among modernism's dramatic peaks. Brecht's only rival as the leading Western playwright of the middle and late twentieth century is Samuel Beckett.

Gerhard Brand

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Consider the unfairness involved in the considerable criticism of Bertolt Brecht's Communist convictions while Europe was being wracked by Fascist and Nazi forces.
- With such organizations as the House Committee on Un-American Activities so important in the 1950's, why was 1956 such an unfortunate time for Brecht to die?
- Consider Brecht's place among the poets of Germany.
- What traits dominate the mother figure in Brecht's plays?
- What explanation might be given for the extraordinary popularity of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* in the United States?
- Did the success of Brecht's most important plays result because of, or in spite of, his relentless hostility toward business?
- Which merits of Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* give this play a chance to remain "one of the wonders of the modern theater"?

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## ANDRÉ BRINK

**Born:** Vrede, Orange Free State, South Africa  
May 29, 1935

*Among the first Afrikaner writers to win international acclaim, Brink is best known for his intimate portrayals of Afrikaner life, which are seamlessly placed within the larger context of the fight of blacks, Cape Coloureds, and other nonwhites to win political freedom.*

### BIOGRAPHY

André Phillipus Brink was the first of four children born to a local Afrikaner magistrate and a schoolteacher on May 29, 1935, in the Orange Free State, South Africa. The Afrikaners are descendants of seventeenth century Dutch and Huguenot immigrants who settled three main areas in what is today South Africa. Brink's parents shared their home region's strict Dutch Reformed Church's Calvinistic religious beliefs and evinced the Afrikaner suspicion of and disdain for the Bantu (black) and Cape Coloured (mixed race) peoples of Southern Africa.

Growing up in a household where his father's judicial work moved them from place to place in the Free State, Brink was exposed at an early age to the Afrikaner Nationalist Party politics espoused by his father and his friends, especially their distrust of the British rulers of South Africa, a remembrance focusing on past grievances, including the Boer War of 1899-1902, wherein Afrikaners were killed in great numbers and placed in the first of the world's concentration camps. His father and mother were, in their own way, exemplary citizens—dutiful, highly religious conformists careful about doing or saying anything out of the ordinary, and his siblings followed their lead. Brink was the only family member who would openly rebel against apartheid.

Brink went on to study Afrikaans and Dutch literature at South Africa's highly conservative Potchefstroom University from 1956 to 1959. Feeling in need of a more worldly perspective than that afforded him by Potchefstroom, he elected to study at the Sorbonne in Paris, which he attended from 1959 to 1961. His encounters with French

manners and mores, in addition to the opinions of contemporary European writers, led him to see his native land in new ways. In fact, the bohemianism and the literary existentialism of Parisian intellectuals allowed him to find creative ways to break with his restrictive Afrikaner upbringing. It was in Paris that he became conversant with major Continental directions in writing, and he would incorporate European depictions of explicit sexuality and violence into his work.

After graduating from the Sorbonne, Brink returned to South Africa to study for degrees in literature at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, a place he would call home for three decades. His early Rhodes years marked his emergence as a major writer and member of the Sestigers Movement (literally, "people of the '60's") in literature, a rebellious group of young people who decried the apartheid policies that treated blacks as subhumans without rights. He went on to teach for many years at both Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town, the latter eventually awarding him the rank of professor of literature emeritus.

Brink published his first novel, written in Afrikaans, *Lobola vir die lewe*, in 1962, but it was not until the publication of another Afrikaans work, *Kennis van die aand* (1973; *Looking on Darkness*, 1974), that the South African government finally saw how subversive his writing was and banned it, the first Afrikaans novel ever to be so treated. Though banned in his own nation for his political views, Brink's subsequent novels and essays began to receive world renown; his fiction earned critical acclaim for its depiction of daily Afrikaner life, with its complex codes of conduct, its passionate beliefs based on fear and narrowness of mental horizon, its intense

loyalties, and its betrayals by those whose eyes were open to the truth. He shocked some readers and many establishment critics with his emphasis on the most overt violence, as well as his depiction of vivid sexual encounters between men and women of different races and the homoerotic undercurrents lurking in the dealings of male Afrikaners.

In 1975, Brink published the controversial novel *'N Omblik in die wind* (1975; *An Instant in the Wind*, 1976), and he subsequently produced two major novels of protest, *Gerugte van Reën* (1978; *Rumours of Rain*, 1978) and *'N droë wit seisoen* (1979; *A Dry White Season*, 1979), both of which were banned in South Africa. The 1980's brought forth such impressive novelistic explorations of modern South Africa as *Houd-den-bek* (1982; *A Chain of Voices*, 1982), *Die muur van die pes* (1984; *The Wall of the Plague*, 1984), *States of Emergency* (1988), and *Die eerste lewe van Adamastor* (1988; *The First Life of Adamastor*, 1993, also known as *Cape of Storms*). In the 1990's, the decade marked by the apartheid system's destruction, Brink published several additional novels, including *An Act of Terror* (1991) and *Inteendeel* (1993; *On the Contrary*, 1993), and edited *SA, 27 April 1994: An Author's Diary* (1994). In the twenty-first century, Brink wrote the noted novels *Donkermaan* (2000; *The Rights of Desire*, 2000), *Anderkant die stilte* (2002; *The Other Side of Silence*, 2002), and *Praying Mantis* (2005). In addition to writing novels, he has translated many works of other authors into Afrikaans, and he has written critically lauded plays and essays.

His major novels and other literary works and his great help in bringing Afrikaner literature into the modern world have earned for him three South African Central News Agency (CNA) Awards for his work in both English and Afrikaans; honorary doctorates from noted South African and European universities; the Herzog Prize for theater; Britain's Martin Luther King Memorial Prize for literature; Italy's Premio Mondello award; and France's highly prestigious Legion d'Honneur, to name some of the most significant honors. Additionally, he has been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature and was twice on the short list

for one of Britain's most important literary awards, the Man Booker Prize.

## ANALYSIS

Brink possesses the restless spirit of a rebel and innovator whose ideas led him to confrontations with South African authorities during the apartheid era. He is at his best depicting the rural districts he knew as a boy, where white girls and boys often had as best friends the very same black girls and boys from whom they would wall off themselves in adult life. Yet despite the dictates of the old and now dismantled apartheid system, the whites, even as adults, would sometimes surprise themselves by falling in lust—or even in love—with someone of another race. Brink also is at his best when he graphically portrays the human costs resulting from the onerous apartheid laws—the beatings, the jailings, and the state-sanctioned murders.

In his earliest novels written in Afrikaans, Brink portrays those who, being at emotional and spiritual odds with fellow Afrikaners, find ways to divorce themselves from the country's soul-killing narrowness. During the apartheid period, people like Brink and those characters who resembled him followed their own internal countercultural compass and found themselves aliens in their own land, persons no longer considered part of the "white tribe" in which they had been raised.

Brink, in a large sense, envisions himself to be the true Afrikaner chronicler of the long, slow decline of white South African power and authority and the rise of a multicultural nation in its place. Through flashbacks, uninvolved narrators, diary entries, and other methods of showcasing the failures of apartheid's pass laws and immorality acts, its violence and brutality, and its more subtle means of coercing conformity, his aim is to depict how even the most determined efforts to maintain the status quo, to keep fear at bay through the dehumanizing of those perceived as "different," are bound to collapse when subversive events, such as love arising between those of differing ethnicity, relentlessly works against the creaky, jerry-built apartheid structure, eventually causing it to collapse.

## RUMOURS OF RAIN

**First published:** *Gerugte van Reën*, 1978  
(English translation, 1978)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A world-weary and rich Afrikaner business executive experiences an existential dilemma that forces him to reconsider the realities of apartheid.*

Martin Mynhardt's ties to his family farm in the Eastern Cape of Good Hope could form a barrier to the acquisitive desires of a land-hungry company that wants to own and control the region outright. Yet Martin is not the sort of person to sentimentalize his roots or to care much about the effect of the farm's loss on family members and their black retainers.

There are, however, two people in Martin's world whom he does actually care for—far more than he cares for his emotionally estranged wife, Elise, or his angry, disillusioned son, Louis: namely, his old childhood friend and companion, the political revolutionary Bernard, and his lovely wife—and Martin's last lover—Bea, an Italian expatriate and political activist who came to South Africa at a young age. Martin's existential dilemma is whether to help his old friends by hiding important writings that Bernard pleads with Martin to take with him, thereby putting Martin's life in mortal danger as an enemy of the South African state, or to sell out his friends and resume some semblance of his previous politically uninvolved life. Martin then is faced with the hardest of choices: Should he once again turn traitor to Bernard—since Martin already betrayed Bernard by falling in love with Bea—and destroy everything Bernard had attempted to do with his life by turning state's evidence, or should he invite certain death by being seen as Bernard and Bea's accomplice in treason against the state?

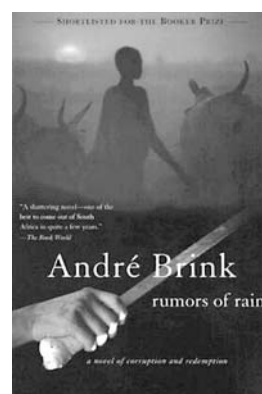
Thus, this novel is about the loyalties of the heart, things people ignore only at their peril: Martin's long-standing marriage to Elise, interrupted over the years by various infidelities; his emotional ties to and sense of responsibility for his son Louis, a soldier in South Africa's losing fight against Angola, with whom he has not fostered a good father-son relationship; Bernard's love for Bea that is coupled with his inability to put her before his own

powerful political aspirations; Bea's deep love for her husband, set alongside her physical desire for Martin's lovemaking sessions with her; and Martin's loyalty to his own boyhood and the family and farm that were at its center, versus the need for business allies who may come in handy in the future. In *Rumours of Rain*, love is a choice and is juxtaposed with decisions that betray it.

All of Martin's allegiances are tested by events he never saw coming. For instance, as South Africa's once seemingly unified, apparently strong facade develops cracks through participation in border wars and skirmishes, such as the conflict with Angola, young men like Louis are drafted into hellish and ill-conceived conflicts of attrition. Martin, wanting very much to see his "white tribe" winning, fails to be able to envision the failure of that enterprise, something of which Louis could apprise him, if he would only ask, for Louis has participated in war, unlike his father and other Afrikaners who cheer on the troops from their own safe and secure vantage point far from the front lines.

Linked in Martin's mind with Bernard's final day in court, before he is taken away by the thugs who run South Africa, is the death of his father, who though learned never found ways to leave behind his distorted Afrikaner concept of the world; readers readily see that same stubborn determination in Martin to be true to the traditional Afrikaner ways of thinking and doing. Yet Martin, unlike his father, who lived when apartheid was at its peak, cannot hang on to the past though he tries, just as he literally cannot hang onto his family's farm. Historical forces now dictate that he open his closed mind to a new world order, one that has engulfed his nation, and yet he never really does.

Bernard, however, is the true cycle-breaker of the piece—the true rebel, passionate and self-denying in his search for a transformed, reconfigured South Africa where all people can be free. He is the one at novel's end who is the agent of political change—that "rain" from the book's title that will fall hard and fast on



this spiritually and morally drought-stricken place, a stream of destruction that brings new life. Yet Martin, almost despite himself, ends up becoming one with the redemptive flood of political action advocated by Bernard and Bea, and he gives up his life to the higher cause they espouse. Readers do see him as redeemed from what had been a bigoted, sorry, shallow, selfish, and morally diminished existence.

## A DRY WHITE SEASON

**First published:** *N droë wit seisoen*, 1979  
(English translation, 1979)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A white teacher's quest for authenticity leads him to abandon family and friends to fight the racist South African apartheid system in order to find justice for a black man and his son who were murdered by that system.*

In *A Dry White Season*, a successful novel which became a successful motion picture, Brink visits familiar terrain, namely Afrikaner South Africa (as opposed to British South Africa) at a time of moral and spiritual drought just prior to the coming of the storms of change that will bring this nation rain and renewal. As did his earlier novel, *Rumours of Rain*, Brink's *A Dry White Season* gives readers a white South African protagonist, but this time one more in keeping with Brink's own actively subversive nature, as well as one in tune with Steve Biko, a real-life hero who died after being tortured and killed while in the custody of the South African police at the very time this novel was written.

Unlike the narrator in *Rumours of Rain*, the generally self-seeking businessman Martin Mynhardt, this book concerns Ben du Toit, who from his student days has been an agent of resistance against the powers fostering the injustice he sees festering in his country. When Ben finds that Jonathan, the son of his school's gardener, Gordon Ngubene, has had his skin deeply scored six times by a knife while being detained by police on suspicion of being part of a minor melee, he becomes enraged. Jonathan Ngubene has been supported by Ben and is a kind of son to him, so this act of brutality against Jona-

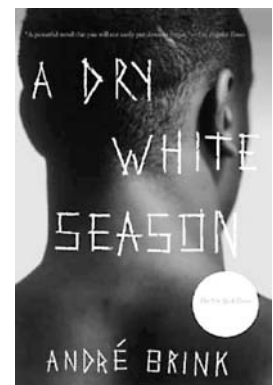
than is appalling to Ben. Things, however, get worse when Ben finds that Gordon, the boy's father, has disappeared after he searched for his son, who was in police custody. Gordon vanishes into the police state netherworld of apartheid secrecy, and Ben finds he must investigate Gordon's fate, something that brings on his own destruction and martyrdom.

In this novel, Brink manages to deliver the physicality of his native South Africa, especially in his descriptions of all of those squalid, stinking, rotting, dangerous black townships, like Soweto, where the poor black majority of South Africans attempt to survive, but also in the glorious revealed splendor of that country's veld lands with its famous animal denizens. Yet another sight, one even more memorable, is revealed when the curtain is parted and readers see state lock-ups filled with the detritus of despairing convicts, places where torture is a daily occurrence. Here is the state's fearsome underbelly, a place where fear breeds hatred toward the feared. On the other hand, Brink also gives readers glimpses of humanity among the worst of these guards and torturers, seeing them as vulnerable persons whose pathetic lives are bound up in fear of "the Other," here represented best by Gordon, Jonathan, and then Ben.

Brink's readers function as both judge and jury for the old apartheid state of South Africa in the world's courthouse of opinion. As prosecuting attorney, the author could be seen to say to them, as any good prosecutor would, "Here is the system we Afrikaners have assembled, and this terrible system does not deserve to live another day!"

## SUMMARY

Within each of his works, André Brink depicts the brutal South African apartheid government apparatus from the viewpoints of victims, as well as their victimizers. At his most effective, as in *Rumours of Rain* and *A Dry White Season*, he compellingly demonstrates that even the most disinter-



ested, self-serving, passive Afrikaner can suddenly find himself (and it is almost always a man) in a life and death struggle when someone he loves is in grave peril after having broken the laws of the apartheid state. He also manages to convey how essentially fragile that state, with all its projected power and authority, actually is when victims stand up to it and expose it to the world—people like for-

mer Robben Island prisoner Nelson Mandela. Replacing the heretofore reactionary nation of South Africa with the rainbow-hued South Africa of Mandela is part of what Brink is about in his subversive novels, and he succeeds in helping to bring about incredible change.

John D. Raymer

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*Gerugte van Reën*, 1978 (*Rumours of Rain*, 1978)  
*'N droë wit seisoen*, 1979 (*A Dry White Season*, 1979)  
*Houd-den-bek*, 1982 (*A Chain of Voices*, 1982)  
*Die muur van die pes*, 1984 (*The Wall of the Plague*, 1984)  
*Die eerste lewe van Adamastor*, 1988 (novella; *The First Life of Adamastor*, 1993; also known as *Cape of Storms*)  
*States of Emergency*, 1988  
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*Inteendeel*, 1993 (*On the Contrary*, 1993)  
*Sandkastele*, 1995 (*Imaginations of Sand*, 1996)  
*Duiwelskloof*, 1998 (*Devil's Valley*, 1998)  
*Donkerman*, 2000 (*The Rights of Desire*, 2000)  
*Anderkant die stilte*, 2002 (*The Other Side of Silence*, 2002)  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What crimes does André Brink find that Afrikaners have committed against their own country?
- How does Brink enable readers to see how all people allow themselves to act on false impressions of those different from themselves?
- In Brink's view, what should come first in life: the people who are closest to you or the causes in which you deeply believe?
- What does Brink see as being his duty as an Afrikaner writer? Is it different from what a writer of any other nationality would envision?
- According to Brink, why are Afrikaners not able to fully feel a part of the continent in which they live?
- Are Afrikaners in these novels tribal in their thinking?



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## CHARLOTTE BRONTË

**Born:** Thornton, Yorkshire, England  
April 21, 1816

**Died:** Haworth, Yorkshire, England  
March 31, 1855

*In isolated circumstances, Brontë produced *Jane Eyre*, a work that was to have tremendous influence on the Victorian reading public.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Charlotte Brontë (BRAHN-tee) was born in Thornton, England, on April 21, 1816, the third daughter of Maria Branwell Brontë and the Reverend Patrick Brontë. The family rapidly increased to include a son, Branwell, and two more daughters, Emily and Anne. Shortly after moving to the village of Haworth, situated high in the moors of West Yorkshire, the children experienced the first of many tragedies: In September, 1821, their mother died of a lingering illness. To help take care of the children, Maria Branwell's older sister Elizabeth came to live with the family; her strict Methodist ways and somewhat unsympathetic nature were a gloomy influence on the grieving, lonely youngsters.

Finding some sympathy in one another's company was not to provide solace for long. The two oldest Brontë daughters, Maria and Elizabeth, were sent to school, followed soon after by Charlotte and Emily. Weakened by bouts of measles and whooping cough and subjected to the poor diet of the school, Maria and Elizabeth were particularly susceptible to the illnesses that were epidemic at the time. Within months, both had been sent home from school, and by June, 1825, both had died. The younger children remained at home, being schooled by their father and forging the close literary relationships that were to inform their future endeavors.

In June of 1826, Patrick Brontë brought home a set of twelve wooden soldiers as a gift for Branwell. Already accustomed to making up stories in the style of *Blackwood's Magazine*, the children quickly named the soldiers after popular heroes and began to identify with their favorite characters. They created an imaginary land over which they ruled as the four "Genies." The two older children, Charlotte and Branwell, began collaborating on stories about the land of "Angria," about which they wrote every day in minuscule books. From these early productions came Charlotte's desire to be a novelist and Branwell's belief that he would become a great poet in the style of Lord Byron.

In 1831, Brontë again went to school, this time at Roe Head, a happy environment where she made lifelong friends with two other pupils, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. She was fond of her teacher, and she seemed to accept the occupation for which she was being trained, that of governess. By the time she was nineteen, she had been offered the opportunity to teach at Roe Head, thereby earning free schooling for one of her sisters. Her letters from this period indicate her frustration with teaching; her only real pleasure seemed to come from the continued collaboration with Branwell. Yet Brontë suspected that even this satisfaction was temporary after she received a response to a letter that she had written in 1836 to Robert Southey, the poet laureate of England. He was discouraging about a literary career and warned her that she might become unfit for any other work if she spent too much time daydreaming. Brontë seemed to accept this advice, and she

left Roe Head vowing to put her fantasy world behind her.

By 1839, Brontë herself was realizing the dangers of indulging for too long in imaginative escapism. After turning down two marriage proposals from men for whom she was temperamentally unsuited, she began to reject the extravagant romanticism of her imaginary characters and turned to the question of how to support herself. Much of the discretionary income of the Brontë family went to support Branwell's education and desire to become an artist or poet, and Emily seemed emotionally incapable of living away from her home and familiar moors, so Charlotte was determined to find practical employment. She took a position as private governess to a wealthy family but found the situation exhausting and degrading. Her experiences with the Sidgwick family provided much of the material for *Jane Eyre* (1847) but were otherwise unproductive.

Realizing that her education was insufficient to obtain a first-class teaching position, Brontë traveled to Brussels in 1842 to study French at the Pensionnat Heger, a small private school. Her lessons were interrupted by her aunt's death in November of that year, but she made enough progress to be asked to return to the Pensionnat as a teacher in 1843. She soon developed romantic feelings for the master of the school, Clementin Heger. She expressed her passion for him in letters that she wrote after her return to Haworth in 1844, but Heger, married, could not respond. Ironically, her depression over this unrequited love was deepened by the disturbing behavior of Branwell, who left a tutoring job in disgrace after having an affair with his employer's wife. Other aspects of Branwell's behavior—his bragging, his drunken carousing, his experiments with opium—all seemed evidence of the dangerous romanticism inherent in his adolescent aspirations to a poetic life.

Nonetheless, it was in 1844 that Brontë began her most productive period as a writer. With new maturity and seriousness of intent, she wrote her first novel, *The Professor* (1857), which was destined to be rejected by six publishers. Using the pseudonym Currer Bell, she published a collection of poetry with her sisters, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846), and then, while Anne and Emily worked on their novels, she produced *Jane Eyre* (1847). This book, extremely popular at the time,

was to gain her the fame she experienced in her later life.

The year 1848 included Brontë's supreme enjoyment at reading good reviews of *Jane Eyre* and the pleasure of making herself known to her London publishers. This public triumph, however, was countered by private tragedy: Branwell, weakened by his intemperate behavior, contracted tuberculosis and rapidly died. Brontë collapsed emotionally and physically after his death, and, though needing care herself, she began to observe signs of tuberculosis in Emily. Emily refused to discuss her obvious illness or accept medical care. Before the year was over, she, too, had died, and there were suspicions that Anne was infected with the disease as well.

In 1849, Brontë published *Shirley*, a novel whose main character reflects aspects of Emily Brontë's personality. In an attempt to save Anne's life, Brontë traveled with her to Scarborough, where the air was deemed healthy for victims of tuberculosis. The effort came too late, and Anne died while visiting the seaside resort. Brontë traveled again to London and met William Makepeace Thackeray, the leading literary figure of the time, and in 1850 she became friends with Elizabeth Gaskell, a significant Victorian novelist who was to become Brontë's first biographer. Throughout this period of mourning, Brontë kept writing.

*Villette*, Brontë's last complete novel, was published in 1853. In 1854, she decided to marry Arthur Bell Nicholls, who worked as her father's curate. After taking a wedding trip to Ireland to meet Nicholls's relatives, she began work on another novel, *Emma*, which was published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860 (it is often reprinted in editions of *The Professor*). Brontë found great satisfaction in her marriage to Nicholls, despite having resisted his proposals for years. They seemed destined for a happy future, until she became ill. Already worn out by pregnancy, Brontë took a poorly timed walk on a stormy day, and her condition rapidly worsened. She died in Haworth on March 31, 1855, leaving her husband to see to the long-delayed publication of *The Professor*.

## ANALYSIS

Brontë learned her craft from the available literature of the day and through practice. In childhood, she imitated the style of literary magazines and popular fiction while writing stories, plays, and

poems with her brother and sisters. In these collaborative productions, she often chose to create the persona of a historical hero—a particular favorite was the duke of Wellington—and tried to speak in the elevated, stylized language that she imagined was appropriate to such distinguished public figures. The effort, although a considerable amount of imaginative fun, resulted in characters who sounded bombastic and unnatural.

In her mature fiction—four novels and an unfinished fragment of a fifth—Brontë found greater success creating narrators who shared a measure of her life experience. The most autobiographical of her novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, focus on the private world of women and their restricted choices in male-dominated Victorian society. Narrated by female characters, both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* make use of the popular nineteenth century motif of the orphaned child who must make his or her own way in an antagonistic world. Brontë also successfully exploited elements of the romance novel and the gothic novel when she constructed her plots. Jane Eyre discovers a madwoman concealed in the attic of her employer's mansion, and Lucy Snowe (the narrator of *Villette*) is frightened by the recurrent appearance of a ghost who haunts her school.

Feminist critics have been extremely interested in Brontë's work because it exposes the limitations placed on women's lives in the nineteenth century. Women of the respectable middle class had very few ways of earning their keep. Marrying, teaching, or serving as secretary-companion to a wealthy woman were nearly the only choices that a moderately educated woman could expect to have. Brontë, though not an outspoken feminist, regretted that women were not encouraged to make the same kinds of contributions as men and were often treated as intellectually inferior. Her characters, male or female, demand respect as individuals and strive to work in conditions where their potential will be fully realized.

Brontë's ideas about nature were shaped by the Romantic poets and her life in the Yorkshire moors. In her novels, cities tend to be places of corruption, where human beings conspire against or neglect one another. Outdoors, there is a purifying element that allows people to approach one another honestly, and natural forces often act to promote correct moral behavior. Brontë makes use of the pathetic fallacy—nature mimicking human

feeling—and personifies nature in various ways, most notably when the moon becomes a mother figure in *Jane Eyre*. Both techniques emphasize Brontë's view that the landscape plays an important role in determining human action.

## JANE EYRE

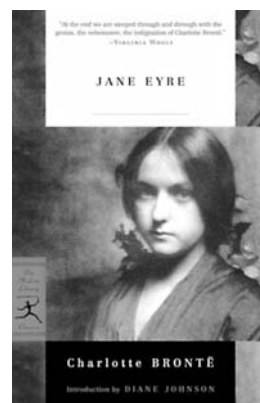
**First published:** 1847

**Type of work:** Novel

*An orphaned, friendless governess achieves independence and finds contentment in marriage to her former employer.*

*Jane Eyre* appealed to the Victorian reading public on both sides of the Atlantic. Published under a pseudonym, the novel had its London enthusiasts at first speculating about the real author, then marveling at the achievement of a little-known, isolated vicar's daughter from Yorkshire. In America, the plot and narrative technique of *Jane Eyre* were quickly imitated by women writers hoping to capitalize on the novel's popularity. The plot contains many elements to capture and maintain the reader's attention: an abused orphan who rebels successfully against her oppressors, a mystery involving screams in the attic and a burning bed, a marriage stopped at the altar, sensual temptation and moral victory, and the reformation of a good man gone wrong.

The appeal of the book is not dependent solely on a lively plot; Jane Eyre herself is an engaging character. Unwilling to accept others' definitions of her as an unattractive, dependent relation, Jane asserts herself against those who treat her badly. Faced with unpleasant cousins and oppressive schoolteachers, Jane fights for what she thinks is right. She is made to feel that her passionate responses are a character flaw, but the reader is made to see that her rebelliousness is appropriate.



In a book that explores the conflict between individual and society, it is not surprising that there are a number of structural oppositions as well. Jane's worldly cousins, the Reeds, are countered by her intellectual cousins, the Riverses. The tyrannical schoolmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, is paired with the soothing headmistress, Miss Temple. Most important is the contrast between the two proposals of marriage that Jane receives, and the men who make them: Mr. Rochester recognizes Jane's true character, but he would pamper and oppress her with riches; St. John Rivers respects Jane's intellectual capabilities and self-control, but he would withhold true love and expect Jane to destroy her health doing difficult missionary work in India. Jane is able to resist both of them because she has developed a healthy sense of self-worth and has risen above the abuse she received as a child. Her emotional independence is matched by an unexpected inheritance, which alleviates Jane's need to work in subservient positions. Thus strengthened, Jane can return to Rochester after his first wife dies. The physical mutilation he has undergone—blinding and loss of an arm—makes him dependent on Jane for more than amusement. In a marriage of mutual respect and support, Jane's self-image can continue to prosper.

## VILLETTE

**First published:** 1853

**Type of work:** Novel

*Orphaned and nearly friendless, a young Englishwoman seeks to earn a living by teaching in a Belgian school.*

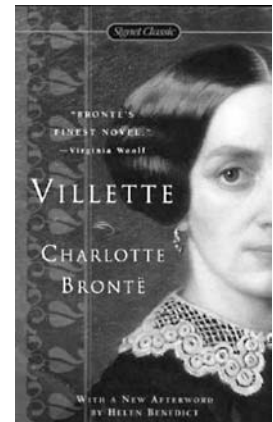
In *Villette*, Brontë once again tells the story from the point of view of an autobiographical narrator. Unlike Jane Eyre, however, the narrator of *Villette*, Lucy Snowe, is neither entirely reliable nor likable. Her unpleasant nature and habit of withholding information from the reader is responsible for the lack of critical consensus about *Villette*. While some literary scholars see the novel as a well-constructed discourse on the repressive nature of Victorian society, others view it as a disordered representation of a neurotic character. The mixed response to

*Villette* was evident in the first reviews it received, and it never achieved the popularity of *Jane Eyre*.

There are marked similarities between *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Both narrators are orphans, both teach to earn their livings, and both consider themselves unattractive. In both novels, Brontë drew on her own experience to create a realistic setting; indeed, *Villette* is placed in the same Belgian territory as Brontë's first novel, *The Professor*. Yet *Villette* differs from the previous novels in a number of important ways. Formally, the shifting focus, plot coincidences, and length of time that passes between Lucy's narration and the events that she recounts all challenge the conventions of the realistic novel. This departure is particularly evident in the ending, when Lucy refuses to explain what has happened to her fiancé, Paul Emanuel, and instead tells the reader to imagine that she has been reunited with him and has embarked on a blissful life. The reality, which Lucy condescendingly assumes the reader is too sentimental to accept, is that Paul has been drowned in a violent storm at sea.

Lucy's open ending of her story points to another important difference between *Villette* and earlier Brontë novels: The delineation of the narrator's character is such that she cannot be trusted. Like Jane Eyre, Lucy feels that her inner self is not expressed or evident in her passive, public existence. Unlike Jane, however, she does not rebel against this disjunction; instead, she manipulates it in order to satisfy her voyeuristic impulses. Powerless, Lucy gains perverse pleasure in thinking that she is more observant about others than they are about her. She works at disguising her true character, an effort that fails only with Paul, the man whom she eventually comes to love.

Lucy Snowe, named carefully by Brontë to suggest her cold personality and buried life, emphasizes those experiences that support her assertion that fate has deprived her of any kind of happiness. She hastily summarizes her childhood, spent hap-



pily with a godmother, and begins a detailed account of her life at the time of her first employment as companion to an old woman who has mourned a dead lover for thirty years. From this melancholy position, Lucy takes a job as teacher to the youngest children in a Belgian girls' school. Strongly biased against Catholics, she finds herself alone in a Catholic country with an imperfect grasp of the language and contempt for the moral corruption that she perceives in her pupils and fellow teachers. Isolated in such a way, it is small wonder that she has an emotional and physical breakdown.

Her illness serves to reunite her with her godmother and former friends, who now live in Villette, and Lucy is tempted to enjoy the life of ease that they offer. Instead, she returns to the company of Madame Beck, the director of the school, who spies on Lucy, and Paul, a sarcastic, small man who seems to discern Lucy's true nature. He recognizes her passivity for what it is, a condescending voyeurism, and he stimulates Lucy to bring her true talents to the surface. Under his sometimes savage tutelage, Lucy demonstrates significant intellectual and dramatic capabilities, and she seems less afraid of expressing her feelings. Yet Brontë was not content to write another novel with the conventional happy ending; Paul and Lucy never do marry, and Lucy, writing the book near

the end of a long life, is careful not to revise her initial self-portrait as someone whom fate has deprived of happiness. What Brontë allows the reader to see, however, is that Lucy's psychological inability to act on her own behalf and her repressed anger at what she calls fate have partially created her circumstances. At the same time, Lucy has survived with a measure of dignity as the director of her own school. With both financial and emotional independence, Lucy suggests that there are possibilities for women other than marriage or degrading subservience to an employer.

## SUMMARY

Charlotte Brontë's contribution to the Victorian novel was one of character, not one of plot or technical innovation. Her most vivid creation is the autobiographical narrator of *Jane Eyre*, a character who relates her story in an entertaining fashion and establishes that it is personality, rather than wealth or physical appeal, that makes an interesting heroine. By the time she wrote *Villette*, Brontë was more overt in her challenges to literary convention, a tendency that makes that novel more problematic and promising for contemporary literary scholars.

Gweneth A. Dunleavy

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- Does Charlotte Brontë's father or his children themselves deserve more credit for their creativity as youngsters?
- How do major characters in Brontë's novels mirror the author's extraordinary ability to overcome obstacles to her creative achievements?
- Explain Brontë's knowledge of Romantic poets and her keenness for art as bases for her depiction of nature in her novels.
- What combination of personal traits makes Jane Eyre such a successful heroine?
- Discuss whether *Villette* deserves a higher rank in English fiction than it has received.





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## EMILY BRONTË

**Born:** Thornton, Yorkshire, England

July 30, 1818

**Died:** Haworth, Yorkshire, England

December 19, 1848

*Known chiefly for her inspiring novel *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë is also recognized for her imaginative poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Emily Jane Brontë (BRAHN-tee) was born on July 30, 1818, in Thornton, Yorkshire, England, the fifth of six children, five of whom were girls. Her father, Patrick Brontë, was an industrious Irish clergyman who accepted a permanent post at St. Michael and All Angels Church when Emily was two years old. Her mother, Maria Branwell, a Cornish merchant's daughter, died shortly after the move to Haworth, after which her devout and capable sister Elizabeth Branwell joined the family to care for the Brontë children.

Growing up in the parsonage shaped Brontë's life enormously. She was secluded from all but her family. The few accounts to be had of Brontë's character confirm that she was outwardly reserved, almost incommunicative, but inwardly she experienced a freedom and power of imagination that was anything but reserved. Brontë was attached to few things in her lifetime—her household, the moor, and her own imaginative world—but from these she was inseparable.

Brontë had little formal education. The few times that she left home were injurious to her. In 1824, at the age of six, Brontë and her sister Charlotte followed the two eldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth, to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan. Within a year, all had returned, Maria and Eliza-

beth subsequently dying of typhoid and consumption caused by the harsh conditions experienced at the school (a period later described in Charlotte's novel *Jane Eyre*, 1847). After that, Brontë was tutored at home in her father's study and exposed to a wide variety of literature, including the works of William Shakespeare, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), the novels and poetry of Sir Walter Scott, and the works of the Romantic poets, such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron. She also had access to the Border country ballads from Scotland, political journals (*Blackwood's Magazine*), and local tales.

Brontë's first efforts as a writer began at the age of eleven. Her muse came to her in the form of a wooden toy soldier brought home in a box for her brother, Patrick Branwell. Together, the Brontë children began the ongoing creation of imagined worlds and the adventures of their newfound heroes. Brontë's was the world of "Gondal," an island kingdom in the South Pacific, complete with a history of political struggle and passionate intrigue. Many of her 193 poems originated in this imaginative but highly developed kingdom.

In 1831, Brontë briefly attended Roe Head School, where her sister Charlotte was governess. Intensely homesick, she was soon replaced by her younger sister, Anne. Seven years later, Brontë left home again to teach at Law Hill near Halifax, this time enduring only six months away from home. She left for a final time in 1842 to attend a school in Brussels with Charlotte, as part of their dream to open a school of their own in Haworth. Brontë's faculty for both music and languages proved enormous in Brussels, but she was forced to leave

abruptly after a year, when Elizabeth Branwell died. Brontë chose never to return, remaining at Haworth until her death in 1848.

Brontë's poetry was first published in 1845, more than fifteen years after she began writing, and long since the girls had stopped sharing their work. A manuscript of her Gondal poems was discovered by Charlotte, who was delighted and stirred by the unusually bold style of her sister's work. Emily herself stormed at the invasion of her privacy and only gradually was persuaded to contribute the poems to a joint publication of all three sisters' poetry, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846). Pseudonyms neutral in gender were used so that the sisters' work could not be judged solely on that basis, and all ties to the world of Gondal were omitted, erasing any possible aspects of childishness from the poems. Only two copies sold, despite the careful preparation and hard work put into the venture. Stimulated, rather than disheartened, by the experience, the three women began writing novels.

Between October, 1845, and June, 1846, Brontë wrote her great, and only, novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), a romance that has its roots in the Gondal poetry. Unfortunately, *Wuthering Heights* received attention mainly in connection with Charlotte's novel *Jane Eyre*, whose simultaneous appearance led to public confusion about the authorship of both novels. Some critics maintained that *Wuthering Heights* was a previous, inferior effort of Currer (Charlotte) Bell, condemning it as rough and brutal next to the more refined and humane *Jane Eyre*.

Brontë did not live to write another novel or see the strength of her one work acknowledged by more than her family and perhaps one critic. In 1848, her brother, Patrick Branwell, who had already succumbed to alcohol and opium, died of consumption. Brontë caught cold at her brother's funeral and never recovered. She died on December 19, 1848, in Haworth, Yorkshire, England.

## ANALYSIS

Brontë shared much with the Romantic poets, whose works she had read during childhood. Underlying all of her own poetry and prose is the Romantic ideal of transcendence, the desire to rise above the domain of time and space that encompasses ordinary human experience. Brontë's works are filled with human passion and longing that

drive toward this goal. In its emotional turmoil, the love between Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* exceeds the boundaries of the mortal world and endures beyond the grave. This lack of established borders between life and death provides much of the excitement in the novel, as characters communicate as ghosts and in dreams through the veil of time, in a setting that simultaneously assumes supernatural qualities.

Brontë's poetry expresses the longing for freedom from the chains of mortality, depicting life as "cold captivity" (in "The Caged Bird") and death as liberation of the soul. The subject of one of her most renowned poems, "No Coward Soul Is Mine," is her Romantic desire for a mystical union with the deity, whom Brontë saw as the God both within and without her. In Brontë's poetry, crossing over the lines of the mortal world establishes a resonance, exemplified in "Remembrance," where speakers, events, and audience exist in different realms: for example, in the distant past, in the present, and in the realm beyond death. All of Brontë's poetry and prose is highly imaginative, which points to a final means to freedom in her work: the world of imagination, a gift more highly prized by the Romantics than reason.

Another important Romantic element in Brontë's work is nature. Growing up in the stormy northern England countryside, Brontë knew the great potential of the tempestuous moorland weather to communicate the vast range of human emotions. Brontë uses the outer world of nature as a metaphor for human nature, that is, as something heavily symbolic, carrying an equivalence to a person's inner world. There is interplay and even interchange between Brontë's characters and the natural elements. In *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood's surreal dream of Catherine Earnshaw's ghost on a stormy night is prompted by the wildly knocking branch against the window pane, which becomes a "little, ice-cold hand!" when he reaches for it. Heathcliff himself assumes enough aspects of the moor in his brutal, remorseless nature that he becomes inextricable from it. The dynamic role of nature also adds much excitement to the action in the drama, continually energizing the characters.

For all the passionate overflow of Brontë's created worlds, her presentation is highly controlled, giving her work unexpected power and intensity. This aspect of her writing stems not only from the

nature of the themes that she explores but even more from her own skill in delivering the material. The narrative of *Wuthering Heights* is a complex chronological layering, yet Brontë delivers it cleanly and ingenuously, as the narrator is brought under Heathcliff's roof by the storm and, in a single night, brings three names, three dates, and the ghost of Catherine Linton into view. Likewise, Nelly, the housekeeper who relates the tale to Lockwood, quotes the characters directly without encumbering interpretation or embellishment. Brontë's own description is always vivid and striking, with no extra words spent, moving her plot forward at a delightfully exciting pace.

Brontë's poetry exhibits the simplicity and austerity inherent in her style. She uses ordinary, uncomplicated language, direct address, and subtle methods, such as the repetition of single words or alliteration, to create moods and deepen their effects, often achieving a profound lucidity. Even the pauses in her lines work to expand or command a mood, as exemplified by her poem "No Coward Soul Is Mine" with her words to the immortal deity who "Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears." These singly delivered, sibilant words demand the slow pace of deliberation and awe. Likewise, Brontë constructs her literature from natural materials. As a result, her images endure humbly yet vividly in the memory. The correspondence posited in Brontë's poem "Love and Friendship" between love and the seasonal rose-briar and between the evergreen holly and friendship is simple, yet powerfully effective. In "The Bluebell," a single bluebell that can remedy homesickness for the more passionate "purple heath" of the moor quietly persists in miniature.

Brontë communicates her own fierce independence, as well as her well-known mystical yearning for transcendence, in all of her work, from her young poems of the childhood world of Gondal to the rich harvest of her single novel, *Wuthering Heights*. In all Brontë's work, it is apparent that her attachment to the natural world is always as strong as her desire to transcend it. This enigma of individuality that seeks to go beyond itself was the one that Brontë chose to write from and live through. It is this concern that haunts her poetry and lives unsettled and restless in her novel.

## WUTHERING HEIGHTS

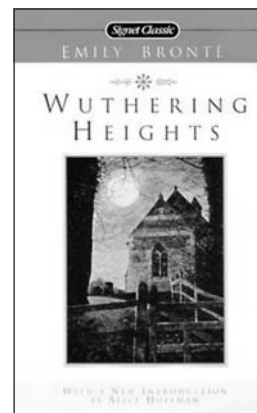
**First published:** 1847

**Type of work:** Novel

*A jilted lover's passion becomes a storm of vengeance in the wild moorland of northern England.*

First published in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* is an enduring gothic romance filled with intrigue and terror. It is set in the northern England countryside, where the weather fluctuates in sudden extremes and where bogs can open underfoot of unsuspecting night venturers. Under this atmospheric dome of brooding unpredictability, Brontë explores the violent and unpredictable elements of human passion. The story revolves around the tempestuous romance between Heathcliff, an orphan who is taken home to Wuthering Heights on impulse, and Catherine Earnshaw, a strong-willed girl whose mother died delivering her and who becomes Heathcliff's close companion.

The setting is central to the novel. Both action and characters can be understood in terms of two households. Wuthering Heights, overtaken by the sinister usurper, Heathcliff, becomes a dark, winter world of precipitous acts that lead to brutality, vengeance, and social alienation. What *Wuthering Heights* lacks in history, education, and gregariousness is supplied by the more springlike Thrushcross Grange, where the fair-haired Lintons live in the human world of reason, order, and gentleness. Unfortunately, these less passionate mortals are subject to the indifferent forces of nature, dying in childbirth and of consumption too easily. They are subject to Heathcliff's wrath as well, losing all assets and independence to him.



Brontë uses the element of unpredictability to spur the action in *Wuthering Heights*, which adds excitement and suspense at every turn and enlivens

the characters by infusing them with the characteristic storminess of the moorland weather. Seemingly chance events gather like ominous clouds to create the passionate tale of Heathcliff and Catherine. They are brought together by chance and are left to roam the moor together, far from the world of shelter and discipline, when Catherine's father dies, leaving her tyrannical brother, Hindley, in charge. Accident also accounts for Catherine's introduction to the more refined world of Thrushcross Grange, when she is bitten by a watchdog while spying on her cousins, who then rescue her. Even Heathcliff's angry departure and vowed vengeance is the result of eavesdropping, hearing only what he could mistake for rejection, and not Catherine's true feelings for him.

In Heathcliff's character, Brontë explores the great destructive potential of unrestrained passion. In him, human emotion is uncontrollable and deadly. In the ghostly union of Catherine and Heathcliff beyond the grave, however, Brontë suggests the metaphysical nature of love and the potential of passion to project itself beyond the physical realm of existence.

The ending of *Wuthering Heights* depicts Brontë's final answer to the theme of destructive passion—the answer of mercy and forgiveness, which Brontë holds to be the supreme quality in human beings. Hareton, whom Heathcliff once unwittingly saved from death and then forever after abused, forgives his captor for everything. This forgiveness is accompanied by the mercy that Catherine Linton shows Hareton, teaching him to read after years of mocking his ignorance. Together, these acts of grace nullify the deadly effects of their keeper, who dies soon afterward. The passion of winter becomes the compromise of spring; the storm has passed, and life continues in harmony at last.

## “REMEMBRANCE”

**First published:** 1846 (collected in *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, 1846)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A woman mourns the death of her lover, fifteen years later.*

“Remembrance” is one of Brontë's well-known poems, one originally from the world of Gondal that Brontë created with her sister Anne at a young age. This poem is an elegy, a sorrowful lament for the dead. Queen Rosina Alcona speaks directly to her lost love, the emperor Julius Brenzaida, fifteen years after his assassination, in yearning that does not recognize the limits of time and space. Such an emotional state is typical in Brontë's poems, as is the simplicity and earnestness of the lines. The key feature of her style is repetition:

Cold in the earth—and the deep snow piled  
above thee!

Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!  
Have I forgot, my Only Love, to love thee,  
Severed at last by Time's all-severing wave?

Brontë repeats single words, such as “cold,” throughout the poem, insisting on their effect, but only subtly. When the repetition occurs in each line (“cold,” “far,” “love,” and “sever”), a resonance is established that expresses the unfilled span of fifteen years through which the speaker's words must travel.

Brontë also uses assonance, the less obvious repetition of vowel sounds, as in the second stanza line, “Over the mountains, on that northern shore.” She uses alliteration to unify the speaker's experience of life and death, sorrow and joy, as well. In the sixth stanza, “days of golden dreams” are tied to the “despair [that] was powerless to destroy” by strong consonant alliteration. To further the emotional effect of joy turned to sorrow, “destroy” is rhymed with “joy” in the last line of the stanza.

The pauses that occur at the ends of the lines are unusually long. This effect certainly adds to the resonance and feeling of words that must travel a long way, perhaps never reaching the listener except by the web of quiet persistence that exists in repeti-

tion. This is the memorableness of Brontë's poems, that they linger like faint strains of music.

### SUMMARY

Emily Brontë is a master at exploring human emotion. In the annals of world literature, her status is unique. Her standing as a major novelist rests on the merits of *Wuthering Heights*, yet no examination of English fiction can afford to ignore it. The book's character and settings are embedded within the heritage of Western culture. Her poetry, infused with the Romantic ideal of transcendence, depicts the soul's desire to travel beyond the limits of time and space in order to find liberation.

The moorland in which she grew up gave her a language of expression that is powerful as well as beautiful. Charlotte Brontë best expresses the originality and power of Emily's work:

With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands, colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock: in the former sense, terrible and goblinlike; in the latter, almost beautiful, for its colouring of mellow grey, and moorland moss clothes it; and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant's foot.

Jennifer McLeod

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Would a child sharing the personal traits of Emily Brontë receive proper encouragement in the type of school she would be most likely to attend today?
- Explain whether Gondal was primarily an exercise of Brontë's imagination or something that she perceived as a reality.
- Does the term "gothic novel" apply to *Wuthering Heights*?
- Is *Wuthering Heights* a greater novel than *Jane Eyre*? Substantiate your claim.
- Does Brontë's fondness for music contribute substantially to *Wuthering Heights*?
- As in other arts, repetition can be a flaw or an asset in poetry. How does Brontë make it work?





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## RUPERT BROOKE

**Born:** Rugby, Warwickshire, England  
August 3, 1887

**Died:** Aboard a hospital ship in the Aegean Sea  
April 23, 1915

*A poet and writer of some prominence before World War I, Brooke wrote war poems, particularly "The Soldier," that captured the patriotic idealism of the generation of young soldiers who died in the early months of that conflict.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rupert Chawner Brooke was born in Rugby, England, on August 3, 1887. His father, William Parker Brooke, was an instructor of classics at Rugby School, one of the most prestigious of England's public schools, but it was Mary Ruth Cotterill, Rupert's mother, who dominated the family. Young Brooke, the middle child among three brothers, attended Rugby School, playing cricket and football, excelling in English, winning prizes for his poetry, and becoming Head Boy. Many of his contemporaries were attracted to his personality; others noted his tall, blond physique, reminiscent of a young Apollo.

From Rugby, Brooke entered King's College, Cambridge, where, under the influence of more modern writers and intellectuals, he abandoned some of the Decadent fin de siècle postures found in his earlier poetry. He also made friends among some of England's most famous political and artistic families: the Asquiths, Darwins, Oliviers, and Stracheys. Freed from the day-to-day influence of his family, he joined the socialist Fabian Society and university dramatic groups; he also began writing for the *Cambridge Review*, a university journal with a national reputation. During his Cambridge years, from 1906 to 1909, he wrote at least sixty poems, about a third of which were printed in his first volume of poetry, *Poems*, in 1911.

Failure to receive a first-class degree and the complications of emotional exhaustion prompted Brooke to leave Cambridge for the small village of Grantchester, just a few miles distant but far enough from the attractions of the university city. His friends and acquaintances congregated around him there, and his time at the Old Vicarage, his principal residence in Grantchester, assumed almost mythic proportions, although he lived there principally for only two years. In addition to his poetry, Brooke became an accomplished literary critic; he particularly admired Robert Browning and John Donne, and although always opposing free verse, he praised the poetry of Ezra Pound. He also wrote a dissertation on the Elizabethan dramatist John Webster. Virginia Woolf, a friend, noted Brooke's wide literary knowledge and disciplined work habits.

*Poems* included fifty poems from both his younger years and after his university days. The volume was widely reviewed and well received, considering that it was the author's first book. In early 1912, however, Brooke suffered a breakdown, compounded by both personal and professional considerations. His literary career, his dependency on his changing circle of acquaintances, his relationship with his mother, and his other emotional attachments led him to fear that he was becoming insane. Nevertheless, during this period he wrote one of his most famous poems, "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester." By the end of the year, apparently recovered, he was again engaged in several literary projects.



In 1913, Brooke traveled to Canada, the United States, and the islands of the South Pacific. Initially, his response to the culture of the Western Hemisphere was mainly dismissive, but the California cities of San Francisco and Berkeley pleased him, and his three months in Tahiti led to some of his best love poems. He had also begun working with Edward Marsh on the first of a series of anthologies of modern poets. Known as “Georgian Poetry,” the first volume appeared in 1913. Later, the term came to denote a certain artificial vacuumness, but the initial volume included, in addition to poems by Brooke, work by D. H. Lawrence, John Masefield, Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon.

By the time of Brooke’s return to England in the spring of 1914, his circle included not only his university friendships at Cambridge and Grantchester but also the major writers and artists of the day. In addition, he was on close terms with the prime minister, Herbert Asquith, and Winston Churchill, first lord of the admiralty. Still young, his future seemed bright as a poet or literary critic, even perchance a politician. On the day after his twenty-seventh birthday, however, Great Britain entered World War I, and Brooke soon sought an officer’s commission. During the winter of 1914-1915, he wrote a series of sonnets on the war, published in *1914, and Other Poems* (1915), in which he idealized sacrificing one’s life for one’s country. Many of his contemporaries had already gone to the Western Front, where thousands were dying in what came to be called “no man’s land,” and in early 1915 Brooke’s Royal Naval Division was ordered to take part in the Dardanelles campaign against Turkey, Germany’s ally. In spite of Brooke’s robust appearance, his health had always been problematic, and before his unit entered combat he became ill with fever and died on a hospital ship in the Aegean Sea on April 23, 1915, England’s St. George’s Day. Even before his death, his poem “The Soldier” had been read during services in Westminster Abbey. Churchill wrote of Brooke’s death and sacrifice in Brooke’s obituary in *The Times* of London. Brooke’s apotheosis had begun.

#### ANALYSIS

Brooke’s facility with verse manifested itself early in his youth, and his technical abilities were fully developed before leaving Cambridge. Influ-

enced by Browning’s use of common language and ordinary personalities, so unlike the poetry of fellow Victorians Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and William Morris, Brooke freely borrowed from and parodied the style and content not only of Browning and Tennyson but also of A. E. Housman and Algernon Charles Swinburne. He mastered the dramatic sonnet form and wrote numerous poems in what has been called a narrative idyll style. Whatever his form, Brooke chose to write in traditional meter rather than experiment in the free-verse approach of Pound and T. S. Eliot. Brooke’s reliance upon such forms is perhaps one reason why his reputation declined among critics, but it also explains in part why he remained popular among general readers.

Brooke’s mature literary life was relatively brief. If he early mastered the forms of poetry, the subject matter of his works and the “voice” of his poems evolved from his boyhood days at Rugby and his years at Cambridge until his death while still in his twenties. Although he worked and reworked his material, his willingness to exclude so many of his early efforts from his first published volume of poetry in 1911 suggests that he realized that many of his poems were not of the highest quality. The collected poems form a rather slight volume, and in terms of mere quantity Brooke could be categorized as a minor poet.

Critics have also complained that Brooke too often intruded sentimentality and artificiality into many of his poems. In poems such as “Ante Aram,” Brooke resorts to archaic diction, convoluted syntax, and vague, romantic description. The resulting language is more Victorian, more Tennysonian, than expected, given Brooke’s avowed aim of a new poetry for the new century, and hardly reflects his praise of Browning’s use of the common speech of the common people.

One of the most apparent elements throughout Brooke’s work is his preoccupation with death, particularly the death of the young. His idealized notion of the sacrificial death appears out of place in the violent historical context of the twentieth century, but it could have resulted from Brooke’s youth: Death can hold a morbid fascination for the young, who have no sense of their own mortality. Perhaps he was also influenced by the Decadent writers who interested him while still a schoolboy. Yet the paradigm for this theme may be Brooke’s

own personality; among his last poems, “The Soldier” can be seen as a culmination of his quest for death.

Brooke’s poems also frequently connect death with love. In “Mummia,” he describes the ancient Egyptians drinking the dust of mummies to achieve a state of sexual ecstasy. In the same way, he says that the poet has “sucked all lovers of all time/ To rarify ecstasy,” citing famous lovers such as Helen, Juliet, and Cleopatra, whose tragic lives immortalized their passion. This romantic vision of death as the culmination of love contrasts with poems such as “The Funeral of Youth: Threnody,” where Brooke tells in allegorical fashion the sad lament of those friends of Youth who came to his burial. He includes among these such figures as Laughter, Pride, Joy, Lust, Folly, Grief, Sorrow, Wisdom, Passion, and others who met again at Youth’s funeral, “All except only Love. Love had died long ago.” Death, in this poem, brings the loss of love, rather than its ultimate fulfillment. At other times, death results in the transmutation of love into a kind of Platonic ideal, as in “Tiare Tahiti,” written during his travels in the South Pacific. He notes that, after death,

Instead of lovers, Love shall be;  
For hearts, Immutability;  
And there, on the Ideal Reef,  
Thunders the Everlasting Sea!

Brooke, however, was not always the youthful romanticist or idealist ruminating about death and love. Like Browning, he could also be very much the realist, sometimes punctuating this realism with humor and irony, too much so for some of his contemporaries. Both his publisher and Edward Marsh, his close friend and adviser, objected to the inclusion of two of his sonnets in his first book of poems. In “Libido,” where Brooke writes of sexual conquest, not romantic love, the phrase “your remembered smell most agony” was felt by Marsh and others to be in bad taste. In “A Channel Passage,” the narrator tries to remember his lover in order to avoid becoming physically sick while crossing the English Channel.

Finally, if critics have often rightly criticized Brooke for idealizing the sacrificial death of youth, he could also write of the end of youthful idealism brought about by age. In a reference to Homer’s

tale of the Trojan Wars, Brooke shows, in “Menelaus and Helen,” husband and wife at the end of their lives:

Often he wonders why on earth he went  
Troyward, or why poor Paris ever came.  
Oft she weeps, gummy-eyed and impotent;  
Her dry shanks twist at Paris’ mumbled name.  
So Menelaus nagged; and Helen cried;  
And Paris slept on by Scamander side.

Brooke never reached the age of Helen and Menelaus; instead, he died at age twenty-seven, to be immortalized like Achilles or the young Apollo, whom so many believed that he resembled.

### “THE OLD VICARAGE, GRANTCHESTER”

**First published:** 1916 (collected in *Collected Poems*, 1916)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem records the exiled poet’s reflections and remembrances of his home in England.*

“The Old Vicarage, Grantchester” was written by Brooke while in Berlin in 1912. After initially titling the poem “Home” and then “The Sentimental Exile,” the author eventually chose the name of his occasional residence near Cambridge. One of Brooke’s most famous poems, its references can be overly obscure because of the many specific Cambridge locations and English traditions to which the poem refers. Some have seen it as sentimentally nostalgic, which it is, while others have recognized its satiric and sometimes cruel humor.

Using octosyllabics—a meter often favored by Brooke—the author writes of Grantchester and other nearby villages in what has been called a seriocomic style. It is very much a poem of “place,” the place where Brooke composed the work, Berlin, and the contrast of that German world (“Here am I, sweating, sick, and hot”) with his home in England. Yet it is more than just the longing of an exile for his home, nostalgically imagined. The landscape of Cambridgeshire is reproduced in the poem, but Brooke, the academic, populates this English world with allusions and ref-

erences from history and myth. He compares the countryside to a kind of Greek Arcadia, home to nymphs and fauns, and refers to such famous literary figures as Lord Byron, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Tennyson. Homesick for England, a land “Where men with Splendid Hearts may go,” it is Grantchester, in particular, that he desires.

If the poem is nostalgic and sentimental, however, it is also satiric in its treatment of the Cambridgeshire landscape. In wishing to be in Grantchester, Brooke compares its virtues with those of other nearby towns and villages. In a series of wry couplets, Brooke pokes sly fun at the inhabitants of neighboring villages, whom he contrasts with those in Grantchester. The people of Cambridge are said to be “urban, squat, and packed with guile,” while oaths—or worse—are flung at visitors to Over and Trumpington. He complains that “Ditton girls are mean and dirty,/ And there’s none in Harston under thirty,” but Grantchester is described as a place of “peace and holy quiet.” Even the residents of Grantchester, however, are not immune to Brooke’s teasing; in a line that is perhaps only half in jest, given his own bouts of depression, he adds that “when they get to feeling old,/ They up and shoot themselves, I’m told.”

Yet there is also a seriousness in the poem underneath its comedic elements. In his conclusion, Brooke asks a series of rhetorical questions:

Say, is there Beauty yet to find?  
And Certainty? and Quiet kind?  
Deep meadows yet, for to forget  
The lies, and truths, and pain? . . . oh! yet  
Stands the Church clock at ten to three?  
And is there honey still for tea?

The poet longs for the remembered, if imagined, permanence of Grantchester, but he also sadly and whimsically recognizes even its ultimate impermanence and transience. Written only two years before the outbreak of World War I, the poem foreshadows the world that will be forever lost as a result of that conflict.

## “THE SOLDIER”

**First published:** 1915 (collected in *1914, and Other Poems*, 1915)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Envisioning the narrator’s probable death in war, the poem reflects his idealism and patriotic self-sacrifice.*

“The Soldier” was one of five sonnets that Brooke composed shortly after the beginning of World War I and published in 1915 with the title *1914, and Other Poems*. Written in two stanzas, an octet of eight lines and a sestet of six lines, it is by far his most famous poem, expressing the idealism common throughout the nations of Europe as they eagerly marched to battle in 1914 and felt by Brooke before his own death in April, 1915.

The well-known opening lines represented this romantic notion of consecration through sacrifice by showing the speaker’s transformation after death: “there’s some corner of a foreign field/ That is for ever England.” In retrospect, to others the poem came to epitomize the misguided and self-satisfied naïveté that died in the trenches of “no man’s land.” The real war of ugly and often futile death was captured not in Brooke’s work but in the poems by his English contemporaries, such as Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et decorum est.”

Yet “The Soldier” is more an elegy of sacrifice than a poem about modern war. It is true that Brooke died before going into battle, but his friendships with English statesman Winston Churchill and other high-ranking politicians had given him knowledge about the destructiveness that industry and technology would bring to the battlefield. There is nothing of that kind of war in the poem. There is also nothing about the reality of dying; the first-person narrator ignores the stench of corpses on the battlefield, instead envisioning a death that transfigures him into an idealized world.

### 1914 & Other Poems



Rupert Brooke

This is not simply any world, however, for “The Soldier” is a poem about Brooke’s feelings for England, particularly the rural English countryside of Cambridgeshire. His burial place, though in some foreign land, will become a part of England, but not the England of cities and factories. It was the landscape of natural England that made and formed the poet, and he waxes lyrical about the beauties of English flowers, rivers, and sunshine, elements that have formed him in his youth.

Brooke believed that his England was worthy of sacrifice. This patriotic element in “The Soldier” reflects the strong strain of nationalism existing throughout Western civilization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As traditional religion had become more personal and individual, nationalism and patriotism had become the religion of the public community, and “The Soldier” reflects those passions. In the second stanza, Brooke refers to “the eternal mind,” a Platonic reference, where the dust of the narrator had become a mere “pulse,” but a pulse that

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by  
England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and  
gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English  
heaven.

Brooke’s soldier—as Brooke himself—was eagerly willing to sacrifice everything, even his life, for the Eden of England. It struck a strong chord in the early days of World War I. By the end of the war in 1918, with ten million dead, other poets were striking other chords, less idealistic, less self-sacrificing, and less patriotic.

## SUMMARY

Unfortunately, perhaps, Rupert Brooke is remembered primarily for one poem, “The Soldier,” a poem that most critics agree was not among his finest accomplishments. His patriotic elegy to sacrifice, coinciding with his youthful death, turned Brooke into a monument to youth, to idealism, to a past that no longer existed after the Great War was over. Brooke saw himself and his poetry as a progressive step beyond that of his Victorian predecessors. Paradoxically, he now too often seems part of a world of rural innocence that has long since disappeared. If Brooke had lived, it is impossible to say that he would have become a major poet, but his early death obscured his legacy of poetic realism, irony, humor, intelligence, and passion, which is also found in his writings.

Eugene Larson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What did the development of Rupert Brooke's dramatic skill owe to his study of Robert Browning? What did it owe to John Donne?
- To what extent does Brooke's poetic reputation rest on his personal qualities and adventures?
- In what respects was Brooke a late Victorian poet?
- Can nostalgia and satire coexist successfully in the same poem? Does your answer apply to "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester"?
- Relate Brooke's "The Soldier" to the poetic tradition—familiar in William Shakespeare, Browning, and others—of celebrating England.

## ANITA BROOKNER

**Born:** London, England  
July 16, 1928

*Brookner's novels depict the painful experiences of intelligent, sensitive, and lonely women and men who try to find love in a world of greed and selfishness.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anita Brookner was born in London, England, on July 16, 1928; some references wrongly report the year as 1938. Her parents were Newson Brookner, a Polish immigrant and businessman, and Maude Schiska Brookner, who had been an opera singer before her marriage.

Brookner and her parents lived with her grandmother, part of an extended Polish Jewish family that included many aunts, uncles, and cousins. As a child she read many books by the great nineteenth century English novelist Charles Dickens. She was brought up according to Jewish traditions but because of her delicate health was never asked to learn Hebrew. Although Brookner is not religious and although she was born and reared in London, she thinks her upbringing may have caused her to feel like an outsider in English society. Critics think that many of the heroines of her novels reflect their author's sense of estrangement.

She attended James Allen's Girls' School in Dulwich, a pleasant section of London south of the Thames River. She earned a bachelor of arts degree in French literature at King's College of the University of London. She then studied art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, also in London, where she was awarded a doctorate. She had traveled to Paris, France, conducting research to write her dissertation, which she later revised for publication as *Greuze: The Rise and Fall of an Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (1972).

Brookner had a distinguished career as an art historian before turning to fiction. She taught first from 1959 to 1964 as a visiting lecturer at the University of Reading in England and after 1964 at the Courtauld Institute. In 1967-1968, she was the first woman to hold the distinguished post of Slade Pro-

fessor of Art at Cambridge University. She has published several highly acclaimed works on art history, mainly on French painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Brookner began her career as a novelist when she was about fifty years old. She later told an interviewer that she was unhappy and thought that by writing a novel she would be forced to think carefully about her own life. Her first novel, *The Debut* (1981; published in England as *A Start in Life*, 1981), is generally regarded as autobiographical.

Thereafter, she published one novel a year. Her career can be seen in stages. *The Debut*, *Providence* (1982), and *Look at Me* (1983) center on the experiences of younger women growing up in London, beginning careers, and searching for love. In *Hotel du Lac* (1984), Brookner begins to write about older women and to construct more complicated stories. *Hotel du Lac's* central character is a writer, and, like *Look at Me*, the novel questions the relationship of fiction to life. In 1984, *Hotel du Lac* won the prestigious Booker-McConnell Prize, and a film version was released in 1986.

Most of Brookner's later novels also have women as central characters, but they are middle-aged or older. These novels tend to expand her range in other ways as well. They often focus on families and their problems. Blanche Vernon in *The Misalliance* (1986; published in England as *A Misalliance*, 1986) has been divorced; Fay Langdon in *Brief Lives* (1990) is a widow. *Family and Friends* (1985) was something new for Brookner; it tells the story of a whole family, including two brothers, over a period of years and takes the reader as far afield as Hollywood. *Latecomers* (1988) also deals with two families, at the center of which are two male friends, marking Brookner's continuing ex-



ploration of male characters. In *Lewis Percy* (1989) and in *A Private View* (1994) the central characters are also male. Other novels she wrote in the 1990's include *A Closed Eye* (1991), *Fraud* (1992), and *A Family Romance* (1993).

When she was teaching, Brookner wrote her novels during summer holidays and mainly in her office at the Courtauld Institute. In 1987, she retired from teaching in order to devote her time to writing, including essays, introductions, and reviews. Brookner, who remained unmarried, settled in a small apartment overlooking a square in Chelsea, a fashionable district in London.

In 1990, Brookner received the title Commander, Order of the British Empire. Her professional achievements earned for Brookner such awards as honorary degrees from Smith College and the University of Loughborough. Criticizing Brookner's body of work as repetitive, Oxford University's Encaenia committee, which selects honorary doctorate recipients, repeatedly decided not to honor Brookner with that recognition despite colleagues' support after she won the Booker-McConnell Prize. Cambridge's women's college, New Hall, and King's College London both designated Brookner a Fellow. Her novel *Making Things Better* (2002; published in England as *The Next Big Thing*, 2002) was included on the Man Booker Prize long list in 2002. *The Bay of Angels* (2001) received the 2003 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

During the early twenty-first century, Brookner continued to explore relationships between grown children and parents, especially daughters with their mothers, and friends in novels, including *The Rules of Engagement* (2003) and *Leaving Home* (2005). She also wrote the nonfiction book *Romanticism and Its Discontents* (2000).

## ANALYSIS

Brookner has acknowledged that *The Debut* is autobiographical and that her novels taken together are sometimes seen as a massive work of self-analysis. Her intelligent and lonely heroines are often considered to be versions of Brookner herself. There is a recognizable Brookner woman and Brookner world.

Her novels are told in the present; flashbacks transport the reader to a character's youth and give a family's history. Brookner often employs sus-

pense. In *Hotel du Lac*, the reader does not find out why Edith left England until halfway through the novel; at the beginning of *Fraud*, Anna has mysteriously disappeared and does not surface for several chapters. Although most of Brookner's novels take place in London, some characters go abroad, mainly to France, and many (like Brookner herself) have important roots in central Europe.

Readers are introduced to London circles not often depicted in fiction. Most characters are financially comfortable. Many, like Francis Hinton in *Look at Me* and Anna Durrant in *Fraud*, have inherited wealth. On the other hand, Hartmann and Fibich in *Latecomers* are successful business partners. Brookner's earlier heroines are often both attracted to and repulsed by a well-off, happy, and conventional family, such as the Benedicts in *Look at Me* and the Livingstones in *A Friend from England* (1987). In most of these cases, readers enter these characters' spacious apartments, with their warm rooms expensively and heavily furnished in a taste that seems oppressively bland and old-fashioned.

Most readers and critics focus upon the Brookner heroine. No matter what her age, she thinks of the past, of her restricted childhood or of her blighted days as a young woman. She is intelligent, literate, and given to unblinking self-analysis and self-appraisal. She is acceptable looking, but not strikingly beautiful—some might call her plain. All these qualities make her think of herself as an exile.

Although the Brookner woman of the early novels is lonely and alone, she is a keen observer of the material objects that surround her and of the appearance and character of the people she meets. She wants to participate in life and is attracted to happy circles of what seem to her normal people. She yearns for marriage to a perfect man. She is disappointed.

Women in the later novels share many of these traits. Even though they marry, they still hope for love. Blanche in *The Misalliance* is deserted for a younger woman; Fay in *Brief Lives* lives for her married lover; and in *A Closed Eye*, Harriet yearns for but does not get Jack.

Readers and critics have charged that Brookner's women lack the assertiveness that is admired in the heroines of many contemporary novels. Although some, like Anna in *Fraud*, do assert themselves, most cannot change their relations with

other people any more than they can change the drab decor of their apartments. Why do Brookner's women not break out of their restrictive worlds? Their worlds are powerful webs of obligations to their parents and of their personal limitations. In her later novels, these obligations combine with inertia and the complications of husbands, other women, children, and lovers. The ties are simple, but strong; the women do not break free. Even so, a mystery remains. Brookner's central characters seem to live in magic circles they cannot step out of. They resemble figures in a legend, imprisoned by a sorcerer's spell or a parent's curse. Perhaps the spell is simply that even though the characters know that dreams rarely come true, they also know that to give up those dreams is death.

Brookner creates a marvelous gallery of supporting characters. Her heroines fall for a variety of charming and vital men who always prefer beautiful, spoiled women, like Mousie and Sally in *The Misalliance* and Yvette of *Latecomers*. There are wise and sympathetic older women, like Molly Edwards in *The Debut*, the loyal Millie Savage in *Brief Lives*, and the no-nonsense Mrs. Marsh in *Fraud*. Some figures are absurd, like the acrobat Vadim in *Providence* and the charming Toto in *Latecomers*. Others are grotesques, from the scorpion-like Alix in *Look at Me* and the satanic Mr. Neville in *Hotel du Lac* to Fay's gin-swilling mother-in-law in *Brief Lives*, the exasperating Dolly in *A Family Romance*, and Katy Gibb, the vulgar New Age practitioner in *A Private View*. Many of these supporting characters know what the central characters seem unable to comprehend: that beautiful, greedy, selfish people always win, and virtuous, innocent people always lose.

Brookner mostly used boys and men as secondary characters in her early books. She began to depict more completely examined male protagonists in such novels as *Latecomers*, in which two Jewish males, Thomas Hartmann and Thomas Fibich, are exiles from Germany, somewhat like Julius Herz in *Making Things Better*, but experience greater extremes of suffering because of direct repercussions from the Holocaust. Like her women, Brookner's male characters are often isolated emotionally and physically, experiencing discouragement or despair when their desires are unattainable or unrequited. Brookner foreshadows Julius Herz's infatuation with his cousin Fanny Bauer in *Altered States*

(1996), in which Alan Sherwood desires his cousin Sarah Miller, who shares similar personality characteristics with Fanny. Unlike Julius, Alan's obsession becomes tragic when his wife Angela commits suicide after Alan abandons her.

Offering the similar themes and literary styles that she uses to portray her female characters, Brookner's male-driven novels explore characters' psychological responses by revealing what they are thinking and how they justify their behavior or passivity as they face losses and rejection. She explores changing gender roles in society and men's reactions when some female characters have successful careers and do not rely on men for financial support but still desire romantic interaction, although often imposing boundaries.

Some critics claim that Brookner's novels are really conventional romances. Although Brookner is aware of the attraction of romances, the endings of her novels are never conventionally happy. The conflicts in her novels may seem to be only those of innocent people against an evil world. In Brookner's hands, however, these personal conflicts reflect the profound cultural shock of the past two centuries, the clash of the hopes of Romanticism with the real world. Early novels dramatize this conflict rather simply, but as Brookner has matured as a novelist, her sympathies have grown wider, encompassing groups of men and women engaged in lives of hope, disappointment, and some success.

Few of Brookner's characters, male or female, often limited by assumptions, pretensions, or emotions, achieve complete autonomy and cling to people and places that comfort but are not always good for them. Brookner effectively establishes somber tones when these characters, confined by familial or romantic duties and expectations, remain unfulfilled and powerless and often on the periphery unless a catalyst provokes them to become more selfish and less selfless in an attempt to fill their emptiness.

Although several of her novels are told by their central characters (*Look at Me*, *A Friend in England*, *Brief Lives*, and *A Private View*), most of them employ limited omniscience. *Hotel du Lac* is a mixture of devices. For the most part, a narrator restricts the reader to Edith's mind, but significant exceptions hint at Mr. Neville's satanic powers. Edith's unsent letters are first-person commentaries on

the action. *Family and Friends* is also unusual; it contains very little conversation, and its story is told almost entirely by a narrator.

Brookner has said that although she revises her first drafts very little, she prides herself on being lucid. Critics praise her prose for other qualities as well. It is studded with apt allusions to novels (English, American, French, and Russian) and to the visual arts. These references can become symbolic, as in descriptions of paintings in *The Misalliance*.

Her words describe the surface of life precisely and lovingly: furniture, clothes, art objects, food. Her metaphors and similes are surprising and expressive: Edith's room is "veal-colored" in *Hotel du Lac*, and Lewis Percy's potential mother-in-law watches him "with the stillness of a lizard." Moreover, the reader always senses a sophisticated and joyful play of wit and intelligence while reading Brookner.

## THE DEBUT

**First published:** 1981

**Type of work:** Novel

*An older woman remembers how her family thwarted her hopes for love.*

In *The Debut*, Brookner's first novel, the reader meets Dr. Ruth Weiss when she is a teacher of French literature in a university. She is forty years old and dresses in an old-fashioned way. From the beginning, Brookner evokes one of her major themes: the relation of stories to actual life. The narrator tells the reader enigmatically that Ruth's life has been blighted by literature. Her students and colleagues are not aware of her past, which was intense and adventurous. The reader is taken back to Ruth's past.

Ruth grows up in London as the only child of irresponsible parents—her English mother a fading actress and her European Jewish father a philanthropic book dealer. After her sensible grandmother dies, their household, with the help of a

slovenly housekeeper, Mrs. Cutler, degenerates into shambles. Ruth, an intelligent girl, takes refuge in books; their stories and their happy endings become real to her. She believes that real girls, like Cinderella, get to the ball. Ruth believes that virtue is rewarded, as in the endings of novels by Charles Dickens. Like most of the central female figures of Brookner's later novels, she is a lonely, rather plain, timid, thoughtful young woman. Even as a university student, she makes only a few friends; her attempt to make dinner for an attractive man is a disaster.

In her university work, she is fascinated by the French writer Honoré de Balzac, whose novels tell her unpleasant truths about life. She learns that vice succeeds more often than virtue and that good looks count for a lot. Her studies draw her to Paris (like Brookner), where life takes a turn for the better. She meets a worldly English couple who convince her to cut and style her marvelous red hair (Brookner herself is red-haired) and to dress fashionably. She begins to live a life of selfish pleasure. Then she meets the famous Professor Duplessis and falls in love. The professor is a renowned Balzac scholar; though married and much older than she, he is tender and considerate. Ruth's happiness is at its peak when the professor comes for a meal in her marvelous new apartment. A telephone message calls her home: Her parents' lives have been shattered by a violent quarrel. They need her, and she makes a dismal trip back to London.

She returns to a diminished life. She gives up her new, liberated personality and reverts to her earlier role as timid daughter. Her mother dies. Even though her father suffers a stroke, he lingers on for many years, with Ruth as his housekeeper. She gets a university job and prospers. She contracts a loveless marriage, but her husband is killed in an accident. The reader is returned to the Dr. Ruth Weiss of the first chapter, a typical Brookner heroine: a lonely, sensitive, intelligent forty-year-old academic who once hoped that life would have a happy ending but whose consolation is that she once had adventures that seemed as intense as those in any novel.

## LOOK AT ME

**First published:** 1983

**Type of work:** Novel

*Frances Hinton tries to enter a glamorous world and find love, but she is defeated.*

The story of *Look at Me*, Brookner's third novel, is told in the first person by its central character, Frances Hinton. She is an efficient young librarian at a medical institute in London. Like other Brookner heroines, she is lonely. Her parents are both dead, and she lives on in the comfortable family apartment with their housekeeper. Perhaps because she knows she is not beautiful, perhaps because of a previous unhappy love affair at which she hints, Frances classifies herself (also like so many of Brookner's heroines) as an observer of life, not a participant. She shows readers her powers of observation in describing the odd people she knows and promises to use them as a writer of entertaining, sharply satirical fiction. She has had a story or two published, and she contemplates a novel.

Behind Frances the observer is Frances the woman who longs to be a participant in life. She longs to cry out: "Look at me!" She wants excitement and finds it in the friendship of Nick Fraser, a handsome doctor who works at the institute, and Alix, his beautiful wife. They are a perfect couple, handsome and attractive, though Alix gradually emerges as the more powerful of the two. She is domineering and self-centered, but Frances is willing to be dominated and realizes (like Ruth in *The Debut*) that Alix's selfishness and greed are what life's participants possess. Far from turning away, Frances attaches herself to the Frasers with her eyes open.

Frances also hopes for love. Through Nick and Alix's efforts, Frances is thrown together with Dr. James Anstey, who also works at the institute. Grad-

ually they develop a close friendship—perhaps love. Each evening after leaving the Frasers, they walk across Hyde Park to Frances's apartment and sit quietly together. Without acknowledging that she is in love, Frances feels more and more like a participant in life, less like an observer and less like a writer.

Things go sour. In an ugly scene at a restaurant, Frances realizes that James has become the lover of the Frasers' friend Maria, that he is another essentially selfish person, and that she is fated to remain an observer. At the end of the novel, Frances prepares to take revenge by writing satirical, entertaining novels about persons like the Frasers and James Anstey. (Brookner herself suggested that revenge may be one of her motives for writing.) The first-person novel, in fact, is presented as Frances's revenge. Yet part of her still cannot resist people like Nick and Alix. She will seek them out in order to make notes for her fiction.

## ~~HOTEL DU LAC~~

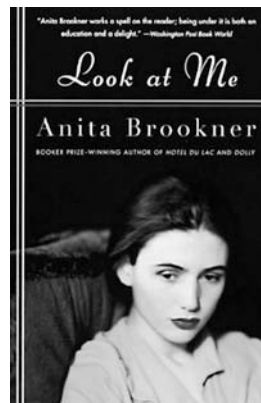
**First published:** 1984

**Type of work:** Novel

*Edith, a writer of romances with happy endings, refuses the temptation of a possible happy ending in her own life.*

At the beginning of *Hotel du Lac* (hotel of the lake), Edith Hope is thirty-nine years old. As usual in Brookner novels, she is less than beautiful. She is shy, meek, intelligent, and lonely. She is beginning an unexplained exile at an exclusive hotel on the banks of Lake Geneva in Switzerland.

Like Frances in *Look at Me*, she is a writer, but she is more than simply a satiric observer. In this novel, Brookner expands on the relationship of real life to fiction. Edith is an established writer of romances; she knows how to write stories with happy endings. She divides people into hares and tortoises: The hares are beautiful, selfish, and loved, like Nick and Alix in *Look at Me*; tortoises are meek, plain, and unloved, like Ruth in *The Debut*. Even though in real life the hares always win, Edith knows that her romances are popular because the women who read them are tortoises, and in her



books the tortoises always win. Hares do not read books; they are too busy having fun.

The characters of *Hotel du Lac* are not so easily categorized, although Edith's descriptions of them are brilliant and amusing. The pencil-thin Monica and an aging countess may be tortoises. A grotesque old lady and her plump, seductive daughter seem like hares. The elegant and charming Philip Neville is clearly not a tortoise. After Edith, the professional novelist, invents plots for them, however, she discovers her fictions are nothing like their true stories.

Edith herself is not exactly a tortoise. She has participated in life. From the beginning, Edith reveals part of her story in letters (unmailed) to David, a married man who has been her lover. Halfway through the novel, the reader learns why Edith is in Switzerland: She had to get out of town after leaving her fiancé waiting at the church. At the end of the novel, she is tempted to escape her lonely life forever when Philip Neville offers her a luxurious, loveless marriage. She rejects him and returns home to uncertainty.

Like other Brookner heroines, she has yearned for true love and lost it, but that does not mean she has given up on fiction. In a final letter, she tells David that she has always believed in the happy endings of her romance novels, though she now suspects they are not for her.

## MAKING THINGS BETTER

**First published:** 2002 (pb. in England as *The Next Big Thing*, 2002)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Julius Herz contemplates how to proceed after he is forced into an abrupt, unplanned retirement.*

*Making Things Better* opens with Julius Herz, age seventy-three, dreaming of his narcissistic cousin Fanny Bauer, whom he has romantically desired but been denied since childhood. Much of this narrative peers inside Julius's thoughts, revealing his backstory while chronicling his present. A German exile, a frequent figure in Brookner's fiction, Julius has lived in London since his Jewish family de-

parted Berlin when he was fourteen during the 1930's. A benefactor, Mr. Ostrovski, provided Julius's parents, Willy and Trude Herz, a flat and income from his music store.

This novel's American title is embedded in the text as Julius attempts to make conditions tolerable by dutifully serving his controlling parents and maintaining contact with his older brother, Freddy, a gifted violinist who resides in a hospice after a mental breakdown. That exile enabled Freddy to escape his parents' expectations. Trapped in a dreamlike existence, Julius neglects his desires, including his wife, Josie, who divorces him. Instead of seeking autonomous employment, Julius works in the music store with his father, settling into a tranquilizing routine that helps him grieve as the sole survivor after his parents' and brother's deaths.

Ostrovski sells the property where Julius works and lives, forcing Julius to make decisions. Julius adjusts to newfound idleness by leasing a flat and strolling to shops, galleries, and parks. As times passes, aging Julius measures life in the terms of his lease commitment, assuming he might die before renewing it. The text repeats this novel's British title, referring to dying being the next significant event for older people.

Brookner's choice of Julius's German surname, Herz, meaning heart, symbolizes his geriatric concerns, both emotional and physical. He meets Josie for lunches but values her friendship rather than attempting to reconnect romantically with her. Julius is aroused by his unattainable new neighbor, Sophie Clay, a young career woman. He longs for love, particularly with Fanny. When he experiences alarming heart flutters, Julius seeks help from an aloof physician who prescribes medication and ignores Julius's comments about Sigmund Freud. Ted Bishop, Julius's housecleaner, shares a cautionary tale in which an elderly airline passenger experiences a dire medical situation, foreshadowing Julius's future.

Julius goes to Paris, desiring to see a Eugène





Delacroix painting that had impressed him as a young man. His memories offer revelations of freedoms he had briefly savored there in the past. At home, he gets rid of heirlooms, particularly family photographs. After not communicating with him for years, Fanny sends Julius letters, pleading for him to help her with legal troubles. Provoked, Julius responds, telling Fanny she is self-centered and should read Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901; English translation, 1924), which examines family relationships. Destroying those angry notes, Julius mails kinder messages, suggesting they retreat to Beau Rivage, the Swiss hotel where he had unsuccessfully proposed to Fanny thirty years earlier. As Julius, wholeheartedly pursuing his desires instead of submitting to others, prepares to board the airplane, he ironically suffers an attack, accidentally dropping and stepping on his heart pills. Julius moves forward, his fate and destination unclear, to experience the next significant phase of his life, either his demise or his renewal.

#### SUMMARY

Anita Brookner has created a number of distinctive novels. Her central characters usually are intel-

ligent and sensitive women who yearn for love. The mood of the novels is somewhat somber because these women are foiled by many things: their own timidity, the restraints of family, and the self-centered greed of other people. Some of her later novels focus on male characters as well and describe the workings of more than one family. Readers get to know these characters well because of Brookner's deft analyses of their motives and attitudes, as well as her descriptions of the surfaces of their lives. If the stories are unhappy, Brookner's style is not: It is witty and imaginative.

Although some reviewers criticize Brookner's novels as being redundant, other critics emphasize that Brookner does not repeatedly create the same plots and characters but introduces new perceptions presented through people and settings familiar to her. They maintain that her evolving insights enrich her literary style with each novel she writes. While detractors dismiss Brookner's fiction as lacking sufficient literary substance, many scholars and readers recognize its qualities that merit continued attention.

*George Soule; updated by Elizabeth D. Schafer*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does the theme of exile shape Anita Brookner's characters and affect their behavior and perceptions of cultural differences?
- Analyze how Brookner's descriptions of residences and domestic life reveal characters' mind-sets. Contrast how several of her characters define their concept of home.
- Discuss the significance of childhood memories to Brookner's characters and how the literary device of flashbacks either deepens or distracts from her characterizations and plots.
- How effective is Brookner's inclusion of characters' letters, both mailed and un-sent, as a literary style?
- Compare characters' resignation and conformity to traditional gender and familial roles. How do themes of love, sacrifice, and disappointment permeate Brookner's novels?
- Examine how references to art and literature enhance the themes in Brookner's fiction. Discuss how possessing keen intellects strengthens or diminishes her characters' lives.
- Analyze how despair seems essential for character development in Brookner's works.
- Discuss Brookner's use of humor and how it balances her dramatic storytelling.



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## ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

**Born:** Coxhoe Hall, County Durham, England  
March 6, 1806

**Died:** Florence, Italy  
June 29, 1861

*As a nineteenth century English poet, Barrett Browning is recognized as a major literary artist and is considered an originator of a feminine poetic tradition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Barrett was born on March 6, 1806, the eldest child of Mary Graham Clark and Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett. She spent her childhood at Hope End, an estate owned by her parents, located in Herefordshire, England. She was a bright, intelligent child who grew up with the advantages of living in an upper-middle-class family, advantages made possible by her father's plantations in Jamaica. According to an essay she wrote when she was fourteen, she claims to have wanted to be a poet from the age of four. Poetry remained her life-long ambition.

Barrett's early life revolved around her family. Her mother was a submissive Victorian wife dedicated to her husband and children. She encouraged Barrett by copying and saving her daughter's early attempts at writing. Her father was a man with a tyrannical nature who imposed his will on the family. At the age of eight, Barrett wrote two birthday odes, one to her mother and one to her father. She portrayed women as loving and kind, but without power, and men as powerful and God-like. Although she remained devoted to her parents, neither parent served as a model for an aspiring female poet. She had to look elsewhere for the inspiration that she required to reach her goal.

Barrett found three main sources of encourage-

ment through her commitment to reading and studying: the Romantic poets, especially Lord Byron, the radical feminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and Greek language and literature. Her success in teaching herself the Greek language was one of the most extraordinary accomplishments of her early years. Since Victorian girls were not sent to school, all Barrett's knowledge was gained by self-study and her desire to learn. The two subjects to which she committed herself were poetry and Greek, although she taught herself other subjects, including Latin. Through her efforts, she became an acknowledged expert in her favorite subjects. Her first major poem, *The Battle of Marathon* (privately published by her father in 1820), written at the age of fourteen, is modeled after the Greek Homeric epic poem form. Its subject is an early Greek battle.

At fifteen, Barrett and two of her sisters became ill, and it was feared that she would die. She was sent to Gloucester for medical treatment and remained there for a year. She did not fully recover. The cause of her illness has never been determined. For many years, it was believed to be an emotional rather than a physical disorder, although it has been suggested that she suffered from tuberculosis. Her family blamed a fall from a horse, which injured her back. Whatever the cause, she became an invalid and a recluse. More than ever, her life was restricted to her family circle and the books that she loved. She devoted herself to writing.

In 1826, Barrett published her first serious book of poetry, *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems*. Although published anonymously, it marked her first attempt to address a larger audience. The book also resulted in two important friendships. In response to *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems*, she received a letter from Uvedale Price, an eighty-year-old man who asked her to review the proofs of his book on ancient Greek pronunciation. He praised her poems and approved of her latest work, "The Development of Genius," a poem to which her father objected and which she did not finish. Price encouraged her and provided the support that she needed to overcome her father's displeasure. Hugh Stuart Boyd, a blind classical scholar, also sent her a letter of praise. She began spending her time reading Greek to him, and he helped her to continue her study of the language and literature.

The years 1828 through 1832 were marked by setbacks in Barrett's personal life and a curbing of her literary production. In 1828, her mother died. Price died the following year. In 1832, her father had to sell his Hope End estate due to losses experienced in his Jamaican plantations. The family began a series of moves to various rented houses, ending in Wimpole Street, London, in 1838. With her mother's death and the loss of her friendships with Price and Boyd, Barrett became even more reclusive. In 1833, she published *Prometheus Bound, Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus: And Miscellaneous Poems*. With the publication of *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838), she finally achieved critical and popular acclaim. The reviewers found the poems intelligent and learned. Her ballads were particularly popular. It was this book that established her reputation in the United States.

In 1844, she published *Poems*. The four years that Barrett spent writing the poems were filled with sickness and sorrow. She had contracted a disease of the lungs and was forced to live in Torquay, France, because of its milder climate. In 1840, her brother Sam died from a fever, and her favorite brother, Edward, died in a sailing accident in the bay of Torquay. Her father believed Barrett had caused Edward's death, since Edward was visiting her when he died. She suffered intense grief, sorrow, and guilt. In 1841, she returned to Wimpole Street, where she retreated to her room to live the life of an absolute recluse. She refused to see anyone. Her doctors advised her not to change her

clothes, so she continually wore a black dress, silk in the summer, velvet in the winter. During this period, she wrote the poems that established her as one of the major poets of her time.

Perhaps even more important than the acclaim she achieved with the publication of *Poems* was a letter of admiration she received from a fellow poet. In January, 1845, Robert Browning wrote Barrett, "I love your verse with all my heart . . . and I love you too" (*The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846*, published in 1898). This letter was the beginning of one of the most romantic love stories of all time. They continued to correspond until May, when he came to visit her. They were secretly married in September, 1846, and left England to establish their home in Italy.

Their marriage was a happy one. They influenced each other's poetry. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems* (1850), which includes *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, is a sonnet sequence of forty-four poems representing their relationship. During her married years, she continued writing poetry, including her epic poem of feminine struggle *Aurora Leigh* (1856). In 1849, at the age of forty-three, she bore her only child, Robert Weidemann. Barrett Browning died from a lung disorder, probably tuberculosis, in Florence, Italy, on June 29, 1861.

## ANALYSIS

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a poet remembered for all the wrong reasons. Reclusive for most of her life, publicity shy, and extremely reserved, she is primarily known today as the heroine of an unbelievably romantic and public love story, Rudolf Besier's *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1930); a 1934 film and its 1957 remake, have also been released under that title. A serious poet aspiring to her own place in Western poetic tradition, she is regarded as the conventional love poet of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* who celebrates the power of conjugal love and monogamous marriage. As an advocate for women's rights, she is seen as a mere appendage of her more famous husband. Politically conservative, born into aristocracy, and appalled by what she considered the inhumanity of modern industrial society, she has been viewed as a spokeswoman for radical political upheaval. Finally, though a woman who believed in the natural superiority of men, Barrett Browning is admired as an early proponent of equal rights for women.

These discrepancies between the person, the poetry, and the reputation are not merely the result of confusion or ignorance. Barrett Browning is an extremely difficult author, whose work is complex, experimental, and individual. Her use of poetic form to subvert poetic expectation and tradition makes her work interesting and significant but requires reflective readers and critical examination if it is to be understood. The study of her work is important for an understanding of the time in which she wrote and for her poetic achievement.

Barrett Browning was an extremely prolific author who began writing prose and poetry as a child and continued actively writing until she died at the age of fifty-five. She demonstrates a serious concern for the world around her, an unflinching ability to analyze her own feelings and motivation, a love of language, a desire to experiment and create a new poetry, and a conception of poetry as a moral force in the affairs of men and women.

Barrett Browning is also one of the first major poets to articulate the themes and concerns of Victorian England and the developing industrial world. The value of work, the awareness of alienation and human isolation, the loss of conventional religious faith, the conflict between religion and science, the function of art, the ambiguous relationship between society and nature, the conflict between free will and fate, the relationship between men and women, and the place and value of culture are subjects that absorbed Victorian writers and intellectuals. These themes are found throughout Barrett Browning's poetry. She anticipates the emptiness and feelings of alienation expressed by Matthew Arnold; writes medieval ballads and experiments with epic and sonnet forms, as did Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti; uses dramatic monologues much like Robert Browning; and addresses the political and social issues of her time, as did many of her male contemporaries. Yet she is an original, innovative poet who presents her own well-considered, informed views in a highly developed, artistic form.

Barrett Browning's most lasting contribution to poetry and literature is her imaginative adoption

of traditional poetic forms to new subject matter, her struggle and final success in establishing the female voice as a poetic possibility, her belief in poetry as a moral agent in the affairs of men and women, and her persistency in the belief that life has meaning and purpose. Poems such as "Rhyme of the Duchess May," "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," and "Bertha in the Lane" extend the ballad form to include the ambivalent position of women rather than the traditional subject of masculine heroism. *The Cry of the Children* (1844), "Crowned and Buried," and "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" address the controversial topics of child labor, Napoleon I's return from exile, and slavery. They extend the province of poetry to contemporary political issues. In *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, she not only adopts a form previously reserved for the male expression of love but also creates one of the most accomplished and beautiful sonnet sequences in the English language. Finally, in *Aurora Leigh*, she creates a successful epic poem about the struggle of a woman to achieve a life of her own on equal terms with society and men.

Barrett Browning believed that a poet was an important moral influence in the world. Accepting the Romantic vision of the poet as prophet, she appropriated the vision and resolved restoration of values destroyed by the marketplace. She saw the underside of an industrial society in the prevalence of ignorance, crime, prostitution, and exhaustion. For Barrett Browning, the poet served as the link between the everyday values of commonplace life and the possibility of transcendent consciousness. In the materialistic world of Victorian England and the modern industrial world, she believed that there was a desperate need for a contemporary prophet-poet to restore the values preempted by the factories and the mines. Humanity required a poet who would embrace the joy and pain of human existence and confront the conditions and reality of the world. Barrett Browning saw herself as the prophet-poet in a debased, lost, industrial world, crying, like the children in her poem *The Cry of the Children*, for hope and compassion.

## THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN

**First published:** 1844

**Type of work:** Poem

*The plight of Victorian children working in a factory is exposed by their lament of the drudgery and hopelessness of their lives.*

*The Cry of the Children* is representative not only of Barrett Browning's political poetry but also of her work in general. It contains themes and images that can be found throughout her work. The use of language, meter, and rhyme in the poem demonstrates her innovative poetics and singular style.

It is problematic that Barrett Browning actually heard the cry of the children whom she so eloquently laments in her poem. She wrote *The Cry of the Children* after reading a report on the employment of children in mines and manufactories. A master of language, she evokes its emotional power to engender a response of outrage in her readers. The poem is intentionally didactic, political in purpose as well as subject matter. It is an expression of her own alienation and abhorrence of industrial society seen through the eyes and feelings of factory children, represented as innocence betrayed and used by political and economic interests for selfish purposes.

Throughout the poem, demonic images of a Factory Hell are contrasted with the Heaven of the English countryside, the inferno of industrialism with the bliss of a land-based society. The children are implored to leave the mine and city for the serenity of meadow and country. The grinding, droning mechanism of industrial society destroys the promise and hope of human life. Barrett Browning was concerned with the fate of a society that exploited human life for profit, and she ends her poem with an indictment of industrial society.

The reader is made to experience the dreariness of the factory inferno by Barrett Browning's use of language, as she describes the harrowing reality of the "droning, turning" factory wheels, relentlessly grinding the children's spirit and life as it molds its goods. The factory is depicted as a perversion of nature, a literal Hell seen as the absence and corruption of the natural world. Instead of the world revolving around the sun, the sky turns—as the

wheels, similarly, turn. Barrett Browning's use of words ending in "ing" and containing long vowel sounds—"moaning," "droning," "turning," "burning"—invokes the monotony and despair of this awful abyss of industry.

The "Children" of the poem are silenced by the sound of the wheels turning, seek the silence of death as their only means of escape, and, finally, are reduced to a mere "sob in the silence" in a vain effort to curse. The struggle to speak is a constant theme in the poem, a motif that vies with the oppression of the factory and the plight of the children. The repetition of the phrase, "say the children" makes it a key element in the very structure of the poem. Words of speech and silence are used throughout—"hear," "ask," "listen," "sing," "answer," "quiet," "silent," "still," "words," "speechless," "preach," "stifle." The hopelessness of the children's plight is partially caused by their inability to be heard or to express themselves. They are oppressed and exploited because they are not authorized to speak. In the end, even God is unable to hear their feeble attempts at prayer.

## SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

**First published:** 1850 (collected in *Poems*, 1850)

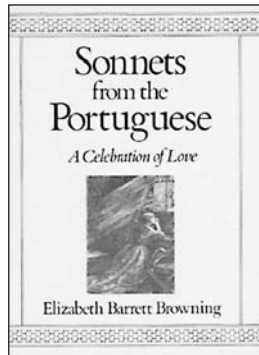
**Type of work:** Poems

*This sequence contains forty-four sonnets written in the Petrarchan sonnet form and treating romantic love in a long poem from a woman's perspective.*

*Sonnets from the Portuguese* is Barrett Browning's most enduring and popular poem, although it has been undervalued by critics. The sequence of sonnets was new and experimental when it was written. It adopted a poetic form and subject matter reserved for the expression of male amatory experience and depicted modern life and domestic events in a traditionally high literary form used to express the pursuit of ideal love and the poet's failure to translate it into the actual world. Instead, Barrett Browning replaced the male poetic voice with her own and related the feelings that she expe-



rienced during Robert Browning's courtship. The sonnets bring together the voice of a woman and the voice of the poet and make them one. They not only relate a courtship between a man and a woman but also relate the transformation of a



woman into a poet. They authorize the woman to be a poet and ponder the problem of being both the object and the subject of love and poetic thought.

For a full understanding of the poems, it must be remembered that they are a sequence that forms a complete work describing a process that ends with achieved love and

realized poetic power. Helen Cooper, in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist* (1988), divides the poems into three groups: woman seen as the object of a man's desire and love (Sonnets 1 and 2), the woman struggling to free herself from being objectified and maintaining her own subjectivity (Sonnets 3 through 40), and the woman achieving her own subjectivity while accepting the man's love (Sonnets 41 through 44). This grouping reveals the two themes addressed in the sonnets: the development of a mature love based on mutual respect and the quest of the poet-artist for her own voice and authority.

Barrett Browning wrote the sonnets to record her feelings during her courtship. At the time, she was living in her father's house and subject to his will. He had forbidden any of his children to marry, and, as a dutiful daughter, Elizabeth obeyed him until she married Robert at the age of forty. The

sonnets are an honest portrayal of her struggle with the prospect of love and marriage, which were not easily accepted by her because of age and her father's demands. Many critics in her own time and later consider the poems too personal. They view them as a form of private love letters that should not have been published. In large part, their popularity is due to Barrett Browning's lack of pretense and sincere expression of her own experiences of love. Many readers have shared these experiences with her and find joy in their poetic expression. Although the emotions in the sonnets validate their sincerity, and though they are based on her own courtship, these considerations hide the true achievement that she accomplished in writing the sonnets. They are complex, crafted, artistic poems, written in a difficult form, employing original conceits and metaphors. They are not the simple emotional writings of a woman in love but the realized work of an accomplished poet performing at the height of her powers.

## SUMMARY

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a preeminent poet of the nineteenth century whose work belongs in the mainstream of Western poetic tradition. Her work is more significant and influential than is generally accepted. She is a pivotal writer in the transition from a Romantic to a modern sensibility, appropriating the outlook and perspective of her precursors, adapting them to her own time and situation, and preserving them for the future. Not only is she the first poet in a tradition of female poets, but she has also earned her place in the larger tradition of English poetry, which includes men and women.

Herbert Northcote

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*The Cry of the Children*, 1844



## Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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*Casa Guidi Windows*, 1851

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain how a consideration of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's early life rebuffs the inclination of critics to regard her as an "appendage" to her husband.
- Show how Barrett Browning's literary work is a better guide to understanding relationships between men and women than the famous romance between her and Robert Browning.
- Is *Aurora Leigh* truly an epic? What epic traits does it exemplify?
- Substantiate the assertion that Barrett Browning displayed "innovative poetics" in *The Cry of the Children*.
- Considering the lengthy tradition of sonnet sequences before *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, what features of Barrett Browning's sequence justify calling it "new and experimental"?



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## ROBERT BROWNING

**Born:** Camberwell, England  
May 7, 1812

**Died:** Venice, Italy  
December 12, 1889

*Widely recognized as one of the two greatest poets of Victorian England (with Alfred, Lord Tennyson), Browning produced some of the best dramatic poetry of all time and influenced modern poets.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Robert Browning was born on May 7, 1812, in Camberwell, a suburb of London, England, to Robert and Sara Anna Wiedemann Browning. His father was a senior clerk in the Bank of England and a conservative, unambitious, bookish man closer in temperament to a scholar than to a businessman. His mother, a Scottish gentlewoman, reared her son to love the Church, music, gardening, and nature. Growing up in the urban middle class, Browning had one sister, to whom he paid a lifelong devotion. From 1820 to 1826, he attended a boarding school. In 1828, he enrolled in the recently opened University of London, but he withdrew after only a few months. His main education came from tutors and his father's ample library.

In the view of many, Browning's young adulthood was an essentially irresponsible time, as he preferred to stay at home rather than work or attend school. At home, he read Alexander Pope's *The Iliad of Homer* (1715-1720), the Romantic poets in general, and a favorite who became his idol, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Around 1824, Browning wrote "Incondita," a volume of poetry in imitation of Lord Byron. When his parents could not get the manuscript published, he destroyed it. Only two poems from this collection have survived.

Thus, Browning's occupation became that of poet. His whole family seemed to indulge him.

When his first poem, *Pauline*, finally appeared in 1833, his aunt paid for its publication. Anonymously printed, the poem received little notice, and no record can be obtained proving that it sold a single copy. In fact, most critics view *Pauline* as a typical Romantic poem characterized by excessive self-indulgence.

During the next few years, Browning journeyed to Russia (1834) and produced two long poems—*Paracelsus* (1835), set in the Renaissance, and *Sordello* (1840), set in medieval Italy. Although both poems were critical failures, taken together with his trip they indicate that Browning was learning to move beyond himself, to develop aesthetic distance from his subject.

From 1837 to 1847, Browning turned to playwriting. Determined to make a career change to dramatist and inspired by actor-manager William Charles Macready, Browning threw himself into his ambition. *Strafford* (pr., pb. 1837) was performed for five nights in 1837 before it closed, and his play *Luria* was published in 1846. None of his plays made money, and he finally abandoned the theater. That is not to say, however, that the period was wasted. During that time, William Shakespeare replaced Shelley as Browning's literary guiding light, and Browning mastered some of the basic dramatic techniques that later made his poetry great.

In 1841, concurrent with his outpouring of drama, Browning began writing a series of eight "shilling" pamphlets. Titled *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-1846) for the hem of a Hebrew high priest's garment, all were issued at his father's expense. Or-

iginally intending to make each pamphlet a play, Browning had such faith in his newly acquired dramatic ability that he included a few poems. *Pippa Passes* (1841), the first of these poems, eventually became very popular. The poem, complete with monologues and scenes, tells the tale of a factory girl's yearly holiday and her song, which influences others into action and morality.

The strength of the ensuing poems was the dramatic monologue, a form that Browning did not invent but that he did perfect by adding a psychological dimension. *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) contains his first real successes in this format, with such notable poems as "My Last Duchess," "Porphyria's Lover," and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) delivered "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." Although few of these volumes sold well immediately, critics and a segment of the public began to appreciate his psychological insights into people and his grasp of historical periods. Influenced, too, by John Donne, Browning had achieved objectivity, ridding himself of his indulgent Romantic angst.

The most famous portion of Browning's life also occurred during this period, and it was directly occasioned by his new type of poetry. One person expressing admiration for his talents was the famed English poet and invalid Elizabeth Barrett. Thus began one of the great factual love stories in Western culture. Her father, dedicated to keeping his children unmarried, dominated her, using her poor health to make her into a recluse. In January, 1845, Browning began to correspond with her. Barrett expressed herself and her growing love for Browning poetically in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, published in *Poems* (1850). After more than a year and a half of courtship, Browning secretly married her, without her father's permission, in St. Marylebone Church on September 12, 1846. With his new wife, her dog, and her maid, Browning hastened to Italy, their new home.

Flourishing in the society of Rome and Florence, Elizabeth seemed healthier, and Browning began to publish his finest work. *Men and Women*, which many people consider to be his best single volume, appeared in 1855 and became his first popular success. *Dramatis Personae* was published in 1864. During this period, Elizabeth produced a son, and, using Italian materials, Browning himself achieved great fame. Yet tragedy struck as the sickly

Elizabeth died in 1861. Browning buried her in Florence, took his son, Robert "Pen" Browning, home, and never returned to the city that he loved.

For the next two decades, Browning continued to produce collections of poetry at the rate of one every year and a half. Socially, he gave dinners for many of the literary luminaries of his day, and he had a great many honorary degrees conferred upon him. His poetry lost some of its freshness, and his voice occasionally weakened. Yet his poems still sparkled with moments of greatness.

From 1888 to 1894, his *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning* was published in seventeen volumes, and he supervised the last edition himself. In 1889, his last work, *Asolando*, appeared, and in the fall of that same year he journeyed back to Italy. While walking on the Lido in Venice, where he was staying with Pen and his wife, he caught a cold. He died on December 12, 1889, in Venice. His body was returned to England, where he received his most prestigious honor, burial in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. Born into the heyday of Romanticism, he died at the time that the Victorian era was itself expiring.

## ANALYSIS

During his lifetime, Browning was probably appreciated most for his optimistic themes about humankind in a pessimistic era. Typically, Browning offers this self-portrait at the end of the epilogue to *Asolando*: "One who never turned his back but marched breast forward/ Never doubted clouds would break./ Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph." Retrospect, however, reveals a greater legacy and a more profound influence, especially on later generations of poets. When Browning began writing, Romanticism dominated poetry with all of its effusive self-indulgence, its confessional nature, its overwhelming *Weltschmerz*—its supreme subjectivity and preoccupation with the individual poet's emotional state of being. By the time he died, Browning had demonstrated that poetry could be intensely dramatic, profoundly psychological, and simultaneously insightful.

Browning's insistence on the poet's detachment and devotion to the dramatic ideal was his enduring literary legacy and his greatest influence on future poets, such as T. S. Eliot. In his advertisement published on the second page of *Dramatic Lyrics*, Browning announced his credo, his preference for

"poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." More precisely, Browning refined, though he did not invent, a poetic genre called the dramatic monologue. Browning's poems of this type are essentially speeches by a single person. Unlike a soliloquy, however, a listener/audience is present, though never speaking. As a result, as in real life, the speaker offers no guarantee of telling the truth. As with all drama, the speech is set at a particular place, is about a specific subject, and contains a conflict with some opposing force. The ultimate thrust of a Browning monologue is character insight; the speaker, no matter what the apparent subject of the monologue, always reveals the essence of his or her personality. Thus, there is usually a sense of dramatic irony. Browning's major contribution to the dramatic monologue, then, is to demonstrate its psychological potential; the chief motives, the very soul of the speaker, are laid bare.

Browning, then, is the harbinger of the modern literary preoccupation with the mysteries of the psyche. He reveals both the breadth and the depth of the human mind, and these insights range from the normal to the abnormal. Browning, for example, originally classified one of his earlier poems, "Porphyria's Lover," under the heading "Madhouse Cells." The poem, coldly narrated by a man who has only a moment ago finished strangling his lover, shows Browning's willingness to explore that other side of the human mind, the dark side. Moreover, Browning is willing to plumb the depths beyond the conscious mind. Occasionally, when his poems seem incomprehensible, his characters are gripped by irrational impulses and speak from their unconscious.

Of course, not all of Browning's seemingly obscure lines can be traced to the minds of his characters. After the hours in his father's library and his journeys to Italy, his knowledge was immense, and he frequently uses allusions to history, the Bible, and the classics. In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," for example, Browning displays an awareness of church ritual, Greek mythology, and marble. Also, he was a great experimenter. He used metrical variations and often unnatural syntax. He was fond of beginning his poems in mid-speech and situation. "My Last Duchess" commences as the Duke of Ferrara is only fifty-

six lines from finishing a long interview with the count's emissary. Browning shuns logical transitions, preferring to jump from one thought to the next as most people do in everyday speech. He often discards pronouns.

Another notable characteristic of Browning's verse is his detachment. Like many of the realists of his day, he refrained from the moral judgment of his characters, thus eschewing the didactic theory of art. Nowhere in "Porphyria's Lover," for example, does Browning intrude to pronounce the homicidal lover evil or a sociopath. If there are judgments to be made, Browning leaves that task to his readers. Thus, Browning occasionally went against the oversimplified Victorian morality of art.

As both Browning's intense love affair with Elizabeth Barrett and the title of one volume, *Men and Women*, suggest, he was very much interested in the relationship of the sexes, especially in the high plane of love. Perhaps partially because he was forced to woo Barrett at first from a distance, Browning became profoundly reflective about romantic love. Even a cursory reading of his poetry reveals that he had several theories about man-woman relationships, and these theories, combined with the intense psychological reality of his characters, suggest why he is viewed as one of the great love poets in English. Interestingly, some of his great love lyrics were written before he met his wife and after she had died. When the eponymous speaker of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" argues, "Grow old along with me!/ The best is yet to be," one must realize that the lines were composed after Elizabeth had died and therefore express wishful thinking. Also, Browning's love lyrics express not only the joy of love but also its failures. "Meeting at Night" is coupled with "Parting at Morning," wherein the male lover must leave the woman whom he loves to return to the "world of men."

One notable idea often finding expression in Browning is how often love can be replaced by a preoccupation with material things. In "My Last Duchess," the Duke of Ferrara has reduced the woman whom he had married to a work of art, where she is now even less treasured than a bronze statue. In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," the dying bishop has replaced his original love of God with things—a wine press, classical manuscripts, and villas.

Another typical theme in Browning is the su-

premacry of romantic love. Perhaps the best example of this idea occurs in “Love Among the Ruins.” The palace of the prince and the prince’s power are in ruins, the soldiers and their war machines have vanished, and Browning concludes that despite their “triumphs” and “glories,” “love is best.” True love for Browning was part and parcel of spiritual love.

What, then, is the poet’s role in the midst of love and psychology? Perhaps Browning best states his poetic credo in “Fra Lippo Lippi” by using the persona as his mouthpiece: “this world . . . means intensely, and means good.” In his “Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley,” Browning elaborated upon this notion of the poet finding the “good.” The poet must have a “great moral purpose,” must search the world around him, for, paradoxically, the greatest spiritual elevation occurs when the poet immerses himself in the things of this world. Often Browning’s optimism is misunderstood. Good comes not in the actual attainment of higher things, often love, but also in the attempt. Failure and disappointment are secondary if the attempt is made.

### “MY LAST DUCHESS”

**First published:** 1842 (collected in *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The Duke of Ferrara reveals himself to be a selfish, jealous man desiring to control other people’s lives.*

“My Last Duchess” is probably Browning’s most popular and most anthologized poem. The poem first appeared in 1842 in *Dramatic Lyrics*, which is contained in *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-1846). Perhaps the major reason for the fame of “My Last Duchess” is that it is probably the finest example of Browning’s dramatic monologue. In it, he paints a devastating self-portrait of royalty, a portrait that doubtless reveals more of the duke’s personality than Ferrara intends. In fact, the irony is profound, for with each word spoken in an attempt to criticize his last duchess, the duke ironically reveals his utterly detestable nature and how far he is from seeing it himself.

Before the subtleties of “My Last Duchess” can be grasped, the basic elements of this dramatic monologue must be understood. The only speaker is the Duke of Ferrara. The listener, who, offstage, asks about the smile of the last duchess in the portrait, is silent during the entire poem. The listener is the emissary of a count and is helping to negotiate a marriage between the count’s daughter and the duke. The time is probably the Italian Renaissance, though Browning does not so specify. The location is the duke’s palace, probably upstairs in some art gallery, since the duke points to two nearby art objects. The two men are about to join the “company below” (line 47), so the fifty-six lines of the poem represent the end of the duke’s negotiating, his final terms.

Since the thrust of a Browning dramatic monologue is psychological self-characterization, what kind of man does the duke reveal himself to be? Surely, he is a very jealous man. He brags that he has had the duchess’s portrait made by Fra Pandolf. Why would he hire a monk, obviously noted for his sacred art, to paint a secular portrait? The duke admits, “’twas not/ Her husband’s presence only, called that spot/ Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek” (lines 13-15). Then he notes that “perhaps/ Fra Pandolf chanced to say” (lines 15-16) and provides two exact quotations. The suggestion is strong that he observed the whole enterprise. He gave Fra Pandolf only a day to finish the expensive commissioned art. Pandolf is a painter so notable that the duke drops the artist’s name. Probably, he chose Pandolf because, as a man of the cloth, the good brother would have taken a vow of chastity. Yet the duke’s jealousy was so powerful that he observed this chaste painter with his wife in order to be sure. Later, the duke implies that the duchess was the kind of woman who had to be watched, for she had a heart “too easily impressed” (line 23), and “her looks went everywhere” (line 24). Yet the evidence that he uses to corroborate this charge—her love of sunsets, the cherry bough with which she was presented, her pet white mule—suggests only that she was a natural woman who preferred the simple pleasures.

The duke’s pride and selfishness are also revealed. He is very proud of his family name, for, as he describes his marriage to his last duchess, he states that he gave her “My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name” (line 33). Yet he never once men-



tions love or his willingness to emerge from his own ego. Instead, he emphasizes that it is his curtain, his portrait, his name, his “commands” (line 45), and his sculpture. Tellingly, within fifty-six lines he uses seventeen first-person pronouns.

Undoubtedly, though, the most dominant feature of the duke’s personality is a godlike desire for total control of his environment: “I said/ ‘Fra Pandolf’ by design” (lines 5-6). Browning reveals this trait by bracketing the poem with artistic images of control. As noted above, the painting of Fra Pandolf portrait reveals how the duke orchestrates the situation. Moreover, even now the duke controls the emissary’s perception of the last duchess. Everything that the listener hears about her is filtered through the mind and voice of the duke. The emissary cannot even look at her portrait without the duke opening a curtain that he has had placed in front of the painting.

The final artistic image is most revealing. The last word in the duke’s negotiations is further evidence of his desire for control. He compels the emissary to focus attention on another commissioned object d’art: “Notice Neptune, though,/ Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity/ Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!” (lines 54-56). Once again, the commissioned art is a sort of Rorschach test—it reveals a great deal about the personality of the commissioner. The thrust of the art object is dominance—the duke desires to be Neptune, god of the sea, taming a small, beautiful sea creature in what would obviously be no contest. In other words, the duke sees himself as a god who has tamed/will tame his duchess.

As earlier indicated, the duke has always associated his last duchess with beautiful things of nature. Like Neptune, the duke rules his kingdom, Ferrara, with an iron fist. When he grew tired of his last duchess, he says, “I gave commands” (line 45), and her smiles “stopped together” (line 46). Since the duke says that in her portrait the last duchess is “looking as if she were alive” (line 2), the suggestion is strong that, like the god that he would be, the duke has exercised the power over life and death.

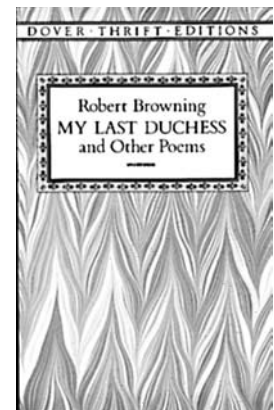
The key critical question in “My Last Duchess” focuses on the duke’s motivation. Why would a man so obviously desiring marriage to the count’s daughter reveal himself in such negative terms? Critics take opposing views: Some characterize him

as “shrewd”; others, as “witless.” A related critical question considers the duke’s impending marriage: Why would a man who has had so much trouble with his first duchess want a second wife?

The answers to both questions seem to lie in the duke’s godlike self-image. Interestingly, for a man preoccupied with his nine-hundred-year-old name, nowhere does he mention progeny, and without children there will be no one to carry on the family name. Importantly, he uses a series of terminative images, all emphasizing the end of the cycle of life, to describe his last duchess—the sunset ends the day, the breaking of the bough ends the life of the cherry (also a sexual reference), the white mule is the end of its line (mules then could not reproduce within the breed), and whiteness as a color associated with sterility. Could it be that the duke, since he uses these images, employs his last duchess as a scapegoat and that he is the one who is sterile? Thus, his object in procuring the “fair daughter’s self” (line 52) is children. No doubt, for a man who likes commissioned artwork, the “dowry” (line 51) will help defray his expenses. Perhaps the duke, like another Renaissance figure, Henry VIII, will run through a series of brides because he is unable to see the flaws in his own personality.

Stylistically, Browning has written a tour de force. The fifty-six lines are all in iambic pentameter couplets. The couplet form is quite formal in English poetry, and this pattern suggests the formal nature of the duke and control. Interestingly, unlike the traditional neoclassic heroic couplet, where lines are end-stopped, Browning favors enjambment, and the run-on line suggests the duke’s inability to control everything—his inability to be a god.

Historically, readers have wondered about two things. Is the duke based on a real person? Some have suggested Vespasiano Gonzaga, duke of Sabbioneta, while others favor Alfonso II, fifth and last duke of Ferrara. Second, in his lifetime Browning was often asked what really happened to the





duke's last duchess. Finally, Browning was forced to say, "the commands were that she should be put to death . . . or he might have had her shut up in a convent."

### "THE BISHOP ORDERS HIS TOMB AT SAINT PRAXED'S CHURCH"

**First published:** 1845 (collected in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, 1845)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The dying bishop reveals himself to be more concerned with maintaining his materialism than admitting his many sins.*

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" was printed in 1845 in *Hood's Magazine* and later that same year in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, which is contained in *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-1846). It was probably suggested by Browning's visit to Italy the previous year. Although an actual Saint Praxed's church exists in Rome, no bishop from "15—," the poem's dateline, is buried there, but the bishop in the poem typifies the bishops of the era.

The poem is another fine example of Browning's mastery of the dramatic monologue form. The speaker is the church's bishop, who is "dying by degrees" (line 11). His silent audience is his "Nephews—sons mine" (line 3). Actually, "nephews" is a historic euphemism for illegitimate sons, and only on his death is the bishop finally willing to acknowledge his paternity. The setting is Saint Praxed's church: More specifically, the bishop seems to be lying up front, to the right of the pulpit, and near the choir loft. The situation is simple: With not much time left, the bishop is negotiating with his "sons" to do something that he cannot—to ensure that he will be buried in a marble tomb as befits his position in the church hierarchy.

As with "My Last Duchess," the speaker ironically creates a self-portrait very different from what he intends. Because the bishop nears death, he can no longer control his words and thus reveals a man somewhat less than a paragon of virtue, a very flawed human who has hypocritically violated his

clerical vows. As a representative of the Roman Catholic church, he suggests that the institution has failed, having been corrupted by materialistic, secular concerns.

One measure of a cleric's righteousness has always been how he avoids the seven deadly sins. Browning provides an ironic "confession" in which the bishop admits to them all. Wrath is one of the deadly sins. Dying, the bishop is still angry at Gandolf, his predecessor, who has claimed a better burial site in the church. As his negotiations with his sons prove unsuccessful, the dying bishop becomes increasingly angry at them. He also asks God to curse Gandolf.

Another sin is pride. Though the bishop begins his 122 lines with a warning about vanity, he is proud of many things, especially his possessions, and the fact that he won his boys' mother away from Gandolf. Yet he still envies (the third sin) his predecessor for that burial site.

Gluttony is manifest in a general sense by the sheer number of his possessions and in a gustatory sense by the way that he depicts the sacrament of communion; once dead, he will feast his eyes on a perpetual banquet, "God made and eaten all day long" (line 82). Greed is revealed with his last wish and his possessions. He desires his tomb to be made of basalt (a hard, dark-colored rock), as compared to his predecessor's cheap and "paltry onion-stone" (line 31). The bishop's legacy is mostly materialistic. Seeing that his sons are not acceding to his dying wishes, he offers his possessions as a bribe. He has accumulated a vineyard, a huge lapis lazuli stone, villas, horses, Greek manuscripts, and mistresses. Of course, as a priest he at one time took a vow of poverty.

Perhaps his greatest sin, however, is lechery. Having also taken a vow of chastity, he has also taken several mistresses and has fathered children by at least one of them. Quite often he commingles the sacred and the sexual. The lapis lazuli is described as "Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast" (line 44). On the horizontal surface of his tomb, he wants etched in bronze a bas-relief of pans and nymphs, Christ delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Moses with the Ten Commandments, and "one Pan/ Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off" (lines 60-61). Furthermore, Browning emphasizes the ironic distance between the bishop's sexual activity and what the cleric should

be by the name of the very church that the bishop serves and represents. St. Praxed was a second century virgin martyr who converted to Christianity and gave her worldly possessions to the poor. The bishop is a sixteenth century nonvirgin who has never practiced self-sacrifice and has unofficially converted from Christianity to mammonism. He now obviously worships all the worldly goods that he can accumulate.

One helpful way of reading this poem is as an ironic sermon. After all, the bishop typically begins his address with a biblical quotation, the words from the book of Ecclesiastes 1:2, and the rest of the poem is an ironic portrayal of his own vain self-estimation, complete with moral illustrations. As a religious person, the bishop should doubtless consider this moment as an occasion for confession—to explain what he did, to acknowledge its sinfulness, and to ask for forgiveness. Instead, he dies as vain and as self-deluded as he has lived. His final thoughts dwell upon the carnal beauty of his mistress and the envy that evoked in his archrival. Browning's final irony, then, is overwhelming. The bishop is not a servant of God but of Dionysus, the pagan god of fertility and sexuality.

### **“MEETING AT NIGHT” AND “PARTING AT MORNING”**

**First published:** 1845 (collected in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, 1845)

**Type of work:** Poems

*Romantic passion is brief, and lovers must return to the real world.*

“Meeting at Night” and “Parting at Morning” are companion poems that are best read as one poem. They were first published in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* under the general title “Night and Morning,” which suggests that Browning saw them as part of a natural, inevitable cycle.

When the poems first appeared, they were criticized as being immoral because they describe lovers rendezvousing for a night of passion, then going their separate ways. Early critics worried that the man and woman, because of the clandestine nature of the tryst, are not married. In any event,

there is much of Browning in this poem, for, like its lovers, Elizabeth Barrett and he had to meet secretly.

Although early critics debated the poems' use of pronouns, Browning said that in both poems the man—the “me” of “Parting at Morning,” line 4—is speaking, detailing his night with his lover. The real strength of the poems is Browning's mastery of imagery. Every line in both poems employs some specific image in an attempt to stimulate a particular sense. Browning's subject is a favorite, love between men and women, but only a close examination of the imagery reveals the exact nature of that love.

What Browning meticulously communicates in these poems is the physical nature of love. The images constantly refer to the senses of smell, taste, touch, and hearing, as well as sensations of heat, light, and kinesthesia. Browning's artistry lies in his indirection. Never does the speaker say that their relationship is deeply sexual; he implies it. The description of the journey becomes a sort of emotional topography. Life apart for the lovers is like the land, black and gray with only a little light. They are each halves of the moon. Yet as he gets closer to the woman, his senses come alive, even commingle: the “warm sea-scented beach” (line 7) appeals to three senses simultaneously. When they join, like the boat's prow in the “slushy sand” (line 6), there is a sudden spurt of love.

While he communicates the emotions of the ecstatic moment, Browning also suggests that they are fleeting, like the night, and inevitably the male must return to the “world of men” (“Parting at Morning,” line 4). Browning said that the first poem argues that “raptures are self-sufficient and enduring,” while the second contends “how fleeting” is that belief.

### **SUMMARY**

Robert Browning stands as the transitional English poet between the supreme subjectivity of the Romantics and the subtleties of modern poetry. He masterfully showed the dramatic and psychological possibilities of verse. In the Victorian era of sexual reticence and profound doubt, he demonstrated the power of human passion and the prevalence of the human spirit.

*Hal Charles*

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*A Soul's Tragedy*, pb. 1846

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What did Robert Browning learn from his study of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry?
- In regard to Browning, what do you understand the phrase "indulgent Romantic angst" to mean?
- How does the monologue form of Browning's dramatic poems differentiate them from plays?
- To what extent might the tones and emphases used in reading of "My Last Justice" aloud affect its interpretation?
- Should we understand the duke in "My Last Duchess" as "shrewd" or "witless" in his obvious revelation of himself to his visitor?
- How does one explain Browning's fondness for rhymed couplets when he so often seems to be undermining their effect with enjambments and rhythmical variations?
- What seems to be the best way of understanding the motivation of the bishop in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church"?

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# MIKHAIL BULGAKOV

**Born:** Kiev, Ukraine, Russian Empire (now in Ukraine)

May 15, 1891

**Died:** Moscow, Soviet Union (now in Russia)

March 10, 1940

*Bulgakov's plays and novels draw on both fantasy and realism to portray life in the early Soviet Union and to comment on the human condition. While regarded primarily as a playwright in his own lifetime, Bulgakov became best known in succeeding years as the author of the grim comic masterpiece, his novel The Master and Margarita.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (bewl-GAH-kuhf) was born in the Ukrainian city of Kiev, then part of the Russian empire, in 1891. Although Kiev was an ancient seat of Russian civilization, Ukraine was a distinct province of the Russian empire with its own sense of identity. Bulgakov's family was of Russian ethnicity, however, and solidly situated in Kiev's middle-class intelligentsia. His father, A. I. Bulgakov, came from a line of theologians and was himself a professor at the Kiev Theological Academy. His mother was both religious and intellectual and played a large part in the education of Mikhail and his six brothers and sisters. At home, Bulgakov developed an interest in religion that lasted into the officially atheistic Communist years of his country, influencing his writings.

A. I. Bulgakov died in 1907, when Mikhail was only sixteen. His widowed mother supported the family, becoming a teacher and secretary at a society for the advancement of learning. At an early age, then, the future writer experienced the life of the struggling middle class.

Bulgakov's literary tastes and understanding were formed in school, as well as at home. His teachers at the First Kiev Gymnasium, which he attended from 1901 to 1904, encouraged him to read the great writers of Russian literature, including Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, and Fyodor Dostoevski. After graduating from the gymnasium, he went on to study medicine at St. Vladimir University, completing his degree in 1916. While a student, he married his first wife, Tatiana Lappa, in 1913.

The young doctor finished his education to begin a professional life in the midst of war and revolution; Russia had been embroiled in World War I since 1914. Bulgakov practiced medicine for a time at the Kiev Military Hospital and then was transferred to be the only doctor in a small village in Smolensk province. His observations of peasant life became the basis for a short-story collection that he wrote in the 1920's, *Zapiski iunogo vracha* (1963; *A Country Doctor's Notebook*, 1975).

The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilich Lenin, took power in Petrograd (later Leningrad) in late 1917. They pulled the Russian empire, soon renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, out of World War I but waged a bloody civil war to unite the country under their government. Bulgakov returned to Kiev in 1918 to start a medical practice there, in time to see Ukraine torn by fighting among German occupation forces, Bolshevik Red Army soldiers, anti-Bolshevik White Army fighters, and Ukrainian separatists, among others. His first novel, *Belaya gvardiya* (1927, 1929; *The White Guard*, 1971), was a fictional treatment of the civil war in Kiev.

The White Army, needing physicians, drafted Bulgakov in 1919. He became seriously ill after the Whites sent him to the North Caucasus. It was apparently during his illness that he decided to leave medicine and take up writing as his career. His first plays appeared during his time in the Caucasus.

In 1921, as the civil war drew to an end with the Red Army victorious, Bulgakov moved to Moscow and attempted to earn a living by writing plays and



short pieces for newspapers. His wife, Tatiana, moved with him, but the couple divorced in 1924 and he later married Lyubov Belozerskaya. It was in his early years in Moscow that he began work on *The White Guard*, part of which he published in the journal *Rossiia* in 1925. The Moscow Art Theater asked him to create a dramatic version of the story, so he rewrote his tale of civil war in Kiev as the play *Dni Turbinykh* (pb. 1955; *Days of the Turbins*, 1934), which was performed in 1926. Although many Bolsheviks disliked Bulgakov's sympathetic portrayal of White Army officers, the country's emerging dictator, Joseph Stalin, enjoyed it and approved it as politically acceptable. Although Bulgakov achieved recognition as a playwright, during these same years in Moscow he wrote other important works of fiction, including the acclaimed short novel *Sobache serdtse* (wr. 1925, pb. 1968, reliable text, 1969; *The Heart of a Dog*, 1968).

Bulgakov's plays became popular, but their often satirical character aroused the suspicions of the Bolsheviks, who became known in the years after the civil war as the Communist Party. He wrote more than thirty plays, but only ten have survived. *Days of the Turbins* was followed by *Zoykina kvartira* (pr. 1926, pb. 1971; *Zoya's Apartment*, 1970), which was popular but is not regarded as one of Bulgakov's better works. His play *Bagrovyy ostrov* (pr. 1928, pb. 1968; *The Crimson Island*, 1972), an adaptation of one of his short stories, was also well received by the Moscow public. However, *Beg* (wr. 1928, pr. 1957, pb. 1962; *Flight*, 1969) was not produced until 1957 because Soviet officials decided it praised emigrating White Army generals. The satirical character of his work repeatedly got him into trouble, and in 1929 all of his plays were banned.

After the ban, Bulgakov decided he could not stay in Russia if he could not work, and he wrote to the Soviet government requesting permission to leave the country. Stalin replied with a personal telephone call and permitted Bulgakov to obtain work as an assistant producer at the Moscow Arts Theater. The Soviet dictator, who frequently gave more favorable treatment to writers than to other citizens, kept Bulgakov from being executed or sent to a prison camp but did not allow the author to resume publishing his work.

From 1928 until the end of his life, Bulgakov worked on his masterpiece, the novel *Master i Margarita* (wr. 1928-1940; pb. 1966-1967, censored

version; 1973, uncensored version; *The Master and Margarita*, 1967). His third wife, Elena Shilovskaya, whom he married in 1932 after divorcing Lyubov Belozerskaya, encouraged him as he worked on this novel while his physical and mental health worsened. The novel was finished, but it was not published during Bulgakov's lifetime. He was completing a satirical novel on his experiences in the theater, *Teatralny roman* (1965; *Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel*, 1967), when he died of a kidney disease in Moscow in 1940.

## ANALYSIS

Mikhail Bulgakov lived and worked in a world in rapid transformation, with the traditional and the revolutionary, the tragic and the comic, the mundane and the fantastic, and the secular and the religious continually colliding. His writing reflects these juxtaposed opposites, and this makes it difficult to place him in a literary category. Many of Bulgakov's works are marked by complex plot structures and narrative techniques that weave together different levels of storytelling. The plays, stories, and novels he produced also show the variety of his literary influences. They combine, in different degrees, the grim satire of early nineteenth century Russian author Nikolai Gogol and the moral realism of the late nineteenth century master Fyodor Dostoevski. Bulgakov was an admirer of science fiction, and his imaginative flights were inspired by the English author H. G. Wells. His early theological background led him to bring biblical themes and concepts into his work.

All of Bulgakov's work, even the most fantastic, contains a large element of autobiography, but it is always autobiography that mixes episodes in the external world, perceptions, and thoughts. *A Country Doctor's Notebook*, for example, is a series of fictionalized vignettes of his own experiences as a medical man in the countryside. It consists of tragicomic stories told by a first-person narrator. This narrator is an introspective individual, much given to spending time in his own thoughts, which superimposes an individual psychology on a world of events. Realistic enough to document early nineteenth century medical practices, the observations occur in the mind of a narrator readily stimulated to fantasy.

*The White Guard* similarly grew out of Bulgakov's own life. The Turbin family, around whom he



structured the tale of the coming of war to Kiev, was based on Bulgakov's own family. Aleksei Turbin is clearly based on Bulgakov himself. In the novel's alternation between scenes of home life and battle scenes, the writer offered his own experience of the impact of history on the life of a single family and the life of a city. Again, however, the autobiography goes beyond historical realism and enters into a psychological level. The novel shuttles rapidly across scenes and episodes, at times possessing a cinematic quality. Bits of disconnected dialogue and sound effects accompany this scene-shifting. The overall effect is one of a world that is shattering around the lives at the center of the story; it is an autobiography that tries to recount how it felt to be in a city at war.

Satire was another characteristic of Bulgakov's work, one that coexisted with his autobiographical inclination. It was through satire that another trait was expressed most forcefully—the use of imaginative fantasy. Some of the satire can be seen in his humorous approaches to country life in *A Country Doctor's Notebook*. However, the contradictions and bureaucratic character of Moscow life in the 1920's after the civil war moved him more toward writing in the satirical vein. The short stories he published in the mid-1920's, such as "Diavoliada" ("Diaboliad") and "Rokovye iaitsa" ("The Fatal Eggs"), brought together the sharp satire of Gogol with twentieth century science fiction. Influenced by the fiction of Wells, the latter story tells of a Russian zoologist who invents a ray that enables creatures born of eggs to increase their size and reproductive rate. Russia is affected by a disease that wipes out its chicken population, and eggs are imported from other countries to replace them. The ray is applied to the eggs to increase productivity, but by mistake the eggs treated are those of reptiles rather than chickens and the country is attacked by an army of giant snakes and crocodiles. The Soviet worship of ever-increasing productivity and efficiency and the problem of unforeseen consequences are here mocked in the guise of science fiction. The satire was also pronounced in many of Bulgakov's plays; *The Crimson Island*, for example, satirized Soviet censorship.

## THE HEART OF A DOG

**First published:** *Sobache serdtse*, wr. 1925; pb. 1968; reliable text, 1969 (English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novella

*After transplanting human organs into a stray dog, a scientist is troubled as the dog takes on human characteristics*

*The Heart of a Dog* is often regarded as science fiction or satirical fantasy. The novella tells the tale of Sharik, a stray dog who has been brought in for experimentation by the scientist Philip Philipovich Preobrazhensky. The experimenter specializes in transplanting the organs of animals into humans and vice versa.

The work moves with a constantly shifting perspective, jumping from the dog's point of view to Preobrazhensky's to that of an unseen narrator. It opens with the howling of the dog, who complains that he was scalded when a cook at the National Economic Council's canteen spilled boiling water on him. Sharik recounts his misfortune to himself. He had been foraging in the garbage outside the council building when the cook threw the water out. The style shows some of what has been called "stream of consciousness," as the dog thinks about the good life he could have enjoyed, rolling in the park, and about his present misfortune.

A girl finds the injured dog, and, without a break, the narrative slips from the dog's thoughts to a narrator outside the story. Then it returns to the dog, who sees Preobrazhensky in the street and imagines what the man is thinking. Preobrazhensky puts a leash on the dog and leads him away. Thus, the opening of the story introduces readers to the main characters and the technique of juxtaposing internal monologues and physical descriptions.

The tale continues with Sharik watching the professor, who is seeing patients at his apartment. Sharik bites a man whom Preobrazhensky has been rejuvenating with transplants, and the dog sees a woman in whom the doctor promises to transplant monkey ovaries. The dog also watches as Preobrazhensky is visited by a house management committee threatening to install more residents in the doctor's home. Preobrazhensky overcomes this

problem by calling a powerful patient waiting for an operation and threatening to end his practice. The scientist dismisses the committee with sneering comments about the proletariat. In this way, the science-fiction elements of the story are placed alongside elements of Socialist Realism, sardonically portraying the redistribution of homes and rooms in newly socialist Russia, along with the corruption that accompanied these types of social experiments. Bulgakov is calling attention to the clumsy nature of economic and social experimentation in the same scenes in which he presents imaginary scientific experimentation.

Preobrazhensky eats well, and while sharing a meal with a fellow doctor he makes more derisive remarks about the proletariat and socialist ideals. The reader is never entirely sure whether Bulgakov might be agreeing, at least in part, with Preobrazhensky's sentiments toward the new Russia. When the fellow doctor accuses Preobrazhensky of sounding like a counterrevolutionary, Preobrazhensky shrugs off the accusation and pays his friend for the bite that Sharik has inflicted. Sharik, however, is in for his own surprise. Doctor Bormenthal, Preobrazhensky's associate, puts a cloth with a strange smell over the dog's nose, and then the two men lift the animal onto an operating table. In an eerie operation, they replace the dog's testicles and pituitary gland with those of a deceased man.

After the operation the narrative shifts again, starting as Preobrazhensky's notes on the operation and then becoming a journal of changes in Sharik, who becomes gradually more human. The former dog begins to speak and then to wear clothes; eventually, his outward appearance is completely human.

As Sharik moves closer toward humanity, he becomes more of a bother to Preobrazhensky. Eventually, the dog becomes not simply human but a human along the lines of Soviet slogans, albeit with some canine traits, such as scratching for fleas. He renames himself Polygraph Polygraphovich Sharikov and styles himself as an agent of the Moscow Cleansing Department, which has the job of eliminating cats and other small animals. Eventually, Preobrazhensky has to turn his creature back into a dog in order to have any peace.

## THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

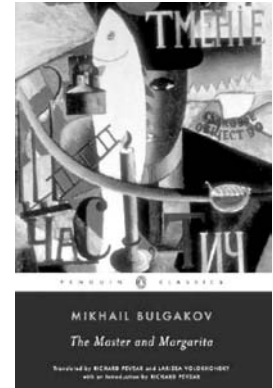
**First published:** *Master i Margarita*, wr. 1928-1940; pb. 1966-1967, censored version; 1973, uncensored version (English translation, 1967)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Satan comes to Earth in Moscow during the Stalinist period and turns a novelist's mistress into a witch, thereby unintentionally saving the novelist from oppression*

*The Master and Margarita* is generally regarded as Bulgakov's best work and as one of the masterpieces of world literature. It incorporates the satirical fantasy of *The Heart of a Dog* but carries this to a higher level of sophistication and artistry. Bulgakov began writing the book in 1928 but reported burning the first version of the manuscript in 1930, after one of his plays was banned. He later wrote a second version and finally finished a draft of a third version in 1937, but he continued working on this last draft until his death.

In the first scene of the book, two Soviet atheist literary men, Berlioz and the poet Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyryov, who has the pen name Bezdomny, meet a mysterious magician named Woland on a park bench in Moscow. Woland, who is Satan in disguise, interrupts a discussion of theology, prefiguring the eruption of the religious and magical into materialist Soviet official reality that will run throughout the book. Woland predicts that Berlioz's head will be cut off at a precise time later that morning. Numerous satirical references to Soviet life appear in the first chapter. For example, Berlioz is the head of the MASSOLIT, a Soviet-style acronym for a writers' organization that could be rendered in English as "Lottalit." The initial chapter is entitled "Never Talk to Strangers," which would not only be good advice for the two men meeting Satan but also reflects Soviet paranoid propaganda about public enemies.



Following Bulgakov's technique of rapidly shifting setting, Woland begins talking about the meeting of Pontius Pilate and Yeshua Ha-Nozri (Jesus the Nazarene), and the story jumps back centuries to this meeting. This same story will also be found in the rejected manuscript of the Master's novel, and it will recur as a second level of narrative, or a story within a story, throughout the book. Drawing on his theological background, Bulgakov works apocryphal material about the life of Jesus into the narrative. The scene moves back to the three men in the park, where the two atheists are skeptical of Woland's account of the Gospel. However, Woland's authority seems to be verified when Berlioz is hit by a streetcar and beheaded, according to prediction.

Much of the rest of part 1 of the novel concerns the descent of Ivan Nikolayevich into madness, or confrontation with reality, until he is locked up in a hospital. There, in chapter 13, entitled "Enter the Hero," Ivan Nikolayevich meets the mysterious Master. In delaying the introduction of the hero for so long and then announcing that he is bringing in the protagonist, Bulgakov is making a point of playing with novelistic conventions. Stories of Woland as a magician and his Satanic familiars are interspersed with the movement toward the entrance of the Master, as are episodes from the strange gospel of Pilate.

If Bulgakov delays in presenting the Master, he waits even longer to introduce Margarita, who enters only in the second half of the book. Margarita, who may have been based on Bulgakov's third wife, Elena Shilovskaya, continues to support the Master and his novel, even in the face of his despair. She reaches a deal with Woland, or Satan, and becomes a witch, flying naked through the air. The climax of the novel occurs when Margarita attends Satan's grand ball at midnight on Good Friday, a reminder of the Master's novel about Yeshua and Pilate. At the ball she meets the great figures from history released from the ball. Offered one wish, she chooses to free the Master. Together, the Master and Margarita leave Moscow, its hypocrisy and corruption, with Satan.

## BLACK SNOW: A THEATRICAL NOVEL

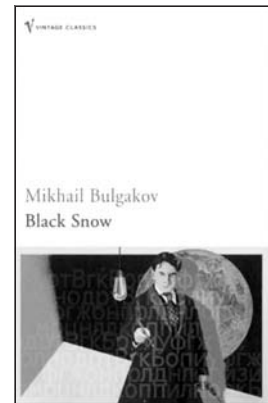
**First published:** *Teatralny roman*, 1965  
(English translation, 1967)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A writer experiences hypocrisy and difficulty while attempting to stage a dramatic adaptation of his novel*

*Black Snow* displays both the autobiographical and the satirical components in Bulgakov's work. Written in the first person, it tells the story of Maxudov, the author of a novel who has been invited to write a play based on his novel, much as Bulgakov was asked to turn *The White Guard* into *Days of the Turbins*. The theater is clearly the Moscow Arts Theater of the 1930's, guided by Konstantin Stanislavsky, the originator of method acting. Bulgakov skewers the character representing Stanislavsky, whom he clearly found difficult during his own days at the Moscow Arts Theater.

The novel opens with the chapter "How It All Began," with Maxudov receiving a request for an interview from Xavier Borisovich Ilchin, the director of the Academy of Drama at the Independent Theater. With Bulgakov's typical fondness for playing with plot structures, however, this turns out not to be the beginning, since the story then shifts back to a previous time, when Maxudov was the proofreader for *The Shipping Gazette* and had written an unpublished novel in his spare time. He was about to commit suicide when he heard a performance of the opera *Faust* in a nearby room and was interrupted by a magazine editor, who wanted to publish his novel. For several chapters, Maxudov tells the story of his novel's publication and then suddenly returns to his meeting with Ilchin.



Instead of bringing success, the dramatization of Maxudov's novel is an endless series of farcical frustrations. Ultimately, Maxudov does commit suicide by throwing himself off a bridge. The narrative ends in an uncompleted sentence. However, Bulgakov includes an afterword explaining that Maxudov did not finish his novel because of his suicide. Was the novel really unfinished, or was Maxudov's failure to end the tale the real and intended ending of Bulgakov's novel about a story about a play based on a novel?

### SUMMARY

Mikhail Bulgakov blended social and spiritual concerns in his work, satirizing the absurdities and injustices of Stalinist Russia while raising questions about the deeper meaning of life. In a society ruled by rigid bureaucracy and collectivism, Bulgakov affirmed the transcendent value of individuals and the lasting worth of art. He drew on many of the traditions of Russian literature and religion, but his fictions are modern and experimental in their structures and styles.

Carl L. Bankston III

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*Belaya gvardiya*, 1927, 1929 (2 volumes; *The White Guard*, 1971)

*Master i Margarita*, wr. 1928-1940, censored version pb. 1966-1967, uncensored version 1973 (*The Master and Margarita*, 1967)

*Teatralny roman*, 1965 (*Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel*, 1967)

##### SHORT FICTION:

*Diavoliada*, 1925 (*Diaboliad, and Other Stories*, 1972)

*Traktat o zhilishche*, 1926 (*A Treatise on Housing*, 1972)

*Zapiski iunogo vracha*, 1963 (*A Country Doctor's Notebook*, 1975)

*Notes on the Cuff, and Other Stories*, 1991

##### DRAMA:

*Dni Turbinykh*, pr. 1926, pb. 1955 (adaptation of his novel *Belaya gvardiya*; *Days of the Turbins*, 1934)

*Zoykina kvartira*, pr. 1926, pb. 1971 (*Zoya's Apartment*, 1970)

*Bagrovyy ostrov*, pr. 1928, pb. 1968 (adaptation of his short story; *The Crimson Island*, 1972)

*Beg*, wr. 1928, pr. 1957, pb. 1962 (*Flight*, 1969)

*Kabala svyatosh*, wr. 1929, pr. 1936, pb. 1962 (*A Cabal of Hypocrites*, 1972; also known as *Molière*)

*Adam i Eva*, wr. 1930-1931, pb. 1971 (*Adam and Eve*, 1971)

*Blazhenstvo*, wr. 1934, pb. 1966 (*Bliss*, 1976)

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What were some of the ways in which Mikhail Bulgakov's own life served as a basis for fiction in his novels and plays?
- Name some of the ways in which Bulgakov defied the conventions of fiction and discuss why he chose to do so.
- Religion occupies an important place in Bulgakov's writing, but he does not express conventional Christian views. How does Bulgakov offer an unorthodox approach to religion?
- How did Soviet communism affect Bulgakov's life and writings?
- What characteristics of Bulgakov's writings led the Soviet authorities to ban them?
- In works such as *The Heart of a Dog* and *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov made use of many of the themes found in works of fantasy and science fiction. What are some of these themes, and in what books and stories can they be found?

## *Mikhail Bulgakov*

*Posledniye dni (Pushkin)*, wr. 1934-1935, pr. 1943, pb. 1955 (*The Last Days*, 1976)

*Ivan Vasilievich*, wr. 1935, pb. 1965, pr. 1966 (English translation, 1974)

*Rashel*, wr. c. 1936, pb. 1972 (libretto; adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's short story "Mademoiselle Fifi")

*Minin i Pozharskii*, wr. 1936, pb. 1976 (libretto)

*Batum*, wr. 1938, pb. 1977

*Don Kikhot*, pr. 1941, pb. 1962

*The Early Plays of Mikhail Bulgakov*, pb. 1972

*Six Plays*, pb. 1991

### NONFICTION:

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### TRANSLATION:

*L'Avare*, 1936 (of Molière's play)

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## JOHN BUNYAN

**Born:** Elstow, Bedfordshire, England  
November, 10, 1628 (baptized)

**Died:** London, England  
August 31, 1688

*A master of the plain style, Bunyan enriched English literature by producing allegorical prose works on the theme of religion and a spiritual autobiography.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Bunyan (BUHN-yuhn), the son of Thomas Bunyan and his second wife, Margaret Bentley, was baptized on November 10, 1628, in the village of Elstow, near Bedford, England. Although his ancestors had been English yeoman farmers and small landowners in Bedfordshire, his father was a whitesmith or metal craftsman, suggesting that the family fortunes had declined over generations. Bunyan himself was apprenticed at his father's craft, though the designation changed to tinker, or mender of metal implements, and for many years he earned his living through his skill. The Bunyans were not destitute, nor were they forced to become itinerant craftsmen, for both Bunyan and his father owned a forge and workshop in Elstow. In his confessional autobiography, Bunyan lists activities of his youth as dancing, playing tip-cat, ringing church bells, and swearing—all of which he solemnly condemned.

He attended school, either in Elstow or in nearby Bedford, but it appears that he learned little beyond the ability to read and write English. His actual lifelong education was obtained through the King James Bible (1611), which he knew well enough to recall hundreds, perhaps thousands, of verses at will. He absorbed its style, its metaphors and symbols, its cadences, and its themes. In addition, he possessed a broad knowledge of Protestant

religious works, including John Foxe's *The Book of Martyrs* (1563) and Martin Luther's *In epistolam Sancti Pauli ad Galatas commentarius* (1519; *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 1575). Throughout Bunyan's lifetime, England was undergoing sweeping changes in its society, politics, economics, and religion. Although these changes affected Bunyan's life profoundly, he hardly noted them except for the movement toward religious freedom.

In 1644, following the death of his mother and his father's remarriage, Bunyan enlisted in the parliamentary army in a regiment garrisoned at Newport Pagnall and commanded by Sir Samuel Luke. Historians have established that parliamentary armies of the time had religion as their main interest, with units expounding the scriptures, reading, and debating points of doctrine; Bunyan probably encountered a wide range of viewpoints among the Dissenters. A plan to send his company to Ireland did not come to fruition, and he had experienced no military engagements of importance when he was demobilized in 1646.

Bunyan married soon afterward, perhaps in 1648, and his wife's small dowry included two religious handbooks, *The Plaine Man's Pathway to Heaven* (1601), by Arthur Dent, and *The Practice of Piety* (1612), by Lewis Bayley. The Dent book employed the biblical journey metaphor that became prominent in Bunyan's own prose. Following a prolonged period of religious angst, narrated in his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), Bunyan joined the Baptist Congregation at Bedford in 1653 and began evangeli-



cal preaching and religious tract writing, the first of these being pamphlets directed against the Quakers. Following the death of his first wife, who left him with four small children, he married again in 1659 and, with his devoted second wife, had two additional children.

A successful preacher who never prepared his sermons in advance, Bunyan attracted large crowds through his obvious sincerity, plain style, and fervor. After his fame spread, he was invited to preach in towns throughout the Midland counties and even in London. Barred from preaching in the established church, he addressed congregations in fields, barns, chapels, and forests. As he was not licensed, he was arrested in 1660 and imprisoned in the Bedford county jail, where he remained until 1672, sustaining himself and his family by making laces. Imprisonment was not a stern ordeal for him, and it is plain from his own account that his jailers sought to release him, provided that he would agree not to preach. This Bunyan steadfastly refused to do. He pointed out that while none could be absolutely certain of correctness in biblical interpretation, his own views were as plausible as the official ones. During his imprisonment he was permitted visits from friends and family, wrote prolifically, and was released for brief periods to visit others. The record shows that he attended unauthorized religious meetings during some of his leaves from prison. Following his release in 1672, he became the minister of the Bedford Congregation; he was then imprisoned again for several months, probably in 1676 and 1677. It is generally accepted that during this imprisonment he wrote his masterpiece *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (part 1, 1678). *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come, the Second Part* was published in 1684.

For the remainder of his life, Bunyan continued his ministry and prolific writing. In August, 1688, while riding on horseback from Reading to London after attempting to settle a dispute between a father and son, he experienced a chill. He died in London on August 31, 1688, and was buried in Bunhill Fields, the principal cemetery for Dissenters.

#### ANALYSIS

Beginning with the publication of *Some Gospel Truths Opened* (1656), a tract directed against the

Quakers, Bunyan was to produce numerous published works during his lifetime. All were religious in nature, though there is considerable variety within the general subject. Some are polemical and controversial, and a few concern broad religious doctrines; some are handbooks or guides for adults, while others instruct children. Since Bunyan did not publish his sermons, little evidence remains of his preaching, though two of his published titles appear to be sermons. Literary historians agree that only four of his works are of lasting interest, and three of these—*The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (1680), and *The Holy War* (1682)—are allegories of religious life that center on the plight of the individual soul.

Bunyan's first significant prose work was his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, a prominent example of a genre that goes back to the fifth century *Confessiones* (397-400; *Confessions*, 1620) of Saint Augustine. In simple and muscular prose, Bunyan gives a dramatized account of his spiritual development, his conversion, and the beginning of his ministry. Details of his daily life are scant, and his autobiography serves to illustrate the workings of God on Earth. To Bunyan, salvation is essentially a gripping drama featuring God and the Devil struggling for the individual soul. In accounting for his spiritual development, Bunyan lists evidences of his wickedness, actually trivial infractions, and attempts to elucidate the stages of his conversion.

At the center of Bunyan's narrative lies a recurring cyclic pattern of psychological interest, for life's journey does not occur in a direct line. Always anxious about salvation, the narrator falls into a deep depression, convinced that he is lost or, in one memorable instance, that he has committed the unpardonable sin. These periods last for days, weeks, or months. He sometimes hears voices telling him to "sell Christ" or urging him to doubt or curse God. Occasionally he hears a stern and wrathful voice from Heaven issuing a warning. Efforts to find support and reassurance from others prove fruitless. On one occasion he confesses to a wise old Christian man that he believes he has committed the unpardonable sin, and the old man agrees. After a period of profound gloom, however, he reads or recalls a biblical verse that gives him hope or relieves his anxiety. The depression passes, and he is reassured for a time, only to experience a

later recurrence of the entire cycle. Finally, sometime during his late twenties, the cycles end. Assured of salvation, he begins his ministry.

With the publication of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a richly imaginative depiction of the quest for salvation, Bunyan achieved lasting fame. The work saw numerous editions within his lifetime and, through translations into many languages, attained the status of a world classic.

In contrast to Christian's successful journey to Heaven in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan's next allegorical work chronicles the destruction of a sinner. *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* is cast in the form of a dialogue between Mr. Wiseman and Mr. Attentive, who does not simply listen but injects comments of his own and asks pointed questions. A notorious sinner from childhood, Mr. Badman seeks wealth through marriage, defrauds others throughout his life, and betrays all who trust him. A clear example of Bunyan's view of a hardened sinner, Mr. Badman grows increasingly vicious in his personal life. Following the death of his first wife, he marries a woman as evil as himself, but they soon part in acrimony. As if to stress that he no longer struggles against sin, he is granted a peaceful death.

In their narration, Mr. Wiseman and Mr. Attentive enrich the plot with brief sensationalized accounts of other sinners and their fates. Drawn from actual events of the time or from current stories, they emphasize the disastrous consequences of evil, and their authenticity is never questioned. In one account, a man is borne away violently by evil spirits after publicly drinking a toast to the Devil. In other accounts, a despondent man's suicide is recounted in vivid detail, while a poor village woman, having stolen two pence, swears that she is innocent and invites the ground to swallow her, whereupon witnesses see the ground open and bury her twelve feet deep. To supplement the instructional intent of the allegorical and brief stories, Mr. Wiseman quotes biblical verses directed toward Christian behavior and ethics, reinforcing the moral message.

*The Holy War* features a more complex allegorical plot than Bunyan's earlier works; scholars have demonstrated that the meaning of the work operates on several levels. On one level, Bunyan alludes to contemporary events in Bedford, where Puritan officeholders were being replaced by Royalists. In

its description of sieges and drills, the work also reflects the English Civil War and Bunyan's experience as a soldier. Yet fundamentally the book presents a sweeping, comprehensive depiction of God's Providence as it applies to the world at large and the individual soul. The city, Mansoul, with five gates named for each of the senses, is established by El Shaddai (God). Diabolus besieges and captures the city, endowing it with a new charter and replacing the old city recorder, Mr. Conscience, with Mr. Forget-Good. El Shaddai dispatches an army to besiege and retake the city, at length placing Emmanuel (Christ) in command. Supported by a host of important personages—such as Mr. Alderman Atheism, Mr. Lustings, and Mr. Fornication—Diabolus mounts a strong resistance, but eventually the city falls. Once the rule of El Shaddai is restored, however, the city relapses into its evil ways, and Diabolus renews the war. Although he recaptures most of the city, he fails to retake the citadel at the center, which is defended by Emmanuel and his supporters.

## THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

**First published:** Part 1, 1678; part 2, 1684

**Type of work:** Religious allegory

*Rejecting his existence in the City of Destruction, Christian makes the long and arduous journey to the Heavenly City.*

*The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan's best-known work, narrates the protagonist Christian's journey to salvation. Made aware of his own mortality, Christian abandons the City of Destruction and begins his journey to the Heavenly City. The narrative takes the form of an allegorical dream vision and develops the theme of individual salvation through a highly consistent allegorical framework.

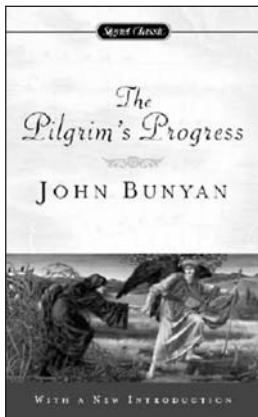
Urged on by Evangelist, Christian abandons his wife and children, stopping his ears with his fingers to silence their pleas, an indication that the journey to salvation must be an individual experience. The two companions whom he encounters along the way, Faithful and Hopeful, are actually facets of his own character. Once he has begun the journey, he reflects the character of the wayfaring, warring

Christian disciple, often tempted and often struggling but never abandoning the path.

Christian is not tempted by the worldly pleasures of Vanity Fair or by any pomp and ceremony associated with riches, nor is he swayed by the erroneous reasoning of Obstinate, Pliable, Sloth, or Mr. Worldly Wiseman or the shallow optimism apparent in characters such as Hypocrisy, Formality, and Ignorance. His serious temptations concern fear, doubt, and despair. At the journey's beginning he is mired in the Slough of Despond, escaping only after difficult exertions. He

meets frightening monsters such as Pope and Pagan and battles the demoniac warrior Apollyon. Cast into a dungeon at Doubting Castle by Giant Despair, he can free himself only with a key called Promise. He must maintain constant vigilance in order to avoid being distracted from his goal in places such as the Valley of Ease and the Valley of Deceit.

Yet the journey is not without its rewarding pauses and encouragements. At the outset his burden drops when he reaches the Cross, and at the House Beautiful he receives instruction and grace.



In the vicinity of Beulah Land, he meets the shepherds Knowledge, Watchful, Experience, and Sincere. As he approaches the River of Death near the end of the journey, he can see the Heavenly City beyond and is confident of his safe arrival.

The style of *The Pilgrim's Progress* makes the work accessible to readers of all levels. Bunyan employs simple diction and language, biblical images and metaphors, and repetition, all of which are suitable to his didactic purpose. In 1684, Bunyan published a second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, narrating the journey of Christian's wife, Christiana; her maid; and their children to Heaven. They are guided by the magnanimous Mr. Greatheart, whose presence makes the perils of the journey less intense.

### SUMMARY

John Bunyan's writings brought him fame as a master allegorist and exponent of the plain style. While his works are informed with a powerfully consistent mythic vision, his arresting theme of individual salvation remains their most striking feature, a theme developed through strain and angst. His individualism, denying all but arbitrary grace, places the entire burden of salvation on the individual human. Even while realizing that most people would not play their part in the great drama successfully, he sought to illustrate how the individual's journey through life might best be made.

Stanley Archer

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- John Bunyan possessed few, if any, of the early advantages many prospective writers possess. What resources buoyed the literary capacity of this tinker's son?
- Explain how Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* rises above its autobiographical form and becomes a book about the challenges of a religious quest.
- Give instances from *The Pilgrim's Progress* to exemplify Christian as a "wayfaring, warring Christian disciple."
- Characterize the "progress" of Bunyan's pilgrim.
- Full-blown allegory is not popular at present. How does one account for the forcefulness of Bunyan's allegory today?



Monitor/Archive Photos

## ANTHONY BURGESS

**Born:** Manchester, England

February 25, 1917

**Died:** London, England

November 25, 1993

*One of the most prolific twentieth century British writers, Burgess is known for his linguistic prowess, his engaging plots, and his parodic, sometimes vicious, humor.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anthony Burgess (BUR-juhs), christened John Burgess Wilson (Anthony was his confirmation name), was born on February 25, 1917, in Manchester, England, to Joseph and Elizabeth Burgess Wilson. In early 1919, an influenza epidemic killed Burgess's mother and his only sibling, a sister. In 1922, Burgess's father remarried. Anthony Burgess faulted his stepmother, Maggie Dwyer, with "an emotional coldness" that he believed marred his work and that many of the female characters in his novels exhibit.

Burgess attended a Catholic elementary school and received two scholarships to the Catholic preparatory school, Xaverian College, where he flourished, both artistically and intellectually. Though he attended Catholic schools, by sixteen he had rejected the Catholic church and its teachings; Catholicism remains, however, a recurrent subject in his fiction. Because he failed a physics course, Burgess was unable to enroll in music studies as he had wished, but he received his bachelor of arts, with honors, in English language and literature from the University of Manchester in June, 1940.

In October, 1940, Burgess joined the army, serving first in the Army Medical Corps, then in the Army Educational Corps. In January, 1942, he married Llewela Isherwood Jones, a Welsh economics student at the University of Manchester and a

cousin of writer Christopher Isherwood. Throughout their long marriage, Llewela, or Lynne, as Burgess called her, was unfaithful, engaging in numerous casual affairs. This behavior, and Burgess's attitude toward it, undoubtedly contributed to the portrayals of faithless wives and the misogyny that appear in his fiction.

In 1944, while Burgess was stationed in Gibraltar, he received word that Llewela had been assaulted, according to her by American soldiers, resulting in her miscarriage and in physicians' orders that she never become pregnant again. Somewhat simplistically, Burgess blamed this attack for Llewela's increasing alcoholism and for her death, of cirrhosis of the liver, twenty-four years later. This attack was transformed into the attack on the fictional writer and his wife in Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962; reprinted with final chapter, 1986).

From 1946 to 1959, Burgess held various teaching posts, including one as an education officer in Malaya. His stay in Malaya was a turning point in his career: It is in Malaya that he began writing fiction. In 1956, his first novel, *Time for a Tiger*, the first novel in the Malayan Trilogy, was published. Since colonial servants were discouraged from writing fiction, he used the pen name Anthony Burgess. The trilogy's second and third installments, *The Enemy in the Blanket* and *Beds in the East*, appeared in 1958 and 1959, respectively; all three novels were published as *The Long Day Wanes* in 1965.

In 1959, Burgess collapsed while lecturing to his students, was sent back to London, and was diagnosed (so he consistently claimed) as suffering



from a fatal brain tumor, with only a year to live. During this “terminal” year, his first year as a full-time writer, Burgess wrote five novels: *The Doctor Is Sick* (1960), *The Right to an Answer* (1960), *Devil of a State* (1961), *The Worm and the Ring* (1961), and *One Hand Clapping* (1961), the latter written under the pseudonym Joseph Kell. Burgess later complied with a request to review one of Kell’s novels, claiming to have “assumed that the editor wanted a bit of a joke.” Burgess’s review created a controversy, with some critics charging that the author had deceitfully reviewed his own book, but Burgess’s literary career was now firmly established. No sign or symptoms of a brain tumor ever subsequently appeared.

In 1962, Burgess published his most famous novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, as well as *The Wanting Seed*. In 1963, he published *Honey for the Bears* and another novel under the Kell pseudonym, *Inside Mr. Enderby*. His fictional biography, *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare’s Love-Life*, and *The Eve of Saint Venus* appeared in 1964, the same year that Liliana Macellari, a linguist at Cambridge University, and Burgess had a son, Andrew. His parody of Ian Fleming’s James Bond series, *Tremor of Intent*, was published in 1966.

The year 1968 was a momentous one for Burgess. In March, his wife, Llewela, died. In October, Burgess married Liliana Macellari, the mother of his son. He published *Urgent Copy: Literary Studies*, *Enderby Outside*, and, in the United States, *Enderby* (which contained both *Mr. Enderby* and *Enderby Outside*). Burgess also permanently left England. From 1969 to 1973, he continued his prolific writing career, also serving as writer-in-residence and teaching creative writing at several universities in the United States.

Burgess’s novel *MF* (1971) and director Stanley Kubrick’s brilliant and faithful film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* appeared in the same year. From 1974 to 1986, Burgess published many books, among them *The Clockwork Testament: Or, Enderby’s End* (1974), *Abba Abba* (1977), *Man of Nazareth* (1979), and *Enderby’s Dark Lady* (1984). During this same period, Burgess wrote *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), his most experimental novel, which is elaborately patterned after Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony. *Earthly Powers*, his treatment of Roman Catholicism, appeared in 1980. In 1987, he published *Little Wilson and Big God*, the first volume of his projected three-volume autobiography. *The*

*Devil’s Mode*, a collection of short stories, appeared in 1989; in 1990, the second installment of his autobiography, *You’ve Had Your Time*, was published.

Burgess died in London on November, 25, 1993, at the age of seventy-six.

## ANALYSIS

Burgess seems not only fascinated with language but also obsessed with it. Though he claims to have avoided “overmuch word play and verbal oddity” in deference to his reading public, his novels are nevertheless filled, occasionally distractingly so, with wordplay. Sometimes, as in *A Clockwork Orange*, this playing with language creates a new language, one that becomes more powerful than English could have been for portraying the subject matter. When *A Clockwork Orange*’s gang member-narrator, Alex, describes “a bit of the ultra violence” as fine and “horrorshow,” or describes as “sophistoes” two adolescent girls intent on seduction, the language defines Alex as much as, if not more than, his behavior does. In fact, in *A Clockwork Orange*, language is a character. Burgess also uses language effectively in *Nothing Like the Sun*, his fictional biography of William Shakespeare. In this novel Elizabethan language and idiom create a Shakespeare that no other rendering of language could have produced.

The language of Shakespeare, whom Burgess calls a “word-boy,” involves the reader more intensely than traditional usage of English. In *The Eve of Saint Venus*, Burgess parodies overinflated poetic language, with language again becoming one of the characters of the novel. Burgess’s Malayan Trilogy has been called “not so much plotted as it is orchestrated,” and the integration of music with language is vital in his most experimental novel, *Napoleon Symphony*, in which he attempts to synthesize the language of the novel and the musical elements of Beethoven’s *Eroica*. Though Burgess often calls unnecessary attention to his play with language and can overdo his linguistic games, he manages, in most of his work, to make language powerful, effective, and noticeable.

Burgess’s work often deals with the duality of nature: good and evil, free will and determinism, romanticism and realism, comedy and tragedy. His characters must grapple with their behavior in terms of these dualities. In his attempt to discover his own beliefs, Hillier, in *Tremor of Intent*, has many



debates with several characters on the nature of good and evil. The conflict and paradox of opposing forces pervade the three novels that constitute the Malayan Trilogy.

Kenneth Toomey, the homosexual narrator of *Earthly Powers*, wrestles with the question of good and evil. Toomey and the pope's discussions of good and evil and of free will and determinism form the philosophical backbone of the novel. Zverkov, a character in *Honey for the Bears*, represents philosophy and thought; Karamzin, of the same novel, represents force and physical strength. Like the characters in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the characters in Burgess's *One Hand Clapping* are confronted with the predicament of living a meaningful life in a spiritual and cultural desert. Alex, the narrator of *A Clockwork Orange*, complains about all the discussion and debate over good and evil; since no one ever tries to determine the essential source and nature of goodness, Alex claims that he does not understand the insistence on dissecting the nature of evil. Burgess seems as much a philosopher as a novelist, with his constant analysis of the duality of the nature of life, but it is these philosophical ruminations that lend depth to his work.

Sometimes subtle, but more often blatant if not slapstick, the comic elements of Burgess's work are essential Burgess. The violence and depravity of *A Clockwork Orange* are made palatable by its narrator's irrepressible sense of irony, lending humor to the most gruesome aspects of the novel. In the Malayan Trilogy, Burgess's engaging representation of life transforms depravity into comedy. The narrator of *The Right to an Answer* is cynical and ironic. *Devil of a State* is a farce, while *Honey for the Bears* is comic throughout. The comic elements of both *Earthly Powers* and *Tremor of Intent* are interwoven with philosophical musings on the nature of good and evil. The humor of Burgess's work is sometimes grotesque, often cynical, but usually integral to the fiction.

Sexuality, especially homosexuality, seems to be another obsession of Burgess. Many of the wives in his fiction are unfaithful: Hortense in *Earthly Powers*, Sheila in *The Doctor Is Sick*, Anne in *Nothing Like the Sun*, Mrs. Walters in *Tremor of Intent*, Belinda of *Honey for the Bears*, and Beatrice-Joanna of *The Wanting Seed*. Incest, and the potential for incest, also appears. Toomey often ponders the possibility

of a sexual liaison with his sister Hortense. Shakespeare's brother Richard has an affair with Shakespeare's wife, which constitutes a type of incest since she is Richard's sister-in-law. Hillier, in *Tremor of Intent*, often ruminates on his paternal yet sexual feelings toward Clara, with whom he does eventually have sex. *MF* also deals with the incestuous. Homosexuality often appears in Burgess's work. WS (Burgess's name for William Shakespeare) in *Nothing Like the Sun* becomes involved with his beautiful male sponsor. While in prison, Alex of *A Clockwork Orange* is forced to fend off an inmate to protect himself from homosexual advances. Alan in *Tremor of Intent* submits himself to a homosexual encounter in order to receive a stolen gun. The husband and wife of *Honey for the Bears* have an open marriage but are basically homosexual. Derek, the high government official of *The Wanting Seed*, is homosexual. Kenneth Toomey of *Earthly Powers* is a homosexual, and his sexual orientation is as much a concern of the novel as is the role of the church and God.

## A CLOCKWORK ORANGE

**First published:** 1962

**Type of work:** Novel

*In an unidentified future society, teenage Alex recalls his violent gang activities, his imprisonment, and his reformation.*

Burgess's most memorable novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, cannot be discussed without addressing its language, "nadsat," a combination of Russian, English, and slang, which was invented for the novel and which catapults its narrator, Alex, into the reader's consciousness as few other books can. Alex invites readers along with him and his "droogs" (buddies) as they sit in a bar, eyeing the "devotchkas [girls] . . . dressed in the height of fashion" and wearing "make-up to match (rainbows round the glazzies [eyes], that is, and the rot [mouth] painted very wide)." He narrates their adventures as they do a bit of ultraviolence: They "razrez" a teacher's books to bits, then "tolchock" him and treat him to the "old bootcrush"; they come across Billyboy and his five droogs, which

leads to a gang fight with “the nozh [knife], the oozy [chain], the britva [razor], not just fisties and boots”; they beat to death an old woman and her “pusscats.”

Throughout part 1, the extreme violence of the novel is made palatable by the unusual language, which presents repulsive acts with strange, new words, drawing the reader into the book and into the violence itself. The language of the novel captures the reader and makes him or her one of Alex’s “droogs,” maintaining sympathy for Alex throughout his violent activities. When he rapes two ten-year-old girls in his room, he tells the reader that “this time they thought nothing fun and stopped creeching with high mirth, and had to submit to the strange and weird desires of Alexander the Large which . . . were chooodessny and zammechat and very demanding. . . . But they were both very very drunken and could hardly feel very much.” When he hints at his brutality toward his father and mother, he reveals that his father was “like humble mumble chumble.” In addition to making the violence more acceptable, Alex’s inclusion of biblical language, “Oh, my brothers,” makes the narrator more than just an uneducated criminal; at times, in fact, Alex sounds suspiciously like a preacher addressing his congregation on the nature of good and evil. The language of *A Clockwork Orange*, innovative, powerful, and original, becomes almost like a character in the novel. The language not only distances the violence being described but also forces the reader to reevaluate that violence. Indeed, the language is one of the things that makes *A Clockwork Orange* so powerful.

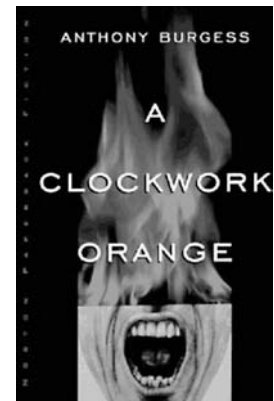
The novel opens with the line “What’s it going to be then, eh?” This question, which serves as the structure to open each of the novel’s three sections, introduces the reader not only to the “humble narrator” Alex but also to one of the novel’s major themes: the nature of free will. In part 2, Alex, who is only fifteen and who has been incarcerated for murdering the old woman with the cats, is subjected to reconditioning by the State. In this, “the real weepy and like tragic part of the story,” the State tries to take away Alex’s free will by making him ill when he views sex and violence, and also when he listens to Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, which had been a favorite of Alex after his violent activities. The nature of free will and determinism is one of Burgess’s most oft-repeated

themes; Alex and the prison chaplain, who constantly addresses Alex as “little 6655321” rather than by his name, discuss the fact that Alex is going “to be made into a good boy.” Burgess’s attack on behaviorists and on totalitarian states is obvious: Alex is made ill by drugs, is forced to view nauseatingly violent films, and is reduced to a sniveling, whining victim.

Part 3 presents the reader with a new, reformed Alex, an Alex without free will or freedom of choice, an Alex who has become a victim, and an Alex who ultimately tries to commit suicide. Something of a celebrity after his reconditioning by the State, Alex views a photograph of himself in the newspaper, looking “very gloomy and like scared, but that was really with the flashbulbs going pop pop all the time.” Upon arrival home, Alex learns that his parents have rented his room to a lodger and that he is no longer welcome there. All of his personal belongings were sold to pay for the upkeep of the orphaned cats of the woman Alex had murdered. Alex staggers away, only to encounter some of his former victims, who beat him and subject him to the same treatment to which he had originally subjected them.

Throughout, Burgess makes it clear that without freedom of choice and free will, even when that choice is used to commit evil, people become helpless victims of society and life. In his despair at his life without choice, Alex tries to commit suicide, leading the State to be accused of failure in its “criminal reform scheme” and to be accused of figurative murder, since the State has, indeed, murdered the real Alex. Alex’s attempted suicide makes him feel “filled up again with clean.” It also makes his parents repent for their abominable treatment of him after his release from prison. The government authorities try to restore Alex to his former, unreconditioned self.

Until 1986, the published novel excluded the final chapter, as did Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film, and the second to the last chapter ends with Alex’s imagining himself doing some ultraviolence and



his ironic comment, "I was cured all right." The final chapter, however, though often considered weak by American audiences or critics, reveals another of Burgess's important themes: an essentially optimistic view of humankind. Alex chooses to reject his formerly violent ways. He tells his audience, "And all it was was that I was young." Alex decides to grow up and have a family. Just as he had chosen to commit violence, with free will Alex can choose to avoid evil.

### NOTHING LIKE THE SUN: A STORY OF SHAKESPEARE'S LOVE-LIFE

**First published:** 1964

**Type of work:** Novel

*Set in Elizabethan England, and using Elizabethan language and idiom, this fictional account of William Shakespeare's love life concentrates on his sexual encounters.*

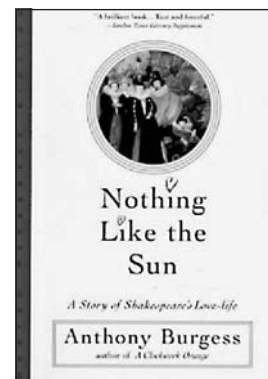
In *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love-Life*, Anthony Burgess freely imagines the sexual exploits and love life of William Shakespeare. The protagonist, identified as WS throughout the novel, is seduced and forced into marriage with Anne Hathaway by her pregnancy. WS does not believe the child is his, and this establishes some of the themes of the novel: sexual infidelity, manipulation, and coercion. WS's relationship with his wife is not a happy one, and, despite the birth of twins, whom WS does claim as his own, he goes to London to work and live, rarely returning home to his wife and children, who live with WS's parents and siblings.

Away from home, WS becomes involved with his beautiful male sponsor, the earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesly, to whom "Venus and Adonis" and the sonnets are dedicated. Like WS's wife, Southampton is also unfaithful to WS, which forces WS to seek the love of his "dark lady" in the arms of Fatimah, a beauty whom WS describes as neither black nor white, but "gold." Fatimah, greatly interested in WS's friends and acquaintances, eventually has an affair with Wriothesly. When WS discovers her infidelity, he returns to Stratford, only to

find himself cuckolded by his own brother. WS returns to London. After a time, he takes Fatimah back. From her, WS contracts syphilis, which Fatimah contracted from Wriothesly. According to Burgess, this disease affects WS's worldview, leading, by implication, to the darker artistic vision of the tragedies.

Interwoven with WS's sexual exploits and disappointments is the milieu of Elizabethan England, Burgess shows his readers the effects of the plague, the struggles of the theaters, and the tempests of the playwrights and their players, all in the idiom and language of the Elizabethans. Burgess abundantly displays his linguistic ability and playfulness in *Nothing Like the Sun*. Many of the characters speak lines from Shakespeare's plays, and Burgess describes the environment, characters, and behavior in language that approximates that of the time period, lending a richness and complexity to the novel that would not have been comparable with contemporary English. The use of language is also of great importance to the "word-boy" WS, so the Elizabethan English in the novel becomes an appropriate metaphor for WS's struggles to form language that fits his view of the world and to express his deepest beliefs. To emphasize this importance of language, a few parts of the novel are written as a journal or as if they were excerpts from a drama.

As a sort of prologue (though not identified as such) before the novel proper, these words appear: "Mr. Burgess's farewell lecture to his special students . . . who complained that Shakespeare had nothing to give to the East. (Thanks for the farewell gift of three bottles of *samsu*. I will take a swig now. Delicious.)" In the epilogue, the reader is again introduced to this *samsu*-swigging persona, who enters the narrative of the novel only once or twice. The point of view in the epilogue immediately returns to that of WS, however, who is now dying, attended by his physician son-in-law. The viewpoint in *Nothing Like the Sun* is almost consistently that of WS, so it is unclear why Burgess's persona intrudes into the narrative,



especially since Burgess does so infrequently and inconsequentially.

## TREMOR OF INTENT

**First published:** 1966

**Type of work:** Novel

*In this parody of the spy genre, secret agent Hillier is sent to reclaim a British scientist named Roper, and he encounters the villainous Theodorescu.*

In the first part of Burgess's *Tremor of Intent*, the protagonist is a secret agent named Hillier, who wishes to retire and who suffers from the "two chronic diseases of gluttony and satyriasis." He recounts his memories of his childhood and young adult relationship with Roper, a British scientist. Hillier has been sent, on this last mission before retirement, to recover Roper from the Soviet Union.

Many of Burgess's standard themes appear in this part of the book: the role of the church and religion, the duality of good and evil, the nature of free will, and the infidelity of wives. Roper and Hillier address many of these topics themselves, but Roper also discusses the philosophical issues with others. Roper's wife, a German girl whom he married after World War II, is unfaithful, and Hillier, ostensibly in the name of Roper's honor, beats her lover (just before Hillier has sex with her himself). Though at the beginning of the novel Hillier is on a cruise ship on his way to recover Roper, it is not until part 2 that the action of the novel actually takes place on the cruise ship.

In part 2, where the parody of the spy genre begins in earnest, Hillier meets the siblings Alan and Clara Walters, who will aid him in his attempt to get Roper and who will save Hillier's life. Young Clara represents the innocent female in the novel, and, though Hillier will ultimately have relations with her, he spends much of the novel avoiding sexual contact with her, trying to convince himself that his feelings toward her are paternal. He readily admits his sexual feelings, however, for Miss Devi, the

wicked woman of the genre; she is employed as secretary to the novel's villain, Mr. Theodorescu, a gluttonous, obese pederast.

Hillier engages in a gluttony contest with Theodorescu, and Burgess catalogs the foods they eat in great detail. Hillier also indulges in sexual antics with Miss Devi, leading to his being tricked (by drugs) into giving Theodorescu information, which the villain, as a neutral, plans to sell to the highest bidder. Burgess clearly condemns the villain Theodorescu for being a neutral. Apparently, not choosing sides, or choosing to be on all sides, is a crime in this novel; many of the other characters, but especially the young boy Alan, detest such neutrality.

In part 3, after Hillier finds Roper, he discovers that he himself is the one who has been duped: He has not been sent to rescue Roper after all, but to be killed. True to the genre, however, Hillier is saved. Burgess has the assassin engage in a philosophical discussion with Hillier and Roper, allowing them time to be rescued.

Hillier then finds Theodorescu, gorges the villain with information, and eliminates him. Hillier also has his long-anticipated sexual rendezvous with Clara. Even while parodying the genre, Burgess presents a plot with sufficient twists and surprises to retain the reader's interest. Though the sometimes lengthy discussions on good and evil or on the nature of choice may seem inappropriate, they can also be interpreted as Burgess's parody of the genre: His spies and villains deal with major philosophical issues even as they practice their craft.

In part 4, Burgess has Clara and Alan, who were essential components of Hillier's success in surviving his last assignment, come to visit Hillier, and the three of them briefly discuss some of the philosophical issues present in the early parts of the novel. Hillier, former spy, glutton, and satyr, has now, in the ultimate parody of the spy genre and in the ultimate representation of Burgess's essentially optimistic worldview, become a priest. Burgess does not play with language excessively in *Tremor of Intent* as he does in some of his other novels. His characters discuss his usual themes in great detail.



## NAPOLEON SYMPHONY

**First published:** 1974

**Type of work:** Novel

*In this fictionalized biography of Napoleon I, Burgess employs the structure of Ludwig van Beethoven's third symphony, the Eroica, as a controlling literary device.*

When Beethoven began to work on his third symphony, the *Eroica*, he viewed the work as a tribute to Napoleon I. As he proceeded with the composition, however, he lost faith in Napoleon; Beethoven was so irked when Napoleon declared himself emperor of France that the composer ended up dedicating the *Eroica* not to Napoleon but to Prometheus. In *Napoleon Symphony*, Burgess merges his skill in writing with his highly developed knowledge of music to produce a tragicomical biography of the famed French general and emperor.

Like Beethoven's symphony, Burgess's novel is divided into movements, each of which focuses on a significant period in Napoleon's life. The novel is at once complex but eminently accessible to general readers. Readers with strong backgrounds in history and music will find hidden gems of meaning that might easily be missed by more casual readers. Less sophisticated readers, however, will delight in the basic story Burgess is telling and in the humor with which he tells it.

The novel covers Napoleon's life from the time he married Josephine to his death and some of the period following it. Just as Beethoven's symphony has four movements, so does Burgess's novel. In structuring it, Burgess played the *Eroica* over and over on his phonograph, timing each movement meticulously. He then worked out a way to make the sections of his novel proportionate to the movements of the symphony.

Following his death on the island of St. Helena, Burgess's Napoleon assumes Promethean proportions. Despite his defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon had moved relentlessly toward his ideal objective of uniting Europe, for which Burgess celebrates him. The greatest strength of *Napoleon Symphony* is that in structuring it parallel to the *Eroica*, Burgess succeeds in making the French emperor a rounded character. Readers see him as a conquering hero,

but they also are given access to him in his more personal moments.

In one section, Napoleon, who has no heir, is shown presiding over a family dinner. Most of the attendees at this dinner are fueled by greed. The salient question "What is in it for me?" underlies the motives of the people at this gathering. The irony of seeing a Napoleon who, although he could lead armies and shape empires, could not control his and Josephine's grasping relatives is not lost on readers.

## EARTHLY POWERS

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*Against a backdrop of international events of the twentieth century, the homosexual author Kenneth Toomey narrates the story of his life.*

*Earthly Powers* contains many of Burgess's favorite themes: the duality of nature, good versus evil, free will versus determinism, sexuality, and infidelity. The narrator, homosexual author Kenneth Toomey, becomes related, through the marriage of his sister Hortense, to the Catholic family Campanati, whose adopted son Carlo will one day become pope. Though future pontiff Carlo Campanati is rarely in the novel, when he is present, he and the narrator often argue about such philosophical issues as free will, choice, and the nature of a God who creates homosexuals and whose church condemns homosexuality.

Toomey is eighty-one years old at the start of the novel. When he attempts to end the relationship with his unfaithful lover-secretary Geoffrey, Geoffrey threatens blackmail. Geoffrey, however, is then forced to flee to avoid criminal prosecution for some crime he has committed. Early in the novel, Toomey is asked to corroborate a "miracle" supposedly performed by Carlo years earlier; to rid himself of Geoffrey, Toomey sends Geoffrey to Chicago to investigate the miracle.

The novel then explores Toomey's long life, including his various affairs and betrayals: with Val, who leaves him and who will one day become a poet; with Sir Richard Curry Burt, who involves

Toomey in a bizarre homosexual situation at a dock; with Ralph, an African American, who leaves Toomey to return to Africa and his black heritage; and with physician Phillip Shawcross, a platonic relationship that Toomey claims is his greatest love.

Like the wives in Burgess's other works, Toomey's male lovers in this novel are often unfaithful and frequently cruel. Toomey, like many of Burgess's characters, is obsessed with sexuality and often has incestuous thoughts about his sister Hortense, who seems to be the only woman with whom he would consider having a physical relationship. After her divorce, Hortense has a lesbian relationship, despite the fact that she had previously reviled Toomey for his homosexuality. At the end of the novel, Toomey and his sister Hortense are living together, as Mr. and Mrs. Toomey, and sleep in the same bedroom, though in separate beds.

Woven into the story of Toomey's relatively unhappy love life are the stories of his sister Hortense, who marries Domenico Campanati, the pontiff's brother, and who is unfaithful in order to give her sterile husband children; of Toomey's brother Tom, a comedian who dies, apparently from smoking-induced cancer; of Toomey's nephew John, who is killed in Africa, along with his wife, after Toomey helps finance a research trip for them; and of John's twin sister, Ann, whose own daughter Eve will become tragically involved with the person whom Carlo Campanati saved in the miracle performed so long ago. Toomey's life intersects not only with these characters but also with various literary and historical personages, some of whom are actually presented in the plot of the novel, and others who are mentioned only in passing: James

Joyce, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Heinrich Himmler, and Joseph Goebbels, to name a few.

By the end of the novel, in a bizarre twist of the characters' fates, Toomey learns that the child miraculously saved by Carlo Campanati grew up to become Godfrey Manning, or God for short, a cult figure who poisons his entire congregation with cyanide but does not join his flock in this ultimate communion. Burgess's irony is deftly presented, especially in the final chapters of the novel. His homosexual narrator remains a relatively sympathetic character throughout *Earthly Powers*, and Burgess's plot successfully weaves the stories of all the characters together. Burgess does not engage in extensive linguistic wordplay or invent new language for this novel, as he does in many of his other books, but he does explore in depth his usual philosophical and theological issues: the nature of good and evil, the nature of free will and choice.

## SUMMARY

The fiction of Anthony Burgess is a unique concoction of language and linguistic wordplay, philosophical discussions, grotesque details, comedy, and tragedy. Burgess's work is not of a consistently high quality; some of his novels are flawed, and his obsession with language can become intrusive and distracting. Nevertheless, Burgess's body of work shows a wide range of philosophical interests and diverse treatment of his subject matters, and it is a worthy representative of British literature. At his best, Burgess creates language that becomes a character in the fiction and that is greater than the characters or themes contained in the novels.

*Sherri Szeman; updated by R. Baird Shuman*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Anthony Burgess reveals a great deal about his attitude toward women in his writing. Discuss the attitudes that he reveals.
- What are the chief characteristics that Burgess's characters reveal in love relationships?
- Burgess is much concerned with such dichotomies as good and evil. Discuss the dichotomies that appear to motivate him most significantly.
- How does Burgess use humor to appeal to general readers of his work?
- Discuss Burgess's attitude toward religion as revealed in his writing.

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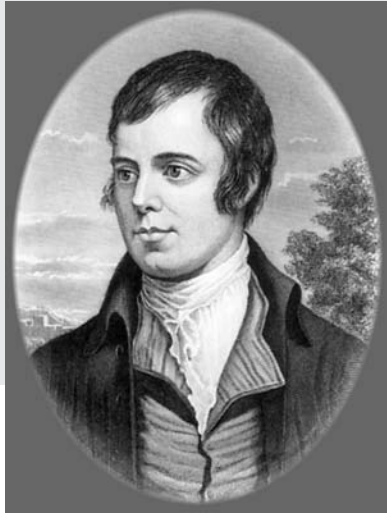
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## ROBERT BURNS

**Born:** Alloway, Ayrshire, Scotland

January 25, 1759

**Died:** Dumfries, Scotland

July 21, 1796

*As the greatest of the Scottish poets, Burns composed lyrics, ballads, satires, and occasional verse that advanced the Romantic movement and remain part of the permanent literary heritage.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Robert Burns was born on the family farm in the Ayrshire district of Scotland on January 25, 1759, to William Burnes (as the father spelled his name) and Agnes Broun. William, a poor tenant farmer, struggled to keep his family from poverty. At Mount Oliphant, Lochlie, and Mossgiel, as the family moved from one farm to another, the story of failure was the same, in spite of backbreaking toil. In every case, rents for the land were too costly. To supplement the family income, Burns tried to dress flax in Irvine, but he eventually returned to the farm in Mauchline parish, where his father died in 1784. In "The Cotter's Saturday Night," Burns romanticizes the nobility of his father in a nostalgic, deeply felt remembrance.

Burns's earliest schooling was from John Murdoch, a competent teacher hired by the farmers of the district; at Dalrymple, he studied at the parish school. Briefly in 1773, he was again a pupil at Murdoch's school at Ayr. In spite of the interruptions in his education, Burns was an apt scholar, and he was fortunate to have sound educators as his masters. He learned French well enough to read but not to speak in that language, studied mathematics with his uncle at Ballochneil in 1777, and studied elements of surveying under Hugh Rodger, schoolmaster at nearby Kirkoswald.

Before that time, Burns had been writing verse to various young women, among them Mary Camp-

bell ("Highland Mary"), with whom he was having an affair, and who died in 1786. In 1788, he married Jean Armour, of Mauchline with whom he had four children. As early as 1785, he had begun "The Jolly Beggars." By 1786, he had collected enough early verse to publish his first book, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, which was printed in Kilmarnock, Scotland.

At first, Burns achieved a local reputation, but his fame as a supposedly unlettered bard soon grew. In Edinburgh, where he was lionized as a country genius by the aristocrats, he conducted himself with dignity. Two reprintings of his poems, with additions, appeared in 1787 and 1793. The volume was also published in London; within two years, pirated editions appeared in Dublin, Belfast, Philadelphia, and New York.

For the first edition of the Kilmarnock poems, he had received only twenty pounds, but for the second he earned the princely sum, to him, of four hundred pounds. With this money, he was able to travel briefly, buy property of his own, and settle down with Jean and their four children on a farm at Ellisland, near Dumfries. After a last unsatisfactory attempt to make the farm pay, Burns left with his family for Dumfries, where he accepted another appointment as an excise (tax) officer in 1791; he remained there for the rest of his life.

In spite of malicious gossip, his last five years were those of a respected townsman and celebrated poet. These years were burdened as well by illness, the toll of his early plowman's labors. Nevertheless, he continued writing and contributed three hundred songs to two collections of Scottish

songs, James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803) and George Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (1793-1805). Burns died in Dumfries from rheumatic heart disease at the age of thirty-seven, on July 21, 1796.

### ANALYSIS

In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds on July 13, 1818, poet John Keats wrote of Burns:

One song of Burns's is of more worth to you than all I could think for a whole year in his native country. His misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill—I tried to forget it—to drink toddy without any care—to write a merry sonnet—it won't do—he talked with bitches—he drank with blackguards, he was miserable—We can see horribly clear, in the works of such a man his whole life, as if we were God's spies.

Keats admires Burns's humanity, an expansiveness that elevates Burns's vision to those who, in William Shakespeare's words from *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608), are "God's spies." In his range, Burns indeed may be compared with such English poets of tolerance and humanity as Geoffrey Chaucer and Robert Browning; although his psychology and depth of understanding are less acute than those writers, his lyrical gifts are possibly purer. Burns's scope includes a wide range of types and literary conventions, from sketches on the "bitches" and "blackguards" in taverns or in churches, to the most elevated love songs, to rallying choruses for democratic solidarity. A poet of the people, Burns wrote so that "his whole life" became the subject of his art.

Burns's major poetry generally falls into five convenient groupings: drinking songs; love songs; satires, usually on Calvinistic rigors; democratic chants or songs; and verse narratives. In addition, he wrote miscellaneous verse epistles, mostly moralistic but sometimes aesthetic, and occasional pieces, usually to commemorate a particular event or to praise (sometimes flatter) a particular person. Among his most notable drinking songs are "The Jolly Beggars" and "Willy Brew'd a Peck of Maut." Examples of his love lyrics include "Ae Fond Kiss," "Highland Mary," "A Red, Red Rose," and "O, Once I Lov'd a Bonie Lass." Examples of the satires are "Holy Willie's Prayer," "Address to the

Unco Guid," and "Address to the Deil." Among Burns's patriotic or democratic songs are "Scots, Wha Hae," "Is There for Honest Poverty," and the more Jacobean "A Dream" and "The Twa Dogs." His most famous verse narrative is "Tam O'Shanter." A good example of Burns's didactic verse treating his aesthetic is "Epistle to J. Lapraik." Taken together, these varieties of poetic subjects or types share the Burns signature of spontaneity, wit, freshness, sincerity, and vigor.

Usually classed among the "pre-Romantic" writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Burns is in most regards a true Romantic. Like such major early Romantics as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Burns demonstrates in his verse extemporaneous effusion, directness, and lyricism; like them, he exalts the common man, delights in the rustic (or natural) beauties of the open countryside, and celebrates his own ego. To the extent that Burns is also influenced by neoclassical literary conventions, his verse is generally more tersely epigrammatical (except in comparison with much of Byron's work), less innovative in terms of experimentation with new meters or forms, and less directly concerned with transcendental emotions. Unlike the major Romantics who followed him, Burns eschewed blank verse and never attempted to write for the theater. These distinctions aside, Burns rightly takes his place with the still-greater poet William Blake as both forerunner and shaper of the Romantic impulse in Western literature.

### "THE JOLLY BEGGARS"

**First published:** 1799 (collected in *The Canongate Burns*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Subtitled "A Cantata," this poem is a medley of rowdy, sometimes ribald, joyous drinking songs.*

In "The Study of Poetry," Matthew Arnold, a severe critic of Burns in general, could not resist describing "The Jolly Beggars" favorably as a "puissant and splendid production." Literary anteced-

ents of the work, which combines a medley of songs in a loose dramatic structure, go back to John Fletcher's *The Beggar's Bush* (before 1622) or to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (pr., pb. 1728). Slightly more than a generation after Burns, the French poet Pierre-Jean de Béranger would write song-comedic productions such as "Les Gueux" ("The Beggars") and "Le Vieux Vagabond" ("The Old Vagabond"). However, nothing in Western literature can match Burns's production for energy, sly wit, and lyricism.

Suggested by a chance visit by the poet with two friends to the "doss house" (brothel) of Poosie Nansie (her real name was Agnes Gibson) in the Cowgate, Mauchline, "The Jolly Beggars" transforms the sordid reality of the original scene into a bawdy, lighthearted comedy. Challenging the prudery of his own day, Burns exalts a kind of rough, natural sensuality, without a trace of sniggering. Although joyous sex is a theme of the poem, its real message is that people must have liberty to live in the way that they wish. No more defiant yet witty lines have been written in defense of freedom:

A fig for those by law protected!  
Liberty's a glorious feast!  
Courts for cowards were erected,  
Churches built to please the priest!

### "A RED, RED ROSE"

**First published:** 1796 (collected in *The Canongate Burns*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The speaker in this well-beloved lyric bids his sweetheart farewell but promises to return to her.*

"A Red, Red Rose," also titled in some anthologies according to its first line, "O, my luve is like a red, red rose," was written in 1794 and printed in 1796. The song may be enjoyed as a simple, unaffected effusion of sentiment, or it may be understood on a more complex level as a lover's promises that are full of contradictions, ironies, and paradoxes. The reader should keep in mind the fact that Burns constructed the poem, stanza by stanza, by "deconstructing" old songs and ballads to use

parts that he could revise and improve. For example, Burns's first stanza may be compared with his source, "The Wanton Wife of Castle Gate": "Her cheeks are like the roses/ That blossom fresh in June;/ O, she's like a new-strung instrument/ That's newly put in tune." Clearly, Burns's version is more delicate, while at the same time audaciously calculated. By emphasizing the absolute redness of the rose—the "red, red rose"—the poet demonstrates his seeming artlessness as a sign of sincerity. What other poet could rhyme "June" and "tune" without appearing hackneyed? With Burns the very simplicity of the language works toward an effect of absolute purity.

Readers who analyze the poem using the tools of New Criticism or other twentieth century critical approaches will observe, on the other hand, contradictory elements that seem to work against the speaker's innocent protestations of love. The first two lines of the second stanza do not complete an expected (or logical) thought: "So deep in luve am I" (that I cannot bear to leave my beloved). Instead, the speaker rhetorically protests his love through a series of preposterous boasts. His love will last until the seas go dry, until rocks melt with the sun; he will continue to love while the sands of life (in an hourglass) shall run. Yet so steadfast a lover, after all, is departing from his beloved, not staying by her side. For whatever reason, he is compelled to leave her rather than remain. His final exaggerated promise, that he will return to her, though the journey takes a thousand miles, seems farfetched, even ironically humorous: Instead of such a titanic effort, why should he not simply stay with her?

These paradoxical reflections, however, which change a reading of the poem from one of "pure" lyric to one of irony, are not so difficult to reconcile on the level of common sense. What lover has not exaggerated his or her emotions? Are these exaggerated promises of Burns's speaker any less sincere for being illogical? No matter how the reader resolves this issue, he or she cannot help but admire Burns's art in revising the meter of his source for the last stanza, an old song titled "The True Lover's Farewell": "Fare you well, my own true love/ And fare you well for a while,/ And I will be sure to return back again/ If I go ten thousand mile." Although Burns's revisions are minor, they reveal the difference in technique between a merely competent poet and a master.



## “HOLY WILLIE’S PRAYER”

**First published:** 1789 (collected in *The Canongate Burns*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet satirizes Willie, who is far from “holy,” caught in the act of prayer.*

“Holy Willie’s Prayer,” written in 1785, was printed in 1789 and reprinted in 1799. It was one of the poet’s favorite verses, and he sent a copy to his friend, the convivial preacher John M’Math, who had requested it, along with a dedicatory poem titled “Epistle to the Rev. John M’Math” (published in 1808). To M’Math he sent his “Argument” as background information:

Holy Willie was a rather oldish bachelor elder, in the parish of Mauchline, and much and justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tipping orthodoxy, and for that spiritualized bawdry which refines to liquorous devotion.

The real-life “Willie” whom Burns had in mind was William Fisher, a strict Presbyterian elder of the Mauchline church.

In his satire on religious fanaticism, Burns cleverly allows Willie to witness against himself. Willie’s prayer, addressed to the deity of Calvinist doctrine, is really a self-serving plea to be forgiven for his own sins of sexual promiscuity (with Meg). Willie’s God—more cruel than righteous—punishes sinners according to the doctrine of predestination of saints: Only a small number of “elect” souls, chosen before their births, will enter Heaven; the others, no matter their goodness, piety, or deeds, are condemned (predestined) to Hell. Willie exults in thoughts of revenge toward the miserable souls who are doomed to such eternal torment. The victims over whom he gloats are, from the reader’s point of view, far less deserving of hellfire than Willie, a hypocrite, lecher, and demon of wrath.

In the “Epistle to the Rev. John M’Math,” Burns defends his own simple creed as one superior to self-styled “holy” Willie’s: “God knows, I’m no the thing I should be,/ Nor am I even the thing I could be,/ But twenty times I rather would be/ An atheist clean/ Than under gospel colors hid be,/ Just for a screen.” His argument, he avers, is not against a be-

nign doctrine of Christianity with its reach of forgiveness for sincerely repented sins, but against the hypocrites and scoundrels “even wi’ holy robes,/ But hellish spirit!”

## “IS THERE FOR HONEST POVERTY”

**First published:** 1795 (collected in *The Canongate Burns*, 2001)

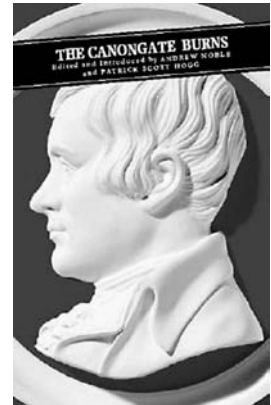
**Type of work:** Poem

*This celebrated democratic poem advances claims for the simple dignity of the common man over those for class and caste.*

“Is There for Honest Poverty” (also sometimes anthologized under the title “For A’ That and A’ That”) was written in 1794, printed in 1795, and reprinted in 1799. Burns adapted the meter and the phrase “for a’ that” from older songs. A Jacobite song published in 1750 has the following chorus: “For a’ that and a’ that,/ And twice as muckle’s a’ that,/ He’s far beyond the seas the night/ Yet he’ll be here for a’ that.” Also, in “The Jolly Beggars,” Burns had used the popular refrain, although in a different context.

Although the poem is clear enough in its general outline—that the honest worth of men of goodwill, no matter what their social class, rank, or financial condition, outweighs the pretensions of caste or privilege—readers often have trouble understanding Burns’s elliptical phrasing. His argument is that “honest poverty” has greater worth than the false pride of high social position. Symbols of rank—ribbons, stars, “and all that”—are superfluities. True merit is based upon “sense and worth,” the “pith o’ sense, and pride o’ worth,” not upon the “tinsel show” of fine clothing or the pretentiousness of fine dining.

Because Burns wants his reader to grasp the im-





plied meanings of his poem, he often omits logical connectives between ideas. The beginning lines, with suggested additions, may be paraphrased as follows: (What) is there for honest poverty, that it hangs its head and all that (meaning, all that humility, all that false shame because of supposedly low status)? People pass by the coward slave (who lacks the authentic dignity of self-esteem); people dare to be poor for all that (in spite of “all that” lowly position implied by people’s poverty).

Throughout the poem, Burns invites the reader to participate in interpreting the poem. He wants the reader to understand the elliptical expression “and a’ that” in terms of one’s own experiences with the class system. As for Burns’s point of view, that is unambiguous. He hopes that men and women of goodwill in time will unite, so that “man to man, the world o’er/ Shall brithers be for a’ that!”

## TAM O’SCHANTER

**First published:** 1791 (collected in *The Canongate Burns*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this sustained narrative poem, a drunken befuddled Scottish farmer encounters witches, but he survives.*

“Tam O’Shanter” was a favorite with Burns, who described the work in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop (April 11, 1791): “I look on *Tam O’Shanter* to be my standard performance in the poetical line.” He goes on to say that his “spice of roguish waggy” shows a “force of genius and a finishing polish that I despair of ever excelling.” The idea for the story came from several legends popular in the neighborhood of the poet’s birthplace, which is within a mile of Alloway Kirk (church). One of Burns’s friends, Francis Grose, sent him a prose account of the legend, one upon which Burns probably drew. If a reader compares the flat style of Grose with Burns’s jolly version, then he or she can better assess the poet’s talent. The conclusion of Grose’s narrative is as follows: “the unsightly tailless condition of the vigorous steed was, to the last hour of the noble creature’s life, an awful warning to the

Carrick farmers not to stay too late in Ayr markets.” Burns’s rendering is: “Now, wha this tale o’ truth shall read,/ Each man and mother’s son take heed;/ Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,/ Think! ye may buy the joys o’er dear;/ Remember Tam O’Shanter’s mare.”

Tam himself may have been based loosely upon the character of Douglas Graham, whose father was a tenant at the farm of Shanter on the Carrick shore. Noted for his habits of drunkenness, Graham was, like Burns’s hero, afflicted with a scolding wife. According to D. Auld of Ayre (whose story was taken from notes left at the Edinburgh University Library), a local tradition held that once, while Graham was carousing at the tavern, some local humorists plucked hairs from the tail of his horse, tethered outside the tavern door, until it resembled a stump. As Auld’s account has it, the locals swore the next morning that the unfortunate horse had its tail depilated by witches.

Burns’s narrative is that oxymoron, a rollicking ghost story. With gentle, tolerant humor, the poet moralizes over the foibles of Tam, commiserates with his good wife, Kate, and philosophizes on the brevity of human happiness. Most of the narrative is perfectly clear to readers, so long as they follow notes on the Scottish words glossed from a well-edited text. The matter of the “cutty-sark,” however, confuses some. Burns has in mind, first, the short skirt worn by the most audacious of the witches; then he refers to the witch herself, when Tam blurts out, “Weel done, Cutty-sark”—meaning the hag who dances wearing the clothing. At this point in the narrative, Tam upsets the witches’ frolic dances, and witches and warlocks chase after the hard-riding Tam to the keystone of the bridge. Why cannot the witches pursue Tam over the bridge? Because they must not approach water, symbol of Christian baptism and grace. Nannie, leading the witches’ riotous pursuit, therefore can grasp only at poor Meg’s tail as the horse reaches the safety of the bridge. Horse and rider are saved, but not the tail. So ends, with an appropriate moral, Burns’s homily on the dangers of “inspiring bold John Barlycorn”—hard alcohol.

## SUMMARY

In his “Epistle to J. Lapraik,” Robert Burns modestly denies any pretensions to the highest ranks of poetry: “I am nae poet, in a sense,/ But just a

rhymers like by chance./ An' hae to learning nae pretence;/ Yet, what the matter?/ Whene'er my Muse does on me glance,/ I jingle at her." Critics who have taken these casual words seriously, as a valid expression of Burns's aesthetic, have done the poet an injustice. His artistry is by no means that of "jingling" rhymes. Burns is a thinking sentimentalist, a writer who combines rationality with passion. Even his sentimentality is usually controlled by wit, irony, or plain common sense, so that

his love poetry not only seems genuine, it is indeed a genuine expression of the poet's larger love of freedom—freedom to live honestly and to love openly, without the constraints of religious bigotry, social prudery, or political subjugation. In his love of freedom, Burns remains—over the centuries—a defiant voice against hypocrisy and cant, against meanness of spirit. Through his art, he shows his readers that freedom is joyous.

Leslie B. Mittleman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What poetic habits of the eighteenth century does "pre-Romantic" Robert Burns share?
- Cite a few instances of Burns's successful appropriation of already familiar poetic images.
- Offer examples of Burns's capacity for observation of small yet telling aspects of nature.
- Although Burns's songs do not require music, many have been set to music. What qualities make them so musical?
- Show how "Holy Willie's Prayer" is a satire not just of religious hypocrisy but also of Calvinism.
- Are Burns's moral lapses as noteworthy as literary historians have tended to make them?



Courtesy, Teos

## A. S. BYATT

**Born:** Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England  
August 24, 1936

*Byatt has bridged the gap between literary academia and popular fiction by creating characters and situations that are plausible, compelling, and sympathetic, and raising critical questions about the roles of literature, science, and faith in the contemporary world.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Antonia Susan Drabble was the first child born to lawyer John Frederick and his homemaker wife Kathleen Marie Bloor. The couple had received a Cambridge education and remained avid readers, encouraging their children's intellectual pursuits. A. S. Byatt (BI-uh-t) and her sister, Margaret Drabble, both rewarded their parents with prominent literary careers.

Like her parents, Byatt began her studies at Cambridge, where she graduated with honors in 1957. She then pursued postgraduate work at Bryn Mawr College in the United States for a year before returning to England to begin her doctoral studies in early English literature at Oxford. However, her marriage to Ian Charles Rayner Byatt in 1959 forced her to abandon the traditional path to an academic degree, since married women were not permitted to hold scholarships.

To satisfy her intellectual interests, Byatt began teaching part time while maintaining her household and giving birth to two children, Antonia and Charles. She also continued writing fiction, a habit she had begun while a university student, despite pressure from her professors to focus on criticism to the exclusion of more creative endeavors.

The two novels she started while at Cambridge and Bryn Mawr were soon to be published as

*Shadow of a Sun* (1964; also known as *The Shadow of the Sun*, 1993) and *The Game* (1967). Between the two, she produced a collection of critical essays, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965), an extended study of Murdoch's work. Murdoch remains a major influence on Byatt's writing, along with Elizabeth Bowen and George Eliot, two other novelists who paint with a fine brush. Throughout Byatt's career, she has alternated the publication of fictional works with her criticism, including such works as *Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time* (1970; republished as *Unruly Times*, 1989) and *Pas-sions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (1991).

In 1969, Byatt divorced her first husband and married Peter John Duffy, a businessman. Her second marriage produced two more children, Isabel and Miranda, but in 1972 her only son was killed in a car accident. For nearly a decade, she buried herself in English instruction, working with students at a local college. Even after *The Virgin in the Garden* was published in 1978, Byatt could not bring herself to quit teaching. Not until 1983 would she become a full-time writer.

While Byatt's previous work had not been unsuccessful, *The Virgin in the Garden* announced her presence as a literary personality to be reckoned with. Its lush, dense imagery is interwoven with sophisticated speculation on the nature of history, art, and education. The first in a tetralogy, which would eventually include *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996), and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), *The Virgin in the Garden* introduces its readers to the Potter family, particularly Frederica, a precocious intellect and avid reader, much like Byatt herself.

However, it was with the appearance of *Possession* (1990) that Byatt became one of the most best-loved figures in contemporary British letters. A blend of genres and periods, *Possession* mixes the Victorian literary landscape with the contemporary world of letters. Throughout the novel, Byatt intersperses selections purportedly written by nineteenth century poets, including her own skillful imitations of Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti, as well as fairy tales, letters, and diaries of Byatt's own invention. The narrative relies upon the conventions of romance, detective, and crime fiction to keep readers fascinated by the sometimes dark, often boring, underbelly of academia. *Possession* proved just how powerful Byatt's vast literary knowledge could be when it was used to create a brilliantly told story.

In addition to being a best seller that was adapted as a motion picture, *Possession* garnered Byatt the title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire. In 1999, after several more novels, short stories, and works of criticism, including *Angels and Insects: Two Novellas* (1992), *Babel Tower*, and *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations About Women Writers* (1995), Byatt was made Dame Commander. She was also awarded an honorary doctorate of letters degree from Cambridge, her seventh such award.

## ANALYSIS

Byatt's fiction frequently depicts conflicts, sometimes violent, between siblings, spouses, or parents and their children. These episodes have been interpreted autobiographically by many critics. In particular, her first two novels, *Shadow of a Sun* and *The Game*, portray female characters suffocated by the aura of jealous competition exuded by the powerful male personalities who dominate them. Her latter work also explores the sibling rivalry that develops when two sisters enjoy varying degrees of success in their literary careers. While these plotlines may or may not have arisen from her personal experience, when developed with Byatt's subtlety and grace, they suggest broader literary themes beyond mere biography.

Although her early work was no doubt drawn from personal experience, beginning with *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt proved that she was more concerned with technique than content. She is particularly fascinated by the ways in which words can be manipulated on the page, much as artists

place paint on canvas. *Still Life* and *The Matisse Stories* (1993) represent her most conscious efforts to develop this technique. In both, she meditates upon color and light to establish moods.

Her work also examines the conflicting roles that her female characters must either fulfill or reject. Frederica, the main character in a quartet of novels featuring the Potter family, must divide her efforts in *Babel Tower* between caring for her son, divorcing her abusive husband, exploring an intensely fulfilling sexual relationship with John Ottaker, and teaching night school for a local adult education program. Her need to perform each of these tasks to the best of her ability and her fear that she will not be able to do so finally force her to find a creative outlet for the divided selves she feels powerless to unite. Although she prefers the companionship of males, she finds solace in the domesticity of her female roommate, a single mother like herself. The two establish a sort of domestic partnership that permits them both to find personal satisfaction beyond merely domestic labor.

The process of reading and writing is central to Byatt's fiction, which often features poets and scholars, such as the avid reader Frederica Potter or the academics Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, who study Victorian poetry in *Possession*. Behind Byatt's many technical details lurks always her solitary question: What purpose does literature serve? Clearly, she herself has not developed a satisfactory answer, since she continues to provide her readers with so many possibilities.

The Victorian era likewise fascinates Byatt, and several of her works have been set in that period. Specifically, she treats the era's conflict between faith and science, primarily in response to Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859). Randolph Ash, the poet being studied in *Possession*, and William Adamson from "Morpho Eugenia" in *Angels and Insects* both find creative ways to analyze the biology of the natural world. Other characters whom Byatt treats sympathetically, such as Stephanie Potter Orton (*The Virgin in the Garden*), Maud Bailey (*Possession*), and Emily Tennyson Jesse ("The Conjugal Angel" in *Angels and Insects*) seek a spiritual outlook toward their world that is not tied dogmatically to any specific religious framework.

Despite both critical and popular acclaim, Byatt's fiction is sometimes criticized for being too



dense, implying that her rich tangle of metaphors and allusions is too obscure and intricate for her readers to appreciate. Like the Victorians she imitates, Byatt will occasionally interrupt the narrative with authorial reflections. Hers, however, take on a particularly postmodern tone as she reflects on her desire to articulate meaning in a way her readers will comprehend and on her fear that language may block her efforts. Reaction to these reflections has been mixed; some critics enjoy the postmodern revelation of the wizard behind the screen, while others find it distracting. However, her skill at shaping characters and plots leaves much for even the naïve reader to enjoy, while the scholarly reader can revel in the complexity of her style.

## THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN

**First published:** 1978

**Type of work:** Novel

*Blesford Ride School celebrates the coronation of England's new queen, while the Potter family experiences passion, both sexual and spiritual.*

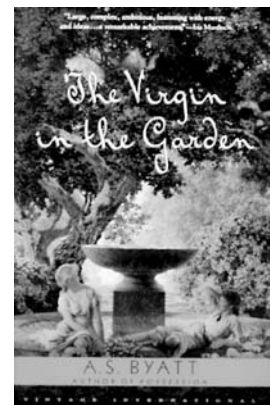
Denser and more complicated than Byatt's previous books, *The Virgin in the Garden* appeared after a long period of personal turmoil that resulted in a sort of literary rebirth. The novel's time line spans the 1952-1953 academic year at Blesford Ride, and it is the first of four novels that will trace the fortunes of the Potter family alongside those of post-World War II England. Fictionally, this is the year in which Stephanie marries, Frederica attains the grades that determine her college choices, and Marcus suffers a nervous breakdown. Historically, Queen Elizabeth II succeeds her father as reigning monarch and accepts the coronation. In Byatt's novel, however, both the Potter family and 1950's England witness the rise of a new monarch: sexual relations.

The Potter's oldest daughter Stephanie resists her attraction to clergyman Daniel Orton as a way of reaffirming the intellectual aspirations that have been lagging since she began teaching grammar school. The middle child Frederica would love nothing more than to be swept off her feet by

teacher and playwright, Alexander Wedderburn. Alex's play depicting the life of Queen Elizabeth I, intended to usher in the era of her namesake, serves as a focal point for much of the novel's action and permits Frederica and Alexander a greater degree of intimacy than is perhaps advisable. The young woman's innocence is reaffirmed, however, through her shock and surprise at Alex's ongoing affair with the wife of the German master, Jenny Parry, and through her obliviousness to the relations between instructor Thomas Poole and her own classmate, Anthea Warburton, although both situations cast their dismal shadow over Frederica's own escapades.

In the midst of these tensions—sexual, emotional, and intellectual—the youngest Potter child, Marcus, withdraws into a world of his own, mentored by Lucas Simmonds, the math teacher, and thus the antithesis to the children's father, William Potter, head of the English department. Marcus is an intuitive young man who visualizes a complex network of images and is thus able to solve complicated mathematical problems, until his intuition is subjected to scrutiny. In an attempt to quantify his gift, Simmonds runs the boy through exercises that would now be called paranormal studies, all the while insinuating himself into the boy's innermost world. Eventually, the teacher makes a sexual advance toward Marcus that causes the older man to attempt suicide and leads the younger to suffer a mental collapse.

As unique as each situation may be, all reflect a facet of the same gem: unconsummated desire. For despite the rampant atmosphere of sexual activity, what is most interesting is all the sex that is not taking place. Stephanie and Daniel, despite their attraction for one another, fumble through the physicality of their relationship hampered by their private emotional and intellectual burdens. Alex's lover grows increasingly frustrated with the discomforts of stolen love, and her frustration renders him unable to satisfy her. Frederica's fumbling advances to her teacher could almost be comical



were there not such serious repercussions to the corresponding behavior of her classmates and siblings.

For all of the tension, Byatt acknowledges that virginity may offer its own rewards, as in the case of Queen Elizabeth I, who withheld her favors to maintain title and control of her country. In general, however, Byatt treats sexual innocence much like spiritual faith that has not been tested. Both create a tremendous amount of irritation and excitability, but despite all of their rich promise, both remain infertile and barren; hence, the paradox of her title.

However, while sexual desire translates on one plane to spirituality, on another it equates to literary criticism. The innocence of Frederica's body is in stark contrast with the experience of her mind. The girl inherited a keen textual eye from her father, and yet, lacking the creative experience that someone like Alex possesses, can she read responsibly? By posing this complex question, *The Virgin in the Garden* differs from Byatt's previous two novels, and she has now landed in the world of postmodernism.

The contemporary reader will necessarily approach a text with a certain amount of knowledge, very much like the brilliantly educated and wickedly smart Frederica. The contemporary author might, like Stephanie, feel some hesitation at imposing the seemingly arbitrary limits necessitated by the narrative framework, although few contemporary critics seem as hesitant as Marcus is to expose the patterns. It will remain to later novels for Byatt to determine whether the contemporary reader, trapped within a dense network of literary theory, can continue to exist in an innocent state or whether only a creative act of one's own will finally initiate the reader into a realm of knowledge commensurate with the author.

## POSSESSION

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Novel

*Previously undiscovered letters between two Victorian poets spark an intense interest on both sides of the Atlantic that culminates in grave robbery and a shocking revelation.*

Ironically, Byatt's most popular novel, *Possession* is also the one most deeply imbued with literary scholarship, even if the world of belles lettres provides setting and motivation rather than metaphor and imagery. *Possession* is also the novel that most fully displays Byatt's impressive stylistic range in a virtuoso performance that combines narrative genres, including romance, detective, and crime fiction with poetic imitations of Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti, as well as journals, diaries, and letters in voices ranging from Scottish to American.

The idea of possession dominates the novel from the first chapter, as Roland Michell, an academic struggling to churn out an interpretation of obscure Victorian poet Randolph Ash for James Blackadder's "Ash Factory," stumbles upon a letter in the British National Library and decides to pocket it. Blackadder himself has charted out his own intellectual territory in the basement of the British Museum, where he has effectively imprisoned any scholar who would study Randolph Ash under his purported advisement, a convenient position from which he can monitor their publications. His American counterpart, Leonora Stern, has staked a similar claim for Ash contemporary Christabel LaMotte. Fellow American Mortimer P. Cropper fancies himself an Ash scholar, having written his biography, but proceeds as though knowledge were a commodity, available to the highest bidder.

Possessed in one way or another by each of these forceful personalities, Maud Bailey, director of the Women's Resource Center and herself an established LaMotte scholar, resists the giving of herself, fearful of having to abandon her identity. Intellectually, Bailey has chosen a corner of the world where she can work collaboratively with other like-minded scholars, outside of the competition on which Blackadder and others appear to thrive. Ap-



proached sexually by both Leonora Stern and Roland Michell, she holds their desires at bay even as she negotiates a successful working relationship with them.

She does, however, allow herself to be possessed by the past, along with Michell. He approaches her with the letters, believing that her extensive knowledge of LaMotte might provide him with some answers. Together, they embark on a journey across England and backwards through time to the days

when Ash and LaMotte were apparently embarking on the same tenuous relationship now unfolding between the contemporary pair. As they read letters and diaries, soak in the local landscapes, and interview distant relatives, both scholars find themselves enchanted by a past they had never imagined. Within the poetry by the purportedly happily married Ash and

the purportedly lesbian LaMotte the reader may glimpse only the most transparent outline of a connection, one that apparently lies behind the tortured silent secret of the journals kept by Ash's wife, Ellen, as well as the apparent suicide of LaMotte's life partner, Blanche Glover.

As the novel progresses and the evidence mounts, so, too, does the suspense. The intellectual and financial stakes rise, to the point where Mortimer Cropper illegally exhumes Ash's corpse in order to expose his affair with LaMotte and thus shake the foundation of Victorian studies down to its very core. In a heart-pounding scene, he is caught, rain-soaked and mud-covered, by Bailey, Michell, and a host of others, who are all now privy to the secrets of the grave. From a locked box within the coffin, it is revealed that all evidence of the affair belongs legally and rightfully to Maud Bailey as a direct descendant of Maia Thomasine Bailey, formerly believed to be LaMotte's niece, now shown to be the illegitimate child of Ash's affair with LaMotte.

Maud learns to let down the glorious blond hair that proclaims her lineage and her desirability. She and Michell discover an equal partnership, while he abandons the world of academia to pursue his

own poetic talents. In an epilogue, Byatt concludes the story with the one aspect of it that could not be possessed: an individual's memory of an experience. Once upon a time, Ash met his daughter, who told him she wanted to be called May and that she did not care for poetry. He clipped a lock of her hair, and it was her braid that was buried with him, not LaMotte's, as had been supposed.

While the characters in the novel remain ignorant of this truth, Byatt's readers know the tale, and the irony of its inclusion forces them to question whether anything—artistic endeavors, personal identity, or familial relationships—can exist in this world without being public property. The epilogue, along with much else in the book, forces readers to question their own knowledge and assumptions, a task symbolized by Roland Michell. Initially engaged in an erudite quest to understand the influence of an obscure Enlightenment philosopher upon Ash's poem "Prosperina," by novel's end Michell is freed from the weight of the written record and able to approach literature with some self-assurance in his own power as both reader and author.



## ANGELS AND INSECTS

**First published:** 1992

**Type of work:** Novellas

*Two novellas explore nineteenth century attitudes toward science and spirituality as they reveal the passions by which the characters live, regardless of cultural standards or norms.*

*Angels and Insects* consists of two novellas, "Morpho Eugenia" and "The Conjugal Angel," both of which are set in Victorian England just after mid-century, leading to speculation that the book continues several themes Byatt had left undeveloped in her earlier novel *Possession*. It would seem that the first story explores the scientific questions of the day while the second wrestles with the spiritual, but Byatt resists such neat thematic divides. The laboratory of Bredely Hall in the first novella resonates with the spiritual implications of Darwin's theory of natural selection, while in the second novella, sound scientific arguments are proffered in

the living room of Tennyson's sister for the séances held there, thus twining the two themes together in a sort of Gordian knot.

The *Morpho Eugenia* is a species of exotic butterfly, one of the few relics salvaged by William Adamson when he was shipwrecked on his return from the Amazon. The Alabaster home seems to offer him a rebirth in a modern Garden of Eden. The father, Harald Alabaster, offers to support Adamson's research, while the two oldest boys spend their days on horseback, and three beautiful and eligible daughters are paraded before him. The most perfectly formed of these is also a *Eugenia*. In a dazzling scene, Adamson proposes to her in the family greenhouse as millions of live butterflies swirl around them.

Happily married, Adamson explores the land around the manor with the family's younger children and their governess, Mattie Crompton. Mattie's journals surprise him with her keen observations on the social behaviors of the insects they observe, much like those that keep Bredely Hall running with such precision, such as the daily efforts of the servants to dump the rat carcasses that collect in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Adamson's wife provides him with five new specimens to add to his collection: a son and four daughters.

Slowly, however, the knowledge dawns on Adamson that his real inheritance in England is not paradise, but the one gift shared by all of Adam's sons: the flawed nature of nature. Original sin, in its most primal state, revisits the household in the incestuous relationship maintained by *Eugenia* and her half brother, Edgar. William and Mattie use the earnings from their publications to escape beyond the smooth surface of the Alabaster household back to the Amazon world of the noble savage.

The characters in "The Conjugal Angel" are also searching for an escape of sorts. Through the séances they conduct, they hope to find answers to their most painful questions from the world beyond. Liliás Papagay, who literally lost her husband more than two decades ago when he set out to sea and never returned, invokes the spiritual plane through automatic writing, the receipt of messages from dead spirits. She works with her roommate, Sophy Sheekhy, a medium who has been plagued

since her youth by visions of the dead. Together, they lead séances for Mrs. Hearnshaw, a desperate mother whose children have all died in infancy; Mr. Hawke, a spiritual "dabbler"; and for Captain and Mrs. Jesse.

Mrs. Jesse, formerly Emily Tennyson, had been engaged in her youth to Arthur Hallam, the best friend of her brother, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who was historically the preeminent poet of the Victorian age. Alfred's grief over his friend's death is famously recorded in his seminal work, *In Memoriam* (1850). The poem makes him beloved of the British people but leaves Mrs. Jesse feeling as though her own process of mourning has been overshadowed. She hosts the séances, hoping to hear from Arthur, but when she finally does, she rejects his invitation to join with him after their death in the form of one Conjugal Angel, choosing instead the husband who comforted her in her long years of grief.

## SUMMARY

Despite the occasional criticism for her weighty style, A. S. Byatt's dense, literary imagery, rich metaphors, and erudite store of knowledge balance beautifully with her engaging story lines and compelling characters, ensuring her a place not only among the best-selling authors but also within the world of academia. Always mindful of her responsibility as an author to remain true to her characters and to construct plots and situations only within the bounds of the plausible, she does not hesitate to remind her readers of the onus placed upon them to explore to the fullest potential of their own ingenuity as they interpret her work.

Byatt's firm convictions on topics ranging from female equality to the human craving for spirituality and creativity, when coupled with her vast imagination, find a passionate outpouring in language as visual, tactile, and otherwise sensorial as ink on a page can ever be. Notwithstanding her Victorian settings and characters, the questions she poses about faith and science, art and math, man and woman, will not be resolved for many hundreds of years to come.

L. Michelle Baker

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does A. S. Byatt define as a healthy balance between career success and emotional fulfillment for women?
- What does Byatt believe is the role of religion in contemporary culture? What distinctions does she draw between religion and faith, or spirituality?
- What themes are common to the two novellas in *Angels and Insects*?
- Identify a scene in either "Morpho Eugenia" or "The Conjugal Angel" that you believe is implausible. Justify its inclusion in or state how it detracts from the story.
- What solace do the characters in *The Virgin in the Garden* find in various types of artistic expression? Does Byatt appear to favor one creative endeavor, such as painting, over another, such as literature?



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## LORD BYRON

**Born:** London, England  
January 22, 1788

**Died:** Missolonghi, Greece  
April 19, 1824

*One of the major English Romantic poets, Byron, as satirist and as creator of the Romantic figure the “Byronic hero,” also had a significant impact on nineteenth century European culture.*

### BIOGRAPHY

George Gordon, later to become the sixth Lord Byron, was born January 22, 1788, in London, England, the son of Captain John “Mad Jack” Byron and Catherine Gordon of Gight, Scotland. Catherine was heiress to a small fortune, which her husband soon squandered. After the couple fled from creditors to France, Catherine left her philandering husband and moved to London. George Gordon was born with a clubbed right foot, an ailment that caused him much humiliation throughout his life but for which he attempted to compensate through athletic endeavors. The Byrons soon moved to Aberdeen, where Catherine could better afford to live on her modest allowance. Captain Byron died in France in 1791 at the age of thirty-six. His son would die at the same age.

After years of attending grammar schools in Aberdeen, George Gordon became the sixth Lord Byron upon the death of his granduncle in 1798. He moved to Newstead Abbey, Nottinghamshire, the Byron family seat, and the Byrons’ lifestyle changed considerably. From 1801 to 1805, young Byron attended Harrow School, spending his vacations with his mother, who was alternately abusive and tender. In 1804, he began a correspondence with his half sister, Augusta Leigh, from whom he had been living separately since his infancy, thus

forming a close and complicated relationship that outlasted many others and that became the source of considerable scandal, in part accounting for the failure of his marriage and in part prompting Byron’s self-exile to Europe. Entering Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1805, Byron formed other lasting alliances, most notably those of his dear friends John Cam Hobhouse and John Edleston. It was during this time that Byron began to form his ideals of the sanctity of political and personal liberty. In 1807, he published a volume of poems, *Hours of Idleness*, which was attacked in the *Edinburgh Review*. An undistinguished student, Byron left Cambridge in 1808 with a master’s degree.

In 1809, Byron took his seat in the House of Lords, often supporting liberal, unpopular causes. In this year, he also discovered and exploited his unrivaled knack for satire, publishing *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, in which he lashed out at the *Edinburgh Review* and criticized contemporaries Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and others of the “Lake School” of poetry. Later in 1809, Byron left with his friend Hobhouse on a tour, not the customary Grand Tour of Western Europe, but a tour of Portugal, Spain, Albania, and Greece. This trip inspired him to begin *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-1818; 1819), and he finished the first canto in Athens. In 1810, Byron finished the second canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, traveling further in Turkey and Greece. Inspired by the Ovidian story of Hero and Leander, he swam the Hellespont on May 3, 1810, an accomplishment of which he boasted in a poem “Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos.” He returned to England in

1811, shortly before his mother's death. Despite her unstable and often cruel treatment of him, the son mourned her loss, which was closely followed by the loss of two school friends.

In 1812, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was published. "I awoke one morning and found myself famous," Byron wrote. Byron's fame, his extraordinary personal beauty, and the intriguing, dangerous image created by the public's insistence upon confusing the character of Harold with Byron himself attracted the attention of many women, and he engaged in numerous indiscreet affairs, notably with Lady Caroline Lamb, whose obsession with him would provoke him to escape into an ill-suited marriage with Annabella Milbanke in 1815. Meanwhile, in 1813, Byron also began an affair with Augusta Leigh, his half sister; he also published the first of his Oriental tales, *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*, and in the following year he published *The Corsair* and *Lara*. Annabella, who was intellectual but priggish, was frightened and appalled by Byron's cruelty, his sexual and behavioral eccentricities, and his excessive attention to Augusta. Seriously doubting his sanity, Lady Byron left her husband after only a year of marriage, taking their only daughter, Augusta Ada. In April of 1816, Byron again left England, this time never to return.

Byron spent the summer of 1816 in Switzerland with Percy Bysshe Shelley, the Romantic poet, Mary Godwin (later known as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, 1818), and her step-sister, Jane "Claire" Clairmont, with whom Byron had had a brief affair in England. He traveled some more through Italy and Switzerland with Hobhouse and published canto 3 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Prisoner of Chillon, and Other Poems* (1816). The trip through the Alps inspired him to begin his verse play *Manfred* (pb. 1817, pr. 1834), the darkest treatment of his "Byronic hero." In 1817, Claire Clairmont and Byron had a daughter, Allegra. Byron spent most of 1817 traveling and living in Venice and other parts of Italy, completing *Manfred* and working on the fourth and final cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. It was also during this time that Byron luckily discovered the Italian poetic form of *ottava rima*, with which he experimented in writing *Beppo: A Venetian Story* (1818), a comic tale set in Venice.

In 1818, Byron began *Don Juan* (1819-1824; 1826). In 1819, he began his last major love affair,

with Teresa, Countess of Guiccioli. The first two cantos of *Don Juan* were published in July, 1819. Public reception was one of outrage and cries of indecency and slander. In 1820, Byron lived in the Guiccioli palace in Ravenna, Italy, and wrote *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* (pr., pb. 1821), the first of his political dramas based on the five-part classical models. After the pope permitted Teresa's legal separation from her husband, Byron became more closely involved with her family's political activities, most significantly with the radical society known as the Carbonari, who conspired to revolt against Austrian dominance in Italy. This struggle was unsuccessful, and in 1821 the family was exiled to Pisa. Byron then turned his attention to the Greek cause of independence from Turkey.

In 1821, Byron also published *Cain: A Mystery* (pb. 1821) and cantos 3 through 5 of *Don Juan*, which, amid continued public disapproval, enjoyed tremendous sales. Joining Teresa and her family in Pisa, Byron was the source of extensive scandal back in England, and his friends, though admiring his genius, became increasingly concerned and admonishing about the license of his work. Disgusted with his publisher's reluctance to publish *Cain*, Byron changed publishers, allowing John Hunt to include *The Vision of Judgment* (1822) in the first issue of the literary journal *The Liberal*. In 1822, Byron mourned the death of both his daughter, Allegra, and his close friend Percy Bysshe Shelley. In 1823, Byron left for Greece with Teresa's brother, Pietro Gamba. He soon became severely ill, but left for Missolonghi, Greece, convinced of its strategic importance in the revolution. John Hunt published *Don Juan*, cantos 6 through 16. On his thirty-sixth birthday, Byron wrote "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year." In Missolonghi, on April 19, 1824, Byron died, to this day a national hero in Greece. Denied burial with fellow great poets in Westminster Abbey because of his profligate lifestyle, Byron's body is buried in the family vault at Hucknall Torkard Church in Nottinghamshire, near Newstead.

## ANALYSIS

Byron's popularity has not always corresponded to his critical appraisal. He stands apart from his fellow Romantic poets—William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats—in his stubborn reverence for the



poetic style of Restoration and Augustan writers such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Indeed, it was the eighteenth century propensity for wit and satire that was also Byron's forte. It is ironic, then, that Byron is in many ways considered to represent the epitome of the Romantic figure. Both personally and in many of his dark, tormented Romantic heroes, Byron created a cultural icon that had a significant impact on his society and the literary movement of his time, though it must be noted that, although the Byronic hero is certainly in part autobiographical, it represents only one aspect of a complex personality.

Perhaps the salient characteristic of Byron's work that assures his label as a consummate Romantic is his creation of the so-called Byronic hero. This character type appears in many variations in Byron's works but is generally based on such literary characters as Prometheus, John Milton's Satan, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Faust, and many popular sentimental heroes of the age—and, of course, on Byron himself. Though there are variations on this type—Harold, Cain, Manfred, the Giaour, Lara, Selim, and others—generally, the Byronic hero is a melancholy man of great and noble principles, with great courage of his convictions, and haunted by some secret past sin—usually a sin of illicit love, occasionally suggested to be incestuous. He is alienated, proud, and driven by his own turbulent passion.

Recurrent themes in Byron's work can be said to be subsumed under the larger category of nature versus civilization. Political oppression, military aggression, sexual repression, even the superficial restraints of a frivolous, silly English society—all go against the Romantic aspiration that Byron sees as inherent in human nature, and such oppression always yields disastrous results.

Byron, who appears to have had an almost innate love of liberty, was exposed in his extensive travels to markedly diverse cultures and experiences, thus giving him a unique perspective (and certainly a broader one than his contemporaries) on human nature and civilization. Witnessing the ravages of war, the demoralization of political oppression, and the violence of prejudice and hypocrisy particularly afforded Byron a rare insight into the weaknesses of his own English society. These political and societal flaws Byron exposed in many of his works, particularly in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

age, *Don Juan*, and *The Vision of Judgment*, at the risk of great public disapproval and alienation and at great personal cost. The extent and the exotic nature of Byron's travels, in addition to his vivid descriptions of his experiences and his retelling of colorful folktales, additionally account for much of the popularity of Byron's works. His accounts of the virtually unexplored, mysterious land of Albania, for example, captivated the imagination of his insular English readers.

A common theme in Byron's work is certainly that of love in its many manifestations: illicit love, idyllic love, sexual repression, sexual decadence, thwarted love, marriage. Yet in all of its variations, this theme, too, is one of civilization and the discontentment it creates when it denies natural expressions of love. Probably the most touching of Byron's love stories is that of Don Juan and Haidee in canto 1 of *Don Juan*. The affair is innocent, natural, primitive, and therefore by society's standards immoral and unsanctified. Similarly, Don Juan's lack of proper sex education, despite his mother's otherwise vigorous intellectual rigors, in denying what is natural and inevitable, ironically destroys lives.

Byron also repeatedly rails against tyranny and political oppression of any kind. The recent turn of events resulting from the French Revolution and the despotic reign of Napoleon I, all of which in the beginning offered such promise, provided Byron with much fodder for condemning such acts of aggression. Yet in war Byron finds inspiration in those who fight to retain or protect their freedoms. His knowledge of political and military history—European, American, Asian, Mediterranean—was vast, his understanding profound.

Byron was a versatile poet, if not always an accomplished one. In addition to skillfully and poignantly handled romantic lyrics such as "She Walks in Beauty," "When We Two Parted," and the more famous epics, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, Byron also completed lyrical dramas, a number of popular exotic and romantic tales, and satirical works on the literary and political foibles of his time. In terms of both style and structure, his indebtedness to his eighteenth century heroes Dryden and Pope has been given much critical attention. His philosophical and literary faith lay more in reason than in emotion; his preferred delivery was more often one of wit and satire than sentiment and self-indulgence.



## CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE

**First published:** Cantos 1 and 2, 1812; canto 3, 1816; canto 4, 1818; the four cantos published together, 1819

**Type of work:** Poem

*Attempting to escape the pangs of guilt resulting from his mysterious past, self-exiled Childe Harold flees to Europe and witnesses the beauties and horrors of other cultures.*

Byron began *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* on his first trip abroad, when he and Hobhouse toured Spain, Portugal, Albania, and Greece. It was originally titled "*Childe Burun*"; "*Childe*" refers to a young nobleman who has not yet officially taken his title, and "*Burun*" is an earlier form of Byron's own name. Inspired by his recent reading of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), Byron chose to employ the nine-line Spenserian stanza for the major part of this work.

The first two cantos were published in 1812, and Byron's ensuing popularity among the social and literary circles of London was unprecedented, in part because the public insisted—with some accuracy and despite Byron's prefatory disclaimer to the contrary—upon identifying the intriguing Harold as Byron himself. Byron's own confusion of the two, however, is evident in his frequent dropping of the story line of the work to engage in repeated authorial digressions, which themselves intrude on the almost gratuitous plot. Harold is a young, though not inexperienced, Englishman who is compelled to flee Britain, although, the reader is told, it is in fact his own psyche he is trying to escape. The young man has a mysterious background, an unspeakably painful secret in his past. Perhaps, it is suggested, the secret is of some illicit love. With Harold, Byron introduces the first of his many Byronic heroes.

In canto 1, Harold leaves England, having lived a life of sensuous indulgence. He bids farewell to no friends or family, not even to his mother and sister, although he loves them both deeply. Landing in Portugal, Harold proceeds to visit various battlegrounds across Europe, thus giving Byron as narrator the opportunity to digress on historical,

political, and even moral issues of the recent Peninsular War in which England served to help the Spanish resist the French invasion, an event that portended the end of Napoleon I's tyranny. As he looks upon the towns that were devastated by Napoleon's army, Byron laments the loss of life and champions those who nobly fought for the preservation of liberty. Byron praises the courageous women of the Spanish province of Aragon who joined the men in resisting an invading French army. Though these women were not trained to be warriors, like the mythological Amazons, but were taught to love, they nevertheless proved themselves to be strong and brave; thus, Byron suggests, they emerge far more beautiful than the women of other countries such as England.

In Spain, Harold witnesses a Sunday bullfight in one of the most famous passages from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in which Byron is clearly at the same time fascinated and repelled by this violent yet graceful sport. Though Harold is moved by the beauty and song of the festivities around him, he cannot participate, for his pain alienates him from the joys of human activity. He remains a spectator. Singing a ballad, "To Inez," Harold mourns the futility of running away when it is his own "secret woe" that he is attempting to escape. Comparing himself to the "Wandering Jew" of medieval legend who, having mocked Christ, is doomed to roam the earth eternally, seeking the peace of death, Harold bemoans the "hell" that lies hidden in the human heart.

Canto 2 opens with a meditation upon the contributions of classical Greece, a salute prompted by Harold's visit to the Acropolis. As Harold views the ruins of Greece's high achievements, Byron interprets them as reflections of the present loss of Greek freedom, thus foreshadowing his later involvement in the cause of Greek independence. Descriptions of the mysterious land of Albania in this canto represent one of the earliest authentic representations of this exotic country by an Englishman.

Canto 3 begins with Byron sadly recalling his daughter, Ada, whom he has not seen since the breakup of his marriage. Byron returns to the story of Harold, first warning readers that the young hero has greatly changed since the publication of the first two cantos. During the interim, Byron has endured the painful separation and the scandal con-

cerning his relationship with Augusta, all of which essentially forced him to leave England. His bitterness is evident in the far darker tone of canto 3, and the character of Harold and that of the narrator, never strikingly different in temperament, now are more clearly merged.

Still unable to completely detach himself from feeling the pangs of human compassion, Harold flees to the solitude of natural surroundings, finding nature to be the one true consoler. He feels a communication with the desert, the forest, the ocean, the mountains. Finding Harold at the site of the Battle of Waterloo, “the grave of France,” Byron resumes the theme of Napoleon’s despotism and takes the opportunity to examine tyranny in general. Praising the heroes of that fateful and momentous battle, Byron blames Napoleon’s extremism, arguing that moderation would have prevented the disastrous results of a once noble plan. Harold then travels to Germany, where he still is not immune to feelings of love and joy, however fleeting.

Visiting the Swiss Alps leads Harold to the sites of other battles. Lake Lemán (Lake Geneva) recalls to Byron the great French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the forerunners of the Romantic movement. This section, it has often been noted, has a distinctly Shelleyan mood, and indeed Byron wrote it while visiting Percy Bysshe Shelley. Byron explores the pantheistic philosophies of William Wordsworth, Shelley, and Rousseau and expresses feelings of oneness with nature, though he ultimately rejects their ideas. These feelings, furthermore, lead him to consider his feelings of alienation in the world of humankind. Insisting that he is neither cynical nor completely disillusioned, Byron insists that he believes that there are one or two people who are “almost what they seem” and that happiness and goodness are possible. Byron concludes the canto as he begins it, lamenting his absence from Ada, imagining what it would be like to share in her development, to watch her grow.

Canto 4 takes Harold to Italy, at first to Venice, decaying yet still beautiful because its spirit is immortal. Byron confesses that he still has some love for his native country and that he hopes that he will be remembered there. If he dies on foreign soil, he confesses, his spirit will return to England. The canto concludes with Byron’s famous apostrophe, or address, to the ocean.

## DON JUAN

**First published:** Cantos 1 and 2, 1819; cantos 3 through 5, 1821; cantos 6 through 14, 1823; cantos 15 and 16, 1824; the 16 cantos published together, 1826

**Type of work:** Poem

*Forced to flee his homeland, the ingenuous Spanish rogue finds love, tragedy, violence, hypocrisy, and wisdom on his world travels.*

*Don Juan* is a unique approach to the already popular legend of the philandering womanizer immortalized in literary and operatic works. Byron’s Don Juan, the name comically anglicized to rhyme with “new one” and “true one,” is a passive character, in many ways a victim of predatory women, and more of a picaresque hero in his unwitting roguishness. Not only is he not the seductive, ruthless Don Juan of legend, he is also not a Byronic hero. That role falls more to the narrator of the comic epic, the two characters being more clearly distinguished than in Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

In *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, Byron discovered the appropriateness of *ottava rima* to his own particular style and literary needs. This Italian stanzaic form had been exploited in the burlesque tales of Luigi Pulci, Francesco Berni, and Giovanni Battista Casti, but it was John Hookham Frere’s (1817–1818) that revealed to Byron the seriocomic potential for this flexible form in the satirical piece he was planning. The colloquial, conversational style of *ottava rima* worked well with both the narrative line of Byron’s mock epic and the serious digressions in which Byron rails against tyranny, hypocrisy, cant, sexual repression, and literary mercenaries.

Byron opens *Don Juan* with a dedication to his old nemesis, Robert Southey, who was at the time poet laureate. Byron hated Southey for his turncoat politics, for his spreading of rumors about Byron, and for his weak verse. The publication of the first two cantos in 1818 created scandal and outrage for the author. Although the names of publisher and author did not appear on the title page, Byron’s identity was unmistakable. Even Byron’s friends—Hobhouse and others—though admir-

ing the genius of the work, were shocked and concerned about its language and content. The invectives against contemporaneous writers and against Lady Byron smacked of slander; his comments on political and theological issues bordered on sedition and blasphemy. Byron, arguing that this was in fact “the most moral of poems,” remained steadfast against editing and censoring. The work, however, also received significant critical praise from such noteworthy giants as Percy Bysshe Shelley, German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and John Gibson Lockhart (Sir Walter Scott’s son-in-law, writing under the pen name of “John Bull”). Byron found much strength and determination in these encouragements.

Byron’s avowed purpose in *Don Juan* was to be “quietly facetious on everything.” The narrative opens with sixteen-year-old naïf Don Juan, who innocently falls in love with Dona Julia, the young wife of Don Alfonso, a gentleman of fifty who has been linked romantically with Juan’s mother, Dona Inez. Although Byron’s poem is “epic” and he promises to observe the epic conventions of Aristotle and the classical authors, his hero is modern, of ordinary proportions and weaknesses. The plot

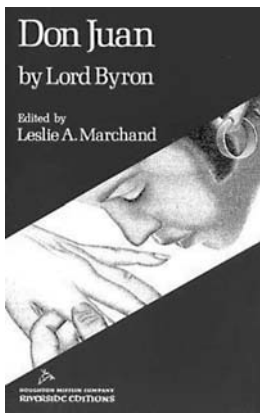
follows a line of at times almost stock farce, the lovers being discovered by Alfonso’s spotting Juan’s shoes under Julia’s bed. At the end of the canto, Juan must flee Spain, the divorced Julia enters a convent, and the picaresque adventures of the young hero begin. Byron’s narrator takes the opportunity during the story to comment on love, education, and marriage.

Juan is shipwrecked in canto 2 and, after a shocking encounter with cannibalism, is washed ashore in the Greek Cyclades and is rescued by the beautiful maiden, Haidee, with whom he shares an idyllic love in canto 3 until her pirate father, Lambro, returns in canto 4 and Juan is sold into Turkish slavery. Haidee dies of a broken heart. The Haidee passage is one of Byron’s most poignant, his depiction of innocent love thwarted by exter-

nal, evil forces one of his most touching. Canto 5 finds Juan accompanied and befriended by Johnson, an English soldier of fortune, and the two are bought by a black eunuch who dresses Juan in women’s clothes and takes him to the harem queen, Gulbayez, whose advances Juan rejects in deference to Haidee’s memory. In canto 6, however, Juan spends a sensuous and loving night in the harem with Lolah, Katinka, Dudu, and the other odalisques but is unfortunately sentenced to death in the morning.

The epic takes on a more serious tone with cantos 7 and 8, in large part as a result of the significant changes in Byron’s own life since the publication of the previous cantos. Juan and Johnson, who have managed to escape, join the Russian army, and Byron vehemently condemns war and military aggression. In cantos 9 and 10, Juan, now a war hero, meets Catherine the Great, who sends him to England. In the remaining cantos, 11 to 16, Byron satirizes English society. As a guest at the country estate of Lord Henry Amundeville, Norman Abbey (based on Byron’s own Newstead Abbey), Juan is pursued by three women: Lord Henry’s wife, the sophisticated and intellectual but self-centered Lady Adeline; the mysterious, gracious, graceful Countess Fitz-Fulke; and the silent but emotionally deep Aurora Raby. Much of the final canto concerns a social gathering and the identity of the mysterious ghost of the Black Friar, whom Juan sees at night.

At the time of his death in 1824, Byron was still working on *Don Juan* but had completed only a fragment of canto 17, which does not continue the story line.



## THE PRISONER OF CHILLON

**First published:** 1816

**Type of work:** Poem

*Imprisoned for religious and democratic sentiments, a priest watches his brothers die beside him but is inspired by a songbird and his own strong spirit.*

*The Prisoner of Chillon* is a dramatic monologue written after Byron and Shelley visited the Castle of

Chillon in Switzerland, where a priest, François Bonivard, was imprisoned for six years for expressing democratic ideals rooted in his religious doctrine. Impressed by Bonivard's courageous and principled struggle against the cruelty and tyranny of his captors, Byron used the story to comment further on his already characteristic themes of isolation, liberty, oppression, and conviction.

The poem opens with the "Sonnet on Chillon," which reveals, both in content and in style, the influence of Shelley on Byron's work and thought at this time in his career. Byron celebrates the site of Bonivard's imprisonment as consecrated ground, and he praises in exalted and idealistic tones the futility of attempts to constrict the true and free spirit.

The remainder of the poem is told from the first-person perspective of Bonivard himself. Although Byron deviates somewhat from the historical record, this poem represents the first example of Byron using a real person as his protagonist. Bonivard's father and five of his brothers have already perished as a result of this persecution of their faith. Two of them were imprisoned with Bonivard: the youngest brother, sweet of disposition, with tears only for the pain of others; the older brother an active man, strong and courageous. Both of the brothers died while the three of them were chained to huge pillars in the dark Gothic dungeon. Alone and the last survivor of his family, Bonivard then fell into a deep despair, his senses dulled, losing any concept of time, unaware of darkness or light.

In an almost conventional Romantic moment, Bonivard's despair is interrupted by the arrival of a songbird. The prisoner speculates, with the last vestiges of optimism, that the bird may also have been imprisoned in a cage and has managed to escape. Perhaps, he speculates, the bird might in fact be his brother's soul visiting him with messages of hope. When the bird flies away, however, Bonivard feels more alone than ever. Yet miraculously, his captors begin to treat him with more compassion, allowing him to walk around in his cell unchained. He climbs up the wall, not to try to escape but merely to get a glimpse through the barred windows of the mountains once again. The beauty of this sight again makes his imprisonment seem even more unbearable. After an indeterminate length of time—days, months, even years—Bonivard is released.

The freedom is a hollow victory, however, since he has lost all that is dear to him, and he had come to consider the prison his home. Even the chains and the spiders seemed to be his friends.

## THE VISION OF JUDGMENT

**First published:** 1822

**Type of work:** Poem

*Upon the death of King George III, Satan and the Archangel Michael debate over possession of the tyrant's soul.*

Byron had already mocked Robert Southey in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) and in his dedication to *Don Juan*, but his ridicule of Southey is at its pinnacle in *The Vision of Judgment*. Byron hated Southey for many reasons. He disapproved of the poetry of Southey and even the greater "Lake School" poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He also resented Southey's turn to conservatism later in life, marked by his being made poet laureate in 1813. Moreover, Southey had spread vicious rumors about Byron's personal life. Upon the death of King George III, Southey, in his role as poet laureate, wrote a sycophantic celebration of George's glorious entry into heaven, *A Vision of Judgment* (1821). In this work, Southey lashed out at Byron, ascribing him to the "Satanic" school. Byron retorted with *The Vision of Judgment*. John Murray, Byron's publisher, was becoming increasingly fearful of the British disapproval of Byron's work, so Byron published the poem in the new literary journal *The Liberal*, edited by Byron and John Hunt, later Byron's new publisher.

In Byron's poem, Saint Peter waits, bored, by the gates of Heaven, his keys rusty and the lock dull with disuse. The angels have nothing to do but sing. Only the angel who records the names of souls lost to hell is overworked, even requesting additional help. Satan is so busy that his thirst for evil is almost quenched. The death of George III brings hypocritical mourning on earth, people drawn to the pomp without really caring about him. Upon hearing that King George III has died, Saint Peter recalls that the last royal entry into Heaven

was by the beheaded King Louis XVI, who was admitted as a martyr by playing on the sympathy of the saints.

While the Archangel Michael and Satan debate over who will get the soul of George III, witnesses are called. These include one who praises George, obviously to flatter him, and the anonymous letter writer known as “Junius” who criticized George and who refuses to recant his writings. Then Southey arrives and starts to recite his *A Vision of Judgment*. By the fourth line, the angels and devils have fled in terror. At the fifth line, Saint Peter uses his keys to knock Southey into his lake. In the confusion, George slips unobserved into Heaven.

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*The Curse of Minerva*, 1812  
*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos 1-4, 1812-1818,  
1819 (the 4 cantos published together)  
*The Bride of Abydos*, 1813  
*Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn*, 1813  
*The Giaour*, 1813  
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## SUMMARY

Lord Byron's impact on nineteenth century European and American culture, both as a personal cultural figure and as a poet and satirist, cannot be exaggerated. Stylistically and formally, his work is more diverse than that of his fellow Romantics. Byron's curious and perhaps confusing blend of idealism and cynicism accounts in part for critical reluctance to assign to him the same label of Romantic as easily as to Wordsworth or Shelley. Yet in his idealistic, steadfast determination to pursue truth, to strip away the surface to expose cant, hypocrisy, and oppression, Byron was at once a reflection of his culture and an iconoclast.

Lou Thompson

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is Lord Byron more of a Romantic figure than a Romantic poet? Justify your response.
- Consider the statement that *Don Juan* does not look as “immoral” today as it once was alleged to be.
- Do you agree or disagree with the assertion that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is more travelogue than character study? Why?
- Byron was fond of difficult poetic stanzas, such as the *ottava rima* and the Spenserian stanza. How do his rhyming techniques contribute to his success at these forms?
- Assess Percy Bysshe Shelley's influence on Byron.
- Show why Byron deserves to be called an iconoclast.



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*The Two Foscari*, pb. 1821, pr. 1837 (verse play)

*Heaven and Earth*, pb. 1822 (fragment; verse play)

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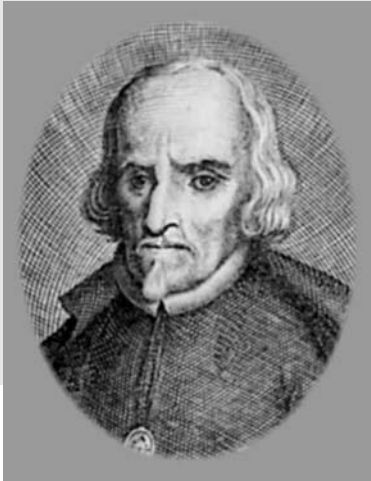
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## PEDRO CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA

**Born:** Madrid, Spain  
January 17, 1600

**Died:** Madrid, Spain  
May 25, 1681

*Author of more than one hundred full-length plays and many one-act autos sacramentales (religious, often allegorical plays), Calderón is considered one of the truly great dramatists of Spain's Golden Age.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Pedro Calderón de la Barca (kahl-day-ROHN day lah BAH-rah) was born in Madrid, Spain, on January 17, 1600, into a well-established Castilian family of the lesser nobility. He was the third child of Ana María de Henao and Diego Calderón de la Barca, who held a post at the Spanish court. The family therefore followed the king to Valladolid and then back to Madrid, where Calderón attended the Colegio Imperial, a Jesuit school, from 1608 to 1613. In 1610, his mother died suddenly, and his father died in 1615. His mother had wanted her son to become a priest, and his father encouraged him strongly to complete his studies. In 1614, Calderón had enrolled at the University of Alcalá de Henares. Then, in the years 1616 to 1620, he divided his time between Alcalá and the University of Salamanca, where he probably completed the degree in canonical law. His study of theology, logic, and scholastic philosophy may well have influenced his intellectual approach to the ideas presented in his plays. His early verses, which he entered in a poetry contest in 1620 in honor of the beatification of Saint Isadore, were considered worthy of praise by his great contemporary, the dramatist Lope de Vega Carpio, and his first play *Amor, honor y poder* (pr. 1623, pb. 1634; love, honor, and power) was performed in Madrid in 1623. During the next two years, he was probably a soldier in Italy and Flanders. This period is followed by a very productive period of playwriting. By 1630, he had

written fifteen plays, including *La dama duende* (wr. 1629, pr., pb. 1636; *The Phantom Lady*, 1664) and *El príncipe constante* (pr. 1629, pb. 1636; *The Constant Prince*, 1853).

Although the record of his life is quite sketchy for someone who lived within court society, two stories appear in discussions of Calderón's life. One is from his university period, when he is said to have been fined for having killed a relative of the duke of Frias (a case later settled out of court); the other tells of an escapade in which Calderón followed an actor, who had wounded his brother in a duel, into a convent. Complaints from the nuns caused him to be placed under house arrest for a few days.

By 1637, he had written almost all of his well-known secular plays, including his famous philosophical play *La vida es sueño* (pr. 1635, pb. 1636; *Life Is a Dream*, 1830), and when Lope de Vega died in 1635, Calderón became his successor as court dramatist. Twelve of his dramas were published in 1636 and another twelve in 1637. At the same time, he was appointed to the Order of Santiago. During a revolt against Spain in 1640, he was sent with his order to Catalonia. His portrayals in *El alcalde de Zalamea* (pr. 1643, pb. 1651; *The Mayor of Zalamea*, 1853) may have their origin in his experiences there. When ill health forced him to return to Madrid in 1642, he became a member of the household of the duke of Alba for four years. After his two brothers were killed and his mistress died within a short period, he resigned his post at court in 1650 and entered the priesthood in 1651. In the following period, he wrote many *autos sacramentales*, me-

dieval allegorical dramas. He was chaplain in Toledo for a time and then was persuaded by the king to return to court in 1663, where he remained until his death. His plays were collected and edited: the third part with twelve plays in 1664, the fourth in 1672, and the fifth in 1677, which contains four plays that he disowned. His own list of dramas written in 1680 includes 110 secular plays and seventy *autos sacramentales*. It is said that at the time of his death he was in the process of writing a new *auto sacramentale*. He died on May 25, 1681, in Madrid, very much esteemed by his contemporaries as a great dramatist.

### ANALYSIS

Calderón's literary productions fall squarely within a period in Spain during which the arts and literature reached their greatest glory, a period often referred to as the Golden Age and associated with the reign of Philip IV (1621-1665). When Calderón began writing his plays, Lope de Vega Carpio, the great dramatist and Calderón's predecessor at court, had already developed the prescribed form of the *comedia*, a three-act drama (not necessarily a comedy) written in verse. Lope de Vega's guidelines for composing the *comedia* are explained in *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609; *The New Art of Writing Plays*, 1914). Because of the tremendous influence of Lope de Vega on the theater of his time, Calderón also wrote using the established rules, composing carefully written plots and polished verse.

Calderón's style is marked by ornamentation, sometimes to the point of obscurity. A popular technique of this period, referred to as Gongorism (after a leading poet, Luis de Góngora y Argote), this style of writing was highly artificial and refined, using many figures of speech, mythological allusions, hyperbole, and archaic words, in addition to a complex syntax based on the Latin form. This style is often combined with conceptism, a cultivated play with ideas. Although this style presents difficulties for the modern audience, the seventeenth century Spanish audience expected and appreciated the skill behind such usage.

The *comedia* was a popular form of entertainment, involving questions of love, honor, and patriotism. In addition, the comic character provided comic relief in even serious dramas with scenes of mistaken identity or bumbling inability to under-

stand a problem. The key, however, was action. Action was always preferred over subtle character development, and the plot itself involved major events of violence, such as murder, battles, even natural disasters. The conflict often set up a situation of good versus evil—for example, the peasant mayor defending his family's honor against an aristocratic captain's base actions in *The Mayor of Zalamea*, or the conflict between father and son in *Life Is a Dream*, successfully resolved when the son adopts the approved values of his father.

The plays of Calderón cover a whole range of variations. His poetic skill and religious sensitivity made him master of the *auto sacramentale*. In these allegorical plays, Calderón continued in the tradition of the medieval morality play, raising its artistic level. His scholastic background and dramatic skill combined to enable him to dramatize abstract theological concepts in a convincing way. A fine example of an earlier *auto sacramentale* is *El gran teatro del mundo* (wr. 1635, pr. 1649, pb. 1677; *The Great Theater of the World*, 1856). Throughout his life, these plays developed greater complexity, and late in his life the themes of the Fall and Redemption appear to be presented with a mature understanding and compassion toward human beings in their weakness. Some of Calderón's plays—*The Constant Prince*, about the devotion of Prince Ferdinand of Portugal, or the famous *El sitio de Breda* (pr. 1625, pb. 1636), based on events also depicted in Diego Velázquez's painting *Las lanzas*—present themes from history or a legend.

The court drama grew out of popular drama, and with the construction of the palace in the Buen Retiro, with its special theater, Calderón, too, wrote plays with spectacular staging effects and elaborate machinery and settings. Successfully developed court plays went beyond popular drama in combining drama with dance, music, and visual arts. Perhaps the best of these is *La hija del aire* (pr. 1653, pb. 1664; *The Daughter of the Air*, 1831), a two-part play of violence and passion based on the legend of a warrior queen of Babylon. Mythological themes dominate this art form, as can be seen by some of the titles, *Eco y Narciso* (wr. 1661, pb. 1688; Echo and Narcissus) and *La estatua de Prometeo* (wr. 1669, pb. 1683; the statue of Prometheus).

Calderón's bloody tragedies of honor were very popular with seventeenth century audiences, even if audiences today find the resolution of some of

the honor conflicts shocking. For example, in *El médico de su honra* (pb. 1637; *The Surgeon of His Honor*, 1853), an innocent wife is murdered by her husband on the mere suspicion of dishonoring his name. The whole issue of honor and its defense must be seen in its seventeenth century context in order to be understood, but this play was intended to shock, showing perhaps Calderón's rejection of the rigid assumptions of the honor code, which led to such excesses.

Although Calderón was known for many types of serious plays, he was also a master of the light, amusing *comedia de capa y espada* (cloak-and-sword play). The name derives from the cloak and sword that were the marks of a gentleman of the time. These plays were pure entertainment—the theme was usually love along with its obstacles, intrigues, and misunderstandings, all written in charming, natural dialogue. The characters are paired sets of two or three gentlemen with their respective ladies and servants (confidants to their masters). The humorous *Casa con dos puertas, mala es de guardar* (wr. 1629, pr., pb. 1636; *A House with Two Doors Is Difficult to Guard*, 1737) is a good example.

Through the various forms that his dramas took, Calderón used the structure and poetic devices popular in his time, and, under Lope de Vega's influence, the development of characters was always subordinate to the action, producing a fast-moving, entertaining spectacle. In the case of the court play, especially, these elements often became quite elaborate. His plots are skillfully constructed, often with a struggle between opposing forces, and the themes are rarely simple; they are, rather, a group of related themes, all of which contribute to the plot.

Calderón's writing is characterized by various types of verse or meter depending on the use: soliloquies, for example, were often written in sonnet form; one of two types (called the *romance* and *redondilla*) was employed for dialogue and narration. Each change of meter changed the mood. Within his poetic style, Baroque techniques appear, such as the use of visual images drawn from nature and mythology, the use of simile and metaphor, parodies and plays on words, the contrast of light and shadow (*chiaroscuro*), and self-contradictory images (*oxymorons*). In all of his works, Calderón's skillful use of the themes, techniques, and style of his period mark him as a truly masterful dramatist.

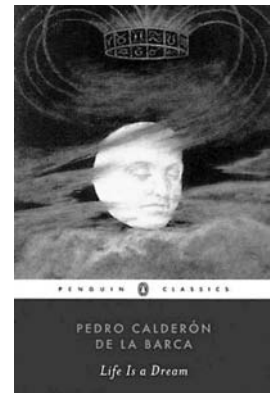
## LIFE IS A DREAM

**First produced:** *La vida es sueño*, 1635 (first published, 1636; English translation, 1830)

**Type of work:** Play

*A young prince, imprisoned from childhood, is tested by his father to see if his reason and prudence will triumph over base instincts.*

Usually recognized as Calderón's finest drama, *Life Is a Dream* premiered at the Royal Court of Spain. Its theme, revealed in the title, focuses on the instability of life and the illusory nature of the world. The story opens one night in the countryside between Poland and Russia, where Rosaura, a noblewoman disguised as a man, and her servant are journeying on foot after the loss of their horses. The opening lines give an example of Calderón's imagery and language:



Are you the fabulous hippogriff running in  
harness with the wind?  
Flameless thunderbolt, featherless bird, fish  
without scales,  
Monster of the four elements without instinct to  
check your headlong flight?

Rosaura's questions include mythological references and images of nature described out of character. The landscape itself reflects Rosaura's emotional upheaval. Amid the turbulence, she finds Segismundo's prison cave and hears his soliloquy of distress at the loss of his freedom. His guardian, Clotaldo, shown throughout the drama to be a man of integrity, sends the visitors away, but not before recognizing Rosaura as his daughter by the sword that she carries (which acts as a symbol of her family honor).

From the beginning, the first of several themes grouped together in this complex philosophical drama are introduced. Segismundo had been imprisoned by his father, King Basilio, who feared the

predictions of the stars that his son would humiliate him and rule as a tyrant. Now, years later, he wonders if he has done right and decides to test the young man by drugging him and bringing him to the palace. In these luxurious surroundings, the inexperienced Segismundo shows his base nature by following his own pleasure and acting in a violent and insulting manner. When returned to his prison, he is told by Clotaldo that it was all a dream—a development that sets up a second theme complex in which dream and reality are confused, and in which deception and truth are indistinguishable to the protagonist. As Segismundo says in his famous lines:

What is life? a delirium!  
What is life? illusion,  
A shadow, a fiction  
Whose greatest good is nothing,  
Because life is a dream!  
Even dreams are only dreams.

When freed by soldiers later, Segismundo proves that he has learned from his experience to control his passions and to do good, as Clotaldo has counseled, even in his dreams. At the end of the play, the prophecy has been fulfilled, as his father kneels at his son's feet—showing the strength of predestination. Yet a moment later, Segismundo wins his father's forgiveness and demonstrates forbearance and prudence in his final actions—showing his ability to use his freedom and free will wisely to counterbalance the pull of his destiny.

A second theme throughout the play, introduced in the first act, is the question of honor. Rosaura has been deceived and abandoned by Astolfo, nephew of the king. The two main characters meet in their hour of need and help each other: Rosaura inspires love in Segismundo and shows him the way to appropriate princely conduct, while he, in turn, restores her honor by marrying her to Astolfo, thus sacrificing his own wishes to the demands of society by restoring each person to his or her rightful place.

## THE MAYOR OF ZALAMEA

**First produced:** *El alcalde de Zalamea*, 1643  
(first published, 1651; English  
translation, 1853)

**Type of work:** Play

*The mayor of Zalamea, a wealthy peasant,  
executes an aristocratic captain in the royal army  
for having dishonored his (the mayor's) daughter.*

The theme of honor is central to the action of Calderón's much-admired play *The Mayor of Zalamea*. The plot is constructed around a conflict based on the contrast between the honorable and just peasant Pedro Crespo and the dishonorable deeds of the aristocratic Captain Alvaro. As the play opens, Crespo agrees to quarter Captain Alvaro in his home, but he takes the precaution of hiding his beautiful, unmarried daughter, Isabel, in the attic with a female companion. His curiosity aroused, Don Alvaro later manages to see Isabel and abduct her. She is rescued by her brother, but only after she has been raped and abandoned by the captain. In an effort to satisfy the requirements of the honor code, Crespo tries every means to get Don Alvaro to marry Isabel, even offering all of his wealth. The dramatic scene is particularly moving as Crespo acts sincerely and humanely to try to obtain justice. Yet even as he shows his nobility of character, the captain arrogantly refuses his offer and rejects his authority.

The question of legal jurisdiction now enters the play, as the aristocratic captain declares himself exempt from civilian authority. Coupled with this question is the theme of honor, which Crespo argues is a property of the soul, which belongs to God, even though Alvaro's life and possessions are in the service of the king. The honor question crosses the lines of rank and jurisdiction in his argument. At the height of the action, the commander, Don Lope de Figueroa, confronts Crespo angrily on the question of legal authority over Don Alvaro. The verse form expresses the anger as threats are exchanged.

The development of Pedro Crespo's character and demonstration of the qualities of prudence and a sense of justice are central to this play. The audience watches through the first two acts as his true character begins to emerge, until in act 3 he



becomes an agent of social justice. In deciding to execute Don Alvaro, Crespo debates whether he should act as a father (in defense of family honor) or as the mayor of Zalamea (to obtain justice at a higher level). When he acts, he does so as mayor, and in his argument at the end he maintains that the two spheres of justice, military and civilian, are really all part of a higher law, the king's justice (representative of God's law).

### SUMMARY

Pedro Calderón de la Barca proved himself a master of the many variations of dramatic art of his time. His style can be ornate, with imagery and mythological references, or simple and more direct, to reflect characters of society's lower classes.

His varied verse forms are suited to their use within the dialogue, and his plots are carefully constructed for dramatic effect.

Calderón's themes range from the religious and theological in his *autos sacramentales* to the witty and fast-moving stories of love and misadventure in his *comedias de capa y espada*. In his serious dramas, he focuses on larger issues, such as the problem of honor, dream and reality, deception and truth, freedom and predestination. With all of his dramas clearly anchored in the Spanish Golden Age, the force of allegory is often evident—showing the characters their rightful position within a society believed to be ordained by God.

Susan L. Piepke

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*Casa con dos puertas, mala es de guardar*, wr. 1629, pr., pb. 1636 (*A House with Two Doors Is Difficult to Guard*, 1737)

*La dama duende*, wr. 1629, pr., pb. 1936 (*The Phantom Lady*, 1664)

*Los cabellos de Absalón*, wr. c. 1634, pb. 1684 (*The Crown of Absalom*, 1993)

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*El mayor encanto, amor*, pr. 1635, pb. 1637 (*Love, the Greatest Enchantment*, 1870)

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*El alcalde de Zalamea*, pr. 1643, pb. 1651 (*The Mayor of Zalamea*, 1853)

*La hija del aire, Parte I*, pr. 1653, pb. 1664 (*The Daughter of the Air, Part I*, 1831)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- If Pedro Calderón de la Barca is indeed a major writer of the Spanish Golden Age, what do his plays suggest about the literary traits that Spaniards of that age admired or expected?
- To what extent does the *auto sacramental* resemble English religious plays with which you are familiar?
- How does the theme of the Rosaura plot in *Life Is a Dream* relate to the plot involving Segismundo?
- Why must humans consider life as a dream?
- What features of *Life Is a Dream* seem most like comedy as William Shakespeare practiced it? What features seem significantly different?

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John Martin

## MORLEY CALLAGHAN

**Born:** Toronto, Ontario, Canada

February 22, 1903

**Died:** Toronto, Ontario, Canada

August 25, 1990

*Callaghan, one of the greatest Canadian fiction writers of the twentieth century, transcended the regional and national by handling universal themes in a compelling style.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Edward Morley Callaghan (KAL-uh-han) was born in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, to parents who were Roman Catholics of Irish descent. He attended public school, Riverdale Collegiate, and St. Michael's College of the University of Toronto. While in college, he did well in his studies, debated, boxed, played baseball and hockey, and was a part-time reporter on the Toronto *Daily Star*. In 1923, he met Ernest Hemingway, who was the European correspondent for the Toronto *Star Weekly* and who encouraged Callaghan's ambition to become a writer. After earning his B.A. in 1925, Callaghan attended Osgoode Law School in Toronto.

In 1926, he published two short stories and began to receive encouragement from the American literary figures Robert McAlmon and Ezra Pound. Callaghan visited New York City and met several important writers. Through the good offices of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Callaghan in 1928 met Maxwell Perkins, the brilliant editor at the publishing house of Charles Scribner's Sons in New York. Perkins became his loyal adviser, bought three of his stories for *Scribner's Magazine*, and accepted his novel *Strange Fugitive* (1928) and a collection of stories called *A Native Argosy* (1929). His short story "A Country Passion," about a couple's frustrations, was republished in *The Best Stories of 1928*. This was the first of many Callaghan pieces that were hon-

ored in *The Best Stories* series. Though called to the bar in 1928, Callaghan never practiced law.

In 1929, Callaghan married his college sweetheart, Loretto Florence Dee, and spent seven delightful months with her in Paris; much later, he reminisced in *That Summer in Paris: Memories of Tangled Friendships with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Some Others* (1963) about his time there. After a few restless months living on a Pennsylvania farm and in a New York hotel, Callaghan and his wife made Toronto their permanent home, beginning in 1930. By then Callaghan was established as a respected writer of long and short fiction. In addition to *Scribner's Magazine*, he eventually published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Maclean's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Yale Review*.

Until World War II began, Callaghan's career was marked by steady writing and a sequence of excellent books. They are *It's Never Over* (1930, written in Paris), *No Man's Meat* (1931), *A Broken Journey* (1932), *Such Is My Beloved* (1934), *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), *Now That April's Here, and Other Stories* (1936), and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937). Callaghan also wrote two plays in 1939 and began a monthly column a year later for *New World Magazine*. He continued with the column until 1948. In 1942, he was permitted to sail aboard a Canadian naval corvette, in preparation for writing a National Film Board script. A year later, he began work for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), starting with a talk show and continuing with quiz shows. He returned to novel writing in 1947. In 1948, two minor novels appeared, *Luke*

*Baldwin's Vow*, for children, and *The Varsity Story*. *The Loved and the Lost*, a Governor-General's Literary Award winner, was published in 1951, and *The Many Coloured Coat*, based on a 1955 story, appeared in 1960. Callaghan continued to produce stories, eventually writing more than one hundred, and he also published many nonfiction articles.

In 1950, Callaghan returned to the CBC with his own talk show and began to make guest appearances on television. In 1958, the *Star Weekly* dispatched him to Rome to report on the death of Pope Pius XII, and this experience led him to write his novel *A Passion in Rome* (1961).

In his last decades, the steady Callaghan made writing his life. He won more awards, including both the Canada Council Molson Prize and the Royal Bank of Canada Award in 1970. He enjoyed a beautiful home with his wife in Toronto and regular visits from admiring readers, critics, and fellow writers. His last novels include *A Fine and Private Place* (1975), *Close to the Sun Again* (1977), and *A Time for Judas* (1983); the latter novel is about Judas's finding a friend to record and preserve the story of Christ's need to be betrayed. Callaghan's beloved wife died in 1984. In subsequent years, he published his last two novels, *Our Lady of the Snows* (1985) and *A Wild Old Man on the Road* (1988).

## ANALYSIS

Morley Callaghan's international literary reputation struggles against two curious adversities. The first resulted from the revelation that he had knocked down the burly Hemingway during a boxing match at a Parisian athletic club in 1929; a great deal of hoopla was made over this unimportant feat, which should have been quickly forgotten. In addition, his credibility as a significant international writer suffered because his fiction was often set in Toronto, causing many critics to dismiss him as merely a competent regional writer. Edmund Wilson, the distinguished and influential American critic, began a 1960 essay on Callaghan by saying that he "is today perhaps the most unjustly neglected novelist in the English-speaking world," and concluded wryly that this might be so because readers wonder whether any Toronto writer could be legitimately compared to Anton Chekhov and Ivan Turgenev—as White believed Callaghan should be.

Callaghan's fiction addresses many universal

themes. Often, he uses characters who may be defined as ordinary people with dilemmas. He then dramatizes their suffering when they fail to make the "right" choices, which they often do because they lack anything resembling free will. He shows how the establishment breaks the hearts of the have-nots, the unfortunate, and the misfits in its midst. Callaghan also describes how people of goodwill must have, seize, add to, and strengthen their moral values to survive in a troubled world. Callaghan develops orderly, uncomplicated, suspenseful plots. He includes violence and muted sensuality, tangles people in permanent psychological conflict, and closes without passing judgment, leaving characters with little if any hope for happiness.

*It's Never Over* presents the consequences of the execution of a combat veteran who killed a policeman under mitigating circumstances. The murderer's sister wrecks her life, that of her brother's best friend, and that of the friend's girlfriend by clinging to a dead past that prevents her from having a living present or future.

*No Man's Meat* focuses on a triangular relationship. The staid, childless marriage of Bert and Teresa Beddoes is shattered when their friend Jean Allen, who has left her husband, comes to visit them. After a serene sunset over a peaceful Canadian lake, from which the three take no lesson, Bert and Jean shoot craps, while Teresa watches. Jean loses a final startling bet and sleeps with Bert to pay it off; Teresa does not protest but insists with "calmness" that the two sleep together. In the morning, Jean reveals why she left her husband. She can hardly stand a man's touch; she is a lesbian. She then departs with Teresa.

*Such Is My Beloved* has attracted increased attention in recent years. It's the story of an idealistic, young priest who falls in love with the idea of saving the souls of two prostitutes in his neighborhood. Though he has the best intentions, his innocence of social reality leads to negative consequences for all concerned.

Callaghan describes weather and street scenes in a painterly way and employs cinematic techniques. The opening paragraph of *Our Lady of the Snows*, for example, tells how on a certain Christmas Eve "big wet [snow] flakes" fall "on an old dilapidated neighborhood," and then zooms in on a nearby hotel and its loquacious bartender named

“Gil” Gilhooley. The novel also has autobiographical overtones, since Gil had ambitions to be a writer and is trying to come to terms with his brother’s death. Callaghan’s only sibling, an older brother, died in 1946. In *A Fine and Private Place*, Al and Lisa discuss details of the hit-and-run death of an enigmatic friend, a writer named Eugene Shore. Callaghan makes masterful use of clipped, simple dialogue that is at once realistic and heightened. Such dialogue is also reminiscent of cinema.

Callaghan often uses simple plot structures. *The Many Coloured Coat* features three central characters in an unnamed city that resembles Montreal. One character perceptively admires the other two, who are contrasted. A temptation generates a crime, a public trial, a conviction, and a suicide in prison. The fortunes of the surviving pair undergo inversion—one up-then-down, the other down-then-up. A second trial permits a private reconciliation of the two survivors.

Almost never presenting his action through omniscient narrators who explain things for the reader, Callaghan has his characters, especially in short stories, learn something significant at the climax. “Day by Day,” for example, describes the consequence of a young wife’s prayer that her husband may find contentment. He comes home, observes her spiritual enlightenment, becomes suspicious, and storms out. At the end of the story, “She had such a strange feeling of guilt. White-faced and still, she tried to ask herself what it was that was slowly driving them apart day by day.” In “A Sick Call,” a Catholic priest pays a requested visit to a sick former member of the church in order to provide spiritual comfort. In so doing, he bothers the woman’s gruff young husband, whose love for her the priest wistfully sees as beautifully “staunch,” though “pagan.” The story ends: “As he [the priest] began to wonder about the nature of this beauty, for some reason he felt inexpressibly sad.”

## “TWO FISHERMEN”

**First published:** 1934, as “Who Is My Neighbor?” (collected in *Morley Callaghan’s Stories*, 1959)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A hangman comes to town on business, goes fishing with the local newspaper reporter before the execution, and confronts him afterward.*

One of the two fishermen of the title is Michael Foster, a young journalist for a small-town newspaper called the *Examiner* who wants to work for a metropolitan paper instead. The other fisherman, K. Smith, has come to town to execute the well-liked Tom Delaney, who fought, was hurt by, and killed his wife’s molester.

The story falls into two parts. The first part takes place in the evening; Foster finds Smith, borrows a boat, and rows him out onto the lake. They share a bottle and grow “neighborly.” “Smitty” amusingly talks about his wife and children and then begins to discuss his work, “knowing he ought to be ashamed.” Next day, soon after the execution, the two meet again. Smith, now formally dressed, gives Foster two fish he caught before dawn that morning. An upset crowd approaches and pelts Smith, and a flying rock cuts Smith’s head. The inefficient sheriff intervenes and saves Smith. An irate citizen notices Foster’s fish, grabs them, and hurls them toward Smith. Smith stares at his gift, in the dust; Foster, backing away, feels “hot with shame” for “betraying Smitty.”

This story concerns injustice, friendship’s limits, disloyalty, and the sad separation of work and play. Tom should not be hanged. Foster makes and loses a friend. Smith endures his job partly so he can fish in different places. The serenity of the lake implicitly mocks the characters’ common inhumanity. A bleeding head, betrayal, and fish provide twisted Christian symbolism. When asked to select one of his stories for inclusion in *This Is My Best*, a 1942 collection of works by famous authors, Callaghan submitted “Two Fishermen.” He might easily have chosen any of a dozen other splendid stories, but he rightly held this one in high regard.

## THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

**First published:** 1935

**Type of work:** Novel

*When a father and his estranged son are implicated in an only partly accidental drowning, frustrated hopes and wrecked lives result.*

This novel, whose title derives from the Bible, tells the story of an egocentric, sinful man who learns repentance and gains forgiveness through the love of a meek woman. The plot involves interlocking activities of several characters. Andrew Aikenhead is a successful advertising agent. Andrew's mentally unbalanced first wife has died, and their son Michael, an infrequently employed engineer, resents his father's second marriage to Marthe Choate. Marthe's irresponsible son by her previous marriage, David, has tested the limits of Andrew's patience.

In a pathetic effort to improve matters, Andrew manages to persuade Michael to vacation with his family and a few friends at his lakeside home. David, who drinks excessively, harasses Sheila, Michael's sister and the fiancé of Ross, the physician son of Andrew's partner Jay Hillquist. After arguing noisily with Andrew, David goes boating with Michael in the dark. The two argue. David dives from the boat, swims around foolishly, becomes confused, and calls for help. Michael bruises him with an oar in an angry rescue attempt, then abandons him. The next day David's drowned body is found. Suspicion falls on Andrew, although the police lack evidence to prosecute. Michael, bitterly blaming his father for much of his life's trouble, fails to come forward with the truth.

Marthe leaves Andrew, who so declines that Jay

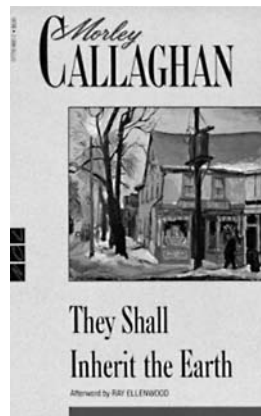
dissolves their partnership. Sheila marries Ross but, fearing family madness, tells him she wants no children. Michael, on whom Callaghan concentrates, has four friends: Anna Prychoda, an unemployed dress designer; Huck Farr, a callous sensualist; Nathaniel Benjamin, a would-be teacher and a convert from Judaism to Christianity; and Bill Johnson, a loudmouthed communist. Michael finds no solace with Huck, despite their former camaraderie, especially when he observes Huck's campaign to seduce Anna. He finds no answers in religion through Nathaniel, none in politics through Bill, nor any in nature when he goes wolf hunting with Ross and observes slaughter.

Meek Anna becomes Michael's salvation. Falling awkwardly in love, they soon become intimate. When she shyly tells him she is pregnant and appears frightened by his initial silence, he explains: "I was just feeling glad, and I was trying to understand why I felt glad." Her reply is wondrous: "Then I'm glad too." At one point, Michael watches Anna peacefully sleeping and begins to understand:

If to be poor in spirit meant to be without false pride, or be humble enough to forget oneself, then she was poor in spirit, for she gave herself to everything that touched her, she let herself be, she lost herself in the fullness of the world, and in losing herself she found the world, and she possessed her whole soul. People like her could have everything. They could inherit the earth.

Michael confesses his sin to Anna. She says that only meaningless justice would be served by his going to the police, that instead he should ask the prodigal son's forgiveness of the father. What follows this dramatic act, nicely underplayed by Callaghan, contains the seeds of a diminished contentment.

Callaghan handles details with consummate skill, creates many scenes as if for a film treatment, and conveys psychological realities by natural dialogue and by having his characters ponder what they want to say but cannot express. Misery results from misunderstanding, resentment, and misinterpretation but imperfectly articulated love points to a moral: "give all of yourself to help."





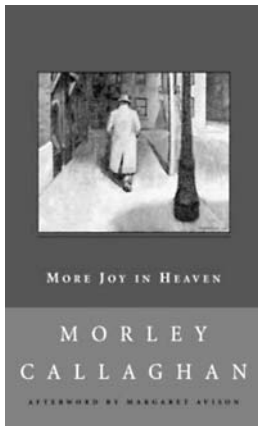
## MORE JOY IN HEAVEN

**First published:** 1937

**Type of work:** Novel

*A famous bank robber apparently reforms while serving a long prison term, but after a few months back in society, he is destroyed by the pressures of success.*

Red Ryan was the actual person who served as the model for the hero of *More Joy in Heaven*. He was released from prison in 1935 after serving more than ten years for grand theft. For a few months, Ryan was the toast of Toronto, but the fashion of his popularity passed and he reverted to his previous patterns. Ryan was finally killed by a police officer while attempting to rob a liquor store.



Callaghan's novel turns this true story into a version of the parable of the prodigal son. The fictional hero of *More Joy in Heaven*, Kip Caley, sees another

side of life while serving his long prison term. His transformation is due largely to the help of a priest who is ministering there. Caley forgets the demands of his giant ego and finds new satisfaction in helping other inmates. He becomes a model prisoner, and through the intervention of a Canadian senator and other political figures, he is granted parole.

Unfortunately, his well-earned reputation for being reborn on the inside makes him a valuable commodity on the outside. The senator gets him a job as a greeter at a popular sports bar, which puts Caley back in contact with the fast-track world of heavy drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Shrewd entrepreneurs, political opportunists, and thrill seekers of various kinds pounce on him as soon as he is free.

Caley loses touch with Father Butler, who in prison had shown him a better way of life. Instead, Caley finds himself hobnobbing with a bishop of

the church, whose devotion to the power of the institution leaves little time to care about any individual. A waitress named Julie, who has also been through some hard times, comes to love Caley for reasons that have nothing to do with his notoriety. She has to compete, however, with the senator's daughter, who wants only a fling with the famous former bank robber. Julie wins, but their love is not enough to stave off the inevitable tragedy.

The dream that catches fire in Caley's heart is to become a member of the parole board, which would allow him to continue on a larger scale the worthwhile work he had begun in prison. The dream is frustrated, however, by his own impatience and then vetoed by Judge Ford. This same judge had originally sentenced Caley and had opposed his early release. Judge Ford is untouched by mercy, pity, peace, or love. He sees nothing but the law. In one memorable passage, Ford is compared to the cynical former convict Whispering Joe Foley. They are portrayed as mirror images of each other, both addicted to the law. Ford can think only in terms of enforcing the law; Foley can think only in terms of breaking it.

The extremely romantic and dramatic ending leaves the reader with a better understanding of the impersonal forces that control society and destroy Kip Caley. Sympathy for Caley is qualified, however, by an appreciation of the tragic consequences of his kind of egomaniacal naïveté. The celebration to welcome back the prodigal son can become toxic if it continues too long.

## THAT SUMMER IN PARIS

**First published:** 1963

**Type of work:** Memoir

*Callaghan describes seven months in 1929 spent with his wife in Paris associating with expatriate writers and sharing their mostly carefree café life there.*

Callaghan began *That Summer in Paris: Memories of Tangled Friendships with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Some Others* to correct the many stories generated by his outboxing Hemingway in Paris. The book, however, grew into a charming compilation of

memories of Paris boulevards, commentary, and conversations with American writers, editors, and publishers. The book falls into thirds, followed by a coda. In the first third, Callaghan details his newspaper work in Toronto, meeting Hemingway there, and conferring with members of the literati in New York. Callaghan presents himself as an eager young author, ready for advice but also rather cocksure.

The Callaghans arrive in Paris in April. Callaghan, recalling numerous experiences with remarkable objectivity, offers vignettes of Parisian life before the economic collapse and war that were to come. He reveres Paris as “a lighted place where the imagination was free,” that people “have to make room for . . . in their thoughts even if they never visit them.” Distancing himself from the French writers he observes, he calls one trio “French cutups” and André Gide “a second-rate novelist.” Some Americans fare no better. Gertrude Stein’s abstract prose is “nonsense.” A host spoils his generous treatment of Americans with gossip and cruel behavior. Through this host, however, Callaghan meets James Joyce, whom he esteems above all other living writers, whose wife he meets and likes, and in whose home he is entertained. Callaghan also reveres Hemingway and hopes to meet F. Scott Fitzgerald through him. Callaghan does meet “Scott” later.

Callaghan summarizes more adventures with celebrities and phonies, describes far too much drinking, and carefully reports his boxing match with Hemingway. Fitzgerald, who timed the match, in innocent excitement let a three-minute round run on, which allowed Callaghan to floor Hemingway, who bellowed that Fitzgerald had done it purposely to see him humiliated. Callaghan concludes that Hemingway had to be the winner in everything. The episode ruined the already shaky

friendship between Fitzgerald and Hemingway, whom Callaghan crisply analyzes: “[Hemingway’s] quality for moving others to make legends out of his life may have been as tragic a flaw as was Scott’s instinct for courting humiliation from his inferiors.”

The book’s last chapters serve as an epilogue. After enjoying a trip to Versailles and Chartres with Hemingway, the Callaghans return, via London and Dublin, to their home in Toronto. Embroiled at once in inaccurate reports of his boxing victory, Callaghan tries honorably but without success to set the record straight by publishing an explanation in the newspapers.

Callaghan, who took pains to disparage the seventeenth century love of balance and form seen at Versailles, avoids compositional symmetry in this book. It has two chapters of three pages each and one of nineteen. He makes casual generalizations concerning life and art. Some of his critical observations could, of course, be the result of hindsight. *That Summer in Paris* is now a classic remembrance of Paris in 1929.

## SUMMARY

Morley Callaghan, a remarkably intelligent and enduring man of letters, transcended his Canadian borders. His is the work of a great writer rather than a great regional writer. At his best, he portrays ordinary people caught in situations too hard to wriggle out of with much grace; yet, his characters try and in trying merit nonjudgmental love. Callaghan invites his readers to approach these characters, get inside their personalities, and agree that words are often inadequate to do more than suggest the depths of their all-too-human quandaries.

*Robert L. Gale; updated by Steven Lehman*

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LONG FICTION:

*Strange Fugitive*, 1928

*It’s Never Over*, 1930

*No Man’s Meat*, 1931 (novella)

*A Broken Journey*, 1932

*Such Is My Beloved*, 1934



## Morley Callaghan

*They Shall Inherit the Earth*, 1935  
*More Joy in Heaven*, 1937  
*The Varsity Story*, 1948  
*The Loved and the Lost*, 1951  
*The Many Coloured Coat*, 1960  
*A Passion in Rome*, 1961  
*A Fine and Private Place*, 1975  
*Season of the Witch*, 1976  
*Close to the Sun Again*, 1977  
“No Man’s Meat,” and “The Enchanted Pimp,” 1978  
*A Time for Judas*, 1983  
*Our Lady of the Snows*, 1985  
*A Wild Old Man on the Road*, 1988

### SHORT FICTION:

*A Native Argosy*, 1929  
*Now That April’s Here, and Other Stories*, 1936  
*Morley Callaghan’s Stories*, 1959  
*The Lost and Found Stories of Morley Callaghan*, 1985

### DRAMA:

*Turn Home Again*, pr. 1940 (also known as *Going Home*)  
*To Tell the Truth*, pr. 1949  
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### NONFICTION:

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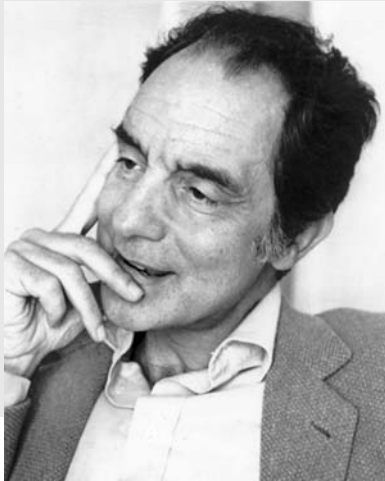
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Red Ryan, the historical model for Kip Caley, compare to the fictional character who is the protagonist of Morley Callaghan’s *More Joy in Heaven*?
- Peggy’s innocence in *The Loved and the Lost* is referred to as malignant. Explain this unusual combination of ideas in this novel and/or other works of Callaghan.
- Describe the conflict between Christianity and the church in *Such Is My Beloved*.
- How has Callaghan’s friendship with Ernest Hemingway affected his literary reputation over the years?
- How does the parable of the prodigal son relate to the themes of *More Joy in Heaven* and *They Shall Inherit the Earth*?
- What aspects of Callaghan’s work do you find to be especially Canadian?
- Callaghan’s style has been criticized as “corny” in recent years. Do you agree? Provide examples to support your view one way or the other.
- Explain how ordinary people suffer from their dealings with the establishment in three of Callaghan’s works.



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## ITALO CALVINO

**Born:** Santiago de las Vegas, Cuba  
October 15, 1923

**Died:** Siena, Italy  
September 19, 1985

*With quirky humanism and imaginative style, internationally acclaimed storyteller Calvino breathed life into traditional and innovative narrative forms by skillfully blending reality, fantasy, and wit.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Italo Calvino (kahl-VEE-noh) was born in Santiago de las Vegas, Cuba, near Havana, on October 15, 1923, to parents who were well into middle age. Agricultural scientists, they returned to the ancestral farm on the Italian Riviera when Calvino was two. Their intellectual openness, enlightened skepticism, and enthusiasm for scientific method deeply influenced Calvino's later artistic development.

After a rather lonely adolescence, Calvino left San Remo to study agronomy at the University of Turin in 1941. Drafted into the national army two years later, he immediately deserted to join the Italian Resistance and fight Fascism. When World War II ended in 1945, he returned to Turin, changed his major from agronomy to English literature (his thesis was on Joseph Conrad), completed his degree, and began writing fiction. His first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947, 1957, 1965; *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, 1956), a realistic story about an orphan's wartime adventures with a band of partisans, first appeared in 1947. It won the Riccione literary prize in 1947 and much critical praise. His many short stories, some of which in the collection *Gli amori difficili* (1970; *Difficult Loves*, 1984), also earned acclaim.

In his mid-twenties, Calvino took a position with the Einaudi publishing house. The staff there included novelists Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Natalia Levi Ginzburg—all leaders in Italy's intellectual vanguard. They introduced Calvino to the

neorealist literary movement and encouraged his increasingly active participation in politics. Under their tutelage, Calvino found the late 1940's and the 1950's especially productive.

Besides his editorship at Einaudi (a position he kept until his death), he directed a literary journal with Vittorini, served on the staff of Italy's official Communist newspaper, and contributed many polemical articles to *Il politecnico*. He also produced an amazing amount of fiction, most of which boldly entered fantastic territory. Three of his four historical fantasy works—the novellas *Il visconte dimezzato* (1952; *The Cloven Viscount*, 1962), *Il barone rampante* (1957; *The Baron in the Trees*, 1959), and *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959; *The Non-Existent Knight*, 1962)—are from this period. They constitute some of his most celebrated and characteristic works.

Calvino took special delight in reading and studying fables. By editing and retelling some two hundred regional folktales in *Fiabe italiane: Raccolte della tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni e trascritte in lingua dai vari dialetti* (1956; *Italian Fables*, 1959; also translated as *Italian Folktales*, 1980), Calvino entertained readers of all ages and contributed significantly to folklore scholarship. This absorption in storytelling's ancient roots also stimulated him to produce some modern counterparts; several of these are collected in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (1963; *The Watcher, and Other Stories*, 1971). These contemporary parables testify to Calvino's own political and social disenchantment (he quit the Communist Party around 1958).

Realistic and popular elements also pervade the

comic vignettes of *Marcovaldo: Ovvero, Le stagioni in città* (1963; *Marcovaldo: Or, The Seasons in the City*, 1983), in which Marcovaldo, an impoverished peasant, moves his family to the big city. Ironically, he spends more time and money trying to recapture the life he abandoned than in improving his lot. As in much of Calvino's work, an essentially tragic view of life underlies the humorous and gently resigned spirit of the narratives.

Calvino moved to Paris in 1964, where he met and married an Argentinean translator for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that same year; the couple had a daughter in 1965. Calvino remained in Paris for sixteen years, during which time friendships with internationally recognized intellectuals, such as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and literary critic Roland Barthes, greatly inspired his critical and creative writing. The finely crafted works from this period—*Le cosmicomiche* (1965; *Cosmicomics*, 1968), *Ti con zero* (1967; *t zero*, 1969), *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969, 1973; *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, 1976), and *Le città invisibili* (1972; *Invisible Cities*, 1974)—are remarkable for their intellectual playfulness and literary inventiveness. In 1972, *Invisible Cities*, Calvino's final historical fantasy, captured the prestigious Feltrinelli Prize, Italy's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. The last novel Calvino wrote in Paris was *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979; *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, 1981), a spirited parody of literary experiments, such as the French *nouveau roman* (New Novel), which appeared in 1979. The international success of this book secured Calvino's reputation as a major twentieth century author.

In 1980, Calvino and his family relocated to Rome. *Palomar*, his last novel, was published in 1983; the English translation, *Mr. Palomar*, appeared around the time of his death on September 19, 1985, in Siena, Italy, from a cerebral hemorrhage. As personal in its own way as was his first novel, *Mr. Palomar* is essentially an extended meditation on man and the cosmos. Its meticulous investigation of the complexities of human experience—whether physical, mental, or spiritual—is similar to the short stories in the posthumous *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (1986; *Under the Jaguar Sun*, 1988), where the senses of taste, hearing, and smell provide entry into the magical, ineffable, and grotesque dimensions of mundane existence.

## ANALYSIS

Calvino's reputation as a master storyteller and innovative writer rests primarily on his success in fusing the traditional and original, the magical and mundane, the grotesque and ineffable—elements that are disparate, even contradictory. Generally, this literary alchemy is seen in two basic ways: If the story relates something real, Calvino will introduce magical or fantastic elements; if it describes the incredible or imaginary, he will present it in a nonchalantly realistic manner.

Because of the intricate interrelationship of the actual and the imaginary in his work, Calvino is considered both a realist and a fantasist. His brand of realism, however, is best described as neorealistic. Like realism and naturalism, neorealism depicts the world in an unidealized, concrete manner. Unlike these other literary genres, neorealism does not do so in order to present an impartial picture of reality; rather, it seeks to communicate a particular experience of that reality. Neorealism achieves this effect by revealing the elusive, intangible aspects of experience—the psychological, symbolic, or metaphysical dimensions, for example—residing within the physical and actual.

Calvino's imaginative perception of the real world is complemented by his rational interpretation of the fantastic. As he observes in an essay from *Una pietra sopra: Discorsi di letteratura e società* (1980; *The Uses of Literature*, 1986):

For me the main thing in a narrative is not the explanation of an extraordinary event, but the order of things that this extraordinary event produces in itself and around it; the pattern, the symmetry, the network of images deposited around it, as in the formation of a crystal.

Calvino refers frequently to the crystal to describe his own way of thinking and writing. In *Sulla fiaba* (1988; *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 1988), a collection of lectures that he was preparing at the time of his death, he remarks that the precision and geometric faceting of the crystal, and its ability to refract light, are what make it, for him, a model of perfection and an emblem of his work. In his writing, Calvino mimics the crystal's rationality, symmetry, and ability to combine endlessly in order to explore all the possible variations and alter-

natives of a given idea or argument. For him, the possible is as important as the real.

The “crystalline” features of Calvino’s fiction are especially pronounced in works from his Parisian years. The complex permutations in *t zero*, the multiplicity of phenomena and interpretation in *Invisible Cities*, and the intricately woven interrelationships of characters, events, images, and ideas in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* are clearly analogous to the faceted structure and systematic self-organization of crystals. Simultaneously rational and organic, this system offers Calvino a satisfying intellectual and artistic means of expressing and illuminating the entanglements of human life within an increasingly complex and unpredictable world.

The crystal’s almost magical relationship with light is another significant quality. Applied to Calvino’s fiction, lightness—one of the literary values he admired and discusses in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*—suggests luminosity, elucidation, and weightlessness. Luminosity refers to visibility, or the exactness of Calvino’s images. After observing that his stories generally grow out of an image or visualized concept, Calvino affirms that the visual image is “a way of attaining knowledge of the most profound meaning.” In order to arrive at that meaning, he uses a procedure that strives to unite spontaneously generated images with the sequential logic of discursive thought. That is, in order to interpret images into words and then mold them into a narrative, he synthesizes intuition and reason, spontaneity and calculation, fantasy and fact.

Calvino’s talent for elucidating contemporary reality often finds paradoxical expression in his historical novels. He sometimes takes a remarkable event as his departure point, such as Italian merchant Marco Polo’s thirteenth century visit to Mongol emperor Kublai Khan’s court in *Invisible Cities*, and interprets it in an original manner, which sheds light on contemporary issues. He also uses the literature of the past, such as Ludovico Ariosto’s Renaissance epic *Orlando Furioso* (1516,

1521, 1532; English translation, 1591) and Miguel de Cervantes’s satiric novel *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615; *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1612-1620), for example, to inspire and form his modern visions.

Calvino’s respect for the past and for literary tradition rarely translates into mere imitation. In *Cosmicomics* and *t zero*, for example, he reverses the usual premise of the historical novel: Instead of using the past as a means for understanding the present, and instead of evoking a real, specific time and place from history, he employs modern scientific theories to fashion a fantastic, impossible past. This reconstruction achieves its unity through its first-person narrator, Qfwfq, an ageless, protean being who describes the formation of the cosmos, the evolution of life, and the perplexities of consciousness. With Qfwfq, Calvino not only gives abstract ideas, such as time and space, a narrative form, but, more importantly, elucidates important questions about the character of existence and the essence of being human.

It is this last question that raises the idea of light as weightlessness; while the tone of his work is accurately described as “light,” it can hardly be called frivolous. This quality he prefers to characterize as a buoyant thoughtfulness adopted to ease the

desperate and all-pervading oppression . . . in a human condition common to us all. . . . Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness . . . I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. . . . I look to ~[literature and] science to nourish my visions in which all heaviness disappears.

Literature for Calvino is thus not a body of traditions or a special, artistic way of using words; it is rather “the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living.” This search not only expresses humankind’s existential needs but also affirms people’s distinctly human values.

## THE CLOVEN VISCOUNT

**First published:** *Il visconte dimezzato*, 1952  
(English translation, 1962)

**Type of work:** Novella

*Split lengthwise by a cannonball, Medardo's good and evil halves generate various kinds of conflict, try to destroy each other, and are finally reunited.*

*The Cloven Viscount* was rereleased in 1960 as part of the trilogy *I nostri antenati* (1960; *Our Ancestors*, 1980). Although the three novellas have no specifics in common, they are nonetheless connected by their similar exploration of concepts illuminating contemporary cultural crises. *The Cloven Viscount* probes ethics by interpreting literally the division of human good and evil; *The Baron in the Trees* explores the isolation and egocentricity of individuals; and *The Non-Existent Knight* examines the clash between the ideal and the real, between image and actuality.

*The Cloven Viscount* is deceptively simple. Participating in his first battle, Medardo is cloven in two by a cannonball. Patched by doctors, the recovered half returns to Terralba, immediately causes his father's death, and terrorizes the countryside; it is Medardo's evil self. Soon his good side returns. Inevitably, the two sides meet, duel, and, because of their wounds, are finally fused into "a whole man again, neither good nor bad, but a mixture of goodness and badness."

Clearly a parable on human nature, Medardo's division alludes to the archetypal struggle between good and evil. Yet Calvino offers alternate interpretations of this central dichotomy. In this story and its seventeenth century setting, Medardo's division refers to philosophical dualism—the human being perceived as mind and body, subject and object—a view formulated around 1640 by French philosopher René Descartes. Moreover, with the motifs of science and technology, Calvino further alludes to a twentieth century variation: human being and machine. Technology, like its creator, is both gift and curse; like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, it possesses a formidable, ambiguous power.

To explore divisiveness and the ambiguities of duality, many other characters also contain contra-

dictions: Pamela is chaste but earthy; Pietrochiodo is a destructive creator; Medardo's nephew, the narrator, is a high-born bastard. These variations and juxtapositions direct attention to what dualism, by nature, disregards—the inevitable "shades of gray." Such permutations also serve to effect a reversal in the sense of the terms of the dichotomy, as when the good Medardo is considered a worse evil than his counterpart. By exposing the complexity behind the supposed simplicity, Calvino emphasizes the integral unity of dichotomies: "Thus the days went by at Terralba, and our sensibilities became numbed, since we felt ourselves lost between an evil and a virtue equally inhuman." The paradoxical relationship of the two Medardos to Terralba's unusual members, especially the dour Huguenots and hedonistic lepers, provides a good example of the intersection of theme, structure, and technique in Calvino's work.

Unfortunately, "a whole Viscount is not enough to make all the world whole." Novels, like the situations they depict and the life they emulate, are, at least for Calvino, complex things incapable of giving easy answers. As the narrator melancholically reflects at the end: "I, though, amid all this fervor of wholeness, felt myself growing sadder and more lacking. Sometimes one who thinks himself incomplete is merely young."

## THE BARON IN THE TREES

**First published:** *Il barone rampante*, 1957  
(English translation, 1959)

**Type of work:** Novella

*A young baron, rebelling against the restraints of family and society, climbs into the treetops to live freely, vowing never to descend.*

Calvino appropriately sets *The Baron in the Trees*, his tale of the rebellious and eccentric Baron Cosimo Rondo, in the late eighteenth century—the uneasy transitional period from Enlightenment to Romanticism. The elegance, inventiveness, and practicality with which Cosimo (only twelve when he climbs into the trees) adapts to and improves upon his condition illustrate the Enlightenment's faith in reason, progress, and perfectibil-



ity. Cosimo's self-indulgence, "superhuman tenacity," and feral lifestyle, on the other hand, suggest the egotism, extravagance, and primitivism of Romantic sensibility.

Elevated above the world, Cosimo enters a familiar reality made strange, in which "branches spread out like the tentacles of extraordinary animals, and the plants on the ground opened up stars of fretted leaves like the green skins of reptiles." Stranger yet are the people he encounters: ragamuffin fruit thieves, murderous Moors, plotting Jesuits, literate brigands, exiled Spaniards, and even the great Napoleon I himself. Each seems more curious than the other.

It is Cosimo who is the most unusual of the lot. As Biagio, the narrator and Cosimo's brother, remarks, the locals consider him mad: "I am not talking only of his determination to live up there, but of the various oddities of his character; and no one considered him other than an original." Original in his persistent aloofness and nonconformity, Cosimo is also unique for the many guises he assumes. Sometimes, for example, he portrays a savior, as when he extinguishes fires and assists peasants. Other times he is a destroyer, as when he causes his uncle's decapitation, his bandit friend's hanging, and his aged tutor's lifelong imprisonment. Most usually, however, he is a subversive: insurrection, a "Project for the Constitution of an Ideal State in the Trees," and freemasonry all play parts in his revolt against human organization.

Cosimo's eccentric individualism arouses both admiration and contempt, sympathy and incomprehension—an ambivalence particularly pronounced in his love affairs. His most complicated affair is with the perverse and haughty aristocrat Violante (Viola). Throughout the book, these two collide, mingle, and separate like a pair of natural, primeval forces. Cosimo's obstinate pride and ignorance of human feeling finally, irrevocably, clash with Viola's insatiable emotional appetite. As fiercely independent as Cosimo, Viola's individuality becomes too much for the customarily distant Cosimo; the inability to communicate and to accept another's individuality ultimately destroys their union.

Alone as never before, Cosimo vacillates between utterly wild, animalistic behavior and elaborately rational plans "for installing a world republic of men—equal, free, and just." Well past the age of

sixty, he finally encounters a death that is as curious as his life and maintains his childhood vow. Although touchingly lyrical, his memorial, "Lived in trees—Always loved earth—Went into sky," only emphasizes his essential detachment from human life.

Paradoxically, however, Cosimo contributes his own special legacy to humanity. Restless spirit and witness to a great age, the "patriot on the treetops" achieves mythic stature. As his brother/biographer comments:

[Cosimo] understood something else, something that was all-embracing, and he could not say it in words but only by living as he did. Only by being so frankly himself as he was till his death could he give something to all men.

## INVISIBLE CITIES

**First published:** *Le città invisibili*, 1972  
(English translation, 1974)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Marco Polo distracts the aging Kublai Khan with wild tales of cities he has seen in his travels—or are they reworked versions of the same city?*

Despite being called a novel, *Invisible Cities* is not truly a novel. There is no plot or character development. Instead, it is a collection of about fifty-five short, highly impressionistic pastiches of arbitrarily named fantastic cities (such as Adelma, Berenice, Chloe, Diomira, Irene, Penthesilea, Phyllis, Raissa, Valdrada, Zirna, and Zobeide, to name a few), placed in a structure that is quite meticulous, yet rambling, that nearly mimics the structure of a full commercial novel.

The stories are set within the framework of a very loose dialogue wherein the famous Venetian explorer Marco Polo comes to the court of the legendary emperor Kublai Khan. While there, Polo is instructed to travel the empire and gather not gold or treasure but stories with which to regale the aging, and frequently impatient, conqueror with descriptions of every city he has visited on his long peregrinations through the Mongolian realm, as Khan is bored with his own messengers' stories.

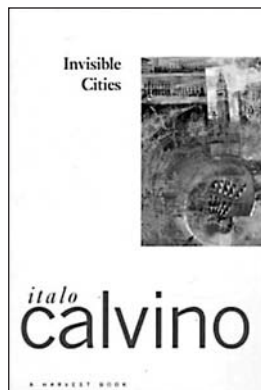


Throughout the dialogue—and a true dialogue it is, as Khan and Polo are the only two characters in the work (although a case could be made that each city is also its own character)—the emperor expresses his belief that Polo is merely describing his home city of Venice in different and fanciful ways, ways that Polo could not use with honesty or impunity in his own land. Khan also occasionally be-

lieves that the cities Polo is describing do not exist at all, except in the Venetian explorer's imagination.

Upon a summary first reading, *Invisible Cities* could be considered a nice collection of prose works on imaginary cities. Indeed, during the interplay between the two characters it is difficult to tell whether the things Polo is describing

represent differing aspects of a single city or different cities with the same aspect in each of them. However, it quickly becomes clear that while some passages are horribly contrived, the novel is larger in scope than mere descriptions of cities. It is a work that muses upon the concept of living in a city, the concept of home, and perhaps even the concept of belonging somewhere. Calvino's book is also a surreal and postmodern journey through the language of the imagination, a delicious mélange of psychological states, physical states, sensory states, transcendence, and more.



## IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER

**First published:** *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979 (English translation, 1981)

**Type of work:** Novel

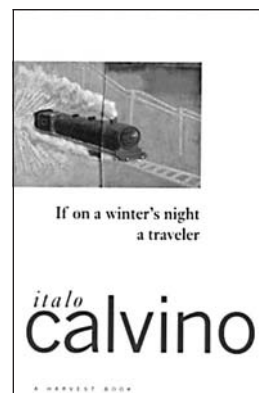
*The Reader and the Other Reader attempt to read ten different books in ten different genres in libraries, bookstores, and government archives around the world. They also fall in love with each other and uncover an insidious plot by Apocryphers to replace real books with fake books.*

This novel, which is definitely not a quick read, is considered an Oulipian work. Oulipo, the acronym for Ouvrior de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop of Potential Literature), was founded on November 24, 1960, in France as a subcommittee of the Collège de Pataphysique by Raymond Queneau and François le Lionnais. This group of writers and mathematicians sought to create works using constrained techniques, such as repetition, switching every noun in a story with another noun, and writing without using a specific letter of the alphabet.

In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Calvino uses the constraint of repetitive experiences slightly differently. All the odd-numbered chapters are told in the second person and tell the reader what is happening in preparation for the next chapter.

All the even-numbered chapters are chapters of the books that the protagonist is trying to read.

Near the end of the novel, the character Silas Flannery perhaps states what Calvino himself thought when writing this work: "I have had the idea of writing a novel composed only of beginnings of novels. The protagonist could be a Reader who is continually interrupted. The Reader buys the new novel A by the author Z. But it is a defective copy, he cannot go beyond the beginning. . . . He



returns to the bookstore to have the volume exchanged . . . ”

As the Reader continually tries to obtain a correct copy of the book that he wants to read, each time he encounters a problem: The chapters are all the same in one book, and the “replacement” is a totally different book altogether, although the pages after a certain point are all blank.

Calvino’s skill is evident in this work, as each of the “novels” within the novel is written as though by a different author, with differing styles, tone, and prose. It is almost as though the author is daring readers to continue reading despite the abrupt endings, U-turns, and divergences. Despite the shuffling and shifting of stories, the end of the book ties up all the loose ends.

## SUMMARY

Like his own forefathers, the Renaissance humanists, Italo Calvino finds material for his art wherever eye and mind pause, absorbed in contemplation or delight, and poses ageless questions about the nature of world and humanity. Calvino’s own answer to the question “Who are we?” significantly reveals his artistic vision: “Who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects.” His translation of this comprehensive perception into vital new literary forms makes him one of the most original—and classical—authors of the twentieth century.

*Terri Frongia; updated by Daryl F. Mallett*

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*Il cavaliere inesistente*, 1959 (novella; *The Non-Existent Knight*, 1962)

*I nostri antenati*, 1960 (*Our Ancestors*, 1980; includes *The Cloven Viscount*, *The Non-Existent Knight*, and *The Baron in the Trees*)

*Il castello dei destini incrociati*, 1969, 1973 (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, 1976)

*Le città invisibili*, 1972 (*Invisible Cities*, 1974)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How was Italo Calvino’s early exposure to Italian writers Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Natalia Levi Ginzburg influential in his writing?
- Calvino’s work has been compared to that of other writers like William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Barth. Do you agree or disagree and why?
- What is Oulipo? How does Calvino fit into the Oulipean movement?
- How does Calvino’s work differ from other Oulipean writers, such as Georges Perec or Raymond Queneau?
- Does Calvino’s influence show in any of the works of his “students,” or writers whom he has influenced, such as Mario Rigoni Stern, Gianni Celati, or Andrea de Carlo?

*Italo Calvino*

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## LUIS DE CAMÕES

**Born:** Lisbon, Portugal  
c. 1524

**Died:** Lisbon, Portugal  
June 10, 1580

*Camões wrote Portugal's great poetic epic, The Lusiads, and is considered to be the founder and exemplar of Portuguese literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Luis de Camões (kuh-MOYNSH) is the preeminent poet of the Portuguese language, occupying a place in that language analogous to William Shakespeare in English or Dante in Italian in both the magnitude of his achievement and his influence upon Portuguese literature. Camões's epic of discovery and conquest *Os Lusíadas* (1572; *The Lusiads*, 1655) is the work for which he is most renowned, but his lyric poetry and plays have also commanded attention.

Luis Vaz de Camões, the son of Simão Vaz de Camões and Ana de Sá, was born in Lisbon, Portugal, around 1524. His family was well off but did not inhabit the upper reaches of the aristocracy. Camões's family was originally Galician in origin and had lived for some generations in the mountainous northern Portuguese town of Chaves. There are unsubstantiated rumors that some of his ancestors may have been converted Jews, but it is difficult to determine the validity of this claim.

His overseas travels aside, the details of Camões's life are hazy, and beyond a few known facts what is generally thought about Camões's biography is largely a product of scholarly conjecture. It is thought that Camões attended the newly relocated University of Coimbra, where his uncle Bento was the first chancellor. At Coimbra, Camões wrote *Enfatriões* (pr. 1540), a comic play in which the

Greek gods assume human form. This play foreshadowed his juxtaposition of classical deities with contemporary characters in *The Lusiads*.

Camões arrived in Lisbon in the mid-1540's. He presented himself to King John III and wrote *Auto del-Rei Seleuco* (pr. 1542), a historical play based on domestic drama in the household of the Hellenistic monarchs of present-day Syria. On April 11, 1542, Camões first saw Caterina de Ataíde in church, and that day changed his life forever. Caterina is believed to be the great love of his life and the object of his passionate love sonnets, where her name is encrypted as "Natercia." She returned his feelings, but Camões's relatively low status at court and a certain reputation for wildness of character did not allow Caterina to reciprocate openly the poet's ardor. His love inspired him to write sonnets that circulated privately, although they were printed posthumously in 1595 as *Rimas* (*The Lyrides*, 1803, 1884). Some critics also think he was in love with the king's daughter, the Infanta Maria, but there is no actual evidence for this.

In 1549, Camões made his first expedition outside Portugal; he was involved in a military foray into Morocco, where he lost an eye. Additional complications ensued on his return to Lisbon, where on June 24, 1552, he was accused of assaulting a cavalry officer, Gonçalves Borges. Camões was imprisoned, but he was released the following year after being pardoned by the king on the condition that he perform five years of military service abroad. Camões's voyage to India provided the empirical basis for his recounting of Vasco da Gama's voyage in *The Lusiads*.

Camões was the first major European writer to travel physically south of the equator. His distance from Caterina prompted him to write more sonnets. Camões is said to have been dissatisfied with his enforced Asian sojourn, not only because of its compulsory nature and his exile from his home country but also because of his distance from his Portuguese lover. However, as demonstrated in his poem "Barbara," Camões was not averse to the charms of ladies of the East whom he encountered on his voyage.

Camões was a keen observer of the places he traveled. His poem "Arabia Felix," although rife with classical framings of Arabian topography, contains insights that could not have been acquired other than by actual observation. Notably, in "Arabia Felix" Camões emphasizes how his experience with the places mentioned in the poem contradicted European idealizations of the exotic East.

Both Camões's personal experience and the Portuguese history he chronicled must be kept in mind when analyzing *The Lusiads*, which he began writing in the mid-1560's. The epic poem chronicles Vasco da Gama's voyage around Africa to India, although Camões himself spent far more time in Asia than in Africa. A traumatic and climactic event in his travels occurred in 1569, when he was on his way from Macao, the Portuguese enclave in China, to Goa, the equivalent enclave in India. His ship was wrecked off what are now the southern coasts of Vietnam and Cambodia; legendarily, he swam safely to shore while holding the manuscript of his unfinished epic.

Camões returned to Portugal in 1570 with the help of his friend Diogo do Couto. In 1572, *The Lusiads* was published, having been printed by Antonio Gonçalves over the course of the previous two years. The young king, Sebastian, the grandson of John III, was just reaching maturity and welcomed the publication of a national epic to buttress his rule and his ambitions to crusade against the Muslims. For the first time in his life, Camões was in official favor, and he briefly operated as a pillar of the Lisbon literary establishment, writing prose prefaces to a number of works by other writers.

This brief period of prosperity ended, however, after Sebastian was killed at the battle of Alcacer-Quibir in Morocco in 1578. Not only was the flower of Portugal's hope dead, but the rules of succession

meant that, after a brief interval, the rule of Portugal would pass to King Philip II of Spain, leaving Spain and Portugal effectively united and the two empires effectively commingled. Camões died in 1580, four months after Philip assumed the throne.

## ANALYSIS

Camões's ambitious epic *The Lusiads* has tended to overshadow his lyric poetry, but the same sensibility is evident in both. In sonnet 54, "Todas as almas tristes se mostravam," the sudden revelation of the poet's love for Caterina while he is in church, the sense of a general prayerfulness giving way to a more ardent and specific veneration of the beloved, is startling and forceful, even within the heightened rhetoric of sonnet conventions. In sonnet 314, "Se a ninguém tratais com desamor," he displays the resourcefulness of the lover in trying to read every sign of his beloved's conduct beneficially, seeing her very indifference to him as a kind of special favor. In sonnet 81, "Amor é um fogo que arde sem se ver," Camões contemplates the cessation of Caterina's treasured eyes and even envisages her bodily decomposition, or at least the stillness and coldness of her tomb. In "Alma minha gentl" (sonnet 18), on hearing of Caterina's death, the poet prays to join her, to be unconscious and insentient. The very ardor of his pleas, however, signifies his continued consciousness. He senses that his praise of Caterina is insufficient, yet the sonnet in which he expresses his admission is perhaps his greatest.

*The Lusiads* has an intimacy that is similar to Camões's lyric poetry. The epic is about real people who lived in the recent past, which differs from other Renaissance epics that concentrated on fictional, mythical, or biblical personages, or on figures, such as Godfrey of Bouillon (the hero of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, 1581; *Jerusalem Delivered*, 1600), who were sufficiently removed in time to be outside of living memory. The sense that the Portuguese, a previously obscure people, were now making their mark upon the world's destiny and the excitement that the country now had a national epic pervade the poem. The epic's depiction of non-European people was a novelty in its time, since most Portuguese people knew little or nothing about Asia and Africa.

Although written more than five hundred years ago, *The Lusiads* has continued to attract critical at-



tention. Part of Camões's appeal to contemporary readers is his pronounced ambiguity on the subject of empire. This is clearly evident in book 4. As the Portuguese expedition sets sail, an old man sounds a cautionary note, warning of the negative implications of the nation's vaulting ambitions. This passage has long been read as Camões expressing reservations about the potential hubris of colonialism and exploration. Book 4 also contains a parallel passage about Adamastor, a mythological character invented by Camões who is similar to the giants and monsters in Greek mythology. Adamastor is the spirit of the Cape of Good Hope, which the voyagers must round on their way to the Indian Ocean. In later years, when the land around the cape was colonized and became South Africa, Adamastor became an important character in South African literature, epitomizing the Africans' recalcitrance to accept Eurocentric definitions of the continent.

The South African reading of Camões is the most obvious example of a difference in how he is read and interpreted in his native Portuguese and in English translations. Camões's life—his passions, his personal losses, and his sense of being a misfit in his own society—has received more attention in the Portuguese-speaking world. In the English-speaking world, however, the emphasis has been on Camões's contributions to the epic tradition, and, more recently, on the global and post-colonial implications of his work.

Richard Fanshawe in the seventeenth century, William Julius Mickle in the eighteenth century, Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton and Major Thomas Livingstone Mitchell in the nineteenth century, and Leonard Bacon, William Atkinson, and Landeg White in the twentieth century all translated Camões into English. Some critics and readers have complained that Camões's work suffers in its English translation because his translators did not live during the Renaissance. Nonetheless, *The Lusiads* has had a substantive if limited effect on several major English-language writers.

## THE LUSIADS

**First published:** *Os Lusíadas*, 1572 (English translation, 1655)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*The story of the Portuguese exploration of Africa and the Indian Ocean is told in the form of a traditional epic.*

Vasco da Gama is the chief character in *The Lusiads*, but he is not its hero. The poem's title derives from Lusitania, the Roman name for the province that roughly encompasses present-day Portugal. The nation of Portugal and all of its people are the true heroes of this patriotic epic.

*The Lusiads* is written in *ottava rima*, a rhyme scheme of Italian origin that was commonly used in Renaissance epic poetry. An *ottava rima* stanza has eight lines with three rhymes, following the rhyme scheme *abababcc*. It is a flowing meter that allows the narrative to move smoothly, and the long, assonant rhymes have a kind of lulling quality.

*The Lusiads* begins in medias res, or in the middle of the action. Vasco da Gama and his Portuguese crewmen are in the East African kingdom of Malindi, having survived rough weather and an ambush. The local king encourages Gama to recite the history of the Portuguese people, which he does, going back to ancient times.

Gama tells the story of the Roman general Quintus Sertorius, whose successful rebellion drove a repressive regime out of Hispania (now Portugal and Spain). Gama then describes the growth of Portugal from a small principality to a significant European state. The story culminates in book 4, with the 1385 Battle of Aljubarrota, in which the Portuguese defeated the Spanish kingdom of Castile and restored the Portuguese monarch to the throne. Camões's patriotism is evident in his description of Portuguese general Nuno Álvares Pereira's victory over Spain:





O'er Tago's waves his gallant band he led,  
And humbled Spain in every province bled;  
Sevilia's standard in his spear he bore,  
And Andulsia's ensigns kept in gore.  
Low in the dust distress'd Castilia mourned,  
And bathed in tears each eye to heaven was turned  
The orphans, widows, and the hoary sires;  
And heaven relenting quench'd the raging fires  
Of mutual hate. . . .

After this battle, the Portuguese were able to launch overseas explorations, and these initial voyages are delineated in the poem. Finally, Gama tells the story of his own voyage, his circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope, which the Portuguese called the Cape of Storms. It is here that the most supernatural elements of the poem appear: Adamastor and a maritime apparition. Along with these fantastic elements, book 4 also contains highly realistic details of a ravaging disease.

*The Lusiads* includes an account of the battle between the goddess Venus, who is a "divine" advocate on behalf of the Portuguese, and Bacchus, the patron god of Asia who tries to prevent the Portuguese from having a successful voyage. Bacchus represents both the irrationality of the non-European world and the limits of human daring and exploration that the Portuguese, through their bravery

and fortitude, are seeking to transcend. Despite the warm reception extended by the king of Malindi, some Asians and Africans resented the Portuguese exploration because it infringed upon the lives of the Muslims and Hindus who resided on these continents. Camões's poem depicts the introduction of Christianity to the non-European world as a result of the Portuguese and Spanish explorations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

## SUMMARY

When the Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso in his song "Lingua" says, "I like to feel my tongue touch the tongue of Luis de Camões," he is not only laying claim to an intimate contact with Portuguese literary tradition but also identifying himself with Camões as a bard and an artistic personality. In the twenty-first century, Camões is not merely a Portuguese national poet; he is a poet of the global Lusophone world, which includes Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and East Timor. The highest literary award for a writer in Portuguese is the Premio Luis de Camões, testifying to the poet's founding and indispensable role in worldwide Portuguese literary culture.

Nicholas Birns

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is the principal preoccupation of Luis de Camões's lyric poetry?
- How did Camões's sojourn in Asia affect the subject matter of his writing?
- How does Camões's Portuguese nationality operate as his subject matter in *The Lusiads*?
- How is Camões seen differently in Portugal and in the English-speaking world?

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## ALBERT CAMUS

**Born:** Mondovi, Algeria  
November 7, 1913

**Died:** Near Sens, France  
January 4, 1960

*A major force in France's intellectual life by the middle of the twentieth century, especially among those associated with existentialism, Camus was a leading novelist, short-story writer, philosopher, and playwright.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Albert Camus (kah-MEW) was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, a village in the interior of Algeria, which, since 1830, had been under the administration of France. Camus's father, Lucien, was a winery worker; his mother, Catherine Sintès, could not read or write. Shortly after the outbreak of World War I, Lucien Camus was mobilized in a North African regiment. Wounded at the First Battle of the Marne, he died on October 11, 1914, before Albert's first birthday. Catherine took the family to Belcourt, a working-class section of Algiers, to live with her mother, Marie Catherine Sintès. Catherine, who worked in a munitions factory and then as a cleaning woman, suffered a stroke that left her deaf and partially paralyzed. Albert lived with his mother, his older brother Lucien, and several relatives in a three-room apartment without electricity or running water, sharing a toilet with two other apartments.

At the local primary school, a teacher named Louis Germain took an interest in young Camus, providing him with extra instruction and entering him into competition for scholarships. As a subsidized day-boarder at a secondary school, Camus excelled in sports and began a lifelong friendship with teacher Jean Grenier, who encouraged him in his study of philosophy. In 1930, Camus developed

the first symptoms of tuberculosis and moved out of his family apartment. In 1932, he published four articles in the Algerian journal *Sud*.

In 1934, Camus married Simone Hié, a fellow student, and also joined the Communist Party, which assigned him the task of proselytizing Muslims. Exempt from military service because of his lungs, he studied philosophy at the University of Algiers, financing his education through loans and a variety of odd jobs that included auto accessory salesman, municipal clerk, and research assistant with the university's meteorological service. Poor health, however, prevented him from pursuing a teaching career. His marriage was dissolved in 1936.

Cofounder of the blue-collar Théâtre du Travail, Camus collaborated in 1936 in writing the play *Révolte dans les Asturies* (revolt in the Asturias), the performance of which was banned. As an actor for Radio Algiers, he toured the countryside. In 1937, he began writing for the liberal newspaper *Alger-Républicain* and was expelled from the Communist Party in a dispute over policy. His first book, *L'Envers et l'endroit* (1937; "The Wrong Side and the Right Side," 1968), a collection of essays, was also published in 1937. In 1939, Camus cofounded the literary review *Rivages* and, when France declared war on Germany, attempted to enlist but was turned down because of his tuberculosis. He moved to Paris to work on the staff of *Paris-Soir*, relocating in the south of France when the Germans occupied the north. In December, 1940, he quit his job at *Paris-Soir* and returned to Algeria with his

new wife, Francine Faure, a math teacher from Oran.

In 1942, to recover from an attack of tuberculosis, he traveled with Francine to Chambon-sur-Lignon in the mountains of central France. Camus remained there while Francine returned to Oran, and, after the Allied landing in North Africa, he became separated from her until the liberation of France. He joined the Resistance network *Combat* in the Lyons region. In 1942, he published his first novel, *L'Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*, 1946), and his philosophical work *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955). Camus moved to Paris, where he joined the editorial staff of Gallimard, a publishing house, and worked on the underground newspaper *Combat*, becoming its editor. His writings for *Combat* were published posthumously as *Camus à Combat: Éditoriaux et articles, 1944-1947* (2002; *Camus at Combat: Writing, 1944-1947*, 2006). He became acquainted with Jean-Paul Sartre and other influential intellectuals.

His play *Le Malentendu* (*The Misunderstanding*, pr., pb. 1948) was produced in Paris in 1944, after the city's liberation from German Occupation. In 1945, his play *Caligula* (wr. 1888-1939, pb. 1944, pr. 1945; English translation, 1948) was produced, and he visited Algeria to report on atrocities committed by the colonial French government. He also became father to twins, Jean and Catherine.

Camus visited the United States in 1946 and, the following year, published *La Peste* (1947; *The Plague*, 1948) to great acclaim. A 1948 production of *L'État de siège* (pr., pb. 1948; *State of Siege*, 1958) was not successful. Camus spoke out against French repression of a popular rebellion in Madagascar and in defense of Greek Communists who were sentenced to death. Through written deposition, he testified for the defense in a trial of Algerian nationalists. In 1951, publication of *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*, 1956) provoked heated controversy and led to Camus's break with Sartre and other Marxist critics of his work.

After the 1954 outbreak of armed rebellion by Muslim Algerians against French administration, Camus became increasingly distraught over the escalating cycle of violence and reprisals. In 1955, he attempted to mediate a truce but was rebuffed. In 1956, he protested Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution and published *La Chute* (*The Fall*, 1957). In 1957, he published *L'Exil et le royaume*

(*Exile and the Kingdom*, 1958), a volume of short stories, and "Réflexions sur la guillotine" ("Reflections on the Guillotine"), a plea for the abolition of capital punishment. On October 17 of that year, Camus became the ninth Frenchman and second youngest author of any nationality to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

His health and mood fluctuating, Camus worked on *Le Premier Homme*, an autobiographical novel he never completed. On January 4, 1960, he was killed instantaneously when a car driven by his publisher Michel Gallimard crashed into a tree near the French village of Sens. Amid the wreckage was the working manuscript of *Le Premier Homme*, a slightly fictionalized account of Camus's own impoverished childhood in Belcourt. Though for a long time the author's heirs restricted access to the material, *Le Premier Homme* (1994; *The First Man*, 1995) was finally published more than three decades after his death.

## ANALYSIS

When Camus received the Nobel Prize in 1957, the citation lauded him "for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminated the problems of the human conscience in our times." Camus died less than three years later without augmenting what was a relatively meager oeuvre: three novels and a handful of plays, short stories, and essays. It is possible to read his entire life's work, including the posthumously published autobiographical fragment *Le Premier Homme*, in less time than it takes to absorb one novel by some of his more hermetic contemporaries.

Camus is widely read and fervently admired in a way few other twentieth century writers are. In a memoir of Robert F. Kennedy, journalist Jack Newfield recalls that the senator always traveled with a copy of Camus's writings: "He discovered Camus when he was thirty-eight, in the months of solitude and grief after his brother's death. By 1968 he had read, and re-read, all of Camus[']s essays, dramas and novels. But he more than just read Camus. He memorized him, meditated about him, quoted him and was changed by him."

Heir to the French tradition of literary crusaders, of activist authors like Michel de Montaigne, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, and Émile Zola, Camus is the lucid moral conscience of his era. His fiction,

drama, and essays pose fundamental questions about individual identity and social bonds that cannot be ignored in the century that produced Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Camus served in the underground Resistance to the Nazi occupation of France and after the war refused to confine himself to a purely literary role. He became embroiled in many of the most tumultuous political controversies of the time—colonialism, capital punishment, racism, and East-West alliances. Even posthumously, he remains a public figure challenging his readers to a stringent standard of candor and compassion.

“A novel,” wrote Camus in his review of Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *La Nausée* (1938; *Nausea*, 1949), “is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images.” Camus’s own novels are probably much more than just a philosophy expressed in images but they are never anything less. *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *The Fall* are among the most popular and esteemed books ever published in France; translated into dozens of languages, they remain not only in print but also in demand long after most other books of their era have been forgotten. Their appeal is less in plot and characterization than in the utter honesty with which they pose questions of personal, social, and cosmic identity. The scrupulously austere style that Camus honed was an embarrassment to the temptations of bogus rhetoric.

Camus came to Paris in the 1940’s with a proletarian and Algerian background that set him apart from the erudite middle-class French intellectuals who befriended him. Along with Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Camus emerged as one of the leaders of existentialism, a philosophical movement that was extremely popular following World War II. Existentialism has its roots in the writings of German philosophers, particularly Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger, though its legacy can be traced back through Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard to as far as the pre-Socratic Greek Heraclitus. Never a systematic philosophy, existentialism was, in fact, a product of skepticism toward the intellectual arrogance of rational systems. Existentialism was the embodiment of a postwar zeitgeist cynical toward the shibboleths and values that had facilitated and camouflaged global catastrophe. It insisted that existence precedes essence, that nothing

is given—nothingness is the given. In the vast, indifferent universe, the individual is ineluctably responsible for creating his or her own identity. Five A’s—alienation, absurdity, angst, anomie, and anxiety—seemed indispensable to the vocabulary of anyone who aspired to speak the language of existentialism, and there were many.

For a while, particularly in philosophical writings such as *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus was a very prominent existentialist voice, and the Algerian newcomer whom Sartre later called a “Cartesian of the absurd” became a frequent companion of Sartre and de Beauvoir during the heady days following the liberation of Paris. Camus, however, became increasingly uncomfortable in the role of high priest of the new cult of the posthumous God. Rejecting the faddishness of it all, he began emphasizing differences between his ideas and those of Sartre and insisted that he was not an existentialist. Following their feud in 1951, he no longer even called himself a friend of Sartre.

Whether or not they are technically “existentialist,” and whether or not the term has ceased to have any clear definition, Camus’s books are an embodiment of the attitudes of many Europeans at the middle of the twentieth century. Behind novels that are tolerant of everything but falsehood lies widespread bitterness over the failure of the crusade to save democracy in Spain, the fall of France’s Third Republic, the Nazi genocide, and the prospects of nuclear annihilation.

“Phony” is Holden Caulfield’s favorite term of derision in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, a popular novel published in 1951 during the peak of Camus’s career, and the term applies as well to everything that Meursault, Rieux, and Clamence despise in Camus’s fictional worlds. Camus, for whom metaphysical mutiny was a starting point for full awareness, saw a development in his own writings “from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared.” The evolution of his work was cut short by a fatal automobile accident. What he did leave behind is a legacy that Sartre recognized in the eulogy he published three days after his erstwhile comrade’s shocking death: “Camus could never cease to be one of the principal forces in our cultural domain, nor to represent, in his own way, the history of France and of this century.”



## THE STRANGER

**First published:** *L'Étranger*, 1942 (English translation, 1946)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This terse account describes how a man kills a stranger and suffers the consequences of actions that he never intended or even understood.*

*The Stranger* offers one of the most striking openings in modern fiction: “Mama died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know.” Immediately introduced is a character, Meursault, so disconnected from chronology and other human beings that he is one of twentieth century literature’s most memorable embodiments of alienation, of an absurdist world where social bonds are a sham. The British edition of Camus’s first published novel translates the title as *The Outsider*; and Meursault indeed finds himself a marginal figure in a decentered universe where private and immediate sensations have displaced objective norms.

Meursault, an employee of a shipping company, participates in the rituals of his mother’s funeral and, though he realizes he is supposed to be playing the role of bereaved son, cannot feel anything for the old woman’s corpse. Shortly after returning to Algiers, Meursault goes to the beach, picks up a woman, Marie Cardona, and takes her to the movies and then to bed.

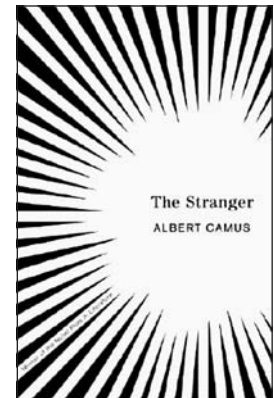
The following Sunday, Meursault and Marie are invited by Raymond Sintès, a raffish neighbor, to spend the day at the beach. During the outing, they are trailed and menaced by two Arab men who are apparently resentful of the way in which Raymond has abused a woman. During a solitary walk along the shore, Meursault encounters one of the Arabs again. It is oppressively hot, and the knife that the Arab wields glistens blindingly in the sun. Without premeditation or reflection, Meursault takes the gun that Raymond has given him and fires five shots into the stranger.

Narrated in Meursault’s own affectless voice, *The Stranger* consists of two sections. The first re-

counts the events leading up to the fatal shooting, and the second reports its aftermath—Meursault’s imprisonment, trial, conviction, and impending execution. Part 2 is in effect a commentary on part 1, an attempt to find coherence in one man’s random actions. Marie, Raymond, the owner of the café that Meursault frequents, his mother’s elderly friend, and others testify in court about the events in part 1. Both attorneys attempt to find some pattern. In the story that Meursault’s lawyer tells, all the details paint the portrait of an innocent man acting in self-defense.

Yet the prosecutor finds a different design. For him, Meursault’s callousness about his mother’s death is symptomatic of a cold-blooded murderer, and it is that reading that the jury accepts when it sentences Meursault to death by guillotine. Meursault, however, rejects the specious patterns that both attorneys impose on events. He also refuses consolation from the prison chaplain, who offers him a kind of cosmic narrative in which everything is linked to a vast providential scheme.

Alone in his cell, Meursault realizes that despite the lies people tell to camouflage the truth, all are condemned to death. Uncomfortable with the florid rhetoric that distracts a reader from stark realities, he becomes a champion of candor. In his spare, honest style and his recognition that life is gratuitous and resistant to human attempts to catalog and rationalize it, Meursault is prepared to face extinction liberated from all illusions. He is, wrote Camus in 1955, “not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth.”





## THE PLAGUE

**First published:** *La Peste*, 1947 (English translation, 1948)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Inhabitants of Oran, Algeria, are tested by an epidemic that devastates the city.*

*The Plague*, which propelled Camus into international celebrity, is both an allegory of World War II and a universal meditation on human conduct and community. Organized into five sections, *The Plague* recounts the collective ordeal of Oran, Algeria, in the throes of an outbreak of bubonic plague. At the outset, even before the sudden proliferation of dead rats and sick humans that persuades reluctant officials to declare an epidemic, Oran is described as a drab, ugly city whose inhabitants are preoccupied with commerce.

Trapped within Oran after a quarantine is imposed are the novel's principal characters: Bernard Rieux, a physician separated from the ailing wife he sent to a sanatorium before the outbreak of the plague; Raymond Rambert, a Parisian journalist on assignment in Oran; Jean Tarrou, a stranger who takes an active part in opposing the epidemic; Joseph Grand, a municipal clerk obsessed with composing a perfect sentence; Paneloux, a Jesuit priest who delivers two crucial sermons during the course of the plague; and Cottard, a black-market opportunist.

Camus begins his novel with an epigraph from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) that invites readers to read the book as a veiled representation of something other than merely an epidemic in Oran. In a 1955 letter to critic Roland Barthes, the author specified the terms of the allegory; "*The Plague*, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism. The proof of this is that although the specific enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized it."

The book is, moreover, a meditation on human solidarity and individual responsibility. What is the logical and ethical response to a universe in which suffering prevails and effort seems futile? In the first of two sermons strategically positioned in part 2

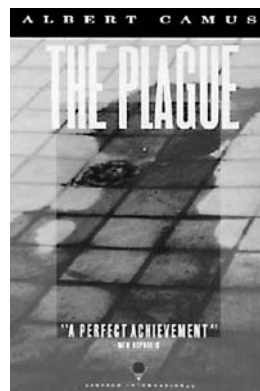
and part 4 of the five-part chronicle, Paneloux posits an anthropomorphic God who has sent the plague as retribution for human sin. After witnessing the agonizing death of an innocent child, however, Paneloux revises his theodicy to reconcile unmerited torment with belief in a logical and benevolent Providence.

Tarrou, a magistrate's son who left home in revulsion over state executions, remains forever opposed to a scheme of things in which cruelty triumphs. His selfless, if hopeless, dedication to the struggle against the plague—both the actual disease and the metaphorical plague he contends is the human condition—offers a sharp contrast to the egoism of Cottard, who exploits the misfortunes of Oran for personal advantage. Rambert's initial reaction to the quarantine is concern for his personal happiness, for how he can escape from the city and return to Paris to the woman he loves. He learns, however, that his lot is also Oran's, and he stays in the city to make common cause with the victims of the plague.

Under such circumstances, the flamboyant individualism that enlivens traditional fiction is inappropriate, and the novel, conceding that readers crave heroes, nominates the lackluster Grand, whose grandness resides in selfless, bootless dedication to writing a perfect sentence and ending the plague:

Yes, if it is a fact that people like to have examples given them, men of the type they call heroic, and if it is absolutely necessary that this narrative should include a "hero," the narrator commends to his readers, with, to his thinking, perfect justice, this insignificant and obscure hero who had to his credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal.

One of the novel's most striking features is its handling of narrative point of view. The story is told in meticulously neutral prose, from a perspective that seems detached from the experiences it re-



counts. Less than a dozen pages from the end, however, when the plague has subsided and the gates of Oran have been reopened, Rieux steps forward to confess that he has been the narrator all along. Though the text's preoccupation with exile and isolation are clearly the result of Rieux's own enforced separation from his ailing wife, he as narrator has taken great pains to present an impersonal "chronicle," the objective account of an honest witness. Writing himself into the story of his community is another way in which Rieux tries to overcome the solitude that is his lot as a widower and a human being.

In a universe in which "plague" is inexplicable and gratuitous, Rieux realizes that physicians are as ineffectual as anyone else. Yet he finds value in collective struggle, regardless of the outcome. The plague is never defeated. It merely, and mysteriously, recedes, and the reader is left with Rieux's realization that eternal vigilance is necessary against an indomitable foe.

## THE FALL

**First published:** *La Chute*, 1956 (English translation, 1957)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In an Amsterdam bar, a French lawyer imparts to a stranger his lessons in misanthropy.*

*The Fall* is an extended monologue conducted over the course of five days by a man who calls himself Jean-Baptiste Clamence. The setting is Amsterdam, whose fogginess is miasmic and whose canals are likened to the concentric circles of hell. Like some infernal Ancient Mariner, the speaker attaches himself to a stranger who happens to wander into a raffish bar incongruously named Mexico City. A master of guile, Clamence deliberately piques the curiosity of his listener, who remains an unnamed "you." Gradually, cunningly, he implicates him—and the reader—in his diabolical tale. Clamence infers that his auditor is a successful Parisian lawyer in his forties, and he tailors his story to appeal to and expose the weaknesses of the stranger.

Clamence claims that he, too, used to live in

Paris, where, as a widely respected magistrate, he exuded self-confidence. He then recounts an incident that forever undermined his certainties about personal worth.

One November evening, walking across a bridge, he heard the cry of a woman who had thrown herself into the river. His reaction was to deny that he had heard anything and to continue walking. He remains, however, haunted by that dying cry and the fact that he evaded responsibility toward another human being.

Written at a troubled time in Camus's own life, *The Fall* is the bitter fictional tirade of a brilliant misanthrope who dismisses civilization with a mordant epigram: "A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers." Clamence admits that his name is a cunning alias. Like the biblical *vox clamans in deserto*, the narrator is a voice crying in the wilderness mocking specious hope for clemency toward universal guilt. "Every man testifies to the crime of all the others—that is my faith and my hope," declares Clamence. It is also the rationale for his narrative, a strategy of confessing his culpability and coercing the listener—and reader—into acknowledging and sharing it.

Duplicitous Clamence has assumed the function of what he calls "judge-penitent," a deft way of being both condemner and condemned. He eventually lures his listener to his apartment, where he reveals a stolen Van Eyck on the wall. The reader's knowledge of the purloined painting now implicates the reader, too, in the crime. The subject of the work, *The Just Judges*, reinforces the novel's theme of judgement even as it mocks the possibility of justice. It is not merely perverse bravado that impels Clamence to entrust his felonious secret to a stranger; he realizes that in a world devoid of innocence, no one dare judge anyone else. Yet he dreams of being apprehended, of finding release from his personal burden by a stroke of the guillotine. Jean-Baptiste longs for the decapitation that was the fate of his namesake John the Baptist:

I would be decapitated, for instance, and I'd have no more fear of death; I'd be saved. Above the gathered crowd, you would hold up my still warm head, so that they could recognize themselves in it and could again dominate—an exemplar. All would be consummated; I should have brought to

a close, unseen and unknown, my career as a false prophet crying in the wilderness and refusing to come forth.

Such redemption never comes. *The Fall* portrays all as trapped in a fallen world. Like Sisyphus, Clamence is condemned to repeat his futile gestures. Every time he encounters another listener (and reader), he is compelled anew to spread his gospel of universal guilt, to confirm it by his very success in persuading readers to share his story.

### “THE GUEST”

**First published:** “L’Hôte,” 1957 (collected in *Exile and the Kingdom*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A schoolmaster living on a remote Algerian plateau is torn by an order to deliver an Arab prisoner to authorities.*

To translate the French word *hôte*—someone who either gives or receives hospitality—into English, it is necessary to sacrifice its ambiguity. “The Guest,” Camus’s most frequently anthologized short story, focuses on a character who, suspended between giving and receiving, fails at hospitality. It could as accurately, or ironically, be translated as “The Host.”

At the outset of “The Guest,” Daru, a schoolmaster of European stock who was born in Algeria, observes two figures, one on horseback and one on foot, slowly make their way through the desolate, snowy landscape toward the schoolhouse where he lives, alone. Balducci, the man on horseback, is a gendarme, and he is accompanying an Arab who has been arrested for killing his own cousin.

Balducci explains that because of civil unrest Daru is being conscripted to convey the prisoner to the authorities in Tinguit, a town located a few hours’ journey away, the next day. The teacher refuses this assignment, but Balducci leaves the unnamed Arab with him anyway. A reluctant host to an unwanted guest, Daru passes the night fitfully, fearful that the Arab might attack him and wishing for his escape. In the morning, the two set out for police headquarters in Tinguit. After walking a considerable distance but still two hours short of

their destination, Daru parts company with the Arab, telling him to proceed alone, either to turn himself in to the police in Tinguit or to seek refuge among sympathetic nomads. The teacher watches somberly as the Arab continues alone along the path to prison. On returning to his schoolhouse, Daru, who has tried not to take sides, discovers a message threatening revenge against him for having delivered the Arab to the authorities.

In “The Guest,” the third of six short stories in a collection titled *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus continues his examination of longing and alienation. The final word of the story, “alone,” emphasizes the work’s central theme of solitude. Just like the French Algerian Camus, who was rebuffed by both sides when he attempted in 1955 to mediate between France and the Algerian separatists, Daru finds himself condemned to solitude, uncomfortable either among his fellow colons or within the indigenous Arab community. A drawing of the four rivers of France on the schoolroom blackboard indicates that his job is to inculcate his North African pupils with the culture of a European colonial power. However, Daru’s loyalties are not so much torn as eroded. The only bond that he feels is, ironically, with the vast, forbidding landscape that remains indifferent to the human beings who put in brief appearances. Like much of the rest of Camus’s fiction, “The Guest” employs spare, incisive language to depict a universe of disconnected human beings who are tormented by the illusion of free choice.

### THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

**First published:** *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942  
(English translation, 1955)

**Type of Work:** Essays

*The Myth of Sisyphus is a meditation on an ancient Greek figure who, condemned for eternity to a futile task, is seen by Camus as representative of the human condition.*

*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus’s most explicit philosophical pronouncement, begins by dismissing all reflection that evades the question of why people live. “There is but one truly serious philosophical

problem, and that is suicide," he declares. "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."

*The Myth of Sisyphus* includes several miscellaneous pieces—a discussion of Franz Kafka, a self-interview on the responsibility of the artist, and four personal evocations of the landscape of Algeria that were also published elsewhere. The most remarkable and influential section of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, however, is its title essay. In it and the supporting chapters, Camus appropriates the ancient Greek story of the king of Corinth who was punished by the gods for failing to show them sufficient respect. Sisyphus is condemned for eternity to push a boulder up the side of a steep mountain. Whenever he is about to reach the summit, the boulder rolls back to the base, and Sisyphus is obliged to begin his endless, pointless task again.

Camus seizes on this myth as an emblem of the human condition. Life, he contends, is absurd. Devoid of purpose, existence is an endless, empty series of compulsive repetitions with no possibility of attaining a goal. Sisyphus becomes the prototype of the "absurd hero," a figure whose variations Camus traces in the roles of the philanderer, the actor, and the conqueror. Like Rieux, who rebels against a scheme of things he cannot accept but cannot change, Camus's Sisyphus is a figure of admirable futility: "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth."

A literary meditation rather than a work of rigorous formal philosophy, *The Myth of Sisyphus* offers a vision of human contingency and self-authentication popularly associated with the term existentialism. It assumes a post-Nietzschean universe in which the obituary for God has been written. Refusing to accept external validation, Camus contends that individuals are responsible for their own situations. He insists that such responsibility begins

with awareness, a consciousness that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is itself designed to encourage.

The essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" concludes with the provocative assertion that despite the futility and dreariness of his punitive task, Sisyphus is a figure of felicity:

Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Sisyphus possesses the satisfaction of awareness, the modest pleasure of honest confrontation with the bleak conditions of his existence. It is a gloss on the life and works of Camus himself, an obsessively lucid author who refused the spurious consolations of actions and expressions that divert readers from the truth.

## SUMMARY

More than most other authors, Albert Camus both reflected and shaped his zeitgeist, the spirit of an era plagued by tyranny, invasion, genocide, and colonialism. A child of the Algerian proletariat living among the Parisian intelligentsia and writing about human alienation, he stood both inside and outside history. He was a champion of lucidity and honesty in an age whose public rhetoric camouflaged savage realities. The sparsely styled fiction, drama, and essays that Camus produced during a relatively brief career offer the paradox of tonic disillusionment, an exhilaration over candid contemplation of the absurd. In North America, perhaps even more than in France, Camus remains read and loved long after the works of many of his contemporaries have fallen out of favor and print.

Steven G. Kellman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is it accurate or useful to consider the work of Albert Camus "existentialist"?
- How are Camus's Algerian origins reflected in his fiction?
- Why is Meursault executed in *The Stranger*?
- Why does Camus not reveal the identity of the narrator of *The Plague* until the novel's conclusion?
- What is the significance of the title *The Fall*?
- How does *The Myth of Sisyphus* help explicate some of Camus's fiction?
- What is going to happen to Daru after the final words of "The Guest"?
- How does Camus treat the theme of capital punishment?
- How does a tension between solidarity and solitude shape Camus's work?





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## PETER CAREY

**Born:** Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia  
May 7, 1943

*In his fiction, Carey explores the nature of modern Australian identity, partly by creating origin myths for white Australia drawing on the nation's history, immigration, and land settlement, but also by experimenting with the nature of storytelling itself, showing how people constantly reinvent themselves through the stories they tell about themselves.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Peter Philip Carey was born on May 7, 1943, in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia, where his parents ran a General Motors dealership. He studied at the prestigious Geelong Grammar School between 1954 and 1960 before moving to Monash University in Melbourne to enroll in a science degree program, intending to major in chemistry and zoology. Boredom and a car accident cut short his studies, and he left the university to work for what he later described as an “eccentric” advertising agency. Two of his colleagues, the writers Barry Oakley and Morris Lurie, introduced him to a broad range of European and American literature. He read widely, particularly the work of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and William Faulkner, and by 1964 he had begun to write fiction himself. In the next four years, he wrote several novels and a number of short stories. Although some of his early work was initially accepted for publication, it was later rejected and he remained unpublished as a novelist until 1981.

Carey traveled in Europe and the Middle East during the late 1960's, also spending two years in London before returning to Australia. He worked for a number of advertising agencies in Melbourne and Sydney and published a number of short stories which were later collected in *The Fat Man in History* (1974). In 1976, Carey joined an “alternative community” called Starlight at Yandina in

Queensland. Here, he wrote the stories that were collected in *War Crimes* (1979), as well as *Bliss* (1981), his first published novel. Carey continued to work in advertising, setting up his own agency in 1980, until he left Australia in 1990 to settle in New York. Carey also directed the master of fine arts in creative writing program at Hunter College, part of the City University of New York.

Carey's move to New York, prompted by his wife's career as a theater director, drew criticism from some commentators, who wondered whether he had the right to speak from an Australian perspective while living outside the country. He has also courted controversy on other occasions, most notably in 1998, when he declined an invitation to meet Queen Elizabeth II after winning the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Many believed that this response was because of his Australian republican beliefs, although Carey cited family reasons. In fact, according to Carey, he had asked for the meeting to be postponed, and Buckingham Palace did reschedule it. More recently, Carey's novel *Theft: A Love Story* (2006) attracted adverse publicity when his former wife, Alison Summers, claimed he had created a particularly unpleasant minor character in order to take revenge upon her. Carey remained silent on the matter.

Carey has won numerous awards for his work. He received the Man Booker Prize twice, for *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) in 1988 and *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) in 2001, and he has been short-listed twice. He has won the Miles Franklin Award, given in Australia, on three occasions, for *Bliss*, *Os-*



*car and Lucinda*, and *Jack Maggs* (1997), and was short-listed on two other occasions.

## ANALYSIS

Peter Carey once said, “my fictional project has always been the invention or discovery of my own country.” His writing is shaped by an acute awareness that Australia’s earliest white settlers were criminals cast out by their own country, cut adrift from their own history. Their dilemma is exemplified by Jack Maggs, who regards himself as an Englishman, but who can only remain English as long as he doesn’t return to his home country. Carey’s novels attempt to provide the voiceless former convicts with a new set of origin myths, to reflect their new circumstances, thus initiating a new cycle of history. This is important to Carey because Australians, as he has noted, really believe in failure and seek to deny the fact that their country’s origins lie in the formation of penal colonies.

In the same way, there are no losers in Australia, only “battlers” who continue to struggle with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Carey claims that Australians admire “battlers” more than those who actually succeed, and his fiction is populated with characters who have to deal with one setback after another. They are constantly on the brink of achieving success, only to lose everything at the last moment, often through their own incompetence. His careful portrayals of these people suggest a certain sympathy; however, he never shrinks from exploring the immensity of their self-deception. Ironically, the confidence-trickster in *Illywhacker* (1985) is the one character who fully understands his own capacity to deceive others, and even then he occasionally manages to deceive himself.

Carey is extremely skilled at providing a voice for those unable to speak for or to defend themselves. This is best illustrated in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, where Carey’s close study of the language of Ned Kelly’s Jerilderie letter allows him to tell Kelly’s full story more vividly. Likewise, with *Jack Maggs*, Carey gives a convincing voice to an Englishman who has been away for a long time. However, Carey’s skills extend beyond historical reconstruction, as shown in *Bliss* and *The Tax Inspector* (1991), where he reveals a flair for handling a complex ensemble of voices, while in *Theft* the narrative is shared between the Boone brothers, one of whom has learning problems. Only in the first-

person framing narrative of *My Life as a Fake* (2003) does this skill seem to temporarily desert him, when he seems unable to create a convincing voice for Micks, the English poetry editor.

Carey employs a wide range of narrative techniques throughout his novels and constantly interrogates the nature of storytelling itself, as befits a man who is interested in providing his country with a set of histories. At times, Carey’s narrators are aware of themselves as characters in novels and equally aware of their audiences, whom they directly address. In other instances, his characters are themselves storytellers, using their skills to come to terms with their lives, or else aware of the power of the printed word as a vehicle of expression.

Carey’s great influences are Beckett, Faulkner, and Joyce; his narratives frequently appear to be chaotic or fragmentary, his characters acting at random rather than according to the dictates of a previously chosen plot. Carey notes the influence of postmodernism on his work, while *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) is clearly intended as homage to *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne. Nonetheless, Carey’s novels retain an overall narrative coherence; they often end abruptly, not always as the reader anticipates, but always in a way that, in retrospect, does provide closure and satisfaction.

## OSCAR AND LUCINDA

**First published:** 1988

**Type of work:** Novel

*An unconventional young couple, who have finally found love in the face of adversity, lose the chance of happiness together when the woman bets her fortune on the man’s ability to deliver a glass church safely to its destination.*

*Oscar and Lucinda* was the first of Peter Carey’s novels to win the Man Booker Prize. The present-day first-person narrator tells the story of Oscar Hopkins and Lucinda Leplastrier, two young people who meet on board a ship sailing to Australia. The implication, from references made, is that the couple are the narrator’s great-grandparents and

that he or she is telling a love story. However, the truth is more complicated.

Lucinda, a wealthy heiress, is returning to Australia after carrying out research on the manufacture of glass in London. On a whim, once she had come into her fortune she bought a glassworks, which she is now attempting to run. Her efforts are confounded in part by the fact that her male employees, although they are willing to work for her, will not allow her in the factory and prefer to deal with her friend, the Reverend Hassett.

Accustomed to living on a farm in the bush with her father and mother, and latterly alone, Lucinda has found it hard to make friends in Sydney. Having bought the glassworks, she finds her way to the Reverend Hassett, an expert in the properties of glass though not its manufacture, and to the household of Mr. d'Abbs, her financial adviser, where she plays cards with him and his friends. Lucinda's unconventionality is not intentional, but all her life she has been used to taking care of herself, and she finds she does not fit comfortably into the role that society assigns wealthy young women. As a result, her visit to London, where she has called on her mother's old friends and correspondents, has been an unmitigated disaster.

Oscar Hopkins's father was a nonconformist preacher and naturalist who had brought up his son alone, according to his own unorthodox beliefs. Queerly dressed, physically and emotionally stunted, Oscar finally rebels by rejecting his father's religious beliefs and attaching himself to the local Church of England vicar. The church sponsors Oscar's degree at Oxford, where Oscar discovers his latent skill as a gambler. After he takes holy orders, the church determines to send him to Australia.

Oscar and Lucinda bond over their shared love of gambling. When Oscar arrives in Sydney, it is assumed by many that he is to be her husband. The men at the glassworks gladly accept him in a way that they have never accepted Lucinda. However, unable to articulate their feelings for one another, the two become confused about their desire for one another. Oscar is convinced that Lucinda loves the Reverend Hassett, who has been sent away to Boat Harbour because his bishop does not approve of his religious views, whereas Lucinda's determination to build the priest a church made out of glass is an attempt to encourage people to buy the

buildings she wants to develop. Their work on the building brings Oscar and Lucinda together and they enjoy a period of happiness, although their relationship causes a scandal.

Their brief happiness is destroyed when Lucinda foolishly wagers her fortune on whether or not Oscar will be able to successfully deliver the building to the Reverend Hassett, convinced that he will succeed. However, Oscar's journey descends into farce as the expedition's leader determines to use the voyage to establish himself as a famous explorer. Pursuing his own agenda, he leads the expedition away from its intended route. On his arrival at Boat Harbour, Oscar, ill from the journey and emotionally naïve, is enticed into marriage by a local woman. After he dies by drowning, his wife claims Lucinda's fortune, and the reader finally understands that the narrator's great-grandmother is not the person they initially supposed. Lucinda has disappeared from the historical record without a trace.

## TRUE HISTORY OF THE KELLY GANG

**First published:** 2000

**Type of work:** Novel

*A first-person account of the life of Ned Kelly, the Australian bushranger, in which he attempts to explain to his daughter how he was driven to break the law by the authorities.*

*True History of the Kelly Gang* gives the bushranger Ned Kelly a chance to tell his own story in the form of a long letter to his daughter in San Francisco. Kelly's father was a former convict, transported to Tasmania; Kelly has no idea what his father's crime might have been. He met Kelly's mother, Ellen, in a town called Donnybrook, and they determined to marry. Her family, the Quinns, were habitual criminals who constantly drew the attention of the police. Ellen Quinn was unaware that her husband was a former criminal, but the police knew, subjected his family to much attention, and attempted to blackmail Ellen for sexual favors. Kelly's father is finally imprisoned when he takes the blame for young Kelly's theft and butchering of

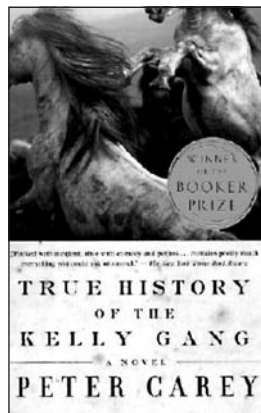
a cow, although he is in fact prosecuted for removing a brand from the hide. He is released as a favor after Kelly saves a local man's son from drowning, but he is a broken man and dies shortly after.

At twelve, Kelly finds himself the man of the family and struggles to lead a law-abiding life through farming and breaking horses. His mother, meanwhile, opens a drinking den and, it is suggested, also works as a prostitute. The family moves around, supported by the extended Quinn family, finally settling in the Glenrowan area, where they have bought some land and become "selectors," or settlers. However, they live in great poverty and remain targets for the local police. Young Ned is temporarily apprenticed to the bushranger Harry Power and is present when a number of crimes are committed. He serves several terms in prison for alleged cattle-rustling and other crimes.

The final period of his short but tumultuous life begins with an incident on the family property, when a policeman, Fitzpatrick, claims he was injured in a gunfight with members of the Kelly family. The Kelly family claim Fitzpatrick was knocked to the ground when he attempted to proposition Ned's sister Kate. Ned's mother is imprisoned, but Ned and his brother Dan go into hiding, where they are joined by two friends.

The police determine to track down the Kelly gang. Ned and his friends come across a group of police officers at Stringybark Creek, whom they disarm, killing one policeman, and then wait for the others to return. When they do, although one policeman proposes that the police should surrender, the others refuse, and there is a shootout in which all of the policemen are killed.

The Kelly gang then carry out a series of audacious bank raids, taking hostages but killing no one. They are finally betrayed by one of their friends when they arrive in Glenrowan. Knowing that a trainload of policemen is on its way to the town, the gang take hostages and pull up rail tracks in order to cause a train crash.



Ned Kelly's letter to his daughter ceases at this point, and his story is supplemented by a third-party account of the siege in which the Kelly Gang, all except Ned, are killed, and an account of Ned Kelly's hanging.

Throughout the narrative, Kelly is desperate to ensure that his daughter knows the truth about her father, and he attempts to justify his actions, as he did in the Jerilderie letter, by showing that the police and the authorities in Victoria treated the colonists unfairly and with great severity.

## THEFT: A LOVE STORY

First published: 2006

Type of work: Novel

*Michael "Butcher" Bones and his brother, Hugh "Slow" Bones, maintain an uneasy relationship as Michael attempts to resuscitate his flagging career as an artist while starting a new relationship with Marlene Leibovitz, an art historian.*

*Theft* opens with artist Michael Bones, newly released from prison, discovering that he is to be sent to northern New South Wales to take care of an isolated property belonging to his biggest collector, Jean-Paul Milan, and also to act as caretaker to his slow-witted brother, Hugh Bones. The hope is that Michael will cut down on his drinking, as well as produce some new works. He has lost control of most of his work, as it was deemed to be marital assets during his divorce from his wife, and he was prosecuted for attempting to steal it back.

Michael is not particularly happy to be caring for his brother or to be exiled in Bellingen, let alone to be issued with a long list of maintenance tasks around the house. However, once Milan leaves, the brothers settle into a chaotic day-to-day routine, during which Michael more or less unintentionally vandalizes the house in the cause of his art, which is rather different in its production methods than his patron seems to suppose.

It is at this point that Marlene Leibovitz inadvertently enters the Bones brothers' lives, when, en route to visit their neighbor, Dozy Boylan, to authenticate a painting by Jacques Leibovitz, she is

caught in a flood. Hugh and Marlene immediately establish a rapport, much to Michael's surprise. He meanwhile is astonished to learn that Boylan owns a painting by Leibovitz, as it was this artist who first inspired him to become an artist. When Marlene returns she tells Michael the story of how Leibovitz's wife, Dominique,

stole many of his half-finished works after his death and then altered and amended them, exercising *droit moral* (or moral rights) in order to control and authenticate them. Marlene, married to the artist's son, Olivier Leibovitz, now has the *droit moral* to control her father-in-law's work, and she is thus an immensely powerful woman in the art world.



Some time after Marlene's departure, Michael is surprised to receive a visit from the Sydney police, who seem convinced that he is in some way involved in the theft of Boylan's Leibovitz and who impound his latest work. He is already having trouble reestablishing his career, as the galleries do not want to know him, so this incident is a disaster for him. Unexpectedly, the brothers encounter Marlene Leibovitz again, and she rescues them, revealing that her husband has run away and is suspected of having stolen Boylan's painting, although he is physically incapable of touching any of his father's paintings because he hates them so much.

Michael and Hugh finally leave Australia and

follow Marlene to New York. For a period, Michael, Marlene, and Hugh lead a golden life. Michael's art is recognized once again and he feels successful. Hugh enjoys the bustle of New York and makes friends. Marlene reveals her life story to Michael: She has deceived him and is really an Australian woman who fled a life of poverty and transformed herself, through hard work and study, into an expert on art, in order to catch Olivier Leibovitz.

Blinded by his growing love for her, Michael does not understand that Marlene, although she has enabled him to restart his artistic career, is also using him to help her authenticate forged Leibovitz paintings. When Olivier dies and she finally inherits the *droit moral* to control the paintings, Michael strongly suspects that Marlene encouraged Hugh to murder Olivier, and the brothers flee New York for Australia. However, Michael's past continues to haunt him.

## SUMMARY

Peter Carey's novels address the issue of what it means to be Australian, particularly in regard to the paradox that the history of Australian settlement is so new, whereas the continent and its indigenous culture are so ancient. Likewise, he constantly seeks to give voice to the white colonists who have been expelled from their home country or who have fled, hoping to find a better life, and whose histories have been lost as a result. However meaningless and petty their lives may seem to outsiders, Carey's constantly reiterated point is that these are the people whose work made Australia what it is. Their lives are as just as important as those of the people whom history does remember, and his writing gives them a voice.

Maureen Kincaid Speller

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Peter Carey's work contribute to a new myth of origin for Australia?
- Families are very important in Carey's work. Compare the role of family in *True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Theft*.
- Carey has lived outside Australia since he wrote *The Tax Inspector*. Has that affected his view of the country in later novels, and, if so, how?
- What is the difference between a loser and a battler, and how is this illustrated in Carey's novels?
- Carey has often referred to other novels in his work. Examine the influence of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) on *Jack Maggs* and of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) on *My Life as a Fake*.





Archive Photos

## ALEJO CARPENTIER

**Born:** Havana, Cuba  
December 26, 1904

**Died:** Paris, France  
April 24, 1980

*An important novelist, short-story writer, and essayist of the first half of the twentieth century, Carpentier was also a musicologist and theorist of Latin American culture.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alejo Carpentier (kahr-pehn-TYAYR) was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1904. His father was French and his mother was of Russian origin, and they had emigrated to Cuba two years before their son's birth. Carpentier was bilingual in both French and Spanish, but people who knew him say that he pronounced Spanish with a very strong French accent and that he felt more comfortable communicating in French, which was the language spoken in his household. His parents were wealthy; they had a spacious house with an excellent library where their son studied. He went to private schools in Cuba but he also spent long periods in Paris, which helped him compare and contrast Latin American and European cultural values. Carpentier wanted to continue his father's business and he started studying architecture, but after his father unexpectedly abandoned the family, Alejo quit the university and went into journalism. He turned out to be an excellent writer and a very talented editor. During those years he also showed great interest in Afro-Cuban culture, especially music, and soon wrote and produced several ballets, comic operas, numerous conference articles, stories, and poems.

The 1920's in Cuba were turbulent. It was the youngest of all Latin American republics; only in 1898 had it gained independence from Spain. That

same year, however, the United States occupied Cuba; this occupation lasted until 1902. Thereafter, the United States regularly intervened in Cuban affairs and in 1925 it strongly supported the rise of President Gerardo Machado, a dictator.

Carpentier became involved with the opposition, and in 1927, he was put in jail for more than a month for signing an antigovernment manifesto. After that experience he escaped from Cuba using a friend's documents, flew to Paris, and stayed in the French capital for the next eleven years. Between 1928 and 1939 he also traveled extensively around Europe. Carpentier was well connected among European avant-garde artists, and he wrote extensively about Pablo Picasso, Federico García Lorca, and Igor Stravinsky. Carpentier wrote criticism of Surrealism, including unfavorable comments about André Breton. Meeting European artists, he became aware of other Latin American writers who, for political or economic reasons, were residing in Paris. He met future Nobel Prize laureates from Guatemala, Chile, and Mexico. Among the people he met were Miguel Ángel Asturias, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz. While in Paris, Carpentier also attended anthropology and ethnography courses at the Sorbonne. According to many critics, it is precisely in Paris where Carpentier discovered Latin America and became interested in defining Latin American and Cuban identity.

In 1933, he published a novel with a strong Afro-Cuban flavor, *¡Ecué-Yamba-O! Historia Afro-Cubana*, but this work did not have much of an effect on his career as a writer. Carpentier himself later rejected



the work and did not allow it to be reprinted for many years.

The political situation in Europe was becoming quite tense around 1939. The rise of fascism and the gathering clouds of World War II coincided with the fall of the Spanish Republic. At the same time, the climate in Cuba was somewhat more favorable. Fulgencio Batista, who in 1933 had overthrown Gerardo Machado, made some loose coalitions with the Left.

In 1939, Carpentier returned to Cuba with his French wife, but they soon divorced and two years later he was remarried, this time to a Cuban woman, Lilia Esteban Hierro. He remained with her until his death. While in Cuba, he collaborated in several major magazines and journals and published some of his most famous stories. His writing from this period reflects his interest in musicology, particularly in finding the roots of Cuban rhythm in Spanish, African, and indigenous forms.

In 1945, Carpentier and his wife left Cuba to settle in Caracas, Venezuela. Although he had earlier rejected the frantic pace of life of New York, in Caracas he resided in a place that offered those same characteristics of developed capitalism. At the same time, he was able to enjoy occasional trips in the jungle and unexplored wilderness. During his stay in Venezuela Carpentier wrote several of his most celebrated novels and short stories. These include *El reino de este mundo* (1949; *The Kingdom of This World*, 1957), *Los pasos perdidos* (1953; *The Lost Steps*, 1956), *Guerra del tiempo* (1958; *War of Time*, 1970), and *El siglo de las luces* (1962; *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 1963).

After the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro, Carpentier returned to Havana and stayed faithful to its stated revolutionary ideals even when most prominent writers began distancing themselves from it. He held a prestigious position in the government and from 1968 lived in Paris as a Cuban cultural representative. He continued writing and publishing until his death on April 24, 1980.

## ANALYSIS

The two central themes in Carpentier's writing are history and Latin American identity. One of the most erudite writers of the twentieth century, Carpentier began his search for Latin American history and identity in European libraries. When, in the early 1920's, the European avant-garde started

looking for non-Western cultural expressions, many Latin American writers turned toward African and pre-Hispanic roots. Carpentier strongly believed that the concept of the marvelous was solely embedded in Latin American reality and that it presupposed a faith—not a religious faith, but a cultural belief. This theory tied in with Carpentier's endeavors to define the exclusiveness of Latin American identity and went directly against Surrealism's idea of universalism.

Carpentier, together with many other Latin American intellectuals, was very much under the philosophical influence of Oswald Spengler. According to this German thinker, culture, like nature, goes through four periods in its maturation. Western culture, he claimed, had reached its old age and was declining. On the other hand, the New World, especially in its faith—in sharp contrast with Western reflexivity and consciousness of cultural values—still had not reached its apogee.

The problem for Carpentier was precisely that faith. Being educated in a very traditional European style, he himself was more inclined toward reflexivity. He could not but be an observer, an anthropologist or an ethnographer in Latin America. As soon as he started writing about the "magic" of the New World, he became an outsider who was merely struggling with language in an attempt to translate this magic into a Western order.

Carpentier's writing also reflects his desire to find the beginnings of culture and civilization. His interest in music led him to research different tonal systems, and his fascination with language made him look for what he called the original language, a language in which the sign and the content were not separate or fragmented. The search for originality led him to search for origins. The failure of this enterprise is described in his best-known novel, *The Lost Steps*.

Besides being a fiction writer, Carpentier was a theorist of literature. His theory of Magical Realism became part of a well-known style that identifies much Latin American literature. According to Carpentier, the marvelous and the magic are an integral part of reality. All the cultural expressions that European civilization has long tried to suffocate still exist in Latin America: African drums, indigenous rhythms, and non-Western cosmogonies can be detected together with Spanish romances from the sixteenth century. These elements create

a natural feeling of the marvelous in Latin America. European Surrealists, on the other hand, had to re-create it artificially in their writing. Carpentier concluded that Latin American culture is by its nature baroque and that it has subverted its European influences since the first moments of colonization.

Carpentier's style, both in his fiction and in his nonfiction, is extremely elaborate and refined. He is like an architect of language, a builder whose every brick fits perfectly into the narrative. His metaphors are filled with historical, literary, and cultural references. In order to comprehend his writing fully, Carpentier's reader must know European and Caribbean cultural traditions. Some of Carpentier's novels are experimental. *¡Ecué-Yamba-O!*, for example, contains, besides the narrative, photographs of rituals and of different musical instruments. *The Lost Steps* follows the biblical book of Genesis in its description of the seven days.

Despite Carpentier's acceptance of Castro's regime, Marxist ideology focused on class struggle rarely permeates Carpentier's writing. Although it does appear in some of his speeches in the 1970's, his writing is progressive in another sense: It is about the racial diversity of the American continent, and it brings to light the African, indigenous, and Spanish cultural traditions.

## "JOURNEY BACK TO THE SOURCE"

**First published:** "Viaje a la semilla," 1958  
(collected in *War of Time*, 1970)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The story of Marcial's life is narrated backward, beginning with his death and ending with his return to the womb.*

According to Carpentier, the story "Journey Back to the Source" was inspired by the baroque splendor of old Havana. Written eleven years after his first novel, this story contains several elements that later germinated into some of the most impor-

tant topics of Carpentier's oeuvre. The story is composed of three parts that resemble the musical tempos *allegro*, *andante*, and *allegro*, respectively. The first and the last parts are very short and have many parallels in form. The second part is the longest and relates to backward time travel.

The story begins with a vision of a decrepit urban house that is being demolished by workers. They are somewhat puzzled by the unusual appearance of an old man who answers all their inquiries with incomprehensible sounds. After an extraordinary gesture made by the old man, the house "heals" and the central part of the story begins. The protagonist, Marcial, first appears to be dead and then slowly comes back to life.

Marcial's backward-progressing life is not narrated for comic effect. His life becomes a return to the origins, a search for the lost, maternal paradise. He is vaguely aware of the backwardness of the process and notices that the clocks in the house signal first five and then four. Marcial feels great pleasure when, after becoming underage, he realizes that his signature no longer carries the burden of responsibility. His ego slowly diminishes and dissolves as he leaves the world of writing behind him.

The reader becomes aware of how much family and society have influenced Marcial's identity. Another step in this process of divestiture is the loss of language, which, according to Carpentier, is an artificial, alienating construct. Marcial is overwhelmed by joy as he enters the language of babble. In the end, he is back in his mother's protective body.

The last segment of the story returns to ordinary time. The workers are amazed to find the terrain of the house completely cleaned up. One of them remembers the somewhat mysterious circumstances of Marcial's drowning, and the reader is left to wonder if Marcial had anything to do with his wife's death.

"Journey Back to the Source" is permeated with nostalgia for the past. Glorious colonial architecture is described in detail, and there is a sense that the story is an homage to an aristocratic Cuban class that has vanished. The story also depicts Marcial's loneliness, unhappiness, and constant feeling of not belonging.

## THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD

**First published:** *El reino de este mundo*, 1949  
(English translation, 1957)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This work is a fictionalized account of the uprising of slaves in Haiti and their struggle for independence.*

Carpentier published *The Kingdom of This World* six years after he accompanied the French actor Louis Jouvet on a trip to Haiti. Carpentier was very impressed by the ruins and stories of the Haitian slave uprisings in the 1700's and in 1820, the year of the fall of Henri (Henry) Christophe's government.

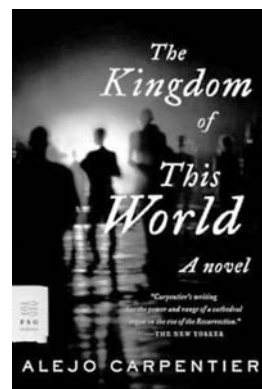
This extremely fragmented novel is composed of four parts connected by the awakening of the slave Ti Noel. The novel is preceded by a famous prologue that describes Carpentier's ideas about marvelous realism, which would become widely known as Magical Realism. Carpentier states that in writing *The Kingdom of This World* he has followed historical reality in every detail and that his work is a product of extremely rigorous documentation. The purpose of his argument is to show how Latin American history naturally contains magic. His characters in the novel—the wealthy slave owner Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy, the slave Ti Noel, the Jamaican, the slave storyteller Mackandal (who used poison in his rebellion against the French rule in Haiti), the punished confessor Cornejo Brelle, General Leclerc, and the black monarch Henry Christophe—are all historical figures. Carpentier's hand, however, orders all the scenes in which these protagonists are participating and the book's marvelous coincidences exist only in fiction. For example, in the novel, many historic events are announced on Sunday and take place on Monday. This, needless to say, has not been corroborated by more factual history.

The novel opens with narration about a slave, Ti Noel, born in Haiti, who learns about Africa from the stories of a much older slave, Mackandal. In a preventable accident, Mackandal loses his hand and becomes virtually useless to his owner. He soon runs away and is presumed to be behind a strange wave of poisonings that strikes the island. The goal

of this "Lord of Venom," who is believed to have supernatural powers, is to liberate the slaves from French colonizers. After four years of clandestine operations, he returns during Christmas and is captured and executed by the French. His people continue to believe, however, that he is capable of changing his form and that he has remained in the kingdom of this world.

The second part of the novel starts about twenty years later. The slave owner Mézy has lost two wives. He becomes involved with an actress, who persuades him to go to Paris. She does not have much success in French theaters, and he starts feeling nostalgic about the island, so they return to Haiti. The colonist starts drinking and the actress relives the memories of her theatrical performances. When the Jamaican starts spreading talk about the French Revolution and its notions of freedom, brotherhood, and equality, Mézy, together with other slave owners, tries to stop him. The rebellion is eventually suffocated, but all the slave owners' property is destroyed and, more important for the slave owners, the slaves, who represent the working force, are being executed. Although Bouckman is killed, the French are faced with the secret voodoo cult that connects and empowers all the Africans. Mézy, with his slave, Ti Noel, goes into exile and settles in Santiago de Cuba. The second part ends with a description of the arrival of Leclerc, sent to recapture Haiti, and his sensual wife Paulina Buonaparte. The general soon dies and she leaves for Rome.

The third part is set several years later during the rule of Henry Christophe, previously briefly mentioned in the novel as a cook and then a soldier. Ti Noel returns from Cuba. Despite his old age, he is soon drafted and forced to work on building a French-style fortress for Henry Christophe. Although slavery has been officially abolished, Ti Noel's work is the same. Only the color of his master's skin has changed. Henry Christophe commits suicide after realizing that he has wrongly identi-



fied with European culture and forgotten his African heritage.

In the concluding section of the book Ti Noel witnesses the ascendancy of the cruel republican government, mulattos who will now rule over blacks. Since he has perfected his secret knowledge, he is capable of leaving the kingdom of this world but he decides to stay. The novel ends with a mythical green wind that erases all of his traces but leaves the reader with the possibility that Ti Noel has merely changed his form, and that as a vulture he will continue guarding his people.

## THE LOST STEPS

**First published:** *Los pasos perdidos*, 1953  
(English translation, 1956)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A musician from a large Western city goes to a primitive region in search of his origins.*

*The Lost Steps* is a novel about an anonymous musician who has origins, as does Carpentier, in two different cultural traditions. The musician has a European father and a Latin American mother. This duality creates an identity conflict that he tries to resolve by going back to his mother's land. The novel is written in a form like that of a confessional diary. This emphasizes the existential crisis and loneliness of the anonymous protagonist.

From indications in the novel's diary entries, critics have concluded that the novel is set in 1950. In the conclusion, Carpentier explains that the action occurs in Venezuela, around the river Orinoco, and that several characters and episodes are real.

The protagonist of *The Lost Steps* lives in a Western metropolis with his wife Ruth, who is an actress, and his lover, Mouche. Although neither of them makes him feel happy, he decides to take Mouche

with him on a research trip in the jungle. The scientific reason for his journey is to locate a very primitive musical instrument. They leave civilization and very soon all the artificiality of his lover is revealed. Her makeup is dissolving in the heat of the tropics and he is disgusted by her inability to adapt to the new circumstances. He, on the other hand, is delighted and feels reborn because he is able to communicate with people in his mother tongue. This is the beginning of the protagonist's search for origins.

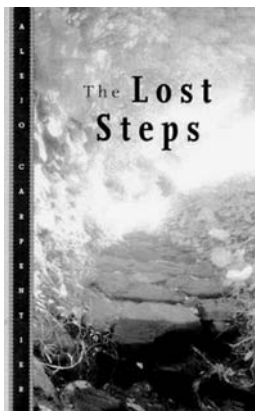
After Mouche falls sick he leaves her in a hotel with a recommendation to return to the city. He, however, full of hopes and eager to abandon Western falseness and pretension, enters the jungle, which is described as virginal. He is grateful to his mother for teaching him the language that is now opening a whole new world to him.

In the jungle, the narrator-protagonist meets Rosario, an indigenous woman, whom he perceives as natural and uncontaminated by Western civilization. He falls in love with her and after settling in the valley that he describes as paradise, he believes that he has finally found true happiness. The protagonist's regression to this secret world, in which Western culture has not made an imprint, has been compared to a return to the tranquillity of the mother's womb. The similarities between Rosario and the protagonist's mother add to this idea.

While enjoying the fullness of his identity, the protagonist also locates the musical instrument for which he has been searching. Soon, he senses the desire to write a composition that would represent the culmination of his career. He calls it *Threnody* and it is intended to be a musical transcription of Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614). Although Rosario, who believes that he is writing a letter, remarks that there is no post office in the jungle, he continues to write. He runs out of paper and decides that he has to return to civilization and get some. Returning to the world of history and writing, he forever loses his recently discovered world.

## SUMMARY

Alejo Carpentier's work is about the search for what it means to be Latin American. Western ideas of the linearity of history and "progress" in music, literature, and philosophy are juxtaposed with African and pre-Hispanic cosmogonies that favor a cir-



cular path in history and an oral tradition. In spite of all the steps that Carpentier's protagonists take toward freeing themselves, in the end they are unable to escape the artificiality of their Western existence.

*Ksenija Bilbija*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What cultural and political obstacles hampered Alejo Carpentier in his attempt to capture the essence of Latin America in his writings?
- How did Carpentier's interest in architecture influence the structure of his literary work?
- What information about Carpentier's work might stimulate greater interest in it in the United States?
- Determine whether "Magical Realism" is or is not a self-contradictory literary term.
- What are the most important metaphors in *The Lost Steps*?

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## LEWIS CARROLL

**Born:** Daresbury, Cheshire, England  
January 27, 1832

**Died:** Guildford, Surrey, England  
January 14, 1898

*World-renowned for his two Alice books, Carroll not only re-shaped the genre of children's literature but also, in pioneering the art of nonsense, influenced the course of modern absurdist literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was born on January 27, 1832, in the parsonage of Daresbury, Cheshire, England. The third child and the eldest son of the eleven children of the Reverend Charles Dodgson and Frances Jane Lutwidge, he was descended from two North Country families with a long tradition of service to church and state. The world has come to know Charles Dodgson as Lewis Carroll, a pseudonym he chose in 1856 for his fictional and poetical works. He reserved his family name for his academic books and essays.

When he was eleven years old, his family moved from Daresbury to the rectory at Croft, just inside the Yorkshire boundary, where his father assumed his new duties as rector. During his years at Croft, Carroll revealed his early genius for nonsense by editing and writing for a series of family magazines titled *The Rectory Umbrella* and *Mischmasch*. Carroll matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, on May 23, 1850. At the end of four years of study he distinguished himself by taking first-class honors in the Final Mathematical School and received his B.A. in 1854. During that same year, he published his first poem and story in the *Whitby Gazette*. Although he was ordained deacon in 1861, Carroll decided not to go on to take holy orders but instead to teach mathematics at Oxford, where he was to spend the rest of his life.

In 1856, Carroll purchased a camera and soon developed into one of the foremost portrait photographers of his day. His work includes numerous photographs of children as well as of such famous contemporaries as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, John Ruskin, the Rossetti family, Michael Faraday, John Everett Millais, and Holman Hunt. He is acknowledged as a pioneer in British amateur photography and the most outstanding photographer of children in the nineteenth century.

It was also in 1856 that Carroll first met the children of the dean of Christ Church,

Henry George Liddell. He immortalized these children—Alice, Edith, and Lorina—not only in his photographs but also in his classic story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Alice was the inspiration for the story, and her two sisters appear in the tale as the Eaglet (Edith) and the Lory (Lorina). On July 4, 1862, Carroll, accompanied by his friend Robinson Duckworth, made a rowing expedition on the river with the three Liddell sisters. It was during this trip that he told them the story of Wonderland. He later wrote out the story and illustrated it with his own drawings. In February, 1863, he completed this original version of the story, which he titled *Alice's Adventures Underground*. Two years later he published an expanded version of the original story as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, illustrated by the *Punch* magazine artist John Tennel.

In 1869, he published a collection of his comic and serious verse under the title *Phantasmagoria, and Other Poems* (1869), the title poem being about

a charming ghost that haunts a country gentleman. He then followed up the success of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with the publication of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* in 1871. His long nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*, illustrated by Henry Holiday, was published in 1876, followed by his last collection of comic verse, *Rhyme? and Reason?* in 1883.

Despite his innovative excursions into the world of nonsense and the absurd, Carroll did not neglect his traditional studies. He continued to publish a number of serious and traditional studies in mathematics and logic, including *Euclid and His Modern Rivals* (1879), *The Game of Logic* (1887), *Curiosa Mathematica, Part I: A New Theory of Parallels* (1888), *Curiosa Mathematica, Part II: Pillow Problems Thought During Wakeful Hours* (1893), and *Symbolic Logic, Part I: Elementary* (1896).

On January 14, 1898, Carroll died at his sisters' home in Guildford and is buried there. A memorial plaque has subsequently been placed in the floor of Westminster Abbey to honor this remarkable man. *Three Sunsets, and Other Poems*, a collection of his serious verse, was published posthumously in 1898.

## ANALYSIS

In his serious poetry, collected in *Phantasmagoria* and *Three Sunsets, and Other Poems*, Carroll reveals some of his heartfelt emotions of grief, anxiety, and love, but not without maintaining a firm control over those emotions. By writing in conventional poetic forms, alluding to established poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and modeling his poems upon theirs, and by adopting an accepted sentimental tone, Carroll carefully modulated and refined the raw emotions that threatened his sense of order and psychological integrity, making them socially agreeable to his audience and to himself. He was especially attracted to and influenced by such poems as Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Keats's "La Belle Dame sans merci" (1820), and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) and "Mariana" (1830), all of which dwell upon such disturbing themes as guilt, depression, or sexual temptation. In short, Carroll attempted to shape his anxieties within a poetic tradition and to guard them against the riotous swirl of fear, chaos, and despair.

Carroll's nonsense verse, on the other hand, is much more complex and paradoxical than his serious poetry. Much as he relaxed and allowed his imagination to blossom in the presence of his young girlfriends, Carroll ignored and even challenged some of the conventional literary constraints in writing his comic poetry. The poetry in the two Alice books, such as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat," "Speak Roughly to Your Little Boy," "Beautiful Soup," "Jabberwocky," and "The Walrus and the Carpenter," are rebellious in the way that children are. These poems are visceral, instinctive, and free in their confrontation of authority and convention. While they assume the poetic forms and meters of traditional English poetry, they undermine that tradition by their comic tone, bizarre logic, and unsettling assumptions. Carroll's nonsense verse embodies his primal feelings about the possible meaninglessness of life, his repressed violence and sexuality, and his growing awareness that order and meaning within the context of a poem do not necessarily reflect a corresponding order in the terrifying void of cosmic reality.

Carroll's long poem *The Hunting of the Snark* is his comic defense against the unthinkable idea of the meaninglessness of life and his fear of annihilation after death. Under the leadership of the Bellman, a madcap crew sets forth to hunt the Snark. The hero of this mock epic is the Baker, who has been warned that he will be annihilated if the Snark is a Boojum. As the center of authority and truth, the Bellman constantly rings his bell (which is depicted in every illustration), reminding the crew of the passage of time and of their mortality. He defines truth by announcing at the outset that whatever he repeats three times is true. Carroll's questers, therefore, design their own world, for that is all they have. The mythical Snark is actually a booby trap, and the Baker vanishes away forever, thus destroying all order, hope, and meaning.

Carroll's strong Christian faith, however, would never allow him consciously to think along these lines. There was a God, a clear purpose in life, and an afterlife awaiting the righteous. Yet even as the Snark hunters manufactured some form of order as a buffer against madness, Carroll created a comic ballad with the bravado of an English adventurer in order to contain his greatest fear.

Carroll's sense of the absurd anticipates the work of the existentialists and Surrealists. The trial

of the Knave of Hearts in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, for example, points to Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (1925; *The Trial*, 1937). The decapitating Queen calls for the Knave of Hearts to be sentenced before the jury submits its verdict. The only evidence brought against him for stealing the tarts is a nonsense poem that is impervious to interpretation. In *The Hunting of the Snark*, Carroll presents another absurd trial in which a pig is sentenced to transportation for life for leaving its pen. By the time the sentence is handed down, it is discovered that the pig has long been dead. The blank map that the Snark hunters use in their quest for the Snark also anticipates the existentialist view of the human will seen in Jean-Paul Sartre's counsel to leap before you look. Finally, given the fluidity of time and the dreamlike atmosphere of Wonderland, it is not surprising that Salvador Dalí chose to illustrate *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and that other surrealists find Carroll's own illustrations and prose a fertile ground for their own productions.

The great humor of the two Alice books, however, is what gives them their energy and immortality. It is a humor that transcends parody, satire, social wit, and slapstick—though to be sure those elements are all there—in order to fight the terrifying and incomprehensible issues of time, space, injustice, violence, self-identity, death, and the cosmic void. Rather than face these Medusa-like issues directly, Carroll circles and jabs at them with his comedy. His Christian faith gives a structure and meaning to his conscious life, and his humor protects that meaning from the threatening fears and uncertainties of his unconscious.

## ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

**First published:** 1865

**Type of work:** Novella

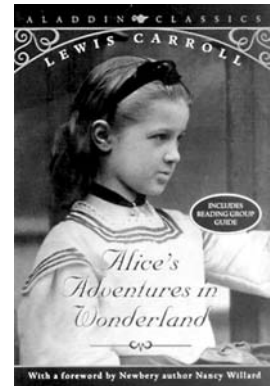
*After falling down a rabbit hole, Alice experiences a series of bizarre adventures that threaten to undermine her sense of order and control.*

Although Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* explicitly to entertain children, it has be-

come a treasure to philosophers, literary critics, biographers, clergy, psychoanalysts, and linguists, not to mention mathematicians, theologians, and logicians. There appears to be something in this work for everyone, and there are almost as many interpretations of it as there are commentators.

Alice's dream becomes her nightmare. A novelty at first, Wonderland becomes increasingly oppressive to Alice as she is faced with its fundamental disorder. Everything there, including her own body size, is in a state of flux. She is treated rudely, is bullied, is asked questions with no answers, and is denied answers to asked questions. Her recitations of poems turn into parodies, a baby turns into a pig, and a cat turns into a grin. The essence of time and space is called into question, and her romantic notion of an idyllic garden of life becomes a paper wasteland. Whether Alice, as some critics argue, is an alien who invades and contaminates Wonderland or is an innocent contaminated by it, one important fact remains the same: She has a vision that shows the world to be chaotic, meaningless, and a terrifying void. In order to escape that oppressive and disorienting vision, she denies it with her outcry that "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" and happily regains the morally intelligible and emotionally comfortable world of her sister, who sits next to her on the green banks of a civilized Victorian countryside.

The assaults upon Alice's sense of order, stability, and proper manners wrought by such characters as the Hatter, Cheshire Cat, and March Hare make it clear that Wonderland is not the promised land, a place of sleepy fulfillment. Rather, Wonderland stimulates the senses and the mind. It is a *monde fatale*, so to speak, one that seduces Alice into seeking new sights, new conversations, new ideas, but it never satisfies her. Conventional meaning, understanding, and the fulfillment that comes with illumination are constantly denied her. That is the secret of Wonderland: Its disorienting and compelling attractions make it a "Wanderland" and Alice herself an addicted wanderer, free of the intellec-



tual and moral burden of ordering her experiences into some meaningful whole. She is never bored because she is never satisfied.

Significantly, she is presented with a stimulating, alluring vision early in her adventures. Alice finds a tiny golden key that opens a door that leads into a small passage. As she kneels down and looks along the passage, she sees a beautiful garden with bright flowers and cool fountains. She is too large, however, to fit through the door in order to enter the attractive garden. Alice's dream garden corresponds to a longing for lost innocence, for the Garden of Eden. Her desire invests the place with imagined significance. Later, when she actually enters the garden, it loses its romantic aspect. In fact, it proves to be a parodic Garden of Life, for the roses are painted, the people are playing cards, and the death-cry "Off with her head!" echoes throughout the croquet grounds.

Alice's dream garden is an excellent example of Carroll's paradoxical duality. Like Alice, he is possessed by a romantic vision of an Edenic childhood more desirable than his own fallen world, but it is a vision that he knows is inevitably corrupted by adult sin and sexuality. He thus allows Alice's dream of the garden to fill her with hope and joy for a time but later tramples that pastoral vision with the hatred and fury of the beheading Queen and the artificiality of the flowers and inhabitants.

## THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

**First published:** 1871

**Type of work:** Novella

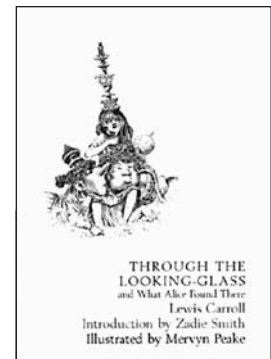
*After passing through a looking-glass, Alice is manipulated by the rules of a chess game until she becomes a queen.*

*Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* abandons the fluidity and chaos of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for artifice and strict determinism. In the first book, the emphasis is upon Alice's adventures and what happens to her on the experiential level. In the sequel, the reader accepts Alice and with detachment examines nature transformed in Looking-Glass Land's chessboard land-

scape. The voyage has shifted from the Kingdom of Chaos, with its riotous motion and verbal whirlpool, to the land of stasis, where the landscape is geometrical and the chess pieces are carefully manipulated by the rules of a precise game. In *Wonderland* every character says and does whatever comes into his or her head, but in the Looking-Glass world life is completely determined and without choice. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the Lion and the Unicorn, the Red Knight and the White Knight must fight at regular intervals, whether they want to or not. They are trapped within the linguistic web of the poems that give them life, and their recurrent actions are forever predestined.

Whereas *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* undermines Alice's sense of time, space, and common-sense logic, *Through the Looking-Glass* questions her very reality. Tweedledum and Tweedledee express the view developed by George Berkeley that all material objects, including Alice herself, are only "sorts of things" in the mind of the sleeping Red King (God). If the Red King were to awaken from his dreaming, they warn Alice, she would expire as quickly as a candle. Alice, it would seem, is a mere fiction shaped by a dreaming mind that threatens her with annihilation.

The ultimate question of what is real and what is a dream, however, is never resolved in the book. In fact, the story ends with the perplexing question of who dreamed it all—Alice or the Red King? Presumably, Alice dreamed of the King, who is dreaming of Alice, who is dreaming of the King, and the process continues. The question of dream versus reality is appropriately set forth in terms of an infinite regression through mirror facing mirror. The apprehension of reality is indefinitely deferred, and the only reality may be one's thoughts and their well-ordered expression. Were Alice to wake the Red King she would share the Baker's fate in *The Hunting of the Snark*. The cool geometry of Looking-Glass Land offers only a temporary oasis in a mutable, biological, and moral wasteland. Carroll recognized that the machinery of conven-



tions and customs, mathematics and logic, and reality and dreams helped to define, and momentarily sustain and comfort, the frightened, imperfect, and comic adventurer.

In the final chapter, Alice rebels against the constraints of her chessboard existence. Having become Queen, she asserts her human authority against the controlling powers of the chessboard and brings both the intricate game and the story to an end. In chess terms, Alice has captured the Red Queen and checkmates the sleeping Red King. In human terms, she has matured and entered that fated condition of puberty, at which point Carroll dismisses his dreamchild once and for all from his remarkable fiction.

### SUMMARY

In contrast with the seeming placidity and orderliness of his life at Oxford, Lewis Carroll's writings

exhibit considerable violence and disorder and a powerful struggle to control and contain those forces underground. This contrast, which gave rise to his two masterpieces—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*—marks a fundamental conflict within Carroll himself, a ruthless battle between emotion and reason, sentiment and satire, chaos and control. Carroll was sometimes an intensely lonely man who needed the nonthreatening company of children to buoy his spirits and distract him from thoughts of death and the void. His books on mathematics and logic, which document the life of his mind, pale in comparison with his two Alice books and nonsense poetry, which document his obsession with the child girl and his unique comic battle with the great human fears that possess all human beings.

Richard Kelly

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the statement that Lewis Carroll directed his Alice books more to adults than to children.
- Discuss the proposition that the Alice books are generally suitable for children.
- Does Carroll's obsession with the girl child detract from the satisfactoriness of the Alice books?
- Show how traditional syntax underlies and enhances the nonsense vocabulary in "Jabberwocky."
- Consider whether one, or both, of these statements is true: The Alice books poke fun at logic themselves, and the Alice books poke fun at people's attempts to employ logic effectively.
- Explain why *Through the Looking Glass* should not be understood as a mere attempt to recapture the achievement of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.





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## CATULLUS

**Born:** Verona, Cisalpine Gaul (now in Italy)  
c. 85 B.C.E.

**Died:** Probably Rome (now in Italy)  
54 B.C.E.

*Though he left only a small volume of poems, Catullus exerted a lasting influence on poets of Western civilization by adapting the models of his predecessors and introducing new idioms, subjects, and modes of emotional expression.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Gaius Valerius Catullus (kuh-TUHL-uhs) was born in Verona, now an Italian city but in ancient times part of Cisalpine Gaul, recently seized by the Romans. (The Latin *Gallia Cisalpina* translates as “Gaul on this side of the Alps,” that is, the Italian side.) Catullus’s life probably spanned 30 to 33 years; St. Jerome placed his birth as early as 87 B.C.E., and his last poems are dated in 54 B.C.E.

Catullus’s family was of equestrian, or noble, rank. Some scholars speculate that his family was Celtic. Their evidence includes the Gaulish location of the family’s estate and the poet’s use of some Celtic terms rather than the Latin equivalents. These circumstances do not necessarily confirm the speculation, however, for many Romans, including the Emperor Tiberius and his mother Livia, owned estates in the provinces, and Catullus’s vocabulary could be explained by his proximity to Celts without his necessarily being one. In any case, Catullus’s family was quite prominent in Cisalpine Gaul. Julius Caesar, as governor of that province in 59 B.C.E., honored the poet’s father with a visit, according to the historian Suetonius.

Catullus probably received a typical education for his social class, including a close study of classical Greek literary forms and culture and possibly a sojourn in Athens. The young man’s poetry cer-

tainly reflects this training, though his work and his literary alliances also suggest a strong desire to establish a distinctly original, Roman poetic expression.

His education completed, Catullus settled in Rome in 61 B.C.E., when he would have been in his mid-twenties. He became part of a circle called the *neoteri*, or *novi poetae* (new poets), founded a generation earlier and led by Catullus’s older contemporary, Publius Cato. The *neoteri* were strongly influenced by the Greek Alexandrian poets; Catullus especially admired the elegant and polished style of Callimachus.

Despite the friendship between his father and Caesar, Catullus wrote at least two acidly satirical poems (numbers 29 and 57) about Caesar; in one poem, the poet even suggested that Caesar had molested young girls. Suetonius reports that Caesar acknowledged the injury to his reputation from Catullus’s poetic attacks, and he tried to cultivate the good will of Catullus and others in the circle of *neoteri*. Ultimately, he extracted an apology from the poet, whom he immediately invited to dine. Caesar also maintained his longtime friendship with Catullus’s father.

In Rome, Catullus met and fell in love with the woman he calls Lesbia in his lyric poems. He bestowed this name in honor of Sappho of Lesbos, a great lyric poet like Catullus himself. Most scholars believe that Catullus’s Lesbia was Clodia Metelli, wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus, a nobleman who held several important offices in Roman government, including that of consul. Clodia’s brother

was Publius Clodius Pulcher, a notorious enemy of the orator Cicero. Clodia was older than Catullus by seven to ten years. Though at first she seemed to return the passionate love she aroused in him, she saw him as merely another in a long series of amorous diversions. The uncertainty of the relationship inspired great lyric poems, ranging in mood from ardent passion, to disappointment and sorrow, to bitter hatred and scorn.

Most of the events mentioned above have been deduced from passages in Catullus's poetry or from references in the writings of his contemporaries. One documented fact is the poet's journey to the province of Bythina, in what is now Turkey, where he served on the staff of the governor, Gaius Memmius. Evidently it was not a pleasant tour of duty: The four poems he left about his sojourn in Bythina are marked by homesickness, complaints of poverty, and disgust with his employer. During his year there, Catullus also visited the tomb of his older brother—who had died in military service near Troy—and performed the required funeral rites. The poet composed one of his best-known elegiac pieces, with the gently desolate ending "*frater, ave atque vale*" (brother, hail and farewell). Catullus returned to Rome in 56 B.C.E. and lived the remainder of his brief life there.

### ANALYSIS

Of the poems attributed to Catullus, 116 have been preserved; 3 are now judged to have been written by someone else. It was only by chance that any of his work survived through the Middle Ages. One poem, number 62, was included in a ninth century anthology of Latin works. In the fourteenth century, a single manuscript containing the 116 poems was discovered in the poet's native Verona. That manuscript disappeared in the following century, but two copies had been made, and one of these survives to the present day, housed at Oxford University in England.

The entire collection constituted a slender but potent volume. The Greek Callimachus is credited with the saying *mega biblion mega kakon* ("big book, big evil"), and his admirer Catullus seems to have taken this to heart. None of the Roman poet's surviving works exceeds 408 lines; most are between 10 and 30 lines long. As Callimachus's poetry showed great learning and polish, so did the work of Catullus, whose followers called him *doctus*

*poeta* (learned craftsman). However, while Callimachus's style was criticized as labored and artificial, Catullus's poems earned praise for their easy grace and polish, belying the effort that produced this technical excellence.

Although Alexandrian thought and style directly influenced Catullus, much of that tradition had already been assimilated by his Roman predecessors or contemporaries, including the epic poet Quintus Ennius and the philosophical poet Titus Lucretius Carus. However, Catullus's uses and expressions of the literary conventions are distinctly his own. His skilled use of Roman vocabulary and rhythms of speech are set against the classical Greek meters to produce a markedly original, Roman literature.

A few of his poems are based not only on Greek meter but on actual Greek poems; for example, Poem 66, about the lock of Berenice, is a translation from Callimachus, and his Poem 51 is thought to be an adaptation of a lost poem by Sappho. Catullus, like Sappho and Callimachus, avoided the traditional epic treatment of war and military conquest, heroes and gods. Instead, his poems are about personal matters: love's rapture and lovers' quarrels, his grief at losing a brother, his love of the family estate in the provinces. Indeed, Catullus was among the first Roman poets to adapt Roman poetic subjects to Greek meters.

In the short poems especially, Catullus's original use of the Alexandrian conventions—meter, learned allusions, and rhetorical figures—contribute to his reputation for directness, simplicity, and emotional sincerity. For example, Catullus's Poem 3—the famous lament for his female friend's dead sparrow—is written in a familiar Alexandrian meter, the Phalaecian hendecasyllabic. In Catullus's hands, however, it becomes an instrument for the simple, poignant expression of sympathy, such as one might hear anywhere in Rome. His poems contain slang, made-up words, and occasional vulgarity not encountered in his Alexandrian models.

Despite the brevity of his life and the slenderness of his surviving output, Catullus had a strong influence on his immediate Roman successors. The most prominent among them adopted different aspects of Catullus's model. Quintus Horatius Flaccus showed the Catullan influence in his lyric poems, while Publius Vergilius Maro manifested it in his use of the elegiac meters. In the following

century, Marcus Valerius Martialis, a master of the poetic epigram, acknowledged his debt to Catullus's achievement in that genre.

The discovery of his surviving poems in the fourteenth century marked the beginning of his popularity in modern times. By the mid-1300's, the Italian poet Petrarch had read Catullus and begun to imitate his work. Catullus's influence can be seen during the Renaissance and beyond through the work of Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Lord Byron. Translators of Catullus have included the poets Thomas Campion, William Wordsworth, and Louis Zukofsky.

Catullus's proficiency in expressing emotion has led scholars to debate whether his poems reflect the author's state of mind or simply the artistic skill that he brought to composition. Given the array of feeling his poems express, either he felt a wide range of intense emotions, or he had a broad range of skill in artistic evocation, or both. However, the question also implies a moral evaluation of the writer's intent, which probably cannot be resolved concerning an author as far removed in time as Catullus. What can be said with certainty is that much of the value in his poems lies in the authenticity with which they portray emotions. Both the effect of his poems on the reader and his influence on the exceptional poets who came after him are testimony to that artistic authenticity.

## POEM 5 ("LET US LIVE, MY LESBIA")

**Written:** First century B.C.E. (collected in *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem, which begins, "Let us live and love, my Lesbia," is among Catullus's best known and most influential works.*

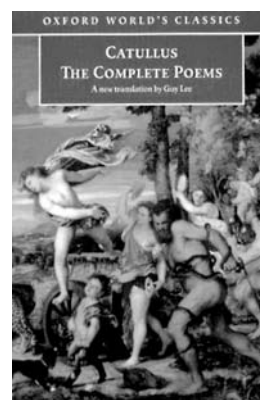
Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe wrote imitations of Poem 5, and Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" ("Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"), though directly inspired by Horace's *carpe diem* (seize the day), is also strongly

reminiscent of this work. Evidently written early on in the poet's relationship with Lesbia, Poem 5 opens by exhorting the beloved to enjoy sensual love in the present and to ignore moral reproaches from envious older people. What is their disapproval compared with the brevity of life?; because, "... when our brief light has set,/ night is one long everlasting sleep."

At first glance the poem seems very similar in spirit to *carpe diem*, but it goes on to evoke other levels of meaning. The poet demands numberless kisses of Lesbia: "Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more,/ another thousand, and another hundred . . ." In this breathless enumeration, some scholars have perceived an innocent, delighted, and amorous confusion. Others inferred a more serious intent: Envious witnesses would somehow be able to harm the young couple by knowing the exact number of kisses exchanged; in Roman belief this knowledge could enable a practitioner of witchcraft to curse the lovers with the evil eye. The lovers should prevent this by concealing the account from their detractors, and even from themselves.

To explain the repeated alternation "a thousand" with "a hundred," one scholar envisions the lovers tallying kisses with a Roman abacus, which had separate columns for pebbles representing tens, hundreds, and thousands. When the accounting is completed, according to this vivid interpretation, the abacus is shaken vigorously, scattering all the pebbles and wiping out the score, to the confusion of those who would give the evil eye. The poem itself makes no mention of an abacus or of counting pebbles (*calculi*), but the Latin verb used here, *conturbabimus*, does denote a throwing into disorder.

Poem 5 is written in hendecasyllabic verse (meaning literally, eleven-syllable line), a form favored by Sappho and the Alexandrians and revived during the Renaissance. Among Renaissance poets striving to re-create or surpass the literary forms of classical literature, a vogue arose for using quanti-



tative meter (hendecasyllabic and others from classical Greek and Latin) in stress-based vernacular languages, especially English. As late as the nineteenth century, poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne were attempting this form, with varied success.

### POEM 7 (“YOU ASK ME HOW MANY KISSES”)

**Written:** First century B.C.E. (collected in *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*With its recurring theme of counting kisses, Poem 7 is closely associated with Poem 5.*

You ask how many kissings of you,  
Lesbia, are enough for me and more than enough.  
As great as the number of the Libyan sand  
that lies on silphium-bearing Cyrene . . .

Catullus is again mindful of “evil tongues” that might “bewitch” the couple if the number of kisses were known. This time, instead of confusing the number, the poet seems to envision stealing away with Lesbia to a foreign land where they will not be observed except by “. . . the stars, when night is silent,/ that see the stolen loves of men . . .,” and the poet wants as many kisses as there are stars.

Poem 7 is an example of the poet’s flair for blending traditional Greek meters (again, the hendecasyllabic) with his own creative use of colloquial Latin. In Latin, line 1 ends with the word *basiationes*. Some consider this a “made-up” word and assign it the playful meaning “kissifications.” The orthography is legitimate, though Poem 7 is the only poem in which the poet uses *basiationes*, and the next Roman poet to use it was the epigrammist Martial in the following century. In the fourth line, Catullus does use a made-up word, *lasarpiciferis*, or “silphium-bearing,” to describe Cyrene, an ancient city in Libya.

In the context of this passionate love poem it is significant that Cyrene, after whom the Libyan city is named, was beloved of Apollo, who carried her off to Africa and there built her a city.

### POEM 61 (“O, HAUNTER OF THE HELICONIAN MOUNT”)

**Written:** First century B.C.E. (collected in *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The contrast between this poem and the shorter lyrics underscores the poet’s artistic range.*

At 230 lines, this is, for Catullus, a long poem. In composing it, Catullus made certain modifications to the glyconic meter, giving it a lightness well suited to this joyful epithalamium, or wedding poem. Most epithalamia were meant to be sung, not spoken, and the meter lent itself to a stately but energetic processional dance. Catullus could have intended this poem to be sung, or he could have presented it privately as a gift to the wedding couple, Junia Aurunculeia and Manlius Torquatus.

By turns serious and ribald, Poem 61 provides readers with insight into the Roman moral view of marriage. Early on, he acknowledges the weeping bride’s reluctance to leave her mother’s side, but he reminds her that the dictates of Venus (goddess of love) cannot be fulfilled without her willing participation, and, moreover, “No house without thee can/ give children, no parent rest/ on his offspring; but all is well/ if thou art willing . . .” Then, lest Aurunculeia fear that she will not please her new husband, Catullus reassures her that there is no fairer woman around, and he later reassures the groom that he is handsome.

Thus the poet addresses the significance not only of the wedding night but also of the entire institution of marriage. He goes on to describe the roles that both wife and husband are expected to play throughout married life. The chief expectation in a marriage was the birth of children. Catullus notes that marital fidelity is required to ensure honor and the continuation of the family line. Lest the reader conclude that all of that responsibility is imposed on the wife, Catullus exhorts the husband at length to give up any former liaisons—including homosexual relations, which were evidently common among unmarried men of the upper classes—and cleave only to his bride.

## POEM 85 (“I HATE AND I LOVE”)

**Written:** First century B.C.E. (collected in *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*An elegiac couplet just two lines in length, Poem 85 exemplifies the poet’s ability to depict a situation concisely.*

“*Odi et amo. quare id faciam fortasse requiris. / Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*” has been translated as “I hate and love. Why I do so, perhaps you ask. / I know not, but I feel it, and I am in torment.” The final word, *excrucior*, has also been translated literally as “I am crucified.”

Poem 85 is popularly associated with a famous poem by the seventeenth century English satirist Tom Brown: “I do not love thee, Dr. Fell, / The reason why I cannot tell; / But this I know, and know full well, / I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.” More likely, Brown’s poem was actually an imitation of an epigram by Martial.

Many scholars have observed that Poem 85 embodies a particular kind of symmetry achieved by balancing opposites. There is opposition between

the negative *odi* (hate) and the positive *amo* (love); there also is opposition between *sentio* (feel) and *excrucior* (am crucified). Another set of opposites consists of the active *faciam* (I do) and the passive *fieri* (it happens). A final pair includes *requiris* (you ask) and *nescio* (I do not know). In every aspect, this brief poem is tightly balanced. Some scholars have even diagrammed what is known as chiasmic form in the poem, with lines connecting the opposites, producing something akin to a cross. At any rate, a distinctive feature of Poem 85 is that it comprises a full gamut of emotions, whereas each of the poems that explicitly mentions Lesbia is emotionally exclusive, expressing passionate love, pathetic sorrow, moral condemnation, or furious hatred.

### SUMMARY

Catullus was one of Western civilization’s greatest and most influential lyric poets. He carried forward the metrical traditions of classical Greece but adapted them to new poetic rhythms and poetic subjects, with a vastly broader range of emotional expression than his Greek and Roman models. He was instrumental in setting the standard of poetic emotional expression for more than two thousand years. His work also has importance in revealing to posterity the values and the current events of the late Roman republic in which he lived.

Thomas Rankin

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what way was Catullus a traditional poet? In what way was he an innovator?
- What was Catullus's attitude toward traditional poetic subjects, such as war and military conquest?
- Why does Catullus value physical love so highly?
- Judging by all of Catullus's poems, is physical pleasure the only interest a woman holds for him?
- In Catullus's poems about Lesbia, does he appear to dominate the woman he loves?
- Catullus's poems about Lesbia swing between emotional extremes, from love to misery to hate. Does he ever achieve emotional balance toward her?
- The poet spent most of his adult life in Rome. What was his attitude toward the countryside?



## CONSTANTINE P. CAVAFY

**Born:** Alexandria, Egypt  
April 17, 1863

**Died:** Alexandria, Egypt  
April 29, 1933

*Among the most important of modern Greek poets, Cavafy found his subject matter in the history of the ancient Greeks in the Hellenistic Age, as well as in his own life as a homosexual. Some of his poems teach humankind how to live, but they are never simple morality lessons.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Constantine P. Cavafy (kah-VAH-fee) was born on April 17, 1863, in Alexandria, Egypt, the youngest of seven brothers born to Peter-John Ioannou Cavafy and Haricleia Georgaki Photiades. Alexandria, named for its founder, Alexander the Great, was to be Cavafy's home and a primary source for his poetry for almost all of his life.

The Cavafys were a rich Greek commercial family; the father held British and Greek citizenship, as did his children. Cavafy's father and mother both came from Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey); Cavafy was to claim an ancestry leading back to the Greeks who rose to high positions under the Turkish empire. However, the family fortune was lost, and after Cavafy's father died, his mother took her younger children to England, where her elder sons were running what was left of the family business. Cavafy had some English schooling, so his English was excellent; he also knew French and Italian well and spoke a little Arabic. The family business eventually collapsed, and after five years in England, the Cavafys returned to Alexandria, where they lived in a kind of genteel poverty, no longer among the leading Greek families.

In 1881, as the result of antforeign riots in Alexandria, the Cavafys fled to Istanbul, where the mother's family still resided. Here, too, they lived poorly, with some help from the mother's relatives and money sent by the elder brothers, who had gone back to Alexandria. In 1885, Cavafy's mother and her other sons also returned. Cavafy worked as a journalist and a broker to provide some financial support for his family.

From this point, Cavafy identified himself as a Greek in citizenship as well as in culture, albeit a Greek who regarded Alexandria as his home. He lived with his mother until her death and then lived with two brothers successively; after the departure of the last brother for Europe in 1908, Cavafy lived alone for the remainder of his life, the last of his immediate family. In 1889, he began working, without pay, as a clerk in the irrigation section of the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works; after about two and a half years, he began to be paid, although his position had to be renewed periodically. Nevertheless, he served thirty years, receiving regular pay increases and praises for his work.

All this time he was writing articles and poems, although he destroyed most of his poetry, especially the earlier pieces. He found his real poetic voice rather late, and, as a result, his collected, mature poetry is not extensive. Instead of publishing his poetry in books, he printed his poems in newspapers and periodicals, later making up small pamphlets and broadsheets of his works and circulating them among his friends. Despite this limited circulation and the fact that the first collection of his poems was not published in book form until two years after his death, his reputation as a poet grew. Although his acceptance in Greece itself was slow, in time he was recognized as a major poet not only in Alexandria but also in Greece. He was introduced to the English-speaking world by the novelist E. M. Forster.

In 1932, Cavafy was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. He went to Athens for treatment, where the doctors performed a tracheotomy, and as a result

he was unable to speak. He returned to Alexandria, the city he loved so much, where he died on April 29, 1933, twelve days after his seventieth birthday.

### ANALYSIS

Cavafy's Greek is a very carefully modulated, spoken Greek, with occasional usages of *katharevousa*, or "purified." This "purified" language was a nineteenth century attempt to give the Greeks a common, official language and overcome the difficulties brought about by the many local dialects. Artificial and hardly used except in official documents, it was far more formal than the demotic (spoken) language of even the educated. However, Cavafy's uses, limited as they were, added to the gravity of his poetry, giving those poems an additional level of seriousness.

Above all, Cavafy is concrete and imagistic in his use of language, avoiding abstractions. He rarely uses figures of speech, which makes the poetry plain on its surface, but this "plainness" adds an element of the dramatic. He sometimes employs a formal pattern, often an iambic meter, as well as rhymes; these metrical patterns offer a music to the poems but they are also an element of their meaning.

The "historical" poems make up most of Cavafy's mature poetry; indeed, Cavafy felt that, other than being a poet, he could have been an historian. His poems are not, however, limited to or by historical fact; he may give the feel of an actual time and/or of a real person, but that time, that person, relates to all of his readers.

These historical poems deal mostly with the events and individuals of the Hellenistic Age, the long, brilliant but slowly declining period of Greek political power and culture in the eastern Mediterranean following the conquests of Alexander the Great; the political Hellenist world died with the suicide of Cleopatra. Some of Cavafy's works are about the Roman world, and a few treat episodes from the history of the Byzantine Empire. Some touch upon religion, although not from the viewpoint of belief; Cavafy was and remained a member of the Greek Orthodox communion but did not practice the religion. There are also love poems, obviously homosexual, intense but never presenting sexual acts.

Almost all his poems have a voice, a clear speaker. The voices are sometimes the actual voices

of the protagonists, but more often, especially in the historical poems, there is a seemingly objective presentation, as if a film camera is filming the events and people, or there is a speaker outside the events, describing calmly, but never dispassionately, what is going on or has occurred.

His refusal to make explicit and simple generalizations grounds the poems in real human experience, not in vagueness or preachiness, so that the reader experiences their meanings; that is, Cavafy asks his reader to live in his world, not simply to draw grand or simple lessons from it. The general tone of his historical poems is elegiac—a quiet lament for loss, for the ends of things, for the decline of a great civilization, for the loss of individual hopes, and, in the end, for the inevitability of historical change, which destroys.

### "WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS"

**First published:** "Perimenontas tous varvarous," 1904 (collected in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, 1961)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Two speakers, in the course of a day, talk of the collapse of their political world, unable to understand what is happening.*

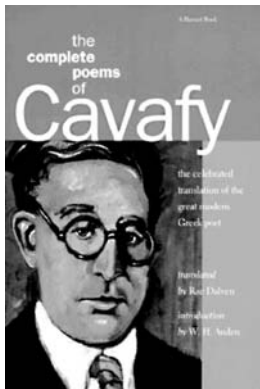
This poem is a dialogue, a short drama but deliberately without any sort of action; the first speaker asks a series of questions, which is answered by the second. Each exchange advances the time of day a little, from the morning to the late afternoon; there is no symbolic night that would somehow give closure. The dialogue has been read as reflecting the final days of the Roman Empire, attacked and overrun by Germanic invaders, although the scene and meaning should not be limited to a particular time or set of events. The poem is about Rome, but by implication about all imperial civilizations coming to their end; there is also a suggestion of the final days of the Byzantine Empire, the continuation of the Roman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean.

The speakers are citizens of a dying empire and are waiting for the arrival of the barbarians, who

will take over, by implication making real decisions and exercising real power, restoring energy if not peace. The tone of the conversation is hardly excited; the voices are of a worn-out civilization, too tired to resist, too decayed to hope. The first speaker asks, as if unaware, why the citizens are waiting in the marketplace. The second speaker replies that they are waiting for the barbarians. There seems to be an awkwardness in having the first speaker seem so uninformed, but this is not really awkward; Cavafy is illustrating the decay of interest in the civic world, an apathy that has led to ignorance.

The powers of the state are present in all their external show, ready to greet the barbarians. This grand display, however, is essentially hollow. The senate, which under the Roman Republic ruled the state, is now, under the reign of the Roman emperors, simply a ceremonial group. However, the emperor also is hollow, powerless, simply carrying out ceremonies while waiting for someone, the barbarians, to settle matters. This waiting is a humiliation, but even humiliation is no longer significant.

Disconcertingly, however, the barbarians do not arrive. The first speaker finally asks why the waiting emperor, officials, and citizens are suddenly disturbed and then depart, going back to their homes in a confused manner. In an odd way, this is the only moment in the poem where emotion seems to be felt. The second speaker replies that people from the frontiers have reported that there are no more barbarians. The empire's citizens must face their own true emptiness. There is no solution, no ending, not even violence. The air has simply gone out of everything. Most empires end in violence but not in mere hopelessness, and this is the poem's final and devastating irony.



## “ITHAKA”

**First published:** 1911 (collected in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, 1961)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem and “The God Abandons Anthony” have related themes: “Ithaka” tells readers how to live, while “The God Abandons Anthony” tells readers how to die.*

In “Ithaka,” Cavafy makes use of the story from the *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614), Homer’s epic tale of Odysseus’s ten-year struggle to return home from the Trojan War. This return is a kind of scaffolding for making a value statement about human life. The island kingdom of Ithaka becomes a symbol of completion and value, and the attempt to return should be the purpose of life. Odysseus is driven by a powerful longing for his home, a longing that ends with his arrival there; but for Cavafy, Ithaka is not a place, but a process, the journey itself, and the journey is one’s life. In brief, the purpose of life cannot simply be wrapped up by its ending; it is in living that one finds value.

The voice in the poem is, perhaps, the poet’s, speaking directly to the reader, even though that “reader” could also be Odysseus. The facts of Odysseus’s journey come into the poem only as symbols of what readers can meet on their lives’ journeys. In a sense, the voice urges readers to be moral, but it is not a preaching voice.

In the second section, the voice essentially tells readers to wish for a long life, but a life which is to be enjoyed for the pleasure of being alive, in seeing that which is new and beautiful, appealing to the senses. The readers also are urged to learn, “learn” being twice repeated in the Greek for emphasis on this part of the process.

Of course, one must always have the end, Ithaka, in mind, for it is “your destiny.” One should not hurry, however, and the end is not the end. Ithaka in itself may be “poor,” but getting there is how, in living one’s life, one will give and receive richness and meaning in that life.

## “THE GOD ABANDONS ANTHONY”

**First published:** “Apoleipein o theos Antonion,” 1911 (collected in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, 1961)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Using the story of the death of Marc Antony, the speaker here urges Antony—and, by implication, the reader—to accept one’s end gracefully and bravely.*

According to Plutarch, on the night before Marc Antony died, he heard the sounds of the retinue of his tutelary god, Bacchus, leaving the city of Alexandria, in effect telling Antony that he no longer had any divine support in his struggle against Octavian, the future emperor Augustus. That departure is the subject of Cavafy’s poem; the speaker is simply a voice addressing Antony, telling him not to mourn but to accept his fate without fear and without regret, a lesson certainly, but a lesson about how to live, not how to get to heaven.

The poem is also about the ends of the lives of the once-powerful, the end of a political structure. The suicides of Antony and Cleopatra marked the last of the long succession of the Greek-descended Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt. The Romans, who had replaced Alexander’s Greek successors elsewhere, now ruled all of the eastern Mediterranean lands. In that, the poem is treating a great social event, an event that has meanings to and affects a great num-

ber of people. However, the poem is not simply a discussion of a political event, nor does it point to a moral; it is rather a presentation of how a great soul should conduct itself when all is lost.

The speaker of the poem addresses Antony at the same moment he addresses the reader, for the poem is indeed about Antony, but, potentially, about all of its readers. The first three lines are wonderfully imagistic, beginning with the evocative hour of “midnight,” the hour when strange, in this case wonderful, things happen. The speaker then introduces “the invisible troupe” of Bacchus, whom readers can imagine even though “invisible,” with its otherworldly music and clamor. The speaker directly addresses Antony (as well as the readers), urging him not to mourn the Alexandria that is “leaving” him; the last line of the poem will repeat this same pattern, only it is the Alexandria he is “losing.” The speaker urges Antony to be brave, not in the sense of taking violent action, but by an acceptance of his fate. Do not lament, do not regret. When one has lived one’s life, one should approach death bravely and with a final enjoyment of life, in this case the sound of the unearthly music, and so say goodbye to Alexandria, the marvelous city, Cavafy’s city.

### SUMMARY

Constantine P. Cavafy’s poems based upon history and myth are his evocations of the past, but they have the purpose of telling readers not only about that past but how the past can add to and explain readers’ lives in the present.

*L. L. Lee*

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What could be Constantine P. Cavafy's purpose in choosing subject matter and people from the long distant past, in particular the Hellenistic Age, rather than more modern times? In developing this topic, consider in what way a Greek poet, writing about the Greek past, could have meaning to a modern person from another culture.
- Can the use of Greek or Roman myth be a useful practice for poets in the present world?
- In working out a "theme," a statement of meaning, for Cavafy's poems, can a reader argue that a work may have more than one theme? Must multiple themes agree with one another or can they clash?
- What is the attitude toward action, both physical and mental, in "Waiting for the Barbarians," "Ithaka," and "The God Abandons Anthony"?
- Why does Cavafy make little use of ideas or images drawn from nature?



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## PAUL CELAN

**Born:** Czernowitz, Romania (now Chernivtsi, Ukraine)  
November 23, 1920

**Died:** Paris, France  
April, 1970

*Celan's tormented poetry of the Holocaust is an effort to reach into silence to find speech; his most renowned poem, "Death Fugue," is for many the most important poem to come out of World War II.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Paul Celan (say-LAHN) was born Paul Antschel in Romania to Jewish parents, Leon and Fritz Antschel, in 1920. It was a culture-rich household. Young Celan showed early promise in linguistics, learning a number of languages as a child and adolescent and developing a love of literature. Nevertheless, in 1938 he undertook premedical studies in France. While studying at Tours, he developed an admiration for Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud, controversial French poets very much in vogue with young intellectuals.

Celan came home to the beginning of World War II and the capture and death of his parents, who refused to flee; his father died from disease in an internment camp and his mother was shot. He himself was forced to work in a Nazi labor camp in Moldavia for about eighteen months between 1942 and 1944. His anguish over the loss of his parents and his helplessness during the war informed his poetry throughout his life. His early poem "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue"), still perhaps his most widely anthologized, was probably written in 1944.

After the war was over, Celan went to Bucharest, Romania, where he worked for a publishing house and associated with Surrealist poets and artists. He made the acquaintance in these years of both experimental poets and Jewish poets who were dealing specifically with Holocaust themes, including Nelly Sachs, with whom he had a long correspon-

dence. He then stayed briefly in Vienna, finally relocating to Paris in 1948, where he studied philology, receiving his licence de lettres degree in 1950. His first poetry collection was published in Paris, and Celan was to remain there for the rest of his life, teaching German literature, publishing his poetry, and winning literary awards, including the Bremen Literature Prize and the George Büchner Prize.

Celan hated the German language and its Holocaust baggage but felt stuck with it; most of his poems are in German, although he wrote some in Romanian. His poetry from the outset was dark and difficult, becoming more so as he became older. His work became increasingly knotted and obscure as he engaged in his struggle with the language and his past. He changed his name first to Ancel, then to the French-sounding anagram of Ancel, Celan, fleeing the heritage that was his one true language. Ironically, Celan also translated the work of dozens of poets from many countries into German.

In Paris, Celan married the artist Gisele de Lestrangé, and the couple had two children. One son died in infancy. His surviving son, Eric, gave Celan a large part of the little joy he had in his life. The wonder and delight Celan experienced through his son appears in some of his last poems and in the published collection of his letters. These emotions, however, were not enough to outweigh his tragic past; he suffered constantly from depression, and at one point he voluntarily committed himself to a mental hospital, at the suggestion of his wife. He committed suicide by drowning him-



self in the Seine River sometime in April, 1970, after writing in his diary the comment, “Depart Paul.” His body was not found until the beginning of May; thus, his death date remains uncertain, although some sources list it as May 1.

### ANALYSIS

From Celan’s very first work, the Holocaust was the overwhelming center of his poetry. There was no escape from the Holocaust into art, into language, into friendship, or into love. The poems are powerfully effective in bringing back the reality of the Holocaust and making those who came after it aware of what it did to those who survived it, as well as to those who did not.

His earliest poetry is his clearest, but Celan repudiated some of his early work even when it was popular. In his earliest work, Celan shows the horror of the Holocaust directly through description and reflection. The later work becomes more cryptic, enigmatic, folded in upon itself. The later work also has a more religious or spiritual dimension, asking a distant or absent God how such a thing as the Holocaust could be allowed to happen. Early poems are more purely mournful; later poems also interrogate, reach after answers that forever remain elusive. His late poems have been slow to appear in English despite their power and Celan’s reputation because they pose almost insurmountable problems to the translator.

In Celan’s early work, rhythms often ironically underscore the horror that is depicted in the poetry. These poems are more lyrical and more expansive than the poems that came later. The later poems are a grappling with the German language, which represented the destroyer to Celan, and yet was the only language in which he felt comfortable writing. Later poems have to be pored over, as the reader learns to appreciate the invented words and the words or expressions with multiple meanings. Celan develops a private mythology of death in which colors and sounds play against blacks and silences.

His view of poetry as a desperate attempt at communication is reflected in the acceptance speech he delivered when he received the Bremen Literary Prize in 1958. In this speech, he describes poetry as “a message in a bottle, cast out and addressed to something that stands open, perhaps an addressable Thou, an addressable reality.” He

writes to connect, and yet this connection is unpredictable and unreliable. His speech is inseparable from silence. As he said when he accepted the George Büchner Prize, “Certainly the poem, the poem today shows—and this I think has only indirectly to do with the sharper fall of syntax or heightened sense of ellipsis—the poem unmistakably shows a strong bent toward falling silent.” He goes on to articulate something of his struggle as a poet, which may illuminate his struggle as a tormented Holocaust survivor: “It holds on . . . the poem holds on at the edge of itself; so as to exist, it ceaselessly calls and hauls itself from its Now-no-more into its Ever-yet.” (Translation is by John Felsteiner.)

Many critics claim that the early poem “Death Fugue” is the preeminent poem of the Holocaust. Other Celan poems, including “Todtnauberg,” have received major critical attention for their complex, difficult representation of World War II and its causes, its results, and its apologists. While some of Celan’s poetry was published in English shortly after the war, his reputation grew tremendously toward the end of the twentieth century. His importance is based on the depth of his work, its struggle with theological issues and with human evil. The intense torment of his desire to “survive” his experience, to find some reason for which life still could be lived, is present in every poem.

### “DEATH FUGUE”

**First published:** 1947, in Romanian; 1948, in German as “Todesfuge” (collected in *Nineteen Poems*, 1972)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The deaths of the Jews in the Holocaust are mourned in a musical poem that is the most frequently anthologized and taught of Celan’s poems.*

“Death Fugue,” or “Todesfuge,” remains Celan’s most popular poem, although he at one time repudiated it, refusing to anthologize it further or to read it aloud. In this poem, Celan treats his subject, the Holocaust, directly and graphically. He wrote “Todesfuge” in 1944 or 1945—critics disagree—and it was first published in 1947 in Romanian, not

German, having been translated by Celan's friend, Petre Solomon. This poem was immediately and immensely popular, as it expressed in unshakable images the Jewish experience under Adolf Hitler.

Celan indicated that the poem arose from the Nazi practice of forcing Jews to play dance tunes while prisoners were executed; in one camp where this was done, the entire orchestra was shot after the performance. His first name for the poem was *Todestango* (death tango), and it was first published under the Romanian equivalent of this name. The bleak, obsessive repetitions and the music of the lines suggest the death dance. The poem also has qualities of the musical form of the fugue, in which a theme or themes appear again and again in differing patterns. The theme of the blond- and dark-haired women, the black milk, and the death-dealer are repeated throughout the poem, the repetitions themselves creating a musical effect. Changes appear in the repeated lines, as variations on the theme.

In the poem the "we" who narrate describe the "black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening"; "we," perhaps the voiceless, annihilated Jews, are destroyed by those who should nourish them. (Translation is by Michael Hamburger.) The reader, too, is implicated, forced in mind to drink the milk and breathe the ashes of destruction. The ideal German, Aryan woman, Margarete, is compared with "ashen-haired" Shulamith, who is the erased Jewish woman. Margarete's name evokes the woman whom Faust seduces in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Faust: Eine Tragödie* (part 1, pb. 1808, pr. 1829; *The Tragedy of Faust*, 1823; part 2, pb. 1833, pr. 1854; English translation, 1838). Shulamith's name may suggest "shalom," the Hebrew word for peace, and it also alludes to the Beloved in the Song of Solomon. The speaker, the "we" or the Jews, are forced to "shovel a grave in the air" for Shulamith. Shulamith's hair is not merely covered with ashes—it is ashes; she is ashes. The women and the milk are motifs throughout the poem.

Another motif is the death-dealer, a man who "lives in the house," who is present in the enclosed society and whose pleasure is killing. He "looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air." The death-dealer is at the center of the action, playing "with his serpents" and sowing destruction around him. The repetition gathers heaviness as the poem proceeds, shifting back and forth between the

women and the man. The phrase, "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening" goes through various permutations; the last is "Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night," the German familiar *du* (you) taking the place of the objective "it." The black milk is internalized, a part of the speaker. The poem concludes with a final reference to the two women, she of the golden hair and she of the ashen hair, as the music seems to die away into silence.

In "Death Fugue," the ashes of the death camps become the air that "we" must breathe—we the speakers, as well as we the readers. "We" become saturated with the Holocaust, drink its black milk, breathe in its smoke. Knowledge of Celan's life and of the Nazi's forced execution dances only deepens the experience. The images evoke the monstrous violation that was the Holocaust, and the eerie repetitious music ensures that the images of profound, irremediable loss will stay with the reader.

### "TODTNAUBERG"

**First published:** 1970 (collected in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This difficult poem shows Celan's ambivalent reaction to Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher whose work Celan respected but who has been accused of Nazi sympathies.*

"Todtnauberg" was inspired by Celan's single encounter with one of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger. It has been the center of a fierce debate, most of which has taken place in France among contemporary philosophers, but the poem has been discussed at length in Germany, England, the United States, and elsewhere. It is a difficult poem because of its compression and allusiveness; without knowing its background the reader may find it impenetrable.

Todtnauberg was the name of Heidegger's home in the Black Mountains of Germany, and therefore this title cannot be translated, although the name's components reflect some of Celan's preoccupations: *Tod* (death) and *Berg* (mountain).

In 1966, after giving a reading, Celan was taken to a meeting with Heidegger at Todtnauberg. The two went for a walk and talked, and Celan wrote in Heidegger's guest book in his home. Then Celan went back to his hotel. That very week, he wrote the poem, identifying the time and place of composition.

Heidegger remains a major figure in contemporary theory. His reputation has been tainted by his association with Nazism, and rumors of this connection were already afloat when he met Celan. He was interested in Celan's work and Celan in his; Heidegger went to hear Celan read his work. However, the issue of Heidegger's politics remained a barrier between them.

In the poem, Celan describes his single visit with the German philosopher at Todtnauberg. The beginning seems bright with hope, as the first images in the poem are of the healing herbs, arnica and eyebright, that Celan spotted upon his arrival there. (Heidegger was impressed by Celan's knowledge of botany.) The speaker then takes a drink from a well—perhaps another symbol of hope and renewal. This is followed by his writing in the guest book, which is almost exactly what he wrote to Heidegger: "a hope, today,/ for a thinker's/ word/ to come,/ in the heart." (Translation is by Pierre Joris.) The question is: Was Celan asking for an explanation or an apology from Heidegger himself? The "thinker" is probably Heidegger.

In the poem, Celan is then driven back to his hotel, as he was after the actual visit. Upon leaving, he talks of how nature now appears: orchids, log trails, and dampness. There is a suggested unpleasantness: "Krudess," or crudeness, is shown, probably by another passenger, and the driver is witness to it. The trip continues with nature now appearing oppressive and overbearing.

As in many poems, the speaker is effaced; the event seems to happen unobserved. This poem includes only one reference to "us" and the rest is objective; Celan's later poetry tends to place the subject matter outside of the recorder. This makes the poem difficult to decipher. Is the crudeness indeed from another passenger? It is not identified. Or is it some insight into the visit that has just ended? Could it be that Celan has simply decided that no hope could possibly be justified, despite what he has just written in Heidegger's guest book?

Some argue that Celan is asking in the poem for

an apology from Heidegger that does not come. Others think that he is looking to Heidegger as a thinker who could help the healing process. If the former, Heidegger did not seem to read the poem that way; he felt honored by it.

## SNOW PART

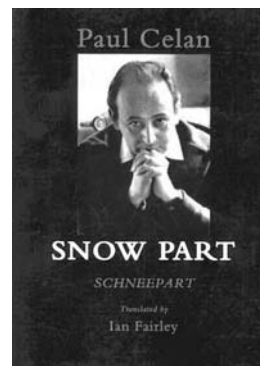
**First published:** *Schneepart*, 1971 (English translation, 2007)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*Celan's last and often most difficult poems are translated by Ian Fairley in a collection published in 2007; some of these poems were previously untranslated and unpublished.*

*Snow Part* represents Celan's last work and shows his most difficult struggles with language and silence. Some of these poems were not authorized by their writer for publication, but Celan's son allowed them to be published. This collection is for those who wrestle with philosophical and psychological questions surrounding the Holocaust. These are Celan's last words on the subject, and their knotted, gnarled syntax, their effaced narrators, and their ambiguities make them difficult to enter but rewarding of study. They are shadowed by Celan's suicide, which took place shortly after the last poems were written, but they should not be read exclusively in the light of his death, as some of them show signs of hope.

The English translation by Ian Fairley is mostly comprised of the poems included in the poetry collection *Schneepart*, which Celan wrote around the time of his 1967 breakdown. The poems show the breakdown, the falling away, of any constructed coherence the poet had brought to or read into his shattered world. Most of the poems are short, terse, and dense. A few poems express a kind of distant optimism—a shaky faith that sometime, somehow,



all will be well. In addition to the poems in *Schneepart*, Fairley also has translated and included some previously uncollected and unpublished poems as part of this collection.

The most extensive poem here and perhaps the most optimistic is “Was Naht” (“What Knits”). The poem asks what “this voice” is knitting, or drawing together, on “this side and on that,” maybe the abyss of the Holocaust, maybe death and life. The “snow needle” springs from the “chasms” and the “you” addressed in the poem is asked to come forth:

. . . tumuli, tumuli,  
you  
hill out of there, alive,  
come  
into the kiss.

“Hill” is used here as a verb, and this transformation is Celan’s, who invents the word “hugelst,” the familiar form of the nonexistent verb “to hill.”

The poem works toward some transformation and resurrection; though “worms/ inweb you,” still the globe gives you “safe passage,” and there is “a word, with all its green” that you are told to follow. (Translation by Ian Fairley.) The poem is somewhat spooky, suggesting that the dead are coming alive, being reborn into the unimaginable. Yet, it is a rebirth. Beetle and worms are weighted against words, a tree, green. The green concludes, suggesting at least a possibility of renewal.

Other poems are less accessible, and Fairley’s translations do not always open them to readers unfamiliar with Celan, as he uses words not familiar to many, such as “grimpfen” for “marshy,” and “thole” for “endurance.” Nevertheless, these last poems will be part of the Celan canon, and the explanations that Fairley provides of their sources help the student who is unfamiliar with German history to enter into their world.

## SUMMARY

Paul Celan remains perhaps the best-known Holocaust poet. His poems make the Holocaust real for those who came after it and serve as a painful evocation of its horror for those who lived through it. The tortured groping for understanding is also a search for God; these poems are religion-haunted, always asking an unreachable and silent God the question, “Why?” The knotted, difficult late poems are attempts to express the inexpressible cataclysm, as well as to make some kind of sense of it, in language and also beyond language. It is probably easiest for the reader to enter Celan’s world through the more accessible early work, such as the immensely popular “Death Fugue,” which gives some idea of his developing private mythology. However, the later work also rewards study. Celan’s dense last poems contain a compressed energy that gives even the shortest, most cryptic poems fire.

Janet McCann

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What recurrent images and symbols show Paul Celan’s preoccupation with the Holocaust?
- Are there any glimmers of light in the darkness of Celan’s poetry? What are they?
- How do Celan’s experiments with language fit in with the content of his poetry?
- What role does silence play in Celan’s poetry?
- What elements of music and dance do you see in “Death Fugue”? What relationship does the music have with the underlying theme?
- One critic said that poetry was impossible after the Holocaust. Why might one believe this assertion? Discuss Celan’s poetry in the light of this comment.
- How does Celan use his own and his family’s experience of the Holocaust in his poetry?
- How does the poetry of Celan add a dimension to what is generally taught about the Holocaust?
- Celan uses neologisms, invented words, to express ideas he could not find words for. His translators have tried to represent these with invented English words. What effect do Celan’s neologisms have?
- How does Celan’s description of the Holocaust compare with others you have read in both poetry and prose?

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## MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

**Born:** Alcalá de Henares, Spain

September 29, 1547

**Died:** Madrid, Spain

April 23, 1616

*The creator of Don Quixote, one of the most original characters in world literature, Cervantes is known for his many-sided humor and his insight into the nature of reality.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Nothing is known of the first twenty years of Miguel de Cervantes (sur-VAHN-teez) Saavedra's life except that he is believed to have been born on September 29, 1547, and christened on October 9, 1547, in the church of Santa Maria in Alcalá de Henares, Spain, a small university town a little more than twenty miles northeast of Madrid. His father was Rodrigo de Cervantes, a ne'er-do-well surgeon who moved frequently from town to town while his mother probably remained in Alcalá with the children. Rodrigo's was an old family that had seen better days, claiming hidalgo rank but now heavily in debt. Cervantes' education seems to have been limited. In 1568, he was a student in the City School of Madrid, but he may have interrupted his studies to serve in the army in Flanders.

In December, 1569, he traveled to Rome as chamberlain in the household of Cardinal Acquaviva. Restless, he soon applied for a certificate of legitimacy to prove that he came from "Old Christian stock" so that he might, with his brother Rodrigo, enlist as a soldier in the Spanish army under Don Juan of Austria, an experience that gave him a chance to visit Italian cities. He fought in the Battle of Lepanto (1571). Sick below with a fever on the battleship *Marquesa*, he insisted on being brought on deck. In command of a longboat with twelve men, he continued to fight even after being

wounded twice in the chest and having his left hand shattered, rendering it useless for the rest of his life. Later, he took part in the capture of Tunis in 1573.

He left the army in 1573, planning to return to Spain. En route, he and his brother were captured by the Turks and taken to Algiers, where Cervantes was imprisoned and enslaved for five years. After several attempts to escape, he was ransomed and returned to Madrid, where he tried to satisfy his ambitions as a writer, trying his hand at sonnets and plays for the then-burgeoning theater. Between twenty and thirty plays were rejected by producers. In 1584, with Ana de Villafranca, probably an actress, he had an illegitimate daughter, Isabel. In December of that same year, he married Catalina de Salazar y Palacios, daughter of a prosperous peasant of Esquivas, who, however, brought him little dowry.

For all of his life, Cervantes was financially insecure. After his marriage, he was burdened with the responsibility for two sisters, an illegitimate daughter, a niece, and a maidservant, besides his wife, and his attempts at a literary career met with little or no financial success. In 1585, however, he wrote and published a pastoral romance, *La Galatea* (1585; *Galatea: A Pastoral Romance*, 1833), which had considerable popular reception. In that same year, he wrote his historic tragedy *El cerco de Numancia* (wr. 1585, pb. 1784; *The Siege of Numantia*, 1870; also as *Numantia: A Tragedy*), the story of the collective suicide of a Celtiberian city encircled by the Roman army in 133 B.C.E., which chose death rather than surrender; it was successfully produced.

In 1588, he found employment collecting wheat and oil for the Spanish armada, roaming the countryside of Andalusia and becoming familiar with folk speech and folklore. Again he met with misfortune, was excommunicated for seizing wheat belonging to the cathedral of Seville, and was imprisoned for a shortage in his accounts. He wrote two sonnets on the armada that met with popular approval. In May, 1590, he applied for a post in the New World but was refused and told to seek something nearer home. He turned again to writing and in 1595 won first prize in a poetry contest. In 1598 his sonnet, "Soneto al t mulo de Felipe II," on the funeral of that monarch, attracted attention.

In 1603, after imprisonment for debt, he moved to the Calle del Rastro in Valladolid after the court transferred there; he began work on *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605; *Don Quixote of the Mancha, Part 1*, 1612; hereinafter referred to as *Don Quixote*). Published in 1605, it was an immediate popular success, not only in Spain but abroad, quickly translated and published in England, Brussels, France, and Italy. Yet fate intervened again when, that same year, a neighbor was murdered, and Cervantes and his family were imprisoned for a time, an experience that embittered him and seems to have prompted him to withdraw from the limelight until 1608, when he moved back to Madrid. In 1613, Cervantes published *Novelas ejemplares* (1613; *Exemplary Novels*, 1846), and a collection of his comedies and interludes, *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos* (pb. 1615), appeared two years later. His long burlesque poem *Viaje del Parnaso* (1614; *The Voyage to Parnassus*, 1870) was published in 1614. In 1614, a copy of a spurious and vicious so-called sequel to *Don Quixote* appeared, written by a mysterious Alonso Fern ndez de Avellaneda. Cervantes, angered, hurried to finish his own *Segunda parte del ingenioso cavallero don Quixote de la Mancha* (1615; *Don Quixote de la Mancha, Part 2*, 1620).

In his last year, Cervantes joined the Tertiary Order of St. Francis. Ill, he hurried to finish *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617; *The Travels of Persiles and Sigismunda: A Northern History*, 1619), a prose romance, which was not published until 1617, after his death. On April 18, 1616, Cervantes sent for the almoner of the Franciscan monastery to administer the last sacraments. The next day, somewhat improved, he wrote the dedication to

*The Travels of Persiles and Sigismunda*, now finished. On Wednesday, he penned a final "Farewell, witticisms; farewell, jests; farewell, cheerful friends."

Cervantes died in Madrid on April 23, 1616—on the same day as William Shakespeare. He was buried in the Trinitarian monastery, wearing the Franciscan rough habit. His remains were scattered at the end of the seventeenth century during the rebuilding of the monastery. He left no children except for Isabel, and there are no descendants today.

## ANALYSIS

The strongest and most immediate impression one gets from most of Cervantes' work is his unique gift for humor, especially for burlesque, but also for irony. Besides *The Voyage to Parnassus* and some of the interludes, there is that kind of humor in *Don Quixote*: the dubbing of Don Quixote as a knight, the tournament at the duke's, the marvels such as the talking head and the enchanted bark, the visit of Altisidora to Hell. There is also burlesque of literary conventions: "sonnets, epigrams, or eulogies . . . bear[ing] the names of grave and entitled personages" that are "commonly found at the beginning of books"; the citation of authorities; segments in the pastoral and picaresque modes; sonnets and love tales.

Irony appears in the contrast between the grandiose expectations of Sancho Panza for the governorship of Barataria and the actual experience. There is a special irony, however, in the ending of the novel, when the dreams of Don Quixote come to nothing, and he resigns himself to being just Alonso Quijano.

There are other forms of humor, such as playfulness when Cervantes avenges himself on the spurious *Don Quixote* by placing that book in Hell, and in the confusion of Don Alvaro over meeting two Don Quixotes, the spurious one and the real one. There is also a playful humor of Cervantes' account of Don Quixote's discomfiture at the amorous advances of Altisidora. There is slapstick in Don Quixote's battle with the bagful of cats, and in the trampling of Sancho under the feet of the supposed defenders against the phony attack on Barataria.

*Don Quixote*, however, transcends humor. It borrows the experiences of Cervantes: his imprisonment and slavery in Algiers, his service in the army, his wanderings in Andalusia, his associations with the underworld during his imprisonments. Out of

these experiences come most of the themes and motifs of his literary works.

Like many of his contemporaries, Cervantes had certain ideas about the nature and responsibilities of those who govern, ideas that he deftly wove into the fabric of his literary work, especially *Don Quixote*, where he frequently contrasts the ideals of chivalry with modern decadence. The tenure of Sancho as governor of Barataria gave Cervantes added opportunity to express those ideas: The common individual is as well equipped to govern as a noble; the governor should beware bribery and entreaties, be suave and mild in fulfilling duties, let the tears of the poor find compassion, and seek to uncover the truth in his or her judgments.

Cervantes also had certain standards for his literary profession, and he judged his contemporaries by those standards, especially in *The Voyage to Parnassus* and “Canto de Calíope” (“Song of Calliope”), standards that he applied not only to chivalric romances but also to the pastorals, love poetry, and comedy: verisimilitude, consistent structure, and the avoidance of supernatural elements, trivialities, and playing to the pit. He returns to this theme frequently in *Don Quixote*.

Cervantes shows an interest in, and sympathy for, the peasants, although he never idealizes them. He incorporates them into his comedies, as well as in *Don Quixote*. Sancho is such a peasant, who repeatedly quotes folk proverbs. Several of the scenes in *Don Quixote* are village or countryside scenes like those Cervantes knew in Andalusia. Not surprising, then, is the presence of the pastoral elements, notably the love story of Grisótomo and Marcela in part 1, and Don Quixote’s decision to become a shepherd when he is compelled to forsake knight-errantry. The picaresque element, influenced by Cervantes’ knowledge of the Sevillean underworld, appears in the beggar and other characters in his *Exemplary Novels*. In *Don Quixote*, it appears when Don Quixote tries to free a chain gang of galley slaves, all criminals, who then turn on him and rob him. The most sharply delineated rogue is Ginés de Pasamonte, who appears twice in the novel.

The absorbing concern of *Don Quixote*, however, is the interplay between the delusions of Don Quixote and reality. This theme probably reflects an inner conflict within Cervantes himself, considering his youthful regard for the idealism of the chivalric, then for the pastoral romance, and considering his belief in the need for charm and imagination in poetry, tempered by his developing regard for artistic truth.

This dichotomy is dramatized by the play between Don Quixote, a well-read, highly imaginative but deluded individual, and Sancho Panza, an illiterate peasant with a store of common sense and folk wisdom but with little or no imagination or vision. At the beginning, the line of demarcation is clear-cut, but as the story progresses, the line becomes more and more blurred. There are times when the grand delusions of Don Quixote are so powerful that even Sancho has his doubts; in one instance, Quixote accepts the delusion that Dulcinea is enchanted. Sancho has his own illusions—that he will become the governor of an island and wealthy. At times, the roles are reversed, as when Sancho tries to deceive Quixote into believing that three peasant girls are princesses riding palfreys, and Quixote corrects him: “They are donkeys.”

There are other distortions of reality for Sancho, as when he and Quixote encounter a carter with two docile lions in a cage, and Sancho, exaggerating their size and ferocity, flees. There are times when other people, sensible persons, also distort the truth: biased parents boast of their children, their lovers, their beloved. Persons, such as the innkeeper’s daughter who has illusions of bruises after dreaming that she has fallen from a tower, can be deluded by dreams. There is a difference, however, between their illusions and Quixote’s, the difference between a transforming faith and absurd conclusions.

At the end of *Don Quixote*, sadly, Don Quixote no longer believes in his delusions, in his visions, and again he becomes Alonso Quijano. Yet even then, the skeptic Sancho Panza will protest: “Who knows but behind some bush we may come upon the lady Dulcinea, as disenchanting as you can wish.”

## DON QUIXOTE DE LA MANCHA, PART 1

**First published:** *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1605 (English translation, 1612)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A certain Alonso Quijano fancies himself a modern knight-errant righting every manner of wrong and takes the name of Don Quixote.*

*Don Quixote* is a parody of the romance of chivalry, as Aubrey F. G. Bell has described it, “a multiplicity of heterogeneous thoughts, events, episodes, scenes, and characters” welded together in a harmonious whole and bound together by “humor and the consistency of two chief characters,” Alonso Quijano of the village of La Mancha and an illiterate peasant whom he recruits as his squire.

Quijano, or Don Quixote, as he renames himself, is close to fifty, lean and gaunt, and has spent most of his time reading books of chivalry, selling many acres of his land to buy more of these books. Finally, his wits weakened, he decides to put into practice all that he has read. He polishes old pieces of armor and doctors a piece of a helmet with cardboard reinforced with iron strips, and he sets out to find someone to dub him a knight. The innkeeper at a nearby inn humors him. Alarmed at his absence, his niece finds him and brings him back to his village, where she and the curate decide to burn Quixote’s library of more than one hundred books.

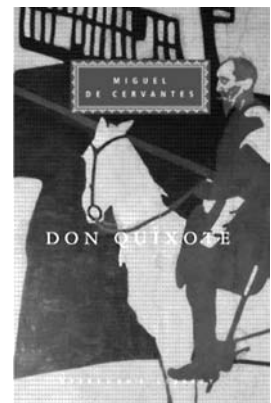
Quixote chooses as his lady a good-looking farm girl who lives nearby, Aldonza Lorenzo, whom he renames Dulcinea. Since a squire is necessary, Quixote persuades a neighboring farmer, Sancho Panza, to follow him, with promises of adventure and the prospect of winning an island, over which Sancho is to become governor. Embarked upon his second sally, they find windmills, which Quixote imagines to be giants. Despite Sancho’s warnings, Quixote charges them and is unhorsed by one of the wings. Now seeing that these are really windmills, Quixote explains them as the work of a magician who has changed what are truly giants into windmills. There follow a series of episodes, many of them derived from folklore, in which Quixote suffers setbacks. Two flocks of sheep are imagined

to be a Christian army fighting a pagan army—the bleating of the sheep mistaken for the neighing of horses, the sound of trumpets, and the roll of drums.

They meet a man on horseback with something on his helmet that gleams like gold. Quixote is convinced that it is the gold helmet of Mambrino, a famous enchanted helmet of folklore. Bearing down upon the horseman, who is a barber traveling from one village to another to perform some bloodletting for one man and to trim the beard of another, Quixote dismounts and puts to flight the barber, who abandons his headgear, which is actually a basin atop his head to protect it from the rain. Quixote picks it up and proceeds to wear it on his own head.

When Quixote and Sancho meet a chain gang of galley slaves, all criminals, Quixote concludes that now is the time to right wrongs and aid the wretched. When the guards refuse to unshackle them, Quixote charges, and in the turmoil the criminals break their chains and the guards alternate their blows between Quixote, Sancho, and the thieves. In the confusion, the guards flee, abandoning their weapons. The criminals now turn upon Quixote and Sancho and steal their clothing. Chagrined at the succession of defeats and fearing further pursuit, Quixote and Sancho retreat to the mountains of Sierra Moreno, where, Quixote reasons, there is a setting better adapted to the adventures that he seeks, a place for the marvels like those of which he has read.

There, Don Quixote meets a double pair of lovers, Cardenio and Luscinda, Fernando and Dorotea. Cardenio is betrayed by his friend Fernando, who tries to win Luscinda away from Cardenio while breaking his engagement to Dorotea. Cardenio becomes mad, a foil to Don Quixote’s madness. Don Quixote, as helper of damsels in distress, becomes involved, and the lovers are all eventually reunited. This preoccupation with love inspires Quixote to send a love letter and





a love poem to Dulcinea with Sancho, who returns to the home village. There, he joins the curate and the barber in a plot to bring Quixote back home. Dorotea will pretend that she is a distressed princess who has come from Guinea to seek redress for an injury done to her by a giant and to seek Don Quixote's help.

En route to the village, they stop at an inn, where Don Quixote goes to sleep in the garret where wineskins are kept. Dreaming that he is engaged in a struggle with a giant, he begins to slash at the wineskins. Half awake, he mistakes the wine for the flow of blood. Even after thoroughly waking, he continues the battle and begins to look for the giant's head on the floor, persuaded that he has cut it off. Sancho is so convinced that he looks for it too and assures the innkeeper's daughter that he saw the monster.

Among the persons at the inn are a student and a former soldier with a Morisco maiden. Both soldier and student inspire lengthy discourses from Don Quixote on war and peace, on the treatment of students, on the treatment of soldiers, and on the comparisons between the professions of arms and letters. Artillery, Don Quixote says, is a diabolic device by which an infamous arm may take the life of a valiant knight without his knowing from where the blow came. Peace is the greatest blessing desirable in this life. The end of war is peace.

The student's chief hardship is poverty. He must suffer hunger, cold, destitution, nakedness. The soldier is the poorest of the poor, dependent upon wretched pay, which comes late or never, and upon such booty as he can amass, to the peril of his life and conscience. On the day of battle, they place upon his head a doctor's cap to heal the wound inflicted by some bullet that may have passed through his temple or left him mutilated. It is far easier to reward scholars than soldiers, for the former may receive posts, while the latter receive any compensation that their master has a disposition to give. Men of letters argue that, without them, men of arms cannot support themselves; men of arms reply that, without them, there can be no letters, since by their efforts states are preserved. To attain eminence in letters requires time, loss of sleep, hunger, headaches, and indigestion; to be a good soldier costs as much and more. The former soldier, pressed to tell his story, is revealed as a for-

mer captive of the Moors and enslaved by them. The captive's tale has many elements derived from Cervantes's own experiences in Algiers, and Cervantes himself appears briefly as a character in the tale.

Sancho, the curate, and the barber finally get Quixote home. Back home, he is warmly greeted by the townsfolk and taken to his house, where the niece and the housekeeper care for him. Quixote and Sancho do mention the possibility of a third sally, but the author does not know what will happen.

## DON QUIXOTE DE LA MANCHA, PART 2

**First published:** *Segunda parte del ingenioso cavallero don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1615  
(English translation, 1620)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Don Quixote embarks with Sancho Panza on his third sally, which takes him into a larger and more variegated world.*

Responding to criticism of part 1 and stung by the spurious sequel to *Don Quixote* by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, Cervantes restricts this novel more to the protagonists, with fewer interpolations and digressions. Don Quixote and Sancho are never lost to view, and the bonds between them are kept strong, even when they are separated.

In part 2, there is a refinement of the character of Don Quixote and a development of his saner nature, including moments of sanity when he comments on society in a mixed picture of madness and idealism. There is a corresponding refinement in the character of Sancho, as his understanding of and sympathy for Don Quixote develop. The world of part 2 is a much expanded world in which Don Quixote travels much farther from his native village, as far as Barcelona and the Mediterranean coast. It has a wider range of characters: peasants, bandits, traveling actors, shepherds, country squires, dukes, and Moriscos. Part 2 begins about a month after the end of part 1. Two new characters are introduced: Cid Hamete Benengeli, the Moor-

ish author of *Don Quixote*, whom Cervantes frequently pretends to cite, and Sansón Carrasco, recent graduate of the University of Salamanca.

To cure Don Quixote's madness, the curate and barber consult frequently with the niece and housekeeper. Finally satisfied that he has come to his senses, they come to the house and begin a discussion of statecraft, in which Don Quixote impresses them with his good sense, until the subject turns to chivalry and he again defends the old knightly virtues found in the romances against the sloth, arrogance, and theory over practice of the present age, persuading his auditors of a return of his madness. When Don Quixote asks Sancho's opinions regarding criticisms of him, Sancho refers him to a book by Cid Hamete Benengeli, then mentions Sansón Carrasco, the student, who knows all about the book. Thus, Quixote and Sancho meet Sansón, who wins them over with flattery, although he is secretly allied with the curate and the barber, plotting stratagems to discourage Quixote as a knight.

The first concern of Don Quixote is to see his lady Dulcinea, so they set out for Toboso, Dulcinea's hometown. Stopping just outside, Quixote sends Sancho into town to find her. Sancho, however, has no idea what she looks like, so Quixote decides on a trick of his own: He (Quixote) will approach the first farm girl he meets. Don Quixote sees only a farm girl and is bewildered. Sancho is hard pressed to convince him. The girl, annoyed, rides off. Sancho explains the snub nose, mole on lip, and the odor of garlic as enchantments, an explanation that satisfies Quixote.

Arriving at a woods, the two meet Sansón, disguised as a knight. His plan is to challenge Quixote's mistress and in an ensuing clash of arms, defeat Don Quixote, who then by the rules of knighthood would be obligated to follow the bidding of the victor—in this case, to return to his village. Sansón's plot fails, and Don Quixote and Sancho leave him behind in the care of a bonesetter. In the woods, Don Quixote also meets the Knight of the Wood, who, not recognizing him, boasts of having met and defeated all Spanish knights. Further discussion reveals that the Knight of the Wood had really met the spurious Don Quixote that Avellaneda had conceived.

Don Quixote meets a traveler, Don Diego de

Miranda, with whom he engages in his favorite subject, knights-errant. Don Diego, intrigued by this now sensible, now mad man, invites him to his home. En route, they meet a carter bearing two lions in a cage on his way to the king. Ordered to get out of the way and warned that the lions are dangerous, Quixote, feeling a threat to his courage, orders the carter to open the cages. His companions retreat to a far distance, while he approaches one of the lions, braces his buckler, draws his sword, and faces the lion, which then turns around, stretches, yawns, washes its face, and then enters its cage and lies down. God upholds true chivalry, Quixote shouts, and then fixes the white cloth of victory on his lance. Quixote is a crazy sane man, an insane man on the verge of sanity, Don Diego concludes.

Later, Don Quixote meets a duke and a duchess on a hunt in the forest and is invited to their palace, where the hosts keep Quixote and Sancho for their amusement, proceeding to play a series of "jests" at their expense. At a dinner, Quixote speaks of the giants whom he has conquered and the enchanters whom he has met. An ecclesiastic at the table recognizes Quixote and answers him with a sermon about Don Quixote's experiences, ridiculing his belief in these creatures. Angered, Quixote answers with a discourse on the high and narrow path of knight-errantry that rights wrongs and does good. The duke, to irritate the ecclesiastic, offers Sancho the governorship that Quixote had promised him.

Sancho's tenure as governor of the Island of Barataria, actually a village in the duke's domain, lasts but seven days, in which Don Quixote offers him much advice, and where Sancho very astutely settles petitions brought to him. Yet since this was another of the duke's jests, the latter arranges a mock invasion, in which Sancho is badly bruised and decides that he has had enough.

Slapstick humor is provided by the account of a hunt, where Sancho, frightened by a boar, scrambles up a tree and is stuck until his screams are heard and he is freed. In another incident, Dulcinea's disenchantment requires three thousand and some lashes on Sancho's back, which Sancho performs on himself, out of sight but not out of hearing, so that he lashes the trees, with proper sound effects.



Sansón again attempts to best Don Quixote in knightly encounter, this time disguised as the Knight of the White Moon. He is successful. Quixote agrees to return to La Mancha for a year. Since he can no longer be a knight-errant, however, he will become Quixotic, a shepherd, with Sancho as Pancino, living among shepherds and shepherdesses, restoring the Arcadia of old. Back home, Don Quixote calmly announces that he is no longer Don Quixote but Alonso Quijano, the Good, and the enemy of the romances. The curate declares that Quijano, the Good, is dying but also sane. After writing his will, Quixote dies. The curate sends for a notary to witness that he is truly dead, lest some author other than Cid Hamet Benengeli try to resurrect him falsely.

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*Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos*, pb. 1615 (includes *Pedro de Urdemalas* [*Pedro the Artful Dodger*, 1807], *El juez de los divorcios* [*The Divorce Court Judge*, 1919], *Los habladores* [*Two Chatterboxes*, 1930], *La cueva de Salamanca* [*The Cave of Salamanca*, 1933], *La elección de los alcaldes de Daganzo* [*Choosing a Councilman in Daganzo*, 1948], *La guarda cuidadosa* [*The Hawk-eyed Sentinel*, 1948], *El retablo de las maravillas* [*The Wonder*

## SUMMARY

As a writer, Miguel de Cervantes aimed to move his reader to laughter. He also had serious concerns about excesses in literary art. A logical result was *Don Quixote*, a parody on chivalric romances.

An assemblage of heterogeneous elements welded together by humor and the consistency of two characters, *Don Quixote* is Cervantes' masterpiece. It depicts one of the world's best-known fictional characters, a madman who sets out to right wrongs, and a squire with much common sense but little or no vision. Between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Cervantes probes human delusions and the conflict between idealism and realism.

Thomas Amherst Perry

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways does *Don Quixote* reflect the age of Miguel de Cervantes, who began it when he was in his late middle age?
- Much of Cervantes' humor is very difficult to translate. How might a reader unfamiliar with Spanish at least partially overcome this difficulty?
- Since few people today are, like Don Quixote, victims of an insatiable love of chivalric romances, how can his story impress modern readers as much as, or more than, it did readers who were very familiar with them?
- Is Don Quixote a crazy old man? Does Don Quixote possess nobility?
- Consider the statement that Don Quixote transforms Sancho into a better man.
- What does the rich assortment of minor characters contribute to *Don Quixote*?
- Does the evidence of the novel *Don Quixote* itself confirm the suspicion that Cervantes only gradually learned what kind of book he was writing?

Show, 1948], *El rufián viudo llamada Trampagos* [*Trampagos the Pimp Who Lost His Moll*, 1948], *El viejo celoso* [*The Jealous Old Husband*, 1948], and *El vizcaíno fingido* [*The Basque Imposter*, 1948])  
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## AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

**Born:** Basse-Pointe, Martinique  
June 26, 1913

**Died:** Fort-de-France, Martinique  
April 17, 2008

*In his finely crafted poems, plays, and essays, Césaire presents images of black people who refuse to submit to the evils of racism and colonialism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aimé Césaire (say-ZEHR) was born in abject poverty in Basse-Pointe on the French Caribbean island of Martinique, on June 25, 1913. After primary studies in Basse-Pointe, he earned a scholarship that enabled him to study at the Victor Schoelcher High School in Fort-de-France, where one of his classmates was Léon-Gontran Damas, who became a famous poet and remained Césaire's close friend until his death in 1978. Victor Schoelcher High School was then the most prestigious high school on Martinique, and it was named for a white Frenchman who helped end slavery on Martinique and in all of the French colonies. Victor Schoelcher remains beloved among Martiniquais; the main library in Fort-de-France is called the Victor Schoelcher Library, and the Université des Antilles is located in the city of Schoelcher, which is near Fort-de-France. The example of Schoelcher taught Césaire the need for all people of good faith to resist evil.

In 1932, Césaire traveled to Paris to begin his university studies. While studying in Paris, he met a fellow student named Léopold Senghor, who became a celebrated poet and served as the president of Senegal from its independence in 1960 until his retirement in 1980. While Damas, Senghor, and Césaire were studying in Paris together in the 1930's, they created a literary movement that Césaire called "la Négritude" (Blackness), which was inspired by poets of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, Countée Cullen, and Jean Toomer, whose poems Damas, Senghor, and Césaire read either in the original English versions or in French translations. The basic purpose of

Négritude was to describe in French the experience of being black in a positive way that would appeal to readers of all races and nationalities and would expand the literary canon to include black writers.

In 1937, Césaire married a Martiniquais woman named Suzanne Roussy. After completing his studies, he began writing his highly autobiographical poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939, 1947, 1956; *Memorandum on My Martinique*, 1947; better known as *Return to My Native Land*, 1968), in which he described the return to Martinique of a man who has come home from France with a deep appreciation of African cultural values and of the essential dignity of all black people. In September, 1940, Césaire and his wife returned to Fort-de-France to become teachers at the Victor Schoelcher High School. Between 1941 and 1945, they taught together at this high school, and among their students were Edouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon, who later became distinguished writers, defenders of Négritude, and eloquent critics of racism.

After the Allies liberated France in 1944, Césaire entered politics. In 1945, he was elected the mayor of Fort-de-France, a position he held uninterruptedly until 2001. In 1946, he was elected as a representative from Martinique to the French National Assembly in Paris. He remained in the assembly until 1994. Between 1945 and 1956, he belonged to the French Communist Party, but he resigned from the party in 1956 to protest the Soviet invasion of Hungary. He then created a new political movement that he called the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais (Martiniquais Progressive Party). He re-

mained enormously popular in Martinique. In addition to helping improve Martinique's infrastructure, educational system, and standard of living, he persuaded the French government in 1948 to transform the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe from colonies to overseas departments of France. This change also granted the residents of these two islands full French citizenship.

Césaire's extraordinarily long political career can be attributed to his skill in managing the funds that he received from France in order to improve the quality of life for all social classes in Martinique. He knew that France wanted above all to maintain its naval base and the deep harbor in Fort-de-France. This base is militarily important because it is France's main naval base in the Western hemisphere, and the port of Fort-de-France enables France to earn a great deal of money from shipping. Césaire understood that the French government would heavily subsidize Martinique in order to maintain calm there. Over the decades, Césaire persuaded successive French governments to provide large expenditures to build roads, an international airport, petroleum refineries, schools, a university, and hospitals and to hire more than one-third of working Martiniquais as well-paid French civil servants. Césaire made sure that economic conditions improved throughout the island and not just in the capital of Fort-de-France.

Voters came to realize that Césaire was not just a writer with an international reputation who continued to write respected poems, essays, and plays. He also was a highly skilled politician who succeeded in meeting the economic and social needs of the Martiniquais, while at the same time maintaining a stable society in which the ethical and moral values of the black majority were always affirmed and respected. He helped to maintain a very stable and diversified economy in which shipping, commerce, petroleum refineries, tourism, and agriculture worked together in order to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life in Martinique.

In 2006, the ninety-three-year-old Césaire received two major honors. He was elected to the prestigious French Academy, and the name of the Fort-de-France airport was officially changed from Lamentin Airport to Aimé Césaire Airport. Césaire died in a hospital in Fort-de-France on April 17, 2008. He was ninety-four.

## ANALYSIS

While Léopold Senghor, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Aimé Césaire were studying in French colonial schools, they read textbooks that affirmed the superiority of French culture over the native civilizations of the colonized peoples. French colonial authorities arrogantly spoke of "the civilizing mission of France" and of their desire "to assimilate" those in their colonies into the supposedly superior French culture. In Paris, Senghor, Damas, and Césaire met numerous black students and writers from Africa and from various regions of the African diaspora. The term "African diaspora" refers to black people who now live in exile far from Africa as a result of the slave trade that transported their ancestors into slavery in the New World. Senghor, Damas, and Césaire took courses in Paris on African civilizations and learned a great deal about the rich cultures of Africa before the slave trade and the European colonial exploitation of the continent. They also came to realize that colonial powers had created negative images of black people as a means of justifying racism. As well-educated people who had learned to express themselves in fluent French, Senghor, Damas, and Césaire came to believe that it was their responsibility to speak for ordinary black people who needed to appreciate their profound dignity as human beings.

Both Senghor and Damas readily admitted that it was their friend Césaire who invented the term "Négritude." Césaire argued that "Négritude" meant describing the experience of what it meant to be a black person in literary works that would appeal to readers of all races. Senghor and Césaire had a white friend, Georges Pompidou, who studied with them in Paris and later served as the president of France from 1969 to 1974. Césaire and Senghor would read their poems to each other in order to make sure that these works authentically captured aspects of black culture, and then they would read their poems to Pompidou in order to find out if their poems were of universal appeal. Pompidou was not just an ordinary friend. He also possessed a deep appreciation of French poetry. He introduced Senghor and Césaire to the poetry of Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire and helped his friends realize that great poetry had to have universal appeal to readers. Pompidou's own acumen as a fine judge of French poetry was shown in his excellent *Anthologie de la poésie française* (1961), an

anthology that is still used in introductory courses on French poetry.

In *Return to My Native Land*, Césaire illustrates how he combined Négritude with what Senghor later called *la civilisation de l'universel* (the civilization of the universal). In this long and exquisite poem, Césaire describes how his extended stay in France gave him the time to appreciate the values of his own culture and to realize that he could not be anything other than a proud black man from rural Martinique. He presents this highly autobiographical poem as an illustration of the voyage of self-discovery that all people experience in their lives. This poem helps readers understand the essential difference between what they do and who they are. Although Césaire achieved international fame as a statesman and a writer, he never forgot that he was raised in the impoverished village of Basse-Pointe, where his moral values were formed in his childhood. As a black man, Césaire knew that he could authentically describe the world only from his perspective of a black man. For Senghor, Damas, and Césaire, Négritude enabled them to present positive and authentic images of black culture, while at the same time depicting readers' universal search for their own values.

## CADASTRE

**First published:** 1961 (English translation, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*A very personal collection of poems, in which Césaire explores the meaning of black culture from different countries in his understanding of the world.*

The very title of this book of poems will send readers to a French dictionary because *cadastre* is an obscure legal term that means a register of land possessions. The French word *cadastre* translates into English as the equally rare word “cadastre,”

which can also be spelled “cadaster.” Once readers have understood the meaning of the title, they begin to realize that Césaire strives to evoke many different places that were important in his life.

He naturally mentions his native island of Martinique in the poem “Ton portrait” (“Your Portrait”), addressed to Martinique. He evokes not the title of “the flower island” that is designed to attract tourists but rather the 1902 *cauchemar* (nightmare), when the Mount Pelée volcano exploded and killed more than thirty thousand people in the former capital of Saint-Pierre, leaving only one survivor. Martiniquais are still traumatized by this volcanic explosion, and the area around Mount Pelée remains largely abandoned more than a century after this natural disaster.

Each afternoon there is a report on Martinique television designed to assure Martiniquais that they do not have to evacuate their homeland within twenty-four hours. During his fifty-six years as the mayor of Fort-de-France, Césaire had to make sure that the city's emergency services were always prepared for another explosion of this active volcano.

In another poem, “Ode à la Guinée” (“Ode to Guinea”), he evokes the West African country from which so many slaves were taken in chains to Martinique. Césaire “salutes” Guinea, whose screams of suffering still “strike” him. The horrors of slavery were so terrible that they can never disappear from Césaire's understanding of the world. In a powerful poem, “Lynch” (“Lynching”), Césaire mentions this extreme crime of violence committed against African Americans by the Ku Klux Klan and other racists. In *Cadastre*, Césaire describes very powerfully the unity of suffering that tragically links blacks in Africa with blacks in the African diaspora.





## THE TRAGEDY OF KING CHRISTOPHE

**First produced:** *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*, 1964 (first published, 1963; English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Play

*This powerful tragedy explores the abuse of power by a Haitian leader who places his own interests over those of his people, who are fighting to maintain their newly acquired freedom.*

In both *The Tragedy of King Christophe* and in *Une Saison au Congo* (pb. 1966, pr. 1967; *A Season in the Congo*, 1968), Césaire explores the abuse of power by black politicians. Although Césaire recognized that there were many superb black leaders, such as his friend, President Léopold Senghor of Senegal, and Toussaint-Louverture, the founder of the Haitian Republic and the subject of a biography written by Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème coloniale* (1960), Césaire knew all too well that many black leaders in Haiti and in various African countries betrayed and exploited their people by transforming democracies into dictatorships. In *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, Césaire contrasts the simple honesty of Pétion, a successor to the heroic Toussaint-Louverture, with the demagogue and megalomaniac General Christophe.

As this play begins, the Haitians realize there is a very real threat that the forces of Napoleon I will invade Haiti in order to overthrow this new democracy and reestablish slavery. Pétion understands clearly that Napoleon I, who had reestablished slavery in the French Empire after it had been abolished during the French Revolution, wants to destroy the new democracy in Haiti. In order to resist the expected French invasion, Haitians must all cooperate in order to maintain their freedom. Pétion does not want power for himself; rather he desires to serve the Haitian people, so they can enjoy real freedom themselves.

Christophe, however, believes that he alone knows what the Haitian people truly need, and he needs to become their king so he can impose his will on them. In his mind, his vanity is more important than the survival of the fragile Haitian democ-

racy. As a manipulator, Christophe lies quite effectively to the naïve people by telling them what they want to hear. He presents the specious claim that he alone understands the horrors of slavery that they experienced before Toussaint-Louverture's slave revolt, and then he argues that Haitians need a monarchy with all its trappings and impressive traditions.

He has himself crowned king and hopes that the peasants to whom he grants empty titles of nobility will feel as much loyalty as sycophantic nobles did to King Louis XIV at Versailles. King Christophe deludes himself into thinking that the Haitian people will find their dignity not in resisting the French forces intent on destroying Haitian freedom but rather in the theatrical ceremonies and performances that he creates for their amusement. He is so egotistical that he affirms near the end of the first of this play's three acts that Haitians will owe their true heritage to him alone.

King Christophe, however, remains an ambiguous tragic hero because theatergoers and readers can never fully decide whether he is delusional because of a mental illness or if he deliberately intends to impose himself as Haiti's absolute ruler in an effort to destroy its new and fragile democracy. Although Christophe gives several eloquent speeches that well describe the intense suffering of black people as a result of slavery, he nevertheless takes unreasonable actions that endanger Haitian freedom in the face of an invasion by the French, who aim to end Haitian independence and reestablish slavery.

Although readers and theatergoers may choose to view Christophe as an evil despot, there is another possible explanation for his bizarre behavior. In his 1952 book, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967), the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who studied under Césaire at Victor Schoelcher High School, argues persuasively that the experience of racism is so traumatic that it can cause serious psychological problems. *The Tragedy of King Christophe* was written and performed shortly after Fanon's death from leukemia in 1961. Like many great dramatic works, *The Tragedy of King Christophe* permits radically different interpretations. Its title character can be seen as a petty despot, or as a victim of racism and slavery, or perhaps as both simultaneously.



## A SEASON IN THE CONGO

**First produced:** *Une Saison au Congo*, 1967  
(first published, 1966; English  
translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Play

*This political play describes how a European country manages to maintain its economic exploitation even during the postcolonial period.*

*A Season in the Congo* deals with an extremely obvious exploitation of an African country during the early postcolonial period. In 1960, Belgium very grudgingly granted independence to its colony, the Belgian Congo, in which between three million and twenty million Congolese were either executed or worked to death while toiling on Belgian rubber plantations in the colony, known as the Congo Free State until 1980 and the Belgian Congo from 1908 until 1960. After independence, the country was first named the Congo and then Zaire. In his novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899, serial; 1902, book) Joseph Conrad portrays the horrendous human suffering in the Congo Free State that modern historians have frequently compared to the Nazi Holocaust and to Joseph Stalin's mass murder of Soviet citizens.

In the late 1950's and the early 1960's, France and England began committing themselves to granting independence to their many African colonies. The crimes against humanity committed against the black Congolese by Belgium were so awful and well known that few blacks in Africa and throughout the black diaspora trusted Belgium to act properly toward the newly independent Congo. Congolese blacks became even more suspicious when Belgian colonial authorities had Patrice Lumumba arrested because of his opposition to long-term mining leases designed to enable Belgium to continue exploiting the Congo's mineral riches after independence. Strong international criticism forced Belgium to release Lumumba so he could participate in discussions aimed at transferring power from Belgium to the Congo.

In *A Season in the Congo*, Césaire contrasts the idealism of Lumumba, who wants to end completely Belgian influence in the Congo, with the overt cynicism and corruption of General Mokutu, who sells

out his country for his personal enrichment. It does not take much imagination for readers and theatergoers to understand that Mokutu represents Mobutu Sese Seko, who helped overthrow the elected government of Lumumba with Belgian military assistance. Belgian businesses rewarded Mobutu generously for his betrayal of his homeland. Mobutu allowed Belgian mining interests to continue stealing the Congo's mineral resources for decades, while helping none of the Congolese except himself and his thugs.

In *A Season in the Congo*, Césaire portrays how Belgians, with the covert support of Mokutu, fund a civil war in the Congo in order to overthrow Lumumba's government. When the United Nations, represented in this play by its then Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, refuses to intervene because this is allegedly a civil war not involving any foreign country, Lumumba flies to Moscow and Soviet military planes restore him to power. Césaire shows quite powerfully how the Congo became a pawn in the larger conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States for political influence in Africa. In this play, Lumumba refuses to meet with the United Nations' diplomat, Ralph Bunche, because Lumumba understands all too clearly that although Bunche was a distinguished African American, Bunche's loyalty was to the United States and not to newly independent African countries.

Once the United Nations abandons the Congo, the die is cast for Lumumba. Theatergoers and readers realize that it is only a question of when and how Lumumba will die. Mokutu makes arrangements for killers to execute Lumumba; when the Congolese demonstrate openly in support of the martyred leader, Mokutu instructs his soldiers to use machine guns against the demonstrators. Just to make sure that theatergoers and readers identify Mokutu as Mobutu, Césaire specifies that Mokutu wears "a leopard-skin outfit," similar to the one Mobutu liked to wear when he became the dictator of the country that he renamed Zaire.

When Césaire completed this play in the mid-1960's, he could not imagine that Mobutu would allow Belgian mining interests to continue stealing wealth from Zaire, while at the same time destroying Zaire's infrastructure, until 1997, when Mobutu was finally driven into exile in Morocco.

**SUMMARY**

Aimé Césaire is generally considered to be among the most important writers of the postcolonial era. His essays, poems, and plays explain clearly the many links between race and the colonial experience in postcolonial countries in Africa and in the black diaspora. Like his friend Léopold Senghor, Césaire realized that he needed to make his vision of race and colonialism appeal to readers of all races and countries so that all readers could learn to accept people with different views, beliefs, and experiences. It is not surprising that Césaire is beloved not just in Martinique and in Africa but also in France, whose august French Academy elected him to membership in October, 2006, the very month in which the French-speaking world celebrated the centennial of the birth of Césaire's close friend and fellow poet, Senghor.

*Edmund J. Campion*

**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- Why is it significant that Aimé Césaire presents both positive and negative images of black characters?
- What is the meaning of “Négritude” in the postcolonial era?
- Why is it essential to keep talking about race, although such discussions may make certain people uncomfortable?
- Is it possible to distinguish one's personal views of the historical Patrice Lumumba from one's reaction to the idealistic character presented in *A Season in the Congo*?

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*Une Saison au Congo*, pb. 1966, pr. 1967 (*A Season in the Congo*, 1968)  
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**About the Author**

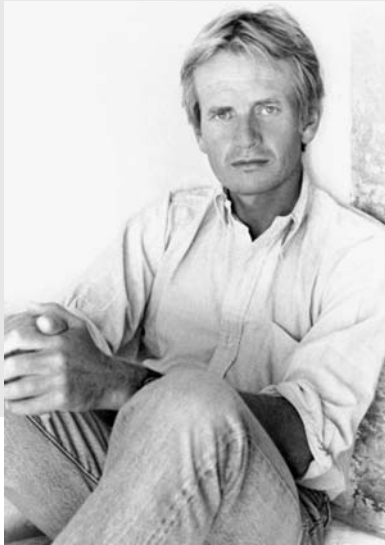
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## BRUCE CHATWIN

**Born:** Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England  
May 13, 1940

**Died:** Nice, France  
January 18, 1989

*Widely recognized as one of England's most brilliant essayists, novelists, and journalists, Chatwin wrote semiautobiographical travel books that secured for him a permanent place among travel writers of the twentieth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Bruce Chatwin was born in Sheffield, England, on May 13, 1940. His mother was Margharita Turnell Chatwin, and his father, Charles Leslie Chatwin, was a lawyer. His family regularly moved around England, but he attended a private secondary school in Marlborough. He did not pursue a formal university degree, choosing to read on his own and travel throughout the world to places that fascinated him. His writings about these locations became his first published works and established him as an expert on their history, geography, and culture.

He did, however, work for eight years at Sotheby's, the famous art auction house in London. Beginning as a porter there, he worked his way up to art consultant and picture expert and, finally, became a director and member of Sotheby's board of directors in 1965. His rise to such a high position in his early twenties has become one of the art world's most famous success stories. Though starting work still in his teens, he suggested that a newly acquired Picasso painting was really a fake. When highly paid experts were asked to authenticate the painting, they found that it was, indeed, just that. Chatwin was then offered a job as an expert in paintings. His career at Sotheby's was so successful that he was actually given, at age twenty-five, a partnership in the company, becoming the youngest man in the

history of Sotheby's to be appointed director of modern art.

In the meantime, Chatwin had used his self-taught expertise to begin his own antiquities collection. Disaster struck, however, when he suddenly lost his eyesight at the age of twenty-five by, according to his eye doctor, studying too closely the details of paintings and other art objects. Though it was considered a psychosomatic disorder, his physician suggested that he find landscapes with long horizons so that he could physiologically expand the parameters of his vision. Upon the return of his eyesight, Chatwin immediately sailed to the African Sahara and became deeply involved not only in the physical landscape but also with the nomadic tribes that traveled throughout the land and domesticated its enormous spaces. Initially, he had become interested in the relationship between the physical geography and the spiritual lives of those who lived there and how that combined into a geography of the imagination.

Chatwin never returned to the rarefied atmosphere and financially successful world of art criticism and auctioneering, preferring the nomadic existence of the people that he studied for the remainder of his life. He then began his career as a journalist in London, journeying to the most remote parts of the earth and reporting on the strange nomadic peoples who lived in places that at first seemed barely habitable. What he discovered was that those places that seemed most barren actually possessed the most elaborate, complex, and richly detailed spiritual cosmologies. Yet he also discov-

ered that even in remote areas, such as Patagonia and the outback of Australia, Western "civilization" and values had done enormous damage both to the natives of the region and to the delicate ecological balance between the human, animal, and plant life that cohabit in vital symbiotic relationships.

After becoming interested in anthropology and archaeology through his journalistic assignments, Chatwin began writing in earnest. His visit to the southern tip of South America known as Patagonia became the subject matter of his first full-length book, *In Patagonia* (1977). It was highly praised by many critics as a worthy successor to the travel journals of both D. H. Lawrence and Evelyn Waugh. It won several prestigious awards at the time, namely the Hawthornden Prize in 1978 and the E. M. Forster Award in 1979. His ability to amalgamate facts with fictional techniques raised the level of discourse from mere reportage to a serious examination of the spiritual lives of a variety of European and indigenous groups in the desolate areas of the world.

His next major critical success was a novel titled *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), which he had initially intended as a nonfictional biography about a notorious nineteenth century Brazilian slave trader, Francisco Felix de Souza. Chatwin's arrest and imprisonment as an illegal mercenary in the West African nation of Dahomey, the setting of de Souza's atrocities, became the occasion of the novel. The book mixed fact and fiction so compellingly that the German film director Werner Herzog decided to adapt it for a film. Having successfully garnered international acclaim as both a travel writer and a nonfiction novelist, Chatwin then proceeded to write a conventional novel about identical twin brothers who spend eighty years on a remote Welsh farm. That novel, *On the Black Hill* (1982), elicited high praise from such authors as John Updike, who compared it favorably to both Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway.

Chatwin's fifth book became his most renowned travel journal and received unusually high praise. *The Songlines* (1987) is a quasi documentary account of his trip to Australia to study Aboriginal culture. Again, he intermixes an adventure narrative with philosophical meditations on the damage done to the instinctual lives of the natives of the area. The book has become a virtual model for the work of other concerned students of how Western

culture has systematically destroyed the spiritual foundations of so-called savage cultures.

Chatwin's final novel, *Utz* (1988), was a product of his deep knowledge of antiquities. It documents, fictionally, the life of Caspar Utz, a Czech aristocrat who collected priceless Meissen figurines during World War II. His final work was a collection of essays titled *What Am I Doing Here* (1989), which was published posthumously. He died in Nice, France, on January 18, 1989, of a rare bone marrow cancer possibly contracted during a visit to China, but there were some reports that he actually died of complications from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

## ANALYSIS

The key to understanding the complex world of Chatwin is that he combined a number of identities that manifest themselves in his writings. He was a respected and highly accomplished novelist, a writer of critically acclaimed travel books, and a superb essayist. What distinguished him from others who write novels, travel literature, or essays was that he interwove genres in exceptionally imaginative ways. By amalgamating these genres, he was able to keep the content of his books open and multifaceted. *In Patagonia* is primarily a journalistic assignment that he recorded in ninety-seven journal entries. It documents a trip to the southern tip of South America but tells much more than the mere literal events of that trip. He consciously does not call it a diary, since that word suggests a simple recording of daily events. Since he is highly conscious of the etymologies of crucial words, he calls it a journal and stresses the connection between the words "journey" and "journal"; he thus establishes a two-part structure consisting of the physical journey and, as importantly, the spiritual journey he is taking into his own psyche as well as the spiritual history of the place itself.

The ostensible reason for the trip is to find the origin of a primitive relic that had been in his family for many years. What he serendipitously discovers is a deeper understanding of himself, his family, and the heart of Patagonia itself. By varying his methods of inquiry, he was able to bring into his book enormous amounts of information that include religious, historical, mythical, archaeological, and personal data. What emerges, then, are cultural investigations that reveal radical differ-

ences in his Eurocentric value system and the so-called primitive societies that had flourished until the arrival of Western exploiters. His physical explorations become metaphysical ones, since he is always interested in the earliest signs of some kind of common human nature. Chatwin, like writers such as the poet Ezra Pound and the fiction writer Guy Davenport, was keenly interested in how the archaic imagination reasserts itself in modern society, and how it can be used to salvage humankind from its self-destructive practices.

Since Chatwin possessed a highly attuned romantic imagination that trusted impulse and embraced risk, he believed that avenues other than fact and data contribute to a comprehensive understanding of humanity's problematical plight. His novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah* combines the facts about the life of a Brazilian slave trader with Chatwin's own starkly dramatic re-creations of the sadistic conditions under which the slaves suffered. Some critics called it a mock-heroic fantasy full of exotic, even surrealistic scenes. He uses fictional techniques to shape and organize the bare facts into cinematic images that demand attention and make their points with shattering impact.

After receiving worldwide acclaim for a travel book (*In Patagonia*) and a nonfiction novel (*The Viceroy of Ouidah*) that became a film, Chatwin produced a conventional novel, fully fictional as far as anyone knew, about identical twin brothers who spend their lives on a remote Welsh farm. *On the Black Hill* is as explicitly detailed in miniature as his earlier works were grandly exotic.

*The Songlines*, perhaps his most brilliant and respected book, revisits the genre of the travel book as it details his explorations of one of the oldest cultures of the world, the Aborigines in the dry heart of central Australia. Chatwin loved extremes and was especially enamored with where extremes converged. What interested him most were those locations, geographical and cultural, where the aggressively linear West meets the cyclical ever-renewing "primitive" imaginations of the Aborigines.

In his last major work, he returned to the nonfiction novel. *Utz* combines techniques from detective fiction with James Bond-like adventures in its depiction of lost treasures of rare miniature figurines in central Europe. Chatwin was able to use his encyclopedic knowledge of antiquities that he had collected during and after his career with Sotheby's.

## IN PATAGONIA

**First published:** 1977

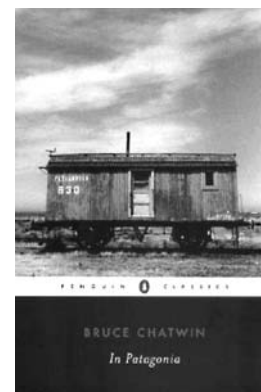
**Type of work:** Travel literature

*The narrator journeys to the southern tip of South America to authenticate a lost family relic but discovers, instead, the disturbing riches of Patagonia.*

One of the difficulties that critics had when *In Patagonia* first appeared in print was what to call it. It was certainly a travel book that treated that remote area with the same serious attention that classic travel writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Evelyn Waugh treated the locations that they wrote about. Indeed, Chatwin's style is every bit as literary and novelistic as the best of either Lawrence or Waugh, both of whom were known primarily as novelists.

Though the structure of the book is quite obviously the journal of a trip, Chatwin varies his methods throughout the work. He uses anecdotes about people he met and adventures he had and interweaves them, sometimes seamlessly, with anecdotes, adventures, and stories he had earlier read about in books and articles about Patagonia. Though the book opens with the narrator's call to adventure as he vows to find and authenticate the origin of a family relic from Patagonia (a piece of giant animal skin from prehistoric times), the narrator quietly removes himself as an active participant in the action of the venture. He prefers to record what he sees and hears and also to connect that data with the many sources he studied before embarking on his trip.

The book becomes, then, a mélange of diverse methods of presentation that include biography, autobiography, anthropology, myth, geography, religion, portrait, strange encounters, family history, and philosophical speculation. He uses all of these methods not only to describe a sense of the place but also, more importantly, to evoke the spirit of the actual geography and its relationship to the





original natives, the Araucanian Indians. While the book celebrates the diversity of that part of the world, it also, just as vividly, laments what has been lost as a result of the invasions of other cultures into its precincts. The narrator spends considerable time meditating on the ruins of Patagonia and on what it had once been as a culture unsullied by Western materialistic values.

Chatwin is also involved in the ultimate journey South; that is, a Dantean journey into hell. Indeed, at the tip of Patagonia is Tierra del Fuego, or the Land of Fire. He meets a variety of wise and not-so-wise guides as he pursues both his actual and his mythological journeys to the underworld. What keeps the reader involved is the sense that he or she is witnessing and recording a fall from the Edenic timeless innocence of the native Patagonians into the time-bound, linear world of divided consciousness—that Western imperative that separates the world into categories of sacred and profane.

Chatwin uses dramatic juxtapositions to show how a variety of European immigrants, such as the Welsh, Germans, Scots, Boers, and others, had left the stultifying atmospheres of their native countries while yet ironically and unconsciously re-creating the same cultural restrictions they thought they were fleeing. What fascinates Chatwin about this urge to find satisfaction in radically new landscapes is the suspicion that the source of this desire has a genetic basis. In chapter 44, he encounters some scientists who have been studying the migration patterns of jackass penguins: “We talked late into the night, arguing whether or not we, too, have journeys mapped out in our central nervous systems; it seemed the only way to account for our insane restlessness.” In short, the quest—the basic plot of most Western literature—can be explained as physiological law. Indeed, such questions tortured Chatwin in many of his other examinations of nomadic cultures. He suspected that humankind’s fall consisted in abandoning his natural, biologically determined impulse to move throughout the world continuously; settling into a permanent place was therefore unnatural.

Chatwin’s most convincing form of historical and anthropological inquiry always comes, however, in the form of his etymological research. Linguistically, the name “Patagonia” refers to a tribe of Tehuelche Indians who were hunters of great size, speed, and endurance. He extrapolates from these

characteristics that Caliban, of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (pr. 1611; pb. 1623), was probably a Patagonian, an idea that he pursues into Gnostic and Hermetic interpretations of Patagonia that had found their way into a number of Renaissance texts. Throughout the work, Chatwin identifies himself with the mythic Abel, the wanderer, as opposed to Cain, the hoarder of property. He also uncovers historical accounts of American heroes, such as Butch Cassidy, and British scientist Charles Darwin, whose early associations with Patagonia were disturbing and repulsive.

One of Chatwin’s most convincing arguments for looking upon Patagonia as a place of Edenic innocence is the language of one of its indigenous tribes, the Yaghans. He notes that there are no abstractions in that language for moral ideas such as “good” or “beautiful” unless they are rooted to actual things. The tribe’s territory is always a paradise that could never be improved upon, and hell was the outside world.

The last stop on this odyssey through the visionary south is the cave in which his grandmother’s cousin, Captain Charley Milward, had probably found the piece of prehistoric animal skin that became the central relic of his family. Nearing the end of his visit, he states that he has accomplished “the object of this ridiculous journey.” Chatwin leaves Patagonia convinced that humankind lost its innocence when it ceased its nomadic existence and settled into one place, and that Cain derived his reputation for villainy principally because he founded the first city.

## THE SONGLINES

**First published:** 1987

**Type of work:** Novel

*The narrator, Chatwin, journeys throughout the Australian outback in search of Aboriginal sacred sites.*

*The Songlines* is generally considered Bruce Chatwin’s masterpiece, even though its form is difficult to categorize. It certainly is an adventure story, but it is also a novel of ideas; it combines, although to a lesser extent than *In Patagonia*, many of

the identical literary, historical, and philosophical techniques, such as anecdote, biography, autobiography, anthropological case study, and other similar methods of inquiry. The book includes a previously unpublished anthropological study called "The Nomadic Alternative," which had arisen from Chatwin's journeys to Africa and South America.

Some critics have labeled *The Songlines* a meta-physical novel that interweaves Chatwin's experiences in the Australian outback with philosophical meditations on the dark future of Western civilization. It resembles *In Patagonia* in that it can be read as a long meditation upon the ruins of the prelogical civilization of the Aborigines, who now dwell in the fallen world of time and permanent location and, as a result, have lost their visionary consciousness. Their reaction to being restricted to a particular space has resulted in alcoholism of epidemic proportions.

Readers familiar with Chatwin's recurring concern will encounter it again in this work. As in *In Patagonia*, Chatwin believes that humankind's original pristine state was as nomadic travelers rather than as settlers in a permanent location. What obsessed him for more than twenty years was the destructive territorialism that permanent ownership breeds. Mircea Eliade demonstrated in dozens of books that humankind has derived its sense of the sacred from symbolic centers in which the divine and the human intersect. These points of intersection (Calvary, for example) then become permanent centers of significance or shrines around which civilizations are built. People, then, derive their identities from their proximity to permanent sacred places.

What troubled Chatwin was that the definition of the sacred among the natives of the Australian outback differs radically from Christian theologians insofar as Aboriginal sacred places cover the earth and derive their sacred status and identity from the human imaginations that "sing" them into existence. The poetry of that idea and the idea of that kind of poetry drove him to pursue an ardu-

ous and sometimes dangerous trip into one of the world's most remote and desolate areas.

The narrator finds a brilliant Russian, Arkady Volchok, an Australian citizen, to guide him through the outback. Arkady's job is to map the sacred sites of the Aborigines so that the national railroad system will not infringe upon those areas. Volchok becomes Chatwin's highly informed guide throughout the journey. What he discovers is in enormous contrast to the usual Judeo-Christian creation narrative, and the narrator's dramatic confrontation with these stunning differences becomes the energy that drives the story along. Volchok leads Chatwin through the elaborate cosmology of the natives consisting of the "Dreaming-tracks," or "Songlines," that are the footprints of the ancestors as they crisscrossed the land for ten thousand years singing the world into existence. As these ancient totemic ancestors traveled nomadically through the land, they scattered a trail of words and songs along their footprints, known as "Dreaming-tracks," which became paths of communication among the most distant tribes. By naming in song all significant objects or features of the landscape, the ancestors called all things into existence. Chatwin found that, once again, nature followed art in that the Greek word from which "poem" derives is "poesis," which means "to make or create." The "Walkabout," then, became a ritual journey to keep the land in its original condition and, thus, re-create Creation. Nothing was there until the Ancestors, the great poets and singers, brought it into existence from out of their own minds and souls. The narrator delights in both the similarities and the differences between the primary wisdom of the European Holy Grail quest ("The king and the land are one") and the core of the Aboriginal cosmology ("The song and the land are one").

Later, in talking to an ex-Benedictine Aboriginal named Father Flynn, Chatwin finally hears articulated what he has suspected for twenty years: Once people settled into one place, everything began to disintegrate. The people had to keep moving in such barren land: "To move in such landscape was survival: to stay in the same place was suicide." A good third of the book consists of Chatwin's notes from his journal, most of which are quotations from a range of philosophers, spiritual leaders, and writers such as the Buddha, Meister



Eckehart, the biblical writers, Shakespeare, Martin Buber, Arthur Koestler, William Blake, and many, many others. He concludes the book with salient quotations from Giambattista Vico, the linguistic philosopher Otto Jespersen, and finally the great German existentialist Martin Heidegger. Arkady takes him to witness the final hours of three ancient Aborigines who are dying together on their shared totemic songline behind a large rock in the middle of a desert. They are “going back” into the place of their conception so that they may become “the Ancestor.”

Chatwin was terminally ill as he finished this book, and though the book’s organization is weakest at its conclusion, his sensual writing style is as lucid as anything he ever wrote.

### SUMMARY

Few writers went to such great lengths to pursue their passionate obsessions as Bruce Chatwin. Suspecting that a nomadic existence was humankind’s original and most natural condition, he journeyed to the farthest points on the planet to test his theory. If he was not as great a stylist as the other two distinguished travel writers, Evelyn Waugh and D. H. Lawrence, he certainly brought a more precise and varied brand of scholarship to his work. Compared with Lawrence, Chatwin documented even more brutally the disastrous consequences that modern industrialization and mechanization

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does the range of writers who have praised Bruce Chatwin suggest about the man?
- If places are not sacred, and if people are too “territorial,” how can Chatwin’s awareness of a need to travel be explained?
- What evidence from your experience confirms or denies the dangers Chatwin saw in being “restricted to a particular space”?
- Chatwin rose quickly, both as an art critic and writer. Which matters more: genius or determination?
- Consider Chatwin’s body of work as an argument against too strict an adherence to the demands and limitations of literary genre.

had on so-called primitive societies. His works truly celebrate the idiosyncratic diversity of the world while simultaneously lamenting the damage done to the instinctual lives of those, such as the Aborigines, who have no methods of protecting themselves.

Patrick Meanor

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## GEOFFREY CHAUCER

**Born:** London(?), England  
c. 1343

**Died:** London, England  
October 25(?), 1400

*Generally agreed to be the most important writer in English literature prior to William Shakespeare, Chaucer retains a central position in the development of English literature and the English language.*

### BIOGRAPHY

While historians have been able to reconstruct much about the life of Geoffrey Chaucer (CHAW-sur) from the 493 documents, mostly office records, that mention him, these documents cast light only on the public life of a prominent civil servant; not one refers to him as an author. That is not to say that he was not recognized or appreciated as a poet by his contemporaries: In Chaucer's day, poetry was considered to be a leisure pastime of talented men, a valuable skill, but not in itself a career. Chaucer, too, probably thought of himself primarily in terms of his public duties rather than his poetry.

The exact date and even year of Chaucer's birth are unknown; the year 1340 has become traditionally accepted, but 1343 may be a more accurate guess. He was probably born in London, where his parents, John and Agnes, held property. His father was a prosperous wine merchant with business ties to the court of King Edward III.

Despite his middle-class origins, he was to have a distinguished public career as a courtier, soldier, diplomat, and civil servant. No records of his early childhood or schooling have survived, but in 1357 Chaucer received an appointment to serve as a page in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, countess of Ulster and wife of Edward III's son Lionel, duke of Clarence. Chaucer apparently went along with Prince Lionel's forces when England invaded France in 1359, was captured by the French, and then ransomed in 1360.

No direct evidence survives concerning Chaucer's activities between 1360 and 1366, but Thomas Speght, who edited Chaucer's works in 1598, claimed to have seen records establishing that Chaucer was studying among the lawyers of the Inner Temple, one of the four great Inns of Court. As expensive academies for the sons of rich or noble families, the inns were more convenient than the universities for a grounding in common law because of their proximity to the law courts in Westminster and also because common law was studied in three languages, English, French, and Latin, at a time when only Latin was used at the universities. A period of study at one of the inns would account for the training in record keeping and legal procedures that would have been considered prerequisite for many of the posts that Chaucer later held.

In 1366 he married Philippa de Roet, a woman well above his own social class, the daughter of a knight and sister of Katherine Swynford. (Swynford was to become the mistress and eventually the third wife of Edward III's son, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, who would become one of the most powerful men in England.) About 1367, Chaucer began working as a member of the household of Edward III and was soon advanced from the status of yeoman to that of esquire (just below a knight). He apparently had no specific duties and may have been valuable to the household in part for his storytelling abilities. He was engaged in four diplomatic missions to France between 1366 and 1370, and an extended mission to Italy in 1372 and 1373. In 1374, having been made financially indepen-



dent with a yearly grant and a rent-free house, he left the royal household and became controller of customs for the port of London. It was the first of a series of responsible administrative positions that he would hold through the reigns of three monarchs—a tribute both to his competence and to his ability to remain on good terms with the members of opposing factions.

Chaucer's busy life in public affairs was apparently never a serious obstacle to his creative work. Indeed, most of his poetry seems to have been written during the years of his most active public service, and relatively little after his retirement. Since Chaucer's works were all written before the introduction of the printing press into England and existed only in his manuscripts and copies made of them by scribes, there are no exact dates of "publication" of any of his works. Dating the works is further complicated by evidence that he left several of them unfinished and worked on others over long periods of time. Still, various kinds of evidence suggest that, by this stage of his career, he had translated much of the French *Roman de la rose* (eleventh century) into English as the *Romaunt of the Rose* (c. 1370), had written several short poems, and also had written the first of his "major minor poems," *Book of the Duchess* (c. 1370), an elegy almost certainly written to commemorate the death of Blanche of Lancaster, the first wife of John of Gaunt. The date of her death, probably in 1368 or 1369, has allowed literary historians to assign a fairly secure date to this particular work, although even in this case it may be that the poem was written well after the event.

Chaucer was sent again to France to conduct peace negotiations several times in 1376 and 1377. One of the goals of these talks may have been to arrange a marriage between ten-year-old Richard, heir to the English throne, and eleven-year-old Marie, daughter of the king of France. It has been suggested that the second of Chaucer's major minor poems, *Parlement of Foules* (1380), satirizes these discussions and was written during this period, but the date and occasion of the poem have been much disputed. He continued to hold positions of influence when Richard II came to the throne in 1377, traveling to Italy again in 1378 to negotiate with the ruler of Milan.

In or around 1380, Chaucer completed his translation of *De consolacione philosophiae* (c. 523;

*The Consolation of Philosophy*, late ninth century), by the Roman philosopher Boethius, from Latin into English. This translation, known usually by the title *Boece* (c. 1380), would have provided access to a work of great literary, as well as philosophical, value for those who could not read Latin, and it is also seen as having had a strong influence on Chaucer's own ideas. In 1382, he published *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem that includes discussions of Boethian ideas about free will and determinism. In 1385, Chaucer was allowed to appoint a permanent deputy to handle his duties in the customs office, and in 1386 he was elected to Parliament, resigning the office of controller of customs shortly thereafter. The period between 1386 and 1389 seems to have been relatively quiet, and it is thought that during these years he wrote the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), as well as several of the individual tales themselves. He was appointed to the important post of clerk of the king's works in 1389, in charge of the maintenance and supervision of several royal forests, parks, and public buildings, including Westminster Palace and the Tower of London, until 1391, when he was appointed deputy forester of one of the royal forests, still a responsible position, but far less demanding than his clerkship had been. About this time, he must have written the fourth of his major minor poems, *The Legend of Good Women* (1380-1386), and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* (1387-1392), a technical manual on the use of the astrolabe, a scientific instrument used for astronomical observations, which Chaucer says he wrote for his ten-year-old son, Lewis. When Henry IV came to the throne in 1399, he doubled Chaucer's annuity, a sign of his continued favor with the court. Chaucer's tomb in London's Westminster Abbey, which marks the first burial in what has come to be called Poets' Corner, gives the date of his death as October 25, 1400.

## ANALYSIS

One of the keys to Chaucer's continued critical success is the scope and diversity of his work, which extends from romance to tragedy, from sermon to dream vision, from pious saints' lives to bawdy fabliaux. Each century's readers have found something new in Chaucer and have learned something about themselves, as well.

Chaucer was recognized even in his own time as



the foremost of English poets. A ballad written by the French poet Eustache Deschamps in 1386, well before the works for which Chaucer is now remembered, identifies him as the “great translator, noble Geoffrey Chaucer” (probably thinking of his translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose*) and praises his work extravagantly, as do the contemporary English writers Thomas Usk and John Gower. Chaucer’s most important creative output consists of six major narrative poems, although his translations and short poems are also of high quality and considerable interest. These six are *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, his two masterpieces, and the four “major minor” poems, *Book of the Duchess*, *Parlement of Foules*, *House of Fame* (1372-1380), and *The Legend of Good Women*.

All four of the major minor poems are structured by the devices of the dramatized first-person narrator and the dream vision. In the earliest of these poems, *Book of the Duchess*, the evidently love-sick and therefore (by the conventions of courtly love) insomniac narrator reads the classical myth of Ceyx and Alcyone to help him sleep. After finishing the tale, he does in fact fall asleep and has a dream in which he follows a group of hunters on a chase. He is eventually led by a small dog into a clearing in the woods, where he comes upon a grieving knight dressed all in black. At first uncomprehending, the narrator comes to realize that the Black Knight’s grief has been caused by the death of his incomparable lady-love and the end of their blissful life together. The poet then wakes and resolves to write the story of his experience, presumably the very poem that the reader has just read. The poem is a sensitive elegy on the death of John of Gaunt’s wife Blanche, but it is also of great interest in its own right as a work of art.

While the framing device of the dream vision had long been a standard tool for medieval poets, especially for the presentation of allegorical subjects, Chaucer’s innovative grafting of the character of the narrator onto this stock technique creates additional levels of psychological and dramatic depth. The narrator’s naïve questions, the result of his failing to understand the Black Knight’s poetic and allusive speeches about his loss, provide the knight with a sympathetic, if obtuse, listener and enable him to talk his way through his grief and achieve a measure of consolation. Some critics prefer to read the poem

with a slightly different emphasis, arguing that the dreamer-narrator only pretends to be naïve in order to help the knight work through his grief to a catharsis. Some see the dramatic irony as the effect of the distance between Chaucer the author and his naïve narrator; others interpret it as a result of the distance between the sophisticated narrator and the bumbling persona that he creates for the knight’s benefit. In either case, the key narrative function—achieved through the unreliable persona who accurately records, but inaccurately interprets, the events that he narrates—is already present in Chaucer’s first extended work. This narrative persona would appear in one guise or another in all Chaucer’s major narratives and would become one of the poet’s most distinctive stylistic trademarks.

*Parlement of Foules* follows *Book of the Duchess* closely in structure if not in time. Chaucer combines the motifs of the dream vision and limited narrator with the popular conventions of the council or parliament of birds and the *demande d’amour*, the “question of love,” which calls for the solution of delicate and usually involved problems of etiquette in courtly love. As in the earlier poem, the narrator, having lamented his own inaptitude for love, reads a book (this time one on dreams) and falls asleep. After being shown around an allegorical landscape by one of the characters in the book that he had been reading, the narrator is taken to a beautiful park near the temple of Venus, where the birds of the parliament are gathered before the goddess of Nature on Saint Valentine’s Day for the purpose of choosing their mates. A female “formel” eagle is claimed by three different suitors, who present in turn their arguments for deserving her love. The issue is then subjected to a lively debate among the general assembly of birds, which eventually deteriorates into bickering and name-calling. Nature takes charge at this point and leaves the decision to the formel eagle herself, who chooses to defer her choice until next year’s Valentine’s Day gathering. The shouting of the birds at this decision wakes the dreamer, who returns to his books, still hoping to learn from them something about love. Critics have been unable to agree about the interpretation of the poem. It has been read variously as a serious debate about the conventions of courtly love, as a satire mocking those conventions, as an allegory (either about love and mar-

riage in general or, more specifically, about the suit of Richard II for the hand of Marie of France in 1377 or the hand of Anne of Bohemia in 1381), and as a political and social satire (with the birds representing different social classes).

Such diversity of critical opinion represents the norm, rather than the exception, in studies of Chaucer, and there has been even less agreement about interpretation of his two remaining major minor poems, *House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women*, at least in part because neither appears to have ever been completed. *House of Fame* presents an especially heterogeneous set of materials, recounting the dreamer's vision of the story of Dido and Aeneas in book 1, an airborne journey to the House of Fame in the talons of a talking eagle in book 2, and a visit to the House of Fame and the House of Rumor in book 3. None of the critical explanations offered of the poem's overall theme or meaning has been widely accepted, and the diversity of the different parts may preclude such unifying readings. The poem does succeed, however, as an often brilliantly comic literary experiment. *The Legend of Good Women* presents a prologue, which exists in two versions, in which the god of love demands that the narrator write a series of tales about good women to atone for his many tales about unfaithful women. The nine tales that follow are not among Chaucer's best efforts, and he apparently lost interest and abandoned the idea without completing the poem. The device of a prologue and dramatic frame enclosing a series of stories, however, may well have helped him conceive the structure of *The Canterbury Tales*.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES

**First published:** 1387-1400

**Type of work:** Poetry

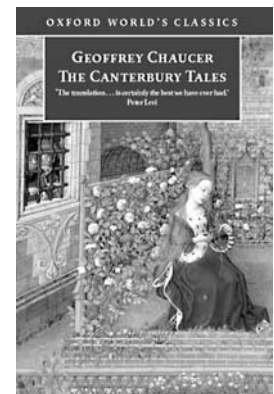
*A motley group of travelers on a pilgrimage agree to take turns telling stories to one another along the way.*

*The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's best-known and most important literary achievement, consists of twenty-four tales, some with prologues and epilogues, which range over a wide variety of styles,

subjects, and genres. The work avoids becoming merely a loose collection of unrelated stories because of Chaucer's ingenious development of the framing device of the pilgrimage and his ability to suit his diverse tales to the personalities of their tellers. Chaucer's ideas about the book apparently evolved over a period of decades, with some tales (the Second Nun's Tale, parts of the Monk's Tale) possibly written as early as the 1370's, and others (the Nun's Priest's Tale, the Parson's Tale) probably written in the later 1390's, not long before his death. The imaginative breakthrough that made the work possible—his conceiving of the framing narrative that lends coherence to the stories—seems to have occurred some time in the 1380's, when he must have written an early version of the General Prologue. The work is evidently unfinished, though the flexible nature of the framing device allows for considerable diversity of opinion as to Chaucer's final plans for the poem's overall structure.

*The Canterbury Tales* begins with the General Prologue, which opens with a lyrical evocation of springtime in England, the time for folk to go on pilgrimages to holy shrines to thank the saints for their good fortune of the past year. It then proceeds to a series of portraits of a particular group of pilgrims assembled at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, near London, where they are preparing to leave on their pilgrimage to Canterbury. The ostensibly random assemblage of pilgrims actually provides a fairly complete spectrum of the middle classes of fourteenth century England, omitting the higher nobility and the poorer peasants but representing a substantial number of the social gradations between the Knight and the Plowman. These characters are not merely representative abstractions, however, but are provided with vividly individual traits to the degree that they become distinct characters for the reader.

One of the most interesting of the characters is the unnamed first-person narrator, who meets the group at the inn on his way to Canterbury, decides



to join their party, and describes them for the reader. Critics usually call the narrator “Chaucer the Pilgrim” to differentiate him from the author, whose point of view often seems to diverge considerably from that of his mouthpiece. While the naïve narrator approves of the worldly Prioress and Monk and is amused by the villainous Shipman, the reader is able to see beyond his uncritically approving point of view to their serious faults. The technique of the unreliable narrator leaves all direct storytelling and commentary to speakers whose point of view is suspect to various degrees and calls for the reader to infer the implicit truth from the information provided. If Chaucer did not originate this method of narration, he certainly developed it to a greater extent than any other writer before him. The device of the unreliable narrator has had an influence on later narrative writing, especially in the twentieth century, that would be difficult to overestimate, and much of this influence may be traced directly to Chaucer’s own refinement of the technique.

The proprietor of the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailly, is so struck by the conviviality of the group that he decides to join them on the condition that they agree to participate in a storytelling contest, with himself as leader and judge of the contest. Each pilgrim will tell four stories, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back, and the winner will get a free dinner at the inn at the other pilgrims’ expense. The travelers agree and draw lots for the telling of the first tale. The lot falls to the Knight, who begins the sequence of tales. No pilgrim actually tells more than one tale (with the exception of Chaucer the Pilgrim, discussed below), and at one time it was thought that Chaucer must have originally planned some 120 tales (four each for thirty pilgrims). More recently, critics have argued that the scheme for 120 tales is proposed by Harry Bailly, not Chaucer, and that *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole may be fairly close to its final form. While the work is clearly not finished in a strict traditional sense (the pilgrims never arrive at Canterbury or return, and the winner of the contest is never revealed), it does seem to have a coherence of effect that is just as satisfying aesthetically as a more rigid closure would have been.

The Knight tells one of the longest and most formal tales, a chivalric romance with philosophical overtones set in ancient Thebes, treating of courtly

love and ceremonial combat among the nobility. This somewhat idealized tale of aristocratic life is followed by an abrupt change of pace when the Miller, so drunk that he can hardly sit on his horse, insists on telling the next tale, which addresses the rather less courtly love of a college student and his elderly landlord’s young wife. The tale is one of the finest examples of the fabliau, a short comic tale, usually obscene, depicting illicit love and practical jokes among lower- and middle-class characters. The tale contains a number of parallels to the Knight’s Tale and may be viewed in part as a parody of it. In addition to connecting with the preceding tale, the Miller’s Tale provides the impetus for the next. The Reeve, who bears a number of similarities to the foolish carpenter cuckolded by the student, takes the Miller’s Tale personally and repays him with another fabliau, this one about a miller whose wife and daughter are comically seduced by two college students. The Cook’s Tale, which follows, is an incomplete fragment that would evidently have been another fabliau.

These four tales follow the General Prologue and one another in all the major manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* and are collectively referred to as part (or fragment) 1 (or A). Depending on the manuscripts followed, modern editions usually recognize ten distinct parts; while the order of tales within each part is fixed, the parts themselves are not always arranged in the same order. None of the arrangements offered is without its problems, and it may well be the case that Chaucer had not decided on a final order. The most commonly followed arrangement is that of the Ellesmere manuscript, and that will be observed here, as well.

After part 2, which consists of the Man of Law’s tale of the saintly Constance and her several tribulations, come parts 3 through 5, a textually and thematically connected series that has come to be called the Marriage Group, as several of the tales seem to be pursuing what amounts to a running debate on the proper roles of the man and woman in marriage. In the Wife of Bath’s lengthy prologue, as well as in her tale, she argues that the woman should have the mastery of the man in marriage. While most of her arguments are drawn from traditional antifeminine satire, and while the stock character type of the bawdy older woman had existed since classical times, Chaucer combines these elements to original effect. Alison of Bath is devel-

oped into a much more rounded and sympathetic character than any of her predecessors, and her humorous and lively account of her methods of outwitting and dominating men seems, at least to modern readers, more feminist than antifeminist. After an exchange of fabliaux between the Friar and the Summoner (each telling a tale that degrades the other's profession), the Clerk tells a tale about a pure and virtuous wife, perhaps by way of replying to the Wife of Bath, and then the Merchant tells a tale of an unfaithful wife. After a short and incomplete attempt at a chivalric romance by the youthful Squire (whose tale does not measure up to that of his accomplished father, the Knight), the Franklin tells a tale of mutual respect and forbearance by a married couple, a tale that is usually seen as concluding the marriage debate with a compromise. Part 6, one of the more difficult parts to place in the sequence, contains the brief Physician's tale of Appius's sacrifice of his daughter Virginia and the justly renowned Pardoner's prologue and tale of greed and murder, frequently anthologized and often called one of the first great short stories in English literature.

Part 7 is the longest and most varied of the parts. It begins with the Shipman's crude fabliau and the Prioress's sentimental saint's legend. Chaucer the Pilgrim starts to recount an inept romance about Sir Thopas, but his story is so bad that he is interrupted and told to stop. Chaucer the Pilgrim then tells the Tale of Melibee, a lengthy prose sermon. After the Monk recounts a series of brief tragic anecdotes, and is also interrupted, the Nun's Priest tells his tale. The latter is based on the popular stories of Reynard the Fox, in which the fox tries to outwit and capture the cock, Chauntecleer. Chaucer fuses the genre of the beast fable with that of the mock epic, telling his story of barnyard animals in the elevated rhetoric of courtly romance, and makes the cock into a somewhat bombastic orator whose digressive and encyclopedic argument with his wife over dreams almost overshadows the plot of the story. Because of its comedy and stylistic range, the Nun's Priest's Tale is widely considered by modern readers to be the one that ought to have been awarded the prize at the end of the pilgrimage.

In part 8, the Second Nun tells a saint's legend, and the Canon Yeoman delivers an exposé of the fraudulent practices of medieval alchemists. Part 9

contains only the Manciple's version of a tale from *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 C.E.) by Ovid, Chaucer's favorite classical author. Part 10 contains the Parson's long prose sermon and, perhaps, Chaucer's Retraction, a listing and retraction of his worldly writings, which some critics see as a part of the text and an ironic advertisement for the works, and which others see as a sincere extrafictional address to posterity.

While *The Canterbury Tales* may be unfinished, the very openness of its structure has increasingly come to be seen as one of the sources of the work's complexity and richness. The poem is unified to the degree that, read as a whole, it can draw the reader into the creative process of interpretation and discovery that it demands. Yet it is designed freely enough that the tales may also be appreciated as individual works outside the context of the frame.

## TROILUS AND CRISEYDE

**First published:** 1382

**Type of work:** Poem

*Troilus and Criseyde meet and fall in love in the besieged city of Troy but after three years of happiness are separated.*

*Troilus and Criseyde* is Chaucer's longest complete work and in many ways his most polished; he wrote it at the peak of his creative powers and may well have expected it to endure as his most important literary achievement. Indeed, it has only been in the last century or two that readers have come to rank it a step beneath the incomplete and somewhat experimental *The Canterbury Tales*. His combining of the conventional setting and plot of medieval romance with realistic insights into character and motivation have led critics to debate whether it is more properly considered a sophisticated medieval romance or the first modern psychological novel.

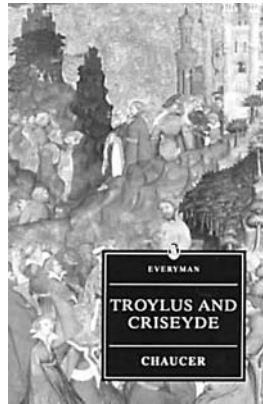
The story of the Trojan War had long been a popular one in England, partly because of the popular legend that Britain had been founded by the Trojan hero Brut. It is not surprising, therefore, that Chaucer, like many of his contemporaries,



wrote a book dealing with aspects of the Troy story. Chaucer's interest lies not so much in the Trojan War itself (though political events caused by the siege affect the personal events that constitute his focus) as in the love story between the two title characters, both members of the Trojan aristocracy. Troilus and Criseyde do not appear as characters in the original version of the legend of Troy, Homer's *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611); Chaucer's immediate source is the contemporary Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il filostrato*

(c. 1335; *The Filostrato*, 1873), but Chaucer expands the poem considerably (from 5,740 to 8,239 lines) and changes the plot and characters so freely that the poem becomes distinctively his own creation.

The bare outline of the plot is relatively simple: The young nobleman Troilus, son of the Trojan king Priam, falls in love with the widow Criseyde, suffering all



the pains of unrequited love specified in the courtly love tradition. He reveals his love for her to his friend Pandarus, who is also Criseyde's uncle and whose machinations eventually unite the two as lovers. Criseyde's father, Calchas, a soothsayer who has foreseen the Trojan defeat and has deserted to the Greek camp, arranges for his daughter to be exchanged for a Trojan prisoner and to be sent to join him. His well-intentioned effort to save his daughter from the destruction of the city has tragic consequences for the two lovers. Before leaving Troy, Criseyde promises to Troilus that she will escape and return to him; this proves difficult, however, and in time her resolve weakens, and she takes a new lover, the Greek soldier Diomedes. Troilus eventually recognizes that she has been unfaithful and, having been killed by the Greek hero Achilles, looks down from the heavens and laughs

at the mutability of earthly love as compared to the more durable joys of divine love.

The roles of Pandarus and Criseyde are far more complex in Chaucer's version than in Boccaccio's, and their treatment shifts the emphasis of the plot. Chaucer changes Pandarus from a nondescript comrade of Troilus to Criseyde's elderly uncle, creating tension between his dual roles as Troilus's friend and adviser and Criseyde's guardian. Criseyde is the most complex of the characters, and her actions are less clearly reprehensible. Whereas Boccaccio's tale is focused on Troilus, who represents the author's own disappointment in love, the role of Criseyde comes to dominate Chaucer's poem. Chaucer's greater insight into Criseyde's character creates a balance between the actions that result from the outside pressures of fate and society upon Criseyde and the actions that result from her own free will. While she does prove unfaithful to Troilus, the narrator is generally sympathetic to her, and it is difficult to see what else she could have done to survive under the circumstances in which she finds herself. As a result, critics are divided over whether her portrayal is meant to be admired and pitied or condemned as faithless and perhaps immoral.

## SUMMARY

Geoffrey Chaucer was recognized even in his own time as one of the greatest of English poets and is now regarded as the foremost writer in English literature before the time of William Shakespeare. The outstanding characteristics of Chaucer's work include its diversity—covering a spectrum of genres extending from pious saints' lives to bawdy fabliaux, from romance to tragedy—and its consistently humorous quality, allowing Chaucer to combine the serious treatment of moral and philosophical questions with a pervasively comic and entertaining style. His masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, has proven to be one of the truly inexhaustible classics of world literature, appealing in new ways to each new generation of readers.

William Nelles

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Geoffrey Chaucer is classified as a poet. Does the evidence of his work suggest that a writer with his capacities today would be primarily a short-story writer?
- The pilgrims never get to Canterbury, never return, and the storytelling contest suggested by Harry Bailly never occurs. Are not these too many defects to impose upon the reader?
- *The Canterbury Tales* is an account of a Christian pilgrimage involving several characters with religious vocations, some of them unworthy representatives, and one of them, the Parson, exceptional. Are critics and readers today ill-equipped to appreciate the poem's religious significance?
- Consider the statement that Chaucer's outrageous characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, are his most interesting ones.
- Give several examples of Chaucer's pilgrims' contentions with each other.
- Critics disagree about whether Criseyde is to be admired and pitied or she is to be condemned. Which view seems best supported by the evidence of the poem *Troilus and Criseyde*?





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## ANTON CHEKHOV

**Born:** Taganrog, Russia

January 29, 1860

**Died:** Badenweiler, Germany

July 15, 1904

*Chekhov was both a great writer of short fiction and a superb dramatist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (CHEH-kawf) was born on January 29, 1860, into a family of tradesmen in the southern Russian port town of Taganrog, a stiflingly provincial place where he spent his first nineteen years. Chekhov despised Taganrog and used the adjective “Taganrogish” for behavior that he regarded as dull, boorish, squalid, or vulgar. Chekhov’s father, Pavel Egorovich, was a despotic grocer who terrorized his wife, five sons, and one daughter, overworked them, eventually went bankrupt, and had to flee town to escape his creditors. Chekhov’s mother was the soul of kindness, but she was too timid and deferential to protect her children against an abusive father who beat his offspring, ordered them to attend church services daily, and forbade them the luxury of play. “We felt like little convicts at hard labor,” Chekhov wrote in an 1892 letter about his childhood—though he did manage to fish and swim and to become a great practical joker. It is nonetheless crucial to note that he was deprived of an adequate portion of familial love in his formative years. That may account for the central flaw in Chekhov’s character: his marked tendency to avoid emotional (and with women, physical) intimacy with family, friends, and lovers.

Chekhov’s Taganrog schooling coincided with tremendous socioeconomic revolutionary fer-

ment incited by the writings of Mikhail Bakunin, Aleksandr Herzen, and others, culminating in the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. Yet he was sheltered from these winds of modernity and showed no particular inclination, in either his youth or his manhood, to espouse or oppose radical causes. He did show early signs of the poor health that would cost him his life at the age of forty-four: peritonitis, malaria, hemorrhoids, migraines, and other ailments. His symptoms may well have indicated an early tubercular infection, with the bacillus aided in its assault on Chekhov’s body by his hard boyhood regimen of schooling, churchgoing, and shop-minding.

In July, 1876, the elder Chekhovs and all the children but Anton fled Taganrog for Moscow, leaving him to finish grammar school and giving him a theme—dispossession—that he was to feature in both *Tri sestry* (pr., pb. 1901, revised pb. 1904; *The Three Sisters*, 1920) and *Vishnyovyy sad* (pr., pb. 1904; *The Cherry Orchard*, 1908). For three years, the lad supported himself alone in his hometown, burdened with economic worries but relieved of his tyrannical father. Astonishingly, Chekhov not only took care of his own needs but also was able to send small sums to his family. He seems to have been born with a maturity and a fastidious sense of order and responsibility that never deserted him.

In August, 1879, Chekhov joined his family in Moscow and lived there for the next twenty years. He began a demanding five-year grind to become a physician, began his literary career in 1880 with comic sketches published in periodicals, and soon established himself as the de facto head of the Che-

khov household. Chekhov was enormously prolific in his early years as a writer. He wrote not only stories and short plays but also sketches, comic calendars, captions for cartoons, and even a detective novel, *Drama na okhote* (1884-1885; *The Shooting Party*, 1926). When he reviewed his achievements for a collection of his works that was published in 1899, he excluded 342 of his early titles, calling them “my literary excrement,” but only 6 of his later ones. The major source for Chekhov biographers is his enormous and often eloquent correspondence; the total number of his extant letters is about 4,400.

In June, 1884, Chekhov passed his medical school examinations and was to practice medicine sporadically during the remaining twenty years of his life, though always as a profession secondary to writing. He often claimed medicine for his “wife” and literature for his “mistress,” but the mistress had little trouble supplanting the wife. Chekhov’s medical training enabled him to become acquainted with people on diverse social levels and reinforced his sensible, pragmatic (or diagnostic) view of life. Chekhov often attested in his letters to the harmony of his two callings, claiming that familiarity with the scientific method had enriched his literary skills: “To the chemist nothing in this world is unclean. The writer must be as objective as the chemist.”

In one respect, ironically, Chekhov’s medical knowledge proved to be of no value: his care, or rather neglect, of his own health. As early as December, 1884, he suffered a serious attack of chest pains and blood spitting. In October, 1888, he wrote of his bleeding and chronic coughing fits but refused to characterize them as tubercular symptoms. Hemorrhoids afflicted him with maddening torments, but he rejected a medical colleague’s offer to remove them by an operation. Gastritis, phlebitis, migraine headaches, dizzy spells, defective vision, heart palpitations—all these were frequent afflictions.

In the 1890’s, with Chekhov established as a highly eligible bachelor, many women sought his affections, but he usually managed to evade them. A highly productive, hardworking writer, he used his writing as a shield against amorous involvements and insisted that sexual energy (of which he had very little) bore no relation—except perhaps an inverted one—to creative energy (of which he

had a ceaseless supply). He frequently linked artistic creativity with erotic self-denial. Sensual, fleshly women in Chekhov’s fiction and drama are almost invariably predatory, distasteful, and villainous, with Chekhov the author idealizing, as romantically desirable, pallid women with thin arms and flat breasts. Yet Chekhov the man, when interested in women at all, preferred them robust, hearty, and earthy. While love is the dominant theme of Chekhov’s mature work, it is almost never happily consummated love. He prefers to collapse illusions rather than fulfill hopes, to stress romantic frustration and forlornness rather than union and bliss.

Before his marriage at the age of forty-one, Chekhov had only one incontestable mistress, the actress Lydia Yavorsky. Olga Knipper was Chekhov’s second certain mistress and then his wife for what were to be his last three years. She had taken drama lessons from Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko, cofounder of the Moscow Art Theatre, and graduated into leading roles with his company, including Masha in *The Three Sisters* and Lyuba Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*. Olga was Chekhov’s opposite rather than duplicate: lusty in contrast to his asceticism, insecure and manic-depressive compared to his stable, steady temperament. By July, 1900, she was creeping into his Yalta bedroom at night, stepping on creaking stairs that awakened his old mother and spinsterish sister. The forthright, determined Olga took the initiative in courting the evasive, elusive author, and they were married on May 25, 1901.

In June, 1904, Anton and Olga traveled to the German spa of Badenweiler, near the Black Forest, to attempt his cure. On July 15 he died there, first taking the time to explain to his wife that he was about to die, then draining a glass of champagne, turning calmly to his left side, and expiring. Chekhov’s corpse was delivered to Russia in a railway wagon labeled “Fresh Oysters”—an incongruous effect that he would have loved to have used in one of his stories.

## ANALYSIS

Chekhov is the gentlest, subtlest, most modest, and most complex of the nineteenth century’s major authors. In an era when such titans as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevski were concerned with the conflict of good against evil, Chekhov primarily saw the conflict of simplicity against pretension

and found the consequences depressing. In the Russia of his time, choked with morality tales, nourished on progressive theories of history, lashed with messianic messages, Chekhov was ahead of his age, a lonely, restrained, melancholy man who remains, despite extensive scholarship and criticism, an ambiguous and elusive figure.

Chekhov is the moralist of the venial sin, seeing a soul damned not for murder, robbery, or adultery but for the small, universal faults of ill-temper, untruthfulness, miserliness, and disloyalty. In his short story "Poprygunya" ("The Grasshopper"), Olga Iranovna, who cheats on her dull doctor husband by having an affair with a mediocre, flashy painter, will not be damned for her adultery. Rather, she will be damned for her shallowness, superciliousness, and narcissism. Be truthful to yourselves and to others, Chekhov says in his art.

With his penchant for understatement and irony, Chekhov has had an overwhelming influence on both short-story writers and dramatists. He does not commit himself to any particular stance, does not issue moral imperatives to his public, and bequeaths no mystical enlightenment to a darkling humanity. Neither a prophet nor a system builder, Chekhov is a diagnostician who works unobtrusively and dispassionately but with great care and delicacy through the materials that life presents. He has no religion, accepting a world of comfortless indifference. He is averse to metaphysics and politics, romanticism and sentimentality. Unlike Tolstoy, he refuses to idealize the peasant class; he is disgusted by the crass materialism of the middle class; and he chronicles the drift, inertia, and self-pity of the upper class.

Yet Chekhov's bleak vision of modern life does not lead him to regard existence as meaningless or people as absurd. Humane to the very marrow of his bones, he never loses sight of the qualities that make his characters affective beings even when analyzing them with tough and apparently impersonal candor, and he refuses to entertain false hopes about them or their world. In what has become a famous letter, Chekhov writes in October, 1889:

I am not a liberal, a conservative, an evolutionist, a monk, or indifferent to the world. I should like to be a free artist—and that is all. . . . I regard trademarks or labels as prejudices. My holy of holies are

the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom—freedom from violence and falsehood in whatever form these may be expressed.

Chekhov is passionately addicted to what he vaguely labels "culture," by which he means an indefinable union of humanity, decency, intelligence, education, will, and accomplishment. Yet his tough intelligence tells him—and his audience—that people with these characteristics constitute a dwindling minority. Consequently, he afflicts most of his characters with such flaws as laziness, hypocrisy, pretentiousness, and self-destructiveness.

In everything that Chekhov writes, he refuses to claim for himself the brilliant, commanding powers that are often considered the essence of literary genius. His art is indirect, muted, and apparently casual; he loves to pose as an ideal eavesdropper who communicates an overheard conversation to the jury of his readers or spectators. He excludes whatever is maneuvered, subjective, theatrical, or otherwise grand. He is modest in both his matter and his manner, dealing with the pains of isolation and loneliness, frustrated ambitions, agonizing misunderstandings, forlorn hopes, boredom, and listlessness. He consistently questions the heroic mode, with his best fiction and drama representing lives from which the possibility of valor has been removed, with pathos and desolation displacing honor, admiration, or dignity. Even when his scenes are comic, the sound of heartbreak's snapping strings is never distant.

Chekhov's techniques are those of suggestion and implication, with the author meticulously invisible yet miraculously present. He has a remarkable gift for psychological acuteness and absolute control of tone—a subtle and unique blend of the melancholy, the farcical, the lyrical, and the ironic. He evokes atmosphere with marvelous skill, portrays elusive states of mind, and renders fleeting sensations and subtle effects by a masterful selection of telling details. Like a pointillist painter, Chekhov's brush strokes may seem, at close range, monotonous and drab. Yet once readers step back to view the work from the proper distance, they will respond to the irresistible art of a supreme stylist and creator of mood.

Chekhov knows that both the tragedy and the comedy of life are precisely that they do not usually

lead to a large crisis but dissolve in small ones. Thus, he avoids, in both his stories and his plays, the cumulative action that Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Émile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoevski favor. He insists on observing his characters in the apparently commonplace routine of their everyday lives.

## "THE KISS"

**First published:** "Potseluy," 1887 (collected in *The Portable Chekhov*, 1947)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Lieutenant Ryabovich, a timid artillery officer, finds his life significantly changed as the result of a kiss in the dark.*

The setting of "The Kiss" is a Russian village on a May evening. The officers of an artillery brigade encamped nearby are invited by a retired lieutenant general, the leading landowner in the village, to spend an evening dining and dancing in his residence. After describing a panoramic scene of aristocratic society, Chekhov focuses on one of the officers, Ryabovich, an inarticulate conversationalist, a graceless dancer, a timid drinker, and an altogether awkward social mixer. During the evening, he strays into a semidark room, which is soon entered by an unidentifiable woman, who clasps two fragrant arms around his neck, whispers, "At last!" and kisses him. Recognizing her mistake, the woman then shrieks and runs from the room.

Ryabovich also exits quickly and soon shows himself to be a changed man: He no longer worries about his round shoulders, plain looks, and general ineptness. He begins to exercise a lively romantic fancy, speculating who at the dinner table might have been his companion. Before falling asleep, he indulges in joyful fantasies.

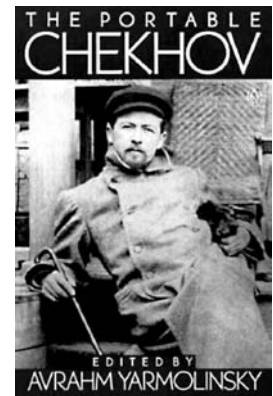
The artillery brigade soon leaves the area for maneuvers. Ryabovich tries to tell himself that the episode of the kiss was accidental and trifling, but to no avail: His psychic needs embrace it as a wondrously radiant event. When he tries to recount it to his coarse fellow officers, he is chagrined that they reduce it to a lewd, womanizing level. He imagines himself loved by, and married to, the

woman, happy and stable; he can hardly wait to return to the village, to reunite with her.

In late August, Ryabovich's battery does return. That night, he makes his second trip to the general's estate, but this time he pauses to ponder in the garden. He can no longer hear the nightingale that sang loudly in May; the poplar and grass no longer exude a scent. He walks a bridge near the general's bathing cabin and touches a towel that feels clammy and cold. Ripples of the river rip the moon's reflection into bits. Ryabovich now realizes that his romantic dreams have been absurdly disproportionate to their cause. When the general's invitation comes, he refuses it.

It is a masterful tale, as Chekhov demonstrates his vision of life as a pathetic comedy of errors, with misunderstanding and miscommunication rooted in the psychic substance of human nature. Lieutenant Ryabovich, the least dashing and romantic of men, is transformed by the kiss meant for another into a person with a penchant for an intense inner life that runs its dreamy course virtually separate from the dreariness of external reality. He inflates an insignificant incident into an absurd cluster of fantasies centering on ideal love and beauty. All the more embittering, then, is his plunge from ecstasy to despair as he recognizes, in the story's anticlimactic resolution, the falseness of his hopes, the frustration of his yearnings.

Chekhov dramatizes two of his pervasive themes in "The Kiss." One is the enormous difficulty, often the impossibility, of establishing a communion of feelings between human beings. Ryabovich discovers that he cannot explain to his fellow officers his happiness that an extraordinary event has transformed his life. Lieutenant Lobytko regards Ryabovich's experience as an opportunity to parade and exaggerate his own sexual adventures. Lieutenant Merzlyakov dismisses the lady in the dark as "some sort of lunatic." The brigade general assumes that all of his officers have his own preference for stout, tall, middle-aged women.



The other great Chekhovian theme (which he shares with Nikolai Gogol) is the contrast between beauty and sensitivity, and the pervasiveness of the elusive characteristic best expressed by the Russian word *poslost*. The term is untranslatable, but it suggests vulgarity, banality, boredom, seediness, shallowness, and suffocation of the spirit. Ryabovich, surrounded by the coarseness of his comrades, depressed by the plodding routine of artillery maneuvers, poignantly tries to rise above this atmosphere of *poslost* by caressing an impossible dream.

When Ryabovich returns to Lieutenant General von Rabbeck's garden in late summer, "a crushing uneasiness took possession of him." His exultant mood disappears as he confronts the prospect of a nonexistent reunion with a nonexistent beloved. Chekhov symbolizes Ryabovich's feelings of rejection and disillusionment. As Ryabovich touches the general's cold, wet bathing towel and observes the moon's reflection, this time torn by the river waters, he has a shattering epiphany of heartbreak: "How stupid, how very stupid!" he exclaims, interpreting the endless, aimless running of the water as equivalent to the endless, aimless running of his life—of all lives. "To what purpose?"

### "GOOSEBERRIES"

**First published:** "Kryzhovnik," 1898  
(collected in *The Portable Chekhov*, 1947)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A frugal minor official saves money to buy a country estate, which does not transform him into the benevolent landowner of his self-image.*

"Gooseberries" is one of three linked Chekhov stories treating forms of desire, in which friends on holiday in the country relate remembrances as travels take them to different locations. In "Gooseberries," the two companions, Burkin, a schoolmaster, and Ivan Ivanovitch, a veterinary surgeon, seek shelter at a welcoming friend's farm. After the

men wash up, they enter the comfortable house of their host, Alehin. There, the veterinarian agrees to tell a story about his younger brother, Nikolay, once an unhappy office-bound civil servant, who for years desires and dreams of buying a country estate near water with a garden, orchard, and, most particularly, gooseberries. Nikolay continues to dream and lives frugally, penny-pinching on food and clothes to save money. Then he marries an elderly rich widow, keeping her short of food while he banks her money in his name. The deprived lady conveniently dies, leaving him with sufficient savings to purchase the country estate.

Continuing his narrative, Ivan visits his now porcine brother on his estate and finds Nikolay a gluttonous, idle, self-satisfied landowner, convinced of salvation by such deeds of charity as treating all peasants' ailments with castor oil and corrupting them with gallons of vodka on special holidays. Such condescension, Nikolay believes, permit the peasants to love him as their gentleman landowner. A sumptuous meal ends with home-grown gooseberries, which Nikolay excitedly eats with relish, claiming them delicious without perceiving that they are sour and unripe. Ivan feels guilt that he, too, has been content with his life without realizing that behind such idle satisfaction exists the poverty and suffering of the weaker. Ending his story, Ivan warns his friends that they rest easy in the happy smugness of country comfort because they do not hear the unhappy people who bear their burdens in silence. Further disquieting his companions, Ivan predicts that life will someday remind the contented that trouble will find them.

The narrative has two parts. The frame story concerns the farm visit, where all enjoy comfort, and, after hearing the inner story about the veterinarian's brother, are warned by the storyteller about the complacency they all share as gentlemen. Ivan's epiphany reflects Chekhov's belief, stated in an 1898 letter, that leaving stressful city life for a comfortable country life can lead to a selfish existence without practicing good works. The story illumines Chekhov's insightful perception of the human condition.



## “THE LADY WITH THE DOG”

**First published:** “Dama s sobachkoi,” 1899  
(collected in *The Portable Chekhov*, 1947)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Two people married to other partners fall in love, only to face an uncertain future.*

Alternately titled “The Lady with the Dog” or “The Lady with the Little Dog,” this story treats the theme of adultery, akin to Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1875-1877; English translation, 1886), and has a heroine with the same first name. Yet whereas Tolstoy pursues and punishes his Anna for having violated a social and moral law, Chekhov treats his Anna gently and compassionately in one of his most accomplished tales.

The plot can be briefly summarized. The banker Dmitry Dmitrich Gurov, a married but philandering man of almost forty, spends a vacation alone in the seaside resort of Yalta, where he meets and skillfully seduces a much younger lady, Anna Sergeyevna, who is also on holiday without her spouse. Their first encounter leads to a furtive and sporadic liaison, with Anna, who lives in a provincial town, having trysts with him in Moscow once every two or three months. Now deeply in love, the couple faces an unpredictable future. Chekhov ends the story on this indeterminate note.

Like a play, the narrative is divided into four parts, each of which deftly dramatizes a different phase of Anna and Dmitry’s romance. The first, of course, deals with their meeting in Yalta. The reader makes Dmitry’s acquaintance as a type: He is a cold-blooded roué, contemptuous of women as easy conquests yet compulsively erotic. He approaches Anna by fondling her dog, discovers that Anna is a gentlewoman who, like himself, is bored on holiday, and finds himself charmed by her shyness, slimness, and “lovely gray eyes.”

In part 2, they walk on the pier, Dmitry kisses her passionately, they have sex back at the hotel, and Anna is immediately remorseful, while he calmly

cuts himself a section of watermelon. The alternation of Dmitry’s feelings between cynicism and lyricism recurs rhythmically. Chekhov treats Anna tenderly, rendering her shame and penitence as genuine, with her unconsciously assuming the posture of a classical Magdalen. When she leaves for home, both lovers assume that the brief affair has ended. He reflects that she overestimated his character in calling him “kind, exceptional, high-minded,” while his treatment of her was arrogantly condescending.

Part 3 starts with Dmitry busily immersed in his Moscow life and expecting Anna’s image to have filtered out of his memories within a month. Not so. He discovers himself in love with her and finds life without her “clipped and wingless.” He travels to Anna’s town to see her, only to find her house virtually sealed off by “a long gray fence studded with nails.” That is the first of a series of images of hardness, constriction, and enclosure. They symbolize the difficulty and sadness of a love between people both married to others. Anna’s town is the apotheosis of grayness: the fence, a gray carpet in the hotel room, a gray cloth covering the bed, the inkwell on the desk gray with dust.

Dmitry finds Anna attending a first night performance in the local theater. In the scene describing their reunion there, the tone of the tale assumes dramatic tension. Both speak in anxious, short, urgent exclamatory phrases. Dmitry, now realizing that his heart belongs to Anna, treats her deferentially and no longer worries whether onlookers can see them embracing. The best that they can do, however, is to meet on the theater’s narrow and gloomy staircase. She swears that she will visit him in Moscow and does so in part 4.

In Moscow, Anna and Dmitry find a pathetically marginal happiness together. Chekhov contrasts the scene in her hotel room there with that in part 2. Dmitry is now soft and considerate with Anna, no longer slightly bored and irritated. For the first time, he finds himself loving a woman unselfishly. The story’s concluding mood is one of gentle melancholia, of mingled joy and pain and sadness.



## THE SEAGULL

**First produced:** *Chayka*, 1896, rev. pr. 1898  
(first published, 1904; English  
translation, 1909)

**Type of work:** Play

*Confined to his mother's provincial estate, a young writer finds his avant-garde work and his love rejected by both his successful actress mother and a girl he adores, and his ensuing despair leads to suicide.*

*The Seagull* inaugurates the most significant portion of Chekhov's career, when his major plays were written, and marks a departure from his earlier dramatic work, chiefly conventionally structured short plays with plots developing onstage climax and resolution. *The Seagull* and subsequent plays treat onstage the characters' inner action and lives without typical plot progression, while keeping dramatic events offstage. The play's production proved a disaster. Masterfully directed two years later at the new Moscow Art Theatre, it was a recognized success as a new dramatic form.

In the play's first of four acts, a celebrated stage actress, Arkadina, returns to visit her estate with her younger lover and popular writer, Trigorin. There they, with her doddering brother Sorin and visitors, are given a performance of a murky symbolic play by her son Konstantin. Its sole performer is a neighbor girl, Nina, whom Konstantin adores. When the play is rejected by both Arkadina and Trigorin as decadent, its author is devastated.

The second act reveals the characters' unhappy lives fueled by unrequited love. Both the estate manager's wife and her daughter, Masha, are rejected by those they love: respectively, physician Dr. Dorn and Konstantin. The latter jealously loves his dismissive mother, who strives to hold onto the self-absorbed Trigorin. Angry at Nina's indifference to his play, Konstantin kills a seagull and gives it to her as a symbol of ruined hope before departing. Trigorin, meanwhile, is flattered by Nina's affec-

tionate admiration and is led to admit his success stems from his writing about mere trivialities. Observing the dead gull, he remembers a story idea about a girl who lives free as a seagull until she is seen by a man who indifferently destroys her like the shot seagull.

In act 3, after a failed suicide attempt, Konstantin berates his departing mother for remaining with Trigorin, whom he calls a hack, and is rebuffed by her. Nina, now determined to leave her family and pursue an acting career, offers her love to Trigorin and arranges to meet him in Moscow.

The final act occurs two years later. Arkadina and the still celebrated Trigorin return to the estate to find that Konstantin has become a published writer. The aging Arkadina is trying to keep a grip on Trigorin and her fading glory as an actress. Masha, ever-devoted to Konstantin, has joylessly married a schoolmaster. Nina, a lowly provincial actress who still loves Trigorin, arrives in the vicinity. Konstantin has followed her unspectacular stage career and knows that Trigorin had left her with a child who died. Nina, still believing in her art, meets Konstantin, declines his urgent invitation to stay with him, and departs to continue her acting. Without her, Konstantin determines that his art and recognition are meaningless and shoots himself.

One underlying theme of the play is each character's isolation and failure to achieve his or her dreams. Chekhov employs such dialogue devices as pauses, fragments of speech, and soliloquies to reveal a character's inner self. Another thematic thread is the nature of art and artists. Four characters are artists reflecting individual attitudes. Konstantin's working desire for new forms is undeveloped. His work is anathema both to his mother, whose fading career remains rooted in pseudo-realistic theater, and to Trigorin, who aspires to treat vital issues but remains a popular hack. Despite Trigorin's desertion and her plodding career, Nina rejects her family's security and Konstantin to hold true to her art. The pervasive seagull metaphor represents not only Nina but the failed hopes and discontented lives of all the characters.

## THE THREE SISTERS

**First produced:** *Tri sestry*, 1901 (first published, 1901; English translation, 1920)

**Type of work:** Play

*The Prozorov family of three sisters and one brother lead lives of quiet desperation in a provincial town.*

Nowhere in modern drama is there greater majesty or fuller substance than in *The Three Sisters*. These qualities issue from Chekhov's incomparable ability to make physical data yield moral truth, domestic irritation dilate into the great cage of cosmic suffering, and a single moment beat with the immeasurability of all time. Almost nothing "happens" in the play: His characters transmit no urgency, create no suspense, feel little tension. Yet *The Three Sisters* offers a psychic and spiritual eventfulness so dense, yet also so delicately organized, as to make the work one of the miracles of drama and certainly Chekhov's masterpiece. No play has ever conveyed more subtly the transitory beauty and sadness of the passing moment. None has ever expressed more shatteringly the defeat of sensitive minds and generous hearts, the pathos of frustrated personal aspirations.

The play's structure is woven of several separate strands of narrative, resulting in a complex dramatic texture. A highly educated Moscow family, the Prozorovs, were geographically transplanted eleven years earlier than the beginning action when the father, a brigadier general, took command of an artillery unit in a provincial town. The first scene opens on the first anniversary of his death, with the three daughters and one son living in their inherited house but wishing they were in Moscow. That city is seen by them through a haze of delusions as a center of sunshine, refinement, and sensibility, in contrast to the banality, stupidity, and dreariness of their town. This vision of Moscow is, of course, a mythical opiate. The Prozorovs never move there, preparing the reader/spectator for the play's principal motifs of nonattainment and nonfulfillment.

Olga, the eldest sister, teaches school; Masha has married a dull local teacher, Kulygin; Irina, the

youngest, has a position in the telegraph office; Andrey, the family's pride, is expected to continue his studies at Moscow University and become a professor. All four are wonderfully reared, highly educated, sensitive, and unhappily stranded in a mediocre small town where only the officers of the garrison are of their class. Chekhov concentrates on the wasting away of this superior family in a coarse and sordid environment.

This milieu is personified by Natasha, a local girl whom Andrey marries, a pretentious, bourgeois, vicious, and vengeful person who is Chekhov's most malevolent character. She dispossesses the Prozorovs by steady degrees in the drama's course, taking control of the house's mortgage money and shifting the family from room to room, until she has finally evicted them from the house. In the last act, Olga is installed in a municipal apartment, Irina has moved to a furnished room, and even Andrey is ejected from his section of the residence to make way for a baby sired by Natasha's lover, Protopopov.

In typically Chekhovian manner, the conflict is usually kept indistinct. Andrey and his sisters are too polite or too deeply involved in their own problems or simply too weak to confront Natasha directly. Nevertheless, the contrast between the town's natives (not only Natasha but also Kulygin and, offstage, Protopopov) and the Muscovites (the Prozorovs and certain artillery officers) provides the basic theme of the clash between culture and vulgarity. The Prozorovs permit the dreary town to brutalize them. Masha tries to find happiness through a liaison with a lieutenant colonel, Vershinin, also unhappily married; then his brigade must leave, and she is again sentenced to her unbearable pedant of a husband. Olga, doomed to spinsterhood, suffers from migraine headaches. Andrey, drained of his youthful vigor, resigns himself to a minor bureaucratic post and loses heavily at cards.

Irina's story is more complicated: The most beautiful of the sisters, she is desired by a lieutenant, Baron Tusenbach, a cheerful soul despite a gloomy philosophy of life, and Captain Solyony, a disagreeable, menacing bully. For a while, Irina is tormented by dreams of Moscow and a perfect romance. Then she resigns herself to marrying the likable, decent Tusenbach, who has abandoned his commission to seek salvation through hard work in

a brickyard, even though she does not love him. In act 4, however, Solyony, having sworn that if he cannot have Irina, nobody else shall, challenges Tusenbach to a duel and kills him.

Everything fails the Prozorovs. As their culture fades, Masha forgets her piano-playing skills, Irina is perpetually tired, Andrey trails through life aimlessly—the forces of darkness move in on them like carrion crows, slowly and relentlessly withdrawing all that once promised them contentment. The question that the play finally asks, articulated by Olga in her last speech, is whether the Prozorovs' defeat has any ultimate meaning. According to Vershinin, it does: He has faith in the future, whose generations will be more productive and progressive, as civilization marches toward perfection. In a friendly debate, Tusenbach disagrees:

Life will be just the same as ever not merely in a couple of hundred years' time, but in a million years. Life . . . follows its own laws, which don't concern us, which we can't discover anyway.

Even gloomier is Chebutykin, a sixty-year-old physician who had once been in love with the mother of the Prozorov family and who has transferred that affection to Irina, having installed himself in the family circle. He takes refuge from his disappointment through alcohol, neglect of his medical knowledge, and a profound nihilism.

In the last act, Chebutykin does not raise a finger to prevent the Solyony-Tusenbach duel—he sees everything that comes to hurt the Prozorovs but never intervenes. With the family's hopes shattered, the sisters huddle together, statuesque, motionless, defeated, listening as Olga muses, “if we wait a little longer, we shall find out why we live, why we suffer. . . . Oh, if we only knew, if only we knew!”

## THE CHERRY ORCHARD

**First produced:** *Vishnyovy sad*, 1904 (first published, 1904; English translation, 1908)

**Type of work:** Play

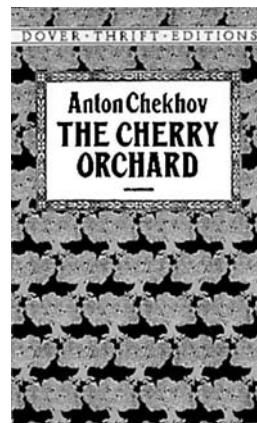
*The decline of the aristocracy is symbolized by Lyuba Ranevskaya's loss of her cherry orchard.*

Whereas Chekhov depicts the defeat of the cultured elite in one of drama's saddest works, *The Three Sisters*, he examines the same problem from a more comic-ironic view in *The Cherry Orchard*. While Konstantin Stanislavsky staged the premiere of the play as a somber tragedy, Chekhov insisted, in letters about this production, on calling it “not a

drama but a comedy, in places almost a farce.” Nonetheless, it has most often been performed as pathetic drama. Surely, its subjects are depressingly serious: the loss of an ancestral estate; the rise of a semiliterate, ambitious middle class to replace the aristocracy; the dispossession and scattering of the Ranevskaya family and household; and the guilt and remorse of Lyuba, who cannot

resist her attachment to an unworthy man. The play's concerns are loss, the failure to communicate and comprehend, and the death of an old order.

*The Cherry Orchard* presents a dilemma: The Ranevskaya family, which includes landowner Lyuboff (Lyuba) Andreeva Ranevskaya, her brother Gayev, daughter Anya, and adopted daughter Varya, faces two alternatives that it finds equally unacceptable: either to lose the estate on the auction block because of its unpaid mortgage, or to destroy its uniqueness by chopping down its cherry trees and razing the residence to replace it with summer cottages. The second option, which will be exercised by the businessman who buys the orchard at auction, Yermolay Alexeevich Lopahin,



offers what the gentry considers a vulgar economic solution at the expense of its cherished values of beauty and inspiration. In this situation, Mme Ranevskaya chooses not to act, thereby forfeiting the property.

Before the reader/spectator laments the losses dramatized, it would be well to understand precisely what is being lost, and why. Chekhov softens the act of dispossession by qualifying sympathy for the victims and complicating the character of the despoiler. Certainly, both Lyuba and Gayev, while charming and well intentioned, are a good deal less pathetic and attractive than their predecessors, the Prozorovs. Lyuba is irresponsible, negligent, and self-destructive. Her indolence and uncontrollable extravagance bring her house tumbling down. Granted, to her the orchard emblemizes childhood innocence, the elegance of the old, leisured, manorial nobility, culture, grace, purity, and beauty. Yet Lyuba's visions of innocence and childhood have had to yield to her tarnished adulthood with its reckless adultery, girlishness, and inertia. Once the symbol of a vigorous way of life, the orchard now represents the decay and rottenness that have overtaken that life.

While the orchard reminds Lyuba of her pure childhood, it strikes the student-tutor Trofimov as a memento of slavery. He tells the seventeen-year-old Anya of the guilty dreams of Russia's decaying upper class:

Just think . . . your grandfather . . . and all your forefathers were serf owners—they owned living souls. Don't you see human beings gazing at you from every cherry tree in your orchard . . . don't you hear voices?

Eloquently idealistic though Trofimov is, he has his less engaging side. Chekhov is usually ironic at the expense of the activist, and he shows Trofimov as slothful, superficial, fatuous, and undersexed. The volatile Lyuba lashes out at him for urging her to confront the truth of her miserable situation; she stabs cruelly at his immaturity. Horrified, he rushes out of the room and tumbles down the stairs. After a remorseful Lyuba begs his pardon and dances with him, they forgive each other. Chekhov shows how his characters can lapse from dignity only to accentuate their humanity.

The self-made merchant/developer Lopahin

plays a profoundly ambiguous role in the drama. He is the despoiler of the old order, who cannot restrain his class-conscious sense of triumph when he has acquired the orchard at the auction: He rightly calls himself "a pig in a pastry shop," is brisk with the servants, pitiless with Gayev, and insensitive to Varya, who would like to marry him. Yet he is the most positive character in the play. He labors, with increasing exasperation, to bring the befuddled gentry to their senses. He is alone in having energy, purpose, dedication, and shrewdness enough to suggest how the estate can be converted into a profitable operation. He worships Lyuba and can refuse her nothing, though he despairs of her ability to survive. Most likely, she is the secret love of his life, furnishing the real reason why he will not marry Varya. Chekhov depicts Lopahin as generous, unpretentious, and free of malice; Lopahin's motives are innocent, though his impact is destructive. In sum, Chekhov markedly softens the act of dispossession.

Moreover, he shows that what is being lost is not, in truth, an order of stability, familial love and unity, innocence and usefulness—these are already long gone. The destruction of the estate is the destruction of illusions, and the drama explores this double negative at many ambivalent and ironic levels of action, characterization, and theme. The governess Charlotta soliloquizes about her rootlessness and life's emptiness then muffles her words by chewing on a cucumber and clowning. Gayev vows that the estate will not be sold, while continually popping candy into his mouth. Lyuba's valet Yasha parodies her French manners, while her maid Dunyasha mimics her passionate nature. The rivalry of the clumsy clerk Yepihodov and the insolent Yasha for the affected Dunyasha is a travesty of romantic love. Old, deaf Firs, neglected and abandoned at the play's end, is a relic of the obsolete days when the orchard's cherries were abundant and sweet.

## SUMMARY

"You ask me what life is?" Anton Chekhov once wrote his wife. "It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, that's all we know." Chekhov records facts: people, places, things, words, actions. Held in his artist's vision, they catch the comic, pathetic, sometimes frightening, other times loving but always vulnerable and lonely human pose be-

tween birth and death. Chekhov is the subtlest, quietest, most indirect of storytellers and dramatists, capable of examining his characters' darkest despair with calm sympathy, gentle irony, and restrained affection. As an author, he seeks to be an impartial witness to the human condition, careful not to indulge in moral fervor, messianic dogma, or anything that smacks of theatricality. A hater of lies and delusions, he has no remedy for the disease of modern life and refuses to arouse false hopes about the future of humankind.

*Gerhard Brand; updated by Christian H. Moe*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Describe Anton Chekhov's use of nature to emphasize the actions and thoughts of the characters in several major plays.
- Consider how the physician characters in *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* might serve as the playwright's mouthpiece as they observe the characters about them.
- Examine how Chekhov uses soliloquies, fragments of speech, and public utterances to reveal the inner being of his characters.
- A common Chekhovian theme is the isolation of people and their failure to achieve their dreams. Discuss this theme's appearance in at least two major plays.
- In three major plays how, why, and where do certain characters meet death?
- What ideas about art and artists are reflected by Arkadina, Trigorin, Konstantin, and Nina in *The Seagull*?
- Discuss any three characters who might individually represent Chekhov's conception of the landed gentry, the merchant middle class, and the peasant class.
- In terms of storytelling, characters, and theme, how is "Gooseberries" linked to two other short stories by Chekhov, "The Man in a Case" and "About Love"?



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## AGATHA CHRISTIE

**Born:** Torquay, Devon, England  
September 15, 1890

**Died:** Wallingford, Oxfordshire, England  
January 12, 1976

*As the foremost writer in what has been called the golden age of crime fiction, Christie was instrumental in bringing the genre to new heights of literary achievement.*

### BIOGRAPHY

On September 15, 1890, Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born in Torquay, Devon, England. Her father, who died when she was eleven, was American, and her mother was British. At this point in time, formal schooling for young women usually took place in the home. At sixteen, Agatha went to Paris to study piano and singing. She became an accomplished pianist and was fluent in French. This linguistic knowledge helped her to create realistic dialogue for her famous character, the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, whose English was fractured and frequently included French expressions.

In 1912, Miller became engaged to Archibald Christie, a young officer in what would become the Royal Air Force in 1918. They were married on December 24, 1914. During World War I, he was stationed in France and Mrs. Christie became a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment in a hospital at Torquay. Her work in the pharmacy would be invaluable, as she became familiar with many of the poisons that she would later use in her novels. She was writing short stories at this time, and a few were published. In 1916, after a challenge from her sister that she could not write a detective novel, Christie produced *The Mysterious Affair at Styles: A Detective Story* (1920), featuring Poirot. The book was rejected by a number of publishers before it was fi-

nally published by Godley Head in 1920. It was not a great financial success, but the publication encouraged Christie to continue writing.

Between 1920 and 1926, Christie published six novels and introduced several new primary characters. Among these were Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, who made their debut in *The Secret Adversary* (1922), and Colonel John Race, who was introduced in 1924 with the publication of *The Man in the Brown Suit*. The author also published *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), which featured Superintendent Battle, the only major Christie detective who was affiliated with Scotland Yard. In 1926, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was published and provoked a violent debate among both reviewers and readers alike. Christie, according to some, broke the rules of fair play often associated with mystery novels by allowing the narrator, Ackroyd, to be the murderer. Christie responded with the defense that the reader must suspect all the characters. This novel is now regarded as one of her highest achievements.

At this point, Christie's life began to change dramatically. Her mother died soon after the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and her marriage to Colonel Christie was quickly falling apart. On December 4, 1926, she took her car and drove away from her Berkshire home, supposedly for a short drive. Colonel Christie called the police when she did not return after a reasonable time. Her car was found two days later, its wheels hanging over a cliff. The entire country seemed involved in the search for the missing author, whose life appeared to be taking on the characteristics of one of

her books. Two weeks after her disappearance, staff members at a Yorkshire hotel identified her among their guests. She had registered as Teresa Neele of Capetown. “Mrs. Neele” had appeared completely normal to the staff and guests of the hotel. The doctor who later examined her concluded that she had a legitimate case of amnesia that had been brought about by stress.

In 1928, she was divorced from Colonel Christie and spent her time traveling while her daughter Rosalind was in school. She met her second husband, Max Mallowan, an archaeologist, in 1930 while visiting Ur in what is now Iraq. They were married on September 11, 1930. From that time on, she spent several months a year at digs in Iraq or Syria. During World War II, while Mallowan worked as an adviser on Arab affairs for the British military government in North Africa, Christie again volunteered as a nurse. She was assigned to the pharmacy at University College in London. Once again, this experience enabled her to gain valuable information on poisons. Because she had little to do in the evenings, Christie continued writing, and two of her most famous books, *Sleeping Murder* (1976) and *Curtain: Hercule Poirot’s Last Case* (1975), were written during this time. These were the “last cases” of Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot. They were originally intended to be published posthumously. The success of the film version of *Murder on the Orient Express* in 1974, however, convinced Christie that the books should be published sooner. Thus, *Curtain* was published in 1975 and *Sleeping Murder* in 1976. Christie published her autobiography, *An Autobiography*, in 1977.

Christie was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. The year 1952 saw the opening of Christie’s *The Mousetrap* in London, a work that has the distinction of being the longest-running legitimate play in history. In 1955, she received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *Witness for the Prosecution* (pr. 1953). She was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1956, received an honorary doctorate of literature from the University of Exeter in 1961, and was made a dame of the British empire in 1971. Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum measured her for a wax portrait in 1972. After a brief period of failing health, Christie died in her home in Wallingford on January 12, 1976.

## ANALYSIS

Christie is known for her crime-fiction novels, especially those that feature Poirot, introduced in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, or Miss Marple, an elderly spinster introduced in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930). Her other detectives include Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, Superintendent Battle, and Colonel John Race. Christie began writing during what has been called the golden age of crime fiction. This time period can be roughly defined as the years between World War I and World War II. It was a time of world recovery, tinged with hardship as well as a certain amount of optimism. People were anxious to forget their daily troubles, and crime-fiction novels often provided this escape. Following the publication of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Christie was on her way to becoming a well-established author. At about the time of World War II, her novels became quite popular, and she firmly established her place as a leader in the genre.

Christie can be characterized as a traditional mystery writer, depending on imagination and intelligence, rather than technological marvels, to solve crimes. That is one of the reasons that she has remained popular. She was always careful to “play fair” and provide her reader with all the information necessary to solve the crime, plus enough red herrings to make this task challenging. By the time Christie died in 1976, many new scientific discoveries had revolutionized police departments around the world. While she did not ignore modern methods, she made it clear that all the scientific apparatus in the world would not solve a crime if there was not a thinking individual to work with the machinery.

One of her two most popular thinking individuals is Hercule Poirot, a fastidious and curious Belgian with a large mustache. Poirot is painted as a dandy, about whose appearance others often make jokes. Scoffers often find themselves rebuffed, however, because Poirot’s sometimes semicomical fastidiousness hides a keen mind and a nature that demands that he search for the truth in all matters. In this search, Poirot employs his “little grey cells” in order to distinguish the truth from fiction. He often accomplishes this by asking seemingly irrelevant questions. These questions, however, turn out to be relevant and often important in terms of uncovering information previously hidden.

Christie's other well-known detective is Jane Marple, a spinster who resides in the village of St. Mary Mead. One of the characteristics that has set Miss Marple apart from other detectives is her age. She is in her seventies or eighties, but the reader should not underestimate her. Miss Marple uses her knowledge of human nature to solve crimes. In addition, Christie uses the anonymity that Miss Marple can assume. Miss Marple looks so innocent that no one could ever suspect her of having any dealings with the police. She is everyone's old-fashioned aunt and blends in quite well with the scenery.

Several factors account for Christie's popularity. First, her plots are well constructed. She takes the reader through a logical series of actions to an equally logical conclusion. In addition, enough red herrings are dragged across the reader's path to ensure continued interest in the activities. Characterization is also an important factor. While Poirot and the Beresfords, especially, are occasionally parodies of themselves, they are still believable. Their eccentricities are not so outlandish as to be thought impossible. In addition, Christie has an ear for dialogue. Her characters consistently speak in a manner appropriate to their roles in the novels. Her characters also continually act in a manner consistent with roles created for them.

Christie was also interested in looking at human nature in general; thus, her plots revolve around the motivations that cause people to act in a desperate manner. These include greed, jealousy, a desire for power, and revenge. This tendency to construct crimes around common motives rather than esoteric ones enables the reader to relate easily to the characters involved.

Through the course of her career, Christie developed a particular style and stuck with it. In her novels, the reader can expect a clever plot, believable dialogue, and engaging characters. This adherence to a pattern that worked has contributed greatly to the popularity of her novels.

## THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

**First published:** 1926

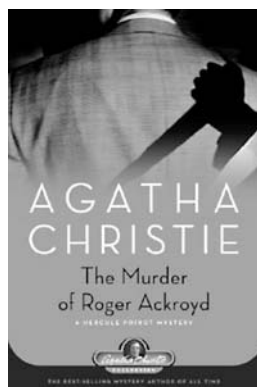
**Type of work:** Novel

*In this novel, Dr. James Sheppard leads the reader through an account of the murder of his friend, Roger Ackroyd.*

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was Christie's sixth novel and was published in 1926. It was the third novel that featured the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Like many of her other novels, the book is set in a small town and focuses on the interactions between characters who are well known to one another.

When the novel was first published, critical reactions were mixed because of the unusual narrative structure. Christie chose to have the murderer tell the story from his point of view. This device caused some consternation because some believed that Christie was not "playing fair" with her readers. They reasoned that, in crime fiction, if the novel is to be fair, the reader should be able to follow the same path the detective does in order to solve the crime. Some believed that by having the narrator as the murderer, the reader would not be able to follow the path of the clues, since the murderer would, in order to protect his identity, conceal certain key pieces of information.

Christie circumvents this problem in several ways. First, Dr. Sheppard is an extremely believable character. Because of the remorseful tone he assumes at the beginning of the novel, the reader immediately trusts him and his observations. In addition, Poirot appears to trust Sheppard, including him in discussions with the police and, as Poirot admits, using Sheppard as a substitute for Captain Hastings, who had played Dr. Watson to Poirot's Sherlock Holmes in previous novels. Thus, the reader is led to trust Sheppard because Poirot trusts him.



Sheppard also establishes an intimate rapport with the reader through the use of first-person narrative. The reader is privy to what are assumed to be the doctor's private thoughts about Ackroyd's murder. Poirot also confides in Sheppard and often asks his opinion of people within the town. Again, this action on the part of Christie serves to inspire confidence in the narrator; the reader does not suspect him because Poirot does not, and because Christie has, as in previous novels, established Poirot as a reliable source and a good judge of human nature.

Another aspect to the novel in regard to the narration is the comparatively small role that Poirot plays. The reader is accustomed to seeing him as the main character—almost as a master puppeteer who guides the movements of all around him. In fact, the readers expect Poirot to manipulate them, for this is the nature of crime fiction in general: The reader is manipulated by the detective to see things his or her way. Christie, however, chooses to radically depart from this formula. Instead of Poirot manipulating the reader, Sheppard manipulates both the reader and Poirot. The reader is unaware of this subterfuge, however, until the end of the novel, when all the other probable suspects have been eliminated and only Sheppard remains. The reader is then privy to Sheppard's confession, and all the pieces to this very complex puzzle fall into place.

## A POCKET FULL OF RYE

**First published:** 1953

**Type of work:** Novel

*Jane Marple travels to Yewtree Lodge to try to discover who has murdered her former maid, Gladys Martin.*

*A Pocket Full of Rye* opens with the death of Rex Fortescue, a successful but not universally liked financier. Curiously, rye is discovered in one of his pockets. In addition, it was not his afternoon tea that poisoned him but something that he had eaten at breakfast that contained taxine, a derivative of yew. Before long, Gladys Martin, the parlor maid, has been strangled, and Rex's attractive sec-

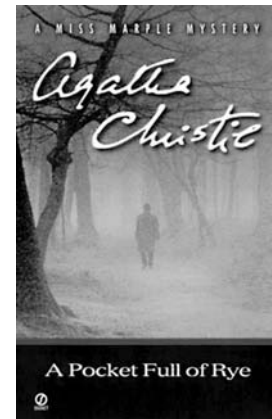
ond wife, Adele, has received a dose of cyanide in her tea.

The police are baffled, both by the methods the murderer has chosen to employ and by the number of motives. Adding to the confusion is the sudden appearance of Lancelot Fortescue and his wife Pat. Years before, Lance had moved to Africa after his father had turned him out of the house for ostensibly forging a check. According to him, he and his father had made their peace, and he has come back to enter the family business, much to the dismay of the oldest son, Percival, who resides at Yewtree Lodge with his wife, Jennifer. All parties stand to gain from the death of Rex Fortescue. Consequently, there are nearly as many motives as there are suspects, and no one can adequately account for his or her time. Adding to the confusion are the rye in Rex's pocket and a clothespin clipped to the nose of Gladys Martin.

Miss Marple enters the Fortescue home as a former employer of Gladys Martin. She wants to see the girl's murderer found. Inspector Neele quickly finds that Miss Marple is a valuable asset and asks that she lend a hand in finding out information about the family. Miss Marple is aided in her endeavors by Miss Ramsbottom, Rex Fortescue's eccentric sister-in-law from his first marriage. She likes Miss Marple because Marple is sensible, and she insists that Marple stay at Yewtree Lodge.

The continued presence of Miss Marple unnerves the household, with the exception of Miss Ramsbottom, but greatly aids Inspector Neele, who finds her observations invaluable. In addition, Miss Marple is the quintessential objective observer. She does not know anyone in the household except the late Gladys Martin and so is in a position to evaluate objectively the various members of the family.

Throughout the novel, the reader sees Christie employ her own powers of observation to bring the characters to life. As in most of her novels, the setting is sketched and the reader is left to fill in the fine details. With the characters, however, Christie



takes great care to see that all necessary details are supplied for the reader. Facets of the characters are often revealed through dress and everyday actions.

This novel also serves to give the reader a fairly complete portrait of Jane Marple. Christie herself described her as “dithery,” and that she is. This behavior, however, is more camouflage than anything else. Miss Marple does indeed take in everything around her. Christie also uses this novel to show the benefits of age. Inspector Neele does not see the significance of the pocket full of rye, the clothespin on Gladys’s nose, or the fact that Adele was poisoned while eating scones with honey. Yet when Miss Marple reminds him of the rhyme from Mother Goose, several pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

The overriding theme of this novel is that justice must be served. Miss Marple gets involved in the murders because of Gladys Martin, a not-very-bright parlor maid. It is definitely Miss Marple’s be-

lief that her murder deserves as much attention as the murder of a wealthy business executive. It is a theme present in many of Christie’s works: Justice is not simply for those who are privileged, but for all.

## SUMMARY

Taken as a whole, Agatha Christie’s crime-fiction novels constitute some of the best-known works in the genre. Her primary detectives, Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot, are some of the best-known characters in popular fiction. Christie’s talents include the ability to weave a cunning plot, construct realistic dialogue, and create believable characters. All these traits combine to create novels that are entertaining and engaging. While Christie’s writing is somewhat old-fashioned, she uses realistic motivations that enable readers to relate easily to the situations at hand.

Victoria E. McLure

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Evaluate Agatha Christie's most famous use of an unusual point of view.
- Contrast Jane Marple's and Hercule Poirot's aptness for detection.
- People seldom reread mysteries, but Christie's stage mystery, *The Mousetrap*, is the longest-running legitimate play in history. How does one account for its durability?
- Christie was not what usually would be considered a stylist. Evaluate her style as to its appropriateness for her literary purposes.
- Trace the influence of Miss Marple on characterizations by later writers of crime fiction.



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## CICERO

**Born:** Arpinum, Latium (now Arpino, Italy)  
January 3, 106 B.C.E.

**Died:** Formiae, Latium (now Formia, Italy)  
December 7, 43 B.C.E.

*Universally regarded as the greatest of the Roman orators, Cicero was also a competent poet whose epics showed the possibilities of the rhymed hexameter and thus paved the way for the works of Vergil.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Marcus Tullius Cicero (SIHS-uh-roh), the son of a Roman knight, was born in Arpinum, Latium (now Arpino, Italy), on January 3, 106 B.C.E. He was the elder son of Marcus Tullius Cicero and Helvia. He was also one of several famous Romans, such as Gaius Marius, who made the Latium region of Italy famous. His family was upper-middle-class, and he was well educated in law, rhetoric, and Greek literature and philosophy, attending schools in both Rome and Greece. In 89 B.C.E., he commenced military training under Pompeius Strabo, the father of Pompey the Great, the Roman general who became the rival of Julius Caesar; he also served with Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who was the commanding general in the campaign to drive Mithridates, king of Pontus, back to Asia. Cicero first appeared in the Roman courts in 81 B.C.E. and his celebrated defense of Sextus Roscius, the great actor who had taught him elocution, established him as a preeminent defense lawyer. Within a decade, he had won many important legal battles, including the prosecution of Gaius Verres (governor of Sicily, 73-71 B.C.E.) for extortion and other forms of maladministration. In this famous case, Cicero displayed remarkable versatility: He delivered a brief speech, notable for its thundering rhetoric and its inclusion of evidence by witnesses.

Cicero was made praetor in 66 B.C.E. and consul in 63 B.C.E. His first speech as consul was against the agricultural policy of Servilius Rullus and in the interests of Pompey, with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship. At this time, he discovered the conspiracy of Lucius Sergius Catilina (Catiline) to murder the consuls, generate uprisings, and burn Rome. After escaping an attempt on his life, Cicero on the same day delivered one of his greatest prosecution speeches. The conspirators were apprehended and executed on the authority of Cicero himself. Marcus Porcius Cato, who outdid Cicero in vituperation, argued for execution; Julius Caesar argued against it. When Cicero announced the death of the conspirators with the single word *vixerunt* (they are dead), he was hailed by Quintus Catulus as the father of his country—a title later accorded to President George Washington in recognition of his having saved the United States from its enemies.

Because he had acted on his own authority, Cicero was criticized for the execution of the Catiline conspirators—which he never regretted, though it was legally questionable because it was carried out without a formal trial. Cicero went into voluntary exile for a year, but on his return to Rome he became a great advocate of the republican form of government, against Caesar's concept of a popularly supported dictatorship. During his absence, however, the politician Publius Clodius Pulcher had a bill passed that forbade the execution of a Roman citizen without trial, tried to have Cicero declared an official exile, and ordered the destruction of Cicero's beautiful villa at Tuscum.

From August 4, 57 B.C.E., when he landed at Brindisi in the south of Italy, Cicero was warmly welcomed by the populace, who were favorable to his political theory of *concordia ordinum* (harmony among the several social classes). His monthlong journey to Rome helped to establish his popularity; however, he faced formidable obstacles in his plan to reestablish himself in the world of politics because Pompey and Caesar formed an alliance. After promptings by Pompey, Cicero agreed to align himself with them politically, though he found distasteful some of the legal cases that he was obliged to accept. Accordingly, he decided to devote himself increasingly to writing, with *De oratore* (55 B.C.E.; *On Oratory*, 1742), *De republica* (51 B.C.E.; *On the State*, 1817), and *De legibus* (52 B.C.E.; *On the Laws*, 1841) being some of his main publications. He was pleased when Titus Milo assembled a gang to try to defeat the gang controlled by Clodius, which kept Rome in constant fear, and Cicero agreed to defend Milo when Clodius was killed on the Appian Way. Cicero was so intimidated by Pompey, however, who was given plenipotentiary powers to restore order, that he did not deliver his speech at the trial. Milo was exiled, joined an insurrection, and was captured and killed. Only later did Cicero publish his defense speech as *Pro Milone* (52 B.C.E.; *For Milo*, 1577).

During the civil war (49–45 B.C.E.), Cicero was given charge of recruiting soldiers for Pompey's armies, but he did not leave Italy with Pompey and his men, though he later joined them for a while, until illness forced him to retire. When Caesar defeated Pompey's army at Pharsalus in 48 B.C.E., Cicero was offered safe conduct and returned to Rome, where he continued his efforts for a republican polity and against Caesar's dictatorship. There began his second intense period of literary works, which included *Brutus* (46 B.C.E.; English translation, 1776), a study of Roman orators, indicating their strengths in the five divisions of rhetoric: ideas, arrangement, diction, delivery, and memory, and *Orator* (46 B.C.E.; *The Orator*, 1776), composed in the form of a letter addressed to Marcus Junius Brutus that answers a request for a picture of the perfect speaker. It is the latest of Cicero's rhetorical studies and offers a defense of his own career as an orator, as well as a detailed examination of the five canons of rhetoric. In particular, *The Orator* defends the florid, or Asian, style against critics who favored the

Attic, or plain, style, and it asserts the validity of vitality, exuberance, digressions, and rhythmical language in the composition of effective speeches. That is, Cicero favored the speech style of the public orator rather than that of the cool, collected, logical courtroom advocate of his era. That his point of view had merit may be gathered from the almost universal belief that he is the unchallenged master of Latin prose style.

Cicero took no part in the assassination of Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 B.C.E. Two days later, on March 17, he delivered a conciliatory speech in the Roman senate, supporting a general amnesty. Later, he delivered the fourteen great Philippic orations (so named because they resemble the great Greek orator Demosthenes' speeches against Philip of Macedon) that marked his return to politics. Cicero thought that he could "use" Caesar's adopted son Octavian, but Octavian was astute and could not be manipulated. The latter's march against Rome made him consul. When the Second Triumvirate of Octavian, Marc Antony, and Marcus Lepidus was formed, Cicero was proscribed, caught, and killed near Caieta in Formiae, Latium (now Formia, Italy), on December 7, 43 B.C.E. Marc Antony and his wife, Fulvia, had Cicero's head and hands nailed to the rostrum in the Roman forum.

## ANALYSIS

For many readers, the most interesting of Cicero's works are his letters to Titus Atticus, the Roman philosopher and patron of literature, who was perhaps his closest friend; to his brother Quintus; or to Marcus Junius Brutus, the principal assassin of Caesar. For others, his philosophical works have a special interest, since they expound a fundamentally Stoic position and address such topics as friendship, old age, duty, the good, the nature of the gods, and the goals of life and politics. Yet for those interested in rhetoric and oratory, his three treatises—*On Oratory*, *Brutus*, and *The Orator*—constitute a major investigation and analysis of those subjects. These three works have justified placing Cicero in the company of Aristotle and Quintilian as the three great classical writers on the subject of public speaking. In many ways, Cicero's *On Oratory* is the most important of his three books: It gives full consideration to all the aspects of the subject, and it lacks the self-justification of the

more epistolary *Brutus*. *On Oratory* is the theoretical study, *Brutus* is the exemplification, and *The Orator* is a consideration of the ideal, as one critic has phrased it. *On Oratory* is written in three books and is offered as a reconsideration of earlier thoughts and writings on public speaking; it was intended as edification for his brother Quintus, who had inquired about the functions of the orator. In addition, it defends Cicero's view that the good speaker is a well-educated person.

For centuries, the very term "Ciceronian" suggested everything that was elevated and admirable in the art of rhetoric, whether written or spoken. Cicero was the consummate stylist, the model advocate. His strengths in the use and manipulation of language were admitted by all, and his weaknesses or defects were few or trifling. Whether speaking for the prosecution or for the defense, his advocacy was considered exemplary. Hugh Blair, an eminent eighteenth century critic who was professor of rhetoric and belles lettres at the University of Edinburgh, offered his appraisal of Cicero in one of his *Lectures on Rhetoric* (1783): "He is always full and flowing, never abrupt. He is a great amplifier of every subject; magnificent, and in his sentiments highly moral. His manner is on the whole diffuse, yet it is often happily varied, and suited to the subject." Blair thought that some of Cicero's great achievements were his ability to gain the attention of his audiences and to influence them, his ability to arrange his arguments with the greatest force and propriety, and his reluctance to bring the emotional proofs into force before he had prepared the way with logical conviction. Blair concluded that "no man knew the power and force of words better than Cicero." Yet even Blair discerned certain weaknesses in Cicero, and he proposed that they amounted to a predilection for show (for "eloquence" in the old terminology), which had the effect of leaving on the minds of both readers and hearers "the impression of a good man, but withal, of a vain man."

Over the years, concepts of appropriate style have changed somewhat, and today "Ciceronian" implies the use of long and elaborate sentences—usually of the periodic form—that end with great force and climax. The term also suggests parenthetical elements, doubled elements, appositives, such tropes as triads, and periphrasis. Yet in his many great speeches he knew how and when to use

the demotic, the conversational, and the formal styles to serve the purpose of the occasion. Their amalgam in his magnificent speeches on Milo and Catiline, for example, is still worthy of study by students of courtroom speaking; for the ordinary person who relishes language used at its best, there are few authors who are more satisfying.

## ON ORATORY

**First published:** *De oratore*, 55 B.C.E. (English translation, 1742)

**Type of work:** Essay

*In the form of a Platonic dialogue with other famous orators, Cicero offers his philosophy of rhetoric as more than the mastery of certain rules; rather, it is the training of the whole person to speak effectively.*

*On Oratory* takes the form of a dialogue, though it is fictional: It is merely a vehicle for Cicero to state his theory of public speaking, supported by the views of some other famous orators of his time. These are Licinius Crassus, Marcus Antonius, Sulpicius Rufus, and Caius Aurelius Cotta. Others participate in sections of the book; the most notable of them is Quintus Mucius Scaevola, the elderly lawyer and Stoic.

In book 1, Cicero offers *On Oratory* as his principal contribution to the discussion of rhetoric (the art of persuasion in all of its forms), indicating that it is to supersede all of his earlier statements on the subject, and that it is prompted by his brother Quintus's inquiry about the matter. Great orators are rare, says Cicero, not owing to a dearth of men of ability but because of the difficulty of the art itself, in spite of its great rewards, both in compensation and in fame. Cicero calls for a liberal education (a wide general knowledge), mastery—not just fluency—in the language, psychological insight and sophistication, wit (sharpness of intellect), humor, excellent delivery (voice and gesture), and outstanding memory. All of these demands are to be satisfied if the speaker is merely to be competent to meet the usual demands of public life; leadership requires that they be mastered to a high degree, and that the speaker must



first have attained a knowledge “of all important subjects and arts.”

“There is, to my mind,” says Crassus, “no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the speaker wishes or divert them from whatever he wishes.” In every free society that has enjoyed the fruits of peace and prosperity, the art of rhetoric has always flourished and reigned supreme; it is indeed puzzling that so few men have been given the power to use language to move others. Scaevola objects that Crassus values rhetoric too highly and proposes that its main uses are to be seen in the law courts and in political situations only. Crassus replies that rhetoric alone is insufficient: The great orator must be well versed in moral and political philosophy, his language must rival that of the poet, and his style must reveal his depth of education. Answering Scaevola, he admits that few can attain the ideal of a true liberal education, but that all should aspire to it. There follows Cicero’s view that “in an orator we must demand the subtlety of the logician, the thoughts of the philosopher, a diction almost poetic, a lawyer’s memory, a tragedian’s voice, and the bearing almost of the consummate actor. Accordingly, no rarer thing than a finished orator can be discovered among the sons of men.”

Cicero’s discussion of the art or science of rhetoric follows the Greek model, most clearly stated by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*: There are three speech types (forensic, or courtroom; deliberative, or parliamentary; and panegyric, or speeches of praise and blame); speeches have three sections (introduction, discussion, and conclusion); and the act of speaking covers the arrangement of ideas, style, and delivery (involving voice, gesture, and memory). The competent speaker practices frequently. He or she writes themes to improve fluency and style, paraphrases poetry and prose extemporaneously and occasionally impromptu, delivers speeches upon all subjects and as often as the opportunity allows, practices gestures and trains the voice, engages in close reading of literature, and debates both for and against as many propositions as possible.

Book 2 takes the form of a second day’s discussion of the topic of oratory. Antonius proposes that oratory is not a science but that many useful rules can be derived from the observation of successful

speakers: Oratory covers all good speaking and on all subjects. He suggests that the most difficult kind of oratory is forensic—courtroom speaking. There, the speaker is required to meet argument with argument and appeals to the emotions by appeals to the opposite emotions. Cicero proposes that wit and humor are natural gifts and cannot be taught; he suggests that there are two types of wit, irony and raillery, and that they are often particularly effective in court cases. Antonius resumes his contribution, proposing that the strongest argument should be placed either at the beginning or at the end of the speech.

Book 3 is devoted to a discussion of style, which Crassus holds to be inseparable from matter. Further, he says that various styles are necessary and admirable, but that the first consideration of the orator is clarity of diction. Embellishment should be produced naturally, not as an extravagance. Always, style should be adapted to a specific audience and occasion. Style depends on correctness, lucidity, ornateness, and appropriateness to the subject and occasion; but style without effective delivery is impotent, and effective delivery depends in large measure on a pleasing variety in vocal qualities: “This variation . . . will add charm to the delivery.”

## SUMMARY

Charles Sears Baldwin, a Columbia University professor of rhetoric in the 1920’s, noted that Cicero sympathized with the views of both Antonius and Crassus: Both orators are right in almost all of their views, which are actually complementary. Further, Baldwin believed that book 1 of *On Oratory* has been the volume studied most by readers because it

has most of the Ciceronian message which can be summarized rather easily: The effective speaker is the well-educated individual who has studied the speeches of the great orators of the past, has studied the component parts of the oration and their requirements, and has practiced diligently to strengthen wit, voice, and bodily delivery—always remembering that any good speech must be adapted to both the occasion and the audience.

Marian B. McLeod



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Show how Cicero exemplifies the speaker who is also a doer.
- Some of Cicero's orations have long been used in the teaching of Latin. What practical value is there in studying the structures of argument by an ancient orator?
- During what period in American political history did Cicero most influence political speakers?
- One of Cicero's favorite courtroom techniques was "passing over" a subject that he would, in fact, thus emphasize, so that his listeners would remember it. Cite some instances of this technique being used today, in or out of literature.
- The word "rhetoric" is often used with negative connotations. What are the principles by which Cicero defends the importance of rhetoric?
- Summarize and assess Cicero's essay on friendship or one of his other essays.



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## ARTHUR C. CLARKE

**Born:** Minehead, Somerset, England  
December 16, 1917

**Died:** Colombo, Sri Lanka  
March 19, 2008

*A prolific writer of novels, short stories, and nonfiction, Clarke was a well-known and very influential science-fiction author.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Arthur C. Clarke was born in the village of Minehead, Somerset, England, on December 16, 1917, the son of Charles Wright Clarke and Norah Mary Willis Clarke. Even as a boy, he was interested in science and writing. In 1931, he read *Last and First Men* (1930) by Olaf Stapledon, a book that changed his life. A strong advocate of space exploration, he joined the British Interplanetary Society in 1935, serving as its chair from 1946 to 1947 and again from 1950 to 1953.

Clarke did well in mathematics but could not afford to attend a university. Instead, he took the civil service examination and in 1936 found employment as an assistant auditor in His Majesty's Exchequer and Audit Department. He continued to read widely and began to publish short fiction in 1937.

From 1941 to 1946, Clarke served in the Royal Air Force (RAF). Because of his poor eyesight, he was unable to qualify for pilot training. He was sent to electronics and radar school and worked as a technical officer on the first trials of ground control approach radar. He also served as a radar instructor. A technical paper that he wrote describing the possibility of communications satellites was published in the October, 1945, issue of *Wireless World*, an engineering journal. After leaving the

RAF in 1946, he received a grant to enter King's College, London; he received a degree in physics and mathematics in 1948. From 1949 to 1950, he was an assistant editor for *Science Abstracts*, a technical journal.

During the 1950's and 1960's, Clarke published prolifically, both fiction and nonfiction. *Childhood's End* (1953) was the first work to win critical acclaim. In 1956, he won the Hugo Award for his short story "The Star." Between 1964 and 1968, Clarke wrote the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and collaborated with director Stanley Kubrick on the 1968 screenplay. This book and its sequels, *2010: Odyssey Two* (1982) and *2061: Odyssey Three* (1987), and *3001: The Final Odyssey* (1997) are probably his best-known works. Clarke has won virtually every award for science-fiction writing, an Academy Award conomination for the screenplay of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and a number of awards for science writing.

Clarke has written an astonishing number of nonfiction books and articles, some for the general public but many for scientific and technical journals. He also became interested in underwater exploration and published several books and articles on this subject. Clarke married Marilyn Mayfield in 1953; they were divorced in 1964. He moved to Sri Lanka in 1956 but continued to make frequent trips to England and the United States. Queen Elizabeth II conferred knighthood on him in 1998, and the investiture ceremony took place in 2000.

Clarke died on March 19, 2008, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, after having a cardiorespiratory attack. He was ninety years old.

## ANALYSIS

In his introduction to *Time Probe: The Sciences in Science Fiction* (1966), an anthology of science-fiction stories he edited, Clarke explains his views on what science fiction should be. In the first place, it must incorporate some principles of science and technology. He strongly emphasizes, however, that “the prime function of a story is to entertain—not to instruct or to preach.” In addition, the story must contain some intellectual substance if it is to have lasting value. All of these qualities are evident in his own fiction.

Clarke was educated as a scientist and writes about the future in a remarkably detailed, believable manner. He became a staunch advocate of space travel; books such as *Prelude to Space* (1951) are mostly propaganda with many scientific details to show how some technical accomplishment might be possible. Clarke sees space travel as opening new horizons for human civilization, similar to the exploration of the Western Hemisphere several centuries ago.

Other stories show his skill as a storyteller, often including some surprising revelation that changes the readers’ perspective. In *Childhood’s End*, the extraterrestrial creatures that seem to be acting as humankind’s guardian angels turn out to look like devils. Another example is “The Star.” It tells about a Jesuit priest who, while traveling on a starship, discovers the ruins of an ancient civilization that was destroyed when its sun became a supernova. By calculating the time when the light from this star would have reached Earth, he determines that this civilization was destroyed to create the star of Bethlehem.

Clarke’s writing can be a combination of the mundane with the lyrical and mystical; *2001: A Space Odyssey* includes both. On the one hand, readers learn about the details of space travel, including how toilets work in zero gravity. On the other hand, the ending describes astronaut David Bowman traveling through time and space to some other type of existence in what is a truly transcendental experience.

Most of Clarke’s writings deal with two main themes: the belief that human beings are not alone

in the universe and the outcome of human evolution. Clarke is convinced that life has evolved on many other planets and that it is merely a matter of time before contact is made. In stories such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the extraterrestrial being plays a key role in the development of the human race; in others, such as *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), the aliens are indifferent. In all cases, the first contact with another race shows that humans are members of a galactic community.

The question of what will become of humans has troubled writers since Charles Darwin first published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. Some authors, such as H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895), have taken a pessimistic position, predicting that the human race will simply expire. Others, such as Olaf Stapledon in *Star Maker* (1937), suggest that human beings may eventually evolve into new, superior creatures. Clarke belongs to the latter group.

Clarke sees the evolution of humans as something they cannot control, but he also sees the possibility of some type of transcendent mutation, one in which the mind is freed from matter—and therefore from decay and death. That is certainly the case of Vanamonde in *Against the Fall of Night* (1953), of the children in *Childhood’s End*, and of David Bowman in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Even if humans cannot be sure of their evolutionary future, Clarke thinks that change and potential progress are preferable to stagnation. In *Imperial Earth* (1975), Duncan Makenzie is the latest in a long line of clones. Because of an inherited genetic defect, cloning is the only way the family can perpetuate itself. Makenzie has the resources to make one clone and is expected to make a genetic duplicate of himself. Instead, he decides to have his dead friend cloned because the friend had intellectual gifts and because that clone would be able to have children and thus contribute to the genetic pool; thus the potential for change would exist.

Clarke takes a mostly optimistic view of the future. Although humans cannot know what lies ahead and cannot to a large extent control it, they should trust their potential.

## CHILDHOOD'S END

**First published:** 1953

**Type of work:** Novel

*While Earth is being supervised by extraterrestrial Overlords, humans suddenly evolve into a new type of creature.*

*Childhood's End* begins with this unusual statement: "The opinions expressed in this book are not those of the author." Although Clarke's books usually promote space exploration, this one shows that humans are not ready to travel to the stars.

Many writers have speculated about the first encounter between the human race and extraterrestrial beings and what the relationship between those two races will be. *Childhood's End* begins with a description of just such an encounter. Some thirty years after the end of World War II, just as the Americans and the Russians are both about to launch their first rockets to the Moon, spaceships appear over every major city on Earth. The Overlords, as the extraterrestrials come to be called, are intellectually and technologically superior to humans and quickly assert their authority.

The directives of the Overlords result in an improved standard of living for all the creatures on Earth. Some object to their domination, mostly because the Overlords are secretive and have never explained why they have come to Earth. No one has ever seen one, and only Rikki Stormgren, the secretary general of the United Nations, ever speaks to them. Karellen, the head Overlord, explains to Stormgren that he is not a dictator but "only a civil servant trying to administer a colonial policy in whose shaping I had no hand." He does not say who sent him. After fifty-five years, the Overlords finally show themselves to humans. Although their actions make them seem like the guardian angels of humankind, they look exactly like the ancient legends of devils with horns, barbed tails, and leathery wings.

The Overlords have prohibited space travel, and people such as Jan Rodricks resent this because they want to learn what is out there. Rodricks is a stowaway inside a whale model that is being shipped to the Overlords' home planet and becomes the first and last of his species to travel in space. He learns, however, just how vast and un-

knowable the universe is and how paltry humans are in comparison. He understands why the Overlords have said, "The stars are not for Man."

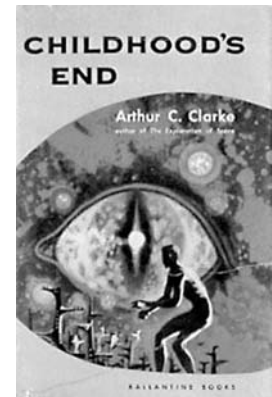
The Overlords represent science and reason and spend much time learning about humans. One of them, Rashaverak, attends a party because the host owns one of the best libraries on paranormal phenomena. When the last few guests experiment with a sophisticated Ouija board, Rashaverak does not participate but sits outside the circle and observes. One of the guests wonders if Rashaverak is like an anthropologist watching a primitive religious rite he does not understand. Apparently, the Overlords are not omniscient.

When the children of the planet begin their transformation into a new type of creature, Karellen finally announces the Overlords' true purpose: They were sent to Earth by some superior force called the Overmind to help humans through the transition from their present form to a new type of existence. They can help with the birth of a new species and can observe it, but they themselves lack the potential to evolve any further.

A major question in *Childhood's End* is what will be the next step in human evolution. The Overlords engineer the first stage by creating a utopia in which humans learn to live in a cooperative society. All the major problems, such as war and famine, have been solved, but no more real progress occurs; no more major scientific breakthroughs are made and no notable works of art are created.

When the final change occurs, it is triggered not by the humans' intellectual or technological advances but by their paranormal powers. All the children are soon affected by the "Total Breakthrough," and a new species evolves. They lose their individual personalities; each becomes like a single cell in a larger brain. Eventually, they lose their need to exist in material form and join with other races from other planets in the Overmind, free to roam the universe.

The species known as *Homo sapiens* comes to an



end as Jan Rodricks, the last man on Earth, watches the final joining take place. He expresses a sense of achievement and fulfillment and sends a message to the Overlords, now on their way home: "I am sorry for you. Though I cannot understand it, I've seen what my race became. Everything we ever achieved has gone up there into the stars."

The Overlords, who seemed so powerful in the beginning, do not have the potential to evolve. Humans do not possess their great intellectual powers, but they do have paranormal powers and therefore can evolve into a new species. The stars are not for the present race but rather for its descendants.

## 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

**First published:** 1968

**Type of work:** Novel

*A team of astronauts is sent to discover the destination of a strange signal emitted by a monolith excavated on the Moon.*

*2001: A Space Odyssey* is Clarke's best-known work, partly because of the popularity of the 1968 film version. From 1964 to 1968, Clarke and director Stanley Kubrick collaborated on the novel and the screenplay, with Kubrick having control over the film and Clarke being responsible for the novel. Both works were extensively revised, and Clarke later published some material cut from the novel in *The Lost Worlds of 2001* (1972).

In the epilogue to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Clarke says the book "was concerned with the next stage of human evolution." The beginning of the book describes creatures not yet human, the middle shows modern humankind, and the ending speculates on what humanity might become. Black monoliths appear in each section and provide connections between each section.

When the book opens, three million years in the past, man-apes have reached a crucial point in their development. Unable to obtain enough food, they will perish if they do not learn to use tools to hunt. Space-traveling extraterrestrials recognize their potential and teach them how to use bones as weapons. The first monolith is a teaching device, but it also transforms Moon-Watcher, one of the

smarter apes; the structure of his brain is altered and the change will be passed on to his descendants. Without this almost divine intervention, the human race would not have evolved. Moon-Watcher also discovers, on his own, that the weapons can kill others of his own species.

In the next section, humans have developed a sophisticated technology that enables them to travel to the Moon—and also to create increasingly lethal weapons. They also are at a crucial point in their history: Will they continue to progress or will they destroy themselves and the planet?

Clarke sees technology as a necessary step forward. In "The Sentinel," the short story on which *2001: A Space Odyssey* is based, a scientist discovers an ancient device on the surface of the Moon. When disturbed, it emits a signal. The scientist speculates, "They would be interested in our civilization only if we proved our fitness to survive—by crossing space and so escaping from the Earth, our cradle."

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, scientists discover a similar device, this time another black monolith. When uncovered after three million years, it emits a powerful signal toward Saturn. Humankind now knows that it is no longer alone in the universe.

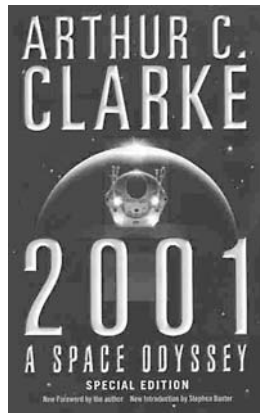
Undaunted, not waiting for the extraterrestrials to come to Earth, the humans launch a mission to Saturn. David Bowman, the one astronaut to survive that trip, discovers a third monolith on Japetus, one of the moons of Saturn. This one is a "star gate," an extremely advanced machine that shuttles him through time and space to a distant part of the universe. In this odyssey, he discovers that the beings that left the monoliths have themselves evolved, first into mechanical bodies that could last forever, and finally into creatures of energy no longer dependent on matter for their existence.

Bowman undergoes a transformation, first aging rapidly, then dying and being reborn as the infant Star Child. He is the first human to make this evolutionary jump. Again the extraterrestrials have intervened to make it possible.

Whether this evolutionary jump has resulted in a better creature, or whether humankind will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, is not clearly answered. At the very end, Star Child completes his journey back to Earth, where he discerns some atomic bombs in orbit and detonates them.



Does he merely destroy the bombs, making the world a safer place, or does he destroy humankind in the process? The description of Star Child discovering his new powers is almost identical to the description of Moon-Watcher discovering his new power: Both are like children who learn through play.



The people in *2001: A Space Odyssey* tend to be detached, unemotional men of science. HAL, the computer, seems more human than the humans. HAL may represent another evolutionary path to intelligent life. Although he is a machine, his electronic brain can reproduce most of the mental activities of which a human brain is capable. He becomes “neurotic” and “dies” when Bowman

disconnects his higher mental functions. In the sequel *2010: Odyssey Two* (1982), the extraterrestrials permit the lonely Star Child Bowman to choose a companion. He chooses the revived HAL, who is then transformed into a creature of mental energy like Bowman. Once again the extraterrestrials are controlling the evolutionary process.

## GREETINGS, CARBON-BASED BIPEDS!

**First published:** 1999

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*This book is a collection of Clarke's nonfiction writings arranged in chronological order and grouped by decades; Clarke provides introductions in which he explains the background behind his writing of each selection and his reflections on it at the time the anthology was being compiled.*

*Greetings, Carbon-Based Biped!* *Collected Essays, 1934-1998* includes a large number of essays on diverse subjects. The essay from which the title

is taken, “Greetings, Carbon-Based Biped!” explores the reasons why humans search for evidence of intelligent life on other planets: The search is important because “It represents the highest possible form of exploration; and when we cease to explore, we will cease to be human.” This collection documents Clarke’s explorations of science fiction, of science and technology, and of the impact of science and technology on humans.

The selections that deal with science fiction reveal Clarke’s perspective on the genre. “Aspects of Science Fiction” is his attempt to define science fiction and to differentiate it from fantasy, while “Writing to Sell” expresses his frustrations with the pressure to produce works that will appeal to a wide audience. His reviews of science-fiction books and films are included. Some of the tributes to other science-fiction and fantasy authors, usually written at the times of their deaths, include “Dunsany, Lord of Fantasy,” “Tribute to Robert A. Heinlein,” “Good-Bye, Isaac” (Isaac Asimov), and “Gene Roddenberry.” His prefaces to *The War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon* also show his engagement with other writers of the genre.

Some pieces discuss his own work. “The Birth of HAL,” for example, explains the origin of HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and “Son of Dr. Strangelove” explains his collaboration with Stanley Kubrick in the production of the film version of that book.

Trained in the technical disciplines, Clarke has also published technical and scientific papers. In “Extraterrestrial Relays,” first published in an engineering journal in 1945, Clarke describes the problems of providing telephone service to all areas of the globe using the system of transmitters and wires that was currently in use. Then he proposes that worldwide telecommunications could be facilitated by means of satellites placed in geosynchronous orbits above the earth. Highly theoretical (it appeared before any rockets capable of achieving orbit had been launched), this paper predicts the type of telecommunications system now in use. In “The Star of Bethlehem,” he relies on his knowledge of astronomy as he speculates that the star was actually a supernova. His scientific speculation on this event was the basis for his short story “The Star.” The final selection, “The Twenty-First Century: A (Very) Brief History,” attempts to prophesize the technological advances that will take place in this century.

Clarke also includes many commentaries on the



development of technology and its impact on humans and on society. In "The Uses of the Moon," which first appeared in 1965, he argues for colonization of the Moon based on economic benefits; however, in "Space and the Spirit of Man," published the same year, he makes the claim that space exploration is necessary for human spiritual growth. "The Obsolescence of Man" speculates that humans might eventually be replaced by machines.

Clarke's nonfiction work provides much insight into his knowledge of science and technology and his views on how they affect human societies, as well as his views on the genre of science fiction.

### SUMMARY

Arthur C. Clarke's stories are grounded in scientific fact, but they also deal with a future that can-

not be known. For the most part, he is optimistic about that future and the role humans will play in it, and he sees space travel as an invigorating force. He believes that life exists on other planets and that eventually humans will make contact with it. Although the human race may reach the end of its evolutionary development, it has the potential to become something better.

In *Profiles of the Future* (1962), one of his non-fiction books, Clarke writes that he is not trying "to describe the future, but to define the boundaries within which possible futures must lie." When considering the future, he says, the one fact "of which we can be certain is that it will be utterly fantastic."

Eunice Pedersen Johnston

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Arthur C. Clarke's fiction speculates about the lives of humans in the future. Is his vision of the future a utopia, where humans live happy lives in a nearly perfect society, or a dystopia, where they lead a fearful existence in a hostile world?
- Are any of Clarke's characters complex, well-developed ones to whom readers can relate?
- What role does the theory of evolution play in Clarke's fiction?
- What nonhuman sentient beings appear in Clarke's fiction, how are they different from humans, and why are they important?
- What is the relationship between humans and technology in Clarke's fiction?

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National Archives

## JEAN COCTEAU

**Born:** Maisons-Laffitte, France

July 5, 1889

**Died:** Milly-la-Forêt, France

October 11, 1963

*Cocteau's protean achievements, which encompass most literary genres and media, secured for him a place as one of the most influential French avant-gardists of the twentieth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau (kok-TOH) was born on July 5, 1889, in Maisons-Laffitte, on the outskirts of Paris, France, where he would spend most of his diverse, prolific, and well-publicized artistic career. A fragile child, he was introduced early to the arts by his family and their acquaintances. At the age of nine, his father, Georges, committed suicide, an event never mentioned in any of Cocteau's works; Cocteau then began his intense preoccupation with the circus, the theater, and classical music. He attended primary school from the ages of eleven to fourteen, and his three failures at the *baccalauréat* clearly showed his lack of taste for the regimented French educational system, which he later called being "badly brought up."

Cocteau's adolescence was spent living with his stylish and independently wealthy mother, Eugénie, whose influence he admits never diminished even with his artistic successes. Although his attempts at independence, including marriage to the actress Madeleine Carlier, failed, his mother received with hospitality his homosexual friends, and Cocteau pursued an active career in Paris's fin de siècle high society and artistic circles. After the 1908 performance of several of his poems, he was introduced to the director of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev, and to the innovative composer

Igor Stravinsky. Cocteau served in the medical corps during World War I, returning to Paris to collaborate with Diaghilev, Erik Satie, and Pablo Picasso on a ballet, *Parade*, in 1917.

Cocteau's most important friendship was with the young novelist Raymond Radiguet, whom he met in 1919; the period produced a farce, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (pr. 1921; *The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower*, 1937), and the novels *Thomas l'imposteur* (1923; *Thomas the Impostor*, 1925) and *Le Grand Écart* (1923; *The Grand Ecart*, 1925), before the tragic death of Radiguet at the age of twenty. Heartbroken, Cocteau retired to the French Riviera and turned first to the use of opium and then to religion. The next few years, in and out of opium asylums, were spent collaborating with the painter Christian Bérard on several works, including the play *La Voix humaine* (pr., pb. 1930; *The Human Voice*, 1951) and the film *La Belle et la bête* (1946; *Beauty and the Beast*, 1947). During this time, Cocteau was involved with twenty-year-old Jean Desbordes, who inspired *Le Livre blanc* (1928; *The White Paper*, 1957). He also completed *Les Enfants terribles* (1929; *Enfants Terribles*, 1930; also known as *Children of the Game*) and the first version of *Orphée* (pr. 1926, pb. 1927; *Orpheus*, 1933).

With the publication of *Children of the Game*, Cocteau achieved notoriety and success. In February, 1930, he produced his one-act, one-man play *The Human Voice*, which was decried by the Surrealists, who finally forgave him in 1938. Along with successes on the stage, his first film, *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930; *The Blood of a Poet*, 1949), was presented and well received in January, 1932, and was fol-

lowed by his version of Oedipus in *La Machine infernale* (pr., pb. 1934; *The Infernal Machine*, 1936). During World War II and Germany's occupation of France (1940-1950), many of his plays premiered, including *Les Monstres sacrés* (pr., pb. 1940; *The Holy Terrors*, 1953) and his neo-Sophoclean tragedy *Antigone* (pr. 1922, pb. 1928; English translation, 1961). The success of his film *L'Éternel Retour* (1943; *The Eternal Return*, 1948) was followed by the loss of two friends, one to pneumonia in a concentration camp and the other to Gestapo torture.

With the end of the war, Cocteau presented numerous ballets, plays, and films, including his enduringly successful *Beauty and the Beast*. Cocteau finally left Paris for good in 1947 and moved to Milly-la-Forêt, France, where he lived with a young painter, Édouard Dermit. While writing *Bacchus* (pr. 1951, pb. 1952; English translation, 1955) and his *Journal d'un inconnu* (1952; *The Hand of a Stranger*, 1956; also known as *Diary of an Unknown*, 1988), he concentrated upon the fine arts, especially his paintings and illustrations, first exhibited in Munich in 1952. He also worked in pottery, glass, mosaic, tapestry, stained glass, and architecture.

He was elected to the Belgian Académie Royale and the Académie Française in 1955, was received into the French Legion of Honor in 1957, and died quietly at Milly-la-Forêt on October 11, 1963.

## ANALYSIS

Cocteau constructed for himself a complete aesthetic universe; he wrote the texts, designed the scenery and costumes, selected the dancers, arranged the choreography, wrote the music, directed, often performed in the production, and illustrated the published book. As much as any one since the composer Richard Wagner, Cocteau demanded that his productions and publications be "total artistic experiences," under the control of a single aesthetic imperative, and that his audiences appreciate his work on its own terms, free from modish evaluations or conservative intolerance. There is a curious combination in Cocteau's work of an intense insistence both on classicism and on artificial convention and upon radicalism and individualism. The most sustained exposition of his thoughts on art and literature is his late work *La Difficulté d'être* (1947; *The Difficulty of Being*, 1966).

Rather than allying himself with fashionable authors of the day, most notably the Surrealists, Cocteau designates as his inspiration the Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne, who described his own writings as being "consubstantial with their author"—both mystically and physically inseparable from their author. Cocteau persistently credits the contributions of his friends to his work and insists upon the direct relationship of his own lived experience to that which he artistically represents. Yet his work is not simply an autobiographical expression of a personal experience to be assimilated exactly to the copious personal remarks and records that the author has left behind. Indeed, critics have even accused Cocteau of a lack of artistic and theoretical originality. Even as familiarity with such biographical details as the artistic society of the Café aux Deux Magots, frequented by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and the Parisian avant-garde, is necessary to the full appreciation of the satire that opens the 1950 film *Orpheus*, for example, so, too, a knowledge of Cocteau's theoretical indebtedness is crucial. Cocteau never claims to be original and often attributes his theoretical and artistic borrowings, claiming in this scholarly respect, as well as in other artistic aspects, to strive for clarity and lucidity, to "show darkness in broad daylight."

Cocteau's emphasis upon neoclassical simplicity and order in works such as *Orpheus* and *Antigone* stands in apparent contradiction to his recurrent interest in many of the metaphysical questions raised by German Romanticism in particular. In many of his works, from *The Blood of a Poet* and *Bacchus* to *Children of the Game*, as well as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Orpheus*, Cocteau develops commentaries upon, and versions of, central Romantic themes such as the inextricability of love and death, divine poetic intoxication, the inevitability of suffering for the artist, and the incomprehension and lack of appreciation of bourgeois society for radical art. Cocteau himself cites as inspirations the importance of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of Dionysiac poetic inspiration and of the unparalleled polymathy of the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Perhaps the single most persistent theme in Cocteau is that love can only be perfected in death. Like his precursor the French Romantic poet and novelist Victor Hugo, Cocteau sees the poet as the *écho sonore*, whose voice echoes



both the events of the external world and such intense internal orphic realizations.

If love and death is a central theme, then the conduct and destiny of the poet is his dominant theoretical preoccupation. For Cocteau, “poetry” encompasses all media, and his own corpus contains experiments in dozens of literary genres and artistic media. For Cocteau, poetry is not an esoteric preoccupation of an elite group of aesthetes. Although often criticized as being precisely such a precious enterprise destined for a marginal coterie, Cocteau’s “poetry,” like the productions of so many artistic movements of the first half of the twentieth century, insists upon the universal relevance and importance of poetry as that alone that makes life worthwhile in a materialistic age, as the only remaining “spiritual luxury.” Cocteau’s work is committed to the double imperative both continually to shock its audience and uncompromisingly to create a radically individualized system of its own artistic fabrication.

The phenomenon of Cocteau, patron of new talent, scintillating conversationalist, homosexual, opium addict, and *grand maître* of the French avant-garde, especially after his self-imposed exile from Paris, often obscures the substance of his artistic achievement. Perhaps more so than any of his extraordinary fictional poets, Cocteau himself has become one of his own *monstres sacrés*.

## ANTIGONE

**First produced:** 1922 (first published, 1928;  
English translation, 1961)

**Type of work:** Play

*Antigone, the cursed descendant of Oedipus, must decide between familial duty and the laws of the state in order to bury her brother.*

Cocteau chose in 1922 to translate Sophocles’ famous tragedy *Antigonē* (441 B.C.E.; *Antigone*, 1729) into French. Cocteau himself, in his diaries, declares that he was motivated by a feeling of sympathy with the heroine, who like Joan of Arc, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Jean Genet, shares the condition of being both persecuted and inspired. For Cocteau, the persecution of Antigone will be based

on her purity, which distinguishes her from the rest of corrupt society. The first production of *Antigone* in 1922 was staged at the At  lier in Paris with settings by Pablo Picasso, music by Arthur Honegger, and costumes by Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel. Charles Dullin and Antonin Artaud played the parts of Creon and Tiresias, Cocteau himself took the part of the Chorus, and Genica Atanasiou played Antigone. This collaboration of innovators in all fields of the arts is typical of Cocteau’s productions and films.

Cocteau’s text shortens Sophocles’ tragedy, adapting the Greek tragedy to a unified French dramatic form, and shifts many of the psychological and verbal emphases of the ancient play. Cocteau’s prose is itself shortened; it is often not only concise but abrupt, giving a feel of avant-garde modernity to the play’s language. Cocteau describes his effort as a reduction and “scouring” of language to the point at which the play “hurtles toward its conclusion like an express train.” At the same time that the play is accelerated by Cocteau’s streamlined language, it is transformed from the record of the majestic actions of kings, a traditional definition of a tragedy, to a minimalist melodrama that restricts and schematizes the characters and the scale of their actions. Even with stage directions, its text can never adequately record the rich visual and auditory experience of the play in performance. Many of the stage directions and costuming directions suggest, but cannot represent, the boldness of the play’s staging:

beneath the masks one could make out the actor’s faces, and ethereal features were sewn onto the masks in white millinery wire. The costumes were worn over black bathing suits, and arms and legs were covered. The general effect was suggestive of a sordid carnival of kings, a family of insects.

The theatricality of the performance, such expressionist stage directions as “Antigone . . . braces herself for the day ahead,” and all the mentions of musical interludes indicate the multimedia nature of this piece of “performance art.” This version of Sophoclean theatricality, which also relied upon masks and music, both insists upon the connection between Cocteau’s piece and the Greek original and emphasizes the degree to which it has transformed the classical material that it invokes.



Cocteau emphasizes both the translation of the Antigone myth by time and the persistence of the importance of myth and its accompanying spectacles.

In scenes such as the encounter between Creon and Antigone, Sophocles himself carefully presented and questioned the nature of legal justice and its relationship to human emotions and familial duty. With Cocteau's treatment of the myth, another issue emerges clearly, however—that of Antigone's nature as a poet. Other playwrights, notably Cocteau's contemporary Jean Anouilh, insist upon the defiant heroism of Antigone in the face of political oppression in their adaptations of Sophocles' play. In Cocteau's version, such political, or even religious or familial, defiance gives way to an emphasis upon Antigone's autonomy and her status as a poet. She does not present an elaborate defense of her actions; instead, she offers the spectacle of her demise as the gesture that will testify to her innocence. Creon corroborates the theatricality of the drama, when, in the last moments of the play, he describes his plight as the cause of three deaths, as "not knowing where to look."

## CHILDREN OF THE GAME

**First published:** *Les Enfants terribles*, 1929  
(English translation, 1930)

**Type of work:** Novel

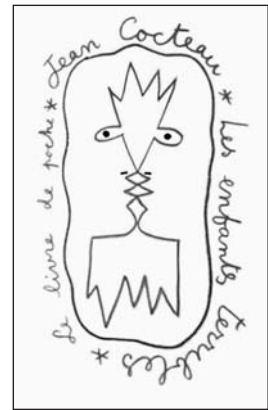
*Two children, Paul and Elizabeth, play a dangerous and amoral game that substitutes fantasy for reality and finally kills them.*

Much of *Children of the Game* is drawn from Cocteau's experiences from 1900 through 1903 as an unhappy student at the "Petit Condorcet," a college in the rue Amsterdam. Indeed, the opening description of a visit to the Cité des Monthiers, a hidden courtyard of artists within an international diplomatic neighborhood of Paris, is a recollection of many such visits that Cocteau himself made with school friends. Cocteau uses the same autobiographical material in his *The Blood of a Poet*, which represents a development of ideas raised by *Children of the Game*, and in the famous film noir version directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. The symbolic

meanings that will be assigned to the later cinematographic versions of the story are already present in the story of these children, who, Cocteau will say later in his journals, did not recognize their own poetry, who "were not playing horses but actually became horses."

Written in three weeks in 1929 while Cocteau was being treated for opium addiction, the novel focuses on the theme of the adolescent, a new creation of the years following the end of World War I, whose sense of prestige and freedom in the first half of the decade would decay into disenchantment in the second half. The plot of the novel itself is simple and absolute in its construction, revolving around the promise made between Paul and Elizabeth to adhere to a pact, which excludes the rest of the world and love. They are "angelic," in the sense of being both innocent and uncompromising. For a few years, they are granted a carefree life in their world of childish, if nightmarish, performances and images before the encroachment of a race of adults perverts and destroys them. The novel opens and closes with snow scenes, which establish the emotional coldness of the life that it depicts. Like the falling snow, which blocks out the world, the children's game substitutes their nocturnal performances and an absolute code of rules for all the accepted ways of ordering reality.

The novel opens with the school bully throwing a deadly snowball at Paul. This childhood rite of initiation, which is repeated in the autobiographical *The Blood of a Poet*, forms an ominous frame for the whole novel. Although scarcely present in the novel, Dargelos remains a haunting threat, an avenging angel, from whom the children retreat into their symbolic world of the game. He finally sends poison, a more incontrovertibly lethal symbol than the snowball, into that children's room, whence the rules of the game originate. Only with Paul's death, Elizabeth's suicide, and the poisonous invasion of their sacred, and yet horrendous,



magical space, the “theater of the bedroom,” will the curse be lifted. Cocteau consistently emphasizes the theatricality of their game through a careful attention to stage lighting for their vignettes, an attention that slowly seeps beyond the room to alter the balance of light and dark in the real world outside the room. Even natural phenomena are subject to distortion in this ever-expanding theater of cruelty. The unnerving combination of perversion and order within the constructed security of the children’s game-world will be accompanied in the film version not only by chiaroscuro lighting but also by the deceptively soothing music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Antonio Vivaldi.

Elizabeth’s suicide appropriately ends the game, for she has always been the stronger player, controlling both Paul’s behavior and that of his friend Gerard. Although brutalized and terrified by her brother, Elizabeth finally causes the death of her brother when he breaks their childhood contract and falls in love with Agatha. Elizabeth, in a fever both jealous and physical, shoots both her al-

ready poisoned brother and herself in the head with a revolver. As an avenging Electra, she brings a final terrifying consummation of the tragic ritual, on a white and snow-covered stage, by playing the horror absolutely according to the rules.

## SUMMARY

At the age of forty-one, in his 1930 account of opium addiction, Jean Cocteau would write that even a poet cannot write his own biography. In the broadest sense, however, Cocteau’s life was an exercise in being as many different poets as possible. In media ranging from fresco to film to the novel, Cocteau attempted to bring together a perfection of classical form and a wildly innovative modernity. By placing the debris of World War I on the stage of Greek tragedy behind a veil of medieval mysticism, he created a revolution not only in art but also in society. As flamboyant in life as in art, his agility and intensity continue to impress and sometimes to offend.

Elizabeth Richmond

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Investigate Jean Cocteau's motives in reworking the material of Sophocles' *Antigone*.
- What does it mean to construct "a complete aesthetic universe"?
- What advantages do you see in a writer disclaiming originality, as did Cocteau?
- Defend or refute the proposition that Cocteau, a versatile writer, excelled primarily in his plays.
- Restate Cocteau's "double imperative" in your own words.

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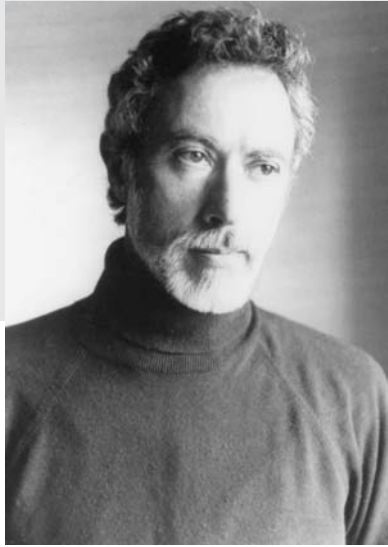
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*La Difficulté d'être*, 1947 (*The Difficulty of Being*, 1966)  
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## J. M. COETZEE

**Born:** Cape Town, South Africa  
February 9, 1940

*The recipient of numerous prestigious writing awards, Coetzee's cryptic, many-layered novels explore the spiritual, moral, and sociopolitical context of human experience.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Michael Coetzee (koot-SEE) was born in Cape Town, South Africa, on February 9, 1940. His grandparents were farmers who descended from a long line of white Afrikaners, Dutch settlers who came to South Africa in the seventeenth century. Coetzee's father was an attorney, and his mother was a schoolteacher whose free spirit Coetzee much admired. As a child, Coetzee grew up in and around the Karoo desert, an arid South African landscape that provided him with many of the settings for his novels. The author spoke English at home and, after attending various English-language schools, became knowledgeable in Afrikaans, Dutch, and several other languages. Coetzee's wide intelligence is reflected in his academic degrees, as well as in his publications in a variety of disciplines. He received two bachelor of arts degrees from the University of Cape Town, one in English and the other in mathematics. In 1963, he also received an M.A. in English from the university. After graduation, he entered the private sector in England, working for International Business Machines in London and for International Computers in Bracknell, Berkshire. Coetzee's marriage in 1963 produced a daughter and son; the couple divorced in 1980.

In 1965, Coetzee began his doctoral education in English at the University of Texas at Austin as a

Fulbright scholar. There, he completed his dissertation on Samuel Beckett. He was offered a teaching position at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo in 1968, but he was denied permanent residence in the United States because of his involvement in protests against the Vietnam War. Although he left the United States in 1971, he returned in 1983 and 1986 as visiting professor at SUNY-Buffalo and Johns Hopkins University, respectively.

In 1972, Coetzee returned to South Africa to become a professor of English literature at the University of Cape Town. Retiring in 2002, he relocated to Australia, teaching at the University of Adelaide, where his partner, Dorothy Driver, also teaches. He became an Australian citizen in 2006.

A reclusive man, Coetzee has nevertheless achieved renown as a major public intellectual, recognized for his principled stands on such issues as censorship, ethical vegetarianism, and animal rights.

Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*, was published in 1974. It was followed by *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), which won the South African Central News Agency (CNA) Award and the Mofolo-Plomer Prize. Both these novels rely on first-person perspectives to convey the manner in which South Africa has dehumanized its inhabitants. Successive novels also won critical acclaim for their portrayals of introspective characters living in South Africa at various historical periods. In 1980, Coetzee published *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which won the South African CNA Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. The enigmatic *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), which drew for inspiration on the work of



Franz Kafka, won two awards, the prestigious Man Booker Prize from Britain in 1983 and the French Prix Femina Etranger in 1985. Coetzee also was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society in 1987. In 1999 he won a second Man Booker Prize for his novel *Disgrace* (1999), and in 2003, Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

*Foe*, a version of the Robinson Crusoe narrative by Daniel Defoe, was published in 1986, and *Age of Iron* appeared in 1990. These two novels are narrated by women who are deeply troubled and affected by the societies in which they live. In 1994, Coetzee published the novel *The Master of Petersburg*, set in Russia, which draws on the life of Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevski and addresses the tragic accidental death of Coetzee's son at the age of twenty-three. That novel won the *Irish Times*' International prize in 1994. In 1999, Coetzee published *Disgrace*, a novel set in postapartheid South Africa; a 2006 poll of experts compiled by *The Observer* newspaper named it the "greatest novel of the last 25 years" written in English outside the United States. There followed a series of books in which Coetzee introduced Elizabeth Costello, a character similar to the author in everything but gender: *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and *Slow Man* (2005), a novel in which the lonely and troubled protagonist appears to be a character imagined by Costello herself. At the end of 2007, Coetzee published *Diary of a Bad Year*, a novel that features an Australian writer addressing a variety of political and moral issues.

In addition to writing novels, Coetzee is a prolific scholar who has published essays on European writers such as Beckett, Dostoevski, Leo Tolstoy, D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, and Vladimir Nabokov. More notable are his nonliterary essays, which deal with his training in linguistics and mathematics. In 1988, he published a collection of essays, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, which examines the literary production of his native country. He also has written two autobiographies, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* (2002), and has collected all his essays into several separate volumes.

## ANALYSIS

For the uninitiated reader, Coetzee's fictional texts are highly sophisticated, featuring complex

plot development and character formation. Furthermore, the mostly short novels are dense in their allusions to historical and political facts, which contribute to the difficulty of their comprehension. Although the situations in his novels derive from the realities of South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, Coetzee's fiction often breaks with the conventions of realistic narration, creating stories that have a timeless and fablelike aspect and carry numerous layers of meaning. Very often, the novels are constructed from interior monologues, in which the narrator seems to be speaking to himself or herself. The specifics of historical time and space must be inferred from the characters' plights. In this way, Coetzee allows the personal experiences to speak the truth of the social and cultural situations.

In his first novel, *Dusklands*, Coetzee seems to indicate that South Africa does not have a monopoly on human cruelty. The two-part novel consists of two "reports" on the warfare that the government has waged against civilians. The first report is narrated by Eugene Dawn, a specialist for the United States military, who reports to a supervisor named Coetzee on war against the North Vietnamese in the twentieth century. The second part is written by Jacobus Coetzee in the eighteenth century, and it is translated by a Dr. S. J. Coetzee. Of the two narrators in the novel, Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, one is introspective and sensitive, while the other is arrogant and aggressive. By naming the supervisor of the first part and the narrator and translator of the second part after his own last name, Coetzee seems to be issuing an indictment against his own forbears who, centuries earlier, had migrated to South Africa. The fictional character, Jacobus Coetzee, reveals his cruelty in a series of violent acts directed against the natives, whose land he has invaded.

Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, which was published in the United States as *From the Heart of the Country* (1977), contains the Afrikaans language in the novel's dialogues. For the English-language edition, Coetzee himself translated the dialogues. The narrator of this novel records her observations in the form of a journal, but there are apparent inconsistencies, which provide the reader with a clue to the ways in which isolation from other people might direct the narrator to think and behave in a disturbing manner. There is



some indication that the narrator's madness may be the product of the South African farm itself. The theme of a hostile environment and the human isolation that hostility produces also appears in the next novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The Magistrate, like Coetzee's other characters, is an introspective narrator who is pitted against a variety of circumstances over which he has little control. As a war between the Third Empire and the natives (or "barbarians," as the empire refers to them) unfolds, the Magistrate begins to sympathize more and more with the victims of the regime.

Coetzee's novels emphasize the cruelty of which all human beings are capable. Sometimes, as in the case of the Magistrate, his characters realize too late their roles in helping to advance the cruelty. Other times, his characters choose to disappear altogether from society. That appears to be the case with the main character, a gardener named Michael, in *Life and Times of Michael K*. From birth, Michael is an outcast who spends his childhood in an orphanage among other unwanted children. The novel focuses on Michael's journey to the farm where his mother spent part of her girlhood. Mother and son begin the journey to escape the violence that has followed the collapse of the government after years of civil war; ultimately Michael realizes that his obligation to his mother has put him in conflict with the government. Michael's mother dies on the way to the farm, and he resumes the journey, taking her ashes with him—but the war follows him, and he is captured by guerrilla soldiers who interpret his withdrawal from society and his determination to honor his mother's wishes as a revolutionary act. His response to his imprisonment is passive resistance—a fast that infuriates but ultimately deeply impresses his captors. The novel ends with the enigmatic observation that people do what they can under the circumstances, suggesting that even under tremendous limitations and pressures, the individual can live with some integrity and sense of principle.

As was true of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee's novel *Foe* is an allegorical novel that examines the relationship between an empire and its colonized peoples. Retelling Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Foe* features a woman, Susan

Barton, who is cast away on the same island as Robinson Crusoe (here called Cruso) and Friday. Issues such as the relationship of gender to power, European cultural domination, and race are explored; as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the character of Friday represents both the consequences of oppression and a capacity for resistance that defies the power of the colonizers.

As in *Foe*, layers of telling and retelling of a single story occur with variation in Coetzee's next novel, *Age of Iron*. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Currens tells her grown daughter living in the United States the story of a vagabond named Vercueil, who one day appears at her home. Mrs. Currens and Vercueil become involved in unraveling the murder of two young black boys in one of the townships. When she is questioned by the police for her concern, Mrs. Currens shows the reader that her allegiances are no longer simply to the state; her knowledge of death and violence has sensitized her to the way that her government operates. She achieves an ethical status greater than that of her powerful government by becoming a surrogate parent first to the vagabond, and then to the children of her black housekeeper. *The Master of Petersburg* also demonstrates the way in which Coetzee's characters become alienated from a fascistic social environment. As in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this novel suggests that much evil arises from the human tendency to demonize the marginal and the disempowered. As is characteristic of Coetzee's work, the resolution of the story takes place inside the psyche of his protagonist, rather than externally. Despite its internal resolution, however, this novel suggests a society on the brink of a new era, and in his next major novel, *Disgrace*, Coetzee explores a South Africa that has changed dramatically by overturning apartheid. Here, the powerful and the powerless are beginning to change places, and the white characters in the novel must find new ways to live, and, indeed, new philosophies of life. *Disgrace* introduces a major new theme in Coetzee's work, namely, the situation of exploited and brutalized animals, a theme he continues in subsequent work. Novels such as *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* also explore the way in which mortality inspires soul-searching with regard to what makes for a good and meaningful life.

## IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*The narrator, Magda, keeps a journal that reflects a psychological disorientation attributable to living on a South African farm at the beginning of the twentieth century.*

The narrator of Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, is a virginal white spinster named Magda, who is living at the beginning of the twentieth century on a South African farm with her father and several servants and field hands. Magda's father is the callous ruler of the farm; his character and the isolation of farm life in South Africa have a decided effect on Magda's psychology. When her father takes a black mistress, Magda's reactions are not only extreme, but the line between reality and fantasy begins to blur.

In conventional literary terms, Magda's narrative may be considered "unreliable," because of inconsistencies in the sequence of events and in the manner of presentation. For example, in one scene, Magda brutally kills her father and his mistress with an ax while they are in bed; a little later, her father is up and about. A little later still, Magda once again enacts a scenario motivated by both envy and vengeance, shooting her father as he is in the midst of a sexual act; toward the novel's end, after an elaborate and illegal burial of her father, Magda is nevertheless still conversing with him. There are a variety of sexual encounters, although these seem to arise from Magda's wishful imagination, rather than as a record of actual happenings. There are sexual undercurrents in her relationships with the two men, her father and the servant Hendrik; even her conversations with Hendrik's young wife, Klein-Anna, seem filled with erotic tensions, and in one scene, Magda makes a proposition to the couple that suggests the existence of a love triangle. Magda's narrative, like that of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, is motivated by highly intense and personal wishes and desires. If the accounts themselves appear dubious to the reader, however, they are accurate renditions of the narrator's troubled psychological state. Coetzee

seems to pose this question throughout the novel: What is real, what is reality? At the heart of the journal entries, what is actual may remain forever unknown, but what is certain is the disorientation and alienation that Magda experiences as a result of her life in South Africa.

## WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*The Third Empire wages a war with natives who are governed by the Magistrate, whose more liberal policies lead to his persecution by his own people; in the process, he begins to question the moral status of the empire and his own previous role as a member of its bureaucracy.*

*Waiting for the Barbarians* is narrated by a man known only as the Magistrate, who administers an outpost of an unnamed empire. The time and place of the novel's plot are also unspecified, and these indeterminacies allow the reader to perceive the events as universal. The novel begins with the arrival of Colonel Joll from the Third Empire, which has declared war against the "barbarians," the natives indigenous to the area. Among the captives, the Magistrate witnesses the killing of an old man and the torture of a young boy. Later, he encounters a young woman whose body bears the visible cruelties of the empire.

It is in his relationship with the young woman that the Magistrate begins to reexamine the goals of the empire. Before Joll's arrival, the Magistrate had lived without incident among the natives; some of his leisure time was spent excavating and deciphering the artifacts of those who had lived there before him. In the young "barbarian"



woman, the Magistrate begins to understand that he, along with those in the service of the empire, helped to destroy an innocent and peaceful civilization. After the Magistrate embarks on a journey to return the woman to her people, he is perceived as an enemy of the state, and, upon his return, is tortured, humiliated, and imprisoned. This process allows the Magistrate to recognize his body's vulnerability; the honesty and authority of his body's pain expresses essential realities ignored by his surface personality.

The military expedition fails to engage the barbarians successfully and disintegrates; the barbarians have made themselves utterly inaccessible, frustrating Joll, whose failed campaign has turned the outpost into a wasteland devoid of the vegetation of human life. As the novel comes to a close, the Magistrate and the remaining inhabitants of the outpost are left to await the barbarians, but in point of fact no one is coming; it is the barbaric Joll, who, at last, is leaving in disgrace. The last words the Magistrate speaks to Joll are of the crimes latent in the empire itself, which he tells Joll must not be inflicted on others. He has come to understand that the empire's citizens cannot depend on invading barbarians to justify the monsters they have made of themselves; the barbarians in this regard are an elaborate misdirection. Alone once again, the Magistrate watches children happily build out of the snow a "not bad" image of a man; this reasonably decent snowman can also describe the Magistrate's own developing character.

## DISGRACE

**First published:** 1999

**Type of work:** Novel

*After a sex scandal, a South African professor is stripped of his status; this disgrace is compounded by a devastating sexual attack on his daughter and the consequent dismantling of his illusions about himself and his place in the world.*

The novel's protagonist, David Lurie, is a womanizing professor in his early fifties, teaching romantic poetry in the postapartheid world of Cape

Technical University. Appearing before a tribunal because of a sex scandal involving one of his young students, David is remorseful, but he also justifies his actions as the outcome of valid romantic passions like those of Lord Byron, an aspect of whose life David is attempting to convert into an opera.

Dismissed from his teaching position, David takes refuge with his daughter, Lucy, on her farm on the Eastern Cape. The central event of this novel is Lucy's rape by three black men, during which David is brutalized and set on fire. The three men are linked to Petrus, a formerly disenfranchised black South African, who, in the new post-apartheid society, is slowly taking over Lucy's land. It becomes clear that the attack on Lucy was a way to bring her under Petrus's power; pregnant by the impaired young boy who was actually the only male permitted to have sex with her, Lucy will, as a result, come under the protection of Petrus as his nominal third wife and live as a tenant on his land. David is appalled that Lucy will accept this humiliation; Lucy agrees it is humiliation but believes she must start at ground level, with nothing, no rights, no dignity, like a dog.

The metaphor of a dog is also a reality; David's current job is at the local animal shelter, where he helps Bev Shaw, a middle-aged local woman, dispose of the abandoned dogs of the now-fled white South African populace. However, David's new status as the "dog-man" is not only an image of his fall from grace; he finds that the humiliations he has undergone have given him the ability to sympathize with suffering. He develops a compassionate relationship with Bev and with the doomed animals, in whom he sees dignity and spirituality. Although for Lucy neither she nor the dogs have any political or metaphysical status, David begins to feel that both he and animals possess souls, and that his journey is ultimately a spiritual one.

In the end, the foundations of David's life are destroyed; he has lost his job, his possessions, his identity, his status, and his daughter, and his opera project comes to nothing and expresses nothing. However, when the father of the young student he had seduced suggests that his new, difficult path is one that God has ordained for him, David immediately agrees. His work at the shelter becomes a form of penance that can possibly lead to his salvation.

## ELIZABETH COSTELLO

**First published:** 2003

**Type of work:** Novel

*An aging Australian writer who travels the world struggles with serious issues, such as sexuality, art, evil, mortality, and spirituality.*

This novel is organized around the character of Elizabeth Costello, who is virtually an alter ego for the author himself. While a famous and successful writer, she is also a lonely, confused, and sad old woman who knows that other people find her infuriating, which further isolates her. As she travels from Amsterdam to South Africa, Massachusetts, and to what appears to be the gates of Heaven, she gives readers what are described as lessons, eight in toto. The first two chapters of this novel, "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and

the Animals," argue that the slaughtering of animals is a crime that leads to moral corruption and spiritual disaster. Related to this is the overvaluation of human reason, which Costello suggests is simply the mask that power wears and which has made it impossible for humans to empathize with the situation of animals. She suggests that human beings have forgotten their own animal

natures, especially their shared mortality. In contemplating her own death she feels she shares the existential situation of animals, and at the end of her two lessons on this issue, her son, John, indeed comforts her as if she were a miserable suffering creature approaching death.

A second topic concerns the issue of evil and is organized around Costello's reaction to a novel written about Nazi Germany. She concludes the author may be too pleasurably involved with his subject, as a result becoming demonic; Costello suspects this demonic presence in herself as well. In the next section, the voice of Costello gives way to

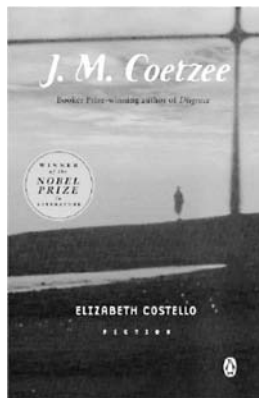
that of her sister, a Catholic nun, who denounces the study of the humanities, art, and the privileging of reason. When her sister suggests that the humanities have lost their spiritual dimension, Costello agrees that if art is to survive, it must respond to the human craving for salvation.

Eventually, Costello's final destination is a strange prison camp; here she must make a case for herself before a mysterious panel of judges in order to get past the gate into the next world. She finally produces an enigmatic statement that deploys the situation of the common frog as a metaphor not just for death but also for redemption.

A final chapter also takes readers into a more phantasmagoric reality. It is inspired by Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon" (1902) but imagined from the perspective of Lord Chandos's wife. She appears to mediate the rationality of Bacon and the mysticism of her husband, but whether it is possible for her to successfully accomplish this mission is open to question. Beginning with the body, both animal and human, Costello's lessons move through considerations of good, evil, death, sexuality, and art to a more fantastic mode of consciousness that never absolutely reveals its purposes or meanings.

### SUMMARY

J. M. Coetzee's novels are dense and filled with philosophical awareness of the situation of people living with or under oppressive circumstances, but, more importantly, his novels explore the way in which a false self, associated with a powerful but corrupt political or social system, must be dismantled. In creating realistic interior and external worlds that reflect human cruelty and atrocity, Coetzee never lets the reader forget that his protagonists are vulnerable men or women who have lost their way, and who are now on reparative journeys that involve serious moral and spiritual issues. His protagonists are not so much the victims of crime as they are themselves criminals who are unaware of their criminal natures, or, more often, they are ordinary people implicated in criminal systems, and for this they must atone. The novels are difficult to comprehend at times because the subject matter and the characters that inhabit the devastated worlds do not lend themselves to easy simplifications, especially since the reader must accept



that pain and suffering is often the pathway to enlightenment, and that humiliation and disempowerment are necessary to achieve a full humanity.

Cynthia Wong; updated by Margaret Boe Birns

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In his novels, J. M. Coetzee subjects his major characters to considerable suffering of one kind or another. Is there a meaning or purpose to this suffering? Are there lessons to be learned?
- How do Coetzee's novels explore the relationship between the powerful and the powerless?
- Discuss Coetzee's novels in the context of the violent history and politics of South Africa, especially apartheid.
- Discuss the way in which the suffering of animals has developed into an important aspect of Coetzee's fiction.
- Often Coetzee's narratives frustrate a desire for clarification and will defer meanings indefinitely. What is the purpose of this cryptic aspect of his novels?
- In awarding Coetzee the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy praised him for his exposure of the "cosmetic morality and cruel rationalism" of Western civilization. How do his novels explore this critical problem?





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## SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

**Born:** Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire, England  
October 21, 1772

**Died:** Highgate, London, England  
July 25, 1834

*Coleridge is one of the most important and prolific English Romantic poets. His contributions to the art and philosophy of the age include some of the greatest literary criticism ever written, as well as one of humanity's most innovative biographical documents.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in Ottery St. Mary, at the vicarage of a small town in rural Devonshire, England, on October 21, 1772, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (KOH-lirihj) was the tenth and last child of the Reverend John and Ann Bowden Coleridge. John was an ambitious and scholarly man who served his community not only as parish priest but also as headmaster of the local grammar school, the site of his youngest child's first formal education. Many of Coleridge's early family associations seem fraught with anxiety and pain. His elderly parents doted upon their clever and eager child, which his siblings resented, and Coleridge developed an intense dependency upon those whom he perceived to be stronger and better than he—a pattern that persisted throughout his life. Thus, intellectual precocity brought him much attention and affection at the same time that nearly insatiable appetites, manifest as greed for books and food, prevented his ever feeling fully satisfied and cherished.

Whatever possibilities might have existed for bliss at home were thwarted, however, when John Coleridge died suddenly when the boy was about to turn nine. His mother was nearly destitute, so her youngest son was dispatched to London to attend Christ's Hospital Grammar School, originally a charity school for the children of indigent clergy. The boarding school was conservative and strict, but Coleridge, despite claims of homesickness and

loneliness, flourished in the urban academic environment under the unflinching and at times painfully demanding tutelage of James Bowyer, who encouraged the youth's poetry writing and guided his inaugural study of Continental philosophy, which continued throughout his life. Moreover, Coleridge was viewed by many of the other boys as gregarious and charming, although his lifelong friend Charles Lamb, also enrolled there, wrote later of Coleridge's unhappiness at Christ's Hospital.

Shortly before his twentieth birthday in 1792, Coleridge matriculated at Jesus College, Cambridge University, on a scholarship designated for those intending to take Holy Orders in the Church of England. From an initially rigorous regimen of mathematics and the classics, Coleridge drifted by his third and final year toward no less intensive but more idiosyncratic and less respectable pursuits. For a youth of slender means, he contracted sizable debts and became a supporter of religious and political radicals such as William Frend and William Godwin. England, in the initial period following the start of the French Revolution, harbored a number of young and idealistic sympathizers to the French, and Coleridge found himself in intelligent and congenial company. Overcome by guilt for his financial state, however, which was also undermining his chances with a young woman with whom he was in love, Coleridge impulsively and secretly enlisted in the Light Dragoons as Silas Tomkyn Comberbacke, preserving the initials by which he preferred to be known. The dragoons were cavalry



units, requiring equestrian skills beyond those of Coleridge. After a month, he appealed to his brothers, who paid off his debts and the cost of his discharge.

Returning to Cambridge in the spring of 1793, Coleridge met Robert Southey, another improvident young intellectual poet, recently at Oxford and also unwillingly destined for the church. They instantly became great friends, with Coleridge virtually idolizing Southey, sharing ideas and interests and formulating Pantisocracy, a utopian community to be established in the United States along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. In Bristol, where Coleridge began delivering successful public lectures on various literary and philosophic topics, he contributed journalistic articles and essays, wrote poetry, and undertook in-depth study and reflection, which he recorded in notebooks and the margins of published books. All of these occupations lasted his entire life.

In October, 1795, Coleridge wed Sara Fricker. They settled in Clevedon on the Bristol Channel, while he prepared to launch his own (short-lived) weekly newspaper, *The Watchman*. Idyllically happy, Coleridge wrote one of his most famous poems, "The Eolian Harp," in which he explores the idea of the "One Life."

Around this time, too, Coleridge met William Wordsworth, also a young, restless, and penurious Cambridge radical and aspiring poet. As he had with Southey (with whom Coleridge had now quarreled), Coleridge fell into a kind of hero worship of Wordsworth, although in many ways their relationship was mutually sustaining.

Coleridge's first book of poems appeared in 1796, along with the first issue of his newspaper, but neither was very successful. This same year, Coleridge was reconciled with Southey, who was now his brother-in-law, and Coleridge's first son, Hartley, was born. Coleridge decided to move his young family to Nether Stowey in the rural west of England, where he had been born. The year was also marked by an outbreak of facial neuralgia, for which Coleridge amply medicated himself with laudanum, an alcoholic tincture of opium; at that time, laudanum was as readily used as aspirin is today and was a recourse that was already habitual with Coleridge.

Coleridge had been a sickly child. When he was eighteen, he developed serious rheumatic fever

and very likely received a considerable amount of laudanum for anesthetic relief. In addition, opium initially offered him an escape from his inadequacies. Despite some periods of remission, the rheumatic fever seems to have become a chronic condition progressing over the course of his life to rheumatism and rheumatic heart disease. As a result of his ill health, coupled with his dependent personality, Coleridge swiftly capitulated to opium addiction, which itself compromised his health, as well as the conduct of his life.

While living in Stowey, Coleridge labored on the play *Orosio*, completed in 1797 and destined for the Drury Lane Theatre in London—which, however, rejected it. (In 1813, revised and renamed *Remorse*, it triumphed at that theater.) Meanwhile, he also wrote more conversation poems, including "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," about a walk in the country made by a group of his friends whom he was unable to accompany because Sara had spilled hot milk on his foot, and "Frost at Midnight," in which he pledges a childhood nurtured by nature for baby Hartley, unlike his own London-bound experiences at Christ's Hospital. Coleridge also is thought to have written the mysterious, exotic "Kubla Khan" around this time.

During the last years of the eighteenth century, Coleridge was increasingly drawn to Wordsworth. In discussing their craft, the two poets decided to collaborate first on a poem, then on a collection. The poem was to be a narrative about the wandering, guilt-ridden Cain; the idea dissolved into Coleridge's magnificent *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), which was published as the first poem of their joint *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). This collection is generally seen as heralding the English Romantic movement. The volume ends with Wordsworth's masterpiece "Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," the philosophic underpinnings of which are clearly Coleridge's notion of the One Life, transmuted through Wordsworth's childhood mysticism. Shortly after writing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge wrote the fragmentary *Christabel* (1816), and the Wedgwood family of pottery wealth, whose sons were sympathetic to Coleridge's writing, settled a £150 annuity on the perpetually indigent poet. It was well timed, for the Coleridge family now included a second son, Berkeley.

One of the reasons for publishing *Lyrical Ballads*

was to underwrite a winter in Germany, which Coleridge believed was the essential place to study. He had originally planned to write the age's great philosophic poem; now he turned the responsibility for that work over to Wordsworth, typically deferring to one deemed superior. (Wordsworth accepted the charge and felt burdened by it for life, haunted by Coleridge's specter, though Coleridge himself by no means escaped the self-inflicted obligation of producing a magnum opus). The Wordsworths and Coleridge, with his wife and family left in the care of friends, set sail for Germany before the collection appeared, toward the end of 1798. The Wordsworths were cold, poor, lonely, and miserable in Goslar, while Coleridge reveled in the social and intellectual ferment at the university town of Göttingen. In April, he finally received word that Berkeley had died two months before, although he did not return to Stowey until July, which aroused accusations of neglect. Once back in England, Coleridge decided that he and his family would follow the Wordsworths to the Lake District, and he installed his family in Greta Hall in Keswick. In 1800, a third son, Derwent, was born, and Coleridge devoted himself for a time to journalism to support his family.

Coleridge's health, as a result of both genuine malady and the opium use, was suffering, and his marriage was seriously foundering. Although he and Sara had seemed ecstatically happy at first, the full burden of the household had fallen to Sara, who was unable to rely upon her husband for assistance or steady financial support. Moreover, he had, since his earliest married days, been unable to stay in one place or at one task for very long; he was alternately indolent, fidgety, moody, and infirm of purpose and of place, for which the encumbered Sara had no sympathy. For emotional and physical sanctuary, he fled frequently to the Wordsworths in Grasmere, where he encountered the sister of Wordsworth's intended bride, Sara Hutchison, whom he rendered anagrammatically as "Asra" when he fell madly in love with her. A verse letter to her, much revised, became his moving and melancholic paean to his inability to feel and, ironically, to write. It became "Dejection: An Ode." His ardor for Sara seems not to have been consummated.

Coleridge increasingly chose prose over poetry to channel his emotional and creative furies. At times, he tried to make his marriage work, and his

last child and only daughter, Sara, was born at the end of 1802. Coleridge, however, effectively ceased being a member of his family after young Sara was born. His marriage was virtually over, though divorce, in keeping with the mores of the day, was never seriously contemplated. In 1804, Coleridge set off for Malta to recover his health in a foreign and presumably more hospitable climate, to break his addiction, and to produce some serious writing, including some philosophical notes to buttress Wordsworth's grand poem. He traveled around southern Europe, skirting the movements of Napoleon I's armies, and returned to England in 1806, still addicted, still ill, and claiming that the notes for the poem had been lost at sea. In the meantime, Wordsworth was writing his great autobiographical *The Prelude: Or, The Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1850), which he always considered as his poem addressed to Coleridge. Nonetheless, Coleridge had clearly tried and expended the good favor of his friends.

Although Coleridge remained in touch with his family, his base of operations was henceforth London, where he lectured to great acclaim on poetry, both contemporary and Renaissance, and philosophy, publishing a journal, *The Friend* (1809-1810, 1818), which was notable but insolvent. His youthful radicalism had almost entirely eroded, so that now he wrote positively and enthusiastically about the English establishment and the Church of England, trying to contrive his magnum opus now in religious terms.

In 1810, Coleridge moved in with the Montagus, who endeavored to cure his addiction, although Wordsworth, their friend, warned them of the hopelessness of helping Coleridge. When Wordsworth's warning came true, they revealed it to Coleridge, who thereupon broke off all relations—already somewhat cooled—with Wordsworth. The breach was healed two years later, although the two were never what they had been to one another, despite a joint trip to Germany in 1828.

In 1815, Coleridge began what became an innovative document, the unfinished *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, eventually published in 1817. *Sibylline Leaves*, a collection of verse, also appeared in 1817.

Coleridge resided for about six years with the Morgan family, wealthy admirers who failed to eliminate his dependency on opium, and then for the remainder of his life with Dr. James Gillman in

Highgate, who seems to have finally controlled the habit. Coleridge was particularly fortunate in this hospitality, for his health remained very poor, and in 1812 he willingly surrendered his annuity when the Wedgwoods experienced financial reverses. He continued various writing projects, which earned for him some economic relief and growing respect as a literary critic and as an architect of a modern temperament in art.

Coleridge regretted the unfolding patterns of the lives of his abandoned children. His son Hartley, who had seemed the quintessential Romantic child, had to leave Oxford and great academic promise owing to alcohol abuse, drifting into alcoholism and homelessness. His brilliant daughter Sara had married her cousin Henry Coleridge; the blood relationship concerned her father, although the couple proved their devotion by serving as the first editors of Coleridge's writings. Drawing upon his faith at the end, Coleridge died of a massive heart attack compounded by rheumatic hypertension on July 25, 1834, in London and was buried at Highgate Cemetery.

## ANALYSIS

As one of the three primary figures of the first generation of the traditional canon of English Romantic poets, Coleridge is responsible along with Wordsworth for the *Lyrical Ballads*, which is generally viewed as the opening salvo of English Romanticism. Coleridge's masterwork is that great vision of sin and Redemption, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which begins the volume, but he wrote other magnificent poems and contributed substantially to literary theory.

In fact, in many respects, English Romanticism might not have occurred without the synergy of the two poets in the mid- to late 1790's and into the first decade of the nineteenth century. Critics have interpreted Wordsworth's "Peter Bell" and "The Idiot Boy" as reactions to or attempted corrections of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Also, Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" is often seen as engaged in a "lyrical dialogue," to use critic Paul Magnuson's expression, with Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," in which both poets ponder emotional despair and what it means for themselves in the world and as poets, as well as what each thinks of the other's ideas.

One of Coleridge's earliest contributions to En-

glish Romanticism was the "conversation poem," a form that he invented, which critic M. H. Abrams later termed the "greater Romantic lyric." In this form, a speaker describes to a silent listener the physical surroundings and the passage of his thoughts until some insight, related to the landscape and yet also transforming both it and him, arises. Other Romantic poets borrowed the form (William Wordsworth's "Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc," and John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" might be considered examples), but no one surpassed the compact power of "The Eolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," and "Frost at Midnight."

For Coleridge, the conversation poem was particularly well suited to his evocation of the One Life, a philosophy of pantheism with which he was much taken in the 1790's. In brief, this philosophy holds that the Creator and the created are one, that God suffuses and interfuses the universe, and that all that lives is in and of God. Coleridge, however, was uncomfortable subscribing to this idea for very long, and age, care, and experience seem to have taken their toll and restored him to the Church of England. Nonetheless, his restless imagination explored the implications of the established religion, as well. Late in life, his prose works reflected these interests.

Many of Coleridge's projects share the recurring Romantic characteristic of fragmentation. For the Romantics, the fragment was testament to the partiality of the human ability to understand and to re-create the world. For Coleridge, in particular, the fragment also testified to his own tendencies to start vast projects that would, for a variety of reasons, fail to be realized in their entirety. Nonetheless, in the Romantic period great merit was located in the portion that abided, and fragments by Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Lord Byron have all been published, while Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and *Biographia Literaria* are all billed as incomplete. Despite their tentativeness, however, they are triumphs of artistry, celebrating the mystery of the universe coupled with the insatiable and indestructible talent to fabricate, which Coleridge understood, both as practitioner and as philosopher.

Coleridge devised theories to account for the functioning of the imagination and offered in-

spired commentary on many other great writers, including William Shakespeare and John Milton, as well as his former collaborator, Wordsworth. For Coleridge, creativity imitated the divine act recorded in the biblical book of Genesis, not as blasphemy but as homage and as the best of which humanity was capable. Also, aesthetic value, he believed, derived from the degree to which art achieved or approached organic form rather than stylized or artificial construction. Thus, he linked art with the vitality of the living thing, which he saw as also celebrating multifaceted integrity, what he called “multeity in unity”—a phrase that sums up, as well, the varied legacy subsumed under the name of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

## THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

**First published:** 1798 (collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798)

**Type of work:** Poem

*On a long sea voyage, a sailor kills the faithful albatross, which then brings down upon him ghostly punishment and penance.*

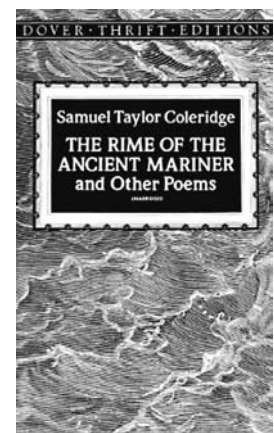
Coleridge’s masterpiece, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, was first published as part of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which thereby secured its position as one of the landmark poems of its age, despite its archaic ballad form. Structured as a frame narrative, the poem begins with the Mariner’s detaining a guest on his way to a wedding with the spellbinding account of a most strange ocean voyage. The Mariner tells of a southbound voyage to the Antarctic. He describes how the ship, as it clears the horizon, ominously dips below the church and below all of civilized and conventional authority, descending toward the unknown, the wild, and the hellish. Reaching the frozen, seemingly blank, polar world, the sailors call to and feed a white albatross, a large seabird, as an apparent friend or messenger from another realm. The Mariner inexplicably shoots it, sacrificing it, innocent and pure, with his crossbow (echoing Easter imagery). Thereupon, the ship idles without wind to move it while the superstitious crew grows increasingly thirsty and hangs the

dead bird around the Mariner’s neck to punish him for his cruelty, which they feel in some way has stalled their trip.

At last, a ship is sighted, but it is a skeleton ship, carrying the Spectre-Woman, “Life-in-Death,” and her mate Death, who are types of avenging spirits of the albatross. The two of them toss dice to determine who will decide the fate of the Mariner’s ship, and the Woman wins. She imposes a penance on the Mariner, which begins with the death of the crew while the Mariner lives on, unable to die, unable even to sleep. Watching the now-beautiful phosphorescent water snakes, which earlier looked monstrous to him, the Mariner is impelled to bless them, and at once the albatross slides off his neck into the sea. His unconscious action restores a balance upset by his murder of the albatross, although his penance is not finished, as disembodied spirit voices assert.

The Mariner is now able to sleep, and he dreams while the ship sails home, manned by spirits animating the crew’s corpses. At length, the ship escapes the haunted universe to return to home port, but then it suddenly sinks, while the Mariner is rescued and immediately absolved of his sins, if only for a time, by the Hermit of the Wood. Nonetheless, his need for penance remains, for the Mariner must wander endlessly and solitarily, until an agony seizes him, and he in turn seizes one whom he knows must hear his tale. The Wedding Guest misses the marriage ceremony, but he has been irrevocably changed by the Mariner’s words.

The poem has given rise to a multitude of interpretations, stressing the existential, meaningless murder of the albatross in an incomprehensible world; the Christian pattern of sin, confession, and penance within a sacramental universe; the functioning of the symbolic or nightmare imagination as the Mariner’s fate unfolds; and the necessity, even the desperation, of narration. Coleridge himself after the first publication appended marginalia that recapit-





ulated the poem in an effort to clarify, although what it actually did was to retell the plot at a slant and thereby distance the author, as well as the frame, from the poem's peculiar and disturbing nature, relinquishing responsibility for interpretation to each reader.

## CHRISTABEL

**First published:** 1816 (collected in  
*Christabel*, 1816)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The maiden Christabel finds the mysterious, serpentine Geraldine in the woods at midnight and brings her home to her castle with subsequent emotional chaos.*

*Christabel* has two parts, written in 1797 and 1800, with the second part a distinct falling-off from the preceding. In the first part, the maiden Christabel, rather unwisely for a defenseless young girl, goes into the woods at midnight to pray for her betrothed knight, where she discovers the beautiful but evil Geraldine, who claims that she has been abandoned by five would-be rapists. At once, the idea of sexual violation comes into the poem. Christabel takes pity upon Geraldine and brings her to the home that she shares with her father, Sir Leoline. Geraldine, like evil spirits traditionally, cannot cross the threshold of the castle, so poor, duped Christabel carries her, in an ironic inversion of the marriage ritual.

Christabel brings Geraldine to her bedchamber and tells her guest about her mother's having died when she was born. They undress, Geraldine revealing her magic and mystery in an undescribed horror visible on her chest and side. Naïvely, Christabel sleeps with her visitor. In the conclusion to the first part, the narrator acknowledges that Geraldine now has Christabel at her mercy and that only the unlikely aid of the spirit of Christabel's mother can save her. Geraldine probably is a lesbian vampire, as is most persuasively argued by James Twitchell and Camille Paglia in Harold Bloom's collection of essays on Coleridge.

The second part of the poem concerns the day after the previous waking nightmare. Sir Leoline

arises to note that he awakes to a world of death, which clearly characterizes the experience to which his daughter is now subject. He meets Geraldine, who discloses that she is the daughter of his youthful best friend, from whom he is now estranged. He decides to use this visit to mend fences, while the watching Christabel is reminded of how chilled she was when she touched Geraldine the night before.

Similarly, Bard Bracy, the resident poet who is by virtue of his craft gifted with the artist's intuition of truth, describes a dream that he has just had, in which Sir Leoline's pet dove, named for his daughter, has been captured by a green snake. Moreover, Christabel, under the magnetic but malevolent influence of Geraldine's serpentine eyes, reflects the same diabolic appearance, which renders Sir Leoline, interpreting it as jealousy, enraged at his evidently inhospitable child. Christabel's troubles are only just beginning, it seems, as the poem breaks off.

Coleridge talked of completing the poem, but starting as it does with the rise of evil, he was uncomfortable pursuing that to its anticipated and un-Christian triumph. It remains, then, a provocative fragment of innocence in the grasp of potent, malicious, and unconventional female sexuality.

## "KUBLA KHAN"

**First published:** 1816 (collected in  
*Christabel*, 1816)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In a fragment of an opium dream, the Mongol emperor builds a crystal palace; then an Abyssinian maiden and a flashing-eyed prophet reproduce it.*

"Kubla Khan," tagged as a fragment, has two parts. The first is a mostly prose introduction in which Coleridge recounts the circumstances under which he composed the following lines of verse. He confesses to having fallen asleep after taking medication for a minor complaint while meditating upon a voluminous travelogue. Asleep, he dreams the images that, upon waking, he dashes down as the poem. Unfortunately, he is inter-

rupted by a man from Porlock, a nearby town, and when he is again able to write, he recalls little more. Additionally, Coleridge announces that he is publishing this fragment, written years before, only at the behest of the deservedly famous (as he ingenuously notes) Lord Byron. Thus, in short order, Coleridge blames a book, sleep and dreams, drugs, a visitor, and Byron for this curious and cryptic poem rather than bravely taking responsibility for it himself.

Coleridge's insecurities prevented his claiming a masterpiece. The poem proper is also bipartite. Its first section describes how, godlike, Kubla Khan creates an entire world, a kind of Eden, merely by utterance. His decree animates a world of fountains and rivers, caves and gardens, energy and peace, an enchanted and hallowed place that seems to represent the origins of life, consciousness, and art. Within this Eden, conflict, a fall, is predicted, for the emperor hears ancient war prophecies.

Abruptly, the poem switches to a dream of an Abyssinian dulcimer-playing maiden singing of a holy mountain. The poet declares that, were he able to recall her song, which in a way he has just done with lines that evoke her, he would also be able to duplicate Kubla Khan's invention, which he has actually also just done in writing the foregoing, and his witnesses would attest to his inspiration, his art, and his prophecy.

What Coleridge has done is to celebrate his poetic artistry and its kinship with the creative and prophetic powers of religion and humanity's deepest desires.

## BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA

**First published:** 1817

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*In an unfinished autobiography, Coleridge considers his childhood, the rules of poetry, Wordsworth's poetry, the nature of creation, and German philosophy.*

Ostensibly a literary biography, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, is also one of the greatest works of liter-

ary criticism. Coleridge begins by discussing his secondary education, particularly in classical poetry, under James Bowyer at Christ's Hospital Grammar School. From there, he launches a discussion of Wordsworth's poetry, to which he later returns. Coleridge takes Wordsworth at face value and applies to Wordsworth's poetry what Wordsworth in his 1800 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* claimed to do. Coleridge shows that Wordsworth's protestations that his craft was the common language of common people was not strictly true, and that his poetry is nonetheless artifice, consciously crafted and not the unreflective, thoughtless speech he said it represented. Still, Coleridge argues that Wordsworth is the finest contemporary poet and an example of poetic genius. He also gives his version of the origin of the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, saying that Wordsworth was to write of natural scenes made extraordinary by his craft, while Coleridge was to write of the supernatural rendered credible by his art. This interpretation is somewhat at odds with Wordsworth's emphasis in his preface on the volume's intended singular purpose.

Coleridge also proffers his definition of imagination. He distinguishes the "primary," which he describes as the divine ability to create, the source of all animate power. The "secondary" imagination is the human ability to create through the inventive perception and recollection of images. Last is the "fancy," which is simply the ability to remember.

Coleridge, in addition, discourses at length on philosophy. Beginning with Thomas De Quincey, who was himself later similarly charged, critics have noted, censured, or excused the extensive portions of the *Biographia Literaria* that correspond to translations of the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Commentator Thomas McFarland has pointed out that Schelling did not consider his work to have been plagiarized and that in large measure what Coleridge was doing was registering a congruence of his thinking with that of Schelling, before both diverged in opposite directions. Moreover, McFarland notes that Coleridge fully intended to return to the manuscript later to insert his own words for the words of the German, which were at the moment merely holding a place in the text, as it were, for Coleridge's words. Alas, Coleridge never returned, never substituted, and never completed the work. Thus, it might be de-



scribed most accurately as an “anatomy,” as critic Northrop Frye defines it, a congeries of digressions, meditations, and reflections, the unity of which may be unclear but the sum of which clearly exceeds its parts.

### SUMMARY

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was justly celebrated during his lifetime for his wide learning and wonderful powers of conversation, which competed personally with devastating opium addiction, deep-seated miseries, and emotional insecurities. Yet he is also remembered for his poetic gifts, which enabled him to explore extraordinary worlds opened up by creative powers, and his philosophical inquiries, which attempted to account for those worlds, those powers, and his own complex self.

Laura Dabundo

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Were Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s health problems and remedies in any way beneficial for his literary work?
- Consider the *Lyrical Ballads* as a landmark work of English Romanticism.
- Consider the *Lyrical Ballads* as a source of subsequent conflict and confusion for its two authors.
- *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* stands as a particularly long-running required poem for relatively young students. What qualities of the poem enable it to remain a more successful educational venture than some of the other curricular standbys from its time and from the nineteenth century?
- In what ways was *Biographia Literaria* an original work of literary criticism?
- How can Coleridge’s “conversation poems” be so justified? Was it a matter of the poet having a conversation with himself?
- What habits or circumstances sometimes prevented Coleridge from completing poems successfully?

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## COLETTE

**Born:** Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, Burgundy, France  
January 28, 1873

**Died:** Paris, France  
August 3, 1954

*Colette is one of France's most popular novelists, noted especially for her depictions of love, animals, and nature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (kaw-LEHT) was born in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, a small town in south-west France, on January 28, 1873, to Jules-Joseph Colette and Adèle-Sidonie Landoy Robineau-Duclos. Jules-Joseph was a retired army captain turned tax collector, and his new profession led the family to Saint-Sauveur-en Puisaye. At first things went well, and Colette enjoyed a happy childhood in her easygoing, freethinking family. Jules-Joseph, however, was too easygoing; he was not very industrious, and he did not have much of a head for business. In 1890, the family was forced to sell its house and move in with Colette's older brother Achille Robineau-Duclos, a doctor in a nearby village.

It was there, in 1891, that the family received a visit from Henri Gauthiers-Villars (later known simply as "Willy"), the son of a former colleague of Jules-Joseph in the military. Willy had rejected his father's scientific orientation in favor of literature, aided by his father's contacts in the publishing industry. Willy was fifteen years older than Colette, but the age difference apparently did not pose a problem. They were engaged within the year, and in 1893 they were married. To what extent Colette was in love with Willy is a question that has preoccupied biographers ever since. It is certain that Colette had a considerable amount of difficulty leaving behind her mother, to whom she remained

strongly attached, when the couple moved to Paris that year. Not much is known about the early years of Colette's marriage, but it was clearly a period of disillusionment. Willy, it transpired, was something of a philanderer and without real literary talent. Colette fell ill, no doubt partly as a result of her depression. It was Side (as Colette called her mother) who came and nursed her back to health, a further testimony to the close bond between mother and daughter.

As a way to lift Colette out of her depression, Willy suggested that she become one of his ghostwriters and write down some of her schoolgirl memories with a bit of added spice to make them sell. The first result of their collaboration, *Claudine à l'école* (1900; *Claudine at School*, 1956), was published in 1900 and became an immediate success. Willy and Colette quickly followed with *Claudine à Paris* (1901; *Claudine in Paris*, 1958) the following year, *Claudine en ménage* (1902; *The Indulgent Husband*, 1935; also translated as *Claudine Married*, 1960) in 1902, and finally *Claudine s'en va* (1903; *The Innocent Wife*, 1934; also translated as *Claudine and Annie*, 1962) the year after that. The series was a resounding success and led to a "Claudine craze" that made the authors household names.

All four novels contained a strong autobiographical element, characteristic of all Colette's work, and as the heroine Claudine evolved through each story, so, too, did Colette. Like her heroine, she had left school, got married, moved to Paris, and grown more and more independent. By 1904, Colette no longer needed Willy as coauthor and her first solo novel appeared, signed merely by "Madame Colette Willy."

Colette's new confidence and independence put increasing distance between her and Willy. The stress on their relationship was intensified by the death of Colette's father in 1905, and in 1906 the couple separated and Colette's life entered a new phase. She began appearing on the stage, notably in mime-dramas that often led to controversy because of the roles that she played. She also became involved in a relationship with the Marquise de Belboeuf (known as "Missy"), which would last for several years. During this time, Colette continued publishing, and several important novels appeared during this period, including *La Retraite sentimentale* (1907; *Retreat from Love*, 1974) and *La Vagabonde* (1911; *The Vagabond*, 1954).

In 1912, a death in the family once again precipitated a change. Colette had been living with Henri de Jouvenel, whom she had met the previous year. Henri was then a vigorous newspaper editor and a thirty-five-year-old divorcé with two children. In September, 1912, Colette's mother, Sido, died. In December, Colette married Henri, and their daughter (also named Colette) was born the following year. Family life was interrupted by World War I, but Colette continued to write, travel, and publish. Her work was recognized after the war, in 1920, when she was awarded membership in the French Legion of Honor in recognition of her contributions to literature. This award coincided with the publication of one of her best-known novels, *Chéri* (1920; English translation, 1929), in 1920. The novel was successfully adapted for the stage the following year.

In the early 1920's, Colette's relationship with Henri began to deteriorate. He was very busy, was having affairs with other women, and would occasionally disappear without explanation. In 1923, Colette announced her intention of divorcing him, a process completed the following year. Shortly afterward, Colette met Maurice Goudekot, a pearl dealer some eighteen years her junior, in the south of France. Although they were not married until 1935, this quickly became the central relationship in Colette's life and it would last until her death nearly thirty years later.

Colette was by now a very successful writer, with an apartment in Paris and a house near St. Tropez in the south of France. She was kept busy writing, adapting for the stage, and traveling. She published a number of novels, including *Le Blé en herbe*

(1923; *The Ripening Corn*, 1931; also translated as *The Ripening Seed*, 1955), *La Fin de Chéri* (1926; *The Last of Chéri*, 1932), *La Naissance du jour* (1928; *A Lesson in Love*, 1932; also translated as *Break of Day*, 1961), and *La Chatte* (1933; *The Cat*, 1936).

Domestic and professional happiness were once again interrupted by war when the Germans invaded France in World War II. Colette left Paris briefly but returned in 1941 to endure the Occupation. She was forced to be separated from Maurice, who was first arrested by the Germans and then fled to the unoccupied zone to avoid further danger. Colette was far from idle, however, and it was during the war, in 1944, that one of her most popular works, *Gigi* (1944; English translation, 1952), first appeared. Published originally in a periodical in Lyon in 1942, it was published as a book in 1944 and later became an Academy Award-winning film that brought Colette an international reputation.

*Gigi* was the last novel that Colette would write, but she continued to receive honors. She was promoted within the Legion of Honor (she received the Grand Cross in 1953); she was elected to the Académie Goncourt (in 1945) and later became the president of that prestigious literary body; finally, when she died in Paris on August 3, 1954, she became the first French woman to be honored by a state funeral. She was, however, as controversial in death as she had sometimes been in life. The Catholic church would not permit a religious funeral because of her two divorces, a stand that generated considerable criticism.

## ANALYSIS

The majority of Colette's works are so short as to call into question whether they should be labeled "novels" or "short stories." Although relying heavily on description and evocation of mood, her works are not given to prolixity. Her literary output was nevertheless quite prolific, with one edition of her complete works stretching to fifteen volumes. The consistent quality of this large volume of works, their style and themes, brought Colette popularity and recognition during her lifetime and have contributed to the maintenance and spread of her reputation since her death.

Colette was not a deep or philosophical writer, and she left no profound thesis on the meaning of her writing, but she was a keen observer of life and of nature, and she possessed a gift for turning those

observations into stories that illuminated human experience with charm and humor, stories that appealed to and were admired by her vast readership. The Claudine stories illustrate the devices that initially gained for her a following and continue to entertain today. Based heavily on autobiography, the subjects of the stories are unpretentious: In the first volume of the series, the young Claudine shares her memories of schooldays, using the provincial school as a forum to observe the vagaries of human behavior. Colette would often draw on such autobiographical sources for the inspiration for her stories. For all of this, her work does not suffer from a lack of originality, for not every author shares Colette's ability to see the interest of a subject or her ability to set the scene so delicately.

Thus, in *Claudine at School*, the reader shares Claudine's glimpses of budding, burgeoning, and dying love, for example—a subject that might be banal in the hands of a less talented writer but that takes on a universal quality when treated by Colette. Moreover, the fact that some of these moments occur between women seems perfectly natural when presented through Claudine's eyes. All human beings are entitled to their happiness as well as to their weaknesses, and Claudine's nonjudgmental attitude illustrates Colette's talent for showing the human side of everyone. The same openness and sympathy are evident in Colette's presentation of marginal social figures such as the courtesans of *Chéri* and *Gigi* and the homosexual character Marcel, Claudine's friend in *Claudine in Paris*. It is also evident in the more complex *Ces plaisirs* (1932; better known as *Le Pur et l'impur*, 1941; *The Pure and the Impure*, 1967), a work of memoirs and biography that some critics find the most challenging of Colette's works, but which presents memories of Colette's personal acquaintances in the same nonjudgmental way.

Colette's gift for evoking credibility and sympathy is such that her ability to render human qualities extends even to animals. One of her most popular novels, *The Cat*, depicts a love triangle between a husband and wife (Alain and Camille) and the husband's cat, Saha. Colette depicts the bond between a man and his cat with such insight that the intrusion of a cat into a marriage does not appear at all farfetched, and the reader is quickly caught up in the tensions of the conflicting pull of emotions.

Because of the autobiographical nature of her work, many of Colette's novels are told from the perspective of a first-person narrator (again, the Claudine series offers an illustration), but a number of works are written in the third person. Even so, the narrator is not an intrusive presence, and the stories somehow seem to tell themselves. This narrative strategy and Colette's use of dialogue perhaps explain why so many of her works were successfully adapted to the stage.

Colette created a number of characters who are remembered vividly by readers. Chief among these is the figure of the gamine, the assertive but endearing girl represented by (among others) Claudine and Gigi. While Colette does not neglect male characters (the figure Chéri must certainly be mentioned here), many of her creations are women, and it is no doubt Colette's attention to the problems and intricacies of women's lives that has earned for her a large following among women readers.

## CHÉRI

**First published:** 1920 (English translation, 1929)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The handsome Chéri falls in love with an older courtesan, whom he leaves when his mother arranges a marriage.*

One of Colette's contemporaries suggested that *Chéri* was one of the most important love stories ever written. Despite the many unconventional aspects of the story—love between an older woman and a younger man, the sympathetic depiction of a courtesan, and the willingness with which Chéri submits to an arranged marriage—the novel indeed remains an engrossing portrait of doomed love.

Léonie Vallon, known as Léa de Lonval, a courtesan nearing the end of her career, falls in love with Fred Peloux, known as Chéri, the son of one of her rivals. Although they live together for several years and seem to love each other, their relationship is precarious, and indeed when Chéri announces that he is going to marry Edmée for



money, Léa accepts the inevitable breakup. She maintains a strong exterior so as not to give her rivals the satisfaction of seeing her pain. The reader, however, sees a different side, as the narrator shows Léa's loneliness and desperate attempts to fill the time. The reader is also made aware that Chéri is not entirely happy and comes to see—even before Chéri himself is aware of it—that Chéri misses the comfort and love of his former mistress. The climax comes after Léa returns from a mysterious vacation, and Chéri, more aware of his feelings for having missed her, shows up one night to confess his love.

A happy ending would have satisfied many readers, but Colette does not compromise for effect: After Chéri spends the night with Léa, he returns the next morning to Edmée. The bittersweet ending reveals Colette's preoccupation with harmony rather than happiness. The story achieves its resolution from the fact that Chéri realizes his true feelings. This confrontation with the past frees him to continue his relationship with Edmée in the present. Avoiding facile wish fulfillment, Colette instead offers a profound insight into human nature.



## THE LAST OF CHÉRI

**First published:** *La Fin de Chéri*, 1926  
(English translation, 1932)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Chéri attempts to revive a former love, but when it fails, he commits suicide.*

While the first volume of Chéri's story, set in the pre-World War I Paris of 1912, conveyed the light, carefree mood of the belle époque, *The Last of Chéri* has the somber, sober mood of postwar France, when many illusions had been lost. Five years have passed since Chéri left Léa, but he has been unable to find a purpose in his life to replace his lost love.

His thoughts turn back to this idealized past, as many in France also thought back to prewar days with nostalgia, and he decides to revive his relationship with Léa.

Chéri's attempt to recapture the past, however, fails. When he does see Léa again, he does not even recognize her because she has changed so much. She has stopped trying to disguise her age and appears transformed into an unattractive old woman. Significantly, when Chéri sees her, he thinks of his mother. With this realization that he cannot return to the past and yet cannot live with or in the present, Chéri resolves that the only remaining choice is suicide. In this act, he symbolically returns to his happy prewar days with Léa by surrounding himself with pictures of her as he remembers her, as a beautiful young woman, at the moment of his death.

Once again, Colette maintains a light touch in a novel that has philosophical underpinnings in its representation of human attempts to recapture the past. Chéri appears as a tragic hero who has brought about his own suffering by giving up love for money and who now pays a fatal price for his blindness, but the tragic elements never dominate the narrative. Subtle comparisons (Chéri compares Léa to the war, for example, to explain his inability to come to terms with the present), well-chosen adjectives placed for effect—these are the techniques whereby Colette suggests to her readers that the story of Chéri may have a more universal message than its unusual aspects might at first suggest.

## GIGI

**First published:** 1944 (English translation, 1952)

**Type of work:** Novella

*Gigi, reared to be a courtesan, instead marries the rich Gaston Lachaille.*

Colette once again provides an indirect comment on contemporary France. With Paris occupied and in the grip of war, readers of Colette's *Gigi* are transported to a less complicated and painful time. Set in 1899, the story once again orchestrates a small but intimate cast of characters in a personal



drama with a twist. The plot focuses on the “gamine” character of Gigi (a nickname for Gilberte), a young woman who has been reared by her grandmother and great-aunt to follow in their profession as a courtesan. They hope to make her the mistress of Gaston Lachaille, but Gigi instead becomes his

wife. This conclusion introduces an ironic twist. In the conventional love story, the resolution of the plot through marriage is usually the desired outcome, but in *Gigi* marriage appears as a frustration rather than a fulfillment of plans. The story serves as a light-hearted reminder that the best laid plans may go astray, especially if love is involved.



In once again portraying the charm and humor of an independent and mischievous adolescent,

Colette comes full circle in her career, ending her writing with a character very similar to the one who made her reputation, Claudine. It is through her ebullience and love of life that Gigi wins Gaston’s true affection, a message of optimism and faith in the power of love.

## SUMMARY

Colette’s state funeral was a symbol of the popularity that her works had gained by the time of her death. Her numerous works of fiction were accessible and highly readable, yet they presented a unique perspective on everyday human problems and experiences. From the girlish figures of Claudine and Gigi to the lonely old women such as Léa, from finely drawn tragic figures such as Chéri to the almost human Saha, Colette’s characters are memorable individuals. Her twists on conventional love stories are imaginative and frequently more complex than their superficial simplicity and light tone would suggest.

Melanie Hawthorne

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*Journal à rebours* and *De ma fenêtre*, 1941, 1942, respectively (translated together as *Looking Backwards*, 1975)  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Few authors begin their career as coauthors, as did Colette. How did this early experience benefit her career?
- Colette is well known for her gamins, of whom *Gigi* is probably best known to Americans because of the film based on the story. By what means can an author contrive characters both “assertive” and “endearing”?
- To what extent was Colette, by then a senior citizen, able to convey successfully the era of the Nazi invasion of France in World War II?
- In what ways did Colette’s nation far exceed the United States in honoring a literary woman with a sensational personal reputation?
- Is Colette open to the charge of repetitive plotting of her fiction?

*Colette*

*Nudité*, 1943

*Trois . . . Six . . . Neuf*, 1944

*Belles Saisons*, 1945

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## WILLIAM CONGREVE

**Born:** Bardsey, Yorkshire, England

January 24, 1670

**Died:** London, England

January 19, 1729

*Congreve is considered the most brilliant of the Restoration dramatists, a writer who used sharp wit, vision, and comic dialogue to expose the hypocrisies of society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Congreve (KAWN-greev) was born in Bardsey, Yorkshire, England, on January 24, 1670. In 1674, his father, William, an army officer, was stationed in Ireland. Congreve was sent to school in Kilkenny, where he met Jonathan Swift, the future satirist. The two formed a lifelong friendship. In 1686, Congreve entered Trinity College, Dublin, earning his M.A. in 1696. Around 1688, the family moved to the Congreve home at Stretton, Staffordshire, where Congreve's father was estate agent to the earl of Cork. Congreve entered Middle Temple, London, to read law in 1691, but he soon abandoned his studies to write. He produced a light novel, *Incognita: Or, Love and Duty Reconcil'd*, in 1692. The following March, Congreve was catapulted to fame with the production of *The Old Bachelor* (pr., pb. 1693), a play he wrote to amuse himself while recovering from an illness. It was an enormous success, highly praised by the poet and essayist John Dryden, who remained an enthusiastic supporter of Congreve's work.

His next play, *The Double-Dealer* (pr. 1693, pb. 1694), opened later in 1693. Though now considered a much better play than his first, it was unpopular with audiences of the time. *Love for Love* followed in 1695, enjoying great success as the first performance staged for the new theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Congreve became one of the managers of the theater, promising to write a new

play every year—a promise that he failed to keep. The year 1696 saw publication of Congreve's essay "A Letter Concerning Humour in Comedy."

By now, Congreve was firmly established as a man of letters. The government rewarded him with a salaried position somewhat of the nature of a sinecure. He was made a commissioner for licensing hackney coaches—the first of several undemanding yet lucrative civil service posts that he accumulated throughout his life. In 1697, a tragedy, *The Mourning Bride* (pr., pb. 1697), was produced at Lincoln's Inn Fields theater. In 1698, Jeremy Collier published a vicious attack on Congreve in *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Congreve replied with his *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (1698). Two years later, in March, 1700, Lincoln's Inn Fields produced Congreve's greatest work, *The Way of the World* (pr., pb. 1700). In spite of a brilliant cast, the play was poorly received. Congreve is said to have appeared onstage at the end to rebuke the audience.

Congreve never wrote another full-length play, though he did produce other work: a masque, *The Judgement of Paris* (pr., pb. 1701); an opera, *Semele* (pb. 1710, pr. 1744); a prose tale; and several unremarkable poems. The Collier attack and the cold reception given *The Way of the World* are often cited as reasons for his early retirement from writing for the stage. Other contributing factors may have been poor health—he suffered from gout—and his affluence. His civil service posts, added to a private income, meant that he did not need the modest earnings that his plays had generated.

Some scholars suggest that Congreve had always placed a higher priority on cultivating high society than on writing. They cite an occasion in 1726 when the French writer Voltaire came to request an audience with Congreve and was granted it only on the condition that he be considered a “gentleman” rather than a playwright. Voltaire replied in disgust that if that were the case, he would not have bothered to visit. Congreve’s remark is, however, open to interpretations other than the snobbery imputed to him by Voltaire. It could as easily have been prompted by weariness caused by illness and a reluctance to defend and explain plays written more than twenty years previously. Indeed, Congreve was known for his constant and warm friendships with people from all social circles, from his early companions in Ireland to the nobility of England. His literary friends (including Swift, John Dryden, the poet Alexander Pope, and dramatist John Gay) were unanimous in their warm praise of his character, as well as his writing.

Congreve never married, but his mistress of many years was the actress Anne Bracegirdle, who played many of his female leads. In his later years, he formed a devoted attachment to Henrietta, second duchess of Marlborough, and it is probable that he fathered her second daughter, Lady Mary Godolphin, later duchess of Leeds. Congreve never fully recovered from a carriage accident in Bath in 1728, and he died in London on January 19 the following year. He left two hundred pounds to Anne Bracegirdle and the rest of his large fortune to the duchess of Marlborough.

## ANALYSIS

Congreve has become known as the most brilliantly witty of the group of Restoration dramatists that included Dryden, George Etherege, and William Wycherley. Restoration drama is a comedy of manners showing a metropolitan society in pursuit of pleasure. It takes a satirical view of the hypocrisy, sexual freedom, and moral degradation of the sophisticated class of people that would have formed its audience. Congreve’s characters are variations on Restoration stock types: On one side, there are the fools, including “coxcombs,” “fops” (vain, self-deluded followers of fashion), and dullards pretending to wit. In this category also are the predatory old men and women who set their sights on handsome young spouses. On the other side of the

fence are the people of sense—characters who carry the audience’s sympathy because they have a higher degree of awareness of self and others and a genuine wit.

The desired outcome in these plays is the marriage between a young couple of sense and their secure possession of the fortune due to them. Working against this desired outcome are schemes engineered by the old, deluded, or wicked against the young couple. The prizes at stake are a young and handsome spouse and the fortune. Sometimes the fortune is already in the possession of the young person, becoming part of the prize. More often, it is still in the control of the old and foolish and will only descend to the young person at the old person’s discretion.

*The Double-Dealer* and *The Way of the World* are remarkable among Restoration comedies; though they feature many brilliantly caricatured schemers driven by folly and weakness, such characters are not the primary engineers of trouble. Instead, the seeds of evil are sown and tended by villains of almost tragic status—Maskwell in *The Double-Dealer* and Mrs. Marwood (and, to a less intense degree, Fainall) in *The Way of the World*. Characters such as Lady Touchwood and Lady Wishfort, powerful though they be in their ability to frustrate the desired outcome, are instruments in the hands of these grand destroyers of happiness.

Many of Congreve’s characters are drawn with a complexity and insight not seen in other plays of the type. The witty “whirlwind” character of Millamant in *The Way of the World* remains a challenge for any actress. Foolish characters evoke pathos even as they do laughter—for example, Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World*, with her hopeless attempts at reconstructing her long-lost beauty by artificial means, and Sir Paul Plyant in *The Double-Dealer*, nightly swaddled in blankets that prevent him from fathering the son for whom he longs. More than any other Restoration dramatist, Congreve saw the tragedy underlying the ridiculousness of his subjects.

In the world of Congreve’s plays, values are inverted, and characters pretend to be the opposite of what they really are. Mirabell’s epigrammatic couplet at the end of the first act of *The Way of the World* summarizes this unnatural moral condition: “Where modesty’s ill-manners, ’tis but fit/ That impudence and malice pass for wit.” Hence, in *The*



*Double Dealer*; Brisk's obsession with his "wit" belies his true status as a "pert coxcomb"; Lady Plyant's harping on her "honour" as she capitulates without much resistance to Careless's seduction reveals her promiscuity. The constant abuse of such terms by hypocritical or foolish characters makes them gain ironic weight at every repetition. The pointedness and brilliance of Congreve's wit have remained unrivaled, except possibly in the plays of Oscar Wilde three centuries later. Congreve's dialogue has a rhythm, cadence, and rhetorical structure at times approaching the status of poetry.

## THE DOUBLE-DEALER

**First produced:** 1693 (first published, 1694)

**Type of work:** Play

*In a sophisticated social circle of fops, wits, fools, and hypocrites, two schemers try to foil the intention of a young couple to marry.*

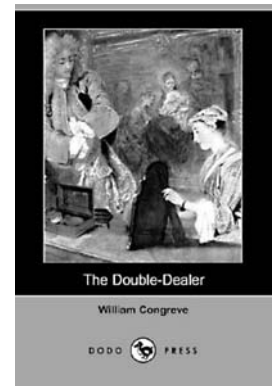
The action of *The Double-Dealer* is governed by the Machiavellian schemes of Maskwell and the manipulative Lady Touchwood, with whom he is in league. Maskwell and Lady Touchwood both want to break the intended match between the innocent couple Cynthia and Mellefont—Maskwell, because he wants Cynthia for himself, and Lady Touchwood, because she wants Mellefont for herself. Most of the characters' lives revolve around hidden motives, secret intrigues, and deception. Nobody, except Mellefont and Cynthia, is what he or she seems. Sir Paul and Lady Plyant pretend to the world to be the happiest married couple; Lady Plyant pretends to her husband that she is too chaste to grant him her sexual favors, while enthusiastically pursuing intrigues with others. The fop Brisk sets himself up as a wit; the giggling Lord Froth affects solemnity; the vacuous Lady Froth sees herself as a writer of heroic epic poems.

The supreme embodiment of deception is Maskwell. He pretends to be Mellefont's loyal friend, defending him against Lady Touchwood's plotting and supporting the marriage with Cynthia. In fact, he is using every weapon in his armory to discredit Mellefont in the eyes of his uncle and benefactor-to-be, Lord Touchwood, and his bride's

parents, Sir Paul and Lady Plyant. Such is Maskwell's skill that he prevails upon the unwitting Mellefont to conspire in his own undoing: In a seeming effort to put an end to Lady Touchwood's activities, Maskwell suggests that Mellefont appear in her bedroom at a time calculated to compromise her; Maskwell, however, ensures that it is Mellefont who is compromised and risks the wrath of Lord Touchwood. Neither Mellefont nor anyone else sees through Maskwell's guise until Cynthia points out a discrepancy in his instructions to her and Mellefont toward the end of the play. Others are also fooled: Lord Touchwood almost disinherits Mellefont in favor of Maskwell; and, ironically, Lady Touchwood herself mistakenly believes that Maskwell is motivated by his attachment and obligations to her.

Maskwell creates a labyrinth of confusion, symbolized by the many references to private stairs, hidden passages, and back ways and put into words by the baffled Mellefont: "I am confounded in a maze of thoughts, each leading into one another, and all ending in perplexity." Maskwell's controlling genius lies in his ability to play upon the desires and weaknesses of his dupes. As he says, those who want to be deceived will be, "and, if they will not hear the serpent's hiss, they must be stung into experience, and future caution." The theme of willful self-deception is strong. Even when Sir Paul has written evidence of his wife's intended infidelity thrust into his hands, he is eager to swallow the hastily engineered explanation provided by her and Careless. Once again Sir Paul submits to being swaddled in blankets in the marital bed.

The unpopularity of *The Double-Dealer* in and after Congreve's time may have been attributable to unease at the extreme nature of the evil represented in it. Maskwell's coolness and single-mindedness in plotting evil, his flawless mask of honesty and loyalty, and his unrepentant silence after his villainy is finally unmasked recall William Shakespeare's villain Iago in *Othello, the Moor*





of *Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622) and place him beyond the conventions of Restoration comedy. Lady Touchwood, too, attains a sinister status beyond that of a hot-tempered woman scorned; in the scene with Mellefont in her chamber at the end of act 4, against all odds she makes herself appear innocent and Mellefont appear the criminal in Lord Touchwood's eyes. As she leaves, she turns and smiles malevolently at Mellefont—a truly spine-chilling image.

That this uncompromising sense of evil was intentionally created by Congreve is suggested by constant references to witchcraft, possession, and the devil used in connection with Maskwell and Lady Touchwood. The good-evil polarity is reinforced by the strong visual symbolism of the final expulsion of Maskwell and Lady Touchwood by Mellefont and Lord Touchwood dressed in parsons' costumes. The schemers are undone by their own machinations, in the absence of any conscious campaign on the part of the good characters, and the young couple are free to marry. As Brisk says, Love and Murder will out—in the unfoldment of time and by the workings of Providence.

## THE WAY OF THE WORLD

**First produced:** 1700 (first published, 1700)

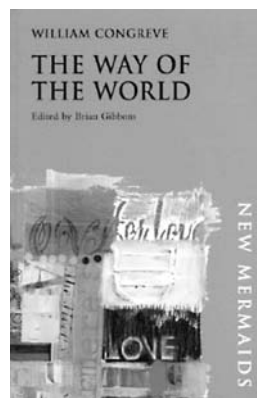
**Type of work:** Play

*A deceiver in league with his lover plots to prevent the marriage between Mirabell and Millamant and to secure Millamant's fortune.*

*The Way of the World* is generally viewed as the supreme example of its genre. Its characters—the vengeful and ultimately pathetic Lady Wishfort, the sparring lovers Mirabell and Millamant, the dark and devious Mrs. Marwood—remain in the mind long after the play is over. The complexities and subtleties of relationships are observed with a keen psychological insight: the domineering nature of Lady Wishfort turning to abject dependence on her mentor Mrs. Marwood; the carefully manipulated shifts of power between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood; and the passionate attraction between Mirabell and Millamant, disguised beneath a covering of mockery and indifference.

As in *The Double-Dealer*, covert motives and hypocrisy govern the action of the play. Old Lady Wishfort has loved Mirabell since he pretended to love her in order to woo her niece Millamant: Her ostensible motivation in opposing the young couple's marriage is to protect her daughter from a deceiver, but her actual motivation is to avenge herself on Mirabell. Mirabell counters with an equally underhanded plan to foil Lady Wishfort's plots with a decoy—his servant Waitwell disguised as wealthy suitor Sir Rowland. Waitwell is to prepare

to marry Lady Wishfort, and Mirabell is to reveal his servant's true identity and release her from the match on condition that she release Millamant's fortune and grant Mirabell her hand in marriage.



Mrs. Marwood, at the center of the scheming, exploits Lady Wishfort's dislike of Mirabell to pursue her own ends. Her ostensible desire throughout

is to protect Lady Wishfort's interests. Her actual desire, however, is to fan the flames of Lady Wishfort's fury against Mirabell and to persuade her to disinherit Millamant in favor of Fainall, Mrs. Marwood's lover. Fainall, meanwhile, means to denounce his wife (Lady Wishfort's daughter) publicly for infidelity with Mirabell in an effort to blackmail Lady Wishfort into making over Mrs. Fainall's estate to him. The blatant hypocrisy of his scheme becomes evident in the light of his true motivation: to have his wife's fortune under the control of himself and his mistress, Mrs. Marwood. Congreve depicts a constant satirical tension between outward self and inward self, between the mask and the face behind it.

Deception is not only an interface between the characters and the world; it also serves to illustrate the characters' view of themselves. Lady Wishfort's attempt to turn back the years by painting herself a new face is an image whose symbolism reverberates throughout the play. It is a visual illustration of the affectations in which the foolish characters indulge. In the same vein, Petulant pays prostitutes to hire a coach and call on him in order to give the im-

pression that he is in demand among ladies; and Mrs. Marwood makes a great show of hating men even while her actions are motivated by desire for them. All these characters are, metaphorically speaking, painting their own faces—cultivating appearances that are at odds with reality. Hence, Mirabell's premarital condition to Millamant—"I article, that you continue to like your own face, as long as I shall, and while it passes current with me, that you endeavour not to new-coin it"—suggests a conscious rejection of the affectation and pretense that characterize the foolish sector of society.

The appearance of the unsophisticated, country-bred Sir Wilful Witwoud shows the extent to which this world has become divorced from the natural order. Lady Wishfort condemns his uncouth manners as barbaric—though shortly afterward she displays true cold-blooded barbarity in her relish at the prospect of Mirabell's slowly starving to death. The metropolitan Witwoud disowns his brother (Sir Wilful Witwoud) because it is not fashionable to acknowledge relations in town. One treasures Sir Wilful's ingenuous response to Witwoud's snub: "The fashion's a fool; and you're a fop, dear brother."

Mirabell and Millamant, with their wit and good sense, stand in contrast to the fops and fools. They embrace the pleasures of the town—indeed, Millamant is uncompromising in her disdain for the country—yet are not blind to its folly. The famous scene in which Mirabell and Millamant barter conditions and provisos for their life together shows a couple who see their world as it is and pre-

fer not to waste time pretending it is otherwise. It is significant that Mirabell's clear-sighted, if cynical, understanding of "the way of the world" helps him foil the plot against Mrs. Fainall and restore himself to Lady Wishfort's good graces. Lacking faith in Fainall's integrity, Mirabell had previously ensured that Mrs. Fainall's estate was made over to him in trust, making her husband's claim on it ineffective. Lady Wishfort is happy to offer Millamant to Mirabell in exchange for her daughter's honor and fortune intact, and the prospect of their marriage makes a satisfying resolution to this complex plot.

## SUMMARY

The satirical vision and pointed wit of William Congreve's plays expose the hypocrisy, affectation, and moral degradation of the affluent society of his time. The extreme complexity of his plots makes his plays notoriously difficult to follow on the page. It is on the stage that their superbly entertaining quality is most evident: The rapid-fire wit of the dialogue, lively action, and psychological truth of the characterization carry the audience through labyrinthine twists and turns of plot. Indeed, the plays' complex form aptly reflects the confusion created by the manipulative and self-deceiving characters, for whom no word or action is straightforward, simple, or what it seems. In Congreve's universe, inverted or perverted values predominate, but truth and good sense must finally prevail.

Claire Robinson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- With William Congreve, comic drama in Restoration England reached a high point. In what manner does this theater mirror the rejection of Puritan values under the later Stuart kings?
- What was Congreve's point in having his characters cultivate appearances at odds with reality?
- Consider the appropriateness of Congreve's title *The Way of the World*.
- Was Congreve a moralist? Explain your response.
- Since a reader can go back and study the text of a drama, how can you explain the assertion that the complexity of Congreve's drama is more difficult for the reader than the playgoer to understand?



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## JOSEPH CONRAD

**Born:** near Berdyczów, Podolia, Poland (now Berdychiv, Ukraine)  
December 3, 1857

**Died:** Oswalds, Bishopsbourne, England  
August 3, 1924

*One of the most original and innovative writers of English prose, Conrad was a pioneer of the psychological novel, and his characters reflect the moral dilemmas of the modern world.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Conrad was born in Poland, spent much of his childhood in Russian exile with his parents, was orphaned at an early age and reared by his uncle, lived as a young man in France, and then, after a career with the British merchant marine, became one of the major writers in English literature. He lived a life as adventurous as that portrayed in any of his novels, and, in fact, many of the episodes of Conrad's later fiction were rooted in his own experiences.

He was born near Berdyczów on December 3, 1857, and christened Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski. Conrad was particularly proud of his ancestry, which, rooted in the Polish nobility, had a long and distinguished history. Apollo Korzeniowski, his father, was a Polish intellectual and writer whose works included original verse and translations of William Shakespeare. Apollo Korzeniowski was also a fervent Polish patriot at a time when Poland was a part of the Russian Empire. In 1861, his activities with the Polish independence movement caused his arrest and exile by Czarist authorities. He, along with his wife Ewa and his young son, Józef, was sent to Vologda, a dismal town northeast of Moscow.

At Vologda, the climate was severe and living conditions were harsh. Ewa, who suffered from tuberculosis, died in April, 1865, when Józef was only seven years old. A few years later, Apollo was re-

leased from exile because of his own ill health. Shortly after returning to his native Poland, he died, and at eleven years old Józef was left to the care of his maternal uncle. Fortunately, the uncle was a kindly man who provided for Józef's education and supported him for many years.

Because of his painful memories and his own intense Polish patriotism, Conrad found life in occupied Poland unbearable; when doctors recommended a seaside environment to improve his health, he gladly moved to Marseilles, France, in October, 1874.

In Marseilles, he lived on funds from his uncle and made several voyages as a sailor on French ships. In 1877, he was part of an attempt to smuggle weapons to royalist rebels in Spain, a cause that excited his romantic nature, but their plot was betrayed and the vessel, the *Tremolino*, had to be deliberately run aground to avoid capture.

About this time Conrad seems to have had an unhappy love affair. The details are unclear and not totally convincing, but in the spring of the following year Conrad attempted suicide. The cause may have been his unhappy romantic attachment, or it may have been the loss of all of his money while gambling at Monte Carlo. Whatever the reason, the wound was minor, and within a month he was able to sign aboard his first English ship, the *Mavis*. On April 24, 1878, Józef Korzeniowski, soon to be known as Joseph Conrad, became an English sailor. He would remain with the British merchant marine for the next seventeen years, serving on eighteen different vessels, rising through the ranks

as second mate, first mate, and finally captain, commanding the *Otago*, in 1888. He became a British citizen in 1886.

During these voyages, Conrad traveled to the settings that inspired his later stories. In 1883, he was second mate on board the *Palestine*, which caught fire and later sank, leaving the crew to survive in open boats until it reached land. The events are brilliantly re-created by Conrad in his short story "Youth." In 1890, Conrad was in the Belgian Congo as part of a European trading company but left before the year had ended. His health was seriously weakened by malaria, and his psychological and moral senses were severely shaken by the ruthless, amoral exploitation of the natives by Europeans desperate for ivory. These experiences remained with Conrad for many years and found their powerful, searing expression in the short novel *Heart of Darkness* (serial, 1899; book, 1902).

Conrad had grown increasingly despondent about his opportunities in the merchant marine. Although he was a competent, even outstanding officer, commands were difficult to obtain and the financial rewards were small. Conrad concluded that his seafaring career was unsuccessful; he had already started work on his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895). In January, 1894, Conrad ended his seagoing career, determined to make his living as a writer. *Almayer's Folly* gained favorable critical notice, mostly for its exotic setting and characters. Conrad's next work, *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), seemed to mark him as a talented but perhaps limited author of exotic romances. With the appearance of *The Children of the Sea: A Tale of the Forecastle* (1897; republished as *The Nigger of the Narcissus: A Tale of the Sea*, 1898), however, the literary world was forced to take note of a new and strikingly original talent.

After the turmoil and adventures of his earlier life, Conrad's middle and later years were relatively peaceful and uneventful, marred only by tight financial conditions, a situation not uncommon for writers. Conrad settled at Pent Farm in Kent with his wife Jessie George, to whom he was married on March 24, 1896. The Conrads had two sons, Alfred Borys and John Alexander. The family life of the Conrads does not appear to have been especially close, largely because of Conrad's own innate reserve and aloofness. He was also plagued by bouts of severe illness and the anguish of composition,

which, for him, could be almost unbearable.

As an author, Conrad was critically acknowledged but not popular until fairly late in his career. Classic novels such as *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), or *Under Western Eyes* (1911) had relatively modest sales. Even collaboration with the well-known English author Ford Madox Ford failed to bring wide sales. To supplement his income, Conrad frequently contributed short fiction to popular magazines, and eight volumes of these stories were collected and published during Conrad's lifetime.

It was not until 1913 that Conrad wrote his first truly popular work, *Chance* (pb. 1913). Ironically, many literary critics have marked this novel as the beginning of his decline as an artist. Its success, however, gave Conrad financial stability, and in 1919 he moved to a country estate at Oswalds, near Canterbury, England. It was there that Conrad spent the remaining years of his life. He declined a knighthood in 1924, and that same year, after a long struggle with ill health, died in Oswalds of a heart attack on August 3. He was buried at Canterbury.

## ANALYSIS

Conrad is notable for three major contributions to English and world literature: his unique style, his addition of new settings and genres to serious writing, and his creation of the psychological story. Conrad's style is remarkable, not least because he was already an adult by the time he had learned to speak and write English. In early works such as *Almayer's Folly*, or *An Outcast of the Islands*, the descriptions of jungle or exotic landscapes are remarkable for their precision and detail. In the short story "The Lagoon," the landscape itself becomes a character in the tale rather than merely a setting or background.

The early stories, as critics have noted, tend to be static and somewhat slow-moving, and Conrad's style accounts for much of this, especially his extensive descriptions. These tendencies, however, were refined by Conrad as his career developed so that his language, still using numerous modifiers, was able to express action concisely and vividly. His mature style is capable of both description and action, so that a story such as "Youth" easily combines rousing action at sea with delicate, almost elegiac memories.



Conrad's second contribution to modern literature was his introduction of new settings and types of novels, which extended the range of literature. Conrad used exotic locations, such as the Far East, the African jungle, or the Caribbean, which had traditionally been reserved for light romantic or escapist fiction, and made them the settings for serious literature. This device also allowed Conrad to develop his characteristic themes in appropriate settings, most notably the confrontation of conflicting moral and ethical codes.

Conrad also expanded literature by creating political fiction—or more specifically, what might be termed the spy novel. In works such as *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad literally established this particular genre of literature, creating the prototypical characters and situation that have remained constant through the work of such later authors as Graham Greene and John le Carré. Conrad's novels of espionage and intrigue are always more than exciting adventures because they inevitably contain considerations of deep moral and ethical dilemmas, highlighted by the shadowy situation in which the characters are placed.

The emphasis on the interior lives of his characters, on their hidden motivations and desires, is undoubtedly Conrad's most famous and lasting accomplishment. Working at a time when Sigmund Freud's writings and other psychological theories were opening new aspects of human personality, Conrad in his stories and novels delved deeply into facets and features that earlier fiction had either neglected or treated briefly and often superficially.

Conrad's single greatest achievement was his virtual creation of the psychological story, in which the interior lives of the characters achieve an immediacy and importance comparable to actual life. In stories such as "The Secret Sharer" or *Heart of Darkness*, the events are filtered through the perceptions and minds of characters who are changed by what they see and experience. The novel *Lord Jim*, one of Conrad's most famous and impressive works, contains many vivid and exciting scenes, but its essential action is internal and takes place within the mind and soul of its title character.

Even when Conrad's stories are spread across a vast canvas with a number of characters, as is the case with *Nostromo*, much, if not most, of the key action remains internal and psychological. In this

fashion, Conrad's works are not simply stories of adventure but contain full and fully believable human beings whose actions, however exciting or unusual, still spring from recognizable human impulses and causes.

## LORD JIM

**First published:** 1900

**Type of work:** Novel

*Having failed his own inner moral code in a moment of crisis, a man struggles to redeem himself.*

*Lord Jim*, Conrad's most famous work, is also his most extensive examination of a persistent theme: the conflict between an individual's inner moral code and his or her outward actions. Throughout Conrad's short stories and novels, his characters are often afraid, even obsessed, with the concern of how their personal standards will bear up under the stress of events. This situation is explicit in *Lord Jim*. As a young boy learning the sailor's craft, Jim is certain he will meet the test of moral courage, but later, while serving as a first mate on the *Patna*, an old, unseaworthy steamer carrying Moslem pilgrims across the Indian Ocean, he fails the test. The *Patna* strikes an unknown object in the night and seems ready to sink. The crew, including Jim, abandons the ship and its passengers. When the drifting *Patna* is discovered and the events are revealed, Jim becomes an outcast, both literally and morally.

These events occur quickly, and the bulk of the novel consists of Jim's personal and moral redemption. For a while, he drifts from port to port, leaving when his identity is discovered. Finally, he abandons the world of Europeans altogether and heads upriver to a small Malay village. Even there, however, he finds he cannot escape the demands of his sensitive moral feelings and must prove to himself that he is not a coward.

Jim's early efforts win praise, especially when he rids the countryside of the notorious bandit, Sherif Ali. Yet this is not enough for Jim, who intuitively senses that his honor has not been restored nor his moral balance satisfied. That occurs only at the end



of the novel, after Jim has inadvertently caused the death of a Malay friend, the son of a powerful local chief. Knowing that it will mean his own death, Jim accepts his responsibility without hesitation or fear, and his action redeems the long years of exile caused by his moment of fear and indecision on the *Patna*.

Such a relatively simple tale might seem more suitable for a short story than a full-length novel, and when *Lord Jim* was first published, many critics complained that it was too long. Such is not the case, however, for the power and impact of *Lord Jim* lie not in narrative actions but in psychological nuances and meanings.

Once again, Conrad uses Marlow as both a character and a narrator. Marlow, who went through his own testing experiences in the short story "Youth" and was more severely tested in *Heart of Darkness*, comes to know Jim by accident and then follows his career as if by fate. It is Marlow, for example, who obtains Jim's positions after the *Patna* incident, and it is Marlow who visits Jim in the small Malay village of Patusan, which is the setting for the second part of the novel. Throughout the story, Marlow is concerned, even obsessed, with Jim's actions and thoughts.

The presentation of these actions is not straightforward; Conrad's narrative seldom is, especially when he is concerned with revelation of character. Marlow is less interested in what Jim does than what those actions reveal of the inner man. Much of the novel concerns Marlow's speculations on Jim's actions, and often Marlow seems to be the central character of the book.

In the end, however, the actions of the mysterious Jim command the reader's attention. Significantly, Conrad allows his title character no last name, letting him be known by his Malay title of Tuan Jim, or Lord Jim. This title is given sincerely by the Patusan villagers, but Jim and the reader both understand the implicit irony of the title, an irony that can be resolved only by Jim's final, deliberate actions.

## NOSTROMO

**First published:** 1904

**Type of work:** Novel

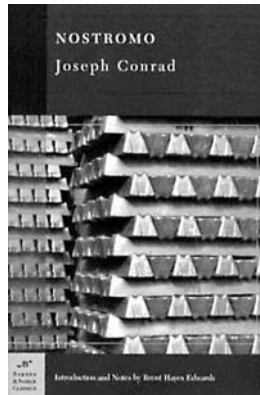
*Caught in the moral ambiguities of a South American revolution, an essentially good man finds his innocence corrupted.*

*Nostromo* is Conrad's most expansive and ambitious political novel, a story that examines how both societies and individuals are adversely affected by the process of government in its most brutal form. The book combines several of Conrad's recurring themes, most notably the harmful effects of imperialism, the baleful influence of wealth, and the evil results of individuals acting without the restraints of inner moral codes.

The story is set in the Occidental Province of Costaguana, a nation in Central America. Isolated behind an almost impassable mountain range and situated on a broad but windless bay, the Golfo Placido, Sulaco, the capital city of the province, has for centuries remained outside of events. Sulaco's only importance comes from the riches of its nearby silver mine, known as the Gould Concession because it is operated by an English family of that name. The Goulds, who have lived in Costaguana for three generations, are permitted to work the mine so long as they pay sufficient bribes to whatever government happens to control Costaguana. Charles Gould, who has brought the mine to its greatest productivity, has grown tired of this endless extortion and resolves to throw his great wealth behind a revolution that will finally bring a responsible government to power in Costaguana.

The novel also follows the career of its title character, an Italian immigrant who is the leader of the stevedores and other dockworkers in Sulaco harbor and whose real name is Gian' Battista Fidenza. Fidenza has been given the nickname "Nostromo," meaning "one of ours," by the Englishmen who operate Costaguana's shipping line and is valued by his English masters for his ability to discipline his fellow workers. He is also a brave and resourceful individual, and when the Gould-inspired government seems about to collapse following another revolution, Nostromo is ordered to transport a shipment of silver to safety outside Costaguana.

After his small craft is nearly wrecked by a passing ship during the dangerous night crossing, Nostromo hides the treasure on a deserted island in the Golfo Placido. When he learns that Gould and the others believe the silver lost, Nostromo



resolves to keep it for himself. Nostromo's realization of the loss of his integrity weighs heavily on him, and although his death at the novel's end comes from a tragic mistake, Conrad makes it clear that the real cause is Nostromo's sense of overwhelming guilt.

As is typical of Conrad, these events are not related in strict chronological sequence or through simple narrative. Instead, the novel moves forward and backward in time, arranged more by themes than events. Following a natural metaphor suggested by the silver mine, Conrad pursues each vein of his story until it seems exhausted, then turns to another. Only gradually, as the narrative strands are connected, does a total picture of events and characters emerge. Because nothing is simple in Costaguana, Conrad implies, its history must also be told in an oblique fashion.

Conrad uses several different narrators. Much of *Nostromo* is told by a third-person narrator who seems to have visited the place and perhaps even participated in some of the actions. Two of the most important accounts of the novel's central events, the defeat and resurgence of the Gould-backed revolution, are told indirectly. The first is presented in a letter written by one of the revolutionaries, Decoud, to his sister. The second is retold years after the events by another character, the Englishman, Captain Mitchell. Ironically, neither man understands fully what he has related; only the reader can place their stories into perspective.

Such irony, an essential trait of Conrad, runs strongly through *Nostromo*. Not only do the characters engage in actions whose importance and results they cannot comprehend, their very names signal a gulf between perception and reality. Most notable, of course, is the title character himself. Nostromo, as he is called by his supposed masters,

is anything but "one of ours," and his real name, Fidenza, or "Faithful," becomes a cruel joke when he steals the silver he has been entrusted to preserve.

For Conrad, irony was inevitable in a political situation because politics is the exploitation of the split between the real and the perceived. In such a fashion, Charles Gould defends his silver mine and his backing of yet another revolution for Costaguana because they will bring "law, good faith, order, security." As he tells his wife:

That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That's your ray of hope.

"Afterwards," Conrad implies in *Nostromo*, never comes. There will always be one more revolution, one more justification for money-making above justice itself. In Conrad's most ironic novel, nothing is more bitterly ironic than Charles Gould's "ray of hope."

## HEART OF DARKNESS

**First published:** 1899, serial; 1902, book

**Type of work:** Novel

*On a voyage up the Congo River, a man confronts the savagery and inner darkness that is part of all human nature.*

*Heart of Darkness* was based upon Conrad's own experiences in the Congo as first mate on the riverboat *Roi des Belges* in 1890, during which he was overwhelmed by intense moral revulsion at the degradation and exploitation of the natives by the ruthless European traders. Conrad noted that, in turn, the savage jungle quickly eliminated the slight beneficial effects that civilization gave to the white plunderers. His observations and reactions to this situation were transmuted into one of his most powerful works.

The character of Marlow, introduced in the short story "Youth," reappears as the narrator and central character of *Heart of Darkness*. The center of *Heart of Darkness* is a trip by Marlow up the Congo

River in search of a mysterious Mister Kurtz. The events that take place during this river voyage constitute both a literal and a symbolic journey by Marlow into that “immense heart of darkness” that is both the African jungle and the human soul.

The events of the story are relatively simple. Marlow finds himself, as sailors often do, without a position, a situation Conrad knew well. Against his better judgment, Marlow contracts to serve as a riverboat captain for a Belgian company that exports ivory from the Congo. Exactly as happened to Conrad, however, Marlow’s boat is wrecked before he arrives, and he is assigned to serve as a mate on a company steamboat sailing upriver. Marlow goes willingly because he wishes to meet the famous Mister Kurtz, a man who has become renowned equally as a trader of ivory and as a champion of civilization.

Marlow learns, however, that Kurtz is more than an ivory trader, and that the man’s vision of civilization and progress has been changed by contact with the African wilderness. When Marlow arrives at Kurtz’s station, he finds that Kurtz has reverted to savagery and is alternately feared or worshiped by the terrified natives whom he oppresses. Kurtz’s station is ringed with posts decorated with human skulls, and unspeakable rites are celebrated there in honor of the man-god Kurtz. Marlow loads the sick, delirious Kurtz on the boat and hurries back down the river, narrowly escaping an ambush by the terrified and outraged natives. Kurtz dies on the journey.

Marlow takes Kurtz’s belongings, including his precious journal, back to Kurtz’s fiancé in Europe. Having carefully removed the increasingly frenzied and desperate passages that occur toward the end of the diary, Marlow lies to the woman, claiming that Kurtz died as he had wished and as she herself would have wanted, as an apostle for civilization and Christianity. Still, Marlow must recognize the truth that he has witnessed.

The impact of *Heart of Darkness* comes from the nearly devastating effects Marlow experiences in the Congo. As the story unfolds, the world in which Marlow finds himself grows both more corrupted and more corrupting, so that nothing is left untouched or untainted. Marlow’s adventures become stranger, and the characters he meets grow increasingly odd, starting with the greedy traders whom Marlow ironically describes as “pilgrims,”

through an eccentric Russian who wanders in dress clothes through the jungle, to Kurtz himself, that figure of ultimate madness. Only the native Africans, whether the cruelly abused workers who slave for the trading company or the savages who serve Kurtz out of fear and superstition, retain some of their original dignity. To Marlow, however, they are initially beyond his comprehension. *Heart of Darkness* shows the reader the world through Marlow’s eyes, and it is a strange and terrifying place where the normal order of civilized life is both inverted and perverted.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad presents his narrative in a carefully distanced fashion; little is told directly. The story begins with Marlow and four friends aboard a small boat on the Thames River, talking about their experiences. One of the listeners, who is never named, is the actual narrator of the story he has heard from Marlow; while readers may believe they are listening directly to Marlow, actually they hear his story secondhand. Within this narrative framework, the tale shuttles back and forth as Marlow recounts part of his story, then comments upon it. At times, Marlow makes additional reflections upon his own observations. It is only by retelling the events that Marlow comes to understand them, a gradual revelation that is shared by the reader.

*Heart of Darkness* makes substantial use of symbolism. Conrad used symbolism—the literary device that uses the images of a work to underscore and emphasize its themes and meanings—in many of his works, especially in his descriptions of the landscape, which grows denser and darker as Marlow’s journey progresses. The technique is essential for *Heart of Darkness*; the underlying meanings of the story are too terrifying and bleak to be expressed openly. Conrad also uses imagery throughout his story to underscore the meaning of events as Marlow comes to understand them. Opposites are frequent, so that brightness is contrasted with gloom; the lush growth of the jungle is juxtaposed with the sterility of the white traders; and the luxurious, even alarming, life of the wild is always connected with death and decomposition. Running throughout the story are images and metaphors of madness, especially the insanity caused by isolation. In particular, the decline of Kurtz is a powerfully symbolic expression of the weaknesses of supposedly civilized Europeans. The dominant symbol

for the entire work is found in its title and final words: All human nature is a vast “heart of darkness.”

### “THE SECRET SHARER”

**First published:** 1912 (collected in *Twixt Land and Sea, Tales*, 1912)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A young ship's captain hides a murderer in his own cabin to maintain his own inner moral code.*

“The Secret Sharer” is Conrad’s most famous short story and one that has long puzzled readers and critics. The story’s central character is a young captain, whose name the reader never learns and who has just assumed his first command. The man is nervous, wondering if he will be able to fulfill the obligations of his new position and, more importantly, his own ideals. As he paces the empty deck of his ship during the night, he is startled to discover a naked man swimming by his ship’s side. Once aboard, the swimmer, Leggatt, confesses that he is fleeing from his own ship, the *Sephora*, because he murdered a fellow sailor. As the young captain and Leggatt talk, it appears that the act was justified because the *Sephora* was in danger during a violent storm and Leggatt had to strike the man down in order to save the ship. Because the letter of the law makes no provision for this particular situation, however, Leggatt is condemned as a criminal and will be punished, perhaps executed, if captured. That places the young captain in a moral dilemma: Should he hide Leggatt or turn him over to the authorities? Almost without hesitation, the captain puts Leggatt in his own cabin, where the fugitive remains hidden until the captain sails his new ship dangerously close to land, allowing Leggatt the chance to swim for safety and escape.

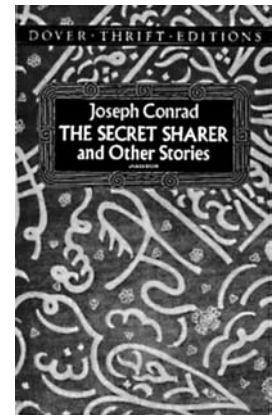
The young captain upholds his own moral code by pledging and keeping his word to the mysterious murderer Leggatt, even though his code stands in opposition to conventional law and morality. By taking this action, which some might see as willful, even perverse, the young captain demonstrates to

himself that he is capable of fulfilling that “ideal conception of one’s personality every man sets up for himself secretly.” This ideal conception is not presented explicitly in the story. Rather, readers see the captain’s code in action and perhaps assess its consequences but must decide for themselves what the young captain considers his standards and why he must uphold them even in the face of danger and disgrace.

Creating and living by a morality that must be a secret, in this case literally so, is an instance of irony by Conrad and a central paradox of “The Secret Sharer.” The captain’s code requires him to protect a murderer and to risk his own ship and crew. He faces this danger when he steers dangerously close to shore, risking shipwreck. Since the captain cannot tell his crew the true reason for his baffling action, another secret is present in the story. When the captain succeeds, however, he feels a secret bond between himself and his ship.

“The Secret Sharer” hides these mysteries in the mask of a straightforward narrative, and all of its ambiguity and double meanings are presented in a simple fashion. Even the title is multiple: Since only the captain knows about Leggatt, Leggatt’s presence is indeed a secret. On another level, however, the murderer and the young commander also share common secrets—Leggatt’s presence on board the ship and the “ideal conception of one’s personality” that seems to be their joint moral code.

Doubling, in the physical and moral sense, is found throughout “The Secret Sharer.” The young captain and Leggatt are so similar that they seem to be twins, an identification that Conrad clearly intends the reader to take in more than one sense. Both men feel themselves to be outcasts—Leggatt actually so, because of his crime, the captain, psychologically, because of his newness to the ship and its crew. Leggatt can be regarded as the alter ego of the captain, perhaps a reflection of the darker, even criminal, aspects of the captain’s personality. Some readers have argued that Leggatt does not



even exist but is only a figment of the young captain's imagination.

"The Secret Sharer" is one of the most complex and multilayered short stories in literature. Without resorting to technical devices such as using several narrators or switching back and forth in time, Conrad tells a story that presents the reader with a mystery that cannot be resolved even as it cannot be ignored.

### SUMMARY

Joseph Conrad's mastery of the psychological story and his creation of memorable and highly complex characters established him as one of the most important authors in world literature. In exploring such concepts as the double and the human subconscious, Conrad both anticipated and complemented many modern psychological theories. In addition, Conrad is one of the most original and influential of modern English prose stylists. His densely written and often highly descriptive passages reflect perfectly the complex world of his narratives and his often mysterious but always memorable characters.

Michael Witkoski

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Consider *Lord Jim* as an example of Joseph Conrad's ability to combine exciting external action and psychological intensity.
- Conrad used Marlow in several works as a narrator or viewpoint character. Does the reader learn the essential truth from Marlow, or is this character just one of the revealing sources?
- In *Heart of Darkness*, what are the ingredients of the darkness?
- Is it possible to establish the true self of the captain in "The Secret Sharer"? Explain your position.
- What resources was Conrad able to bring to the creation of what is often called the "spy novel"?
- It is very difficult to understand how Conrad wrote compellingly in a language which he never managed to speak very well. How did his early life and young adulthood prepare him to be a writer?

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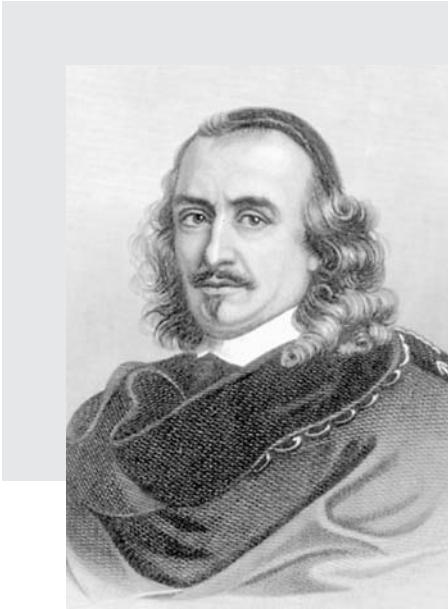
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## PIERRE CORNEILLE

**Born:** Rouen, France

June 6, 1606

**Died:** Paris, France

October 1, 1684

*Corneille helped to create neoclassical theater in France. His thirty-three plays, written between 1629 and 1674, attained a standard of excellence and a psychological depth equalled in the seventeenth century only by Molière and Jean Racine.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Pierre Corneille (kawr-NAY) was born in the Norman city of Rouen, France, on June 6, 1606. He was the eldest of the six children born to Pierre and Marthe Corneille. His younger brother Thomas also became a very successful playwright. Between 1615 and 1622, Corneille studied at the Jesuit high school in Rouen. He was a learned Latinist and remained a fervent Catholic for his entire life. In 1624, he received his law degree and was admitted to the bar in Rouen. It is not known if he ever practiced law. He lived in his native city until 1662, when he moved to Paris with his family.

Beginning in 1629, Corneille began writing plays for Parisian theater companies. His early plays revealed both his skill as a dramatist and the diversity of his interests. He wrote witty comedies, a powerful tragedy titled *Médée* (pr. 1635, pb. 1639), and *L'Illusion comique* (pr. 1636, pb. 1636; *The Illusion*, 1989), which contains a series of plays-within-a-play. His 1637 tragicomedy *Le Cid* (pr., pb. 1637; *The Cid*, 1637) provoked an extremely positive reaction from Parisian theatergoers and much criticism from writers who were clearly jealous of Corneille's success. The decade that followed the first performances of *The Cid* was a very productive period for him. He wrote a series of excellent plays inspired largely by Roman and Spanish sources; these works established his reputation as the most

creative and influential French playwright of his generation. Plays such as *The Cid*, *Horace* (pr. 1640, pb. 1641; English translation, 1656), *Cinna: Ou, La Clémence d'Auguste* (pr. 1640, pb. 1643; *Cinna*, 1713), *Polyeucte* (pr. 1642, pb. 1643; English translation, 1655), and *Le Menteur* (pr. 1643, pb. 1644; *The Liar*, 1671) are considered masterpieces of French theater. They are regularly performed by modern French theatrical companies and are frequently studied in courses on French theater.

In 1641, Corneille married Marie de Lampérière. The Corneilles had seven children. In 1647, he was elected to the French Academy, whose meetings he attended quite regularly until 1683, when he became very ill. The money that he received from theatrical troupes and the annual grants that he received from King Louis XIV for his contributions to the cultural life of France enabled the Corneilles to lead a comfortable life in Rouen.

Between 1648 and 1653, however, there was a civil war in France called the Fronde. The resulting social instability caused a decrease in theater attendance in Paris. After the first performances of his tragedy *Nicomède* in 1651 (English translation, 1671), Corneille stopped writing plays for several years. Between 1651 and 1656, he worked on a verse translation of Thomas à Kempis's influential Latin book of lay piety, *Imitatio Christi* (c. 1427; *The Imitation of Christ*, c. 1460-1630). Corneille's translation, *Imitation de Jésus-Christ* (1656), contained more than thirteen thousand lines of poetry. He was very interested in religious subjects and, in 1670, he published *Office de la Sainte Vierge*, a fine

translation of Saint Bonaventure's literary work on the Virgin Mary. His contemporaries were greatly impressed by the quality of these translations. For the 1660 edition of his works, Corneille undertook a systematic revision of his earlier plays and also wrote three very influential essays of dramatic criticism. These essays are generally considered to be the clearest descriptions of such conventions of neoclassical French theater as the importance of respecting social decorum and the three rules requiring the unities of time, place, and action.

Although the nine plays that Corneille wrote between 1659 and 1674 reveal that his skills as a dramatist had not diminished, Parisian theatergoers responded more favorably to the plays of Molière and Racine than to those of Corneille. Discouraged by this popular reaction to his later plays, Corneille retired definitively after the first performances of *Suréna* (pr. 1674, pb. 1675; English translation, 1960) in 1674. Although Parisian theatergoers reacted coolly to *Suréna* during its first run, critics now consider *Suréna* to be a brilliant tragedy. During the last ten years of his life, Corneille wrote occasional poems, corresponded with fellow writers, and continued to attend the meetings of the French Academy. Very poor health prevented him from leaving his house in Paris after August, 1683. He died there on October 1, 1684, and was succeeded in the French Academy by his brother Thomas.

## ANALYSIS

Corneille is famous for his skill in creating dramatic tension by placing sympathetic characters in situations that require them to make difficult moral choices. As a lawyer, Corneille understood that the motivation for human behavior is rarely simple. Individuals wish to believe that their personal search for happiness should not conflict with the allegiance owed to state and family, but this is not always the case. In both *The Cid* and *Horace*, Corneille shows that characters can react very differently during the same moral crisis. In several plays, he made effective use of blocking characters who created problems that would not have existed if all the characters had been tolerant and understanding. The Roman tragedy *Horace* illustrates nicely how Corneille integrated moral conflicts into his plays.

From the opening scenes in *Horace*, audiences

realize that several generations of Albans and Romans have lived together in peace and that numerous marriages between Albans and Romans seem to have cemented the links between their two countries. At the beginning of *Horace*, one cannot imagine what could possibly destroy the stability and peace between Rome and Alba. Sabine (an Alban noblewoman) has married the Roman nobleman Horace, and his sister Camille is in love with Sabine's brother Curiace and hopes to marry him. The Roman king decides, however, to invade Alba in order to expand his political power. Corneille's audiences understand that this is a totally unjustified and unnecessary invasion, because the Albans have not the slightest desire to threaten the security of Rome. They simply want to live in peace with their more powerful neighbors in Rome. The Roman invasion provokes extreme reactions from both Sabine's husband and her father-in-law, the older Horace. Both affirm that Romans must prove their loyalty by hating the Albans. Neither the younger nor the elder Horace believes that one can separate political service to one's country from commitment to one's beloved. Both the younger and older Horaces are fanatics who refuse to accept the fact that Camille can love Curiace and still be a loyal Roman. In combat, Camille's two other brothers and Curiace are all killed. The grieving Camille tells Horace that Rome has dishonored itself by killing peaceful Albans. The enraged Horace takes out his sword and kills his sister offstage. In a very real sense, the war between Alba and Rome was the equivalent of a civil war, the two countries having lived together in peace for generations. In *Horace*, Corneille shows that the combination of civil war and blind patriotism can transform otherwise decent people into violent characters. Patriotism is an admirable virtue, but one should never allow patriotism to corrupt moral judgment. Blinded by his hatred for Alba, Horace concludes that killing Camille was "an act of justice." It is obvious that this murder of his sister had absolutely nothing to do with "justice" and represented, on the contrary, the moral degeneracy of Horace.

Corneille lived during a very turbulent period of French history. During his childhood in Normandy, peasant revolts against the royal forces were suppressed with incredible cruelty. During the 1630's, the intolerance of Cardinal Richelieu (the French prime minister under King Louis XIII)

caused much suffering among French Protestants. The abuse of power by Cardinal Mazarin (the French prime minister during the early years of the reign of King Louis XIV) created great resentment and provoked a civil war that lasted from 1648 until 1653.

Several of Corneille's most effective plays, such as *Horace*, *Polyeucte*, and *Suréna*, illustrate the extraordinarily destructive effect on society when political power is used abusively or arbitrarily. The action in his major plays takes place in different countries, but the game of political power unfolds in very similar ways. Corneille's political plays warn that the misuse of political power can have a long-term negative effect on society as a whole. Corneille created much sympathy for characters who adhered to high ethical standards and refused to commit amoral actions in order to advance their careers, but these same morally admirable characters are frequently destroyed by those who played the political "power game" more ruthlessly and effectively.

Corneille is justly famous for the finely crafted speeches that his characters use in order to defend their political decisions. The formal eloquence of these speeches is not misleading once it is realized that selfish and intolerant characters such as Horace use specious reasoning in order to justify their refusal to respect the basic freedom and dignity of other characters. When Horace tries to justify his murder of his sister Camille, the audience is not persuaded by his arguments.

It would be hasty to conclude that Corneille did not believe in the basic goodness of people. He spent years translating into French Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Jesus Christ*, a famous work of lay piety that affirmed that systematic meditation and prayer can enable all Christians to develop a rich understanding of the divine perfection in every believer. Corneille felt that people can attain true happiness and spiritual growth in their personal lives as long as they are not tempted by the Machiavellian world of politics.

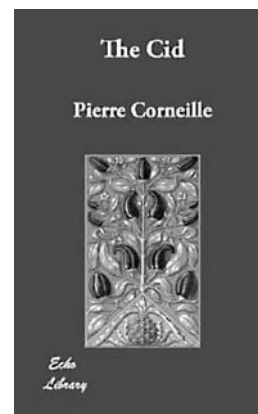
## THE CID

**First produced:** *Le Cid*, 1637 (first published, 1637; English translation, 1637)

**Type of work:** Play

*In the feudal society of medieval Spain, the sympathetic lovers Rodrigue and Chimène must choose between duty and love.*

Although it was Corneille's eighth play, *The Cid* was his first great popular and critical success. He transformed the medieval epic legend of the Cid into a very intimate play in which Rodrigue and Chimène suffer unnecessarily because of the selfishness of their fathers. Rodrigue and Chimène love each other very much and want to get married. Instead of considering the happiness of their adult children, Don Gomès (Chimène's father) and Don Diègue (Rodrigue's father) become involved in a petty argument that turns violent. Each claims to merit the honor of serving as the governor to King Fernand's eldest son, a purely honorary position. The king's decision is totally arbitrary and does not imply any criticism of the man not chosen. When Don Gomès realizes that his rival will receive this appointment, he loses his temper and slaps Don Diègue, who interprets this not as the crime of battery but rather as an offense against his family's honor. He demands that his son avenge this insult by killing Don Gomès in a duel—a request that places Rodrigue in a terrible situation and does not give him enough time to consider an alternative. As a lawyer, Corneille knew that there were obvious legal remedies available for Don Diègue. Charges should have been brought against Don Gomès, and a court should have tried him for his physical attack against Don Diègue, who could also have begun a civil suit against his attacker. Death was an excessive penalty for the crime of battery. In act 1, both Don Diègue and Rodrigue deliver mono-



both Don Diègue and Rodrigue deliver mono-

logues that create very negative impressions on listeners, who conclude that both characters are irrational and violent men who do not respect the absolute value of human life.

After the death of Don Gomès, the king finds himself in a very delicate situation. As an absolute monarch, he has the authority to judge criminal cases. Although Rodrigue is a military hero, the king cannot excuse Rodrigue's crime because it is very dangerous for individuals to place themselves above the law. Society cannot permit young soldiers to kill elderly gentlemen in duels. Although Chimène demands justice, she does not want to have Rodrigue executed for the murder of her father. King Fernand is a patient and objective judge. He comes to understand that it was the fanaticism of Don Diègue that caused Rodrigue to commit his heinous crime. There were extenuating circumstances. Although Rodrigue is guilty, the king pardons him and allows him to resume his military career. King Fernand suggests that after an appropriate period of mourning Chimène may want to marry Rodrigue. He strongly recommends that Chimène take at least one year before deciding whether she can forgive Rodrigue for his crime.

*The Cid* shows that chaos may result if individuals place their own desires above the needs of society as a whole. Whatever his motivation may have been, Don Diègue did not consider the effect of his fanaticism on others. Only the wisdom and compassion of King Fernand resulted in a solution that both preserved the rule of law and spared the life of Rodrigue. King Fernand accorded equal importance to both justice and mercy.

When he first published *The Cid*, Corneille referred to it as a tragicomedy, although he later decided to call it a tragedy. There is, however, no tragic vision of the world in *The Cid*. Although this play explores serious themes, such as death and justice, it does have a relatively optimistic ending. King Fernand may well succeed in restoring order to his kingdom while at the same time allowing Rodrigue and Chimène to live emotionally satisfying lives.

## POLYEUCTE

**First produced:** 1642 (first published, 1643;  
English translation, 1655)

**Type of work:** Play

*Polyeucte describes the heroism of converts to Christianity who willingly accept martyrdom.*

The action in *Polyeucte* takes place in the Roman colony of Armenia. Emperor Decia hates Christians and insists that all of his governors enforce his draconian laws against them. Practicing Christianity is a capital offense. Polyeucte has married Pauline, the daughter of Félix, the Roman governor in Armenia. Although she loved Sévère, she acceded to her father's wishes and married Polyeucte because he was then richer than Sévère. Things have changed, and Sévère is now an influential adviser to Emperor Decia. Polyeucte seems to be a very ordinary person. No one expects any surprises from him, but his friend Nérarque persuades him to embrace Christianity. Both Polyeucte and Pauline speak of her recurring nightmare in which she sees Polyeucte's death. He does not take this nightmare seriously, but she is terrified. Although he wants to become a Christian, he does not want to anger Pauline and Félix, who hold Christians in contempt. After much hesitation, Polyeucte publicly reveals his conversion.

This development creates an immediate problem for Félix, Sévère, and Pauline. Should Decia's arbitrary law against Christians be enforced? At first, Félix thinks that he can profit from Polyeucte's martyrdom if Pauline then marries the influential Sévère. Pauline rejects this proposal and vows never to marry Sévère; she appeals to Sévère's love for her and begs him to intervene with her father. Félix is intransigent but gives his son-in-law one last opportunity to avoid death. He forces Polyeucte to watch the execution of Nérarque offstage. Far from discouraging him, this martyrdom only serves to strengthen Polyeucte's commitment to his new religion, and he is executed. The martyrdom of Polyeucte unexpectedly affects Félix and Pauline, who are so moved by his courage that they both convert to Christianity. As this tragedy ends, Sévère expresses admiration for Christians and promises not to persecute them. He believes

that Félix and Pauline can serve both God and Decia.

*Polyeucte* is a very powerful tragedy that explores with much sensitivity the importance of courage, loyalty, and personal commitment to ethical and religious beliefs. Although Polyeucte had no intention of converting to Christianity before his conversations with Néarque, he comes to realize that his life would have no meaning if he were to deny his faith. He refuses to lose his immortal soul in order to save his life. Although Pauline would have preferred to marry Sévère, Polyeucte is her husband and she admires his courage. Her love and respect for him made her ready to accept the gift of faith after his execution. Similarly, Félix was displeased that his son-in-law was not as skilled a politician as Sévère, but he did recognize Polyeucte's honesty. Félix's conversion to Christianity has struck many critics as almost incredible, but one cannot question his sincerity. Félix tells Sévère: "I made him a

martyr, his death made me a Christian." *Polyeucte* continues to fascinate readers and theatergoers by its very effective representation of heroism through characters who refuse to compromise their moral beliefs.

## SUMMARY

Pierre Corneille was a gifted playwright who has remained justly famous for his treatment of moral problems. Audiences can identify with the universal moral dilemmas he described so well. In depicting the feudalism in *The Cid* or the Roman imperial power in *Horace* and *Polyeucte*, Corneille described problems that exist even today. Like Pauline, Polyeucte, Rodrigue, and Chimène, one recognizes that there are still conflicts between one's personal ethical beliefs and the demands that society imposes on the individual.

Edmund J. Campion

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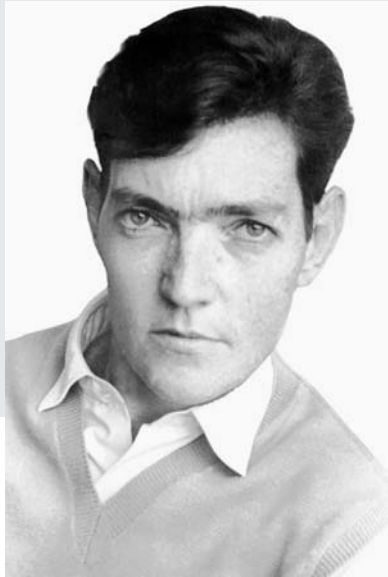
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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- Explain how the themes of Pierre Corneille's political plays can have relevance in the twenty-first century.
- To what extent was Corneille's tragic vision governed by the principles of French neoclassicism?
- Reveal how training in the law assisted Corneille in constructing his plays.
- Tragedy, as the modern world understands it, did not exist in Europe before the Reformation because Romantic Catholic faith militated against a tragic outlook. What circumstances allowed the Catholic Corneille in the seventeenth century to compose tragedies?
- What is a tragicomedy, and how does *The Cid* fulfill the definition?





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## JULIO CORTÁZAR

**Born:** Brussels, Belgium

August 26, 1914

**Died:** Paris, France

February 12, 1984

*Cortázar is the most widely known in a generation of Latin American writers and has significantly raised the status of Argentine literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Julio Cortázar (KOHR-tah-sahr) was born on August 26, 1914, in Brussels, Belgium, where his Argentine parents, Julio José and María Herminia (Descotte) Cortázar, were on business. When he was four years old, the family returned to Argentina to establish permanent residence in Banfield, a suburb of Buenos Aires. When he was still very young, Cortázar and the family were abandoned by his father; his mother and aunt reared him and his sister.

Cortázar earned a degree as a primary and secondary schoolteacher in 1935, but before finishing his first year of studies at the University of Buenos Aires, he left to take a position as a high school teacher, which he held until 1944. *Presencia* (1938), published under the pseudonym of Julio Denis, was his first publication. It is a collection of poems, a genre in which he was to work again in later years. From 1944 to 1945, he taught literature at the University of Cuyo in the province of Mendoza, where he was briefly imprisoned for participating in anti-Peronist demonstrations.

In 1946, he returned to Buenos Aires, where he worked as the manager of Cámara Argentina del Libro (the Argentine Publishing Association). After passing examinations in languages and law, he worked as a public translator from 1948 to 1951. In

1946, his first short story was published by Jorge Luis Borges. In 1951, he was awarded a scholarship by the French government to study in Paris. He left Argentina the same month that *Bestiario* (1951), his first collection of short stories, was published. The eight stories in *Bestiario* reflect the influence of the French Surrealists on his writing. Each situation in *Bestiario* confronts the reader with that point at which fantasy emerges as a product of logical order.

The rest of Cortázar's life was spent in Paris, where he began working as a translator for UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) in 1952. He also translated into Spanish the works of such authors as Louisa May Alcott, Daniel Defoe, G. K. Chesterton, André Gide, John Keats, Edgar Allan Poe, and Marguerite Yourcenar. Cortázar married the Argentine translator Aurora Bernárdez in 1953.

Cortázar's first novel, *Los premios* (1960; *The Winners*, 1965), is a thriller about a cross section of Argentine society, the winners of a lottery whose prize is a cruise on a ship. The author's revolutionary approach to the novel as a genre is only partially realized in *The Winners*. It reached maturity with *Rayuela* (1963; *Hopscotch*, 1966), the novel that definitively established Cortázar's international reputation as one of the most important twentieth century Latin American writers. In this novel Cortázar not only challenges traditional novelistic structure but also revolutionizes conventional modes of expression. In *Hopscotch* Cortázar's expression is lyrical, comic, mystic, esoteric, ironic, and inventive.

Cortázar thrived in France both personally and professionally. In 1974, he was awarded the Prix Médicis for his fourth and most political novel, *Libro de Manuel* (1973; *A Manual for Manuel*, 1978). He donated the prize money to an organization aiding families of political prisoners in Chile. In 1976, he received the Grand Aigle d'Or de la Ville de Nice for his entire work to date. Without relinquishing his Argentine citizenship, he acquired French citizenship in 1981. He returned to Argentina for several short visits; he also visited Cuba and Nicaragua, maintaining ties with the socialist regimes of those countries. In 1975, he participated as a member of the Second Russell Tribunal investigating violations of human rights in such Latin American countries as Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Paraguay. After 1960, he also visited the United States on several occasions, lecturing as a distinguished writer at universities from coast to coast. He died of leukemia in Paris on February 12, 1984.

#### ANALYSIS

Cortázar always preferred French and English literature to Spanish. As a young man he was particularly attracted to French Surrealism and recognized its influence on his work. In his later years he was fascinated by books on psychology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology.

Cortázar considered himself to be the only one of his generation to employ the techniques and themes of both of the schools of writing that dominated Buenos Aires between 1920 and 1940: One was the Florida group, with its European intellectualism, polished style, and universal themes; the other was the Boedo group, with its realistic urban scenes and unkempt style. Cortázar used characters whose language reflects the Argentine Spanish of several different social classes, which is in the style of the Boedo group, yet his fiction has a universal appeal, dealing with the fantastic that lurks beyond everyday reality, which is characteristic of the Florida group.

For Cortázar the fantastic represents an alteration in the laws, based on the Western notion of logic and reason, that supposedly regulate an ordered reality. As in the works of Alfred Jarry, a French writer whom Cortázar admired, the exceptions are as significant as the rules in fully understanding the hidden and perhaps ignored realities impinging upon human life.

In his short stories Cortázar initially creates normal settings and conventional characters in familiar situations. Soon the reader is caught up in some strange, even nightmarish, turn of events that threatens the established order. This fantastic, illogical dimension infiltrates and subverts everyday reality, allowing both reader and writer to experience an exception to the rules.

In his first collection of stories, Cortázar exhibits a worldview that coincides with that of the Surrealists: The so-called real, concrete world is only one side of a coin whose opposing face is the fantastic, the repressed, the hidden, and the taboo. Like the Surrealists, Cortázar ventures upon the darker, ignored, and repressed side of humanity. He did not consider these darker human dimensions to be pathological; instead, they served as exciting keys to a full appreciation of life. In a work as early as the dramatic poem *Los reyes* (1949; *the kings*), Cortázar adapted and altered the Greek myth of the Minotaur—half man, half bull—using him as a sympathetic character to show acceptance of humanity's basic dichotomy.

Although certain common elements exist between Cortázar's short stories and his novels, he always differentiated the two fictional forms, depicting the novel as the more dangerous of the two because of the liberties it permits. He maintained that he identified with particular characters in his novels—for example, Horacio Oliveira in *Hopscotch* and Andrés in *A Manual for Manuel*. These characters seek a way of life and love and a more just social order.

In *Hopscotch*, the reader is exposed to Cortázar's theory of the antinovel. Morelli, an old man, is a famous author, one read by bohemians; his manuscript notes on the antinovel are discovered while he is in the hospital recovering from a car accident. It is Morelli who proposes to make the reader an accomplice in the creative process.

The concept of the antinovel—the fragmented literary structure—was popular in the early 1960's, when *Hopscotch* was published. *Hopscotch* can also be seen as a natural consequence of the dissolution of the novelistic form. The phenomenon began in the late nineteenth century with modernist novels by the Colombian José Asunción Silva and by the Argentine Eugenio Cambaceres. Moreover, by the early 1920's and 1930's, Latin American vanguard poets such as Pablo Neruda and César

Vallejo were revolutionizing and demystifying poetry.

Cortázar not only challenges the traditional novelistic structure but also revolutionizes language. He aims to destroy literary rhetoric and outmoded forms. His use of imagery is richly varied. His characters play with words, engage in word games, and invent languages. In addition to inventing language, Cortázar makes unusual orthographic changes based on phonetics, joining words in strings to emphasize their vulgarity.

In *Hopscotch* and *A Manual for Manuel* eroticism plays a dominant role in the concept of revelation and revolution, for to Cortázar rebellion is sexual and political; it is a liberation of society collectively and of the individual's desires.

Structural and stylistic playfulness in his fiction is always a means of saving oneself from the crushing seriousness of the world. In the final years, humor was still to be found in his poetry and in the collage travelogue he wrote with his companion Carol Dunlop. The title of the book indicates Cortázar's playfulness: *Los autonautas de la cosmopista: O, Un viaje atemporal Paris-Marsella* (1983; *Autonauts of the Cosmoroute: A Timeless Journey from Paris to Marseille*, 2007).

## HOPSCOTCH

**First published:** *Rayuela*, 1963 (English translation, 1966)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In Hopscotch, Julio Cortázar revolutionized the conventional modes of novelistic expression and strives toward a new mode of consciousness.*

*Hopscotch* is divided into three sections: "From the Other Side," "From This Side," and "From Diverse Sides." At the beginning of the novel Cortázar offers a "Table of Instructions" for reading the novel and suggests that while *Hopscotch* consists of many books, it most importantly consists of two books. He invites the reader to choose between, first, a traditional reading of chapters 1 through 56 (the first two sections) and, second, a more unconventional reading that begins with chapter 73 and proceeds in hopscotch fashion

through a sequence of at least 153 brief chapters.

The traditional reading revolves around Horacio Oliveira, an unemployed Argentine intellectual in his forties, living first in Paris and then in Buenos Aires around 1950. He and his bohemian friends—a Russian, a North American couple, two Frenchmen, a Chinese, and a Spaniard—form a group, called the Serpent Club, that spends hours discussing art, literature, music, and philosophy, and listening to jazz recordings in smoke-filled rooms. The novel, however, focuses on Oliveira's persistent and anguished self-analysis; he agonizingly questions his every thought, emotion, word, and action. A product of Western civilization, Oliveira constantly rationalizes and drowns in his own well of dialectic possibilities. Oliveira is aware of the absurdity of daily life but is not yet sure of how to contend with it. He searches, feeling alone and condemned to conformity.

The novel begins with Oliveira asking himself if he would find La Maga. She is his lover, an Uruguayan woman living in Paris with her baby. Unlike Oliveira, she is spontaneous and intuitive. Dissatisfied with his routine, self-centered life based on logic, Oliveira seeks out unusual experiences and unconventional reactions, all the while envying La Maga's unfettered consciousness.

Oliveira leaves Paris and returns to Argentina in the two sections of the traditionally read novel. Although La Maga disappears in Paris, she remains present in Oliveira's mind, as does his desire to rid himself of the trappings of Western civilization. In Buenos Aires, his relationships with an old friend, Traveler, who ironically has never journeyed far from home, and with his wife, Talita, are the material for most of his soul-searching. Traveler becomes a double for Oliveira; Traveler is without intellectual and existential anguish, at home in his own territory. Talita replaces La Maga, becoming her double. The three work in a circus and then in a sanatorium for the insane, where the final chap-



ters of the second section take place. The reader is never told if Oliveira commits suicide or goes insane in the final chapters. In the second version of the book, the author tells the reader that life is a commentary on something else that can never be attained.

In the more unconventional, hopscotch reading of the novel, the “Table of Instructions” guides the reader through all but one of the fifty-six chapters in the first two sections and all of the chapters in the third section. In this reading, these “expendable” chapters are interspersed randomly within the chronological sequence of the first fifty-six chapters of the book. The reader, who must piece together the collage of chapters, is aided by the author’s introductory instructions and numbers at the end of each chapter. In this way Cortázar exacts the reader’s participation in constructing the second reading of a novel that ends in a deadlock, alternating between chapters 58 and 131. *Hopscotch* is a double—even multiple—novel. On at least two levels it involves a search for authenticity: the story of a man’s self-analysis and search for an absolute, and a reevaluation of traditional novelistic structure, carrying out its destruction and planning for its revival.

## 62: A MODEL KIT

**First published:** 62: *Modelo para armar*, 1968  
(English translation, 1972)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In 62: A Model Kit, certainties about plot and character are sacrificed to opportunities for extending and making elaborate patterns of narrative surfaces.*

Unlike Oliveira in *Hopscotch*, who plays a game in order to save himself from reality, the characters in *62: A Model Kit* are played like pawns on a chessboard. The novel is a juxtaposition of the protagonist’s experiences in two different but related territories called the Zone and the City. The former is a meeting place for the group of characters while the City has no geographic limitation,

only high sidewalks and a hotel with labyrinthine rooms.

The novel’s protagonist is actually a group of characters. These characters are deliberately sketchy. Echoes of one another, they perceive a subliminal level of reality and intuit associations that reveal what life is about.

The associations, in constant, dreamlike metamorphosis, justify the novel’s chronological order of episodes and the utilization of private symbols. The opening scene gives a clear example of how events reverberating in the mind of a character initiate a chain of associations.

Juan, an Argentine interpreter living in Paris, is seated in the Polidor restaurant facing a wall of mirrors when he overhears a customer asking for *château saignant*, a rare steak. These words remind Juan of a book he just bought by Michel Butor in which he found a description of Niagara Falls by another Frenchman, François René de Chateaubriand, the author of *Atala* (1801; English translation, 1802). They also remind him of a related phrase, *château sanglant*, the “bloody castle.” Free associating from this last phrase, other images occur to him: Frau Marta, Transylvania, and the word “Sylvaner,” the name of the wine he has just ordered. Word associations open up onto mysteriously disturbing worlds. This particular association exposes the reader to the novel’s Gothic episodes about Vienna and the Baslisken Haus, with its legends of the Blood Countess Elizabeth Bathory, who bled and tortured girls in her castle and bathed in their blood. More associations occur to Juan and are borne out in the novel’s plot, in which desire without love, ill-fated relationships among characters, and vampirism all play a part.

*62: A Model Kit* is a dialectic between the exploratory nature of language and experience, and the forces—the conscious mind and its manipulation of the narrative—that counter the liberation offered by this exploration.



## A MANUAL FOR MANUEL

**First published:** *Libro de Manuel*, 1973  
(English translation, 1978)

**Type of work:** Novel

A Manual for Manuel, Cortázar's most politically committed work of fiction, is an exposé of human rights violations in Latin America within an imaginatively crafted narrative structure.

The novel, a mixture of fact and fiction, humor and eroticism, concerns itself with political conditions in Latin America. Cortázar wrote the novel in order to expose the systematic torture of political prisoners. Since his other books had been best sellers throughout Latin America, he hoped that this novel would enjoy wide circulation and influence. In part to avert censorship, he did not include a political treatise, expressing his socialist vision for Latin America, in the book. Instead, he chose a bizarre mixture of fantasy and fact: The plot is fiction, but the news articles inserted in the text are factual. The novel's protagonist, Andrés, is, like Cortázar, the product of two worlds—middle-class comfort and socialist commitment—and Cortázar implies that a blind adherence to either might deny the individual the very freedom that he most values.

*A Manual for Manuel* is about the kidnapping of a Latin American diplomat by a group of strange guerrillas in Paris. It has two narrators. One is one of the guerrillas, jokingly referred to as “you know who,” who takes notes on the assault plans. The other is Andrés, who is indecisive about joining the group and who uncovers the plot of the novel by reading those plans. The articles that interrupt the plot are from actual French and Latin American newspapers. These articles concern individual protests against the torture of political prisoners in such countries as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, reports of guerrilla activities in Latin America and Europe, and discussions of taboos such as homosexuality. The articles are being collected for two members of the group, Susana and Patricio, who are making a scrapbook for their baby boy, Manuel. They aim to educate him—along with the reader—

about protest, change, and revolution in Latin American societies.

The group incites unrest in middle-class neighborhoods with provocations that are a strange mixture of guerrilla activity and pranks that disturb bourgeois sensibilities. Apart from these uprisings and the kidnapping, the social commitment seems to be consistently undermined by Andrés's erotic preoccupations and adventures and by the strange undertakings of another very colorful member of the group. This member is Lonstein, an Argentine Jew, who washes bodies in the morgue and speaks an inventive language combining musical rhythms and sounds, Argentine slang, and neologisms based on French and English. *A Manual for Manuel* is not only the author's assertion of his adherence to socialist revolution but also his statement that he will not sacrifice personal freedom of expression—erotic rites, aesthetic predilections, humor, and imagination—to any ideology.

Cortázar devotes twelve of the final seventeen pages to two factual excerpts: the testimony of political prisoners in a press conference of the Forum for Human Rights denouncing cases of torture in Argentina and a section from *Conversations with Americans* (1970), testimony taken by the attorney Mark Lane from thirty-two Vietnam War veterans who attested the acts of torture they committed, acts for which they were trained and commended during that war. These texts run down the pages in two parallel columns and end with a shocking statistical table from the United States Department of Defense that shows, by country, numbers of Latin American military personnel trained in the United States. Cortázar points out thereby that the United States aids oppressive regimes in their programs of torture by training their police.

### SUMMARY

In theory and practice, Julio Cortázar seeks a total fictional renovation, not out of an eagerness for originality but out of necessity. This renovation consists of the destruction of character, situation, literary style, form, and language. His is an anti-literature that seeks to transgress the literary deed, the book. He wishes to open up the closed literary order—even to create disorder—to establish new perspectives.

Genevieve Slomski



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*El examen*, wr. 1950, pb. 1986 (*Final Exam*, 2000)  
*Los premios*, 1960 (*The Winners*, 1965)  
*Rayuela*, 1963 (*Hopscotch*, 1966)  
*62: Modelo para armar*, 1968 (*62: A Model Kit*, 1972)  
*Libro de Manuel*, 1973 (*A Manual for Manuel*, 1978)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*Bestiario*, 1951  
*Final del juego*, 1956  
*Las armas secretas*, 1959  
*Historias de cronopios y de famas*, 1962 (*Cronopios and Famas*, 1969)  
*End of the Game, and Other Stories*, 1963 (also as *Blow-Up, and Other Stories*, 1967)  
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*Octaedro*, 1974 (included in *A Change of Light, and Other Stories*, 1980)  
*Alguien que anda por ahí y otros relatos*, 1977 (included in *A Change of Light, and Other Stories*, 1980)  
*Un tal Lucas*, 1979 (*A Certain Lucas*, 1984)  
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*Queremos tanto a Glenda y otros relatos*, 1980 (*We Love Glenda So Much, and Other Stories*, 1983)  
*Deshoras*, 1982

#### POETRY:

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*Los reyes*, 1949  
*Pameos y meopas*, 1971  
*Salvo el crepúsculo*, 1984

#### NONFICTION:

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*Último round*, 1969  
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*Prosa del observatorio*, 1972 (with Antonio Galvez)  
*Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales: Una utopía realizable*, 1975  
*Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura*, 1976 (with Mario Vargas Llosa and Oscar Collazos)  
*Paris: The Essence of Image*, 1981  
*Los astronautas de la cosmopista: O, Un viaje atemporal Paris-Marsella*, 1983 (with Carol Dunlap; *Autonauts of the Cosmoroute: A Timeless Voyage from Paris to Marseille*, 2007)  
*Nicaragua tan violentamente dulce*, 1983 (*Nicaraguan Sketches*, 1989)  
*Cartas*, 2000 (3 volumes)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did Julio Cortázar's works, which he wrote mostly after moving to Europe, depend more on his earlier experiences in Argentina or on his capacity for contemplating his Argentinian background from abroad?
- What does the variety of the writers whose works Cortázar translated reveal about the man?
- Discuss Cortázar's determination to enrich Spanish literature by taking advantage of his mastery of French and English.
- How did the myth of the Minotaur help Cortázar develop one of his important themes?
- What is the likely reason for Cortázar's use of *Hopscotch* as a title, and how does the work undermine the traditional structure of the novel?
- To what extent can a mixture of fact and fiction, as in *A Manual for Manuel*, succeed in enhancing his reader's concept of political reality?
- Is an intention to "create disorder" truly a "necessity" for a man with Cortázar's literary ambitions?



TRANSLATIONS:

*Robinson Crusoe*, 1945 (of Daniel Defoe's novel)

*El inmoralista*, 1947 (of André Gide's *L'Immoraliste*)

*Vida y Cartas de John Keats*, c. 1948-1951 (of Lord Houghton's *Life and Letters of John Keats*)

*El hombre que sabía demasiado*, c. 1948-1951 (of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*)

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*La filosofía de Sartre y el psicoanálisis existencialista*, 1951 (of Stern's *Sartre, His Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*)

MISCELLANEOUS:

*La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, 1967 (*Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, 1986)

*Último round*, 1969

*Divertimiento*, 1986

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## SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

**Born:** San Miguel Nepantla, New Spain (now in Mexico)  
November, 1648 (baptized December 2, 1648)

**Died:** Mexico City, New Spain (now in Mexico)  
April 17, 1695

*Primarily known for her poetry, Sor Juana was a leading writer of Mexico's colonial period and is appreciated today as an important figure in Latin American literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez de Santillana was born in the small village of San Miguel Nepantla, New Spain (now in Mexico), probably in November, 1648. Although a biography by the Jesuit Diego Calleja lists the date as November 12, 1651, many scholars believe that a baptismal record from her parish dated December 2, 1648, is hers. Her parents, Pedro Manuel de Asbaje and Isabel Ramírez de Santillana, were not officially married, and her father left the household when she was very young. Her writings hardly mention him.

Juana Inés was one of six children, and she was reared by her maternal grandfather at his country home. His library fascinated her. By the age of three she learned to read and by six or seven expressed her desire to go to the university in Mexico City. At the age of eight she composed a dramatic poem to the Eucharist, using the poetic style of the seventeenth century. Her able mind allowed her to learn Latin on her own after only about twenty lessons. This established a pattern of independent learning that was to continue throughout her life.

When she was sixteen, Juana Inés went to the viceroy's court as a lady in the service of the vicereine, Marquesa de Mancera. The two apparently became good friends; they shared a love of the intellectual life. A young woman of Juana Inés's so-

cial position had no opportunity for marriage, however, and she had no wish to marry. Her desire to continue studying helped persuade her to enter a convent. In 1667, she entered the Convent of the Discalced Carmelites, but the order was too severe for her. A year later, she found her place in the Order of Saint Jerome and on February 24, 1669, officially became Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (krews).

The regulations of her religious order were not especially strict, although the communal life led by the nuns sometimes interrupted her studies. From 1669 to 1690, she built up a personal library and was able to read broadly to fill in gaps in her education. She also wrote extensively.

The reign of the Marqués de la Laguna as viceroy (1680-1688) was a very productive period in Sor Juana's intellectual life. In true Baroque tradition, she greeted his arrival with a symbolic work, *Neptuno alegórico* (1680; allegorical Neptune). Among her other works are *Primero sueño* (1692; *First Dream*, 1983), which uses mythology and philosophical argument to discuss the relation of the intellect to the senses, and *El divino Narciso* (pr. c. 1680, pb. 1690; *The Divine Narcissus*, 1945), a sacramental play with allegorical characters. Poems for special occasions make up much of her other work, and a collection of some of them was published in 1689.

In 1690, Sor Juana's *Carta atenagórica* (letter worthy of Athena) was published. The letter is a critique of a sermon given by the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Vieira on Holy Thursday, 1650, and was published with a brief prologue by the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz. He

signed his prologue Sor Filotea de la Cruz and dated it November 25, 1690. The bishop's suggestion that Sor Juana direct her study more to the area of sacred letters brought her famous reply, *Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1700; *The Poet's Answer to the Most Illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz*, 1994). With this famous manuscript, Sor Juana defines herself as an intellectual and defends her thirst for knowledge. She also addresses the question of whether women should be allowed to study. Given the century in which she lived, it is not surprising that she met much opposition to her desire to study.

These letters caused disagreement within the Church, and her confessor, Jesuit Father Antonio Nuñez de Miranda, broke all ties with her. Sor Juana's reply was written in a very frank style because she never expected the letter to be published. When she lost the protective support of her court patronage, her life became more difficult; she experienced increasing opposition within her community.

In 1692, hunger riots and increasing pressure for penitential acts left Sor Juana feeling isolated, and the next year she wrote an affirmation of faith. She renounced her worldly interests, sold her library, and for the last two years of her life wrote nothing. When an epidemic struck the convent, Sor Juana was among those who became ill. She died on April 17, 1695.

## ANALYSIS

Sor Juana's fame rests on her lyrical poetry. Her work is highly praised for its use of symbolism, decorative and exotic imagery, hyperbole, contrast, paradox, and references to important fields of learning in her time, such as philosophy, theology, and science. While the modern reader may occasionally wish for a more personal and individual voice behind her writings' highly stylized conventions, her work clearly places her among the poets of the Baroque tradition of Spain. She shares in this tradition with writers like Luis de Góngora y Argote and Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Her poems are demonstrations of talent in manipulating language and form, rather than personal revelations. From the beginning, Sor Juana's writing shows skill in using the styles of her time. Her intelligence and extensive reading are evident. From the time she entered the convent in 1669, Sor Juana wrote many

poems, but it is impossible to date them exactly because the originals have been lost and because her style does not exhibit much change. Her works show a great sense of form and proportion and an ability with wordplay and contrasts.

Sor Juana cultivated the full range of poetry typical for her times, including courtly poems, occasional verse (for special occasions and poetry contests), humorous poetry, religious verses (especially *villancicos*, carols composed to be sung on a religious holiday), and love poetry. Her courtly poems are numerous, but the love poetry is considered more important—among them are some poems considered to be Sor Juana's best.

The critics of her time did not find it strange that a nun would write love poetry. She wrote as a woman of the upper classes and enjoyed the protection of the court. Of course, at the same time she was writing *villancicos*, an appropriate activity for a nun. Her love poems explore conventional aspects of the theme: the pain of rejection, the beauty of the beloved, the irrationality of being in love, and the emotion of pure and distant love. Some of the poetry is addressed to a shadowy male figure named Silvio or Fabio while other times she speaks in a male persona and addresses her verses to a woman. The latter poems correspond most nearly to convention.

Baroque poetry is characterized by extravagant description and a love of the exotic. Sor Juana's verses incorporate her homeland, Mexico, which was certainly an exotic place from the European perspective. As Mexican poet and cultural critic Octavio Paz has noted, the mestizos and mulattoes she describes are primarily picturesque and semicomical, in keeping with the seventeenth-century view of the low position of such people. One poem introduces an herb doctor and his sorcerer's brew, while another, a *villancico*, presents the *tocotín*, a lively Aztec dance complete with Nahuatl words.

When Sor Juana describes her world at court, she creates portraits, exploring as she does so the differences between the subject and his or her portrait. One poem, speaking of a flattering portrait of herself, reflects upon life's illusion and vanity, which ends with death and a return to dust. Other portraits, like one of Lisarda, make fun of the literary style in which they are written, using self-parody. This type of literary game, which is hard for

the modern reader to appreciate, contains many imaginative and charming moments.

Writing was an integral part of Sor Juana's identity, and some of her poems use imagery that identifies her with her pen. In one example, her pen produces words of mourning, which she calls black tears. Since *pluma* in Spanish means both pen and feather, flight and writing can be related with a play on the same word. *Pluma* in turn represents the whole wing, and the wing contributes to an image of flight. *First Dream*, for example, identifies intellectual striving and boldness with Phaeton's mythological failed flight in Apollo's chariot.

In the area of religious drama, Sor Juana wrote three plays of the type called an *auto sacramental*, a one-act play performed during the feast of Corpus Christi. Her best known of these is *The Divine Narcissus*. Although performed for Corpus Christi, the theme of the Eucharist is very often not central to the action of an *auto*. These plays, derived from medieval religious plays, were often performed with much pageantry and elaborate costumes. All of Sor Juana's three *autos* were introduced with prologues called *loas*. The *loa* before *The Divine Narcissus* portrays an Aztec ceremony in which Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, was broken apart and eaten—a clear parallel to the Christian Eucharist.

Sor Juana's most personal works are the poems that address the price of her intellectual distinction. One of her most famous asks why the world hounds her and what harm is done if she chooses to fill her mind with things of beauty rather than worry about outward, physical beauty. She was certainly well aware that being a woman attracted gushy, condescending praise, as well as harsh criticism, for her intellectual accomplishments. In one poem, she wonders whether European readers are too willing to see perfection in her work because a woman who writes well is so unusual, such a special case. Whether criticized or praised, Sor Juana surely experienced the isolation of a woman who was not living within the accepted sphere.

## THE DIVINE NARCISSUS

**First produced:** *El divino Narciso*, c. 1680  
(first published, 1690; English  
translation, 1945)

**Type of work:** Play

*This poetic drama presents a series of allegorical tableaux in which Human Nature reveals her search for Christ in the form of Narcissus.*

*The Divine Narcissus*, based in part on the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus, is considered Sor Juana's masterpiece of religious theater. The characters are all allegorical. The divine Narcissus represents Christ. Human Nature appears as a woman searching for her lover, Narcissus. Echo represents fallen nature or evil and is accompanied by Pride and Self-Love. The play is written in verse and divided into five tableaux with fifteen scenes. Although there is little action, the play is notable for Sor Juana's beautifully lyrical descriptions, as well as the imaginative use of two well-known stories.

In the introductory scene, Synagogue and Gentilism decide to stage a play in which revelation and pagan antiquity will be represented. Human Nature explains the imagery and announces that she must find a spring to cleanse her image, distorted by guilt, so that the Divine Narcissus can again recognize his image in her. Then Echo appears, telling of Narcissus's rejection, which makes her wish to keep Human Nature from achieving a union with him. The second tableau portrays the temptation of Narcissus by Echo. In one of the best scenes of the play, Echo approaches Narcissus as a shepherd maid who pays in unhappiness for the gift of her great beauty. The association of unhappiness and beauty is a common theme of the period. The parallel is to Lucifer, the most beautiful of angels, who, in exile from God, was also the most unhappy. The temptation scene just as clearly parallels Christ's temptation by the devil. The skillful meshing of biblical themes and pagan literature is characteristic of Sor Juana's *autos*.

Human Nature appears, singing of her despair and longing for Narcissus in the style of the Song of Songs: "Worn out with searching for Narcissus,/ granting my wandering foot no respite." Grace, sent by God, reveals the waters of a fountain that

will cleanse Human Nature and that in their purity symbolize the Virgin Mary. Then, in the fourth tableau, Narcissus perceives the beautiful reflected image of himself and Human Nature at the same time and sings of his love: "What surpassing beauty is this,/ beside whose purest light/ the whole celestial sphere turns pale?"

Echo is defeated and can only repeat the last syllables spoken by Pride and Self-Love. The tableau ends with Narcissus expressing the terrible suffering of human love as he yields his spirit to death with the biblical words lamenting his abandonment by the Father. Although Human Nature grieves at first, she is assured that Narcissus lives and that she will be protected by the sacraments.

Sor Juana weaves biblical and pagan elements together to form a unique presentation of a religious theme. Octavio Paz rates it as one of the few *autos* having the mark of true poetry.

## FIRST DREAM

**First published:** *Primero sueño*, 1692  
(collected in *A Sor Juana Anthology*, 1988)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The account of a dream remembered during waking hours tells of a search for knowledge that ends in disillusionment.*

*First Dream*, Sor Juana's longest and most ambitious poem, takes the form of a dream retold after waking in the morning. It focuses on a matter of great importance to her: the human desire to know and understand the world. The text demonstrates Sor Juana's own extensive scholarship. It also showcases her poetic skill with images. Central to this work are the numerous images associated with sleep that are woven into her account: night contrasted with day, the dominion of sleep over human beings, sleep as a type of death, the deception of dreams. Sor Juana herself attached great personal significance to this work, and she makes special mention of it in her famous letter, *The Poet's Answer to the Most Illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz*.

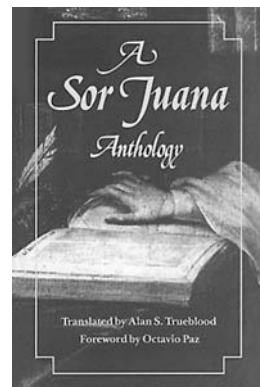
In the opening lines, the shadow of night reaches toward the stars, but its "frowning gloom" surrounds only the earth. Night is not able to put

out the light of the stars, "splendid lights, forever free, aglow forever." Sor Juana calls the shadow "pyramidal," and her interest in pyramids is explored later in a more intellectual fashion as she discusses Homer's ideas regarding pyramids. The shape reflects the ambition of the mind, mounting upward and attempting ambitiously to grasp the essence of life and the First Cause of creation. Throughout her text, Sor Juana makes use of rhetorical figures to illustrate the action of the searching intelligence. Other parallel images refer to daring flight, including the failed flight of Icarus, whose wings, held on with wax, melted when he flew too close to the sun.

The poem explores the effects of night and darkness, commanding every living creature to sleep. First the animals, then people, fall under the spell. Morpheus, an image of death, is all-powerful—ruler and peasant alike must give in and rest. As the soul frees itself of the body, it begins to contemplate Creation. Scientific references to the four humors and the workings of the body give way to intellectual flight, with references to Atlas, Olympus, and the pyramids of Egypt.

The soul then enters the upper sphere and tries to grasp the immense complexity of creation, but the sheer numbers of creatures and elements in the universe overwhelm the mind. Sor Juana then explores the mental processes of scholastic doctrine, taking up one thing at a time and dividing things into categories. She introduces representative features of the total system but finds her mind frustrated. Debating whether it is wise to try again, the soul is caught by the rising sun. Night gives way, in images of a military retreat. Human senses take over again, and the sleeper, identified as Sor Juana herself, awakes.

Although the ideas are deeply philosophical, the poem derives much of its beauty and subtlety of meaning through references to mythology and the scientific ideas of Sor Juana's time. The verses describing the night and nature's slow yielding to sleep are particularly beautiful. She uses the *silva*, with eleven-syllable and seven-syllable lines that oc-





casional rhyme but are often free in order and may not rhyme. Once the world has gone to sleep, Sor Juana's soul explores the nature of human intellect. Since the life of the mind was so central to her identity, it is not surprising that this work had a special place in Sor Juana's affections.

## "FOOLISH MEN"

**First published:** "Hombres necios," 1700  
(collected in *The Answer: Including a Selection of Poems*, 1994)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Using logical argument, Sor Juana attacks men's double standard.*

Sor Juana's reputation as an early feminist rests upon *The Poet's Answer to the Most Illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz* and upon the poem "Foolish Men." The poem is commonly known by its first two words, "Hombres necios," which translate as "Foolish Men," or by its first line, which translates as "foolish men, who accuse. . . ." "Foolish Men," a poem in defense of women, is among her best-known works. Written in a relatively frank and idiomatic tone, the verses seem strikingly modern. Clearly, Sor Juana had difficulty in her own life with the role assigned to women. Sor Juana's poetry often portrays women as the more logical partners in battles of love with men. Her view of love is certainly not idealized; relationships between men and women are necessarily problematic, and love itself is an unreasonable emotion filled with tension and strife.

"Foolish Men" opens with a blunt accusation against men who are very good at blaming women for faults that men themselves have caused. Sor Juana argues for women, although she never refers to women as "we." Her short verses, in the form of

*redondillas*—stanzas of four lines rhyming *abba*—move forcefully through her logical argument. The content is easy enough to follow, and Sor Juana repeats her view in various forms of rephrasing. Men win over women's resistance and then, becoming self-righteous, blame them for feminine frivolity. Furthermore, a woman cannot win. If she refuses her suitor, she is ungrateful and cold; if she gives in, she is lewd.

After establishing the problem, Sor Juana poses the question: Who is guiltier if their passion leads to sin? Her implicit answer is obvious. Her concluding verses challenge men to either love women as they have made them, or make them into whatever they would prefer. It is, after all, men's pursuit that leads to women's fall. Her final stanza speaks by her personal authority ("I well know . . .") of men's arrogance. Contrary to the male view of women as the occasion of sin, she presents her own view of men as allied with the devil, the flesh, and the world.

While Sor Juana was not a feminist in the sense of an activist fighting in the public sphere for women's rights, she was conscious of her position as a woman writer, and she did assert her right to develop her intellectual ability. "Foolish Men" confronts prejudice against women directly, but the logical and witty form of the poem puts it in the tradition of seventeenth century Baroque literature.

## SUMMARY

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz produced an impressive body of work, including poems and poetic drama. She was admired and considered exceptional during her lifetime. It should be remembered that originality in the seventeenth century meant cleverness in using traditional forms. Sor Juana used her intelligence and perceptiveness to create unique combinations while writing of known themes and ideas. Her work is a pleasure to the senses; her images often surprise and delight.

*Susan L. Piepke*



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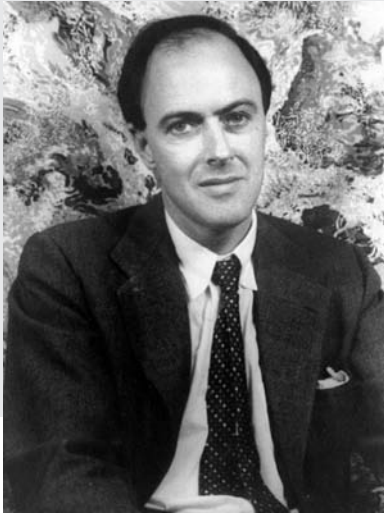
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Point out some of the ways in which the themes of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz reach far beyond the scope one might expect from a seventeenth-century Mexican nun.
- What themes in Sor Juana's work have generated the interest of readers in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century?
- Consider *First Dream* as a poem on the life of the mind.
- Are the "foolish men" in the poem so titled all men or just some men? How effective is this poem more than three centuries after it was written?
- Sor Juana was, and had to be, an obedient member of a religious community. In what ways was she a truly independent woman?



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## ROALD DAHL

**Born:** Llandaff, Wales  
September 13, 1916

**Died:** Oxford, Oxfordshire, England  
November 23, 1990

*Dahl is noted for his darkly humorous stories of grotesque characters who meet even more grotesque fates as poetic justice, particularly in **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, which has twice been adapted for film.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Roald Dahl was born on September 13, 1916, to a Norwegian family living in Wales. When he was three, his older sister Astri suddenly became ill and died, and his father subsequently lost his will to live, dying from pneumonia shortly afterward. The elder Dahl's last wish was to put the surviving children in English schools, which he perceived as being superior. As a result, Dahl's mother could not return to Norway, where she could receive assistance from family.

However academically rigorous English schools might be, the young Dahl found their discipline policies monstrous and oppressive. Decades afterward he would vividly recall his terror at the continual threat of being beaten with a bamboo or wooden cane. This weapon could create vicious welts on its victim's back and buttocks and leave painful bruises for weeks. Although some of the canings Dahl and his friends received may have been deserved, many of them were the result of the capricious exercise of authority by ill-tempered teachers and older students. The experience left him with a lifelong sympathy for the small and weak and an active detestation of bullies.

However, Dahl's schooldays were not a period of unrelenting horror. While at one school, he was part of a program by which the Cadbury Chocolate Company tested new formulations. At regular periods each student would receive a box containing

twenty small bars of chocolate to evaluate. Dahl came to look forward to each distribution, and often imagined the laboratory in which they were created.

When Dahl finished school, he decided not to pursue a university degree because he wanted to see the world. He obtained a job with Shell Oil, which sent him to Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in Africa. While he was there, World War II broke out and he volunteered for the Royal Air Force (RAF). After learning how to fly, he was sent north to another airbase. However, the directions he was given were faulty, and he ran out of fuel before reaching the runway. Injured in the crash landing, he barely escaped his plane before it caught fire.

While he was recuperating from his injuries and it became increasingly clear that he would never again be fit enough to fly, the RAF sent him to Washington, D.C., to serve as an attaché in its embassy. There he was interviewed about his experiences, only to run out of time to answer all of the reporter's questions. He offered to send the reporter some notes to fill in what he had omitted, but the paper he delivered was practically a finished story. The reporter then suggested that he might have a career in writing.

Dahl proved an adept writer, and after some early realistic stories he began to delve into psychological horror in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, albeit in contemporary settings. Even after he returned to England after the war, he continued to find American publications his best markets, simply because they paid so much more than British

ones. As a result, he made multiple trips to New York, and on one of them he met his future wife, actress Patricia Neal. He nearly missed the opportunity with her, for while he could be a witty conversationalist, he could also be very rude to those he found boring. The evening he met her, he was more interested in talking with another of his dinner companions, and Neal felt so slighted that when he called to ask her on a date the following night, she turned him down. Only when he persisted did she finally relent.

After they married and had children, they settled into a routine by which they summered in England but lived in New York during the rest of the year so that Neal could continue her acting career. However, that arrangement was disrupted when their infant son Theo was struck by a taxicab and nearly killed. Dahl decided New York was simply too dangerous for families and moved back to England full time. The badly injured Theo developed hydrocephalus and required a shunt, which caused troubles of its own. Dahl worked on an improved shunt in an effort to better his son's condition.

Just as things seemed to be improving for Theo, their eldest daughter Olivia died from complications of measles. Then Neal experienced a series of strokes while expecting yet another of their children. At first she was left unable to speak, and only by rigorous therapies designed by Dahl himself did she slowly and painfully regain enough function to return to acting, even if only on a limited basis.

This series of misfortunes left the family in awkward financial straits, and to earn extra money Dahl turned to screenwriting. He wrote the screenplays to two Ian Fleming novels, the James Bond story *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and the children's story *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang* (1968).

By the 1970's and 1980's, Dahl's financial situation had become more comfortable. However, he remained a difficult person to deal with, and he often quarreled with his publishers over changes with which he disagreed. After one particularly harsh quarrel, the leading New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf dropped him from its stable of writers. However, Dahl was sufficiently well known that another publisher was willing to put up with his moods, and his intransigence was not the end of his career, as it might have been with a lesser writer.

His moods also destroyed his marriage with Neal, and he subsequently went on to marry Felicity

d'Abreau Crossland, whom he had first met when she was a stylist working in the film industry. However, by this point Dahl's health was deteriorating and recurring back and joint problems made it increasingly difficult for him to write. Finally he developed a rare form of leukemia, and on November 23, 1990, he died, leaving a wealth of unpublished manuscripts in various stages of completion.

## ANALYSIS

Although Dahl's career began with realistic pieces, such as his fictionalized account of his experience escaping from a wrecked airplane, he soon became known for tales of strange and extreme human behavior. His short stories for adults were often dark and brooding, sometimes involving characters making desperate gambles for extremely high stakes or responding to emotional stresses with sudden outbursts of violence. For instance, in "A Man from the South," the protagonist becomes involved in a gamble in which he will have a finger cut off should he lose his bet.

In his novels for children, he expanded upon this fascination for the macabre, adding fantastical elements. In addition, he drew even deeper upon his childhood experiences of bullies and of abusers of authority to create worlds in which such individuals come to bad ends of the sort that not only perfectly suit their failings and cruelties but often include an element of grotesque humor. Although occasionally an innocent character is harmed, this generally happens "off-camera," often as part of the backstory of the protagonist.

For instance, in *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), which was inspired when Dahl noted that the peaches in his orchard grew to a certain size before stopping and wondered what would happen if one of them did not stop growing, the title character's parents are killed by a rampaging rhinoceros in a freak accident at the zoo. However, this incident is only told in summary narration as the readers are introduced to James, and it is never actually shown. By contrast, James's wicked aunts, who enjoy tormenting the boy while they have him in their guardianship, are squashed when the giant peach falls from its branch.

Similarly, in *The Magic Finger* (1966), the protagonist uses her gift to transform a pair of nasty neighbors who refuse to stop hunting the local wildlife. Their transformation, spectacular in its

poetic justice, is a surprise which would have been given away had Dahl not yielded to his editor's insistence that he change the original title, *The Almost Ducks*. In *The Twits* (1980), the vile and cruel Mr. and Mrs. Twit enjoy tormenting a troop of monkeys by forcing them to stand on their heads. The monkeys have their revenge by tricking the Twits into standing on their heads and promptly stick them there with a powerful glue that Mr. Twit had previously used to capture birds that Mrs. Twit then cooked for supper.

Because of the sheer frequency with which the antagonists of Dahl's stories for children come to grotesque bad ends, Dahl's works have consistently appeared high on the American Library Association's list of most frequently challenged books. However, not every adult in Dahl's books comes to a horrible end. In fact, several of the books feature close bonds between children and adult mentors. In *The Witches* (1983), the protagonist is aided by his grandmother in defeating the witches' plot to murder all the world's children. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964, 1973), Charlie chooses Grandpa Joe rather than one of his parents as his adult companion on the tour of the Wonka factory.

### "LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER"

**First published:** 1953 (collected in *Someone Like You*, 1953)

**Type of work:** Short story

*An abused young wife murders her husband and tricks the investigating detectives into eating the murder weapon.*

In "Lamb to the Slaughter," Dahl shows his mastery of short-form psychological horror, in which the very absence of overtly fantastical elements only accentuates the building atmosphere of horror. The entire story takes place within the apartment of one Mary Maloney, pregnant wife of a loudish and incompetent police detective. Hers has

been a steadfastly domestic existence, and she has ignored her husband's misbehavior until one night, when he comes home late after yet another round of drinking and informs her that he is going to leave her for another woman. Still she clings to her illusion of happy domesticity, telling him she will fix supper.

Only when he sneeringly tells her not to bother with supper does she snap and bludgeon him with the frozen leg of lamb that was to have been their meal. After the initial fit of anger, she comes back to her senses and realizes what she has done. Not wanting to ruin the life of the baby she is expecting, she puts the leg of lamb into the oven and goes to the grocery store to get some vegetables. While there, she makes a point of talking cheerfully with the grocer about fixing her husband's supper.

Upon returning to their apartment, she screams in horror and makes a great commotion at finding her husband's body lying on the floor. She then calls the police, and within the hour they are investigating. Agreeing that he was killed by a heavy, blunt object, they begin a search for the murder weapon and are quite puzzled at being unable to find it. After a few hours, Mary comments that she had forgotten to turn the oven off in all the confusion and suggests that the officers might wish to eat the now-cooked leg of lamb. Without a second thought they all set to eating and discussing the case, never realizing that the meat they are avidly devouring is in fact the missing murder weapon. Meanwhile, Mary sits in the living room and giggles softly to herself in amusement at the way in which she has tricked the police.

The ending is particularly striking because it so blatantly violates the expectation of the murder mystery, namely, that the culprit should be caught at the end. Yet at the same time there seems to be a certain justice in Mary's not being caught, that she was in fact justified in taking the life of a man so loudish as to not only betray his wife by dallying with another woman but also to abandon his wife when in the vulnerable state of pregnancy, thus also abandoning his unborn child.

## CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

**First published:** 1964

**Type of work:** Novel

*A poor but virtuous boy wins a ticket to tour a wondrous chocolate factory alongside four vice-ridden children.*

As a result of having been adapted to the screen not once but twice, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is the best known of Dahl's works. Although both the cinematic adaptations follow the general story line, each introduces a certain amount of artistic liberty, which has resulted in some confusion as to the actual plot line of the original novel. For instance, in the 1971 adaptation, the squirrels that are the downfall of Veruca Salt are replaced by giant geese that lay golden chocolate eggs and Slugworth is revealed to be an agent of Wonka's, while in the 2005 adaptation an extensive backstory is created for Wonka. In the first film, the Oompa-Loompas, the midget workers in Wonka's factory, do not sing the songs from the book, while the second film adapts Dahl's lyrics.

The story centers around the title character, Charlie Bucket, who lives with his parents and all four grandparents in a tiny house. Although the story is clearly set in the modern world, as television plays an important part in the plot, there is no evidence of modern social welfare services to ameliorate the poverty of the Bucket family's life, which seems more reminiscent of the Victorian era and Gilded Age. None of Charlie's grandparents seems to be receiving government assistance, and when Charlie's father is laid off from his low-paying job as a result of automation, there is no unemployment check to fend off impending starvation.

However, the anachronistic impoverishment only serves to underline Charlie's love for chocolate and the seeming impossibility of his hopes when he hears reclusive chocolatier Willy Wonka's announcement that he has placed five golden tickets in bars of chocolate around the world. These tickets will admit the bearer to a tour of Wonka's famous candy factory, after which each lucky person will be given a lifetime supply of chocolate.

One by one the golden tickets are found by children whose moral failings are palpably obvious to

even the youngest readers. Twice Charlie is given a bar of chocolate as a gift, but neither is a winner. Just as all appears to be lost, he finds some money under a storm grate and uses it to buy a bar of chocolate that contains the final golden ticket.

On the appointed day, Charlie and Grandpa Joe join the other four children and their parents at the steps of the Wonka chocolate factory, where they are admitted for the first time to a wonderland of magical confections. One by one, the other four children fall victim to traps laid by their own vices. The gluttonous Augustus Gloop tries to drink from a river of chocolate, only to fall in and be sucked up by an intake piped directly to the fudge-cooking room. Obsessive gum-chewer Violet Beauregarde chews an experimental meal in a stick of gum and is turned into a giant human blueberry. Spoiled rich kid Veruca Salt tries to seize one of Wonka's nut-sorting squirrels for her own and is dropped down an incinerator chute, although that incinerator was fortunately shut down for maintenance, and she will find not an inferno but a three-day accumulation of garbage to cushion her fall. Obsessive television watcher Mike Teavee tries to teleport himself by Wonka's chocolate-transporting television system and is reduced to a midget only a few inches high.

With the bad children removed, Charlie's virtue becomes obvious and Wonka announces that Charlie has won the biggest prize of all. He will become Wonka's heir and student, and all of his family are invited to move into the chocolate factory with him. In a moment of triumph, Wonka leads Charlie and Grandpa Joe into the Great Glass Elevator, which proves capable not only of moving in every direction within the chocolate factory but also can fly.

### SUMMARY

Roald Dahl's greatest strength lies in his mastery of the grotesque, by which he can evoke both humor and horror. Again and again in his works villains meet comeuppances at once bizarre and red-





olent of poetic justice. Bullies and abusers of authority come in for particular attention in Dahl's fun-house-mirror worlds, regularly meeting absurd ends that perfectly match their vices. Yet at the same time Dahl never crosses the line to the gruesome or disgusting. The ends to which his villains come, particularly in his writing for children, are just absurd enough to be clearly divorced from reality, and thus the reader feels free to laugh.

*Leigh Husband Kimmel*

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*Matilda*, 1988  
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*Esio Trot*, 1990  
*The Minpins*, 1991  
*The Vicar of Nibbleswicke*, 1991  
*My Year*, 1993  
*The Umbrella Man, and Other Stories*, 1998 (pb. in England as *The Great Automatic Grammatizator, and Other Stories*)

#### LONG FICTION:

- Sometime Never: A Fable for Supermen*, 1948  
*My Uncle Oswald*, 1979

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What cues does Roald Dahl use in "Lamb to the Slaughter" to create the false expectations that one is reading a murder mystery and thus set the reader up for the shocking ending?
- Discuss the multiple meanings of the title "Lamb to the Slaughter."
- How does Dahl use the unusual names of his characters to telegraph their flaws?
- Compare and contrast the original book version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and the two cinematic adaptations: *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971), starring Gene Wilder, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), starring Johnny Depp.
- Discuss the changes made to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in response to charges of racism.
- Compare the protagonists' relationships with their grandparents in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Witches*.
- Discuss the significance of the order in which the bad children are eliminated from the tour of the Wonka factory.



## Roald Dahl

### SHORT FICTION:

*Over to You: Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying*, 1946

*Someone Like You*, 1953

*Kiss, Kiss*, 1959

*Twenty-Six Kisses from Roald Dahl*, 1960

*Selected Stories of Roald Dahl*, 1968

*Twenty-Nine Kisses*, 1969

*Selected Stories*, 1970

*Switch Bitch*, 1974

*Tales of the Unexpected*, 1977

*The Best of Roald Dahl*, 1978

*Taste, and Other Tales*, 1979

*A Roald Dahl Selection: Nine Short Stories*, 1980

*More Tales of the Unexpected*, 1980

*Completely Unexpected Tales*, 1986

*The Roald Dahl Omnibus*, 1986

*Two Fables*, 1986

*A Second Roald Dahl Selection: Eight Short Stories*, 1987

*Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*, 1989

*The Collected Short Stories of Roald Dahl*, 1991

*Skin, and Other Stories*, 2000

### DRAMA:

*The Honeys*, pr. 1955

### SCREENPLAYS:

*You Only Live Twice*, 1967 (with Harry Jack Bloom)

*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, 1968 (with Ken Hughes)

*The Night-Digger*, 1970

*The Lightning Bug*, 1971

*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, 1971 (adaptation of his novel)

### NONFICTION:

*Boy: Tales of Childhood*, 1984

*Going Solo*, 1986

*Memories with Food: At Gipsy House*, 1991 (with Felicity Dahl)

### About the Author

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## DANTE

**Born:** Florence (now in Italy)

May or June, 1265

**Died:** Ravenna (now in Italy)

September 13 or 14, 1321

*Dante introduced the use of vernacular language in poetry and pioneered the secular use of allegory, creating verse which is simultaneously historical, universal, and intensely personal.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Dante (DAH-n-tay) Alighieri was born in Florence sometime in May or June, 1265. His family was of the minor nobility, though neither wealthy nor particularly famous. What details exist concerning his background and career come from his own writings, from the sketch written by his neighbor Giovanni Villani, from the eulogy written after his death by Giovanni Boccaccio, and from the fifteenth century biography written by Leonardo Bruni. The miscellaneous nature of these sources, the fictive elements incorporated in Dante's own biographical references, and the welter of legend that surrounds his life make it difficult to isolate fact from fiction; nevertheless, certain things are clear.

Dante's family name was Alagherius in its latinized form, was spelled Alaghieri during his lifetime, and was written Alighieri in the centuries following his death. His given name is a shortened form of Durante. He was deprived of both parents relatively early in his life, his mother having died when he was a boy and his father (who had subsequently remarried) in the year 1283. His father's death thus corresponds exactly to Dante's coming-of-age. He had a half brother, Francesco, and a half sister, Tana, both children of his father's second marriage. There was another sister, though it is impossible to say whether she was Dante's full or half

sister. Based on Dante's own testimony, he had a happy childhood.

It is clear that Dante came from a family that valued education. He had his elementary training from the Dominicans, and he attended the Franciscan school of Santa Croce in his youth. His writings indicate a close familiarity with both country and city life, which he acquired at a relatively early age. Dante's interests in his youth thus paralleled those of other young men from his class and background; they included travel, a knowledge of art and drawing, music, but most of all, an abiding interest in poetry.

The most important early counsel that Dante received in his youth came from Guido Cavalcanti, who was twelve years Dante's senior and came from the wealthy Cavalcante family. Guido would become Dante's first friend in the personal, as well as the literary, sphere. More questionable insofar as its desirability was Dante's early association with Forese Donati, brother of Corso Donati. Corso was the leader of the Florentine political faction known as the Blacks. It was Corso who massacred and expelled the opposing Whites in 1301. The story of Corso's death appears in *Purgatorio* 24 of *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), related by Forese. These political involvements would provide an important element in Dante's poetry but would also be the source of his personal frustration and the reason for his eventual exile from the city. It was possibly at the urging of Forese that Dante took part in the Battle of Campaldino on June 11, 1289, the decisive engagement of Florence's campaign against the neighboring town of Arezzo. By

this time, Dante was a young husband, having married Gemma Donati, a fourth cousin to Forese and Corso, sometime between 1283 and 1285. It was an arranged marriage with a relatively wealthy family, the dowry set as early as 1277, but it also solidified Dante's political connections with the Donati family.

Subsequent to his marriage, between the years 1287 and 1289, Dante was in Bologna, possibly for university-level studies. The deep debt into which he fell between the years 1290 and 1300 was likely aggravated by the cost of these studies combined with those of Dante's growing family. He and Gemma would have two sons, Pietro and Jacopo, and one daughter, probably named Antonia Beatrice. Nothing is known of a child named Giovanni, whose signature appears on a contract drafted at Lucca in 1308, except that he calls himself the "son of Dante Alighieri of Florence."

Dante's first involvements in the political life of Florence date from 1295. He worked tirelessly during this period for Florentine independence and against extension of papal political influence. For two months during the summer of 1300, he served as one of the six priors of the city, served as Florence's representative to San Gimignano in the same year, and was commissioned in 1301 to supervise the widening of a street. While on a mission to Rome, opposing political factions indicted him on a trumped-up charge of embezzlement and condemned him first to payment of a fine, then to exile, and then to death. It is likely that Dante could have restored himself to the city through payment of a fine; yet he refused to do this. Instead, he spent the first few months of 1302 in conspiracy with other Florentine exiles, but soon thereafter, disgusted by their violent radicalism, he went his own way and accepted the life of an exile. His wife and family, however, remained in Florence, so the years that followed were increasingly lonely and filled with frustration.

Fortunately, Dante could turn for assistance to several wealthy friends and patrons during his years as a wandering exile, and the first of these was the Scala family of Verona. Alberto della Scala and his three sons Bartolommeo, Alboino, and Francesco (Can Grande) held sovereignty in Verona from 1262 to 1329 and brought a period of unparalleled peace and stability to the city. Each would provide the Florentine exile, at various times of

his wanderings, with the support necessary to sustain him.

Dante left Verona in 1304, most likely after the death of Alberto's eldest son, Bartolommeo. He returned to Bologna at this time, probably to the university, where he had been known as early as 1287. His wanderings subsequently brought him to Padua and in the same year, 1306, to Lunigiana, the city of the Malaspina family. The period at Lunigiana is documented by Dante's service to the Malaspinas both as negotiator and attorney, assisting in their conclusion of an agreement of peace with the bishop of Luni. Boccaccio and Villani report Dante's subsequent travels throughout northern Italy, following the course of the Arno and perhaps, from 1307 to 1309, establishing residence in Paris.

When Henry VII (Henry of Luxembourg) became Holy Roman Emperor in 1312, Dante hoped that some rapprochement of church and state would be possible. Three letters that Dante wrote in 1310 and 1311 praise Henry's idealism and indicate the poet's support for the imperial program. Still, Henry's invasion came to naught; the papacy, which had promised its support, turned against him, and Henry died near Siena in 1313. Dante's own hopes for triumphant return to Florence died with the emperor.

Two cities offered Dante sanctuary from the political turmoil that attended Henry's death: Verona and Ravenna. Francesco (Can Grande) della Scala of Verona provided immediate asylum, though Dante would spend his final years under the patronage of Guido Novello da Polenta of Ravenna. Guido was a nephew of Francesca da Rimini, whose illicit love for Paolo da Malatesta had by this time been immortalized by Dante in *Inferno* 5 of *The Divine Comedy*. Ravenna would be Dante's home until his death. He spent his final years engaged on occasional diplomatic missions for Guido, one of which was an embassy to Venice. Though he never returned to Florence, he died hoping that Can Grande, influential among the Ghibellines, would bring stability and an end to factionalism in northern Italy. Dante died in Ravenna, Italy, on September 13 or 14, 1321.

## ANALYSIS

Political alignments caused Dante's exile, but exile broadened Dante's historical perspective and

thus provided an important dimension for his verse. The attribute one most closely associates with Dante's mature poetry is, indeed, his ability to universalize particular historical details. He is able to see all human experience in terms of his own, and there is little doubt that his long period of wandering and his life as an exile, begun in middle age and continued through the rest of his life, furnished the salvation metaphor central to *The Divine Comedy*.

From the earliest period of his life, Dante was fascinated with the possibilities of vernacular Italian as the medium for his poetry. Even in his student verse, he had moved away from classically inspired convention and what he considered its artificiality. His relationship to the classical past is something that he clearly acknowledges; it is implied by the fact that he elects to have Vergil, the prominent poet of Latin literature, lead his Pilgrim through Hell and Purgatory. It is also the writers of classical Greece and Rome who welcome the Pilgrim as one of their fraternity in the Limbo of the Poets (*Inferno* 4). This reception and its location in the region of the unbaptized indicate that, at the beginning of his journey, and correspondingly at the beginning of his career as a poet, Dante derived satisfaction from his relationship to the classical tradition. Correspondingly, the fact that the Pilgrim leaves Vergil behind when he enters Paradise implies more than that only the baptized can enjoy the Beatific Vision. In effect, the progress of the Pilgrim equals the progress of the Poet. The wandering exile, the man searching for meaning in his own life and in life generally, the poet who is ambitious and who seeks to surpass the poets who have influenced him—all of these are simultaneously Dante.

Still another indication that Dante would accept such a description of his life and work (which became for him synonymous) appears in his treatment of Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* 15. Brunetto, his former teacher, appears among the sodomites. This sensational context, seen in terms of Dante's aesthetics, becomes, however, an argument against

stultifying imitation, a verbal sodomy that feeds upon the conventions of the past and thus inhibits genuine progress. In truth, the meaning of the Brunetto canto is one of the most disputed in Dante's poem; yet, this view of its meaning, that it provides an important key to Dante's philosophy of composition through the criticism that it implies, does not preclude the debt that Dante felt to Brunetto as his teacher. If anything, it underscores the difference between a teacher (who privileges the value of the past and transmits it) and the superior creative artist (who uses the past but privileges innovation and originality).

One measure of Dante's ability to make innovative change appears in the figure of Beatrice. It is likely that he based his creation upon the daughter of Folco dei Portinari, a wealthy Florentine who died in 1289. It matters relatively little whether one accepts this testimony, provided by Boccaccio. If so, however, it makes the relationship poignant and Platonic, for this Beatrice died a young bride (the wife of the banker Simone dei Bardi) at the age of twenty-four. What is important for Dante's aesthetics is that Beatrice illustrates the remarkable way that Dante alters the conventions of courtly love as it had appeared in medieval poetry.

If one believes the tradition, Dante saw Beatrice for the first time when she was nine years of age, on May 1, 1274. His love grows, documented in *La vita nuova* (c. 1292; *Vita Nuova*, 1861; better known as *The New Life*), though his lady remains unnamed and never reciprocates the poet's attentions. The unnamed persona of *The New Life* finds her ultimate development in the *Paradiso*, the final canticle of *The Divine Comedy*. In this context, she literally shows the Pilgrim the way to blessedness, and she figuratively allows the Poet to describe infinite love through finite language. She intercedes to secure the Pilgrim's initial impetus toward salvation, but she simultaneously employs Vergil, whose *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553) had helped inspire the formation of the Poet, as the primary agent of that salvation.

## THE NEW LIFE

**First published:** *La vita nuova*, c. 1292  
(English translation, 1861)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*This collection of verse and commentary traces the progress of the poet's love for an unnamed woman and the progress of the poet in the pursuit of his art.*

*The New Life* is a logical precursor of *The Divine Comedy*; both involve the figure of Beatrice, and both show a marked concern with the aesthetics of writing verse. Both also deal with love, though at this point arises the important distinction: Though pure in both works, the love in *The Divine Comedy* is divine and therefore infinite. It engineers the Pilgrim's salvation through the figure of Beatrice and guides the Poet's progress as would a Muse. The unnamed woman of *The New Life*, identifiable with Beatrice, is closer, as portrayed, to the feminine persona of courtly poetry, and the love that she represents is transcendent.

The poems of *The New Life*, though arranged as chronological narrative, were not written as a cycle; indeed, many date from Dante's youth. The first, for example, is an extraordinary dream poem originally sent for comment to Guido Cavalcanti. Guido was older than Dante and a proud, disdainful Florentine Gueff. He was quick to seize on the sonnet's strong psychological implications. Love appears as a feudal lord. In his arms he holds a sleeping woman, who is naked except for a blood-red cloak thrown about her. In his hand he holds the poet's heart. Love then awakens the woman, convinces her to eat the poet's heart, then departs with her, and the dream ends. Though written considerably earlier than *The New Life*, this sonnet sets the psychological tone for the entire work. Without knowing, the lady has consumed the poet's heart and, by extension, his soul and his life; the poet's own love is the means by which she has done this.

Poems, however, constitute only one part of *The New Life*. Accompanying them are two kinds of commentary. The first is prose narrative that illuminates the verse that follows it. The second, which immediately follows and appears whenever the poet deems necessary, is a commentary on the

poem's prosody itself. For example, the commentary on the dream poem notes that it is divided into two parts, that it initiates a response and resolves it, and that it was controversial when Dante had first circulated it, but that it ultimately won for him a special friend and mentor (Cavalcanti), who, however, remains unnamed.

This second variety of commentary breaks the narrative of the prose commentaries that introduce and link the verse; nevertheless, the commentaries on prosody indicate that the process through which Dante created *The New Life* is just as important to him as the work itself. Admittedly, Dante handles his concern with aesthetics less gracefully in this work than in *The Divine Comedy*; still, the privileged place that he implicitly assigns to prosody by including technical commentaries indicates his clear thesis that a poet grows artistically in direct proportion to the poem as it is written.

Even at the point when Beatrice dies, the logical climax and the place where one might expect some particularly personal element to appear, Dante refuses to allow it. Instead, he introduces a quotation from the lamentations of the book of Jeremiah to suggest the depth of his grief, notes that he cannot provide details about her death, and in the following section precisely calculates by the Arabic method the hour, day, and month on which she died. The result is that the reader dwells upon the mystical nature of the experience. The poet first encounters the woman as she begins her ninth year, and she dies on the ninth day of the ninth month. Thus, although one can calculate that the unnamed love dies on June 8, 1290 (by the Roman calendar), the affair becomes universalized, even stylized, in a way that implies a symmetry in the stages of life.

The depersonalization of the poet's style underscores the poet's thesis: to fix upon those moments that mark the beginnings of a new life. To provide every detail would limit the experience to only those persons immediately concerned. Leaving such details unwritten makes memory, that of the reader, as well as of the poet, essential to a reading of the work. *The New Life* thus marks an important stage in the poet's development as a poet. It logically precedes *The Divine Comedy* insofar as it lacks the latter poem's highly personal references; yet it resembles this work as a journal of universalized human experience.



*The New Life* provides additional linkages that unify its discontinuous narrative. Besides the numerology that frames the poet's encounters with the Beatrice figure, the three meetings themselves occur at times that mark stages of the poet's own life. The first, discussed above, is the childhood meeting that occurs at the end of the poet's ninth year and the beginning of the Beatrice figure's ninth year. This point marks the poet's boyhood; he realizes that the encounter is meaningful, for it affects his vital, animal, and natural spirits. Yet this tumult is sexless; what has taken place is a fundamental alteration in the poet's perceptions and a basic development in his personality.

The second encounter takes place nine years later in the ninth hour of the day. Now the poet sees the Beatrice figure, who actually greets him. The physical dimension adds to the nature of the experience. Again, the poet has reached a new stage in his life. He retires to his room and experiences the dream noted above. The personification of Love, his declaration *Ego dominus tuus* (I am your master), the naked Beatrice figure clothed only with a crimson cloth, and her eating of the poet's heart all add to the sexual innuendo. That the woman is the same one who greeted the poet is clear. She is both *la donna de la salute* (the lady of the greeting) and the lady of the poet's salvation. The poet inquires of many *trovatori* (troubadours), somewhat naïvely, the meaning of the dream, and this juncture introduces his *primo amico* (first friend), the otherwise unnamed Cavalcanti. Again, the poet realizes that he has reached a new stage in life but senses even more that the physical dimension has lessened the spirituality of his love. The overwhelming emotion is regret, not lust, and the screen-love device, the poet's substitution of another woman for his true love, represents his attempt to preserve the purity of the original experience. Appropriately, it is the Love persona himself who counsels the poet to adopt this ruse, and it succeeds so well that the poet acquires the reputation of a *roué*. When Beatrice next passes him, she withholds her greeting. The greeting in this context assumes the dimension of a benefaction, akin to the creative inspiration that a Muse might furnish. That it is withheld signals a nadir

of the poet's creative activity, just as it indicates another stage in the poet's life.

Sorrow is the predominant emotion at this point, and the Love figure reappears to counsel that the poet abandon his screen-love ruse. The Love figure, who speaks only in Latin, declares that he is the center of a circle at which all points of the circumference are equidistant. In other words, the poet, though he recognizes the transcendence of love, cannot know love's eternity. That, in essence, is the creative problem with which Dante as a poet must grapple; indeed, it is one that he manages to surmount only in *The Divine Comedy*.

Fate increasingly informs the pattern of life after this experience. At a wedding reception, the poet suddenly senses the presence of Beatrice. He attempts to distract himself by looking at the paintings that adorn the walls of the house, then raises his eyes only to discover Beatrice herself. Again, he swoons and observes that at this point he has moved to that stage of life beyond which it is impossible to return to what had been. Death and the poet's awareness of his mortality intrude when a young woman dies, when Beatrice's father dies, and when the poet himself falls seriously ill. In the ninth day of his illness, the poet reflects on the inadequacy of life and its brevity. Again a dream intrudes, this time a nightmare, in which disheveled women in mourning first warn the poet of his mortality, then declare him dead. Beatrice is among them, and in the same dream a friend appears to tell the poet that Beatrice herself has died. The landscape clouds over, and the natural world appears fundamentally changed, much as it had at the death of Christ. Even so, the poet now witnesses his beloved's assumption into heaven. The poet recognizes the beatitude that attends death, and he himself wishes to die.

This vision foreshadows the actual death of Beatrice. The poet sees her death as a divine judgment that the world had been unworthy of one so perfect. Following the death of Beatrice, a young woman pities the poet in his mourning. He accepts her pity and thereby recognizes the mortal, as well as the transcendent, power of love. His sorrow thus passes beyond mortal bounds and arrives at the Empyrean, the largest sphere of First Cause, in which Beatrice herself dwells for all time.



## THE DIVINE COMEDY

**First published:** *La divina commedia*, c. 1320  
(English translation, 1802)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*Through the medium of secular allegory, Dante simultaneously individualizes, universalizes, and describes symbolically the circularity of life's journey.*

*The Divine Comedy* represents the mature Dante's solution to the poet's task announced in *The New Life*. Its three canticles (the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*) display a nearly limitless wealth of references to historical particulars of the late Middle Ages and to Dante's life. Even so, its allegorical form allows these to function as symbols. The Pilgrim's journey through Hell to Heaven thus becomes an emblem of all human experience and a recognition of life's circularity. The "Comedy" of its title is, therefore, the situation of life and the accumulation of experience that attends it.

Correspondingly, however, chronological placement of the narrative from Good Friday through Easter Sunday, 1300, particularizes the experience even as it implies the death and rebirth that attends a critical stage of any person's life. The poet tells his readers in the first line of the *Inferno* that he is midway through life, and indeed Dante would have been thirty-five years of age in 1300. Though he maintains present tense throughout the poem, he is, however, actually writing in the years that follow the events that he describes. This extraordinary method allows the Poet to place what amounts to prophetic utterance in the mouth of the Pilgrim. Dante thus maintains and further develops the thesis of *The New Life*, that the progress of the Pilgrim corresponds directly to the progress of the Poet. The literal journey that the Pilgrim undertakes toward the Beatific Vision succeeds only insofar as the Poet can transcend the finite barriers that signification imposes upon language.

If one understands the task of the poem in these terms, the exponential symbolism of *The Divine Comedy* becomes inescapably clear. Like every human being, Dante carries the intellectual burden of what has formed him. At midlife, this includes the historical influences of his time and the artistic

influences of what he has read. His task is to use these to direct his life's journey and, if he is able, to transcend them. His inspiration for doing this is the same feminine persona that appears in *The New Life*, though in *The Divine Comedy* Dante specifically identifies her as Beatrice. Her name implies the grace that she represents, and it is noteworthy that she intercedes with St. Lucy, patroness of the blind, and with the Blessed Virgin Mary to set the Pilgrim on the course toward Paradise. Beatrice thus represents efficient grace, Lucy illuminating grace, and Mary prevenient grace. Collectively, they oppose the three visions of sin (Leopard, Lion, and She-wolf) that obstruct the Pilgrim's path.

The women logically employ the Roman poet Vergil as the Pilgrim's guide through Hell and Purgatory. Vergil represents the achievement of pre-Christian antiquity. His poem the *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553) is the logical forerunner of the poem that Dante hopes to write. Dante, if successful in his journey as Pilgrim and Poet, will synthesize the epic of classical antiquity with the allegory of biblical literature. Understandably, the Pilgrim protests to Vergil that he is neither Aeneas nor St. Paul. This protestation reflects the Poet's awareness of the daunting artistic task of fusing pre-Christian and Christian thought as much as it does the Pilgrim's awareness of the long distance between Hell and Heaven. In reality, they are one and the same journey, and Dante undertakes both tasks simultaneously in *The Divine Comedy*. Appropriately, Vergil can guide the Pilgrim only through Hell and in the ascent of Mount Purgatory. Past that point the pre-Christian past cannot venture. St. Bernard and ultimately Beatrice will guide the Pilgrim through Heaven; yet Vergil (and the pre-Christian wisdom that he represents) offers enough direction to ensure that the Pilgrim reaches Heaven's threshold.

The sinners whom the Pilgrim beholds as he descends through the circles of Hell correspond generically to the three specters that had haunted him in the wood before Vergil's arrival. The sins of the Leopard are serious but unpremeditated. Paolo da Malatesta and Francesca, the adulterous lovers of *Inferno* 5, are good representatives of this grouping. For political reasons and as an alliance of families, Francesca was married to the deformed Gianciotto, son of Malatesta da Verrucchio and ruler of Rimini, but she fell in love with Gian-

ciotto's handsome younger brother Paolo. Gianciotto caught Paolo and Francesca in adultery and murdered them both. Dante bases his depiction of their affair upon these historical personages; Francesca was aunt to Guido Novello di Polenta, Dante's friend and host at Ravenna during his years of exile. Even so, he makes the immediate cause of their adultery their reading of a book, the tale of Guinevere and Lancelot. Guinevere, too, had married a man older than she, King Arthur of Camelot; like Francesca, she fell in love with a handsome younger man. Lancelot thus corresponds to Paolo, Guinevere to Francesca, and Arthur to Gianciotto. Dante thus describes seduction by language, calling the book that Paolo and Francesca read a panderer. Its language has seductive charms but was wrongly directed. Paolo and Francesca burn intertwined in a single flame in punishment for their sin, but their punishment effectively extends their passion into eternity.

The Brunetto Latini episode of *Inferno* 15, the soothsayers' canto of *Inferno* 20, as well as many of the other encounters that the Pilgrim has with sinners stress wrong use of language. Brunetto's was wrong because it pridefully paid too great a debt to the past and did not seek transcendence. When Dante's Vergil recounts a version of the founding of his native Mantua, which differs from that which the Roman poet had provided in his own *Aeneid* 10.101, then makes the Pilgrim promise to believe only that which he has now spoken, Dante questions in another way the timeless signification of words with reference only to the natural order. He also implies that there is nothing inherently mantic about a poem, not even Vergil's *Aeneid*, and makes Vergil himself articulate the thought.

The topography of Dante's Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven violates the conventional Christian conception of these states because of his use of the gyre to describe each. As the Pilgrim descends Hell's circles, the sinners appear more bound to their sin. Paolo and Francesca burn in perpetual consummation of their passion at Hell's top, but at its frozen core Vanni Fucci curses God, and Judas Iscariot stands frozen beside Satan. The topographical arrangement implies degrees of offense, yet all sinners in Hell have mortally offended God. Gyre imagery continues as the Pilgrim and Vergil ascend Mount Purgatory. Though its gyres are more discrete than those of Hell, the chaos of sin rules

within each of its precincts, mitigated only to the degree that the sinners trust in the divine mercy that will allow them to reach Heaven.

Dante's Mount Purgatory consequently has three major regions through which the Pilgrim and Vergil ascend: ante-Purgatory, occupied by those who failed to use the grace that divine mercy had provided them in life; lower Purgatory, the region for the proud, envious, and wrathful; and upper Purgatory, reserved for the slothful, covetous, gluttonous, and lustful. At its summit is an earthly paradise corresponding to Eden, as well as to the Elysium of *Aeneid* 6. Logically, Vergil cannot venture beyond this stage both because of his status as pre-Christian and because of his achievement as a poet. As Purgatory implies the reconstitution of a soul, its mountain requires an ascent that corresponds to the descent through Hell. The process that it imposes upon its sinners is purificatory rather than penal, and so it is appropriate that all of its souls at some period, whether on arrival or after preliminary cleansing in ante-Purgatory, must pass through Peter's Gate. After the sinners have demonstrated their desire for Heaven by ascending the three steps of penitence (confession, contrition, and satisfaction), an angel inscribes seven P's upon their foreheads (*peccata*) for the seven capital sins (pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth). These vanish singly as the soul ascends each cornice. Once again, signification emerges as a dominant aspect of Dante's allegory. Inscribing the P's enforces the souls' awareness of the sin that had existed hidden in life. The Pilgrim grows in his appreciation of the unspoken word as the Poet grows in his ability to express the ineffable in words whose signification is conventionally finite.

It is in *Purgatorio* 30 that the Pilgrim, awakened in the Edenic paradise by the approach of Beatrice, realizes that Vergil is no longer with him. The fears of the Pilgrim at this apparent abandonment by his guide correspond to those of the Poet, who realizes that from this point the artistic task is his alone. This realization creates impressive tension between the status of the journey, whose successful outcome would appear assured, and the task of the Poet, whose task of reconciling heavily weighted allegorical language with the limitless signification of the infinite necessary to describe the nature of Heaven grows more challenging.

The poetry of *Paradiso* does assume a more mys-

tical character, which enlists the full imaginative powers of the reader. In a way impossible in either the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*, the reader becomes a participant in the transforming experience that Heaven imposes. The gyres recur, though as circles of the blessed grouped around the Beatific Vision. Even among those saved, the capacity to appreciate the infinite varies directly with their distance from the Vision itself. The Poet thus asks the reader to accept a paradox, which once granted, allows finite language's reconciliation with the Logos itself. It is Dante's most extraordinary achievement of all, and it is the key to an appreciation that is worthy of the *Paradiso*.

Beatrice now assumes an active role in the direction of the Pilgrim. They rise from the earth into the heavenly Empyrean, the abode of God, within which revolves the Primum Mobile, the swiftest and outermost of the heavens. The light of the sun, the music of the spheres, and the gaze of Beatrice, all representing spiritual illumination and enlightenment, increasingly fill the cantos of the *Paradiso* and replace the doubt, darkness, and periodic faintings of the Pilgrim on his passage through Hell and Purgatory.

Much emphasis rests upon the degrees of happiness that the blessed of Heaven experience. Piccarda dei Donati and the Empress Constance both reside in a lesser sphere of bliss; both had been forced to leave the spiritual life that they would have preferred and enter into forced marriages. Even so, Piccarda and Constance experience a full measure of happiness. In another paradox, they know the infinite bliss of Heaven to the full measure of their ability to comprehend it. Their joy is no less than that of the souls that are closer to the Beatific Vision, even though they reside within a considerably lower sphere.

In the Ptolemaic cosmos, which informs *The Divine Comedy*, all the planets (including for Dante the Sun and Moon) orbit the earth upon a series of transparent concentric spheres. These celestial spheres provide the external order that characterizes Heaven. They guide the seven heavenly bodies that circle the earth: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Beyond the planets is the Sphere of Fixed Stars, and still further is the Primum Mobile. Beyond all nine spheres lies the Empyrean, Dante's unmoved, eternal, boundless region in which the Logos and the saints reside. This

conception of Heaven is another means by which the Poet allows his poem to move beyond limited signification and approach the unchanging infinity of First Cause.

Central to portrayal of the Primum Mobile is the symbol of the Celestial Rose. It is a circle of white light within which is a golden center of God's glory. White petals rise in a thousand tiers, and upon these sit the blessed: saints of the old law at one side, saints of the new on the other; little children arranged immediately around the golden center; virtuous women in one descending portion, saintly men in another opposite location. Beams of divine glory, comparable to sunbeams but carried by angels, bear divine love to the created world, not of necessity but from divine graciousness.

As the Pilgrim nears the Beatific Vision, he comprehends all the contradictions that had filled his life's journey. He compares himself to the geometer, who knows it is theoretically possible to square the circle, yet he recognizes the limitations that language imposes upon any attempt to describe accurately what he sees. The image of divinity seems self-sufficient, self-defined, simultaneously that of the Pilgrim and of all humanity. The single word that allows the Poet to describe it is "love," the boundless ability that is assuredly human but that also moves the sun and stars.

## SUMMARY

Love's transcendent power directs both *The New Life* and *The Divine Comedy* to their conclusions. Though entirely different in their scope and complexity, both works ratify this transcendence through the signification of language and the figure of Beatrice. Still, one indication of the aesthetic distance between the two works is that the former emphasizes that love offers the means by which life evolves, while the latter identifies pure love as the First Cause of the cosmos itself. It is a mark of Dante's artistry that he manages to universalize the highly personal situations upon which both works depend. Ultimately, in *The Divine Comedy*, the mode of allegory allows him to do that even as he retains thousands of particularized references; yet the anonymity of *The New Life* is a clear indication that he had always sought the *dolce stil nuovo* ("sweet new style") that he would realize in his maturity.

Robert J. Forman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Consider *The New Life* of Dante as an innovative way of perceiving and presenting a life.
- To what extent is *The New Life* a review of Dante's own life?
- Why is life to the medieval Dante a comedy? Why is tragedy impossible?
- What are limitations to Vergil's role as a guide to a Christian pilgrim?
- How do the punishments of sinners in *The Divine Comedy* differ from those that might be considered conventionally Christian?
- What are the ingredients of Dante's success in managing a rarity in medieval poetry: the blending of personal and universal truths?
- Conveying Paradise in literature is an extraordinarily difficult feat. How does Dante solve the problem, and how effective is his solution?

## RUBÉN DARÍO

**Born:** Metapa (now Ciudad Darío), Nicaragua  
January 18, 1867

**Died:** León, Nicaragua  
February 6, 1916

*Influenced by French writers in his development of a uniquely Latin American style of writing, Darío became the preeminent writer of the Modernismo movement, forging a revolutionary, dynamic style that inspired future writers in both Latin America and Spain.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rubén Darío (dah-REE-oh), born Félix Rubén García Sarmiento in Metapa (now Ciudad Darío), Nicaragua, on January 18, 1867, shaped a revitalized Spanish literature. He began life in poverty, a circumstance that would beset him all his life. The marriage between his mother, Rosa Sarmiento, and Manuel García soon ended, and their son was adopted by his mother's aunt Bernarda Sarmiento de Ramírez and her husband Colonel Félix Ramírez of León, Nicaragua. The boy began writing verses in primary school. He studied Greek and Latin in a Jesuit school, but when economic difficulties prohibited more formal education he learned on his own, reading widely and voraciously. At age fourteen, the young writer adopted the name Rubén Darío and so impressed the Nicaraguan president with his poems that he was offered educational support.

The offer of formal education financed by the government never materialized, but this limitation did not stop Darío. Throughout his life he thrived on intellectual kinships. As an adolescent he was introduced to the occult by an early teacher. He read Ecuadorian writer Juan Montalvo, sharing with him hope for the reestablishment of a Central American union. Through acquaintance with El Salvadorian writer Francisco Gavidia, he discovered the French Romantic and Parnassian writers. Later he read the French Symbolists, American writers Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe, and other *Modernista* writers. With these writers, he felt a sense of alienation from the newly prosperous and materialist Latin Americans and would work to develop a new Spanish discourse.

In 1884, he accepted an appointment to the secretarial staff of the Nicaraguan president in Managua and contributed articles and reviews to local periodicals. In 1885, he took a position at the National Library in Managua that enabled him to read the Spanish classics. In 1887, he moved to Chile after discovering that his sweetheart, Rosario Murillo, had become involved with another man.

In Chile, Darío became a customs inspector. He won a poetry competition for his *Canto épico a las glorias de Chile* (1888), a poem celebrating the heroes in Chile's war against Peru and Bolivia, and he received honorable mentions for *Rimas* (1887), a collection of poems. Both of these works were inspired by Spanish Romantic poet G. A. Bécquer. He published *Abrojas* (1887; thistles), another collection of poems, and his first major work *Azul* (1888; partial English translation as *Blue*, 2002). Introducing a new style and new themes reflecting French writers, *Azul* was a literary innovation.

In 1889, Darío moved to El Salvador, where the president of the county appointed him to manage *La Unión*, a daily newspaper espousing the idea of a reunited Central America. There he met and married Rafaela Contreras Cañas. On the night of their wedding, the president was assassinated, and Darío fled the country. In 1891, his son, Rubén Darío Contreras, was born, and Darío accepted a position in Spain. While he was away, his wife died.

Distraught, he returned to Managua, where he was manipulated into marrying Rosario Murillo, his former sweetheart. They married and had a son who soon died. Separating himself from this marriage, Darío accepted an appointment as consul



general of Columbia in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 1896, he published *Prosas profanas, y otros poemas* (*Prosas Profanas, and Other Poems*, 1922), a work reflecting the aestheticism of the French Parnassian poets, and *Los raros* (the uncommon ones), a book of prose portraits.

In 1898, Darío became the Argentinean correspondent in Spain for *La Nación*. In Spain, he began an enduring relationship with Francisca Sánchez. He also met Spanish writers, developing a friendship with Juan Ramon Jiménez, who supervised the publication of the volumes *Cantos de vida y esperanza, los cisnes, y otras poemas* (1905; *Songs of Life and Hope*, 2004). This book, recognized as his masterpiece, assimilates a variety of influences filtered through his own poetical search for an understanding of life and art.

Living in Paris and then in Spain, Darío continued to travel, write, publish, and struggle with the financial difficulties and demons that motivated bouts with a dissipated lifestyle. In 1906, his son, Rubén Darío Sánchez, was born. Darío published a book of essays, *Opiniones* (opinions), followed in 1907 by *El canto errante* (the roving song) and *Parisiense* (from Paris). In 1910, he published *Poema del otoño, y otros poemas* (the autumn poem, and other poems). "Poema del otoño" ("Autumn Poem"), one of his best lyrical pieces, expresses both the realization of the brevity of life and an affirmation of individual and universal life. In 1911 and 1912, he published collections of essays *Letras* (literature) and *Todo al vuelo* (just in passing), and in 1914 published his last book of poems, *Canto a la Argentina, oda a mitre, y otros poemas* (English translation, 1920).

He began to compile his complete works and wrote several autobiographical pieces, including *Historia de mis libros* (1914; history of my books). Embarking on a tour to read his poems that he hoped would be profitable, he fell ill and returned to León, Nicaragua, where he died on February 6, 1916, of liver disease. Honored by a funeral service conducted in a cathedral filled with admirers, he was celebrated as the most important Spanish American poet of his era.

## ANALYSIS

Rubén Darío shaped a new style of Spanish literature as part of the literary movement called *Modernismo*, which lasted from 1885 until 1910.

Darío was most influential figure of this movement. Reflecting an alienation from a materialistic society and seeking out new forms and themes, Darío assimilated the style of other writers, particularly the French Romantics, Parnassians, and Symbolists, with his Spanish sensibility. Writing in a self-consciously artistic style, he used language to evoke a musicality, employed images to describe the visual and to present the erotic, developed a system of symbols and myths to reflect his artistic vision, and explored themes new to Spanish literature.

Growing up in an isolated, conventional culture, Darío developed his style by reading the classics and contemporary writers outside the Spanish culture. When he was twenty, the more cosmopolitan Chile nourished his sensibilities and provided an audience eager to be delighted by art. His first poems imitated a more conventional Spanish style. In 1888, French literature became the impetus for his first major work, *Blue*, a literary breakthrough. The title carried symbolic meaning for Darío, suggesting the imagistic nature of the new style, the color blue corresponding both with art and the universe. *Blue* brought Darío transatlantic attention after sparking the praise of Spanish writer Juan Valera. Its originality illuminated new directions for Spanish writers.

While *Blue* presented an artistic revolution, *Prosas Profanas, and Other Poems* demonstrated *Modernismo* at its peak. Introducing the work in a prologue, "Palabras luminarias" (illuminating words), Darío summarizes his beliefs and inspirations, asserting the aristocracy of art and the mediocrity of the opinions of the masses, expressing his love for the sensual and aesthetic, and acknowledging his appreciation of French writers. The poems describe love, mythological creatures, courtiers, paganism, Christianity, and art itself. They express special adoration of women, who represent the soul and human longing. "Era un aire suave . . ." ("The Air Was Gentle . . .") praises the eternal feminine in the figure of Marquise Eulalia, an embodiment of Venus. In "Verlaine: Responso" ("Verlaine: Response"), dedicated to French Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine, Verlaine becomes symbolic of the reconciliation of the flesh and the spirit. Alternately embracing the pagan (the flesh) and the Christian (the spirit), Darío strives to yoke together opposites.

His next collection, *Songs of Life and Hope*, pre-



sents the work of his maturity. It explores themes ranging from the societal and political to the personal and artistic. Here the poet examines the inner spirit of great figures, the alchemy of special events, the magic of artistic creation, and the ethereal beauty of sacrifice. Throughout he reflects his sense of the alienation of the artist, as well as his preoccupation with human mortality. He describes those people capable of transforming the joy and grief of life into beauty. He pays homage to the artist, the diplomat, the optimist, and implicitly to Christ, celebrating those who express an optimistic vision and those who create tranquility and peace. He embraces the Spanish culture reflected in both Miguel de Cervantes's character Don Quixote and in the Catholic faith, and he asserts his religious belief. Using allusion, visual description, and erotic suggestion, he creates symbols to reflect emotional states or desirable personal, even national, approaches to life. Ultimately these symbols aggregate into a personal mythology, affirming the values of faith, hope, and love. In both its thematic import and elegant style, *Cantos* presents Darío at his most masterful.

Other poetry collections followed. He followed *Songs of Life and Hope* with *El canto errante* (1907). In *Poema del otoño, y otras poems*, the title poem explores the cycle of life and death, affirming life. Facing the inevitable destruction of time, the poet, with other *Modernista* writers, finds correspondences among the elements of the universe. *Canto a la Argentina, oda a mitre, y otros poemas* reiterates themes that are Darío's particular and universal concerns. While this was his last collection of poems, he continued publishing individual pieces of merit in periodicals until his death.

## BLUE

**First published:** *Azul*, 1888 (partial English translation in *Cuentos y poesías/Stories and Poems: A Dual Language Book*, 2002)

**Type of work:** Short stories and poems

*These stories and poems employ an innovative, self-consciously artistic style, often addressing the role of the artist in society.*

*Blue*, a collection containing more stories than poems, demonstrates the new style and themes that Darío initiates in Spanish. Unlike conventional Spanish literature to this date, these works carry no moral purpose, describe no feats of heroism, and do not use any clichéd Spanish themes. The stories adopt a new worldly-wise tone, often suggesting Paris or some other place of mystery or intrigue. They evoke an erotic, sensual mood, create vivid, ethereal images, and describe the artist and the unappreciated role of art in a bourgeois society. They describe nymphs, fairies, and other characters that become symbolic or mythic.

Some of the stories Darío considered prose poems used the literary techniques of rhythm and repetition to achieve the musicality characteristic of his work. He reflects the inspiration of William Shakespeare in the story "El velo de la reina Mab" ("The Veil of Queen Mab"). Two stories, "El rey burgués" ("The Bourgeois King") and "El pájaro azul" ("The Blue Parrot"), describe how a poet suffers for art. Ostracized by society in the first story and by his father in the second, the poet is cast off and forgotten.

The poems introduce the Alexandrine sonnet in "Caupolicán" and further imitate French poetry in free verse, line length, and syntax. In "Venus," the poet addresses the planet as a symbol of art and beauty and languishes in its silent response to his attraction. The collection dazzles with artistry.

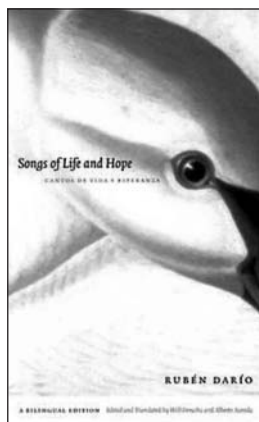
## SONGS OF LIFE AND HOPE

**First published:** *Cantos de vida y esperanza, los cisnes, y otros poemas* 1905 (English translation, 2004)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*These poems describe and exemplify the ways that attitudes, beliefs, beauty, and art redeem the tragic in life.*

*Songs of Life and Hope* confirms Darío's position as not only the exemplar of *Modernismo* but also as Spanish poet par excellence. This work elucidates his tragic vision of life and articulates its redemption. As Darío focuses on these themes, he continues to extend innovations of style, form, and development of ideas.



In the preface Darío reasserts his belief in the supremacy of art and his disdain for the conventional-minded. In the poems, he develops the free verse, rhythms, and repetitions that contribute to the poems' lyrical qualities. He uses symbols to reflect the fusion of contrasting spirits. He laments the fate of humankind, then explains and exemplifies what redeems life, what offers comfort and hope.

The first poem, "Nocturno" ("Nocturne"), an autobiographical piece, describes his struggles and longing. Awareness of loss, of time wasted, and of mortality reverberate throughout. Comfort and hope are offered in descriptions of both how to live—engage in life fully and passionately—and where to find inspiration—in the sources of redemption, beauty, and harmony. For Darío, the comfort of the flesh makes life whole and even makes the spiritual accessible. "Leda" explores this impetus and result.

Religious belief and recognition of harmony and beauty also provide comfort. The tragic life is relieved by spiritual belief. In "Spes." the poet prays for the grace that will purge his unworthy impulses

and the guilt that follows. Recognizing a universal mood of despair and pain, the speaker waits in "Canto de esperanza" ("Song of Hope") for a second coming and mourns the sterile, hopeless world of no belief. The optimistic spirit, he explains in "Salutación del optimista" ("Greetings from an Optimist"), enables doleful misgivings to melt away.

Harmony is created by the uniting of contrasting elements. In "Al rey Óscar" ("To King Oscar"), the regal emissary from Norway brings to Spain a spirit that complements the Spanish spirit. Art and artists create this harmony as well. "Cyrano en España" ("Cyrano in Spain") and "Salutación a Leonardo" ("A Salutation to Leonardo") describe other felicitous unions. Again, Darío uses symbols to create a mythology of life and hope. Classical figures of mythology and everyday creatures, such as swans, represent beauty and life.

## "POEM OF AUTUMN"

**First published:** 1910 (collected in *Cuentos y poesías/Stories and Poems: A Dual Language Book*, 2002)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem reassesses a life and explores the redemptive effect of beauty and love.*

The collection *Poema del otoño, y otras poemas* reflects the last stage of Darío's literary career. The long title poem, "Poem of Autumn," the most important work in this collection, alternates between lamenting mortality and affirming life. The poet looks at life through the lens of the autumn of his life, a time of meditation and reflection. The reflective spirit observes what has been and expresses hope for more of the same. At times the past provokes remorse, at other times joy and an accompanying melancholy. In either case the speaker longs for more of the sensual and the beautiful. The poet finds that savoring the flowers and the honey of the moment—that is, living in the present—revives the downcast spirit.

In advising those growing old to seek pleasure, he reflects *Modernismo's* recognition of correspondences in the world. Expressing love and experi-

encing its pleasure enables humankind to participate in the universal force of creation. Human beings feel the surge of life in their blood just as the tree experiences the surge of life in the flowing of its sap. The human body, Darío asserts, contains the earth, the sun, and the sea. Consolation comes in recognizing the universal, timeless, cyclical qualities of life. Life, the poem confirms, unfolds as a journey to death, but the way is paved by love.

### SUMMARY

Born into poverty in a Nicaraguan village, Rubén Darío became the most important transformer of the conventional Spanish literature of the nineteenth century. Inspired by French writers, Darío imitated and assimilated the styles and themes of French literature into his works. Raised in the Spanish, Catholic culture, Darío always felt closely connected to his heritage. He felt a similarly strong

connection to the sensual life, and he found in experience with women both physical and spiritual comfort. Darío often lived a bohemian lifestyle motivated both by his artistic temperament and economic necessity. Periods of despair provoked bouts of debauchery, which in turn caused him much guilt resulting in periods of intense religiosity.

Existential awareness of the mortal fate of mankind became a preoccupation of his more mature works. His underlying despair, however, was contrasted by a love of life and the beautiful. He felt the tragedy of life could be redeemed by savoring the sensual, embracing the spiritual, and experiencing art. Art represented harmony and tranquillity and soothed the troubled soul of humankind. His innovations in literature resulted in his being recognized as the most outstanding writer of the literary movement *Modernismo*.

Bernadette Flynn Low

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#### NONFICTION:

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*Tierras solares*, 1904

*Opiniones*, 1906

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss circumstances or personal traits in Rubén Darío's life that shaped his work.
- Describe artistic elements in Darío's work that reflect *Modernismo*.
- Identify some themes that recur in Darío's work.
- Describe some of the artistic differences between his early work of *Modernismo*, *Blue*, and his mature work, *Songs of Life and Hope*.
- Describe the mood of "Poem of Autumn" and what it expresses of Darío's attitudes toward life.

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*Historias de mis libros*, 1914

MISCELLANEOUS:

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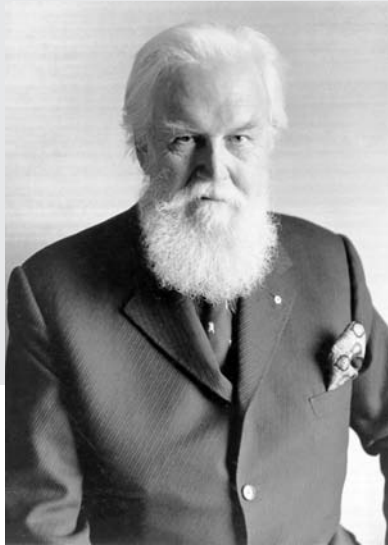
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## ROBERTSON DAVIES

**Born:** Thamesville, Ontario, Canada

August 28, 1913

**Died:** Toronto, Ontario, Canada

December 2, 1995

*One of Canada's leading novelists, Davies meshes comedy and serious discussions of complex philosophical issues to produce works that are both enjoyable and thought-provoking.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Robertson Davies was born in the small town of Thamesville, Ontario, Canada, on August 28, 1913. His father, William Rupert Davies, had immigrated with his parents to Canada from Wales in the 1890's and had married Florence Mackay, a woman of Scottish-Dutch descent whose family had been in North America since the 1680's. By the time Robertson was born, Rupert Davies had become an influential newspaper publisher. Both of Robertson's parents had strong personalities and greatly influenced Davies's intellectual development; his novel *Murder and Walking Spirits* (1991) is a fictionalized homage to his ancestry. His parents read often to their children; in an interview, Davies remarked that these stories "marked me forever as a lover, and victim, of myth."

When Davies was five years old, his father bought a newspaper business in the small Ontario town of Renfrew and moved the family there. Davies went to the country school with the children of farmers and woodcutters, and his experiences there—he was teased, beaten, and terrorized—parallel those of Francis Cornish in *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985). The family lived in Renfrew until 1925, and it was in his father's Renfrew newspaper that Davies had his first work published at the age of ten. Everyone in the family was expected to write clearly and accurately, and Davies was sent to re-

port on a slide show and lecture on William Shakespeare's England.

In 1925, father bought a newspaper in the college town of Kingston, Ontario. In 1928, Davies began attending Upper Canada College, a prestigious boys' school. Here, he won prizes for speech and acted in school plays; he recalled that he was "capable of learning anything that interested me in record time, but cretinous in my failure to comprehend whatever I did not like." He did not like mathematics and failed both geometry and algebra in his matriculation examinations, which meant that he could not attend university as a regular student.

Queen's University in Kingston, however, allowed Davies to enter as a "special student." He was able to take classes but could not receive a degree. He took courses in literature, drama, and history and, as at Upper Canada College, participated as often as possible in drama productions. While Davies was at Queen's, his father, while on a trip to Great Britain, inquired about admission to Oxford; Davies was accepted by Balliol College and left Queen's University in 1935. Davies thoroughly enjoyed the Oxford atmosphere and did very well there. He soon joined the Oxford University Dramatic Society and stage-managed and acted in several productions. He read Elizabethan drama and was awarded a bachelor of literature degree in 1938. He was able to publish his university thesis in 1939 as *Shakespeare's Boy Actors*.

After finishing at Oxford, Davies toured with a theater company for several months before going to London and joining the Old Vic, which was then managed by Tyrone Guthrie. He was assigned mi-

nor acting roles, but his chief duties were to teach theater history in the school attached to the company and to act as a literary assistant to Guthrie. The Old Vic disbanded in 1939 because of World War II; Davies tried to enlist but was rejected because of his poor eyesight.

At the Old Vic, Davies met Brenda Mathews, an Australian woman who worked as a stage manager for the company. On February 2, 1940, they were married and in December had their first child. Upon their return to Canada that same year, Davies worked briefly for his father's newspaper in Kingston before being offered the job of literary editor at *Saturday Night*, which was then a well-respected Canadian paper. He wrote on music, theater, and ballet, as well as literature.

Davies stayed at *Saturday Night* until 1942, when his father bought the Peterborough *Examiner*. Davies became the editor of that newspaper; during his years there, the paper was favorably regarded and his editorial comments were often quoted elsewhere. Davies created the character of Samuel Marchbanks for the *Examiner*, and the column in which Marchbanks acidly and wittily commented on the mores of the times appeared in several other newspapers. During his time in Peterborough, Davies helped form the Peterborough Little Theater. He wrote plays for it and for professional companies, and his plays *Eros at Breakfast* (pr. 1948, pb. 1949) and *Fortune, My Foe* (pr. 1948, pb. 1949) won the awards for best production at the Dominion Drama Festival. In 1951, Davies published his first novel, *Tempest-Tost*, which drew on his knowledge of nonprofessional acting companies in its comic portrayal of a Little Theater production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623).

From 1953 to 1959, Davies, while continuing to edit the Peterborough *Examiner*, also wrote for *Saturday Night's* book column. In 1953, Davies was elected to the board of directors of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, on which he served until 1971. In 1955, Davies' second novel, *Leaven of Malice* (1954), was published and received the Leacock Medal for humor in Canadian writing. This second novel is also set in the fictional town of Salterton and with *Tempest-Tost* and *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958) forms a loose trilogy.

In 1960, Davies spent a year as a visiting professor of English at Trinity College, University of To-

ronto, and in 1963 he was appointed the first master of the newly opened Massey College, University of Toronto. He taught English and drama at the university until his retirement in 1981. In 1970, he published *Fifth Business*, the first novel in the Deptford Trilogy, which brought him much acclaim. *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975) followed. During the 1970's, Davies also wrote a number of critical studies.

In his retirement, Davies continued writing, publishing a third trilogy during the 1980's that began with *The Rebel Angels* (1981) and continued with *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985) and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988). In 1991, his novel *Murther and Walking Spirits*, a kind of fictional history of Canada and of the author's ancestry, was published. Davies and his wife continued to live in Toronto, where he died on December 2, 1995.

## ANALYSIS

In *Stage Voices: Twelve Canadian Playwrights Talk About Their Lives and Work* (1978), edited by Geraldine Anthony, Davies said that his work might be categorized as

comedy, in the broadest sense of the term. But I take it to include a great measure of romance, of pathos, of the rueful awareness that life is short in time and that what we understand of it is only a trifle of the whole. . . . The greater part of life is lived in the mode of comedy.

Davies' comment applies to his novels quite as much as to his plays; they are comedies in the broadest sense of the term. His novels are witty and occasionally even slapstick, as when Professor Vambrace, in *Tempest-Tost*, attempts to eat grapes while declaiming one of Prospero's speeches. In a somewhat more technical sense, Davies' novels are comedies because they are about real human frailties and limitations. If tragedy can be described as the great brought low through the actions of their faults, then perhaps comedy can be defined as the ordinary muddling through while occasionally appearing ridiculous because of their faults. In *Tempest-Tost*, Hector Mackilwraith, a middle-aged teacher of mathematics, attempts to hang himself in the middle of a production of the *The Tempest* because he loves a young woman, Griselda, who he knows will never love him. Instead of being tragic,



Hector's suicide attempt is ridiculous: He is told off by the director for disrupting the play and has broken a number of bottles of homemade champagne in his fall, so that at first everyone thinks he is merely drunk. There is pathos in this account of Hector's misery, but not tragedy.

Hector's fault is that he has lived an almost purely intellectual life and disregarded, or buried, his emotional side. Even when he ponders being attracted to Griselda, he makes a list of the pros and cons of pursuing her. This theme of the overreliance on intellect to disastrous effect appears also in *Fifth Business* and, more explicitly, in *The Manticore*, in which it is treated much more seriously than in *Tempest-Tost*. In fact, it is a theme that reappears in one guise or another in most of Davies' novels. In *The Rebel Angels*, it appears as a conflict between a beautiful graduate student's "root" and "crown" (using the metaphor of a tree): Maria Theotoky wants to jettison her emotional, irrational Gypsy background, her root, while living in the intellectual ivory tower of the university, her crown. In *A Mixture of Frailties*, Monica Gall must learn to release the emotion trapped inside her if she wants to become a great singer. Dunstan Ramsay, in *Fifth Business*, spends his life intellectually examining the lives of saints, something that is at heart intuitive and emotional, and at fifty his "bottled-up feelings have burst their bottle and splashed glass and acid everywhere."

It is in *The Manticore*, however, that Davies illustrates this theme most effectively. David Staunton's whole life has been an attempt to bury his emotions and live by his intellect. He wrongly believes that this is the only way he can survive; upon his father's mysterious death, emotion breaks through and he decides to enter Jungian analysis to bring order back into his life. The analysis brings David's true feelings to the fore, and David must acknowledge these feelings before he can be "cured."

*The Manticore* is also the book that most explicitly makes use of the work of Carl Jung. As David undergoes analysis and works through his memories and dreams, Davies explains some of the archetypes that Jung identified in his work, such as the shadow, friend, and anima; the aim is to acknowledge and accept these elements in oneself and so achieve a wholeness and knowledge of oneself. David, in his diary, dreams of escaping "the stupider kinds of illusion." Jung's ideas are important in most of

Davies's works. In the Cornish Trilogy, especially in *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Davies makes much of the idea that "we all have a personal myth . . . that has its shape and its pattern somewhere outside our daily world." Simon Darcourt, a character in *The Lyre of Orpheus*, learns that his myth is not that of Servant, as he had once thought, but of Fool—the Fool on the tarot card who is being pushed by instinct, represented by a dog, into making discoveries that would otherwise remain in mystery. In the same novel, Arthur, his wife Maria, and Geraint, the father of Maria's baby, are playing out the roles of the cuckolded King Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot. Dunstan Ramsay, in *Fifth Business*, is Fifth Business, the man in opera who, while not the most important character, "knows the secret of the hero's birth, or comes to the assistance of the heroine when she thinks all is lost."

To Davies, a myth is a way of approaching the archetypes that are true for all people at all times. It provides people with the "power to see themselves objectively" because it is an outside measure, not one made up by the individual. Personal myth acknowledges one's place in the scheme of things; it allows one to know what and who one is while escaping "the stupider kinds of illusion." Jung is also an important presence in *Murder and Walking Spirits*, in which the protagonist meets and converses with his anima, his feminine inner self, consistent with one of Jung's most important concepts.

In identifying Dunstan Ramsay as Fifth Business, Davies uses characters from opera that are essentially melodramatic: the Hero, the Heroine, the Villain, the Rival, and Fifth Business. Davies has written that "Melodrama is an art in which Good and Evil contend, and in which the dividing line between Good and Evil may often be blurred, and in which Good may often be the winner." In *World of Wonders*, the hero, Magnus Eisengrim, undergoes severe mistreatment as a child; he is abducted and sodomized by a magician with a traveling carnival, made to spend long hours hidden inside a mechanical effigy, working its machinery so as to impress the carnival-goers, and is otherwise abused and ignored. That is certainly evil. Yet the result is that Magnus becomes a very great magician, a master illusionist, something that he would never have become had he spent his life in Deptford, where he was born. Here the dividing line between good and evil is blurred, and it seems that good is the winner.

Davies also employs elements of satire, especially in his earlier works. In *Tempest-Tost* and *Leaven of Malice*, particularly, Davies pokes fun at some of the social conventions of Salterton, the town in which they are set, and deflates the pretensions of some of the characters. Yet rather than satire, which Davies claims he never intended to write, perhaps one should use the term “comedy of manners” to describe these novels. He examines the follies of the opinions and behaviors of various characters, and his favorite target is the person with a self-deluding sense of importance. In *Leaven of Malice*, he pokes fun at a character who tries to apply psychological precepts facilely: “The chapter on Freudian psychology in his general textbook had not, after all, equipped him to deal with a tiresomely literal professor of classics who knew Oedipus at first hand, so to speak.”

Davies is convinced of the importance of the individual, but he is concerned with the individual who knows or comes to know himself or herself, not the self-deluding fool. The books of the Deptford Trilogy, in particular, written for the most part in the first person, are about the growth in self-knowledge of the individual. Several of Davies’ books are bildungsromans; they recount the development, the education, of a young person reaching for maturity. *World of Wonders* is one such novel; so is *A Mixture of Frailties*, the third novel in the Salterton Trilogy. In it, Monica Gall leaves her family and Canada for England, where she has several teachers who each, in their way, teach her not only music and singing but also how to value herself and her opinions. Monica comes from an essentially anti-intellectual, culturally deprived background; part of her development is learning which parts of her background are part of her and valuable to her and which are not.

This tension between family and individual is a recurrent pattern in Davies’ novels. In *Tempest-Tost* and *Leaven of Malice*, Solly Bridgetower and Pearl Vambrace each have an overpowering parent to overcome; in *A Mixture of Frailties*, Solly’s mother even exerts her dominance beyond the grave in her humiliating will, which says that Solly will not inherit until he and Pearl have a son. Making a break between domineering parent and submissive child is not the only way to portray and deal with the tension between the two, however; that would be far too simplistic. Both Monica in *A Mix-*

*ture of Frailties* and Maria in *The Rebel Angels* have to come to terms with their parents, accepting them for what they are. Maria fights her mother’s Gypsy inheritance but must acknowledge it if she wants to be wholly herself.

Davies includes a huge amount of ideas, themes, and arcane knowledge in his books. *What’s Bred in the Bone* discusses undertaking, art, alchemy, astrology, and spying. *The Rebel Angels* includes François Rabelais, Paracelsus, Gypsy lore, the tarot, and more. Davies does not expect his reader to be knowledgeable about these things; what the reader needs to know is adequately, and often amusingly, explained.

## THE DEPTFORD TRILOGY

**First published:** *Fifth Business*, 1970; *The Manticore*, 1972; *World of Wonders*, 1975

**Type of work:** Novels

*A snowball thrown with a stone in it has consequences for the lives of three men.*

The publication of *Fifth Business*, the first novel in the Deptford Trilogy, marked a deepening of Davies’ novelistic talents. His previous novels (the Salterton Trilogy), while amusing and certainly not devoid of ideas, lack the depth of thought and power that characterizes *Fifth Business*. Davies has said that when he began *Fifth Business*, he had no intention of writing a trilogy; the subsequent two novels arose because he found that he had more to say about some of the characters. Each novel can stand completely on its own, yet there is a link between the novels. They express some of the same ideas and themes in different ways, and the reader is richer for having read the others.

In a speech transcribed in *One Half of Robertson Davies* (1977), Davies commented that *Fifth Business* arose from his examination of the extent to which one is responsible for the outcome of one’s actions and when this responsibility begins. He decided that

it began with life itself, and that a child was as responsible as anyone else if it chose a course of action knowingly. In *Fifth Business* . . . a boy makes a

choice: he wants to hurt his companion, so he throws a snowball at him, and in the snowball is a stone. . . . The consequences of the snowball with the stone in it continue for sixty years, and do much to shape the lives of three men.

The boy who threw the stone is Percy Boyd Staunton; He aimed it at Dunstan Ramsay, and it hit the mother of Magnus Eisengrim. *Fifth Business* examines the life of Ramsay; *The Manticore* looks at Boy Staunton's life and the effect it has had on his son, David Staunton; and *World of Wonders* concerns Magnus Eisengrim.

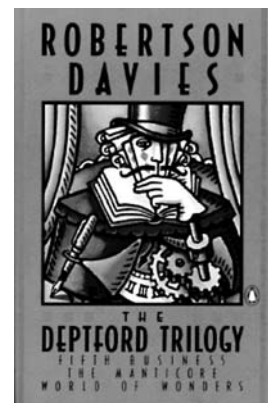
*Fifth Business* begins at 5:58 P.M. on December 27, 1908, in a small Canadian town in Ontario called Deptford. That is the exact time that Percy Boyd Staunton threw the snowball that Dunstan Ramsay sidestepped. Ramsay took evasive action knowingly and feels guilty when he realizes that the snowball meant for him has caused Mary Dempster to lose her wits and to have her baby, Paul, prematurely. This scenario is the beginning of Ramsay's involvement with Mrs. Dempster, who becomes more than simply a responsibility to him; Ramsay comes to see her as a saint. Whether or not she is a saint is important only to Ramsay. An old Jesuit questions him: "who is she in your personal world? What figure is she in your personal mythology? . . . [Y]ou must find your answer in psychological truth, not in objective truth." What Mary Dempster has done is to enrich Ramsay's life. Through her ability to love without fear, she has given him an entry into the world of the spirit.

After being wounded at Passchendaele, Ramsay's is not a particularly unusual life. He attends a university, gets a position as a teacher of history at a boys' school, and begins writing books on saints for travelers, as well as producing a book on the psychology of myth and legend. Finally, on a sabbatical to South America visiting churches and studying local legends of saints, he again meets Paul Dempster, who has become Magnus Eisengrim, and meets Magnus's manager, Liesl Vitzliputzli. Liesl is a gargoyle of a woman who, along with Mrs. Dempster and the Jesuit priest, becomes one of Ramsay's most important teachers. She forces him to find out who he is in his "personal world": "Who are you? Where do you fit into poetry and myth? Do you know who I think you are, Ramsay? I think you are Fifth Business."

Fifth Business quite accurately reflects the role Ramsay has played in his relationship to Boy Staunton. Boy considers Ramsay an eccentric and old friend but one who is unsuccessful in the way in which Boy measures success. If Fifth Business "knows the secret of the hero's birth," then Ramsay fits the bill, for he knows Boy's beginnings, his traits established from boyhood, better than Boy does himself. Ramsay's final act as Fifth Business in Boy's life is to force him to examine his actions and take responsibility for them: "I'm simply trying to recover something of the totality of your life. Don't you want to possess it as a whole—the bad with the good?" Possessing one's life as a whole—the bad with the good—is essentially what *Fifth Business* is about.

Ramsay, over many years and with the help of such teachers as Liesl, comes to know himself essentially through his own efforts. In *The Manticore*, David Staunton, the son of Boy Staunton, has inherited his father's lack of self-knowledge and goes to Switzerland for Jungian analysis in an attempt to put his life back together. Boy's ignorance of his true nature has a lasting detrimental effect on his son: David struggles very hard before he can break down the false image his father has created and see him as he was and before he can stop putting himself on trial for not living up to his father's standards of manliness.

Like *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore* is written in the first person; It is David's record of his analysis. His analyst asks him to prepare a "brief"—David is a successful Toronto lawyer—which consists mainly of a chronological account of David's childhood memories. Like *Fifth Business*, the plot of *The Manticore* does not reveal a wildly unusual life, but the events of David's life show why he is who he is. He has taken refuge from his feelings because, in effect, every time he had strong feelings he was punished for them. By denying them and creating a shell of rationality, he protects himself. One of his tasks under analysis is to recall and recognize his true emotions.



David's analysis only goes so far in helping him recognize and accept both sides of himself, the emotional and the intellectual. His analyst helps him identify the ways in which Jungian archetypes apply to the people in his life and helps him strip the archetypes away to allow these people to be themselves, real people and not images created by David. It takes an encounter with Liesl, however, to truly put him on the path to wholeness. Liesl, whom David has met in a chance encounter with Ramsay during the Christmas holidays, takes David to a cave in the mountains where the remains of a group of primitive men have been found. She leads him further into the mountain, forcing him to crawl and wriggle through the narrow passageway to a kind of holy of holies, the place where these primitive men worshiped bears. David is uncomfortable and wants to go back to the light; darkness and bear-worship are unreasonable to him, and he wants to run back to rationality. On the way out, David becomes severely frightened and empties his bowels. Before this trip, Liesl has suggested that learning "to know oneself as fully human" must involve a kind of "rebirth"; "It's more a reentry and return from the womb of mankind. A fuller comprehension of one's humanity. . . . It's not a thinker's thing." David's trip back from the cave is his rebirth; the terror is something he feels deeply. It gives him the "glimmering" of his own humanity and perhaps the ability to face the "inner struggle" to become whole, which is what Liesl describes as heroic behavior.

*World of Wonders* presents the life of the third man affected by that stone-filled snowball. Unlike Ramsay and David's, Paul Dempster's life has been far from ordinary. Eisengrim (the name Paul Dempster has finally taken) is asked to tell his story as a kind of subtext for a film he is starring in about the life of the magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. He tells it to Ramsay, Liesl, and the director, cinematographer, and producer of the film and begins with what he calls his descent into hell.

His particular hell is Wanless's World of Wonders. He has stolen fifteen cents to go to the fair,

and five of that buys him entry to a carnival show—the World of Wonders—where he sees a fat woman, a man who writes with his feet, and Willard the magician. After the show, Willard, on the pretext of showing Paul a trick, rapes him and then, in a panic, abducts him. Paul spends the years of his adolescence and young adulthood being sodomized by Willard and shut inside a mechanical effigy called Abdullah, used to fool carnival-goers. After Willard's death, Paul travels to England, where he joins a theater troupe as the double of the leading man, Sir John Tresize, in a series of melodramas. After Sir John's death and a period of odd jobs, he travels to Switzerland, where he gets a job repairing mechanical toys that have been smashed to bits by the adolescent Liesl, who suffers from a disease that has thickened the bones of her head, distorting her features. Magnus teaches her to be human again, and they later perform a magic show that makes Magnus the world's greatest illusionist.

During most of his life, Magnus has been forced to be someone other than himself, to the point of being given names not of his own choosing. Yet these experiences have not made him a non-person; they have made him a very great magician, who knows himself very well. Out of evil has come good. Liesl attributes this to what she calls Magnus's "Magian World View": "It was a sense of the unfathomable wonder of the invisible world that existed side by side with a hard recognition of the roughness and cruelty and day-to-day demands of the tangible world."

All three of the Deptford novels have this concern with the "invisible world." In *Fifth Business*, it expresses itself in Ramsay's concern with saints; in *The Manticore*, it is represented by the cave in which David is at last freed to have feelings; in *World of Wonders*, it is this "Magian World View" that finds art in low places. Magnus has survived and prospered because he has always had an art to sustain him—conjuring with Willard, acting with the Tresizes, and fixing clocks in Switzerland. Art has allowed Magnus to remain an individual who is wholly himself.



## THE CORNISH TRILOGY

**First published:** *The Rebel Angels*, 1981;  
*What's Bred in the Bone*, 1985; *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 1988

**Type of work:** Novels

*The life of Francis Cornish and his influence after his death lay the groundwork for these novels.*

The Cornish Trilogy shares many of the themes that run through the Deptford Trilogy, and it is these themes as much as the characters that link the three novels that can be read completely independently. Davies is once again concerned with finding one's personal myth, becoming fully oneself—something that often is connected with art or pure scholarship in these novels—and in each book he again approaches the topic somewhat differently.

*The Rebel Angels* is the only novel in the trilogy to be written in the first person; the main narrative voice is passed back and forth between Maria Theotoky, a beautiful graduate student who narrates the sections titled "Second Paradise," and Simon Darcourt, an Anglican priest and teacher at the university, who narrates the chapters called "The New Aubrey." Maria's sections focus on her love for Clement Hollier, her dissertation director, and her problems with John Parlabane, a renegade monk who teaches skeptic philosophy and was a boyhood friend of Hollier. Darcourt is one of Francis Cornish's executors, along with Hollier and Urquhart McVarish, and his chapters attempt to provide a broader view of the university, especially of its personalities. As Darcourt and Maria's experiences overlap, the effect of two separate narrators is not a disjointed story line but one that is dovetailed. Maria's voice, in fact, is much like Darcourt's, and while this is a weakness in terms of portraying Maria, it does give the novel a continuity and a unity of vision.

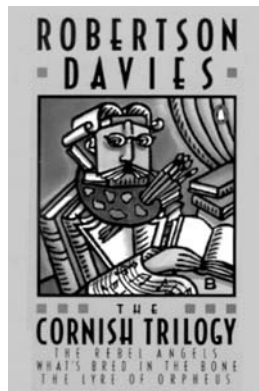
The main thrust of the story comes from the actions of Parlabane, who deliberately sets out to get everybody excited. He badgers Maria, poking and prying into her personal life and giving her long lectures on his philosophy; he cadges money from Darcourt and Hollier; and he plays the sycophant to Urky McVarish, the professor everyone else is

united in loathing. At the end of the novel, he kills McVarish in a gruesome way and then kills himself, leaving a letter explaining the circumstances of the murder to Hollier and Maria. Parlabane also writes a long, rambling novel called *Be Not Another's*, which he thrusts on Hollier, Maria, and Darcourt, asking for their opinions and then ignoring them.

Parlabane—though his book is based on his own life, though he seems to obey no rules but his own, and though he gives perfectly good advice to Maria on knowing herself—does not fully know himself. For Dunstan Ramsay, David Staunton, and Magnus Eisengrim, knowing oneself involves a balance between intellect and wonder; Parlabane has no balance and relies on his intellect, despite his claim of belief in God. Parlabane is an egotist and, as such, cannot fully know himself, for he does not really accept anything outside his own authority. Nevertheless, he is able to become one of Maria's Rebel Angels, helping her to realize that she must accept her Gypsy background as much as her university education if she wants to be herself. Maria also calls Hollier and Darcourt her Rebel Angels, placing them in her personal mythology, for the Rebel Angels taught wisdom to men after being thrown out of heaven, and Maria believes that the three have taught her much about herself.

*What's Bred in the Bone* is the strongest novel of the Cornish Trilogy, perhaps because it is the most focused. It tells the story of what is bred in the bone of Francis Cornish, the experiences and inheritances that make him who he is. It begins prior to his birth by describing the town of Blairlogie, Ontario, and the family into which he was born, and goes on to describe all the events that are important in forming Cornish's character, from his first discovery that the world is separate from him to his death. Francis discovers that art is his talent and develops it by sketching the corpses at the undertaker's, where his grandfather's coachman holds a second job. At the university, he practices drawing in the manner of the Old Masters, using the silver-point technique, and after Oxford he takes a job helping Tancred Saraceni, an art restorer. When Saraceni challenges him to paint a picture in Old Master style, mixing paints as they would have done and using a wooden panel of the right age, Francis paints "the myth of Francis Cornish." It is a triptych of the Marriage at Cana, and every figure in it is significant for whom Francis Cornish has become.

In *What's Bred in the Bone*, Davies again strongly emphasizes the importance of discovering one's personal myth. In an early conversation with Francis, Saraceni says that modern artists "are painting the inner vision . . . but they depend only on themselves, unaided by religion or myth, and of course what most of them find within themselves is revelation only to themselves." One needs a connection with the "world of wonders" to produce a life that is meaningful. Davies does not imply that find-



ing one's personal myth is easy or that knowing oneself solves all problems. Because Francis expresses himself best in Old Master style, he is effectively prevented from painting anything, for he would simply be accused of fakery. Though in his old age he seems to the world an "eccentric and crabbed spirit, there was a quality of completeness about him." Francis dies

laughing, having recognized the allegory of his own life.

*The Lyre of Orpheus*, which further develops several of the main characters of *The Rebel Angels*, pursues several threads of plot. Simon Darcourt, whose discoveries while writing a biography of Francis Cornish provided the framing fiction of *What's Bred in the Bone*, is studying Francis's art and discovering his own personal myth in the process. His plan to prove and reveal Francis as a great artist and not a skillful faker leads him, with help from Maria's mother, to identify his personal myth as that of the Fool on the tarot cards, who is pushed by instinct, "something outside the confines of intellect and caution," into unconventional paths. Darcourt finds this identification of his personal myth gives him "a stronger sense of who he was."

The second major thread of plot involves the decision by the Cornish Foundation (headed by Arthur Cornish, Francis's nephew) to produce an opera called *Arthur of Britain: Or, The Magnanimous Cuckold*. The opera and the characters involved in creating it take up a large part of the narrative, but the most important facet of it is the way the plot—Guenevere and Lancelot's betrayal of Arthur—is

reflected in the lives of Arthur and Maria Cornish and Geraint Powell, the director of the opera and Arthur's friend. Maria's infidelity with Geraint does not exactly parallel Guenevere's, for she does not love Geraint, and in many ways Geraint's bedding of her reflects the way Uther came to Ygraine to sire Arthur more than it does Guenevere and Lancelot's affair. During a discussion of what plot the opera should use, Darcourt recalls Ovid saying that "the great truths of life are the wax, and all we can do is to stamp it with different forms. . . . If we are true to the great myth, we can give it what form we choose. The myth—the wax—does not change." Arthur and Maria must learn how to be true to "the great myth" in order for their marriage to be enriched rather than destroyed, and that lesson is expressed in the loving charity of Sir Walter Scott's lines used in the opera's libretto:

It is the secret sympathy,  
The silver link, the silken tie,  
Which heart to heart, and mind to mind,  
In body and in soul can bind.

## MURDER AND WALKING SPIRITS

**First published:** 1991

**Type of work:** Novel

*Newspaper editor Connor Gilmartin is murdered and spends his afterlife attending a film festival with his murderer; the films show him his family history since the colonial period.*

Although it begins in the present day, *Murder and Walking Spirits* is a multigenerational novel that spans more than two hundred years of family and national history. Its narrator and protagonist, Connor Gilmartin, is the entertainment editor of a newspaper called the *Advocate*. It is tempting to equate Gilmartin with Robertson Davies, who was also a newspaperman and whose family histories share many details with the fictional ones presented here, but there are some significant differences, not the least of which is age; Connor Gilmartin is a full generation younger than Davies, who has perhaps as much in common with Connor's father, Brochwel, as with the narrator.



The story of Connor Gilmartin's murder and afterlife, during which he attends a film festival with his murderer and colleague Allard Going, known as the Sniffer, forms a frame for the multigenerational flashback that constitutes most of the narrative. Other significant characters from the frame portion of the novel include Gilmartin's adulterous wife, Esme Baron, and his friend and spiritual advisor, Hugh McWearie. He recounts earlier conversations with McWearie that cover Christianity, Buddhism, Celtic mythology, and Emanuel Swedenborg and continue the Jungian theme that can be found in many of Davies's other novels.

Although he is unable to haunt his killer or make himself known to anybody who is alive, Gilmartin finds himself bound to Allard Going and is forced to attend a series of films with him. However, the "films" the protagonist is shown are for himself alone. While the festival audience watches *The Spirit of '76*, Gilmartin's private film opens in New York in 1774 and follows his Loyalist great-great-great-grandmother's brave exodus to Canada after the American Revolution.

The third part of the novel is set in Wales. While Going views *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, the ghost narrator sees a film about five generations of his Welsh Gilmartin ancestors, the last of whom, because of financial setbacks, immigrate to North America.

While Going sees a film called *The Master Builder*, the invisible narrator watches the unfolding of the next chapter of his family history from the perspective of his grandfather Gil and Gil's unstable father-in-law, the builder and opium addict William McOmish. Gil's marriage to Malvina McOmish represents the merging of the Dutch and

Welsh family lines. *Scenes from a Marriage* depicts the youth of Gilmartin's father, Brochwel, who will one day be a university professor specializing in the poetry of Robert Browning; appropriately, this section of the novel uses interior monologues from multiple points of view, providing Gilmartin and the reader with a variety of viewpoints that require some assembly in order to understand the situation.

The novel concludes with the ghost revisiting those who have survived him: his wife, who is parlaying her bereavement into a book deal, and his murderer, who is taking over his victim's job even as he is consumed with grief over his crime. The book concludes with a conversation between the ghost and his anima, a Jungian term for the feminine, true inner self of a man. While there is no absolution as such for the murderer Going or the unfaithful wife Esme, the novel concludes, in conversation between self and soul, with acceptance.

## SUMMARY

*Murder and Walking Spirits* and the novels of the Deptford and Cornish trilogies are rich in character and complex in theme. They are engagingly written; Robertson Davies entertains at the same time that he makes the reader think. The foregoing analyses can cover only a small fraction of the ideas Davies brings to his writing and point out what is perhaps the overriding theme of his novels: the importance of recognizing the wonder of the world, whether one calls it God, myth, mystery, the realm of "the Mothers," the unconscious, or all of the above.

Karen M. Cleveland Marwick;  
updated by James S. Brown

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*The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks*, 1947  
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*Renown at Stratford: A Record of the Shakespeare Festival in Canada*, 1953, 1953 (with Tyrone Guthrie)  
*Twice Have the Trumpets Sounded: A Record of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in Canada*, 1954, 1954 (with Guthrie)  
*Thrice the Brinded Cat Hath Mew'd: A Record of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival in Canada*, 1955, 1955 (with Guthrie)  
*A Voice from the Attic*, 1960  
*The Personal Art: Reading to Good Purpose*, 1961  
*Marchbanks' Almanack*, 1967  
*Stephen Leacock: Feast of Stephen*, 1970  
*One Half of Robertson Davies*, 1977  
*The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies*, 1979  
*The Well-Tempered Critic*, 1981  
*Reading and Writing*, 1993

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Robertson Davies use autobiography and history in his novels? How does one account for the differences between the author's experiences and those of the characters who seem to represent him?
- What role does the psychology of Carl Jung play in Davies' works? How does the concept of archetypes manifest itself in the novels?
- What role does Canadian nationalism play in the novels? Can the author's attitude toward his nation be considered positive, negative, or ambivalent?
- Artistic creation is an important theme in many of Davies' novels—the visual arts, as well as music, opera, and drama. How might one characterize the author's attitude toward art and the artist?
- Robertson Davies has been characterized as a comic novelist. Is this characterization accurate? Why or why not?

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Library of Congress

## DANIEL DEFOE

**Born:** London, England  
1660

**Died:** London, England  
April 26, 1731

*Generally considered the most typically English of the major early eighteenth century writers, Defoe was one of the great journalists and professional authors of his age and an important contributor to the development of the novel in English.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Daniel Defoe (dih-FOH) was born Daniel Foe in the parish of St. Giles Cripplegate, London, England, in 1660, the son of James Foe, a tallow chandler and butcher who later held several positions of authority in the city of London, and Alice Foe. (Defoe changed his name to its more aristocratic form sometime around the age of forty.) Because there are no surviving records of Defoe's birth, biographers have surmised, on the basis of two of his off-hand statements, that he was born sometime in the autumn. Defoe's early years were eventful: When he was five, the Great Plague ravaged London and his family fled to the country; the next year, the Great Fire of London leveled thousands of houses and eighty-seven churches, including St. Paul's Cathedral. He grew up in a London wracked with political and religious controversy, and belonging as he did to a Dissenting family, he must have been more than a little interested in the events occurring around him.

Because the Foes were Presbyterians, a major Dissenting group, Daniel was denied an education at Oxford and Cambridge, from which Nonconformists were barred. Instead, from 1671 to 1679, with the intention of studying for the ministry, he attended schools founded for well-to-do Dissenters: James Fisher's school in Surrey, and the Academy for Dissenters, run by the Reverend

Charles Morton, north of London. Unlike the traditional classical courses of study at Oxford and Cambridge, the curriculum at Morton's Academy emphasized modern philosophy and science, as well as the new English grammar. This practical education—especially the study of English—became the foundation on which Defoe built his later career as a professional writer.

Defoe left Morton's Academy around 1679, having at some point decided against the ministry. By the early 1680's, he had established himself as a hosiery merchant in London, and in 1684, he married Mary Tuffley, with whom he had eight children.

For Defoe, the 1680's and the 1690's saw substantial business and political activity. Although as a merchant he traveled extensively in England and on the Continent—acquiring the geographical and linguistic knowledge that his writing would later reveal—he found time for involvement in the Duke of Monmouth's Rebellion in 1685, for his first published piece of writing (a pamphlet against the Catholic James II), and for participation in William III's triumphal entry into London in 1688. Defoe's business interests included not only hosiery but also wine, tobacco, land, and civet cats; he conducted business on a grand scale—and, like other aggressive merchants of his age, was entangled in a number of legal suits. In 1692, Defoe's businesses failed, leaving him seventeen thousand pounds in debt.

After his financial collapse, Defoe used his Whiggish connections to acquire various lucrative

government positions. For half a decade, he served as a trustee of the government lottery, worked as an accountant for the government office that levied duties on glassware, and even functioned as a secret agent for the Crown. By 1694, he was able to set up a brick and tile factory near London and to pay off many of his debts; by the mid-1690's, he had prospered enough to purchase a new house and a coach and horses. Sometime during these years, he also changed his name.

Defoe began writing at the end of the seventeenth century, publishing his first book, *An Essay upon Projects* (1697), and much Whig propaganda, culminating in his defense of the Crown in the satiric poem *The True-Born Englishman: A Satyr* (1701). With King William's death in 1702, resentment against Dissenters, whom the king had protected, grew. That December, Defoe published *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), an outrageous proposal, supposedly from a High Church extremist, for prosecuting and killing those who did not conform to the Church of England. Arrested for sedition, Defoe was pilloried, fined, and jailed. His half-year sojourn in Newgate Prison left him with huge debts and a failed brick and tile factory.

Released from prison at the behest of Robert Harley, the Tory speaker of the House of Commons, Defoe worked for Harley as a secret agent, traveling throughout England in search of political information, and writing and publishing a thrice-weekly Tory publication, *The Review* (1704-1713). Defoe also produced a considerable number of other journalistic pieces, familiar essays, poems, allegories, letters, and book-length works on various topics. Although he kept his Tory connections secret and publicly remained a Whig, he was criticized by the Whigs, who suspected his affiliations. Criticism was not Defoe's only problem; from 1713 to 1714, he was arrested several times either for debt or for political reasons, and each time he was released as a result of government intervention.

With the death of Queen Anne and the fall of the Tory ministry, the pragmatic Defoe offered his services to Sir Robert Walpole, the powerful Whig politician. Until the year before his death, Defoe was Walpole's secret agent working in the Tory publication network, subverting Tory propaganda from within. He also published a popular series of conduct books, including the well-received *The Family Instructor, in Three Parts* (1715).

With the publication of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner, Written by Himself* (1719; commonly known as *Robinson Crusoe*), Defoe began yet another career, producing in the remaining decade or so of his life the fictional works that assured him a place among England's literary greats. *Robinson Crusoe* was followed a few months later with *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: Being the Second and Last Part of His Life* (1719) and with *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, with His Vision of the Angelick World* (1720). The second and third volumes never earned the acclaim of the first, and neither was worthy of the first. Defoe's success with *Crusoe's* story led to a number of long narratives, including those on which his enduring fame rests: *Memoirs of a Cavalier: Or, A Military Journal of the Wars in Germany, and the Wars in England, from the Year 1632 to the Year 1648* (1720); *The Life, Adventures, and Pyracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* (1720); *The History and Remarkable Life of the Truly Honourable Col Jacques, Commonly Call'd Col Jack* (1722); *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722; also known as *The History of the Great Plague in London*); *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, Written from Her Own Memorandums* (1722; commonly known as *Moll Flanders*); and *The Fortunate Mistress* (1724; more popularly known as *Roxana*). In addition, during the last decade of his life he wrote several other book-length works on a variety of topics and continued to produce pamphlets, criminal biographies, political pieces, and other journalistic works.

Defoe died in London on April 26, 1731.

## ANALYSIS

Defoe's admirers sometimes call him the "father of the novel" and sometimes refer to him as the "first great realistic writer." While neither phrase is completely accurate—there is no consensus about the identity of the first novelist, and there is controversy about when realistic writing first became popular—both descriptions reveal something about Defoe's major literary contribution. He was one of the best of the earliest writers of realistic fiction, the genre that eventually evolved into the novel as it is known today.

Defoe and his contemporaries did not invent fiction or even popularize it. Elizabethan and Jacobean England produced a number of writers whose



chief oeuvre was fictional writing—imitations of classical models, prose romances, biographical accounts of criminals and rogues, picaresque tales, allegories, and even translations of the lengthy and complicated narratives so popular in France. To this tradition, Defoe added the realistic first-person narrative, featuring the humble everyday occurrences that constitute the life of the ordinary—not famous or notorious—human being.

All Defoe's long major works are fictional narratives that pretend to be true autobiographies. Defoe's skill at inventing realistic episodes and providing superbly realized detail makes it difficult for the average reader to believe that the tales are fictional, that they have no basis in actuality, and that they are the creations of one man.

Defoe's fiction is notable for its verisimilitude—that illusion of reality or semblance of truth created through the use of concrete details, elaborate identifications of the sources of information or ideas, simple and unadorned prose, frequent reminders to the reader to beware of inaccuracies, and, most important, the first-person narrator. Verisimilitude is created through the naming of actual places and people, the inclusion of historical events as background, the inclusion of prefatory statements in which the narrator writes of material omitted because of lack of space or mentions corroborating testimony to the events in the narrative, and the creation of completely believable characters.

In *An Essay upon Projects*, Defoe suggests the creation of a Society, modeled on the French Academy, "to polish and refine the English Tongue . . . to establish Purity and Propriety of Stile. . . ." Defoe's concern with language is evident in the fact that "Purity and Propriety of Stile" are the dominant characteristics of his prose. To Defoe, clarity and plainness—qualities learned at Morton's Academy—were not only necessary for understanding but also morally correct. Plain language was, for Defoe, the language of the everyday world that he inhabited, the diction and imagery of business people, the vocabulary of the middle class, the honest communication of the common English citizen. This stylistic plainness is completely appropriate to Defoe's intentions in his fiction and lends an air of authenticity to the autobiographical discourse of his characters. Plainness of language notwithstanding, Defoe's prose is not de-

void of linguistic creativity; when it is appropriate, he skillfully uses aphorisms, proverbial phrases, and figurative comparisons. He apostrophizes, uses analogies, constructs alliterative sequences and rhetorical questions. Like Alexander Pope, he is a master of periphrasis.

At first acquaintance, Defoe's first-person narrators seem unusual or uncommon—they are prostitute and courtesan, sailor and gentleman, criminal and Quaker—but they are very much of a type: They are practical, business-minded, middle-class folk who inhabit an active and vigorous world. These narrators—Roxana, Moll Flanders, Robinson Crusoe, Colonel Jack, Captain Singleton, the unnamed Cavalier—are possessed of a sturdy, irrepressible desire to conquer all circumstances; they are industrious and determined, and their ingenuity often proves their economic salvation. Indeed, Defoe's narrators seem always to be counting or tallying money or goods or movable property.

All Defoe's long narratives tell essentially the same story: An average, but prudent and hard-working, person is forced by circumstances into desperate straits but manages, through human ingenuity and determination, to gain success. Defoe's characters personify the heroic in common humanity, and their actions represent the religious significance of hard work and discipline. Defoe writes about everyday life and its temptations and compromises, but he also illustrates the workings of divine providence in the humblest of daily activities.

Defoe's fiction has often been criticized for its lack of discernible structure—he rarely uses chapter divisions, leaving no clues to the dramatic moments and internal climaxes in the narratives. He provides a stunning variety of richly detailed episodes that do little to advance what little plot there is, but which do create a sense of the importance of the mundane. Unlike the novelists who would follow him, Defoe avoids character analysis, preferring instead to concentrate on action and incident; his characters show little emotion and a considerable amount of calm reflection. Defoe's debts to allegory and the moral treatise are evident in the hortatory tone so characteristic of his tales; he moralizes frequently—to many readers' irritation—but always, it is in the service of his intentions, in the contexts of the solid middle-class fictional world that he has created.



## ROBINSON CRUSOE

**First published** 1719

**Type of work:** Novel

*Shipwrecked on a deserted island, an English seaman manages to create, through hard work and ingenuity, a profitable and comfortable life for himself.*

*Robinson Crusoe* was Defoe's first-published full narrative and his most popular, appealing to both middle-class and aristocratic readers with its combination of a believable and very human first-person narrator, realistic detail, allusions and references to actual places and people, imagery drawn from everyday life and the natural world, and an appealing, if somewhat unstructured, narrative line.

The title page of the book provides a considerable amount of information for the reader. *The LIFE and Strange Surprising ADVENTURES of ROBINSON CRUSOE, of YORK. Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by PI-RATES. Written by Himself.* That, in brief, is a plot summary. It also is evidence of the ordinariness of the narrator, a seaman from York (and therefore middle class) who is forced by circumstances to fend for himself in unfriendly surroundings, a practical man who manages to survive for twenty-eight years before his rescue. Finally, within this long title is the evidence of Defoe's insistence on realism—the use of real place names, the statement that the book is an autobiographical narrative.

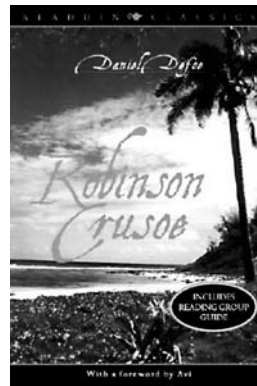
That Robinson Crusoe is a Defoe character is evident from the moment he finds himself shipwrecked. He acts immediately in the interest of survival, salvaging such necessities as he can from the stricken ship and building a rude shelter. Yet Crusoe's concern is not only for his physical well-being; he begins a journal in which he plans to record his spiritual progress as it is reflected in the daily activities that mark his sojourn on the island. For nearly two decades, Crusoe works to create a life for him-

self, building what he needs, improvising where he must, and ultimately replicating a little corner of England on the desert island. What he accomplishes is beyond basic survival; he fashions an English life that is dependent on the transformation of raw materials into the necessities of his culture. He plants grain that he bakes into bread, he domesticates goats so that he might have milk, and he turns a cave into a cozy fortified dwelling that boasts comfortable furniture. When Friday arrives, Crusoe's little English empire is complete: The conqueror has mastered both the territory and its people.

Having survived the shipwreck, Crusoe has become strongly aware of his vulnerability as a human being, and throughout the narrative he insists that his life is proof of the workings of divine Providence. Consequently, he often reflects on the spiritual lessons to be learned not only from his experiences on the island but also from the events in his life that led to his sojourn so far from home. This reflection is typical of Defoe's narrators, who look on life's experiences as a series of symbolic occurrences pointing to the connections between the spiritual and the secular.

Defoe has created in Robinson Crusoe a man very like himself—and very much a typical eighteenth century Englishman. Crusoe's plebeian origins, his earnest industry, his tendency to see religious meaning in the mundane, and his talent for overcoming misfortune are all Defoe's qualities. Like the average Englishman of his time, Crusoe is something of a bigot, and although he treats Friday well, the slave is never offered his freedom and must call Crusoe "Master." Crusoe triumphs over his circumstances and environment, and indeed he manages to provide himself with a little paradise on earth; but he is English to the core, and with the first opportunity he returns to England and settles down to family life.

*Robinson Crusoe* is often described as one of the major forerunners of the novel. Although written as a travel narrative, it displays many of the modern



novel's major characteristics: realism (through verisimilitude, the first-person narrator, imagery from the natural world, and copious detail), interesting and believable characters engaged in plausible adventures and activities, and an engaging story.

## MOLL FLANDERS

**First published:** 1722

**Type of work:** Novel

*Born into poverty, a resourceful and industrious woman works her way through moral lapses and misfortunes to repentance and middle-class respectability and comfort.*

If *Moll Flanders* is Defoe's most highly regarded fictional narrative, Moll Flanders is probably Defoe's most memorable narrator, with her compelling account of a life spent largely in attempts to survive in a society hostile to unattached women.

Born to and abandoned by a convicted felon, Moll Flanders is reared first by Gypsies and then as a ward of the parish of Colchester. At fourteen, she is hired as a servant to a kind family who educates her along with their daughters. Moll, believing she is loved, loses her virtue to the oldest son, who later pays her to marry the youngest son, Robin. Widowed after five years, Moll is married four more times, to a draper who spends all of her money, to a sea captain who turns out to be her half brother, to a roguish Irishman (from whom she separates when he decides to continue highway robbery), and to a bank clerk (with whom she finds happiness until his death). Between the brother and the highwayman, she spends six years as the mistress of a gentleman whose wife is insane. Moll also bears several children to husbands and lover, but she seems ill-suited to motherhood. In the end, she is reunited with the great love of her life—Jemmy E., the charming Irishman—with whom she resolves to live respectably.

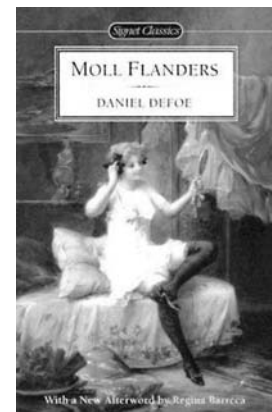
Because she has no social status and no real financial possibilities, Moll Flanders, like so many eighteenth century women, is dependent to a great degree on men—as husbands or keepers or employers—and on her own industry for survival. Her

adventures following Robin's death are focused on marrying profitably: Moll learns to say little about herself, to pretend to wealth in order to attract men, and to behave like a lady in order to appear worthy of gentlemen. Like so many women of the middle class and the aristocracy, her principal objects are money and security, and she employs all of her energy in the pursuit of a financially lucrative marriage. She has two embarrassing failures and achieves only modest success with the bank clerk, and when he dies, she is eventually tempted by her poverty to begin a criminal career that lasts for twelve years. By the time Moll is apprehended in the act of stealing two pieces of silk, she has become one of the wealthiest thieves in London.

In the story of Moll Flanders, the reader can recognize many of the concerns that Defoe addressed in his fiction. Moll is a sturdy, resourceful, intelligent woman, driven by her need to survive. She turns to a life of crime, is enabled by her industry and ingenuity to succeed to the point of minor wealth, and is forced by her Newgate incarceration to a recognition of her need for repentance.

The story of Moll Flanders's life and misadventures displays the stylistic traits for which Defoe is praised. Moll's world—eighteenth century London, with its crowded streets and throngs of humanity, with its gulf between rich and poor—is vividly realized in Defoe's attention to detail and in his frequent allusions to actual places and real people. The horrors of Newgate Prison are detailed in vigorous language that conveys strong images of confinement and inescapable poverty. Defoe's fascination with precise location and the intricacies of process allows Moll to elaborate on her plans for snaring rich husbands and on her techniques for stealing jewelry or other goods. So graphically located are Moll's exploits that at times the book reads like a criminal atlas of eighteenth century London streets or even like a manual for a would-be thief.

This focus on the minutiae of thievery, coupled



with Moll's evident relish in telling stories that display her audacity and subtlety in criminal activity, her satisfaction with the expertise she developed, and her sense of triumph at acquiring wealth (albeit through crime), becomes the basis for Defoe's didacticism. The middle-class traits that Defoe admires—practicality, determination, focus on assets and liabilities—have been employed in a reprehensible life, and Moll must undergo a spiritual conversion and repent before the narrative ends.

Finally caught in the act, Moll is incarcerated in Newgate and condemned to death. She is visited by a clergyman, who prays with her and entreats her to repent her wicked past. Moved by the minister's words, Moll realizes that she must be concerned with her spiritual impoverishment. Her repentance is intensified by the imprisonment of Jemmy, her favorite husband, whose criminal life she now blames on her desertion of him. Moll and Jemmy escape execution and are transported to Virginia, where they purchase their freedom and become landowners. The elderly Moll Flanders who narrates the story is a woman who is determined to tell

her story so it can serve as a deterrent to anyone who might contemplate a life of crime, as an assurance to the sinner that no life is too despicable to be salvaged through repentance.

## SUMMARY

Daniel Defoe's narratives—in particular, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*—are widely regarded as ancestors of the novel. The first two have each, at one time or another, been declared “the first novel,” although the consensus is that both books lack two essential characteristics of the novel: character development and a well-structured plot.

There is more agreement on Defoe's contribution to the development of the new genre. From Defoe's work, the novel acquired realism, moral complexity, plain language, and a focus on everyday human life. He may not be the father of the English novel, but that genre owes much of its character to the fiction he produced.

E. D. Huntley

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*Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, with His Vision of the Angelick World*, 1720

*The History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell, a Gentleman Who, Tho' Deaf and Dumb, Writes Down Any Stranger's Name at First Sight, with Their Future Contingencies of Fortune*, 1720

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SHORT FICTION:

*A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal*, 1706

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*The True-Born Englishman: A Satyr*, 1701

NONFICTION:

*An Essay upon Projects*, 1697

*The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, 1702

*The History of the Union of Great Britain*, 1709

*An Appeal to Honour and Justice*, 1715

*The Family Instructor*, in *Three Parts*, 1715

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent did the rigors of Daniel Defoe's early life prepare him for the career that he had?
- Defoe is one of the earliest of the many writers whose literary career grew out of a journalistic background. What historical factors made this development possible?
- What desires of readers did Defoe understand extremely well for a man of his time?
- Explain Robinson Crusoe's creativity beyond his skill for surviving.
- How does the characterization of Moll Flanders benefit from the first-person narration of the work?
- Does the great range of techniques and literary artifices of works accepted as novels of recent decades provide a basis for arguing that Defoe should be regarded as the first true English novelist?





Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## ANITA DESAI

**Born:** Mussoorie, India  
June 24, 1937

*One of the most acclaimed of contemporary Indian women novelists writing in English, Desai has made a notable contribution to women's studies and to the psychological novel.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anita Desai (duh-SI) was born in Mussoorie, India, on June 24, 1937, of Indo-German parentage—her father, Dhiren N. Mazumdar, was a Bengali Hindu and her mother, Antoinette Nime, was a German. She grew up in Delhi speaking German and Bengali at home and Hindi and Urdu to her friends and neighbors. She learned English only when she went to a mission school. By her own account, she instantly fell in love with English literature and it became her lifelong obsession. Educated at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School and later at Miranda House at the University of Delhi, she completed her B.A. in English literature with honors in 1957. Soon after her graduation, she moved to Calcutta, where she worked for a year at the Max Mueller Bhavan institute and married Ashvin Desai, an executive, on December 13, 1958. The couple had four children. Her youngest daughter, Kiran Desai, is a successful novelist herself, winning the 2006 Man Booker Prize for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006).

A gifted writer, Desai began writing at the age of seven. She published her first story in English at the age of nine in an American children's magazine. Her literary career, however, began with the publication of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock*, in 1963. In this novel she presents a probing psycho-

logical study of a hypersensitive young woman obsessed with the neurotic fear of death caused by an oppressive marriage. The three parts of the novel showed her growing sense of alienation, her growing hysteria, and her eventual degeneration into insanity. Desai's effective use of the stream-of-consciousness technique in the novel and the lyrical quality of her prose attracted critical praise and launched her career.

After the success of her first novel, Desai continued to explore the interior landscape of the female psyche for the next fifteen years. Between 1965 and 1980, she wrote five novels of unusual distinction: *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), and *Clear Light of Day* (1980). Some of these novels received wide critical acclaim both in India and abroad. She received the certificate of excellence from the Authors and Publishers' Guild of India for *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Fire on the Mountain* won for her the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize for Regional Literature and the Sahitya Akademi Award, the most prestigious literary award offered by India's National Academy of Letters. Her sixth novel, *Clear Light of Day*, was nominated for England's celebrated Man Booker Prize.

Two novels, *In Custody* (1984) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), in which she writes about cross-cultural concerns and experiences from a male point of view, marked a new stage of development in her career as a novelist. *In Custody* explores the decline of Urdu, a gracious and poetic language once cherished in northern India by both Muslims and Hindus. In *Baumgartner's Bombay* she portrays the life of a wandering Jew seeking refuge

in India. The novel was also regarded as Desai's search for her German roots. Both these novels received a great deal of attention in the United States. *Baumgartner's Bombay*, in particular, aroused much interest among Jewish readers and won a Jewish prize, the Hadassah. *In Custody* was nominated for the Man Booker Prize. In 1993 she won the Literary Lion Award from the New York Public Library and in 1994 the Neil Gunn Fellowship of the Scottish Arts Council.

Her novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) chronicles the quest of two European hippies, the Italian Matteo and his German wife Sophie, who in 1975 join the Indian ashram of a woman guru simply called Mother. Disenchanted with Mother, Sophie leaves the ashram with her children on a mission to debunk the spiritual leader. Eventually, she learns about Mother's past and comes to see her in a different light. The novel fascinated critics and readers for its look at India from an outsider's perspective, taking up the idea introduced in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. Desai's next novel, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) juxtaposes the lives of two Indian siblings in two distinct places in the world. While the elder sister Uma stays in India to support her aging parents, her young brother Arun earns a scholarship to the United States, where he experiences his first summer vacation with an American guest family. Contrasting descriptions of the Indian and American society, the novel was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and won Desai the Alberto Moravia Award from Italy in 1999.

With *The Zigzag Way* (2004) Desai moved away from India and turned to the adventures of Eric, a young American historian, in a remote Mexican village. For Eric, it is also a voyage of discovery of his own English family roots as he encounters the mysterious Dona Vera, herself a wizened European immigrant with a shady past. The beautifully rendered Mexican landscape seemed inspired by Desai's own Mexican retreat.

In addition to the novels, Desai has published two volumes of short stories, *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories* (1978) and *Diamond Dust: Stories* (2000). The latter contains "The Rooftop Dwellers," a sequel to *Fasting, Feasting*, telling of Arun's humorous return to India that Desai had left out of the novel because its lighthearted tone contrasted with the novel's more somber atmosphere. Desai also cowrote a screenplay of her novel *In Custody*,

which in 1993 was made into a film by the Bombay-born Ismail Merchant, who had coproduced films with James Ivory since the early 1960's. A prolific writer, Desai also has written three novels for children: *The Peacock Garden* (1974), *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976), and *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (1982), for which she received the 1982 Guardian Award for Children's Fiction.

A major voice in Indian literature in English, Desai served for a number of years as a member of the Advisory Board for English of the Sahitya Akademi, where she was made a lifetime fellow in 2007, at age seventy. In 1978, she was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1986, she was a visiting fellow at Girton College, Cambridge, England, and in 1987-1988 she taught at Smith College in the United States. From 1988 to 1993, as Purington Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, she taught creative writing one semester a year and split her time between India and the United States. In 1993, she was appointed the John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Program of Writing, teaching creative writing. By 2007, she was a professor emeritus at MIT and was giving guest lectures around the globe. Reticent about her private life, Desai does not encourage any investigation of autobiographical detail in her work.

## ANALYSIS

Of all the Indian writers of English fiction, Desai is perhaps the most consummate artist. In her own account, though writing comes to her as naturally as breathing, she works consciously, laboriously, and meticulously to impose a design on the chaotic raw material of life. She regards writing as a process of discovering the truth. This truth is for the most part hidden beneath the surfaces of what people see, say, and do. Consequently, she does not give much importance to plot. Her major preoccupation as a novelist is to plunge to the depths of her characters' subconscious and reveal the interior landscapes of their minds through the use of evocative poetry, myth, symbol, image, and metaphor.

Desai's writing shows that she has the rare ability to transcend the limitations of a foreign medium of expression, the English language. In her own words, "By writing novels that have been cataloged by critics as psychological, and that are purely sub-



jective, I have been left free to employ, simply, the language of the interior." Unlike other contemporary Indian writers who are mainly concerned with the country's social, political, or economic problems, Desai claims that her "novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics, or character." Her central concern in fiction has always been an exploration of the individual psyche.

Though the setting, the characters, the ethos, and the atmosphere of her novels are generally Indian, she successfully transcends the constraints of her contemporary social and political reality by using stylistic devices such as stream of consciousness, the interior monologue, flashback, pattern and rhythm, fantasy, and symbolism. She frequently uses remembrance as a narrative technique to probe the characters' buried selves, as well as to further the plot. Her novels show the influence of many English and European writers, including Henry James, E. M. Forster, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Rimbaud, Anton Chekhov, and Fyodor Dostoevski. In her later novels, Desai has experimented with describing India through the eyes of Europeans, or having an Indian character look at America with the eyes of a foreigner. With *The Zigzag Way*, Desai moved completely away from India, yet her trademark psychological introspection into her characters and her fascination with revealing the past through a series of flashbacks and stories links this novel to her previous ones with Indian themes.

Though Desai refuses to label herself as a feminist, she is gifted with an extraordinary feminine sensibility and has made female and feminist concerns the mainstay of her fiction. She may be regarded as a pioneer in exploring the lives of women in her early novels, which are dominated by compelling women, such as Maya (*Cry, the Peacock*), Monisha (*Voices in the City*), Sarah (*Bye-Bye, Blackbird*), Sita (*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*), Nanda Kaul (*Fire on the Mountain*), and Bim (*Clear Light of Day*). Her women struggle against the tyranny of a patriarchal family or an oppressive marriage to retain a sense of dignity, honor, and integrity. This is beautifully accomplished in the character of Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, who sacrifices much for her aging, conservative and domineering parents, yet refuses to give up her soul.

In some of the novels she also focuses her atten-

tion on the tragic plight of the Indian widow. In *Clear Light of Day*, for example, she presents a haunting portrait of Aunt Mira, who was married at twelve and widowed at fifteen when she was yet a virgin. Consequently, throughout her life she is obliged to slave for others, first for her husband's family and then for the Das family. Desai lets the reader see through Aunt Mira's eyes the strangeness of life and how she shrivels in fear from it.

*In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* shift the spotlight from women to men and point to a new direction in Desai's growth as a writer. The thematic groundwork for these two novels was prepared by an earlier work, *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*, which dealt with the plight of Indian immigrants in England and explored the problems of cultural preservation and assimilation. *In Custody* makes a political statement about the loss of a civilization; Urdu was the repository of the Mughal culture in Indian history. In *Baumgartner's Bombay*, Desai turns to the experiences of an Austrian Jew who escapes from the Nazis and comes as an immigrant to seek refuge in India, but there, too, is always treated as an outsider. In depicting Baumgartner's view of India, Desai was probably empathizing with her own mother's experiences. By her own account, in writing the novel she found a way to explore the German side of her ancestry. The novel indicates Desai's growing political concerns and her impatience with human intolerance.

In Desai's fictional world, the predominant theme is alienation of the individual. The theme of alienation manifests itself in many forms. In her earlier novels, *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, and *Fire on the Mountain*, alienation results from entrapment in an unhappy and oppressive marriage. In *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* alienation stems from the encounter between two cultures or races. In *Clear Light of Day* the source of alienation is the breakup of the family as a result of India's partition. In *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* the cause of alienation is as much a hostile social milieu as it is existential angst. In *Journey to Ithaca* an alternative European marriage nearly breaks under the strain of the young husband's fanatical quest for spiritual enlightenment that leaves his wife feeling left out and betrayed. Loneliness in the middle of an overbearing family is Uma's fate in *Fasting, Feasting*. Initially, Eric appears as a rather remote, somewhat weak but also

alienated young academic in *The Zigzag Way*, whom only confrontation with his family's past brings to an engagement with life.

The theme of an older woman who may be either a spiritual guide or a charlatan is investigated in Desai's characters of Mother from *Journey to Ithaca* and Dona Vera of *The Zigzag Way*. Both women have their strengths and attractiveness, yet there are also some less savory details to their past lives, underlining the author's general refusal to indulge in any kind of nostalgia or idealization.

Some other themes and motifs in Desai's fiction are conflict between tradition and modernity, conflict between East and West, disharmony in marital relationships, disenchantment, loss and gain, death and violence, and the inhumane and oppressive environment of metropolitan cities like Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay. *Journey to Ithaca* looked at Paris, Venice, and New York City in the 1920's, while the second half of *Fasting, Feasting* is set in the suburbs surrounding a Massachusetts college town. *The Zigzag Way* looks at remote Mexico. Her fiction is also known for its power to evoke an atmosphere. Though her major themes are universal, she successfully uses English to incorporate Indian sensibility into her fictional world.

## FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel portrays the tense relationship between a self-exiled old woman and her mentally disturbed great-granddaughter, a recluse who sets a mountain on fire.*

*Fire on the Mountain* is a superbly crafted novel, known for its rich symbolic imagery and psychological insights. A winner of two prestigious awards, it tells the story of two older women and a young girl.

The first part of the novel takes the reader inside the mind of Nanda Kaul, the aged protagonist. The widow of a university vice chancellor and once at the hub of a large, demanding family and a hectic social life, she now lives in seclusion at Carignano, a desolate old house on the ridge of a mountain

in Kasauli. Aloof, indifferent, and irritable, she wants no intrusion to violate her privacy. Her cloistered life is threatened when she receives a letter announcing an impending visit by her great-granddaughter Raka and when a telephone call comes from her childhood friend Ila Das, who wishes to visit her.

The second part of the novel shows the tense relationship between Nanda Kaul and Raka. A recluse, Raka has the habit of slipping away into her own private world, ignoring her great-grandmother completely. Haunted by nightmarish memories of a drunken, violent father and an unhappy, battered mother, she shuns human company and spends her time roaming the desolate hills and ravines like a bird or a lizard. This offers Desai an opportunity to weave symbolic nature imagery into the text of the novel. Challenged by Raka's indifference, Nanda Kaul reluctantly comes out of her self-imposed quietude and makes a desperate, though futile, attempt to attract the child to her by telling her fantastic stories about her own childhood.

The final part of the novel describes Ila Das's brief visit to Carignano for tea. Formerly a lecturer at Mr. Kaul's university, she now works as a welfare officer in the Kasauli area. During the visit, she nostalgically evokes memories of Nanda Kaul's seemingly glamorous past as the vice chancellor's wife. On her way home, however, she is raped and murdered. The shocking news of her tragic end shatters Nanda Kaul completely and breaks down her psychological defenses. Before she collapses, she splutters the truth that all the stories she told Raka were fabricated, that her husband never loved her and had carried on a lifelong affair with a Christian woman whom he loved but could not marry, that she always felt alienated from her children, and that she was forced into a life of exile. Meanwhile Raka slips away with some matches and sets the forest on fire.

The plot of the novel is very simple, but its rich imagery and symbolism reflect the characters' moods and mental states and reveal their interior landscapes. The fire on the mountain is symbolic of the fire that smolders in Nanda Kaul's heart for years because of her husband's betrayal in marriage. It is also symbolic of women's rage in general.

## CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*Through remembrance during a family reunion, two sisters regain a clear understanding of the importance of family in their lives.*

*Clear Light of Day* is known for its unmatched power of conveying the atmosphere of decadence. It takes place in Delhi, in the summer of 1947—the year of India’s independence and partition. Through the interplay of memory and introspection, the novel re-creates the dull, stagnant lives of a middle-class Bengali family—the Das household. Desai describes the novel as “a four-dimensional piece on how a family moves backwards and forwards in a period of time.” Accordingly, the novel is divided into four parts.

The first part of the novel is set in the present. The second part deals with the past immediately preceding the present. The third part delves into an earlier past, and the fourth part brings the time sequence back to the present again, with an eye toward the future.

Desai’s control of the narrative, as characters slip into their subconscious and examine the past, shows her mastery of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

The novel begins when Tara returns from the United States with her diplomat husband to visit her childhood home in Delhi. Bim, her unmarried older sister, still lives in the house with her youngest brother, Baba, who is mentally retarded. Their parents are dead, and their older brother, Raja, has abandoned the family to live in another city as the rich heir of his Muslim father-in-law’s estate. As a result, Bim is left alone to take care of the house, her retarded brother, and her father’s business, in addition to pursuing her career as a history professor.

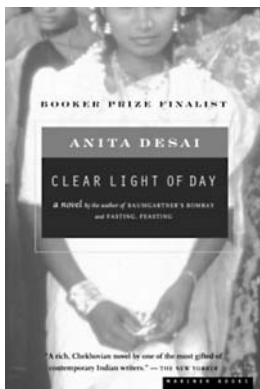
As Tara and Bim compare their memories, Tara discovers that Bim is still trapped in the past, nur-

turing a deep resentment against Raja over a letter he wrote to her from Hyderabad. To suggest the stagnant nature of Bim’s psyche, Desai uses an image of the stagnant well in the garden that would not release a dead cow. As Bim recounts her sacrifices for the family, Tara comes to understand why her sister has become bitter and angry. Tara’s constant prodding, however, brings Bim to the verge of neurosis when her anger erupts at helpless Baba. Bim’s loss of control, followed by repentance and compassion, makes her see things much more clearly, realizing that her siblings are part of her life, and that together they form a whole. Tara also discovers that, though she has submerged herself in her husband’s life, much of her is still anchored in Bim and Raja and the old childhood home.

Tara’s visit thus proves to be therapeutic for Bim, who finally comes to terms with the past. Though Bim decides not to attend the wedding of Raja’s daughter, she forgives him and invites him to Delhi. Her emotional conflict is resolved.

Though the characters of Bim and Tara are finely juxtaposed and fully developed, the predominant point of view in the novel is Bim’s. It is mainly through Bim’s perspective that readers see the story of the family’s disintegration and reconciliation. In *Bim*, Desai has created a strong, resourceful, self-reliant, and enlightened woman protagonist.

Nominated for the Man Booker Prize, *Clear Light of Day* has been praised for its musical structure and rhythmic devices that depict women’s memories afloat in time. In the novel, time is a destroyer and a preserver.



## “A DEVOTED SON”

**First published:** 1978 (collected in *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories*, 1978)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The story dramatizes the conflict between a physician son and his ailing father’s attitudes toward life.*

“A Devoted Son” appears in Desai’s acclaimed collection of short stories, *Games at Twilight, and Other Stories*. Unlike her earlier novels in which fe-

male characters dominate the texts, this story is about male characters. Focusing on a father-son relationship in a traditional Hindu family, the story looks at the problem of old age from two different angles. The setting of the story is realistic. Developed with a sense of humor, the story presents a fine study in human psychology and love.

The title of the story refers to Rakesh, who is always reverential to his parents, touching their feet in devotion. A brilliant student, after getting his M.D. in India he goes to the United States on a scholarship and pursues his career in a most prestigious hospital, winning the admiration of his American colleagues. His love and devotion to his aging parents compel him to return to India, get married to an uneducated village girl in deference to his parents' wishes, start working in a city hospital, rise to the position of a director, and finally set up his own clinic and come to be recognized as the best and the richest doctor in town. People can hardly believe that a man born to illiterate parents could rise to such heights of glory and yet remain devoted to them.

The conflict between the father and the son begins when, after his retirement and the death of his wife, the old man frequently falls ill with mysterious diseases that even his physician son cannot diagnose. Worried about his father's health, the son begins to supervise his father's diet. All the mouth-watering sweets, fried savory snacks, and rich meals are forbidden. Instead he is forced to eat boiled foods and take numerous kinds of pills, powders, medicines, and tonics. The old man is shocked with disbelief at his son's tyrannical attitude, for who could ever imagine "a son who actually refused his father the food he craved?" He feels starved and complains to his neighboring friend of his son's attitude, but nobody believes him.

In the last scene, when his son brings him a new tonic to make him feel better, the father reproachfully smashes the tonic bottle on the floor and expresses his wish to be left alone to die. The father's final act of rebellion makes the reader wonder whether the son's almost tyrannical control of his father's life is justified in the name of filial devotion. Viewed in this light, the title of the story becomes ironic.

## FASTING, FEASTING

**First published:** 1999

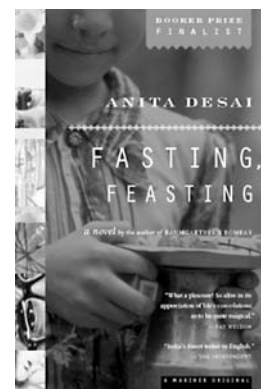
**Type of work:** Novel

*The lives of two Indian siblings are contrasted: While sister Uma stays at home to care for her aging parents, son Arun goes to the United States on a scholarship.*

In *Fasting, Feasting* Desai focuses on the children of a conservative, upper-middle-class Indian family living in a provincial town southwest of Bombay. Desai is as much interested in the family dynamics as in the effects of strict patriarchy on the next generation.

As the novel opens, husband and wife, who have become so much like one person that Uma refers to them as MamaPapa, sit on their favorite veranda swing. The place is symbolic for the static nature of their lives now that Papa has retired as a lawyer and his children are adults. Uma is there to serve them, even though she is forty-three, but unmarried. Here, such rituals of patriarchy are performed, as when Uma fetches an orange that Mama carefully peels, slices, and skins before handing each sliver to Papa.

In keeping with Desai's desire to tell the truth in her fiction, even if it is painful, Uma is denied much possibility to develop. Through her flashbacks it is revealed that she was denied the opportunity to go to her beloved convent school when she was fifteen, and she was forced to return to her parents when she ran away to attend the school. Mama decided to arrange a marriage for her at age sixteen, but the prospective groom scandalized the family when he fell in love with her younger sister Aruna. Uma then joined her widowed aunt Mira-masi on a pilgrimage to a temple, where she longed to stay but was taken home again. In Mira-masi, the reader meets one of Desai's wizened old women who have taken to spirituality as an act of defiance.



The next attempts to marry off Uma also were failures. The second fiancé's family just took her dowry, and the third married Uma in a nightmare version of a traditional wedding and intended to enslave her as a second wife. For once, she was saved by Papa.

Uma's fate is not the worst, as Desai shows through the other female characters around her. Beautiful, intelligent Anamika wins a scholarship to Oxford she is never allowed to accept because of her early marriage. Bullied by her mother-in-law, Anamika is most likely killed by her husband, who masks her death as suicide. Even Uma's younger sister Aruna, who marries a successful man whom she dominates, is trapped by her desire for perfection. Happier alternatives are hinted at in women like Doctor Dutt and young Moyna, daughter of the neighbor Mrs. Joshi, who also has a career. However, the first part of the novel ends with the dispersal of Anamika's ashes, witnessed by a grieving Uma.

The second part of the novel tells of Arun's first summer holiday in Massachusetts, where he has gone to study. He is invited to stay with the Pattons, a suburban family. Critics have complained that the Pattons are a bit of a caricature. Mr. Patton is a steak-eating businessman who bosses his wife and children; Mrs. Patton is a closet vegetarian who seeks survival through evasion; daughter Melanie

is anorexic; and son Rod is a passionate jogger and football player. At the end of the novel, formal closure is achieved as Arun gives a grateful Mrs. Patton the shawl and tea that his parents made Uma send him.

*Fasting, Feasting* works best when it focuses on the Indian family. Even though Uma and Mama can share a joke alone on the swing, the limits of Uma's life imposed by patriarchy are painfully obvious. Desai's look at America is deliberately that of an outsider like Arun, who sees irony in everyday life. Desai had planned to write a third, humorous part of the novel, telling of Arun's return to India after graduation, but instead she published it as the short story "The Rooftop Dwellers" in her collection *Diamond Dust: Stories*.

## SUMMARY

Focusing on the inner, private lives of people and exploring their minds, Anita Desai has made a notable contribution to the development of the psychological novel. She has also played a pioneering role, particularly in the context of patriarchal society in India, in exploring female and feminist concerns and in making the woman's viewpoint, thoughts, and behavior the central focus of her novels. Gifted with a poetic sensibility, she works on the craft of fiction with meticulous care.

*Chaman L. Sahni; updated by R. C. Lutz*

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*Voices in the City*, 1965  
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*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, 1975  
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*Clear Light of Day*, 1980  
*In Custody*, 1984  
*Baumgartner's Bombay*, 1988  
*Journey to Ithaca*, 1995  
*Fasting, Feasting*, 1999  
*The Zigzag Way*, 2004

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*Diamond Dust: Stories*, 2000



## SCREENPLAY:

*In Custody*, 1993 (with Shahrukh Husain; adaptation of her novel)

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- How do Anita Desai's female characters cope with the demands that their society places upon them?
- What is the importance of place in Desai's novels? To what extent does Desai's description of place interact with the fate of her characters?
- Is there a difference in how a female and a male character are portrayed and develop in Desai's novels?
- What is the role of the past in Desai's novels, and how does it affect the central characters?
- Many of Desai's characters are relative outsiders of the society she depicts. What are some of the effects of their positions as outsiders?
- Looking at spiritual leaders in Desai's novels, how are they portrayed?
- Compare Desai's descriptions of India with that of another locale. Is Desai as effective in evoking non-Indian settings as Indian settings?
- Discuss how one of Desai's female characters develops in the course of one of her novels. What threatens and what promotes her development?





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## CHARLES DICKENS

**Born:** Portsmouth, Hampshire, England  
February 7, 1812

**Died:** Gad's Hill, near Rochester, Kent, England  
June 9, 1870

*Dickens's innovations in genre, serialization, and magazine publishing deeply affected the development of the nineteenth century novel. His social criticism had a direct influence on his country, and his extraordinary inventiveness left a legacy of memorable characters.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England, on February 7, 1812, the second child of John and Elizabeth Dickens. Following his father's work as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, the family moved to the port town of Chatham in 1817, where for a time Dickens enjoyed an idyllic middle-class childhood—fresh country air, decent schooling, and books to read in the attic on sunny afternoons.

It was a short idyll. By 1822, improvident John Dickens's fortunes were waning. Recalled to London by his office, he placed his wife and six children in a cheap and smelly little house in the ugly new suburb of Camden Town. In late January or early February, 1824, the seminal event of Dickens's life occurred: He was sent to work sticking labels on bottles of boot polish alongside a group of ragged urchins in Warren's Blacking Factory, a tottering and rat-infested building next to the Thames River in old central London. Passersby could see him at work in the window. His degradation seemed complete.

To make matters worse, there was the loneliness. Within a month, in February, 1824, John Dickens was arrested for debt. His family joined him in the Marshalsea Prison—all, that is, except twelve-year-old Charles, who was left to survive on his own in London.

Buoyed by an inheritance, Dickens's father was released after only a few months in prison. Charles's mother, however, kept her son at the blacking factory—something he never forgot. Only after John Dickens had retired from the office and turned to freelance journalism in March, 1825, was Charles sent back to school. The nightmare had lasted little more than a year, but a year is a long time to a sensitive, brilliant, and ambitious boy; such an experience, in the class-conscious society of Victorian England, was for Dickens a deep source of shame. The adult Dickens told it only once, to his best friend and first biographer John Forster. His wife never knew.

In 1827, Dickens left school for a dull job as a lawyer's clerk. Two years later, he followed his father into journalism, first as a law reporter, then as the fastest shorthand reporter in the houses of Parliament, moving in 1834 to one of the best newspapers in the country, the *Morning Chronicle*. Meanwhile, he was rejected in love, dabbled in amateur theatricals, and, in 1833, had his first short story published.

Success came fast. Under the pen name of Boz, Dickens rapidly published a series of London "Street Sketches" over the next two years. These were collected together as his first book, *Sketches by Boz* (1836). Original, brilliantly illustrated, and intensely observant of the new phenomena of urban life, it captured the public fancy, and Dickens was invited to collaborate on another project with top cartoonist George Cruikshank. *Pickwick*

*Papers* (1836-1837) followed, in twenty monthly serial parts; its resounding success was assured when Dickens invented Sam Weller, the archetypal streetwise low-life, and teamed him with genial, portly, gentlemanly Mr. Pickwick.

Dickens needed quick success. His craving for middle-class respectability led him rapidly into marriage to kindly and unassuming Catherine Hogarth in 1836, into a growing family, and into the solid comforts of a "proper" home. This situation was also graced by his teenage sister-in-law Mary, whose sudden death in his arms in May, 1837, profoundly shook him. That same year, keen to exercise control over his own writing and thereby to maximize his profits, he first tried his hand at magazine editing. The periodical *Bentley's Miscellany* seemed to need rejuvenating, and although he was still in the middle of *Pickwick Papers*, he began serialization in the magazine of his *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839). That in turn overlapped with his next novel, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839). When *Bentley's Miscellany* folded in 1839, he launched his own magazine, the short-lived *Master Humphry's Clock* (1840-1841), and serialized in it, in forty weekly parts, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841), which was both a pinnacle of Victorian sentimentality and a nightmare of threatened and dying childhood. He also published his historical novel *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of '80* (1841).

The year 1842 saw Dickens's first visit to America. His experiences produced a controversial travel book, *American Notes* (1842), and his picture of a failed utopia, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844). At thirty, he was already a figure of towering importance in Victorian society: Every one of his novels addressed a pressing social issue; he was heavily involved with charities and pressure groups and was increasingly attracted by the stage. Meanwhile, his wife was pregnant with their fifth child. In 1843, he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, following its success with another holiday offering every year.

The writing of his next big novel, *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848), in Italy (which was also the site of another travel book, *Pictures from Italy*, in 1846), went slowly: Dickens missed the direct inspiration of late-night walks in the London streets. His major autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, was published in 1849-1850. In 1850, his ninth child was born and he began his most successful venture into magazine editorship, the weekly *Household Words*

(1849-1859), which mixed entertainment with useful information. It ran until arguments with his publishers caused Dickens to shut it down and start again under the title *All the Year Round* (1859-1870); in this magazine, Dickens helped launch such important fellow novelists as pioneer "sensation" and detective-fiction writer Wilkie Collins.

Dickens's other career as a semiprofessional actor-director first started to merge with his career as a writer in December, 1853, when he gave his first public reading from his own works—a seasonal offering, not for profit, of *A Christmas Carol*. *Bleak House* (1852-1853) had been published the year before, and *Hard Times* (1854), his exposé of industrial inhumanity, was published the year after. In 1855, Dickens again met the first love of his life, the capricious and ornamental banker's daughter Maria Beadnell, who had toyed with him in the early 1830's. She was now fat, forty, and silly. He had his revenge on her, and on the march of time, whose ravages he was himself starting to feel, in the character of garrulous Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857).

In 1856, Dickens bought Gad's Hill Place in Kent, the gentleman's country house that he had once admired, as a boy, from the dusty highroad. In 1857, while directing and acting in a play, he met the young actress Ellen Ternan. The following year, he separated from his plump and aging wife, trumpeting his self-justification in *Household Words* and point-blank denying the obvious implications of his new liaison. The same year, he gave another, better performance, as the dramatic public reader of his own works: Eyewitness accounts testify to his extraordinary, almost hypnotic power over his audience and his ability to transform himself into each of his own characters. Several weeks of London engagements were followed by a three-and-a-half-month reading tour of the provinces, Scotland, and Ireland.

The first issues of *All the Year Round* in 1859 contained the first installment of Dickens's romantic fable of revolutionary France, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) began serialization in 1860, the year of Dickens's second season of public readings. The deaths of his mother and (in India) of his son Walter perhaps colored his shadowy last finished novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), a tale of deceit, betrayals, and violence.

By 1865, Dickens, at fifty-three, looked twenty years older; he had lived too intensely. Death was hastened when, against doctors' orders and family pleas, he added to his public reading repertoire an adaptation of the scene in *Oliver Twist*, where villain Bill Sikes murders the prostitute Nancy. What brought him back to this gory scene, after nearly thirty years—acting ambition, an obsession with sex, blood, and violence, or murky impulses toward self-destruction—will never be satisfactorily explained. He died of heart failure on June 9, 1870, in Kent, England, leaving on his desk an unfinished tale of perversity and murder, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870).

### ANALYSIS

Dickens is one of the accidental giants of literature: Only William Shakespeare has commanded anything like the same level of both extraordinary popularity and critical esteem. Dickens was the first mainstream nineteenth century writer to reach out to hundreds of thousands of lower-class semiliterate readers, for whom he retained a conscientious concern that was only partly paternalistic: When one reads in *Our Mutual Friend* that the urchin Sloppy, who turns the washer-woman's mangle, is "a beautiful reader of a newspaper," because "He do the police in different voices," one can laugh yet be respectful. Dickens himself did much to bring his works within the reach of ordinary people: Monthly serial parts at a shilling (one twentieth of a pound), in an age when a standard novel cost more than thirty times as much, put fiction within the reach of the lower middle classes; the twopence (a sixth of a shilling) weekly cost of *Household Words* made quality entertainment and useful information available to a mass audience.

One secret of Dickens's success, as the detective novelist and critic G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1906, was that Dickens was both genius and Everyman: He wanted what the people wanted. That helps explain why about a dozen pirated adaptations of *Oliver Twist* were playing popular theaters across London before Dickens had even finished writing the novel and why early cinema invested so heavily in his novels—the second British feature film, in 1912, was an adaptation of the very same novel. It partly accounts, too, for the wild fluctuations in his critical reputation during his lifetime and after. Other sources for this are probably his period senti-

mentality and his resounding anti-intellectualism—he was, above all, an instinctive performer and semieducated improviser, the master of the carnival, a self-made man who thought he had a few hard-won truths to tell but who, unconsciously, revealed considerably more. He was not really, Chesterton argues, a novelist at all, but "the last of the mythologists," whose godlike characters, from Pickwick and Sam Weller on, exist "in a perpetual summer of being themselves." A Dickens novel is theater, even circus. Not until *Dombey and Son* in 1846 did he (regretfully) move on from the episodic and freewheeling "life and adventures" structure of his early novels.

When the twelve-year-old Dickens walked alone through London to the blacking factory, the scene of his degradation, he learned step-by-step the map of the sprawling and frightening city that looms in nearly every one of his works, the first modern metropolis, where only one in two poor children would survive to precarious adulthood. It takes the first detective in fiction to penetrate such a labyrinth, and Dickens invents him, in *Bleak House*'s Police Inspector Bucket. To express the image of the great city, it takes an imaginative identification of people with their houses, like the kind Dickens achieves in *Little Dorrit*, or the intrusion of a gigantic symbol, such as the (real-life) dustheaps that loom over the urban wasteland of *Our Mutual Friend*, and through which scavengers sift for coins, spoons, rags, and bits of human bone.

The story of his childhood degradation was also the source of his relentless, even desperate, creative energy and the core of the central myth he created of lost and violated childhood. As if upping the stakes of helplessness and terror, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and the much-later *Little Dorrit*, he projects his anguish through the female persona of Little Nell, to whose deathbed the narrative inevitably marches, and "little" Amy Dorrit, the child born and bred in the Marshalsea Prison, who rises by force of humility of spirit above its degradation. In *Bleak House*, perhaps his masterpiece, he speaks, still more startlingly, directly through another female character, illegitimate and unattractive Esther Summerson.

In every one of Dickens's novels is embedded an attack on a specific social abuse. In *Bleak House*, it is the dilatory injustice of the legal system. His portrait of the vampiric lawyer Mr. Vholes, a minor

character who might at any moment step to center stage, perhaps typifies Dickens's method and its biblical roots: Attempting to reassure a client, Vholes thumps his coffinlike desk, making a sound as if ashes were falling on ashes, and dust on dust. This very same example, however, points back toward the true source of Dickens's art: not a thirst for social justice, though he devoutly felt this, but an eye for the weirdness of the world and the estranged unfamiliarity of the ordinary—Vholes “skinning” his black gloves from his hands.

## OLIVER TWIST

**First published:** 1837-1839 (originally published as *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An orphan survives the workhouse and London's criminal underworld to be rescued by a rich benefactor.*

The first chapters of Dickens's first “true” novel, *Oliver Twist*, which he began to write concurrently with the picaresque adventures of Mr. Pickwick, form a hard-hitting satire on the inhuman cruelties of the New Poor Laws of 1834. These dictated that society's jobless and desperate should be virtually imprisoned in harsh institutions known as workhouses. Into one of these a little bastard boy is born—the lowest of the low, christened “Oliver Twist” by a pompous parish official, Mr. Bumble the beadle. Yet Oliver is in fact a gentleman by blood, with a fortune awaiting him, for his story is also a romance of origins, a battered child's wish fulfillment.

*The Parish Boy's Progress* (to use Dickens's subtitle) really starts when Oliver draws the short straw among a group of starving workhouse boys and must approach the master at dinnertime to utter his famous request: “Please, sir, I want some more.” He is promptly sold to an undertaker, whose wife locks him up among the coffins for punishment. He escapes to London, where he is befriended by a streetwise boy, the Artful Dodger, who initiates him into the all-boy household of an “old gentleman” called Fagin (the name of one of Dickens's com-

panions at the blacking factory), a criminal mastermind. Innocent as ever, it is not until Oliver is mistakenly arrested that he realizes that his new friends are pickpockets. During his trial at the police court, the gentleman, Mr. Brownlow, whom he is supposed to have robbed, recognizes Oliver's innate goodness and takes him into his home.

All seems safe—but Oliver knows too much about wily, demonic Fagin and his companion-in-crime, Bill Sikes. Sikes's woman, Nancy, a prostitute, is employed to steal Oliver back—an act that she immediately regrets and tries to repair. Sikes tries to seal Oliver's degradation and his power over him by employing him on a housebreaking expedition. The plan misfires when Oliver is shot crawling through the window of a country house and is taken in by the gentle people he is supposed to be robbing—an old lady and her ward, who eventually turns out to be Oliver's aunt.

As this excess of coincidences indicates, the second half of the novel is inferior to the first. Good eventually defeats evil, and Oliver inherits the heaven of respectable middle-classness, hardly a radical solution to a novel that trumpets its social criticism. Creative energy dissipates, however, when the action leaves the nightmare underworld of London, which seems almost a projection or map of Dickens's own childhood terrors. The real climax of the novel is Sikes's brutal murder of Nancy—one of the scenes that led some commentators to worry that the novel belied its author's fascination with the criminality that it denounced.

## NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

**First published:** 1838-1839 (originally published as *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*)

**Type of work:** Novel

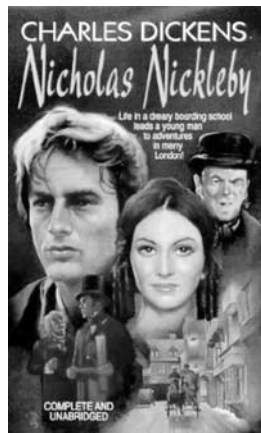
*A young gentleman restores the flagging fortunes of his family and exposes the villainy of his uncle.*

The title character of *Nicholas Nickleby* sets off to be a schoolmaster in the north of England when the death of his father leaves the Nickleby family in bad straits—a trial his pretentiously genteel and



garrulous mother (a comic portrait of Dickens's own mother) finds hard to bear. At Dotheboys Hall in Yorkshire, Nicholas wins a test of strength with the evil headmaster Squeers, whose reign of terror has resulted in the abuse and deaths of his cringing charges, all of whom are orphans and unwanted children—a fictionalization of the real-life horrors that Dickens documented during a visit to Yorkshire with his illustrator.

Next, Nicholas becomes an actor in the hilariously inept touring company of Mr. and Mrs. Crummies, a development that allows Dickens to demonstrate both his knowledge and his affection for the theater. Meanwhile, the rather precarious main plot of the novel concerns the pathetic Smike, a handicapped boy whom Nicholas rescued from Dotheboys; its climax occurs when the boy is revealed to be the illegitimate son of Nicholas's evil uncle, Ralph Nickleby, who has also plotted against the innocence of Nicholas's sister, Kate. Father and son both perish, but a happy conclusion is brought about by the fairy-tale benevolence of the Cheeryble Brothers. Not surprisingly, they have long been targets of attack for critics who believe that Dickens has no practical or political solutions to offer to the abuses that he exposes.



## DAVID COPPERFIELD

**First published:** 1849-1850 (originally published as *The Personal History of David Copperfield*)

**Type of work:** Novel

*David Copperfield's autobiography duplicates the rags-to-riches shape of Dickens's own life: from castaway factory boy to famous author and self-made gentleman.*

Dickens's eighth novel, his favorite, has an intimate relationship to his own story: "C. D." becomes "D. C." Some months before he began it, he had sat down to write the story of his childhood degradation for the first and only time in his life. The experience was too painful and Dickens abandoned the autobiographical attempt. Yet the material found its way, often word for word, directly into the first-person fiction of *David Copperfield*, which, as Dickens puts it semijokingly in the subtitle, the hero "never meant to be published on any account."

Fatherless David Copperfield's idyllic relationship to his pretty and childlike mother is utterly ended by her second marriage. Austere Mr. Murdstone lives up to the fairy-tale model of the wicked stepparent, whipping the terrified boy when he stammers over impossibly long sums, sending him away to school (where he meets and worships handsome Steerforth), and finally depriving David of his inheritance when his mother dies in childbirth, consigning him instead to the hell of Murdstone and Grinby's (that is, Warren's) factory. Comfort, however, is provided by the feckless, wordy, self-important Mr. Micawber, a masterly comic transformation of Dickens's own father, with whom the lonely boy takes lodgings. Micawber suffers the same fate of imprisonment in debtors' prison but remains convinced that his luck will change.

Meanwhile, an important subplot centers on the seafaring folk David meets through his devoted nurse, Peggotty: her brother Daniel, whose house is an upturned boat, the stalwart fisherman Ham, and Little Em'ly, the reckless and beautiful girl who is eventually seduced and ruined by Steerforth, David's idol. Steerforth's treatment of Little Em'ly is only partially redeemed by his death in a storm at

sea, which also kills Ham, who had hoped to marry Little Em'ly.

When Micawber departs in search of his fortune, David also leaves London in quest of love and family. Robbed even of his clothes, he walks the long miles to Dover, where he is rewarded by the half-unexpected affection of his cantankerous and eccentric Aunt Betsy. She provides the schooling proper to a gentleman at Dr. Strong's academy and sets David on the path to becoming a successful professional writer. The text pays little attention to his work; however, his romantic life looms far larger. David enters into an unsuitable marriage to sweet, frivolous, luxurious Dora Spenlow, who calls herself his child-wife.

On her deathbed—tragic but inevitable, given her inadequacies—Dora commends David to the woman who will be her successor, Dr. Strong's daughter, Agnes, an incarnation of the Victorian ideal of the domestic angel, and, as such, somewhat lifeless and unbelievable. Embedded in this development is a hint at Dickens's dissatisfaction with his own marriage and his desire for escape. Yet several hurdles must be negotiated before David can be safely delivered into the haven of a proper Victorian marriage. Dr. Strong and Agnes must be rescued from the clutches of the reptilian, mock-humble Uriah Heep, largely through the agency of Micawber. Little Em'ly must be found and rescued; old Daniel Peggotty finally immigrates with her to Australia—a treatment of the taboo fallen woman theme that was radical and humane for its time, and which reflects the lessons that Dickens learned in his ten-year involvement with a home for fallen women, Urania Cottage.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

**First published:** 1860-1861

**Type of work:** Novel

*The mysterious benefactor who turns Pip into a gentleman proves to be not the aristocratic lady he supposed but a runaway convict.*

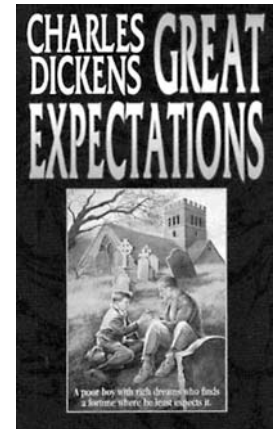
Not one of Dickens's child characters enjoys a happy and uncomplicated relationship with two living parents. In his fiction, Dickens found it nec-

essary not only to orphan himself of the parents who shamed him but also to re-create them in ideal shapes—and sometimes, too, to be fair to them. That is what happens in *Great Expectations*. What strikes one most powerfully about this compact and streamlined narrative—technically, perhaps Dickens's best—is the excessive and apparently unmotivated guilt of its hero: guilt, perhaps, for the terrible snobbery into which he falls as he tries to climb the social ladder, guilt at his rejection of his parents, or the guilt of the human condition.

Pip is a village orphan brought up roughly by his unmotherly sister (her bosom bristles with pins), the wife of gentle blacksmith Joe Gargery. In the first chapter of the novel, on the memorable day when he becomes aware for the first time of his identity and his place in a hostile world, Pip meets, in the graveyard where his parents lie buried, a shivering, ravenous, and monstrous man, an escapee from the prison ships across the marshes, who terrorizes Pip into stealing food and drink for him. The convict is eventually recaptured, but not before Pip (and Joe) has come to pity him or before he has lied that it was he who stole a pie and brandy from the Gargery larder.

Next, Pip also meets the rich, weird recluse Miss Havisham, who lives in a darkened and dusty room where time has stood still, dressed always in a yellowing wedding dress. He falls in love with her petulant and beautiful ward, Estella, whom the old woman is training to break men's hearts as vengeance for her own abandonment at the altar.

Some years later, a lawyer named Jaggers appears at the smithy with the news that Pip, now Joe's apprentice, has been left a fortune and is to become a gentleman. Pip leaves for London, and inevitably a wedge is driven between him and his best friend, illiterate Joe, of whom Pip sinks so low as to become ashamed. Miss Havisham (the wordplay on "sham" is appropriate) lets Pip believe that it is she who is his benefactor, but the real benefactor is actually the least likely person imaginable: Mag-





witch, the monstrous convict, who has made good in Australia and now returns to England (thereby breaking the rules of his sentence) in hopes that the boy he has “made” will return his devoted affection. Pip is horrified and disgusted: His money is contaminated. The lesson of love and human decency that he must learn comes very hard indeed. Yet he learns it: By the time poor Magwitch is reclaimed by justice, Pip is prepared to stand holding his hand in the public court. Thankfully, Magwitch dies in prison before he can be hanged. Pip himself now falls seriously ill and is nursed back to life by Joe. No one, however, can turn back the clock: The moment Pip is better, Joe (calling him “sir”) retreats to the village. Pip’s loneliness at the end of the novel seems mediated only by a vague promise that a chastened Estella may some day be his—a modification of the harsher original ending Dickens had intended.

*Great Expectations* is psychologically Dickens’s most mature and realistic novel, although it works through his usual system of displacements and dark doublings. Loutish Orlick, Joe’s other apprentice, for example, seems to function as Pip’s alter ego when he attacks his uncaring sister, Mrs. Joe. It is also a novel that depicts the powerful influence of environment as well as of heredity: Magwitch, the convict, and bitter Miss Havisham were themselves both abused and lonely as children. For

all of its somber coloring, however, the novel is also riotously funny in the characteristically Dickensian mode of excess: Pontificating Uncle Pumblechook, a seed merchant who subjected the boy Pip to humiliation over Christmas dinner, gets his poetic comeuppance, Joe reports, when Orlick robs him, “stuff[ing] his mouth full of flowering annuals to perwent his crying out.”

## SUMMARY

Charles Dickens did not create novels: He created a world. Since his death in 1870, a semantic slippage has taken place, whereby he has become identified with the Victorian age and with Englishness; this is not altogether inappropriate. His fictions have frustrated and inspired writers as different as Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, and Graham Greene, to name but a few; they have also profoundly influenced early filmmakers and theorists such as D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein.

Dickens was a well of creativity. Through his erratic and eccentric fiction, he probed some of the mysteries of the human heart and human society; he allows readers to experience the world over again through the eyes of his child-narrators. As a result, Scrooge, Micawber, Pickwick, Fagin, Miss Havisham, and their companions have attained a life beyond the texts that gave them birth.

Joss Lutz Marsh

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- By what literary techniques does Charles Dickens avoid falling into bitterness, like that which his own early life produced in him, when he writes of socially deprived characters?
- Discuss Sam Weller as Dickens's most instigative early character.
- Dickens was not a particularly successful family man, but he wrote convincingly of successful family life. What factors in his life made this achievement possible—even likely—in his case?
- Explain whether *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations* is the more convincing bildungsroman.
- Offer evidence to show that Dickens's capacity for humor suffered (or did not suffer) in *Bleak House* and later works.
- Was Dickens off course in *A Tale of Two Cities*?
- Was there a negative side to Dickens's highly popular readings from his works on stage?
- If many readers have difficulty reading Dickens's novels today, should they be severely edited to accommodate such readers?



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## DENIS DIDEROT

**Born:** Langres, France

October 5, 1713

**Died:** Paris, France

July 31, 1784

*In addition to his many articles for Encyclopédie and his works of nonfiction, Diderot created fictional works in which he dealt with significant philosophical and moral issues.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Denis Diderot (dee-DROH) was born in Langres, Champagne, France, on October 5, 1713. He was the second child born to Didier Diderot and Angélique Vigneron Diderot; a son born the previous year had died in infancy. His mother was the daughter of a merchant tanner, and his father was a master cutler, well known for his surgical tools. Diderot had two sisters who survived to adulthood. His sister Denise, who remained unmarried her entire life, was born on January 27, 1715; his sister Angélique, who became an Ursuline nun in spite of the family's opposition, was born on April 3, 1720. On March 21, 1722, the last of his siblings, Didier-Pierre, was born.

From 1723 to 1728, Diderot studied at the Collège des Jésuites at Langres. He was an avid reader and a good student. He was particularly fond of the works of Horace and Homer. Diderot was destined for a career in the church and on August 22, 1726, he received tonsure.

Upon completion of his studies at Langres, he went to Paris to continue his education at the Collège Louis-le-Grand and at the Collège d'Har-court. On September 2, 1732, he was awarded a master of arts degree in philosophy from the University of Paris. Diderot was no longer interested in becoming a member of the clergy and decided to study law. By 1734, Diderot had also lost interest in

becoming a lawyer and decided that he wished to be a writer. This decision was not well received by his father, who withdrew all financial support from Diderot.

During the next ten years, Diderot remained in Paris leading an impoverished and bohemian life. He supported himself by working as a law clerk, a bookseller's hack, a translator of English books, and a tutor. In 1741, he met Antoinette Champion; in 1742, he became acquainted with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, like Diderot, would become one of the major writers and thinkers of the period. Diderot returned to Langres in 1743 to ask for his father's blessing of his planned marriage to Antoinette Champion. Unfortunately, she was of a lower social class, fatherless, and without a dowry. The elder Diderot not only refused to approve the marriage but also had Diderot incarcerated.

In spite of his father's disapproval, Diderot married Antoinette in a secret ceremony on November 6, 1743, at Saint-Pierre-aux-Boeufs in Paris. The couple had four children. A daughter, Angélique, and a son, Denis-Laurent, died in infancy. The other son, Jacques-François-Denis, died on June 30, 1750, as a result of a fever. He was five years old. Marie-Angélique, Diderot's only child that survived to adulthood, was born three years later on September 2, 1753.

After his marriage, Diderot continued to earn his living by translating English works. In 1743, his French translation of Temple Stanyan's *Grecian History* (1739) was published. In 1745, he published his *Principes de la philosophie morale: Ou, Essai de M. S. \*\*\* sur le mérite et la vertu, avec réflexions*, a

translation of Lord Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*. From 1746 to 1748, he published *Dictionnaire universel de médecine*, a translation of Robert James's *A Medicinal Dictionary*. During this time, differences of opinion and conflicts developed between Diderot and his wife; Diderot began a liaison with Madeleine de Puisieux, a writer of novels and moral treatises. She was a demanding mistress and he gave her his earnings from the Shaftesbury translation. In 1748, he wrote *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (*The Indiscreet Toys*, 1749), an erotic novel printed in the Netherlands and gave her his earnings. Shortly thereafter, the affair came to an end. In 1755, he met Sophie Volland, who would be his lover and intellectual partner for the rest of his life.

Sometime in 1745, André le Breton had approached Diderot about translating Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia: Or, Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* into French. Diderot convinced le Breton not merely to print a translation but to compile a work that would include all the arts, sciences, and trades. This momentous and mind-boggling project called *Encyclopédie*, was to occupy the next twenty-six years of Diderot's life. The first volume appeared in 1751; the final volume was published in 1772. These years were fraught with difficulty and setbacks, including opposition from the Church, license suspensions, and abandonment of the project by colleagues, leaving Diderot to write innumerable articles.

By 1746, Diderot had begun to publish original philosophical works in French. Although his *Pensées philosophiques* (English translation, 1819; also as *Philosophical Thoughts*, 1916), published anonymously, did contain several passages taken from Shaftesbury, it was primarily his own work. The book, which contained anti-Christian ideas, was burned by the parliament of Paris. In 1749, Diderot published his *Lettre sur les aveugles* (*An Essay on Blindness*, 1750; also as *Letter on the Blind*, 1916). Although the main subject of the work was the role the five senses played in the acquisition of ideas, it also brought into question the existence of God. As a result, Diderot was imprisoned at the Château de Vincennes for three months. Diderot's incarceration made him very wary about publishing controversial texts, with the result that many of his writings only appeared after his death.

While working on the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot be-

came especially interested in theater. He advocated a new type of play which presented bourgeois family life, virtue, and sentiment. He wrote two plays, *Le Fils naturel: Ou, Les Épreuves de la vertu* (pr., pb. 1757; *Dorval: Or, The Test of Virtue*, 1767) and *Le Père de famille* (pb. 1758, pr. 1761; *The Father of the Family*, 1770; also known as *The Family Picture*, 1871), and two books of dramatic criticism, *Entretiens sur "Le Fils naturel"* (1757) and *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* (1758; English translation of chapters 1-5 in *Dramatic Essays of the Neo-Classical Age*, 1950).

During this time, he also wrote the majority of his major philosophical works, including *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* (1751; *Letter on the Deaf and Dumb*, 1916) and his two posthumously published novels, *La Religieuse* (1796; *The Nun*, 1797) and *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1821, 1891; *Rameau's Nephew*, 1897), as well as *Éloge de Richardson* (1762; *Eulogy of Richardson*, 1893). In 1759, he began to write his critical commentaries on painting, *Les Salons* (1759-1781, serial; 1845, 1857, book). These were more often than not short stories filled with bourgeois sentiment inspired by the paintings.

Neither the *Encyclopédie* nor his other writings provided Diderot with a comfortable income. Therefore in 1765, in order to provide a dowry to his daughter, he sold his library to Czarina Catherine the Great of Russia, who graciously let him keep it during his lifetime and gave him a salary as librarian of the collection. Diderot traveled to Russia in 1773 to thank Catherine for her generosity.

During the 1770's and until his death, Diderot continued to write. From 1771 to 1773, he composed *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (pb. 1796; *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, 1797) and *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1796; *Supplément to Bougainville's Voyage*, 1926), neither of which was published until 1796. Diderot died at his daughter's home in Paris on July 31, 1784. His beloved Sophie had died only a few months earlier. Diderot was one of the great thinkers of his time and counted among his friends and colleagues Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Baron von Friedrich Melchior Grimm, Baron d'Holbach, and Voltaire.

## ANALYSIS

As a thinker, philosopher, and writer, Diderot was a multifaceted individual. He was interested in virtually all subjects: the arts, science, literature,

theater, philosophy, religion, mathematics, medicine, and mechanics. He wrote in both fictional and nonfictional genres. Throughout his writing career, Diderot was constantly in turmoil as he sought to reconcile his rational materialistic views of man and nature and his sentimentality in regard to love and family, which resulted from his bourgeois heritage. As a rational thinker, Diderot was unable to accept the orthodox doctrine of the Catholic Church. Many of his works question the existence of God, the practice of religion in general, and the human situation. Diderot expressed his ideas in many different genres, including philosophical essays, dialogues, plays, novels, art criticism, and literary criticism.

The dominant themes throughout his various writings illustrate both his inability to formulate a concise philosophical theory and his inquisitiveness. Diderot was above all else concerned with the moral responsibility of the individual in society, for he found moral responsibility essential for the successful social interaction of people. The fact that he opted for the rational tenets of materialism and fatalism over Christian doctrine and belief in free will, sin, and redemption led him into an unsolvable dilemma. How could he reconcile the lack of free will in a fatalistic world and moral responsibility? If people were predetermined to be what they were, then how could they be responsible for their actions? Diderot addresses this problem in many of his works, particularly in his narratives.

Diderot was a master of literary form and composition. His works are carefully conceived and have an identifiable structure. His novel *The Nun* is based on a three-part structure. Three mother superiors represent three distortions of human nature resulting from their isolation and confinement away from a natural, heterosexual society. In *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, the motif of journeys gives the novel a definite structure. Yet in each novel, Diderot saves his narrative from rigidity and stagnation by overlaying the structure with chaotic movement. Suzanne's life in the convents is one of total disorder, while Jacques and his Master are at every moment buffeted by chance.

The one element which is most characteristic of Diderot's writing is dialogue. Diderot was in a constant dialogue with himself as he attempted to reconcile rational thinking and sentimentalism. Dialogue was the perfect medium for his works.

## JACQUES THE FATALIST AND HIS MASTER

**First published:** *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, wr. c. 1771, pb. 1796 (English translation, 1797)

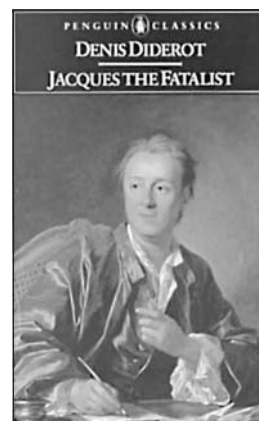
**Type of work:** Novel

*A valet and his master set out on a journey, during which they discuss and experience the whims of fate.*

*Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* is a philosophical novel in which Diderot, through a fictional narrative, examines the problem of moral responsibility and the consequences of accepting a philosophy of determinism. Jacques and his Master start out on a journey and soon find themselves the victims of chance occurrences. One of the horses suddenly bolts for no apparent reason and the two travelers end up at an inn, where they are robbed. The progress of the entire journey is governed by chance (fate); neither Jacques nor his Master has any control over where they go. Jacques explains all of these occurrences and others throughout the journey by saying that they were predetermined, or as he defines the situations, written on the great wheel of fate.

The novel has a multilayered structure in which dialogue plays an extensive role. In addition to the actual physical journey of Jacques and his Master, Diderot creates a series of other narrated journeys. As they ride along, Jacques tells of his loves, the Master attempts to recount his amorous affairs, and the people they meet tell stories of faithful and unfaithful loves. The narratives are continuously interrupted by chance occurrences. This structure serves to emphasize Diderot's intellectual belief in materialism and the constant change and movement that occur in a physical world, which is always in a state of metamorphosis.

It is in the narratives within the narrative that





Diderot presents the incompatibility of moral responsibility and determinism and the difficulty of judging the acts of other people. The story of Mme de la Pommeraye and the Marquis d'Arcis, the longest interpolated story in the novel, illustrates this dilemma. The marquis and Mme de la Pommeraye have been lovers; he has tired of her and broken off the relationship. Mme de la Pommeraye vengefully arranges for him to marry a woman who is not a virgin and therefore makes him a cuckolded husband. Jacques and his Master argue about who is guilty—Mme de la Pommeraye or the marquis—or if anyone is guilty. Under a deterministic philosophy, each individual was simply doing what he or she was predestined to do; consequently, neither could be held responsible for his or her actions. For Diderot, determinism precluded moral responsibility and led to a world in which any and all acts, whether benevolent or destructive, were acceptable; he believed this led to anarchy and was unacceptable in a society.

The novel, however, is not simply a fictional consideration of a philosophical concept. Humor abounds in the work. The many tales of infidelity fill the novel with a bawdiness reminiscent of the medieval fabliaux, of François Rabelais, and of Voltaire's short stories. Using the basic materialistic idea that a human being, like everything else on the earth, is in a constant state of change, the various narrators recount satirical anecdotes of infidelity.

The riotous, good-humored amusement created by these episodes does not banish sentiment from the novel. Diderot, who was always subject to the bourgeois virtue and respect for morality that his parents instilled in him, was himself extremely sentimental and recognized the human need for enduring love and stability. Therefore, he concludes his novel with Jacques wisely saying that he prefers not to know if his future wife will or will not be faithful to him, but he will believe in her fidelity, and after that he can change nothing. Here, Diderot once again addresses the dilemma that tormented him to the end of his life: What his mind presented to him as rational truth was not what his emotional self wanted to hear.

Diderot was interested not only in using novels to express his ideas, but he was also intrigued with the novel as a genre and the relationship or dialogue which exists between the writer and the

reader. As author, Diderot repeatedly interrupts his fictional creation to address his reader. He taunts his readers with his own power as author. He can continue a tale, interrupt it, or leave it unfinished and start a new one. He can take the intrigue wherever he wishes. The reader is at his mercy as long as the reading process continues. However, he also recognizes the reader's freedom of choice; the reader can simply stop reading.

Thus, *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* is a philosophical novel, a bawdy comical novel, a sentimental novel, and a query into the novel as a genre.

## THE NUN

**First published:** *La Religieuse*, 1796 (English translation, 1797)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A rebellious young girl is forced to become a nun against her will and attempts to leave the convent.*

*The Nun*, a memoir novel written in first person, was originally written as a series of letters to Marc-Antoine-Nicolas, Marquis de Croismare. Diderot was not composing a novel but participating in a ruse to bring the marquis back to Paris. The marquis, a member of the intellectual circle that frequented the home of Louise Tardieu d'Esclavelles, Marquise d'Epinay, had been called away to his lands in Normandy on business matters. Before leaving Paris, he had attempted to help a woman who had been cloistered against her will. Diderot's letters were an attempt to convince the marquis that she had fled the convent and needed his help. Developing an attachment for the character he had created, Diderot went on to write a novel about her.

*The Nun* is a forcible attack upon the cloistering of women. Diderot presents the convent as an unnaturally repressive institution, which degrades human nature, corrupting it to promiscuity, sadism, or insanity. The novel recounts the misfortunes and torments of the illegitimate Suzanne Simonin, who is forced to take the veil in order to expiate the sin of her mother and to enable the legitimate daughters to make more suitable marriages.



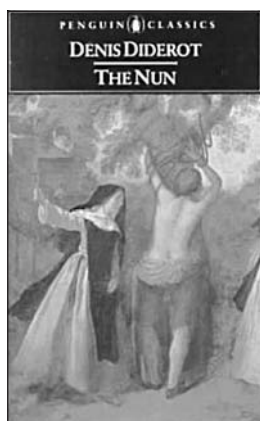
Suzanne is confined under the authority of three different mother superiors. Mme de Moni, the first mother superior, is kind to Suzanne and even favors her. However, in the closed oppressive ambiance of the convent, with its continual emphasis on expiation of sin and communion with God, Mme de Moni slips from mysticism into insanity and dies. Her successor, Sister Sainte-Christine, particularly dislikes Suzanne, who is an element of chaos and discord in the otherwise well-disciplined community. Little by little, she becomes more and more sadistic. Suzanne is deprived of furniture, bedding, and clothing. She is locked in her cell. The other nuns are forbidden to speak to her or even to recognize her existence. Broken glass is strewn in her path and she is made to walk on it. She is treated as a cadaver.

It is generally accepted that Diderot was strongly influenced in his depiction of the convent and the horrendous treatment of Suzanne by the tragic fate of his sister Angélique, an Ursuline nun. She lost her sanity and died of exhaustion from overwork at the age of twenty-eight.

Throughout her time in the convents, Suzanne has been working through legal channels to receive permission to renounce her vows. Fortunately, her lawyer, Manouri, arranges for her to be transferred to another convent before she succumbs to the sadistic mistreatment. The lesbian mother superior in this convent treats Suzanne very well. Diderot succeeds in having Suzanne describe the lesbian behavior in exact detail while remaining unaware of what is occurring between her and the mother superior.

This is the final portrayal in the novel of the deforming and corruption of human nature by the convent. The mother superior eventually falls into a state of delirium and dies in torment. Suzanne finally escapes from the convent with the help of

an unscrupulous priest who takes her to a house of prostitution. At the end of the novel, she escapes and is desperately seeking the marquis's help in finding a reputable position.



## RAMEAU'S NEPHEW

**First published:** *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 1821,  
1891 (English translation, 1897)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Although this work is traditionally included among Diderot's novels, it is actually a dialogue, teeming with satire and strengthened by elements drawn from reality.*

In *Rameau's Nephew*, Lui (Rameau's nephew) and Moi (Diderot) engage in a combative conversation. The work is a totality of contradictions. Lui insists upon what he believes to be true and Moi objects that the exact opposite is right. Lui is a self-admitted parasite upon society who takes advantage of everyone and everything that he can. He admits to having taught his son that money is more important than anything else and to mourning his deceased wife because he could have profited by prostituting her. Lui insists that his lifestyle is morally correct. Moi, who is the embodiment of bourgeois morality, is appalled by Lui and vehemently objects to his assertions. Lui and Moi are both strong combatants, and Diderot does not permit either one a decisive victory. This ambiguity makes the dialogue an inquiry into morality that never finds an answer.

While neither Lui nor Moi can claim a victory, they do lead each other into a state of change, of becoming less of what they were. The character of Lui also undergoes startling physical change as he contorts himself in the most outlandish fashion, acting out what he says. Lui is like an actor, creating characters by his gestures and physical contortions. Just as Lui contorts himself to assume the various individuals he talks about, he also shapes himself into whatever he needs to be to profit from social opportunity. Lui's explanation of his relationship to the society in which he lives enables Diderot to satirize a number of his enemies in the novel.

The believability of the dialogue as a real conversation that actually took place is enhanced by Diderot's use of realism. The conversation occurs in the Café de la Régence, an actual café in Paris. The characters of Lui and Moi are drawn from real life. The musician Jean-Philippe Rameau had a nephew, and of course Diderot put himself into the

dialogue as *Moi*. The conversation proceeds in a realistic fashion, as one topic brings up another and the two interlocutors discuss a number of topics, including music, women, making a living, and what it means to be successful.

## SUMMARY

Denis Diderot's literary works reflect the two contrary aspects of his nature. His philosophical writings reveal his rational acceptance of a me-

chanical, materialistic world and the human being as a part of it. His plays, his critical comments on painting, *Les Salons*; and his novel *The Nun* represent the sentimental and moralistic Diderot. *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* stands as the work most representative of Diderot in his totality, as it brings together his philosophical beliefs, an examination of materialism and fatalism, and his sentimentality in depicting Jacques's final attitude.

Shawncey Webb

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#### SHORT FICTION:

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*Concerning the Education of a Prince*, wr. 1758, pb. 1941

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Denis Diderot's attitude toward fidelity?
- What role does dialogue play in Diderot's fiction?
- What is the importance of gesture in *Rameau's Nephew*?
- Why does Diderot oppose convents and a cloistered life?
- Why does Diderot combine chaos and order in his works?

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## ISAK DINESEN

**Born:** Rungsted, Denmark  
April 17, 1885

**Died:** Rungsted, Denmark  
September 7, 1962

*Mentioned for the Nobel Prize many times, Dinesen was admired for her unique short stories and for her brilliant memoir of her life in Africa.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Baroness Karen Christenze Blixen-Finecke, who later used such pen names as Isak Dinesen (DEE-nuh-suhn), Karen Blixen, Pierre Andrezel, and Tania B., was born in a house by the sea in Rungsted, Denmark, on April 17, 1885. The house in which she was born had once been occupied by Johannes Ewald, the man usually considered to be Denmark's finest poet. When she was only ten years old, her father hanged himself, a tragic event that marked the rest of her life and profoundly affected the tone of her stories.

Dinesen had no formal schooling as a child but did attend a private school in France during her teen years. In 1903, she entered the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen to study painting, but for the next seven years she also devoted herself to writing—and to a painful relationship with Hans Blixen-Finecke. In 1910, she left Denmark, intending to study art in Paris, but she abruptly returned home and continued her writing. Profoundly depressed by the various setbacks and apparent lack of direction in her life, she took a brief vacation trip to Rome. On returning, she became engaged to Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, the twin brother of her former lover. In 1914, she followed Bror to Kenya, and they were married in the capital city of Nairobi.

The marriage with Bror Blixen was rocky at best. From him she contracted syphilis, which rendered her sterile and contributed to the progressive dete-

rioration of her health over the rest of her life. Bror Blixen was a famous sportsman and notorious womanizer who mismanaged the coffee plantation he had bought with money provided by Dinesen's family. They divorced in 1921, and she took control of the plantation, which became known as the Karen Coffee Company.

Unpredictable weather and fluctuations in the world price of coffee impelled the Karen Coffee Company's decline with each succeeding year of the decade of the 1920's. The company was pulled inexorably downward by the stock market crash of 1929. The one bright spot in Dinesen's life during these dark years was the profoundly joyful association she had with Denys Finch Hatton, a big-game hunter and lover of the arts. He encouraged her to continue her writing and storytelling and shared his love for the flora and fauna of the East African plateau with her.

Denys Finch Hatton was also an aviator; Dinesen flew with him over wild, beautiful, and inaccessible country. Without the influence of this special man, who became her lover and her mentor, much of Dinesen's work might never have been produced. In 1931, Hatton died when his plane crashed, her bankrupt farm was sold off by auctioneers, and she left her beloved Africa, never to return.

Dinesen settled down in Rungstedlund, her family estate near Rungsted, Denmark, where she finished writing—in English—a book she had begun in Africa, *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934). The work became a great success, as did four more of her titles. During this time Dinesen's health began to decline, but she continued to write, her career having

been launched by the success of *Seven Gothic Tales*. Her next work, her most famous, is a memoir of her years on the coffee plantation outside Nairobi. *Den afrikanske Farm* (1937; *Out of Africa*, 1937) is one of her most enduring books: She wrote it in English and Danish.

World War II and a clinical diagnosis of tertiary syphilis did not keep Dinesen from continuing to write. In 1942, she completed another set of her remarkable stories, *Vinter-Eventyr* (*Winter's Tales*, 1942), also published in Danish and English. Between 1942 and 1957, Dinesen was plagued by worsening health. Consequently, she wrote less and less, communicating with her reading public through interviews and radio broadcasts. An invalid after several operations in 1955, she published one more book of her stories in two languages, *Sidste Fortællinger* (*Last Tales*, 1957), in 1957.

She summoned the energy for a widely publicized visit to New York City in 1959, an event documented by famous photographers and painters. In 1960, she published *Skygger paa Græsset* (*Shadows on the Grass*, 1960) a brilliant reprise of her earlier African theme. Her body was wasting away even as the book appeared, and Dinesen died on September 7, 1962. She was buried on the grounds of her family estate.

## ANALYSIS

In 1985, most young Americans had never heard of Dinesen, but then her longest and most famous work, *Out of Africa*, appeared on the silver screen, with Meryl Streep playing Isak and Robert Redford in the role of Denys Finch Hatton, her friend, lover, and artistic mentor. The screenplay is actually an amalgam of various texts about Dinesen's African experience. Drawing on biographies, letters, and other sources, the screenplay evokes the evolutionary process by which Dinesen became an artist and no longer a coffee plantation manager. In one memorable scene in the film, Isak responds to suggestions by Denys and his friend Berkeley Cole that she tell them a story. They provide the first line, and she invents, as she speaks, a complicated, magical tale.

That scene encapsulates the artistic method of Dinesen, who was a dreamer and inventor of fictions for her entire career. Even her remembrances of Africa are imbued with the sense of wonder and otherworldliness that characterize her

fiction. There is an air of fantasy and fairy tale in everything that Dinesen wrote. She composed stories from the deep reservoirs of her imagination and her nightmares; she was never a strict realist or a journalist. Reality, for her, remained an internalized affair; how she remembered was always more important than what she remembered. It was the sense of a thing that counted most with her. In other days she may have been called a teller of tales, a carrier of legends and ancient wisdom. Dinesen called herself a storyteller, not a writer. Her job, she insisted, was "to create another sort of reality."

Dinesen may be classified as a romantic writer in the sense that she favors powerfully emotional and exotic stories, often filled with inexplicable or irrational events. Her emphasis is always on a few closely analyzed characters, never on society as a whole. Her world is filled with strong, often uncontrollable, forces. Readers who are familiar with the tales of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, with their moody atmospheres and eccentric characters, will encounter many of the same elements in the fables of Isak Dinesen.

"The Poet," for example, is the strange tale that concludes Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales*. There is virtually no plot in the story. An old businessman befriends and encourages a young poet in a remote but beautiful Danish village where they both fall in love with a young widow, who is a former dancer. Although she is in love with the poet, the young woman agrees to marry the old man. In the final scene, the poet, drunk and desperate, shoots the old man. The woman finds the old man and smashes a rock over his head. In the final pages of the story, one of the most beautiful passages ever written by Dinesen, the old man relives all the beautiful moments of his life: poetry, the smell of grass, the beautiful light of the stars. The juxtaposition of unexpected violence and pure beauty makes a powerful and unforgettable impression on the reader. Like all of Dinesen's best tales, "The Poet" represents a tragic but mystical view of life, in which the terrifying and the edifying tend to happen side by side. There is never any cheap irony or perfunctory reversals in Dinesen's stories, as one may find in the short stories of O. Henry or Guy de Maupassant. Dinesen presents the reader with a universe that is whole, inscrutable, and thrilling.

Dinesen's love of magic, mystery, and artistic creation owes much to the milieu of her upbringing.



ing. She was a member of the last genteel generation of Europeans whose cultural lives were formed before the outbreak of World War I. Dinesen was first and last an aesthete, a lover of beauty for beauty's sake. She was well traveled and multilingual. She had also been trained as a painter; indeed, she saw the world in terms of tints and colorations rather than plots and causation. For all its apparent objectivity, *Out of Africa* is a brilliantly subjective work, communicating her elation and awe at the sight of people, animals, and places. In all her African writings one finds very few objective descriptions of these people and things, but there are many notations of her reactions to them.

A continuous thread runs through Dinesen's works. *Seven Gothic Tales*, *Out of Africa*, and *Winter's Tales* all emphasize exotic characters and the themes of art and violence. In *Shadows on the Grass* Dinesen returns to these themes and, as she did in *Out of Africa*, becomes a character in her own story about Africa.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that Dinesen distorted the details of her experiences or that she invented fictional characters not reflective of her feelings. Isak Dinesen lived the life of an authentic artist, a life in which the real and the imagined could coexist. In this she found the substance of her art.

## OUT OF AFRICA

**First published:** *Den afrikanske Farm*, 1937

**Type of work:** Memoir

*A young woman goes to Africa, runs a coffee plantation, falls in love, and collects indelible memories.*

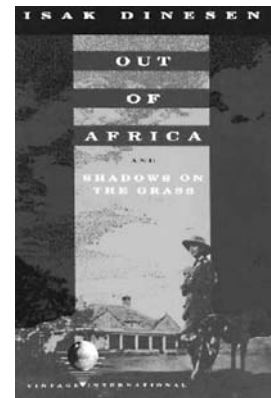
*Out of Africa* partakes of history, autobiography, and pastoral romance. It is a highly personal account of a period in the author's life (roughly 1913 to 1931). Unlike authors of many memoirs or autobiographies, Dinesen is largely uninterested in facts, figures, dates, historical background, or politics. World War I and the Great Depression occur within the time frame of this book, but there is little direct mention of them although Dinesen occasionally discusses their effect on people's lives. Al-

though she spent nearly twenty years in Africa and knew hundreds of people, only a dozen or so names emerge in the narrative. The narrative itself tends to be a rather casual affair, for Dinesen tends to tell her story in episodes, rather than in lengthy sequences. Some episodes clearly overlap, like the accidental shooting of an African child, the subsequent trial, and the appearance of Chief Kinanjui, a Kikuyu tribesman, whose death is described in some detail later. The exact sequence and linkage of these events remains unclear, or rather unimportant from Dinesen's point of view.

What does matter to Dinesen is the large tapestry of events; in fact, she uses the word "tapestry" many times to describe the dappled colors of greenery and sunlight under the canopy of the African forest. In short, she sees this African interlude with the eyes of a painter; characters and events tend to be grouped into episodes or pictorial clusters. The reader goes from one cluster to another, in the manner of a tourist looking at a huge tapestry, inspecting one portion at a time.

One may simplify *Out of Africa* into three large clusters, the first being the coffee farm, its native inhabitants, and servants. In this cluster belong Farah, Dinesen's overseer and general manager, the Danish jack-of-all-trades Old Knudsen, and the beautiful blue Ngong Hills that border her property. She omits most of the technical details about growing and harvesting coffee beans.

Another distinct cluster belongs to Lulu, the wild female bushbuck that Dinesen tamed. She devotes many pages to the habits and appearance of this lovely creature. Despite her nearness to two large game reserves, Dinesen does not generally describe other wild creatures, with the exception of giraffes and lions. The lions actually belong to the third cluster, which is presided over by Denys Finch Hatton and his friend Berkeley Cole (who dies shortly before Hatton's plane crash). In the end, lions come to sleep over Hatton's grave, providing one of the most moving and poignant pas-



sages in the book. This brings closure to this complex and unforgettable story, which, by itself, would have permanently established the reputation of Dinesen for readers worldwide.

## WINTER'S TALES

**First published:** *Vinter-Eventyr*, 1942

**Type of work:** Short stories

*In these beautifully written tales, the reader encounters unpredictable characters.*

Romantic in tone and setting, the stories of *Winter's Tales* have reminded many readers of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the dark, brooding fables of Joseph Conrad. Each of these eleven tales features domineering characters who take control of their lives and who define themselves by reacting strongly to another character. Most of the tales are set in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, in a glittering world of aristocrats, sea captains, officers, lords, and ladies. In "Sorg-Agre" ("Sorrow-Acre") for example, an

eighteenth century Danish nobleman tells a peasant woman that she can save her son from death only by harvesting an acre of rye in the course of one day, from sunup to sundown. The woman succeeds but dies in doing so, leaving the aristocrat—and the reader—to ponder the meaning of her death. The nobleman does not allow the field to be planted again, and erects a statue of the

woman on the spot where she died, as if her death were, in fact, a kind of victory over the meanness of everyday living.

In "Heloïse" ("The Heroine"), an aristocratic Frenchwoman saves a group of tourists who are trapped in Germany at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. Later, one of the young men who owes his life to her discovers that she has become a dance hall girl, although she remains as proud and

heroic as when he first encountered her. The air of mystery and the sense of invisible forces operating on people's lives play a major part in the overall effect of the tales. In "Fra det gamle Danmark" ("The Fish") a medieval king eats a fish containing a woman's ring with a strange blue stone. The ring belongs to the wife of a prominent courtier. In the end, the courtier murders the king who, it turns out, had been secretly wooing the woman. The fish is both a symbol and an instrument of his fate.

Stories that reflect the author's preoccupation with destiny, especially the destiny of the artist, are "Det drømmende barn" ("The Dreaming Child") and "Peter og Rosa" ("Peter and Rosa"). These stories contain artist figures as protagonists, and both of the protagonists die early deaths in a world that does not seem to be able to accommodate them. The dreaming child is an orphan who imagines he has aristocratic parents; when he is adopted by such parents, he makes them believe that they do belong to him. His sudden death leaves them utterly perplexed. In like manner, young Peter is so completely enamored of sailing that he convinces Rosa to go onto the ice floes in a recently thawed harbor. They are swept out to sea by an unseen and uncontrollable current.

## SHADOWS ON THE GRASS

**First published:** *Skygger paa Græsset*, 1960

**Type of work:** Memoir

*In four short pieces, Dinesen writes the postscript to her earlier masterpiece, Out of Africa.*

*Shadows on the Grass* is the last book Dinesen wrote, and it is the briefest and most factual, filled with dates, names, and references to other books and writers. She was dead within a year of its publication.

*Shadows on the Grass* serves as a coda or giant footnote to *Out of Africa*, filling the reader in on what happened to Dinesen's servants and friends. The primary focus is on Farah, the Somali-born servant who acted as her chief of staff. He is depicted as fiercely arrogant and utterly loyal, and his death is one of the most moving and tragic



moments in all of Dinesen's writing. In fact, the film characterization of Farah depends more on this short text than on the book *Out of Africa*. Other characters who figure prominently include Kamante, who goes blind, old Juma, who dies, and Abdullahi, Farah's son, who ultimately prospers. What strikes the informed reader of Dinesen's work in reading these portraits is how similar they seem to the imaginary ones in *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Winter's Tales*. Clearly, Dinesen idealized all who touched her deeply, transforming them in her imagination into the same kind of romantic, contradictory, and willful types that one encounters in her great tales.

Dinesen is unusually reflective and self-analytical in *Shadows on the Grass*, freely admitting that the African experiences changed her life and made her writing career possible. She also shows a new consciousness of how the Masai and Kikuyu experienced a painful culture shock after the introduction of Western technology and culture, all of which made them listless and turned their old lives into boredom. Her frustrations with these people, especially when they would not heed her medical advice, and her unconditional affection for them

come through on nearly every page. In *Shadows on the Grass* there is less of an emphasis on the exotic landscape and its aesthetic delights and more of a premium placed on human values and spiritual appreciation. One senses that Dinesen anticipated her own death and that she wanted to acknowledge her huge debt of gratitude to all her deceased friends.

## SUMMARY

Isak Dinesen was one of those rare writers who was able to combine the real and imagined spheres of existence. Her talent depended on a kind of verbal alchemy that allowed her to change words and deeds into timeless, enchanting creations. Events in her life were translated into symbolic experiences that became the basis for her tales and memoirs. Few human beings are endowed with that kind of power. After *Out of Africa* was released as a film in 1985, another 650,000 copies of the book were sold during the next two years. Her work still attracts readers and will continue to do so as long as people believe in a world of infinite possibilities.

Daniel L. Guillory

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- Gengældelsens Veje*, 1944 (as Pierre Andrézel; *The Angelic Avengers*, 1946)

#### NONFICTION:

- Den afrikanske Farm*, 1937 (*Out of Africa*, 1937)
- Skygger paa Græsset*, 1960 (*Shadows on the Grass*, 1960)
- Essays*, 1965

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Isak Dinesen's "storyteller" differ from a writer?
- Were there advantages for Dinesen's literary perspective in her cultural life being "formed before the outbreak of World War I"?
- Demonstrate how some of the characters in *Winter's Tales* take charge of their own lives.
- How did the circumstances of Dinesen's life contribute to her capacity for looking at life with the eyes of a painter?
- What did Africa do for Isak Dinesen?

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## JOHN DONNE

**Born:** London, England

Between January 24 and June 19, 1572

**Died:** London, England

March 31, 1631

*Somewhat disparaged initially as a Metaphysical poet, Donne became known as one of the best poets of Renaissance England.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Donne (duhn) was born to prosperous parents in London, England, sometime between January 24 and June 19, in 1572. His father, also named John, was a successful iron merchant; his mother, Elizabeth, a descendant of Sir Thomas More and John Heywood, the dramatist. Both parents were devout Catholics. Their religion and especially his mother's literary background seem to have had a profound influence upon Donne. He would not always remain a Catholic; he eventually took orders in the Anglican Church, but throughout his life, he retained a passionate interest in religion, and he was writing poetry before he was twenty-one. His parents sent him to Oxford, where he stayed for three years, but he left before he was sixteen and without a degree.

In 1590, he began his study of law at Lincoln's Inn, where he probably acquired most of his learning in law and where he entered the service of Sir Thomas Egerton, thereby establishing himself in a secular career. He took part in two military expeditions under the influence of Egerton, but they were uneventful for him; he wrote two poems based on them, "The Storm" and "The Calm."

While in Egerton's service in 1591, Donne met and in violation of canon law secretly married Ann Moore, Egerton's niece and the daughter of Sir George Moore, an event that profoundly affected

Donne's career. As a consequence of the marriage, Egerton dismissed Donne from his employ, and Moore had him imprisoned briefly. Released after the Archbishop of Canterbury declared the marriage legal, Donne, now thirty, found himself with a wife and no prospects. Egerton refused to reinstate him, and Moore implacably refused to release Ann's dowry. Donne's marriage thus marks the end of one era of his life and the beginning of another.

During Donne's earlier era, he had begun to write poetry, including songs, sonnets, satires, and elegies. These secular poems, early expressions of Donne's genius and typical of Renaissance poetry, were not originally printed but circulated among friends. Each of the songs and sonnets is unique, each looking at one of the many possible perspectives of love, its glories and its failures. His satires, all in the tradition of the seventeenth century, assault urban vice; his third satire deserves special note, for it reveals Donne's changing attitude toward religion as he moved away from Catholicism. The nineteen elegies contributed especially to Donne's reputation as Jack Donne, a man-about-town and a frequenter of the ladies. All of these early poems reveal Donne's philosophical and scientific bent, his use of rugged, dramatic verse, his references to everyday experiences, and his fondness for fantastic metaphors—qualities that identified him to the English writer and critic Samuel Johnson, at least, as a Metaphysical poet.

Following his release from prison, Donne moved from London to Pyrford and then to Mitchum, still searching for secular preferment. This period of Donne's life, characterized by fewer



and different types of literary pieces, failed to produce a political appointment for him, but he did succeed in establishing himself with some worthy patrons. Among his patrons were Lady Magdalen Herbert, for whom he may have written the “La Corona” sonnet sequence and the “Autumnall,” and Sir Robert Drury. When Drury’s young daughter, Elizabeth, died, Donne wrote *An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary* (1611) and, subsequently, *Of the Progress of the Soule: The Second Anniversary* (1612), poems known today as the *Anniversaries*.

Also during this period, Donne began to establish himself as a writer of prose. His first important work was *Biathanatos* (1646), an argument justifying suicide and still of interest today because of what it reveals of Donne’s erudition and of his state of mind at the time he wrote the work. His prose career further developed in the service of Thomas Morton, dean of Gloucester, who retained Donne to write polemical prose against Catholics. Donne obliged with *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), an attack against the Catholic Church for teaching that to remain Catholic in defiance of British law was an act of martyrdom. This work also provides the best evidence up to 1610 that Donne had reconciled himself to the Anglican Church. His most scathing attack upon Catholics was *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), in which he has Ignatius, a Jesuit, depose Satan and become the sovereign of Hell.

In 1609, Sir George Moore relented and released Ann’s dowry, an event that signaled a change in fortune for Donne. He never received the secular appointment he sought, but he decided instead to become a priest and took holy orders in the Anglican Church in 1615. Close upon this appointment, his wife died in 1617 while giving birth to their twelfth child, and for the rest of his life Donne was, according to biographer Izaak Walton, “crucified to the world.” Donne quickly established himself as the leading Anglican preacher of his day, and he was appointed dean of St. Paul’s in 1621, a position he held for the remaining ten years of his life.

The last part of his life was devoted almost entirely to sermons, and although only 6 were published during his lifetime, 150 were published by the year 1700. His only important poetic accomplishments during this period were a few divine poems and hymns, including his *Devotions upon Emer-*

*gent Occasions* (1624), written during a severe illness, and his “Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness,” written, Walton concludes, only eight days before he died. He preached his last sermon before King Charles I on February 15, 1631; he died on March 31, 1631, in London.

## ANALYSIS

Fewer than ten of Donne’s poems were published during his lifetime, and he was better known as a preacher and a writer of prose, especially sermons. Donne himself seems not to have been sure of the value of the poetry he wrote before he became a priest. It was 1633 before his first collection of poetry was published.

Early response to his poetry was not entirely favorable. Even his friend Ben Jonson said that Donne “did not keep accent” and that he would perish for “being misunderstood.” Samuel Johnson, calling him a Metaphysical poet, said that Donne’s poetry was new but not natural, that it presented “heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together.” He did acknowledge that Donne demonstrated intensive knowledge. Johnson’s critical views of Donne’s poetry served as a standard for years, but in the twentieth century, largely through the influence of T. S. Eliot, who perceived Donne’s images not as excesses but as significant examples of “sensuous apprehension of thought,” Donne’s reputation as a poet improved to the point that he is now regarded as a major English poet of the seventeenth century. He is still perceived as a Metaphysical poet, but the appreciation for such poetry has grown so that now Donne’s Metaphysical qualities are not disparaged but admired.

Increasingly among moderns, Donne is seen as a product and spokesperson for his age, the Renaissance, a period characterized by new discoveries and intellectual advancements but also by the fragmentation of such institutions as feudalism and scholasticism, a time of separation of the secular and the spiritual, a turbulent, confusing world where truth could no longer be perceived as one. Thinkers such as Donne would have found themselves attracted to all the new worlds but detached from them. Donne said “the new philosophy puts all in doubt.” To live in such a world invited either indifference or attempts, which Donne chose, to achieve a unified sensibility, of which his poetry becomes one of the finest statements of the period. As

one might expect, unifying the fractured world of the seventeenth century proved to be a formidable task, and it is his poetic adaptations to this task that give Donne's poetry its original rhetoric and imagery.

Donne writes as a scholar, as a curious observer open to a wide range of experiences. He fills his writing with allusions to his wide reading: "A Valediction: Of the Booke" contains references to the Sybil, Homer, Platonism, national leaders, the Bible, alchemy, theology, astronomy, and languages; *Biathanatos* quotes more than one hundred authorities. His intellectuality shapes his rhetoric, for he crowds his ideas into his poetry. As if impatient of transition and connectives, Donne may construct a single line of poetry almost entirely of verbs: "I saw him I/ Assail'd, fight, taken, stabb'd, bleed, fall, and dye."

Well versed in casuistry and law, Donne writes analytically, dialectically, as opposed to reflectively. As one reads Donne's poetry, one senses an imagined conversation in which Donne constantly tries to convince, verbally pushing and shoving. His sentences are more faithful to the form of conversation and logic than to poetic meter; thus, his poetry seems rugged and argumentative.

Yet Donne is not just a logical analyst; he is also a sensitive poet, and as he writes in the chaos of his passion and thought, he creates some startling imagery. Thus, he can write of the heart as the seat of the emotions, or he can write of the heart as a butcher might think of it: "When I had ripp'd me, 'and search'd where hearts did lye." He can also speak of bodies as temples of souls, or he can observe that "Rack't carcasses make ill anatomies." Forcing such imagery into a poem can result in vivid poetry, but it may also necessitate a vehicle to portray such sharply contrasting modes of perception—what came to be known as one of the outstanding features of Donne's poetry, the Metaphysical conceit.

It is particularly Donne's conceits, his extended metaphors, that have intrigued his readers. Not that conceits are unique to him or even new. Previous poets such as Sir Thomas Wyatt fully and carefully developed such images, but Donne pushes the conceit to startling new capacities for meaning, to extraordinary heights of association blending quite disparate elements.

Essentially, the Metaphysical conceit joins two

things not usually thought of as being together, and in this fusion creates a new apprehension of truth. For example, one may bring together flint and steel and produce fire. To understand how this analogy supports the notion of the Metaphysical conceit, it is important to see that when one strikes the flint against the steel the result is not just flint or just steel, nor is it some combination of the flint and steel; it is a new entity, fire. Similarly, Donne, in one of his most famous conceits, brings together a compass and lovers. A compass has no more to do with lovers than does flint with steel, but when Donne unites them, a new concept emerges, a new way of looking at the relationship between lovers. Again, Donne brings together a flea and an argument for seduction, and disparate as these elements are, once one sees how Donne fuses them in his poem "The Flea," one can never think of seduction in the same way again.

Reading Donne's poetry is not always easy. It is the record of a passionate, analytical intellect at work. For him, no experience is ever complete. He constantly moves ideas around, observes them from different perspectives, arranges them into new patterns of thought. Perhaps as much as anyone else, he captures the spirit of the Renaissance, and his poetry has become an embodiment of it.

### "A VALEDICTION: FORBIDDING MOURNING"

**First published:** 1633 (collected in *Poems, by J. D.: With Elegies on the Authors Death*, 1633)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this moving poem containing Donne's most famous conceit, the compass, the poet gently argues against weeping when true lovers part.*

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," probably written to his wife in 1601 before Donne left on a trip to the Continent, has often been anthologized. It is not only one of Donne's most popular works but also one of his most representative.

The poem rests, as do most of Donne's love poems, in the tradition of Renaissance love poetry. There is, for example, the conventional analogy of

dying and the parting of lovers; there are references to floods of tears, tempests of sighs, and the spiritualizing quality of love. The poem is not different in kind from other poetry of the period, but it is different in degree. Donne and his lover exceed the traditional model for lovers, for they have so spiritualized their love that to reveal it to common lovers by weeping at parting would profane it much as a mystic discussing his or her ecstatic union with God would cheapen that experience.

Further, the poem reveals Donne's awareness of and interest in Renaissance topics such as astronomy. For his own purposes in this poem, Donne takes the traditional view and derives his phrase "sublunary lovers" from the older Ptolemaic system, which argued that everything beneath the moon was imperfect and corruptible while all above the moon was perfect and incorruptible. Donne insists that ordinary love, being beneath the moon, is inferior to his love, which has been made perfect beyond the moon.

Typically, Donne pushes his argument to more complex levels of understanding and turns next to the notion of Platonic love, which he also compares with his own. The basic idea of Platonic love is the idea that, in another world, the Real World, there exist perfect ideals or archetypes for all particular things that exist in this, the actual world. Thus, all examples of love in human experience must be compared to the ideal of love in the Real World in order to determine their validity. In this framework, Donne argues that his love is the Platonic archetype. Unlike sublunary, inferior love, which is activated by the senses, Donne's love is nourished by the soul. Because of the superior love Donne and his lady enjoy, they should not behave as ordinary lovers and weep and sigh at parting.

Bringing to bear yet another argument against acting like inferior lovers, Donne next insists that his soul and the soul of his lover through a mystical union have become one. Thus, they do not experience a breach in parting but an expansion "like gold to avery thinnesse beate." Actually, this argument is two-pronged, for it posits the superiority of Donne's love in that he compares it to gold, the costliest metal, and it offers further support that perfect love does not weep at parting, for it cannot admit absence.

The apex of Donne's argument is developed in the last four stanzas of the poem as he unfolds his

famous compass conceit. The metaphor is relatively simple; its value lies primarily in its success in shocking the reader into new sensibilities. The lady is the fixed foot of the compass; Donne is the moving foot. The firmer the fixed foot (the truer the lady's love), the more just the circle of the moving foot.

This conceit, typical of Donne's best, represents an elaboration of a metaphor to the furthest stage intellect can pursue it. It unifies sensation and reason, description of things and feelings. Donne stresses the logic of his argument more than the beauty of his metaphor, and ultimately the reader is likely to be more impressed with the puzzle of the image, with the fact that it really works, than with its delineation of character or passion. Thus, the conceit serves as a fitting climax to a powerful but gentle argument that true lovers secure in the exaltation of their love disdain public shows of affection.

### "THE FLEA"

**First published:** 1633 (collected in *Poems, by J. D.: With Elegies on the Authors Death*, 1633)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This sardonic poem of seduction traces the mind of Donne at his argumentative best.*

Perhaps interest in "The Flea" is, as the English scholar and writer C. S. Lewis has suggested, mostly accidental. Perhaps, as he says, if the flea had not acquired a reputation as an unpleasant pest, the poem would not be as striking as it is. On the other hand, possibly no conceit ever developed represents as well as Donne's flea a capacity for total meaning. Such a metaphor, coupled with the argumentative ingenuity of Donne, results in a remarkable poem.

It is impossible to say when the poem was written, but it was published among his *Songs and Sonnets*, which was included in *Poems by J. D.: With Elegies on the Authors Death* (1633). The poem's irreverent tone, its mocking challenge of traditional values, and its sardonic treatment of its subject matter mark it as one of Donne's earlier poems, when he was known as Jack Donne, "a frequenter of la-

dies and of plays.” It is inconceivable that Donne could have written the poem after he became the dean of St. Paul’s Church.

Told in the first person, the poem is a dramatic monologue, a form often used by Donne, wherein the narrator, who is a character in the poem, is speaking to someone who never replies. The drama of the poem evolves, however, through the narrator’s response to events shared with the silent companion. In “The Flea,” the narrator has clearly been attempting unsuccessfully to seduce a lady. She has rejected his advances, remonstrating that sex for them would be a sin, a shame, and, for her, a loss of virginity—strong traditional arguments in seventeenth century England. Yet her arguments, perhaps even more than the prospect of sex, inspire the narrator to new heights of argumentative persuasion couched in the conceit of the flea.

He begins with the assertion that sex between them would have no more effect than the bite of a flea, but he then paradoxically argues for the significance of the flea he has just belittled. Now he claims that the flea represents the marriage bed, the ideal of sexuality; the Church, the sanctifier of marriage; and at least an earthly reflection of the Trinity, in that it represents three lives in one: the lives of Donne, the lady, and the flea. Why this paradoxical shift? Apart from Donne’s love of paradox, he probably expects his argument to show that since all three of the impediments to sex—marriage, Church, and Trinity—can be summed up in a flea, they are not significant obstacles.

Donne next argues that he is concerned that she will, by killing the flea, commit the triple crime of his murder, her own suicide, and the destruction of their sexual union, crimes all possible because the bloods of Donne and the woman are mixed in the flea. He believes that the lady is capable of such murder because, by withholding her sexual favors from him, she constantly kills him.

Even as Donne speaks, the lady kills the flea and triumphantly declares that his fears are unfounded, for the death of the flea weakens neither her nor Donne. In a brilliant reversal, Donne turns her argument against her, pointing out that just as she insists that the blood lost in the death of the flea is nothing, so blood lost in her yielding to him would be equally insignificant.

The argument of the poem is well wrought, and as the conceit unfolds, its elements lose their iden-

ties in a new way of looking at sexual love. Significantly, even as Donne cajoles and teases the lady into accepting his conclusion, readers find themselves drawn into the argument, shocked perhaps by the appearance and function of the flea but pleased with the overall effect, thus proving the efficacy of Donne’s conceit.

### “BATTER MY HEART, THREE PERSON’D GOD”

**First published:** 1633 (collected in *Poems*, by J. D.: *With Elegies on the Authors Death*, 1633)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this intensely personal sonnet, Donne depicts in military and marital terms his ongoing struggle with God.*

“Batter My Heart, Three Person’d God” is one of nineteen sonnets that Donne wrote after taking orders in the Anglican Church. Earlier in his life, before his marriage and ordination, he wrote some fifty-five poems published in *Songs and Sonnets*, but none of these is technically a sonnet. The latter sonnets that he wrote as an Anglican priest, however, are true sonnets, and they display Donne’s continuing love of wit and paradoxes but also his deepening concern about his relationship to God.

“Batter My Heart, Three Person’d God” is a fairly typical sonnet. It has fourteen lines, and the metrical scheme is iambic pentameter, five feet to a line; each foot contains an unstressed and a stressed syllable. The rhyme scheme is *abba, abba, cdcd, ee*, not the only sonnet rhyme sequence but a common one. The poem, typical of many sonnets, is made up of an octet: The first eight lines have the same rhyme scheme and develop a single image, in this poem, the image of a city under siege. The last six lines form a sestet, the first four lines having a consistent rhyme scheme and their own image, that of a marital relationship. The last two lines of the sestet form a couplet; they rhyme with each other and bring together the thought of the octet and the sestet.

As Donne matured and as his image changed from that of Jack Donne, man-about-town, to that

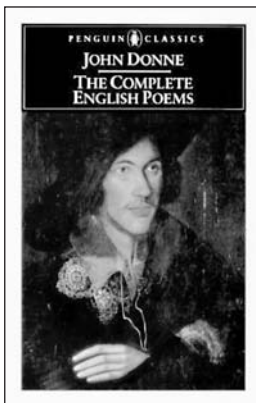
of John Donne, dean of St. Paul's, his poetry also changed, as this poem shows. After he took Holy Orders, he directed his love poetry not to women but to God. He tempered the sardonic indifference of some of his earlier poetry with the submissiveness of faith, and the shocking conceits of his earlier writing soften. Yet his intellect remains as vigorous as ever, and his witty imagery and love of paradox still characterize his poetry.

The seemingly impatient, boundless energy of Donne's mind continues to erupt in his later poetry. Disdaining connectives and transition, it abruptly expresses itself in verb after strong verb. Thus, Donne complains in this poem that until now God has been content to "knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend," but Donne desires God to "overthrow, and bend . . . to breake, blowe, burn, and make me new." These lines record a writer trying in his poetry to keep up with, to describe, somehow, the passionate, scintillating images that tumble from his mind.

The witty imagery of this poem, like much of Donne's work, is built upon paradox, not a surprising development when one couples Donne's seemingly innate love of paradox with the emphasis on

paradox in the Christian tradition to which Donne turned. Donne's plea, for example, for God to overthrow him so he may stand, to enthrall him so he may be free, echoes the Christian ideas that the way up to God leads down, that one must lose one's self in order to find one's self, and that one must die to live. His appeal to God to ravish him so that he may be chaste

recalls the paradox of Mary, the virgin Mother of God. Just as in the sex act the partner may aggressively surrender, so Donne "labors to admit" God. Ultimately, one finds in this poem a passionate yet reasoned attempt to resolve the Christian dilemma articulated by Saint Paul, who found himself doing not the good that he wanted to do but the evil that he did not want to do. Donne wants to be loved by God, but he finds himself "betroth'd" to God's enemy, Satan.



In this poem, however, unlike earlier poems, the metaphors do not shock; they are fairly standard in Christian writing in the seventeenth century. Nor is it Donne's argumentative wit, but perhaps the honesty of his depiction of the ongoing struggle between his body and his soul, that attracts. Vividly dramatized is his commitment to faith—his "captiv'd" reason is useless to him. The poem raises the question of whether the poetry of the dean of St. Paul's is as good as the poetry of Jack Donne, but it settles once and for all Donne's commitment to religion as a way of life.

### "HYMN TO GOD MY GOD, IN MY SICKNESS"

**First published:** 1635 (collected in *Poems*, by J. D.: *With Elegies on the Authors Death*, 1635)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this poem, written perhaps as late as eight days before his death, Donne reflects upon his dying and his prospects of salvation.*

"Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" is perhaps the last poem that Donne ever wrote and thus serves as a good example of the poetic interests he maintained late in life after his wife's death and his ordination. Most critics divide Donne's career into at least two parts: an earlier, more productive period when he was known as a man-about-town and wrote primarily satires and witty treatments of love, and a later period after he accepted Holy Orders in the Anglican Church. Clearly, "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" belongs to the latter period. As one might expect, there are similarities and dissimilarities between it and the poems of the earlier period. "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" reveals Donne's continuing wide intellectual interests and his ongoing talent for bringing these interests together in vivid, insightful metaphors; but it also shows a new, humbler concern for the welfare of his soul.

A cursory look at the poem reveals examples of Donne's intellectual interests. He raises the issue of cartography, the making of maps, popular in the Renaissance when discoveries of new lands con-



stantly made news. Donne reveals his own interest in and knowledge of geography, referring to Jerusalem, Gibraltar, the Pacific Ocean, and the Bering Strait, which had become a hoped-for passage to Eastern riches.

His use of the phrase "*per fretum febris*" (through the straits of fever) does not establish him as a Latin scholar, though he probably was, but it is his thorough acquaintance with religious topics that is striking. Thus, he writes about how in Christianity the East symbolizes birth and resurrection, how the West symbolizes death, and how just as on a map East and West merge, so birth fades into death and death into resurrection. He refers to Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and the theory current in the seventeenth century that after the Deluge, these three sons repopulated the entire earth.

He shows his familiarity with the classical Christian notion that the Garden of Eden was located on the same spot where Jerusalem was later built and that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil grew on the same site where Christ's cross stood, thus locating all four of these contrasting, contradicting symbols in the same place and creating a magnificently paradoxical image. Another paradox important to Donne and also indicative of his immersion in Christian theory is the paradox of the two Adams. As Donne points out, through the first Adam humankind fell from grace, forfeited the Garden of Eden, and was condemned to earn its bread with the sweat of physical labor. Through Christ, the second Adam, however, humanity is restored to grace, regains Paradise, and, instead of the pain of the first Adam's sweat, knows the balm, the saving efficacy, of the second Adam's blood.

In one of this poem's most vivid metaphors, Donne brings his knowledge of geography and religion together in a conceit wherein spiritual and physical cosmography unite in the body of Donne. Thus, his physicians become cosmographers, map-makers, and Donne's body becomes their map. On this map, East, his birth, and West, his death, can be discerned. As surely as he began his journey in the

East, he will conclude his journey in the West. Yet, asserts Donne, his West holds no fears for him, for as in all flat maps, and Donne's body is such a map, East and West meld into one, so Donne expects his death to merge into resurrection. Death will become life.

Reflecting on the poem to this point, one may discern several similarities between it and Donne's earlier poetry. It retains the same wittiness, love of learning, and penchant for striking comparisons as those earlier poems do. Yet there arises a difference in this poem. In previous poems, Donne flaunted his knowledge and used his wit to bully his opponents into submission. In this poem, Donne trusts not in his wit or argumentative acumen but in Christ's "purple" (His Lordship) to save him, and he concludes not with the original swaggering confidence that he has taught his opponent a lesson but with the humbler hope that he may learn from his own poem. Ultimately, his conceit of the map does not carry him to flights of fancy but to submission to his fate as he reflects upon the straits before him and the God who waits beyond them.

## SUMMARY

T. S. Eliot perceived John Donne's worldview as one of unified sensibility, as an attempt to hold together what Renaissance thought threatened to tear asunder, and a study of Donne's poetry confirms this view. Widely read, acquainted with all worlds but committed to none, able to bring together the most heterogeneous elements in convincing if shocking images, Donne stands out as a thinker capable of moving easily between absolutes and particulars, of probing potentialities, of heightening sensuality into philosophy, of thinking and feeling simultaneously, and of distilling all of these experiences into an intimate logic. His intensely personal record of the turbulent seventeenth century has meaning in modern humanity's chaotic world; his experimental Renaissance style of writing poetry has become characteristic of modern poetics.

Ray G. Wright

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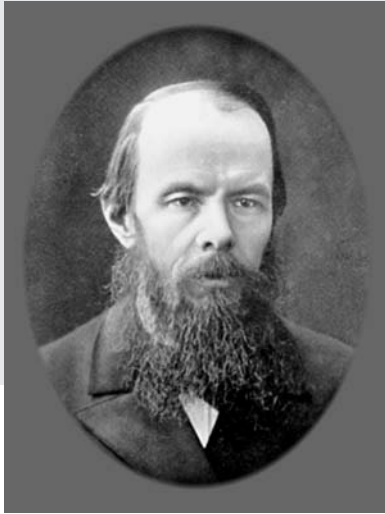
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What literary habits of John Donne kept even important later poets and critics from appreciating his poetry?
- What is there in "Metaphysical poetry" that has made it attractive from the time of T. S. Eliot on?
- Writers are often advised to take pains to begin their works well. What characteristics of Donne's poems make clear that he understood this sort of advice?
- Explain why, with respect to "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," mourning is forbidden.
- What literary techniques, especially the use of metaphor, in "Batter My Heart, Three Person'd God" resemble those in the poetry of "Jack Donne"?
- Donne ends "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" with a paradox: "Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down." Find several other paradoxes of this type in Donne's poetry.
- What does "thinking and feeling simultaneously" mean? What does Eliot's need to emphasize this concept suggest about the ordinary state of our emotional and intellectual processes?



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## FYODOR DOSTOEVSKI

**Born:** Moscow, Russia

November 11, 1821

**Died:** St. Petersburg, Russia

February 9, 1881

*Dostoevski is widely regarded as the leading practitioner of the psychological novel in the nineteenth century and as one of the greatest novelists of all time.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevski (dahs-tuh-YEHF-skee), novelist, journalist, religious polemicist, and political reformer, was born in Moscow, Russia, on November 11, 1821, the second child of Mikhail Andreevich Dostoevski and Marya Fedorovna Nechaeva. His father, a surgeon, had served for eight years in the army and, at Fyodor's birth, held a staff position at St. Mary's Hospital for the destitute of Moscow. An able and intelligent man who had succeeded in pulling himself out of generations of poverty, Dostoevski's father was nonetheless often violent, moody, and given to bouts of heavy drinking that frightened his children. His mother was an engaging and attractive woman, practical, efficient, and cheerful in running her household.

Dostoevski had seven brothers and sisters. He was closest to his older brother, Mikhail, and the third child in the family, his sister Varvara. These three seem to have formed a closer relationship to their father than the youngest five, whose lives were centered almost entirely on their mother. Mikhail, Fyodor, and Varvara shared intellectual and literary interests, and Fyodor's novels and stories reveal themes, types, and motifs closely linked to his lifetime experience with these two close siblings.

Dostoevski spent the first twelve years of his life at home, where he was schooled by his father and by private tutors. He finished his early education at

the best boarding school in Moscow, an educational experience recorded in fictional alteration in his novel *Podrostok* (1875; *A Raw Youth*, 1916). At sixteen, he entered the St. Petersburg military engineering school, where he was an indifferent student of soldierly science, spending much of his time at musical and theatrical performances, on nights out with fellow cadets, and especially in reading. Dostoevski was a voracious reader, working his way through the classics, being particularly fond of Homer and William Shakespeare. So taken was he with the greatness of these authors that he determined to master the literary craft in a way never before done in the Russian language. This determination, coupled with his father's murder at the hands of the peasants on a small family estate and his mother's death from tuberculosis, led Dostoevski in 1844 to begin life anew. He resigned his engineering lieutenant's commission and became a full-time writer.

His first two literary attempts illustrate the power that he was to manifest throughout his career. First, he translated into Russian the French novelist Honoré de Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* (1833; English translation, 1859). Balzac had recently been lionized on a visit to St. Petersburg, and Dostoevski saw his chance to create a success and make some money. Yet it is his choice of this particular work to translate that is important: *Eugénie Grandet* reveals motifs of criminality, the psychology of self-sacrifice, and the power of obsessive behavior that inform much of Dostoevski's later work. Second, he produced the short novel *Bednye lyudi* (1846; *Poor Folk*, 1887), which a friend gave to the

great Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinsky to read. To Dostoevski's surprise and delight, Belinsky gave it high praise, recognizing the young author's uncommon and powerful insight into the tragic victimization of people caught in circumstances beyond their control. In this novel, Dostoevski reveals the ability to show from within a character's psychology, a new technique that caused the literary elite of his day to rank him immediately with Russia's greatest writers.

During the next six years, Dostoevski wrote many works showing an astonishing range of style and form. The most important of these is the novel *Dvoynik* (1846; *The Double*, 1917), in which a morbidly delicate clerk is shown progressively sinking into insanity, an almost clinical description underscored by the hero's encounters with beings in mirrors, on the street, and in dreams, all of whom are embodiments of his worst pathological desires and which portray the disease of advancing schizophrenia in a powerful new way.

In addition to his writing, Dostoevski participated in political discussions at the homes of leading radicals. The repressive Czar Nicholas I had arrested twenty-one of the participants in these discussions. All of them, including Dostoevski, were sentenced to be shot. He was saved at the last moment by the czar's order to have him sent to prison in Siberia, to be followed by a stint in the army. The experience of a last-minute reprieve haunted him for the rest of his life, and the frightful conditions of the Siberian labor camp produced a changed man. During his imprisonment, he began to have sharp hallucinations, and this period marks the beginning of his bouts with epilepsy. Dostoevski emerged from prison and the army intensely spiritualized, so much so that he accepted his punishment as a just reward for his previous crimes, political and emotional. His intense prison experience also supplied him with material for the deeply penetrating psychological portraits that characterize the remainder of his literary output.

At the end of 1859, he was allowed to begin writing again. Returning to St. Petersburg, he found radicals against him because of his renewed interest in religion. Together with his older brother, he established the magazine *Vremya* (time) with the goal of drawing together into a cooperative stance the leading groups of Russian writers and intellec-

tuals, a goal that was only partially met. In order to heal his emotional wounds and to gain breadth of experience, Dostoevski went to Germany in 1862. While he was gone, the government banned the publication of *Vremya*, saying that it was unpatriotic. Undaunted, he returned and again, in partnership with Mikhail, began a new journal, *Epokha* (epoch).

The establishment of his new magazine in 1864 marks the beginning of Dostoevski's greatest writing period, the time in which he produced *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye* (1866; *Crime and Punishment*, 1886), *Idiot* (1868; *The Idiot*, 1877), *Besy* (1871-1872; *The Possessed*, 1913; also known as *The Devils*), and *Bratya Karamazovy* (1879-1880; *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1912). His life was seldom happy: Problems caused by gambling and epilepsy continued to plague him, and marital peace eluded him until he met and wed Anna Grigorievna Snitkina, an unprepossessing but absolutely devoted stenographer who aided him greatly by bringing order to his emotional life and efficiency to his personal affairs. He had suffered from emphysema for years, and he died of that terrible disease on February 9, 1881, in St. Petersburg, where he is buried.

## ANALYSIS

In a sense, all of Dostoevski's works are psychological accounts of obsessive behavior. There is no epic sweep to the novels, even though they are very long, and no detailed "slice of life" observation on the part of the narrators. The manner in which his fiction differs from other work of his time is that Dostoevski uncovers for the reader the detailed psychological complexity of an act (such as murder) while avoiding complexity of motif and cleverness of rhetorical patterns. His work achieves a clinical economy of both subject and treatment. This economy, coupled with the reader's natural fascination with the bizarre obsessions that focus the stories, represents the creation of a new kind of serious fiction that is related to but rises above the psycho-thriller.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Dostoevski's novels and stories are easy reading. His real goal is to reveal the core of human nature. To do so, he typically subjects his characters to frightening situations, then gradually removes, one by one, the psychological props that they have used to keep themselves in balance, until, finally,

they are left quite alone in their dilemmas. In this way, the reader is led into the depths of the human mind's darkest chasms. The reader's absorption in the question of what a human being will choose to do when left alone in the night of previously hidden obsessions is what creates the electric suspense of Dostoevski's stories. The chief manner by which he brings about this revelation is through the subtle manipulation of imagery.

First, almost all Dostoevski's works are set in the city, that soot-stained, chaotic collection of human souls crowded into a kind of heap. There is a certain protection in a city, but also an inevitable rubbing away of individual identity by too-close contact. Cities confine rather than liberate: Symbolically, they hide the self in a welter of interpersonal relations and complexities. Second, the novels and stories tend to focus on images of lower animal life (spiders, snakes, flies, and lice, for example), providing for the reader the association of Dostoevski's obsessed characters with disease-carrying and filth-ridden loathsomeness. Finally, the use of dreams for symbolic purposes is omnipresent. There is usually a buildup of tension to the beginning of a dream, followed by a sequence that reveals a segment of a character's subconscious. Dostoevski accomplishes this very subtly, intermixing dreams as wish fulfillments, regressions, self-assertions, and foreshadowings.

The power of Dostoevski's art has been called cruel and even sadistic, seeming to revel in the morbid and abnormal. Modern psychology, however, has provided a clinical understanding of mental and emotional abnormalities, so that it is now clear how the novels and stories anticipate and artistically present many of the discoveries made by social scientists. Dostoevski's art represents the first realistic view into areas of the psyche virtually unexplored before his time. Mental illnesses now named by modern psychiatry are given life by his characters: manic depression, senile dementia, infantilism, and megalomania find form in Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Natasha Filipovna, and Kirilov.

In fact, Dostoevski's insistent use of dreams for symbolic purposes anticipates the most influential early psychological treatise in history, Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (1900; *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1913). The dream that Svidrigailov (*Crime and Punishment*) has just prior to his suicide, in which he violates a child, is Freudian to the core.

Stavrogin's (*The Possessed*) rape of a twelve-year-old girl is mirrored in his dream of the Lorraine painting, which comes to life and haunts him to the verge of insanity. Arkady (*A Raw Youth*) is aware that his dreams are the key to his identity, particularly the one in which a gruesome spider spins its web inside his bowels. Hippolyte (*The Idiot*) has a dream that perfectly reveals his split personality: A snake slithers off the wall of his bedroom and chases him around the house. It noiselessly follows him until, just as it touches his head, his dog (already dead for more than five years) runs up and bites the reptile in two. Hippolyte awakes as the leering dog stands in front of him with the two parts of the serpent still writhing in his mouth. Alyosha (*The Brothers Karamazov*) is spiritually transformed by the dream of his dead mentor's corpse being alive once again and present at the biblical marriage at Cana. Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*) has a dream in which, as he is walking past a tavern with his father, he observes peasants beating a horse to death, a scene that he, upon waking, realizes represents his murder plan. The hero of "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" eventually understands that dreams are always symbolic, always unreasonable, deeply embedded wish fulfillments. The use of dream imagery and dream analysis in Dostoevski's works has never been surpassed in Western literature and has been the most influential, along with Freud's writings, of any treatments of the idea.

In addition to Dostoevski's brilliance as a forerunner of psychoanalysis, his place as cocreator of the modern novel is secure. He produced his works while Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, and Charles Dickens were creating theirs. Each of these writers attempted, in his own way, to describe realistically how human beings react to everyday life. Naturalistic views of heredity, environment, and human motivation are basic to the creation of the social types represented in the great nineteenth century novels, but Dostoevski treats these topics in a unique way. He is interested in throwing light on the primitive and raw elements of human nature, out of which social types may be understood. By showing characters in the grip of actual or potential crime and the consequences of these crimes, Dostoevski reveals that human ills and universal evil are not at all outside individuals: Rather, they rest squarely inside each individual.



## NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

**First published:** *Zapiski iz podpolya*, 1864  
(English translation, 1913)

**Type of work:** Novella

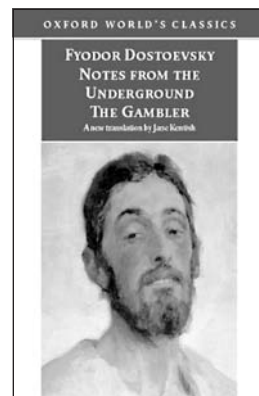
*A sick and spiteful man philosophizes about his irrationality, defending himself in advance against criticism of his negativism.*

One of Dostoevski's most interesting and original works, *Notes from the Underground* represents the real beginning of his literary greatness, even though the earlier novel *Poor Folk* had already made him famous. Translated into many languages many times, this work is more widely read than perhaps any other late nineteenth century short novel or story. The "underground man" has become a literary archetype, and numerous modern movements have claimed Dostoevski's creation as their spiritual progenitor. The story consists of two parts. In the first, the underground man gives a long monologue that encapsulates his philosophy, while in the second part, adventures from his life are recounted. Together, these halves form a whole psychological portrait, making a powerful statement against the possibility of rational social progress.

By noticing that the underground man tyrannizes everyone around him, one sees how easy it is for superficial and sentimental people to be corrupted by a strong personality. Thus, the story expresses a pessimistic vision of humankind as weak, too self-centered ever to experience joy, and prone to the agony of solipsism. The essence of the underground man's meaning lies in his assertion that, as far as he is concerned, the world can go to hell, just as long as he gets his tea. Moreover, *Notes from the Underground* is a political polemic aimed at reforming Russian society, with its endless wavering between Western European ideas and the "Russian soul." The recounted adventures in the second half of the story are symbolic representations of episodes from Russia's dislocated past and present. These recollections reveal that it is not really the underground man who has a problem with true identity: It is Russia itself. By extension, *Notes from the Underground* is also a renunciation of Dostoevski's own past. The author, through the narrator,

derides his previously held optimism and joyful feelings, and he replaces them with pessimism, hopelessness, and despair. Something ugly had arisen in Dostoevski's spirit, and he felt compelled to give it expression, no matter how venomous it might be.

Above all, there seems little doubt that it is a full-blown attack on the particular positivist philosophy of Dostoevski's day, a philosophy holding that human beings are rational and capable of creating a better society for everyone through material progress. The underground man's spiritual isolation is the result of positivism's failure to make any material progress at all, and his self-disgust is an agonized cry of protest against it.



## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

**First published:** *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye*, 1866 (English translation, 1886)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An intensely emotional intellectual, driven by poverty, comes to believe that he lives above common morality and commits a murder, only to find that his punishment is worse than he imagined it could be.*

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevski treats the problem of crime and the criminal mentality. He is not interested in the social aspects of criminal behavior, and there is little said in the novel about the legalities of crime. Dostoevski has an interior view of criminality, a conviction that crime and its inevitable punishment are deeply seated aspects of the human spirit.

Raskolnikov (the novel's hero) is presented from the inside. The reader knows what he did before knowing why he did it, and the story is told as a gradual revelation of the hero's motives. That accounts for the uncanny suspense of the first several

chapters: The reader continually searches for the reason that Raskolnikov has murdered the pawnbroker. Intertwined with the reader's suspense is the slowly dawning realization that Raskolnikov himself does not know his motive. This "double suspense" creates a dense texture that gives the novel its complexity, a complexity laid over the relative simplicity of the plot.

As the novel progresses, Raskolnikov's possible motives become ever more bizarre. The consistent notion behind his behavior is revealed in his confession to the innocent prostitute, Sonia, after the crime, when he blurts out that he did it because he only wanted to see if he could go beyond a normal person's revulsion against such an act. This admission seems to suggest that Raskolnikov is an egotist, a self-styled superman who wants to see if he can get away with transgressing the law. The reader comes to find, however, that Raskolnikov's impulses go more deeply than that: Raskolnikov wants to see if he can overstep the limits of evil itself, if he can exert ultimate power over another person. That is what the murder means to him.

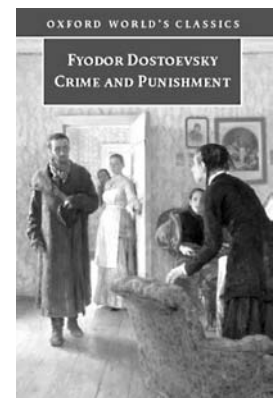
Dostoevski's brilliant unfolding of Raskolnikov's deepest motive really begins after the confession to Sonia. Before this point in the novel, the reader is puzzled by a welter of seemingly conflicting evidence about the hero's personality. Raskolnikov says he does not believe in God and that there is no arbiter of absolute good and evil. Yet he is numb with self-doubt. In spite of his logical decision to commit murder, he is troubled and hesitant. His horrible dream of the peasants beating a horse to death causes him to awake trembling at the very thought that he himself might be so cruel. As he later walks along the banks of the Neva, his obsession with committing an evil act alternates with a loathing for the very idea. Then, after the deed has been done, something curious occurs that turns out to be the key to understanding his true motive and the rest of the novel. It becomes clear that Raskolnikov's response to having committed murder is merely puzzlement. In other words, he shows neither remorse nor joy. He realizes that he feels the same way that he has always felt.

Finally, the reader understands that the loathsome criminality of Raskolnikov's motive lies in its amorality. He had decided to murder the old woman pawnbroker on strictly logical grounds, but

the unease that he continues to feel is not a guilty conscience stemming from a too-strict logicity. Had he murdered for money or out of anger and then been caught, his punishment would have been easier than that which comes to gnaw at him. Having made a cold-blooded sociopathic decision to assert himself at the expense of another's very identity, he finds his feelings locked into the conventional morality that his intellect so despises. He is thus caught in an emotional vacuum, the most inescapable kind of punishment. Raskolnikov has murdered an old woman, but the inability to have an authentically strong feeling about it has murdered him spiritually. In a dream, he tries to kill her repeatedly, slicing at her skull with an ax, but as he looks closely into her face he can see her laughing horribly. Raskolnikov has really killed himself with the ax of cold-blooded self-assertion. He has no clearly definable motive because he is a sociopathic personality.

In the end of the story, Dostoevski makes clear how problematic such a personality is for society. Once again, the author's meaning is revealed in a dream sequence. Raskolnikov is ill in Siberia and dreams that he and the rest of the world have been devastated by an infestation of highly intelligent germs. The infestation causes insanity. The infected believe themselves to be logical, scientific, progressive, and morally sound; yet they get sick and go mad from the infection. Anarchy results, and human society disintegrates. Dostoevski's point is that sociopathic personalities are like these microbes, able to kill everything that they touch.

The sickness of cold-blooded amorality is shown against a background of conventional, commonsensical standards that define the boundaries of good and evil. The relationship between them is seen in the novel's other characters. Raskolnikov's sister, Dunya, is about to be married to Luzhin, a manipulative businessman, and the morally grotesque Svidrigailov hovers around them, while the prostitute, Sonia, and the policeman, Porfiry, at



tempt to maneuver the hero into a confession. Each relationship is flawed by the characters' tendency toward self-serving logicity, none more self-indulgent than that between Svidrigailov and Dunya, caused for the most part by Svidrigailov's profligacy. Years of cold philosophizing have left Svidrigailov with no heartfelt values, not even the common sense to distinguish between the most fundamental kinds of good and evil. In order to escape his emotional wretchedness, he fills his days with a sinister kind of debauchery. When his love for Dunya is rejected, he is able to shoot himself with a cool detachment. Sonia, although kindly and sensitive, is nevertheless a prostitute; like the others, she has murdered herself by becoming a tool of the dissoluteness of other people. She, like the others, has defined herself by coolly deciding on a course of action that indulges others in their weaknesses. It is the ultimate punishment that results from sociopathic attitudes and behaviors: Like the crime, the punishment is cold, wretched, impersonal, and ultimately without any satisfaction.

## THE POSSESSED

**First published:** *Besy*, 1871-1872 (English translation, 1913)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the troubled world of mid-nineteenth century Russia, a group of characters find that their interest in nihilism leads to disaster.*

*The Possessed* is the most topical of Dostoevski's novels and stories. During the 1860's, the radical fringe of the Russian intelligentsia attempted to implant the ideology known as "nihilism" into the general revolutionary fervor caused by the recent abolition of serfdom. Nihilism (from the Latin *nihil*, meaning "nothing") was concerned more with destroying societal forms and traditions than with establishing something positive. The destructive anger of this group had been the topic of several novels already published, the most important of which was Ivan Turgenev's *Ottsy i deti* (1862; *Fathers and Sons*, 1867). *The Possessed*, therefore, is both an attack on nihilism, with sharp caricatures

of contemporary revolutionaries, and an attempt to create the great antinihilist novel. Dostoevski's most important innovation to the antinihilist novel is the structural device of having two chief characters. These two, Pyotr Verkhovensky and Nikolai Stavrogin, embody the two sides of Dostoevski's political anger, his hatred of the Russian revolutionary left, and his violent distrust of the Russian aristocracy.

In addition to his key role in this novel, Stavrogin is a foreshadowing of characters to appear in Dostoevski's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In *The Possessed*, this character is obviously another version of Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*), but whereas Raskolnikov is a weak man without values and direction, Stavrogin has a strong character but is still without values and goals. Through him, Dostoevski pictures the consequences of atheism, especially those destructive consequences particularly suffered by the strong and intelligent. Such persons begin in a vague moral drift, progress to a reliance on individual goals, develop from this a self-centeredness, and eventually come to a cosmic self-indulgence that forever separates the individual from moorings of universal truth, the only kind of truth that would bring meaning and significance to life. In his confession, Stavrogin reveals the obsession with which all amoral individuals are possessed, the need to punish themselves. He had considered shooting himself but decides instead to marry a completely unsuitable woman as a way of making his suffering last longer. Dostoevski's point is that masochism is the inevitable result of atheism, because atheism contains no transcendent value. That, then, means indifference, tedium, and ultimate self-annihilation.

Beyond the embodiment of individual, spiritual masochism, Stavrogin represents the social masochism of nihilism. He joins with the revolutionaries, those possessed with fanatical ideas, a possession compared by Dostoevski to the devils that drive the swine over the cliff in the New Testament. Stavrogin and the revolutionaries disrupt a provincial town with a series of spectacular scandals, but, in the end, Stavrogin finds that he is beyond caring about even the most wildly destructive of the radicals' plans. He has no spiritual center and can in the blink of an eye annihilate in his mind his interest in nihilism. That, then, is the basic flaw in the revolutionaries' doctrine: Its indifference to posi-

tive values is the seed of its own destruction. Nihilism cannot believe in anything, especially itself. It can only annihilate everything, including itself.

Pyotr Verkhovensky might be seen as the sadistic complement to Stavrogin's masochism. The son of a faded provincial liberal, Verkhovensky arrives in his family's town with grandiose plans for a revolution. He has a kind of genial charisma, and the radical group (formerly led by his father) quickly follows his lead. Their mean-spiritedness results in ugly incidents, such as the desecration of an icon and the setting of fires. When a member of the group decides to leave as a result of a change of mind, Verkhovensky maneuvers the others into murdering him, after which he flees, leaving the rest to suffer the consequences.

Verkhovensky is modeled on the self-righteous dreamers who had infected Russian politics in Dostoevski's youth and who had been indicted thoroughly in *Fathers and Sons*. The significance of this portrait is that Verkhovensky is more than an example of Dostoevski's ability to create political satire. Verkhovensky is the culmination of Dostoevski's treatment of the interrelations of politics and religion, an embodiment of the idea that no social or political progress can be made without individual moral and spiritual regeneration. In using the disintegration of Verkhovensky's active participation in his home town to show how the political ideals of the Russian left are bankrupt, Dostoevski indicates that the real problem lies in the spiritual emptiness of the revolutionaries themselves.

Just as there are two main characters in the novel, so there are two stories. One is about the few days in August during which nasty events in a provincial town take place. The other is the past action of all the characters who people the present moment in that provincial town. There is a constant interplay of these stories, and events from one expand the meaning of the other. It is a very unique, complex, and artistically satisfying structural device and, along with the two-main-character strategy, makes *The Possessed* one of Dostoevski's greatest creations.

## THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

**First published:** *Bratya Karamazovy*, 1879-1880 (English translation, 1912)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The sons of an irresponsible provincial businessman return home and become involved in a complex series of events leading to tragedy and the family's destruction.*

Like *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov* revolves around a murder. Fyodor Karamazov, a corrupt provincial landowner and businessman, has fathered four sons: Dmitri, an army officer, by his first wife; Ivan, a teacher and scholar, by his second wife; Alyosha, a monk in training, also by his second wife; and Smerdyakov, an epileptic servant in his household and his illegitimate child by a retarded local girl. Fyodor is murdered by Smerdyakov, but Dmitri's freewheeling anger and violence make him the suspect. After his arrest, a spectacular trial is held. The prosecution builds a solid case, and Dmitri is found guilty and sent to Siberia. Ivan learns that Smerdyakov is the real murderer, but, since nothing can be proved, Dmitri must suffer the consequences of the deed to the end. Ivan has a nervous breakdown, Smerdyakov commits suicide, and Alyosha goes to Siberia to offer what comfort he can to his brother.

The four brothers are symbolic of the basic causes of human spiritual isolation. Dmitri is a deeply sensual person, constantly involved in physical pleasures such as drink, sexual seduction, and material comfort; yet he is aware that his physical excesses are a grave weakness. Ivan is a self-aware intellectual whose arrogance isolates him from meaningful contact with common people. Alyosha has a narrow catechistic faith that imprisons him within the walls of religious naïveté. Smerdyakov represents the distorted drives of the classic passive manipulator. Gross sensuality, proud intellectualism, narrow religiosity, and scapegoating irresponsibility infect the entire series of relationships, not only between the brothers but also between them and the other characters, as well. The weaknesses of the brothers are projected as the fourfold nature of fallen humankind, the representation of spiritual failure and the legacy of Original Sin.

It is in the episode called “The Grand Inquisitor” that Dostoevski’s philosophy of sin and redemption is distilled. Ivan tells the story to Alyosha in order to explain why he is so troubled by his inability to grasp the essence of religion intellectually. Set in sixteenth century Spain, the narrative portrays Christ’s return to earth at a time when faith had been nearly eradicated by the Catholic Inquisition. Christ comforts the enemies of the Church, who are being burned at the stake, gives sight to the blind, weeps with those who mourn, and raises the dead. All who see Him know who He is. The Grand Inquisitor also recognizes Him and has Him arrested for performing acts contrary to the procedures of the Church. One evening, the old Inquisitor visits Christ in His vile prison in order to explain to Him why He must be burned at the stake. Christ must die, the old man insists, because His return would ruin the Church’s centuries-old attempt to save humankind. Christ committed a grave error in rejecting Satan’s three temptations in the wilderness, because those three temptations strike at the core of human weakness: Their eradication through Christ’s power would mean human freedom, something that all of history proves is the root of disaster. Had Christ’s example empowered human beings to happiness through freedom, the Church’s work would be in vain. In any case, there is no evidence that humanity can handle freedom, so the Church, out of love for all people, establishes rules and indices to enslave them. In this way, the problems created by impossible freedom can be avoided. During this explanation, Christ slowly rises to His feet and finally kisses the old man gently. Deeply moved but clinging to his doctrine, the Grand Inquisitor warns Christ never to return and then releases Him.

This episode ties together the entire novel and shows *The Brothers Karamazov* to be a drama of the irony of the soul’s choice. Mortality is defined by

the necessity of choosing good over evil and creating freedom with those choices; yet such freedom is incompatible with human nature. Human beings might choose only the right through authority and spiritual coercion, and these motivations are the opposite of the example of Christ. The problem is that Christ Himself was perfect; that is, He embodied freedom and wanted it for all people. People, however, are not perfect and are not capable of disinterested righteousness, and that is why human beings will never choose freedom. The Grand Inquisitor’s explanation of the world’s future gives a vision of the problem: Human beings will whine and rebel until the age of reason and science brings about so much confusion and disturbance that they will begin to destroy each other. The very weakest will be left, and they will beg the Grand Inquisitor and his institutional religion to make their decisions for them. They will then be “happy” because they will be allowed no moral responsibility. The world will eventually be like a stern parent with many “happy” babies waiting to be coddled.

## SUMMARY

The novels and stories of Fyodor Dostoevski are explorations of human nature and the nature of the religious experience. His vision is ambivalent, verging on the cynically pessimistic and burdened with the demons of human weakness. Yet in the conflating design of their characterization and plot structures, the works provide a rich poetic texture of compelling truth about humankind’s personal and religious values. His thought is radical and prophetic, and his art is confrontational. His novels are less an examination of religious ideology than a discernment of spirituality. Dostoevski asserts that life and art are meaningful. The nature of that meaning, however, is troubling, fraught with danger, and necessary to grasp.

Larry H. Peer

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why is it possible to have a better understanding of Fyodor Dostoevski's psychological novels today than could readers of his time?
- Present evidence that *Notes from the Underground* is a "literary archetype."
- Explain whether or not Dostoevski's literary punishments fit the crimes.
- Does a character like Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* verify that Dostoevski can demonstrate redeeming features in human nature?
- Is Dostoevski's opposition to atheism as an essential basis for immorality convincing?
- To what extent does Dostoevski show his major characters overcoming criminal temptations?

MISCELLANEOUS:

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## SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

**Born:** Edinburgh, Scotland  
May 22, 1859

**Died:** Crowborough, East Sussex, England  
July 7, 1930

*Doyle created one of the first and most popular of fictional detectives—Sherlock Holmes.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (doyuhl) was born on May 22, 1859, into an artistic Catholic family living in Edinburgh, Scotland, and he grew up there. His father, Charles, was a public servant and artist who illustrated the first edition of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887 serial; 1888, book), the first tale of Sherlock Holmes. Charles suffered from mental disease and alcoholism and was institutionalized from 1879 until his death in 1893. Arthur's mother, Mary Foley Doyle, reared seven children, of whom Arthur was the fourth. She oversaw Arthur's education, sending him to Jesuit schools at Stoneyhurst and at Feldkirch, Austria, despite the family's comparative poverty, and encouraging him to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh.

Doyle began his writing career soon after beginning medical study, publishing his first story, "The Mystery of Sasassa Valley," in 1879. At the university, he met two professors who became models for his most famous literary creations. Dr. Joseph Bell was the prototype for Sherlock Holmes; William Rutherford became the model for Professor Challenger of *The Lost World* (1912).

Before finishing his medical schooling, Doyle sought adventure, serving as ship's surgeon on two voyages. After completing his M.D. in 1885, he married Louise Hawkins. They had two children, Mary Louise and Alleyne Kingsley. A year after his marriage, he finished *A Study in Scarlet*.

Doyle thought of himself mainly as a historical novelist in the mode of Sir Walter Scott, whom he admired, but the public showed more interest in Sherlock Holmes. At the request of *Lippincott's Magazine*, Doyle produced *The Sign of Four* (1890). Relinquishing his medical practice in 1891, he turned to writing for his living. He then wrote a series of Holmes stories for *The Strand*, beginning with "A Scandal in Bohemia." These were so popular that the editors asked for more. Before he had finished twelve of them, collected in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), he was tired of his characters and told his mother—who thought it a mistake—that he intended to kill Holmes in the last tale. He waited, however, until the next series, collected as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), to have Holmes die, in "The Adventure of the Final Problem." Having taken Louise to Switzerland after discovering her tuberculosis, Doyle was away from London when readers of *The Strand* were shocked by Holmes's death. Despite the sorrow and anger of Holmes's fans, Doyle published no more Holmes stories until *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901-1902, serial; 1902, book).

Between 1893 and 1901, Doyle continued writing popular stories for *The Strand*, the best about Étienne Gérard, a comic soldier in Napoleon I's army. He also made a successful reading tour of the United States, sailed up the Nile River with Louise, and visited the Sudan as a war correspondent. Having been convinced that the climate of Surrey was good for tuberculosis patients, Doyle and Louise settled there in 1896. In 1897, he met and fell in love with Jean Leckie, then twenty-four. With typical loyalty and honor, Doyle maintained a platonic

relationship with her until after Louise's death. He married Jean in 1907, and they had three children, Denis, Adrian, and Lena Jean.

Before the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, Doyle published story collections, novels, poetry, and drama. Too old for combat, he served under terrible conditions and without pay as a medical officer. His war experiences led to two books. In the second, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (1902), he defended the British role in the war. For this service, he was knighted in 1902.

After running unsuccessfully for Parliament in 1900, Doyle visited Dartmoor. There he heard legends that became the inspiration for *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. While this novel was appearing in *The Strand*, William Gillette's play *Sherlock Holmes* (1899) opened successfully in London, and American and British publishers offered Doyle about \$7,500 per story to write more. He revived Holmes in "The Adventure of the Empty House" and continued to produce Holmes stories sporadically for the rest of his life.

Energetic, inquisitive, and ambitious, Doyle sought to influence public opinion in many ways during the last years of his life. He spoke out on political issues, such as Irish home rule, ran again for Parliament, participated in an Anglo-German auto race, traveled widely in Europe and America, and was a war correspondent during World War I. In 1916, he became convinced that he had received a spirit message from the dead and proceeded to become a leader of the spiritualist movement. He wrote several books on spiritualism, including *The History of Spiritualism* (1926).

His best-remembered accomplishment in the last third of his life is the creation of Professor Challenger, the hero of *The Lost World*, a passionate scientist eager to explore unknown worlds. Like Holmes, Challenger eventually became a film hero. *The Lost World* also provided an outline for the classic film *King Kong* (1933).

Doyle fell ill with heart disease in 1929 and died on July 7, 1930, at his home, Windlesham, in Crowborough, East Sussex, England, where he is buried.

## ANALYSIS

Doyle tended to think of his Sherlock Holmes stories as popular fiction, written primarily to maintain his income while he worked on more im-

portant works, such as *The White Company* (1891). Though this historical novel in a medieval setting is thought to be one of his best books, and though his science-fiction novels about Professor Challenger are also well respected, the tales of Sherlock Holmes are still considered Doyle's best and most memorable work.

In Holmes and Dr. John Watson, Doyle created well-rounded, interesting characters. Holmes is the utter rationalist, understanding emotions almost exclusively as factors in the solution of interesting intellectual problems. He solves crimes by using keen observation, by building hypotheses based on established facts, and by testing those hypotheses. He is often amusing and entertaining when he and Watson play their game of inferring a character's habits or recent activities from the observation of details about their first appearance or possessions, such as an accidentally lost cane. Holmes is always superior at finding the correct way to arrange the clues into a meaningful order. Watson, though quite competent, is a more ordinary man, a doctor who eventually marries and lives a prosaic life, except when he is with Holmes on a case. Then his life blossoms into adventure, and his loyalty, medical knowledge, physical strength, and energy serve Holmes well. Holmes is a creative genius, using a "scientific method" in an artistic manner to produce masterpieces of detection. Watson, as Holmes's Boswell, or biographer, turns these masterpieces into what Holmes often describes as trivial romances, more entertaining than instructive.

One factor that contributes to the enduring popularity of these tales is that readers have found the stories instructive as well as entertaining. Within the conventions of the classic detective story, Doyle tells stories that shed light upon interesting complexities of British Victorian society and upon some enduring social themes.

The classic detective story may be defined as taking place in a world where order is normal. In this way, it is distinct from the hard-boiled detective story, where disorder is the norm. The classic detective becomes necessary when criminals introduce disorder, threatening social and familial stability. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a diabolical murderer attempts to kill the heirs of an estate to legitimize his more distant claim. In the process, he not only creates disorder in his family and among

his immediate victims but also violates his own marriage and disrupts the good work in the community of the recently restored Baskerville family wealth. Furthermore, by making use of the old superstition of a vengeful hellhound that pursues the Baskerville heirs, the murderer undercuts the foundation of rationality upon which communal order rests. Critics have pointed out that Stapleton, the murderer, threatens to turn the whole community into an analog of the Grimpen Mire, an important symbolic setting of the novella, where people and animals can be lost and then sucked into the dangerous muddy pools at the slightest misstep.

Holmes's function as a detective of rationality is to foil this villain and thereby protect society from disintegration. In contrast, a hard-boiled detective, such as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1939), works in a corrupt society to protect the innocent from its dangers, to salvage some order from the dominant chaos. The classic detective relies primarily upon mental work to sort out clues and discover the sources of disorder, while the hard-boiled detective relies more on violence to defend innocent victims. While the most common crime motive in the classic detective story is greed, the more common motive in hard-boiled detective fiction is power. Doyle may come closest to hard-boiled fiction in "The Adventure of the Final Problem" and "The Adventure of the Empty House," where Holmes encounters the organized crime of Professor Moriarty, a criminal for whom power and domination are more important than wealth.

Doyle's themes tend to concern family relations and their extensions into social and political relations. A number of these stories deal with corrupted relations between adults and children or between men and women, in which the physically weaker are endangered and abused because of their disadvantaged social position. Taken together, these tales provide not only exciting and suspenseful reading but also vivid portraits of Victorian life and insightful analyses of human nature and social life.

## "A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA"

**First published:** 1891 (collected in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Sherlock Holmes attempts to save the king of Bohemia from a scandal that would prevent his projected marriage.*

As "A Scandal in Bohemia" begins, it is March, 1888. The recently married Dr. John Watson happens by his old bachelor quarters at 221B Baker Street and finds Sherlock Holmes pacing the floor in the brilliantly lit rooms. Since Watson has married and settled into domestic tranquillity, Holmes, for whom the life of the emotions would be grit in his machinery, has been alternating between cocaine-induced dreams and his fiercely energetic solutions of mysteries abandoned by the official police. On this evening, Holmes takes an unusual assignment, unlike those of the two previously published cases, *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*. Indeed, Watson indicates that this is the first case in which Holmes fails, and his defeat comes at the hands of a woman, Irene Adler, an American singer, actress, and adventurer "of dubious and questionable memory," now deceased.

It may be because this is one of the earlier Holmes tales that it deviates so interestingly from the pattern of solution that later came to dominate these stories. This story strikingly resembles its great predecessor, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," in which Auguste Dupin determines the hiding place of a woman who is apparently of the French royal family and then recovers a letter being used to blackmail her. Like Dupin in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Holmes surprises his friend early in the story with an accurate account of Watson's recent activities based on details about the condition of his shoes.

Holmes's task is to locate and recover a photograph that shows Adler and the king of Bohemia together. Adler, a spurned lover, has threatened to deliver the photograph to Princess Clotilde, the king's intended, on the day their engagement is announced. Clotilde and her family would object so strongly to this proof of a previous sexual affair that the marriage would be canceled, disrupting international relations.



Holmes fairly easily determines that Adler, because she is an intelligent woman, would hide the photograph in her own home, but cleverly enough that ordinary burglars—who have already made two attempts—would not find it. In disguise, he observes her home and, by accident, witnesses her wedding to a lawyer. This event in itself might end her threat to the king, but Holmes wishes to make sure. He plots successfully to force her to show him the letter's hiding place. While assisting in this trick, Watson becomes less sure that he and Holmes are right to violate the privacy of the kind and beautiful Adler, even to help the king.

Holmes and Watson have deliberately set out to break the law by stealing the photograph. Only as the story closes do they both realize that they have taken the side of a powerful man who has won Adler's love and then cast her aside for reasons of policy. Adler sees through Holmes's trick, flees with her husband and the photograph, and leaves behind a note for Holmes, saying she will not use the photograph to harm the king unless he threatens her further. She thus earns Holmes and Watson's admiration, and from then on Holmes refers to her as "the woman" and ceases to speak deprecatingly of women's intelligence. At the same time, the king earns their contempt for his failure to rise above the conventional demands of his rank to make such a magnificent woman his queen.

This story proves atypical in the Sherlock Holmes series because the detective is called upon to break the law in order to maintain a questionable idea of order. Holmes's love of mystery and his lack of respect for women help to draw him into this temptation, but his understanding of emotional values, despite his apparent freedom from the softer emotions, leads him to regret what he intended and to admire the woman whom he mistook for a criminal.

## "THE ADVENTURE OF THE SPECKLED BAND"

**First published:** 1892 (collected in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Holmes aids a woman whose twin sister has died mysteriously upon the eve of her marriage and who fears that her stepfather may intend the same fate for her.*

"The Adventure of the Speckled Band" is probably the most famous of Sherlock Holmes's cases, not only because of its diabolical plot about a stepfather preventing his twin daughters from marrying and thereby diminishing his income from his deceased wife's estate, but also because it so perfectly realizes the pattern of detection that became Holmes's trademark. Watson opens the story with the information that he has been freed to tell this story by the premature death of the client, Helen Stoner.

Helen comes to Holmes and Watson in April, 1883, terrified that she may meet the same fate as her sister, who died mysteriously two years earlier. Encouraged and reassured by Holmes, she recounts the reasons for her fears. Because of repairs on the house, she has had to move into the bedroom used by her sister when she died and has heard a low whistle in the night, just as her sister did on several nights before her death. Her sister died soon after announcing her engagement to be married, and Helen is now also engaged to marry. Furthermore, the stepfather, Dr. Grimesby Roylott of the Stoke Moran estate in Surrey, is well known as a violent and temperamental giant who brooks no interference with his will. Having married their mother in India, where his medical practice was successful until he murdered his Indian butler, he returned to England, where his wife died in a railway accident. He then retired with his young stepdaughters into virtual seclusion at Stoke Moran, where he gives some of his time to collecting exotic animals, such as a baboon and a cheetah, said to come from India, which he allows to roam free on his grounds. He also associates with bands of gypsies that he allows to camp on his grounds.

Summarized, these details about Roylott's life seem rather silly, but they work fairly effectively to

account for Holmes's initial failure to discover how Helen's sister died and, therefore, what threat Helen must fear. This body of detail allows Holmes to develop two theories to explain the death, though he claims to have at least seven. The incorrect theory assumes that Roylott, with his clear motive for preventing his daughters from marrying, employs the gypsies by somehow making it possible for them to enter the woman's room at night and frighten her to death in some way. This theory would explain why there are no signs of violence on her body; why the police have found no way of entering her room once she locked herself in, away from cheetahs and baboons, each night; and why her mysterious last words to Helen were about a speckled band. When Holmes examines the scene, however, he makes several other pertinent discoveries, such as the small opening at the ceiling between the woman's room and Dr. Roylott's room, that the bell rope that hangs down onto the bed is not functional, and that the bed is fastened to the floor and cannot be shifted. These and other details make the case clear to Holmes, but he must, of course, test it.

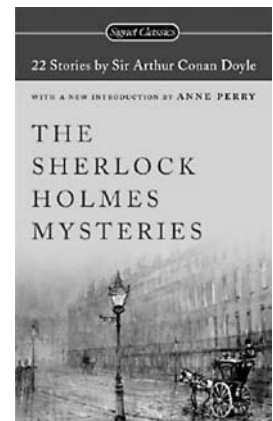
One of the great scenes in the Holmes stories is the night that Watson and the detective spend in the absolutely dark room, waiting for something to happen. Only when the speckled band appears and reveals itself to be a poisonous snake do the two men fully realize that the evil doctor has trained an Indian swamp adder to descend through the opening, down the bell rope and onto the bed, and return. Holmes, now aware of what was supposed to happen, drives the dangerous snake back upon the doctor, catching the murderer in his own trap.

Though there are many interesting variations, this general pattern is usually recognized as the form of the classic Holmes story. A client gives the detective the unconnected clues that form a mystery. The detective invents structures that make sense of these clues and determines which one is correct. Usually this requires a personal inspection of the crime scene and some other research that uncovers unnoticed clues. The detective reaches a

final conclusion by means of reasoning about this information, produces and tests the solution, and reveals the criminal. Though this process usually involves some action and danger, the central activity of the detective is solving the puzzle, and the reader's main pleasure is in attempting to reach the answer before or along with the detective. That is the general form one expects to encounter in the classical detective stories of such masters of the form as Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie.

This story also deals with Doyle's typical themes. Often, his client turns out to be a young woman who is, in some way, the victim of a powerful male—a relative, an employer, or a former suitor. As is often the case, the motive here is to obtain money and property. All the Holmes stories emphasize the rationality of causes for mysterious events. This story especially, but not uniquely, underlines Holmes's wisdom. Like his famous contemporary, Sigmund Freud, Holmes is willing to listen to the problems of a nervous young woman, when even her future husband responds only with "soothing answers and averted eyes." Helen addresses Holmes as one who "can see deeply into the manifold wickedness of the human heart."

That, however, is not true. Holmes is usually characterized as lacking insight into emotions beyond the common motives for crime. What he really excels at is developing and testing logical connections between seemingly unconnected events. Perhaps this apparent contradiction may be explained by Watson's assertion at the opening of the story that Holmes's rapid deductions were "swift as intuitions," suggesting that his logic is so fine an art that it may look like intuition or may mimic deep insight into the wickedness of the human heart.



## “THE ADVENTURE OF THE FINAL PROBLEM”

**First published:** 1893 (collected in *Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Having trapped the evil master criminal, Professor Moriarty, Holmes tries but fails to evade Moriarty's attempts to kill the detective before being arrested.*

In December, 1893, in the British magazine *The Strand* and the American magazine *McClure's*, readers were shocked to see Dr. Watson's melancholy account of the death of Holmes, who, according to Watson, was murdered two years earlier by Professor Moriarty, the Napoleon of crime. In writing “The Adventure of the Final Problem” and by introducing a new character of mythic proportions in Moriarty, however, Doyle probably effectively ensured that public pressure for more tales would increase rather than diminish.

“The Adventure of the Final Problem” is a tale not of detection but of rivalry and pursuit. Holmes comes to Watson's home in the night, when by good fortune Mrs. Watson is away on a visit and Watson is free to travel with Holmes to the Continent to escape Moriarty. Moriarty is one of the first great leaders of organized crime in fiction. Doyle presents him as in every way Holmes's equal, except that Moriarty has inherited criminal tendencies that have made him diabolical. Moriarty has organized a crime network that is like a giant spider's web, with the professor as the spider at its center: “He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city.” To counter the professor's web, Holmes has helped the police to construct a net in which those in Moriarty's gang, including the great spider himself, will be caught. He has not, however, been able to carry out this project without Moriarty's knowledge. On

the day Holmes visits Watson, Moriarty has come to Holmes's rooms and promised that if Holmes destroys him, the professor will take Holmes with him. Holmes has refused to be intimidated and, as a result, has endured a series of murder attempts during the day.

Holmes requests Watson's company for a trip to Switzerland, the main purpose of which is to evade Moriarty until the arrests occur, which for unexplained reasons requires three days of waiting. Despite their elaborate measures, Moriarty is able to follow them. When his gang is arrested, Moriarty himself is not caught. The professor overtakes Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls in the Swiss Alps. When Watson returns to the scene he has been fooled into leaving, all the remaining evidence indicates that Holmes and Moriarty, locked in a final struggle, fell into the falls, from which their bodies cannot be recovered.

Repeatedly in this story, Holmes reflects to Watson that his career has reached a peak and, therefore, that he is willing to accept even death if this proves to be the only way to rid England of Moriarty. This fatalistic mood proves prophetic when it appears the two have died in an equal and apparently irresolvable struggle of wit and skill.

That Doyle had some reservations about killing his hero seems clear. While having the bodies lost may seem to annihilate Holmes utterly, it leaves quite open the possibility that Doyle later exploited: that Holmes, in fact, did not die but went underground to avoid the dangers of Moriarty's remaining friends. In “The Adventure of the Empty House,” Holmes returns from three years of retreat to apprehend Moriarty's most dangerous remaining agents, among them Colonel Sebastian Moran. Of course, Doyle might have avoided reviving Holmes by “discovering” more of the many cases he solved before his death, as he did when he published *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Public pleasure at Holmes's “resurrection” greatly enhanced the detective's popularity and ensured a devoted readership for the many more tales Doyle wrote.

## “THE RING OF THOTH”

**First published:** 1890 (collected in *The Captain of Polestar, and Other Tales*, 1890)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In this supernatural fantasy, an Egyptologist stumbles upon a four-thousand-year-old man, who tells him the story of how he came to live so long.*

While Doyle is best known for his tales of Sherlock Holmes, he wrote a variety of other kinds of fiction, much of which is vigorous and entertaining. In interesting contrast to the Holmes stories, with their insistence upon rational explanation and natural order, are his stories of the supernatural. At the end of “Lot No. 249,” one of his best supernatural tales, the narrator says, “But the wisdom of men is small, and the ways of Nature are strange, and who shall put a bound to the dark things which may be found by those who seek for them?” Doyle’s tales of the supernatural also help to illustrate the wit and humor that, in fact, show up in many of his stories, for in these tales he often maintains an ironic narrative tone.

In “The Ring of Thoth,” irony is directed at the central character, Mr. John Vansittart Smith, a fellow of the Royal Society. Though Smith is a highly talented scientist, he is also represented as a fickle fellow. The narrator opens the story with an extended metaphor of courtship. Smith “flirts” with zoology, chemistry, and Oriental studies, almost “marrying” each, but finally is “caught” by Egyptology. Then the metaphor turns real: “So struck was Mr. Smith that he straightway married an Egyptological young lady who had written upon the sixth dynasty, and having thus secured a sound base of operations he set himself to collect materials for a work which should unite the research of Lepsius and the ingenuity of Champollion.” The humor continues as Smith journeys to Paris to study materials at the Louvre, where the narrator describes him as looking like a comic bird while he studies. When a pair of English tourists make disparaging comments about an attendant’s appearance, Smith believes they are talking about him, making fun of his lack of physical beauty. Discovering his error, Smith notices that the at-

tendant really does look like an authentic ancient Egyptian.

Smith’s curiosity is aroused, but when questioned, the attendant insists he is French. The ridiculous leads to the wondrous when, in the course of studying ancient documents, Smith falls asleep and remains unnoticed behind a door. He awakens in the early morning to discover the mysterious attendant unwrapping the mummy of a beautiful young girl, for whom the attendant expresses great affection. Then, in the course of searching among a collection of rings, the attendant spills some liquid and, in wiping it up, discovers Smith. As a result of this humorous series of accidents, Smith learns the story of Sosra.

Sosra, the attendant, is really an ancient Egyptian who developed an elixir of life. He and his best friend, Parmes, the priest of Thoth, drank it and became immortal. Then they both fell in love with Princess Atma, who loved Sosra; she soon died of a plague, having been hesitant about taking the elixir herself. Parmes then discovered an antidote for the elixir, making it possible for him to die and join Atma in the afterlife, but he hid it from Sosra so that he and Atma would be separated forever. After four thousand years of searching, Sosra has finally found the Ring of Thoth, which contains the antidote. He tells Smith his story and, along the way, makes it clear that Smith knows little of value about ancient Egyptian culture, even though he is one of the best modern Egyptologists. Then he lets Smith out of the Louvre and goes to join his beloved.

This amusing and entertaining tale of the supernatural contrasts the fickle modern scientist with the dedicated ancient scientist, who by sixteen had mastered his craft and who remained loyal to his first love for four millennia. On the other hand, Sosra’s story contains a warning for Smith, who has given way to a passion for ancient knowledge that may lead him along a path parallel to Sosra’s. The tale also casts an ironic light on the modern rationalist’s faith that one can understand the past or master any area of knowledge, thus providing an implicit, though perhaps not very serious, critique of the world view espoused by Sherlock Holmes.

### SUMMARY

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s biographers agree in describing him as typical of the late Victorian era.

He remained confident throughout his life of the soundness of his own moral vision and in the basic goodness of British morality. As a public personage, he repeatedly took the lead, both in praising British principles and in criticizing particular policies. He is credited with helping to modernize British defense between the Boer War and World War I, especially the defensive gear of common soldiers. He twice played detective himself, investigating cases of people unjustly condemned to prison. One of these, the Edalji case in 1906, contributed to establishing a court of criminal appeal in 1907. Even his support of spiritualism was a public crusade to effect the spiritual transformation of a nation he feared was in decline.

sade to effect the spiritual transformation of a nation he feared was in decline.

While his public services were many, Doyle will continue to be remembered mainly for the Sherlock Holmes stories. Holmes and Watson are indelible fixtures of Western culture, encountered in virtually every popular medium. These stories have influenced every important writer in the detective genre, from traditionalists, such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ellery Queen, to hard-boiled writers, such as Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, and P. D. James.

Terry Heller

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What evidence suggests that as a writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was not obsessed by, or confined to, detective fiction?
- What character traits of Dr. Watson make him an ideal partner for Sherlock Holmes?
- There are a number of similarities between Doyle's detective stories and those of Edgar Allan Poe. What are the most striking dissimilarities?
- What traits of Doyle's detective fiction survive among the more traditional sleuths in modern detective fiction?
- Have changes in the technology and resources of detection curtailed modern readers' capacity to enjoy the Sherlock Holmes stories?



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## RODDY DOYLE

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland  
May 8, 1958

*Principally in his novels but also in his plays and screenplay adaptations of his novels, Doyle describes the lives and hopes of working-class north-side Dubliners in his dialogue-rich depictions of the fictional Barrytown area.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Roddy Doyle (doyuhl; in Irish, Ruaidhri O Duill) was born on May 8, 1958, in Kilbarrack, Dublin, Ireland, the third of four children (two daughters and two sons) of Rory Doyle, a printer, and Ita Bolger Doyle, a legal secretary. Kilbarrack is a working-class neighborhood of Dublin, approximately seven miles north of downtown. The vocations of Doyle's parents likely influenced the type and tenor of his own future life's work. As a novelist, he depends directly on the work of printers, and he actually printed and privately published the first run of his first novel, *The Commitments* (1987), in 1985 when he could not initially find a publisher. In addition, his mother's work for a prestigious south-side Dublin law firm likely provided young Doyle with insights into the widening gulf between the haves and have-nots in contemporary Irish culture, a theme that receives treatment in Doyle's work and life.

Doyle studied at a national school in Raheny from 1963 to 1971 and then at St. Fintan's Christian Brothers School in Sutton from 1971 to 1976. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1979 from University College, Dublin, with a double major in English and geography. He returned to his Kilbarrack neighborhood after graduation and taught at Greendale Community School from 1979 to 1993. Doyle seems to have been a passionate and popular teacher of English and geography. Students recall his complaints about the depictions of certain of their fellow Dubliners in the work of countryman James Joyce; his love of all Irish music, traditional and contemporary; and his leather jacket and jeans, which earned him the endearing name of "Punky Doyle" among some of his students.

In the early 1980's, Doyle began writing short stories and a novel during the evenings and summers in addition to his full-time teaching job. Although Doyle is clearly aware of the impressive corpus of the Irish literary tradition within which he writes, on the few occasions when he has commented on his literary influences, he has referenced mostly American and English novelists, rather than Irish writers, as the source of his ability to believe in his own identity as an author. The plain, colloquial language of novels such as *Wise Blood* (1952) by Flannery O'Connor, *A Proper Marriage* (1954) by Doris Lessing, *Ragtime* (1975) by E. L. Doctorow, and *The World According to Garp* (1978) by John Irving inspired Doyle to believe that he could render with similarly understated language the north side of Dublin.

Although Doyle seems to have had no grand plan to write a trilogy, his second and third novels continued the saga of three generations of the Rabbitte family, their relatives, and friends in the raw Barrytown neighborhoods, that he started in *The Commitments*. This setting allows Doyle to contextualize his narratives within all of the social ills that beset Ireland in the latter decades of the twentieth century, including unemployment and underemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, the plight of women, the plight of the family, and the coming-of-age of a new generation of young adults with diminished expectations for the future and sometimes for themselves. In *The Snapper* (1990), issues of alcohol abuse leading to sexual assault and unplanned pregnancy explain the title of the novel, which is contemporary Irish-English slang for a "wee bairn" of unclear paternal parentage.

The third novel of the Barrytown trilogy, *The*

*Van* (1991), again shows the indefatigable Barrytown spirit, with two lifelong middle-aged friends engaging in another entrepreneurial foray, a mobile fish-and-chips van, which provides food to neighborhood residents and a livelihood for the two friends and their families. *The Van* was short-listed for The Man Booker Prize in 1991, the same year that Doyle, with Dick Clement and Ian LaFrenais, adapted *The Commitments* as a screenplay for what became a critically and commercially successful feature film. Indeed, the success of the film created a temporary cottage industry for the all-Irish cast, who performed as *The Commitments* in major music venues on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean for several years following the film's release.

With *Paddy Clarke, Ha-Ha-Ha* (1993), Doyle showed his ability to change his narrative perspective to that of a ten-year-old boy, whose eloquent, epigrammatic narration both knowingly and unknowingly describes the parallel deterioration of his parents' marriage and of the Irish social and political culture of 1968, the year in which the novel is set. *Paddy Clarke, Ha-Ha-Ha* won the Man Booker Prize in 1993, making Doyle the first Irish writer ever to receive the award. The novel went on to become the most commercially successful Man Booker Prize winner up to that time.

The commercial success of the film version of *The Commitments*, combined with the receipt of the Man Booker Prize, allowed Doyle to retire from teaching and devote his complete professional focus to writing. Doyle authored the screenplay adaptations for *The Snapper* (1993) and *The Van* (1996), both of which enjoyed critical acclaim but not as much commercial success as the film adaptation of *The Commitments* (1991).

The theme of physical and sexual assault of female characters is depicted through the character of Paula Spencer in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996). Spencer's story was continued a decade later in the novel which bears her name, *Paula Spencer* (2006). Although the poignancy of her plight cannot be denied, Paula, like most of Doyle's protagonists, confronts and eventually overcomes her considerable challenges. Doyle's four-part British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) teleplay, *Family* (1994), reprised the recurrent themes in his novels. By this time, Doyle was actively campaigning for abortion rights, women's rights, and the legalization of divorce in Ireland.

In 1989, Doyle married Belinda Moller and they had two sons, Rory, born in 1991, and Jack, born in 1992. Although Doyle remains protective of many details of his personal and family life, he has admitted in interviews that since his retirement from teaching in 1993, he generally devotes each weekday until 5 P.M. to writing, at which point he stops in order to make the family dinner with his wife.

## ANALYSIS

Some Irish critics have complained that Doyle's literary corpus perpetuates negative stereotypes about Ireland, with his narratives of boozing and sometimes promiscuous and often foolhardy characters. His defenders—and there are many of them, on all continents—justify the characters' profanity and addictive behavior as accurate slices of life in an island country that has experienced periods of industrial and commercial decline. Perhaps one of the best examples of Doyle as not only a masterful novelist but also a social critic comes early in *The Commitments*, when Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr., is creating a locus of understanding for the wayward young Dubliners whom he is forming into his vision of a Motown-cover band. As the musicians and singers express skepticism about white kids in Dublin in the 1980's covering the music of black kids in Detroit in the 1960's, Rabbitte waxes eloquent:

Your music should be abou' where you're from an' the sort o' people yeh come from. . . .

Say it once, say it loud. I'm black an' I'm proud. . . .  
The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads. . . . An'  
Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. . . . An' the  
northsider Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin.  
Say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud.

Rabbitte understands a basic concept of social justice, as well as a leveling feature of music: differences of race, culture, religion, and continent fade away as dispossessed peoples understand their similar plight. Once that level of understanding and awareness has occurred, then music that describes the anguish of the human heart in conflict will resonate not only within but across cultures.

Doyle could have remained within the fictional architecture of Barrytown, just as William Faulkner created and articulated his fictional world of



Yoknapatawpha County in the majority of his novels. As Doyle approached his third decade as a professional writer, however, he moved beyond Barrytown in one direction to write children's literature and in a radically different direction to write two novels focused on pathologic spousal abuse. Given his talents as a writer and his commitment to social justice in Ireland, it is likely that his future works will continue to be valued in both literary and social circles.

## THE COMMITMENTS

**First published:** 1987

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Irish music devotee conceives of and manages a Motown-cover band in 1980's Dublin that shows promise but then self-destructs, a casualty of mismanaged egos and libidos.*

The picaresque character of James "Jimmy" Rabbitte, Jr., manages both the group The Commitments and the novel *The Commitments*. Rabbitte is the mastermind of the concept of "Dublin soul" after the first wave of punk rock in the 1980's. He takes out a classified ad in the *Hot Press*, the alternative newspaper in Dublin, which attracts a truly motley crew of mostly young north-side Dubliners to play honest, straightforward rhythm and blues in the tradition of Motown Records, down to the white shirts and black suits for the men and simple black dinner dresses for the three Commitmentettes.

Doyle exquisitely shows the partially planned, partially haphazard manner in which most local bands form. At the same time, Doyle's descriptions of the characters' situations and their disarmingly unique and poetic Irish-English diction and syntax provide insights into what seems to be an exceptionally authentic rendering of working-class Irish urban culture. Critics have both praised and reviled Doyle for his willingness to use not only the colloquialisms and slang of regional dialect but also a good deal of profanity, including repeated usages of what are generally thought to be the

crudest swear words. While Doyle generally declines comment on his work, his defenders usually praise his ability to render the local idiom of Dublin's north side, and the profane diction seems consistent with the young adults who populate his fiction.

Other critics find limitations in this novel's scant character development beyond that of Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr. However, the novel is only 165 pages long, and much of it contains either epigrammatic dialogue or the lyrics of dozens of 1950's and 1960's rhythm and blues hits. Other members of Jimmy's immediate family, relegated perhaps to supporting status in this novel, essentially have their own novels later in the Barrytown trilogy. *The Snapper* is primarily Sharon Rabbitte's novel and concerns her metamorphosing relationship with her family, especially her father, James Rabbitte, Sr.; *The Van* is primarily about the relationship of James, Sr., with his best friend, Bimbo.

As *The Commitments* begins to develop a regional following in the neighborhood, drummer Billy Mooney drops out because he cannot stomach that Declan "Deco" Cuffe, the band's vocalist who never knew his own talent until he had twenty rum and blacks at the Christmas dinner dance and sang to the crowd while he was fully "locked," has become an egotistical nightmare. The band's senior citizen member, Joey "The Lips" Fagan, who purportedly played trumpet for James Brown, Otis Redding, and other great rhythm and blues artists in a long career, has returned to Dublin in his declining years to take care of his "Ma" and to mentor the band. His "mentoring" includes intimate escapades with two of the three Commitmentettes, which only exacerbates the interne-cine battles of ego and art that eventually derail the band just as it seems to be developing a reputation beyond its north-side neighborhood.



## THE SNAPPER

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Novel

*A twenty-year-old woman has a one-night stand with the father of a friend and then spends her pregnancy protecting his identity and redefining her own relationship with the members of her family.*

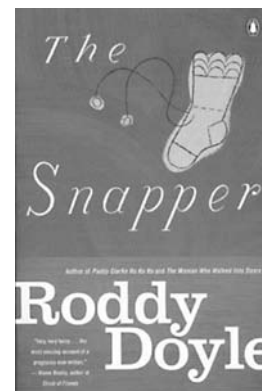
*The Snapper* easily stands alone as an independent novel, yet it also seamlessly follows from the end of *The Commitments*. With the group disbanded, Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr., spends most of this novel in an upstairs room of the family apartment, practicing his best disc jockey voice for what he now hopes will be his future career. The novel opens in medias res, just as the essential exposition for the text to follow is occurring. Sharon reveals that she is three months pregnant, expects to carry the baby to full term and raise it as a single mother, and refuses to identify the father. The balance of the novel covers the remaining six months in Sharon's pregnancy, concluding as she delivers a healthy daughter, whom she names Georgina Rabbitte.

Although the dialogue remains "hilarious and haunting" (to quote from the *San Francisco Chronicle* review), there is less dialogue and more narration and narrative commentary than in *The Commitments*. Sharon's innocent and isolated worries and opinions about her developing pregnancy and the prospect of motherhood as a single parent are delineated through the rambling interior monologue she undergoes as she makes herself read three pages nightly from texts she has borrowed from the public library.

Although the Barrytown community and Sharon's parents initially obsess over the identity of the baby's father, paternal and grandfatherly love and affection on the part of Jimmy Rabbitte, Sr., combine with a sense of developing awe, as he increasingly appreciates his daughter's imminent motherhood with an understanding that he never achieved in any of his wife's pregnancies for their own five children. Veronica Rabbitte, Sharon's mother, also balances a number of conflicting emotions and opinions as she manifests the characteristic fierce loyalty and independence of the

Rabbitte family, especially when confronted by Doris Burgess on her front porch. The troubled Mrs. Burgess, wife of the middle-aged Lothario whom the Rabbittes suspect is the father of Sharon's baby, has walked over to the Rabbitte residence and asked to see Sharon. Veronica states honestly that Sharon is at work and then brooks no further discussion about a relationship that her daughter has not publicly admitted. When Mrs. Burgess tries to force the issue, Veronica responds with a punch to her neighbor's face, reclaiming her front porch and, perhaps in her mind, her daughter's dignity as well.

This novel is suffused with the pain and ramifications of endemic poverty, yet most of the characters approach their impoverished lives with a concerted belief that they will have a rollicking good time today and every day in one way or another. While Sharon's inner thoughts are often remorseful about herself and accusatory toward her family and friends, she eventually comes to terms with her predicament and acknowledges that Barrytown is comfortably tolerant of the sometimes foolish and reckless behavior of its residents.



## PADDY CLARKE, HA-HA-HA

**First published:** 1993

**Type of work:** Novel

*A working-class ten-year-old boy in Doyle's fictional Barrytown region of the north side of Dublin experiences adolescence with his group of picaresque friends, as he and his brother view the deterioration of his parents' marriage.*

Both the attention to the depiction of Irish characters and to contemporary Irish colloquialisms and north-side Dublin dialect are suggested in the title of Doyle's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Paddy Clarke, Ha-Ha-Ha*. The novel has been justifi-

ably and favorably compared to numerous bildungsromans, or coming-of-age novels, including Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915, serial; 1916, book), and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). *Paddy Clarke, Ha-Ha-Ha* indeed shows some of the struggles of the title character as he tries to have fun as a young boy, even as the circumstances of his family and his neighborhood cause him to grapple with some adult-sized issues and problems. Paddy is proud of his status as an oldest son, and he is characteristically condescending to his younger brother, Sinbad, and his two baby sisters.

As lower-middle-class suburban sprawl moves northward from Dublin, new treeless housing subdivisions under construction provide a dangerous but thrilling landscape for Paddy and his hooligan friends, Aidan, Liam, and Kevin. They terrorize the younger kids in the neighborhood, perform acrobatic feats of boyhood heroism on slag piles of discarded cement, and even create mock-Viking funeral rites for dead rats among the construction rubble. Doyle's narrative voice, channeled through the ten-year-old consciousness of Paddy, is authentic and unsentimental. Given the almost clichéd renderings of Paddy's existence—poverty, crime, deteriorating family situation, and a lack of positive role models—the novel could have become sentimental or trite, but it does not because Paddy never feels sorry for himself but simply exerts his make-do Irish spirit on his situation.

As the novel proceeds and Paddy becomes aware of the demise of his parents' relationship in a way that his younger siblings cannot, he exerts his will in a manner that seems especially suited to a headstrong ten-year-old boy. After he has become disturbingly accustomed to the nightly, lengthy arguments between his parents, which he can hear with clarity even though he is two closed doors

away, he decides to stay up all night and to repeat, quietly but insistently, the simple whispered word "stop" in order to quell his parents' arguments and to return the household to some state of repose and assumed peace. Like many of the characters whom Doyle created in the Barrytown trilogy, Paddy Clarke continues in the tradition of the indefatigable picaro, who will seek creative and non-conformist solutions to problems that are likely never to be solved or corrected—which makes young Paddy's attempt all the more gallant yet still believable.

Unlike Huck Finn, who happily set out for the American frontier at the end of his novel, or young Stephen Daedalus, who in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* chose to leave Ireland for Paris in order to seek his destiny as a writer, Paddy Clarke remains in Barrytown at the end of Doyle's novel. It is his father, not Paddy, who leaves quietly. Paddy knows instinctively that his father will not return, and the other children in the neighborhood taunt him as the language of the novel's title is reprised in anonymous dialogue near the end of the text.

## SUMMARY

Roddy Doyle's poetics is certainly grounded in the literary and narrative traditions of Ireland, but it is also significantly affected by his concern about the current social and economic conditions of Ireland, which have moved his perspective and some of his writings quite didactically toward public and literary manifestations of a fervent commitment to social justice. The themes of conflicted love, family dynamics, popular and traditional music, generational poverty, and a fondness for alcohol suffuse Doyle's work, which continues to command a worldwide audience. His ear for language and for the regional dialects of Irish-influenced English constitutes a literary gift to readers.

Richard Sax

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper*, after Jimmy Rabbitte, Sr., reads the books concerning pregnancy that his daughter, Sharon, has been taking out of the public library, he develops a new understanding of, and appreciation for, the female body in general and his daughter's condition in particular. How does this father-daughter relationship improve in some ways, yet decline in other ways, during the course of Sharon's pregnancy?
- Consider the possible meanings for these colorful adjectives and adverbs that the denizens of Barrytown use: "deadly," "locked," "rapid," and "Mickah stitched Deco a loaf."
- With the popularity of the band U2 and the continuing development of new types of synthesized rock music in the mid- to late 1980's, how believable is Jimmy Rabbitte, Jr.'s choice of the anachronistic simplicity of Motown music and Detroit soul of the 1960's as the musical focus for a band of working-class north-side Dubliners in early adulthood?
- What degree of help can Paddy Clarke expect to obtain from the traditional sources of stability and direction: parental will and control, the Catholic Church, grammar school authorities and rules, and even childhood friends?



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## MARGARET DRABBLE

**Born:** Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England  
June 5, 1939

*Drabble is a prolific novelist, one of the leading realists of British fiction in the second half of the twentieth century. She is also a noted scholar and critic.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Margaret Drabble was born on June 5, 1939, in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England, the daughter of a circuit court judge, John Frederick Drabble, and a teacher of English, Kathleen Bloor Drabble. Her older sister, Antonia Susan, was to achieve a considerable reputation as a novelist under the name of A. S. Byatt; her younger sister, Helen, became an art critic; and a brother became an attorney. Drabble was educated at a Quaker boarding school in York and at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she concentrated in literature but spent much of her time in theater activities and was not involved with the literary set, dominated by the critic F. R. Leavis. After graduation from Cambridge in 1960, she spent a year as an actress with the Royal Shakespeare Company; in June, 1960, she married Clive Swift, an actor. She left acting when she became pregnant; her first three novels were written during her three pregnancies.

Her early novels, based closely on her own experiences as a young woman, were immediate critical successes. The first, *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), focused on choosing between marriage and a career; the second, *The Garrick Year* (1964), dealt with the apparent necessity for a young woman to choose between an acting career and her family. Drabble's conviction that motherhood and a career are not

mutually exclusive led to *The Millstone* (1965; published in the United States as *Thank You All Very Much*), whose central figure pursues an academic career undeterred by the birth of her child. Drabble continued to write in a strictly realistic mode, focusing on characters of approximately her own age and, to a large extent, of her own station and condition in life. *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) deals with a young woman less concerned with husband and children than with her desire to escape from a provincial town to the excitement of London. Social problems and dislocations as they affect individuals continued to occupy her attention through the novels of her later years: *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980), *The Radiant Way* (1987), and *A Natural Curiosity* (1989).

While her primary reputation has been as a novelist, Drabble has achieved a considerable reputation as a literary critic. Her thesis at Cambridge was a study of the fiction of Arnold Bennett, which led to a major book, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (1974). She wrote a brief study of a major Romantic poet, *Wordsworth: Literature in Perspective* (1966), and a broader study of the relationship between poetry and the environment, *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (1979). She edited a collection of essays dealing with one of her favorite novelists, *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1975). She was chosen to edit two revised editions of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, which were published in 1985 and 2000. For many years, she taught a course in literature at Morley College in London.

Drabble has received numerous awards, including the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Award in 1966, the James Tait Black Award in 1968, and the



American Academy E. M. Forster Award in 1973. She received an honorary degree from Sheffield University in 1976. In 1980, she was named a Commander, Order of the British Empire. Drabble's marriage to Clive Swift ended in divorce in 1975; she married writer Michael Holroyd in 1982 and continued to live in London.

## ANALYSIS

Drabble admires the experimental methods of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and Drabble's own prose occasionally owes something to the stream-of-consciousness methods pioneered by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, but she has not been known as an experimenter in her own work. She prefers not to use chapter divisions, using spaces to indicate changes of location or action. The nearest thing to unconventional method occurs in the early novel *The Waterfall* (1969). The novel opens with third-person narration but then switches to first-person narration by the central character; thereafter, the two methods alternate. On the whole, however, Drabble's fiction is in an older tradition. She has been compared to such sturdily realistic novelists as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Arnold Bennett, and Henry James, among others. She has said that she would like to write the great English novel, a successor to George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872).

Furthermore, she is sometimes seen as a feminist writer, since she is much concerned with the difficulties encountered by her female characters, but she rejects the description. In the past, she argued that feminism proposes oversimplified explanations for complex social and economic problems that affect both sexes, although perhaps not equally. In this regard, she most closely resembles her admired predecessor Eliot.

Drabble's novels are straightforward descriptions of the events in the lives of people who are representative of their time and social position, although they could hardly be called average. She deliberately chooses to focus on characters whose ages and social positions are similar to her own at the time of writing, arguing that these would be the people whom she would know best and about whom she could therefore write with the greatest confidence. Because she herself had to contend with the complications of building a career while rearing several children, she presents a number of

characters who must deal with this problem: It plays an important part in *The Garrick Year*, in *The Millstone*, in *Jerusalem the Golden*, and in *The Realms of Gold*, all written while Drabble was wrestling with the same life choices that face her characters.

In her later novels, beginning with *Jerusalem the Golden*, Drabble abandons the first-person narrative that she had earlier been using in favor of an omniscient third-person narrator. Her usual method is to focus on a single figure or on two or more central characters and to describe in detail a day or an episode in the life of such characters. In the course of describing an incident, she uses flashbacks to convey whatever information she thinks is important about the childhood or youth of the character, interpolating commentary on specific actions or on more general social or economic activities of the time. Long narrative passages fill the gaps between the extended scenes that Drabble uses to convey critical episodes in the lives of her characters.

She occasionally addresses the reader directly, for example by introducing a character briefly, with a comment to the effect that he or she will appear later in a more important role. Near the end of *The Realms of Gold*, the narrator observes that all the surviving major characters are reasonably content and well off, and she tells the reader: "So there you are. Invent a more suitable ending if you can." Drabble is also willing, in what might be called an old-fashioned way, to insert comments on her own methods. At the beginning of the final section of *The Ice Age*, for example, she writes, "It ought now to be necessary to imagine a future for Anthony Keating. There is no need to worry about the other characters." At another point in *The Realms of Gold*, while commenting about a coincidental meeting between characters, she mentions the coincidence but disarms criticism by saying that there will be less likely coincidences at other points in the book as there are in life.

Perhaps more important still, Drabble is never reluctant to comment on the social and economic situations in which she places her characters. The contemporary style is to ignore such matters or to leave them for the reader to deduce, but Drabble is outspoken in describing what seem to her the ills of society. In *The Ice Age*, in particular, she describes the laws and regulations that have made it possible for several of her principal characters to make a considerable amount of money and later to be

bankrupted or sent to jail. Since many of her major characters are women, she frequently makes pungent observations about the difficulties that women encounter in modern society. Her characters who try to be content with being housewives and mothers are never really satisfied, but those who choose careers along with motherhood encounter their own difficulties. Neither situation is anywhere close to ideal, although she never says anything critical of motherhood.

In other important ways, Drabble's methods run counter to those made popular by such modern novelists as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. There are very few extended stretches of dialogue in Drabble's fiction. Instead, there are long narrative and descriptive sections informing the reader about characters, in the manner of Eliot or James. Dialogue is used only sparingly to highlight special scenes; even when it is used, it is generally employed only as a counterpoint to a description of a conversation. Drabble is more interested in conveying the feelings and reactions of her characters than in trying to make accurate representations of how they speak, and she evidently believes that summaries with commentary are more effective for her purpose.

Furthermore, Drabble does not seem to be concerned that her readers will be bored by novels in which there is not much dramatic action. In some novels, crucial developments are precipitated by a shocking event. *The Waterfall* is unusual, in that the climactic action, a fatal automobile accident, is described directly; elsewhere, decisive events take place offstage. In *The Needle's Eye*, a divorced father kidnaps his three children and threatens to take them out of England; in *The Ice Age*, a young woman is involved in a fatal automobile accident in a Balkan country; in *The Realms of Gold*, an old woman dies of starvation. Yet none of these events is described directly. Rather, Drabble concentrates on the effects of such episodes on the characters who are at the center of the action.

Since violent action and snappy dialogue are not encountered frequently in Drabble's fiction, she must rely on style and characterization to hold the interest of her readers. Her style is unsensational but consistently interesting and fresh, at least in the long novels of her major period, including *The Realms of Gold* and *The Needle's Eye*. Her descriptions are detailed but seldom overly so, con-

veying a strong sense of what kinds of settings her characters inhabit, and her descriptions of characters are sharp and often witty.

More important, her characters are interesting. It is not Drabble's method to idealize these figures or make them grotesques. Instead, she provides them with a mixture of strengths and weaknesses so that they are recognizably human, generally admirable and entertaining without being boring. Frances Wingate, in *The Realms of Gold*, for example, is a successful archaeologist and an attractive and forceful woman, but she is also a careless mother, happy that her children no longer demand her attention, and she has foolishly broken off her affair with the man whom she genuinely loves for no reason at all other than that her life had temporarily become less than exciting. Rose Vassiliou, in *The Needle's Eye*, is a caring mother and a noble character in some ways, but she can also be dependent, annoying, and self-destructively moral.

Drabble's later novels—*The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground*, *The Radiant Way*, and *A Natural Curiosity*—all received negative reviews. Critics argued that Drabble was more interested in depicting large social issues and commenting on those issues than in creating interesting and believable characters. Nevertheless, the respect with which her work is treated is a clear indication that she remains one of the major British novelists of the second half of the twentieth century.

## THE WATERFALL

**First published:** 1969

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young married Englishwoman, mother of two, falls in love for the first time and engages in a passionate affair with her cousin's husband.*

In *The Waterfall*, Jane Gray is married to the successful guitarist Malcolm Gray, but she has driven him away with her indifference, her sloppy housekeeping, and her frigidity. When she gives birth to her second child, Bianca, she is looked after by her cousin and best friend, Lucy, and Lucy's husband, James Otford. She and James almost immediately fall in love, and when she has recovered from the

aftereffects of childbirth they begin a passionate affair, keeping Lucy, the absent Malcolm, and both Jane and Malcolm's parents in ignorance.

For the first time, Jane is not only in love but also sexually passionate. The affair seems to be proceeding without difficulty until James suggests that they travel to Norway for a vacation with Jane's two children. She is reluctant at first but then agrees. At the beginning of the trip, however, they are involved in a terrible automobile accident. Both James and Jane have expected something like this to happen, since he is a very daring and bad driver, but ironically the accident is not his fault. Another driver is killed. Jane and the children are shaken but not injured, but James is thrown from the car and severely hurt; he remains in a coma for weeks.

Jane, pretending to be Mrs. Otford, remains near James and visits him every day, but Malcolm Gray eventually finds out where she is and tells Lucy. Lucy's reaction is to call and tell Jane that she wishes that both the lovers had been killed in the accident, but she soon relents and comes to join Jane in her hospital vigil. She reveals that her marriage was also going badly, that James was a lousy provider, and he had other affairs before the one with Jane; the news is a severe shock to Jane. Lucy, it develops, is also having an affair, evidently not her first. When James recovers consciousness and begins to regain his strength and abilities, Jane leaves to return to her home. The affair, however, is not over; when James recovers, he and Jane manage to get together for brief trips that are the highlights of Jane's life.

Its narrow focus on the private lives of its characters makes this novel less socially concerned than most of Drabble's fiction. What keeps *The Waterfall* from being a conventionally tear-jerking romance is the technique that Drabble adopts of alternating chapters of third-person narration describing the romance with Jane's first-person comments, in which she admits lying about many things: her marriage, her blaming her parents for faults they did not have, and her describing the emotions other than passion that affected her during the affair. She feels no guilt, and at the end she has somehow managed to remain friendly with Lucy, but she recognizes that she is responsible for her own failings and her own decisions. Blaming fate, her parents, or others, as she had done in the earlier third-person segments, is no longer possible.

## THE NEEDLE'S EYE

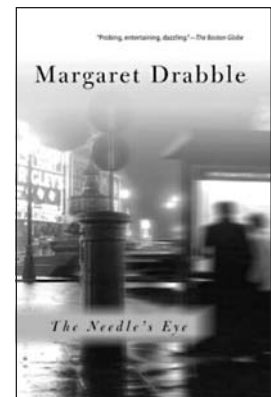
**First published:** 1972

**Type of work:** Novel

*A man and a woman, both unhappy with their lives, form a friendship that never becomes romantic but that sustains both of them.*

In *The Needle's Eye*, Simon Camish is a successful barrister who is profoundly unhappy in his marriage to Julie. Rose Vassiliou is a divorced mother of three children who lives in virtual poverty. The daughter of wealthy parents, she has renounced her family and donated a large inheritance to a charity, rather than accept money that she believes she does not deserve. When Simon and Rose meet, each recognizes in the other qualities that he or she lacks. The two are polar opposites. Simon devotes considerable energy to suppressing the emotions that Rose expresses openly and shamelessly. Simon has struggled all of his life to gain the money and social position that Rose has thrown away. He remains locked in a marriage to a woman who is concerned only with material things and who makes him unhappy, while Rose has divorced Christopher, the husband whom she married against her family's bitter opposition. Although he abused her physically and verbally, she feels guilty for separating Christopher from their children, whom he loves and misses. Ironically, Christopher, because he has become successful in business, is now closer to Rose's parents than she is.

As their friendship grows, Simon and Rose realize, separately, that they could be happy living together, even though there is no real sexual attraction between them. Yet Rose says nothing because she does not believe that she deserves happiness, and Simon cannot bring himself to speak of something so emotionally important to him. Christopher's kidnapping of his three children precipitates a confrontation involving himself, Rose, and Simon,



an event that turns out to be quiet and undramatic. In the end, Rose takes Christopher back, Simon remains with Julie, and each continues to value and rely on the other's goodwill. Neither is truly happy, but both are more content than they had been.

*The Needle's Eye* combines social criticism with acute observations on the emotional difficulties of living in modern British society. Drabble disapproves of a society that values money and material objects highly and that does little to alleviate the conditions under which people without money have to live. Poverty, she observes, is not ennobling. Wealth is not ennobling either, but it makes the strains of life easier. The economic values of this society, however, are less damaging to the individual than are the social norms that require that a tight rein be kept on emotions and that pain and suffering always be denied and minimized by the sufferer. Drabble also pokes holes in romantic ideas; Rose's youthful passion for Christopher brings her years of misery when the passion is spent, and her noble gesture of renouncing her inheritance leaves her miserably poor and puts her children in the same condition.

Drabble does not suggest that society is entirely to blame for what happens to her characters. They make choices, and those choices go a long way toward determining what will happen in their lives. Among the minor characters are a few who have made choices that are better for them: Jeremy Alford, a lawyer, and his pregnant wife are quite happy, as is Miss Lindley, the teacher of one of Rose's children. Less happy are those, like Simon and Rose, whose choices have required them to struggle against their upbringing and early environment.

## THE REALMS OF GOLD

**First published:** 1975

**Type of work:** Novel

*A mature woman, a successful archaeologist, ends a happy relationship with her lover and tries to put her life back together.*

*The Realms of Gold* is Drabble's most optimistic novel and the one in which she seems most relaxed

as a writer. Her central figure, Frances Wingate, is about forty years old, a respected professional in the field of archaeology. Years before, she had correctly predicted the location of the ruins of an ancient trading center in the Sahara Desert and had led in its excavation, and consequently she has enjoyed a highly satisfying career. Her marriage to a wealthy man did not turn out well, but her children have become independent, and she is able to leave them for extended periods while she attends professional conferences and other meetings important to her.

The problem in Wingate's life is her broken relationship with Karel Schmidt, a lecturer at a small university, who had been her lover. Separated from him, Frances realizes that she had broken off their relationship for frivolous and foolish reasons. Her life, she believed when she made the break, had become too regular, too contented, and she needed change. The change that she manufactured has separated her from the only man she has loved, and she wants nothing more than to get him back. Very early in the novel, she sends him a postcard from an unnamed Mediterranean city, announcing that she misses him and loves him. She assumes that this will lead to a reconciliation, but when she does not hear from him she swallows her disappointment and determines to go on with her life. Because of a postal strike, the card does not reach Karel for weeks. In those weeks, the action of most of the novel takes place.

Frances travels to Africa for a conference, at which she becomes friendly with a cousin whom she had not known before, David Ollerenshaw. She enjoys flirting with a handsome Italian archaeologist and finds it satisfying to be an important figure among her contemporaries, but she also realizes that Karel is more important to her than this adulation and attention. Karel, having finally received her message, tries to join her in Africa but fails. After some comic errors, they are finally reunited in England.

Frances and Karel are sympathetic characters, but so are many of the others who populate this long book. The exceptions are Frances's parents. Like the parents in most Drabble novels, these characters are somewhat cold and distant; her father is head of a small university, while her mother, a lecturer on birth control and a sexual counselor, does not like sex. Her brother, Hugh, is an alco-

holic who is successful in business but needs alcohol to dull his sensibilities. Hugh's son Stephen, a university student, has fathered a daughter and has become obsessed with the dangers that await her as she matures. Stephen's young wife has had a mental collapse and has had to be institutionalized. In the end, to avert the suffering that he believes is in store for her, he kills his daughter and himself. Frances's second cousin, Janet Bird, has no such fears. She tolerates a bad marriage and enjoys the company of Frances when fate brings them together, but she is not fearful for her child. In her quiet courage, she is like David Ollerenshaw, a geologist who the narrator says was intended for a large role but assumes only secondary importance.

Except for Stephen and his daughter, all the major characters in *The Realms of Gold* survive and, in varying degrees, find happiness. Even Karel's discontented wife finally finds her place in life and permits Karel and Frances to live together. She and Frances, although they do not like each other, learn to get along.

## THE ICE AGE

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*Anthony Keating and the people associated with him are frustrated and unhappy during the economic depression in Britain during the 1970's.*

After the relative contentment of the ending of *The Realms of Gold*, *The Ice Age* is like a cold shower. The later work begins the series of late novels in which Drabble adopts what critics have called a sociological approach in her fiction. These novels are concerned with the economic and social events in England during the years between 1973 and 1990, years in which a depression was followed by a period of recovery in some parts of the economy, fueled by the exploitation of North Sea oil. There is some justice in the critical complaint that Drabble became less interested in her characters than in how she could use the novel to address the current state of British affairs.

The structure of *The Ice Age* is unusual. As she of-

ten does, Drabble dispenses with chapter divisions, but this novel is divided into three parts; the first two move among five major characters and several minor ones. The final section focuses on only one of these characters. At the end, strong religious overtones are introduced, but it is unclear how seriously Drabble intends the religious motif to be taken.

Anthony Keating is at the center of attention and in the final section becomes the only important character. He is one of a group of middle-aged men and women whose lives have been disrupted by financial and social upheavals. Anthony became involved in real estate speculation after finding several other careers boring. For a while, he and his partners were surprisingly successful, but an economic slump has hit them hard. Anthony has had a mild heart attack and is trying to recover, while wondering whether he is about to become bankrupt. His friend Max Friedmann has been killed by a bomb thrown into a London restaurant by the IRA (Irish Republican Army); Max's wife Kitty lost a foot in the incident and is trying to pretend that nothing bad happened. Anthony's lover, Alison Murray, is a onetime star actress who left the stage to look after her second daughter, Molly, born with cerebral palsy and somewhat retarded. Now Alison is desperately unhappy in the Iron Curtain country of Wallacia, where her disaffected daughter Jane is to be tried for vehicular homicide. Anthony looks after Molly. Len Wincobank, a very successful if piratical developer, crossed the legal lines and is in prison. His lover, Maureen Kirby, finds a new employer, who will become her new lover. Giles Peters, who got Anthony into the real estate business, is desperately looking for a way to salvage their investments.

The problems of these characters represent the problems of a sick and depressed society. The malaise is more spiritual than economic, for when better things begin to happen to at least some of the characters, they cannot believe in their good fortune and become even more depressed. When Alison returns to England from the dingy totalitarianism of Wallacia, she is extremely disappointed at what she finds and goes into a deep depression. Anthony's financial fortunes take a turn for the better, and he becomes solvent again, but he knows his good fortune cannot last, and it does not.

At the beginning of the third and final part of



*The Ice Age*, Drabble dismisses most of the characters in a single paragraph and turns her attention to Anthony. He and Alison enjoy a brief period of contentment before he is called by a man in the British Foreign Office. Jane Murray, Alison's daughter, may be released from prison, he tells Anthony, but someone must go and get her. Anthony goes, somewhat reluctantly carrying secret messages from the Foreign Office. In Wallacia, Jane is released, and Anthony gets her to the airport, but as they are trying to get to their plane an uprising takes place. At Anthony's urging, Jane runs and is able to board the plane, but Anthony is left behind. After several months, his friends in England learn that he has been sent to prison for six years for espionage. The British ambassador in Wallacia realizes that his captors do not believe that Anthony was a spy; if they did, he would have been shot. Yet he will have to serve his term.

In prison, Anthony begins to write a book about the existence of God and the possibility of faith. In part, this is a reversion to his childhood as the son of a churchman, but it is also the only way in which

he can try to understand what has happened to him. When he sees a bird that is far from its natural habitat, he takes it as a sign that he has not been forgotten by God. Recognizing that he believes this because he wants to, he cannot resist hope. Drabble, however, does not end on a hopeful note. Alison, living in England with Molly, has no hope, is neither alive nor dead. The doom-filled final sentence of the book is: "England will recover, but not Alison Murray."

## SUMMARY

Margaret Drabble belongs to the school of fiction that believes that novels can accurately depict the realities of life. Her intention is to show individuals trying to fashion satisfactory lives in a society that is or seems to be too often hostile. Her vision grows darker after 1977, but it is likely that her later works will be read as accurate guides to what life was like in the last four decades of the twentieth century.

John M. Muste

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does Margaret Drabble's choice of Arnold Bennett as a subject and her interpretation of the value of his work suggest about her own theory of fiction?
- Consider the theme of making the best of one's lot in Drabble's fiction.
- Are there ingredients of Drabble's novels that will probably enable them to outlast the circumstances of the time in which they were written?
- What does Drabble's practice of focusing on one day or episode in the life of her characters owe to earlier efforts of the same sort by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce?
- Does Drabble's view of the conflicts and dislocations of professional women change over the course of her writing career?



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## JOHN DRYDEN

**Born:** Aldwinckle, Northamptonshire, England  
August 19, 1631

**Died:** London, England  
May 12, 1700

*The leading literary figure of his day, Dryden elevated satiric poetry to a high art form and established the heroic couplet as the dominant stanza form for English verse.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Dryden (DRI-duhn) was born in the village of Aldwinckle, Northamptonshire, England, on August 19, 1631, the fourteenth child of Erasmus and Mary Pickering Dryden. His family owned land in the area and was identified with the Puritan cause, which Dryden later rejected. Little is known about his childhood, since Dryden was reluctant to record events of his personal life. At about age fifteen, he was enrolled in Westminster School in London, an institution noted for its production of poets and bishops during the seventeenth century. The curriculum stressed not only classical learning but also original poetic composition in Latin and English. Following a thorough grounding in Latin classics under the headmaster, Dr. Richard Busby, he enrolled in Trinity College, Cambridge, completing the B.A. in 1654. After the death of his father brought him a modest income from family lands, he moved to London, where he held a minor clerical position in the government of Oliver Cromwell. Apart from infrequent visits to his native Northamptonshire, London was to be his place of residence for the remainder of his life.

Dryden began his career in literature relatively late, and his initial efforts showed little promise. He produced little poetry of merit before age thirty. An elegy on the death of Oliver Cromwell in

1658 was followed by a congratulatory poem, *Astraea redux* (1660), on the Restoration of Charles II. Like most Englishmen of his day, Dryden welcomed the return of monarchical rule and fervently hoped that it would put an end to threats of civil disturbance and war that had characterized the Puritan Revolution. Following the Restoration, he determined to devote his life to literature, and in an age when authors had no copyright protection, he turned his attention to drama, which offered the surest rewards for a talented writer. His marriage in 1663 to Lady Elizabeth Howard, sister of the minor dramatist Sir Robert Howard, brought him a generous dowry. Although the marriage was not entirely happy, Dryden was devoted to his three sons.

During the early 1660's, Dryden wrote a variety of plays, most notably heroic tragedies, which trained him to use the heroic couplet in dialogue. Later, he turned to the popular comedies of manners, tragicomedies, and even operas, which more resembled modern musical comedies than the grand operas of the nineteenth century. Following a precedent established by French poets, he became a literary critic by writing explanatory prefaces for his poems and dramas. In numerous occasional poems, he employed the couplet as an instrument for reasoning in verse.

In 1668, he was appointed poet laureate, a position that he held for twenty years. Although he received a generous annual stipend of two hundred pounds, the position identified him with the monarchy during a time of intense political conflict. During the late 1670's, when events surrounding

the Popish Plot posed a threat to Charles II, Dryden turned his talent to political satire on behalf of the king. Initially, he succeeded in influencing a large portion of the public to support the king against the Whig Party. Continuing his efforts on behalf of the monarchy, Dryden translated obscure French prose works that held implied analogies to the political scene in England. After the fall of James II in 1688, Dryden suffered the loss of both his political cause and his position as poet laureate. His declaration in 1686 that he had abandoned the Church of England for the Roman Catholic Church increased his alienation. Dryden had seen the development of the two-party system in England and the triumph in 1688 of the parliamentary cause over the monarchy. Basically conservative by temperament, he never wavered in his mistaken belief that the fall of James II spelled ruin for the nation.

During the final decade of his life, Dryden found little success in writing for the theater, but he was able to undertake major translations of Juvenal, Persius, and Vergil, turning their classical Latin verses into popular English heroic couplets. His publisher, Jacob Tonson, was willing to pay generously for polished translations of major classical authors. He continued writing poems of praise (panegyrics) and verse epistles complimenting the work of younger contemporaries such as playwright William Congreve. Though out of favor, Dryden was often surrounded by younger poets who admired his achievements. Ironically, some of his best poetry and prose was written during the final period of his life. He died in London on May 12, 1700, and was interred in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

## ANALYSIS

Dryden experienced one of the most productive and varied literary careers in all of English literature. Sometimes called the first professional man of letters in England, he was motivated by the desire to re-create the classical excellence of Greece and Rome in vernacular literature. He dominated his age as no writer before or since has done, and indeed, the period 1660 to 1700 in English literature is designated by literary historians as the Age of Dryden. In poetry, translation, drama, and literary criticism, he was the leading author of his time. In addition, he produced biographies and antholo-

gies of poetry. His literary career spanned four decades, one of the longest among English authors, and it is marked by a firm sense of literary genre and a lasting regard for classical principles.

Although his earliest productions were poetry, he established a reputation as a dramatist, beginning with the comedy *The Wild Gallant* (pr. 1663, pb. 1669). His initial dramatic successes were heroic tragedies, highly artificial dramas featuring spectacular scenery, the love-honor hero, extravagant and bombastic speeches, splendid costuming, and often exotic settings. They were written in heroic couplets, a pair of rhymed verses in iambic pentameter, a medium inspired by French rhymed tragedies. This dramatic genre, which endured into the 1670's, is seen at its best in Dryden's *The Indian Emperor: Or, The Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards* (pr. 1665, pb. 1667) and *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards, Parts I and II* (pr. 1670-1671, pb. 1672). By the time Dryden wrote his most famous tragedy, *All for Love: Or, The World Well Lost* (pr. 1677, pb. 1678), he had abandoned heroic couplets in favor of blank verse, the verse form used in most of his dramas after 1675. Dryden's efforts at comedy were mixed, for he was inclined to stress the licentious elements of the comedy of manners in plays such as *The Assignment: Or, Love in a Nunnery* (pr. 1672, pb. 1673) and *The Kind Keeper: Or, Mr. Limberham* (pr. 1678, pb. 1680). Yet one finds the sparkling wit of a comedy such as *Marriage à la Mode* (pr. 1672, pb. 1673) comparable to that of more gifted contemporaries in the genre, such as Sir George Etherege and William Wycherley.

Despite their musical scores by Henry Purcell, Dryden's operas were not notably successful, yet his tragicomedies have drawn the admiration of critics. Among them, *Don Sebastian, King of Portugal* (pr. 1689, pb. 1690) is highly regarded for its portrayal of characters and emotion and for its excellent blank verse.

As a literary critic, Dryden stands as one of the most important in English literature. Most of his essays are occasional; that is, they are attached to other works as prefaces or appendices. An important exception is *Of Dramatic Poesie: An Essay* (1668), Dryden's general assessment of the drama. The first systematic critic in English, he is a moderate neoclassicist. As a critic, Dryden attempts to explain the individual work and place it within the proper genre. He is noteworthy for defining im-

portant critical terms and genres, and his definitions of terms such as “wit,” “drama,” “satire,” and “biography” are thoughtful and worthy of study. In addition to informing the reader about his own practices, Dryden includes responses to his detractors and opponents. His work is in large measure an outgrowth of the numerous critical controversies in which he engaged. Among these were the controversy with Thomas Shadwell over the nature of comedy, with numerous others over the use of heroic couplets in drama, with Thomas Rymer over the nature of tragedy, and with Jeremy Collier over the dramatist’s ethical responsibility. These controversies helped shape his own critical views, which varied over his career.

In approaching an analysis, Dryden sought to ascertain the proper rules for the production of the type, a standard procedure with a neoclassic critic. Where rules and theories did not exist, he sought to discover and elucidate them. Turning to translation late in his career, Dryden developed his own theory, according the translator three approaches: metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation. Metaphrase, or literal translation, he considered too limiting if translation is to be considered an art. Paraphrase, which Dryden preferred, permitted the poet to expand or contract the original passages and to modernize the use of names and allusions. The third, imitation, was only a loose rendition of the original, following its theme and organization. Dryden’s ideal demanded that a translator replicate the poetic effects of the original for a modern audience of a different nation.

Since his theoretical approach was often ad hoc, Dryden maintains little consistency in his specific critical opinions; his consistency lies in his broadly neoclassic perspective. He is neither a rigid neoclassicist nor a slavish follower of precedent. For example, he argues that genius sometimes transcends the rules of art and produces superior aesthetic effects by violating the rules; he thus accepts the principle of poetic license. He points out how earlier geniuses such as William Shakespeare violated rules such as the classical unities and yet succeeded in drama, an indication that rules are not absolute.

The most significant passages from Dryden’s critical works are those that record his judgments of other writers, for he possessed a keen appreciation for the merits of others and an unerring ability

to discern them. His descriptions of the works of British authors, such as William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Edmund Spenser, to name a few, are insightful and penetrating, and the list can be extended to include classical writers such as Homer, Ovid, Juvenal, Horace, and Vergil, among others. Some of the most important passages of this kind are to be found in *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693) and “Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*” (1700). Not only did he identify the great writers of his own nation; he also incorporated within his writings the basic concepts of English literary history, tracing the origin and development of a national literature.

Paradoxically, the most important feature of Dryden’s criticism may be his supple, graceful, and idiomatic prose style. Dryden expressed his critical opinions in an elegant and fluent style that has marked him as a master of English prose.

Today, Dryden is most often remembered for his poetry. He produced more than two hundred poems in English, and for every original verse he wrote two others of translation. A poet of extraordinary versatility, Dryden employs numerous genres: odes, elegies, epigrams, panegyrics, prologues and epilogues, satires, verse epistles, and verse essays. His original poetry is often occasional—directed toward public events and prominent people of his own time—so that it mirrors upper-class English life of the late seventeenth century. In his panegyrics and verse epistles, he complimented important public figures of his time, often in an egregiously flattering tone. His satires and lyrics are rich in topical allusions relating to events of his day. Sometimes called journalistic, Dryden’s poetry is also ratiocinative and argumentative, as if anticipating the Age of Reason. A master of reasoning in verse, he is better known for his epigrammatic wit and humor than for his portrayal of deep human emotions.

In addition to replicating classical poetic genres in English, Dryden established the heroic couplet as the dominant poetic form in England. While he wrote in a variety of meters, the rhymed iambic pentameter couplet is most frequent. Dryden polished the couplet by following grammatical order insofar as possible and by making the couplet a closed form, that is, normally having a full stop to conclude the second line. The heroic couplet



proved an effective vehicle for developing reasoned discourse, for pointed epigrammatic wit, and for elegant, emphatic expression of ideas. Its major defects are that its polish seems artificial, notably in dialogue, and the stanza form calls attention to itself, inviting the reader to lose sight of the poem's organization. After dominating English literature for a century, the heroic couplet gave way to less rigid and restrictive verse forms.

### OF DRAMATIC POESIE: AN ESSAY

**First published:** 1668

**Type of work:** Literary criticism

*The rules of classical drama, while sound guides, may be ignored by modern writers if compensatory merits can be achieved.*

*Of Dramatic Poesie: An Essay*, Dryden's only major critical essay to be published independently of any other work, is technically a Socratic dialogue introducing four characters, each with a different view of drama. Crites, who allegorically represents Dryden's brother-in-law Sir Robert Howard, defends the rules and practices of classical Greek and Roman dramatists. Lisideius, representing Sir Charles Sedley, defends the French neoclassic dramatists of the seventeenth century as most worthy of emulation. Eugenius, representing Charles Sackville, supports Elizabethan dramatists—William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson—as superior to all others. Neander, representing Dryden himself, suggests that the contemporary Restoration dramatists have in some ways surpassed the achievement of their predecessors. Each speaker in turn examines the qualities of plot, characterization, important themes, style, and diction in dramas of his chosen period. The word “essay” in the title suggests the tentative nature of Dryden's discourse, and throughout the speakers maintain a rational tone.

The discourse introduces the dichotomous approach frequently found in Dryden's poetry and prose, with terms juxtaposed and explored. This device is best demonstrated in Lisideius's definition of a play: “A just and lively image of human na-

ture, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.” Contrastive terms such as “passion” (emotion) and “humour” (wit and eccentricity), “delight and instruction,” and “just and lively” are hallmarks of neoclassic criticism. Dryden extends them to include contrastive authors such as Homer and Vergil, Shakespeare and Jonson.

Since Neander is the last to speak, the major emphasis of *Of Dramatic Poesie: An Essay* falls to his portion, and Dryden intends his points of view to prevail. Neander pays eloquent tribute to the genius of Shakespeare and Jonson, praising them as the two English predecessors who bear comparison with the ancient dramatists. Yet he defends contemporary drama by arguing that it depicts better manners than those of Elizabethan drama and that it has the added beauty of rhyme. In a lengthy analysis, Neander explains why rhyme should be considered superior to blank verse. The position on rhyme exposes both the tentative nature of *Of Dramatic Poesie: An Essay* and Dryden's tendency toward inconsistency in his critical opinions, for within less than a decade he reversed this position.

### MARRIAGE À LA MODE

**First produced:** 1672 (first published, 1673)

**Type of work:** Play

*The theme of rightful succession is developed through two plots centering on love—one an idealized version, the other sophisticated and cynical.*

Dryden's most successful comedy, *Marriage à la Mode*, combines within its two distinct plots the conventions of romantic tragicomedy and the Restoration comedy of manners, a genre not fully developed when he produced his play. The tragicomic plot develops the theme of succession to the throne, perhaps Dryden's most important dramatic theme after the love-honor conflict. Having usurped the Sicilian throne, Polydamas discovers two young persons of gentle birth who have been living rustic lives under the care of Hermogenes, a former courtier. Hermogenes assures the usurper

that one of them is his son Leonidas, though Leonidas is in reality the son of the king whom he had deposed. When Polydamas orders Leonidas to marry the daughter of his friend, he refuses, protesting his love for Palmyra, his companion under Hermogenes' care. When Polydamas seeks to banish her, Hermogenes identifies her as the king's daughter and claims Leonidas as his own son. Polydamas then seeks to force Palmyra to marry his friend Argaleon and banishes Leonidas under sentence of death. Faced with death, Leonidas wins over the tyrant's supporters, removes him from the throne, and pardons him as the father of his beloved Palmyra.

In the plot, the main elements of tragicomedy are prominent: the remote setting, the tyrannical usurper, the long-lost noble youth, the faithful servant, and idealized romantic love. Dryden's early debt to the tragicomedies of John Fletcher is apparent in his use of stock characters and situations.

In the subplot, the love theme reflects the cynicism of the comedy of manners. Two witty couples—Rhodophil and Doralice, Palamede and Melantha—express sophisticated and detached attitudes toward love and marriage. Before his marriage to Melantha, Palamede hopes to engage in an affair with Doralice, his friend Rhodophil's wife, while Rhodophil, disenchanted with marriage, seeks to make Melantha his mistress. Like characters of the comedy of manners, they satirize the Puritans, country folk, and romantic love. Love is to them merely a game of conquest. Disguises, masked balls, and assignations enliven the plot while witty repartee sparkles throughout the dialogue. The would-be rakes never realize their romantic goals because their plans go awry, and they remain friends at the end.

Though the two plots are loosely connected, both Rhodophil and Palamede support the right of Leonidas to the throne at the conclusion. Also, both plot lines reject the authority of parents to select the spouses of their children. For the most part, however, the two plots exist in separate worlds: the witty, sophisticated, urban milieu of the comedy of manners and the idealistic, sentimental world of the tragicomedy.

## ABSALOM AND ACHITOPHEL

**First published:** 1681, part 1; 1682, part 2

**Type of work:** Poem

*Political strife jeopardizes rights and long-established precedents, representing a threat to the nation.*

Dryden's political satire *Absalom and Achitophel* reflects upon politics in England during the era of the Popish Plot (1679-1681), when the Whig Party, under the leadership of the earl of Shaftesbury, sought to prevent the legitimate succession of James, duke of York, because of his Catholicism. The Whigs supported a parliamentary bill that would have placed the illegitimate son of Charles II, James, duke of Monmouth, on the throne. Alarmed by efforts to tamper with established monarchical power, Dryden employs the biblical revolt against David by his son Absalom as a parallel narrative to discredit the Whig cause.

The poem represents a mixed, or Varronian, kind of satire, for satiric passages exist alongside straightforward normative portions. The plot is both loose and inconclusive, the satiric elements being confined to the poem's first major section. Dryden narrates the origin and development of the supposed plot, which the Whigs had concocted to discredit the king's position. Each prominent Whig leader is the subject of an extended poetic character, ridiculing him as extremist and undermining his reputation. Though biblical names are used, readers of the time clearly recognized each object of Dryden's satiric thrusts. The efforts of Achitophel to tempt Absalom are partially successful. In the second section, Dryden outlines his theory of government, advocating established rights and powers and rejecting innovation. A second series of characters praises the king's supporters in Parliament, and the poem concludes with a speech by King David (Charles II) upholding his traditional rights, offering conciliation, but also indicating firmness.

In the poetic characters, Dryden's artistic skill is at its best. Using witty aphorisms and the stylistic conventions of the couplet—such as balance, antithesis, and chiasmus—Dryden succeeds in discrediting Whig leaders.

## MAC FLECKNOE

**First published:** 1682

**Type of work:** Poem

*An attack on false literary standards and poor literary achievement serves to advance desirable literary ideals.*

*Mac Flecknoe: Or, A Satyre upon the True-Blew-Protestant Poet, T. S.*, employs the mock epic form to assail bad poets and poetry, represented by its victim, the dramatist Thomas Shadwell. Dryden establishes true literary norms through attacking inferior ones. The date of composition and occasion for the satire are uncertain, but it is generally thought that composition followed the death of Richard Flecknoe (c. 1678), an obscure poetaster. After the brief introduction, the satire introduces Flecknoe as a speaker deliberating his choice of a successor to the throne of Nonsense. Through the use of the convention of a mock coronation, Dryden gives the poem a narrative structure, a reflection of his view that satire is rightly a form of heroic (epic) poetry.

The introduction is a masterful passage combining irony and mock solemnity, contrasting the seriousness of succession with a throne epitomizing dullness. Sober aphorisms and allusions to Augustan Rome are deflated by allusions to the realm of Nonsense. Flecknoe selects Shadwell as the most fitting of all of his sons to occupy the throne of Nonsense and uphold dullness. Dryden incorporates numerous references to Shadwell's life and allusions to his dramas, with Flecknoe concluding: "All arguments, but most his plays persuade,/ That for anointed dullness he was made." Flecknoe chooses as the coronation site a run-down section of London near the Barbican, associated with inferior poets. The poem then describes the coronation, complete with procession, satiric description of Shadwell, the paraphernalia of office, and cheers of the assembled throng of hack writers and booksellers. Flecknoe urges his successor to find new ways to be dull, but to avoid boastful compari-

sons of himself with Ben Jonson and John Fletcher. Suggesting that Shadwell has been unsuccessful in all major literary genres, Flecknoe exhorts him to confine his talents to acrostics, pattern poems, and songs that can be sung to the lute. At the conclusion, as Flecknoe falls through a trap door, his mantle is borne aloft to settle on Shadwell.

The satire enables Dryden to develop at length one of his most congenial concepts, that of regal succession, though it gives an ironic twist to a theme that is usually serious. Monarchical allusions such as those to Augustan Rome, a distant ideal, serve to enhance the withering satire. Shadwell is ironically endowed with the name of a Roman successor, and Flecknoe is compared to Augustus Caesar, ironic elevations of the trivial that are characteristic of high burlesque. In the realm of literary succession, names of great dramatists and poets are used to deflate the pretensions of obscure poetasters, as in a passage describing the coronation site:

Great Fletcher never treads in buskins here,  
Nor greater Jonson dares in socks appear;  
But gentle Simkin just reception finds  
Amidst this monument of vanish'd minds:  
Pure clinches the suburban Muse affords,  
And Panton waging harmless war with words.

The major genres, such as Jonsonian comedy and the tragicomedies of John Fletcher, give way to punning and inferior wordplay as forms of entertainment. While the poem upholds important neoclassic principles, the overarching framework emerges from its narrative structure and from recurrent patterns of contrast: wit and dullness; sense and nonsense.

What provoked Dryden's mock attack on his literary rival remains unclear. As a poet, Shadwell produced only crude and inferior verses, but critics have found merit in his comedies, modeled after the comedies of humor produced by Jonson. Except for serious students of the period, they are now forgotten, and for most students of literature Shadwell's name survives through Dryden's satiric masterpiece.

## “TO MY DEAR FRIEND MR. CONGREVE”

**First published:** 1694 (collected in *John Dryden: The Major Works*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*For his literary achievement at an early age, William Congreve is celebrated as a true successor to the throne of wit.*

Although “To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve” is formally a verse epistle, it is representative also of Dryden’s numerous panegyrics, or poems of praise. Written during his final decade, it demonstrates his inclination to praise younger contemporaries and reflects Dryden’s mastery of the heroic couplet. Readily divided into two sections, the epistle employs two of Dryden’s most important poetic conventions: the conservative metaphor of the temple and the concept of succession, in this poem applied to the kingdom of letters.

In the first part, the poem praises Congreve by placing him within the context of English literary history. While Dryden grants the Elizabethan dramatists transcendent genius, he views their dramas as irregular and crude. The second great period of drama, the early Restoration, brought polish and refinement to the drama, or, in Dryden’s words, better manners, yet this improvement had its price:

Our age was cultivated thus at length,  
But what we gain’d in skill we lost in strength.  
Our builders were with want of genius cursed;  
The second temple was not like the first.

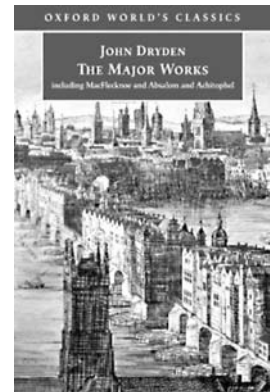
The elegant balance and aphoristic expression of the passage are succeeded by a bold chiasmus and further development of the temple metaphor, celebrating the achievement of a dramatist one generation younger than Dryden:

Till you, the best Vitruvius, come at length;  
Our beauties equal, but excel our strength.  
Firm Doric pillars found your solid base;  
The fair Corinthian crowns the higher space:  
Thus all below is strength, and all above is grace.

Dryden endows the younger Congreve with the wit and genius of the Elizabethans and the polish and refinement of the Restoration dramatists. The comparison to the Roman architect Vitruvius is followed by another to the youthful Roman general Scipio Africanus to emphasize Congreve’s early achievement.

Before renewing the panegyric in the poem’s second part, Dryden becomes personal and speaks of his own career. Typically, he writes about himself with restraint; the numerous autobiographical passages in Dryden’s poetry and prose reveal more about his reactions to events and less about the events themselves. In writing of himself, he couches his experience within the mythic context of literary succession; having been poet laureate, he had occupied a throne of letters. Writing of his loss of the laureateship, Dryden asserts that he could have been content had the office gone to Congreve. Instead, it went to his old enemy Thomas Shadwell. Despite this anomaly, he continues, Congreve’s merits will elevate him to a throne in the kingdom of letters. Comparing Congreve with Shakespeare, he predicts a long and illustrious career for the youthful dramatist. Dryden, like a deposed monarch, recognizes that his own career is drawing to its close and asks Congreve to defend his memory against attacks that are certain to follow after his death.

The poem stands as an example of Dryden’s generous praise, couched within a mythic context of his own invention. Ironically, Congreve retired from playwriting in 1700, and while his brilliant comedies remain alive today, his dramatic range was limited to the comedy of manners. He lived to fulfill Dryden’s request, leaving a poignant memoir of the poet as a preface to the 1717 edition of Dryden’s dramas.



## ALEXANDER'S FEAST

**First published:** 1697

**Type of work:** Poem

*Musical performances can so move the emotions, even of heroic individuals, that such individuals are influenced to undertake specific actions.*

*Alexander's Feast: Or, The Power of Music, an Ode in Honor of St. Cecilia's Day* is Dryden's second ode honoring Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music. The poem's theme, the power of music to move human emotions, is identical with that of "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day," written a decade earlier. Both odes are occasional, having been composed at the invitation of the London Musical Society. The second ode, however, is much more elaborate, for Dryden introduces characters and places them within a dramatic setting. The Greeks are celebrating their victory over the Persian King Darius when the musician at the banquet, Timotheus, is called upon to perform.

With exalted strains, Timotheus creates within Alexander the Great a sense that he has become a deity. An alteration of tone changes his mood to a desire for pleasure, and following this a longing for love of his mistress Thaïs, who sits beside him. Somber strains evoke pity for the fallen Darius, but these are followed by strident tones calling for revenge on behalf of Greek soldiers who have perished. Alexander and his mistress and their company rush out, torches in hand, to burn the Persian

city Persepolis. The poem concludes with a grand chorus, stressing the power of music to move emotions and contrasting the legend of Saint Cecilia with the power of Timotheus. Dryden recalls the story that after she had invented the organ, she played such beautiful music that an angel, mistaking the sounds for those of heaven, appeared as she played:

Let old Timotheus yield the prize,  
Or both divide the crown:  
He rais'd a mortal to the skies;  
She drew an angel down.

The intricate form resembles the Pindaric ode in its lengthy and complicated irregular stanzas, yet its linear organization follows the tradition of Horace. Dryden achieves a complex, forceful, and energetic movement, and his use of historical events and characters contributes to a lively, dramatic expression of his theme.

### SUMMARY

John Dryden's amazingly varied literary production adapted the classical poetic genres to the England of his day. He sought to enrich the national literature and to serve as an instructor of manners and morals for his society. His appeal is primarily to reason, not to emotion.

His classical sense of polish enabled him to perfect the heroic couplet and make it the dominant verse form in English. His prose remains a model of lucid, idiomatic, and graceful writing.

*Stanley Archer*

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- John Dryden has been accused of being a trimmer—of expediently changing his views on religion, government, and literary standards. What evidence is there to refute this charge?
- Examine the applicability of Dryden's biblical lore in *Absalom and Achitophel*.
- Was outrage at his nation for honoring the minor poet Thomas Shadwell a sufficient or merely a contributing provocation for Dryden to write *Mac Flecknoe*?
- Show how Dryden's characterizations of the speakers in *Of Dramatic Poesie: An Essay* reflect his critical broad-mindedness.
- Discuss Dryden's influence on literary art in the century that followed his death in 1700.
- Trace Dryden's importance as a link between the Jacobean and Restoration drama.

# DU FU

**Born:** Gongxian, China  
712

**Died:** Tanzhou (now Changsha, Hunan province), China  
770

*Generally regarded as China's finest poet, Du Fu is celebrated for his seriousness of purpose, his mastery of poetic technique, and his innovations in subject matter.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Du Fu (doo foo; also known as Tu Fu) lived during the century when China's Tang Dynasty (618-907) reached the peak of its political and cultural achievement and began its long decline. The pivotal event in the lives of both the poet and the dynasty was the An-Shi Rebellion, which ended the reign of Xuanzong, "the Brilliant Emperor," and brought the death of many thousands of Chinese people. Its importance is fully reflected in Du Fu's poetry; in fact, the poems that made his reputation were written after the rebellion began, when he was already in his mid-forties.

The poet was born in 712 in Gongxian, China. His father's name was Du Xian. The family had a tradition of many generations of public service, and after some five years traveling in the south of China during his early twenties, Du Fu returned to Ch'ang-an in 736 to attempt the examinations for imperial service. Unexpectedly, he failed, and once again he devoted himself to travel. Du Fu wrote about these experiences many years later in "The Wanderings of My Prime."

In the early 740's, he lived in Luoyang, during which time he met the poet Li Po. Du Fu addressed several poems to Li Po, and the former clearly treasured the friendship for the rest of his life, although the two poets do not appear to have met again after their excursions of 744 and 745.

Du Fu moved to Ch'ang-an in 746 and set about gaining an official position. The next year offered the opportunity of a special examination, but the corrupt first minister saw to it that no one was passed. Five years later, possibly as a result of three poems well received by the emperor himself, Du Fu

was again able to take the examination. This time he was put on a list of those awaiting appointments, but he had to wait another three years before being assigned a police commissioner's post. This post he declined, and he was made adjutant in the Office of the Right Commander of the heir apparent's Palace Guard.

During this ten-year waiting period, Du Fu's poetry began to show an increasing sympathy for the ordinary people of China. He had already written about the ravages of war in the famous "Song of the War Wagons," and when severe rains in the autumn of 754 led to food shortages and price rises, "Sighing over the Autumn Rains" movingly tells how a little rice now required the surrender of a person's bedding. The situation was so serious that the poet had moved his family away from the capital, and joy at his new appointment was tempered by the death from hunger of his infant son, an event chronicled in "Five Hundred Words to Express My Feelings When I Went from the Capital to Fengxian." Yet Du Fu's personal unhappiness was soon to be overshadowed by a national disaster, and public and private events would sit side by side in his poetry.

At the beginning of 756-757, An Lu-shan, the governor-general of the northern and northeastern border regions, captured Luoyang and threatened the imperial capital. About ten years earlier, the emperor had taken as concubine the wife of one of his own sons. Yang Guifei soon made herself effective empress, had her older sisters ennobled, and helped one of her cousins, Yang Guozhong, climb to the rank of highest minister of state. The unpopular Yang family was An Lu-shan's declared

target, and when the emperor was forced to flee Ch'ang-an, it was the imperial troops who executed the corrupt minister, his son, and two of Lady Yang's sisters, and who finally insisted on the death of the concubine herself. Shortly thereafter, Suzong, the heir apparent, was proclaimed emperor and began the long process of crushing the rebellion.

Du Fu, who had taken his family to Fengxian, eighty miles from Ch'ang-an, now moved them further north to Qiang Village and tried to join the new emperor. The poet seems to have been captured by the rebels and taken to Ch'ang-an, where he stayed for about eight months, until early 757, when he managed to make his way through enemy lines to Suzong's headquarters. Poems such as "Moonlit Night," "Spring Prospect," "P'eng-ya Road," and "The Journey North" reflect these experiences.

Du Fu was now appointed to a junior advisory position. He did not make a great success of this opportunity, and six months after the recovery of Ch'ang-an and Luoyang, the poet was transferred to a minor post in Huazhou, sixty miles from the capital. After little more than a year, he resigned and took his family to Chengdu, where he built his famous thatched hut in the spring of 760. The last decade of his life was a prolific period, and most of Du Fu's surviving poetry comes from these years.

In Chengdu, the poet seems to have depended on the kindness of others, but after a local revolt, which forced him and his family to flee the city for almost two years, he joined the military staff of his friend Yan Wu, the new provincial governor. In early 765, after less than a year, Du Fu resigned and moved to Kui-zhou at the western entrance to the gorges of the Yangtse River. The city prefect was extremely helpful, and Du Fu probably became his unofficial secretary. By 767, the poet had two houses and held fields and orchards, but the next year he left, possibly still thinking of an official post in the capital. Du Fu died in Tanzhou, China, in late 770.

### ANALYSIS

The two indigenous religions of China, Confucianism and Daoism, both hinge on the word "Dao," or "Way," meaning the principle by which human beings are to seek harmony. Confucian-

ism tended to emphasize the social elements of the Dao, putting particular value on the virtues of truthfulness, diligence, filial piety, and loyalty to government as likely to generate harmony on earth. Daoism itself, on the other hand, was skeptical about the possibility of illuminating the Dao at all, and it taught that the Way might only be known through an inner awareness and union with the ultimate reality of all things. Du Fu's family history of government service generated in him a Confucian sense of the importance of public responsibility, but as his friendship and admiration for the Daoist poet Li Po suggest, there was a quietist streak to his character, which found expression in frequent praise of rural life and the hermit's role. Du Fu's sympathy with both polarities of the Chinese value system may help to account for his enormous poetic prestige.

Until the 750's, Du Fu did not seem to have been particularly interested in the public world, but then he produced a number of poems on social issues, possibly in response to a deterioration in governance. A poet would not have been regarded as moving out of his proper sphere in writing political commentary; since Confucianism regarded government as of vital concern to the wise man, there was a long tradition of using poetry as a vehicle for social and political criticism. Du Fu's "ballads," however, are unusually direct, and his engagement with political events has gained for him the title of the "poet-historian."

One of the first of these poems was "Song of the War Wagons." The opening lines describe conscripted men going to war behind the baggage wagons, while their wives, parents, and children stumble after them, weeping. A soldier tells how he and his fellows, driven "like dogs or chickens," have given their blood to satisfy the emperor's expansionist ambitions. The poem has been praised for its acute sensitivity to the ordinary person's difficulties. Du Fu also wrote about the evils of conscription in the three "officer" poems (759). The last of these tells of an old man who escapes over the wall right as the recruiting officer arrives. All his sons have gone to the war, and now even his wife and daughter-in-law are taken to cook for the army. At this point, Du Fu can only offer compassion since the people are being taken to defend the empire, not expand it.

The concept of *re*, of benevolence, charity, or

good-heartedness, was the paramount Confucian virtue, and in Du Fu's poems of the rebellion it finds frequent expression. "A Fine Lady" shows his compassion for a well-born woman. Her brothers were killed in the rebellion, and her husband deserted her for a younger woman, so she is now reduced to selling her pearls one by one. With an eye for compelling detail, Du Fu tells how she and her maid ineffectually try to cover the holes in their roof with living creepers.

Very few poets wrote about the An-Shi Rebellion, and while there were ancient precedents for such poems as "Song of the War Wagons," Du Fu was breaking new ground when he wrote about his family's experiences. "P'eng-ya Road" describes them walking through the rain and mud, their clothes wet and cold, his son eating bitter plums, and his daughter biting her father in her hunger. Eventually, they arrive at a friend's house, and the poem becomes a celebration of hospitality. Friendship is one of the traditional subjects of Chinese literature, and the drama of his family's journey and their pitiful condition makes the friend's hospitality glow all the more brightly as a moment of blessed harmony in a disordered world.

A reverence for nature is a continuing theme in Chinese verse, and many of Du Fu's poems express a degree of unity with the natural world. In "Moonlit Night," he finds himself in harmony with his wife and children when he considers that they are looking at the same moon in Fu-zhou that he sees in Ch'ang-an. In "Facing the Snow," however, he evokes tumultuous storm clouds to parallel China in rebellion. "Restless Night" anxiously represents a calm and peaceful nature as being under the same threat of war as humankind, and Du Fu's sympathy now extends to the natural world itself.

Nature was not always bleak. "The River Village," written during the "thatched hut" period of 760 through 762, celebrates a secret beauty that unites all creation: the curve of the river, the swallows on the roof, the gulls in the water, his wife making a chessboard, and his sons bending needles into fish hooks. Du Fu achieves a similar sense of oneness in "A Traveler at Night Writes His Thoughts." The poet is on a boat sailing down the Yangtse River; grasses grow on the bank, the stars are above, and the moon is reflected in the water. Bitterly, Du Fu reflects that his poetry has not made him a name and that his life in government has not

been a success. What does he resemble? A sand gull, floating between heaven and earth. This image is not one of power and authority, nor is it one of leaden impotence. The gull, or the poet, is a mediator between earth and heaven, stitching a single garment of universal harmony.

### "SPRING PROSPECT"

**Written:** "Chun wang," 757 (collected in *The Selected Poems of Du Fu*, 2002)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Feeling aged by the devastation of the civil war, the poet finds comfort in nature.*

"Spring Prospect," Du Fu's most famous poem, was written while he was held in Ch'ang-an and is characteristic of his verse, both in form and in subject matter. The poem seems to separate the artificial (the "nation" and the "city") and the natural ("hills and streams"), only to erase this distinction when "grass and trees" are seen flourishing in Ch'ang-an at a time of destruction. The lines "feeling the times,/ flowers draw tears;/ hating separation,/ birds alarm the heart" are willfully ambiguous. Burton Watson, the translator, has given the flavor of the original by using dangling participles. Who is the implied subject of "feeling" or of "hating"? Is it the poet or the flowers and birds? Is nature sympathizing with humanity and the poet? Are the flowers crying over the political situation, or the birds suffering because Du Fu and his family are apart? On the other hand, the lines can be taken to mean that the poet is weeping on the flowers, symbols of beauty and renewal, while the birds' songs stoke his emotional anguish. Thus, the poetry weaves humanity and nature together into one fabric.

The "beacon fires" of line 5, "Beacon fires three months running," were used by the Chinese to maintain contact between garrisons; they would be lit at regular times to indicate that all was well. In the poem, their use for three months shows how long the emergency has lasted. The final two lines focus on the poet, but he refuses to take himself too seriously: He is losing so much hair that soon there will not be enough in the topknot for him to pin on



his hat, and it will fall off. This wry, self-deprecating humor is typical of Du Fu.

The poem in Chinese consists of eight lines of five words each, a form called *lǔshǐ*, or regulated verse. It was one of a group of forms known as “modern style,” which developed after the fifth century C.E. and could be written with either seven or five syllables to the line—Chinese words normally have only one syllable. Du Fu is particularly admired for his mastery of this very strict form. There were precise rules for verbal and tonal parallelism in the second and third pairs of lines, and the translation preserves most of these antitheses, as indicated for example, in lines 3 and 4: “feeling”/“hating”; “the times” (political and personal dislocation)/“separation”; “flowers”/“birds”; “draw”/“alarm”; “tears”/“heart.”

### “THE JOURNEY NORTH”

**Written:** “Bei zheng,” 757 (collected in *Crossing the Yellow River: Three Hundred Poems from the Chinese*, 2000)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Du Fu describes his journey across a devastated land to visit his impoverished wife and children.*

In “The Journey North,” Du Fu has received formal permission from the emperor to make a visit to his wife and children, but the poet wonders how important he should consider his family at a time when “the whole universe is suffering fearsome wounds.” In this state of confusion and anxiety, he begins his phantasmagoric journey through a devastated and depopulated countryside. There is temporary respite when he comes to the mountains—“Here retired pursuits could be enjoyed.” Yet the world calls him back, and he must cross an old battlefield at night, the moonlight illuminating white bones.

The poet’s homecoming is a widely praised passage. He finds his wife and children in patched

clothes; his spoiled son is now barefoot and pale, and Du Fu himself falls sick and takes to his bed. At this point, he realizes that he has some cosmetics and silk in his bag, and the children take immediate pleasure in the makeup, playing at being grown-ups. The poet can temporarily forget the trials of life in the pleasure of being with his children.

After these three dozen lines of domestic realism, the poem returns to its initial mode, and Du Fu turns to speculating on the outcome of the rebellion. He says that he believes that the “demonic atmosphere will soon break,” that the empire is, after all, built on firm foundations.

The poem is striking for its mixture of the domestic and the high political. The “shifting style,” with its abrupt changes of mood and topic, is characteristic of Du Fu and sets him apart from his contemporaries. He is quite happy to let the personal stand beside the public and to unify the two in the space of a poem, although his sense of himself as a potentially public figure, and sometimes as a mildly absurd one, constantly draws him back to earth.

### SUMMARY

The horrors of the mid-century An-Shi Rebellion elicited in Du Fu the supreme Confucian value of compassion for his fellow human beings. Parallel to his strong awareness of the everyday world and his sense of public responsibility was an urge to experience the unity of humanity and the natural world. Yet the physical destruction and dislocation that he saw around him made it hard for the poet to see nature as harmonious, although occasionally he was able to transcend his own troubles and those of his country.

William Atkinson



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine the concept of *re* in poems of Du Fu other than "A Fine Lady."
- Show how Du Fu uses observation of the natural world to cast light upon human disorders.
- Comment on tributes to quietness in Du Fu's poems.
- What are the most specific Confucian values in Du Fu's poetry?
- Does any century in Western history reflect social and political problems similar to those described in Du Fu's poetry?



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## ALEXANDRE DUMAS, PÈRE

**Born:** Villers-Cotterêts, France

July 24, 1802

**Died:** Puys, France

December 5, 1870

*Dumas is a major French writer who excelled in four different literary genres in an original, prolific, and flamboyant way.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The prince of storytellers, Alexandre Dumas, *père* (dew-MAH pehr), was born on July 24, 1802, in the town of Villers-Cotterêts, northwest of Paris, France. His name was officially altered in 1813 to Alexandre Davy de la Pailleterie Dumas. Dumas was the son of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie, a mulatto illegitimate son of a marquis. Thomas-Alexandre enlisted in the Queen's Dragoons as a private in 1786, although he soon rose rapidly in rank. While on leave in Villers-Cotterêts he met and fell in love with Marie-Louise-Elizabeth Labouret, an innkeeper's daughter. They were married on November 28, 1792. By that time Thomas-Alexandre had obtained commissioned rank, and by June, 1793, he had achieved the rank of brigadier general.

After serving with Napoleon I in Egypt, Thomas-Alexandre left for home. He stopped his ship in Naples, unaware that he was in hostile territory. He was arrested and spent two years in prison. When he returned to Villers-Cotterêts, his health was broken. He died when Alexandre Dumas was four years old.

At eighteen, Alexandre knew about hunting and woodcraft but otherwise had little education. Fortunately, he became friends with two experienced young men, Amédée de la Ponce, an army officer, and Adolphe de Leuven, a Swedish aristocrat. Both men helped the younger Dumas find himself and pursue his education. Dumas's read-

ing had been meager. De la Ponce offered to teach him German and Italian. Dumas readily accepted this generous offer. Eventually he became acquainted with the German Sturm und Drang movement of the 1770's and 1780's. The Italian who moved him most was Ugo Foscolo, a novelist and critic.

Adolphe de Leuven spent only his summers in Villers-Cotterêts; in the winter he resided in Paris. His descriptions and stories of Paris fascinated Dumas. De Leuven also liked to write vaudeville sketches and suggested that Dumas collaborate with him. They wrote several sketches together, and some were accepted for performance. De Leuven also introduced Dumas to the historical prose works of Sir Walter Scott.

Dumas moved to Paris in 1823. There he got a job as a copyist in an office. He soon developed a passion for the theater and decided to pursue a literary career. The assistant director of his office took an interest in him and advised him to educate himself further. Dumas read the histories of Jean Froissart, Pierre de Bourdeille, and Blaise de Lasseran Massencôme; the memoirs of Cardinal de Retz and the duc de Saint-Simon; the old classics of Homer, Vergil, and Dante; and the modern classics of Victor Hugo, Alphonse Lamartine, and André-Marie de Chénier.

Dumas greatly enjoyed attending the theater, especially performances of William Shakespeare's plays by touring English actors. He turned to writing plays. He achieved success with the romantic drama *Henry III et sa cour* (pr., pb. 1829; *Catherine of Cleves*, 1831, also known as *Henry III and His Court*, 1904). He continued with more plays, including, in

the time following his first success, *Christine: Ou, Stockholm, Fontainebleau, et Rome* (pr., pb. 1830), *Antony* (pr., pb. 1831; English translation, 1904), *La Tour de Nesle* (pr., pb. 1832; *The Tower of Nesle*, 1890), and *Catherine Howard* (pr., pb. 1834; English translation, 1859).

Dumas also wrote novels. In writing novels, his aim was to present history in a way that would dispel the commonly held idea that history is no more than a boring accumulation of dates and facts. One of his first efforts, *La Comtesse de Salisbury* (1839; the countess of Salisbury), was the first novel that he published as a serial in a popular magazine. He became established as a writer of historical fiction and went on to produce such masterpieces as *Les Frères corses* (1844; *The Corsican Brothers*, 1880), *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1844; *The Three Musketeers*, 1846), *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1844-1845; *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, 1846), and *La Reine Margot* (1845; *Marguerite de Navarre: Or, The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Eve*, 1845, better known as *Marguerite de Valois*, 1846).

Dumas was a prodigious worker. His complete works amount to around three hundred volumes. He founded and edited a half-dozen magazines and newspapers. He had a half-dozen mistresses and a wife, whom he divorced. By his mistresses he had a son and two daughters; by his wife he had no child. He traveled widely and wrote numerous accounts of his trips. He was extravagant and always in debt. Late in his career he became a political activist. In June, 1860, he joined the Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi. In July, 1870, Dumas suffered a severe stroke. On December 5, he died at his son's home at Puys; he was buried at his native town of Villers-Cotterêts.

## ANALYSIS

Dumas's long novels are sometimes called, misleadingly, romances. They are not, first of all, like what are commonly called romance novels, which deal with a woman falling in love. Moreover, there is an important distinction to be made between a novel and a romance. The distinction has to do with the powers of the protagonist. Novels are about ordinary people and how they fare in their conflicts. The protagonist of a novel is treated realistically and is often given a detailed psychological portrait. On the other hand, the romance presents extraordinary persons whose powers are magical

and border on the mythological. The protagonists of romances are not so much individual men and women as archetypes, dream images, or symbols. The romantic protagonist comes from an upper world, and the antagonist has attributes of an underworld. The conflict takes place in a realistic setting, but the laws of nature may be suspended. Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623) is an example of such a romance in English literature, as is the film *Star Wars* (1977). Dumas's novels are realistic, not romances.

Dumas wrote many historical novels. When reading history, one needs always to remember that what happened is being rendered by the person telling what happened. Even the most factual histories involve interpretation. Dumas's historical novels do not make romances out of history. For example, rather than create a King Arthur, whose powers are those of a hero of a romance, Dumas creates characters who resemble, in their accomplishments, failings, and personalities, people the reader may know in life. Dumas usually succeeds in producing a convincing illusion of historical reality. His novels are often so compelling that many readers never question their historical accuracy.

## THE THREE MUSKETEERS

**First published:** *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, 1844  
(English translation, 1846)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Three of King Louis XIII's musketeers and a cadet serve their king and queen with loyalty, bravery, and honor; their adventures taking place in a context of historical fact.*

*The Three Musketeers*, a historical novel, is arranged in five parts. In the first, the introduction, the reader meets the heroes: the cadet, d'Artagnan, and the king's musketeers Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. They become the Inseparables. In the second part, the reader discovers that there is considerable intrigue going on in the court of Louis XIII. There is rivalry between the king and Cardinal de Richelieu, which is reflected in a rivalry between the king's guards and the cardinal's guards. What is

more, scandal follows the king's consort, Queen Anne of Austria, and the duke of Buckingham, who are in a liaison. In the third part, there is a religious war between the Catholics and Protestants of France. There is a siege at La Rochelle (an actual event). In the fourth part, a beautiful femme fatale causes the assassination of the duke of Buckingham, tries without success to poison d'Artagnan, and successfully poisons another character. In the last part, she gets her retribution. Her executioner is the brother of a priest whom she seduced and ruined. D'Artagnan is rewarded with a promotion.

The principal characters have their prototypes in real people. The king, queen, cardinal, and other important members of the court all existed in fact. D'Artagnan is based on a real person.

The king's guards, an elite force whose job was to protect the king, were gentlemen trained from an early age in horsemanship and the use of arms. They were armed with muskets and rapiers. When guarding the king, they rode horseback and used their rapiers, but in war they fought on foot, with their muskets. When Cardinal de Richelieu saw this impressive military unit, he formed his own guard of musketeers. Both corps wore scarlet uniforms. They were distinguished from each other by whether they rode gray or black horses. Not surprisingly, the two corps were rivals.

Dumas tells a simple yet stirring tale. Aside from the dashing swordplay, the novel relies upon, and communicates to the reader, a complex set of social codes. The text supports the institution of absolute monarchy and the aristocratic values of France before 1789. The aristocratic conception of honor, for example, is promulgated in the actions and discussions of the characters.

## THE COUNT OF MONTE-CRISTO

**First published:** *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, 1844-1845 (English translation, 1846)

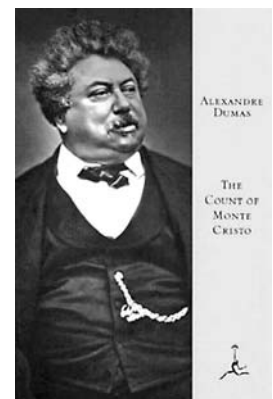
**Type of work:** Novel

*Evil men cause a young ship captain to spend fourteen years in prison for a crime he did not commit. Once free, the man obtains great wealth, brings about the destruction of the men, reunites two lovers, gives them his wealth, and sails away to parts unknown.*

*The Count of Monte-Cristo*, which may be the best example of Dumas's narrative and imaginative power, is quite unlike *The Three Musketeers*. It is not historical. The time of its action is not remote, relative to the time of its publication. Its values are not aristocratic but bourgeois. It deals with the power of money, with what currently is called white-collar crime, and with greed. It is about shipping, commerce, banking, bribery, and corruption. Opposing a dishonest group including a lawyer, an accountant, and a banker are an honest shipowner and merchant marine officer.

The novel is also about the bourgeois values of getting demoted and promoted. Dantès, the merchant marine officer, gets promoted, because of his ability, to captain. He is about to marry his sweetheart, Mercédès. He is honest and naïve. He does not think that Danglars wants his captaincy or that Mondego wants his sweetheart. The men falsely accuse him of being a Bonapartist spy. He does not think that the prosecutor Villefort will convict him and send him to prison in order to cover up the wrongdoing of Villefort's father. Dantès, for being too innocent, is demoted.

He learns in prison of a great treasure hidden on the island of Monte-Cristo. He escapes. Retrieving the fortune, he changes his identity, becoming the Count of Monte-Cristo. He is, in a





sense, promoted. Now extremely wealthy, he seeks vengeance on those who have wronged him. He is also healthy and handsome, despite his years in prison.

“Monte-Cristo” is Italian for “Christ mount” or “Cristo hill.” Château D’If, the island prison from which the count escapes (by water, necessarily), is French for “house of the evergreen tree.” In a sense, then, a second son of God (healthy, rich, and handsome) is born from the watery grave at the foot of the Christmas tree. The mission of this second son is to drive the crooked money-grubbers from the temple of the new industrial capitalism. The son has fallen, and he has risen again. In the end, he disappears to even greater adventure over the blue horizon.

Dumas got the gist of the plot from the files of the Parisian police. In 1807, a handsome young shoemaker was sent to prison by a falsehood. In prison, he learned of a hidden treasure. Once free and with the treasure, the shoemaker did not behave as the count does. The shoemaker personally murdered all but one of the people responsible for his misfortune. The one he did not murder murdered him. The count, on the other hand, does not murder his wrongdoers but instead creates events in which each wrongdoer destroys himself.

## MARGUERITE DE VALOIS

**First published:** *La Reine Margot*, 1845  
(English translation, 1845)

**Type of work:** Novel

*During the last two years of the reign of Charles IX (1572-1574), a political rivalry develops, with Catherine de Médicis, mother of Charles, on one side, and Henri de Navarre (later King Henri IV) and his wife, Marguerite de Valois, her daughter, on the other.*

*Marguerite de Valois*, written with Auguste Maquet, is the first novel of Dumas’s Valois trilogy, which ranks among the author’s best works. The characters have their counterparts in the actual history of the sixteenth century. The novel is not a romance; no laws of nature are suspended, and the characters are not endowed with any magical pow-

ers. They are, however, somewhat larger than life in their actions and passions. This quality is fitting, however, for the powerful, willful royalty that the novel is about.

Dumas allows himself the liberty of compressing and altering the facts of history in order to construct a compelling story. The novel takes place during a time of religious wars that were as much political as they were religious. The rival factions represented by Marguerite and her mother were Catholic on one hand and Protestant on the other. Upon the death of Charles IX, his brother takes over the throne, becoming Henri III. Henri de Navarre flees for his life, to await the time (1589) when he may obtain the throne.

De Navarre is the protagonist of the novel, despite its title. His enemy is Catherine de Médicis, who wants her son (or, failing that, her grandson) to rule France. Dumas paints de Navarre as a brave and level-headed soldier and politician who is shrewd and capable in dealing with his enemies. He is also capable, as he needed to be to survive, of shifting his religious affiliation. This serves to bring a degree of religious toleration to his nation. Catherine de Médicis is portrayed as a monster. In historical fact it is unlikely that she could have been as evil as Dumas portrays her, although in fact she did authorize the assassination of Admiral de Coligny and his Protestant followers. Furthermore, it appears that her actions led to the infamous Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. She uses her daughter as a pawn, which her daughter resents. Catherine marries Marguerite to Henri so that one way or another her male descendants will rule France—either through Marguerite or through Charles IX.

The novel’s many other characters are also compelling and memorable. Charles IX is a bundle of opposites—now friendly, then deadly, now meek, then tyrannical, now cruel, then kind. Comte Hyacinthe Lerac de la Mole is a fop but also a brave and fierce swordsman and a sincere lover of Marguerite. Others include the perfumer, poisoner, and soothsayer René; the assassin Maurevel; and a large assortment of braggarts, killers, and family.

## SUMMARY

Alexandre Dumas, *père*, was, in his amazing productivity, larger than life, like many of his characters. This has blinded many critics to his genius as a

literary creator. He is not a stylist or an exquisite craftsman like Edgar Allan Poe or Gustave Flaubert. On the other hand, his novels are impossible to put down; they lead the enchanted reader to the end. He is still read around the world, his stories still are retold in new works, including film. He succeeded in his aim of making history come alive.

Richard P. Benton

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Investigate the complex social codes in Alexandre Dumas, père's *The Three Musketeers*.
- Show how *The Count of Monte-Cristo* both fulfills and defies the writer's devotion to historical reality as a basis for fiction.
- Compare the attitude to history reflected in the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Dumas.
- By what techniques does Dumas make convincing larger-than-life characters?
- Discuss the more memorable aspects of Paris found in Dumas's novels.

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## DAPHNE DU MAURIER

**Born:** London, England  
May 13, 1907

**Died:** Par, Cornwall, England  
April 19, 1989

*One of the most celebrated popular fiction writers of her time, du Maurier inspired the revival of the gothic romance.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Daphne du Maurier (dew MOR-ee-ay) was born in London, England, on May 13, 1907, the second daughter of Gerald and Muriel (Beaumont) du Maurier. Her father, Sir Gerald du Maurier, was a leading actor of his day, and her grandfather was George du Maurier, author of *Trilby* (1894), the story of a young girl mesmerized by a sinister Hungarian musician named Svengali. Du Maurier enjoyed a privileged childhood, surrounded by celebrities and protected from life's harshness. She was instructed by a governess and at private schools until she was sixteen, when she was sent to a finishing school near Paris.

Soon after she returned to England, she developed a crush on an older cousin and then fell in love with film director Carol Reed, experiences that led to the writing of three novels that were moderately successful. Her breakthrough came with the publication of *Jamaica Inn* (1936), a thoroughly romantic historical novel inspired by her discovery of Cornwall, a rugged, windswept peninsula of southwestern England that was to be the setting for her most popular works. Her marriage in 1932, to Major Frederick A. M. Browning, and her subsequently becoming the mother of three children created a conflict between her duties as wife and mother and her passion for writing. It was a

conflict she resolved by spending as much time as she could on her own in Cornwall.

Du Maurier moved to Cornwall permanently in 1943 when she leased Menabilly, a crumbling old mansion on the coast that she had already used as the setting for *Rebecca* (1938), her best and most famous novel. No sooner had she moved in than she set to work writing a series of historical best-sellers, beginning with *Hungry Hill* (1943), a family chronicle set in Ireland, *Frenchman's Creek* (1941), a novel that takes place near Menabilly, and *The King's General* (1946), a novel based on the actual history of the original owners of Menabilly. Although the house was cold, drafty, and rat-ridden, she loved it, and her children bravely put up with it while du Maurier continued to write successful novels, plays, and short stories.

She became the first lady of gothic romance fiction, a label she resented because she also wrote history, biography, and stage plays. When she did try something not gothic, like *The Parasites* (1949), an incisive analysis of the modern bohemian temperament as revealed in the lives of three talented but spoiled young artists, it was largely ignored. She won back her fans with *My Cousin Rachel* (1951), a tale of mystery and intrigue set on the Cornish coast. She also published a biography of her grandfather (she had already published a biography of her father in 1934) and the novel *Mary Anne* (1954), a fictionalized account of a colorful ancestor. She also began writing short stories, the best known of which are "The Birds" (in *The Apple Tree: A Short Novel and Some Stories*, 1952), the inspiration for the Alfred Hitchcock film, and "Don't Look Now" (in *Not After Midnight, and Other Stories*,

1971), a haunting tale of intrigue, deception, and murder set in Venice that was masterfully filmed by Nicholas Roeg.

Du Maurier's final novels, *The Scapegoat* (1957), *The Glass-Blowers* (1963), *The Flight of the Falcon* (1965), *The House on the Strand* (1969), and *Rule Britannia* (1972), reveal her growing interest in psychology and the question of identity. The best of these is *The House on the Strand*, a novel in which du Maurier renders the brittle landscape of drug-induced hallucination with stunning clarity. In 1969, du Maurier was named a Dame of the British Empire. It was also the year she moved from Menabilly to Kilmarth, the house which had been the setting for *The House on the Strand*. *Rule Britannia*, her last novel, with its shrill anti-Americanism, is merely an embarrassment.

In her later years, her health failing, she became bitter and depressed, a virtual recluse. She died in her sleep on April 19, 1989, at the age of eighty-one, and her ashes were taken to Kilmarth and buried on the grounds.

## ANALYSIS

Daphne du Maurier was a storyteller who had good stories to tell and knew how to tell them. It is this union of good plot and good style that accounts for her enormous success as a writer of popular fiction. Her stories are products of a fertile imagination fueled by her love of history and her sense of place. She also brought to her writing the keen psychological insights necessary to develop believable characters and to explore human conflicts, especially those between the sexes. Such tension helps build suspense, but the element of mystery in a du Maurier story depends even more on her fascination with the deceptiveness of appearances. In most of her works, things are never quite what they seem, and no one is above suspicion.

Du Maurier's ability to tell a story is evident in the technique she uses to set the mood in the beginning lines. In deceptively simple language she moves quickly into the story, not only establishing atmosphere but also creating suspense. Often she achieves this effect by using a first-person narrator to give the story greater credibility. In *The House on the Strand*, Dick Kilmarth is transported back to medieval times by a drug he has found in the basement of the family's ancestral home on the coast of Cornwall. "The first thing I noticed," he says, "was

the clarity of the air, and then the sharp green color of the land." He then remarks on the lack of softness in the landscape and the way the hills do not blend with the sky but stand out "like rocks, so close that I could almost touch them." It seems that all his senses have been "in some way sharpened" except for the sense of touch. "I could not feel the ground beneath my feet," he says, adding, "Magnus had warned me of this." It is an ominous remark that raises a number of questions. Just where is Dick Kilmarth, and how did he get wherever he is? Why is his sense of touch dulled? Who is Magnus? As du Maurier proceeds to answer these questions, she raises even more, until Dick's experiences seem to be taking place even as she writes. This technique of mixing answers with new questions is one she uses throughout to keep readers turning the pages.

The opening lines of *Rebecca* establish the atmosphere so palpably that when Hitchcock made the film, he felt compelled to use a voice-over to achieve the same effect. "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again," the narrator says. "It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter for the way was barred to me. . . . Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me." Du Maurier was actually describing the first time she stumbled upon Menabilly, the neglected, old country house in Cornwall that inspired *Rebecca* and in which du Maurier later lived for many years. So intense was her feeling for Cornwall that she charmed language into making that feeling almost tangible.

"The Birds," another story filmed by Hitchcock, opens with a line that, though innocent enough, sounds a chilling note: "On December the third the wind changed overnight and it was winter." This is followed by a brief glimpse of the mellow autumn that had just ended and then a hint of something troubling ahead: "The birds had been more restless than ever this fall of the year, the agitation more marked because the days were still . . . [and] there were many more [birds] than usual." Bit by bit du Maurier builds the suspense until there is no escaping the horrible realization of just how threatening the birds really are.

The theme of the deceptiveness of appearances haunts the pages of *My Cousin Rachel*, in which

Philip Ashley is never sure whether his seductive cousin is a murderess or simply a charming flirt. In *Rebecca*, the young, new wife suffers throughout the novel because she misreads her husband's moods and motives. No one seems to know Rebecca, not even Mrs. Danvers, who is obsessed with her. In "Don't Look Now," the bereaved parents, visiting Venice to forget the death of their daughter, are enmeshed in a web of deception to a point where they can no longer trust their own senses. In *The House on the Strand*, Dick Kilmarth reaches the point at which hallucination becomes more real than reality. Like him, many of du Maurier's characters are as deceived about themselves as they are about others.

Du Maurier's interest in the tension between the sexes stemmed from turbulent and confused feelings that characterized her own relationships. Her writings on this conflict also mirrored many of the concerns of women of her day, especially women who had achieved independence without feeling quite comfortable with it. Her heroines frequently want to assert themselves but are afraid to take the risk. They defer to men whom they then resent.

The narrator of *Rebecca* is an example. Her lack of self-esteem is reflected in the fact that throughout the book she is known only as Mrs. de Winter, a name she shares with the first Mrs. de Winter, the legendary Rebecca. The second Mrs. de Winter is half her husband's age and thoroughly uncomfortable in his world. He is the wealthy, dashing lord of the manor while she is the shy, penniless orphan afraid of her own shadow. Here du Maurier is exploring the turmoil within a young girl who longs to feel liberated and equal but who cannot escape feeling trapped and inferior.

Other characteristics that account for du Maurier's enormous popularity are those commonly associated with the gothic novel, a term used to describe a type of novel that reached its peak in the novels of the Brontë sisters, especially Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). The common ingredients include a remote country house, a poor innocent young girl (usually a governess), a brooding and mysterious older man, and a sinister presence of some sort or other lurking in a remote part of the house. Although only *Rebecca* fits this mold, du Maurier makes use of the gothic atmosphere in so many of her other novels (*Jamaica Inn*, *Frenchman's*

*Creek*, *The King's General*, *My Cousin Rachel*) that the impression remains that she was mainly a writer of gothic romances. As such she inspired a whole generation of modern writers to do the same, and her influence continues to be felt in such writers as Mary Stewart, Mary Higgins Clark, and Ruth Rendell.

## REBECCA

**First published:** 1938

**Type of work:** Novel

*A wealthy widower marries a penniless girl and takes her to Manderley, where she is intimidated by the housekeeper and the mystery of Rebecca.*

*Rebecca* is the novel that made Daphne du Maurier famous and that remains her best-known work. *Rebecca* has been called a modern *Jane Eyre*, and there are certainly striking similarities between the two novels. In each there is a shy, poor, and rather plain heroine who takes up residence in a grand country house. Once there she is terror-

ized by strange goings-on, falls in love with the master of the house (an older man), and lives to see the house burned to the ground by a deranged woman. The differences are few but important. Du Maurier's heroine is not a governess but the second wife of a man whose tempestuous first wife died under questionable circumstances. The new wife's shyness is made

more painful when she compares herself with the exotic Rebecca.

In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester's first wife is alive but mad and stands in the way of his marrying Jane. In the du Maurier story, Rebecca is dead but her spirit haunts the halls of Manderley and puts a strain on the marriage between Maxim and his new wife. Throughout the novel the new wife is convinced that her husband is brooding over the death



of Rebecca. This misconception is reinforced by Mrs. Danvers, the sinister housekeeper who keeps Rebecca's boudoir exactly as it used to be. She does her best to poison the heroine's mind, even to the point of encouraging her to jump from a high window.

Maxim is distraught because the truth is that he killed Rebecca in a fit of rage, put her body in a boat, and scuttled the boat. The reader finds out later that Rebecca had deliberately goaded Maxim into killing her because she had just learned she had a terminal illness. The tension between Maxim and his young wife eases once this cloud of secrecy is lifted. Meanwhile, Mrs. Danvers, sensing defeat but unwilling to surrender, sets fire to Manderley and perishes in the conflagration, just as the mad wife does near the end of *Jane Eyre*.

Du Maurier said that not giving her heroine a name became a challenge to her in writing the novel. For readers it has remained the perfect way to suggest the heroine's low self-esteem, especially since the story is told through her eyes. Above all, however, is du Maurier's superb sense of atmosphere that, once established in the haunting opening lines, continues unflawed until the last chilling lines when the de Winters realize that the crimson glow in the sky is not the sunrise but Manderley in flames. Du Maurier's obsession with Cornwall can be felt in every line, and it is this total sense of place that gives *Rebecca* its magic. Du Maurier began writing the novel when she was in Egypt with her husband while he was stationed there. In an effort to shut out the stifling heat, the harsh light, and the teeming masses, she returned in her mind to Cornwall's chill mists and stormy seas, its craggy promontories, and its windswept beaches. The result was a modern but ageless love story—with a twist.

## THE HOUSE ON THE STRAND

**First published:** 1969

**Type of work:** Novel

*An unhappy husband uses drugs to escape, through time travel, to the fourteenth century and back.*

In *The House on the Strand*, Dick Kilmarth experiments with a hallucinogenic drug that transports him back to fourteenth century Cornwall, just before the onset of the Black Death. His initial encounter is so overwhelming that he knows he must repeat it, even though he suffers horrible aftereffects. The more he finds modern life unsatisfying, the more he is compelled to return to a time when people and events seemed bigger than life. Du Maurier cleverly manipulates the parallels between Dick's real and imaginary worlds so as to enlist sympathy for Dick's rejection of the real world. Dick, who is married to a shrewish woman named Vita, who has two loutish sons from a previous marriage, is thoroughly disenchanted with the emptiness and boredom of modern life in general.

In contrast, the life of the fourteenth century is given all the sweep and pageantry of a medieval melodrama. Du Maurier, with her flair for historical romance and her devotion to Cornwall, is able to bring that distant drama to life and give it such immediacy that it makes Dick's preference for those times quite understandable. Near the end of the story Dick chooses to return to the fourteenth century even though he knows that he will be returning to a time when England was about to be ravaged by plague. During his rational periods he is aware that his life in the fourteenth century is all a fantasy and that he is killing himself pursuing it, but he would rather live vicariously in the glorious past, even if it is a dream, than die of boredom in what is called reality. In the end, the choice is no longer his to make.

As in *Rebecca*, the psychological realism of the



DAPHNE DU MAURIER





novel gives credence to its extraordinary events. The novel develops some of du Maurier's favorite themes: the tension between the sexes, the power of the past over the present, and the deceptiveness of appearances. Added to this is du Maurier's boldness in writing such a controversial novel. In daring to write of mind-altering drugs, she could have expected to alienate her followers, offend the moralists, and be laughed at by the youth of the 1960's, who might have accused her of invading their turf. All these things happened, but the book sold well anyway.

### "THE BIRDS"

**First published:** 1952 (collected in *The Apple Tree: A Short Novel and Some Stories*, 1952)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A farmer and his family in Cornwall are terrorized by hordes of killer birds that mount a deadly attack on their isolated farmhouse.*

"The Birds," one of Daphne du Maurier's most chilling short stories, is in the collection *The Apple Tree*. The shock lies in the idea of birds as destroyers. People usually associate birds with things like freedom and beauty and music. However, in this story, du Maurier drew on her own experience with vicious seagulls. She imagines once-innocent creatures suddenly mutated into merciless killers bent on destroying humanity.

The story focuses on the heroic efforts of disabled farmer Nat Hocken to protect his family from the hordes of birds that relentlessly try to invade the family's cottage. Nat does odd jobs around the neighborhood, and on his way home one evening in early December, he notices that there are more birds around than usual and that they have become strangely aggressive. When he arrives home, he hears on the radio that all over England something has happened to the birds. "The flocks

of birds have caused dislocation in all areas," says the broadcaster, and there is something sinister in the word "dislocation," for it suggests that the order of nature has been broken and humanity has lost its dominion over the birds and beasts. When the government and the military admit that there is nothing they can do, Nat is forced to rely on himself to survive. It is survival of the fittest, and he knows who will win.

Birds peck at Nat's eyes one day, and he is viciously attacked by gulls the next. One day when the birds calm down a bit, Nat goes to check on his neighbors, only to find their mutilated bodies next to the telephone. That night, as the birds mount an attack, Nat works ceaselessly to plug up every access to the cottage as thousands of birds descend upon the house, breaking the windows and screaming down the chimney.

Finally, unable to resist any longer, Nat settles back and listens as even the tiniest of birds join in the final assault. As the end approaches, he wonders "how many millions of years were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them this instinct to destroy mankind with all the deft precision of machines."

In addition to the gradual layering of horrifying detail, du Maurier also heightens the effect of the story by focusing only on Nat Hocken and his family. Defenseless, alone, doomed, they seem to be the last people on earth—and perhaps they are.

### SUMMARY

In her fiction, Daphne du Maurier presents a world in which appearances are deceiving, events defy explanation, and essential mysteries go unresolved. Her superb storytelling skills have blinded critics to the fact that the truly frightening element in her fiction is not the superficial mystery but the menace just below the surface. Deception, illusion, and uncertainty are the furies that torment her characters. There is a rebel beneath du Maurier's romanticism.

Thomas Whissen

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What restrictions did Daphne du Maurier's early literary reputation impose on her later writing career?
- What did du Maurier gain by her custom of having her narrators ask so many questions?
- In *Rebecca*, was du Maurier doing more than exploiting the well-known turns in the plot of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)?
- To what extent was du Maurier's "The Birds" not just a provocation but a guide to the film directed by Alfred Hitchcock?
- Explain the "menace just below the surface" in du Maurier's fiction.

*Daphne du Maurier*

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# DUONG THU HUONG

**Born:** Thai Binh, Vietnam  
1947

*Internationally acclaimed by both the popular press and academic audiences, Duong is the most widely read literary figure from Vietnam since the Communist takeover of that country in 1975.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in central Vietnam in 1947, when that country was still a French colony, Duong Thu Huong (zhung tew huong) started her life with modest beginnings as the daughter of a school-teacher mother and a father who was a tailor and guerilla fighter for Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. As a teenager in the mid-1960's, she joined the Communist Party, serving as the leader of a Communist youth brigade that, in part, provided entertainment for Communist troops during the Vietnam War. She was one of only three persons in the brigade of forty to survive the experience. Forever committed to and involved with politics, she also voluntarily joined the Vietnamese army in its brief war against China in 1979; she was the first woman to serve in combat on the front lines of the conflict. She also was a war correspondent and wrote news releases about the war. After the war, she wrote and spoke on behalf of the government and the Communist cause. During this time she supported herself primarily by writing fiction and screenplays.

In the early 1980's, there was a major shift in her temperament and beliefs about the role of Communism in her country. She began to speak openly against corruption, bribery, chicanery, repression, and bureaucracy at public political events, as well as in her writings. During the decade she wrote three novels. The first two, *Hành trình ngày thơ ấu* (1985; journey in childhood) and *Bên kia bờ ảo vọng: Tiểu thuyết* (1988; *Beyond Illusions*, 2002), were not problematic for the government. In fact, at this time the government in Hanoi had called for writers in the country to comment about the nation's social, economic, and political problems.

However, when she published *Nhung thiên duong*

*mù: Tiểu thuyết* (1988; *Paradise of the Blind*, 1993), she ran into trouble with government censors and mainline Communists. While no one thought the work to be overtly anti-Communist or antigovernment propaganda, it was too revealing of problems in its nuances and undertones. The two major objections from the government seem to have been the subtle comments about the role of women, both in Vietnamese society and in a Communist-controlled country, and about the government's policy of land reform—the collective rather than private ownership of businesses and property. The work was extremely popular in Vietnam, where some forty thousand copies were sold before the novel was withdrawn and the government forbid it to be circulated. Ownership of the novel was declared illegal and punishable by imprisonment.

In addition, during the controversy about the novel, Duong committed a sin unpardonable by the Communist hierarchy, when she spoke openly for “pluralism,” meaning the recognition and legitimate involvement of political parties other than the Communist Party in the affairs of the nation. She also advocated for human rights in a manner that was unacceptable to the government. She was expelled from the Communist Party in 1989, and in April, 1991, she was arrested on fabricated charges and imprisoned without trial. Government officials accused her of having unsanctioned contacts with agents of foreign governments and of smuggling illegal documents out of the country. There was no substance to the charges, as Duong's activities had always been open and public. During her seven months in prison, Duong was recognized by Amnesty International and other organizations as a political prisoner. In addition, she was fired from her job as a screenwriter for the government-

sanctioned Vietnam Film Company. Previously, she had been awarded prizes for her work with the organization.

Upon her release from prison in 1991, she found herself the subject of international attention and curiosity. *Paradise of the Blind* had been critically acclaimed, but the government then banned all of her works in Vietnam. However, her work was recognized and honored by other countries. In 1992 and 1996, two of her novels were short-listed for a French literary prize, the Prix Femina; in France, *Paradise of the Blind* was so well received that she was also given the title Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. In 1992, she received a grant from the United States-based Hammet-Hellman Foundation. In 1995, she sent another novel, *Tiểu thuyết vô đề* (1991), to publishers in France and England; an English translation, *Novel Without a Name*, was published in 1995.

Duong's passport was revoked and other recriminations followed, primarily to prevent her from having contact with the outside world. Nevertheless, she was further honored with the International Dublin IMPAC Award in 1997, the Prince Claus Foundation Award in 1999, and the Grinzane Cavour Literary Award in 2005. In the spring of 2006, the Vietnamese government gave her permission to travel abroad, and she was interviewed by American novelist Robert Stone in New York City. That same year, she received the PEN-Novib Freedom of Expression Award.

In the early twenty-first century, Duong continued to write while in semiretirement in Hanoi, where she lived with her two children on a meager monthly pension from the government and the royalties from her work.

## ANALYSIS

Since Duong Thu Huong's novels were first translated into French, English, and other languages in the late 1980's, she has been by far the most widely read and acclaimed writer from her native Vietnam. The success of her works lies in her ability to successfully intertwine themes that are both personal and political. It is hard to escape the omnipresent historical and biographical elements of her books; yet it would be misleading to interpret her novels by giving too much attention to these matters. She has lived her life amid the back-

drop of the Vietnamese War; hence, this war is her subject matter. Similarly, the biographical elements of her life sometimes find their way into her fiction in heavy-handed ways. Nevertheless, the impetus of her efforts is neither historical nor biographical.

Of more importance are the political elements in her work, which are never far from the background of her plots and the lives of her characters. Originally, she used and developed her talents as a writer to promote the Communist cause in press releases from the front lines during the short Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. Her writings during the early 1980's were primarily her work for the Vietnam Film Company, a government organization.

However, by the time she wrote her first novel, *Hành trình ngày thơ ấu*, she had begun to expose weaknesses and failures of the Communist government after its takeover of Vietnam in 1975. She realized that the government, primarily because of its corruption and violations of human rights, was systematically making life worse for all citizens. In this first book, which is a novel of initiation, a twelve-year-old girl travels across the country to find her father, who is fighting in the war, to seek his help for a social problem—the abuse of one of her friends. The girl comes to see that justice cannot be found because of the war and the policies of the government, which are alluded to but not overtly condemned. Duong more forthrightly tackles this conflict between loyalty to government and loyalty to justice in her second work, *Beyond Illusions*, in which a young married couple is divided in the course of action for its life. Linh, the wife and Duong persona, is committed to doing what is right, despite the consequences. Her husband, Nguyen, on the other hand, betrays justice and human rights in order to secure favors for himself and to protect his family. Both novels were extremely popular in Vietnam during the 1980's, and hundreds of thousands of copies were sold.

With the publication of *Paradise of the Blind* in 1988, however, Duong came into serious trouble with the government. While she followed her usual method of criticizing the government by criticizing individual members of the government, her exposé of the weaknesses of land reform was not visibly directed at the corruption of individual Communist Party members so much as at the established policy of the entire government. Accord-



ingly, the work was banned in Vietnam, while becoming an international best-seller in Europe and North America. Readers will note that the comments about land reform in the novel are few in number and of little substance; nevertheless, the Communist government would not permit the novel's circulation.

In *Novel Without a Name*, Duong again increased the scope and magnanimity of her attack on the government by writing what is basically an antiwar novel, but of course the war is the American war in Vietnam. She came to question the purpose of removing the capitalists and democrats from South Vietnam when the result was increased economic disaster and the loss of human rights for all citizens, whether in North or South Vietnam. The novel is told from the point of view of a young soldier in the army who is fighting for North Vietnam and comes to understand the futility of his efforts, even after his country's victory. Duong creates another novel with a similar theme in *Luu Ly* (1997; *Memories of a Pure Spring*, 2000), which is the most biographical of her works and recalls many of her own experiences in Vietnam's wars against the United States and China.

Ostensibly, she left war and politics behind in *Chon vang* (1999; *No Man's Land*, 2005) by turning to the personal and internal conflicts of women. The main character, Mien, is happily married and living on a farm with her husband, when a previous husband whom she thought dead returns after an absence of fourteen years. Politics have not been completely omitted, however, as the returning husband represents the life that Mien could have had, in contrast to her current husband, who embodies the life she is living. In something of a national, disparate allegory, questioning what might have happened if South Vietnam had won the war, Duong suggests that things would be horrid, no matter which country won.

The bleakness and pessimism of the repeated themes of her work are abetted by the style of her prose. Many of her characters survive the atrocities of the war and its aftermath, but few are able to conquer or come even close to making peace with them. At times, she writes of Vietnam when life was war free and carefree, before the Communists and Americans wreaked havoc on the nation, and readers can find sentimentality in these depictions of a time when life was good. However, she becomes

less sentimental in depicting life during and after the war. While wartime is never good and people are victimized to the point of no return, many people do go on and find stability in their lives and in society. Duong's characters, however, are never able to do this.

Typically, her novels unfold in the same way. In straightforward prose, she records a series of episodic events punctuated and advanced by dialogue. Food, both its preparation and consumption, is discussed in great detail in her work, which shows the importance of food in Vietnamese society. Events are recorded from the points of view of two or three main characters, each of whom has a personal agenda that represents some political truth, policy, or ideology. Evil triumphs, though the good survive to suffer.

## PARADISE OF THE BLIND

**First published:** *Nhung thiên duong mù: Tiểu thuyết*, 1988 (English translation, 1993)

**Type of work:** Novel

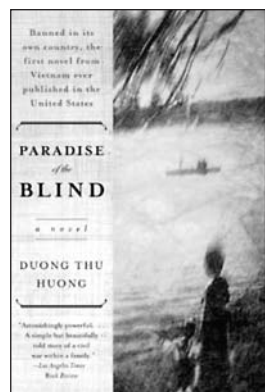
*Growing up in Vietnam in the 1980's, Hang is reared without any men, and her life is torn between two forceful and strong-willed women: her mother Que, who represents the failure of the Communists after the Vietnam War, and her Aunt Tam, who embodies the government that could and should have been.*

Even the title of Duong's third novel, *Paradise of the Blind*, is itself an attack on the Communist government which took over Vietnam after the country's war with the United States ended in 1975. The novel has no "paradise" but exists only as a dystopia, and not one of the characters is blind. The title refers to Communist leaders, who publicly spoke of and pretended to create what they called a "peasants' paradise" or a "workers' paradise," but were clearly failing in Vietnam, as they were in other Communist countries. There is no paradise; there are only blind people promoting a paradise based on a flawed political theory, which can never succeed.

Duong constructs this novel as a political allegory around the three main characters. Hang, the

young girl who is experiencing a coming-of-age, represents postwar Vietnam, and the two women who control her represent the political struggle occurring in Vietnam after the Vietnam War. Hang's mother, Que, is the traditional Vietnamese who has "lost" after acquiescing to the circumstances of the war by giving herself over to the will of the Communists. She does this literally in the plot when she sends her husband off into hiding. The other woman, Aunt Tam, the sister of Hang's exiled father, represents capitalism and democracy, but she also cannot succeed; she can only maneuver and buy into the corruption and bribery of the political and economic system in various ways as the plot unfolds.

At the end of the novel, Que loses her leg in a freak accident that is not her fault, and is left handicapped forever. Tam simply dies from hard work and her inability to make peace and survive within the Communist system. Both women spend their lives hating each other and maneuvering for the love and attention of Hang, and in so doing they destroy any chance Hang has for a successful, happy, and peaceful future. Such is the state of Vietnam.



Similarly, the two main male characters in the novel are also allegorical figures. Hang's father, Ton, is an honorable, French-educated, intelligent, handsome, and resourceful schoolteacher. He is the French-American male power figure who would change the country's government into a democracy with freedom, human rights, and capitalism. In contrast with him, his brother-in-law, Que's brother Chinh, is a Communist who espouses a great ideology but behaves with little morality. He fails to take care of his family, and he ruins Que's chance for happiness by forcing her to drive her own husband, Ton, into exile in the north. Here, Ton takes refuge among the Hmong, a traditional Vietnamese tribal minority, who take him in and provide shelter and safety. Ton eventually kills himself after a failed attempt to take care of his wife and daughter. His death represents the passing possi-

bility of Vietnam's political identity and success as a Western-style democracy.

Uncle Chinh, the Communist character, turns into the villain of the novel, with little or no goodness to his credit. Living in Russia, he survives there as something of a lackey and servant to foreign students at a university. After Hang completes her college education, paid for entirely by Aunt Tam, she, too, visits Russia as a "guest worker," where she is summoned to see her uncle. Here he betrays her and leaves her in a room with a group of Russian men, who presumably rape her after he exits, though the narrative does not explicitly record this. Though absent from most of Hang's daily life, Chinh is always somewhere in the background, causing trouble, and he surfaces only when he needs something from Tam, which usually turns out to be the money that she has earned, penny by penny, as a street vendor. Duong's meaning is entirely clear: Uncle Chinh represents the greed and corruption of the Communist government.

Duong does not provide a chronological narrative of all of these events. Rather, the novel begins late in the action, when Hang is living in Russia and is summoned to visit Uncle Chinh. Hang visits him out of obedience to the traditional Vietnamese values of families, but she does so to her own detriment. Again, the political commentary shows how following the ways of the past will damn Vietnam as effectively as trying to make Communism work or resurrecting the ideals of the French and Americans. As Hang travels within Russia to find her uncle, Duong provides numerous flashbacks of Hang's childhood in order to reveal the political intrigue surrounding the main character.

Vietnamese government censors objected to this novel, but their concern was probably not with its underlying political allegory. In her first two novels, Duong had written of the problems in the country, and her Communist characters did not fare well, but she was not subjected to censorship. However, in the first chapters of *Paradise of the Blind*, she explicitly focuses on one particular aspect of Communist ideology: land reform. Duong reveals several important ways in which everyone was victimized by this so-called reform and how no one benefited from it. It is noteworthy that the government itself gave up on land reform about the same time that the novel appeared. The Communists were evidently willing to change a misguided

policy, but they were not willing for their policy to be publicly criticized in Duong's novel.

### SUMMARY

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Duong Thu Huong has been the most successful novelist to come from Vietnam, attracting readers both at home and abroad. As one who initially promoted Communism and fought it in two wars herself, she is uniquely qualified to expose the weaknesses of the failed system, which manifested themselves after the Vietnam War. All of her work is political, though she seldom directly attacks her country's government as she does in *Paradise of the Blind*. The international attention her novels have received, as well as the numerous awards bestowed on them, proves her ability to write books that are not only political but also literary.

Carl Singleton

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- The Communist government of Vietnam banned Duong Thu Huong's book *Paradise of the Blind* shortly after its publication. Find specific instances in the text which would have been objectionable to the Communist censors.
- The women in *Paradise of the Blind* are all subservient to the wishes and commands of the men in their families. Show how this is true for the three main characters—Hang, Tam, and Que.
- Find several instances in the novel where capitalism and free enterprise are in contrast to the principles of Communism as a political theory.
- Look closely at chapter 6 in *Paradise of the Blind*, in which the families celebrate the most important holiday on the Vietnamese calendar, Tet. What are the particular traditions, such as food, that are part of the celebration?
- The novel has three main settings: Hanoi, the countryside village, and Russia. How do the respective settings abet meaning and character development?
- Food is central to life and culture in Vietnam. Find episodes where the preparation and consumption of food reveal this centrality.
- The author uses flashbacks throughout the narrative not only to recall events from Hang's childhood but also to explain events before her birth. Locate instances of this and speculate about why Duong did not provide a straightforward, chronological narrative.
- At the end of the novel, translators have provided "A Glossary of Vietnamese Food and Cultural Terms" in the English translation. Tie specific entries in the glossary to occurrences in the plot.

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The New Press

## MARGUERITE DURAS

**Born:** Gia Dinh, French Indochina (now in Vietnam)  
April 4, 1914

**Died:** Paris, France  
March 3, 1996

*Duras, recognized early in her career for experimenting successfully with form and image, contributed largely to the discussion of point of view in fiction as well as film.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Marguerite Duras (dew-RAH) was born Marguerite Donnadiou on April 4, 1914, in Gia Dinh, near Saigon, French Indochina (now Vietnam), the youngest of three children. Her two brothers, Pierre and Paulo, shared much of the deprivation and adventure of her childhood. The family's fortunes changed radically after the death of their father, Henri Donnadiou, a professor of mathematics, in 1918. After her father's death, her mother, Marie LeGrand, kept the family in French Indochina, moving in 1924 to Sadeck and then to Vinhlong, where she taught at a school for Asian children. That same year she bought property on the Mekong River, hoping to run a profitable farm, but the land flooded after every planting season, wiping out all of the family's work.

These childhood years in French Indochina contributed to themes and characters that recur in Duras's works. The rain forests, for example, take on symbolic, terrifying, and seductive power in *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969; *Destroy, She Said*, 1970). As a child, Duras ran and played in the rain forests, hunting for birds and small game to bring back to her family to eat. Her freedom in the forest is consistently linked to the fear of the creatures in it as well as the necessity to return to the farm. The flooding of the farm apparently had a significant

effect on Duras because floods and engulfings recur in her works.

Duras's brothers also appear in her novels, most notably in *L'Amant* (1984; *The Lover*, 1985). Her novels recall how her brother Pierre, her mother's favored child, tormented her and her other brother, Paulo. Duras's close relationship with Paulo, the younger of the brothers, appears overtly in *The Lover*. Despite being the youngest child in the family, Duras tried to protect the slightly retarded Paulo from Pierre. Another experience reflected in her works is her mental breakdown at the age of twelve, which led to her fascination with insanity. The breakdown of the female protagonist in her screenplay *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) reflects this integration of mental stability with the character's development. Duras's own assessment of life and work appears in a letter: "True writers have no life at all. . . . My books are truer than myself."

Duras credits her becoming a writer to the appearance of Elizabeth Striedter, an administrator's wife, in her family's small town in 1922, when Duras was eight years old. Striedter was accompanied to town by rumors that her young lover had killed himself when she left him. In interviews, Duras has acknowledged her fascination with Striedter's dark power.

When Duras was seventeen or eighteen (Duras provides conflicting information and other sources do not agree), she and her family returned to France. She studied law and political science in Paris while her family returned to Indochina. In 1939, she married Robert Antelme; they were both active in the French Resistance during World War II.



The war years shaped Duras's later life and work. She lost a child at birth, as do several of her fictional characters. Her brother Paulo died in Saigon; a brother's death is a part of the narrator's crisis in *The Lover*. Duras also met Dionys Mascolo, her second husband and the father of her son, Jean, during her work with the French Resistance. In 1943, her first novel, *Les Impudents* (the immodest ones), was published, at which time she took the name Duras. In 1944, the same year her second novel, *La Vie tranquille* (the quiet life), was published, Antelme was arrested by the Germans and deported to Dachau, a German concentration camp. After the liberation, Mascolo and François Mitterrand (later the French prime minister) secured the release of Antelme, who was skeletal and desperately ill. His experience and Duras's role in nursing him back to health indelibly imprinted human cruelty and human hope in the face of such barbarism on her psyche.

From her first publication until she worked on *Moderato cantabile* (1958; English translation, 1960), Duras described her writing process as similar to "the way people go to the office, every day, peacefully. . . . With *Moderato*, it wasn't as calm. And then after May, 1968, with *Détruire*, it wasn't like that at all anymore." Duras wrote *Destroy, She Said* in a matter of days, making her "really frightened for the first time." Duras often noted her feeling of being out of control within the writing process itself.

Duras became a controversial figure in France in the 1960's. She welcomed controversy with such acts as dropping her membership in the Communist Party and speaking about a woman who murdered her child. Duras often was interviewed on French television programs and wrote frequently for French magazines, contributing to the debate on social issues and literature. Suffering from asthma and the effects of alcoholism, Duras was hospitalized three times between 1980 and 1985. The longest and most serious of her hospital stays occurred in 1988, when she was being treated for asthma and went into a coma for five months. After she regained consciousness, she remained in the hospital for an additional three months. She received a tracheotomy, which involved placing a permanent breathing passage in her throat.

Duras identified three main fixtures around which she organized her life: love, alcohol, and writing. Her productiveness as a writer and film-

maker accompanied a life that was often filled with excessive desire and drink. She died of throat cancer at the age of eighty-one and was buried in Cimetière du Montparnasse in Paris under a tombstone marked only "M.D."

## ANALYSIS

Duras's artistic output includes novels, screenplays, and stage plays. Her third published novel, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950; *The Sea Wall*, 1952, also *A Sea of Troubles*, 1953), provides evidence of her habit of using a central scene, variations on which are repeated throughout the work. *The Sea Wall* tells the story of a widowed mother who buys a piece of land that is regularly flooded by the Pacific Ocean. The image of the deluge dominates the novel and the lives of the widow and her two children.

A short story, "Le Boa" (1954; "The Boa," 1984), also centers on vividly described scenes, in this instance juxtaposing one of a boa constrictor at the zoo devouring a chicken with another of the body of Mademoiselle Barbet, a seventy-five-year-old woman who manages a boarding school. The unnamed female narrator observes both scenes and provides a perspective for the reader. Both the flooding image of *The Sea Wall* and the narrative eye of "The Boa" suggest the passive nature of woman, of body, at the mercy of natural forces of flood, menarche, imagination, and desire.

Duras's works are often studied for their portrayals of women. Her best-known work, *The Lover*, explores the narrator's relationship with her mother and with her Chinese lover. The novel often portrays women as passive objects, showing the teenaged narrator carried along with the current of the events of her life, as symbolized by the objects she watches float down the Mekong River. The women in *Destroy, She Said* and *La Pluie d'été* (1990; *Summer Rain*, 1992) operate outside conventional morality and expectations. Alissa in *Destroy, She Said* introduces two men she is with, separately at different times, as her husband. The mother in *Summer Rain* tells her children a story of a love affair on a train.

Duras's fiction often recounts lives on the margins of a culture. *Summer Rain*, for instance, focuses on a couple who settle in Vitry, France, and then have seven children, rearing them on money provided by the government, entering the life of the

town only to drink with others. Isolation in this novel includes not only the family and the townspeople but also the children's separation from their parents. The children often stay in a shanty on the back of the property rather than in the house. The parents often keep the children out of the house during the day, leaving the older children to care for the younger ones. The patterns of separation lead a reader to see the novel as allegory, suggesting a pattern of colonizers keeping the indigenous population dependent but not nurturing that population. A teacher mediates between family and culture when he notes the incipient genius of Ernesto, the eldest child.

Other patterns in her work suggest the influence of Ernest Hemingway, most notably in her dialogue. *Destroy, She Said* consists almost entirely of dialogue, and the novel explores the developing relationship among four people at a resort. As is the case in Hemingway's dialogue, silence and allusive exchanges elucidate the conflicts between characters. As in other works, in *Destroy, She Said* Duras explores the female as object, in this case Elisabeth Alion, whom two men watch through a window every morning and afternoon.

The visual nature of Duras's writing lent itself to her becoming a filmmaker and to the frequent adaption of her novels as films or plays. Duras began writing plays in an antiplay tradition, placing bits of her characters' lives directly before the audience in situations that often contain little plot structure and no clear beginning, middle, or end. Duras's stage personages, despite their frequent loneliness, boredom, and depression, inevitably find some hope in their lives, some triumph.

One of Duras's first plays, *Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise* (pr., pb. 1960; *The Viaducts of Seine-et-Oise*, 1967), tells a story based on a true incident that was reported in the press. An elderly couple murdered and then dismembered a crippled cousin who had lived with them for twenty-seven years. Accounts of this crime attracted great public attention, and the public was intrigued by the lack of animosity and conflict within the home before the murder occurred. Duras's two-act play suggests that the couple killed the cousin to verify their own bland lives. The old couple had been public servants, working for the state-owned railway company, with only retirement to anticipate. Within the play they have only moments of understanding that they are alive,

communicating briefly with others. The stultifying effects of industrialized life are at the heart of Duras's exploration of the case. This play reveals human motivation in ways that challenge conventional morality.

Duras also explores what it means to be alive in her screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour*. The film gained an admiring audience, receiving the International Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1959 and the New York Film Critics Award in 1960. The film increased her profile internationally and enhanced her reputation as an artist. *Hiroshima mon amour* explores a relationship between an unnamed French actress and an unnamed Japanese architect, opening with the lovers' embracing bodies filling the screen. The bodies' texture changes from smooth to sandlike, suggesting mutability even before the shift to scenes of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb was dropped. As a backdrop to the juxtaposed scenes of the lovers and the destroyed city, the lovers converse. The woman's voice repeats, "I saw them" as she identifies places (the hospital, the museum, the streets); the man continually replies that the woman "saw nothing at Hiroshima." Further contrasts between the lovers are represented within the pastoral scenes of Nevers, France, where the young woman had an affair with a German soldier who was killed by Resistance fighters just before the liberation. The trees, grass, and streams of Nevers provoke the viewer to contrast these pastoral images with the rubble and burned victims of Hiroshima. The lovers each represent cities: she, Nevers; he, Hiroshima.

Her juxtaposition of Hiroshima's victims with the lovers' intense relationship allows Duras to explore the moral questions of their lives. The couple flouts convention; both are married to others. The war stories of each one become their link.

Duras's novels, screenplays, and stage plays often reflect her politics. Her experience with the horrors of war is evident in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Duras is not, however, simply a political writer; her contribution to the novel places her within the New Novelist group. New Novels explored the free flow of time in narration and the use of silence. Other practitioners of the New Novel include Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Duras contributed to the novel and to film, often exploring a single scene or image from a variety of perspectives and meanings.

## THE LOVER

**First published:** *L'Amant* 1984 (English translation, 1985)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Frenchwoman remembers her awakening to desire in a relationship forbidden by class and racial prejudices.*

In her short and powerful novel, which won the Prix Goncourt in France in 1984, Duras recounts the largely autobiographical story of her family's struggles in Southeast Asia. The major characters of the book are the narrator, whose obsessive remembrances of her days as a high school student in Saigon center the novel; the Chinese lover, whose father prevents him from marrying the narrator; the narrator's mother, whose favoritism for her older son and alternating encouragement and abuse of the narrator undermine the family; the older brother, who terrorizes his younger brother and sister while never finishing the school courses his mother arranges for him; and the younger brother, whose death spurs the narrator to attempt suicide.

Central themes of the book include memory and separation. Memory provides the frame for the novel, which is the recollection of a middle-aged Frenchwoman. One image that combines these themes is the photograph. The narrator describes how the mother has the family go to the photographer, always having pictures of the family group but not taking pictures of "Vinh Long . . . of the garden, the river, the straight tamarind-lined avenues of the French conquest, not of the house, nor of our institutional white-washed bedrooms with the big black-and-gilt iron beds, lit up like classrooms by the red streetlights, the green metal lampshades."

The narrator separates herself from her mother by describing what the mother does not consider worthy of recording; the narrator recounts a scene more vivid than the posed family portraits for which she sat. The mother, however, continues to

show the family photographs to her cousins in France long after the children have stopped corresponding with the cousins. The narrator sees grace in her mother's practice of showing the photographs: "She sees everything through to the bitter end without ever dreaming she might give up. . . . It's in this valor, human, absurd, that I see true grace." The narrator sees valor in what can also be perceived as a fruitless or pointless action and loves her mother as a separate self with true grace.

The obsessive remembrance in *The Lover* centers on the scene of the teenage narrator riding the ferry as she crosses the Mekong River. The scene is described in fragments and explanations of those fragments throughout the novel: "I'm fifteen and a

half. Crossing the river. Going back to Saigon I feel I'm going on a journey." Her explanations then address her clothes, her hat, her shoes, her expression, and the black limousine in which the lover awaited her. Crossing the river leads her to view herself as an object in a remembered scene, as one in a photograph.

Her point of view shifts from first to third person, exemplifying the narrator's feeling of separation and disjunction. She often objectifies herself, referring to her body as a perceived quantity, not as a living self: "Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire."

Publication of *The Lover* marked a resurgence of interest in Duras's work. A film version was released in 1992, achieving on the screen much of the tone of the novel and making good use of the image of the young narrator on the ferry, crossing the Mekong, as a unifying device. Both the novel and the film generate consideration on issues such as identity and perspective.



## THE WAR: A MEMOIR

**First published:** *Le Douleur*, 1985 (English translation, 1986)

**Type of work:** Memoir

*Duras documents waiting for and then caring for her husband, Robert Antelme, upon his return from Dachau.*

In her introductory notes for *The War: A Memoir*, Duras informs the reader that she found the memoir in her cupboards and has no recollection of having written it; she simply recognizes her own handwriting. The memoir is a powerful statement of the pain of waiting, loving, and enduring.

During the war years, Duras struggled between conflicting passions for her husband and for her soon-to-be lover, Dionys Mascolo. Both of these men were working within the French Resistance, and she documents the tension she felt as she met with a German representative who was her source of information about her husband's fate. The complete memoir of the exchanges between Duras and the German official is a separate section of *The War*.

*The War* tells of the ways in which Duras survived as she waited. One strategy she used to keep her sanity was to dedicate all of her energy to her work. She documented refugees and deportees as they came through Paris, all the time seeking news of her husband. She tormented herself with visions of her husband shot and decaying in a ditch, a vision she knew was altogether possible, in fact probable.

One powerful and important message within the memoir is the insight offered into human nature. The French after liberation were not, to paraphrase Duras, satiated with violence; many sought satisfaction through making the "enemy" suffer. At a center in which she worked she saw

A prisoner who's a priest [bringing] a German orphan back to the center. He held him by the hand, was proud of him, showed him off, explained how he'd found him and that it wasn't the poor child's fault. The women looked askance at him. He was abrogating to himself the right to forgive, to absolve, already . . . without any knowledge of the hatred that filled everyone, a hatred terrible yet pleasant, consoling, like a belief in God.

The group of Frenchwomen at this place ignored the child and spat on the priest, who, Duras judges, "was right, but in a language the women didn't understand." The memoir documents a people's response to war and hatred. The experience itself, as Duras often notes, defies language.

As in other remembrances of concentration camp victims, the extent of illness and the astounding capacity for survival mark the reader indelibly. The descriptions of hands transparent in the light and bony legs that look like crutches make the camps real. Duras's unintentional cruelty in having a dessert in the house when Robert first returns haunts the reader. Robert had to wait for weeks to eat real food because his internal organs were not supported well enough to hold it. Duras notes that the survivor was once more being forbidden to eat, just as he was in the concentration camp.

Duras said that she does not remember having written the memoir; readers will be unable to forget it.



## "THE CRUSHED NETTLE"

**First published:** "L'Ortie brisée," 1985  
(collected in *The War: A Memoir*, 1986)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In newly liberated Paris, a factory worker offers understanding to a stranger.*

"The Crushed Nettle" recounts a confrontation between a factory worker, Lucien, who is having his lunch, and a stranger who wears a light-colored suit and smokes English cigarettes. The story centers on two important symbols: the nettles and a hole. This story contains not only a symbol system typical of Duras's work but also an important treatment of silence and the inherent tensions of conversation.

In the beginning of the story, the nettles are de-

scribed as growing in the spaces between the paving stones and “against the fences around the wooden houses: an invasion.” The nettles claimed the spaces between the paving stones that had been brought there in years past, the city government apparently having abandoned the idea of paving the road. The nettles are also providing a feeding spot for the flies in the heavy and warm summer air. This backdrop frames Lucien, the stranger, the ten-year-old boy, and his baby brother, around noon, near a dump.

The road that is not completely paved leads to a hole “overgrown with a tangle of old iron and nettles.” The juxtaposition of nature and civilization is brought to the reader’s attention with the explanation, “The city ends where the weeds and old iron begin. The war has left it behind.”

Duras suggests that the stranger in the light-colored suit is like the city that has been left behind. The stranger is separate from the world of pain—of nettles—that is familiar to Lucien and the children. Duras repeats her description of the background sounds: “From the shacks there comes the sound of crockery, voices, the squalling of children, mothers shouting, no words.” The background noise of no words matches the difficulty in communicating experienced by the stranger and Lucien. The moment of crisis in the story occurs after Lucien explains that he lost part of his finger; the stranger (after an interruption in the conversation by the ten-year-old boy) expresses sympathy with Lucien and says, “And you went back to the same job.” The attempt to understand the life of Lucien leads the stranger into “speaking mechanically, of being silent, instead of dying. He has something shut up inside himself that he can’t say, can’t reveal. Because he doesn’t know what it is. He doesn’t know how one speaks about death. He is confronted with himself just as the man and the little boy are.”

The stranger has been drawn to this road leading to a hole and has struggled to make a connection with Lucien. Duras’s commentary on the connection consists of describing the stranger’s grasping a nettle and crushing it in his hand, painful for him, but having very little impact on the whole clump of nettles.

## HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

**First produced:** 1959 (first published, 1960; English translation, 1961)

**Type of work:** Screenplay

*In postwar Japan, an unnamed couple meet and share a brief affair against the nuclear fallout of Hiroshima and other war memories.*

Several years after the nuclear attack on Hiroshima at the end of World War II, Duras presents the story of a French woman and a Japanese man engaged in a twenty-four-hour love affair in *Hiroshima, mon amour*. Duras was specifically chosen by French New Wave cinema director Alain Resnais to write a screenplay for a story of people affected by war. He had originally been asked to produce a documentary on the nuclear destruction in this city, but he was concerned he would produce another Holocaust piece similar to his film *Nuit et brouillard* (1955; *Night and Fog*). In response to his request, Duras worked with him to create a film that won major prizes at the Cannes and New York film festivals.

In a five-part saga of the couple’s physical and psychological intimacy, Duras creates a poignant story of love and loss with unnamed protagonists set against the reconstruction of Hiroshima in the 1950’s and the horrors of the 1945 attack. She brings added dimensions to the concepts of human interaction and communication by using a flashback technique (amplified by Resnais’s cinematography) to recount the woman’s affair as a teenager with a young German soldier in Vichy France and her subsequent ostracism and mental breakdown. The reality of life in postwar Japan, where cultures continue to clash, is juxtaposed against the romanticism of war-torn lovers, or any couple whose dreams are never destined to be fulfilled.

The couple meet when the woman comes to Japan to act in a film about peace. This meeting takes place before the story opens, as they are already intimately involved in the opening shots. The camera scans their bodies as the texture of their skin turns from smoothness to an ashlike quality. With this technique, Resnais and Duras set the scene for two personal stories affected by larger issues. Duras



draws on her personal experiences and hardships in the French Resistance during World War II and when her husband almost died at Dachau.

The story continues in several venues, including the hotel room, a café, a railroad station, and the memorial park dedicated to those lost in the bombing. In each location the couple comes together either mentally or physically and then is pulled apart by memories, described in a stream-of-consciousness narration through dialogue and visual images. The dialogue is brief and often truncated with flashbacks substituting for verbal description. Eventually the lovers must part and live their lives in separate places. They identify each other only by their respective locations, Hiroshima and Nevers, France.

The screenplay (and film) is more meditative than linear in its storytelling. The settings of a modern Japanese city and a rural town in France serve as symbols for the characters—an architect, who is representative of the new Japan, and an actress,

who is still reconstructing her life after her wartime trauma. This story is about the impact of memory on individuals and was one of the first French New Wave films to make innovative use of flashbacks. Duras uses her war experiences in a creative way to convey the far-reaching effects of conflict.

### SUMMARY

Marguerite Duras, a highly acclaimed writer in various genres, put French Indochina on the map of modern world literature. Her understanding of the sensual, the corrupt, the futile, and the amoral is transmitted through her writings in a series of vivid images. These images raise the particular—a girl on a ferry or a flooded field, for example—toward the symbolic. Such images, often originating in Duras's personal experience, may serve as metaphors for the larger historical and societal events that form the context and the backdrop to the lives of her characters.

*Janet T. Palmer; updated by Dolores A. D'Angelo*

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*Abahn Sabana David*, 1970

*L'Amour*, 1971

*India Song: Texte-théâtre-film*, 1973 (English translation, 1976)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Marguerite Duras incorporate her experiences in World War II into her characterizations?
- How does memory and recall function in Duras's plot development?
- How does the theme of loss affect the actions of the characters in Duras's novels?
- The impact of outside events is important in many of Duras's works. Describe two events, natural or human-made, which affect the events of the plot in her novels or plays.
- Describe how the complexities of love are used as a force of change in Duras's works.

Marguerite Duras

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*L'Amant*, 1984 (*The Lover*, 1985)  
*Les Yeux bleus, cheveux noirs*, 1987 (*Blue Eyes, Black Hair*, 1987)  
*Emily L.*, 1987 (English translation, 1989)  
*La Pluie d'été*, 1990 (*Summer Rain*, 1992)  
*L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, 1991 (*The North China Lover*, 1992)  
*Yann Andrea Steiner*, 1992 (*Yann Andrea Steiner: A Memoir*, 1993)

SHORT FICTION:

*Des journées entières dans les arbres*, 1954 (*Days in the Trees*, 1967)  
*L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, 1980 (*The Man Sitting in the Corridor*, 1991)  
*L'Homme atlantique*, 1982 (*The Atlantic Man*, 1993)  
*La Pute de la côte Normande*, 1986 (*The Slut of the Normandy Coast*, 1993)  
*Two by Duras*, 1993 (includes *The Slut of the Normandy Coast* and *The Atlantic Man*)

DRAMA:

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*Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise*, pr., pb. 1960 (*The Viaducts of Seine-et-Oise*, 1967)  
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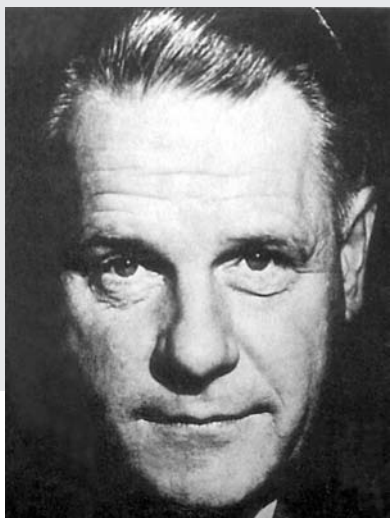
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## LAWRENCE DURRELL

**Born:** Julundur, India  
February 27, 1912

**Died:** Sommières, France  
November 7, 1990

*Durrell was a major experimental British novelist who sought to fuse Western notions of time and space with Eastern metaphysics.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Lawrence George Durrell (DUR-uhl) was born on February 27, 1912, in Julundur in northern India, near Pakistan and Tibet. His Irish father, Lawrence Samuel Durrell, and his English mother, Louisa Florence Dixie, had also been born in India. This mix of nationalities marked Durrell's creative imagination. He would claim in later years that he had "a Tibetan mentality."

Durrell's "nursery-rhyme happiness" came to an end when he was shipped to England at age eleven to be formally educated. The immediate discomfort he felt in England he attributed to its lifestyle, which he termed "the English death." He explained: "English life is really like an autopsy. It is so, so dreary." Deeply alienated, he refused to adjust himself to England and resisted the regimentation of school life, eventually refusing to pass university exams.

Instead, he resolved to be a writer. At first he had difficulty finding his voice in words, either in verse or in fiction. Eventually, he invented a pseudonym, Charles Norden, and produced two novels, *Pied Piper of Lovers* (1935) and *Panic Spring* (1937), for the mass market.

Two fortunate events occurred in 1935 that changed the course of his career. First, he persuaded his mother, siblings, and wife, Nancy Myers, to move to Corfu, Greece, to live more economically and to escape the English winter. Life in

Greece was a revelation; Durrell felt it reconnected him to India. While in Greece, he began working on what may be his greatest accomplishment as a writer, *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957-1960; 1962). Second, Durrell chanced upon Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and wrote Miller a fan letter. Thus began a forty-five-year friendship and correspondence based on their love of literature, their fascination with the Far East, and their comradeship in the face of personal and artistic setbacks. In their early letters, Miller praised Durrell and urged him not to compromise his artistic standards and give into his publisher's demands to change portions of *The Black Book* (1938), the work on which Durrell was then focused. Durrell followed Miller's advice and stood firm.

After six idyllic years in Corfu and Athens, Durrell and his wife were forced to flee Greece in 1941, just ahead of the advancing Nazi army. They settled in Alexandria, Egypt. Durrell got a job as a press attaché in the British Information Office. Ostensibly working, Durrell was in reality closely observing the assortment of sights, sensations, and people that wartime Alexandria, a crossroads of the East and West, had to offer.

In 1945, divorced from his wife and "liberated from . . . [his] Egyptian prison," Durrell was "free at last to return to Greece." He spent two years in Rhodes as director of public relations for the Dodocanese Islands and met the woman who was to become his second wife, Eve Cohen.

Durrell returned to the Mediterranean in 1952, hoping to find the serenity in which to write. He bought a stone house in Cyprus and earned a living

teaching English to Cypriots. During that time period, peace proved elusive. War broke out among the Cypriot Greeks who desired union with Greece, the British (who were still attempting to control Cyprus as a crown colony), and the Turkish Cypriots (who favored partition). Durrell, by this time, had left teaching and was working as the British public relations officer in Nicosia. He found himself caught between the warring factions and even became a target for terrorists. *Bitter Lemons* (1957) is Durrell's account of these troubled years.

While in Cyprus, Durrell resumed writing *The Alexandria Quartet*, finally completing the four volumes in England. The series was published between 1957 and 1960 and was a critical and commercial success. Durrell received recognition as an author of international stature.

After being forced out of his beloved Greece, Durrell finally settled in Sommières, in the south of France. He bought an old mansion and for the next thirty-five years produced two more cycles of novels: *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, comprising *Tunc* (1968) and *Nunquam* (1970), and *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-1985; 1992). Neither of these cycles achieved the critical and popular success of *The Alexandria Quartet*. Durrell continued writing poetry, and his *Collected Poems, 1931-1974* appeared in 1980.

Durrell married two more times. He wed his third wife, Claude-Marie Vincendon, in 1961. He was devastated when she died of cancer in 1967. His fourth marriage, to Ghislaine de Boysson, began in 1973. His later years were darkened by the suicide of his daughter, Sappho-Jane, in 1985. Durrell died on November 7, 1990.

## ANALYSIS

Lawrence Durrell's goal in writing is to "sum up in a sort of metaphor the cosmology of a particular moment in which we are living." He is a metaphysical writer who, through his characters, asks philosophical questions such as, What is the nature of reality? How does the artist describe it in words? What is the right way to live as an artist and as a human being?

When Durrell's perspective on reality is considered, the reader must first take into account his origins in India. Throughout his life, Durrell recalled his "childhood dream of Tibet" with great nostalgia:

If you live in a Buddhist country, it is so extraordinary. You wake up without being afraid of your neighbor, as you do in the countries we inhabit. The whole of nature seems permeated by a sense of harmless good will, and it opens a field for self-development which is not accessible in a country where you have very rigid, theologically oriented people with a national ethos that's repressive or restrictive in any way.

Drawing on these childhood memories and his readings in contemporary physics, Durrell claims that the cosmology of the mid-twentieth century can be found in a blend of Western physics with Eastern metaphysics, which he says "are coming to a point of confluence." These notions are explained in *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, which Durrell published in 1952.

In *A Key to Modern British Poetry*, Durrell begins by looking at Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, whom he calls the two major architects of modern Western consciousness. Einstein is significant because he "torpedoed the old Victorian material universe" and Freud because he "torpedoed the idea of the stable ego." The discoveries of Einstein and Freud, occurring in nearly the same time period, unlocked the secrets of the "universe outside man, and the universe inside." Einstein, and the physicists who followed him, in exploring the universe outside humankind, discarded the notion that the smallest unit of matter is the particle. They proved, instead, that "particles" sometimes are better thought of as waves. Durrell translates this discovery into human terms: At times people are conscious of themselves as individuals, but if they accept the fact of the continuum that exists in the melding of time and space, then people "may perhaps form ingredients of a single continuous stream of life."

In Durrell's view, Freud's discovery of the universe inside humankind parallels Einstein's investigations into the world outside. Studying hysterics in the 1890's, Freud noticed how under hypnosis they were able to recall painful experiences of which their waking, conscious minds were unaware. Freud hypothesized that there was an area of the mind beyond consciousness; he called it the unconscious, and, according to Durrell, that is "how the idea of the splitting of the psyche first started." Durrell, like D. H. Lawrence before him,



rejected “the old stable ego of character” in favor of characterization that is more amorphous and ambiguous. As Balthazar in *The Alexandria Quartet* says: “Each psyche is really an ant-hill of opposing predispositions. Personality as something with fixed attributes is an illusion.”

If space and time are relative and the human personality is not fixed, the cosmology of the age needs to reflect these uncertainties. The closest equivalent philosophical system, in Durrell’s view, can be found in Eastern philosophies. According to Buddhism, once the ego stops its selfish cravings, it enters a state of oneness with the universe. Durrell calls this state a “field,” which is the spiritual equivalent of the field concept in physics. Durrell believes that the unity and interrelatedness of matter in the physical world can be applied to the spiritual realm as well: “Phenomena may be individuals carrying on separate existences in space and time, but in the deeper reality beyond space and time we may be all members of one body.” Durrell has a name for this deeper reality; he calls it the Heraldic Reality.

Durrell’s entire literary output—his poetry, novels, and travel writings—can be seen as a quest to enter this exalted realm. Many of Durrell’s major characters, such as Darley, Pursewarden, and Clea in *The Alexandria Quartet*, Constance and Blanford in *The Avignon Quintet*, and the narrative voice of *Prospero’s Cell* (1945), are heroes and heroines on a quest to transform their lives. As they proceed in their quest, they face obstacles. They sometimes realize that they have set off in the wrong direction. As the narrator of *The Black Book* says: “There is only trial and error on a journey like this, and no signposts.”

The people that Durrell’s modern hero encounters are no help, either. They also have no recognizable signposts to their personalities. When Justine in *The Alexandria Quartet* looks at her multifaceted reflections in a dressmaker’s mirror, she asks: “Why should not people show more than one profile at a time?”

The quests on which Durrell’s characters embark do not exactly follow the traditional pattern of the Western hero. Instead, these journeys more closely correspond to the movement of the soul in reincarnation. Even when Durrell began his writing career in the 1930’s, he had this pattern in mind. The first draft of *Justine* (1957) was entitled

*The Book of the Dead*. *The Avignon Quintet* also deals with death. In an interview, Durrell noted the importance of this subject: “The basic trauma, the basic neurosis” in human life is death. If one can get “on top of it” by facing its reality and also by subduing the “recalcitrant ego,” then one can achieve “celestial amnesia, which is antiegoism.” One then ends up “swimming in the continuum,” another word for the Heraldic Reality.

## PROSPERO’S CELL

**First published:** 1945

**Type of work:** Memoir

*Durrell moves to Corfu with his family in the 1930’s and comes of age as a writer.*

*Prospero’s Cell* is a fine example of Durrell’s metaphysical speculations and a precursor to *The Alexandria Quartet*. Durrell, believing that “we are the children of our landscape,” tries to capture the essence of Greece in this book of his travels. Written in the 1930’s, when Durrell was just starting out as a writer, the book is more like a portrait of the artist as a young man than a conventional travel guide. He records the learning process that he has to undergo in order to become a writer, rather than listing the typical tourist attractions.

The process begins when, like a child, Durrell examines the building blocks of reality: “rock, air, sky—and all the elementals . . . white house, white rock, friends, and a narrow style of living.” Greece, at this stage of his creative development, provides the raw materials for his inspiration; he tries to manipulate its images into art. His challenge is to capture in words the multifaceted nature of reality.

In *Prospero’s Cell*, he finds that Corfu’s reality, which to him is always changing and receding, still seems touched by the wand of William Shakespeare’s magician, Prospero. The book, written in the form of a journal, mixes history and metaphysical speculations about life, geology, biography, folk customs, and peasant remedies, reflecting the narrator’s difficulty in capturing the island’s spirit. The primary quality of Durrell’s Corfu is transformation, as he views the island undergoing a sea change before his eyes. Traveling through the

Greek waters, one leaves behind “the certainties” of the “real” world: “You enter Greece as one might enter a dark crystal; the form of things becomes irregular, refracted. Mirages suddenly swallow islands, and wherever you look the trembling curtain of the atmosphere deceives.”

The narrative voice receives artistic advice from Count D., a Prospero-like wealthy recluse who resides on the island. The Count tells him that the best one can do is create “a portrait inexact in detail, containing bright splinters of landscape.” The count’s advice gives the narrator confidence that his fragmented images will come as close to the truth of Corfu as anything he could write.

The inexactness, the mutable natural world, the characters’ various visions, and the slippery nature of time and language are depicted for a reason. Durrell is testing out his notions of the Heraldic Universe. He contrasts the world of phenomena or striving (which he calls the “minus side”) to the world of repose or the Heraldic Universe (the “plus side”). The “plus” and “minus sides,” as he describes them, can be connected to Eastern philosophies. Knowledge of these two angles of vision allows him “to see Greece with the inner eyes—not as a collection of battered vestiges left over from cultures long since abandoned—but as something ever-present and ever-renewed.” In other words, Greece is the rich background on which Durrell constructs his own image of the country, a place where “sunlight and inner light meet.”

## THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET

**First published:** *Justine*, 1957; *Balthazar*, 1958; *Mountolive*, 1958; *Clea*, 1960; published collectively as *The Alexandria Quartet*, 1962

**Type of work:** Novels

*The Alexandria Quartet is Durrell’s investigation of modern love, as told through the experiences of the character Darley, who is a young Englishman living in Alexandria.*

*The Alexandria Quartet* is the story of the life and loves of a young British man, Darley, who lives in Egypt during World War II. Darley has love affairs

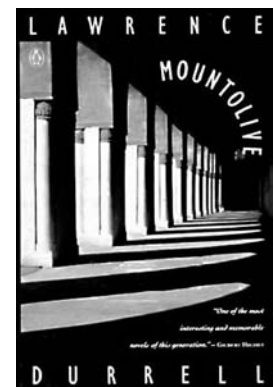
with three women: Justine, the sensuous Jewish wife of a rich Egyptian banker, Nessim; Melissa, a dancer in a cabaret who develops tuberculosis and dies; and Clea, a beautiful artist who eventually becomes Darley’s soulmate.

The central topic of the *The Alexandria Quartet* is “an investigation of modern love.” Durrell believed in the idea, whose origin is in Platonism, that by studying and experiencing the varieties of love, one can ascend from raw physical contact to higher forms of spiritual connection. In an interview, Durrell describes the role of love:

The sexual act becomes identified with all knowledge, all knowing; and the act . . . seems a sort of biological contraption whose object is not only the race’s survival, but also the awakening of the psychic forces latent in the human being.

Thus Eros is the “motive force in man,” a “vibration” that is meant “to wake some of the engines of understanding” in men and women. Each of the major characters in *The Alexandria Quartet* embodies one or more aspects of Western love. Justine represents the power of sexual passion, and Melissa, charitable affection. In keeping with Durrell’s view that Western love is bankrupt, the characters seek but fail to find passionate love relationships that will somehow transform their lives. Trapped in Alexandria’s great “winepress of love,” they cannot escape their egos’ obsessive delusions; they all are “deeply wounded in their sex.” Only Clea, who pulls Darley along with her, transforms her life and art—the two are inextricably mixed in Durrell’s view.

Clea’s transformation occurs on a boat trip when Darley accidentally releases a harpoon that pins Clea’s painting hand to an underwater wreck. To save her life, Darley is forced to cut off her hand. The anguish, physical pain, and empathy that the two characters experience dissolve the petty, selfish concerns that their egos had previously placed at the center of the relationship. They experience a



transforming vision that gives them a sense of their belonging.

Durrell also investigates Western relativity. *The Alexandria Quartet* is structured to correspond to Einstein's theory of relativity: "Three sides of space and one of time constitute the soup-mix recipe of a continuum. The four novels follow this pattern." The first three volumes explore differing perspectives on the novel's events; *Clea* moves the story along in time.

*The Alexandria Quartet* ends with Clea's recovery and with both Darley and Clea feeling reborn as artists. They decide to separate after the end of World War II, as they both make plans to go to Europe. In an interview in 1986, Durrell assumed that they would eventually reunite. He claimed that "they're preparing to make a child." They are ready to give birth as artists and as human beings.

## THE AVIGNON QUINTET

**First published:** *Monsieur: Or, The Prince of Darkness*, 1974; *Livia: Or, Buried Alive*, 1978; *Constance: Or, Solitary Practices*, 1981; *Sebastian: Or, Ruling Passions*, 1983; *Quinx: Or, The Ripper's Tale*, 1985; published collectively as *The Avignon Quintet*, 1992

**Type of work:** Novels

*Several groups of young people, searching for the meaning of life during World War II, fall under the spell of a gnostic cult.*

*The Avignon Quintet* is a vast, multidimensional novel of five parts. Durrell calls the arrangement a quincunx, which is an arrangement of five objects with four located at the corners of a square and the fifth at the center (the pattern for the fives in a deck of cards). A person, with four limbs and the kundalini, corresponds to this arrangement. The kundalini is coiled energy lying at the base of the spine.

In *The Avignon Quintet*, Durrell is attempting, by means of the novel form, to construct a cosmology for the modern age. The story is set in Avignon, the seat of the Roman Catholic popes from 1309 to 1377. The novel's focus, though, is not on orga-

nized religion but on its antithesis: heresy. Several of the major characters belong to a heretical gnostic cult based in Egypt and led by a wealthy Egyptian, Akkad. This wealthy cult preaches that the world is corrupt, because it is composed of evil matter that is alien to the human spirit and the true God. This world cannot be attributed to a God that is good; instead, it is the creation of a demiurge. Durrell calls him Monsieur or the Prince of Darkness: "The Prince of Usury, the spirit of gain, the enigmatic power of capital value embodied in the poetry of gold, or specie, or scrip."

Some extreme gnostics believe that there is a way out of the corrupt world; they can refuse to accept its terms by committing suicide. In Akkad's cult, the member who is to die is chosen randomly and the deed is done by someone else. *The Avignon Quintet* begins with such an execution. Bruce Drexel is arriving in Avignon to attend the funeral of his best friend, lover, and brother-in-law, Piers de Nogaret. Bruce tries to make sense of Piers's death by recalling their visit to Egypt, during which they viewed one of Akkad's gnostic rituals. Piers had embraced the cult's beliefs and become a convert.

In the meantime, other characters and situations are introduced. Names and details blend into one another so that it becomes hard to distinguish them. The initial trio of characters has much in common with the next trio, Hilary, Livia, and Constance, who appear in *Livia*. In addition, characters who are first presented as real later turn out to be imaginary. The novelist Rob Sutcliffe, who has apparently married Bruce's sister Pia, is not real at all; he is a fabrication of another novelist, Aubrey Blanford. Both men, of course, are fabrications of yet a third novelist, Lawrence Durrell.

Durrell, master trickster, has a serious purpose at hand. Through his spokesmen—Akkad and his clone, Affad—Durrell articulates a dark view of life, that "death sets in with conception." Yet, if one accepts the reality of human life—that one must die—then one can improvise a new mode of existence that breaks the deadening bonds of conventionality. As Akkad explains, one can become "truthful in a way that you never thought you could be."

## SUMMARY

Lawrence Durrell spent more than fifty years writing novels, plays, poetry, letters, and essays that

“interrogate human values” and experiment with language. In his first serious novel, *The Black Book*, he states his belief that “art must no longer exist to depict man, but to invoke God.” He dedicated his life’s work to this problem. His two greatest works of art, *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Avignon Quintet*, offer “an honest representation of the human passions” and explore the depth of spirituality possible in a chaotic age of relativity and skepticism.

Anna Lillios

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Does Lawrence Durrell’s intrinsic restlessness pervade his novels?
- How did Durrell’s understanding of Albert Einstein influence his theory of characterization?
- What in Greece, apart from its “battered vestiges,” is most interesting to Durrell?
- In what ways did Durrell’s experiences between 1952 and 1957 prepare him for *The Alexandria Quartet*?
- Contrast Plato and Durrell’s methods of examining the varieties of love.
- Characterize Durrell’s lyrical response to the Mediterranean world in his poetry.

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## UMBERTO ECO

**Born:** Alessandria, Italy  
January 5, 1932

*A multitalented scholar who specializes in the study of semiotics, Eco is also a novelist of note; both his fiction and his nonfiction writings ultimately focus on the signs that cultures use to communicate.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Umberto Eco (EHK-oh), son of Giulio and Giovanna Bisio Eco, spent his childhood in Alessandria, Italy, roughly equidistant from Milan and Turin. He left Alessandria to attend the nearby University of Turin, which awarded him a doctorate in 1954. His doctoral research in medieval studies exposed him to much of the material that he later used in his scholarly books and in his novels *Il nome della rosa* (1980; *The Name of the Rose*, 1983) and *Il pendolo di Foucault* (1989; *Foucault's Pendulum*, 1989). Eco's lifelong intellectual passion has been semiotics, the study of the signs cultures use to communicate, particularly as they relate to the interpretation of literature and meaning.

Following his doctoral studies, Eco spent five years, from 1954 to 1959, with Italian Radio-Television as editor for cultural programming, dealing with those aspects of semiotics that were concerned with mass communication. Midway through his years at the broadcasting company, Eco was appointed assistant lecturer in aesthetics at the University of Turin, remaining there until 1964. In 1962, he married a teacher, Renate Ränge, the mother of their two children, Stefano and Carlotta.

Eco's appointment to his first university post coincided with the publication of his first book, *Il*

*problema estetico in San Tommaso* (1956; *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, 1988), an outgrowth of his doctoral dissertation. The second edition, retitled *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino*, followed in 1970. Eco moved to the University of Milan as a lecturer in architecture for the 1964-1965 academic year, leaving Milan to relocate at the University of Florence as a professor of visual communications, where he served from 1966 until 1969.

During this time, Eco established an international reputation, becoming a major figure in semiotics, a field that encompasses aesthetics, logic, graphic art, communications, psychology, and literature. He was appointed professor of semiotics at Milan Polytechnic in 1969, remaining there until 1971, when he became associate professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna. At Bologna, he directed the doctoral program in semiotics that he was instrumental in establishing in 1986. In 1993, he was appointed chair of the Corso di Laurea in Scienze della Comunicazione.

As his reputation grew, Eco regularly held prestigious visiting professorships in the United States at such institutions as New York University (1969 and 1976), Northwestern University (1972), the University of California at San Diego (1975), Yale University (1977, 1980, and 1981), and Columbia University (1978). He also held visiting appointments at European and British universities and at Murdoch University in Australia.

Eco served as secretary-general of the International Association for Semiotic Studies from 1972 to 1979 and as vice president of that organization following his term as secretary-general. He is an honorary trustee of the James Joyce Foundation

and has received more than a dozen honorary doctoral degrees.

The publication of *The Name of the Rose* brought Eco a flood of awards, among them Italy's Premio Strega (1981) and Premio Anghiari (1981), France's Prix Medicis for the best foreign novel (1982), and the best fiction book award of Logos Bookstores (1983). He also received the McLuhan Teleglobe Canada Award from the United Nations' Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Canadian Commission in 1985 for his achievements in communications.

As growing numbers of scholars recognized Eco as a giant in his field, his writing attracted considerable attention from broader audiences. His *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (1962) was published as *The Open Work* (1989) by the Harvard University Press. He coedited several successful books, including *Storia figurata delle invenzioni: Dalla selce scheggiata al volo spaziali* (1961; *The Picture History of Inventions from Plough to Polaris*, 1963) and *I fumetti di Mao* (1971; *The People's Comic Book: Red Women's Detachment, Hot on the Trail, and Other Chinese Comics*, 1973).

These successes, however, paled in comparison to the reception accorded his first novel, *The Name of the Rose*. The book had been published in Italy in 1980, and three years later, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published the English translation, which became an immediate best seller. Harcourt Brace paid Eco four thousand dollars for the U.S. publication rights to the book. So great was its popularity that when Eco produced his next novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, the same publisher paid more than a million dollars for the publication rights and did an initial press run of 225,000 copies. The Literary Guild paid \$100,000 to include the book as its main book club selection; bidding for the paperback rights began at \$925,000.

## ANALYSIS

Umberto Eco is among the most cerebral contemporary authors. His store of factual information from the broad range of fields in his specialty, semiotics, is all-encompassing. In his university days, he focused his semiotic studies on the medieval period, and he has made creative use of this period in his subsequent writing.

A strenuous academic focus in his life and writing preceded the publication of his first novel, *The*

*Name of the Rose*. The broad scope of his scholarship led him deeply into the history and psychology of art and architecture, as well as into music, aesthetics, logic, communication theory, and many areas of history. His explorations reached beyond Western culture. He delved into Eastern cultures as well, seeking always to understand the signs by which cultures communicate.

Eco's close reading and profound understanding of the works of James Joyce left indelible marks on his writing. Just as Joyce grappled with the question of how to deal with time within his work, so Eco has dealt with similar questions. Time is a vast continuum devoid of beginning and end. In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco uses an intricately structured temporal framework, with definite beginnings and definite ends, to provide a recognizable pattern—that is, impose meaning—on time's fluid continuum.

Eco's handling of time in his fiction is crucial and provides one of the many conceptual levels at which his two mystery novels, *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, function. In *Ulysses* (1922), Joyce confines his action to a twenty-four-hour day; Eco, in his first novel, situates the action in a seven-day period in which days are divided into rigidly structured segments. In *Foucault's Pendulum*, however, Eco deals with time differently, not using much of the sequential structure of his first novel. In this work time is not dealt with in the linear way in which Western cultures view it.

The structure of time is one of the most significant conceptual frameworks for human communication. The ways in which people segment this infinite, unsegmented continuum fascinates Eco. Each dot on the continuum—each life, each thing—has virtually no intrinsic meaning, yet each one exists within a context that imposes meaning. The way one understands time, Eco might argue, is the way one interprets one's experience.

In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992), a book drawn from the Tanner Lectures, delivered at Cambridge University in the preceding year, Eco discusses with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose the limits of interpretation. Rorty defends readers' rights to use texts for their own purposes and to interpret them in the light of these purposes. Eco, however, limits the extent to which texts can be interpreted and allows authors the right to rule out some interpretations, thereby allowing writers the luxury of being inter-

preted within the framework of their own creative intent.

Postmodern critic Culler defends overinterpretation (interpretation beyond the framework of the author's intent), which presumably would include interpretations of old works based upon subsequent scientific findings. For example, Culler might defend interpreting Sophocles' or William Shakespeare's work in the light of Freudian or Jungian psychology. Although Eco accepts interpretations based on scientific findings that come after a piece of literature has been published, he balks at many of the interpretive schools that have grown out of movements with political agendas.

Brooke-Rose is close to Eco in her interpretive theory, believing that literary texts, in and of themselves, are interpretations that continually retest mythic paradigms. She, like Eco, considers the writer a reader of "the world, the book, and the world as book."

Eco's life, as demonstrated clearly in such seminal scholarly works in English as *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979), and *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio* (1984; *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 1984), has focused intently on attempts to understand the order that cultures impose upon an amorphous environment. In all of his work, scholarly and creative, Eco is fundamentally concerned with moving toward an understanding of the meaning of meaning.

Eco's two early novels, wearing the mantle of popular mystery novels, are intricately layered works that, to be understood at any but a superficial level, must be read in the light of their many levels of meaning. The Joycean technique of intricately layering meaning is apparent on every page of Eco's elaborately structured novels.

Eco contends that if signs do not reveal things themselves—that is, if meaning is not inherent within signs—communities produce a shared idea of what the thing is. This extension of Plato's theory of innate ideas and of Immanuel Kant's theory of *Dinge an sich* (things in themselves) leads toward the key to understanding the meaning that Eco seeks.

## THE NAME OF THE ROSE

**First published:** *Il nome della rosa*, 1980  
(English translation, 1983)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Set in a fourteenth century monastery, The Name of the Rose is a multilayered, philosophical treatise successfully masquerading as a mystery thriller.*

In his first novel, Eco, already widely published in semiotics, sets up a story reminiscent of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries. Eco, however, uses his mystery story to convey to his readers an incredible wealth of information about the medieval period, semiotics, aesthetics, and logic. Eco's intention obviously was not merely to write a thriller. Indeed, much of *The Name of the Rose*, which launches frequently into serious philosophical discourse, is far from thrilling.

The novel treats dissension within the Franciscan order that reaches the boiling point in 1327. One group within the order, the Spiritualists, favors ecclesiastical poverty. Louis IV, the emperor, sides with this group. In the opposing camp are a corrupt pope, John XXII, and a group of monks who fear that ecclesiastical poverty will diminish the church's power and influence. A meeting of the opposing forces is arranged on the neutral ground of a Benedictine abbey.

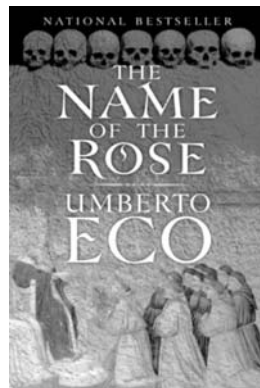
Representing the spiritualists is William of Baskerville, a British Franciscan, who represents Louis IV. He is accompanied by his young scribe, Adso. William, a consummate logician, is much like Eco himself and bears striking similarities to Sherlock Holmes. Adso, a convincing Watson, is the narrator and fictive author of the book. He writes the story fifty years after the events it relates.

Before the first session of the meeting convenes, a dead monk is discovered at the bottom of a cliff. William, assisted by Adso, sets out to explain the murder and find the murderer. Before long, however, other murders occur, presumably in keeping with an apocalyptic prophecy, and the two clerics face a significant problem. The other monks press for a solution, showing their willingness to let blind faith, not reason, dictate their reaction to the crimes.

In order to understand what is happening, they examine the scriptures closely and debate them heatedly. A major portion of the first half of the book concerns these theological debates. The two investigators attempt to decode messages and understand arcane symbols in books housed in the monastery's large library. In essence, William and Adso engage in semiotic investigation.

The library, an intricately constructed labyrinth, is a repository for all manner of manuscripts that deal with pagan rituals, witchcraft, and magic. William knows that the murders are related directly to one secret book, forbidden to the monks, that has great powers. He suspects that some of the monks have become so intent on protecting this secret book that they are driven to murder to keep others from it.

After excursions down many blind alleys, William discovers the forbidden book and identifies the murderer. The book, ironically, is the second volume of Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 334-323 B.C.E.), no copy of which exists in fact. In this second volume, comedy is set forth as a positive force, something counter to much of the church's teaching of the period, which is why the book was hidden. A fire destroys the library; the second volume of *Poetics* and other precious books are lost to posterity.



## TRAVELS IN HYPER REALITY

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Essays

*Eco comments on how Americans keep touch with their pasts by creating replications or miniaturizations of their artifacts.*

It is doubtful that this collection of Eco's essays about America would have been published had the publisher not wished to capitalize on Eco's celebrity following the unprecedented (and unantici-

pated) success of *The Name of the Rose*, a best seller. It is fortunate that these essays have been collected because they shed considerable light upon Eco's philosophical concerns.

The title essay, "Travels in Hyper Reality," is particularly enlightening. It delves into America's small places that are untouched by big-city sophistication and remote from the floods of information that assail people in urban areas. Eco contends that Americans insist on creating icons that are perfect replications of the realities they are meant to depict. He tells of stumbling upon seven three-dimensional replications in wax of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* on the four-hundred-mile trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles alone. He muses on the Lyndon B. Johnson Memorial in Texas, with its inch-by-inch replication of the Oval Office.

Throughout *Travels in Hyper Reality*, Eco pursues the question that has engrossed philosophers in the millennia since pre-Socratic materialism was eclipsed by Platonic idealism: What is real? He grapples also with the question of how societies depict what is called the great chain of being. For Americans, the answer seems to be to create and enshrine hyperrealities, often garish ones, that either replicate or miniaturize enough elements of the past to preserve it and lend it reality.

## FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM

**First published:** *Il pendolo di Foucault*, 1989  
(English translation, 1989)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This mystery thriller that ranges across time and cultures is partly a philosophical discourse and partly an intricately elaborated joke.*

*Foucault's Pendulum* is 641 pages long. The story extends quite aimlessly for nearly the first quarter of the book, after which it gains focus and momentum. This is not a failing on Eco's part; his writing is calculated even if his pace may frustrate some readers.

Readers who had difficulty with Eco's frequent inclusion of Latin passages in *The Name of the Rose* face a nine-line quotation in Hebrew at the begin-



ning of this novel. Eco regularly lapses into foreign languages in his novels, much as James Joyce did in his. When readers complain to him about this, he dismisses their complaints by saying that they do not have to translate the passages: Had he wanted readers to know what they mean, he would have provided translations.

Foucault's pendulum was invented in 1851 by Jean-Bernard-Léon Foucault to demonstrate the axial rotation of the earth. Foucault suspended a weight from a wire attached to a fixed point. Unlike

a pendulum in a clock, the Foucault pendulum is able to swing in any plane. Such a pendulum will continue to swing in the same plane even as the earth turns beneath it. To an observer, it appears that the pendulum is turning in a circle as it swings back and forth; the truth is that the observer, not the pendulum, turns in a circle. Eco uses the pendulum as a metaphor for his narrative approach.

Casaubon, a doctoral student in philology, well versed in the Knights Templar legend, narrates the story. Count Aglie, also expert in this field, is Grand Master of the secrets of the Knights Templar, which makes him potentially master of the universe. Colonel Ardeni is also caught up in the legend, although he is a lesser light than either Casaubon or Aglie, and clearly an opportunist. As Casaubon's narrative proceeds, it becomes not only a story of intrigue about the secrets of the Knights Templar but also a running commentary on the signs and structure of the story itself. The ultimate aim of the story, ostensibly a mystery thriller, is semiotic. Although the central action occurs in Milan during the 1980's, the story, through flashbacks and reflections, moves to Brazil and Paris and extends back to times long distant.

Each of the book's 120 chapters (the number has significance in the Knights Templar legend) springs from a separate source. These sources range from Geronimo Cardan's *Somniorum syonesiorum* (1562) and Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) to

Woody Allen's *Getting Even* (1971) and Karl Raimund Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations* (1962).

Eco's mystery involves Ardeni, who appears and ingratiates himself to Casaubon and his friend, Belbo, an editor. Ardeni claims to possess coded messages, found in a document he has stolen, that predicts a second coming of the Knights Templar. Belbo is skeptical and dismisses Ardeni as a crank. Ardeni disappears, perhaps having been murdered. Belbo, whom Aglie is convinced possesses the Templar's secret, then dies under mysterious circumstances.

Casaubon escapes through the sewers of Paris, surfacing finally at the Eiffel Tower, which Eco calls a virtually useless, empty sign. Casaubon is thought to be mad. In a subplot—one of several—he is in love with Lia, who bears his child, a small comfort for him, as he now is convinced that he will be the next victim. He finds Belbo's last text but discovers it cannot be read, but must be reconstructed.



## THE MYSTERIOUS FLAME OF QUEEN LOANA

**First published:** *La misteriosa fiamma della regina Loana*, 2004 (English translation, 2005)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Using his protagonist's loss of the memory of his own past as a pretext, Eco deals in depth with the question of identity.*

Eco's protagonist, called Yambo although his full name is Giamattista Bodoni (for the eighteenth century Italian printer who designed a popular style of type), is an antiquarian book dealer who suffers an accident, not fully detailed by the author, that leaves him able to remember everything he has ever read but unable to remember anything about his own existence during the past sixty years. Seeking to regain his lost identity, Yambo, at the urging of Paola, his psychologist wife, returns to his ancestral home, Solara, where he seeks clues to his identity through the thousands of papers, books, and photographs he finds there. The Eco novel is richly illustrated with much of this material.

Although he has a vivid recollection of the elements of his past, Yambo has lost the “self” of his past and is searching to regain it. Eco uses fog metaphorically throughout much of this novel to mirror Yambo’s confused condition, which reminds one of the Capgras Syndrome that Richard Powers employed in his novel *The Echo Maker* (2006), published shortly after Eco’s book.

As in his earlier works, Eco deals here with the time continuum. Paola says that people live in three time contexts—expectation, attention, and memory—and much of Eco’s novel illustrates the truth of her statement. This novel can be classified as a bildungsroman, or developmental, coming-of-age novel, despite the protagonist’s age.

## SUMMARY

Umberto Eco has successfully merged the specialized and barely accessible writing of semiotics

with forms ranging from popular essays to novels to children’s books. He has demonstrated how to convey complex philosophical theories to broad audiences. He succeeds by writing enticing mysteries or, in the case of one of his children’s books, *La bomba e il generale* (1989; *The Bomb and the General*, 1989), by writing a pacifist dialogue that, although appropriate for young children, is concerned fundamentally with signs.

Eco’s scholarly work has become standard fare in college-level communications courses. His popular work has drawn a large, if sometimes bewildered, readership. Perhaps this author’s special magic is his way of revealing an incredible mind actively at work. While he is spinning his tales, he is simultaneously divulging how he translates experience into literature.

R. Baird Shuman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In Umberto Eco's view, how does time impose an order on the universe?
- How does Eco use his knowledge of medieval history in his writing?
- What does Eco mean by contending that context gives meaning to time?
- What role does psychology play in the works by Eco that you have read?
- What is Eco's attitude toward using scientific advances in the interpretation of ancient texts?

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## GEORGE ELIOT

**Born:** Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, England  
November 22, 1819

**Died:** London, England  
December 22, 1880

*As an author who wrote in many different genres, Eliot is remembered primarily for her novels of social and psychological realism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mary Ann Evans was born on November 22, 1819, in Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, England. (She changed her name in 1857 to George Eliot.) During her infancy, the family moved to Griff House, also on the seven-thousand-acre Arbury Estate near Coventry, which Robert Evans, Mary Ann's father, managed for the Newdigate family. Her mother's name was Christina Pearson. It was in this large, old farmhouse, with its wide lawns and mature trees, surrounded by fields, farmhouses, canals, and coach roads, that Evans lived until she was twenty, gathering impressions that form much of the landscape of her fiction. She roamed the meadows with her brother Isaac and toured the estate with her father, waiting in farmhouse kitchens or the housekeeper's quarters of Arbury Hall or Astley Castle while her father conducted his business, and developing that sensitivity toward all social classes that informs her work. Persons, images, and events from these early years color her mature writing, notably *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), and the "Brother and Sister" sonnets (1874).

Besides her father and brother, a major influence on young Evans was Maria Lewis, a teacher at a boarding school Evans attended during her ninth to thirteenth years. Miss Lewis's ardent evangelicalism appealed to her after the Evans family's

attendance at "high and dry" Anglican services, unmarked by "enthusiastic" fervor or nineteenth century doctrinal questioning. (Long after she ceased to regard biblical writing as literally true, George Eliot created fictional contrasts between the less personal, old-fashioned religion of her father and the moral energy that she had experienced with evangelicalism.) At thirteen, she transferred to a Coventry school, where she learned drawing, painting, history, arithmetic, and etiquette; she cultivated English speech and excelled in French, music, and English composition. Her letters to Miss Lewis indicate a religious austerity, and critic Gordon Haight finds evidence of a religious conversion within the evangelical party of the Church of England when she was fifteen.

After her mother's death in 1836, Evans became her father's housekeeper. Robert Evans left Griff House to Isaac and moved with Mary Ann to Bird Grove, a house just outside Coventry, where the intellectual leaders welcomed his mentally cultivated daughter. She became close friends with Charles and Cara Bray, sister of Charles Hennell, whose *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) had just appeared in a second edition. Evans's scientific reading had already weakened her earlier convictions; the emotional support of her new "free-thinking" friends influenced her to complete the break with Scripture-based Christianity and to undertake her first serious publication, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846), a three-volume translation of David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-1836). The fifteen hundred pages of German, with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew quota-



tions, posed a two-year translation task. Published in 1846 without the translator's name, it was a major influence on the nineteenth century "crisis of faith" and identified Evans, for those who inquired, with the Higher Criticism, the scholarly examination of Scripture for its historical credibility.

Preoccupied with nursing her father until his death in 1849, Evans continued her reading, finding Jean-Jacques Rousseau and George Sand her favorite authors, and began translating Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), which she never published. After Robert Evans died, the Brays took her to France and Italy, leaving her to spend the fall and winter in Geneva, Switzerland, among political refugees from continental revolutions. She lived with the family of an artist, François D'Albert Durade, who painted her portrait, later translated some of her fiction, and became her lifelong friend. She enjoyed music, theater, mixing with celebrities, and making notes for fiction to come.

Returning to Coventry in 1850, Evans was asked to write for and help edit John Chapman's *Westminster Review*, the leading progressive quarterly in London. She was its de facto editor from 1851 to 1854, although Chapman received public acknowledgment. Through him, she continued to meet leading intellectual figures, among them Herbert Spencer and George Henry Lewes. Attracted at first to Spencer, she found Lewes to be the more enduring friend. Because Lewes had condoned the adultery of his wife, Agnes, he was not permitted under English law to divorce her, but the marriage had clearly failed. He and Evans committed themselves to each other and lived together openly until his death in 1878, the royalties from her books continuing to support Agnes and her children.

In 1854, Chapman published Evans's translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841) as *The Essence of Christianity*, and she left with Lewes for Germany to help with his biography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. On their return, he used his standing as essayist and reviewer to submit her early fiction without identifying her to the publisher John Blackwood. By the time that her identity was revealed, after *Adam Bede*'s publication, readers who objected to Evans's unconventional life could not take back their praise for George Eliot's fiction.

Virginia Woolf's view that the union with Lewes

freed Eliot's creativity is supported by the record. With his encouragement and protection of her sensitivity to public criticism, she wrote her way past scandal and social ostracism into the hearts of her readers until many of the socially great, including royalty, sought her company. When Lewes died after twenty-four years of devotion to her, Eliot isolated herself for three months, despite pleas from friends, and completed the book he had begun.

In May, 1880, Eliot married John Walter Cross, twenty years her junior but a loving friend she and Lewes had known for several years. The marriage, though brief, was happy. She died in London on December 22, 1880, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery, London, near Lewes, the corners of the plots touching at one point.

## ANALYSIS

In a series of 1856 essays for the *Westminster Review*, George Eliot (the name she sent to Blackwood in 1857) formulates the theories of literary art that would shape the fiction she began writing in September of that year. Revealing the influence of Honoré de Balzac and French criticism, she explains "realism," a relatively new aesthetic concept to her English audience. The context is her praise for John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843-1860); it teaches "the truth of infinite value," or "realism—the doctrine that all truth and beauty" lie in art that represents "definite, substantial reality," not "vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling." She was to write instead of the "truth of feeling, as the only universal bond of union" between people. Although her contemporaries and later readers have been awed by her manifest intellectual depth and breadth, she considered what was "essentially human" far more important than cerebral analysis: "If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally."

Because Eliot believed that strife among people derived from lack of understanding of "what is apart from themselves," she defined the "sacred" task of the artist as awakening in self-enclosed people a knowledgeable, sympathetic understanding of "the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour" in the lives of others, particularly the laborers and artisans being misrepresented by writers who had not lived among them. For Eliot, all people of whatever social class were

“struggling erring human creatures.” Her purpose was not to argue the causes that made nineteenth century intellectual life controversial but to inform and cultivate her readers’ moral imaginations away from self-centeredness and toward sympathy for others.

In an essay panning the falseness of those who would promote evangelical spirituality yet retain a fascination with the wealthy aristocracy, Eliot declared that the “real drama of Evangelicalism” lay “among the middle and lower classes,” among those such as the farmers she had known on the Arbury Estate and the congregation she had met when attending chapel with Maria Lewis. She returned to the rural scenes and experiences of her youth for her first three books.

The three stories that constitute *Scenes of Clerical Life*—“The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Baron,” “Mr. Gilfil’s Love-Story,” and “Janet’s Repentance”—were published serially in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1857, then as a two-volume book in 1858. Stories of clerics, or churchmen, were popular at the time, but many were poor examples of literary art because the authors idealized their characters into unreal, romantic heroes and made them spokespersons for partisan views in the doctrinal controversies of the mid-nineteenth century. Eliot’s stories are about three quite different country parsons, fictional elaborations of actual people she had known. Her purpose is not to expound doctrine, however, but to show the relative effectiveness of each parson, according to his capacity for interpersonal sympathy. A subtler purpose, unrecognized by many readers in an age that accepted the subjection of women as natural and right, is to win sympathy for the sufferings of women, which have been caused by an insensitive and judgmental community, a too-rigid social caste system, the lack of economic opportunity, or a negligent—even brutal—husband.

Wanting to portray sympathetic characters with psychological realism despite her publisher’s wish for heroes and heroines that were models of morally acceptable behavior, Eliot turned to the expanded form of the novel for her next book, *Adam Bede*, which became a best seller before the year was over. She continued her success with *The Mill on the Floss*, the last of her early works based in the rural Midlands and the most autobiographical. The Tulliver children, judgmental Tom and hoy-

den Maggie, are fictional variations of Isaac and Mary Ann Evans; the Dodson family’s allegiance to custom-bound respectability reflects attitudes of the Pearsons, Eliot’s mother’s family. Maggie is Eliot’s first major heroine, of several, who grows from an unconscious egoism to an awareness of another. She is also a tragic heroine developed by the classical formula: “a character essentially noble but liable to great error—error that is anguish to its own nobleness.”

*Romola* (1862-1863), which Eliot interrupted to write *Silas Marner*, is among the least read of Eliot’s books, but it was well received by the leading minds among her contemporaries, Henry James proclaiming it the “finest thing she wrote.” Set in fifteenth century Florence, it develops the heroine from dependency and subjection to moral and spiritual autonomy and shows the author’s increasing skill with mythic narrative techniques.

*Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) repeats Eliot’s theme of past influencing present but presents the heroine, Esther Lyon, with a choice between entrapment in the tyranny of the past and the moral freedom of continuing to choose her commitments, a theme with added variations in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Her “political novel” is Eliot’s first fully developed treatment of relatively contemporary England, but her imagery of entrapment is drawn from Dante’s description of hell. Set at the time of the first Reform Bill (1832), the novel’s political part concerns issues current with the Reform Bill of 1867. Eliot favors a slow, organic cultural development, similar to Matthew Arnold’s ideas, over political solutions attempted by legislation. The importance of sexual awareness, honesty, energy, and their intelligent commitment—always a theme in Eliot’s work—receives more detailed treatment than in the first five books. Consequences of ill-considered sexual choices are seen not primarily as social disapprobation but as the fugitive self-enclosure of Mrs. Transome, another tragic heroine as classically defined.

In the novel’s more complex treatment of its milieu, the organic inclusion of the past in the present, and Esther’s choice between creative or destructive acceptance of that past, *Felix Holt, the Radical* reveals the confidence of an established writer and anticipates the fuller treatment of similar ideas in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

## ADAM BEDE

**First published:** 1859

**Type of work:** Novel

*As self-deception brings tragic consequences for Arthur, a young squire, and Hetty, a dairy maid, Adam, through suffering, learns tolerance for weakness.*

In *Adam Bede*, Eliot again represents the humor and wit of the lower classes through their rural dialect and idiom, a skill that had captivated readers of “Amos Barton” and helped to establish her as a writer of humor, pathos, and social realism. Where the earlier work had divided such wit between a few characters and the narrator, however, *Adam Bede* concentrates it in Mrs. Poyser, master of the colorful maxim, and leaves the narrator more distant than in the earlier story. Eliot interrupts the narrative, nevertheless, to instruct the reader in the aesthetic rules of realism. The well-known chapter 17 is often quoted as Eliot’s artistic creed, favoring truthfulness over idealism, exhorting the reader to find beauty in “old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands” as well as in “a face paled by the celestial light,” and urging the reader to “tolerate, pity, and love” his “more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent” fellow mortals.

For the germ of her story, Eliot recalled an episode recounted during her youth by her Methodist Aunt Samuel, who had visited in prison a young woman condemned to execution for the murder of her child, and who had wrought from her a penitential confession after the failure of others to do so. The novel goes far beyond the historical event, however, rendering it as art by the detailed fictional creation of Hetty Sorrel as childish and unconsciously self-engrossed, hardly capable of any moral awareness that her acts could bring significant consequences, hardly able to distinguish fantasy from reality.

In a design of paired opposites found also in her other fiction, Eliot sharpens the delineation of

Hetty’s character by contrasting her with the selfless Dinah Morris, the young Methodist open-air preacher. Similarly, Eliot contrasts the title character, a village carpenter, to Arthur Donnithorne, heir to the estate and future landlord of the Hayslope community. They are compared primarily by their respective ways of expressing their love for Hetty, who is expected to marry Adam but whose aspirations to luxury and fashionable adornments make her susceptible to Arthur’s admiring eye, as her fantasies enable him to seduce her, although he knows quite well that a young man of his class cannot marry a working girl.

Hetty’s recognition of her limitations and errors is so slim that she can hardly be called a tragic character. Adam is the primary sufferer, since his love for Hetty has been genuine, if blind. Narrow and inflexible in his rectitude, he learns through his suffering to be more tolerant of weakness and, with his new “power of loving,” to give and receive sympathy in the shared condition of fallibility. His moral growth is slow, in keeping with Eliot’s psychological realism, but he softens in his judgment of others and awakens to the realization that Dinah, though not at all kittenish like Hetty, has her form of appeal too. In turn, Dinah reconsiders her resolution to follow an ascetic life, rechannels her ministering love in interpersonal directions, and comes to return Adam’s love for her.

The misogynistic Bartle Massey claims his place in the community as he brings food and wine to the suffering Adam in an “upper room,” one of the story’s Christian images. Mr. Irwine, in his failure to sense Arthur’s need for confession, is one of Eliot’s recurrent churchmen who appear benevolent but prove ineffective.

Arthur, whose expected responsible leadership has represented hope to the community, can only leave Hayslope in shame. His departure signals the end of that older world, as the narrator regrets the loss of “Fine Old Leisure,” but the novel ends optimistically, centered on Adam, Dinah, and their children.

## SILAS MARNER

**First published:** 1861

**Type of work:** Novel

*In a village of fairy-tale remoteness, a wronged and therefore bitter miser is redeemed, reborn, and restored to human fellowship through unselfish love.*

In *Silas Marner*, George Eliot achieved some of her most successful symbolic narrative, a method that has been compared to Nathaniel Hawthorne's definition of "romance" with reference to this story. In this novel, Eliot's pervasive theme of spiritual renewal through the influence of human love and communal fellowship is embodied, as elsewhere, in realistic events, drama, and dialogue, with currents of symbolic meanings that suggest a mythic structure of concrete universals. Eliot called the story a "legendary tale" with a "realistic treatment."

The theme of spiritual rebirth is announced in chapter 1 by reference to Marner as "a dead man come to life again" and to his "inward life" as a "metamorphosis." The resolution is foreshadowed in the description of his catalepsy as "a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness" that his former religious community has "mistaken for death." The rigidity of despair has driven him from his former home in a northern industrial city, the dimly lit Lantern Yard, where members of his "narrow religious sect" have believed him guilty of stealing church funds in the keeping of a dying man. Marner has been so stunned at being framed by the man he thought was his best friend, at being renounced by his fiancé, who soon married the guilty man, and at being believed guilty by his community, that he could only flee. Because he had believed that God would defend his innocence, he has felt utterly abandoned in his faith and has declared "there is no just God."

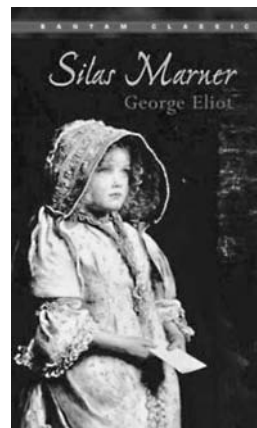
He chances among strangers in the isolated village of Raveloe and for fifteen years remains an alien at its fringes, immersed in his work as a linen weaver like "a spinning insect," loving only the gold

he earns and hoards, with ties to neither past nor present. When his gold is stolen as the Christmas season begins, Marner announces his loss at the Rainbow (promise of hope) Tavern and, like Job, begins to receive "comforters," an interaction that slowly renews human feeling and consciousness of dependency. On New Year's Eve, as Marner longs for the return of his gold, he finds on his hearth instead a sleeping, golden-haired toddler, a baby girl who has wandered in while Marner held his door open during one of his cataleptic trances, leaving her laudanum-stupefied mother unconscious in the snow-filled lane. Marner can only think that "the gold had turned into the child," but then seeks the mother, goes for the authorities, and learns that the woman is dead.

Marner clings urgently to the child as his own and names her Eppie for his mother and sister, renewing his ties to his past. His conscientious fatherhood, under the good Dolly Winthrop's tutelage, brings him firmly into the community, including its church, making the ways of Raveloe no longer alien to him. As in *Adam Bede*, Eliot contrasts the Church of England as a vehicle of tradition with

evangelicalism as awakening more fervent, personal religious feelings for some. She is not an advocate of either set of beliefs, however, but approves a religious sense that cultivates "a loving nature" with a Wordsworthian piety expressed in charitable acts and fortified by a non-doctrinal awareness of "Unseen Love." As Dinah the Methodist awakened this sense in Hetty, Dolly the Anglican

awakens it in Marner, enabling him to ravel (weave or involve) himself into the "O"—to join the circle of fellowship. He is rewarded by Eppie's filial loyalty when her blood father offers to adopt her into his home of luxury and rank.



## MIDDLEMARCH

**First published:** 1871-1872

**Type of work:** Novel

*Personal destinies and vocational fulfillments are limited by chance, contingency, the social fabric, and inherited ideas, as well as flaws in the individual moral will.*

Considered Eliot's masterpiece, *Middlemarch* develops a complex web of relationships in a provincial community shortly before the 1832 Reform Bill. The author's perspective from 1871 suggests that the hoped-for results from that legislation have not been achieved, just as the youthful hopes of her characters are not fully realized, perhaps for similar reasons lying with human limitations beyond correction by legislation.

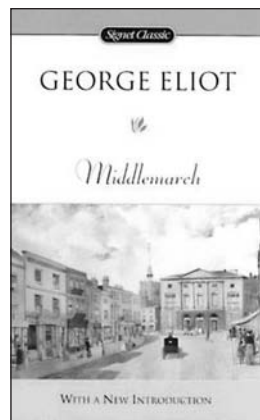
Dorothea Brooke, a young heiress, is compared to Saint Theresa of Avila, whose "passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life" and found it in reforming a religious order. For Dorothea, however, a "later-born" Theresa, philanthropic aspirations are "helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul." Limited by narrow experience and Calvinistic education, with generous but vague impulses to do something grand, she marries Edward Casaubon, rector of Lowick, a sterile and impotent pedant more than twice her age who needs a copyist to spare his eyes. Unable to see through his pretensions to scholarship or to suspect his poverty of soul, Dorothea believes she will grow by participating in his exalted research. Her ensuing joyless life, circumscribed by his fear that she will discover his fraudulent pose, as his young cousin Will Ladislaw has, is presented through imagery of entrapment in the Minotaur's labyrinth. Eliot satirizes property-based attitudes that find the marriage "a good match."

Tertius Lydgate, a young doctor aspiring to re-

form medical practice, is Dorothea's visionary counterpart. He has selected Middlemarch as a place to practice up-to-date medicine and pursue his research into "minute processes which prepare human misery and joy," but his intellectual ambition is weakened by irresolution and lack of self-knowledge. One of his weaknesses is his judgment concerning women, which brings him, after resolving to defer marriage, to propose to Rosamond Vincy, convinced that her "polished" and "docile" charm will be an adornment to his life. Once married, he does learn much of "human misery," as her egoistic vanity and drive for social status beyond Middlemarch force him to abandon his aspirations for a practice among the wealthy. Whereas Dorothea escapes her Minotaur by his death, Lydgate dies young himself, having compared Rosamond to a basil plant that "flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains."

Totally successful in achieving her goals, Rosamond is opposed dramatically to Dorothea, whose moral ardor (opposed to Rosamond's "neutrality") is noble but ineffective for choosing a husband, because she shortsightedly mistakes Casaubon's arid pedantry for spiritual breadth. As a product of Mrs. Lemon's school, Rosamond has learned to win admiration for her appearance, her parlor music, her sketches, and other typical "feminine achievements," such as getting out of a carriage gracefully. Eliot satirizes what passed for education to many Victorian ladies, leaving them with no higher aims than to marry well and please themselves in the stylish world. Rosamond is awakened to her own humanity and that of others only once, in response to Dorothea's selfless act in her behalf when her indiscretion threatens her marriage.

Equally significant as obstacles to reform are the forces embodied in Casaubon and Nicholas Bulstrode, each representing a "religious" voice in England and each exposed as a pious fraud. Bulstrode's hypocritical evangelical pretensions oppress others and salve his own conscience for his shady appropriation, years earlier, of another's money. Eliot implies that the powerful use religion to maintain power and to thwart reforming efforts. Part of her artistic creed was to represent fully the medium in which her characters act. Therefore, voices of reform are frequently checked by a community afraid to set aside inherited customs and ideas. This point is most clearly made in the refer-





ence to Casaubon's will, which limits Dorothea's choices after his death as the "Dead Hand." The phrase alludes to Edmund Burke's claim that England would be saved from revolution by a mortmain, or dead hand, carrying a weight of tradition that innovation could not displace.

A contrast with overreaching ambition is Caleb Garth, a man of integrity who concentrates on excellent performance of his work as land agent. His daughter Mary, with neither Dorothea's nor Rosamond's form of egoism, is solidly grounded in domestic and interpersonal values and will marry Fred Vincy only if he renounces his family's plan to place him in the Church, a step up in rank. Farebrother, a holdover from the older Low Church, demonstrates the religion of humanity that Eliot approves.

Will Ladislaw, who has sustained Dorothea as her respect for her husband turned to pity, brings light to the dark world of Lowick and a fresh, critical mind, educated on the Continent, to the stale parochialism of Middlemarch. His personal vitality restores Dorothea's energy as his aesthetic sensitivity awakens her undeveloped sense for beauty, and their marriage, though frowned upon in class-conscious and xenophobic Middlemarch, brings her a long-awaited proper channel for her reforming spirit as a helpmate to Will, who becomes a member of Parliament on the reforming side.

## DANIEL DERONDA

**First published:** 1876

**Type of work:** Novel

*Egoistic cruelty and the will to power threaten far-reaching destruction, but compassion and a noble vocation energize conscience and the will to live worthily.*

*Daniel Deronda* reaches beyond Eliot's other work in both form and ideas. The plot develops in two separate lines, one concerning the English upper classes and the other portraying a Jewish family living in the humbler part of East London. These lines converge in the title character, who has matured as the ward (and believes he is the illegitimate son) of Sir Hugo Mallinger, but discovers that

he has a distinguished Jewish mother and grandfather. His discovery resolves dilemmas of identity and vocation, favorite themes of Eliot.

Deronda's alertness, compassion, and moral seriousness lead him to rescue two quite different maidens. One is Mirah, a despairing Jewess who tries to drown herself because she cannot find the mother and brother from whom she has become separated. As he aids her search, Deronda meets Mordecai, a visionary Jew who sees in Daniel one who will complete his dream of perpetuating the Jewish cultural past in a coherent national future. The theme of inherited vision thus counterpoints the theme of inherited wealth.

The other maiden Deronda rescues is Gwendolen Harleth, a talented but ego-driven dilettante of limited experience and education. Deronda restores to her a necklace she has pawned to replace gambling losses; more significant, he awakens her conscience by disapproving of her reckless behavior. Later, after she has married Henleigh Grandcourt for money and power and is racked by guilt for having knowingly taken him from the woman who has borne his illegitimate children, she becomes dependent on the sympathetic, insightful Daniel to be her moral guide.

Eliot counterpoints the purposeless, property-absorbed, and morally vacuous daily trivia of the wealthy English, suggested in the name Mallinger, with the significant vocations of Mordecai and another Jew, Klesmer, a Continental musician of excellent artistry. When Gwendolen suffers financial reverses and hopes to escape the humiliating oppression of a governess's life by successful acting and singing, Klesmer points out that in her world she has "not been called upon to be anything but a charming young lady, whom it is an impoliteness to find fault with." Lacking self-criticism or self-discipline, she is unprepared, he tells her, for "a life of arduous, unceasing work," suitable only to "natures framed to love perfection and to labour for it" and dreams only of "donning [an artist's] life as a livery," whereas its "honour comes from the inward vocation and the hard-won achievement." Klesmer's words dimly veil Eliot's judgment of the unproductive leisure class.

Again in this novel Eliot portrays marriage as bondage, but the unaware egoism of Rosamond and self-serving rationalizing of Casaubon, however deadly their effects, seem almost everyday

evils compared with Grandcourt's calculated will to mastery. Accustomed to deference and regard as her due, Gwendolen has been favorably impressed by Grandcourt's polite but uninspired behavior and has found his lack of ardor pleasingly untroublesome. She marries him for money and power, driven by her own will to mastery and lacking the moral imagination to envision her life subjected to his unloving will. The torturous chemistry between them contrasts with the sympathetic meeting of souls in the marriages of Daniel and Mirah and of Klesmer and Catherine Arrowpoint. Eliot's repeated satire against marriage as an arrangement for the suitable inheritance of property is nowhere so stinging as in the Reverend Mr. Gascoigne's advice to Gwendolen that it is her "duty" to elevate her family by marrying rank, and in Mr. and Mrs. Arrowpoint's insistence to Catherine that her "duty" as an heiress lies in marrying the proper manager of their estate. The author's treatment of marital intimacy observes customary Victorian restraint but reveals evils of imposed brutality unusual in contemporary fiction. Her sensibility is

represented in Klesmer's plea to Catherine: "don't give yourself for a meal to a minotaur."

This novel develops Eliot's most complex psychological explorations and moral implications of interpersonal action.

## SUMMARY

In its concern with human motives, especially unconscious ones, George Eliot's fiction is a major stage in the development of the psychological novel. Her treatment of sexual identity and relationships influenced the fiction of Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce. Depicting marriage as an inescapable trap, she treats both male and female characters with sympathy but is particularly concerned to expose and reform the suffering of subjugated women. Her analyses of Self and Other are often explained as deriving from the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, but there seems little doubt that Eliot's remarkable insight grew primarily from her own experience and imagination.

Carolyn F. Dickinson

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*The Mill on the Floss*, 1860

*Silas Marner*, 1861

*Romola*, 1862-1863

*Felix Holt, the Radical*, 1866

*Middlemarch*, 1871-1872

*Daniel Deronda*, 1876

#### SHORT FICTION:

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#### POETRY:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What characteristics of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* are also traits of George Eliot?
- Investigate the subject of education for girls as displayed in Eliot's novels.
- Why has *Middlemarch* been a favorite novel of many writers but has seldom been a favorite of other readers?
- What defects render Eliot's churchmen ineffectual?
- Does Eliot ever create a female character whose role is something other than a frequently frustrated companion of a man?
- Is Eliot's rigorous moral imagination a barrier to modern readers?
- Had Eliot been born in the middle of the twentieth century, what occupation might you have expected her to pursue?



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## T. S. ELIOT

**Born:** St. Louis, Missouri  
September 26, 1888

**Died:** London, England  
January 4, 1965

*Accepted by most scholars as the most influential poet of the twentieth century, Eliot stood at the vanguard of a movement that reshaped the way poetry is written and written about.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888, the youngest child of a family with four daughters and a son. Eliot's grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, arrived in St. Louis from Boston in 1834 and quickly rose to prominence. The Reverend Eliot made his mark not only as a Unitarian minister and abolitionist but also as an educator, becoming chancellor of Washington University in 1872. As a boy, Eliot was much influenced by his grandfather and by his family's New England heritage. His summers were usually spent in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where his father had built a vacation home. His mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, herself a poet, also reinforced in Eliot a sense of his family's essentially New England outlook. As he matured, his sympathies shifted still farther east, to Great Britain. In his twenties, Eliot established permanent residence in England, eventually becoming a British citizen. The pull of these three very different places—the Midwest, New England, and Great Britain—is crucial to understanding Eliot both as a man and as a writer. His last great work, *Four Quartets* (1943), is in a sense an extended meditation on the way that history and geographical place had formed him.

Although his father, Henry Ware Eliot, was a

business executive (president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company), Eliot was encouraged by his mother to pursue literary and scholarly interests. In fact, his early education was begun under her supervision, and her love of poetry very likely sparked his own. In 1898, Eliot began attending Smith Academy in St. Louis, and in 1906, he spent a year at Milton Academy in Massachusetts before entering Harvard. He received his B.A. in philosophy in 1909.

During this period, Harvard's department of philosophy was rich in stimulating and original thinkers, and Eliot studied under two important twentieth century philosophers, George Santayana and Irving Babbitt. He began work on his master's at Harvard in the fall of 1909. He spent the following academic year, 1910-1911, studying in France, where he attended the lectures of another major modern philosopher, Henri Bergson. At the same time, however, Eliot became acquainted with the poetry of the nineteenth century French Symbolist poets, particularly Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Jules Laforgue. Although he had written poetry throughout his adolescence and later at Harvard, the work of the Symbolists transformed him as a writer. His verse began to change radically, culminating four years later in the publication of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915).

The year that Eliot spent in France, his biographers agree, altered him psychologically as well. He returned to Harvard deepened by his year abroad and less content with the narrow confines of scholarship. Nevertheless, he pursued graduate

work until 1914, reading Indian philosophy and studying the work of F. H. Bradley, the subject of his dissertation.

By 1915, Eliot was living in London and becoming known in literary circles there: He had met another rising American poet, Ezra Pound, who was instrumental in seeing to it that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was published by Harriet Monroe in *Poetry* magazine (June, 1915). Pound also pushed forward the publication of Eliot’s first book, *Prufrock, and Other Observations* (1917).

Practical life in London was difficult for Eliot at first. He taught a variety of subjects at High Wycombe Grammar School and then at Highgate School. In 1917, he began work for Lloyds Bank as a clerk in the colonial and foreign department. At the same time, he was steadily publishing reviews and criticism in a number of well-known English journals, thus strengthening his literary reputation. In 1919, *Poems* was published, and in 1920 a collection of essays, *The Sacred Wood*, assured his stature as a critic. Then in 1922 *The Waste Land* appeared. Thereafter, Eliot’s position as one of the twentieth century’s leading poets was no longer in doubt.

This was also a period of severe personal stress for Eliot. He had married Vivien Haigh-Wood in 1915, and the marriage had been plagued with difficulties nearly from the outset. Both husband and wife were often ill with a variety of psychological and physical ailments, and she was eventually institutionalized. In the fall and winter of 1921-1922, Eliot was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and doctors prescribed travel and rest. It was during this period of recuperation that *The Waste Land* was composed.

Financial pressures also continued to weigh on Eliot, but these were relieved when, in 1922, he was given the editorship of *The Criterion*, a literary quarterly that Eliot managed until 1939. This position led in turn to his becoming a director of the publishing firm of Faber & Faber. He stayed with the firm until his retirement.

Throughout, his friend Pound continued to help him both in his personal life and in his literary career. *The Waste Land* had originally run to almost eight hundred lines, but Pound had cut the original nearly in half, tightening and focusing the work. Pound had also been a key figure in persuading Lady Rothermere, *The Criterion*’s financial

backer, to hire Eliot as a fully salaried editor in chief. After World War II, when Pound’s reputation was badly clouded, Eliot was quick to recognize his debt to “Uncle Ez.” (It was Pound who gave Eliot his famous nickname “Possum.”)

Eliot became an Anglo-Catholic in 1927. Throughout the remainder of his life, he was to explore the meaning of Christianity in his poetry, his essays, and his drama. In fact, his first substantial dramatic work, *The Rock: A Pageant Play* (pr., pb. 1934), was intended to be staged within the church. Subsequent poetic dramas—especially *Murder in the Cathedral* (pr., pb. 1935)—were animated by religious themes.

By 1940, Eliot was one of the most notable British literary figures, a key arbiter of taste and a keen critic of modern culture. *Four Quartets*, his last major nondramatic work, brought together the several threads of his life—personal, historic, and religious—and capped his reputation as the foremost poet of his time. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

The Nobel was only the chief distinction among dozens of awards and honors Eliot received during the last years of his life. He had become the English-speaking world’s most distinguished man of letters, a role that he seemed to adopt easily. However, like many of the earlier roles that he had played, that of the Great Man seemed to conceal the private Eliot, a true self that he rarely revealed to anyone. The one exception here may perhaps have been his second wife, Valerie Fletcher, whom he married in 1957. His last years with her, according to Eliot himself, may have been his happiest. He died in London on January 4, 1965.

## ANALYSIS

Writing about the poetry of Eliot is difficult for a number of reasons. One major difficulty is that Eliot himself helped dictate the rules for how critics interpret poetry. He did this through his many influential essays on poetry, beginning with those in *The Sacred Wood*, and through the way he transformed the style of modern poetry. Every young poet writing in English after Eliot has had either to imitate or to reject him (often both).

Eliot as a thinker was profoundly interested in the role of literary tradition—the impact of earlier great writers on later ones. However, he himself in a sense started from scratch. When Pound first



read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” he was astonished. Eliot, Pound wrote, “has actually trained himself and modernized himself on his own.”

Sometime in the period from 1908 through 1910, Eliot managed to create a new poetic style in English. During this time, he had been reading the French Symbolist poets, who had flourished in the last half of the nineteenth century. Eliot was especially drawn to Laforgue, whose dramatic monologues contained a mixture of highly sophisticated irony and an original, difficult style. “The form in which I began to write,” Eliot later commented, “was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue. . . . The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only found in French.”

The immediate result of this new style was “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the first major modernist poem. Modernism was an artistic movement that lasted, in American and English literature, from about 1900 to 1940, although most literature since that time continues to be heavily influenced by modernist techniques. These techniques, first developed largely by Pound and Eliot, involved the use of free verse (poetry without regular meter and rhyme), multiple speakers (or personae) within one poem, and a disjointed, nonlinear style.

Another clear influence of French Symbolist poetry on “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was Eliot’s use of intensely urban imagery: Prufrock is a citizen of the modern city, an acute observer of its confusion, grime, and poignancy. The poem’s opening lines are reminiscent of images that French readers had found in the work of Baudelaire. For English readers, however, the stark pictures of Eliot’s poem were startling: “Let us go then, you and I,/ When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table.” When *Prufrock, and Other Observations* appeared in 1917, readers knew that a new and powerful poetic movement was beginning to make itself felt. Eliot and Pound knew that they were creating a literary revolution: Both poets actively furthered the revolution through their essays, articles, and reviews. Two years later, in 1919, *Poems* was published. The volume included “Gerontion,” a monologue spoken by an old man and cast in blank verse. Once again, the setting was bleakly urban

and the sensibility of the speaker was distinctly modern, which meant that the speaker’s viewpoint was ironic, detached, and resigned.

*The Sacred Wood*, a collection of essays, appeared soon after the publication of *Poems*. Scholars still debate the impact on subsequent literature of these relatively short prose articles, most of which were written for literary magazines or newspapers. Students of modern English literature agree, however, that these essays, like the poems that preceded them, permanently altered the way readers assessed poetry. Eliot not only shaped readers’ perceptions of modern poetry but also reevaluated the poetry of the past, the “tradition,” as Eliot termed it.

Two essays from the collection are particularly important: “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “Hamlet and His Problems.” In the first, Eliot sets out two key critical ideas: the nature of the tradition and the “impersonal theory of poetry.” For Eliot, the tradition of literature comprised a living body of works that both influenced contemporary writers and, at the same time, were somehow changed by the light cast on them by modern works. According to Eliot, the masterful poet, fully conscious of working within the tradition, is very much an instrument of the tradition; that is, he or she is in a way an impersonal medium for the common literary heritage. In “Hamlet and His Problems,” Eliot introduced the theory of the “objective correlative,” the idea that the words of literature should correspond exactly with things and with emotions.

One last key critical idea of this period, introduced in “The Metaphysical Poets” and “Andrew Marvell,” was the “dissociation of sensibility.” A practical effect of Eliot’s emphasis on literary tradition was to give new importance to literary periods that had been neglected; one of these, in Eliot’s view, was the era of the Metaphysical poets at the beginning of the seventeenth century. He believed that English poetry had declined in the period following the Metaphysical poets, such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell, and that the cause of this decline lay in a “dissociation of sensibility.” In other words, thought and feeling in poems (sensibility) began to be severed (the dissociation). Poets were no longer able to join the intellect and the emotions to produce true masterworks.

These three ideas—the impersonal theory of

poetry, the objective correlative, and the dissociation of sensibility—certainly changed the way American and British scholars studied poetry: Innovative critical schools, such as the American New Criticism of the late 1920's and 1930's, were the result, and university training in literature was also changed by these principles.

Easily as important, however, is the fact that Eliot's theories go a long way toward explaining what he was trying to do in his poetry. In his next major poem, and his most famous, these ideas were given full play. *The Waste Land* is unquestionably one of the most important poems of the twentieth century. Its importance lies in its literary excellence—its insight and originality—and in its influence on other poets. Although Eliot said that he always wrote with his mind firmly on tradition, *The Waste Land* broke with the look, the sound, and the subject of most poetry written since the early nineteenth century. In the poem, allusions to myth, religion, Western and Eastern literature, and popular culture are almost constant; in fact, many stretches of the poem are direct, and unacknowledged, quotations from other sources. Because no one narrator appears to be speaking the poem, the work seems as impersonal as a crowded London street. The five sections of *The Waste Land* also constitute Eliot's "objective correlative," a chain of events that sparks a particular emotional mood. The mood is one of despair, loneliness, and confusion—the central feelings, Eliot believed, of modern city dwellers.

During the early and mid-1920's, Eliot struggled to emerge from his own private wasteland. Many of the poems of this period, such as "The Hollow Men," reflect his desperation. At the same time, he was deeply immersed in the study of the great medieval poet Dante, whose poetry and prose seemed to illuminate a way that a poet could approach religion and achieve serenity of spirit. Accordingly, at the end of the decade Eliot joined the Church of England; from then until the end of his life, he was a faithful to it. *Ash Wednesday* (1930) accurately describes the stage in Eliot's life that hovered between intellectual, nonbelieving despair and instinctive religious faith. In the poem, the speaker is far less impersonal than in earlier works: There is no reason to suppose, in fact, that the narrator is not Eliot himself, a man desperately seeking his God.

By 1930, Eliot was firmly established as an influential man of letters. As his literary star continued to rise, however, his personal life became more difficult. By then, he had separated from Vivien, and in 1933, with the cooperation of her family, he had his wife committed to a mental institution. Thereafter, Eliot lived the life of a secular monk. He actually roomed in the households of celibate clergy throughout much of the 1930's.

Eliot had also become an even more prolific writer of reviews and essays. In fact, although he published a considerable amount of important criticism during the 1930's (including *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, 1933, and *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, 1934), his output of poetry had slowed to a trickle.

Not so his dramatic writing. Evidently, Eliot's creative drive had rechanneled itself toward the writing of plays, especially ones with strongly religious themes. His first full effort was *The Rock*, which was a modernized version of the traditional pageant play staged in a large church. The peak of his dramatic career, however, came with *Murder in the Cathedral*. In this play set in the Middle Ages, Eliot retells the story of the murder of Thomas à Becket by his former friend King Henry II. The work enjoyed much popular success in London and New York, and it has been repeatedly broadcast as a radio play. The widespread acceptance of *Murder in the Cathedral* led Eliot to believe that the time was ripe for a revival of poetic drama, although, as it turned out, he remained the only masterly practitioner of the form.

Eliot's last great poetic achievement came during the early 1940's, with the publication of *Four Quartets*. Written as Britain faced the threat of Adolf Hitler's armies, this long poem is strongly affirmative—a real departure, in many ways, from Eliot's previous work. Many critics argue, in fact, that this, and not *The Waste Land*, is his greatest poem. The *Four Quartets* consist of "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding" (three of which were published individually). In this sequence, Eliot has moved quite far from his earlier impersonality: The poem is nearly autobiographical, although much of it explores the relation of human beings generally to God. Each of the places named in the quartets had a deeply personal meaning to Eliot. East Coker, for

example, is the town from which the Eliot family came to the New World, and the Dry Salvages are a group of small, rocky islands off the New England coast, where Eliot vacationed as a boy.

From World War II on, Eliot seemed increasingly to find the serenity for which he was searching. He continued to write plays, and these became more approachable, more popular, even more humorous.

Eliot definitely had his comic, whimsical side. Nowhere is this better displayed than in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), the series of poems about extraordinary felines that went into the making of *Cats* (1981), the successful Broadway hit musical. It seems reasonable to suppose that Eliot would have appreciated his success on Broadway. One of the twentieth century's most difficult poets had at last found easy popular acclaim.

### **"THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK"**

**First published:** 1915 (collected in *Prufrock, and Other Observations*, 1917)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A genteel, middle-aged speaker describes the emptiness and anxiety of a life lived in a grim twentieth century city.*

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" marks the beginning of the modernist movement in Anglo-American poetry. It is the first English-language poem in the twentieth century to employ free verse, startling juxtapositions of allusion and situation, an intensely self-conscious speaker (or "persona"), and a truly urban setting. The initial quotation is from Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), the great fourteenth century epic describing the author's descent into the Inferno and eventual ascent into Paradise. The lines (in Italian) are spoken by one of the damned souls to Dante as he journeys through Hell. Like souls in the Inferno, Prufrock exists in a kind of living death.

In the poem's opening lines, Prufrock invites the reader to accompany him as he walks through a modern city making his social rounds. Perhaps he

assumes that they share his comfortable wealth and socially active lifestyle. As his proper, even prissy, name implies, Prufrock is neurotic, fearful, sensitive, and bored. His upper-class friends—the women who "come and go"—apparently lead arid and pointless lives. At any rate, what is evident right from the outset of the poem is that Prufrock is unhappy with his life. His unhappiness, he suspects, has something to do with the society in which he lives: There is, for example, the jarring clash between the grim cityscape through which he walks and the mindless tea-party conversation of his friends.

One important way in which this poem is different from the poetry of the century before it is the way in which the speaker describes nature. In the nineteenth century, poets described the natural world as the real home of God, as the fountain at which weary human beings could refresh themselves. A nineteenth century poet, such as William Wordsworth, might have described the coming of evening as being "gentle, like a nun." In contrast, Prufrock's evening is like a very sick person awaiting an operation; the dusk over the city is anesthetized and spread-eagled on an operating table. The urban images that follow this one are just as grim: Prufrock's city, which is perhaps Eliot's London, is a town of cheap hotels and bad restaurants. The streets appear sinister; they seem to threaten the people walking in them, bullying them with pointed questions. The urban landscape is made even more ominous by a "yellow fog" that, catlike, "rubs" against windows and "licks" the "corners of the evening."

As night falls and the fog settles in, Prufrock describes another landscape—this time, a temporal one where time stretches to infinity. He knows, however, that he will not be able to use this time to advantage; as usual, he will be indecisive. "There will be time" enough, he says, but only for "a hundred indecisions."

Like the limitless streets outside his window, infinite time also threatens Prufrock. The more life he has left to live, the more he is left to wonder and to question. Wondering and questioning frighten him because the answers that they provoke might challenge the perfect, unchanging regularity of his tidy existence. He knows that time is dangerous, that "In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." Nothing, in

other words, is as settled as it seems. Nothing that has happened to Prufrock in his life is particularly comforting: He would like his life to change, but at the same time he fears change and the unexpected events that change might bring. He feels as though he already knows everything that is bound to happen to him. He especially knows the kinds of people whom he is likely to continue meeting—socialites who pin him down with their critical scrutiny.

Yet something besides these general, abstract worries bothers Prufrock. His chronic indecision blocks him from some important action. The reader never learns specifically what this thwarted act might be, but Prufrock seems to address a woman, perhaps one he loves. Their friends appear to gossip about them “among the porcelain” teacups. Prufrock implies, however, that the woman would reject him if he could ever gather his courage and tell her how he feels. He pictures her sitting in her genteel drawing room, explaining that she had not meant to encourage him: “That is not what I meant at all,” she tells him.

Prufrock knows, in any case, that he cannot be the hero of anyone’s story; he cannot be Hamlet (despite Hamlet’s similar bouts of indecision)—instead, he is only a bit player, even a Fool. He imagines himself growing old, unchanged, worrying about his health and the “risks” of eating a peach. Still, he faintly hears the mermaids of romance singing in his imagination, even though they are not singing to him. In a final imagined vision, he sees these nymphs of the sea, free and beautiful, calling him. Reality, however, intrudes in the form of “human voices,” perhaps those of the art-chattering women, and he is “drowned” in his empty life.

## “TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT”

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *The Sacred Wood*, 1920)

**Type of work:** Essay

*The writing of a poem is a living dynamic wherein the contemporary poet is shaped by literary tradition, while, at the same time, tradition is altered by the poet.*

Only rarely in the history of English literature has a critical essay, such as “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” so changed the way people understand poetry. Anyone who has any real interest in modern poetry—reader, critic, or poet—has had to confront this essay and decide for himself or herself its strengths and weaknesses.

One of the important ways that the essay has altered literary criticism has to do with the meaning of the title’s key words, “tradition” and “individual talent.” In the very first paragraph, Eliot indicates that, by “tradition,” he does not mean what people usually mean in talking about literature; ordinarily, a “traditional” writer is perhaps an old-fashioned writer, one who uses tried-and-true plots and a steady, understandable style. Rather, Eliot uses “tradition” in a more objective and historical sense: His definition of tradition is paradoxical because he says that the historical sense of tradition is a keen understanding of both what is timeless and what is not. A true poet understands “not only the pastness of the past, but . . . its presence.”

This is less confusing than it appears: Eliot simply means that for a poet writing in the tradition—a poet who understands his or her heritage—all the great poetry of the past is alive. When the poet writes a poem, great poems of the past help to enliven the modern work. This dynamic relationship is not finished when the poem is written, however, because the new poem casts a new light on the poems that came before. In the same way that the tradition of great poetry helped shape a new, modern poem, the contemporary poem changes the way one looks at the poems that shaped it.

Another apparent contradiction lies in Eliot’s use of “individual” in “individual talent.” He says that a poet’s true individuality lies in the ways he or she embodies the immortality of poetic “ances-

tors.” In a sense, poets who know what they are doing “plug into” tradition; electrified by the greatness of the past, they achieve a sharper profile, a greater individuality.

It is important to stress that Eliot is not saying that good poets should simply copy the poetry of the past. In fact, he argues just the opposite: Good poets bring something new into the world—“novelty,” he writes, “is better than repetition”—that makes an important advance on what has come before. To do this, the poet has to know what is truly new and different; a poet can do this only by having a thorough knowledge of the classic and traditional. To have this kind of knowledge means, in turn, that the poet needs to know not only about the poetry of his or her own language but also about the poetry of other nations and cultures.

In a crucial metaphor about midway in the essay, Eliot compares the poet to a catalyst in chemistry. He describes what happens when two gases are combined in the presence of a piece of platinum: A new compound is formed, but the platinum is unaffected. The platinum is the poet’s mind, which uses tradition and personal experience (the two gases) to create a poem. In this kind of literary combustion, the poet remains “impersonal.” That is, he or she manages to separate individual facts of life from the work of art that is being created. As Eliot says, “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium,” which is the medium of poetry.

In a third, concluding section of the essay, Eliot draws an important conclusion, one that has been crucial to the way poetry has been studied since the 1920’s. The essay shifts the study of a poem from an emphasis on the poet as a person, to the study of the poem isolated from the poet. After reading this essay, critics would increasingly concentrate on the internal structure of poetry—the tropes, figures, and themes of the work. At the same time, critics would banish the life of the writer from the study of his or her writings; the poet’s personality, as Eliot seemed to imply, was irrelevant to the artwork produced. The peak of this theory was reached with the New Critics and their successors in Britain and the United States from about 1930 through the 1950’s. Later years, however, have seen a waning of the impersonal theory of poetry and a return of the poet to his or her work.

## THE WASTE LAND

**First published:** 1922

**Type of work:** Poem

*A complex tapestry of voices, cultures, and historical periods, the poem weaves a portrait of modern society in decay.*

In order to understand *The Waste Land*—one of the most difficult poems in a difficult literary period—the reader might do well to envision the work as a much-spliced film or videotape, a montage of images and sounds. This imaginary film is, in a sense, a real-life documentary: There are no heroes or heroines, and there is no narrator telling readers what to think or how to feel. Instead, Eliot allows multiple voices to tell their individual stories. Many of the stories are contemporary and portray a sordid society without values; other stories are drawn from world culture and include, among other motifs, Elizabethan England, ancient Greek mythology, and Buddhist scriptures.

The poem is divided into five sections. In the first, “The Burial of the Dead,” the speaker is an old Austro-Hungarian noblewoman reminiscing about the golden days of her youth before the disasters of World War I. The second section, “A Game of Chess,” is set in the boudoir of a fashionable contemporary Englishwoman. The third, “The Fire Sermon,” mixes images of Elizabeth’s England, the Thames and Rhine rivers, and the legend of the Greek seer Tiresias. The fourth, “Death by Water,” is a brief portrait of a drowned Phoenician sea-trader. The fifth, “What the Thunder Said,” combines the above themes with that of religious peace. These parts combine in the poem’s overall montage to create a meaning that encompasses all of them. Because the poem is so complex, that meaning must be left to the individual reader; however, many students of the poem have suggested that, generally, Eliot shows his readers the collapse of Western culture in the aftermath of the war.

Part 1 is a natural beginning for Eliot’s overall panorama because the speaker, Marie, describes her memories of a key period in modern history. Clearly, her life has been materially and culturally rich. Now in old age, thoughts of the past seem to embitter her, and she spends much of her time



reading. The following stanzas describe the visions of the Sibyl, a prophetess in Greek mythology, and compare these to the bogus fortune-telling of a modern Sibyl, Madame Sosostiris. The section's final stanza imagines a fog-shrouded London Bridge as a pathway in the Underworld, where souls fleetingly recognize one another.

In part 2, a narrator describes the sensual surroundings of a wealthy woman's bedroom—the ornate chair in which the woman sits, the room's marble floor and carved fireplace, her glittering jewels and heavy perfumes. She is bickering with a man, her husband or her lover, and complains that her “nerves are bad to-night.” Then a contrasting setting appears: a London pub. Two women are gossiping in Cockney English about a friend's marriage gone bad.

A description of the River Thames begins part 3. The narrator juxtaposes the pretty stream that Renaissance poets saw with the garbage-filled canal of the twentieth century. Most of the section tells the story of an uninspired seduction. The speaker, ironically, is the Greek sage Tiresias, who, in legend, was changed from a man into a woman. In this androgynous mode, Tiresias can reflect on both the male and the female aspects of the modern-day affair between a seedy clerk and a tired typist. This section ends with snippets of past songs about the Thames and the Rhine.

The brief stanzas in part 4 picture Phlebas, a Middle Eastern merchant from the late classical period. The tone is elegiac: The speaker imagines the bones of the young trader washed by the seas and advises the reader to consider the brevity of life.

The final section, part 5, is set in a barren landscape, perhaps the Waste Land itself, where heat lays its heavy hand on a group of anonymous speakers. They seem to be apostles of some sacrificed god, perhaps Christ himself. The opening stanza's description of confused “torchlight on sweaty faces” in a garden and an “agony in stony places” tends to suggest this Christian interpretation. Hope, however, has fled the holy man's followers, who wander through the desert listening to thunder that is never followed by rain. Nevertheless, the thunder holds some small promise. The poem shifts setting again. Now the thunder crashes over an Indian jungle while the speaker listens and “translates” the thunderclaps. The thunder

speaks three words in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language, which is also the language of Buddhist and Hindu scriptures. The first word is “Datta” (“given”), the second is “Dayadhvam” (“compassion”), and the third is “Damyata” (“control”). In this three-part message from the natural world, which tells of God's gifts of compassion and self-control, the speaker finally finds cause for “peace”—the “shantih” of the closing line.

## FOUR QUARTETS

**First published:** 1943

**Type of work:** Poem

*The speaker meditates on his own life, the passing of time, and his own relation to God and to other human beings, living and dead.*

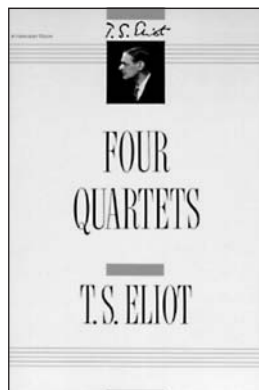
Perhaps the best way to approach the *Four Quartets* is to view it as Eliot's spiritual autobiography. This long work is by far the poet's most personal poem. In it, he drops the many masks of his earlier verse—Prufrock or the multiple speakers of *The Waste Land*—and meditates on the meaning of life and God. The poem is divided into four sections, the “quartets” of the title: “Burnt Norton,” the name of an English country house with a memorable garden; “East Coker,” the village from which Eliot's English ancestors left for the New World; “The Dry Salvages,” a group of small islands off the New England coast, to which Eliot would sail as a young man; and “Little Gidding,” the name of a religious community led by Nicholas Ferrar, a seventeenth-century Christian mystic.

Much of the language in this poem is undramatic, abstract, and philosophical. In fact, it is important to remember that Eliot was trained as a philosopher, so that when he uses common words such as “time” or “future,” he has thought carefully about a very particular definition. As the poem makes clear, for Eliot “time” was not at all a vague concept.

“Burnt Norton” opens, as did *The Waste Land*, with a memory of childhood, although this time the memory is Eliot's own. He recalls a garden where children played hide-and-seek. The surroundings are calm, quiet, and lovely—like the

memories themselves. The following parts of this first section approach the passage of time in different ways: the change of seasons as it is charted by the movement of constellations, the “still point” of religious illumination and its contrast with the “internal darkness” of worldly life, and the struggle to capture time and eternity in words (Eliot’s own struggle as a poet).

Eliot imagines an older kind of time in “East Coker,” the poem’s second section. This is rural time, the cycle of the seasons in planting and harvest. Because the farming village of East Coker is also in Eliot’s own past, as the place of his forebears, it represents historical time as well. In the section’s third stanza, he pictures what an old country festival might have been like before the Eliots departed for America. When he looks at what his ancestors have bequeathed him, however, he feels deceived. He had hoped that their heritage would teach him how to grow old gracefully, but as he looks forward into old age, he sees only death—his own and that of others, no matter how powerful or famous. Thus he struggles to come to terms with the darkness. Words, he knows, cannot encompass death. He counsels himself to have patience, neither to hope nor to strive. Most of all, he realizes that he needs to put himself under the care of the “wounded surgeon,”



a figure for Christ. Dying repentant, Eliot believes, is the only true life.

“The Dry Salvages,” the third section, comprises two memories of Eliot’s youth: the rhythm of the Mississippi River in his St. Louis boyhood and the sounds of the Atlantic Ocean near his family’s summerhouse. The river and the sea are “gods,”

living beings that modern people have ignored—perhaps to their peril. His thoughts turn to New England fishermen, constantly fighting the elements, waiting to return to land. He draws a parallel between these men, cast on the harsh rhythms of the ocean, and his readers. They, too, are set on a voyage whose end cannot be known. They are not the same people who left port, for every moment they are changing. Like the sea, everything around the reader is unstable and flowing. Just as individuals are incessantly losing their past selves, so they are unable to see through the mists of the future. Memory remains their only reality, unless they attain the timelessness of the saint.

“Little Gidding,” the last section, hints at an answer to Eliot’s perplexity with the many kinds of time—human, natural, and divine. As he sits in a old English chapel, he hears a “Calling.” Through Love, human beings are redeemed, and through death, they are mysteriously born again.

## SUMMARY

Many readers of modern poetry know the twentieth century as “The Age of Eliot.” Be that as it may, T. S. Eliot’s stature ranks him among the two or three great English-language poets of the last hundred years (the others being, perhaps, Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats).

This is so for three reasons. First, as Pound pointed out, Eliot was the century’s poetic forerunner: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” stands at the threshold of the twentieth century’s modernist tradition. Second, certain of Eliot’s poems—especially *The Waste Land*—seem to convey the anonymity, confusion, and urbanity of the time better than those of any other poet. Third, Eliot was perhaps the last “Man of Letters” in the old English literary tradition; his views on literature and the canon held ultimate authority for many years and still have an astonishing influence throughout the English-speaking world.

John Steven Childs

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain how T. S. Eliot's reading habits as a young man helped shape his literary career.
- What aspects of Eliot's depiction of J. Alfred Prufrock are totally missing in the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning and those of other earlier poets?
- Explain how Eliot's understanding of the key words in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" govern the thesis of the essay.
- What must a person coming to Eliot with a reading background of poetry written before World War I learn for a minimally successful understanding of a work such as *The Waste Land*?
- Does *The Waste Land* ever become, or come dangerously close to becoming, a waste land of Eliot's scholarship?
- After poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, why does Eliot's *Four Quartets* disappoint some readers?
- What is most compelling, for a reader disinclined to share Eliot's religious convictions, in his later religious poetry?

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## BUCHI EMECHETA

**Born:** Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria  
July 21, 1944

*As one of the most prominent and prolific African female writers, Emecheta examines and critiques the roles and customs of African women and men in present-day Nigeria and London. She is one of the first writers who contributed to the development of an African female literary tradition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta (eh-mee-CHEH-tah) was born on July 21, 1944, in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria, to Egbo parents, Jeremy Nwaudike and Alice Ogbanje Okwuekwu Emecheta. Wanting their two children to maintain connections with their cultural traditions, the parents would travel back and forth to their native village, Ibuza. There Emecheta was exposed to storytellers—an influence that is evident in her work, for her writing style is one of storytelling. She credits listening to storytellers, particularly her father's sister “Big Mother,” as the factor that shaped her literary imagination.

Emecheta's father died when she was nine years old, and the family was separated. Emecheta went to live with her mother's cousin in Lagos, her mother was inherited by her husband's brother, and her younger brother went to live with her father's brother. Although Emecheta relates that she was treated like a servant, she was able to continue her education by winning a scholarship to Methodist Girls' High School, and consequently she was able to fulfill one of her childhood dreams—to receive an education.

When her dream of attending the University of Ibadan was thwarted, she married Sylvester Onwordi in 1960, to whom she had been promised since the age of eleven. She worked for the American embassy in Lagos for two years supporting the family of four and then followed her husband, a student, to London. There she continued to support the growing family, which then consisted of five children—Chiedu (Florence), Ikechukwu (Sylvester), Chukwuemeka (Jake), Obiajulu (Christy), and Chiago (Alice)—by working as a librarian at the British Museum. Surrounded by books and

having had the dream of being a writer since childhood, Emecheta began to write in her spare time. She completed her first manuscript; however, it was burned by her husband, an action that led to their separation.

Deciding that the one thing she could do was write and needing to support her family, Emecheta began writing a column for the *New Statesman*. Articles submitted to the magazine formed the basis of her first novel, *In the Ditch* (1972). A second novel, *Second-Class Citizen*, followed in 1974. These two highly autobiographical novels (published together in 1983 as *Adah's Story*) relate the protagonist's experience of immigrating to and living in London. In 1970, she entered London University and received a degree in sociology, with honors, in 1974, thereby fulfilling yet another dream.

While working as a youth worker and sociologist, Emecheta continued writing. In 1976, she wrote two plays for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)—*A Kind of Marriage*, adapted as a novel in 1986, and *The Ju Ju Landlord*—and also reconstructed her first manuscript, which was published as *The Bride Price* (1976). These were followed by *The Slave Girl* (1977), which received the Jock Campbell Award for Commonwealth Writers, and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), which addresses the issue of a woman's worth as it relates to her fertility. Unlike Emecheta's first two novels, these are set in Nigeria.

In late 1970's and early 1980's, Emecheta traveled abroad, serving as a visiting professor at universities in the United States and at the University of Calabar in Nigeria; in 1982, she returned to England as a lecturer and then a fellow at London University. Emecheta also began to write books for



children and young adults, including *Titch the Cat* (1979), *Nowhere to Play* (1980), *The Wrestling Match* (1980), *The Moonlight Bride* (1980), and *Naira Power* (1982), while continuing to write for adults. Both *Destination Biafra*, which addresses civil war in Nigeria, and *Double Yoke*, which is set on a university campus in Nigeria, appeared in 1982, the same year that Emecheta and her son, Sylvester, established the Ogwugwu Afor Publishing Company. *The Rape of Shavi*, an allegorical work about the relationship between Africa and Europe, followed in 1983, the year that Emecheta was named among the Best of Young British Writers by the Book Marketing Council.

Before returning to fiction writing, Emecheta published her autobiography, *Head Above Water*, in 1986. She has since produced the novels *Gwendolen* (1989; pb. in the United States as *The Family*, 1990), which relates the story of a West Indian-born woman who immigrates to London; *Kehinde* (1994), the tale of a middle-aged woman who gives up her profession and returns to Nigeria, only to learn that her husband has taken a second wife; and *The New Tribe* (2000), the story of Chester, a black Nigerian child adopted by a white family in England who searches for his identity. With its male protagonist and focus on transracial adoption, *The New Tribe* is the greatest departure from the themes of her previous novels.

In 1990, Emecheta became a member of the PEN Club, and in 1992, she received an honorary doctorate of literature degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey. In 2008, Emecheta was living in both London, where she was a member of the Arts Council of Great Britain, and in Ibuza, Nigeria. By realizing her childhood dreams of receiving an education and becoming a writer, Emecheta, a storyteller, essayist, novelist, playwright, autobiographer, and poet, is recognized as the most prolific African female writer to date.

## ANALYSIS

In the essay "Feminism with a Small 'f'" and in her autobiography, Emecheta states that it was through growing up listening to storytellers that she decided that she wanted to become a storyteller herself. This explains her writing style, which is much like that of storytelling. Although her work does not only tell stories about the subjugation of

women or advance an African view of feminism, as is often asserted by critics, it is writing that focuses primarily on the experiences of women. Running throughout Emecheta's fiction are the themes of women desiring education, defying tradition, and making choices about their own lives.

The desire for education is present in almost all of Emecheta's novels, from a young girl who decides to attend school, even when her parents do not allow it, to a young woman enduring humiliation and harassment while pursuing higher education. Choosing a husband of one's own choice, rather than being controlled by the bride price, is also a prevalent theme. A number of Emecheta's women choose men who cannot afford the bride price; other women run to the men, likewise keeping them from having to pay the bride price. Women also choose to have or abort children, to leave abusive husbands, and to reject polygamous relationships.

While Emecheta does reveal a number of African practices and traditions that may be repressive for women, she also writes about practices that empower them. Thus, while women suffer because of problems with fertility or because of incest and polygamy, there are those who experience financial independence as traders and businesswomen, as well as those who achieve emotional and psychological independence.

Emecheta also tells stories about family. She focuses on issues such as orphans (both female and male), women bonding, and mother-daughter as well as father-daughter relationships. Because feminist readings of the novels often become the focus of her work, the fact that the father-daughter bond is stronger than that of the mother-daughter relationship in a number of her novels is usually ignored.

Emecheta is aware that her work serves not only to reveal African practices and traditions, and their contradictions, but also to introduce readers to African culture and traditions—mythic histories before the era of colonization, proverbs and sayings, songs, foods, cultural artifacts, and language, both African (such as the words "dibia" and "lappa") and Africanized English (such as "dokita" for "doctor, or "felenza" for "influenza"). The setting for many of her novels is the early half of the twentieth century, where traditional cultures are affected not only by the end of colonialism but also by modern-

ism. As a result, her work presents such themes as the clashing and blending of cultures—African and European, traditional religions versus Christianity, and the generational differences between elders and the young. Whatever the themes, almost all of Emecheta's work is tinged with irony, which she asserts is a feature of storytelling, and all of her stories contain philosophical lessons.

## SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN

**First published:** 1974

**Type of work:** Novel

*Adah immigrates with her husband to London, where she is treated as a second-class citizen, not in society but in her own home.*

*Second Class-Citizen*, which tells the story of Adah Ofili from her childhood to her early years in London, begins with a discussion of dreams. The eight-year-old Adah, who was born in Lagos during World War II, can only dream of going to school, since she was not allowed to attend because she was not a boy. One day when her mother is distracted, Adah goes to the Methodist School where a neighbor teaches, and he allows her to remain for the day. When she returns home, the police are there. Her mother is punished for child neglect, yet Adah is allowed to continue attending school.

A few months later, Adah's father goes to the hospital but does not return. Her mother is inherited by her father's brother, her brother goes to live with one of her father's cousins, and Adah is sent to live with one of her mother's brothers. Only because she could bring a higher bride price if educated, she is allowed to remain in school. Suitors come; however, she is not interested in any of them. Instead, fascinated with the possibility of winning a scholarship to secondary school, Adah steals the money for the sitting fee, passes the examination, and wins the scholarship. She attends the Methodist Girls' School and completes the four-year course.

Wanting to continue her education at the university, Adah knows that she will not be allowed to live on her own. Therefore, she marries a student, Francis Obi, who is too poor to pay the bride price,

with the hope of being able to attend school and study at her own pace. Instead, she gives birth to a daughter and begins working for the American consulate library. Having had the dream of going to the United Kingdom, she shares it with her husband. They decide to go, but his family, who depend upon her income, approves of his leaving but insists that Adah remain in Lagos. She agrees for a time but eventually persuades her in-laws to allow her also to travel to England.

Adah's dream comes true as she sails for London with two young children; however, the narrator makes it clear that all dreamers know that there are setbacks to dreams. For Adah, there are complications when she gives birth to her third child. She is in the hospital for a few weeks but is ignored by her husband. Rather than being concerned about her welfare or the child's, he is more interested in using the money she receives from work for his personal advancement. Adah then comes to accept that she did not marry the man of her dreams.

Francis informs Adah that in England she is a second-class citizen. Noting Adah's disappointment at their living conditions among a lower class than they would have associated with in Lagos, he tells her she cannot discriminate against her own people, for they are all second-class now. In spite of Francis's conciliation, Adah rejects the notion of being a second-class citizen: She has what is considered a first-class citizen's job and insists upon taking care of her own children, a trait linked in England only to white women. When her son, Victor, becomes seriously ill and she believes it is because of the conditions at the home where he is staying while she works, Adah approaches her children's social worker and insists that they be moved from that sitter. Because of Adah's fierce persistence, her children are placed in a nursery. Thus, she learns that what Francis has been telling her is not true: Second-class citizens can fight for their rights.

Francis's idea is further undermined when Victor again becomes ill, this time on Christmas Day. Francis calls their doctor, but the doctor refuses to make a house visit. Francis summons two policemen, who come to see the child and agree that a doctor is needed. Although the family doctor, an Indian, does not come, a Chinese one does. Adah is keenly aware of that which Francis mostly likely does not see: England equally provides some services for both its first- and second-class citizens.

When it is clear that she will not accept the second-class citizenship that Francis seeks to impose at home, and when she realizes that he does not respect her and her dreams, scoffing at her desire to be a writer and destroying her first manuscript, Adah takes her five children and leaves.

## THE BRIDE PRICE

**First published:** 1976

**Type of work:** Novel

*Aku-nna's life changes upon her father's death. She leaves Lagos for the town of Ibuza and comes into conflict with her ancestral home's customs and traditions.*

*The Bride Price*, set in Lagos in the early 1950s, opens with the thirteen-year-old Aku-nna (whose name means “a father’s wealth”) and her eleven-year-old brother, Nna-nndo (“father is the shelter”) walking into their apartment and seeing their father, Ezekiel Odia, home from work. He explains that he is going to the hospital for medical attention for a foot wound he had received while fighting in World War II, but he promises to be back by the evening meal. When he does not return, two uncles, Uche and Joseph, come to assist, for the children’s mother, Ma Blackie (so named because of her black skin) is in Ibuza, visiting the river goddess because of fertility problems. Three weeks later, the father does return—to be buried. The children realize that they are orphans and that their lives will no longer be the same.

Once Ma Blackie returns to Lagos, the family learns its fate: They are to move to Ibuza, as Ma Blackie is to live with her husband’s older brother, Okonkwo. Ezekiel has made financial provisions for his family; consequently, they can remain together. Ma Blackie is able to invest in and trade palm oil, and Nna-nndo, as well as Aku-nna, who

will be forced to marry so the bride price can be used to ensure her brother’s education, are able to remain in school. Ma Blackie soon becomes Okonkwo’s fourth wife.

Aku-nna quickly captures the attention of her twenty-four-year-old schoolteacher, Chike Ofolue, because she is quiet yet intelligent. Nevertheless, she is informed by her cousin that the Ibuza women are not allowed to associate with him as he is the son of former slaves, those who had been kidnapped to be sold to the Europeans. (According to a story that his mother told Chike, his princess grandmother was not sold because she was so beautiful. She was allowed to have children, and when the slave trade became illegal, her sons were given to the missionaries. As a result, they were educated and became teachers; their children became lawyers and doctors.) Aku-nna responds to Chike’s attentions, as he is the only one who takes an interest in her thoughts as well as her growing womanhood.

The love interest might have been a passing fancy for Chike and Aku-nna had it not been for the resistance from the community. Instead their love grows, and Chike, who affectionately calls Aku-nna “akum” or “my wealth,” is prepared to follow the village custom. His parents will ask her parents for Aku-nna and also pay the bride price. Insulted because an oshu, or slave, would dare think of marrying Aku-nna, another suitor, Okoboshi, kidnaps her as his bride. Deciding to fight back, Aku-nna tells Okoboshi that she has already given herself to Chike and, with Chike’s help, escapes. They travel to a town in midwest Nigeria and marry.

Since Okoboshi states that he has taken a lock of Aku-nna’s hair, and therefore is her husband, retaliation takes place in Ibuza: Okonkwo publicly divorces Ma Blackie and refuses to accept the bride price, the cocoa plants on the Ofolue plantation are destroyed, and the Ofolues, in turn, sue—and win. Although their actions cause much dissension in Ibuza, Aku-nna and Chike are happy. He is a manager for an oil company, she teaches school, and they soon are expecting their first child. In the midst of their happiness, Aku-nna takes ill, and even though she receives proper medical treatment, she dies in childbirth. Her last request to Chike is to name their daughter “Joy.”

The novel concludes with a paragraph that explains how Aku-nna and Chike fulfill the supersti-



tion that if a woman is to live to see her children's children, the bride price must be paid. With this paragraph, it becomes apparent that the novel is a story, told by an omniscient narrator, that contains a philosophical lesson.

## THE SLAVE GIRL

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*The orphaned Ojebeta is sold by her brother; after twenty-eight years, she returns to Ibuza and marries, and her bride price is finally paid.*

That *The Slave Girl* is narrated by a storyteller is apparent through its structure: Its prologue is one of mythical beginnings that relates the founding of Ibuza by a young prince, Umejei. The stage is set for the story, which takes place in the early twentieth century, of Okweukwu and Umeadi Oda, their two sons, Owezim and Okolie, and their daughter, Ojebeta.

Although “only a daughter,” Ojebeta is beloved because she is the only girl child who survives after so many have not. Her specialness is demonstrated through her ogbanje charms, which her father has to travel miles through dangerous territory to obtain, and her intricate facial tattoos, both of which are to ensure that she will not be sold into slavery. However, when Ojebeta's parents die of “felenza,” the seven-year-old is sold to

a relative by her brother, Okolie, for eight pounds, money that he uses to pay for his coming-of-age dance. Ojebeta becomes one of five slave girls and two boys owned by Ma Palagada, a successful market trader.

In Onitsha, Ojebeta lives the life of a slave girl; however, because of Ma Palagada's wealth and eventual conversion to

Christianity, she is allowed to attend school, to learn to sew, and—once Ma Palagada's son, Clif-

ford, informs his mother of his desire to marry Ojebeta—to receive special, more sophisticated refinement training. When Ma Palagada dies, Clifford becomes preoccupied with taking over the business, and one of Ma's daughters intends to take Ojebeta as a maid for her children. Remembering her past life in Ibuza and having had dreams of running away, Ojebeta decides to return to her homeland rather than be bought a second time.

The more refined Ojebeta does return home, begins to sell palm oil, and becomes rich based upon the village standards. That the enslaved Ojebeta has fared better than those who have never been enslaved is suggested with her prosperous return. This notion is also reiterated through the fate of some of the other slaves. The oldest slave girl, Chiago, marries Pa Palagada, becomes head of the household, and bears him four sons; Amanna, who encouraged Ojebeta to return home, is a successful business owner; and Jienuaka, one of the male slaves, marries another one of the slave girls, Nwayinuzo, and becomes a successful businessman.

When Ojebeta learns that a relative wishes to sell her for the bride price, she shaves her hair to prevent a lock from being taken. She instead chooses to marry Jacob Okonji, a man from Ibuza who was educated and lived in Lagos. Wanting to adhere to tradition, Ojebeta and Jacob seek approval from her brothers, and Okolie admits that he had sold Ojebeta. The two marry and have two children. When Ojebeta later begins to miscarry, Jacob fears it is a result of the bride price not being paid, for Ojebeta still legally belongs to the Palagadas.

When Ojebeta's husband and brothers learn that Clifford Palagada is coming to Lagos, they know he is there to collect the bride price. Jacob welcomes him into their home and pays the bride price. The storyteller-narrator concludes that years after having been sold into slavery and years after Britain had outlawed slavery, Ojebeta was once again changing masters.

## SUMMARY

Buchi Emecheta's work is identified with African feminism, for it is viewed as addressing the experience of women in a male-dominated society. Her works indeed reveal a number of repressive African practices and traditions but also include their contradictions. Nonetheless, most of



her female characters possess an independent, resilient spirit that allows them to survive, despite their suffering.

Emecheta's work also serves a second function. Through her literary technique of storytelling, her fiction continues the African oral tradition of stories that provide philosophical lessons. Emecheta best explains the purpose of her work, saying it is to "write about Africa for the whole world."

Paula C. Barnes

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are the differences in the roles and expectations for Buchi Emecheta's female protagonists and for their mothers or other female characters?
- Naming is important in African culture and in Emecheta's novels. Discuss the importance of the characters' names as well as the significance of her novels' titles.
- The practice of polygamy is seen in the works of Emecheta, yet none of the protagonists' fathers in *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, and *The Slave Girl* has more than one wife. Speculate upon the reasons for this break with tradition in Emecheta's works.
- What similarities can be seen in Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, and *The Slave Girl*?
- What philosophical lessons can be derived from *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl*?



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## SHŪSAKU ENDŌ

**Born:** Tokyo, Japan  
March 27, 1923

**Died:** Tokyo, Japan  
September 29, 1996

*Considered one of the finest Japanese novelists of the twentieth century, Endō, a Christian writer, explored relationships between the East and the West, striving to reconcile Western Christianity, with its emphasis on God's justice, with the Eastern concept of compassion.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The second son of Endō Tsunehisa and Iku, Shūsaku Endō (ehn-doh) was born in Tokyo, Japan, on March 27, 1923. He was taken to Dalian in Japanese-occupied Chinese Manchuria when he was three. When his parents divorced in 1933, he returned with his mother to Kobe, Japan. Endō Iku converted to Catholicism, and at the age of eleven, under family pressure, Shūsaku joined the Catholic Church and took the Christian name Paul; he was taunted by schoolmates because he was a Christian. In 1943, Endō entered Keio University but left shortly to work for the war effort. Returning to the university in 1945, he studied French literature and graduated in 1948. While there, he published several articles, including “Kamigami to kami to” (the gods and God) and “Katorikku sakka no mondai” (the problems confronting the Catholic author).

In 1950, Endō was among the first Japanese to study abroad following World War II. In France, he studied the work of various French Catholic writers, first at the University of Lyons and then in Paris, but in February, 1953, illness forced him to return to Japan.

Endō published two novellas, *Shiroi hito* (1954; white man), which won the thirty-third Akutagawa Prize, and *Kiroi hito* (1955; yellow man). In 1956, he taught at Jochi (Sophia) University, a private Catholic school. *Umi to dokuyaku* (*The Sea and Poison*, 1972) for which he received the Shinchosha Prize and the Mainichi Culture Prize, followed in 1957. In 1959, Endō published the novel *Obakasan* (*Wonderful Fool*, 1974) before returning to France to gather materials for a study of the Marquis de

Sade. Again, tuberculosis forced his return to Japan, where he was hospitalized for almost three years. During that time, however, he published *Kazan* (1959; *Volcano*, 1978). Endō then published the novels *Watashi ga suteta onna* (1963; *The Girl I Left Behind*, 1994), *Ryugaku* (1965; *Foreign Studies*, 1989), and *Chinmoku* (1966; *Silence*, 1969), and a dramatic version of that novel, *Ogon no kuni* (pr. 1966, pb. 1969; *The Golden Country*, 1970). In 1967, he was a lecturer at Seijō University before becoming chief editor of the journal *Mita bungaku* and publishing some short stories. In 1973, the nonfiction books *Iesu no shōgai* (*A Life of Jesus*, 1978) and *Shikai no hotori* (beside the dead sea) were published, followed by his novel *Kuchibue o fuku toki* (*When I Whistle*, 1979), in 1974.

In 1977, Endō published *Kirisuto no tanjō* (the birth of Christ), which received the Yomiuri Literary Award, and he garnered the International Dag Hammarskjöld Prize for *A Life of Jesus* in 1978. He also received the Artistic Academy Award for services to literature. His novel *Samurai* (1980; *The Samurai*, 1982) was awarded the Noma Literary Prize. In 1985, Endō was elected president of the Japan PEN Club, and the next year he published *Sukyandaru* (*Scandal*, 1988), which won the Silver Bear Award for Literature at the 1986 Berlin Festival. In subsequent years he received honorary doctorates from Georgetown University, John Carroll University, and Fujen University in Taipei, as well as being selected as a Bunka Kōrōsha (Person of Cultural Merit), one of Japan's highest honors. His novel *Fukai kawa* (1993; *Deep River*, 1994) earned him the Mainichi Cultural Arts Award. In 1995 he

was awarded the Bunka Kunsho (Order of Cultural Merit) by the emperor of Japan. Endō was short-listed for the Nobel Prize in Literature several times.

Plagued by ill health most of his life, Shūsaku Endō succumbed to his final illness on September 29, 1996. He is buried in the Fuchū Catholic Cemetery in Tokyo, Japan.

### ANALYSIS

The work of Shūsaku Endō is often described as a literature of reconciliation. As a Japanese but also a Christian, Endō dealt throughout his career with the problem of writing for an audience who did not identify readily with Christian ideas. The Japanese seem to have a sense of religion, at least in the subconscious, but that sense of what Endō called the “cosmic life” is not articulated as firm dogma as it is in Christianity. Endō sought to reconcile Western Christianity, with its emphasis on God’s justice, with the Eastern mind that is much more open to a concept of compassion. His books address such themes as the religious indifference of the East; Japanese numbness to sin and guilt; a widening gap in understanding between Eastern and Western cultures; and the struggle between martyrdom and apostasy, acceptance and alienation, and courage and cowardice.

In his early 1947 essay “Kamigami to kami to” (the gods and God), Endō sees an unfathomable gulf between the Eastern pantheistic world, in which everything is part of a whole, and the monotheistic West, where there is a clear distinction between God and man. In *Shiroi hito*, Endō develops a theme to which he will return throughout his career: the individual reacting to unconscious impulses that are incomprehensible. Closely related to this theme is another major motif in his work: the idea that all human beings leave indelible marks on those whose lives they touch, however briefly. *Shiroi hito* uses the Nazi atrocities in France during World War II to symbolize man’s inhumanity to man. Using the technique of paradoxical inversion, the protagonist comes to view the Nazis’ behavior as exhibiting basic human instincts rather than extreme callousness and of civilization pulling off a mask to expose the real nature of humankind. Later, when Jacques, a young seminarian, catches the protagonist stealing, he continues to send him Christian tracts; the protagonist is dispa-

sionate and hates what he sees as the hypocrisy of people like Jacques, who are willing to die for what they believe, since he feels that they are as prone to evil as anyone else. The protagonist struggles with the question of Original Sin and the fact that human beings are powerless to overcome it.

Prior to a lengthy hospitalization for treatment of tuberculosis, Endō published *The Sea and Poison*, a novel which may have been his best effort to delve into the realm of the unconscious. He uses vivisection by the Japanese on American prisoners of war to probe the extremes of human behavior and to seek a satisfactory distinction between sin and evil, as differentiated by a psychologist who influenced Endō. He views sin as having limits, even as necessary for establishing one’s personal identity. Unlike absolute evil, however, one may be redeemed from sin, whereas there is no potential salvation from evil. In the novel, some of the characters become aware of the concept of sin but are unable to handle it. The protagonist, Dr. Suguru, cannot understand why he so readily agreed to participate in the vivisection; he finds himself responding to the urging of his unconscious and is troubled when he discovers aspects of himself that he never before acknowledged.

With *Wonderful Fool*, Endō moves toward emphasizing humankind’s potential for salvation rather than its sin and weakness. He uses the technique of the fusion of opposites, whereby qualities that are traditionally viewed in one way come to be seen as their very opposite. Gaston, the French protagonist who comes to Japan to visit his pen pal, is a simpleminded, weak individual who loves unconditionally, even though that love is not returned and is even abused. Gaston is a Christ figure, and it is significant that he is a foreigner, for at that time love and Christianity are considered incongruities between Easterners and Westerners. The idea of a person being inspired wholly by love is alien to the Japanese mind. When Gaston is abducted by a criminal who thinks this simpleton might be useful to him in avoiding a police dragnet, Gaston is beaten for removing the bullets from the gun that the criminal planned to use to kill again. Even after the criminal’s release from prison, Gaston seeks the man out, determined to save him from the consequences of his sin, and, by extension, to save Japanese society from the elements in it that would prevent Christianity from taking root. In or-

der to learn how to love, the criminal must be loved.

In the same year *Wonderful Fool* appeared, *Volcano*, a novel about an apostate Catholic priest and a weather station director in provincial Japan, who has expert knowledge about a volcano, also was published. *The Samurai*, set in the seventeenth century, is a historical novel that recounts the diplomatic mission of Hasekura Tsunenaga to Mexico and Europe. It marks the peak of Endō's struggle with his dual Christian and Japanese heritage. In 1993, three years before Endō's death, *Deep River*, a novel about a variety of moral and spiritual dilemmas that plague a group of tourists traveling in India, was published.

Endō's achievement in the short-story genre may equal that of his novels, but because many of his short stories have not been translated into English, they are less well known outside Japan. These stories examine the same themes that are in his novels: the cultural incompatibility of East and West, the struggle to understand Christian faith and belief, and the situation of the Japanese Christian. Perhaps his best-known short-story collection is *Juichi no irogarasu* (1979; *Stained-Glass Elegies*, 1984).

## FOREIGN STUDIES

**First published:** *Ryugaku*, 1965 (English translation, 1989)

**Type of work:** Short fiction and a novella

*Two Japanese students in France and one in Rome make a strong statement about the chasm that separates the Japanese mind from the Western mind.*

*Foreign Studies* consists of two short stories and a novella that make up what Endō considered to be a novel. The first story, "A Summer in Rouen," draws on Endō's own often painful experiences when he was a student in France. The protagonist, the Japanese student Kudo, goes to France to study soon after the end of World War II. The middle-class Catholic family with whom he lives immediately gives Kudo the name Paul (Endō's own Christian name) and makes it clear that they consider him a replacement for their deceased son, Paul, who had

planned to go to Japan as a missionary. Almost from the outset, Kudo realizes that the family has little knowledge of the Japanese and that he does not fit into his new environment either. This theme of alienation and disparity between the East and the West is repeated throughout Endō's early work.

The second story, "Araki Thomas," concerns the title character, a Japanese Christian who studies in Rome during the seventeenth century. Christianity was spreading throughout Japan until 1587, when the nation's ruler, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, suddenly reversed his tolerant stance and issued an anti-Christian edict ordering all priests and missionaries out of the country. Araki, a seminarian, goes to Macao and then on to Rome around 1600. There, he is treated with great kindness, but like Kudo, he grows weary of having to put on a forced smile to suit other people's expectations. Before leaving Rome, Araki learns that twenty-six Japanese have been martyred; the Christians in Rome praise him, as if he were one of the martyrs, because they assume that when he returns to Japan he, too, will remain faithful and become one as well. Araki is asked to return to Japan and work, even if in hiding, to keep Christianity alive there.

Upon his return in 1617, he finds the persecution of Christians to be more prevalent than he had expected, and when he is arrested and tortured, he apostatizes, blackening his reputation as a priest. It would seem that his experience with the West has weakened him, highlighting the theme of the Japanese inability to survive in the Christian West. The tone of "Araki Thomas" is that of someone recounting historical fact in a matter-of-fact way.

The book ends with a novella, "And You, Too." It is about Tanaka, who, like Endō himself, is a university professor in Japan who has come to France to study the Marquis de Sade. Tanaka hopes to take in all of European culture, but gradually, amid the bleak winter setting in Paris, Tanaka, like Kudo and Araki, feels more and more isolated, both from the French people around him and from a group of Japanese who claim they are having no difficulty in assimilating into Western life. He meets Sakisaka, another Japanese academic who also has trouble reconciling the values of the East with those of the West, and who becomes ill with tuberculosis and returns to Japan feeling that he has failed.

Tanaka determines to climb up to the Marquis de Sade's castle near Avignon, where he sees a red

stain, which, in his imagination, Sade left to provide a link between himself and Tanaka. On his way back, he coughs up blood and realizes that he, too, must return, defeated, to Japan.

Endō has Sakisaka express his own sentiment when he says that he tried to assimilate in two years the culture that the French had taken two thousand years to develop, but in so doing, his illness is proof of his having lost his fight to understand the alien culture. The character voices Endō's own wish not to be like so many other Japanese people, who only drink in the culture superficially and never apprehend the essential nature of the people. Tanaka feels out of touch with his unconscious, a struggle with which Endō also had to come to terms.

Endō's point of view changes during the final twenty years of his writing, mainly because of his reflection on the unconscious in his work. He came to believe that, after all, meaningful communication between East and West was possible at the unconscious level.

## SILENCE

**First published:** *Chimmoku*, 1966 (English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Portuguese missionary apostatizes as a formality; his faith actually deepens as he rejects an earlier perception that God was silent in times of need.*

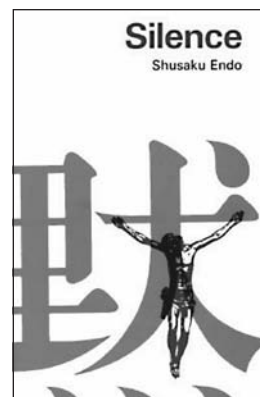
By the time Endō wrote *Silence*, he had become interested in studying the history of Christian missions in Japan, particularly during the period between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, when missionaries tried fervently to establish Christianity, only to be repelled by Japanese rulers. As Endō studied accounts of persecution and martyrdom, he noticed that little was said about those who were tortured and eventually succumbed to apostasy by the act of *efumi*, stepping on an image of the crucifix. Endō empathized most with these so-called weaklings who would live out their days suffering from guilt and loneliness. He was further fascinated by the *Kakure* (hidden)

Christians, who ostensibly apostatized, but then persisted sacrificially in trying to keep their faith alive. Questions about how he would have reacted in the same circumstance led him to conclude that he, too, would have been among the weak.

This theological debate with himself gave birth to *Silence*. Endō concluded that all mention in the archives of the Christian missionary Christovao Ferreira ended when he apostatized; hence, it is not unreasonable for the protagonist of the novel, the Portuguese missionary Rodrigues, to do the same. However, many critics and Japanese pastors viewed Endō's decision as heresy and questioned his claim to be a Christian. They questioned how a novel focusing on the silence of God when the faithful were facing torture and death could be justified. Endō was not surprised, seeing the criticism as evidence that the church was as yet unwilling to address his perceived tension between literature and religion, as well as evidence that readers viewed the apostasy scenes of the novel as its decisive point. However, in the final chapters of the book and the diary extracts that follow, it becomes clear that Rodrigues's apparent renunciation is just that, and in fact, his inward faith is deeper and more real than it had ever been.

Viewed as Endō intended, *Silence* is an attempt to get to the heart of Rodrigues's inner self and his self-discovery. There has been a genuine change: The Rodrigues who came to Japan in 1640 was totally self-assured in his mission; gradually, uncertainty creeps in, and although he puts on an optimistic facade for the sake of those who are suffering, his doubt increases. When he observes the agonizing deaths of two of the converts, he succumbs to a perception of God as silent and indifferent to their suffering. He even asks himself whether he is losing his faith, and after months of psychological confusion, he can no longer reason logically.

When Ferrerira suggests that Christ himself would have apostatized to save others, Rodrigues can only say, "No, no," but it is at this darkest mo-





ment, when he is about to step on the *fumie* (image of the crucifix), that his inner light begins to glow. He now sees the face of Christ as that of a man who wants to share humankind's pain. Rodrigues's outward renunciation frees him physically, and he is helped by the very people who had pressured him into apostasy. Rodrigues is able now to conclude that, even though his fellow priests would condemn him, he has not betrayed God; rather, he has loved Him differently.

The final section of the novel moves forward twenty years and features diary excerpts of the final years of Rodrigues, now living as Okada San'emon. He has decided to hire Kichijiro, the man who betrayed him by alerting the rulers to his whereabouts, as his servant. A union between the two develops as each embarks on a journey of self-discovery. Rodrigues (Okada) now looks upon Christ as one who stands not in judgment but as a companion who shares in his pain.

Thus, *Silence* marks a major turning point in Endō's work. Endō confessed that the distance he had sensed between Christianity and himself had

been buried, and he now viewed Christianity as a maternalistic religion, in which Christ shared in a child's pain, rather than as a judgmental, paternalistic religion. Rodrigues provides the model for Endō's acknowledging the possibility of a reconciliation of seemingly disparate views.

### SUMMARY

Throughout his career as a Japanese Christian writer, Shūsaku Endō sought to resolve and reconcile several conflicts: the conflict between his adopted religion and his profession; the conflict between his Christian responsibility to look for the potential for salvation in humankind and his belief that, as a writer, he must treat his observations of human nature honestly; the conflict between working in a culture not conducive to writing about the relationship between God and humankind and being true to exploring that relationship as a writer; the conflict between humankind's surface manifestations and its inner self; and the conflict between East and West.

Victoria Price

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*Kuchibue o fuku toki*, 1974 (*When I Whistle*, 1979)

*Samurai*, 1980 (*The Samurai*, 1982)

*Sukyandaru*, 1986 (*Scandal*, 1988)

*Hangyaku*, 1989 (2 volumes)

*Kessen no tiki*, 1991

*Otoko no issho*, 1991

*Yojo no gotoku*, 1991

*Aio chiisana budo*, 1993

*Fukai kawa*, 1993 (*Deep River*, 1994)

*Shukuteki*, 1995

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How can one justify Shūsaku Endō being called a novelist of reconciliation?
- At what point in Endō's work does he begin to believe that it may be possible for Christianity to take root in Japan?
- How does the technique of transposition work in *Wonderful Fool* and *The Girl I Left Behind*?
- Why does Endō think that the Japanese are more likely to accept a Jesus who is a mother figure rather than a father figure?
- In addition to that of East and West, what are some other contrasts that are thematically important in Endō's work?

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AP/Wide World Photos

## LAURA ESQUIVEL

**Born:** Mexico City, Mexico  
September 30, 1950

*Esquivel's novels are highly imaginative, with each hinging on a particular conceit, such as magical recipes, time travel, reincarnation, the use of Morse code to communicate with a dying man, or the imagined life of one of Mexico's most important, yet least known, historical figures, Malinche.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Laura Alicia Palomares Esquivel (ehs-kee-VEHL) was born in Mexico City on September 30, 1950, to Josephina, a homemaker, and Julio Caesar Esquivel, a telegraph operator diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She was the third of four children, three daughters and one son. Her parents later divorced, and her father's illness and death in 1999 served as the inspiration for *Tan veloz como el deseo* (2001; *Swift as Desire*, 2001), Esquivel's third novel.

Esquivel grew up in a pleasant neighborhood of Mexico City, near the Escuela Normal de Maestros, the national college for the preparation of teachers. She attended the college and trained as an elementary school teacher. For eight years she taught elementary-age children and then founded a children's theater workshop, Taller de Teatro y Literatura, with the collaboration of some friends. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Esquivel also produced dramatic pieces for children's theater and wrote for children's public television.

She met and married the actor Alfonso Arau, and their daughter Sandra was born in 1976. Arau later became a director and producer. In 1985, Esquivel and Arau collaborated on the film production of her screenplay for children, *Chido One*, also known as *Tacos de oro* (gold tacos). The Mexican Academy of Motion Pictures nominated Esqui-

vel's script for best screenplay. Esquivel also wrote the screenplay for another children's film, *Estrellita marinera* (1994; *Little Ocean Star*, 1994).

In 1989, Esquivel published the novel for which she remains most famous, *Como agua para chocolate: Novela de entregas mensuales con recetas, amores, y remedios caseros* (1989; *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*, 1992). The book quickly became a hugely successful novel in Mexico and abroad and was translated into many languages. Esquivel received the ABBY (American Booksellers' Book of the Year) Award in 1994 for the novel. She had originally conceived of the project as a screenplay, but the difficulty of financing a film led her to tell the story as a novel. Esquivel and Arau collaborated on the film adaption of the novel, with Esquivel as screenwriter and Arau as director. Like the novel, the film was enormously popular. It won ten Ariel Awards (the Mexican equivalent of the Academy Awards), including honors for best direction and best screenplay, and was nominated for a Golden Globe for best foreign film. Esquivel followed this novel with *La ley del amor* (*The Law of Love*, 1996) in 1995 and then published *Swift as Desire* six years later. *Malinche* (English translation, 2006), Esquivel's fourth novel, appeared in 2006.

Esquivel has often commented on her family's influence on her writing, particularly her grandmother's kitchen, where she learned much of the culinary magic developed as Magical Realism in *Like Water for Chocolate*. Esquivel's interest in food and cooking is also evident in her other publica-

tions. She published a book about cooking and philosophy, *Íntimas suculencias: Tratado filosófico de cocina* (1998; *Between the Fires: Intimate Writings on Life, Love, Food, and Flavor*, 2000). In addition, she has written prefaces to three cookbooks: *An Appetite for Passion* (1995), *The Secrets of Jesuit Bread-making: Recipes and Traditions from Jesuit Bakers Around the World* (1995), and *La cocina del chile* (2003; *cooking with chiles*). She has continued to write works for children, publishing *Estrellita marinera: Una fábula de nuestra tiempo* (little sea star: a fable of our time) in 1999. Esquivel is also the author of a self-help book, *El libro de las emociones: Son de la razón sin corazón* (2000), a guide for recognizing and learning how to express emotions adequately.

Esquivel divorced Alfonso Arau after the release of the film *Like Water for Chocolate*. She married a dentist, Javier Valdez, and the couple settled in Mexico City, dividing their time between Mexico and New York.

## ANALYSIS

The hybrid form of the novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, mixing the history of the Mexican Revolution, relations between the United States and Mexico, and the Magical Realism of the almost incantatory, and certainly passionate, recipes of the heroine, Tita de la Garza, resulted in a novel of enduring popularity that continues to be taught in high school and college literature classes in Spanish or in translation.

Esquivel considered her second novel, *The Law of Love*, the first multimedia novel. The setting is simultaneously the sixteenth century Mexico of Hernán Cortés's conquest of the Aztecs and the twenty-third century future in the same location. The media include color comic book panels that illustrate the text and a compact disc of musical recordings with instructions for listening to them at specific points in the narrative. The protagonist is an astroanalyst, Azucena Martínez, in the future Mexico City, looking for her soul mate, Rodrigo Sánchez. In ancient Aztec times, Rodrigo killed an innocent child and now must pay penance for his crime through several centuries. Azucena has no such karmic debts. Her love saves Rodrigo and restores the karmic balance of the universe. The novel combines romance with Mexican and Mesoamerican culture and science fiction, more magic

than Magical Realism. Though the story and structure are highly imaginative, the complicated plot may try the reader's patience and credulity.

Esquivel's third novel, *Swift as Desire*, takes a magical approach to the telegraph. The protagonist, who is of Mayan Indian heritage, has an uncanny ability to understand other people's unexpressed feelings. As he lies dying, he is unable to speak, so his daughter uses a telegraph and Morse code to communicate with her father. The novel is both a testament to Esquivel's father and a panegyric to a technology that was as revolutionary in its day as the Internet was in the late twentieth century.

The novel *Malinche* was produced at the suggestion of Santillana, a Mexican publishing company. Malinche, also known as Malintzin or Doña Marina, was Aztec booty given as a gift to Hernán Cortés to be his slave. She served as his interpreter for his dealings with the Aztecs, and thus was an indispensable component of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Malinche is considered the mother of the Mexican race because of the son she produced as a result of her liaison with Cortés, but she is also considered a traitor to the nation's indigenous people because of her liaison with the enemy and her assistance in the domination of native tribes. Few facts are known about Malinche's life, and Esquivel spent two years researching the historical context of her title character's life.

## LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE

**First published:** *Como agua para chocolate*, 1989 (English translation, 1992)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Enslaved to a family tradition that prevents the youngest daughter from marrying while her mother lives, a young woman expresses her love through the language of food.*

*Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*, as its full title suggests, is a hybrid work, combining the elements of a historical novel set during the turbulent times of the Mexican Revolution, the mystical and healing art of food that Esquivel learned in

her grandmother's kitchen, and a highly romantic love story. The story unfolds through the twelve divisions of the novel, one chapter for each month of the year, beginning with January and ending with December, with one recipe per chapter, each recipe in some way relevant to the events that will occur in that chapter. After the list of ingredients, the narrative begins with instructions for the preparation of that month's recipe. The cookbook-style organization of the text blends with a romantic story that many critics consider a clever parody of the typical romance novel.

The heroine of the novel, Tita de la Garza, is born in the kitchen and raised there by the Indian family servant, Nacha. As the youngest of three daughters of the domineering matriarch, Mamá Elena, Tita is required to take care of her mother until her mother's death, forsaking any life of her own. Tita falls in love with Pedro. Pedro courts Tita in hopes of marrying her, but the tradition of caretaking (a tradition invented by Esquivel for her purposes in the novel) prevents their marriage. Frustrated but determined, Pedro marries Tita's sister, Rosaura, in order to be close to Tita, but Tita envies Pedro's intimacy with Rosaura and bemoans his lack of intimacy with her. Though Mamá Elena is aware of Tita's feelings for Pedro, she forces Tita to prepare the cake that will be served at her sister's wedding. Tita's tears season the batter with sorrow and longing and transfer her emotions to the wedding guests, who suffer uncontrollable melancholy and sobbing before forcefully vomiting their meal.

Tita's most provocative recipe is "Quail in Rose Petal Sauce," which causes all those who eat it to become consumed with the same passionate desire with which Tita crushes the rose petals. In an attempt to put an end to Pedro and Tita's love, Mamá Elena sends Rosaura and Pedro, with their son, to the United States to separate the would-be lovers. Away from his beloved Aunt Tita, the child dies, and Tita, who (magically) had nursed him despite having never been pregnant, suffers a nervous breakdown. She spends some time in Texas under the treatment of a kindly but very boring American doctor, John Brown. Dr. Brown asks Tita to marry him, though he senses she has no passion for him. After her mother's death, Tita accepts his proposal, not out of love but rather as a repayment for his kindness to her.

However, Pedro is profoundly jealous and begs Tita not to marry the good Dr. Brown. The two desperate lovers begin an affair. Rosaura gives birth to a daughter, Esperanza (Hope), and vows to make her daughter follow the same stifling family tradition that has made Tita so unhappy. Tita makes a vow to save her niece. Rosaura becomes mysteriously obese and flatulent, eventually dying of digestive problems, and thus releasing her daughter from the family fate. Now Tita and Pedro can finally be truly together. She and Pedro spend a single glorious night in an embrace so passionate that it spontaneously causes fireworks that ignite a fire, destroying the two lovers and the entire ranch.

In several interviews, Esquivel has commented about the importance of the kitchen in her life, whether it be the kitchen of her childhood, cooking with her mother and grandmother from the age of seven, or her own kitchen. Esquivel believes in the power of food and the power of the emotions with which people create the magic, the alchemy, of the kitchen. In this novel, the so-called feminine arts of healing, caretaking, and cooking assume nearly mythical proportions, as Tita's culinary creations cause magical reactions. Culinary magic is just one aspect of the Magical Realism in this novel. In addition to elements of Magical Realism already mentioned, Tita's tears are equally magical. Even before birth, she cries in the womb when onions are cut. At her birth, her dried tears are swept up to be used for salt. While recovering in Texas, her sorrow is so great that her tears run down the stairs of Dr. Brown's house like a river.

The novel is dominated by female characters. The matriarch of the family, Mamá Elena, runs the family hacienda with an iron will, and though she is a woman, she embodies and perpetuates the traditions of a deeply masculine, patriarchal society. Her three daughters are three completely different types of women. Rosaura is the most traditional, conforming to convention and the role expected of her, and, perhaps literally, repressing her own





feelings so much that she becomes inflated with her own repression and dies by poisoning herself. Gertrudis is the most flamboyant of the three. She impetuously runs off with a soldier of the revolution, jumping behind him on his horse and galloping away. She then essentially takes on a male role, becoming a soldier herself, rising to the rank of general, participating actively in the revolution rather than being one of the women who make camp for their men. Tita creates a revolution of a kind as well, refusing to forgo her passion for Pedro, resisting her mother's will while Mamá Elena lives, and chasing off the ghost of her dead mother when Mamá Elena tries to control her daughter from beyond the grave. By her example and through her stubborn refusal to allow Rosaura to dictate her daughter's future, Tita most certainly helps to liberate Esperanza from the twin curse of duty and tradition.

The female characters in *Like Water for Chocolate* are much more powerful than the male characters. Pedro is handsome but weak-willed; Dr. Brown is kind but boring. The women in this novel defy the gender roles of their time. Though Tita is con-

demned to the kitchen and the traditional role of caretaker, she revolts against those roles, using the ingredients at hand to express her endless love for Pedro.

### SUMMARY

Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate* portrays what finally becomes a literally all-consuming love. Pedro and Tita manage to circumvent the conventions and traditions that have bound them. Esquivel skillfully blends elements from fantasy, Magical Realism, cookbooks, and romance novels, seasoned with a dash of the historical novel, to create a compelling story of frustrated and finally consummated love. The immense success of her novel has been credited with contributing to the boom in Spanish-language publishing in the United States for the Latino market. The enduring popularity of both the novel and the film make them common texts for classroom use in Spanish or English. Esquivel's subsequent work, though equally innovative, has not met with the same success.

Linda Ledford-Miller

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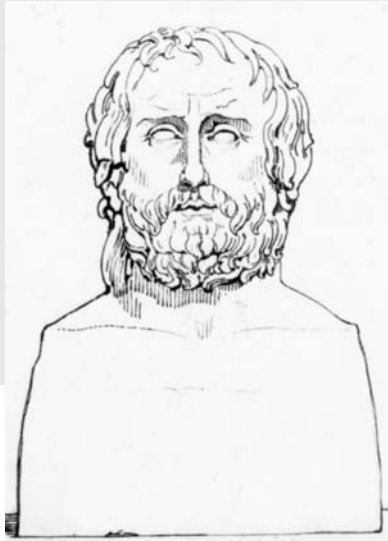
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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, how do duty and responsibility conflict with desire?
- Compare the three sisters Rosaura, Gertrudis, and Tita. They have very different personalities and lead very different lives. Do they break with convention, or are they representative of female stereotypes?
- Mamá Elena has been keeping a secret for many years. How does that secret relate to the rigid traditional roles she maintains herself and tries to force on others?
- Each of the chapters of the novel contains elements or examples of Magical Realism. Give three specific examples of Magical Realism in *Like Water for Chocolate* and discuss the significance of the example to the chapter or the novel as a whole.
- Is Tita a feminist character? What evidence in the text supports your answer?
- At one point, Tita must choose between Dr. John Brown and Pedro. Why does she choose Pedro, and who is the better choice?
- Why are the male characters in *Like Water for Chocolate* less developed than the female characters?
- How does the historical background of the Mexican Revolution contribute to the novel?



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## EURIPIDES

**Born:** Phlya, Greece  
c. 485 B.C.E.

**Died:** Macedonia, Greece  
406 B.C.E.

*The youngest of the three great tragedians of Athens, Euripides reinterpreted the traditional myths of ancient Greece in light of the philosophy and psychological insights of his day.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Almost nothing is known for certain about the life of Euripides (yew-RIHP-uh-deez). While a number of ancient authors claim to supply information about his life or to comment upon his character, much of what these authors say has been based upon legends. At their worst, tales about Euripides have been corrupted by how the poet was depicted in ancient comedy and satire. Even at their best, these stories are often merely anecdotes misremembered or invented by the author's admirers long after his death.

Not even Euripides' birthplace is known for sure. Most ancient sources suggest that Euripides was born on Salamis, an island off the coast of Athens. Yet this tradition seems to be part of an ancient legend connecting each of the three major tragedians with the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.E. According to this legend, Aeschylus fought against the Persians in this battle, Sophocles sang in the chorus of youths that celebrated the Athenian victory, and Euripides was born on the island on the very day of the battle itself. The coincidence seems too incredible to be true.

Another tradition, which relates that Euripides was born at Phlya in central Attica, Greece, sometime in 485 B.C.E., may well be more accurate. His father's name was Mnesarchos, and his mother's name was Cleito.

The town of Phlya was famous for its temples, a detail that accords well with another story told about Euripides' youth. As a child, Euripides is said to have been a torchbearer and to have poured wine at festivals honoring the god Apollo. This privilege would probably have been reserved for the nobility, and it suggests that the family of Euripides was wealthy. Indeed, some ancient sources state that Euripides' mother, Cleito, was descended from a family of high social standing. A variant tradition stating that Euripides' mother was reduced to selling vegetables for a living appears to have been the invention of the comic poet Aristophanes.

Early in his life, Euripides moved with his family to Athens. There he received an education typical of many young Athenians of the fifth century B.C.E. He studied literature, art (especially painting), music, gymnastics, and philosophy. At that time, Greek philosophy was becoming a more important part of Athenian education than it had been for the poet's older contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles. As a result, Euripides would always be the most philosophical of the ancient tragedians. He was interested in evaluating new ideas and frequently assigned to his characters opinions attributable to philosophers alive at the time.

The Peloponnesian War, waged between Sparta and Athens, began in the year 431 B.C.E. and continued even after Euripides' death. This long struggle had a profound impact upon him. Initially a supporter of the war, Euripides presented the Athenians as glorious defenders of justice in *Hērakleidai* (c. 430 B.C.E.; *The Children of Herakles*,

1781). Nevertheless, after the Athenians committed atrocities on the island of Melos in 416 B.C.E., Euripides turned against the war and produced *Trōiades* (415 B.C.E.; *The Trojan Women*, 1782), a play that provided a critical commentary on war's cruelty against the innocent.

The comic poet Aristophanes, who included Euripides as a character in several of his plays, depicted the poet as a brooding intellectual who hated other people, especially women. Later authors took this depiction at face value and described Euripides as a hermit who lived in a cave on the island of Salamis. It is more likely, however, that Aristophanes' view of Euripides was intended to be satirical rather than realistic. Indeed, Euripides' reputation as a misogynist seems to be derived from his depictions of Medea, Phaedra, and Hecuba (as well as the belief that his own two marriages were unhappy) rather than from any attitude of the poet himself. While Euripides did, at times, include portraits of violent or threatening women in his plays, he also depicted women such as Alcestis, Iphigeneia, and Macaria in a more positive and sympathetic light.

Toward the end of Euripides' life, the poet retired from Athens and moved to the court of King Archelaus in Macedon. There he composed the *Bakchai* (405 B.C.E.; *The Bacchae*, 1781), a tragedy that was not performed until after his death. Stories abound concerning the death of Euripides. It is said that Euripides was attacked and killed by hunting dogs, perhaps intentionally released by the rival poets Arridaeus and Crateuas. This story of a violent death is too similar to that told about the death of Pentheus, the central character in *The Bacchae*, to be taken at face value. According to tradition, Euripides died in 406 B.C.E. in Macedonia, Greece.

## ANALYSIS

In *De poetica* (c. 334 B.C.E.-323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705), Aristotle quotes Sophocles as saying that he (Sophocles) presented individuals as they should be while Euripides presented them as they are. This concern for a realistic depiction of human character and motivation is one of the hallmarks of Euripidean tragedy. Rather than presenting action as the result of sweeping historical or religious forces, as did Aeschylus, or of noble and heroic individual choices, as did Sophocles, Euripides at-

tributes actions in his plays to ordinary, and easily understandable, human emotions.

While the forces motivating the characters in Euripidean tragedy are frequently less edifying than those that Aeschylus or Sophocles attributed to their characters, this pessimism was central to Euripides' outlook upon the world. The horrors of the Peloponnesian War seem to have affected Euripides more deeply than his contemporaries, and he sought to depict those horrors upon the stage. Seeing few genuine heroes in his own society, Euripides was hesitant to assume that such heroes had existed in the remote past. His characters tend to be motivated by base emotions such as anger, greed, and lust rather than by the lofty piety and constancy that inspire such characters as Sophocles' Antigone.

Euripides was interested in the psychology of the characters who populate traditional Greek myths. He turns a skeptical eye toward the platitudes with which they justify their own actions and seeks to reveal a less flattering source of motivation. What was shocking to his contemporaries was that Euripides extended this psychological analysis even to the gods. He saw deities such as Aphrodite, Artemis, and Dionysus as symbols of emotions—lust, restraint, irrationality, for example—rather than as the anthropomorphic images worshiped in the temples.

Perhaps for this reason, Euripides was, in his lifetime, the least popular of the three Athenian tragedians. He won first prize in the annual poetic competition only four times and was awarded this prize one additional time after his death. Nevertheless, the ideas advanced by him became increasingly popular in the following centuries, and, for this reason, more of his works have survived than have the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles combined.

A Euripidean play will usually begin with an extended prologue that provides the audience with crucial information. The play will end with the appearance of a god who resolves the central conflict of the drama. The individual who delivers the prologue, known as the protatic character, may not even reappear in the rest of the drama. Nevertheless, protatic characters play an important role in determining how the audience views the action of the play. The god who appeared at the end of the drama was frequently lowered to the stage by means of a hoist, a turn of events called the *deus ex machina*.

This general structure of a Euripidean tragedy frequently gives the audience the impression that the action depicted on stage is predestined and thus inescapable. Yet it is important to remember that the determining factor in Euripidean drama is more frequently human emotion (and base emotion, at that) than divine will. Thus, Euripides' characters usually have little control over their actions; they are victims of their own emotions, not pawns of some impersonal or cosmic Fate.

Euripides' view that emotions provoke much of human activity caused him to adopt a different focus in his tragedies from that of Aeschylus or Sophocles. Rather than depicting a world inhabited primarily by kings and the nobility, Euripides presents a more democratic universe. Not only do common people appear on stage more frequently in Euripidean tragedy than in the works of his predecessors, but they are also more central to the drama and tend to be more memorable. In Euripides' view of the world, human tragedy affects everyone; it is not merely the province of the aristocracy.

Euripides also was less constrained by traditional myths than were Aeschylus or Sophocles. He was free to change details of the plot, add characters, or incorporate elements from another story. This freedom often gives the Euripidean version of a myth a sense of greater realism. It also allows the author to criticize details of a myth that he regards as foolish or inconsistent.

## MEDEA

**First produced:** *Mēdeia*, 431 B.C.E. (English translation, 1781)

**Type of work:** Play

*A witch whose husband is about to leave her for another woman takes vengeance against him by killing his children.*

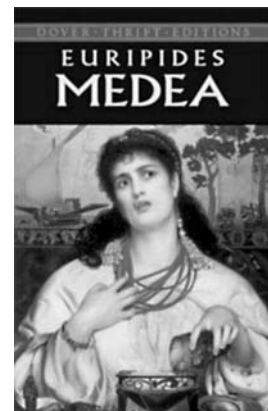
The *Medea* illustrates many characteristic features of Euripidean tragedy. The play begins with a prologue in which the central conflict of the tragedy is revealed to the audience. This prologue is not delivered by a god or by any member of the nobility, but by a nurse, a character of relatively humble status. Yet the story that the nurse relates con-

tains many fantastic elements and supernatural details: For example, she speaks of the Symplegades (the Clashing Rocks that destroyed ships attempting to sail through them), the Golden Fleece, and Jason's legendary ship, the *Argo*. Nevertheless, these mythological details will not be Euripides' central concern in this play. The poet will devote far more attention to human psychology and ordinary emotions (jealousy, anger, and pride) than to the marvels of legend. Euripides' answer to the central question of this tragedy—What could lead a mother to kill her own children?—will not be the Golden Fleece or even a tragic curse, but a combination of spurned love, the desperate plight of women and exiles, and the individual nature of this particular mother.

Euripides quickly shifts attention away from the wonders of the prologue to the troubles that exist in Medea's marriage.

For Medea, the predicament of a husband who intends to leave her is compounded by the low status of women in Greek society generally and by her further isolation as an exile. Medea speaks at length about the difficulties of women in ancient Greece (lines 231-251) and about the ill treatment accorded to foreigners (lines 252-258, 511-515). The audience observes that Medea has relatively few choices available to her. If Jason abandons her, Medea's life will be little better than that of a slave.

Furthermore, in Medea's debate with Jason (lines 465-519), the audience is reminded that Medea has used violence before when doing what she felt to be necessary. She had killed her brother, Apsyrtus, in order that Jason might escape from her father, Aeëtes. She had killed Jason's uncle, Pelias, in order that Jason's father might regain his throne. Thus, the audience begins to understand that Medea is a person who kills whenever she believes that she has no other choice. Because she is a woman and an exile in a world that is hostile to both, Medea's choices gradually diminish as the play continues.





In this way, Euripides has rewritten a traditional Greek fairy tale as a psychological study. He has brought his mythic characters down to the level of ordinary human beings and has shown that what motivated them were emotions that the audience could readily understand. By so doing, Euripides is able to make Medea seem a sympathetic character, despite her violent actions and the elements of fantasy traditionally found in her story.

## HIPPOLYTUS

**First produced:** *Hippolytos*, 428 B.C.E.  
(revised version of an earlier play;  
English translation, 1781)

**Type of work:** Play

*Phaedra, rejected by her son-in-law,  
Hippolytus, accuses him of rape.*

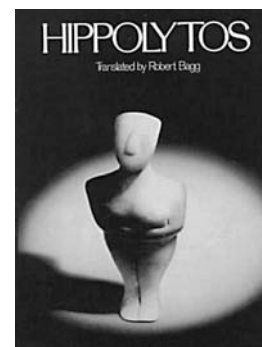
The *Hippolytus* was part of only five trilogies for which Euripides was awarded first prize. One of the reasons for the success of this play may be that the *Hippolytus* is far more traditional in structure than many other Euripidean tragedies. For example, both Theseus and Hippolytus himself follow the pattern of the tragic hero described by Aristotle in *Poetics*: They are neither perfectly good nor purely evil but, while generally virtuous, suffer because of a flaw in character or by committing some mistake. Moreover, the play's emphasis upon the need for restraint in all human endeavor echoes the sentiment of the widely quoted Greek proverb, "Nothing too much." Theseus and Hippolytus are thus guilty of hubris (usually defined as excessive pride, insolence, and self-righteousness), which would have been regarded, even by the most conservative of Euripides' critics, as a fatal flaw of character.

Nevertheless, Euripides has made several important innovations in this work. First, his view of the gods is not at all the same as that found in traditional Greek religion. Aphrodite and Artemis, although they appear on stage in human form, are largely personifications of lust and chastity. It is the conflict between these competing forces that brings about the tragedy of Phaedra and Hippolytus; the inability of these characters to find a balance between the desires represented by Aphro-

dite and the goals represented by Artemis destroys them.

This image of the gods is not at all flattering. Aphrodite uses Phaedra as a pawn to achieve the vengeance that she desires against Hippolytus. Humankind is seen to be the plaything of the gods, subject to their whims and unable to escape the destiny that they have imposed. Yet since the gods are presented as human emotions in this drama, Euripides is not being fatalistic in the traditional sense. Rather, the poet is implying, even as the philosophers of his day had suggested, that humanity is the victim of its own passions and conflicting desires. In the end, it is human emotion, not destiny, which brings about suffering in the *Hippolytus*.

Phaedra's act of vengeance against Hippolytus, coupled with Medea's act of vengeance against Jason, helps to explain why Euripides so often was seen in antiquity as a hater of women. Yet Euripides added little to the depictions of these characters that could not be found elsewhere in their stories. Moreover, his depiction of men such as Jason and even, to a certain extent, Theseus is similarly unflattering, and he casts other women, such as Alcestis and Iphigenia, in a more positive light. For this reason, the violent acts of revenge committed by Phaedra and Medea result not from the author's misogyny but from his interpretation of their individual characters.



## THE TROJAN WOMEN

**First produced:** *Trōiades*, 415 B.C.E. (English translation, 1782)

**Type of work:** Play

*Shortly after the fall of Troy, Hecuba learns  
the fate of her children and grandchildren.*

In 416 B.C.E., the Athenian empire, at war against Sparta, captured the neutral island of

Melos in the Aegean Sea. Punishing the Melians for their resistance, the Athenians killed all the men who remained on the island and reduced the women and children to slavery. This act of unprovoked aggression turned Euripides against the Athenian cause in the Peloponnesian War, a cause that he had earlier supported. For example, his negative depiction of the Corinthians in the *Medea*, written during the first year of the war, may be traced in large part to the alliance that existed between Corinth and Sparta. Fifteen years later, however, Euripides has shifted from seeing the Spartans and their allies as the enemy to seeing war itself as the enemy.

The structure of *The Trojan Women* is episodic. That is to say, it does not so much tell a continuous story as depict a series of individual and discrete scenes. The sum total of the episodes is not a plot, as in standard narrative tragedy, but an impression. The impression that Euripides sought to convey in *The Trojan Women* is that war is unspeakably horrible. The author attempted in the various scenes of this tragedy to depict the suffering that war causes even for those innocents who do not fight in it, innocents such as women, children, and the elderly.

Unity is provided in the drama by the continual presence of Hecuba. In her person are represented all wives who have lost their husbands in war and all mothers who have lost their children. Each successive episode brings word of new sorrows to Hecuba. When she first appears to the audience, she is aware that she has lost her city, her position, and most members of her family. That seems tragic enough, but Euripides wanted to illustrate that war spares nothing for the innocent, not even their hopes. Hecuba must also endure seeing her daughter Cassandra apparently afflicted with madness. (The audience, however, which knew that the curse of Cassandra was to prophesy the truth but never to be believed, would have realized that her “madness” was really an accurate prediction of the future.) In the following episode, Hecuba learns that another daughter, Polyxena, had been sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles. Finally, Hecuba must endure the slaughter of Andromache’s infant son, Astyanax, who is flung from the walls of Troy. Hecuba concludes (lines 1280-1283) that it is futile even to call upon the gods for help; the prayers of the innocent go unanswered.

The only consolation available to Hecuba is that

her sufferings, and those of the other Trojans, were so severe that they will always be remembered (lines 1240-1250). Hecuba knows that, if it were not for their many sorrows, the Trojans would not become the subject of songs for generations yet unborn. This realization is cold comfort, indeed, but it is the only consolation that Euripides was willing to admit in this play. His goal was to see that later ages never forgot what the Trojans, like the Meians, had endured.

## THE BACCHAE

**First produced:** *Bakchai*, 405 B.C.E. (English translation, 1781)

**Type of work:** Play

*A king of Thebes is punished for resisting the cult of the god Dionysus.*

In about 408 B.C.E., Euripides left Athens to accept the invitation of King Archelaus to write works for his court in Macedon. There Euripides died in 406 B.C.E. His final trilogy of plays, including both *The Bacchae* and *Iphigeneia ē en Taurois* (c. 414 B.C.E.; *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 1782), was produced in Athens by his son. Posthumously, he was awarded first prize for this trilogy, the fifth time that the poet had been so honored.

One of the reasons why *The Bacchae* may have been popular with its original audience was that it reflects a far more traditional view of humankind and the gods than do many of Euripides’ plays. Dionysus in *The Bacchae* is still seen as a psychological force or as a state of mind (in this case, irrationality), like Aphrodite and Artemis in the *Hippolytus*. In this play, however, it is Pentheus, the “modern man” who uses reason to challenge the authority of the gods, who suffers most. At the end of the tragedy, Cadmus cites the fate of Pentheus as proof that the gods exist and that they punish those who resist them (lines 1325-1326).

The final words of *The Bacchae* are a restatement of the traditional Greek view that the gods act in ways that humankind does not expect and that human knowledge is therefore limited (lines 1388-1392). It is a conclusion that would be appropriate for nearly any Greek tragedy, and, indeed, it

strongly resembles the endings of both Sophocles' *Antigonē* (441 B.C.E.; *Antigone*, 1729) and *Oidipous epi Kolōnōi* (401 B.C.E.; *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1729). This traditional Greek belief that moderation is best because humankind's knowledge is limited is central to the entire structure of *The Bacchae*. While Pentheus is punished for his stubborn resistance to the god Dionysus, his mother, Agave, who accepted the god, also suffers. For modern readers, this development is one of the most troubling aspects of the work; at the end of the play, Dionysus seems to be punishing both his enemies and his own followers. Yet it must be remembered that, for Euripides, Dionysus symbolizes irrationality. Those who exclude irrationality totally from their lives become stolid, unimaginative, and dull; when their carefully reasoned worlds collapse, they may be "torn apart" by irrationality, as literally happens to Pentheus in this play. Yet those who succumb to irrationality entirely are playing with madness, and they may eventually destroy what is most dear to them. With irrationality, as with everything, Euripides is saying, the middle way is best.

In dramatic terms, Euripides accomplishes a difficult task in *The Bacchae*. He manages to change the audience's opinion about both Dionysus and Pentheus as the drama unfolds. When Dionysus first appears, he wins the audience's favor: They are told that Pentheus is resisting the god unjustly and that Dionysus has come to Thebes in person to reward the just and to punish the guilty. By the end of the drama, however, Dionysus seems a fearful figure whose penalties are extreme and whose power

destroys even those who embrace his cult. Pentheus, on the other hand, first appears as a brash, skeptical, and thoroughly unlikable individual. Yet by the end of the drama, the audience is likely to pity him because of the degree to which he has been punished. This ability to change an audience's perspective in such a short time is one of Euripides' finest accomplishments in this play.

## SUMMARY

In the works of Euripides, the traditional stories of Greek tragedy were reinterpreted in light of the philosophical theories current in the late fifth century B.C.E. Gods in Euripides' works usually personify human emotions and resemble only in outward form the highly anthropomorphic deities of Homer and Sophocles. Kings and nobles from the remote past speak in the language of the Athenian law courts. Ordinary people are also frequently introduced into Euripidean tragedy and are central to the plot.

Throughout the eighteen surviving plays of Euripides, it is possible to trace his evolution as an artist. Early works such as the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus* contain, despite their many innovations, the conventional view that the Athenians are a great and just people. This view declines in such works as *The Trojan Women*. Moreover, though Euripides' sense of disillusionment with the Athenian empire may have caused him to leave Athens in 408 B.C.E., his last works illustrate a return to a more traditional view of humanity and the gods.

Jeffrey L. Buller

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Of the 66 tragedies and 22 satyr plays Euripides wrote, the following survive:

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*Mēdeia*, 431 B.C.E. (*Medea*, 1781)

*Hērakleidai*, c. 430 B.C.E. (*The Children of Herakles*, 1781)

*Hippolytos*, 428 B.C.E. (revised version of an earlier play; *Hippolytus*, 1781)

*Andromachē*, c. 426 B.C.E. (*Andromache*, 1782)

*Hekabē*, 425 B.C.E. (*Hecuba*, 1782)

*Hiketides*, c. 423 B.C.E. (*The Suppliants*, 1781)

*Kyklōps*, c. 421 B.C.E. (*Cyclops*, 1782)

*Hērakles*, c. 420 B.C.E. (*Heracles*, 1781)

*Trōiades*, 415 B.C.E. (*The Trojan Women*, 1782)  
*Iphigeneia ē en Taurois*, c. 414 B.C.E. (*Iphigenia in Tauris*, 1782)  
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*Helenē*, 412 B.C.E. (*Helen*, 1782)  
*Iōn*, c. 411 B.C.E. (*Ion*, 1781)  
*Phoinissai*, 409 B.C.E. (*The Phoenician Women*, 1781)  
*Orestēs*, 408 B.C.E. (*Orestes*, 1782)  
*Bakchai*, 405 B.C.E. (*The Bacchae*, 1781)  
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#### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Investigate Euripides' originality in depicting Greek mythical tradition.
- In what ways does Aristotle's theory of tragedy apply less aptly to Euripides' plays than to those of Aeschylus and Sophocles?
- Do enthusiasts of classical drama today better understand Euripides' tragic outlook than that of Aeschylus and Sophocles?
- Is Medea more a victim of external circumstances or of her own emotional responses to them?
- Did Euripides court disaster in his time by his uncompromising realism?
- Which modern playwrights are most Euripidean?



AP/Wide World Photos

## HELEN FIELDING

**Born:** Morley, West Yorkshire, England  
February 19, 1958

*Female readers around the world found themselves identifying with the comic adventures of Fielding's "singleton" heroine, Bridget Jones, who keeps a diary of her tumultuous relationships with food, cigarettes, men, and anything else she can think to worry about.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The daughter of a mill manager and a home-maker, Helen Fielding was born in Morley, West Yorkshire, England, on February 19, 1958. She attended a local girls' school and then studied at Oxford, reading English at St. Anne's College and receiving her B.A. in that field of study. After graduating from Oxford in 1979, Fielding spent the next ten years working as a producer for British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Television in London.

During her time at the BBC, Fielding worked with former Oxford classmate and friend Richard Curtis (a screenwriter for the 1994 film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, among others) on *Comic Relief*, a televised appeal for African famine relief, which, in addition to providing aid to Africa also gave Fielding the raw material for her first published novel, *Cause Celeb* (1994). This novel is about a woman who flees to Africa and becomes an administrator for a famine relief organization in order to escape the effects of a soured romance in Britain. The success of *Cause Celeb* prompted an intriguing invitation from the *Independent* newspaper in 1995: Would she like to write a weekly column in the voice of a character of her own creation? Fielding's acceptance of the offer was the birth of Bridget Jones.

Drawing on a feature of her own diaries from

college years past, Fielding began each of the columns with Bridget's current weight and the number of alcohol units, cigarettes, and calories she consumed that day. This ticker-tape device, with the parenthetical commentary that always accompanied it, served as a barometer of the kind of day Bridget was experiencing, and Fielding used it to greatly humorous effects. The adventures of Bridget Jones became wildly popular with the *Independent's* readers, and Fielding was soon approached about making them into a novel.

A longtime admirer of Jane Austen's work, Fielding used the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to give structure to the naturally episodic nature of her work. As in the Austen novel, Fielding's heroine is at first repulsed by a seemingly haughty and cold-hearted man, but she gradually learns to love him as she discovers his true qualities. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, published in 1996, rose to the top of the best-seller list.

In 1998, Fielding moved her column to the *Telegraph*. In 1999, a sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, this time modeled on Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), was published and immediately moved to the top of the best-seller list. Both books have been made into major motion pictures, with Renée Zellweger as Bridget Jones, Hugh Grant as the irresistible cad Daniel Cleaver, and Colin Firth as the heroic lover Mark Darcy. In 2007, Fielding was working on a third Bridget Jones novel, and the rights to the film version of that book had already been bought by a film production company.

After the two Bridget Jones novels, Fielding wrote two other playful works, the first a supple-



ment to the Jones books, *Bridget Jones's Guide to Life* (2001), itself a spoof of the self-help books Bridget reads compulsively, and the second, *Olivia Joules and the Overactive Imagination* (2003), which tells the story of a young and beautiful British journalist turned spy who tracks down an international terrorist.

### ANALYSIS

Like her literary forebear Jane Austen, Fielding's literary genius lies in the realm of the comedy of manners, and, like Austen, Fielding's primary subject is the relationship between men and women. While Austen's writing gave birth to the modern romance novel and Fielding's to "chick lit," it would be fair to say that neither writer is really an innovator in plot and structure but rather both shine in their representation of character: Austen, for heroes who pulse with carefully restrained emotions, and Fielding, for a protagonist who alternately wallows and exults in the same emotions Austen's characters so carefully control. It is the modern woman's ability to appreciate Fielding's roller coaster of emotion that has made Bridget Jones so popular.

Unlike the readers of Austen, who may find themselves identifying with a variety of characters, Fielding's readers are left with only one imaginatively satisfying option, Bridget herself, and in reading her diary, the reader temporarily takes on the limitations of Bridget's own vision.

The first of these limitations is the business of the weight/alcohol-unit/calorie catalog at the beginning of each diary entry. Never merely scientific data, these statistics always tell a story themselves, offering hints of what has happened during the day and giving the reader the pleasure of guessing what that happening was. Rarely has fiction given readers such systematic information on the connection between a character's mind and her body. Though there is a comprehensive summary of consumption at the end of the book, because the novel is written as a diary, and truly for an audience of one, there is no equally comprehensive physical detail regarding the people and places in Bridget's world because she obviously already knows quite well what they look like. This lack of physical detail—aside from the persistent presence of consumer products, like Silk Cuts, Salon Selectives, and Milk Tray—is another significant limitation on the

reader's vision, and it serves to accentuate and make more palpable the range of emotions Bridget experiences. The decisive limitation, however, is Bridget herself, who, in addition to being generally ignorant of the affairs of the world around her (she does not know the geographical location of Germany or the basic details of the television stories she herself is covering), also spends the bulk of her time thinking and worrying about two topics: her circle of friends and the men that are romantically interested in her. Granting these limitations to be necessary to the form Fielding uses, readers must ask themselves a question: What is the significance of this diary of Bridget Jones?

Having already written a score of newspaper columns in the voice of Bridget and now being asked to make these columns into a novel, Fielding found herself asking this very question. How could she give meaning to the disparate experiences of Bridget's life? She did so by using the plots from Austen's novels, first *Pride and Prejudice* and then *Persuasion*. By choosing these two novels to serve as the basis for her own plots, Fielding was, in essence, deciding the fate of Bridget Jones's life. Despite the fact that the novels celebrate Bridget's off-the-wall single antics, the events and people in Bridget's life reveal that her happiness comes through sharing love with one man, Mark Darcy. While Fielding, unlike Austen, does not insist on marriage as a symbol or sacrament of this love, she does, like Austen, give first place to the theme of romantic love.

Fielding has taken heavy criticism from writers who maintain that this vision of romance is falsely conceived and not true to the experience of the modern woman. In addition, some argue that this representation of romance—and of Bridget's almost-permanent emotional angst regarding it—perpetuates the stereotype that single women are single because there is something wrong with them, not because they desire that way of life.

There are no easy answers to these and other related criticisms arising from Fielding's reenvisioning of Austen, but it is helpful for the first-time reader of the Bridget Jones books to remember that, above all, Bridget Jones is a comic figure. Whatever the cultural effects of Bridget's adventures, it is important to remember her original reason for being, as Fielding has said in interviews, was to make people laugh at her in order that they might then be able to laugh at themselves. If this

principle of comedy is remembered, Fielding's books, in addition to being enjoyable, may also give readers the added benefit of wisdom.

## BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY

**First published:** 1996

**Type of work:** Novel

*Bridget falls for the wrong man but then learns to love the right one.*

Bridget Jones's diary starts the new year the way many diaries do—with a bundle of resolutions, which in order to be followed would necessitate either the joining of a religious community or the complete obliteration of the personality of the diarist in question. As neither of these are options for Bridget, she does one of the very things she vowed not to do in her resolutions: fall for a man who is completely commitment-phobic, her boss at the publishing house, Daniel Cleaver.

This romance, the main event of the first half of the novel (a novel that covers each month of the calendar year), is constantly framed by Bridget's interactions with her friends. No action of Daniel is too small to be analyzed by Bridget's loyal trio of pals: the explosively opinionated Shazzer, the delicate Jude, and appearance-obsessed Tom, a homosexual. At least once a week the four get together, and the meetings, in addition to being a forum for discussing Bridget's problems, also involve Shazzer proclaiming stridently her vision of feminism; Jude complaining and worrying about her own commitment-phobic boyfriend, Vile Richard; and Tom alternately offering advice to all and wondering aloud about his own tenuous relationship with Pretentious Jerome. (The epithets "vile" and "pretentious" are Bridget's own, and are, in the diary, inseparable from the actual names.)

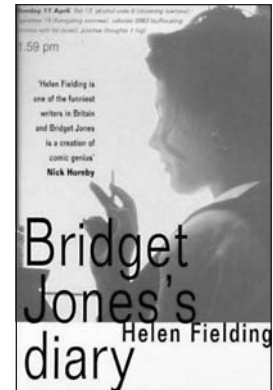
The other significant characters in the novel are Bridget's parents. From the outset, they are having problems. After more than thirty years of marriage, Bridget's mother decides to separate from her husband and pursue a career as a television presenter. Although she denies it to Bridget, she also becomes romantically involved with a person of questionable character, a Portuguese man named Julio.

Bridget's father, crushed by these developments, becomes a shell of his former self, so Bridget finds herself besieged by embarrassingly personal phone calls from him and from her mother.

Meanwhile, Bridget and Daniel have been going together for a few months, and though there have been a few hitches in their relationship, Bridget finds she is very much in love with him. However, her earlier misgivings about Daniel are confirmed when he ducks out, at the last minute, from participating in a family costume party the two had been invited to attend. The "tarts and vicars" costume theme is abandoned by the host, but that message is never delivered to Bridget, so she is forced to endure catty jokes and horrid small talk while wearing a come-hither street-woman outfit, complete with a bunny tail on the back. Utterly embarrassed, she stops by Daniel's apartment after the party for a comforting word, only to find that he has not been working as he claimed he would be but has in fact been with another woman. Furious, Bridget quits her job at the publishing house, and, with the help of her mother's newfound connections, finds work as a reporter for a local television station.

It is at this point that Mark Darcy becomes a character of interest to Bridget. A childhood playmate of Bridget's, the now divorced Mark is introduced to the reader at the beginning of the novel at a Christmas party with Bridget's family; in fact, Bridget's mother is trying to set the two of them up. Bridget's first impression of Mark as a cold and harsh person is reinforced later in the novel at the costume party, when he openly criticizes Daniel to Bridget. Events in the second half of the novel, however, will make Bridget reexamine her initial feelings.

Bridget is assigned to cover a front-page human rights lawsuit, but she misses the interview time because she is making a run for cigarettes and believes she will certainly be fired. However, Mark Darcy, who is the acting attorney in the case, happens to be fetching cigarettes for his client at the



same moment as Bridget, and in a gesture of generosity, he grants an exclusive interview between his client and Bridget. The avenues are now open for Mark and Bridget to begin a romance of their own, but not before Mark has done another good deed to seal his reputation in Bridget's eyes.

When Bridget's mother leaves the country with Julio and thousands of pounds scammed from her friends and family, it is Mark who follows Julio to Portugal to make sure Bridget's mother is returned safely. After this is accomplished, he commandeers Julio's capture in England at the annual Christmas party, and he rescues Bridget from another lonely holiday by whisking her away to an expensive hotel suite. There he confesses his love for Bridget, and the diaries conclude with the two together in bed.

## BRIDGET JONES: THE EDGE OF REASON

**First published:** 1999

**Type of work:** Novel

*Bridget and Mark Darcy overcome the by-now-familiar Fielding obstacles of self-help books, opinionated friends, and schemers to finally realize that they love each other.*

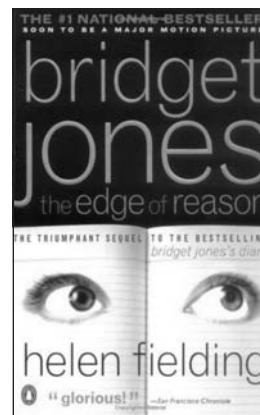
The sequel picks up exactly one month and four days after the first novel, the amount of time that Bridget and Mark Darcy have been boyfriend and girlfriend. Bridget's boyfriend bliss, however, is decisively short-lived. From the outset of the novel, people and situations seem to conspire to keep the lovers apart. Their evenings together are ceaselessly interrupted by phone calls from Bridget's friends; a case of mistaken identity makes it seem that Mark is a sexual pervert; and, worst of all, another woman has taken it into her head to woo Bridget's man.

This woman, Rebecca, who was introduced briefly in the first novel as an acquaintance (not much liked) of Bridget and her friends, is a major player in the sequel. Thin and rich and many other things that Bridget is not, Rebecca is known among Bridget's friends as a "jellyfish"; she is always sneaking up on a person unawares with her conversational stings. After inviting Mark and Bridget to a

party at her parents' cottage, Rebecca arranges an evening of discord for the happy couple. Having informed her teenage nephew that Bridget and Mark are splitting up, she makes space for the boy and Bridget to be alone, and then she and Mark "accidentally" walk in on the boy trying to kiss Bridget. The result of this setup is the eventual split between Bridget and Mark, the reunion of which is complicated by the often contradictory advice Bridget receives from her library of self-help books and the counsel she solicits from her friends. Soon after the party, Bridget sees Mark with Rebecca one night in town. Though he offers to explain the situation, Bridget—encouraged by the support of Shazzer and Jude, who are in her apartment when he calls—will not listen to him. Shortly after this conversation, Mark and Rebecca begin dating.

Single once more, Bridget has the time to devote herself completely to preparing for a freelance assignment her friend Tom has helped her land: an interview, in Rome, with Colin Firth, the actor who plays Mr. Darcy in the British Broadcasting Corporation version of *Pride and Prejudice* (as well as Mark Darcy in the film version of Fielding's novels). Although the interview is supposed to focus on Firth's role in an upcoming film, *Fever Pitch*, Bridget cannot help herself from constantly referring back to the character of Mr. Darcy. As she is not able to write an account of the interview in time for the deadline, the newspaper prints the complete transcript of the interview, to Bridget's embarrassment and to great comic effect.

As in the first novel, world travel proves to be an impetus for Mark and Bridget to realize their love for one another, although Bridget journeys much farther away than her mother did in the previous book. Having recently dumped her library of self-help books into the dustbin and filled with hopes of detachment from her romantic struggles, Bridget joins Shazzer on a vacation to Thailand. On the plane, Shazzer meets a handsome stranger named Jed who strikes up a romance with her. For a week the two are al-



most inseparable, and Jed finds a hut next door to Shazzer's.

Unfortunately for Shazzer, Jed, like Julio in the previous novel, has ulterior motives for romance. The day before they are to leave Thailand, Bridget and Shazzer find that their island hut has been broken into and their plane tickets and most of their money is gone. Bridget goes to the hotel nearby for assistance and finds Jed. He gives her money for the train to the Bangkok airport and a bag to carry the few things that were not stolen from their hut. Shazzer and Bridget go to the airport, where Bridget is detained by the Thai authorities. The bag Jed has given them is lined with narcotics, and Bridget is told she may be facing up to ten years in a Thai prison.

Immediately after hearing what happened, Mark flies to Asia, tracks down Jed, and extracts a confession for theft and planting drugs. Despite Mark's efforts, Bridget still has to spend a little more than a week in a Thai prison. Upon her return to England, she receives a terrible scare: the "gift" in the mail of a live bullet inside a pen. While the police investigate who might be trying to kill her, Bridget keeps a low profile, staying first at Shazzer's house and then, when he has been ruled

out as a suspect, at Mark's. Once there, both Mark and Bridget reveal their feelings for each other and begin sleeping together again. Shortly after this, the police discover the originator of the bullet-pen, a builder at Bridget's apartment who has a record for stealing from the homes on which he works.

The novel concludes with the wedding of Jude and Vile Richard, during which Bridget overhears a conversation between Rebecca and Mark confirming that Mark indeed does not have any romantic feelings for Rebecca, but in fact loves and needs Bridget.

### SUMMARY

It is an open question whether Helen Fielding's novels will prove to be of lasting literary value, but the cultural significance of Bridget Jones is unquestionable. Critics may bemoan Bridget's superficiality, self-centeredness, and ignorance of the world, and champions may see these very traits as part of a larger cultural critique. However, no one can deny that Bridget Jones is "real" in the sense that she is a character who speaks to and for women all over the Western world.

Zachary W. Czaia

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones books are clearly meant to be read as comic works of literature. Is it possible for something to be funny and "serious literature" at the same time? Explain. Do the Bridget Jones books achieve this balance?
- Some critics of the Bridget Jones books feel that they trivialize feminism and do a disservice to women. Is this a valid criticism or not? How so?
- Although Bridget spends much time worrying about men, she spends little or no time contemplating marriage for herself. Why is this?
- Compare the plots of Jane Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Persuasion* (1818) to the two Bridget Jones novels. What are the similarities and differences between the plots? What is the significance of the differences and similarities?
- Some reviewers have complained that the Bridget Jones books are not a realistic depiction of modern single life. Make an argument for or against this complaint.
- Part of the cultural phenomenon of Bridget Jones is wrapped up in the Hollywood film adaptation of the two novels. Compare the characters, action, and setting of the books versus the films.





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## HENRY FIELDING

**Born:** Sharpham Park, Somersetshire, England  
April 22, 1707

**Died:** Lisbon, Portugal  
October 8, 1754

*Fielding's greatest achievement lay in his contributions to the development of the novel, eclipsing his multifaceted career as a dramatist, a journalist, and a lawyer and magistrate deeply involved with the problems of his society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Henry Fielding was born at Sharpham Park, his maternal grandfather's estate near Glastonbury, in Somersetshire, England, on April 22, 1707, the first child in a family of five. His father, Edmund Fielding, was a lieutenant who fought under the duke of Marlborough against the forces of Louis XIV of France. His mother, Sarah, was the granddaughter of Sir Henry Gould, baron of the exchequer; her family had been considered gentry for several generations. Yet Fielding himself was not fully included among this upper class; with his family being considered "poor relations," he was *déclassé*. This situation, perhaps, was the genesis of his later contemptuous attitude toward many of the upper class, an attitude exhibited particularly in his novels.

During his childhood, Fielding lived in the village of East Stour, Dorsetshire. He was educated at home during his early years. His mother died when he was eleven, and he was then sent to the home of a cantankerous maternal aunt, who encouraged his impudence when his father remarried when Fielding was thirteen, this time to a "papist" Italian. For this impudence, he was sent to school at Eton. Consequently, his father and the family servants saw him in a very unflattering light. He discovered firsthand the malicious misjudgments others could make, a realization that he used later in *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749; commonly known as

*Tom Jones*). At Eton, however, he found lifelong friends, as well as enjoyment of his studies. There, he developed deep friendships with George Lyttleton and with William Pitt the Elder. After an unsuccessful elopement when he was nineteen, he then settled in London. In time, he began to see the city, with the numerous temptations available, as a great corrupter of the susceptible, another realization that he put to use in his novels.

Fielding's literary career began early, before he was twenty-one. His first publication, "The Masquerade," a verse satire, appeared in late January, 1728, and weeks later, his first play, *Love in Several Masques*, a light comedy, was produced. In spite of finding it somewhat difficult to judge what audiences wanted, Fielding became the leading playwright of the period between 1730 and 1737. During these years, his dramatic skill in great demand, he produced a number of comedies, numerous skits, and farces, including his best farce, *Tom Thumb: A Tragedy* (pr., pb. 1730; revised as *The Tragedy of Tragedies: Or, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (pr., pb. 1731). *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* (pr., pb. 1737) was a vicious attack on the contemporary political corruption. The stage—and his dramas—had become a part of the political background of his time. Fielding, chief among the attackers, satirized the government of Prime Minister Robert Walpole through his farces. The government, however, finally struck back. The Theatrical Licensing Act of June 21, 1737, shut down this criticism, including Fielding's. With drama now severely restricted and future dramas to be censored

by a powerful Lord Chamberlain, Fielding was thus effectively denied the stage.

With the closing of the theaters, Fielding turned to law, studying at the Middle Temple and qualifying in 1740. In 1734, he married Charlotte Craddock. They became the parents of two daughters. With her ill health and his own health deteriorating, Fielding found it difficult to maintain his law career. Partly because of his own improvidence, he endured some long periods of "considerable poverty," but, assisted by a longtime friend, Ralph Allen of Bath, along with his wealthy Eton friend, Lyttleton, he was able to continue. (Fielding used Allen and Lyttleton as models for Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*. His wife became the model for Sophia Western in *Tom Jones* and for the heroine in his last novel.) When his wife died in 1744, he was too devastated to write much for more than a year afterward.

More by circumstance, Fielding became enmeshed in the writing of novels. In the fall of 1740, Samuel Richardson had developed the series of model letters for newly educated young ladies into a connected whole that became his first novel, *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740-1741). The book was immensely popular. Fielding, however, had found Richardson's heroine "too passive" and regarded Richardson himself as a "milksoop and a straitlaced preacher out of his pulpit." Five months later, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* (1741) appeared, clearly a parody, showing in a savage satire a money-grubbing, lusty wench, decidedly the opposite of Richardson's chaste heroine. That book, also in epistolary form, was published under a pseudonym. This parody has been ascribed to Fielding, but whether he actually produced it is debatable: A number of Fielding's biographers do not include it among his accomplishments.

Fielding's *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742; commonly known as *Joseph Andrews*) is more often acknowledged as his first novel. He followed this with the heavily satirical, fictionalized *The History of the Life of the Late Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743, 1754), based on an actual highwayman of the same name, using this new genre to criticize Walpole again. He followed with *Tom Jones*, considered to be his masterpiece, and finally with *Amelia* (1751).

In 1747, Fielding remarried, this time to his wife's maid and friend, Mary Daniel. This marriage,

though it raised some scandal in class-conscious England, was quite happy. Five children were born of it.

In 1748, with Lyttleton's aid, Fielding was appointed police magistrate, or justice of the peace, for Westminster in London. He had long been disturbed by the various corruptions that he had observed in the courts; once powerless to intervene, he was now able to battle from within against this corruption, including the "trading justices" who had been padding their incomes by imposing and embezzling fines. In 1749, his jurisdiction was to include the whole county of Middlesex; he also was chairman of the quarter sessions court at Westminster, in addition to a court at Bow Street. Together with his blind half brother, John Fielding, also a magistrate, he established new standards of honesty and competence on the bench. To do this, he wrote a number of legal inquiries and pamphlets, including a proposal for banning public hangings and for organizing the Bow Street Runners, a pioneer group established to detect crime. In 1753, in spite of increasingly ill health, he wrote an exhaustive and humane "A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor." That same year, he both organized and established a plan for breaking up the criminal gangs then flourishing in London. His often sympathetic treatment of the lower classes in his novels is evident. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he recognized the existence of the "deserving poor."

Since 1741, Fielding's health had been gradually deteriorating. In 1754, he resigned his magistracy and, with his wife and a daughter, sailed to Lisbon, Portugal, where, he felt, the milder climate could possibly help him. In that city on October 8, however, only two months after his arrival, he died. He left a nonfiction journal, *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, published posthumously in 1755.

## ANALYSIS

Fielding, a man of his eighteenth century society, was naturally class-conscious, perhaps opinionated, and possibly a bit self-righteous; like many of his contemporaries, he was "conservative, consistent, and orthodox" in his beliefs. His view of a stratified society was hardly unusual, for almost everyone felt that "all government was based on the principle of subordination and the duty of all classes of men is to contribute to the good of the

whole.” To Fielding, the homes of the high-placed were no more than prisons: “Newgate [Prison] with the mask on.” He displayed caustic attitudes toward this group in both *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*. His own religious beliefs were integral to his very being. As a magistrate he acted upon these beliefs; he was sympathetic toward his impoverished clients and also accepted a smaller salary. Fielding’s scrupulously honest efforts in time reduced the questionable practices that he had seen. He carried this same honesty into his novels.

Yet Fielding was his own man, a truly independent thinker. Not entirely in sympathy with his contemporary world, he was hypercritical of the mores of every class, satirizing the various odious behaviors of his world in the persons of numerous characters in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, particularly those that exemplified hypocrisy, which he deemed “an ungenerous behavior,” whatever the class of the person. The upper class provided numerous examples. In *Joseph Andrews*, he satirizes Lady Booby’s attempt to seduce her much younger, chaste footman, Joseph, an act not only reprehensible but also ludicrous. In *Tom Jones*, he shows a lady by position as actually no more than a high-born prostitute or pimp.

Fielding did not spare the middle class, either. In *Joseph Andrews*, he depicted the un-Christian behavior of Parson Trulliber, who laughed at Parson Adams’s swine- and mud-stained clothes, constantly berated his own wife, regardless of who was present, and then spurned Parson Adams’s need of a loan, though he could have spared much more money than what had been requested. The latter was the essence, Fielding thought, of “faith without works,” in his mind typical of a then-current popular religious leader whose ideas Fielding especially detested. Innkeepers, doctors, lawyers, maids, tutors—these became the targets of Fielding’s strong disapproval. “Money called the tune” at the time, an idea Fielding could not support.

The lower class, also, came under Fielding’s satire. While he could be compassionate toward many of this class, he could still deplore their flaws. A “practical idealist,” he gave to the needy, supported the foundling and lying-in hospitals, established subscriptions for old men, and shared his scant income and his plenteous writing talents where he could, even up to the few months before his death. Moreover, unlike his contemporaries, he recog-

nized the dualities of human nature, the constructive-destructive natures of human beings. In *Tom Jones*, he shows the basically admirable Squire Western and Squire Allworthy as each having the human blemishes of class consciousness. He portrays Tom Jones as a basically decent young man but one who still must learn prudence through a number of devastating experiences, which he eventually surmounts, gaining the necessary wisdom. Even Parson Adams, in *Joseph Andrews*, shares this duality of nature.

Fielding, then, was indignant at the world that he knew. This feeling led to his satiric view of this world, an irony he reiterated repeatedly on stage, in journals, and in his novels in order to correct and redress the awfulness of existing conditions, high and low. He became, then, in his novels especially, “the most faithful representative of his age: he gave its coarsenesses, its brutalities, and sometimes with too little consciousness of their evils, though no one ever satirized more powerfully the worst abuses of the time.” He found that his witty but serious approach with his “sure and just sense of values” could and did make dents in the general attitudes and behavior.

Fielding also “represents the strong, healthy common sense and stubborn honesty of the sound English nature” in his particular way, with his object “to give a faithful picture of human nature.” Thus, he usually created the illusion of reality, using all ranges of humor—slapstick, situational (based on characters in situations), and the practical joke—to show the various behaviors in his characters that needed correcting. His world appreciated humor in whatever form, and Fielding knew his world very well.

## JOSEPH ANDREWS

**First published:** 1742

**Type of work:** Novel

*A parody in the first ten chapters, this novel tells of the adventures of a young man, although centering more on his traveling companion.*

Many critics say *Joseph Andrews* is Fielding’s first novel, discounting *An Apology for the Life of Mrs.*

*Shamela Andrews* (1741). *Joseph Andrews*, however, though a parody of *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740-1741; commonly known as *Pamela*) in its first ten chapters, is “more refined and truly comic” than *Shamela*. Joseph is the “newly invented” brother of Richardson’s heroine, and Squire Booby and Lady Booby the counterparts of *Pamela*’s Mr. B. When Fielding had achieved his purpose, his novel soon moved on into an almost picaresque tale centered more on Parson Adams, who, from the eleventh chapter on, dominates the novel.

The full title is typically eighteenth century: *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams, Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of Don Quixote*. The novel was published anonymously in 1742 and did not achieve the immediate acclaim that *Pamela* had, though a new edition came six months later. Fielding was not part of the literary mainstream, a situation true generally of the other early novelists. Individuals “of taste and intellect” liked Fielding’s book, finding *Joseph Andrews* truer, more real, “not a tissue of silly make-believe.” Fielding—and Richardson—thus validated this new form of fiction.

*Joseph Andrews* could be called a picaresque novel in structure, for its plotline is similar to the one-line structure of picaresque fiction, much like Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615), Fielding’s mentor’s book. The plot of the novel progresses by “shuttling,” moving forward by “small oscillations of emotion,” which, in the larger, all-over design, are small parts of a unified whole, episodic in nature. At times, events seem like reversals, followed by forward movement.

In the novel, Fielding employed ironies, unmaskings, conflicts, and reversals. He used coincidences, too, but credibly, indicating one should trust in Divine Providence, the basis of his own creed. One of these coincidences is the peddler, as a burlesque of Sophocles’ *Oedipous Tyrannos* (c. 429 B.C.E.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715), acting as a messenger in the novel: He arrives just as he is needed, and he happens to know the rights of the births of the two young people, the very information that is needed then. Fielding himself acted as a superior observer, writing in the third person (rather than using Richardson’s first person of the epistolary form). Though there are realistic situations and

characterizations in *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding did not strive for complete authenticity.

By reversing the sexes of the two main figures of *Pamela* in his own novel, Fielding showed more clearly, he felt, the silliness, the ludicrousness of the “sentimentality and improbability” prevalent in much of his contemporary world. His title character becomes Joseph because he acts like the biblical Joseph, who rejected Potiphar’s wife. With his engagement to Fanny, Joseph, at first almost a paragon, becomes more like a normal human being, more real, rather than an improbable “cardboard” character.

In the general plot, Joseph rises from a low rank to become a footman in the London house of a baronet (actually the lowest rank of gentry), Sir Thomas Booby, who dies early in the novel. Not long after, Joseph is inappropriately importuned by the newly widowed Lady Booby and then by Mrs. Slipslop, Lady Booby’s horrendous waitingwoman. In the meantime, Fanny Goodwill, Joseph’s eventual “intended,” is dismissed for her “immorality” (as Slipslop terms her behavior), but principally because she is attractive. A virtuous, chaste young woman, though naïve, she exists to be rescued. She is sent home to Somersetshire, on the Booby’s country estate. Joseph, too, has now been dismissed and has headed for the same destination.

Parson Adams, who was Joseph and Fanny’s tutor en route to London, happens upon Joseph in an inn just outside London. The Parson reverses his route and, with Joseph, makes his way back to Joseph’s country home, encountering numerous characters and adventures on the way, including rescuing Fanny from a dire situation. At home comes the denouement: the revelation of Fanny and Joseph’s true parentages, a seeming reversal, and a hilarious nighttime bedroom scene at Lady Booby’s. After all the reversals and seeming conflicts, Joseph and Fanny overcome their difficulties.

Fielding, in this novel, followed “the quixotic pattern of master and Man meeting on the road,”





much as Cervantes did. Yet he used his previously developed theater skills, too, for the last book of *Joseph Andrews*, the “musical bed” situation, showed quite surely “excessive stagecraft in Fielding’s art.” In other places, too, he evidently used this previous experience, adapting it to this new genre.

Looking at Fielding’s cast of characters in *Joseph Andrews*, one sees that the psychology of the characters stands out more so than Fielding’s “puppet-like manipulation” of them. Fanny and Joseph, while humanized, are hardly more than conventional young lovers. Parson Adams, however, is a “living human being,” both aggressive and humble, a mixture of strong and yet unsophisticated sentiments, comic and yet maddening, but lovable in his unselfish kindness, his unwavering goodness, and his thoroughly honest nature. He is the epitome of naïve virtue, probably Fielding’s finest conception.

In *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding utilizes his characters to expose eighteenth century mores: the class consciousness and the easy willingness to admit a formerly lower-class person into a higher class, when circumstances rectify situations. Two incidents illustrate this last point. The Boobys readily admit Fanny, a former serving maid, into their upper-class family, having learned that Fanny is by birth really Pamela’s sister, and Mr. Wilson, formerly an outcast rake of London absorbed in the “bright lights,” is readily reaccepted once he becomes a respectable country gentleman.

*Joseph Andrews*, however, is not merely a didactic novel. It is that, true, but the didacticism is masked with the overlay of irony and humor. Fielding’s characters are part of a plot replete with ludicrous but essentially serious undertakings and reversals. It is a plot carried out by psychologically realistic characters in humorous yet realistic situations. Fielding’s didacticism is, therefore, effective.

## TOM JONES

**First published:** 1749

**Type of work:** Novel

*In this pseudoautobiographical novel, a thoroughly good young man, through a series of adventures, evolves from innocence to maturity.*

Fielding’s best-plotted novel, his masterpiece, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, probably was begun in 1746. When the novel finally appeared, it was “enthusiastically received” by the general public, though not by two groups, the Tory journalists, who strongly disliked Fielding for supporting the House of Hanover, and Richardson and his group, who saw Fielding as a “filthy and immoral writer,” even to the point of slandering Fielding himself, particularly for “marrying his cook.”

This novel can be labeled pseudoautobiographical: Tom Jones, the main character and hero, is to a large degree a fictionalized version of his creator’s own boyhood experiences, as well as Fielding’s own psychological responses to those experiences. The narrative structure moves, through the journey to London that Tom makes, from innocence to experience. Fielding, in this novel, used a central plot interspersed with seemingly peripheral incidents or subplots, all of which helped the central plot to move steadily toward a desired terminal objective. These peripheral episodes thus fit into the main plot—seeming detours, but all part of the route that Tom must take on his road to knowledge. Using the tight construction of a well-made play, Fielding produced in *Tom Jones* one of the best-plotted novels in English.

Fielding himself called *Tom Jones* a “comic epic poem in prose,” though others say it is “essentially a comic romance.” Yet Fielding does include some parts that parody the effects of heroic poetry, particularly the digressions. Like other eighteenth century writers, Fielding felt it was his duty to try to change his society. Thus, he headed each of the eighteen books of *Tom Jones* with an introductory essay, each of which elaborates on an idea that he wished to promote, much like the Greek chorus in a tragedy. The digressions that he interjected only briefly divert the plot, which continues inexorably on to its conclusion.



The structure of *Tom Jones* shows three major parts, each six books in length. The first third of the novel is set in the Paradise Hall of Squire Allworthy in Somersetshire. Here, Tom's infancy and early years to age twenty need only the first three books to be told; the beginning of his twenty-first year and his break with the squire highlight the next three books. The second third, books 7 through 12, take but weeks to complete, recounting Tom's adventures on the road to London. The third part, books 13 through 18, is set in London, taking only days to complete. Yet the tone is grimmer, not the comical rowdy, farcical adventures Tom has hitherto met on the road but ugly involvements: prostitution, incest, and the like, similar to what Fielding had seen of London himself.

Tom, as a seeming orphan, is an antihero (part of the picaresque tradition). As such, he is in a sense isolated from his society, which does not know what a truly good person is; as such, he does not fit in. Fielding shows this in numerous scenes. Tom is the essentially good person, though he does sometimes do things that result in harmful out-

comes. After Tom's foolishness results in Black George being fired, Tom tries, typically, to atone by giving financial assistance to Black George's family and obtaining another job for him. Nothing Tom does deeply harms another person—more often, Tom harms himself. He is even able to forgive Thwackum's vicious beatings. Throughout the novel, Tom's adventures illustrate his good im-

pulses, his desire to do the right thing each time. Fielding does not see virtue without fault—one has to achieve it by experience, taking it as one goes, the good with the bad. The good-natured will survive, as Tom does.

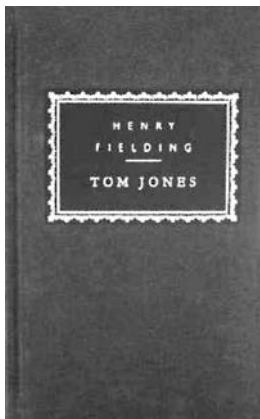
Blifil, Tom's foil, is quite evidently Tom's mirror side. Fielding shows the reader Blifil's toadying in the presence of the tutors, his freeing Sophia's bird and giving a glib, rationalized excuse to Squire

Allworthy—"the bird wanted to be free"—and his remembering Tom's trespasses and relating them to the squire in the worst light, so that Tom is dismissed from Paradise Hall. There, Blifil is the snake, so to speak, "cold, calculating, selfish, ambitious," eager to supplant his good-natured opposite by manipulation. The two have the same mother, the same environment, the same education, but totally different natures, again illustrating Fielding's fascination with determinism, or predestination (fate). The other characters in *Tom Jones* may be additional old stock types, with each of the four humors represented. The Man of the Mountain can be said to represent the melancholy; Partridge, Tom's putative father, the sanguine; with others representing the choleric and phlegmatic humors.

A mentor character, Squire Allworthy, Fielding's mouthpiece, is never shown as a "pompous fool." Having been modeled on two of Fielding's good friends, Squire Allworthy is shown as a good man, though not all wise. Fielding would have been ashamed to mock these friends. Like many good people, Allworthy is not able to imagine what some others would think or do; he is thus all too susceptible to the villains' manipulations. As a result, he puts Tom out of Paradise Hall and onto the road. He is an honorable man, who, when finally presented with the deeds of his nephews, Tom and Blifil, is able to recognize his own shortcomings, restoring Tom to grace and Blifil to his own hell. As a mentor character, his purpose is to put the author's ideas into practice; like other such characters, he is not especially well developed but remains wooden and static.

Squire Western is an example of the Tory independent landowners who generally favored the Stuarts. He, like his society, hated the German Hanoverians, who, in his view, were foisted upon the English. (Fielding himself favored the Hanoverians.) Decidedly Church of England (as Fielding was), he is hostile to central government, preferring peace rather than the upset of war, especially internecine, or civil, war.

Squire Western's sister, having been immersed in the Hanoverian court, is therefore suspect at home, not only for her political and social leanings but also as a model for Squire Western's daughter Sophia, who is of marriageable age. Never having



been married herself, Sophia and the squire finally discredit her as a suitable role model.

The tutors, modeled after two Salisbury acquaintances, are foils to Tom. Thwackum, the principal tutor, represents violent authority; he rationalizes his vicious beatings of Tom, having no concern with goodness or charity. Fielding shows Thwackum to be an outraged, morally bankrupt hypocrite; when the tutor learns that Squire Allworthy plans on leaving one thousand pounds to him, Thwackum laments that it is only that. Another hypocrite is the other tutor, the deist Square, who on the surface upholds the “natural beauty of virtue” but finds no qualms in sneaking out to Molly Seagrim’s for a sexual tryst, where Tom discovers him. Square represents rational persuasion, but both he and Thwackum vitiate the principles they have espoused as teachers. Of the two, though, Square does grow as a character.

## SUMMARY

Henry Fielding was an “innovating master of the first order.” In *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, as in his other novels, he discarded his predecessor’s epistolary method, calling his own books “comic epics in prose”—in effect, the first modern novels, the development of which influenced Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray in the nineteenth century. Though he is hardly an “exalted moralist” or a philosopher, his opinions do shape his novels, in part or in whole, in various episodes. *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* show him to be one of the most thoughtful of novelists. Though satiric, he maintained a somewhat realistic outlook; he is the first novelist to give the impression of frankly and fully recording normal behavior: His characters are “real people” who could step off Fielding’s pages into real life, thus sidestepping the encroachment of the then-prevalent sentimentality.

Mary Beale Wright

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, and thus the mainstream of the English novel, began as a literary competition between Fielding and Samuel Richardson. Trace the development of this competition.
- Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews* is considered one of Fielding's greatest characters. Writers often prefer bad clergymen as more interesting. How does Fielding make Adams, a good clergyman, interesting?
- The titles of Fielding's novels refer to them as "histories." What is the etymological link between "history" and "story"?
- Fielding refers to *Tom Jones* as "a comic epic poem in prose, perhaps a confusion, but certainly an assemblage, of literary genres." What does his use of such a phrase suggest about the literary situation in Fielding's time?
- Speculate on possible reasons for the extraordinarily simple name and mysterious origin (he was a foundling) of Tom Jones.
- Demonstrate how Tom Jones resembles, but also differs from, an established literary type called the picaresque, a common synonym for which is "rogue."
- Samuel Richardson, Fielding's early rival, claimed with reference to Tom Jones that Fielding was trying "to whiten a vicious character." Comment on the unfairness of that assertion.

## RICHARD FLANAGAN

**Born:** Rosebery, Tasmania, Australia  
1961

*Flanagan's fiction reflects his desire to present Tasmania's distinctive history and qualities to the rest of Australia, as well as to the wider world. His novels explore small, tight-knit societies, which are driven by the need for connection through families and through social contacts. He regards his work as a conversation between European culture and Australian experience.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Richard Flanagan (FLAN-ih-guhn) was born in Rosebery, Tasmania, Australia, in 1961, the fifth of six children and the descendant of Irish convicts transported to Tasmania (then known as Van Diemen's Land) during the Great Famine of the 1840's. He spent his childhood in Rosebery, a small mining town on the west coast of Tasmania, an area which has featured extensively in his novels.

Flanagan left school at sixteen to work as a bush laborer but later attended the University of Tasmania, earning a first class honors degree in 1982. He was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and attended the University of Oxford in England, where he earned a master's degree in literature in 1983. Like the protagonist of his first novel, Flanagan has worked as a river guide, and he took part in the first expedition to canoe the Jane River and the Gordon Gorge. He has also worked as a building laborer.

Flanagan's first novel was the now much celebrated *Death of a River Guide* (1994), which was so popular that it sold out its entire print run of 3,500 copies in less than four weeks—an unusual development for an Australian first novel. A second print run sold out almost as quickly. *Death of a River Guide* went on to win the 1996 National Fiction Award in Australia and the 1995 Victorian Premier's Award for First Fiction. His second novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), was similarly successful, winning the 1999 Australian Booksellers Book of the Year Award, the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction, and the 1998 Victorian Premier's Prize for Best Novel.

*Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2001), Flanagan's third novel, drew attention not only for

its story but for its production, featuring colored portraits of the fish mentioned in the novel, with the text printed in a variety of different colored inks. It won the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book in the Southeast Asia and South Pacific Region and was short-listed for the 2002 Miles Franklin Award. Flanagan's next novel, *The Unknown Terrorist*, was published in 2006.

Flanagan is also a well-known and outspoken campaigner on environmental and political issues in Tasmania. He has been highly critical of the Tasmanian government and regularly campaigns against activities he regards as being detrimental to the Tasmanian landscape and its inhabitants. In 2008, he was living in Tasmania with his wife and three children.

### ANALYSIS

In an interview after *Death of a River Guide* was published, Flanagan commented that "Art is the closest thing we have to holding on to that inner spirit world that we feel always to be on the verge of vanishing and which we recall only as the vaguest of sensations: the touch of a loved one, the shadow of a forgotten tree, the sound of a parent crying." Flanagan's concern to hold onto that "inner spirit world" is shown time and again in his novels. His characters are preoccupied with remembering the past or with reclaiming lost details of their own lives.

As he lies trapped under a waterfall, Aljaz Cosini, the eponymous river guide, becomes the conduit for the memories not only of his immediate family but of all his ancestors. On the one hand, he relives the parts they played in the creation of

Tasmania as a country and a landscape, but on the other hand, his visions recapture all the tiny details of their lives that no one thought to record. The dilemma of William Buelow Gould, the protagonist in *Gould's Book of Fish*, lies in the fact that he has created a fake life for himself because he has no other life available to him, but Flanagan then poses two questions: What happens if you start to believe in the identity you have constructed for yourself, and what happens if that identity is revealed to be a fake? Flanagan is immensely preoccupied with the opportunities that migration presents for people to literally reinvent themselves but also with the ways in which they lie to themselves as a result of having that chance to make themselves anew.

Flanagan is also fascinated by the structures of narrative, and both *Death of a River Guide* and *Gould's Book of Fish* experiment with ways of breaking out of conventional narrative frameworks. *Death of a River Guide* works with three different narrative threads, two working forward in time, and one working backward in time, with all three interlinking and criss-crossing to produce a complex picture of the immigrant experience in Tasmania. *Gould's Book of Fish* employs what appears at first sight to be a standard framing device, with an unreliable narrator telling a story from within the framing device. Only gradually does it become clear that no part of this narrative structure can be safely relied on and that the whole narrative is in fact gradually collapsing in on itself, under the weight of its own artifice. As Flanagan clearly shows, there is no one person to whom ownership of the creative act can be fully assigned. Everyone, including the reader, is participating.

## DEATH OF A RIVER GUIDE

**First published:** 1994

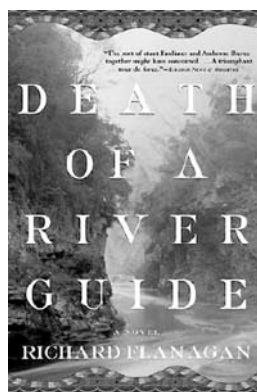
**Type of work:** Novel

*Trapped beneath a waterfall on the Franklin River in Tasmania as he lies drowning, Aljaz Cosini, a river guide, travels back in time, seeing not only his life but that of his family, friends, and ancestors, providing a unique perspective on the turbulent history of Tasmania.*

Flanagan's breathtaking debut novel opens with the protagonist, Aljaz Cosini, trapped among rocks, under a waterfall. He is at the point of death, drowning, and as is expected of drowning people, his life is flashing before his eyes. However, it is not simply a matter of recapitulating his own life. Aljaz has also been granted visions and he is traveling beyond his own life, into the lives of others, the earlier members of his own family. Through their eyes he learns not only the history of his family but also of Tasmania itself.

Aljaz has only taken on this job to help out an acquaintance, having recently returned to Tasmania. His father has just died and he is alone in the world, with nothing to tie him down. He is being paid badly, and the river trip is poorly equipped; he is also out of condition, having long since given up working as a river guide. However, he has got nothing else going on in his life, and as he has drifted through life over the last few years, so he drifts into this final job, afraid, uncertain, but at the same time determined to do the decent thing by his clients.

In fact, as Aljaz lies under the water, he tells three stories. One is his own, beginning with his birth in Italy to the mercurial Sonja and the absent Harry, and moving forward in time through his relationship with the enigmatic Couta Ho, from another generation of immigrants, and the loss of their child, Jemma, to the ill-fated river rafting expedition and his imminent death. The second is the story of the rafting





expedition itself, while the final story is one that comes to him in flashes and visions, which send him traveling back and forth through time.

This last is the story of Harry's family, the Lewises and the Quades, decent, honest settlers, as Harry's mother, Rose, insists, not like the convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land, or Tasmania, as it was later called. Harry's father, Boy, was a lumberjack and a trapper. After Rose died, Harry went up into the mountains to work with his father until Boy was killed by a falling tree, after which Harry wandered the world, ending up in Italy, where he met Aljaz's mother, Sonja.

However, as visions assail Aljaz, he begins to realize that his family's beginnings are much more complex than he had been led to believe. His family are not the settlers his grandmother insisted they were but instead are descended from convicts. There was no mayor of Parramatta, but instead there was Ned Quade, transported from Salford, England, a convict who escaped and tried to make his way home. No one in Tasmania is quite what he seems to be, but each has a respectable cover story; everyone insists they came to Tasmania of their own free will.

As the visions intensify, Aljaz sees how his family's story is also a story that reflects the history of European settlement in Tasmania, even up to the present day and his arrival there with his mother. Gradually, however, he begins to see that there is another, secret history, more secret even than the fact of having convict ancestors. Throughout the novel there is an awareness of the indigenous inhabitants of Tasmania, the Aboriginal peoples, being displaced from their lands or murdered, but by the present day they have vanished, seemingly without trace. However, as Aljaz gradually comes to realize, while the Aboriginal people may no longer be visible, they still exist in the interstices of the white world. All of his life he has been taunted by other white Tasmanians for being an "immigrant." It turns out, as the reader has probably already suspected for some time and perhaps Aljaz himself has guessed, that his father's family is not as "white" as it claims to be and that he in fact has Aboriginal ancestors, thus tying him more closely to the land than most of the people who taunted him.

Aljaz's death is inevitable and is indeed signaled in the novel's title. Yet in his dying Aljaz transcends the wretchedness of his recent life and at long last

finds a secure place for himself, among his ancestors, a part of the history of Tasmania, the country he finds he cannot live within, but from which he cannot live away.

## GOULD'S BOOK OF FISH

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*A first-person narrative in which William Buelow Gould, convict and reluctant artist, tells a story of the settlement of Tasmania through the paintings that he is obliged to produce.*

Who William Buelow Gould was to begin with will never be known. Gould himself has no idea who he really was, other than that he was the product of a nameless man who died making love to a nameless woman who died in the act of childbirth. Young William is brought up in the poorhouse until apprenticed to a stonemason. Unsited to the heavy work, he runs away to London and begins an odyssey that will take him across the world, finally arriving at the Tasmanian penal colony of Sarah Island.

Indeed, Gould never set out to be a painter at all; all he wanted to do was survive. As luck would have it, in America he falls in with Jean-Babeuf Audubon, with whom he embarks on an abortive business venture. Audubon, not unlike his namesake John James, is a painter of birds, and from him Gould gets the first inkling of what it might mean to be an artist. However, Gould himself has no particular interest in painting until he reaches a situation where claiming to be an artist will conveniently get him out of trouble. At this point, Gould assumes the identity of an artist, helped by having worked for a few months decorating porcelain, and he manages to fake his way as such until, having arrived at Sarah Island, he finds himself employed by the prison doctor.

Tobias Lempriere is desperate to become a fellow of the Royal Society, and he believes that Gould's skills will help him to secure this coveted position by having Gould paint the fish of Macquarie Harbor. At first, Gould struggles to fulfil Lempriere's demands; he is more used to painting

copies of old master paintings. However, almost in spite of himself, Gould begins to paint in earnest, and he struggles with the fact that he is no longer faking his skills, as he has faked so much throughout his life, but is in fact an artist.

However, the reader learns Gould's story through words rather than through pictures. Gould is, or so he claims, writing his life story while imprisoned in a cell that is flooded by the tide twice a day, and which also contains the rotting corpse of a man whom Gould has indirectly killed. He is, by his own admission, an entirely unreliable narrator, and the experienced reader will have noticed that someone—perhaps Gould, perhaps someone else—has studded Gould's narrative with elements of other stories. An episode from Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767) makes an appearance, as does a fragment of plot from Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). These are stories Gould is unlikely to have come across, which throws open the

question of whether this is Gould's own narrative, or whether Gould even existed.

For Gould's narrative is in fact being re-created by one Sid Hammet, who found the book in a junk shop and was entranced by the extraordinary paintings and the peculiar, multicolored narrative, until one night he left the book on a pub counter and, so he says, lost it. The narrative that is available to readers is Sid's recollec-

tion of Gould's narrative rather than the book itself, and it may in turn be wrong. Gould's own concern in writing his narrative is to record his autobiography, having discovered that the official history of the Sarah Island penal colony is at consider-

able variance to his actual experience. Whereas Gould sees the island commandant's megalomaniac desire to build an empire, fired by letters (faked letters, it turns out) from the sister of the man whose identity he assumed, Gould discovers that the colony's official records have been faked. Instead of recording the effects of the commandant's insanity, they show a colony gradually being established and becoming successful. Which is accurate? It is impossible to say.

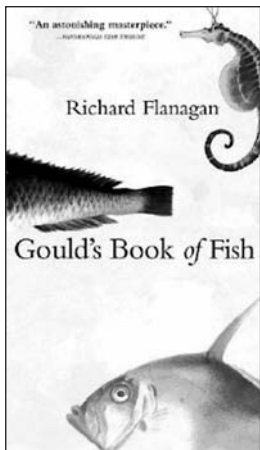
Gould escapes from the penal colony and travels into the Tasmanian interior. However, he begins to become aware that the narrative that holds his world together is disintegrating around him. Most significantly, he becomes aware of his own fictional nature, as his world and someone's re-creation of it begin to collapse into one another. Finally, Gould believes he has become a fish, a weedy sea dragon, and the story comes full circle, as he is now the fish that Sid Hammet is staring at in a tank. Except that nothing is at all certain.

Flanagan's novel questions the entire nature of fiction and forgery, a subject particularly pertinent in Australian culture, with its long history of literary fakery and reinvention of identity.

## SUMMARY

Richard Flanagan's novels explore the nature of Tasmania, his native land and a place of which he is inordinately proud. Flanagan does not hesitate to address the darker side of Tasmania's history as a penal colony, nor the fact that the country's indigenous inhabitants were all but exterminated by white settlers. However, he also seeks to show that his country's history is more complex than a simple matter of settlement and extinction. For Flanagan, Tasmania's history is closely related to the land, but he also shows how modern Tasmanians are affected, often unwittingly, by the experiences of their forefathers, and that they carry the history of their country deep inside themselves. Flanagan's role as a writer is to remind the world of this.

Maureen Kincaid Speller



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*The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, 1997

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*The Unknown Terrorist*, 2006

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does Richard Flanagan's writing tell the reader about Tasmania? How important is it to his novels that Tasmania is an island, isolated from the rest of Australia?
- Connections between people are very significant in Flanagan's novels. How is this significance illustrated in his writing?
- Flanagan describes himself as having come from an "oral culture." How is this reflected in his writing?
- In *Gould's Book of Fish*, William Buelow Gould has worked as a forger. Even his names are all borrowed from other people. What can this tell us about the nature of identity?
- Flanagan has described his novels as a dialogue between European culture and the Australian experience. In the novels, find ways in which European culture impinges on Australian life.
- In Flanagan's novels, his characters live close to nature. How does the interaction with nature affect their daily lives?



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## GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

**Born:** Rouen, France  
December 12, 1821

**Died:** Croisset, France  
May 8, 1880

*Flaubert is recognized as one of the world's greatest novelists. His novel *Madame Bovary* is particularly acclaimed as a masterpiece of world literature and an example of realism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Gustave Flaubert (floh-BEHR) was born in the historic Normandy city of Rouen, in northern France, on December 12, 1821. His father, Dr. Achille Cléophas Flaubert, was a surgeon in Rouen, where Gustave went to school. Gustave was one of six children, only three of whom survived to adulthood. Among them was his older brother Achille, who became a doctor like his father. Gustave was a good student, winning prizes for history and earning his *baccalauréat* in 1840.

Between 1840 and 1843, Flaubert studied law in Paris but failed his examinations. In 1844, he began to suffer from strange fits identified as epilepsy. The first attack rendered him an invalid for several months and led to the family's moving to Croisset, outside Rouen. A second consequence of the illness was that Flaubert's family came to accept that he would not pursue a career and allowed him to devote himself to his writing. Certain critics, among them the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, have commented extensively on the role of Flaubert's debilitating illness on his subsequent literary career.

In 1846, Flaubert's father died, a loss quickly followed by the death of his sister Caroline in childbirth. Flaubert remained with his mother, Caroline Fleuriot (she died in 1872), and his infant niece, and he began to develop his literary ideas. His first draft of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874; *The*

*Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1895), the final version of which was not published until 1874, was read to friends at this time, and the seeds of the novel that would become *Madame Bovary* (1857; English translation, 1886) were sown. While working, Flaubert lived a hermitlike existence at the family's country house at Croisset. This reclusive regime did not prevent Flaubert from visiting Paris, as well as more distant and exotic sites. In October, 1849, Flaubert left France with his friend Maxime du Camp for a journey to the Middle East that lasted until May, 1851.

Both during and after this journey, Flaubert kept in touch through letters, and his correspondence, edited and published after his death, survives as an important record of his thoughts and ideas, as his extensive correspondence with the novelist George Sand illustrates. During the period from 1851 through 1853, when Flaubert was working intensively on *Madame Bovary*, he also wrote to Louise Colet, herself a writer; she was his mistress and, some have argued, one of the models for the character Emma Bovary.

Flaubert did not publish his first novel, *Madame Bovary*, until 1856, when it began to appear in serial form in the *Revue de Paris*. The following year, the novel became the subject of a trial. The agents of the repressive Second Empire regime unsuccessfully prosecuted the novel for obscenity, claiming that the depiction of adultery would corrupt public morals. Flaubert was eventually acquitted of the charges, and the novel appeared in book form. Even without the publicity of the trial, the novel became famous, in part thanks to Flaubert's now-

famous style (Flaubert was extraordinarily demanding of himself and was constantly revising until he found *le mot juste*) and his development of “free indirect style,” a form of reported speech in which it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the voice of the narrator and the interior monologue of the protagonist.

After the turbulence of the trial, Flaubert took another trip that lasted from April to June of 1858. This time he traveled to Tunisia to collect information for a book he was planning, to be set in Carthage. This novel, *Salammô* (1862; English translation, 1886), was subsequently published in 1862 and marked a new trend in Flaubert’s work. His eye for detail was every bit as keen, and the novel boasts lush passages of description that illustrate Flaubert’s romantic tendencies, but his choosing to set the novel in the distant past has been seen by many critics as significant.

Flaubert returned to a contemporary setting in his next novel, *L’Éducation sentimentale* (1869; *A Sentimental Education*, 1898). The book was first published in France in 1869, near the end of the Second Empire; its description of the 1848 revolution added to Flaubert’s reputation as a realist, thanks to his meticulous documentation of contemporary life. Flaubert’s career was interrupted by the political events of 1870, when France went to war with Prussia, a confrontation that quickly brought about the end of the Second Empire. Flaubert continued to suffer from nervous illness but served in the National Guard. The interruptions to his work were not only political, however, for on April 6, 1872, his mother died. Flaubert persevered with his writing despite the setbacks. He dabbled briefly in theater, but his play *Le Candidat* (pr., pb. 1874; *The Candidate*, 1904) ran for only four performances in 1874 before being canceled. Flaubert had more success with his novel *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, an idea on which he had been working since the 1840’s. The novel was finally published in 1874.

During the remaining years of his life, Flaubert worked alternately on two projects: *Trois Contes* (1877; *Three Tales*, 1903) and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881; *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, 1896). These works required prodigious quantities of documentation, and progress was slow. In addition, Flaubert was beset by health problems, as well as financial worries. When the husband of his niece Caroline, Ernest Commanville, went bankrupt, Flaubert helped out

financially to avoid bringing dishonor on the family, but the cost was great. He himself was ruined financially, forced to sell many family heirlooms that he was reluctant to part with, and he faced the prospect of relying on his writing to bring in an income. *Three Tales* was eventually published in 1877, and Flaubert could finally give his undivided attention to *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, but it was too late. He died on May 8, 1880, in Croisset, his last work still unfinished. Even though this novel was incomplete, it nevertheless was published in 1881, the year after Flaubert’s death.

### ANALYSIS

Flaubert has been hailed as a realist, thanks mainly to his masterpiece *Madame Bovary*; he has also been claimed as a precursor of decadence, but Flaubert cared little for labels. He did not affiliate himself with any particular school of literature, and his main concern was with style. His works alternate between works of realism and exoticism. His first novel, *Madame Bovary*, his most celebrated accomplishment, was followed by *Salammô*, a work set in the distant past. Flaubert returned to the recent past and the politically charged years of the 1848 revolution with *A Sentimental Education* but again departed from this realistic approach in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

Despite this alternation, all of Flaubert’s works share certain features: They are meticulously researched, stylistically rich, and exhaustively rewritten. His letters are a valuable complement to his prose fiction works, documenting his struggles with style and recounting how, for example, he would declaim his work aloud in order to find exactly the right word to fit not just the meaning of the sentence but its formal structure and poetic cadence as well. Flaubert’s style became legendary, and admirers could recite typical passages. One favorite example was the opening sentence of *Salammô*, whose tripartite structure was typical of Flaubert’s style.

Although Flaubert is often associated with the realist school, his works were influential in a number of other ways. The themes of mysticism, sadism, and the femme fatale, a pattern in Flaubert’s work already discernible in *Salammô* but accentuated by *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and by the short story “Hérodiade” (published in Flaubert’s collection *Three Tales*), were recognized in the 1880’s as



important precursors to the Decadent movement in literature.

Flaubert's interest in realism was also a reflection of his preoccupation with the power of the cliché to obscure meaning even as it appears to make meaning possible. Throughout his life, Flaubert was fascinated by what he came to call "received ideas"—ideas that on the surface seem meaningful but, when examined, reveal lack of critical thought and mediocrity. The first illustration of this theme occurs in the character of Homais, the chemist in *Madame Bovary*. Homais has an opinion about everything, but his pronouncements are usually unoriginal, pompous, and complacent.

Flaubert was still preoccupied by this idea at the end of his life, as demonstrated in his final novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Although unfinished, it is nevertheless a masterpiece, like most, if not all, of Flaubert's published works. The result, once again, of meticulous research, the novel illustrates Flaubert's mockery of bourgeois complacency through the figures of two middle-class clerks who, meeting by chance, decide that they are soul brothers based on the (to them) portentous realization that they have the same ideas. Flaubert undercuts this spiritual affinity by revealing that their uncanny sympathy is proven (in their estimation) by the fact that each had the brilliant idea of writing his name inside his hat. The banality of this initial point of commonality sets the tone for their joint story. They retire from their menial jobs and buy a farm in Normandy, determined to devote themselves to a great communal project that will realize their ambitions and ideals. They sink their fortunes into a series of fads, each sillier than the next (landscape gardening, fertilizer experimentation, social reform, and the study of phallic symbolism), in which their total lack of talent or inspiration brings failure after failure. While Flaubert created characters who become mouthpieces for received ideas, he also collected examples of received ideas and compiled them into a sort of dictionary arranged alphabetically by theme and titled *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (1910, 1913; *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, 1954).

Flaubert's relentless mockery of middle-class self-satisfaction is extremely humorous but relies heavily on irony for its effect, and the reader must be constantly vigilant in order to perceive the

disjunction between the high tone of the speeches of various characters and its inappropriateness. Flaubert seldom intrudes as narrator to point out these juxtapositions; indeed, his famous style of free indirect mode obscures the role of the narrator. This style lies somewhere between interior monologue (presenting things the way they are perceived by a given character) and indirect (or reported) speech presented by a third-person narrator or observer. The narrator does not tell the reader what to think but presents narrative events colored by the perceptions of individual participants, which the reader must then evaluate. Thus, a famous scene in *Madame Bovary* depicts a troubled Emma seeking to unburden herself to the priest Bournisien. Emma catches him at a bad moment, when he is distracted by the more temporal concerns of controlling an unruly group of boys. His attention is only half on Emma, a problem compounded by his own lack of spiritual vision and understanding. The best comfort he can offer is to suggest her problem may be due to something she has eaten.

## MADAME BOVARY

**First published:** 1857 (English translation, 1886)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young woman, unable to reconcile her idealistic vision of life with reality, commits suicide after a series of adulterous affairs.*

*Madame Bovary*, Flaubert's first published novel, is arguably his greatest. Emma Bovary has become one of the most famous characters in world literature, and critics continue to debate and interpret her life, which, in its depiction of the conflict between idealism and reality, remains every bit as relevant today as it did when first published.

Formally divided into three parts, each one corresponding to a stage in Emma's life, the novel opens with Charles Bovary's youth and ends after Emma's death, making Charles, as it were, a set of parentheses that enclose Emma's life. Each section corresponds to an important stage in the narrative. The first part ends with the move to Yonville and

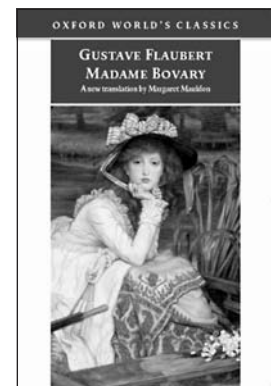
the news that Emma is pregnant, thus presenting optimism at the prospect of change. As the reader suspects, however, the change does not bring happiness, and Emma quickly becomes dissatisfied once again. In her search for happiness, she turns to adultery with the rakish and unabashedly exploitative Rodolphe, whom Emma persists in seeing as a romantic hero. Emma plans to elope with him, but he balks at the last minute, and Emma is thrust into a depression that ends the second part of the novel. In the final section, Emma engages in yet another adulterous affair, this time with Léon, using the pretext of music lessons as the cover for her regular visits to nearby Rouen. The affair quickly becomes a routine, however, and a typical day sees Emma lying ever more blatantly to cover her tracks, selling property to pay the mounting bills, juggling the money problems, and taking less and less trouble to be discreet about the affair. For once, Emma is getting what she wants—excitement, romance, luxuries—and is forced to confront the fact that these are not the things that bring happiness. Unable to extricate herself from the financial problems that are ruining the family, and now irrevocably disillusioned about the possibility of finding happiness, she concludes that the only alternative is suicide.

Her dissatisfactions are highlighted by the contrast between her ideals and her uninspiring husband. The novel opens with the description of Charles Bovary as a schoolboy, a rather bumbling and boorish figure who provokes derision and mockery in his new classmates. It has often been noted that the name “Bovary,” derived from the Latin for “ox,” symbolizes Charles’s bovine character: slow, coarse and unrefined, rather dull-witted. Charles’s unfortunate start in life does not prevent him from becoming a doctor with a modest country practice and marrying for the second time for love, not for money. He marries Emma, the daughter of one of his farmer-patients, who then takes over as the central character of the narrative. Charles is an “*officier de santé*,” a phrase often simply translated as “country doctor,” but it is important, especially for contemporary readers, to remember that this was a second-class kind of doctor. Thus, although Charles is associated with the prestigious field of medicine, he is presented as one of its less-skilled practitioners. His was a modestly paid and

extremely unglamorous occupation, which consisted mainly of contact with the most distasteful aspects of human malaise.

Flaubert describes in detail Emma’s background and education, for the fact that her outlook has been conditioned by reading novels is important in understanding her subsequent disappointments in life. She has high expectations of marriage and looks to it to fulfill all her dreams and ideals. When reality does not live up to these hopes, she is quickly dissatisfied. She imagines that satisfaction can be found in motherhood, romantic affairs, religion, material possessions, and any number of other fads that temporarily inspire her enthusiasm, but she is disappointed every time. At the end of the novel, when she despairs of finding happiness and realizes that she has ruined her family’s life through the debts she has incurred, she poisons herself with arsenic, turning her disillusionment inward in a self-destructive gesture of defeat.

Critics have disagreed over how Emma’s character should be interpreted. According to some, her idealism is seen as destructive and unrealistic, an example of the negative forces unleashed by romantic and indulgent imagination or, more reductively, as the folly of a materialistic and acquisitive woman who brings about the downfall of her family through her unbounded and selfish desires. A more sympathetic reading has also emerged based on a different understanding of the role of gender in the novel, a reading that sees Emma less as a silly woman, and more as a character in search of a deeper meaning to life but trapped by circumstances. These differences of interpretation are highlighted by different interpretations of the title of the work, which stresses that the heroine is not Emma, but *Madame*. Does the title, symbolizing Emma’s married, public identity, call attention to what she betrays, or to the situation that entraps her?



## A SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

**First published:** *L'Éducation sentimentale*, 1869; (English translation, 1898)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The idealistic young Frédéric Moreau falls in love with an inaccessible woman and, over the course of a lifetime, gradually loses his ideals.*

*A Sentimental Education*, Flaubert's third novel, furthered the author's reputation for realism through its depiction of the recent past, specifically the events of 1848. The novel also had another realistic twist in its autobiographical underpinnings: The basis for Frédéric's infatuation with Madame Arnoux is Flaubert's idealization of Madame Maurice Schlésinger (Elisa Foucault), whom he had met while on vacation at Trouville, when he was only fourteen. Madame Schlésinger, the wife of a music editor and then twenty-six years old, became for Flaubert the model of an ideal but distant woman.

*A Sentimental Education* follows its hero Frédéric Moreau over a period of many years, from his youth and its romantic aspirations through a series of lessons in life in which Frédéric is exposed to the decidedly unromantic side of a number of lifestyles. Political idealism, brotherhood, high society, finance, and the art world are all demystified as Frédéric learns more about each segment of society. Gradually, his ideals are eroded, leaving him only with disillusionment. When he gets together with his old childhood friend, Deslauriers, at the end of the novel, they relive their schoolboy days, including one incident in particular when they went to a brothel. In the closing words of the novel, the two men decide that these were the best times they had ever had. The nostalgia for their lost youth and innocence is poignant, yet at the same time the reader is left wondering. If a botched visit to a brothel is the highlight of their youth and the best that they remember, this fact alone speaks volumes about the many disappointments their lives contain.

A constant theme weaving together Frédéric's lessons in life is his love for Madame Arnoux. He meets her for the first time by chance when she is a fellow traveler on the ferry he is taking home to

Nogent, and it is love at first sight for him. He is only eighteen years old at the time, but this idealized love quickly becomes the dominant passion of his life. Frédéric befriends the expansive and genial Monsieur Arnoux, Marie's husband, and becomes more deeply involved in his fortunes than he (Frédéric) would otherwise prefer, all in an attempt to retain his proximity to Arnoux's wife. Frédéric loans money and becomes implicated in Arnoux's affairs with mistresses, all to retain some contact with the family. Each time he resolves to take action, a twist of events thwarts him at the last minute (or are these merely pretexts to disguise his own ambivalence?), and Flaubert's talents are fully deployed in creating dramatic irony that constantly defers resolution of the plot.

The most significant example of this irony comes when Frédéric finally has a chance to consummate his relationship with Madame Arnoux. They arrange a rendezvous, for which Frédéric even arrives early, but his anticipation gradually turns to disappointment as he waits and waits. Finally, after five hours, he leaves. This disappointment precipitates Frédéric's next action, for he goes to see Arnoux's mistress Rosanette in order to get his revenge. Thus, by the time he learns the real reason for Madame Arnoux's failure to appear (her child had fallen ill), he had already judged the situation and engaged himself in another course of action (with Rosanette).

While preserving his ideal love, unconsummated, for Madame Arnoux, Frédéric enters a number of liaisons with other women that highlight in various ways the primary relationship. The relationship with Rosanette, for example, serves to contrast carnal love with the ideal and spiritual qualities with which Frédéric endows his love for Madame Arnoux. Similarly, his relationship with Louise underscores the role of inaccessibility in the development of the plot. Louise is ultimately uninteresting to Frédéric because she is accessible, and this paradox (wanting only what one cannot have) provides the key to understanding the failure of Frédéric's relationship with Madame Arnoux: The moment that he thinks that she has finally become accessible to him is the moment that he starts looking elsewhere.

Frédéric Moreau is a male counterpart to Emma Bovary (indeed, the poet Charles Baudelaire once remarked that Emma Bovary had a man's soul in a

woman's body), both characters trying to break out of the human condition of frustrated desire. Superficially, both characters can be read as weak and misguided individuals who suffer from the illusion that the grass is always greener somewhere else. Yet Flaubert treats this theme with indulgence for his characters' weakness and suggests that their dissatisfactions also possess a metaphysical dimension.

### THREE TALES

**First published:** *Trois Contes*, 1877 (English translation, 1903)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*The life story of an obscure country servant is followed by the medieval story of Saint Julian and complemented by a reworking of the biblical story of Herodias.*

*Three Tales* consists of three short stories: "Un Cœur simple" ("A Simple Heart"), "La Légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier" ("The Legend of St. Julian, Hospitalier"), and "Hérodias" ("Herodias"). Taken together, these three stories reflect Flaubert's thematic concerns and artistic style. "A Simple Heart" tells the story of Félicité, a simple-minded and religious family servant. Set in contemporary, provincial France, this short story became an exercise in realism and narrative style. "The Legend of St. Julian, Hospitalier" reactivates Flaubert's interest in historical settings and the lives of saints (with a fantastic twist), while "Herodias" shares some of these features (the historical setting) while also incorporating the themes of exoticism and the femme fatale, a theme frequently explored by nineteenth century writers through the story of Salomé, which enjoyed a particular vogue in literature and painting at the turn of the century. Despite these different settings and themes, the three stories present a certain unity through recurrent motifs and patterns.

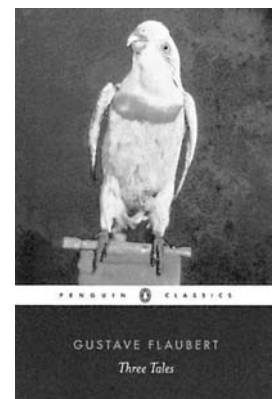
Stylistically, these stories reveal Flaubert's mature writing skills, and the minimal use of dialogue gives Flaubert ample room to develop his narrative techniques. Félicité, whose name ironically means "felicity" or "happiness," is shown through a third-person narrator whose voice blends imperceptibly

into a more articulate version of her own inner voice. It is the story of an obscure and overlooked life, told in five carefully structured parts. Félicité lives vicariously through the children of her mistress Madame Aubain, through a nephew, and finally even through a parrot. Just when she seems most unwanted herself, she adopts an unwanted parrot, Loulou, who becomes her companion. When the parrot dies, she has it stuffed, and at the moment of her own death she confuses the sight of Loulou with a vision of the Holy Ghost descending from heaven.

Flaubert stated that his intentions in "A Simple Heart" were not to be ironic but to evoke pity. He relied heavily on autobiographical details for the background materials and even brought home a stuffed parrot that he kept on his desk as inspiration during the writing of the story. It was not pity for himself he wished to evoke, even though his recent financial ruin was still a source of pain. Instead, he was responding to a challenge from the novelist George Sand, who had reproached him for being unable to depict simple goodness. Sand died before she was able to see her challenge bear fruit in this story.

This rather muted story stands in contrast to the two historical panels of this triptych, a structure echoing the alternation in Flaubert's work between contemporary and exotic works. In the companion panels, the reader finds the story of Saint Julian, which invokes the bright colors of a gothic stained-glass window, and the equally colorful, but more barbaric, story of Herodias, also with a saintly figure, that of John the Baptist.

The story of Saint Julian focuses on the fulfillment of three predictions. Julian's birth is accompanied by two divine prophecies. The first, that he will be a saint, is delivered to his mother, while the second, predicting military glory, is told to his father. Julian himself receives a third, and more troubling, prophecy. The young Julian is an avid hunter, but when one of his targets, a stag, addresses him in a human voice to tell him



he (Julian) will kill his parents, he leaves home to avoid his fate.

The second part of the story sees Julian fulfilling the prophecy of military glory, where he continues to indulge his bloodlust. Like his more familiar counterpart Oedipus, Julian nevertheless cannot escape his destiny, and the narrative leads the reader to the inexorable fulfillment of the stag's curse. Leaving his palace one night to hunt, Julian returns to find two people in his bed. Supposing them to be his wife and a lover, he kills them in a rage, only to discover that the couple was his own parents, on a pilgrimage, to whom his wife had given up the bed.

To complete the cycle of prophecies, the third segment takes up the prediction of sainthood. Julian has become an outcast to atone for his sins and lives a poor and hermitlike existence. One night, during a storm, a leper asks to be ferried across the river. Julian complies and also grants the leper's requests for food and shelter. The leper eventually requests that Julian warm him with his own body, and when Julian does this, the leper is miraculously transformed into Jesus, who transports Julian with him to heaven.

Here, Flaubert does not focus on the inner thoughts and perceptions of characters, choosing instead to present them like the naïve characters of the cathedral window that inspired them and to show the workings of tragedy. Julian is a tragic character, doomed by his own love of pointless killing but redeemed by charity and humility. The twin themes of fate and faith link all three stories in this series.

The final panel of the triptych is also similar to the story of Saint Julian by also being depicted on Rouen cathedral, in Flaubert's hometown, though this time in the form of a stone carving rather than a stained-glass window. "Herodias" throws the reader into the midst of the narrative at a crucial time, precisely when the actors in a tragic drama can yet intervene to change the course of events. In the opening scene of "Herodias," Herod Antipas is up before dawn, agitated, contemplating the need for decision and action. The timing of the action, which occupies twenty-four hours, from dawn to dawn, gives the story a classical form. Herod must decide how best to use his prisoner John the Baptist (Iaokanann) in his quest to control Jerusalem.

Herod's situation is precarious. He is planning to celebrate his birthday, and a number of powerful Romans have been invited to attend, but at the same time he is being attacked by the king of the Arabs. Once again, prophecy has a role to play, for it has been predicted that someone important will die in the citadel that day. Herod's problem is that there are so many important people around, it is not clear who the victim will be. The irony is that Iaokanann is not on his list of possibilities, since he fails to consider him important.

A Roman inspection of the citadel is the pretext for a lavish description of the visiting dignitaries, the fortress, and of Iaokanann himself, setting the tone of intrigue and excitement that dominates. The description, reminiscent of Flaubert's earlier novel *Salammô*, continues with the evening feast, which also serves to illustrate the clash of cultures and to air the growing rumors concerning Iaokanann's role in a new religious movement.

The climax of the evening is Salomé's dance. Salomé is the puppet of her scheming mother Herodias, who uses her daughter's seductive charm to manipulate the powerful men around her. Flaubert maintained that the interest of "Herodias" lay not in the religious theme but in the figure of Herodias as a kind of Cleopatra figure, that is, a study in power and seduction. Herod is particularly smitten by Salomé because of her resemblance to Herodias (Salomé is her daughter by an earlier marriage) and offers her any reward she chooses. Salomé asks for the head of Iaokanann, which is brought to her on a platter.

## SUMMARY

Gustave Flaubert's reputation as a master of prose fiction is based on a number of long novels, as well as some shorter fiction, that sustain the quality of his best moments.

His style, innovative in its use of an ambiguous narrative voice and the result of much care and labor, has contributed to his standing as a major writer. His psychological insight, and, more recently, an appreciation of his experiments in the control of narrative perspective make him one of the first modern novelists and one of the greatest of all time.

Melanie Hawthorne



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is Gustave Flaubert's subtle narrative style in effect a tribute to the capacities of his reader?
- What does *Madame Bovary* gain from its introductory chapter on an episode in the school life of Emma's future husband?
- What interpretation would you offer for the use of the word "Madame" in the title of the novel about Emma Bovary?
- If Frédéric Moreau of *A Sentimental Education* is a male counterpart to Emma Bovary, is he, as a man with a better chance to control his circumstances, therefore less susceptible to sympathetic interpretation?
- What qualities are most necessary in a translator of Flaubert?
- How does the mentality that could compose a work called *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* reveal itself in Flaubert's fiction?

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# DARIO FO

**Born:** San Giano, Italy  
March 24, 1926

*Fo is an internationally acclaimed political playwright whose widely performed plays utilize characteristics of traditional Italian theater to treat topical issues satirically.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Dario Fo was born in a small Italian town near Lake Maggiore, near the Swiss border. His father, a railway worker, found time to act in an amateur theater company. His mother authored a book of regional reminiscences. The eldest of three children, Dario had a brother who became a theater administrator and a sister who wrote books about the family's wartime experiences.

The northern region where Fo lived had a strong tradition of popular antiauthoritarian narrative, maintained by traveling storytellers who told stories about fantastic adventures to local fishermen and to peasant farmers. Fo listened to these stories and picked up a substantial repertoire for his own use.

Following an abortive army stint, Fo studied architecture in Milan but dropped out to become a performer. His career began in revues, escapist entertainment of postwar Italy. He proved to be a gifted comic, mime, and stage designer. Fo had built a reputation with his monologues over Italian national radio as Poer Nano, a poor simpleton who confuses biblical and secular stories so that, for example, Cain is the victim of a priggish Abel. Fo also performed Poer Nano on stage, fleshing out his satirical gifts and championing the underdog. In 1954, he married Franca Rame, a talented Milanese actress from a popular touring theater family. Together they embarked on a successful series of productions.

Without being a Communist Party member, Fo held leftist political perspectives and attacked concepts he felt were inspired by fascism and preserved by the Christian Democrats, the ruling right-wing party. Despite frequent police visits to his satirical performances, Fo grew in stature as a

performer and skillful storyteller. In the 1950's, Fo had a three-year film career designing and acting, but he returned to the stage in Milan. He and his wife together founded Compagnia Dario Fo-Franca Rame, producing farces and boulevard comedies, with several works subsequently receiving English and American productions.

In 1959, the company opened Milan's Odeon Theater season with a six-play series. The first, *Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper* (pr. 1959, pb. 1966; *Archangels Don't Play Pinball*, 1987) was written, directed, and designed by Fo, and it ridiculed government bureaucracy. His success in the conventional theater was confirmed by pieces fusing comedy, music, farcical plots, and social references. In a period seething with unrest, authorities threatened to ban performances, but the Fos, having earned success in the theater, were securely established as performers.

Fo presented some of his one-act farces on Italian television. He appeared on a popular show, presenting satirical sketches and songs, which caused immediate censorship problems. A conflict with producers ended in Fo's walking out of the studio.

Leaving the mainstream theater, Fo in 1968 created the Associazione Nuova Scena, a leftist collective that dispensed with traditional stage company organization and set itself up as a private club. Offering revue-length sketches satirizing the communists as well as establishment institutions, the company played in working-class areas. From this period came Fo's internationally popular one-person show called *Mistero buffo: Giullarata popolare* (pr. 1969, pb. 1970; *Mistero Buffo: Comic Mysteries*, 1983), which uses gospel and secular stories to exemplify the common person's struggle. The company had a brief life, torn apart not only by internal

arguments but also by difficulties with the initially supportive Communist Party, which had become annoyed by the fun Fo made of it. When Nuova Scena terminated in 1970, Fo and his wife broke with communist cultural organizations and formed another theater, headquartered in Milan and dedicated to examining sociopolitical issues. An important play presented there was his now internationally known *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (pr., pb. 1970; *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, 1979), which satirizes police injustice. During the early 1970's, Fo's plays dealt with political issues of the time. The new, Milan-based La Comune theater group toured plays to local audiences and performed at workers' demonstrations. This politically oriented activity was harshly judged by the conservative forces in power. Franca Rame suffered kidnapping and rape by fascists. Fo was arrested for barring police from performances. In 1975, Fo's theater ejected him from the organization, claiming that his star status was not in keeping with the company's political aims.

In the late 1970's and 1980's, Fo returned to television. His plays have been produced in Europe, England, and America, including *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in New York City. For political reasons, Fo was denied a visa to enter the United States until 1985. Dario Fo and Franca Rame have continued to enjoy international exposure and recognition through their works for the political theater.

Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1997. In announcing the award, the judges described Fo as a writer "who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden."

## ANALYSIS

Dario Fo and Franca Rame consider theater to be an intervention. Fo's leftist perspective was shaped by his sympathy with the wartime resistance to the Fascists, and after World War II he continued to oppose Italy's right-wing politicians. By the 1950's, Fo had so stung his targets in the government and religious bureaucracies that he drew fire from them. Finding a political affinity with the work of Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, Fo was influenced by Brecht's epic theater techniques and later employed them in his own work. Wedded to his political perspective is Fo's experienced skill as

comic actor and mime, trained in revues employing a format of short satirical, farcical sketches. These factors, plus his love of commedia dell'arte characters, with their different regional dialects, are reflected in his work. An early example is *Il dito nell'occhio* (pr. 1953; finger in the eye). Cowritten with Franco Parenti and Giustino Durano, the play is a cabaret-style revue composed of twenty-one short sketches interspersed with music. It satirizes the social mores and the traditional values of the Italian middle class. This mixture of mime, spectacle, and social comment was successful with audiences but roused the authorities to police performances.

Fo's first play at Milan's Odeon theater was *Archangels Don't Play Pinball*, an accomplished farce combining political content with Brechtian epic theater. In the play, government bureaucracy and other aspects of Italian society are ridiculed. The protagonist discovers he has been mistakenly registered as a dog and is sent to a kennel. The play attracted productions abroad, as well as censorship. Other pieces followed, also fusing comedy, music, farcical plot, and social comment. It was common for the authorities to threaten to ban performances. Beginning in 1960, Fo presented short farces, satirical sketches, and songs on national television criticizing such sensitive issues as, for example, working conditions in factories, which caused official censure and his departure from television.

Returning to mainstream, establishment theater, Fo used material from the Middle Ages to evaluate the present from a historical perspective. His *Isabella, tre caravelle è un cacciaballe* (pr., pb. 1963; Isabella, three sailing ships, and a con man) debunks the romanticized, storybook Columbus. Another play presents Adam and Eve as the only human survivors, along with a corrupt general, of a vast cataclysm, after which cats take over the world. *Settimo: Ruba un po' meno* (pr., pb. 1964; seventh commandment: thou shalt steal a bit less) is a bitter, farcical comedy about real estate speculation supported by official corruption. Historical farce is the basis for *La colpa è sempre del diavolo* (pr., pb. 1965; always blame the devil), which is set in an imaginary period of the Middle Ages that resembles 1965 and that exposes superstitions and clerical oppression of the poor. *La signora è da buttare* (pr., pb. 1967; the lady is discardable), produced

during the Vietnam War, uses a revue-sketch format and circus setting to indict America as an imperialistic, capitalist society. Threatened with arrest, Fo ceased productions for the mainstream, bourgeois theater.

In 1968, Fo created Nuova Scena, a company allied to the Italian Communist Party, which toured the country performing for working-class and popular audiences in nontraditional locations such as factories and market squares. The company's first play was an allegorical puppet play using marionettes and mechanical figures to represent social forces like capitalism, the middle class, and royalty. It used revue-length sketches to satirize the Church, monarchy, the army, and industrialism. Its central theme was the historical struggle between the middle class and the working class. Another representative play was Fo's one-man show *Mistero Buffo: Comic Mysteries*, for which he drew on apocryphal gospel stories, secular tales, and the counterculture of the Middle Ages. He uses a language composed of partially invented and archaic tongues, drawn partially from the dialects of northern Italy. The playwright played all the roles, in the tradition of both the *guillare*, traveling comic/singer/mime of the Middle Ages, and the clown of the *commedia dell'arte*.

After internal disputes and the Communist Party's withdrawal of support ended Fo's connection with Nuova Scena in 1970, he created an independent political theater group called La Comune, dedicated to examining sociopolitical issues, for which he wrote several major works. The first play this group presented was his *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, which was based on an actual case. The satirical farce deals with the tension between a murder by the police and the ridiculous explanations of the officials trying to cover it up. Other works in the 1970's utilize such themes as police brutality, the treatment of political prisoners, the Palestine struggle, and the like. *Non si paga! Non si paga!* (pr., pb. 1974; *We Can't Pay! We Won't Pay!*, 1978) treats the subject of civil disobedience in a story of a shop steward's wife who raids a supermarket to protest rising prices and incurs her husband's disapproval. *Clacson, trombette e pernacchi* (pr. 1981; *Trumpets and Raspberries*, 1981, also as *About Face*, 1983), also espousing a political cause, is based on the actual terrorist kidnapping and murder of an Italian politician whose colleagues of the

Christian Democrat Party refused to negotiate with his captors and thus ensured his execution. The play farcically mocks political cynicism and the overzealousness of police, who see terrorists everywhere. It tells of a falsely accused proletarian rescuer of a kidnapped executive whose identity becomes confused with that of the victim.

In the late 1970's, Fo withdrew from La Comune. He continued to write and act in plays. That Fo's work had not lost its power to upset the authorities was demonstrated in 1987 by a piece introduced on Italian television. The work featured remarks about the Church that drew protest.

Dario Fo, with his wife Franca Rame, has continued to enjoy international exposure and recognition as an actor, mime, and dramatist. He is a master political satirist and farceur. His work is noted as a vehicle for sociopolitical protest in the context of comic theater.

## MISTERO BUFFO: COMIC MYSTERIES

**First produced:** *Mistero buffo: Giullarata popolare*, 1969 (first published, 1970; English translation 1983)

**Type of work:** Play

*Apocryphal gospel and secular stories are satirized to accent common people's struggles against capitalistic and ecclesiastic oppression.*

*Mistero Buffo: Comic Mysteries* stands as Fo's most important one-person play. The playwright drew on religious and secular stories, and he played all the roles in the tradition of a medieval jongleur who presents the underdog's disrespect for authority. For many characters Fo created a language culled from northern Italian dialects. Mixing the sacred and the burlesque, the episodes subvert accepted wisdom and challenge entrenched authority. Among the play's twelve episodes is a key text, "The Birth of the Jongleur," in which the jongleur figure is a serf whose land is taken from him, and whose family is destroyed through the tyranny of a feudal lord aided by the Church. The despairing peasant is saved from suicide by the appearance of an antiestablishment Christ, disguised as a stranger,



who endows him with hope and the eloquence to spread the message to the oppressed underling to oppose the rich and powerful. His mission is political—to be the articulate spokesman for the exploited. The theme is repeated in a companion piece, “The Birth of the Villeyn,” as the master of a serf born from an ass’s rectum is advised by an angel to treat him harshly since he has no soul, thus predicting the underling’s sad future.

Other gospel stories bear similar approaches and themes. The title characters of “The Morality Play of the Blind Man and the Cripple,” meeting Christ en route to Calvary, attempt to flee to avoid his miraculously curing their afflictions and thus restoring them to a master’s subjugation. A miracle is demythicized in “The Wedding Feast at Cana” by a bibulous peasant who describes the event as a drunken party, and in “The Resurrection of Lazarus,” as peasants describe a fairground spectacle with graphic references to the smell and sight of Lazarus’s decomposing, worm-ridden body. “Boniface VIII” illustrates the capacity of a vain, supercilious pope to oscillate between arrogance and humility when confronted by Christ carrying the cross.

The play contains four texts about the Passion, two of which display the irreverence of the common-man jongleur toward sacred events. As the Fool in “Death of the Fool,” the jongleur plays cards at the inn housing the Last Supper, distracting and seducing Death, who is embodied as a grieving virgin who has come to take Christ away, but is diverted from her purpose. The same figure in “The Fool Beneath the Cross” wins Christ’s body on the cross only to have the body reject him. In two other “Passion Plays,” the Madonna overcomes her grief at the Crucifixion through angry political awareness.

Satirization of sacred subjects often is the result of a purposeful focus on the common-man figure who is painfully aware of his sorry lot. In *Mistero Buffo*’s mixture of narrative and dialogue, Fo creates a bounteous expression of his social views.

## ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

**First produced:** *Morte accidentale di un anarchico*, 1970 (first published, 1970; English translation, 1979)

**Type of work:** Play

*In this satirical farce, a madman of many disguises exposes the ridiculous lies covering up a police murder.*

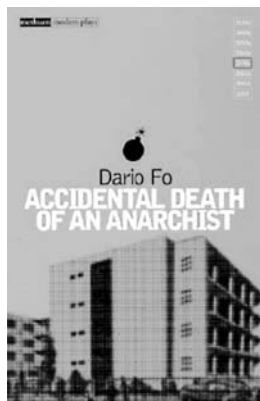
Internationally popular, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is based on a 1969 incident in which an anarchist railway worker, arrested in connection with a terrorist bombing in Milan, fell to his death from a fourth-story window at police headquarters during the course of an interrogation. His death was officially declared a suicide. The police report held blatant contradictions. Subsequent investigation revealed the probable innocence of the worker. Fo set out to demolish the official story through the play’s production at his collective, La Commune.

Fo created one of his most successful roles for this play, that of a maniac who infiltrates the Milan police headquarters and carries out a number of impersonations in order to force the police to admit the illogic of the worker’s alleged leap from a window and to confess their culpability. The Maniac resembles the Zanni figure of the *commedia dell’arte*.

Called “a grotesque farce” by its author, the play’s dramatic action takes the form of a mock investigation carried out by a make-believe judicial examiner. A madman impostor (the Maniac), summoned to police headquarters to answer to charges of false identity, luckily happens to steal the file on the anarchist’s death. He then changes his identity, posing as an investigating judge, purportedly to ascertain that the police have constructed a solid case which can be upheld by the magistrates. In the course of the interrogation of the officers, the Maniac is forced to assume numerous disguises. He exposes the blatant contradictions and lies of the police, who admit their guilt, whereupon the Maniac invents for them another outrageous story about the anarchist’s fall. The arrival of a journalist and police who recognize him forces the Maniac’s

disclosure and his threat that he has taped their confession and plans to blow them all up to destroy the capitalist police state. One confused policeman handcuffs his superiors to the wall. In a Brechtian-like conclusion, the Maniac confronts the journalist—and the audience—with a choice of alternate endings: to free the police, which will result in the impostor's death and perpetuate police duplicity, to allow the Maniac to escape with evidence of police duplicity, or to allow the Maniac to escape with evidence of police guilt.

Fo's purpose throughout is to arouse the audience's indignation at police authoritarianism. The play's farcical action and zaniness counterpoint the serious indictment being made. Moreover, the play's use of a historical event demonstrates the directness of Fo's left-wing politics. The play has been performed in more than forty countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States.



## ARCHANGELS DON'T PLAY PINBALL

**First produced:** *Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper*, 1959 (first published, 1966; English translation, 1987)

**Type of work:** Play

*A man mistakenly registered as a dog struggles against a mindless government bureaucracy to restore his identity.*

*Archangels Don't Play Pinball* was the first of a series of six plays that Fo produced with his wife at Milan's Teatro Odeon, the equivalent of a Broadway or West End theater. A three-act farce with music, based on a short story by Italian writer Augusto Frassinetti, it is one of Fo's most accomplished farces and his first play to be performed outside It-

aly. It has been performed many times since and has brought its playwright international recognition.

Structurally, *Archangels Don't Play Pinball* is a fast-moving farce, with bedroom mix-ups and officious officialdom, similar to those crafted by such French farceurs as Georges Feydeau and Eugene Labiche. The intervention of the archangels at the play's end parallels the *deus ex machina* of classic Greek theater as well as Brecht's use of gods in *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (wr. 1938-1940, pr. 1943, pb. 1953; *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, 1948). It is Fo's first play to combine political-satirical content with a Brechtian form, abandoning the revue-sketch and short farce format for a consistent plotline and character development. In the traveling company tradition of doubling roles, ten of the play's twelve characters play several parts. The device becomes a source of farcical complication as the protagonist recognizes the players in their new identities.

The play is set in Milan's industrial outskirts and introduces a gang of loutish youths given to conning tricks, who have made the hero, Lofty, the fall guy for their jokes. For example, they pay a harlot (Blondie) to set up a fake marriage with Lofty. When Lofty tries claiming a disability pension, he finds himself registered as a dog and must submit to being sent to a kennel. From there the story follows his struggles to clarify his identity and to defend himself against a series of mindless bureaucrats—from dog-catchers to a government minister. He encounters them in a number of farcical episodes in different locales. With his innocent, literal interpretation of situations, Lofty reveals them in all their absurdity. Ultimately, Lofty wakes up in a house in the red-light district, where he has suffered a fall and unconsciousness. He realizes that he has been dreaming. He is delighted to find himself mock-married to Blondie, and they subsequently find happiness in each other.

Fo's satirization of government bureaucracy caused the play to be censored. The exposure of the failings of the conservative government was not lost on Italian audiences of the 1950's. By his own admission, Fo, dealing at the time with a middle-class audience, had to make social and political truths palatable by serving them in a sauce of farcical satire.

## SUMMARY

Dario Fo has become an internationally acclaimed political playwright whose work has won popular success and critical praise for its content, its skilled improvisatory and comedic techniques, and its satirical perspective. With his wife and collaborator, Franca Rame, Fo has been active in the Italian and European theater for more than thirty years, performing in many countries to many groups. His work came to the wide attention of English-speaking audiences only in the 1980's. Fo's life and work evince his belief that the theater can be an instrument of political illumination as well as entertainment.

Christian H. Moe

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does Dario Fo's work owe to the *com-media dell'arte*?
- What is traditional and what is antagonistic to conventional religious themes in *Mistero Buffo: Comic Mysteries*?
- Consider the suitability of the protagonist of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* being a "maniac."
- Explain why farce is an appropriate dramatic form in *Archangels Don't Play Pinball*.
- Explain the force of improvisation in Fo's plays.

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Archive Photos

## FORD MADOX FORD

**Born:** Merton, England  
December 17, 1873

**Died:** Deauville, France  
June 26, 1939

*One of the most productive writers of the modernist period, Ford was a stylistic innovator, an invaluable editor and collaborator, and a great novelist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ford Madox Ford was born Ford Hermann Hueffer in Merton, Surrey, a suburb of London, England, on December 17, 1873, the eldest son of Francis Hueffer, a musicologist and critic, and Catherine Brown Hueffer, daughter of the renowned painter Ford Madox Brown. He was given the upbringing appropriate to the scion of an artistic family; lessons in languages, in music, and in painting preceded entry into an experimental school, Praetorius. There he remained until his father died in 1889, leaving the family penniless; they had to be taken in by Ford's grandfather.

Fordie, as he was known to his friends, roamed the streets of London for the next few years, associating with aesthetes and decadents, anarchists and artists. Aided by his grandfather, he published three books of fairy tales by the time he turned twenty-one and began working on a serious novel; these accomplishments emboldened him to elope with Elsie Martindale, whom he had met years before at Praetorius, in 1894.

After two very uncomfortable years, Elsie's parents forgave their daughter and agreed to help support the young couple; by that time, Ford's own career was progressing with the publication of *Ford Madox Brown* (1896) the official biography of his late grandfather, and his introduction to Joseph Conrad, the Polish-born novelist, with whom Ford

would be connected for the next decade. Although the value of this relationship has been much debated, it is undeniable that Ford (who was by now calling himself Ford Madox Hueffer) provided Conrad with vital information about English idioms and customs, in addition to psychological support during the latter's frequent bouts of despondency. Nevertheless, the products of this collaboration—*The Inheritors* (1901), *Romance* (1903), and *The Nature of a Crime* (1909, serial; 1924, book)—are markedly inferior to the works each wrote on his own during this period, such as Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) and Ford's Fifth Queen trilogy (1906-1908).

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Ford was best known as a writer of nonfiction. His study of the English Channel towns, *The Cinque Ports*, appeared in 1900; *The Soul of London* appeared in 1905, and two further books on English country life followed in 1906 and 1907. Interspersed with these were collections of fairy tales, biographies of artists such as Hans Holbein, and a weekly newspaper column. Though these works made little money for Ford, they kept his name before the public; meanwhile, he was preparing his brilliant re-creation of the life of Katherine Howard, fifth queen of King Henry VIII, published as *The Fifth Queen* (1906), *Privy Seal* (1907), and *The Fifth Queen Crowned* (1908). In this trilogy, Ford for the first time successfully fused his lifelong learning about England with his growing knowledge of contemporary human psychology; in Ford's hands, Henry VIII's fifth queen, actually executed for fornication, becomes a champion of conscience

framed for her efforts to restore Catholicism to England.

Unfortunately, none of these books ever sold more than a few thousand copies. In fact, Ford's career up to the outbreak of World War I was marked by outright failures, interspersed with a few half-successes, such as *Mr. Apollo* (1908), *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (1911), and *The New Humpty-Dumpty* (1912). Perhaps his greatest fame stemmed from the *English Review*, which Ford edited from its first issue in December, 1908, until the middle of 1910. This journal, like Ford's later magazine *Transatlantic Review*, gave voice to an entire generation of literary artists, from established writers such as H. G. Wells and Henry James to new voices such as those of Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and D. H. Lawrence. It also lost nearly £500 an issue, and within two years, Ford had been forced out. It was perhaps in response to this lack of critical and financial success that Ford began an affair with Violet Hunt, who had five previous liaisons, including one with the writer W. Somerset Maugham. Ford's wife refused a divorce, took him to court, and ultimately forced him to leave England for most of the next two years. Such shows of force could not persuade Ford to return to his wife, and though Elsie never agreed to a divorce, she finally allowed him to advertise his mistress as his wife, making Ford and Violet acceptable once more in polite society. Ironically, these ugly years of struggle provided Ford with material for his greatest work, *The Good Soldier* (1915).

By the time this novel appeared, England was at war with Germany. Ford wrote two books of propaganda, then enlisted in the army as a junior officer. Although he was never directly in the front lines, he spent several weeks under continual artillery fire, received a concussion, and was sent home in March, 1917. Ford's experiences in World War I would serve as the raw material for his other great work of fiction, *Parade's End* (1924-1928, 1950). Still suffering from the effects of shell shock, Ford moved to a cottage in Sussex, where he was joined by Stella Bowen, a young Australian painter whom he had met through Ezra Pound; to prevent a repetition of his earlier legal difficulties, he changed his name at this time to the familiar Ford Madox Ford. His shell shock might explain the frequent lapses from factuality that fill the pages of *Thus to Revisit* (1921), the first of several books of memoirs and

recollections Ford would write, which also include *Return to Yesterday* (1931) and *Portraits from Life* (1937; published in England as *Mightier than the Sword*, 1938). These works are characterized by incisive description of events that never took place; their inaccuracies and outright fantasies have haunted Ford's reputation ever since.

The last twenty years of Ford's life were spent alternately in France and the United States, where a new generation admired him as a teacher and father figure. He began *The Transatlantic Review*, which he edited with Ernest Hemingway, publishing works by writers as disparate as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. He went on a long lecture tour in the United States in 1926 and 1927, returned to France, ended his liaison with Stella Bowen, and sailed back for another American tour in 1928. In the spring of 1930, he was back in Paris, where he met the woman with whom he would pass the rest of his life, Janice Biala; in 1931, he wrote his last first-rate work, a collection of poems about Janice called *Buckshee*, which was published in 1966.

The onset of the Depression made the life of a writer even harder, and Ford was pushed into a series of works designed simply to pay the bills that inexorably mounted around him; by the end of his career, he had returned to that nonfictional form with which he had begun, perhaps the best example of which is *Provence* (1935). Still dreaming of critical respectability, he finished a comprehensive literary history entitled *The March of Literature* in 1938. The accumulated effects of forty years' overindulgence in food and wine, however, finally caught up with him; on June 26, 1939, in Deauville, France, he died of uremia and heart failure.

## ANALYSIS

Ford is best known for his leadership of the modernist movement in literature, a movement famous for its experiments in form and style but equally important for its revolution in subject matter. The Victorians, for example, had turned to fantasy as a way of escaping the evils of urbanization and industrialization; the modernists, in contrast, used the fantastic as a way of confronting human beings' deepest psychological reactions to extreme situations. These writers thought of themselves as discovering new planes of existence, or (in a famous image invented by the novelist Virginia Woolf) exposing the buried connections among the isolated,

alienated inhabitants of the times. Such efforts were underscored by the scientific discoveries of the time, such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory, Henri Bergson's theory of temporality, and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, all of which were published between 1895 and 1905.

Throughout his career, Ford insisted that literature must confront the main issues of contemporary life, even though its outward subject might be a tale five centuries old (the Fifth Queen Trilogy) or might involve actions considered physically impossible (*Henry for Hugh*, 1934). Ford even wrote a series of satires on contemporary life—*The Simple Life Limited* (1911), *The New Humpty-Dumpty* (1912), and *Mr. Fleight* (1913)—though he lacked sufficient courage to publish them under his own name, using the pseudonym Daniel Chaucer for the first two titles. The *Parade's End* novels contain the most vivid re-creation of wartime experience in the history of English literature.

Most of Ford's serious analysis of the social and political changes that characterized the early twentieth century remains unacknowledged by contemporary readers, however, because of Ford's striking stylistic experimentation. Ford often used a point of view that is mistakenly called the "interior monologue," but he was one of the first to recognize that people do not, as a rule, make speeches to themselves. In place of the unrealistic "monologue," Ford offered a succession of fragments, each one arising into consciousness but quickly succeeded by other, seemingly unrelated, fragments. His work can thus be called the first truly realistic work in literary history.

Ford's technique offered a second advantage as well. Since Samuel Richardson wrote *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* as a series of letters in 1740-1741, writers have striven to record action that takes place in the immediate present accurately yet effectively, but all that they have created is a series of acceptable conventions for interpreting retellings of past events as if they were happening in the present. James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922) and Ford in novels from *The Fifth Queen* to *The Last Post* (1928) created a sense that what was taking place for the character was being immediately transcribed for the reader. Ford's name for this new technique was "impressionism," a term he borrowed from the painters among whom he had grown up during the 1890's.

The method of literary impressionism has not proven to be as historically important as pictorial Impressionism was. Both techniques seemed unnatural and chaotic at first, demanding a wholesale reeducation of the audience. Yet where Impressionism in art ultimately allowed audiences to appreciate the beauty of painted surfaces as well as the beauty of pictured scenes, literary impressionism could not offer an equivalent alternative form of satisfaction. Works written in this style remain notoriously difficult to read; for full understanding, they must be enacted, not merely scanned. Those who are willing to give the work this extra attention, however, will find that they have enlarged their experience along with their understanding.

The primacy of memories and impressions is the greatest strength of Ford's fiction, but it is simultaneously the gravest weakness in his nonfiction. To be plain about it, Ford was a liar—but a liar out of art, not malice. Each time Ford wrote a fictitious anecdote about one of his more famous contemporaries, he would convince himself that the incident was true in every detail; each time such an anecdote was called into question, the entire memoir became suspect. Soon, no one believed anything Ford wrote. The real culprit was, in fact, Ford's commitment to literary impressionism. At the time he wrote the lie he thought it was true; the lie had first appeared, and subsequently taken shape, in his mind, and therefore it must be thought of as a truthful image, if not an image of the truth. If only Ford could be granted his stylistic premise, the lapses from factuality of his books would no longer be grounds for condemnation.

Nevertheless, Ford's made-up memories caused him to alienate one old friend after another. As an example, when Joseph Conrad died in 1924, Ford published a long appreciation of his old friend, receiving high praise for the way in which he had brought a literary giant to vibrant, breathing life—that is, until those who had known Conrad best began to protest over the "vast differences," as Conrad's widow put it, between the incidents they had witnessed and those which Ford now described. In turn, Ford defended his approach, calling the book "a novel, not a monograph; a portrait, not a narration."

## THE GOOD SOLDIER

**First published:** 1915

**Type of work:** Novel

*A widower reveals the corruption and depravity hidden beneath the polite surface of a longtime relationship.*

*The Good Soldier* is several novels at once. It is a romantic comedy of manners that turns sour; it is a social satire that offers no normative way of life; it is a true confession by a consummate liar; it is a profound psychological study of people one can never quite understand; it is a modernist tour de force. Most tellingly, it is Ford's masterwork.

The image one must keep in mind when reading *The Good Soldier* is the onion. It is composed of layer upon layer; cutting into it at any point brings tears to one's eyes, and when one has peeled away the final layer there is absolutely nothing left for one's efforts—no kernel, no pith, no ultimate moral. Ford wanted to call it "The Saddest Story," and only his publisher's insistence that no one would buy a book with such a depressing title in the middle of the Great War led him to change it.

The novel is a first-person narrative, covering a little more than ten years in the life of John Dowell. Dowell is a member of that privileged class whose names echo through history. His "farm," as he calls it, occupies several blocks of downtown Philadelphia. In 1901, drifting through a life of gentlemanly idleness, he meets and marries Florence Hurlbird of Stamford, Connecticut; they sail to Europe for their honeymoon, only to discover that Florence has a heart ailment that prevents her from ever returning to America. Thus they drift from one resort to the next, following the social calendar; in one of these resorts, Bad Nauheim, they meet Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, whose lives will intertwine with theirs in disastrous fashion.

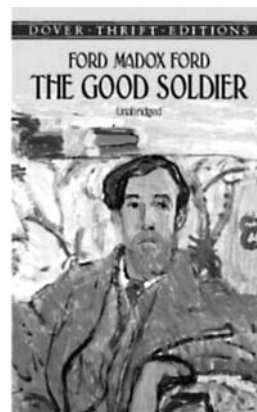
For nine years life seems perfect; the two couples meet at Nauheim, spend an idyllic summer, and part the best of friends. Underneath that immaculate surface, however, deadly currents seethe—lust and greed disguised as sentiment and prudence. Florence and Edward are lovers; Leonora, to whom Edward has turned over management of his estate, does not dare to speak out for fear of

scandal and financial ruination. Then Florence discovers that she has been supplanted in Edward's heart by Nancy Rufford, Leonora's young ward. That same evening, an old acquaintance spots Florence and reveals Florence's lurid sexual history; her veils of deceit stripped away, she poisons herself. Edward and Leonora return to England, where Leonora informs her ward about Edward's growing love; the resulting complex emotions drive Nancy to a breakdown. Leonora asks John to keep Edward company, while she ships Nancy out to India in the hope that a change of scene will help her. Faced with this second loss, Edward kills himself. Within months, Leonora has remarried and started a new family. John, who also loves Nancy, resumes his old role of nursemaid.

It is a plot worthy of a soap opera, but it is only half the story. The other half is made up of the revelation of John's character and his associated revelations about the idle rich—and these are far more profound than the melodramatic incidents of the surface. Readers have never succeeded in understanding John Dowell. His dry wit belies his pose as "an ignorant fool." His ability to contrast the problems that arise from "keeping a shut mouth to the world" with the "hell" that results from Florence's and Leonora's compulsive talking shows that he is in fact a consummate reader of character. Yet he is himself a connoisseur of talk. He deliberately ob-

scures his story with flashbacks and digressions, he presents statements as truths that he later labels lies, and he invites the reader to admire his closest friends, only to sentence them to death, insanity, and "intense solitude." Does he hate his wife for the twelve years of lies she imposed on him? At one point, he claims that he "hates her with the hatred of the adulterer," but later in his narrative he claims not to think about her at all. Does he admire Leonora for her efforts to save her marriage, her faith, and finally herself? Again a reader can only answer, "sometimes."

*The Good Soldier* is thus a triumph of literary im-





pressionism. It is a melodrama without a hero, a psychological study conducted by a dolt, and a confession (made up as the narrator goes along) by the only character who has not been guilty of a crime. It is, in other words, terrifyingly like real life. Moreover, most readers will conclude, if real life is like *The Good Soldier*, then they had better beware.

## PARADE'S END

**First published:** *Some Do Not . . .*, 1924; *No More Parades*, 1925; *A Man Could Stand Up*, 1926; *The Last Post*, 1928; published collectively as *Parade's End*, 1950

**Type of work:** Novels

*An unlikely hero survives desertion by his friends, calumny by his wife, and the terrors of the Great War, finding happiness at last with the woman he loves.*

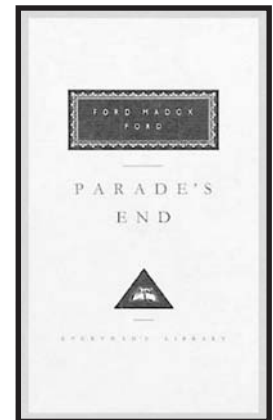
*Parade's End* is a series of four novels depicting the meeting, courtship, and ultimate fulfillment of two modern heroes, Christopher Tietjens and Valentine Wannop, despite social condemnation, personal travails, and World War I. Into these novels Ford poured his own experiences as a writer, as a lover, and as a soldier; he used the techniques of literary impressionism to transform them into an utterly believable narrative. Some people have felt that, taken as a whole, these four novels constitute the best record available of the revolution in English society caused by the Great War.

The first novel of the sequence, *Some Do Not . . .*, begins just before the outbreak of World War I and records the creation of an emotional bond between Christopher and Valentine during a police pursuit, a breakfast party, and a fog-shrouded late-night carriage ride. Ford presents his hero and heroine as two of the last moral human beings left in Western society; while all around them friends, relatives, and nations succumb to their passions, Christopher and Valentine, as the title puts it, do not. At the same time, they are being judged according to these others' standards, and thus their fornication is presumed on all sides. As a result, acquaintances will cut them, employers will demote them, and even their parents will endure bitter dis-

appointment; and because *Parade's End* is not a fairy tale, these reactions will never be wholly resolved.

The second novel of the sequence, *No More Parades*, finds Christopher with the army in France. His efforts are going unrewarded; his wife, Sylvia, is raising a scandal about him; and his love for Valentine has been buried deep under layers of responsibility. At the climax of the novel, he must undergo an extended interrogation to avoid a court-martial on charges of striking a superior officer (who had stormed into his hotel room late at night without identifying himself); that same morning, his command is to be subjected to a formal inspection. The resulting interior monologue invites comparison with Molly Bloom's final monologue in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). In *A Man Could Stand Up*, the third volume, Christopher has been moved up to the front lines, where he must survive a last-ditch enemy barrage. Shortly thereafter, the war finally ends; it is at last time for his love to surface from under four years of military repression. When Valentine's name does pop into his conscious mind, he is astonished: "What! Is *that* still there?" Ford finally grants his lovers their first embrace, though not until the very conclusion of the novel: "They were dancing! . . . They were setting out."

Later in life, Ford claimed that these three novels formed a perfect whole; the addition of *The Last Post*, he felt, broke the unity of time and place created by the frame of World War I and the dual themes of battles in the trenches and battles between the sexes. Most readers, however, find this final novel emotionally necessary, for in it Christopher's wife, Sylvia, finally ends her private war and agrees to a divorce; the "curse" on the Tietjens family, which has been a recurring subtheme, is ended with the cutting down of Groby Great Tree; and Valentine gives birth to the first undisputed Tietjens. In addition, Ford provides another culminating monologue, this time the dying thoughts of





Christopher's brother Mark; confronting his impassive presence, even Sylvia falls silent.

Finally, Ford's introduction of this final theme, a reprise of his earlier concern in *The Good Soldier*, gives *Parade's End* a larger significance. In this tetralogy, Ford examined the profound crises that he, and England, had recently faced, and he found not the mere accommodation of "peace in our time" but the dawning of a final resolution, the acknowledgment that "you must have a pattern to interpret things by." It is not itself a statement of the pattern, but it will have to do.

## SUMMARY

Had Ford Madox Ford written only half a dozen novels, served as editor of only one great literary magazine, and encouraged only a few writers and artists to embrace the principles of modernism, he would still be remembered as a great man and a great artist. He drank too deeply from the cup of life, writing too many words, loving too many women, and leaving behind too many disappointed expectations. Only now, when his personal and artistic imperfections have faded, can one perceive the real and lasting power of Ford's vision and the truth of his impressions.

Hartley S. Spatt

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*The Nature of a Crime*, 1909 (serial), 1924 (book; with Conrad)  
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*A Call*, 1910  
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*The Panel*, 1912  
*The New Humpty-Dumpty*, 1912  
*Mr. Fleight*, 1913  
*The Young Lovell*, 1913 (also known as *Ring for Nancy*)  
*The Good Soldier*, 1915  
*The Marsden Case*, 1923  
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*No More Parades*, 1925  
*A Man Could Stand Up*, 1926  
*The Last Post*, 1928  
*A Little Less than Gods*, 1928  
*No Enemy*, 1929  
*When the Wicked Man*, 1931

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Relatively few writers have owed as much to a grandfather as did Ford Madox Ford. What can make a grandfather a better guardian than a father for a young writer?
- What was the most significant aspect of Ford's relationship with Joseph Conrad?
- Why must the onion be kept in mind when reading Ford's *The Good Soldier*?
- Ford showed an early interest in fairy tales. Did this interest appear in any of his mature writing?
- What is the basis for Ford's use of the word "parade" in his tetralogy, *Parade's End*?

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Archive Photos

## E. M. FORSTER

**Born:** London, England

January 1, 1879

**Died:** Coventry, Warwickshire, England

June 7, 1970

*Forster was a prominent English novelist, essayist, and short-story writer. His works display an enormous depth of insight into the human condition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Edward Morgan Forster (FOR-stur) was born in London, England, on January 1, 1879, the only son of Edward Morgan Llewellyn Forster, a descendant of prominent members of the Clapham Sect, an evangelical group of social activists, and Alice Clara (Lily) Whichelo Forster. His father, an architect who had studied with Sir Arthur Blomfield (Thomas Hardy's mentor), died unexpectedly in 1880. That left the one-year-old Edward Forster in the care of his mother, his maternal grandmother, Louisa Whichelo, and his paternal great-aunt and godmother, Marianne Thornton, who financed his education and became his benefactress. In 1893, Forster and his mother moved to Tonbridge and he attended Tonbridge School, where he was very unhappy, from 1893 to 1897. In 1897, he went to King's College, Cambridge, and developed a number of personal relationships that had a profound influence on his work. In his last year at Cambridge, Forster became a member of the Apostles society, which later evolved into the Bloomsbury Group. This group was a literary, artistic, and intellectual society, active in the Bloomsbury area of London, and comprising such notable figures as Virginia Woolf, the novelist; Lytton Strachey, the biographer; Clive Bell, the art critic; Roger Fry, the artist and critic; John Maynard Keynes, the influential economist; Victoria Sackville-West, the poet and writer; and others. After Forster left Cam-

bridge, he took an extended tour of Italy and Greece with his mother. This travel provided the setting and material for his early novels, which satirize English tourists abroad. His literary career began in 1903 with his contributions to *The Independent Review*, a Bloomsbury Group periodical of liberal anti-imperialist sympathies.

In 1905, Forster tutored the children of the Countess von Arnim in Germany and returned to England for the publication of his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905). He taught Latin at the Working Men's College and lectured on Italian art and history for the Cambridge Local Lectures Board. In 1906, Forster became a tutor and developed a strong relationship with Syed Ross Masood, an Indian Muslim patriot. *The Longest Journey*, Forster's second novel, published in 1907, *A Room with a View*, published in 1908, and *Howards End*, published in 1910, established Forster as one of England's leading novelists.

Forster visited India between 1912 and 1921, and during World War I he spent three years in Egypt. He published two minor works: *Alexandria: A History and a Guide* (1922) and *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923). In 1924, Forster published *A Passage to India*, his final and most critically acclaimed novel. He began the work in 1913, and after an extensive hiatus, Forster completed the novel in England after his return from India.

After inheriting a house from his aunt in West Hackhurst, near Dorset, Forster lived there with his mother until her death in 1945. He gave the Clark Lectures at Cambridge and published them as *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). In 1936, he published his

first collection of essays, *Abinger Harvest—A Miscellany*, which was an attack on the hypocrisy and self-righteousness that he attributed to the British mentality. After being evicted from his West Hackhurst apartment in 1947, Forster visited the United States and lectured at Harvard and Hamilton colleges. Forster wrote two biographies, *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* (1934) and *Marianne Thornton: A Domestic Biography, 1797-1887* (1956), collaborated with Benjamin Britten and Eric Crozier on the libretto for the opera *Billy Budd* (1951), and published his second collection of essays, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951), and an uneven collection of his letters and experiences from India in *The Hill of Devi* (1953).

Forster received significant recognition for his literary achievements. Queen Elizabeth II awarded him membership in the Order of Companions of Honour to the Queen in 1953. In 1960, Santha Rama Rau adapted *A Passage to India* for the stage. After playing in London for a year, the play opened on Broadway and ran for 110 performances. Most critics believed that the play was inferior to the novel; however, Forster was pleased with the adaptation. On June 7, 1970, he died in Coventry, England, at the home of Bob and May Buckingham. He had two works published posthumously, *Maurice* (1971), written in 1913 but not released until the public disclosure of his homosexuality, and *The Life to Come, and Other Stories* (1972), fourteen stories that reveal much about his private inner life.

## ANALYSIS

Critics generally agree that Forster's finest achievements were his novels, in which plot is overshadowed by the conflict of ideas and development of character. Forster achieves objectivity in many of his novels by utilizing the figure of the outsider as narrator. His narrative style is straightforward, with events progressing in logical order. Much of Forster's work is a study of personal relationships. Personal emotion is elevated above social convention in most of his novels, and Forster utilizes the recurring theme of society's oppression of the individual's characteristically generous and sensitive inclinations. The heart/conscience conflict, as illustrated in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), is a major concern in many of Forster's works. He consistently expresses oppo-

sition to racism and prejudice among individuals.

*A Passage to India* is generally considered to be Forster's artistic masterpiece; it was his last novel. This work is a sympathetic rendering of the assumption that, once human beings are prisoners of mythology, it is very difficult to change their thinking. They must transcend the elements of culture that imprison them in order to reach out to humanity. The title of Forster's novel comes from Walt Whitman's poem but is its thematic antithesis. Whitman envisions the total unity and spiritual connections of all people, and Forster suggests that this is not possible. As a humanistic novel, *A Passage to India* illustrates the indifference of nature and humanity's compulsion toward order: "The inarticulate world is closer at hand and readier to resume control as soon as men are tired."

His subsequent works took the form of literary criticism, general essays, and biography. Perhaps his most well-known and influential volume of non-fiction is *Aspects of the Novel*. Forster posits a theory of characterization coupled with a "pattern and rhythm" for the novel. He suggests that characters in a novel are either round, able to surprise the audience, or flat, stereotypes or caricatures.

Many of Forster's works use music and art as basic tools for communicating meaning. It was his belief that music is the deepest of the arts and that music, more so than language, "would civilize the barbarian." In *A Room with a View*, Reverend Arthur Beebe understands the nature of Lucy Honeychurch by the way that she plays Beethoven. He is aware of the depths of her passion and observes that, if she lived the way she plays, her life would truly be exciting. A passage in *Howards End* explores the reaction of the audience to Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and ironically makes clear the ineffability of a musical experience. A sensitive or intuitive person might have insights into realities communicated via the medium of music, since word symbols or language is an inadequate tool for expressing life. Music has a way of transcending and displays an integrating power. It plays a powerful and evocative tool in five of Forster's works.

In *E. M. Forster* (1970), Martial Rose observes Forster's ironic temper. He pigeonholes Forster as an acute observer and disinterested craftsman who rarely allowed an indulgence of personal passions to ruin the pattern of a work of order. Forster ad-



mired the work of Voltaire, praising him for his critical genius and humanity. He applauded Voltaire for his concern for truth, belief in tolerance, pity for the oppressed, and ability to “drive his ideas home.”

The ethical impulse characterizes the whole of Forster’s writing. This quality constrained his writing in aesthetic terms. He was oftentimes locked into a defensive and contradictory position. Often, he insisted on the separation of the creative and critical faculties, and other times he felt that they were inextricable.

## A ROOM WITH A VIEW

**First published:** 1908

**Type of work:** Novel

*Italy provides the landscape and the freedom to abandon English boundaries and to experience life passionately.*

*A Room with a View* may be considered in two parts, with part 1 taking place in Italy and representing the Greek world and its Dionysian element and part 2 taking place in England and representing the medieval or ascetic. A synthesis of the views or divisions will provide a balanced perspective.

Miss Lucy Honeychurch, a young Englishwoman, and Miss Charlotte Bartlett, her cousin and chaperon, arrive at the Pension Bertolini and are disappointed to find that they have been misled about their rooms. They are not south, but north, and neither has a view. During dinner, Mr. Emerson and his son, George, generously offer to exchange their rooms, which do have a view. Emerson believes that women like looking at a view; men do not. He does not care what he sees outside; his view is within. Charlotte and Lucy are startled by the so-called tactlessness and indelicateness of their offer. They see Reverend Arthur Beebe, who assures the ladies that some niceties go against the grain. He agrees to act as an intermediary and makes arrangements with the Emersons to switch rooms. Charlotte is careful not to give Lucy the room formerly occupied by George. She believes that, in a small way, she is a woman of the world and knows where some things can lead.

Later, Beebe hears Lucy playing the piano and asks if he can say something daring. He tells her that if she could live in the way that she plays Beethoven, it would be very exciting for everyone. Music provides the one outlet for Lucy’s enormous passion and is indeed a force that will eventually lead her to a more vital and spontaneous existence.

Lucy later decides to go for a walk alone. She sees Mr. Emerson at Santa Croce Church. He is clearly a nonconformist and guides her through the Giotto frescoes. Lucy finds that she is very comfortable with him, but she is confused over why he is so concerned about his son. Meanwhile Miss Eleanor Lavish, a novelist, and Charlotte are wandering about Italy alone. Miss Lavish believes that only by exploring the unknown does one get to know a country. She tells Charlotte that she has her eye on Lucy, for she believes that Lucy is open to the physical sensations and can be transfigured in Italy.

Lucy walks through the Piazza Signoria and passes two men arguing over a debt. She faints at the sight of the ensuing street brawl as a stabbed man, bleeding from the mouth, dies at her feet. George is there to retrieve her. After he revives her, she asks him to get the photographs that she dropped during the chaos. Because they have blood on them, George throws them away. The Italian’s death brings them close together. Lucy asks that George not tell anyone about the incident.

Traveling with a number of guests from the pension, Lucy and Charlotte drive to Fiesole. The group disperses, and Lucy asks to be taken to speak with Beebe. The driver mistakenly leads her to George, who is standing at the end of a beautiful pathway covered with violets. Captivated by the moment, George embraces Lucy. Their kiss is interrupted by Charlotte, who rushes Lucy away. Charlotte is afraid that George will talk about the kiss and tells Lucy that he is obviously accustomed to stealing kisses. Cutting their visit short, Charlotte and Lucy take the train to Rome.

Lucy returns home to Surrey and promises to marry Cecil Vyse, a decadent dilettante who revels in material possessions. Beebe visits Lucy and comments on how promising she seems to be. He notes that she plays Beethoven passionately and lives so quietly. Beebe suspects that one day music and life will mingle and that Lucy will be wonderful at both. Cecil startles Beebe with the announcement of his plans to marry Lucy. While traveling in Rome,

Cecil meets the Emersons and convinces them to lease a villa in Surrey from Sir Harry Otway. The local residents had hoped that a certain class of residents would move into the villas, and Cecil encourages the Emersons to move in to disrupt the social order.

Beebe takes Freddy Honeychurch (Lucy's brother) to meet the Emersons, and Freddy encourages George and Beebe to "go for a bath" at the pond. Lucy, Cecil, and her mother encounter the frolicking swimmers while walking through the grounds. Lucy is shocked to learn that the Emersons have taken the Otway villa. Cousin Charlotte comes to visit and is concerned that the Emersons are in Surrey. George, Freddy, Lucy, and a friend invite Cecil to play tennis with them, and he sneeringly declines. After the tennis game, Cecil reads "Under the Loggia" by Eleanor Lavish aloud to George and Lucy, who recognize the description of their kiss. On the way into the house, George kisses her again. Lucy scolds Charlotte for telling Miss Lavish about the kiss.

Lucy lies to George about her feelings for him. She implores him to leave and never return. George tells her that Cecil is incapable of loving her as a woman and can only love her as a possession; he tells Lucy that he loves her and that Cecil does not. George reluctantly leaves. Symbolically, George can be seen as a protagonist of life, Cecil of material possessions (art), and Charlotte of order and decorum (antilife). If Lucy marries Cecil (who thinks of her as a work of art, not as a woman), she would be denying her own happiness. At this point, however, she is ashamed of her passionate attraction for George. Denying her love for George, Lucy breaks her engagement to Cecil and makes plans to meet Teresa and Catherine Alan in Athens. Charlotte arranges a meeting between the elder Mr. Emerson and Lucy. Lucy lies to George, Cecil, Beebe, and Mr. Emerson about her feelings. She finally abandons her plans to go to Greece, marries George against the wishes of her mother, and returns to Italy with George to their room with a view.

In *The Achievement of E. M. Forster* (1962), J. B. Beer posits the notion of the importance and symbolism of the "view" in a conversation between Lucy and Cecil:

"I had got an idea—I dare say wrongly—that you feel more at home with me in a room."

"A room?" she echoed, hopelessly bewildered.  
"Yes. Or at the most, in a garden, or on a road. Never in the real country like this." . . .

"I connect you with a view—a certain type of view. . . . When I think of you it's always as in a room" . . .

To her surprise, he seemed annoyed.  
"A drawing-room, pray? With no view?"  
"Yes, with no view, I fancy. Why not?"

Significantly, the novel begins and ends with the same view in the pension in Italy. The reticent Lucy is finally victorious over the repressive urgings of conformity and accepts her call of life. She is a different person now and has opted for life rather than antilife. The union of George and Lucy represents a comingling of intellect and heart.

## A PASSAGE TO INDIA

**First published:** 1924

**Type of work:** Novel

*The domination of the Indian people by the forces of British imperialism suggests the impossibility of bridging the gulf of antipathy between the races.*

*A Passage to India* has a tripartite structure labeled mosque, caves, and temple. Each section serves as a symbolic signpost and corresponds to the seasons of the Indian year.

After being summoned to the house of Major Callendar, Dr. Aziz, a Moslem doctor at the government hospital, discovers that the major has gone and that he must walk back to his house because two English women departed in his hired tonga (two-wheeled vehicle). While stopping at a mosque on his way back to Chandrapore, Aziz meets Mrs. Moore, the mother of Ronald Heaslop, the city magistrate. Aziz and Mrs. Moore seem to "connect" with each other and share a common understanding of life. Under the racially fragmented system of British colonialism, however, neither the British nor the Indians can speak publicly of this kind of communication. The elderly Mrs. Moore invites Aziz to walk back to the club with her and introduces him to Adela Quested, newly arrived from England and the fiancé of her son. Although *A Pas-*

*sage to India* clearly addresses social and political issues, the major theme is the plight of the human race. The fact that the characters struggle unsuccessfully to “connect” in the novel indicates Forster’s pessimism, yet he portrays a desire on the part of Aziz, Fielding, Mrs. Moore, and Adela to understand and to establish meaningful relationships with each other.

Mrs. Moore and Adela want to see the real India and complain about the colonized India that they have seen. Turton, a member of the British club, holds a bridge party for them and invites a few native Indian guests. The party is a failure, in that the Indians separate into groups apart from the British and the situation is uncomfortable. Fielding, the government college principal who associates freely with the Indians, invites the ladies to tea at his home. Adela persuades him to include Aziz and Professor Godbole, a Hindu teacher and associate of Fielding. At the tea, Adela and Mrs. Moore have a refreshing conversation with Aziz and Godbole. Aziz is overjoyed by the interaction of the group members and invites all of them to visit the Marabar Caves. Mrs. Moore and Adela accept the invitation, and Aziz plans an elaborate outing.

Heaslop arrives to escort his mother and his fiancé to a game of polo and is very rude to Aziz. The incident causes Adela and Heaslop to quarrel, and she breaks off their engagement. The couple then goes for a ride, and after striking an unidentified animal on the road, Adela changes her mind, and they are reconciled.

Unfortunately, Godbole and Fielding miss their train and Aziz must escort the British ladies to the Marabar Caves alone. Mrs. Moore is frightened by a loud booming echo in the first cave and stops to rest. Considering the gulf between the British and Indians, Mrs. Moore sees the futility of her Christian and moralistic ideas about life echoed in this hollow sound. Mrs. Moore declines to continue their explorations, and Aziz, a guide, and Adela proceed along. Adela upsets Aziz by inquiring whether he has more than one wife. Aziz leaves her briefly to regain his composure, and Adela wanders into a cave and claims that she is almost assaulted by Aziz. She stumbles down a hill, where she meets Nancy Derek, who has brought Fielding to the caves. Nancy takes Adela back to Chandrapore.

The Marabar Caves section of the novel is one of

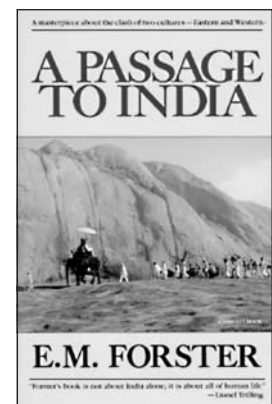
the most puzzling. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson and a number of readers and other reviewers of Forster’s works objected to the mystery of the caves scene. In a June 26, 1924, letter to Dickinson, Forster wrote the following:

In the cave it is either a man, or the supernatural, or an illusion. And even if I know! My writing mind therefore is a blur here—i.e. I will it to remain a blur, and to be uncertain, as I am of many facts in daily life. . . . It sprang straight from my subject matter.

Mrs. Moore is at once devastated and terrified by the hollow, booming echo from the caves. Her revelation suggests that perhaps the gulf that lies between the British and Indians cannot be bridged and that her Christianity is no match for the inexplicable. She has no answer for the confusion at the caves and realizes that all the British can do is to “muddle.”

Aziz meets Fielding at the caves, and neither knows what has happened. They assume that Adela decided to leave with Nancy. Aziz and Fielding return by train, and Aziz is met by the police inspector and arrested. Fielding and Mrs. Moore alienate themselves from the British by siding with Aziz. Realizing his mother’s position about the matter, Heaslop arranges passage for Mrs. Moore to return to England, and she dies at sea. During the trial, one of Aziz’s friends accuses Heaslop of smuggling his mother out of India so that she cannot testify in defense of Aziz. The Indian spectators loudly begin calling for Mrs. Moore. Then, Adela exonerates Aziz with her testimony and is publicly ostracized by the British. Fielding rescues Adela, encourages Aziz not to file a damage suit against her, and she returns to England.

Two years later, Aziz is the personal physician to the rajah of Mau, a Hindu state in India, and Godbole is the minister of education. Aziz has become totally disillusioned with the British, includ-



ing Fielding. He has not accepted any letters from Fielding because he assumes that Fielding has married Adela. Aziz is angered to learn that Fielding is visiting Mau as a part of his official duties. When Aziz meets Fielding again, he discovers that the former Stella Moore, daughter of Mrs. Moore, has married Fielding. Because of the distance between them, Aziz and Fielding cannot renew their friendship. The floods in Mau prevent the Fieldings from leaving immediately.

Before Fielding and his family make their departure from India, he and Aziz decide to go horseback riding together and begin rather amicably discussing the British/Indian problem. Sensing the end of their association, Aziz and Fielding attempt to swear eternal friendship but are forced down separate paths by rocks presenting narrow pathways for the horses. This symbolizes their inability to bridge the gulf between their races and indicates that a friendship between them is not yet possible.

The Indian setting is very important in *A Passage to India* and is an antagonistic agent to the British colonialists. The landscape attempts to expel the British, and some critics pinpoint the correspondence of the three sections of the novel to three divisions of the Indian year: cool spring, hot summer, wet monsoon. The caves are elemental, and the narrative begins with extensive references and descriptions of the physical setting. The nothingness of the caves should convince people to accept the irrational and emphasizes their relative insignificance. The British experience in India suggests that humanity must not oppose the natural rhythms of the earth and attempt to impose order on the “chaos” that is India.

## HOWARDS END

**First published:** 1910

**Type of work:** Novel

*The manor house is a symbol of personal freedom and offers hope to a disordered society.*

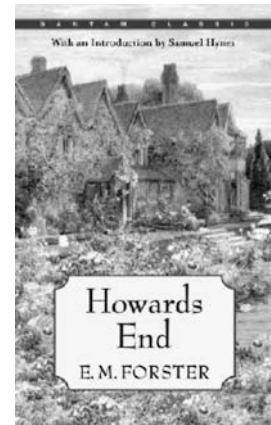
*Howards End*, sometimes proclaimed as Forster’s most mature novel, uses the country house as a symbol of cultural unity. On the title page of the early editions is the phrase “Only connect.” Forster

admonishes humankind that its most significant failure is the reluctance to establish relationships with each other and eliminate the obstacles of prejudice that divide and subjugate individuals. The Schlegels and the Wilcoxes represent two different ways of life. The Schlegels signify culture (“sweetness and light”), and the Wilcoxes represent materialism (acquisitiveness and power). The threat of the “machine in the garden” or the growing materialism in Edwardian England challenges the order of traditional English society. Although the mood of the novel is social comedy, it exhibits the trappings of a novel of manners, and the serious subject of social and political upheaval is implied.

The narrative begins with Helen Schlegel’s letter to her sister Margaret. She writes from Howards End, where she is a guest of the Wilcox family. The Wilcox family had met the Schlegels while both families were vacationing in Germany. Both sisters had been invited to Howards End, but Margaret stays with Tibby, their brother, who is ill. Helen Schlegel falls in love with Paul Wilcox and the Wilcox family, but both families are opposed to the match. In a rather indelicate manner, Helen breaks off her relationship with Paul. In a bumbling rescue by her aunt, Mrs. Munt, Helen returns home. Mrs. Munt breaks every rule of decorum and embarrasses Helen and herself. Soon the Wilcox family rents a flat across the street from the Schlegel home. The Schlegel home is a leasehold property, inherited from their father. At the expiration of the lease, they will have to move. Mrs. Ruth Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel become good friends.

Helen Schlegel accidentally takes an umbrella from Leonard Bast at a concert. This working-class young man intrigues the Schlegel sisters, who do not know of his attachment to Jacky, a woman some years older than Leonard and soon to become his wife.

Shortly after Ruth Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel become friends, Ruth dies. She leaves Howards





End to Margaret, much to the dismay of her husband and son. No one tells Margaret of her inheritance since it is not part of the official will. After several years, Helen and Margaret meet Henry Wilcox in the park. Wilcox deliberately misleads them about the stability of the firm for which Leonard Bast works. Wilcox is attracted to Margaret and sees Bast as a possible rival. Unaware of that, the two women advise Bast to change jobs, and he does so.

When the long-term lease on the Schlegel home expires, Margaret receives a letter from Henry Wilcox offering to lease them his house in London. Margaret goes with him to look at the house, and he proposes marriage. In spite of the joint disapproval from the Wilcox and Schlegel families, Margaret accepts his proposal. There is the hope that a union between Henry and Margaret will form a vital bond and facilitate the coalescence of the two different ways of life. Forster writes the following:

Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man.

Deprived of experiencing the power of true love, Margaret has expectations that she might be able to bring him to her way of thinking.

After learning that Leonard Bast lost everything he had following the bad advice that Helen and Margaret had given him, Helen believes that Henry Wilcox should compensate Bast. Margaret learns that Jacky Bast had been a mistress to Wilcox and thinks it unnecessary and in poor taste to assist the Basts. Helen falls in love with Leonard Bast, spends part of a night with him, and offers him £5,000, which he refuses. Helen remorsefully leaves England. Unaware of the relationship between Helen and Bast, Margaret marries Henry Wilcox, and Helen does not return for the ceremonies. Several months pass and Helen finally returns to England. She avoids Margaret and Wilcox but wants to retrieve some books that she had stored at Howards End. When Margaret sees Helen, she discovers that Helen is pregnant. Helen asks to spend a night with her sister, but Henry forbids it.

Margaret disobeys her husband and spends the night at Howards End with Helen. Charles Wilcox comes the next morning to get them out of the house. He meets Leonard Bast, who has come to try to get funds from Margaret. Seeing Bast, Charles seizes a saber and strikes him several times. Bast dies suddenly. Charles is sentenced to three years in prison for murdering Bast. Publicly disgraced by the manslaughter verdict and imprisonment of his son, Henry Wilcox becomes an invalid and unfortunately is unable to connect and form the bridge between his own and Margaret's divergent lifestyles. Margaret takes care of Henry out of kindness rather than love. Margaret, Henry, and Helen move into the house at Howards End.

Helen and Leonard have a son, and Henry develops a deep attachment to this child. Finally following the wishes of his former wife, Henry makes a new will that gives Howards End to Margaret. Upon her death, the house will go to the illegitimate child of Leonard Bast. Ironically, this child will be the inheritor of all that Henry Wilcox and his son had been trying to keep. Helen and Leonard's offspring represents the epitome of human diversity and the future of England.

## SUMMARY

E. M. Forster writes: "As a rule, if a writer has a romantic temperament, he will find relationships beautiful." This statement encapsulates the optimistic truths that Forster asserts in his literature about the nature of humanity. Considered by some critics to be one of the greatest moralists of his time, Forster directs his attention to character flaws that cause temporary disharmony in personal relationships.

In "E. M. Forster as Victorian and Modern: *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*," Malcolm Bradbury contends that Forster demands a personal connection between inner and outer worlds and demands that both society and humankind be whole. This explains the fact that Forster's works focus on individual redemptions and personal relationships, while, at the same time, they are very social novels.

Charlene Taylor Evans



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster puts great emphasis on the importance of “story.” Since this is an obvious element in fiction, why did he insist on it so strongly?
- Investigate the significance of music as reality and metaphor in Forster’s fiction.
- In *A Passage to India*, what character traits allow Aziz and Mrs. Moore to connect as well as they do?
- Comment on the motto of *Howards End*, “Only connect,” as it applies to other Forster novels.
- In *Howards End*, Forster mentions the importance of “the past sanctifying the present.” Explain how this happens in the novel.
- Consider the desire for possessions as a frequent failing of Forster’s characters.



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## JOHN FOWLES

**Born:** Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, England  
March 31, 1926

**Died:** Lyme Regis, Dorset, England  
November 5, 2005

*Fowles was both critically and popularly received for his first four novels—The Collector, The Magus, The French Lieutenant's Woman, and Daniel Martin—three of which were made into films.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Fowles (fowlz) was born in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, England, on March 31, 1926. During World War II his family was evacuated to the more remote town of Ippeplen, South Devon; there Fowles discovered the beauty of the countryside that figures so prominently in his fiction. In these early years, he developed a love of nature, patterning Frederick Clegg's butterfly-collecting obsession in his novel *The Collector* (1963) after his own. It was not until later that he learned to love nature for itself.

As a student at the Bedford School, Fowles studied German and French literature and eventually rose to the powerful position of head boy. At Bedford, he learned to love literature and power; only later did he learn to hate the latter. He then went into military service and spent six months at the University of Edinburgh, completing training as a lieutenant in the merchant marine right as the war was ending. Following the war, he continued his education in German and, more particularly, French literature at New College, Oxford, where he graduated with a B.A. with honors in 1950. His fiction owes much to his study of French literature, particularly his early interest in existentialism and his continuing interest in the Celtic romance, from which stems his express belief that all literature has its roots in the theme of the quest.

After graduation, Fowles taught English at the

University of Poitiers. A year later, he took a job teaching English on a Greek island, which provided the grist for his first written (but not his first published) novel, *The Magus* (1965, 1977). It was also there that he met Elizabeth Whitton, whom he married three years later. Having begun writing, he continued to teach in and around London until the success of his first published novel, *The Collector*, allowed him to quit teaching to become a full-time writer. Two years later, *The Magus* was published following twelve years of writing and revision; still not happy with it despite its favorable reception, Fowles revised and republished it in 1977.

In 1966, he and Elizabeth moved to Lyme Regis in Dorset. Their first residence was a farm at the edge of the Undercliff; subsequently, they moved to an eighteenth century house overlooking Lyme Bay. The town and the farmhouse figure prominently in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), both the book and the film (1981). He is perhaps best known for this novel, for which he won two awards: the Silver Pen Award from the International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists (PEN) in 1969 and the W. H. Smith and Son Literary Award in 1970. Fowles himself was most pleased with the film adaptation of the novel, the only one of his books that achieved popular success as a film.

*The Ebony Tower* (1974)—Fowles's collection of short stories, a novella, and a translation of a twelfth century French romance—was written in the midst of writing his next novel. In 1986, the title story in the collection was made into a film in En-

gland. *Daniel Martin* was published in 1977 and marked the high point of his popular success.

The novels that have followed have not been as well received, by either the critics or the public, because of their increasingly experimental nature. These include *Mantissa* (1982), which takes place inside the head of a writer with amnesia, and *A Maggot* (1985), a historical novel, set in the eighteenth century, about the mysterious disappearance of a duke's son and the various versions of the story told by those who knew him.

While principally known for his fiction, Fowles also wrote a volume of poetry, *Poems* (1973); a philosophical work, *The Aristos: A Self-Portrait in Ideas* (1964); and a historical work, *A Short History of Lyne Regis* (1982). He also wrote a number of essays accompanied by photographs, including *Shipwreck* (1974), *Islands* (1978), *The Tree* (1979), and *The Enigma of Stonehenge* (1980), and the foreword to an illustrated volume, *The Undercliff* (1989).

A mild stroke in 1988 limited his output. After his wife, Elizabeth, died in March, 1990, from stomach cancer, Fowles continued to live and work in Lyne Regis. In 1998 he married Sarah Smith. He died on November 5, 2005.

## ANALYSIS

Fowles's fiction has one main theme: the quest of the protagonists for self-knowledge or wholeness. In each of his novels, as well as in his short stories, the protagonist is faced with learning how to quest in a world in which the contemporary quester is cut off from the traditions and rituals of the past that once gave questers of old—exemplified by heroes such as Lancelot, King Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table—purpose and direction.

What separates the journey of the Fowlesian hero from the journey of the medieval hero is that much of it has become internalized. Where the quester of old battled dragons, monsters, and mysterious knights, the modern quester has no such obvious obstacles. For the modern quester, the battles are largely inward, as the quester must struggle against ignorance and inertia. The modern journey can thus be seen in psychological terms with the results measured by the quester's ability to attain self-knowledge or wholeness, which is often characterized in Fowles's fiction as the ability of the hero to know love.

In this respect, Fowles saw his fiction as having a social dimension in its capacity to help alter people's view of life. While he claimed to pay little attention to what the critics wrote, he always paid serious attention to the opinions of his readers. From the many thousands of letters he received, he felt that his fiction moved readers to think and act differently as they identified with the struggles of his questers. His main social concern is with the condition of human beings, trapped like potential fossils in a receding sea—an image that figures prominently in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Likewise, Fowles is concerned with nature, in the sense of the "natural man" who must be discovered by the protagonists on the quest, as well as with humanity's respect for nature. Many of the pivotal scenes in his fiction are set in natural landscapes, such as the Undercliff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Thorncombe in *Daniel Martin*. The antiheroes are often those who fail to understand or respect nature, an example most succinctly portrayed in the character of Frederick Clegg in *The Collector*.

His short-story collection, *The Ebony Tower*, was originally called "Variations" because Fowles saw the stories as variations on the themes of his longer fiction. These same variations are evident within the long fiction, making the whole body of Fowles's fiction subject to examination under one central theme—that of quest and discovery—with variations.

Its clearest statement is made in Fowles's first written, later rewritten, novel *The Magus*. About its conception, he once said, "I only knew the basic idea of a secret world, whose penetration involved ordeal and whose final reward was self-knowledge, obsessed me." To look briefly at the basic idea of this secret world and the ordeal and reward that await the successful protagonist is to understand the basis of Fowles's fiction in its many variations.

In the story, Nicholas Urfe, well educated and in the prime of life, nonetheless wants to kill himself because he does not see sufficient reason to live. Embarrassed by his lack of commitment even to death, which prevents him from pulling the trigger on the gun, he soon stumbles into the land of adventure provided by his guide on the quest, Conchis, who represents the mythic wise old man. Within this secret realm, always described as an otherworldly place, Nicholas experiences all the

challenges of the quest: danger, love, temptation, and moments of clear vision. Finally ejected from the mythic landscape, he returns to London with enough understanding to know that it is Alison, the woman whose love he earlier rejected, for whom he must now wait and of whom he must prove himself worthy. The final scene, cast in the garden of Regents Park, does not answer the question of whether they ultimately reunite because it is not as important as the evidence of the self-knowledge Nicholas has attained. For Fowles, this ambiguous ending, made more so in the revised version, is a way of leaving the story “unconcluded,” a device he varies in subsequent novels, with multiple endings in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and no ending in *A Maggot*. It is only in *Daniel Martin* that the happy ending is achieved, and then only after much struggle on the part of the protagonist-author. It comes as no surprise that the novel following *Daniel Martin* leaves reality behind altogether, as the protagonist-author of *Mantissa* creates a fiction inside his head. There the ending is circular, returning to its unclear beginning.

While many of his questers are successful to the extent that they gain self-knowledge and come to know and experience love, not all succeed. The most poignant failure is Frederick Clegg in *The Collector*. In this novel there are no winners, for Clegg, who longs for love and thinks he understands nature, is in fact as trapped as the butterflies he traps and kills. Likewise, he traps and kills Miranda, the girl he thinks he loves, because he does not know how to journey and cannot learn from the signs and signals presented to him. His fear keeps him trapped in a downward spiral of worsening experience. Following Miranda’s death, it is inevitable that he will trap again and that the inevitable cycle will repeat itself.

Other questers fail, particularly those presented in the short-story collection, *The Ebony Tower*. There, the variations are largely those of the dark side of the quest: what happens when the protagonists, for a variety of reasons, cannot choose to respond to the call to the quest. From the ebony tower of the first story to the dark cloud of the last in the collection, the stories are increasingly dark portrayals of the questers’ failure to break out of their molds. In *A Maggot*, Bartholomew may succeed in breaking free, but the mystery of his disappearance is never fully determined. The woman he

leaves behind can free herself only by removing herself completely from society to join a new religious order and give birth to its future leader.

Throughout all of these variations, however, the central theme persists: Can people choose, and, if so, how do they choose? These ideas concerned Fowles, not only for his characters but also for himself as a novelist and a human being.

## THE COLLECTOR

**First published:** 1963

**Type of work:** Novel

*A butterfly collector wins the lottery and, with the money, buys a house in the country and captures the girl of his dreams.*

*The Collector*, Fowles’s first published novel, was an instant hit. While the British viewed it as criminal fiction, Americans liked it for its psychological exploration of a troubled character. Written from a split viewpoint, it tells the story first from Clegg’s point of view, then repeats the same story from Miranda’s diary, and finally returns to Clegg describing the inevitable ending and his plans for the future. In the telling, the marked differences separating the two characters are evident. Clegg’s narrative is halting, formal, and nearly inarticulate in places. Miranda’s narrative is free-flowing, alive with feeling, expressive, and natural. Their two tales, divided as they are by language and background, reflect the vast differences that separate them.

Echoing many of the same ideas expressed in his philosophical work *The Aristos: A Self-Portrait in Ideas* (1964), Fowles examines his social concerns over the split between “the Many,” which Clegg represents, and “the Few,” which Miranda represents. Clegg, who suddenly finds himself wealthy as a result of winning money in the football pools, is given the money of “the Few” without any of the education to appreciate it or to use it wisely. He is freed to quest, but he does not have the inner or outer knowledge to understand what confronts him and what he can choose. Thus, he fails not only for himself; his failure also causes Miranda to die. For Clegg, Miranda remains nothing more than his

most prized specimen, better than even his most beautiful butterflies.

Miranda, too, has lived in a world isolated from “the Many,” and it is only as a result of being Clegg’s prisoner that she is forced to think about the world he inhabits. As a result of her entrapment, she takes the journey of inward discovery that her diary later reveals. She knows that she will be a better person for her experience if she survives the imprisonment. To her credit, she comes to understand Clegg and to have sympathy for him. Still, even with all of her education and class superiority, she cannot humanize him.

Clegg’s only emotion is that concerning the loss of his ideal. He has admired Miranda from afar and idealized her to be all that he believes a woman

should be. When her reality and vitality cloud the picture, his admiration turns to disgust and gives him “permission” to treat her as a specimen to be chloroformed and photographed to suit his perverted tastes. In most of the photographs, he cuts off her head, symbolic of his repressed desire to see her merely as a beautiful body, without her willful intelligence.



Miranda’s diary breaks off with the words. “Do not let me die.” Clegg’s account picks up after that, first as a rationalization of his failure to prevent her from dying, which is also an unrealized admission of his inability to accept the call to the quest. When he goes to the doctor’s office, it is crowded with people and he does not have the courage to go straight in to see the doctor. Unnerved by the people and the look of the doctor, he flees; the result is that Miranda dies. At first it bothers him terribly, and he romantically imagines killing himself so that the two can lie together forever. Even this notion soon passes, however, as he begins to find fault with her, eventually blaming her for her own death.

His final chilling thoughts of his next victim, a girl he has already identified specifically to avoid making the mistake he made with Miranda of “aiming too high,” demonstrate the repetition of the cy-

cle that will be Clegg’s life: Unable to quest toward self-understanding, he is doomed to repeat himself.

## THE MAGUS

**First published:** 1965

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young man journeys to a small Greek island, where he experiences many adventures under the watchful eye of his guide, Maurice Conchis.*

*The Magus* was the first novel Fowles wrote, although not the first that he published. After working on it for many years, he finally released it for publication in 1965. Despite its success, Fowles remained dissatisfied with the novel and subsequently revised it for republication in 1977. It is an important work for its portrayal of the protagonist trapped in a meaningless world who must learn to choose life and love, and for its use of myth and mystery to define what is lacking in the protagonist’s life. The Greek island setting is important as the other world in which the journey takes place; likewise, it was important to Fowles as the place where his journey as a writer began.

Nicholas Urfe is the protagonist who becomes the quester. Fleeing England and the love of Alison, he journeys to Greece to find adventure and to escape his commitments. Adventure he does find, but not in the form he expected. He seeks mystery with a small “m”; what he finds is Mystery with a capital “M”: the mystery of himself, which he learns as he quests.

His guide for the journey is Maurice Conchis, who has already taken the journey of self-discovery and who has knowledge to impart to others. As in all of Fowles’s fiction, one of the central themes of this novel is that of unmasking. Each person hides behind many masks; the question is knowing which is the real person. Conchis wears many masks as part of the “godgame” he prepares and presents for Nicholas’s education. Various characters are unmasked, leading up to the unmasking of Nicholas in the central trial scene and the announcement that he is now one of the “elect.” Nicholas



knows that he has been exposed and feels changed, but he does not fully comprehend the extent of the change. Thus, as he is evicted from the realm of myth and returned to the real world of London, he comes slowly to understand that the final challenge of the quest will be a reunion with Alison, whom he had earlier rejected.

Since so much of Fowles's fiction measures the success of the quester in terms of the ability to know and experience love, Nicholas is given the opportunity to demonstrate his changed relationship toward women and to continue to learn from several women: Lily de Seitas, the mother of the twins who play such an important role in the Greek island adventure; Jojo, the young waif he takes in and who falls in love with him; and Kemp, the crusty landlady who is actually one of his guides on the quest. Finally, with the breaking of the plate, the gift that Mrs. de Seitas has given him, and an almost-tearful scene involving Nicholas that subsequently and inexplicably occurs, Kemp knows that Nicholas is ready to receive Alison again, and she arranges it.

Whether they reunite or separate is not important to Fowles, although it continues to remain important to his readers. What matters in terms of Nicholas's quest is how far he has come in his ability to know and want love and in his ability to share. His journey will continue, with Alison or perhaps with someone else.

What may make this novel such a perennial favorite on college campuses are the techniques Fowles uses to present the tale. The story is told in a first-person narrative by Nicholas after the events have taken place; he nonetheless reveals only what he knew at any given point in the story. Readers tend to want to decipher the truth or mystery of the events just as Nicholas does. They share Nicholas's surprise, shock, and fear at the strange twists and turns of events. Thus, as Fowles hopes his fiction will do, the book has the potential to change readers. When Nicholas does not tell the new American quester, Briggs, what he will really experience on the island of Bourani, so, too, the reader is as likely not to tell a friend what he or she will experience when reading this book. The adventure awaits each reader.

## THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

**First published:** 1969

**Type of work:** Novel

*A nineteenth century gentleman abandons the woman to whom he is engaged in order to pursue "the French lieutenant's woman," who, meanwhile, has mysteriously fled.*

Charles Smithson, the protagonist of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, is very much like Nicholas Urfe of *The Magus*. He is well-born and well-bred and should be in an excellent position to enjoy the fruits of life, but he finds himself vaguely dissatisfied. Thinking that marriage to the clever Ernestina Freeman will provide the sense of fulfillment his life lacks, he is quickly dissuaded of this notion upon his instant attraction to Sarah Woodruff, the "French lieutenant's woman."

She is Mystery with a capital "M," and her separate world, which she has created for herself with her fabricated tale of sexual encounter with the French lieutenant, gives her the freedom the nineteenth century setting and her circumstances would not otherwise provide. She and the Undercliff that she frequents become the mythic landscape, the otherworld that Charles enters in search of adventure, just as Nicholas enters Bourani in *The Magus*.

Both Charles and Sarah are trapped in roles that neither wants. Sarah has the education of a well-bred lady but her lower social standing keeps her in the working class. Charles is a gentleman, but he chafes at the rigid world he inhabits. Unknown to him is his longing to break free. His hobby is the study of fossils trapped by the receding seas when the world changed. Likewise, his place in history is at a turning point in the world, at the end of the Victorian era. The question that the novel poses is whether Charles, like his echinoderm fossils, will be trapped as the world changes or will be able to break free.



Commerce is on the rise, and even while Charles does not expect that he will have to work to earn a living, he is surprised to find that his uncle, from whom he has expected to receive a handsome inheritance, has remarried, dimming Charles's chances of living the life of perpetual ease. Even so, he declines an offer by Mr. Freeman, Ernestina's father, to come into the world of business, feeling ill-suited for this endeavor.

Charles believes in a Darwinian view of the world and enjoys arguing about this new scientific view with Dr. Grogan; but the scientific pursuit of knowledge does not fully satisfy him, which explains why he is so easily and surprisingly taken by the mysterious woman he first sees at the end of the quay in Lyme Regis. The pursuit of Sarah becomes his obsession. In discovering the "Sarah" within him, he discovers his ability to feel love. As is true of many Fowles characters, this is the mark of his progress on the journey. Charles chooses, as the questing hero must, to give up certainty and reputation (marriage to Ernestina) to pursue the unknown (Sarah) and all that it might hold.

Freedom of choice, freedom for the individual, is a major concern in this novel as well as in others by Fowles. What is particularly compelling in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is Fowles's use of the Victorian setting and the form of the Victorian novel, complete with intrusions by the author to comment on the action and even change the ending. The first "ending" comes in the middle of the novel, so it comes as no surprise that this is not really the ending but rather a device to show what the traditional Victorian ending to the tale would be: Charles's decision to avoid the temptation of Sarah and to marry Ernestina and live out his lot in life.

Having dispensed with the traditional Victorian ending, Fowles steps in to inform the reader that it was a myth. So saying, he returns Charles to the pivotal moment of choice, and this time Charles chooses to get off the train in Exeter to go find Sarah, who he knows is there. They do meet in a brief sexual encounter, but when Charles learns that she has fabricated a turned ankle to get him into her room, he flees her in disgust. Later, realizing that he has been rash and determining to break off his engagement to Ernestina to marry Sarah (something a gentleman does not do), he finds, on his return, that Sarah has mysteriously left. The rest of

the novel focuses on Charles's growing awareness of his feelings, which his desire for Sarah represents.

Two more endings conclude the novel. In both, Charles and Sarah meet each other once again, just as Nicholas and Alison meet again in the conclusion to *The Magus*. In the first ending, the couple are reunited through the intercession of the child born of that brief sexual encounter. In the second and final ending, the one Fowles hoped readers would accept as the most real, the clock is turned back and Charles and Sarah are again reunited, only to part. As Charles once again flees from Sarah, he knows that he must begin again, as though reborn. Yet he knows that he is not a trapped echinoderm but a man who has broken free into a new world of choices. Although Sarah cannot be the object of his love, he now has found "an atom of faith in himself," and the future, with all of its potential, awaits him.

## THE EBONY TOWER

**First published:** 1974

**Type of work:** Novella, short stories, and translation

*Fowles translates a twelfth century romance about a questing knight who resurrects a princess from a deadly sleep, then contrasts that tale with his own stories about twentieth century characters who are less successful in pursuing their personal quests.*

*The Ebony Tower* includes the title novella, three short stories, and the author's translation of Marie de France's *Eliduc*, a twelfth century romance. *Eliduc* is included in the volume because it is a source of inspiration for the other stories. In this medieval romance the knight leaves his faithful wife, Guildelüec, to travel to a foreign land where he falls in love with the ravishingly beautiful princess, Guilliadun. After some trials and tribulations, including the miraculous resurrection of the princess from a deathly sleep, the story ends happily with the marriage of the princess and the knight and Guildelüec's gracious acquiescence in her new status as former wife. Absolving *Eliduc* of

any blame for falling in love with the princess, Guiddelüec becomes a nun.

In the title novella, the protagonist, David Williams, a British abstract painter and art critic, has left his faithful wife at home to travel to France to interview the renowned artist Henry Breastley, a representational painter who detests the kind of abstract art in which David believes. Living with Breastley are two young women; one of them is a modern version of the “princess” who needs to be rescued. At the crucial moment, David discovers that he is no modern-day Eliduc who can muster the courage to overcome convention and rescue this damsel in distress. The story concludes with a disillusioned David returning to his wife and realizing that he is only “surviving” and not really living.

In “Poor Koko” an elderly scholar recounts how a young burglar surprised him in a country cottage where he was attempting to finish writing his manuscript about a nineteenth century novelist. The burglar tied him up but did not hurt him. The scholar was shocked, though, when the burglar destroyed his manuscript. The scholar ponders this puzzling act and presents various unconvincing explanations for it.

“The Enigma” also ends without solving the mystery at the heart of the story. John Marcus Fielding, a Conservative member of Parliament, disappears without a trace, and a police detective named Jennings investigates the case. Jennings interviews Isobel Dodgson, the former girlfriend of Fielding’s son. Jennings and Dodgson become romantically involved, and Jennings loses all interest in his investigation. In Fowles’s ironic reenvisioning of the detective story, a genre that requires that the mystery be solved, romance seems to be more important than a solution to the mystery.

The final work, “The Cloud,” is a discursive story about a diverse group of British people picnicking in rural France. Near the end of the story, an alienated woman named Catherine, whose husband has committed suicide, tells her young niece a rambling story of a princess who is waiting for her prince to rescue her and “just love her for herself.” Later Catherine wanders away from her fellow picnickers. When one of their group, a man named Peter, finds her, the two have sex, and Peter returns to the group while Catherine does not. Then the group, except for Catherine, leaves under an ominous cloud. The story concludes with these words:

“The princess calls, but there is no one, now, to hear her.” That final metaphoric sentence is an apt conclusion not only for “The Cloud” but also for this collection of stories.

## DANIEL MARTIN

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*A middle-aged screenwriter living in Hollywood is called back to England to his dying friend’s bedside and there returns to his first love, the man’s wife.*

In his fourth novel, *Daniel Martin*, Fowles writes his first happy ending. The protagonist, Daniel Martin, a writer and alter ego for Fowles, struggles throughout the novel with the concept of the happy ending and whether the late twentieth century world can accept it. He finally decides, as his own life reveals to him, that the happy ending is possible. The route to that decision forms the action of the novel. At the same time, Daniel’s story becomes *Daniel Martin*, the novel Daniel has wanted to write.

The quester has now come of age; in fact, he is middle-aged. His dilemma is like that of the questers of the earlier novels whose stories were of younger men confronting issues of choice and freedom. Once again, the protagonist is a man who seems to have everything. In this case, his “everything” is a successful life as a playwright and now screenwriter in Hollywood and a beautiful young actress for a lover. Yet the same longing and sense of incompleteness are within him, just as they are within Nicholas and Charles in Fowles’s previous novels. For Daniel, the call to the quest comes in the form of a phone call that returns him to the bedside of his former best friend, who is now dying. Returning to England, he is faced with the unfinished business of his life. With Anthony’s suicide, the way is cleared for him to become reunited with Jane, his true love and now Anthony’s widow. Daniel sees his opportunity to come alive again; Jane resists.

To know where they began, Fowles takes the action back to their college days at Oxford and to the

deep bond of friendship among four friends: Anthony, Jane, Jane's sister, and Daniel. Although Daniel and Jane come to realize that they love each other, Daniel makes the "correct" choice (the same choice Fowles presents in the first ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) and marries the one he is "supposed" to marry, not the one he loves. That marriage ends in divorce, and although Jane stays married to Anthony until his death, their marriage does not provide the true depth of feeling that she might have had with Daniel.

Once Daniel has rediscovered the significant moments and sacred places in his past, he longs to find these places and moments again. Thus, the journey moves into the present and the future with Daniel's invitation to Jane to take a trip with him. Fittingly, the trip is a journey up the Nile, which symbolizes lost worlds as well as the potential for a future world with Jane. From that journey, in which he explores much about his feelings for Jane and his own feelings, he persuades Jane to continue with him to Palmyra, an ancient city of wealth and prosperity now in ruins. Again the symbolism of place is apparent: Their arrival in the wasteland of Palmyra can symbolize either what they will become or the potential to turn their own wasteland into a garden if they can escape the bonds that separate them. They do the latter in Jane's symbolic burial of her wedding ring in the sands of the desert. Thus, with her ties to the past severed and

with their earlier ties to each other revived, they journey together into the future. The only unfinished business for Daniel is to let Jenny, his Hollywood lover, gently go. The last scene of this first novel with a happy ending places Daniel and Jane in the kitchen together, the quintessential picture of home, talking about the novel Daniel can now write—which is in fact the one the reader has just read.

## SUMMARY

The whole body of John Fowles's fiction can be seen as variations on the theme of quest as discovery, which Fowles sees as at the heart of literature dating back to the twelfth century. Fowles gives that theme a distinctly modern twist with his psychological examination of characters in search of meaning in a meaningless world. The successful questers learn to choose freely; the unsuccessful ones remain trapped in roles they merely play out over the course of their lives.

The freedom of choice is more important to Fowles than any specific choices his characters make, which is why he tries to give his characters so much choice. It is also why he writes open endings and multiple endings in some of his novels. Not only are his characters left to choose for themselves, but so, too, are his readers.

*Carol M. Barnum; updated by Allan Chavkin*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is John Fowles's purpose in presenting the reader with different endings for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* instead of one definite ending? Which ending is most appropriate for the novel?
- In some of Fowles's works, such as *The Ebony Tower*, France and England symbolize two different outlooks or "lifestyles." What is Fowles suggesting by this opposition?
- What is the narrative and thematic significance of the "damsel in distress" motif in Fowles's work?
- Infidelity is a situation that occurs repeatedly in Fowles's work. What is Fowles's attitude toward infidelity? Do you agree?
- Examine gender roles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Does the novel reinforce conventional assumptions about gender roles or challenge those assumptions?
- In "A Personal Note" that accompanies Fowles's translation of *Eliduc* in *The Ebony Tower*, he suggests that the type of medieval romance that he includes in this collection is "seminal in the history of fiction" and also in his own fiction. Explain Fowles's preoccupation with medieval romance and its influence in various ways on his short stories and novels.
- In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Collector*, and some of Fowles's other works (such as "Poor Koko"), the class status of the characters seems to be very important. Discuss what Fowles is suggesting about class divisions in the society of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and some of his other works.
- Many of the conclusions of Fowles's stories are open-ended. Examine some of the endings and explain the thematic implications of concluding in this manner.





(Courtesy, George Graziller, Inc.)

## JANET FRAME

**Born:** Dunedin, New Zealand

August 28, 1924

**Died:** Dunedin, New Zealand

January 29, 2004

*Frame was one of New Zealand's greatest writers, who won numerous literary prizes worldwide for her novels, short stories, and poems.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Janet Paterson Frame was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, the third in a family of five children. George Samuel Frame, her father, worked as a railroad engineer, and the family moved frequently as his place of work changed. Her mother, Lottie Clarice Godfrey, had to raise a large family with little money. Despite difficult circumstances and childhood tragedies, Frame went on to become New Zealand's best-known writer since Katherine Mansfield.

Frame's compiled reflections, *An Autobiography* (1989), tells the poignant tale of young Janet—sensitive, intelligent, and gifted—growing up in the repressive atmosphere of provincial New Zealand. As a child, Frame watched her mother, a talented storyteller and poet, subjugate her life to her husband's needs and submit to his sometimes brutal moods. In spite of this, Lottie Frame managed to establish an atmosphere of intellectual liveliness in her household, where Janet and the other children were surrounded with poetry and stories. Janet created an inner world that allowed her to retreat into her imagination in self-defense as life became increasingly troublesome. In the world of her imagination there was no punishment for being original or different as there was at school and in society. At home, she and her sisters were beaten by

their father for any signs of pubescent sexual curiosity. In small-town New Zealand in the 1930's no deviation from acceptable behavior was tolerated and people were rigidly stratified into social and economic classes.

During these years, Frame also experienced family tragedy. Her brother, Bruddie, was epileptic—a disease that was not understood at the time—and he was punished when he could not control his fits. In 1937, Janet's eldest sister, Myrtle, drowned in the local swimming pool. A few years later, her younger sister, Isabel, also drowned while swimming in Picton Sound. These were terrible blows to Frame. She transformed her suffering into fiction and poetry, and around the time of Myrtle's death one of Janet's poems won a prize. Increasingly, Frame longed to live in her dreams, in spite of being a practical child who loved mathematics. Later, she longed for recognition as an artist in a world where creativity was suspected and scorned.

Frame found recognition when she went to a teachers' college in Dunedin. While there, she developed a romantic attachment to a male teacher who recognized her talent and intelligence. Owing in part to his glorification of the mental illness of the painter Vincent van Gogh and other creative geniuses, Frame sought his affection and interest by playing with insanity. This, in addition to her growing fear that the life and identity she was creating for herself would never allow her to express her passion for writing, resulted in severe depression and a suicide attempt. She was subsequently institutionalized for eight years, diagnosed as schizophrenic. Frame underwent extensive electroshock

treatment and was only saved by the publication of her first collection of short stories, *The Lagoon* (1951), which won a prominent award.

After leaving the asylum, Frame became friends with Frank Sargeson, a New Zealand short-story writer, who gave her a place to live and encouraged her to write. For the first time in her life she met people who valued literature and recognized her talent. She was now free to live simply and to write. She finished her first novel, *Owls Do Cry* (1957), a fictionalized account of her traumatic childhood and early adulthood, and was awarded a grant to travel. After a period in London, she went to Paris and Barcelona, and then returned to England. While in London she sought professional psychiatric help and discovered that she had been misdiagnosed and was not schizophrenic. This news was problematic, for she now had to cope with the loss of an identity that had ironically become a comfort to her. Her psychiatrist helped her to realize a new identity through her writing, encouraging her to recount her experience in mental institutions. Frame finished *Faces in the Water* (1961) during this period. Upon hearing that her father had suddenly died, she returned to New Zealand, where she remained until she died of acute myeloid leukemia in Dunedin on January 29, 2004.

During her lifetime, Frame received numerous awards and honors for her work. She was made a Commander of the Order of British Empire in 1983; won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book for her novel *The Carpathians* (1988) in 1989; and in 1990 was admitted to the Order of New Zealand by Queen Elizabeth II. Shortly before her death, she received the New Zealand Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement.

## ANALYSIS

Frame will be remembered not only for her novels, short stories, and poems but also for her autobiography, which has been called one of the greatest autobiographies of the twentieth century, and which was made into a film, *An Angel at My Table* (1990), directed by Jane Campion.

Although Frame's work often deals with insanity, it would be simplistic to classify her novels as the literature of madness. Readers will discover in her work a continual resistance to enclosure in any such category. She evades classification. She has been called a surrealist, a magical realist, a post-

colonial writer, and a postmodern feminist. Her writing encompasses much but takes no fixed point of view. She is a protean voice from the inner world of insanity which, as a refuge from an outer world of oppression, allows her to speak the truth about insanity and about the experience of those thought to be insane. She reflects this truth facet by facet, examining language in its relation to meaning and memory, being in relation to language and the self, and insanity from the standpoint of the self's integrity. All this results in a manifestation of the spirit that is sometimes lyrical and poetic, sometimes strange and humorous, often apocalyptic and extraordinary.

Frame's unusual thematic material is evident in her earliest works. Her first published novels, *Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water*, are semiautobiographical accounts of her difficult early years. Frame said in her autobiography that when she wrote *Faces in the Water* she omitted a lot because she was afraid of appearing too dramatic. Even so, the book is a chilling rendition of life in a mental institution, including the nightmare of receiving shock treatment. Her description of these sessions with the so-called new electric treatment tells of being obliterated, of being ripped away from recognizable reality. Frame apparently received massive doses of electric shock two hundred times in eight years. Such treatment was given without anesthesia and to many it is more like legalized torture than medical science. These repeated traumas were perhaps the origins of Frame's extended examination of the nature of language and reality. For example, in describing the shock treatment, she wrote in *Faces in the Water*: "It is time to leave the words themselves and parachute to their meaning in the dark earth and seas below."

*Faces in the Water* is written as a straightforward narrative and is closest in tone to Frame's autobiography. The style that is most characteristic of her subsequent novels first appears in *Owls Do Cry*, the title of which comes from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623). The main characters in the novel are based indirectly on the author's family and her own early experience. In the novel, Francie's life has parallels to Frame's older sister Myrtle; Toby is an epileptic, like her brother Bruddie; and Daphne is put in an asylum. Daphne represents an alternative life Frame might have had if her writing had not saved

her. After her stay in the asylum Daphne goes to work in the wool mills and advances as a “normal person.” Before her “strange fancies” are taken from her, Daphne often speaks in a voice that is poetic and tragic, giving a good indication of what Frame’s inner world might have been like. At the opening of the novel are these lyrical and disturbing words: “But what use the green river, the gold place, if time and death pinned human in the pocket of my land not rest from taking underground the green all-willowed and white rose and bean flower and morning mist picnic of song in pepper-pot breast of thrush?” This style of writing is often encountered in Frame’s work and indicates the degree to which she presses at the limits of language.

In *Owls Do Cry*, Frame develops powerful and complex images that recur throughout her work. One of these is the image of fire, including electrical fire, reminiscent of shock treatment. In the novel, the children spend time playing at a rubbish dump where they find treasures. However, Francie, the eldest, is accidentally burned to death at the dump. Francie, like Frame’s own sister Myrtle, was sexually precocious and the image of fire recalls the Christian idea of burning in Hell for sin. As such images recur in Frame’s work, they begin to function like symbols that have many meanings and that are very suggestive poetically.

*Owls Do Cry* and *Faces in the Water* are a lasting and powerful testament to what Frame called “the brutality that lurks under a conspiracy of decency.” This theme is present in many of her subsequent novels and stories, and much of her literary career was spent in articulating an alternate vision of life, whereby the normal appears strange and even absurd, while the abnormal seems closer to the truth of authentic experience.

Another central theme in Frame’s work concerns the effects of colonialism and its aftermath. New Zealand was a colony of Britain from 1841 until 1947. For white New Zealanders, England represented the cultural and geographical center, while New Zealand was a mere colony at the extreme edge of the world. Frame examines this motif in many works, but most thoroughly in *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962). The degree to which Frame succeeded in gaining a large international readership suggests that this colonial sense of cultural inferiority was unnecessary and outmoded. As her fame

spread, and as she garnered prestigious prizes for her work, Frame became an increasingly important voice in the world of literature.

## THE EDGE OF THE ALPHABET

**First published:** 1962

**Type of work:** Novel

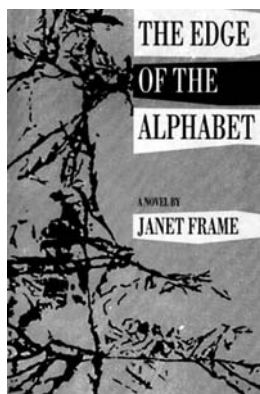
*Toby Withers, an epileptic from New Zealand, travels to London to become a writer. On the way, he meets Zoe Bryce, a spinster schoolteacher, and Pat Keenan, an Irish bus driver, both of whom, in different ways, are also seeking a purpose for their lives.*

*The Edge of the Alphabet* was written after Frame’s travels to England and, like her other novels, contains elements of autobiography. The novel is narrated by Thora Pattern, one of many elusive impostor narrators to be encountered in Frame’s novels. She tells the story of Toby Withers (the same name, but not the same character as in *Owls Do Cry*), who is an epileptic New Zealander traveling to London to find his “center.” Equally important are Zoe Bryce, an English spinster schoolteacher, and Pat Keenan, an Irish bus driver. What they all have in common is their marginality, something that many of Frame’s characters possess. Marginality can be defined as a distance from a privileged center, whether that distance be social (the misfit or outcast), economic (the poor or the working class), political (the unsophisticated colonial), or sexual (the unloved spinster). Frame’s novels often explore the process and effects of marginalization.

The edge of the alphabet is a metaphor for what is peripheral or marginalized, and it works on several levels. Toby, for instance, is marginalized by his epilepsy. He is not normal, not acceptable to other people. Even in his inner world, he is alienated from his central self by his fragmenting epileptic fits. He is further marginalized by being a New Zealander, someone far from the geographical “center” that England represents. When Toby mentions in England that he is from New Zealand, people ask him if that is somewhere in Australia. For people at the “center,” the periphery is inconsequential. In traveling to the center—London—Toby is also

looking for his self, a self from which he is distanced by inner and outer conditions. Thora Pattern, the narrator, asks, “And what if we meet ourselves on the edge of the Alphabet and can make no sign, no speech?” For some, living far from the “center” deprives them of the possibility of fitting in with others, or even with themselves. Marginalization denies legitimacy. Nevertheless, a central argument in the book and a general one in all of Frame’s novels is that the absence of a center is legitimated as a part of human experience. From one standpoint, as Toby says, “Everybody comes from the other side of the world.” There is no real “center.” London is simply “the other side.”

The primary reason for Toby’s trip is to write his book *The Lost Tribe*. London represents for him the center of writing (the alphabet), just as New Zealand symbolizes the edge. At the center, Toby hopes to be able to control and master words, but as he sits down to write in his exercise book, he discovers that, even at the center, language is elusive. Toby’s inability to write *The Lost Tribe* comes to represent the absence of centrality, since for him the center turns out to be no better than the margin. Furthermore, to complete a book suggests closure, and that is seen to be an illusion, an obstacle to the truth of self-realization as a continual process. In the end, Toby returns to New Zealand, where, ironically, he is more acceptable after having been overseas.



## THE CARPATHIANS

**First published:** 1988

**Type of work:** Novel

*Mattina Brecon, a rich editor from New York City, travels to New Zealand for a holiday. She gets to know the inhabitants of Kowhai Street in Puamahara, a small town, and witnesses the rain of the alphabet and the death of the memory of the people on that street.*

*The Carpathians* is one of Frame’s later novels. In this work Frame has fully developed the themes found in her earlier books. These themes include the imposture of the writer and of language itself, postcolonial New Zealand, and the experience of insanity.

*The Carpathians* has an impostor narrator, Dinah Wheatstone. In the novel multiple narrative voices take turns assuming the role of author or central authority. The reader assumes the novelist is JHB, a writer and husband of Mattina Brecon, but finds out at the end that it is her son John Henry, who announces that both his parents died when he was young, and that he never knew them. This series of illusory authors describing illusive experience becomes an analogy for mistaken notions of reality.

Mattina begins the narrative by recounting her trip to the town of Puamahara, where she rents a house on Kowhai Street. Mattina becomes acquainted with her neighbors and meets Dinah Wheatstone (Dinny), a self-proclaimed impostor and novelist. Mattina agrees to read Dinny’s manuscript and, in part two, the narrative voice shifts to Dinny, who describes herself as a graduate impostor and who denies the “existence of anything, of anywhere and anytime.” In the course of the novel the reader becomes familiar, one by one, with the “ordinary, extraordinary” people of Kowhai Street. At the same time, Mattina begins to experience what she calls the presence of the disorder of space and time.

Mattina is awakened one night by cries in the street. Her neighbors are being destroyed in a deadly rain of words and letters, which are falling on them as seed and jewels and excrement. The rain is the letters of all the languages of the world, and the work of “transforming being, thought and language” has begun. The people are reduced to

primitive, prelinguistic sounds. Within these sounds there is “a new music, each note effortlessly linking the next, like dew-drops or mercury.” The people of Kowhai Street experience the disaster of “the unknowing and unbeing that accompanies death.” The following morning all the inhabitants, including the impostor novelist, are dead. Only Mattina survives.

Mattina returns to New York. Before she goes, she buys Kowhai Street—a reminder of America’s new economic power. Mattina dies soon after, but not before asking her husband to go to see her new property in New Zealand. She also asks him to visit a former inhabitant of Kowhai Street, Decima Townsend, who is autistic and who lives in a mental institution outside town. Jake visits New Zealand but is unable to learn anything about what really happened at Kowhai Street, since everyone has either forgotten about it or denies the calamity occurred. In the end, the memory of truth is kept alive only by the “Housekeepers of Ancient Springtime”: the insane, the poets, who live at the edge of the alphabet.

## YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE HUMAN HEART

**First published:** 1983

**Type of work:** Short stories

*The title story of the collection is set in Philadelphia. A visitor to a museum sees a large replica of a human heart, made to allow children to see the passage of a single blood cell. The visitor then watches a teacher giving a lesson on snakes.*

“You Are Now Entering the Human Heart” is a macabre tale of an elderly schoolteacher who permits a harmless snake to be wrapped around her neck in order to demonstrate to her class that there is no reason for fear. As she sits, trying to overcome her revulsion for the sake of impressing her class, the reader sees into her inner world, her heart. She is old and will soon retire to a life of fear and solitude, afraid to go out onto the streets of Philadelphia. She has no reason to learn not to fear snakes, but she is willing to lie for her class. The children

remain too scared to touch the snake, but the teacher’s mask slips when the snake moves its head close to hers. She involuntarily throws the snake from her and shatters the illusion she has created. The children, who a moment before were filled with admiration, now see their teacher helplessly exposed.

The violence of casting the snake away is symbolic of the violence with which Frame casts away illusion. She has had to learn to balance her extreme sensitivity with her ferocious integrity.

“Keel and Kool” is the story of a New Zealand family taking an outing after the death of the eldest daughter, Eva. “Keel and kool” is the sound made by seagulls crying in the sky. In the story it becomes a lament for the death of Eva, Winnie’s older sister. This may be interpreted as a reference to Frame’s older sister, Myrtle, as autobiographical detail is mixed with fantasy.

Eva’s best friend Joan has come on the picnic. The two girls go off to play, and Joan starts telling Winnie things that Eva had told her. Eva and she had had secrets. As Joan talks about her friendship with Eva, Winnie knows that they shared things she and Eva never shared. This heightens her grief, and she turns on Joan, calling her a liar. In the next moments she tries to come to grips with the permanence of her loss. She climbs a tree and listens to the seagulls cry. Her mother never talks of death. She always says Eva has passed away, “as if it were not death really, only pretend.”

Winnie learns the truth from the seagulls’ cry: Eva is gone, and will never come again. A child rejects the lies of the adult world in favor of the truth. Frame’s preoccupation with truth and falsehood pervades her writings.

“The Terrible Screaming” is a story about a town where one night terrible screaming is heard but everyone lies about it. The screaming begins one night and then continues. All the people in the town are afraid to admit that they heard the screams because they think others will consider them insane. They continue to live as if they hear nothing. One day a distinguished stranger visits the town and hears the screaming. The head of the welcoming committee denies the screams, and the stranger is sent to an asylum. The screaming continues unacknowledged. At the end of the story readers learn that the screaming is called Silence.

This story, in its use of allegory, resembles a fa-



ble. It is also a sketch of what develops into a major theme in Frame's novels: the insane live close to the truth, while the sane live in a world where truth is denied. Those who speak the truth are brutalized, locked up, or marginalized.

### SUMMARY

Janet Frame, in her novels, stories, poems, and autobiographies, transmitted a harrowing vision of death and resurrection and the spiritual power of language. She affirmed the purity and strength of being against the dark antithesis of human mediocrity, confusion, and dishonesty. She transmuted the cruelty and unspeakable suffering of her early life into a worldly wisdom and humor, an affirmation of life itself. Hers was a unique and enduring literary legacy.

Tina Kane

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did the events of Janet Frame's life give support to her "resistance to enclosure"?
- Consider whether Frame gains any literary advantages from working in a nation so remote from the Western world.
- What is most beneficial about marginalization?
- What is an "impostor narrator," and what is the function of the impostor narrator in *The Carpathians*?
- Is Frame contending that the sane have no reliable access to the truth?

*Janet Frame*

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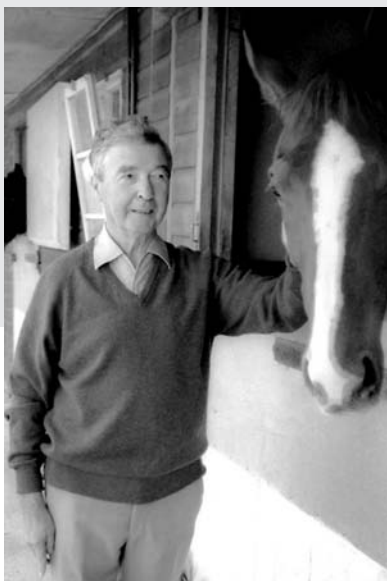
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AP/Wide World Photos

## DICK FRANCIS

**Born:** Lawrenny, near Tenby, Pembrokeshire, Wales  
October 31, 1920

*Francis has helped raise the literary status of the mystery genre through highly informed exploration of the subject he knows best: the diverse world of thoroughbred horse racing.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Richard Stanley Francis was born in Wales on October 31, 1920, the son of George Vincent and Catherine Mary Francis. His father, a powerful influence in Francis's life, had been a professional steeplechase jockey and later a riding instructor to royalty. Francis later dramatized in his novels his love-hate relationship with his demanding father.

Francis quit school at age fifteen in order to work with horses. His ambition was to become a steeplechase jockey like his father and to outperform his father in that dangerous profession. When he later became a writer, he had to work hard to make up for his scholastic deficiencies.

He postponed his career as a jockey when World War II began, joining the Royal Air Force in 1940, hoping to become a pilot. For a long time he had to be content with working ground crew but eventually overcame such obstacles as his limited education and learned to fly fighters, troop-carrying gliders, and bombers. His enthusiasm for this dangerous but exciting branch of military service was characteristic.

Francis married Mary Brenchley at war's end. He rode his first steeplechase at age twenty-five, but not until he had ridden thirty-nine races did he experience his first win. By the end of the racing season in 1947, he had ridden nine winners and was

thinking of turning professional when he had a major riding accident.

Physical pain and injuries are constant topics in Francis's novels. His novels' protagonists display a jockey's indifference to such punishment. Francis writes from experience. During his career he suffered twelve broken collarbones, five broken noses, many broken ribs, three crushed vertebrae, a fractured skull, several broken arms and wrists, and a ruptured spleen. He retired in 1957 after a very bad fall, having decided he was getting too old for such punishment and wishing to quit while still at the top of his profession.

At the peak of his career, Francis was riding in three hundred to four hundred races annually. During the 1953-1954 racing season he earned the title of Champion Jockey for winning seventy-six races. He was noted for his bravery and empathy with his mounts. His love of horses is the common factor in his dual careers of jockey and novelist.

One major disappointment of Francis's life was his failure to win England's most prestigious sweepstakes event, the Grand National. In the 1956 Grand National, while riding Queen Mary's horse, Devon Loch, eleven lengths ahead of the nearest contender, his mount faltered only thirty yards short of the finish line in front of a cheering crowd of 250,000. Devon Loch's mysterious collapse and his resultant injuries helped influence Francis's choice of a second career as a mystery writer and also influenced many of the plots he created.

His fame enabled Francis to make a good sum of money writing his autobiography, *The Sport of Queens: The Autobiography of Dick Francis* (1957, revised 1968, 1974, 1982, 1988). This writing experience, as arduous and painful psychologically as

some of his spills and recuperations, made it possible for him to become a racing correspondent for the London *Sunday Express*. His journalism experience was invaluable to his career as a novelist. Encouraged by his wife, he learned to use simple, concrete English. When he published *Dead Cert* in 1962, he was already a competent professional writer.

One of the most traumatic events of Francis's life was his wife Mary being stricken with polio in 1949 and having to live in an artificial respirator. He dramatized the incident in his award-winning novel *Forfeit* (1968). Fortunately, unlike the woman in the novel, Mary recovered from the disease and lived a normal life, bearing two sons and working as Francis's researcher and collaborator. The couple enjoyed world travel but made their permanent home in the Caribbean (a partial setting for *Forfeit*). Francis's fiction often contains disguised autobiography, a dramatization of personal experiences and emotions that heightens the power of his novels and their reader appeal. The couple also conducted research through experience. The Francis's own private air-charter business provided the background for *Rat Race* (1970), Mary took up painting for *In the Frame* (1976), and both spent time in pharmacological laboratories preparing for *Banker* (1982). *Twice Shy* (1981) draws inspiration from Francis's son Felix, a physics teacher, while *Driving Force* (1992) draws on his son Merrick's experiences in the horse transport business.

Over the years, Francis became sophisticated, self-confident, and cosmopolitan. These changes are reflected in the settings of his novels and the characters with whom his protagonists interact. Francis, who wrote his first novel because "the carpets were wearing thin, the house needed painting, and the boys needed educating," became a millionaire who could be depended upon to produce a best seller every year. In 1983, he was knighted, receiving the Order of the British Empire for his achievements as horseman and author. After Mary Francis's death in 2000, Dick Francis stopped writing, but in 2006, with his son Felix acting as researcher and manager, he returned to his serial character Sid Halley with *Under Orders* (2006), one of his best, with its focus on determination in the face of injury and loss.

*Dead Heat*, published in September, 2007, brings together food poisoning and a terrorist bomb with

a chef and restaurateur as amateur detective. In the year following the book's appearance, Francis had open-heart surgery to insert a new valve, fractured his pelvis in a fall, and suffered severe circulatory problems, resulting in the amputation of his right leg.

## ANALYSIS

Although Dick Francis has only two sustained heroes, Sid Halley and Kit Fielding, he accomplishes the more difficult feat of creating a sustained subject: horse racing (especially steeplechasing), an inherently appealing topic because of its action, color, and danger and the aura of glamour and glory left over from when courageous horses were an essential part of warfare.

Francis's novels are told in the first person with strikingly similar underlying plot formulas: some unknown villain threatening the world of thoroughbred racing through skullduggery. The hero must uncover this villain's identity, while, in turn, the power-hungry villain, often an aggressive social climber, takes increasingly drastic steps to protect his anonymity. Excruciating abuse only strengthens the resolve of Francis's heroes. The villain's identity usually comes as a big surprise, as it does in the classic English mystery novel. The fact that Francis reworks this same basic story in varied ways reveals his conservative nature. His heroes embody his own old-fashioned values of British fair play, hard work, loyalty, honesty, modesty, courtesy, diplomacy, monogamy, and patriotism. He believes that good must ultimately triumph over evil even though it may seem that good is always on the defensive and that evil sprouts a hundred heads for every one lopped off. Francis reassures readers that the world is a safe place where justice triumphs over injustice and truth over falsehood. As a consequence, over the years he has had to subject his amateur detectives to increasing mental and physical torment and make the triumph of justice a very near thing, because his long-term readers are too sure the heroes will come out all right in the end.

Francis is a prolific writer, and for many years he published an average of one novel a year, his research often assisted by his wife. His mysteries, in the classic English tradition, feature an amateur detective who becomes involved in a tight little world in which there is a strictly limited number of suspects. As an amateur detective, the hero is moti-

vated by principle or by sympathy for the victim. Going against a deep grain of English culture, he is also egalitarian, moving easily between classes, admiring competences of different types, suggesting involvement in challenging tasks as a way out of delinquency, despising the selfish, the greedy, the inhumane. While most literary detectives follow the example of their earliest prototypes (Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes) by working with their brains, Francis's amateur detective heroes use their brains and instincts while engaged in continuous movement—running, driving cars at high speed, flying in airplanes, or riding thoroughbred horses over hurdles. Some of his heroes' finest insights occur while they are being tortured, trampled, or burned. Francis thus marries the British cozy mystery and elements of the American hard-boiled detective tradition.

Francis suffered many broken bones and much physical pain during his racing career and enjoyed proving his ability to recuperate. His writing career began only because it became impossible for him to continue riding. His novels are full of regret for the lost days of thrills, cheering crowds, and the joys of victory, but they also capture the dark side of the sport. His professional detective, Sid Halley, lost the use of his arm when his jumper fell and a passing hoof sliced into him, and, in *Under Orders*, while making discreet inquiries into gambling and race fixing, his tenacity in the face of injury results in his Dutch girlfriend being beaten and then shot to derail his investigation.

Despite his reliance on the same underlying plot formula, Francis makes each novel unique by creating a new hero with a new set of problems. He sets each story in a different locale and features varied facets of horse racing, but unlike some conventional series books, Francis's provide the pleasure of familiar central figures and situations in uniquely interesting, individualized circumstances, often reflecting current problems in horse racing or social issues of the moment. There is never a sense of a new backdrop for its own sake; plot, problem, and setting are tightly integrated. Admirers of Dick Francis enjoy learning more and more about the complex world of horse racing, a microcosm including all social classes: the lowest touts and crooks, stable cleaners, horse handlers, jockeys, trainers, and cheap bettors, as well as the

big plungers, wealthy breeders, filthy rich owners, dukes, duchesses, kings, and queens. Francis greatly values competence and his heroes teach readers about their special expertise, whether it be computers, diplomacy, flying, winemaking, amateur photography, banking, accounting, gold mining, or filmmaking, mainly in England, but also in Norway, Canada, the Caribbean, Russia, and the United States. *Wild Horses* (1994), for example, brings to life the collaborative process of adapting a book to the screen that, at the same time, leads the film director to solve a cold case the screenplay builds on, just as his ingenuity as a toymaker enabled the hero of *High Stakes* (1975) to outwit opponents. Francis also admires bravery in the face of debilitating diseases or injuries, explaining how a myoelectric false hand works or a bone marrow transplant takes place. In a sense, Francis reflects changes in British culture, retaining a proper respect for British tradition and the venerable customs of the racing community while embracing a modern meritocracy based on technical competence.

Although his early novels emphasized action, Francis quickly realized that adult readers are more interested in action that proceeds from character. Consequently, over the years he has become so much more proficient at depicting the complexity and variety of human character that his novels have come to be considered mainstream rather than genre fiction. In his best novels, Francis manages his characters as a conductor does an orchestra. In *Decider* (1993), for example, he paints a mural of humanity, including children, young men and women, older men and women, and representatives of all social classes. Multiple and subtle motivations make his characters (heroes and villains) seem true to life. The hero of *Decider*, an example of Francis's mature work, has multiple motives: sympathy for several people embroiled in a bitter family dispute, professional interest in the architectural problems involved with renovating the racetrack, financial interest as a shareholder, sexual attraction, and anger at the unknown villain who threatens him and his children, among various other motives.

At the same time, the other characters in *Decider* are driven by complex motivations of their own. One, desperately in need of money, wants the track converted to building lots. Another tries to protect



the family name from disgrace. A traditionalist wants to preserve the racetrack in its pristine form. A modernist wants the Victorian structure transformed by the latest innovations into stainless steel and plastic.

Francis's plots also have become more complex and more intriguing as he has become more successful. The descriptions of pain have moved from the literal to the psychological: self-doubt, fear, obsession. Over the years he has grown from a penniless, uneducated farm lad living in the muck of stables to a cosmopolitan millionaire at home on two continents and knighted by the queen of England, a writer capable of wry humor and complex psychological analysis. He received the Agatha Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000.

## DEAD CERT

**First published:** 1962

**Type of work:** Novel

*A jockey discovers that a small army of taxi drivers, directed by an unknown mastermind, is using intimidation, mayhem, and murder to fix horse races.*

*Dead Cert*, Francis's first published novel and his first attempt at fiction, is written in the first person from the point of view of a jockey turned amateur detective because wicked individuals intrude into his life and threaten to kill him. The novel is full of action and episodes in which the hero is subjected to incredible torture, from which he seems to recover with superhuman ease. Having established this prototype, Francis has hardly deviated from it in the novels he has published since. He has stated: "I write in the first person because that's how I like to describe things. . . . As they're written in the first person, a lot of each book describes what's in the hero's mind. It would be difficult to portray on screen."

In *Dead Cert*, the hero is a young amateur jockey named Alan York, whose father is a South African multimillionaire. The book opens in the middle of a steeplechase at Maidenhead. York is trailing Admiral, ridden by his best friend Bill Davidson, when he sees the unbeatable horse, the dead certainty of

the title, trip and his friend take a fatal fall. York is the only person who has seen a wire deliberately stretched across the top of a hurdle, clearly to prevent the favorite from winning.

The fact that York, in second place, becomes the winner attracts attention from the police, who also suspect that he is having an affair with Davidson's wife. Francis provides a strong "push-pull" motivation for York to investigate the crime: to find out who was responsible for his friend's death and to clear himself of suspicion. Although York is warned off his investigation and subjected to torture, he persists until he exposes the mastermind's identity and destroys the entire ring of crooked taxi drivers.

York's relationship with beautiful, aristocratic Kate Ellery-Penn helps him discover the mastermind's identity. *Dead Cert* also established the convention of the love affair featured in most of Francis's novels. His early descriptions of such relationships were inhibited and chaste. Despite his brilliant description of physical sensations, such as the pain of injured jockeys, Francis does not titillate readers with descriptions of torrid passions; however, his handling of sexual relationships has become more open in later works, as evidenced by the hero's sensual yearning for his lover in *Under Orders*.

Critics have praised the fine writing in the long sequence of closing chapters in which the hero rides a thoroughbred horse across the English countryside, jumping fences and hedges and darting through motor traffic in an effort to elude the murderous taxi drivers who are receiving radio orders from the criminal mastermind.

## FORFEIT

**First published:** 1968

**Type of work:** Novel

*The world of horse racing journalism is being corrupted by crooked gamblers who intimidate owners, trainers, and jockeys and who sometimes kill or cripple favored horses.*

*Forfeit*, published six years after *Dead Cert*, represents a leap forward in Francis's craft, with more emphasis on characterization and less on action

for action's sake. Largely because of its greater realism and stronger characterization, *Forfeit* won the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award, bringing his work to the attention of a wider American audience.

The plot is based on the system of wagering in England before the introduction of pari-mutuels. Bookies would set the odds on each horse based on the number of bets they were taking in. If a horse were scratched before the race, the bets would be forfeited to the bookie, hence the title.

In *Forfeit*, a gambler who owns a string of betting parlors exploits this archaic system by making sure that heavy favorites fail to appear or at least fail to win. This unknown kingpin enhances his profits by bribing turf journalists to praise certain horses so enthusiastically that bettors heavily back them, only to later forfeit their wagers. Through bribery or intimidation of jockeys, trainers, and owners, the gambling czar makes sure that certain horses do not win.

Hero James Tyrone, a former jockey who is now a journalist, like Francis himself, becomes suspicious when an alcoholic colleague warns him against selling his integrity as a writer and dies shortly thereafter under mysterious circumstances.

Tyrone's wife Elizabeth is incapacitated by polio and can only breathe by means of a mechanical respirator. As a result of her frailty, she cannot have normal marital relations. Tyrone remains devoted to her in spite of this deprivation and the demands that her condition impose. Since he cannot afford full-time care, he must act as her nurse and write his column at the same time.

His sexual impulses involve him with an attractive biracial woman, Gail, but he feels guilty about his infidelity. This triangle gives *Forfeit* a more mature, more dramatic impact than Francis's previous books.

The villain and his crew of thugs try all their tactics on Tyrone, but as a typical Francis hero, this courageous, idealistic jockey turned reporter refuses to quit. Eventually he gives up his illicit liaison, exposes the race-fixing racket in print, and wins against the sadistic mastermind.

In *Forfeit*, Francis perfected the kind of plot line he was to follow with variations in later novels. An honest man connected in some way with the world of horse racing turns amateur detective in order to expose an unknown mastermind who is spreading

corruption. The detective-hero is motivated by the desire to see good triumph over evil, not by financial gain.

## DECIDER

**First published:** 1993

**Type of work:** Novel

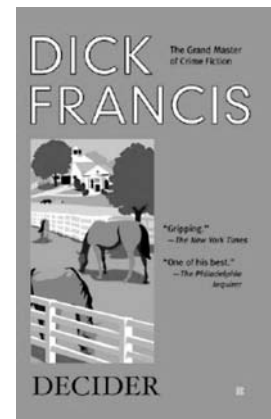
*An architect becomes entangled with a family of temperamental, sometimes violent aristocrats fighting over whether to renovate, rebuild, or demolish their historic racetrack.*

*Decider* shows Francis at the peak of his form. There is plenty of action and suspense, but his complexity of characterization explains why critics regard him as a serious writer. Like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Elmore Leonard, and John le Carré, Francis has transcended his genre by treating it with the same scrupulous care customarily given to mainstream fiction. Francis has been honored by fellow detective-fiction writers because he has helped elevate their profession for critics and the public.

The amateur-detective, first-person narrator of *Decider* is Lee Morris, an architect who happens to own a small interest in the historic old Stratton Park racecourse. The major shareholders are the self-willed, eccentric, outspoken, snobbish members of an aristocratic family who have conflicting ideas about what should be done with the facility.

Francis's heroes invariably face family problems or personal handicaps that affect their behavior. In *Decider*, the hero endures a loveless marriage, cares for five rambunctious children, and copes with the problems caused by the Stratton family. His concern for his children's safety, his Achilles' heel, almost gets him killed.

Interestingly, Francis's worldview has widened over the years, with his increasing maturity, fame,



and prosperity and with the world itself changing since 1962. Later novels such as *Decider* are full of Americanisms, such as “wimpish,” “rough trade,” “look-see,” “max,” “the slammer,” “Peter Pan syndrome,” “sob stuff,” and “trashed.” His heroes and heroines now dine in restaurants that serve haute cuisine and vintage champagne. He writes about the upper class with the assurance of one accustomed to moving in such circles.

The hero of *Decider* is not a member of the working class like the jockey-detective in *Dead Cert* or the overworked, financially harassed journalist-detective in *Forfeit*; Lee Morris owns real estate and shares of a racetrack. *Decider* sounds modern and sophisticated, whereas *Dead Cert* reads like an old-fashioned English detective novel, with a chaste love relationship leading toward marriage (“Kate’s kisses were sweet and virginal”), and quaint British expressions such as “Rum looking cove,” possibly incomprehensible to speakers of non-British varieties of the language. Alan York of *Dead Cert* moves in a world of jockeys, taxi drivers, bartenders, and other working-class types; Lee Morris of *Decider* moves with ease in the upper reaches of bourgeois society.

Stratton, determined to destroy the stately racetrack so that it may be sold to tract housing developers, tries sabotage, intimidation, murder, kidnapping, and torture to get his way, but Morris, a typical Francis hero, becomes tenacious under pressure. Although Stratton’s henchman plants dynamite and causes extensive wreckage, Morris ultimately exposes the mastermind and saves the racetrack, an ornate Victorian structure that might be said to symbolize Francis’s love for the world of horse racing.

## COME TO GRIEF

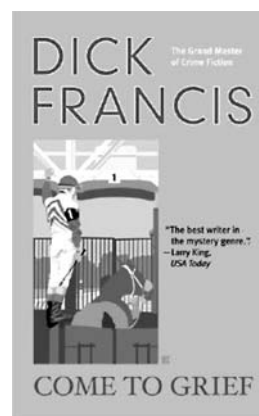
**First published:** 1995

**Type of work:** Novel

*No one believes Sid Halley when he maintains that his close friend, a fellow jockey much beloved in the racing world, has committed a series of atrocious crimes.*

The title *Come to Grief* sums up what happens throughout the book, as disease, injury, and negative publicity bring humans and animals to grief. The dominant grief is perpetrated by a serial mutilator, who chops off the forefeet of valuable thoroughbred horses, much beloved of owners but uninsured, and that of the pony of an impressionable child. The novel brings back champion jockey turned private investigator Sid Halley, who appeared in *Odds Against* (1965) and *Whip Hand* (1979), and who sees in these injuries a mirror image of his own physical loss of a forearm, hacked off by a sadistic fiend. The nightmare he faces—the loss of his good hand—proves a near reality when his longtime friend, Ellis Quint, in the grip of his criminal obsession, sadistically assaults Halley with the weapon he had used on defenseless horses.

Quint has won British hearts with his fearless rides as a jockey and with the heartwarming stories he creates as a television host (including a particularly moving piece on a child with leukemia, whose pony is one of the victims), yet his deeds bring his disbelieving family to grief. Quint’s father mutilates a horse to provide his son an alibi and then tries to kill Halley; his mother commits suicide. The gentlemanly, kindly facade Quint projects hides a lust for power and for blood, but while Halley struggles to expose Quint’s dark side, he must deal with character assassination by a local newspaper, rejection by the racing community, and public opinion that turns even those he seeks to help against him. Those who fall under Quint’s in-



fluence come to grief as well, with Owen Yorkshire giving vent to a murderous temper, and Lord Tilepit discovering that he has colluded with a murderer.

Winner of the Silver Dagger Award from Britain's Crime Writers' Association, *Come to Grief* provides a satisfying study of the slogging footwork of detection, the interviewing of witnesses and checking of alibis, but it is also a powerful psychological study of friendship, what leads to it, and the difficulty of walking away from it. Halley struggles with his perceptions; his instincts tell him that his friend, Quint, shows up at the crime scene or is connected to the crime scene too many times for it to be coincidence, and yet Quint is a former jockey like himself, someone Halley thinks he understands as deeply as he understands himself. When the evidence builds until it is irrefutable in his mind and he must turn over his discoveries to the police, Halley grieves for the loss of his friend. At the end, he understands the dark forces that drive Quint and sees behind the madness and corruption some glimmers of the man he once held in such high esteem: Quint could have left Halley

armless, and he pulled back from the deed; Quint could have let his father kill Halley, but he killed his father instead. Thus, Halley grieves for what has been lost—the friendship, the bright potential, and the lingering comradeship—despite the grave perils threatened.

## SUMMARY

Dick Francis has, amazingly, written more than forty novels over a period of more than forty-five years, all on the subject of horse racing in all its diversity. His heroes think on their feet while engaged in strenuous action. Over the years, his heroes, like their creator, have become more affluent, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan; they also have become more fully developed and more credibly motivated. Francis has received many honors for helping bring serious critical and scholarly attention to the genre of popular detective fiction. He merges the American and the British mystery-writing tradition, giving readers the best of both worlds.

*Bill Delaney; updated by Gina Macdonald*

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*Bonecrack*, 1971  
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*Risk*, 1977  
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*Reflex*, 1980

## Dick Francis

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*Driving Force*, 1992  
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Great Racing Stories*)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Competence is a running theme in the novels of Dick Francis. Choose a character you admire from your favorite Francis novel and explain what evidence it provides of competence. How can one recognize competence? What psychological benefits does competence produce?
- Francis has written credibly about children. What characterizes young Rachel in *Come to Grief*? Is she credible? Why, or why not?
- Francis's heroes follow traditional methods of detection. Choose three methods in any novel and explain how they further the detective's investigation.
- Choose five specialized racing terms that occur in a Francis novel and explain what they mean from context.
- Class distinctions are always interesting in Francis, with some self-made men becoming more snobbish than the aristocrats. Find an example in any of the books mentioned in this essay and illustrate that snobishness.
- How do Francis's characters deal with pain? Provide examples.
- Francis's detectives have a tenuous relationship with newspaper reporters, sometimes seeking their help, other times suffering their criticism. Explain with examples.
- In every Francis novel, readers glean lessons about horses. What are some specific facts you learned about horses from reading his books?



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## ANNE FRANK

**Born:** Frankfurt am Main, Germany  
June 12, 1929

**Died:** Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, near Hanover, Germany  
March, 1945

*Frank's diary has made the horrors of the Holocaust real for millions of readers. From her account of more than two years hiding from the Nazis, many have gotten to know and love an ordinary girl who died simply because she was Jewish.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anne Frank was born on June 12, 1929, in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Her parents were Otto and Edith Frank, and she had an older sister, Margot. When Anne was small, the family lived in two different houses, both in neighborhoods populated by Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic families. The Franks were Reform Jews who mixed with Christians for social and business purposes. Otto Frank read widely and kept many books in the house, and from a young age, his children were encouraged to love books.

In 1933, the year Anne turned four, Adolf Hitler came to power. He quickly began enacting laws to limit Jews' freedom and take their businesses. Alarmed by the events in their country, the Frank family decided to immigrate to the Netherlands. Otto Frank received an offer to start a new business in Amsterdam selling pectin, which is used in making jam. He later added a second business venture selling spices.

Margot, Anne, and their mother stayed with Anne's grandmother in Aachen for several months while Otto made arrangements for their arrival. The family eventually settled in a newly constructed neighborhood in Amsterdam and were joined by other Jewish families who had fled Germany. Margot and Anne attended a Montessori school. They were good students, although Anne sometimes got into trouble for talking in class.

The German army invaded the Netherlands in 1940. Almost immediately, policies discriminating against Jews were enacted. Their papers were marked so they could be easily identifiable as Jews.

Jews had to attach stars visibly to their clothing and were banned from using public transportation or even bicycles. Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend schools with Christian children. Margot and Anne moved to a school for Jewish children only. Anticipating that, as in Germany, Jews in the Netherlands would have their businesses taken from them, Otto Frank transferred his businesses to non-Jewish associates.

As evidenced by her diary, Frank was aware of discrimination against the Jews even before her family went into hiding. Frank's parents, however, were careful to ensure that her life was as normal as possible. She and her friends socialized at one another's homes. Early entries in her diary highlight Frank's growing interest in the boys who walked her to school.

Otto Frank arranged for the family to go into hiding in an annex to the building where his business was housed. Margot Frank was in the first group of Jews to receive a notice that she was being deported from the Netherlands. The family moved into the annex on July 6, 1942, the day after the notice arrived. Sympathetic workers at the company made sure that they had food and other needed items while in hiding. Those helpers who provided for their needs and protected them were Victor Kugler, Johannes Kleiman, Miep Gies, and Bep Voskuijl.

Frank's diary primarily records the events of the years her family spent in hiding. The Frank family was joined in their small quarters by the van Pels family—Hermann, Auguste, and their fifteen-year-old son Peter. Fritz Pfeffer joined the two families in the fall.

The diary records the tedium of staying in one small space for more than two years. It also records the inevitable personality conflicts and disagreements of eight people living together in a small space under extremely stressful conditions.

Frank read widely while in hiding, and her reading must have influenced her writing style in the journal. Her reading included novels for adolescents and adults, works of history, and mythology. The residents of the annex looked forward to their helpers bringing them library books every week.

Perhaps most significantly for readers, Frank wrote a great deal during her years in the annex. Besides her diary entries, she also wrote short stories and poems. She decided that when she grew up she wanted to be a journalist and writer. She also decided that, after the war, she wanted to publish her diary so that others would know what she and her family went through. These literary ambitions led her to make additions to the diary with publication in mind. The result is no doubt a more polished and complete version of the story than readers would expect from the diary of an adolescent girl.

The last entry of Frank's diary is dated August 1, 1944. In the mid-morning of August 4, an officer and several members of the security police arrived at the building. They arrested the eight people hiding there. They also arrested Victor Kugler and Johannes Kleiman, who had helped protect and provide for them.

Anne and the seven other Jews from the annex were imprisoned in Amsterdam and then sent to a transit camp called Westerbork. From there, they were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. They were members of the last group deported from the Netherlands on September 3, 1944.

Margot and Anne were transferred to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany in late October, 1944. Both died of typhus, along with thousands of other prisoners at the concentration camp. Margot died first, and Anne died a few days later. The exact date of her death is not known, but based on accounts of witnesses at Bergen-Belsen, it most likely occurred in early March, 1944. Margot and Anne's bodies were placed in mass graves at the concentration camp. The camp was liberated on April 12, 1945, only weeks after Anne's death.

Although she was only fifteen when she died, be-

cause of her diary Anne Frank is the most well-known Jew to die at the hands of the Nazis. Of the eight people who lived in the annex, only Otto Frank survived the war. After the war, Miep Gies, one of the people who helped the family survive in hiding, gave him the diary. Otto Frank spent much of the rest of his life making sure that it was published and read by as many people as possible.

## ANALYSIS

Anne Frank is the most famous victim of Nazi oppression. Her diary has allowed millions of readers to feel they know a teenage girl who shared her thoughts and experiences in an honest way—a girl who died in a concentration camp simply because she was Jewish.

While the absolute horror of the Holocaust and the vast numbers of Jews murdered are beyond comprehension, readers know that once there was a girl named Anne Frank who hid with her family and four other people for more than two years. Their goal was to escape being murdered because they were Jews.

Frank and the others lived in a small space and could not go outside or even open the curtains for much of the time. They feared discovery and bombing and had little to eat as the war progressed. Readers know about the stress and deprivation of those eight people in hiding. Readers, however, also know that Frank thought about the everyday things that teenagers normally think about—friends, boys, hair and clothes, and parents who do not understand what being a teenager is like. Readers may never be able to fully comprehend the Holocaust, but Anne Frank is real to millions.

Frank began writing her diary as a forum for her own thoughts and feelings after receiving it as a gift for her thirteenth birthday. She named the diary "Kitty" and wrote to it as a best friend. Readers learn everything a girl would tell her best friend. The diary's heartfelt and conversational tone makes readers feel like valued confidants.

A month after she started writing in the diary, her family went into hiding from the Nazis in a secret annex to a business in Amsterdam. As she extensively recorded the details of their lives in the annex and wrote short stories and poems, Frank developed an interest in writing professionally. After hearing Queen Wilhelmina say on the radio

that she would like to see reports published about what happened during the Nazi occupation, Frank decided she wanted to publish her diary after World War II.

She revised sections written earlier to prepare the diary for publication once the war ended. As a result, the published version of the diary combines the candid observations and concerns typical of an adolescent with a literary style and polish that would not appear in writing solely for a teenager's own use. While readers get a sense that an ordinary girl wrote the diary, Frank's writing ability clearly sets her apart from the average teenager. Her talents for rendering realistic details and articulating her feelings have allowed millions of readers to share her experiences.

Frank wrote her last diary entry several days before the eight people hiding in the annex were captured. Miep Gies, one of the people who had provided the Franks with food and other necessities while they were in hiding, found the diary and protected it until the war ended. She gave it to Otto Frank after he returned from being imprisoned in a concentration camp.

Otto Frank followed his daughter's wishes and had the diary published. He devoted his time to promoting the diary. The original edition, published in 1947, omitted some of the passages that deal explicitly with sexuality and that portray residents of the annex in a particularly bad light. Edits were made to keep the diary a readable length, and the passages were edited for grammar and spelling. For the most part, however, what was published was exactly what Frank had written. Every effort was made to maintain the diary's accuracy as a historical document.

In 1991, following the discovery of several pages of the diary that had not previously been published, a definitive edition was released. It includes the newly found passages and the previously omitted diary entries that address sexuality and portray the annex residents in a negative way.

Since its original publication, the diary has been translated into more than fifty languages and has sold more than twenty million copies. It has been adapted for stage plays and films, and a number of books by Frank's friends and admirers have supplemented its contents. A collection of the short stories Frank wrote while in hiding, *Verhaaltjes en gebeurtenissen uit het Achterhuis* (1982; *Anne Frank's*

*Tales from the Secret Annex*, 1983), appeared in 1982.

The annex in Amsterdam is open to visitors. Since the diary was written by a child, it has proved an excellent introduction to the Holocaust for school children around the world.

## THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL

**First published:** *Het Achterhuis*, 1947; definitive edition, 1991 (English translation 1952; definitive edition, 1995)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*A teenage girl and seven other Jews hide from the Nazis for more than two years in a secret annex of a building in Amsterdam.*

Anne Frank receives her diary as a gift for her thirteenth birthday on June 12, 1942. It is her favorite present. She names the diary "Kitty" and writes to it as a best friend. The first entries are mainly about her friends and the boys who show interest in her. Although Anne writes that she is glad to have Kitty, since she does not have a good friend, it is clear that she is popular, well liked, and socially inclined.

Later that month, the Nazis, who are occupying the Netherlands, announce a policy to deport Jews to concentration camps. Anne learns of her family's plan to go into hiding shortly before it is put into action. They hide in a secret annex, where Anne shares a room with her sister, Margot.

A few days later a family, who in the diary are called the van Daans, move into the annex with the Franks. Their son Peter is a few years older than Anne. At first she does not like him, describing him as lazy and shy. The pressures of families sharing small quarters are quickly evident. Arguments erupt, especially between Mrs. Frank and Mrs. van Daan. Many of the arguments arise from Mrs. Frank's belief that the van Daans are taking more than their share of commonly held items or taking the best food for themselves.

Like the others, Anne has a hard time living in the annex. She cannot go outside, and the families must keep the curtains closed and not make noise during the day so that workers at the surrounding

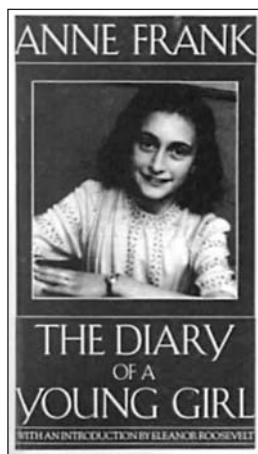
businesses will not suspect that they are there. They are even limited to when they can flush the toilet or run water.

The situation becomes more difficult after a few months, when a man Anne calls Albert Dussel in her diary moves in with the families. He shares a room with Anne, and Margot sleeps in their parents' room. Dussel is inconsiderate about sharing the room and is critical of Anne.

Anne misses her friends, and life in the annex is monotonous. The families pass their time reading and studying. Anne, Margot, and Peter continue their schoolwork, so they will be able to attend school again when the war ends. Both they and the adults study several languages, and the teenagers take a correspondence course in shorthand.

Over time, there are food shortages, making it harder to obtain the same variety and quantity of food as before. As the war progresses, the residents of the annex are kept awake by air raids. Several times, break-ins at the business downstairs cause them to be especially fearful that they will be found and captured. Besides the possibility that the burglars will find them and turn them in for a bounty, they also fear that the police will discover them when they investigate the crimes.

Anne experiences the normal concerns of teenagers while her family endures this difficult situation. She is curious about her body and writes several diary entries about getting her period, how male and female bodies differ, and her attitudes about sexuality. After the families have been together for some time, she and Peter become attracted to one another. They discuss intimate details about themselves. Anne knows little about male anatomy or sexual intercourse, but she and Peter share what they know about these topics.



As her attraction to Peter develops, Anne learns to see the conflicts between the two families from both sides. She initially supports her mother in disagreements with Mrs. van Daan and assesses this woman in harsh terms, but she later learns to recognize Mrs. van Daan's good points.

Anne's ongoing conflicts with her mother figure prominently in her diary entries. Anne sometimes goes as far as to say that she and her mother do not love each other. In the context of a diary, however, these comments seem to be the typical venting of a teenager with little outlet for her feelings. Anne admires her father, who supports her when conflicts arise with other residents of the annex.

Anne and her sister Margot enjoy each other's company, although Anne is sometimes jealous of her sister and feels insecure in comparison with her. She worries that others think Margot is prettier and smarter. She thinks her mother favors Margot.

In Anne's candid presentation of herself in her diary, she is clearly imperfect. She sometimes says nasty things about other residents of the annex and plays jokes on them. For example, she once posts a notice on the bathroom door noting Mr. Dussel's regular timetable for using that room.

Ultimately, it is those details about Anne's struggles and her very human reactions to her difficult situation that make the diary so compelling. She is a real teenager with real emotions who is forced to share a small space with seven other people over a very stressful two-year period.

## SUMMARY

Anne Frank's diary has made her the best-known Jewish victim of the Nazis. The diary has given a human voice to the unfathomable horrors of the Holocaust. Her story of hiding in a secret annex for more than two years vividly describes a life that most readers could not imagine on their own. Above all, Frank comes through as a real and authentic girl, who in spite of her difficult situation writes about the concerns typical of any teenager. Knowing that she later died in a concentration camp, readers have a chance to mourn one of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis.

*Joan Hope*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does the diary format help readers feel like the writer is a good friend?
- What details does Anne Frank share about herself that make her seem like an ordinary teenager?
- What passages in the diary are particularly effective in making readers aware of the effects of prejudice?
- How do the residents of the annex cope with the stress of life in hiding and of sharing tight living quarters with so many other people?
- How does Frank place her family's problems in the larger context of Adolf Hitler's effort to eliminate the Jewish people?
- Frank revised passages of her diary with publication in mind. What evidence is found in the text that she was thinking about an outside audience?



## MILES FRANKLIN

**Born:** Talbingo station, New South Wales, Australia  
October 14, 1879

**Died:** Carlton, New South Wales, Australia  
September 19, 1954

*Franklin's novels capture not only the history of Australia but also its spirit. In her portraits of family life, she portrays independent women, a rarity at the time, and families ruled by paternalistic men bent on success, all of which are presented within a rich context of politics, economic change, and social theory, mostly from a liberal viewpoint.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin was born on October 14, 1879, in Talbingo station in New South Wales, Australia, a mountainous region near Canberra, the nation's capital. She spent her first ten years on the family cattle station with her six younger brothers and sisters. Her education was provided by a Scottish tutor, a Mr. Auchinvole, who taught her about William Shakespeare, the Bible, Charles Dickens, and Aesop's fables. After the family's cattle business was dissolved, the Franklins went to live on a dairy farm near Bangalore, where Franklin's mother named the small property with scant resources Stillwater.

Franklin was jealous of her younger, prettier sister, who remained with her grandmother at Brindabella, and she was often at odds with her mother. She attended the nearby Thornford School, where she excelled in music. In 1896, she got a position at Oakdale with her uncle, George Franklin, who hired her to teach his eldest children. However, she soon returned home to write, with the guidance of Thomas J. Hebblewhite, editor of the *Goulburn Post*.

She turned to fiction and in just ten weeks wrote *My Brilliant Career* (1901), her first novel and best-known book, when she was only sixteen. After three Australian publishers rejected the book, she asked poet and short-story writer Henry Lawson to

take the novel to England and find a publisher for her. Lawson read the novel and wrote a preface for it. In 1901, the book was published abroad, under the pseudonym Miles Franklin, by Blackwoods, the same Edinburgh-based company that published Lawson's work. Because so many of the characters and events in the novel corresponded closely to those in Franklin's life, many readers, including her own family, particularly the relatives at Oakdale, and her former neighbors, regarded the novel as fact, not fiction, and were hurt by their treatment in the book. Despite those reservations, the novel brought Franklin to the attention of Australia's literati, but she withdrew the book from publication after it went through four editions, and it was out of print from 1904 until 1966.

Upset by criticism at home, she moved to Sydney in 1904, where she wrote for the *Bulletin* under the pen name Mary Anne while employed as a domestic servant. She also worked on *My Career Goes Bung*, a reworking of *My Brilliant Career*, but the novel was not published until 1946 because of its daring language and tone. While she was in Sydney, she met Rose Scott, a suffragette who deepened her feminist views. After her second novel was rejected by publishers, she left Australia for the United States, stopping at Auckland, New Zealand, and then at San Francisco, where she performed relief work in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake and fire.

Moving on to Chicago, she became involved with the Chicago Renaissance writers and met Al-

ice Henry, another Australian feminist and a labor activist. Franklin worked with Henry at the Women's Trade Union League, becoming the manager of the league's national office in Chicago and the editor of the league's magazine, *Life and Labor*. In 1909, she published *Some Everyday Folk and Dawn*, a novel featuring a suffragette named Dawn, who seems to be an older version of Sybylla, the heroine of *My Brilliant Career*.

At the start of World War I, Franklin went to London, where she worked first in slum nurseries and then for the Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in the Balkans from 1917 through 1918. After the war she returned to London, where she found employment at the National Housing Council in Bloomsbury. Although she returned twice to Australia for short trips in 1924 and 1930, she did not visit the bush country she described in her novels. While living in London she focused on her Brent of Bin Bin series, six novels about Australian pioneer families from the 1850's to the 1930's, which were published under the pen name Brent of Bin Bin. *Up the Country*, the first book in the series, appeared in 1928, and the final novel, *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang*, was published in 1956.

After returning to Australia in 1933, she published *All That Swagger* (1936) under her own name. Literary critics consider this multigenerational novel about Irish pioneers in Australia to be her best-written book. *All That Swagger* won the Sydney *Bulletin's* S. H. Prior Prize. Despite the novel's success, the plays and essays she wrote during the rest of her life were not well received. She died in 1954 of several coronary problems. In her will, she provided the funds for the Miles Franklin Award, an annual literary prize for the best Australian-published novel or play portraying Australian life. The first winner was Patrick White for his novel *Voss* (1957).

## ANALYSIS

Although Miles Franklin devoted her years in London, and particularly her Chicago years, to feminist causes, such as the right to vote and improved working conditions for women, those concerns are not the focus of her novels. Instead, her books are about the Australian experience, especially during the pioneer stage of the country's development. Since that experience began for many pioneers in Ireland, she provides the context in

which emigration from Ireland took place. Her books are saturated with details of the landscape, machinery, wildlife, and the rituals of domestic and agricultural chores. She is also adept at drawing class distinctions, defining the "squatocracy" or discussing the niceties of elegant living. Sprinkled throughout her novels are "asides," insightful comments about persons and mores. For example, she elaborates on the phrase, "Masculinity leant heavily on beards," ironically suggesting the importance of beards to macho Australians. At times, she offers ironic assessments of events, such as this description of homecoming parades after World War I:

Brutalized and exhausted peoples, destitute of leaders of vision or followers of faith, groped in a limbo of shattered ideals and discredited philosophies. Nevertheless the welcome home celebrations were flattering to the survivors, and a relief to the spiritual lesions of the non-combatants who organized them.

Franklin had few illusions about governments.

The verisimilitude in Franklin's descriptions is matched by her accurate transcription of the dialects her characters use. The Irish speech of Danny, the protagonist in *All That Swagger*, is especially interesting and entertaining; his pronunciation of "moind" for "mind" works well for comic effect. She also captures the nuances of formal English. Even the letters she includes in her novels reflect their writers' background, class, and education. Since *My Brilliant Career* is written in the first person by Sybylla, the epistolary additions are also effective because they provide a means of knowing what other characters think and provide a balance against the egocentric Sybylla. On the other hand, *All That Swagger*, an epic, uses the omniscient point of view, giving readers the thoughts and opinions of many characters.

Franklin's novels are also much concerned with the business of marriage, of "making good marriages," and with marriage itself. Franklin never married, even though she had many suitors, and her views about marriage are reflected in her novels. Sybylla sees marriage as slavery, and that view is borne out by the marriages in Franklin's novels. Chauvinistic males, even if displaying good character traits, unthinkingly commit insensitive acts.

Danny does not get a priest for his dying wife and neglects Della when he portions out his estate. Harold, although willing to support Sybylla's writing, does so in a manner reminiscent of Torvald condescendingly indulging Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). (In an interesting switch from a typical romance, it is Harold, not Sybylla, who suffers when his love is unrequited.) The good men "just don't get it," or they are weak dreamers, like Harry in *All That Swagger*, or they are impractical spendthrifts, like Harry's brother Robert, intent on preserving their image. The women are not much better. Aside from Sybylla, and from Della and Clare in *All That Swagger*, the women seem content to accept their lot in life, fulfilling their stereotyped roles. When Sybylla defies her mother, she soon finds that even her female supporters turn against her and urge her to behave the way a young girl should. A quotation from *All That Swagger* aptly and sardonically describes Franklin's opinion of marriage: "The mating instinct brews a delirious spring, then follows a long summer and autumn, frequently of incompatibility."

Franklin's characters in *All That Swagger* tend to be one-dimensional: Harry, the dreamer; Robert, the spendthrift; Della, the independent woman. Since the cast of characters in that novel is so large, perhaps flat characters are inevitable. It is Franklin's complex characters that attract the reader. Danny is certainly the most interesting character in the novel because he is so complex. A one-legged dreamer; a friend to the Aborigines; the savior of Wong Foo; an intrepid horseman; a comic figure with his ridiculous hat, his brogue, and his misfit entourage; an insensitive yet loving husband—he is the legend he becomes to his neighbors. Sybylla is bright, independent, talented, yet snobbish and selfish at the same time. She, like Danny, has as many foibles as virtues.

Franklin's countless characters, some of them introduced to provide an amusing anecdote, such as the pub owner Hennesy and the widow he courts in *All That Swagger*, and others simply disappearing from sight, are not conducive to well-made plots. *My Brilliant Career* is primarily a coming-of-age book, ending where the author was at the time it was written. Franklin's novels tend to simply progress chronologically, with some entertaining digressions, but readers do not turn to her for plots. They read her for her characters, her skillful

rendering of Australia and Australians, and for the delight she takes in providing readers with a view of an evolving, fascinating country.

## MY BRILLIANT CAREER

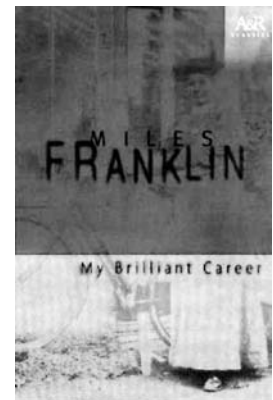
**First published:** 1901

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel, which draws heavily on Franklin's own life, focuses on a young Australian girl's coming-of-age and progress from rags to comparative riches. In the course of the novel, Sybylla rejects what appears to be her ideal man in favor of independence and a literary career.*

*My Brilliant Career* is the first-person account of a talented young woman's coming-of-age, as well as a kind of "portrait of the artist as a young woman." It was also, for many Australians, a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, with characters and events that closely parallel Franklin's own life. Sybylla, the protagonist, recounts her father's economic, social, and mental decline, when the family had to move to 'Possum Gully, and describes her mother's decline as the result of her marriage. After seeing what her mother endures, Sybylla vows never to marry, considering marriage "slavery" and a "terrible let down and unfair to women."

Her resolve is tested when she leaves the family's sorry homestead to live with her wealthy grandmother. There she meets Harold Beecham, a rich, young man who only gains her affections when he loses his money and must, she thinks, depend on her. Sybylla has her own misfortune. Her mother forces her to return home to help the family financially by serving as governess to the M'Swat children, whose parents are better off financially but who lack any trace of refinement. When she falls ill because of her situation, Sybylla returns to her home. Harold, who has regained his position and wealth, asks her to marry him. She rejects



him, thus turning what might have been a fairy-tale romance into something else—the story of a woman who will sacrifice marriage for career and independence.

Although the novel contains Sybylla's praise of the love between a man and a woman, she undercuts that description by describing a lover as "someone who is a part of our life as we are part of theirs, someone in whose life we feel assured our death would leave a gap for a day or two." "A day or two" may be understatement, or it may be Franklin's way of debunking society's notions about undying romantic love.

Except for Harold, the men in *My Brilliant Career* are weak, childish, petulant, and insensitive. When Harold professes his determination to aid Sybylla in her pursuit of a writing career, he would seem to be her perfect "helpmeet" (helpmate). Yet Sybylla ultimately spurns him. When he needs her, she loves him, but when he is independent and able to help her achieve her goals, she rejects him. What Sybylla wants is control over her life and other people. When she senses that Harold has "the calm air of ownership" as he approaches her, she strikes him with a whip, leaving him with a scar. She regrets the action, but her description of their relationship—"the amused tolerance held by a great Newfoundland for the pranks of a kitten"—reflects her resentment at being patronized by a man.

For the most part, the women in the novel accept their lot in life, even though it destroys them; they are unsympathetic to Sybylla, whom they do not understand. Even Sybylla thinks herself "queer" for harboring her feminist beliefs. What makes her ideas so out of step is the time they are expressed—a time when feminist ideas were not fashionable—and the place—an Australian bush traditionally macho and paternalistic.

## ALL THAT SWAGGER

**First published:** 1936

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel chronicles four generations of a pioneering Australian family.*

Franklin wrote *All That Swagger* partly to appease her family, some of whom thought they were negatively depicted in *My Brilliant Career*. The novel begins in Ireland, where Franklin's paternal grandfather, Joseph Franklin, was born. Daniel (Danny) Brian Robert M. Delacy, the protagonist of the first half of the novel, has much in common with Joseph Franklin. Danny has "swagger," a certain amount of bravura, and he is a true pioneer pursuing new frontiers. He elopes with Johanna Cooley, whose Catholic parents do not approve of Protestant Danny, and takes her to Australia, where he acquires some property and gives it its Aboriginal name, Bewuck. Not content there, he pushes on to even lonelier mountain territory in Berrabinga, where his wife, without any of the trappings she enjoyed in Ireland, is miserable. When the house at Berrabinga burns and their eldest child is killed in the fire, Johanna has to cope in Danny's absence, and the event sours her permanently on the Australian bush and her husband, whom she banishes to the guest room.

Although he put his ambitions ahead of his wife, fails to get a priest to administer the last rites to Johanna, and totally ignores his daughter, Della, when he takes his sons into partnership, Danny is, for the most part, sympathetically portrayed. Rather than battle the Aborigines for the land, he negotiates with them, avoiding conflict. His humanity also is displayed through his rescue and "adoptions" of Doogoolook, an Aborigine boy, and Maeve, who is half white and half Aborigine; his rescue of Wong Foo from the snow; as well as his salvaging the injured horse Nullad-Mundoe, who becomes the sire of a long line of racehorses.

Danny, who lost a leg in an accident, is undaunted by his handicap and continues to ride, even fording raging rivers. Enjoying the respect of all of his neighbors for his honesty and generosity, Danny possesses "swagger" in the best sense of the word. For Franklin, Danny is one of the "givers"



who “provide lashings and leavings of raw material” for the “shrewder investors—the takers.”

With Danny’s death, there is decline, as his children lack his pioneering spirit. Robert’s lavish entertaining bankrupts Berrabinga; William has no pioneering spirit; and Harry, who has some of Danny’s spirit, is physically weak. Danny’s spirit persists, however, in Clare Delacy, Robert’s daughter, who marries her cousin, Harry’s son Darcy. It is their son, Brian, who will fulfill the Delacy pioneering destiny. The characters generally agree that “Old Danny will never be dead as long as he [Brian] is alive.”

Brian’s frontier is not earthly; his frontier is the sky. After studying in Great Britain, he leaves the university to work in an airplane factory and then joins the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a pilot, but illness leads to his dismissal from the RAF. Fortunately, he finds a benefactress, Lola Bradley, a wealthy aviator, and the two, who get married, get a contract to fly the Multiple-Vertical-Gyro to Australia. The result of their successful flight is that “Here was posterity fulfilling Danny.”

## SUMMARY

Miles Franklin’s literary reputation rests upon *My Brilliant Career*, hardly her best novel, but the one that attracted readers who were impressed by the portrait of pioneering Australians and the depiction of a spunky young narrator, whose “yarn” about her coming-of-age was a significant break with conventional nineteenth century novels about courtship and marriage. The novel resurfaced in 1966, and when it was adapted, somewhat loosely, as a film released in 1979, during the Women’s Movement, it gained even more popularity.

She revisited the material covered in *My Brilliant Career* in a series of six novels written during the 1920’s and 1930’s, the “Brent of Bin Bin” books, which have been unjustly neglected. *All That Swagger*, hailed as her best book, captures the Australian pioneering spirit and the country’s ties to Ireland as no other Australian novel has, but the book does tend to get bogged down in its later stages by quite a bit of political and social theorizing.

Thomas L. Erskine

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- Old Blastus of Bandicoot*, 1931
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- Pioneers on Parade*, 1939 (with Dymphna Cusack)
- My Career Goes Bung*, 1946
- Sydney Royal*, 1947

#### LONG FICTION (AS BRENT OF BIN BIN):

- Up the Country*, 1928
- Ten Creeks Run*, 1930
- Back to Bool Bool*, 1931
- Prelude to Waking*, 1950
- Cockatoos*, 1954
- Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang*, 1956

#### DRAMA:

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NONFICTION:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent is *My Brilliant Career* about a "brilliant career"? How do you think Miles Franklin intended the title to be interpreted?
- Do you believe that Sybylla could ever find a "helpmeet" (helpmate) suitable to marry? Explain.
- Some critics believe that *All That Swagger* really ends with Danny's death and that Brian's triumph does not "save" the novel. Do you agree? Explain.
- Speaking of his father, Harry in *All That Swagger* says: "Perhaps when all our hides are in the tanyard, it will be difficult to say who were the failures and who the successes." Is Danny, Harry's father, a failure or a success? Explain.
- Identify the successful marriages in *All That Swagger* and *My Brilliant Career*. What characterizes them?
- Danny and Brian are the bookends of *All That Swagger*. Why is Danny a more interesting character?

# MAX FRISCH

**Born:** Zurich, Switzerland

May 15, 1911

**Died:** Zurich, Switzerland

April 4, 1991

*Frisch, a Swiss novelist, playwright, diarist, and essayist, is regarded as one of the most important post-World War II writers in the German language, examining complexities of identity and the emptiness of middle-class values in the mid-twentieth century.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Max Frisch was born on May 15, 1911, into a middle-class Swiss household headed by Franz Bruno Frisch, an architect and real estate broker, and Karolina Bettina Wilderman Frisch. He attended the mathematical high school in Zurich and went to the University of Zurich in 1931 to study German. In 1933, his studies were interrupted by the death of his father and the resulting need for Frisch to support himself and his mother. Frisch then earned a living as a freelance reporter for Zurich's liberal newspaper, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and traveled to the Balkans and southeastern Europe. In 1935, he returned to Zurich to study architecture at the Federal Institute of Technology, earning his degree in 1940.

Between 1940 and 1945, Frisch served intermittently in the Swiss army. In 1942, he married Gertrud Constanze von Mayenburg, also an architect, and opened his own architectural firm. His play *Nun singen sie wieder: Versuch eines Requiems* (pr. 1945, pb. 1946; *Now They Sing Again*, 1972) was performed in 1945 by the Zürcher Schauspielhaus, one of the most renowned German-speaking theaters. This marked the beginning of Frisch's collaboration with his dramaturgical mentor, Kurt Hirschfeld, director at the Zürcher Schauspielhaus, who, along with American playwright Thornton Wilder and German playwright Bertolt Brecht, exerted the greatest influence on Frisch's dramaturgy. Frisch's debt to Wilder is evidenced by the theatricalism of his play *Die chinesische Mauer* (pr. 1946, pb. 1947; *The Chinese Wall*, 1961), and Frisch acknowledged Wilder's influence in an essay enti-

tled "Theater ohne Illusion" (1948; theater without illusion).

In 1947, Frisch met Bertolt Brecht, who lived in Zurich for a year before returning to East Berlin in 1948. Brecht's theory of epic theater, which Frisch read about in drafts of Brecht's essays for *Kleines Organon für das Theater* (1948; *A Little Organum for the Theater*, 1951), informed Frisch's developing aesthetic. However, Frisch could not accept Brecht's contention that drama can change society. Frisch felt that the role of drama was to raise questions and thereby stir the consciousness of audience members, who, as individuals, have the power to effect change in their own lives.

The years 1949 to 1956 were marked by the publication of his first book of biographical sketches, *Tagebuch, 1946-1949* (1950; *Sketchbook, 1946-1949*, 1977); productions of three new plays; study in the United States, supported by a Rockefeller grant (1951); and the broadcast of a radio version of *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*The Firebugs*, 1959) over Public Bavarian Radio in 1953. In 1954, Frisch published his novel *Stiller* (1954; *I'm Not Stiller*, 1958), the success of which allowed him to sell his architectural firm and devote himself full time to writing. He also separated from his first wife in 1954 and received a divorce in 1959.

The year 1957 marked the publication of what is considered one of his best novels, *Homo Faber* (*Homo Faber: A Report*, 1959). In 1958, Frisch's international reputation as a playwright was cemented by the production of a stage version of *The Firebugs*, which has become part of the modern dramatic repertoire. In the same year, Frisch received the

most prestigious award for German literature, the Georg Buchner Prize. Also that year, he met German writer Ingeborg Bachmann in Paris, with whom he lived in Rome from 1960 through 1962.

Frisch's well-received analysis of racial prejudice, *Andorra* (pr., pb. 1961; English translation, 1963), was performed at the Zurich Schauspielhaus in November, 1961. By this time, Frisch had achieved international stature. He returned to live in Switzerland in 1965 and married his mistress, Marianne Oellers, in 1968, divorcing her in 1979. Frisch's most successful later works include the novels *Montauk* (1975; English translation, 1976) and *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* (1979; *Man in the Holocene*, 1980); the biographical sketches *Tagebuch, 1966-1971* (1972; *Sketchbook, 1966-1971*, 1974); and the play *Triptychon; Drei szenische Bilder* (pb. 1978, pr. 1979; *Triptych*, 1981). Frisch was diagnosed with cancer in 1990 and died in his Zurich apartment in 1991.

Throughout his life, Frisch traveled extensively, visiting Eastern and Western Europe, the United States, Russia, the Middle East, and Japan. These experiences enriched him as a person and as a writer. In *Sketchbook, 1946-1949*, Frisch describes the liberating quality of travel. For Frisch, travel allows the individual to encounter people who have not formed opinions about the traveler's identity; the individual is completely unknown and unjudged. This opens the individual up to new possibilities, to what is possible in life. Travel, relocation, and dislocation are themes that recur throughout Frisch's work.

## ANALYSIS

Based on a story that Frisch included in *Sketchbook, 1946-1949* and adapted into a radio play in 1953, *The Firebugs* premiered at the Zurich Schauspielhaus on March 29, 1958. An immediate success, the play sharply satirizes capitalism and middle-class values through the person of Gottlieb Biedermann, whose last name in German trans-

lates as "conventional man." A great deal of speculation has been made about the political overtones of the play: Is it referring to the takeover in Germany by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party; to Switzerland's neutrality during World War II, which allowed the country to benefit economically, both from the Nazis and the Allies; or to the accession of the West to Communist demands after World War II and the creation of the Soviet bloc? Frisch referred to *The Firebugs* as a morality play without a moral, which implies that in a general, and not a topical, way it exposes the inability of any democracy built on middle-class values and pretended liberal ideals to deal effectively with terrorism because of its lack of moral courage and need to appear respectable.

*Andorra*, like *The Firebugs*, grew out of a story idea Frisch included in *Sketchbook, 1946-1949*, entitled "Der andorranische Jude" ("The Andorran Jew"). Premiering at the Zurich Schauspielhaus on November 2, 1961, the play attracted international attention as a study of the effects of racism. Frisch said that the country of Andorra was meant to be a model, a simulacrum or exemplum of any society, anywhere, in which identity can be determined by social context. Andri, one of the play's characters, is as much an Andorran as anyone else in the play. He was told since childhood, however, that he is a Jew and his identity is determined by society's prejudices, despite his attempts to free himself from these imposed limitations.

*Homo Faber* illustrates what Frisch called the "dramaturgy of permutation," a story in which the identity of the protagonist mutates from a fixed and settled point to becoming more complex and protean, more fully reflecting the moral and existential complexity of the modern world. Throughout his journeys, Faber invents and reinvents himself, as events force him to reevaluate who he is and form a new understanding. The dramaturgy of permutation operates at some level in all of Frisch's works.

## THE FIREBUGS

**First produced:** *Biedermann und die Brandstifter*, 1953 (radio play; first produced on stage, 1958; first published, 1958; English translation 1959; also translated as *The Fire Raisers*, 1962)

**Type of work:** Play

*A middle-class businessman does not have the courage to evict three arsonists from his home, ultimately resulting in the destruction of his house and his city.*

Gottlieb Biedermann is a captain of industry whose wealth comes from manufacturing a brand of hair tonic invented by his former valet, Knechtling, whom Biedermann dismissed when he asked for a share in the profits. The play begins at a moment when arsonists are setting houses on fire throughout the city. Although Biedermann suspects that Schmitz, a homeless stranger who insinuates himself into the Biedermann household and asks for shelter, could be an arsonist, he offers him dinner and allows him to move into his attic.

During dinner, Biedermann is disturbed by the arrival of Knechtling, who pleads through Biedermann's servant, Anna, for financial assistance because he has a sick wife and three children. Biedermann will not admit Knechtling and tells Anna, "Let him put his head in the gas oven or instruct a solicitor—go ahead—if Herr Knechtling can afford to lose or win a case." Schmitz witnesses Biedermann's callousness but flatters his show of humanity. Biedermann allows Schmitz to stay, after asking for reassurance that he is not an arsonist. Schmitz is able to manipulate both Biedermann and his wife, Babette, by playing on their need to appear kind and compassionate. Soon Schmitz is joined by two more strangers: Eisenring, a former waiter, and an unemployed doctor of philosophy, who is driven to join the conspirators by political ideology, whereas the other two appear drawn to their arson because they merely enjoy starting fires.

The scenes in the Biedermann household are punctuated by the speeches of a chorus of firemen, who warn the city's residents of the "stupidity" of allowing fires to start. They are the guardians of the homes and lives of the citizens and attempt to bring Biedermann to his senses about the danger pre-

sented by the barrels of gasoline the three conspirators bring into the attic, along with paraphernalia to detonate an explosion. Biedermann, however, asserts his right as a free citizen "not to think at all" and proceeds with his plan to win the friendship of the arsonists by sponsoring a sumptuous family-style dinner. Biedermann has all the middle-class accoutrements removed from the dining room—the silver candelabra and wine bucket, damask napkins and tablecloth—in order to create an informal atmosphere. However, the conspirators had been expecting such trappings, and the embarrassed Biedermann calls for their return.

The meal culminates with Schmitz and Eisenring asking Biedermann to supply them with matches, which he does. At the end of the play, the stage is engulfed in red light, with sirens blaring and alarm bells ringing, and the audience knows that the conflagration has started. The culpability of Biedermann and his disingenuous life are evidenced in his treatment of Knechtling, who followed Biedermann's advice to commit suicide by putting his head in a gas oven. During the course of the play, Knechtling's widow visits Biedermann, since the bill for the funeral wreath sent by the Biedermanns is sent to the Knechtlings by mistake. Sure that Mrs. Knechtling will ask for financial assistance, Biedermann refuses to see her. Though morally responsible for Knechtling's death, Biedermann smugly clings to his pretense of innocence.

After the initial production, Frisch added an epilogue to the play, in which Biedermann and Babette find themselves in Hell, with the three arsonists presiding in disguise. The Biedermanns cannot accept that they are not in Heaven and reveal their greediness and lack of acceptance of their culpability. Babette, for example, dies in the fire because she rushes back to her bedroom to rescue her jewelry. At the very end, all the workers in Hell go on strike, and, consequently, the Biedermanns are saved. The city appears to be rising again, and the chorus of firemen announces that all of those individuals who were killed in the fire have been forgotten. The lesson of this experience has been lost; just as Biedermann never acknowledges his guilt, society itself, made up of many Biedermanns, is doomed to repeat its past mistakes.



## HOMO FABER

**First published:** 1957 (English translation, 1959)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Walter Faber, an engineer for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and a prototypical twentieth century technocrat, learns that human identity and worth are not defined by the material world but by human relationships.*

The protagonist of Frisch's *Homo Faber* (literally in Latin, "man the maker") embarks on a business trip to South America, only to be transformed by his travels, which take him back to his past and forward to his future. Walter Faber, an engineer working for UNESCO, sets out from his Manhattan apartment to check on engines being manufactured in Venezuela. On board his flight, he meets a German named Herbert, and after their plane crashes in the Sierra Madre desert in Mexico, he learns that Herbert is the brother of one of his old friends, Joachim. Walter also discovers that Joachim married Walter's former mistress, Hanna, and that they had a child together. Telling this story as a reminiscence at a future time, Walter recalls that when he left Hanna she was pregnant with his child, which he speculates may be the child who is supposed to be Joachim's.

After their rescue, Walter decides to accompany Herbert to Guatemala, where Joachim has been managing a tobacco plantation. During their strenuous trip to the plantation, Walter reflects on his relationship with Hanna and acquits himself of any guilt about the way he abandoned her. Upon arrival, they learn that Joachim hanged himself months before. The two men film and then bury the untouched body, and Herbert determines that he will remain on the plantation assuming Joachim's responsibilities. Walter goes on to Venezuela, only to discover that the engines have not been assembled. Upon returning to New York, Walter tries to avoid a scene with Ivy, his married mistress, with whom he had broken off prior to his journey. He decides to sail to Paris to attend a conference rather than wait for his scheduled flight.

Aboard the ship, Walter becomes infatuated with a young woman named Sabeth. After arriving in Paris, he tries to meet her again in the Louvre. He develops a friendship with her and offers to drive her to Rome. Walter, narrating the story from the future, insists that he did not suspect that Sabeth was his daughter. On the road trip through France and Italy, Sabeth eventually goes to Walter's room, and they sleep together. As Walter begins to question Sabeth about her family, he realizes that she is Hanna's child and his daughter. He absolves himself from guilt, however, because Sabeth initiated their sexual relationship.

Time lapses and Walter awakens in a hospital in Athens, unclear about what has just occurred. His memory returns, and he recalls that he brought Sabeth to the hospital after she was bitten by a poisonous snake as they walked on the beach at night. Hanna has come to look after her daughter, and she is surprised to learn that Walter is the man with whom her daughter has been traveling. Walter tells Hanna about the night of the snakebite, and Hanna confesses that Sabeth is his daughter. Sabeth eventually dies from an undiagnosed concussion that resulted from her fall after she was bitten.

The remainder of the novel chronicles Walter's continued travels, during which he is haunted by memories of Sabeth and his growing realization of how important Hanna has become to him. At the novel's end, Walter returns to Athens, where he enters the hospital for tests. Throughout his journeys, from the very beginning of the novel, he has been plagued by stomach pains, which are ultimately diagnosed as cancer. Walter prepares for an operation and expects to die. He comes to the realization that identity and worth do not depend on his mastery of the material world but on his relationships with others.

Early in the novel, Walter relishes travel because it makes him feel disconnected and anonymous, and, therefore, empowered to reinvent himself. Through the agency of Hanna, he begins to realize how important it is to be with people who know him, with whom he shares a history, a life. As Walter is wheeled into the operating room, he understands that the only person who will remember him, for whom his life made any difference, is Hanna.

## ANDORRA

**First produced:** 1961 (first published, 1961;  
English translation, 1963)

**Type of work:** Play

*A teacher raises his illegitimate son as a Jew in a small village in the fictional country of Andorra, where he is destroyed by anti-Semitism.*

*Andorra* centers on a teacher named Can, who returned from Andorra's neighboring country, the nation of the Blacks, accompanied by an infant, whom he claimed was an orphaned Jew. Since the Blacks are notorious for their anti-Semitism, he rescued the boy and adopted him as his own child. The boy, Andri, has grown to be a young man who is in love with Can's daughter, Barblin (Andri's half sister), who has also promised to marry him.

As the play begins, Barblin is whitewashing her father's house in preparation for St. George's Day. Pieder, a soldier, ogles her and scoffs at her assertion that she is engaged. Andorra is described as a snow-white country, beautiful, peaceful, and

pious. Pieder, however, points to the fact that underneath the whitewash is red clay, and when the rains come the church and houses are revealed for what they are, blood red like a slaughtered pig. At the inn, the townspeople are also revealed for what they really are in their treatment of Andri, whom they regard with disdain because they think he is a Jew. They ascribe to him traits they

associate with Jewishness: avarice, sneakiness, ambition, unfeelingness, and cowardliness. The Cabinetmaker, for instance, asks for an exorbitant fee to take Andri as an apprentice because he thinks that Andri would make a better salesman.

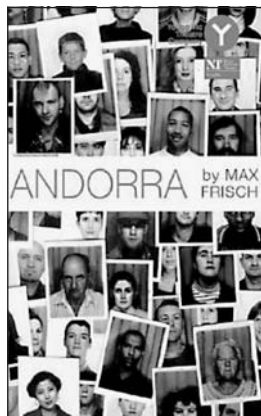
Andri accepts the identity that is forced on him by the town and feels disappointment and resentment when Can refuses to allow him to marry

Barblin, thinking that his adopted father will not allow his daughter to marry a Jew. That night, Pieder sneaks into Barblin's room and overpowers her. In the early morning, Can stumbles into the hallway where Andri is sitting guard outside Barblin's room. The drunken Can tries to tell Andri the truth about his birth but hesitates, and Andri refuses to listen to him. Once Can retreats, Andri pounds on Barblin's door, which Pieder opens and tells him to go away or he will smash his face in.

The next day, the despondent Andri meets with the Priest, who attempts to help Andri reconcile himself to the fact that he is different from the Andorrans. In the town square, Andri accosts Pieder and provokes a fight. The Senora, a woman from the country of the Blacks, intervenes after the soldiers have knocked Andri down and kicked him. She cleans Andri's wounds and leads him home, arm in arm. She then confronts and upbraids Can for the lie he perpetrated to save his reputation. She accuses him of being a coward and makes him promise to tell Andri and the townspeople the truth.

The Senora forges a bond with Andri before leaving to return home. Before she departs the town, however, she is murdered by someone who throws a stone at her. Andri is accused of the murder by the Innkeeper, who claims to have witnessed the event. Andri was with the Priest at the time, who was trying unsuccessfully to convince him that he truly is Can's son and not a Jew. The Blacks invade Andorra, capture the town, and begin the process of identifying the Senora's killer. All the men of the town are forced to parade barefoot across the town square with sacks over their heads while the Jew Detector seeks to identify the culprit. He pronounces that Andri is the Jew who killed the Senora, and despite the protestations of Can and his wife that Andri is not a Jew and that he is innocent of the murder, Andri is killed.

The play ends with the image of Barblin again whitewashing what she thinks is her father's house, but now her head is shaven and she is obviously unstrung because of Andri's death and her father's suicide by hanging. She says, "I'm whitewashing so that we shall have a white Andorra, you murderers, a snow-white Andorra; I shall whitewash all of you, all of you."



## SUMMARY

In the fictional worlds projected by Max Frisch's novels and plays, human beings strive to accommodate themselves to socially defined roles, many times never fully understanding themselves and their true potential. The quest for identity is Frisch's central theme, and his works provide examples of individuals who either fail in the process of self-discovery or make tentative stabs at reinventing themselves in more complex, imaginative, and morally responsible ways. This quest for identity drove Frisch's own personal life and is reflected in his commitment to evolve his own consciousness.

Ernest I. Nolan

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are some of the targets of Max Frisch's satire?
- How does Frisch treat the theme of racism?
- What is Frisch saying about the permanence or mutability of human identity?
- How does Frisch counteract the theater of illusion in his plays?
- What is the role of travel in Frisch's novels?

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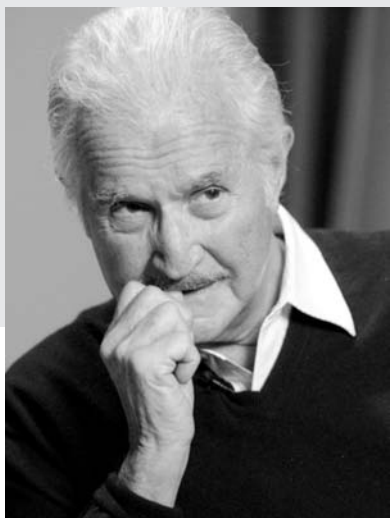
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AP/Wide World Photos

## CARLOS FUENTES

**Born:** Panama City, Panama  
November, 11, 1928

*Aside from affirming a powerful Mexican identity in his writing, Fuentes introduced innovative language and experimental narrative techniques into mainstream Latin American fiction.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Carlos Fuentes (FWAYN-tays) was born on November 11, 1928, in Panama City, Panama, into a Mexican family that he later characterized as typically petit bourgeois. As the son of a career diplomat, Rafael Fuentes, and Berta Macias Rivas, Carlos Fuentes traveled frequently, attending the best schools in several of the major capitals of the Americas. He learned English at the age of four while his family was living in Washington, D.C. He graduated from high school in Mexico City and then studied law at the National University and the Institut des Hautes Études Internationales in Geneva, Switzerland.

Upon his return to Mexico, he became assistant head of the press section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1954. While he was head of the department of cultural relations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he also founded and edited *Revista mexicana de literatura* (Mexican review of literature). He later edited or coedited the leftist journals *El espectador*, *Siempre*, and *Política*.

In 1954, Fuentes published a collection of short stories entitled *Los días enmascarados* (the masked days), his first book. He also began to devote himself to writing full time—novels, book reviews, political essays, film scripts (for Luis Buñuel, among others), and plays.

Fuentes's first two novels reflect his social and artistic concerns at the time. *La región más trans-*

*parente* (1958; *Where the Air Is Clear*, 1960) deals with Mexico's social, political, and cultural problems from a loosely Marxist perspective. The book was widely read, became controversial, and established Fuentes as the leading young novelist of Mexico. *Las buenas conciencias* (1959; *The Good Conscience*, 1961) is a portrait of a bourgeois family in the provincial town of Guanajuato.

The innovative techniques of Fuentes's first novel, *Where the Air Is Clear*, are more fully developed in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962; *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, 1964). That novel portrays the Mexican Revolution and its betrayal in modern Mexican society through the memories of Cruz as he lies dying. Generally considered to be Fuentes's most successful novel, it has been translated into fifteen languages.

With his novella *Aura* (English translation, 1965), a psychological fantasy published in 1962, Fuentes begins to turn away slightly from his earlier focus on social issues and toward Magical Realism. His next work, a collection of short stories, *Cantar de ciegos* (1964; *Songs of the Blind*), focuses on the secret and often bizarre lives of individuals, in a more realistic vein.

For the next several years, Fuentes lived primarily in Paris, although he returned frequently to Mexico City. Much of his next two novels, *Cambio de piel* (1967; *A Change of Skin*, 1968) and *Zona sagrada* (1967; *Holy Place*, 1972), was written in Paris. Fuentes moved back to Mexico in 1969 and published what was to become a famous essay on Latin American literature, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*. His novella, *Cumpleaños* (1969), appeared the same year. Two plays followed the next year.

From 1975 to 1977, Fuentes served as Mexico's



ambassador to France. Following completion of *Terra nostra* (1975; English translation, 1976) and *La cabeza de la hidra* (1978; *The Hydra Head*, 1978), he returned to his investigation of the European scene in *Una familia lejana* (1980; *Distant Relations*, 1982). *Cristóbal nonato* (1987; *Christopher Unborn*, 1989), a novel, as well as a collection of short stories, *Constancia, y otras novelas para vírgenes* (*Constancia, and Other Stories for Virgins*, 1990), were published in 1989. One of his best-known novels for American audiences is *Gringo viejo* (*The Old Gringo*, 1985), published in 1985 and then adapted to film in 1989. Fuentes was awarded the Cervantes Prize for Literature in 1987.

During the 1990's, Fuentes published several more books, three of them of particular interest and all three translated into English. *El naranjo: O, Los círculos del tiempo* (1993; *The Orange Tree*, 1994) consists of five novellas, all of which describe cultures in collision. *Diana: O, La cazadora solitaria* (1994; *Diana, the Goddess Who Hunts Alone*, 1995) describes the affair between a married Mexican novelist and an actress who stars in American films; the relationship purportedly is based on an affair between Fuentes and actress Jean Seberg. *Los años con Laura Díaz* (1999; *The Years with Laura Díaz*, 2000) is a tour de force epic about a woman's role in Mexican history, featuring fictional and historical figures, including Diego Rivera and Freda Kahlo.

Since 2000, Fuentes has continued to write novels and short stories, and his criticism of the United States has intensified. His satiric *La silla del águila* (2003; *The Eagle's Throne*, 2006) takes place in 2020, when Condoleezza Rice is the American president who shuts down Mexican communications after the Mexican government cuts off oil supplies to the United States, which is occupying Colombia. *Contra Bush* (2004) attacks President George W. Bush for intensifying the tensions between strong and weak countries. *En esto creo* (2002; *This I Believe: An A to Z of a Life*, 2005) won the Best Book of the Year Award from the Royal Spanish Academy.

An international figure, Fuentes for many years was denied a visa for travel to the United States because of his political views, but once that ban was lifted, he taught at many American universities, including Harvard, Princeton, Georgetown, Brown, Columbia, and George Mason, in addition to his teaching stints at the University of Paris and Cam-

bridge University, where he was the Simon Bolívar Professor. He is considered to be Mexico's most important living writer.

## ANALYSIS

Fuentes's overriding literary concern is with establishing a viable Mexican identity, both as an autonomous entity and in relation to the outside world. Myth, legend, and history often intertwine in Fuentes's work. Fuentes turns to Mexico's past—the Aztec culture, the Christian faith imposed by the Spanish conquistadors, and the failed hopes of the Mexican Revolution—and uses it thematically and symbolically to comment on contemporary concerns and to project his own vision of Mexico's future. In portraying Aztec civilization, Fuentes contrasts the superhuman Mexican gods with the classical deities, who do resemble mortals. The Mexican gods are “the other, a separate reality,” according to Fuentes. This separation incites a paradoxical encounter between what cannot be affected by humans (the sacred) and the human, physical, and imaginative construction of those sacred spaces and times.

The Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier has argued in his famous essay “Lo real maravilloso” (the marvelous real) that indigenous American culture and nature provide its writers with a wealth of startling images. They constitute a spontaneous, native type of surrealism that contrasts with the artificial variety practiced by European Surrealists. In this kind of Magical Realism, supernatural events appear to grow out of the environment rather than descending upon it from beyond. Fuentes uses Magical Realism in two distinct but related capacities: to underline extreme psychological power and to suggest the presence of ancient cosmic forces drawn from Mexican mythology. The juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible images in his fiction often results from the proximity of two different cultures, from the intrusion of ancient beliefs or figures into modern life.

Cultural layering in Fuentes's fiction often manifests itself in character “doubling,” or the confusion of identities. Often the characters in Fuentes's work are psychologically or socially deviant. Many are misfits, while others do not tolerate ways of life that differ from their own.

## THE DEATH OF ARTEMIO CRUZ

**First published:** *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, 1962 (English translation, 1964)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Through the deathbed meditations of Artemio Cruz, the novel explores how the Mexican Revolution has affected Mexican society at large.*

In *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, Fuentes's most widely known novel, Cruz uses his memory to fight against death; Fuentes uses his novel to fight for the memory of the original ideals of the Mexican Revolution, subsequently forgotten and betrayed. The text that Artemio Cruz narrates during the final twelve hours of his life is perhaps his final attempt at domination before he is conquered by death. Struggles for power, however, pervade not only individual relations within the novel but also social relations. The hunger for power consumes not only Cruz as an individual but also society at large. During the Mexican Revolution, the original impetus of the struggle was fragmented, its spirit weakened by the power struggles of its generals; in the years following the revolution, the disruptive desire for power persists, in Fuentes's view.

Private power struggles, fragmenting and disintegrating intimate relations, are most fully developed in the war between Artemio and his wife, Catalina. The tension between the couple is only one manifestation of the continual play of opposing forces in the novel. Like Cruz, who is divided between past and present, body and mind, love and domination, Mexico is divided between the rich and the poor, Spanish and Indian heritages, modern buildings and ancient ruins, revolutionary ideals and mundane compromises. Compressed into the mind of one man, as he lies dying, these divisions take on urgency and universal significance.

The confrontation between memory and death continues throughout the novel. It motivates the most striking aspect of the novel—the division of the text into three different modes of narration and three different verb tenses. The interest of the novel depends to a large extent on the carefully orchestrated interplay between the different voices of Cruz.

With few exceptions, Artemio narrates the en-

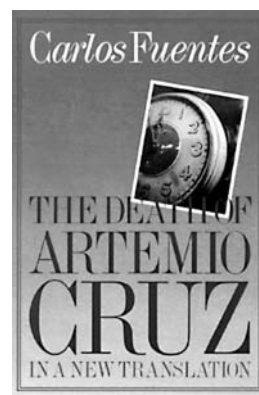
tire book. His sickness and imminent death are recounted in the first person and present tense; his meditations and desires in the second person and the future tense; and the events of his past life in the third person and the past tense. While the persons and tenses of the voices are clear, the perspectives of the voices preclude precise descriptions, since they share many images and ideas. They are often described as three distinct parts of the mind: the conscious, the subconscious, and the unconscious. These three different voices demonstrate the coexistence of Cruz's separate selves.

The novel reveals a continual interplay of historical and individual forces. Fuentes's technique is to alternate the three voices in brief sections rather than to present three long narratives, a technique that heightens the tension that the reader experiences between sympathy for and condemnation of Cruz. The shifting perspectives make the choice difficult.

From the novel's central focus on the conflicts within Cruz, the reader moves outward to the conflicts that divide Mexican society as a whole, particularly to the problems posed by the Mexican Revolution. Fuentes has compressed approximately 150 years of Mexican history into the novel. As in Cruz's personal story, so in the historical panorama of Mexico the narrative moves backward in search of origins.

Through the figure of Cruz's paternal grandmother, Ludivinia Menchaca, the historical narrative begins in 1810, the year of her birth and the year of the first revolution, the war of independence from Spain. Cruz's grandmother embodies the old order, the landed aristocracy, which resisted reform movements even back in the mid-nineteenth century. Artemio Cruz is born on her family's land but denied its heritage. Although he fights in the revolution against the order upheld by families such as the Mechacas, he ends up in virtually the same position as his grandmother, denying a voice to later revolutionaries.

Ludivinia's vision of the "green-eyed child,"



Artemio Cruz, outside her window, forms the link between the tumultuous period through which she lived and the later revolution. In between came the years of Porfirio Díaz, who originally rose to power when he opposed the reelection of the former president, Benito Juárez, in 1870. In order to strengthen Mexico financially, the Díaz regime allowed many foreign concessions to enter Mexico, gave away huge amounts of land taken from the Indians, and denied freedom to the press. The second revolution began in 1910, when Francisco Madero opposed the reelection of Díaz. Madero became president in 1911, but his government became weakened by continued fighting. Victoriano Huerta took over in 1913 and Madero was killed by Huerta's forces. These acts provoked Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón to rise against Huerta and to uphold the original constitution against Huerta's politics of personal power. Carranza and Obregón were supported intermittently by the forces under Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

In 1913, when the reader first sees Cruz in the revolution, he is fighting with the forces of Carranza against Huerta. When forced to choose sides between Carranza and Obregón, he chooses Obregón, who later becomes president. Fuentes suggests that, early in the revolution, leaders concentrated too heavily on ideology and ignored practical concerns of the common people, including land reform. The betrayal of the revolution by Cruz evokes Fuentes's own revolutionary perspective. Four specific failings of postrevolutionary Mexican society are echoed throughout the novel: class domination, Americanization, financial corruption, and failure of land reform.

## TERRA NOSTRA

**First published:** 1975 (English translation, 1976)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Using European history to investigate the origin of Latin American culture, Fuentes's novel explores the continuing dynamics of cultural colonialism and independence.*

*Terra Nostra* opens amidst chaotic scenes in Paris: Repentant sinners converge on the church of Saint Germain de Pres and hundreds of women give birth along the banks of the Seine. A man named Pollo Phoibee meets a young woman with grey eyes and tattooed lips, called Celestina, who wants him to explain all these strange events to her. Pollo slips and falls into the Seine. Symbolically echoing *The Fall of Icarus*, the painting by sixteenth century Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, Pollo—and the reader—fall into the temporal realm of art. There, historical events are shifted out of their traditional sequence and combined with fantastic events. In the next chapter, Pollo, now nameless, has fallen back into sixteenth century Spain. He is discovered on a beach and taken to a palace by the queen of the land, La Señora. This occasion is the first of many instances in the novel in which water serves as a linking device between distant places and times.

The first section of *Terra Nostra*, called "The Old World," concerns the activities of La Señora's husband, El Señor, and his court. El Señor, an imaginary version of Philip II of Spain, is obsessed with the task of building an elaborate palace, the Escorial, to function primarily as a royal mausoleum, and with the prospect of his own death. By sacrificing his life to the building of the magnificent monument, with statues of his ancestors, he hopes to arrest time, to attain eternal life.

El Señor's religious passion ultimately causes him to neglect and mistreat his queen. She recounts a bizarre scene in which she falls on her back in the palace courtyard and cannot get up by herself because of her heavy iron hoopskirts. Everyone abandons her to the elements for days because only the king is allowed to touch her. Mold grows on her, her skin burns and peels, and she

is so lonely that she welcomes the mouse that crawls under her skirts. When El Señor finally appears and has a mirror held before her, La Señora screams at seeing her now-unrecognizable face. She believes that her husband has caused her to fall and to rot, so that their appearances would be equally repulsive. La Señora finally realizes, however, that it is not her husband's evil nature that has caused his cruelty; his extreme Christian fervor has caused him not to touch her. She decides then that she will choose the Devil to combat him, and henceforth she will follow her own desires.

"The Old World" section of the novel ends with Celestina's companion, the pilgrim, as he begins to tell a tale to El Señor, the tale that constitutes his adventures in "The New World," the second and briefest section of the novel. At first, the visions of the New World are idyllic. Ultimately, however, the pilgrim and his friend, an old man named Pedro, are cast upon a beach covered with pearls. Pedro stakes out a claim and is killed defending it from the natives. The natives believe that the earth is divine and cannot be possessed by any person. Pedro has been destroyed by his need for private property in a society that seems to practice a kind of cosmic socialism. He has violated the native utopian tradition that Fuentes (in his essays) hopes will resurface in Mexico.

The society's anticipation and acceptance of the pilgrim as one of their original princes naturally recalls the Aztec belief that the arrival of Hernán Cortés constituted the long-awaited reappearance of the plumed serpent-god Quetzalcoatl. In each case, the conquest of the New World by the Old is facilitated by the incorporation of an Old World explorer into the New World religion. Earlier, the Spaniards killed the Indians with guns; now, the pilgrim offers them a mirror as a gift, but it is no less fatal. The ancient views himself and dies of terror. The people then claim the pilgrim as their chieftain and founder. He finally sees his aged reflection in a mirror, however, as the original ancient had done. (The mirror also might suggest a variety of external or internal conflicts—between two cultures, two people, and two parts of the self.)

Finally, before returning to the Old World, the pilgrim again meets the original ancient, who ex-

plains to him that he has killed his own hostile brother (part of himself). The ancient says that this continual struggle between opposing forces is necessary for life. This life cycle is precisely what El Señor is trying so desperately to avoid by his plan for eternal fixity within the Escorial.

It is also why, at the beginning of the third part of the novel, El Señor resists the discovery of the New World. This section of the novel is called "The Next World." El Señor is overwhelmed by the knowledge of the New World and also by the philosophy of the ancient, who proclaims that the essence of life is change. El Señor wishes to hide these things from his people so that they will not envision a system other than the one by which he rules them. Most of all, he fears the pilgrim himself, whose task is to achieve freedom. Near the end of the novel, presumably after El Señor dies, he climbs a stairway in his palace, where "on each step the world offered the temptation to choose anew . . . but always in the same, if transfigured place: this land, land of Vespers, Spain, Terra Nostra" Yet Terra Nostra is the known world on old maps, and El Señor has remained there, never venturing to explore his new domains across the sea.

The last chapter of the novel reiterates the opening scene in Paris, where Pollo and Celestina meet in a final embrace. They are fused into one androgynous being that can possess itself continuously in an ecstasy of love. Power struggles are abolished; this act of love abolishes the difference between the self and the other. Their embrace is a wedding that reverses time, since its single self-fertilizing being resembles the figure of Uroboros, an undifferentiated unity imagined in many ancient mythologies to precede humankind's division into individual creatures of different sexes.

This apocalyptic end is a vision, not a confirmation, of paradise and represents the hope that the "next world" will succeed the known world. Love triumphs here, but it cannot abolish the cruel cycles of history. Thus, at the end of the novel, the reader is left balanced between two visions: unity versus diversity, "ours" versus "yours" or "mine," love versus power, and satisfaction versus frustration.

## THE OLD GRINGO

**First published:** *Gringo viejo*, 1985 (English translation, 1985)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In his novel about the fictionalized death of American writer Ambrose Bierce (the Old Gringo), Fuentes explores Mexican history, stresses the importance of recall and remembrance, and places the action in Mexico, where the revolution is taking place.*

The action in *The Old Gringo* occurs within a short period of time. The Old Gringo (Bierce), searching for yet another frontier, rides into Mexico with a few belongings, notably a suitcase with a couple of his books and a copy of *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), whose protagonist is also on a quest. Miguel de Cervantes's "hero" is at once romantic and comic, and surely Fuentes is commenting ironically about the Old Gringo's venture. As he puts it, "My work is finished and so am I." As Inocencio Mansalvo describes the Old Gringo's purpose, "That man came here to die."

The Old Gringo searches for Pancho Villa's army but instead finds a band of rebels led by "General" Tomás Arroyo, the illegitimate son of the Mirandas, whose estate he destroys. After demonstrating his prowess with a gun, the Old Gringo joins Arroyo's band and in the fighting the next day displays "suicidal courage." Harriet Wilson, the teacher the Mirandas hired for their children, is also at the Miranda estate and is intent on educating children and salvaging what she can of the Miranda property. Unfortunately, only a ballroom full of mirrors remains. After the battle, as Arroyo and Harriet dance, she imagines he is her father, who died in Cuba, and she has intercourse with him. When the Old Gringo burns the papers Arroyo has proving Mexican ownership of the land, Arroyo shoots him. When Villa arrives, he discovers what has happened, exhumes the Old Gringo's body, and then has him shot by a firing squad. Villa

also kills Arroyo. At the end of the novel, Harriet claims the Old Gringo is actually her father and has his body taken back to Washington, D.C., where he is buried next to her mother.

In addition to the events that transpire, Fuentes provides his readers with the thoughts and emotional baggage of the three main characters. The Old Gringo has already experienced "four successive and irreparable blows" (presumably the deaths of his four children) and seeks the "fifth, blind, murderous blow of fate." He suspects that "each of us carries the real frontier inside," and when Mansalvo says that the Old Gringo died because he crossed the frontier, he speaks literally, but the remark also is metaphorical.

Harriet has her own demons, especially the memory of her father, who had a black mistress in the family home in Washington and who stayed in Cuba with a "negress" rather than return home to his family. She is also the product of "God-fearing, sober" Methodism, which encourages strength, thrift, and wisdom, and her experiences in Mexico threaten that background. The hall of mirrors forces her to look critically at her life. She tests the Mexicans, leaving pearls where they can be stolen, which they are, but she persists in her notion of duty and desires to "civilize" the Mexicans. She also says she has crossed the frontier, and again the frontier is both literal and metaphorical.

Arroyo's remembered past is even more complex, since as the bastard Miranda son he was denied any rights and was almost killed when soldiers destroyed the village in which he was staying. Hidden in the cellar with two vicious dogs, he is rescued by a "moon-faced woman" who becomes his lover. The cellar and near-death experience, as well as the rescue, suggest a kind of rebirth for the revolutionary, who is determined to return to the Miranda estate in spite of Villa's orders that no one return to his home. For Arroyo, the dreams are not of his father but of his absent mother, whose love is out of reach. In returning home, he also crossed a frontier.



## THE YEARS WITH LAURA DÍAZ

**First published:** *Los años con Laura Díaz*,  
1999 (English translation, 2000)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel spans the twentieth century, providing readers with Mexican history, politics, economics, mythology, and legend, as it explores a woman's eventual self-acceptance and emergence as a photographer, a woman with vision.*

*The Years with Laura Díaz* begins and ends with Santiago López-Alfaro making a television documentary, first in Detroit in 1999 and then in Los Angeles in 2000. In Detroit, while looking at a mural painted by Diego Rivera, he sees the face of Laura Díaz, the woman whose story is covered in the ensuing pages; at the end of the novel, he is looking at another mural by a Mexican painter, whose work, like Rivera's, was also censored and obliterated.

The framing device sets the plot in motion, taking readers back to 1905, when Laura's grandmother, Cosima Kelsen, is traveling from Mexico City to the family home in Veracruz. On the trip home, a dashing bandit nicknamed the Hunk of Papantla cuts off her fingers in order to steal her rings, but, inexplicably, a legend develops that Cosima never got over her infatuation with the bandit. That legend is but one of many that persists in family history. At her home in Catemaco, Cosima has three daughters: the pianist Hilda, the writer Virginia, and Leticia, Laura's mother. She also "adopts" Maria de la O, her husband Felipe's mulatto daughter. At Cosima's funeral, Laura follows a white crow (more legend) to what she believes is a giant female figure covered with jewels, a sight that recurs later in the novel.

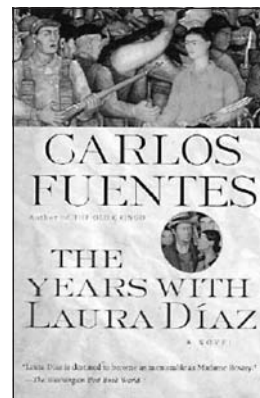
When Laura and Leticia join Leticia's husband, Fernando, in Veracruz, where he has become a bank president, Laura meets the first Santiago, her half brother, the son from Fernando's first marriage, and the two become very close. Santiago, a revolutionary, is executed by a firing squad, and Fernando is transferred to Xalapa. Laura marries Juan Francisco López Greene, a labor leader, and has two sons, Santiago and Danton, but she is unhappy, believing that she has "shrunk" rather than

grown. She realizes that she knows only Francisco's public self, not his private self. After Francisco informs on Carmela Soriano, a rebel, Laura leaves her husband and is soon attending soirees with Orlando Ximenéz, a notorious womanizer. She also becomes friends with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who take her to Detroit, where Diego includes her in his mural. When she returns to Mexico, she meets Jorge Maura, the only man she really loves, but he leaves her to help his Jewish lover escape from Nazi persecution.

Laura then returns to Francisco and renews her relationships with her children. Santiago, the painter, gives his mother a painting she believes depicts the Fall of Man. Santiago dies at twenty-six, before he can realize his artistic potential. His brother, Danton, marries a wealthy woman and has a son, another Santiago, who rebels against his father, becomes political, and is killed at a demonstration, but not before his wife becomes pregnant. Her baby becomes the fourth Santiago, Laura's grandson, who begins and ends the story.

At the demonstration, Laura, who has been given a camera, photographs her son and begins her career as a photographer and her life as a complete human being. In 1972, after she learns that she has cancer, she returns to Catemaco, her childhood home, which has been restored by Danton, and finds the statue of the woman, as well as the ceiba tree, which her grandfather, in an effort to spare her from superstition, had told her was the statue she had seen. In embracing the ceiba tree, with its spines like "wounding daggers," Laura finds the tree ironically "protecting" in the sense that it provides her the release from life she seeks.

In addition to an intricate plot and a large cast of characters, Fuentes offers his readers a tour of Mexican history, a course in American-Mexican relations, McCarthyism, mural painting, and mythology. Most of the political content comes from discussions between Francisco and labor leaders and between Jorge and his friends, and the novel suffers a bit from the pro-



tracted harangues about why the revolution failed. The nature of Mexican-American relations is vividly portrayed through Rivera's mural and Santiago's interpretation of it. While Rivera paints many black and brown faces, he does not paint any white ones—the white workers are facing away from spectators. The machines on which American capitalism relies are depicted as menacing and outsized, so that they seem to be a threat. Harry Jaffee, one of Laura's lovers, is one of the many political refugees from the northeast United States and Hollywood whose careers have been destroyed by the anti-Communist paranoia fostered by right-wing politicians.

The legends and mythology in the book are, almost without exception, feminine. The giant fe-

male statue, the doll Li Po, and Leticia, "the central feminine image" for Laura, suggest that the real power in the novel is feminine.

## SUMMARY

In his fiction, Carlos Fuentes confronts the problems of Mexican identity through the presence of ancestral voices and indigenous mythologies. His is a view of humankind molded by history yet morally responsible for individual actions, situated in time yet responsive to eternal values. The fictional mode that he uses to express his view is Magical (symbolic) Realism, a realism that can be comprehended only through symbols.

*Genevieve Slomski; updated by Thomas L. Erskine*

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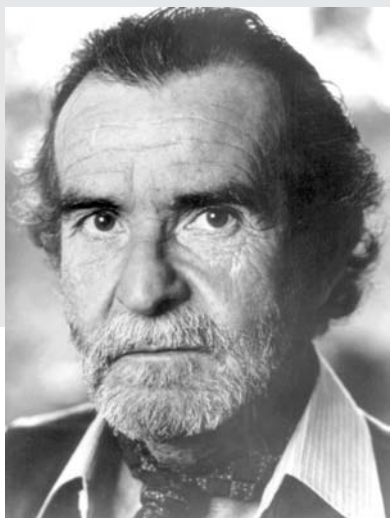
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Carlos Fuentes's view of the United States' influence on Mexico?
- How does Fuentes use art and artists to convey his ideas about politics?
- What is the relationship between myth and history in Fuentes's works?
- What is the importance of Santiago's *The Fall of Man* painting that Laura renames *The Ascent of Humanity* in *The Years with Laura Díaz*? How does it relate to Fuentes's portraits of the two priests?
- To what extent has "General" Arroyo, a character in *The Old Gringo*, crossed a frontier to die?
- Discuss Harriet's feelings about her father and how those feelings affect her actions in *The Old Gringo*.
- What point does Fuentes make about the writing of history in *The Old Gringo*?
- Laura Díaz seems driven to probe her lovers' deepest secrets, to know their private and public selves. How does her desire affect her relationships, and if she changes her mind, what prompts her change of heart?

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Richard Corman

## ATHOL FUGARD

**Born:** Middelburg, South Africa  
June 11, 1932

*A renowned and prolific playwright, Fugard has illuminated without didacticism the social situation in South Africa under apartheid.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Harold Athol Lannigan Fugard (FYEW-gard) spent his first three years in the village of Middelburg, where his parents owned a small general store. His crippled father was an English-speaking South African, his mother an Afrikaans-speaking descendant of Dutch pioneers who had settled the area during the seventeenth century.

In 1935, the family moved to Port Elizabeth, where Mrs. Fugard opened a tearoom which provided most of the family income. Her husband was not only physically handicapped but also an alcoholic.

When he had finished high school, Fugard went to Port Elizabeth Technical College, where he learned motor mechanics, and then obtained a scholarship to the University of Cape Town to study philosophy and social anthropology. He is quoted as dropping out in his senior year to avoid "being trapped as an academic." He then hitchhiked through Africa for six months to Port Sudan, where he signed up as the only Caucasian crew member on a tramp steamer.

His experiences during the two-year voyage to the Orient played an important part in the development of his view of race relations. Back in South Africa, he met and married (in 1956) Sheila Meiring, an actress, and Fugard began his lifelong interest in the theater.

In 1958, Fugard took a job as a clerk in the

Fordsburg Native Commissioner's Court in Johannesburg, where local passbook law cases were tried. Under this law, native Africans were strictly controlled in regard to their housing and places of work. They were literally allowed to come to urban areas only to "minister to the needs of the white man" and required to leave when they "cease to so minister." Seeing Africans sent to prison for non-compliance at the rate of "one every two minutes," as Fugard said later in an interview, so appalled him, it motivated him to expose life under apartheid to the world.

Fugard left the court and took a job as stage manager at South Africa's white National Theatre Organization. He now had some black friends who were also interested in the theater, and he began writing short plays, such as *No-Good Friday* (pr. 1958, pb. 1977), and *Nongogo* (pr. 1959, pb. 1977), which they rehearsed and performed for private audiences.

In 1959, he and his wife went to London with the intention of gaining wider theatrical experience, but in March, 1960, seventy-two demonstrators protesting the passbook laws were massacred in Sharpeville, near Johannesburg, and the Fugards bought one-way tickets home.

One of the first diary entries made by the playwright in 1960 signifies his intention to personify South Africa's racial situation in two characters, the "coloured" brothers Morris and Zachariah. The result was *The Blood Knot* (pr. 1961, pb. 1963), which ran in London and then for seven months Off-Broadway in 1964. By this time, Fugard was not only writing but also directing, and for the last part of the New York run he acted in one of the roles.

At about the same time Fugard was approached



by five men of the Xhosa tribe who asked him to help them form a theater company. The result was the Serpent Company, which with the playwright's help presented classic plays by Bertolt Brecht, Jean Genet, August Strindberg, and Sophocles. Although the group successfully toured Scotland, Ireland, and England, it was prohibited by the government from performing publicly before white or mixed audiences in South Africa.

In 1967, when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) televised *The Blood Knot*, the government of South Africa withdrew Fugard's passport. Therefore, he was unable to attend performances of any of his plays outside the country until 1971, when, in response to a petition signed by four thousand people, his passport was returned in time for him to attend the London opening of *Boesman and Lena* (pr., pb. 1969).

During this same period, the Serpent Players started to work on improvisations, which resulted in two plays devised by Fugard in collaboration with John Kani and Winston Ntshona. The first, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (pr. 1972, pb. 1973), shows an African assuming the identity of a corpse in order to secure a valid passbook. The second, *The Island* (pr. 1973, pb. 1974), reveals the unbelievable brutality of life on Robben Island, South Africa's maximum security prison for black political prisoners. Here two inmates entertain with a performance of the ancient Greek play *Antigone*, adapting its message of civil disobedience to life in South Africa. When these plays were performed on Broadway (1974-1975), they received three Tony nominations: Best Play, Best Director (Fugard), and Best Actor. Kani and Ntshona were given the acting award jointly.

Fugard has written a number of successful plays and a novel since 1975. At one point in his *Notebooks 1960-1977* (1983), he writes of tearing up the first few chapters of a novel, deciding that he is primarily a playwright. In 1980, however, *Tsotsi* appeared and received excellent reviews. This realistic story of a young African hoodlum (the title means "gangster" in English) who has shut out his childhood and become a nameless sociopath is very moving.

In 1981, Fugard had moderate success with the play *A Lesson from Aloes* (pr. 1978, pb. 1981), and in 1982 "*MASTER HAROLD*" . . . and the Boys (pr., pb. 1982) played in many venues and on television in the United Kingdom and the United States.

*The Road to Mecca* (pr. 1984, pb. 1985) followed in 1984; *My Children! My Africa!* (pr., pb. 1990) came in 1990, with Fugard's daughter, Lisa, in a leading role; and in 1992, *Playland* was produced and published. The play *Hello and Goodbye* (pr. 1965, pb. 1966), first produced in 1965, was revised and presented successfully, under the playwright's direction, at Princeton University in 1994. At that time, Fugard said he intended to continue as a man of the theater, writing, directing, and acting both in and out of his beloved South Africa.

## ANALYSIS

The society of South Africa under apartheid was unique; it seems necessary to describe some features of that society before analyzing Fugard's work. These features include the country's system, now dismantled in law if not in memory, of classification and separation by race.

South African whites include Afrikaners, who were descendants of the Dutch settlers, and other Caucasians, most of whom had English backgrounds. In terms of economic status, these people cover a broad spectrum. There are also Indians, some Asians, and those of mixed racial backgrounds, who are called "coloured." At the bottom of the social scale are the indigenous Africans.

The native Africans were strictly segregated to undesirable living quarters, usually slums on the outskirts of urban areas, frequently at some distance from employment. Furthermore, native Africans had at all times to carry identification cards that specified the most intimate particulars of their lives. Except for the employer-employee relationship, native Africans were supposed to have no contact with whites. For the most part, audiences at sporting events and the theater were either all white or all black. A small percentage of native Africans were literate; however, a few gained enough education to work as scribes, civil servants, actors, or even teachers, but most did heavy manual or menial work.

Finally, the criminal justice system was harsh, inhumane, and corrupt. For example, those in power allowed the roving gangs of African hoodlums, called "tsotsis," to prey on their own people with impunity, while arresting any nonwhite who failed to present a proper passcard when asked to do so by a policeman.

Fugard's work deals with all these conditions

without (except for *My Children! My Africa!*) becoming overtly political. He accomplishes this by maintaining an aesthetic distance and by creating characters who, although sometimes symbolic, are always compelling as human beings involved in dramatic conflict.

In *Notebooks, 1960-1977*, Fugard discusses frankly his admiration for Samuel Beckett's plays and Albert Camus's novels, and acknowledges the influence of both men on his work. He asserts also that consciousness is a thin beach, and that the unconscious is the sea where his ideas originate. For example, his traumatic childhood experiences and his love-hate relationship with his alcoholic, crippled father led him to write "*MASTER HAROLD*" . . . and the Boys. The guilt he felt when as a young boy he spit in the face of an African became the source for the climax in that play.

An entry from 1963 in *Notebooks 1960-1977* explains clearly Fugard's approach to writing his plays. He notices a young man aimlessly loitering near a bar in a white slum, Valley Road. His drunkenness suggests his need to shut out reality, so the playwright creates that reality. He gives him a name, Johnnie Smit; he visualizes the two rooms of the shack where Johnnie cares for his blind, crippled father; and he brings in Johnnie's sister, Hester, who has returned home after an absence of fifteen years.

Tired of her life as a prostitute, Hester has a single aim: to claim her share of the compensation money paid her father by the South African Railways after his accident. She believes the cash is hidden in some boxes in the old man's room, and she forces Johnnie to lug out box after box, which she rummages through, strewing their worthless contents around with mounting frustration, as her brother warns her not to awaken the invalid in the next room.

Some of the items in the boxes, such as her dead mother's clothes, birth and wedding certificates, old photographs, and a box of men's shoes—left ones only—bring back memories of a bleak childhood with many family fights and little cash.

While Hester is searching the boxes, Johnnie is trying out his father's crutches. Finally the last box is opened, and as Hester threatens to confront their father, Johnnie must tell her the truth. Johannes Cornelius Smit has died and there is no money.

At this point the furious Hester beats her unre-

sisting brother to the floor, where he remains as she leaves to return to her life as "a woman in a room." After her exit, Johnnie crawls to the crutches, stands on them, and assumes the persona of his father. The play is given the title *Hello and Goodbye*.

This play is very representative of Fugard's style. All of his plays have only two or three characters; they are all set in South Africa and played out against the backdrop of that society; the dialogue is crisp and realistic, if occasionally somewhat poetic; and his characters are all three-dimensional, neither heroes nor villains, but frequently victims.

One of Fugard's best plays, *Boesman and Lena*, ran for a year in New York and received rave reviews. The coloured characters frequently speak Afrikaans, so a three-page glossary is a requirement. With talented actors, such as James Earl Jones and Ruby Dee, who first played the roles, there was no need for translation.

*Boesman and Lena* is the story of a nomadic coloured couple who have been together for many years. Time after time their makeshift shelter has been destroyed; they compare themselves to human rubbish—an apt description. Boesman takes out his disgust with life by abusing Lena; she defies him by inviting an old black to share their fire and food. All she wants is someone to talk to, even though the old African can only understand and repeat one word—Lena. When they realize that the black has died, Boesman starts to pack up. Were the authorities to find them with a dead man, there might be questions. Lena thinks she will not go this time, but the sight of Boesman trying to carry all of their poor possessions alone moves her, and she follows him into the darkness, carrying her share of the "white man's junk."

There is frequently physical violence in Fugard's plays. Characters become frustrated and misdirect their aggression, exploding, taking out their feelings on other, weaker victims. For example, in the one play which is openly political, *My Children! My Africa!*, Mr. M., the protagonist, is an older black teacher, who preaches peaceful coexistence with the ruling white society. A mob of young students, furious with this approach, consider Mr. M. a traitor to their cause and kill him. The play is meant to illustrate the desperation that can so easily lead to violence. The play's somewhat didactic approach is less effective than most of Fugard's work, which makes the point more subtly.

## THE BLOOD KNOT

**First produced:** 1961 (first published, 1963)

**Type of work:** Play

*Two colored half brothers, one very light, the other very dark, realize their inextricable connection.*

This play, first produced in Johannesburg, may be considered seminal in that it defines clearly the society of South Africa under apartheid, a society that Fugard loathed.

Morris, who can pass for white, and his half brother, Zachariah, most definitely an African, share a one-room shack in the nonwhite slum of Korsten, near Port Elizabeth.

Zachariah is completely illiterate and a little slow-witted, but he has a menial job as a gatekeeper. Morris acts as homemaker—cleaning their room, cooking the meals, mending Zachariah's clothing, and preparing nightly footbaths for his brother.

In the year they have been together Morris has saved part of Zach's pay each week with the goal of accumulating enough cash to buy a small farm far from the area so that they can live as independent human beings.

Zachariah, however, is more interested in the present than the future. He remembers a friend who used to help him squander each week's pay on wine and women, and he is quite resentful of his brother's somewhat puritanical attitude.

To placate Zachariah, Morris suggests a pen pal, to be found in a newspaper listing women interested in this kind of activity. Not entirely convinced that this will take the place of "having a woman," Zach finally chooses Ethel Lange, and dictates a letter to Morris. She replies, enclosing a picture of herself that brings Morris to his senses. Zachariah has brought home a white newspaper, and has corresponded with a white woman whose brother is a policeman. She also writes that she will be coming to their area in June, and Morris panics. He wants to burn all the letters and forget the whole thing, but Zachariah convinces him to meet Ethel, passing as a white man, and insists on using all the money they have saved to buy the appropriate clothing for the occasion. The next letter from Ethel is a farewell note; she is being married and her fiancé does not want her to continue the pen pal correspondence.

This plot is the skeleton that Fugard fleshes out. Fugard emphasizes the blood knot that has brought Morris back to his half brother after years of separation. They remember having the same mother; they recall fleeting glimpses of early childhood when the light-skinned child was favored over his brother; they act out an imaginary scene in which Morris, dressed in the white man's finery, mistreats the African gatekeeper. They even pretend to chase away an old black woman, who represents both their birth mother and Mother Africa.

Throughout their playacting they vent their frustrations. Morris intimates that he has tried to "pass" but failed; Zachariah shows his deep-seated envy of Morris. At one time, after Morris has gone through the imaginary gate, it is "locked," and when he cannot "escape," the two men almost come to blows. In the end, Morris winds up his old alarm clock, the one he has used throughout the play to remind him of tasks such as fixing Zachariah's footbath, preparing supper, or going to sleep. Morris says: "You see, we're tied together, Zach. It's what they call the blood knot . . . the bond between brothers."

## THE ROAD TO MECCA

**First produced:** 1984 (first published, 1985)

**Type of work:** Play

*An elderly recluse thwarts the attempts of her Calvinist neighbors to send her to an old people's home.*

This play is based on the facts of the life and work of Helen Martins of New Bethseda, South Africa. In Fugard's foreword he describes the isolated bleakness of the area, which is offset by Mrs. Martins, who has filled her yard with heathen statues and sculptures, all facing toward Mecca.

Helen receives an unexpected visit from her much younger friend, Elsa Barlow, who has driven eight hundred miles from Cape Town in response to a letter that seemed to her a cry for help. Helen's depression has two causes: First, she realizes that her age is catching up with her, and second, she resents the pressure she feels to leave her Mecca and go into an old people's home.

A third character, the Calvinist pastor, Marius

Byleveld, comes to Helen's house, expecting that she has decided to sign the form that will finalize her move to the old people's home; however, she resists and decides to continue living as she has.

Elsa has some serious problems of her own, which she does not reveal until the end of the play. She speaks only of the African woman carrying a baby to whom she had given a lift, food, and money, a woman she left trudging patiently to some unknown destination. The stage setting for this play is pivotal to understanding the theme. Helen's house is described as "an extraordinary room . . . the walls—mirrors on all of them—are all of different colors, while on the ceiling and floor are solid, multicolored geometric patterns . . . the final effect is not bizarre but rather one of light and extravagant fantasy."

Since the death of her husband fifteen years before, Helen has been creating art and repudiating the "Christian values" of the village, causing both fear and resentment among her neighbors. As a representative of the narrow-minded villagers, Pastor Byleveld argues with Elsa, bringing out the theme of the play, which is conflict between the paternalistic Calvinist doctrine of the town and the somewhat hedonistic attitude held by both Elsa and Helen.

In her final attempt to explain her self-created "Mecca" to Byleveld, Helen reveals her need for freedom, her desire for light, her intense pleasure in her creations. She instructs Elsa to light all the

candles, and in prose bordering on poetry she describes the ecstasy she feels when the darkness has been vanquished. She then returns the unsigned form to the pastor, who leaves, but not before revealing his repressed feelings for Helen when he says: "There is more light in you than in all your candles put together."

At this point Elsa tells Helen the significance of the African woman and

her baby. After Elsa's lover chose to return to his estranged wife rather than face divorce, Elsa had an abortion. The sight of the indigent black woman walking, her infant on her back, down the road

where there would be no Mecca had simply overwhelmed her. Only now, with Helen's encouragement, can she cry.

At the end of the play, after Helen's admission that she has completed her Mecca and must now learn to blow out the candles, Elsa gives her tea laced with Valium. The two women joke about "artificial sweeteners," which may signify Helen's suicide. The actual Mrs. Martins died in this way.

## "MASTER HAROLD" . . . AND THE BOYS

**First produced:** 1982 (first published, 1982)

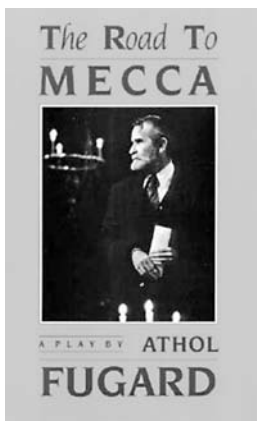
**Type of work:** Play

*A young high school boy makes some important discoveries about himself and his life.*

As the play opens on a rainy afternoon in the St. George's Park Tea Room, two black waiters, Sam and Willie, are cleaning up while discussing a forthcoming dance contest that they plan to enter. Willie is having some difficulty mastering certain steps; Sam, the more expert dancer, is instructing him. There is a light mood of camaraderie between them, as the third character, a seventeen-year-old white boy, Hally, enters.

This is his mother's tearoom, and it is quickly established that Hally has known these two men since he was a young child, when they were servants in his parents' boarding house. The relationship, especially with Sam, involves some easy bantering about those bygone days with Hally hiding in Sam's room, cooperation on homework assignments, and an essay that Hally must write describing a cultural event. What is bothering Hally at the moment, however, is his family situation.

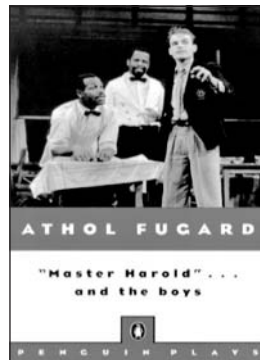
His crippled, alcoholic father has been in the hospital, and when his mother telephones the tearoom, Hally tries unsuccessfully to persuade her to leave him there. She refuses, and when the boy realizes that life with his father at home will resume that very night, he is furious and vents his anger and hatred with some violence. Sam tries to stem Hally's vitriolic outpouring, but he succeeds only in diverting the boy's wrath to himself. This culminates in Hally asserting his position as "Master Harold" and finally spitting in Sam's face. At first, Sam's reaction is great



anger, but that quickly subsides as Willie reminds him that Hally is “just a child.”

In their reminiscences, Sam and Willie speak of a kite that Sam made for Hally, one made of tomato-box wood and brown paper, using flour and water for glue and old stockings for the tail, with scraps of string tied together so the boy could hold it. Hally had hoped no classmates would be up on the hill; he was sure that his kite would not fly—but it did. It flew high, dipped, and flew even higher. Then Sam left Hally because “he had work to do.”

After Hally's hateful act against his friend, Sam tells him why he had made the kite. It was meant to comfort the child who had been publicly humiliated as he went home from the hotel bar, carrying his father's crutches, and trailing after the big black man who carried the unconscious drunk on his back. Sam also explains that he could not sit with Hally to fly the kite because the bench had been marked: “whites only.” A resumption of the relationship between Sam and Hally seems impossible. Still, Sam talks of making and flying another kite and of Hally's realizing that he need not sit on the bench alone. The boy leaves, and the play ends with Sam tutoring Willie in his dance steps.



There is a parallel between this play and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In that novel Jim, a black man, acts as Huck's surrogate father; in the play Sam assumes the same role. Hally and Huck have alcoholic fathers who behave without concern for their sons; both children have ambiguous feelings toward the natural parent. Both also finally perceive the nature of unselfish love.

This play is possibly the most autobiographical of all Fugard's work. His mother's tearoom, his crippled, alcoholic father, and the experience of spitting in a black man's face are all factual. With consummate skill the playwright dramatically weaves these strands into a powerful text that successfully illuminates both the South African experience and emotions common to all audiences.

## SUMMARY

Athol Fugard is a regional writer, which he does not consider a pejorative label since he has great love for his native South Africa. He also admits to an autobiographical quality to his work. What he denies is that he is a propagandist, believing that if one tells the human story, the propaganda will take care of itself. His plays, using few characters and generally sparse stage settings, depend almost entirely on interpretation by actors. In his best work, Fugard creates drama that transcends the particular and achieves universality.

Edythe M. McGovern

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## Athol Fugard

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did Athol Fugard's parentage and early experiences amount to an ideal preparation for his writing?
- In what ways did South African apartheid pervert justice more thoroughly than did the plight of African Americans in the United States between Reconstruction and the 1960's?
- Comment on the significance of the title *The Blood Knot*.
- How did Samuel Beckett's plays influence Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*?
- Explain why sparse stage settings contribute to the universality of Fugard's plays.
- Explain how Fugard reshapes the historical events that underlie "Master Harold" . . . and the Boys.



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## MAVIS GALLANT

**Born:** Montreal, Canada  
August 11, 1922

*Primarily a writer of short stories, Gallant has explored, using her native Canada and adopted France as backdrops, the plight of individuals caught between cultures.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mavis Gallant (guh-LAHNT) was born Mavis de Trafford Young in Montreal, Canada, on August 11, 1922, the daughter of parents who enrolled her, beginning at the age of four, in a series of schools, some seventeen in number, in Montreal, Ottawa, and the eastern United States. Although a Protestant, she also attended some Catholic schools, which later provided her with material for her stories. Her childhood years were marked by loneliness. Her mother virtually abandoned her to foster parents in Ottawa before Gallant, while in her teens, went to live with a New York psychiatrist and his wife, who became her legal guardians. Her father died when she was a young girl.

After she returned to Montreal in 1940, she worked for a short time with the National Film Board before becoming a reporter for the *Montreal Standard* in 1944. During the next six years she wrote many features, photo-stories, and reviews, some of which she later reworked into her fiction. In her features she reveals a knowledge of Freudian psychology, a wide acquaintance with English Canadian and French Canadian literature and culture, an interest in a variety of displaced people caught in an alien culture, and a fascination with the dynamics of family struggles.

For a variety of reasons Gallant left her job with the newspaper in 1950. Her brief marriage to Johnny Gallant had ended, leaving her deter-

mined to live independently. This was difficult in Montreal; she had always been drawn to Europe, where she wanted to write for a living. During her *Montreal Standard* years she had been writing short stories, a few of which appeared in the *Montreal Standard Magazine* and *Preview*, but her writing career began in earnest with the publication of the short story "Madeline's Birthday" in *The New Yorker*, a prestigious North American journal in which most of her stories have first appeared.

*The Other Paris*, her first short-story collection, appeared in 1956. The short stories concern cultural clashes between North America and Europe, family power struggles, and the gap between reality and the reality perceived by the characters. In 1959, she published her first novel, *Green Water, Green Sky*, which concerns the destructive relationship between a mother and daughter living abroad in Europe. Her second short-story collection, *My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel* (1964; published in England as *An Unmarried Man's Summer*, 1965), which contains the short novel *Its Image in the Mirror*, explores the relationship between past and present, as well as the process by which memory shapes reality.

In 1968, she turned to nonfiction for *The New Yorker*, which published her "The Events in May: A Paris Notebook," her description of the political upheaval in France. Her first full-length novel, *A Fairly Good Time* (1970), was followed by another nonfiction piece, *The Affair of Gabriel Russier* (1971), for which she wrote a lengthy introduction. She then returned to writing fiction and by 1980 had published three more short-story collections: *The Pegnitz Junction: A Novella and Five Short Stories* (1973), *The End of the World, and Other Stories* (1974),

and *From the Fifteenth District: A Novella and Eight Short Stories* (1979).

Critical acclaim in Canada did not come until 1978, when *Canadian Fiction Magazine* devoted an entire issue to her work. *Home Truths: Selected Canadian Stories* (1981), which won a Governor-General's Award, firmly established her not only as an international writer, but as a Canadian one. It concerns Canadians at home and abroad, and the "Linnet Muir" sequence of stories has been read as Gallant's autobiographical account of her years in Canada.

*Overhead in a Balloon* (1985), a collection of short stories about Parisians, marked a stylistic departure for Gallant, who was influenced by comics and cartoons. *What Is to Be Done?*, a play about two Canadian women who are Communist sympathizers during World War II, was produced in 1982. *In Transit* (1988) and *Across the Bridge* (1993), two later short-story collections, reflect Gallant's continuing interest in how people behave when they are caught between two cultures or two stages in their lives.

## ANALYSIS

Gallant's experiences often serve as material for her fiction. Her sense of abandonment as a child, her departure from her native Canada, and her subsequent life as an expatriate writer in Paris—these events have contributed to the recurrent themes of alienation, search for a voice, the effect of the past on the future, and the role memory and imagination play in shaping reality and history. Whether the stories take place in Canada or Europe, the protagonists, usually women, attempt unsuccessfully to create an ideal life, reach a point where insight is seemingly unavoidable, and yet often create instead a new reality that reshapes the history that might have precipitated that insight.

For Gallant, childhood is the source of memory, a rich repository of good and, more often, bad events that inevitably affect adult behavior. Often, there is, as amply illustrated in the stories in her *Green Water, Green Sky*, a destructive relationship between mother and daughter. The daughters' identities and voices in the stories in this collection are controlled by the mothers, who have accepted the roles society has created for them. Since Gallant regards Canada as a repressive, rigid society, she sometimes equates the mother figure with Canada

and the daughter with Europe. The daughter, like Gallant, must escape and live the life of an expatriate in order to free herself and become independent—this, however, seldom happens in Gallant's work.

Daughters without dominating mothers often seem abandoned, psychologically orphaned, and intent on a man's approval and love. Fathers are ineffectual absentees who denigrate or patronize their daughters. Prospective husbands (many Gallant stories feature women who confront marital decisions) are not sympathetically portrayed. Retreating from the real world, toward intellectual pursuits, they seldom act decisively; instead they drift into decisions.

As the titles of her novels and short-story collections often indicate, her characters are often in transit or are at a critical junction in their lives. Gallant places them in the present, recounts the past that led to the present event, and then often somewhat abruptly ends the story. A geographical journey often serves as metaphor for the emotional or psychological trip her protagonists make. In *The Pegnitz Junction*, Christine's Paris holiday ends in disillusionment, and her meandering train trip back to Germany ends at a junction—she neither makes a decision about her two suitors nor continues her trip. In the six stories about Linnet Muir in *Home Truths*, Linnet attempts to return home, in this case to Canada (Linnet seems a thinly veiled Gallant). She finds that she, too, cannot return home. In her native Montreal, she remains, like so many Gallant characters, an alien, a foreigner caught between two cultures, between the past and the present.

In Gallant's fiction, women are often shielded from real experience, and they sometimes resort to creating ideal romantic worlds based on their culturally derived assumptions about men and marriage. In "Across the Bridge," the title story of Gallant's 1993 short-story collection, Sylvie constructs an enchanted world; in "The Other Paris," the title story of her 1956 short-story collection, Carol imagines a "dream Paris." Both worlds are revealed as unreal. In both cases the protagonist retreats from the revelation and imagines a new world in which she can live a lesser life. In *The Pegnitz Junction* this ability to create or construct other worlds is carried into the psychic realm. Christine's "scripts" for other people's lives, scripts that surpass her own

story in interest and action, demonstrate the importance of the imagination and of control of the story.

Gallant's characters are bound to the historical settings in which their fictional lives exist. Whether it is sterile Montreal, drab 1950's or activist 1960's Paris, or the broader canvas of post-World War II Europe, the historical settings shape the characters' lives. The war in Indochina may not be the focus of *The Other Paris*, but it is on the periphery; what happens there deeply affects characters' lives.

Important as history is, for Gallant it is not a fixed, permanent record of past events, but a shifting account shaped by people who record public events (World War II, the Dreyfus case, the war in Indochina) in their own personal memories. Past events are interpreted as commentaries on the failed present by an older generation intent on giving meaning and consequence to their lives. Even professional historians fail to establish a true history. In "Kingdom Come" (1986), Gallant recounts the fate of a professor who attempts to document the linguistic past of an obscure tribe in a remote location. He is rejected by the tribe and his own children, and his "history" is dismissed by his colleagues.

Gallant demonstrates the complex interplay between characters and history by including journals and letters, which possess a documentary quality, in her fiction; by using multiple points of view, which often are abruptly shifted; and by employing interior monologues and flashbacks. Gallant also sometimes shifts the narrative point of view, for example, from third person limited to the omniscient; it is often difficult to detect the exact point of view, making it impossible to identify how aware a character is. The cyclical nature of many of Gallant's narratives also poses problems for readers, since some stories are framed by similar stories. This lends a claustrophobic air to the narrative. Some stories begin before a climactic moment, retreat into the past, return to the present, and stop just short of actual resolution. Although the "endings" of these stories are not told, they are implied and are, in a sense, created by the character, who anticipates an ending, reinterprets past action, and imagines a resolution that is at once true and false.

## "THE OTHER PARIS"

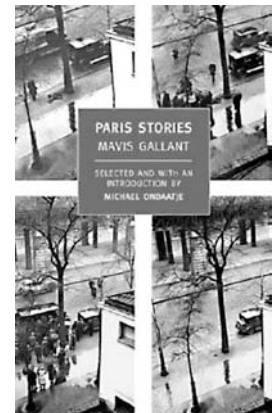
**First published:** 1956 (collected in *The Other Paris*, 1956)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In post-World War II Paris, when a young American woman fails to discover her imagined Paris in the real Paris, she reinvents her experiences and returns home.*

"The Other Paris," the title story of Gallant's first collection of short stories, takes place in the drab Paris of the 1950's. Carol Frazier, the protagonist, is a young American whose views of Paris, love, and marriage have been shaped by the media and college lectures. The story begins at a dressmaker's, where Carol and Odile, her French friend, discuss Carol's impending wedding to Howard Mitchell, a coworker at an American government agency. The recollection of his proposal establishes the conflict between Carol's imagined Paris, with "the Seine, moonlight, barrows of violets, acacias in flower," and reality, a proposal at lunch, "over a tuna-fish salad." The imagined proposal scene, however, is the one Carol "had nearly come to believe . . . herself." Undaunted by the first disillusionment, Carol undertakes the "business of falling in love." Gallant's ironic coupling of "business" and "love" foreshadows the failure of Carol's undertaking. When she does not fall in love, she attributes it to the rainy weather and the winter season.

Despite her daily observation of "shabby girls," "men who needed a haircut," and whining children, Carol retains her belief that her imagined Paris exists, that she only has to find it. She smugly pities Odile, but her meeting with Felix, Odile's young boyfriend, who is Carol's age, upsets her preconceived notions. She maintains that she has no interest in Felix, but her actions reveal her fascination with him. Judging him by her standards, his unemployment is inexcusable. She interprets his



possession of American cigarettes as a “bad sign.” She, however, fantasizes about him, so much so that at his apartment Carol’s heart “leaped as if he, Felix, had said he loved her.” She corrects herself quickly, denying her real feelings, telling herself that she desires not Felix, but some other man, someone who does not exist.

The meeting at Felix’s apartment follows a series of disappointments. Earlier in the story, Carol convinces Howard to take her to hear singing in the Place Vendôme, an outing that culminates in “acrid smoke,” Howard’s catching a cold, and her realization that “nothing happened.” Another blow comes at a musical debut given by Odile’s sister, who Carol believes will wear Carol’s “green tulle.” The concert is held at a theater where a piece of the ceiling falls and almost hits Howard, Odile’s sister does not wear Carol’s dress, and Odile’s family snubs Carol, a foreigner.

She discovers that her vision of love comes from Felix and Odile, but she must deny her insight, rationalize her decision, and conclude that what she has with Howard is better. She senses that she will reinvent her Paris experiences so that a “coherent picture, accurate but untrue,” will emerge.

## THE PEGNITZ JUNCTION

**First published:** 1973

**Type of work:** Novella

*As a young woman journeys, literally and metaphorically, she invents stories that are more “real” than her own.*

Christine, a young German woman, is at a junction in her life. Although engaged to a theology student, she travels with her lover, Herbert, and Bert, his son, to Paris for a holiday. She considers the trip a test of how well she and Bert can get along. Most of the novella, which takes place after World War II, occurs not in Paris, but on the train back to Germany. Most of “what happens” is internal, rather than external. Although the narration

leads to Christine’s marital decision, which she does not make, *The Pegnitz Junction* also concerns the creative process, which is capable of inventing a reality more “real” and interesting than reality. As the three travel on the train, Christine’s imagined scenarios regarding other passengers and people she sees make her own story pale in comparison. Gallant uses italics, for the most part, to distinguish Christine’s scripts from her own story.

Christine prefers Herbert to the theology student because she believes Herbert does not create “barriers”—the second thoughts, self-analysis, and talk that paradoxically prevent true communication. Before the end of the story, however, Herbert veers off into analysis, the language people use to control others. Small gestures and details add up; together they imply the dead end that Christine will eventually reach. When the drunken porter verbally abuses them in Paris, Herbert only contemplates action. On the train, he begs her to marry him and vows to put Bert in a boarding school, but later “it was as if nothing had been said.” Herbert, like so many other characters in Gallant’s fiction, is controlled by memories of his past, his failed marriage, and his mother.

Christine, who is bored and annoyed with Herbert, begins to retreat from the present, creating a stream-of-consciousness story which seems to emanate from an elderly woman passenger. That story, involving German immigrants in the United States, is full of envy, resentment, paranoia, greed, and revenge. It culminates in the woman’s petty triumph over relatives. Another invented scenario concerns a family and ends with the violent death of one of the characters. Another passenger remembers his childhood loss of Marie and the flight of his family; Christine believes that he knows that she knows about his memory. Her unspoken question to him, “Why spend a vacation in a dead landscape?” also applies to her own Paris holiday. In fact, all of Christine’s invented stories relate to her situation: the doomed search for love, the plight of the refugee, the violence felt but not expressed. At the end of the novella, Christine’s desire to have “the last word, without interference” reflects her need to take control.



## “ACROSS THE BRIDGE”

**First published:** 1991 (collected in *Across the Bridge*, 1993)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A young Frenchwoman attempts to create an enchanted romantic world, fails, and then rationalizes her acceptance of a mediocre married life.*

“Across the Bridge” concerns Sylvie’s passage from one state to another. The story of a young woman who breaks her engagement because of an infatuation with another man, only to return to her fiancé, “Across the Bridge” also concerns the loss of romance and idealism and the acceptance of mediocrity, an acceptance Sylvie quite deliberately transforms into happiness. Before that transformation occurs, she comes to understand her real relationship to her mother and her real image in the eyes of her father and fiancé.

The story begins on a bridge, with Sylvie telling her mother that she does not love Arnaud, but instead loves Bernard Brunelle, with whom she is only casually acquainted. Her mother’s response, that love takes “patience, like practicing scales,” reflects her opinion of love and marriage, an opinion Sylvie will eventually come to share. She sees her mother and herself like “two sisters who never quarrel,” and interprets her mother’s throwing the wedding invitations into the Seine as a sign that both women have “put something over on life, or on men.” Sylvie does not, however, understand her mother’s real position.

While Sylvie proceeds to invent the details of her projected life with Bernard, her father writes to Bernard’s father, who rejects the proposed marriage. Sylvie must face the reality of knowing that her fantasy will not come true. Her parents respond with passive aggression, giving up their holiday as “penance” for their daughter’s sin. Sylvie’s mother, who was her “sister,” now turns from Sylvie to her husband and metaphorically commands

Sylvie to stand aside. Eventually her father says that he forgives her, but his “forgiving” words and his actions belie his ostensible forgiveness. His negative response to Sylvie’s reading a newspaper and his description of her as “washed up” further weaken her.

When Julien, a cousin and marital alternative, is reported missing in the war in Indochina, Sylvie’s mother decides to renew Sylvie’s relationship with Arnaud. Sylvie then recognizes the conspiracy that mothers engage in with the world, letting their daughters receive only as much understanding as they think necessary. The extent of Sylvie’s mother’s control is revealed when Sylvie lets her mother dictate a letter to Arnaud.

Arnaud meets Sylvie, and his discourse with her is not about them but about analogous characters from operas and plays. Sylvie unwittingly reveals her response to Arnaud when she describes him eating the dessert he does not wish to waste: “He must love me. Otherwise it would be disgusting.” So successfully does she internalize this “love” that she begins to shape their future by wondering about weaning him away from his cheap habits. Even though he does not look at her after he boards the train, she, on her walk home, imagines his return journey and a false “true life” that in retrospect makes her “happy.”

## SUMMARY

As the number of expatriates in the world grows, writers are increasingly confronting the issue of cultural conflict. Marginal people, caught between native and adopted cultures, are currently the subject of much fiction. Mavis Gallant draws on her own experience in her native Canada and adopted France to depict characters caught in transit, people who are not only geographically, but psychologically and emotionally, aliens. More recently, she has explored the plight of post-World War II Germans. She has done so, however, in terms that cast as much light on the writing process as on her alienated characters.

Thomas L. Erskine

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#### LONG FICTION:

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*Its Image on the Mirror*, 1964 (novella)

*A Fairly Good Time*, 1970

#### DRAMA:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How has the linguistic divisiveness of Canada affected Mavis Gallant's writing career?
- Does Gallant introduce a contemporary but essentially unfamiliar moral world to her readers, or does she help them make sense of a familiar but confusing world?
- How does one explain the rather late recognition of Gallant's merit by a Canadian audience?
- What does the adjective "other" signify in the title "The Other Paris"?
- How can the "acceptance of mediocrity" lead to happiness, as happens to Sylvie in "Across the Bridge"?

# GAO XINGJIAN

**Born:** Ganzhou, Jiangxi province, China  
January 4, 1940

*An accomplished avant-garde dramatist, novelist, short-story writer, and painter, Gao Xingjian was the first person writing in Chinese to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 2000.*

## BIOGRAPHY

On January 4, 1940, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Gao Xingjian (gow shihng-jyahn) was born in Ganzhou in China's Jiangxi province. His father held a senior position with the Bank of China, and his mother was a former actress who volunteered in patriotic plays staged by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). As the family retreated from advancing Japanese forces, survived the end of World War II and the subsequent civil war in China, which ended with a Communist victory on the mainland in late 1949, Gao's mother installed in her son a lifelong love for reading, writing, and painting.

In 1957, Gao graduated from high school in Nanjing. Instead of studying painting, he enrolled in the department of French at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages. Upon his graduation in 1962, he was made a translator at the Foreign Languages Press, a position he held formally until 1980. In the early 1960's, Gao lost his mother, who drowned when the Communists sent her to the countryside.

When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Gao's position linking him to the West became dangerous. He was sent to a cadre school for reeducation and from 1970 to 1975 labored in the countryside. There, he burned all his accumulated unpublished manuscripts. Allowed to return to Beijing in 1975, Gao resumed his job, writing, and painting. He traveled to France and Italy in 1979 as a delegation translator and published his novella, *Hanye de xingchen* (1980; stars on a cold night), and his first critical essay. In 1981, Gao published his influential book *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (a preliminary exploration of the techniques of modern

fiction), which established him as a proponent of Western-style modernism.

After his travels to France as translator for Chinese writers, Gao was transferred to the Beijing People's Art Theater. His first play, *Juedui xin hao* (pr. 1982; *Alarm Signal*, 1996), was produced by Lin Zhaohua, one of China's most renowned theater directors. His second play, *Chezan* (pr. 1983; *The Bus Stop*, 1996), ran afoul of the Chinese government's "antispiritual pollution campaign" and was banned after its production in early 1983.

Wrongly diagnosed with lung cancer, which killed his father in 1981, and learning that the Communists wanted to send him to a reform camp, Gao left Beijing. He traveled to the source of the Yangze River in Sichuan province and back to its estuary near Shanghai from July to November, 1983. Part of his experience was included in his next play, *Yeren* (pr. 1985; *Wild Man*, 1990). In 1985, Gao again traveled to Europe, where there were solo exhibitions of his paintings in West Germany and Austria.

Gao's play *Bi'an* (pr. 1986, pb. 1995; *The Other Shore*, 1999) was banned; all of his plays would become forbidden in the People's Republic of China. He focused on painting and writing essays instead. In 1987, Gao was invited to West Germany, and Chinese authorities allowed him to go. In 1988, he settled in self-chosen exile in Paris, France.

After the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing on June 4, 1989, Gao renounced his membership in the Chinese Communist Party, and the party expelled him two years later. His play *Taowang* (pr. 1989; *Fugitives*, 1993, also as *Escape*, 2007) dealt with the massacre. In 1990, his first novel, *Ling shan* (*Soul Mountain*, 2000), was published in Taiwan.

Gao had begun writing it in 1982, brought his manuscript with him to Europe, and finished it in Paris in September, 1989.

In Paris, Gao supported himself by selling his paintings and continued to write. He published the play *Shengsijie* (pb. 1991, pr. 1993; *Between Life and Death*, 1999). In 1992, he was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la France, and he published another play, *Diuhua yu fanjie* (pb. 1992; *Dialogue and Rebuttal*, 1999). In the 1990's, Gao wrote his next plays in French first, before translating them into Chinese. *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end* (pb. 1993; *Weekend Quartet*, 1999) was followed by *Le Somnambule* (wr. 1993, pb. 1995; *Nocturnal Wanderer*, 1999), for which he was awarded the Prix Communauté Française de Belgique in 1994.

Critical acclamation for *Soul Mountain* gathered steam and the novel won for Gao the 1997 Prix du Nouvel An chinois. He became a French citizen in 1998. Gao's next novel, *Yige ren de shengjing* (1999; *One Man's Bible*, 2002), was followed by the play *Bayue xue* (pb. 2000, pr. 2002; *Snow in August*, 2003).

Gao won the Nobel Prize in Literature on October 12, 2000, and delivered his acceptance speech in Chinese on December 7, 2000. The Chinese University in Hong Kong awarded him an honorary doctorate in literature in 2001.

Since winning the Nobel Prize, he has increasingly focused on painting. *Pour une autre esthétique* (2001; *Return to Painting*, 2002) featured Gao's ink paintings from an exhibition of the same name in New York City in 2002. *Gei wo laoye mai yugan* (1999; *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather: Stories*, 2004) contains short stories written by Gao between 1983 and 1991. *"Escape" and "The Man Who Questions Death"* (pb. 2007) featured two new English translations of his plays *Taowang* and *Kouwen siwang* (pr., pb. 2003), respectively. A solo exhibition of his paintings in Germany in 2007 was a huge success, perhaps solidifying Gao's shift from literature to ink printing.

## ANALYSIS

The two outstanding literary characteristics of Gao Xingjian's masterful novels *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* are autobiographical elements and formal experimentation. At one level, the narrative of *Soul Mountain* is driven by Gao's personal im-

pressions gathered during his own travels to the remote southwestern parts of China's Sichuan province and his subsequent journey along the Yangze River to its estuary into the East China Sea in 1983. Similarly, *One Man's Bible* tells of both the horrors and the tribulations witnessed and endured by Gao during the disastrous years of the Cultural Revolution, unleashed by Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong and his wife Jiang Qing from 1966 to 1976, and the upheavals and ironies of the subsequent post-Mao era witnessed by the author.

What further distinguishes both novels is Gao's forceful use of stylistic experimentation and literary innovation. Most strikingly, Gao splits the persona of his protagonists into different entities by means of experimentation with personal pronouns. In *Soul Mountain*, the narrator's "I" is juxtaposed with a second character addressed only as "you," who acts as if he were a different person, even though "you" is another part of the narrator's self. Midway into the novel, to create another level of self-alienation leading to self-awareness, "you" is left behind to become "he," described as a shadow of the narrator's "I." The women of the novel are identified only as "she." In *One Man's Bible*, when the narrator describes his past in Mao's vicious China, the third person "he" is used to relate that experience; to render his present visit to China, the narrator uses "you" to refer to himself. Gao's goal is to offer as many perspectives on one's self as possible by using these different pronouns.

Reflecting Gao's rich work as a playwright, even in his novels dialogue is of key importance, and descriptions of his characters are of secondary importance. One can see the work of Gao the dramatist active in his novels and short stories.

Appreciative of French modernism, existentialism, and the notion of the absurd that Gao encountered in mid-twentieth century French novels and plays he read and translated into Chinese, Gao's novels echo their literary themes and techniques. Both *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible* eschew conventional, linear narratives, a unifying plot, and sharply drawn characters involved in a plot leading to a clear climax. They replace these conventions with stream-of-consciousness narration, meandering thoughts, a pastiche of elements of folktales, and journalistic interludes describing, for example, indigenous rituals, and end more in a

vision than in a classic resolution of plot conflicts.

In addition to these Western influences, Gao includes elements drawn from Chinese history, philosophy, and religion. Critics have remarked on the Zen Buddhist-like qualities expressed in his novels, short stories, and plays. At the end of *Soul Mountain*, God may appear in the guise of a frog, and *One Man's Bible* finishes on a note of ambiguity.

Gao's many globally performed plays roughly fall into two categories. His early plays, written in China from 1982 until 1986, sought to adapt modern Western theatrical experimentation as a means of enlivening Chinese drama. His first play, *Alarm Signal*, ends with the unemployed protagonist choosing law over crime by helping to prevent a train robbery. *The Bus Stop* was banned in 1983 for its critical depiction of people waiting for a bus that never stops. Reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (pb. 1952, pr. 1953; *Waiting for Godot*, 1954), at the end of *The Bus Stop* some characters do indeed leave the stage, more active than their counterparts in Beckett's play.

The second set of Gao's plays, collected in *The Other Shore* (1999), increasingly adds traditional Chinese theatrical, philosophical, religious, and historical elements. With the exception of *The Other Shore* itself, Gao's last play written in China and banned from production in 1986, these later plays were written in France after 1987. What unifies them is the playwright's attempt to move beyond messages that can be impressed by language. Instead, Gao employs Zen concepts, such as *gong-an* storytelling moving through questions and answers, or *hundun*, the idea of depicting the self in chaos. In these plays, truth is grasped at by means of intuition rather than by reasoning. *Snow in August* is Gao's most openly Buddhist play, featuring the life of Huineng, the Zen monk who founded the Sudden Enlightenment School in the late seventh century B.C.E.

Gao's short stories collected in *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* reveal a steady shift from realism to surrealism. Early stories like "Yuan'ensi" ("The Temple"), celebrating the joy of newlyweds, or "Gongyuanli" ("In the Park"), which reads more like a play, or "Choujin" ("Cramp"), telling of the protagonist's nearly fatal idea of impressing a woman by swimming far into the ocean, are followed by the absurd title piece. The last story, "Shunjian" ("In an Instant"), may remind a reader

of the surrealist work of Chinese writer Can Xue or the Magical Realism of Gabriel García Márquez.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Gao emphasized that he writes neither for the proletarian masses or for a commercial audience. His novels, plays, and short stories seek to comment on the human condition and are created for an audience appreciating a unique artistic answer to the question of what constitutes the modern self.

## SOUL MOUNTAIN

**First published:** *Ling shan*, 1990 (English translation, 2000)

**Type of work:** Novel

*On a journey that is as much spiritual quest as physical endeavor, the protagonist travels to southwest China and then to the Yangze River estuary near Shanghai.*

Gao Xingjian began writing *Soul Mountain*, the introspective and experimental novel key to his winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, in Beijing in the summer of 1982. Suddenly confronted with death after being wrongly diagnosed with lung cancer and feeling almost resurrected when the correct results came in, Gao perceived of *Soul Mountain* as a quest to the sources of self in mainland China in the post-Mao Zedong era. When he ran afoul of party authorities over his provocative plays, Gao set out on a five-month journey in 1983 that would provide much of the geographical content of the novel. Gao finally finished the work in self-imposed exile in Paris in September, 1989. *Soul Mountain* was first published in Taiwan in 1990 and translated into English in 2000.

*Soul Mountain* opens at the beginning of the journey of the protagonist, who is identified only by the first person pronoun "I." "I" soon finds himself encountering alternate versions of himself called "you" and "he," as well as meeting a variety of realistically described Chinese people and some enigmatic women referred to only as "she." The narrator, like the author in 1983, has left behind the literary world of Beijing and seeks contact with people living in the rugged Sichuan province. There he encounters a biologist trying to save the



giant panda from extinction, as well as members of China's minority tribes holding on to their indigenous customs and traditions.

The narrator also enters a love affair with a rebellious woman, whom he ultimately causes to leave him as he eschews the responsibilities of a lasting relationship. At the same time, though, he admits to needing human company. A solitary existence, like that lived by Buddhist monks he encounters, is not for him as he strives for human interaction after all.

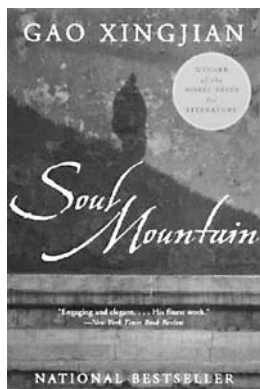
In addition to the narrator's philosophical musings, often rendered by the modernist literary devices of stream-of-consciousness internal monologue and fragmentary thoughts, *Soul Mountain* contains brilliantly rendered descriptions of the people and natural sights "I" encounters along his ten-thousand-mile journey. As he travels along China's mighty Yangze River, ancient folk customs are juxtaposed with the negative effects resulting from industrialization and degradation of the environment.

He also reflects on fate, the work of Chinese literary men of past ages, and these writers' relationship to their own society.

In the end, the protagonist achieves a revelation of some kind. He is convinced that God, a mysterious presence, is speaking to him through a tiny green frog in winter's snow. Just as humans

cannot hope to understand God, so "I" fails to understand whatever message the frog may be relating. "I" is content to have revealed that he really knows almost nothing about the nature of humanity and its role in the larger universe.

The Nobel Prize committee praised *Soul Mountain* for its humanistic vision, its formal experimentation, and its universal poetic qualities. The novel has been seen as an original exploration of humanity's ongoing quest to find meaning in a modern world pressured by the lingering forces of totalitarianism and threatened by environmental destruction.



## ONE MAN'S BIBLE

**First published:** *Yige ren de shengjing*, 1999  
(English translation, 2002)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Visiting Hong Kong with a German-Jewish lover, the narrator remembers his sufferings during the Cultural Revolution and ponders the meaning of human existence in the contemporary world.*

In *One Man's Bible*, Gao Xingjian juxtaposes two time periods. In the recent past, there are the memories of the unnamed protagonist during mainland China's disastrous Cultural Revolution. In the present, the narrator experiences a love affair with Margarethe, a German-Jewish woman with whom he visits Hong Kong in 1996 to stage one of his experimental plays.

Drawing on the author's personal experiences, *One Man's Bible* also showcases Gao's formal literary experiments in the vein of modernism. Most strikingly, whenever the protagonist remembers his past, he uses the third person singular, "he," to refer to himself. Relating his present experiences, he switches to "you" when talking about himself. This literary technique is intended to indicate the fragmentary nature of the modern human self.

As the protagonist and Margarethe indulge in their love affair, his memories bubble to the surface in a string of fragmentary episodes highlighting the tremendous amount of suffering as Mao Zedong and his wife Jiang Qing unleashed the Cultural Revolution on their Communist subjects from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976. *One Man's Bible* reveals a nightmare world where children spied on and denounced their parents, playmates, and teachers. Then neighbor was forced to speak against neighbor; physical harm, banishment, or death lurked around every corner.

At the same time he is relating past events, the narrator also engages in philosophical interludes about the nature of storytelling, philosophy, memory, and human consciousness. Through his protagonist, Gao attempts to arrive at a modern view of human existence, haunted by the experience of totalitarian regimes. In the present, the narrator is worried about the dangers of interpersonal rela-

tionships that are always fraught with the danger of personal hurt and disappointment. The narrator's sexual liaisons remain unsatisfactory, yet he cannot give up his longing to find a soul mate.

Gao's rendition of the horrible effects of the Cultural Revolution paint a stark picture of the persistence of fear augmented by daily betrayals and denunciations. To protect himself, the narrator joins the system, only to realize that exile and social disassociation remain his only means of survival. The passages dealing with the past are on par with other superb accounts of this time, such as Jung Chan's *Wild Swans* (1992).

In the novel's present, the narrator seeks to chart the course of his future from a hotel room in Hong Kong in 1996, one year before the city is handed over to the People's Republic of China. At times using the technique of metafiction and directly addressing the reader about his endeavor to tell his story, the narrator is torn by his lust for life, including sexuality, and his great world-weariness.

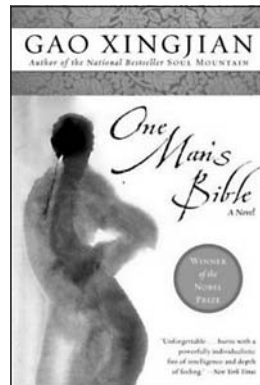
*One Man's Bible* ends inconclusively with the nar-

rator remembering an afternoon sitting in a restaurant in the French city of Perpignan. As various pieces of classical music are played by a live band nearby, he reflects on his past life and his decision to continue to write, and to seek love, despite his previous disappointments. Totalitarian China tried to break his soul, but language and literature have set him free.

## SUMMARY

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "Wenxue de liyou" ("The Case for Literature"), delivered in Stockholm on December 7, 2000, Gao Xingjian stated that he wrote neither to educate the masses nor for a commercial market. Instead, his writing is for himself and for those readers willing to accompany him on his quest for the meaning of self, of human existence, and of humanity's role in the physical world. A reader of his two outstanding novels, his innovative plays, and his experimental short stories may concur that Gao has remained true to his goals. His writings in many genres, as well as his paintings, all question the fate of the individual soul struggling to carve out some meaning in an often hostile environment. In the end, the characters of Gao's literary work refuse to become recluses but seek the comfort of a loving other, no matter how impossible to achieve this may be.

R. C. Lutz



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*Chezhan*, pr. 1983 (*The Bus Stop*, 1996)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are some of the key encounters of the protagonist of Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain*, and how do they affect him?
- Do you feel that the journey of the protagonist of *Soul Mountain* is successful, or not? Give reasons for your viewpoint.
- According to *One Man's Bible*, how did the Cultural Revolution affect the lives of the narrator and his friends and neighbors?
- How would you characterize the relationship between the narrator of *One Man's Bible* and the character of Margarethe? How is this relationship affected by the narrator's past experiences?
- Gao Xingjian has stated that his plays aim to overcome the barriers of language and realism. Looking at one of his plays, what are some means by which he attempts to reach this goal?
- For one of his short stories, discuss Gao Xingjian's formal experimentation with the concepts of characterization, narrative structure, and realistic storytelling.

# FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA

**Born:** Fuentevaqueros, Spain

June 5, 1898

**Died:** Víznar, Spain

August 19, 1936

*Considered the most important Spanish dramatist in the twentieth century, as well as an outstanding poet, García Lorca made a major contribution to the poetical theater of his time.*

## BIOGRAPHY

The son of a well-to-do landholder, Federico García Rodríguez, and a former schoolteacher, Vicenta Lorca, Federico García Lorca (gahr-SEE-ah LAWR-kah) was born in the small village of Fuentevaqueros, Spain, near the Andalusian city of Granada on June 5, 1898. Legend has it that García Lorca was a slow walker and talker, but his mother and brother remembered that he was normal in his development. He did, however, display at an early age a vivid imagination and a strong creative flair. He was fond of staging puppet shows written and costumed by him for an audience composed of the family servants. He also liked to play the role of priest at impromptu masses. These childhood interests foretold his success as a playwright, director, and actor, and they underscore the importance of religious ritual in his life.

The years spent as a child in a rural Spanish village left an indelible imprint on his mind and inspired the many metaphors and symbols from the natural world that characterize his poetry and plays. He himself emphasized this influence:

I love the countryside. I feel myself linked to it in all my emotions. My oldest childhood memories have the flavour of the earth. . . . Were this not so I could not have written *Blood Wedding*.

García Lorca's first love was music. He played the piano extremely well and hoped that his parents would send him to Paris for lessons leading to a career as a concert pianist. They refused to grant his wish, and he turned to writing instead. Music's loss was literature's gain. He published

his first book, *Impresiones y paisajes* (1918; *Impressions and Landscapes*, 1987), a series of prose vignettes about his travels in central Spain with a student group, followed by his first book of poetry, *Libro de poemas* (1921; book of poems). In these poems, fanciful and deft though they are, he has yet to find his own voice and is much influenced by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío and two older Spanish poets, Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado.

Although he finally managed to earn a law degree at the University of Granada, García Lorca was an indifferent student bent on becoming a poet despite his father's skepticism. In 1918, he went to Madrid and took lodgings at the Residencia de Estudiantes, a private residence for students attending the University of Madrid. The residencia was a center for liberal intellectual life in the capital. Many of its residents, such as García Lorca, went on to become internationally known. Two of them were the painter Salvador Dalí, who was then especially close to García Lorca, and the film director Luis Buñuel.

The publication of *Romancero gitano, 1924-1927* (1928; *The Gypsy Ballads of García Lorca*, 1951, 1953) catapulted its author into the limelight. Using the form of the Spanish ballad, García Lorca created a modern mythology for his gypsy protagonists. They are subject to the forces of nature (a malevolent female moon kidnaps a gypsy boy; an erotic wind chases a gypsy girl) and are persecuted by the guardians of society, the infamous Spanish Civil Guard. Sensual, provocative, and dazzling, *The Gypsy Ballads of García Lorca* became a best seller overnight and branded its author as a poet inter-

ested only in Andalusian folklore, a label that García Lorca resented.

Seeking a change of environment and a new direction for his poetry, García Lorca went to New York City in June, 1929, enrolled in a class in English at Columbia University, made friends, and walked the streets of the metropolis. A few months after his arrival, Wall Street crashed, and he witnessed the hysteria provoked by this event. He responded to the vitality of African Americans and viewed them as victims of society, like the gypsies in his own country. New York's "cruel geometry," its heartlessness, the concrete wasteland, and the canyons formed by skyscrapers were overwhelming. Reading in translation the poetry of Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot helped suggest new directions that his own poetry might take. He returned to Spain, via Cuba, in March, 1930, with the manuscript of *Poeta en Nueva York* (1940; *Poet in New York*, 1940, 1955), in which a strong poetic voice denounces in surrealistic imagery the inhumanity of capitalism's prototypical city.

In 1934, the bullfighter Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, a friend and fellow writer, was fatally gored in the bull ring. *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (1935; *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter*, 1937, 1939), written a short while after the tragedy, is generally considered to be one of the finest of modern elegies.

García Lorca's interest in the theater goes back to his childhood. His first efforts as a playwright met with dismal failure in Madrid in the 1920's. While in New York, he made a vow to return to writing plays. In a letter to his family, he said, "One must think of the theater of the future." Once more in Spain, he became a popular lecturer and also organized a student theater group known as La Barraca that toured the provinces with a repertoire of classical and modern Spanish plays. García Lorca served as director, actor, and set designer. *Bodas de sangre* (pr. 1933, pb. 1935; *Blood Wedding*, 1939), the first of what was to become a trilogy on the frustration and repression of women in rural Spain, opened to an enthusiastic Madrid audience in 1933. It was followed in 1934 with the premiere of *Yerma* (pr. 1934, pb. 1937; English translation, 1941). Posthumously, *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (wr. 1936, pr., pb. 1945; *The House of Bernarda Alba*, 1947) opened in Buenos Aires in 1945. These three plays are still presented around the world and are known equally well in Russia, China, and Japan.

*Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* represent some of the most successful examples of poetry written for the stage in the twentieth century.

García Lorca's fame, his friendship with left-wing figures, his proclamations of sympathy for the workers and the poor, and his homosexuality made him an object of loathing on the part of the Fascists. He was in Granada when the Spanish Civil War broke out in July, 1936. It was a period of anarchy in which many old scores were settled. Denounced to the Fascist military commander of Granada, García Lorca was summarily executed on August 19 of that year, in Víznar, Spain. His body lies in a mass grave along with many other victims of this tragic episode in Spanish history.

### ANALYSIS

Humor, irony, and whimsy, the prime ingredients of García Lorca's early poetry, set the tone for the pervasive theme of his first books. His had been a relatively happy childhood, spent at play in a small village bathed in Mediterranean light, close to nature, where he busily observed animals and reacted to the mixture of the young, old, and infirm that naturally surrounded him. Many of his unpublished stories written as a teenager reveal a strong sense of compassion for those less fortunate than he, and this moral sense was to make itself especially felt in *Poet in New York*, as he witnessed the plight of the blacks and the poor in New York. In *Libro de poemas*, García Lorca sought the language of flowers and stones, playfully described an old lizard moving along the path like a nearsighted philosopher, and celebrated the cicada's endless need to sing. When he grew older, he realized that his childhood had been a kind of Eden, and its loss frequently provided him with poignant metaphors.

Andalusia also suggested a style and a theme for his first mature poetry. Flamenco singing (*el cante jondo*, the deep song) had come to Spain probably from Africa. Its long, monotonous wail was the province of the gypsy. In *Poema del cante jondo* (1931; *Poem of the Gypsy Seguidilla*, 1967), García Lorca attempts to imitate this emotional chant and, through metaphor, to describe some of its effects upon the listener. When he writes that "The wail imprints in the wind, the shadow of the cypress," he shows the power of the deep song to permeate everywhere and the tragic pitch reached by its feelings (the cypress is associated with death).



From the poems inspired by the *cante jondo*, it was a short step to *The Gypsy Ballads of García Lorca*, where García Lorca's gift for metaphor first astounded a large public. In primitive mythology, no dividing line exists between the natural and supernatural worlds. Elements of nature are personified and interact with humans, and the gods quarrel and make love among themselves and the inhabitants of the earth. That is the world that García Lorca attempts to re-create in his gypsy ballads. The moon hypnotizes a gypsy girl, and the wind snarls at the roof of a house in which another gypsy girl has taken refuge. Other elements of nature (trees, water) react in sympathy to the plight of the gypsies. Sex, violence, and a strange beauty of language combine to explain the attraction of these ballads.

The poet formed by a rural agrarian society found himself horrified and offended by New York. The moon loses its mythical magic and becomes a fat woman wetting the streets. Prevalent adjectives such as "hollow" (perhaps an echo of T. S. Eliot's "hollow men") and "empty" express the sense of alienation that García Lorca felt. *Poet in New York's* rage and despair speak not only for García Lorca's loneliness in this alien land but also for his outrage at the poverty and the treatment of the blacks. "El rey de Harlem" ("The King of Harlem") depicts the blacks as victims of white civilization and proposes to show as early as 1929 that "black is beautiful," and that whiteness, whether bleached or in the blush of apples, must be abolished so that the blacks can have their freedom of expression. "I denounce everyone/ Who ignores the other half," he wrote in a poem about New York's offices. Moral outrage controls the pell-mell rush of imagery and keeps the surrealistic tendency from getting out of hand. The poet, condemning the mindless slaughter of animals, mourning for the lost Eden of his childhood, and evoking a dance of death through Wall Street, has written a classic book on the alienation and despair produced by the urban landscape.

Reading Walt Whitman and meeting the American poet Hart Crane helped García Lorca come to terms with his homosexuality. His "Oda a Walt Whitman" ("Ode to Walt Whitman"), written in New York, idealizes a pure homosexual love in con-

trast with that of male prostitution. He began work on two obscure and difficult plays in which he explored homosexuality and its relation to all forms of love, *Así que pasen cinco años* (wr. 1931, pb. 1937, pr. 1945 in English, pr. 1954 in Spanish; *When Five Years Pass*, 1941) and *El público* (wr. 1930, pb. 1976; *The Audience*, 1958).

As a child, García Lorca was deeply Catholic, and some of his unpublished pieces show how closely he identified with the figure of Jesus Christ. Letters from New York to the family recount his disillusion with the coldness of Protestant churches and their lack of ritual. Even in his most pagan moments, he expresses himself from a Spanish Catholic experience, and his images often come from church icons, the history of the saints, and the Bible. His religion is also a source of his strong moral feelings in the face of economic suffering and racial prejudice.

García Lorca's dramatic trilogy, *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*, promises to be an enduring monument. Each play addresses the ultimately tragic oppression by society on the freedom of individuals. In *Blood Wedding*, a marriage of convenience is violently subverted when Leonardo, who is already married but has always longed for the bride, carries her off into the forest. He is killed by the outraged villagers, and the bride is excoriated by the bridegroom's mother. In *Yerma*, the protagonist is a childless woman (*yerma* means "barren") who does not love her husband but cannot leave him because society forbids it. In a fit of anger and frustration, she strangles her husband, thus killing her only legitimate chance of having a child. Bernarda Alba suffocates her daughters' desires and rules like a cruel despot in *The House of Bernarda Alba*. She determines that the eldest should marry first, even though the youngest is the most attractive. The suitor Pepe el Romano courts Angustias but has an affair with Adela. When Bernarda discovers what has been occurring, Adela commits suicide, but the undaunted matriarch shouts that her youngest has died a virgin, thus continuing to impose her will.

García Lorca's work is an outcry against oppression of all kinds (sexual, social, racial). Individuals need to be free to express themselves, and silence is a form of death.

## “THE GUITAR”

**First published:** “La guitarra,” 1931  
(collected in *Poem of the Gypsy Seguidilla*,  
1967)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The all-powerful guitar evokes a strange,  
magic world.*

“The Guitar” typifies García Lorca’s purpose in the *cante jondo*: to approximate in print something of the auditory experience in hearing the music. Two characteristics are notable. The sound of the guitar is like a wail (*llanto*), the same word that refers to the flamenco singing. “The lament of the guitar begins” is the opening line of the poem, and it is repeated two lines later. The guitar’s lament is monotonous and repetitious (like the wind and the rain), and García Lorca achieves this effect through further repetition. Three times he writes the phrase, “It is impossible to silence it.” Meanwhile, the strength of the guitar’s sound is sufficient to break the wine cups of dawn. Flamenco players sing and dance all night, and their revelry persists until daybreak.

For what does the guitar wail? Why is its sound so heartbreaking and haunting? In a series of brilliant metaphors, García Lorca supplies some answers, summarized in the simple lines, “It weeps for/ things far away.” “Sand of the warm south/ asking for white camellias” associates the guitar with Andalusia, situated on the Mediterranean Sea with its beaches and flowers. “It weeps arrow without target/ evening without morning.” Arrows without targets and evenings without mornings are metaphors of disorientation. Another cause for its grief is “The first dead bird/ upon the branch,” a reference to the loss of innocence, a theme that appears often in García Lorca’s verse.

Finally, this instrument that evokes so many poignant feelings itself becomes a metaphor: “Oh, guitar!/ Heart grievously wounded/ by five swords.” It is a splendid example of a García Lorca metaphor. The body of a guitar roughly approximates the shape of a heart, which is wounded by the five fingers of the person playing it. The image also evokes the common household religious print of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, wounded by the grief of the world.

## “RIDER’S SONG”

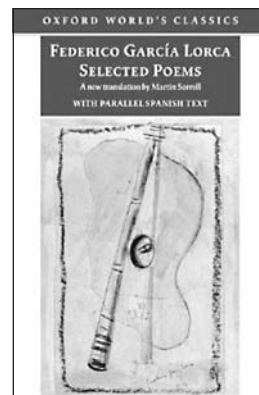
**First published:** “Canción de jinete,” 1927  
(collected in *Selected Poems of Federico  
García Lorca*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A horseman has set out on a journey to the  
Andalusian city of Córdoba; even though he  
knows the way, he will never reach his  
destination.*

In “Rider’s Song,” one of his most popular short poems, García Lorca has written a parable about the unattainability of goals. The refrain that frames the poem, “Córdoba/ Far away and alone,” indicates in somber tones the rider’s destination. Córdoba in the eleventh century was the capital of Arabic Spain and the richest city in Europe, and for a modern traveler it is still a city of great cultural wealth.

Mounted on a valiant black pony, olives in his saddlebag, the moon lighting his way, conditions seem optimum for the rider. The moon is usually a malevolent figure in García Lorca’s poetry, however, and it soon turns red, the color of violence and blood. “Although I know the roads/ I’ll never reach Córdoba,” exclaims the narrator, and the reader discovers why: “Death is looking at me/ From the towers of Córdoba.” The road seems suddenly long, and the poem ends the way that it began: “Córdoba/ Far away and alone.” The poem takes on special meaning for the reader who knows that García Lorca greatly feared death and was executed at the age of thirty-eight in the midst of a brilliant career.



## “BALLAD OF THE MOON, MOON”

**First published** 1928 (collected in *The Gypsy Ballads of García Lorca*, 1951, 1953)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Dressed as a woman, the moon descends to Earth and, by means of her dance, casts a spell on a gypsy boy and carries him off with her.*

Since it is the first poem in *Romancero gitano*, 1924-1927 (1928; *The Gypsy Ballads of García Lorca*, 1951, 1953), “Ballad of the Moon, Moon” sets the tone and also signals the role of the moon and other natural elements in the book. The moon appears in the smithy (gypsies were often blacksmiths) dressed as a woman, wearing a bustle of white lilies (suggested by the moon’s whiteness), and she begins a lascivious dance in front of a little boy left in the shop by his parents. García Lorca renders the spell cast on the boy through rhyme and repetition: “The boy stares and stares at her./ The boy keeps staring hard.” Captivated, the boy warns the moon that she must flee before the gypsies return or they will chop her up for necklaces and silver rings, typical gypsy jewelry. The words that he uses to caution the moon are incantatory, “Run away, moon, run away, moon.”

The moon, however, refuses to be frightened and answers the boy with her own prediction: When the gypsies come, they will find you on the anvil with your tiny eyes shut. Enthralled, the boy draws near. A rider is heard galloping across the plain, and in the smithy the boy’s eyes are shut. The moon gives way to the sound of dry hooves pounding on the ground, which suggests death.

The gypsies return through the olive groves, their bronze faces also under the spell of the moon. A barn owl hoots, and through the sky goes the moon, taking a boy by the hand. The boy’s body lies inside the smithy, but his spirit has gone with the moon. The gypsies, upon discovering their loss, commence to wail and shout. Outside, the air, this time a sympathetic element of nature, watches over them.

There are many stories in Greek and Roman mythology of the moon descending to the earth to capture a young man and take him away. The most

famous case is the handsome Greek shepherd Endymion, whom the moon goddess found irresistible. Thus did García Lorca create a modern mythology for his gypsies, weaving strands of ancient tales and local Andalusian culture.

## LAMENT FOR THE DEATH OF A BULLFIGHTER

**First published:** *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, 1935 (English translation, 1937, 1939)

**Type of work:** Poem

*García Lorca mourns the death of his friend, fellow poet, and famous bullfighter in terms that remind the reader of the mythical and religious source of bullfighting.*

*Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter* grows out of a series of facts that help explain some of the poem’s allusions. Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, the son of a Seville doctor, was a member of García Lorca’s generation, a patron of the arts, a writer admired for his plays, and a nationally known bullfighter who had learned his art from the great García y Belmonte. Sánchez Mejías retired from bullfighting in 1922 but allowed himself to return to the ring in 1934, close to the age of forty-three. He was gored on August 11, 1934. Taken to a clinic in Madrid, gangrene set in, and he suffered a painful end, writhing on his bed. He died on August 13. The next day, his body was placed on a train to take him for burial to Seville, and a Madrid newspaper in bold headlines announced the time of the train’s departure: AT FIVE O’CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON.

García Lorca had strong thoughts on the origin and nature of the bullfight, and it is these convictions that help explain the rhetoric of the elegy on the death of his friend. The sport, if it may be called that, was connected to the Spanish character. As García Lorca noted, “Spain [was] the only country where death is the national spectacle.” Ancient Near Eastern religions deified the cow, and many primitive religions required the annual sacrifice of an animal to ensure the fertility of the crops. Bulls were bred in Spain in Roman times, and the modern art of bullfighting began in the eighteenth cen-

ture. García Lorca viewed the bullfighter as priest, the struggle with the animal as a ritual, and the entire spectacle as a primordial pagan rite. The bull's bellow in the ring, the blood that is shed before the roaring crowd, and the entwined movement of man and animal originate, García Lorca believed, in primitive spectacles from the Mediterranean region of Europe.

The poem consists of 220 lines divided into four parts. Part 1, "The Goring and the Death," creates the turmoil that surrounded Ignacio's accident and the agony of his death. With a dirgelike effect, every other line reads "At five o'clock in the afternoon." Attributes of the goring and the clinic are strewn between each of these funereal lines: the winding sheet, the basket of lime to be thrown on the spilled blood in the ring, cotton and oxide, the operating table ("a coffin with wheels"), groups of silent men on the corners awaiting the news, and the metaphor that announces the gangrene: "death laid eggs in the wound." The gored flesh burns like the sun, and it is five o'clock on all the clocks!

Part 2, "The Spilt Blood," starts with an anguished shout, "I do not want to see it" (Ignacio's blood on the sand). The poet cries out to his old friend the moon to rush to the scene and sends for jasmines so that their whiteness will cover the blood.

Lines 67 to 74 incorporate for the first time mythical elements. The cow of the old world licking up the generations of blood spilled on the sand alludes to the primitive cow goddess. The bulls of Guisando are standing stone statues not far from Madrid, erected as part of a bull cult. With this device, García Lorca turns the personal tragedy of Ignacio's death into an event with mythic proportions, a millennial sacrifice. Ignacio did not flinch when he saw the horns near, but the "terrible mothers/ lifted their heads," for they scented once more the sacrificial blood. These terrible mothers contain, as is so often the case in García Lorca's poetry, several layers of allusion: the fates of Greek mythology and the baleful female goddesses in different religions.

The elegy demands a recitation of the deceased's qualities, and García Lorca waxes eloquent. Ignacio is a prince, his strength a river of lions, his laughter as white as a lily, his countenance a blend of Rome and Andalusia. He knew how to

fight, but he was also an artist "soft with the ears of corn." Now, however, his blood ("nightingale of his veins") soaks into the earth, to form part of a pool of agony that stretches to the stars. No chalice can contain it, no song can smother it. The poet shouts once more: "I do not want to see it!!"

Part 3, "Body Laid Out," presents a series of complex images evoked by the thought of Ignacio's body awaiting its transport to Seville to be buried. He is stone cold, defenseless (rain penetrates his mouth); mourners crowd around the body, creasing the shroud. The scene needs men with hard voices to accompany this captain bound by death. Finally, the poet releases the body: "Go, Ignacio: do not feel the hot bellow./ Sleep, fly, rest: the sea also dies!"

After the preceding torrent of grief, part 4, "Absent Soul," has a haunting, quiet sadness, a final acceptance. The loneliness of the dead and their eventual disappearance into oblivion form its basic themes. The bull, the fig tree, the child no longer know Ignacio, because he has died forever. Autumn will come and go, death will continue. Only art will preserve Ignacio, and thus García Lorca returns to the purpose of all elegies, to erect a verbal monument in words to the departed individual. Many readers think that García Lorca wrote his own epitaph in the final stanza: "Not for a long time will there be born, if indeed he is born,/ an Andalusian so famous, so rich in adventure."

## BLOOD WEDDING

**First produced:** *Bodas de sangre*, 1933 (first published, 1935; English translation, 1939)

**Type of work:** Play

*García Lorca's first hit, Blood Wedding, using prose and poetry, recounts the story of a rural wedding in southern Spain that ends in violence.*

*Blood Wedding* bestowed fame and fortune overnight on its author. In 1928, García Lorca read a newspaper account of a wedding that ended in tragic circumstances near Almería in southern Spain. He clipped the article, reread it five years

later, and in a week finished his play, which became a hit in Madrid, Barcelona, and Buenos Aires. In *Blood Wedding*, García Lorca forcefully presents the theme of his three tragedies: Love that is unfulfilled because of the need to preserve honor and appearances results in death. A good-natured, hardworking young man contracts matrimony with a woman. The bridegroom is the only surviving member of a family that has been involved in a feud with the Felixes, and his mother is still overcome with a mixture of rage and fear that her only surviving son will meet the same fate. In rural Spain, where there were no secrets, it was known that the bride had been seeing someone else before the engagement. She is still madly in love with Leonardo (of the Felix family), who is married and the father of a boy. While the wedding celebration continues with singing and dancing, Leonardo rides away with the new bride. He is pursued by the groom, and the two men kill each other, thus causing the mother's forebodings to come true.

This simple plot summary does little to account for the sharp visual and verbal impact of the drama. García Lorca assigned a different color to each one of the scenes and characters. The groom's house has yellow walls, a pink cross accents the bride's dwelling, and the scene of the wedding has shades of whites, grays, and cool blues. Flowers are assigned to each character: carnations to the groom, a crown of orange blossoms to the bride. Folk lullabies are used for their musical effect and to advance the plot, and folk dances enliven the foreground of the wedding, while in the background the passions of Leonardo and the bride impel them to a tragic conclusion.

Signs of the care with which this play was crafted are the various clues at the outset as to the fate that will befall the characters. The mother, still grieving over the murder of her husband and first son, curses all knives and sharp-edged weapons. Leonardo's first speech reveals that he has had to put new shoes on his horse, suggesting that he is riding his stallion to death by making nightly visits to the bride-to-be. Even the lullabies contain portents. Leonardo's mother-in-law sings to her grandchild about a giant horse (Leonardo) that refuses to drink water (conform to custom) and rides with a silver dagger (death) in his eyes, through the gray valleys where the mare (the bride) awaits.

Vintage García Lorca is the blend of fantasy and

symbolism in the first scene of act 3. Leonardo and the bride take refuge in the forest from the groom, and in this section of the play García Lorca exercises his talent for magic and mystery that marked *The Gypsy Ballads of García Lorca*. He sets the stage carefully: "A forest at night with great moist tree trunks and a murky atmosphere. Two violins are playing." The moon emerges in the guise of a young white-faced woodcutter and recites a poetic monologue about her mythical powers. She wants no shadows and will shine on the groom's white vest and point the way for the daggers. A barefoot beggar woman appears, her face hardly visible under the dark-green folds of her garment. Representing death, she directs the moon to throw lots of light, for they cannot escape.

The vengeful, unforgiving figure of the mother is plain. Her grief is monumental, and she scorns the bride's passion. The fact that the bride in the final scene proclaims that she is still a virgin seems beneath contempt as far as the groom's mother is concerned.

As Leonardo and the bride cling to each other in the forest and await the groom and his men, they are portrayed as if in the grips of a force much stronger than they. "I love you, but leave me," cries the bride, torn between her passion and her honor. Leonardo replies that the blame is not his, "The blame belongs to the earth,/ And to the smell that comes/ From your breasts and your braids." It is this powerful passion in conflict with tradition and honor that creates the tragic conclusions of the three plays in García Lorca's trilogy.



## SUMMARY

Readers of Federico García Lorca's poetry and plays encounter an intense, shattering emotion, one that occasionally hovers on the edge of melodrama but that frequently stirs deep feelings. Lovers of metaphor are fascinated by the play of his imagination and keep discovering new interpretations as they read his verse. García Lorca is not a difficult poet, however, for he believed in keeping



firm control, obeying what he called the logic of the poem.

After he was executed by the Fascists in 1936, he became a symbol of the poet as a victim of repression. His reputation outside Spain grew accordingly. Now, with the history of the Spanish Civil War long past, it is a testimony to his talent that he continues to be probably the best known of modern Spanish writers.

Howard Young

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Show how music serves as metaphor in the poetry of Federico García Lorca.
- Examine García Lorca's thesis that New York in the late 1920's was an effective symbol of the Western world.
- Compare García Lorca's conception of the ballad with the conception that governed the folk ballads of England and Scotland.
- To what extent does *Blood Wedding* depend on a concept of honor that is difficult for an American audience to understand?
- Consider the subject of frustrated love in García Lorca's plays.

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## GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

**Born:** Aracataca, Colombia  
March 6, 1928

*One of the most admired writers of Latin American fiction, Nobel laureate García Márquez has brought worldwide recognition to the contributions of Latin American authors in contemporary world literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

On March 6, 1928, Gabriel José de la Concordia García Márquez (gahr-SEE-ah MAHR-kays) was born in Aracataca, Colombia. The oldest of eleven children of Luisa Santiago Márquez Iguarán and Gabriel Eligio García, the boy was reared by his grandparents during his early years. He refers to his grandfather, a retired colonel, as the “guardian angel” of his “infancy.” The old man instilled in him a love for the past, especially for the period of the Colombian civil wars from 1899 to 1903. García Márquez also grew up hearing his grandmother and aunts tell stories of local myths and legends.

After graduation from the National Secondary School near Bogotá in 1946, García Márquez entered the National University of Colombia to study law. While there, he also read poetry avidly and began to write short stories. In 1948, an assassination in Bogotá triggered a civil war that first drew García Márquez’s attention to politics and that caused the closing of the National University. When he resumed his studies at the University of Cartagena, García Márquez studied journalism. In 1950, he went to work as a columnist for *El Heraldo* in Barranquilla. He also spent considerable time reading and discussing fiction with other journalists and writers in local cafés and bookstores. In that context, García Márquez first became acquainted with the works of European and North American authors that particularly influenced his

own work, including the writings of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and Joseph Conrad.

In 1954, García Márquez returned to Bogotá as a film critic and reporter for *El Espectador* and, in his spare time, composed short stories. He published the first major work, *La hojarasca* (*Leaf Storm*, 1972) in 1955. In addition to fiction, García Márquez also wrote a true account of the shipwreck of a Colombian naval destroyer, which *El Espectador* published anonymously. This story included material about illegal government activity and stirred so much controversy that the editor of *El Espectador* sent García Márquez abroad to work as a foreign correspondent. When the Colombian government eventually shut down *El Espectador* altogether, García Márquez remained in Paris. The two political novels that he wrote during this time were well received in literary circles: *La mala hora* (1962; revised, 1966; *In Evil Hour*, 1979) and *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (1961; *No One Writes to the Colonel*, 1968). His fiction did not receive widespread critical acclaim until the publication of his surprise best seller *Cien años de soledad* (1967; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970).

In 1958, García Márquez left Europe to work for the newspaper *Momento* in Caracas, Venezuela. That same year, he married Mercedes Barcha and resumed work on his short stories. From 1959 to 1965, however, García Márquez—who, like most Latin American intellectuals, supported the Cuban Revolution—concentrated fully on journalism and political issues. His return to fiction resulted in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel that has risen to the foreground of twentieth century fiction. Be-

cause of the financial security that it brought, García Márquez was able to support his wife and two sons and still devote himself full time to writing fiction. He also began to travel widely, denouncing political dictatorship and speaking in support of human rights.

In 1985, García Márquez published *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1988), another major work of fiction that received laudatory reviews. A subsequent novel, *El general en su laberinto* (1989; *The General in His Labyrinth*, 1990), challenged the image of Simón Bolívar—generally considered to be Latin America's greatest hero—and sparked great controversy in Latin America. He subsequently published several additional collections of short stories, including *Doce cuentos peregrinos* (1992; *Strange Pilgrims: Twelve Stories*, 1993); a novel, *Memoria de mis putas tristes* (2004; *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, 2005); and several works of nonfiction, including *Noticia de un secuestro* (1996; *News of a Kidnapping*, 1997) and the first volume of his projected three-volume memoir, *Vivir para contarla* (2002; *Living to Tell the Tale*, 2003). His later books show an increasing attention to political and social concerns, a marked change from his earlier works and their tendency toward Magical Realism and the fantastical. Nevertheless, most of his works retain their air of the imaginative and continue to demonstrate his highly artistic style.

In 1971, García Márquez received an honorary doctorate from Columbia University, and in 1972 he won the prestigious Rómulo Gallegos Prize in Venezuela and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature; he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982. Returning to Colombia in 1990 after living abroad for thirty years, García Márquez continued to commute with his wife among homes in Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia. In 1999, García Márquez was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer, an event that induced him to finally begin work on his memoirs. *La República*, a Peruvian daily newspaper, incorrectly reported his imminent death in 2000.

## ANALYSIS

Latin American fiction flourished in the 1960's and became appreciated as a powerful force in contemporary literature. Along with fellow Latin American authors Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sabato, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes, García Márquez is one of the most significant literary in-

fluences in this period, known as the Latin American Boom. His fiction presents a reality quite unlike that in the novels of previous generations. Blending history, folktales, and imagination, García Márquez creates an expanded vision of life. Literary critics have coined a term for this bold interweaving of imagination and reality: Magical Realism.

The bulk of García Márquez's fiction, which includes social and political issues and commentary, is set between the early 1800's and the early 1900's in the mythical village of Macondo, which resembles his childhood village of Aracataca. García Márquez researches details of daily life in the nineteenth century for use in his fiction. He also considers himself "quite disrespectful of real time and space," and, thus, free to build relationships between different worlds and eras. Because he has "no desire to change a detail" that he likes "just to make the chronology function properly," García Márquez writes stories that free readers from space/time boundaries and encourage them to take a fresh look at the world. García Márquez seems to suggest through his writings that nothing is impossible.

Through rich and luxurious language, García Márquez characteristically offers detailed images of persons, places, and things. He provides his readers mathematical precision. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, a breakfast consists of exactly eight quarts of coffee, thirty eggs, and juice from forty oranges. Rain falls in Macondo for precisely four years, eleven months, and two days. Such concrete specificity within myth and legend helps to create the stimulating interplay between reality and fantasy for which García Márquez is best known.

Thematically, García Márquez attends to topics and ideas that challenge the established order in people's lives. A recurring image is a plague that comes and changes all that it touches. García Márquez once said that the only subject about which he writes is solitude, and it is certainly a recurring theme. He also said that all of his books are about love, and that also seems to be true. Frequently, he investigates the relationship among love, solitude, and power, especially with an eye toward uncovering an individual's relationship to his or her fate or destiny. Themes of nostalgia and dignity pervade some of his more mature works.

Death is another characteristic theme, although the gloomy perspective prior to 1959 contrasts sharply with García Márquez's more mature work. García Márquez also writes frequently about both the humor and the emotions of aging, from his first two books, *Leaf Storm* and *No One Writes to the Colonel*, to his more recent *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *The General in His Labyrinth*. He cites his grandparents as the models for most of the mature people in his fiction. Other influences from García Márquez's childhood also abound: old houses, ancient matriarchs, a sense of nostalgia, civil wars, colonels, and banana companies, among other things.

Although García Márquez's work shows thematic consistency, his tone and style have undergone considerable changes. His early work was generally most concerned with communicating content through a precise, controlled style. An exception was his elaborate, dense first work of fiction, *Leaf Storm*. In the late 1950's, however, García Márquez's approach became more allegorical, and he entered into a period of literary crisis, a period of severe self-criticism and dissatisfaction with previous work. Caught between his old sparse style and the growing mythical approach, with its flowing language, supernatural occurrences, and hyperbole, García Márquez wrote no fiction until 1965. Then, while he was driving from Mexico City to Acapulco, García Márquez had a vision of how he could, at last, tell the story of his childhood, and he immediately returned home to write in seclusion, sometimes for fourteen hours a day. Writing constantly for one and a half years, he produced the masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which his Magical Realism blossomed fully.

Some critics have been disappointed that, since this novel, García Márquez has not extended Magical Realism. García Márquez explains that his work as a whole is founded on "a geographic and historical reality" that is not that of "magical realism and all those other things which people talk about." He takes a different path in every book, he says, because "style is determined by subject, by the mood of the times."

The fiction García Márquez created after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* continues to display his wide-ranging and considerable literary skills. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, written in the author's own maturity about an octogenarian protagonist, offers an almost childlike delight in

the powerful discovery that old age can be a time of love, joy, and passion. *The General in His Labyrinth*, in contrast, presents an almost humorless investigation of García Márquez's ever-present themes of solitude, love, and destiny. Both reflect the author's own vibrant energy and enthusiasm for life. Although death is a major theme in his work, García Márquez has said that he does not pay much attention to it because it distracts him from the most important thing in life: what one does. By interacting with the worlds that García Márquez creates, his readers become better able to reflect upon their own worlds—the realities that they themselves create—and embrace more of the field of all possibilities in their own daily lives.

## ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE

**First published:** *Cien años de soledad*, 1967  
(English translation, 1970)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Six generations of the founding family of Macondo are chronicled in this comic masterpiece.*

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* traces the Buendía family dynasty through six generations of chaotic decline. Family patriarch José Arcadio Buendía founds the almost-perfect town of Macondo with three hundred inhabitants, all under age thirty. A man of "unbridled imagination" who always goes "beyond the genius of nature and even beyond miracles and magic," José Arcadio devotes his life to the quest for knowledge, but he is finally overwhelmed by the intensity of his own pursuit and spends his last days chained to a chestnut tree, preaching in Latin against the existence of God.

José Arcadio's son, Colonel Aureliano, shepherds Macondo into a period of political rebellion and conflict reminiscent of the civil wars that were part of the lore and culture of García Márquez's youth. A giant American fruit company develops the town, but worker exploitation erupts in a violent strike, and thousands are killed in a secret massacre. Úrsula, matriarch of the family and José Arcadio's wife, struggles to save the family from an



evil destiny for more than 130 years. Her death, however, signals the demise of the family and of Macondo. At the end, the two surviving Buendías together conceive a child, who is born with the prophesied curly tail of a pig. Both the child and his mother die, leaving the father alone.

Until its final pages, the novel seems to be written from the perspective of an omniscient author. At the conclusion, the reader learns that the story has been the unfolding of the prophecy made by the old gypsy Melquíades, who had long ago recorded the history of the Buendías family in Sanskrit. As his final act, the father—sole survivor of the family, as well as of the town of Macondo—deciphers the parchments of Melquíades. He begins to read of the very instant that he is living, “prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last pages of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror.” He realizes that at the precise instant that he finishes reading, the entire story will be wiped from the memory of humankind and that it will never be repeated, because “races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.”

Thus, the novel becomes a world that both gives birth to, and consumes, itself. The main theme is solitude, humankind’s destiny in a universe that it can never completely comprehend or control, and

the novel has been interpreted as a family saga, as a history in microcosm of Colombia, and even as an epic myth of the human experience moving from the paradise of Eden to the apocalypse. With majestic irony and magic, García Márquez interweaves details of everyday life with the fantastic to create such memorable images as a plague of insomnia that afflicts the

whole town; Remedios the Beauty, who rises to heaven still clutching the bedsheets that she was hanging out to dry; and a cloud of yellow butterflies, which follow Mauricio Babilonia everywhere he goes. Although grounded in Latin American history, this work employs facts and figures to suit poetic purposes. For example, García Márquez ex-

pands the number of people who actually died in the United Fruit Company strike of 1928 from seventeen to more than three thousand to reflect popular Latin American legend, and as a hyperbole reflecting a vast number of bodies—enough bodies to fill a train.

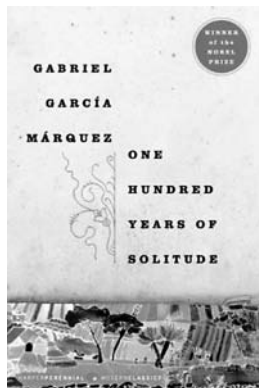
This novel circles and recircles. García Márquez describes José Arcadio Buendía as one with enough lucidity to sense that time can stumble and have accidents, and therefore splinter and leave an “eternalized fragment” in a room. In this novel, darting back and forth between visions and memories of generations, García Márquez bends both time and space to create his own eternalized fragment of reality. Critics worldwide have hailed this masterpiece as Magical Realism at its best.

## LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA

**First published:** *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, 1985 (English translation, 1988)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An octogenarian renews his courtship of a woman who spurned him more than fifty years ago, and this time love triumphs.*



*Love in the Time of Cholera* is a celebration of life over death, love over despair, and health over sickness. It is the story of Florentino Ariza, who was rejected by Fermina Daza in his youth. He maintains a silent vigil of unrequited love for fifty-one years, nine months, and four days, until he meets Fermina again at her husband’s wake and renews his suit. The novel spans a period from the late 1870’s to the early 1930’s, and it is set in a South American community modeled after Cartagena, Colombia, and besieged by civil wars and plagues.

Florentino, an eighteen-year-old apprentice telegraph operator, sees thirteen-year old Fermina and falls madly in love. Fermina’s father finds out and sends his daughter on an extended trip to remove her from temptation. She returns years later, rejects Florentino, and accepts the proposal of a cultured physician and cholera specialist, Dr. Juvenal Urbino. Although Florentino continues to love Fermina throughout the years, he also continues

his own social relationships—engaging in 622 long-term liaisons, which he records in a series of notebooks—and becomes president of a riverboat company. Then Florentino learns that eighty-one-year-old Juvenal has died, falling off a ladder trying to capture a condescending, bilingual parrot. Although *Love in the Time of Cholera* does not have the extended fantasy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, touches of unexpected, delightful humor—like the parrot—abound. In the midst of careful detailing, it is almost as if García Márquez winks and turns his head to tell the reader a private joke.

When Florentino attends Juvenal's wake at the Urbino home, Fermina orders him to leave. Undaunted, he launches a fervent, youthful courtship and eventually triumphs, consummating his passion on a riverboat during a trip on the Magdalena River. The ship is unable to dock because of an outbreak of cholera on board, and the crew and passengers are running low on supplies. Florentino is focused on life, not death. At the end of the novel, the captain asks Florentino how long he thinks they can keep going up and down the river, and Florentino responds, "Forever."

This novel differs considerably from much of García Márquez's previous fiction. It is a more precise and simple story, in contrast to his often complicated multiple narratives. Except for a brief section in the beginning, the plot proceeds chronologically. Although reality and fantasy intermingle, the fantastic in this novel is not as fantastic as in other works, and the line between the two is less blurred. Critics have suggested that *Love in the Time of Cholera* reads like a nineteenth century novel in the majestic narrative tradition.

García Márquez continues to address his enduring themes of love and destiny; this novel is an optimistic celebration of life. Evil and negativity are present, and this time his characteristic plague is cholera. In this novel, however, such situations make people want to live more, not less. García Márquez has explained that Fermina and Floren-

tino's romance—which is based on the relationship of his father and mother—was sparked by an image that he once saw: an elderly couple, very much in love, dancing on the deck of a ship. García Márquez told an interviewer that he could not have written *Love in the Time of Cholera* when he was younger because it includes points of view that he did not have in his youth. He continued, "I think that aging has made me realize that feelings and sentiments, what happens in the heart, are ultimately the most important."

## THE GENERAL IN HIS LABYRINTH

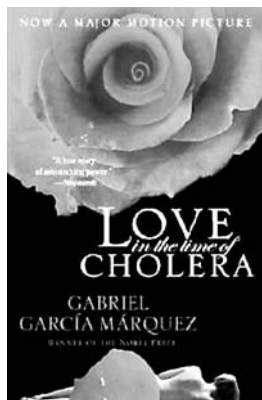
**First published:** *El general en su laberinto*, 1989 (English translation, 1990)

**Type of work:** Novel

*General Simón Bolívar reflects on his life and career as he proceeds on his final journey through the Colombian landscape.*

In keeping with the narrative structure of some of his other works of fiction—*One Hundred Years of Solitude* in particular—the text of *The General in His Labyrinth* begins with the story's ending, when General Simón Bolívar is facing the end of his career and life. The reader is introduced to an aging, frail Bolívar, who is a mere shadow of the legendary figure he once was. Against the backdrop of his own native land, García Márquez weaves the fantastic and grotesque into a fictionalized tale of the hero's last days, bringing to life a very human portrait of this legendary figure and the culture he helped create.

The story takes place as Bolívar travels along the Magdalena River, his journey along which acts as a metaphor for the hero's psychological and emotional journey. As he follows the river's winding path, he reflects—sometimes lucidly, sometimes not—on the events of his life and the achievements and failures he has met. Following his resignation as president, the real-life Bolívar had set out along the Magdalena River to travel to the coast and eventually make his way to Europe. García Márquez's fictionalized version of the hero follows the same path and with the same results: He never makes it



to the end of this journey, dying before he reaches the coast and relieving himself of the impossible decision to leave the land of which he is so much a part.

The story speaks to the cultural lore and legends passed down to García Márquez by his grandfather and others around whom he grew up. Though by the time of García Márquez's youth Bolívar was no longer the predominant contemporary heroic figure, the legendary status of *El Libertador* (The Liberator) lives on to this day and helps to shape Colombian and Latin American culture. It is therefore with a certain degree of risk that García Márquez takes on this subject, especially given the novel's sometimes unflattering portrayals of Bolívar and his decline at the end of his life, as well as the highly fictionalized and fantastic accounts of this poorly recorded and little-known final journey.

The historical setting in which the story takes place is a very real part of the Colombian cultural landscape, and García Márquez largely consigns his narrative to historical accuracy in that respect. Nevertheless, his imaginative flair is as alive in this novel as in his others, and it helps to color the historical elements of the story with the same fantastical flair apparent in his other works. The General in the novel is a largely beloved historical figure who, even in his aging, decrepit body, retains the grandeur of the larger-than-life hero of previous times. His mental journey allows the story to transcend the bounds of time and place and to venture even into the imagined or fantasized. The historical setting of the novel places far more rigid bounds on García Márquez's narrative than those found in his works of Magical Realism. However, the work as a whole is representative of the evolving nature of García Márquez's body of literature, which increasingly finds itself situated in the very real culture and history of the author's homeland.

## LIVING TO TELL THE TALE

**First published:** *Vivir para contarla*, 2002  
(English translation, 2003)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*This is the first volume in a projected three-volume memoir, outlining García Márquez's life from his birth to the day he proposed to his wife.*

The central story of *Living to Tell the Tale* is Gabriel García Márquez's journey with his mother to sell the home in which he had grown up. This journey sparks an outpouring of memories and initiates a theme of change—temporal, personal, and cultural—that pervades the book. Other significant themes include personal dignity and nostalgia. As with his other works, this text plays with chronology and weaves autobiographical episodes in and out of memory, popular culture, and historical context. As noted in the book's opening epigraph, "Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it."

García Márquez's memoir takes its shape against the backdrop of cultural, political, and literary events in Colombia, spanning three decades and describing the landscape of the region between the 1920's and the 1950's. The memoir's narrative is stunning in its ability to bring to life the socio-cultural setting that gave birth to one of Colombia's most beloved literary figures. Nevertheless, the book received strong criticism for its excessively lengthy and at times seemingly unnecessary expository passages.

Readers familiar with the author's works of fiction will find in this memoir numerous clues to his inspirations for settings, characters, plots, and many of the fantastic elements apparent in his fictions. Many elements of the story serve to highlight the Colombian landscape in which García Márquez's personal narrative, as well as so many of his other stories, take place. Along the way, the reader meets many of the true-to-life individuals that are the basis for many of García Márquez's more colorful characters. He also recounts some of the lore handed down to him by the elders of his family—stories, folklore, and superstitions that provide the context for some of his stories' plot lines.

García Márquez frequently pauses to mention the incidents and moments in which he realized his path to becoming a writer. The first chapter outlines an argument with his mother regarding his career that takes place when he is in his early twenties. He makes clear to her his choice to become a writer, and throughout the rest of the book he justifies that decision through numerous anecdotes and tidbits of personal history. He describes the literary circles in which he made his first forays into authorship, and he mentions many established writers who were the inspiration for his own writing career—William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Joseph Conrad among them. His dedication to his personal journey toward becoming an author, journalist, and poet is an inspiration to budding writers of a later generation.

The memoir recounts many largely factual events and experiences that helped to shape García Márquez's life and career. As a memoir and not a strict autobiography, the story at times veers toward the fantastic and unbelievable, with hyperbolized characters, odd coincidences, and some

anecdotes that the author admits to having fabricated in his own memory. Though the tone of this work is inconsistent, drifting at times between the dryly accurate and the fantastically unbelievable, the work offers overall a literary window to the life of a literary man.

## SUMMARY

The fiction of Gabriel García Márquez is an investigation of what has been called "poetic truth." Most of his work presents pictures of nineteenth century Latin American life that are recognizable in many respects, but García Márquez also deals with deeper truths and investigates more universal patterns. To do so, he blends fantasy and realism in what critics have called Magical Realism, creating works that have earned him not only the Nobel Prize in Literature but also the kind of recognition that he says he has always desired: people reading and talking about his books "not with admiration or enthusiasm but with affection."

*Jean C. Fulton; updated by Rachel E. Frier*

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*El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, 1985 (*Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1988)

*El general en su laberinto*, 1989 (*The General in His Labyrinth*, 1990)

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*Del amor y otros demonios*, 1994 (*Of Love and Other Demons*, 1995)

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#### SHORT FICTION:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are some examples of Gabriel García Márquez's Magical Realism? How do these examples help shape the text in which they appear?
- To what extent do the recurrent themes of his works—love and solitude, nostalgia and dignity, death and destiny—reflect the cultural context in which García Márquez writes? To what extent are these themes more universal?
- *The General in His Labyrinth* and *Living to Tell the Tale* are both based very strongly on real, historical events, yet incorporate a great number of fictive or imaginative elements. In what ways does the inclusion of the fictional benefit or detract from the reader's experience and/or understanding of the historical events?
- In what ways do the works of García Márquez help to bridge a literary gap between the works of Latin American writers and North American and European writers?
- In interviews and elsewhere, García Márquez has alluded to the very personal experiences that are the basis for many of his characters, settings, and plots. What might this pattern suggest about the author's views on the nature of literature?
- How has *One Hundred Years of Solitude* shaped readers' and critics' expectations of Magical Realism, both within García Márquez's texts and in a broader literary canon?



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# KAHLIL GIBRAN

**Born:** Besharri, Lebanon

January 6, 1883

**Died:** New York, New York

April 10, 1931

*While Gibran is best known for his poetry and short stories, he also is recognized for his drawings and influence on the poetic form of Arabic literature.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Kahlil Gibran (juh-BRON) was born in Besharri, Lebanon, on January 6, 1883, the son of Khalil and Kamila Gibran. He had a stepbrother, Peter, and two sisters, Marianna and Sultana. Family life was marked by economic insecurity and frequent parental arguments. As an escape from such conditions, Gibran spent much time in the nearby countryside. In particular, he liked the region called the Cedars of Lebanon, which was filled with mountains, gorges, rivers, and waterfalls. The beauty of the area fueled his romantic dreaming. His writings and drawings often drew upon these childhood images and experiences.

The family had few material possessions, so Gibran often made his own toys—objects like kite-flying vehicles and waterwheels. The attention and praise he received when he shared his creations led him to equate creative work with love. This idea remained with him throughout his life. As for education, Gibran did not have even what little schooling was available for boys of his day: learning Arabic and basic mathematical calculations. While biographers disagree as to the education he did receive, it generally is agreed that Kahlil had a tutor who helped and encouraged him. Gibran was eight years old when his father was arrested and charged with embezzlement. When his father was found guilty, all of the family's possessions were seized, leaving them only the clothes they were wearing. Kamila decided to escape this disgrace by taking her family to America; they sailed on June 25, 1895. Boston became their home.

In Boston, Gibran entered public school and became acquainted with the world of theater, libraries,

and museums. He met people who took an interest in him and his artistic talents. One such person was Fred Holland Day, a publisher and photographer who became Gibran's patron. Day not only used him as a subject in his photographs but also gave him his first success as an artist when, in 1898, several of his drawings were used as book covers for published books. In addition, Day introduced the young boy to other persons in the art world who could be of help. One such person was Lilla Cabot Perry, a versatile painter. She took an interest in Gibran, often used him as one of her models, and probably gave him his first set of paints.

Day also introduced the young man to a wide range of authors and literature. Of particular interest was the *Classical Dictionary* (1788) by John Lempriere, an English scholar. This reference book, widely used in the nineteenth century, described the gods and goddesses of classical mythology and history. According to Gibran, this book led him to renounce his Maronite Christian religion and provided him with information that infused his writings.

After three years in Boston, Gibran returned to Lebanon to study Arabic. From there he went to Paris to study art and drawing. While in Paris, he published *Al-Arwāḥ al-Mutamarridah* (1908; *Spirits Rebellious*, 1948), a book that led to his being declared an exile by the Turkish government, to his excommunication from the Maronite Church, and to the banning of his books in Lebanon. He was pardoned in 1908. This book, like many of Gibran's early works, revealed his concern about conditions in his homeland.

Gibran returned to Boston in 1902, when his sister Sultana died. Within the next year, both his stepbrother Peter and his mother Kamila also died. Gibran remained in Boston until 1911, when he moved to New York City. Marianna, his remaining sister, supported Gibran while he painted and wrote. His first art show was in Boston in 1904. It was during this show that Gibran met Mary Haskell, a headmistress in Boston, who became his lifelong benefactress, editor, and lover. According to their love letters, published in 1972, they never physically consummated their love.

While Gibran continued to draw and paint after he moved to New York City, he also increased his literary efforts and eventually became better known for his writings than for his drawings. Gibran also spent time organizing other Arab émigré writers who lived in America. Together they published several periodicals that influenced Arabic literature.

In the 1920's, Gibran's already frail health became a major concern. By 1928, he was drinking heavily to ease the physical pain from which he suffered; within a year he was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. Gibran died on April 10, 1931, at the age of 48. He was buried with state honors in Besharri, Lebanon.

## ANALYSIS

During what has been called Gibran's first literary phase (1902-1915), he wrote exclusively in Arabic and published eight books. They included *Al Ajnīḥah al-Mutakassirah* (1912; *The Broken Wings*, 1957), *Kitāb Dam'ah wa Ibtisāmah* (1914; *Tears and Laughter*, 1946, also known as *A Tear and a Smile*, 1950), and *Al-Mawākib* (1919; *The Procession*, 1947). *The Broken Wings*, a prose poem about a young man's first love, is considered his best and most popular work in Arabic. His best poetic work is said to be *The Procession*, which explores the "complete unity of all living things as they moved toward the fulfillment of their beings." His plays and short stories became known from China to Spain.

Gibran's use of short and simple words in his early poetry introduced a new style to Arab poets, who generally prided themselves on using words that had to be looked up in a dictionary. In addition, his first writings express dismay over the poor and oppressive conditions in his homeland and often urge his countrymen to revolt against the Turks. All of his writings of this period in some way

reflect his revolt against the social, the religious, and the literary forms of the day. Many of these writings also depicted Gibran's typical hero, who used eloquent speech to overcome the Lebanese feudal lords and the clergy, who were fundamentally anti-Christian.

His best works, however, are considered to be those written between 1918 and his death in 1931. This time became known as his second literary period, when he wrote mainly in English, and his themes changed from revolt to contentment and peace. During these years he wrote few poems, but those he did reflect the same topics as his prose: the power of universal love, nature, and the essential goodness of humanity. Perhaps the difficulty he experienced using the English language was one reason he wrote more prose than poetry during this time. His English prose consists of moral fables, aphorisms, fragments of conversation, and parables. The works of this period include *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918), *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* (1920), *The Prophet* (1923), *Sand and Foam* (1926), *Jesus, the Son of Man* (1928), and *The Earth Gods* (1931). Two works published after his death were *The Wanderer: His Parables and His Sayings* (1932) and *The Garden of the Prophet* (1933).

While there are clear distinctions between the writings of the two periods, there are similarities as well. First, Gibran frequently uses himself and his homeland as the basis for his literary characters and settings. For example, *The Broken Wings*, set in Lebanon, is thought to be autobiographical. Likewise, in *The Prophet*, the young prophet Almustafa is considered to be Gibran, and the return to the "isle of his birth" is interpreted as Gibran's desire to return to Lebanon. Second, Gibran considered himself a poet-prophet-philosopher. While this combination was common in Arabic literary circles, it does not have a counterpart in the American tradition. It is widely believed in the West that philosophers are supposed to think more deeply and objectively than other people. They are supposed to analyze facts and events as well as cause-and-effect relationships. The expected result of such study is to produce general principles and concepts that may be applied to life. Except for the general principles, Gibran does not much conform to the Western concept of what a philosopher is. Third, Gibran's works are known for their mysticism, simplicity, imagery, metrical beauty, wisdom, and lofty

vision. Basic to his writings are eternal questions, such as “What is humankind’s purpose?” and “Where did humankind come from and where is it going?” He consistently deals with human relationships, questions about life and death, and the need to know oneself. His writings reflect his beliefs that life is a mixture of joy and suffering, that individuals are responsible for their own destiny, and that humans are social beings who must coexist. Other themes include the difficulties faced by women, the power of and need for truth over law, the importance of work, the concept of love as a unifying force in nature, and the possibility of reincarnation, in the sense that one returns to finish the work left undone by one’s death. Fourth, Gibran’s writings spark the imagination. Whether it is the multiple messages that can be found within the same work, the similes or metaphors drawn from nature, or the various moods created by simple words, the reader is drawn into the work and becomes a part of it.

There are two key characteristics to Gibran’s style. First, there is parallelism, repetition, and refrain. The second characteristic is a rhythm such as that found in biblical and other sacred writings. While these qualities greatly influenced Arabic literature, they are not common in American literature. This may be one reason why Gibran’s writings have never received much attention from American literary scholars.

## THE PROPHET

**First published:** 1923

**Type of work:** Narrative

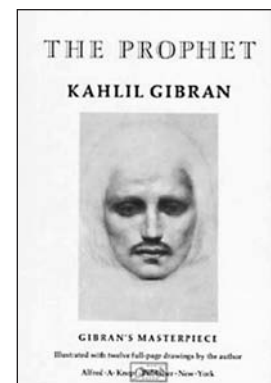
*A young prophet, about to leave the place where he has lived for twelve years, shares his wisdom through responses to questions directed to him.*

*The Prophet*, Gibran’s most famous work, has sold more copies and been translated into more languages than any of his other writings. Its popularity has been attributed to its simple style, metrical beauty, and words of wisdom. It focuses on human relationships—with others, with nature, and with God.

Almustafa, a young prophet, has lived in Orphalese for twelve years and is waiting for the ship that will take him home. The townspeople beg him to stay, but Almustafa remains firm in his decision. Then they ask him to speak to them one more time, to share his words of wisdom on love, marriage, children, giving, eating and drinking, work, joy and sorrow, houses, clothes, buying and selling, crime and punishment, laws, freedom, reason and passion, pain, self-knowledge, teaching, friendship, talking, time, good and evil, prayer, pleasure, beauty, religion, and death. His final words are a promise that he will return to Orphalese.

While the structure is narrative, the language is very rhythmic and biblical in style, using such phrases as “You have been told . . . but I say unto you” and “Verily I say unto you.” The repetition of such words as “but,” “and,” and “for” helps maintain the thought and logic of the theme as Gibran moves from response to response, as one idea suggests another. In addition, Gibran skillfully uses rhetorical questions. This can be observed in Almustafa’s response to the question about giving. He says, “What is fear of need but need itself?” and “Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable?”

Mysticism, characteristic of all Gibran’s writings, is extensively present in *The Prophet*. For example, Almustafa’s words are given to him directly by God. Furthermore, personal characteristics are attributed to inanimate concepts; love is personified, and the ocean is able to “laugh with you.” The work reflects an entrance into a progression through, and an emergence from, a mystical state. Also in keeping with the characteristics of mysticism, God is treated as a principle or a force rather than as a person; God’s divinity is in nature. Since all living creatures come from and return to God, God is present in all things, present in all places and at all times. At the same time, Almustafa acknowledges the human traits of God when he asserts, “God listens not to your words save when He Himself utters them through your lips.”



In interpreting this work, Mikail Naimy, a writer and friend of Gibran, suggests that Almustafa is Gibran. The twelve years spent in Orphalese correspond to the twelve years Gibran lived in New York. “The isle of his birth” was Lebanon, and Almitra, the seeress, represents Mary Haskell. Naimy also proposes that the promise to return to Orphalese was an example of Gibran’s belief in reincarnation. Other critics have taken a broader view and suggested that Orphalese symbolizes the earth, Almustafa’s twelve-year stay in Orphalese parallels the separation of the individual spirit from the “All-Spirit” while on earth, and the “isle of birth” is the center of Life Universal, the place where all beings are born.

## THE BROKEN WINGS

**First published:** *Al Ajniḥah al-Mutakassirah*, 1912 (English translation, 1957)

**Type of work:** Prose poem

*A young man’s first love is thwarted when the village bishop selects the young woman the young man loves as the bride for his nephew.*

*The Broken Wings* is considered Gibran’s best writing in Arabic. The prose poem, set in Lebanon, is written in the first person and skillfully uses everyday words. Gibran effectively engages the reader in the work’s depiction of emotion, alienation, and the longing for connections.

The central male character is a young Lebanese student who meets Ferris Effandi, a friend of his father. The young man meets and falls in love with Effandi’s daughter, Selma, who is described as “beautiful in both spirit and body.” They are prevented from marrying when the village bishop chooses Selma to be the wife for his nephew. After Selma marries, she and her friend do not meet again until they see each other at Effandi’s house just before his death. When Selma reveals the conditions of her unhappy marriage, Effandi asks the young man to be Selma’s brother and friend.

Defying the social customs of the day, the two meet secretly and regularly in a secluded temple to talk and share their thoughts. These bittersweet hours spent together cannot heal Selma’s failing health, which is caused by unhappiness. She begins to see death as her rescuer. When her newborn son dies, she holds him in her arms and says, “You have come to take me away my child . . . lead me and let us leave this dark cave.”

There is some debate as to whether or not *The Broken Wings* is autobiographical. Some think Gibran is recounting the story of his first love, Hala Dahir, the oldest daughter of Selim Dahir, Gibran’s tutor. Reportedly, their love was discouraged by Hala’s brother, who thought she could do better. Gibran told Mary Haskell, however, that the work is not based on any of his experiences.

As in his other Arabic works, revolt against social and religious structures is a central element. The young man in love bemoans the plight of women who are “looked upon as a commodity, purchased and delivered from one house to another . . . [they] become like an old piece of furniture left in a dark corner.” The three principal characters are brought into conflict with the local church leader, who arranges a marriage without regard for the feelings of the chosen woman or her family. This conflict, along with unrequited love, leads the two lovers to defy both religious and social practices by meeting in the temple. Not only was it a sacrilege to use the temple in this manner, but it also was taboo for married women to be in the company of other men. In keeping with Gibran’s style, the hero is both young and wise. He looks for some workable way of feeling, thinking, and living that will lead him to prevail over the social and religious forces that keep people from realizing their true selves.





## “THE POET FROM BAALBEK”

**First published:** 1912 (collected in *Thoughts and Meditations*, 1960)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Using the theme of reincarnation, this short story honors the Lebanese poet Kahlil Effandi Mutran.*

Gibran was invited to Beirut to participate in a ceremony honoring the Lebanese poet Kahlil Effandi Mutran. Unable to attend the celebration, he sent this short story to be read on his behalf. In the letter Gibran included with the story, he said that the “devilish muses” inspired this prose and that its length was short when compared with “the dignity of the great prince and outstanding poet.”

Gibran believed in reincarnation for the purpose of completing tasks left undone by the person’s death. “The Poet from Baalbek” provides a clear example of this belief. Part 1 is set in the city of Baalbek, 112 B.C.E. The emir is saddened by the death of a beloved poet. A sage from India comforts the emir with these words, “Remember . . . that the sacred Law which restores the sublimity of Spring after the passing of Winter will reinstate you a prince and him a genius poet.”

The setting for part 2 is Cairo, Egypt, and the year is 1912. A pensive prince asks his companion to recite some poetry. When the prince hears poetry that speaks to his soul, he asks who wrote the verses. The reply is, “the poet from Baalbek.” Upon hearing this, the prince remembers words spoken long ago by Mohammed: “You were dead and He brought you back to life, and He will return you to the dead and then restore you to life. Whereupon

you shall go back to him.” The prince decides that this poet must be honored because “he descends from his lofty domain to tarry among us, singing; if we do not honor him he will unfold his wings and fly back to his dwelling place.” The story ends with the prince, alone, pondering life and its mysteries.

One example of Gibran’s ability to create vivid pictures with simple words can be found in part 1, where the phrases “glittering lamps,” “gilded censers,” and “immobile slaves and guards” help set the stage and mood. Elements of mysticism and the belief in universal truths are found in the wise sayings of the poet and sage, as well as in the prince’s reflection on the mysteries of life. While a sense of sadness and longing pervades the story, there is also the joy created by the poet’s words and the deep sadness felt at his death. Gibran even involves mythology, mentioning the temple of Ishtar as a place where the poet was seen one evening. Both Gibran and Mutran supported the group honoring Mutran, The Arab League of Progress, which was created to promote Arab unity and culture.

### SUMMARY

For Kahlil Gibran, the desire for a perfect world was muted by the realities of life. Good and bad, joy and sorrow, ignorance and knowledge existed side by side. This dichotomy was reflected in his writings. On one hand, he used his Arabic writings to denounce the conditions in his homeland and to urge his countrymen to rebel. On the other hand, he promoted peace and contentment in his English works. Simple and ordinary words combined in metaphors, similes, wise sayings, parables, poems, and stories expose his belief in the power of love, God, nature, reason, understanding, honesty, and the authority of the great mind.

*Beth Adams Bowser*

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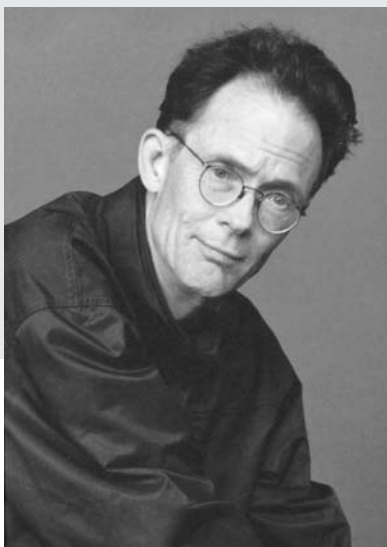
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Was Kahlil Gibran more a man of Lebanon or of the United States?
- Gibran's influence as a writer has been immense. Of his recognized literary virtues, which best explain the popularity of *The Prophet*?
- If Almustafa in *The Prophet* is Gibran, how does the author avoid a display of egoism?
- Discuss Gibran's capacity for perceiving and adapting insights that are more characteristically feminine.
- Characterize Gibran's god.



Karen Moskowitz

## WILLIAM GIBSON

**Born:** Conway, South Carolina  
March 17, 1948

*Gibson's award-winning novels and short stories helped revitalize the science-fiction genre in the 1980's by examining the mostly negative effects of computer, biological, media, and telecommunication technologies on human beings.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Gibson was born on March 17, 1948, in Conway, South Carolina. His father, William Ford Gibson, Jr., was a manager at the construction company that installed the plumbing fixtures in the Oak Ridge nuclear facility, where the first atomic bomb was built. His father's work required the family to move throughout the southeastern United States. Gibson's father died when he was eight. After his father's death, Gibson and his mother, Elizabeth Otey Williams Gibson, moved to Wytheville, Virginia, a small town in the southwestern part of the state where she grew up. Gibson's mother was an avid reader and helped restore the town library, which had burned down in 1910.

As a boy, Gibson discovered science fiction in a *Classics Illustrated* comic book adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895), which led him to Wells's original. He also watched *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet* on television and read a book on space travel so many times that the cover fell off. As a young teenager, Gibson was reading the works of J. G. Ballard, Alfred Bester, Ray Bradbury, Samuel R. Delany, and other science-fiction writers. (Gibson later wrote the foreword to the 1996 edition of Delany's novel *Dahlgren*.) At age fifteen, Gibson was sent to a boarding school in Tucson, Arizona, where he discovered William S. Burroughs, especially his 1964 novel *Nova Express*.

Gibson went on to read Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Hunter Thompson, and Thomas Pynchon.

After his mother's death when he was eighteen, Gibson dropped out of school and fled from the United States to Canada to avoid military service. He lived in Toronto for about three years and wandered around Europe for another. He married Deborah Thompson, a language instructor from Canada, in 1972. They had two children, Graeme Ford and Claire Thompson, and settled in Vancouver, British Columbia, Deborah's hometown. He later used Vancouver as the setting for his short story "The Winter Market" (1986). Gibson earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of British Columbia in 1977.

After graduating, Gibson began to write seriously while staying home and taking care of the children. Written originally as a class assignment, "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" appeared in *Unearth* magazine in 1977. The short story "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981) and the novelette "Burning Chrome" (1982) were both nominated for Nebula Awards. Terry Carr, an editor at Ace Books, encouraged Gibson to write a novel, which eventually became *Neuromancer* (1984). This novel won the Hugo, Nebula, Ditmar, Sei-un, and Philip K. Dick awards and established Gibson as one of the hottest new writers in the science-fiction genre.

After writing two more novels set in the same future as *Neuromancer* and picking up more Hugo and Nebula nominations, Gibson collaborated with Bruce Sterling on *The Difference Engine* (1991), an alternate history set in Victorian England. It was also nominated for the Nebula Award. He then wrote another science-fiction series, the Bridge

Trilogy. The first book in the trilogy, *Virtual Light* (1993), was nominated for the Hugo Award. Some of his subsequent novels, such as *Pattern Recognition* (2003) and *Spook Country* (2007), are not science fiction, but they are often placed in the science-fiction section of bookstores so that fans of *Neuromancer* can find them.

Besides novels and short stories, Gibson wrote the screenplay adaptation for "Johnny Mnemonic." The film was released in 1995 but was neither a commercial nor a critical success. Gibson blamed the postproduction editing process for the film's failure and believed that the version edited for release in Japan was better. Gibson also wrote two scripts for *The XFiles* television series and was the first of many writers involved in the third *Alien* film, released in 1992. It was Gibson's idea to include prisoners with bar codes tattooed on their foreheads, but the rest of his script was not included in the final film, although it can be read on the Internet. Over the years, he has written several additional screenplays, but none of them has been produced.

## ANALYSIS

Ironically, given the subject matter of his work, Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* and his early short stories on a manual typewriter. He did not buy an Apple II computer until he broke an irreplaceable part of his typewriter. In any case, he knew little about computers when he started writing. He first learned about the concept of the computer virus when he overheard a conversation in a hotel bar, and he never heard the term "hacker" until after finishing *Neuromancer*. Actually, his ignorance worked in his favor. If he had been more knowledgeable, he would have known that computer networks would never have the bandwidth for what his fiction described.

*Neuromancer* and his next two novels, *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), are collectively known as the Cyberspace Trilogy and take place in a dystopian future, as do some of the stories in his collection *Burning Chrome* (1986). "Cyberspace," the term Gibson coined in the novellette "Burning Chrome," is the marriage of virtual reality technology with the Internet and is a place where someone can visit or even live. Gibson got the idea for cyberspace by watching children play video games, but he does not claim the concept was original.

The three books are also called the Sprawl Trilogy. "The Sprawl" is the nickname for the Boston Atlanta Metropolitan Axis, a continuous urban area from Atlanta to Boston that is the setting of the novels. *Neuromancer* takes place around the year 2035, *Count Zero* around 2043, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* around 2050. In Gibson's mid-twenty-first century, multinational corporations are more powerful than any government, democracy is considered an obsolete concept, and the middle class has disappeared.

Gibson stopped writing about the cyberspace future after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of his key premises was that there would be a war between the Soviet Union and the United States prior to 2035. In addition, some of his descriptions of futuristic technology were dated less than a decade after *Neuromancer* was published. None of the characters has a cell phone or its mid-twenty-first century equivalent, for example.

Gibson postulated a different future for his Bridge Trilogy, which consists of the novels *Virtual Light* (1993), *Idoru* (1996), and *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1999). Set in 2005 and afterward, the trilogy gets its name from the prominence of the San Francisco Bay Bridge in the first and third books. In this series, the bridge was closed after an earthquake, was taken over by the homeless, and is now a city in itself. This concept originally appeared in Gibson's short story "Skinner's Room," which he wrote for a 1990 art exhibit, "Visionary San Francisco." The three books sometimes are called the San Francisco Trilogy because much of the action in the first and third books takes place there; the second book is set in Tokyo.

Even in his work that is not science fiction, Gibson is preoccupied with technology and its effects on human beings. *The Difference Engine*, cowritten with Bruce Sterling, is set in an alternative 1855 London, and the key premise is that Charles Babbage (1791-1871) succeeded in building a computer with the materials of the time, using a steam engine as the power supply. In reality, Babbage failed to construct a computer, although his theory was correct. Babbage called his failed invention an "analytical engine," and the novel is concerned with how history would have been changed if the information revolution had arrived a century earlier. In some ways, this novel is even more dystopian than the books in the Cyberspace Trilogy.

*Pattern Recognition* is set in the summer of 2002 and was influenced by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It is not science fiction but rather a contemporary thriller that includes encounters with the Russian mafia. The main character is Cayce Pollard, who works as a fashion industry consultant but has an allergy-like phobia to trademarks and corporate logos, such as the Michelin Man. (Gibson's daughter has a similar problem.) Cayce and other characters are obsessed with the footage of a mysterious Web video, in which bits and pieces are released one at a time and not necessarily in order, and she travels to places like Tokyo and Moscow to locate the video's creator.

## NEUROMANCER

**First published:** 1984

**Type of work:** Novel

*Assisted by a team of specialists, a futuristic computer hacker penetrates the defenses of one of the most advanced systems in the world.*

The protagonist of *Neuromancer* is Case, whom no one calls by his first name. In the opening chapter, he is barely making it as a street hustler in Chiba City, a suburb of Tokyo where many Europeans and Americans live. Case was formerly a cyberspace cowboy who stole data from banks, corporations, and governments, but he was caught double-crossing one of his clients. This client punished him by altering his nervous system so he can no longer use the neural implants required to interface with the world's computer matrix.

Case is recruited by a mysterious man named Armitage to become a cyberspace cowboy once again. In addition to a generous fee, Armitage arranges for Case's nervous system to be repaired. However, the surgeons also install sacs of poison with time-release mechanisms into Case's body so he will not consider disappearing. Armitage promises to remove the poison when Case accomplishes his mission. Case later finds out that Armitage's real name is Willis Corto and that he is a soldier who lost his eyesight, legs, part of his jaw, and his sanity in World War III. Someone has restored him physically, but Case quickly realizes that Armitage's

apparent sanity is only a facade. Armitage was inspired by the character of Commissioner Hauk in the 1981 film *Escape from New York*.

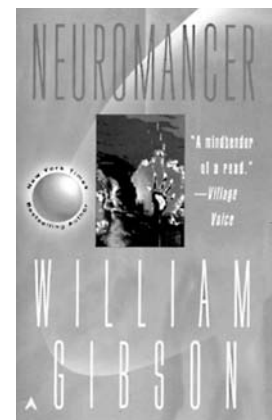
Armitage's principal associate is Molly Millions, a former prostitute who is now a "razor girl." Gibson originally created Molly for "Johnny Mnemonic" and featured her again in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Retractable razors have been implanted into her hands in place of her fingernails, and her reflexes have been enhanced.

The next person enlisted into the gang is actually a dead man, McCoy Pauley, also known as Dixie Flatline. He was a top cyberspace cowboy who became brain dead when he encountered the electronic defenses of an artificial intelligence (AI). The gang steals a cassette of his recorded memories, skills, and personality to help them crack the defenses of the same AI that killed him.

The last recruit is Peter Riviera, a holographic performing artist and Demerol addict. He is also a psychopath and the least trustworthy member of the team. His mission will be to seduce 3Jane Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool, a member of the Tessier-Ashpool family currently residing at the family home on the space habitat Freeside. The Tessier-Ashpools are one of the wealthiest families in the world, and they own Freeside.

The power behind Armitage is an AI named Wintermute, based in a mainframe in Berne, Switzerland, that is owned by the Tessier-Ashpools. It is akin to the one that killed Pauley, also owned by the Tessier-Ashpools but based in a mainframe in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Since Wintermute is not human, its motivations are mysterious, but in one sense it is the most human of all the characters in the novel. It knows in some way that it is incomplete and that there is more to existence than processing data.

The team is assisted by the inhabitants of Zion, a space colony founded by five Rastafarians convinced that they were living in the Final Days, as described in the Book of Revelations, and who regard the entire earth as a modern-





day Babylon. Rasta is an actual religion with about one million adherents. It originated in Jamaica in the 1930's and is the source of reggae music. The Rastafarians' space tug is named after Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a proponent of black nationalism and African American separatism.

*Neuromancer* shows the influence of film noir, the pre-1960 crime films photographed in black and white, because the novel's plot takes the form of a caper. In a traditional caper film, such as *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), the protagonists are a group of criminals who band together to rob a jewelry store, bank, or other location where valuables are stored. In *Neuromancer*, the goal is information, not jewelry or cash, but in Gibson's vision of the year 2035, information can be as valuable as gold. Something goes wrong, of course, and whether the gang succeeds or even survives is in doubt until the last chapter.

## VIRTUAL LIGHT

**First published:** 1993

**Type of Work:** Novel

*A simple act of petty thievery leads to murder and the discovery of a conspiracy that will affect the lives of millions of people.*

*Virtual Light* is set in a less dystopian and more satirical future than *Neuromancer*. The title refers to a form of instrumentation that produces optical sensations directly in the eye without the use of photons and which was originally developed to help blind people see. The story primarily takes place in California in 2005, as Gibson imagined it might be like when he wrote the book in the early 1990's. Besides holding normal jobs and paying taxes, the characters have lives and families, unlike most of the characters in *Neuromancer*. Some of those characters are actually motivated by moral values, and the novel has a relatively happy ending.

*Virtual Light* takes place in a time of social, political, and economic turmoil. California has split into two states, NoCal and SoCal, but governments, especially police departments, are still relevant. The main characters are immersed in and dealing with this turmoil, while powerful organizations have

their own agenda without regard to the human consequences of their actions. There are interesting supporting characters, such as Skinner, one of the first squatters on the San Francisco Bay Bridge, and Sublett, a Texan who was raised in a religion that believes God can be found on television.

Originally from Beaverton, Oregon, Chevette-Marie Washington is a bicycle courier who lives with Skinner on the bridge. The bridge became a haven for the homeless after it was closed to traffic following an earthquake.

When Chevette crashes a party in a hotel in San Francisco, an obnoxious man she immediately dislikes comes on to her. In revenge, she picks his pocket and walks away with what she thinks are sunglasses.

Berry Rydell is a former cop who is working as a security guard at the beginning of the novel. He drives around in an armored Land Rover designed by Ralph Lauren. Born in 1983, he was originally from Knoxville, Tennessee, not far from the Virginia town where Gibson grew up. Other characters comment that Rydell looks like a younger version of the actor Tommy Lee Jones. When he was a cop, Rydell was almost featured on the reality show *Cops in Trouble*, so he almost had his fifteen minutes of fame. He has a nose for trouble, in the sense of getting into it. After eighteen days on the job as a member of the Knoxville police force, he shoots and kills a man. The man was high on a drug called "dancer," was holding his girlfriend and their two children hostage, and was randomly firing shots from a gun. After the shooting, Rydell was permanently suspended from active duty and the dead man's girlfriend filed a lawsuit against Rydell and the police department.

Rydell then moved to Los Angeles and joined a security company named IntenSecure, headquartered in Singapore. When the computer in his van is hacked by a group called the Republic of Desire in order to indicate an emergency in a client's home, Rydell catches the wife of the homeowner and her gardener in a compromising situation. To



get Rydell out of Los Angeles, his supervisor finds an assignment for him in San Francisco, where he is to help find and return the glasses that Chevette has stolen. Rydell eventually discovers that he is being set up by his employer and the owners of the glasses.

The plot is driven by a “MacGuffin,” a term coined by film director Alfred Hitchcock. It refers to a plot device, usually a physical object, that drives the action but is ultimately irrelevant to the real story. The title of *The Maltese Falcon* (1929-1930, serial; 1930, book) by Dashiell Hammett refers to perhaps the most famous example of this plot device. In *Virtual Light*, the MacGuffin is the supposed sunglasses, which resemble the kind that

were worn by the singer Roy Orbison. (Skinner has a poster of Orbison in his room.) They are not sunglasses but rather virtual reality glasses that contain information for which the owners are willing to kill Chevette, Rydell, and anyone else who gets in their way.

### SUMMARY

William Gibson’s books and stories blend trends, fashions, futuristic technology, and sophisticated literary techniques. He can extrapolate current trends as well as the top traditional science-fiction writers, but he can also hold his own stylistically with the best mainstream authors.

Thomas R. Feller

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*All Tomorrow’s Parties*, 1999  
*Pattern Recognition*, 2003  
*Spook Country*, 2007

#### SHORT FICTION:

“Fragments of a Hologram Rose,” 1977  
“Johnny Mnemonic,” 1981  
“The Gernsback Continuum,” 1981  
“Burning Chrome,” 1982  
*Burning Chrome*, 1986

#### SCREENPLAY:

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*Agrippa: A Book of the Dead*, 1992 (multimedia; with Dennis Ashbaugh)  
*No Maps for These Territories*, 2000 (documentary)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- William Gibson prefers to write about the people who live on the margins of society. Why would he write about such people rather than the rich and famous?
- Is Gibson optimistic or pessimistic about the present and the future?
- Romance is generally lacking from Gibson’s books. Does Gibson believe that romantic love is impossible in our high-tech world?
- In conventional science fiction, a highly competent person overcomes formidable, but not insurmountable, obstacles to solve problems affecting large numbers of people. In what ways do Gibson’s books depart from this template?
- What is Gibson’s attitude toward computers and other high-tech devices?

**About the Author**

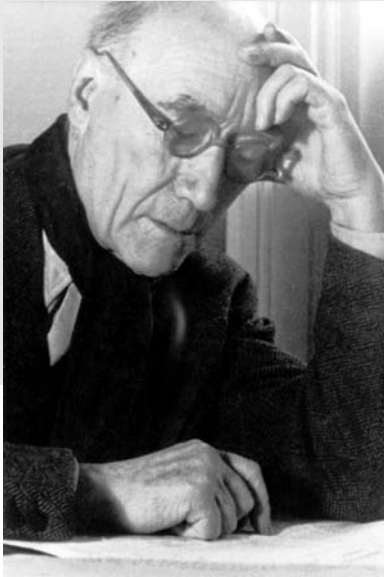
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## ANDRÉ GIDE

**Born:** Paris, France  
November 22, 1869

**Died:** Paris, France  
February 19, 1951

*Following World War I, Gide emerged as a leading spokesperson for rebellious youth seeking to lead spontaneous and “sincere” lives in opposition to conventional morality.*

### BIOGRAPHY

André Paul Guillaume Gide (zheed) was born on November 22, 1869, in Paris, France, the only child of Juliette Rondeaux and Paul Gide. Both parents were Huguenots in Roman Catholic France and believed in a strict Protestant upbringing for their son. Gide’s father died when André was only eleven years old. This loss, combined with a somewhat nervous temperament, turned Gide into a difficult and unhappy young man plagued by psychosomatic illness. At an early age he developed an almost obsessive infatuation for his cousin, Madeleine Rondeaux, whom he worshiped as an idealized epitome of pious and pure young womanhood. They saw each other at family gatherings and corresponded regularly for several years; both families, however, apparently opposed the two of them getting married, and they had to wait until the death of Gide’s mother in 1895.

Gide’s relationship with Madeleine was a platonic and spiritual one throughout their married lives. Though he was unfaithful to her, he continued to place Madeleine on a pedestal and to find in her the inspiration for much of his best work. Madeleine served as the model for Marceline in *L’Immoraliste* (1902; *The Immoralist*, 1930) and for Alissa in *La Porte étroite* (1909; *Strait Is the Gate*, 1924), both female exemplars of Christian morality and piety.

The major crisis in their marriage occurred in 1918, when Gide returned from one of his jaunts to Switzerland with his lover, Marc Allegret, to learn that Madeleine had burned all of his letters to her. Gide was profoundly distressed by the destruction of what he believed to be the expression of the most noble side of his nature; he was also forced to recognize, perhaps for the first time, the very real pain his duplicitous life was causing her. Following Madeleine’s death in 1938, Gide privately published a small volume, *Et nunc manet in te* (1947, 1951; *Madeline*, 1952), which attempted to justify his unorthodox marital relationship and to express remorse at having forced his wife to lead a life of loneliness and isolation.

With hindsight, it is easy to identify a moral continuum in the influence of Gide’s mother and wife on his own sense of self. Together, they represent the forces of Protestantism, spirituality, and the highest standards of morality; they also represent the forces of repression and denial, against which Gide would find himself struggling his entire life. As a timid and shy young man, Gide was uncomfortable with his peers. He was embarrassed by his own sheltered existence and lack of exposure to the male initiation rites of his generation. The turning point of his life occurred on a trip to Africa in the summer of 1893, following the publication of his first few books and his acceptance into the literary circles of Paris. He and Paul Laurens, the son of a well-known painter, set out with the express goal of finding opportunities for their first sexual adventures. Both quickly became involved with a young Arab dancing girl, and Gide began what was

to become the first of a series of relationships with young Arab boys. Gide saw his new life as a kind of rebirth marked by health, joy, and sensuality. These experiences became the basis for the natural, unfettered existence he would preach in such works as *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897; *Fruits of the Earth*, 1949).

Gide continued to write prolifically throughout his life. He often worked on several books at the same time, almost as if the warring aspects of his personality needed to find expression in separate ways. In the 1930's, he also began to play a more active political role, speaking out throughout Europe against the dangers of Fascism. As a precursor to the postwar existentialists, Gide is famous for the credo most clearly articulated by Bernard in *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1925; *The Counterfeiters*, 1927), a belief that individuals must find their own law for living within themselves and then use it as their guide. In a sense, Bernard represents a restatement of Gide's youthful credo that one can learn to live only by living, in this case more maturely understood to include the sense of responsibility and social awareness lacking in *Fruits of the Earth*.

In 1947, Gide was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The presentation address acknowledged the controversy surrounding the apparent immorality of Gide's work: "The work of André Gide contains pages which provoke with almost confessional audacity. . . . One must always remember that this manner of acting is a form of the impassioned love of truth. . . . Through all the phases of his evolution, Gide has appeared as a true defender of literary integrity, founded on the personality's right and duty to present all its problems resolutely and honestly." Gide died on February 19, 1951, in Paris, after a long and rich literary life that included the publication of more than eighty volumes of stories, novels, memoirs, and literary essays.

## ANALYSIS

Gide's earliest works were influenced by Symbolism and Decadence. *Le Voyage d'Urien* (1893; *Urien's Voyage*, 1964), for example, takes the reader on a highly ironic journey to a series of perpetually changing landscapes. Gide's sensual language and playful exploration of consciousness and perception in this work has been compared to the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Rimbaud. Gide

later rejected what he termed the German mysticism of such early works in favor of a crisper, more precise style that he felt better suited the French language.

Gide's first work, *Les Cahiers d'André Walter* (1891; *The Notebooks of André Walter*, 1968), though published anonymously, brought him into the literary circle of the famous French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Gide became acquainted with the major writers of his time, including Paul Valéry, with whom he maintained a literary correspondence throughout his life. In *Paludes* (1895; *Marshlands*, 1953), however, Gide satirized the artificiality of Mallarmé's artistic credo and called for an art based on spontaneity rather than an abstract concept of artistic purity. *Fruits of the Earth* was Gide's most successful attempt to put his new artistic beliefs into practice. It is a work that reads like a series of unrelated personal experiences; sensual language replaces metaphor and symbol. It was also the first work by Gide demonstrating the influence of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Nietzsche, the great German apostles of titanic individualism. Though only five hundred copies of *Fruits of the Earth* were sold in the first ten years following its publication, the post-World War I generation embraced its call for an honest and spontaneous life and its apparent condemnation of conventional morality.

With the publication of *The Immoralist* in 1902, Gide's works became increasingly psychological, almost appearing to be case studies of the nature of individualism confronting a series of polarities—sickness and health, asceticism and sensualism, relationship and independence, puritanism and paganism, Europe and Africa. *The Immoralist* tells the story of Michel, a young academic who revolts against repression and conformity as he strives to achieve what he believes to be a healthy, sensual, unfettered existence. It is often compared to two other tales, *Strait Is the Gate* and *La Symphonie pastorale* (1919; *The Pastoral Symphony*, 1931), written in similarly concentrated, journalistic styles with the same thematic polarities at their center. *Strait Is the Gate* tells the story of a young woman as excessive in her piety as Michel in his immorality. She literally tries to destroy herself in renunciation of the love she craves and out of fear that she might resemble the adulterous mother whom she despises. *The Pastoral Symphony* tells the story of a self-deluded Cal-



vinist minister who falls in love with an innocent, blind child whom he has rescued from poverty. As a mature, married man who should be a model of morality for his community, he cannot at first admit the sexual nature of his feelings for her.

Together, these three tales portray a complex erotic drama performed against a backdrop of Puritan repression and self-denial. The stories of all three are variations on experiences from Gide's own life—in particular, the repressiveness of his Protestant upbringing, his unconsummated marriage to his cousin Madeleine, his extensive travels in Africa, and his struggle to accept his homosexuality. All three are tightly structured; the second half of *The Immoralist*, for example, repeats the journey of the first half in reverse. In his *Journal* (1939-1950, 1954; *The Journals of André Gide, 1889-1949, 1947-1951*), Gide complained that all three were misread; middle-class French men and women failed to note the irony in Gide's use of unreliable narrators. They condemned *The Immoralist* for its pagan hedonism and praised *Strait Is the Gate* for its Christian values, in both cases missing Gide's critique of excessive behavior.

The last period of Gide's long and rich literary life was dominated by the writing of his *Journal* and of *The Counterfeiters*, his most complex and ambitious work, the only one he called a novel. *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926; *If It Die . . .*, 1935), Gide's chronicle of his youth and sexual initiation in North Africa, is, in effect, the preface to the *Journal*. With its publication, Gide's contemporaries began to understand the close relationship between his life and his fiction. He himself spoke of his characters as representing possibilities within himself that might have become monstrous if left unchecked by the little bit of common sense he possessed.

In writing *The Counterfeiters*, Gide acknowledged his growing awareness of the individual's relationship to a larger society and gave vent to his own fears about the impact of Fascist thinking on all aspects of French life. *The Counterfeiters* takes almost all the themes and characters found in earlier works and weaves them into a comprehensive study of French literary circles and middle-class life. It is, in a sense, a serious sequel to *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914; *The Vatican Swindle*, 1925; better known as *Lafcadio's Adventures*, 1927), a farcical tale filled with complex plots and amusing coincidences. Lafcadio, its flippant young hero, who kills a com-

plete stranger for no good reason other than the exercise of pure freedom, becomes, like Bernard in *The Counterfeiters*, the most positive of Gide's protagonists. Bernard is ultimately the only one of Gide's characters who seems capable of both true individualism and social responsibility, and whose authenticity allows him to be faithful both to himself and to others.

Gide spent six years writing *The Counterfeiters*; it was the last major fiction of his career. For the remaining twenty-five years of his life, he continued to work on his journals, a variety of short stories, literary essays, and even political exposés of French colonial practices in Africa. At his death, he was honored as one of the great moral voices of the twentieth century; a year later the Holy Office of the Vatican ordered that his entire work be placed on the index of prohibited books. Corrupter of youth or model of sincerity and authenticity? The paradox is appropriate; no writer has ever been more aware of the contradictions within himself and his world.

## THE IMMORALIST

**First published:** *L'Immoraliste*, 1902 (English translation, 1930)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young anthropologist journeys from sickness to health to debauchery in rebellion against his repressive Protestant upbringing.*

*The Immoralist* was the first of Gide's famous series of quasi-autobiographical, psychological tales. It is narrated as if it is a confession made to three friends of the protagonist, Michel. He has summoned them together to hear his story, not to pass judgment, but simply to listen. Strangely, he wishes that their friendship may "resist" the accounting of his life that he is about to make. In the end, however, the friends believe that they have been unwittingly turned into "accomplices," that Michel's confession is a veiled attempt to legitimize his "immorality" rather than to express remorse at the pain and suffering he has caused.

The framing context of the story is significant in that it helps the reader appreciate Gide's irony.

The novel has been misread as a call for a Nietzschean individualism that revels in its own freedom. The only clue to an action's propriety, according to such a philosophy, would be the pleasure the individual takes in it, irrespective of its impact on others. Ménalque, the Nietzschean apostle of pure freedom in the novel, mocks the "man of principles" as "the most detestable kind of person in the world" and warns Michel that as a married man with responsibilities he must choose between his freedom and his happiness. In attempting to heed Ménalque's advice and to satisfy his own sensual desires, Michel proves at least indirectly responsible for the declining health and ultimate death of his wife, Marcéline. As he concludes his story, Michel begins to wonder if his nights of debauchery were as freely chosen as he wants to believe or if he had, in fact, become the victim of the "brutality of passion." His friends are "struck dumb" in the end by the confession they have just heard. Gide must have expected that his readers would feel the same; "Drag me away from here," Michel begs, "I can't leave of my own accord."

This novel, like most of Gide's work, is highly structured. It divides neatly into five sections. The first and last sections take place in Africa, the setting for Michel's recovery from tuberculosis and Marcéline's ultimate death from it. The second

and fourth sections are set in Normandy, where Michel first involves himself in the management of his inherited property and then later almost consciously sets out to destroy it. The middle section is set in Paris, where Michel presents lectures on his new philosophy, exalting the savagery of the Goths and condemning Latin culture as anti-theetical to life. It is there

that Michel feels most attracted to Ménalque, who alone seems to understand why Michel is now "burning what he once worshipped."

Perhaps the most striking example of the tale's conscious symmetry is the contrast between two highly symbolic scenes. Early in the novel Michel experiences the healing power of sensuality as he

delights in "the circumspect call of turtledoves" and the sight of a naked child tending a herd of goats. Toward the end, Michel goes to sleep among a group of young boys lying in the open air and wakes up covered with vermin. This second "baptism" marks the final stage of Michel's journey, which has taken him from sickness to health, from impotence to debauchery, and from a passive observer of the immorality of others to an active participant in the seamiest of existences.

## THE COUNTERFEITERS

**First published:** *Les Faux-monnayeurs*, 1925  
(English translation, 1927)

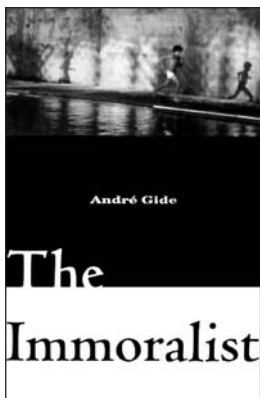
**Type of work:** Novel

*The Counterfeiters juxtaposes several complexly interwoven plots with the journals of a would-be novelist.*

*The Counterfeiters* is Gide's most complex and ambitious work, the only one he called a novel. There are at least a dozen characters and almost as many subplots surrounding a group of families, some of whose children are involved in a ring of counterfeiters. On its most coherent level *The Counterfeiters* is a study of adolescents attempting to discover who they really are and how they may achieve authentic, "sincere" lives in the face of all the false, counterfeit attitudes and social forms that dominate their middle-class lives.

The two major characters, Olivier and Bernard, share a love of literature and an enthusiasm for life. Bernard, however, is by far the stronger of the two; he alone is capable of true authenticity, of discovering his own internal law and living by it. In terms of one of the novel's major metaphors, Bernard is the fish who sees with his own light; Olivier is the fish who becomes the prey of others because he swims either too high or too low. Olivier at his best is capable of true lyricism; at his most vulnerable he falls under the influence of Robert de Passavant, a literary counterfeiter who is guilty of claiming the ideas of others as his own.

Olivier is ultimately rescued from Passavant's pernicious influence by his uncle Édouard, whom he has always adored but whom he has been too shy



to approach. Édouard functions in a sense as the center of the novel. His notebooks are juxtaposed with Bernard's and Olivier's narratives; they provide most of the key subplots and a running commentary on the nature of the novel viewed in terms of the same problem of authenticity at work in the lives of the main characters. Édouard is not the implied author of the novel but rather a character in his own right understood to represent the opposite of Passavant. He would like his art to be absolutely "true," "unedited," and "original."



His particular dilemma is how to move beyond observation and journal writing without falsifying his material, a dilemma Gide sees as endemic to the novel, the "freest" of literary genres.

The novel turns on the passing of Édouard's mentorship from Bernard to Olivier, Édouard's nephew and lover. This transfer of influence occurs the night of the Argonaut dinner, one of the major set pieces of the novel in which key characters, both real and fictional, and key plots from both the narrative proper and the journals all intersect. For Passavant, it is a night of celebration turned to ridicule. For both Bernard and Olivier, the night brings a coming-of-age. Bernard's sexual initiation marks his growing independence; Olivier's encounter is followed by a failed suicide attempt proving his continued vulnerability.

By this point in the novel Bernard emerges as one of Gide's true heroes, the only character in *The Counterfeiters* strong enough to live a potentially productive life, both free of hypocrisy and morally good. Bernard's story is a variation on the classic pattern of the hero's journey: He progresses from the discovery that he is a "natural" child, hence free

from the genetic curse of following in his father's footsteps, to the influence of a sympathetic surrogate father (Édouard) under whose wing he experiences both pure and spiritual love, to the passing of his *baccalauréat* examination (a required rite of passage for French schoolboys), to a return home in recognition of the true love that the father he rejected has always felt for him.

In one of the most explicit message chapters of the novel, "Bernard and the Angel," Bernard longs "for dedication, for sacrifice," for some noble cause outside himself to which he could offer his newly won freedom. Unfortunately, most of the ready-made causes he sees around him strike false notes. As he struggles with his Angel, Bernard wonders if it is possible to live without a goal and still not coast aimlessly through life. Christopher Columbus, he thinks, did not know where he was going when he discovered America: "His goal was to go ahead. . . . Himself was his goal." Bernard fears that without a goal he may live badly. Gide clearly believes that it is a risk worth taking.

## SUMMARY

André Gide's ultimate literary achievement is that of a moralist in the great French tradition. Though he proved an innovator in his experimental works, *The Counterfeiters* and *The Vatican Swindle*, he was most influential as a proponent of individualism and what he called, "sincerity." Gide's moral philosophy was a product of both his times and his own personal experience. Gide managed to reconcile the post-World War I yearning for excitement and adventure with his own profound belief in moral goodness. The distance between Michel's obsessive pursuit of his own sensual pleasures in the name of freedom and Bernard's return home in acknowledgment of his responsibility to others marks the distance between the romantic individualism of the 1890's and the existentialism of the 1950's. It is the same distance Gide traveled in his own life and work.

Jane Missner Barstow

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*Les Faux-monnayeurs*, 1925 (*The Counterfeiters*, 1927)  
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*Le Traité du Narcisse*, 1891 ("Narcissus," in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1953)  
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*Le Retour de l'enfant prodigue*, 1907 (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1953)  
*Les Nouvelles Nourritures*, 1935 (*New Fruits of the Earth*, 1949)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does the structure of André Gide's *The Immoralist* refute the charge that it justifies immorality in Michel?
- To what extent was Gide's age—he was almost fifty when World War I ended—a factor in his ability to see the postwar world more positively than many younger writers?
- Consider Gide's journal of *The Counterfeiters* as distinct from his other journals.
- Are Bernard and Olivier themselves counterfeiters?
- Gide has been considered a man who retained the faults of youthfulness. Does your reading of Gide confirm or deny this assertion?
- How did Gide influence the existential movement?

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## RUMER GODDEN

**Born:** Eastbourne, Sussex, England  
December 10, 1907

**Died:** Thornhill, Dumfriesshire, Scotland  
November 8, 1998

*In lyrical fiction and nonfiction, Godden offers sensitive portrayals of twentieth century families in Great Britain and abroad, capturing the interior world of individuals, alliances, and betrayals within close relationship and friction between different generations and cultures.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Margaret Rumer Godden (GOD-uhn) was born in Eastbourne, Sussex, England, on December 10, 1907, at the height of British colonial power. She was the second of four children born to Arthur Leigh Godden, an independent-minded river navigation company manager, and Katherine Norah Hingley, a Midlander from a prosperous manufacturing family. Rumer moved from England to India with her family when she was nine months old. Thereafter until late life, she lived alternately in both countries, which offered abundant settings for storytelling, access to two distinct cultures, and insight into the plight of social outsiders.

With the exception of an unhappy year in London shortly before World War I, Godden spent a halcyon childhood beside tributaries of the Ganges River, along routes of the Calcutta-based steamship company that employed her father. Her early education was home-centered, fueled by lively family lore and the diverse Indian languages and traditions of household servants. Her parents and Aunt Mary Hingley taught leisurely paced lessons in math, spelling, literature, history, and the Bible, and Godden wrote her first tales and poems in paper books that she and her three sisters had cut and stitched themselves. On summer journeys, Godden absorbed even more of the vast landscape and complexity of India that would color the majority of her numerous books, including novels, short stories, biographies, and tales for children.

In 1920, Godden returned to England for formal education. Unaccustomed to boarding school restrictions and made to feel like misfits, Rumer

and her older sister, Jon, were removed or expelled from five schools in two years. Finally, they settled at Moira House, an innovative Eastbourne school where Mona Swann, the vice principal, cultivated Rumer's writing talent with private lessons in literary technique. In 1925, Godden decided against college in France, returning to India for several restless years that included Hindi lessons and a broken engagement.

Drawing on a love of dance and despite a childhood back injury, Godden then trained in London to become a ballet teacher. By 1928, she had opened the Peggie Godden School of Dance in Calcutta, which welcomed Eurasians among its students. Since it was taboo for society ladies to work, Godden was ostracized by India's English elite. However, the eight-year run of her school led to two ballet novels and many stories about marginalized Eurasians.

In 1934, Godden married Laurence Sinclair Foster, a stockbroker and avid sportsman by whom she had become pregnant. Their son died shortly after birth. The couple later had two daughters, Jane and Paula. Godden began writing novels while pregnant with Jane.

Godden's first novels juxtaposed Eastern and Western outlooks and moved back and forth in time. *Chinese Puzzle* (1936) featured a Pekingese dog reincarnated in England from an ancient Mandarin man, and *The Lady and the Unicorn* (1937) followed Eurasians in a Calcutta home with an evocative past. Her first commercial success was *Black Narcissus* (1939), a tragically comic story about Anglican nuns trying to establish a convent in a

tainted Himalayan palace. Marketed extensively in the United States, the book won international acclaim. It was also the first of Godden's works to be made into a film or adapted for television.

The financial reward of *Black Narcissus* was short-lived, however. Laurence Foster had gambled away most of the book's profits and embezzled company funds before abandoning his family and debts to join the English army. Nearly penniless, Godden and her children spent World War II in an isolated cottage in India's Kashmir Mountains. She wrote prolifically—*Gypsy, Gypsy* (1940), *Breakfast with the Nikolides* (1942), *Rungli-Rungliot (Thus Far and No Further)* (1943), and *A Fugue in Time* (1945) were published during that time—while teaching her children and a nephew and raising herbs. After surviving a poisoning attempt, an episode recreated in *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953), the author and her daughters returned to England in 1945 with the manuscript of a coming-of-age story set in India. That novel, *The River* (1946), was a successful book with two protagonists modeled after Rumer and Jon Godden and was made into a film by renowned director Jean Renoir. Godden wrote the screenplay and consulted during filming in 1949 and 1950.

In the late 1940's, Godden also began writing children's stories and verse lauded for their entry into the imaginations, thought processes, and moral quandaries of young people. Her first and favorite such work was *The Doll's House* (1947), a seemingly simple tale about toys. Subsequently, she penned *In Noah's Ark* (1949), *The Mousewife* (1951), Whitbread Prize-winning *The Diddakoi* (1972), *The Valiant Chatti-Maker* (1983), and more. Like the novels she continued writing for adults, Godden's works for children frequently had Indian roots; few had simplistic endings. Typically, they depicted young people and animals—such as a resilient gypsy girl or a homeless mouse—tapping inner strength to deal with an imperfect world.

Godden married British civil servant James Haynes-Dixon in 1949. In the 1950's, she converted to Catholicism, which may account for the kinder portrayals of nuns in Godden's later work. Certainly, the Benedictines of *In This House of Brede* (1969) and the nuns of *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* (1979) outshine the bullying sister superior of *Black Narcissus*, who was modeled after a school administrator young Godden had abhorred.

After her second husband's death in 1973, Godden relocated to Scotland. She continued writing in a variety of genres, reading her books aloud to test for quality. Rumer Godden died in 1998 at the age of ninety.

## ANALYSIS

In tone and quality, Rumer Godden's work has been compared to that of English short-story writer Katherine Mansfield. However, Godden's best-known work is uniquely grounded in the India of her youth, with the exoticism, hierarchies, and culture clashes of that distinctive time and place. In fact, Godden built her novels on actual incidents and people in British India, drawing on journals, notebooks, and letters she wrote while in India.

The protagonists of Godden's fiction are women and children, especially awkward girls on the cusp of adulthood. The young are adrift, either separated from parents, far from home, or otherwise short on stability as they experience vulnerability, adolescent pangs, an awareness of sex, and the loss of innocence. The Bullock siblings of *The Greengage Summer* (1958), for example, fend for themselves among criminals in a foreign hotel when their mother falls ill. Without parental guidance, the Eurasian twins of *The Lady and the Unicorn* fall for dishonorable Englishmen. Similarly, the uprooted daughter of a hypocritical British envoy in *The Peacock Spring: A Western Progress* (1975) seeks solace with an attentive Indian poet. Despite prejudice, poverty, or broken plans, Godden's young protagonists find new senses of power within themselves. Their adult counterparts, however, do not always fare as well. Adults like Sophie Ward, the forthright widow living among hostile villagers in *Kingfishers Catch Fire*, are more easily daunted by circumstances.

The dominant theme of Godden's work is the swiftness of time, which carries the lives of her characters in a riverlike continuity, hastened by a great many house clocks and church bells. Houses themselves absorb human essences and serve as harbingers of time, outlasting generations of people they shelter. Thus, family history repeats itself in the home of *A Fugue in Time*, and centuries of human voices and spirits inhabit the house dubbed China Court in *China Court: The Hours of a Country House* (1961). As Harriet of *The River* bemoans after her

brother's death, the sweep of time continues despite what befalls people.

The narrative form that Godden uses is nonlinear and intensely psychological. Not only does the narrative jump across past, present, and future time, but, along with dialogue and concrete descriptions of places and things, it also weaves memories and the nuanced, hidden, and unspoken intentions of characters. The narrative conveys what characters meant to say, what they could have said, and how they will recall events years later.

Although her books were favorably reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* and other reputable publications, the inclusion of Godden's fiction in book-of-the-month-clubs and ladies' magazines dampened her early reputation among the literati. By the 1940's, however, most critics took Godden seriously, and she had earned a solid reputation for finely crafted plots, subtle treatments of character, and a complex and effective narrative style.

## A TIME TO DANCE, NO TIME TO WEEP

**First published:** 1987

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*Godden describes the joyful and the difficult experiences that shaped her life and writing career from 1907 to 1946.*

As the Ecclesiastes-based title of *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep* suggests, Godden's early life was marked by dramatic contrasts between joy and sorrow. Her quirky, unorthodox family offered the creative freedom that her first marriage never would; writing became satisfying and cathartic work, but it was often interrupted by the children that Godden had to raise alone; the author would earn a comfortable living and a popular following, but not before money worries and social ostracism had taken their tolls; and although Godden embraced Indian culture as did few Europeans of her time, she was haunted by how a trusted Indian servant had nearly killed her.

The prologue of the *A Time to Dance, No Time to*

*Weep* is portentous. It depicts a wary twelve-year-old Godden and her older sister, Jon, on a wet English quay, having just arrived from India and left their childhoods behind for formal schooling. India had meant sunlight, family, and inclusion for young Godden; England, as she had briefly known it while living with her aunts and grandmother at age five, proffered dull routine, Anglican piety, and dizzying rules and regulations. As the memoir moves beyond initial chapters on lineage and home life to Godden's turbulent education, dating years, marriage, and motherhood, the wariness of the twelve-year-old seems to have been warranted. After Godden's childhood, things often went awry.

Supporting her sister through upheavals was Jon Godden, the literary touchstone of sister whose closeness with the author is discussed in the chapter "The Little Fishes." Like odd fishes out of water, Rumer and Jon Godden endured school together, closed ranks when others wronged them, and always encouraged one another's literary efforts. Jon was an accomplished artist and author in her own right; Rumer routinely sought her sister's assessment before submitting books for publication. The sisters cowrote *Two Under the Indian Sun* (1966), a joint autobiography of their youth, and *Shiva's Pigeons: An Experience of India* (1972).

Biographers have argued that Godden writes sympathetically about outsiders—such as plucky orphans, transient gypsies, entrapped mothers, and people shunned—because her own sense of exclusion was profound. Indeed, by Godden's own account in *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep*, she was the least attractive of the four Godden sisters, an unsporting student out of step with peers, and a woman put off by the very cliques and chattiness prized by her first husband and British club society in India. When some of her books were banned from club libraries because they addressed unsavory liaisons and racial tensions, the distance increased between Godden and her offended English contemporaries.

Written when the author was eighty years old, *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep* closes on a Liverpool quay, with Godden and her daughters returning to England for a fresh start after World War II. The story continues in *A House with Four Rooms* (1989), a second memoir published two years later.

## A CANDLE FOR ST. JUDE

**First published:** 1948

**Type of work:** Novel

*Headed by a passionate and exacting former ballerina, a ballet ensemble in post-World War II London prepares for the opening-night performance of a new season that also marks the fiftieth anniversary of its founder's stage debut.*

*A Candle for St. Jude* is a critically distinguished short novel praised at publication for its witty and compassionate characterization of two elder heroines, as well as for an intimate, behind-the-scenes rendering of the ballet. Like a group of lightly nostalgic British novels published in the aftermath of World War II, it focuses on a narrow but sparkling slice of humanity.

*A Candle for St. Jude* is a small story about art and continuity, tracing two days in the life of a small but accomplished ballet company. Told in the third person by an omniscient narrator, the novel revolves around Madame Anna Holbein, an aging Russian ballerina turned theater manager whose artistic inspirations, uncompromising standards, and heady points of view drive the action and dominate the narrative.

In this novel, as in much of Godden's work, houses are harbingers of hope and links to the past. *A Candle for St. Jude* begins with the selection of a house that defines the novel's central character. The dark, wisteria-framed London house that Madame Holbein chose to transform into a ballet school and theater was worn, difficult to clean, and nearly impossible to afford. To Madame, however, it was perfect, ripe with artistic possibilities to be realized as she saw fit. Madame is dedicated to artistic perfection: She provides vision, while the dancers, costumers, musicians, and others in her theatrical circle must deal with messy practicalities, however capricious and unreasonable Madame's demands. Indeed, Madame's opposite is her practical and self-sacrificing sister-in-law, the widow with whom Madame shares the London home. Ilse Holbein's faith rests in God and the Catholic Church rather than art, but she contributes to Ballet Holbein by cooking meals, keeping books, and praying fervently for the success of the financially tenuous enterprise.

Crisis erupts the day before the new season, when Madame suddenly realizes that *Lyre with Seven Strings*, one of three ballets on the opening-night program, is wrong for the occasion. Conceived by seventeen-year-old Hilda French, the ardent, superior pupil who unnerves Madame but takes after her, the ballet portrays seven essential facets of a harmonious life. Madame wants to shorten and rename the ballet, or cut it entirely from the program. Headstrong Hilda resists, and theater members take sides, each with unique aspirations and loyalties at stake. Lion, a leading dancer who is drawn to Hilda as she is to him, woos her to capitulate.

Even so, Madame remains distraught: On the cusp of celebrating her own dancing debut and longtime reputation for success, she has no viable substitute for the troublesome third ballet. As her anxiety and exhaustion increase, streams of consciousness and shifts in time—frequent storytelling devices for Godden—take over the narrative. Madame's immediate managerial worries are overtaken by a flurry of girlhood memories, lines that someone once said to her, bouquets from past admirers, and moments from *Tarantella*, *Giselle*, and other ballets in which she once starred. Madame collapses and takes to her bed.

Finally, Madame discovers the last-minute program solution in *Leda and the Swan*, a primal and strangely powerful ballet for two based on the classic seduction of a young virgin by a virile winged beast. The new ballet is Hilda's, written in a notebook the girl left in an empty practice room where sleepless Madame wanders. When Lion and Hilda demonstrate the new ballet—its power intensified by their attraction to one another—Madame recognizes Hilda's considerable vision, which has surpassed the artistry of Lion's usual dance partner and Madame's favorite student, Caroline.

Caroline herself recognizes the potency of Hilda's new ballet. Like Lion, Caroline has advanced to the Metropolitan Ballet but returns to perform with Ballet Holbein as guest artist, in deference to Madame. Afraid of being outshone by Hilda, Caroline walks out, threatening to draw Lion into mutiny, too. When Caroline returns in time to perform, Madame gives her a treasured keepsake from the czar of Russia. Meanwhile, Madame has ordered and cajoled others to draft musical scores, refashion new costumes from old, and hurry to produce Hilda's new ballet on time.

The story closes with an assured Madame Holbein dressing for the evening and planning how to single out Hilda for recognition when the curtain falls, marking the start of an unbounded career for the girl. Madame wonders, after days of theatrical missteps, quarrels, tears, and opportunities, what accounts for the eleventh-hour miracle of a wondrous ballet program? Ilse is convinced that the credit goes to St. Jude, patron saint of lost causes. She had lit a candle to him on Ballet Holbein's behalf.

## THE BATTLE OF THE VILLA FIORITA

**First published:** 1963

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two unescorted English siblings venture to Italy, determined to wrest their recently divorced mother from her lover, bring her home to England, and restore stability to their dispersed family.*

*The Battle of the Villa Fiorita*, a novel about children pitted against parents, demonstrates Godden's technical mastery of character development and family dynamics. One of the author's few novels set outside India, *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* has garnered praise for its vivid evocation of the Italian landscape, as well as for an authentic representation of how families operate—even from critics who find its premise implausible.

For this work, Godden employs a single narrator but shifting points of view, primarily those of the two Clavering children and their mother, to tell a story unfolding in two places. The Italian countryside of exotic fragrances, sprawling gardens, and alluring beauty serves as the immediate battleground setting, while the backstory is set in conventional England, where the Claverings' once-predictable life ended with divorce.

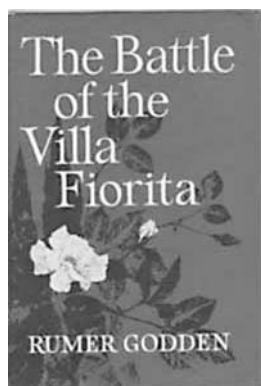
The story opens with two travel-weary children

outside the locked gates of an Italian villa, the temporary lakeside abode of their adulterous English mother and the film director intent on marrying her. Like soldiers pushed to the brink, fourteen-year-old Hugh Clavering and his younger sister Caddie have arrived to derail the relationship between their mother, Fanny Clavering, and Robert Quillet, a widowed director who fell in love with the plain matron while filming in Whitcross, her middle-class neighborhood.

With Godden's customary acuity for presenting life as children experience it, the story begins and ends with the point of view of eleven-year-old Caddie. Caddie compares the untidy physicality of the villa to the orderly decor and furniture at Stebbings, the spacious suburban home she had to leave for a cramped London flat when her father assumed custody of the three Clavering children. At Stebbings, Caddie's world had centered on Topaz, her beloved pony, and the secure routine of school, holidays, and childhood rituals. Then, life became ruled by words like "access," "custody," and "visitation"—words explained to Caddie by her older sister Philippa, unfazed by the divorce and headed for school in France. Caddie wants her mother and her old life back.

At the villa, Hugh's attention is attracted by disturbing signs of his mother's newly awakened sexuality, such as a finely embroidered petticoat and an unmatronly scarf. In a series of flashbacks prompted by visual cues, and eventually by questions from his astounded mother, Hugh tells how he and Caddie left school and traveled to the villa. Fanny is impressed by her children's efforts to reach her, but she and Rob promptly notify their father, Darrell Clavering, a queen's messenger, of the children's whereabouts. As the three adults plan how to return the children to their father, none of them grasps the subversive nature of Hugh and Caddie's mission. Nevertheless, Darrell's business schedule and Hugh's case of food poisoning delay the return.

In spite of themselves, Hugh and Caddie warm to Italy and to fair-minded Rob. Caddie relishes the La Scala opera and sumptuous meal to which Rob treats her, and Rob steadies Hugh with masculine advice after the lad has an unsettling sexual encounter. However, when Rob's ten-year-old daughter, Pia, arrives at the villa from Rome at her father's request, battle lines form. The three chil-





dren join forces against Fanny and Rob, using contentiousness and a hunger strike to drive a wedge between them.

Fanny and Rob disagree over how to handle the hunger strike. The couple also is taxed by increasingly dangerous and public crises involving the children. Hugh runs away and then returns. Caddie, grasping at Catholic theology touted by convent-educated Pia, begs the village priest to make her mother a Catholic; Catholic mothers do not marry other people's fathers when their husbands are alive. Caddie's public tears turn Malcesine villagers against Rob and Fanny. Then, Caddie pummels Pia upon learning that the prim girl and Hugh have betrayed her, secretly eating during the strike and disregarding the purpose of the Italian journey, which had been financed by the sale of Caddie's beloved pony. Finally, Hugh nearly drowns himself and Pia in a reckless boating accident.

Remembering the moral warnings of her deceased Aunt Isabel, Fanny convinces herself that Hugh's brush with death is her own terrible punishment for doing wrong; that is, for attempting to build a separate, loving new life with Rob. Her well-

worn bedside book, the *Imitation of Christ*, suggests that Fanny may have swept aside her long-standing religious convictions for love. In the end, Rob and Fanny give up the battle, parting ways by mutual, but brokenhearted, agreement. The novel closes with Fanny and her children exiting the villa gates, headed for the Milan airport and an uncertain future.

## SUMMARY

In her original, edited, and translated work, Rumer Godden specialized in revealing the inner workings of families and communities. Her portrayals of actual families, as well as nuns living in a community, animals on an ark, or miniature dolls in a toy world, offer a real-life balance of joys and jealousies, love and rivalries, innocence and darkness. Although the author was inclined to process life by retreating with her pen rather than socializing in the mainstream, she created a substantial body of work that successfully re-created the exoticism of colonial and then independent India, as well as twentieth century England.

Wendy Alison Lamb

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways are *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* and *A Candle for St. Jude* coming-of-age novels?
- What sets outsiders in Rumer Godden's fiction apart from other characters?
- How are descriptions of nature used in Godden's works?
- How does Godden view marriage?
- How do religious rituals and images function in Godden's novels?

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## JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

**Born:** Frankfurt am Main (now in Germany)  
August 28, 1749

**Died:** Weimar, Saxe-Weimer-Eisenbach (now in  
Germany)  
March 22, 1832

*Widely recognized as one of Germany's greatest lyric poets, Goethe is most famous for his very personal, autobiographical verse and his profound understanding of human individuality in relationship to nature, history, and society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (GUR-tuh) was born in Frankfurt am Main (now in Germany) on August 28, 1749, the eldest son of Johann Kaspar and Katharina Elisabeth Goethe. He was educated at home by his lawyer father before attending the University of Leipzig to study law in 1765. Goethe acknowledges his parents' influence in his autobiography, indicating that from his father he inherited his stature and the serious conduct of his life, and from his "dear mother" he acquired the gaiety of spirit and his love of storytelling.

As a student in Leipzig, a leading cultural center of eighteenth century Europe, Goethe developed an interest in literature and art and became acquainted with the dramatic works of contemporary Romantic poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and literary critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Their influence and Goethe's affection for Anna Katharina Schönlkopf, daughter of a Leipzig tavern owner, are reflected in his early poetry and dramatic works, especially in the one-act comedy in verse *Die Laune des Verliebten* (wr. 1767, pr. 1779, pb. 1806; *The Wayward Lover*, 1879). Illness caused Goethe to return to Frankfurt in 1768. During his convalescence, he studied religious mysticism, astrology, and alchemy. His familiarity in these areas becomes evident in his best-known work,

*Faust: Eine Tragödie* (pb. 1808, pr. 1829; *The Tragedy of Faust*, 1823).

Goethe received his law degree in 1771 from the University of Strasbourg and returned to Frankfurt to practice law with his father for four years. In Strasbourg, Goethe made the acquaintance of the German philosopher and literary critic Johann Gottfried Herder, a leader in the German Romantic movement known as Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress). Herder introduced Goethe to the works of William Shakespeare, and consequently, Goethe patterned his first dramatic tragedy on Shakespeare's dramatic style. He received his first literary acclaim with *Götz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand* (pb. 1773, pr. 1774; *Goetz of Berlichingen, with the Iron Hand*, 1799), the fictionalized story of a German knight whose exploits stimulated a national German revolt against the authority of the emperor and the church early in the sixteenth century.

In 1774, Goethe's reputation as an author of international fame was established with the sensational success of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774; *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1779), a sentimental and psychological novel in letter form, inspired by his infatuation with Charlotte ("Lotte") Buff, the fiancé of his friend G. C. Kestner.

Goethe's influence as a writer spread throughout Germany and was enhanced by his association with Duke Karl August, who invited him to live and

work at the ducal court in Saxe-Weimar. Goethe moved to Weimar in 1775 and, except for a two-year sojourn to Italy, lived in Weimar until his death in 1832. At the court of Karl August, Goethe assumed a wide variety of governmental duties. He became a member of and, later, head of the duke's cabinet. As a minister of the state, he managed state finances, military recruiting, and social activities. He also pursued his personal interest in science, spending years studying horticulture, geology, botany, and biology.

The governmental duties that Goethe had accepted consumed much of his time in the first ten years at Weimar and significantly limited his literary activities. Except for some notable poems, such as the lyric "Wanderer's Nachtlied" ("Wanderer's Night Song"), and the ballad "Erkönig" ("The Erlking"), he wrote little during the period between 1775 and 1785. At this time, his primary intellectual stimulation came from correspondence with Charlotte von Stein, the wife of a Weimar official. Stein, a woman of refined literary taste and culture, was seven years his senior and the mother of seven children. She dominated Goethe's intellectual and romantic interests for twelve years, until his journey to Italy in 1786. He remained there until 1788.

In Italy, Goethe found new vitality. He had become weary of life at the Weimar court and of his relationship with Charlotte von Stein. His study of ancient Greek and Roman literature, art, and architecture and its influence on the Renaissance provided him with new inspiration. The products of his Italian stay include the classical dramas *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (first version pr. 1779, pb. 1854, second version pb. 1787, pr. 1800; *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 1793) and *Torquato Tasso* (pb. 1790, pr. 1807; English translation, 1827). These works introduced the classical period in German literature with their focus on ideas and form.

Goethe's return to Weimar proved difficult and disappointing. His new literary principles met with considerable opposition, and his decision to live with young Christiane Vulpius offended court circles and aroused the enmity of Charlotte von Stein. Christiane gave birth to his son in 1789; to legitimize the child, Goethe married Christiane in 1806. For some time, Goethe reabsorbed himself in his scientific interests, publishing *Beyträge zur Optik* (1791, 1792) and *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810; *Theory of*

*Colors*, 1840). Goethe also spent much of his time in nearby Jena, where he met Friedrich Schiller, a German poet, dramatist, philosopher, and historian.

Beginning in 1794, a close friendship developed between Goethe and Schiller that proved inspiring to both men. Their intellectual partnership caused them to be viewed, then and now, as the two leading figures in German literature. The friendship, with its stimulating daily discussions and collaborations on various projects, proved rehabilitating to Goethe's literary interests. When Schiller died in 1805, Goethe buried his grief in an intense study of Oriental literature, drawing parallels between his personal experiences and elements of Oriental culture. His study culminated in a collection of love poems, rich in Oriental imagery, published under the title *Westöstlicher Divan* (1819, *West-Eastern Divan*, 1877).

Goethe remained productive until his death in Weimar on March 22, 1832. His writings in the period between 1805 and 1832 include the novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809; *Elective Affinities*, 1849); a fictionalized account of his Italian journey, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796; *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1825); his multivolume autobiography *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1814; *The Autobiography of Goethe*, 1824; better known as *Poetry and Truth from My Own Life*); and the second part of his most famous dramatic poem, *Faust*, published posthumously in 1833 (pr. 1854; *The Tragedy of Faust, Part Two*, 1838).

## ANALYSIS

Goethe is recognized as one of the greatest and most versatile European writers and thinkers of modern times. He profoundly influenced the growth of German Romanticism. His first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, was one of the literary sensations of the eighteenth century. A psychological unfolding in letter form, it brings new focus to the epistolary novel. With *Elective Affinities*, Goethe created a new type of fiction. Instead of concentrating on one individual character, Goethe builds this novel around social concerns, the complications of human relationships, and divorce.

Many of Goethe's works are autobiographical. The tone of the first volume of his autobiography sets a new standard for autobiographical writings.



Because Goethe defines his own writings as fragments of a grand confession, it is important to study his life in order to understand his work. That is especially true of his poetry, which is characteristically extremely personal and private. With his autobiographical writings, Goethe himself makes the most important contributions to the understanding of his own literature.

The lyrical poetry of his early days brought Goethe into the foreground of the German literary arena. Collecting folk songs with his friend Johann Gottfried Herder inspired him to write numerous poems in the folk-song style. Some of these became popular favorites among the German people, such as “Heidenröslein” (“Little Rose of the Heath”) and “The Erlking.” In both poems, Goethe explores the themes of love, alienation, and death. In “Little Rose of the Heath,” the love is that of a young man, and in “The Erlking,” it is the love of a father for a young child. Both poems are reflective of the passions of Goethe’s Storm and Stress period, during which the focus was on depth of emotions and on the individual.

While Goethe’s initial fame comes from his lyric poetry, it is his dramatic poem *Faust* that is considered the crowning achievement of his long life and one of the masterpieces of world literature. In style, theme, and point of view, it delineates Goethe’s impressive range of development from the early, rebellious Storm and Stress days to the calm classicism and realistic vision of his later years. The themes of the individual’s right to negotiate his own destiny, to strive for knowledge and power, and to cross the threshold into the supernatural all contribute to making *Faust* a landmark as the first major work in the spirit of modern individualism.

## FAUST

**First produced:** *Faust: Eine Tragödie*, part 1, 1829 (first published, 1808; English translation, 1823); *Faust: Eine Tragödie, zweiter Teil*, part 2, 1854 (first published, 1833; English translation, 1838)

**Type of work:** Play

*A medieval scholar turns to supernatural forces in his quest for knowledge and sells his soul to the Devil.*

Goethe began his most famous work, *Faust*, while he was in his twenties. He published the first part of *Faust* in 1808 and completed the second part two months before his death. The Faust story is based on the legend of the Renaissance scholar Dr. Faustus, who quested after universal knowledge by means of alchemy and magic. The real Johannes Faustus lived from 1480 to 1540. His legendary adventures became the subject for innumerable puppet shows and popular folk dramas throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Germany. Thus, Goethe was familiar with the Faust myth since childhood, and from the time that he was twenty, until he died at eighty-two, the theme never left his imagination.

The theme of Goethe’s *Faust* befits both the Romantic fascination with the supernatural and the themes of justice and good and evil, which have occupied literature since biblical times. Goethe takes the theme of good and evil beyond the traditional Christian concept embodied in God and the Devil. Influenced by the study of Oriental literature, Goethe sees the world as a totality composed of opposing forces: light and dark, good and evil, male and female, yin and yang, physical and spiritual, natural and supernatural. God and the Devil (whom Goethe calls Mephistopheles, which means “without light”) are representative of these opposing forces on a larger, as well as a smaller, scale: within the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (humanity). There exists on all levels a constant struggle between the opposing forces, with each side striving to overcome the other. It is this striving that is key to the understanding of Goethe’s work. The redeeming factor of Faust is that he continues to strive. To

Goethe, the ideal man, the Faustian man, never gives up striving.

The story of the Faust drama (sometimes referred to as the Gretchen tragedy) begins in Heaven. In “The Prologue in Heaven”—a modern enactment of the Job story—the Devil, Mephistopheles, complains that God’s creation, man, is so pitiful and corrupt that it is no more fun to torture him. God asks Mephistopheles if he knows the good man Faust. The Devil laughs and offers God a bet: “What do you wager? You will lose him yet.” God accepts Mephistopheles’ bet for Faust’s soul and points out that as long as man strives, he will make mistakes, but that he is basically good.

Despite Mephistopheles’ gleefully wicked intent to make Faust “eat dust” like his cousin the Snake, God tells Mephistopheles that He never hated him or those like him, but instead, he considers him necessary to provoke humankind to action. These lines embody the key to understanding the theme of the Faust story and the Faustian striving:

I have never hated the likes of you.  
Of all the spirits of denial  
The joker is the last that I eschew.  
Man finds relaxation too attractive—  
Too fond too soon of unconditional rest;  
Which is why I am pleased to give him a companion  
Who lures and thrusts and must, as devil, be active.

Goethe depicts the Devil not as the customary embodiment of fear-filled threat and wickedness but rather as a jovial but serious mischief maker. When the curtain closes after the prologue and Mephistopheles is left alone on stage, he humorously observes that God is not all that bad, saying, “I like to see the Old One now and then.”

The first part of the tragedy begins with Faust alone in his study. Dr. Faust is a professor, doctor, lawyer, and theologian. He has studied all that there is to study but bemoans the fact that he still knows nothing. He teaches, but he feels that he is merely leading his students by the nose, since

they could read for themselves and know all that he knows. He would like to be able to teach something that would improve humankind.

There is one subject, though, of which Faust knows virtually nothing: the world of the spirits. He opens a book on mystic art by Nostradamus and sees the sign of the Macrocosm and then of the Earth Spirit. Inspired to venture into this mystic world, he calls forth the Earth Spirit. In a flash of red flame, the Spirit appears before him, then vanishes, as Faust is unable to detain it. Feeling dejected, Faust decides that there is only one way to experience the world of the spirits, and that is to go through the door to death. He considers crossing that threshold and reaches for a vial of poison. As he lifts the poison to his lips, Faust hears the church bells outside ringing on Easter morning (symbolic, of course, of rebirth). He puts the poison down, decides to delay his quest for now, and takes a walk in the village with Wagner, his student.

A black poodle joins Faust and Wagner on their walk and follows Faust back to his study. The poodle fidgets nervously as Faust reaches for the Bible and begins to read: “In the Beginning was the Word.” Faust ponders the biblical text, then writes what he considers to be a correction: “In the beginning was the Deed.” The squirming poodle distracts Faust. Then Faust realizes that this dog is not an ordinary one. Suddenly, mist fills the small room, and from behind the stove, Mephistopheles steps forward, dressed like a traveling scholar.

When Faust asks the name of his guest, Mephistopheles identifies himself as the dark side of Totality, the evil side of good, the power that negates, but in negating creates “A part of that Power/ Which always wills evil, always procures good . . . I am a part of the Part which in the beginning was all/ A part of the darkness which gave birth to light.” The image of Mephistopheles as a part of the Greater Whole, as that force that destroys (negates), but in destroying the old creates the new, is essential to the theme of the play. Believing that he can still Faust’s unrest and continuous striving, Mephistopheles challenges Faust to a wager. He agrees to be Faust’s servant and to do or show him anything that he wants. If Faust ever says that he is totally satisfied, that the moment is so perfect that he wants it to last forever, then he will die and Mephistopheles will possess his soul.

The Devil and Faust sign their bet in blood. Be-



fore they begin their quest, Mephistopheles takes Faust to the Witch's Kitchen for a youth potion. The witch, startled to find two traveling scholars in her kitchen, does not recognize the Devil. He chastises her and tells her that the Devil must go along with the times. The time for cloven feet, pitchforks, and traditional views of Satan is over: "Satan has long been a myth without sense or sinew. . . . They are quit of the Evil One but the evil ones remain./ You may call me Noble Baron, that should do; I am a cavalier among other cavaliers."

On leaving the Witch, Faust and Mephistopheles begin their adventures. In their sojourns, Faust falls in love with a young girl, Margaret—usually referred to as Gretchen. Gretchen is the embodiment of innocence. She falls in love with Faust but is uneasy around Mephistopheles. Since Gretchen lives with her mother, consummating their love is a problem until Mephistopheles secures a sleeping potion. Unfortunately, the sleeping potion is too strong, and Gretchen's mother dies. Gretchen's brother, Valentine, appears and challenges Faust to a duel. Faust, with Mephistopheles at his side, kills Valentine. Faust is then ushered away by Mephistopheles to a witches' celebration, the Walpurgis Night. In the meantime, Gretchen has discovered that she is pregnant. She gives birth, then kills her illegitimate child and goes to prison.

In the midst of the bizarre activities of the Walpurgis Night, Faust is distracted by a mirror image of Gretchen in jail. He confronts Mephistopheles with what he (the Devil) has done. Mephistopheles, however, reminds Faust that he is merely his servant, and that Faust, alone, is responsible for his actions. In other words, the Devil did not make him do it; he simply facilitated the act.

Faust goes to Gretchen and, with Mephistopheles' help, wants to get her out of prison. Gretchen at first rejoices at seeing Faust, but when she realizes that Mephistopheles is behind him, she turns away from Faust and bids him farewell. All she wants is to die and be punished for her sins. After Faust and Mephistopheles leave, a heavenly voice calls out that Gretchen's soul is saved, she having been an innocent victim of circumstance. Thus ends *Faust*, part 1.

At the beginning of *Faust*, part 2, Faust awakens, again on Easter morning (a new rebirth), to continue his adventures with Mephistopheles. Faust has learned that personal gratifications do not sat-

isfy him and now sets out on an expedition to do something for humankind. He encounters a king who is out of money, and Mephistopheles suggests issuing paper money.

*Faust*, part 2, is considerably longer than *Faust*, part 1, and is usually considered too cumbersome for stage productions with its intricate network of details. A familiarization with the major themes, however, is important in understanding the Faust story in its entirety. One of the themes that occupied much of Goethe's later works is classical mythology. In the second part of the tragedy, Faust falls in love with Helen of Troy and asks Mephistopheles to conjure up the famous heroine. He marries Helen and has a son with her, whom he calls Euphorion. When Euphorion (who is thought to be a symbol for the English poet Lord Byron) is seven years of age, he tries to fly from the top of a ledge and crashes to the ground. With the death of Euphorion, Helen of Troy returns to the underworld, and Faust is left to continue his quest for satisfaction.

Goethe filled *Faust*, part 2, with extensive symbolism, revealing his increasing interest in the more restrained and structured classics, contrasting his earlier fascination with the Romantic extremism. The union of Faust and Helen represents the union of Romantic emotionalism and classic restraint. Their offspring is euphoria (Euphorion), but euphoria is short-lived.

Tragedy and failure do not prevent Faust from his striving. In the hope of doing something of value for humankind, he seeks to reclaim land from the sea to convert it into a public housing project. By the end of *Faust*, part 2, Faust is one hundred years old and blind. He hears digging outside and thinks that Mephistopheles is finally working on the housing project. Overjoyed at the thought that finally something will be done for humankind, Faust makes his way outside to let Mephistopheles know that this moment is the one for which he has been waiting. He dies reflecting that he has never found a moment so beautiful, so pleasant, that he wanted it to linger. The digging sound that Faust heard was Mephistopheles preparing Faust's grave. In the final scene of part 2, the soul of Faust is carried to Heaven, saved because the moment that he had found most beautiful was a moment that he thought would benefit humankind.

In contrast to the traditional Christian concept of good and evil, Goethe depicts the two forces not as mutually exclusive but as part of the greater Totality, as intricate parts of the Whole, of which all are a part. In portraying the opposing forces as existing in the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (humankind), Goethe indicates that both forces exist on every level, that all humankind has an inherent goodness that is sometimes challenged by inherent badness.

Goethe's perspective is directly influenced by Oriental thought. Western interest in Oriental literature began to spread in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century with the Romantic fascination for the exotic and reached a high point during the nineteenth century.

## THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER

**First published:** *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774 (English translation, 1779)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An artistic and intellectual young man, tormented by hopeless love for a young married woman, ends his anguish with a gunshot to his head.*

The first great popular success of Goethe's career was *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. It is a sentimental and psychological novel in letter form, influenced by Samuel Richardson, an eighteenth century English novelist famous for his epistolary novels. The letter-writing style is a natural genre for Goethe, whose writings are filled with biographical and autobiographical elements.

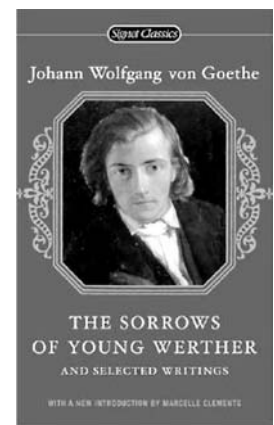
The character, Lotte, to whom the protagonist, Werther, is irrevocably drawn was inspired by Goethe's unhappy infatuation with Charlotte ("Lotte") Buff, the fiancé of his friend G. C. Kestner. Goethe met Lotte during his summer stay in Wetzlar in 1772. The end of the novel, with Werther pulling the trigger of the gun pointed at his head, was most probably prompted by the tragic fate of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, secretary of the Brunswick ambas-

sador, who committed suicide in October, 1772, after a public reprimand and the subsequent ostracism from aristocratic circles for his infatuation with the wife of a colleague.

In the letters to his friend, Goethe's character, Werther, describes the joy and agony of his love for Lotte. She also feels the attraction but is betrothed to Albert, whom she subsequently marries. Werther befriends Lotte's husband but is convinced that Albert's love for Lotte is not as deep as his own. After a passionate embrace with his beloved, the chaos and excruciating turmoil in his heart become unbearable for Werther. He asks Lotte to let him borrow Albert's pistols for safety on a journey that he never takes. Instead, in an ironic twist, the weapons of protection provide Werther with the means to end his suffering.

Goethe's sentimental novel stands for more than the fate of Werther. It becomes the creed of a whole generation protesting the oversimplified and optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason and its disregard for emotions. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* met with enthusiastic response from its readers and was soon translated into most of the European languages.

Its popularity produced a kind of Werther fever, with imitations of Werther behavior, which unfortunately led to a series of suicides. For a brief time, the publication of the novel was stopped and its sale banned. The reverberations of the effect of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* reached into the twentieth century, with psychologists referring to a rash of suicides among young people as the "Werther syndrome." The popularity of this novel testifies to Goethe's success in directing into a single channel the many currents of sentimentalism that were so prevalent during the German Romantic period.



## “THE ERLKING”

**First published:** “Erlkönig,” 1782 (collected in *Selected Poetry: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A father on horseback, clutching tightly his feverish and hallucinating child, rushes in vain to get his son home before he dies.*

The theme, setting, and mood of Goethe’s “The Erlking” capture the spirit of the Romantic period of the late eighteenth century. Characteristics of Romanticism include a love for nature, a fascination with the supernatural, and the recurring themes of love and death, all of which are contained in Goethe’s poem.

“The Erlking” begins with a narrator describing a father’s frantic ride home on horseback, through the woods, holding tightly his feverish child. The child begins to hallucinate and tells his father that he sees the Erlking:

“O father, see yonder!” he says;  
“My boy, on what do you so fearfully gaze?”  
“O, ’tis the Er’king with his crown and shroud.”  
“No, my son, it is but a dark wreath of cloud.”

The father’s rational explanation of what his son sees remains unheeded. The feverish child describes the luring of the Erlking, who invites him to come with him, promising toys and playmates. The fearful child hesitates, but the Erlking persists and finally takes him by force. At the end of the poem, the father arrives home with his son dead in his arms.

The Erlking symbolizes death, which is to the Romantic a source not only of fear but also of attraction to the unknown and the supernatural. Goethe’s poem embodies the universal theme of the loss of innocence. In this perspective, the Erlking becomes the monstrous maturity, which lures youth but destroys its innocence. The fatalistic tone of the poem suggests that innocence inevitably succumbs to, and is destroyed by, the socialization of adulthood.

Goethe’s poem reflects the Romantics’ view of society as the culprit in the destruction of innocence. They believed in the natural goodness of

humankind and emphasized the expression of feelings, which they considered more important than intellect. In eighteenth century Germany, emotionalism burst forth in violent form in the Storm and Stress literary movement, of which Goethe was an integral part.

## “WANDERER’S NIGHT SONG”

**First published:** “Wanderers Nachtlied,” 1776 (collected in *Selected Poetry: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, 2005)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Addressed to the creator, the poem is an appeal for freedom from the torment of the soul and the bustle of life.*

“Wanderer’s Night Song” is representative of the poems written by the young Goethe at the height of his Storm and Stress years. It is indicative of his love of nature and his view of nature as the creator of all things. “Wanderer’s Night Song” exemplifies Goethe’s pantheistic ideas and sentiments, which he developed out of his study of the seventeenth century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza and the eighteenth century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The poem is an appeal to nature to allow the sweet freedom (symbolic of death) to enter the chest, suggesting the stopping of the heartbeat. This poem, like “The Erlking” and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, yearns for freedom from emotional agonies, a freedom attainable only by crossing the final threshold of physical existence.

## SUMMARY

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as a poet, dramatist, and novelist, made a major contribution to world literature. His themes of individuality and social concerns reflect a profound understanding of human interrelationships. With his lyric poetry, his novels and dramas, and his vast correspondence with his contemporaries, Goethe influenced writers and thinkers of his own time and helped shape the literary movements of the nineteenth century. Goethe is widely considered to be one of the most versatile and prolific figures in all world literature.

*Elisabeth Stein*



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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is often considered the earliest of the great authors of the Romantic movement. Which Romantic traits are most important in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*?
- What is the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement? What does Goethe contribute to it?
- Is the morality of *Faust* heretical by the religious standards of Goethe's society?
- Consider the union of Faust and Helen of Troy as a unification of classical and Romantic values. How can emotionalism and classic restraint be combined?
- Offer arguments that *Faust* conveys a more hopeful or a more skeptical outlook.
- Goethe studied a number of sciences. Do they influence his literary works in any significant way?

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

*Pandora*, pb. 1808

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## NIKOLAI GOGOL

**Born:** Sorochintsy, Ukraine, Russia (now in Ukraine)  
March 31, 1809

**Died:** Moscow, Russia  
March 4, 1852

*Russia's greatest writer of serious comedy, Gogol penned novels, short stories, and dramas that add human pathos to hilarity and stretch portrayals of reality from the ordinary to the eccentric and the grotesque. His work profoundly influenced future literary pieces of psychological focus or of the absurd.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol (GAW-guhl) was born in the village of Sorochintsy, near the town of Dikanka in Ukraine, then a part of the Russian empire, on March 31, 1809. Gogol was the first surviving child of Vasily Afanasievich Gogol-Yanovsky, a landowner of dubious claim to Polish nobility who owned 150 to 200 serfs and was given to arranging plays and pageants for the amusement of the local gentry, and Maria Ivanovna Kosiarovsky, the niece of the wealthy local patriarch, Dmitri Prokofeyevich Troschinsky. At the time that her marriage was arranged, Maria was barely fourteen years old. She was herself a child in a household that she was expected to fill with other children. Maria was an extremely doting mother whose children, especially her oldest son, Nikolai, could do no wrong. She was given to fantasy and, when extolling her children, did not let truth or reality interpose. Later, after Gogol's death, she gave interviews in which she claimed that her son had invented the steam engine and designed the network of railroads then spreading across the country.

Gogol began his education in the district school at Poltava. He was enrolled there in the same class with Ivan, his younger brother and closest companion. Ivan's sudden death during the summer vacation of 1819 had a lasting impact on Gogol. He was a lifelong hypochondriac who lived in particular

fear of death's caprice. He later told acquaintances that his continual seeking of medical treatment was attributable to distress caused by his stomach being in an upside-down position. Troschinsky agreed to pay for his transfer to the boarding school in Nezhin, which he attended from 1821 to 1828. While there, he participated with a number of future literary contributors in school dramas. His schoolmates called him the "mysterious dwarf" because of his aloofness and his physical appearance and posture. It was in the school at Nezhin that Gogol began to write literary works of his own and to plan his move to the capital of St. Petersburg, where he was sure that a bright career awaited him.

At the end of 1828, Gogol is supposed to have sought out Alexander Pushkin, the reigning literary star in St. Petersburg, for sponsorship and advice. He was rebuffed, the story goes, by Pushkin's butler, who refused to awaken the great poet after a night of gambling. Gogol then began a series of minor civil posts, received through the importuned influence of Troschinsky. His attempt to self-publish his schoolboy poem, *Hanz Kuechelgarten*, under the pseudonym V. Alov, was an embarrassing disaster for him, and he fled for six weeks to Germany, offering such fanciful excuses by letter to his mother that she erroneously concluded that he had contracted a venereal disease. He returned to St. Petersburg and persisted in his writing, changing his emphasis to prose works of Ukrainian life and superstitions. With the circulation of these works under the name Nikolai Gogol, he

soon won the sponsorship of Pushkin and of Vasily Zhukovsky, the poet and translator.

In the 1830's, Gogol was given the care of two of his sisters, who had come to St. Petersburg to find suitable husbands. This responsibility necessitated his working as a tutor and teacher. At first, upon Zhukovsky's recommendation, he taught history at a young women's finishing school, the Patriotic Institute, but he complained to acquaintances that it vexed him to bestow his insights on such "puny intellects" as his students there possessed. Women, apart from his mother and sisters, were always beneath his concern. He never had, or sought, romantic involvement with any woman. Indeed, current scholars debate the evidence for his struggle with a latent homosexuality. His effusive and often saccharine letters to male acquaintances seem to support the contention that the objects of his romantic feelings were male.

As Gogol's first collection of stories, *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikanki* (1831, 1832; *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, 1926), gained popularity, he was struggling through a professorship in world history at St. Petersburg University, a position for which he had no appropriate credentials or erudition. The publication of his *Arabeski* (1835; *Arabesques*, 1982), a miscellany of lectures, essays, and stories; of his *Mirgorod* (1835; English translation, 1928), a collection of four stories; and of his fantastic short story "Nos" ("The Nose") gave him financial independence at last, and he was able to cease his labors in academia. Pushkin had given him the idea for a play about a man who is mistaken by provincial officials for a visiting government inspector general, but the staging and reception of *Revizor* (pr., pb. 1836; *The Inspector General*, 1890) so upset Gogol that he left St. Petersburg for Europe, returning only twice for visits in the next twelve years.

It was also Pushkin who gave Gogol the core idea of his great novel *Myortvye dushi* (1842, 1855; *Dead Souls*, 1887). The basic idea of this work was that a swindler might make money by buying the legal titles to deceased serfs, or "souls," whose names were still listed on the decennial census rolls. Gogol's subsequent characterization of the real "dead souls," who were the dead serfs' greedy or oblivious owners, was acclaimed by the seminal socialist literary critic Vissarion Belinsky as Russia's most accomplished literary indictment of the institution of serfdom. Belinsky hailed Gogol as an abolitionist

and a social critic of the first magnitude and urged him to continue his literary endeavors in this vein. However, Belinsky was misinterpreting Gogol's motivation in writing *Dead Souls*. Gogol was not primarily a socially conscious writer, though he came to think that he should be, trying to meet the expectations of Belinsky and others of his time.

In 1842, Gogol's short story "Shinel" ("The Overcoat") was published. The pitiful protagonist of this work, Akaky Akakievich, whose demise was occasioned by his attempt to procure a new overcoat, became the epitome of the "little man" theme in the "laughter through tears" point of view. Gogol's portrayal sprang from his own deep feelings of human inadequacy and from his religious conception of divine retribution for wrongs done. Once again, however, the social critics misinterpreted him and proclaimed his work as an example of literature with a sociopolitical message. They clamored for him to complete the second part of *Dead Souls*, expecting to obtain therein his guidance in the social and political concerns of the day.

After 1842, Gogol struggled more and more with the loss of his inspiration. The social and political expectations that his previous works had elicited from others were not in accord with his own growing religious mysticism. The act of literary creation became ever more difficult for him. He traveled from place to place, at last sending in his *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druz'yami* (1847; *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, 1969) for publication in Moscow. The critics were mystified by this intensely personal call for the spiritual regeneration of Russia along religious lines. Belinsky was incensed and wrote a famous open letter to Gogol in which he expressed his sense of disappointment and betrayal. As a result, Gogol felt even more estranged from his beloved country and its problems. His efforts to complete the second part of *Dead Souls*, the work that he felt might ransom him with his readership, became even more belabored.

In the spring of 1848, Gogol traveled to Jerusalem, hoping to find spiritual peace. He returned to Moscow still without hope, but he was impressed with the spiritual guidance that he was offered by Father Matthew Konstantinovsky, former archbishop of Rzhev, who had taken to giving his guidance in Moscow to the nobles gathered for that purpose by Count Alexander Tolstoy, a former dip-

lomat and very conservative religious scholar. Konstantinovsky advised Gogol to renounce literary pursuits altogether in the interest of saving his soul. This advice only tormented Gogol's soul further, since literary pursuits were tantamount to living and breathing for him. He therefore decided to travel again, to Odessa, to see his mother in Sorochintsy, and to various monasteries, but finally he returned to Moscow in early 1852.

On the last day of January, 1852, Gogol was staying at the Moscow home of Count Tolstoy. Gogol was deeply under the influence of Konstantinovsky, who was berating him for his continued attempts to find salvation in "pagan" literature. Gogol woke a servant boy in the middle of the night to aid him in burning his manuscripts for the second part of *Dead Souls* in the household furnace. The boy pleaded with Gogol to stop, but Gogol continued until the work of his past decade of life was destroyed. Only a few days afterward, he summoned the doctors to bleed him with leeches to correct stomach pangs that were the result of his fasting. The loss of blood in his weakened condition caused his death in Moscow on March 4, 1852. All the leading intellectuals of Moscow society attended his funeral. His gravestone in the cemetery of St. Daniel's Monastery is inscribed with the words that he chose from the book of Jeremiah: "For they will laugh at my bitter words."

## ANALYSIS

Early in his literary career, Gogol strove to entertain his more cosmopolitan Russian readers with tales of Ukrainian folk customs and superstitions. Supernatural tales were very popular at that time, and the main literary method was to structure a story in such a way that the events related could be attributed either to natural or to supernatural causes. The tension between the two possibilities of interpretation was a key aspect of the narration. Occurrences of spontaneous human combustion, as Gogol relates in "Vecher nakanune Ivana Kupala" ("St. John's Eve"), from *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, and in "Viy," from *Mirgorod*, and again later in *Dead Souls*, can be seen either as evidence of unknown natural processes or as divine intercession in human events.

As Gogol's career matured, he began to deviate from the prevailing modes of prose narration, both in theme and in method. Indeed, his innovations

in these areas defined his greatness as a writer. *Taras Bulba* (1835, 1842; English translation, 1886) was a harbinger of thematic innovation, with its treatment of a father's killing of his own son for reasons of obsessive pride. This story also shows the transcendence of the narration itself over its relation to reality, a later Gogol hallmark. That is, the time frame of *Taras Bulba* is hard to define, and the specific ethnic conflicts among Cossacks and Turks and Poles are only vaguely explored, if at all. The time line of the narrative misses subtleties of season or of reasonable travel time between the cities depicted, yet the reader is swept into the relationships of the characters and into their actions by the power of Gogol's narration. By the time of his *Arabesques* collection, Gogol had essentially abandoned the tales of Ukrainian life and was writing stories that were intended not only to entertain and amuse but also to edify and mystify. The struggle between good and evil and its consequences for ordinary people gained primacy in Gogol's characterizations.

Long a part of Slavic narrative technique is the "telling of what is not." Gogol elevated this technique to literary use and availed himself of it on a multitude of levels. He deliberately sought to bring to the reader's attention details that other writers would not consider worth mentioning—descriptions of meals eaten, street signs passed, dogs encountered. In *Dead Souls*, Gogol justifies his fixation on detail by writing that "microscopes, revealing the movements of unseen creatures, are just as wonderful as telescopes, which give us a new view of the sun." The reader is deluged with what is not of significance to the main plot, as well as with what is. Digression follows digression until the point is almost, but not quite, lost. Characters are created and explored and then suddenly dropped.

In Gogol's earlier work, his satire is largely devoid of sympathy for its human objects. The epigraph to his play *The Inspector General* quotes a Russian popular saying, "If your face is skew don't blame the mirror." In his later "Confession by an Author," Gogol writes that he "resolved in *The Inspector General* to pile all the rubbish of Russia together . . . and laugh at the whole lot." Provincial officials are parodied as petty, corrupt, venal, and downright foolish in their attempts to find favor in the eyes of Khlestakov, a St. Petersburg clerk whom they mistakenly believe is a government inspector



general. Khlestakov soon assumes the pose with relish but is revealed as a fraud when the local postmaster reads his letter to a friend in which, to their horror, the parodied provincial officials are ridiculed.

As Gogol matured as a writer, he developed more sympathy for his objects of ridicule, obviously identifying with them personally as a human being caught in the clash of forces, both social and spiritual, beyond human control. In “The Overcoat,” the reader can feel Gogol’s sympathy for the tormented Akaky Akakievich, the office copy clerk who is the butt of his coworkers’ pranks. Gogol gives Akaky a supernatural revenge for the cruelty and the slights. In *Dead Souls*, Gogol summarized his relationship with his characters in this way: “Supernatural powers have ordained that I should walk hand in hand with my odd heroes, observing the life that flows majestically past me, conveying it through laughter, which the world can hear, while seeing it myself through tears it never suspects.” This “laughter through tears” is the most lasting literary legacy of Nikolai Gogol.

### “THE DIARY OF A MADMAN”

**First published:** “Zapiski sumasshedshego,” 1835 (collected in *Arabesques*, 1982)

**Type of work:** Short story (in diary form)

*The reader witnesses the progression of a man’s insanity in twenty entries from his diary.*

In “The Diary of a Madman,” the eccentric clerk Poprishchin is infatuated with the daughter of his office director. He records in his diary that he has intercepted a letter from her dog to another dog. The contents eventually lead him to conclude that “women are in love with the Devil,” a fact that only he has discovered. Soon, he ceases going to work, where his main task is to sharpen the director’s quills, because he has become the king of Spain, although “Spain and China are one and the same country.” The flimsy moon, he relates, is inhabited by people’s noses, and that is why they cannot see them on their own faces.

Poprishchin (whose name evokes the Russian word for “pimple”) records October 3 as his first di-

ary entry. Entries for October 4, November 6, and November 8 follow. As his insanity becomes more and more pervasive and debilitating, the entries are given dates such as “the 43rd Day of April in the year 2000” and “The 34th of yrae yraurbeF 349.” The reader begins to see shadows of reality in Poprishchin’s ramblings, as when he mentions the “Spanish court custom” requiring that his head be shaved and that water be dripped on it. In his last entry, Poprishchin longs for escape. He wants to return to his peasant home and to his mother, saying,

O mother, mother, save your unhappy son! Let a tear fall on his aching head! See how they torture him! Press the poor orphan to your bosom! He has no rest in this world; they hunt him from place to place.

Mother, mother, have pity on your sick child! And do you know that the Bey of Algiers has a wart under his nose?

### “THE NOSE”

**First published:** “Nos,” 1836 (collected in *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, 1985)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A St. Petersburg city official awakens without a nose and takes several courses of remedial action to no effect before the nose’s mysterious return.*

Much has been made of the “nose” theme in Gogol’s work “The Nose.” American writer Vladimir Nabokov, in his interpretation, rejects the Freudian view that, in Gogol’s topsy-turvy world, the nose represents a misplaced phallus, and that his literary fixation on noses, sneezes, snuff, stinks, scents, and the like evidences his own uncertain sense of sexual identity. Instead, Nabokov attributes Gogol’s “olfactivism” to a general nasal consciousness in the Russian culture that was made more acute in Gogol’s work because of the peaked prominence of his own nose. Whatever the origin, Gogol’s tale is “verily a hymn to that organ.”

St. Petersburg barber Ivan Yakovlevich awakes to find a nose baked into his breakfast bread. He recognizes the nose as that of his recent customer, Major Platon Kovalyov, a collegiate assessor in the

municipal government. Harangued by his wife, he seeks to dispose of the nose by wrapping it in a cloth and throwing it into the water below the Isaac Bridge. He is observed in this act, however, by a policeman. Kovalyov awakens, looks in the mirror, and notices that his nose is missing. He is most upset about this, so he covers his face with a handkerchief and walks out onto Nevsky Prospect to seek aid. His sense of embarrassment prevents him from approaching anyone, however, and his discomfiture is greatly increased when, in front of a confectionary shop, he encounters his nose exiting a carriage. Since his nose is wearing the uniform of an official of higher rank than his, Kovalyov importunes the nose very politely to return to his face. The nose, however, is indignant and denies that there can be any close ties between them, before haughtily walking away.



Kovalyov goes to seek the aid of the chief of police, but the chief of police is not at home. Kovalyov realizes that he must act on his own to effect the return of his nose. He contemplates advertising in the newspaper for its return but rejects the idea. At this point, the policeman who had observed Yakovlevich throwing the nose off the Isaac Bridge comes to Kovalyov's house to inform him that the nose "had been arrested just as it was getting into a carriage for Riga." The nose is now returned to Kovalyov in its cloth wrapping. Kovalyov is very grateful, but he does not know how to stick the nose back onto his face. A physician whom he consults on the matter is of no help at all.

Thinking things over, Kovalyov concludes that the loss of his nose is the result of a spell put on him by his superior's wife, Madame Podtochina, whose ire he aroused when he refused to marry her daughter. He writes Madame Podtochina a letter, demanding that she restore his nose to its rightful place or face "legal procedures." Kovalyov's quandary continues until April 7, when he awakens to find his nose returned to its proper place in the middle of his face.

The notion of a nose disappearing from a man's

face, assuming human size, rank, and uniform, is Gogol's way of expressing life's absurdity. The reader's sense of expected reality is violated. Is this the relation of dreams? Is it the rambling of a madman? Are there unexplained facts behind it all? What does it mean? Many authors since have included similar violations of expected reality in their literary art. Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (1915; *The Metamorphosis*, 1936), in which a man wakes up to find himself transformed into an insect, comes to mind. Gogol characterizes the entire story within the narrative as one of those "strange things" that "happen all the time." "Whatever you might say," he writes in the famous concluding sentences, "such things do happen, rarely perhaps, but they do."

## "THE OVERCOAT"

**First published:** "Shinel," 1842 (collected in *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, 1985)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A downtrodden copy clerk saves for months to buy an overcoat, but before he can enjoy it, it is stolen, and as a result, he dies.*

In many a workplace, there is one person who serves as the object of the others' cruel amusement. In "The Overcoat," that person is Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, a poor office worker whose very name reminds a Russian of excrement-befouled boots (from "kaka," the child's word for excrement, and "bashmak" for boot or shoe). His coworkers poke endless fun at him. They tear paper into confetti and sprinkle it over his head. Akaky protests only when the torment becomes extreme. Otherwise, he is content to work as a copy clerk, keeping his pencils sharp and copying document after document all day.

The fiercely cold St. Petersburg winter forces Akaky to consider the purchase of a new overcoat, since his old coat has worn to complete transparency and is useless. The tailor, Petrovich, suggests the possibility of owning a splendid new coat with a "catskin collar that could pass for marten." After months of the most sacrificing parsimony (so many months, in fact, that it would have been summer

and the coat not needed, but Gogol's narrative logic is not fazed by this fact), Akaky saves the needed eighty rubles to buy the coat. He immediately wears it to work and basks for the first time in the admiration of his coworkers. One of them even invites Akaky to a birthday party. On the way home after the party, a group of "people with moustaches," one of whom had a "fist the size of a civil servant's head," accosts him and strips him of his new coat.

Akaky knows that seeking redress for such a crime from the police is futile. Instead, he makes an appointment to see a "very important person." This "very important person," however, sees Akaky only as someone else to intimidate. He booms out three questions at Akaky (there is much triplicity in Gogol's work): "Are you aware who you are talking to?" "Do you realize who is standing before you?" and "Do you hear me?" Akaky flees this person's office in terror, goes home coatless through the winter wind, and takes to bed with a swollen throat and a fever. In three days, he is dead. It takes another three days for his office to miss him and replace him with another copy clerk, whose letters were written "in a hand quite unlike Akaky Akakievich's upright ciphers, sloping heavily to one side."

The sad story is not ended, however, as a mysterious ghost begins to haunt St. Petersburg near the area of the department. The ghost accosts people and strips them of their coats. Indeed, the "very important person," whose conscience had begun to trouble him over his treatment of Akaky, is accosted by the ghost and has his coat stolen as well. The reader feels that, in death, Akaky is wreaking his revenge on those who slighted him in life. The coat-stealing ghost is not seen again after the robbery of the "very important person's" coat. Another ghost, though, is seen by a cowardly constable, who is taken aback by the "much taller" apparition's "enormous moustache" and a "fist such as you would see on no living man." With this baffling inclusion, Gogol ends his classic story of the "little man" and his mistreatment by society.



"The Overcoat" has been a very influential story in world literature. Many literary works that treat the problems of an individual in a callous society with some psychological depth and empathy owe a debt to Gogol. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevski's famous remark that "We all came out from Gogol's Overcoat" still held true through much of the twentieth century. The "little tramp" films of the English actor Charlie Chaplin also embody Gogolesque aspects of the "little man" and the "laughter through tears" character type.

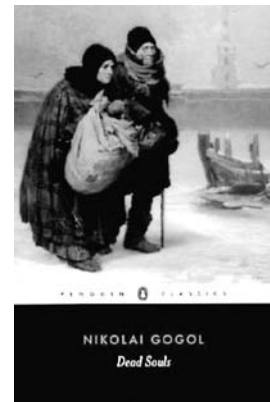
## DEAD SOULS

**First published:** *Myortvye dushi*, part 1, 1842; part 2, 1855 (English translation, 1887)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A con artist plans to purchase "dead souls," or serfs, from a number of provincial landowners who turn out to be the real "dead souls."*

In Gogol's time, a Russian landowner could buy and sell serfs, or "souls," like any other property. The serfs were counted, for the purpose of tax assessment, every ten years. Thus, a landowner still had to pay taxes on the value of serfs who had died, until the next ten-year census could legally record the deaths. In *Dead Souls*, a prose novel subtitled *A Poem*, Gogol's hero, Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, plans to buy the titles to these "dead souls" and use them as collateral to obtain a large loan. He comes to a small provincial town and begins to proposition the local landowners: the slothful Manilovs (the "kind-manners"), the slovenly Plewshkin ("Mr. Spittoon"), the coarse Sobakievich ("Mr. Dog"), the cautious Madame Korobachka ("Mrs. Box"), and the bully and cheat Nozdryov ("Mr. Nostrils"). These landowners are revealed to be so petty and avaricious that not even Chichikov's amazing offer can be worked to his ad-



vantage on them. Some stall, some refuse for no obvious reasons, some promise and then renege, and others want “in on the deal.” In the end, Chichikov, having concluded that the landowners are a hopeless lot, leaves for other regions.

Throughout *Dead Souls*, Gogol presents Russian life as a mosaic of strangely intersecting inanities. He makes his authorial presence felt as a first-person commentator. His commentator’s stance is curiously unresolved. Though he likens Russia to the “fastest troika imaginable . . . racing headlong . . . inspired by God,” he seems most insistent, with his wordy, tongue-in-cheek prose, in portraying the life within its borders as inalterably superficial.

## SUMMARY

Nikolai Gogol was a man with more than his share of neuroses. He was confident of his narrative gift yet lived in fear that his inspiration would wane. He was misinterpreted in his lifetime, and he died in mental and spiritual frustration. However, he has given world literature some of its most laughable and yet pathetic prose. In most of his mature works, he laid bare the banality and the pettiness (signifying the manifestation of false values) underlying all human pretense. For Gogol, humor was the most effective way to call for human sincerity. Digressions were the way that he chose to address the central aspects of human life. Trivia was his path to finding what was most important.

Lee B. Croft

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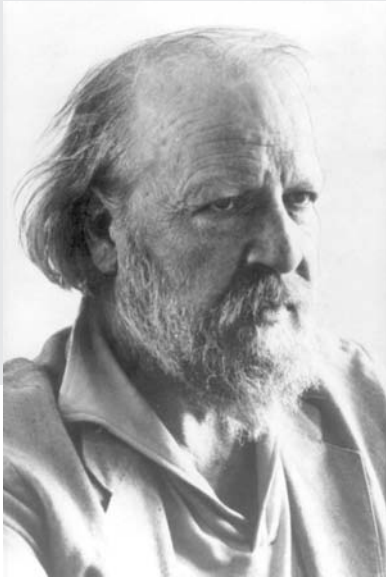
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Some have called Nikolai Gogol “the Russian Dickens.” What resemblances do you see between Gogol and Charles Dickens?
- How does Gogol enlist sympathy for Akaky in “The Overcoat”? Is it undercut by the “supernatural revenge” at the end?
- Show how Gogol’s rather offhand remarks and comments in his fiction contribute to its humorous effect.
- What absurdist features do you find in Gogol’s writing, and can you make any comparison between them and similar effects in more recent fiction?
- Some readers who come to Gogol after reading other Russian writers, such as Fyodor Dostoevski and Leo Tolstoy, are disappointed that Gogol does not seem serious. Consider the matter of Gogol’s seriousness or lack of it.
- Argue that Gogol is or is not a champion of the underdog.





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## WILLIAM GOLDING

**Born:** St. Columb Minor, Cornwall, England  
September 19, 1911

**Died:** Perranarworthal, Cornwall, England  
June 19, 1993

*Golding's novels explore the dark side of the human psyche. His *Lord of the Flies* became a classic fictive study in the dark side of human nature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Gerald Golding was born on September 19, 1911, in St. Columb Minor in Cornwall, England. His father was an extremely well-educated schoolmaster, and his mother was a strong-minded suffragette. Golding grew up in the family home at Marlborough. When he left to enter Brasenose College, Oxford, he had planned to study science, but he later decided to study English literature instead. After graduating, he worked for a while in a London theater group, writing, acting, and producing. In 1939, however, he married and then followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a schoolmaster at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury. He left Bishop Wordsworth's to serve in the Royal Navy during World War II. He saw action at sea as a lieutenant on a rocket launcher and was very affected by seeing the violence of which people were capable. He returned to the school in 1945 and taught there until 1961.

As a child, Golding had been fascinated with words, and as an adult he tried his hand at writing, but with little early success. A small volume, *Poems* (1934), was published when he was twenty-three, but Golding decided he was not a poet. During the early years of his teaching career, he wrote several novels that he himself described as being too derivative, too much like works that had already been

written. Publishers were not interested in these works, either. Trying a new tactic, Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies* (1954). For this novel, he adopted an unusual perspective that he then altered at the end, and he used his experience with small boys to explore the dark side of humanity, which the war had brought to his attention. This time, Golding was more pleased with his efforts, but twenty-one publishers rejected the novel before Faber & Faber published it in 1954. Thus, Golding was forty-three when his literary career began to flourish.

A fairly regular stream of novels followed: *The Inheritors* (1955), *Pincher Martin* (1956; first published in the United States as *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*), *Free Fall* (1959), and *The Spire* (1964). In addition, he published a collection of essays and book reviews, *The Hot Gates, and Other Occasional Pieces* (1965).

By 1964, Golding was enjoying the respect of scholars, a widening audience, and financial security. He left Bishop Wordsworth's in 1961 and, after a year as writer-in-residence at Hollins College in Virginia, devoted himself solely to writing.

With the publication of *The Pyramid* (1967), Golding's reputation suffered a slight decline. Critics gave the novel's linked episodes and light social satire mixed reviews. The publication of three novellas in *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels* (1971) did nothing to recoup Golding's reputation, nor did the eight-year hiatus before *Darkness Visible* was published in 1979. That novel, however, attracted favorable critical attention and won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1979. Golding's reputation was on the rise again. *Rites of Passage*, the

first novel of *A Sea Trilogy*, followed in 1980, winning the Man Booker Prize and garnering much praise for Golding's parody of eighteenth century prose and for his adaptation of the tradition of sea journals. Golding also won the Man Booker Prize for his collection of essays, *A Moving Target*, published in 1982. In 1983, Golding was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and he was knighted in 1986.

Before Golding completed *A Sea Trilogy*, three other books appeared: *A Moving Target*; *The Paper Men* (1984), a novel dismissed by most critics as the autobiographical musings of a cranky author, who both craved and rejected critical attention; and *An Egyptian Journal* (1985), an account of a trip to Egypt in the winter of 1984. The publication of *Close Quarters* in 1987 and *Fire Down Below* in 1989, however, completed *A Sea Trilogy* and confirmed the critical praise received for *Rites of Passage*. The trilogy firmly reestablished Golding as a major novelist of the twentieth century. It has since been reissued as a single volume under the title *To the Ends of the Earth: A Sea Trilogy* (1991). Another novel, *The Double Tongue*, was published posthumously in 1995. Set in classical Greece, it centers on the priestess of the Delphic Oracle at a time of growing disbelief. The writer as prophet in a skeptical world and the communicating of wisdom are the predominant themes of the book.

## ANALYSIS

Critics have called Golding an allegorist, a fabulist, and a mythmaker. Of the three terms, Golding preferred mythmaker, and when he was awarded the Nobel Prize the citation acknowledged the mythic quality of his work, his ability to illuminate the condition of humankind by means of a concrete story.

In framing the concrete stories, Golding often draws on literary precedents, both specific works and genres. For *Lord of the Flies* Golding turns to the genre of boys' adventure stories and to R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), in particular. Where Ballantyne's boys, stranded on a desert island, have a jolly time and live harmoniously, Golding's boys become little savages. Golding turns the literary precedent on its head, using it only as a starting place for his own unique view.

Golding also draws on his interests and his biography in his works. For example, Golding grew up

near the sea, served in the navy, and has written essays on the pleasure and pain of sailing his own boat. Thus, in *A Sea Trilogy*, Golding is able to describe accurately the tensions of shipboard proximity, the moods of the ocean, and the nautical minutiae with which the crew must be concerned.

Golding once said that although he was, by nature, an optimist, he hoped that a defective logic made him a pessimist. This view in many ways sums up the themes that play in his novels. In other words, his logic and objective observation reveal the dark side of human nature that people prefer to deny or ignore. However, there may be hope and some reason for optimism if that dark side can be laid bare and acknowledged, for humankind has the potential for good as well as for evil.

The exploration of the dark side of humanity is a major thematic focus in virtually every novel, and Golding has been criticized as limiting himself to this one dimension. Even as he explores human depravity, however, Golding implies or asserts a second theme: the value of self-awareness and love as the means of coping with this inherent evil. In some works, such as *Lord of the Flies*, mostly depravity is shown. In *Darkness Visible*, however, the potential for good is explored more fully. The protagonist, Matty Windrave, devotes himself to the powers of good and saves one character from his evil impulses.

These two major themes in Golding's work are reinforced by some elements of his style and other characteristics of his novels. Often Golding creates remote or confined settings: a desert island in *Lord of the Flies*, a rock in the middle of the ocean in *Pincher Martin*, or the microcosm of the ship in *A Sea Trilogy*. In these settings, the characters may act out the evil that civilization keeps in bounds or be forced to look inside themselves to see the darkness lurking there. A restricted point of view forces readers to see from a particular, sometimes unfamiliar, perspective. In addition, Golding may suddenly change that perspective at the end of a novel, forcing the reader to see the situation anew.

Golding has been charged with obscurity, but whatever obscurity exists in his work serves a thematic purpose. He created a fictional world seen with new eyes from unusual perspectives. The degree to which readers experience a connection between the fictional world and the world they inhabit is the degree to which Golding succeeded as a mythmaker.

## LORD OF THE FLIES

**First published:** 1954

**Type of work:** Novel

*British schoolboys stranded on an island exhibit savagery that was suppressed in the supposedly civilized, war-torn world they left behind.*

*Lord of the Flies* opens with schoolboys wandering out of the jungle, into which their plane has crashed, and onto the beach of a remote island. In this isolated setting, the boys first try to maintain a veneer of civilization, but they soon shed it to exhibit the evil that is inborn. Golding tells the story from the boys' perspective until the final few pages, where he then alters the perspective to enlarge the context. Little boys are not the only ones who have savagery at their core; the grown-ups do as well.

The first two boys to emerge, Ralph, an easygoing but fairly responsible boy, and Piggy, a thinker who is fat and asthmatic, gather the rest of the boys by sounding a conch shell. At their first assembly, the boys recognize the need for some rules: "After all, we're not savages. We're English." They elect Ralph chief and make Jack the leader of the boys who will hunt for food and keep a signal fire going.

Before long, the boys' immaturity and irresponsibility are clear and are a source of frustration to Ralph and Piggy. After building a couple of shelters, the boys would rather swim and roll rocks than work. The hunters would rather hunt than follow through on their other job of keeping a signal fire going. As a result, they miss the chance to signal a passing ship.

Immaturity and irresponsibility soon give way to violence and fear-inspired frenzy as the last vestiges of the veneer of civilization disappear. For Jack the early fun of hunting becomes a compulsion to track down and kill. He teaches his hunters to circle and close in on their prey, and in the circle the boys become bloodthirsty savages.

Fear works to intensify the power of the mob.

Some of the little boys are afraid of a "beastie," and their fear spreads to all the boys. Only one boy, Simon, has the insight to know that the beast is inside them and the savagery they have always suppressed is what they should fear. Seeing something move among the rocks, the boys conclude that they have found the beast and are terrified. Only Simon has the courage to investigate. He finds a dead aviator, his parachute lines entangled in the rocks. Exhausted from his search and sick at what he has found, Simon crawls down the mountain, arriving on the beach to find himself in the middle of a circle of madly dancing, paint-smeared boys. In a blind frenzy, somehow thinking Simon is the beast crawling toward them, they kill him.

Although Piggy refers to Simon's death as an accident, Ralph knows it was murder and says he is scared "of us." Like Simon, Ralph knows the beast is within; he becomes the next scapegoat. The circle is closing on Ralph when the boys are rescued by officers from a cruiser. The perspective changes immediately. One officer remarks, "Fun and games." He asks Ralph jokingly, "Having a war or something? . . . Nobody killed, I hope? Any dead bodies?" The reader knows, as Ralph does, the awful truth of two dead bodies. The officer's naïveté reinforces the irony of the entire novel. The boys come out of a world at war. They land in an idyllic spot where their basic needs are met and where they can escape the carnage of the adult world. Since evil is within them, however, they, too, war on one another. They return, finally, to a world at war because escape from the island is not escape from evil. Evil is in the hearts of people.



## THE INHERITORS

**First published:** 1955

**Type of work:** Novel

*A group of Neanderthals comes into contact with a group of Homo sapiens and perishes in the encounter.*

Golding's second novel, *The Inheritors*, is set in a similarly exotic location as *Lord of the Flies*, and, like it, traces the process of civilization and its disintegration. Unlike *Lord of the Flies*, however, it is set in the distant past rather than the near future, and it describes forces of both progress and dissolution.

Taking as his subtext the popular social evolutionism in vogue at the turn of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the work of H. G. Wells, Golding traces the demise of Neanderthal man in the face of the advent of *Homo sapiens*. To both species of humans, life is, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish, and short," though in somewhat different ways. Golding questions whether *Homo sapiens* is the "fitter" of the two species.

The narrative is told from the viewpoint of a small group of Neanderthals, returning from their winter quarters in a coastal cave to their summer gathering grounds in a forest at the base of the mountains, by a lake and waterfall. The Neanderthals quickly discover a group of *Homo sapiens* encamped on an island by the waterfall. This is a species they have never encountered before. Instinctively, they seek their company as fellow humans. The Neanderthals are portrayed as simple, instinctive, intuitive, living in harmony with nature, and with a sense of the sacredness of life. They are afraid to kill any living being. They possess a language, though this is implemented by an almost telepathic communication. In the course of the novel, the main character, Lok, discovers the force of simile.

The humans of *Homo sapiens*, however, are terrified of these small, red-haired creatures who sometimes walk on all four limbs; they view the Neanderthals as wood-demons. In contrast to the Neanderthal group, the *Homo sapiens* group is portrayed as fearful, cannibalistic (they eat the Neanderthal girl, Liku, in their hunger), and orgiastic. They hunt and get drunk. They also propitiate the

dark forces by chopping off human limbs and clearly are prepared to make human sacrifice. Their rituals stand in great contrast to the Neanderthals' numinous reverence for the Earth Mother. The Neanderthals are finally destroyed by their attempted contact with the *Homo sapiens*, with only the group's baby surviving as a kidnap victim, for the purposes of being a trophy or pet.

Golding raises the question of evolutionary loss, as well as gain. Though technically more advanced, *Homo sapiens* has little reverence for earth, gaining only terror and panic from the inexplicable forces in the otherness of nature. Golding's point is that contemporary human beings are the inheritors of this tradition. To make this point more dramatically, the perspective of the narrative suddenly changes in the last chapter, where the terrified humans are in their dugout canoe, sailing away from the haunted forests. Readers suddenly see the last little, hairy Neanderthal from the perspective of *Homo sapiens*.

## PINCHER MARTIN

**First published:** 1956

**Type of work:** Novel

*A self-centered man, stranded alone on what seems to be a rock in the middle of the ocean, faces the dark center of his being as he struggles to evade the nothingness of death.*

*Pincher Martin* (first published in the United States as *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*) depicts one man's ferocious struggle against the nothingness, the loss of identity that death brings. Typically, Golding places the main character in a remote setting, where he is forced to take a long, hard look at himself. Also typically, what the character sees is a darkness at his core. A quintessentially self-centered person, Martin realizes that in his life he did whatever was necessary to come out on top or to have his own way. In death, however, he is fighting the one force that will erase all that he is and he has. Thus he fights death with all his strength.

Seemingly the only survivor of a torpedoed ship, Martin is in fact alive only inside his own head. That



is where his struggle takes place, but he imagines the battle raging on a rock in the middle of the ocean, a rock he has created from the memory of one of his own teeth.

Appropriate to the focus of the story, Golding tells virtually the whole story from Martin's perspective. Initially, Golding elicits sympathy for Martin by describing in detail the horror of his near drowning. Once Martin reaches the rock, he admonishes himself to think, to use his intellect and reason to survive. Admiration grows for this man who can keep his wits about him, devise shelter, and find water and food. Since the story is being told from inside Martin's mind, he also returns to memories that reveal a self-centeredness at the core of his being. Thus Golding moves to a familiar theme, the revelation of the darkness and depravity in the heart of humanity.

Using Martin's memories and repeated images of eating, Golding slowly paints a picture of an unscrupulous, cruel man who nevertheless once felt moved by a love that was his one chance to experience something other than self-satisfaction. Martin remembers all the people he "ate": a nameless woman and a young boy whom he used sexually and tossed aside and the producer whose wife he seduced. More specifically he remembers Nathaniel, whom Martin loved for some reason that he cannot understand. He also hated him because Nat, without apparent effort, had obtained what Pincher could not get by force: Nat had peace of mind and also had Mary. For Martin, hate was stronger than love, so he raped Mary and tried to kill Nat.

All the images of eating converge into one symbol, the Chinese box. Martin recounts that the Chinese bury a fish in a tin box. Maggots eat the fish first and then each other until there is one maggot left, a rare dish. The sound of a spade knocking on the side of the box as it is dug up is like the sound of thunder. Pincher Martin lives his whole life trying to be the last successful maggot. When he realizes that the rock is only his tooth, imagined out of his effort to hang onto his identity, the only thing he has, he hears thunder and knows that the black lightning of God is coming for him. When the black lightning comes, he will be eaten.

After the lightning takes Martin's center, the perspective must change, for Pincher Martin no longer exists, even in his own mind. The end of the

novel relates a conversation between the man who discovered Martin's body washed ashore and the officer who identifies and removes the body. The former wonders if Martin suffered; the latter tells him Martin never had time to kick his seaboots off. From Martin's perspective, however, the power of the imagination at the moment of death and his self-centeredness have extended his agony.

## DARKNESS VISIBLE

**First published:** 1979

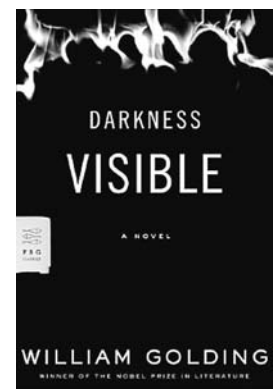
**Type of work:** Novel

*A deformed and unlikely savior appears in the modern wasteland, bringing a message of spiritual power and love to its inhabitants.*

*Darkness Visible*, by its title, conveys Golding's central preoccupation, that of making the darkness within visible through fiction. This novel focuses on the spiritual darkness of the modern world and its accompanying loss of love. The urban wasteland is represented by Greenfield, an English village once aptly named but currently suffering all the ills of urbanization, such as pollution, noise, and overcrowding. Two overlapping tales show that the people who live there are also suffering. For them, love is either distorted or absent; the old rituals have either died or lost their power to put people in touch with the divine.

The story begins in war-ravaged London, where the central character, Matty Windrave, emerges in flames like a burning bush from one of the fires. This child survives but is extremely deformed and without any family. He is shuttled from place to place, his distorted features making people uncomfortable. They see only the outside and do not value his kindness, honesty, or hard work. Although Matty craves love, he is rebuffed or used at every turn.

His teacher, Mr. Pedigree, likes handsome





young boys and sits Matty almost behind a cabinet. Pedigree's perversity leads him to ask favorite boys to his rooms under the guise of helping them with their lessons. When he is warned by the headmaster about these meetings, Pedigree uses Matty to screen himself. Knowing that no one would think he had ulterior motives for inviting such an ugly child, he asks Matty to come to his rooms. The current favorite cannot deal with his rejection and falls to his death, which ultimately leads to Pedigree's imprisonment. Pedigree tells Matty it is all his fault. Matty believes him. He thinks Pedigree is a friend he betrayed and resolves to make amends.

To those who reject him, Matty looks inhuman, but he is perhaps more than human. Unlike others who have lost touch with the spiritual world, Matty communicates with angels who help him in his quest to answer questions about who he is and what his mission is. Matty knows that the old rituals have lost their power, so he creates his own or endures new versions of the old ones. He memorizes and recites Bible passages, walks in chains through a swamp in self-baptism, and suffers a mock crucifixion. He knows he may be perceived as mad but feels that he needs the rituals to cleanse himself of his perceived sin, ward off evil, and gain the more-than-human power he will need for his mission of salvation.

The second story focuses on Sophy Stanhope, one of twin girls who grow up in Greenfield. Unlike Matty, Sophy and her sister, Toni, are beautiful. They are objects of attention and affection for everyone except their father, from whom they want love. Sophy's frustration comes out in violent, destructive impulses. Like Matty, she is in touch with mysterious forces, but she taps into them for evil purposes. Her first experience involves sensing and acting on the synchronous moment when a small duck swimming by can be killed by a large stone thrown into the water. Also like Matty, Sophy craves love. She has a family, but in her part of the wasteland world, family love is a joke. Her mother has abandoned the family, and her father consorts with a series of "aunties." Sophy's own love life involves an undercurrent of risk, violence, or manipulation.

The paths of the characters converge after they are grown up or have grown old. Matty's mission is to guard the messianic child that his angels tell him

will be the new representative of divine power on earth. Sophy plots with others to kidnap the same child, the ransom and the evil adventure appealing to her. When Sophy's cohorts bomb the school where the child lives, Matty whirls through the fire to save him, becoming the burnt offering the angels have told him he must become.

Matty must also save Pedigree from himself. An old man who preys on children in the park, Pedigree knows that his compulsion will one day lead him to murder a child to keep him from telling. Nevertheless, he cannot stop himself. Pedigree is in the park waiting for his next boy to come close when he has a vision. The dead Matty approaches to take away the brightly colored ball that Pedigree uses to entice the boys. As Pedigree clutches the ball to his chest, it becomes his beating heart; when Matty pulls it from him, his heart stops and he dies. However, Pedigree dies with insight. It is he who realizes that Matty was the only person who loved him and that love is what all people are searching for, whether they call it sex, money, or power. Thus Matty is vindicated and evil thwarted at the end of the novel by the power of love and a higher, inexplicable power with which Matty was in tune.

## A SEA TRILOGY

**First published:** *Rites of Passage*, 1980; *Close Quarters*, 1987; *Fire Down Below*, 1989

**Type of work:** Novels

*In the journals chronicling his voyage to Australia, Edmund Talbot comments on fellow passengers, the crew, and shipboard events while revealing his own maturation.*

*Rites of Passage*, *Close Quarters*, and *Fire Down Below* constitute Golding's *A Sea Trilogy*. The focus of the trilogy, taken as a whole, is Edmund Talbot's maturation. Showing Talbot from his departure as a young upstart, sure of preferment and success, to his reflections as an old man, the novels allow Talbot to demonstrate his growth as a human being. Using the literary genre of the sea journal, Golding allows Talbot to speak for himself. Talbot's eighteenth century prose and his insistence on learning sailors' jargon lend authenticity to his record of

the physical journey, while the content and tone of his journals reveal the results of his psychological journey and growth. In particular, his maturity is revealed in his record of his relationships with the other passengers and the crew and in his comments about himself.

In *Rites of Passage*, Talbot is a snob, easily impressed by titles, fine clothing, or fancy manners. He holds himself aloof and seems quite self-satisfied, certain of his intellect, his talents, and his future success. Any insecurity is revealed in the obsequious tone he sometimes adopts in his journal, which is written for his benefactor and godfather in England. He is very much concerned with being witty and painting a favorable picture of himself on the voyage.

As part of his commentary, Talbot introduces the other people on board. The passengers include Zenobia Brocklebank, an older woman attempting to seem younger and more socially prominent than her condition warrants; her father, who resorts to drink; Mr. Prettiman, a rationalist; Miss Granham, a spinster dismissed by Talbot as cold and unattractive; and the Reverend Colley, an earnest but overzealous clergyman. The crew includes Captain Anderson, the chief officer, who is strongly anti-clergy; Billy Rogers, a handsome sailor who becomes Colley's shame; Mr. Summers, a lowborn officer with highborn qualities; and Wheeler, servant to Talbot.

The central event of this first novel is the death of Colley. Talbot finds Colley a ridiculous figure for much of the novel, and it is clear why Colley becomes the butt of jokes. A practical joke played by the sailors as part of the rites of crossing the equator is carried too far, however, and Colley simply wills himself to die of shame. After reading the letter that Colley left behind, Talbot must take a second look at the man. In addition, Talbot examines his own role in Colley's death, sensing that blaming the sailors is too easy. In this way, Talbot takes the first major step toward maturity. Examination of cruelty and blame—and the evil in human nature that prompts such tormenting—also allies *Rites of Passage* with earlier Golding novels.

With *Close Quarters*, Talbot begins a new journal. This one is to be written for himself rather than his patron, so he is freed from the necessity of banter and afforded the opportunity for introspection. In this novel, Talbot is less snobbish and displays an

improved sense of humor. Still bristly when teased by being called "Lord Talbot," he can sometimes laugh at himself. Primarily, though, he matures in his relationships and has his courage tested. With one exception, his focus shifts somewhat from the passengers to the crew as the decrepit condition of the ship becomes significant.

When the ship is becalmed beside the *Alcyone*, Talbot finds new interests. In particular he falls in love with Marion Chumley, the ward of the captain of the *Alcyone*. His infatuation at first seems ridiculous, but his intentions are honorable and he remains true through their subsequent separation. In addition, he has a new officer to observe. Lieutenant Benet is sent to Talbot's ship in order to end an affair on board the *Alcyone*.

A risk taker, Benet is soon in conflict with Mr. Summers, who conservatively calculates the odds before acting. Their disagreements with each other and with Captain Anderson about how to handle the ship's broken mast afford Talbot an opportunity to admire the discipline of the ship's social order, particularly the way Summers yields to it despite his frustration at having to carry out orders with which he disagrees. As Talbot becomes better acquainted with Summers, his admiration and their friendship develop. It is a mark of Talbot's maturity that their friendship can survive a falling out.

Once the mast breaks, all aboard are in grave danger, and Talbot records their ways of facing impending death. One drinks, another prefers a quick, self-inflicted gunshot to longer suffering, and some retain their dignity. Talbot is among the latter despite his very real fear. In *Close Quarters*, Talbot is tested in love, friendship, and courage and is not found wanting.

*Fire Down Below* further demonstrates Talbot's maturation as he continues to learn to look beneath surface appearances in order to find true worth. The novel also returns to the theme of accountability, touched on in *Rites of Passage*. As Talbot's friendship with Summers is renewed and grows, Talbot sees clearly the qualities that make Summers superior to an officer who trades solely on his good family ties. Talbot appreciates Summers's kindness and concern, even for little things like helping to relieve the itch of being salty all the time. He recognizes Summers's sensitivity, his allowing Talbot to stand the night watch to avoid be-

ing in the cabin where Wheeler, Talbot's servant, committed suicide. Talbot also reforms his opinion of Miss Granham, now Mrs. Prettiman, appreciating her strength and intelligence. Talbot is more willing to learn from others about the practicalities of what to wear to be comfortable for months at sea or about social philosophy, which he discusses with the Prettimans.

If Talbot's character is in better shape in *Fire Down Below*, the ship is in worse shape. It survives a terrible storm and an encounter with an iceberg, but the foremast is shifting, slowing the ship's progress. Benet proposes running a hot metal bolt through the foremast, and Anderson agrees. The ship moves faster, but Summers alone acknowledges the danger that the mast will be smoldering on the inside. The ship safely reaches port, and Summers's loyalty seems to be rewarded when he is given command of the ship. In fact, Anderson and Benet have simply walked away from the responsibility for what they have done. When the ship catches fire and sinks, it is Summers who dies on board.

Events move swiftly once the ship reaches Sydney. Talbot's fortunes are reversed and then reversed again. When his patron dies, he must adjust to being penniless. However, he later learns that he has been left a seat in Parliament, enabling him to marry Marion and return to England. It is to Talbot's credit that he can accept his misfortune and

rejoice in his good fortune. He has developed an equanimity he lacked when he first set out.

At the end of *Fire Down Below* Talbot speaks not to himself in his journal but, as an old man, to an audience of "dear readers." Looking back over his life, Talbot has some regrets that he turned down the adventure of setting off with the Prettimans to build a new world in Australia and instead chose the safer path of life as a member of Parliament. His final assessment, however, is that while his life has not been without disappointment or sorrow, it has been a good one. The self-satisfied narrator of *Rites of Passage* has become, by the end of the trilogy, simply satisfied.

## SUMMARY

As a mythmaker, William Golding writes stories that illuminate a truth about human nature. He sometimes creates those stories by presenting literary precedents in new ways and sometimes supplies the concrete details by drawing on his own experiences and interests. The truth he most often reveals is the existence of a depravity most humans would like to ignore or deny. The pessimism of such a focus is sometimes balanced by the possibility that self-awareness empowers goodness in people. In those novels that present both the darkness and the potential light, Golding's pessimistic logic and optimistic nature merge.

*Rebecca Kelly; updated by David Barratt*

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*Free Fall*, 1959

*The Spire*, 1964

*The Pyramid*, 1967

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*Rites of Passage*, 1980 (with *Close Quarters* and *Fire Down Below* known as *A Sea Trilogy*)

*The Paper Men*, 1984

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss why the norms of civilization break down so quickly in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*. What are the individual steps of the breakdown?
- What is the "price" of erecting the spire in *The Spire*? Is it worth the price?
- Discuss the symbolism of the sea voyage to Australia in *The Sea Trilogy*. What are the symbols that seem to typify Golding's view of human nature?
- Discuss which of Golding's novels seem to best exemplify modern society's search for spirituality and which novels most mark its absence.
- Golding frequently talks of The Fall. What does he mean by this idea, and how does he show that its effects may be overcome, if at all?
- Which novels seem to best show Golding as a writer of hope and which as a deeply pessimistic writer?
- Discuss Golding's use of fire in his novels. What is its function?
- What does the word "epiphany" mean, and what is the importance of epiphanies in Golding's novels?



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## OLIVER GOLDSMITH

**Born:** Pallas, County Longford (?), Ireland  
November 10, 1728 or 1730

**Died:** London, England  
April 4, 1774

*Goldsmith was a superb and highly versatile author. His humorous writings exhibited grace and charm with an awareness of the blessings and sorrows of life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Oliver Goldsmith's life divides into almost equal segments. The first half is poorly understood. The second, beginning in 1756 with his arrival in London, is well documented. Goldsmith's birth is shrouded in some mystery. It is believed that he was born on November 10, 1728 or 1730, at his parents' home at Pallas, County Longford, Ireland. The uncertainty arises because the year next to Goldsmith's recorded birth was ripped out of the family Bible. He was the fourth child and second son of Charles Goldsmith, a leisure-loving curate who rose slowly in the Anglican Church, and Ann Jones Goldsmith. Shortly after Oliver's birth, the family moved to Lissoy, where Charles became curate-in-charge of the parish at Kilkenny West.

At school, Goldsmith was a careless student, but never an unintelligent one. He was good in Latin and translated some of Vergil into English verse. This early taste for versification deepened in his youth, when he had the opportunity to hear professional storytellers and entertainers. Their lively tales increased his interest in romantic writing. Goldsmith's mother recognized his interest in, and devotion to, poetry and music from his early childhood. When he was older, she insisted, in spite of a grave financial condition, that he be educated as had his father and older brother. With financial backing from an adoring uncle, the decision was

made for Goldsmith to attend Trinity College at Dublin in 1745. He was to enter as a sizar, or "poor scholar." Sizar swept the floors, were subjected to an embarrassing dress code requirement, and waited on others in return for room, board, and tuition fees. Goldsmith disliked his situation, wanting to quit school. Fortunately, his uncle encouraged him to continue, pointing out that Sir Isaac Newton had once been a sizar at Trinity.

Goldsmith was graduated from Trinity College in 1750 with a B.A. degree. Over the next two years, he worked as a tutor, failed in his efforts to be ordained in the Anglican Church because of his age, and seriously considered emigrating to America or studying law in Dublin. He finally did neither, entering the University of Edinburgh in 1752 to study medicine. After two years, he still had not received a degree. In 1754, Goldsmith traveled to the University of Leyden in Holland to continue his medical studies. He then spent a year or so traveling throughout Europe. He arrived in Dover, England, on February 1, 1756. For several years, he worked at a variety of positions, including apothecary's assistant, physician, proofreader at a printing house, and usher at a boys' school. He also launched his literary career in 1757 by contributing articles to the *Monthly Review*, a practice that continued until his death. In the next few years, he continued writing and published *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* (1759). He also translated French works into English and published essays in *Critical Review*, *Bee*, *Busy Body*, *Weekly Magazine*, *Royal Magazine*, *British Magazine*, and *Lady's Magazine*. For the next two years, 1760 to 1761, he wrote his fa-



mous “Chinese Letters” for *The Public Ledger*, which were published in book form in *The Citizen of the World* (1762). He became known as “Dr. Goldsmith” at this time and became friends with such writers as Thomas Percy, Tobias Smollett, Edmund Burke, and, most important, Samuel Johnson.

Goldsmith became a prolific writer during the last fifteen years of his life. Hardly a year passed when he did not publish several works. Also, his versatility was, and still is, astonishing. Goldsmith wrote essays, translations, plays, novels, and poems. He also contributed paid hack work for publisher John Newbery. Goldsmith was always plagued by poverty. He was also jealous by nature, particularly of other writers. His most successful works were often spurred by others’ success. Some good examples are the novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), in a genre that he normally despised, and two plays for the theater, including his masterpiece *She Stoops to Conquer: Or, The Mistakes of a Night* (pr., pb. 1773).

In 1772, he became seriously ill with a bladder infection. Ailments would continue to haunt him until his death. Remarkably, his literary output did not decrease but remained constant. In fact, his productivity increased in the months preceding his demise. It was as if he knew that the end was near. A number of his works were unfinished, or published posthumously. On March 25, 1774, he became sick with kidney trouble. At the time, he was staying at the Temple in London. Ignoring the advice of several doctors, Goldsmith insisted on medicating himself by taking Dr. James’s Fever Powders. The patent medicine had brought him relief in the past, but this time it induced severe fits of diarrhea and vomiting. Goldsmith refused to stop the medication. The symptoms worsened. In London on Monday, April 4, 1774, he went into violent convulsions and, after ninety minutes of agony, died. Five days later, Goldsmith was buried in an unmarked grave at the Temple Churchyard. The eulogies on his passing were effusive. Johnson wrote a Latin epitaph that was placed in the Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey.

## ANALYSIS

Washington Irving wrote of Goldsmith that his genius “flowered early, but was late in bringing its fruit to maturity.” However, an abundance poured forth during the last fifteen years of Goldsmith’s life. Numerous studies have examined his separate

contributions as essayist, novelist, dramatist, biographer, philosopher, and poet.

Goldsmith’s literary career was launched in the April, 1757, issue of the *Monthly Review*, but his first important work did not appear until two years later with the publication of his first book, *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*. The author published it anonymously, and for good reason, since he was aiming at the decline of learning in general. Goldsmith’s work was self-serving. It allowed him to attack his enemies, particularly the pedantic critics who judged English literature by classic Greek or Latin standards. Needless to say, he raised a hornet’s nest of criticism and received the serious literary attention that he craved.

Goldsmith is difficult to categorize as a writer because he wrote so well on so many topics and in so many genres. William Hazlitt said of him:

Goldsmith, both in verse and prose, was one of the most delightful writers in the language. His verse flows like a limpid stream. His ease is quite unconscious. Everything in him is spontaneous, unstudied, yet elegant, harmonious, graceful, nearly faultless.

Goldsmith was not a radical thinker like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but he infused his work with moderation, sensibility, and irony. In his essays, he denounced the evils of capital punishment, cruelty to animals, and excessive gambling; he noted the stupidity of revenge and the negative effects of luxurious living; and he made sensible suggestions about children’s education. He had strong feelings about the prevalence of sentimental comedy, which he despised and tried to destroy by bringing back boisterous humor to the English stage.

In verse, Goldsmith was certainly skilled. He could pen poetical epistles, prologues, epilogues, and ballads, as well as more conventional poems. His versifying was always spontaneous and humorous, and it reflected dignity. Goldsmith’s poetry could demonstrate strength, as well. In *The Traveler: Or, A Prospect of Society* (1764) and *The Deserted Village* (1770), he employed the similar theme of a man isolated from others, longing for his home. Goldsmith’s use of a narrator in these poems also appears in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. He engaged the device of speaking directly to the reader so that the vicar could comment on the criminal code and pe-

nal system. Such is his artistry, however, that the character always remains a true literary creation.

Poverty fueled Goldsmith's genius. All his life, he struggled to survive. It was only his writing that kept him out of the poorhouse or debtors' prison. The lack of financial resources helps explain why he was so prolific. To be blunt, Goldsmith was also a hack writer. Samuel Johnson says of Goldsmith that he was always able to adorn the most menial labor. Publishers often requested certain types of work, which may explain his versatility and why he never stayed with one genre for long. It was not uncommon for him to write in several genres at the same time. In 1766, he published his novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and began his first comedic play, *The Good-Natured Man* (pr., pb. 1768).

A worse criticism of Goldsmith, besides the serious charge of hack writer, is that he often plagiarized others. The accusation was first leveled at him in 1759, when he became sole contributor to the *Bee*, a weekly magazine whose pages he had to fill. Week after week, he wrote a number of essays, many of which were lifted from volume 5 of the French *Encyclopédie*. Goldsmith never defended his practice, justifying it as hack work, not literature. Even his famous series of "Chinese Letters" was lifted or adapted from several other sources, particularly *Lettres Chinoises* (1739-1740) by Jean Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens. In his lengthy two-volume *An History of England in a Series of Letters from a Nobleman to His Son* (1764), Goldsmith borrowed heavily from Voltaire, Paul Rapin de Thoyras, Tobias Smollett, and Edmund Burke. He freely admitted "borrowing" the character Croaker in his play *The Good-Natured Man* from Johnson's periodical, *The Rambler*. He stole ideas, characters, words, and paragraphs from others throughout his career.

Goldsmith was no saint. He was highly irritable, possessing a mercurial temperament, envied other writers, gambled heavily, drank too much, borrowed money that he could not repay, lied to his friends and relatives, was often dishonest in his business dealings, and demonstrated a parasitic dependence on other writers. Goldsmith recognized his shortcomings and his absurd behavior. In the end, he triumphed over his imperfections. He became a warmhearted individual who gave freely of himself, always kept his integrity when it mattered, refused to write or dedicate work for people whom he did not respect, and always made his plagiarized

borrowings more distinguished than the original. In short, he was a genius whose work revealed wisdom, seasoned judgment, and good humor. These attributes are best exemplified in two of his most famous works: *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *She Stoops to Conquer*.

## THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

**First published:** 1766

**Type of work:** Novel

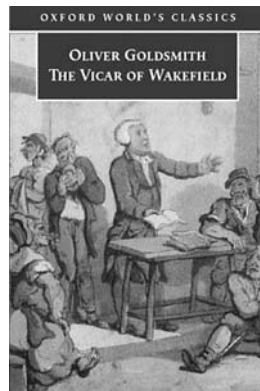
*This charming, comical, romantic tale features a pastoral setting and is about a simple vicar experiencing a series of family misfortunes.*

*The Vicar of Wakefield*, although published in March, 1766, was actually written years earlier. Scholarly evidence suggests that Goldsmith began writing the novel in 1760 and probably finished it in 1765. Mysterious stories surround the composition, sale, and publication of the work. One such tale concerns the venerable Samuel Johnson. According to his biographer, James Boswell, Johnson was summoned for immediate assistance by Goldsmith. It seems that Goldsmith was behind in his rent, and his landlady had him arrested. Johnson quieted the much disturbed writer, learned of an unpublished novel, and sold a one-third share to a bookseller. Goldsmith discharged the debts and eventually sold the remaining shares.

The work in question is strongly believed to be *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Why did he write it? Speculation suggests that Goldsmith wrote the novel because he was consumed with envy by the publication, in January, 1760, of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne. Though Goldsmith professed a long dislike for the novel, the celebrity status enjoyed by Sterne may have motivated the still little-known Goldsmith to match his rival's success. Much has been made of the autobiographical portions to be found in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, including its faulty plot structure, the narrative technique employed, and the sentimental reversal-of-fortune conclusion. Goldsmith uses the vicar, the delightful creation of Dr. Charles Primrose, as the novel's narrator and through the character voices many of his own ideas and experiences.

*The Vicar of Wakefield* falls neatly into two equal segments. The first is humorous, a comically ironic idyll. The second is romantic, underscored by a series of unrelieved disasters that befall the Primroses. Most critics believe that the second section is superior. The novel's central theme, that innocence can become contemptible in the face of evil or worldly wisdom, while never fully articulated by Goldsmith, supports the whole work. The vicar and his family are simple, innocent folk enjoying a pleasant, pastoral existence until they come into contact with reality. Their very virtues are turned on them as they suffer one disaster after another. Goldsmith reveals that the overthrow of their innocence is replaced by wisdom and compassion.

Perhaps that is why *The Vicar of Wakefield* achieved immediate popularity that increased substantially following Goldsmith's death. During the nineteenth century, for example, the novel enjoyed at least two editions a year. It has been translated into many languages. The reason for its success may be that the novel can be interpreted in many different ways. It exudes irresistible charm and ebullience, demonstrating Goldsmith's genius and absurdity. *The Vicar of Wakefield* remains one of the most popular books from the eighteenth century. The only other work by Goldsmith to match it in continuing popularity is his play *She Stoops to Conquer*.



## SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

**First produced:** 1773 (first published, 1773)

**Type of work:** Play

*This delightful comedy revolves around two youthful couples pursuing romantic intrigue against a background of deception, error, and the machinations of several eccentric characters.*

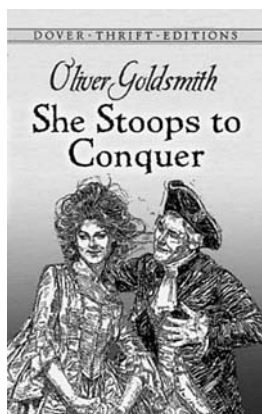
*She Stoops to Conquer: Or, The Mistakes of a Night* was an immediate success for Goldsmith, his last literary triumph. The opening night audience at Covent Garden on March 15, 1773, roared its continued approval. Five days following the premiere, every copy of the published version of the play was sold. Yet the circumstances surrounding the production of the play were marked by enormous difficulty for Goldsmith because the theater manager anticipated certain failure. Goldsmith finished writing the comedy in September, 1771. He took it to George Colman, manager of the Covent Garden, who repeatedly postponed producing it. It was only through the firm intervention of Samuel Johnson that Colman reluctantly agreed to stage it. (Goldsmith inscribed the published work to Johnson.) The script was much revised and altered during the weeks of rehearsal. Several of the leading actors refused to appear in it and were replaced. The play's approval was such a complete success that Colman was severely criticized for his delay.

Looking back, it is difficult to comprehend Colman's reluctance to stage the comedy. *She Stoops to Conquer* was Goldsmith's second play. (Five years earlier at Covent Garden, Colman produced Goldsmith's first effort, *The Good-Natured Man*, also well received by the public.) The problem stemmed from the fact that Goldsmith's views on comedy were different from prevailing taste. He had taken aim at the whole genre. In a piece published early in 1773 entitled "Essay on the Theatre: Or, A Comparison Between Sentimental and Laughing Comedy," he had bemoaned the prevailing taste of audiences for "sentimental comedy," which he called a bastard form of tragedy. In its place, Goldsmith proposed a new comic genre to be called "laughing comedy." The new form of comedy, as his two plays aptly demonstrated, eliminated moralizing, false appeals to sentimentality, and extraneous song and dance and concentrated instead on mirth, the ex-

posure of human follies, and using characters from the middle and lower classes and dialogue that was easy and natural. The general aim was laughter.

*She Stoops to Conquer* is a perfect example of Goldsmith's theories. The play opens with two gentlemen from London looking for the home of Mr. Hardcastle. They are tricked into thinking that the home is an inn and conduct themselves accordingly. One of the young men is there to woo young Kate Hardcastle. Kate pretends to be a barmaid until

the hero declares his love for her. The Londoners behave boorishly to all concerned, and the nonstop frolic escalates rapidly. *She Stoops to Conquer* contains vital energy, many farcical elements, and amusing irony. Goldsmith's major theme is exploring the follies of blindness that all humans commit. After poking fun at all the characters, the playwright ends the comedy on a note of discovery. The hero, for example, finds himself and discovers the meaning of true love, marrying the perfect woman for him.



until the hero declares his love for her. The Londoners behave boorishly to all concerned, and the nonstop frolic escalates rapidly. *She Stoops to Conquer* contains vital energy, many farcical elements, and amusing irony. Goldsmith's major theme is exploring the follies of blindness that all humans commit. After poking fun at all the characters, the playwright ends the comedy on a note of discovery. The hero, for example, finds himself and discovers the meaning of true love, marrying the perfect woman for him.

About a year after its premiere, Goldsmith died. *She Stoops to Conquer* endured, however, to become one of the most frequently produced plays of the English repertoire. Hardly a year passes in the United States that it is not staged by some professional, community, or university theater company. It has also been produced several times for television.

## SUMMARY

Oliver Goldsmith is one of the great writers of the eighteenth century, ranking with Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson. He was certainly the master comedian of his age. His versatility in producing important poems, dramas, novels, and essays is without peer.

Goldsmith always remained a puzzle to his contemporaries. He was a difficult personality for them to comprehend. After his death, however, he assumed legendary proportions. Over the centuries, many anecdotes and recollections of the man have been offered, including countless books and shorter works. Perhaps Johnson wrote it best in his Latin inscription on Goldsmith's memorial in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey: "in genius lofty, lively, versatile; in style weighty, clear, engaging."

Terry Theodore

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Oliver Goldsmith seems to have been a writer who had one good novel in him. What qualities other than his skillful application of autobiographical elements contribute to the success of *The Vicar of Wakefield*?
- Develop the theme of moral blindness in *She Stoops to Conquer*.
- What saves Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* from being merely nostalgic verse for a way of life that has passed?
- Discuss writer James Boswell's unfair depiction of Goldsmith as a kind of second-rate Samuel Johnson.
- It is difficult to find writers as versatile as Goldsmith. What aspects of his artistry characterize all or most of the genres in which he wrote?





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## NADINE GORDIMER

**Born:** Springs, Transvaal, South Africa  
November 20, 1923

*Recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, Gordimer is noted for her vivid portrayals of human lives under apartheid.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Nadine Gordimer (GAWR-duh-mur) was born in Springs, a small gold mining town in South Africa, on November 20, 1923. Her maternal grandfather emigrated from Europe to South Africa in the 1890's in order to prospect for diamonds. Her Lithuanian-born Jewish father, who was also a part of the white colonial expansion in the early 1900's, started out as a watch repairer for mine workers and eventually owned a jeweler's shop. The circumstances of Gordimer's white middle-class upbringing provoked her understanding of the racial stratification in South African society.

One of two daughters, Gordimer had little formal education. As a very young girl, she took great pleasure in dancing until the age of ten, when she had persistent fainting spells. The condition was diagnosed as a rapid heartbeat caused by an enlarged thyroid gland. Forced to forgo dancing and participate in less strenuous activities, Gordimer recalls feeling considerably deprived during her childhood. She learned to channel her energies into reading and writing.

Gordimer had begun writing at the age of nine, and at the age of thirteen she published her first literary effort in the children's section of a Johannesburg newspaper. Because of the medical diagnosis, her mother was able to take young Nadine out of school, an act that later caused Gordimer to resent

her mother. For an entire year, at the age of eleven, Gordimer stayed at home and read. Among her readings, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) affected her nascent social and political sensibilities. Her education was resumed with the hiring of private tutors. Most of her formative years, then, were isolated from other children and spent largely in the company of adults. From observing and listening to others, Gordimer was already collecting an arsenal of material for her writing.

By the age of fifteen, Gordimer had her first short story published in a magazine. At the age of twenty-one, she attended the University of Witwatersrand but left after a year. Nevertheless, this brief period at the university left a deep impression on her developing political consciousness. It was the first time she had mixed with blacks and was able to observe for herself their terrible plight in South Africa. At the university, Gordimer mingled with blacks as "equals," as people engaged with the world of ideas. Still, from her early reading of Sinclair's novel about America's unjust labor practices, she was able to consider the situation of blacks in South Africa. She perceived that they were denied an education, exploited economically, and summarily dehumanized by a white minority government.

Gordimer's assessment of her hometown, especially in the light of her time at the university, is particularly harsh. Growing up in the Transvaal region of South Africa, she was frequently bored by what she perceived as trivial or practical matters of existence. She believes that her life changed completely in her early twenties, when she became intellectually stimulated by the events in the world and in her country. Although she did not participate actively in politics, she began to take what she

considered a liberal humanist approach to the injustices visited upon the black population. In the 1940's, leftist movements, communist discussion groups, and black national movements were not yet banned by the white government, and the flurry of political activities attracted Gordimer's interest and attention. She was concentrating intensely on her writing at this time and had not yet incorporated these political observations into her work.

In 1949—the same year the White National Party officially came into power—Gordimer published a book of short stories, *Face to Face*, in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was twenty-six at the time. That was followed by a collection entitled *The Soft Voice of the Serpent, and Other Stories* (1952), which was published in New York and London. Her stories also began appearing in *The New Yorker* and journals such as *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Yale Review*. She observes that politics and the devastating effects of apartheid on all South Africans have played a significant role in her development as a writer, but that “I was writing before politics impinged itself upon my consciousness.”

Her first novel, *The Lying Days*, appeared in 1953 and contained specific autobiographical overtones. The main character, Helen Shaw, also undergoes a transformation in her political awareness at the university. Helen leaves her sheltered home life to discover a world populated with whites and blacks. Her first confrontation with issues of life and death occurs after she befriends several students who are committed to social change. Unlike Gordimer, however, who has stayed in South Africa to confront the conflicts directly, Helen departs from the country at the end of the novel. Although Helen grows wiser and more sensitive to the turmoil in her country, her decision to leave contrasts sharply with the author's determination to produce change by staying.

In the next forty years of her writing career, Gordimer's many novels and short stories focused increasingly on the effects of apartheid. The kinds of changes her different characters experience reflect the modifications of her country. Like people in real life, her characters endure the joys and hardships that social and political changes bring. Her fifth novel, *A Guest of Honour* (1970), won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and her sixth novel, *The Conservationist* (1974), was awarded the

Man Booker Prize, a CNA Literary Award, and the Grand Aigle d'Or, a French international award. Gordimer's fictional work is substantially supplemented by her many pieces of nonfictional writing and her public interviews. In 1988, Stephen Clingman collected and published several from this wide array of writings in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics, and Places*.

In 1990, Gordimer joined the African National Congress (ANC), an organization led by Nelson Mandela that opposed the rule of a white minority government. That same year, South Africa began the process of dismantling apartheid. After more than fifty years of literary production, Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991. The Nobel Foundation praised *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter* (1979), and *July's People* (1981) as the masterpieces of her career. Only years before, several of her novels had been officially banned in South Africa for their political content.

In the years following the fall of apartheid, Gordimer continued writing about her culture in novels, short stories, and nonfiction. Her novels published after the dismantling of apartheid—*None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The House Gun* (1998), *The Pickup* (2001), and *Get a Life* (2005)—deal with issues relevant to the new South Africa: land reclamation, violence and reconciliation, immigration, and the environment.

Gordimer is active in supporting South African culture, particularly writing. An active member of the international writing community, she served as a vice president of PEN International and as a judge for the Man Booker International Prize for 2007.

## ANALYSIS

Gordimer is often praised for her unsentimental portrayals of human lives under apartheid. Her postapartheid fiction continues to chronicle how personal lives are impacted by politics in the new South Africa. She has emphasized repeatedly that “the real influence of politics on my writing is the influence of politics on people.” As Gordimer herself becomes increasingly aware of and indignant about the political apparatus of her country, each character in her novels experiences a transformation that reflects the changes in South Africa. Until the dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990's, Gordimer's characters were situated in the con-

text of a political system where the nation's economic and judicial power was concentrated in and exercised by a minority racial group. She portrays the entire spectrum of lives—black and white—oppressed by a racist regime.

In her fiction, Gordimer begins to hold South Africa accountable for the suppression and eradication of a majority of its people. Even those characters who strive to be as apolitical as possible are directly affected. As an example, Rebecca, a character in *A Guest of Honour*, proclaims her general ignorance in matters of politics. In the novel Rebecca falls in love with Colonel Bray, a white administrator who supports black liberation and who dies violently; the remainder of the novel expresses Rebecca's disorientation and her feelings of dispossession as she wanders in London, unable to forget the politically motivated events leading to her lover's death.

Sometimes her characters openly express an apathetic stance, but even they are deeply affected at a personal level. In her second novel, *A World of Strangers* (1958), the main character is young, white, and upper-crust. Toby Hood moves from one social circle to another without much concern for social or political causes. Toby's lack of care for the politics in South Africa comes to an abrupt halt when his black friend, Steven Sitole, is hunted down by the police in a fatal car chase. Only then does Toby begin to recognize the inequities created by the color of someone's skin. After identifying Steven's body—much to the surprise of the white policemen, who view the friendship as an anomaly in South Africa—Toby begins to confront his own relationship to the country. Shortly after another friend, Anna, is arrested for subversive activity against the government, Toby makes the decision to leave South Africa.

Like the character Helen in *The Lying Days*, Toby realizes the shallowness of his own life and begins to find the terms for his own existence. Because the characters are so entrenched in their personal situations, it is difficult for them to be openly or even deeply concerned about the lives of other people. Like her early characters, who start to take a humanist approach to the atrocities of apartheid, Gordimer herself observed that the relationship of politics to people was not so apparent to her when she began writing, and that the realization came to her slowly. Having grown up in an insular, white,

middle-class household, Gordimer began to shape her own awareness about the conflicts in South Africa only through reading about other people's pain in a variety of literature.

Her third novel, *Occasion for Loving* (1963), shows several characters who live without social consciousness and responsibility. The lives of the Stillwell family and their friends are empty and without much virtue; they move carelessly in and out of relationships and appear unmoved by the catastrophes that occur in the background. This novel ends a decisive phase in Gordimer's work, where she begins to move away from issues such as ignorance and indifference and toward events that require the individual to take some form of direct action against apartheid.

In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), Gordimer begins to experiment with different narrative strategies in order to capture as fully as possible the complexities of human lives in the grip of an oppressive regime. In this brief first-person narration, the main character, Liz Van Den Sandt, seems to begin where Helen Shaw might have continued years later had she returned to South Africa. In a novel that encompasses the events of a single day, Liz first learns of her former husband's death as the story opens. In the course of the day, which includes her breaking the news to their son at his boarding school, Liz memorializes the death of her politically active former husband. In untangling some mysteries of life and death, she decides that the meaning of life in South Africa includes becoming active and responsible. At the end Liz meets with a former ally of "the cause" and is incited to take subversive political action against apartheid.

*The Late Bourgeois World* marks a definite turning point in the way that Gordimer writes about the influence of politics on people. Until then, and in the short stories of the 1950's and 1960's, Gordimer emphasized the course of individual human lives, focusing on people's personal joys and pains. As Gordimer's own political consciousness grew, she found the novel form more difficult to write because her worldview had grown considerably.

One complaint that uninitiated readers have about Gordimer's later novels concerns the difficulty of identifying who is narrating or speaking about the events. The later novels use dashes instead of quotation marks to indicate speech, making the shift from external narration to dialogue or

from characters' thoughts to speech a bit more difficult to note. Ambiguity, at times, reflects the dangers involved in speaking the truth; shifts in narrative perspective emphasize the variety of views. As in the various forces that make up and affect the political situation in South Africa, Gordimer's narrative strategies reflect the complexities of human relationships. Gordimer's novels mirror the political and social reality without oversimplifying the devastating consequences.

In *A Guest of Honour*, the former administrator (who is white) has been invited to return to a liberated Africa in order to reform its educational system. Colonel Bray's observations of the effects of revolution reveal his sensitivity to the injustices that apartheid has inflicted upon the country. As the novel progresses, the reader experiences Bray's split allegiance to the two new black leaders as well as to white South Africa. In *The Conservationist*, the white landowner treats his help with great indifference and arrogance; after all, he is the boss. Although Mehring owns the land (the veld, as the landscape in South Africa is called), he does not understand it in the way the black natives do. Through a series of unusual events and natural catastrophes, Mehring slowly loses first the control of the land and then the land itself. By the novel's end, Mehring may be dead, and the ambiguity of this event is displaced by the one that closes the novel: The blacks are burying one of their own in their land.

Like *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter* employs a multiperspective narration. At times, the reader appears to be inside the head of the main character and at other times to be watching that character involved in some objective situation. At times, the narrative perspective appears to be in the first person while at other times it appears omniscient. While these approaches may appear unusual, they are in fact consistent with the complicated situations that Gordimer represents in her fiction. For example, when Rosa Burger remembers the past, she thinks of herself as "another" person, one who used to do or say certain things. When she is seen waiting outside the prison at the age of fourteen, the narrative must capture the fact that "she" is being watched by someone else. Later, when her activities are directly under police surveillance, it is reasonable to expect the narrative to tell what was observed about her. If Rosa remem-

bers a conversation she had with a former lover, she indicates that it was "I" who said or felt these things.

Gordimer begins to take greater liberties at finding different forms to capture the essence of the vastness and complexities of those living under apartheid and to express precisely the events that are private and public. In both *July's People* and *A Sport of Nature* (1987), she casts the events in the future, after a revolution might already have occurred.

Her three novels of the 1990's chart the period of change from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. In these Gordimer continues chronicling how personal lives are impacted by politics. *My Son's Story* (1990) focuses on a family that becomes involved in the struggle for freedom. Although Gordimer had previously used minority characters as narrators in her short fiction, this is her first novel narrated by a mixed-race character, Will, the son named for William Shakespeare. In *My Son's Story* the method of narration seems dual—alternating between Will's first-person account and a seemingly external voice. However, at the end of the novel, Will claims both voices, having spoken in the first person as the son—whose father, sister, and mother all become involved in fighting for freedom—and in the third person as a writer who has imagined what he could not know as an individual. Together the voices create the story, not only of his family but also of the turmoil that is South Africa.

The action of *None to Accompany Me* covers the end of apartheid and the beginnings of democracy. Vera Stark, true to her name, whittles her interests and activities to what she sees as essential. Ultimately, her work satisfies her more than marriage, family, and her home. A lawyer, she works to minimize the movement of blacks to inferior sections of South Africa and, when it becomes possible, works to reclaim land for their use. *The House Gun* echoes a major concern of the new South Africa—how to come to terms with past violence. An adult son of two liberal South Africans has killed a man—a personal, not a political, act. The novel traces how these three characters need to find a way to reconcile themselves to the truth of the murder before their lives can move forward. The parents must also face how they feel about depending upon a respected black lawyer to handle Duncan's case.

*The Pickup* and *Get a Life* continue meshing the



political and the personal. Gordimer has often said that she believes politics and sex are the strongest forces affecting individuals. These dual concerns govern the complex relationship between Julie Summers, a white privileged South African, and Ibrahim ibn Musa, an illegal Arab immigrant, in *The Pickup*. In *Get a Life* the personal and political are metaphorically embodied in Paul Bannerman. At thirty-five, diagnosed with thyroid cancer, he receives radioactive iodine treatment. To avoid possibly contaminating his wife and son, he moves back with his parents, who care for him as he recuperates. As an ecologist working to see that the inevitable progress in South Africa is not destructive to the environment, Paul has been concerned with a proposed nuclear reactor. In Paul and in the environment, the dangers of contamination are juxtaposed with the human ability to thwart the danger and maintain life. The novel deals with the relationships in the two marriages, Paul's and his parents'. On a personal and political level accommodations must be made between the real and the ideal: How much disparity in values and actions can marriages survive? How much interference by industrial man can nature withstand?

## THE CONSERVATIONIST

**First published:** 1974

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the wake of political change and natural catastrophes in South Africa, a white landowner loses everything.*

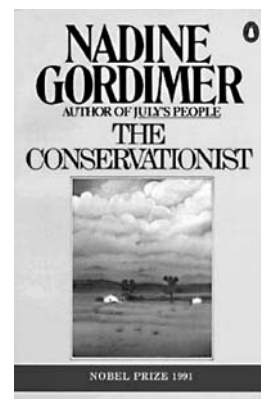
*The Conservationist* was held by the South African Censorship Board for ten weeks before it was finally released to the public. The novel, which tells the story of a white landowner named Mehring whose farm is run by black natives, begins with the discovery of a dead African found on Mehring's land. At the end, after a careless burial by white policemen exposes the body, the native is given a proper burial by the blacks who work Mehring's farm. The story's final sentences summarize the spirit of the novel: "They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them." In an interview in

the *Paris Review* in 1983, Gordimer explained that the African battle cry, *mayibuye*, means "Africa, come back"; it is also the slogan of the ANC. The "coming back" refers to the return of the dead in the novel as well as to the theme that blacks will someday reclaim Africa as their own.

In combining the resurrection theme with a political one, Gordimer conveys a larger message that deals with life and death under apartheid. The image of the dead African permeates the other events in the novel and serves as a constant reminder of the shallowness of Mehring, who owns and rules a piece of Africa without understanding the land or the natives who inhabit it. In this respect, Mehring is like the living dead who unnaturally impose their values on those who are forced to exist under apartheid.

Mehring's actions are completely detached from those of the Africans in the novel. His activities include driving his Mercedes into town to attend parties or other social gatherings, where he is seen in a variety of situations that reveal his dissatisfaction with his life. By contrast, the Africans are represented in ritual events that strengthen their tie to the land: dances, the community's slaughter of a calf, a kind of Christmas party, and, most important, the burial of the dead African at the novel's end. While Mehring appears bored or has unpropitious sexual encounters, the Africans are actively engaged with their work, even with the menial tasks that will keep the farm running. Mehring's personal relationships are also disparate ones. He has lost contact with his son, and his mistress Antonia becomes increasingly disconnected from him. Meanwhile the Africans are portrayed in situations that suggest the strength of their community. Jacobus, the farm's foreman, is the mediator between Mehring and the land and is the first to inform the owner of the dead body. It is also Jacobus who brings the Africans together to bury the dead and call for the return of Africa.

If Mehring is to symbolize the decline of the white ruling class, Gordimer achieves this message





with the amazing storm that literally sweeps Mehrling off his land. In his last scene in the novel, Mehrling is fleeing from the farm, after the African's dead body is washed up by the storm, when he spots and picks up a colored woman hitchhiker; they drive to a deserted cyanide mine dump. The scene ends ambiguously with the presence of a third person who may be a coconspirator with the colored woman, and the culmination of the encounter appears as a prelude to Mehrling's demise.

The novel frequently shifts perspectives to achieve the full effects of the events. Sometimes Mehrling is speaking of events in the present; at other times he is reflecting upon or remembering some other event. At still other times in the novel, there appears to be a completely detached observer who is recounting events. The shifts set a swift pace to events that are otherwise stagnant in development. They also capture the distinct events as they occur. For example, in the scenes where the Africans are involved in communal or ritual activities, it would be unrealistic for Mehrling to narrate the fullness of the events, since he is never present at any of their affairs. Similarly, it is impossible for any of the Africans to narrate Mehrling's activities and thoughts, since these people do not seem to possess the language skills to do so convincingly.

*The Conservationist* contains the author's vision that blacks will someday reclaim Africa. In the 1970's, when the novel appeared, the Black Power movement had been gaining momentum. Blacks argued that they must speak their cause on their own behalf and must first return to the traditions and roots of Africa in order to do so. Furthermore, in the liberation of Africa from white rule, it was unfortunate but essential that whites become fully dispossessed. Only in an ultimate and absolute return of the land to those who first inhabited it could liberation be complete. When the novel closes, Mehrling's fate is unspecified but nevertheless certain, and the Africans are totally engaged with the forces that constitute life and death.

## BURGER'S DAUGHTER

**First published:** 1979

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young woman comes to personal and political terms with the meaning of the life and the death of her father.*

*Burger's Daughter* expresses well the author's contention that "fiction is a way of exploring possibilities present but undreamt of in the living of a single life." The novel is the evolution of Rosa Burger's awareness and understanding of the forces that make up the life of her politically active family. It also chronicles the fictitious life of Lionel Burger, a white member of the Communist Party, and the activities that reflect the historical development of South African politics from the 1920's to the 1970's. Through the lives of the father and the daughter, Gordimer explores the possibilities present to the Burger family and shows the choices that they make.

One of the novel's main themes concerns the degree to which an individual is expected to make a political commitment to the life of the republic. Initially, in Rosa's case, the choice to go against apartheid is in fact the legacy from her family rather than from anything resembling a personal decision. In the course of the novel, Rosa retraces the steps of her family's past, as she also understands the real and devastating effects of a segregated society. She makes a series of difficult choices that land her in a South African prison at the novel's end.

The novel begins with Rosa at the age of fourteen, as she waits alongside others who have come to bring supplies and messages to imprisoned loved ones. She is seen in a schoolgirl's uniform carrying a quilt and a hot-water bottle for her mother, who is in prison. The narrative shifts from this third-person perspective to the voice of Rosa herself as she recounts that event from girlhood, as well as the many others that shape her life.

The tone of the first-person perspective is self-analytical, as it reflects upon Rosa's personal experiences. She recounts her brother's death by drowning; her mother's death by multiple sclerosis; the intense love relationship with a man named Conrad; the imprisonment and death of her father; the

first time she leaves South Africa and politics to spend a yearlong respite in Paris with Madame Bagnelli (Katya), her father's first wife; and finally, the events that lead to her own decision to be involved with politics after all.

Against the background of her family's history lies that of South Africa. Two major events are reported in *Burger's Daughter* that lend factual veracity to the fictional story: the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, preceding Lionel's final arrest, and the Soweto Riots of 1976. In her remembrances of the events, Rosa addresses her thoughts to her past lover Conrad as well as to Madame Bagnelli. Only at the end of the novel does Rosa address her dead father, admonishing him as well as herself for the choices made in their lifetimes.

Among Rosa's many encounters and experiences, perhaps the most striking one is the phone call she receives one night from Baasie, years after they played together as children in the Burger household. He reproaches her for what he perceives as her capitalizing on her father's name without understanding the real plight of blacks in South Africa. As a dispossessed black, Baasie refers to a political rally at which he spotted her and condemns her patronage of the black cause. Rosa is literally sickened by the encounter with this disembodied voice from her past, but it nevertheless encourages her to take some form of political action.

Like *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter* is told with multiple points of view in the narrative. Although the bulk of the novel is told from Rosa's perspective, other perspectives are operating in the novel as well. There is an objective voice that fills in the gaps of the Burger family's history as well as South Africa's political history, and there appears to be another objective perspective told by someone who is particularly familiar with Rosa's life and compassionately reports the facts. When Rosa is under surveillance, reports of her activities appear in an "official" capacity.

All of these combined narrative strategies produce a full presentation of Rosa's life as it is constituted by her family and her country. The novel also addresses the issue of individual identity in two contexts: Can the individual be truly autonomous, or is the individual always the object of historical forces over which he or she has very little final control? Rosa is not unduly oppressed by these con-

cerns, and her narrative is particularly balanced in the way it presents the possibilities available to her under the circumstances.

Thrust at birth into the hotbed of political concerns, Rosa discovers that her father's legacy does not necessarily preclude her individual actions and choices. In the end, she determines that being Burger's daughter means respecting her father's choices as well as finding the terms for her own existence.

## JULY'S PEOPLE

**First published:** 1981

**Type of work:** Novel

*This work focuses on the plight of a white family during a successful period of black liberation.*

*July's People* is set in a time and place when the African effort to liberate blacks from white rule has successfully taken place. The entire country has become a battleground; the novel focuses on the plight of the Smaleses, an enlightened white middle-class family.

Bamford and Maureen Smales are "rescued" from deterioration by their servant, July, who takes them and their children into his native village. On the way there, July is seen literally caring for them, and it is obvious to the reader that he has not entirely abandoned his socialized role as a servant to white people. The Smaleses are uncomfortable with the shifting situation as they discover their increasing dependence on July. The novel's epigraph is an emblem of what the reader might expect in the course of events. Gordimer quotes from *Quaderni del carcere* (1948-1951; partial translation as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 1971): "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." Africa is experiencing a change, and both blacks and whites are caught in the "interregnum," in the midst of change itself.

Gordimer, however, does not simplify the political implications. In other words, she does not advocate a view that white liberals such as the Smaleses

must necessarily be excluded from black liberation. Neither does she cast an approving eye on the transition to black South African rule. Both groups experience pains in the transition; the new cannot yet be born in the middle of all the changes. Everyone is thrust into chaos and uncertainty; all social roles are shifting and changing.

If the lack of a concrete political agenda is a major issue in the novel, it also turns everything upside down for all the characters. For one thing, sexual roles are confused. Bamford, who had been the head of the household, is emasculated by relying on his former servant to save him and his family. Subsequently, he becomes figuratively, then literally, impotent, since he progressively loses his ability to relate to Maureen in any marital way. Much of the perspective of events is seen through Maureen's experiences. She comes to see more clearly the lines drawn to differentiate race, class, and gender. More specifically, she understands that the lines allow for cultural oppression at many levels. Like many white South Africans who inherited their place in the country from generations of black oppression, however, Maureen does not know how to make a radical change in her own daily way of being.

July himself responds to the changes by acting in the most pragmatic way: He takes care of the white people as he has always done and, given the situation, takes the logical step of bringing them to his village. There, July has them meet the chief, whose main concern is to solicit Bamford's aid in combating the Russians and Cubans, whom the chief considers to be worse enemies than the white South Africans. The old relationship between July and the Smaleses takes on a new, but hardly radical, dimension as the white family becomes divested of their former "authority." Because July has always lived in the city and taken care of the Smaleses, the transposition to the village does not in fact change his role very much—July is still taking care of the family—only now, July answers to the authority of the chief.

The novel raises the question of who should properly rule Africa—the whites who have profited from the suppression of blacks, or the blacks who have failed to adapt to the industrial growth of the country? Gordimer projects a vision of the future, one that is filled with many complex consider-

ations, and appears uneasy about making a prophetic statement. In essence, South Africa is always undergoing political and social turmoil, since its policy of apartheid displaces all people at all levels.

July's people, then, are both the blacks and the whites who constitute Africa. In this novel, however, there do not appear to be any heroes who will rescue the entire nation.

## "CITY LOVERS" AND "COUNTRY LOVERS"

**First published:** 1956 (collected in *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Two pairs of lovers suffer the consequences of opposing South African law.*

Originally published as "Town and Country Lovers," the two short stories "City Lovers" and "Country Lovers" are paired stories that reveal the devastating personal effects of racial segregation. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Act of 1950 were laws passed by the white government to prevent miscegenation in any form. In "City Lovers," Dr. Franz-Josef von Leinsdorf is a foreign geologist who becomes sexually involved with a colored shopgirl. The girl, who is appropriately unnamed to indicate her lack of social status, becomes little more than the object of the doctor's sexual and domestic needs. The two are arrested, and their transgression is made public. In "Country Lovers," a white boy and a black girl grow up together and become teenage lovers. Although the girl, Thebedi, marries a black man, she soon gives birth to a child that was no doubt fathered by Paulus, her white lover. At the story's end, the child is dead and the parents stand trial, but insufficient evidence fails to convict either parent for violating the law.

Both stories are told in a straightforward manner and tone, but the emotional impact of the events is strongly suggested. In the compact form of a short story, Gordimer effectively captures the impact of South African laws upon individual lives.

## THE PICKUP

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*A car malfunction leads to an unexpected and problematic relationship between Julie Summers, a privileged white South African, and Abdu, an illegal Arab immigrant.*

Julie Summers picks up a mechanic, who uses the name Abdu while working illegally in South Africa. Although she initiates the relationship, he, too, may be implicated in the pickup. In Julie, Abdu sees someone who has access to what he hopes to achieve: citizenship and a position of worth in a meaningful society.

Ironically, the characters' contrasting values, needs, and desires sometimes become clear to the reader before they are evident to Abdu and Julie. Abdu insists Julie introduce him to her family; Julie sees no reason for this, as she has separated herself from her divorced parents and their privileged lifestyles. During the visit to her father, Julie is embarrassed by the lavish house and hospitality, but Abdu respects the success of her father and his friends. A reversal happens weeks later, after Abdu has been deported and Julie travels with him to his country. Julie is surprised that Abdu insists upon their marriage before he brings her to his family home; she

has no respect for a marriage certificate issued by a government deporting him. Abdu is embarrassed by his dirty, impoverished North African village, but Julie becomes entranced living with his large, extended family on the edge of a desert that she, but not Abdu, sees as spiritual.

Several times the narrator intrudes, addressing the readers directly.

In the second and third paragraphs of the novel, the narrator makes clear that the novel mainly investigates Julie's story. The novel imagines what might happen when a young, privileged South African woman, who is open to experience and wants

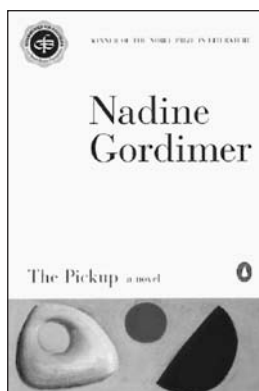
to reject her privileges gained through a racist society, meets her opposite. The narrator more often gives Julie's thoughts rather than Abdu's; the narrator follows her much more often than him. Therefore, Julie's love for Abdu is clear long before readers can be sure of Abdu's feelings for her. Despite early suggestions that Julie's love for Abdu might be met with his use of her—as a person who has access to wealth and power—late in the novel it becomes apparent that Abdu does love Julie and respects her freedom to choose and her independence. He believes his country has curtailed his life choices.

The method of narration is appropriate for the novel, although it may cause readers difficulty. It shifts from an omniscient voice to the characters' thoughts and dialogue without clear markers. Readers must come to understand the characters in order to know when words signify thoughts or dialogue and to whom they belong. The ambiguity and uncertainty readers experience parallels the feelings the characters have as they continue their unexpected and difficult relationship. The novel ends with both characters holding true to their desires: Ibrahim ibn Musa (Abdu) flying to the United States to find a better life, and Julie staying in his village with the solace of family and the desert and her newfound ability to teach English.

## SUMMARY

In illuminating the horror and devastation of South African politics, Nadine Gordimer's writings are brilliant expositions of the way that human lives endure in the face of adversity. Her writing about post-apartheid South Africa continues to deal with both the personal and the political as she treats topics relevant to a country struggling to make itself anew. As Stephen Clingman writes in his introduction to a collection of her essays, Gordimer is the interpreter par excellence of her country. Significantly, Gordimer has lived in South Africa all of her life and has accumulated a lifetime of observations and experiences that help her literature present life under apartheid and after it has been replaced with majority rule. For a writer whose work is filled with political situations, Gordimer strives to represent as fully, honestly, and intelligently as possible the entire spectrum of experiences.

*Cynthia Wong; updated by Marion Petrillo*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many of Nadine Gordimer's young adult characters experience an epiphany, a sudden understanding of a core truth. Choose a few examples, and discuss whether the epiphanies are related to race or personal relationships or to something else.
- Gordimer often includes historical references in her fiction. Choose a few examples, such as references to historic people or to events or to laws, and discuss how effective their inclusion is in the work.
- Compare or contrast the husband-wife relationships in several of Gordimer's stories or novels.
- Gordimer's method of narration sometimes proves difficult. Discuss why the method of narration in *The House Gun* might be appropriate for Gordimer's aims.
- Do you envision Julie Summers and Ibrahim ibn Musa in *The Pickup* as living separately for the rest of their lives? Why or why not?
- Discuss how Gordimer relies on irony to suggest her themes. Begin by considering some of her titles.



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Mottke Weissman

## GÜNTER GRASS

**Born:** Danzig (now Gdańsk), Poland  
October 16, 1927

*Considered one of the most important figures in post-World War II German literature, Grass provocatively combines art and politics in his fiction, poetry, and autobiographical writings.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Günter Wilhelm Grass (gros) was born a Catholic in Danzig (now Gdańsk), Poland, on October 16, 1927, the son of a German shopkeeper and his wife, who was Kashubian, or Slavic. Grass's racially mixed ancestry appears frequently in his written work. From 1933 to 1944, Grass attended school in Danzig and became a member of the Hitler Youth movement. In 1944, when he was seventeen, he was drafted into the German army, was wounded in the Russian advance, and was taken prisoner by the Americans. In his novel *Kopfgeburt: Oder, Die Deutschen sterben aus* (1980; *Headbirths: Or, The Germans Are Dying Out*, 1982), Grass himself acknowledges that had he been born ten years earlier, he would have "developed unswervingly into a convinced National Socialist" (Nazi). Grass did not question the Nazi philosophy until he was taken, as a reeducation measure after the war, to visit the concentration camp at Dachau. After his release in 1946, Grass held many jobs: farmworker, potash miner, and stonemason's apprentice. In 1947, he moved to Düsseldorf to study art, painting, and sculpture. He also was a drummer in jazz bands. The details of these various occupations and enterprises frequently occur in his work.

His desire to be an artist emerged early in his youth. As a child, he collected albums of picture cards of great European masterpieces printed on

coupons from his mother's cigarette packs. In his memoir, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (2006; *Peeling the Onion*, 2007), Grass recalls that at the age of ten he was able to readily distinguish Hans Baldung from Matthias Grünewald and Frans Hals from Rembrandt. When he was not leafing through these albums of paintings, he was curled up with one of the books from his mother's bookshelves: Fyodor Dostoevski's *Besy* (1871-1872; *The Possessed*, 1913), Knut Hamsun's *Sult* (1890; *Hunger*, 1899), or Wilhelm Raabe's *Der Hungerpastor* (1864; *The Hunger-Pastor*, 1885), among them. Grass derived great pleasure from reading Vicki Baum's *Stud. Chem. Helene Willfüer* (1928; *Helene Willfüer*, chemistry student), a book blacklisted by the Catholic Church because of its heroine's teenage pregnancy and her attempts to end it by abortion. Because of his early encounters with art and writing, Grass knew even as a teenager that he wanted to become a famous artist.

In 1951 and 1952, Grass toured Italy and France. In 1954, he married the Swiss ballerina Anna Schwarz. In 1955, after moving to Berlin, Grass joined the literary organization Gruppe 47 (Group 47), whose authors read aloud and criticized one another's works-in-progress. In 1957, Grass read from his first novel *Die Blechtrommel* (1959; *The Tin Drum*, 1961). The members of Gruppe 47 saw great artistic promise in Grass; in 1958, he was awarded the Gruppe 47 Prize, the stipend of which helped finance a trip to Poland to complete research for *The Tin Drum*. Grass, now the father of twin boys, Franz and Raoul, born in 1957, became famous with the publication of his first novel. The Bremen Senate refused to award its literary prize for the novel, but the book received the Berlin Critics'

Prize. Praised as innovative and daring, condemned as blasphemous and obscene, *The Tin Drum* set the stage for critical reception of Grass's future novels. In 1979, director Volker Schlöndorff's film of *The Tin Drum* appeared, winning Grass new fans. The film won the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1979.

For the next four years, Grass continued to write lyric poetry and drama, in addition to beginning work on his next novels. In 1961, the year of his daughter Laura's birth, the novel *Katz und Maus* (1961; *Cat and Mouse*, 1963) appeared, followed in 1963 by the novel *Hundejahre* (1963; *Dog Years*, 1965). These two works were later published, along with *The Tin Drum*, as the *Danziger Trilogie* (1980; *Danzig Trilogy*, 1987), since all three take place in Grass's birthplace of Danzig. At this time, he developed tuberculosis; he also became actively involved in politics, which penetrates his fictional work. In 1963, he was elected to the Berlin Academy of Art.

Grass began to travel extensively in 1964, making several trips to the United States, while continuing to produce drama, ballets, essays, and poetry. His son Bruno was born in 1965. The novel *Örtlich betäubt* (1969; *Local Anesthetic*, 1969) was a success in the United States. Grass and the novel were featured in *Time* magazine on April 13, 1970. He became increasingly politically active from 1969 to 1972, giving numerous campaign speeches, and in 1972 he published *Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (1972; *From the Diary of a Snail*, 1973). Though fictional and supposedly his diary as a political campaigner, *From the Diary of a Snail* is addressed to his children as a lesson in history and gives Grass's political views as well as a private picture of Grass and his family.

In 1974, though he continued to travel abroad and to write numerous editorials, speeches, poems, and essays, Grass returned more of his attention to fictional art, producing *Der Butt* (1977; *The Flounder*, 1978), dedicated to his daughter, Helena. *The Flounder* was so widely acclaimed that in 1978 he was able to endow a literary award in the name of one of his admired teachers, administered by the Berlin Academy of Art. Though he had earlier dismissed friends' concerns about the state of his marriage, he and his wife Anna were divorced in 1978. The following year he married Berlin organist Ute Ehrhardt Grunert.

In 1979, Grass also published *Das Treffen in Telgte* (1979; *The Meeting at Telgte*, 1981), which, like *The Flounder*, joins history and fiction; autobiography and fiction are joined in *Headbirths*. In *The Meeting at Telgte*, as in *From the Diary of a Snail*, Grass allows more glimpses into his personal life, detailing his travels with Grunert and the Schlöndorffs, while also detailing the travels of fictional characters. In 1986, he published *Die Rättin* (1986; *The Rat*, 1987), in which his earlier fictional characters are reunited.

Although Grass continued to weave his political commentary into his fiction, his articles on politics and on the nature of writing began to appear in magazines such as *The Nation*. In 1985, a collection of these essays, *On Writing and Politics: 1967-1983*, appeared. The writings range from his retrospective look at writing *The Tin Drum* to an endorsement of writers and trade unions, the right to resist, and the artist's right to speak freely in society.

As much as the Nazi regime, the Holocaust, and the German loss of military pride play a role in Grass's early fiction, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the idea of a reunified Germany occupy much of his later writing. After the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, Grass pondered the identity of the New Germany in *Deutscher Lastenausgleich: Wider das dumpfe Einheitsgebot* (1990; *Two States—One Nation?*, 1990), a collection of speeches and interviews that attempt to reconcile the German past with its future. Two years later, Grass used the metaphor of German-Polish reconciliation in *Unkenrufe* (1992; *The Call of the Toad*, 1992) to examine the dangers of German reunification. Grass's fascination with German history and identity and the future of the new Germany figures prominently again in *Ein weites Feld* (1995; *Too Far Afield*, 2000), which centers on the life and work of German novelist Theodor Fontane. In *Mein Jahrhundert* (1999; *My Century*, 1999), Grass weaves fictional accounts of German history with autobiographical recollections as he recounts the one hundred years of German history from 1900 through 1999.

In 1999, Grass was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. In awarding him the prize, the Nobel Academy praised his novels for returning the forgotten face of history to his readers. In his acceptance speech, Grass emphasized the importance of storytelling in a world in which history has come to an end.

In 2002, Grass once again used a historical event—the Russian sinking of the German refugee carrier the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in 1945—as a way of examining the roots of German anti-Semitism and its existence in a new Germany in *Im Krebsgang* (2002; *Crabwalk*, 2003). In 2006, Grass found himself at the center of heated controversy when he admitted being a member of the Waffen-SS as a young man in World War II in his provocative and multilayered memoir, *Peeling the Onion*. While many critics called for him to return his Nobel Prize, other defended him and his work, pointing to its rich and complex interweaving of history and art.

### ANALYSIS

History and objects are almost an obsession with Grass. Most of his fiction is driven by the momentous events of history, and Grass employs objects, and extended metaphors with these objects, until they become symbols of that history. He is both praised and condemned for his use of minute details in his novels, and this mass of detail contributes to the bulk of most of his works. When he employs less detail, as in *Cat and Mouse* and *Headbirths*, the works are significantly shorter.

World War II is the overwhelming background in many of Grass's works, such as *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse*, and *Dog Years*, while *The Flounder* tackles the entire history of the human race, especially the history of males and females. The tin drum, in the novel of the same name, serves as the symbol of Germany's military aggression, as well as other human violence. In *Cat and Mouse*, the character Mahlke has an Adam's apple "like a mouse," and the narrator is "the cat" intent on (and successful at) destroying Mahlke the mouse. Other historical symbols of destruction abound in this novel, including a sunken minesweeper and a stolen Iron Cross. In *Dog Years*, scarecrows, dogs, and ballerinas are only a few of the objects that become symbols of destruction, violence, and (at times) rebirth. In *The Flounder*, a talking fish becomes the guiding intelligence throughout humankind's violent history and continual rebirth.

Another hallmark of Grass's fiction is its point of

view: shifting, unpredictable, self-aware. Many of his narrators are unreliable, shifting between the first and the third person in telling their own tales, changing their minds, and telling different versions of the same events. Oskar of *The Tin Drum* begins his story with the line, "Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital," and he shifts constantly between "I" and "he, Oskar," sometimes within the same sentence. The three narrators in *Dog Years* contradict one another. The first-person narrator of *The Flounder* is a different male during each period of history, as well as the contemporary man in the tale; the "I" in this novel is a different version of each of his male predecessors while, at the same time, encompassing all of these ancestors. In his later works *The Call of the Toad*, *Too Far Afield*, and *Crabwalk*, Grass uses multiple points of view to examine the German past, its present, and its future.

Many of Grass's narrators are highly self-aware artists and storytellers. *The Tin Drum*'s Oskar says, "I have just reread the last paragraph. . . . Oskar's pen . . . has managed . . . to lie." *Local Anesthetic* opens with, "I told my dentist all this." Grass's narrators know that they are creating art: They debate the merits of doing so, mock their audience, and despair of their ability to create the best art possible. The journalist narrator of *Crabwalk* questions his ability to tell the story his mother wants him to tell.

Religious and political themes dominate Grass's work. Indeed, religion and politics are inseparable from his fiction. After a visit to the Church of the Sacred Heart in *The Tin Drum*, Oskar insists that he is more Jesus than Jesus because the plaster statue is unable to play Oskar's tin drum. Mahlke of *Cat and Mouse* worships the Virgin Mary and builds shrines to her. The historical politics of World War II are pervasive in *The Danzig Trilogy*, *Call of the Toad*, and *Crabwalk*. The politics of religion throughout history are woven into the structure of *The Flounder*, and contemporary politics appear when the flounder is put on trial for giving men, and not women, advice. *From the Diary of a Snail*, *Headbirths*, and *Too Far Afield* continue this discursive weaving of art, politics, and religion.

## THE TIN DRUM

**First published:** *Die Blechtrommel*, 1959  
(English translation, 1961)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Against the backdrop of the rise of Nazism, World War II, and Germany's collapse, the self-made dwarf Oskar Matzerath narrates his life story.*

*The Tin Drum* opens with the line, "Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital," thus setting the stage for its unreliable narrator, Oskar Matzerath, who tells varying versions of his story throughout the book. Oskar begins his life story with his Kashubian grandmother Anna Bronski and her improbable impregnation by Joseph Koljaiczek, who eludes police by hiding under Anna's four skirts as she sits in a potato field. This fantastic conception is only one of the "miraculous" events that occur in the novel. The importance of history is evident in Oskar's concern with the ancestry details.

Anna's daughter Agnes grows up into a lovely woman, falls in love with her beautiful cousin Jan Bronski, but marries the German Alfred Matzerath, whom she nurses during the war. Throughout the first part of the novel, Agnes is torn between these two men, just as the Poles are torn between Germany and Poland, and Oskar continually speculates on the true nature of his parentage, unable to decide which of the two men is his real father. When Oskar is born, clairaudient and with his mental development completed at birth, Alfred Matzerath promises that Oskar shall inherit the grocery when he grows up. Preferring his mother's promise of a tin drum on his third birthday, and entranced by the sound of a moth beating its wings against a sixty-watt light bulb, Oskar decides to stay: "Besides, the midwife had already cut my umbilical cord." That is a pattern with Oskar: Whenever possible, Oskar chooses childhood pursuits over adult responsibilities; whenever possible, he claims responsibility for actions that have already occurred or that he could not have controlled.

On his third birthday, Oskar does indeed receive his drum, and, disgusted with the world of adults, with its deception and sordidness, including his mother's ongoing affair with her cousin Jan,

Oskar decides that he will not become an adult: He throws himself down the cellar stairs in order to have an explanation for his having stopped growing at the age of three. Throughout book 1, Oskar drums his way through the increasingly sordid Danzig environs, paralleling the rise of National Socialism. Germany's increasing aggression mirrors the deteriorating personal moral standards of the characters. Oskar's tin drum serves as an extended metaphor not only for Germany's military aggression but also for all human violence, as well as for Oskar's refusal to grow up.

Book 2 parallels World War II. The attack on the Polish post office makes a partisan martyr out of Oskar's "presumptive father" Jan Bronski. In this book, Oskar's association with violence and immorality increases, though he does not actually commit the crimes himself (a defense that, historically, has often been claimed by accused Nazi war criminals). Oskar travels with the dwarf Bebra, whom he met in book 1, who is now part of Joseph Goebbels's Nazi propaganda machine. In Nazi uniform, Oskar tours Paris and other occupied territories, playing his drum and breaking glass for the German soldiers with his voice. Oskar's disillusionment with the church in general, and with Catholicism in particular, which began in book 1, continues until Oskar decides that he himself is Jesus. Oskar/Jesus leads a gang of juvenile delinquents, called the Dusters, inspiring them to commit ever greater crimes. After the gang is betrayed, Oskar/Jesus is put on trial but found innocent because of his age. This trial foreshadows the trial in book 3, in which Oskar is found guilty and placed in a mental institution. The violence and destruction of book 2 increases, resulting in Alfred Matzerath's death. At Matzerath's funeral, Oskar is hit in the head by a rock, throws himself into Matzerath's grave, and decides to grow, to begin a responsible, adult life.

Book 3 is the reconstruction of Oskar's life, just as it is the rebuilding of Poland, Germany, and Eu-





rope after the war. Oskar's fascination with women continues. In book 1, his mother was the object of his interest. In book 2 he was interested in Maria, until she was unfaithful; then he turned to the midget Roswitha. In book 3, Oskar is fascinated with Sister Dorothea, whom he never sees and with whose murder he is charged. The details of Grass's various postwar occupations appear here: Oskar becomes an apprentice stonemason and a jazz drummer. Oskar also becomes a wealthy recording star by taking old people, through his drumming, back to their childhoods. Oskar spends most of book 3 ruminating about the events in books 1 and 2. Book 3 is considered, almost unanimously by the critics, to be less effective than the earlier parts of the novel, perhaps because Grass tries, unsuccessfully, to show Oskar's (Germany's) survival despite his having become deformed during his growth spurt, or perhaps because Grass lacked the necessary distance to present his material objectively. The film version of *The Tin Drum* did not include book 3, ending with Oskar's beginning to grow and leaving his birthplace of Danzig. The novel ends with a children's rhyme about the Black Witch, a line to which Oskar has repeatedly referred throughout the novel: "Here's the black, wicked Witch./ Ha! ha! ha!"

## HEADBIRTHS

**First published:** *Kopfgeburten*, 1980 (English translation, 1982)

**Type of work:** Novel/autobiography

*Grass's own political thoughts are interwoven with the travels of Harm and Dörte Peters, who are indecisive about having a child.*

In *Headbirths*, Grass becomes the narrator of his own novel, a technique that he used in *From the Diary of a Snail*. Though not a novel in the traditional sense, *Headbirths* presents the story of a German couple, Harm and Dörte Peters, who, even as they travel through Asia, are unable to get away from the political upheavals at home and who are unable to decide whether to have a baby of their own. This decision is the source of the title: The only births are "head births," and at this rate, writes Grass, the

German race will die out. Grass also ponders a world populated with as many Germans as there are Chinese, for example, and at the end of the novel Grass puts Harm and Dörte in their old Volkswagen in the midst of a huge crowd of Turkish, Indian, Chinese, and African children, still unable to decide on a child of their own.

*Headbirths* explores one of Grass's major interests: the making of art and the relationship of artist, art, and audience. In this novel, Grass writes that Harm and Dörte disagree with him on certain issues, so that Grass is "forced" to change his original ideas. His other major interest, politics, also is an integral part of this book. Grass presents not only his own political views but also Harm and Dörte arguments about the upcoming political election at home. Sometimes Grass and Dörte "agree" with each other, and Grass writes that he and Dörte attend press conferences together, a plot point that blurs the line between art and reality. Though Grass actually did travel to Asia, *Headbirths* is more about his political and theoretical ruminations than about the actual travels. Harm and Dörte, though sometimes shown visiting fertility temples, or indirectly presented arguing about politics or the "Yes-to-baby/No-to-baby" question, are never fully developed as characters. Rather, they serve as a springboard for Grass to present his political views and concerns.

## CRABWALK

**First published:** *Im Krebsgang*, 2002 (English translation, 2003)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This multilayered novel examines the Russian sinking of a German refugee ship from the perspectives of three different characters, each of whom represents some facet of political opinion about the event.*

In *Crabwalk*, Grass uses the Russian sinking of the German refugee carrier *Wilhelm Gustloff* as a tool to examine the German past, present, and future. In 1945, a Soviet submarine launched an attack on the German ship, sinking it and sending nine thousand people to their deaths in the icy Baltic.

The narrator, a middle-aged journalist, was born on that night to an unwed mother who was in one of the ship's lifeboats. Hounding him to uncover the events that transpired that night, she serves as the voice of the proud German past and its wartime glories.

In his research, the journalist uncovers that the man for whom the ship was named was a hero to the Third Reich. An organizer for the Nazi Party, Wilhelm Gustloff established new troops for the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls. Gustloff became a hero and a martyr when he was assassinated by a Jew, David Frankfurter. The ship was named after Gustloff as a memorial to honor his service to the Third Reich. When it sinks, the proud image of German military glory and might is called into question.

The journalist's research also carries him into the small corners of the Internet, where conversations on a right-wing chat room catch his attention. The chats not only reveal pride in the Nazi past but also glorify the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* as a symbol of Germany's sufferings in the war. The organizer of the chat room calls for revenge for the death of Wilhelm Gustloff. As he searches more deeply, the journalist discovers that his own son is the organizing voice on the chat room of neo-Nazis.

Family history collides with the history of Germany as the journalist, his mother, and the journalist's son scuttle crablike from left to right in their search for clues about the history and identity of Germany.

## PEELING THE ONION

**First published:** *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, 2006 (English translation, 2007)

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*In his first true memoir, Grass reveals his feelings about his involvement in the Nazi youth movement, his hunger to be an artist, his first love, and the demands of the writing life.*

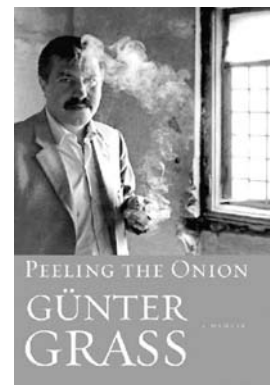
In August, 2006, Grass aroused emotions across the literary world when he revealed in his memoir *Peeling the Onion* that he had been a member of the

Waffen-SS as a teenager. Reaction to the news was swift, with many calling for him to return the Nobel Prize he received in 1999. Others were more supportive of Grass, pointing out that he had already paid the price of his youthful actions by living all those years with his guilt over having served in the SS.

In *Peeling the Onion*, Grass recalls his involvement with the Waffen-SS. He admits that as a teenager he became a part of this military operation, and he offers a quite stark portrait of life in the Nazi youth movement. He also admits honestly and poignantly, though, that he never fired a shot and that the guilt and shame of his involvement have gnawed ceaselessly at him since then.

*Peeling the Onion* does not stop with his youthful military involvement. Grass recalls the tortures of his youthful life: his flirtations with religion, his lustful hunger for various young women, his consuming desire for art, and his earliest forays into the writing life. *Peeling the Onion* records Grass's life from his birth up until the publication of *The Tin Drum* (1959).

In *Peeling the Onion*, Grass uses the image of hunger to describe the stages of his life. Literally, after the war he could not get enough to eat. Another hunger—the lustful desire of a young man for a young woman—soon began to compete with his physical hunger. The hunger that most motivated his life, however, was his hunger for art. As a young boy, he had collected coupons from cigarette boxes that reproduced classic works of art. He also read voraciously, seeing books as his entry into other worlds. In the late 1940's, he apprenticed himself to a tombstone maker in order to become a sculptor. During those years he began writing poetry and discovered the way that words could satisfy this new hunger. From then on, Grass lived in the world of his characters and from the writing of one book until the next.



## SUMMARY

Günter Grass's writings are a fantastic blend of minute (often grotesque) details, incisive satire,

macabre humor, and political commentary. Grass attempts in all of his works to address questions dealing with German history and identity, and he often writes from his personal involvement in political issues. The multiple points of view in his novels, the magical elements that mark his style, and his focus on the themes of alienation and the outsider place him in the company of other contemporary writers, such as Salman Rushdie and W. G. Sebald. Grass's body of work, however, presents one of the most powerful visions of post-World War II Europe and Germany. His style and meticulous attention to detail make him a unique and vital representative of German literature.

*Sherri Szeman; updated by Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.*

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*Kopfgeburten: Oder, Die Deutschen sterben aus*, 1980 (*Headbirths: Or, The Germans Are Dying Out*, 1982)  
*Danziger Trilogie*, 1980 (*Danzig Trilogy*, 1987; includes *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse*, and *Dog Years*)  
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*Im Krebsgang*, 2002 (*Crabwalk*, 2003)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many of Günter Grass's novels contain autobiographical elements. In what ways do the narrators of *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse*, *Dog Years*, *The Flounder*, *Call of the Toad*, and *Crabwalk* resemble Grass?
- In his youth, Grass wanted to be a sculptor and painter. How do Grass's artistic instincts control the structure of his books? Are his novels simply word paintings?
- In what ways do Grass's novels resemble novels by Franz Kafka and Theodor Fontane, two of his mentors in German literature?
- Discuss the themes of hunger, guilt, and shame in *The Tin Drum*, *The Flounder*, *Headbirths*, *Crabwalk*, and *Peeling the Onion*.
- Discuss Grass's treatment of religion in *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse*, *Dog Years*, and *Crabwalk*.
- What is Grass's view of women? Are they important characters in his novels? Which women in his novels are strong characters?
- Does Grass's view of the history and identity of the German people change from *The Tin Drum* to *Crabwalk*? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

Günter Grass

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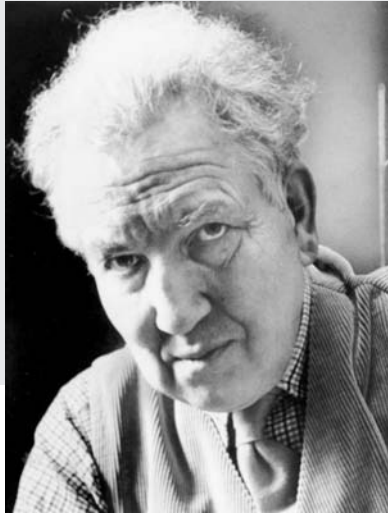
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## ROBERT GRAVES

**Born:** Wimbledon, Surrey, England

July 24, 1895

**Died:** Deyá, Majorca, Spain

December 7, 1985

*Recognized as one of the technical masters of English verse, Graves believed that true poetry must be literally inspired by the Muse of ancient myth.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Robert Ranke Graves was born July 24, 1895, at Wimbledon, near London, England. His father, Alfred Percival Graves, a minor poet and Gaelic scholar, had remarried late in life to Amalie von Ranke; through his mother, Robert Graves was related to the distinguished German historian Leopold von Ranke. There were eventually nine children in the Graves family, including Robert, and the household was a fairly typical, late-Victorian establishment, dedicated to maintaining the conventions of society, especially those of religion. Until his teenage years, Robert, in particular, was a devoutly religious boy with a particular fastidiousness about sexual matters and an aversion to any rituals or beliefs that deviated from the strictest tenets of reformed Protestantism.

From 1910 until 1914, Graves attended Charterhouse, one of the famous English public schools. His stay at Charterhouse was generally unpleasant for several reasons. He was repulsed by the general air of homosexual affections that permeated the place but, at the same time, inadvertently encouraged such interests, as Graves himself later recognized and admitted in his autobiography, *Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography* (1929).

Graves was also a scholarship student, which exposed him to the cruel and snobbish mockery of his classmates. As the relationship between Great

Britain and Germany steadily deteriorated during this time, Graves was further tormented because of his German middle name. Finally, he was ridiculed because of his desire to write poetry. It was practicing this talent, however, that helped make Charterhouse bearable for Graves and attracted the notice of Edward Marsh, a patron of the prevailing Georgian School of English poetry. Marsh encouraged Graves in his efforts and introduced him to other writers, helping to prepare the way for Graves's first book of poems, *Over the Brazier* (1916).

Before this appeared, however, Graves had embarked on the most traumatic experience of his life, service in the trenches during World War I. Intensely patriotic, Graves had enlisted in 1914 at the outbreak of the war, joining the Royal Welch Fusiliers, one of the most notable units in the British army. Sent to France as an officer when only nineteen years old, Graves experienced the horrors, frustrations, and insanity of modern warfare. In 1916, he was severely wounded and listed as dead. His unexpected return to his family was, at least for Graves, a literal resurrection that forever marked his thinking and poetry. The war wounded Graves psychologically as well as physically. He found himself unable to face strangers, incapable of holding a regular job, and a victim of nightmares and unexplainable fears. His poetry, which had been light and lyrical, took on deeper and more brooding tones; throughout his career, he would return in various fashions to his experience in battle, in particular his wounding and "death."

After a long period of recuperation, Graves was married in January, 1918, to Nancy Nicholson.

Only eighteen, Nicholson had strongly held feminist convictions; she demanded that the marriage vows be rewritten to excise references to obedience and that any daughters take her surname. Graves agreed to these requests, an early sign of what was to become first a recognition and then an exaltation of the role of the female in human life and artistic creation. Eventually the Graves-Nicholson marriage would produce four children.

After living in a cottage on the estate of the poet John Masefield, failing as a shopkeeper, and experiencing great financial want, Graves returned to school, taking his degree at St. John's College, Oxford. He continued to write poetry all during this time and between 1920 and 1925 published a volume of poems each year. He also met a number of prominent persons, among them T. E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, and the poet and novelist Thomas Hardy.

In 1926, these friends helped Graves obtain the post of professor of English literature at the new Egyptian University at Cairo. Accompanying Graves and his wife was their new friend, the American poet Laura Riding, who was to exert a powerful influence on Graves's personal and poetic life. After only one year, the trio returned to England as severe domestic disputes strained the Graves's marriage; in 1929, Graves left his wife for Riding and moved to Deyá, Majorca, a small island off the coast of Spain. Graves would make Majorca his home for the rest of his life, leaving it only for brief periods or when forced away by war.

During the next ten years, Graves was deeply influenced by Riding's theories of composition and inspiration, especially the belief in the essentially feminine nature of creativity. Graves would later personify this principle as the White Goddess, whom he identified with the Muse of classical mythology. In 1939, however, while he was in the United States because of World War II, the Graves-Riding relationship dissolved, and each of them found another companion. Graves married Beryl Hodge, the former wife of one of his best friends. In 1946, the couple moved to Majorca.

After that, Graves's personal life remained fairly settled, and the controversies and excitements he caused were artistic and intellectual. He had already scored one of his few truly popular successes with his novel *I, Claudius* (1934), a fictional ac-

count of the early Roman emperors. While researching Greek myths for another historical novel, *The Golden Fleece* (1944; also known as *Hercules, My Shipmate*, 1945), Graves was struck by a new and radically different view of these ancient stories. Rejecting the traditional interpretations, Graves saw the myths as distorted but still decipherable links to an older, more universal religion that worshiped an all-powerful moon goddess. This figure, the White Goddess, was also present, Graves maintained, in Celtic and northern European folklore and poetry. Graves claimed additional evidence for his theories from the works of anthropologists, such as *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), by Sir James Frazer. The presence of the White Goddess, the only true Muse of poetry and for whom Graves claimed a literal existence, remained Graves's central theme for the rest of his life.

Graves's theories were not without critics, and later works also drew attacks, especially those that challenged traditional Christianity, such as *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953), or disputed ancient Jewish beliefs, as did *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (1964). Graves defended his iconoclastic theories with skill and learning in numerous books and in his lectures at schools and colleges throughout the world, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Trinity College, Dublin. From 1961 through 1966, he was professor of poetry at Oxford.

It was as an original poet, however, that Graves made his most individual and lasting mark. The body of his poetic work is unmatched among twentieth century writers for lyrical intensity and technical skill. Avoiding obscurity for its own sake, forsaking experimentation for traditional disciplines of meter and rhyme, Graves pursued the craft of poetry more as a sacred calling than as a career. When he died in Dejá, Majorca, Spain, on December 7, 1985, he left behind achievements that made him one of the truly indispensable writers of his time.

## ANALYSIS

Graves is best known as one of the most accomplished lyric poets of the twentieth century, but his highly individualistic and often controversial scholarship won for him almost equal, and certainly more fiercely contested, notice. He was also an excellent author of historical fiction, and his short stories and essays rank among the best pro-

duced in his time; several works, such as *I, Claudius* and the story "The Shout," have been recognized as modern classics.

Graves's poetry was part of the grand procession of English verse, emphasizing the use of rhyme, regular meter, and definite, often traditional structure. Although his career overlapped those of poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Graves disdained their innovative, nonconventional forms and techniques. Graves believed, as did Edgar Allan Poe, that a long poem was impossible because inspiration could not sustain itself for more than brief stretches; therefore, he never attempted anything on the order of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) or Pound's *Cantos* (1925-1972). Graves further thought that deliberate obscurity in poetry was a fault, so his verse does not have the enigmatic complexity of some of Eliot's lines or the recondite cultural references that Pound sometimes inserted into his lines. In short, Graves believed in and practiced clarity, technical mastery, and an absolute devotion to what he considered the true themes of poetry.

These themes inevitably revolved around the love of man and woman, and Graves is rightly regarded as one of the twentieth century's greatest love poets. Because of his peculiar beliefs about the nature of his inspiration, however, Graves's love poetry contains dimensions that are lacking in other authors. For Graves, the relationship between the poet and his lover echoed a more ancient and enduring situation, that between the White Goddess and the sacrificial king who died only to be reborn with the onset of spring. This goddess was symbolized, if not actually embodied, in a mortal woman, thus inspiring poets. What their poems celebrated, however, was greater than a single woman or individual love affairs; it was the universal and immortal goddess herself. All true poems, Graves insisted, told some aspect of this ancient tale. It was in this sense that he wrote, in "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," that "there is one story and one story only."

A Graves poem, then, is generally a brief vision of an aspect of this immortal and recurring story, peopled by contemporary characters, perhaps, but always referring, even if implicitly, to the underlying myth. In this sense, Graves's personal system of

philosophy-mythology invites comparison with that erected by William Butler Yeats, whose book *A Vision* (1925, 1937) provided the scaffolding and explanation for the themes, symbols, and meanings of Yeats's poetry. In both cases readers can, and often have, rejected the theories behind the poetry in favor of the poems themselves. So great are the powers of these two poets, and so enduring are their poems, that this is possible.

Still, in both cases the reader can find more to appreciate and consider by knowing the theories and, in the case of Graves, can find considerable enjoyment in the way those theories are presented. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), his lengthy and polemical presentation of his ideas, is a remarkable book. Rejecting much of traditional historical, literary, and anthropological writings, Graves boldly turns Greek myths upside down, rewrites the development of Western poetry, and scorches his opponents with fierce and learned sarcasm. The Greek god Apollo, for example, was not for Graves the true patron of the arts but only an impostor who had ousted the goddess by fraud, force, and deceit. That was a typical Graves's interpretation, delightful to read, and, because of Graves's learning, impossible to dismiss out of hand.

Had Graves been only a poet, he would have commanded his place in literary history. If mythology and cultural studies had been his main thrust, he would still have to be reckoned with as a quirky but important figure. Should he be considered solely for his autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, he would rank among the foremost of modern writers to tell his own story and that of his entire generation. He was a far more versatile talent, however, as his many outstanding novels, stories, essays, and occasional pieces demonstrate. The list of Graves's works is long, and there seems to be no genre that he did not attempt, and few in which he did not excel.

In his own eyes, however, Graves was always a poet. In the religious sense, poetry was his vocation, his calling. It was a mystery to which he had been summoned by the goddess, to whom he owed all of his allegiance and dedicated all of his talents. Never was a goddess better served.

## GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

**First published:** 1929

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*Graves recounts his childhood and youth and his devastating experiences as a soldier in World War I.*

As Graves recalls in *Goodbye to All That*, he grew up in a household that stressed the time-honored virtues of Christianity, patriotism, and progress. Along with millions of other young Englishmen, he found that these virtues were severely shaken, if not totally destroyed, by the nightmare of World War I. Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Graves was a brilliant writer, and his classic autobiography is an account of both his own personal experiences and the end of innocence for an entire generation and nation.

Although the book covers all Graves's life up to the time he wrote it, the work is primarily a memoir of his service in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, one of the most respected regiments in the British army. After a brief account of his family life and a rapid but thorough review of his education at Charterhouse, Graves thrusts the reader directly into the experiences of modern warfare. These are by turns stirring, boring, horrifying, heroic in brief moments, and brutal for long stretches. The battlefield of World War I was not a glamorous place or an arena for storybook heroism; it was a nasty, death-filled place. The Western Front was a morass of death and mud where huge armies grappled without seeming purpose or hope of victory.

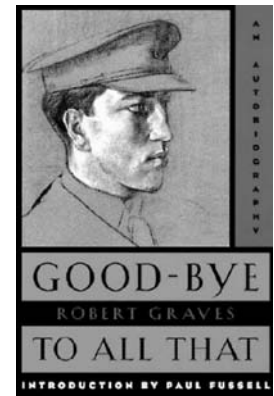
As a young lieutenant being sent into battle, Graves had a life expectancy on the front lines of just about three months; he lasted for two years. He was then severely wounded and reported as dead. For more than a week, his friends and family back in England believed that Graves had, in fact, died. His unexpected recovery and the delayed notification to his family constitute the "resurrection," which is one of the central passages of *Goodbye to All That*. The experience clearly had a deep and lasting influence on Graves both as a man and as a poet.

The war scarred Graves and nearly broke his spirit. That this should be so is hardly remarkable, and the reader of *Goodbye to All That* will find exam-

ple after example of stupidity and callousness from higher officers, government officials, the popular press, and even the general public. On one hand, Graves was rightly proud of his unit, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and its men. Without false sentiment or vainglory, he presents an affectionate and moving portrait of a distinguished and honored regiment, skilled at its tasks and as brave as modern soldiers can be. On the other hand, Graves felt nothing but contempt for the commanders who wasted such brave men in criminally stupid fashion. Frontal attacks on entrenched positions, pointlessly enduring endless bombardments that blasted men into bloody fragments, repeated encounters with the horrors of gas warfare and trench combat—these were inflicted on the Fusiliers by the Allied high command, not the German enemy. Graves never got over that fact. Had he not been wounded, he might have gone totally insane; as it was, he suffered a severe mental setback and did not recover for many years after the war. In one sense, in his hatred for British hypocrisy, Graves never did recover, nor did he ever wish to recover.

*Goodbye to All That*, then, is more than an autobiography. It is also an explanation of Graves as a man and as a poet, setting forth what he believes and why he believes it. Having been transformed by his wartime experiences, Graves felt compelled to chart those changes and present them. His book, as the title implies, is also a farewell to England and English life. In one sense, it is literally a farewell, for when *Goodbye to All That* was published, Graves left England for Majorca with Laura Riding. Although he and Riding would separate in 1939, Graves would remain in Majorca for the rest of his life; he made occasional visits to Great Britain but never again considered it his home.

In another sense, Graves was saying good-bye to a way of life that had been destroyed by war and time. His childhood and youth had been spent in another age, a time when the world seemed certain, the future was bright, and men and women





lived orderly, confident lives. Nothing of that remained after the war. Uncertainty, fear, and doubt reigned, and all the promises of religion and politics had been revealed as nothing more than hollow, cynical words to fool the masses. Not without a sense of regret at lost innocence, Graves also said good-bye to all that he had known in his youth.

## THE WHITE GODDESS

**First published:** 1948

**Type of work:** Literary and mythological criticism

*Graves traces all true poetry back to an ancient religion of the three-part moon goddess, the truths of which have now largely been lost.*

*The White Goddess* eventually had its source in Graves's first popular success in fiction with the novel *I, Claudius*, an account of the first four Roman emperors. He followed this with a sequel, *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* (1934). While researching material for another novel set in ancient times, *The Golden Fleece*, Graves was seized by a revelation of what he believed to have been the true structure and nature of all ancient poetry and, indeed, of all real poetry to modern times. This vision was expanded, with recondite references to Celtic, northern European, and Mediterranean myths and prehistory, to form the basis for his most notable and controversial work of criticism, *The White Goddess*.

The book is subtitled *A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, and in it Graves presents a highly detailed account of what true poetry is, what constitutes its unvarying themes, and how these themes have been used by all real poets for thousands of years. Although Graves indulges in numerous digressions, his main points can be briefly summarized.

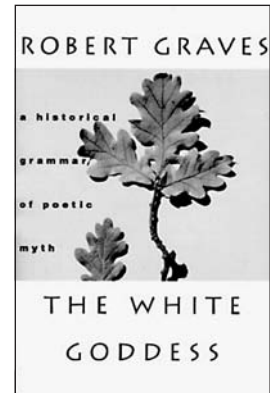
Until the end of the Bronze Age, roughly 1000 B.C.E., a single religion had held sway in most of the world from northern India to Britain; that is, in those areas where the Indo-European language was established. This religion consisted of worship of the three-part, or tripartite, goddess, who, because of her mutable nature, was most commonly associated with the moon; her phases were those of

Maiden, Wife and Mother, and Crone. In these three guises, the universal goddess presided over all birth, growth, and death. Two gods attended the goddess: the god of the spring, or waxing year, who was ritually slain at midsummer and supplanted by his rival, the god of the waning year, who ruled until the winter solstice. At that time, the god of the waxing year was resurrected through the power of the goddess, and the cycle began once more. This cosmic story was repeated in human society and individual human lives, and it was the task of the true poet to celebrate this mystery; the poet succeeded only to the extent that he accepted the power of the goddess and was granted her inspiration.

Graves maintained that this goddess worship, which formed the essential basis for all real property, was violently disrupted and then displaced by invaders from the Middle East, worshipers of a supreme male god, who usurped the rightful place of the goddess. This process occurred in several stages, beginning with the advent of the classical Greek pantheon of gods dominated by Zeus and culminating with the spread of patriarchal Christianity throughout

Europe. The worship of the goddess, and therefore the practice of true poetry, was effectively outlawed. Where it persisted, it did so either under hidden forms, such as those practiced by the Welsh bards, or as a debased and only partially correct memory. Modern poets still manage to exist, Graves maintained, and to be inspired by the White Goddess as a muse, but they do so largely unconsciously and often in defiance of accepted social and critical conventions.

*The White Goddess* is a work packed with references to a wide range of historical, anthropological, and mythological studies, including Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Drawing upon Frazer's illuminating study of the truths behind myths, Graves added his own interpretations of traditions ranging from the obscure, such as the ancient Welsh poem "The Battle of the Trees," to the familiar, as in the book of Revelation from the Bible. All





of these provide evidence, Graves insists, to support his thesis.

Such arguments by Graves are one reason *The White Goddess* has been so controversial since its publication. By positing a single, unified goddess worship that extended through Indo-European culture, Graves is inverting or contradicting much of traditional scholarship. His interpretation of Greek myths in support of his theory has been attacked as idiosyncratic at best, simply wrong at worst, and his subsequent account of these stories, *The Greek Myths* (1955), was attacked by many critics on these grounds.

A second reason for the controversy surrounding *The White Goddess* was that Graves presented his work not simply as a historical or critical study but as a literal and truthful account of the continuing source of true poetry. Graves does not use the triple goddess as a metaphor; rather, she is an actual deity. Worshipped before the coming of the patriarchal invaders, she inspired poets; known only dimly and by chance inspiration now, she is still the only real Muse of true poems in the contemporary world. Such a belief seems to many in the modern world perverse, yet it is the position that Graves forcefully and learnedly argued in *The White Goddess* and which he maintained in the body of his poetic work.

*The White Goddess* thus joins the ranks of those works of English literature that cannot be satisfactorily classified. Along with William Butler Yeats's *A Vision*, Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-1834), and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), it is an achievement that has inspired admiration, condemnation, and continued debate among its readers.

## "ULYSSES"

**First published:** 1933 (collected in *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, 2000)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The wandering Greek hero of Homeric legend must always be with a woman because of his devotion to the eternal goddess.*

As Graves demonstrates in "Ulysses," he was, above all else, one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. His lyrical gifts were extraordinary, and his technical mastery of verse form, rhyme, and rhythm was unrivaled. Unlike many other poets of the modern era, Graves did not engage in free verse, idiosyncratic form, or unusual styles. He worked within the traditions of English poetry, almost always using a specific pattern of rhyme and a regular meter to frame his message. This message varies, but more often than not it is a variant of his central theme, the concept of the three-part goddess and the true poet's devotion to her. Since the goddess often appears in the guise of a mortal woman, Graves is predominantly a love poet, and his lyrics celebrate the possibility of enduring affection between man and woman. Graves was not, however, without his sardonic side. The gulf between deity and daily life was all too obvious for Graves, and even the most heroic of men, such as Ulysses, could be blind to the truths offered by the goddess. Such is the case in this poem that has the hero's name.

Ulysses is fated to need women but never truly understand them; at the same time, he is secretly terrified by the changeable nature of women. He comprehends enough to recognize the mutable nature of the goddess who appears sometimes as a virgin, a loving wife, a seductive temptress, and even as an implacable, natural force. The mythological Ulysses encountered all of these in his return from the Trojan War, and Graves's poem is a compressed litany of this journey. Ulysses meets the goddess as the sorceress Circe, in the form of the Symplegades, or clashing rocks, and as the Sirens, destroyers of ships and men. The goddess also takes her form in Ulysses's chaste wife, Penelope, who waits for him for twenty years while he is fighting on the plains of Asia and then trying to return home. What Ulysses senses, without consciously realizing it, is that all of these women are the same

and are versions, avatars, of the White Goddess. What he does accept is that he needs them and that without them he is incomplete.

### **“TO JUAN AT THE WINTER SOLSTICE”**

**First published:** 1945 (collected in *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, 2000)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The only true theme for an authentic poet is the recurring myth of the White Goddess and her powers.*

The rule of the triple goddess, which Graves explains in his book *The White Goddess*, finds its most trenchant and beautiful exposition in “To Juan at the Winter Solstice.” The Juan of the poem may be the poet’s own son or it may equally well be Don Juan, the famous lover of many beautiful women and thus a worshiper of the goddess in her many aspects. To whomever it is addressed, the poem is both an invocation of the Muse of true poetry and an example of the mysteries she performs.

“There is one story and one story only,” Graves says in his opening line, and by the time the poem concludes he has shown that the various aspects of the myth of the goddess encompass all the truths that humankind can know or poets can relate. In doing this, Graves recapitulates his arguments from *The White Goddess*, showing how the Welsh tree poems, the myth of the Zodiac, and the recurring legends of sacrificial kings are part of this single, powerful tale, the story of the goddess.

Graves moves, methodically but poetically, through these mutations. These are the subjects, he says, for a true poet: verses about the Zodiac, which is a representation of the goddess in her heavenly, seasonal aspect; and poems about the god of the waxing year, who rules only to be sacrificed at midsummer, as “Royally then he barter life for life.” On the other hand, the poet may turn inward, but still, if he is a true poet, his personal story will reflect the universal one.

In the end, Graves maintains, the one story that can be told is that of the goddess, her beauty, and her power:

Her brow was creamy as the crested wave,  
Her sea-grey eyes were wild  
But nothing promised that was not performed.

### **“THE PERSIAN VERSION”**

**First published:** 1945 (collected in *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, 2000)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem is an account of the battle of Marathon from the losing side.*

Graves admitted that “at times the satiric left hand of poetry displaces the lyric right hand,” and “The Persian Version” is a poem written with his left hand but one that also contains a hint of the real pain and suffering he endured in World War I, when so many pointless and useless Allied defeats and deaths were reported to the gullible public as great victories or examples of British fortitude. As he showed in *Goodbye to All That*, Graves understood that the German public had been fed the same lies. Why should it have been different in ancient times?

This is the premise for “The Persian Version,” where the famous battle of Marathon is put into its true—that is, Persian—perspective. For European history, Marathon was the first and perhaps greatest struggle of democracy against tyranny, the prototype of all subsequent battles for freedom. For the Persians, Graves’s poem says, the event was only a minor event, a “trifling skirmish” upon which “truth-loving Persians” do not like to dwell; the implication here is that the Greeks have lied about the battle, an accusation often levied in wartime. Using terminology from the military, Graves calls Marathon “a mere reconnaissance in force” and notes, as any well-trained military spokesperson would be sure to add, that the ships involved were only “light craft detached from the main Persian fleet.” In other words, Marathon was essentially a local, almost unnoticed event, not the world-shaking clash of legend.

“The Persian Version” is an ironic, even savage poem, which underscores the futility of warfare and the endless idiocies to which governments will go to wrest some shred of spurious victory from even the most obvious defeat, just as the Persians

claim to be the victors in this encounter because, despite the losses and deaths, “All arms combined magnificently together.” That is exactly the sort of bombast Graves read while his friends were being killed beside him in the trenches. In “The Persian Version,” he made it a joke, but it is a joke with a serious, bitter center.

### SUMMARY

Robert Graves considered himself a poet. His other work, while done to the best of his ability, was either to support himself while he wrote his poems or to explain them. He felt chosen to compose relatively short poems of praise to a universal goddess

whose existence almost all others denied and in a style that many had ceased to practice. Graves was thus a strange combination of Georgian English poet and Bronze Age Greek.

He accepted that largely self-created role and prospered artistically in it, writing some of the most beautiful and enduring poetry of the twentieth century. In his verse forms and patterns, Graves is often entirely conventional, while in his underlying themes he is enduringly ancient. Above all, he remains Robert Graves, and his poems are a lasting combination of all of these elements.

*Michael Witkoski*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent can negative criticism of Robert Graves be regarded as disapproval of him as a maverick poet scornful of the principles that guided his contemporaries?
- What is the relationship between the war and its warriors in *Goodbye to All That*?
- Contrast Graves's interpretation of Ulysses with Alfred, Lord Tennyson's.
- Can it be argued that the power of the poem “To Juan at the Winter Solstice” does not depend on its underlying mythology?
- Consider Graves's historical novels as the source for his later interpretation of the ancient classics.
- Graves wanted his poems to be concentrated and lucid. Did the literary forms he used promote this aim? Did he succeed in fulfilling it?

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## GRAHAM GREENE

**Born:** Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England  
October 2, 1904

**Died:** Vevey, Switzerland  
April 3, 1991

*Greene, a twentieth century writer best known for his novels, also distinguished himself as the author of numerous short stories, plays, travel books, and film criticism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Graham Greene, born in Berkhamsted, England, on October 2, 1904, was the fourth of six children. His father, Charles Henry Greene, was a history and classics master who, in 1910, became headmaster of Berkhamsted School.

As a highly sensitive, imaginative youth from a respected upper-middle-class family, Greene had the opportunity to develop more exotic emotional problems than are characteristic of children of the lower classes. When he first discovered that he could read, he hid this fact from his parents out of fear that they would then make him enter preparatory school. He began to live a covert life, secretly reading books about adventure and mystery of which his parents would not approve. As a child, Greene also developed inordinate fears of the dark, of birds and bats, of drowning, and of the footsteps of strangers. He developed recurrent nightmares about a witch who would lurk at night in the nursery at the linen cupboard.

In 1912, as he approached his eighth birthday, Graham Greene enrolled in Berkhamsted School. He was to spend the next ten years there, the last five of which proved to be a hellish confinement for him. Being the headmaster's son, he felt himself alienated from the other boys and was bewildered by his sense of divided loyalties. His filial devotion was constantly challenged by his desire to be accepted. He was never able to resolve these con-

flicting loyalties, and, to make matters worse, two schoolboys, Carter and Wheeler, sadistically exploited Greene's anxiety with cruel psychological precision. While Greene never disclosed the specific details of their actions, Norman Sherry, in his biography of Greene, has shown that these two boys exercised a powerful control over Greene during a critical time in his development. Being more experienced in worldly matters, they took pleasure in attacking Greene's naïveté and trust. Carter not only tormented Greene for being the headmaster's son but also, after winning his confidence and discovering his secret dreams and desires, disabused Greene of many of his romantic and chivalric ideals. As the murderer of Greene's childhood and his arch betrayer, Carter would appear in many forms throughout Greene's stories and novels and become one of the powerful demons that Greene would spend his literary life attempting to exorcise. Years later Greene was to observe that every creative writer worth consideration is a victim, a man given over to an obsession.

By 1920, Greene had developed manic-depressive and suicidal behavior that led his parents to send him to a psychoanalyst for treatment. The experience proved beneficial, and Greene began self-consciously to record and analyze his dreams and feelings. It was also during this period that he began to write short stories, the act of which served, perhaps unwittingly, to shape and to help control his fears and depressions.

In 1922, Greene entered Balliol College, Oxford, to study history. His academic career was not especially distinguished. He edited the Oxford

*Outlook* and during his last year at the school published a volume of verse entitled *Babbling April: Poems* (1925), a work derivative of the style of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

In the autumn of the following year, in a confused state of intolerable boredom and sexual frustration, Greene took his older brother's revolver, slipped a bullet into the chamber, spun the barrel, placed the muzzle against his right ear, and pulled the trigger. The excitement of gambling with his own life rejuvenated him. During the next few months he played this dangerous game several more times. These adrenaline ecstasies soon abated, but his acute fear of boredom, and his penchant for dangerous acts that he hoped would curb that fear, remained with him for life. His later excursions into Africa, Mexico, and Vietnam during periods of bloody revolutions, for example, were largely motivated by the same dreadful feeling of emptiness in his life and became for him a new form of Russian roulette.

After he was graduated from Balliol, he began a career in journalism, working for the *Nottingham Journal* and then *The Times* in London. It was during this time that he met and proposed marriage to Vivien Dayrell-Browning, a Roman Catholic. In order to understand and appreciate better the religion of his future wife, Greene took instructions in the faith and became a Catholic in 1926. Having agreed to a monastic marriage, Greene married her the next year and apparently abided by this unusual agreement until his separation from her several decades later. In his spare time, he wrote his first novel, *The Man Within*, published in 1929. Stirred by its success, he devoted full time to writing novels, short stories, and book reviews. In 1930, he published *The Name of Action* and, in 1931, *Rumour at Nightfall*, two action novels. He finally achieved the notice he was seeking with the publication of *Stamboul Train: An Entertainment* (1932; published in the United States as *Orient Express: An Entertainment*, 1933). Based upon a rugged trip to Liberia during 1934-1935, Greene's travel book, *Journey Without Maps* (1936), reveals his attempt to return to a pure and innocent landscape. Significantly, Greene had long conceptualized Africa as being roughly the shape of the human heart.

During the next few years, Greene was sued by representatives of Shirley Temple over a caustic review that he wrote of her film *Wee Willie Winkie*

(1937). He also produced a thriller entitled *A Gun for Sale: An Entertainment* (1936; published in the United States as *This Gun for Hire: An Entertainment*). With the publication of *Brighton Rock* in 1938, critics discovered that Greene was a writer whose work contained explicitly Catholic themes. His most popular and most explicitly Catholic novel was *The Power and the Glory* (1940; reissued as *The Labyrinthine Ways*), published two years after he visited Mexico to report on the religious persecution in that country. Recruited into the Secret Service in 1941, Greene was sent to West Africa, where he wrote *The Ministry of Fear: An Entertainment* (1943), a melodrama filled with bizarre twists of plot. After World War II, in 1946, he began work on another major novel, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), set in the West Africa he came to know so well. When motion-picture producer Alexander Korda wanted to make a film about the four-power occupation of Vienna, he sent Greene to that city to research the subject. The result was the film script for *The Third Man*, released in 1949. Starring Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton, the film has become a classic.

During the next ten years, Greene produced three more novels: *The End of the Affair* (1951), *The Quiet American* (1955), and *Our Man in Havana: An Entertainment* (1958), all of which were made into motion pictures. *The Quiet American* was especially upsetting to American reviewers because of its damning analysis of the United States' involvement in Vietnam during the early 1950's. Greene also wrote three plays during this period: *The Living Room* (pr., pb. 1953), *The Potting Shed* (pr. pb. 1957), and *The Complaisant Lover* (pr., pb. 1959). The first two plays focused heavily upon Catholic themes, including the unfashionable belief in miracles.

In 1961, he published *A Burnt-Out Case*. Ostensibly about an architect who comes to an African leprosarium to escape the mindless adulation he has received in Europe, the novel is very autobiographical and suggests Greene's growing uneasiness with his faith. *The Comedians* (1966), his next novel, is set in Haiti during the bloody reign of Papa Doc Duvalier. The motion picture based on the novel is distinguished by its two stars: Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Greene also published two collections of short fiction during this time: *A Sense of Reality* (1963) and *May We Borrow Your Husband? and Other Comedies of the Sexual Life*

(1967). Although overshadowed by his novels, his short stories are nevertheless quite powerful and worthy of careful attention.

In 1971, Greene published the first volume of his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, which extends only to the 1930's. His 1980 *Ways of Escape* brings his life up to date. The focus in both books is upon his literary, rather than his personal, life. *The Honorary Consul*, published in 1973, was one of Greene's favorite novels, though critics have never ranked it among his very best works. *The Human Factor* (1978) is based upon the sensational defection to the Soviet Union of Kim Philby, Greene's former boss in the Secret Service.

With the publication of *Monsignor Quixote* in 1982, Greene compared Catholicism and Marxism by having the principals of the novel, a Spanish priest and a Communist former mayor, debate the relative merits of their beliefs. *Getting to Know the General: The Story of an Involvement* (1984) is Greene's reportorial hymn to his friend General Omar Torrijos of Panama. In 1985, *The Tenth Man* appeared. This novel is based upon an old manuscript by Greene that was discovered in the vaults of a Hollywood motion-picture company. Greene apparently had forgotten he had ever written it, but after it was discovered, he allowed it to be published. His last published novel, *The Captain and the Enemy*, published in 1988, is a slim work that lacks the fire and the complexity of his earlier fiction.

Having lived in Antibes for the last twenty-five years of his life, Greene managed from this outpost to remain a liberal gadfly, attacking in newsprint any and all countries that compromised his sense of justice and humanity. Many believed that he was never awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature because of his radical political views. He died on April 3, 1991, of an undisclosed blood disease, in a hospital in Vevey, Switzerland. His last publication, a collection of short stories uncannily entitled *The Last Word, and Other Stories* (1990), appeared a few months before his death.

## ANALYSIS

Greene's exciting, fast-paced narratives have an illusive transparency about them, as if one can see and hear the characters and visualize their surroundings without the distractions of the author's presence or stylistic mannerisms. This authorial invisibility may derive from Greene's experience in

writing film scripts and from the many years he spent in reviewing motion pictures. It is interesting to note, in this connection, how few of his novels are written from the first-person point of view, a perspective clearly unsuited to a screenplay.

Although many of his novels are based on topical events—whether in England, Mexico, Vietnam, or Haiti—Greene's personal involvement in those events as a reporter and as a student of human nature allows him the perspective of an insider. It is almost as if he would not ask his characters to do or think something that he himself had not done or thought. Life, to Greene, is a series of risks and moral choices; the dangers are betrayal, corruption, and failure. The central quest of his obsessed heroes is for the peace and innocence of their lost childhood, an adventure that is characterized by great tension and suffering, and one that often ends only in death.

Greene's fiction offers a unique vision of the world, a vision derived from his obsession with certain themes, characters, and events. Feeling that his childhood innocence was savaged at Berkhamsted School by the psychological bullies Carter and Wheeler, Greene became obsessed with the theme of lost childhood, a theme that dominates most of his novels and short fiction. Greene is like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who burns with a constant passion to tell the passerby his story; like the Mariner, he can hold his audience with the hypnotic eye of a true believer and weave his obsession into a compelling fiction. In fact, Greene acknowledged that his writing was a form of therapy that enabled him to escape the madness, melancholy, and panic inherent in the human condition.

Greene's obsessions and fascinations are many and evolve into themes focused on innocence, evil, pity, hatred, the isolated and hunted individual, betrayal, suicide, dreams, seedy and decadent surroundings ("Greeneland," as some critics call it), violence, carnal sexuality, and failure. His characters fall into four categories: the sinner, the innocent, the pious, and the humanist.

All of these obsessive figures, themes, and subjects are circumscribed by Greene's fatalistic and pessimistic vision of the world. There is little healthy humor or laughter in most of his novels, but rather a sense of inevitable failure, pain, and suffering. There may be a God in Greene's world,

but the focus is almost always on the twisted world itself: its nightmarish oppression, its squalor, and its seeming hopelessness.

Greene's Catholicism and his obsessions supply much of the strength of his novels. They are the muscles that make the body of his fiction work, but they should not be viewed in isolation from the total performance, which concerns itself with the human condition and the fundamental theme of much great literature: the struggle of innocence against evil and the hope of redemption. Greene's fiction appeals to the reader's profound urge to avenge an imperfect world that has betrayed his or her own youthful fantasies and ideals.

## BRIGHTON ROCK

**First published:** 1938

**Type of work:** Novel

*The young leader of a gang of racetrack hoodlums finds his world disintegrating as he is relentlessly pursued by a self-righteous avenger.*

*Brighton Rock* is the story of a seventeen-year-old brutal criminal named Pinkie Brown, who has recently assumed the leadership of a gang of race-track hoodlums working out of Brighton, an English seaside resort. A man named Hale, an advertising agent who is in Brighton to promote his newspaper, has betrayed Kite, the former leader of the gang now run by Pinkie. Hale knows that Pinkie has recognized him and is planning revenge. The pursuit and murder of Hale are set against a background of fun-seeking holiday crowds, band music, flower gardens in bloom, and a warm summer sun.

While seeking refuge from his would-be killers, Hale takes up with a vulgar, sensual woman named Ida Arnold. After Hale is murdered, Ida takes it upon herself to seek revenge. In the meantime, Pinkie befriends a young waitress named Rose, whose knowledge of his gang's involvement in Hale's murder makes her a threat to his safety. He then marries her because he knows that a wife cannot testify against her husband in court. Ida, delighting in her role as detective and avenger, begins to focus more clearly on her suspects, harasses

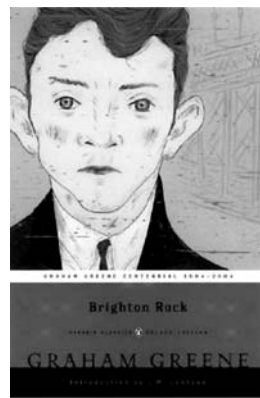
Rose, and begins to frighten Pinkie with her constant inquiries about Hale.

Pinkie panics and kills one of his fellow gang members whom he feels he can no longer trust. Then, in a desperate attempt to rid himself of Rose, who in his mind has come to represent the horrors of sexuality and entrapment, he lures her into a suicide pact with him. His plan is to let Rose take her own life, which, out of reckless love for Pinkie, she is willing to do, and then escape. After they drive to the coast to consummate the pact, Dallow, a member of Pinkie's gang, arrives to inform him that the police know who killed Hale and that there is no hope for any of them now. As Pinkie reaches for the bottle of vitriol, which he always carries with him, to hurl at Dallow, the acid flies back into his face. He runs screaming over the edge of an embankment and plunges to his death in the water below.

The novel ends on a note of terrible irony. Rose's only consolations are the possibility that she will have Pinkie's baby and will enjoy playing for the first time a gramophone recording that he had made for her earlier on the Brighton pier. He had told her that he had put something "loving" on the record; what he had actually said was, "God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home forever and let me be?" The novel ends with Rose walking toward her room in the hope that Pinkie's love for her will be expressed and confirmed on the recording.

Pinkie Brown is the embodiment of deprived innocence. Greene visualizes Pinkie in realistic detail, but his metaphorical language elevates the young killer's character almost to the level of a morality play or a parable. On one level Pinkie may be a common thug from Brighton in the 1930's, but on another level he is a fallen angel, a tragicomic hero who, on an irrevocable course of self-destruction, transcends time and space.

The theme of lost or betrayed innocence is central to this novel. The neighborhood in which Pinkie was born and reared is called Paradise Piece





and is now reduced to rubble. Pinkie's fear of sexuality is directly related to the theme of lost innocence. When he believes that he will soon be inextricably bound to Rose as her husband, he feels as if he were shut out from an Eden of ignorance.

Pinkie's only real choice in life is suicide. That is his only way of escape from human contacts and other people's emotions. Other people make Pinkie's world a hell, but at least he understands hell, whereas heaven is just a word to him. When they christened him, he asserts, the holy water did not work, and he never howled the devil out. His faith is in Satan, not in God.

## THE POWER AND THE GLORY

**First published:** 1940

**Type of work:** Novel

*During the persecution of Catholics in Mexico, a hunted, alcoholic Catholic priest overcomes his human failings to achieve martyrdom.*

The setting of *The Power and the Glory* is Mexico during the late 1930's, when President Plutarco Elias Calles, in the name of revolution, was closing down the churches and murdering or exiling priests and practicing Catholics. The hero is an unnamed whiskey priest who is pursued through the countryside by an unnamed lieutenant. The fact that the protagonists are not named gives the novel the form of a parable. The priest represents a human, Christlike figure persecuted by the lieutenant, who embodies the ruthless, secular ideals of socialism.

In his continuous search for safety and food, the priest takes refuge in a barn owned by Captain Fellows, an English banana planter. His thirteen-year-old daughter, Coral, risks her and her family's safety in attending to the priest's needs during his stay. She stands in vivid contrast to the priest's own illegitimate daughter, Brigita. Coral is still an innocent and later appears to the priest in a comforting dream moments before he is executed. Brigita, on the other hand, despite her youth, has lost her innocence amid her squalid poverty. The priest is overcome by his guilt for having brought a hopeless child into the world and prays that God will

take his faith and life in exchange for the salvation of his daughter. Along his travels the priest meets up with a mestizo, a grotesque Judas figure who leads the priest to his capture by the lieutenant. Awaiting execution in prison, the priest reveals a profound contrition for his sins, especially for the damage he has done to his child, and in his final moments selflessly prays for her redemption.

One of the little boys in the town, Luis, who earlier had admired the machismo of the lieutenant, now spits on him, the spittle landing on the lieutenant's revolver. Through this scene Greene suggests that the execution of the whiskey priest thus has a moral impact on the next generation. The novel concludes with a mysterious stranger knocking at the door of Luis's home. He identifies himself as a priest and Luis kisses his hand. The fugitive church, the reader is reassured, is still a vital presence and will survive the violence of socialist oppression.

The theme of the hunted man establishes an exciting and nightmarish atmosphere that makes this novel a first-class thriller. There is much more here, however, than a simple manhunt. Greene has created characters that are at once human and symbolic. The priest and the lieutenant embody the extreme dualism of the human spirit: godliness versus godlessness, love versus hatred, spirituality versus materialism, concern for the individual versus concern for the state. The symbiotic relationship between the two men is brought out after the priest's death, when the lieutenant feels that his vitality has been drained from him and that he no longer has a clear purpose in life.

## THE MINISTRY OF FEAR

**First published:** 1943

**Type of work:** Novel

*In war-torn London, an innocent man unwittingly finds himself hunted down by a network of spies.*

Set in London during the height of the German Blitzkrieg, *The Ministry of Fear: An Entertainment* develops the theme of pity as an isolating and self-destructive force. The hero, Arthur Rowe, has poi-

soned his wife because he could not bear to watch her suffer from an incurable disease. Although the court finds him innocent of any crime, he nurses a powerful sense of guilt for his actions and continues to be driven by a disproportionate sense of responsibility for the suffering of those around him.

The novel opens with Rowe entering a local fair. He is drawn to the fair because it reminds him of his lost innocence. Despite the war raging around him, the fair affords him lush gardens and sweet smells from his childhood. Ironically, his attendance at the fair leads to his becoming a hunted man. He wins a cake that, unknown to him, contains a microfilm of secret naval plans placed there by a spy ring. When he returns home, one of the Nazi agents who constitute the Ministry of Fear visits him in an attempt to poison him. Recognizing the smell of the poison (the same one he used for his wife), Rowe realizes that someone wants to kill him for no apparent reason, turning his sense of reality into a Kafkaesque nightmare. Later, while Rowe is attending a séance, one of the guests is murdered with Rowe's knife and Willi Hilfe, a young Austrian relief worker (who pretends to be Rowe's friend but who actually masterminds the Nazi spy ring) advises Rowe to go underground. The murder, however, is merely a contrivance to drive Rowe into hiding. He is seriously injured when, upon opening a case supposedly containing books, a bomb goes off.

The second part of the novel finds Rowe a victim of amnesia from the bomb blast and a patient in a nursing home run by Dr. Forester, one of the spies. Through an act of crippling violence, Rowe, remembering nothing from his past, is ironically returned to a more innocent world. His amnesia allows him to enjoy an Arcadian existence for a time, unaware of the war in London, his murder trial, and his fugitive past.

When Rowe challenges Dr. Forester for his cruelty to one of the patients at the home, the doctor retaliates by revealing Rowe's real name and showing him a newspaper clipping of his murder trial. This sudden illumination marks the beginning of Rowe's rebirth and return to the sordid, complex world from which he enjoyed only a temporary retreat. He gradually puts the bits and pieces of his past back together again and moves closer to becoming a whole man. He still, however, does not know the details of his murder trial.

The novel ends with Rowe's confrontation of Willi Hilfe. After Rowe disarms him, Willi offers Rowe a deal: He will complete Rowe's memory about the death of his wife and turn over the microfilm in exchange for Rowe's revolver and a single bullet with which to commit suicide. Rowe refuses but Willi insists on revealing the details of Rowe's trial anyway. His curiosity satiated, Rowe feels himself a whole man once again and, in still another act of pity, allows Willi to commit suicide.

Rowe's anguish over the suffering of others leads him to become a sinister force of violence himself. His sense of pity leads to the murder of his wife and to the suicide of Willi Hilfe. He is hunted by the Ministry of Fear, the reader is told, because he loved, but Rowe misleads one here. His selfishness and quiet arrogance are the forces that actually motivate his most important actions and shape his emotional commitments to others. Thus the victim of the Ministry of Fear is actually the victim of his own pity, the most terrible passion Greene allows his characters.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

**First published:** 1948

**Type of work:** Novel

*A middle-aged police officer in British West Africa is driven to suicide in order to protect his wife and his mistress from suffering.*

Major Scobie, the hero of *The Heart of the Matter*, is a middle-aged police officer in British West Africa. During his fifteen years of service he has acquired a reputation for unfailing integrity. His wife, Louise, is a nagging and restless woman who plans a holiday trip to South Africa to escape the languid, oppressive atmosphere of Sierra Leone and the embarrassment caused by her husband's failure to be promoted to commissioner. Scobie, whose love for her has long been replaced by an obsessive sense of pity and responsibility, borrows the money for her vacation from a Syrian smuggler and usurer named Yusef.

During his wife's absence Scobie falls in love with a nineteen-year-old girl named Helen Rolt, who has been widowed in a shipwreck off the coast.

When Louise returns, Scobie still feels morally bound to live up to his private vow to see to it that she is always happy. Complicating matters further, Scobie writes Helen a letter reassuring her of his love for her. This letter winds up in the hands of Yusef, who blackmails Scobie into helping him smuggle some diamonds out of the country.

Shortly after her return home, Louise asks Scobie to go to Holy Communion with her. He goes to confession but cannot promise the priest that he will not see Helen again and so cannot be absolved of his sin. In order to ward off any suspicion of his adultery, however, he receives Communion in the state of mortal sin. He willingly risks his eternal damnation rather than inflict pain on Louise. At the same time, his love and sense of responsibility for Helen are so strong that he cannot bring himself to end the affair. He thus tells God that he will accept eternal damnation in exchange for the happiness of these two women.

Tormented by his religious hypocrisy and by the certain knowledge that his dilemma will lead him to inflict unnecessary pain on Louise or Helen, Scobie decides to commit suicide. Both women, he reasons, will forget him after his death and will regain their happiness. He studies the symptoms of angina pectoris so that his death may appear to be natural then poisons himself with tablets prescribed by his doctor for the pretended illness.

Scobie is a sympathetic figure, demanding the reader's pity and respect. His sense of pity and responsibility for the happiness of others, however, is excessive and demonstrates an almost monstrous pride that leads to his self-destruction. The reader feels sorry for Scobie because he cannot help himself. Watching his fall from grace is like watching the hero of a drama who, flawed by a critical blindness in his character, seeks peace and happiness but ironically and irrevocably brings upon himself and others pain, suffering, and death. The novel

conveys a strong sense of fatalism as a chain of interlocking events that combines with Scobie's obsessive personality to diminish his freedom and finally makes suicide the only means by which he can resolve his overwhelming dilemma.

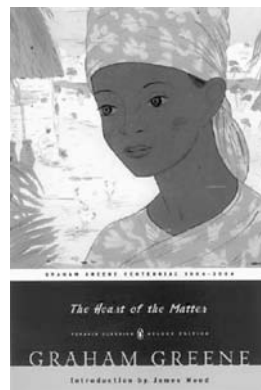
During Scobie's last moments he begins a prayer to God that he fails to finish. The reader is inclined to believe that this tragic man, who has suffered deeply, will at last be awarded the peace of God, but Greene characteristically denies the reader the restful certainty of that conclusion. Strictly speaking, suicide is a mortal sin that cannot be repented, and thus, according to Catholic doctrine, Scobie's soul is damned to Hell. Afterward, Scobie's priest, Father Rank, points out that the Church does not know what goes on in a single human heart, thereby leaving the door open to the possibility that Scobie's final state of mind might have made his salvation possible.

## SUMMARY

Despite the variety of literary forms that Graham Greene explored, his greatness clearly lies in his fiction. Unlike writers of the 1920's and 1930's, he practically ignored the experimental novel. Rather, he followed the loose tradition of such diverse writers as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, and Marjorie Bowen.

Greene's main achievements in the novel are twofold. First, he is a master storyteller, one of the chief reasons for his popular success. Second, he has created a unique vision of the world, having turned his personal obsessions into universal works of art. Greene both lived and wrote on the dangerous edge of things, and in the world of his novels he has re-created the bittersweet conflict between the fascination of innocence and the hell-haunted drama of human existence. It is a surprising, suspenseful, frightening, and dark world that he has created, but it is above all a human place, peopled with sad and suffering men and women with a profound longing for peace, some of whom occasionally startle the reader with their compassion and love and childlike simplicity.

*Richard Kelly*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did Graham Greene's recollection of the boys who tormented him when he was young serve him as a writer? Did this obsession damage as well as contribute to his fiction?
- How does Greene's depiction of foreign places differ in his travel books and his novels?
- Catholicism is important in many Greene novels, but his books are also "fatalistic and pessimistic." How can these two elements be compounded?
- Were Joseph Conrad's novels a major influence on Greene?
- Consider the theme of self-destructiveness in Greene's fiction.
- Can Greene, or any writer, be his own therapist?



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## THE BROTHERS GRIMM

### Jacob Grimm

**Born:** Hanau, near Kassel, Hesse-Kassel (now in Germany)

January 4, 1785

**Died:** Berlin, Prussia (now in Germany)

September 20, 1863

### Wilhelm Grimm

**Born:** Hanau, near Kassel, Hesse-Kassel (now in Germany)

February 24, 1786

**Died:** Berlin, Prussia (now in Germany)

December 16, 1859

*Accomplished scholars of Teutonic folklore, linguistics, and philology, the Brothers Grimm gained literary immortality with their collection of German fairy tales.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm was born on January 4, 1785, in Hanau, Hesse-Kassel, in what is now Germany. His brother, Wilhelm Carl Grimm, was born a year later on February 24, also in Hanau. Their parents were Philipp Wilhelm Grimm, a German official, and Dorothea Zimmer Grimm. Jacob and Wilhelm were close all of their lives, lived together, worked as a team on certain projects, held professorships at the same universities, and contributed enormously to Germanic studies. Jacob was the dominant force, disciplined, with an appetite for tedious research. Wilhelm was frailer, warmer, more sociable, drawn to music and literature. Yet each had the generous, even temper needed to sustain a lifetime of collaboration.

As law students at the University of Marburg, they were influenced by Professor Friedrich Karl von Savigny. At a time when Napoleon I was conquering all of Europe, Jacob had a revelation of his and Wilhelm's life work while browsing in Savigny's library. From that time forward, the Grimms devoted themselves to resurrecting the German past in scholarship. They were inspired by patriotism, but a kind that looks back wistfully.

The brothers began editing medieval manuscripts. Jacob Grimm's first publication of note, *Über den altdeutschen Meistergesang* (1811), was a series of essays on medieval German poetry. At the same time, Jacob and Wilhelm began collecting folktales from friends and neighbors. Their joint publication, a large assortment of these folktales, eventually put the Grimms on the literary map for good. It was *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812, 1815; *German Popular Stories*, 1823-1826), published in two volumes. These stories became known and loved in English as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Its publication was a landmark of the German Romantic movement, for within it was the voice of the common people given literary expression in enchanting stories. The book began a new era in folklore collecting, a respect for the story as told. Reviewers found it boorish, but it gained immediate public acceptance and was promptly translated. The book saw several editions in the Grimms' lifetimes alone.

After the Napoleonic Wars, Jacob found work in Cassel in the same library that employed Wilhelm. The output of the Grimms was enormous. Among their notable achievements was an exhaustive two-

volume study of German legends, *Deutsche Sagen* (1816-1818; *The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, 1981) and Jacob's encyclopedic study of Teutonic mythology, *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835-1837; *Teutonic Mythology*, 1880-1888). In 1819, Jacob Grimm published his German grammar, *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819-1837), a work that, in its second edition of four volumes, amazed the scholarly world. Jacob amassed a huge body of evidence to codify the consonant shifts in the Germanic family of languages from earliest times to the nineteenth century. The exact relationship of those shifts is called Grimm's law, and it established linguistics as a science. Jacob followed that in 1828 with *Deutsche Rechtsaltertümer*, an account of proverbs as the basis of German law.

When Wilhelm married Dorothea Wild in 1825, Jacob continued to live in the household amiably. Both brothers found positions at the University of Göttingen, with Jacob becoming head librarian and full professor in 1830 and Wilhelm receiving a professorship in 1835. When the Grimms signed a protest over the king of Hanover abolishing the constitution, they were fired. Both returned to Cassel. Then in 1840 they received professorships at the University of Berlin, which they held until their deaths. Their last great labor was on the first volume of a colossal thirty-two-volume German dictionary, the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1854-1960), which took four generations of scholars and more than one hundred years to finish. Wilhelm died in Berlin on December 16, 1859. Jacob died there on September 20, 1863.

## ANALYSIS

*Grimm's Fairy Tales* has a distinctive German flavor even in English translation. The settings are German: forests, castles, mountains, quaint villages, inns, and huts. The characters are old-fashioned German types: merchants, cobblers, tailors, millers, huntsmen, tramps, robbers, woodcutters, parsons, peasants, kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Even the supernatural beings have a Germanic coloring: witches, dwarves, giants, elves, nixies, and the devil. Yet this very seventeenth century German quality adds to the magic of the stories. If these stories were not so firmly grounded in their time and place, they would lose their essence, their ability to reveal the universals of human experience.

Stories that satirize stupidity and laziness are common to every culture that values practical intelligence and hard work. Tales such as "Die kluge Else" ("Clever Elsie"), "Der Frieder und das Katherlieschen" ("Frederick and Catherine"), "Die klugen Leute" ("Wise Folks"), and "Der faule Heinz" ("Lazy Harry") show with some wit the folly of the stupid and the idle. Ridicule is a tool to make misfits conform, but when it is directed at characters in an amusing story, the point is made without the sting of personal venom.

There are many animal tales in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, some of which are fables, tales with a moral. In "Der Wolf und der Fuchs" ("The Wolf and the Fox"), the wolf's rampant gluttony leads to its destruction, while foresight saves the fox. In "Katze und Maus in Gesellschaft" ("The Cat and Mouse in Partnership"), gluttony is symbolic of the greedy and powerful, who swallow the weak under the guise of benevolence. There are realistic stories, too, and these deal with cruelty to the helpless, which is always condemned. Tales such as "Der Nagel" ("The Nail"), "Der alte Grossvater und der Enkel" ("The Old Man and His Grandson"), "Der arme Junge im Grab" ("The Poor Boy in the Grave"), "Lieb und Leid teilen" ("Sharing Joy and Sorrow"), and "Die klare Sonne bringt's an den Tag" ("The Bright Sun Brings It to Light") depict the hard, evil side of human nature unsoftened by fantasy. In fact, "The Bright Sun Brings It to Light" eerily foreshadows the Holocaust in a small way. Religious stories also form an important part of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*; "Marienkind" ("Mary's Child") is an outstanding example. There is a whole section devoted to these stories under the heading "The Children's Legends." Finally, there are nonsense tales, brief bits of humor told for sheer exuberance. "Das Hausgesinde" ("My Household") has cumulative nonsense, "Läuschen und Flöhchen" ("The Louse and the Flea") contains nonsense on the theme of getting carried away, "Das dietmarsische Lügenmärchen" ("The Ditmars Tale of Wonders") displays the nonsense of obvious absurdities, and "Die schöne Katrinelje und Pif Paf Poltrie" ("Fair Katrinelje and Pif-Paf-Poltrie") reveals the nonsense of the proposal ritual.

It is for the fairy tales, however, that the Grimms are remembered. In them, poetic fantasy and realistic detail blend in startling ways, as in dreams. Yet if these tales resemble dreams with their magic and

wish fulfillment, they are consciously crafted stories that follow the rules of the genre.

Fairy tales are meant to be recited or read aloud to children. One thing that a child wants is a good story. The plot must therefore be the main attraction. The story needs dramatic contrast: good versus evil, kindness versus cruelty, loyalty versus treachery. Further, the hero or heroine must have some purpose, such as winning a royal mate, helping others, undoing a spell. The plot also needs suspense, things that hinder the hero or heroine from achieving the goal. That is the reason for the pattern of three so common in fairy tales—three nights in a haunted castle, three riddles to be solved, three magic tasks. Three is the ideal number for building suspense: Four is too long, and two is too short, to hold a child's interest.

Magic is significant in fairy tales. There are magic helpers who assist the kindhearted to reach their goals. Old women and gnomes furnish magic objects and advice. Talking animals, fish, birds, and insects perform the tasks that the hero or heroine finds impossible. Magic objects enable the hero to do specific feats that would otherwise be beyond him. Besides helpful magic, there is evil magic in fairy tales—spells that turn a human into a beast, spells that petrify a place, and spells used to dupe the trusting. To overcome evil magic, it takes patience and love.

Since everything in a fairy tale is subordinate to the plot, the characters are revealed by their acts and speech. The heroes and heroines lack complexity and often a name. Yet they usually have the qualities necessary to heroism, whether heroism in story or in real life. These are courage, generosity of spirit, and the persistence needed to overcome adversity. The wicked people in fairy tales and in life are proud, unhappy, envious, and mean. They cannot stand adversity and take nasty shortcuts to get what they want. Sooner or later, their treachery is exposed. Fairy tales are grounded in the basic qualities of human experience.

## “THE WATER OF LIFE”

**First published:** “Das Wasser des Lebens,” 1815 (collected in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 2002)

**Type of work:** Folklore

*In seeking a cure for his father, the third of three sons finds his future wife and suffers the treachery of his older brothers.*

“The Water of Life” is storytelling pared to the bone. The tale is so lucid and simple that it almost defies analysis. Situation, speech, and action blend in one flowing narrative. A king is dying. His three sons learn from an old man that the only way to save their father is to bring him the water of life. The dying king reluctantly gives one son after the other permission to seek the water.

When the two proud older brothers meet a dwarf who asks where they are going, they answer rudely, so the dwarf sends them up a ravine, where they become trapped. Arrogance itself is a trap, and the ravines are symbolic of the older brothers' hard pride that keeps them from progressing. When the third prince meets the dwarf, he answers politely and confesses that he does not know where the water of life is. The dwarf then tells him that the water is in an enchanted castle, and he gives the prince the three things that he needs to enter the castle: a wand to open the gate and two small loaves of bread to feed the guardian lions. The dwarf also warns him to leave the castle by midnight. The prince thanks him and leaves. The amount of information conveyed in a few sentences is amazing: The hero is revealed as courteous, humbly honest, and grateful.

Once inside the castle, the prince acts on his own initiative. He finds a hall with spellbound princes and removes their rings. He finds a sword and a loaf of bread that he takes. He finds a lovely princess, who wakes and kisses him. She says that they will be wed in a year and that her kingdom will be his. She also tells him where the water is and warns him that he will be imprisoned in the castle if he stays past midnight. He falls asleep, however, and barely awakens in time to fetch the water and escape, losing part of his heel as the gate slams shut. The events in the enchanted castle are vivid,

mysterious, and dreamlike. Yet they work a change in the hero. He becomes both more affectionate and more effective. His one blind spot, however, is that he trusts his brothers.

Again he meets the dwarf, who tells him that the sword (the wand, magically transformed) can defeat many armies and that the supply of bread will never end. The prince asks about his brothers, and the dwarf releases them, warning the prince about their evil hearts. The brothers are joyfully reunited and travel home together, with the youngest telling of all that befell him. On the way, they find three successive kingdoms ravaged by war and famine. The prince saves each with his sword and bread. Before arriving home, the brothers undergo a sea journey in which the older brothers switch the water of life for sea water while the youngest sleeps. Sleep is a real danger in this tale.

The youngest son is accused of attempted poisoning after giving his father the salt water, while his brothers get the credit for rejuvenating the king. The king then orders his huntsman to execute his third son on a hunting trip. Yet the prince is so considerate of the huntsman's feelings that the huntsman tells him of the king's orders and, instead of killing him, exchanges clothes with the prince. The prince hides in the forest for a year. Meanwhile, the king repents his hasty act when three wagons of gold and jewels come for his third son from the three kingdoms that he had saved. When the huntsman tells the truth, the king grants his lost son amnesty.

The princess orders a golden road built to her castle and tells her servants to send away all who ride up by the side of the road, but to admit the one who rides down the middle. The older brothers ride to the side when they notice that the road is gold. The prince, however, never notices, his mind being full of the princess; he rides down the center to his bride, her kingdom, and his father's love. His wicked brothers set forth on the sea and are never heard from again.

The main symbols in the story almost speak for themselves. The wand and two small loaves of bread that admit the prince into the castle become, magically, the sword and loaf by which he saves three kingdoms. The water of life is balanced by the water of death (sea water). The golden road that leads to success must not be approached gingerly; it must be ridden down the center with all of one's being focused on the goal.

## **"MARY'S CHILD"**

**First published:** "Marienkind," 1812

(collected in *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 2002)

**Type of work:** Folklore

*A young woman is cast out of heaven for her sins and must suffer repeated losses until she repents and confesses.*

"Mary's Child" has three levels operating in perfect harmony. One is the story surface, the actual events and language; another is symbolic, with parallels in everyone's life; and the third is the spiritual level, eternity revealed through time.

Mary takes a starving woodcutter's baby girl to heaven to rear as her own. The infant is given the best of care and has angels for playmates. When the girl is fourteen, Mary goes on a long trip and leaves the keys to thirteen rooms in heaven with the girl, telling her that she may open every door but the thirteenth, which is forbidden. The girl opens a new door every day to find an apostle. On the thirteenth day, devoured by curiosity, she opens the forbidden door and sees the Trinity blazing in fire and glory. She gazes in awe and puts out her finger, which turns to gold. Suddenly, she is seized by panic, closes the door, and rushes to Mary, who knows immediately what has happened. Three times Mary asks the girl if she opened the forbidden door, and three times the girl denies it. Mary has no choice but to send her to earth. It is Original Sin repeated, but it is also the way that adolescence is experienced, as a loss of innocence and being cared for by adults. It marks the beginning of suffering as a constant part of the human makeup and the point at which one must accept the consequences of one's actions.

The girl is isolated from all human contact in a part of the forest surrounded by thorns. She tries to cry out but finds that she is mute. She must fend for herself, eating roots, nuts, and berries, and having





only a hollow tree for shelter. She looks back on her life in heaven with longing. That is how things are out in the cold, harsh world of adolescence, where pain isolates one from everyone else.

The girl becomes a woman. Her clothes have dissolved in shreds, but she is covered by her long, golden hair. One spring, a king chases a roe into her area of forest and must hack through the thorns. He finds a beautiful, mute young woman, whom he takes home and marries. At this point, the courtship rite is stripped to its basics. A man chases a sleek, healthy animal into cover. If he persists in his hunt through the thorns of misunderstanding, jealousy, female contrariness, and pain, he will behold the one woman in the world for him, exactly as she is, naked and splendid. She, in turn, will behold a king.

In the following three years of marriage, the queen has two sons and a daughter. After the birth of each, Mary visits the queen and asks if she opened the forbidden door, and each time the queen denies it. Thereupon Mary takes the child to heaven, again leaving the queen mute. After the disappearance of each child, the king's councillors and subjects accuse the queen of cannibalism until the king can no longer ignore them. The queen is

tried, convicted, and sentenced to burn at the stake. Her one sin, compounded by six lies, leads to death. Yet as the flames rise, her icy heart melts, and she cries out, "Yes, Mary, I did it." Mary then quenches the fire with rain, fully restores the queen's speech and three children, and blesses her with happiness. Mary herself points out the moral that forgiveness is gained only by repentance and confession. The real miracle is that God is humble enough to accept last-minute repentance.

## SUMMARY

The style of the Brothers Grimm's tales is simple, appropriate for a child. The language is serious, dignified, and poetic. There is little description, a lot of action, and enough speech to make the narrative interesting. In some stories, a person or an animal will resort to verse at a crucial point. The openings and closings of the Grimms' fairy tales are ritualistic, pungent, and much more inventive than the stale "once upon a time" and "they lived happily ever after."

In selecting and arranging their folktales, the Grimms, and Wilhelm especially, showed balance, taste, and love. The result was wonderful.

James Weigel, Jr.

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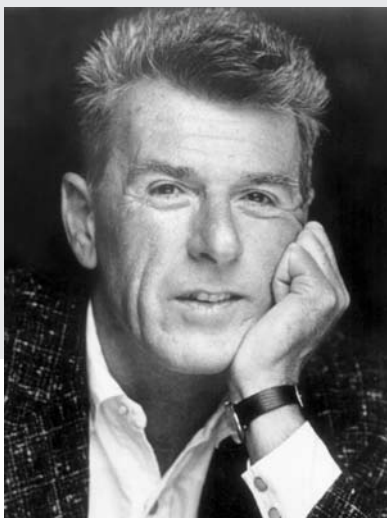
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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain how the differing talents of the Brothers Grimm enabled them to work together effectively.
- Offer an explanation of the Grimms' successful admixture of linguistic study and the creation of fairy tales.
- What besides gathering interesting folk material did the Grimms have to do to create fairy tales?
- Implausibility does not seem to be a defect in fairy tales. Why not?
- Examine the beginnings of several Grimm fairy tales to determine how they avoid clichés.
- Do fairy tales need to have morals attached to them? If not, why not?



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## THOM GUNN

**Born:** Gravesend, Kent, England  
August 29, 1929

**Died:** San Francisco, California  
April 25, 2004

*Gunn displayed poetic skill of a high order and successfully explored a number of subjects that were new to poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Thomson William Gunn was born on August 29, 1929, at Gravesend, a small town in Kent on the Thames. His father, Herbert Gunn, was a successful journalist, and Thom Gunn had a privileged middle-class upbringing that was marred by the divorce of his parents and the death of his mother, Ann Charlotte Thomson Gunn, when Thom was twelve. The family had moved earlier to fashionable Hampstead, nearer London, and Gunn attended University College preparatory school. Gunn did not go immediately to a university after completing secondary school because he was drafted into the British army, in which he served for the required two years. He then entered Cambridge University in 1950, where he read English literature and began writing the poems that would make his reputation. The dominant figure at Cambridge during that period was F. R. Leavis, a critic who stressed the necessity of following tradition; he may have had some influence upon Gunn, but the rule of tradition was alien to Gunn's exploratory and innovative poetry. Gunn consistently broke away from the mainstream of received critical opinion.

After Cambridge, Gunn went to Stanford University on a creative writing fellowship. At Stanford, he studied under the American poet and critic Yvor Winters. Winters had a great influence upon

Gunn, especially in his belief that poetry is made up of logical propositions and moral judgments rather than emotional outpourings. Winters was a traditionalist in matters of poetic meter and form, and he encouraged Gunn to retain and perfect traditional poetic elements in his poetry.

Winters encouraged Gunn to study for a Ph.D. in English, but after two years of study Gunn became bored with the work and did not complete the degree. He did, however, accept a teaching position at the University of California at Berkeley in 1958 and remained a resident of the San Francisco Bay area. He abandoned his tenured position as a professor at Berkeley in 1966, but he continued to teach there part-time.

Gunn's first book, *Fighting Terms*, was published in 1954, the year that he graduated from Cambridge. The poems are written in strict, traditional meter and form, but they deal with untraditional themes of violence and the control of the will. In 1957, Gunn published his second book of poems, *The Sense of Movement*. The subject was still violence and the will, but Gunn had found more appropriate and effective means to discuss it. The literary allusions in these poems were not drawn from his reading but from motorcycle gangs in California with whom he had spent some time. The reception of this book was far better than that of his first book. Critics recognized a new voice and a new subject area for English poetry.

*My Sad Captains, and Other Poems* (1961) was Gunn's next book of poems, and it marks a significant change in style. The first part of the book is written in the strict meter that characterizes Gunn's style. The second part of the book, how-

ever, is in syllabics. Gunn was not yet a free verse poet, since the syllabics did follow a regular pattern, but he was straying from the traditional metrics that were so much a part of his poetry.

In 1966, Gunn published a book of poems, *Positives*, that were paired with photographs by his brother, Ander Gunn. What was noteworthy in addition to the experiment in poetry and photography was that the poems were in free verse. Gunn's progression from traditional meters and forms to free verse is representative of that of many English poets.

*Touch* was published in 1967, and it shows a thematic change in Gunn's poetry. The emphasis in *Touch* is on the necessity of human intercourse, which directly contrasts to the solitary exercise of the will that is so prominent in Gunn's earlier books.

*Moly* (1971) was the next milestone book for Gunn. The subject is the liberating LSD experiences that Gunn had. Gunn uses meter in order to give structure to what is by its nature an unstructured experience. Gunn believed that LSD had the potential to liberate a person from his or her divided condition and to free one from human limitations, but he still insisted that the description of such a liberation occur within the traditional framework of measured poetry.

Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) deals with the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic that devastated the San Francisco area. Many of the poems are precise descriptions of the suffering and courage of those afflicted with the AIDS virus. Gunn was a homosexual, but that aspect of his identity was hidden behind the various invented speakers in his earlier poems. In Gunn's later poems, there is a directness and emotion that is not prominent in his earlier poetry.

In 1979, Gunn published *Selected Poems: 1950-1975* and in 1993, *Collected Poems*. The first volume is a group of Gunn's best and best-known poems. *Collected Poems*, however, shows the full range and achievement of one of the most important post-World War II poets writing in English.

Gunn died in his sleep in San Francisco on April 25, 2004.

## ANALYSIS

Thom Gunn once described himself as a "derivative poet. I learn what I can from whom I can." He

tried out a number of poetic styles and was influenced by a number of poetic traditions. As a result, his poetry encompassed a very wide range of subjects, and the poems reflected the influence of many important figures in modern poetry. The influence of Yvor Winters led Gunn to read, write about, and to some extent imitate such Renaissance poets as Ben Jonson and Fulke Greville. By the middle of his career, however, he began to read and be influenced by such different poets as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Gary Snyder. The essays he wrote on these poets and the changes in his style clearly show his change in affiliation.

Gunn's poetic style is unusual in its clarity of diction. His use of classical models and references, especially in the early poems, is clearly a reason for his exactness in choosing words. The influence of Winters may be another factor in Gunn's unusually clear poems. Winters stressed the poetry of statement, and Gunn seems to have adopted that mode in his poetry.

Nearly all of Gunn's early poetry was written in traditional meters and very often in traditional stanzaic forms. The meter of most of his early poems is the most traditional of all meters in English, iambic pentameter. A few poems are written in iambic tetrameter and even fewer in iambic trimeter, but Gunn tended to stick to pentameter, which he polished and refined. Gunn also consistently used rhyme in his poems, especially alternating rhyme, and occasionally, as in "Moly," he used the heroic couplet.

Gunn was impressed by T. S. Eliot's dictum that a poet does not express his personality but escapes from it. As a result, many of his poems have invented speakers, such as the warrior from the Trojan War in "The Wound" or the motorcycle riders in *The Sense of Movement*. It is only in *The Man with Night Sweats* that he speaks in his own voice.

The themes of Gunn's poems are various, but in the early poems the major focus is on the will. This theme can be seen in the warrior of "The Wound" and the soldier of "Incident upon a Journey," who has "no regrets" about his violent actions. The exercise of the will can be seen as a mode of life in "On the Move" and "Innocence." In "On the Move" the motorcyclists "dare a future" by their movement. Whether there is any meaning in their actions is not dealt with; it is the keeping in motion, a metaphor for the will, that matters. In "Innocence" the

soldier has made himself or been made into an “instrument.” Military allusions and metaphors are common in Gunn’s poetry, even in a love poem, such as “The Beach Head,” where the stages of seduction are described as an invasion. Another love poem, “Carnal Knowledge,” portrays the act of love as one of shared deception rather than union. It is interesting that Gunn wrote few poems on the two eternal subjects of English poetry, nature and love. He was a traditional poet, but he avoided nearly all the traditional subjects of poetry.

Along with will and its accompanying violence, Gunn focused on choice. He read the works of Jean-Paul Sartre while he was a student, and many of the French philosopher’s ideas can be found in Gunn’s poetry. “Vox Humana” is a good example of his writing on the theme of choice. The speaker in this poem feels urged on by some force within him to choose what will become the pattern of his life. Without choice, life and existence remain a “blur,” but with choice comes a fixed design that is often destructive.

The focus on will and action led Gunn to write poems about such unlikely figures as Elvis Presley and Claus von Stauffenberg. Presley turns “revolt into style.” Whether he merely adopts a pose or not does not matter; he becomes an icon who leads others to liberation. Presley is similar to one of the motorcycle riders of *The Sense of Movement*, but von Stauffenberg is a more conventional heroic personage. He was the leader of the plot to kill Hitler and died in great pain for that act. He is “honor personified,” although he exists in a time when “honor cannot grow.”

Another interesting theme in Gunn’s poetry is the city. He celebrated the city with sexual metaphors and wrote few poems dealing with nature. The city solicits the speakers in his poems and holds them in an embrace. In “The Map of the City,” he describes the city above all as a place of “chances” and “endless potentiality”; it is a place where liberation is possible.

In *Moly*, Gunn stresses the liberating elements of the LSD experience, since it can take one beyond the agony of choice and the will. “Rites of Passage” shows something of the change LSD brings to the speaker. He has become an animal, specifically a horse, and that transformation brings “completion” rather than regret. Now he can challenge the father who has dominated him. He has become the

Oedipal son who is ready to displace the father with his “horns” and send a message to his mother. The change is a liberating one; the speaker is freed from moral inhibition and can come into his own.

In *The Man with Night Sweats*, Gunn displays a sympathy and feeling for others that had not been prominent in his earlier poetry. He describes the heroism and grace of a group of people who have endured great suffering. Gunn becomes the bard who will record these moments of suffering and courage.

When near your death a friend  
Asked you what he could do,  
‘Remember me,’ you said.  
We will remember you.

Gunn has distilled his poetry into naked clarity and feeling.

## “ON THE MOVE”

**First published:** 1955 (collected in *The Sense of Movement*, 1957)

**Type of work:** Poem

*“On the Move” describes and celebrates the “created will,” which is exemplified in the freedom of a California motorcycle gang.*

“On the Move” is perhaps Gunn’s best-known poem. It perfectly and sympathetically captures the ethos of motorcycle gangs. The poem opens with images of birds following “instinct” and “some hidden purpose.” They have a secure place, since they are “nested.” This, of course, contrasts them to human nature; people are racked with uncertainty and have only a “baffled sense” because they lack instinct and defined purpose. The poem is the fullest exploration of a theme that has obsessed Gunn from the start of his poetic career.

In contrast to the ordinary person, who remains baffled, the motorcycle gangs “strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—/ And almost hear a meaning in their noise.” They have escaped from the plight of the divided and approach—even if they never reach—the instinct of animals. Gunn describes them as “flies,” metaphorically connecting them to



animals. Where they travel is a matter of chance rather than logic or even moral choice. For Gunn, a life that is open to chance, even if it is dangerous or destructive, is preferable to the intellectual paralysis to which modern people are prone.

The motorcycle gang is portrayed, however, as scaring “a flight of birds across the field.” They are antagonists to the birds of the first stanza. The birds must yield to the will. The actions of the motorcycle gangs, even if destructive, are a solution, if only a partial one. They escape “discord” and damnation by moving “always toward, toward.” In continual flux, they avoid the anxiety of thought to which many are prone.

The last stanza resolves the contrasts. The motorcyclists pass through towns on an endless quest. They find a solution in joining “the movement in a valueless world.” They are neither “birds” nor “saints,” however, since both “complete their purposes.” They are, instead, an alternative. By staying in motion, they may reach no “absolute” or completion, but “One is always nearer by not keeping still.” They are precisely between the given purpose of animals and saints and the sense of meaninglessness and lack of definition that people are constantly condemned to experience.

“On the Move” is a philosophical poem. It confronts the condition of humanity in a world without God or values. How in such a world is one to find a direction or purpose? Gunn’s qualified answer is the “willed” action of a band of motorcycle riders who refuse to submit to the anxieties and dislocations of modern life. Gunn discovers freedom in a group of people who have rejected conventional social mores.

## “MOLY”

**First published:** 1971 (collected in *Moly*, 1971)

**Type of work:** Poem

*“Moly” dramatizes the early stages of a man’s transformation from a lower, bestial nature to a higher, spiritual state.*

“Moly” is written in heroic couplets that have the incantatory effect of a spell or a charm. The re-

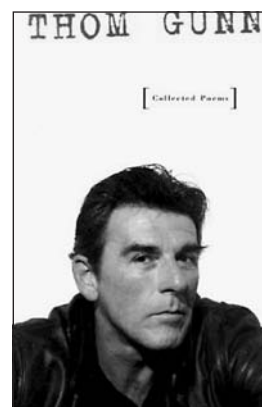
peated rhymes mirror the subject perfectly. The poem deals with states of transformation, specifically the effects of LSD upon the human brain. Even with such an unusual subject, Gunn uses conventional metrics and an allusion to one of the best-known works in the Western tradition, Homer’s *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614).

The poem begins with the speaker awaking to find he has been transformed into a beast. He attempts to find out exactly what type of animal he has become: “Parrot, moth, shark, wolf, crocodile, ass, flea./ What germs, what jostling mobs there were in me.” He finally recognizes that he is a pig. He has “bristles” and is “snouted.” “She,” presumably Circe, has brought on this unwelcome change, but, other than acknowledging her role, he says nothing more of her.

The speaker recognizes that the only human elements that remain within him are the eyes; other than this he is “buried in swine.” So, human perception is still there, but his mind and soul are bestial. He would “eat a man,” but he is afraid. There is an animal cunning and a predatory fear about him. These animal qualities, however, are not celebrated as they are in other poems. Now they define a lower condition.

The pig-man is rooting, but this is described as seeking his lost humanity rather than acting in piglike fashion. In addition, he prays to the gods to help him find the plant, “moly,” that will restore his humanity. Prayer is, of course, a sign of a yearning for and acknowledgment of a higher state. The “moly” is described in images of coolness, although it has a “black forked root.” Above all, it possesses “magic” in each of its parts.

The view of the animal state as preferable in “On the Move” is reversed in “Moly.” In commenting on the poem, Gunn has said that one may become a pig, but that is not one’s true state. Apparently, Gunn now favors a search for one’s higher, perhaps spiritual, conditions, rather than celebrating one’s animal, instinc-



tual states. The speaker in “Moly” asks for change, a key concept in Gunn’s poetry. The changes brought by the gods and the moly “are all holy.” Gunn’s positive view of change is now focused on spiritual yearning rather than the exercise of the will.

The poem ends with the search for change rather than change itself. “Moly” and “On the Move” share the theme of incompleteness. The plant, and LSD, hold out the promise of change, but Gunn does not present it in the poem. It remains a dream and a direction in which one is compelled to go. People cannot be satisfied with a bestial condition; they must seek some higher state.

### “LAMENT”

**First published:** 1992 (collected in *The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992)

**Type of work:** Poem

*“Lament” is a detailed description of the effects of the AIDS virus upon a victim.*

“Lament” is a descriptive and narrative poem. It traces the stages of AIDS upon a nameless victim, recording the mental and physical changes in that person. The poem is written in a loose iambic pentameter, and uses rhyming couplets. The couplets do not call attention to themselves, since they are rarely end-stopped. Only by rereading the poem can one become aware of its hidden craft.

The first line announces the subject: “Your dying was a difficult enterprise.” In the early stages, the sufferer is primarily concerned with “petty things.” There is little change in the character of the infected one. He retains “hope” and is “courteous still.” The pain soon brings “nightmare” and an unaccustomed “outrage” to the afflicted one. The “outrage” comes from being excluded from the rituals of ordinary life. He cannot feel “summer on the skin.” Instead, he is imprisoned in the “Canada of a hospital room.” Gunn has described the change in images of distance that perfectly capture the nature of the alteration.

The “distance” that the disease brings becomes more apparent as he becomes “thin”; however, while his body is decaying, his mind remains active

and alert. He writes messages to his friends and is reconciled with his “grey father” after four years of alienation. Gunn then attempts to define the character of the victim, to sum up his essence. He describes him as he was in the past when he displayed wit and humor. “I was so tickled by your mind’s light touch/ I couldn’t sleep, you made me laugh too much.” The images of “lightness” and “laughter” that define the person’s essence are effective contrasts with his later state.

The AIDS sufferer must now confront death. He does this simply but heroically, “equally, without complaint,/ unwhimpering.” He also retains a “lack of self-love” that kept him from worldly success but endeared him to his friends. He does not accept the death that has come upon him. As a result, there is something “uncompleted” about him.

The final stage is the collapse of the body; machines take over, and he drowns in his own “fluids.” The death is rendered memorably and simply by Gunn: “And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey,/ Achieving your completeness, in a way.” “Completeness” is defined as enduring the inevitable death; it is, therefore, an accomplishment and not a defeat. In the last section of the poem, the speaker assesses his feelings about the person and the event. He speaks about the body of the victim, who did not feel that it was attractive, which finally betrayed him. Gunn describes the AIDS virus as a “guest,” a metaphor which suggests an intimate relation between the victim and the disease.

The last line of the poem completes the “enterprise” of the first line. The AIDS victim has completed “This difficult, tedious, painful enterprise.” Dying is an “enterprise,” an adventurous activity. Gunn brings together the stages of the disease in three contrasting adjectives: “difficult, tedious, painful.” Together they sum up the experience.

### SUMMARY

The publication of *Collected Poems* established Thom Gunn as a major English poet. He wrote with great skill and precision in traditional and experimental styles. Moreover, he refused to be fixed in one poetic mode or subject. He constantly explored and found new styles and subjects for his poetry. His unique accomplishment was to retain the grace and force of tradition while transcending its thematic confines.

James Sullivan

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*Poetry from Cambridge 1951-52: A Selection of Verse by Members of the University*, 1952  
*Five American Poets*, 1963 (with Ted Hughes)  
*Selected Poems of Fulke Greville*, 1968  
*Ben Jonson*, 1974  
*Ezra Pound*, 2000  
*Selected Poems*, 2003 (of Yvor Winters)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What was conventional and what was unusual in the advice given to young Thom Gunn by Yvor Winters?
- How does Gunn's use of invented speakers reflect Winters's conception of poetry?
- Trace Gunn's movement toward poems in less traditional forms.
- What common characteristics of members of motorcycle gangs made them a valid subject for Gunn?
- Gunn uses military metaphors even in love poems. Cite effective examples. Do you see anything precarious in this habit?

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## MARK HADDON

**Born:** Northampton, England  
September 26, 1962

*With the publication of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Haddon bridged the gap between children's fiction and fiction for adults by offering a narrative in the voice of a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's syndrome.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mark Haddon was born on September 26, 1962, in Northampton, a populous area of England's East Midlands region. Although the author has been reserved about offering information about his early years, he has noted in interviews that in writing fiction for children—the literary genre in which he had his first success—he sensed that he was always writing for the child he once was. He has also said that he read little fiction as a child; instead, he read books about science, particularly chemistry and archeology. His favorite book was *Origins of the Universe* (1972) by Albert Hinkelbein. He imagined that he would become a paleontologist. In his adolescence, he discovered poetry, another of his adult writing interests.

Haddon attended Uppingham School and received a B.A. in English from Merton College, Oxford, in 1981. In 1984, he received an M.A. from Edinburgh University. He married Sos Eltis, a fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford. The couple had two children and settled in Oxford.

In his earlier life, Haddon worked at a variety of jobs, which may have influenced his view of the world as it appears in his fiction, as well as in his works for children. His early part-time job as a caregiver to patients with multiple sclerosis and autism surely helped his understanding of learning-disabled people, such as Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), and his work as an illustrator and cartoonist must have readied him to produce his illustrated books for children.

Haddon began publishing books for children in the late 1980's; he has noted ironically that he once imagined such writing would be easier than writing

for adults. From the start, his children's books incorporated humor and mystery and often demonstrated a powerful empathy with his characters, qualities which also have been praised in his adult fiction. In 1994, Haddon published four books in the Baby Dinosaurs series. In the mid-1990's, he wrote and illustrated the first of the popular Agent Z series books, which chronicled the adventures of three friends who form a club and find themselves involved in a variety of humorous escapades.

Two of Haddon's books for young people have been praised for exemplifying his gift for empathy. In *The Real Porky Philips* (1994), the central character is an overweight boy who finds a way to validate his identity with his school world; the novel was short-listed for the Smarties Prize. In *Titch Johnson, Almost World Champion* (1993), the central character is able to overcome his self-image as a loser. Another of Haddon's works for children, *The Sea of Tranquility* (1996), has roots in his youthful interest in space travel and the first moon landing. Haddon has also written for children's television.

Despite his success as a children's author, Haddon has had an ongoing interest in writing adult fiction, an interest which ultimately led to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. He has told interviewers that his earlier work included not only the seventeen published children's books but also five unpublished novels, some of which he has called "breathhtakingly bad." One of them, he has jokingly suggested, should be published as a "dreadful warning to young writers who want to be the next James Joyce."

Publication of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* became a surprising route into adult fiction because in England, at his agent's arrange-



ment, it was published simultaneously by two publishing houses, one for adult literature and another for children's literature. The two versions were identical except for their covers; even the "adult" language was maintained in the young people's version. (Haddon has pointed out that all children know that adults swear, and in the novel, only the adults use swear words.) The novel's double success was a surprise to Haddon, although he has expressed interest in continuing to write for adults, as well as in pursuing his interest in poetry.

### ANALYSIS

Haddon once noted in a newspaper essay that Jane Austen's novels focus on ordinary people, going about ordinary lives at the end of the eighteenth century. What makes readers admire her work, he claimed, is the sympathy she exhibits for those ordinary young men and women who populate her novels. One might say much the same about Haddon's first two adult novels, which, like Austen's, are populated by ordinary people whom Haddon invites the reader to feel for and even to like. Superficially, the characters of these novels are quite different.

The adolescent Christopher Boone, the narrator of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, tells his story with the affectless voice of a person with Asperger's syndrome. He is incapable of analyzing the emotions of the people around him or of interpreting their motives in his dizzying world, where he always teeters on the edge of sensory overload. The four characters who provide the point of view in *A Spot of Bother* (2006), on the other hand, spend a great deal of time analyzing themselves and others. All of them, however, are part of a very ordinary world. Christopher is trying to understand who killed the poodle of one of his neighbors, and in the process he comes to learn the secret of his mother's death and his family's breakdown. The four members of the middle-class Hall family in *A Spot of Bother* are grappling with the usual materials of comedy—three love affairs, which look likely to disintegrate, a family wedding, and, the salt in the comic froth, a grand-scale mid-life crisis.

The last decades have increased public understanding of what the medical world calls "the autism spectrum," so that Christopher Boone's particular personality traits in *The Curious Incident of the*

*Dog in the Night-Time* may remind readers of what countless magazine articles and television specials have often described. The person with Asperger's syndrome, a high functioning variety of autism, may have difficulty empathizing with others and with understanding the significance of others' gestures and facial expressions. Such persons may dislike being touched, may insist on rigid routines for activities and even for foods, and may find loud noises frightening and painful. They may find figurative language and jokes baffling, and they may have their own idiosyncratic passions and monomanias and their own curious means for comforting themselves, such as rocking or hand flapping, when the world frightens them with incursions of noise or other sensory impressions. Haddon's success lies in creating a voice for Christopher that rings true but still allows the reader to care about him. Part of the novel's humor rises from Christopher's misinterpretation of events around him, but because those events are described through Christopher's eyes, the reader inevitably identifies with him as well. His fear of people he does not know forces him into a complicated mental gymnastic in order to find a railroad station; he is more comfortable making mental maps than asking directions. His solution is funny, but it also establishes his intelligence.

Haddon accomplishes the same effect in portraying George Hall's mental breakdown in *A Spot of Bother*. Like Christopher, George imagines that even his most irrational actions are perfectly logical, an effect of stress. Haddon is particularly skilled at creating lifelike descriptions of disintegrating mental states, the state which makes Christopher sit immobilized on a bench in a subway station for six hours or which leads George to attempt do-it-yourself surgery on what he believes to be a tumor on his hip.

It may seem superficial to note that communication is an important theme in Haddon's work; after all, communication is a key to most human relationships. Some critics faulted *A Spot of Bother* for offering situation-comedy situations and solutions, last-minute epiphanies that some readers found too pat for comfort. However, even truisms can be meaningful. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, most of the novel's action results from Christopher's inability to communicate with others, and one of his father's most appealing qualities

is his effort to make his son understand his love for him. Tellingly, father and son's estrangement arises from his father's attempt to hide the fact that Christopher's mother has left them by telling Christopher that his mother has died. Christopher's terrifying journey from Swindon to London is precipitated by his finding a packet of the letters that his mother has faithfully written to him.

In *A Spot of Bother*, the whole Hall family is paralyzed by the members' failure to talk to one another or to look much beyond themselves. George and Jean are in late middle age, and their marriage has faded into wordless routines that have sent each of them in different directions. Jean is involved in a love affair, while George, whose focus is even more inward than hers, concludes that he is dying of cancer. Their grown daughter Katie seems about to make a second bad marriage, though neither of her parents is able to tell her their concerns, particularly because ever since her explosive adolescence, talking with her has been a bit like walking through a minefield. George and Jean have also been unable to talk honestly with their son Jamie, who has told them that he is gay but who has never brought his partner, Tony, to meet them. Now Jamie's relationship with Tony seems to have ruptured, in part because Jamie has been unable to articulate—or even to admit to himself—the depth of his feelings for Tony. Haddon's particular gift is his ability to make his readers care about these people, even while he describes the world as it is viewed through their very limited vision. “Only connect” is the motto the English novelist E. M. Forster provided for his characters in *Howards End* (1910); it would carry equal weight in Haddon's work.

## THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

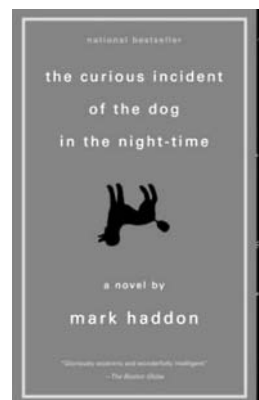
**First published:** 2003

**Type of work:** Novel

*When fifteen-year-old Christopher discovers that his mother is alive in London, he sets off on a journey to find her, despite the many ways in which he is limited by Asperger's syndrome.*

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* established Mark Haddon as a writer of adult fiction. It won the Whitbread Book of the Year prize, *The Guardian* Children's Fiction Prize, and the Booktrust award for teenage fiction. The novel's main appeal is the character of its narrator, fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone, whose counselor in his special-needs school has suggested that he write a book, and so he does. Although the words “autism” and “Asperger's syndrome” are never mentioned in the novel, it soon becomes clear that Christopher has a high functioning form of autism. Because of the particular way his brain is wired, fiction is unappealing to him; he cannot tell lies or understand most made-up stories. As he tells his narrative, the list of his quirks grows ever larger. He cannot eat things colored yellow or brown. He cannot be touched. Seeing three red cars in a row on the way to school means that it will be a good day.

Christopher, however, is a very bright child. In mathematics, his abilities are far beyond his age. He is intensely observant of the world around him, even though its human inhabitants are mostly a mystery to him. He loves puzzles and is very good at them, so it is no surprise that he likes the Sherlock Holmes mysteries of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; Holmes's dispassionate analysis of clues is especially appealing to him. Thus he has decided to write a mystery to address his counselor's assignment.



From the opening pages, Christopher's special gifts, as well as his special limitations, are apparent. He numbers his chapters using only prime numbers (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, and so forth). He always knows the precise time, and he notices that one of his teachers wears brown shoes with approximately sixty small circular holes in them. When Christopher finds a dead poodle, he is sad; he likes dogs, whose moods are much less puzzling than human moods, and he resolves to discover its killer.

Christopher's discovery of the dog leads to a skirmish with the dog's owner, who calls the police. When the policeman asks too many questions too fast, Christopher employs his usual method of coping with overload—he lies down and begins groaning. When the policeman tries to force him to get up, he becomes frantic and hits the man because of his intolerance for being touched. When his father comes to get him out of jail, the two fan out their fingers and touch their hands together; this gesture, created by his father, means "I love you" and substitutes for the hug that Christopher cannot bear. Throughout the novel, Christopher's father seems to be a man who is doing his best in a nearly impossible circumstance, raising his difficult son alone. However, here his father testily tells Christopher to give up the idea of investigating the poodle's death.

Christopher does not stop the investigation, however. It is the subject of his book, and he begins interviewing some of the more approachable neighbors, but timidly, because he is fearful of strangers. When his father learns of the book, he throws it away, with the inevitable result that Christopher searches until he finds it in his father's closet, along with a packet of letters his mother has written him every week since his father told him she died of a heart attack. Now he learns that she is alive, living in London with the husband of the neighbor who owned the dog. She confesses that she thinks Christopher is better off with his father, who has more patience than she did; nevertheless, she loves Christopher and is puzzled that he has never written her.

The letters occupy the exact center of the novel and form a turning point for what happens to Christopher, for when his father discovers him reading the letters, he tries to explain his terrible lie, talks about his liaison with the dog-owning neighbor after his wife's departure, and finally con-

fesses that he himself killed the dog in a bout of anger. Christopher is left with only one possible conclusion: His father is a dangerous man who may also try to kill him.

That conclusion leads Christopher to start his bold trip to London. He surmounts all the obstacles, although sometimes he does so awkwardly, hiding in a luggage compartment for most of the train trip, sitting terrified in the subway station for six hours, and risking his life among the subway rails to rescue his pet rat Toby. When at last he arrives at his mother's apartment, he is met with the awkward fact that her partner is not at all glad to share the flat with someone whose needs are as complicated as Christopher's. In the end, his mother moves back to Swindon with Christopher, although she does not return to his father. In the novel's last chapters, it is clear that his father is willing to make a herculean effort to regain Christopher's trust. He takes the first step by buying him a dog, to Christopher's pleasure. Christopher passes his A-level mathematics exam with an "A," adding to the novel's hopeful conclusion.

## A SPOT OF BOTHER

**First published:** 2006

**Type of work:** Novel

*George Hall is thrust into a deep depression when he concludes that he has cancer; meanwhile, his wife, daughter, and son all face crises of their own.*

The domestic comedy of *A Spot of Bother* is presented from four viewpoints. It begins as George Hall, a retired playground equipment manufacturer, decides that an odd spot on his hip is cancerous. In "his" chapters, he grapples with growing terror at the thought that he is about to die. Despite his doctor's reassurance, he sinks ever deeper into angst, finally attempting to remove the spot himself. A hospital stay and a prescription for Valium give him some respite, but soon his despair reemerges, leaving him nearly incapacitated.

His wife, Jean, is little help. Over the years, their marriage has staled, and she is involved in a love affair with David, one of George's former coworkers.

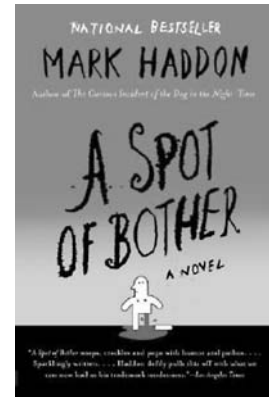
At the time of George's crisis, she is upset that their daughter, Katie, is about to marry Ray, a man the family has called "unsuitable." Her concern for Katie and her interest in David leave her little time for George's eccentric behavior, and anyway, George is unable to tell her about his fears, especially after he observes her and David making love in their bed.

Katie herself is unsure of her motives for marrying Ray. He seems much better than her first husband, and he is unfailingly kind to her little boy, Jacob. Moreover, he has a nice house and plenty of money. What he lacks is Katie's intellectual achievement, and she fears that she is about to marry for security, not love.

Her brother Jamie, a successful real estate agent, also has love problems. He and his boyfriend Tony have just split, and Jamie must come to terms with his guilt in spoiling their relationship, as well as with his concern for his sister's welfare. He dreads the upcoming wedding, knowing that his parents are hypersensitive to what others may think of his homosexuality. His unwillingness to invite Tony to the wedding was the precipitating factor in their breakup.

The novel's many short chapters circle through these characters' concerns and the various crises that arise from the on-again, off-again wedding and George's erratic behavior; at one point, he

crouches behind a chair and moos softly. Because this is a comedy, the errors multiply on the day of the wedding, but each character arrives at last at an understanding of the importance of true love. Everyone realizes what a sterling fellow Ray is; Jamie manages to patch things up with Tony; Jean knows that she belongs with George, who in turn realizes that the spot on his hip is just what the doctor diagnosed—eczema. Among all these rather neat epiphanies, all the characters come to understand that human attachments are more significant than what others may think about them. None of them says "Only connect," but they all know it.



## SUMMARY

Mark Haddon's work is essentially comic. His skill is in creating voices for his comic characters, in making their breakdowns both funny and moving, and reminding his readers that human connections make life bearable.

Ann D. Garbett

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, what evidence do you see that Christopher's parents love him?
- What about Christopher would make it difficult to care for him?
- How well (or badly) does Christopher manage his trip to London? Is he brave or foolish?
- Why does Christopher include all the math problems and puzzles in the novel?
- What makes the Hall family reevaluate Ray in *A Spot of Bother*?
- What does Jamie learn about love in the course of trying to get Tony to return to him?
- What future do you see for George and Jean at the end of *A Spot of Bother*? Will they be able to make a new start?





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## KNUT HAMSun

**Born:** Lom, Norway

August 4, 1859

**Died:** Nørholm, Norway

February 19, 1952

*In addition to writing poetry and drama, Hamsun is recognized as an originator and skilled practitioner of the modern psychological novel, as well as one of the pioneers of literary modernism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Knut Hamsun (HAHM-suhn) was born Knut Pedersen on August 4, 1859, at the farm Garmotræet in the district of Lom, Norway. His father, Peder Pedersen, and mother, Tora Pedersen, were both of peasant stock. In 1863, Pedersen and his family moved to Hamarøy in Nordland, Norway, where they settled on a farm called Hamsund, from which Hamsun later took the name by which he is known. Hamsun's early childhood was a happy time. At the age of nine, however, he was sent to live with his uncle, who owned Hamsund and to whom his parents were indebted. The boy worked hard and was harshly treated, but at the age of fourteen he was released and began working odd jobs.

The young Hamsun was familiar with both the popular writing of his time and some of its more valuable literature. Dreaming about becoming a writer, he published two short books while yet in his teens and was able to obtain the support of a wealthy merchant. He produced another manuscript and traveled to Copenhagen but was unable to find a publisher. He spent a difficult winter in the city of Christiania (now Oslo), Norway, and later spent several years in the United States, where he worked in a variety of jobs, read widely, and lectured to his compatriots on cultural and literary topics.

Hamsun's difficult times provided him with the material for his novel *Sult* (1890; *Hunger*, 1899), the work that was his literary breakthrough. Some lectures on the state of literature, delivered in 1891, further contributed to his fame; Hamsun argued in favor of the new psychological novel, of which *Hunger* was a groundbreaking example.

The 1890's were very productive years for Hamsun. He wrote such significant novels as *Mysterier* (1892; *Mysteries*, 1927), *Pan* (1894; English translation, 1920), and *Victoria* (1898; English translation, 1929), enjoyed an increasing reputation, and traveled much. He also wrote poetry and drama. In 1898, he married Bergljot Bech, whom he had met the previous year and who inspired the beautiful love story *Victoria*. The couple divorced in 1906.

During the next few years, Hamsun wrote a number of other novels that are not considered among his best. After his marriage to Marie Andersen in 1909, however, he turned away from focusing on the solitary and exceptional mind and increased his attention to social relationships. One of these novels, a celebration of rural life entitled *Markens grøde* (1917; *Growth of the Soil*, 1920), helped earn him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1920. The book, in which the author argues in favor of traditional values, tells about a man who goes into the woods of northern Norway, clears land for a farm, and rears a family in close contact with nature.

*Growth of the Soil* was inspired by Hamsun's life on his farm, Skogheim, in Hamarøy, northern Nor-

way. He found himself too isolated there, however, and purchased the farm Nørholm in the far south, where he settled in the 1920's. Fearing that his creativity was failing, he began psychotherapy in 1926. The following year, he published his novel *Landstrykere* (1927; *Vagabonds*, 1930; also as *Wayfarers*), which is universally regarded as the finest book from the second half of his career. The first volume in a trilogy, it was followed by *August* (1930; English translation, 1931) and *Men livet lever* (1933; *The Road Leads On*, 1934). The trilogy tells about a dreamer and eccentric named August, who is both admired and criticized by the author. August possesses a priceless creative imagination, but he uses it mostly for schemes that bring trouble to those who know him.

By the time he concluded the August trilogy, Hamsun was well into his seventies. He was not as intellectually keen and physically strong as he had been, and his hearing was failing. He published what was expected to be his final book, *Ringens sluttet* (1936; *The Ring Is Closed*, 1937), and he would probably have remained silent were it not for the political developments of the time. Hamsun had always admired Germany and German culture and had been rather contemptuous of the British. He now allowed himself to be seduced by the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler and, when Germany invaded Norway, he supported the collaborationists and urged Norwegian soldiers not to fight. After the war, he was brought to trial, convicted of treason, and heavily fined. As a defense, he published the moving memoir *På gjengrodd stier* (1949; *On Overgrown Paths*, 1967), lived quietly, and died on his farm in Nørholm, Norway, on February 19, 1952.

## ANALYSIS

As a young man, Hamsun keenly felt the difference between himself and those who possessed wealth and power in society. An outsider, he wanted to achieve social and material success, but he also valued the freedom of not having to fulfill the expectations of others. Many of his early protagonists have been placed in a similar position, in that they have to choose between, on one hand, freedom and powerlessness, and, on the other, power and its accompanying ties.

Another characteristic of the young Hamsun was that he believed himself to be talented but unappreciated. This characteristic is also found in his

heroes, many of whom are afflicted with an extreme self-absorption stemming from a lack of recognition.

Hamsun's early novels, such as *Hunger* and *Pan*, are inquiries into the minds of hypersensitive, gifted, and lonely individuals. In order to facilitate the exploration of the mind, these books make use of first-person narrators through whose narration the reader is given the illusion of having direct access to the psyches of the narrator-protagonists. These characters often seem to confirm or even celebrate their independence by outrageous acts, such as when the hero of *Hunger* deliberately eats until he vomits, when Nagel in *Mysteries* frightens the lowly character called the Midget, and when Glahn in *Pan* spits into the ear of the Finnish baron. Yet the same characters also strive to fit into their society, pursuing art, women of a higher social standing, or both. Each of these men also tries to climb socially through love. The ties of artistic success and respectability are definitely felt to be ties that bind, and so are the bonds of matrimony, but each of these outsider-protagonists is nevertheless in pursuit of them.

Hamsun's literary style changed dramatically as he moved into the second half of his career, and so did his thematic concerns. After achieving success, he was not as interested in the character of the lonely outsider as before, and he turned his attention to portraying the workings of social life. He also abandoned the first-person perspective in favor of third-person narration, employing omniscient narrators through which he could have access to the minds of all of his characters. He retained some interest in the exceptional individual, but his concern largely shifted to the social group. At the same time, the author became highly critical of many of the features of modern life, such as industrial production, women's liberation, and the labor movement.

These objections to modernity first came to the fore in the two novels *Børn av tiden* (1913; *Children of the Age*, 1924) and *Segelfoss by* (1915; *Segelfoss Town*, 1925), both of which have as their setting the town of Segelfoss in northern Norway. Through a portrayal of the gradual industrialization and modernization of the community, which grows from a few houses scattered around a flour mill into a small town, Hamsun analyzes the process by which the old and semifeudal social order vanishes and is re-

placed by the social and economic reality of the twentieth century. The author distrusts modern life with its lack of respect for authority, its money-based economy, and its system of education through which talented young people are reduced to clergymen, doctors, and lawyers. Both of the novels have an engaging story line, interesting characters, and several humorous episodes, but the general tone is one of pessimism.

Hamsun's critique of modern life continues in *Growth of the Soil*, in which he creates a positive counterpart to the decaying society at Segelfoss. Isak Sellanraa, the protagonist, is a man not only without a past but also without the cultural baggage of contemporary life. The novel relates how he conquers the wilderness of northern Norway and builds a farm, rears a family, and passes on his farm to one of his sons. Isak (his name is the Norwegian form of the name Isaac) is named for an Old Testament patriarch; his values are hard work, patriotism, and the simple life. His is not an entirely paradisiacal existence, however, for civilization closes in on him in the form of a mining operation that goes bankrupt, and he loses part of his family to modern thinking. An important motif in the book is the author's anti-Americanism. Hamsun placed his story in northern Norway in order to show that there was no need for enterprising people to immigrate to the United States; however, at the end of the book, Isak's oldest son has no way out but emigration, constituting a powerful indictment of the way of life that Hamsun had come to know while in America.

In the trilogy that consists of *Vagabonds*, *August*, and *The Road Leads On*, many of the themes of *Growth of the Soil* are continued. A tragic character named Edevart, who does not have the strength to resist the allure of the modern world, is corrupted and leaves Norway for the United States, where he does not feel at home. Returning home he feels equally out of place, and his lack of a sense of belonging extends to his relationship with women. His counterpart, August, is unsettled from the beginning; his ideology is completely in line with that of high capitalist industrialism, although his acts are those of a parasite. Other characters exemplify Hamsun's positive values but are given comparatively little space. The anti-American theme is continued in Hamsun's final novel, *The Ring Is Closed*, which is a dark and pessimistic book.

## HUNGER

**First published:** *Sult*, 1890 (English translation, 1899)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A budding writer starves in the capital city of Christiania (now Oslo), Norway.*

*Hunger*, which was based on Hamsun's many unhappy experiences in Norway's capital city of Christiania, was one of the first modern psychological novels in world literature. Told in the first person, it is the story of a young writer of exceptional sensibility, who, stripped of all of his property and without any reliable means of support, is about to perish from extreme hunger. The book contains little action in the traditional sense. With the exception of the story of a few attempts to secure employment and the account of a brief encounter with a lady of the middle class, the text consists almost exclusively of reports of the narrator's mental life during periods of starvation.

The experience of hunger was surely not uncommon among artists at the time and the social

consequences of hunger figure prominently in the naturalistic literature of the Scandinavian countries. The importance of *Hunger* lies not in its subject matter but rather in the manner in which the author deals with it, for his focus is on a portrayal of the strange workings of the mind while in an altered state resulting from the lack of nourishment. To this end, Ham-

sun uses a stream-of-consciousness technique through which the reader is given access both to the perceptions, moods, and strange ideas of the narrator and to his reflections on his own state of mind.

The narrator views himself as a completely committed artist, and his concern is both to prevent his hunger from negatively affecting the sensibilities that make him capable of producing art and to use his unpleasant experiences in his art. The narra-



tor's tendency toward self-observation can be viewed both as a part of his artistic project, the gathering of material for a novel that he wants to write, and as a means of making certain that the needs of his body do not overcome his mental or artistic needs.

Little is learned about the narrator's past throughout the book, and only a few details concerning his identity are provided. These details do not even include the mention of his name, but it is clear that he is an individual who, in the past, has been somewhat better off economically; it is possible to deduce that he, like Hamsun himself, worked in other occupations before devoting his life entirely to writing. The novel shows, however, that he is not exclusively concerned with examining his own mind for the purpose of his art.

A mysterious young middle-class woman named Ylajali, to whom he is attracted, appears to have little artistic significance to him; his interest in her seems to originate in a concern for social position. The narrator's pursuit of Ylajali can be read as an alternative means to the kind of success that, so far, he has not been able to achieve through his art. That makes the narrator-protagonist of *Hunger* appear to be a practical man, who, perhaps like his creator Hamsun, views art as a means of social advancement at least as much as an end in itself.

## PAN

**First published:** *Pan*, 1894 (English translation, 1920)

**Type of work:** Novel

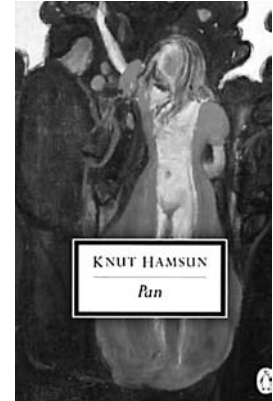
*A young lieutenant experiences love and the dynamics of power during a summer in northern Norway.*

*Pan* has a rather complex narrative structure. It is a first-person novel in which the main part of the story is told by the narrator-protagonist, Glahn, two years after the events that are being narrated took place. The main part is followed by an epilogue, also in the first person, in which the story of Glahn's death is told by an unnamed hunting companion.

The main story takes place in northern Norway during the summer months of the year 1855. Glahn, a lieutenant who has obtained leave from his commission, is living a rather primitive life as a hunter and fisherman in a forest cabin near the trading post Sirilund. He is tired of civilization, he says, and has left behind the norms of cultured society, being unable to get along well with cultivated people. In narrating his story, Glahn tells both about the external events of his life out in the wilderness and about his reflections on existence, and it is clear that he is trying to become an artist.

During visits to the trading post, Glahn becomes acquainted with Edvarda, the daughter of the trader Mack. Being attracted to her both because of her social position and for her own sake, he tries to win her, but Edvarda is emotionally unpredictable, and a love-hate relationship, in which they take turns torturing each other, develops. Glahn also enters into a sexual relationship with Eva, who, despite her marriage to the local blacksmith, is the mistress of Edvarda's father, Mack, whom Glahn displaces. Attempting to play the role of the Greek god Pan, Glahn also seduces a young goatherd named Henriette.

Much of the story deals with the battle between Glahn and Mack over Eva, as well as with Glahn's attempts to get rid of two rivals in his relationship to Edvarda—the local doctor and a Finnish baron who is conducting scientific research in the area. Glahn, while present at a party and slightly inebriated, deliberately offends the baron by spitting into his ear. He also offends the doctor by treating him like a dog, whistling to him and coaxing him to jump over his gun as if it were a stick. Neither the doctor nor the baron is willing to lower himself to Glahn's level, but Mack, who has been accustomed to holding unchallenged power in the area, is not afraid of facing him. Shrewd and manipulative, Mack decides to show Glahn that he is the more intelligent of the two by forcing him to abandon a project. Glahn has been planning to blast some rock out of a seaside cliff as a final salute to the



baron, who is leaving by ship, but Mack orders Eva to tar a boat below the cliff, thinking that Glahn will not risk hurting her. Glahn, however, has less regard for Eva's life than for his own pride, and the result is that Eva dies in the explosion.

Glahn behaves erratically on other occasions also. One of the most disturbing instances is found in the book's epilogue, which relates how he goads a hunting companion into shooting and killing him while in India. Not necessarily a happy story, *Pan* clearly sets forth Hamsun's view of the relationship between love, power, and the temperament of the artist.

## GROWTH OF THE SOIL

**First published:** *Markens grøde*, 1917  
(English translation, 1920)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A homesteader carves out a farm from raw nature in northern Norway but later finds his work overtaken by civilization.*

Starting with the novels *Children of the Age* and *Segelfoss Town*, Hamsun severely criticized the decline of traditional society and the problems associated with modernization. This critique was continued in *Growth of the Soil*, in which Hamsun both wanted to show the full extent of the evils of the modern age and to offer his portrait of modernity against the backdrop of the story of a heroic homesteader, Isak Sellanraa.

Like some of the outsiders in Hamsun's novels from the 1890's, Isak has no history when he appears in the wilderness, looking for a place to settle. Hamsun emphasizes that his presence is as natural as that of the wild animals of the area, and shows that his premodern approach to living is both healthier and more natural than a life based on a monetary economy. Isak works hard, clearing land and building shelter for himself and his farm animals with simple hand tools, and his work is portrayed as more authentic than the mechanized and highly capitalized alternative.

As Isak's farm grows and prospers, he is able to attract a woman, Inger, whose harelip makes her willing to settle for the strong but physically un-

attractive homesteader. Inger bears two healthy sons, Elseus and Sivert, but her third child is a girl with a harelip. Worried that the child will have a miserable life, Inger gives birth to her in secret and kills her before anyone sees her. While she is generally unsentimental, Inger deeply mourns her daughter.

Inger's criminal act is discovered and she is sentenced to six years in prison in the city of Trondheim. While Inger is basically a good person, another mother and child murderess in the novel, a servant named Barbro, is not. Barbro lacks the sound instincts that could have allowed her to bond with Axel, the homesteader who wants her as his wife.

When Inger returns from prison after completing her sentence, she brings many new ideas that she learned while she was away from home. She also encourages Elseus, her first-born son and heir to the Sellanraa farm, to get a job in town. This experience makes Elseus unfit for farm life and he eventually has no choice but to leave Norway for the United States.

The biggest threat to the rural values depicted by Hamsun, however, comes from the discovery of copper ore on Isak's land. The local sheriff, Geisler, helps Isak obtain title to his homestead and is a generally helpful adviser to him, but he is also the agent through which the copper mine is developed, and modernity invades Isak's paradise. Ultimately, however, the mine fails, while Isak's farm continues to prosper and is taken over by his son Sivert, who represents the next generation of the family.

## SUMMARY

The literary career of Knut Hamsun is marked by the contrast between the great artistic quality of his works, which are almost universally admired, and the questionable, even bizarre, behavior of many of his central characters. While social themes became the focus in Hamsun's later novels, resulting in a subordination of character portrayal to the author's ideological concerns, his early works were explorations of highly unusual minds. Artists or artists in the making, his early protagonists are always memorable, although not always to be admired, and their tortured lives are made intelligible to the reader through their occasionally outrageous actions. Through it all, the reader is made



acutely aware of the price that must be paid for creating art. Such later characters as Isak in *Growth of the Soil* exhibit a similar degree of commitment to their own particular projects.

Jan Sjøvik

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*Night Roamers, and Other Stories*, 1992

*Tales of Love and Loss*, 1997 (translation of “Siesta,” “Kratskog,” and “Stridende liv”)

#### POETRY:

“Det vilde kor,” 1904

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent and in what manner is hypersensitivity used as a motif in *Hunger* and *Pan*?
- Why has Knut Hamsun given many of his protagonists, such as those in *Hunger*, *Pan*, and *Growth of the Soil*, outsider status?
- Why is the protagonist in *Hunger* depicted as having a very dysfunctional relationship with food?
- What is the role of art in the life of the protagonist of *Hunger*?
- Why has Glahn, the protagonist in *Pan*, come to Sirilund to spend the summer?
- What is the relationship between love and power in *Pan*?
- How do the farm and the copper mine in *Growth of the Soil* represent different attitudes toward life?
- Why is Isak, the protagonist in *Growth of the Soil*, depicted as a heroic person?

*Knut Hamsun*

DRAMA:

*Vid rigets port*, pb. 1895

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*Aftenrøde*, pb. 1898

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## PETER HANDKE

**Born:** Griffen, Austria  
December 6, 1942

*Handke is best known for his novels and plays, which are characterized by their innovative use of language and their radical departure from established literary and theatrical traditions.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Peter Handke (HAHNT-kuh) was born on December 6, 1942, in Griffen, Austria, a village in the province of Carinthia near the Yugoslavian border. As a child he lived in the country, except for four years spent in Berlin between 1944 and 1948. He studied law at the University of Graz from 1961 to 1965, which may have influenced his writing style; his attention to detail, precision, and complex sentence structure are all characteristic of legal language.

Handke's first published work appeared in the magazine *Manuskripte* in the mid-1960's; his first novel, *Die Hornissen* (the hornets), appeared in 1966. This novel was favorably received by critics, but Handke did not achieve true recognition until later that year, when he launched a dramatic public attack on German writing and criticism that, he believed, unduly favored traditional descriptive prose and rejected new, experimental techniques. The setting for this attack was a writers' conference in Princeton, New Jersey; the audience (and targets) were the members of Gruppe 47 (Group 47), an influential organization of German writers. Ironically, the writers Handke criticized responded enthusiastically to his remarks, and the incident led to his recognition in the prestigious magazine *Der Spiegel*. The Princeton meeting was a major turning point in Handke's career, bringing international

attention to both his work and his controversial and innovative ideas about writing.

Handke's rejection of tradition and interest in artistic experimentation received their first major expression the same year in *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (pr., pb. 1966; *Offending the Audience*, 1969), a short play whose title is indicative of its content. Instead of a typical play with scenes, characters, costumes, and sets, *Offending the Audience* consists of four actors in ordinary clothes on a bare stage. Instead of speaking lines of dialogue to one another, the actors directly address the audience, telling them that they are not going to see a play at all, then going on to discuss various ideas about the theater, audiences, illusion, and reality. The title has a double meaning: First, the expectations of the audience are mocked by the bizarre nature of the play; in addition, the audience is subjected to a barrage of insults from the actors before the play ends. For obvious reasons, some critics called this work an "antiplay" or "antitheater"; Handke prefers the term *Sprechstucke*, or "speaking piece." First performed in Frankfurt as part of a weeklong theater festival called Experimenta I, *Offending the Audience* was as startling and intriguing as Handke's Princeton speech; it ensured Handke's status as a major figure in experimental theater in the 1960's.

Other "speaking pieces" followed: *Weissagung* (pr., pb. 1966; *Prophecy*, 1976), *Selbstbezeichnung* (pr., pb. 1966; *Self-Accusation*, 1969), and *Hilferufe* (pr. 1967; *Calling for Help*, 1970). Like *Offending the Audience*, these short dramatic pieces lack the traditional elements of scene, character, and plot and are highly experimental in nature. The year 1968 saw the production of *Kaspar* (English translation, 1969), Handke's first full-length drama,

based on the true story of a young man who grew up in isolation and did not learn to talk until late adolescence. Compared by some critics to Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (pr. 1952, pb. 1953; *Waiting for Godot*, 1954), *Kaspar* represents Handke's greatest theatrical success. Other notable plays by Handke include *Das Mündel will Vormund sein* (pr., pb. 1969; *My Foot My Tutor*, 1970), *Quodlibet* (pr. 1970; English translation, 1976), and *Der Ritt über den Bodensee* (pr., pb. 1971; *The Ride Across Lake Constance*, 1972).

Handke's literary reputation is based as much on his fiction as on his dramatic works. His first novel to achieve notable success was *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (1970; *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, 1972). The novel deals with the mental breakdown of a working-class man, a former soccer player whose psychological deterioration culminates in murder. Murder and mental illness also figure prominently in *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* (1975; *A Moment of True Feeling*, 1977). Handke offers a more personal treatment of death in *Wunschloses Unglück* (1972; *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, 1974). While classified as fiction in most Handke bibliographies, this work is actually an account of his mother's life and suicide. Other novels include *Die linkshändige Frau* (1976; *The Left-Handed Woman*, 1978) and a collection of short novels published under the English title *Slow Homecoming* (1985). The central character in *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht: Ein Märchen aus den neuen Zeiten* (1994, *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, 1998), Gregor K., is simultaneously an allusion to Franz Kafka's famous character Josef K. and a representation of Handke himself.

In addition to novels and plays, Handke collaborated on the screenplay to *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, 1987) with director Wim Wenders, and he has published a number of poems and essays, many of which have been collected and translated in several volumes. One of his better-known collections of poems is *Die Innenwelt der Aussenwelt der Innenwelt* (1969; *The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld*, 1974). In 1969, Handke, along with ten other writers, established a cooperative publishing company called Verlag der Autoren. He has lectured at universities in the United States and has adapted several of his works to radio and film. He has lived in Austria, France, Germany, and the United States.

Handke has come under scrutiny for his political views. As early as 1966 he gained notoriety by criticizing Heinrich Boll and Günter Grass for employing the novel as a means of social criticism. In 1999, he gave back the prize money associated with the Georg Brückner Award, which he won in 1973, and left the Catholic Church because of his opposition to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) attacks on Belgrade. In 2006, he was announced as the winner of the Heinrich Heine Prize, only to have the prize revoked by the city of Düsseldorf primarily because of the author's remarks at the funeral of Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milošević.

## ANALYSIS

Because of their nontraditional form and style and often bizarre subject matter, Handke's works may seem intimidating to readers approaching them for the first time. A play such as *Prophecy*, for example, which consists entirely of statements such as "The chickens will scurry like chickens" and "The weasel will be weasel-faced," resists the kind of straightforward interpretation that more conventional literary works allow. A consideration of some recurring themes in Handke's work, however, can help clarify his often obscure material. Among Handke's most important themes are the uses and significance of language, the analysis of abnormal psychological states, and the nature of the writing process itself.

Handke's writing is filled with strange, innovative, and often playful uses of language. Moreover, language itself is frequently the subject of his writing, as in *Calling for Help*, which consists of a series of sentences and phrases spoken by two or more people on stage, each relating in some way to a need for help: "someone has escaped from death row," "workers at that time were living in inhuman conditions," "in case of emergency." Each sentence or phrase is followed by the response "no," as in a children's guessing game, until the required word, "help," is tried, leading to a "yes!" Handke explains:

the speakers' objective is to show the way to the sought-after word HELP, a way that leads across many sentences and words. . . . while the speakers are seeking the *word* help they are in need of *help*; once having found the *word* help they no longer

need any help. before they find the word they ask *for* help, whereas once they have found the word help they only speak *help* without needing to ask *for* help any longer. once able to shout help, they no longer need to shout *for* help; they are relieved that they can shout help. the word HELP has lost its meaning.

*Calling for Help* uses irony and wit to examine a fundamental paradox of human relationships: People often find it most difficult to communicate their most urgent needs to others. When communication is finally established, Handke suggests, it may lose its original purpose and value. (Note that Handke, like the poet E. E. Cummings, ignores traditional capitalization rules in this work—probably to emphasize its verbal, rather than written, nature.)

If Handke's use of language is sometimes playful, his subject matter is often just the opposite, frequently centering on mental breakdowns or other psychological disturbances. The protagonists of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, *A Moment of True Feeling*, *Kaspar*, and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* all exhibit some kind of emotional problem: psychosis, neurosis, childhood trauma, or depression. This emphasis on mental illness might seem morbid at first. Handke is not, however, interested in depicting the sensational or the bizarre for its own sake; his treatment of these subjects is typically low-key and objective. Rather, Handke uses the concepts of mental health and mental illness to examine and comment on the nature of reality, perception, and the place of the individual in society. For example, Joseph Bloch in *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* walks away from his job, assuming that he is fired because only one of his coworkers looks at him when he arrives at work one day. An obviously neurotic behavior, Bloch's action demonstrates the frightening power of individual perception: His reality has, in a real sense, been altered solely because of the way he views that reality. A similar situation is found in *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (1972; *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, 1974). The narrator of this novel, an Austrian such

as Handke himself, declares, "As far back as I can remember, I seem to have been born for horror and fear." As he travels across America after receiving a letter from his estranged wife ("I am in New York. Please do not look for me, it would not be nice for you to find me"), his troubled perceptions of life are used to shed light on personal interactions, the relationship of Europe to America (the "old world" and the new), and the connections between personal experience and the "real world."

A final element that defines Handke's writing is his treatment of the writing process as a subject in itself, a characteristic of much contemporary, or postmodern, literature. While authors of more conventional literature tend to tell their stories without referring to themselves or to their audience, Handke often interjects into his plays and fiction explicit commentary about himself, his thoughts about what he is writing, and his audience. Obvious examples are seen in *Offending the Audience*, where the relationship of the audience to the presentation on stage is the central concern of the play, and in *Calling for Help*, where audience reaction is crucial to the meaning of the material. Awareness and acknowledgment of the writing process are also found in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, in which Handke repeatedly comments on his motivation for and approach to writing:

My mother has been dead for almost seven weeks; I had better get to work before the need to write about her, which I felt so strongly at her funeral, dies away and I fall back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the news of her suicide.

Through his direct commentary on the creative process, Handke continually reminds his readers that literature is the end product of a conscious intellectual endeavor, and that writing does not exist in a vacuum but has full meaning only in the context of the relationship between the writer and his audience. While analyzing the psychology of his characters, Handke does not shy away from examining his own as well.



## A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS

**First published:** *Wunschloses Unglück*, 1972  
(English translation, 1974)

**Type of work:** Novella

*Handke reacts to his mother's suicide by telling her life story, examining the forces that shaped her life and that ultimately led to her death.*

*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is considered by critics to be one of Handke's finest works. Like so much of his writing, it defies pigeonholing in a traditional scheme of literary classification: Is it fiction, is it biography, or is it a personal meditation? Perhaps it is most accurate to say that Handke applies the techniques of fiction—imagination, reconstruction of events, dialogue, thoughts, emotions, and descriptions of characters and scenes—to an account of actual events, much like current historical fiction and television docudramas.

Handke's mother's story begins in a small Austrian village, the site of her eventual death. (Interestingly, the mother is never named—probably to emphasize the conformity and anonymity imposed upon the women in her society.) For most of the villagers, life is full of poverty and desperation—especially for the women. In his mother's day, Handke says, "a girl's future was a joke." This observation is borne out by the mother's subsequent experiences: a loveless marriage, shattered dreams, and life in a society that coerces her into denying her true feelings and personality. While she courageously makes repeated attempts to break free from repression and persecution—leaving home to pursue a career at age fifteen, illegally crossing borders in postwar Europe to escape from Germany and return to Austria, reading literature and involving herself in politics—she eventually succumbs to the negative forces at work in her life, saying, "I'm not human anymore." Following a debilitating illness, probably psychological in origin, she calmly and deliberately ends her own life.

*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is interesting for several reasons. First, it illustrates the cause-and-effect relationship between pressures in society and individual psychological disturbance. The mother's emotional problems—including fear, rigidity, self-blame, and depression—are founded in political and social pressures. Furthermore, by omitting her name and by repeatedly referring to her life's events as "the old story," Handke stresses the universality of her plight: She is not simply an individual but a "type," symbolic of millions of women throughout history.

Second, the book provides a good example of Handke's use of a new, alternative mode of expression, one that places the act of writing at the heart of its narrative. Handke continually interrupts his mother's story to interject comments about his approach to it. Just before describing the suicide, he pauses to inform the reader that "From this point on, I shall have to be careful to keep my story from telling itself." After her death he says, "All

at once, in my impotent rage, I felt the need of writing something about my mother." The act of writing does not produce the desired catharsis, however, for he later observes, "It is not true that writing has helped me." By alternating the story of his mother with an account of his telling of her story, giving each equal prominence, Handke allows the reader to gain vivid insight into the creative process.

He also demonstrates that the process of writing is just as important and interesting—perhaps more so—as its end product. Appropriately, Handke recognizes that it is an open-ended process as well, ending *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* with the statement, "Someday I shall write about all this in greater detail."



## SLOW HOMECOMING

**First published:** *Langsame Heimkehr*, 1979  
(*The Long Way Around*, 1985); *Die Lehre  
der Sainte-Victoire*, 1980 (*The Lesson of  
Mont-Sainte-Victoire*, 1985);  
*Kindergeschichte*, 1981 (*Child Story*, 1985)

**Type of work:** Novellas

*A scientist, an artist, and a child reveal  
insights about the relationship of people to the  
world and to each other.*

*Slow Homecoming* is the English title of a collection of three of Handke's short novels, whose individual titles may be translated as *The Long Way Around*, *The Lesson of Mont-Sainte-Victoire*, and *Child Story*. The three works feature separate plots and characters and different styles. Taken as a group, however, they represent variations on a common theme: the ways in which people view themselves and their place in the world around them.

*The Long Way Around* tells the story of Sorger, a geologist whose physical journey from Alaska, California, and New York to his home in Europe parallels an inner journey of discovery and self-awareness. At the beginning of the novel, Sorger is a loner who "had done no work expressly useful to anyone" and who "would not have been fit company for anyone"; he tries to comprehend the meaning of existence by obsessively describing the physical world. This approach fails, and Sorger nears a psychological collapse, but eventually he realizes that it is relationships with other people, not his science, that give life its significance. He leaves for home full of confidence and optimism.

*The Lesson of Mont-Sainte-Victoire* deals with art rather than science, relating the visual art of French painter Paul Cézanne to the literary art of Handke himself. Handke describes his visit to a spot in the Sainte-Victoire mountain range where Cézanne found particular inspiration and the effects that the experience has had on his own creativity. The "lesson" is that true understanding and insight can be achieved only through the synthesis of form and object, subjective perception and objective reality, the specific and the universal. Handke applies this knowledge in the concluding section, a description of the woods near Salzburg.

*Child Story*, the final novella in the collection, is Handke's autobiographical account of his relationship with his daughter from her birth through age ten. For Handke, being a parent is both magically fulfilling and horribly trying, and he describes both feelings with equal clarity: His primitive urge to protect and defend his newborn child contrasts starkly with the anger and frustration that, years later, cause him to strike her nearly "hard enough to kill her." Throughout *Child Story*, however, Handke shows the importance of the interaction of parent and child, as his daughter provides him with the same kinds of insights that science and art offered in the two previous novellas.

*Slow Homecoming* is one of Handke's most complex and difficult works. Often abandoning narrative in favor of meditations on life, knowledge, and nature, the three short novels owe as much to philosophy as to fiction. In their unusual blend of fiction and fact, description and explanation, investigation and revelation, the three sections of *Slow Homecoming* represent some of Handke's most creative, fully developed, and innovative work.

## ON A DARK NIGHT I LEFT MY SILENT HOUSE

**First published:** *In einer dunklen Nacht ging  
ich aus meinem stillen Haus*, 1997 (English  
translation, 2000)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A suburban Austrian pharmacist embarks on  
a journey with two once-famous companions,  
culminating in a phantasmagoric adventure on  
the Spanish steppe.*

*On a Dark Night I Left My Silent House* employs, in essence, two narrators—one telling the story to the reader, and the central character, an alienated pharmacist from the Salzburg suburb of Taxham. The strategy allows Handke to provide himself with ironic distance from the story even as he tells it. For example, the book's narrator will occasionally interject an explanation from the protagonist, but the mere fact that information is presented to the reader in this form calls attention to the subjectivity of the perspective. Handke thus combines con-

tent that often seems absurd or surreal with a narrative form that calls into question the nature of "truth." The reader is never completely certain whether the events being narrated actually occurred, if they are subjective interpretations of events that another observer might have described differently, if they represent the subconscious of the central character, or if indeed they are altogether hallucinatory.

The tale begins prosaically enough. The pharmacist leads a mundane existence in a nondescript suburban town. He has his distinguishing characteristics—he is an aficionado of mushrooms, for example—but he remains an unremarkable figure. Estranged from his wife, although they continue to share the same house, he leads an alienated but not altogether lonely existence. The first real event of the novel is an apparently random act of violence perpetrated against the pharmacist. He is rendered mute by a blow to the head, although it is never entirely clear whether the cause of his speechlessness is physical or psychological.

At an unimposing restaurant the pharmacist meets a former Olympic skier and a once-famous poet, and, without saying a word, becomes their driver for a vacation trip which takes the trio to an encounter with a widow, who attacks the pharmacist and becomes an object of fascination, and to meetings with the daughter of the poet (intentional) and the son of the pharmacist (completely random). After some time, the pharmacist ventures forth on his own into a dreamlike land described as Spain but bearing little resemblance to any geographical locale. Ultimately, he returns

home, his life changed in apparently profound but nonetheless unspecified ways.

This is a difficult book: While it clearly touches on themes of alienation, longing, and impermanence, these readily identified motifs are not entirely fleshed out. The circumstances surrounding the long-ago departure of the pharmacist's son, for example, are hinted at but never fully articulated. Similarly, the exact nature of the relationship between the protagonist and the widow lies tantalizingly just out of reach.

Handke has expressed his preference for art works that "almost move" the observer rather than works that actually do so; *On a Dark Night I Left My Silent House* is an example of that type of art. This work appeals more to the mind than to the heart; the structure and language of the book are at least as important as any empathetic characterization. Still, the psychology of the characters, especially of the pharmacist, remains key, and the reader is compelled to provide answers that the author does not.

## SUMMARY

Peter Handke's works stand on the cutting edge of contemporary literature. Whether playing linguistic games to explore human communication, depicting disturbed characters to reveal the inner workings of the mind, or casting a spotlight on his own creative processes, Handke's literary works are as fascinating as they are unusual. Although Handke's fame has waned in recent years outside the German-speaking world, he remains one of the world's most innovative and creative writers of drama, fiction, and poetry.

Charles Avinger; updated by Richard Jones

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent are Peter Handke's political views, or his expression of them, relevant to a consideration of his writing?
- Handke's plays provide little in the way of stage directions, apparently leaving staging considerations up to individual directors. What elements of his plays are necessary? What elements are legitimately open to interpretation?
- Handke often seems to ask more questions than he answers. What are the effects of this technique on the reader?
- As a poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright, Handke engages in a wide variety of literary pursuits. Where does he fit in a discussion of writers who pursue multiple genres?
- Some of Handke's work is overtly autobiographical, some partially so. How important is it to understand the author if we are to understand his writing?
- Handke is known for the precision of his language, even as he discusses inarticulateness. Discuss this apparent anomaly. How, if at all, is it relevant that English-language readers will encounter his work only in translation?

Peter Handke

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## THOMAS HARDY

**Born:** Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England  
June 2, 1840

**Died:** Dorchester, Dorset, England  
January 11, 1928

*Because of the modernity of vision of both his fiction and his poetry, Hardy is a key transitional figure between the Victorian period and the twentieth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Hardy was born in the small village of Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England, on June 2, 1840. Although his father, a mason, was satisfied with his rural life, his mother encouraged Hardy to get an education and raise his social status. Hardy's first effort to do so was to become the student of Dorchester architect John Hicks. In a fateful accident, the kind of accident that Hardy would later make part of the cornerstone of his fiction, the well-known poet William Barnes had a school next door to Hicks's office. The older poet and the young apprentice became friends, and Barnes became one of the strongest influences on Hardy. Another important influence on Hardy's early life was his friendship with Horace Moule, a classical scholar, essayist, and reviewer. Particularly important was Moule's introduction of Hardy to the works of philosopher John Stuart Mill and the Bible-challenging collection *Essays and Reviews* (1860), both of which served to make Hardy doubt his simple religious faith.

At age twenty-one, Hardy went to London to continue his study of architecture. Once there, however, the publication of Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* in 1866 so influenced Hardy that he began writing poems and trying to get them published. After almost two years of being rebuffed by the London publishers, he re-

turned to Bockhampton and decided to try his hand at writing fiction. His first effort, "The Poor Man and the Lady," was based on a contrast between the rural life of his childhood and the urban life he had experienced in London. Although he did receive some favorable response from publishers, he decided not to publish the work. Instead, based on the advice of the novelist George Meredith, Hardy looked to a popular genre of the time, the detective story, and wrote *Desperate Remedies* (1871). Later, because of the favorable response that editors had made to the rural scenes in his unpublished novel "The Poor Man and the Lady," Hardy wrote his pastoral idyll *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). Although the book did not sell well, critics liked it and Hardy was encouraged to continue. At the time, the most favorable publishing outlet for authors was serial publication in weekly and monthly periodicals. Hardy began writing such a serial, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872-1873), on the advice of a periodical editor and thus launched his full-time career as an author, having given up architecture forever.

In 1874, Hardy married Emma Lavinia Gifford, who, like his mother, was socially ambitious. After *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Hardy went back to the rural world for his inspiration and wrote *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). The book received many favorable reviews, and Hardy's reputation started growing. Publishers and editors began to solicit work from him. Hardy's next successful work, *The Return of the Native* (1878), was composed while he and his wife were living in a small cottage at Sturminster Newton, although shortly afterward the couple moved

to London for the social life that his wife desired. When Hardy became ill, they moved back to Dorset, where he wrote *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) while he was having his home, Max Gate, built. For the next several years, Hardy continued his writing, traveled with his wife, and studied German philosophy.

Although Hardy was well established by the last decade of the nineteenth century, one of the best-known and most widely read authors in England, his last two novels were not well received. First, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) was rejected by two publishers, who feared offending the public, before finally being accepted for serial publication. Indeed, many readers did respond with shock and hostility to the book, especially because of the sexuality suggested in the novel. The publication of Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895) raised an even greater outcry, with a number of thinkers challenging the book on the grounds of its being a threat to public decency and morality. Hardy decided that he had had enough and would write no more novels, a popular literary form that left him open to public criticism.

He thus returned to his first love, poetry, reasoning that because of poetry's subtle indirection and its limitation to a relatively small and select audience, he could say things that would not receive such a hostile response. Indeed, Hardy, who lived to an old age, still had time to create an enviable career as a poet, publishing more than one thousand poems in many volumes of verse. He also published an epic poem/drama titled *The Dynasts: A Drama of the Napoleonic Wars* (pb. 1903, 1906, 1908, 1910, pr. 1914 [abridged by Harley Granville-Barker]).

During Hardy's final years of life, he enjoyed the respect of his colleagues and readers, receiving several honors and being hailed as one of the last great authors of Victorian letters. Hardy's wife died in 1912, and four years later he married Florence Dugdale, who had worked for him as a secretary and who cared for him for the rest of his life. Hardy continued to write poetry regularly. His collection of poems *Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres* (1928) was ready to be published when he died on January 11, 1928, in Dorchester, Dorset, England. His ashes were placed in Westminster Abbey.

## ANALYSIS

Most commentators on the intellectual and artistic life of the nineteenth century are in agreement that the most important event during that period was the so-called death of God, that is, the loss of a unified ground of being, based on Christian faith. These thinkers argue that what is now referred to as the modernist temperament in art and thought actually began with the breakup of a value-ordered universe in the Romantic period. Hardy was one of the most important artists of the period who were powerfully influenced by this loss. Many critics have pointed out that the most significant influence on what has been called Hardy's philosophy was his loss of a notion of a universe governed by a divine power. Indeed, what has often been analyzed as Hardy's philosophy can be summed up in one of his earliest notebook entries: "The world does not despise us; it only neglects us." In his autobiographical notes, Hardy presents a picture of himself as a sensitive young man who attended church regularly and believed in a personal God who ruled the universe. When Hardy came to London in his early twenties and discovered such intellectual ferment as caused by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) and the *Essays and Reviews*, he lost his faith and never recovered it.

Many other nineteenth century writers experienced a similar loss, but few felt it so profoundly as Hardy. Furthermore, whereas some nineteenth century writers and thinkers, such as William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle, were able to make a leap of faith to an organic concept of nature knowable by the human imagination, Hardy felt the loss of God as a loss with no consequent gain. As one of his most famous poems, "The Darkling Thrush," makes clear, Hardy was unable to ascertain any unity of meaning in the world outside him. He was more like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who, having experienced the nightmarish chaos of a world without meaning or value, can never really believe in a unified and meaningful world again, but must spend the rest of his life telling and retelling his one story of loss and resultant despair. An understanding of any of Hardy's novels and poems must begin with this basic assumption.

Although Hardy refused to give in to any sense of an external value, he was not content to remain

in such an isolated state but was continually trying to find some basis for a ground of being other than that of transcendence. Hardy's ultimate intellectual and creative challenge to this loss was what might now be called humanistic existentialism. For Hardy, as it was later for such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, if any value was to be found in the world for humankind, it lay in not giving in to hope for transcendence but facing the emptiness in the universe—what Hardy called “facing the worst”—and, like the Ancient Mariner, playing this back over and over again in all of his works. Consequently, Hardy's art can be seen as a series of variations in form on this one barren theme of loss.

Hardy's most basic artistic and technical problem in dealing with his loss of God was the incompatibility of the lack of a unified ground of being with the novel form he felt compelled to develop, for the novel as a form depends on some unified social or mythic structure to hold it together. Hardy thus searched for older forms to imitate to establish a structure for his novels, even though the grafting of his humanistic existential view onto old forms resulted in grotesque distortions. Hardy imitated the detective form and the social comedy form when he was concerned merely with publishing a popular novel, but when he wanted to write a serious work of fiction, he turned to classical Greek and Elizabethan genres, such as the pastoral and the tragedy.

This very choice, however, raised a second artistic problem for Hardy in his search for an adequate literary form. Whereas the classical writers saw human life secure within a stable and ordered religious and social context, Hardy saw humanity as isolated and alone, searching fruitlessly for meaning in the world. Because Hardy denied the static and ordered worldview of the past, he was in turn denied the context of myth, symbol, and ritual that derived from that view. Thus, Hardy had to create a modern myth that presupposed the absence of God. Hardy's use of the traditional patterns of tragedy and pastoral, combined with his rejection of the value system that gave meaning to these patterns, resulted in a distortion of the old form that in turn created a grotesque new form.

In a typical Hardy pastoral novel, such as *Far from*

*the Madding Crowd*, nature is not divinely ordered, as it is in the classical pastoral. Although on the surface the story seems to fit the pastoral mode—it is set in a rural community, the main character is a shepherd, and the inhabitants seem content with their lives—the clash of Hardy's atheistic view with the traditional pastoral creates a grotesque inversion of the form. The story is thus a fable of the barrenness and death of the unified pastoral world, the tragic results of wrong choice, and the irrationality of sexual attraction. Although critics have suggested that Hardy's best-known “tragic” novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, is his most explicit use of the Greek tragic pattern, there are many differences that make it difficult to see it as typically Greek. The fall of Michael Henchard, the mayor, at the end is the result of a combination of factors, not the least of which is Henchard's mistaken view that the world around him is unified and dependable. His death symbolizes the disappearance of the old order. What really brings Henchard down is that, given the loss of a transcendent order, he has violated the only order left to humans: the human-created order of humanity itself.

Interest in Hardy's work has followed two basic patterns. The first was philosophical, with many critics uncovering what they saw to be metaphysical structures that supposedly underlay his fiction. Since the early 1970's, however, interest has shifted to that aspect of Hardy's work most ignored before: his technical facility and his generic experimentation. Only since the late 1980's has what once was termed Hardy's fictional clumsiness been reevaluated in terms of poetic technique. Moreover, Hardy's career as a poet, which has always been under the shadow of his fiction, has been reevaluated. During his career, which began in the Victorian era and did not end until after World War I, Hardy was a contemporary first of Matthew Arnold and then of T. S. Eliot. Critics have seen Hardy as an important transitional figure between the Victorian sensibility and the modern era. Like the great moderns that followed him, Hardy realized that the task of the artist was not to try to find an external controlling force but rather to write works that symbolize the modern need to find or create such a value system.

## THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

**First published:** 1878

**Type of work:** Novel

*A powerful young woman rebels against her isolation on the desolate heath but is defeated by the crushing indifference of nature to the desires of humankind.*

Many readers have noted the formal classical structure of *The Return of the Native* as well as the similarities of the characters to such powerful mythic figures as Oedipus and Prometheus. It is, however, the brooding Egdon Heath itself that becomes the more significant structuring principle. In fact, as many have noted, the heath is one of the principal actors in the drama, for the actions of all the characters are reactions in some way to the indifference that the heath represents. Egdon Heath is the landscape from which God has departed. In its barrenness, it seems like some giant prehistoric monster lying dormant but ready to swallow up anyone who tries to escape its grasp.

As in other Hardy rural idylls, there is a chorus of rustic characters in *The Return of the Native*. They belong on the heath because of their ignorance of the incongruity between the human longing for meaning and the intractable indifference of the external world symbolized by the heath. They still maintain a mythic, superstitious belief in a pagan animism and fatalistically accept the nature of things as they are. The Druidical rites of the fires that open the novel, the insignificance of Christian religion, the voodoo doll of Susan Nonesuch—all these characterize the pagan fatalism of the rustics.

The main characters in the novel are not merely rustic, and they make something other than a fatalistic response to the heath. All of them are characterized by their various reactions to the heath's indifference. Mrs. Yeobright is said to have the very solitude of the heath concentrated in her face. Although she knows she no longer has hope of escape, she focuses all of her attention on seeing that her son Clym does. Damon Wildeva is an outsider, the mysterious stranger who seems detached from the heath but who ultimately must answer to its indifference. Tomasine Yeobright aligns herself with the natural world because of her innocence and therefore sees no discrepancy between human

wishes and the blindness of the natural world. Diggory Venn, the most puzzling character in the novel, is an outcast, wandering the heath as both a rustic and a demoniac figure.

The most towering figures in the novel, however, are Clym Yeobright, the native of the title who returns to the heath, and Eustacia Vye, the powerful, rebellious figure who yearns to escape its bleakness. As is typical of cultural values of the period, Eustacia's only real hope of leaving the crushing suffocation of the heath is by being "loved to madness"; thus her rebellion is often manifested as coquetry. Clym, on the other hand, wishes to remain on the heath, seeing only friendliness written on its face. Having spent some time in the intellectual ferment of the social world, he now wishes to escape the disease of thought and teach the rustics what they intuitively know: that the only life is the life of fatalistic acceptance.

Clym is the disillusioned intellectual trying to return to the mythic simplicity of the natural world; he would prefer not to grapple with the incongruities he has seen. He is indeed blind, as his mother tells him, in thinking that he can teach the peasants the view that life is something "to be put up with" when they have always known and fatalistically accepted that fact. He furthermore reveals his blindness by marrying Eustacia, thinking she will remain with him on the heath, while Eustacia reveals that she is similarly misdirected by idealizing him and thinking that he will take her away. Both characters search for a meaning and a basis for value, but both are trapped by the irrationality of love and vain hopes in a basically irrational world.

After the two marry and Eustacia, in one of Hardy's typical examples of human misunderstandings and the mischance of events, turns Clym's mother away from her door to die on the heath, Clym blames her for his mother's death and drives her away. Eustacia's trip across the heath is one in which the natural world seems inimical to her, for she stumbles over roots and "oozing lumps of fleshy fungi" that impede her path like the organs of some giant prehistoric animal. At the end of the novel, Eustacia's suicidal leap into the pool is less a capitulation to the forces around her than it is a heroic rebellion, for it is an assertion of the absurdity of human hopes by a romantic temperament that refuses to live by such absurdity.

*The Return of the Native* is probably the most de-

bated of all Hardy's novels, having been called a masterpiece by some critics and a failure by others. Some readers have seen it to be primarily the story of Clym Yeobright's spiritual odyssey, while others have declared as central Eustacia's struggle with the heath. Eustacia herself is one of Hardy's most puzzling creations. While one reader claims that her story is a realistic case history, another calls it a supernatural myth; while one sees her as a tragic heroine, another calls her the parody of a heroine. Even Diggory Venn has been the subject of much debate and argument, being interpreted as both a peasant laborer and a demonic visitant, while Damon Wildevie is seen alternately as a romantic adventurer and Eustacia's demonic familiar. Moreover, the accidents and coincidences that dominate the plot have been the source of much critical disagreement, called both the fault of weaknesses in the characters and the result of Hardy's philosophic determinism, while the framework of magic and superstition that surrounds the action of the work has been termed both grotesque parody and animistic gratuitousness. It is because the novel hovers between realism and romanticism, between the real world and the dynamic world of myth, that both its characters and its actions are so much a subject of critical controversy.

## TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

**First published:** 1891

**Type of work:** Novel

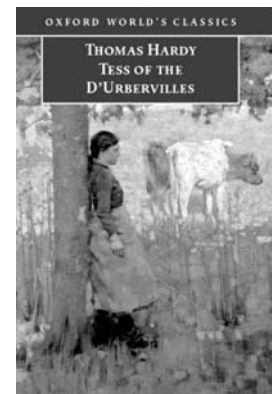
*An innocent young rural maiden is cast out of her familiar world after losing her virginity and finally rebels against the injustice of society and the universe.*

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* centers on Tess's relationship to the natural world. As that relationship changes, so does her situation. At the beginning of the novel, Tess is a child of nature who is confident that the natural world will protect her and provide her with a value system. When nature fails her, however, she has no value system to which to turn and thus is thrown out of her comfortable world to journey both outwardly and inwardly in search of a way back to her relationship with the natural world.

Tess first appears "at home" in the world of the small hamlet of Marlott, where, in the May Day dance, she manifests her innocence. Tess, however, is not a typical rustic maid; she is more sensitive than her friends. It is this sensitivity that ultimately undermines her. For example, shame for her father's drunken condition makes her volunteer to take a load of beehives to market, and despair for the laziness of her parents makes her ignore where she is going. As a result, when the family's only horse is killed, her sense of duty makes her overcome her pride to go to her aristocratic relatives for help. It is her first journey outside her secluded and protected world and her first encounter with the corruption of society.

Alec, her cousin, is a stock figure of the antinatural world, and when they meet, the image is a classic one of innocence in the grasp of the corrupt. When Alec takes Tess into the woods, she is not afraid of him, for she feels that she is in her natural element, and she so trusts the natural world to protect her that she falls asleep, only to be seduced by Alec. The antinatural force and her own innocence conspire to make her an outcast among her people. When her illegitimate child is born dead and the church refuses to give it a Christian burial, Tess renounces her religion and leaves the valley of her home in search of some new meaning for her life.

Tess begins her quest in the Valley of the Great Dairies, where the natural world is so lush and fertile as to be a symbolic realm, and Tess hopes for a reintegration with the world she has lost. She puts her moral plight out of her mind until she meets the morally ambiguous Angel Clare. Whereas Tess has challenged formal religion because of her personal experience, Angel has challenged it because of intellectual questioning. Like Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*, Angel has left the intellectual world for the natural world, where he believes innocence and uncontaminated purity and goodness prevail. These qualities are precisely what he sees in the milkmaid Tess.





On the first night of their marriage, however, Tess confesses her previous indiscretion with her cousin Alec, and Angel, unable to accept her as less than pure, leaves her. Tess wanders the countryside once again, until one morning on the road she awakes to find dead pheasants around her. At this point, Tess becomes aware that in a Darwinistic universe, violation, injury, and even death are innate and inescapable realities. Tess realizes that she is not guilty by the laws of such a world. With this new realization, she can go to Chalk-Newton, a land symbolic of the wasteland situation in which she finds herself, and fully accept the blind indifference of the world; she no longer holds out hope of being reintegrated into the natural world of value and meaning.

It is at this point that Alec returns to her life. Taking the path of least resistance, and having given up all hope, she begins living with him. Hope returns, too late, in the form of Angel Clare, who, having come to the same existential realization at which Tess had arrived, returns. Now seeing Alec as the embodiment of all the deception and meaninglessness in the world, Tess kills him, asserting her freedom from social values and her willingness to accept the human penalties of such freedom.

In the final chapter of the novel, Tess and Angel wander until they end up at Stonehenge, where Tess lies down on the pagan altar and willingly gives herself up to the authorities as a kind of archetypal sacrifice. Tess is the embodiment of human rebellion against an empty universe. The basic source of Tess's tragedy throughout the novel springs from her insistent hope that she will find external meaning and value. Only at the end does she achieve true awareness that such meaning does not exist.

## JUDE THE OBSCURE

**First published:** 1895

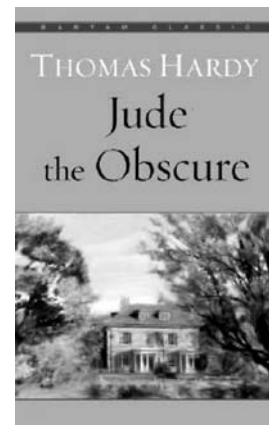
**Type of work:** Novel

*A young man tries to find meaning in the life of the mind and the spirit, only to be defeated by his own physical desires and the narrow-mindedness of his society.*

*Jude the Obscure* may be thought of as the argument of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* taken one step farther. Whereas the latter focuses on the loss of a unified order and meaning, the former begins with the premise of that loss and deals with the epic search for meaning. The novel is the archetypal story of everyone who searches for a basis of meaning and value. The problem for Jude is that all of the symbols of meaning for him—education, religion, the beauty of Sue Bridehead—are illusions. Jude is “obscure” because he is in darkness, trying to find an illumination of his relationship to the world but failing at every turn.

The novel begins with Jude as a young man losing his only real friend, the schoolmaster Phillotson, who has been the center of his world. Thus, from the first Jude must find a new center and a new hope to relieve his loneliness. His first projection of hope is toward the celestial city of Christminster, where his teacher has gone. In the first section of the book, his dream is like an indefinable glow in the distance. His ideal value system, represented both by the Christian and the classical framework of Christminster, is put aside, however, when he meets Arabella, described by Hardy as “a substantial female animal.” Seduced by the flesh, Jude marries Arabella when she says she is pregnant and gives up his hope of an education. His discovery that Arabella has deceived him is the first disillusionment he suffers in his quest for meaning.

The second phase of Jude's spiritual journey in-



volves his actual journey to Christminster, a city the vision of which is made even more specific by his seeing a picture of Sue Bridehead, who becomes for him a concrete image of his idealizations. Jude's first disillusionment at Christminster comes when he is turned down by all the colleges to which he applies. Thus, he shifts from the life of reason to the life of religion, practicing the rituals of the church.

During the next phase of his search, after having lost Sue to his old schoolmaster Phillotson, Jude becomes aware of the aridity of the religious life and burns all of his theology books. When Sue leaves Phillotson and returns to Jude, he has new hope, in spite of the fact that Sue is unwilling to live with him as a wife. The return of Arabella frightens her into giving in to his sexual desires, and the couple have children together.

When the most morbid of the children kills himself and the others, Sue makes an extreme shift from her former rebellion and accepts a supreme deity whose laws she believes she has transgressed. As penance, she leaves Jude to return to Phillotson. After Sue leaves, Jude goes to "a dreary, strange flat scene, where boughs dripped, and coughs and consumption lurked, and where he had never been before." This is a typical Hardy technique for presenting moments of existential realization: The natural world becomes an inimical reflection of the character's awareness of the absurd. Subsequently, Jude's reaction to the world around him is complete indifference. Jude's final journey to see Sue is a journey to death and a final rejection of the indifferent universe of which his experiences have made him aware. *Jude the Obscure* is the most crushing example of Hardy's vision. It may be one of his last novels because it is difficult to imagine pushing the tragedy of lost hopes beyond this point.

## WESSEX POEMS, AND OTHER VERSES

**First published:** 1898

**Type of work:** Poetry

*In this collection, Hardy meditates on loss in many contexts—personal, historical, and philosophical.*

The criticism of *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for their supposed immorality led Hardy to pursue seriously his longstanding ambition to write poetry. Appealing to a better educated, more sophisticated audience than novelists did, poets were given more latitude. The poems in *Wessex Poems*, the first of many volumes of poetry that Hardy was to publish, included some poems written as early as the 1860's, as well as poems written specifically for the book. *Wessex Poems* received a mixed critical reception. The established poetical style of the Victorian age had grown stale, and Hardy—somewhat like his contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins—sought a new poetry. Difficulties in Hardy's syntax and his very eclectic diction led many of the first readers of the *Wessex Poems*—and many readers since—to find the poems in this volume sometimes awkward.

Hardy employed a wide range of poetic forms in *Wessex Poems*: sonnets (including a sixteen line "sonnet" in the form pioneered by George Meredith), ballads, and dramatic monologues among them. In "The Impercipient," Hardy makes ironical use of a metrical form common in Anglican hymns. Equally ironic is his use of the rigorous patterns of the sonnet to complain of the randomness of Fate in "Hap," which is in this respect a forerunner of Robert Frost's later sonnet, "Design."

In "Hap," Hardy concludes that the Fates could as easily have sent him happiness as sorrow in his life. In poem after poem in this volume, Hardy writes of frustration, loss, grief, and suffering. The loss of love brings pain; the loss of faith brings only regret; death brings grief. Even history is loss—of past achievement—provoking nostalgia that is as bitter as it is sweet. Perhaps the single most critically admired poem in *Wessex Poems* is the little lyric "Neutral Tones," in which Hardy's vivid description of the bleak setting of a meeting between disil-

lusioned former lovers effectively conveys the emotion of the meeting. Another critically praised poem—one among many more—is “Nature’s Questioning,” in which ambiguity, complexity, and the open ending are characteristic of modern sensibilities. “The Dance at the Phoenix” uses ballad form effectively to trace the life of a woman from her uninhibited youth through her long and responsible marriage to one last revel before her death. “Thoughts of Phena” is Hardy’s deeply personal meditation on the death of a cousin who had once been close to him. Some critics in 1898 complained of the pervasive pessimism of the volume, but time has shown that in theme and tone Hardy’s *Wessex Poems* were better attuned to the direction poetry was to take, even before World War I.

### SUMMARY

Thomas Hardy is something of an anomaly in nineteenth century literature. On one hand, there is something excessively old-fashioned and melodramatic about his fiction; on the other hand, there is also something powerfully symbolic about such characters as Eustacia, Tess, and Jude, who find themselves trapped in a hopeless world not of their own making, a world that seems to offer no meaning and value, and a world against which they

quite rightfully rebel, even though such rebellion inevitably ends in defeat.

Hardy is one of the two most widely read and discussed English novelists of the nineteenth century, second only to Charles Dickens as the British writer most representative of the period and most controversial and worthy of study. Every year, new books are published on Hardy that attempt to lay bare the secret of his thought, his art, and, indeed, his continuing power. Hardy was a great existential humanist. His hope for the world was that it would realize that creeds and conventions that presuppose a God-centered origin of value were baseless. His hope was that men and women would loosen themselves from those foolish creeds and become aware of their freedom to create their own human value system. If people would only realize, Hardy reasoned, that all are equally alone and without hope for divine help, then perhaps they would also realize that it is the height of absurdity for such lost and isolated creatures to fight among themselves. At once old-fashioned and modern, Hardy is perhaps the single most important transitional figure between the old world of unity and faith and the new world of fragmentation and doubt.

Charles E. May; updated by David W. Cole

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Thomas Hardy respond to the Victorian culture's pervasive belief in human—and especially British—progress?
- What are Hardy's attitudes toward social class and class conflict?
- Are Hardy's views of romantic love clear? Are they consistent in his work?
- How does Hardy depict southwestern England—the Wessex of his fiction and poetry?
- Compare the themes, forms, and diction of some of Hardy's poetry to those of another poet, such as his predecessor Alfred, Lord Tennyson (perhaps the quintessential Victorian poet), Gerard Manley Hopkins (a near-contemporary, displaying both striking similarities and striking differences with Hardy), or Robert Frost (a younger American regionalist who also had a dark side).

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# WILSON HARRIS

**Born:** New Amsterdam, British Guiana (now Guyana)  
March 24, 1921

*Harris is a poet, novelist, critic, and philosopher whose work is concerned primarily with the quest for identity on the individual and communal levels.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Theodore Wilson Harris was born in New Amsterdam, in British Guiana (which became Guyana in 1966) on March 24, 1921. He went to school in the capital, Georgetown, before attending Queen's College from 1934 to 1939. He studied land surveying, and following graduation in 1942 he was appointed an assistant government surveyor and promoted to government surveyor in 1944. Between 1942 and 1953, Harris made numerous expeditions into the rain forest of his South American country. The Cuyuni River, the Essequibo River, the Potaro River, and various inland and coastal regions, where he came in close contact with the indigenous peoples and pristine landscapes, were later incorporated into his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), as well as two collections of short stories, *The Sleepers of Roraima* (1970) and *The Age of the Rainmakers* (1971).

He married Cecily Carew in 1945. In 1950, he visited France and Britain and published his first collection of poems, *Fetish*, in 1951. A second (and last) book of poetry, *Eternity to Season*, was published in 1954. Following his divorce from Carew, Harris immigrated to Britain in 1959, where he met and married Scottish writer Margaret Burns, to whom he dedicated all his novels thereafter. A book of essays, *Tradition, The Writer, and Society*, was published in 1967. Harris and Burns lived in Holland Park, London, an area which was to influence the setting of the novel *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness and Genesis of the Clowns*, published in 1977.

British Guiana gained its independence from England in 1966 and changed its name to Guyana. In addition to Guyana, the Anglophone Caribbean nations include Antigua, Barbados, Bermuda, St.

Lucia, Grenada, Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago, British Honduras, St. Vincent, and St. Kitts. While these nations have in common a shared history of colonialism, slavery, and decimation of the native peoples, they also reflect different cultures and political systems. Guyana, for example, while being an English-speaking country, is primarily South American in its culture. (It borders on Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname.) Harris is very conscious of this identity, and feels strong affinities to Latin American writers.

Harris's novels can be grouped into phases, each dealing with facets of one theme, and taking its inspiration from the numerous traditions that make up the multiracial, multicultural Caribbean culture he comes from. It is this combination of cultural traditions, embracing the African, East Indian, ancient Greek, Judeo-Christian, and Native American, that makes his work complex, difficult, and at times baffling even to his ardent admirers. In this, Harris differs from Caribbean writers who highlight one ethnic affiliation, such as Derek Walcott, who emphasizes the African heritage, or those such as V. S. Naipaul, who view the Caribbean's racially mixed communities as culturally impoverished or otherwise weakened. Harris, on the other hand, views his own and his country's mixed heritage as a source of strength, vitality, and original creativity.

Ever since he published his first book of poetry, Harris has been producing an average of one novel per year. He has also authored a large number of critical essays. Some of these have been collected in the books *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (1983) and *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles* (1981). Almost all of his creative work transcends the conventional boundaries of

time and space, leaping from dream to reality, from one time structure to another, and from one hemisphere to the other.

Harris is quite secretive about his personal life, granting relatively few interviews. He is fully established as a groundbreaking writer and has held academic positions at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California, the University of the West Indies, the University of Toronto, Leeds University, the University of Mysore, Yale University, and the University of Newcastle, Australia.

### ANALYSIS

Wilson Harris is considered a challenging, difficult writer by even his most enthusiastic fans. His style is a complex combination of layers of mythic symbolism, drawing upon the various African, East Asian, Native American, and European cultural traditions. His writing is an attempt to capture the unique Caribbean identity. Harris completely rejects the notion of the lack of history of the West Indies, which have been seen as a mere appendage to the European imperial powers, as some remote islands, landed upon by mistake, that serve at best as stepping stones on the way to the more important destinations. Instead, Harris insists that this part of the world, through its history of conquest, colonization, and slavery, has developed a wealthy heritage latent in the collective memory of all Caribbean peoples.

Harris's writing is not so much a re-creation of this history as it is an attempt to resurrect and highlight it, to bring it to the surface again, after it has been discarded as unimportant by the colonial powers. This is a common concern of numerous Caribbean writers, who seek to assert the vitality of their heritage, and are frequently harsh in their depiction of how Europe exploited, dispossessed, and betrayed the New World. Harris, however, is unique in that he does not present the West Indies as a culture in conflict with the European powers that have conquered and dominated it. All cultures, according to Harris, are complementary, and while Europe has tended to exclude non-European people from its definition of "civilized" and to project a notion of universal human experience based upon its limited knowledge, no history of the world can be complete if it does not take into account the experience of all cultures. Harris's aim is to expose "all partial orders masquerading as totalities or absolutes."

Harris first gained international recognition with the 1954 private publication of *Eternity to Season*, a collection of boldly experimental poems drawing on various ancient myths and rich in multiple layers of imagery. These poems were originally published in Guiana under the pseudonym Kona Waruk, which Harris abandoned almost immediately. A previous book of poetry, *Fetish*, had received little praise because of its difficult and frequently paradoxical use of language. These are Harris's only two books of poetry, although his prose style is poetic, and he occasionally includes some original poems in his works of fiction.

Harris's first four novels, *Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962), and *The Secret Ladder* (1963), making up the Guyana Quartet, deal with the conquest of the Americas, early colonization, slavery, and plantation life. They reflect, in their detailed depiction of the people and places, Harris's early years as a land surveyor. These novels also express, to a lesser degree, all the elements that Harris elaborates on in his later works: the search for an identity, the fluctuation between visions and consciousness, the leaps forward and back in time and space, and a conscious emphasis on language and creativity. Many of the characters encountered in these early works appear again in later novels. The quartet was followed in 1964 by *Heartland*.

In 1965, Harris published *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, the first book of a new cycle that additionally includes *The Waiting Room* (1967), *Tumatumari* (1968), and *Ascent to Omai* (1970). With the exception of *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, which takes place in the coastal city of Georgetown, where Harris lived as a child, the setting of these novels is the interior, and they take the form of diaries, reminiscence, logbooks, and dreamlike recollections. These novels have been compared to the work of Irish writers Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, whom Harris admires, and about whom he wrote critical articles, elaborating on their need, similar to the West Indians, to reconstitute a coherent unity after experiencing "something which bordered upon a state of tragic humiliation and eclipse."

Most postcolonial writers try to highlight aspects of cultures that were either denied validity or degraded. In the seven novellas that make up *The Sleepers of Roraima* and in *The Tree of the Sun* (1978), Harris tries to revive, in the strictest sense of the

word, the Caribbean culture that has been all but annihilated through colonialism. This is one of the more uncommon approaches to Caribbean literature, focusing not on the present but on the pre-Columbian aspects of that area's history.

Paralleling his own travels, the settings of Harris's novels move from the Americas to Europe and back. *Black Marsden: A Tabula Rasa Comedy* (1972) takes place in Edinburgh, hometown of Harris's wife Margaret, and the central character, Dr. Black Marsden, is a hypnotist who influences all who come in contact with him, except his host, Clive Goodrich. This novel was followed in 1975 by *Companions of the Day and Night*, in which Goodrich, free from Marsden's magic, travels to Mexico with Idiot Nameless. In *Companions of the Day and Night*, the various influences that characterize Caribbean culture are prominent again; Goodrich's trip is calculated not in terms of the European calendar but in pre-Columbian fashion: the nine-day cycle known as companions of the night and the thirteen-day cycle known as companions of the day. His other works of fiction include: *Carnival* (1985), *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987), and *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990).

In addition to novels, Harris has authored numerous essays, including essays published after each novel that attempt to explain the vision articulated in his fiction. Most of these articles are reprinted in *Explorations*, a collection that gives the reader helpful insight into Harris's thought. Another collection of essays, *The Womb of Space*, provides Harris's interpretation of the works of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Ellison, Jean Toomer, Juan Rulfo, Jean Rhys, Paule Marshall, Aime Cesaire, Raja Rao, Zulfikar Ghose, and others.

## PALACE OF THE PEACOCK

**First published:** 1960

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel describes a seven-day river expedition into the Guyanese interior, during which the members of the crew die one by one.*

*Palace of the Peacock* contains most of the elements that Harris elaborates upon in his later

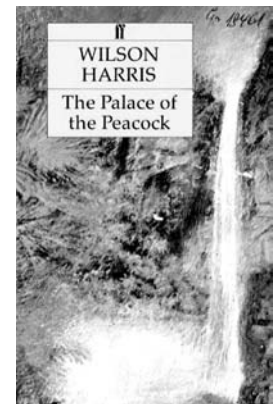
works, and it establishes his rejection of the conventional European style of fiction writing, which follows a linear pattern of narration and in which all aspects of the story are finally brought together to a logical conclusion. The storyline in this novel is as follows: Donne, a white colonizer, is leading a multiracial crew into the forest in hopes of enlisting cheap labor for his ranch plantation. As they penetrate deeper into the interior, the members of the crew, and finally the captain himself, die off one after the other.

The novel is very rich in symbolism. Donne, the ruthless white master, stands for the exploitative European presence in the Caribbean, concerned with individual gain, and having no appreciation of the natives except in terms of the physical labor that can be extracted from them. The crew of the ship represent the major racial groups of postcolonial Guiana: indigenous, African, and Asian. The length of the journey, seven days, hints at an anti-Genesis, a destruction rather than creation of the New World. The journey itself is representative of a quest, an exploration of identity as well as territory.

The novel begins as a dream of Captain Donne's twin brother, the narrator. In the dream, Donne has been murdered by Mariella, a Native American woman he had seduced, exploited, and abused. The murder is a symbolic reference to the spirit of defiance and bitterness of the natives against the colonialists. Significantly, Mariella is also the name of the territory of the mission the crew stop at during their expedition.

Mariella, who also appears as an old woman, is similar in her variety of states of being to the crew members who are already dead and are reliving their adventures through the narrator's vision. Finally, the murdered captain, Donne, whose story is told by his twin brother, eventually merges with this narrator, completely eroding of the traditional definition of a protagonist as a separate literary character with a specific function in the story.

Although aspects of *Palace of the Peacock* are ex-



plained toward the end of the novel, no final resolution takes place. Instead, the narrative implies that all stories and histories are merely interpretations of a vision, a perception construed in a state of altered consciousness.

### **“YUROKON”**

**First published:** 1970 (collected in *The Sleepers of Roraima*, 1970)

**Type of work:** Short story

*“Yurokon” is a fable centering on cannibalism.*

Like the other two short stories that make up *The Sleepers of Roraima*, “Yurokon” takes place in the twentieth century, and its central character is a young Carib, trying to reconstruct his identity out of what is left of his cultural mythology, which is jealously guarded by an elder. In the first short story, “Couvade,” a grandfather explains to the young man, Couvade, the meaning of his name, and the reader gains insight into one of the beliefs of the original peoples of the Caribbean. Similarly, in the second short story, “I, Quiyumucon,” readers are told of another Caribbean tradition through Poli, the son of Quiyumucon. In “Yurokon,” the young man asks his uncle why his tribe is known as “huntmen of bones,” and the uncle explains that the Caribs resorted to cannibalism out of self-defense, to scare the Spanish conquerors away. “We became huntmen of bones when we ate our first Spanish sailor,” the uncle states, not denying the charge of cannibalism, yet seeking to explain it. The uncle goes on to explain how, by fashioning flutes out of the dead Spaniards’ bones, the Caribs wanted to make the conquerors think they had been eaten, reduced to a morsel in the mouths of the natives, “the morsel of the flute, that was all.”

In the twentieth century, little is left of the Caribs besides their name, which they have given to the sea they roamed and the islands they peopled. Their name is the source of the word “cannibal.” Their ritual involved the eating of a piece of flesh of their defeated enemies. In their own worldview, the Caribs were engaging in a process they called “transubstantiation of species”; they did not leave

their defeated enemies to rot away, but instead fashioned flutes out of their enemies’ bones, transforming death into melody.

The initial encounter between Caribs and Spaniards is recounted through Yurokon’s visions, influenced by his uncle’s version of the story, as well as the more common European rendition of it. Both groups are portrayed in highly ambivalent terms. The Caribs represent “innocent evil” (well-intentioned cannibalism), and the Spaniards “maleficent good” (destroying in the name of civilizing). The imagery that represents each group also suggests an overlap between the two. As Yurokon awakes from his dream, in which he has visualized the defeat of the Caribs and their withdrawal into the underworld, he hears a Catholic missionary, Father Gabriel, announcing Eastertide, the resurrection.

The historical defeat of the Caribs can be interpreted as a transubstantiation (just as the cannibal’s victim is transubstantiated) of the species rather than its extinction. Yurokon, who had been disturbed by the loss of his tribe’s name, is relieved to realize that namelessness is also “a sea of names,” just as “numberlessness,” which is “native to heaven, means both without numbers and innumerable.”

### **THE EYE OF THE SCARECROW**

**First published:** 1965

**Type of work:** Novel

*An unnamed narrator, N., attempts to reconstruct, through a personal diary, the events of his childhood in Georgetown, British Guiana.*

*The Eye of the Scarecrow* is one of Harris’s more disjointed novels as far as language and sequence of events are concerned. The novel is in the form of a diary. Over nine months, the diarist, N., seeks a new way of rendering life by letting past events speak for themselves as he surrenders to a “visionary organization of memory,” free from tedious realism.

Through the diary entries, the reader perceives N. as introspective, prone to hallucinations, and highly sensitive, while his friend L. is practical and

levelheaded, "the engineer in charge of the expedition." In his diary, written in 1963 and 1964, N. is trying to reconstruct the events of the year 1948, which witnessed a major, if abortive, miners' strike in Georgetown. That year is confused, in N.'s recollections, with 1929, the year of the beginning of the Great Depression. The diary itself covers a nine-month period, symbolic of gestation, the creation of a new person. It opens with N. describing the funeral processions of the fallen strikers of 1948. The confusion between years and between the symbols of birth (N. writes that he is "riding out of the womb") and death (the funeral hearse) gradually takes over the whole novel, and it leads in the final section to a full fusion of the narrator and L. This is rendered more baffling by the occasional repetition of earlier segments of the book. This fusion of apparent opposites is hinted at in an earlier reference to L. and N. sending for a prostitute together on their expedition in 1948. N. is first shown as disapproving of L.'s exploitation and manipulation of the woman, Hebra, and shrinking from even touching her, yet he soon finds out that he has behaved with no less blind and insensitive lust himself, as he awakens by her side.

The scarecrow, a metaphor that runs throughout the book, assumes various guises in different sections, shifting from a desiccated look on L.'s face, to the dislocated image of the Georgetown coastline, to the figure of the dying governor of Guiana (representing the end of the British Empire), to the tenements of Waterloo Street. All the while the scarecrow also represents the fallen victims of 1948 and 1929: the strikers, the beggars, the nameless paupers, the many living dead.

The narrator's quest concludes with "THE MANIFESTO OF THE UNBORN STATE OF EXILE," in

which he describes language as the vehicle for expressing silence. Language alone, readers are told, can express "the ultimate 'silent' and 'immaterial' complexity of arousal. And this is the stuff of one's essential understanding of the reality of the original Word, the Well of Silence."

Harris, in this novel, employs some of his longest sentences ever: many take more than one dozen lines and require a second and third reading before they can be comprehended. Since the novel itself is relatively short (less than one hundred pages), the result is a compact matrix of themes, ranging from the analysis of relationships, to the quest for inner harmony through the wedding of opposites, to a philosophical discussion of language, couched in the historical background of Guyana as a land of violence, conquest, and cross-fertilization.

## SUMMARY

Wilson Harris can safely be called one of the most original and difficult writers of the second half of the twentieth century. His extreme erudition, together with a familiarity with various cultural traditions, allows him, in his fiction, to depict the heterogeneity of his native land. His writing is elusive, calling for numerous interpretations rather than a single and definitive explanation. As he builds a Caribbean identity that has been silenced by the European version of history, Harris refuses to take sides, to reach a final verdict as to who qualifies as victim or victor in the encounter between Europe and the Americas. He thereby leaves room for change and renewal, for a revival of the nearly extinct.

Nada Elia

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Wilson Harris

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Wilson Harris seeks to present the complex culture of the Caribbean. How did the slave trade contribute to this complexity?
- Is Caribbean culture too complicated in its ethnic and sociological makeup to be regarded as an entity?
- What makes such elements as diaries and the recollection of dreams useful for Harris?
- Examine the scarecrow as metaphor in Harris's novel *The Eye of the Scarecrow*.
- Harris is a writer with a record of success in academic institutions. Does he cut himself off from less academic audiences by his difficult style?
- No resolution takes place in *Palace of the Peacock*. What literary or other cultural experiences of Harris's audiences in recent times have prepared them to accept such an apparent deficiency?

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## JAROSLAV HAŠEK

**Born:** Prague, Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in Czech Republic)

April 30, 1883

**Died:** Lipnice nad Sázavou, Czechoslovakia (now in Czech Republic)

January 3, 1923

*Hašek's unfinished novel The Good Soldier: Švejk is an antiwar satire written in the picaresque manner. Švejk, perhaps the best-known character in Czech literature, sees the world as absurd and refuses to take it seriously. Whether he is truly an imbecile or a con artist feigning mental deficiency, he manages to confound the author and expose the flaws and failures of institutes intended to improve humankind.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jaroslav Hašek (HAH-shehk) was born in 1883 in Prague, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, an alcoholic, was a schoolteacher who died when Jaroslav was thirteen. Although the family did not have much money, they lived in an affluent section of the city. Jaroslav was a clever but mischievous boy who was attracted to disruption and who held little respect for authority. After being expelled from grammar school following a rock-throwing incident, he was sent to work in a chemist's shop but was soon fired. He had already begun writing, and on the advice of a potential employer, he returned to school, completing his education at the Czecholavonic Commercial Academy in 1902.

A walking tour he undertook in 1900 inspired him to complete a number of stories based on his experiences, and several were published in small journals. In spite of this early success and his exposure to a lively artistic community in Prague, Hašek was not attracted to avant-garde ideas and did not aspire to literary success. In 1906, he joined an anarchist organization and began writing political articles and editing an anarchist journal; his activism led to a jail sentence for assaulting an officer during a demonstration. However, during this time he had fallen in love with Jarmila Mayerova, a woman whose parents did not approve of the relationship because of his political affiliations and his reputation as a drunken prankster. In order to convince Jarmila's parents that he would make a responsible

husband, he began publishing short stories.

After returning to the Catholic Church, Hašek married Jarmila in 1910, but he was unable to maintain an orderly life. He was fired from editing the journal *Animal World* because he wrote articles about nonexistent species and advertised the sale of pedigreed werewolves. He also continued to frequent pubs. After a quarrel with Jarmila and a drinking spree, he apparently tried to jump from the Charles Bridge; although he later denied he was attempting suicide, he was confined for a brief period to a mental hospital.

Hašek reconciled with his wife, but his hoaxes continued. He established the Cynological Institute, which was simply an unsuccessful dog-selling business. In 1911, he founded a mock political party and ran for office. By the summer of 1911, Hašek had separated from his wife and returned to a life of drinking and partying. At the same time, he continued to write, producing scripts for cabarets and introducing the first stories to feature a soldier named Švejk.

In 1915, Hašek was drafted into the Austrian army, and in spite of his police record and his association with anarchist groups, was assigned to the Ninety-first Infantry Regiment. From České Budějovice in southern Bohemia, he was sent into Hungary and then to the Galician front, a part of the Austrian empire now subsumed by Poland and the Ukraine. His regiment was engaged in heavy battle, and in the fall of 1915 he was captured by the Russians. Conditions in the prison camps were

dreadful, but Hašek was able to secure a position working for a camp commander and thus avoided undue hardship.

When a military group of Czech and Slovak volunteers, later called the Czech Legion, was formed, Hašek joined, using his writing talents to recruit volunteers and churn out propaganda. During this period he was able to produce a second series of Švejk stories, which was published in Kiev in 1917. Many of the characters, including Lieutenant Lukaš, are based on Hašek's acquaintances from the Ninety-first Infantry Regiment.

While working with the Czech Legion, Hašek supported the Russian czars, but following the Bolshevik Revolution, he left the legion for the Red Army in Russia and became a member of the Communist Party. Although he had continued to drink and was arrested on several occasions, his disruptive behavior ceased after he joined the Communists. For more than two and one-half years he remained sober and stayed out of trouble. He did, however, remarry without having divorced his first wife.

In 1920, Hašek brought his new wife to Prague with the intent of helping to establish the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. However, he soon abandoned his political goals and took up his old habits. Unable to find employment, he began writing what would become the first volume of *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (1921-1923; *The Good Soldier: Švejk*, 1930). He was forced to publish this book himself, but the venture proved successful enough that he was able to purchase a small house in the village of Lipnice, where he continued work on the next volumes. He was also able to secure a publisher. The second and third volumes were as popular as the first. However, his carousing was undermining his health; he was forced to dictate much of the last volume, and at times his sentence structure grew incoherent. He died in 1923 without having finished the fourth volume.

Hašek built his novel from his life. He shared with Švejk an affinity for clashes with authority, a fondness for storytelling, and an attraction to drink, but character and author differ distinctly in temperament. While Švejk adjusts to whatever situation he encounters and is almost always happy, Hašek was an inveterate rebel for whom conformity was difficult. His biographers maintain that, despite the humor of his writing, he was for most of his life a very unhappy man.

## ANALYSIS

Although Jaroslav Hašek wrote hundreds of short stories and articles, his literary reputation rests solely on his incomplete novel *The Good Soldier: Švejk*. The novel is set during World War I and is based on Hašek's experiences as a soldier in the Austrian army.

Švejk is an enigma who appears to be both a blundering idiot and a shrewd manipulator confounding whatever authority he encounters. In creating Švejk, Hašek may have been inspired by a short sketch that appeared in several popular journals in 1906. Both this character and Hašek's original soldier, who first appeared in a 1911 series of stories, are Czech peasants whose ignorance keeps them in constant conflict with military authority.

The first Švejk was created during a period of strict censorship by the Austrian government, a fact that may account for the two-dimensionality of the character. A second series of stories published while Hašek was in Russia recruiting Czech prisoners of war to fight against Austria serves as little more than anti-Austrian propaganda; the stories are humorless and the characters flat. However, the Švejk of the novel is a picaresque character who recognizes that the world is absurd and that there is nothing to be done to bring order or meaning to existence.

The structure of the novel is episodic and rambling. Digressions are frequent as Švejk, who repeatedly gets into trouble, explains himself through lengthy monologues only tangentially related to the situation at hand. Although Švejk faces harsh treatment from his superiors, he remains cheerful, willing to undergo whatever is necessary for the protection of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He does not change as a result of his experiences, and his misadventures frequently carry him back to where he started.

This circularity is particularly evident in the chapter "Švejk's České Budějovice anabasis." After getting himself ejected from the train carrying his company, Švejk sets out on foot to catch up with it; however, he manages always to head in the wrong direction. Throughout the last three volumes of the novel, Švejk is separated from his company and its officer, Lieutenant Lukaš, then reunited to find that nothing has changed as the army snails its way through bureaucratic inefficiency toward the front.

When Hašek died in 1923, his characters had not yet reached the battle lines; consequently, *The Good Soldier: Švejk* is an antiwar novel which does not depict combat. Still, Hašek conveys the futility of war, both through the use of an omniscient narrator, who provides undisguised criticism, and through Švejk and his companions. Like Švejk, his fellow soldiers expect to die. One of the group is writing a history of the company's battles before the fact, using the logic that since the outcome of war is the same—death—the experience of dying in battle must be recorded in advance.

Hašek further underscores the foolishness of war by blurring the lines between allies and enemies. In the opening chapter, Švejk, still a civilian, is accused of treason. When he reports for military duty while suffering from rheumatism, he is charged with disloyalty in spite of his professed willingness to serve; once he assumes active duty, he is suspected of spying and is even mistaken for a Russian prisoner of war. When asked by a cruel officer to respond to a poster depicting an Austrian soldier impaling a Russian against a wall with his bayonet, Švejk sympathizes with the mortally wounded Russian and with the Austrian, who he predicts will be punished for damaging his bayonet. Austrian propaganda does not instill hatred of the enemy, only a reminder of the hostility of the military toward its own soldiers.

Hašek's satire succeeds in reaching beyond the boundaries of war, for it is ultimately the social structure that he targets. Švejk's experiences as a soldier mirror those of his civilian life, suggesting that the military is no different from other institutions. Švejk's willingness to conform allows him to survive, but at the same time, his conformity undermines authority, causing whatever system is wielding control to implode. It seems fitting that *The Good Soldier: Švejk* is incomplete, for Hašek has envisioned a worldview that does not provide for resolution.

## THE GOOD SOLDIER: ŠVEJK

**First published:** *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, 1921-1923 (English translation, 1930)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Josef Švejk, a Czech drafted by the Austrian army to fight in World War I, creates havoc and undermines authority through seemingly innocent actions, and no one can determine whether he is a blundering fool or a shrewd operator.*

Jaroslav Hašek intended *The Good Soldier: Švejk* to be a six-volume novel based on his experiences in World War I; however Hašek died before completing the fourth volume, which ends before Švejk experiences active combat. The first volume begins in 1914 in Prague. Archduke Franz Ferdinand, nephew of the Austrian emperor, has just been assassinated in Sarajevo, an event which will result in the outbreak of the war.

Josef Švejk, a Czech, is introduced as a veteran who has been certified an imbecile by the Austrian army. He now makes a modest living selling mongrels with forged pedigrees. News of the assassination does not interrupt his daily routine of pub visits, but he soon draws the attention of an undercover police officer and is arrested for speaking disrespectfully of the late archduke. When he confesses willingly to charges of treason, Švejk is sent to a lunatic asylum, where he enjoys his treatment so much he is eventually released.

However, he does not have long to celebrate his freedom, for he is soon called to rejoin the Austrian army. When he appears for his physical in a wheelchair because of a rheumatism attack, he is accused of malingering and sent to the garrison jail, where prisoners are subjected to daily enemas until they admit to faking infirmity. Švejk, however, undergoes his treatments cheerfully.

He is finally released to the custody of Chaplain Katz, a priest with a fondness for liquor. As the chaplain's assigned servant, called a "batman" in the military, Švejk takes on the responsibility of finding ways to finance the chaplain's debauchery and of delivering him safely home afterward. This arrangement ends abruptly when the chaplain



loses Švejk in a card game to another officer, Lieutenant Lukaš.

The lieutenant is a kind man who seems genuinely fond of Švejk. Still, Švejk's blundering repeatedly complicates the lieutenant's life. In an effort to please Lukaš by acquiring a dog for him, Švejk procures a stolen animal. Catastrophe ensues when the true owner turns out to be a colonel who has Lukaš and Švejk transferred to the Ninety-first Infantry Regiment in Budějovice, where march battalions are forming to be sent to the Galician front. The first volume ends with Švejk expressing his joy at the prospect of dying in combat with the lieutenant.

The second installment of the novel opens with Švejk and Lukaš en route to Budějovice. Švejk manages to lose some of the lieutenant's luggage, to insult a major general, and to pull the emergency cord on the train, bringing it to a halt. Švejk is removed from the train, and Lukaš continues without him. After convincing the stationmaster of his innocence, Švejk begins drinking with a Hungarian soldier and misses the next trains. Finally, he is apprehended by another officer who orders him to set off on foot to rejoin his company; however, Švejk walks in the wrong direction, roaming from village to village, until he is mistaken for a spy and finally escorted to Budějovice, where his identity is established. Švejk is sentenced to three days in the military prison for losing his regiment before returning, much to the dismay of Lieutenant Lukaš, to the company as its orderly.

The regiment moves on to Hungary, where Lieutenant Lukaš begins an ill-advised relationship with a married woman. Švejk, delivering a letter to the woman for the lieutenant, encounters her husband. Švejk swallows the letter, which he claims to have written himself, but when a fight breaks out, he is arrested once again. The charges are soon dropped, but a newspaper article causes embarrassment for the company. In the concluding adventure of this segment, Švejk makes hash of a coded message, leaving the lieutenant with undecipherable orders.

In the third part, subtitled "The Glorious Licking," Švejk's company makes its way through Hungary, where tensions between Hungarians and Czechs run high. Švejk's companions on the journey include the gluttonous Baloun and an occultist cook. Many of the episodes concern procuring and

consuming food and drink. Even the entry of Italy into the war is discussed in terms of the effects on the men's rations. Švejk steals a chicken from local peasants, contributing to ethnic hostility and once again leaving the lieutenant exasperated.

A sadistic officer, Lieutenant Dub, joins the battalion and attempts to catch Švejk violating regulations, but Švejk is able to undermine Dub's efforts by carrying out orders literally. As the battalion approaches the front, Švejk, separated from the others, startles an escaped Russian prisoner who is bathing. The man runs off, but instead of pursuing him, Švejk decides to try on the Russian's uniform. Before he knows what is happening, he is captured by a group of Austrian soldiers.

In the fourth section, Švejk is first mistaken by his captors for a Russian Jew because he speaks German. He is then determined to be a defector and is sentenced to be executed. When a chaplain visits his cell for a spiritual consultation, Švejk begins a long monologue about attractive women, which greatly disturbs the chaplain, who appears to suffer a nervous breakdown. A telegram clearing Švejk of all charges arrives soon after, and Švejk is returned to his march company. Hašek died before finishing the novel, leaving no indication of what would become of Švejk.

Illustrations by Josef Lada were completed after Hašek's death, when a version of the novel was serialized in the Sunday supplement of a Czech newspaper, and most translations include a number of these drawings.

## SUMMARY

Since the first volume appeared in 1921, *The Good Soldier Švejk* has been popular but controversial. Reviewers at the time of the novel's publication were generally skeptical, given Jaroslav Hašek's reputation for perpetrating hoaxes and for aligning himself with radical movements. The influential German critic Max Brod considered Hašek's work as important as that of the German Czech author Franz Kafka, while the noted scholar



Rene Wellek dismissed *The Good Soldier: Švejk* as “unliterary.” In the 1930’s, the book was banned by the Nazis but embraced by the Communists, who found the title character representative of the common worker. By the year 2000, the New York Public Library had named the novel one of the one hundred most important books of the twentieth century, yet Hašek has received little critical attention from American scholars.

K Edgington

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In Jaroslav Hašek’s novel, *The Good Soldier: Švejk*, in what ways does Švejk appear to be “a patent idiot”?
- What evidence suggests Švejk is an educated man?
- How does Hašek’s use of specific place names affect your reading of *The Good Soldier: Švejk*?
- How does the narrator’s point of view differ from Švejk’s?
- Some critics claim that Švejk is amoral. Do you agree? Support your opinion with examples.



Miloš Fikejz

## VÁCLAV HAVEL

**Born:** Prague, Czechoslovakia (now in Czech Republic)  
October 5, 1936

*Havel, who became Czechoslovakia's president in 1989, is one of the best-known contemporary European playwrights and an acclaimed essayist and poet.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Václav Havel (HAH-vehl) was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now in the Czech Republic), on October 5, 1936, into a wealthy patrician family. Sharing the fate of their entire class, the Havels lost their property to collectivization when the Communist government came to power in 1948, nationalizing all private enterprises and assets. Because of the bourgeois background of his father, Václav Havel, and mother, Božena Vavreckova, young Havel was barred from institutions of higher learning.

He nevertheless attained schooling in night classes while working in a chemical laboratory. After completing his secondary education, he became a stage technician at the ABC Theatre in Prague in 1959. Between 1960 and 1969, he worked in various positions with several playhouses, including the Theater on the Balustrade, beginning as a menial worker and advancing to become a dramaturge and playwright; concurrently, he studied dramaturgy at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Prague.

During the years that led up to the political liberalization and reforms of the Prague Spring in 1968, the Theater on the Balustrade became the most influential theater company in Prague. Havel coauthored three plays before his first independent effort, *Zahradní slavnost* (pr., pb. 1963; *The Garden Party*, 1969), which immediately brought him critical acclaim and wider audiences. Yet all hopes for democratization, evident, for example,

in a greater freedom of the press, were crushed in August, 1968, when the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies headed by the Soviet Union restored a hard-line Communist regime under Gustáv Husák and established rigid control of the political and economic life.

During the brief period of reform, Havel had his previously confiscated passport returned to him and was permitted to travel to New York in mid-1968 to witness the first American production of his play *Vyrozumění* (pr. 1965, pb. 1966; *The Memorandum*, 1967) under Joseph Papp, a production that won an Obie Award. Two years later, *Ztižená možnost soustředění* (pr., pb. 1968; *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, 1969) met with similar success in another New York production. Immediately after the Soviet invasion, Havel, like other artists and representatives of public life, made radio broadcasts from the underground to appeal to the West for support and to call for continued protest among his compatriots against repression of civil liberties. As a result of his unequivocal championing of human rights, Havel again had his passport confiscated, and, along with thousands of others, was forced into various blue-collar jobs, some of which later provided him with subject matter for his plays and infused his vision.

Havel's writings were not published, and his plays were banned from the stage in Czechoslovakia between 1970 and 1989. Yet he categorically refused to emigrate and continued to write regardless of all pressure and hardship. *Žebrácká opera* (pr. 1975, pb. 1977; *The Beggar's Opera*, 1976), an adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (pr., pb. 1728), was first performed clandestinely by a Czech

amateur troupe in November, 1975. Havel's subsequent plays premiered mostly in foreign productions, with a clear preponderance of one-act plays over full-length plays, such as the seldom performed *Horský hotel* (pb. 1976, pr. 1981; the mountain resort).

The play *Spiklenci* (pr. 1974, pb. 1977; the conspirators) was first performed in the Federal Republic of Germany. The one-act plays *Audience* (pr. 1976, pb. 1977; English translation, 1976) and *Vernisáž* (pr. 1976, pb. 1977; *Private View*, 1978) were first produced in 1976 in Austria; the one-act *Protest* (pr. 1978; English translation, 1980) was performed in 1978. *Largo desolato* (pr., pb. 1985; English translation, 1987) premiered in Vienna, while the Faustian satire *Pokoušení* (pr, pb. 1986; *Temptation*, 1988) was first performed in 1986 in Vienna and in 1987 in England. Similarly, Havel's essays first appeared abroad, among them "Moc bezmocných" in London, later translated as "The Power of the Powerless."

For his criticism of the repressive Communist regime, Havel earned its unrelenting hate. During the 1970's, he was arrested and imprisoned several times. Havel became one of the signatories and spokespersons for Charter 77, a human rights declaration of January, 1977. In 1979, Havel, along with other Charter 77 members, was arrested and tried on charges of "subversion of the republic." He was sentenced to four and a half years in prison.

Between his two prison terms, Havel wrote the acclaimed *Protest*, the third part of the trilogy that also includes *Audience* and *Private View*. A selection of letters that Havel wrote to his wife from prison appeared as *Dopisy Olze: Červen 1979-Září 1982* (1983; *Letters to Olga: June 1979-September 1982*, 1988). For reasons of poor health, which prompted appeals on his behalf from the international intellectual community, Havel was released in February, 1983.

Until the Velvet Revolution of November, 1989, which peacefully ousted the hard-line Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, Havel was subjected to harassment by secret police and endured a brief imprisonment in early 1989 that again caused an international outcry. In December, 1989, Havel was elected president of the newly democratic Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, an office for which he was reconfirmed in June, 1990, in the first freely held elections since 1948. Two years later, in

the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the political realignments that accompanied that historic event, Havel announced on July 17, 1992, that he would resign on the following Monday rather than preside over the likely division of his nation into separate Czech and Slovak republics. He planned to continue working for democracy.

Since then, Havel has followed the changing international scene. He founded a yearly conference, Forum 2000, which deals with world affairs. He has written numerous essays commenting on these affairs often published in newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*. These essays often deal with issues of abuse of human dignity and freedom in places such as Tibet, Sudan, Burma/Myanmar, Zimbabwe, and North Korea. He also addresses concerns about preserving the planet against the threat of global warming. His book *Prosím stručně* (2006; *To the Castle and Back*, 2007) records his life leading up to and away from his governmental career at Prague Castle. It consists of multiple forms: reminiscences, quoted memoranda, and selections from a lengthy interview conducted by Karel Hvíždala. All of these are interspersed with excerpts from a running account of his visit to Washington, D.C., in the spring of 2005.

In the meantime, he has not abandoned his theatrical interests. In 2006, he was invited to be artist-in-residence at Columbia University. During his stay there, several theaters joined together to present a festival of eighteen of his plays. The next year brought the news of his first new play in eighteen years, *Odcházení* (pb. 2007, pr. 2008). Loosely based on William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608) and Anton Chekhov's *Vishnyovy sad* (pr., pb. 1904; *The Cherry Orchard*, 1908), the action emerges out of the retirement of a chancellor named Rieger, whose power and villa are both taken from him as his political rival plans to make the villa's orchard into a major shopping center. Naturally, one would look for parallels with Havel's own career, and while there are some, Havel points out the many disparities that come of his satirizing Rieger as a glib politician. Havel himself is in the play as the disembodied voice of the playwright commenting on his own creation. The National Theatre originally was to produce the new work in March, 2008, but Havel withdrew it when the theater denied his wish that the main roles be played

by his second wife, Dagmar Havlova (a role he wrote for her), and Jan Triska (the role of the chancellor) and that the director be David Radok. The Archa Theatre in Prague agreed to honor Havel's requests and produced the play in May, 2008.

## ANALYSIS

To view Havel exclusively as a critic of 1960's Communist Czechoslovakia and as a dissident during Husák's so-called normalization period of the 1970's and 1980's would limit his scope as a writer and thinker. Although Havel resisted being called a philosopher, his thinking is firmly grounded in his country's humanistic tradition. The all-pervasive themes of his dramatic fiction and essays are individual responsibility, human dignity and identity, and the burden of human existence. While these themes are central to modern art, Havel's dramatic vision particularly owes a debt to Franz Kafka and the French Theater of the Absurd. Furthermore, Havel was influenced by Martin Heidegger's work, which was conveyed to the Czechs and Slovaks by the philosopher Jan Patočka, who steadfastly applied the principles of individual responsibility to his own life amid persecution.

Paul Wilson, in the introduction to his translation of *Letters to Olga*, rightly notes that phenomenology is congenial to a central and Eastern European mind that struggles to free itself from ideology and its deterministic worldview. Rather than attributing responsibility for the state of things to external factors, phenomenology seeks the obligation for betterment within the individual. Consequently, human rights, according to Wilson, are not privileges that can be granted or taken away at will but principles that govern responsible human conduct, which in turn revitalizes society.

This philosophical stance in part accounts for Havel's courageous, uncompromising championing of human rights. Havel writes about his own experience—from "below," where he was forced by the political circumstances—in the hope of addressing universal human concerns. Thus, in his work he not only exposes a corrupt, repressive regime in central Europe but also discloses a universally shared modern condition.

Havel's interest is devoted to questions such as how the individual copes with impersonal power, how people maintain their identities, and how they carry themselves under the burden of existence.

Although the author calls for the individual to assume responsibility and to live in the truth (as described in his essay "The Power of the Powerless"), he is not a naïve dreamer who would expect immediate and far-reaching results. Yet Havel seems steadfastly convinced that power is not an external but rather an internal faculty. This responsibility to answer only to one's conscience at all costs is an active and perhaps inescapable endeavor.

Not surprisingly, Havel's plays, particularly the so-called Vaněk trilogy, consisting of the semiautobiographical one-act plays *Audience*, *Protest*, and *Private View*, ironically expose the attempts of individuals to justify their selfish conformity in a repressive political system in which they claim to have no part, yet from which they shamelessly benefit. In *Audience*, Vaněk, a dissident, works in a brewery where he is being observed by the secret police with the help of his boss, an informer, who, among other unethical proposals, asks Vaněk, the writer, to relieve him from writing reports by composing them himself. *Protest* juxtaposes the dissident Vaněk and the successful sellout Staněk; the latter selfishly seeks Vaněk's help against the arrest of his daughter's boyfriend, only to reason artfully against and ultimately dodge the signing of the very petition on the young man's behalf that Vaněk has already prepared. *Private View* attacks the vacuous lives of conformist snobs, depicting a couple who subscribe to materialistic comforts and exhort Vaněk to abandon his obstinate antagonism and its corollary material deprivation. In each of these plays, the mental and linguistic acrobatics and sophistries reveal the absurdity of life in "normalized" Czechoslovakia, or, more universally, the schizophrenia of a life lived against one's conscience.

Havel is interested in language, in both its potential benefits and its perniciousness. The essay "Words on Words" restates this theme of the far-reaching "power of words to change history" that is already present in his early plays *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*. The two satires are scathing absurdist indictments of the official Communist bureaucratism and its empty clichés that are characteristic of a dehumanized society in which monstrous paradoxes abound. Like these two plays, the vicious comedy *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* is more than a satire on Communist bureaucracy and an individual's plight to escape its dehu-



manizing effects; it reiterates Havel's recurrent themes, which range from the schizophrenia of existence to fragmentation, alienation, and the loss of human identity.

## THE MEMORANDUM

**First produced:** *Vyrozumění*, 1965 (first published, 1966; English translation, 1967)

**Type of work:** Play

*This play is a grotesque on the introduction of Ptydepe, an artificial, "logical" language, into a large organization satirizing the dehumanizing officialese of prereform Communist Czechoslovakia.*

*The Memorandum* is perhaps Havel's most widely performed play, along with *Private View*. Again, it would not do Havel justice to view the play exclusively as a parody of Communist bureaucracy and its lingo; rather, it is about the dehumanizing effects and the tyranny of language in any system that causes the disintegration of human identity.

The twelve scenes are set in a deliberately "generic" large organization, the purpose of which, like that of any amorphous self-serving bureaucracy, is not plain. Josef Gross, the managing director, and the development of his personality from the introduction to the abolition of the artificial language Ptydepe are both central to the play. Gross cannot decipher a memorandum directed to him because it is written in Ptydepe, a new office language introduced apparently without his knowledge by deputy director Ballas and his cronies and taught in classes in which every employee seems to have enrolled.

Ptydepe is presumably rational and precise and therefore superior to "dilettantish" natural languages, with their vagueness and ambivalence. Its goal is to eliminate imprecision by limiting all similarity between words and thereby achieve the highest possible redundancy in language. The result is monstrously long words that are formed by the least probable combination of letters. This new

doctrine is difficult and complex, so it can be mastered only by discipline and most of all by faith. It is easy to see the parallels between Ptydepe and Communist ideology.

After attempting in vain to stop the spread of Ptydepe, Gross becomes enmeshed in a Kafkaesque catch-22: Even the translation director, Stroll, cannot perform the translation unless Gross's text is "authorized" by a "Ptydepist," a specialist who gives permission for each translation. Prior to an authorization, however, the memo needs to be translated. Gross realizes that since he cannot acquire Ptydepe himself because of his lack of faith, the only way to learn what his memo contains is to know it already.

Ballas glibly threatens Gross into submission by ridiculous charges, forces him to sign a declaration of compliance to Ptydepe, coerces him into self-indictment for his "wrongdoings," and finally reduces him to the post of "staff watcher," a spy who observes all employees through a crack in the wall. Gross regains his rank with the help of Maria, a sympathetic typist, who translates his memo at a moment when Ballas and his associates already begin to reverse themselves in a total rejection of Ptydepe. The memo itself utterly renounces the artificial language.

Ballas ingeniously justifies his reversal and again pressures the vindicated but naïve Gross into compliance, this time by threatening to expose Gross's forced declaration of advocacy of Ptydepe. A search for culprits ensues. As a result, Maria is dismissed for performing an unauthorized translation. Gross conveniently rationalizes his inaction by claiming that if he maintains his position he will keep Ballas and his cronies in check. Ballas, in the meantime, introduces a new nonsensical bureaucratic language, Chorukor, a very antithesis to Ptydepe. Gross placates Maria by empty, hollow phrases invoking high ethical ideals; he blames the "difficult times" in which humankind, including himself, is fragmented, manipulated, and alienated. This "analysis" is ironic coming from an unwilling conformist who diagnoses in himself the very ills that are Havel's primary philosophical concerns but who fails to assume his individual responsibility.

## LETTERS TO OLGA

**First published:** *Dopisy Olze: Červen 1979-Září 1982, 1983* (English translation, 1988)

**Type of work:** Letters and essays

*This publication contains 144 selected letters from prison to Havel's wife written between June, 1979, and September, 1982; the last sixteen letters are noted for their philosophical content.*

*Letters to Olga* is a moving document of Havel's imprisonment and, simultaneously, an important philosophical statement, primarily in the final sixteen letters, which were circulated separately and illegally underground.

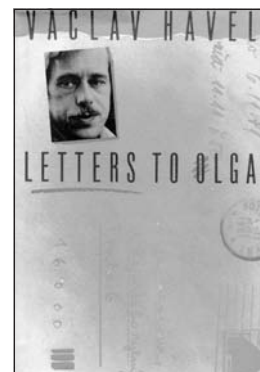
The letters are particularly interesting in the light of the circumstances under which they were composed. Havel was subjected to hard labor with set quotas that were deliberately high and thus difficult to fulfill. He was permitted to write home only one four-page letter a week to only one person, so it is perhaps not surprising that he chose to address them to Olga Havel, his wife from 1964 until her death in 1996. Censorship was extremely strict and whimsical. The letters had to adhere to precise specifications: They had to be legible and without corrections, quotation marks, or foreign words. The censors prohibited humor and any thoughts that went beyond what they classified as family matters. The prisoners could not write rough drafts or take notes.

Under such difficult conditions, the weekly letter writing evolved into an anxious guessing game against the arbitrary interpretations of the censors, who ruthlessly confiscated letters that did not fit their specifications. Havel developed a strong dependence on this sole means of intellectual expression permitted to him.

Through her occasional letters, Olga grants him vicarious participation in the cherished life outside the prison. That explains Havel's recurring insistence that Olga write to him more often, in more detail, and answer his questions and requests—an insistence that occasionally culminates in downright petulance and frustration. Havel persistently inquires about such mundane matters as the upkeep of their weekend retreat, Hrádeček, their Prague apartment, or Olga's social life.

Naturally, censorship inhibited intimacy and so the letters may be perceived as devoid of true warmth and feeling. Yet Olga's presence is felt, and Havel's dependence on her, his earnest adviser and first critic of his work, is evident. When Havel became seriously ill in prison in early 1983, it was his wife who alerted the intellectual community abroad, whose interventions on Havel's behalf speeded his release from prison before his sentence was terminated.

The final sixteen letters do not constitute a rigorous philosophical treatise, but even so they show Havel's indebtedness to phenomenological thought and illuminate the tenets of his work. At the center is the image of birth that symbolizes the fundamental condition of humankind, the experience of separation and release, of breaking away: Humanity is cast into an alien world and faces the question of who it is. What essentially characterizes humankind is a boundless primal sense of responsibility for others in a world into which it is cast. All individuals share this isolation in a world from which they cannot escape, and this vulnerability and helplessness cry out for compassion. The misery of others reminds them of their own "thrownness" and isolation in the world. It follows that humankind is not only responsible for others but also obligated to shape the environment, free from scientific or ideological determinism.



### SUMMARY

Václav Havel's life and work bear witness to his unwavering humanism, his assertion of individual conscience and responsibility under adverse conditions. His primary interest is devoted to universal dilemmas that transcend the mere historical circumstances of Communist totalitarianism in central Europe and include questions of human identity, fragmentation and alienation, communicational collapse, and existential schizophrenia.

In his essay "Words on Words," Havel describes the earthshaking potential, both beneficial and

detrimental, of language. That words of truth prevail and indeed can change history has been proven by him and the thousands of students, artists, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens who peacefully toppled Czechoslovakia's hard-line Communist regime in 1989.

*Dana Loewy; updated by Stanley Longman*

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*Ztížená možnost soustředění*, pr., pb. 1968 (*The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, 1969)  
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*Odcházení*, pb. 2007, pr. 2008

#### RADIO PLAY:

*Anděl Strážný*, 1968

#### TELEPLAY:

*Motýl na anténě*, 1975

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- A common theme in the works of Václav Havel is the sense of the arbitrary isolation of the individual in a senseless society. Discuss instances of this theme and the bearing it has on Havel's own experience as a revolutionary in Communist Czechoslovakia.
- Havel makes much of the use, misuse, and abuse of language in his plays. Why does he take such interest in this matter?
- Why would Havel have preferred drama to other forms of literature?
- What position does Havel take on the matter of social responsibility? Does the individual owe anything to his or her society?
- Havel's memoir *To the Castle and Back* is composed of pieces from a long interview, selections from his governmental memoranda, and journal entries from his visit to the United States after he had left office. What effect does this structure seem to have? Why did he not write it as a straight chronological memoir?
- In what sense could one argue that Havel's plays are disguised autobiographies?
- What might have led Havel to return to playwriting so many years after he gave it up for the sake of his government work?

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## BESSIE HEAD

**Born:** Pietermaritzburg, South Africa  
July 6, 1937

**Died:** Serowe, Botswana  
April 17, 1986

*An exiled South African writer, Head voiced Africans' perspective on apartheid and other social issues based on her experiences, exposing inequity and despair as her characters, often ostracized because of ethnicity or gender, strived to belong and survive.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Bessie Head was born in the Fort Napier Mental Institution on July 6, 1937, at Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, to Bessie Amelia Birch Emery, the daughter of affluent English immigrants. Her paternity remains unknown, although most sources state that Head's father probably was an African man who tended her grandparents' racehorses. Named Bessie Amelia Emery at birth, the infant Head was placed for adoption because her mentally ill mother remained institutionalized. After Afrikaners refused to raise the biracial child, George and Nellie Heathcote accepted Head as a foster child. Residing in Pietermaritzburg during her early childhood, Head thought Nellie Heathcote was her mother. Her biological mother, of whom she was unaware, died when Head was six years old and provided money for her daughter's education.

In 1950, Head began studies at an orphanage, St Monica's Home, near Durban, South Africa. Head voraciously read literature, savoring the ability to live vicariously through books. Her reading was the catalyst for her interest in writing because she wanted to create similar experiences for readers. A magistrate court eventually revealed that Head's real mother was white and her father African. Her school principal threatened that Head might suffer insanity like her mother. Devastated, the teenage Head questioned her true identity.

By 1953, Head enrolled in a program to become a teacher, completing it two years later. She began teaching primary students in Durban in 1956. In July, 1958, Head moved to Cape Town and started

writing for the *Golden City Post*. The next spring, she relocated to Johannesburg, where she wrote for the *Drum* periodicals, supported political reform, and affiliated with the Pan Africanist Congress.

She married journalist Harold Head on September 1, 1961, at Simonstown. They both secured writing assignments with *The New African*. Head gave birth to her son, Howard, on May 15, 1962. She also completed her manuscript for *The Cardinals* (1993) that year. By February, 1964, Head was separated from her husband, and she secured exit visas for herself and her son so she could leave South Africa to teach in Serowe, Botswana. After being dismissed from her teaching job, Head moved to the Bamangwato Development Farm in early 1966 and then resided in the Francistown refugee camp.

Head's article published in the *New Statesman* in 1966 resulted in her receiving an advance from Simon & Schuster for her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969). By January, 1969, Head had returned to Serowe, where she constructed a home and gardened for the local cooperative, selling produce and gooseberry preserves to supplement her royalties. During 1970, Head wrote another novel, *Maru* (1971).

She experienced an emotional collapse in the spring of 1971, resulting in treatment at the Lobatse Mental Hospital. After being released, Head started a third novel, *A Question of Power* (1973), which was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 1974. In that same year, the Norwegian government granted Head citizenship and asylum in that country, but she decided to stay in Africa,



working on her short-story anthology, *The Collector of Treasures, and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977). Head interviewed community residents and began writing her nonfiction book *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, published in 1981.

Head received expanded global recognition for her writing; journalists for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and *London Magazine* profiled the author. In the summer of 1977, she traveled to the United States to participate in the University of Iowa's International Writing Program workshops. The university library's vast African collection benefited Head's historical research. During her American trip, Head learned that the government of Botswana had denied her request for citizenship, although it eventually designated Head a citizen in February, 1979.

Head wrote *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984) and traveled in Europe and Australia to attend literary events. In February, 1986, her divorce became final. Suffering from hepatitis, Head died on April 17, 1986, at Sekgoma Memorial Hospital in Serowe and was buried in that community's Botolaote Cemetery. Publishers posthumously released several of Head's books, including *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989) and *The Cardinals, with Meditations and Short Stories* (1993).

BessieFest, a celebration of Head's seventieth birthday, was held in July, 2007, and participants, including scholars and colleagues, gathered in African places associated with Head to commemorate her literary achievements. The Bessie Head Trust preserves her Serowe home.

## ANALYSIS

Viewing herself as a humanitarian, Bessie Head wrote to examine her life and community, expressing her awareness of political, religious, and social issues and seeking to depict African cultures authentically. Her characters experience internal turmoil, much like Head did as she dealt with misperceptions and untruths regarding her identity. Head wrote her fiction primarily from a third-person viewpoint, with omniscient observers removed from the situations they described, much like her characters were removed from their native homes and relocated as exiles and refugees to unfamiliar places. These characters, like Head, strive to become part of their new communities and secure acceptance.

As Head's characters endeavor to belong, they often remain outsiders, both to their new communities and to themselves. Head created characters on the periphery, confused not only by their often mixed ancestry but also by peoples' reaction to them. As a result of misunderstandings and assumptions, Head's characters are frequently victimized by generalizations that define them inaccurately and associate negative stereotypes with them. Although some of this categorization is benign, many people maliciously assign identities to exclude or vilify characters.

As Head depicts in *A Question of Power*, deception causes fragile individuals to question their worth and to believe lies. Support or ostracism from their community determines whether characters will thrive or succumb to identifiers beyond their control, such as parentage. Racism within ethnicities, as Head depicts in *Maru*, exposes inequities that seem unnecessary.

Head consistently creates borders as a literary device in her writing; her characters are trapped physically and emotionally by both real and imagined boundaries. Political and legal borders designate rules for characters to abide or resist. Other boundaries, including livestock fences and corals, indicate how the freedom of human beings and animals is restricted on land, with only the sky offering movement without borders. Freedom, however, presents responsibilities and demands accountability.

Gender roles are another important component of Head's writing. Both men and women represent innocence and evil. Rejecting rigid archetypes, Head does not cast all female characters as victims, nor depict males solely as villains. Characters in such works as the *The Cardinals* are complex and display both naïveté and malice. Head creates strong women who are resilient to the challenges presented in patriarchal societies. Some women are depicted as fragile, yet exhibit the strength and resourcefulness to overcome their weaknesses. Many of Head's fictional men are misogynists or predators who torment women, taking advantage of their vulnerabilities by manipulating them or cruelly attacking their insecurities. Some of Head's male characters, however, are compassionate and offer possibilities for salvation; acts of kindness and affection redeem characters.

Power and wealth are also important concerns

in Head's work. Most of her characters are impoverished financially. Rejecting greed and materialism, many of her characters consider the freedom to make unhindered decisions priceless. Their perception of wealth is to possess and share innate qualities of empathy and community. However, some entitled characters scheme, planning how to acquire more monetary wealth and power over people they consider inferior.

Head effectively develops emotions as strong literary elements. Many of her characters experience or indulge in hostile behavior, and both oppressors and victims express their rage. Anger and hate offer her characters the means to intimidate targeted individuals and groups or to resist oppression, often culminating in aggression and violence. Passive characters internalize their fury, punishing themselves instead of their tormentors by allowing their emotions to become irrational and paralyzing. Head emphasizes how peace and hope can enable characters to adapt to their circumstances and to embrace faith in themselves and their community, thus attaining the power to live sanely.

Head uses images of nature to intensify her characterizations and settings. She personifies nature as a fickle character, which both oppresses and rejuvenates human beings. Head's settings are often bleak, particularly the dying bush in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, where even tree roots wither. She uses colors, such as red dust, black vultures, and white ants, to accentuate her imagery and suggest conflicts between individuals, within individuals, and between individuals and nature. Drought represents the depletion of hope and trust that nature will protect, emphasizing the need for Head's characters to summon their inner resources to survive such barrenness.

Interested in portraying Africans realistically, Head gives voice to ordinary people in her novels and nonfiction work, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. She offers an African perspective of natives' roles in that continent's history in *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga*.

## WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER

**First published:** 1969

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Zulu man freed from jail escapes from South Africa into Botswana, where he lives as a refugee, seeking freedom, community, and self-knowledge.*

Survival and rebirth resonate in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The protagonist, Makhaya Maseko, nervously waits in an elderly man's hut in Barolong, South Africa, before daring to cross into independent Botswana. Makhaya burns a note linking him to a bombing plan and reveals he dislikes his tribe and has been imprisoned. Police sirens wail as they pass in the darkness before he climbs barbed wire fences to freedom. Moving blindly in Botswana, Makhaya hears melodious bells that replace the harsh sound of sirens.

Makhaya spends the night with an older woman and a girl, who tell him the bells are worn by the cattle, which move freely. After sunrise, a truck driver offers Makhaya a ride to a crossroads where Makhaya hopes to register as a refugee. At the police station, the policeman knows Makhaya's name, showing him a newspaper article identifying him as a saboteur. Makhaya denies that charge, and the officer says he realizes that Makhaya only thinks about violence but does not pursue it.

Makhaya sees an elderly man, Dinorego, outside the post office and tells him that he desires contentment. Dinorego, an outsider originally from northern Botswana, contemplates Makhaya's fortitude for living in rural Botswana, commenting that God has blessed his village, which is free of crime and violence and rich with generosity and tolerance compared to urban South Africa. Dinorego invites Makhaya to his and his daughter Maria's home in Golema Mmidi. Here, Makhaya encounters a community of women because most of the male villagers are at cattle posts tending their livestock. Dinorego introduces Makhaya to an Englishman, Gilbert Balfour, who aids the natives by providing scientific and cooperative agricultural methods to ease impoverishment. The village's punitive subchief, Matenge, is aware of Makhaya's arrival and suspicious of his intentions.

Makhaya joins Gilbert in his efforts to build res-

ervoirs in order to store water during a prolonged drought, and he agrees to teach women how to erect tobacco storage sheds. During this work, Makhaya meets Paulina Sebesto, also an outsider, who has moved to Golema Mmidi with her daughter after her husband committed suicide. Her son is at a cattle post with the family's cows. Mma-Millipede, a divorced woman who has been Dinorego's friend since childhood, envisions Makhaya and Paulina together. Accepted in the community, Makhaya participates in villagers' rites of passage, including Gilbert and Maria's wedding, and becomes closer to Paulina.

When Paulina's son, who is suffering from tuberculosis, does not return with the other cattle-men, Makhaya travels with Paulina and Gilbert across the dry bush, seeing bones from thousands of famine-stricken cattle and observing dead trees filled with vultures. They reach the hut, where Makhaya shields Paulina from seeing her son's corpse. He stays with the boy's remains and burns them, collecting the ashes in a container that he gives to Paulina, honoring her customs. The Golema Mmidi community gathers at Paulina's hut to grieve. They hope the annual September rain clouds will soon bring relief and restore life to the desolate bush.

When Paulina is summoned to court by a servant of Matenge, Paulina assumes her relationship with Makhaya has upset Matenge, who strictly controls Golema Mmidi. Villagers accompany Paulina as she walks toward Matenge's mansion. The crowd alarms Matenge, who cowers inside after his servants abandon him. The villagers watch Matenge's house, curious about why he has targeted Paulina. Inside, Matenge cries, contemplating his loss of control over the villagers. He realizes his future is gone if the villagers will no longer recognize his authority.

Makhaya enters Matenge's house by knocking the door down. The villagers follow him indoors. They discover that Matenge has hung himself. Although Matenge assumed the villagers threatened

his possessions, they are more interested in the freedom to make decisions. To them, wealth is generosity and compassion. Despite Matenge's cruelties to them, the villagers treat his body with benevolence, not vengeance, gently preparing it for the arrival of his brother, Paramount Chief Sekoto. Sekoto lies about his brother's suicide to protect his family's image and his power. Through her characterization of the brothers, Head emphasizes how fear and charm empower and weaken leaders and their communities.

Makhaya adapts to life in Golema Mmidi, achieving peace from his emotional strife. He proposes marriage to Paulina. Their sacrifices are the catalysts for beginning a new life together, and they will no longer be outsiders.

## A QUESTION OF POWER

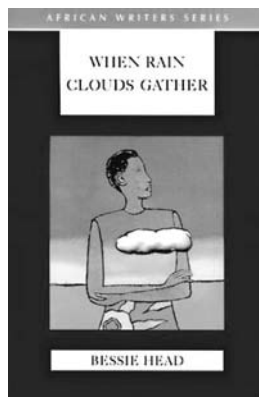
**First published:** 1973

**Type of work:** Novel

*A South African woman exiled in Botswana alternates between experiencing nightmares and normal activities as she struggles with inner and external demons threatening her sanity.*

Head explores emotional instability in *A Question of Power*, which is divided into two halves, representing the two powerful male characters impacting the vulnerable protagonist, Elizabeth. Many scholars consider this powerful novel with strong autobiographical elements to be Head's most significant and provocative work.

In the first section, entitled "Sello," readers learn about Elizabeth's history, beginning with her birth in a South African mental hospital and her mixed racial heritage. Her story closely parallels many aspects of Head's life. Narcissistic men, including her unfaithful husband, have mistreated Elizabeth, who distrusts most males and loathes herself. As an adult living in Motabeng village with her son, whom she calls Shorty, Elizabeth experiences nocturnal visits from a villager named Sello, whom she sees sitting near her bed. Describing Sello as a monk, Elizabeth sleeplessly listens to his comments about poverty and Africa. Although good, Sello seeks to influence Elizabeth's soul



by revealing his susceptibility to evil.

Fragile because she feels like an outsider, Elizabeth obsesses about slights from her community because of her ethnic identity. Powerless, she questions if she belongs and doubts her worthiness. Sello comments about Elizabeth's precarious role in Motabeng. During her nocturnal episodes, Elizabeth also encounters Medusa, whose fury intensifies Elizabeth's despair. Elizabeth absorbs the messages she receives during the night, and her sanity weakens.

Head presents Elizabeth's experiences as streams of bizarre thoughts with intervals of lucidity, as she struggles with her inner demons. Elizabeth questions her sanity because of the absurd things she hears and sees. Head uses bird imagery, including a dead owl on Elizabeth's doorstep, hawks, and songbirds, to indicate Elizabeth's shifts from melancholy to normality.

In the second section, named for Dan, Elizabeth suffers Dan's derisive attacks, which demean her as being inferior to other women and denounce her mixed ethnicity. In her imagination she hears his messages as recordings cycling through the night. Dan is evil and manipulative, and his sadistic words and actions confuse Elizabeth, who often seems delirious as she endures his visits. Interested in controlling Elizabeth's body, Dan frightens her. Elizabeth believes Dan is in her bed with other women, tormenting her with their sexual prowess. His rejection and ridicule cause her mind to twist.

Elizabeth loses control of her emotions during daytime. Community members question her sanity, and she loses her teaching position at the local school because she refuses to convince others she is sane. Eugene, the principal, helps Elizabeth pursue agricultural tasks for the local cooperative. Working closely with an African woman, Kenosi, and an American, Tom, Elizabeth discusses political concerns in Africa and globally. When Tom says he supports Black Power, Elizabeth responds that the Africans might reject him because he is white.

Elizabeth contemplates whether good and evil, and God and Satan, can exist simultaneously within a person. She questions whether she is evil and harmful to others. Her mind exhausted, Elizabeth becomes fragmented and has a nervous breakdown. She talks in her sleep, scaring her son, who hears her rants. Elizabeth attacks an aged woman,

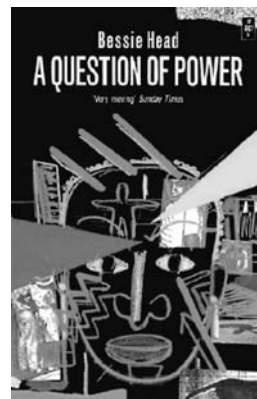
Mrs. Jones, living nearby, and hangs a sign on the Motabeng post office, accusing Sello, whom she blames for provoking her rage, of committing incest with his daughter. Her irrational acts result in her being sent twice to the hospital, where she is sedated.

Discarding the medicine prescribed to her, Elizabeth seizes power over her life. Returning to Motabeng, she embraces her sanity. The cooperative provides Elizabeth a peaceful Eden, where she

can be healed and cultivate land to sustain life. Elizabeth apologizes to Mrs. Jones, who says Elizabeth should trust Jesus, but Elizabeth believes faith exists more in ordinary human beings than in an unseen spiritual being.

As the two split halves of herself, represented by Sello and Dan, are unified, Elizabeth becomes whole. She no longer ex-

ists in fragments, and she believes Sello and Dan have strengthened her. Realizing that the abuse of power is evil, Elizabeth chooses love and self-acceptance instead of victimization and terror and is empowered. She holds her hand above the land to emphasize that she belongs.



## SUMMARY

Bessie Head shaped African literature with her unique perspectives and realism delivered through compelling characterizations, settings, and imagery. Her writing examined universal concerns, specifically understanding people's internal struggles to define and accept themselves and their roles in their communities, as well as the treatment of individuals and groups. Her work revealed how people's perceptions of self and others are often unreliable and resulted in emotional, political, and social paradoxes, antagonism, and persecution.

In addition to her commentary on both white and black suppression of African natives, Head incorporated references to violent racism during the Holocaust and in the United States in order to reinforce her themes of oppression. She emphasized the need for worldwide humanity and unity to com-

bat prejudice by her depiction of diverse peoples, representing various ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes, who overlooked their differences to achieve common benefits. Her messages of joy, love, and autonomy prevail over chaos, humiliation, and the abuses her characters endured.

Elizabeth D. Schafer

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Bessie Head depict power as good or evil, or a combination of both, and which characters most convincingly exhibit those traits?
- Discuss how Head reveals the way insanity can empower characters.
- What boundaries, both physical and emotional, entrap or free Head's characters and how do they react to those borders?
- How does Head depict impoverishment and wealth? Which status seems to empower her characters the most? Why?
- Examine the descriptions of setting that enhance or weaken Head's narratives.
- How do suffering and sacrifice reinforce community in Head's fiction?
- Discuss the role of deception and truth to assert power in Head's novels.
- How does Head use imagery of drought and moisture, including tears, as a literary device?





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## SEAMUS HEANEY

**Born:** Mossbawn, County Derry, Northern Ireland  
April 13, 1939

*The most significant Irish poet since William Butler Yeats, Heaney incorporates the very matter of Ireland, both its physical geography and its expansive history, in his poetry. Out of this rich literary clay he fashions an oeuvre that chronicles Ireland's past and present and heralds its future.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Seamus Heaney (HEE-nee), the eldest of nine children, was born on his Catholic parents' farm in County Derry, Northern Ireland, on April 13, 1939. On his father's side of the family were cattle dealers; on his mother's were mill workers. Heaney would break with both family traditions and embrace a different line of work as a man of letters, but his rural ancestry and the landscapes of his childhood would provide rich fodder for his poetry. The rural-industrial divide between his parents further revealed itself in their speech patterns. In his childhood, Heaney felt torn between his loquacious mother and his reticent father, a tension sustained in the adult poet's style of writing. A second tension was manifest in County Derry where Heaney was reared. Differences in practices and beliefs among Catholic and Protestant neighbors were apparent to the boy at an early age, despite generally peaceful relations between the local sects in the 1940's and 1950's. This experience, too, would provide material for future poetry.

The young scholar attended local grammar schools near Mossbawn, the name accorded the family farm. When Heaney was twelve, a scholarship replaced farm labor with academic pursuits, and he left home to attend St. Columbs College, a boarding school in Derry. His inaugural poem "Digging," published in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), pays homage to the rural life of his forefathers, but from an early age Heaney's preference was for the

life of the mind. Heaney left Derry for Belfast to attend Queen's University. Following completion of English studies, he remained in Belfast, enrolling in postgraduate classes at St. Joseph's College of Education, where he earned a teaching certificate. At this point in his life, Heaney embarked on a teaching career and began writing poems in earnest, dual occupations that would remain constants in his life.

The 1960's were a time of expansion for Heaney in terms of his career, his family, and his publications. For much of the decade, Heaney taught at colleges and universities in Belfast, including positions as a lecturer at St. Joseph's College and later Queen's University. In 1965, he married Marie Devlin, a teacher. Their first son, Michael, was born in 1966, the same year *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney's first collection of poems, appeared in print. A second son, Christopher, was born in 1968; a year later his second volume of poetry, *Door into the Dark* (1969) was published. In addition to teaching, Heaney broadcast education programs on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio and television networks. In 1970, with political violence on the rise in Northern Ireland, Heaney accepted a one-year appointment at the University of California at Berkeley, temporarily relocating his family to the United States. Ironically, instead of fleeing political strife, Heaney encountered it in another form. At Berkeley, student protests over both civil rights and the Vietnam War caused him to assume a more political voice in his own poetry.

Following his year in Berkeley, Heaney formally resigned his post at Queen's University and settled

with his family in the south of Ireland. Their exodus to a rural cottage in Glanmore coincided with the publication of another volume, *Wintering Out* (1972). The influence of political unrest in Northern Ireland and abroad upon his poetry was evident. For the first time the poet's verse ventured from the private sphere into public concerns, and the collection received a subdued response from the critics, many uncomfortable with Heaney's new direction. In 1973, daughter Catherine Ann was born. With his family still lodged at Glanmore, for the next two years Heaney traveled between England and the United States to present lectures and readings of his poetry. In 1975, Heaney accepted a position as chair of the English department at Caryfort College in Dublin, and his family again relocated. *North* (1975), a collection of poems, appeared the same year and received positive appraisal from the critics. The 1970's ended with the publication of *Field Work* (1979) and the new decade began with the simultaneous publications of *Poems, 1965-1975* (1980; pb. in England as *Selected Poems, 1965-1975*, 1980) and *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (1980).

The 1980's found the poet and teacher still dividing his time among Ireland, the United States, and England. In 1982, Heaney took a post at Harvard University in Massachusetts that required his presence on campus only half the year. During his tenure at Harvard, two significant works, *Station Island* (1984) and *The Haw Lantern* (1987) were published. Beginning in 1989, Heaney served as professor of poetry at Oxford University in England, another flexible position that allowed him to focus on his writing. In the 1990's, Heaney produced poems at a prolific rate, also writing prose, plays, and translations. Collections of new poetry included *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1996), and *Audenesque* (1998). Heaney's reputation as a translator was further enhanced upon the publication of *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (1999), a popular and critical achievement. Two volumes of poetry, *Electric Light* (2001) and *District and Circle* (2006), also received positive appraisal in the twenty-first century.

Throughout his career, Heaney has been an advocate for his craft, conducting poetry workshops and judging writing competitions. In the mid-1960's, while teaching at Queen's University, Heaney assumed responsibility for the poetry work-

shop founded by British poet Philip Hobsbaum. In the 1970's, Heaney was an active member of the Republic of Ireland's Arts Council. Honorary degrees from numerous institutions in Ireland and abroad have been awarded Heaney in recognition of his poetry and service. The Irish Academy of Artists and Writers and the American Academy of Arts and Letters count Heaney among their distinguished members. The French Ministry of Culture dubbed Heaney a *Commandeur de L'Ordre des Arts et Lettres*. In 1995, Heaney's reputation as one of the most influential poets of the latter half of the twentieth century was confirmed when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

### ANALYSIS

Critics place Heaney in the Northern School, a loose affiliation of Irish poets who grew up during The Troubles, a period of conflict between various nationalist and unionist forces in Ireland beginning in the late 1960's. This group saw their country torn by political and religious strife for nearly three decades, and their poetry offers a varied response to the events of the times, acts of destructive and deadly violence. Among the writers associated with this group, including Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, Heaney offers the most intimate response. Many of Heaney's poems focus on history, politics, and personal identity; in particular, he examines the individual self both avoiding and embracing broader cultural concerns. For Heaney, the cultural and the personal are separate but bound aspects of a single identity, an idea reminiscent of English poet John Keats's theory of inseparable, but irreconcilable, opposites. Frequently, memory functions in Heaney's poetry as the linking element between self, history, and culture.

Much of Heaney's poetry is written from the first-person perspective and the poet directs his attention to events in his own life and immediate environs. "Digging," the first poem in his first volume, metaphorically connects his father and grandfather's labors breaking turf to the pen that Heaney hoists. "I'll dig with it," he notes in the final line of the poem, and does, into the landscape of his elders and back through the ages. Heaney avoids solipsism by allowing his poetic lens to travel in reverse to encounter generations of family members and centuries of ancestors. "The Tollund Man,"

featured in *Wintering Out*, explores the past through preserved corpses exhumed from the bogs. These remains of sacrificial victims become, in Heaney's verse, a metaphor for sectarian violence in present-day Ireland. Heaney links the two directly in "Punishment," published in *North*, a poem that contrasts sanctions against adulterous women in prehistoric times with reprisals against Irish women who consorted with British soldiers. The first were drowned, the latter tarred and feathered. Heaney questions whether his own position as detached poet, one who records events but does not participate in them, might not be a kind of complicity.

Heaney's poetic form varies from free verse to sonnets to terza rima; that he has mastered so many forms is a testament to his diversity and skill as a poet. However, what grounds his poetry is not a particular form but his ability to link Ireland's past and present through connected themes. Primary among these themes is Heaney's ongoing exploration of the role of the poet in contemporary society. For Heaney, the poet speaks not as a national troubadour, mouthpiece, or social conscience, but from the perspective of an observer, one who relays his own life and experiences as they touch upon and are touched by the experiences of others.

## STATION ISLAND

**First published:** 1984

**Type of work:** Poetry

*A collection of imagistic poems that are confessional in nature.*

Part 1 of this three-part collection contains poems that recount personal events and objects from Heaney's life. In one entry, the poet and his sons fly a kite that becomes emblematic of both the resiliency and the fragility of the human spirit. In another, the fabric of a bathrobe removed from its wearer by her lover is likened to the cloth of religious vestments, simultaneously elevating human sexuality to the level of the divine and returning the spiritual realm to the bodily. These slice-of-life poems capture individual images, snapshots of particular scenes and moments in the poet's life. Col-

lectively viewed as an album, they reinforce what it means to be human.

The title of this collection derives from the middle section, "Station Island." This twelve-part sequence focuses on pilgrimages, both religious and literary. En route to Lough Derg, a traditional destination for devout Irish Catholics, the pilgrim, apparently the poet Heaney, encounters deceased acquaintances and literary personages and engages them in dialogue. Central to their conversations is the role of the artist in relation to national, political, and religious concerns. Certain characters express anger that the poet has not joined the fight that ended their own lives. Others advise the poet to avoid participation in social movements, not merely to preserve the poet's life but to keep pure the poet's craft. Eventually the pilgrim meets James Joyce. The iconic Irish novelist, one of the many dead resurrected in the poem, advises the pilgrim to avoid all nationalistic affiliations. In section 12, Joyce warns against political involvement even for a noble cause: "You lose more of yourself than you redeem / doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent." The resolution at poem's end announces the poet's role as one independent of entanglements with dominant forces. From the margins, the detached poet chronicles a culture from the outside looking in, all the while observing those on the inside pushing out. In "Station Island," Heaney seems to weigh against politically motivated poetry, suggesting that the politics of any age should not push the poet's hand across the page.

Part 3 resurrects Sweeney, the mythical Irish king who was ousted by a saint for refusing to finance construction of a cathedral. Transformed into a bird, Sweeney is both punished for his transgressions and liberated from the chains of nation rule. Heaney first presented Sweeney in his translation of the legend *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (1983; revised as *Sweeney's Flight*, 1992). In the final poems in this collection, Sweeney and Heaney, ousted king and outsider poet, begin to



merge. In his refusal to write the poetry of politics and religion, Heaney, like his alter ego Sweeney, has gained a measure of freedom, a certain poetic license.

## “CLEARANCES”

**First published:** 1987 (collected in *The Haw Lantern*, 1987)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This sonnet sequence eulogizes a mother, reminisces about childhood, and ruminates on life and death.*

*The Haw Lantern* is Heaney’s midlife volume of poetry, a response to the myriad crises that commonly arise during that stage of life. The centerpiece of the collection is the sonnet sequence entitled “Clearances.” These sonnets commemorate the life and mark the death of the poet’s mother, Margaret Kathleen Heaney, whose simultaneous presence and absence are expressed in sparse but vivid imagery.

The first sonnet in the sequence opens with a cobblestone being tossed; the poet notes that it seems aimed at him. The hurled stone is a reference to his maternal great-grandmother, a Protestant who married a Catholic, thereby earning the derision of many in the community; it also symbolizes the unrest that plagued Ireland for so many decades. The aside suggests that Heaney, who has made his mark as a Catholic poet in Northern Ireland, might just as easily have written as a Protestant poet, save for his great-grandmother’s conversion by marriage, a chance stone tossed like a coin flipped. In this series of sonnets, *The Troubles* are closer to home, more personal, and more painful.

The first eight lines of the third sonnet in “Clearances” depict a son peeling potatoes alone with his mother while other household members attend Mass away from home. The next four lines switch to a scene of a priest presiding over the deathbed ritual. As others present in the room recite prayers for the dead or weep, the poet retreats back into this memory in the final couplet: “Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—/ Never closer the whole rest of our lives.” Memory allows him to

experience true communion with his mother, a sacrament no less sacred and far more immediate than the rites for the dead offered by the priest. The fifth sonnet in “Clearances” merges the poet’s memory of unpinning air-dried linen sheets from the line and folding them into squares with his mother, the cloth alternately forming sails in the wind, and, though the poet never writes the word, a shroud for his mother.

## “THE SHARPING STONE”

**First published:** 1996 (collected in *The Spirit Level*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Relying on the images of wood and clay, the poet pays tribute to a deceased father and simultaneously to all crafters, those both of wood and of life.*

In “The Sharping Stone,” Heaney returns to the earthen materials that first composed the subject matter of his poems. The item named in the poem’s title, a sharpening stone, is an instrument used to sharpen metal objects like knives, scissors, and axes. This whetstone also recalls blades used by woodsmen to fell trees and by carvers to hew timber into furniture and other objects for human use. In the first stanza, the poet recovers the sharpening stone from within an apothecary’s drawer as he packs up the now deceased man’s possessions. Intended as a gift for the older man, its future use is called into question.

In scope, the poem travels from present to past, from Ireland to other countries, and projects into a future time and place: the land of the dead. Engaged in the act of retrieving the whetstone from a cedar drawer, the poet ponders where next to place this tool. In the second stanza, memory guides the poet to a forest park and to two tree trunks “Prepared for launching, at right angles across / A causeway of short fence-posts set like rollers.” A side excursion to the Louvre Museum in Paris temporarily displaces both Ireland and wooden objects from the poem. The poet recalls an Etruscan clay double sarcophagus, one intended for the burial of a married couple. The image on its casing displays

husband and wife, two figures recumbent and content. As the stanza closes, the image is revealed to adorn a postcard sent to the father, who claimed it among his possessions, and in this manner the focus of the poem returns to the wooden drawer and its contents.

The image of a ship set to launch, introduced in the second stanza, returns in the fifth. The poet ponders placing the sharpening stone in its drawer and allowing both to drift downriver, recalling Viking rituals of sending the dead out to sea with provisions for the afterlife. Drawers, coffins, and boats are repositories for objects, whether sharpening stones, corpses, or passengers. The instruments that the artisans employed to craft these containers were sharpened by whetstones similar to the one the poet has retrieved. What connects sharpening stone to tool, and tool to drawer, and the wooden objects to each other, is the human crafter. Nature provides for people and people craft natural materials into serviceable objects to accommodate their journeys, which inevitably reach death. That Hea-

ney considers forwarding the sharpening stone to the deceased hints at the possibility that the human odyssey extends beyond death.

## SUMMARY

Seamus Heaney follows in the footsteps of William Butler Yeats, the premier Irish poet, with whom Heaney is frequently ranked and compared. Heaney was born the same year Yeats died, 1939, and some critics view this happenstance as a symbolic passing of the poetic torch in Ireland. As a modern-day Yeats, Heaney still wrestles with questions that plagued his compatriot a century earlier. Does poetry matter in a violence-ridden world? What responsibility does the poet share for the despair that ensnares so many people in his or her country? Heaney avoids definite answers to these questions; instead he chronicles personal events and experiences in poems that comprise a microcosm of Irish life in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Dorothy Dodge Robbins

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What role do Seamus Heaney's rural upbringing and the landscape of his childhood play in his poetry?
- How do bogs function in Heaney's poetry as representations of the life and culture of the Irish people?
- In "Digging," what connections does Heaney make between the craft of writing and the labor of cutting turf?
- How does communication between the living and the dead function as a motif in "Station Island"?
- Describe the relationship between poet and mother in "Clearances" and poet and father in "The Sharping Stone."
- How does Heaney's poetry address the historical conflicts between unionist Protestants and nationalist Catholics in Northern Ireland?



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## ANNE HÉBERT

**Born:** Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, Quebec, Canada

August 1, 1916

**Died:** Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
January 22, 2000

*Dramatist, poet, short-story writer, and novelist, Hébert, one of Canada's most accomplished writers, was principally known for her brooding characters and mysterious worlds.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, a village near Quebec City, on August 1, 1916, to Maurice Hébert and Marguerite Marie Taché, Anne Hébert (ay-bahr) was the eldest of four children. With her brothers, Jean and Pierre, her sister, Marie, and her parents, Hébert lived in Quebec City, and spent her summers in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault. She was reared in a cultivated and privileged French Canadian family whose ancestry dated back through her father's side to the first farmer in New France. Maurice Hébert, a civil servant, became known as a writer and literary critic. Her maternal grandfather was the architect for the legislative building in Quebec City. In this atmosphere, Hébert received an informal but impressive education from her father, who encouraged her in her efforts to write poetry, and from whom she learned much about the French language.

In addition to what she learned at Collège Notre-Dame-de-Bellevue and Collège Mérici in Quebec City, Hébert received a cultural and literary education in the circle of family and friends. An important figure in her childhood was her cousin, four years older than she, the poet Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, who spent his summers at Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault. During her late adolescence, Hébert developed an interest in theater, and with Saint-Denys Garneau and others who were to become notables in the Quebec literary

world, she put on plays in the church hall in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault.

In 1939, Hébert had begun publishing her poems in journals. Some of these poems would appear in her first collection, *Les Songes en équilibre* (1942; dreams in equilibrium), for which she received an important Canadian literary award, the Prix David. Her writing career was launched. For years after the death in 1943 of her cousin, Hébert worked on a collection of short stories, published in 1950 as *Le Torrent* (*The Torrent: Novellas and Short Stories*, 1973). The repressive atmosphere of a Roman Catholic church in Quebec is depicted in this work. Consequently, Hébert was forced to pay for the work's publication; she was unable to find a publisher willing to accept the manuscript. The Roman Catholic Church alienated many of the young artists, writers, and intellectuals of the time.

From 1945 to 1954, Hébert was involved in radio and film, working for Radio-Canada, the French branch of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Film Board of Canada. Her screenplay, *Saint-Denys Garneau* (1960), is a testament to the life and work of her brilliant cousin.

In 1954, Hébert received an award from the Royal Society of Canada, which enabled her to move to Paris and to devote herself to her career as a writer. At that time, Hébert settled in Paris, although she occasionally returned to Quebec. Hébert was one of very few Québécois writers whose works were published in France.

*Les Chambres de bois* (1958; *The Silent Rooms*, 1974), Hébert's first novel, published in France in 1958,

was awarded three prestigious prizes. In 1960, her father died. In the same year, Hébert was elected to the Royal Society of Canada, and in 1961 received the Prix du Gouverneur Général du Canada for *Poèmes* (1960; *Poems*, 1975), a revised version of her earlier work, *Le Tombeau des rois* (1953; *The Tomb of the Kings*, 1967). During the 1960's, thanks in part to a writing grant received from the Canada Council of the Arts, Hébert wrote *Kamouraska* (1970; English translation, 1973). This novel is considered to be one of the finest masterpieces of modern Canadian literature. In 1971, it was awarded the Prix des Libraires de France. Psychologically spellbinding, it moves from past to present, telling of the symbolic imprisonment of Elisabeth d'Aulnières, who, once involved in a passionate and brutal love affair, lives in an emotionless and rigid nineteenth century Quebec. In 1973, the novel was made into a film bearing the same title by the Quebec director Claude Jutra. For her life work, Hébert received the Prix David again in 1978; she was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1968 and an Officer of the National Order of Quebec in 1985.

Hébert continued to produce complex works that, often expressing a dichotomous view of existence—past and present, good and evil, reality and unreality—were eerie and fascinating. She made a compelling and original contribution to Canadian literature in particular and to world literature in general. She died of bone cancer in Montreal on January 22, 2000.

## ANALYSIS

Poet, dramatist, novelist, writer of short stories and novellas, and script writer, Hébert offered, in all of her works, a singular vision possessing a magical lucidity that saw beyond the mundane. While she wrote exclusively in French, she was nevertheless one of the few contemporary Canadian writers whose work was known throughout the world. Virtually all of her works were translated into English; *Kamouraska* has been translated into English, Finnish, Italian, German, Japanese, Spanish, and Czech. During a writing career spanning more than five decades, Hébert succeeded in portraying alienated and marginal characters, people whose destiny is more powerful than they. She also succeeded in creating a modern literary text that invites introspection and contemplation of life's mystery, breaking with the mode of traditional realism.

Her first collection of poetry, *Les Songes en équilibre*, bears the traits of a beginning mastery of verse. Hébert composed many of the poems in the collection in her early twenties. The poems are experiments with free verse, short lines, and the evocation of brief impressions. This collection contains traces of the poetic themes to be expressed so eloquently in her later works. Some of these themes are the foreboding created by death, the artist and the romantic vision of a dream world, and the recurring image of hands.

First published in its original language in 1950, *The Torrent* is a collection of six short prose works, one of which bears the title "Le Torrent" ("The Torrent"). In "The Torrent," François Perrault is brutally treated by his mother, "big Claudine," who, refusing to accept his decision not to return to school, renders him deaf by striking him on the head several times with a handful of keys. From this time on, a state of dispossession takes hold of François, who later becomes partially responsible for the violent death of his mother, and who isolates himself. His solitude is disturbed by his desires for a woman. He succeeds in buying a woman with feline eyes, whom he names Amica, from an itinerant peddler. Their relationship ends when Amica robs François and deserts him. He is left alone, weakened by a life of disappointment, and, in a lucid moment, wishes to lose himself in a mirror's reflection of his emptiness.

With *The Tomb of the Kings*, Hébert's fascination with death, physical constraint, and dispossession became evident. With a stark style that is characteristic of Hébert, these twenty-seven poems evoke a desire for introspection, for the other side of existence. The image of a woman's hands bears traces of life's experiences, a vivisection, and some bloody and horrible scene.

The title of the book *The Silent Rooms* refers to one of the book's poems, "La Chambre de bois" (literally, a wooden room), in *The Tomb of the Kings*. Its poetic form and its short unnumbered chapters, grouped in three parts, without transitions between them, draw attention to the lack of references to space and time. The reader does learn, however, that the rooms of the title are located in modern Paris. Despite this realistic element, the novel is dreamlike, weaving itself around psychological glimpses that reveal a fascination with death and an ultimate acceptance of life. Michel, a young

man of artistic temperament, and Catherine, the central character, begin a relationship that leads her through a process of self-discovery, commencing with Michel's attempts to confine her to a deathlike existence in their wooden rooms, and culminating in her realization that she wishes to liberate herself from Michel's oppressive presence. Catherine succeeds in doing so; in an unnamed Mediterranean landscape—warm, sultry, and framed by the sea and olive trees—she falls in love with Bruno, incarnation of light and vitality, and thus begins a new life.

The publication of *Kamouraska* marked a divergence in Hébert's career because it is based on a murder that took place in nineteenth century Quebec, in the town of Kamouraska. It is for this novel that she is best known in the English-speaking world. Elisabeth d'Aulnières is imprisoned for the murder of her husband, Antoine Tassy, while her lover and accomplice, George Nelson, successfully escapes to the United States. Like Catherine in *The Silent Rooms*, Elisabeth, once released from prison, leads a claustrophobic life with her new husband, Jérôme Rolland. In flashbacks, she relives the passion she shared with Nelson.

*Les Enfants du sabbat* (1975; *Children of the Black Sabbath*, 1977) is set in Quebec in 1944. Just as *Kamouraska* shifts between past and present, *Children of the Black Sabbath* alternates between images of pious religion and pagan witchcraft. The nun Sister Julie, a child of two practitioners of witchcraft—Adélarde, the devil incarnate, and Philomène—has been initiated by them into the practices of the black sabbath. Having mysteriously become pregnant within the convent, she is believed to be carrying the devil's child, and she undergoes an unsuccessful exorcism before giving birth, in a nightmarish scene, to a child half human and half beast. In so doing, she unleashes the forces of evil among the Sisters of the Precious Blood.

*L'Enfant chargé de songes* (1992; *Burden of Dreams*, 1994) recounts the childhood of Julien Vallières in an isolated area of rural Quebec, where he lives under the domination of his obsessive mother, Pauline. Julien's life is irremediably changed after he meets a mysterious and passionate young woman, Lydie Bruneau. Wild and indomitable, thundering through the countryside on horseback, she releases Julien's carnal desires, longing for love, and

a desire for a fuller appreciation of life. Hébert's aesthetics transcended the commonplace and the fashionable, underlining her uniqueness as a writer who contemplated the dichotomous nature of life.

### "MYSTERY OF THE WORD"

**First published:** "Mystère de la parole,"  
1960 (collected in *Poems*, 1975)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A cornerstone for Hébert's poetic aesthetics, this poem tells of the importance of language in an untamed and newly created land.*

Mysterious, brooding, and introspective, Hébert's poetry is distinctly her own. Her third collection of poetry, *Poems*, contains the poems of the previously published *The Tomb of the Kings*. A second section contains a short prose text, "Poetry, Broken Solitude," and fifteen poems, including the poem "Mystery of the Word." This poem has a sweeping biblical style and a solemn tone that speaks of possession, belonging, discovery, and beginnings. Whereas in *The Tomb of the Kings* Hébert evokes death and dispossession, in "Mystery of the Word" she celebrates life and the creative power of the word. Composed of sixteen long lines, "Mystery of the Word" recounts the birth of a primitive society that receives the gift of fire. The fullness and splendor of fire's horror are revealed to the society.

The text opens in a tranquil landscape, miraculously awakened by enlightening forces that instill in the individual a sense of belonging and magical wonderment. Received by outstretched hands like a sword, this event is an ennobling experience. Odorous arrows, a metaphor describing the fullness of sensuality, inevitably draw the senses to ferns, leaves, flowers, damp wood, blue grasses, and the ambient world, expressed as a musk-laden beast. Colors and sounds, personified, visit this new land in masses while the enchantment of dreams seizes the minds of the innocent.

As if by a curtain rising on a stage, announced by three beats of a stick (which is compared to the rhythmic pulsation of blood), the fullness of the

world is revealed, and, in an instant, takes hold of the human psyche. With it, the gift of the word is received, and seizes everything in a sweeping gesture. Through words, humanity and dawn, symbolic of the beginning of a civilization, become one. Forest and city, untamed lands and civilized collectives dot the land, which has become identifiable by the use of language.

The humanizing quality of language, its capacity to express the fullness of existence, makes it an indispensable element in the foundation of civilization and culture. It should be noted that Hébert's conception of the primordial importance and power of language is consistently expressed throughout her work. In the final verse of "Mystery of the Word," the narrative voice expresses the desire that the individual possessing the power of the word assume the responsibility of telling of life and death, at dawn among the grasses. This poem confirms the place of language in Hébert's aesthetics; for Hébert, language is the means by which the fullness of existence, including dreams and inexplicable manifestations of the unknown, is powerfully and simply expressed.

## KAMOURASKA

**First published:** *Kamouraska*, 1970 (English translation, 1973)

**Type of work:** Novel

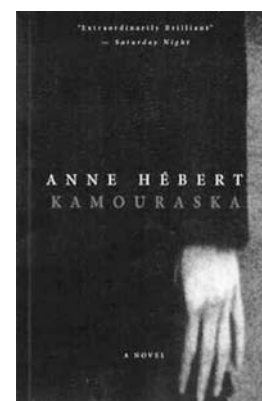
*By her second husband's deathbed, Elisabeth d'Aulnières recalls a passionate love affair that led to the slaying of her first husband, for which she was imprisoned.*

*Kamouraska* is based upon the murder in 1839 of Achille Taché, squire of Kamouraska, which was plotted and carried out by Doctor George Holmes, the lover of Madame Taché, Elisabeth d'Estimauville. Holmes escaped prosecution by fleeing to Vermont, and in 1841 Madame Taché was found not guilty of the murder of her husband. In 1843, she married Léon-Charles Clément, a notary and later in his life a member of the Canadian parliament. Hébert alters the true events somewhat. In Hébert's novel, Elisabeth's flashbacks are the means by which the past floods into the present. Elisabeth

d'Aulnières's psyche is the means through which the plot unfolds. In Hébert's work, the first husband is named Antoine Tassy, and the lover George Nelson.

The novel, divided into unnumbered chapters, opens as Elisabeth sits at the bedside of her dying husband, Jérôme Rolland, in the family home in Quebec City. Thinking of her tearless eyes behind the black crepe veil she will wear in mourning, Elisabeth recalls the murder of her first husband, and the subsequent two months spent in prison. A dutiful wife for the past eighteen years, living an honorable and upright life, she appears in the eyes of the dying man as a triumphant figure of transfigured death. Flashbacks, daydreams, and nightmares express her repressed rage at standing trial for poisoning Tassy and for being abandoned by her lover, who raced wildly to freedom across the snow in a bloodied sleigh. She also rages at her powerlessness; a once passionate woman, she must conform to the puritanical mores of nineteenth century Quebec. As she witnesses her husband's death, Elisabeth realizes that she is in a living death. She recalls the truly vital life she had led before becoming Madame Rolland and assuming an identity that was intended to offer renewal but that, in actuality, represents another form of imprisonment.

One of the most powerful images of *Kamouraska* is the bloodied flight of Nelson across the snow to Vermont. He appears as a demon, released with furious force, soaked in blood, his black whiskers and ruddy dark complexion contrasting with the whiteness of the snow. The final scene of the novel, cast in the whiteness of bed linens and pallor of death, portrays a peaceful Rolland, who accepts his approaching death, having received his last rites, and therefore having a cleansed soul. He comforts his wife, who has awakened from a nightmare in which she saw herself, black, dug up from the earth, clinging to an immense lust for life, and running, begging and weeping, through the streets.





## CHILDREN OF THE BLACK SABBATH

**First published:** *Les Enfants du sabbat*, 1975  
(English translation, 1977)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two worlds, one Roman Catholic, the other satanic, struggle for authority within a young woman.*

Hébert's dualistic perception of existence is seen in *Children of the Black Sabbath*, set in Quebec in 1944, with flashbacks to the preceding decade. Satanic rituals in an isolated mountainous area and religious ceremonies performed in the Convent of the Precious Blood are juxtaposed by means of narrative shifts. Witchcraft, demonic possession, exorcism, and satanic initiation find their corollaries in prayers, dedication to God, Mass, and initiation into cloistered life. In *Héloïse* (1980; English translation, 1982), set in Paris, Hébert depicts two worlds, one above (that of the living) and one below (that of the living dead, notably of vampires). In *Children of the Black Sabbath* she creates a similar dichotomous world. Whereas *Héloïse* is not without ironic humor (the vampires portrayed in it are fond of Bloody Marys, for example), *Children of the Black Sabbath* presents with great clarity the debauchery of both worlds.

Sister Julie of the Trinity was reared with her brother Joseph by practitioners of sorcery. Adélaré was their father and the devil incarnate, and Philomène was their mother. Sister Julie is carried back through dreams and memories to her childhood, where she was witness to lustful perversion,

drunken behavior, and satanic rituals. Now, in the apparent calm of the convent, she must reconcile her past with her present as a cloistered nun in the Convent of the Precious Blood. Her presence does, however, cause great disturbances, not only because of her inexplicable pregnancy, which produces in the novel's final scene the nightmarish image of a half-human, half-beast newborn, but also because it seems to unleash forces that free the nuns from the stultifying and supremely deceitful ways of convent life. Vowed to silence and personal deprivation, they soon become inclined to hallucinations, blasphemous behavior, and to rebellion, through erotic dreams, against the vow of chastity.

*Children of the Black Sabbath* is unsettling in its depiction of sordid sexual initiation in the world of sorcerers and deceit within the walls of the convent. As do many of Hébert's other works, this novel probes the traditional conception of reality, suggesting the existence of another world that is dark and powerful.

### SUMMARY

Anne Hébert, in a prolific and distinguished career, produced remarkable prose and poetic works, all of which adhered to a conception of life as a mysterious force, struggling to maintain equilibrium in its desires and obsessions. Choosing a rich, lucid, and wonderfully evocative style, she succeeded in creating aesthetic dimensions that are distinctly her own. Her writings, rather than being rational and realistic, combined dream and reality and unforeseen shifts in time and place. A supremely resonant voice, Hébert was, indeed, one of the most compelling writers of the twentieth century.

*Kenneth W. Meadwell*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What aspects of Anne Hébert's French Canadian background have been useful for her?
- What were the chief limitations of Hébert's French Canadian background upon her career?
- What traits in Hébert's writing seem to have made her more successful in France than other French Canadian writers?
- Demonstrate how Hébert was able to take literary advantage of the repressive aspects of Roman Catholic authority.
- Cite instances of the importance and power of language in Hébert's volume *Poems*.
- Discuss the function of dreams in propelling the plot of *Kamouraska*.



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## HEINRICH HEINE

**Born:** Düsseldorf, Prussia (now in Germany)  
December 13, 1797

**Died:** Paris, France  
February 17, 1856

*Heine is internationally celebrated as one of the greatest lyric poets of his time, as well as the author of vivid, frequently satiric prose works.*

### BIOGRAPHY

When Heinrich Heine (HI-nuh) misstated his birth date as January 1, 1800, and described himself as “one of the first men of the nineteenth century,” he was not only exploiting the dual sense of “first”—earliest and foremost—but also engaging in a characteristic bit of obfuscation. Heinrich Heine was actually born Chaim Harry Heine on December 13, 1797, in Düsseldorf, Prussia (now in Germany), the son of Samson Heine, a merchant, and Betty (or Peira) von Geldern Heine. Both his given name, Harry, and his family name derived from Chaim (the latter by way of Heymann or Heinemann). The Jewish antecedents of the poet’s parents were impressive, but in his parental home Judaism had been downgraded. The boy received only a spotty Jewish education in a Jewish school, but later he was sent to a lyceum attached to a Franciscan monastery, where the teaching was done largely by French priests. There, Heine received an early taste of the French culture and spirit, coupled with his love of Napoleon I, to which Heine was later to become so attached. Napoleon the conqueror and emancipator had brought hope and freedom to German Jewry, but after his defeat many of the old restrictions were put in force again. Following a brief sojourn in Frankfurt, Heine was set up in business in Hamburg by his wealthy uncle Salomon Heine. A failure in business and in love

(his affection for his cousins Amalie and Therese was unrequited), he was nevertheless a published poet at age twenty.

After attending the universities of Bonn and Göttingen, he spent two and a half fruitful years in Berlin, where he studied and frequented literary salons. In 1822, he joined the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden (Society for Jewish Culture and Scholarship), a group that strove to continue Moses Mendelssohn’s work of cultural emancipation. That autumn, he visited Prussian Poland and came to appreciate the self-assurance and unity of the eastern Jews, who, unlike German Jewry, were not prey to heterogeneous emotions and resentments. Heine, however, converted to Protestantism on June 28, 1825, shortly before taking a doctorate of laws at Göttingen, and was now called Christian Johann Heinrich Heine. The adoption of Lutheranism, the state religion of Prussia, was to have facilitated the poet’s law practice, which he never even attempted, or to have procured a professorship for him, which did not happen. Referring to his baptism as his “ticket of admission to European culture,” Heine often expressed himself in ironic, cynical, and even self-lacerating terms. Paradoxically, his Jewish awareness and education really began with this conversion, and Heine particularly prized the Bible, which he regarded as the “portable fatherland” of the Jews.

Heine spent the last twenty-five years of his life in exile. Attracted by the July Revolution of 1830, but also because he could not find any suitable employment in Germany and was bedeviled by censorship, he went to Paris in 1831, where he was to

spend the rest of his life, except for brief and furtive visits to Germany in 1843 and 1844. Associating with such famed French writers as Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, and Charles Baude-laire, Heine became an indefatigable cultural mediator, interpreting his native land to the French and vice versa and creating or introducing literary forms new to German literature, such as the travel letter and the *feuilleton*, an elegant, witty, stylistically brilliant essay on many aspects of culture. Until 1848, Heine was supported by a pension from the French government, and he also received an annual subvention from his uncle Salomon, though the latter's death in 1844 marked the beginning of family strife. In Paris, Heine remained what he had always been: a German Jew full of conflicts and contradictions. In 1849, he averred that he was no longer an admirer of the pleasure-loving Hellenes but merely an ailing Jew. After abandoning his flirtation with atheism, polytheism, and hedonistic paganism, he moved closer to a personal and transcendent God, but he remained ambivalent to the end.

After living with a young French shopgirl named Crescentia Eugénie Mirat (whom he called Mathilde) for seven years, he married her in 1841. In his last years, he suffered from a syphilitic infection, a progressive crippling malady that paralyzed his body but not his mind or spirit. During the last eight years of his life, he wasted away in the *Matratzengruft*, his self-styled mattress grave or crypt. Heine died in Paris on February 17, 1856, and was buried in the cemetery of Montmartre, at his own request without the ministrations of clergy.

## ANALYSIS

Heine's relatively brief life span encompassed such crucial and formative events as the rise and fall of Napoleon I, the Congress of Vienna, and the failed revolutions of 1830 and 1848. In German literature, the currents during Heine's lifetime were Romanticism, the Junges Deutschland (Young Germany) movement (a journalistic, political, and polemical movement), and poetic realism. Heine described himself as the last of the Romantics and sat in judgment on German Romanticism in *Die romantische Schule* (1836; *The Romantic School*, 1876), published in 1836 mainly for the benefit of French readers. By virtue of his activism, Heine is widely

considered as the leading and possibly only poetic (rather than merely journalistic and ephemeral) member of the group of young revolutionary firebrands, polemicists, and reformers of the Young Germany movement.

Heine grew up when German Jewry was taking its first, faltering steps "from the ghetto into Europe," to use Arthur Eloesser's phrase, a step that these Jews had been enabled to take by the work of two great men—Mendelssohn in the cultural sphere and Napoleon in the political and legal arena. German Jewry's struggle for emancipation is most strikingly symbolized in Heine, and his creative tension derives from the turbulence of his time. In him the *Weltschmerz*, the Romantic pessimism and sadness over the evils of the world and the precariousness of the human condition, mingled with his convoluted Jewishness. When Heine made his famous statement, "Der Riss der Zeit geht durch mein Herz," he meant that the maelstrom of conflicting religious, political, social, and cultural currents near the beginning of the German-Jewish symbiosis and the Industrial Age was producing a rift in his heart.

A remarkable blend of the Jewish and the German past may be found in *Der Rabbi von Bacherach* (1887; *The Rabbi of Bacherach*, 1891), a fragmentary prose work that Heine wrote in an effort to celebrate medieval Jewish life in the manner of Sir Walter Scott's depiction of medieval Scottish life. In the years following his conversion, Heine produced the great works that were to bring him worldwide fame and stature, variously, as the German Aristophanes, the German François Rabelais, the German Lord Byron, the German Voltaire, and the German Jonathan Swift. In 1826 and 1827, he published a volume of *Reisebilder* (1826-1831; *Pictures of Travel*, 1855), and 1827 saw the publication of *Buch der Lieder* (*Book of Songs*, 1856), the most popular poetry collection of the nineteenth century. Like its earlier and later companion volumes, this book contains poems that combine simplicity with sophistication and subtlety, poignance with eloquence, and epigrammatic concision with an expansive folk-song quality, in addition to presenting intentional dissonances and vulgarity in the manner of what has been termed romantic irony. In form, Heine's poems range from memorable epigrams of a few lines to brilliant ballads and extensive verse epics. *Book of Songs* contains such major

cycles as “Junge Leiden” (“Youthful Sorrows”), “Lyrisches Intermezzo” (“Lyrical Intermezzo”), “Die Heimkehr” (“The Homecoming”)—which includes “Lorelei” (“Loreley”), Heine’s best-known poem and, in Friedrich Silcher’s setting, widely regarded as a folk song—and “Die Nordsee” (“The North Sea”). Heine’s poetry inspired musical settings by Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt, Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolf, Richard Strauss, and other composers. In general, Heine’s works are as much “fragments of a great confession” as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s are. “Out of my great pains I make little songs,” Heine once wrote.

One of Heine’s two tragedies is *Almansor* (1823; English translation, 1905), which explores the conflicts between Moors and Christians in medieval Spain and may be regarded as a parable of the situation of German Jewry in Heine’s day. In it, the Moor Hassan’s reply to Almansor’s horrified remark about the burning of the Koran in the marketplace of Granada contains these words of chilling prescience: “That was only a prelude; where one burns books, one is going to wind up burning people, too.”

Louis Untermeyer, an outstanding biographer and translator of Heine, has pointed out that the poet’s ethnic inheritance is expressed in the flavor of his writings, which is not bittersweet, as it has often been characterized, but sweet and sour, the result of generations of cultural, as well as culinary, pungency. Heine’s wry wit and comic stance have led another noted critic, S. S. Praver, to discern a “reasonably straight” line from Heine to Philip Roth, Woody Allen, or Mel Brooks.

## GERMANY: A WINTER’S TALE

**First published:** *Deutschland: Ein*

*Wintermärchen*, 1844 (English translation, 1892)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*Based on his furtive trip to his native Germany from his Parisian exile, this work takes an irreverent look at many aspects of Germany’s history, culture, and present conditions.*

The title of *Germany: A Winter’s Tale* is reminiscent of William Shakespeare’s play *The Winter’s Tale* (pr. c. 1610-1611, pb. 1623), and the work shows Heine at the poetic peak of his radical phase. This frequently lighthearted but rarely lightweight verse epic is an impishly witty chronicle of the exiled writer’s first visit to Germany in October, 1843. Heine’s work was published as a supplement to his collection *Neue Gedichte* (1844; *New Poems*, 1858) in September, 1844, was reprinted separately the following month, and then appeared uncut in installments in the Paris revolutionary journal *Vorwärts* (forward) in October and November, the first two printings having been proscribed and confiscated by the German authorities. Representing Heine’s answer to the bombastic political poetry of his time, *Germany: A Winter’s Tale* takes a refreshingly irreverent look at many German conditions and attitudes, particularly symbols of German nationalism and conservatism. The poet attempts to bring some fresh air into the musty corners of the German past and sweep away the Romanticists’ fascination with an idealized medievalism. It helps to remember that Heine’s native country was still decades away from being united; in his time, Germany was an agglomeration of thirty-six petty principalities, each headed by a king, a duke, a bishop, or another kind of potentate. Heine excoriates the backward political and social structure, as well as the hidebound mentality, of a land that was still under the spell of absolutism, feudalism, and nationalism.

Heine’s poetic sequence consists of twenty-seven sections, each called a *caput* (head, heading, or chapter). In his four-line stanzas, the poet employs colloquial language and a meter based on iambic stresses. The second and fourth lines are rhymed, frequently in the comic punning fashion



familiar to American readers from the poems of Ogden Nash or Dorothy Parker. The vibrant, dynamic effect achieved by Heine is reminiscent of facile folk poetry or folk songs and has inspired a number of imitations and updated adaptations.

In the opening caput, the traveling poet describes his emotions as he, Antaeus-like, touches the soil of his native country again for the first time in a dozen years. A sort of pie-in-the-sky song sung by a harp-playing girl makes him think of replacing the lullabies of institutionalized religion with rousing secular songs about liberty and a good life for everyone here on earth. In the next section, Heine reflects on the connection between snooping Prussian customs agents and censors looking for intellectual contraband. Caput 3, set in Aachen, is a satiric sally against the stiffness of Prussian soldiers and the outworn relics of medievalism. In Cologne, the poet remembers the clerical narrow-mindedness of that city and the legend that the bones of the Three Wise Men from the East are interred in its famous cathedral. Caput 5 presents a hilarious conversation with Father Rhine, the river having long been a bone of contention between the Germans and the French. The poet then symbolically communes, in the nocturnal city, with the ax-bearing executor of his ideas, who then smashes, in the poet's dream, the skeletons of the Wise Men, representing false beliefs. After remembering Napoleon the libertarian, Heine reaches Westphalia and enjoys succulent German food again. Traveling through the Teutoburg Forest, where the Cheruscan chieftain Arminius (or Hermann) vanquished the Roman legions of Varus in 9 C.E., Heine wonders what Roman greatness his mediocre contemporaries would have achieved if the outcome of that battle had been different. A nocturnal breakdown of his carriage gives Heine a chance to make a pompous speech to some wolves and assure them that he is one of them. A roadside crucifix stirs thoughts of Christ and the dangers faced by idealists.

In caputs 14, 15, 16, and 17, Heine concerns himself with the so-called Kyffhäuser Legend, according to which Emperor Frederick Barbarossa

(Frederick I Barbarossa) and his retinue are asleep in a Thuringian mountain cave and will come to the aid of their country in its hour of need. The poet fantasizes that the emperor shows him around and asks to be updated on political and cultural figures; but the two quarrel, though an apologetic Heine admits, somewhat ironically, that some aspects of the past are preferable to the present. Following a nightmarish encounter with the Prussian eagle, a symbol of confinement and oppression, and after slogging through the mud of Bückeburg, Heine finally reaches Hamburg (caput 20) and is reunited with his beloved

(and quintessentially Jewish) mother, who serves her son a sumptuous meal. The poet comments on the people and places of Hamburg, a large part of which was destroyed in a conflagration of May, 1842. On a street, he encounters a majestic woman who, far from being a lady of the evening, turns out to be Hammonia, the "guardian goddess" of Hamburg, and claims to be the daughter of Charlemagne. The rest of Heine's work contains his conversations with her. Assessing his situation and stature, she warmly invites him to return to Hamburg and even vouchsafes him a glimpse of Germany's future in a sort of enchanted chamber pot, but the poet is almost overcome by the stench. (It is interesting to note that a German recording of this work, complete with music and sound effects, briefly presents the voice of Adolf Hitler at this point). In a rather weak conclusion, Heine describes himself as an heir of Aristophanes and, referring to the *Inferno*, the first canticle of Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), entreats the king of Prussia to treat poets well, while warning him that they would be able to condemn him to eternal damnation.



## “HEBREW MELODIES”

**First published:** “Hebräische Melodien,”

1851 (collected in *Jewish Stories and Hebrew Melodies*, 1987)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*The poet celebrates the Sabbath observance, remembers one of the great figures of medieval Hebrew poetry, and passes a sardonic judgment on representatives of both Judaism and Christianity.*

Heine’s sequence of three poems on Jewish themes forms part of his collection *Romanzero* (1851; English translation, 1859). The title was undoubtedly suggested by the *Hebrew Melodies* (1815) of Lord Byron.

The poems reflect both continuity and change as far as the poet’s attitude toward Judaism and his Jewish heritage is concerned. “Prinzessin Sabbat” (“Princess Sabbath”) presents, in thirty-eight unrhymed stanzas, a warmly evocative account of the Sabbath observance in a synagogue. On the eve of the Jewish day of rest, Israel (that is, a Jew) is temporarily freed from the witch’s curse that has transformed him into a dog and enters the house of prayer like a prince ready to meet his princess, the personification of the Sabbath, who is as humble and quiet as she is beautiful. Heine describes the richly symbolic festive bustle in the synagogue as the princess promises her beloved culinary delights. Such treats stir visions of biblical scenes, but the waning of the Sabbath threatens to transform the observant Jew into a workaday beast again. The poem ends with a description of the traditional *Havdalah* ceremony. The smell of a spice box sustains the worshipers, who are saddened and weakened by the need to bid the Sabbath farewell, and a few drops of wine serve to extinguish the candle and thus the day of rest.

“Jehuda ben Halevy,” the longest poem in this sequence, has twenty-four stanzas and almost nine hundred lines, and yet it is a fragment with an elegiac beginning and undertone, for in his age-old mourning for devastated Jerusalem the poet invokes the exemplary figure of Judah ha-Levi, a scholar, physician, and poet. Heine gives a flowery description of the making of the poet and his study of the Torah and the Talmud, but he also integrates

him into the mainstream of Christian medieval Europe and calls him the equal of the great Provençal poets, though his muse was Jerusalem rather than some lady love. In a long digression, Heine concerns himself with jewels found by Alexander the Great after his victory over the Persian king Darius III in 331 B.C.E., specifically the wondrous wanderings of a pearl necklace. He also pays tribute to the other great poets of that age, Salomon ben Judah ibn Gabirol (Ibn Gabriol) of Malaga and Moses ibn Ezra of Granada.

“Disputation” consists of 110 unrhymed stanzas. The witty narrator gives a mordant account of a fourteenth century public debate between a Franciscan friar and a rabbi at the Toledo court of King Pedro I of Castile. The question to be settled in this grotesque variant on a medieval tournament is which is the true God, the threefold Christian God of love or the Hebrews’ stern deity. Since the loser will have to adopt the religion of the winner, each dueling debater has assistants ready with baptismal basins and circumcision knives. The friar gives a crude, absurd account of Christian beliefs, and the more rationalistic rabbi emphasizes that Jehovah is a strong living presence. In this twelve-hour mental marathon, the arguments become increasingly heated and vituperative, and when the king asks his queen for her judgment, she comes to the unsettling conclusion that “both of them stink.”

## SUMMARY

Heinrich Heine’s fame rests primarily in his body of lyric poetry. It led to some of the most well-known German folk songs ever produced and has appeared in numerous foreign translations. While calling himself the last of the Romantics, he often criticized the Romantic movement for its lack of social and political commitment. In the turbulent period before the revolution of 1848, he advocated a new German literature addressing such important issues of the day as human rights, women’s emancipation, and equal representation of the masses in national government. He continues to be regarded as one of Germany’s most outspoken champions of the liberal cause.

One of Heine’s early translators, the American poet Emma Lazarus, has pointed out that Heine was a German Jew with the mind and eyes of a Greek, a beauty-loving, myth-creating pagan soul housed in a somber Hebrew frame. Cer-

tainly Heine's poetic persona encompassed the German literary heritage and the Western tradition, as well as classical antiquity and timeless popular legend.

Harry Zohn

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*Die Bäder von Lucca*, 1829 (*The Baths of Lucca*, 1855)

*Zur Geschichte der neueren schönen Literatur in Deutschland*, 1833 (*Letters Auxiliary to the History of Modern Polite Literature in Germany*, 1836)

*Französische Zustände*, 1833 (*French Affairs*, 1889)

*Der Salon*, 1834-1840 (4 volumes; *The Salon*, 1893)

*Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, 1835 (*On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, 1876)

*Die romantische Schule*, 1836 (expansion of *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*; *The Romantic School*, 1876)

*Über die französische Bühne*, 1837 (*Concerning the French Stage*, 1891-1905)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Investigate the cultural background that made it necessary for a baptism to admit Heinrich Heine to "European culture."
- Consider Heine's role in mediating between the often antagonistic German and French cultures.
- What were Heine's contributions to the Young Germany movement?
- Relate Heine's wit and comedic talents to those of present-day comics, such as Woody Allen and Mel Brooks.
- Characterize Heine's criticism of the Romantics' conception of medievalism.
- What forces in his background and personality prepared Heine for his sardonic representation of both Judaism and Christianity in his poem "Disputation"?

## *Heinrich Heine*

*Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen*, 1838 (*Shakespeare's Maidens and Ladies*, 1891)

*Ludwig Börne: Eine Denkschrift von H. Heine*, 1840 (*Ludwig Börne: Recollections of a Revolutionist*, 1881)

*Les Dieux en exil*, 1853 (*Gods in Exile*, 1962)

*Vermischte Schriften*, 1854 (3 volumes)

*Lutetia: Berichte über Politik, Kunst, und Volksleben*, 1854 (*Lutetia: Reports on Politics, Art, and Popular Life*, 1891-1905)

*De l'Allemagne*, 1855 (2 volumes)

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AP/Wide World Photos

## JAMES HERRIOT

**Born:** Sunderland, England  
October 3, 1916

**Died:** Thirlby, near Thirsk, Yorkshire, England  
February 23, 1995

*Herriot is best known for his collections of semiautobiographical tales recounting his life as a veterinarian and his interactions with the animals, people, and landscape of the Yorkshire Dales in northern England.*

### BIOGRAPHY

James Alfred ("Alf") Wight, better known by his pen name, James Herriot (HEH-ree-uht), was born on October 3, 1916, in Sunderland, England. He was the only child of James Henry Wight, a musician, and Hannah Bell Wight, a singer. Three weeks after his birth, his family moved to Hillhead, a suburb of Glasgow, Scotland.

When he was thirteen years old, Herriot read an article in *Meccano Magazine* that made him decide to become a veterinarian treating small animals. However, when he graduated from Glasgow Veterinary School in 1938, jobs were scarce. He took a position as assistant to J. Donald Sinclair, who had a rural veterinary practice in Thirsk in the Yorkshire Dales in northern England. Donald's brother, Brian, also worked for the practice. Finding himself treating mostly large rather than small animals, Herriot quickly realized that he loved working with farm animals, loved the rugged countryside in which the practice was located, and greatly admired most of the farmers and farm workers with whom he interacted. When he first began practice, the draft horse was in widespread use. Gradually, the tractor replaced the horse, and his practice of veterinary medicine changed accordingly.

On November 5, 1941, Herriot married Joan Catherine Danbury, and on the same day he was made a partner in Donald Sinclair's practice. In 1943, during World War II, he joined the British

Royal Air Force. In 1944, he went absent without leave (AWOL) for a brief period to be present at the birth of his first child, Nicholas James Wight, who later became a veterinarian and practiced with his father. Herriot was not caught while he was AWOL. He was discharged from the air force in 1945 because of health problems that kept him from flying.

He then returned to practice in Thirsk. According to his biographers, it was when he was in the air force and away from the Dales that he realized how much he loved that area of England and loved being a rural veterinarian there. His daughter, Rosemary, was born on May 9, 1949. She, too, wanted to become a veterinarian, but Herriot considered that life too physically difficult for a female, so she became a physician and practiced in Yorkshire. When Nicholas and Rosemary were young, they used to make rounds with their father, visiting the remote farms with him on the Yorkshire Dales.

Herriot made several trips abroad, one to the Soviet Union in 1961 as a sheep veterinarian, one to Turkey in 1963 by airplane as a cattle veterinarian, and two to the United States in the 1970's to publicize his books. Most of the rest of his life was spent in and around Yorkshire.

In his late forties, Herriot decided that he needed an additional source of income, so he decided to try writing. He wrote under the pseudonym James Herriot because he believed that veterinarians should not advertise and that publishing works about his practice under his own name would be a form of advertising. He also changed



the name of his partner to Siegfried Farnon and the name of his partner's brother to Tristan Farnon. The town in which he lived became Darrowby, actually an amalgam of several towns in the area.

His first attempts at writing were short stories based on his work as a veterinarian. Periodicals rejected them. To better prepare himself, he read books about writing and reread works by some of his favorite authors, including Charles Dickens, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Ernest Hemingway. As a result, he decided to take his short stories and rework them into full-length books. He published two books in England, *If Only They Could Talk* in 1970 and *It Shouldn't Happen to a Vet* in 1972, but neither sold well.

Thomas McCormack, president of St. Martin's Press in New York, discovered both books when he was in England in 1972 and took them home with him. At the urging of his wife, McCormack read the books and decided to publish them as one volume. He had Herriot rework the material slightly to make a single volume and to add material about his marriage at the end of the book. As a result, *All Creatures Great and Small* was released in the United States in 1972 and quickly became a best seller. It remains Herriot's most popular book.

He then wrote a series of three more books, all of which, like *All Creatures Great and Small*, took their titles from the Anglican hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful." These books were *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1973), *All Things Wise and Wonderful* (1977), and *The Lord God Made Them All* (1981). He also published a number of books for children, such as *Moses the Kitten* (1984), *Only One Woof* (1985), and *The Market Square Dog* (1989). A collection of his dog stories appeared in 1986 and a collection of cat stories in 1994. In 1992, he published his last major book, *Every Living Thing*, as well as *James Herriot's Treasury for Children*. In 1979, he departed from his usual books about animals to publish *James Herriot's Yorkshire*, with photographs by Derry Brabbs, a tribute to the land he had come to love.

Herriot was diagnosed with cancer in 1992 and died from that disease in 1995. In 1996, *James Herriot's Favorite Dog Stories* was released in a new edition with an introduction that is believed to be the last thing he wrote.

Several films are based on Herriot's works. Probably the most popular was the television series *All*

*Creatures Great and Small*, produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1978, which drew on a number of his books. Herriot won numerous honors for his works, including the American Veterinary Medical Association's Award of Appreciation (1975), the Order of the British Empire (1979), an honorary doctorate from Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Scotland (1979), and an honorary doctorate from Liverpool University in England (1983). He served as president of the Yorkshire Veterinary Society from 1973 to 1974 and was made a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in 1982.

## ANALYSIS

James Herriot wrote tales based mainly on his work as a veterinary surgeon in the Yorkshire Dales in England. Each of his five major books covers material from two or three years of his life. He weaves the tales together, often beginning a tale in one chapter, leaving it for a chapter or two, and then concluding it. A major literary device that he uses well is the flashback. Part of one episode will remind him of an earlier one, and he does not conclude the narrative of the original episode until he finishes telling about the earlier one.

His books are basically episodic; they have no overall climax but instead consist of short narratives, many of which have their own climaxes, tied together by the same characters and settings. Many of the individual chapters can stand alone as separate stories.

There is some disagreement about how much of the books are based on fact and how much of their content is fictitious. At the very least, Herriot fictionalizes parts of his life, changing the names of people he knew, including himself, and the names of places where he worked and lived. Although his works seem to flow spontaneously, they are the end process of a series of revisions, rewrites, and polishing, things he claimed he loved doing. He recreates himself as a mature narrator who looks back on his past and is able to laugh at and sympathize with himself.

His first major work, *All Creatures Great and Small*, is set at a time before the coming of widespread mechanization to the English countryside and the advent of wonder drugs, including antibiotics, in the treatment of animals. His last major book, *Every Living Thing*, reflects some of the changes that in-

dustrialization and improvements in medicine brought to the practice of veterinary medicine. Although he dislikes change, he writes of the way advances in medicine enhance the way veterinarians treat animals. He finds antibiotics and sulfonamides especially helpful, but even these drugs are not always sufficient. New surgical techniques, about which Herriot reads in periodicals, also better equip a veterinarian to treat animals.

Throughout his major works, Herriot portrays himself as a comic figure, who, almost in spite of himself, becomes a competent veterinarian in a rural practice. He feels that he often makes a fool of himself in his practice, sometimes because of his misdiagnosis of an animal, as in the case of Mr. Handshaw's cow. Herriot says the cow has a broken pelvis and will never get up, but the cow ends up being fine. Sometimes he seems foolish to the farmers and their assistants even when his diagnosis is correct, as in their insistence that their animals have tail worm and his insistence that there is no such thing.

Herriot clearly exaggerates the traits of Siegfried Farnon, his employer and later his partner, and of Siegfried's brother, Tristan Farnon. Siegfried, too, becomes a comical character. He chastises Herriot for being forgetful at the same time that he is himself terribly forgetful; he scolds his assistant for being too generous in his use of thread and cotton, while the next day chastising him for being too parsimonious. When Siegfried puts on a show of patience, Herriot knows that some kind of trouble will ensue. Nonetheless, Herriot admires Siegfried's competence and concern and values his friendship. Tristan is a ne'er-do-well who repeatedly wrecks cars and mixes things up, as he does when he sends a can of cow excrement to Mr. Cranford with instructions to work it well into his boar's back using his hands, or when he sends a package of ointment to a laboratory to have it analyzed for John's disease. Still, Tristan is a friendly, compassionate, and brilliant person.

The books are tied together by Herriot's love for the countryside in which he works and for the people and animals who live there. He recognizes that behind most of the people's gruff exteriors is a strong concern for their fellow human beings and for their animals. Throughout the books runs the author's optimism about the human condition and the interaction of humans and animals. Each of the

major books deals with the problems of life and death, but life always triumphs, always goes on, and death seems a necessary part of the processes of life.

## ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

**First published:** 1972

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Herriot tells stories about his work as a rural English veterinarian and about his courtship and marriage.*

*All Creatures Great and Small* was James Herriot's first book to be published in the United States. In it, the mature Herriot tells of his youthful self, when he graduated from veterinary school and began working in a rural veterinary practice. The narrator, like the reader, is able to laugh at the naïveté of Herriot, as well as at the people who surround him, including his employer, Siegfried Farnon, and his employer's brother, Tristan Farnon. Simultaneously, the reader can recognize the close bond that develops between Herriot, Siegfried, and Tristan, the tremendous respect Herriot has for Siegfried, and the friendship he feels for Tristan.

At the beginning of the book, Herriot is lying on a cobblestone floor, covered with muck, shirtless, and in a cold, drafty barn, with snow sometimes blowing on him, as he tries successfully to deliver a calf. The first chapter ends shortly after he mistakenly thinks that a farmer's question "How about a drink?" is directed at him, rather than at the cow that gave birth. Thus, he immediately introduces the hardships of a rural veterinarian's life, as well as the kind of comic character his early misunderstandings of the rural Yorkshire folk made him. He simultaneously reveals his awe and delight at the miracle of birth, even when it occurs in the most uncomfortable of circumstances. The book ends with his account of his honeymoon, with his wife assisting him as he does tuberculin tests of cattle. The entire book illustrates the kind of joy Herriot eventually finds in his work in the rough Yorkshire Dales.

*All Creatures Great and Small* illustrates how living

a simple life can provide an antidote for the complex problems of modern civilization. The narrator repeatedly reminds the reader that he is writing about a time of change, a time when the draft horse is disappearing from the farms and modern technology is replacing it. He also reminds the reader that the use of traditional medicines, some of which were ineffective, is ending. In addition, rural veterinary work is gradually shifting from large farm animals to small animals. On a larger scale, he laments how radio, television, and the automobile are making people similar everywhere. He even bemoans the disappearance of the older words and expressions of the Yorkshire countryside.

In spite of his conservatism, Herriot uses the new drugs as they become available and follows the new surgical procedures, most of which he reads about in magazines. However, he recognizes that there is no need to entirely abandon the old techniques. To Herriot's amazement, Siegfried successfully uses the traditional technique of bleeding to heal a case of laminitis, an inflammation in a horse's hoof, for a horse belonging to Mr. Myatt and his family, whom Herriot calls "gipsies."

The book shows Herriot, the man from the city, gradually overcoming the distance between himself and the people who dwell in the Dales, eventually becoming accepted and even loved by many of the rural folk among whom he works. He also learns to recognize that beneath their often rough exteriors are what he feels are the best qualities

of the Dalesmen, "the indestructibility, the tough philosophy, the unthinking generosity and hospitality." He interacts with people of all social strata, from the very rich and titled to the very poor, and he treats them all with dignity. He often discovers that he prefers the poor farmers who live high in the Dales and barely manage to make a living from their small, rocky farms to some of

the richer people in the lowlands. For example, he realizes that he prefers the company of the poor Alton family to the rich Taverner family. In his an-

ecdotes, he treats the joy and wonder of life, along with the hardship and death that are always present in the harsh landscape he comes to love so much.

By ending the book with his marriage, Herriot shows life triumphing over death and hope triumphing over pessimism. Some critics theorize that post-World War II America was more optimistic than post-World War II England, in part because of the devastating effects that bombing had on English cities. The optimism of *All Creatures Great and Small*, these critics feel, helped make the book popular in the United States, while the same optimism kept the two books from which it was drawn from being popular in England. In addition, the book's nostalgia for simpler past times and its romantic atmosphere, along with a strong advertising campaign, helped make and keep it popular in the United States. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

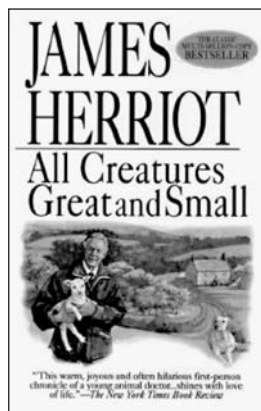
The marriage at the book's end represents a new beginning in Herriot's life, as well as what appears to be a decision to continue with that life rather than try to become the kind of small-animal veterinarian he originally intended to be. He paints himself as a comic figure throughout his wooing and winning of his wife, Helen Alderson. Herriot thus shows that love can triumph in spite of human failings. He and Helen spend their honeymoon testing cattle for tuberculosis and enjoy what they are doing, demonstrating the kind of close bond they have with the animals and people of the Dales, as well as their close bond with each other.

## SUMMARY

James Herriot's books are a basically optimistic account of his work as a veterinarian in the Yorkshire Dales. Although he encounters some unpleasant people and sometimes has to watch helplessly as good people are hurt when their animals die, he remains optimistic about human nature and nature itself. What he considers the miracle of birth always delights him.

From Herriot's point of view as the narrator of his tales, he recognizes how poorly equipped the pre-World War II veterinarians were to handle some of the cases they treated. However, he also recognizes the good veterinarians do with the limited resources available to them.

Richard Tuerk



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*James Herriot's Dog Stories*, 1986  
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*James Herriot's Animal Stories*, 1997

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does James Herriot view the births and deaths of the animals with which he works?
- What is Herriot's attitude toward the eccentricities of many of the people he encounters in Yorkshire?
- How does the interaction between Herriot, Siegfried, and Tristan provide comedy for Herriot's books?
- How does the comedy in Herriot's books enable him to write about serious, often distressing, topics without alienating his readers?
- What effect does the use of lines from an Anglican hymn as the titles of four of Herriot's books have on the readers' attitudes toward the books and the events in them?
- Many critics say that the Yorkshire Dales themselves are central to the meaning and effect of Herriot's books. Do you agree or disagree? Why?



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## HERMANN HESSE

**Born:** Calw, Germany

July 2, 1877

**Died:** Montagnola, Switzerland

August 9, 1962

*Hesse combined elements of German Romanticism, Eastern religion, and Jungian psychoanalysis to explore the themes of the isolation of the artist and the fundamental duality of existence.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Hermann Hesse (HEH-suh) was born in Calw, Württemberg, Germany, on July 2, 1877, to Johannes and Marie Hesse. The family moved to Basel, Switzerland, in 1881, where Hesse acquired Swiss citizenship. He returned to Calw in 1889, and in 1890 and 1891 he attended Latin school in Göppingen in order to prepare himself for the Württemberg regional examinations. To qualify he had to renounce his Swiss citizenship. In 1891 and 1892, he was a student at the seminary in Maulbronn, which he left after seven months because he wanted to be a writer. In 1892, he underwent exorcism treatments in Bad Boll, attempted suicide, spent three months in a clinic for nervous diseases at Stetten, and was admitted to the Gymnasium in Cannstatt. Over the next ten years he worked in a clockworks factory in Calw and in bookshops in Tübingen and Basel. During this time he began writing a novel, "Schweinigel" (the hedgehog), the manuscript of which has disappeared. In 1899, he published his first prose work, *Eine Stunde hinter Mitternacht* (an hour beyond midnight).

In 1901, Hesse made his first trip to Italy, returning in 1903 to finish *Peter Camenzind*, his first successful novel, which appeared in 1904 (English translation, 1961). That same year he married Maria Bernoulli and moved to Gaienhofen on Lake Constance, where he began a career as a free-

lance writer. In 1905, his first son, Bruno, was born. In 1906, he published *Unterm Rad* (*The Prodigy*, 1957; also published as *Beneath the Wheel*, 1968) and founded *Marz*, a liberal weekly directed against the personal authority of Kaiser Wilhelm II. His second son, Heiner, was born in 1909, and his third son, Martin, in 1911. Meanwhile, he published *Gertrude* (1910; *Gertrude and I*, 1915; also published as *Gertrude*, 1955) and a collection of poetry, *Unterwegs: Gedichte* (1911; on the road). That same year he traveled to India, a journey that resulted in *Aus Indien* (1913; sketches from an Indian journey) and a lifelong interest in Eastern philosophy.

Hesse published *Rosshalde* in 1914 (English translation, 1970), the year that World War I began. He volunteered for active duty but was found unfit for military service and was assigned to the embassy in Bern, Switzerland, where he edited newspapers and established a publishing company for prisoners of war. In 1915, when his father died and his wife and youngest son fell seriously ill, Hesse suffered a nervous breakdown that led to psychotherapy with J. B. Lang, a student of Carl Jung.

In 1919, Hesse moved to Montagnola, Switzerland, where he lived until 1931. The year 1919 also saw the publication of *Demian* (English translation, 1923), a book that gathered a cult following throughout Europe. *Blick ins Chaos* was published in 1920, and translated into English as *In Sight of Chaos* (1923). *Ausgewählte Gedichte* (selected poems) appeared in 1921, the same year Hesse suffered an emotional crisis that lasted eighteen months, during which time he underwent psychoanalysis with Jung himself. *Siddhartha*, Hesse's most



popular novel, appeared in 1922 (English translation, 1951). In 1924, Hesse became a Swiss citizen again; in 1926, he was elected a member of the Prussian Academy of Writers, from which he resigned in 1931 after expressing fears that the academy was deceiving people about contemporary German politics.

In 1927, Hesse turned fifty; his second wife, Ruth, divorced him; Hugo Ball published a biography of him; and *Der Steppenwolf* (*Steppenwolf*, 1929), his most bizarre work, appeared. In 1930, Hesse published *Narziss und Goldmund* (*Death and the Lover*, 1932; also published as *Narcissus and Goldmund*, 1968), and in 1931, he married Ninon Dolbin and moved into a house in Montagnola built especially for him by H. C. Bodmer with a lifetime right of occupancy. In 1932, Hesse published the third work inspired by his travels in the Far East, *Die Morgenlandfahrt* (1932; *The Journey to the East*, 1956).

Between 1932 and 1943, Hesse wrote and published many stories and poems but spent most of this time composing his masterpiece, *Das Glasperlenspiel: Versuch einer Lebensbeschreibung des Magister Ludi Josef Knecht samt Knechts hinterlassenen Schriften* (1943; *Magister Ludi*, 1949; also published as *The Glass Bead Game*, 1969), the novel that not only capped a lifetime of supreme literary achievement but also led directly to his being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946. Between 1939 and 1945, many of Hesse's works, including *Steppenwolf* and *Narcissus and Goldmund*, were banned in Germany. *The Glass Bead Game* was published in Switzerland in 1943, but by 1946 publication of his works was resumed in Germany, and that same year Hesse was awarded the Goethe Prize in Frankfurt.

*Gesammelte Dichtungen* (collected works), in six volumes, appeared in 1952 in honor of Hesse's seventy-fifth birthday, and succeeding years saw publication of facsimile editions, correspondence, incidental pieces, and new and old poetry. In 1956, the Hermann Hesse Prize was established by the Society for the Advancement of German Art in Baden-Württemberg. On August 9, 1962, Hesse died in Montagnola.

## ANALYSIS

Hesse's first published work, *Eine Stunde hinter Mitternacht*, is a collection of short stories overflowing with sentimental posturing and romantic cli-

chés, a style Hesse soon came to call sick and incomprehensible, but which he simply refined rather than repudiated. In his next work, *Hinterlassene Schriften und Gedichte von Hermann Lauscher* (1901), the hero with a split personality became the model for a long line of alter egos (*doppelgänger*), including Narcissus and Goldmund, Emil Sinclair and Max Demian, and Hans Giebenrath and Hermann Heilner.

The early works contain many of the themes that appear in Hesse's later writings. One of these is the author as confessor-observer who looks at life objectively and perceives a higher resolution above its superficial contradictions. A similar theme is that of the child who views the world in the eternal present and lives as in a paradise, unaware of the passage of time. Other familiar themes are those of the mirrored image, the outsider, and the Earth Mother. There is also a pervasive love of nature throughout Hesse's works. The hero of *Peter Camenzind*, Hesse's next major novel, strives to obey his own inner law the way seeds obey theirs. His experiences as a student in the city expose him to the artificiality of humankind, and he comes to feel that his mission is to lead the world back to God through Nature. *Peter Camenzind* also contains another of Hesse's central themes: a moment of awakening when intuition and intelligence ignite in a burst of inspiration. *Beneath the Wheel* is a school novel much like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (1959), and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Like Joyce's novel of initiation, this novel chronicles the rebellion of its main characters, Hans Giebenrath and Hermann Heilner, against a dehumanizing educational system. Heilner has the courage to escape, but Giebenrath retreats into a world of madness and ultimately commits suicide. The theme of the inaccessible woman dominates Hesse's next novel, *Gertrude*. Similar goddess figures can be found in *Peter Camenzind* and particularly in *Demian*, where Frau Eva, Demian's mother, is portrayed as a shadowy Earth Mother and an object of veneration to those few who bear the mark of Cain.

Discouraged by the events of World War I, branded a traitor by his country, and devastated by a series of domestic disasters, Hesse underwent psychoanalysis to emerge spiritually reborn. The artistic reflection of this rebirth is *Demian*, in which

Hesse makes conscious use of dreams, memories, and associations. Hesse published it under the name of its narrator, Emil Sinclair, because he wished to express the change of personality he (Hesse) had experienced with psychoanalysis and because he wished to appeal to a more intellectual kind of reader. There is only one principle that *Demian* teaches: that people have a duty to be themselves. Those who abide by this principle will be the ones qualified to lead humanity into the future. In *Demian*, these people bear the mark of Cain as a badge of honor, not shame, a sign that they have the courage to break old rules and create new ones. From *Demian* on, Hesse's theme is the fundamental oneness of all being. This vision of the unity of all life is central to *Klingsors letzter Sommer* (1920; *Klingsor's Last Summer*, 1970) and *Knulp: Drei Geschichten aus dem Leben Knulps* (1915; *Knulp: Three Tales from the Life of Knulp*, 1971), Hesse's personal favorites among his own works, as well as to *Klein und Wagner* (1920) and to his most popular work, *Siddhartha*. Although Siddhartha's life closely parallels that of the Buddha, the novel, with its synthesis of all major religions, is really the profession of faith of a seeker who cannot accept any doctrine but who, when he finds his "way," is able to approve each doctrine and share in the universal brotherhood of all of those who have glimpsed something of the divine and the eternal.

*Steppenwolf* is, like all Hesse's work, the biography of a soul. In this novel, Harry Haller purges his soul of time and personality in a vain attempt to attain the realm of the Immortals. Although he fails because he has not learned to see the eternal behind the temporary and to laugh at the game of life, the novel ends on a note of hope for Haller. In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, the conflict between Spirit and Nature is embodied in the relationship between Narcissus, the analytical thinker and theologian who represents the Spirit, and Goldmund, the dreamy artist who represents Nature. Narcissus inhabits a monastery, the World of the Father, while Goldmund lives in the outside world, the World of the Mother. Ultimately, a mystical union of these opposites is realized.

After *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hesse's perspective again changes, and in his last two prose works the individual quest is no longer the center of the novel. In *The Journey to the East*, the message is that the willful, personal self must die and the supra-personal self must increase. This means the liberation of the true self and the ability to view life as a game. The journey Hesse describes in this work is not geographical but spiritual. All wayfarers are drawn irresistibly eastward in search of the home and youth of the soul, the everywhere and nowhere, the unification of all times. The east becomes a metaphor for the Kingdom of the Spirit, and the whole book is an appeal to a way of life that runs against the currents of the time. When Hesse speaks of the order of the wayfarers, he perceives them as a wave in the eternal stream of the human spirit toward the East, toward Home. This novel also celebrates artists as artist-saints, for among the travelers are famous painters, writers, and musicians. *Demian* expresses the belief that it is through those who bear the mark that humanity progresses. Now, years later, this belief is reaffirmed. *The Journey to the East* announces that it is good for those who bear the mark to know that they have comrades and to know that they are part of the journey.

*The Glass Bead Game* is Hesse's masterpiece. Like *The Journey to the East*, *The Glass Bead Game* expresses faith in the indestructibility of humanity's spiritual culture. Regardless of differing interpretations, *The Glass Bead Game* repeats the major motifs of Hesse's other works, particularly the essential duality of human nature, which is represented by contrasting characters who form bonds that ultimately transcend their differences and result in an all-encompassing oneness. The artist-saint and the millennium are the principal themes of *The Glass Bead Game*. The artist-saint—the self-fulfilled individual—is embodied in such characters as Goldmund, Demian, Siddhartha, and the Wayfarer to the East. In *The Glass Bead Game*, the artist-saint Josef Knecht is formally installed in the eternal and invisible Kingdom of the Spirit, the end of the Inward Way.

## SIDDHARTHA

**First published:** 1922 (English translation, 1951)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Brahman searches for ultimate reality through profligacy and asceticism and learns that wisdom cannot be taught but must come from one's inner struggle.*

*Siddhartha* combines two universal myths, that of Everyman searching for enlightenment and that of the hero on the way to sainthood. Siddhartha takes the journey common to all of Hesse's later heroes, passing from the irresponsible paradise of childhood through the purifying conflicts of youth to the liberation of adult wisdom, the "higher irresponsibility" of absolute faith. Throughout Hesse's works is the reminder that one can learn how to live only from life itself, not from books or teachers. Thus, Siddhartha, the eternal seeker, goes his own way, bowing to no one. He must disregard the wishes of his father, the advice of his friend Govinda, and finally even the counsel of the great Buddha. Only thus can he find his way to his true self.

The story of *Siddhartha* is also built on the myth of the quest. For Siddhartha, the quest begins when he feels that the teachings of Brahmanism do not lead to salvation and decides to try other paths. He leaves home with his friend Govinda to join the ascetic Samanas, with whom he spends three years. When he realizes that asceticism and yoga are only leading him further away from himself, he goes with Govinda to hear the teachings of Guatama the Buddha. Govinda remains with the great teacher, but Siddhartha decides that he must seek his own path through immersion in the world of the senses.

He travels to a large city, where he falls in love with Kamala, a famous courtesan. With her help Siddhartha becomes wealthy, able to afford anything he wants—including Kamala herself. Eventually he realizes that this life of indulgence is just as pointless as a life of denial, that both luxury and asceticism can be extremes that obstruct the path to spiritual illumination. He decides, therefore, to turn his back on the world of Sansara and illusion. Unaware that Kamala is now pregnant with his

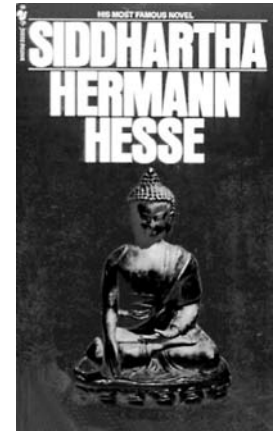
child, Siddhartha flees the city and returns to the river, where, in despair, he almost commits suicide.

Realizing that suicide is an evasion, not an answer, he decides to stay by the river and to try to understand himself. He looks upon the contrary experiences of asceticism and indulgence as necessary opposites that define and neutralize each other, leaving him once again in his original state of innocence but with a knowledge of good and evil. Living with the wise ferryman Vasudeva, Siddhartha learns many secrets from the river, the most important ones being that time is an illusion, that all being is one, and that for knowledge to be significant, it must be conditioned by love.

Twelve years later, Kamala comes to the river with her son in search of Buddha. When she dies from a snake bite, Siddhartha begins to care for the boy. He loves his son desperately, but the boy longs to escape the two old boatmen and return to life in the city. Eventually he escapes, and Siddhartha, realizing how deeply he loves his son, also realizes that loving him means letting him go. Vasudeva soon dies, and Siddhartha takes his place. Govinda appears one day and is struck by the change that has overtaken Siddhartha, for it is clear to Govinda that Siddhartha, like Buddha, has at last achieved absolute peace and harmony.

When Hesse talks of peace and harmony, he means the perfect balance of opposites. Every truth is made up of equally true opposites. In order for Buddha to teach about the world, he had to divide it into Sansara and Nirvana, illusion and truth, suffering and salvation. The world itself, however, is never one-sided. A deed is never wholly Sansara or wholly Nirvana, just as a person is never wholly a saint or a sinner. These absolutes persist because people are under the illusion that time is real. Time is not real; and if time is not real, then the dividing line between this world and eternity, between suffering and bliss, between good and evil, is also an illusion.

The lesson Siddhartha learns is that the world is



perfect at every moment, that every sin carries the hope of grace within it. During deep meditation it is possible to dispel time, to see simultaneously all of the past, present, and future, and then to see everything as good, everything as perfect, everything as Brahman. Thus, everything that exists is good—death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary; it needs only the concurrence of true believers. Then all will be well with them and nothing can harm them.

## STEPPENWOLF

**First published:** *Der Steppenwolf*, 1927  
(English translation, 1929)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An idealistic artist, struggling to accept the crassness of the real world, learns how to relate to humanity without compromising his integrity.*

*Steppenwolf* is Hesse's most surrealistic novel. With its cast of dreamlike characters, its Magic Theater, and its nightmarish imagery, it comes closer than any of his other works to re-creating the fevered intensity of the lost soul adrift in time and space, ensnared in its own smothering web. The only way back is the mystical process of depersonalization. Harry Haller, the main character, is a man in deep despair because he doubts his ideals and his vocation. Life has become senseless; he longs for new values. Haller first has to learn to accept himself wholly, then to perceive life as a game, and finally to expand his soul to include the whole world in its totality.

On the surface, a bourgeois world is a world of sanity. Haller looks about him at the comfortable routine of domestic existence, and although he feels nostalgia for it, he can no longer accept it. Thus when he sees a sign that says "Magic Theater; Entrance Not for Everybody; For Madmen Only," he tries to enter, because only madmen can make any sense out of a bourgeois world. Until Haller reads the pamphlet entitled "Treatise on the Steppenwolf," he has always thought of himself as a double personality: man and wolf, the civilized human being and the freedom-loving outlaw. So great is this inner tension that Haller has often been on

the point of taking his life and indeed is able to keep living only because he plans to commit suicide on his fiftieth birthday.

After reading the treatise, however, Haller realizes that he is wrong in supposing that he is a two-fold person. All people, he learns, have manifold personalities, and the common notion that each person is a single ego is false. The road to enlightenment is to surrender the idea of a central ego and to expand the soul until it includes nothing less than everything. To achieve this enlightenment, one must experience certain symbolic rites of passage that will remove one from the clutches of the bourgeois.

Haller has such an experience when he encounters a professor of comparative folklore with whom he once studied and accepts an invitation to dine with him and his wife. During the meal, Haller is forced to behave courteously and exchange social lies with his host and hostess. When the professor, a right-wing nationalist, ridicules a newspaper article denouncing the kaiser, however, Haller declares angrily that he is the author of the article and cares nothing for the professor, his scholarship, or his politics. Calling himself a schizophrenic who is no longer fit for human society, Haller storms out, relieved; the lone wolf in him has triumphed over the bourgeois.

Haller then meets Maria, who becomes his mistress, and Pablo, a handsome young musician with extensive experience in sex and drugs. One evening Pablo invites Haller to his quarters for a little entertainment—"for madmen only," he explains—the ticket of admission being one of Pablo's drugs. When Haller has succumbed to the influence of

the drugs, Pablo holds up a small mirror in which Haller sees himself in a double vision, as a man whose features blend with those of a shy, beautiful, dazed wolf with smoldering, frightened eyes. Next Pablo leads him into a theater corridor where there is a full-length mirror. Standing before it, Haller sees himself in a

hundred forms: as child, adolescent, mature man, both happy and sad, dressed and naked. One form,





an elegant young man, embraces Pablo.

Turning from the mirror, Haller walks down the corridor, off of which are dozens of doors, each offering the fulfillment of a thwarted or unrecognized aspect of Haller's personality. Haller goes through a sequence of bizarre experiences climaxing in the symbolic murder of Hermine and culminating in his appearance before a dozen robed judges who, instead of sentencing him to death as he expects, condemn him to "eternal life." Then all but Haller laugh. He is left feeling that he still has much to learn about how to live but promises himself that he will work at it and one day even learn to laugh.

## NARCISSUS AND GOLDMUND

**First published:** *Narziss und Goldmund*, 1930  
(English translation, *Death and the Lover*,  
1932; also as *Narcissus and Goldmund*,  
1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two close friends lead contrasting lives, one spiritual, one sensual, ultimately realizing that they are but opposite sides of the same nature.*

In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hesse reaches into the past to explore the theme of the reconciliation of opposites. The conflict between artistic and scholarly existence had always been a problem for him, and in this novel Hesse embodies those opposites in the personalities of two close friends whose interdependent lives take meaning from each other. Both young men meet as novitiates in a monastery, but it is clear from the beginning that they are destined for very different vocations. Narcissus is a scholar who searches for meaning in abstractions, whereas Goldmund is a sensualist who seeks meaning in the concrete world of the senses.

At the end of his novitiate, Narcissus takes final vows and starts his prescribed ascetic exercises, dedicating himself to a life of service to the spirit even though he is aware of its one-sidedness. Goldmund, on the other hand, runs away from the monastery and meets a young gypsy who surrenders herself to him and then leaves him to return to her husband. Thus Goldmund's first experience in

the world of the senses teaches him how unstable and fleeting it is. Yet he continues his search for worldly satisfaction. He has an adventure with a peasant woman, then joins the household of a knight, from whom he flees after getting involved in a triangle with the knight's two daughters. Shortly thereafter Goldmund experiences the violence of the world when he kills a thief, hides the corpse, and escapes.

Goldmund next becomes a disciple of Master Nicholas, a sculptor whose statue of St. Mary he admires. When Goldmund fashions a statue of the disciple John, the features are clearly those of Narcissus. Master Nicholas realizes Goldmund's possibilities and decides to admit him to the guild and give the young man his daughter in marriage. Goldmund, however, does not want to live a bourgeois life and deserts his master. It is the period of the Black Death, and Goldmund meets two refugees, a vagabond cleric and a girl the cleric thinks he has rescued from the plague. For a time the three live together in a country cottage, but once the girl falls ill with the disease, the cleric flees, leaving Goldmund to nurse her until her death. Goldmund then returns to Master Nicholas, who, he learns, has died from the disease.

Soon thereafter Goldmund is caught in bed with the governor's mistress and condemned to death. When a priest comes to give him extreme unction, Goldmund considers killing the priest and escaping in the priest's habit, but the priest turns out to be Narcissus, who has become Abbot John. As Narcissus had promised, he has come to his friend in the hour of his direst need, when the world of the senses and the world of violence and disease have led him to contemplate the sin of premeditated murder. Through Narcissus's influence, Goldmund is released, and the two friends return to the monastery, where Goldmund is given a shop in which he can create sculptures. Once again Goldmund cannot submit to the discipline of monastic life and flees. Years later he returns to the monastery as a tired old man. The world has become too much for him; he longs for peace but harbors no grudge against fate. He has no faith in a life after death but still looks forward to dying, seeing it as a happiness in which his mother will take him by the hand and lead him back into the innocence of nonexistence.

Although Narcissus is portrayed from the begin-



ning as being well on the way to perfection, in the end he has not yet achieved it. His life seems complete only when it is seen as a frame of reference within which Goldmund's experiences acquire meaning. The life of Goldmund is developed in stages as he moves upward from innocence through experience to attain, through sensuality, the higher innocence that Narcissus has sought through spirituality. Neither, however, can make it alone. As halves of the same entity, they need each other. This reality is the interdependence that is the theme of all of Hesse's works.

## THE GLASS BEAD GAME

**First published:** *Das Glasperlenspiel*, 1943  
(English translation, *Magister Ludi*, 1949;  
also as *The Glass Bead Game*, 1969)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young man in a futuristic utopian society renounces the emphasis on pure intellect and the world of the spirit, leaves the Order, and dies.*

*The Glass Bead Game* is Hesse's masterpiece. He wrote it over a period of eleven years (1932 to 1943), during a time when the world seemed bent on self-destruction. Because *The Glass Bead Game* is, among other things, an urgent plea for an all-embracing humanitarianism, it has a more didactic tone and a more explicit linkage with spiritual ideas from the past. The result is a book subject to many interpretations. On one level it restates Hesse's belief in the individual's ability to attain perfection and to help others by serving as an example, creating an eternal circle of master and disciple. By affirming faith in the individual's perfectibility and will to serve, Hesse implies his belief in the coming of a better humanity that will conquer chaos and barbarity.

For many readers, the significance of *The Glass Bead Game* lies in the synthesis that it represents in Hesse's art and life. It is the work in which he reaffirms most strongly his belief in the Kingdom of the Spirit, seeing in the Game an eternal approach to this Kingdom. The central figure's name, (Josef) Knecht, means "servant" in German, suggesting that his purpose is to serve the hierarchy. His

ultimate service is as supreme Magister Ludi, an office he holds for eight years, but he is plagued by doubts from the beginning. Slowly he realizes that he is aware of the polarities of the light World of the Father (Castalia) and the dark World of the Mother (the outside world). Knecht harbors two opposing feelings within his breast—one toward service to the Order, the other toward "awakening."

The irrational strain grows. As with Goldmund, it is the artist in him that desires liberation. When he does decide to leave the Order, the reason he gives is that he fears that devotion to the spiritual life in seclusion from the world leads to degeneration, that the glass bead game is nothing but an esoteric play as pastime. He prefers to become a Castalian teacher in the outside world. Not long after Knecht leaves Castalia in his quest for self-fulfillment, he drowns in an icy lake one morning right at sunrise. Hesse himself saw Knecht's death as a sacrifice made to free Tito, his pupil, to take up Knecht's cause. This affirmative conclusion is symbolized by the way Tito takes up the robe Knecht has left behind and puts it on after Knecht's death.

By writing *The Glass Bead Game*, Hesse tried to achieve mainly two goals: to build a spiritual realm in which he himself could live and breathe in spite of the poisoning of the world around him and to strengthen the resistance of his German friends against the barbaric powers under which they had to suffer. In order to create this spiritual realm, however, it was not enough to return to the past or to dwell on the present. Instead it became necessary for Hesse to project his ideas into the future, when the unbearable present would have become history. The utopian character of the novel, therefore, is not a gimmick but a need to view the present from a clearer perspective.

## SUMMARY

Hermann Hesse's works are all fragments of a long confession, reflecting a single human being and his relation to the world and to his own self. Although they are primarily concerned with self-recognition and self-realization, these spiritual autobiographies deal with the human condition in general. They have a mystical quality in the way Hesse traces the quest for identity in a universe that is either hostile or indifferent. Yet the quest is not

undertaken within the dogma of an established religion, for then obedience to an established law would suffice. To Hesse, one finds the way according to one's own inner law.

Thomas Whissen

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How do you account for the burst of popularity for Hermann Hesse's fiction in the United States in the 1960's?
- Compare Hesse's *Beneath the Wheel* to American school novels, such as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (1959).
- Comment on Thomas Mann's suggestion that *The Glass Bead Game* gave the American reader the opportunity "to dare to laugh."
- What is your understanding of Siddhartha's discovery that "every sin carries the hope of grace within it"?
- Trace the right of passage through which Henry Haller must move in *Steppenwolf*.
- By what means does Hesse make his works both spiritual autobiographies and stories of Everyman?

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## E. T. A. HOFFMANN

**Born:** Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)

January 24, 1776

**Died:** Berlin, Prussia (now in Germany)

June 25, 1822

*The author of four novels and the composer of the opera Undine, Hoffmann wrote bizarre Romantic tales. A few provide the text of Jacques Offenbach's Les Contes d'Hoffmann (The Tales of Hoffmann) and of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky's the Shchelkunchik (The Nutcracker Suite) ballet.*

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Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann (HAWF-mahn) is known as E. T. A. Hoffmann, because he changed the name “Wilhelm” to “Amadeus” as a tribute to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the German composer. Hoffmann was born on January 24, 1776, in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia). He came from a family of lawyers with a long tradition of service to the state, a calling that he also felt obliged to follow. His parents were separated when he was three years old, and he was cared for by a bachelor uncle, who was eccentric and demanding but a great lover of music. Hoffmann's thorough education in instrumental music and theory may have been the only positive aspect of his lonely childhood.

Hoffmann displayed virtuoso talents. He wrote music throughout his career and was middle-aged before he abandoned the notion that he would be remembered by posterity as a composer. Hoffmann was also a gifted artist and an inspired caricaturist, an ability that had a negative effect on his career. Yet his irrepressible humor and dualistic personality contributed to his genius. Hoffmann displayed a lifelong tendency toward excess in his lifestyle and in the consumption of alcohol, factors that help to explain his early death at the age of forty-six.

From 1792 to 1795, Hoffmann attended the uni-

versity in Königsberg as a law student. He passed difficult examinations, making him eligible for service as a high-ranking legal official in the Prussian government. His life, like that of the writer Franz Kafka a century later, was compartmentalized into pursuit of the traditional legal career during business hours and devotion to his artistic talents during his off-hours. Hoffmann also gave private music lessons and fell in love with one of his pupils, Cora Hatt, who was married.

From 1797 to 1807, Hoffmann held positions in Prussian courts of law in Posen, Plozk, and Warsaw. He was sent to the remote hamlet of Plozk because of an indiscretion involving his caricature portrait of one of the leading military personalities in Posen, who was not amused by the likeness. In 1802, Hoffmann married Michalina (Rohrer) Trzynska. During the years from 1797 to 1807, he continued to study both painting and composition, completing an opera and a symphony. He also began to write fiction at this time.

Because he refused to swear an oath of fealty to Napoleon I's occupation government, Hoffmann was dismissed from public service in 1807. After a time of personal hardship and near starvation in Berlin, he succeeded in obtaining the position of musical director and in-house composer at the Bamberg theater, where he stayed from 1808 to 1813. After the failure of his first production as music director, Hoffmann resigned but retained the job of composer of stage music and ballets. He gave

private music lessons again, and he fell in love with another pupil, Julia Marc. This unfortunate passion drove him to thoughts of suicide, a theme often adumbrated in his fiction. Divorce was not an option in Hoffmann's time and situation. In these difficult years, Hoffmann continued to write instrumental or choral music, published his first short story, "Ritter Gluck: Eine Erinnerung aus dem Jahr 1809" ("Ritter Gluck"), and functioned as a theatrical designer.

In 1813, Hoffmann was appointed music director for the opera company of Joseph Seconda in Dresden and Leipzig. He wrote such stories as "Der goldene Topf: Ein Märchen aus der neuen Zeit" ("The Golden Flower Pot"), an essay titled "Beethovens Instrumentalmusik" ("Beethoven's Instrumental Music"), and his own opera, *Undine* (1816), with libretto supplied by the writer Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. This charming story of a water sprite in love with a mortal knight was produced in Berlin in 1816 for fourteen popular performances. The opera house burned to the ground, however, while Hoffmann watched, horrified, from his room across the street. *Undine* was soon forgotten. Contemporary music historians view it as one of the most unjustly neglected operas of Romanticism.

Hoffmann's months at Seconda's opera were brief. He returned to Berlin in 1814 to take the position of deputy judge in the court of appeal, a prestigious appointment that he held until his death in 1822. He continued to write stories, reviews of musical performances, novels, and sketches. He was well known in artistic circles, befriending the famous actor Ludwig Devrient and counting many Romantic writers among his close friends. He was also a habitué of the renowned wineshop Lütter and Wegner. Late in his life, he was appointed commissioner of inquiry for a set of important trials, where he acquitted himself with honesty and efficiency. He also returned to the fatal error of caricature, this time of people at the trial, whom he pilloried in a short story titled *Meister Floh: Ein Märchen in sieben Abenteuern zweier Freunde* (1822; *Master Flea: A Fairy Tale in Seven Adventures of Two Friends*, 1826). A man with, in his own words, "too much reality" to devote himself entirely to writing, Hoffmann continued to function in two spheres, even up until paralysis claimed his life. He dictated his last story, "Der Feind" ("The Enemy"), until a few days before

his death on June 25, 1822, in Berlin, Prussia. Hoffmann is among the most famous of all Romantic tellers of tales, particularly in England, France, and the United States.

## ANALYSIS

Hoffmann's fiction is noted for its astonishing depiction of pathological psychological states; for the use of description emulating the detail of dreams; for the introduction of grotesque, supernatural, and bizarre elements into his narratives; for its sometimes macabre humor; and for the portrayal of characters torn between two conflicting desires. His work, like his life, is dualistic, full of two-sided heroes leading frenetic, eccentric lives.

Hoffmann came to fame as a writer after having considered the calling of an artist or a composer-musician. He accompanied his efforts as a lawyer and author with the writing of operas, symphonies, and a wealth of smaller compositions. He often gave private music lessons to augment his precarious income and published critical articles about the music of his time.

Musicians and other kinds of artists play a significant role in Hoffmann's fiction as ambivalent heroes. The most famous (partly autobiographical) character that he created was Kapellmeister (Conductor) Johannes Kreisler, the hero of a cycle of stories, which served as the inspiration for the occasional music titled *Kreisleriana* by the nineteenth century composer Robert Schumann. Kreisler was also the hero of Hoffmann's avant-garde novel *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr; nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Makulaturblättern* (1819-1821; *The Life and Opinions of Kater Murr; with the Fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Scrap Paper*, 1969; also known as *The Educated Cat*). In this novel, Hoffmann's dualism is graphically displayed, since the book purports to be the autobiography of a tomcat, who uses the reverse sides of the musician Kreisler's autobiography for his own story. Thus, each page of the cat's life alternates with pages of the musician's confessions. Murr (Purr) is the very embodiment of a limited and judgmental member of the middle class, and the composer's struggles are caused precisely because of such attitudes.

The eighteenth century composer Christoph Gluck is a main character in Hoffmann's earli-



est story, “Ritter Gluck.” In this tale, as in most, the supernatural plays a role because the composer is a ghost. Other magical, often humorous, elements figure prominently in the stories, including fire spirits and salamanders, in “The Golden Flower Pot”; twisted demoniac characters who appear in various guises and may be in league with the Devil, such as Coppelius in “Der Sandmann” (“The Sandman”); or eccentric violin collectors, who build houses symmetrical only on the inside, like Councillor Krespel in “Rat Krespel” (“Councillor Krespel”). Titles such as “Das öde Haus” (“The Deserted House”) from *Nachtstücke* (1817; night pieces), *Die Elixiere des Teufels: Nachgelassene Papiere des Bruders Medardus, eines Kapuziners* (1815-1816; *The Devil’s Elixirs: From the Posthumous Papers of Brother Medardus, a Capuchin Friar*, 1824), and “Der Elementargeist” (“The Nature Spirit”) attest to the range of fantastic themes that crowd Hoffmann’s tales.

Hoffmann often wrote about people who were obsessed by one peculiar idea. For example, he depicted the slightly mad obsession of Councillor Krespel for taking violins apart in order to see where their beautiful tone resided. That is analogous to the futility of doing an autopsy on a human body to search for the soul or the cause of a beautiful singing voice. Indeed, Krespel, a lawyer like Hoffmann, has been unhappily married to an operatic soprano from Italy (where the best violins were also made) and has a daughter who will die if she sings. Of course, she has a divinely beautiful voice, and, inevitably, she succumbs to the fatal temptation to sing. This theme is taken up by such later authors as Thomas Mann in his novella *Tristan* (1903; English translation, 1925). It is also typical of Hoffmann’s fiction that more than one related theme is treated in the same story, for example, building an inwardly symmetrical house, dismantling violins, and enforcing silence on a gifted, but physically frail, singer.

Hoffmann was the first author to write mystery fiction, when he published, “Das Fräulein von Scuderi” (“Mademoiselle de Scudéry”) in volume three of *Die Serapionsbrüder* (1819-1821; *The Serapion Brethren*, 1886-1892), twenty-two years before Edgar Allan Poe. It contains a fanciful description of an artist-criminal obsessed with a beautiful work of art, a theme that has enjoyed wide currency since Hoffmann’s time.

The author arranged his stories into collections, with names such as *The Serapion Brethren*, perhaps a reference to his own friends and fellow Romantics, or *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier* (1814-1815; *Fantasy Pieces in Callot’s Manner*, 1996). In all, he wrote nearly fifty tales. Although an entire collection may not be remembered, individual stories have entered the canon of world literature and, aided by their use in musical compositions, have become part of the Western heritage, particularly through the use of “Nussknacker and Mausekönig” (“Nutcracker and the King of Mice”) in *The Nutcracker Suite* ballet of Russian composer Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky.

Fascinated by mesmerism, an early fad related to hypnosis, and by the ways in which the human spirit is drawn to conflicting realities, one of which may be fatal, Hoffmann captured the imagination of a Romantic generation. He is still read in numerous translations throughout the world.

### “THE SANDMAN”

**First published:** “Der Sandmann,” 1816  
(collected *Selected Writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann*, 1969)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A promising young author becomes the victim of an obsession with the identity of the two women whom he loves, and he plunges to his death.*

“The Sandman,” justly regarded as one of Hoffmann’s greatest stories, is the basis for a scene from the opera *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (*The Tales of Hoffmann*) by Jacques Offenbach and for the Léo Delibes ballet *Coppélia*. It is a typical example of Hoffmann’s use of doubles.

While studying at the university, Nathaniel, a sensitive aspiring writer, believes that a barometer maker and binocular salesman named Coppola is a terrifying figure from his childhood. Dabbling in alchemistic experiments with a lawyer named Coppelius, Nathaniel’s father died in a laboratory explosion. So that she could hurry the children into bed whenever Coppelius visited Nathaniel’s father, Nathaniel’s nurse had used the figure of Coppelius to scare the children with stories of the

Sandman, who steals the eyes of children for his nefarious purposes. Although rationally, the two men cannot be identical, despite the similarity of their names (Coppelius and Coppola), an encounter with Coppola reminds Nathaniel of his father's death.

Nathaniel's agitation at encountering Coppola is soothed by a trip to his home. His fiancé, Clara, a name suggesting the clarity and reason recommended by the Enlightenment, exercises a healing influence on him, although she does not comprehend his confessional and deeply felt poetic art. In Clara's opinion, Nathaniel's preoccupation with emotionally stimulating poetry is not good for him.

Upon his return to the university, Nathaniel discovers his rooming house destroyed by fire. His new lodgings face the apartment of the mysterious scientist Spalanzani and his daughter Olympia. Using the binoculars purchased from Coppola before Nathaniel's restorative trip home, he observes and falls hopelessly in love with Olympia.

After meeting her at a gathering at the professor's home, Nathaniel is confirmed in his opinion that she is a woman who truly understands his artistic soul. She listens to his compositions by the hour, sometimes punctuating Nathaniel's reading with the single cry, "Oh!" Olympia, however, is an automaton, built by the scientist and fantastically endowed with "life" from the essence of Nathaniel's eyes, stolen by the "Sandman" Coppola when Nathaniel bought the binoculars. Thus, when Nathaniel looks into Olympia's eyes he sees and loves himself.

Nathaniel goes mad one day because he chances to see Spalanzani and Coppola struggling over ownership of Olympia and tearing her limb from limb in the process. Again nursed back to health by Clara, Nathaniel accidentally turns his binoculars on her. He suddenly understands that it is Clara who is really a lifeless doll. He attempts to murder her, but instead he falls from a great height onto the city square, just as the barometer maker is walking by.

In this tale, the themes of identity, the supernatural, demonism, alchemy, and automata, reflecting a fear of scientific innovation and the dilemma of the artist in society, combine to create the typical Hoffmannesque thrill of fear and alienation, combined with horror and tragic disappointment. One

can see why such tales influenced writers such as Poe and may be the forerunners of modern science fiction.

### "MADEMOISELLE DE SCUDÉRY"

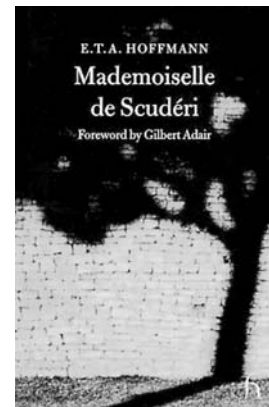
**First published:** "Das Fräulein von Scuderi," 1820 (collected in *The Serapion Brethren*, 1886-1892)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The obsessive desire of a master jeweler to possess his creations leads him to murder and death in seventeenth century Paris.*

"Mademoiselle de Scudéry," considered to be Hoffmann's supreme achievement, may be the earliest mystery story. It served also as the inspiration for the opera *Cardillac* by twentieth century composer Paul Hindemith. Like many of Hoffmann's tales, it provides a psychologically accurate portrait of a pathological personality, in this case a split personality, or a Jekyll-and-Hyde figure, the master jeweler Cardillac. Written with attention to historical accuracy, and the creation of the mood in Paris during the reign of Louis XIV, the story is also a masterpiece of narrative technique, using a minor poet and spinster of advanced age, Mademoiselle de Scudéry, as the agency by which the fiendish criminal-artist is brought to justice.

A lengthy tale, "Mademoiselle de Scudéry" includes a narrative about a rash of notorious poisonings and the consequent creation of a special tribunal in Paris to hunt down malefactors. This reference serves to explain the mood of Parisians, who are almost hysterical even before the murders are perpetrated by Cardillac. It also calls into question the kind of justice available in society when a citizenry is roused, a query pertinent to events not only in Hoffmann's time but also in the present age.



In the main story, Cardillac's apprentice Olivier, who has Mademoiselle's special "pet" as a baby, and Madelon, the jeweler's daughter, are wrongfully accused of the theft of Cardillac's jewels and his murder. The young couple are portrayed as shining examples of virtue, and Scudéry must clear up the confusion to save the innocent couple.

In what proves to be a tortuous process, Cardillac's criminal behavior is revealed, but, to protect Madelon from knowledge of her father's crimes, Mademoiselle de Scudéry must secretly narrate the true events to the king himself, whose heart is softened by Madelon's resemblance to a woman whom the king once loved but lost to the convent. Formal procedures are circumvented in the interest of subjective and arbitrary considerations. Only the honesty of individuals assures that the streets of Paris are safe and that justice has been served.

Cardillac is revealed to be the victim of a prenatal influence—his mother's pathological appetite for jewelry during her pregnancy. He is driven to create masterpieces of jewelry in his daytime identity as the irreproachable jeweler for Paris nobility (Dr. Jekyll). At night, however, he is obsessively compelled to steal the lovely baubles back, killing their rightful owners (Mr. Hyde). After many baffling murders, one of Cardillac's victims parries the knife thrust intended to kill him and stabs

Cardillac instead. Olivier, who has discovered his master's secret, drags the jeweler back to his apartment, only to be taken for the thief-murderer himself. After Mademoiselle has explained the unique situation to the king, the young couple is permitted to immigrate to another country, thus keeping the truth from Madelon and the public while providing a rather questionable and subjective kind of justice.

## SUMMARY

E. T. A. Hoffmann's tales call into question the nature of the artist and of art itself, or they provide puzzling views of a reality only imperfectly comprehended. They are grotesque parodies of the ideal of harmonious beauty in art and narrative fiction. Typical Hoffmann heroes are talented but obsessive. They cannot conform to society, and thus they are compelled to seek understanding in unnatural ways. They are crushed by society or find themselves utterly unable to discern where reality lies. They are swept along by forces that they cannot control and forced to participate in bizarre, irrational events. Yet, the reader is captivated by Hoffmann's masterful storytelling. Ever the ironic humorist, he softens the harshness of his tragic vision with fantasy, wit, and humor.

Erlis Glass

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways does E. T. A. Hoffmann bring supernatural and realistic elements together in *Master Flea: A Fairy Tale in Seven Adventures to Two Friends*?
- Is Councillor Krespel in the story named for him a version of the author?
- Trace the influence of Hoffmann on the mystery stories of Edgar Allan Poe.
- Hoffmann is usually called a Romantic. Are there aspects of his stories that seem anti-Romantic?
- Cite several instances of the influence of Hoffmann's stories as bases for works or parts of works by well-known composers.



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## HOMER

**Born:** Possibly Ionia, Asia Minor (now in Turkey)  
c. early eighth century B.C.E.

**Died:** Greece  
c. late eighth century B.C.E.

*The Homeric Iliad and Odyssey provide both the finest examples of Greek epic and valuable testimony on the nature of the Mycenaean world.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The ancient Greeks recognized the advantage of keeping vague the identity of the poet whom they universally called *Omeros*. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* became, in effect, national epics half a millennium before anything like pan-Hellenism actually existed. In them, ancient Greece saw its tradition and its history, and they alone marked the transition from a nonliterate culture to a literary one. It is hardly surprising, then, that seven cities claimed Homer (HOH-mur) as their own or that a mass of manifestly false genealogical material appeared in ancient times, concocted to demonstrate that the poet of the *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611) and *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614) was their native son.

Ionia becomes, essentially because of the predominance of Ionian dialect, the region most often cited by modern scholars as Homer's place of birth. Still, this general agreement contributes little toward settling the infinitely more important question of how a presumably blind poet from a rural and relatively unsophisticated region of the Greek world could have written two poems as cosmopolitan as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. An explanation unacceptable to modern sensibilities is that there was no single poet called Homer, or even if there had been, that his poems were passed by oral tradition throughout the Greek world and received suc-

cessive refinements through the rhapsodes, professional reciters who presented them. The episodic nature of the poems themselves lends credence to the argument that they originally had been separate shorter works reconciled into epics. There again, nineteenth century etymologists deduced that the name "Homer" meant "the united." In plural form, the *Omeroi* would thus be guild members entrusted with maintaining the legends of the Trojan War at an appropriate standard. This original group, so the argument runs, became identified with the succeeding generation of Homeric imitators, called *Homeridae* (sons of Homer) even in ancient times. Reconciling this patronymic with the plural form yielded the name *Omeros*.

Because no definitive biography of Homer existed, even in ancient times, wildly contradictory dates appear to frame his life span. Modern scholars reject the ancient assumption that Homer lived within chronological proximity to the historical Trojan War, now generally set from 1194-1184 B.C.E. The majority of ancient opinion, following the historian Herodotus (484-425 B.C.E.), accepted a mid-ninth century B.C.E. period for Homer's mature years, as Herodotus claims (2.53) that Homer could not have lived more than four centuries before his own. Early Christianity found it expedient to place Homer's birth date as close as possible to the period assigned to biblical codification, primarily to reconcile the Greek and Hebrew traditions.

Until the mid-twentieth century, a ninth century dating for Homer remained the most popular; even so, an eighth century Homer is more logical



and has become widely accepted based on several arguments. Post-Homeric literature, including the epic imitations of the *Homeridae*, Hesiod and the Hesiodic continuations, and the earliest lyric and elegiac poems of Greek literature, are firmly placed in the seventh century B.C.E. All depend on Homeric influence as their most important internal feature. It is clear that Homer precedes Hesiod, and also as clear that relative chronological proximity exists between the two poets. That would place Homer's birth in the eighth century, not the ninth. It is also probable that Herodotus calculated the number of generations that existed between himself and Homer, for it is clear from another place in his work (2.142) that Herodotus calculates three generations as one hundred years.

None of these speculations settles the essential question of the poet's identity. Indeed, many people have become lost in various aspects of the question. An Ionian identity makes sense, and perhaps one might localize it even further to Smyrna on the coast of Asia Minor or to the offshore island of Chios, a stronghold of the *Homeridae*. The *Iliad* contains two specific references to the area: a description of the birds that gather beside the Cayster, the Ionian river, and a description of the northwest winds that blow from Thrace. Even so, that is hardly conclusive. Who Homer was, and whether one poet by that name actually existed, must essentially remain unanswered questions.

## ANALYSIS

Accepting an eighth century dating for composition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as most modern scholars do, logically raises questions regarding the appropriateness of the Homeric poems as historical testimony. Such questions do not grow substantially fewer by moving Homer's century back to the ninth. Archaeological methods developed since Heinrich Schliemann's excavations at the site of Troy in the 1870's have set the dates for the historical Trojan War between 1194 and 1184 B.C.E. That would mean that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* describe a historical period four or three hundred years anterior to his own. Since the Greek world was still at its preliterate stage (the ability to write existed, but the written language was not used for literary purposes), Homer had no written records upon which to rely. Even so, memory remains strong in preliterate societies. Mythic storytelling

becomes a privileged art, one that does not tolerate deviation from elements considered essential. Descriptions of personalities, places, events, and outcomes must remain consistent. Numbers involved and chronological frames for these events assume considerably less importance. Given that classical Greek identifies all numbers above ten thousand as *myria* (myriad), no ancient reader would have expected a precise inventory of numbers in the "Catalogue of Ships and Heroes" that fills *Iliad* 2. In fact, Greek notions of history before Thucydides differed as much as their understanding of biography before Plutarch (c. 46 C.E.-after 120 C.E.).

Nevertheless, archaeology supports much of what Homer provides regarding the Trojan War. Read emblematically, the *Iliad* implies a major clash of Greek and non-Greek cultures. Even ancient historical sources document the friction between the Peloponnesic Greeks and the inhabitants of Ionia, Caria, and Anatolia, and it is likely that the theft of Helen (whose value is material, not human, by Mycenaean standards) represents the mercantile friction that existed between the Peloponnesus and Asia Minor.

Moreover, the internal consistency of the Homeric poems constitutes a strong argument in favor of their reliability. Both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* rely extensively on verbatim repeated passages, epithets regularly assigned to people, places, and things, and massive lists known as epic catalogs. Formulaic endings often fill out the hexameter verse, implicitly supporting the authenticity of the line in question. All these techniques effectively become mnemonic devices that facilitated oral transmission of the poems by rhapsodes, who originally circulated the Homeric poems throughout the Greek world. It is clear that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had assumed privileged status at a period that approximates their composition. With this understood, it is unlikely that the rhapsodes would have altered the essentials of the poems in any substantive way. Late second century B.C.E. codification by Aristarchus and Xenodotus appears limited to division into books and a choice of likely readings between or among variant readings not significantly affecting the poems themselves. Obviously, stability of text cannot guarantee reliability of content, but, given the pre-Thucydidean conception of history, it is clear that the Homeric epics can provide valuable insights into the Mycenaean world.

Of course, Homer was not Mycenaean. Archaeological evidence shows that pre-Greek culture died following, and perhaps partly in consequence of, the power vacuum created by the absence of traditional power structures on the Peloponnese during the years of preparation and fighting at Troy. It is another question whether the Mycenaean kingdoms fell by a Dorian invasion or simply by neglect. Still, the *Odyssey* would support the latter contention, one sustained as well by modern archaeology. The instability of Odysseus's Ithaca is clear, and the poem clearly contrasts the Mycenaean outlook of Odysseus, Nestor, and Eumaeus with that which the suitors of Penelope have imposed. Likewise, it is easy to detect the unease that Menelaus shows upon his return to Sparta with the reclaimed Helen. Even young Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, senses how much the war has cost and the unhappiness that prevails in its aftermath.

One typical characteristic of Homeric epic is thus its ability to restrict a massive theme such as the Trojan War both chronologically and to its human dimension. The *Iliad*, though its theme is indeed the fighting at Troy, treats its subject only in terms of the conflict of Achilles and Agamemnon. Chronologically, it covers no more than ninety days, perhaps as few as sixty. It also initiates what would become the accepted practice of beginning in medias res (in the middle of events) and ending before the final conclusion of the events that it describes. There is nothing of the nine years that preceded the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, nor is there anything of the strategy that would result in Greek victory: the wooden horse. Homer's narrative ends with the return of Hector's body to his father, Priam. The effect is to underscore the importance of *moira* (fate) as a controlling factor in Achilles' life. Readers know that once Achilles has made the decision to remain at Troy he will kill Hector and will himself die soon after. That Achilles' acceptance of *moira* would become a moral imperative as a result of Hector's killing of Patroclus thus emerges as the climax of Homer's narrative.

Narrative pattern in the *Odyssey* resembles that of the *Iliad* insofar as it begins in medias res. Odysseus has spent approximately seven years on Calypso's island as the epic begins. His adventures with his crew are behind him, and he recalls them subsequently to his Phaeacian hosts only by way of flashback. Most of the ongoing narrative of the *Od-*

*yssey* concerns itself with recognition scenes, and these culminate with Odysseus's recognition by the suitors and his gory slaughter of them and the unfaithful handmaidens. Another slaughter, that of the fathers of the suitors, appears about to start when the goddess Athena suddenly appears and ends the entire narrative by *deus ex machina* (goddess from the machine, describing any unnatural termination of narrative). Readers learn nothing through the *Odyssey* regarding how well (or badly) Odysseus resumes his position as king, husband, or father.

## ILIAD

**First compiled:** c. 750 B.C.E. (English translation, 1611)

**Type of work:** Epic poem

*Homer's Iliad presents the Trojan War in terms of the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon; fate, willingness to accept death, courage, and pettiness are its timeless themes.*

Though the myths describe the Trojan War as a thirty-year cycle of preparations, conflict, and homecomings, the chronological period that the *Iliad* covers is actually quite restricted, not more than ninety days in the final year of fighting. Despite its focus on the quarrel of only two of its warriors, both of them Greek, Homer nevertheless conveys the full range of human emotions that prevails in war, even as he provides a vivid portrait of Mycenaean culture. The result is that his *Iliad*, bold and all-encompassing though it is, remains essentially quite limited; that is undoubtedly one of the most distinctive features of Homer's epic. Homer makes the limits of his intentions clear from the outset. His invocation to Caliope, the Muse of epic, specifies that he will sing of Achilles' anger.

Obviously, the anger of Achilles operates on several levels and has far-reaching consequences. On the personal level, it refers to the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon for possession of Briseis, a young woman originally given to Achilles by the Achaeans as his prize of honor. Agamemnon, too, had a captive mistress, Chryseis; yet, she was the daughter of a priest of Apollo named Chryses.

When Agamemnon haughtily refuses to return Chryseis to her father, Chryses invokes Apollo himself, who sends a plague upon the Achaeans. Once he realizes that the army will be decimated by disease if he takes no action, Agamemnon returns Chryseis to her father, though he simultaneously demands that Achilles surrender Briseis to him as her replacement. Agamemnon fears that the Achaeans will consider him weak if he does not enforce his will upon Achilles in this way, yet the reader perceives only Agamemnon's pettiness and insecurity.

Achilles reviles Agamemnon in the *agora* (assembly) of leaders, yet he surrenders Briseis to him without active resistance. More significantly, Achilles announces his intentions to withdraw his Myrmidons from battle and return with them to Phthia, their home in southern Thessaly. These dramatic announcements made, Achilles throws down the *skeptron* (staff), which gives him the un-

contested right to speak, and dashes from the *agora*. This extraordinary behavior at the least implies weakness and apparently cowardice. It seems to complement the pettiness of Agamemnon, but there are clearly other reasons for Achilles' actions.

Thetis, the goddess-mother of Achilles, subsequently appears to comfort her son, who is all too aware of how the Achae-

ans could interpret his sudden withdrawal and threat to return home. She reviews the alternatives that *moira* (fate) has assigned to him: either to slay Hector, the first of the Trojan warriors, and to be killed at Troy soon thereafter or to live a long and undistinguished life in Phthia, dying there of old age. Achilles well knows these alternatives. His withdrawal, which extends from *Iliad* 1 to *Iliad* 22, represents an essential pause to consider these alternatives at a crucial juncture of his life. Worth noting is the fact that Achilles undertakes no preparations to return home; also, although the war initially goes badly for the Achaeans, to the extent that Agamemnon offers Achilles an impressive se-

ries of gifts (including restoration of Briseis) for his return, Achilles' prolonged absence makes relatively little difference overall.

Agamemnon's embassy to secure Achilles' return contains elements of magnanimity and self-interest. Significantly, Agamemnon does not personally entreat Achilles. Instead, he enlists the cunning Odysseus and Diomedes (who would together devise the stratagem of the wooden horse), as well as Achilles' old tutor Phoenix. The appeal thus emerges through a combination of clever argument and sage advice, and the collection of gifts (listed in catalog form) is calculated both to impress the Achaeans with Agamemnon's *megala-psyché* (great-heartedness, generosity), as much as it is to force Achilles to make his decision. That is one of several places in which the humanity of the poem emerges. Achilles' concern for his old tutor, seen in his insistence that Phoenix remain overnight rather than attempt to return immediately, shows that he values privileged relationships such as master and student. It has its counterpart in Achilles' relationship to Patroclus, his young protégé in the art of war. This relationship, severed by Patroclus's death, will ultimately provide the impetus that Achilles needs to accept the short but glorious life that *moira* has offered him.

In one sense, all the characters of the *Iliad* recognize the inevitability of *moira* yet remain essentially powerless to change it. The tears of Achilles that precede his mother's appearance are an indication of this human frailty, but so is Hector's meeting with his wife, Andromache, and their infant son, Astyanax. In *Iliad* 6, long before Achilles returns to battle, the Achaeans have advanced to the very walls of Troy. Hector, the bravest of the Trojan warriors, searches for Alexandrus (Paris), whose theft of Helen had been the immediate cause of the war, and finds him in Helen's rooms. His reproaches make Alexandrus recognize his obligations, and Alexandrus takes up his arms to defend the city, but the primary contrast is clear. Andromache recognizes and regretfully accepts the likelihood of her husband's death in battle, but Helen belittles Alexandrus as a sensualist willing to allow others to fight for him. Andromache's fears for Hector correspond to those of the child, Astyanax, who does not recognize his father because of the helmet that he wears. When Hector removes the helmet, the child accepts his father's embrace, and the couple



laughs. There, then, is a contrast between pure love and simple sensual attraction as well as between responsibility and weakness.

Even the deities of Olympus display the flaws of their human counterparts. They, too, remain tied to *moira* and are essentially powerless to change it. They, too, govern by *agorai*, and these assemblies inevitably end as inconclusively as those of the human warriors below. The gods and goddesses have taken sides in the war, but these reflect their previous personal antagonisms rather than their concern with humanity. Thetis, for example, does intercede with Zeus for her son Achilles but is aware that doing so will necessarily provoke the jealousy of Hera, Zeus's wife. She must also know that any favor that Zeus grants to Achilles would necessarily be in the context of glory on the battlefield. Ironically, any such benefaction would necessarily hasten her son's death. Just as Agamemnon prevails in the human order, so does Zeus in the divine; yet neither appears able to take meaningful and decisive actions that affect outcomes. The power of both is limited to immediate actions and short-term results.

The peculiar powerlessness of Zeus emerges clearly in the Sarpedon episode, *Iliad* 16. At this point, Patroclus has received Achilles' permission to reenter battle wearing his master's armor. Patroclus experiences his *aristeia* (moment of glory), a series of combats in which he defeats one opponent after another. Sarpedon, a beautiful boy loved by Zeus, is one of those whom *moira* has determined that Patroclus will defeat. Zeus raises the scales of *moira*, watches Sarpedon's weight descend, and realizes that he must accept the young man's death. His resignation to *moira* parallels that of Andromache, even as it underscores the similarity of mortals and immortals.

Though Achilles allows his protégé, Patroclus, to enter battle, he himself remains apart. Patroclus is effectively Achilles' surrogate, however, and his appearance in his master's armor emphasizes this relationship. So devastating is the effect of his presence that the Trojans at first believe Achilles has returned. In one sense that is true, for Patroclus looks very much like Achilles, and the *aristeia* that he enjoys is equivalent to any that his master could

have enjoyed. It is also true that once Patroclus has entered battle, the *moira* of Achilles is sealed, for the lives of master and student are tied by the bonds of friendship and obligation. Patroclus dies at the hands of Hector, and while Hector succeeds in claiming the armor of Achilles, the body of Patroclus remains with the Greeks. The announcement of Patroclus's death sends Achilles into a threnody and leads to his construction of an extravagant pyre for the corpse. This development provides the opportunity for another catalog listing the offerings that formed the pyre. Averse as human sacrifice was to Greek sensibilities, the pyre includes young Trojans captured in battle.

Achilles now recognizes that his obligations to Patroclus have forced his return, but he has no armor worthy of the event. Thetis intervenes again, this time to secure armor crafted by the artisan deity Hephaestus, and once again Thetis's intervention hastens her son's *moira*. In effect, the alternatives that had existed in *Iliad* 1 are no longer available. The period of introspection has ended, and Achilles reenters battle knowing that he will kill Hector but equally aware that his own death will follow soon after. When Achilles meets Hector in battle, he is, in effect, encountering an aspect of himself. Hector wears the armor of Achilles, and Achilles has donned the glorious new armor that his mother, Thetis, had secured for him. In killing Hector, especially because Homer has already portrayed that warrior's character so sympathetically, Achilles eliminates his ties to the past and fully accepts the alternative of a short but glorious life. It is his true destiny and, like the armor provided by Thetis, the only *moira* that is appropriate for him.

The humanity that lies behind so much of the bravado in the *Iliad* emerges in the final scene of the poem. Old Priam, king of Troy, comes to Achilles to beg for the return of his son's body. Even though Achilles realizes that Hector had been the immediate cause of his beloved Patroclus's death and that Hector had forced Achilles to accept his own *moira*, he grants Priam's request and declares a truce for ritual mourning and appropriate burial of the dead on both sides. The *Iliad* thus ends in a suspension, rather than a resolution, of events.

## ODYSSEY

**First compiled:** c. 725 B.C.E. (English translation, 1614)

**Type of work:** Epic poem

*The return of Odysseus to Ithaca nearly twenty years after his departure for Troy represents his personal struggle, often against larger forces, to restore the stability that war had cast aside.*

Read at its most basic level, the *Odyssey* recounts Odysseus's struggles to return to his native island of Ithaca after ten years of fighting at Troy. It appears to be a highly particularized account of one warrior's struggles and sufferings. No doubt exists that Odysseus remains the focus; though names of his crew appear at intervals, they collectively constitute a vehicle that gets their master part of the way home, and all of them die long before their master reaches home. Even the mythic Phaeacians, who literally place the sleeping hero on his remote western island, remain peculiarly nameless, except for the family that rules them, but Alcinous, Aretê, and Nausicaä merely approve this final phase of the journey. The seafaring Phaeacians themselves suffer permanent hardship for their good deed: Poseidon landlocks their harbors in retribution for Odysseus's having blinded Polyphemus the Cyclops, the sea-god's monster son.

Once Odysseus finally realizes that the Phaeacians have actually returned him to Ithaca, and not merely abandoned him on a forsaken island in order to steal the treasure that their king had given to him, the hero proceeds to test everyone he meets, starting with Eumaeus, his swineherd, and Telemachus, the son whom he had to abandon in infancy in order to honor his commitment to fight at Troy. He tests his old nurse, Eurycleia, who, when she recognizes his scar received in youth during a boar hunt, appropriately venerates him. He tests his wife, Penelope, who has waited for Odysseus more than nineteen years, resisting more than a score of much younger suitors. Her stratagem of weaving and unweaving a funeral shroud for the aging Laërtes, Odysseus's father, allows her to delay choosing a new husband, but it also allows this assortment of brash young men with decidedly uncourtly manners to move into Odysseus's

great hall and deplete the wealth of his household through their ceaseless banquets and irresponsible behavior. This irresponsibility extends to the moral sphere as well, for the suitors, in short order, corrupt the handmaidens of the household.

True to form, Odysseus arrives disguised as a beggar, tests the suitors, finds that they have abused the laws of hospitality, and kills them all. He ratifies this action by pronouncing moral judgment on the handmaidens, as well. Once they have cleaned the great hall of the suitors' blood, he orders the handmaidens to be collectively hanged in the courtyard. While this mass slaughter is in progress, Phemius, the court rhapsode, is ordered by Odysseus to sing as loudly as possible to the loudest of musical accompaniments in order to cover the screams of those being killed. Furthermore, Odysseus enlists both Telemachus and Eumaeus as accomplices. The first thing that Odysseus and his nineteen-year-old son do together is, in effect, commit mass murder, then retreat to the suburban vineyard at which old Laërtes is awaiting the arrival of the fathers of the suitors, who are avid for vengeance. Another slaughter is about to begin when the goddess Athene, the mentor of Odysseus from the outset, calls a halt, and the *Odyssey* ends.

Seen in this way, Odysseus does not appear to be a very nice man, and certainly not very heroic. Even so, his epithet *polutropos* (many-wiled) implies that there is more to his character, and correspondingly to Homer's poem, than this rather negative reading implies. Indeed, virtually every action of Odysseus admits of positive and negative interpretations. In this respect, Homer's Odysseus mirrors humanity at large. To assess Odysseus positively, it is necessary to consider external particulars more carefully than has been done above. It is also important to bear in mind details that Homer assumes his audience knows and therefore does not, given the limited parameters of epic poetry, feel particularly obligated to supply.

First of all, Odysseus had never wanted to fight at Troy. He had been perfectly happy as king of his rural island with his young wife, Penelope, and infant son, Telemachus. He had even feigned madness by sowing his fields with salt instead of seed in order to escape his obligation to restore Helen to Menelaus. Canny Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus, recognized immediately, however, that this was a typical Odyssean ruse. To test Odysseus's sanity, Agamem-



non placed Telemachus in the path of the plowshare, and of course Odysseus had to turn the plow aside to spare the “seed” that he prized most of all: his son and heir. Homer knows that his audience will recognize immediately the disparate values of Odysseus and Agamemnon, for the latter would be willing to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigeneia in order to ensure a favorable wind for the departing armada. Agamemnon would, of course, pay the price for his moral lapse. Having escaped ten years of war with barely a scratch, his wife Clytemnestra, ironically Helen’s half sister, would murder him on the day of his return as he emerged from his bath.

Placing these sets of events beside each other shows the essential difference between Odysseus and Agamemnon. Odysseus privileges the values of home and family; Agamemnon quickly recognizes affronts to the honor of his clan but is willing to avenge these at the cost of his immediate family. Yet it is clear that the Trojan War has no positive effect on Odysseus. It forces him to place domestic considerations to one side and use his wiles in order to survive. Odysseus is, above all, a survivor, and his stratagems of the theft of the Palladium (the great statue of Athene in the citadel of Troy) and of the wooden horse ultimately bring victory to the Greek forces. Without them, the war would have continued even beyond the ten years specified in the myths.

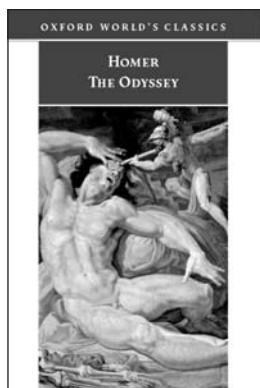
That is the knowledge that Homer assumes, and the first item that he includes among Odysseus’s postwar exploits is that, after leaving Troy, Odysseus and his crew sack a town, that of the Cicones, who had been Trojan allies. Like many warriors, Odysseus has trouble laying aside the ways of war. What would have been acceptable behavior in the context of war becomes unacceptable afterward, yet Odysseus cannot recognize this fact. When he and his men arrive on the island of the Cyclops, the first thing that he and his men do is raid the stores of the Cyclops Polyphemus. Polyphemus is hardly a sympathetic creature. He is a giant, nonphiloprogenitive son of the sea-god Poseidon; like all Cy-

clops, he has in the middle of his forehead an eye the size of a wheel. This heterotopic eye effectively makes Polyphemus a symbol of irrationality, corresponding to the displaced moral environment in which Odysseus has functioned in the years since leaving Ithaca.

As Odysseus had eaten the food of Polyphemus without leave to do so, it is justifiable by the irrational standards of Polyphemus for the Cyclops to eat some of Odysseus’s crew, and he does so. When Polyphemus asks to know the name of their leader, Odysseus appropriately calls himself *Outis* (nobody), for he has, in effect, lost the dignity of a name derived from the infinitive *odyssasthai* (to be angry, wrathful). Wrath implies righteousness and reasonable cause, but the immediate history of Odysseus has allowed little chance for righteous anger. Once he blinds the Cyclops, however, Odysseus has neutralized one symbol of unreason in his world. When he follows this act by devising his crew’s escape from the Cyclops’s cave, strapping them to the undersides of Polyphemus’s sheep, he declares not only his name but also his patronymic and epithet to the monster: He is Odysseus, son of Laërtes, the sacker of cities.

Ironically, Odysseus’s bold insistence on his proper identity allows the anger of Poseidon to find its mark. Still, Odysseus has to identify himself fully in this way, even as he and his crew have to accept the consequences: long and hard struggles for the master and death by attrition for the crew. The crew, like the mass of humanity, satisfies itself with apparently easy courses of action and thereby defines life as existence that precedes death. As Homer kills them, singly and in groups, his audience wastes no mourning upon them; nor does Odysseus.

Though the crew appears largely as a collective entity, Homer makes clear that its individuals freely choose their doom. For example, the Lotos Eaters offer Odysseus’s crew lotos-fruit, which, when eaten, causes them to forget home and enjoy the earthly paradise of the present in which they find themselves. Forgetting one’s past is tantamount to abandoning the cause that produced the present and the impetus that impels the future. It is apparently easier to live in the eternal present, but doing so robs life’s journey of reason. The crew members who eat the lotos-fruit accept a form of the irrational with the excuse of world-weariness, but the



drug culture of the Lotos Eaters is merely death in life.

When Odysseus's crew taste the potion of the witch Circe, she transforms them into swine. Their almost unanimous collective identity had at least been human. After their transformation, they lose rationality, the highest human faculty; that happens because they had made insufficient use of the faculty. Hermes, Zeus's messenger but also, fittingly, the guide to the Underworld, warns Odysseus to prepare himself for Circe's magic by applying the *molū* (wild garlic), which he finds at his feet, before encountering the witch. Hermes also admonishes Odysseus to extract a promise from Circe not to emasculate him. In both respects, Hermes' advice focuses on the weed to preserve a sense of personal identity and power. The herbal drug is as secondary in importance to the state of mind that it produces as the lotos-fruit had been in the Lotos Eaters episode. What is important is its obvious availability and the self-assurance that follows its use. It is worth noting that Odysseus temporarily loses sight of his personal mission to continue life's journey, for he remains on Circe's island until pressured to resume his adventures. In doing so, he comes dangerously close to accepting the paradisaical present, essentially what the Lotos Eaters had offered. This lapse from obligation characterizes even the most heroic, however, and it underscores the fact that life's journey is nonlinear; it rather assumes varying degrees of circularity that resemble the past, which spring from it but always differ. Life returns to its origins at its end, though the origins themselves appear other than what they had been.

Perhaps the Aeolus episode emphasizes the difference between Odysseus and his crew most profoundly of all. The king of the winds entrusts Odysseus with a sack filled with all winds, which could conceivably oppose Odysseus's homeward journey. Aeolus appears to offer Odysseus an easy passage to his destination, but Odysseus must stay at the tiller nine days and nine nights, since he needs all his faculties to maintain his course. Within sight of Ithaca, Odysseus falls asleep, and this temporary loss of reason is enough to allow the jealousy and curiosity of his crew to surface. The crew resents the universal recognition that Odysseus receives and opens the sack thinking that it contains some special treasure that Odysseus does not wish to share. Immediately, the hostile winds blow Odys-

seus and his crew away from his homeland, and when the Ithacans reappear before Aeolus to request a second sack, the king refuses. This refusal is only right: Any benefaction requires personal responsibility for its proper use. Absent this responsibility, it becomes an imposed control that predetermines an outcome. Reaching the goal of the journey ultimately requires the skill of the traveler, not counting on the good fortune of meeting one's personal equivalent of a sympathetic Aeolus to smooth the passage.

Even as the Phaeacians are returning Odysseus to Ithaca, Telemachus, at the instructions of Athene disguised as the traveler Mentos, is about to set sail in search of Odysseus's whereabouts. The first four books of Homer's poem thus belong firmly to Telemachus and represent the young man's personal odyssey. Telemachus has never known his father, has seen only the aberrant, extended family that the arrival of the suitors has caused. His adventures in *Odyssey* 1 to 4 show him one family that respects moral values (that of Nestor of Pylos) and one that is entirely secular (that of Menelaus and Helen). Menelaus and Helen appear content, though the unease of their relationship is plain. It is only through an anodyne, which Helen adds to their wine, that they maintain this fragile equilibrium. They, like the crew members who had succumbed to the lotos-fruit or Circe's potion, have chosen existence rather than life. Telemachus also refines his understanding of the laws of hospitality through gifts mutually offered and tactfully refused, as well as through his sagacity, the polytropic quality that characterizes his father. He manages to elude the suitors, who plan his assassination upon his return, and returns to the other side of his island and to the hut of Eumaeus, to be reunited with Odysseus and plot the extermination of the suitors.

## SUMMARY

One could question whether even Odysseus and Penelope could recapture the same degree of happiness that they had enjoyed before the Trojan War and before the arrival of the suitors. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in his poem "Ulysses," strongly implies his hero's disgust both with the Ithacans and with an "aged wife." Nikos Kazantzakis, in his *Odysseia* (1938; *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, 1958), even more definitely describes Odysseus's need to face

death in the midst of an active life. Happiness takes the form of completing the heroic mission, and Homer's Odysseus and Achilles do this. For Achilles, completing the mission consists in the willingness to accept the destiny of a brief but glorious life, the only kind appropriate to his heroic nature. The life of Odysseus is longer, perhaps even more demanding because of its challenges, but no less worthy.

Robert J. Forman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are the advantages of a storyteller, such as Homer, beginning in medias res? Are there any disadvantages to such a beginning?
- Is the *Iliad* a glorification of war?
- Does the emphasis on *moira* corroborate common human presuppositions today as well as in Homer's time?
- Might the state of Ithaca when Odysseus returns reflect an awareness of the decline of the former Mycenaean world?
- To what extent does Odysseus succumb to the many temptations in his path?
- In their concentration on young Telemachus, do the first four books of the *Odyssey* amount to the first bildungsroman in Western literature?
- In what respect is Penelope a fitting wife for Odysseus?



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## GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

**Born:** Stratford, England

July 28, 1844

**Died:** Dublin, Ireland

June 8, 1889

*Hopkins's vigorous poetry was first published after his death, when he became a major influence on modern poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born on July 28, 1844, in Stratford, a suburb of London, England. His father, Manley, was a devout Anglican, a well-educated and successful author of marine handbooks and some poetry. At Oxford, Hopkins studied Greek and Latin and wrote poetry on nature and religious subjects. Among his teachers was Walter Pater, whose aesthetic and social theories influenced Hopkins; Hopkins's friends included Robert Bridges, the poet who encouraged him throughout his career and eventually published his poems.

At Oxford, Hopkins came under the influence of the Oxford Movement to revitalize Anglicanism by returning to its Roman Catholic roots, and this influence led him to John Henry Newman. Hopkins read Newman's autobiographical *Apologia pro vita sua* (1864), which described his conversion to Catholicism. Conversations with Newman led Hopkins to convert in 1866. Hopkins's conversion radically changed his life, alienating him from his family and leading him into a religious vocation. After completing his B.A. at Oxford with honors, Hopkins decided to take holy orders as a Jesuit. To mark this change in his life, he burned copies of his poems, though he had asked Bridges to save the best of his work. For seven years, he wrote no poems,

and for the rest of his life he remained unwilling to publish except when this was approved by his superiors in the Church.

Though Hopkins eventually resumed writing poetry, most of his energies from 1868 until his death were devoted to teaching, study, and, for a time, the duties of a parish priest. Having decided to seek ordination, he studied theology as he taught at various Catholic institutions. One of these was St. Beuno's in Wales, where he learned Welsh, which influenced his uses of alliteration and word arrangement in his poems. During this period, he produced his great ode "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*," a beautiful but forbiddingly difficult consideration of the drowning of five exiled Franciscan nuns. Ordained in 1877, he served as teacher and as priest in England and Scotland and served several terms in slum parishes in towns such as Liverpool and Glasgow.

During the last five years of his life, he was professor of Greek and Latin at University College, Dublin. Though the position was an honor, the work was very demanding, and he was unhappy away from England. He died from typhoid fever on June 8, 1889, in Dublin, Ireland.

In 1918, when Bridges published the poems that he had lovingly saved as his friend sent them to him, contemporary writers immediately recognized that Hopkins was a major new voice in poetry. Even though he had been dead for twenty-nine years, his innovations in form and style impressed the early moderns such as William Butler Yeats, W. H. Auden, and T. S. Eliot as refreshingly new.

## ANALYSIS

Hopkins is, above all, a Christian poet. He is also a difficult poet, who in his best work produced a density of diction and experimented with syntax, rhythm, and sounds in ways that can daunt an inexperienced reader. In fact, however, the difficulties of language and structure in his poems are not so great as they may seem at first. With a dictionary, patience, and a little imagination, any reasonably mature reader can make sense of Hopkins's unusual word choices and arrangements.

The more serious difficulty of Hopkins is his Christian point of view. While some forms of Christianity continue to hold great popular appeal, the number of readers who understand and appreciate traditional Christian doctrines has continued to decline since Hopkins's death. Most modern readers, even those who are practicing Christians, probably will need to use a commentary or reader's guide in order to make sense of Hopkins's uses of Christian scripture and doctrine.

An overview of Christian belief is helpful in order to understand the central concept of his poetic theory, "inscape." Traditional Christians believe that a single perfect and loving God, usually envisioned as a father, created the universe and all life. He made humankind with free will, which humankind then asserted against God, opening a division between humanity and God, called sin, that humanity could not heal by itself. This rebellion is called the Fall of Man. God desires a communion, or intimate spiritual relation, with humanity that remains impossible as long as humans feel separated from God.

To make this communion possible and heal the division, God descended to earth in human form. He was born as Jesus Christ of Nazareth to Hebrew parents, Mary and Joseph, in the first year of the modern calendar. Jesus lived a short life as a holy man, performing miracles and preaching an ethic of brotherhood and love on the grounds that God required it and that each individual possessed an immortal soul that connected that person with God. Then Jesus was accused of a variety of crimes and was executed on a cross near Jerusalem. Three days after his death, he was resurrected and appeared to a number of people in his physical body. Forty days later, he ascended into the realm of God the Father and is expected by Christians to return

at an undefined future date. At that time, he is expected to make judgments about all human souls that have ever lived to determine the ultimate quality of their afterlives.

Ten days after the ascension of Jesus, now celebrated at Pentecost, a new aspect of God entered into the world, a spiritual being called the Holy Spirit, that is said to flow through those who accept as true the story of Jesus and who work at conforming their wills to his teachings. The original division from God that humanity initiated is healed by God, who through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit reaches out to humanity with offers of communion. Though traditional Christian doctrine contains many more ideas and images and though many of these are disputed in various sects, most Christians agree on this central narrative.

Hopkins's literary models and mentors were Romantics such as John Keats and Walter Pater. This background disposed Hopkins to view nature sacramentally, as a kind of book upon which the messages of divinity were addressed to mankind. Romantic pantheism was not, however, consistent with Christian theology. In the theology of the medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus, Hopkins found ideas that helped him to resolve his vivid experiences of divinity in nature with Christian theology. From this thinking, the idea of "inscape" emerges.

Literary critics have differed considerably about the nature of inscape. Hopkins seems to have concluded that every object in the universe had a central organizing principle that could be called its identity. This spirit of the object was not a simple thing but a dynamic principle, the actuating core of its identity or being, and Hopkins called it the inscape of the object. Human beings are capable of recognizing the inscapes of other people and of objects. When they do so, they experience "instress," which can be described as a feeling of communion with the "soul" of the object. When one experiences instress, one finds Christ in the object, the imprint of God the creator upon His creation. Many of Hopkins's poems are about the experience of instress, the discovering of inscape, and the momentary union with God through Christ in the contemplation of natural objects. This set of ideas justifies critics in labeling Hopkins a Christian Romantic poet.



## “GOD’S GRANDEUR”

**First published:** 1918 (collected in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Now First Published, with Notes by Robert Bridges*, 1918)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet reflects on the persistent human failure to see God’s presence in nature.*

Hopkins’s ideas of inscape and instress seem to imply that every object in creation has something like a soul, that is, a power that points toward its divine creator. He begins “God’s Grandeur,” composed in 1877, with the assertion that the world as a whole has this inscape: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Though several senses of the word “charge” may be relevant in this statement, the primary sense seems to be of electric force. God is like an electric charge present in the world. This image is continued in the statement that this divine force “will flame out.” While conveying the idea of a lightning strike implicit in the image of an electrical charge, this new image also suggests the Pentecostal tongue of flame, which introduces one of the aspects of God’s presence in the world as the Holy Spirit, the idea with which the poet ends. Hopkins extends this idea into that of blinding light, another familiar biblical image associated with God, when he says that the flaming out of the grandeur of God is “like the shining of shook foil.” In a letter, Hopkins said that he was thinking of gold foil, which “gives off broad glares like sheet lightning and . . . owing to its zigzag dints and creasings and network of small many cornered facets, a sort of fork lightning too.” Other senses of foil may also enrich this image—for example, the idea of a sword, with its suggestions of challenge and judgment. The next image compares the gathering of the force of God in nature to the way oil gathers in a container as seeds or olives are crushed.

Having asserted the presence, greatness, and force of divine power in nature, the poet poses the main question: “Why do men then now not reck his rod?” He asks why, given the visible power of God in nature, people fail to see it and to show regard for God. The phrase “reck his rod,” which may seem archaic and needlessly difficult, like the entire grammatical arrangement of the question, never-

theless is carefully chosen. “Rod” seems mainly to refer to the scepter, symbolic of power to judge, that points to and rhymes with God; but rods are also often thought of as instruments of punishment. “Reck” is a little used and archaic term, meaning to regard or care for, and both meanings are relevant here. It is also however, related to words such as “recognize” and “reckoning,” with their various connotations. Such meanings amplify the question in several ways. For example, these ideas remind readers that recognizing the power of God in the world leads to knowledge (reckoning in the sense of navigation) about the purpose of one’s life.

As this look at the first quatrain of the sonnet demonstrates, one characteristic of Hopkins’s poetry is a density of diction that allows the reader to pursue individual word choices into areas of meaning that nearly always enrich the depth and suggestiveness of the poem. Hopkins chooses words and images that reverberate deeply. Even though the above analysis may seem to some readers to have “overread” the first four lines, professional readers typically find much more of interest to say about them simply on the basis of word choice and images, and even more when they consider aspects of rhythm, sound, and grammar.

The second quatrain of the octave (or first eight lines) answers the question of the first quatrain. The reason people do not honor God as they should is that they are unaware of God’s grandeur. The poet says that generations have walked the earth, searing or burning it for business purposes, blurring or making it difficult to see and smearing it or making it less visible with work of all kinds. It is a complex idea that has at least two meanings. First, the world itself is altered by human labor so that it reveals God’s grandeur less clearly and directly. Second, however, the processes of trade and labor alter human perception, so that people are less attuned to seeing the inscapes of nature. The poet repeats this idea in the last two lines of the octave, where he says that nature is smudged by man and smells like man and that, because people wear clothing, they are less likely to perceive nature directly.

Having asserted that God’s power in nature is brilliantly if sporadically visible but that human labor obscures its visibility and weakens the human ability to perceive it, the poet turns to the miracle

of Spirit's continuing presence in the sestet, the last six lines of the sonnet. The poet says that even though labor blinds people to it, God's grandeur persists. At the center of every natural thing is a freshness that the poet can see. This realization is just as true as that the darkness of sunset does not presage eternal darkness but rather a new dawning. These observations mean that the Holy Ghost is present, that it continually renews the "bent" or misshapen world, just as a bird—a typical image of the Holy Spirit—broods over its nest, pouring energy into its egg (the world) so that it will hatch to reveal a new bird, the double of itself within.

The richness and depth of "God's Grandeur" is apparent in Hopkins's use of diction, imagery, and metaphor, but these techniques do not exhaust the art of the poem. One can learn a lot more about it by studying how Hopkins arranges alliteration, meter, and rhyme. For example, one of the astonishing features of this poem is that while it is especially rich in language, it is very confined in form. Not only did Hopkins use one of the most restrictive forms in English poetry, the sonnet, but he chose one of the most difficult forms of the sonnet, the Italian, which uses only four rhyming sounds at the ends of its lines. Such a choice seems quite appropriate for a poem about how the infinite energy of God is constrained in the physical form of the world.

### "THE WINDHOVER"

**First published:** 1918 (collected in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Now First Published, with Notes by Robert Bridges*, 1918)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet sees Christ represented in a falcon's flight and dive in pursuit of its prey.*

Dedicated "To Christ Our Lord," this sonnet in the Italian form was composed in 1877. While diction, image, and metaphor are central technical elements in the poem's success and meaning, "The Windhover" nicely illustrates Hopkins's more radical experiments with meter and sound.

In the octave, the poet says that while walking in

the morning he saw and admired a falcon in its flight. In the first three lines of the sestet, he recounts a visionary experience, his narration shifting into present tense. The vision comes upon him as he watches the bird dive in pursuit of its prey, and several levels of meaning "burst" forth from this motion. The vision begins with the word "buckle." When the bird buckles, it collapses, pulling back its wings for a swift, controlled descent. Yet this verb also means to put on armor, to prepare for action as in a battle, and it also means to fasten together, as in buckling the ends of a belt. Furthermore, collapse can mean at least two things, the drawing in of the bird as it dives or the folding up of one who experiences pain or momentary weakness. These are only a few of the many interesting meanings critics have found in nineteenth century uses of this word.

Fire bursts forth from the bird when it dives, and this fire makes the bird "a billion/ Times told lovelier, more dangerous." This vision leads the poet to address the bird: "Oh my chevalier!" A chevalier is a knight, one who serves a king in battle and who is often represented as rescuing the weak and oppressed from evils both natural and supernatural. One key suggestion of the knight image is the idea of putting on armor to enter into a battle. This image connects with the divinity to whom the poem is addressed, Christ. The knight putting on his armor is parallel to Christ's incarnation, the son of God entering a physical body to become Jesus, thereby entering the world to do battle with human sin.

This suggestion of incarnation is one way in which God descends to human beings and in which God is like the falcon that descends to grasp its prey, except that God's intention is benevolent. For this reason, among others, the falcon's dive may be seen as a billion times lovelier, but why a billion times more dangerous? Perhaps the poet there reflects upon the human experience of grace. Trapped in sin as humans are, in the smudged world of "God's Grandeur," they are unlikely to welcome the radical changes that God's "dive" requires of them. This negative aspect of grace is reflected in another descent suggested by the bird's dive, the descent into the grave, by which Christ's incarnation is completed as he shares death with humankind and by means of which Christ's "prey" is figuratively snatched up from the earth, as Christ makes possible the human ascent into heaven that

completes the act of divine grace. Just as the bird will rise after its dive, so Christ arose after his death, and humans who accept this graciousness may rise after their deaths.

In the last three lines of the poem, the poet asserts almost humorously that his vision really is not a wonder. After all, a mere plow shines as a result of its plowing the earth, and almost burnt coals, when they fall and break, flash forth red-gold fire. While he may appear to retreat from the intensity of the vision of the diving bird, he cannot really reduce his own or the reader's impression of the profundity of that vision. Though he chooses an ordinary plow as his next image of comparison, that image evokes the idea of a descent into the earth in order to prepare a new resurrection, and its shining evokes the fire that broke from the windhover. When he turns to the burnt coals, he cannot avoid an exclamation of affection—"ah, my dear"—addressed to the bird and to Christ as they reveal themselves in the coals. In breaking to reveal flames within, they remind him of the breaking of Jesus' body on the cross, the fall that sent forth the gleams of resurrection and Pentecost.

When Hopkins composed "The Windhover," he had been thinking about altering the rhythmic patterns of contemporary poetry. In Old English poetry he noticed metrical arrangements that he came to call "sprung rhythm." Much of the poetry written before Hopkins in modern English made use of fairly strict syllable counts to determine basic poetic forms. For example, a sonnet would contain as close as possible to 140 syllables, fourteen lines of ten syllables each, and the rhythm of each line would be made of five iambic feet (iambic pentameter), as can be illustrated in the first line of this poem: "I caught this mórning mórning's mínion, kíng-" (the accented syllables are marked). Though it does not make grammatical sense presented this way, this line shows the pattern of iambic pentameter, five pairs of syllables, the first in each pair unaccented, the second in each pair accented. In "The Windhover," there are no more lines that follow strict iambic pentameter so closely. Yet a carefully studied and prepared oral reading will reveal that each line has five heavily accented syllables.

For the main rhythmic pattern of Hopkins's poem, unaccented syllables are not counted, though how they are accented is important to preparing a performance of the poem. Sometimes, as in line 12, Hopkins marked some syllables he intended to have accented; otherwise, the reader must make judgments about which five syllables should receive the major accents in reading. The result of careful thought and analysis, however, is usually an exciting and provocative performance of the poem.

That Hopkins gave so much attention to his rhythm and that he modified, without abandoning, the basic sonnet form underscores the degree to which he thought of his poems as intended for oral performance. When one studies the poem, it becomes clear that one of the many functions of Hopkins's frequent alliteration, especially the repetition of consonant sounds, is to control or at least suggest where accents should fall within the lines.

It is sometimes difficult to believe that a poet would give so much attention to what might seem the minor aspects of a poem, such as its rhythm and sounds. Yet even if one did not have the evidence of his correspondence, the sheer quantity of alliteration and the stress marks in this poem would indicate that Hopkins must have thought about these things. Hopkins not only thought deeply about how he would organize the sound and rhythm in his poems but also worked to integrate those aspects with the overall meaning and experience he hoped to convey. This effort can be seen, for example, in the opening of the poem, where no line has an end-stop—a final punctuation mark—until the exclamation point after "ecstasy." To perform this opening is to realize that it is designed to make speaker and listener feel breathless and, thereby, to convey the wonder of seeing and of almost feeling the flight of the windhover. That this breathless line ends in ecstasy suggests even deeper thought in Hopkins, whether intuitive or conscious, which may have whispered to him that, in a poem about a visionary experience, a good first place to pause is on the word "ecstasy."

## “HURRAHING IN HARVEST”

**First published:** 1918 (collected in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Now First Published, with Notes by Robert Bridges*, 1918)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this Italian sonnet of 1877, the speaker is so moved by his spiritual vision of the harvest season that he leaps into the air.*

Though “Hurrahing in Harvest” is just as rich in diction and ideas as “God’s Grandeur” and “The Windhover,” it may seem more accessible to beginning readers of Hopkins because the poet’s vision and actions are simpler. In the first quatrain, he observes with wonder the beauties of the harvest season, the piling of the grain for threshing, and the wind and clouds of the sky. On both levels, he sees harvest, for he finds in the clouds images of winnowing grain. In the second quatrain, he recounts his experience of walking through such a landscape. As he walks, his heart and his eyes glean, or gather, the remains of the harvest, and what they glean is Christ, “our saviour.” Gathering up visions of Christ in the landscape, he sees Christ as a lover speaking to him through the landscape: “What lips yet gave you a/ Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?” Rapturous love, however, points beyond a comparison of Christ with a lover, for “rapture” shares the root meaning of “raptor,” a bird of prey like the windhover, that seizes its prey and carries it into the sky. For a Christian, the Rapture is that moment when the soul is caught up into Heaven for the final judgment. Christ as rapturous lover is, therefore, an apt image of Christ the savior and the judge, who in the variety of ways observed in “The Windhover” offers to bring the faithful soul out of sin and into the bosom of God.

In the sestet, the poet sees the autumn hills beneath the rich blue sky as Christ’s shoulders, capable of lifting the world like a strong but sweet-smelling stallion. He reflects that this world is always present, waiting to speak in this way to a beholder. When the beholder, in this case the poet, appears, then his heart grows bold wings with tremendous strength to hurl the earth away from his feet. In this way, the heart becomes the raptor, drawing the body with it heavenward, toward God.

Though this poem is clearly typical of Hopkins in its themes and technique, it also can remind readers vividly of seventeenth century Metaphysical poetry, where the figure of Christ as a lover is not uncommon, as in John Donne’s “Batter My Heart, Three-Person’d God.” Like his American contemporary, Emily Dickinson, Hopkins was drawn to Metaphysical conceits, those sometimes shocking comparisons, so delightful in Donne’s poetry, that are capable of moving and astonishing effects. Such an effect occurs when the wings of the poet’s heart carry his body into the air, wittily and somewhat humorously suggesting his imminent ascension into Heaven.

## “I WAKE AND FEEL THE FELL OF DARK, NOT DAY”

**First published:** 1918 (collected in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Now First Published, with Notes by Robert Bridges*, 1918)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet meditates upon his alienation from God and his self-imprisonment.*

In 1885, during the difficult years of exile in Dublin and demanding labor as a professor, Hopkins wrote a series of poems that Robert Bridges called “the terrible sonnets.” In most of these poems, Hopkins explores the theme of exile from God, the alienation and doubt that all believers feel at times. These feelings tend to lead to self-loathing, because it is the human self that stands as a barrier to permanent union with God.

In “I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, Not Day,” the poet awakens in the dark, implicitly awaiting the light of day. The word “fell,” however, indicates that this is more than a literal awakening in the night. A fell is the hide, or pelt, of a dead animal. His feeling the fell of dark suggests imprisonment in an animal body and the desire to escape into a “body of light.”

In the rest of the first quatrain of this modified Italian sonnet, the poet addresses his heart, lamenting the “black hours” they have spent, the terrors they have experienced together in this seem-

ingly endless night. In the second quatrain, he says that he has been speaking metaphorically, that where he has said hours he means years. In fact, his whole life has been lived in the dark of separation from God, yearning for the light of final union. All of his prayers to God have been like dead letters, sent to one who is distant. Dead letters are not delivered and may be returned to the sender. This comparison emphasizes the speaker's despairing sense of entrapment. Unable to communicate with God, he is caught forever in painful communion with his suffering heart.

In the sestet, he says that he understands that God has deliberately given him this experience of exile, though here he says little about why this is the case. In another dark sonnet, "Carrion Comfort," he suggests that God's purpose may be to strengthen or purify him in some way, but in this poem he concentrates on the experience of being made to experience the bitterness of his own flesh.

Though his imagery repeatedly suggests loathing of his physical body, it is not clear that it is the body itself that he hates. Rather, what hurts him is that being in a body prevents his union with God. He says "Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours." This line seems to say that his body is like dough and his spirit like yeast. That yeast should raise and "ennoble" the dough, but instead it sours it. The problem seems, therefore, not to be in the body or the dough but in the isolation of the spirit, the "self-yeast." What is needed is a renewing influx of the Holy Spirit as it is presented in "God's Grandeur."

Perhaps a brilliant visionary experience as in "The Windhover" or "Hurrahing in Harvest" would seem a consoling reply to one of his dead letters, a glimpse of light that would promise a greater light to come. Nothing of that kind, however, comes to the speaker in this poem. His final reflection is that this experience is like that of the damned, except that for them it is worse. He does not explain why at the end of the poem, but the beginning has made this clear: because the damned have no expectation of the day, they have no faith and, therefore, no hope.

### SUMMARY

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a brilliant Christian poet. He produced a small number of finely crafted and moving poems in his lifetime but, for religious reasons, made little effort to publish them. When they were published twenty-nine years after his death by Robert Bridges, Hopkins quickly took a place of honor among modern poets. His radical and difficult experimentation with diction, sound, syntax, and rhythm made him especially attractive to early twentieth century poets. Though his poems seem difficult, they are accessible to patient readers who are willing to inform themselves about Hopkins's traditional Christian beliefs. Indeed, his poems repay repeated study with new discoveries that make them seem increasingly rich and moving as one comes to know them better.

Terry Heller

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#### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain why Gerard Manley Hopkins could not be a nature poet in the same way as John Keats and other Romantics of the earlier nineteenth century.
- In the great sonnet "God's Grandeur," Hopkins omits a preposition, presumably "in," in the line "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." Observe how by placing the missing word in various places in the line, several complementary meanings emerge.
- Observe how Hopkins blends both joy and caution in his religious affirmations. Why are both important?
- Cite instances of how Hopkins appropriates and heightens extremely common and not particularly beautiful things from everyday life.
- Explain what poetry lovers owe to Robert Bridges, other than his poems.
- Much religious verse is difficult to read if the reader does not share the poet's religious outlook. What makes Hopkins's poetry exceptional in this respect?
- Study one Hopkins poem very carefully. Does the experience justify the effort?

# HORACE

**Born:** Venusia (now Venosa, Italy)

December 8, 65 B.C.E.

**Died:** Rome (now in Italy)

November 27, 8 B.C.E.

*One of the most important authors of Rome's Golden Age, Horace excelled at both satire and lyric poetry, while adapting the form and rhythms of Greek verse to the Latin language.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Horace (HAWR-uhs) was born Quintus Horatius Flaccus on December 8, 65 B.C.E., in the small Apulian town of Venusia (now Venosa in south-eastern Italy). The date is recorded in the brief profile of Horace attributed to Suetonius, which appears as an appendix to some of Horace's early manuscripts. The place is recorded in Horace's own *Satires* (35 B.C.E., 30 B.C.E.; English translation, 1567), where the author frequently provides information about his own life. These two sources, Suetonius and Horace himself, permit the biography of Horace to be reconstructed in greater detail than is possible for most other ancient figures.

Horace's father was a freedman (*libertinus*, a slave who had bought his freedom), who made his living by collecting money at auctions. Horace was born, therefore, into nearly the lowest ranks of Roman society. Yet Horace's father was thrifty and managed to save enough money to buy a small farm in Venusia. Moreover, he wanted his son to have greater opportunities than his own. That meant that the young Horace needed to receive a better education than could be obtained in the local schools of Apulia. For this reason, Horace's father moved the family to Rome and enrolled his son in a school attended by the children of equestrians and senators. There Horace's education consisted largely of memorizing passages of early Latin poetry under the stern tutelage of Lucius Orbilius Pupillus. Later in his life, Horace would question the lavish praise that many of his contemporaries heaped upon the early Roman poets. Horace came to believe that much of the language used

by authors such as Livius Andronicus and Gaius Lucilius was awkward and uninspired.

Horace's mother is never mentioned in his works. It seems likely, therefore, that she died early in Horace's life, perhaps even before the family left Venusia. On the other hand, the relationship between Horace and his father seems to have been quite close. Lacking money for a servant, Horace's father escorted the boy to school himself. Moreover, in one of his *Satires*, Horace describes the practical lessons in morality that his father gave him during these years: Horace's father would point out examples of Roman citizens whose way of life was noble and whom Horace was to imitate. He would also mention those whose character was base and whose habits the boy was to avoid. This sort of "education by example," important to both Roman satirists and historians, was to be a major stylistic technique in Horace's own *Satires* and *Epistles* (c. 20-15 B.C.E.; English translation, 1567).

When Horace was about twenty years old, he went to Athens to pursue an advanced course of study. While in Greece, Horace became absorbed with the political intrigues that were occurring throughout the Roman world at the end of the Republican period. He abandoned his studies during the autumn of 44 B.C.E. and joined the forces of Marcus Junius Brutus, one of the principal assassins of Julius Caesar. After Brutus was defeated by Octavian (later the Emperor Augustus) and Marc Antony at the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C.E., Horace returned to Rome. There he found that his father had died and that his family's small farm in Apulia had been confiscated to provide land for Octavian's veterans.

As a result, Horace became a legal secretary or treasury clerk in order to support himself. In his spare time, he began to write verse. It was during this period of his life that some of the *Epodes* (c. 30 B.C.E.; English translation, 1638) and *Satires* were written. Horace's poetry began to be circulated among other members of the Roman intelligentsia, and, in this way, Horace met the poet Vergil. Vergil's literary patron was the wealthy Etruscan aristocrat Gaius Maecenas, and, through Vergil, Horace secured his own introduction to Maecenas. In 38 B.C.E., Maecenas became Horace's patron as well, freeing the poet from financial concerns for the rest of his life. Moving in such elevated literary and political circles, Horace met a number of the most influential persons of his day. He became reconciled with Octavian and appears to have been present at the conference that led to the Treaty of Tarentum in 37 B.C.E.

After Vergil died in 19 B.C.E., Horace virtually became the poet laureate of Rome. In 17 B.C.E., ten years after Octavian had assumed the title of Augustus, Horace composed a great choral hymn in honor of the emperor. This poem, the *Carmen saeculare* (17 B.C.E.; *The Secular Hymn*, 1726), was sung by a choir of twenty-seven boys and twenty-seven girls. Its theme was that Rome, under Augustus's leadership, had entered a new era of peace and reform. Augustus also encouraged Horace to write a fourth book of the *Odes* (23 B.C.E., 13 B.C.E.; English translation, 1621) long after the first three books had been published. He asked Horace to compose an epistle on the art of poetry and commissioned him to write the official hymn celebrating the military victory of his stepsons Drusus and Tiberius.

Horace died on November 27, 8 B.C.E., in Rome, only a few months after his patron, Maecenas. Their tombs were built beside each other on the Esquiline Hill in Rome. In his own works, Horace describes himself as short, fat, delicate in health, and prematurely gray. His contemporaries added that the poet was congenial though independent in spirit, promiscuous, tactful, kindly, and sensitive to the feelings of others.

## ANALYSIS

The body of work published by Horace is rather small, reflecting the author's belief that a poem that is tightly crafted and highly polished is supe-

rior to a work that is longer and less refined. For this reason, Horace's models were not the ponderous Saturnian lines of Andronicus or the lengthy satires of Lucilius. Rather, Horace turned for inspiration to the Greek poetry of Archilochus, Sappho, and Alcaeus, imitating both their meters and their style in Latin verse.

Horace claims to have been the first Latin poet to have adopted Archilochus's iambic meter and to have introduced the style of Alcaeus to a Roman audience. The influence of these Greek predecessors is already apparent in Horace's earliest published works, the seventeen iambic (or iambic-dactylic) poems known as the *Epodes*. A number of the *Epodes* reflect a satirical approach intentionally reminiscent of Archilochus; this humorous style was to be repeated in the *Satires* and the *Epistles*, as well. Not even Horace's patron, Maecenas, is spared, bearing the (admittedly rather gentle) brunt of Horace's satire in Epode 3.

Even in these early and derivative works, however, something of Horace's originality may be seen. For example, apart from his closest friends, Horace rarely mentions specific individuals in these poems. In fact, the object of Horace's satire is frequently not an individual at all, but a general type of character or a particular human flaw. Satire 1.1 thus criticizes the human inability to be contented with one's lot in life, Satire 1.3 ridicules intolerance, and Satire 1.9 presents Horace's encounter with a persistent, but unnamed, bore.

In this way, Horatian satire lacks the topicality of the Athenian playwright Aristophanes or the bitter invective of the Roman satirist Juvenal. Horace's satirical tone tends to be one of bemused ridicule of common human faults, tempered always with tolerance and the poet's awareness of his own imperfections. To some extent, Horace's unwillingness to criticize individuals is a reflection of the political turmoil that occurred during his youth—it would not have been prudent for a former partisan of Brutus to ridicule political figures who had sided with the victorious Octavian—but it may be attributed to Horace's own personality. Throughout his works, Horace appears to be a genuinely amiable human being who disliked conflict and who was willing to adapt to a changing political climate.

Horace's preference for dealing with general literary types rather than specific individuals may be seen even in his greatest literary works, the *Odes*.

For example, the women to whom Horace addresses his odes of love tend to be imaginary female “types” rather than identifiable women of his own day. Their names are usually drawn from Greek lyric or elegiac poetry and are indicative of their appearance or character. Thus, *Odes* 1.5 is addressed to Pyrrha (Greek for “blonde”), *Odes* 1.22 speaks of Lalage (“chatterbox”), and *Odes* 1.23 mentions Chloe (“fresh young thing”). The presence of these type characters makes Horace’s love poetry quite different from that of his contemporary Catullus, whose passionate love affair with Lesbia (an actual Roman woman, whose real name was probably Clodia) may be charted in his poetry from first infatuation to final, bitter rejection.

Horace’s love poetry thus lacks, at times, the passion and intensity of Catullus’s lyrics. Horace’s poems tend to be highly polished and charming, even studied, rather than realistic depictions of a young man in love. Yet what Horatian love poetry may miss in spirit, it more than compensates for in the perfection of its language. Not a word is out of place in one of Horace’s *Odes*, and these works have no parallel in Roman poetry for the beauty of their imagery or allusions.

Horace composed 103 *Odes* in all, arranged in four books published at various periods of his life. Their meters were borrowed from Greek lyric poetry and are amazingly diverse. Indeed, each of the first nine poems in Horace’s first book of *Odes* is composed in a different meter. Each of the odes usually has an addressee (such as Augustus, Maecenas, Pyrrha, or some other person, real or imaginary) and an occasion that, at least as a literary device, prompts the composition of the ode. Within this general framework, Horace mixes traditional Greek themes such as the pleasures of love and drink with more familiar Roman concerns such as the greatness of the state, the nature of the ideal citizen, and the need to preserve one’s integrity in a chaotic society. Satirical themes, such as the notion that one’s heirs will only waste tomorrow the wealth that one hoards today, familiar from the *Satires* and *Epistles*, also sometimes appear.

One of the innovative features of the *Odes* is Horace’s ability to combine these traditional themes in new and unexpected ways. A drinking song, for example, may unexpectedly include patriotic themes, or a poem on the passing of the seasons may suddenly draw a parallel to the ages of a per-

son’s life. The freshness of the *Odes* is attributable, in large part, to the novel way in which these poems recombine traditional literary themes.

Certain phrases introduced by Horace in the *Odes* have become so famous that they are commonplaces in the Western literary tradition. These phrases include *nil desperandum* (“never despair”), *carpe diem* (usually translated as “seize the day,” but a more accurate rendering would be “pluck the day like a flower”), *integer vitae* (“the man whose life is pure”), *auream mediocritatem* (“golden moderation”) and “*Eheu fugaces*” (“Alas the fleeing” years slip away).

## SATIRE 1.9

**First published:** 35 B.C.E. (collected in *Satires*, 35 B.C.E.; English translation, 1567)

**Type of work:** Poem

*While strolling along the Sacred Way, Horace encounters a bore, who persists in accompanying him despite his hints that he would prefer to be alone.*

Horace’s description in Satire 1.9 of his encounter with a bore is an excellent example of his satirical style. The bore is never named, and though several critics have attempted to identify him with the poet Sextus Propertius, Horace provides no clues as to his identity. The reason is that Horace does not wish to create a poem filled with invective against a particular individual. Rather, Horace’s intention is to satirize dullness in general. Humor in the poem is derived from the reader’s identification with Horace’s predicament. Everyone can recall an incident

in which an annoying individual would not leave despite numerous hints. In this way, Horace criticizes the behavior of the bore and of others like him rather than attacking the person by name.



During their (rather one-sided) conversation, the bore reveals that he is a poet and is hoping that Horace will introduce him to Gaius Maecenas (Horace's wealthy patron). In so doing, the bore alienates Horace still further by completely misunderstanding the relationship that poets such as Horace have with their patron, by stressing his ability to write quickly (elsewhere in the *Satires*, Horace makes it clear that he prefers polished writing to swift writing), and by assuming that Horace wants to compete with the other poets in Maecenas's circle. The bore, therefore, appears shallow and insensitive, as well as annoying.

It is unlikely that Horace, in this satire as elsewhere, really sought to correct the fault that he is ridiculing. Few readers will leave this work with a renewed desire to be more interesting and less annoying to others. Rather, by gently mocking this common human flaw, Horace leaves his readers smiling at a situation that they will recognize and a type of folly with which they are well familiar.

### ODES 1.9, THE SORACTE ODE

**First published:** 23 B.C.E. (collected in *Odes*, 23 B.C.E.; English translation, 1621)

**Type of work:** Poem

*On a winter day, Horace looks out from the warmth of a friend's house and sees the snows covering Mount Soracte.*

The charm of *Odes* 1.9, the Soracte ode, is derived from Horace's ability to combine the traditional themes of lyric poetry in new ways. The poem begins with an image of winter: Mount Soracte, twelve miles north of Rome, is covered with snow, and the trees are laden with ice and frost. This image, then, is set into strong contrast with the poet's description of the warmth inside the house of Thaliarchus (Greek for "master of the festivities"), where wine flows abundantly and logs are heaped upon the fire. This contrast reminds Horace, rather abruptly, of how all things, such as the winter cold, are determined by the gods and must be entrusted to them. As a result, humankind, the poet says, should enjoy its youth while it can, taking delight in such simple pleasures as the

warmth of the fire and the distractions of love.

In this way, Horace moves from a description of a natural scene to a commentary on the human condition. The Soracte ode may be read on a number of levels. It captures, as does much of Greek lyric poetry, the particular feeling that its author had at a given moment. Yet it is also a symbolic commentary on the contrast between youth (the fire inside) and old age (the white snow outside).

### ODES 1.37, THE CLEOPATRA ODE

**First published:** 23 B.C.E. (collected in *Odes*, 23 B.C.E.; English translation, 1621)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The Romans may rejoice again, now that Cleopatra has been defeated.*

A combination of drinking song, victory ode, and political manifesto, *Odes* 1.37, the Cleopatra ode, is a celebration of Cleopatra VII's defeat by the forces of Octavian and Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa in 31 B.C.E. It is also another example of Horace's ability to combine diverse themes and poetic genres in an interesting way. While the poem begins with a simple invitation to drink in celebration of the Roman victory, the tone of the work gradually becomes more serious as the work progresses. Cleopatra is first presented as a queen plotting mad destruction for the Capitoline Hill (line 37), then as an accursed monster (*fatale monstrum*, line 21), then as "no submissive woman" (*non humilis mulier*, line 32) but a queen who preferred death to humiliation. There is, in the end, a grudging admiration by Horace for Cleopatra's heroism, even though she had been an enemy to the Roman people.

Marc Antony, who had been defeated along with Cleopatra, is not mentioned. (He had been similarly ignored in Octavian's declaration of war against Cleopatra.) Horace does not think it suitable to revel in the defeat of Antony, a fellow Roman citizen. Nevertheless, Antony's presence is felt throughout the poem in the frequent references to wine and drunkenness. Before the battle, Octavian, Cicero, and others had attempted to de-



pict Antony as a drunk. The poem's structure as a drinking song, its references to Caecuban and Maeotic wine, and its (historically inaccurate) image of Cleopatra as inebriated at the battle are all attempts to remind the reader indirectly of Antony.

The meter of the work is borrowed from the Greek lyric poet Alcaeus, who also wrote drinking songs and victory odes. The repetition of the word "now" (*nunc*) three times in the opening line established an immediacy as though a great threat, long impending, has only now been removed. In addition to the imagery of drunkenness and wine, symbolism of the hunter (Octavian) and hunted (Cleopatra) appears throughout the work. Cleopatra fled, Horace suggests, from the pursuit of Octavian; but when death proved inescapable, she met it nobly as befits a queen.

## THE SECULAR HYMN

**First published:** *Carmen saeculare*, 17 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1726)

**Type of work:** Poem

*At a festival proclaiming the dawn of a new age, the chorus invokes the gods' blessings upon the Roman people.*

Originally sung by a double choir of twenty-seven boys and twenty-seven girls on June 3, 17 B.C.E., *The Secular Hymn* is an important statement about the Romans' view of their empire in the time of Augustus. Stemming from an Etruscan belief that a new age of humanity was inaugurated each eleven (or, in some cases, ten) decades, the Centennial Festival reflected Augustus's view that, with his reign, a new period had begun. For this reason, the poem is filled with images of the rising and setting sun, the passing of the seasons, and, most of all, symbols of birth.

The goddess of childbirth, Eileithyia (or Ili-thyia), is mentioned both because a new age is being born and because of Augustus's belief that Rome needed to return to its traditional values. The emperor rewarded Romans who produced large families and imposed a higher level of taxation upon those who remained single. In this way, Horace is able to use the figure of Eileithyia to shift

from the birth imagery at the beginning of the poem to advocacy of Augustus's social policies in the second group of verses.

Moreover, Eileithyia is only one of the deities invoked in this hymn. Horace also addresses Apollo and Diana, the Sun, the Fates, Ceres, and a host of other gods and goddesses. The resulting image is that Rome's destiny is guided by all the deities in the Roman pantheon. It was the will of the gods that Rome should become great, and it was through their efforts that Augustus rose to rule the state.

The fertility of the Italian countryside and the founding of the Roman people by the Trojan warrior Aeneas, alluded to in this poem, appear also as major themes in the works of Vergil and on the Altar of Peace (*Ara Pacis*), erected in Rome between 13 and 9 B.C.E. These images represent, therefore, a consistent view of how Augustus wished his rule to be portrayed. As the one who brought about the end of the Roman Civil Wars, Augustus is depicted as making it possible for battlefields to become wheat fields once again. As the new Aeneas, Augustus is depicted as fulfilling the gods' plan begun at the very beginning of human history.

The poem ends with an invocation of Apollo and Diana, as it had similarly begun. This "ring composition" allows Horace to tie the poem directly to the human cycles that the Centennial Festival honors. Even as the hymn itself begins, rises, and ends, so (Horace suggests) do the ages of human life. The poet expresses Augustus's belief, however, that the current age would be one of unparalleled peace and prosperity.

## THE ART OF POETRY

**First published:** *Ars poetica*, c. 17 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1567)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In a letter addressed to Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, Horace offers a wide-ranging critique of literature and practical advice on how to write various types of poetry.*

Horace's *Epistles* (c. 20-15 B.C.E.) are written in the same meter, and with much the same style, as

his *Satires*. In form, they are poetic letters intended for a recipient who is named in the first few lines; in actuality, they are general commentaries about human weaknesses or other issues of concern to the author himself.

*The Art of Poetry* is a reiteration of many of the same arguments found in *Epistles* 2.1, written at the request of Augustus. In that work, Horace discussed his views about the proper role of literature and the place of Roman poetry within the ancient literary tradition. In *The Art of Poetry* itself, Horace expands upon these and couples them with specific suggestions for the authors of his day.

Horace begins by praising consistency as the highest virtue of poetry. A work that attempts to be now one thing, now another, is eventually, according to Horace, being nothing at all. For this reason, authors must maintain the same tone throughout a work, not attempt to improve an inferior effort with a “purple patch” (*purpureus . . . pannus*, lines 15-16) of fine words every now and then. Moreover, authors should not attempt subjects that are beyond their powers. If they do, the result will make them look ridiculous.

Each incident and word in a poem should be chosen with care. Precise selection of what is needed, rather than a torrent of words, creates the most polished result. The meter, too, should be chosen with care: Dactylic hexameter, the meter of Homer (and, coincidentally, of *The Art of Poetry*), is appropriate for epic; elegiac couplets are appropriate for sad subjects and songs of thanksgiving; iambic verse lends itself to satire; lyric meters are suitable for victory odes and drinking songs. These meters had all become traditional by Horace’s day, and the poet warns his readers that audiences expect them: A serious thought may unintentionally be made to seem comic if presented in an improper poetic form.

In dramatic poetry, language assigned to a character must both suit the traditional depiction of that character and be consistent within the work itself. In epic poetry, it is best not to prolong the story by starting at the very beginning but to thrust the reader right “into the middle of things” (*in medias res*, line 148). Brevity, as well as an ability to convey both wisdom and pleasure, are essential to the skilled poet.

The reader should not, however, find fault with a poet who occasionally fails to fulfill these high standards since, in the phrase of Horace, “even great Homer sometimes nods” (line 359). Still, the public will not long endure a second-rate poet, and it is the author’s goal to see that such passages are rare. This lapse tends to occur, Horace suggests, when poets distribute their work without sufficient editing. Thus, instead of publishing a work immediately, the poet should set it aside for a time—at line 388, Horace recommends, with satirical exaggeration, that it be set aside for nine years—to see if it still seems as inspired later.

The advice that Horace provides in *The Art of Poetry* is thus a combination of common sense, practical observations drawn from a lifetime of writing, and views inherited from earlier literary critics such as Aristotle, Neoptolemus of Parion, and Philodemus. Probably the last work that Horace wrote, *The Art of Poetry* has played an important role in defining both the classical style and the canons of good writing developed in later periods.

## SUMMARY

Horace’s own works adhere to the principles that the author set forth in *The Art of Poetry*. His poems are consistent, well crafted, brief, and highly polished. Their language is chosen both for its appropriateness to the topic and for the emotional force of its imagery. This achievement is all the more impressive in light of the incredible variety of Horace’s poetry. He perfected both satire and lyric poetry. He was at home with the simple charm of the *Epistles* as well as the lofty grandeur of *The Secular Hymn*. Through his works, the reader comes to understand Horace both as an individual and as a representative of the values of Augustan Rome.

In each of his poems, Horace emphasizes the general human condition instead of particular situations. His satire is not filled with invective against individuals, but with parody of common folly. His love poetry does not reflect his own experiences but, rather, is written to imaginary characters. Even in those lyric poems where he begins by capturing the experience of a specific moment, Horace will usually generalize, using the incident as a way of commenting upon a larger truth.

Jeffrey L. Buller

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Contrast Horace's satirical approach with Juvenalian satire (which is exemplified in the work of a writer such as Jonathan Swift).
- What features of Horace's poetry make him a challenge to translate? Why do so many translators keep making the attempt?
- To whom or what can contemporary poets looking for a patron like Gaius Maecenas turn?
- Horace's love poetry is very different, much less passionate, than Catullus's. What aspects of love can Horace present most effectively?
- If Horace is taken as a good example of what is meant by "classical" poetry, what are the virtues of modern poems so designated?



AP/Wide World Photos

## NICK HORNBY

**Born:** Redhill, Surrey, England  
April 17, 1957

*Hornby's novels combine frank honesty with tolerant and sympathetic wit to chronicle the chaotic misadventures of contemporary relationships. In addition to works of literary and popular music criticism, Hornby has written fiction that examines and critiques modern attitudes toward friendship, sex, and romance with humor, candor, and pathos.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Nick Hornby was born on April 17, 1957, in Redhill, England, the son of Sir Derek Hornby, a successful businessman, and Margaret Hornby, a secretary. His parents' marriage dissolved when he was eleven; Sir Derek moved to houses in both France and the United States, while Margaret continued to work as a secretary in the northern suburbs of London. Hornby lived with his mother, with occasional visits to his father, and the sharp contrast in his parents' respective economic classes, by his own later admission, provided a kind of joint cultural identity, torn between the luxurious affluence of his prosperous father and the sensible, if comparatively sparse, middle-class comforts of his mother.

During his childhood, Hornby discovered the passions that would later feature prominently in his writing. A youthful occupation with reading, particularly comic books and children's literature, cemented his interest in the printed word. A fascination with popular music, ranging from the British rock bands of the mid-1960's to the louder and more bohemian groups emerging from the American and British punk scenes, provided distractions from his fractured home life. Above all, Hornby developed a deep passion for Arsenal, a professional soccer team located in the Highbury section of

north London. During Hornby's formative years, Arsenal had a spate of poor luck. Perennial losers, the Arsenal team nonetheless offered Hornby a sort of cultural identity, though even in the terraces of Highbury this identity remained fractured; the bulk of Arsenal fans were working class. For the middle-class son of a knighted millionaire to support a solidly blue-collar team took a certain amount of social gymnastics, but Hornby loved his trips to the stadium, and the team would remain a source of passionate fascination.

Upon completing secondary school, Hornby attended Cambridge, where he studied English. The experience was a frustrating one; Hornby would later claim that studying literature at the university stunted his development as a writer, imposing upon him a dry and scholarly style that he was unable to ably replicate. After college Hornby held a variety of jobs, ranging from English teacher to corporate representative for Samsung. Frustrated by his life, Hornby turned, slowly, toward literary endeavors.

Hornby's first efforts at writing were screenplays, but he judged these efforts poorly, considering them failures. Feeling cramped by the style that had been imposed upon him in college, able to communicate authentically only through dialogue but still unsure of his voice, Hornby struggled for a time. In the mid-1980's he discovered a number of American writers who would exercise a considerable influence upon him, among them Raymond Carver, Anne Tyler, and Lorrie Moore. The simplicity of their style, coupled with the sympathetic

warmth and humor present in their works, seemed to Hornby to be absent from contemporary English fiction and inspired him to replicate their literary success in an indelibly English setting.

Hornby's first published works, however, were nonfiction. Working as a journalist, Hornby had written articles for a variety of mainstream publications in both England and the United States. His first book, *Contemporary American Fiction*, a collection of critical essays examining the works of his American literary heroes, appeared in 1992 and marked Hornby's initial sojourn into criticism, an area in which he would later distinguish himself.

However, it was his second book, *Fever Pitch* (1992), that brought distinction. A memoir of his obsession with Arsenal, *Fever Pitch* is a collection of essays examining not only the Arsenal teams of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's but, more important, the nature of obsession with sport and, by extension, the nature of obsession itself. Hornby's identification with Arsenal had not faded with age; rather it had become more integral to his existence and the London team's frustrations had come to closely mirror his own. While *Fever Pitch* is distinctly English in its content, the book's broad appeal extends beyond London devotees of soccer; the overriding theme of male obsession with sports, often at the expense of all else, is a universal one.

Though not a novel, *Fever Pitch* established many of the elements that would come to dominate Hornby's fiction. The theme of male obsession, in this case with a sports team, would feature prominently in Hornby's first novel, *High Fidelity* (1995), a work that examines the nature of sex and friendship from a specifically male perspective with a healthy mix of sincerity and irony. Garnering both critical and commercial success, the novel announced Hornby's presence as a legitimate voice in contemporary literature. Following *High Fidelity*, Hornby wrote the more ambitious *About a Boy* (1998), a best seller that further cemented his growing reputation.

Having established himself as a commercially viable and critically acclaimed author, Hornby's subsequent writings demonstrated an increased scope. Building on the success of *About a Boy*, Hornby spent a decade examining the pitfalls of contemporary life from a variety of perspectives, including female voices. *How to Be Good* (2001) examines a practical vision of ethics, and *A Long Way*

*Down* (2005) explores the psyche of a collection of suicidal characters. Hornby has also established himself as a refreshing critical voice, examining both popular music and literature with personal candor that, although not scholarly, is nonetheless insightful.

The birth of his son Danny, who would be later diagnosed with autism, led Hornby to organize the publication of *Speaking with the Angel* (2000), a collection of writings by himself and several of his literary peers, to raise money for Treehouse, a small school for autistic children. In the early twenty-first century, Hornby was living in Highbury in north London, not far from the stadium where Arsenal plays its home matches. He also was working on a screenplay and contributed regularly to a variety of publications.

## ANALYSIS

Hornby's work has long been categorized among the so-called "lad-lit" novels of the latter half of the twentieth century—novels written by male authors focusing upon relationships from a specifically male perspective. Certainly the archetypal "lad lit" protagonist—a single, thirty-something man, whose personal and professional life is stunted by his own immaturity—seems an apt description of both Rob from *High Fidelity* and Will from *About a Boy*, but to assume that Hornby is nothing more than a contributor to a widely defunct popular literature movement minimizes his contributions to contemporary writing. Hornby's work, though widely imitated, is largely original.

Hornby's fiction is notable for its realism. His characters are instantly recognizable and believable, though never mere stereotypes. These realistic characters are placed in realistic situations; Hornby is content to consider the nature of contemporary life by focusing only upon the ordinary details of ordinary men and women. His prose follows suit, as the stylistic hallmark of Hornby's novels is directness. There is an authenticity to this style; Hornby's characters, though insightful, are never erudite, and as such their words accurately reflect their levels of education and intelligence.

Hornby's tone is characterized by the seemingly contradictory presence of both sincerity and irony. The irony stems from the occasionally bitter, occasionally playful sarcasm that characterizes Hornby's sense of humor. The sincerity stems from



revelations of emotion stemming from failed relationships, superficial friendships, and strained love affairs. Hornby's presentation of modern men and women is one of alienation, largely of a character's own making. The focus upon the trivial, at the expense of the vital, allows one to create a world where one is temporarily immune to the pain of daily life; it is only when that world is inevitably invaded by its own pitiful reality that Hornby's characters must seek to address their own spiritual, emotional, and moral failings. It is only then that these characters grow up.

The search for self-actualization, on however small a scale, is the preeminent theme of Hornby's work. While Hornby's characters are neither heroic nor villainous, it is their occupation in a sort of middle ground that makes them accessible and endearing to the reader. However detestable their actions, they are still generally good people with real potential, and however likable their personas they are still very flawed people with real limitations. To both their credit and their distress, Hornby's characters are fully aware of both their failings and their successes. Self-awareness seems like a burden before it acts as the catalyst for real growth and, though no heroes are born, complete adult men and women emerge.

## HIGH FIDELITY

**First published:** 1995

**Type of work:** Novel

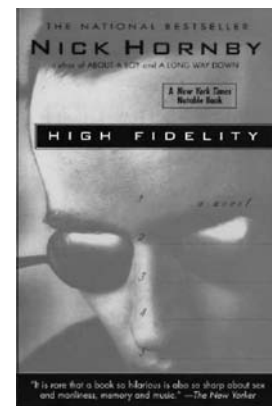
*Following the dissolution of his latest relationship, record store owner, popular music enthusiast, and inveterate serial-dater Rob Fleming attempts to make sense of his personal life.*

*High Fidelity*, Hornby's first novel, immediately establishes both the tone and the thematic content of the work upon the first page. Rob Fleming, following the departure of his girlfriend Laura, ruminates upon his past relationships, creating a top-five list of his most devastating break-ups. In a prolonged apostrophe to the recently departed Laura, Rob explores how these relationships, ranging from his first kiss as an adolescent to his first

adult love affairs, altered his perspective forever. The narrator's self-awareness becomes immediately apparent, as even his ironic detachment seems to provide emotional context, as does his unique organizational patterns of thought that will hold true throughout the entire novel. Rob is a man who arranges his thoughts, whether personal, professional, or trivial, in "top-five" lists. While some of these lists reveal no more than his favorite films or songs, others reveal the innermost workings of his mind.

The novel focuses upon the aftermath of Rob's breakup with Laura, taking the reader on a tour through the narrator's fractured psyche. Having opened the door to old memories in the opening apostrophic rant, Rob will find himself treading through the past repeatedly. Initially this pilgrimage into memory is little more than sentimentality, but closer investigation brings Rob to seek insight from his past romantic mistakes. Amid the daily business of running a failing record store, listening to and talking about music with his two employees and friends, conducting a brief affair with an American singer-songwriter, and generally missing Laura, Rob decides to investigate his own past for answers, reconnecting with his old girlfriends to seek the cause for his broken relationships.

While *High Fidelity* makes no claim to be a philosophical discourse on the level of Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre, Rob's existential angst is perhaps more accessible and readily identifiable than, say, Meursault's in Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*, 1946). The loneliness, frustration, insecurity, and pain brought on by even a relatively mundane occasion can spark intense introspection. Rob may eschew the philosophical discourse of the intellectual, but his own existence has been, in his mind, a failure, and the meaning of that failure is necessary to consider. At various points he ascribes blame to his parents, his friends, his former girlfriends, even popular music, but none of these ex-



planations seem adequate. It is only when he accepts that he himself is the cause that Rob is able to break loose from the cycle of failed romances.

Thematically, *High Fidelity* is a novel concerned with priorities, with learning to place the vital over the trivial after the relationship has been inverted for so long. Rob discovers that his pop music snobbery is superficial elitism. The seemingly useless knowledge that Rob has acquired regarding music is proven to be valuable only when it is directed toward an actual goal, as when Rob resumes an old occupation as a disk jockey at a club. By the end of the novel, Rob has redirected his life, reuniting with Laura, resisting old temptations to sabotage contentment, and looking toward the future. The personal calamity of the first chapter has provided the impetus for true self-discovery.

## ABOUT A BOY

**First published:** 1998

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel examines the unlikely friendship between Will, a wealthy thirty-something bereft of direction and ambition, and Marcus, a lonely twelve-year-old alienated from his classmates.*

With *About a Boy*, Hornby moved into more ambitious territory. While *High Fidelity* was to some extent autobiographical, *About a Boy* expands the focus beyond the adult obsessive to examine adolescence along with arrested development. While at times less convincing than *High Fidelity*, *About a Boy* finds Hornby experimenting more with both tone and characterization.

The novel focuses upon two characters, Will and Marcus, and their improbable friendship. Will is the heir to a fortune, having inherited the publishing rights to a popular Christmas song. Will has never had to work, and prefers to spend his days listening to music, watching television, using drugs, dating, and driving around London. Will's leisure has allowed him to be "cool" by the standards of men's magazines; he goes to the right clubs, wears the right clothes, and listens to the right music. Marcus, by contrast, is a twelve-year-old boy who does not fit in at school. His parents are separated,

and Marcus lives with his mother, Fiona, a depressive who does not care much about fashion or modern music. Marcus never wears the right clothes and knows nothing about the right music, making him an easy target for bullies.

The two protagonists meet when Will, for purely selfish reasons, becomes interested in dating single mothers and joins a group for single parents, pretending to have a son. Through the group he meets Suzie, a friend of Fiona's, with whom he starts a relationship. When Suzie, at Fiona's request, brings Marcus to a picnic that Will attends, the two are introduced. Initially the relationship is characterized by mutual dislike; Will thinks Marcus is strange and Marcus thinks Will is self-absorbed and annoying. Will has made up his mind to never see Suzie or Marcus again when they drop Marcus off at home, only to discover that Fiona has tried to kill herself.

The attempted suicide changes Marcus's perspective. Once comfortable with a two-person family unit, Marcus now realizes that, should Fiona commit suicide, he will be alone. He resolves to make Will a part of his life, attempting to arrange a relationship between Will and Fiona. His fantasies about Will and Fiona marrying prove to be unlikely, but Marcus is persistent. While a romantic relationship between Will and Fiona never materializes, Marcus continues to visit Will daily.

Will, for his part, is confused by Marcus's persistence. At first he wants nothing to do with this strange child who hassles him day after day, but gradually he comes to realize that Marcus, who is bullied at school every day for being different, needs help. For the first time in his life, Will begins to think beyond himself.

So begins the unlikely friendship between the thirty-six-year-old adolescent and England's oldest twelve-year-old. Will provides Marcus with information about clothes and grunge music, while Marcus provides Will with a greater sense of purpose. Along the way, Marcus befriends and falls in love with Ellie, a fifteen-year-old troublemaker at



his school, whose obsession with the rock band Nirvana acts as a catalyst to another unusual friendship, and Will falls in love with an illustrator and single parent named Rachel.

The end result of Marcus's relationship with Will is, as the latter notes, the necessary sacrifice of the comfortable for normalcy. Will sacrifices his detachment in order to become more involved, while Marcus sacrifices his endearing idiosyncrasies to become more of a typical adolescent. While there is a clear sense that something is lost in the transition, both characters judge that the change is for the best. Ultimately the novel is a sort of coming-of-age tale, though with a rather intriguing twist: coming-of-age for Will might mean becoming an adult in his mid-thirties, but for Marcus it entails becoming a normal kid.

Structurally the novel is divided by chapters, alternating between third-person limited narrations from the perspectives of Marcus and Will. As such, the main literary technique that Hornby uses is stylistic infection, wherein the thoughts and feelings of the two protagonists determine Hornby's diction. The chapters told from Will's perspective are ironic and detached, while those from Marcus's

perspective reflect the curiosity and innocence of a twelve-year-old. This narrative technique serves to heighten the detailed characterization of both Will and Marcus.

## SUMMARY

Nick Hornby's popularity is likely related to the accessibility of his novels, which, in turn, is a by-product of his style. The relatively simple, yet eloquent, diction of his prose, interspersed with both slang and profanity, accents the realism of his work, which in turn makes the existential crises faced by Rob and Will recognizable to readers. The specifically British settings may be deeply ingrained into the substance of the work, but the broader issues and the broader questions his characters confront are such that a change in dialect or accent in no way diminishes them. Film adaptations have shifted the location of *Fever Pitch* to Boston and *High Fidelity* to Chicago, but the thematic content in both cases remains unaltered. This success serves as testament to the universality of Hornby's work and the extent of his appeal.

Kevin Farrell

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#### NONFICTION:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the relationship between maturity and happiness in Nick Hornby's novels.
- How does Hornby's use of distinctly male perspectives influence the meaning of *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*?
- Compare Hornby's portrayal of romantic relationships to that of a female author.
- Discuss the role that popular culture plays in Hornby's novels.
- Compare and contrast Will from *About a Boy* and Rob from *High Fidelity*.
- *High Fidelity* is written in the first person while *About a Boy* is written in the third person. How does the difference in point of view in each novel serve to establish Hornby's literary meaning?
- How does Hornby distinguish between the trivial and the vital? Do you agree with the distinction? Why or why not?
- Compare Hornby's prose to that of another English writer.

## A. E. HOUSMAN

**Born:** Fockbury, Worcestershire, England

March 26, 1859

**Died:** Cambridge, England

April 30, 1936

*Although he operated under self-imposed limitations of theme and form, Housman is known as one of the most gifted lyric poets in the English language.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alfred Edward Housman (HOW-smuhn) was born on March 26, 1859, the eldest of seven children born to Sarah and Edward Housman. Although Housman was born in Fockbury, Worcestershire, England, he grew up in Bromsgrove, near Birmingham, where the Housman family moved when he was still in infancy. Bromsgrove is in close proximity to the Shropshire hills that would become the central setting in Alfred's most famous collection of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*, published in 1896.

Housman's childhood was mostly unhappy. He was frail, often sickly, very devoted to his mother, and alienated from his father. His mother's death in 1871 on young Housman's twelfth birthday further served to alienate his father, a masculine, sporting, practicing attorney who fancied himself as a country squire and who displayed some disappointment that his eldest son did not share these same characteristics or inclinations. The elder Housman soon remarried a cousin, however, and young Housman found in his stepmother, Lucy Housman, a devoted and supportive person who helped make the remainder of his early life bearable, if not altogether happy.

Housman's education began at the Bromsgrove School, where he distinguished himself in his studies from the outset. In fact, at Bromsgrove, Housman was at the top of his class and upon graduation won a scholarship to Oxford in 1877. At Bromsgrove, he developed a taste for classical languages and excelled in both Latin and Greek. He continued these studies at Oxford, becoming especially interested in the Roman poet Sextus Propertius. In

addition, Housman read the works of English writers Matthew Arnold and Thomas Hardy, both contemporaries, whose ideas and forms influenced much of Housman's poetry.

While Housman was matriculating at Oxford, he met Moses Jackson, a classmate who would have a profound effect on the rest of Housman's life. Although Jackson and Housman were from similar backgrounds, Jackson was everything that Housman was not—tall, handsome, well built, athletically inclined, and confident in his own abilities. Jackson and Housman became not only fast friends but also roommates for most of their college careers, along with A. W. Pollard, another Oxford undergraduate. Housman, however, desired more than simply Jackson's companionship; in short, Housman found himself deeply in love with Jackson, a situation from which he apparently never recovered. The exact nature of Jackson's rejection of Housman's affections is not clear, for while they remained lifelong friends, Jackson's rejection left Housman emotionally impaired.

During Housman's first years at Oxford, he continued to succeed brilliantly in his studies, often earning top honors in his examinations, so it was quite unexpected on everyone's part when, in 1881, he miserably failed his final examination in the classics. Housman left Oxford in 1881 without a degree, although he did manage to qualify for a lower degree the following fall. Having received this degree, Housman returned to Bromsgrove, where he taught lower grades while preparing to take the civil service examination, which he took and passed successfully in the fall of 1882. He took a job as a clerk in Her Majesty's Patent Office in



London and moved there in December, 1882, to share an apartment with Jackson and Jackson's younger brother, Adalbert. Housman remained in this job for ten years, until 1892. During this period, Housman continued to study Latin and Greek, working especially on emendations to the texts of various classical authors and preparing scholarly articles for publication in the *Journal of Philology* and *The Classical Review*, while earning a respectable reputation as a classical scholar.

In 1886, Housman moved to his own apartment and lived in near seclusion, devoting most of the time away from work to his studies. In 1887, Moses Jackson took a teaching job in India, and the grief over his departure pushed Housman even further into seclusion. His grief became even more pronounced two years later when, in 1889, Jackson married Rosa Chambers. Housman recorded his feelings in a commemorative poem, "Epithalamium," that he began writing in 1890 but did not publish until 1922 in his last collection, *Last Poems*.

In 1892, Housman won an appointment to the Chair of Latin and Greek at University College in London. Although his record was marred by the previous failure of the examination in the classics at Oxford, his reputation as a careful and brilliant scholar was confirmed by a number of leading scholars in the field. Thus, Housman delivered his opening lecture to the University College faculty in October, 1892, and began a long career as a teacher and scholar of considerable renown.

In November, 1892, the painful death from typhoid of Adalbert Jackson caused a tremendous shock to the customarily sensitive Housman. Not only was the grief over his friend's death intense, but it also triggered a flurry of poetic creativity through which Housman poured out all of the emotion, the sadness, and the pain with which he had lived for so long. Over the next several years, Housman wrote numerous poems, sixty-three of which were assembled into *A Shropshire Lad*. Although the book sold slowly at first, when the Boer War began in 1899, sales had increased considerably, and by World War I, *A Shropshire Lad* had become one of the most popular poetry collections ever.

In 1911, Housman was named Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge and a fellow of Trinity College. He taught there for the remainder of his career, during which time he continued to devote

his time to classical scholarship but wrote only a few new poems. Housman's composition of poems seems to have ceased with the death of Moses Jackson in 1923. Thereafter, Housman devoted his remaining years to his teaching duties and his scholarly interests until his death on April 30, 1936, in Cambridge, England, from complications of heart disease.

## ANALYSIS

Housman's poems all seem to be motivated by one of several emotions: grief and sadness over loss, unrequited love, and a strong sense of fate or destiny. Within this narrow focus, however, Housman created many memorable poems, several of near classic standing, and all imbued with a sense that life, after all, is something to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Housman is frequently termed a minor poet. This classification results in large part from Housman's refusal, or inability, perhaps, to move beyond a handful of themes and to his limiting himself to the lyrical ballad for much of his poetry. Furthermore, the entire corpus of Housman's published poems consists of 178 short works, far fewer in number than most career poets. It must be noted, however, that the bulk of Housman's poetry was produced within the ten-year period from 1892 to 1903, and that Housman perhaps preferred praise for his scholarly studies of the Roman poet Manilius.

Despite Housman's status as a minor poet, however, *A Shropshire Lad* is among the most popular books of poems in the English language. In this short collection of sixty-three poems is found the essential Housman: the superb lyric form, the precise, unornamented language, the extraordinary simplicity in style and tone, and the hauntingly poignant mood that characterizes nearly every poem.

*A Shropshire Lad* is certainly no haphazardly arranged collection of poems; indeed, it is a consciously arranged selection, both chosen and numbered to reflect and emphasize several recurrent themes, among them, praise and celebration of rural life, the constancy of death, especially the death of the young, love lost or unreturned, the special qualities of the soldier, and suicide. These themes are also addressed in *Last Poems*, as well as those poems collected and published posthumously by Housman's younger brother, Laurence Housman.

A typical Housman poem, then, may have a fixation on death, on lost love, or on the unbearable-ness of human life. Furthermore, Housman's persona of Terence Hearsay figures importantly in many of the poems as one who understands the pulse of Shropshire society and who feels compelled to articulate its feelings, concerns, and general way of life. Terence Hearsay, name symbolism included, gives the poems authority, authenticity, and objectivity.

From a technical standpoint, Housman's poems are quite often miniatures wrought to perfection. The lines are short, even, and to the point; furthermore, the language is clear and direct. Yet for all the simplicity of form, language, and theme, there is a formal elegance to Housman's poetry, from the regularity of the meter to the precision of the rhyme. Note, for example, in the opening poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, the following stanza:

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,  
The shires have seen it plain,  
From north and south the sign returns  
And beacons burn again.

The iambic pattern alternates between tetrameter and trimeter lines; alternate lines rhyme as well, giving the poem a lyrical impression; and the combination of these features, then, gives the very high degree of formality to the poems. This first poem repeats the stanzaic form above in seven additional stanzas, and many of the poems throughout the collection repeat the pattern, or a similar one, as well.

Housman did not venture or experiment beyond the miniature poems in his first collection. In subsequent collections, rather than showing any broad growth as a poet, Housman only varied the themes and forms that had established his reputation as a poet many years earlier. These later poems perhaps provided more depth to the examination of these themes. Further, Housman's body of work seems intent on advancing the idea that limitation and concentration make for excellent poetry. In the final analysis, these characteristics are what readers remember and appreciate about Housman.

## "1887"

**First published:** 1896 (collected in *A Shropshire Lad*, 1896)

**Type of work:** Poem

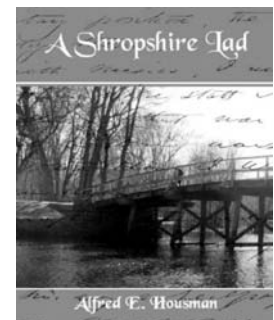
*On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the reign of Queen Victoria, the poet muses about the condition of England.*

In "1887," the first poem in *A Shropshire Lad*, Housman establishes the main themes, the main technique, the chief setting, and the main mood that would characterize the remainder of the sixty-three short poems that constitute the collection. For this reason, "1887" is often referred to as a "frame poem," along with poems LXII and LXIII, for a very deliberately arranged collection.

During the otherwise festive occasion of the eve of Queen Victoria's Golden Anniversary, when others are poised for, or already engaged in, celebration, the persona in Housman's poem adds a strong sense of melancholy as he recalls the past and ponders the future. In short, there is considerable lament over the fact that many friends have made the transition from life to death, many by the horrors of war. The speaker fully understands that the soldiers have performed their duty as "saviours" of the queen and England proper, but he interjects a tone of bitterness that on this happiest of occasions they could not join in the celebration because "themselves they could not save."

Despite the gloominess of the poem, however, the speaker pledges continued love and allegiance to England, the queen, and God, seemingly fully realizing that death is a natural part of life and that life, despite its many travails, must be endured. Thus, the poem ends with a grave admonition that

Oh, God will save her, fear you not  
Be you the men you've been,  
Get you the sons your fathers got,  
And God will save the Queen.



Indeed, England's continued success and the queen's protection are dependent upon the strength of the Shropshire lads and their many counterparts.

### **"LOVELIEST OF TREES"**

**First published:** 1896 (collected in *A Shropshire Lad*, 1896)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In springtime, a young man muses over the brevity of life.*

"Loveliest of Trees" is one of the finest examples of Housman's lyrical poems. The rural setting of the Shropshire woodlands in springtime is a beautiful sight, to behold, with the cherry tree—the loveliest of trees—in full white bloom to celebrate the time of rebirth and rejuvenation associated with Easter. Yet the beauty strikes a chord of melancholy in the speaker, who realizes that life is indeed short; and even if he lives to his full life expectancy, that, too, will be too short a time to behold such splendor as these trees in bloom.

While there is present the popular *carpe diem* theme in "Loveliest of Trees," Housman adds to it a somber sense of impending doom as the speaker resolves to view the beauty of the world while he is yet alive. The attitude and the mood that it creates is typically Housman, in that even in the face of immense beauty, there is always the discomfort of knowing that life has no real permanence, that death and doom are, without question, imminent.

### **"TO AN ATHLETE DYING YOUNG"**

**First published:** 1896 (collected in *A Shropshire Lad*, 1896)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Upon the death of a young runner, the poet celebrates his life and premature death.*

"To an Athlete Dying Young" is one of Housman's most often anthologized poems. Its quiet,

melancholy tone, its theme of the comfort of death, and its simplicity of form and style combine to make the poem a classic celebration of release from the difficulties of life.

In this short elegy, written upon the death of a young, celebrated athlete, Housman advances the idea that it is far better to die in one's prime, while one can be remembered for his or her youthful accomplishments, than to become infirm, forgotten, ignored, or replaced in the memories and hearts of one's townspeople. With the typical detached, observant tone often employed by Housman, the speaker hails the dead youth as a

Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
From fields where glory does not stay

who will not suffer the fate of many other

Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man.

Technically speaking, "To an Athlete Dying Young" is indicative of Housman's gift of poetic craft. The even meter and the taut rhyme add to the deliberate, somber, reflective mood established from the first stanza onward. In addition, contrasting symbols and images—the victory parade and the funeral cortege, the laurel and the rose—add complexity to a deceptively simple poem.

The poem concludes with the projection of what the speaker perceives as victory for the dead young athlete, now a "Townsmen of a stiller town":

And round that early laureled head  
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead  
And find unwithered on its curls  
The garland briefer than a girl's.

Thus, Housman insists that death, especially for youth, is a victory over the impending difficulties, tragedies, and heartbreak that accompany life.

## **“TERENCE, THIS IS STUPID STUFF”**

**First published:** 1896 (collected in *A Shropshire Lad*, 1896)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A friend chides Terence, the poet figure, about his melancholy poetry, and Terence responds.*

“Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff,” poem LXII of *A Shropshire Lad*, is commonly considered Housman’s apologia. In this next-to-last poem in *A Shropshire Lad*, Housman moves toward the conclusion of his presentation of his many themes and offers justification for the melancholy tone of his poetry.

The poem is structured as a dialogue between Terence, the poet figure, and one of Terence’s friends, who initially chides Terence for writing poetry that is somber and thought provoking rather than uplifting and celebratory. The friend warns Terence, jestingly, that he is driving his friends “Moping melancholy mad” with his serious poetry, and that they would prefer something happier, “a tune to dance to.”

Terence responds that the purpose of his poetry is not to entertain but to strengthen and instruct. In fact, Terence suggests that if all that his friends want to do is to have a good time, then there is dancing and drinking for them in which to participate, but that these are hardly answers for life’s many problems. Terence claims to know that from personal experience. Therefore, Terence explains, because life is full of uncertainties, heartbreak, and pain, people should prepare themselves accordingly. His poetry, then, is written to prepare each person for “the dark and cloudy day” that each one will surely face.

Terence concludes his response to his friend’s complaint by relating the ancient tale of King Mithridates, who, anticipating that rivals would attempt to poison him, took small amounts of arsenic and strychnine and developed an immunity to them. Thus, when the attempted assassination occurred, Mithridates was prepared to ward off the ill effects of the poison. Likewise, Terence insists that the poetry will help immunize his readers against “the embittered hour” when they come face to face with adversity.

In “Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff,” Housman re-emphasizes his theme of stoicism and suggests, once again, that life is made bearable by concentrating on its tragedies, and by doing so, one learns to live in the face of adversity.

## **“EPITAPH ON AN ARMY OF MERCENARIES”**

**First published:** 1922 (collected in *Last Poems*, 1922)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet celebrates heroism.*

“Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries” is a short, occasional poem of eight lines, one of the many poems that Housman wrote to celebrate the extraordinary bravery of soldiers in the face of great odds. In this poem, the poet honors the British mercenaries, professional soldiers who performed with great valor and heroism at the battles of Ypres during the early stages of England’s entry into World War I.

In short, Housman says that these soldiers, although paid for their work, saved a world that was fast crumbling; further, had it not been for these hired soldiers, much, if not all, would have been lost. Unfortunately, despite being paid for their services, many of the soldiers were killed in battle; those who were not were often victims of the harshest criticism. Housman both laments their predicament and celebrates their most important contributions.

Housman’s antireligious sentiments are also revealed in this poem. These sentiments were no secret and had been expressed in many of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad*. In “Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries,” however, the poet, in the process of applauding the soldiers’ defense, is bitterly critical of a God who would abandon the world, let the heavens fall, and allow the foundations of the world to crumble.

## **SUMMARY**

A. E. Housman’s poetry has many enduring qualities, among them the intensity of feeling, the fastidious care with which the setting is etched, the

careful maintenance of tone and mood, and the poignancy of the moments of experiences captured and preserved in time. Housman has frequently been accused of being bitterly critical and even sardonic in his poetry. The careful reader, however, will recognize Housman's sincere presentation of actual experiences, experiences that he or she perhaps would rather not confront but that are almost certain to occur. That is perhaps Housman's chief contribution to poetry—the strong medicine that the world needs to immunize it against the ills of life.

Warren J. Carson

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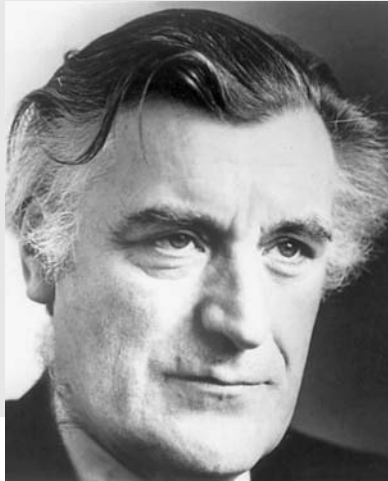
## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why might a teacher of poetry writing recommend A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* to a highly articulate would-be poet?
- Does reading Housman make a reader melancholy? If not, why not?
- What is Housman's attitude toward the athlete dying young? Is the athlete seen as an individual, as a typical athlete, or as representative of a larger class of people?
- Comment upon *A Shropshire Lad*'s unusual sense of unity and coherence.
- What does referring to Housman's poems as "strong medicine" mean?
- Housman was a Latin and Greek scholar. In what ways do his poems reflect that interest? In what ways do they not?



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## TED HUGHES

**Born:** Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire, England  
August 17, 1930

**Died:** North Tawton, Devon, England  
October 28, 1998

*Hughes is recognized as one of England's leading poets writing after World War II; his work is especially noted for its compressed syntax and rhythms, as well as its often violent portrayal of nature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Edward James Hughes was born on August 17, 1930, in Mytholmroyd, on the Calder River, one of England's first industrialized rivers yet also near the wildness of the moors. Hughes was the youngest of three children of Edith Farrar, who traced her ancestry back to the martyr Bishop Farrar, and William Hughes, a carpenter, who was one of only seventeen of an entire regiment to have survived the battle at Gallipoli in World War I. When Hughes was seven, the family moved to Mexborough; there, Hughes led a double life of living in town but often roaming about on nearby farms and estates. The landscape and the language of West Riding and South Yorkshire were undoubtedly significant in shaping Hughes's sensibility: his fascination with animals, natural processes, and archaic myths; the conflict between wilderness, farm, and industrialization; the rhythms of collapse and renewal; and the spare, physical language of the people are present throughout his poetic career.

In 1948, Hughes won an open exhibition to the University of Cambridge. He postponed his studies at Cambridge until 1951, choosing to serve for two years in the National Service, in the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a mechanic at an isolated radio transmission station in Yorkshire. Though he planned to study English literature at Pembroke College, Cambridge, he changed in his third year to archaeology and anthropology. He graduated in June,

1954, the same month that his first poem, "The Little Boys and the Seasons," appeared in the Cambridge journal *Granta*. For the following two years, he worked as a rose gardener, a night watchman in a steel works, a zoo attendant, and a schoolteacher.

In late February, 1956, Hughes met Sylvia Plath, who had arrived from the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship to study. Her own literary career had begun in 1950 with the publication of her poetry. Four months after their first meeting, Plath and Hughes were married. In Plath's *Letters Home* (1975), she states that she learned through Hughes "the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth" and felt herself like "adam's woman [sic]." Hughes brought to Plath's attention the mythologic underpinnings of poetry as conceptualized by the British poet, novelist, and essayist Robert Graves in his *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948). In turn, Plath brought Hughes into contact with the poetry being published in the United States. On his behalf, Plath typed and sent the manuscript of Hughes's first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), which was selected by the poets W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Marianne Moore in a competition for the publication of a first book of poems in English. Published simultaneously in England and the United States, *The Hawk in the Rain* gained immediate critical recognition.

In 1957, Hughes and Plath went to the United States to teach, Plath at Smith College and Hughes at the University of Massachusetts. After a year, they abandoned their teaching in order to spend more

time writing. In the spring of 1959, Hughes received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in December they returned to London. In 1960, Hughes's second collection of poems, *Lupercal*, appeared, and Plath published her collection of poems *The Colossus, and Other Poems*. In 1960, their first child, Frieda Rebecca, was born. Growing weary of the city, the family moved to a thatched rectory in Devon, and in 1962 their second child, Nicholas Farrar, was born. During this period, Hughes was at work not only on some of the poems and stories in *Wodwo* (1967) but also on plays and articles; Plath was completing her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) and was at work on her *Ariel* (1965) poems. By the middle of the year, their marriage was collapsing, with Hughes leaving her for another woman; they returned to London separately, where in February, 1963, Plath committed suicide.

By holding imaginary dialogues with his children, Hughes created three children's books, *How the Whale Became* (1963), *The Earth-Owl and Other Moon-People* (1963), and *Nessie the Mannerless Monster* (1964), also published as *Nessie the Monster* (1974), and thereby avoided falling into silence. In 1967, *Wodwo* was published, as was his text *Poetry in the Making: An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from "Listening and Writing,"* which describes to students the practice of writing. In 1970, Hughes married Carol Orchard, the daughter of a Devon farmer. In 1970, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* was published; this cycle of poems is perhaps Hughes's most important contribution to Anglo-American poetry because of its spare language, the trickster figure of Crow, and the desperate vitality of the voice.

In 1971, Hughes collaborated with the director of the National Theatre, Peter Brook, to create and produce *Orghast* for the Fifth Shiraz Festival in Iran. *Orghast*, both the name of the play and the play's invented language, is based on various myths and folktales, especially that of Prometheus. Hughes continued his interest in dramatic and cyclical poems with *Gaudete* (1977). Simultaneously, Hughes's vision of the natural world became increasingly acute in *Remains of Elmet* (1979), *Moor-town* (1979), *River* (1983), and *Wolfwatching* (1989). In December, 1984, Hughes was named England's poet laureate, succeeding John Betjeman. The publication of *Birthday Letters* (1998) with its use of first-person and intimate autobiographical details of

domestic life marked a stylistic departure in his life's work. He died in North Tawton, Devon, on October 28, 1998.

## ANALYSIS

Much of the sensibility of Hughes's poetry can be defined by several consistent elements. The influence of *The White Goddess*, the landscape of Hughes's childhood, and the connection between literary influences and the vernacular speech of his Yorkshire environs are essential elements of Hughes's poetics. Familial concerns are less self-evident; Hughes seldom seems overtly autobiographical or confessional. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Hughes has written of his family, such as his mother's ancestry ("The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar" in *The Hawk in the Rain*) and his father's ordeals in World War I ("Dust as We Are" and "For the Duration" in *Wolfwatching*).

Perhaps the earliest and most intellectually formative influence was that of *The White Goddess*. Given as a prize to Hughes from his grammar school, Graves's work initiated an interest that continued in Hughes's anthropological studies at Cambridge and further developed throughout his life. Hughes remained an assiduous reader of myths, folklore, ethnology, and poetry. Graves proposes that myth, particularly of fertility and renewal, is the authentic language of poetry. Hughes considers poetry or myth as the means for reintroducing the community to its origins or sources of the energy of renewal. In many ways, Hughes's long dramatic poem *Gaudete* is the culmination of his vision of division, struggle, and atonement through transformation as described in *The White Goddess*. In this work, nature and the human world are divided; there is a human desolation and the impending apocalyptic aftermath of a psychomachy (or a conflict of the soul with the body). At each turn, the poem's mock-epic hero, Lumb, faces a distorted vision of the White Goddess as an expression of death.

Directly linked to the idea of mythopoeia is Hughes's attention to the natural landscape. The physicality of Hughes's diction corresponds to his focus on natural objects. As a child, Hughes would accompany his older brother in the hills and moors, retrieving what his brother shot. In his *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes describes that "at about fifteen my life grew more complicated and my atti-

tude toward animals changed. I accused myself of disturbing their lives. I began to look at them, you see, from their own point of view. And about the same time I began to write poems.” To be a mythmaker, Hughes implicitly knew that he must be a naturalist. Examples of Hughes’s engagement with his natural landscape are to be found throughout his collections of poetry. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is the sequence of thirty-four poems in the collection *Moortown*. In these poems, Hughes details the human toil of farming, the rhythms of farm life, and the profound intersection of the human world and the natural world beyond. It is the toil of the farm, the continual birthing and death, and the seasons’ demands that reinitiate an understanding of nature and the intimate connection between the human body, the psyche, and the world of nature.

Hughes’s influences are often cited as the poets Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and D. H. Lawrence. In an interview with the critic Ekbert Faas, Hughes argues that whatever “speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. . . . [I]n the case of the West Yorkshire dialect, of course, it connects you directly and in your most intimate self to middle English poetry.” The title poem of the collection *Wodwo* illustrates this point. The word “wodwo” appears in the anonymous Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1375–1400) and means a wild man of the woods, and in Hughes’s poem “wodwo” represents the centrality of the unconscious and the mythic demand to be named: “But what shall I be called am I the first/have I an owner what shape am I.” The childhood core of experience—language and landscape—remain in the poet and provide the energies for the writing of poetry.

In the collection *Crow*, Hughes offers several directions in understanding these various influences: The figure of Crow is the consummate poet-bard, the primordial storyteller and memory for an

entire culture; an Everyman, hero, and clown—the prototypic figure of the Trickster found throughout the world’s mythologies. The language of the poems is direct and vernacular; it rejects Latinate words for words rooted in the archaic and Anglo-Saxon. *Crow* investigates the centrality of the Anglo-Saxon-Norse-Celtic roots in the English language and psyche that are, Hughes argues, constantly repressed.

Hughes’s work is also often described, or disparaged, as violent. Such violence is, in fact, the violence of transformation, part of Graves’s interpretation of myth as a movement through birth, life, death, and renewal. The violence ascribed to Hughes’s work is also an attribute of the language and rhythms that he uses: The language is compact, highly stressed, and direct. Hughes responded to the question of violence in his interview with Faas by stating that “Any form of violence—any form of vehement activity—invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe.” Throughout his work, Hughes argues that the epoch’s destructive activities—particularly World Wars I and II and the environmental crisis—have destroyed both humanity’s contact with the natural world and the rituals that maintained the health of the world’s communities. Hughes’s poetry attempts to renew contact with nature, not through accommodation but on nature’s own elemental terms. “Hawk Roosting,” from *Lupercal*, is often cited as an example of Hughes’s celebration of violence. Through its utterly direct language and its inhabitation of the perching hawk, the poem, however, provides a needed contact with the natural world and its powers. The hawk comes to represent nature thinking. The poem contains echoes of the biblical book of Job; indeed Job’s inability to understand his unmerciful God parallels the fruitless efforts to understand nature. The poem warns against confusing human identities with those of the hawk, for to do so will distort nature, as well as humankind. In Hughes’s vision, nature offers no compromises.

## “THE THOUGHT-FOX”

**First published:** 1957 (collected in *The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet imagines a fox’s approach through the night, which is a metaphoric reverie of the writing of poetry.*

“The Thought-Fox” appeared in Hughes’s first collection of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), and is one of his most celebrated and anthologized poems. This poem contains many of the stylistic and thematic elements that have come to define Hughes’s poetry. In terms of Hughes’s poetic development, this poem was unmistakably his breakthrough, signaling his departure from the rhetorical and Metaphysical poetry and his movement toward mythmaking.

The poem comprises a reverie by immediately invoking the imagination in the first line: “I imagine this midnight moment’s forest.” The alliteration in this line suggests a casting of a spell. The first stanza of this twenty-four-line poem arranged in quatrains evokes solitude; plainly, the writer is working late at night alone, the only sound being “the clock’s loneliness.” Beyond the writer’s domain of time and the blank page exists the primordial force of the imagination.

The poet becomes actively aware of the approach of the nearness of the other or the imagination in the second stanza. The poet stands at literal and figurative thresholds: He stares at a blank page, which becomes the dark window, the starless sky, and then into the forest’s darkness. In the third stanza, the poet has crossed these various thresholds to make contact with this totem-figure of the unconscious or the imagination. Both the poet and the metaphorical fox are tentative in their approaches. The rhythm enacts the moment-by-moment movement of the reverie. The selection of simple words underscores the directness of the experience and the rhythm of the poem’s trancelike chant: “Two eyes serve a movement, that now/ And again now, and now, and now/ Sets neat prints into the snow.”

The fourth stanza traces the movement of the fox through the trees. Gradually the blank, snowy page fills with print, the tracks of the thought-fox.

The poem is simultaneously depicting the transcription of a poem from the imagination onto the page and describing the moment of inspiration. The fifth stanza is the most abstract while also seeking to convey the fullness and primordial magic of reverie as the poet is swept into the “deepening greenness,” or vitality, of the imagination. The force of the reverie overwhelms the poet, until the sudden physical presence and departure of the fox in the sixth stanza occurs: “Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox/ It enters the dark hole of the head.” The imagination at this moment shows its immediacy and power; the fox is no longer a shadow but dangerously close before vanishing and leaving the page printed, scented with its presence, its territory marked. The imagination, for Hughes, is a primordial force; its presence is both creative and predatory. The poem implies that it is necessary, however, to engage these archaic powers if one is to write an authentic poetry.

## “SALMON EGGS”

**First published:** 1983 (collected in *River*, 1983)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem is a meditation on the sanctity and continuity of the river, the salmon, and life.*

“Salmon Eggs” is the closing poem of Hughes’s collection *River* (1983). The collection itself is a sequence of forty-three poems offering both description of river life and meditations on the spiritual and physical ecology. “Salmon Eggs,” as the final poem, offers an affirmation: “Only birth matters/ Say the river’s whorls.”

There are two movements in the poem. One is the horizontal flow of the river, its journey downstream, oceanward, toward conclusion and, implicitly, extinction. The other movement is vertical, from the sky, penetrating the water’s surface, probing the sediments. The poet occupies the intersection of these two movements and travels their axis. The poem opens in the past tense, suggesting that had the reader arrived sooner he or she, too, would have seen the salmon. The second stanza, cast in the present moment, gives witness to the salmon’s



fatal exhaustion after spawning. Throughout the poem, there are images of fertility and birth, as well as exhaustion and extinction. These two conditions are never isolated; one always informs the other. For Hughes, the essential role of the poet is to be at the intersection of these movements, to witness and record them.

"Salmon Eggs" continues with the poet or speaker describing his reverie: "I lean and watch the water/ listening to water/ Till my eyes forget me/ And the piled flow supplants me." Rather than the incantatory archaic and totemic being invoked, as in "The Thought-Fox," this poem's reverie carries the poet into the geologic and biological world of catkins, spiders, "mud-blooms," and "Mastodon ephemera."

The speaker notes that "Something else is going on in the river/ More vital than death." Death is merely part of nature's overarching processes. Hughes sees everywhere the continuity of life—"The river goes on/ Sliding through its place, undergoing itself/ In its wheel." The conventional symbol of the river as a coursing of life is certainly evoked here, as well as the vision of life as cyclical. The river is also understood in poetry and myth as the process of time, encompassing both time's passage and eternity—rivers, such as the Styx of Greek mythology, lead to death, as well as to immortality. Hughes's image of the wheel becomes identified as the water mill, a common image in the English landscape, and one that has come to represent both time and fate. The poet communes with the river and invokes a blessing upon the river and upon the salmon, "Sanctus Sanctus/ Swathes the blessed issue." The river becomes a holy "font . . . swaddling the egg." In the course of the river "*Only birth matters.*" The poem closes with the river's movement spreading to encompass the sun and earth. The final line—"mind condenses on old haws"—suggests the crystallization of consciousness or awareness in the same way that dew condenses on the leaves of a hawthorn hedge.

## BIRTHDAY LETTERS

**First published:** 1998

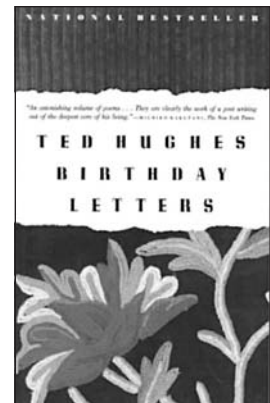
**Type of work:** Poetry

*The poet chronicles his relationship with his former wife, poet Sylvia Plath, and the aftermath of her suicide.*

*Birthday Letters*, a popular best seller, earned Hughes critical acclaim, receiving the Forward Poetry Prize, the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, the Whitbread Prize for Poetry, and the Whitbread British Book of the Year Award. This collection of eighty-eight poems, written over a period of twenty-five years and published just months before the poet's death, created a literary sensation because of its depiction of intimate details of Hughes's life with Sylvia Plath. After Plath's suicide, Hughes remained stoically silent regarding her death. The publication of this book, thirty-five years later, broke that silence.

The book is arranged chronologically, and its first poem, "Fulbright Scholars," illustrates Hughes's initial glimpse of Plath. As its title suggests, the poem re-creates an uncertain memory of seeing a photograph of Fulbright Scholars, in which Plath would have appeared. Hughes places Plath on a pedestal in the poem, unapproachable: "Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely." He describes her "American/ Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners." Finally, at poem's end, Hughes quietly compares this first vision of Plath to the taste of a first peach: "It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted./ I could hardly believe how delicious."

"St. Botolph's" chronicles Hughes's first meeting with Plath at a party celebrating the publication of a literary magazine. He devotes much space to a physical description of his future wife. Again, he describes her as "American," comments on her long fingers, her hair, her smile, and a scar from her earlier suicide attempt while still an under-



graduate. Hughes ends the poem with the effects of their first kiss, "the swelling ring-moat of toothmarks/ That was to brand my face for the next month."

Hughes incorporates the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus in "Life After Death," a poem recounting his, and their children's, grief after Plath's suicide. The eyes of the couple's son show a remarkable similarity to those of Plath and become "wet jewels,/ The hardest substance of the purest pain/ As I fed him in his high white chair." Similarly, "his sister grew/ Paler with the wound/ She could not see or touch or feel." The family is comforted by the sound of wolves from a nearby zoo: "The wolves lifted us in their long voices./ They wound us and enmeshed us/ In their wailing for you, their mourning for us." At the end of the poem, Hughes compares his two children to the mythic founders of Rome, "two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,/ Into orphans/ Beside the corpse of their mother."

The second-to-last poem in the collection, "The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother," is one of only two poems not addressed to Plath. This poem is ad-

dressed to the couple's children, Frieda and Nicholas, to whom the book is dedicated. The poet warns his children: "Protect her/ And they will tear you down/ As if you were more her. . . . Let her be their spoils." However, the poem ends on a note of hope: "Imagine/ These bone-crushing mouths the mouths/ That labour for the beetle/ Who will roll her back into the sun."

## SUMMARY

Ted Hughes offers a powerful vision of the world and of poetry. While the underpinnings of much of his thought may seem esoteric, his poetry is direct and sensory; the poems' immediacy brings the reader into contact with the archaic, mythic, or primordial forces explored by Hughes. Hughes certainly belongs to the tradition of English landscape poets, such as Andrew Marvell, William Wordsworth, or D. H. Lawrence; however, his vision of the natural world suggests that any attempt to control nature results not only in damaging the natural world but also in the distortion and destruction of the human spirit.

*James McCorkle; updated by Nettie Farris*

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- How did Ted Hughes's undergraduate work in anthropology influence his writing?
- How does Hughes perceive nature?
- What role do animals (particularly birds) play in the poetry of Hughes?
- Why is "The Thought-Fox" one of Hughes's most anthologized poems?
- How does his trickster figure Crow serve as an iconic representation of Hughes's poetry?
- How does biographical knowledge and familiarity with the poetry of Sylvia Plath enrich one's reading of *Birthday Letters*?

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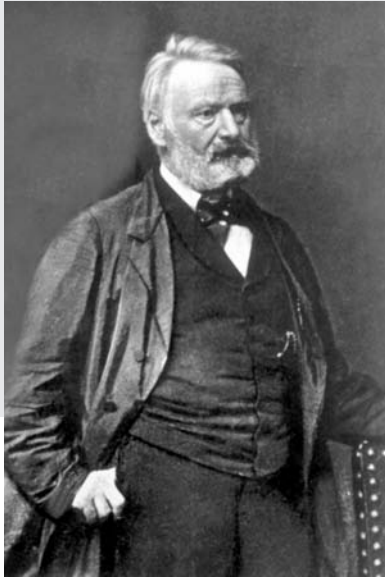
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## VICTOR HUGO

**Born:** Besançon, France  
February 26, 1802

**Died:** Paris, France  
May 22, 1885

*Recognized as a guiding force of the Romantic movement in Europe and the leader of the Romantic rebellion in his own country, Hugo provided nineteenth century France with its greatest novels, verse drama, and lyric poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Victor-Marie Hugo (HYEW-goh) was the third son of Major Joseph Leopold Sigisbert Hugo and Sophie Trebuchet Hugo. He was born in Besançon, in eastern France, on February 26, 1802, in the third year of Napoleon I's First Republic. He was a slight, somewhat misshapen child, who at birth seemed to the doctor to have little chance for survival. No omen could have been more false, as Hugo became a titan of strength and energy, living during one period of his life with the equivalent of three marriage partners and, as an octogenarian, outliving all five of his children.

Hugo's parents quarreled much and separated frequently, gaining legal separation in 1818. His father distinguished himself in a military career, serving Napoleon's brother, Prince Joseph, under whom he obtained a colonelcy and the governorship of Avellino in Italy; he later became count of Sigüenza in Spain when Joseph Bonaparte, having become king of Naples, went on to the kingship of Spain and the Indies. It was in Spain that the young Victor Hugo developed a penchant for Spanish history, legend, and grandiloquence that would materialize in works such as *Hernani* (pr., pb. 1830; English translation, 1830) and *Ruy Blas* (pr., pb. 1838; English translation, 1890). Victor's father attained the rank of general but, after the defeat of Joseph

Bonaparte, returned to France, where he commanded a garrison in Thionville. The three Hugo brothers, after their parents' separation, went to Paris to live with their mother.

Hugo married Adèle Foucher in 1822, three years after he and his brothers had founded *Le Conservateur littéraire*, a magazine for which Hugo wrote more than 120 articles and more than twenty poems in its first two years of existence. In 1821, the magazine had merged with *Les Annales de la littérature et des arts*. That was the year in which his mother died and during which he was at work on his first novel, *Han d'Islande* (1823; *Hans of Iceland*, 1845), a romantic extension of the love shared by Adèle and himself. In the year of his marriage, his first book was published, *Odes et poésies diverses* (1822, 1823); it was dedicated to Adèle.

Adèle and Victor had three sons and two daughters—Léopold II, Léopoldine, Charles, François Victor, and Adèle. The marriage was filled with uncertainty and marred by infidelity, especially on Victor's part, but was never dissolved. After the publication of *Odes et ballades* in 1826, Hugo befriended Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, who had reviewed *Odes et ballades* very favorably and who came, after a time, to carry on an extended amorous liaison with Adèle. The true love of Hugo's life was Juliette Drouet, who devoted herself to him from 1832 until she died in his arms in 1883.

Hugo's long and imposing verse drama, *Cromwell* (pb. 1827; English translation, 1896), appeared in 1827; it was not successful, but the prose preface written for it later was a great success as

a Romantic manifesto. It champions Romantic against French classical literature, upholds the grotesque as an essential artistic development, calls for new rules and models of composition, and associates nature with truth.

French Romanticism may be said to have begun officially at the first performance of Hugo's play *Hernani* on February 25, 1830. One of the cardinal rules of French classical dramaturgy—no carry-over, or enjambment, of a phrasal unit from the end of a verse-line to the beginning of the next—was broken in the first two lines of the drama. The vociferous protest against Hugo's audacity was shouted by the Romantics in the audience, and *Hernani* went on to an acclaimed run.

The fame that *Hernani* brought to Hugo was sustained by his second novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831; *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1833), published when he was only twenty-nine. It was at this period in his life that Hugo had to contend with losing much of Adèle's love for him as she responded favorably to Sainte-Beuve's amatory overtures. Hugo translated his heartache into his fifth volume of poetry, *Les Feuilles d'automne* (1831).

His personal problems were in fellowship with his deepening social consciousness. He deplored the gross disadvantages suffered by the poor at the hands of the wealthy, and he despised the powerlessness of the lower echelons of society against injustices. Two of his works—*Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné* (1829; *The Last Day of a Condemned*, 1840) and *Claude Gueux* (1834)—established an outcry that would culminate in *Les Misérables* (1862; English translation, 1862). Of his personal problems there appeared both the intensification and the solution in the young actress Juliette Drouet, whom Hugo met when she was cast in one of his plays, *Lucrèce Borgia* (pr., pb. 1833; *Lucretia Borgia*, 1842). Adèle was as tolerant of Victor's love for Juliette as he had been of his wife's consorting with Sainte-Beuve. When Victor Hugo and Sainte-Beuve parted company permanently in 1834, the break resulted from professional differences and not personal conflict.

Drouet abandoned her own career and committed her entire life to Hugo, copying his manuscripts and serving him with a selfless devotion that became a mainstay of his emotional life. In October, 1837, he returned alone to Metz, where he and Drouet had first consummated their love. Trou-

bled in spirit and shaken by his initial failure to be elected to the Académie française, Hugo composed his poem "Tristesse d'Olympio" ("Olympio's Sadness"). "Olympio" is the name by which Hugo identified himself as a literary Romanticist. Hugo was elected, in his fifth candidacy and in the lingering triumph of his play *Ruy Blas*, to the Académie in 1841, by which time Drouet had become the equivalent of his second wife.

His triumphs and publications continued, and his fame grew. His personal joys alternated with personal tragedies. In 1843, his daughter Didine and her husband drowned in a boating accident. In 1844, he began his love affair with Léonie d'Aunet, wife of the painter Auguste Briard. In 1845, elevated to the peerage, he became Vicomte Hugo; shortly afterward, he and Madame Briard were surprised in their love nest by the police. In 1848, Hugo founded a newspaper, which within a short time placed itself in opposition to Napoleon III. The editors, including his two brothers, were arrested in 1850, and Hugo himself went into an exile that was to last for twenty years. He was joined in exile by Drouet. His literary productivity flourished during these two decades. He published *Les Châtiments* in 1853; an enormously successful (and perhaps his very best) volume of poetry, entitled *Les Contemplations*, in 1856; *La Légende des siècles* in 1859-1883 (*The Legend of the Centuries*, 1894); the monumental *Les Misérables* in 1862 (English translation, 1862); *William Shakespeare* in 1864 (English translation, 1864); and *Les Travailleurs de la mer* in 1866 (*The Toilers of the Sea*, 1866), among many other works.

During the last years of his exile, his son Charles presented Hugo with the author's first grandchild, Georges, born in 1867. Hugo's wife Adèle died the following year. Then, as the Second Empire under Napoleon III came to an end, Hugo returned to Paris, was received triumphantly, and embraced the Republican cause. His continued political activities, along with his literary and polemical work, did not abate, despite his advancing age. His last novel, *Quatre-vingt-treize* (*Ninety-Three*, 1874), was published in 1874, and is, according to André Maurois, one of his finest. Three years later, Hugo was elected to the senate.

In 1878, Hugo and Drouet moved into a house at 130 Avenue d'Eylau. Hugo's eightieth birthday was celebrated as a national holiday, and the Ave-

nue d'Eylau was renamed the Avenue Victor Hugo. Drouet died on May 11, 1883; Hugo followed her in death on May 22, 1885, in Paris. At the news of his death, the senate and the chamber of deputies adjourned abruptly in initiation of a national mourning. Hugo's body lay in state beneath the Arc de Triomphe and was carried in triumphal procession to the Pantheon, where the remains of one of France's greatest literary giants was given a burial befitting a conquering hero.

### ANALYSIS

Hugo's literary artistry has as its base a definitive Romanticism, a religious sensibility, and a constant regard for the oppressed; its superstructure—a huge corpus of lyric poetry, an important group of verse dramas, and a soaring succession of novels—rises like a Gothic cathedral above the less excessive and more orderly monuments of nineteenth century French literature. For Hugo, excess confirmed and did not suppress greatness: "Heaven," he wrote, "is excess." His religious sensibility was nurtured by his sense of the divine, both in all things, in accordance with pagan depths of imagination, and above all things, in keeping with the Judeo-Christian concept of a deity of creation and succor. His regard for the oppressed is evident in his novels, with their pageantry of victimized innocence, and in his political tracts in favor of revolutionary changes to better the lot of workers and the poor.

To select from his works those most patently representative of the respective constituents of his literary artistry's base, one would perhaps choose the play *Hernani*, which ensured the victory of Romanticism for an entire generation, the novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with its personification of God as human expression and female force, and the novel *Les Misérables*, with a christological pilgrim of immortality as its hero.

For the inner Hugo, the subjective Olympio, one may turn to the Romanticism of his deeply subjective lyric poems. While the lyrics are replete with Romantic excess and concern for the downtrodden, they offer the reader the religious insight and the sense of personal triumph that Hugo experienced in the complex dimensions of human sadness. His Romantic melancholy is born of a joy in life and nature that reacts poignantly to its own curtailment by its own realization of the brevity and

imperfection of human life before the lasting grandeur and magnificent beauty of nature.

In his 1856 collection of poems, *Les Contemplations*, his attitude toward poetic composition is most explicit. The collection is divided into six books, inclusive of 156 poems written during the period from 1830 to 1856, along with preface, prefatory poem, and long eight-part valedictory poem addressed "A celle qui est restée en France" ("To Her Who Has Remained in France"), that is, his daughter Léopoldine, who had died in 1843 and whose spirit pervades the second half of the collection. In the first book, "Aurore," the seventh poem, "Réponse à un acte d'accusation" ("Answer to an Accusation"), written in 1834, constitutes his *ars poetica*. He pleads guilty to trampling upon good taste and traditional French verse, to saying "Let there be darkness" in the manner of God saying "Let there be light," and to ravaging the "old A B C D." He asserts his disregard of Aristotelian limitations and his declaration of the equality, independence, and maturity of words. He sees himself as a revolutionary force taking art by the neck and standing as the instigator of a revolution of words.

In his declaration of the independence of words, he is like Jacques Derrida and the twentieth century deconstructionists who see words as Protean in their resistance to inflexible denotation and lexical boundaries. Just as the deconstructionists came to see words as objects, and objects as words, Hugo, in "À Propos d'Horace" ("Apropos of Horace"), had seen nature as "alphabet des grandes lettres d'ombre" (the alphabet of the great literature of darkness). Darkness or shadow, in Hugo's perspective, is where the truth lies: Light is the mask of Apollo, the disguise of darkness.

"Suite" ("Continuation"), a poem written in 1855 on the island of Jersey, is placed directly after "Answer to an Accusation" in "Aurore." It personifies the word (*le mot*) as a creative entity. The word says "My name is FIAT LUX"—let there be light. The word, antedating its speaker, is like writing, which for Derrida antedates and creates language (and speech, which is the use of language). For both writers, what is posited is the Logos. "Continuation" concludes with "le mot, c'est le Verbe, et le Verbe, c'est Dieu" (the word is the Logos, and the Logos is God).

Hugo lyrically identifies himself with artistic expression by Romantically revolutionizing artistic

expression, which in turn is Divinity itself. Prior to the publication of *Les Contemplations*, Hugo had begun work on two theological poems, the unfinished *La Fin de Satan* (1886; the end of Satan) and the never completed *Dieu* (1891; God); both long fragments were published posthumously. Oriented from Christianity, Hugo's religious sensibility found its tentative expression in a post-Christian spiritualism, not unrelated to the occultism of seances, which stabilized his belief in his personal immortality.

His unorthodox Christianity is discernible in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, in which architecture is seen as a form of writing (one might say, with the deconstructionists, a statement of Writing, or Logos), and in which Notre Dame (Our Lady) is not only the actual cathedral in Paris but also the spirit of the Virgin Mary, for whom the cathedral is named, as well as the virgin Esmeralda, who takes sanctuary within it. Hugo has in this novel already objectified his trinity of God, Soul, and Responsibility: God is the Logos expressed in the architecture, Soul is the female force of Our Lady, and Responsibility is the sanctuary given to "our lady" Esmeralda.

The magisterial *Les Misérables* is a prose parallel to *La Fin de Satan* and very much of a piece with the spiritualism of his 1850's poetry. The theological directions of the novel are apparent in the valley of the shadow—the life of danger, flight, concealment, injustice, and violence—through which the Christlike figure of Jean Valjean passes and in which he is witness to truth. The name "Valjean" itself means "John of the Valley."

Images of the valley of the shadow, of the world of truth in darkness or of dark truths, are dominant in Hugo's work. True light is the spiritual radiance experienced in the darkness, which is the shadow of God; it is the understanding provided by the shadow of the Logos, by "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre" (what the mouth of shadow says). Con-junctive with his theological apprehension of true light in the darkness of shadow is his aesthetic notion of beauty in the grotesque. In his *La Préface de Cromwell* (1827; English translation, 1896), he speaks of the grotesque as one of the supreme beauties of drama. His own mastery of the grotesque can be seen in his Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame. Grotesquerie appears in tandem with theological shadow in *Ninety-Three*, his

last novel, in which the sun rises over a stone monster, the Tourgue (a prison), and a wooden monster, the guillotine. Characteristically, he calls the building a "dogma" and the machine an "idea"; and he adds, "The Tourgue was the monarchy, the guillotine the revolution."

In general, Hugo probes deeply the paradoxes of religion and lyric Romanticism and expresses these as a divine happiness situated in human sadness.

## THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

**First published:** *Notre-Dame de Paris*, 1831  
(English translation, 1833)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A beautiful young woman, reared by gypsies, becomes the beloved of an ineffectual poet, a lecherous priest, and a grotesquely deformed bell ringer.*

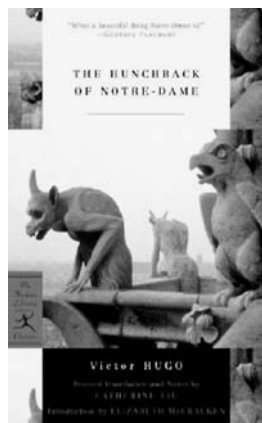
*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Hugo's second novel, emphasizes the theme of *anankē*, the Greek word for fate or necessity. *Anankē* appears in the novel chiefly as inevitable transition; stylistically, the transition is from classicism to Romanticism and, ultimately, from the human to the divine. The cathedral of Notre-Dame is the embodiment of what must be recognized as the permanence of transition. In origin a Gallo-Roman temple to the classical deity Jupiter, it became a Christian basilica and, later, in the twelfth century, a Romanesque cathedral; as its construction continued into the thirteenth century, the Gothic style overtook and succeeded the Romanesque configuration; and the cathedral, completed in 1345, stood as the architectural scripture of its own history. The novel is about this cathedral as a statement of *anankē* more than it is about any particular one of its many characters. In that sense, to translate the title, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, into *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is seriously to delimit the magnitude of the novel.

The action of the novel begins on January 6, 1482, and ends in July of the same year, with an epilogistic chapter disclosing the fate of Quasimodo, the hunchback, dated to mid-1484. Es-



meralda, a sixteen-year-old woman, identified as a gypsy and dancing in the company of her trained goat, catches the eye of Archdeacon Frollo, who orders his misshapen ward, Quasimodo, to kidnap her. Gringoire, a poet, fails in his efforts to intervene, but Esmeralda is rescued by Captain Phoebus and falls in love with him. She becomes the “bride” of Gringoire in a mock ceremony produced by a “court” of beggars. She later becomes the “bride” of Captain Phoebus, who promises marital commitment in his seduction of her but is murdered by Frollo before he can consummate his desire. Frollo frames her for the murder of Phoebus and offers to save her life if she will yield to his desire. She refuses and is then temporarily saved from execution by Quasimodo, who engineers sanctuary for her in the cathedral of Notre-Dame. Quasimodo also loves her and ultimately, after her actual execution, embraces her in death as his “bride” and achieves burial with her.

Esmeralda, loving the one man who does not really love her and being loved by three men whom she does not love, remains a virgin through three “marriages,” as Hugo reconstructs the Christian Trinity through Our Lady: Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit. Esmeralda is the point at which virginity, motherhood, and divinity intersect. Esmeralda, issuing from the womb of Our Lady (the cathedral that had been her sanctuary) is executed in an analogue to crucifixion. By the same spiritual geometry, Notre-Dame, the cathedral of the Mother Church, with its eponymous Virgin Mary as divine Mother,



is the temporal-spatial point at which ancient, medieval, and modern architectural *logoi* (words) intersect in permanent transition. The transition is marked by the fifteenth century invention that will supersede the Logos of architecture: the printing press, which will prevail as the new Writing of humankind. The printed book is identified, in a chapter titled “Ceci tuera cela” (this will kill that),

as the killer of architectural scripture and as the new representation of the human mind.

The narrative integrates some of the standard devices of ancient romance—such as the switching of infants, with the gypsy-infant Quasimodo substituted for Agnes, the daughter of Paquette la Chantefleurie, and the infant’s shoe by which the mother sixteen years later recognizes Esmeralda as her daughter—and Hugo’s Romanticism, in which truth reposes in darkness and grotesquerie. The true depth of the human spirit is sounded in the emotions of the shadow-concealed, deformed, one-eyed Quasimodo. The falsity of exterior light is explicit in the shallow, shining-knightlike Captain Phoebus, whose name is a metonym of the sun.

## LES MISÉRABLES

**First published:** 1862 (English translation, 1862)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A saintly fugitive from justice improves the lives of those whom he befriends and loves, achieves ascendance over his relentless pursuers, and redeems himself.*

The title *Les Misérables* is Hugo’s revision of his original title, “Les Misères.” The choice is affinitive with Hugo’s Romanticism, as it indicates a preference of the concrete (*the wretched ones*) to the abstract (*miseries*), of persons to situations. The full connotative strength of neither title can be retained in literal English translation, and it is good that English translations of the novel appear under the French title. The word *misérables* supports the double sense of “those who are wretched” and “those who are to be pitied.” The second sense implies the possibility or presence of pities. The readers of the novel, then, may participate in the narrative as those who pity the pitiable. Pity is, etymologically, an act of *pietas* (piety). It is in this subjective inclusion of the reader in the artwork that Romanticism differs from classicism. With regard to *Les Misérables*, the reader’s pity is an experience of piety; and piety, in the full Latin sense of *pietas* (devotion, dedication, commiseration), is as much the theme of the novel as it is a manifestation of Hugo’s deep religious sensibility.

The story begins with an account of the exem-



plary piety of a Christian bishop, Monseigneur Myriel Bienvenu, who selects as the most beautiful name of God not Creator, Liberty, Light, Providence, not even God or Father, but the name given by Solomon, Miséricorde (compassion or pity). He is contrasted with men who dig for gold: He is one who digs for pity. To this seventy-five-year-old bishop, in the year 1815, comes Jean Valjean, a paroled convict who has spent nineteen years in prison. He is seeking lodging for the night, and no room has been found for him at the inns of the town. The priest offers him food, lodging, and trust. Valjean had been sentenced to prison, first for the theft of bread to feed his widowed sister and her seven children, and subsequently for four unsuccessful attempts to escape. Hardened by imprisonment and the reception given him by those who had either despised or exploited the former convict, he is capable now of crime for its own sake, as well as for survival. Checking his movement to murder the bishop as he sleeps, Valjean settles for stealing the household silverware. Apprehended and returned to the bishop, he is released, as the bishop, insisting the silverware was not stolen, adds a pair of candlesticks to the “gift.” Valjean’s receipt of mercy restores him to piety, the showing of mercy to others, although the first stage on his new journey involves his reflex theft of a coin from a boy, in his tearful remorse for which he undergoes repentance: He awakens to see a semblance of “Satan in the light of Paradise,” returns to the door of

Monseigneur Bienvenu, and prays in the predawn darkness.

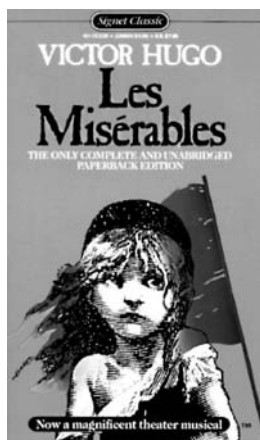
Valjean’s life of altruism takes the forms of various *personas* after his moment of truth in the shadow. The first of these is that of the good mayor of a town; his appropriate pseudonym is Père Madeleine (translatable as Father Magdalene, that is, a priestlike layman converted from wrongdoing).

He intercedes with a police inspector, Javert, to save a woman, Fantine, from a six-month prison sentence. Then, learning from Javert that another man had been arrested as

Valjean in connection with the goods stolen from the bishop, Valjean turns himself in. Later, he escapes from prison and becomes the protector of Fantine’s daughter, Cosette. Living under cover in Paris, he rears Cosette as his daughter and becomes devoted to her. Eventually, Cosette falls in love with Marius, a political activist, toward whom Valjean will bear a paternal resentment; he is once again a “father,” and Cosette addresses him as such. Marius is wounded in the republican uprising of 1832; Valjean rescues him and carries him to safety through the labyrinthine Parisian sewers. The strictly honorable Javert, who finally discovers his unceasing pursuit of Valjean to have been unjust, commits suicide. Cosette and Marius are wed. Valjean, vindicated and at last content, dies in peace in the light of candles held by the “gift” candlesticks.

The novel incorporates a number of subplots and a great variety of characters. All of its narrative elements contribute in the manner of an epic, which it is, to a broad perspective of the Napoleonic era. The Emperor Napoleon I himself appears in the long episode devoted to the Battle of Waterloo. Marius’s father is an officer in Napoleon’s army whose life is saved by Thénardier, to whom accordingly Marius is in debt and by whom Valjean comes also to be pursued. The history of postrevolutionary France, its changing social institutions, the persistence of its religious customs, and its political turmoil, along with realistic depictions of Parisian life and converse, much of which is embodied in the character of a street-smart boy named Gavroche, are interstitial to the vast fabric of Hugo’s tale. To his Romantic tale Hugo adapts much of the machinery of classical epic.

Hugo includes two parenthetical disquisitions: one on the Convent as an abstract idea and as historical fact (part 2, book 7) and one on argot, or slang (part 4, book 7). These slow down the narrative but greatly intensify its substance. The Convent, according to Hugo, is abstractly right in its nurture of religious sensibility but concretely wrong in its preservation of outmoded ritual and dogma. Argot is *la langue des ténébreux* (the language of the shadows). It is the language mainly of wrongdoers (those abominated by society), like “cant” in Henry Fielding’s *The History of the Life of the Late Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743, 1754) and “nadsat” in Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*



(1962), but it is also the language of poverty and is, in its rebelliousness and poetic turn, a language of true life.

Rebelliousness, religious sensibility, and poetic concretion make *Les Misérables* an epical testament to Romanticism. In its five parts, comprising forty-eight books, themselves comprising 361 chapters, the novel discloses the failure of rationalism and of rigidly organized religion. The first two chapters of the first book in part 1 are significantly titled “Un Juste” (a just man) and “La Chute” (the fall). The just man is Monseigneur Bienvenu; the fall is that of Jean Valjean, but it is a fall, not from, but into, grace as he becomes the bishop’s successor in justness. His passage through crime and, climactically, through the Dantesque hell of the sewers of Paris is a pilgrimage of redemption, a movement not toward a paradisiacal light but into the true light at the core of darkness. The last chapter of the concluding book is titled “Suprême Ombre, Suprême Aurore” (supreme darkness, supreme dawn). The supreme darkness is the life that Valjean has fully lived; the supreme dawn is his death.

### “ECSTASY”

**First published:** “Extase,” 1829 (collected in *Les Orientales: Or, Eastern Lyrics*, 1879)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet expresses an affinity with nature.*

The “Ecstasy” that Hugo describes in this twelve-line poem is his experience of himself in nature as nature identifies itself with God. The poem reads, in prose translation, as follows:

I was standing alone by the waves on a starry night, under a cloudless sky and by a sea unbothered by sails. My eyes saw more than the material world; and the woods and mountains and all of nature seemed to question, in mingled murmur, the waves of the sea and the fires of heaven. And the countless legions of golden stars were answering, in voices raised and lowered in a host of harmonies; and the blue waves, which nothing controls or hinders, were saying, as their crest foamed back in an arc, “It is the Lord, the Lord God!”

The solitary stance of the individual in an almost but not quite pantheistic communion with nature is a characteristic posture of nineteenth century Romantic poets in Germany and England, as well as in France. During the eighteenth century, “nature” was “human nature,” which could be improved by rationalism and enlightenment, and ecstasy was as suspect an irrational quality as it had been to Plato. With Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Wordsworth, and Hugo, however, “nature” was the terrestrial and physical universe with which an individual could establish a subjective relationship that was predispositional to spiritual gratification and religious satisfaction. Hugo intones that relationship in this short lyric, in which ecstasy and the night transcend reason and daylight.

### “OLYMPIO’S SADNESS”

**First published:** “Tristesse d’Olympio,” 1840 (collected in *The Literary Life and Poetical Works of Victor Hugo*, 1883)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet makes a solitary retreat to the valley in which he and his mistress began their love affair.*

“Olympio’s Sadness” is Hugo’s realization that nature, endlessly beautiful, can be seen as cruel to human beings, whose beauty, in love and as part of nature, is fleeting and cannot, or will not, be sustained by nature: “How little time it takes for you, Nature, with your unwrinkled brow, to change everything, disregardingly, and, in your acts of transformation, to snap the mysterious threads that bind our hearts.” Hugo saw himself as an Olympian, both in his unorthodox religiousness, which was closer to Greek paganism than to Christianity, and in his sense of personal greatness. For him, sadness was not the opposite of happiness but the comprehension of happiness, even as he considered the true light of the religious soul to be implicit in the darkness and not external to it.

The poem was composed in October, 1837, and is rich in autumnal resonance; but the day is bright with light, and the sky is unvaryingly clear. The external light brings the poet no joy. Joy is to be

remembered only in the natural things—birds, streams, the sky, lakes, and such—that have no remembrance but are themselves remembered and, in being remembered, are for lovers “the shadow of love itself.” The thirty-eighth, and last, stanza locates the soul in a pitch-black night, where the holiness of memory, the essence of human happiness, sleeps in the shadow.

In making this sentimental journey to the scene of his early days of love with his mistress Juliette Drouet, Hugo is following the examples of his fellow Romantic poets Alphonse de Lamartine and Alfred de Musset, each of whom had written superb poems about such retreats.

The first eight stanzas of the poem, each consisting of a pair of two and a half Alexandrine verses, is a third-person narrative of the poet’s return to the scene of his love: the pond, the garden, the orchard, the chestnut tree where the poet and his mistress held trysts and which they used as a repository for love letters. These stanzas are followed by thirty Alexandrine quatrains in which the poet recounts in direct statement his reactions to the loss of subjective syntony over a three-year passage of time.

The poem opens with “The fields were no longer dark,” and, in the smiling autumn light, the poet finds the sadness of his soul. The poem closes

with “this night which no light spangles,” in which in darkness his soul senses the pulsation of memory. The progression of the day from light to darkness defines the progression of the soul from melancholy to the bliss enclosed in what Wordsworth calls “the still sad music of humanity.”

## SUMMARY

Viewing philosophy as, in the words of his character Jean Valjean, “the microscope of thought,” Victor Hugo chose lyric poetry, the verse drama, and the novel to produce his macroscopic depiction of human feeling. He is the consummate Romantic, for whom the dark reaches of the emotions hold more truth than do the logic and science of the Enlightenment. “Science,” he wrote, “has the first word on everything, the last word on nothing”; and he urged artists always to oppose “shadow to light” and “invisible truth to visible fact.”

The three *r*’s evident in Hugo’s life and work are revolution, Romanticism, and religion; and, in his writing, each is implicit with his apprehension of the female force: The fictional women in his novels and the actual women who inspired most of his poetry all attest to his belief that “the poem that is Woman pervades the history of Man.”

Roy Arthur Swanson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What features of French classical literature did Victor Hugo oppose most vigorously? What classical elements does he appropriate?
- Why is the common title *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* an inadequate translation of Hugo's title?
- Why is the title *Les Misérables* usually not translated?
- What is Hugo's sense of the relationship between God and nature?
- Trace Hugo's use of light and dark as symbols in "Olympio's Sadness" and in other poems.

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## ALDOUS HUXLEY

**Born:** Laleham, near Godalming, Surrey, England  
July 26, 1894

**Died:** Los Angeles, California  
November 22, 1963

*Widely renowned as a satiric novelist, Huxley contributed significantly to literary modernism's skeptical reassessment of the scientific and technological tendencies of twentieth century society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aldous Leonard Huxley was born on July 26, 1894, in Laleham, near Godalming, Surrey, England, the third son of Dr. Leonard Huxley, a teacher, editor, and writer, and Julia Arnold, niece of Matthew Arnold and sister of novelist Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Aldous was also the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, a well-known scientist, and the brother of scientist Sir Julian Huxley.

Huxley had planned on a career as a physician, but an affliction with nearly total blindness while studying at Eton altered his plans, and, upon partial recovery three years later, he entered Balliol College, Oxford, and earned a degree in English literature. While Huxley was at Oxford, World War I began, and he was refused enlistment because of his poor eyesight; eventually, he became totally disillusioned about the war and about the direction of twentieth century society, particularly after a visit to America in the Roaring Twenties, during which he was appalled by the material excesses and what he saw as a pervasive spiritual emptiness. The death of his mother when he was fourteen and of his brother Trevenen when Aldous was eighteen may have contributed to the skeptical bent of Aldous's mind. The Oxford years, however, did establish important literary connections for Huxley, since during his years there he met Bertrand Rus-

sell, the Sitwells, D. H. Lawrence, and Lytton Strachey, among others, as well as his future wife, Maria Nys.

After graduation, Huxley worked briefly for the Air Board as a patriotic duty until his poor vision forced his resignation. He then taught at Eton, the preparatory school from which he had been graduated, but did not enjoy teaching, perhaps because of his somewhat introverted nature. He switched to a position as second assistant editor of *The Athenaeum*, a literary review; the increased salary allowed him to marry Nys in 1919. Then, in 1920 and 1921, he worked as drama critic for *The Westminster Gazette*, at the same time writing *Crome Yellow* (1921), his first novel, which began the development of his reputation as a skillful satiric novelist. (Although he had been publishing poetry and short stories since his college days, including *The Burning Wheel*, 1916, his first poetry volume, none had been very successful.)

The even more successful novels *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) followed, allowing Huxley the financial security to leave journalistic work and travel widely in Europe and even once around the world, with stops in India, the Dutch East Indies, and the United States. In fact, from 1923 until his death in 1963, Huxley lived elsewhere than in England, returning there only for visits. From 1923 until 1930, he lived in Italy, studying and admiring Italian architecture and landscapes (painting being a hobby) but expressing contempt for Fascism. While there, he wrote *Point Counter Point* (1928), which was second only

to *Brave New World* (1932) in popularity. The latter was written during Huxley's years in southern France, at Sanery-sur-Mer; he had moved there in 1930 because of the pleasant climate and reasonable cost of living. During these years of residence in France, he also took a trip to Central America that was the basis for his successful travel book *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934). Given his diverse knowledge and interests, Huxley also wrote book reviews, newspaper articles, plays, short stories, and forewords, introductions, and prefaces for others' works—a total of some eighty-five works being written or edited by Huxley by the time of his death in 1963.

That death came in the United States, to which Huxley had emigrated from France in 1937 for several reasons, including not only his belief in impending disaster in Europe (on the eve of World War II) but also his love of the Mojave desert and its climate. The latter, particularly, in combination with the Bates method of visual reeducation, improved his eyesight.

Huxley remained politically engaged in the 1930's and early 1940's, attending to his humanistic concerns, working to avoid World War II, even writing a book, *Ends and Means*, in 1937 on war's motives and futility. Both during and after World War II, however, he turned to less practical considerations and embraced a kind of psychological and philosophical/religious mysticism as a solution to the lack of wholeness, to the fragmentation, of the modern world. That mystical focus is evident even in the 1941 study of Father Joseph, *Grey Eminence*, and in his important later novels, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), *Ape and Essence* (1948), and *Island* (1962). Paradoxically, however, given the Huxley family's scientific tradition, that mysticism was also pragmatic and empirical, involving an attempt to synthesize all of life's diverse elements. Thus, during his years in America, Huxley wrote scripts for Hollywood films and articles for *Playboy* and *Esquire* while at the same time writing essays on parapsychology and mystical novels (novels that also include the very earthy, such as the sexual elements in *Island*). Nor did the mystical concern preclude some political and social activity, such as Huxley's work for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization based on his concern with overpopulation, or his help in the Campaign Against Hunger in 1963.

Socially, too, he was active, talking with composer Igor Stravinsky, taking walks with author Thomas Mann, having picnics with screenwriter Anita Loos and actor Charlie Chaplin, and even going for drives with a juvenile delinquent (Huxley enjoyed and studied automobiles throughout his life).

The mystical concern did help Huxley deal with his wife's death from cancer in 1955 and with his own long struggle with cancer that ended on November 22, 1963, in Los Angeles, California. His life and work indeed reflect a highly varied but impressively unified mind that continually developed in a consistent way from early satiric skepticism to the confident mysticism of the later years and which throughout shows the constant human conflict between the intellectual and emotional polarities of the human personality. Huxley did in fact achieve the synthesis and unity that were the object of his lifetime search.

## ANALYSIS

Huxley's primary thematic concern in his fiction is with the ramifications of humanness: what the authentic human values are, what lifestyles humans should adopt, and what type of society or world humans should create. He is particularly concerned, in that context, with the issue of modernist alienation and isolation in a complex scientific and technological society that, particularly in 1928 and 1932 (the respective dates of publication of his two most important novels, *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World*), was in great upheaval because of the economic problems of capitalism that were all too evident. As a humanist in the classical and Renaissance sense of a broadly educated and talented person with a devotion to improving life on earth, Huxley particularly focuses upon the psychological effects of twentieth century life, of a life of nonstop action as it shapes human attitudes toward love, material possessions, and political structures, but especially as it affects the personal balance and happiness of individual human beings. If humans were not happier in the twentieth century than in the past (and Huxley firmly believed that they were not), then why not? Where did they err and lose the normal human balance of intellect and emotion, body and soul, love and hate, self-concern and concern for others—all the balances involved in being naturally adjusted and contented?

Implicit in such an assumption of balanced “naturalness” is the Romantic conception of humans living in harmony with nature, with all of the created, living world, and thus with themselves. Such a Goetheian Romantic stance inevitably led Huxley to be critical of science and technology and of any positive human future based upon such products of the rational side of human beings. Hence, Huxley continuously presents the scientist as a threat and his creations, his machines, as a similar danger because they control those who use them. The use of machines is implicitly connected to corrupted values in *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World*, for example. In the former, this theme is depicted in Lucy Tantamount’s fascination with airplanes and fast travel as a way to avoid real emotion in relationships, as a way to speed to a new and superficial love relationship. Hence, Lucy deserts Walter Bidlake because he is too caring; too deep in his attachments, too unlike the mechanistic superficiality and temporariness and rapid pace of Lucy’s modern life. Similarly, machines in *Brave New World* adversely affect the normal freedom and balance and harmony in life; for example, mechanical birth processes that allow the creation of perfectly planned, robotic humans who are further controlled by science-created soma, a drug for pleasure and distraction that deprives humans of the pain and suffering that motivate thought and questioning, and thus intellectual development. The result is an acceptance of controlled, thoughtless, superficial lives that lack both emotional depth and intellectual attainment.

It was this kind of presentation of science and technology that led H. G. Wells, the positivist science-fiction writer, to write a letter to Huxley damning him for treason to science after *Brave New World* was published. Such presentation also led to Huxley’s being criticized for cynicism, with many critics not wanting to, or at any rate failing to, note the real human potential for success implicit in both *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World*. Those successes include the balanced-living Mark and Mary Rampion in the former (who do their own housework, read and discuss ideas, and live emotionally and fully, as well) and Bernard and Helmholtz in the latter.

There are also unbalanced and tragic characters in Huxley’s novels, characters who embody Huxley’s ideas about flaws in human development,

flaws that lead to unnaturalness and psychological aberration. The purpose of these characters in Huxley’s novels of ideas is to illustrate the causative forces of psychological aberration, such as Spandrell’s unnatural closeness to his mother, which causes him to hate her, himself, and everyone else when she remarries. He is led to murder as a product of his hate-filled imbalance. Such scenes merely illustrate one type of human perversion and do not indicate the cynical views of the author.

More justified criticisms of Huxley’s novels are that the concern with ideas is so pervasive that characterization is often limited to speeches and dialogue as a way to present ideas, and that plot unity is often lacking because too many characters are used to represent the mélange of ideas involved. However, both *Point Counter Point* and *Brave New World* present positive, hopeful ideas as well as negative ones, as Huxley conveys his messages about the need for more human psychological balance and for more skeptical analysis of the “advancements” in science and technology.

## POINT COUNTER POINT

**First published:** 1928

**Type of work:** Novel

*In early twentieth century England, a range of interrelated characters illustrate the modern world’s complexity and the difficulty of harmonious, sane existence within it.*

*Point Counter Point*, Huxley’s greatest novelistic success except for *Brave New World*, is a complex work involving a multitude of characters who represent various extremes of imbalance in earthly life, imbalances that detract from naturalness and harmony. As such, these characters are the most inclusive presentation of Huxley’s ideas about erroneous human values and actions and about the complex social, political, economic, and psychological causes of such actions and values.

The novel unfolds in a very diffuse way. The introductory section is structured around a party given by Lord Edward Tantamount and his wife, which is attended by a multitude of the “rich and famous,” including nearly all of the characters

whose lives are alternately focused upon in the rest of the novel. At the party, the central conflict is also foreshadowed, that between the socialist Illidge, Lord Tantamount's scientific assistant, and the ultraconservative, capitalistically privileged leader of a reactionary political group, Everard Webley. That plotline then develops with Spandrell's very Freudian and psychologically violent perverseness contributing to the radical violence implicit within Illidge's perspective. (Spandrell has been too psychologically attached to his mother, and her remarriage devastates him, turning him into a pathological being, the villain of the novel.) At Spandrell's urging, he and Illidge eventually perform the central action of the novel, the murder of Webley. That murder leads to the novel's climactic moment, the somewhat tragically heroic decision

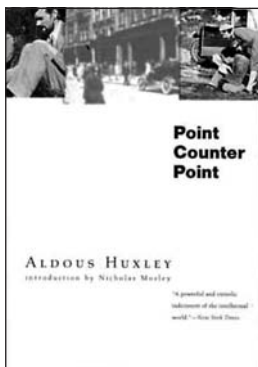
by Spandrell to destroy himself by forcing the police to kill him, illustrating the destructiveness of the social, political, and psychological counterpoints in twentieth century society.

The other plot line counterpoints develop in similarly tragic ways. The painter John Bidlake's psychosexual excessiveness is paralleled by that of the editor Burlap and

the Tantamounts' spoiled daughter Lucy, all three characters pursuing sexual pleasure at the expense of other characters, such as John Bidlake's wives and models, Burlap's rejected secretary Ethel Cobbett (who commits suicide), and Walter Bidlake, from whom Lucy drifts away out of boredom in her pursuit of sexual adventures. These psychosexually excessive characters are themselves also seen as tragic, John Bidlake unable to cope with death, Lucy pursuing sexuality in a desperate attempt to escape thought and deep feeling, and Burlap regressing to an almost infantile sexual relationship with Beatrice Gilray.

The tragic lives of the psychosexually excessive are counterpointed by the equally tragic lives of the religiously and intellectually excessive. Fanatically Christian Rachel Quarles almost totally retreats from her husband and children into religious isola-

tion, in the process bringing Walter Bidlake's mistress, Marjorie, into the same kind of mystical isolation, which leaves Marjorie totally incapable of helping Walter cope with his rejection by Lucy Tantamount. Similarly, Walter's intellectual excessiveness makes him incapable of contentment with either Marjorie or Lucy, since, like Don Quixote, he has read so much idealistic literature that he is continually searching for more than reality affords. Thus, his life is continual tragic dissatisfaction. Also, the philosophically excessive Philip Quarles continually withdraws into thought and avoids feeling, and thus cannot relate to his son, little Phil, or even feel very affected by Phil's death. He is also so withdrawn that he nearly drives his wife into an affair with Webley, a circumstance prevented only by Phil's sudden illness and Webley's murder. Philip Quarles's future is as bleak as that of most of the other characters, since he remains trapped within his personal imbalance. The intellectually scientific are also presented as a counterpoint to the psychosexually excessive, with Lord Edward Tantamount embodying the withdrawn, socially dysfunctional scientist who cannot sexually relate to his wife and who is only happy doing experiments in his laboratory. Thus, at the novel's end, only the Rampions, Mark and Mary, remain as embodiments of the possibility of synthesis and balance in an imbalanced, fragmented modern world that is resoundingly rejected by Huxley in this profoundly satiric novel.



## BRAVE NEW WORLD

**First published:** 1932

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the future world imagined in this novel, there is no provision for complete and emotional human existence.*

*Brave New World* continues the presentation of human psychological and other imbalances of *Point Counter Point*, but in a more creative and unified way. It is set in a future society in which control over individuals is nearly absolute and in which there is virtually no possibility of maintaining a sane, balanced, and fully human existence.

Through the future setting of a scientifically created and controlled technological society, operating in artificial harmony by virtue of nearly deadened human emotional and intellectual attributes, Huxley focuses on the danger of what twentieth century society could become if the values of order, profit, and power continue to prevail over spontaneous creativity, mutual respect and pleasure, and cooperative idealism.

The citizens in this “brave new world” are controlled and conditioned from birth, in fact before birth, by means of genetic engineering, or mechanical childbirth processes. Humans are then subjected to a variety of operant conditioning techniques, including hypnopaedia, or sleep-teaching, which fit them for their carefully planned roles in the society. This role preparation is involved even in the genetic engineering, too, as the embryonic rocket engineers’ birth tubes are kept in constant motion to prepare the engineers to work in weightless environments in which right-side-up and upside-down positions alternate constantly. In the words of the director of the genetics institute, “They learn to associate topsy-turvydom with well-being; in fact, they’re only truly happy when they’re standing on their heads.” The conditioning continues throughout life, the sleep teaching reinforced by the entertainment drug soma, which encourages narcissistic self-indulgence and thus lack of concern for larger decisions of societal direction made by the few in power.

The system of scientific and technological control, directed by Mustapha Mond, is not yet perfect. Some humans continue to be dissatisfied and want more than what is prescribed for them. Mond, who fears real human experience and thus uses control and artificial creation to avoid such balance, has trouble particularly with the emotional and intellectual longings of several characters, with their often subconscious desire to be whole. Specifically, Bernard keeps longing for real love, not just entertainment sex, and the same is true to some extent

of Lenina (thus the important Freudian psychology element again in Huxley’s work). Also, Helmholtz keeps feeling unfulfilled because of some deeply suppressed need that has not been totally eliminated.

The Savage, though, is particularly problematic for Mond. The Savage realizes the total imbalance, the total inhumanness, of the society in its elimination of both deep feeling and intellectual attainment. He believes in feeling, in living, and in experiencing real human pain and thus real human joy—even the pain of death, which defines and creates human joy. When Mond questions him, the Savage admits that he is “claiming the right to be unhappy.” Mond responds with the following:

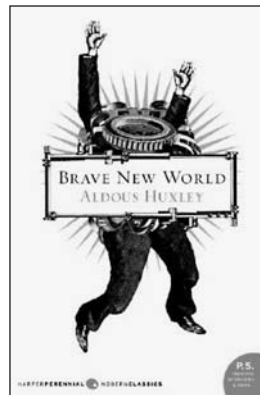
Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.

The Savage’s response is simply, “I claim them all.” They are all part of being human, of being in the real world, and Huxley sees the drug-induced life of scientific and technological society as destructive of that real world. Thus, the Savage dies tragically by hanging himself, in primitive reaction against a world that has eliminated the side of human beings that he represents.

## SUMMARY

In *Brave New World*, which describes a future society that seems perfectly orderly, harmonious, and controlled but which is actually depraved, unhappy, and hellish, Aldous Huxley embodies his principal ideas. He also embodies them in *Point Counter Point*, in a diffuse portrait of imbalanced characters in early twentieth century England.

One of those principal ideas is that humanness and authentic human values involve recognition of and participation in all the dichotomies of human existence: emotion and intellect, mind and body, body and soul, love and hate, self-concern and concern for others. Without that balance and total development, humans are doomed to incomplete, and often tragic, lives. The other principal belief is that modern society is itself unbalanced in its





overly scientific and technological orientation, leading to intellect dominating emotion and thus to final tragedy unless drastic adjustments are made. It is that idea that continues to make Huxley's two great novels tremendously important in solving the problems of today's world.

John L. Grigsby

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Aldous Huxley's title *Point Counter Point* relate to the structure of the novel?
- Miranda in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623) says, "O brave new world/ That has such people in it." How does Huxley's use of the phrase establish the tone of his novel?
- Which novel, Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), now seems more prophetic? Justify your answer.
- Huxley came from a family in which several members were notably scientific. What is his attitude toward science as expressed or implied in his best-known novels?
- In claiming the right to be unhappy, is the Savage in *Brave New World* conceding that technologically controlled beings are indeed happy?

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## HENRIK IBSEN

**Born:** Skien, Norway  
March 20, 1828

**Died:** Christiania (now Oslo), Norway  
May 23, 1906

*Ibsen is widely regarded as the most important dramatist since William Shakespeare, not only for the depth and complexity of the major characters in his plays but also for his technical innovations and his subtle use of symbolism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Henrik Johan Ibsen (IHB-suhn) was born in Skien, a small town on the east coast of Norway, on March 20, 1828, to Knud and Marchinen Altenburg Ibsen. By all accounts, he was a withdrawn and introspective child, much given to reading, painting, and creating puppets for the tiny theater that he had constructed in a storehouse attached to his childhood home. The financial decline of the Ibsen family severely curtailed his formal education. Though he had hoped to go to the university and study medicine, in 1843 he left school and became an apprentice to an apothecary in the small coastal town of Grimstad, where he was to spend nearly seven years. The revolution of 1848 in France, coupled with his study of Cicero's oration against the Roman senator Lucius Sergius Catiline (Catiline), inspired the young Ibsen to write his first play, an unsuccessful verse tragedy entitled *Catalina* (pb. 1850, revised pb. 1875, pr. 1881; *Catiline*, 1921), which treats Catiline not as a traitor to Rome but as an idealistic reformer.

In 1850, Ibsen left Grimstad for Christiania, where he tried his hand at journalism while studying for the examinations that would qualify him to enter the university. Although his second play, *Kjæmpehøien* (pr., pb. 1850, revised pb. 1854; *The Burial Mound*, 1912), was accepted by the Christiania Theater and performed three times that autumn, his other projects met with little success. While he was struggling to make his mark in liter-

ary circles in Christiania, a Norwegian National Theater was established in Bergen to encourage Norwegian playwrights to develop an independent dramatic tradition. In the autumn of 1851, Ibsen was offered a position as "dramatic author" in this new theater. The next spring, the directors of the theater sent him abroad to study theatrical methods. He spent six weeks at the Royal Theater in Copenhagen and about a month in Dresden, Germany, seeing plays and studying stage machinery. After his return to Bergen, he signed a five-year contract as "scene instructor," a position that placed him in charge of blocking, decor, and costumes. He was also expected to write a new play each year for performance on the anniversary of the opening of the theater. In this capacity, he wrote *Sanctansnatten* (pr. 1853, pb. 1909; *St. John's Night*, 1921), *Fru Inger til Østraat* (pr. 1855, pb. 1857; *Lady Inger of Østraat*, 1906), *Gildet paa Solhaug* (pr., pb. 1856, revised pb. 1883; *The Feast at Solhaug*, 1906)—Ibsen's first theatrical triumph—and *Olaf Liljekrans* (pr. 1857, pb. 1902; English translation, 1911).

In 1856, nineteen-year-old Suzannah Thoreson, a young woman of strong character and progressive views, accepted Ibsen's proposal of marriage; they were married on June 18, 1858, nearly a year after Ibsen had left Bergen to become the artistic director of the Christiania Norwegian Theater. Though it was a great success at the Norwegian Theater, his next play, *Hærmændene paa Helgeland* (pr., pb. 1858; *The Vikings at Helgeland*, 1890), could not offset the growing financial difficulties of the the-

ater, which finally had to close down in the summer of 1862. Ibsen's negative views of marriage in *Kjærlighedens komedie* (pb. 1862, pr. 1873; *Love's Comedy*, 1900) stirred up a storm of protest, and not even the success of *Kongsemnerne* (pb. 1863, pr. 1864; *The Pretenders*, 1890), a historical drama of Shakespearean proportions, could rescue him from the desperate financial situation into which he had fallen. Disillusioned by failure in his chosen career, he felt like an outcast. Supported by a state grant for foreign travel, he, his wife, and their young son left Norway in 1864 for what was to be twenty-seven years of self-imposed exile—with only two short visits to his homeland before his return to Christiania in 1891.

The Ibsens settled first in Italy, where they remained for the next four years. The verse drama *Brand* (pb. 1866, pr. 1885; English translation, 1891) proved so successful in book form that it made Ibsen financially independent for the first time in his life. Though less successful with critics than *Brand*, its companion piece, *Peer Gynt* (pb. 1867, pr. 1876; English translation, 1892), quickly went into a second edition. It was first produced at the Christiania Theater in 1876 with a musical suite by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg and has been staged frequently ever since. In 1868, the Ibsen family settled in Dresden, where they remained for nearly seven years, during which time Ibsen wrote *De unges forbund* (pr., pb. 1869; *The League of Youth*, 1890), a five-act political comedy satirizing liberal politicians. Immensely popular in its day, this play has not earned a permanent place in the modern repertory, nor has *Kejser og Galilæer* (pb. 1873, pr. 1896; *Emperor and Galilean*, 1876), a two-part drama in ten acts about the Roman Emperor Julian, who was called Julian the Apostate.

In 1875, Ibsen moved his family to Munich, Germany, where he wrote *Samfundets støtter* (pr., pb. 1877; *The Pillars of Society*, 1880), a play that signaled a new direction in his work. This play and the eleven that followed it all deal with problems in contemporary life. Between 1878 and 1891, the Ibsens divided their time between Munich and Rome with vacations in Berchtesgaden and Gossensass in Tyrol and, in 1885, a summer in Norway. During this period, Ibsen achieved international fame with a series of fascinating, often controversial plays: *Et dukkehjem* (pr., pb. 1879; *A Doll's House*, 1880), *Gengangere* (pb. 1881, pr. 1882; *Ghosts*,

1885), *En folkefiende* (pb. 1882, pr. 1883; *An Enemy of the People*, 1890), all of which have a social emphasis. In the next four plays, *Vildanden* (pb. 1884, pr. 1885; *The Wild Duck*, 1891), *Rosmersholm* (pb. 1886, pr. 1887; English translation, 1889), *Fruen fra havet* (pb. 1888, pr. 1889; *The Lady from the Sea*, 1890), and *Hedda Gabler* (pb. 1890, pr. 1891; English translation, 1891), Ibsen became increasingly interested in exploring the psychological depths of his dramatic figures.

In 1891, Ibsen left Munich to spend the rest of his life in Christiania. His last four plays, *Bygmester solness* (pb. 1892, pr. 1893; *The Master Builder*, 1893), *Lille Eyolf* (pb. 1894, pr. 1895; *Little Eyolf*, 1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (pb. 1896, pr. 1897; English translation, 1897), and *Naar vi døde vaagner* (pb. 1899, pr. 1900; *When We Dead Awaken*, 1900), are deep philosophical meditations on the conflict between life and art. In the spring of 1900, Ibsen became gravely ill; the next year, he suffered his first stroke. In 1903, another stroke broke his health completely. He died on May 23, 1906, in Christiania and was buried with great honor by the Norwegian state.

## ANALYSIS

Ibsen's protagonists generally have great difficulty in coming to terms with the ideas, institutions, and laws that direct their lives. For that reason, they battle for freedom and truth, though their efforts are frequently undermined by the fact that their own past misdeeds threaten to destroy them. This pattern is already evident in *Cataline*, the protagonist of Ibsen's first play. An ardent idealist, *Cataline* is powerless to reform a corrupt society because he is haunted by the ghosts of his own past. The two women in his life, his gentle wife Aurelia and the avenging Furia, represent the opposing forces at war within him. The alternative to active engagement with the forces that limit freedom is aesthetic withdrawal. The conflict between Ibsen's own desire to retreat into aesthetic contemplation and his need to act is clearly expressed in "On the Fells," a poem about a hunter who contemplates life from the heights. Ascent to the mountain top, a common Romantic symbol of artistic detachment, is nearly always connected with the aesthetic view of life in Ibsen's plays.

Many of the concerns of Ibsen's early plays come into sharp focus in the two verse dramas *Brand* and



*Peer Gynt*, both of which raise the question of how one can be true to one's self. Loosely based on some of the ideas of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, *Brand*, with its insistence on total commitment ("all or nothing"), is an existentialist tragedy. Brand is a fiery young pastor who carries Romantic individualism to the extreme. After an unrelenting struggle against "the spirit of compromise," a struggle that costs the lives of his infant son and his wife, he is swallowed up by an avalanche, which reproves him with the words, "He is the God of love." If Brand represents commitment to duty and to a high-minded way of life that kills joy and denies love, *Peer Gynt*, the hero of Ibsen's next play, learns—almost too late—that only by rejecting the self-sufficiency of the romantic individualist and committing oneself to love can one transcend the limits of the self.

The opposition between Brand's self-denial and *Peer*'s self-indulgence is restated in *Emperor and Galilean* as the conflicting claims of Christian asceticism (the Tree of the Cross) and pagan hedonism (the Tree of Knowledge). In this play, the Emperor Julian dreams of effecting a synthesis between these two views of life by establishing a mysterious "third empire." The hope that some such synthesis will open a new path for happiness and self-fulfillment recurs in many of Ibsen's subsequent dramas. *Emperor and Galilean* was Ibsen's last historical play; *Peer Gynt* was his last verse drama. After *The Pillars of Society*, all of Ibsen's plays deal with contemporary life. *The Pillars of Society* is a thesis play designed to show that society is built on rotten foundations. Following the pattern of the popular French "well-made play," Ibsen makes the gradual unveiling of past misdeeds the source of dramatic tension in this play, but instead of trivializing and resolving all conflicts in the last act, he adds psychological depth and social significance to this technique by pressing forward to an unmasking and a confession. A similar pattern underlies all of his subsequent dramas: The protagonist is forced to confront a problem from the past.

In most of these plays, personal conflict is

rooted in ideological differences. Ultraconservative characters, usually businessmen or lawyers, oppose any sort of social change that will jeopardize their wealth or their authority. Their outmoded ideas are challenged by rebellious, idealistic individualists who may be political reformers, artists, or women. The truth-seeking idealists in *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, and *An Enemy of the People* believe that it is their duty to identify and label "lifelies," that is, the evasions and distortions of the truth in the light of which most people lead their lives. Serving as foils to Ibsen's female rebels are a number of female figures for whom ideas or moral issues are less important than security and the opportunity to be devoted wives and mothers. Many of Ibsen's important characters have lost their chance for happiness by marrying for money rather than for love. Others have an unfortunate tendency to misjudge or overestimate the people whom they are trying to reform or to dominate.

Ibsen first began to question the power of the truth to make humanity free in *The Wild Duck*, where he seems to conclude that most people have a very limited capacity for facing the truth and that harmless illusions are much less dangerous than full-blown ideals. In his next three plays, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *Hedda Gabler*, he offers psychological portraits of women whose inner struggles threaten to destroy them. Isolated male figures tend to dominate the plays that he wrote after his return to Norway—*The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*—all of which deal with impotence, old age, and the lack of love. In one way or another, all four of these plays raise once again the question of aesthetic withdrawal, only to show that love, not art, is the only means of self-fulfillment.

More a gadfly than a preacher, Ibsen frequently poses problems without attempting to solve them. The master of the strong curtain, he favors contrapuntal endings: Two opposing views of life collide, leaving motivations and outcomes in doubt. Ibsen believed that the playwright's task was to raise questions, not answer them.

## PEER GYNT

**First produced:** 1876 (first published, 1867;  
English translation, 1892)

**Type of work:** Play

*A romantic dreamer tries to find an empire within himself but finally discovers that his empire really lies in the love of Solveig, the woman who loves him.*

Peer Gynt, the title character, is a man in search of himself. His problem is that he misunderstands “self-realization” and seeks fulfillment in his poetic dreams because he fears life and love. In order to show the full range of his negative development, Ibsen shows Peer first as a feckless young man of twenty, then as a middle-aged tycoon, and finally as a broken old man returning to his native Norway.

As a youth, Peer lives fictional adventures so vividly in his imagination that they almost become his own life experiences. He dreams of being an emperor but is never ready when opportunity knocks. While he has been playing hooky in the uplands, Ingrid of Hegstad, an heiress whom he might have married, has been betrothed to another young man. Looking for trouble, Peer sets off for Hegstad to engage in belated courtship. Among the wedding guests is Solveig, a pure young woman whom Peer instantly loves. When Solveig refuses to dance with him, he gets drunk and steals the bride. Abducting Ingrid makes Peer an outlaw. Though Ingrid is quite willing to marry Peer, he sends her back to her father because he loves Solveig. In what may be a dream sequence, he encounters a woman in green, the daughter of the Troll King, who takes him to her father’s kingdom, where everything is reversed: Black seems white and foul looks pure. Peer is a candidate for the hand of this troll princess, a negative counterpart of Solveig, but in order to win her father’s full approval he must wear a



tail and accept selfishness as a way of life. Peer is quite willing to accept these conditions, until he learns that in doing so he can never return to humanity.

After his narrow escape from the trolls, Peer’s path is blocked by a languid monster called the Boyg, who tells him to “go roundabout.” The Boyg seems to be a portmanteau symbol for everything that prevents Peer from being himself. By having church bells rung, his mother Åse and Solveig—the women who love Peer—manage to save him both from the trolls and the Boyg, yet they cannot save him from himself. What little remains of Åse’s property is seized to compensate Ingrid’s father; yet she gladly suffers for her son. Solveig makes an even bigger sacrifice for Peer: She leaves her beloved family and searches for Peer in his mountain hut. When the troll princess arrives accompanied by their troll son, however, Peer realizes how unworthy he is of Solveig’s love and “goes roundabout,” abandoning her there.

Many years later in North Africa, Peer is a middle-aged millionaire who owes his fortune to all sorts of unprincipled enterprises. Though still apparently human, he has espoused the troll way of life, which he now defines as “the Gyntian self.” Most of the fourth act takes place in a symbolic desert that represents the aridity of this “Gyntian self.” Riding a stolen horse, he encounters a group of Bedouins who take him for a prophet. He falls in love with the exotic dancer Anitra and believes that he is emperor of her thoughts, but she strips him of his rings and clothes and rides off on his horse, abandoning him as he once abandoned Ingrid. While contemplating the Great Sphinx, Peer meets Begriffenfeldt, the mad director of an insane asylum in Cairo. At the asylum, the only place where illusion truly triumphs over reality, the inmates hail Peer as one of them, and Begriffenfeldt crowns him the Emperor of Self.

One brief scene in act 4 shows the faithful Solveig still waiting for Peer’s return. In act 5, the aged and embittered Peer does return to Norway, where everything that he encounters reminds him of his wasted life and points to his impending death. Near his old mountain hut, he hears Solveig singing and realizes that this was where his true empire lay. Yet he is still afraid to face her. Haunted by the emptiness of his stillborn visions, he next encounters the eerie Button Moulder, a mysterious

figure who has been sent to dissolve him, since he has never become the self that he was intended to be. During the final scenes in the play, Ibsen illustrates what “being oneself” really means. Only in the loving arms of Solveig does the dying Peer discover that he has always been himself in her faith, her hope, and her love.

## A DOLL'S HOUSE

**First produced:** *Et dukkehjem*, 1879 (first published, 1879; English translation, 1880)

**Type of work:** Play

*After eight years of marriage, a woman discovers that her husband has never understood her and that marriage has prevented her from becoming herself.*

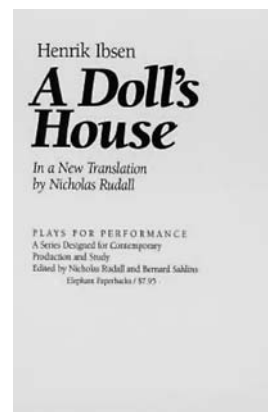
In *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer returns home on Christmas Eve with a Christmas tree that must be hidden from the children until it is trimmed. Indeed, hiding is a major theme in this play. Later in the first act, Nora plays hide-and-seek with her children, and she hides the macaroons that her husband, Torvald, has forbidden her to eat. A more dangerous secret is the fact that, years earlier, she had borrowed a large amount of money to pay for the sojourn in Italy that enabled Torvald to recover from a serious illness. She had borrowed the money illegally from a usurer named Krogstad, and she has secretly been repaying the loan out of the small sums that she is able to earn by copying documents or to save from her household budget. To spare her dying father, who was to have been her cosigner, she even forged his signature on the contract.

That something is wrong with the Helmers' marriage quickly becomes evident in the first scene: Torvald treats Nora more like a favorite child than a wife, and to please him she seems perfectly willing to pretend to be his little “skylark” or his “squirrel.” In other words, she is content to live in a dollhouse. Nora's old school friend, Mrs. Linde, is one of those Ibsen characters who has married for money, not for love. The man she did love—and jilted—was Krogstad. Now a penniless and child-

less widow, she would be very happy to settle down in a dollhouse, but necessity forces her to beg Nora to help her get a job in Torvald's bank.

The plot hinges upon Nora's ignorance of three important facts: Krogstad holds a minor position in the bank of which Torvald is shortly to become manager; Torvald is so embarrassed by Krogstad's presumptuous familiarity that he plans to fire him; and forgery, no matter what the motivation, is a serious crime. Ironically, Torvald fires Krogstad and promises his position to Mrs. Linde. This act prompts Krogstad, who is trying to regain his respectability, to use his knowledge of Nora's forgery to blackmail her: If he loses his job, he will expose her and ruin Torvald. Nora's attempt to persuade Torvald to retain Krogstad precipitates the crisis: Torvald angrily dispatches the letter of dismissal. Her situation worsens when Krogstad delivers an ultimatum and leaves a letter exposing her crime. In desperation, Nora tells Mrs. Linde about the incriminating letter now locked in the mailbox and urges her to use whatever power that she may still have over Krogstad to persuade him to ask for it back unread. By the end of the second act, Nora sees only two possible ways out of her dilemma: Either she will save her beloved husband's reputation by committing suicide, or what she calls “the miracle” will happen, and he will magnanimously assume full responsibility for her crime. In an interview with Krogstad, Mrs. Linde succeeds in reviving his love for her, but she precipitates the final crisis by forbidding him to retract his letter.

Torvald's explosive reaction to Krogstad's letter shows Nora that the man for whom she was willing to sacrifice her life, the man capable of “the miracle,” is a fiction. Discovering that he is self-centered, petty, and unfeeling, she can no longer love him. To challenge his outmoded ideas about marriage, she becomes a rebel and informs him that she is leaving him and the children. When he admonishes her that she is duty bound to remain, she says that she has discovered a higher



duty: her duty to herself. She exits, slamming the door on a bewildered Torvald.

Part of the play's effectiveness on stage depends on Ibsen's suggestive use of props, costumes, and activities (for example, the Christmas tree, the macaroons, the game of hide-and-seek) to illustrate psychological states or to underscore symbolic meanings. In its day, *A Doll's House* was extremely controversial. While many applauded Nora's determination to "be herself," many more condemned her as "unnatural" for deserting her children. More than a century later, the play still raises questions that stimulate readers and spectators.

## AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

**First produced:** *En folkefiende*, 1883 (first published, 1882; English translation, 1890)

**Type of work:** Play

*When a doctor tries to reveal that the water supply for a planned health resort is infected, he is discredited and ostracized because the truth threatens the economic stability of the community.*

In *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Thomas Stockmann is chief medical officer at The Baths, a health resort that is soon to open. Though he first conceived the idea of developing this resort, his older brother, Peter, the mayor of the town, had the business sense and political connections to put it into effect. Ibsen uses the contrast between the two brothers to establish the ideological framework of the play: Thomas is a liberal but impractical idealist; the ultraconservative Peter is motivated chiefly by self-interest and what he calls "the good of the community." Dr. Stockmann's home is a haven for people with liberal ideas: Billing and Hovstad, who edit the town's liberal newspaper; Horster, an open-minded sea captain; and Thomas Stockmann's freethinking daughter, Petra, a schoolteacher. Petra is the first character to raise what is to become the major theme in the play, the "life-lie." When she complains that, at school, she is forced to teach children to believe in lies, Captain Horster encourages her to found a school where children will learn the truth.

The crucial issue in the play emerges when Dr. Stockmann receives a laboratory report confirming his suspicions that the water supply for The Baths is polluted. Jubilant that he has detected the contamination in time to prevent a disastrous epidemic, all the liberals offer their support and declare him a public hero. Peter Stockmann, however, intends to discredit his brother, because the enormous costs of reconstructing the water system spells financial ruin for the investors and, ultimately, for the whole town. Because he has the liberal press and the majority on his side, and, above all, because he is right, Thomas is confident of victory. The battle lines are quickly drawn, but the motives on both sides are mixed. Thomas Stockmann's wife, Katherine, sees the impending fight as a threat to the security of her family. The mayor fears financial ruin and the erosion of his political power. Hovstad is a spineless political opportunist who will espouse any cause that promises to increase his power. Katherine's surrogate father, Morten Kiil, wants revenge for having been voted off the town council. Because Thomas Stockmann and Petra are the only combatants free of self-interest, it proves easy for the mayor to swing the entire community to his side.

Unable to get his message across through the press, Thomas Stockmann calls a public meeting in Captain Horster's house, where he intends to expose the fact that the whole town's prosperity is rooted in a lie. His opponents take charge of the meeting, however, and rule all discussion of The Baths out of order. Goaded to fury, he abandons his intended subject and develops the symbolic significance of the situation: The town's spiritual sources are polluted, and the whole civic community is built over a cesspool of lies. The authorities may be stupid and inflexible, but the worst enemy of truth and freedom is the majority. He launches into a diatribe against the whole notion of a democratic society. The majority is always wrong, he claims, because most people are fools, too lazy to think for themselves and therefore easily led by demagogues. Truth is relative and always changing; by the time that truths filter down to the majority, they are so outdated that they can hardly be distinguished from lies. One such lie is that the common herd has the same right to criticize, govern, and counsel as the few intellectuals. The elitism and incipient racism of his remarks about

the relation between class and intelligence so incense the crowd that he is voted “an enemy of the people.”

The hostility of the mob does not stop with a vote of censure; the Stockmann family is assaulted on every front. The mayor and his supporters visit Thomas Stockmann and try to appeal to his self-interest in the hope of getting him to retract his report on the pollution at The Baths. The final test comes when old Morten Kiil informs him that all the money that he would have left to Katherine’s children is invested in The Baths and will be lost unless he says he was mistaken about the contamination. All these threats to his integrity convince Thomas Stockmann to abandon his plan to take his family to the United States. He realizes that he must stay in Norway and fight. He and Petra vow to open a school in Horster’s house, where they will try to train the “mongrels” to become decent and independent-minded people.

One problem that arises in interpreting this play stems from the disparity between Thomas Stockmann’s facts, which are correct, and his opinions, some of which are indeed questionable. He is frequently ridiculous, and his elitism (his talk of “mongrel” people) clashes sharply with the progressive views that he claims to cherish. Ibsen apparently undermines his protagonist in this manner because there is no reasonable spokesman for the other points of view. In adapting this play for the American stage, American playwright Arthur Miller eliminated Thomas Stockmann’s disagreeable or ridiculous traits, as well as his “fascistic” opinions.

## HEDDA GABLER

**First produced:** 1891 (first published, 1890; English translation, 1891)

**Type of work:** Play

*An unsuccessful attempt to shape the destiny of the man whom she once loved deprives a bored aristocratic lady of her last remaining sense of freedom.*

While the familiar Ibsenian patterns remain intact in *Hedda Gabler*, the conflict is no longer rooted

in ideology. Though she loved the glamorous and dissolute Eilert Løvborg, fear of scandal and of her own repressed sexuality prevented Hedda Gabler from giving her love free rein. As a last resort, she has married George Tesman, a humdrum, middle-class historian, whom she does not love. While George is astonished that he has had the good fortune to marry the daughter of the late General Gabler, Hedda is despondent to find herself trapped in the hopelessly bourgeois Tesman family. George and Hedda both have returned from their long wedding trip with expectations: George fully expects to be appointed to a professorship, and Hedda, much to her dismay, is expecting Tesman’s child. George has assumed that the appointment will automatically be his, because Eilert Løvborg, his only serious rival, has long suffered from acute alcoholism. He soon learns, however, that Eilert has stopped drinking and has published a very successful book. He is not aware, however, that Eilert is still deeply in love with Hedda.

Eilert has recently completed another book, which promises to be his masterpiece. When Thea Elvsted, the wife of Eilert’s former employer, beseeches Tesman to keep an eye on Eilert because she fears that he may start drinking again, Hedda is intrigued. Without difficulty, she gets Thea to admit that, though she has managed to reform Eilert, she has never been able to win his love because he is still haunted by the shadow of another woman. Thea is unaware that Hedda is that woman, and Hedda is extremely gratified to learn that she may still exercise great power over Eilert. She puts this power to the test when she successfully tempts him to take a drink and then to accompany George to a party. Hedda wants to shape Eilert’s destiny by freeing him from fear of alcoholism. Though she assures Thea that he will return “with vine leaves in his hair,” by which she means that his debauchery will have been translated into Dionysian creativity, she is also aware that he may instead succumb to his weakness. Either way, she will have gained control over him.

Unable to control himself, Eilert becomes so drunk at the party that he loses the manuscript of his new book. Tesman, who finds it, entrusts it to Hedda for safekeeping. When the distraught Eilert enters near the end of act 3, he tells Hedda and Thea that he has destroyed the manuscript. Thea, who regards this book as her and Eilert’s “spiritual



child,” is crushed. After Thea’s departure, Eilert confesses to Hedda that he dared not tell her that he had simply lost “their child,” and he intimates that he intends to “end it all” as soon as possible. Firmly believing that his sense of honor will not allow him to live with his failure to master his weakness, Hedda gives him one of her father’s dueling pistols and tells him to “do it beautifully.” After he leaves, she gleefully burns Eilert’s and Thea’s “child.”

Though the first account of Eilert’s death suggests that he has fulfilled Hedda’s expectations, the audience subsequently learns that he has not committed suicide at all. In fact, he has been fatally shot by accident in a brothel, where he was raving about “a lost child.” Hedda’s failure to shape his destiny brings her face-to-face with her own failure to achieve selfhood. The final degradation occurs when Judge Brack, who recognized the gun that killed Eilert as one of General Gabler’s pistols, intimates that the price of his silence is Hedda’s agreement to become his mistress. This final loss of freedom seems to motivate her to shape her own destiny. While Thea and George are patiently work-

ing at the task of reconstructing Eilert’s lost book from notes that Thea has kept, Hedda goes into the adjacent room and shoots herself in the temple.

## SUMMARY

Henrik Ibsen’s impeccable craftsmanship and his deep understanding of human psychology place him in the first rank of dramatists. His plays complement and correct one another in a dialectical manner. Though some of the ideas in the plays are now dated, he continues to hold the stage because of the vitality of his characters. By linking the dramatic device of gradual revelation of the past with the “ghosts” in the past lives of his characters, he found a way to make psychological development his main subject. In skillfully exploiting the relations between his characters and their environment, he used sets and props to suggest a psychological complexity usually considered beyond the scope of the theater. By means of these and other reforms of tired dramatic conventions, Ibsen remade the drama.

Barry Jacobs

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- In what ways did Henrik Ibsen forge a remarkably effective preparation for his career?
- Which accounts for the fact that Ibsen wrote most of his best-known plays while living in Munich and Rome: frustration, a perspective gained by being away, an escape from “the ghosts of the past,” or some other factor?
- Was Ibsen a champion of the rebel or an admirer of just a selection of rebellious characteristics?
- Show how the structure of Ibsen's plays demonstrates his correctness in choosing the drama rather than narrative art.
- In *Hedda Gabler*, what is the significance of the oft-repeated phrase about vine leaves in Eilert's hair?
- What does it mean that Ibsen's plays “complement and correct one another in a dialectical manner”?
- The conflict in *An Enemy of the People* seems very relevant today. Would it have been even more so then if Ibsen had substantiated more effectively the opposition to Dr. Stockmann?

# EUGÈNE IONESCO

**Born:** Slatina, Romania  
November 26, 1909

**Died:** Paris, France  
March 28, 1994

*Hailed as one of the most important playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd and one of its leading defenders, Ionesco wrote plays that applied surrealist techniques to the language and the daily life of their characters in order to express his views on the human condition.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Eugène Ionesco (ee-uh-NEHS-koh) was born in Slatina, Romania, on November 26, 1909. His father, also named Eugène Ionesco, was Romanian, and his mother, Marie-Thérèse Icard Ionesco, was French. The family moved to Paris in 1911. Young Eugène lived there with his mother and his sister until 1922, when his father, who had returned to Romania several years earlier, demanded that his children be sent to him. Eugène thus became a youngster with two countries. He later pointed to that experience as a source of his skepticism because after being taught in France that French was the most beautiful language in the world and the French people were the most courageous, he learned in Bucharest that Romanian was the most beautiful language in the world and the Romanian people were the most courageous.

Ionesco majored in French at the University of Bucharest. He published literary articles and a collection of verses. He married Rodica Burileanu and made a living teaching French. In 1938, he received a scholarship to travel to France so he could write a thesis on French poetry. The thesis was never completed. When he returned to Romania, the future author of *Rhinocéros* (pb. 1959, pr. 1960; *Rhinoceros*, 1959) was horrified by the rise of fascism. He and Rodica returned to France in 1942. They settled in Paris, where Ionesco worked for a publishing firm. Their only child, Marie-France, was born in 1944.

His first play, *La Cantatrice chauve* (pr. 1950, pb. 1954; *The Bald Soprano*, 1956), was a one-act “anti-play” inspired by an English-language instruction

manual. There was no soprano in the play, and nobody was bald. The play was appreciated by only a select few who saw it as a surrealist work. The next play, *La Leçon* (pr. 1951, pb. 1954; *The Lesson*, 1955), was about a real lesson taught by a domineering professor who overwhelms and kills his young pupil. *Les Chaises* (pr. 1952, pb. 1954; *The Chairs*, 1958), a “tragic farce” in which an old couple fills the last hours of their lives with a multitude of imaginary friends and admirers, was better received by the critics. Ionesco’s early plays also include *Jacques: Ou, La Soumission* (pb. 1954, pr. 1955; *Jack: Or, The Submission*, 1958), *L’Avenir est dans les œufs: Ou, Il faut de tout pour faire un monde* (pr. 1953, pb. 1958; *The Future Is in Eggs: Or, It Takes All Sorts to Make a World*, 1960), and a series of short sketches.

Ionesco, who had played with language and with the mechanics of theater, was now in search of a visual language, more direct and stronger than words. He intensified his early plays to give movement, space, and objects their greatest impact. The results were *Victimes du devoir* (pr. 1953, pb. 1954; *Victims of Duty*, 1958) and *Amédée: Ou, Comment s’en débarrasser* (pr., pb., 1954; *Amédée: Or, How to Get Rid of It*, 1955). *Amédée* was Ionesco’s first three-act play. It takes place in an ordinary Parisian apartment in which a corpse, who grows to gigantic proportions, represents, among other things, Amédée’s dead creative instinct. In 1954, Gallimard, one of the most distinguished French publishers, published the first volume of Ionesco’s theatrical works.

A character named Bérenger appeared for the first time in *Tueur sans gages* (pr., pb. 1958; *The Killer*, 1960). Bérenger continued to be the central

figure in the subsequent plays *Rhinoceros*, *Le Piéton de l'air* (pr. 1962, pb. 1963; *A Stroll in the Air*, 1964), and *Le Roi se meurt* (pr. 1962, pb. 1963; *Exit the King*, 1963). In these plays, Béranger represents a part of Ionesco. When Béranger in *Rhinoceros* resists the rise of fanaticism represented by the beasts that invade a peaceful town, he is the part of Ionesco common to people of goodwill and sturdy personality. When Béranger is faced with death in *Exit the King*, he is the part of Ionesco common to all human beings. Béranger, however, is also a deeply intimate part of his creator when, as a French writer vacationing in England, he flies above the sunny countryside in *A Stroll in the Air*.

In *Rhinoceros*, the symbolism of the rhinoceros—accessible, coherent, and powerful—established Ionesco as a world famous dramatic author. The play was first performed in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1959, in Paris and London in 1960, and in New York in 1961. As the first volume of his theatrical works was published in England and the second volume appeared in Paris, Ionesco's fame was confirmed. In response to those critics who denounced him as self-centered, Ionesco argued that the role of the playwright is not to defend any particular ideology but rather to provide a personal testimony of the human experience.

Ionesco continued to write short sketches, such as *Délire à deux* (pr. 1962, pb. 1963; *Frenzy for Two or More*, 1965) and *Jeux de massacre* (pr., pb. 1970; *Killing Game*, 1974; also pb. as *Wipe-out Games*, 1970). His self-discovery continued in more extensive works: *La Soif et la faim* (pr. 1964, pb. 1966; *Hunger and Thirst*, 1968), *L'Homme aux valises* (pr., pb. 1975; *Man with Bags*, 1977), and *Voyages chez les morts: Ou, Thèmes et variations* (pb. 1981; *Journeys Among the Dead: Themes and Variations*, 1985). These works, intensely autobiographical and sometimes obscure, have not achieved the success of Ionesco's earlier ones.

Ionesco also wrote a novel, a collection of short stories, screenplays, and numerous articles. His *Journal en miettes* (1967; *Fragments of a Journal*, 1968) and *Présent passé passé présent* (1968; *Present Past Past Present*, 1972) contain autobiographical material. Some of his writings on avant-garde theater have been collected in *Notes et contre-notes* (1962; *Notes and Counter-Notes*, 1964).

Ionesco was awarded the Grand Prize for Theater by the Société des Auteurs, and in 1971 he was

admitted to the prestigious Académie Française. Gallimard added his *Théâtre complet* (complete plays) to its exclusive Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series in 1991. In 2007, *The Bald Soprano* had been running uninterruptedly in Paris at the tiny La Huchette Theater for fifty-five years.

## ANALYSIS

Ionesco's bilingualism might have contributed to his mistrust of language. It distanced him from the French he used in his literary work and prompted him to find the incongruities that language contains. *The Bald Soprano* introduced the consequences of this mistrust: a language of truisms, clichés, changes of subjects, word associations, sound associations, and other plays on words, all spoken with a rhythm that can accelerate and become a cacophony or a verbal flight devoid of any sense. Ionesco spent the next thirty years experimenting with meaningless language. In his last play, *Journeys Among the Dead*, he intuited that such language is caused either by an exclusive reliance on rationality, as exemplified by the Logician in *Rhinoceros*, or, at the opposite end, a predominance of emotions that the speaker does not understand, as exemplified by the Smiths and the Martins of *The Bald Soprano*.

Meaningless language is either the talk of consciousness alone or the talk of the unconscious alone. Meaningful language comes from an integrated psyche. It has the authenticity of emotions, but it is shaped by consciousness and becomes comprehensible. The coherence of language is, therefore, closely tied to self-knowledge. For Ionesco, the slow process that leads to this intuition about language and consciousness is introspective. This introspection is explicit in *Victims of Duty*. In that play, a policeman enters a Parisian apartment and interrogates Choubert, its occupant. His pressing questions change into a brutal interrogation, and the policeman forces Choubert to look back at his past. As Choubert, a victim of duty, develops an image of descent into oneself, painful memories and strange experiences emerge from his unconscious. He dies without making sense of the elements he has uncovered.

Ionesco will pursue his search. In *Hunger and Thirst*, Jean, his protagonist, is the explorer of vast spaces, unnamed because the physical journey is also an examination of oneself and the human con-

dition. As indicated by their titles, the theme of the journey invades two of his later plays, *Man with Bags* and *Journeys Among the Dead*. *Exit the King* is also a journey and deals with the universal destination of death.

The unconscious is experienced as a foreign country in *A Stroll in the Air*. In this play, England's charming countryside at first seems to welcome a French writer—as such, a double of Ionesco—but the country later changes into the setting of terrifying nightmares. Even in their own country, Ionesco's characters feel like foreigners to their surroundings and to themselves. Mr. Martin, unaware of the reasons that made him marry his wife, needs a long, logical deduction to recognize her. The town residents in *Rhinoceros* see a beast springing out of themselves.

Ionesco's theater deals with exterior realities: the bourgeois routine of the Smiths, the empty life of an old couple, the boring existence of Bérenger, the agony of the king, and many other topics, such as education (*The Lesson*), family life (*Jack: Or, The Submission*), conjugal life (*Frenzy for Two or More*), urban life (*The Killer*), politics (*Le Maître*, pr. 1953, pb. 1958; *The Leader*, 1960), revolution (*Ce formidable bordel*, pr., pb. 1973; *A Hell of a Mess*, 1975), and tyranny (*Man with Bags*). Beyond this multiplicity of topics lies the search for the inner life of the protagonist, the human being in general, and the author himself. In *Frenzy for Two or More*, the metaphorical war between a man and his wife coincides with a real war that destroys the city. Deadly projectiles explode around the couple, but these projectiles change into ludicrous objects—broken cups, fragments of pipes, doll heads—as the hostile partners briefly remember their past and attempt to communicate. When inner life is restored, the internal war ceases and harmony might have a chance in the life of the couple, as well as in the city.

The eruption of strange elements in a banal setting is rarely as clear as it is in *Frenzy for Two or More*. It is nevertheless frequent in Ionesco's work: The clock in the Smiths' living room strikes seventeen times as Mrs. Smith announces that it is nine o'clock, Jack's fiancée has three noses, and a corpse expands in Amédée's bedroom while mushrooms grow in his living room. Sometimes, the effect is intensified by the proliferation of the objects: a young couple produces hundreds of eggs in *The Future Is in Eggs*; dozens of cups are piled up in

*Victims of Duty*; a multitude of rhinoceroses invade a town in *Rhinoceros*; and pieces of furniture fill an apartment, a building, a street, and the entire city in *Le Nouveau Locataire* (pr. 1955, pb. 1958; *The New Tenant*, 1956). There is some logic in the last example, since an apartment is being furnished. This logic, however, is eliminated by the proportions of the event—the city is paralyzed. Ionesco applies the same mechanism when he creates the accumulation of chairs in *The Chairs* or the multiplication of murders in *The Killer*.

The protagonists that produce eggs or carry chairs are led by internal forces, which they ignore and therefore cannot control. They behave like automatons. Ionesco has many ways of making puppets out of his characters. Their mechanical language and the proliferation of objects in their hands, or around them, are two of these methods; others are caricature and distancing. The old woman who raises her petticoats in the hope of looking sexy in *The Chairs*, and the king responsible for countless massacres who cries like a child in *Exit the King* are examples of caricatures. In *Victims of Duty*, Ionesco's first clearly introspective play, Choubert's descent into himself is presented as a show within the show, thus reducing the impact of the undertaking.

In Ionesco's theater, topics are serious, such as the ideological takeover of a town, or death, but they are treated lightly. Language and action, pushed to extremes, deprive the protagonists of a full credibility and plunge them into the absurd, yet they remain tragic in their human implications.

## THE BALD SOPRANO

**First produced:** *La Cantatrice chauve*, 1950  
(first published, 1954; English  
translation, 1956)

**Type of work:** Play

*An English couple engages in small talk during an evening at home. They are visited by another couple and the Fire Chief.*

The title of a play usually permits one to anticipate its content. However, in *The Bald Soprano*, nobody sings and no head is bald. In most plays, words are chosen to make the strongest possible impact.



In *The Bald Soprano*, language flows independently from meaning. A play has a plot and at times subplots. *The Bald Soprano* does not. It is subtitled an “anti-play,” and that is true.

The scene is the English living room of an English couple, the Smiths. Mr. Smith reads the newspaper. Mrs. Smith comments on the dinner they just had, as if her husband had not been there; she praises yogurt, which is good for the stomach, “appendicitis, and apotheosis.” Mr. Smith remarks that a good doctor must die with his patient. He announces the death of Bobby Watson; the same name, repeated thirty times, is applied to all the members of Bobby’s extended family.

The rest of the play is in keeping with this introductory segment. Mary, the maid, introduces the Martins. A long conversation, punctuated by “What a coincidence!,” permits the Martins to deduce that the Smiths are husband and wife. The doorbell rings three times. Nobody is there when Mrs. Smith opens the door. She concludes that every time the doorbell rings, there is nobody there. When Mr. Smith opens the door, the Fire Chief enters; he is in search of fires to extinguish. Various fables are told. Ambiguous statements about fire are made, while Mary throws herself on the Fire Chief. Clichés and false proverbs accumulate at an increasing pace, until the characters scream onomatopoeic words at each other. The noise stops; the lights turn off. When they come back on, the Martins are seated like the Smiths were in the first scene; they repeat the same sentences. The curtain falls.

The absurd language of the play was inspired years earlier, when Ionesco was in Romania and read the self-taught lessons in an English manual in which, for example, one learns the use of prepositions by discovering that the ceiling is above, the walls around, and the floor under. Such sentences stimulated Ionesco’s creativity. The title of the play was determined by chance. During a rehearsal, an actor erroneously replaced the banal expression “the blond teacher” contained in the script with

the unexpected “the bald soprano.” The error fit well with Ionesco’s intentions and he adopted it; it fit so well, in fact, that the bald soprano, absent from the first play, appears as a singing bald English girl in *A Stroll in the Air*; the other play that Ionesco situated in England.

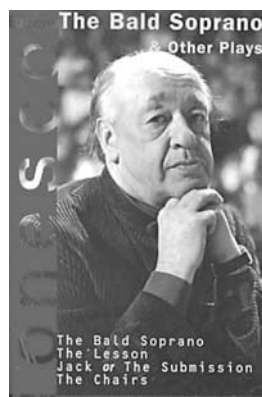
The surprise of the audience who attended the first performances of *The Bald Soprano* is understandable. Since then, however, the play has become the prototype of what was later called the Theater of the Absurd. It is the striking integration of the techniques that Ionesco discovered in surrealist poetry, with his own vision of literature.

## THE CHAIRS

**First produced:** *Les Chaises*, 1952 (first published, 1954; English translation, 1958)

**Type of work:** Play

*An old couple prepares to deliver a message for posterity. The numerous chairs they bring to the stage to accommodate the audience remain empty.*



*The Chairs* is a one-act tragic farce. A ninety-five-year-old man and his ninety-four-year-old wife live isolated on an island. They interminably reminisce, joke, and quarrel. He plans to share his life experience with posterity and has invited a large audience to hear the orator who will speak on his behalf. It would be touching if their dialogue were meaningful, but disconnected from reality, past or present, it often derails into a mechanical blurb.

The doorbell rings, and the old man hobbles to the door. He welcomes the first guest, but the Lady is invisible. The old people are excitedly talking to no one; the chair they offer to the visitor remains empty. The episode repeats itself again and again, with the old couple bringing chairs from the wings faster and faster. This multiplication of chairs is a theatrical miracle—the striking image of void. It culminates with the invisible Emperor’s arrival. The orator, who is a real body, is ready to speak. He reaches the dais and salutes the invisible crowd. The old woman sobs, her husband trembles with emotion; they shout “Long live the Emperor,” and throw themselves out of two symmetrical windows. The orator, who has remained impassive during

the double suicide, coughs, groans, and utters his message—a few guttural sounds. The expected speech is as void as the chairs.

*The Chairs* portrays the loneliness of the elderly. Their situation borders on tragic. They have no descendant, and the offspring that the woman describes is too perfect to be true. As for the man, the apotheosis that he wants is so inflated that it can only blow up. Their conduct neutralizes the empathy they could inspire. The man is ridiculously dependent on his wife; the woman shamefully tries to be sexy. They appear to be close at first, but when the visitors arrive they go their own way, tell contradictory stories, or even lies, and flirt with the guests. Their marriage is an appearance. It is at the same moment, but separately, that they plunge to their deaths.

Ionesco progressively makes puppets out of them. He places in their mouths a language so meaningless that, in extreme cases, it is a verbal flight in which words are associated by sound rather than by meaning. The frantic and shaky transportation of chairs becomes as mechanical as the couple's language. It is a proliferation of objects without a purpose, the same concept that Ionesco used for the accumulation of eggs in *The Future Is in Eggs*. Ionesco's puppets, however, recover some dignity as representatives of the human condition. In the face of death, human activities become irrelevant. Ionesco's tragic farce is a superb expression of the insignificance of life.

## RHINOCEROS

**First produced:** 1959 as *Die Nashörner*; 1960 as *Rhinocéros* (first published, 1959, as *Rhinocéros*; English translation, 1959)

**Type of work:** Play

*A rhinoceros charges through a peaceful town. Soon most residents are attracted by the appeal of bestiality and change into rhinoceroses. Only Bérenger refuses to capitulate.*

The play begins as Bérenger and other patrons are having a drink at an outdoor café. A rhinoceros charges down the street. The characters remark about this strange incident, but soon the initial sur-

prise wears off. The same reaction is repeated when another animal gallops through the street from the opposite direction.

Act 2 begins in the office where Bérenger works. His colleagues are discussing the newspaper account of the animal incident. Mrs. Boeuf rushes in and announces that a rhinoceros has chased her and realizes that it is Mr. Boeuf transformed. Bérenger then visits his friend John, who defends the rhinoceroses, eventually turns into one, and attempts to run Bérenger down.

In act 3, Dudard, one of Bérenger's colleagues, explains the motives of the rhinoceroses, making it sound like Bérenger, who does not share his views, is abnormal. Daisy, Bérenger's girlfriend, informs him that Botard, who had supported Bérenger's views, has joined the animals' ranks. Bérenger receives only excuses and protests when he rallies the others against the bestiality that has overcome the town. Daisy herself fails to hear him; she gives in to the attraction of the herd and leaves the stage to metamorphose. Bérenger misses the force that belonging to a community provides, but he stands his ground, alone and miserable, in his humanity.

A few elements of fantasy appear in the play; for example, Mr. "Boeuf" means Mr. "Ox," and Jean plays an illusionist. However, the play is simple, even traditional, in its structure. This simplicity gives more force to the disturbing presence of beasts in an urban environment. The metamorphosis of the residents reminds one of Franz Kafka's short story *Die Verwandlung* (1915; *The Metamorphosis*, 1936). However, where Kafka's giant bug causes repulsion, Ionesco's "rhinocerotitis" is seductive. The rhinoceroses' trumpeting is perceived as music, and they are said to be as beautiful as gods.

The play represents the mindless following of others in order to be like the herd; the same appearance, the same aspirations, the same thoughts, overtake the community and provide to each individual a cozy sense of closeness. Ionesco was in-



spired to write *Rhinoceros* by the rise of fascism in Romania in the late 1930's, but he purposely refused to give a name to his herd. The play applies to fascism, Stalinism, and all the other political or religious doctrines that justify arbitrary violence in the name of an ideal. The French intelligentsia, who at the time inclined to the Left, highly approved of *Rhinoceros*. Its author was invited into their circle, but Ionesco, then and later, refused any affiliation.

The rhinoceros, enormous and seductive because of its might, blindly charging down a street, trampling kittens, destroying staircases and piercing walls, is a powerful symbol of the danger of ideologies when they turn into fanaticism. It is still a valid symbol in the twenty-first century, whether it applies to the relatively harmless dictatorship of fashion, the excesses of well-intentioned religious groups, the tyranny of political leaders, or the horrors of terrorism.

## EXIT THE KING

**First produced:** *Le Roi se meurt*, 1962 (first published, 1963; English translation, 1963)

**Type of work:** Play

*This play is the simplest and most explicit of Ionesco's works. It portrays the slow acceptance of death by King Bérenger the First.*

*Exit the King* is one long, uninterrupted scene. The kingdom has been deteriorating for some time: the heater does not work, the cows do not produce milk, and the sun is late. Queen Marguerite and the Doctor understand what is coming. They believe that they must inform the King and help him prepare for death. Queen Marie, the King's second and dearest wife, wants to protect him from the truth. Encouraged by Marie, Bérenger first denies that his death is imminent, but he must progressively face the evidence. The physician coldly presents the medical facts.

Marguerite expects the King to live his death as a "ceremony." Marie comforts and cajoles him. In a progression as precise as the various stages described by modern physicians who study the process of dying, Bérenger denies the possibility of his demise, rebels, bargains, despairs, and finally re-

signs himself to it. As he weakens and loses control, his entourage vanishes. Only Queen Marguerite remains at his side. Bérenger has ceased his struggle. He looks inside; he is relieved of the metaphorical weights he carried through life. One limb, one finger at a time, he gives himself up to the Divinity of Death represented by Marguerite. She disappears, leaving the King on his throne, as still as a statue. The scenery fades away, a gray light invades the stage, and everything vanishes in a sort of mist.

Why choose a king to describe the dying process? Because to be born and to live is to take possession of the world. To die is to lose that grip, just as Bérenger witnesses the disappearance of his entourage, his kingdom, and everything else. The secondary reason is a traditional one: Being a king enlarges the character and gives him the nobility of a new King Lear. At times, Bérenger concentrates in himself the entire history of humanity; he invented fire as well as atomic fission. At other times, he is the universe itself, the light and the clouds, as if Ionesco were prophesying the end of the world.

In Ionesco's theater, tragedy and comedy are inseparable. His tragic hero is also a mediocre bourgeois who forgets to wear his slippers. He is even a sadistic and cowardly puppet in the tradition that produced Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (wr. 1888, pr., pb. 1896; English translation, 1951). Some scenes in which Bérenger is pulled between the contradictory commands of his entourage are performed in a slapstick style. Frequent references are made to the fact that the King's death is the subject of a play that will end shortly. These references function on two levels. From a tragic perspective, they remind the audience that the process leading to death is inexorable. In a comic perspective, they say that, in this case at least, it will only be the end of a puppet show.

## SUMMARY

Eugène Ionesco's theater carries elements of daily life to the extreme, gives them a subversive and comical dimension, and expresses the tragedy of the human condition with a wide, liberating laugh. In creating this work, Ionesco played a central role in the invention of a new kind of theater, a theater capable of reflecting the irrationality of humans and the fragility of their world. His plays seemed shocking at the time; they are now classics of the twentieth century.

Gisele C. Feal

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What was Eugène Ionesco's attitude toward politics?
- How did Ionesco's bicultural background influence his work?
- Comment on the use of farce in Ionesco's work.
- *The Bald Soprano* starts as an antiplay. However, its rhythm increases into a dramatic conflict. Study this progression.
- Comment on the respective roles of the Emperor and the orator in *The Chairs*.
- What would you consider the "rhinocerotitis" of our contemporary world? Compare it to *Rhinoceros*.
- Contrast the roles of Queen Marie and Queen Marguerite in *Exit the King*.
- Compare *Exit the King* to another writer's work that is also centered on death.

RADIO PLAY:

*Le Salon de l'automobile*, 1952 (*The Motor Show*, 1963)

SCREENPLAY:

*La Vase*, 1970 (*The Mire*, 1973)

LONG FICTION:

*Le Solitaire*, 1973 (*The Hermit*, 1974)

SHORT FICTION:

*La Photo du colonel*, 1962 (*The Colonel's Photograph*, 1967)

NONFICTION:

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## CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

**Born:** High Lane, Cheshire, England

August 26, 1904

**Died:** Santa Monica, California

January 4, 1986

*Considered one of the finest English novelists of his talented generation, Isherwood wrote his best work on life in Berlin during the last days of the Weimar Republic.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Christopher William Bradshaw-Isherwood was born in High Lane, Cheshire, England, on August 26, 1904. His family, owners of a large Elizabethan mansion, was well established in the upper-middle class of England, and his father, Francis Bradshaw-Isherwood, rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the military before his death in action during World War I. His mother's name was Kathleen Machell-Smith. Isherwood's early education, first at St. Edmund's School and then at Repton School, was significant largely for the friendships that he formed with W. H. Auden and Edward Upward—both of whom would become, like Isherwood, important literary figures in the 1930's. They remained friends for life, most intensely during their Cambridge years. Isherwood wrote poetry and an unpublished novel while at Cambridge; eventually deciding on literature as a career, he purposely failed examinations and subsequently left the university without a degree. While writing *All the Conspirators* (1928), he tutored students and served as secretary to the Mangeot family. After a brief stint as a medical student, he left England to join Auden in Berlin.

The move to Berlin was the most significant of Isherwood's early life. From 1929 to 1933, Isherwood taught English and lived a marginal exist-

tence in a city that was bordering on moral and political chaos. In Berlin, he met many people, English and German, who were to serve as models for the characters in his major works. *The Memorial: Portrait of a Family* (1932), his second novel, was published while he was a resident in Berlin. His "Berlin stories" were published several years after he had left the German capital because of the Nazi takeover: *The Last of Mr. Norris* appeared in 1935; *Goodbye to Berlin*, in 1939. In between the two Berlin novels, Isherwood collaborated with Auden on two plays, *The Dog Beneath the Skin: Or, Where Is Francis?* (pb. 1935, pr. 1936) and *The Ascent of F6* (pb. 1936, pr. 1937), both influenced by German expressionist theater. In 1938, soon after the publication of Isherwood's first autobiography, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (1938), he and Auden traveled to China to report on the outbreak of war there. The result of this journey was another collaboration with Auden, the excellent travel book *Journey to a War* (1939).

At the beginning of 1939, Isherwood left Europe for good and settled in California, which was to be his permanent residence until his death. The move to the United States coincides with a transition in both his life and his work and thus serves as a convenient dividing line in Isherwood's biography. One of the important results of this move was Isherwood's introduction to another British writer, Aldous Huxley, who prompted a profound change in Isherwood's religious life by introducing him to the Indian guru Swami Prabhavananda. Isherwood subsequently became a pacifist and a Vedantist.

A growing interest in Hindu philosophy occupied much of his time in the 1940's. He was the editor of the magazine *Vedanta and the West*, and along with Prabhavananda translated the Hindu religious text *Bhagavad Gītā* (1944). Isherwood was sometimes criticized for his apparent withdrawal from the conflicts confronting his native country. His move to the United States and preoccupation with Hinduism were considered the acts of an escapist. Isherwood remained faithful to the pacifist cause, however, even spending two years working for the American Friends Service Committee hostel for refugees in Pennsylvania.

The year 1945 saw the publication of Isherwood's much-admired novel *Prater Violet*. He also worked for several Hollywood studios during these years, including Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Warner Bros. Finally, in 1946 he became a citizen of the United States.

In the late 1940's, Isherwood traveled through South America; the result of the journey was his second travel book, *The Condor and the Cows: A South American Travel-Diary* (1949). Although he was a well-established writer by this time—his South America book had been commissioned, for example—he remained relatively unknown outside a small group of interested critics and devoted readers. In 1951, however, John Van Druten's play *I Am a Camera* (1951), based on *Goodbye to Berlin*, was performed in New York. The success of the play, and later of the 1968 Broadway musical version and 1972 film *Cabaret*, ensured renown for the novelist.

In the 1950's, Isherwood continued to work on translations of Hindu writings, including *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (1953). Additionally, he published his own work, the novel *The World in the Evening*, in 1954. In 1959, he began teaching as a guest professor at Los Angeles State College. Throughout the 1960's, Isherwood received appointments at California universities, including the University of California at Los Angeles, at Riverside, and at Santa Barbara. Three works appeared in these years: *Down There on a Visit* (1962), *A Single Man* (1964), and *A Meeting by the River* (1967).

In the final years of his life, Isherwood devoted himself to autobiography and to arguing for the acceptance by society of homosexuality. The two efforts are combined in his last great work, *Christopher and His Kind, 1929-1939* (1976), a frank account of

his own homosexual awakening. Christopher Isherwood died on January 4, 1986, in Santa Monica, California.

## ANALYSIS

The aspect of Isherwood's writing that is most immediately apparent is the extent to which his fiction is all but inseparable from his autobiography. For Isherwood, the process of creation began with his own experience and observation. While he certainly invented material, even those inventions tend to be but slight variations of his actual experiences. In some of his best work, most notably *The Last of Mr. Norris* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, Isherwood uses his own name or his middle names for the protagonist.

That noted, it must also be recognized that the "Isherwood" or "Bradshaw" of the novels is never a perfectly autobiographical presentation of the author. There are significant differences, and Isherwood does not hesitate to assume a mask, even if the voice remains his. There is, for example, an aloofness and ingenuousness to the narrator that is not characteristic of Isherwood himself. The boundaries are so imprecise in Isherwood's work, however, that many readers have confused the writer and the protagonist. Isherwood has even been criticized for some of the faults that he purposely assigned to his fictional self. Likewise, his best work has sometimes been mistaken for mere journal or diary extracts strung together in a loose framework.

The more general opinion, however, is that Isherwood is one of the best writers of his generation. Isherwood stands out in part because of the lucidity and ease of his style. Along with novelist and essayist George Orwell, he is representative of the power that a colloquial or vernacular style can achieve. It was a style that he developed after early experimentation with a prose derived from modernist novelists such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. E. M. Forster was particularly influential in the career of the young Isherwood. Consequently, his early novels, such as *All the Conspirators* and *The Memorial*, rely on a tone of ironic understatement by which significant events are treated only slightly while trivial events are presented in full detail. Isherwood referred to this characteristic as the "tea-table technique"; that is, subjects worthy only of the tea table receive undue attention. The inten-

tion is entirely ironic. For example, Isherwood might juxtapose memories of a dead husband with anxieties over cooking and shopping, thus highlighting for the reader the way in which a fragmented postwar society has imposed triviality and isolation on its members.

Though Forster remained the most important influence in his literary career, Isherwood abandoned the techniques of modernism in favor of a more restrained and pared-down realism. Starting with *The Last of Mr. Norris*, he avoided the complexities of a fragmented story line and a jumbled chronology, along with the interior monologue of his earlier novels. Bradshaw's account of his encounters with the strange Mr. Norris is straightforward and colloquial, yet the simple diction conceals a sense of incongruity that can only be called ironic. There is always the slightest sense of mockery and denigration in Isherwood's subtle prose. Indeed, the prose is so subtle that the reader must avoid assuming, mistakenly, that the narrator is merely a neutral or transparent observer—the camera to which the narrator compares himself in *Goodbye to Berlin*. He is not merely a camera; he comments on the subjects of his vision, and the commentary is persistently, if not overtly, ironic.

The source of the irony is the sensibility of Isherwood's detached narrator. He calls little attention to himself, and he does not dramatize himself. He is an unobtrusive guide leading the reader through "the freak museum of our neurotic generation." The narrator's strong urge to be that guide provides the incentive for the documentary style of the Berlin novels. The nature of the political circumstances demands of him a lucid and objective presentation, insofar as objectivity is possible. Isherwood's changing technique exemplified some of the concerns of his generation, particularly the belief that communication was more important than aesthetics.

His work after 1939, the year that he moved to the United States, is generally thought to be inferior to his early work, at least in terms of style. Instead of his quintessential "thirties prose," considered by many to be the best of the decade, Isherwood's later style is more melodramatic and sentimental. According to many critics, the excursions into Oriental philosophy that inform his later work, *A Meeting by the River*, for example, weaken the universal appeal that was so marked in his early

novels. Not all, however, are in agreement on this particular point. Brian Finney, Isherwood's biographer, finds that his later novels compare favorably with the early ones.

The most important aspect of Isherwood's later career remains his public defense of homosexuality. *A Single Man*, for example, is a sympathetic portrait of an aging homosexual. This defense was an inevitable result of his intensely autobiographical approach to fiction. While he suppressed it in his early career, by the 1960's he no longer hedged on the issue. Isherwood had to be courageous in his frankness, since homosexuality had long been a taboo subject in literature. Eventually, he came to see it as a cause and claimed that, in defending this one minority, he was speaking out for all minorities. This sympathy for those who have been marginalized by a brutal society is the most persistent theme in Isherwood's work.

## THE LAST OF MR. NORRIS

**First published:** 1935

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Englishman is captivated by a quirky con artist in the Berlin of the Weimar Republic.*

*The Last of Mr. Norris* (the British title is *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*), Isherwood's third novel, takes place in the year 1930. Two strangers, sharing a compartment on the train to Berlin, begin speaking to each other as the train crosses the border from Holland into Germany. The younger one is William Bradshaw, a young man looking to escape from the restraints of England to the sophisticated and dissolute German capital. The older one is Arthur Norris, a well-dressed man with expensive accoutrements. By the time they reach Berlin, the two are on friendly terms. Eventually, Bradshaw's experiences in Berlin revolve around his somewhat puzzling compatriot.

At first, Bradshaw is blind to Norris's corruption. He consistently underestimates Norris's depravity. Only very slowly does he learn that Norris is practicing blackmail and fraud in order to maintain his accustomed gentlemanly lifestyle. Through Norris, Bradshaw is introduced to the world of sexual deviation and political machina-

tion. Without a doubt, Norris is a charming character, and Bradshaw's ingenuousness is understandable. Ultimately, however, the charm is superficial, and the reader understands before the narrator does that this Norris is a crook who hides behind a mask of snobbery and wealthy appearances. Bradshaw seems incapable of reading these signs and resists detaching himself from a man who has become something of a father figure for him.

Mr. Norris's self-centered depravity is suggestive of the city in which the story takes place. The final years of the Weimar Republic are presented as years of political confrontation marked by the debasement of meaning through distorted language and deliberate lies. Near the end of the novel, the political situation comes center stage, as Bradshaw describes the showdown between Nazis and Communists. Adolf Hitler's shadow looms over the final pages. The German populace is taken in by the Nazi leader in much the same way that Bradshaw has been deceived by Norris. Norris, however, is a comic bungler whose designs are exposed and foiled. By contrast, Hitler seems even more brutal and dynamic. Isherwood's novel is a fascinating account of a personal relationship set against a society in disintegration.

## SALLY BOWLES

**First published:** 1937

**Type of work:** Novella

*A young Englishwoman meets and overcomes various setbacks in Weimar Berlin.*

*Sally Bowles* is the most renowned of Isherwood's famous "Berlin stories," a "loosely-connected sequence of diaries and sketches," as he called them, that together form the novel *Goodbye to Berlin*. Both the story and the character Sally Bowles brought Isherwood his first fame. That fame was attributable in large part to the role of Sally as played by Julie Harris in the play *I Am a Camera*.

Sally Bowles is a young Englishwoman, living in Berlin, who is befriended by the narrator (whose name is Christopher Isherwood, though he is not to be identified completely with the author). Sally is a cabaret artist of little talent but much charm. Indeed, she lives primarily by her charm, wit, and

peculiar beauty. Christopher soon learns that her Bohemian lifestyle involves entertaining gentlemen, but he does not pass judgment on her.

In fact, Christopher finds Sally to be the most attractive of his Berlin friends because watching her is like watching "a performance at the theater." Sally's performances are certainly eccentric and, to a degree, pretentious, yet these pretensions do not bother the narrator. He rather likes her masquerades and disguises. In this sense, Sally has much the same effect on Isherwood that Norris had on Bradshaw. Nevertheless, she is more ingenuous than Norris, and this ingenuousness makes her more transparent. Her charm thus mitigates her obvious dishonesty and artificiality. Sally uses people without compunction, but she is also innocent and childlike. This childishness is the source of her appeal.

In a way, Sally is a peripheral character. Her upper-class connections allow her to escape from Berlin when life there becomes tiresome or boring. While she is unquestionably one of the "lost" characters in Berlin ("The Lost" was Isherwood's working title for *Goodbye to Berlin*), she somehow manages to escape from the impending devastation that the other Berliners must confront. Great disasters leave her unchanged. Despite rejection from lovers, robberies, and an abortion, Sally remains strangely untouched, and indeed she recovers nicely from these setbacks. She is a misfit and a sexual outcast, but she is also a survivor, untouched by the disease and death attacking the Berliners. Isherwood's novella presents a successful character study and raises questions about those human qualities that can prevail in desperate and degenerate circumstances.

## GOODBYE TO BERLIN

**First published:** 1939

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the last days of the Weimar Republic, a young Englishman befriends several Germans and foreigners whose doom is inevitable.*

The world of *Goodbye to Berlin*, possibly Isherwood's finest novel, is a grim world where the decaying past is about to be transformed into a hor-

rible future. Isherwood writes of the period of transition, the period when change is ineluctable and yet few people seem to see it coming, or at least to recognize the significance of this change.

The reader is introduced to this world in the first section, "A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)." This first of two diaries in the novel introduces objects and people that the narrator can observe from the window of his room. The famous phrase from this diary—"I am a camera"—

establishes the technique of the "diary" and something of the narrator's character: He is passive in his perceptions (though not neutral), an observer more than an actor. A certain ironic vision of life is established as well, with an emphasis on the fragmented and discontinuous nature of the world in which the narrator finds himself.

Christopher, called "Herr Issyvoo" by the Germans, turns his attention to four characters of the Berlin scene. The four—Sally Bowles, Peter Wilkinson, Otto Nowak, and Bernhard Landauer—are

representatives of "the lost" (as Isherwood's first, unfinished version of the novel was called). These are people whom "society shuns in horror," according to Isherwood. Christopher tells their stories in a series of episodes that are unified by this theme of the lost.

The novel concludes with another "Berlin Diary," this time dated "Winter, 1932-3." By this time, Nazi brutality is everywhere in evidence, and at novel's end the reader realizes that the coming turmoil will destroy the lost characters of whom Christopher has grown so fond.

### SUMMARY

Another novelist and Christopher Isherwood's coeval, Angus Wilson, placed Isherwood at the moral center of their generation. Both terms, morality and generation, are useful in fixing Isherwood's status: His voice, so clear and precise, is the voice of morality in a world gone chaotic; perhaps more than any other novelist of his time, he speaks for the generation of writers who first achieved prominence in the 1930's. Isherwood's documentary style, combined with a reserved yet persistent moral tone, makes the Berlin stories some of the best in the English language.

Stephen Benz



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Demonstrate how the decline of Germany in the late 1920's and early 1930's affected Christopher Isherwood's literary production.
- Discuss the part other writers have played in establishing a deserved reputation for Isherwood.
- Was John Van Druten misleading his audience when he titled his play based on *Good-bye to Berlin* as *I Am a Camera*?
- What are the most valid aspects of Isherwood's interjection of personal characteristics in his literary characters?
- What are the best reasons for denying that Isherwood was an escapist?
- What justification can you see in Isherwood's using family names, such as *Bradshaw* and even *Isherwood*, in characterizations of people much more naïve and misled than himself or his family members?

# KAZUO ISHIGURO

**Born:** Nagasaki, Japan  
November 8, 1954

*Read by an international audience, Ishiguro's texts center around themes of human dignity and loyalty pledged to dubious or ambiguous causes. His novels have won major literary prizes.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Kazuo Ishiguro (ihsh-ih-GEW-roh) was born on November 8, 1954, in the Japanese city of Nagasaki, the son of Shizuo and Shizuko (née Michida) Ishiguro. In 1960, his father, an oceanographer, moved with his family to Guildford, near London, because the British government offered the scientist a job in connection with the exploration of the North Sea oil fields. Although the family initially assumed they would soon return to their native land, they found many practical reasons to stay in England, including the fact that Ishiguro's father loved the comparative lack of social obligations in his new country. The family's temporary stay became a permanent one, and Kazuo Ishiguro and his two sisters found themselves immersed in British culture.

Sent to what he described as a typical British school, Ishiguro felt fully integrated there. Reading with pleasure the novels of classic nineteenth century British writers, such as Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, and growing up with the works of other influential European writers, such as Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov, Ishiguro nevertheless retained certain crucial ties to his native culture. His vision of Japan was formed by strong childhood memories, Japanese films of the 1950's, and the Japanese books that arrived every month at home, where the family conversed in Japanese. His interest in films portraying a Japanese past that he himself remembered has remained very strong, and he acknowledges these films as a major artistic influence.

In the 1970's, after completing his high school education, Ishiguro traveled and sustained himself with a variety of odd jobs. Taking his cues from his young British peers, he set out for countries, such

as the United States and Canada, that fascinated them all. He did not feel a need or desire to physically explore a Japan with which he felt connected through his imagination. After a short stint as a grouse beater for the Queen Mother at Balmoral Castle in 1973, and employment as a social worker both before and after receiving his B.A. (with honors) in English and philosophy from the University of Kent in 1978, Ishiguro decided to try his hand at writing. He was twenty-five. He had already aborted a brief and unsuccessful career as a singer and songwriter when, in 1979, he enrolled in the creative writing program at the University of East Anglia, where British novelist Malcolm Bradbury taught courses, and where Ishiguro earned an M.A. in 1980.

Having started to write short fiction in the summer before his first term at East Anglia, Ishiguro garnered immediate acclaim with his work. Three of his short stories were published in *Introduction 7: Stories by New Writers* (1981), and his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), received the Winifred Holtby Award from the Royal Society of Literature. Although the novel was translated into thirteen languages, it failed to make a visible impact in America, where his next work, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), remained similarly undiscovered despite having earned the Whitbread Fiction Prize as Whitbread Book of the Year in 1986, another important British literary honor.

The financial rewards for his second novel, however, enabled Ishiguro to end his part-time work in a hostel for London's homeless and allowed him to focus exclusively on his fiction and television scripts; in the latter field, his *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason* (1984) and *The Gourmet* (1986) were well received. While working with characteristic in-

tensity on his third novel in 1986, Ishiguro married Lorna Anne MacDougall, a fellow social worker. When *The Remains of the Day* (1989) was published, the couple was still living in an unpretentious corner of London, a fine piano their most valuable possession. In 1991, their daughter Naomi was born.

*The Remains of the Day* cemented Ishiguro's international success with its triumphant reception. It became the 1989 winner of the Man Booker Prize, the United Kingdom's most prestigious literary award. Finally, the novel also marked Ishiguro's breakthrough in the United States, where it earned him sudden recognition as a major voice in the chorus of contemporary fiction. In 1993, *The Remains of the Day* was made into a motion picture, directed by James Ivory and starring Anthony Hopkins. It was nominated for eight Academy Awards.

In 1995, Ishiguro published an unconventional novel, *The Unconsoled*, that failed to convince most critics. Nevertheless, it won Ishiguro the Cheltenham Prize and was short-listed for the Whitbread Novel Award. In 1998, Ishiguro was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the Ministry of Culture of France, and he also received the Premio Mantova from Italy.

Ishiguro's next novel, *When We Were Orphans* (2000), was received more enthusiastically and was short-listed both for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and the Whitbread Novel Award. *The Saddest Music in the World*, a Canadian film released in 2003, was based on a story by Ishiguro.

Ishiguro wrote the original screenplay for the *The White Countess*, a film directed by James Ivory and released in 2005. In the same year, his dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* was published to great critical and popular acclaim. *Never Let Me Go* was short-listed for four major British literary prizes: the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, the British Book Awards Author of the Year, the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book), and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction).

## ANALYSIS

As a writer, Ishiguro has remained very modest about his fame. In particular, he has rejected claims that his first two novels, despite their setting and Japanese characters, offer a realistic picture of his home country, which he did not see between 1960 and 1989. Instead, he has insisted that it is a charac-

ter's memory of a conflict in life that held his artistic interest in the writing. Thus, the role of memory has been central in all of Ishiguro's novels, and the ambiguity and unreliability of memory is a key topic of his fiction.

Ishiguro's choice of protagonists demonstrates his basic reluctance to look for obvious links between his characters and himself, an authorial strategy that he rejects. Thus, even his Japanese characters rely for their existence primarily on the author's imagination and artistic skills, rather than on his self-observation. Neither Etsuko Sheringham, the widowed Japanese mother who moved to England with her second husband, a Briton, and who tells the story of Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, nor the old painter Masuji Ono, whose diary constitutes the text of *An Artist of the Floating World*, can be seen to represent an authorial alter ego. By making the quintessential English figure of a butler his third protagonist in *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro attempted a quantum leap of the imagination. In return, the brilliant success of his butler, Stevens, entangled in the question of whether he has wasted his life serving a corrupt lord, triumphantly demonstrates his author's mastery of his artistic goal of focusing on the human condition as it is revealed through the crises of diverse characters anywhere in the world.

With the pianist Ryder in *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro created a character who inhabits a surreal world on the border between dream and reality. Through Ryder's extremely subjective and obscure narrative, the novel probes the role and responsibility of the artist vis-à-vis his or her community. Through Christopher Banks of *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro challenged the conventions of the crime novel. While depicted as a kind of Sherlock Holmes, Banks, like the comic-book hero Batman, turned to solving crimes after a crime perpetrated against his parents. Just before the Japanese attack on China in 1937, Banks returns to Shanghai, where he grew up before his parents were kidnapped decades earlier, making him a de facto orphan moving to London. Unlike fellow British writer J. G. Ballard, whose semiautobiographical novels *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and *The Kindness of Women* (1991) bestow an alienating perspective on the Japanese attack by being told from the viewpoint of an imaginative boy, Ishiguro alienates Banks from reality by his uncertain memory and

perception. With Kathy H., protagonist of *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro returned to a female first-person narrator.

Apart from Ishiguro's determination to avoid simple realism and rely instead on sheer artistic imagination and later outright fantasy when creating his fictional worlds, Ishiguro's novels are driven by their first-person narrators. The reader soon discovers that these central voices are rather unreliable in their accounts of past reactions to crises. For all of them, there lurks in the past an experience that may invalidate their projected sense of self and destroy their human dignity. What exactly it is that hovers in the dark as each novel opens is a mystery that unravels only slowly, and the process keeps the reader on edge until a final climactic revelation. Even then, however, pieces of the central mystery are still left to the reader to resolve.

In a move that would become typical of his fiction, Ishiguro opens *A Pale View of Hills* with the narrator seemingly in control, living through a brief, critical moment in the present. As small events trigger a stream of personal memories, answers emerge to questions that the narrator—like all Ishiguro's central characters—refuses to discuss openly. Accordingly, the novel moves along two temporal planes after Etsuko Sheringham is visited at her home in England by Niki, her younger daughter by her late second husband. This visit comes soon after the suicide of Niki's older, Japan-born half sister, Keiko. In a similar vein, Ono's worries in *An Artist of the Floating World* that his artistic support for the imperialists during World War II may endanger the marriage chances for his second daughter, Noriko, and the even less dramatic occasion of Stevens's first holiday after a lifetime of service in *The Remains of the Day* function as catalysts for the protagonists' surveys of their lives.

In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder is about to give a piano recital in an unnamed European city. In the first of the novel's surreal, nightmarish sequences, Ryder has lost his schedule on the plane and nobody is able, or willing, to provide him with a replacement. This situation, named Kafkaesque by a variety of not entirely positive critics, triggers Ryder's increasing confusion within a shadowy world where not just memory but also reality changes from one minute to the next, creating illogical events symbolizing Ryder's mental confusion.

In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks

appears in a more conventional world, yet when he finally reunites with his surviving mother after World War II, the event may be far less hopeful than he interprets it to be. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's memories of her apparently idyllic childhood are juxtaposed with the fantastic elements of an alternate version of late 1990's British society, where clones are bred to serve as organ donors.

In a pattern that again foreshadows how later characters will interact with one another, in Ishiguro's first novel the mother and daughter communicate on a very formal, restrained level. Their polite style of talking allows neither mother nor daughter to say what is really on her mind. At the most, their discussions admit a bitter irony that may hint at the truth. Instead of discussing their problems openly, Ishiguro's pair hovers together on the abyss opened by Keiko's death. It is only through Etsuko's memories, and her haunting recurring dream about a young girl, that the extent of her pain becomes visible: Indelibly impressed in her mind is the question of whether her divorce, her subsequent marriage to a Westerner, and her departure from her native land somehow caused the desperate act of her elder daughter.

Ono and Stevens, too, have a characteristic, roundabout way of dealing with their problems, the very existence of which is unearthed only slowly. With Ryder, the reader is left confused as to the exact nature of his problems. Detective Banks persuades himself that his mother always loved him, but this may be a delusion. Kathy manages to talk to Madame and Miss Emily, the women in charge of rearing her for the cloning program, yet their polite talk fails to bring about a change or a resolution.

While *A Pale View of Hills*, which receives its title from the view of Nagasaki's hills visible from Etsuko's apartment in Japan, centers mostly on a question of personal guilt, it also contains the story of Etsuko's first father-in-law, Seiji Ogata, a former teacher now publicly denounced by one of his former students for his imperialist leanings during World War II.

This conflict of a man trying to come to terms with his past actions in a broad historical setting is the artistic center of Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and is also a powerful theme in *The Remains of the Day*, where Stevens's dead master is revealed to have been a Nazi sympa-

thizer. The question of fascism occurs in Ishiguro's next novels as well. In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder's artistic rival Christoff represents what critics have called musical fascism. *When We Were Orphans* addresses both British imperialism in early twentieth century China and Japan's attack on China in 1937. Only a totalitarian state could ever carry out a program to clone people as future organ donors, as described in *Never Let Me Go*.

Ishiguro has constantly changed and developed the voices of his protagonists. While Etsuko's thoughts are related to the reader with common directness, Ishiguro's next novels more ambitiously try to call attention to the fact of their narrators' subjective coloring of events. A first step to distance them is to have them write, rather than think, their narratives; the next action involves the creation of an unmistakably personal voice for each character. While Stevens's English approximates the language used by a servant to speak to the upper classes in mid-twentieth century Great Britain, Ono's voice is even more complexly constructed. The proposition, advanced by the text, is that his narrative is really a translation from the painter's original Japanese and thus reflects the limitations of his vision. Ono himself confesses to this idea as he tries to explain why he created patriotic paintings that the war party used as propaganda before and during World War II:

But then I for one never saw things too clearly. A narrow artist's perspective. . . . Why, even now, I find it hard to think of the world extending much beyond this city.

With Ryder, Ishiguro developed the point of narrative unreliability to the point of surrealism. Critics did not like Ishiguro's radical break with narrative conventions, and Christopher Banks's narrative is more smooth and reliable than Ryder's. Even Banks's rendition of reality, however, is highly subjective. Kathy more reliably relates the facts of a world that feels itself like an opaque nightmare.

After putting his characters through a mental wringer that forces and squeezes them into confronting what they have made of their lives, Ishiguro does offer them a glimpse of hope. Etsuko, purified by her memories, is able to wave good-bye to Niki with a smile. The old Japanese

men of the war generation, Ono and Ogata, win a tranquility of spirit that allows them to retire from active life with grace and leave the field to their children, even though the punishment represented through their loss of prestige and social esteem should not be underestimated. Stevens, after he has realized what his "great" service to his lord has really cost him—he has denied his affection for his father and never allowed himself to see the love in the eyes of a female colleague—finally understands what he has lost and, with typical understatement, decides on some crucial changes in his no-longer-cheerless life.

During the three days in which *The Unconsoled* takes place, Ryder's mind hovers between waking and dreaming. Here, realism alternates with surrealism in a style mindful of the work of avant-garde Japanese author Kōbō Abe. Abe's surreal novels, such as *Moetsukita chizu* (1967; *The Ruined Map*, 1969), where a detective assumes the identity of the man he is hired to find, may remind the reader of Ishiguro's deconstruction of the conventions of the mystery genre in *When We Were Orphans*. Kathy H. and her fellow clones patiently accept their inhuman fate in *Never Let Me Go* with a kind of fatalism mindful of Stevens's acceptance of his role as butler. Unlike for Stevens, there does not seem to be a change in store for Kathy. She ends her story on a note of quiet resignation.

In his literary works, Ishiguro has created an increasingly fantastic world. In his novels, his protagonists observe with keen verbal precision and deep emotional introspection an oppressive situation.

## AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*After World War II, a Japanese painter, whose work had glorified the war, learns that the next generation does not blame him only because it considers him irrelevant.*

Addressing the reader like an old friend in what reads like portions of a diary, the old Japanese painter Masuji Ono, the narrator of Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, uses the



imminent marriage negotiations for his younger daughter, Noriko, in 1948 to reflect on his life and his career as an artist. Characteristically for Ishiguro, everything that the reader learns comes directly from the first-person narrator, whose account freely wanders from the present to various instances in the past, deliberately refusing to tell a chronological story. The narrator's voice also is highly subjective and cannot be trusted blindly.

Thus, through Ono's musings the reader becomes gradually acquainted with the narrator's troubled career, which is related in a total of four diary entries spanning the years 1948 to 1950. Starting as a fashionable artist who took his themes and motifs from the underworld—the Japanese term is “Floating World”—of the bohemians, artists, and geishas of his unnamed city, Ono eventually denounced his “decadence” during the rise of imperialism in Japan in the 1930's. As a rebel against his old master Matsuda, the young Ono now painted pieces that, like his masterpiece *Complacency*, attacked what he felt was the corruption of an aimless, modern world—here represented by three drinking men—and juxtaposed it with “heroic” images, such as the band of angry young men confronting the well-dressed drinkers in his picture.

Success came almost immediately, and Ono did not have to illustrate comic books, as his master scornfully predicted. However, Ono's masterful pictures also became powerful tools of imperial propaganda. To reinforce the issue of Ono's personal guilt, Ishiguro creates a close parallel between Ono's earlier rejection by his bohemian teacher, Matsuda, who cruelly confiscates Ono's pictures when he changes artistic directions and joins the “patriotic” cause, and Ono's own denunciation of his favorite pupil to the secret police in the 1930's.

Like the former teacher, Seiji Ogata, in Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), Ono supports the imperialist Committee on Unpatriotic Activities—an institution that is Ishiguro's symbol for the wrongs of a system that betrayed the idealism of those who, with exuberant naïveté, put their talents in its service. Confronted with the consequences of his patriotism, Ono now must ask himself whether he wasted or abused his talents by serving the Devil.

Ishiguro's resolution to Ono's crisis, however, is

marked by a disarming, gently ironic humanism. Finally ready to admit to his daughter's potential in-laws that he has, in fact, erred and been guilty, Ono's grand confession is brushed aside by the groom's family, who tell the old man that they regard his former political leanings as irrelevant to their son's marriage; the painter was never that important. Guilty but ignored by a young generation too busy to worry about old men, Ono can watch mirthfully as the young prepare to embark on their own lives.

## THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

**First published:** 1989

**Type of work:** Novel

*Given his first holiday by his new American master, an old British butler reflects on a lifetime of service as he travels to meet an old friend.*

Ishiguro's third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, which won Great Britain's prestigious Man Booker Prize for 1989, undertakes to demonstrate with beautiful clarity how high the human price can be for a person who has dedicated his or her life to a goal that becomes tainted. Set in southern England in the summer of 1956, the novel consists of the diary-like notes composed by Stevens, a British butler whose lifelong goal was to serve Lord Darlington. Now, after the death of the lord, the mansion, complete with its prime servant, has been taken over by an American. Offered his first vacation, Stevens sets out for Cornwall to meet Mrs. Alice Benn, who, as Miss Kenton, had worked with him in the heyday of Darlington Hall.

In the course of Stevens's travels to his final destination, his personal recollections evoke an imaginary England that is made perfect by reason of an understated greatness that simply exists, refusing pompously to announce itself. The source of Stevens's pride, contentment, and self-worth has always been that he has served at the “hub” of his great island's society; his greatest goal was always to be a perfect butler to a perfect lord.

Stevens's ideal is tested in a variety of ways as he remembers amusing anecdotes and darker experiences. When the reader is first told how William Stevens, the butler's father, had to serve a general

whose incompetence had killed his oldest son, and how he did so with “great” composure, the full price for Stevens’s ideal becomes visible. Following his father’s steps, Stevens later flawlessly serves Lord Darlington at a crucial function while his own father, whom old age saw descending in rank to that of a glorified busboy, dies in the attic, and Miss Kenton—and not Stevens—closes his eyes.

Another ambiguity is examined as the reader gradually learns that Lord Darlington—required by Stevens’s definition to be a great man, in order to bestow greatness on his butler—has fallen far short of that distinction. Moved by private pity for the defeated Germans after World War I, the lord gradually becomes an avid sympathizer with the Nazis, and his reputation is destroyed by a related scandal. By 1956, the late Lord Darlington’s name has become a badge of shame.

If Stevens is made to suffer like the millions of citizens of the Axis nations—among them Japan—who decided to trust and follow leaders who pursued aggression and atrocities until defeated in a bitter collapse, Ishiguro’s novel constitutes a highly critical examination of the price of self-neglecting, uncritical, and total service. Though Darlington’s betrayal is bitter, *The Remains of the Day* points out that even if Stevens had served a better lord, he would still have suffered.

The key is the character of Miss Kenton. Stevens’s complete failure to decipher her signals of affection bestows an exquisite sense of melancholy upon the book.

The saddest moment arrives when the two meet again in Cornwall, and she finally spells out her now-impossible love for Stevens, whose heart breaks for a moment before he accepts his fate and politely helps her onto the bus for her return to her husband. Now Stevens achieves full tragic status and realizes that his talents may well have been wasted on Lord Darlington. In a decision that echoes existential philosophy, Stevens decides to try to be a better butler to the American by improving his skill in “bantering,” light irony that he hopes may bring some human

warmth to Darlington Hall. Thus, Ishiguro gives his most tragic character a ray of hope that may guide him beyond the sadness of a life falsely sacrificed.

## NEVER LET ME GO

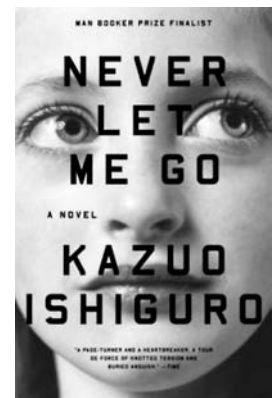
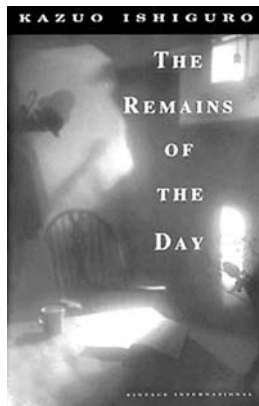
**First published:** 2005

**Type of work:** Novel

*Through his protagonist, Kathy H., Ishiguro reveals an alternate English society where clones are groomed to become organ donors, ultimately leading to their deaths.*

*Never Let Me Go* tranquilly opens with thirty-one-year-old Kathy H., a “carer” for “donors” who will mysteriously “complete,” that is, die, who is about to become a donor herself. Kathy seizes this moment to relate her apparently idyllic childhood at the boarding school of Hailsham, England. In the polite, reserved tone typical of Ishiguro’s first-person narrators, Kathy tells of her youth and that of her friends, cocky Ruth and misfit Tommy, who interact with a cast of fellow pupils at this apparently everyday upscale British institution. The reader of *Never Let Me Go* quickly realizes that there is a dark mystery at the root of Kathy’s recollection. Soon, the reader learns that Kathy lives in a dystopian alternate world where clones are raised to be harvested for their organs until they “complete” (die), generally after their fourth “donation.” The casual use of these euphemistic terms for barbarous acts is a strong motif of the novel.

The novel has a particularly haunting quality because Kathy, like all of her peers, quietly accepts the strange life for which they are being groomed. The title refers to Kathy’s favorite song at Hailsham. It is sung by a fictional woman singer, whom Kathy imagines is tightly holding on to her baby—a poignant fantasy, as all clones are infertile.



After graduating from Hailsham, Kathy and some of her peers are moved to the Cottages, where they live somewhat aimless lives. Ruth and Tommy become lovers while Kathy, who also loves Tommy, looks on. Their destiny catches up with them when “donations” of organs begin. Kathy cares for Ruth, a “donor,” who “completes” (dies). With Tommy next in line, he and Kathy realize their love and visit their former teacher, Madame, and Miss Emily, the headmistress of Hailsham. Miss Emily reveals the truth behind the cloning program. She also states that Hailsham was closed in favor of functional breeding centers that openly disregard a clone’s humanity. After Tommy dies, Kathy drives to Norfolk, forlornly gazing at the North Sea with a quiet, sad acceptance of her fate.

The plot may appear too far-fetched to be happening in late 1990’s England, when the novel takes place. However, read as a dystopian extrapolation of a society that grooms some of its members to serve others to their death, the novel’s theme is far less impossible. Kathy and her peers act with a quiet sense of duty. They do so in the same way that butler Stevens served Nazi-sympathizing Lord Darlington in *The Remains of the Day* or other Ishiguro

characters served Japanese militarism. In letting Kathy tell of her dystopian world, *Never Let Me Go* emerges as a poignant tale of the dangers of acquiescence and the high cost of lives wasted nobly for the wrong cause.

## SUMMARY

Kazuo Ishiguro’s desire to craft complex protagonists, whose experience is radically removed from the life of their author, has led to the creation of a remarkably diverse array of powerful literary characters who have fascinated an international audience. All of his first-person narrators tell of the primal conflict in their lives in their very own, intensely unique ways; they must all come to terms with past actions that have tainted their lives.

Despite their various shortcomings, which most often result from half-blind disregard for the consequences of their actions or the happiness of others and themselves, Ishiguro’s characters are nevertheless offered a final vision of grace that redeems rather than condemns them. This ultimate expression of a guarded optimism is a trademark of Ishiguro’s fiction.

R. C. Lutz

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are some common traits of two of Kazuo Ishiguro's protagonists, and how do these characters differ from each other?
- Discuss the importance of memory in two of Ishiguro's novels.
- What are the key choices made by Stevens the butler in *The Remains of the Day*, and how have they shaped his life so far?
- How do the early and later paintings of Masuji Ono differ, as described in *An Artist of the Floating World*? What are the reasons for this change?
- Are there moments when Kathy rebels, at least somewhat, against her fate in *Never Let Me Go*, and what is the outcome of these events?
- What are the effects of the notorious unreliability of one of Ishiguro's first-person narrators, such as Mr. Ryder?
- Discuss which issues torment two of Ishiguro's protagonists and how they try to solve their resulting mental pain.
- Discuss the role of fascism and militarism in two of Ishiguro's novels.



Nigel Parry

## P. D. JAMES

**Born:** Oxford, England  
August 3, 1920

*James's novels have aptly earned her the title Queen of Crime. These highly credible psychoanalytical studies of character and motive combine intricate plots, introspective voices, and a strong visual sense of place with a deep-seated philosophical grounding in contemporary moral questions.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in Oxford, England, on August 3, 1920, Phyllis Dorothy James attended Cambridge Girls School from 1931 to 1937, then clerked in a tax office for a few years until she found more interesting work as assistant stage manager of the Festival Theatre in Cambridge. She later was a Red Cross nurse during World War II and an assistant at the Ministry of Food. James married Ernest White, and the couple had two daughters, Clare and Jane. When White returned from the war, he was a severe schizophrenic and was permanently institutionalized, forcing James to provide for her family.

Thus, in 1946, James began her long civil service career, first as a National Health Service clerk and then, after earning diplomas in hospital administration and medical research, as a principal administrative assistant with the North West Regional Hospital Board in London. The latter position provided her with the detailed knowledge of illness, aging, and institutions that makes her novels authentic and credible. At forty-two, James published *Cover Her Face* (1962) and was immediately recognized as a major crime novelist.

James's husband died in 1964. Four years later, she took the highly competitive Home Office exams and became a senior civil servant in the criminal department, specializing in juvenile delinquency and criminal law policy. This position,

which she held until she retired in 1979, provided her with a working familiarity of forensic science laboratory routines, police procedures, and law. It also helped her understand the juvenile mind, depicted so effectively in *Innocent Blood* (1980) and *Devices and Desires* (1989). In 1979, she began writing full time but continued to serve as a fellow of the Institute of Hospital Administrators and as a London magistrate.

James was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1983, taught a detective fiction course at Boston University's Metropolitan College in 1984, and became Baroness James of Holland Park in 1991, an honor that heightened her desire for community involvement. In addition, James received the Grandmaster Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1999. On her eightieth birthday she published her autobiography, *Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography* (2000). She was awarded the W. H. Smith Literary Award for *Death in Holy Orders* (2001), the British Book Awards Crime Thriller of the Year for *The Murder Room* (2003), and the Theakston's Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year Award for *The Lighthouse* (2005).

### ANALYSIS

A skilled novelist, eloquent and erudite, influenced by the introspective style of Jane Austen and the Victorian novelists, P. D. James is one of England's most prominent mystery writers. Her works are restrained, their internal tensions resulting from close associates facing painful and unforgiving inquiries into secret fears and obsessions. Keen and inquiring, James faces unpleasant truths about



human frailty, the complex and sometimes self-destructive relationships among people, and humankind's potential for psychic and physical violence. Kindly characters murder to protect family, hearth, or reputation, and innocent suspects prove culpable of lesser and greater transgressions. Despite credible plots, meticulously provided clues, and convincing details and motives, "Whodunit?" is secondary to ambience and character; the creation of a realistic world of professionals whose jealousies and rivalries in the close confines of narrow communities produce Byzantine relationships.

James's novels build on a strong sense of place, inspired by a desolate coastline, a sinister house, an atmospheric London neighborhood, and such closed communities as a nursing home, an isolated village or island, a publishing house, a nuclear power station, a forensic science laboratory, and a small, specialized museum—each location transformed into an organic and vital element of the crime. For example, the personnel of her hierarchical medical communities share a language and a professional mystery that leave patients vulnerable outsiders. In *A Mind to Murder* (1963), a stately Georgian home turned psychiatric outpatient clinic provides an ironic counterpoint to sinister events. Toynton Grange in *The Black Tower* (1975), a nursing home, commune, hotel, monastery, and eccentric lunatic asylum, reflects the bleak desolation of the Dorset coast. In *Devices and Desires*, a nuclear power plant dominates a coastal town and its inhabitants. *Shroud for a Nightingale* (1971) most effectively draws analogies between a nurse's training center and a Nazi prison camp to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of rules and of human beings. *The Lighthouse* is set on an island retreat for influential public figures, while *The Murder Room* takes place in and around a small private war museum on the edge of London's Hampstead Heath.

Such settings, with their narrow communities, enable James to make her murder investigations turn on relationships and routines arising from place. The initial murder in *Shroud for a Nightingale*, for example, results from student nurses who, while practicing intragastric feeding, witness a ghastly, nightmarish death beyond their capacities to cope: carbolic acid added to warm milk in the inserted tube. In *Death of an Expert Witness* (1977), a despised physiologist is murdered in his lab while

examining physical evidence from another murder. A suspect in *Devices and Desires* plunges to his death in the reactor room, the heart of a nuclear power plant whose dangerous force feeds the latent heart of darkness in those associated with it. James's writing captures the "minutiae of ordinary life": the internal rivalries, the jockeying for advancement up the bureaucratic ladder, the unhappy home lives, the daily pressures, the jealousies, the petty strife. James's later works examine dysfunctional families (in particular, parent-child relationships that go awry), the failures of social institutions, and the ambiguous mix of good and evil.

All of James's highly visual novels communicate a sense of an intricate mind at work, meticulously and precisely calculating every twist of plot. James keeps an hour-by-hour chart of her characters so that each detail fits logically and each piece of physical evidence is psychologically right. Her style is leisurely, with intricately woven sentences reflecting the complex musings of intelligent, but not always reliable, characters. Her narrator is third person—the omniscient author, a particular character, even the murderer. Her easy movement from one perspective to another adds a rich, varied texture to detailed descriptions of place and personality. Her metaphors evoke bleak wastelands; her characters casually allude to William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy and talk of murder while taking tea, admiring a rose garden, or debating the esoteric conundrums of theological schisms. Overall, character study outweighs action, but in the final analysis the realities of human motive prove to some degree too complex to be fully known; even as they act, her characters often fail to understand themselves.

James explores complex interpersonal relationships, stress, and psychological consistency. Her respectable middle-class characters, literate and cultured, prove to be consumed by hidden emotions and desperate to preserve their facade of respectability or the reputations of those dearest to them. James's victims are often disagreeable—selfish, narcissistic, lascivious, greedy, hot-tempered, catty, or even senile; her killers appear normal on the surface but are really emotionally maimed, beset by secret torments that ultimately evoke sympathy and pity—an abused childhood, a sexual compulsion, a tragic loss, failed relationships. Her plots

frequently include apparent suicides, accidents, or natural deaths that prove to be murders and interlocking or copycat crimes.

Her main detective, Adam Dalgliesh, brings critical intelligence, sensitivity, and professionalism to his job. A “lonely man in a lonely profession,” an agnostic grounded in Anglican theology, he observes the bleakness of the human condition and sees himself as an instrument of justice. Tall, dark, morose, and sometimes testy, he is the son of a London clergyman, versed in articles of faith, but a born skeptic whose distrust of simple creeds was deepened by the tragic death of his wife in childbirth. Well-read and introspective, he internalizes his horror at unnatural death and comes to terms with it through poetry (titling one volume *Invisible Scars*) and through enforcing a civilizing legal code. Ever compassionate, he is not sentimental. A private man with personal compulsions, he avoids deep emotional attachments until his transforming encounter with Emma Lavenham, a Cambridge professor of Victorian literature, in *Death in Holy Orders*. Their relationship deepens in *The Lighthouse*, and Dalgliesh proposes marriage to Emma in *The Murder Room*. Dalgliesh is brutally honest, patient, ruthless, and unorthodox—a master interrogator with an instinct for asking the right questions to uncover evil but also an effective leader of a police detective team, bringing out the best in those under him (Inspectors Kate Miskin, Piers Tarrant, and Francis Benton-Smith, and Detective Sergeant Robbins). His determined quest for the truth of his cases speeds his rise from detective chief-inspector to commander, as in his daily life he seeks to bring order to chaos.

Cordelia Gray, the sleuth introduced in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972), is a cordial rival to Dalgliesh, who shares his love of Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy, old churches, and fine art. Though sensitive to human responses, calm, and detached amid mayhem, Gray is Dalgliesh’s opposite in optimism and hope, remaining spunky, self-reliant, upbeat, good-natured, and capable despite a series of foster homes and her father’s suicide.

Overall, a James novel, with its dense prose, shrewdly realized characterization, and sound plotting examines human interaction, rationalization, and despair with a unique combination of compassionate understanding and uncompromising analysis.

## INNOCENT BLOOD

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*An adoptee seeking self-identity discovers the painful truth of her parentage and unknowingly becomes part of a revenge plot.*

The title, *Innocent Blood*, refers to a twelve-year-old girl who is lured into the home of a pedophile, raped, and then strangled by the molester’s wife. It also suggests a second victim, eighteen-year-old Philippa Rose Palfrey, an adoptee burdened by her natural parents’ crime. Adopted before the murder occurred, the intelligent but difficult Philippa is adoptive father/sociologist Maurice Palfrey’s living proof of nurture countering genetics. Her blood is not shed, but she must confront her parents’ guilt. Ironically, she proves far more cold-blooded and ruthlessly egocentric than either parent, and her rejection of her long-suffering, docile mother results in the final bloodshed. James’s narrative skill and deft psychological analysis suggest that the final “innocent” blood shed is that of the murderess/mother, who commits suicide when rejected by the daughter she has come to love and on whom she has come to depend.

*Innocent Blood* grew out of James’s musings, on a real murder case, about a child’s knowledge of parental culpability and about the potentially disastrous effects of the Children Act of 1975, which permitted adoptees to learn the identity of their natural parents. Not a detection or a crime novel, it shares the detective story’s interest in guilt and innocence, crime and punishment, love and revenge. Despite her fine education and comfortable home, Philippa fantasizes about her real parents when irritated by her adoptive ones. In a sociological and psychological experiment of the sort she accuses Maurice of indulging in, she finds, and, for the summer months before entering Cambridge, takes in, her real mother, Mary Ducton, a murderess just released from prison. Her act purposefully thwarts Maurice, whose approval and love she seeks, and dismisses her adoptive mother, Hilda, whose timidity and lack of self-worth she scorns.

As mother and daughter share a small London flat, work together in a restaurant, spend time on “educational” tours of museums and galleries, and

seek intimate moments of self-revelation (a program Philippa establishes and her mother passively accepts), the father of the murdered child, Norman Scase, dogs their steps, bent on revenge in fulfillment of a deathbed promise to his wife. James skillfully interweaves the two plotlines—the golden youth searching for identity, the ugly, bumbling, and sweet-tempered but driven older man seeking release from a haunting obligation—drawing them closer and closer as the man becomes as obsessed with Philippa as he is with killing her mother. Ironically, at the moment of final vengeance, Scase finds his act thwarted, the murderess already dead, a victim of her own guilt and rejection by her only child. When his knife plunges into her throat, she has already stolen away the life he seeks. Philippa, recognizing her personal responsibility for her mother's death, protects Scase from the police.

James's basic argument is that identity comes from within, that parents provide few clues about their progeny, and that relinquishing necessary fantasies can bring "a kind of death." Philippa is more the daughter of Maurice than of her real parents, sharing his intellectual distancing, cold disdain for weakness, and narcissistic self-absorption. Maurice's marital and sexual conflicts are but psychological responses to Philippa. A final brief, incestuous affair frees them from their mutual obsession and allows a more normal life thereafter. One set of fantasies, purged by reality, is replaced by another; even Mary Ducton's long, careful confession reworks reality to win back her daughter. According to James, a person's account of his or her life is an interesting psychological study, but it is not reality.

Questions of guilt and innocence shade into blurred grays, with the "criminals" proving to be sad, pitiable victims of physical compulsions or of traumatic childhoods, and with the "innocents" proving disturbingly culpable. Environment outweighs heredity in molding individuals, but some sort of unique, individual personality proves to be the true final determiner.

## A TASTE FOR DEATH

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*The violent deaths of an important political figure and a lowly tramp endanger a young witness and a fledgling investigator.*

The title *A Taste for Death* suggests a murderer whose appetite for power increases with each murderous act. It refers more particularly to Sir Paul Berowne, the murdered Tory minister who, weighed down with guilt at the automobile death of his first wife, had lost his taste for public life, undergone a religious conversion, abandoned a flourishing political career, and accepted death. It encompasses Detective Dalglish's questions about his and his profession's obsession with violent death, as well as Lady Barbara Berowne's taste for death (she enjoys the "power," "mystery," and "ruthlessness" of her gynecologist/surgeon/lover, Stephen Lampart, whose hands determine a patient's life or death). Even the local vicar at whose picturesque church the murders occur finds himself and his congregation infected by a taste for death.

In this dense and detailed police procedural and novel of manners, Dalglish heads a homicide squad assigned to investigate politically sensitive crimes, assisted by the conservative, opinionated, and able but jealous John Massingham and a bright new recruit, Kate Miskin, whose resourcefulness and ambition irritate Massingham but impress Dalglish. James explores the sacrifices and compromises that Miskin, as a career policewoman, must make to maintain a personal life, fulfill family obligations to her aged and contrary mother, and escape the poverty and illegitimacy that have fueled her ambition. This case involves Dalglish personally, for he not only liked the murdered Berowne, having consulted him about blackmail, but also finds that he and the victim had much in common. Both were cultured, private men, dedicated to preserving civilization and art, schooled in language and literature, and aware of ambiguous human relationships and of the need for commitment to enduring values. Interested in church architecture, nineteenth century novelists and poets, and philosophical questions of life and death, both had a cerebral, detached way of coping.

This close study of the frustrations and precision of police procedures and of the intelligence and instincts that transform the minutiae into details of great investigative moment depends on a single bloodstain under a corpse, a struck match, a moved diary, and a missing button. James's argument throughout her depiction of the investigation—the gathering of physical evidence, the taking of testimonies, the checking and rechecking of alibis—is that murder changes everyone it touches; investigators, suspects, and witnesses can never be the same. Mother, wife, mistress, friends, brother-in-law, and business associates cannot escape the questions that lay bare their secret hearts. Dalglish is aware that murder destroys privacy through “the intimate detritus” of a victim's life and “through the mouths, truthful, treacherous, faltering,

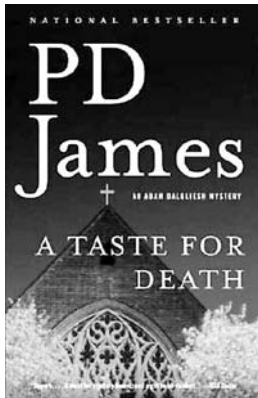
ing, reluctant” of family, friends, and enemies; he also knows that “exploitation” of a suspect's fear, vanity, insecure need to confide, and lonely grief is “at the heart of successful detection.” Disturbed by the activities of his trade, he nonetheless recognizes their necessity. Actions bring consequences and the burdens of guilt and responsibility must be accepted.

Here again James explores the effects of environment on adolescents. Kate Miskin escapes her origins through hard work and sheer grit; Barbara Berowne escapes similar limitations through cold-blooded sexuality, producing a legitimate heir. Barbara's brother, Dominic Swayne, warped by a loveless childhood and a succession of stepfathers, seduces an unattractive household servant to confirm an alibi, feigns friendship to win trust, and hides murder behind a facade of frankness to assure a continued life of luxury. Tough, competent, ten-year-old Darren Wilkes, in turn, controls his environment, despite an alcoholic, prostitute mother, by attaching himself to the kindly sixty-five-year-old spinster, Miss Emily Wharton, whose safety he guards as they provide each other with companionship. Sarah Berowne, in contrast, wealthy and aristocratic, opts for an affair with a

committed communist to embarrass her aloof, reticent father.

Ironically, the murderer helps each of these characters: killing Miskin's contrary mother but freeing Miskin from a limiting psychological and economic burden that prevented her commitment to love and career; frightening young Darren but thereby calling attention to an unnoted illness, leukemia; forcing Sarah to realize the obligations of birth and education, reevaluate her relationship to her lover, and understand that she has been a pawn of the radical left; and seemingly confirming Barbara as heir of the Berowne fortune, an inheritance that her suspicious mother-in-law and wary husband thwart.

*A Taste for Death* is, moreover, replete with convincing details of place and scene: a cold and muddy river bank, a clinically antiseptic operating room, the pleasant cottage of a writer of children's books, the tidy apartment of the upwardly mobile young Kate, the stately manor of the Tory minister, and the Romanesque basilica where the murder occurs.



## THE CHILDREN OF MEN

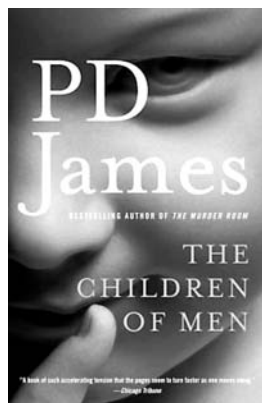
**First published:** 1992

**Type of work:** Novel

*In 2021, amid worldwide male infertility, a disillusioned historian defies a tyrannical government to secure the safety of the first child born since 1995.*

The phrase “children of God” suggests divine guidance, human potential, and the hope of redemption, while James's title *The Children of Men*, a derogatory phrase reminiscent of Old Testament diction, suggests human frailty, a fall from grace, impermanence, and the dark side of the human spirit—cruelty, violence, and a lust for power. In an age in which no child has been born in twenty-six years, adults burdened by guilty pasts face the nightmarish end of the human species. Human achievements lose their grandeur and their potential to inspire as they meld into the landscape. It is a time for Ozymandian contemplation, *carpe diem*, and a human accounting before the world's demise. Such are the thoughts of Oxford historian

and erudite narrator Theodore Faron, who escapes responsibility for the present by taking a slow journey, revisiting European centers of art and architecture in the interim between the two sections of James's novel. In this science-fiction vision of the very near future, James reverses their standard order to identify the first part, "Book One: Omega," and the second part, "Book Two: Alpha."



Thus, book 1 depicts a dystopian winding down, a retrenching of human civilizations, a movement from rural isolation to urban security, and an increasingly powerful and tyrannical government and military, as roving bands of bacchanalian thugs engage in sadistic sacrificial rites, and, in general, the threads of morality and social structure break. In England,

Faron's cousin, a powerful First Warden, makes life and death decisions, condemning rebellious citizens to terrifying island penal colonies where the inmates rule, approving military-assisted mass suicides, and in every instance governing with an iron fist. In effect, James's speculation queries how far national control might be extended under the guise of protecting the citizenry from terrorist-labeled activities. She also envisions heightened psychoses, as frustrated women fake pregnancies and fantasize about motherhood.

Faron's understanding of history, his delight in the Victorian past, and his love of Jane Austen (*Emma* is the book he chooses for his defiant journey with revolutionaries), provide a distanced, scholarly, ironic study of the times, and his past association with the present ruler enables him to provide a contrast in psychologies between himself and his cousin, to analyze the journey that led his cousin to this power, and to predict his behavior in the face of mystery.

The mystery of book 2, a morality tale, echoes the religious story of Mary and the Infant Jesus pursued by Herod and protected by an awed band of worshippers, in this case people willing to die themselves so that mother and child can thrive.

The action therein moves forward like a mystery as well, with traitors whose egos take dominance over philosophical commitments, and with a final murder that changes the future and forces a decent man to step into a power he has not wanted—for the good of humankind. Ironically, it is the only known fertile male who sacrifices himself for his infant. The story ends with hope for regeneration tempered by an understanding of the fallen nature of humankind that requires justice, as well as mercy. In this way, James's take on the future is in keeping with the hard truths of her detective fiction—so much awry in human nature and yet some hope based on frail, unlikely humans who stand up when it counts. The ambiguous mix of hope and cynicism at the end is meant to leave readers pondering the way in which good intentions can be turned awry in politics, as in daily life.

## DEATH IN HOLY ORDERS

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*Dalglish's informal investigation of a troubling death leads to his formal investigation of the murder of an archbishop and its complex ramifications.*

The title *Death in Holy Orders* refers directly to the mystery setting, the isolated and very traditional Protestant theological seminary of St. Anselms, on the bleak East Anglian coast. The seminary is the scene of the unexplained death of a troubled young ordinand and the later murder of a self-righteous archbishop, who was determined to close down the establishment as archaic and redundant and sell its valuable artworks and relics. Both of the dead are in Holy Orders, and every clue that Inspector Dalglish and his London team uncover suggests an insider at work, wearing a seminarian's cloak, opening doors with keys left in-house, and acting in times and places that require local knowledge of schedules and habits.

For Dalglish, the setting holds special meaning, since he spent part of his youth there. He experiences a deep nostalgia for those summer days, rediscovers close ties to the former warden, the el-



derly and devout Father Martin, and finds peace and rest in this place. Thus, he feels comfortable asking questions about the troubled youth who perished beneath a sudden fall of sand from the cliff above him. James introduces the players, the conflicts, the relationships, and the building tensions with Dalglish on the spot observing, rather than coming in after murder has been clearly committed. Amid talk of religious art and of the controversy surrounding a papyrus fragment that could shake the foundations of Christianity, Dalglish suddenly finds himself in the midst of multiple murders that strike at the heart of this small, pious community. Although three deaths arouse Dalglish's intuitive suspicions, it is the murder of the archbishop that provides the impetus for calling in his London team. Once on the spot, they and he uncover some of the nasty secrets behind the innocent facades: pedophilia, incest, lesbianism, and greed, red herrings that distract from the main offense. With almost everyone lying to some degree or simply failing to tell all they know because they do not realize the significance of minor observations, progression toward a swift resolution proves difficult.

The power of this novel lies less in the uncovering of responsibility and more in the ruminative journey through multiple, interconnected lives. Through varied characters, with sensitivity and insight, James examines the painful realities of aging—the diminishing of physical abilities; the loss of memory and order in the descent to senility; the steady whittling away of human ties, yet the need for companionship; the haunting memories of past wrongs and personal failures; the decline of authority; the yielding to change; and the instinct to relive one's dreams through one's children by controlling the directions of their lives. Her young people, in turn, are thoughtless, insensitive, impulsive, and defiant but also conflicted, needy, and directionless. It is only her mature adults, like

Dalglish and Emma, who can enjoy the memories of their youth and, with maturity and hope, seize life when it unexpectedly offers fulfilling possibilities, like the love and trust they share after only brief encounters. The romance between Dalglish and Emma that begins in this book progresses through James's next two novels, *The Murder Room* and *The Lighthouse*.

## SUMMARY

P. D. James's novels are realistic studies of the hidden realities of the soul that compel forbidden acts of violence and murder. Yet despite their grim, clinical detail and their cynical, uncompromising study of behavior, they postulate, in sophisticated, literate prose, the civilizing influence of daily domestic acts and of art, architecture, poetry, and song.

A sense of irony and of existential absurdity lies behind James's depiction of a civilized English facade that crumbles only slightly in the face of multiple murders by seemingly decent human beings. Her characters are three-dimensional, living and suffering in an imperfect world, one in which evil is a tangible reality and in which the diseased, the dying, and the maladjusted are simply part of what one of her characters calls the "progressive incurable disease" that is life. James's genuine curiosity about human nature and motivations is sensitive to the density of human experience and the nuances that govern lives. She coldly dissects character and act but communicates understanding and compassion for frailty. Her knowledgeable treatment of technical procedure and forensics and her meticulously detailed descriptions of place are entirely convincing. As the Queen of Crime, James has made her crime novels uniquely effective studies of human interaction and psychology, setting very high standards for other practitioners attempting to write not simply detective fiction but true literature.

Gina Macdonald

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Every P. D. James mystery novel includes red herrings—distractions that lead investigators away from the central crime. In a James novel you have read, identify two red herrings and explain how they distract.
- Choose a novel, like *Death in Holy Orders* or *The Murder Room*, in which teamwork is important to solving the mystery. What division of labor takes place, and what key pieces of evidence do individual members contribute?
- Despite such teamwork, personality differences and competition create tensions, like those between Kate Miskin and Francis Benton-Smith. Choose two such members of Dalgliesh's team, provide evidence of such tension, and explain the reason for it.
- In *The Children of Men*, which particular government rules or actions do the rebels protest against? Why?
- In your favorite James mystery novel, enumerate the pieces of information that lead to the identification of the murderer.
- Theodore Faron in *The Children of Men* carries Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) around with him, and Austen is Inspector Dalgliesh's favorite author. Select one way in which a later James novel, such as *The Murder Room*, echoes an Austen novel and explain how.
- How does Kate Miskin change as a character from *A Taste for Death* to *The Murder Room*? Cite a couple of changes and illustrate them.



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## RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA

**Born:** Cologne, Germany  
May 7, 1927

*A leading contemporary novelist who writes primarily of encounters between India and the West, Jhabvala is also well known for her short stories and film scripts.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (jahb-VAH-lah) was born on May 7, 1927, in Cologne, Germany, the daughter of a Polish Jewish lawyer, Marcus Prawer, and his wife Leonara. She wrote her first stories in German, but when the family emigrated to England in 1939, she soon started writing in English. She was aware from a very young age of being an expatriate in England, and this feeling of isolation was heightened in her adult life when she lived in India for about twenty-five years.

Ruth Prawer grew up in England, receiving her M.A. degree in English from the University of London while she tried her hand at fiction writing. She met a young Indian architect, Cyrus Jhabvala, married him, and in 1951, left England to make her home in India.

The first stage of Jhabvala's experience in India, which excited and enraptured her, included the birth of her three daughters and the publication of four novels, *To Whom She Will* (1955; published in the United States as *Amrita*, 1956), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *Esmond in India* (1958) and *The Householder* (1960). The large circle of her husband's Indian friends and acquaintances provided Jhabvala with continued opportunities to observe Indian life at very close quarters; the results of this experience are seen in her novels and stories. Since she is always the outsider in India, she also realistically re-

creates the tensions and conflicts that arise when Indians and Westerners interact.

Jhabvala sees the conflicts between Indians and Westerners as being rooted in the complexities of culture, history, and psychology, rather than in the more obvious and superficial difference of color. After her first stage of rapture about India was over, Jhabvala visited England briefly in 1960 and on her return found that her attitude toward India had altered. Some of the sources of her discontent are revealed in her fifth novel, *Get Ready for Battle* (1962), her only novel to center completely upon India's extreme poverty, and the exploitation of its poor by the wealthy minority. Jhabvala's growing disillusionment with the India that she had started out by loving so passionately is progressively revealed in three collections of short stories published between 1960 and 1975: *Like Birds, Like Fishes, and Other Stories* (1963), *A Stronger Climate: Nine Stories* (1968), and *An Experience of India* (1971). In a preface to the third collection, Jhabvala attempts to sum up her varied reactions to India, which she believes any Westerner who spends a lot of time in the country may experience:

It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm—everything Indian is marvelous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvelous; third stage, everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on. I have been through it so many times that now I think of myself as strapped to a wheel that goes round and round and sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down.

These feelings are reflected in the yearning for Europe that overcomes her Western characters in the

three novels published during this period: *A Backward Place* (1965), *A New Dominion* (1972; U.S. edition, *Travelers*, 1973), and *Heat and Dust* (1975).

Fortunately, just as India seemed to be failing the writer as a source of emotional and spiritual sustenance, she was invited to write the screenplays for films directed and produced by James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, a wildly successful association that has resulted in numerous remarkable films and many awards and recognition for the trio. Since then Jhabvala has divided her time between writing novels and writing screenplays.

After spending nearly twenty-five years in India, Jhabvala moved to New York in 1975. *How I Became a Holy Mother, and Other Stories*, a collection published in 1976, features "The Englishwoman," the story of a Westerner who, after living for many years in India, prepares to return to England: "She is eloping, leaving everything behind her—husband, children, grandchildren, thirty years of married life. Her heart is light and so is her luggage." Her subsequent work reflects her passage onward from India: *Three Continents* (1987) attempts to draw together her triple European, Indian, and American heritages, and her first "American" novel, *In Search of Love and Beauty*, was published in 1983.

In 1978, Jhabvala received the Neil Gunn International Fellowship, and in 1984, a MacArthur Foundation fellowship to support her writing. In December of 1984, she was awarded a fellowship from London University, as well as the university's honorary doctor of literature degree.

## ANALYSIS

There can be little doubt that the major and minor concerns that are interwoven in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novels and short stories arise from her personal or observed experience, and it is always tempting to speculate on the extent to which her fiction actually reflects her own life. As an expatriate European writer stationed for most of her adult life in India, she has admitted that she sometimes includes aspects of herself in her Western characters, which has led critics to assume that the hostile attitudes toward India displayed by some of her fictional characters—such as Esmond (*Esmond in India*)—mirror her point of view. By the same token, characters like Judy (*A Backward Place*) and Olivia Rivers (*Heat and Dust*) display bonds of personal affection for India that may also reflect Jhabvala's

own commitment to the country that she adopted by marriage. It would probably be more useful, therefore, to trace how her personal experiences of the East-West encounter have enriched and molded the techniques and content of her work.

Nearly everything she has written springs from the fact that she married an Indian at the age of twenty-four and accompanied him to his country to live there for the next quarter century. Living in Delhi, the capital, she used the city extensively in her work. Its streets, squares, quarters, and suburbs are all named and located so accurately in her early fiction in particular that they can be plotted on a map. This gives her writing a special sense of validity that is remarkable, especially since it comes from the pen of an outsider.

Jhabvala's novels can be conveniently divided into three phases, the first phase marked by romantic idealism, the second by the shedding of illusions, and the third by a renewed search for wholeness. If there is any disillusionment in her first two novels, *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion*, it is in its gentlest form: the comic mismatching of lovers who discover their differences and change partners, end the liaison, or modify their expectations so that harmony can be restored. The fictional world is comfortable and appealing; it appears that these novels are meant to convey to the Western reader an India that the author loves. Jhabvala in this first phase is interested in a number of social issues: the clash between generations in a changing society, the influence of the West on middle-class India, and the lingering effects of British colonialism on Indian life. The people she portrays in her early novels usually belong to the wealthy and privileged classes, while in her later work she begins to display a sense of anger and outrage at the social inequality she sees in India.

*Esmond in India* introduces a set of darker themes that will be worked out in later novels. It presents a series of complicated relationships, at the center of which is Esmond, a villainous and bitter Englishman. *The Householder*, which can be considered the last work of this first phase, marks a return to the harmonious vision of the first two novels, but the tone is more melancholic. A tender comedy, it is a moving portrait of a struggling schoolteacher, Prem, and his delightful bride Indu. Western characters are seen through Prem's eyes.

The next phase of Jhabvala's fiction is marked by a growing uneasiness about the traditional values upheld in the earlier romantic comedies. *Get Ready for Battle* and *A Backward Place* signal a greater interest in the clash of Western and Indian values as they are embodied in the European and Indian characters and their interrelationships. Sarla Devi, the heroine of *Get Ready for Battle*, represents conscience and struggle in a world of greed and dishonesty, and her efforts are inevitably met with defeat. *A Backward Place* considers the problem of being a Western woman in India: It is significant that all three women of the novel, Judy, Clarissa, and Etta, present unsatisfactory solutions.

The third phase of her novels includes *A New Dominion*, *Heat and Dust*, *In Search of Love and Beauty*, and *Three Continents*. The last two inaugurate a new "American" phase as well. In these novels, comedy gives way to seriousness as Jhabvala explores new dimensions of emotional relationships that center on love, particularly in the characters of women and homosexual men. She shows interest in cults with male leaders. The first novel of this group works on this theme of a sinister but magnetic guru; the second (*Heat and Dust*) focuses on an Englishwoman's infatuation with a different kind of guru figure, an Indian prince who is also sinister but magnetic.

*In Search of Love and Beauty* continues the investigation of the charismatic male who attracts blind followers in the character of Leo Kellermann, a German refugee psychiatrist who runs an Academy of Potential Development for his disciples. *Three Continents*, as its title suggests, covers a lot of geographical ground; it appears to be Jhabvala's most pessimistic novel, as well as the one that has been called disappointing by critics. The weakness of the novel probably lies in the character of Harriet Wishwell, who is unreliable as the heroine-narrator of a complex tale that revolves around a woman's passionate love for a homosexual man.

Though Jhabvala's novels may have progressed towards pessimism, it cannot be said that her work represents a totally dark vision: She deals in human relationships across continents and cultures, and she points out to her readers the disillusionments that are inevitable to such complex interactions. That the shedding of illusions is a necessary factor in human relationships is the most valuable lesson offered by Jhabvala in her work, and since truth

brings light, her novels cannot be called completely dark.

## ESMOND IN INDIA

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Novel

*Esmond Stillwood, an Englishman, becomes increasingly bitter and isolated as he spends several years in India and fails to establish a single successful relationship with either Indian or Westerner.*

*Esmond in India*, one of Jhabvala's earliest novels, introduces a darker set of themes that the writer continued to explore in her later work. The principal theme is the dilemma of the foreigner in India, whose initial delight in the country turns to isolation and bitterness. Clearly, this is a subject of personal concern for Jhabvala. The novel begins and ends by focusing on the character of young Shakuntala and spans a period of five months, which is the time that elapses between Shakuntala's graduation from college and her prearranged marriage with the son of her father's friend and associate. It is the life of Esmond, however, the one stranger in the midst of four interlinked Indian families, that is of primary interest. The plot of *Esmond in India* brings the four Indian households into alternate periods of intimacy and conflict, as they are all connected by blood, shared memories, or old associations, while Jhabvala appears to isolate Esmond in order to examine him most closely. He is the only Westerner among them, linked to them by a marriage of which they all disapprove. He is, for a while, married to Gulab (belonging to one of the four families) and has a son, Ravi, though his wife and son return to her mother's house by the end of the novel.

Although Esmond associates with other Westerners in India, he is isolated among them because he has no plans to leave India. He is also one of the few characters in the novel to possess a genuine knowledge and appreciation of India's culture and history, so much so that he believes that in giving lessons and lectures on Indian classical culture, he has found his true vocation. Despite his growing distress of mind, Esmond is far more intelligent



and sensitive than the people around him, including his wife Gulab. Gulab, in her initial attraction to Esmond and her later opposition to him, becomes a symbol of India in his mind. By tracing his journey from comparative calm to mounting hysteria during the five months of the novel, Jhabvala appears to be presenting the stages by which the experience of India affects the Westerner.

Esmond's personality begins to disintegrate along with his marriage, and his contempt for his wife merges with his growing distaste for India. His attempt to console himself with Shakuntala backfires, as the love and devotion she offers him finally drive him to flee to England for safety. Shakuntala's own romantic dream of a daring liaison with Esmond is undercut by the reality of her parents' plans for her and Esmond's plans for himself. Apparently East and West cannot meet, even, or perhaps especially, in romance, Jhabvala seems to imply through Esmond's experiments in India.

## HEAT AND DUST

**First published:** 1975

**Type of work:** Novel

*In parallel stories set fifty years apart, two Englishwomen in India have uncannily similar experiences in their relationships with Indian men but make different decisions about their lives.*

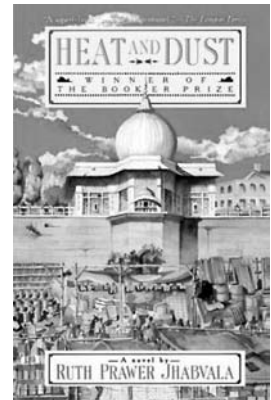
*Heat and Dust* is the story of two Englishwomen who travel to India, about fifty years apart in time, and record their experiences there in letters and journals. The stylistic arrangement of two parallel stories is creatively handled by means of excerpts from the narrator's journal interspersed with the details she provides from her predecessor Olivia's letters that she has in her possession. The reader needs to be alert to the constant shifts between the two tales as they trace similar developments in the lives of the two women. The major historical difference that they encounter is that while Olivia came to India during a time when it was still a part of the British empire, the narrator finds herself in a free country. The passage of time also means that there

has been some progress in the way women are able to conduct their lives. Through these differences, Jhabvala is able to convey the changes that have come about in women's lives in half a century.

In the earlier story, Olivia Rivers is bored and unhappy as the wife of a British colonial administrator in India, and though she loves her handsome husband Douglas, she welcomes the company of the Nawab, a minor Indian prince of a neighboring state, and his English houseguest Harry. Though the British community disapproves of her friendship with the untrustworthy Nawab, she is unable to curb her growing fascination about him until their closeness is sexually consummated. When she finds herself pregnant, she arranges for an abortion and in the scandal that follows chooses to go to the Nawab. She quietly lives the rest of her life in India, in her own house in the hills, leaving behind a legacy of her letters to her sister Marcia.

These letters come into the hands of the narrator, who decides to trace Olivia's story in India. Like Olivia, she ends up with two men in her life, the British Chid and her Indian landlord Inder Lal. Unlike Olivia she is married to neither, and in her progressive times, she is able to carry on her liaisons without scandal. When the narrator becomes pregnant, she decides to keep the child without informing the father, Inder Lal, and moves into the hills where Olivia went, to await her new life on her own.

Jhabvala's central intention in *Heat and Dust* is to provide a voice for women, especially in the story of Olivia. Though Olivia's story is regarded as a scandal by her own generation and hushed up, the reappearance of her detailed letters makes it possible for the narrator to offer the reader Olivia's side of the tale. By cleverly juxtapositioning Olivia's experiences in India and her own, the narrator is also able to provide a sense of how women's lives have changed in the course of the twentieth century.



## “THE HOUSEWIFE”

**First published:** 1971 (collected in *An Experience of India*, 1971)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A woman tries to balance a comfortable but dull life as a housewife with her secret passionate devotion to music, and in indulging the latter she transfers her attentions from her husband to her mysterious music teacher.*

“The Housewife,” one of Jhabvala’s best-known short stories, was first published in *An Experience of India*. It is a moving exploration of the theme of artistic commitment, discreetly embedded in a domestic drama of marital infidelity. Shakuntala, after being a loving and faithful wife for twenty-five years, begins to take singing lessons and quickly discovers that her music becomes the most important thing in her world. While she has, till now, divided her tranquil affections among her husband, daughter, and grandchild, suddenly her life seems to revolve wholly around her lessons, her practice hour each morning, the appearances or absences of her teacher, and his varied responses to her progress.

Shakuntala’s volatile moods are determined by her passion for her music, and her passion is embodied in the guru figure of her music teacher. Jhabvala subtly maps the ups and downs, the triumphs and disappointments of the creative experience. By placing the dilemma in the midst of the ordinary middle-class life of a contented housewife, she particularly raises the question of how a woman is supposed to balance her social commitments in running a household with an overwhelming creative urge. For the woman artist, the practice of her art is to be fitted with difficulty into her everyday life, and its demands test her loyalties by

competing with her concern for her family.

In Shakuntala’s case, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that her music is identified with her music teacher. The fascination of her art is complicated by the fascinations of love. The music teacher, talented, moody, and arrogant, embodies a threat to domestic order and a glimpse into the mysterious world of a life wholly devoted to art and pleasure. She revels in his appreciation of her singing and her money and his intermittent spells of indifference drive her to rashness. When he consistently fails to show up for her lessons, she seeks him out and follows him to his house, where he wastes no time in consummating their tension-filled relationship. Sexual intimacy appears to rouse Shakuntala to a state of telepathic awareness of her teacher and her art. Jhabvala ends her story with an ambiguous question that focuses on the dynamics between ordinary commitments to daily activities and the extraordinary passion for a higher art: “There was no going back from here, she knew. But who would want to go back, who would exchange this blessed state for any other?”

## SUMMARY

Ruth Praver Jhabvala has lived her life as an expatriate—in England, India, and America—and consciousness of this fact has shaped her fiction. Having spent twenty-five years in India and having produced the bulk of her novels, short stories, and film scripts there, it is her personal experience of the East-West encounter that has molded her work. Her observations of Indian life have provided most of her fictional material. Jhabvala has shown particular interest in tracing interactions between Indians and Westerners in various kinds of relationships. Her writing is marked by details of Indian life that only an outsider would notice and remember; this bestows on her fiction a unique character and vision.

Brinda Bose

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is the fact that Ruth Prawer Jhabvala spent the first twelve years of her life in Germany during the rise of Nazi power reflected in her fiction?
- Compare the Western women in Jhabvala's *A Backward Place* with those in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).
- Is Jhabvala's "The Housewife" primarily about the nature of the housewife in the story or about housewifery in India? Can both alternatives be presented successfully?
- To what extent is Jhabvala's India representative of the East?
- What is the symbolic significance of Jhabvala's title *Heat and Dust*?

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## SAMUEL JOHNSON

**Born:** Lichfield, Staffordshire, England

September 18, 1709

**Died:** London, England

December 13, 1784

*Long known principally through James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, L.L.D. (1791) as a talker and eccentric, Johnson is now known best for poetry and prose that make him one of the major figures of the eighteenth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Johnson was born to a fifty-two-year-old bookseller, Michael Johnson, and his forty-year-old wife, Sarah Johnson, on September 18, 1709, in Lichfield, Staffordshire, England. He was a precocious child who soon spent much time reading widely in his father's shop. After a typical classical education at Lichfield Grammar School, Johnson entered Pembroke College, Oxford, in the fall of 1728. When his funds ran out in December of the next year, however, he returned to Lichfield to work in his father's bookshop. Johnson's first published work, a translation into Latin of Alexander Pope's "The Messiah," appeared in 1731, the year of his father's death. Johnson was soon occupied briefly as a schoolmaster in a small town in Leicestershire and afterward in Birmingham as a translator.

At the age of twenty-four he met and married a widow, Elizabeth (Jervis) Porter, called "Tetty," twenty years his senior. Tetty reportedly described the tall, rawboned, awkward Johnson as "the most sensible man that I ever saw in my life." This astonishing marriage, which was childless, lasted until Tetty's death in 1752.

After the failure of a school that Johnson opened near Lichfield, he resolved to seek his fortune as a writer in London. Leaving Tetty behind, he set off in 1737 nearly penniless on the 120-mile trek by horse and on foot with the manuscript of an

unfinished tragedy, *Irene* (pr. 1749) under his arm, in the company of David Garrick, a former pupil who wanted to become an actor.

In the years that followed, Garrick became a famous and wealthy actor, while Johnson eked out a bare existence as a Grub Street hack, writing miscellaneous ill-paid pieces such as translations and biographical essays for Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*. Johnson's work for Cave also included approximations of parliamentary debates assembled from scraps of conversations overheard in coffeehouses and on the streets (publication of the actual debates themselves was prohibited). In these versions, Johnson achieved effective anti-Robert Walpole propaganda, reasonably accurate content, and style generally far better than the originals.

In 1738, Johnson published *London: A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal*, comparing corruption in London under Walpole's ministry to that in Juvenal's degenerate Rome. Praise of the poem by Pope and other literary connoisseurs did not mean financial success for Johnson. Occasionally, he was hungry. Sometimes, in the company of other unfortunates, he walked the London streets at night or slept on bulks along the Thames because he lacked the price of a cheap lodging. These experiences left him with a clear memory of real poverty and a deep sympathy for poor people. This memory and sympathy served him well in writing *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* (1744; commonly known as *Life of Richard Savage*), a full-length biography of an indi-



gent author and Johnson's sometime companion who had died in 1743.

Two years later, Johnson's financial condition had improved enough for him to rent a rather large three-story house at Gough Square, near Grub Street, and to send for his wife. In the top story of this house, Johnson began work on *A Dictionary of the English Language: To Which Are Prefixed, a History of the Language, and an English Grammar* (1755). This project took eight years of laboriously copying more than 116,000 suitable printed quotations, filing the papers in boxes, and doing research and writing. While the work on the dictionary was being pushed forward with the help of a succession of eight amanuenses, Johnson was also active on other literary fronts.

In 1749, he published *The Vanity of Human Wishes: The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated*, perhaps the most profound of all of his poems, and, with Garrick's help, he staged his tragedy *Irene*, at last. The next year, he began *The Rambler* (1750-1752), a semiweekly periodical containing his own thoughtful essays on important human concerns, which continued until 1752, the year of Tetty's death.

With the publication of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson's fame and fortune grew. Oxford awarded him an honorary M.A. degree, and he was soon able to begin another immense project, an edition of William Shakespeare, to be published by subscription, and on another periodical, *The Idler* (1758-1760), for which he wrote essays on the human condition in a generally lighter tone than those of *The Rambler*.

Johnson was still not entirely free from money troubles. When his mother died in 1759, he needed to raise money quickly for her funeral expenses. He thus completed *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759), a moral tale that he seems to have begun some time before her death, for which he received one hundred pounds. In 1762, an annual pension of three hundred pounds awarded by the government made Johnson financially secure, at last. By 1763, when James Boswell, Johnson's first biographer, met him for the first time, Johnson was a celebrity, feared for his acuteness, famed as a talker, and admired for his abilities, endurance, and energy.

Although Johnson suffered from depression, from which he recovered with the help of new friends, the Thrales, he was not idle after the publi-

cation of his edition of Shakespeare and the subsequent award of an honorary LL.D. by Trinity College, Dublin, in 1765. Johnson's next major work, however, came a number of years later. In 1773, at the age of sixty-four, he undertook a strenuous journey with Boswell, who wished to show him something of his native land. This resulted in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1775. Johnson also toured Wales with the Thrales in 1774 and accompanied them to France the next year. At this time, he received an honorary doctorate in civil law from Oxford. He continued to call himself plain "Mr. Johnson."

Johnson's last lengthy literary project, *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets* (1779-1781; commonly known as *The Lives of the Poets*), occupied the years between 1777 to 1781. It consisted of biographical and critical prefaces to the reprinted works of fifty seventeenth and eighteenth century English writers. Though occasionally perfunctory, many of those prefaces featured in *The Lives of the Poets*—especially those on Abraham Cowley, John Milton, John Dryden, Isaac Watts, and Pope, among others—contain some of Johnson's most incisive criticism.

Johnson had always feared death, but in the last years of his life he decided to confront it. Among friends who died was a humble physician for whom Johnson had provided a home for many years. This man is commemorated in some of the most moving verse that Johnson ever wrote, "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet." Johnson's own robust physical health began to break down, too, and he experienced recurrences of depression. His religious faith sustained him, but this time Mrs. Thrale was not there to nurse him through crises; a widow for a time, she had remarried against Johnson's wishes. By the fall of 1784, his sufferings from asthma and dropsy became acute. He became bedridden after returning from a trip to Oxford in late November. After praying fervently and taking leave of his friends, he died of what seems to have been complications of dropsy on December 13 in London. On December 20, Johnson's funeral took place in Westminster Abbey, where he was buried in the Poets' Corner.

## ANALYSIS

As James L. Clifford points out, critics who followed Johnson generally were not favorably im-

pressed by his writings. They decided that his work was pompous, didactic, and even bigoted. Critics now consider Johnson a teacher, moralist, and wise man who appeals strongly to readers because of his sincerity, lucidity, and vigor. No one would claim, however, that Johnson is easy reading. His vocabulary is frequently abstract and Latinate. His sentences are often long, sonorous, and muscular. They seem to demand of readers a tolerance for ample and unhurried thought. Yet although Johnson wishes his readers to understand him, he is not condescending. Rather, he tries to raise them to his own level. He provides many examples to make his points and to put them in broad moral and social context. He also makes frequent use of analogies to things that are familiar, striking, and concrete.

In all of Johnson's writings, his sympathy with weak and downtrodden people is clear. In *The Rambler*, issue 39 (1750), he sympathizes with unhappily married women. In *The Rambler*, issue 148 (August 17, 1751), he warns parents about the misuse of parental authority and cruelty toward children. In *The Rambler*, issue 114 (April 20, 1751), he speaks out against capital punishment for such crimes as robbery. In *The Rambler*, issues 170-171 (November 2 and 9, 1751), he calls for compassion toward prostitutes, many of whom were victims of circumstance. In 1777, an argument by Johnson was successful in freeing Joseph Knight, whose black skin had condemned him to slavery.

Johnson was scrupulous in his concern for the truth and did not passively accept other people's opinions. In 1762, his search for the truth made him look into the alleged appearance of the Cock Lane Ghost, and he exposed it as a fraud. In 1773, he accompanied Boswell on a strenuous journey to the Scottish Highlands to investigate the claim of James Macpherson that his publication of a long pseudoepic poem was in reality authentic folk poetry by the Gaelic poet Ossian. When Johnson wrote *The Lives of the Poets*, he did not merely rely on printed authorities for information about his subjects but tried to search for material on his own—a rare practice in his day.

Because Johnson's critical judgments on literature sometimes differ from those of mainstream received opinion, they are often assumed to be prejudiced. Indeed, Johnson says what he thinks and leaves no doubt as to why. He calls the form of John Milton's "Lycidas" (1638) "easy, vulgar and there-

fore disgusting." Yet he gives his reasons: the inherent improbability of using pastoral imagery to talk about the activities of college friends and acquaintances, and the combinations of these pastoral fictions with "the most awful and sacred truths of Christianity." That is, Milton spoke of college students as *sheep*, of their teachers as *shepherds*, and later, impiously and irreverently, of these *shepherds* as ecclesiastical pastors and saints.

Johnson's poetry addresses the same themes as his prose: human pain and difficulty, the need for morality and truth. In "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet," a poem of nine simple quatrains, Johnson expresses his personal grief for the loss of his "obscurely wise and coarsely kind" friend. He also makes Levet's use of his modest gifts to benefit the sick poor a model for readers. Even Johnson's humorous advice to a spendthrift young heir in "To Sir John Lade, on His Coming of Age" includes both an understanding of lighthearted youth and a serious warning of dangers that might cause Sir John to "hang or drown at last." Johnson's human sympathies and his insistence on truth and morality make readers conscious of his presence in everything that he wrote. He is a compelling guide and friendly teacher who insists that readers take him seriously.

## LONDON

**First published:** 1738

**Type of work:** Poem

*London, the center of British life, is so corrupt that good people must leave it and those of genius, unrewarded, cannot survive in it.*

*London: A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal*, a poem in twenty-seven stanzas of varying lengths, is written in pointed heroic couplets. An imitation of Juvenal's third satire, it revives Juvenal's complaints against flattery, fraud, perjury, theft, and rejection of old Roman virtues and applies them to the British metropolis. Like Juvenal, Johnson is rhetorical and dramatic. He, too, presents readers with a scene: A man, injured by the viciousness and folly of the city, leaving for the peace and solitude of the country, is bidding farewell to his friend.

Johnson's poem opens with a man named Thales waiting on the banks of the Thames for the boat to take him to Wales. Thales reviews his reasons for leaving town: selfishness, greed, the absence of public and private virtue, and the disappearance of true patriotism. The greatest effects of these calamities are felt by the young and the talented. Still other evils, such as arson, random violence, and even murders committed by pampered young delinquents and mischievous drunkards, are directed against the helpless poor or unsuspecting citizens. Thales can say no more because his boat has arrived. Yet he promises to come out of solitude to renew his attack on London vice when his friend is ready to leave the city.

*London* presents a problem to readers: To whom is Thales addressing his grandiose monologue, which is appropriate for a large audience? Merely to the single friend who accompanied him to the boat? It is ironic that the very people who need his message are not there to hear it. It is also possible that Johnson, to show how deeply his speaker is affected by his ordeal, has him "forget" that only one person is listening to him. Of course, outside the fictional situation of the poem, Thales has as an audience all the readers of *London*.

*London* is, in part, a public poem, a satire attacking the corrupt, long-entrenched government of Sir Robert Walpole. A typical Tory complaint repeated several times in the poem—how much London had changed since its glorious days—parallels Juvenal's lament for the death of old Roman virtue. The speaker expresses anger and disappointment for England's losses: of the "fair Justice" of King Alfred, of the heroism and sanctity of King Edward, of the bravery of King Henry (Johnson does not specify which Henry), and of the honor and commercial ascendancy of Queen Elizabeth. Instead, under Walpole, "Worth" and "Science" are ignored, insulted, attacked, and forced by their enemies to leave the capital. These include abstract representations of evil such as "the supple Gaul," "the silken Courtier," the "fiery Fop," the "frolick Drunkard," the "midnight Murderer," *Orgolio*, and *Balbo*, as well as real people, all Whigs, such as Lords Hervey, Marlborough, and Villiers. Such evil undermines the nation and even poisons the English soil.

*London* is also a private poem, which expresses Johnson's personal sense of injury in the outrages committed by a vicious society on the virtuous indi-

vidual. It also contains concrete details that tie it to Johnson's own experience. Johnson had seen two of his friends, Henry Hervey and Richard Savage, victimized and forced, like Thales in the poem, to leave London for Wales.

The poem's rhetorical structure allows the speaker to turn from observations to questions to exclamations, from panoramic descriptions of a society in moral chaos to mock exhortations to villains to do their worst, from condemnations of evil to prayers to be spared. The structure also permits the expression of a wide range of strong feelings—anger, loss, sorrow, rage, regret, indignation—and allows these feelings to build to an almost unbearable tension. Even so, the reader has an impression that great reserves of emotional power are being restrained by an immense effort. Thus, the famous lines in which Johnson describes his own unfortunate condition, "Slow rises worth, by Poverty deprest," sound mild and innocuous out of context. Yet within the poem, they indicate wrath and despair about to explode. These emotions and the themes with which they are associated appear repeatedly in Johnson's writings.

## LIFE OF RICHARD SAVAGE

**First published:** 1744

**Type of work:** Biography

*Johnson tells the story of his impoverished literary friend, Richard Savage, who asserted that he was the illegitimate son of a countess and an earl.*

In *Life of Richard Savage* (the full title is *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers*), his first full-length biography, published anonymously, Johnson describes the sensational life of a Grub Street writer and poet who was his friend and sometime companion in frolic and poverty. When Savage died in 1743, Edward Cave, the publisher, hurried to make arrangements with Johnson to write Savage's notorious story. Johnson had to work quickly. He made some attempts to consult records and examine original documents, but he was less concerned with factual accuracy than with telling the truth about the character of a man who, though unfortunate, had brought most

of his misfortunes on himself. Clearly, Johnson was aware of his friend's many shortcomings. He also wished to defend Savage's memory from malign attacks. Even more, however, he wanted to write an account that would be useful to readers both as an inspiration and as a warning.

According to Johnson's account, which believed Savage's claim to high birth, Savage's mother, Lady Macclesfield, who wished to escape from her marriage, stated that she had committed adultery and that the child she carried had been fathered by Earl Rivers. Her husband's application to Parliament to have the marriage dissolved was successful, and Lady Macclesfield's baby was declared illegitimate. When the baby was born, Rivers acknowledged his paternity but took no other notice of the child. The baby's mother, who remarried soon after her divorce, sent him to a poor woman to be reared as her own and paid no more attention to him. The baby came to be called Richard Savage. His maternal grandmother and his godmother took enough interest in him to pay for his care and his education, but because his mother stated that he had died, Rivers made no provision for him in his will. Thus, Richard Savage lost a legacy of six thousand pounds. Then, Savage's mother tried to have him sent to the American plantations and, failing that, had him apprenticed to a shoemaker. When his nurse died, Savage found among her papers evidence showing who he really was. He began an unsuccessful lifelong campaign, which alternated pleas and vilification, to be recognized and supported by his mother.

Savage must have had considerable charm, for he was helped by the writers Sir Richard Steele and Aaron Hill and the actress Anne Oldfield, who were impressed by his talent for writing and conversation. A short spurt of good fortune ended when Savage was implicated in a murder, tried, found guilty, and condemned to death. His mother obstructed his friends' efforts to get him a reprieve, but eventually he received a royal pardon.

The patronage of Lord Tyrconnel, his supposed cousin, enabled Savage to return to society and made him a literary lion. Yet Savage's frequent drunkenness, outrageous behavior, and sale of a set of books that Tyrconnel had lent him caused a split between them and the end of Tyrconnel's financial support. Savage, ever resilient, addressed Queen Charlotte as her "Volunteer Laureate" in a

poem on her birthday and succeeded in getting a small annual pension from her. When that, or any other money came his way, Savage spent it on wine and jollity, and soon he was without any money, and often without food or shelter. His friends proposed that he go to Wales, where he could write and live cheaply. After a year, however, he was back in London, living in dissipation and want. His friends, their funds and their patience exhausted, let him be taken to Newgate Prison, where at least he would have shelter from the elements. For six months, all went well. Savage was well treated by his jailers. He received visits from his friends and continued to write. In the summer of 1743, however, he became ill and died within a few weeks.

In the *Life of Richard Savage*, Johnson discusses briefly some of Savage's works, such as *The Wanderer* (1729) and *The Bastard* (1728), two poems concerned mainly with Savage's own life and misfortunes; *An Author to Be Let* (1729), a pamphlet that unwisely satirized nearly everyone in the literary establishment of the day; and two poems, *The Volunteer Laureate* (1732, the already-mentioned birthday poem addressed to the queen) and *London and Bristol Compared* (1744), which Johnson quotes in full. Savage's writings were striking, original, and dignified, says Johnson. They might be faulted for uniformity and occasional harshness of style, but they were nonetheless remarkable performances, considering the unfavorable circumstances under which they were written.

Johnson is more interested in discussing Savage's character than his writings. This bent is particularly obvious at the end of the account, where he points out Savage's virtues and abilities, as well as his vices and weaknesses. Savage did not look like a ruffian. His manner was dignified, his mind was strong and agile, his conversation was stimulating, and his judgment of literature and people was sound. He was often compassionate and generous. Yet he was a waster of his own considerable talents, a slave to his passions, and a victim of dissipation. He was unreliable. He was inordinately vain of his abilities and his writings.

Johnson does not condemn Savage or allow others, especially those "who have slumber'd away their time on the down of affluence," to speak ill of Savage or his writings. Instead, Savage's accomplishments should be an inspiration to those who also suffer deprivation or a lesson to those who do

not, showing that imprudence and dissipation “make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.”

## THE VANITY OF HUMAN WISHES

**First published:** 1749

**Type of work:** Poem

*Human efforts can do nothing to achieve security or happiness, but heavenly wisdom can create calm and happiness that humankind cannot achieve alone.*

*The Vanity of Human Wishes: The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated* was published eleven years after *London*. It, too, is a long poem. It consists of twenty-five stanzas of varying lengths, written in heroic couplets. It is also concerned with morality. Its rhetorical style is similar to that of *London*: It also has a speaker who uses the same kind of personifications, the same kind of pointed sentences, the same kind of figures of speech as Johnson’s earlier poem. Yet *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is a more philosophical poem than *London*. Its scope is larger and its manner is more mature.

The poem opens with a magniloquent invitation from a speaker stationed above and beyond the earth to “Let Observation, with extensive View/ Survey Mankind, from *China* to *Peru*” to see how, in the whole inhabited world, various patterns of destruction thwart human efforts. The eye can discern the wavering of an individual who pursues a dangerous solitary course, as well as the larger movements resulting from the sinking of whole nations. The scene encompasses the entire human condition, from humble to exalted. It also takes in the whole of human history, which, from earliest times, was preoccupied with a single question: Can human beings achieve security, fortune, and happiness? Until close to the end of the poem, the answer is no.

The reader is presented with a series of portraits, arranged in what seems to be an order of increasing mischance, of splendid and ambitious persons, such as Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Charles XII of Sweden, and Xerxes I, who meet with defeat and shame by merest accident. These alternate

with vignettes of nameless and typical figures who are also undone by life. Life’s anonymous victims include the scholar, like Johnson himself, whose desire for knowledge and fame is destroyed by “Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.” The rich old man who hopes to buy health and a fresh appetite for enjoyment instead acquires heirs who hope soon to get their hands on his estate. The ambitious mother who thought beauty, rather than virtue, would help her children to advance sees them destroyed because of it.

The multiplication of images, which is accompanied by an increasing complexity of language, also suggests rising tension. The compression of human problems in the question near the end of the poem, “Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,/ Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?” indicates not merely the compounded horror of the human condition but also a tension that is nearly unbearable. The distance between the speaker and the reader is diminished. Also, the distance from what the speaker and the reader see is eliminated, so that both are on the verge of the fate that they witness.

For Johnson, the only possible answer is found in resignation based on religious hope and prayer that asks for love, patience, and faith. With these three, “celestial wisdom” creates the gift of calm and happiness that the human mind cannot obtain on its own.

## RASSELAS, PRINCE OF ABYSSINIA

**First published:** 1759

**Type of work:** Philosophical tale

*Rasselas leaves his birthplace, the Happy Valley, to find a life that will ensure happiness, but he decides at length that he has searched in vain.*

*Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, Johnson’s most famous work, was written rapidly to pay the expenses of his mother’s funeral and published anonymously. It tells in forty-nine brief chapters what seems at first to be a simple story with a clear moral. A young prince, Rasselas, is imprisoned in his Abyssinian birthplace, the Happy Valley. It is a paradise



surrounded by mountains, which, once left, cannot be reentered. Although his life seems perfect, Rasselas is nonetheless bored and unhappy. He manages to escape from his home together with his tutor, Imlac, his sister, Nekayah, and her maid, Pekuah. They set out for Cairo on a quest for a kind of life that will bring happiness.

Rasselas soon discovers that happiness cannot be found among pleasure-seeking young men, learned older men, Stoic philosophers, hermits, or heads of government. His sister, Nekayah, who looked for happiness in private life, found only empty-headed cheerfulness in the daughters of the families that she visited, discord between parents and children, and often discord between spouses. Imlac then proposes that they visit the Pyramids to look for the secret of happiness in the past. When they arrive, Nekayah's maid, Pekuah, afraid of being closed in forever, balks at entering and so is left outside while the others make their explorations. Yet when Rasselas, Nekayah, and Imlac emerge into daylight, Pekuah is missing. She has been kidnapped by Arab horsemen. For the first time, Rasselas, and especially Nekayah, experience real loss and genuine unhappiness.

After seven months, Pekuah is returned unharmed to her mistress. The group happily returns again to Cairo. There, Rasselas announces an intention to devote himself to the life of a scholar. Imlac tells about a scholar whom he knows, an astronomer who seems happy but, upon closer acquaintance, proves to be mad and to believe firmly that he is in control of the weather and the seasons. The astronomer, in fact, is attempting to name Imlac his successor as controller of weather and the seasons. After the young people meet the old astronomer and converse with him, however, his sanity, and also his unhappiness, returns.

What they had seen and done outside the Happy Valley had given Rasselas, Nekayah, and Pekuah a measure of experience that they had not had before and desires they knew could not be fulfilled. At

the end of the tale, in "The Conclusion, in Which Nothing Is Concluded," Pekuah wishes to become prioress of an order of pious women; Nekayah, to found a college of learned women; Rasselas, to become a just ruler. None of these is immediately within grasp, so the three, together with Imlac and the old astronomer, decide to return to Abyssinia as soon as possible. They will not, however, be able to reenter the Happy Valley.

*Rasselas* is not a novel. It is not concerned with so-called real life, but with symbolic action. Its central problem, how and where happiness can be found, is never directly answered, but instead it is considered and reconsidered with increasing refinement from different viewpoints. Its characters, for all of their admirable goals and delicate tastes, are not rounded persons but representative types. They are aids in complicating and clarifying happiness. They show that efforts to obtain happiness are futile, but also that, as in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, happiness can be conferred or received as a gift.

In *Rasselas*, Johnson is, of course, the teller of the tale and often, perhaps, in the figure of Imlac, the wise man. Imlac is comically enthusiastic about his learned interests and would talk forever if not stopped. Yet he is also the character in the tale best equipped to find a solution to the problem of happiness. Imlac is a quintessential teacher, tireless, and, like Johnson, generous. He donates the results of a whole lifetime of activity and thought for Rasselas's benefit. He sees to it that Rasselas and his party avoid obvious foolishness, that they experience whatever good is at hand, and that they consider all available possibilities before they make decisions.

*Rasselas* has often been compared with Voltaire's *Candide: Ou, Optimisme* (1759; *Candide: Or, All for the Best*, 1759; also as *Candide, Or, The Optimist*, 1762), another philosophical tale dating from 1759 and concerned with the problem of finding happiness. Voltaire recommends "cultivating one's garden" as a solution to humankind's difficulties. He does not promise bliss as an outcome of this activity, but rather contentment. Yet Johnson is more pessimistic and more scrupulous than Voltaire. In *Rasselas*, humankind is in a more precarious situation than in *Candide*, more like that of "helpless Man" at the end of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, but without the possibility of a religious solution to the problem. In



*Rasselas*, nothing is entirely within human control, not even the cultivation of a small parcel of land. Impossibilities are everywhere, and trouble can lurk even in the most featureless landscape.

### SUMMARY

No longer considered as a man notable merely because of his eccentric personal mannerisms and interesting talks, Samuel Johnson at last has come into his own as one of the greatest English writers of the eighteenth century. His range is broad. He is a large-souled poet, an incisive essayist, a careful and energetic editor, a pioneer in the art of biography, and a profound moralist. His achievements also include the first *A Dictionary of the English Language* based on scientific principles and a body of literary criticism, which later critics ignore at their peril.

Johnson's special appeal lies in his psychological depth, his integrity, and his love and pity for humankind. These qualities continue to speak to the minds and hearts of readers.

Margaret Duggan

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Compare Samuel Johnson's motivation in his works concerning, respectively, Richard Savage and Dr. Robert Levet.
- Juvenalian satire was important in the eighteenth century. Compile a list of Juvenalian elements in Johnson's *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.
- Examine the lexicographical achievement of Johnson. Mention practices still used and those no longer attempted by dictionary makers.
- What traits of Johnson's personality made him an outstanding subject for the kind of biography James Boswell was able to write?
- Examine Johnson's assessment of human nature as revealed in his essays.
- How does Johnson show himself to be "more scrupulous" in *Rasselas* than Voltaire in *Candide* (1759)?

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## ELIZABETH JOLLEY

**Born:** Birmingham, Warwickshire (now in West Midlands), England  
June 4, 1923

**Died:** Perth, Western Australia, Australia  
February 13, 2007

*A preeminent Australian writer, Jolley is known primarily for her novels; she also achieved distinction for numerous short stories, radio plays, and personal essays.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Monica Elizabeth Jolley was born in Birmingham, Warwickshire, England, on June 4, 1923. Her mother, Margarethe von Fehr, had been teaching in Vienna when she met Charles Knight, a science teacher and Quaker relief worker, just after World War I. The couple moved to England, where Elizabeth and her sister were born and lived in the industrial Midlands area. The fact that her father had been imprisoned during the war for refusing to fight, strongly influenced Jolley's values, as did her early schooling, first at home and later at a Quaker boarding school near Oxford.

Jolley trained as a nurse at St. Thomas Hospital in London and Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. She worked at various hospitals, including an orthopedic hospital during World War II. She married Leonard Jolley, a librarian, and in 1959 the couple and their three children immigrated to Australia, where Leonard helped to establish the library of the University of Western Australia in Perth. Jolley had been writing since childhood, and as an adult she worked as a real estate agent, domestic worker, lecturer, and tutor and conducted writing workshops in prisons and community centers. She also raised geese and cultivated a small orchard.

Jolley's first published works were short stories, collected in *Five Acre Virgin, and Other Stories* in 1976 and in *The Travelling Entertainer, and Other Stories* in

1979. With the publication in 1980 of her first novel, *Palomino*, Jolley won recognition as a novelist of unusual originality and unconventional tragic-comedy. She published many other novels between 1981 and 2001, including *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), *Foxybaby* (1985), *The Well* (1986), *The Sugar Mother* (1988), *Cabin Fever* (1990), *The Orchard Thieves* (1995), and *An Innocent Gentleman* (2001).

*Central Mischief: Elizabeth Jolley on Writing, Her Past, and Herself*, a collection of her essays and other nonfiction writing, appeared in 1992. In addition to numerous awards for stories and for a radio drama, Jolley won the Western Australian Week Awards, was named senior fellow of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, received the South Wales Premier's Prize for fiction, earned an Australian Bicentennial Authority National Literary Commission to write *The Sugar Mother*, and was awarded an honorary doctorate from Western Australia Institute of Technology. She died on February 13, 2007.

### ANALYSIS

A close observer of people and a skillful creator of plot, Jolley once said that she always began her fiction with her characters. In an interview conducted by Ray Willbanks in 1991, Jolley described the way her fiction developed, explaining that she did not write anything until she had "her people." She then placed these people into a confrontation or some other circumstance and continued from there. The conflict in Jolley's novels often results when one of the characters demands too much, or

does not give enough, or when a relationship is challenged from without. "I'm very interested to observe that there are many relationships that really cannot stand an intruder," Jolley said. She added that such intrusion could occur in numerous circumstances—in ordinary superficial relations, in families, or in a close relationship.

These principles were put to work in all of Jolley's fiction. For example, in *The Sugar Mother*, a stuffy, middle-aged professor is married to a high-spirited, insensitive obstetrician who refuses to have a child, even though the professor desperately wants one. The conflict deepens when the wife goes abroad on a yearlong fellowship. Intruders enter the story at this point—a buxom, seemingly innocent young woman and her wickedly conniving mother, who confuses the word "surrogate" with "sugar." When the pair impose themselves on the unwitting professor with a scheme to provide him with the child he wants, a bizarre situation ensues, both comic and tragic.

Jolley is especially concerned with the outsider, the misfit, the exile, the lonely, and the solitary. In her experience, Australia abounded in such types, and she found them in her native England as well. Her fiction is filled with people whose seemingly ordinary lives are quietly desperate and tragic. The story "Supermarket Pavanne," for example, tells of the solitary life of Miss Mallone, who kidnaps a small lost boy and embarks on a fantasy that never makes quite clear what is imaginary, what is real, what is sane, and what is not.

Jolley described her fictional method as one of writing short pieces of dialogue, snatches of scenes, and brief descriptions of people or places on separate small pieces of paper. She collected these papers in manila folders in no particular order until she was ready to assemble and arrange the bits and pieces into a kind of structure, like a map. As she went along, she discovered more about her characters, what happens to them, what they say or think. Often much rearranging, adding, subtracting, and changing occurred before the final work took shape, and that work usually was nonlinear because Jolley liked to play with chronological order. There might be references and cross-references, foreshadowings and flashbacks, repetitions and variations.

Nature and landscape are of primary importance in Jolley's fiction. The barren bush, the thou-

sands of acres of wheatfields, the weather, trees, and plants—all are ordinary, yet very significant in paralleling characters' thoughts and feelings. Examples of such elements can be found in almost everything Jolley has written.

Jolley often mixes the real with the imaginary, such as fantasy, untruthfulness, deliberate deceit, or total lack of awareness of what is happening to another character. She is fond of the framing device, of telling stories within stories. For example, in the novel *Foxybaby*, Miss Alma Porch is hired to direct a drama workshop at a summer weight-loss program deep in the sparsely inhabited wheatfields of Western Australia. Miss Porch uses her own unfinished story as a text. As she recounts her story to her pupils for them to act out, they become absorbed in it, and their lives are intermingled with the lives of the characters in the story that Miss Porch is making up as she goes along.

In *Foxybaby*, Jolley's mixing of the poignant and the ridiculous gets full play. Many of her books contain this element, which may startle, disturb, and even shock. Jolley's awareness of the comic side of tragedy is one of her most distinctive trademarks.

Jolley enables her readers to participate in her fiction, as do the characters in *Foxybaby*. Her works often have open endings, enabling the reader to create his or her own resolution to the story. This device, according to the author, "leaves the reader with something to hope for." This method may initially puzzle and dissatisfy readers, but once they realize what Jolley is doing and why, their enjoyment and entertainment grow as they are allowed—in fact, invited—to take part in the story in an active, imaginative way. The novel *Cabin Fever* uses many of the devices and techniques described above—the lonely, bewildered, entrapped main character; the shifting of time from one dimension to another; narration in the form of dialogue and interior monologue; and the entirely open ending.

In "Self Portrait," a kind of epilogue to a collection of her stories, Jolley explained why the theme of exile was important to her, detailing some of her earliest memories. Her mother had come from Austria shortly after World War I. Jolley recalls her mother's contempt for England, which she had imagined as being composed of castles and country estates, but which instead was urban, industrial, dirty, and mean. "Perhaps my vicarious experience of homesickness and exile started, without any



knowledge or understanding, from the early memories of incomprehensible unhappiness,” Jolley wrote.

Being sent away to boarding school at the age of eleven made her an outsider and exile as well. Other experiences—in training hospitals, in her newly adopted country, in her varied kinds of work—intensified her feelings of isolation. “Perhaps the writer,” Jolley wrote, “in writing, overcomes and accepts feelings of exclusion.” She insisted that she did not write about people she had known or events she had witnessed, but clearly her experiences colored her attitudes, just as her omnivorous reading led to her love of the English language, which she used in a spare, straightforward, seemingly simple and artless style. In her memories and in her manila folders, Jolley stored the images of coal mines, the Cotswolds, the Scottish moors, and her Australian surroundings. She felt that encountering and accepting strange territory was a necessary part of learning to be a writer.

In any appraisal of twentieth century fiction, Jolley is judged as one of the leading fiction writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century. On her death in 2007, she was compared to such notable authors as Flannery O’Connor, Edgar Allan Poe, Evelyn Waugh, and Barbara Pym.

## “THE PERFORMANCE”

**First published:** 1979 (collected in *The Travelling Entertainer, and Other Stories*, 1979)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In a hospital for the emotionally ill, a troubled man tells a sympathetic fellow patient about his life without realizing how much love and selflessness his story reveals about him.*

“The Performance” is included in the collection *The Travelling Entertainer, and Other Stories*. Jolley wrote and published many short stories before her first novel, *Palomino*, found a publisher; by then she was a popular writer of short fiction. Her stories have appeared in more than twenty anthologies.

“The Performance” contains many of the elements that are characteristic of Jolley’s writing. To begin, she uses a framing device: a narrator who is

ostensibly recounting the tale told to him by a confused, anxious man who has just been admitted to the hospital. The narrator tells just enough about himself to give the reader some understanding of his personality and the trouble that has brought him to the hospital (to be “cured” of homosexuality). The way the narrator responds to the man is a kind of performance, a term that is used again and again with a number of meanings; it is the central metaphor of the story.

The structure of the story is also typical of Jolley. The man does not recount events in strict sequence but skips around in time, with one memory reminding him of another. Jolley weaves her story as if it were made up of different strands of yarn—the present, the recent past, the distant past, and the present again, with several permutations of this pattern. It is not until the end of the story that the narrator begins to get a glimmer of understanding of what the man has been trying to tell him.

First, the man talks about his conviction that every work carries its own measure of responsibility, a key idea in the story. Little by little, in a confused and troubled way, he tells of his wife, Charmian, who is a teacher, one who gets ready to teach as if she were preparing for a performance. She is young, full of vitality and excitement, but the man realizes that she thinks of him as “dilapidated, a derelict.” He is only fifty-one, but because his wife treats him like an old man, he feels like one. He is a postman who is having trouble delivering the mail before darkness falls, so he begins to hide it and lose it.

Formerly, the man was a farmer, and he tells of the terrible time when his mother was killed by a branch that he was cutting. He naturally felt responsible. He deeply misses the farm that he once owned. Sometimes he goes back to the deserted place, saying that his feelings “exceed the boundaries of any possible performance.” In addition to his wife, his children live as if their lives were a performance, a competition.

Finally, he tells of a poor, very old woman, rumored to be a witch, who used to ask him every day if he had a letter for her from her son in England. The letter finally arrived, but the old woman was no longer able to comprehend, inhabiting a crazy world of her own until she was run over and crushed by a car. The man feels responsible because he did not look out for her, as he felt respon-

sible for his mother's death, and as he feels responsible for meeting his wife's need for him to be an audience, even though she no longer loves him. Despite the complex structure of the story, it has perfect clarity and coherence, with a strongly delineated main character and an underlying tone of deep disappointment and courage.

As in much of Jolley's work, the ending is open. It is left to the reader to imagine what will happen to the man. He has told his new friend a tale of exile, loneliness, sorrow, and despair. His own story is a kind of performance. Yet his words are so simple and his feelings so strong that the reader is left pondering the possibilities that remain for this kindly, selfless, extremely likable man.

### MISS PEABODY'S INHERITANCE

**First published:** 1983

**Type of work:** Novel

*A spinster's dull, grim life is transformed when she begins a correspondence with a writer who sends her pages from her novel-in-progress, leading to a confusion between reality and fantasy.*

*Miss Peabody's Inheritance* is Elizabeth Jolley's fourth novel. It was an instant critical and popular success, being short-listed for the New South Wales Premier's Prize, a signal achievement even though it did not win the top award.

Dorothy Peabody is a sixtyish typist in a large London firm, where she has worked for almost forty years. Her uneventful life is a dreary round of caring for her demanding, bedridden mother, riding a train to London, working mindlessly all day, taking another train home, and repeating the previous night's chores of getting her mother ready for the night, after the neighbor who cared for her during the day has departed.

Nothing varies this dull existence until Dorothy writes an adulatory letter to an Australian writer named Diana Hopewell, author of *Angels on Horseback*, a trashy romance with vaguely erotic undertones that Dorothy does not understand. Astonishingly, Miss Hopewell replies, describing her exciting life on a beautiful farm, interspersing pages from her work-in-progress, and asking Dor-

othy about her personal life. A lively correspondence ensues, and Dorothy's depressing life becomes exciting and suspenseful as she looks forward to receiving the letters and answering them.

The novel has multiple narrators, none of them reliable, as Jolley uses the novel-within-a-novel structure to tell three separate stories—what Miss Hopewell tells of her life, what Dorothy replies, and the excerpts from Diana's book about three middle-aged unmarried ladies of very respectable demeanor in public but dubious morals in private. The three women embark on their annual holiday in Europe, encumbered by a shy, motherless sixteen-year-old girl who has nowhere to go when school is closed for vacation (one of the ladies being a headmistress).

The sections dealing with the three women and their young companion are written in the present tense, giving the reader a sense of actuality and immediacy. As Dorothy Peabody reads and rereads these sections, she gradually comes to believe that what she is reading is actually happening. As fantasy impinges on her own life, she begins to behave in ways that are totally unlike her. The sudden death of her mother hardly creates a ripple in her routine, to which she has added joining the office workers in their Friday gatherings at a nearby pub. Not surprisingly, Dorothy cannot handle alcohol, and her behavior at these social affairs becomes more and more erratic and weird, culminating in an arrest for drunkenness. As a result, Mr. Bains, second-in-command at the office, offers Dorothy a three-month holiday, believing that the death of her mother has deranged her.

Dorothy has been looking for the three women friends, who are supposed to be winding up their holiday in London. When she fails to find them and realizes that they are probably on their way home now, she accepts Mr. Bains's offer and embarks for Australia to visit her novelist friend. On the plane, she writes her last letter to her friend. The next scene reveals that Diana Hopewell has just died, in the middle of a sentence. There is no beautiful ranch, just a nursing home and a kindly matron who consoles Dorothy in her disappointment, which does not last long. She realizes that she need not make the effort to go to see Diana's farm. All she needs to do is get hold of a typewriter, gather up the pages of the novel that Miss Hope-

well bequeathed to her, and “enter into her inheritance.”

“So much depends in the writing of a novel,” Diana Hopewell had written, “on the impact of the imagination on someone else.” In this sentence, Jolley states clearly the controlling idea of the novel about Miss Peabody. Earlier in the story, Diana had written to Dorothy, “If you feel emotionally involved that is natural. . . . The writing is packed, it is dense writing, emotions on several levels packed in. It is, I hope, a novel of existence and feeling. A reader can be as involved as he wishes and some readers will fight off this involvement. Don’t worry. Read on.” Obviously Miss Hopewell’s is not the only novelist’s voice speaking.

In this early novel, as in those that followed, Jolley aims to involve the reader who is willing to participate in the novel, and she demonstrates her ability to gather the reader into the story so that such involvement is possible. Again, the ending is open. Will Miss Peabody finish the novel or will she sink into dementia? One cannot help wondering as well about those improbably respectable women and the young girl who shocked them by falling in love with, and becoming engaged to, the elderly father of one of her schoolmates.

## CABIN FEVER

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Novel

*An eminent psychological consultant is unable to leave her hotel room on the twenty-fourth floor as she relives her troubled and miserable past.*

In *Cabin Fever*, Jolley recounts the life of a young woman named Vera Wright. Telling the story entirely from the point of view of the first-person narrator, Jolley explores the nature of memory, as she has done in many of her novels. In this book she shows her mastery of the narrative devices she has developed, as well as the natural, straightforward style that is characteristic of her writing.

The book opens in the present, with Vera Wright sitting in her room on the twenty-fourth floor of a hotel in New York, where she is scheduled to deliver a paper at a conference entitled “Perspectives on Moral Insanity.” Other papers listed in the pro-

gram include “Symptoms of Panic Disorder” and “New Discoveries About Diabetes and Anorexia.” Vera appears to be suffering from some of the symptoms that she is supposed to objectively discuss at this conference of physicians, psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, and other health care workers. She knows that she should be meeting and talking with her fellow conferees, but instead she seems to be paralyzed by memories: her parents, her friends at the hospital where she trained to be a nurse, her first lover, and various people for whom she worked while trying to rear her daughter. These jobs include assisting in a home for new mothers, working in a progressive boarding school, and finally acting as a live-in housekeeper for a fifty-eight-year-old professor and his much older sister.

The foregoing summary suggests a neat, chronological succession of characters and incidents, but the story is told in the way that memory works. As Jolley herself writes: “The revival,” (of persons, places, incidents), “is not in any particular order, and one recalled picture, attaching itself to another, is not recognizably connected to another in spite of its being brought to the surface in the wake of the first recollection.” Thus the story is told in a circuitous fashion, with no semblance of chronological order, and yet, because the main components of Vera’s life are mentioned and described and dramatized through dialogue and her own musings, the story begins to be clear and the experiences she underwent are gradually made comprehensible.

Vera’s parents are major figures in her memory. Her mother is a disappointed, critical, anxious woman, while her father is gentle, loving, and kind. (Jolley described her own parents in much the same way.) Two other important people are Dr. Jonathon Metcalf and his wife Magda, who use Vera for their own perverted and selfish pleasure, though she never seems to realize this.

Aside from the remembered (and one suspects sometimes imagined) conversations, the entire story consists of interior monologue and recollections, through which the reader comes to admire Vera’s courage, determination, naïveté, and humor.

The book ends as it began, with Vera still self-imprisoned in her hotel room. She remembers (or imagines?) talking to someone coming to keep an

appointment that they “take the path through the pines from the station. It is both a shortcut and a pleasant little walk. A remedy.” These are the last words in the book, leaving the reader to ponder. While much of the novel seems clear enough, many questions remain unanswered. There is, for example, an untold part to Vera’s story—how she overcame her poverty and helplessness, acquired the education necessary to become an important personage in her field, and reached the stature of one to whom “people come to consult . . . about what worries them.” Are the woman in the hotel room and the young Vera Wright the same person? In the early pages of the book, the narrator remarks, “a ruthless self-examination is needed.” This idea is not clearly connected to what precedes or follows it, yet it seems to be a related and significant clue to what the book is about.

Jolley invites the reader to participate in the story, to allow one’s own imagination and insight to operate in a collaboration with the author, adding speculation and reflection to enhance the overall effect of the novel.

## THE WELL

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*Hester Harper, a lame spinster who cares for her ailing father, brings Katherine, an orphan, into her father’s house to live with them. Following the father’s death, the two women become involved in a bizarre, almost supernatural, event.*

Hester Harper has a distinct limp. She leads an isolated existence on the farm of her father, who when the story opens is an old man. He soon dies. Perhaps to relieve her isolation and loneliness, possibly for more arcane reasons, such as a suppressed lesbianism, she brings an orphan, Katherine, into her father’s house. Jolley often wrote about people who have lost their mothers, as she had lost hers.

When Hester’s father dies, she and Katherine continue to live together in his house. They have a compatible relationship, but it is somewhat compromised by a fantastic event. The two women have gone to a dance and are on their way home follow-

ing it. Hester is driving, and in the darkness she runs down something in the road, presumably a man. The two women, unnerved by what has happened, dump the limp object Hester has run down into a well that is no longer used as a source of water. It becomes a symbol of suppressed sexuality.

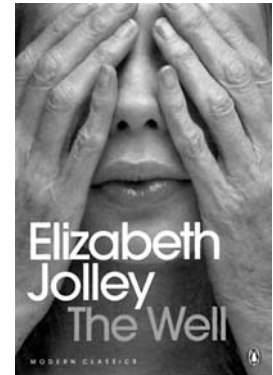
Jolley depicts with incredible detail and psychological accuracy the panic, verging on hysteria, the two women experience after this traumatic occurrence. After dropping the object into the well, Hester then concludes that they have hit a man who has stolen money from her. She thereupon orders Katherine to descend into the well to retrieve her missing money.

Katherine refuses to go down into the well. She tells Hester that the man they have disposed of is still alive. In fact, Katherine has spoken with him, and, in a bizarre twist, he has proposed marriage to her. As in much of Jolley’s writing, reality gives way to fantastic events well outside the normal bounds of reality, but Jolley handles this departure from normality deftly, so that in crossing the line, she does not lose her readers.

## SUMMARY

In a sense, all of Elizabeth Jolley’s fiction is about how one’s feelings about people, places, and facts affect one’s perception of them. This subjectivity extends even to the reader’s perception of the story. The elements that constitute Jolley’s writing include narrative methods that do not follow a chronological line and characters who tend to be outsiders—exiles, misfits, the questionably sane, and lonely, disregarded, apparently ordinary people. Humor, as well as pathos, is a strong characteristic of Jolley’s writing; she once said, “I can’t help seeing the ridiculous side of everything.” A simple, natural, straightforward style tends to contrast with the eccentric, bizarre, or weird characters that inhabit much of her work. Jolley hoped that her readers would be creative, imaginative people. Reading Jolley is not a passive activity, but it is a very rewarding one.

*Natalie Harper; updated by R. Baird Shuman*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- It has been said that in the fiction of Elizabeth Jolley "it is entirely normal to be abnormal." Discuss this statement in terms of the fiction you have read by Jolley.
- What role do personal isolation and alienation play in the fiction you have read by Jolley?
- Jolley is noted for engaging her readers actively in her fiction. Discuss some methods she uses to achieve this end.
- What use does Jolley make of a narrator in staging some of her stories? How does this affect her point of view?
- Discuss how Jolley teeters between reality and fantasy in her writing.



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## BEN JONSON

**Born:** London, England  
June 11, 1573

**Died:** London, England  
August 6, 1637

*A celebrated playwright and poet, Jonson is best known for his satirical comedies, lucid lyrics, and incisive critical opinions.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Jonson, posthumous son of a minister, was born in or near London, England, on June 11, 1573. He received an excellent foundation in classical letters at Westminster School under headmaster William Camden, a famous scholar. Although unable to continue his education at a university, he was an avid reader and on his own became a serious student of classical language and literature. For a time, Jonson followed his stepfather's bricklaying trade, but in 1591 he went to the Low Countries to fight in the army. According to his own account, he bravely killed a foe in view of both the English and enemy camps.

Jonson returned to London in 1592, and two years later married Anne Lewis. In the next year or two, he began a career as actor and playwright. He soon got into trouble. In 1597, he was jailed for his part in *The Isle of Dogs* (pr. 1597), a play that the authorities considered subversive, and the next year killed a fellow actor, Gabriel Spencer, in a duel. His goods were confiscated, and he was branded on the thumb and jailed. While in prison, he converted to Roman Catholicism but later returned to the Anglican faith.

By the start of the seventeenth century, Jonson's reputation as a satirical comedian was well established. He rejected the fashionable romantic comedy and, starting with *Every Man in His Humour* (pb. 1601), staged in 1598, began writing scathing at-

tacks on human vices such as greed, lust, and envy. *Every Man in His Humour* was followed by *Every Man out of His Humour* (pr. 1599, pb. 1600), *Cynthia's Revels: Or, The Fountain of Self-Love* (pr. c. 1600-1601; pb. 1601), and *Poetaster: Or, His Arraignment* (pr. 1601, pb. 1602), all in the new satirical vein.

Jonson wrote for both adult and children's acting companies, and from 1600 to 1602 he participated in the famous war of the theaters, a conflict involving the Elizabethan playwrights John Marston, Thomas Dekker, and Jonson. He also became well known for his courtly masques created in collaboration with the architect Inigo Jones. Although best at writing satirical comedy, Jonson also wrote tragedy, producing two of significance, *Sejanus His Fall* (pr. 1603, pb. 1605; commonly known as *Sejanus*) and *Catiline His Conspiracy* (pr., pb. 1611; commonly known as *Catiline*), which use classical models.

In 1605, with James I on the throne, Jonson was back in jail. He voluntarily joined his collaborators on *Eastward Ho!* (pr., pb. 1605), which had been found offensive for its ridicule of Scots. That same year, he assisted the Privy Council in its inquiries into the Gunpowder Plot, an ill-devised Catholic scheme to blow up Parliament.

The richest period of Jonson's dramatic writing was between 1605, when *Volpone: Or the Fox* (pr. 1605, pb. 1607) was first produced, and 1616, when his collected plays and poetry were published in *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson. Epicæne: Or, The Silent Woman* (pr. 1609, pb. 1616), *The Alchemist* (pr. 1610, pb. 1612), *Bartholomew Fair* (pr. 1614, pb. 1631), and *The Devil Is an Ass* (pr. 1616, pb. 1631) were all penned in that decade.

Jonson then abandoned writing plays for almost ten years. A royal pension allowed him some leisure time for other activities. In 1618, he took a walking tour of Scotland and visited the poet William Drummond of Hawthornden, in whom he confided some of his more biting critical opinions. The following year, recognizing Jonson as a scholar and writer of importance, Oxford granted him an honorary degree.

In 1625, two years after a fire had destroyed his library, Jonson returned to writing plays. He did not, however, regain his earlier form. His most famous dramatic works belong to the fruitful period between 1598 and 1616. His last well-known comedy, *The Staple of News* (pr. 1626, pb. 1631), was produced in 1626, at the very start of his return to playwriting. From then until his death, he wrote what his detractors termed his “dotages,” but one fragmentary work, *The Sad Shepherd: Or, A Tale of Robin Hood*, published posthumously in 1640, is an engaging piece.

In 1628, when he was appointed city chronicler, Jonson was struck with paralysis, probably from a stroke. Thereafter, he largely remained confined to his quarters, where dedicated followers gathered and formed the “Sons of Ben.” These were mostly poets, influenced by Jonson’s verse, which they imitated. The period of his later masques, written for the court of Charles I from 1625 to 1635, was marked by a strained relationship with Jones. In 1631, they quarreled bitterly and ended their collaboration for good. Jonson’s reputation as an affable intellectual and arbiter of literary taste remained intact until his death on August 6, 1637, in London. He was buried in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey under the epitaph, “O Rare Ben Jonson,” testifying to the high esteem in which his contemporaries held him.

## ANALYSIS

One well-worn critical notion is that, although readers admire Ben Jonson, they love William Shakespeare. Jonson’s dramatic output in fact rivaled Shakespeare’s. He wrote nineteen plays, collaborated in several others, and crafted twenty-four courtly masques and entertainments. Yet despite Jonson’s great reputation among his contemporaries, his star has long been eclipsed by the phenomenal achievement of his great fellow dramatist and friend. Granted, Shakespeare’s genius is

unmatched by any of his contemporaries except in isolated instances, but no other lesser genius has been treated to such unfavorable comparisons with Shakespeare as Jonson has. He was to a degree responsible for this turn of events. An outspoken critic, Jonson passed on some negative assessments of his older friend’s work that ultimately made him the target of unjust criticism by many admirers of Shakespeare.

In the prologue to the second version of *Every Man in His Humour*, Jonson presented a critical manifesto that has been wrongly interpreted as a personal attack on Shakespeare conceived in petty jealousy. Although Jonson does allude to Shakespeare’s use of the chorus in his *Henry V* (pr. c. 1598-1599, pb. 1600) plays, his real concern is with the violation of logic characteristic of the popular chronicle play, which, complained Jonson, would often cover the entire span of a character’s life in an obvious violation of classical rules. Jonson was simply rejecting the history play in general, preferring comedy, which could mirror the times and “sport with human follies, not with crimes.”

Clearly, Jonson’s neoclassical bias led him to rebuke the practices of the stage that went against his sense of propriety and reason. Jonson’s comedy, because it is didactic, naturally gravitates toward satire. Its purpose, to make people laugh at their own foolishness, is corrective; hence, in Jonson’s greatest plays, including *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, the main characters are either tricksters who cheat fools or fools themselves. Jonson’s comic mode is thus very different from that of Shakespeare, who is only satirical incidentally.

Jonson also believed that the overdrawn, exaggerated, and flowery speech of many characters was too wearisome, and he preached writing in language that people actually used, including slang heard in the street. That demand would also put him at artistic odds with Shakespeare, who framed different styles of expression for an extraordinary range of characters. Jonson, while embracing the concept of the dramatic unities of time, place, and action, did not always follow it. In contrast, Shakespeare, who either did not entertain the idea or simply rejected it on some occasions, as in *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623), practiced it to perfection.

In his best dramatic work, Jonson is a brilliant craftsman. His comedies are intrigue plays with complex designs, and for sheer stage razzle-dazzle,

they have few rivals. Jonson parades before the audience a succession of fools, brilliantly drawn and comically driven by some obsessive vice or “humor” that makes them fair game for crafty swindlers who prey on their weaknesses. That design becomes central in several of Jonson’s comedies, but the playwright’s genius was such that it never becomes merely formulaic.

Jonson’s susceptibility to criticism lies not in an inability to depict characters but in his disinterest in depicting sympathetic ones. Since his purpose was satirical, he seldom moves his focus away from tricksters and fools toward the more genial types found in the festive comedies of Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s comedies are triumphant and affirm life. Jonson’s comedies take a sour look at it. Within that limitation, and on his own terms, Jonson is a master playwright. His best works offer comic delight in their design. Once set in motion by the tricksters and driven by their own foolishness, the victims move with increasing rapidity through successive scenes until the action gets beyond the tricksters’ control. Resourceful though they may be, the overreaching tricksters end up being victimized by their own greed.

While Jonson is better known as a dramatist than lyrical poet, in the fashion of his own age, he undoubtedly viewed his poetry as his highest literary achievement. He is the primary figure in one of two major movements in poetry in the first half of the seventeenth century. The other movement, the so-called Metaphysical school, followed in the footsteps of John Donne. The “tribe” or “sons” of Ben emulated what Jonson preached and for the most part practiced.

Whereas the modern reader might have trouble reading Jonson’s comedies, which suffer somewhat from their topical word use, that same reader should find much of Jonson’s lyrical poetry remarkably clear. Unlike Donne and other Metaphysical poets, Jonson and his followers strove for clarity, symmetry, and simplicity in verse, which is classical in form and spirit. Except in a few pieces affecting the Metaphysical mode, Jonson’s poetry is free of the strained imagery and intricate thought of Donne and his followers.

Marked by decorum and restraint, Jonson’s lyrics are public and objective, cool and rational, urbane and polished. Many of his pieces are terse, notably his songs, epigrams, and epitaphs. They are

also didactic, sometimes satirical, even, at times, self-mocking. Marked by understatement and irony and purged of all emotional excess, some of his lyrics achieve an objective detachment that makes them seem cold. It is their pared down, uncomplicated statement that gives many of Jonson’s lyrics their modern tone.

Seconded by his critical opinions circulated among members of his group, Jonson’s poetry introduced a public poetry that would for a time gain ascendancy over the more private, subjective, and obscure verse of the Metaphysical poets. An important seminal figure in the classical movement, Jonson’s artistic tastes make him a parent of the neo-Augustan Age.

## VOLPONE

**First produced:** 1605 (first published, 1607)

**Type of work:** Play

*A Venetian “magnifico” who pretends to be dying in order to cheat greedy fortune hunters is undone by his own vanity.*

No work is more firmly bound to Jonson’s name than his great satirical verse comedy *Volpone*. It achieves the mastery of purpose claimed by the playwright and reflects his devotion to classical theories, but it remains a distressing comedy that defies easy interpretation.

The play’s predication is, however, quite simple. Volpone and his servant Mosca pretend that Volpone is dying and encourage Venetian fortune hunters to vie for Volpone’s favor in hopes of being named his heir. All visit Volpone, prompted by Mosca to bring gifts to convince Volpone of their kind concern for his health. Volpone is, of course, perfectly well, but he and Mosca put on such a good act that the legacy hunters are completely fooled. The greedy victims include Corbaccio, an old, deaf miser; Voltore, a conniving lawyer; Corvino, a rich merchant who jealously guards his young, attractive wife, Celia; and Lady Would-be, the wife of a ridiculous English knight.

Complications arise when Mosca convinces Corbaccio to claim that he is drawing up a new will disinheriting his son, Bonario, and naming Volpone his heir. After Corbaccio agrees, Mosca

taunts Bonario and challenges him to go to Volpone's house to overhear Corbaccio confirm the fact. Meanwhile, Volpone, who has been scheming to seduce Corvino's wife, has Mosca talk the foolish merchant into leaving Celia alone with Volpone, who then attempts to force himself on her. Bonario catches him in the act, rescues Celia, and denounces Volpone and Mosca.

Fearful that the game is ended, Volpone throws himself down in despair, but Mosca devises a new scheme to escape trouble. He convinces Corbaccio that his son is out to kill him, tells the suspicious Voltore that Bonario has made Celia swear that Volpone had raped her, and gets Corvino to denounce Celia as a lewd woman. Celia and Bonario, totally innocent, are brought to court, and through the testimony of the legacy hunters and Voltore's cunning, are found guilty in an obvious travesty of justice.

The pair of tricksters then go too far. Determined to vex the fools further, they spread the news that Volpone has died. Each would-be heir then comes to Volpone's house to claim the magnifico's legacy, only to be told that Mosca is the heir. Mosca knows that Volpone himself is now vulnerable and quickly makes plans to cheat him.

Seeking revenge on Mosca, the would-be heirs return to the court to claim that Bonario and Celia have been falsely charged and that Mosca has practiced criminal deceptions. Mosca is called to court, and when he refuses to confirm that Volpone is actually alive, he impels Volpone, disguised as an officer of the court, to reveal himself rather than be tricked. At last discovering the truth, the judges sentence both the tricksters and the fools to appropriate but very harsh, uncomic punishments. Mosca is to be whipped and sent to the galleys. Volpone, his wealth confiscated and given to a hospital for incurables, is to be imprisoned until he does in fact become sick and lame.

Jonson's work is based on a popular beast fable of the fox that feigned death, but its complexity

can be fully explained only by reference to the Roman institution of legacy hunting and such diverse works as *Aesop's Fables*, the Bible, and Desiderius Erasmus's *Morice encomium* (1511; *The Praise of Folly*, 1549). The comedy can also be seen as a morality play within its beast-fable guise. Volpone, like the fox pretending to be dead, traps unwary birds of prey, who are, of course, greedy men hoping to benefit from his death. Jonson's theme and real concern is the unnaturalness of sin. His strong moral intent is driven home by a constant reference to the beast fable in the speeches of Volpone and Mosca.

The dramatist's artistic purpose, as the play's prologue confirms, is to entertain and enlighten the audience while observing the unities of time, place, and action. Strictly speaking, however, Jonson violates his own artistic rules. The action all takes place in Venice within the course of a single day, but classical symmetry is destroyed by the inclusion of a subplot involving Sir Politic Would-be and his fellow Englishman, Peregrine.

The setting of the play, Venice, was probably chosen by Jonson for its reputation as a city full of carnival-like attractions, much like Jonson's own London. Volpone's household includes abnormal human pets, and at one point he disguises himself as a mountebank or quack to catch a glimpse of Celia. It is a Venice teeming with Renaissance life, zestful and curious, a magnet for English travelers such as Peregrine and the Would-bes.

The atmosphere is right for the deceit and trickery practiced by Volpone and Mosca on the callous, hypocritical legacy hunters. Volpone is, of course, no less perverse than his victims. In fact, his opening salutation to his gold, which he venerates as a saint, grotesquely distorts normal human values. As long as his victims are greedy fools, however, Volpone's ingenuity makes him more rogue than villain. Only when Bonario and Celia become enmeshed in his intrigue does he grow ripe for the comic unmasking that marks the play's grim finale.

*Volpone* works through an admirable use of sustained dramatic irony, which is a powerful theatrical device. The audience, recognizing the deceptions practiced by Volpone and Mosca, delights in their clever manipulation of their victims. The irony leads to some hilarious moments, as, for example, when Mosca prompts Corvino to vilify Volpone to his face after convincing him that the





fox is nearly in a coma, or the scene in which Mosca must yell at the deaf and feeble Corbaccio to get him to understand anything at all.

Threaded through the play, the farcical subplot of Sir Politic and Peregrine offers a humorous counterpoint to the fierce, unrelenting satire on compulsive greed in the main plot. In Sir Pol, Jonson pokes fun at harmless fanatics who find conspiracy afoot everywhere. Among other fantastic disclosures, Sir Pol tells Peregrine that he knows how to sell Venice to the Turks. After Peregrine becomes convinced that Sir Politic is actually a pimp for his wife, Lady Pol, he decides to get revenge on him. In the disguise of a merchant, he leads Sir Pol to believe that Peregrine is really a Venetian secret agent who now plans to arrest him. He then helps Sir Pol hide inside a ridiculous contraption made of a tortoise shell before revealing his true self and mocking the silly knight.

Sir Pol's asinine delusions and his fanciful "projects" are in the tradition of burlesque and mimicry, appropriate to the parrot, his beast-fable counterpart. Lady Pol, in the fortune hunt, is more directly related to the main plot, but she, too, is a mimic, aping the dress and manners of Venice and trying the Italian seduction game as if it were a mere extension of Venetian fashions. The topicality of the Sir Politic plot makes it easy to overlook its important function in the play. It contrasts English folly with Italian vice and adds texture and density to the whole. It also clarifies the relationship between vice and folly, showing how each is a species of the unnatural, which is, after all, Jonson's central, unifying theme.

## THE ALCHEMIST

**First produced:** 1610 (first published, 1612)

**Type of work:** Play

*A trio of London sharpers trick their greedy victims through clever manipulation and alchemical gibberish and mock rites.*

Like *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, also in verse, has a complex intrigue plot with a radial design. In both plays, there is a central place where deceit is practiced on a procession of fools. In *The Alchemist*, the setting is Lovewit's London house, where, in

Lovewit's absence, his butler Jeremy has invited a cheater, Subtle, and his whore, Doll, to set up shop as tricksters on a profit-sharing basis.

At the beginning of the play, Subtle and Jeremy haggle over their respective cuts, and Doll manages to restore peace at the moment that the first of the fools, Dapper, enters. He is a clerk whom Jeremy, as Captain Face, has encouraged to consult with "Doctor" Subtle. Dapper wants a familiar spirit to help him win at gambling. After telling him that he is related to the Queen of Fairy, the tricksters whisk him out in order to welcome the next victim, Drugger, a tobacconist who wants to use magic for arranging his shop properly. After he leaves, the tricksters spot Sir Epicure Mammon approaching. Jeremy quickly changes into his disguise as Lungs, Subtle's alchemical assistant, to welcome the knight and his friend, Surly.

What Sir Epicure wants, and Jeremy and Subtle have promised to deliver, is the "philosopher's stone," the end result of the alchemical process. The stone is supposed to have great power, offering its owner eternal youth and the ability to transform base metals into gold. Sir Epicure is a believer, but Surly is not, and no amount of alchemical mumbo jumbo changes his mind. Meanwhile, Sir Epicure is led to believe that Doll is a lord's sister driven mad by scholarship.

After getting rid of Sir Epicure and Surly, the tricksters bring in the Puritan Ananias, who wants the philosopher's stone to aid his cause. Ananias refuses to pay any more money without first seeing some results, and Jeremy indignantly throws him out. Drugger then returns and tells Subtle and Jeremy about Dame Pliant, a rich widow, and her brother, Kastril, prompting Subtle and Jeremy's great interest.

After Ananias returns with Tribulation Wholestone, and they are sent off to settle an ethical point, the other clients start parading in too quickly. For a moment, Subtle and Jeremy get rid of all but Dapper, whom they prepare for a visit from



the Queen of Fairy. They blindfold him, tie him to a chair, take his money, and begin pinching him as fairies. Interrupted by Sir Epicure knocking at the door, the rascals gag Dapper with gingerbread and lock him in a privy closet.

Jeremy as Lungs introduces Sir Epicure to Doll, then changes into his Captain Face uniform to welcome Kastril and Dame Pliant. Almost immediately Surly arrives, disguised as a Spanish don who speaks no English, which induces Subtle and Jeremy to insult him and openly confess their intentions to fleece him. Surly wants to see Doll, but since she is busy with Sir Epicure, they introduce him to Dame Pliant.

At this point, matters get totally out of control. Sir Epicure blunders by alluding to the philosopher's stone, which makes Doll spout passages from an obscure scholarly work. Jeremy, as Lungs, tries to quiet her, and Subtle, always feigning piety, pretends to be deeply affronted by Sir Epicure's lust. Meanwhile, Surly removes his Spanish disguise, denounces the tricksters, and proposes marriage to Dame Pliant. Jeremy, who as Face had been giving Kastril fighting lessons, tries to get him to challenge Surly, but Kastril will not fight. Ananias and Drugger arrive to add to the rout, and, as if to underscore the insanity, the alchemical project explodes.

The play draws to its complex unwinding with the return of Lovewit, who hears complaints from his neighbors. Jeremy at first tries to cover for the tricksters, but several of their victims return to confirm the neighbors' account of their going and coming. With the help of his chastised butler, Lovewit takes full advantage of the situation. Jeremy drives off Doll and Subtle, claiming their booty for his master. Lovewit then marries Dame Pliant, and when officers come to search his house, he promises that he will return the goods of any victims who certify how they lost them. Since the fools are unwilling to disclose their stupidity, Lovewit keeps everything.

As in *Volpone*, in *The Alchemist* Jonson investigates the relationship between tricksters and their victims. Yet the two plays are very different in tone. *The Alchemist* lacks the decadent atmosphere of the earlier play. The perversion of the opening scene in *Volpone* gives way in *The Alchemist* to the bawdy an-

tics of Subtle and Face, and the comic thrust never succumbs so completely to the moral degeneration that marks the darker moments of the former work. Unlike *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* seems to lack an organic, unified, and complete plot. Plot implies development in character or idea, but in *The Alchemist* characters undergo no changes, and the tricksters pay no penalty except the loss of their ill-gotten gains. The play develops as a series of redundant episodes in which the same theme is implicit from start to finish. Unlike *Volpone* and *Mosca*, however, the intriguers in *The Alchemist* deceive only fools deserving of their fate, and they therefore pay no harsh penalty.

The foolish victims are not interdependent. They duplicate and mirror each other, but they do not interact. They come together only by accident, not to work in concert, as Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino do in the trial scenes in *Volpone*. The only concerted efforts, always unstable, are made by the tricksters—Subtle, Face, and Doll. Characters of tremendous zest, they give the play its great appeal. All three share with *Volpone* and *Mosca* one important trait; greedy themselves, they also are comic overreachers who do not know when to quit. Although deft and resourceful, they cannot prevent their scheme from running beyond their control.

The central referent of the play is alchemy and its "grand work." It is a perfect emblem for the play's action, a metaphor for the bulging confidence scheme. By design, the play is tumultuous, with quick costume swapping and breathless sleight-of-hand activity that picks up, goes amiss, and finally undoes the trio of swindlers.

Jonson's dramatic technique, duplication, is carefully patterned in the play. Each of the fools approaches Jeremy and Subtle in the same way. Variety is found only in the nature of their problems. In each case, Jeremy and Subtle promise results, then subject the victim to deliberate neglect before the final cheating. The repeated pattern is a simple but clever dramatic device. To reduce the central import of *The Alchemist* to a blunt attack on human greed is to oversimplify its theme. As in *Volpone*, Jonson is attacking a human depravity that offends against God's creation, and his target is not merely a single vice but any impiety or false idol that perverts nature.

### “ON MY FIRST SON”

**First published:** 1616 (collected in *Epigrams*, 1616)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet addresses his deceased son in a brief elegy that includes an appropriate epitaph.*

In “On My First Son,” Jonson addresses his first-born son, also named Benjamin, who died of the plague in 1603. The poem is an epigram, modeled on those of the Roman poet Martial. It starts as a valediction or farewell using a poetic apostrophe, but it quickly becomes apparent that the son’s departure is eternal and that the poet is lamenting his death.

Jonson’s ideas in the poem reflect the influence of his models. Classical epitaphs often reiterated the idea of life as a sort of borrowing from fate. The poet claims that his son has only been “lent” to him, and with the boy’s death, fate has merely exacted payment of the debt “on the just day.” Also classical in origin is the implicit notion that excessive good luck could kindle the jealousy of the gods, and that knowing this, a wise man should not be too fond of what he loves.

Despite these classical underpinnings, Jonson’s poem does not violate Christian orthodoxy. In attempting to console himself, the grieving father notes that death is an enviable state, free of the ravages of the world and the flesh and an escape from old age. Jonson says that his sin lay in placing too much “hope” in his son, implying that his grief arises from selfish and presumptuous expectations. The poet ends by vowing never to like too much that which he loves.

A compact poem, “On My First Son” consists of only twelve lines in the form of six rhymed couplets. It compresses its thought with great economy of statement and tightly controlled syntax. The poem even threads in a brief epitaph—“here doth lie/ Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry”—which in its simplicity and ironic understatement suggests a profound depth of feeling. Jonson’s reserve at this point quickly dissolves into a sincere and poignant reflection that is the thematic center for the whole piece.

### “TO THE MEMORY OF MY BELOVED MASTER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, AND WHAT HE HATH LEFT US”

**First published:** 1623 (collected in *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*, 1640-1641)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet offers generous praise of William Shakespeare in lines commemorating his genius and his art.*

Jonson’s eighty-line tribute to Shakespeare, “To the Memory of My Beloved Master William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us,” was written to accompany that dramatist’s plays in the famous 1623 edition prepared by Shakespeare’s friends and fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell. The poem is generous in its praise and argues that, despite whatever private reservations he might have had, Jonson wanted to go on public record as one of Shakespeare’s greatest admirers.

The eulogy starts by addressing Shakespeare directly, in an apostrophe, but midway through the poem it shifts to address the English nation. The country, personified as Britain, should “triumph” in Shakespeare, a genius “not of an age, but for all time!” In this middle section, Shakespeare is spoken of in the third person, but Jonson subtly shifts once more to address his deceased friend before the poem’s conclusion.

In the first half, Jonson surveys possible motives for his lavish praise and rejects “silliest ignorance,” “blind affection,” and “crafty malice,” with the implication that his motives are pure, based on sound critical judgment. He does make the rather infamous statement that Shakespeare had “small Latin, and less Greek.” Out of context, that observation may seem condemnatory, but Jonson’s implication is that Shakespeare’s genius is of such an order that he exceeds the greatest writers of “insolent Greece” and “haughty Rome” without being beholden to them for his art—a remarkable admission from an avowed classicist.

A central theme of the poem, one repeatedly used in Shakespeare’s own sonnets, is that art offers its creator immortality. Shakespeare, claims Jonson, will live as long as “we have wits to read, and

praise to give.” The idea of art’s transcendent capability leads to the finale of the poem, an apotheosis or poetic immortalizing, which, in the elegiac tradition, transfixes the subject in the heavens as a constellation, the “star of poets.” That is high public praise from a writer whose natural bias lay against poetic excess. Jonson’s great skill gives it and other lavish statements of praise a sincere ring, and the result is one of the finest poetic eulogies in the English language.

### SUMMARY

For forty years, Ben Jonson was the preeminent literary force in England. He was the leading comic dramatist of Jacobean England, the most highly esteemed creator of masques, a celebrated poet, a cultivator of new literary talent, and an arbiter of his day’s literary taste.

Centuries after Jonson’s death, his dramatic and poetic legacy remains significant. Such plays as *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* are still being produced. Moreover, Jonson’s more ambitious poems are, along with his lyrics, now viewed as the products of an inspired genius. Among English authors, there are few whose works have weathered the passage of time as successfully as have those of Jonson.

*John W. Fiero*

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Ben Jonson’s comedies have often been compared to William Shakespeare’s. One observation has been that the audience laughs at Jonson’s characters and laughs with Shakespeare’s characters. Does this assertion seem to be generally true?
- Which human vices does Jonson satirize most effectively?
- What was a masque, and why was it a significant form of entertainment in Jonson’s time?
- Jonson was a poet whose expression of personal feeling is more profound than it sometimes seems. Examine this statement with respect to “On My First Son” and other Jonson lyrics.
- What makes Jonson’s praise of Shakespeare particularly significant among the many tributes to Shakespeare?

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## JAMES JOYCE

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland  
February 2, 1882

**Died:** Zurich, Switzerland  
January 13, 1941

*Joyce perfected the short story and the novel of education and then revolutionized fiction, especially the novel, with *Ulysses*.*

### BIOGRAPHY

James Augustine Joyce was born into a respectable, if improvident, middle-class family in Dublin, Ireland, on February 2, 1882. He was sent to Clongowes Wood College, a Jesuit boarding school, at the age of six; he entered Belvedere College in 1893. In 1898, he entered another Jesuit institution, University College, Dublin. Joyce was an excellent student but his rebellious nature was becoming clear after he published "The Day of the Rabblement," an attack on the new Irish theater, and refused to sign a petition against the heresy in William Butler Yeats's "Countess Cathleen."

Joyce went to Paris in 1902 to study medicine but had to return to Ireland in 1903 when his mother was dying. During this period, he began an autobiographical novel that later became *Stephen Hero* (1944); some early stories that he published were later revised into the collection *Dubliners* (1914). In 1904, Joyce met Nora Barnacle, the woman who was to become his wife. Nora was from Galway and was employed as a chambermaid. She lacked Joyce's education and social background, but he later claimed that she made him a man. She went abroad with him shortly after their meeting and lived with him until his death. In 1905, Joyce left Ireland for good; he went to Trieste and settled there. Over the next few years, he completed the stories that became *Dubliners*. Although it was initially refused publication because of obscene pas-

sages in a number of its stories, *Dubliners* was finally published in 1914.

In 1913, Joyce was introduced to the poet Ezra Pound. Pound put Joyce in touch with people who could give him financial support and gave him access to a number of modernist journals. During these years, Joyce had been reshaping his early autobiographical novel into the posthumously published *Stephen Hero*. It was first published in a journal with which Pound was connected, *The Egoist*, in 1914 and in book form in 1916 as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce now had two major works in print and a growing reputation as a modernist writer, yet he would never achieve popular success. He still had difficulties in supporting himself and his family. Language tutoring brought in little money and his books even less.

Joyce began the most important work of his career, *Ulysses* (1922), in 1914. *Ulysses* was to transform the novel and modern literature with its many innovations. The early writing of the novel was slow, but Joyce began to serialize the early chapters in another Pound-influenced journal, the *Little Review*, in 1918.

In 1915, Joyce and his family moved to Zurich to escape the problems caused by World War I. He still had great difficulty in finding enough money to keep his household going. He was also having the first serious problems with his eyesight, which would lead to his eventual blindness. After the war was over, Joyce moved to Paris at the suggestion of Pound. It was through Pound that Joyce found a benefactor, Harriet Weaver, who helped support him both before and after he had completed *Ulysses*. In 1922, *Ulysses* was published, and it was quickly

recognized by discerning critics as a great—indeed, a landmark—book.

The next year, 1923, Joyce began work on *Finnegans Wake* (1939), then known as “Work in Progress.” It was to be his most controversial book. Many of Joyce’s most ardent supporters were dismayed at this final development in his fiction. Joyce was, however, sure of his own genius and direction and continued with the creation and serial publication of the book.

In the mid-1930’s, Joyce was spending more time in Zurich than in Paris. His daughter, Lucia, was having severe mental problems, so he called on some of the noteworthy psychiatrists in Switzerland. In addition, Joyce’s eyesight was failing, and he wished to consult a doctor in Zurich about this problem. In 1939, *Finnegans Wake* was finally published, and a few critics did attempt to elucidate the text, but the reception was decidedly less favorable than that of *Ulysses*. Soon after that, France fell to Germany, and Joyce was forced to take up residence in Zurich, Switzerland. He died there on January 13, 1941.

## ANALYSIS

Joyce is a master of style, and readers can find a different one for each of his major works. In *Dubliners*, he adopts a narrow and (for Joyce) conventional realistic approach. In addition, each story is told in the style of the protagonist; the narrator does not impose a style. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, however, uses a much richer and more romantic style, since it is told through the consciousness of an emerging artist. Stephen Dedalus meditates on words and finds that he is attracted not by their meaning but by their sound and rhythm. In such scenes as Stephen discovering his vocation upon the beach and his declaration of his artistic purpose, the style is raised to a very lofty plane. When Stephen creates his villanelle, both the poem and the commentary are in the vein of high Romanticism. *Ulysses* is much more varied; there is the intellectual style of Stephen and the plain style of Bloom, but readers find midway into the book that stylistic experimentation dominates the book. There is, for example, a chapter, “Sirens,” done in musical prose rhythms and filled with allusions to music. There is the parody style of

“Cyclops” and the history of English prose style from Anglo-Saxon to the twentieth century in “Oxen of the Sun.” It seems as if plot and character are subordinated to style as the end of the book approaches.

There are a few important themes evident in the major works. One is women’s betrayal. Joyce was fascinated by betrayal and returned to it many times. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, he uses the betrayal of Stephen’s beloved as a necessary prelude to his flight from Ireland in order to become an artist. Women help him find his vocation and are the subject of his art, but their betrayal is necessary for his freedom. In *Ulysses*, women are once more unfaithful. Molly Bloom betrays her husband and Stephen discusses Anne Shakespeare’s betrayal of her husband, William. In addition, Stephen’s mother is haunting him and preventing his growth.

Another important theme in Joyce is Dublin (or Ireland in general); it is a place that is described as a net, a trap that imprisons or restrains the characters. Nearly all of them long for some escape but none really succeeds in finding it. Even Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s alter ego, is forced to return to the Dublin he had left behind to become an artist. Others dream about a fuller life, but all such dreams are dashed. If there is a spiritual liberation of the country, it can come only through the artist, who alone has the vision to renew the people.

Joyce is unusual in that he never repeats himself. He works on a genre until he exhausts the possibilities for his art. He undertakes the genre of the short story and perfects the mode. Indeed, much of modern story technique is based on Joyce’s “epiphany,” a depiction of the essence of the character and the situation, and his objective narration. He then tries the novel of education and perfects the study of a sensitive individual consciousness. The growth of that consciousness from baby talk and mere sound to the villanelle and poetic prose is dazzling. Joyce then turns to a novel based on a Greek myth and re-creates that novel. Now the novel can break the plot or subordinate it to style; it also becomes a truly encyclopedic work containing theology, social commentary, and fantasy, as well as the more usual novelistic interests of plot and character.

## DUBLINERS

**First published:** 1914

**Type of work:** Short stories

*This collection comprises satiric pictures of life in Dublin that expose the paralysis of will of each of the protagonists in the collection.*

*Dubliners* is not a collection of short stories that were written at various periods and with various themes. It is clearly meant to be a unified work of art. Joyce said that he chose Dublin as the setting because it was “the center of paralysis.” Yet he also stated that his purpose was to depict “the eventual spiritual liberation of my country.” Such a “liberation” could occur only if the *Dubliners* were to shed the myths about Ireland and face their true situation.

The stories of *Dubliners* are cunningly arranged. The first three stories clearly constitute a unit; they portray the life of a child in Dublin and are filled with disillusionment and a recognition of failure. “Araby” describes a failed quest as a nameless boy promises to go to a bazaar called Araby to buy a gift for a young girl. The boy is a dreamer who ignores daily life to dwell upon his beloved. It is significant that he invests her with religious imagery when he speaks of a “chalice” he is protecting. He also does not see her clearly; she is always a brown shape to him, and he worships his idea of her rather than her true self.

On the day of his planned visit to Araby, his uncle is late, and it seems that the boy will not be able to go. Finally, the uncle enters, drunk, and gives him money. It is late when the boy arrives at the bazaar, and he finds not the magic and mystery of his dreams but a woman flirting with two men at a counter. He hears a voice announce that the light is out—a metaphor for the extinguishing of his quest. The epiphany is very harsh: “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.” The boy feels ashamed of his earlier dreams; he, like the other *Dubliners*, is incomplete. His dreams have been smashed and he is filled with self-loathing.

The next stories deal with young and mature people in Dublin. They suffer from a paralysis of the will as well as a failure to fulfill plans or com-

plete escapes or projects. In “Eveline” the main character has found a beau, Frank, who wishes to take her to Buenos Aires against the opposition of her father. She sits in a dusty room and weighs the claims of both sides. Most of her meditation deals with her father and her home. It is a familiar if grim place; the father is a drunk who makes Eveline give him all the money she earns at her job. She can recall only a few positive images of her father. In contrast, Frank is “very kind, manly, open-hearted.” He loves music and will give Eveline an honorable place as his wife. Eveline seems to decide between the two when she thinks of the fate of her mother: “that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness.” In panic, she chooses Frank; he will save her. At the end of the story, however, she cannot answer the call of Frank to join him on the ship. She remains in a state of paralysis between Frank and her home. Her fears of being drowned and her obligations to her family overcome the freedom promised by Frank. She cannot escape Dublin and is described as being “passive, like a helpless animal.” “Eveline” is a quintessential *Dubliners* story. The dream of a fuller life is betrayed by fear and paralysis of the will.

The last group of stories deals with institutions: “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” with politics, “A Mother” with the musical world of Dublin, and “Grace” with religion.

The last story in the collection, “The Dead,” seems to stand alone as a kind of coda. The story itself is very detailed in its presentation of a middle-class and educated world. The protagonist, Gabriel, is Gabriel Conroy. The reader hears Gabriel’s inner thoughts as he meditates on Ireland and his place in it. He is an inner exile in Dublin who takes his vacations on the Continent, writes a review of a British poet, Browning, and has little use for the Irish Literary Revival of language and culture. The structure of the story is the destruction of his aloofness and egotism.

The first of the assaults on Gabriel’s egotism is with the servant Lily. Gabriel makes social conversation with Lily primarily, it seems, to enhance his own image. He pretends to be genuinely interested in Lily and manages to offend her. “‘O, then,’ said Gabriel gaily, ‘I suppose we’ll be going to your wedding one of these fine days with your young man, eh?’” Lily is angered and complains of men who fail to meet their commitments. Gabriel is embar-

rassed at this outburst and later feels that he has used the wrong tone with her.

The next assault on Gabriel is made by Miss Ivors. Miss Ivors is a nationalist and criticizes Gabriel for writing his review in a pro-British journal. She also criticizes him for going to the Continent to learn foreign languages when he has his own language to learn. "O, to tell you the truth," Gabriel suddenly responds, "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!" Gabriel is especially upset because Miss Ivors has criticized him in front of other people.

The last confrontation is the most important and is with his wife, Gretta. After the party is over, Gabriel has romantic feelings about his wife. She, however, seems to be distant and tired. He draws her to him, but she resists his advances. Finally, she reveals that she was thinking not of Gabriel but of a young man she knew in Galway. Gabriel tries to belittle this relationship but does not succeed. Instead, he suddenly begins to realize who he is and what his relationship with his wife has been. He now sees himself as a "ludicrous figure" who has idealized his "clownish lusts." When Gretta reveals that the young man, Michael Furey, died for her, Gabriel's egotism and his world are destroyed. He feels that some "impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him." Gabriel then passes through stages to reach his final state. He becomes a prophet who announces the death of his aunt, Julia Morkan. He begins to shed "generous tears" as he thinks of the death of Michael Furey. Furey had died for love, and although Gabriel has never felt love before, "he knew that such a feeling must be love."

The last movement of the story is very difficult to interpret. Gabriel recognizes that it is time "to set out on his journey westward." That journey can be interpreted as either toward life or toward death. A journey to the west is traditionally associated with death, but all of the positive characters—Gretta, Furey—come from the west. In addition, Gabriel feels his own identity and all of Ireland "fading out into a grey impalpable world." The last sentence speaks of the snow falling "like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." The ending of the story is seen in positive terms by some critics as a figurative rebirth for Gabriel. Others see it as the destruction of Gabriel and the world of Dublin, literally a last judgment. Still others see it as ambiguous, making it impossi-

ble for the reader to decide whether the ending is positive or negative. Yet another interpretation is that Gabriel is a prophet who points the way to the eventual "spiritual liberation" of Dublin through the love that he, Gabriel, recognizes but cannot feel. Thus, the ending signifies a cleansing of society in order to rebuild it on new principles.

## A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN

**First published:** 1914-1915 (serial), 1916 (book)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel examines the growth, development, and emergence of the artist in detail.*

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a bildungsroman, a novel of education; in this case, it is the growth of the artist from his earliest childhood to his declaration of his proper role as an artist, a "priest of the eternal imagination." The novel begins with the earliest experience of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. His world is a world of sensations, especially of touch and smell. Later those sensations will be connected to words, and by the end of the book he recognizes that words have an independent existence. He also recognizes the demands that he submit, to "apologize," as his father and Aunt Dante demand. Throughout the novel, Stephen is continually evading most of the demands that are placed on him. An artist must be free.

The next section takes place at a Jesuit boarding school, Clongowes; the concluding incident in the chapter also takes place there. Stephen had lost his glasses and was, therefore, unable to do his lesson. Father Dolan, however, refuses to accept his explanation. Stephen goes to the rector, Father Conmee, to seek redress. Conmee at first suggests that Father Dolan did not know of the lost glasses, but Stephen insists that he did know. Finally, Conmee reluctantly agrees to order Dolan not to punish Stephen the next day. The chapter ends with Stephen declared a hero by his classmates; he now feels "happy and free." Each chapter of the book ends in some kind of triumph for Stephen. The beginning of the following chapters, however, shows a decline.

The second chapter continues the development of Stephen as he experiences a change in his situation. His father's finances decline and he leaves Clongowes and becomes a day student at another Jesuit school, Belvedere. He also begins to be interested in women. He is involved with the young Ellen and dreams about the fictional Mercedes, who will initiate and transform him. He imagines an encounter with Mercedes when "weakness and timidity and inexperience would fall from him." Stephen's initiation, however, is more sordid. He feels lust rather than love and wishes to fall into sin with a real woman and not an idealized figure from fiction. He goes to the red-light district of Dublin to seek that encounter. The chapter ends with Stephen and a prostitute. She embraces him, and he feels "joy and relief." He will not, however, kiss her; he wishes to retain his aloof independence but finally surrenders and submits. It is, however, a necessary fall; Joyce's artist must fall in order to create "life out of life."

The beginning of the chapter is a decided decline. Stephen does not feel transformed but degraded by his sexual encounter. He feels like a beast instead of a man. Then a retreat is announced at school; Stephen is to hear powerful sermons by a Jesuit. He is immediately affected; he feels that the words are aimed directly at him. He also thinks of a way out; the Virgin will take his hand and that of an innocent young girl, Emma, and lead him to forgiveness and an innocent love. It will not, however, be that easy for Stephen; he is forced to confront his sin and his fate by the Jesuit preacher. The preacher speaks of hell and its terrible punishments. He cites the condemnation of Lucifer, who, like Stephen, will not serve or submit. His description of hell sounds remarkably like Clongowes. The smells and companions of the preacher's hell are exactly like Stephen's memories of his first school. The effect on Stephen is immediate. He calls for help that evening in his bedroom and vomits in disgust at what he has done. He believes that he has lost his inno-

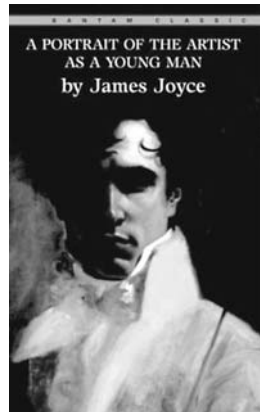
cence and turned himself into a beast. He confesses his sin and once more submits, although this time it is to the Church rather than a prostitute. The last scene of the chapter parallels the earlier one; he takes the host as he had taken the kiss. Yet the Church is not to be Stephen's final choice; it is only a stage in his development.

There is a marked change in the beginning of the next chapter. Stephen has become religious, but his life afterward tends to be dry and mechanical. He imagines himself as a spiritual accountant adding up his devotions. He is then approached by the rector to see if he aspires to the priesthood, particularly for the Jesuit order. At first, he is attracted to the image of himself as a Jesuit, but he quickly dismisses it when he imagines himself back in the cold and smells of Clongowes. In addition, he discovers that his place is "wandering among the snares of the world."

The novel then brings Stephen back to the disorder of his home. He begins to recall a beautiful phrase he has memorized and realizes that it is not the meaning or the "colors" of the words that please him but their sound pattern or rhythm. Stephen as a developing artist has developed his relationship with words from the identification of sound and meaning to a love of syntactic patterns for their own sake.

At the end of the chapter, Stephen comes upon a young girl on the beach. She is described as "a strange and beautiful seabird." His response is one of "profane joy." Her image passes into him, and he announces his vocation. "To life, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!" It is the most important of the many triumphant chapter endings. Stephen realizes that his place is in the fallen world rather than that of the priesthood. He now knows what his vocation is but has not yet actually created a work of art to certify his role as an artist. At this point, he is a potential artist, and a very young one.

The first part of chapter 6 is devoted to Stephen's discussion of the aesthetic he has developed; it is a prelude to the actual creation of a poem in the second part of the chapter. Stephen's aesthetic is rather sophisticated and can be related to many of Joyce's own works. He speaks of the stages of an artist's work: from lyric to epic to dramatic. The artist begins, as Stephen does, with self-expression and continues to "refine himself out of





existence.” The aim is an impersonal art that Joyce develops in *Ulysses*. He also spells out the three elements needed in a work of art: “wholeness, harmony, and radiance.”

The poem that Stephen writes is a villanelle, a highly artificial form; many critics have condemned it and see Stephen as the type of artist that Joyce would reject. They see a considerable amount of distance between Joyce and his protagonist. Others, however, see Stephen as a young but genuine artist.

The last section of the chapter is filled with images of flight as Stephen prepares to leave Ireland and its “nets” of patriotism and church. The true artist needs to be independent, which is impossible for Stephen in Ireland. One other ironic note is found at the close of the chapter. Stephen sees his beloved, to whom he had just written a poem, being caressed by his friend, Davin. Joyce, obsessed with the betrayal of friends and lovers, wrote about it in nearly every one of his major works.

The last part of the book is a series of journal entries by Stephen. The narrator has disappeared. The entries speak of Stephen’s beloved, the images of the road and his departure, and the type of art Stephen is to pursue. The last two entries speak of Stephen’s exalted role as an artist: “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smith of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” The aim is not merely to create individual works but to bring about a “spiritual liberation.”

## ULYSSES

**First published:** 1922

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel re-creates the Odyssey in one day in the life of Dublin as the protagonists meet and complete an imperfect quest.*

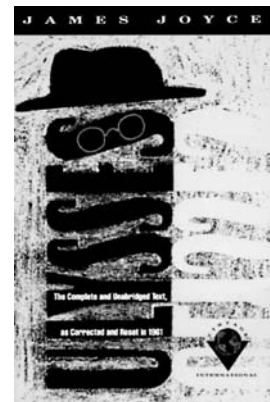
*Ulysses* is based on Homer’s *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614) but compresses the action of the earlier epic into one day. The basic narrative of the *Odyssey* is maintained: Leopold Bloom, the modern counterpart to Ulysses, returns home to his wife and son and then overcomes the suitors and reclaims his place. Stephen Dedalus, the coun-

terpart to Telemachus, needs to grow into a man and be united with his absent father.

The first section of the book, the “Telemachiad,” deals with Stephen. Stephen has returned to Ireland from Paris to face the death of his mother and is haunted by the ghost of his mother and oppressed by the demands of his real father. He needs to purge his mother’s ghost and find a new father. Stephen is oppressed, as is Telemachus, by the usurpers in the tower where he lives. Stephen’s thoughts are abstruse, philosophical, and filled with guilt; he no longer seems to be a potential artist. He wanders around Dublin in search of some relief. One noteworthy episode takes place in the National Library, where Stephen expounds his theory of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. 1600-1601, pb. 1603), which is really a theory that is directly related to Joyce’s own life and work. Stephen also goes to visit a newspaper and tells two of the editors his short story “A Pisgah Prophecy,” which is similar to early stories in *Dubliners*. The proposing of a theory and creation of a literary work by Stephen is also found in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Perhaps Stephen is beginning to fulfill his claim to be a true artist.

Leopold Bloom is an ordinary man with an extraordinary curiosity about everything around him. He, like Stephen, has problems within his family. His wife, Molly, is unfaithful to him and today has received a note from the notorious Blazes Boylan telling her that he will visit her. In addition, Bloom’s son, Rudy, died fourteen years before, rendering Bloom impotent. If Stephen needs a father, Bloom needs a son. They will travel through Dublin and occasionally cross paths before their meeting and tenuous union in the last part of the book.

Bloom is a fairly complaisant husband; he never confronts Molly about Boylan and has his own deceptions as a compensation. He has received a letter from Martha Clifford, with whom he is conducting an extended flirtation. On his travels, he ob-



serves and interacts with the Dubliners. The anti-Semitism and hostility against the Jewish Bloom is seen a number of times. The most important conflict he has about his Jewishness is depicted in the "Cyclops" episode, in which he defends himself forcefully against racial attacks.

The union between Bloom and Stephen begins in the "Circe" chapter. Bloom is humiliated and exalted in the chapter; he is abused by women for his weakness and oddities, while Stephen is drunk and is about to squander or lose his money. Bloom has followed him from a maternity hospital and acts like a father in saving Stephen's money and defending him against charges by the police. He is going to bring him home, where Stephen will teach Molly Italian pronunciation and have a place to stay. Stephen, who seems to have purged his mother's ghost by swinging his walking stick at it in "Circe," is obviously meant to replace the dead Rudy and restore Bloom's virility, but he seems unconvinced by Bloom's offer. There is a wonderful scene between Bloom and Stephen in the next chapter, "Ithaca," where they urinate together and share a cup of cocoa. Some union of father and son does take place. Stephen, however, declines Bloom's offer. He has changed since the beginning of the novel, but not completely. Bloom has also

changed, but not completely. He still has his problem with impotence and Molly's adulteries. The book provides only provisional solutions for the complex problems of the two characters.

The last chapter, "Penelope," is the famous monologue of Molly Bloom. Molly does speak of some of the changes in the book. Bloom has now ordered her to make him bacon and eggs in the morning. She speaks of the sexual encounter with Boylan but asserts that Bloom had more "spunk" in him. Above all, she recalls the first sexual experience with Bloom on Howth, where she gave her "Yes." For all its incompleteness, the book ends with the affirmation by Molly and significant changes in the main characters.

### SUMMARY

James Joyce is a preeminent modernist writer and a great innovator. He altered forever the way the world thinks of fiction. He added a subtlety to the well-plotted short story, provided a richness of detail and an intensity to the central consciousness of the novel of education, and turned the novel into an epic, a form capable of including diverse materials and styles. He did nothing less than transform modern literature.

James Sullivan

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why is it unwise to make generalizations about James Joyce's style?
- "Epiphany" is one of a number of religious terms that Joyce appropriated. Discuss how he adapted it to his literary needs.
- Which of Joyce's ideas and depictions of Dublin would you expect the Irish to favor and which to resist?
- What is your interpretation of Stephen's intention to "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race"?
- What does *Ulysses* gain by being based on Homer's *Odyssey*?
- Do the difficulties of *Finnegans Wake* make it inaccessible to anyone who is not a literary scholar?

# ISMAIL KADARE

**Born:** Gjirokaštër, Albania  
January 28, 1936

*Kadare, the winner of the inaugural Man Booker International Prize for contemporary fiction in 2005, portrays the Albanian people, past and present, focusing on their senseless suffering under rigid regimes and making a strong case for enlightenment and human rights.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Ismail Kadare (ka-DA-reh) was born and grew up in Gjirokaštër in southwestern Albania, close to the Greek border. His family were nonpracticing Muslims. His father, Halit, was a civil servant who served court documents; his mother, Hatixhe, came from a wealthy family. The parents had a large house with many rooms where their three children could play. Kadare's sister, Kadrie, earned a degree in Russian language and literature; his brother, Shahin, is an oncologist.

When Ismail was five, World War II brought the first of a series of invading armies to Gjirokaštër. Eventually, the Communists gained control of Albania. Enver Hoxha, who was also born in Gjirokaštër, was the first secretary of the Albanian Workers Party from 1943 until his death in 1985. Under Hoxha's strict Stalinist regime, many books were banned, telephone conversations were monitored, there was no free press, and all opposition was ruthlessly suppressed. It was a difficult climate in which to become a world-class writer.

Kadare began writing poetry at an early age. His first collection, *Frymëzimet djaloshare* (youthful inspiration), appeared in 1954. In the 1960's he was known primarily as a lyric poet, and he continued publishing volumes of poetry until 1976. His prose, like his poetry, is very lyrical.

After completing high school in Gjirokaštër, Kadare went to the newly founded State University in the capital, Tirana, where he obtained his degree in Albanian language and literature in 1958. He was then sent to the Maxim Gorky Institute for World Literature in Moscow, but he was repatriated in 1961 following Hoxha's break with the Soviet Union.

In Communist Albania, Kadare supported the Communist Party just enough to remain acceptable. He survived by writing ambiguously, never directly criticizing totalitarianism. Hoxha recognized Kadare's talent and promoted him nationally and abroad, allowing him to travel with his wife outside the country. Kadare's first novel, *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (1963; *The General of the Dead Army*, 1971), was also his breakthrough to the West when it appeared in 1970 in an excellent French translation by Jusuf Vrioni.

Although Kadare enjoyed a privileged position in Albania, his career was not without setbacks. In 1975, after the Communist Party interpreted one of his poems as an incitement to revolt, he was banished from the capital and forbidden to publish for three years. In 1981, the Communists considered his novel *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave* (1981; *The Palace of Dreams*, 1993) a thinly veiled criticism of the conditions in Albania and banned it. In 1986, when he realized that the Albanian government remained as oppressive under Ramiz Alia as it had been under Hoxha, Kadare and his French publisher, Claude Durand, began smuggling disguised manuscripts out of Albania and storing them in a safe in the Banque de la Cité in Paris, to be accessed by Durand if anything should happen to the author. At the end of October, 1990, Kadare and his family sought political asylum in France. His unexpected departure was an embarrassment for Albania and helped bring about the collapse of communism later that year.

Kadare was made an honorary member of the Institut de France (1988), was awarded the Prix mondial Cino del Duca (1992), was elected an associate member of L'Academie des Sciences Morales

et Politiques (1996), received the Herder-Preis in Hamburg (1998), and won the inaugural Man Booker International Prize (2005).

Kadare married Elena Gusho in 1963. In 1970, she was the first woman author to have a novel published in Albania. In 1990, the couple settled in Paris in an apartment in the Latin Quarter overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. They have two daughters: Gresa has her doctorate in genetics from the Sorbonne, and Besa has a degree in journalism.

### ANALYSIS

The Albanian people trace their origins back to the Illyrians and have a rich oral tradition. In Kadare's writing, he often portrays the past with the same immediacy as the present. Old stories allow him to remind Albanians of their cultural heritage while focusing on universal truths that outlive all political systems. Kadare sees himself primarily as a storyteller, as a modern Homer. Both he and the semilegendary Greek poet come from the same part of the world.

One of his most beautiful stories, "Kush e solli Doruntinë" (1980; "Doruntine," 1988), is set one thousand years ago. The main character explores and rejects all possible logical explanations for a mysterious event, eventually coming to the startling conclusion that Doruntine was, in fact, brought home to her lonely mother by her dead brother, Constantine. When Constantine supported Doruntine's engagement to a man who lived far away, Constantine gave their mother his word of honor that he would bring Doruntine back to visit, not knowing that he and his eight brothers would soon be killed in a war. Three years later, his word of honor, the *besa*, proves stronger than death itself. Doruntine remembers only a long ride through the night sky with her arms around a horseman who smelled of clay, and the earth on Constantine's grave is freshly disturbed.

Kadare does not glorify the past. In *Prilli i Thyer* (1980; *Broken April*, 1990), he deals with the *besa* in a more realistic setting, showing how the northern Albanians' unquestioning belief in the rules of the *Kanun*, the code of behavior passed down through the centuries, led to the continuation of blood feuds that took the lives of countless young men. In this, Kadare was in agreement with the Communist regime, which took measures to suppress the *Kanun*.

Kadare keeps details of brutality and torture to a minimum, and their scarcity makes his scenes of cruelty all the more memorable. Kadare's description of the horrible human sacrifice in *Ura me tri harqe* (1978; *The Three-Arched Bridge*, 1995) has a historical basis and is obviously a topic that continues to occupy the thoughts of those who live in the region. Nobel Prize-winning author Ivo Andrić told the story differently in *Na Drini ćuprija*, (1945; *The Bridge on the Drina*, 1959). With hindsight, the local people could see that the bridge built in Serbia in the 1360's and 1370's facilitated the invasion of the Turks and led to the Battle of Kosovo between Serbia and the Ottoman Empire in 1389, an event to which Kadare refers repeatedly in his works.

Aside from the historical significance of the tale, Kadare's literary portrayal of the events surrounding the building of the bridge, as seen through the eyes of the monk, Gjon, is a good example of Kadare's ability to set up an extremely complex situation and to show how people in every age feel insecure when they have only partial information, some of which seems to be misinformation. Gjon only begins to suspect the magnitude of the threat to Albania after the bridge is completed, by which time it is too late because the Turks are on the way. The reader can only empathize with Gjon, for when the master builder hands him the mathematical formulas used in the bridge's construction, the monk has no idea what the symbols mean. Such is the human condition.

Ever since reading William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (pr. 1606, pb. 1623) when he was eleven, Kadare has been interested in carefully plotted murders, and the communist regimes of China and Albania provided him with two high-profile cases whose instigators took the secret details to their graves. In *Koncert në Fund të Dimrit* (1988; *The Concert*, 1994), Kadare deals with the rumors circulating around the death of Mao Zedong's designated successor, Lin Biao, before writing a comparative analysis entitled "Macbeth's Last Winter: Synopsis for Another Version of the Tragedy." This is a brilliant piece of writing. Mao was against all Western literature, but Kadare shows that Mao's plot to kill Lin Biao arose from similar feelings of paranoia and inferiority as those experienced by Shakespeare's Macbeth.

In *Pasardhësi*, (2003; *The Successor*, 2005), written after the fall of communism, Kadare deals with the



death of Enver Hoxha's designated successor, Mehmet Shehu, under mysterious circumstances. In the final chapter, Shehu appears as a ghost who occasionally encounters the ghost of Lin Biao. Kadare is a writer at home in the past and the present, in this world and in the beyond.

## THE GENERAL OF THE DEAD ARMY

**First published:** *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*, 1963 (English translation, 1971)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An unnamed general becomes increasingly disillusioned while on a mission to dig up the remains of his country's soldiers who fell in action in Albania.*

*The General of the Dead Army* was Kadare's first novel and contains the distillate of his views on war. As a child, he saw his hometown, Gjirokastër, occupied by Italians, Greeks, and Germans during World War II; all of them eventually had to withdraw. However, Kadare does not write from the viewpoint of his own people, the Albanians, but from the viewpoint of a foreign general sent to Albania twenty years later to repatriate the bodies of his country's fallen soldiers. There is still a lesson to be taught. As the general gradually learns of the invading forces' ignominious actions, he is sickened by his senseless undertaking and, indeed, by war itself.

The exhumation of the dead soldiers is called into question in numerous ways. Soldiers honored their fallen comrades by burying them deep in the earth, so their corpses could not be eaten by dogs and jackals. Such graves were a labor of love, often dug at night using weapons as shovels. Why should the general disturb those graves? The fallen soldiers belong where they fell, with their comrades in arms. In flashbacks, Kadare shows soldiers deliberately "losing" their metal identification tags, even giving them away. The soldiers' emphasis was on life, not on death.

Since most of the corpses are now reduced to six or seven pounds of phosphorus and calcium, the decomposed remains are put in numbered blue nylon bags. Ironically, the only soldier's corpse that was presented to the general in a coffin was turned down because he was not equipped to handle anything that large. The dead bodies cause another death, for although the remains were rigorously disinfected, the main grave digger, an elderly Albanian called Reiz, dies from a raging infection after getting a scratch on his hand.

The general is handed the diary of a deserter, a twenty-two-year-old who makes a compelling case for having chosen life as a farmhand over raping and hanging the villagers, whose homes his Iron Division was burning. The young man derived a sense of peace from the sight of the man-made canals that ran between the fields, and enjoyed seven months with a farming family before he was murdered by his own country's Blue Battalion. By including the representative diary in chapter 11, Kadare presents an attractive alternative to war, an alternative that was chosen by hundreds of men who had come as invaders.

One of the bodies the general is supposed to find and repatriate is that of Colonel Z, whose family has erected a sumptuous marble tomb for him. According to his mother, Colonel Z had every virtue and was sensitive to beauty of every kind. In the course of the novel, however, it emerges that Colonel Z's Blue Battalion committed countless atrocities. In the final year of the general's search, he comes to the town where Colonel Z was last seen. Daytime inquiries yield no information, but in the evening the shameful truth comes to light. For unspeakable behavior, Colonel Z was murdered by a local woman, who hurls a sack of bones at the general's feet. The general is no sooner safely out of the town than he kicks the sack into a fast-flowing river.

*The General of the Dead Army* is a thought-provoking novel and has been filmed twice, as *Il generale dell'armata morte* (1983), directed by Luciano Tovoli, and *La Vie et rien d'autre* (1989), directed by Bernard Tavernier.

## CHRONICLE IN STONE

**First published:** *Kronikë në gurë*, 1971  
(English translation, 1987)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young boy describes the rapidly changing scene as his hometown is occupied by one foreign force after another during World War II.*

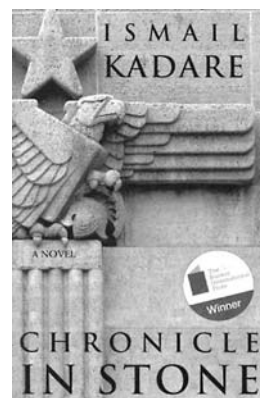
*Chronicle in Stone* is a charming and humorous novel told from the fanciful viewpoint of a child who sees what people do but is not old enough to understand the context of their actions. The steep and ancient city of stone where he lives is not named, but it is surely Kadare's birthplace, Gjiro-kastër. In the last scene, the narrator returns to the city as an adult, realizes he has been figuratively stumbling over its stones ever since he left, and strongly senses the invisible presence of the people he loved.

Kadare makes extensive use of images of sight, and, by extension, insight. The ladies of the neighborhood are shocked when Isa Voco starts wearing glasses. They look through his lenses and see only a distorted world. Isa, however, goes on to join the Resistance. He assassinates the Italian garrison commander and is captured and tortured. By the time he is brought out to be hanged, he is missing one leg but still wearing his glasses, which are the only thing that seem alive on his battered face. In other words, the viewpoint held by the Resistance remains intact. Isa's friend and accomplice, Javer, avenges his death without getting caught and successfully carries out numerous guerrilla attacks.

Ironically, the first-person narrator also needs glasses, but none of the adults thinks of having his eyes tested. He takes a single lens from his grandmother's trunk and holds it to one eye when he goes to a film or otherwise needs to see. His lens stands for the viewpoint of the writer, which brings everything into focus.

Kadare captures the essence of each character with deft descriptions, and most characters are portrayed with affection, such as Kako Pino. Kako has skillfully applied brides' makeup for more than sixty years. She is a thin lady who dresses in black and carries her implements in a red bag. In conversation, Kako repeats hypnotically, "It's the end of the world." That is Kako's leitmotif, and she says it countless times in the course of the novel. At the end of the novel, the Germans are suspicious of the contents of her red bag and hang her, thinking she is a saboteur. In a touching stylistic tribute to Kako, the narrator continues her voice, setting the unsaid words in a paragraph of their own: "The end of the world."

Kadare makes effective use of Greek mythology. He describes how when the lights come back on after an air raid, Aqif Kashahu's pale daughter has her thin arms around the neck of a fair-haired young man who kisses her. No one knows who he is. Aqif grabs his daughter by the hair and drags her upstairs and out of the house. She is never seen again. During a subsequent air raid, the fair-haired young man takes the young narrator aside and tells him that pregnant girls are either strangled or thrown down a well. The fair-haired young man starts breaking into homes to discover whether Aqif's daughter was drowned in a cistern. The Italians arrest the housebreaker, but they show understanding for his story. When they confront Aqif about his daughter, he says that she is visiting distant cousins. Each chapter in the novel is followed by a fragment of a chronicle written by Xivo Gavo, an old man who lives in the city. In Xivo's words, the fair-haired young man was Orpheus, seeking his Eurydice. Kadare thus shows that each person's story is timeless.



## THE CONCERT

**First published:** *Koncert në Fund të Dimrit*,  
1988 (English translation, 1994)

**Type of work:** Novel

*As relations between Albania and China deteriorate, Albanians have to deal with more and more problems in their everyday lives.*

Kadare worked on *The Concert* from 1978 to 1988. It is his longest novel, and it conveys the apprehension felt by the Albanian citizens under Enver Hoxha's strict Communist regime, where anyone could quickly fall out of favor. The novel deals with the last years of Albania's political alliance with China, from Chairman Mao Zedong's eightieth year to his death in 1976. During those years, Mao was determined to humiliate the Albanians for having dared to question his decision to entertain the president of the United States. The title refers to a rare concert given by the Chinese for their foreign visitors on the Day of the Birds, a concert that filled everyone with dread. Its meaning became clear when China subsequently withdrew all support for Albania.

The main plot line illustrates the difference between Albanian and Chinese communism. Arian Krasniqi is an Albanian officer who refuses to obey Minister D's order, suggested to him by the Chinese, to encircle the Communist Party committee with tanks. For his disobedience, Krasniqi is expelled from the party and imprisoned. However, Krasniqi is vindicated by Enver Hoxha himself, who states in a public address that to encircle a party committee with tanks is tantamount to rehearsing for a military putsch and that such orders will never be carried out in Albania, no matter who issues them. Minister D then has no option but to release the tank officer and prepare his auto-critique for the party.

One of the most interesting aspects of *The Con-*

*cert* is Kadare's extended treatment of the mysterious murder of Lin Biao, Mao's second in command. Whether because of Mao's senility or because of conflicting plans that were then combined, Lin Biao's murder emerges as an unparalleled case of overkill. Clues are scattered throughout the novel. In chapter 15, one of the Albanian authors, Skënder Bermema, compiles the theories into a nine-part synopsis entitled "The Truth About the Death of Lin Biao" before setting up the truly enlightening comparison to William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

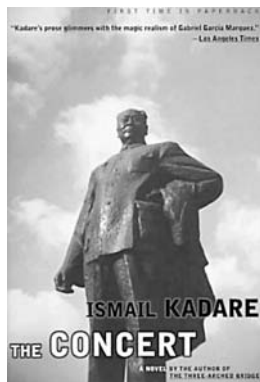
Mao took draconian measures to stamp out intellectualism and individualism in China and intended to weaken Western minds through the mass export of Chinese marijuana. A Chinese committee designs the model new man, Lei Fen, who is twenty-five years old, a soldier peasant who remains a bachelor and loves only his mother, and who dies by accident. Although a token leftist militant Albanian, Juan Maria Krams, embraces the idea of the new man and the abolishment of history, culture, and religion, Europe remains the greatest threat to Mao's China because of its freethinking people. The extreme repression in Communist China is illustrated early in the novel. Gjergj Dibra, an Albanian diplomatic envoy, finds it impossible to carry on a normal conversation in China because there are empty words and tedious slogans for every occasion.

By comparing the European and the Chinese communist systems, Kadare manages to make a strong case for free thought, justice, and human rights. He had difficulty getting the novel published in Albania until after the fall of communism. *The Concert* was first published in French in 1989 and was chosen by the literary magazine *Lire* as the best novel of 1991.

### SUMMARY

The magnitude of Ismail Kadare's work is just beginning to be recognized in the English-speaking world as his works appear in translation. His rare ability to tell a good story is combined with sophisticated literary techniques that reward detailed study. More secondary literature is sure to follow. Although Kadare wrote in a repressive regime until 1990, he did not compromise his artistic or ethical standards but wrote true literature of universal appeal.

Jean M. Snook



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why does Ismail Kadare include a second grave-digging crew from another country in *The General of the Dead Army*?
- Discuss the role of song in chapter 16 of *The General of the Dead Army*.
- Discuss the role of magic in *Chronicle in Stone*.
- Critic Arshi Pipa argues that the grotesque elements added in the third version of *Chronicle in Stone* express Kadare's disgust for the political situation in his country. Do you agree with Pipa's interpretation?
- Describe several types of humor in *Chronicle in Stone*.
- The murder in the Italian brothel is described in *The General of the Dead Army* and referred to again in *Chronicle in Stone*. Analyze the importance of the incident.
- Kadare's story "Qorrfirmari" (1984; "The Blinding Order," 2006) encapsulates the problem with any system that dictates what people should think. Draw comparisons between this story and some of Kadare's other works.

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Archive Photos

## FRANZ KAFKA

**Born:** Prague, Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire  
(now in Czech Republic)  
July 3, 1883

**Died:** Kierling, Klosterneuburg, near Vienna, Austria  
June 3, 1924

*Notable for their spare, unadorned prose style, Kafka's short stories and three novels lead deep into the subconscious and expose the fears from which all people suffer to some extent.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Franz Kafka (KAHF-kah) was born on July 3, 1883, in Prague (now in the Czech Republic), the first child born to Hermann and Julie Kafka. A second son died in infancy, leaving Franz as the only son, with three younger sisters. Kafka reacted negatively to his paternal forebears. His grandfather had been a butcher, something that Kafka found so repugnant that he became a vegetarian. His works contain descriptions of meat and wounds that reflect this revulsion. His father was in business and owned his own shop, and Kafka was bothered by his father's gruff and insulting treatment of his employees. This recollection is perhaps reflected in *Die Verwandlung* (1915; *The Metamorphosis*, 1936), in Gregor Samsa's description of the hostile and suspicious chief clerk. Kafka's mother was unable to give him the attention that he would have liked, since she also worked in the store, but Kafka felt more affinity with her side of the family, particularly with his bachelor uncles, one of whom, Siegfried Lowy, was a country doctor.

Despite his childhood fears of failure, Kafka progressed effortlessly through school and went on to earn his doctorate in law at the German University in Prague. After a brief placement with one firm, which he left because of the abusive language in the office, Kafka found his permanent employment with the Workers' Accident Insurance Insti-

tute, where his function was deemed so essential that he could not be drafted for active service in World War I.

The war years were among the most tumultuous and productive in Kafka's life. In Europe, there was a pervasive atmosphere of decadence and disillusionment. Five hundred years of Habsburg rule were drawing to a close, and the war would culminate in the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

During these years, Kafka spent much time agonizing over his relationship to Felice Bauer, whom he had met in August, 1912, and to whom he had proposed in June, 1913. It was mainly an epistolary association. Bauer did not live in Prague, and she and Kafka often had disagreements when they met. Reflecting the prejudices of his background, Kafka regarded marriage and a family of one's own as *de rigueur* in one sense, but he was also increasingly aware of his calling as a writer, and he did not see how he could find the time to combine the two. In July, 1914, he and Bauer broke off their engagement, but the letters continued, and in July, 1916, they became informally engaged again. This second engagement was made official in July, 1917, and broken off again in December of the same year. It was during his preoccupation with Bauer that Kafka wrote, among other things, *The Metamorphosis*, *Der Prozess* (1925; *The Trial*, 1937), and a short-story collection, *Ein Landarzt: Kleine Erzählungen* (1919; *The Country Doctor: A Collection of Fourteen Short Stories*, 1945).

Kafka's stated reason for breaking off the sec-

ond engagement was that he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis. He had suffered a severe hemorrhage, leading the cleaning lady to comment that he was not long for this world. In fact, he lived another seven years, and aside from taking several leaves of absence and then early retirement from his firm, he did not slow his pace at all.

He met other women. In 1919, he became engaged to Julie Wohryzek, who also had tuberculosis, but broke off this engagement when they did not get the lease for the apartment that they had wanted. In 1920, he had an affair with Milena Jesenká-Polak, who was translating his stories into Czech. She was intellectually and artistically compatible with him, but she broke off the relationship, saying she could not leave her husband despite his harsh treatment of her. In July, 1922, Kafka went to stay with his youngest and closest sister, Ottla, at her home in the country. It was there that he wrote the first nine chapters of *Das Schloss* (1926; *The Castle*, 1930) in a matter of a few weeks. Only in the last year of his life, in September, 1923, did Kafka finally overcome his considerable inhibitions and move in with a woman in Berlin. He was forty; Dora Dymant was nineteen.

Kafka bequeathed his literary estate to his friend and fellow writer Max Brod, instructing him to continue the work Dora had begun of burning the manuscripts. Brod instead ensured that all of Kafka's remaining works, diaries, and letters were published. Kafka died on June 3, 1924, at the sanatorium in Kierling, near Vienna, Austria.

## ANALYSIS

Kafka is probably the only author who has treated such profound subject matter without couching it in poetic language. His unadorned style, consistently simple syntax, and workmanlike prose present the subject matter in such a lucid and accessible manner that the works speak persuasively to the inner psyche. They remain disturbing and enlightening excursions into the nature of the self that are valid for all time.

The human psyche is Kafka's main topic, not political or social commentary, and not specifically autobiography, although clearly his was the mind he knew best. While it is helpful for the reader to have some knowledge of his biography, of Prague, of the time in which Kafka lived, and of concurrent intellectual developments, it is not essential. The

works transcend Kafka's immediate situation. They have been translated into numerous languages and are effortlessly understood as masterpieces by every culture in which they are read.

If one wishes to place Kafka's works in intellectual history, the two concurrent developments that show the closest similarities with his style are psychoanalysis and science fiction. Psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, emphasized the importance of dreams, which spring from the subconscious, for revealing the deeper reality of life. Many of Kafka's works have a dreamlike quality and, according to him, seemed to write themselves. The magnificent short story "Das Urteil" (1913, 1916; "The Sentence," 1928; better known as "The Judgment," 1945), for example, was written in one sitting during an evening in September, 1912. Although very pleased with the work, Kafka did not know what it meant. He did not consciously attempt to create symbolic works, and that is precisely why they are so rewarding to experience. Kafka intuitively knew what was right, but he left it to others to decipher his work.

Science fiction, in a more deliberate manner, imports the same departure from linear reality that characterizes dreams. Time and space may be infinitely contracted or expanded, and it is not unusual for mythical beasts to appear. A founder of science fiction, the man who invented the word "robot," was Karel Čapek, also a Czech. H. G. Wells was writing in Britain at the same time. In Kafka's short story "Ein Landarzt" ("The Country Doctor"), for example, unearthly horses transport the doctor a distance of ten miles in an instant, but the return journey is interminable. Such effects, though, are subsidiary to Kafka's main topic. Although on the verge of speculative fiction, he is not writing about the supernatural per se but about the human psyche, the utterly natural.

Kafka was also unavoidably influenced by the *spiritus mundi*, the zeitgeist, or spirit of his time, but not in such a way as to date his works. As a Jew in a city where there were race riots, as the subject of a dynasty in decline, Kafka captured the prevailing feeling of uncertainty and helplessness, and he observed without judgment. No doubt his extensive legal training was also operative in forming his technique of impartially describing conflicting viewpoints. Even in Kafka's cathartic *Brief an den Vater* (wr. 1919, pb. 1952; *Letter to His Father*, 1954)—

which he delivered to his mother—he was able to understand in all fairness how his behavior must have seemed from his father’s point of view. Thus, the characters in his works are seldom portrayed bluntly as either good or bad, right or wrong. They are three-dimensional and as complex as any human being. Even the antagonists may turn out to be right. Kafka’s stories are not written with the interpretive wisdom of hindsight but with the urgency and uncertainty of current experience.

The omission of a clear verdict on any specific character or situation also enables Kafka’s works to be understood on more than one level. Frequently, his apparent catastrophes are not catastrophes at all but liberating measures necessary for transcendence. It is always the hardworking white-collar professional who meets his demise: the businessman Georg Bendemann in “The Judgment,” the banker Josef K. in *The Trial*, and the doctor in “The Country Doctor.” Taken purely as story, these appear to be tragic fates. The men fall victim to forces beyond their control and either self-destruct, or allow themselves to be destroyed, or cannot prevent themselves from being destroyed. Their common type, however, indicates that they may, on another level, be representative of someone who needed to be removed, of Kafka the lawyer, who repeatedly took precious time away from Kafka the writer, who was in ascendance. As in the later Greek dramas, the tragedy of the flesh can be read as the beginning of the ascendance of the spirit, or, perhaps more appropriately to Kafka, the self. The spirit of the artist rises phoenixlike from the absurd and often contrived demise of the businessperson. Kafka often expressed the wish to dedicate himself to his writing, and it seems he portrayed its fulfillment in some of his works.

To understand the rich, multiplex statements about the reality of the self in Kafka, it is frequently necessary to see several characters as different aspects of the main protagonist. A modified psychoanalytical approach may prove useful in this context. In “The Judgment,” for example, one can see a weak ego (the friend in Russia) torn between the desires of the id (Georg Bendemann) and the dictates of the superego (the father figure). Eventually, the id is suppressed (drowned), the superego may relax (collapse), and, by implication, the ego will flourish (be able to write).

All this sounds oppressively grim, and indeed,

on first reading, many of Kafka’s works do seem horrible and depressing. The fatalism of most of his characters, though, which Kafka only began to counter with *The Castle*, is always offset in tone by careful choreography and by a splendid sense of humor that appreciates the ridiculous in all that humanity does. When reading his stories aloud, Kafka and his listeners were frequently overcome with laughter. It is his ethereal laughter that melts “the frost of this most unhappy of ages” (“The Country Doctor”), ensuring not only endless fascination with Kafka but also his relevance for all time.

## THE TRIAL

**First published:** *Der Prozess*, 1925 (English translation, 1937)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Arrested on his thirtieth birthday, Josef K. battles with an unusual court for a year before allowing himself to be executed without a proper trial.*

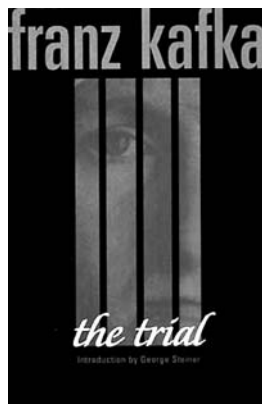
*The Trial* was begun in July, 1914, when Kafka turned thirty-one. He had just broken off his first engagement to Felice Bauer. He had also been unable to write any literature for more than a year, and he was feeling simultaneously frustrated by this writer’s block and guilty for having been unfair to either Bauer or himself (depending on how one looked at it). Out of this inner turmoil arose *The Trial*, which was completed within six months.

Like all Kafka’s writing, *The Trial* achieves a fine balance between the real and the imagistic, containing enough references to everyday life that the reader is initially tempted to confront the content of the surface story with logical argumentation. Were this a standard crime story, one would say that K., who was a banker by profession, misses three excellent opportunities to save himself. At the beginning of the novel, when arrested without being told why, K. neglects to contact his friend the public prosecutor. In the middle of the novel, when it would help to get away for a while, K. turns down his uncle’s invitation to stay with him in the country. At the end of the novel, K. avoids the policeman, who clearly wants to intervene.

The premise of fantasy, though, is that it details

inner reality. Kafka was involved in coming to terms with himself, and he presents the reader with strong evidence that K. and the court are one and the same. Names are always significant in Kafka's works, and one of the two warders who arrests Josef K. on his thirtieth birthday is called Franz—that is, the reader is to understand, Franz Kafka. Josef K. subsequently complains to the Examining Magistrate about the man's behavior and is surprised, on leaving the bank an evening or two later, to hear moaning coming from behind a door he has never opened. To K.'s astonishment, there are the two warders about to be flogged by a third man with a birch, and K. watches as Franz is flogged senseless. On his way home the next day, K. opens the door of the room again: "What he saw, instead of the darkness he had been expecting, destroyed his self-possession completely. Everything was exactly the same, just as he had found it the evening before when he opened the door. The old files and ink-bottles just inside the door, the Flogger with his birch, the warders still completely undressed." Clearly, it is all in K.'s mind, for he must be present for the scene to continue.

What is happening to K., then, is an inner sorting of priorities. What is on "trial" is Kafka's own lack of existential authenticity. At the time that he wrote *The Trial*, Kafka had already realized that Bauer would have been more of a hindrance in his life than a help. Her counterpart in the novel is Fräulein Bürstner (same initials), who does not wish to get involved with K. The other aspect of Kafka's life that necessarily continued to interfere



with his writing was his professional work as a lawyer with the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. This situation is analogous to K.'s workaday existence in the bank. Kafka the writer must have derived great satisfaction from placing on trial and sentencing to death that aspect of his life that was guilty of wasting his time, but that he nevertheless needed.

*Der Prozess* is translated into English as "the trial" or "the process." In fact, no trial takes place in the

novel, so the reader might do well to consider the other meaning of the title. Hegelian and post-Hegelian German philosophy, with which Kafka was familiar, made use of the Greek terms "process" and "praxis" to describe contrasting modes of existence. "Process" imports the notion of an implacable system wherein one is acted upon by forces one does not understand and cannot alter. Surely this is the case of Josef K. in *The Trial*. "Praxis," the opposite of "process," is an act of taking control of one's own destiny, and that is what the more mature protagonist of the same name, K., undertakes to do in Kafka's later novel, *The Castle*.

## THE CASTLE

**First published:** *Das Schloss*, 1926 (English translation, 1930)

**Type of work:** Novel

*K. is summoned by the Castle to work as a land surveyor, but, on arrival, he is unable to determine why he was called.*

*The Castle* is unfinished. It breaks off after the twentieth chapter, with alternative versions in the manuscript indicating that the plot could have continued in two different directions. Critics have tended to be led by Max Brod's report of how Kafka once told him the novel was to end: The Land-Surveyor was to find only partial satisfaction and die exhausted by his struggle. If this is taken as a foregone conclusion, the interpretation is necessarily partial to the dark and depressing aspects of the novel. From an impartial reading of the story, though, it seems equally possible that K., the outsider, could usher in the triumph of reason over the hopelessly entangled and inefficient bureaucracy of the Castle.

The first reading, which ends with K.'s defeat, is consistent with many of Kafka's earlier works and seems to echo the short parable "Vor dem Gesetz" (1915; "Before the Law," 1930) included in *The Trial*, in which the man from the country exhausts all of his resources and eventually dies in the futile attempt to gain admittance to the Law. An essential difference between the characters in the earlier works and the protagonist in the last novel, though, is that K. neither reveres nor is intimidated by the

Castle and its agents, and he has a refreshing tendency to speak his mind. Kafka wrote *The Castle* during the last two years of his life, during which he overcame many inhibitions. It is this new spirit and confidence that seems to speak through K. in the second reading, which emphasizes his chances of success.

It is difficult for the objective reader to take the Castle seriously. Desirable apparently only because it is inaccessible to the common individual, it is a disappointment from the start, to K.'s eyes not a castle at all but "only a wretched-looking town, a huddle of village houses, whose sole merit, if any, lay in being built of stone; but the plaster had long since flaked off and the stone seemed to be crumbling away." Furthermore, there is little evidence of the Castle's having actually done anything for the people in the village. Its "gentlemen" are unprincipled and adept only at keeping the best for themselves. First the Mayor's house, then the Herrenhof are shown to be awash in paperwork, with files hopelessly outdated and no order to the system.

How, then, does the crumbling Castle manage to retain its control over the villagers, indeed command their respect, devotion, and services? First, it maintains a cloak of secrecy around its activities, if any, and tolerates no outsiders. It is a closed system whose preeminence goes unchallenged. Second, it terrorizes those who refuse to be exploited, as evidenced by Amalia's case. Third, it moves quickly to try to bring any active newcomers alongside. K. is told that no surveying will be necessary and is presented with two ridiculous assistants whose purpose is to keep him distracted. Then he is sent a letter congratulating him on the fine land surveying he and his assistants are doing, thereby tempting him to do nothing but maintain appearances, like the rest of the Castle's employees.

From the start, though, K. does not seem like the sort to surrender. In the second chapter, in a significant flashback to his childhood, K. remembers how he was one of the few boys who managed to climb the high wall around the graveyard. "The sense of that triumph had seemed to him then a victory for life." This scene establishes his personality.

In the village, K. refuses to be browbeaten and manipulated, and he persists in trying to force an interview with Klammer to get to the root of why he was summoned. In the thirteenth chapter, one of the students approaches and offers help, believing

that K. in the distant future will "excel everybody." Finally, in the eighteenth chapter, K. barges in on Bürgel, one of the "gentlemen" secretaries in the Herrenhof, only to fall asleep to the drone of Bürgel's voice. Critics who subscribe to a defeatist reading of *The Castle* interpret K.'s falling asleep as a great opportunity lost, for K. could conceivably have gained access to the Castle through Bürgel, whose name is the diminutive of the German word *Burg*, or castle. By this point in the novel, though, the Castle and its representatives have been exposed as so corrupt that K.'s overwhelming desire to sleep can be seen as a natural defense mechanism. K. dreams that he has already achieved a great victory by fighting against and banishing a naked secretary built like a Greek god, and this dream seems to be prophetic. There is every indication that K. will overcome the Castle.

The main interpretive question is what the Castle represents. Surely it embodies the reality of all persons and institutions girded in cloaks of illusory authority, from the church to the village teacher, and lampoons the tricks and devices of those whose interests are served by the perpetration of grand fraud. Kafka was concerned with eternal verities, which was what made him a great writer. The K. in this work has identified the mysterious "Law" and its authority structures by which the K. of *The Trial* was oppressed, and he finds that it is a sham and a chimera. He laughs at it.

## THE METAMORPHOSIS

**First published:** *Die Verwandlung*, 1915  
(English translation, 1936)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Commercial salesman Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself turned into a large bug. This situation forces his dependent family to become self-sufficient.*

*The Metamorphosis* is Kafka's longest story and one of his most frequently analyzed works. Tripartite in form, it traces the months from Gregor Samsa's unique metamorphosis to his death from dehydration, injury, and general neglect. Gregor's health declines as the health of his father, mother,



and sister improves. His metamorphosis from the sole breadwinner to an utterly dependent and undesirable creature prompts the metamorphosis of his sluggish family into hardworking, happier people.

The point is often made that, although it is Gregor who takes on a grotesque form, the real ugliness in the story lies in his family's attitude toward and treatment of him, in their assumption that he is responsible for the debt incurred by his father. As the parents and sister selfishly exploit the best years of Gregor's youth, any possibility he might have of marrying and establishing a family of his own is reduced to his making a fretwork frame for a magazine picture of a woman. They have used him up.

Likewise, his employer shows no appreciation for Gregor's humanity and seems bent only on getting the maximum return from his employee. After five years without missing a day, Gregor needs only to miss one train to have the chief clerk threaten him with dismissal. They also use him up.

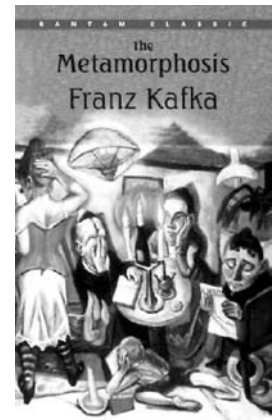
The integrity of Gregor's self is under attack from all sides. Not even his bedroom is a safe retreat. It has doors in all three inside walls, enabling his mother, his father, and his sister to question him simultaneously. No wonder, then, that Gregor revolts. He takes on a form that makes his further exploitation impossible.

Kafka explicitly forbade any artistic illustration of the bug for the book cover. That would have given too mundane a form to a transformation that signifies a revolt of the subconscious, a breakthrough after a long period of self-denial. Gregor entertains the idea that the same may happen to the chief clerk himself some day.

Significantly, the title of the story is not *The Bug* but *The Metamorphosis*. The emphasis is on the change itself, on exploring who one really is and what one really likes to do, on being guided by one's own urges, with no worry concerning where they will lead. Gregor discovers that he feels most comfortable squeezed under the sofa or hanging upside down from the ceiling. His voice changes, so that his speech is unintelligible to humans. He is ravenously hungry, but not for human food. He is moved as never before by his sister's violin playing. "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved." Gregor's new sensitivity to music and the new

sound of his words are clear indications that the story may be read as the self-discovery of the artist.

Kafka does not downplay the risk inherent in eccentric self-expression. Part 1 of the story ends with Gregor's sustaining an injury along his side as his mulish father forces him back into his room. Part 2 ends with Gregor sustaining a more serious, perhaps fatal wound, as his father pelts him with apples. Part 3 ends with Gregor dead, covered with refuse and dust, and disposed of by the cleaning lady. The danger, clearly, of voluntary or involuntary nonconformity is that one may be misunderstood, mistreated, or entirely rejected. Before his metamorphosis, though, Gregor was no better off than after it. While the manifestation of his uniqueness was considered by some to be grotesque, it was an advance over his former routine.



## THE COUNTRY DOCTOR

**First published:** *Ein Landarzt*, 1919 (English translation, 1945)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*These fifteen stories reflect on the human condition, on the uncertain spirit of the time during World War I, and on the nature of the artist.*

*The Country Doctor: A Collection of Fourteen Short Stories* is a collection of stories written between 1914 and 1917. The order of the stories was determined by Kafka, who decided to withdraw the fifteenth story, "Der Kübelreiter" ("The Bucket Rider"), before publication.

The questions addressed in the stories are existential. Human society is so far removed from the natural state that it at times seems to have become lost in its own rules and bureaucracy. Old institutions no longer command respect and take up too much precious time. Behind these general obser-

vations, which were certainly true in the declining days of the Habsburg monarchy, there is in Kafka's works always the autobiographical element, the realization that his writing was the most important thing in his life, and the resentment of his professional obligations as a lawyer and of his fiancé Bauer as diversions from his main objective.

Kafka's story sequence establishes a framework whereby the collection opens with a story of a horse in a law firm and ends with one in which an ape delivers "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to an Academy"). This framework operates to strip away any veneer of respect one may still entertain for these institutions, and, in a masterful kind of "reverse anthropomorphism," it compares humans unfavorably with animals. What is done to animals is not to their benefit. The female chimpanzee has "the insane look of the half-broken animal in her eye." By extension, Kafka seems to be questioning the benefit of what humankind is doing to itself, of the jobs that keep people occupied through the best years of their lives, causing them to conform to hierarchical constructs that deny and suppress their inner selves.

Yet the thought of usurping civilization's rigorous and often dehumanizing controls and structures gives rise to the fear of a relapse into barbarianism. "Ein altes Blatt" ("An Old Manuscript") describes what happened when the nomads assumed power. "Schakale und Araber" ("Jackals and Arabs") cleverly portrays the logical fallacies inherent in the plans for most uprisings, and it identifies the real problem as the nature of the beast rather than the situation.

Some of the stories portray characters overcome by inertia, while others deal with the inability to overcome mortality. Offsetting these, however, are the two death stories that seem, ironically, infused with energy and a sense of purpose. In "Ein Brudermord" ("A Fratricide"), the man who is killed is the one who is a conscientious office worker. Is Kafka wishfully clearing his time-consuming professional life out of the way? In as immediate a style, "Ein Traum" ("A Dream") portrays the burial alive of Josef K., who is also the protagonist in Kafka's novel *The Trial*. While Josef is

alive, the artist engraving the tomb has difficulty writing, but as soon as Josef is wafted down into a great hole, his own name races across the tombstone "in great flourishes." An autobiographical reading of these stories is that Kafka's involvement in his own life lacks authenticity for him and that aspects of his self need to be excised. The indication of where he belongs is given in the brilliant short piece "The Bucket Rider." In it, a freezing man comes to the realization that there is no help for him in this world, and he ascends by supernatural means into the "regions of the ice mountains." This image is a metaphysical removal from the world.

Kafka withdrew "The Bucket Rider" from the collection, perhaps because its message was more elaborately stated in the title story, "The Country Doctor." In this story, the most beautiful and most fantastic of all, Kafka symbolically discards both the profession and the fiancé. The doctor loses his practice and his maid. Instead, he is transported by supernatural means to the bedside of a sick boy, who has a blossom in his side, an unsightly wound that he brought into the world as his only dowry and of which he will die. That is the gift of the artist, which is of consuming magnificence, transporting its owner into the world of the spirit.

## SUMMARY

Franz Kafka is uncontestedly one of the strongest, most original literary voices of the twentieth century. His unpretentious prose, while seemingly rooted in the everyday, penetrates deeply into the reality of the human psyche. All rings true on the psychological level, bizarre though the scenes and circumstances of the narrative may be. Moral precepts shimmer in the distorting light of multiple interpretations, for the works are absolute and support many different interpretations.

Like dreams, Kafka's writing is both fantastic and vividly entertaining and evokes powerful emotional responses ranging from fear to sustained laughter. He was unique, a sovereign artist, a writer for all time.

Jean M. Snook

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*Das Schloss*, 1926 (*The Castle*, 1930)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is *The Trial* merely motivated by Franz Kafka's interest in the law or does it depend significantly on his legal training?
- What are the obstacles to effective communication among Kafka's characters?
- How did Kafka's difficulties with his own father affect his depiction of fathers?
- Does Kafka's fiction reflect an existentialist denial of all absolute principles?
- Can any of the stories of *The Country Doctor* be regarded as optimistic?
- Why do the reactions of fear and laughter seem to converge for Kafka's readers?

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## YASUNARI KAWABATA

**Born:** Ōsaka, Japan  
June 11, 1899

**Died:** Zushi, Japan  
April 16, 1972

*Long recognized in Japan as a literary innovator, Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968, the first Japanese writer to be so honored.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Yasunari Kawabata (kah-wah-bah-tah) was born in Ōsaka, Japan, on June 11, 1899. When Kawabata was two years old, his father died. His mother died the following year, and Kawabata and his sister went to live with his maternal grandparents. Kawabata's grandmother's death in 1906 was followed two years later by the death of his sister, his only sibling, leaving him alone with his grandfather. Following his grandfather's death in 1914, Kawabata moved into a middle-school dormitory in Ōsaka, where he stayed until moving in with relatives to attend high school in Tokyo.

In 1920, Kawabata entered Tokyo Imperial University to study English literature. In his second year, however, he decided to major in Japanese literature. While still in college, Kawabata came to the attention of Kan Kikuchi, a noted editor and author. Kikuchi was so taken with the younger man that he secured a position for Kawabata on the staff of the literary journal *Bungei shunju* (literature of the times) and provided Kawabata with the use of his home. After graduating from Tokyo University in 1924, Kawabata and several other young writers who had been associated with *Bungei shunju* founded their own literary journal, *Bungei jidai* (literary age). The new journal was seen as the official publication of the Shinkankakuha (Neo-Perceptionist) movement. Writers of the Neo-Perceptionist movement were heavily influenced by such Western writers as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein.

Following some early publications in college, Kawabata's first literary breakthrough came with the publication of *Izu no odoriko* (1926; *The Izu Dancer*, 1955). This novel would provide a model for much of Kawabata's later fiction: an autobiographical protagonist and an unattainable, virginal love.

In the early 1930's, Kawabata began to experiment in his short fiction with the stream-of-consciousness technique developed by Joyce. Kawabata also experimented with Surrealism in his short fiction and poetry. During this period, Kawabata worked on several literary magazines, including the influential *Bungakkai* (literary world). He also began to develop many of his "palm-of-the-hand stories." He started writing these very short stories during the 1920's and published 146 of them over the course of his literary career. Kawabata married in 1931, and he and his wife Hideko adopted a daughter in 1943.

In 1934, Kawabata began work on *Yukiguni* (serial, 1935-1937; book, 1947; *Snow Country*, 1956). Between 1934 and 1937, Kawabata published various chapters of *Snow Country* in a series of magazines. He added a chapter in 1939, another in 1940, and a final chapter in 1947 when the novel was published. That each of the early chapters can stand on its own merit is a testament to both Kawabata's skill as a writer and his belief that the novel could end at any point.

During World War II, Kawabata spent much of his time writing self-reflexive childhood reminiscences and studying *Genji monogatari* (c. 1004; *The Tale of Genji*, 1925-1933), Murasaki Shikibu's classic



insider's view of the eleventh century Japanese royal court. While Kawabata was able to retain his apolitical beliefs during the war, he did travel extensively in occupied Manchuria and served on several government-sponsored literary projects.

Kawabata became president of the Japanese chapter of the International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists (PEN) in 1948 and served in that capacity for seventeen years. The late 1940's and early 1950's were productive years for him. He completed two novels, *Sembazuru* (serial, 1949-1951; book, 1952; *Thousand Cranes*, 1958) and *Yama no oto* (serial, 1949-1954; book, 1954; *The Sound of the Mountain*, 1970) and found time to assist a new generation of Japanese authors, most notably Yukio Mishima. Kawabata was also beginning to gain an international following during this time through English and German translations of his fiction.

The 1960's provided an equally busy time for Kawabata as he toured American universities and campaigned at home for conservative political candidates. He was also, of course, still writing. Upon the publication of *Kyoto (The Old Capital)*, 1987) in 1962, Kawabata checked himself into a hospital to recover from a drug dependency developed over the course of writing the novel. In 1968, Kawabata, who had already received every major Japanese award for literature, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Committee cited *Snow Country*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *The Old Capital* as being the basis for their decision.

On April 16, 1972, in Zushi, Japan, Kawabata took his life, leaving no note.

## ANALYSIS

When Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize, many Japanese readers reacted with the same confusion expressed by American readers when William Faulkner was awarded the same prize in 1949. The native audiences for both writers were surprised that an author whom they found so difficult to understand could be appreciated by foreign audiences. Kawabata earned his reputation for being inaccessible through his early experiments with Western-based literary techniques such as stream of consciousness and Surrealism. Even after he moved beyond his flirtation with Western literary styles, he confounded Japanese writers with his fondness for plotless, open-ended stories and his

fragmentary, anecdotal "palm-of-the-hand stories."

The characteristic open-endedness and incompleteness of Kawabata's fiction, combined with the failure of many of his major characters to attain their goals, led some critics to label him a nihilist. Kawabata complained that such critics missed the point of his fiction: "I have never written a story that has . . . nihilism as its main theme. What seems so is in truth a kind of longing for vitality." Makoto Ueda, a critic and scholar of Japanese literature, has suggested that Kawabata's fondness for incomplete endings and open-ended stories is the result of Kawabata's desire to capture the free-flowing nature of life, not a desire to suggest a lack of meaning or completeness for life.

Ueda has noted that the chief characteristics of Kawabata's fiction are beauty, sincerity, and sadness. These three characteristics are not, however, separate entities. Rather, they are intertwined. For example, in *Snow Country*, Yoko's voice is described several times as being so beautiful that it is sad, and even her nose is described as being beautiful with an element of sadness. Beauty also incorporates an element of sincerity, for one who is sincere and pure of heart has a spiritual beauty. Certainly, Kawabata was interested in the outward beauty of landscapes and people, but he was more concerned with the beauty of tradition and emotions.

Kawabata believed that three groups were best prepared to recognize pure beauty. First, little children, because of their innocence, inexperience, and purity of soul, were incapable of seeing ugliness in the world. Second, young women who had not yet experienced life or physical love, who still believed in spiritual, asexual love, were capable of recognizing pure beauty. Finally, dying men were capable of recognizing pure beauty because their closeness to death helped them to transcend the desire for sexual love.

Kawabata's conception of the beauty of pure love can be seen in his first major literary work, *The Izu Dancer*. *The Izu Dancer* is structured around a female dancer and a young student who comes upon the traveling troupe to which the dancer belongs and is immediately attracted to the girl. The young man happens to see the dancer emerge from a bath in a stream, and he is relieved to discover that she is actually a child. His relief is the result of being released from the sexual tension implied by a male/

female relationship. Now he will be able to enjoy love in its purest, most unattainable form and travel freely with the dancers until it is time for him to return to school.

The beauty of tradition is also apparent in Kawabata's fiction. The ancient tea ceremony and the equally historic game of Go figure prominently in two of Kawabata's major novels, *Meijin* (serial, 1942-1954; book, 1954; *The Master of Go*, 1972) and *Thousand Cranes*. Kawabata was as much concerned with the beauty, purity, and simplicity of these Japanese traditions as he was with the characters of the novels for which the traditions provide the structure.

Kawabata believed that the writer's goal should be to create in literature a life of unusual beauty, simplicity, and truth. He recognized that this would be an artificial world, an ideal world, yet he also believed that it was a world that needed to be created. Kawabata believed that a "pure life" was one devoted to the pursuit of an ideal. Recognizing that few dreams are ever realized, Kawabata believed that attaining the ideal, whatever form it may take, was not as important as the pursuit itself. For him, the ideal often took the form of a pure, virginal love, a love that, by its very nature, was unattainable because humankind's desire for physical love ultimately results in the destruction of virginity. Kawabata's use of the unattainable virgin has been linked to his engagement to a fifteen-year-old in the early 1920's.

Death is also present in much of Kawabata's fiction, for anyone who seeks the essence (purity) of life must be willing to risk everything, even death, in pursuit of the ideal. Also, death that occurs before spiritual love can be breached, as in the case of the young man who is the center of Yoko and Komako's lives in *Snow Country*, assures the continuation of the spiritual love. Yoko, for example, states that she will never be able to nurse or mourn another man as she has nursed and mourned the music teacher's son. *The Sound of the Mountain* is reflective of Kawabata's concern with his own mortality. Although he was only in his early fifties while he was writing the novel, death had been an important part of his life from the earliest days.

## SNOW COUNTRY

**First published:** *Yukiguni*, 1935-1937, serial; 1947, book (English translation, 1956)

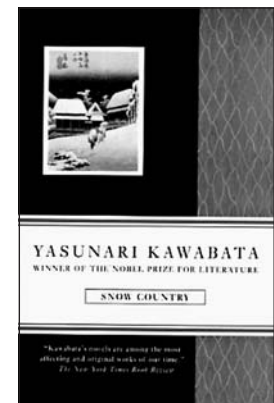
**Type of work:** Novel

*An independently wealthy man makes three visits to his mistress in the mountain country of Japan in search of an elusive dream that remains unfulfilled.*

"The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country." Through the opening line of *Snow Country*, the central character, Shimamura, and the reader are transported back in time. The snow country of the novel has only recently been linked to modern Japan by the railroad. Indeed, as Shimamura notes as he returns to Tokyo after his second visit, "the train . . . was not from the same world as the trains one finds on the main lines."

Shimamura's world, represented by Tokyo, is a world being invaded by Western influences in architecture and lifestyles. The world on the other side of the mountains from Tokyo is a world of rice harvests, winter carnivals, houses built in the style of the old regime, and Chijimi linen that can be traced back to antiquity. Clearly, when Shimamura travels to the snow country, he is leaving behind the decadence of modern Japan and returning to a Japan of the past, a Japan that values simplicity and purity. Shimamura himself acknowledges that he must return to the mountains to regain some of the honesty that is lost by living in Tokyo. Despite his professed desire for honesty, however, Shimamura is more concerned with illusion than with reality. In the opening section of the novel, he views Yoko through her reflection in the mirrorlike window of the train car, but what he sees is an image "floating" in the glass, not Yoko herself.

Shimamura's fascination with occidental ballet is also representative of his desire to maintain a dis-



tance between reality and illusion, as if closeness to a dream destroys the dream. In fact, that is exactly what has happened to him with his earlier fascination with the dance-drama of Kabuki theater. As he researched and studied Kabuki dance and became acquainted with individual dancers, he became dissatisfied with the object of his obsession and turned his attentions to ballet. In this new study, he is determined to maintain the distance between illusion and reality by never watching a ballet performance. He will content himself with studying ballet through books and photographs, assuring that the new dream cannot be destroyed.

Shimamura's relationship with Komako is also built around the pursuit of a dream, a spiritual relationship with a woman. This dream is nearly realized during their first meeting, related through a flashback as Shimamura is traveling toward a second meeting in the mountains. Shimamura and Komako's first meeting is in the spring, a time of hope and promise. When Shimamura first meets Komako, he is attracted to her physically, but he moves quickly to separate her in his mind from a woman to be used for physical pleasure. He sees a purity in her that creates a feeling of revulsion for his physical desires. Komako also recognizes that they may be on the verge of something pure and magical and points out to him that relationships between men and women last longer if they remain "just friends." Physical desire (aided by some *sake*) overpowers the couple's good intentions, however, and the possibility of a purely spiritual relationship is destroyed. The remaining sections of the novel center around Komako's "fall from grace" and Shimamura's interest in the "unspoiled" Yoko.

Shimamura's second visit to the mountain village begins with an air of optimism, for while he has been away from Komako, he has felt closer to her and hopes to recapture something from their first encounter. Once again, he is attracted more to possibilities than to realities. The openness of that first meeting, however, cannot be recaptured; it has been destroyed by the physical relationship. This meeting takes place in the winter, symbolizing the arrested state of their relationship.

Komako is presented in a different light during the second meeting. She is no longer the young woman whom Shimamura met six months earlier; she is now a geisha in the full sense of the word. Nevertheless, Shimamura still finds a purity in her

because she has become a geisha to help pay the medical bills of her former fiancé, who is dying, and to avoid being trapped in a loveless marriage to an old man who has proposed to her. Komako, however, recognizes that there is no longer the possibility for anything but a sexual relationship between Shimamura and herself. Consequently, she drinks heavily when she is engaged to attend parties in her role as a geisha.

When Shimamura returns to the snow country for his third visit, it is autumn, a foreshadowing of the end of the relationship. During the third visit, Komako is drinking even more heavily and strikes out verbally against Yoko, telling Shimamura that the younger girl is insane. Komako is aware of Shimamura's attraction to Yoko and the possibility of pure love that the younger girl represents.

Yoko, ironically, is the character who comes closest to realizing the dream of a pure, asexual love. Yoko served as a nurse for Komako's former fiancé and has spent every day since his death tending his grave. Now she tells Shimamura she is ready to go to Tokyo; she knows she will never love another man in the same way. She has captured the purity of love that Shimamura and Komako had been seeking. Her apparent death at the end of the novel ensures that there will be no other men in her life.

The novel ends, characteristically for Kawabata, with nothing resolved for the main characters. It is not even certain that Yoko has died from her leap off the burning warehouse.

## THOUSAND CRANES

**First published:** *Sembazuru*, 1949-1951, serial; 1952, book (English translation, 1958)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Tokyo bachelor attempts to reconcile his life to the realities of postwar Japan and the traditions of the past.*

The ancient Japanese tea ceremony, which provides the backdrop of *Thousand Cranes*, is as important as the two motifs intertwined throughout the novel: the loss of values in postwar Japan and the elusive search for love.

The tea ceremony itself is symbolic of Japan's

drift away from tradition and historical values. Kikuji Mitani, the protagonist, seems indifferent to his father's collection of antique tea bowls and the tea ceremony itself. His office mates share his lack of interest in the ceremony. Chikako Kurimoto, a former mistress of Kikuji's late father and a teacher of the tea ceremony, wistfully tells Kikuji that fewer and fewer young girls seem to be interested in learning the ways of the tea ceremony. Chikako also notes that the tea ceremony has also been tainted by foreign observers, such as some Americans who visited recently.

The two young women who are of interest to Kikuji in the novel have close ties to the tea ceremony. Chikako is trying to arrange a marriage between Kikuji and Yukiko Inamura. Yukiko, as a student of Chikako's, is tied to the past. Fumiko Ota, a former student of the tea ceremony who is often seen in European dress, is linked to the present. Consequently, as Chikako tries to pressure Kikuji to accept an arranged marriage to Yukiko, and as he tries to define his feelings for Fumiko, he is not merely choosing between two women—he is choosing between the Japan of the past and modern Japan.

Kikuji lives alone in his father's house, both his parents having died. It is a house of the past, in architecture and furnishings—even the maid is a remnant from his father's days. Kikuji continually talks of selling the house and allows it to fall into disrepair. The house represents the traditions of the past, and Kikuji is unsure of the validity of these traditions in postwar Japan. He works in a modern building and leaves his house in Western-style suits, only changing into a kimono when he returns home.

When Chikako arranges a tea ceremony to bring Kikuji and Yukiko together, he is attracted by the latter's beauty. Yet he is also offended by the tradition of arranged marriages and the role that Chikako is trying to play in his life. Despite his attraction to Yukiko, Kikuji realizes that there will always be a distance between them because of her

ties to the past and because of his ambivalent feelings for the past.

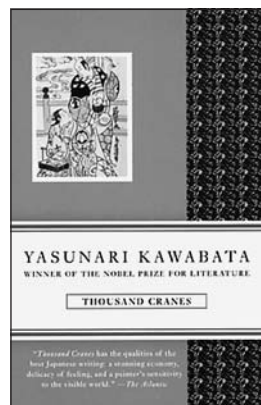
Chikako's tea ceremony also brings Kikuji together with Mrs. Ota and her daughter Fumiko. Fumiko, like Kikuji, is torn between the past and present. She has avoided learning the tea ceremony and is often found wearing European clothes. After her mother's suicide, she makes a formal break with the past by selling her mother's house.

Kikuji's growing alienation from the past can be seen in his use of the antique water pitcher that Fumiko gives him after her mother's death. The pitcher was created for use in the tea ceremony, but Kikuji uses it to hold Western flowers. Near the end of the novel, Chikako, frustrated with her inability to control Kikuji's life, accuses him of being ignorant of Japanese thinking—the worst insult that she can think of making.

Kikuji's dissatisfaction in the novel is not limited to his search for a cultural identity; his dissatisfaction is also related to an inability to find love. When Kikuji was eight years old, his father took him on a visit to Chikako's—his father's mistress at the time. Kikuji saw an ugly birthmark on Chikako's breast and now associates ugliness with sex. He sees Chikako's venomous behavior toward Mrs. Ota and Fumiko as an ugliness derived from her sexual relationship with his father. Even as an adult bachelor, Kikuji feels "soiled" after sexual encounters.

Fumiko also sees ugliness in sex. She blames her mother's adulterous relationship with Kikuji's father for the early deaths of Kikuji's father and mother. She even believes her mother's suicide is the result of her mother not being able "to stand her own ugliness," an ugliness that stems both from her mother's relationship with Kikuji and from her mother's seduction of Kikuji. Fumiko's own suicide at the end of the novel is linked by Kikuji to guilt that she may be feeling over her sexual surrender to him.

Ironically, Fumiko's death comes after she has symbolically broken with the past by selling her mother's house and by shattering a three-hundred-year-old tea bowl that her mother had owned. Her death is also ironic because through his sexual encounter with Fumiko, Kikuji has "escaped the curse and paralysis" that have dominated his life. Unfortunately, he fails to explain this freedom to Fumiko. When he goes to tell her the next morn-



ing, he discovers that it is too late. His indecisiveness the night before has allowed true happiness to escape him.

### SUMMARY

Yasunari Kawabata's true gift as a writer, the gift recognized and cited by the Nobel Prize Committee, was his appreciation of Japanese traditions and his ability to explore the interrelationships between the past, present, and future through the language and literary traditions of the twentieth century. While similar themes ran through much of Kawabata's works, each piece of his fiction has its own unique character and style, be it the attention paid to a physical description of a black water lily or a psychological study of human indifference.

Ronald E. Smith

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is ironic about the difficulty English-speaking audiences had in understanding the work of Yasunari Kawabata, an avid student of English and American writers?
- Consider the validity of Kawabata's explanation of the "incompleteness" of his stories.
- Does Kawabata's notion of love bear any resemblance to that of Dante?
- What does Shimamura learn in the snow country?
- Has Kawabata's ability to explore Japanese traditions influenced Western as well as Japanese readers?



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## NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

**Born:** Heraklion, Crete, Ottoman Empire (now in Greece)

February 18, 1883

**Died:** Freiburg, West Germany (now in Germany)

October 26, 1957

*Kazantzakis, through his examination of the nature of human freedom and the concept of God in a variety of literary works and forms, is the most important Greek writer of the twentieth century and a formidable figure on the world literary stage.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Nikos Kazantzakis (kah-zuhn-TZAH-kees) was born in Heraklion on the Greek island of Crete on February 18, 1883, at a time when that island was under the control of the Ottoman Turks. Rebels fought against the Turks during Kazantzakis's childhood, and they were finally successful in 1898. Once Kazantzakis's family fled to Greece for safety in the midst of the violence of revolution, and as a teenager Kazantzakis was sent to the island of Naxos for the purposes of both schooling and personal safety. Thus, Kazantzakis was born into a world of struggle and movement; struggle became the dominant theme of his writing and movement the theme of his life.

In 1902, young Kazantzakis moved from Crete to Athens to study law, but by 1906 his literary career had also begun with his first novel, *Ophis kai krino* (1906; *Serpent and Lily*, 1980), and the political play *Xemeronei* (pr. 1907; day is breaking), which was produced the next year and which won acclaim for Kazantzakis. In 1907, Kazantzakis moved to Paris to begin graduate study in philosophy. While there, he encountered the works of two philosophers whose ideas were to influence greatly the rest of his career: the German Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed that human beings must violate the rules and conventions of the past in order to break through to a new consciousness; and the Frenchman Henri Bergson, who thought that time is relative to the human condition and not measured by an abstract standard and that the life force (*élan vital*) is constantly fighting to assert itself through a resistant matter. By 1909, Kazantzakis had finished

his dissertation on Nietzsche and returned to Crete, where he became one of the leaders of a literary group that championed the use of the ordinary (demotic) Greek spoken by common people in place of the more formal Greek favored by older literary artists. Kazantzakis and his colleagues hoped thereby to revive the literature of Greece.

Kazantzakis spent the next fifteen years traveling all over Greece and central Europe, becoming involved with many political schemes designed to overthrow the old capitalistic and imperial order, jumping from one philosophical viewpoint to the next, having many experiences that would inform his later works, but writing comparatively little. In 1911, he married Galatea Alexiou, whom he had met while living in Athens. In 1912, war broke out in the Balkans, and Kazantzakis volunteered for duty but wound up assisting the prime minister. Then, in a complete reversal of the path that he had been following, in 1914 and 1915 Kazantzakis toured Greece with a friend, poet Angelos Sikelianós. A highlight of their trip was a visit to Mount Athos, a famous monastery that was one of many where they stayed. Kazantzakis lived alone in a bare monk's cell for months. As a result of this journey and his reading of Dante, Leo Tolstoy, and Western and Eastern religious scriptures, Kazantzakis decided that political change was not the answer to humankind's problems and began to think instead in religious terms, even considering starting a new religion. In 1917, Kazantzakis failed in an effort to mine lignite coal, but during the effort he met a life-affirming worker, George Zorbas. This adventure was to serve as the basis for his most fa-

mous novel, *Vios kai politela tou Alexe Zormpa* (1946; *Zorba the Greek*, 1952). In 1917, Kazantzakis traveled to Switzerland, and he stayed there for the next two years.

Kazantzakis was brought back to political struggle in 1919, when the Greek government assigned him to help repatriate thousands of Greeks who were being persecuted by the Bolsheviks in the Russian Caucasus region. He also took part in the meetings of the World War I peace conference at Versailles and worked in northern Greece resettling refugees from the Caucasus, an experience that he used in the novel *Ho Christos xanastauronetai* (1951; *The Greek Passion*, 1954; also known as *Christ Recrucified*). Disillusioned again by strife in Greece, Kazantzakis left the country in 1920 and spent the decade moving about Europe, visiting or living and working in Paris, Germany, Vienna, Italy, the Soviet Union, Palestine, Cyprus, Egypt, and Czechoslovakia, frequently returning to Greece while writing articles, translations, and reference works for a living. During this period, he divorced his first wife, met Eléni Samfou, who was to become his companion and second wife, and suffered several painful and debilitating attacks of the facial eczema that was to plague him for the rest of his life. He also became enamored of communism (the reason for his visits to Russia), became involved in more political turmoil in Greece, and began work on the volume that he regarded as his most important, his continuation of Homer's epic, *Odyseia* (1938; *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, 1958).

Kazantzakis's wanderlust continued into the 1930's, including a trip to Japan and China, but he finally established a home on the Greek island of Aegina. During this period, he became known to a wider reading audience through his travel articles and books. During World War II, he was confined to Greece because of the German occupation, and in 1945 he returned to politics as a socialist and married Eléni Samfou. Civil war broke out in Greece at the end of World War II, and in 1946, because of controversy generated by both his politics and his writings, he left Greece for England and later Paris, where he worked as a translator for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Later, he and his wife moved to Antibes, France, where he lived for the rest of his life, since opposition to his politics and literary works prevented his return to Greece.

This time was also a period of intense creative activity, during which Kazantzakis wrote and translated several plays and wrote the novels *The Greek Passion*, *Hoi aderphophades* (1963; *The Fratricides*, 1964), *Ho Kapetan Michales* (1953; *Freedom or Death*, 1956; also known as *Freedom and Death: A Novel*), and *Ho teleutaïos peirasmós* (1955; *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1960; also known as *The Last Temptation*). The last novel is his most controversial because it presents Jesus Christ as beset by sexual and psychological problems and incurred the censure of both the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

Meanwhile, Kazantzakis's health was failing as his reputation continued to grow. The facial eczema attacked him again, and in 1953 an infection led to the loss of an eye, but doctors also pinpointed the source of the eczema as a lymphatic disorder, which, during a hospitalization in Germany the next year, was diagnosed as benign lymphatic leukemia. In 1956, he received the Peace Prize in Vienna and narrowly lost the Nobel Prize in Literature to Juan Ramón Jiménez. The next year, Kazantzakis had an adverse reaction to a vaccination during a trip to the Far East and was rushed to the hospital in Germany where his leukemia had been diagnosed. He died of Asiatic influenza in Freiburg, West Germany (now in Germany), on October 26, 1957. He was buried in his native Crete in spite of the opposition of the Greek Orthodox church. He was still working to the end; the last books that he completed were the novel *Ho phthochoules tou Theou* (1956; *Saint Francis*, 1962; also known as *God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi*) and the autobiography *Anafora ston Greko: Myhistorema* (1961; *Report to Greco*, 1965).

## ANALYSIS

There is no more typical event in Kazantzakis's life than his attempt, while living in Vladimir Ilych Lenin's Russia in 1922, to unite and reconcile the political activism and materialism of communism with the asceticism and spirituality of Buddhism, an effort discussed in his philosophical book *Salvatores Dei: Asketike* (1927; *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*, 1960). Judged from outside Kazantzakis's worldview, such an endeavor seems hopeless, pointless, and doomed to failure from the outset. Yet the effort to yoke the extremes of human experience appears over and over in Kazan-

tzakis's work. Odysseus in his *The Odyssey* is both a sacker of cities and a seeker after spiritual peace. The protagonist of *The Greek Passion*, chosen to portray Jesus in a Passion play, begins to assume that role in life and becomes not a man of peace but a revolutionary. Finally, Christ himself in *The Last Temptation of Christ* is unsure whether he should lead a religious revolt or abandon the struggle for an ordinary life with a home and family; beset by doubts, he is still trying to understand the nature of his mission even as he hangs on the Cross.

The inversion of everyday logic and human behavior that is basic to Kazantzakis's thinking appears even in the titles of his books. God is not the Savior of humanity, men and women are the saviors of God (in *The Saviors of God*). Kazantzakis thought of all creation, all existence, as a divine project in which the Holy Spirit, residing in the hearts and minds of humanity, must fight to overcome the resistance of the flesh, which always wants to take the easy way out, give in to its appetites, and surrender in the face of egotistic greed and oppression. God cannot save humankind, for it is the embodiment, the incarnation, of the Spirit of God. It is for humanity to speak and act in terms of that Spirit and thereby save God. The British title of Kazantzakis's novel about Cretan rebellion against the Turks, *Freedom or Death*, is *Freedom and Death*, a pairing more appropriate for the writer's viewpoint. The doomed Cretans fight against impossible odds because that is the only way to assert the divine spirit of freedom and the unity of all life. Few are willing to undertake such a struggle, so their effort is bound to end in death. In that death, they reach the zenith of their exercise of freedom, so the appropriate title is not freedom *or* death, which implies that humanity has a choice between these conditions, but freedom *and* death, which grimly acknowledges the inevitable conclusion of such an attempt. For Kazantzakis, relationships are never stated in "either/or" terms, such as "either politics or religion" or "either the world or God," but in "and/and" terms. In order to understand, for example, politics or religion, the modern human must try to act upon the truths of each at the same time. To act as if only one side of the pair exists is to act on only partial knowledge and therefore really to be blind. The true answer is not "politics or religion" but "politics and religion," and, one should add, everything else, too. Kazantzakis tried to in-

clude as much experience in his life and literary works as he could possibly gather. To those who disagree with his philosophy, Kazantzakis was a madman racing over the globe in search of impossible fulfillment; to his admirers, he lived and wrote a quest for a new definition of the relationships between humans and fellow humans and between humankind and God.

## ZORBA THE GREEK

**First published:** *Vios kai politela tou Alexe Zormpa*, 1946 (English translation, 1952)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A shy and unassertive scholar meets a lusty peasant who renews the scholar's faith in humanity and transforms his life.*

*Zorba the Greek* is based on Kazantzakis's friendship with a real person, George Zorba, who helped the author in an ill-fated scheme to mine lignite in Greece. In the novel, the first-person narrator, known as "The Boss" (a title that Zorba gives him), who is a slightly changed version of Kazantzakis himself, journeys not to Greece but to Crete to mine the coal. Zorba, who fascinates and captivates The Boss the moment that they meet, keeps urging his employer to cast aside convention and live life more fully. He demonstrates how to do this

by dancing, playing his guitarlike *santuri*, and spouting life-affirming philosophy and declarations about the nature of God, which are usually jokes and riddles. For example, Zorba explains the chaos of the physical world by pointing out that fishers pray to God to make fish blind so that they will swim into the nets; the fish pray to God to make the fishers blind

so that they will cast their nets in the wrong places. Since God is the God of both fishers and fish, sometimes God listens to the prayers of the fish and



sometimes to the prayers of the fishers, so sometimes fish are caught and sometimes they are not.

Zorba is also a confidence man, but a good-hearted one; the tables are turned on him by women, for part of the way in which he affirms life is to romance every woman who seems a likely partner, sometimes getting fooled himself and in the process losing much of The Boss's money. The most poignant episode in the book stems from Zorba's sexual appetite. Zorba had befriended an old widow who had once been a coquette, and when she is about to die, The Boss tries to get Zorba to marry her to give her a sense of fulfillment.

At the end of the novel, Zorba's get-rich scheme for transporting coal—a trestle system down the side of a mountain—literally collapses, and The Boss prepares to return to the mainland. Zorba says farewell to The Boss by telling him that he has a good heart but that he lacks one thing to be totally his own man—folly. One must, in other words, be a little crazy to be free.

The novel was adapted for film in 1964, with Anthony Quinn as Zorba and Alan Bates as The Boss, and directed by Michael Cacoyannis. The success of this film helped bring Kazantzakis's work to a wider audience.

## THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

**First published:** *Ho teleutaios peirasmós*, 1955  
(English translation, 1960)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Jesus Christ resists his most powerful temptation, the desire to lead a normal human life, and dies on the Cross, fulfilling his destiny of spiritually uniting humanity and God.*

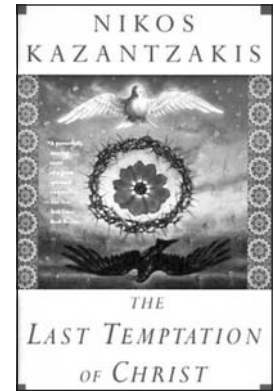
*The Last Temptation of Christ* starts near the end of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and recounts the main events of the familiar Gospel story: Jesus assumes his mission, preaches, gathers disciples, is baptized by John the Baptist, goes to Jerusalem at Passover, is betrayed by Judas, is tried, condemned, and crucified, and finally dies on the Cross. Other details are presented either unconventionally or ambiguously. Pontius Pilate's interview with Jesus is in two

parts, one before Passover and not in connection with Jesus' trial; Jesus apparently raises Lazarus from the dead, but Jesus' involvement in this event is reported by the characters rather than described authorially by Kazantzakis. Peter dreams that he walked on the waves at Jesus' command and tells Matthew, who includes the story as a real event in his account of Christ's life. Jesus is enraged at this and other inaccuracies in Matthew's manuscript, which the publican is writing so that the details of Jesus' life will correspond with the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, but Matthew says that he is directed by an angel.

Although the tone of the novel is serious, this method of reporting the story of Jesus may be a reminder that, in his other works, Kazantzakis describes God as sometimes inconsistent and possessing a sense of humor. Kazantzakis may have de-emphasized Jesus' connection with Judaic tradition in order to underscore the point that, as a human being as well as God, he would have to have had the doubts that any human would have about his or her path in life.

These doubts are the source of the "last temptation" of the title. While enduring the agony of the Cross, Jesus swoons and dreams that he has awakened into a life in which he escaped the torment of the religious zealot, married, and fathered children. This "life" turns out to be a fantasy placed in his mind by Satan; his disciples return and accuse him of being a traitor by denying his mission, rejecting the Cross, and negating the truth of the power of the divine Spirit, which they wish to spread throughout the world. Summoning his strength, Jesus awakens from his dream, dies, and in that death brings freedom to himself and humankind. The novel ends at this point rather than with the Resurrection because Kazantzakis thought that Christ's death fulfilled both prophecy and his spiritual role; nothing more was needed.

Few novels have caused more outrage; religious figures of several faiths condemned the book as both blasphemous and heretical, and literary crit-





ics found the wild swings in Jesus' character and in the attitudes of others toward him either baffling or rendering the novel flawed and episodic. Kazantzakis clearly regards Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of humankind, but his presentation of Christ does not fit any conventional religious view. In 1989, Martin Scorsese directed a film version that was faithful to the novel and even more controversial than the book on which it was based.

### SUMMARY

Nikos Kazantzakis created works of art not as a sterile aesthetic exercise but as part of a lifelong effort to unify God, humanity, and the physical world. His works are important for those seeking to find a new viewpoint that will free humanity from the greed and selfishness that have characterized past centuries.

*Jim Baird*

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Identify the means by which Nikos Kazantzakis was able to vivify Greek literature.
- Did the 1964 film *Zorba the Greek* interpret Kazantzakis's novel accurately?
- Have recent studies of Kazantzakis's work modified the outrage that greeted *The Last Temptation of Christ*?
- Is Kazantzakis's career a validation of the pursuit of impractical ideas?
- Can conventional Christians learn anything about religion from Kazantzakis?

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*Ho teleutaïos peirasmos*, 1955 (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1960; also known as *The Last Temptation*)

*Ho phtochoules tou Theou*, 1956 (*Saint Francis*, 1962; also known as *God's Pauper: Saint Francis of Assisi*)

*Hoi aderphophades*, 1963 (*The Fratricides*, 1964)

##### POETRY:

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## JOHN KEATS

**Born:** Moorfields, London, England  
October 31, 1795

**Died:** Rome, Papal States (now in Italy)  
February 23, 1821

*One of the second generation of Romantic poets, Keats elevated the ode form to a new level of lyrical expression and came to symbolize the supreme literary craftsman.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in London, England, on October 31, 1795, John Keats (keets) was the son of Frances and Thomas Keats, the manager of a livery stable in the north of London. The oldest of four children, two brothers and a sister, Keats was eight years old when his father fell from a horse and suddenly died. The death of Keats's father and his mother's sudden decision to remarry had a dramatic effect on the poet's life. When Alice Jennings, Keats's maternal grandmother, heard of her daughter's decision to marry again, she arranged to have the Keats children come live with her and her husband, John Jennings. This move eventually resulted in the children moving to a different suburb of the city, Enfield, where Keats and his brother, George, began school. This development was a key moment in Keats's early life.

The Enfield school, which was run by the Reverend John Clarke, not only introduced Keats to the various pleasures of literature, which of course was to become the consuming passion of his life, but also brought the young poet into contact with the Reverend Clarke's precocious and well-read son, Charles Cowden Clarke. Charles Clarke, who was eight years older than Keats and who eventually became an important writer, too, quickly established himself as Keats's mentor and friend. It was through his new friend that Keats encountered

many of the books that were to play an important role in his poetry.

In March, 1810, Keats's mother died of tuberculosis. This event was not the sudden blow that his father's earlier death had been, but it was no less traumatic. It is difficult to know precisely how this loss shaped the young man's character, but it is quite likely that this event, combined with the earlier death of his father, deepened the poet's sense of the tragic nature of human existence. As a result, the transitoriness and pain of life are themes that run throughout his poems and letters. Indeed, he would eventually develop the belief that suffering and death are essential to the growth of the human soul, for it is death and suffering that awakens one to the intense beauty of life. People only come to feel the glory of life and the wonder of existence when it is suddenly taken from them, Keats concluded.

At the age of fourteen, Keats became the head of the Keats family. He might have remained in school and gone on to receive a university education, since there was a provision in a trust fund set up by his grandmother that would cover those costs. Yet because of legal complications and the incompetency of Richard Abbey, a London tea merchant who was assigned as guardian for the children upon the death of their mother, Keats was denied his inheritance and, instead, apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, a local apothecary-surgeon. For the next four years, Keats studied medicine with Hammond. This intense training in medicine was relieved only by occasional visits to the nearby Charles Clarke to borrow books and discuss literature.

In 1815, at the age of nineteen, Keats moved to London proper to do his student internship at Guy's Hospital, where he lived and worked for the next two years. It is difficult to overestimate the impression that Guy's must have made on the young poet, whose first responsibility at the hospital was dressing surgical wounds. The sights and sounds of the operating and recovery rooms must have been extremely poignant, particularly since these rooms were filled with patients who had been surgically treated without the benefit of anesthetics. Keats had already experienced the deep emotions of suffering and loss through the death of both parents; now, he was to see that same agony and death displayed on a much larger scale and on a more regular basis in his daily rounds at the hospital.

During his two years at Guy's, Keats became increasingly convinced that poetry was to be his life's work. Life and death were the dominant concerns of his days, but reading and writing were the governing passions of his nights. Long days at the hospital were regularly followed by evenings of writing verse, reading books borrowed from Clarke, and discussing literature with friends and fellow medical students. It is important to note, however, that art was not a refuge for Keats from the agony of life, although he did look to poetry as a way of escaping the unpleasantness of his daily existence. To the contrary, poetry was the supreme expression of the intense experience of living in a world of pain and sorrow, pleasure and joy, the passing and the permanent. It is during this period that Keats produced his first significant poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." It is also during this time that Clarke introduced Keats to Leigh Hunt, a popular essayist of the day, to John Reynolds, a poet, and to Benjamin Haydon, an increasingly important painter. These contacts further persuaded Keats that his true vocation was literature, not surgery. Keats left Guy's Hospital in 1817 to dedicate himself exclusively to the writing of poetry. This year also marks the publication of his first book of poetry, *Poems* (1817).

That same year, Keats moved in with his brothers, George and Tom, who now lived in the London suburb of Hampstead. There he finished his second volume of poetry, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (1818), the mythological story of a mortal shepherd's love for the immortal goddess Diana. Having finished this project, Keats spent the summer

of 1818 on a walking tour through the Lake District and Scotland. His return brought with it three painful discoveries. First, he was diagnosed to be in the early stages of tuberculosis, which was the same disease that had killed his mother and would, in less than three years, claim his own life. Second, and even more jarring, he found that the critics had not liked the two volumes of poetry that he had recently published. Although the impact of these negative criticisms has been overstated, it is probably true that Keats's conviction that his fame as a poet would never last can be traced to these early reviews of his work. Third, in the same year that Keats was diagnosed with tuberculosis, he would watch his youngest brother, Tom, also die of the same disease. Shaken but determined to continue writing, Keats moved to Wentworth Place in 1819. There he met Fanny Brawne, his first love, to whom he was engaged in October of that year.

In 1819, Keats wrote all of his greatest poetry. In that single year, he wrote "Lamia," "The Eve of St. Agnes," all the great odes ("Ode on Indolence," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to Psyche," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on Melancholy," and "To Autumn"), as well as the Miltonic fragment "Hyperion," which he would later rework as *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* (1856). No other single year in literary history has seen such an outpouring of poetic genius, particularly by such a young poet.

The results of this great year were published in 1819 and on into 1820, the year that both marks the extraordinary heights of Keats's artistic career and foretells the imminent end of his short but remarkable life. The worsening tuberculosis made it almost impossible to continue working. When the doctors finally ordered the poet to seek a warmer climate (a common prescription in that day for sufferers of this disease), Joseph Severn, Keats's close friend, accompanied him to Rome. They sailed on September 18, 1820. A few weeks after arriving in Rome, Keats suffered a serious relapse. On February 23, 1821, he died, in Rome, at the age of twenty-five. Buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, he had arranged to have the following words inscribed upon his tombstone: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

## ANALYSIS

Keats was a poet, and it is in his poetry that he gave the fullest expression to his genius. Yet before

turning to the poetry, it may be useful first to address some of the central concerns of the poet, as expressed in his various letters to family and friends. It is in these letters, for example, that he tried to articulate his philosophies of art and life, asking and answering such questions as, What is the true character of a poet? What is the proper role of the poet in society? What is the relationship between art and life? and What is the function of the imagination?

In his letter of October 27, 1818, to Richard Woodhouse, a friend and supporter, Keats offers one of his earliest attempts to define what a poet is. Keats begins by declaring that a poet has no self or identity. A poet, like a chameleon, absorbs the colorations of the outside world, becoming one with the things seen, heard, and touched. Keats's point is that, for poets to comprehend their subjects fully, to enter into the life of things around them, they must free themselves from their own limited experiences of the world—their own biases, emotions, and points of view—and merge with that which they hope to understand and describe. This sympathetic understanding, as opposed to a reasoned understanding, depends not upon logic or even intellect but rather upon imagination. Through the imagination, then, the poet is projected into the subject and lives according to its essential qualities. From this notion of the poet comes one of Keats's most significant contributions to poetic theory, the idea of Negative Capability. This idea extends the above beliefs about escaping the self to form a philosophy about the poetic character and its proper relationship to the world. In his December 21, 1817, letter to his brothers, George and Tom, Keats defined Negative Capability quite simply as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” For Keats, in other words, poetic knowledge comes from accepting the inexplicable mysteries of the world. The poet should not force the world to make sense, for to do that is to reduce and simplify the world and to equate that reduction and simplification with a true understanding. A more profound understanding comes when the poet lives in conjunction with doubt and uncertainty. Again, Keats rejects reason and logic as suitable agents of truth, preferring instead to rely upon imagination and feeling. This preference may help to explain what Keats means when he

writes at the end of his important poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” that “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” The truth that Keats finds in beauty is not the truth that the scientist or historian seeks to discover and document. For Keats, the essential truth of something, a sunset, for example, can be grasped only through a full appreciation of its beauty. As Keats explains in his letter to George and Tom: “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”

This notion of the poet and what constitutes true knowledge goes a long way toward explaining why Keats wrote the kind of poetry that he did. Keats's purpose as a poet is not to teach the reader the so-called truths of this world, in any conventional sense of that word. Nor, Keats argues, is it the poet's business to bully the reader into accepting a ready-made set of conclusions. Poetry, in other words, should “proclaim” nothing. Instead, the ambition of the poet is to arouse the readers' imaginative faculties so that they may participate in the larger existence of creation. As exercises in imagination, Keats's poems seek to lift their readers out of their contracted worlds and raise them to a level of awareness and understanding that is at peace with complexity, ambiguity, contradiction, and mystery. That is the stuff of life; or at least it was the stuff of Keats's difficult life. All attempts to escape that condition through “an irritable reaching after fact and reason” can only result in a sorry self-deception and a diminishment of human experience.

## ENDYMION: A POETIC ROMANCE

**First published:** 1818

**Type of work:** Poem

*Taken from Greek mythology, this poem is the story of a mortal shepherd's quest for immortality through his ideal love, the goddess Diana.*

*Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, Keats's first major work, represents the poet's first sustained attempt to explore the relationship between the real world of human experience and the ethereal world of an



idealized existence. Divided into four books, the poem traces Endymion's progress from his initial desire to rise above his earthly existence by cultivating his love for Diana, the goddess of the moon, who represents ideal love, to his gradual reconciliation, in the end, to his mortal condition and the love that he feels for an Indian maiden whom he meets during his quest. Upon realizing the dangers of trying to deny his own human nature, Endymion suddenly discovers that the Indian maiden, his mortal counterpart, is really Diana, his immortal desire, in disguise. In the end, Endymion learns that he can only rise above his mortal nature and achieve some kind of idealized existence if he first accepts "his natural sphere." Keats's point, as in other poems, is that any attempt to achieve an abstract ideal must begin

with an acceptance of concrete human experience.

Book 1, which opens with the often-quoted line, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever," describes the source of Endymion's discontent with his life as a local chieftain. His life as a man of action and worldly concerns is disrupted by a dream in

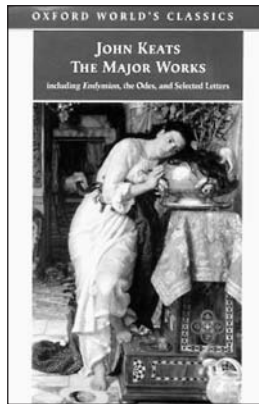
which he imagines himself carried through the skies by a goddess. When she finally returns him to earth, he suddenly finds that his surroundings no longer seem beautiful or satisfying. Having experienced the ethereal world of abstract beauty, Endymion is unable to appreciate the physical beauty of the world around him.

Books 2, 3, and 4, which take place under the earth, at the bottom of the sea, and in the sky, trace Endymion's quest for the goddess of his dream. During his journey, he encounters various characters, the last of whom is Glaucus, who is chained to the bottom of the sea. Glaucus, like Endymion, had once been satisfied with his existence as a mortal, but, aroused by "distemper'd longings," he had transformed himself into a sea-god. When he rejected the seductions of the sea witch, Circe, she chained him to the bottom of the sea for a thousand years. One condition of Glaucus's release is that he and Endymion must locate the bodies of all

the lovers who have drowned at sea and restore them to life. Only by engaging once again in the world of mortal actions can Glaucus escape the dreadful consequences of trying to escape his own mortality.

In book 4, Endymion reenacts the lesson of Glaucus. Having met an Indian maiden, Endymion is torn between his love for this mortal woman and his idealized love for his immortal goddess. Eventually, he admonishes himself for rejecting his own concrete humanity in favor of "his first soft poppy dream." In the end, he learns the essential lesson of his life—that to reject his own humanity is to reject all humanity and the things of this earth.

When Endymion discovers in the end that the Indian maiden is really Diana in disguise, he achieves through this synthesis of these two figures the final wisdom of his life and of Keats's poem: that any desire to achieve the ideal must begin not with a rejection of the mortal world but rather with an acceptance of the human condition. It is through an intense appreciation for the concrete and common things of this world that one penetrates the ethereal and idealized world within and beyond.



## "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE"

**First published:** 1819 (collected in "*Lamia*," "*Isabella*," "*The Eve of St. Agnes*," and *Other Poems*, 1820)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this meditation on the song of the nightingale, Keats explores the power of the imagination to free him from the human condition.*

"Ode to a Nightingale," along with "Ode on Indolence," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode on Melancholy," and "To Autumn," all of which were written between March and September of 1819, document Keats's ongoing struggle to reconcile himself to his own mortality. The deaths of his father (1804) and mother (1810), combined with the imminent death of his brother, Tom, who was in the last stages of tuberculosis, as well as the recent diagnosis of his own contraction of tuberculosis, brought the poet to consider the transient na-

ture of human existence and to search for some form of permanence in nature or in art. The song of the nightingale, which is seen as a kind of natural poet, offers Keats such a symbol of permanence. The poem records Keats's struggle to merge his life with the immortal song of that bird and thereby escape, at least temporarily, his own mortality.

The poem can be divided into three movements or parts. The first part, stanzas 1 to 3, describes the narrator's anguish upon hearing the immortal song of the bird in the distance. The "full-throated ease" with which it sings completely captures the poet's attention, causing him to forget, temporarily, his own mortality. That happiness, however, is short lived, for it quickly becomes the occasion for the poet to remember his own temporary existence.

The pain of that recognition is what generates the desire for escape through wine in the second stanza. Through wine, the poet may find some release from the pain invoked by the bird's song. Clearly, the poet sees the wine as an agent of nature, which further suggests that he sees nature as a source of escape from his own mortality, a common notion among many Romantic poets. The poet reasons that if he can forget his impending death, he will be able to join the bird and subsequently escape what the bird has never known: "The weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear each other groan."

In stanza 4, which begins the second movement, the poet rejects wine and turns instead to "the viewless wings of Poesy." Wine enables him to forget, but it dulls the senses and obstructs vision. Poetry, on the other hand, engages the imagination, enlivens the senses, and empowers the poet to transcend himself and become one with the bird. "Already with thee!" the poet announces his imaginative oneness with the bird.

Stanzas 5, 6, and 7 describe the poet's close union with the bird. The poet "cannot see" what flowers are at his feet, but his imagination can create the scene unavailable to his eyes, including

such minute and hidden details as the "Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves." As his imagination works to re-create the bird's world, the poet's attention is temporarily diverted from "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" of human existence.

Vision gives way to sound in stanza 6, where the poet reveals that he has long been "half in love with easeful Death." The transcendental experience of the previous stanza leads him to recall past times when he had wanted to escape his mortal condition. "To cease upon the midnight with no pain" now seems particularly inviting. Yet, as the poet notes at the end of stanza 6, were he to die, he would be surrendering to the very thing that he hopes to escape—mortality. Moreover, to die is to become deaf to the song of the bird, "To thy high requiem become a sod." There the poet discovers the painful paradox of human existence: Life is a source of great pain and anguish, and yet, oddly enough, to escape the pain and anguish through death is to lose the very thing that makes death desirable. To die is to forfeit all access to beauty and joy.

The final turn comes in the last stanza where the spell is broken, the poet is imaginatively disengaged from the bird, and he returns to the mortal world "Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,/ Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." The poet concedes that "the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is fam'd to do" and is left to wonder if what he has experienced was in fact a visionary moment of transcendence or only a "waking dream." In either case, the poem ends on the ironic note that, although the poet believes that he is trapped within the mortal world of death and change, in fact, like the nightingale whose immortal song is heard by succeeding generations, the poet, through his poetry, has achieved a kind of immortality after all. The poem, like the bird's song, will be heard by future generations, and with each hearing or reading, the spirit of John Keats will live again.

## “ODE ON A GRECIAN URN”

**First published:** 1820 (collected in “*Lamia*,” “*Isabella*,” “*The Eve of St. Agnes*,” and *Other Poems*, 1820)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In a world of change and uncertainty, art offers the poet a symbol of permanence and timeless truth.*

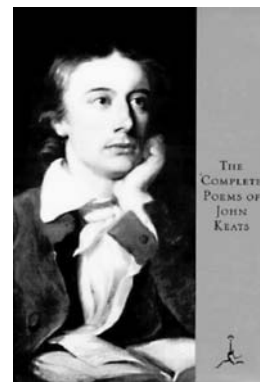
“Ode on a Grecian Urn” addresses many of the same concerns that occupied Keats in “Ode to a Nightingale,” except that in this poem he turns his attention from the natural poetry of the bird to the human artistry of the urn. Unable to escape his sense of life’s transience through the immortal song of the bird, Keats looks to the timeless truth embodied in the urn. Keats once again encounters the paradox that is central to all of his art: To achieve immortality is to rid oneself of change, but it is change, not stasis, that produces the contrasts necessary for all that is good.

In the first stanza, the poet contemplates first the urn as a whole, which he characterizes as a “historian,” and then turns his attention to the detailed scene engraved onto the side of the urn. The urn first is described as an “unravish’d bride of quietness,” calling attention to the fact that it is only when the poet begins to think about the urn that it begins to tell its story. The urn cannot speak, in other words, until it is spoken to. That is a significant point, for it leads to the conclusion that the immortal urn exists in any meaningful way only when it comes into contact with, and is activated by, the inquiring intelligence of a mortal observer. Immortality, the poet again seems to be saying, depends in some fundamental way upon its opposite.

He then begins asking the urn questions about the people portrayed on the side of the urn. He wonders who they are, “deities or mortals, or of both,” and speculates about the location of the engraved scene, “In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?” The setting is obviously ancient Greece, a time when mortals and gods often interacted. From the very beginning, therefore, the poet is concerned with the issue of immortality, both as it is represented by the immortal urn and by the godlike characters whose “legend” is engraved on the side.

Stanza 2 shifts from questions to observations. The first observation stems from the experience of the first stanza. Having tried to experience imaginatively the scene before him, the poet reaches the conclusion that the imagination, when engaged by art, produces an experience that is superior to reality. The sounds of the pipes are sweet, to be sure, but the sounds supplied by the imagination “Are sweeter,” because the imagination can alter and improve upon actual experience. Not bound by the material world, the imagination is capable of conjuring up sights, sounds, and emotions far beyond one’s physical human capabilities. It would seem, therefore, that Keats is suggesting that the world of the imagination, which is the world of art, is preferable to the world of actuality. In the ideal world of art, where life need not conform to the limitations of flesh and blood, everything is as it should be; there the leaves never fall from the trees, no one ever dies, youth never fades, and lovers are forever young and forever in love. Keats comes to that realization through the scene before him: Although the lover, poised to kill his beloved, will never actually complete the act, nevertheless it is not a loss, since his beloved “cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,/ For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”

This praise for the perfection and permanence of art continues through stanzas 3 and most of 4 until the poet pauses to wonder about the “little town by river or sea shore” that has been vacated by the people portrayed on the urn. In attending this celebration of life, they have left their village forever, never to return. In this detail the poet discovers a complication in his admiration for permanence, for even as the lovers will always be young and in love, so in turn will the village always be empty and silent with “not a soul to tell/ Why thou art desolate.” There is a shift in tone from the celebratory mood of the previous two stanzas to a somber, almost sad picture of the deserted town and its eternal silence. The celebration of life on the urn has its counterpart in the unspoken death of the



village. Again Keats brings life and death together, but in this case both are made immortal through art. Keats's point is that if there is much that is desirable in the immortality of his lovers and their eternal celebration of love and life, there is also much that is undesirable in this idealized world; not only will the lover never actually kiss his beloved (they will always remain right on the verge of touching each other's lips) but also everything that surrounds this event likewise will be frozen in time, including the abandoned village.

In the end, the poet sees the urn as a friend to humanity, but that friendship resides less in the particular truth that the urn has to teach humankind and more in the fact that the message is truth, and truth (whether joyful or painful) is beautiful. The questions of whether the permanence of art is good or bad, whether immortality is better than mortality, or whether stasis is preferable to change are all set aside in the end in favor of a statement

about the lasting importance of truth—all truth—and the capacity of art to convey that truth from one generation to the next. Whether or not one agrees with Keats's poem is ultimately unimportant; what is important is that his poem discloses a truth, the great and enduring gift of art.

### SUMMARY

Although John Keats died believing that he would be forgotten by future generations of readers, he is now regarded as one of the great poets of the English language. The felicitousness of his phrasing, the sensuality of his diction, and the richness of his imagery, combined with his profound understanding of the intimate relationship between life and art, make Keats, like William Shakespeare before him, a model to those who look to poetry for an aesthetic apprehension of human experience.

Jack Siemsen

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent does John Keats's concept of Negative Capability contradict the notion of lyric poetry as an expression of personal feelings?
- How does Keats alter the Greek legend of Diana's love for Endymion?
- Comment on Keats's letters as works of art.
- Explain how Keats makes a Grecian urn vital to the reader.
- Considering Keats and also some of his contemporaries, is it reasonable to regard 1819 as the most important year in English poetry?
- Contrast the imagery of Keats's "To Autumn" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind."
- How important for Keats's poetry was his medical training?

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## THOMAS KENEALLY

**Born:** Wauchope, New South Wales, Australia  
October 7, 1935

*Keneally is one of Australia's major literary figures and social commentators; he is best known as the author of the novel Schindler's List, which was made into an acclaimed film.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Keneally (kuh-NEE-lee) was born to Edmund and Elsie Keneally in New South Wales, Australia. The Keneally family—Irish and Roman Catholic—moved from the small town of Wauchope to Homebush, a suburb of Sydney, when Keneally was just an infant, and he was educated at the Christian Brothers' school in Strathfield. Both devout and studious, Keneally went immediately from school into the seminary, and from 1953 to 1959 he prepared for a career as a Catholic priest. He left the seminary only a short time before he was to be ordained. Keneally has explained his decision to do so as the result of the strain of pursuing "sanctity according to the Irish." More specifically, he had come to despair that the Church would ever change to meet the needs of modern Australian society.

After completing his education at St. Patrick's College, he became a high school teacher in a Catholic school in Sydney, but teaching did not satisfy him, and he took up the study of law. On vacation in 1962 and 1963, Keneally began his first novel. Prior to this time, he had done very little serious writing, except for some poetry and a few short stories. In 1963, an Australian magazine, *The Bulletin*, accepted some of his short fiction, and in 1964 his first novel, *The Place at Whitton*, a mix of murder and gothic romance, was published. By 1965, when his second novel, *The Fear*, appeared, Keneally was fully committed to the precarious objective of making his living as a writer. In the same

year he married Judith Martin, a former nun; they had two children, Margaret and Jane.

Keneally received recognition as a writer from early in his career; in 1967, he was the recipient of his first Commonwealth Literary Fund Award for his novel, published that same year, about convict life in Australia, *Bring Larks and Heroes*. In 1968, he received the award again for his comic novel of life in a Catholic seminary, *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968), which also won a Miles Franklin Award. This novel gained him international recognition, and it was subsequently translated into six languages. He has, since that time, been considered a novelist of international reputation.

Keneally has always had an interest in the theater and has done some acting. He was a lecturer in drama from 1969 to 1970 at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales. In 1970, he followed the pattern of many Australian writers and spent time in London, England, where *A Dutiful Daughter* (1971) was published; it became a Book-of-the-Month-Club choice in the United States. In 1972, one of his most admired novels, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, his study of the tragic plight of an Australian aboriginal, was published. It was later turned into a fine film in which Keneally had a small but powerful part as a priest.

From early on, Keneally has written fiction that has a strong allegiance to historical facts. His novel *Blood Red, Sister Rose* (1974), for example, is entirely based on the life of Joan of Arc. His move away from specifically Australian themes was to prove increasingly fruitful in the years to come, and his interest in foreign events and settings was aided by his developing habit of spending long periods abroad, in both Europe and America. By the mid-1970's,

Keneally was established as a serious writer, but he had some personal misgivings about the value of that reputation. His ambition was to write novels of literary quality, and he had done so, but he was not making much money. He was living from novel to novel and worried about the fact that his children were entering their early teens and that he would soon incur extra expenses. He had always had an easy gift for narrative, as several of his novels, however serious, had revealed, and he set out to emphasize that gift, with the hope of breaking into the best-seller lists. His 1976 novel, *Season in Purgatory*, which is based on a true story of partisan activities in Yugoslavia in World War II, was his next attempt. It received good reviews, but it did not sell enough to free Keneally from financial worry. He wryly told one friend that the reviews that he received in such journals as *Newsweek* were flattering but harmful since the reviewers suggested that this was the kind of intelligent, sensitive work that all adventure novels should emulate. The public stayed away from a work so described, and the book had only a modest sale.

Ironically enough, Keneally's writing is very accessible and entertaining, but he has never become a writer of best sellers, with one major exception. Before 1982, Keneally's novels were short-listed on three occasions for the Man Booker Prize but did not win. In 1982, *Schindler's Ark* (as it was originally called) took the prize, despite the fact that there was some uncertainty about whether it really was a novel, since it depended so heavily upon historical fact. Not only did the novel pick up added sales as a result of the award, but the film rights to the book were purchased by director Steven Spielberg, and the novel was published in America under the title *Schindler's List*. However, nothing was done with the property for several years, and in the interim Keneally continued to publish novels and to become increasingly interested in social and political problems in and out of Australia. He remained an important defender of aboriginal rights and a leading supporter of the proposition that Australia should sever its ties to the British monarchy; the latter topic was the focus of his 1993 book, *Our Republic*.

In the early 1990's, his career took an upward turn when Spielberg finally got around to making *Schindler's List* and the film became a major theatrical event throughout the world. From 1991 to

1994, partially because of the success of the film, Keneally was invited to serve as a visiting professor at the University of California at Irvine. During this American sojourn, he published *The Place Where Souls Are Born: A Journey to the Southwest* (1992), a nonfiction treatment of a trip that he and his family took through the Southwest; in this extended piece of travel writing, Keneally responds to the landscape and to the native peoples of the American West in ways reminiscent of his relationship to the terrain and indigenous population of the Australian Outback.

Oddly enough, despite the recognition that *Schindler's List* eventually earned for Keneally in America, his other books, many of which remain in print in Australia and the United Kingdom, seem to be largely ignored in the United States, where the Spielberg film is most admired. This may be another example of the frequent resistance on the part of the general American public to books by foreigners, even if they write in English, or it may be simply an example of bad marketing, but it is very difficult to find any Keneally book except for *Schindler's List* in American bookstores.

Throughout the 1990's and early twenty-first century, Keneally continued to regularly publish novels, still of excellent quality, and often about current events. He was firmly established as one of the leading public commentators on national and international events in Australia, where his natural charm, wit, and capacity to tell a lively story were much appreciated.

## ANALYSIS

Most novelists tend to find a niche tonally, thematically, and stylistically in which they feel comfortable and which best exemplifies their strengths as writers. Keneally started his career as a writer of Australian themes, but he did not stick to that pattern. What is different about him as a writer is that he provides the reader with opportunities to think about his work in many different ways because he never writes the same novel twice. Even novelists of very high quality tend to stick to one sort of work, but Keneally is a restless writer, and one can never be sure what he will write next. He is an extremely sensitive commentator on the Australian scene, not only in terms of its colonial legacy, as explored in *Bring Larks and Heroes*, his novel *The Playmaker* (1987), and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, with its

concern for the plight of the natives, but also in terms of contemporary Australian life in works such as *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* and *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1980), a wry tale of Australian politics during World War II, when the country was in serious danger of falling into the hands of the Japanese.

The Australian theme can, however, be extended beyond the continent in interesting ways, as it is in his two novels about Antarctic exploration. In *The Survivor* (1969) and *A Victim of the Aurora* (1977), Keneally's natural curiosity, intense enthusiasm for researching his projects, and inclination to see characters under stress as likely to indulge in bizarre conduct take the novels beyond the level of simple adventure narrative into much wider and richer areas. It is, in fact, his zest for research that helps Keneally avoid the label of provincialism that besets so many novelists who explore what is termed "the Commonwealth theme."

Keneally is a novelist who might well be considered a historical writer. Sadly, such a label tends to suggest adventure at the expense of accuracy or literary quality, but this is not the case with Keneally, although if he may be considered to occupy any literary niche, this would be it. *Blood Red, Sister Rose* is the first example of his move into non-Australian historical themes, but it is not the last. *Gossip from the Forest* (1975) relates what happened in the forest of Compiègne, where meetings were held to negotiate the 1918 peace treaty between the Allies and the Germans. His 1979 novel, *Confederates*, is about the Civil War campaign in Virginia in 1862. *The Tyrant's Novel*, published in 2003, takes place in an oil-rich Middle Eastern nation where a dictator, modeled after Saddam Hussein, has hired a ghostwriter to pen a work that will extol his questionably beneficent rule and help lift the international sanctions against his country. Narrated in retrospect by the coerced novelist who eventually abandons this project, which blurs the line between fact and fiction in sinister ways, the tale is, in part, Keneally's personal indictment of how individuals seeking refuge in the West are often ill treated by their host countries.

Keneally's natural sympathy for the underdog

has sometimes threatened the artistic balance between narrative and message. For example, his novel *To Asmara* (1989), set in Ethiopia in the late 1980's, tells the story of the battle between the Ethiopian majority and the Eritrean rebels. It starts out by exploring the reactions of several well-meaning foreigners to the disaster. Keneally conducted research, spent some time in the country, and came away not only distressed by what he saw but also outraged by the way in which the Eritrean cause had been misrepresented by the world press and political leaders. He was determined to redress the situation through his novel, and it is an interesting case of how the message, however valid, gets in the way of the final artistic success of the book. The novel raises the intriguing question of how far a work of fiction should go in attempting to change public opinion. Keneally's 1991 novel, *Flying Hero Class*, a story of an airline hijacking by Palestinians on a flight from New York to Frankfurt, seems to indicate a response to the criticism of *To Asmara*, since *Flying Hero Class* seems reluctant to make any judgment regarding either side of the Palestinian crisis.

From very early on in his career, Keneally used his narrative gift to explore serious moral problems from an intelligent, somewhat skeptical, and liberal point of view. As a result, his work has not been simply a matter of a rattling good tale well told but also an inquiry, usually of some subtlety, into the ways in which self-interest, hypocrisy, pomposity, and cruelty make monsters of human beings. This exercise is often carried on with a light dusting of wit and a talent for comedy. Such humor serves as a foil for the moments of intense emotional pain that are also a mark of his work. The range of feeling in his work is very wide.

It is not possible to talk about Keneally as one sort of novelist. He is a regional writer and an international writer. He is sometimes a satirist, sometimes a political commentator, and sometimes a crusader for the underprivileged and the abused. Sometimes he can be a simple adventure writer, and sometimes he creates worlds of gothic incredibility. Stylistically he is very conservative, but when it comes to subject matter and setting, he is impossible to anticipate.

## THE CUT-RATE KINGDOM

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel mixes Australian politics, the terror of World War II in the Pacific, and love in the seats of power.*

This work exemplifies Keneally's ability to mix his interest in his native land, Australia, with two other interests: his enthusiasm for detailed historical research and his fascination with how characters, good or bad, respond to pressure. The historical frame for the novel is World War II. It is sometimes forgotten that Australia was seriously threatened by the possibility of invasion by the Japanese during that war. The Japanese had considerable success early in the conflict and had earned a reputation as fearsome warriors and barbarous conquerors. The novel is written in the context of the fear not only of invasion but also of certain defeat and what that would mean to the Australian population.

The story is told by "Paper" Tyson, a journalist with some of the social gifts of Keneally himself. He is easygoing, worldly-wise, and generous. He is a longtime friend of the Labor prime minister of Australia, Johnny Mulhall. The choice of Tyson as the voice of the novel is important, since his point of view shapes the way in which the reader responds to the book. Tyson, a veteran of World War I, during which he lost a leg at Gallipoli, is mature and possessed of a deep sense of Australian history and politics. He provides a moral, intellectual, and sometimes emotional context for the complicated unrest of a nation on the edge of terror. The enemy is ripping through New Guinea, an easy jump away from the Australian mainland. In capturing the level of suspense created by the country's collective fear of invasion, the novel is of considerable power, but it goes further in exploring the problems of the enemies within. These are the prowling politicians "greased with animus" and the arrogant American military, camped in the country as if on a battleship offshore from the hard fighting. There is an American general with a corncob pipe and his eye on the presidency of the United States who is muscling his way into the Aus-

tralian war effort. Keneally's satiric depiction of the infuriating pomposity of Douglas MacArthur, the commander of Allied forces in the South Pacific, provides some comic relief.

Without alienating their American allies, the Australians attempt to retain some independence, and it is in this area that Keneally explores the theme of national identity and character. Internal politics are also examined as the socialist Prime Minister Mulhall fights American pressures on one side and his own party on the other while the war gobbles up Australian boys and military conscription becomes a necessity. His detractors see the working-class boys as simply cannon fodder; the Australians' feeling of being used is exacerbated by the general perception that America is treating Australia as a "cut-rate kingdom."

These large public questions influence Tyson and Mulhall in their private lives too. Their love affairs, and those of others, affect the way power is used at the highest levels of the government. If the novel shows that politics and love should not mix, it also reveals the way in which Keneally can blend several themes at the same time, develop a period feel, describe the terror of the New Guinea battlefields, and satirize the social and intellectual aridity of Canberra, where the politicians, the military, the promoters, and their hangers-on push and shove for power, profit, and pleasure.

## TO ASMARA

**First published:** 1989

**Type of work:** Novel

*An Australian journalist, a celebrity photographer, and a titled Englishwoman investigate the Ethiopian civil war and find they were wrong in their assumptions.*

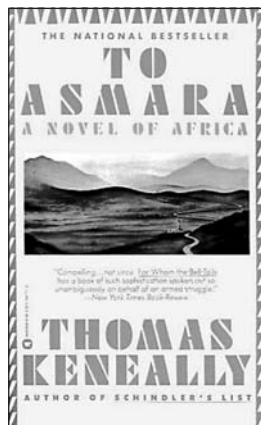
Keneally has often taken on themes which have moved him not simply because of their artistic potential but because they have touched him personally. Usually this impetus does not create a problem, though sometimes if he feels very strongly about a subject he may develop his ideas in a non-fiction format, as he did for *Outback* (1983).

It must be acknowledged that a novel is not necessarily a success simply because it expresses admi-

nable ideas or champions humane solutions to difficult moral problems. As a work of art, it is more than its content. Keneally has, usually, wanted to send a message in his novels, but he has also understood the necessity of incorporating that message into the story. This novel, however, poses the question of whether or not he has been successful in balancing the need to make a moral point with the responsibility to tell a good tale. Certainly the elements for a good story are there. The narrator is an Australian journalist, intelligent and open minded. Hurting from a failed marriage and, as a result, sensitive to the pain of others, he is determined to find out why Ethiopia is a running sore of national despair and suicidal conduct. He flies into the country, as does a celebrity photographer, who is risking his career by insisting on working in Ethiopia, with which the world is bored and wants to hear as little about as possible. A beautiful, titled Englishwoman arrives at the same time, concerned with the African custom of genital mutilation of girls. To add to the group, the photographer's estranged daughter turns up to confront her father. There is also a weary, jaded American relief worker who is a constant source of trouble.

These characters explore two aspects of the Ethiopian disaster of the late 1980's. One is the appalling nature of the war, and the other, almost as serious to Keneally, is the way in which the story was sometimes mistakenly, sometimes deliberately, misreported to the world. The Eritreans, living in the

northern provinces, were, in fact, forcibly joined to Ethiopia by outside powers several years previously, contrary to their own wishes. Their refusal to be governed as Ethiopians was not simply a power struggle but an attempt to free themselves from a union that they had not made and that they never wanted. What made Keneally even more incensed at their plight was the way in which this



information was deliberately suppressed, distorted, or simply misreported by the world press and by the world's power brokers.

The novel is not only about the way that an African nation or two nations tear themselves apart. It is also about how the rich nations of the world have been, often mindlessly, involved in encouraging such mayhem. The novel shows the way in which information is wantonly manipulated by the press, without any concern for truth or fairness, in order to feed the mild curiosity of rich societies that do not much care to get the facts straight. It is a very angry book, and that anger may have gotten in the way of Keneally's achieving an artistic fusion between the novel's main ideas and the characters that move through the seared landscape.

## SCHINDLER'S LIST

**First published:** *Schindler's Ark*, 1982

**Type of work:** Novel

*An amoral, dishonest businessman, using Jewish laborers to make military equipment for the German army in World War II, decides to do the right thing.*

After the release of Steven Spielberg's enormously successful film in 1993, it is unlikely that many people do not know the story of Oskar Schindler, a Sudetan German confidence man who uses his connections with the German SS military organization to feather his own nest. He sets himself up as a military supplier in Krakow, Poland, in 1939, in order to take advantage of the expropriation of Jewish businesses, staffing his factory with Jews whom he can use as slave labor. Little by little he takes responsibility for the workers' lives, with a minimum of interference from the German authorities. First, he houses them in his own compound to save them from constantly being taken out of the ghettos for other work, which would interfere with their factory time. What starts out as effective business practice becomes a peculiar kind of cruel paternalism. Everything changes, however, when the workforce is threatened with transfer to the extermination camps. Schindler, seemingly without much thought or moral intent, begins to thwart the SS in its attempts to drag his workers into the boxcars. He does not save them all; in fact, he saves only a few of the hundreds who pass through his shop, but the Jews who survived



the war never forgot him. This feckless, morally dubious, and often unsavory confidence man became one of the most beloved heroes of the Holocaust.

Keneally found this true story by chance, when a Jewish survivor, Poldek Pfefferberg, told him about this strange German and urged him to write the tale. Keneally researched the historical events assiduously; any other writer might have decided to present the narrative in a nonfiction format, but, as he himself asserts, his strength is in storytelling, and the novel is his natural form of expression. This does not mean that there is much about the novel that is the product of his imagination. Indeed, one of the common criticisms of the work is its reliance on facts, and some critics have suggested that it is really not a novel at all.

The truth of the matter, however, is that for all of its meticulous detail, Keneally's main interest in the story is in Schindler himself. Keneally, who has some experience as a screenwriter, prepared a film script for Spielberg, who, significantly enough, declined to use it. The reason appeared to be that Spielberg wanted the emphasis to be placed on the plight of the workers, as it is in the film. The screenplay prepared by Keneally evidently focused more on the character of Schindler, who seemed not quite to know why he was acting so nobly. The heart of the novel, for all the particularity lavished on the intense squallor of the workers' living conditions and the terrifying cruelty of their German captors, is a character without a moral center who indulges, without any attempt to understand or articulate what he is doing, in a series of mortally dangerous acts of magnanimity. The novel is rich with incident, but at the same time it is propelled by the mystery of human morality.



## HOMEBUSH BOY

**First published:** 1995

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*This amusing and gently self-deprecating personal memoir focuses on a single year in the author's life.*

In this tightly focused autobiography, Keneally looks back on this sixteenth year, a pivotal period of time in his life, signaling the end of his boyhood and the initial recognition of adult responsibilities. The narrative, filtered through the consciousness of the adult writer, manages to retain much of the flavor of youth. On the one hand, Keneally confesses to the reader that much of the energy that he expended on spiritual and aesthetic investigations during his teenage years was probably the result of sublimated sex, whose mysteries his rigid Catholic upbringing kept hidden from him; on the other hand, Keneally's evocation of such landmark events as the first school dance summons up vivid images of adolescent wonderment, particularly the sights and sounds of what is generally perceived to be the relatively innocent decade of the 1950's.

While acknowledging the sacrifices that his dapper father and ambitious mother made in sending him to a Catholic school, Keneally focuses much more attention on the contributions made by his teachers and peers to his adolescent identity. His teachers fall into two basic categories, defined by their ability to think outside the box. On the one hand, there are educators like Brother Buster Clare, who teach only to the test and discourage independent learning; on the other hand, there are those like Brother Dinny McGahan, English teacher and track coach, who introduces the author to texts outside the established curriculum, particularly the works of contemporary writers, and inspires Keneally to broaden his horizons, whether competing for the Newman Society Essay Prize or learning the true meaning of sportsmanship on the playing field.

Among his fellow students, Keneally singles out those whose idiosyncrasies lead him to question the status quo. Of special interest are Mangan, a stubborn, dreamy dilettante whose stated goal is to become a Trappist monk, and Matt Tierney, the first blind boy in Australia to attempt the leaving

certificate, the tangible evidence of high school graduation, doubly handicapped by his lack of sight and his albinism.

It is Keneally's volunteering to become Tierney's study companion that introduces the author to the injustice that often besets those outside the social norm, a condition that he will rail against in later life. In Tierney's case, for example, even though he possesses a keen mind and an athletic body, the authorities, by virtue of his blindness, restrict his participation in sporting events and initially deny him the right to pursue a public college education.

In presenting his own story, Keneally exhibits much of the same insight regarding human psychology that makes his fictional characters believable representations of their flesh and blood counterparts. A good example would be how he uses his own climactic decision to enter the seminary as an implicit acknowledgment of how complicated human motivation can get. In the last section of his memoir, Keneally accepts an invitation to study for

the priesthood, partially out of a youthful allegiance to the church, partially in response to persistent coercion from the clergy, and partially because the girl of his dreams, Bernadette Curran, has taken herself off the dating market by announcing that she wants to become a nun.

By joining the author as he revisits a pivotal year in his own development, readers will discover some of the roots of Keneally's subsequent authorial agenda and vicariously rediscover some of the innocence of youth.

### SUMMARY

Thomas Keneally has produced novels, often based on historical fact, that tell the story of the many by focusing on the lives and experiences of the few. He believes that novels should offer moral commentary on human triumphs and human failures—but not without some sense of the sometimes amusing and sometimes ridiculous nature of human conduct.

*Charles Pullen; updated by S. Thomas Mack*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Although Thomas Keneally lives and works in Australia, critics have argued that he deserves to be read by an international audience. Defend this argument.
- Keneally's work has often been singled out for the author's attention to historical detail. Explore the validity of this argument.
- Many of Keneally's principal characters seem at odds with systems of authority. Find examples.
- How might the author's Catholic upbringing inform his work?
- The issue of social injustice plays a prominent role in much of Keneally's fiction. Trace this theme in more than one work by the author.

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## IMRE KERTÉSZ

**Born:** Budapest, Hungary  
November 9, 1929

*In his novels, Kertész, a Holocaust survivor, matter-of-factly describes life in the concentration camps in which he was imprisoned, placing the Holocaust and its aftermath in an historical and philosophical context.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Imre Kertész (KEHR-tays) was born to a Hungarian Jewish couple in Budapest on November 9, 1929. His father owned a small factory and his mother was a housewife. In 1944, between 500,000 and 600,000 Hungarian Jews and Gypsies were belatedly sent to Nazi labor camps after the German army occupied Hungary, a wavering ally, in the spring of that year.

Kertész was fourteen years old when, on June 30, 1944, he was rounded up on a city bus with others wearing the mandatory yellow Star of David on their clothing. In a freight car carrying sixty people, he was first sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp in occupied Poland and then to the Zeitz and Buchenwald camps in Germany. Earlier, his father had been shipped to the Mathausen labor camp in Austria. The year young Kertész spent in the concentration camps was to be the signal event in his life and later writings.

Liberated by American forces in May, 1945, Kertész returned to Budapest to find that his father had died at Mathausen, his stepmother had remarried, and strangers were now living in the family's former home. Even more shocking to the repatriated Kertész, according to his autobiographical novel *Sorstalanság* (1975; *Fateless*, 1992), was the indifference, even hostility, Hungarians showed to the returning prisoner, who was still wearing his striped camp uniform, as he searched for his mother. Being a secular Jew, he had never given much thought to his Jewishness until, he explained, it was foisted on him by the Holocaust. Even in the concentration camps he was sometimes derided because he did not speak Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jewry, or Hebrew, the language of their faith.

After completing high school in 1948, Kertész found work with a newspaper, *Világosság*, in 1949, but he lost his job in 1951, when the newspaper adopted a strictly Communist and Stalinist editorial policy. By then, Hungary had a large Soviet military presence and was part of the Soviet empire. Kertész did a mandatory stint in the Hungarian army. Upon his release, he survived financially as a freelance radio reporter and eventually wrote librettos for musical comedies. He later became a Hungarian translator for German publishing houses specializing in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schnitzler, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Bernhard, and other German-language writers, some of whom influenced his own work. In 1953, he married his first wife, Albina, who died of cancer in 1995. The couple was childless because Albina was unable to bear a child.

Kertész decided to remain in Hungary in the fall of 1956, when Hungarians revolted against the country's Communist government and its Soviet-imposed policies. He later explained that leaving the country would have ended his aspirations to write in his mother tongue. When he was in East Germany in 1962, Kertész revisited the concentration camp at Buchenwald and found things much changed since his departure in 1945.

Kertész worked on the manuscript of his first and best-known novel, *Fateless*, for thirteen years and eventually found a publisher in 1975, by which time Hungary had become more liberal than its previous hardline Stalinist incarnation. Still, very few Hungarians knew of or read the book. *Fateless* is Kertész's own story of an adolescent's coming-of-age in the midst of humanity's ever-recurring cycles of barbarism. Like Kertész, the boy, György

Köves, survives the Holocaust and later survives his liberation by blending into anonymity and silence during Communist rule.

Kertész authored several other novels and non-fiction books, a few of which were translated into English and other languages.

With the fall of communism and the Soviet Union from 1989 through 1991, Kertész took advantage of his new freedom to travel to Israel, Western Europe, and the United States, where his second wife, Magda, had lived since she escaped from Hungary in 1956. Magda Kertész is fluent in English and has been an articulate spokeswoman and translator for her husband.

Kertész was catapulted into fame and relative affluence in October, 2002, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. When Kertész, the first Hungarian to win the prize, returned to Budapest after being honored in Sweden in December, 2002, he was greeted as a hero. Some seventy thousand copies of *Fateless* were sold within a few weeks, and the Hungarian parliament revoked the tax that would have been due on his \$1.1 million award.

Despite the fact that Kertész continued to characterize himself as a secular Jew, he still blamed Hungarian society for its participation in the systematic elimination of much of the country's Jewish minority during World War II. Even after his triumphant return to Hungary, he spent as much time as he could in his Berlin apartment rather than at his Budapest home, since, in his judgment, the Germans have accepted their responsibility for the Holocaust much more readily than the Hungarians, and he believes that Hungary is still suffering from a continuing latent anti-Semitism.

## ANALYSIS

Imre Kertész's first novel, *Fateless*, is a fairly conventional, chronological narrative of an adolescent boy's reminiscences. It begins with the family's preparations for and farewells to their father after he receives notification that he will be taken to the Mathausen labor camp in Austria. The emphasis is on plain, unsentimental detail in a novel

where the young and unsophisticated narrator tries to understand his situation in the concentration camps to which he is dispatched and where death is a constant possibility. The tale, however, has a dreamlike quality and at times is upbeat as its author allows that everyday life in the camps contains moments of happiness—even as the youth adapts to a radically threatening reality, where individuals are ciphers and where survival becomes a collective act.

In contrast, another one of Kertész's novels, *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (1990; *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, 1997), is a breathless, obsessive, unrelenting monologue. It is part meditation, part memoir, part highly abstract, nonchronological, and inconclusive narrative in the first person touching on a series of scenes, images, and issues, all written in a somber tone about a man who refuses to father a child in a world that has produced, and can again produce, an Auschwitz. The work gives the impression of being written in one long paragraph and in endless sentences. It is a novel of repetition, ambiguity, and uncertainty narrated by a middle-aged Holocaust survivor, his life work being the translation of experience into fiction.

*Felszámolás* (2003; *Liquidation*, 2004) is an investigation into the suicide of an Auschwitz survivor focusing on a play of the same name within the novel. Along the way, important details about the private lives of some of the leading characters come to light. Despite some humorous touches, the book is brooding and exudes melancholy.

Viewing the Holocaust in the context of the Communist rule that followed Nazism, Kertész concludes that the totalitarianism that both events typified was not peculiar to the Nazi or Communist regimes but was a general and human condition. Thus for Kertész, the concentration camps of the Holocaust were not a coincidence but a logical and unavoidable consequence of European culture—especially in Hungary, where extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism had resurfaced several times and where laws defining work and other quotas for Jews preceded the Nazi occupation of 1944.



## FATELESS

**First published:** *Sorstalanság*, 1975 (English translation, 1992; also as *Fatelessness*, 2004)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Hungarian Jew recounts his adolescence spent as a prisoner in three concentration camps during the last months of the Holocaust.*

The book's title refers to the fact that there was no certainty in the destiny of those sent to the Nazi labor/extermination camps. It is a disturbing novel about a guileless Hungarian Jewish boy's experience in the last months of World War II, including the freezing winter of 1944-1945, at the Auschwitz, Zeitz, and Buchenwald camps. As such, it is a highly autobiographical tale about the coming-of-age and survival of an innocent youth, whose lack of sophistication makes him focus on everyday questions of existence rather than on his dismal and threatening environment.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, the most notorious camp in occupied Poland, the boy is advised by other prisoners to add a couple of years to his declared age so he may be assigned to a work detail rather than be "eliminated" as excess baggage as a matter of course. The narrator, György Köves (Imre Kertész), dwells on the minutiae of daily camp life, also of concern to his captors, so that perpetrators and victims are perversely though unintentionally bonded. For example, the narrator is constantly worried about his daily turnip and kohl-rabi soup, concerned whether his portion will be ladled out from the top of the urn, so he will get mostly broth, or whether he will be lucky enough to receive his share from the bottom, where there are vegetables, and, on a lucky day, even a potato or a piece of sausage.

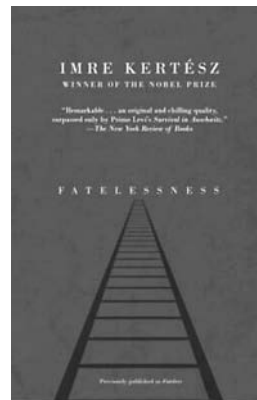
In the camps he tries to adjust to his situation by imposing the logic of a bright, sensitive teenager. His moments of joy are derived from some of his idle time between the end of the working day and the evening roll call, and, more generally, his happiness stems from the solidarity he feels with some

of his fellow inmates. He is especially happy that the medical personnel among the political prisoners, who enjoy more privileges than the others, are willing to assign him a hospital bed and treat his severely infected, injured knee before the officials discover that he has become a disposable resource. Joy also flows from his occasional thoughts of possible freedom.

In fact, Köves even feels some rapport with his German captors, whose presence is sensed only remotely in the camp, since the immediate supervision of prisoners was often left to other prisoners—intermittently brutal Kapos—in exchange for privileges granted to them. The boy sees the Germans as being caught, just as himself, in the inevitable web of history or the universal dictates of human nature comprising both good and evil. The novel is effective because it makes no attempt to sensationalize, editorialize, or embellish but describes reality as the boy sees it.

On his return to Budapest in 1945, the adolescent's former neighbors and friends, even some Jews, urge him to put the ordeal out of his mind, advice that baffles him since "what happened had happened." He also cannot relate to the words of a sympathetic journalist, who says he should feel outraged for having spent time in "the lowest circle of hell." As for the overall reaction of citizens to that episode in Hungarian history, at times it makes Köves (Kertész) nostalgic for the solidarity he experienced in the labor camps. Thus, at the end of the novel the adolescent is left to ponder the meaning of his experience, for which Kertész finds additional voice, insight, and analysis in his later novels.

*Fateless* is a carefully crafted novel, with the author trying hard to say things the right way. It is a simple narrative by a young boy who does not have a complete grasp of where history had taken him.



## KADDISH FOR A CHILD NOT BORN

**First published:** *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, 1990 (English translation, 1997; also as *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, 2004)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A middle-aged Hungarian Jewish writer, a survivor of the Holocaust, refuses to father a child in an uncertain and brutal world.*

The protagonist of this novel, a middle-aged writer and concentration camp survivor, addresses himself to the child he would not have. In his imagination, he is reciting Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for his unborn child. He figures that the horrifying events of the Holocaust, given his historical evolution as well as the evil streak in human nature, could recur, as he explains to a friend at a writers' retreat. He does not wish to bring into the world a child who could experience the same fate (or fatelessness), since in his view the Holocaust was only one example of an extreme form of domination by a public authority at the expense of individuals' lives, self-respect, and freedom—a pathology of modern society and not an isolated case of Nazi Germany victimizing Jews. "What happened to me, my childhood, must never happen to another child," he muses.

As he reviews his life he considers his many disappointments, such as his marriage, which failed because of his refusal to accede to his wife's longing for a child, and his unsuccessful literary career. His sense of void is enhanced when he contemplates the picture of his former spouse's attractive children from her second marriage, children that could have been his own.

Both the narrator and his former wife are Jewish. Unable to fully come to terms with that aspect of his identity, especially as the narrator lacks the emotional and spiritual ties to his Jewish heritage, he is left to consider writing as the only creative act of which he is ostensibly capable. He is unsuccessful even at that. In the midst of long metaphysical musings, his stream of consciousness is peppered with the intermittently recurring word "no," the defining trope of the novel, as the author keeps recalling his refusal to have children years earlier.

However, his wife, who admits that the narrator had taught her how to live with herself, now wants more—not just marriage but also family.

*Kaddish* is a bumpy novel, but there is purpose in Kertész's choice of language, innumerable repetitions, and emphasis on the contradictory. The tone is introspective yet unsentimental.

## LIQUIDATION

**First published:** *Felszámolás*, 2003 (English translation, 2004)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A middle-aged Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, who was born in this concentration camp, commits suicide after his accurate prediction of his friends' future.*

This book is about the termination (or liquidation) of various things. About the time of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, B., also called Bee, is a well-known writer who was born in and survived the Nazis' Auschwitz concentration camp in occupied Poland during World War II. He also lived through the Communist aftermath of the Holocaust. Now, however, he has committed suicide with a morphine overdose. The letter "B" and four numerals tattooed on his thigh, instead of his tiny arm when he was a baby, testifies to his origins.

Fellow workers come to his friend Kingbitter's office to discuss B.'s literary affairs. Among the papers that Kingbitter has salvaged from Communist authorities is the manuscript of a play entitled *Liquidation*. As he reads the script to his colleagues at the office, Kingbitter is amazed at the prescient way in which B. foretells the personal and political crises that Kingbitter and B.'s other close friends now face. These include the liquidation of the bankrupt, state-owned publishing house—a remnant of the Communist era—where they work, which has been considering the publication of B.'s literary efforts. Because of these events and B.'s liquidation of his life, as well as the liquidation of his full-length manuscript (allegedly at B.'s orders to his girlfriend), and, more generally because of the liquidation of the art of literature in favor of dilettantism and ideological spin during Communism, the

members of the group are left with a sense of lost identity, despair, and chaos to confront their moment in history.

Kingbitter, who is managing B.'s literary estate, is desperate to understand his friend's suicide and searches for the longer manuscript (never found), of which the play, he believes, is a synopsis. In his search for the lost novel, he contacts Sarah, who was B.'s lover at the end of his life, and then Judit, B.'s former wife. Their marriage had broken up when B. told his spouse that because of Auschwitz she should not want him to father a child. His wife is driven to divorce him, since she does not want to see the world as a place filled with murderers but rather as a place where it is also possible to live.

Kingbitter, the consummate editor, tries to make sense out of B.'s life, personal and literary. Along the way, however, he finds that his friend's life has in fact

been more intimately linked to his own than he had realized. For example, Kingbitter now discovers that the two friends had been involved with their respective women. Another character of some note is Kürti, also employed by the publishing house, a cuckolded and embittered intellec-

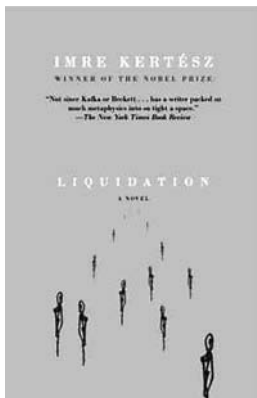
tual, who has similarly suffered from history's cruelties. In short, the novel is about life's losers.

Kertész seems to create a fragmented plot as a way to address the fate of those who have none following the Holocaust and four decades of Communist totalitarianism. There are few substantive answers and the seemingly incoherent organization of the work highlights that fact. The author restates one of the basic themes in most of his Holocaust writings, namely, that "Auschwitz has been hanging around the world since long ago, perhaps for centuries." The play *Liquidation* lacks cohesion, as does the novel of the same name, because its fragmented construction is meant to reflect the incoherent chaos of the world. However, Kertész's main theme echoes that of his earlier novels: The Holocaust is not inexplicable; rather, it is a given within which there are other givens.

#### SUMMARY

The Holocaust and the subsequent rise of Communist totalitarianism are the major themes of Imre Kertész's work. While specifics may change, he believes such events will recur because they are generated by ever-present ideological, cultural, historical, and human reasons. Some individuals caught in these events are able to survive, while others do not, their lives liquidated by a totalitarian public authority or by their own hands. To Kertész, the Holocaust is not a morality tale but merely a specific example of history's many cruelties.

Peter B. Heller



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In *Fateless*, is it credible that the routines of daily life, such as the kind of soup that would be available on a particular day, would be more important than the constant possibility of death in the concentration camp?
- In awarding Imre Kertész the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002, the Swedish Academy stated that Kertész received the award "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history." Is that a good description of Kertész's view of the Holocaust?
- How can one explain the indifference, even hostility, of the Hungarian people in the street at the sight of György Köves, the narrator of *Fateless*, in his striped prison garb, hungry and unkempt, having just returned from a concentration camp? Could it be a sense of guilt or shame, or, as Kertész suggests, continuing, unexpressed, latent anti-Semitism?
- Do you agree or disagree with Kertész's opinion that there will be other Auschwitzes in the future? On what grounds do you do so?
- Is it credible that the adolescent narrator in *Fateless* should have experienced moments of happiness in concentration camps or that he should even have felt nostalgic for the camps?
- Kertész is one of the dwindling number of survivors of the Holocaust, many dying a natural death and a few committing suicide. With the passage of time and the reduction in firsthand accounts, such as those of Kertész, will the impact of the Holocaust on public awareness and public memory fade?



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## SØREN KIERKEGAARD

**Born:** Copenhagen, Denmark  
May 5, 1813

**Died:** Copenhagen, Denmark  
November 11, 1855

*In a number of pseudonymous literary and philosophical works, Kierkegaard created an oeuvre that has profoundly influenced the development of both Scandinavian literature and European philosophy.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (KEER-kuh-gahrd) was born on May 5, 1813, at the family home in Copenhagen, Denmark, to Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard and Ane Sørensdatter Lund. His father was a Jutlander of peasant stock, who, through hard work, had become a well-respected hosier. His mother was a distant cousin of her husband, who had been the family maid prior to the death of Michael's first wife and had then gotten pregnant out of wedlock by her master. Michael was deeply religious and had a strong sense of guilt, believing that God would punish him by not allowing any of his seven children to live beyond the age of thirty-three, the age reached by Jesus Christ.

As the youngest child in the family, Søren grew up with a full measure of his father's morbid religious beliefs. However, he also had the benefit of his father's acute intellect and the academic example of his older brother Peter, who studied theology, obtained a German doctorate, and later became a Lutheran bishop. There were many deaths in the family, however, as five of his siblings as well as his mother died early. Søren responded to the heavy atmosphere in his home by developing a flair for irony.

Kierkegaard prepared for university studies by attending the School of Civic Virtue. Intended for the ministry by his father, he began his study of the-

ology in 1830, but he was more interested in philosophy and literature. His literary debut was an essay, *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer* (1938; *Early Polemical Writings*, 1990), a critique of a novel by Hans Christian Andersen, published a month after the death of his father on August 9, 1838. Three years later he received an M.A. degree with a dissertation entitled *Om Begrebet Ironi med stadigt Hensyn til Socrates* (1841; *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, 1965), which was criticized by his examiners for being excessively literary.

In 1837, Kierkegaard met a young woman named Regine Olsen, to whom he was immediately attracted, and they were formally engaged in 1840. By all accounts Regine loved him deeply and struggled to hold on to him when he broke off the engagement less than a year later. Kierkegaard believed that his pervasive melancholy made him unsuited to marriage, but he returned to the experience in some of his most significant literary and philosophical works.

After breaking the engagement, Kierkegaard traveled to Berlin, ostensibly to hear the lectures of the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Most of his time there was spent, however, on a project that became his most significant philosophical and literary work, the two-part *Enten-Eller* (1843; *Either/Or*, 1944). This work marks the beginning of a thirteen-year-long period of great productivity, during which time Kierkegaard also kept a detailed journal, a habit he kept throughout his life. *Either/Or* discusses two stages of existence, the aesthetic and the ethical,



which are further analyzed in *Stadier paa Livets Vei* (1845; *Stages on Life's Way*, 1940). *Gjentagelsen* (1843; *Repetition*, 1933), narrated by the pseudonymous Constantin Constantius, continues Kierkegaard's psychological exploration of the aesthetic. At the same time, Kierkegaard also published *Frygt og Bæven* (1843; *Fear and Trembling*, 1939), in which Abraham's intended sacrifice of his son Isaac is analyzed as a means of obtaining the kind of faith that transcends reason.

The most important literary device used by Kierkegaard in these works consists of a series of pseudonyms, of which there are sometimes several within the same work. Along with his pseudonymous works Kierkegaard also published a series of theological discourses under his own name, however, and these amplify and clarify many of the points that are made in his literary and philosophical texts.

One of Kierkegaard's main concerns in all of his writings was the paradox of faith, which was further discussed in *Philosophiske Smuler* (1844; *Philosophical Fragments*, 1936). Original sin is the topic of *Begrebet Angest* (1844; *The Concept of Dread*, 1944). *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* (1846; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 1941), a sequel to *Philosophical Fragments*, proposes that truth is determined subjectively because only individuals are able to gain true religious faith through a personal consciousness of sin.

During his most productive years there were few external events in Kierkegaard's life. He lived on the money that he had inherited from his father, frequently attending the theater and incurring substantial expenditures publishing his books. He played elaborate games to preserve the fiction that he was not, in fact, the author of his pseudonymous works. The pseudonymous part of his oeuvre came to an end, however, when in 1845 he attacked a Copenhagen satirical magazine, *Corsaren*, suggesting that he would be a fitting target for its satire. After a series of vehement attacks on his person, Kierkegaard largely withdrew from human society and focused on his religious writing.

*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* (1847; *Works of Love*, 1946) suggests that the paramount duty of human beings is to act according to the will of God. *Sygdommen til Døden* (1849; *The Sickness unto Death*, 1941) discusses various types of despair, which are said to flow from ignoring God's will. *Indøvelse i Christendom* (1850; *Training in Christianity*, 1941)

presents martyrdom as a necessary component of true faith. At this time, Kierkegaard became very critical of the Danish church, which he accused of being rationalistic and lukewarm in a series of pamphlets with the title *Øieblikket* (1855).

Kierkegaard became ill and entered the Royal Frederik's Hospital on October 2, 1855, where he died six weeks later. Both his final journal entries and *Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed* (written in 1848 and 1849, but published posthumously in 1859; *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, 1939) maintain that the purpose of all of his writings, including the aesthetic ones, was ultimately religious.

## ANALYSIS

Kierkegaard's earliest literary works, including his dissertation, should be regarded as apprentice pieces that are of greater interest to specialists than to general readers. This is also true for his religious works, which strongly attest to the author's personal faith and theological background, but which exhibit neither the literary sophistication nor the philosophical subtleties that characterize his pseudonymous oeuvre.

The chief formal characteristic of the pseudonymous works is Kierkegaard's use of a large number of different fictitious characters that both serve as the putative authors or editors of entire books or parts of books and function as literary characters in dialogue with each other. This technique allows Kierkegaard to both make his works aesthetically attractive and to present his ideas in a lively and engaging manner.

Without question, the two-part *Either/Or* (1843) is Kierkegaard's most important literary work, although *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is his most significant work of philosophy. Kierkegaard pretends that *Either/Or* has been edited by a certain Victor Eremita, who, like Kierkegaard himself, lives in Copenhagen. On a certain occasion Eremita discovers a manuscript in a secret compartment in a desk that he has recently purchased, and he publishes it with the title *Either/Or*. The first part contains writings of an aesthetic nature, while the second part consists of ethical rejoinders written by a judge named William.

*Either/Or* emphasizes the need to make choices in human relations and brings the aesthetic and the ethical approaches to life into dialogue with

one another. The dialectical aspect of the text is elevated to a major principle of organization in Kierkegaard's next book, *Fear and Trembling*, which is subtitled *Dialectical Lyric* and is supposed to have been written by one Johannes de Silentio (Silent John) as an inquiry into the story of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible. Its main purpose is to arrive at an understanding of faith as a phenomenon. His final pseudonymous work of 1843 is *Repetition*, which was supposedly authored by an aesthete named Constantin Constantius.

The following year, 1844, saw the publication of three more pseudonymous works, *Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus, *The Concept of Dread* by Vigilius Haufniensis, and *Forord: Morskabslæsning for enkelte Stænder efter Tid og Leilighed* (1844; *Prefaces: Light Reading for Certain Classes as the Occasion May Require*, 1989) by Nicolaus Notabene. While the first of these works considers the serious philosophical question of how to anchor an eternal consciousness in a historical point of departure, the form of *Philosophical Fragments* is reminiscent of that of vaudeville or opera. *Fear and Trembling* appears to be a serious inquiry into the concept of original sin, but its form is that of an inquiry along the lines of Hegelian phenomenology. *Prefaces* is a collection of prefaces to books never written. Literary devices such as these leave the reader unable to draw a firm line between seriousness and irony in Kierkegaard's texts.

When *Stages on Life's Way* appeared in 1845, Kierkegaard returned to both the technique and the concerns of *Either/Or* by offering several different studies in developmental psychology through a compilation of various texts made by a character named Hilarius Bogbinder. The first segment, "In Vino Veritas," is authored by the pseudonym William Afham (William by Him) and brings a number of previously introduced pseudonyms together for an imaginary banquet. At the end of their banquet they come across Judge William, known as "B" in *Either/Or*, who provides further reflections on marriage in a manuscript that is stolen from him. "Skyldig?" / "Ikke-Skyldig?" ("Guilty?" / "Not Guilty?"), supposedly written by a certain Frater Taciturnus, next discusses whether it is ethically defensible to break an engagement. The book concludes with a long letter to the reader in which Frater Taciturnus discusses the religious implications of the previous section.

At least formally, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is a postscript to *Philosophical Fragments* and therefore supposedly written by Johannes Climacus. There is a serious lack of balance between the lengths of the two works, however. Clearly, the *Postscript* part of the title is ironically meant, while the *Concluding* part is not, for Kierkegaard was summing up his philosophical beliefs by proposing that the truth about being is something that each individual has to obtain. In a final explanation appended to *Postscript*, Kierkegaard also formally acknowledged what most people in Danish literary circles already knew—that he was the author of the works produced by his various pseudonyms.

Kierkegaard returned to the use of a pseudonym, however, when he published *The Sickness unto Death*, a catalog of despair and sin, under the name Anti-Climacus. The same pseudonym was used the following year, when *Training in Christianity* was published. Anti-Climacus was given a name that gives him priority over Johannes Climacus, as Kierkegaard wanted to emphasize that religion was more important than philosophy and literature.

## EITHER/OR

**First published:** *Enten-Eller*, 1843 (English translation, 1944)

**Type of work:** Essays

*By juxtaposing a series of aesthetic essays with two lengthy ethical rejoinders, Kierkegaard details the differences between aesthetic and ethical approaches to life.*

Without question, the two-part *Either/Or* is Kierkegaard's most important literary work. Kierkegaard pretends that *Either/Or* has been edited by a certain Victor Eremita, who, like Kierkegaard himself, lives in Copenhagen and likes to go for trips in the countryside. Having recently acquired a used writing desk, Eremita discovers a manuscript in a secret compartment while looking for money to take with him on a journey. The manuscript turns out to be worth more than any amount of money, though, for it is a collection of valuable aesthetic essays, one of which is a long novel-like piece entitled "Forførerens Dagbog" ("The Seducer's Diary"), supposedly written by someone called Johannes

the Seducer. There are, furthermore, two long essays written by an ethicist in response to the writings of the aesthete, which argue that aestheticism is but a developmental stage that must be replaced by a commitment to an ethical form of life, typified by marriage, of which a public engagement is a precursor.

*Either/Or* was published in two parts, of which the first part (the *Either*) contains Victor Eremita's introduction, as well as the aesthetic writings. A series of aphorisms entitled "Diapsalmata" sets the tone for the volume, while several long aesthetic essays discuss such works as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* (1787) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's two-part tragedy *Faust* (1808-1833). While arguing that *Don Giovanni* is the most perfect opera ever created, the title character interests the aesthete because he is an immediate seducer, someone who seduces women indiscriminately in a completely goal-oriented manner. Faust, by contrast, is a reflective seducer who emphasizes the process more than the goal. The aesthete—or "A" as Victor Eremita calls him—regards Giovanni and Faust as two fundamental types of the seducer, who again is the type that serves as Eremita's archetypal aesthete. Johannes, the narrator-protagonist of "The Seducer's Diary," fits the mold of the reflective seducer as he carries out his schemes chiefly in order to be able to later recollect his conquests.

Other aspects of the seducer's character are an avoidance of responsibility and a pathological fear of boredom. One of the funniest essays in *Either/Or* is entitled "Vexel-Driften" ("Crop Rotation"), in which it is shown how boring people can be useful as entertainment. The character named A is contradicted, however, by a judge named William who has provided two lengthy essays, in the form of letters addressed to A and published in the second part of the book (the *Or*), in defense of marriage as an ethical alternative to the irresponsible behavior of the aesthete. William maintains that there is, in fact, greater aesthetic validity in marriage than in

a life of serial seduction, and that the aesthete will eventually discover that the contradictions within the aesthetic sphere of existence will force him to abandon this reckless lifestyle in favor of an ethical mode of living. Otherwise, says William, the aesthete will either lose his sanity or commit suicide.

Much as the aesthetic sphere of existence is ruled by the avoidance of boredom, the ethical sphere is focused on doing one's duty. Ethicists thus make better members of society than aesthetes, but they are also fundamentally much happier, at least according to William and presumably Kierkegaard as well.

## FEAR AND TREMBLING

**First published:** *Frygt og Bæven*, 1843  
(English translation, 1939)

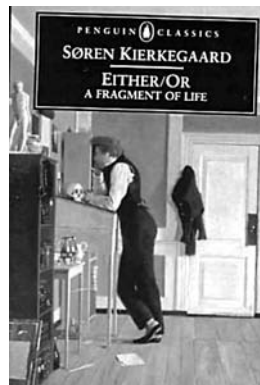
**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Through an examination of the ethical implications of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, religious faith is found to be paradoxical.*

In his two-part work *Either/Or* Kierkegaard had examined the aesthetic and the ethical approaches to living, concluding that the ethical stage should be given priority over the aesthetic. In *Fear and Trembling* he inquires into the relationship between the ethical and the religious.

Kierkegaard chose as his example of religiously motivated behavior an extreme case, the biblical narrative of Abraham's abortive sacrifice of his son Isaac. In the biblical story, Isaac is a son promised Abraham through which all the families of the earth would be blessed as Abraham's descendants would be spread throughout the earth, bringing with them a message of true faith. The blessing of a legal heir had been denied Abraham and his wife Sarah until they were both advanced far beyond the normal childbearing years, but Isaac was finally born. When God spoke to Abraham and commanded him to offer his son as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, Abraham had to choose between obedience and disobedience to God.

When viewed from an ethical perspective, there is never any justification for shedding innocent



blood. Kierkegaard points out that to the ethical mind Abraham is about to become a murderer, and his intended deed is that much worse because he is about to kill his son. Clearly, faith must be of a completely different order than reason if Abraham's actions are to be considered justified. It is true that Abraham's hand was stayed at the very moment when he was about to plunge the sacrificial knife into Isaac, but his intentions were, ethically speaking, those of a murderer.



Kierkegaard asks what readers of the biblical story—and of *Fear and Trembling*—can learn about faith from the account of Abraham and Isaac. The most important lesson is that faith is beyond reason and that faith has such explosive power that it cannot be domesticated. Faith will always be paradoxical.

## THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

**First published:** *Sygdommen til Døden*, 1849  
(English translation, 1941)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Through an analysis of the self and its relationship with the divine, various forms of despair are equated with sin.*

A dense and difficult work, *The Sickness unto Death* is presented as having been written by a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, a name that is related to Johannes Climacus, the putative author of *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The prefix “Anti” denotes that Anti-Climacus comes before and has priority to Johannes Climacus, and that *The Sickness unto Death* deals with higher concerns than do the books written by Climacus. Religious faith is of greater significance than either philosophy or literature.

*The Sickness unto Death* begins with a definition of

the human self. The self, says Kierkegaard, consists in the relations between its various parts, as well as in the relations between these relations. The self's highest relation to itself constitutes spirit, and the self's highest relation to an entity outside of itself is its relation to God. The relations within the self need to be in balance, and there are three such relations that have supreme significance. The finite aspect must be in balance with the infinite, meaning that human beings must understand that they are answerable both to a finite human order—another term for this might be “society”—and an infinite and divine one. The self also contains a relation between the temporal and the eternal, meaning that people both have an origin in time and a future in eternity; they are born at particular historical moments but are designed to exist forever. The third relation is that between freedom—which is also conceived of as possibility—and necessity. God has given his children agency, that is, the power to make and act upon free choices, but God also rules according to eternal law, and human beings should use their freedom of choice to conform to God's expectations of them.

Despair results from imbalances between these various polarities of the self, and despair is essentially sin. For example, a person who is completely focused on blind obedience to divine commands may neglect to use his or her agency productively. Conversely, those who use divinely granted freedom to lead anarchic lives may deeply hurt themselves and others. An improper balance between the temporal and the eternal is equally destructive. Those who forget their eternal dimension and focus solely on the things of this world may get powerful and rich, but they will have no treasures in heaven. Conversely, those who are consumed by thoughts of heavenly bliss may forget the need to act with prudence in this world. People who understand their finitude may be good members of society while neglecting their spiritual needs, while those who see only their infinite possibilities in the life hereafter may shirk their obligations to others in this life.

As Kierkegaard catalogs various forms of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, he is aware that most people are resistant to his analysis of sin and its causes. While emphasizing that human beings have a duty to make choices, Kierkegaard also argues that people are made a certain way by God and must make



the choices that are appropriate to the individuality they have been given.

### SUMMARY

Søren Kierkegaard possessed an exceedingly fertile mind that generated a large number of literary, philosophical, and religious works during a thirteen-year-long period. He is particularly well known for the pseudonymous part of his oeuvre, in which he offered a typology of humankind's approaches to living that contrasts the aesthetic and the ethical modes of existence, giving priority to the latter. Kierkegaard's primary commitment was religious, as shown by the works *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, in which such phenomena as religious faith and despair are analyzed. Above all, however, he was a consummate artist and stylist, who handled his various pseudonyms with great flair and whose native Danish is both supple and humorous.

Jan Sjøvik

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What kind of choices are presented to the reader by the author of *Either/Or*?
- What are the characteristics of the aesthetic sphere of existence according to Søren Kierkegaard?
- Why is duty so important to the Kierkegaardian ethicist?
- How would one look at a broken engagement from an aesthetic point of view? What would the ethicist see in a broken engagement?
- What, according to Kierkegaard, is it possible to learn about faith from the biblical story of Abraham?
- What kind of relationship does Kierkegaard see between sin and despair?

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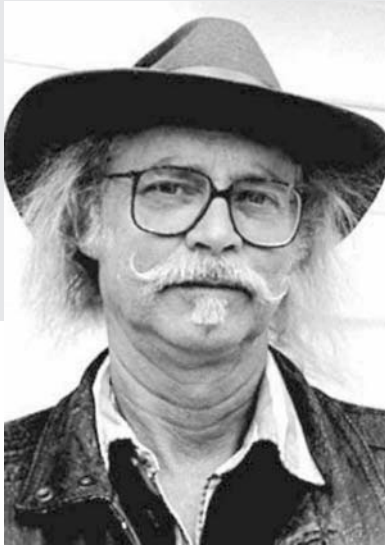
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Courtesy, SMU Press

## W. P. KINSELLA

**Born:** Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
May 25, 1935

*Canadian author Kinsella has been celebrated for his novels and story collections about baseball and contemporary Canadian Indians.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Patrick Kinsella was born on May 25, 1935, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, the son of John Matthew, a contractor, and Olive Mary, a printer. Kinsella's father was a semiprofessional baseball player who taught his son to love the game at an early age, establishing a fascination with the American pastime that would define the Canadian author's reputation as a writer. Kinsella, an only child, grew up in almost total isolation on a farm in northern Alberta. He was homeschooled until the fifth grade and began writing stories about fictional characters who doubled as his friends.

Before embarking on a career as a writer, Kinsella worked as a government clerk, claims investigator, account executive, and restaurant owner. At the age of thirty-five, he began attending the University of Victoria, where he went on to receive his B.A. in creative writing. From 1974 to 1976, he worked as a taxicab driver in Victoria. In 1976, he was accepted to study at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and he received his M.F.A. from the university in 1978. While enrolled in the Writers' Workshop, Kinsella was an instructor at the University of Iowa. After finishing up there, he accepted a job as an assistant professor of English and creative writing at the University of Calgary, and he stayed there from 1978 to 1983.

Kinsella sold his first pieces of writing regularly to magazines. In 1977, a collection of stories, *Dance Me Outside*, was published by Oberon Press in Ottawa, Ontario. *Scars* was published in 1978, and *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa*, a short-story collection, followed in 1980. *Born Indian*, the collection that includes "Fiona the First" (which won honorable mention in the annual series *Best American Short Stories*, 1980), appeared in 1981, and *Shoeless Joe*, a 1982 novel based on the title story from *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa*, was the first of Kinsella's books published in the United States. *Shoeless Joe* was Kinsella's breakthrough book, and its success allowed him to leave behind teaching and pursue writing full time. Now widely esteemed, he was invited to give readings at American universities and colleges, a practice which paid very well. He won the Houghton Mifflin literary fellowship, the Books in Canada award for first novels, and the Canadian Author's Association prize, all for *Shoeless Joe*.

*The Moccasin Telegraph* (later republished as *The Moccasin Telegraph, and Other Stories*), a story collection for which Kinsella won the Writers Guild of Alberta O'Hagan novel medal, was issued in 1983. *The Thrill of the Grass* (1984) and *The Alligator Report* (1985), two more story collections, followed. *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy*, Kinsella's second baseball book, was published in 1986. In 1987, he received the Alberta Achievement Award for Excellence in Literature and the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humor for *The Fencepost Chronicles* (1986). He also won the 1987 Author of the Year Award from the Canadian Booksellers Association.

*Red Wolf, Red Wolf* (1987) and *The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt* (1988), two more story collections that won Kinsella critical acclaim, were fol-

lowed by the 1989 film adaptation of *Shoeless Joe*, which was released by Universal Pictures as *Field of Dreams*. The film was nominated for best picture, best score, and best adapted screenplay awards from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Also in 1989, Kinsella and his third wife, Ann Knight, published a book of poems called *Rainbow Warehouse* (1989). *The Miss Hobbema Pageant*, another collection of stories about the Cree Indian Reserve in Hobbema, Alberta, was released in 1989.

Kinsella took a short hiatus after the success of the film but appeared back on the scene in 1991 with a novel, *Box Socials*, and yet another story collection, *The Dixon Cornbelt League, and Other Baseball Stories* (1993) soon followed. *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour, and Other Stories* appeared in 1994, and *Dance Me Outside* was produced as a motion picture by Norman Jewison in 1995. Kinsella continued his prolific output as the twentieth century ended and the twenty-first century began, publishing several more novels and story collections, including *The Winter Helen Dropped By* (1995), *If Wishes Were Horses* (1996), *Magic Time* (1998), *The Secret of the Northern Lights* (1998), *Japanese Baseball, and Other Stories* (2000), and *Baseball Fantastic: Stories* (2000), for which he was editor, contributor, and author of the introduction.

Kinsella has been married four times. He married Myrna Salls in 1957, and they were divorced in 1963. In 1965, he married Mildred Irene Clay, and they were divorced in 1978. That same year he married Ann Ilene Knight, a writer, and they remained married until 1997. Finally, he married Barbara L. Turner in 1997. Kinsella has three children, all from his first marriage, to Salls: Shannon, Lyndsey, and Erin. He received a D.Litt from Laurentian University, Ontario, in 1990, and a D.Litt from the University of Victoria in 1991. In 1994, he was made an Officer of the Order of Canada, and in 2005, he was awarded the Order of British Columbia. His stories have appeared in several anthologies, including *Best Canadian Short Stories*, *Pushcart Prize V*, and *The Penguin Book of Modern Canadian Short Stories*. He splits his time between White Rock, British Columbia, and Palm Springs, California.

## ANALYSIS

Kinsella turned to writing late in life, publishing his first story collection at the age of forty-two. Since then, however, he has become one of North

America's most prolific authors, winning numerous awards and receiving critical acclaim for his stories about western Canadian Cree Indians and the mystical and magical realms of baseball. Still, he is probably best known for the 1989 film adaption of his novel *Shoeless Joe*, which was released as *Field of Dreams*, an apt and telling title.

Kinsella's first literary success came in 1974, when he started publishing the stories that would appear in *Dance Me Outside*, pieces that dealt predominantly with a young Cree Indian named Silas Ermineskin. Silas is the character that Kinsella comes back to most in his stories about the Cree Nation, but he has assembled quite a cast of characters on the reserve, and he tells their tales in more than one hundred stories, which are collected in *Dance Me Outside*, *Scars*, *Born Indian*, *The Moccasin Telegraph*, and *Other Stories*, *The Fencepost Chronicles*, *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour*, and *Other Stories*, and several other books. In his tales about the Cree Nation, Kinsella focuses on issues of truth and hypocrisy, frustration and endurance, love and hatred. The stories are hard-edged yet sensitive, and they are often very comical. Though Kinsella is not a Canadian Indian, he has been widely praised for his portrayal of the western Canadian Cree Nation. It has often been said that Kinsella's vision of contemporary Canadian Indian life is authentic and accurate, though he certainly has his detractors.

One of the stylistic marks that sets Kinsella's work about the Cree Nation apart is the voice that he adapts. Silas, for instance, tells his tales in broken English that provides vivid imagery and recalls the tone of Silas's literary ancestor, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. The grimness of the subject matter is often complemented by the lightheartedness of Silas's tone. In *The Moccasin Telegraph*, and *Other Stories*, Silas tells eighteen tales set on the Ermineskin Reservation that revolve around attempts by his friends and family to reconcile traditional customs with modern innovations. Again, Silas's voice and vision allow for an interesting take on everyday absurdities. In *The Fencepost Chronicles*, Silas is back as the narrator, but his best friend, Fencepost Frank, is the main character of the stories; in *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour*, and *Other Stories*, Kinsella closely considers the growing relationship between Silas and Frank. Again, Kinsella utilizes Silas's unworried tone to relate stories that range from witty to weighty.

Kinsella's other major works deal predominantly with the game of baseball. While his work about Canadian Indians has garnered him critical attention, his stories and novels with baseball as their dominant motif have gained Kinsella his most considerable recognition. *Shoeless Joe*, probably Kinsella's best-known and most-enduring work, blends comic fantasy and Magical Realism in a story that deals with issues of faith, belief, dreams, innocence, and human communion. Its success is evidence that these timeless themes make the work appealing to a wide audience. In *Shoeless Joe*, Ray Kinsella, the Iowa farmer at the center of the novel, is thrust into a supernatural situation where he encounters the ghost of Shoeless Joe Jackson, the famous ballplayer who was banned from baseball for his involvement in the Chicago Black Sox scandal of 1919. While other writers might allow the fantastic elements of the story to overwhelm the reader, the author never loses sight of the book's major theme: the loss of youthful innocence. *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* also deals with youthful ideals and explores human relationships in the light of a mystical baseball experience.

The same elements that have allowed for Kinsella's success, however, have caused others to respond negatively to his work. In his baseball books especially, Kinsella has been accused of extreme sentimentality. Even critics who have acknowledged *Shoeless Joe* as a great baseball book complain that Kinsella's later baseball writing is overly nostalgic and highly derivative of his best early work. In the end, though, the measure of what readers get out of Kinsella's work will be determined by what they bring to it. The baseball fiction will be exceptionally easy for avid baseball fans to swallow, while others may reject the saccharine vision of the sport as pure and awe-inspiring. Similarly, Kinsella's books about the Cree Nation are also the subject of mixed criticism. While the majority of critics have praised Kinsella for his daring and accurate portrayal of Canadian Indians, others have dismissed his attempts at writing about Canadian Indian culture as arrogant and unnecessary. Interestingly, some commentators have criticized Kinsella's Ermineskin books for being overly sympathetic toward Canadian Indians and blatantly unfair to Caucasians. In any case, Kinsella's literary reputation continues to grow, and he is often the subject of heated critical debates.

## SHOELESS JOE

**First published:** 1982

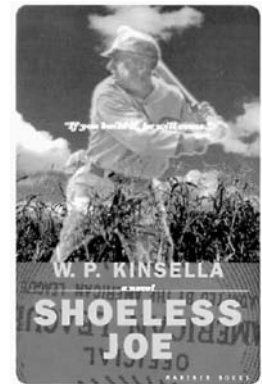
**Type of work:** Novel

*A comic fantasy about an Iowa farmer who builds a ballpark in his cornfield and summons the spirit of baseball legend Shoeless Joe Jackson.*

A novel-length baseball fable that details the adventures of an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella who builds a baseball diamond in his cornfield in the hope of bringing disgraced baseball legend Shoeless Joe Jackson back to life, *Shoeless Joe* is based on the title story from Kinsella's 1980 story collection *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa* and is the author's first novel. If some critics accuse the book of sentimentality, it is because *Shoeless Joe* has none of the elements—sex, violence, and obscenity—that have become so commonplace in contemporary literature and popular culture. Instead, to paraphrase Kinsella, the book is intended to make an affirmative statement about life.

The book begins as Ray sits out on the veranda of his farm home in eastern Iowa and hears the voice of a baseball announcer say, "If you build it, he will come." Ray immediately has a vision of the ballpark that he is being asked to conceive and sets out to realize it. Ray completes the park, and Shoeless Joe Jackson, the Chicago White Sox (later nicknamed the Black Sox) star player who was banned from baseball when it was revealed that his team threw the 1919 World Series, appears to Ray. They talk, and, soon after, Jackson brings back other ghost players.

As the story continues, Ray hears the voice of the baseball announcer again. This time the voice says, "Ease his pain," and Ray somehow understands that he must kidnap reclusive author J. D. Salinger and take him to see a baseball game at Fenway Park. While at Fenway, Ray and Salinger, who at first figures Ray is crazy, receive yet another mysterious message about the next leg of their journey. They



must track down a minor figure from baseball history, Archibald "Moonlight" Graham, who played only a half-inning in his major-league career. Here, Kinsella expertly blends his knowledge of obscure baseball lore with his fictional characters and recreations of historical figures, making for a charming mix of fantasy and reality.

Kinsella's reputation was cemented by the success of this book. He gained further fame when the book was adapted into the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner, James Earl Jones, and Ray Liotta. The book is a subtle meditation on baseball, on the sin and sacrifice of Joe Jackson, on the relationship between fathers and sons, and on the nature of belief and faith. In the end, it recalls the work of famed American director Frank Capra, particularly *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), as Ray comes to realize that baseball can bring people together in small things.

### THE MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH, AND OTHER STORIES

**First published:** 1983

**Type of work:** Short stories

*This collection brings together fifteen tales set on the Ermineskin Reservation in western Canada, narrated by eighteen-year-old Silas Ermineskin.*

Reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson's classic *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), the tales in *The Moccasin Telegraph, and Other Stories* are narrated by Silas Ermineskin, an eighteen-year-old Cree Indian from Hobbema, Alberta, who Kinsella previously utilized as a narrator in *Dance Me Outside*, *Scars*, and *Born Indian*. Silas, like Twain's Huckleberry Finn, is a born storyteller, and he uses tough and funny broken English to narrate hilarious and heart-breaking stories about life on the reservation. The characters from the Cree Nation grapple with issues concerning tradition and the modern world, and Kinsella is deeply engaged by the question of what remains of native wisdom in Canadian Indian culture.

Silas studies tractor repair at the Wetaskiwin Tech School and is also apprenticed to Mad Etta, a four-hundred-pound Medicine Lady who doles out

wisdom from a tree-trunk chair. He has ties to both the contemporary Caucasian world and to the life on the reserve, a conflict which proves central to stories such as "The Ballad of the Public Trustee," "Where the Wild Things Are," "The Mother's Dance," and "The Queen's Hat." Silas is often at the center of the mischief that occurs in these tales, but he is seemingly more concerned with the actions of his friends, particularly Fencepost Frank, a disobedient would-be con artist, and Mad Etta. Kinsella again expertly intermingles the tragic with the comic, and these stories become more about how the Cree people survive difficult situations through humor, trickery, love, and an appreciation of native wisdom. The stories also contemplate the bigotry that many North American Indians still encounter, and this too is dealt with in an enthralling and comical way.

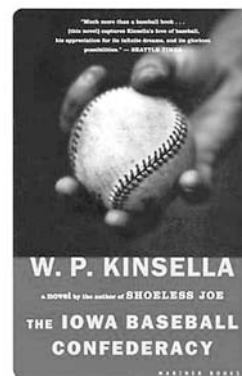
### THE IOWA BASEBALL CONFEDERACY

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*Gideon Clarke attempts to prove to the world that the 1908 Chicago Cubs played an exhibition game against the all-stars of the mythical Iowa Baseball Confederacy.*

*The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* again has baseball as its dominant motif. This time, though, Kinsella injects even more elements of magic and mystery, as the reader learns that to be obsessed with baseball is to achieve a sort of mystical state. The narrator, Gideon Clarke, whose love of baseball was passed down to him by his father, not only is obsessed with a mysterious and mythical baseball event but also is ultimately given access to a magical realm. Clarke, like his father before him, is out to prove to the world that the Chicago Cubs traveled to Onamata, Iowa, in the summer of 1908 for an exhibition





game against the all-stars of the Iowa Baseball Confederacy, an amateur league. The game, which the Cubs figured would not be much of a game at all, lasted in excess of two thousand innings and was played in an almost constant downpour. Since the game appears in no record books, the offices of the Cubs (and pretty much everyone else) have written Clarke off as insane. No one seems to acknowledge the game or even the confederacy. However, Clarke is convinced that the game was played. He believes so strongly, in fact, in the existence of the confederacy and the marathon game they played against the Cubs that he devotes his entire life to setting the record straight.

Kinsella is also concerned here with the rapprochement of fixed forces like love and sadness, sacrifice and anger, and hunger and faith. The book is not only full of lyrical descriptions of America's national pastime and not solely concerned with the magical game between the Cubs and the Confederacy, but it is, like much of Kinsella's work, also lighthearted and funny, a book as much about time travel as it is about baseball, as much about human communion as it is about magic. It is a poignant and heartfelt work.

### **BROTHER FRANK'S GOSPEL HOUR, AND OTHER STORIES**

**First published:** 1994

**Type of work:** Short stories

*This collection again chronicles the adventures of Silas Ermineskin, a Cree writer, and his comical partner, Frank Fencepost.*

In this book, Kinsella revisits the characters from the Ermineskin series. The evolving relationship between Silas, who has become a writer, and his buddy Frank is the focus of this collection. The characters have grown since they appeared in *The Fencepost Chronicles* and *The Miss Hobbema Pageant*,

but they are no less raucous. Kinsella follows his lovable misfits as they swindle their way across western Canada, generally wreaking havoc.

"Bull" chronicles Frank's battle with the Alberta Supreme Court in a uproarious cattle-insemination case. Frank, a witty con artist, is also at the center of the title story, in which he turns a government-sponsored gospel radio show upside down. In "Miracle on Manitoba Street," Frank again concocts an illicit scheme as he visits a Montana reservation and carves the image of the Virgin Mary into a Frigidaire, convincing the locals that it is a miracle, one that they should have to pay to see. "Dream Catcher," one of Kinsella's more serious stories, explores the realities of child abuse, as Silas's twelve-year-old sister is assaulted. "Ice Man" raises questions about gender and identity, as Jason Twelve Trees tries to take part in a cooking competition while his father presses him to become a mechanic. Finally, "The Rain Birds" is a story that is deeply concerned with environmental issues, particularly the effects of corporate farming on the human and natural environment in western Canada. For the most part, critics have embraced *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour, and Other Stories*, praising it for its honest portrayal of human flaws and shortcomings and calling it a showcase for the creativity of the human spirit.

### **SUMMARY**

W. P. Kinsella has earned recognition for his short-story collections dealing with modern-day Canadian Indians and for his novels and stories about baseball. He has a whimsical style in which magic and reality intermingle, and he is deeply concerned with the rejuvenating forces of love, sacrifice, and humor. A determined writer who did not publish his first book until he was forty-two, Kinsella is a prime example of how a writer can endure hardships to come out on top. He is a refreshing, honest, and important voice in North American literature.

*William Boyle*

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*Red Wolf, Red Wolf*, 1987

*The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt*, 1988 (also known as *I Go the Distance*, 1995)

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*The Dixon Cornbelt League, and Other Baseball Stories*, 1993

*Brother Frank's Gospel Hour, and Other Stories*, 1994

*The Secret of the Northern Lights*, 1998

*Japanese Baseball, and Other Stories*, 2000

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is the relationship between nostalgia and magic in W. P. Kinsella's work?
- Does Kinsella seem to have an optimistic or a pessimistic view of the world?
- Kinsella often plays around with time and time travel. What does he accomplish by doing this?
- Race is at the center of Kinsella's work. How do you feel about his portrayal of Canadian Indians?
- A North American Indian character in Kinsella's *The Iowa Baseball Confederacy* says, "Baseball is the one single thing that the white man has done right." How does this statement relate to Kinsella's literary vision?
- What are the unifying elements in Kinsella's fiction between baseball and Canadian Indian culture?
- *Shoeless Joe* is Kinsella's best-known work, but it is by no means canonical. Why do you think Kinsella has not received the same sort of consideration as writers like Bernard Malamud and John Updike, who have also written about baseball?

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## RUDYARD KIPLING

**Born:** Bombay, India

December 30, 1865

**Died:** Hampstead, London, England

January 18, 1936

*One of the most controversial British writers by the beginning of the twentieth century, Kipling is loved for his romantic treatment of India and hated for his imperialistic view of the Indian people.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay, India, on December 30, 1865. His father, John Kipling, was a middle-class craftsman and designer who had received a post at a school of art in Bombay, probably with the help of his wife's brother-in-law, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones. Kipling's mother's name was Alice Macdonald. By all reports, the young Kipling was spoiled by his parents and their Indian servants. When he was five years old, however, his parents began to fear that he was growing more Indian than English, so they brought him and his younger sister back to England, where they were boarded with a Captain Holloway and his wife, who were strangers to the Kiplings.

According to Kipling's own account, in his autobiography as well as in fictional accounts in his works, he was not happy during this period, particularly after the death of Captain Holloway. For whatever reason, Mrs. Holloway did not like him and frequently punished him for what she saw as his headstrong and spoiled behavior. Because of her Calvinist threats of hellfire and damnation, Kipling called the house in the little seaside town the House of Desolation. His life was made even more miserable by his worsening eyesight, which caused his schoolwork to suffer.

In 1878, his mother returned to England to spend some time with her children, but once again

she left for India, this time leaving Kipling in the United Services College boarding school in North Devon, where he stayed until 1882. Because the school had been recently founded primarily for the sons of military officers who could not afford to send them anywhere else, however, it quickly developed a reputation for being a place for bullies and toughs, as Kipling's fictional *Stalky and Co.* (1899) makes abundantly, sometimes obnoxiously, clear.

Since the school was primarily established to get boys past the military examinations rather than into Oxford or Cambridge, Kipling, an omnivorous reader but not the best of students, did not continue his education but left England at the age of seventeen to rejoin his parents in India and to take a position on the staff of an English newspaper, *The Civil and Military Gazette*, in Lahore. Kipling wrote news articles as well as topical fiction for the paper until 1887, when he was transferred to a larger paper, *The Pioneer*, in Allahabad. His job there was to edit the weekly magazine supplement, in which one of his own stories usually appeared. He published his first collection of stories written for the Lahore newspaper, *Plain Tales from the Hills*, in 1888. Also during this time, he wrote a number of other stories, such as *Wee Willie Winkie*, and *Other Child Stories* (1888) and *The Phantom Rickshaw*, and *Other Tales* (1888), which were published in what was called the Railway Series.

In 1889, Kipling went back to London by way of America, and the following year British magazine editors began publishing the Railway Series, which was well received. Kipling enjoyed great success

and was very prolific during this London period. He published *Barrack-Room Ballads, and Other Verses* (1892), a collection of poems that includes such well-known works as “Gunga Din” and “Mandalay,” as well as his first novel, the autobiographical *The Light That Failed* (1890), and some of his most highly respected short stories, such as “Without Benefit of Clergy.”

In 1892, Kipling married Caroline Balestier, sister of Wolcott Balestier, with whom he had collaborated on the romance *The Naulahka: A Story of East and West* (1892). When their honeymoon was cut short by the failure of Kipling’s bank, they went to stay with Caroline’s family in Brattleboro, Vermont, where they lived for four years and where Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book* (1894), *Captains Courageous: A Story of the Grand Banks* (1897), and the first draft of *Kim* (1901). When Kipling became involved in a bitter squabble over money with Caroline’s younger brother Beatty, he had to return to England in 1896. In 1907, he became the first English writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Kipling and his family lived for five years near Rottingdean, not far from Brighton, and then moved to a mansion in rural Sussex. They spent each winter in South Africa, where Kipling met influential British political figures and became even more convinced of the God-given mission of the British to govern over “blacks” and “browns” (as the people of color were called there). After the Boer War, during which he helped edit a newspaper for the British troops, Kipling became more vocal about his imperialism and consequently more alienated from many of his compatriots, who did not share his views. After losing his son in battle during World War I, his hatred of the Germans gave rise to one of his most memorable short stories, “Mary Postgate.” Suffering ill health during his final years, particularly because of an ulcer that he feared was cancer, Kipling remained the conservative reactionary until his death on January 18, 1936, in London, not long after he had turned seventy. He was buried in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey.

## ANALYSIS

Although Robert Louis Stevenson was the first British writer to build his career on the short-story form, Kipling was the first to stimulate a considerable amount of criticism, much of it adverse, because of his short fiction. In fact, much of the nega-

tive criticism that Kipling received is precisely the same kind of criticism that has often been lodged against the short-story form in general—for example, that it focuses only on episodes, that it is too concerned with technique, that it is too dependent on tricks, and that it often lacks a moral force.

Henry James was perhaps the first to note that the young Kipling realized very early the uniqueness of the short story, seeing what chances the form offered for “touching life in a thousand different pieces . . . each a specimen and an illustration.” Yet it is just this appreciation for the episode, according to Edmund Wilson, that prevented Kipling from becoming a great novelist:

You can make an effective short story, as Kipling so often does, about somebody’s scoring off somebody else; but this is not enough for a great novelist, who must show us large social forces, or uncontrollable lines of destiny, or antagonistic impulses of the human spirit, struggling with one another.

Moreover, it is not simply because Kipling could not “graduate,” as it were, to the novel that critics have found fault with him. Critic Randall Jarrell says that Kipling lacks a “dispassionate moral understanding,” that his morality is too one-sided, and that he does not have the ability both to understand things and to understand that there is nothing to be done about them. Short-story writer Frank O’Connor confesses his embarrassment in discussing Kipling’s stories in comparison with those of storytellers such as Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant, for he believes that Kipling is too conscious of the individual reader as an audience who must be affected.

C. S. Lewis also recoiled from Kipling for similar reasons. Complaining about what he calls the excess of Kipling’s art, he complains that Kipling constantly shortened and honed his stories by blotting out passages with India ink. Ultimately, says Lewis, the story is often shortened too much, and, as a result, “the style tends to be too continuously and obtrusively brilliant” with no “leisureliness.” Similarly, Wilson says that it is the paradox of Kipling’s career that he “should have extended the conquests of his craftsmanship in proportion to the shrinking of the range of his dramatic imagination. As his responses to human beings become duller, his sensitivity to his medium increased.”



Such remarks either ignore or fail to take seriously the fact that the short tale practiced by Kipling is not designed to focus on character but rather on fable, on the meaning of an episode in an ideal form. Bonamy Dobrée, in one of the best-known critical efforts to revive interest in Kipling as an artist, has noted this fabular aspect of Kipling's stories, suggesting that as Kipling's mastery of the short-story form increased, he became more and more inclined to introduce an element of fable. "Great realist as he was, it is impossible to see what he was really saying unless the fabular element is at least glimpsed."

Yet the fabular element, so common to the short-story form, often is criticized as being limiting in Kipling, as indeed over the years such an element has been a central source of adverse criticism of short fiction generally. It has been suggested that while Kipling's desire to have complete control of his form and medium can lead to impressive achievements in fantasy and fable, it can also lead to a simplification and distortion. In the short story, it is the fable that is the focus; characters exist for the sake of the story. Kipling was perhaps the first English writer to embrace these characteristics of the short-story form wholeheartedly; thus, his stories are perfect representations of the transition point between the old-fashioned tale of the nineteenth century and the modern British short story.

### "THE STRANGE RIDE OF MORROWBIE JUKES"

**First published:** 1885 (collected in *The Phantom 'Rickshaw, and Other Tales*, 1888)

**Type of work:** Short story

*This work is a combination adventure story and social parable in which a man finds himself trapped in an otherworldly realm somewhere between life and death.*

"The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes" is based on a conventional type of gothic story popular during the early part of the nineteenth century. It is a form that Edgar Allan Poe adapted for his own use and thus made part of the foundation of the short-story form. Kipling's treatment of this genre begins

with the familiar literary convention of being presented as a true story; the central character and storyteller, Jukes, was a civil engineer and thus not a man to take the trouble to invent imaginary tales. When Jukes's story begins, the motivation for his journey to the mysterious realm is supplied in a typically ambiguous gothic way: Jukes has a fever and is light-headed and hallucinatory. When he madly chases a dog into the desert, his horse stumbles and falls. When Jukes regains consciousness, he finds himself in a horseshoe-shaped crater of sand so steep that he cannot climb out. The only way out is across the river where the horseshoe opens out, but that way is guarded by an invisible sentry with a rifle and by a bed of quicksand.

Jukes discovers that he is not alone in the crater; a small band of ragged natives appear, one of whom he recognizes as a telegraph master, Gunga Dass. It is from Gunga Dass that he learns where he is—a sort of wasteland holding place where those who have been in a cataleptic trance are taken until they die in actuality. In existence for at least a century, the hidden village is legendary; no one ever escapes except by death. Thus, the unfortunates who end up there are examples of the "living dead," for even though they live, they are as good as dead and buried. It is part of Kipling's parable pattern that the unfortunates are primarily native Indians of the lower caste.

Much of the story centers on Jukes's helpless situation and his sense of humiliation that, although he is a sahib, a representative of the dominant race, in this place he is like a child completely at the mercy of the natives. Ironically, it is by means of death that Jukes discovers a way to save his life. Finding the body of another sahib who has died there before, Jukes discovers a notebook with directions for bypassing the quicksand. Although he knows that the white man was killed by Gunga Dass, he has not counted on the treachery of the Indian toward himself. Gunga Dass knocks him unconscious and leaves him there to die. Immediately thereafter, Jukes's escape, much like the escape of a character in a story by Poe, is abruptly effected when one of his servants finds him and pulls him out of his sandy trap.

On one hand, the story seems little more than a gothic adventure story of a strange journey, a dreamlike experience with no real meaning. On the other hand, the situation of the white sahib

caught between two worlds, the world of life and the world of death, and at the mercy of Gunga Dass, has symbolic significance even though its surface plot is pure action-adventure. It turns the usual Kipling story of the white man's dominance over the brown man on its head and suggests that, in the world of the living dead, it is the scavenger who survives. Jukes does not earn his escape as Gunga Dass does, but he is pulled out of the hidden valley as if he were abruptly awakened from a bad dream.

## "THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING"

**First published:** 1888 (collected in *The Phantom 'Rickshaw, and Other Tales*, 1888)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Two white men set themselves up as rulers of a hidden country, but their own pride brings about their downfall.*

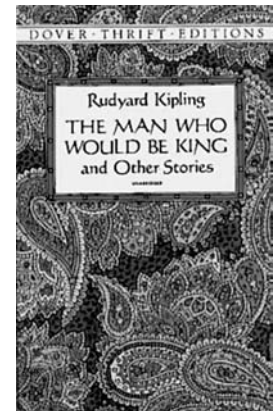
One of Kipling's most Joseph Conrad-like stories is one of his earliest pieces, "The Man Who Would Be King," which Henry James called an "extraordinary tale" and which many critics have suggested is a typical Kipling social parable about British imperialism in India. One critic, Walter Allen, calls it a "great and heroic story," but he says that Kipling evades the metaphysical issues implicit in the story. Although "The Man Who Would Be King" does not contain the philosophic generalizations of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899, serial; 1902, book), and is perhaps not as subtle a piece of symbolist fiction, it is nonetheless a coherent piece of fabular fiction carefully constructed and thematically significant.

The secret of the story is its tone; indeed, tone and style are everything in the work. The story focuses primarily on the crucial difference between a tale told by a narrator who merely reports a story and a narrator who has lived the story he tells. The first-person, primary narrator is a journalist whose job it is to report the doings of "real kings," whereas Peachey Carnehan, the inner narrator, has as his task the reporting of the events of a "pretend king." The primary narrator (Kipling) tells the story of Peachey and Daniel Davrot, which, although it is fiction, is presented as if it were reality. The second-

ary narrator (Peachey) tells a story of Peachey and Davrot in which the two characters project themselves out of the "as-if" real world of the story into the purely projected and fictional world of their adventure.

The tone of the tale reflects the journalist-narrator's bemused attitude toward the pair of unlikely heroes and his incredulity about their "idiotic adventure." "The beginning of everything," he says, is his meeting with Peachey in a railway train, where he learns that the two are posing as correspondents for the newspaper for which the narrator is indeed a real correspondent. Role-playing is an important motif in the story, for indeed Peachey and Davrot are always playing roles; they are essentially vagabonds and loafers with no real identity of their own. After the narrator returns to his office and becomes "respectable," Peachey and Davrot interrupt this respectability to tell him of their fantastic plan and to try to obtain from him a factual framework for the country where they hope to become kings. "We have come to you to know about this country, to read a book about it, and to be shown maps," says Carnehan. "We want you to tell us that we are fools and to show us your books." The mythic proportions of the two men—or rather their storybook proportions, for "mythic" is too serious a word here for the grotesque adventurers—are indicated by the narrator's amused awareness that Davrot's red beard seems to fill half the room and Carnehan's huge shoulders the other half.

The actual adventure begins with additional role-playing as Davrot pretends to be a mad priest (an ironic image that he indeed is to fulfill later) marching forward with whirligigs (playful crosses) to sell as charms to the savages. The narrator again becomes "respectable" and turns his attention to the obituaries of real kings in Europe until three years later, when Peachey returns, a "whining cripple," to confront the narrator with his story that he and Davrot have been crowned kings in Kafiristan, exclaiming, "you've been sitting here ever since—oh, Lord!"



Peachey's inserted story thus stands in contrast to the pedestrian story of the narrator's situation and is contrasted with it by its fantastic, storylike nature in which Peachey and Davrot have indeed set themselves up as fictional kings in a real country.

The storylike nature of the adventure is indicated first of all by Peachey's frequent confusing of himself with Davrot and by his frequent reference to himself in the third person:

There was a party called Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan that was with Davrot. Shall I tell you about him? He died out there in the cold. Slap from the bridge fell old Peachey, turning and twisting in the air like a penny whirligig.

Moreover, Peachey and Davrot often speak to the people Davrot calls the "lost tribe" in biblical language. The purpose of these biblical allusions is to give Peachey's tale an authoritative story framework, indeed the most basic and dignified story framework in Western culture. Davrot becomes king by moving from fighting to craft via Masonic ritual, a ritual that reaffirms Davrot's superior position and controls his followers. Since Davrot has projected himself into the role of god as king, however, and thus assumes a position in the kingdom as the fulfillment of prophecy and legend, he is bound to this particular role. It is only when he wishes to escape the preestablished role and marry a native girl that his world falls apart. When he is bitten by his frightened intended bride, the cry of the people, "Neither God nor Devil, but a man," breaks the spell and propels Davrot and Peachey back into reality again.

The fact that Peachey and Davrot are really double figures is indicated not only by Peachey's reference to himself as suffering Davrot's fate but also by the fact that, if Davrot is the ambiguous god-man, then it is Peachey who must be crucified. Kipling finds it necessary of course to make this split, for the god-man must not only die but also be resurrected. Peachey is the resurrected figure who brings the head of Davrot, still with its crown, back to tell the tale to the narrator. Peachey's final madness and death, and the mysterious disappearance of the crowned head, are the ironic fulfillment of a final escape from external reality.

It seems clear from the seriocomic tone and the parodic use of biblical story and language that what

Kipling is attempting in "The Man Who Would be King" is a burlesque version of a basic dichotomy in the nature of story itself. The narrator, who deals with real events in the world, tells a story of someone, who in turn tells a story of fantastic events in which the real world is transformed into the fabular nature of story. Davrot and Peachey project themselves into a purely story-world, but once they are accepted there, they cannot break the code of the roles that they have assumed. When they do make such an effort, the story they have created, and thus the roles they have played, become apparent as fictional roles only and crumble like a pack of cards. The man who would be a king can be a king only in the pretend world of story itself, and then only as long as story-world or story-reality is maintained. A story character cannot be human, for when he or she attempts to become real—when the character begins to take his or her story status as true reality—the story ends. It is little wonder that "The Man Who Would be King" has such a comic tone, for truly what Kipling is playing with here is not the nature of empires but the nature of story. If one wishes to read this tale as a parable of the tenuous and fictionally imposed nature of British imperialism, then such a reading is possible, but only because the story is primarily about the essentially tenuous nature of the fable world itself.

### "MRS. BATHURST"

**First published:** 1904 (collected in *Traffics and Discoveries*, 1904)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Four men are baffled by the relationship between a sailor who deserts the navy and the widowed keeper of a New Zealand hotel who follows him to England.*

"Mrs. Bathurst" is one of the most cryptic and puzzling of all Kipling's stories. Part of what makes the story such a mystery is the method by which it is told, for it is presented almost completely as a dialogue among four men. Furthermore, the dialogue is so clipped and cryptic that it is often difficult to follow. The principal characters are Petty Officer Pycroft, his friend Sergeant Pritchard of

the marines, the narrator, and his friend Inspector Hooper of the South African railways. Pyecroft and Pritchard tell the other two men the story about Warrant Officer Vickery, who deserted the service with only eighteen months left before his discharge, and his mysterious relationship with Mrs. Bathurst, a young widow who managed a hotel in New Zealand.

The central story of Vickery and Mrs. Bathurst is prefaced by a brief account about the officer Boy Niven, who lured a small group of sailors and marines into the woods for no other reason than for personal publicity. At the end of this inconclusive and seemingly irrelevant little tale, the conversation moves to Vickery and his mysterious desertion so close to his discharge. The first ambiguous reference to Vickery is to his nickname "Click," in reference to the four false teeth on his lower left jaw that were not set properly and thus made a clicking sound when he talked fast. At the reference to the false teeth, Inspector Hooper is meaningfully described with his hand in his waistcoat pocket, although at this point it is certainly not clear why Hooper should have Vickery's false teeth on his person.

When the topic of Mrs. Bathurst is introduced, most of the conversation is between Pyecroft, who is telling the tale, and Pritchard, who knows the lady and vouches for her kindness and integrity. He cannot believe that she is the cause of a married man and father like Vickery deserting the service. In a key phrase in the story, however, Hooper, after hearing of Mrs. Bathurst's ladylike behavior, says, "I don't see her somehow." To see Mrs. Bathurst becomes the challenge of the story. Even though both Pyecroft and Pritchard say they have seen her only once or twice, they can remember her vividly. Pyecroft says, "That's the secret. 'Tisn't beauty, so to speak, nor good talk necessarily. It's just It. Some women'll stay in a man's memory if they once walk down a street."

Kipling's puzzling story is, in some ways, about this kind of fascination, for all four of the men can remember having met one or two women of that nature, and all agree that if a man gets struck with that kind of woman, he goes crazy. What gives the story its particular turn of the screw is the "dark and bloody mystery" of Vickery's own vision of Mrs. Bathurst. Pyecroft tells of Vickery's insisting that he accompany him to a showing of an early motion

picture, the cinematograph, in Cape Town, South Africa. Pyecroft knows that something strange is involved, for he says the look of Vickery's face reminded him of "those things in bottles in those herbalistic shops at Plymouth—preserved in spirits of wine. White an' crumply things—previous to birth as you might say."

What makes Pyecroft's description of the experience at the cinematograph so crucial to the story is the particular nature of early audience response to the new film technology. While watching a film, early viewers often mistook it momentarily for reality. In the particular film scene that Vickery wants Pyecroft to see, the London Mail train is shown arriving at the station and the passengers getting out "just like life." As they walk toward the camera, and thus seemingly toward the film viewers, they walk right out of the picture. Pyecroft sees Mrs. Bathurst come straight toward them, looking at them in a blind way without seeing and then melting out of the picture "like a shadow jumpin' over a candle." Vickery says, "it's the woman herself," and he urges Pyecroft to come with him to see her again the next night. For five consecutive nights, they go to see the film to watch Mrs. Bathurst make her forty-five-second walk toward them with that blind look in her eyes.

Although Pyecroft declares that Vickery is insane, he says that Vickery told him that Mrs. Bathurst was in England looking for him. Vickery tells Pyecroft that, whereas he only had to watch, "I'm it." Moreover, he tells Pyecroft to remember that he is not a murderer, that his wife died in childbirth six weeks after he left England on his last voyage. When the listeners to Pyecroft's story ask for the rest of it, he replies, "the rest is silence." All that is known for sure is that Vickery deserted and disappeared.

The story ends with the men considering the possible meaning of Vickery's experience. Hooper says, "I wonder what it was," and Pyecroft replies, "I've made my 'ead ache in that direction many a long night." Once again, when Pyecroft mentions hearing Vickery's clicking teeth, Hooper's hand goes significantly to his waistcoat pocket. It is Hooper who ends the story with a grisly little tale of his own about two tramps he saw standing by the railway in the interior. Having been struck by lightning, the two were burned to charcoal and fell to bits when Hooper touched them. The man who

was standing up had the false teeth, says Hooper; the other was squatting down and watching him. Both of them fell to pieces when he touched them, Hooper explains. The story ends with Pyecroft saying that after having seen Vickery's face for five consecutive nights, he thanks God that he is dead.

Critics have long puzzled over this story, complaining that Kipling cut too much out of it and thus left it stripped of any explanatory detail. Although one knows that the standing pile of ashes is Vickery, one can only guess that the other one is Mrs. Bathurst herself, since no other character has been introduced in the story. "Mrs. Bathurst" focuses on the unexplainable mystery of human fascination, but it is the mystery of the cinema that serves as the central metaphor, for as Vickery watches the film night after night, he is in that curious situation experienced by all filmgoers of being a viewer who cannot himself be seen. Moreover, as he tells Pyecroft, he is not merely a viewer but is the missing character in the film, for he insists that Mrs. Bathurst has gone to England to find him. Instead of playing a told story over and over again, as is the usual short-story convention, the film creates the illusion of the actual event being repeated. What is so unbearable to Vickery is that Mrs. Bathurst's search for him seems to be repeated over and over again. Although it obviously took place in the past, every time he sees it, it seems to be taking place in the present. Making the story depend on dialogue rather than on narration, Kipling not only makes the cinema scene the central metaphor of the story but also makes cinema technique the means by which the story is told.

## SUMMARY

Rudyard Kipling was one of the most popular British authors at the start of the twentieth century, the most widely read author since Charles Dickens. His position as an artist, however, is not as assured as his popular success. He has been criticized for his jingoistic imperialism that smacks of later fascism, and he has been soundly criticized for being more concerned with fictional technique than with the human emotions of his characters. He has been compared, perhaps unfairly, with the great writer Joseph Conrad; both men were writing at roughly the same time. Although there are surface similarities between the two, in that both focus on strange and exotic realms either at sea or on other continents, Conrad, with his ambiguities and subtleties and his profound exploration of human evil and isolation, seems a true symbolist genius, whereas Kipling often seems merely a good storyteller.

To take a negative approach to the work of Kipling because he is a storyteller rather than a philosophic novelist, however, is to be guilty of the pervasive bias against short fiction as not being as important as the novel. A large number of Kipling's stories, such as "Without Benefit of Clergy," "Mary Postgate," "The Gardener," and "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," as well as "Mrs. Bathurst" and "The Man Who Would Be King," are significant transition works that signal the beginnings of the modern short story.

Charles E. May

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Has Rudyard Kipling's reputation as a "British Empire" man damaged his literary reputation?
- Was Kipling too concerned with technique in his fiction?
- Does it make sense to criticize "The Man Who Would Be King" because it lacks elements of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899, serial; 1902, book)?
- Does Kipling's verse deserve more attention than it now gets?
- Does Kipling have unusual insight into India and its people?

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# HEINRICH VON KLEIST

**Born:** Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, Prussia (now in Germany)  
October 18, 1777

**Died:** Wannsee bei Potsdam, Prussia (now in Germany)  
November 21, 1811

*Kleist ranks as one of the best novella writers of the modern period. His plays, which are considered romantic in tenor, and his short fiction, which combines historical realism with fantastic elements, emphasize the power of human passion and focus on psychological conflict, as well as on conflict between the individual and society.*

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Heinrich von Kleist (klist) was born in 1777 into an aristocratic family of Prussian army officers. When he entered the army himself at fourteen years of age, after attending a French Calvinist school in Berlin, his mother and father had already died. He saw action in the Coalition Wars in 1794 and was promoted before resigning. His ambition led him to study disparate subjects at universities in Frankfurt-on-the-Oder and Königsberg, to travel widely, to live a romantic life in the Swiss countryside, and even to try to enlist in Napoleon I's army in 1803. That last unsuccessful adventure preceded a mental and physical breakdown from which he took six months to recover. In view of his background and the turbulence of this era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, it is understandable that military battle figures prominently in Kleist's works. War is central to the plots of three of his plays; two novellas also deal with revolution or rebellion.

The existential crisis Kleist experienced in 1801, often called the Kant crisis, caused him to despair of ever knowing the truth through study. Desiring to become an author, he stopped looking for civil service jobs and broke his engagement to a noblewoman. Instead, his deep attachments to women centered on Marie von Kleist, a relative by marriage, and on Ulrike, his half sister, both of whom came to his aid when he was ill or in financial trouble.

While he embraced Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concepts of individual freedom, the centrality of

emotion, and the goodness of nature, Kleist turned against Napoleon I after Napoleon's victory against Prussia in 1806. Kleist went on to write patriotic poetry and essays for archconservative newspapers. Arrested mistakenly as a spy in 1807, Kleist spent six months in French prison. His play *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (pr., pb. 1821; *The Prince of Homburg*, 1875), celebrating Prussian military history, is in part a reaction to Napoleon's victory.

Although he had written some plays before 1806, his most intense literary activity began afterward. Fragments of his plays and novellas appeared in his literary journal *Phoebus*. All eight of his stories were completed and published in this period. Some of his plays were staged with limited success. While he lived, Kleist's ambition to win the highest literary laurels fell tragically short, but today his reputation as a major writer is secure.

Kleist's career was dogged by prolonged illnesses, financial straits, and lack of success. He often appealed to relatives for money and was faulted for quarreling with collaborators. Between 1804 and 1806 he was bedridden so often that he finally asked to be released from his hard-won civil service position for health reasons. Financial troubles ended his literary magazine around the same time that his comedy, *Der zerbrochne Krug* (pr. 1808, pb. 1811; *The Broken Jug*, 1930), failed in its premier performance, which greatly demoralized him. In the last year of his life, money worries overwhelmed him. He lost his pension and was pressed by debtors. Censorship ended the short but successful run of the last newspaper Kleist edited. As a

final resort after failing to obtain other writing jobs, he had to appeal to the king to obtain a military post. However, wherever he turned, he could not find the money to buy the required uniform. After a short acquaintance with a woman dying of cancer, Kleist shot both her and himself. His tragic suicide helped bring him to the attention of the world and made him a Romantic icon of suffering, misunderstood genius.

### ANALYSIS

Kleist's first and last literary works were plays. While he usually composed in blank verse, he experimented with an amazing variety of forms. After agonizing difficulties with his first two dramatic efforts, he developed a polished, self-confident technique. He turned out classical five-act plays as well as unorthodox one-act plays, covered mythological as well as patriotic historical subjects, and wrote a village farce as well as a romantic comedy. As an example of his dramatic range, one can contrast his *Amphitryon* (pb. 1807, pr. 1899; English translation, 1962), which imitates the French classical drama of Molière, with his *Penthesilea* (pb. 1808, pr. 1876; English translation, 1959), which is decidedly anti-classical in its form, as well as in its depiction of character. Like William Shakespeare's comedies, Kleist's include serious moments that sometimes border on the tragic. The fact that metaphysical debate and the use of trials or formal interrogations are characteristic of Kleist's plays points to an important theme in his work: the difficulty of reconciling divergent viewpoints and of discovering the truth.

Since the early nineteenth century, Kleist has been considered a master of the novella form he developed from Giovanni Boccaccio's model. Kleist completed only eight of these stories because he began writing them only in the last five years of his life. As is typical of the novella, description is kept to a minimum, character is revealed by action, and events constrain choices, as well as drive the fast-paced narrative forward. Tightly structured with complex sentences, Kleist's stories report much of the dialogue in indirect speech, which can create ironic distance. Kleist is famous for his dramatic openings, with their frequent riddles, as well as his unexpected and sometimes inconclusive endings. The modern, skeptical narrative stance presents a choice of viewpoints for interpreting

events. Despite ample use of historical events and characters, Kleist's stories also contain fantastic elements that can seem hard to reconcile with the realistic details and the sober, objective style of narration.

Through his conscious use of polarities in morality, character, and fate, Kleist externalizes intractable conflict and hones the paradoxes and ironies that he frequently employs. Whereas the sparks of passion fly as the opposites touch, the emotive force is deflected either into humor or into despair as the polarities increasingly diverge or undercut one another. Appearance contradicts reality and a protagonist's needs and desires seem impossible to achieve in the given society or under the particular government. Unlike German Romantics, who share his focus on subjectivity and the emotions, Kleist shines a dubious light on religion and can be relentlessly logical. His works have a great deal to say about the theory and practice of war, as well as about the pitfalls of legal systems and the administration of justice. Kleist provides as rich a field for psychological analyses as he does for social criticism.

Language skepticism pervades Kleist's works. It is a sign of his critique of Enlightenment rationality; however, his works also show the perils of extreme passion. Typically, characters fall silent for long periods or misunderstand what is said. The profusion of dashes in his dialogues marks the unfinished utterances of the characters. Bodily signals, such as blushing, sudden pallor, or fainting, provide better cues to the internal situation of the character than much of what they say. Kleist endows hand gestures, kneeling, and head movements with symbolic meaning and places them at turning points or scenes of extreme emotive power.

The strength and complexity of Kleist's women figures, such as Penthesilea and the Marquise of O——, continue to attract readers and playgoers; twentieth century psychoanalytic and feminist criticism has been particularly active in interpreting his work. Decisive and resourceful in love, the women characters also sometimes experience a desire for fame, participate in political action, or give eloquent voice to existential conflicts. This set of motivations and problems was usually seen only in male protagonists during the nineteenth century.

Prominent themes in Kleist's works include er-

rors of judgment, avoidance of facing up to reality, and a longing for death that is quasi-Romantic. Jumping to conclusions or being honestly mistaken about facts, rather than being tricked, causes his characters to generate the opposite of what they intend. Since Kleist's tragic heroes refuse to accept reality, they might be admired as idealists whose pursuit of the impossible inspires the audience, whereas the comic heroes of this type provoke laughter. It is a mark of Kleist's talent that a character in a given situation can be taken comically, or tragically, or both ways simultaneously. Although perhaps a consequence of failure, the death wish can be read alternately as an implied fulfillment, or as a move to preserve a perfection that has been achieved but is in danger of being compromised by the inexorable march of time.

## PENTHESILEA

**First published:** 1808, first produced, 1876  
(English translation, 1959)

**Type of work:** Play

*Having undermined her people's military campaign against the Greeks, Queen Penthesilea kills Achilles, the man she loves, in a mad rage, and then, dying, severs her ties with the Amazons.*

Rejected by past critics for its sadomasochistic extremes and for the alleged insanity of its protagonist, *Penthesilea* is valued today for its exploration of gender roles and the psychology of eroticism and violence. There is more disagreement on how to understand this play than for any of Kleist's other works. Since so much of the text reports offstage action and the battles are as chaotic as the soul of the protagonist, *Penthesilea* is seldom produced. The plot runs counter to classical legends, where Amazons never fall in love and are always defeated by male heroes.

In the opening scenes, Queen Penthesilea and Achilles feel mutual attraction, yet desire to subdue one another in battle. The Amazons and the Greeks view these desires as contrary to reason and custom. After their first armed contest, which is inconclusive, Penthesilea and Achilles announce

plans to pursue one another and therefore to contravene the real goals of each army. While some Amazons want to continue the fight to win more captives, others argue that an enamored Penthesilea is not fit to wage war and risks losing the captives they have already won.

The High Priestess's prediction that Penthesilea will be defeated by her inner foe, rather than by Achilles, proves true. When Penthesilea lies at Achilles' feet after their second battle, her Amazon friend convinces him to postpone telling the queen of her defeat. Hearing the false report that Achilles is now her prisoner, an ecstatic Penthesilea orders the victory hymn.

A long dialogue ensues in which Achilles inquires about the history of the Amazons. Their ancestors had prayed for revenge to the war god Mars after they were forced into marriage by the murders of their menfolk. Their first queen had died ripping away one breast to prove to Mars that the women could wield a bow. To reproduce, warrior virgins bring the men they have captured in battle home to a love feast. After a month of orgies, the men are loaded with gifts and dismissed. Though Achilles finds these customs unnatural, he is now determined to make Penthesilea his queen. As the Greeks approach and he orders Penthesilea to go with them, she learns that Achilles has conquered her.

While the Greeks drag Achilles away against his will, the Amazons rescue their queen. This angers Penthesilea, who feels she belongs to the victor. However, on learning that by saving her the Amazons have lost all their captives, she blushes with shame. When a challenge to single combat arrives from Achilles, Penthesilea is outraged, believing this proves that he does not love her. Achilles, confident of the queen's love, tells his men he will only pretend to fight to give her an easy victory.

Despite attempts of the Amazons to prevent it, Penthesilea sets out with dogs and elephants against Achilles. After her arrow fells the unarmed





hero, she joins the animals in a feeding frenzy on his corpse. The Amazons are appalled at Penthesilea's brutality. Roused from her stupor, the queen, elated to have defeated Achilles, feels ripe for death, yet she objects to the mutilation of Achilles' corpse. Dumbfounded to hear that she is the perpetrator, she excuses herself by saying that in love there is little difference between kissing and biting. After renouncing Amazon law, she follows Achilles by dying of remorse for her deed.

## THE MARQUISE OF O——

**First published:** *Die Marquise von O——*,  
1808 (English translation, 1960)

**Type of work:** Novella

*An unexpected pregnancy, career obligations, and the paradox of reputation as opposed to actual virtue complicate the life of a widowed marquise and the Russian count who wants to marry her.*

Although a comedy with several amusing scenes, this tale illustrates serious themes in Kleist's works: the crisis of trust and the inaccessibility of vital knowledge. The riddle of rape, its moral implications, and the father-daughter relationship in this story have been controversial. Like other Kleist narratives, this one opens with an enigma: a newspaper announcement in which a woman asks that her child's father, who impregnated her without her knowledge, make himself known so that she can marry him. A long flashback follows to explain how the marquise came to write this.

The marquise's calm life with her family was rudely interrupted when Russians bombarded the citadel where they lived. Close to being sexually assaulted by enemy soldiers, she was rescued by a Russian count, who brought the fainting woman to a safe place. The Russian army left the next morning, denying the marquise a chance to thank her savior in person.

The count suddenly reappears twice to court the marquise. The first is a surprise because he is believed to have been killed in battle; the second is also a surprise because he enters her garden surreptitiously. His respectful, polite demeanor re-

mains in tension with expressions of emotion, such as blushing and abrupt gestures. The demands of his military career and social conventions constantly thwart his desire to wed the marquise.

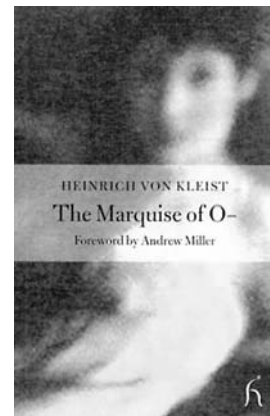
Despite her decision not to remarry on principle, there are indications that the marquise feels attracted to the count. Her equilibrium is upset not only by his wooing but also by her own fainting and nausea spells reminiscent of pregnancy. After hearing from a doctor and a midwife that she is pregnant, she is first insulted and then desperate. Catapulted into crisis, she suffers because her body's condition contradicts her innocent conscience, because her mother condemns her as a deceitful liar, and because her father disowns her and demands she vacate the house.

After this nadir, she begins to be active and angry rather than suffering and depressed. Insisting that her children accompany her and against her father's command, she moves into her late husband's estate and begins fixing it up. She resolves to cherish the coming child, though she is bothered that in the world's eyes it will be illegitimate. At this point she pens the announcement in the paper.

The count's next two proposals are angrily rebuked by the marquise, who reviles him and runs away. He had renewed his suit after hearing about her pregnancy and her parents disowning her; after that, he turns up in answer to the newspaper advertisement.

Before the unknown father is scheduled to appear, the marquise is reconciled with her parents. Visiting to test her innocence with a ruse, her mother pretends she knows who the father is to see how her daughter reacts. After the marquise passes this test, her mother tearfully reaffirms her faith in the marquise's innocence. Her mother arranges the reconciliation with her father, the commandant, a scene that has stimulated lots of discussion because of the prolonged passionate kissing between father and daughter.

When the day arrives to meet the baby's father,



all are astonished that the count walks in. Lambasting him as a devil, the marquise takes to her bed with a fever. Her parents' pleas for her to marry the count fall on deaf ears. Only after he promises to fulfill all the duties of a husband, without enjoying any of his rights, does the marquise agree to this marriage-in-form-only. The count lives apart from her while the baby is born and afterward for about a year. Then the marquise and he joyfully celebrate a second, real marriage.

## MICHAEL KOHLHAAS

**First published:** 1810 (English translation, 1844)

**Type of work:** Novella

*A horse dealer's attempts to obtain justice, which are frustrated by misunderstandings, government corruption, and popular pressure, finally bear fruit, though it costs him his life.*

It was this novella that originally established Kleist as a major writer. Its focus is a sober and determined Michael Kohlhaas, who struggles to pursue justice in a thicket of complicating circumstances and conflicting jurisdictions of power. The historical chronicle that Kleist used includes the unfair confiscation of Kohlhaas's two horses, the difficulties Kohlhaas has in obtaining legal redress, his meeting with Martin Luther, and the attempt to burn down Wittenberg. Many other realistic details are anchored in sixteenth century German politics and feudal society. The enigma the story poses is: How can a decent, honest man become a robber and a murderer?

The first segment of the story shows how an innocent upstanding citizen, like Kohlhaas, is susceptible to unfair treatment by noblemen, despite his circumspection and patience. Junker von Tronka acts arbitrarily and cruelly by abusing Kohlhaas's horses and severely beating Kohlhaas's loyal groom. Kohlhaas demands justice publicly because many others have, like him, suffered under this junker's misrule. Getting no satisfaction in the Saxon courts, Kohlhaas appeals to the elector of Brandenburg. The first case is dismissed because of the intervention of powerful aristocrats; the second is handled by a chancellor, who, since he was

related to the junker by marriage, takes no action. In both instances, Kohlhaas is advised not to pursue this issue any further in the courts.

In the next segment, an increasingly angry Kohlhaas decides that his rights are a matter of existential importance: Although the world is in disarray, his quest gives his life order and meaning. The death of his wife while delivering a petition on his behalf deflects his aim towards vengeance. Resorting to illegal means, he burns the Tronka castle to the ground, calls on men to take up arms against Tronka, and instructs his private army to burn down parts of Wittenberg and Leipzig because they do not surrender the junker. Kohlhaas claims he is waging a just war.

Violence escalates, as the popular mood begins to favor Kohlhaas, and his confederates defeat the forces sent out to capture him. Luther, who issues an edict damning Kohlhaas, insists that the blame lies not with the rulers of Brandenburg and Saxony but rather with lowly functionaries. In a personal meeting, however, Luther admits there is justice in Kohlhaas's demands. Although the elector accepts Luther's advice to grant Kohlhaas amnesty, the latter rejects Luther's plea to forgive his enemies.

After disbanding his men, Kohlhaas goes to Dresden in Saxony, where his case at first gets a sympathetic hearing. However, a decline in popular sympathy for his cause, combined with the Tronka family's machinations, result in him being condemned to death. Discovering a miscarriage of justice by one of his ministers, the elector of Brandenburg requires that Kohlhaas be extradited from Dresden to Berlin. The final leg of the story delays the action while a hunting party of the elector of Saxony is described, and the fantastic element of a mysterious gypsy resembling Kohlhaas's late wife is introduced. Kohlhaas eventually wins his restitution case in the Brandenburg court, which gives him great satisfaction; but, paradoxically, he loses the imperial case, which means he is publicly executed for breaking the peace of the empire.

## SUMMARY

Given the fragile order in society and uncertainty of human knowledge in Heinrich von Kleist's works, neither consistent rational plans nor passionate abandon, neither hesitation nor single-minded pursuit, are guaranteed to succeed. How-

ever, Kleist seems to admire those who risk all and who disregard boundaries set up by societies or governments. Trust, forgiveness, and understanding can allay disaster in Kleist's comedies. In the epic struggle between the unusual individual hero and the world, moral judgments are problematic, and subjective experience gives the key to understanding.

Julie D. Prandi

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What gives rise to conflicts between the individual and the state in *Michael Kohlhaas* and *Penthesilea*? What, if any, political criticism is implied?
- What elements in Heinrich von Kleist's works point to a moral ambiguity that makes it difficult to assess particular characters?
- How do gestures or other body language convey feelings that are not directly expressed by Kleist's characters? To what themes do specific gestures point?
- In what ways do Kleist's characters transcend traditional gender roles or appear to be constrained by them? How does this affect relationships between men and women?
- To what extent does unexpected information at the close of a novella or play by Kleist provide new perspectives on the main characters?
- How does Kleist's irony create distance or intensify tragic or comic moments?

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Courtesy, Author

## JOY KOGAWA

**Born:** Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
June 6, 1935

*A novelist and poet, Kogawa has preeminently expressed the trauma and betrayal experienced by Japanese Canadians because of their forced internment during World War II. She has become a powerful voice for peace and the healing power of community.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Joy Kogawa (koh-gah-wah) was born Joy Nozomie Nakayama in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1935. Gordon Goichi Nakayama, her father, was an Anglican clergyman; Lois Masui Yao Nakayama, her mother, was a musician and kindergarten teacher. Kogawa's very early childhood in Vancouver was secure and full of wonder; she later spoke of loving the fun of the city, with Christmas lights and escalators, and being surrounded by a warm family circle. A gathering danger, however, was the fact that her parents were second-generation Japanese immigrants. Although loyal Canadian citizens, like all Japanese Canadians on the country's West Coast, they were subject to laws hastily enacted after the attack on Pearl Harbor, which ordered all residents "of Japanese ancestry" to be relocated inland. In 1942, some 21,000 people, most of them Canadian citizens, were forced to leave their homes near the Pacific coast. Their property was confiscated, many men were sent to labor camps, and the rest, including whole families, were resettled in ghost towns in interior British Columbia.

The Nakayama family ended up in Slocan, an almost deserted mining town amid the wooded mountains of inland British Columbia. They spent the World War II years there, living in a shack with newspaper walls. Kogawa attended school there and read everything she could find, although her

choices in this ghost town were limited. The Slocan internees did retain features of community, however. Enough Japanese Canadians were living there to start stores and a school and to maintain some traditional customs.

When the war ended in 1945, the Canadian government inexplicably refused to let Japanese Canadians return to their West Coast homes. Instead, they were offered two choices: to move farther east to the prairies or to be "repatriated" to Japan. Kogawa and her family settled in Coaldale, Alberta, where their living conditions were even more primitive than before. Kogawa completed high school there and spent one year studying at the University of Alberta. She then took a job teaching elementary school in Coaldale. In 1955, she moved to Toronto and studied music at the Anglican Women's Training College and Conservatory of Music.

She finally returned to Vancouver in 1956 and enrolled at a music academy in that city. It was there that she met David Kogawa, whom she married in 1957. The couple had two children: Gordon, born in 1957, and Deidre, born in 1959. The Kogawas moved to Toronto in 1957 but lived in various Canadian cities, including Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Ottawa, before divorcing in 1968. During the 1967-1968 school year, Joy Kogawa returned to school, studying at the University of Saskatchewan.

Kogawa started writing in 1957. Her first published short story, "Are There Any Shoes in Heaven?" appeared in 1964. It was about a little boy and conveyed Kogawa's own unease with the prairie landscape and longing for the mountains. From that time on she mainly considered herself a



freelance writer, although she did hold some paid positions which involved writing. From 1974 through 1976, she was a staff writer in the office of the prime minister in Ottawa. In 1978, she served as writer-in-residence at the University of Ottawa.

Early on, she turned her major focus from stories to poetry. She published her first poetry collection, *The Splintered Moon*, in 1967, followed by *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), *Jericho Road* (1977), and *Six Poems* (1978). Although each volume's major focus varied, each combined evocative images from dreams, memories, and personal and historical events with a lyric poet's voice.

In 1979, Kogawa settled permanently in Toronto. The shadow of her family's World War II internal exile emerged in the writing of a semiautobiographical novel, *Obasan*, first published in 1981. She describes herself as writing it "unconsciously" as the story poured out of her own memories and her poet's craft.

The novel's first printing of three thousand copies sold out immediately, and it went on to win the Books in Canada First Novel Award for 1981 and many subsequent awards. The first fiction to deal with the Japanese Canadians' internment, it remains unequalled for its artistry and multileveled treatment of the experience. *Obasan* later became part of the required curriculum for Canadian secondary schools.

Its publication both coincided with and invigorated the Japanese Canadian redress movement, which in 1988 eventually won an apology and reparations of \$21,000 per person from the Canadian government. Against her original intention, Kogawa was drawn into participation in this movement. Her novel *Itsuka*, published in 1991, reflects this political and inner struggle, as it takes *Obasan*'s protagonist to Toronto, where she joins the redress movement. A more straightforward narrative, this novel has not received the immense critical attention of its predecessor.

Kogawa's interests as an author and an activist have continued to expand to other issues of justice, cross-cultural identity, and human rights, especially women's rights. Her 1995 novel, *The Rain Ascends*, deals with a daughter's reaction to discovery of her clergyman father's sexual abuse of boys. The poetry collection *A Song of Lilith* (2000) reimagines the mythical figure of Lilith in poetic form and from a feminist perspective; another po-

etry collection, *A Garden of Anchors*, appeared in 2003.

The Land Conservancy of British Columbia has spearheaded a campaign to save the Vancouver house where Kogawa spent her earliest childhood. She has been awarded the Order of Canada and the Order of British Columbia.

## ANALYSIS

Joy Kogawa's dual cultural heritage as a Japanese Canadian has given her an extraordinarily rich array of images and concerns that inform her writing. *Obasan*, her most acclaimed work, is threaded with evocative images. Symbolic objects loom large in the memories and dreams of the narrator, Naomi, as well as in the events of her life. They almost always have other levels of meaning beyond the simple chain of cause and effect that powers a novel's narrative.

Among the novel's most persistent motifs is that of stone. "Stone" is mentioned at least three times in the short prose poem that introduces the novel; its silence and density hides secrets, and it represents a spell of unknowing cast over Naomi's life. Stone also appears at the book's end in a reconciliation with Naomi's past and a subliminal connection with her dead mother's spirit: "the moon is a pure white stone. . . . The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing."

In the body of the story, stone images appear many other times, usually as an emblem of silence and passivity. Even Uncle Isamu's "stone bread," so hard it is almost inedible, is baked in silent protest against losing his real vocation, boat-building. Yet underlying the stone-as-silence metaphor is another subtext—the tradition of the Japanese rock garden. Such stone gardens create serenity, beauty, and coherence out of the most unlikely materials. As Naomi re-creates her family's ordeal by memory and discovery, a similar pattern emerges out of the cold, unpromising Canadian soil.

Also significant is the opposition of silence and speech woven throughout the novel. In Naomi's life there is silence about the important things. Japanese culture views silence as a positive quality, especially for women; silence holds overtones of attentiveness, discretion, and the unasked-for meeting of needs. *Obasan*, Naomi's aunt, has this virtue. It is not that she does not talk at all; rather, she does not speak of anything important in their lives. Her

comments are a sort of undecipherable shorthand to her thoughts.

Silence can protect when things are too dangerous or painful to speak about. Yet when silence masks the events of one's life, it can also prevent healing or growth. Naomi's other aunt, Emily, is a "word warrior" who prizes speech. Her research, letters, and petitions, she says, are necessary; without work such as hers, facts will never be revealed and suffering can never be redeemed. Naomi's natural inclination is to silence, but before the novel ends, she realizes the value in both approaches. Without the "telling," she could never know her mother's fate or accept the fact of her eternal absence.

Kogawa's own journey as a writer and public figure parallels Naomi's. She speaks of her writing as a "tool for the journey." If speech is necessary for justice to be done, her fiction and poetry are a good, indirect way to use it. They encompass some of the indirection that served *Obasan* so well.

The themes found in *Obasan* inform Kogawa's other works as well: bigotry and its poisonous fruits, personal and national identity, justice, the maternal bond and its jeopardy, memory, and silence. Her other works of fiction venture into new subject areas, but each shows a multileveled awareness at odds with the simple black and white of issues advocacy. In *Itsuka*, even after Naomi "goes political," there is still conflict between Japanese Canadians who want to forget the past and those who keep fighting. *The Rain Ascends* shows a daughter's dilemma, when she discovers that her father, a "good man," is also a child molester.

Kogawa's poetry foreshadows most of the themes of her fiction, but also includes many lamentations and realizations on identity and marriage. Especially noteworthy are the poems written after a 1969 visit to Japan and published in *A Choice of Dreams*. Hiroshima, ancestors' graves, and her mother's girlhood revealed in items saved in a trunk are all subjects that speak poignantly of the author's rich dual heritage and offer readers a window into it.

## OBASAN

**First published:** 1981

**Type of work:** Novel

*A little girl, torn from her parents by the Canadian government's dispersal of citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II, suffers privation and prejudice.*

Five-year-old Naomi Nakane's secure life in her Vancouver home is shattered by a series of events far beyond her control. First, a neighbor lures her into an episode of abuse, leaving her with a guilty heart. Then her mother leaves for Japan to help nurse an ailing grandmother. Her Aunt Emily comes to visit, and Naomi overhears frantic, whispered conversations, which she does not understand. The culmination comes when Naomi, her older brother Stephen, and their Aunt Aya (Obasan of the title) are sent to live in Slocan, a near-deserted mining town in the mountains of interior British Columbia. Naomi's father does not go with them; he is sent to a work camp.

Their assigned home is a sagging, two-room log cabin on the edge of the woods. It is crowded and primitive, even more crowded when an aged aunt and Obasan's husband, Isamu, arrive, but Obasan's and Uncle's efforts soon make it livable. The family group settles in to live there for an unknown duration.

Most of the adults in Slocan have suffered the forced loss of their property, homes, and occupations, but even so a community emerges. Naomi and Stephen do not have a school, except for Sunday School, until May, 1943. Stephen, however, has his music, and Obasan keeps Naomi busy making scrapbooks of the royal family. Naomi has a close brush with death when she jumps off a log raft into a murky lake. Rescued by Rough Lock Bill, a local resident, she ends up in the hospital but learns that not all white Canadians are like her scary Vancouver neighbor.



When the war is over, there is hope of returning to Vancouver. Unfortunately, it is not to be. Naomi's father comes for a short visit. He is greeted joyously, but obviously his health is precarious. When the family is removed once again, this time to work in the sugar beet fields of Alberta, he is hospitalized with tuberculosis. Naomi never sees him again. Nor is there ever any word from her absent mother.

Life and work in the beet fields are even more miserable than life in Slokan. The family's house is a battered one-room chicken coop full of cracks and insects. The work is dirty, exhausting, and dehumanizing. There is no time or energy for anything but working, eating, and sleeping. Later, Naomi explains "I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body cannot tell." Silence and memory loss is necessary here for self-preservation.

Still, school offers some escape for the children. Stephen throws his whole heart into his music, distancing himself from everything Japanese as best he can. Once out of high school, he goes east to a brilliant musical career that has no room for his family or heritage. Naomi becomes a quiet, emotionally repressed schoolteacher in a town a few hours' drive away from Granton, where Obasan and Uncle, now in their eighties, still live.

Framing this tale is Naomi's adult journey, wrapped around it as if sheltering a secret. The novel opens with Naomi and Uncle walking on a coulee, a vast expanse of grass that they visit once a year. Naomi thinks Uncle Isamu likes to go there because it reminds him of the sea, which he loved. One month after this visit, Naomi receives word that her uncle has died. She drives to Granton and tries to console her aunt, who seems shell-shocked. Obasan keeps saying to herself, "Too old" and "Everyday someone dies," coded mantras reminiscent of the cryptic sayings that she once used to turn away the child Naomi's uncomfortable questions.

However, there is a package of old documents among Obasan's many belongings, and as Naomi looks at them for the first time, memories begin to unfurl. It takes more than one hundred pages before the "main story" of the internment years begins. Meanwhile, Aunt Emily's letters and clippings reveal much about the rationale behind the internment policy and its devastating effect on families and individuals.

At the end of the internment narrative, it seems

the worst has been revealed, but there is more. From an old letter written by Grandma Kato, her maternal grandmother, Naomi learns about their fate. Her mother and grandmother had gone to Nagasaki to help care for a cousin's two orphaned children on that fateful day of August 9, 1945, when the atomic bomb blasted the city. Both were grievously injured, but they survived, at least for several years. Naomi's mother was so ashamed of her disfigurement that she begged Obasan, Uncle, and Aunt Emily not to tell "for the sake of the children." They kept their silence, even after Naomi's mother died in 1949.

With the worst secret revealed, Naomi is now free to begin the long process of reconciliation with her past. Now understanding Uncle's agitation the first time they went to the levee—it was just after receiving Grandma Kato's letter—she returns there in the predawn quiet. She lets her grief and emptiness play out and listens for "the song that is left," the beginning of healing.

## JERICHO ROAD

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Poetry

*As on the biblical Jericho Road, the setting of the Good Samaritan parable, the issues of justice and mercy are illuminated through vignettes and imagery in this collection of poetry.*

The collection's title poem is short but cutting, evoking the power of words to hurt the vulnerable, but also the ambiguous function of silence. The linking of a silent reply with a donkey image softens the sharpness while underlining the biblical connection.

The collection is evenly divided between two sections: "Poems for My Enemies" and "The Wedlocked." At the end, a stand-alone piece, "Poem for Wednesday," is a long cry of anticipated grief.

The identities of the "enemies" are never made quite clear. Is Kogawa referring to the nameless old man in the library, subject of the poem "Old Man in the Library," who is struggling to turn his newspaper pages? Is she referring to orange-haired old woman in the poem "Orange Hair," whose totter-

ing across the beach makes others' eyes seek refuge in a book?

Perhaps she is. Certainly, age is a felt enemy here, along with the demanding serpent of success ("The Success Ladder") and even insomnia, compared to a procession of bugs swarming over the body ("Or Poor Coordination"). "Office Toads" evokes the rarity of trust in the workplace. "Faucet Sounds" envisions marital discord in terms of dripping faucets and plumbing bills. "In the Almost Evening" flings out a lament about abandonment. The "tiny blue eraser baby boy" of "Erasure" brings an unbearable poignancy to remembrance of an abortion.

"The Wedlocked" poems plumb the hurts and careful avoidances of marriage in symbols ranging from "blue eels" to "tumbleweed." Not only the wedded but also the formerly wedded can find an uneasy resonance with their own experience. This section is one of personally centered poems, their focus very different from Kogawa's usual, larger themes.

"Poem for Wednesday" starts with flashes from a hospital: a report, white walls, a "steady metallic endless November of nurses." Cascading into memories, the vigil becomes a flood of images

bright and dark. In its allusions, this is probably one of the most Canadian of the author's poems, with its evocation of forests, the "leaping shadows of small animals," and an "ice-locked ark." Urban images also appear, and both return to the despair of the hospital vigil. A defiance of the deity—"if I refuse to cry now refuse to play in your wind-up world"—fades away in the inevitable approach of death. It is a heartbreaking meditation on the limits of mortality and love.

Kogawa's poetry is lyrical, dense with images, and yet accessible to most readers. This collection is less political than most of Kogawa's work, but it speaks of humanity's shared experiences.

## SUMMARY

Joy Kogawa's portrayal of the damage done to Japanese Canadian citizens by their forced removal and internment pricked the nation's conscience and led to her further concern with righting past injustices. Themes of justice, cultural identity, gender, and the meanings of silence infuse her work, making it a unique part of the contemporary Canadian canon.

Emily Alward

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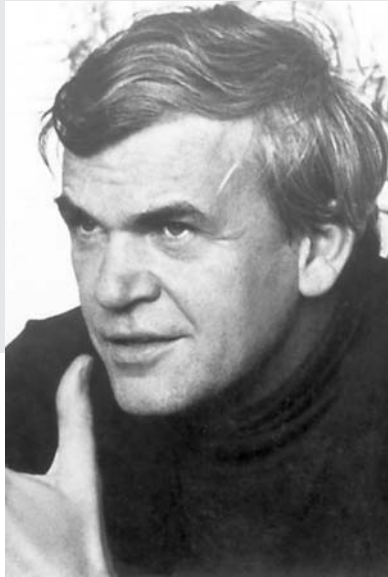
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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Would measures like the summary internment of Japanese-heritage citizens be likely to recur in the United States or Canada? Why or why not?
- Is Joy Kogawa accurate when she labels silence a Japanese virtue and "word warrioring" or truth-telling a Western trait?
- What are some other natural elements that Kogawa uses, as she uses stone, to convey emotion or states of being?
- In *Obasan*, close family ties are a source of strength and survival. In Kogawa's poems, marriage usually means pain for the partners. How do you explain the difference?
- When Rough Lock Bill tells the children the town's name, Slocan, came from Indians chanting "Slow can go," was he trying to tell them something else?





© Vera Kundera

## MILAN KUNDERA

**Born:** Brno, Czechoslovakia (now in Czech Republic)  
April 1, 1929

*Kundera is an internationally acclaimed Czech émigré writer whose novels have used experiments in form to examine fundamental existential questions through explorations of the role of sex and politics in the lives of his characters.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Milan Kundera (koon-DEHR-uh) was born on April 1, 1929, in Brno, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), to Ludvík and Milada Janosikova Kundera. He grew up in the provincial capital of Brno and then went to Prague to attend Charles University and the Film Faculty of the Prague Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. In 1947, he joined the Communist Party. Like the majority of his compatriots, he initially celebrated the Communists' rise to power after World War II as a victory of the future over the past; like them, he soon regretted this decision and found himself at odds with the party. In 1950, he was expelled for "ideological differences" and left Prague to work as a laborer and jazz pianist in the provinces. In 1956, he was reinstated in the party, and two years later he became an assistant professor at the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies of the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts.

In 1963, he became a member of the central committee of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union. Between 1963 and 1968, Kundera's poetry, plays, and fiction made him one of the most important literary figures in Prague. His collections of short stories, entitled *Směšné lásky* (1963, 1970; partial translation as *Laughable Loves*, 1974), were immensely popular and were awarded the Czechoslo-

vak Writers' Publishing House Prize. His first novel *Žert* (1967; *The Joke*, 1969, revised, 1982), which was finally published unchanged after a two-year battle with the censors, quickly went through three editions and received the Union of Czechoslovak Writers' Prize. With other prominent writers, such as Ludvík Vaculík and Ivan Klima, Kundera used his stature in the Writers' Union to press for "socialism with a human face" and thereby helped to usher in the Prague Spring of 1968.

When Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia and crushed this reform movement, Kundera and these other writers were immediately classified as enemies of the state. His books were removed from libraries and bookstores, his plays were banned, he was fired from his teaching position and denied the right to publish in his own country. Consequently, although he would write his next five novels in Czech, beginning in 1970 the first editions of his books were all foreign translations. Between 1970 and 1975, he was both forbidden to work in Czechoslovakia and prevented from traveling abroad. At one point, to support himself he wrote several thousand horoscopes for Prague clients and published a monthly astrology column under a pseudonym.

At the same moment that Kundera was denied publication in his own country, an international readership began to discover him. *The Joke* was quickly translated into a dozen languages. His second novel, *La Vie est ailleurs* (1973; *Life Is Elsewhere*, 1974; in Czech as *Život je jinde*, 1979), was awarded the French Prix Médicis; his third novel, *La Valse aux adieux* (1976; *The Farewell Party*, 1976, revised as *Farewell Waltz*, 1998; in Czech as *Valčík no roz-*

loučenou, 1979), received the Italian Premio Mondello. Philip Roth enthusiastically introduced his works to American readers by publishing both *The Farewell Party* and *Laughable Loves* in his Writers from the Other Europe series.

In 1975, the Czech authorities finally permitted Kundera and his wife to leave the country so he could accept a visiting professorship in comparative literature at the University of Rennes. He arrived in France, at age forty-five, with two suitcases, a few books, and some phonograph records. *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli* (1979; *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1980; in Czech as *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 1981) both established Kundera's place in contemporary world literature and led to the revocation of his Czech citizenship. In 1980, he moved to Paris to become a professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and in 1981 President François Mitterrand made him a French citizen. He wrote two more novels in Czech, *L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être* (1984; *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984; in Czech as *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 1985) and *Nesmrtelnost* (1990; *Immortality*, 1991). After experimenting with writing in French in his play *Jacques et son maître: Hommage à Denis Diderot* (1981; *Jacques and His Master*, 1985), a series of widely read and frequently quoted essays on the history and fate of central Europe, and a collection of his essays and interviews entitled *L'Art du roman* (1986; *The Art of the Novel*, 1988, revised 2000), he has written all of his subsequent works in French and identified himself as a "Franco-Czech novelist." These later works include the essay collections *Les Testaments trahis* (1993; *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, 1995) and *Le Rideau: Essais en sept parties* (2006; *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, 2007) and the novels *La Lenteur* (1995; *Slowness*, 1996), *L'Identité* (1997; *Identity*, 1998), and *La Ignorancia* (2000; *Ignorance*, 2002). Some of his other honors include the Commonwealth Award (1981), the Prix Europa (1982), the Jerusalem Prize for Literature on the Freedom of Man in Society (1985), and the Jaroslav Seifert Prize; he is also regularly mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

## ANALYSIS

"I tried a lot of things" before turning to fiction, Kundera has said. "[C]inema, painting, music, poetry, criticism, theory, aesthetics. But none of it was

serious; I think of all that now as a kind of prehistory." Intellectually and artistically, he has repeatedly emphasized, "I am attached to nothing apart from the European novel, that unrecognized inheritance that comes to us from Cervantes." As Kundera sees it, that inheritance is a record of both an extraordinary sequence of discoveries and a series of roads not taken. With English novelist Samuel Richardson, he argues, the novel discovered psychological realism, and, ever since, most novels have followed the nearly inviolable standards of that tradition. In the second half of the twentieth century, Kundera notes, it has often been argued that the novel is dead. He disagrees, insisting instead that, since Richardson, the novel has ignored many of its possibilities. One of the most important of those unexplored possibilities, he argues, is the one suggested by Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767) and Denis Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (1796; *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, 1797): the idea of the novel as a game rather than a representation of reality.

After Sterne and Diderot, Kundera owes his aesthetic of the novel to the examples of central European novelists and artists of the past century—especially to Hermann Broch and to the Czech composer Leoš Janáček. He shares Broch's view that every serious novel must discover something that the novel—and no other form—can discover. He has also experimented with several of the formal ideas contained in his favorite Broch novel, *Die Schlafwandler* (1931-1932; *The Sleepwalkers*, 1932): The novel's traditional unity of action can be replaced by a unity of theme; the musical technique known as polyphony—the simultaneous presentation of two or more voices or melodic lines that are both bound together and independent—can be adapted to enrich the form of the novel; such novelistic polyphony can allow the author to combine radically different nonnovelistic genres within the text. From Janáček, his favorite composer, Kundera learned to upset technical conventions through ellipsis: to replace traditional transitions with harsh, abrupt juxtapositions, to replace repetition with variations, to eliminate the superfluous.

For Kundera, then, "a novel is a long piece of synthetic prose based on play with invented characters. These are the only limits." By "synthetic," he told Philip Roth, he means the novelist's desire to

grasp his subject from all sides and in the fullest possible completeness. Ironic essay, novelistic narrative, autobiographical fragment, historic fact, flight of fantasy: The synthetic power of the novel is capable of combining everything into a unified whole like the voices of polyphonic music. The unity of the book need not stem from the plot, but can be provided by the theme.

A novel, he believes, should search for and pose questions. The questions that his own works pose are existential: Who am I? What is a self? To what extent do I define my self, and to what extent is it defined by others? Do my choices define me, or does chance? What does life, living, being a human being, really mean? The fact that Kundera can explore such weighty questions in novels that are also witty and entertaining is an essential aspect of his art and his appeal.

In each of his novels, from *The Joke* to *Ignorance*, his exploration of these existential questions is structured around a series of key words (or themes) that appear and reappear from book to book. In his novel *Immortality*, he wrote that he would have called the book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* if he had not already used the title. All of his novels, he told an interviewer, might have been called *The Joke* or *Laughable Loves*. Moreover, each is a book of laughter and forgetting.

## THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING

**First published:** *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*, 1979 (English translation, 1980; in Czech as *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 1981)

**Type of work:** Novel

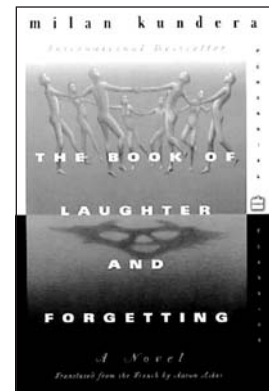
*A novel in the form of variations on the themes of laughter and forgetting, this work examines both the lives of a series of characters in Prague and Paris and the implications of history and memory, for individuals and nations.*

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, like all of Kundera's Czech novels except *The Farewell Party*, is divided into seven parts. Several of the parts have the same titles—two are entitled “Lost Letters,” two are entitled “Angels”—to underline the idea that

the novel is a series of variations on a set of themes. Two parts focus on a young woman named Tamina, but each of the other five focuses on unrelated characters who appear only in that part. Each of the seven parts combines several genres, such as traditional novelistic narrative, autobiography, philosophical essay, dream, political commentary, linguistic analysis, realistic description, and fantasy. The parts are not linked by a single plot, but by their direct or indirect relationship to Kundera's exploration of the meanings that he attaches to words such as “laughter,” “forgetting,” “angels,” the “circle,” “lost,” and “border”; by his reflections on Czech history; and by his voice and presence as the authorial “I.”

They are also connected—to one another, and to all of Kundera's other fiction—by their exploration of the interrelationship of public and private life. In Kundera's work, the threat that the border between public and private life will disappear—the fear that it already has—is the nightmare that lies behind all the verbal and sexual high jinks. Most often, this threat is expressed as an invasion of private life by public life, seen as a distortion of the sexual by the political. In Kundera, sexual relations are an arena where the politically powerless exercise power, where the oppressed oppress, where public tragedy begets private comedy. Yet they are also the sphere where character reveals itself most fully. One of the paradoxes at the heart of his novels is that, in their most intimate moments, his characters are both most themselves and most the product of the external forces acting upon them.

The first part of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* perfectly demonstrates Kundera's novelistic method. Each of its sections presents private and public variations on the theme of forgetting. The love story of Mirek and Zdena is intimately connected to both their individual political histories and the history of their country. Mirek's desire to forget his former love, Zdena, to “airbrush” her out of the picture of his past and his life, is a private



reflection of the public effort of the Czech people to erase the past deed that *they* would like to forget—their support of the Communists in 1947 and 1948. The Communist Party is also engaged in an effort to forget when it seeks to eliminate its own past mistakes by airbrushing Clementis from the photograph described on the novel's first page. The bare space on the wall where Clementis once stood in the photograph is tied to the bare space in his history where Mirek's memories of Zdena should be. Zdena's passionate love of Mirek is presented as both a product of, and the impulse behind, the passionate single-mindedness that also made her a loyal party member; Mirek's decision to become a political dissident is connected to his desire to forget the embarrassment of his youthful relationship with Zdena. The hat on Gottwald's head is an emblem of all the personal and public pasts that cannot be erased.

Similar variations on the theme of forgetting continue throughout the novel, joined by new themes that are introduced with their own variations in each of the succeeding parts. The novel, Kundera writes, is "about Tamina. . . . She is its main character and main audience, and all the other stories are variations on her story and come together in her life as in a mirror." In other words, the parts devoted to Tamina—the fourth and sixth parts, which are the parts that repeat the titles of the earlier parts "Lost Letters" and "Angels"—are the heart of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. There, the novel's themes echo and reverberate in a story that combines sex, love, exile, memory, forgetting, laughter, the circle, angels, politics, and borders in both startling and extremely subtle ways. There, they come together in a story that also introduces the thematic notes upon which Kundera's next novel would be composed. To Tamina, the unbearable lightness of being represented by the island of memory-less children is the ultimate nightmare: a world in which meaning disappears and nothing matters. Like Tereza (even their names echo each other), Tamina clings to meaning, to memory, to mortality—and to the existential burden of spiritual heaviness that comes with them—because, for her, that is what it means to be human. The alternative, Kundera seems to suggest in the novel's final section and coda, is a freedom without meaning and a life without purpose.

## THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

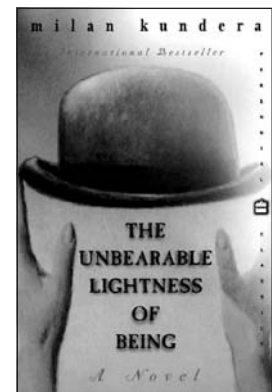
**First published:** *L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être*, 1984 (English translation, 1984; in Czech as *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 1985)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel explores the nature of responsibility and identity through the story of two romantic triangles set before, during, and after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.*

In many ways, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a more traditional novel than *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. It, too, mixes genres and is tied together by variations on a series of themes: lightness and heaviness, body and soul, vertigo and eternal return, the Grand March. It also tells several clearly related stories about four fully developed characters: the waitress/photographer Tereza, the doctor Tomas, the painter Sabina, and the professor Franz. This novel does not follow the conventions of the realistic novel: The fact of the main characters' deaths is revealed long before it occurs, thereby undermining the plot's suspense; a major character is introduced toward the end of the novel and then disappears; and a section is told from the point of view of Tereza and Tomas's dog. It does, however, create and resolve a central conflict among these characters, and it does occur within a recognizable social and historical context.

The main characters are carefully paired, both romantically and thematically. Tereza and Tomas, Tomas and Sabina, and Sabina and Franz are each involved in love affairs. Tereza and Franz are both associated with the theme of weight and heaviness; Tomas and Sabina, with the theme of lightness. Weight and heaviness are associated with the soul, commitment, seriousness, responsibility; lightness, with the body, betrayal, infidelity, and selfishness. Through Tereza's influence, in the course of the novel Tomas makes





the moral journey from lightness to heaviness. Sabina and Franz remain largely unchanged.

Tereza first comes to Prague from the country because of her love for Tomas, a man whose personal life is dominated by his numerous sexual conquests. When they and Sabina join the flood of émigrés after the Russian invasion and arrive in Switzerland, Sabina finds Tereza's counterpart in Franz. When Tereza feels adrift in Zurich and returns to Czechoslovakia, Tomas follows her, although he has lost his position at the hospital and is forced to become a window washer. Although his commitment to her is real, he continues to spend every free moment in dalliances with other women until his love for Tereza finally leads him to agree to leave the city and its temptations for a collective farm. There, they eventually die together in a truck accident. Sabina rejects Franz's desire for commitment and becomes a fashionable artist who travels throughout Europe and America. Franz joins a group of European leftists who travel to Cambodia, drawn by the idea of the Grand March of international revolution, which he sees as somehow related to his love for Sabina; there, he is fatally injured.

As Kundera tells the story, the personal and sexual lives of these four characters are intimately bound up with the social and political realities of Czechoslovakia before and after the Russian invasion. He presents vivid glimpses of the Prague Spring, of the Russian invasion, of post-1968 life in Prague, of the immigration of Czechs to the West, and of Western political attitudes toward émigrés and toward the idea of revolutionary change. Moreover, in spite of his many comments about the unreality of fictional characters, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* he creates four believable and interesting characters whose fates matter to the reader. As a consequence, perhaps, this work has been the most widely read and highly praised of his novels.

## IGNORANCE

**First published:** *La Ignorancia*, 2000  
(English translation, 2002)

**Type of work:** Novel

*After twenty years living in the West, two Czech émigrés return to Prague to find that the home they have remembered with nostalgia is gone.*

In *Ignorance*, Kundera treats themes that could not be more personal and, at the same time, more universal. After the Eastern bloc fell in 1989, he chose not to return to Czechoslovakia. Because Kundera is one of the most visible and admired artists his country has produced in the twentieth century, his choice was controversial in Prague and led to his being publicly, repeatedly, and harshly criticized by many of his former friends. Furthermore—or, perhaps, consequently—in the fiction he wrote in the 1990's, Kundera seemed to be consciously focused on escaping the dissident and émigré identity that had previously defined him in the eyes of many of his readers.

All of his novels since *The Joke* have been informed by a cosmopolitan and philosophical sensibility; he has said that “in our times we must consider a book that is unable to become a part of the world's literature to be nonexistent.” However, a striking shift occurs with *Immortality*, his first novel to appear after 1989. Most of the contemporary characters and the setting in *Immortality* are French. His subsequent novels, *Slowness* and *Identity*, are written in French, located in France, populated by French characters, and nearly totally devoid of the political themes that had been an essential element of his previous fiction. *Ignorance*, therefore, comes at the end of a decade in which the conflict an émigré feels between the claims of past and present, native and adopted language, first and later home, former and current culture, old and new friends—all of which had appeared in earlier works, especially *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—had become an even more insistent concern for Kundera.

To investigate these conflicting claims in *Ignorance*, he once again turns to Czech characters, sending them back to Prague in his stead. This



time, “nostalgia” joins “memory” and “forgetting” as the key words his novel explores. Irena, a widow who has lived in France for twenty years, and Josef, a widower who has lived in Denmark for the same period, are drawn back to Prague by nostalgia, which Kundera associates with Odysseus and defines as “the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.” The question the novel poses is whether there can ever really be such a return, and its answer is no. Although Irena and Josef can fly from Paris to Prague, can walk streets, see friends, and recall encounters and earlier selves that they have thought longingly of in their exile, because nothing and no one—including them—remains as they remembered, the “yearning to return” can never be appeased.

When Irena brings her friends together for a dinner where she serves them good French wine, they prefer to drink Czech beer and are totally uninterested in learning what has happened to her since she left. They had “amputated twenty years from her life,” she thinks. Josef looks at sights he has cherished in his memory and finds that “during his absence an invisible broom had swept over the landscape of his childhood, wiping away everything familiar.” Ultimately, Irena and Josef’s memories of an earlier encounter of their own turn out to be just as disappointing and irreconcilable. The

choice they are left with is the exile’s dilemma: to return to the land of their birth and leave behind self, life, and experience of their time spent abroad, or to return to their adopted land, where all the years and places that first shaped them no longer matter to anyone but them.

## SUMMARY

Milan Kundera has often objected to political readings of his fiction, emphasizing that his novels are about the existential dilemmas of his characters and complaining that Western readers have too often been drawn to the work of writers from “the other Europe” for the wrong reasons. He has often written of his ideas about the novel, the fate of central Europe, and the role of central Europe in the culture of the West. His interviews, essays, and comments are required reading for anyone who is interested in any of these matters. Finally, however, Kundera will be remembered for the power and accomplishment of his novels themselves. Together with those of his contemporaries from central, Eastern, and Western Europe and North, Central, and South America, his works amply demonstrate that the contemporary novel is anything but exhausted or dead.

Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr.

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## Milan Kundera

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Milan Kundera has written that, "Ideology wants to convince us that truth is absolute. A novel shows you that everything is relative." How does his fiction reflect this belief?
- The form of Kundera's novels is not only unusual but also distinctive. What is that form and what does it add to or detract from the experience of reading his work?
- How do Kundera's works treat sexuality and relations between men and women?
- Kundera is often described as a comic writer. What kinds of comedy does his work contain?
- How important are politics to Kundera's artistic vision and/or a reader's response to his writing?
- Kundera has described "the spirit of Prague" as involving "An extraordinary sense of the real. The common man's point of view. History from below. A provocative simplicity. A genius for the absurd. Humor with infinite pessimism." How does his work display, or not display, this spirit?
- Kundera often places a version of himself in his fiction, as a first-person narrator or as a character. What effects does he achieve by doing this?
- What elements of fiction—plot, character, setting, language, narrative voice, and theme—seem to be most important in Kundera's work?
- Kundera has said that, "The novel's spirit is the spirit of continuity; each work is an answer to previous ones." With which previous work(s) does one of his novels seem to be in conversation?



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## JEAN DE LA FONTAINE

**Born:** Château-Thierry, Champagne, France

July 8, 1621

**Died:** Paris, France

April 13, 1695

*La Fontaine is famous for his Fables, in which he used the plots and characters of his sources to produce poems characterized by great formal sophistication, a deceptive simplicity, and transparency of language and content that hide profound social and philosophical commentary.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean de La Fontaine (lah fohn-TEHN) was born on July 8, 1621, in the town of Château-Thierry northeast of Paris, the son of the supervisor of local domains belonging to the king of France. This solid, middle-class background allowed him to become well educated and aspire to a life of some leisure. It is also said that the long hours spent in the forests that were under his father's supervision made La Fontaine especially familiar with and fond of animals, but this may well be part of the myth that later developed around him of someone who preferred nature and quiet contemplation to human society.

His family sent him to a Paris seminary to study theology at the age of twenty, in the hope he might become a priest, but he left after one year. From 1645 to 1647, he studied law in Paris, although academic work was a much lower priority than his growing enthusiasm for literature and his friendships in literary, artistic, and aristocratic circles. Some of these friends were members of the entourage of King Louis XIV's superintendent of finances, Nicolas Fouquet, who would later become the first important patron in La Fontaine's career.

In 1647, La Fontaine married the daughter of a respectable family, Marie Héricart, who was fourteen at the time. Like many upper-class weddings

in this historical period, its purpose was to consolidate two family fortunes, not to unite two people in love. The spouses remained on good terms but were fairly distant throughout their marriage, even to the point of becoming separated. They did, however, have a child, Charles, born in 1653.

In 1658, La Fontaine's father died, leaving behind debts that his son inherited, along with his government office. From this time onward, financial problems were to be a constant worry. Fortunately, the rich and powerful Fouquet took him under his protection. La Fontaine wrote songs and poems for his patron, including a long poem in honor of Fouquet's famous château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, *Élégie aux nymphes de Vaux* (elegy for the nymphs of Vaux), published in 1661.

This happy time did not last long, however. The king's closest adviser, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, was jealous of Fouquet's wealth and power and asked Louis to have him arrested. The king, who had been traumatized as a child by the Wars of the Fronde (1648-1652), a short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful revolt led by magistrates and aristocrats, was always looking for ways to cut down rivals for his absolute power, and he happily complied.

La Fontaine spent the rest of his life seeking other patrons who would provide him with the necessary means to continue his literary career. Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as the playwrights Jean Racine and Molière, he was never able to obtain the good graces of the king, who perhaps never forgave his connection to Fouquet and was

probably aware that many of La Fontaine's fables satirized aspects of his reign. La Fontaine had the difficult task of finding protectors who were willing to risk the displeasure of Louis XIV by their association with him. In 1664, this role was filled by the duchess of Orléans, who supported La Fontaine until her death in 1672, despite financial difficulties of her own. This was a crucial period in his career, during which he published his very successful tales, *Contes et nouvelles en vers* (1665, *Tales and Short Stories in Verse*, 1735), followed by *Deuxième Partie des "Contes et nouvelles en vers"* (1666; *Part Two of "Tales and Short Stories in Verse,"* 1735), and the first six books of his *Fables choisies, mises en vers* (1668-1694; *Fables Written in Verse*, 1735; commonly known as *Fables*).

Another patron, Madame de la Sablière, supported La Fontaine from 1673 until her death in 1694, and La Fontaine became the guest of the financier Barthélemy Hervart during the last year or so of his life. His most important literary productions during this period were the last six books of the *Fables*, published in 1678, 1679, and 1694. In 1683, he was elected to the French Academy, a body founded in 1635 for the purpose of gathering forty of the most prestigious living writers, whose responsibility was to supervise and regulate the French language and compile a dictionary. Since the number of academicians remains constant, one can be elected only after a current member has died. It is ironic that the academician whose seat La Fontaine finally inherited had belonged to none other than his old nemesis, Colbert.

As his health declined during the last years of his life, La Fontaine experienced a rebirth of his Catholic faith. Told by his confessor that his *Tales and Short Stories in Verse* would be considered blasphemous, he repudiated them. When he died on April 13, 1695, he was wearing a *silice*, a kind of shirt made of coarse haircloth worn as a form of penance.

## ANALYSIS

In order to understand the significance of La Fontaine's work, one must start with his audience. In seventeenth century France, the literary world was dominated by salons, groups of artists and intellectuals who would meet at the homes of wealthy aristocrats. This intersection of the wealthy, social upper crust with some of the most talented figures

of the period created a culture that prized not only beauty and intelligence but also the qualities of good conversation, such as creativity, originality, style, wit, and repartee. La Fontaine's work is strongly influenced by that culture, and his poems were in turn very well received by the aristocratic intellectuals who exercised great power over the process of publication.

There has been over the years a tendency to view La Fontaine's work as divided between sophisticated, even licentious works, such as the *Tales and Short Stories in Verse*, intended for adults, and the simpler, more naïve *Fables*, intended for children and adolescents. Nothing could be more mistaken. This misapprehension was reinforced by the fact that the models for his fables, the works of Aesop, Phaedrus, and others, often were indeed written for the education of young children, a tradition La Fontaine seems to reinforce by dedicating his first book of fables to the young dauphin, who was the heir to the throne. In addition, the relatively simple Greek and Latin texts by Aesop and others were commonly used during La Fontaine's time as a means of teaching these classical languages to young people.

Finally, it must be pointed out that La Fontaine's poetic fables have been used in French primary education from the eighteenth century to the present as a way of teaching basic moral principles, as well as instilling a love of poetry through the exercise of recitation. To this day, though not as much as in the past, French schoolchildren are often required to learn several of his most famous poems by heart. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau and many others have pointed out, however, the "morality" of many of La Fontaine's fables is much closer to the cynical, dark, and fatalistic worldview associated with the *Réflexions: Ou, Sentences et maximes morales* (1665-1678; *The Maxims*, 1706) of one of La Fontaine's contemporary influences, François de La Rochefoucauld, than it is to any kind of pious or otherwise benign philosophy.

Furthermore, La Fontaine's use of conventional pastoral settings, rural colloquialisms, and a pseudoconversational style overshadows the fact that the poems are extremely complex metrically, linguistically, and in terms of content. La Fontaine is considered the greatest pure poet of his century, and his literary reputation is at least equal to those contemporaries who contributed to the more ele-

vated, “respectable” genres of tragedy, such as Jean Racine, didactic verse, such as Nicolas Boileau, oratory, such as Jacques Bossuet, and other writers.

## FABLES

**First published:** *Fables choisies, mises en vers*, 1668-1694, 12 volumes (English translation, *Fables Written in Verse*, 1735)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*These more than two hundred verse fables, many based on earlier sources ranging from Aesop to stories written in sixth century India, are characterized by a highly original and complex form and a playfully ambiguous, often satirical, content.*

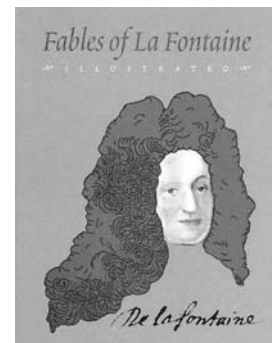
La Fontaine’s *Fables* include some of the most famous poems—perhaps the most famous poems—in the French language. Two such poems are the opening pieces in book 1, “La Cigale et la fourmi” (“The Cicada and the Ant,” often translated as “The Grasshopper and the Ant”) and “Le Corbeau et le renard” (“The Crow and the Fox”). The fame of these poems is due primarily to the fact that they have been learned by heart and recited in class by millions of schoolchildren in France and the French-speaking world. They have been fundamental to the teaching of French to children and to developing an appreciation of literature because of their formal beauty, and they also instill in children the practical morality that they illustrate.

In “The Cicada and the Ant,” for example, the cicada comes to the ant begging for food because she spent all summer long singing instead of preparing for winter. This fable clearly teaches children the importance of planning for the long term, an essential life skill. If it were as simple as that, however, La Fontaine would be regarded as a fine didactic poet, and nothing more. Even in this very first poem, however, something emerges that undermines, and even contradicts, the healthy “moral” implied by the cicada’s unhappy fate. Quite simply, what are readers to make of the ant? Instead of agreeing to share her food with her “friend,” the cicada, she dismisses her without a thought: “So you were singing, were you? Isn’t that nice! Well then, now you can dance.”

Is this the sort of altruistic behavior one wants to encourage in children? Certainly not according to Christian morality, which promotes charity, forgiveness toward others for their sins, and empathy for their misfortunes. Furthermore, the ant is not only un-Christian in her attitude, she expresses her feelings in a cutting, witty manner. Readers therefore have examples of two recurring themes of La Fontaine’s poetry: Success in life goes to those who look after themselves and know how to bend others to their will; and those who are able to manipulate language in an effective, witty manner, regardless of the negative consequences, are to be admired. Finally, it is clear that La Fontaine would have identified with the cicada: His entire career was spent asking rich people to support his artistic endeavors.

The second poem contains a similar “antimorality” hidden under the surface. A hungry fox sees a crow holding a piece of cheese in his beak. He flatters the bird by first saying how beautiful his feathers are, although everyone knows that crows’ feathers are not impressive. The fox then says that if he could sing like the crow, he would most certainly be “the phoenix of the denizens of this forest.” Even though crows cannot sing, the proud bird opens his mouth to sing, the cheese falls to the ground, and the fox makes off with it. Does this poem teach that “Every flatterer lives at the expense of the one he flatters,” which is the explicit “moral” given in the poem, and that one should therefore never have an inflated opinion of oneself? Or does it teach that the way to get by in life is to exploit other people’s weakness of character? These are simply the most obvious examples of a fundamental ambiguity that underlies the majority of La Fontaine’s poetic fables.

Both opening fables are also excellent examples of the subtlety and complexity of his style. Directly contravening many of the established poetic rules of his era, La Fontaine experimented with short verses, such as some poems of less than twelve syllables, which is the length of the standard, classical





French Alexandrine verse. He also combines verses of various lengths within a single poem, makes frequent use of enjambment, mixes high and low levels of discourse, and combines mythological and realistic subject matter, just to name a few of his pioneering techniques, some of which directly influenced not only his peers and disciples but also avant-garde poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Among the other famous fables in book 1 is “Le Loup et le chien” (“The Wolf and the Dog”), in which the wolf envies the dog’s comfortable lifestyle until he learns that he lives constantly in chains; “Le Loup et l’agneau” (“The Wolf and the Lamb”), in which the lamb reasons with the wolf and explains why he should be spared, but is eaten anyway; and “Le Chêne et le roseau” (“The Reed and the Oak Tree”), in which the oak boasts of his size and strength to the reed, only to be knocked down by a powerful storm, while the reed, by bending to the will of the wind, survives. In each case, the simplistic plot and moral of the original fable is transformed into a rich narrative tale, with hidden allusions to contemporary society, and conveyed in a seemingly casual, conversational style that upon closer inspection shows itself to be exquisitely composed and artificial.

The fables in books 2 through 6 tend to be less well known, though they do include poems that many native French speakers would recognize, such as “Le Lion et le rat” (“The Lion and the Rat”) and its famous moral that “one always needs someone littler than oneself” (book 2); “Le Renard et les raisins” (“The Fox and the Grapes”) the famous “sour grapes” fable (book 3); or “Le Lièvre et la tortue” (“The Tortoise and the Hare”) (book 6). Books 7 through 12 were all published later in La Fontaine’s career and tend to be based on a wider variety of sources, including Asian ones, such as the fables of the sixth century Indian storyteller Pilpay, whose texts were translated into French in the mid-seventeenth century. The later fables also have a darker, deeper, and more satirical character than the others.

Book 7 opens with one of the most famous poems that is not learned in primary school, partly because of its length and partly because of its content, “Les Animaux malades de la peste” (“The Animals Sick with the Plague”). In an apocalyptic world, where animals everywhere are falling sick and dying of the plague, the Lion holds a meeting of the animals in which he decides that they need to sacrifice one of themselves in order to placate God’s wrath. However, he adds that they should choose the one among them who is most guilty of sin as their victim. He sets the example by confessing to have swallowed many innocent sheep, and even a shepherd. The others tell him that is no sin and his victims should have felt honored to be devoured by such an important animal. Other animals confess, with similar reactions. Finally, the donkey admits that he once ate some grass that did not belong to him. Everyone immediately agrees that he is the worst among them, and they tear the donkey limb from limb.

#### SUMMARY

Jean de La Fontaine wrote in a wide variety of genres and styles, but he is known today primarily as the author of the *Fables*, his greatest work. Written for an educated and wealthy audience, the fables are full of stylistic subtlety and of satirical, as well as philosophical, content. Because fables traditionally are intended for educating children, and because La Fontaine’s poems have been recited by heart by generations of schoolchildren, the ambiguity and complexity of his work are often ignored. While scholars have always considered him one of France’s greatest poets, people who know him less well still think of him as a clever, witty, but superficial and frivolous writer. It is only necessary to read the texts themselves—there are many good English translations, including one by the great American poet Marianne Moore—to understand that there is far more depth in his beautifully constructed verse than many people are aware.

M. Martin Guiney

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(*Part Two of "Tales and Short Stories in Verse,"* 1735)

*Fables choisies, mises en vers*, 1668-1694 (*Fables Written in Verse*, 1735)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Compare one of Jean de La Fontaine's poems with a different version of the same fable, such as an English translation of Aesop. What differences are there in the story? What differences are there in the moral of the fables, whether it be implicitly or explicitly expressed? How do you account for these differences?
- Many of La Fontaine's fables satirize French society under the reign of the absolute monarch Louis XIV. By doing research on courtly life at the palace of Versailles, or on the political and social life of France at the time, find examples of the behavior and attitudes that La Fontaine is satirizing.
- How does La Fontaine mimic the conversational style in his poems? What aspects of this conversational style are you not likely to find in an actual conversation, and why?
- Eighteenth century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of many people who noted that there is an amoral, and even immoral, aspect to many of La Fontaine's fables. Find evidence of this paradoxical aspect in his fables. Why do you think La Fontaine emphasized the amoral potential inherent in these stories?



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## PÄR LAGERKVIST

**Born:** Växjö, Småland, Sweden

May 23, 1891

**Died:** Lidingö, Uppland, Sweden

July 11, 1974

*Placing his literary artistry within the modernist context, Lagerkvist set the example for the modernization of Swedish literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Pär Fabian Lagerkvist (LAH-gur-kvihst) was born on May 23, 1891, in Växjö, a small town in a province of Sweden that appears to have been named Småland (slight land) because of its unpromising soil and relatively low agricultural productivity. The stony soil of Småland had been improved through the labor of its inhabitants by the time of Lagerkvist's youth, but steady emigration from the area is indicative of its pronounced bleakness. This atmosphere was to provide a tone for Lagerkvist's prose, poetry, and drama. There was bleakness, too, in the formidable, humorless Protestantism that constituted Lagerkvist's religious environment.

Pär was the youngest of seven children. Anders Lagerkvist, his father, was a railroad station employee, and he lived with his family above the railway station's restaurant in Växjö. The bleakness and transience of human existence and vain expectations of divine favor later became Lagerkvist's literary themes. Life with a sternly religious family in a little railway station in a poor landscape may have contributed to Lagerkvist's choosing these themes.

His first publication, at the age of fourteen, was a letter to a newspaper: He protested the differentiation, by social class, of schoolchildren. Indignation of this kind colored much of his early poetry and

essays. Evidence of his early dedication to a literary career includes poems and essays in observation of life's unprivileged people and the dignity with which they cope with life. It also includes his contributions to journals and periodicals with which his ideals of social democracy coincided. His poem "Min Gud" (1912, my God) identifies his God as his authentic self; such a bold, existentialist statement is indicative of Lagerkvist's determination to have the independence of mind he needed to be a writer. *Människor* (1912, people), his first novella, shows his disdain for the academic world. The novella appeared after his single term at the university in Uppsala in 1911.

His artistic school and the end of his isolation were the artistic worlds of Paris, where he devoted his creative powers to the furtherance of cubism, and Copenhagen, where he immersed himself in theater. His first marriage, to the Danish Karen Sörensen, lasted from 1918 to 1925, during which time Lagerkvist fully established himself as a poet, critic, short-story writer, and dramatist. His second marriage, to Elaine Hallberg, a Swede, took place shortly after his divorce from Karen. The new marriage was happy and lasted until Elaine's death in 1967.

With a stable marriage and with, beginning in 1930, a permanent residence in Lidingö, a suburb of Stockholm, Lagerkvist developed in stature as one of Sweden's great twentieth century writers. His travels to Palestine and Greece in 1933 and 1934 engendered a group of essays published under the title *Den knutna näven* (1934, *The Clenched Fist*, 1982), in which he confirmed the humanist

ideals of his youth by comparing the liberating spirit of Greek humanism with the inhibitive spirit of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

More than three decades after writing *Människor*, which Swedish readers and Lagerkvist himself had left to obscurity, Lagerkvist published his first novel, a genre by which he would gain international recognition and acclaim. *Dvärgen* (1944; *The Dwarf*, 1945) is a novel about evil, love, religion, and humanism. This was followed in 1950 by *Barabbas* (English translation, 1951), his most famous work. The enigmatic humanism expressed in these two very successful novels, more than a dozen plays, nine books of poetry, and numerous essays and short stories, brought him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1951. To *Barabbas*, in which the crucifixion of Christ is the point of departure, Lagerkvist added, as the work of his maturity, four novels as sequels and one as a prelude. He remained reclusive during his years of celebrity, refused to grant interviews about his work or to exploit his fame, and confined his statements largely to the content of his literary publications. Literary fashion turned away from him, and critical approval of his later novels waned, but he maintained his artistic principles until his death on July 11, 1974. In 1991, the centenary of his birth was celebrated in Sweden.

## ANALYSIS

The one artistic movement to which Pär Lagerkvist publicly lent his support was cubism. This support took the form of his praise, in his criticism, of cubist art and his relation of cubism to literature. His approval is detailed initially in two works that he published in 1913. The first is his monograph, *Ordkonst och bildkonst: Om modern skönlitteraturs dekadens, om den moderna konstens vitalitet* (*Literary Art and Pictorial Art: On the Decadence of Modern Literature, on the Vitality of Modern Art*, 1982). The second is his review of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Peintres cubistes* (1913; *The Cubist Painters*, 1944). Two movements to which he never gave his blessing or commitment—expressionism and existentialism—are nonetheless reflected in his work and are entirely consistent with his artistic aims. Expressionism was in vogue when Lagerkvist entered the literary scene. Like cubism, it emphasizes individuation and a reorientation of artistic perspective. This emphasis is consistent with the existentialist emphasis

on authentic individualism and personal responsibility. A chronological reading of Lagerkvist's works discloses his passage from expressionism to cubism and existentialism.

The socialist fervor of his earliest poems and sketches finds a receptacle in the rebelliousness of expressionism. His first novel is expressionistic in its abruptness of transitions and its interjectional style. His first play, *Sista människan* (1917; *The Last Man*, 1989) is as expressionistically somber as *Människor* and shares its concern with the inner evil of human beings, but it is more conventional in plot and dialogue than the German expressionist drama of the time. *Den svåra stunden* (1918; *The Difficult Hour I-III*, 1966) is closer to German expressionist drama. The three one-act plays that constitute *The Difficult Hour I-III* produce a multiple perspective on the human experience of the moment of death, and the setting of each act is cubist in its disregard of spatial logic.

Structurally, cubism informs much of Lagerkvist's drama, poetry, and fiction of the five decades of his mature work. He provided literature with an equivalent of the cubist translation of four-dimensional reality into a two-dimensional plane. In *The Dwarf*, for instance, he translates the complexities of the human world into the dimensions of evil and love, represented by, respectively, an evil dwarf and the model for Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. The characters, like the segmented and rearranged units of a cubist canvas, display the fragmentation of human intentions and emotions. The dwarf, who cannot love, murders the only man whom the Mona Lisa can love; he also engineers the deaths of a pair of teenage lovers who are reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet. The varieties of love and the subjectivity of evil are placed within the context of a simple narrative, much as different points of view are integrated on one visual plane in a cubist painting.

Da Vinci appears in *The Dwarf* as Messer Bernardo, an artist and scientist committed to the studious observation of those who love or do evil, or both, without any predisposition in himself to do either. In this regard, Messer Bernardo is an existential hero; he maintains his integrity by accepting that he is without an innate destiny. All of Lagerkvist's later fiction exhibits his affinity for existentialist thought.

*Barabbas* is the first novel in what became a cycle

of five, the narrative of each of which focuses on the event of Christ's crucifixion. The cycle of novels presents, through the characters of Barabbas, Ahasuerus, and Tobias, the human quest for a spiritual satisfaction that is tenable only to the extent that the individual releases the inner self to the object of the quest. The release, achieved by Tobias, corresponds to Martin Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* (1959; *Discourse on Thinking*, 1966), which, as contact of the inner self with the realm of conceptualization, is the highest degree of thought, the spiritual level at which the thinker is at one with being. Tobias finds the Holy Land to be the *Gelassenheit* of his pilgrimage.

## THE ETERNAL SMILE

**First published:** *Det eviga leendet*, 1920  
(English translation, 1934)

**Type of work:** Novella

*A group of the dead in eternity learn in the course of their pilgrimage to God that the value of life is its conceptual uniqueness.*

The eternal smile is the smile of the skull, or the grin of the death's head, as well as the expression of deity in its indifference to the living humankind from which it always distances itself. It is, in other words, something that in divinely preceding or physically surviving human life has nothing to do with actual human life. Life is its own unsmiling conception of itself. It encompasses human beings within its conceivability; the intensity of an individual human life is directly proportional to the individual's experience of this conceivability.

As the dead in the story compare their previous existences, twenty-six brief biographies unfold. One of the dead who had been quite satisfied with earthly life is an old man, who took a menial job, handing out paper in a subterranean restroom, as a stopgap until he could find his real vocation. He discovered with the passage of years that the menial job was in fact his real vocation, so he determined to perform his task with perfection, and this resulted in his finding happiness in life. Collectively, the biographies invite the inference that life is its own, and the only, value.

The twenty-first tale is the most significant. A man relates his love for a woman who learned that her destiny was to die after she had borne a child. After she gave birth to his child and died, the man held the newborn infant to his breast, and as he did so he gained a sense of meaning—the realization that life means but has itself no meaning: "Life has no love for you, tree; life has no love for you, human; for you, flower; for you, swaying grass, except when it means precisely you. When it no longer means you, it loves you no more and annihilates you." Life has no abstract or absolute meaning that can be apprehended by inquiry; instead, life means each existing individual. To live is to be meant by life.

The residents of eternity are perplexed. They contemplate the peace of all-becoming-one and find it empty. They take no pleasure either in the prospect that life's purpose may be only the perpetuation of life. They seek out God, who turns out to be an old man sawing wood by lantern light. Identifying themselves as the living, they ask God to account for the vagaries and disappointments of life. He tells them that he had not meant life to be anything extraordinary, adding: "I have done the best I could," and, later: "I meant only that you should never need to content yourselves with nothing."

## THE DWARF

**First published:** *Dvärgen*, 1944 (English translation, 1945)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A malevolent dwarf is the personification of the evil inherent in every human being.*

Like the Freudian id or the stunted troll, Lagerkvist's dwarf, Piccolino, represents the dark side of human life—"a person's dwarf is really the person's self," and one "cannot do without one's dwarf for long." This is to say that human life is basically evil: Instead of attempting to deny or to eradicate one's evil, which is, in fact, one's instinct to survive, one should be constantly aware of it. The antithesis of evil, in this context, is not good but love, which directs the energy of one's self toward the betterment of another. To be evil and to love is to become good—that is, good at being human. Evil and love



are moral integers; goodness is a functional integer.

Piccolino serves a prince, clearly patterned after Niccolò Macchiavelli's exemplar, Cesare Borgia. The prince dallies sensually with the courtesan Fiammetta; his wife, Princess Teodora, is in love with Don Ricardo (suggestive of the historical Francesco Orsini, an admirer of Petrarch's poetry). Angelica, daughter of the prince and Teodora, is in love with Giovanni, the son of the prince's enemy, Lodovico Montanza il Toro (historically, Ludovico Sforza il Moro). Messer Bernardo (Leonardo da Vinci), who has painted *The Last Supper* for Montanza in the refectory of Santa Croce (Santa Maria delle Grazie), is now painting a portrait of Princess Teodora (the *Mona Lisa*). The time of the events is probably 1502 to 1503, when Macchiavelli and Leonardo da Vinci were both in Cesare Borgia's employ. Boccarossa, a ferocious mercenary soldier in the hire of the prince, may be based upon the historical Ramiro d'Orco.

The prince poisons Montanza and his retinue at a banquet falsely given over to a peace settlement. Piccolino, complicit in the poisonings, arranges on his own for Don Ricardo to be among the victims. Earlier, the dwarf had beheaded Angelica's pet kitten. Subsequent to the treachery of the banquet, Piccolino leads the prince to the bed in which Angelica and Giovanni are engaged in premarital love. The prince beheads Giovanni. Angelica awakens to discover the horror and later drowns herself. Princess Teodora, unable to abide the deaths of her beloved Don Ricardo and her precious daughter Angelica, languishes in the company of the dwarf and dies during a period of plague. Fiammetta also succumbs during the plague. The prince has Piccolino incarcerated and chained in a dungeon, and the dwarf appears to be ignorant of the reason for his prince's disfavor. He is confident, however, that his prince will not be able to do without him for long.

Throughout the novel, love is repressed or destroyed before it can check the evil that is both the

spark of life and, untended or without attenuation by love, the fatal conflagration of human existence.

## BARABBAS

**First published:** 1950 (English translation, 1951)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Barabbas, haunted by the mystery of the man who died in place of himself, strives to achieve belief in the man's divinity.*

Barabbas is the criminal whose release was contingent upon the death sentence of Jesus. In Lagerkvist's novel Barabbas witnesses the Crucifixion and senses that his life and newly gained freedom are defined by a world of darkness and an impulse toward death. He is puzzled by the faith of Jesus' followers and disturbed by their certainty that Jesus is the son of God. He tries to embrace and experience their faith but he cannot.

He detects a curious distance in three persons who were close to Jesus. Jesus' mother does not weep at her son's execution and seems to reproach him for dying in innocence. Peter, a big, red-haired, blue-eyed disciple, has denied Christ and needs reassurance. Lazarus, whom Jesus resurrected, is not happy in his resumed life; his gaze is empty, and in answer to Barabbas's question about what death is like he replies: "The kingdom of death is nothing. But for those who have been there, everything else is also nothing." Many years later, Barabbas envisages Lazarus dead for the second time, his skull grinning in the eternal darkness.

Two persons who are close to Barabbas, a hare-lipped young woman and a man named Sahak, have faith that Christ is their savior, and both die as martyrs. The hare-lipped woman was the mistress of Barabbas. Sahak was his fellow prisoner and slave in the Cyprian copper mines. Both loved Barabbas, and both appear to fulfill their lives, not so much in the secure anticipation of eternal life as in realizing Jesus' doctrine of mutual love. Peter also seems to find his great peace more in his love of Christ and of his fellow Christians than in the prospect of eternal life.



Lagerkvist established his preference of love to eternity in “The Eternal Smile” and in his essay “Stridsland, Evighetsland” (1934; “Land of Conflict, Land of Eternity,” 1988). In the essay he says this explicitly. Like his Barabbas, he does not believe in the divinity of Jesus; like his Barabbas, he looks at the kingdom of the dead and finds that “there is nothing there” for him: “My inner being rises up in pain, because I am alive; my spirit tries to break its shackles, my thought to find an answer to something about which it can only ask questions, something which it is given the power to agonize and brood over.”

The brooding Lagerkvist has his Barabbas brood over the kingdom of death, first as Lazarus describes it and then as it appears to him in the copper mines of Cyprus and in the catacombs of Rome. On the point of entering death’s realm—Barabbas is crucified, along with Peter and other Christians—he makes his death his own, existentially, by making the only choice left to him. He

identifies himself with his death. He exemplifies as well the authentic refusal to blame anyone but oneself for what befalls one, including one’s death.

Lagerkvist’s Barabbas is a recipient of love. That he himself has the capacity to love is shown in his respectful care for the corpse of the harelipped woman and in his vigil at the death of his crucified friend, Sahak. That he does not realize this capacity

is clear in his failure to close the distance between himself and those who love him, until it is too late, and in his inability to understand the commandment, “Love one another.” It remains for Lagerkvist’s pilgrim, Tobias, to realize that love is the foundation of being human.

Lagerkvist followed *Barabbas* with his novel *Sibyllan* (1956; *The Sibyl*, 1958), in which the wandering Jew leaves the Crucifixion scene and seeks the meaning of life and death. The wandering Jew finds his great peace in Lagerkvist’s novel *Ahasverus död* (1960; *The Death of Ahasuerus*, 1962), the first novel in the Pilgrim Trilogy, also known as the

Tobias Trilogy. The other novels in the trilogy are *Pilgrim på havet* (1962; *Pilgrim at Sea*, 1964) and *Det heliga landet* (1964; *The Holy Land*, 1966).

## HEROD AND MARIAMNE

**First published:** *Mariamne*, 1967 (English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The incompatibility of King Herod and his wife Mariamne is aggravated by her inability to love him and his inability to love anyone but her.*

In *Herod and Mariamne*, the last of Lagerkvist’s fictional works published in his lifetime, the concept of love is examined in a lyrical prose narrative of austere simplicity. The novel tells of the relationship of Herod the Great and his second wife, Mariamne. Their tempestuous marriage ends with Herod’s murder of Mariamne. Lagerkvist pares the biblical account down to a short, melancholy song of contrasts.

In the story, the huge, coarse, brutal soldier and reigning tyrant, Herod, is subdued by his love for Mariamne, who is beautiful, gentle, and self-contained. After their marriage, Mariamne requites his sexuality but never his love. She is his bedmate, never his soul mate. His is a desert soul, in need of a temple; she is her own force of life, her own temple. Frustrated by his inability to possess her completely, Herod predisposes himself to his ultimate act against her, ordering her to be executed for conspiracy with her people, the Hasmonians, whose resurgence he has been quelling. The last years of his life are punctuated by his repeated calling out of her name, by his slaughter of the innocents after the birth of Jesus, and by his slowly succumbing to a painful and horrible disease.

Lagerkvist appears to have wanted *Herod and Mariamne* to serve as both prelude and postlude to his cycle of five Crucifixion novels. It is historically a prelude, leading up to the birth of Jesus. It is thematically a postlude, qualifying the love that Tobias experiences as he finds the Holy Land within his heart. Love is not a simple thing: It embraces all human life, and it is directed to another individual, with whom one identifies one’s self. General love, without particularity, becomes the love of human-



ity in the abstract; and the abstraction becomes God, who is not humanity. Particular love, without generality, becomes possessiveness and, ultimately, the love of an object, not a person. Human love, as the foundation of being human, is manifest in both the general and the particular, not merely in one unchecked by the other.

Herod's love of Mariamne is particular; Mariamne's love of people is general. Herod softens a little toward his subjects, and Mariamne becomes moderately sensitized to Herod's sexuality, but there is no full coalescence of the two manifestations of love; they remain at odds.

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## SUMMARY

Pär Lagerkvist's contribution to literature is a unique combination of structure and theme. The structure entails a cubistic elimination of non-essentials as a means of giving lyrical voice to a multiplicity of spatial, temporal, and spiritual perspectives. The theme is an examination of the existentialist authenticity by which individuals expect no more from life than the fullness of living.

Roy Arthur Swanson

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Pär Lagerkvist's view of deity? Is his notion of God thoroughly negative? Explain.
- What elements of existentialism coincide with Lagerkvist's writing?
- How may *The Dwarf* be seen as a cubistic novel?
- What is the difference between the idea of "the meaning of life" and Lagerkvist's concept of "life meaning"?
- How does Lagerkvist deal with the Christian message of love?

Pär Lagerkvist

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## SELMA LAGERLÖF

**Born:** Mårbacka, Värmland, Sweden  
November 20, 1858

**Died:** Mårbacka, Värmland, Sweden  
March 16, 1940

*The author of novels that combine the Swedish folk tradition with realistic descriptions of country life, Lagerlöf was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Selma Ottiliana Lovisa Lagerlöf (LAH-gur-lurv) was born at Mårbacka in Värmland, Sweden, on November 20, 1858, the daughter of Lieutenant Erik Gustav Lagerlöf, member of a landed family, and Louisa Wallroth Lagerlöf, whose father was a well-off ironmonger. Selma was the fourth of five children. The large Lagerlöf household also included an aunt and a beloved grandmother, who was always telling stories to the children gathered around her. Although Selma was only five when her grandmother died, she was to write of that loss as the profoundest sorrow of her life.

At three, Selma was struck by what was probably infantile paralysis. For some months, she was unable to walk, and despite two periods of therapy in Stockholm, she was permanently lame.

In most respects, however, Selma's childhood was a happy one. She had the affection of her parents, the companionship of her brothers and sisters, and the friendship of an appealing young governess. Encouraged by her father, Selma spent a good deal of time reading. She also liked to wander around the estate, responding to its natural beauty, learning about country life and country people, and hearing the legends of Värmland which were to inspire her works.

At the age of seven, Selma announced her intention of becoming an author. Before long, she was

telling stories to others, just as her grandmother had done. By the time she was twenty, Selma had become an accomplished writer, particularly of poems for special occasions. Clearly, she needed to continue her education; however, there was no money for her to do so. Over the years, the family fortunes had declined, and her father's ill health and his problems with alcohol had brought the family to the brink of financial disaster.

Fortunately, in 1880, after hearing Selma read one of her occasional poems at a wedding, the feminist Eva Fryxell took an interest in the talented young woman, suggesting that Selma enroll in the Royal Women's Superior Training College in Stockholm, a teacher training institution whose standards were almost as high as those of a university. Selma took her advice, borrowing the money to do so.

At school, Selma divided her time among attending lectures, studying, and writing poetry. Although she knew that she was on the way to becoming an author, Selma was not sure of her subject matter until a momentous day in 1881, when a story about Värmland cavaliers suddenly came into her mind. Soon Lagerlöf had begun her first novel.

Meanwhile, Lagerlöf's family continued to suffer reverses. Three years after her father's death in 1885, they were forced to sell Mårbacka. Fortunately, Lagerlöf had finished her studies and could support herself. The year of her father's death, she began teaching at the Girls' High School in Landskrona, Sweden, where she was to remain for ten years.

In 1890, five chapters of Lagerlöf's novel, sub-



mitted as a novella, won first place in a contest being conducted by the periodical *Idun*. Taking a year's leave of absence from her school, Lagerlöf completed *Gösta Berlings saga* (1891; *The Story of Gösta Berling*, 1898; also as *Gösta Berling's Saga*, 1918). By 1895, Lagerlöf's work was selling so well that she could resign from her position and become a full-time writer, as she had always wanted to do.

During the years that followed, Lagerlöf published one book after another. Although she brought out several collections of short stories, such as *Osynliga länker* (1894; *Invisible Links*, 1899), and *Kristuslegender* (1904; *Christ Legends*, 1908), she was best known for novels of various kinds. There were serious works, such as *Antikrists mirakler* (1897; *The Miracles of Antichrist*, 1899), inspired by Lagerlöf's travels in Italy, and the two-volume work *Jerusalem I: I Dalarna* (1901; *Jerusalem*, 1915) and *Jerusalem II: I det heliga landet* (1902; *The Holy City: Jerusalem II*, 1918), based on the author's conversations with some ill-fated Dalecarlian peasants who had migrated to the Holy Land, believing that the world was about to end. There were also lighter books like *Liljecronas hem* (1911; *Liliecrona's Home*, 1914), a story about Lagerlöf's own grandmother and her wicked stepmother, which is especially appealing to young readers.

Lagerlöf also wrote fiction of other kinds, including a story designed for children, the two-volume work *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (1906-1907; *The Wonderful Adventure of Nils*, 1907, and *The Further Adventures of Nils*, 1911), and what can best be classified as autobiographical works, *Mårbacka* (1922; English translation, 1924); *Ett barns memoarner* (1930; *Memories of My Childhood*, 1934); and *Dagbok, Mårbacka III* (1932; *The Diary of Selma Lagerlöf*, 1936).

As early as 1904, when she was awarded a Gold Medal by the Swedish Academy, Lagerlöf was nominated for the Nobel Prize. As a result of petty politics, however, she did not receive the award until 1909. In 1914, Lagerlöf was further honored by being elected the first woman member of the Swedish Academy. One result of her success was that she was able to buy back first the house at Mårbacka, and then the land around it. For the last three decades of her life she lived there, ran the estate, wrote, and entertained her admiring public. Lagerlöf died at Mårbacka on March 16, 1940.

## ANALYSIS

When Selma Lagerlöf accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature on December 10, 1909, she surprised the audience of notables by responding not with the lecture they expected, but with a story. In an imagined encounter with her dead father, which she related with great charm, Lagerlöf was able not only to thank everyone who had made her success possible but also to sum up the essence of her work. When she expressed her indebtedness to those who had filled her youth with folktales and legends, Lagerlöf was suggesting the extent to which her realistic writing is colored by fantasy. Like the peasants at Mårbacka, Lagerlöf's characters are unworldly people, living close to nature and to natural creatures; at the same time, however, they dwell on another level, in a world of gentle saints and beguiling devils, ghosts and trolls, visions and dreams, human passion and divine judgment. What skeptics might call the world of the imagination is very real to them, and it becomes just as real to Lagerlöf's readers.

For example, in *Jerusalem*, Lagerlöf shows how certain some Dalecarlian peasants were that they had been called by God to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. She does not mock their spiritual experience; indeed, by revealing her characters' inner conflicts, the anguish they feel as they tear themselves away from their homes and their fields to set out for an alien land, she gives them heroic stature. Although the pilgrims prove to have been misled by their voices, and though in the Holy Land they become less than holy, this does not diminish the importance of what Lagerlöf sees as an eternal struggle: To be human, one must live in two worlds, the natural and the supernatural, even though in the process one may well be destroyed.

The tension between the natural and the supernatural is also illustrated in *The Miracles of Antichrist*. While the novel is set in Sicily, rather than in Sweden, Lagerlöf describes the natural surroundings with the same loving detail that in other novels she devotes to her native landscape. Similarly, though her own people are Lutherans, she treats the Catholic beliefs of Sicilian peasants with obvious respect. At the same time, just as in *Jerusalem*, Lagerlöf tells a story of faith gone wrong. The more accustomed people are to believing in the unseen, the more likely they are to follow false gods. In this case, the new faith is socialism, which, ironically,

destroys the very spiritual sensitivity that enabled it to win converts.

If receptivity to the supernatural can bring human beings to destruction, it can also save them. For example, in *Liliecrona's Home*, evil, in the form of the wicked stepmother, is defeated only when she is exposed; once she is known to be a troll, she must disappear. Similarly, Lagerlöf's one story for children shows how the magical transformation of Nils Holgersson into a nonhuman creature results in his becoming a better human being.

The complexity of Lagerlöf's fiction is clearly illustrated by the work which has been called Lagerlöf's finest novella. *Herr Arnes penningar* (1904; *The Treasure*, 1925), is a fictional retelling of a real event. In the sixteenth century, Scottish raiders attacked a Swedish coastal settlement and massacred the residents, except for a single witness. In Lagerlöf's story, this witness, a young girl, later encounters a handsome Scot and falls as desperately in love with him as he insists he is with her. If she will go with him to Scotland, he says, he can give her high rank and immense wealth. Then, typically, Lagerlöf introduces the supernatural. The protagonist is visited by the ghost of her foster sister, who identifies the Scottish lover as one of the murderers. When the young girl accuses her lover, he decides to escape by using her as a shield. She thwarts him by killing herself. In what must be interpreted as divine intervention, the harbor then freezes, holding the ships in place until the murderers can be removed and punished.

In *The Treasure* can be found all the elements of Lagerlöf's works: a realistic setting; an exciting plot, often, as here, inspired by a historical incident; psychological veracity, in the description of her characters' inner conflicts; the presence of the supernatural; and an ending in which good triumphs over evil. This final characteristic of her work must be seen in the context of Lagerlöf's own subscription to the Christian faith. For her, a happy ending is one in which a human being becomes more nearly what God expects him or her to be. This may result in a better life, as in the case of Nils, or in a triumphant death, as in *The Treasure*, in which the unhappy girl gives up her love and her life for the sake of justice and, presumably, goes to her reward in a world as perfect as this one is imperfect.

Interestingly, the fusion of the real and the mag-

ical, which from the publication of her first novel so enchanted Lagerlöf's readers, aroused the anger of critics. They approved of her believable peasants and her vivid descriptions of country life, which were consistent with the tenets of realism, the literary movement to which most writers and critics were then fully committed. When she introduced fantastic or supernatural characters and episodes into her fiction, however, these literary critics believed that she was attempting to bring back the earlier Romanticism, which they believed had been discredited and which they hoped was extinct. Only when the insightful Danish critic Georg Brandes defended her work as something original and new rather than as a return to an earlier convention did she receive general acceptance from the literary establishment. By insisting on being herself, rather than writing in a predetermined formula, Lagerlöf performed one of her greatest services to her art. Undoubtedly she cleared the way for other writers, who could now find the courage to rebel against realism and naturalism, as their predecessors had against Romanticism, and to express themselves creatively, directed by their own imaginations rather than by the expectations of others.

## THE STORY OF GÖSTA BERLING

**First published:** *Gösta Berlings saga*, 1891  
(English translation, 1898)

**Type of work:** Novel

*At a nineteenth century country manor, good and evil battle for human souls.*

*The Story of Gösta Berling*, Selma Lagerlöf's first published novel, has been the subject of more scholarly articles than any of her other works. Despite its defects, such as the looseness and the episodic nature of the plot, this book continues to be much admired by critics, many of whom consider it Lagerlöf's masterpiece.

The novel is set in a fictional area resembling Värmland. The time is the 1820's, in a country manor house where life is at its most luxurious. So wealthy are the upper classes that someone like the

Mistress of Ekeby, who in addition to her estate owns seven foundries, can support a dozen hedonistic, penniless cavaliers. These men acquire a leader when their patroness takes in the title character, a drunken and now defrocked priest, who himself is easily charmed by the rich ironmaster Sintram. This malevolent figure appears sometimes to be either a devil or a human being who has sold his soul to the devil and at other times a madman who is acting out his satanic fantasies.

In any case, the cavaliers make a pact with Sintram. He will enable them to take over the Mistress of Ekeby's property if during their year in power they manage to do nothing worthwhile. The results are catastrophic not only for the Mistress of Ekeby, who is driven from her property, but for all of those in any way associated with the cavaliers and for the entire area, which succumbs to moral and economic collapse. At the end of the year, when he sees the results of his actions, Gösta Berling has a change of heart. The Mistress comes home to die in peace, and Gösta devotes the rest of his life to others.

In this book, one can see the pattern that Lagerlöf followed throughout her career: the rural setting, the use of folklore, and the revelation of character, from both a psychological and a moral perspective. While it is ev-

ident that Lagerlöf has no doubt about the existence of God and Satan, good and evil, as an artist she understands that human beings have a need to express themselves freely and to enjoy life's pleasures, even though they must also discipline themselves and submit to rules in order to lead meaningful Christian lives. She could empathize with her

cavaliers and with Gösta Berling himself; in fact, at the end of her novel Lagerlöf leaves him at the beginning of his quest. She suggests that it make take him the rest of his life to discover how one can be both happy and good.



## THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF NILS AND THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF NILS

**First published:** *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige*, 1906-1907 (English translation, 1907, 1911)

**Type of work:** Children's literature

*A disobedient boy, changed in shape and exiled from humanity, learns from the birds and animals with whom he lives.*

Selma Lagerlöf's two-volume story for children, translated as *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* and *The Further Adventures of Nils*, was originally written for use in schools. The Swedish National Teachers' Society commissioned the work, with the idea that Swedish schoolchildren could more easily learn about the geography of their country by reading stories set in various regions. It was Lagerlöf who decided to place the information she collected within a unified framework, and her suspenseful story about a boy who flew over Sweden with a flock of geese became one of her most popular works, not only in her own country but throughout the world as well.

Lagerlöf's protagonist is a fourteen-year-old boy, an only child, who is lazy, nasty, and disobedient. When he is left home alone after refusing to go to church with his parents, he is magically transformed into a tiny imp and sent to live with the animals. Befriended by a flock of wild geese, he flies on gooseback over Sweden, into Lapland, and finally back home. He does not see his country only from the air. When the geese land to eat and to sleep, Nils visits nearby places of interest and learns about local customs. Lagerlöf thereby is able to include a great deal of factual material in her account.

There is also a strong didactic element in Lagerlöf's story. From an eagle, a raven, a stork, and a moose, as well as from the geese, Nils learns such values as courage, loyalty, compassion, and self-sacrifice. In Smirre, the wily and predatory fox, Nils sees an uncomfortable reflection of the selfish boy he had been, and by opposing Smirre, in order to protect the geese, Nils clearly forswears his old self. Nils also learns an important lesson from two chil-

dren he encounters during his travels. Motherless, defenseless, and half-starved, Osa and Mats are wandering in search of their father, never complaining, never losing hope. Observing them, Nils cannot help contrasting their behavior with his own ingratitude when he was a pampered human child, and if he ever returns to his family, he promises to do better.

Like Gösta Berling, Nils does get a second chance. He is finally adjudged worthy to resume his human form, and he goes back home, a wiser and a better person.

Ironically, some educators found fault with Lagerlöf's book, essentially because of her highly original approach. Fortunately, the final judgment did not rest with the pedagogues. Translated into forty languages, the story of Nils was read by children and adults throughout the world. The book was so highly regarded in Lagerlöf's own country that in 1950, when an annual award to a Swedish children's author was established, it was named the Nils Holgersson Award, in honor of the author and of her bad-boy-turned-hero.

## MÅRBACKA

**First published:** 1922 (English translation, 1924)

**Type of work:** Autobiographical novel

*Childhood on a Swedish country estate is filled with family stories, folklore, and high adventure.*

*Mårbacka* is the first of three autobiographical volumes that are often classified as nonfiction. In all of them, however, Lagerlöf assumes a persona, so they also can be described as fictional works. The third of these books, *The Diary of Selma Lagerlöf*, was certainly a work of the imagination; in it, the seventy-year-old author pretended to be a fourteen-year-old girl, describing a visit to Stockholm and, even more important, confiding her thoughts and her feelings to her diary and to her readers. In *Mårbacka*, Lagerlöf maintains her distance in another way. Using the third person, rather than the first, she makes Selma Lagerlöf a character in a novel.

Lagerlöf divided *Mårbacka* into five sections, each of which represents a subject, rather than a chronological section. The first, "The Strömstad Journey," is the closest to ordinary autobiography. In it, Lagerlöf describes Selma's terror at being struck by paralysis and the subsequent expedition to the seashore when, either because of her treatment or through divine intervention, the child finds herself able to walk again. The second and third sections of the book are filled with family stories and legends. Then, in "The New Mårbacka," Lagerlöf sympathetically describes Lieutenant Lagerlöf's vain attempts to fulfill his father's dreams for the estate. The final section, "Workdays and Fête Days," recalls games and pranks, daily rituals and family celebrations, including the elaborate annual observation of the Lieutenant's birthday.

Appropriately, the book ends with a touching postscript, written on the hundredth anniversary of her father's birth, in which Selma Lagerlöf expresses the sense of loss she feels not only because so many people she loved are no longer living, but also because their way of life is gone forever. While it has been said that *Mårbacka* is more concerned with a place than with the author's own life, in this collection of memories one can find not only many of her sources, but also the atmosphere and the attitudes that created Lagerlöf the writer.

## SUMMARY

Selma Lagerlöf broke free of the literary conventions of her era to write works that she believed reflected country life as she knew it. Her rural characters may depend for their survival on hard work in the everyday world, but they are keenly aware of the power of the unseen, the supernatural, the spiritual. The lasting popularity of Lagerlöf can be attributed in part to her skill as a storyteller, as seen in her accuracy in the minutest matters, in her adeptness in plotting, and in her ability to develop vivid characters. Her works are also valued because of their underlying optimism. When many writers lament that life is meaningless, it is refreshing to read about human beings who, despite their shortcomings, can be transformed and redeemed through the efforts of a merciful God.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Has criticism of Selma Lagerlöf been influenced by antifeminism?
- Consider the ways in which Lagerlöf's difficult early life became a boon to her as a writer.
- Contrast Lagerlöf's stories of Nils with works recommended for American schoolchildren today.
- What makes a work such as *Mårbacka*, much concerned with "place," succeed as autobiography?
- What are the roots of Lagerlöf's optimism?



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## PHILIP LARKIN

**Born:** Coventry, England

August 9, 1922

**Died:** Hull, England

December 2, 1985

*A major English poet of the post-World War II era, Larkin is admired for crafted, readable poems that speak honestly, with sad wit and irony, of the modern isolated life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Philip Arthur Larkin was born in Coventry, England, on August 9, 1922, the son of Sydney and Eva Emily Day Larkin. His bookish father was city treasurer. Larkin tended to dismiss his Coventry childhood as uneventful but recalled that during the 1930's he "wrote ceaselessly," both prose and verse, while attending King Henry VIII School. As a youth, he kept booklets of his writings—a practice he followed throughout his life, later using typescripts—and published poems in his school magazine, *The Coventrian*. At St. John's College, Oxford, he earned the B.A. with distinction in English literature (1943) and then the M.A. (1947). He failed his physical for military service in World War II. Close friends at Oxford encouraged his literary efforts, and in his mid-twenties he published the novels *Jill* (1946, 1964) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). Though Larkin at first wanted to be a novelist and much later said he found novels "richer, broader, deeper, more enjoyable than poems," poetry proved to be his real vocation. Influenced by the English poet W. H. Auden and, after 1943, by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, Larkin published verses at Oxford and brought out *The North Ship* (1945, 1966), poems that revealed a solitary persona and gained little notice. Larkin later "disowned" the book but allowed its reissue.

Larkin's poems from the late 1940's were the first in his new, representative voice—"less poetic," he said, and "freer of the late Mr. W. B. Yeats also." From 1949 onward, his notebook texts show careful, laborious revision, sometimes extending over months or years. Alternating scarce and fruitful periods were the norm throughout the poet's life.

In 1951, Larkin, by then a gainfully employed librarian, had one hundred copies of a volume titled *XX Poems* printed in Belfast and circulated privately, with little effect. Pressed in 1943 by the Ministry of Labour to find employment, Larkin had found his first job at the public library in Wellington, Shropshire, where, in his reading of the English poet and novelist Thomas Hardy, he found ironic and sober views compatible with his own. Larkin worked at academic libraries in Leicester and Belfast before taking over in 1955 as librarian at the University of Hull, England, a growing institution that thereafter demanded much of his professional energy. Larkin's reclusive and unassuming lifestyle earned for him the epithet the "Hermit of Hull." As his fame grew, he consistently shunned the limelight by giving few readings, interviews, or lectures.

In Larkin's *The Less Deceived* (1955), his now-familiar poetic personality emerged. Thrusting Larkin into prominence among critics and a growing readership, the book brought numerous formal recognitions—the Queen's Gold Medal (1965), other awards, and offers of honorary degrees and fellowships. Behind Larkin's apparently sudden emergence in his thirties as a major poet lay more than a decade of serious effort. *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) confirmed and broadened his reputation. The title poem, begun in May, 1957, like others in the book combines social observation with a strong personal voice. (The poet's reading of this widely acclaimed poem on radio in 1973 was a "first and last" concession to public demand that his voice emerge from hiding.)

From his youth onward, Larkin was a jazz buff.

Features he wrote for the London *Daily Telegraph* were collected as *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1968* (1970).

As editor of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973), Larkin took on a large, prestigious task that had been Yeats's before him. The results led some to charge that Larkin had inordinately favored traditional forms and minor poets. "At any rate," he said, "I made a readable book. I made twentieth-century poetry sound nice."

In the year that Larkin moved from his "high windows" flat to another residence in Hull that was to be his last, his final volume, *High Windows* (1974), appeared. Photographs from mid-life onward show Larkin bald, with heavy dark-rimmed glasses, inscrutable and impish. He traveled little and never married. After 1974, he made only eight poems public, including slight occasional pieces. An interview in *The Paris Review* appeared in 1982. *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982* (1983) assembled prose pieces that add to an understanding of his career.

The year before his death, Larkin refused the offer of the laureateship, Britain's highest honor for poets, reportedly on the grounds that he found his previous decade too unproductive of poetry to make him worthy. Larkin, a smoker, died in Hull, England, on December 2, 1985, after surgery for throat cancer. His *Collected Poems* (1988) was a surprise best seller in England.

## ANALYSIS

The list of contemporary literary luminaries responding in the media to Larkin's *Collected Poems* helps suggest the stature as a modern English poet that Larkin achieved during his lifetime. Seamus Heaney, Stephen Spender, Howard Nemerov, Ian Hamilton, and Derek Walcott figure among Larkin's many admiring reviewers. Some discussion focuses on whether the canon of Larkin's poems should exceed what the poet himself chose to include in the four slim volumes he published—the 115 poems collectively constituting *The North Ship*, *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *High Windows*. Even the thirty poems of his first volume are marginal, since Larkin allowed that book's reprinting in 1966 "with considerable hesitation"; Larkin's characteristic style and voice, the collective features that give him his uniqueness, appear definitively in the last three volumes. Still, editor

Anthony Thwaite salvaged 242 poems that Larkin wrote, mostly between 1946 and his death, with a few from 1938 through 1945. "Aubade," written in November, 1977, and published on December 23 in *The Times Literary Supplement*, is an important, previously uncollected poem from Larkin's late period, during which his nonproductivity led him to think himself unworthy of the proffered laureateship and to reject it. The "morning song" of an aging insomniac who wakes before "all the uncarving/ Intricate rented world begins to rouse," "Aubade" is vintage Larkin: "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night," he starts. "Being brave/ Lets no one off the grave," he concludes.

In variants of just such an authoritative yet self-demeaning voice, Larkin speaks to his readers, sharing calmly depressing, undogmatic glimpses of postimperial (and especially working-class) Britain. In what poet/biographer Alan Brownjohn calls a "vigorous colloquial mode"—language both ordinary and formal, serious and witty, figurative and literal—the Hermit of Hull himself seems to come through, at once thoughtful, intimate, wry, sad, and playful. Poems in Larkin's voice accumulate the collective features of the Larkin persona, a detached and bemused, sometimes misogynistic bachelor. Modestly ranging themes include choice and its fated limits, work, aging, the elusiveness of personal happiness, marriage and singleness, and, in general, the ordinary experiences of unpretentious people, lucidly and often tenderly rendered.

The notable regularity with which Larkin's small volumes appeared—exactly one a decade—says much about his craftsmanship. External evidence of painstaking revision supports the feel that his best poems have of having ripened thoughtfully. ("The Whitsun Weddings," for example, was begun in May, 1957, resumed in 1958, reworked through twenty-three pages, and finished later that year.) Though "quietly English," Larkin's poems after 1960 often show diction—and graphic concerns with sex and bodies—sure to make shy readers redden. Still, a gentleman's formality always remains. Irregularized meter, stanza, and rhyme undergird even the most random-sounding of Larkin's verses.

The paradox of colloquial formality, of course, is not unique to Larkin and in fact has a long history in English poetry. Larkin's underpinning of talk with the organizational structures of traditional verse thus creates frequent random echoes

of John Donne and the other Metaphysical poets, of Robert Browning's artfully "natural" monologues, of T. S. Eliot (the Prufrock persona is never far out of hearing distance), of Lord Byron (especially in the witty rhymes), or of Alexander Pope (with his parallels and wordplay). As to the poet's worldview, the sardonic pessimism of Thomas Hardy is the important influence that Larkin acknowledged.

Since Larkin invented no genuinely new formal mode for writing poems, the impulse to link him not only with earlier poets but also with contemporaries is strong. An association between Larkin and "The Movement" in English letters began soon after the appearance of *The Less Deceived*. The collective tendencies of this loose "school" include a rejection of both Romanticism and the extreme principles of modernist experimentalism. Movement writers think that common sense, honesty, clarity, realism, and empiricism should govern art. Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines* (1956) epitomized features of The Movement.

The Larkin persona, of foreground interest in most poems, is also often an unenthusiastic witness to life. Thus Larkin is both social critic and realist. His ordinary people marry and start their lives ("The Whitsun Weddings"), go to weekend fairs ("Show Saturday"), play cards, visit bars, get sick ("Ambulances"), and die ("The Explosion"). Meanwhile, the empire's soldiers come "home/ For lack of money" ("Homage to a Government"), and England's omnipresent churches stand as taunting residues of a dying religion ("Church Going"). Larkin's social concerns appear as early as the novel *Jill*, a bellwether among postwar British novels for its working-class hero; his poems persist in showing something of the novelist's sense of place and situation. One risks equating poet with persona to say that Larkin's foiled plan to become a novelist seems but one more ironic instance of his "falling short."

Larkin's poems of wistful isolation show sadness and failure and treat the mundane and mediocre; however, they also imply persistent communal values. In "Show Saturday," for example, a weekend fair reveals "something [people] share/ That breaks ancestrally each year into/ Regenerate union. Let it always be there." Young lovers in "High Windows" or "The Whitsun Weddings" find at least brief pleasure in each other, even as the

speaker is excluded. Indeed, there is everywhere in Larkin's poems the sense of a "perfect happiness/ I can't confront" ("Mother, Summer, I").

A Larkin dichotomy that reminds posterity of his successes, not his failures, sounds in a later poem that begins "The daily things we do/ for money or for fun/ Can disappear like dew/ Or harden and live on."

## "TOADS"

**First published:** 1955 (collected in *The Less Deceived*, 1955)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The speaker, after berating himself for letting "the toad work" spoil his life, decides that he is fated for an unromantic existence.*

Memorable among the poems in *The Less Deceived* (1955) that brought Larkin his first fame, "Toads" is a comically exaggerated, self-directed harangue whose speaker seems easily identifiable with the Hermit of Hull. The poem's work-driven man trades six days of his week for economic security, meanwhile giving up "The fame and the girl and the money" that "windfall" types might get with their "wits" or "blarney." The strong sensory impact of the opening rhetorical question makes the poem hard to forget: "Why should I let the toad work/ Squat on my life?" In nine quatrains of rough dactyls, the persona goes on to reach a partial, chilling answer: "something sufficiently toad-like/ Squats in me, too;/ Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,/ And cold as snow."

The poem's main image provides an "objective correlative"—to use the term suggested by the Anglo-American poet/critic T. S. Eliot—for oppressive daily work that suppresses the life of which the individual dreams. (A pun in "toady" as "fawning underling" lurks under the conceit.) The other life that the speaker decides is not for him, the unrealized romantic alternative to a workaday world, gives the poem its main contrast. The word "Toads" rules the poem as image, witty symbol, personification (or animation), metaphor, and analogy; but the text engages many other "poetic" devices. A second rhetorical question, echoing the first, heightens its animated little comic drama with

simile: “Can’t I use my wit as a pitchfork/ And drive the brute off?” (“Wit” is echoed later as “wits” and finally identified with “blarney.” Since the poet as crafty talker is at work in the poem, the foils of librarian and happy-go-lucky poet may be partly what the speaker imagines.) The phrases “skinny as whippets,” “Toad-like,” and “heavy as hard luck,/ . . . cold as snow” show other similes that sharpen the imagery. Further details sketch manly risk-takers living “up lanes/ With fires in a bucket,” eating “windfalls and tinned sardines.” The Popean wit of this last image (technically called *zeugma*) derives from Larkin’s pairing of things intangible and sensibly concrete, both objects of the verb “eat.” Hyperalliteration in the third stanza, especially, reinforces the poem’s comic tone, even as the catalog “Lecturers, lispers,/ Losels, loblollymen, louts” is congruent with the mock-epic, one remote model for the poem.

The speaker’s mention of the inaccessible “stuff/ That dreams are made on,” echoing William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (pr. 1611, pb. 1623), helps set up the poem’s romantic foil. In this detail, the text is reminiscent of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where Prufrock thinks of the inimitable actions of Hamlet as the obverse of his own. Ultimately, in fact, it is hard not to compare Larkin’s resigned persona with Prufrock, for both are timid men whose “love songs” go unsung. Like Eliot and others, Larkin shows skill at using startling conceits to make the “stuff” of his poem memorable. While Prufrock’s mind drifts toward the genteel (and Eliot’s toward free verse), Larkin’s speaker stanzaically envisions a downscale society where something chancier would replace propriety.

Formally, the quatrains of “Toads” exemplify rowdy versions of the four-line “common meter” stanza, long serviceable in English verse. The dactylic meter is an “oomppah-pah” that blusters on. Half-rhymes typify the *abab* scheme: In fact, no exact rhymes occur. Such pairings as “poison/ proportion” and “bucket/ like it” are clever in the manner of Lord Byron. Larkin’s conversational “blarney” also employs colloquial diction, disruptive dashes, exclamations, italicized phrases, and contractions. The phrase “All at one sitting” is a pun full of irony, given both the toad’s “squatting” stance and the nonsedentary life needed for one to get fame, love, or wealth. Dialectal words help indi-

vidualize Larkin’s speaker, who speaks of “losels” (worthless persons), “loblollymen” (louts), “nippers” (children), and “hunkers” (haunches), and who says, “*Stuff your pension!*”

Unlike the rest, the poem’s last stanza is obscure; the pronouns are ambiguous, the antecedents remote. The verb “bodies” seems vaguely transitive. Probably “one” and “the other” (and “either” and “both”) refer to the “two toads” previously mentioned—one squatting “on my life,” the other squatting “in me, too.” The plural title seems to be a main clue that helps identify these two referents. Thus “one bodies the other/ One’s spiritual truth” means that the outward tendency to be a workaholic, symbolized by the outward “toad,” is an emblem of one’s inner reality. If the first “one” is the squatting toad and the second “One” the man on whom it sits, the idea may be that work gives an individual his or her “spiritual truth.” The fact that the speaker rejects the affirmation he asserts makes his last pontification doubly gnomic. Here the pedantic librarian’s voice supplants the breezier blarney that dominates the poem—though wit is a common denominator in both modes. However one reads its end, the poem’s serious theme is that a fatal temperamental workaholicism, while paying the bills and securing the pension, fails to bring such footloose fulfillment as one can fancy.

## “CHURCH GOING”

**First published:** 1955 (collected in *The Less Deceived*, 1955)

**Type of work:** Poem

*An English cyclist’s weekday visit to an empty church provokes his serious, skeptical reverie on the appeal, and future, of Christianity.*

Written the same summer as “Toads,” “Church Going” also first appeared in Larkin’s remarkable little book *The Less Deceived*. Each of the two much-admired poems illustrates the book’s emphatic focus on relative disillusionment. The punning title “Church Going” is typically Larkinesque, implying both “attending church” and “the vanishing church.” A further irony is that Larkin’s “church goer” is a sole drop-in to whom the empty edifice is alien and puzzling, not supportive or enlightening.



As sobriety varies from playfulness, the persona of “Church Going” varies from that of “Toads.” Yet the loneliness and dissociation from human company that one perceives in the speaker and the recognition that he contemplates an important modern dilemma tie him to the “toad-dominated” worker. One added strength of “Church Going” is its firm grounding in a concrete setting and situation, allowing Larkin’s skeptical preachment about the irrelevance of the church to occur without much offense, from the ironic opening phrase onward: “I am sure there’s nothing going on/ . . . inside.” Eventually the speaker wonders “who/ Will be the last, the very last, to seek/ This place for what it was.” Imagery of a church in ruins dominates the poem at its climax: “Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky.” (Conjured images of Tintern Abbey, or other stereotypically English ruins, here summarize the coming fate of churches in England that the speaker sees.) The balanced melancholy of the poem finds the church, though a “place . . . not worth stopping for,” to be nonetheless “A serious house on serious earth” that pulls people toward it, a place “proper to grow wise in,/ If only that so many dead lie round.” The imaginative range of the poem, moving as it does from the concrete to the abstract and universal, from “disbelief” to a future time when even that may be a forgotten human stage, gives it distinction and significance.

Formally “Church Going” is like an ode, a stanzaic lyric poem that develops and explores a serious topic at some length. Each of its seven stanzas comprises nine iambic pentameter lines—the numerology seeming, like religion itself, to tap into the prerational. A complex stanzaic rhyme scheme, *ababcadcd*, employs full and approximate (half or slant) rhymes freely. Skill with subtle metrical variations—trochaic substitutions, caesuras, enjambments, feminine endings—keeps the lines flowing like talk, much in the manner to which readers of Robert Browning’s monologues, or of Larkin’s lyrics, are accustomed. As usual Larkin’s

speaker is syntactic, at once colloquial and formal in his assertions. His sharp imagery draws the church interior in the first two stanzas: “sprawlings of flowers, cut/ For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff/ Up at the holy end; the small neat organ.” The “musty, unignorable silence” has “Brewed God knows how long.” When the man reads “Here endeth” to an empty sanctuary, “The echoes snigger briefly.”

As in “Toads”—and following the lead of his disavowed mentor Yeats—Larkin has his speaker engage in questions, a useful device for exploring alternatives: “Shall we avoid [churches] as unlucky places?” “And what remains when disbelief has gone?” and “I wonder who/ Will be the last . . . to seek/ This place for what it was?” “Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,/ Or Christmas-addict?” In such an inquisitive context, the speaker’s varied assertions hold their ground: “Power of some sort or other will go on,” “It pleases me to stand in silence here,” or “someone will forever be surprising/ A hunger in himself to be more serious,/ And gravitating with it to this ground.”

In this serious meditation on the post-Christian age, Larkin’s witty glints lighten the tone. As the persona, for example, wonders if in future eras “we shall keep/ A few cathedrals chronically on show” and “let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep,” his word “chronically” plays on “perpetually” while suggesting something like a lingering illness, and “let” as “lease” introduces a playful figurative situation, with sheep as renters. The “crew” of cathedral-hounds who “tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were” are mildly satirized as the eventual last “church goers,” just as the phrases “this accoutred frowsty barn” (where “frowsty” means unkempt and musty), “randy for antique,” and “Christmas-addict” all trigger weak smiles. The mild self-denigration that occurs in various details, hinting that the biker is a bit of a perplexed bumblehead, likewise entertains.

The speaker’s “serious” view is clearly that the church is irrelevant and “obsolete,” appeals to superstition, plays a riddling power game, and is destined to fade into vague memory, even as so many church structures in England already have. Nonetheless, nostalgia for inaccessible certainties remains. In that tangential respect, the speakers in “Church Going” and “Toads” are alike: Each looks wistfully at a pattern of living that he seems consti-



tutionally unsuited to embracing and suffers an emotional isolation that seems to be his fate. As in Hardy's poems and novels, there is no possibility that by strength of will the persona can remake himself into something he is not. The final lines hint bleakly that one "grows wise" only in the company of the dead.

### "THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS"

**First published:** 1964 (collected in *The Whitsun Weddings*, 1964)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Taking the train down to London on a Maytime Saturday, a man observes newlyweds boarding at successive stations and contemplates the convergent pattern.*

Written in October, 1958, and published as the title poem in Larkin's 1964 volume, the odelike poem "The Whitsun Weddings" bears formal and thematic resemblances to "Church Going" but shifts its focus away from the Larkin speaker and toward the collective social event that he witnesses, voyeuristically, while making "A slow and stopping curve southwards" from Hull to London. The poem is thus only partly "about" the speaker, whose presumed bachelorhood serves as foil for the "dozen" wedded couples who, at stop after stop, board the train to journey with him toward their separate and communal destinies. The details of the poem that focus on the speaker seem little more than a cumulative medium for framing what he sees: "I was late getting away;" "At first, I didn't notice what a noise/ The weddings made/ Each station that we stopped at;" and, near the end, "I thought of London spread out in the sun,/ Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat." Through much of the poem the speaker says "we," including others on the train with himself and—incrementally—all the couples who join their microcosmic ride.

The poem seems provocative and mildly fatalistic in its conclusions about what the observed phe-

nomena mean. The ironic sense that the couples are wrapped in their own excitement so as to be unaware of participating in any larger pattern governs the poet's conclusion, where "none/ Thought of the others they would never meet/ Or how their lives would all contain this hour." Several details in the poem underscore how destiny operates in ways no person among the passengers can understand: "There [at London] we were aimed," "it was nearly done, this frail/ Travelling coincidence," and finally, "there swelled/ A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain." In the moment lives a sense of "all the power/ That being changed can give." The train ride becomes finally a metaphor for life as it moves onward, propelled by a common stream of marriages. Mutability, the inevitable pattern of change that governs life while remaining so unsusceptible to understanding or governance, is one large theme here.

Much of the poem's appeal lies in its snapshot social realism. In minutely observed if mildly satiric detail, Larkin's observer represents the working-class wedding parties: men "grinning and pomaded, girls/ In parodies of fashion, heels and veils," "mothers loud and fat;/ An uncle shouting smut," young girls who "stared/ At a religious wounding," imagining some bride's impending surrender. The note that "each face seemed to define/ Just what it saw departing" is precise in its relativism. Images of "short-shadowed cattle" and "the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth" vivify the witnessed drama. Meanwhile, unobtrusive figures enrich the poem's texture: "tall heat that slept," a typical personification, and the similes of the last two stanzas are examples.

Formally "The Whitsun Weddings" is much like "Church Going." Its eight stanzas are each ten lines long, all lines but the second (which is two-stressed) showing the elegantly "natural" iambic pentameter that Larkin managed with such skill. The *ababdecde* rhyme scheme suggests that the poet conceived of his stanza as quatrain-plus-sestet, the latter in the manner of Italian sonnets; enjambment, however, usually blurs the division, and run-ons in syntax between stanzas occur often.

## “HIGH WINDOWS”

**First published:** 1974 (collected in *High Windows*, 1974)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Eying a young couple lasciviously, an aging man thinks of his youth before imagining blank “high windows.”*

“High Windows,” finished in 1967 and included as the title poem in Larkin’s last volume, shows modest departures in method and new symbolic in-directions. Though the windows are no doubt symbols, literally they are sashes set high in a wall (perhaps in a tall building) so that one looking out “the sun-comprehending glass” from inside sees only “the deep blue air, that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.” These apertures onto heaven, but not into eternity, are clouded over with a Larkinesque nihilism, an agnostic’s philosophical nothingness. The image of the windows occurs to the speaker “Rather than words,” suggesting the skeptic’s truth that what lies beyond cannot be stated. Thus the poem’s epiphany, its moment of revelation, reveals “Nothing”; the parallelism with “*No God any more*,” occurring earlier, heightens the figurative message. The hint in “high windows” of cathedral panes doubles the irony.

This poem seems an aging man’s piece but also surely reflects something of the youth-led and freedom-intent 1960’s—with “Bonds and gestures pushed to one side”—in its relatively licentious language and loosened style. Like “Church Going,” the poem is a reverie on the absence of viable religion, but the method of exploration here is associative, not quietly rational and syntactic: Seeing the young couple and imagining their sex life makes the speaker think about his lost youth and how he might have appeared then. In turn, that thought triggers the image of the windows. (The cinematic technique of the skyward fadeout may lie in the background of the poem’s closing effect.) The

poem’s unbalanced three-part structure highlights its “middle” section with italicized type.

Formally, the poem is stanzaic but not metrical. Like “Toads,” it intentionally abuses “common meter,” settling into an *abab* rhyme scheme. A notable, witty irony is that “kids” and “diaphragm” are early nonrhymes.

Reading the poem with established notions about the “Larkin persona” overlaid on it, one thinks inevitably of the librarian of Hull in his university-owned “high windowed” apartment, aging and unmarried. Thus irony dominates—whoever imagined the young Larkin among the youthful “lot” that would eventually “*all go down the long slide/ Like free bloody birds*” surely misread things. Typically for Larkin, a set of foils operates: While the speaker can now imagine the young couple in “Paradise” and can think of “everyone young going down the long slide/ To happiness,” that destiny seems to have escaped him personally; even his early freedom from a fearful faith has not left him romantically happy or sensually fulfilled. The poem’s image of “an outdated combine harvester” that has “reaped” little is a quiet, innuendo-filled analogue for the poem’s persona.

### SUMMARY

Though an Oxford graduate and university librarian, Philip Larkin is not “academic.” Acclaimed by scholars and general readers alike, Larkin is a principal English poet of the post-World War II era. Formally conservative, his poems nonetheless adapt colloquial talk and explore contemporary life. His persona’s voice is sad, ironic, balanced, wise, witty, stoic, and capable of surprise. Missing access to the fulfillments of love or faith that others may have, the poet/voyeur looks out wistfully onto the world—but not far into the heavens. Critical discussion of Larkin after 1955 as a part of The Movement in English literature acknowledges his pragmatic rejection of the excesses of both Romanticism and modern experimentation.

Roy Neil Graves

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What did Philip Larkin mean in claiming that he "made twentieth-century poetry sound nice"?
- Trace the influence of Thomas Hardy on the form and tone of Larkin's poetry.
- Were Larkin's trimming of his own canon and his refusal of the laureateship unwise decisions?
- Explain and exemplify "colloquial formality" in Larkin's poems.
- Consider the elements in Larkin's poems that reflect his early desire to become a novelist. How do his poems confirm the wisdom of his avoidance of novel writing?
- Poets sometimes succeed by defying expectations. How does Larkin's "Aubade" defy one's expectations of a morning poem?
- Which poems by Larkin most distinctively reflect *The Movement*?



John Reeves

## MARGARET LAURENCE

**Born:** Neepawa, Manitoba, Canada

July 18, 1926

**Died:** Lakefield, Ontario, Canada

January 5, 1987

*Laurence contributed to the development of Canadian fiction, and particularly to themes relating to women's experiences, through her creation of the Manawaka Cycle, five books based on a fictional Canadian town.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Margaret Laurence was born Jean Margaret Wemyss on July 18, 1926, in Neepawa, Manitoba. Her ancestry was a mixture of Scottish and Irish-Canadian. She was an inveterate reader as a child and began to write stories in her childhood. She wrote stories for the school magazine; by the age of thirteen she had imagined a fictional town of Manawaka, clearly based on Neepawa. Later she would portray that town of Manawaka as the context for her heroines' varied experiences.

Laurence's father, Robert Wemyss, was a lawyer, and her mother, Verna Simpson, was a musician. Her maternal grandfather was a cabinetmaker and became the town undertaker. Laurence's youth was marked with tragic losses and remarkable adaptations on the part of her family. When Laurence was four, her mother died suddenly, and her aunt came to live with her father and her. This aunt, Margaret Simpson, married Laurence's father a year later, and the couple had one child, Robert. Laurence and her stepmother developed a close relationship that persisted throughout Laurence's formative years. Tragedy struck again four years later when Laurence's father died. Laurence's stepmother faced an uncertain future since she was a woman rearing two children alone. Help arrived in the person of Laurence's maternal grandfather, eighty-two years old and also recently widowed,

who came to live with them. The grandfather was in good health and became a strong influence in Laurence's life. Although her stepmother often became engaged in bitter conflicts with her stubborn grandfather, the two provided a stable environment for Laurence and her brother.

Laurence went to college in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and continued to write. In 1947, she was graduated and became a reporter. That same year she married an engineer, Jack Laurence, and the two moved to England in 1949. The next year the Laurences moved to Somaliland, then a British protectorate in East Africa, where Jack built dams to retain rainwater for villagers. Two years later the Laurences moved to the British colony that became Ghana. The Laurence's two children, Jocelyn and David, were born there. Her first book, *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954), was a collection of Somali literature that she edited.

In 1957, the Laurences moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, where Laurence began to write about her African experiences from a fictional perspective. The outcome was *This Side Jordan* (1960), a novel that reflected the turbulent era of emerging independence of the Ghanaian people. She also wrote about her African experience in stories that she published in Canadian magazines from 1954 to 1962. The resulting collection, *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, was published in 1963, a year after Laurence separated from her husband and moved with her children to Buckinghamshire, England. She lived in England for twelve years.

During that period she composed the primary



body of works that secured her reputation as one of Canada's foremost novelists. The year 1963 also saw the appearance of *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (published in the United States as *New Wind in a Dry Land*, 1964), based upon her experience a decade earlier in Somaliland. In 1968, *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists, 1952-1966* appeared. In 1969 she divorced Jack Laurence.

Five works published between 1964 and 1974 are the basis of her fame. These five books, called the Manawaka Cycle, begin with *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *A Jest of God* (1966). Both novels introduce heroines who live in Manawaka, a small prairie town in Canada, and who struggle to gain insights into their families and their identities. In 1969, Laurence completed *The Fire-Dwellers*, which draws upon autobiographical elements and treats the experiences of a sister of the main character in *A Jest of God*. The fourth book in the cycle, *A Bird in the House: Stories* (1970), is largely autobiographical and focuses on Laurence's childhood. Her body of work was acknowledged in 1971, when she received the honor of Companion, Order of Canada. In 1974, Laurence returned to Canada to live in Ontario. In that year *The Diviners* (1974), the last novel in the Manawaka Cycle, appeared. A year later, Laurence was honored again with the Molson Award.

The five Manawaka books were the climax of her writing career. She wrote four children's books from 1970 through 1980; *Heart of a Stranger*, a book of travel writings based on her African experiences, appeared in 1976. After *The Diviners*, she published no more fiction for adults. She became chancellor of Trent University in Ontario in 1981; she died in 1987 in Ontario.

## ANALYSIS

In an autobiographical essay, "Books That Mattered to Me" (1981), Laurence recalled that in college she discovered Canadian writers who were striving to understand what it meant to be Canadian. From her exposure to these writers, Laurence learned that as a writer she would have to "write out of my own place, my own time, my own people." This declaration serves as a good starting point for understanding Laurence's strengths as a Canadian author. She is first and foremost Canadian in her identity and in her values. Readers of her books will

gain insights into the ways in which the vast Canadian landscape affects the choices and struggles faced by individuals and by families. When Laurence discovered her roots, she also discovered her strengths. In doing so, she set the foundation for her finest writing.

The importance of that sense of "place" and its relationship to a character's identity and values is best reflected in her creation of a specific fictional town she called Manawaka, based to a great extent on her hometown of Neepawa, Manitoba, Canada. Her creation of Manawaka reflects also the primacy of the autobiographical elements of Laurence's fiction. All the heroines in the Manawaka novels and short stories can trace their backgrounds or roots in some way to the fictional Manawaka. Often Laurence used specific settings, such as the town cemetery, her grandfather's funeral parlor, the dance hall, or the junkyard, as symbolic settings in which her characters could interact. Just as William Faulkner did in his creation of Yoknapatawpha County (the county seat of Jefferson is based in part on Oxford, Mississippi), Laurence transformed the townspeople and the literal settings to serve the purposes of her art. It is impossible to separate the meanings of Laurence's characterizations, conflicts, and themes from the sense of place that is generated by her blending of autobiography and fiction.

Her experiences in Somaliland and Ghana in the 1950's certainly were formative ones in her career as a writer. The works based on her African experiences reflect the struggles of individuals from diverse cultures trying to communicate with one another and accommodate one another's needs. Similarly, these works concern the problems faced by a country preparing itself for independence. Many of her stories emphasize the outsider's point of view, perhaps reflecting her own status as a Westerner living in an alien culture.

Laurence was acutely aware of the theme of the insider/outsider. She was able to empathize with the plight of people who lived under the domination of colonial powers and thus were, in many respects, outsiders in their own lands because they were subject to oppression. As a Canadian author, she understood that feeling of being outside the main political and economic power base in the Western Hemisphere. As a woman, she was aware of the struggle of women to free themselves from

the domination of men. In her creation of the town of Manawaka, she was identifying with the conflicts that arise between the narrow-minded citizens of a small town and the outsiders who dare to challenge the security of the status quo. Laurence gave voice in her characters to a diverse set of ideas that challenged old assumptions.

Whereas men were the dominant characters in her African stories, women are the dominant characters in her Canadian fiction. Each of the Manawaka books features the experiences of a separate heroine. Four of the women are from Manawaka; the fifth, Morag Gunn, is an outsider who seeks to escape from the town after she has become part of its fabric. Morag is also a novelist and thus perhaps most closely represents the viewpoint of someone who, like Laurence, had to stand on the outside in order to portray objectively the experiences of Manawaka natives. In many respects Laurence is a feminist author. Her women are engaged in a process of reflection and self-discovery. They resist the domination of men and seek insights into their own strengths (and even failings) of character.

Many of her novels and stories portray problems of communication between individuals. Laurence suggests that although people seek closeness and understanding in relationships, they often undermine successful relationships because of deep-seated personal conflicts that remain hidden from them. In Laurence's fictional world relationships are fragile, sometimes fleeting, but always complicated. Characters necessarily have difficulty relating to others when they do not know themselves fully.

## THE STONE ANGEL

**First published:** 1964

**Type of work:** Novel

*An old woman's struggle with cancer stimulates her to reevaluate her life.*

Hagar Shipley, ninety years old, dominates the action in *The Stone Angel*, the first of Laurence's five books that treat the experiences of women whose lives intersect with the fictional town of Manawaka, Manitoba. Hagar tells her story in the first person,

and a review of her past life is woven into the narrative. Hagar was born in Manawaka; her mother died giving birth to her. Hagar has never accepted this loss. She associates any weakness on the part of others as symbolic of the weakness of her mother, who was not able to survive childbirth. To compensate, Hagar has always been a stern, unrelenting judge of others. She has lost touch with the sensitive side of herself.

Laurence provides a compelling symbol of Hagar early in the novel. The town cemetery is dominated by the statue of a stone angel placed there in her mother's honor. In an ironic twist of fate, the carver did not add the eyes of the angel, and the author suggests that this symbolic "blindness" is reflected in Hagar's view of herself, her relationships with her father and her brothers, her marriage to Bram Shipley, and her attitudes toward her two sons, Marvin and John. Hagar has never seen herself for who she truly is. Reared by a maiden aunt, Hagar was dominated by her father, who had a narrow conception of how a young woman should act and what role she should fulfill. Hagar tries to escape her father's domination by

marrying Shipley, an uncouth farmer who shows little promise for managing his property. Before long, Hagar and Bram argue constantly; soon they live separate lives even though they live together. Eventually, they separate when Hagar leaves with their younger son, John.

Hagar invests all of her emotional energy in her son John. She rears him alone and becomes blind

to his character as it develops in a direction similar to that of Bram. John becomes all that Hagar desires that he not become. He defies her just as she defied her father and just as Bram defied her. John even falls in love with a woman whom his mother considers beneath him. Unfortunately, Hagar cannot see and accept the deep affection the two feel toward each other. John and his lover die a tragic death, the result of another defiant act on John's part. Hagar never forgives herself for driving him away and, in her mind, indirectly causing his death.



The day she sees her dead son in the hospital is the day her grieving heart turns to stone.

The image of stone is an important part of the symbolic meaning of the stone angel. If stone is a common symbol of the heart numbed forever by grief, stone also represents what is cold, hard, and unforgiving in the human heart. Hagar's judgments throughout the novel are unrelenting and enduring. She refuses to change her mind once she has made a decision, and this behavior leaves her isolated from the warmth of human contact.

Hagar lives with her son Marvin and his wife, Doris. These caregivers are in their sixties and finding it increasingly difficult to live in harmony with a quarrelsome old woman. Laurence ably treats the theme of adult caregivers facing the limitations of old age while trying to provide adequate care for an older parent. Added to these concerns is Marvin's long-standing unresolved relationship with his mother. John was always her favorite son. Although Marvin has cared for Hagar for more than twenty years, she has never recognized him for being a good son. Near the end of the novel, when Hagar enters the hospital to receive treatment for the symptoms of advanced cancer, she does acknowledge Marvin's devotion to her. Laurence treats their interaction ironically, however, for when Hagar releases Marvin from his burden, she does so as an act of kindness toward him, not because she believes what she tells him. In fact, she calls her recognition of Marvin's efforts a "lie"; but then reconsiders by saying that it was "not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love."

Although Hagar's interaction with Marvin reflects ambivalent feelings on her part, it reflects one of the few times in the novel that she seizes an opportunity to communicate honestly and openly with another person. An important theme in the novel is that of missed opportunities for communication. When Hagar's brother dies, she misses the chance to share her feelings with her other brother; she never tells her father what her needs are; she never tells her husband how much she loves him; she never acknowledges Marvin's appeals for affection when he is a boy; she never tells her son John that it would be all right to see his girlfriend in the house whenever he wants to see her.

Laurence suggests that lost opportunities for communication are related to excessive pride and

a fear of dependency or loss of control. In old age, Hagar begins to realize what she has lost; before she dies, she realizes that what she has always wanted was to experience joy and fullness of life. Yet her need for privacy, her rigid exclusion of contrary points of view, and her pride held her back.

Hagar is an enigma to the end. The epigram for the novel is an excerpt from Dylan Thomas's famous poem "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Hagar lives out the imperative that the narrator makes to his father in that poem. Hagar "rages" from the beginning to the end of this novel. She rages against the loss of control she feels as the object of caregiving; she rages against her aging body and the cancer that afflicts her; she rages against the lack of communication between the generations; she rages at the failed choices she has made throughout her life; and she rages against God for not making the terms of communication between people more accessible and easy to follow.

## THE FIRE-DWELLERS

**First published:** 1969

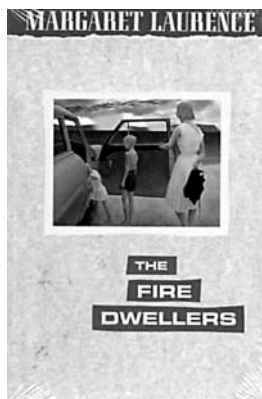
**Type of work:** Novel

*A woman overcomes feelings of self-doubt, struggles to resolve ongoing conflicts with her husband, and discovers untapped sources of strength in her character.*

*The Fire-Dwellers* is the third in the series of Laurence's five Manawaka books. Its heroine, Stacey MacAindra, is the sister of Rachel Cameron, the heroine in the second novel in the series, *A Jest of God* (1966). Whereas Rachel seemed doomed to spend her life in the narrow confines of the small town of Manawaka, her sister Stacey escaped the town and moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, at the age of nineteen. At twenty-three she married Cliff MacAindra, a salesman. Now thirty-nine, Stacey is not happy with her life. She feels unattractive, trapped by the pressures of motherhood, confused by her husband's lack of communication with her, and frustrated with her husband's decision to begin a new job working for a man who appears to be a manipulative and overbearing charlatan.

Laurence tells the story through Stacey's eyes, using the form of interior monologue as the character reacts to events in the present and reflects upon events in the past. Stacey's world is dominated by her responsibilities as a mother of four children, each of whom is an individual with unique needs. At first Stacey feels she has reached an impasse as a caregiver. The burden of responding to the children's diverse requests seems too much to bear. Stacey retreats into a private world. At one point she laments that she is neither a good mother nor a good wife.

In time, Stacey's experiences contradict this declaration. She survives several crises facing her children. At the end of the novel she feels her strength of will renewed. Finally, she declares, "I used to think there would be a blinding flash of light someday, and then I would be wise and calm and would know how to cope with everything and my kids would rise up and call me blessed. Now I see that whatever I'm like, I'm pretty well stuck with it for life." She realizes that she is a good mother and possesses an internal reservoir of strength and determination.



The strains in the relationship between Stacey and her husband reflect Laurence's interest in the theme of the fragile nature of human communication. Stacey complains that Mac will not share his thoughts or fears with her. Initially, she concludes that his lack of disclosure reveals his lack of caring; eventually, she understands that his reticence masks his

fears that he will not be able to take care of the family's financial needs and that he is inadequate at his job. As soon as Stacey grasps the true state of her husband's crisis, she is empowered to act on his behalf against all odds. By the end of the novel, she demonstrates skills for reconciliation, adaptation, and a willingness to take on new challenges on behalf of her family.

Stacey's personal struggle to regain a sense of her own identity reflects Laurence's abiding concern with the process of reflection and self-discov-

ery in women's lives. Stacey constantly seeks answers as to who she is, what her purpose in life should be, and what suitable roles she can fulfill. In despair at her inability to communicate with her husband, Stacey meets a young man by chance and begins a love affair with him. Although Stacey gains a sense of fulfillment from this affair, she does not know how to resolve her relationships at this point.

Eventually, several crises occur that propel her toward a resolution of all relationships. Stacey decides to stay with Mac after he begins to share some of his fears; she does not return to her lover; and she decides to take care of Mac's father after the old man has a bad fall. Mac escapes his intimidating boss when the latter is promoted to a position in Montreal. Stacey cannot help but marvel at the workings of fate and human will. At the end of the novel, Laurence emphasizes a newfound harmony in their relationship after both survive respective periods of self-imposed isolation and introspection. Now the two have each other, not as each would like the other to be but as each accepts the other despite imperfections and limitations of character or will.

In a sense, Stacey has always wanted her husband to speak to her in her language—articulate, expressive, sharing openly, willing to disclose any and all feelings. Yet he cannot speak this way. After one of many family emergencies is overcome late in the novel, Stacey recognizes that Mac and her oldest son speak the same language, a language in many respects foreign to her own. Finally, she comes to accept this difference in how communication works within this family. To Stacey, the world will always be a dangerous place. Everyone is a "fire-dweller"—Stacey's experiences in the novel reflect innumerable close calls and crises. Yet Stacey finally learns to accept the uncertainties and risks associated with the future.

## SUMMARY

Margaret Laurence was always faithful to her Canadian roots as a writer. Her depiction of life on the harsh prairie landscape, particularly her creation of the fictional town of Manawaka, which functions as the setting for four of her novels and a short-story collection, is an integral part of the sense of place in her works. Her creation of strong women characters and her treatment of themes relevant to

women's experiences place her in the forefront of feminist writing. Laurence portrays women who overcome problems of identity, limited roles, the complexities of motherhood, and the perils of marriage relationships. Laurence probes the nuances of communication in human relationships and exposes the difficulties faced by individuals who seek to uncover secrets about their pasts and about themselves.

Robert E. Yahnke

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*The Diviners*, 1974

#### SHORT FICTION:

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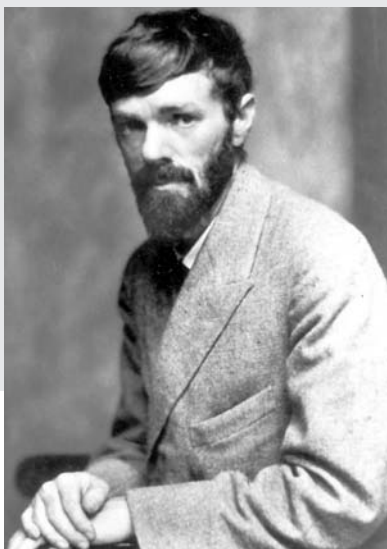
## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Margaret Laurence is one of the many writers who have had to escape their home to write about it. Does it appear that her African experiences helped her to write about Manitoba?
- Compare the insider-outsider conflicts in Manawaka with those in William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.
- At what points in Laurence's life can be seen signs of her own self-discovery?
- What benefits does a reader uninterested in Manitoba acquire from the Manawaka books?
- What interpretation of Dylan Thomas's "rage" governs Laurence's characterization of Hagar in *The Stone Angel*?



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D.C. Public Library

## D. H. LAWRENCE

**Born:** Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, England  
September 11, 1885

**Died:** Vence, France  
March 2, 1930

*A major British author of the twentieth century, Lawrence probed with great intensity and occasional audacity themes of human sexual psychology and questions of moral behavior.*

### BIOGRAPHY

David Herbert Lawrence was born in Eastwood, a coal mining town in Nottinghamshire, England, on September 11, 1885. His father, Arthur John Lawrence, was a gregarious, hard-drinking collier whose marriage to Lydia Beardsall, formerly a schoolteacher of genteel refinements, was a continuous struggle for mastery. D. H. Lawrence was the third son born into this household, along with two sisters. A gentle, studious, sissified boy, Lawrence was sometimes scorned by the more robust colliers' sons of the town; shunning their athletic games, he enjoyed instead the company of his sisters or of their young female friends, whom he charmed with his skill at charades and games of mimicry. Above all, he enjoyed excursions in the Derbyshire countryside not far from the grimy mines, near the lush Sherwood Forest area surrounding Eastwood, a retreat that Lawrence once called "the country of my heart."

Although he did not enter school until he was seven, he made rapid progress when he was enrolled in the Beauvale Board School, and at the age of twelve he was awarded a North County Council scholarship to Nottingham High School, eight miles from his town. After he left high school in 1901, he was briefly employed in Nottingham at the office of a surgical supply factory. At sixteen, he suffered from a severe bout with pneumonia and

required a long time to recuperate. Earlier in 1901, his older brother, Ernest, had died of respiratory illness; frantic, his mother began to focus all of her attention on her convalescent son. So intense was the affectionate relationship between mother and son that Lawrence later came to believe that it had diverted his sexual development from a more normal path.

Some time before his illness, during the summer of 1901, Lawrence had met Jessie Chambers, then fourteen, who was living at the Hagg's farm, three miles from Eastwood. In the convivial household of the Chambers family, so different from his own, Lawrence enjoyed a friendship, especially with the brothers, that was relaxed and spontaneous; with Jessie he enjoyed a deeper, more intimate relationship, although his mother disapproved of the girl.

In 1902, Lawrence was a pupil-teacher at the Eastwood British School, where he taught both in Eastwood and at Ilkeston, Derbyshire, until September, 1906, when he entered Nottingham University. Having placed in the first division of the first class on the National King's Scholarship Examination, he was admitted to a two-year academic program leading to an arts degree. Qualified as a teacher in 1908, he became a junior assistant-master at the Davidson Road School in Croydon, a suburb of London. He worked there until November, 1911, when a second severe attack of pneumonia forced him to take a leave of absence.

Yet as early as 1905 Lawrence had begun writing, and with Jessie Chambers as his sounding board, he experimented in fiction and poetry. When his

mother died in January, 1911, he suffered a terrible emotional blow, yet in that year he published his first novel, *The White Peacock*. Reviewed favorably by most critics—one compared Lawrence as a regionalist to Thomas Hardy—the novel established a thematic pattern that would become fairly typical for the author. Narrated by a Lawrence-like character, the book treats the mating choice of a young woman for one of two suitors, one overcerebral and overcivilized, the other an earthy, vital man. The novel also urges the need for honesty, for naturalness in the relationships between men and men, as well as between men and women.

Lawrence's second novel, *The Trespasser* (1912), based upon the experiences of his friend Helen Corke, was less successful. Yet with the publication of *Sons and Lovers* in 1913, his reputation began to grow. Along with the publication of his first book of poetry in the same year, the novel marked a major advance in his professional career. A year earlier, in April, 1912, Lawrence's personal life had also changed dramatically. After a month's courtship, he had eloped with Frieda von Richthofen Weekley, mother of three small children and wife of a professor of French at Nottingham University.

With Frieda by his side (the couple was not to marry until 1914, when her divorce became final), Lawrence traveled the world extensively—usually in self-imposed exile from England. In the midst of packing and unpacking, seeking warm places more favorable to his tuberculosis, he continued to write major fiction, such as *The Rainbow* (1915), *Women in Love* (1920)—generally regarded as his masterpiece—and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Lawrence also published other novels, including *The Lost Girl* (1920), *Aaron's Rod* (1922), *Kangaroo* (1923), *The Boy in the Bush* (1924), and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). In addition, Lawrence published collections of novellas, numerous volumes of poetry, several volumes of short stories, four volumes of travel sketches, and other collections of essays and plays. By 1928, following the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence's health began to fail. After staying a month at a sanatorium, he insisted upon being moved to a villa at Vence, near Cannes, France. There on March 2, 1930, with Frieda at his side, he died. After burial, his body was later reinterred at Taos, New Mexico.

## ANALYSIS

In an essay entitled "The State of Funk," Lawrence discusses his moral vision as an artist:

My field is to know the feelings inside a man, and to make new feelings conscious. What really torments civilised people is that they are full of feelings they know nothing about; they can't realise them, they can't fulfil them, they can't live them. And so they are tortured. It is like having energy you can't use—it destroys you. And feelings are a form of vital energy.

In Lawrence's worldview, people either possess or lack vital energy—that is to say, *anima*, or spirit. Those whose vital spark fires into passionate energy are truly alive; the rest—those whose natural feelings are dulled by the mechanical routine of "civilization," so that their responses are cerebral, not instinctive—might as well be dead, no matter how successful they may appear to be, no matter how attractive or wealthy or powerful they may seem.

Lawrence's novels, short stories, poems, and miscellaneous writings advance the same moral vision: that men and women (indeed, whole cultures) must discover their true selves, a quality epitomized in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) as the "IT." The IT, or essential self, was once, among primitive cultures, celebrated as a life force of vital energy. When Lawrence visited sites of Etruscan culture, in *Etruscan Places* (1932), he half described, half invented an archaic world during a period when its people took passionate pride in the human body, when they exulted the sacredness of the whole living universe. According to Lawrence, Etruscans and other old civilizations regarded the universe as an organism, a living whole, to which all living things, and even seemingly inanimate things, belong. Now, Lawrence believes, human beings have lost sight of their interconnectedness with the organic universe; they have lost their connection with *anima*, the vital spirit. Through constant mechanical repetition, their feelings, even their sexual feelings, have grown dull, repetitious, lacking spontaneity or natural warmth.

Rejecting the scientific positivism dominant in twentieth century philosophy, Lawrence urges instead a "religion of the blood," a primitivistic belief in the power of instinct rather than mind. For him, the "dark gods" of the blood, of the subconscious

intuitive self, not the light of cerebral rationality, must rule human conduct.

Yet how can modern men and women, forced to work in a mechanized, technologically complex world, tap their deepest feelings? For Lawrence, reared in a mining town that symbolized for him the mechanical horrors of a rigid, artificial, inhuman universe, the answer was both simple and complicated. On a simple level, they must learn to reeducate their native instincts, almost stultified by the repetitions of work, almost blighted by meaningless social intercourse.

To renew these instincts, Lawrence as an artist would educate the sensibility of people, so that they might confront their secret hearts. Typically, his stories concern confrontations or encounters in which characters discover their true sensual identity and either achieve fulfillment or fail. Because the sexual urge, in Lawrence's view, is the last powerful human feeling that resists the mechanization of intellect, he usually shows how characters can reeducate their passionate selves in order to become authentic human beings. Thus, sex—usually identified in the public mind as the writer's central theme—is actually the means, not the end, of vital education. Lawrence once complained bitterly about the vulgar image of him as a "lurid" propagandist for sexuality. His theme, indeed, is not sex, but love. In a sense, Lawrence is the most "romantic" of major twentieth century writers, for he believes not only in the redemptive powers of love but also that human beings have a narrow choice: They will either love or die—they will either become part of the vital flow of energy, or they will dry up, shrink in heart, and become part of the living dead.

If Lawrence's moral vision is simple (or, to his detractors, simplistic), his purposes as an artist are often complicated. Although his plots are generally direct enough—he brings two or three major characters into direct confrontation—the means by which characters confront one another are calculated to expose their intrinsic psychological urges. Commonly, Lawrence will structure a plot around the conflict of three persons in a triangle confrontation. In this pattern, a woman has a choice between two suitors. One is inhibited, "civilized," meticulous to a fault, often limited by a weak or ambiguous sexual drive; the other is virile,

healthy, unaffected, but often coarse in manner. Stories such as "The Old Adam" and "A Modern Lover" are typical. Sometimes the pattern is varied, with a fastidious male character forced to choose between a prim, gentle, sexually undemanding (or unresponsive) potential mate and a more earthy, vital, but sexually assertive female, as in "The Witch a la Mode" and *Sons and Lovers*.

A second common pattern of Lawrence's plots involves the mating of two couples, one seemingly more compatible or "lucky" in its robust sexuality, the other experiencing a serious, early complication in its romance. In this pattern, Lawrence usually shows how the members of the "lucky" couple actually are ill-suited to each other, whereas the problematic couple resolves its difficulties to achieve a measure of happiness as in "Love Among the Haystacks" (1930) and *Women in Love*.

Forced to confront their authentic natures, Lawrence's characters either come to terms with their "blood," their subconscious psychological urges, or fail—usually because they attempt to dominate their lover. For Lawrence, love's psychology is inextricably connected with the psychology of mastery, the urge to control another person. When the impulse toward dominance is stronger than that toward eros, as in "The Prussian Officer," the character will fail to achieve vital fulfillment. When one character succeeds in achieving ruthless domination over the other in spite of the partner's resistance, the result is also tragic, as in *The Fox* (1923). Only when Lawrence's love-partners acquiesce to a passionate relationship that is both sexual (phallic) and tender, is the pattern perfected in mutual love, as in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

As for characters who fail to achieve any vital connection with another human being, they are either humiliated, as Bertie Reid is in "The Blind Man," or, like expiring vampires, decompose, as Pauline Attenborough does in "The Lovely Lady." For Lawrence, the human vampires, those who feed off the vital energy of others to maintain a semblance, but not the reality, of life, are among the living dead. Lawrence's characters are not so much good or evil as they are alive or dead, either life enlarging or life limiting, either those who worship the dark gods or those who worship the gods of machinery and of money.

## SONS AND LOVERS

**First published:** 1913

**Type of work:** Novel

*In this famous psychological novel, a sensitive Midlands youth cannot reciprocate the love of women of his class because of his Oedipal attraction to his mother.*

*Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence's third book, is an apprenticeship novel that, in many respects, defies the conventions of its genre. Among early twentieth century English apprenticeship novels that preceded Lawrence's work, the main character usually undergoes an "education" or "apprenticeship" toward a meaningful life experience. As part of his (or, rarely, her) apprenticeship, the protagonist begins with innocent, often mistaken notions about the nature of reality; only after some painful experiences does he grow to mastery in the game of life. Specifically, he learns valuable lessons about himself, especially his limitations and illusions, but by the completion of his youth he often can answer three questions: What is the nature of love? What vocation is appropriate for me? What is the meaning of life?

In contrast with the main characters in earlier apprenticeship novels or in subsequent ones, Paul Morel, Lawrence's protagonist, fails to find answers to any of these questions. By the end of his life apprenticeship, he has learned only that he is incapable of intense sexual feelings to sustain a relationship with a young woman, that he lacks a true vocation for his considerable talents, and that he cannot fathom the "meaning of life," except narrowly in terms of his own sensibility.

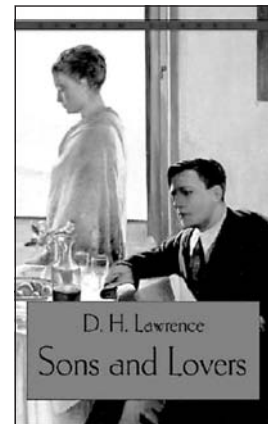
Grappling with a modern version of the classic Oedipal problem, Paul loathes his father, the hard-drinking but convivial miner, Walter, and he attaches himself emotionally to his mother, Gertrude. As a result of this psychological conditioning, in Freudian theory, Paul has been crippled emotionally. Following his mother's death from cancer, Paul is a "derelict," isolated from all meaningful emotional contact with women. His proposal of marriage to Miriam Leivers, whom he had earlier seduced, is merely formalistic, and she rejects him. He turns back Clara Dawes, his paramour, to her husband, Baxter, for he knows that

he cannot give her the fullness of love that she deserves.

Yet the clinical phrase "Oedipal complex" does not quite get to the heart of Paul's dilemma. As Lawrence understands his protagonist, Paul has indeed been crippled in his vitality through his mother's excessive love for him, for her identification of soul with his soul. In Lawrence's variation on the Freudian paradigm, Paul has invested his vital force, his *anima*, so deeply into identification with his mother that they are truly one. He has no more vital energy to surrender to any other woman. Gentle, passive Miriam threatens him because, in his imagination, she wishes to absorb his soul, to destroy what is left of his independence. Although he loves her on a spiritual level, he subconsciously fears her physical sexual presence. His "test" on her sexuality has really been a test of his own capacity to feel erotic emotion through her stimulus—and he fails. His love affair with Clara, sexual enough to satisfy him physically, lacks a dimension of the spirit. In either case, he shrinks from being absorbed—from losing his independence through love with either a passive or an assertive woman.

Even as he fails in his quest for love, Paul also fails to discover a life's vocation. Although he has dabbled in painting, has worked as a spiral clerk at a surgical supply factory, and has taught school briefly, he concludes his youth without ever selecting a foundation for his future labors. His vocation, by the end of the novel, is not to work at all, at least not to work at mechanical, dehumanizing tasks. In a sense, his work at Jordan's—which symbolically manufactures artificial limbs and prostheses—prepares him for the larger world beyond Nottingham. He learns that every person is crippled to some degree, some obviously, like the hunchback, Fanny, others emotionally, like Paul.

Finally, he fails to solve the great mystery of the meaning of life. By the end of the novel, he has made only one crucial decision: to go on living. He





has decided not to follow his mother in death, presumably by his own suicide. Yet this decision, considering the great emotional stress that Paul has endured, is no small victory of the spirit. The lights of the town that urge him onward are symbols of his renewed spark of vital force. By moving toward these lights “quickly,” he shows the reader that he accepts the challenge eagerly.

## WOMEN IN LOVE

**First published:** 1920

**Type of work:** Novel

*In this novel treating the mating of two sisters with their lovers, one couple is relatively successful, while the other concludes its relationship in tragedy.*

*Women in Love*, begun as early as 1913, was tentatively entitled “The Sisters,” then later “The Wedding Ring.” As the sprawling manuscript began to take shape over the next two years, Lawrence published the first part as *The Rainbow* (1915). With considerable revisions and a complete rethinking of the material, he published a second Brangwen novel in 1920. In its final form, *Women in Love* is less a continuation of *The Rainbow* than an altogether different novel. To be sure, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen persist in their quest for happiness. Yet the Gudrun of *The Rainbow* was a minor figure; in *Women in Love*, she is a major protagonist, with a fully developed psychology. Ursula’s change is even more dramatic. In the earlier novel, she was a woman of passionate independence, whereas in *Women in Love* she is subdued—less impulsive, less heroic, more nearly domesticated.

Their lovers, Gerald Crich and Rupert Birkin, complement the sisters’ essential temperaments. Like the fiery, strong-willed Gudrun, Gerald is a controlling, domineering sensualist—one as habituated to subduing horses to his iron command as to overworking his laborers in the coal mines. In contrast, Rupert (a Lawrence-like personality) is sensitive, introspective, emotionally fragile in spite of his intellectual vitality and his charm.

Unless one reads Lawrence’s canceled prologue to *Women in Love*, a chapter that can be examined in the author’s posthumous volume *Phoenix II: Uncol-*

*lected, Unpublished, and Other Prose Works* (1968), one cannot fully understand the reason for Rupert’s timorousness as a lover. Yet this prologue is an essential key to perceiving what follows in the novel. Even as Rupert was pursuing with dutiful but passionless zeal his affair with Hermione Roddice, he was attempting to put behind him a far more satisfactory emotional friendship with Gerald. Whether the men’s earlier relationship had become one of physical homosexuality is not entirely clear, although Lawrence seems to exclude the physical element. Nevertheless, Rupert is erotically stimulated more by men than by women and certainly not by Hermione, in spite of his frantic love-making or his earnest wishes to love her with tenderness:

He wanted all the time to love women. He wanted all the while to feel this kindled, loving attraction toward a beautiful woman, that he would often feel towards a handsome man. But he could not. Whenever it was a case of a woman, there entered in too much spiritual, sisterly love; or else, in reaction, there was only a brutal, callous sort of lust.

As the novel itself begins, a reader ignorant of this complication in Rupert’s psychosexual orientation may not fully understand why the character experiences so much trouble in his relationship with Ursula. The couple, after all, seems to be well suited culturally, intellectually, even emotionally. The two share a similar background in education and social class, are both intelligent, sensitive, tolerant, and certainly “love” each other. Yet their love must be tested and refined. Many readers will wonder at the lengthy disputations between Ursula and Rupert—the continuing, often circular debates over the meaning of love, the subtle defining of roles that each partner must adopt to make the relationship work. Precisely this test is the core of Ursula and Rupert’s mating, for it results in compromises that make it possible for the couple to marry.

Ursula wisely and lovingly diminishes Rupert’s secret fear that women will dominate him sexually. He is actually more comfortable with the embraces of a man. In the chapter “Gladiatorial,” Rupert and Gerald release their tensions (and sublimate their repressed eroticism) by wrestling; more than that, for Rupert the touching is a sign of hope for

“blood-brotherhood,” a deep friendship and binding between the males. When Gerald dies, Rupert is a broken man. Although he has mated successfully with Ursula and loves her as deeply as ever he can a woman, he regrets the loss of another form of fulfillment: bonding for life with a male friend.

If Ursula’s vacillating relationship with Rupert ends at last with bitter-sweet success, Gudrun’s passionate affair with Gerald concludes in tragic failure. Yet their love had seemed at first to be grounded firmly on their similar temperaments.

Both are controlling, emotionally vehement, erotically charged persons. Yet their seeming “luck” in discovering passion so easily is, in fact, a cause for failure in love. Even as Gerald exerts despotic and capricious force to control his miners, so he tries to subdue the strong-willed Gudrun. Yet she is as defiant, independent, and proud a person as he: She battles him sexually for dominance, so that their lovemaking assumes the qualities of a battle, without tenderness or consideration for the other partner. Less cruel than Gerald, she is nevertheless as perverse in diminishing his self-confidence. Near the conclusion of the novel, his suicide seems inevitable.

Yet how can one explain Gudrun’s infatuation with Loerke, a physically unattractive homosexual? Why should this sexually vital woman follow after a man who seems to contrast with Gerald’s powerful, athletic virility? The answer is that Loerke is also, like Gerald, a willful, controlling, arrogant brute. He attracts Gudrun through both his magnetism and his dedication to art; in his drawings and sculpture, he achieves works that are mechanical, starkly industrial, rather than human. Through her servant-to-master role with Loerke, Gudrun will complete her destruction (in Lawrence’s image, her reduction), eventually to become as mechanical as Loerke.

For Lawrence, Gerald’s tragic fate is caused partly by Gudrun’s reductive energy, which corrodes his vital spirit, and partly by his own self-

destructive egoism. In contrast, Ursula and Rupert are “lucky” in love because they nurture, rather than diminish, the vital energy of their partner. Artists such as Loerke—clever, manipulative, independent—may survive with their ego intact; but unless their lives, as well as their art, are established on human principles, they too fail to reach fulfillment.



### “THE HORSE DEALER’S DAUGHTER”

**First published:** 1922 (collected in *England, My England*, 1922)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In this modern psychological fairy tale of rebirth, a desperate woman and her rescuer are redeemed by love.*

“The Horse Dealer’s Daughter,” resembling such fairy tales or folktales of transformation as “Cinderella” or variations on themes of “The Ugly Duckling,” treats a sullen country girl whose condition is wonderfully altered from humble (or ugly) to attractive and marriageable. Mabel Pervin’s transformation also resembles that of tales concerning Princess Aurora or of Snow White, in which a maiden and her world are cast under a spell (or curse), only to revive, along with the revival of life everywhere, upon the magic of a lover’s kiss. As a psychological tale, Lawrence’s story also resembles coming-of-age rituals, in which the protagonist moves from sexual latency to mature fulfillment, from sterility to fecundity, from passivity to vitality.

At twenty-seven, with a fixed expression on her face described as “bull-dog,” Mabel first appears to be an unattractive spinster; worse, she suffers from a depression that brings her to the verge of suicide. Her mother dead, her father and her brothers indifferent to her, she is the drudge of an otherwise all-male household. The men enjoy a vital, jovial connection through their drinking and hearty companionship. Yet Mabel, symbolized by the draught horses tied head to tail, is as captive as a brute animal, in spite of her slumbering, subdued animal strength. Like the horses, she seems to be asleep—helpless to demonstrate her vitality.

When Dr. Jack Ferguson, a friend of the Pervins, especially of Mabel's boisterous brothers, views her wading into the water moments before she submerges into the turgid, "dead" pond, he perceives at once that she wishes to end her life. He rescues her not simply as a physician but also as a concerned human being. In sinking beneath the cold water, he nearly drowns. In a sense, he has saved two persons, Mabel and himself. Yet the immersion, resembling baptism, is a renewal of life—from near death to rebirth—so that both persons are symbolically "reborn."

Mabel's confused words, when she discovers that Ferguson has removed her muddy clothing, challenge him: "Who undressed me?" Certainly it was the doctor, who had in mind only the welfare of his patient. Her next challenge, striking to the heart of her deepest yearning, arouses in him a response that is equally authentic: "Do you love me, then?" For many readers, this challenge appears to be illogical, even absurd. Before the incident, Ferguson had never indicated to her any feeling of love. Yet his response is affirmative. He is compelled to love her, not because of any particular quality in the woman, but because of his need to love. In a sense, his existence has been heretofore as devoid of vital force as hers. He, too, had been dying to his passional self, although he had not been aware of this reduction. In a leap of intuition, he "connects" with Mabel's elliptical meaning. If he does not love her, she might as well be dead. Without intellectual reflection, he knows instantly, subconsciously, that his case is the same.

Ferguson's insistence that the woman marry him at once, the next day if possible, is appropriate to his heart's deepest needs, even as it is to Mabel's. She fears only that his intense, fierce desire will overwhelm her. When she speaks of her "horrible" qualities, she is only human. To Lawrence, all people fear that they are "horrible" despite their exterior attractiveness or charm; only the power of love redeems them from their fears of incapacity. In this most explicitly romantic of Lawrence's stories, his theme must be understood directly, without reading into it any sense of implied irony or satire: Lawrence truly means that Mabel and Jack must either love or die. Awakened into life by the enchantment of flowing vitality, these lovers, like those of fairy-tale romance, successfully complete their ritual of rebirth and are saved.

## "SNAKE"

**First published:** 1921 (collected in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*, 1923)

**Type of work:** Poem

*From his encounter with a snake, the narrator confronts on a symbolic level his attitudes toward sex.*

"Snake" can be understood on two levels, as narrative and as symbol. On the simpler level, a Lawrence-like speaker encounters a snake at "his" water trough. Rapt by nearly hypnotic fascination, he allows the snake to drink, without taking action. Soliloquizing like Hamlet, the speaker wonders whether he is a coward not to kill the snake, because in Sicily the gold snakes are venomous. The snake continues to drink until, satisfied, it climbs the broken bank of the wall face, puts its head into "that dreadful hole," and withdraws "going into blackness." At this point, the speaker throws a log at the water trough yet fails to hit the snake. Immediately, he regrets his "pettiness" and wishes that the snake would come back, for it seemed to be like a king. The speaker has missed his chance with "one of the lords of life."

On the narrative level, the poem is perplexing because a reader cannot fathom why the speaker expresses his internal debate with such vehemence over the question of killing the snake. One is not necessarily a "coward" in avoiding a poisonous snake, nor is one "perverse" in longing to talk to one. What "voices" of his education demand that he kill the snake? Are they the voices of Judaic-Christian tradition concerning the serpent in the Garden of Eden? Are they the voices of scientific rationalism that define a venomous snake as dangerous? Moreover, why should the speaker feel such regret at the act of throwing a log at the snake? After all, the snake had escaped the blow. Why should the snake seem to the speaker to be "like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld"? To be sure, in non-Western cultures the snake (or, in ancient Egypt, the crocodile) is often worshiped as a divine symbol of fertility. In India and in Mexico among the ancient Aztecs, the snake has been revered as a god of sexuality and life. Yet why should a twentieth century European speaker suppose that the snake is "due to be crowned again" as a lord of life?

Answers to these questions can best be determined by analyzing the symbolic structure of the poem. The snake is clearly a phallic image—at least to the speaker. When the snake first emerges, reaching down from “a fissure in the earth-wall,” the speaker perceives, on a subconscious level, the male organ emerging from the female. Lawrence uses the vulva image of “fissure” or “earth-lipped fissure” deliberately. When the speaker, almost trancelike, stares at the snake “withdrawing into that horrid black hole,” he imagines on a symbolic level the act of sexual intercourse. As a result of his “education,” he has repressed his sexuality; his fears of the woman are expressed by the word “horrid.” By throwing a phallic-shaped log at the disappearing snake, he has suddenly snapped the tension. Now he regrets the voices of his “accursed human education.” Even as the Ancient Mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem suffered guilt after slaying the albatross, so the speaker feels guilt at his “mean” act. For the snake, in Lawrence’s symbolism, is indeed a lord of life. Like Pluto, who in Greek mythology ruled the underworld, the sexual force (phallus) rules the subconscious and is “due to be crowned again,” this time as king of the dark gods of the blood—of vitality. Because the snake inhabits two worlds—that of light and of darkness, of the consciousness and of the subconsciousness—it represents to Lawrence (as do “Bavarian Gentians”) a union or wedding of the opposing ele-

ments of the universe into a single symbol of the life force.

## SUMMARY

In “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” D.H. Lawrence makes clear his belief that the only “luck” that a person ever achieves in life is the good fortune—or capability—to love. Yet not all forms of love are life enhancing. As a moralist, Lawrence urges his readers to discriminate between incomplete, self-involved, or perverse love and love represented by phallic tenderness. In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, particularly, he shows how good sex (which is natural, spontaneous, springing from tender feelings toward one’s partner) renews life, whereas, bad sex (which is cerebral, mechanical, springing from self-involvement and the urge to dominate another human being) results in emotional sterility.

In his essay “Why the Novel Matters,” Lawrence wrote that “the novel is the book of life.” By that he did not mean simply that the novel provides a reader with vicarious experiences that resemble life. Instead, he meant that the novel actually gives the reader life, because the novelist transmits part of his life force to the reader. As a novelist and as a writer of different genres, Lawrence is generous in providing not only the simulation of life but also life itself.

Leslie B. Mittleman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does D. H. Lawrence make his "problematic couples" happy?
- As a critic, Lawrence expresses many of his literary convictions. Observe some of them in his book *Studies in Classic American Literature*.
- Do we learn more about the Etruscan culture or about Lawrence in *Etruscan Places*?
- Are Lawrence's unsuccessful lovers primarily failures or victims of forces beyond their control?
- Lawrence's poetry often attempts to capture a revealing moment. How is this true of "Snake"?
- What are the chief pitfalls of equating Paul Morel and his creator?



*D. H. Lawrence*

*Assorted Articles*, 1930

*Apocalypse*, 1931

*Etruscan Places*, 1932

*The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, 1932 (Aldous Huxley, editor)

*Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, 1936 (Edward McDonald, editor)

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Courtesy, Stephen Leacock Museum/Archive

## STEPHEN LEACOCK

**Born:** Swanmore, Hampshire, England (in the Isle of Wight)

December 30, 1869

**Died:** Toronto, Ontario, Canada

March 28, 1944

*Although Leacock wrote authoritatively on political economics, the profession for which he was trained, he became Canada's finest writer of parody and burlesque.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Butler Leacock (LEE-kahk) was born at Swanmore, Hampshire, England, in the Isle of Wight, on December 30, 1869, the son of W. P. Leacock and Agnes Butler Leacock. He was taken in 1876 to live on a farm near Lake Simcoe in Ontario, Canada. Leacock was educated at Upper Canada College in Toronto, where he was head boy in 1887. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1891 and earned a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago in 1903. He then began a distinguished academic career that was to last until he was past sixty-five years of age. From 1891 to 1899, he taught at his old preparatory school and found the job of schoolmaster deeply depressing. He joined the faculty at McGill University in Montreal as a temporary lecturer, however, and eventually became professor of political economy. He was named head of the department of economics and political science in 1908 and taught at the university until 1936.

Leacock was widely known for his professional writings, publishing many learned studies in economics. *Elements of Political Science* (1906) was an early academic work, and *Economic Prosperity in the British Empire* (1930) was a major late work. Their author whimsically observed that he hoped that no one would ever have to read them. Certainly, the larger reading audience knew him as the author of

humorous essays and burlesques. In fact, so enormously successful were his books of humor and his lectures that, in time, his scholarly writings may have been unjustly neglected.

Leacock made his appearance as a humorist in *Literary Lapses* (1910). This well-received collection was followed in rapid succession by *Nonsense Novels* (1911), *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914). Volumes with similarly playful and alliterative titles are *Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy* (1915) and *Frenzied Fiction* (1918).

Works from the latter half of Leacock's career are *Laugh with Leacock* (1930), *Afternoons in Utopia: Tales of the New Time* (1932), *Mark Twain* (1932), *Charles Dickens: His Life and Work* (1933), *Humor: Its Theory and Technique* (1935), and *Funny Pieces: A Book of Random Sketches* (1936). His books on Twain and Dickens are studies of other writers who made liberal use of humor in their work. In *Humor: Its Theory and Technique*, the college professor brings his analytic powers to the study of comic writing. Books from the prolific writer's last decade are *Laugh Parade* (1940), *Our British Empire: Its Structure, Its History, Its Strength* (1940), *My Remarkable Uncle, and Other Sketches* (1942), *How to Write* (1943), *Last Leaves* (1945), and *The Boy I Left Behind Me* (1946).

The sketches in *Literary Lapses* were actually written between 1891 and 1899, Leacock's period as an unhappy schoolmaster, and had appeared in various periodicals. When he offered them to the publishers of his *Elements of Political Science*, they did not

take the proposal seriously. He then printed the sketches at his own expense and, using a news company as distributor, sold three thousand copies in two months. Soon thereafter, the book was published in more conventional form, and Leacock's career as a popular writer was launched.

In August, 1900, Leacock married Beatrix Hamilton of Toronto at the Little Church Around the Corner in New York City. He joined the University Club and, as he became more prosperous, established a summer home in Orillia, Ontario, Canada. Leacock's humor is gently teasing (as opposed to the blistering satire of Twain, to whom he is often compared), but the residents of Orillia were deeply offended by *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. In August, 1915, his only son, Stephen Lushington Leacock, was born. Leacock's wife died in 1925. Gradually, Leacock accumulated a host of honorary degrees: Litt.D., LL.D., and D.C.L.

Leacock's comments on himself are usually so playful and self-mocking as to warn the reader against taking them at face value. For example, in the preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, he offers his membership in the Political Science Association of America, the Royal Colonial Institute, and the Church of England as a proof of his respectability. He goes on to say that he is a member of the Canadian Conservative Party but has failed utterly at politics, since he has never been awarded a contract to build a bridge or anything else.

Following a throat operation, Leacock died in the General Hospital at Toronto on March 28, 1944. He was seventy-four years of age and left behind four chapters of his autobiography.

## ANALYSIS

Leacock has often been compared to Mark Twain. Perhaps it is inevitable that any North American humorist who has won a wide reading audience and whose work is not largely urban and ethnic in nature will be compared to Twain. Moreover, it is true that superficial similarities between the two writers do exist. Both are at their best in the sketch or self-contained episode, and their books, even Twain's novels, are usually collections of short pieces. Both gave humorous lectures that showed them to be skilled performers, as well as writers. Both use a prose that depends little upon quaintness or wordplay. The style of each is simple and straightforward, allowing the comedy to flow from

the closely observed absurdities of daily life rather than from verbal pyrotechnics. Finally, of course, Leacock expressed his fascination with Twain by becoming his biographer.

The differences between the two writers, however, are as marked as the similarities. Twain's satire, from his first book onward, is often characterized by antipathy and disgust for his subjects. Leacock's dominant mood, on the other hand, is one of amused tolerance. Twain is more truly a writer of fiction. Leacock's pieces are not usually short stories in the sense in which that term is traditionally applied. They are fictional to be sure, in that the reader has no illusions that those anecdotes featuring Leacock himself as protagonist recount actual occurrences. The author-narrator usually represents himself as a naïve bumbler, a persona belied by the skill of his storytelling. Apart from such anecdotes, the bulk of Leacock's humor is parody. He wrote many hilarious spoofs of the romantic novels, detective stories, and theatrical melodramas of his day.

It could be argued that all humor is aggressive, that every joke is on someone. Humor is the result of someone's embarrassment, discomposure, loss of status or control, however slight. The ways in which Twain and Leacock express this aggression mark the major difference between them. Leacock writes often about Prohibition in the United States, an undertaking by which he was both amused and bemused. Had Twain lived to see the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment, the reader can easily imagine the virulence with which he would have assaulted the fools, scoundrels, and hypocrites who would abridge the freedom of others through such a high-handed measure. Leacock, however, greeted the noble experiment of the Americans (and similar laws enacted in some Canadian provinces) with a feigned amazement and a gentle skepticism.

Leacock alludes obliquely to the professional stresses created by his books of humor. To his professional colleagues, he was first and foremost a political economist. To those most closely associated with him, he was the department head—the man who determined teaching assignments, who recommended raises in pay and promotions in rank. In the previously mentioned preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Leacock complains that many of his friends believe that he writes humor-

ous trifles only in those hours during which he is too weary to perform his true work. He protests that the truth is the exact opposite of this notion, that his academic writing is easy, while his imaginative work is arduous and succeeds only upon occasion. He concludes that he would rather have written *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) than the entire *Encyclopædia Britannica*. There, Leacock compares himself, by implication, not to Twain but to Lewis Carroll, another gentle humorist and university professor. Leacock attests to the seriousness with which he approached the writing of humor in *Humor: Its Theory and Technique* and *How to Write*.

In typically self-deprecating fashion, Leacock writes that, immediately after he had lectured extensively on imperial organization throughout the British Empire, the Union of South Africa came into being, and riots and wars threatened the empire elsewhere. These events, he says with mock seriousness, will give the reader some idea of the importance of his addresses. The admirer of Leacock's comic writings, however, should not make the same error in reverse that the author attributes to his academic colleagues. Leacock's serious works are not insignificant.

In 1930, while putting together a collection of Leacock's best comic pieces up to that time, the humorist's editor writes that he polled more than a dozen of the wittiest minds of the day regarding what the selections should be. The single most requested piece was not humorous at all. It was a discussion of present-day education under the title, "Oxford as I See It." Even though the volume is to be called *Laugh with Leacock*, the editor says that he is obliged to include this shrewd analysis in the collection. The presence of "Oxford as I See It," surrounded by parodies, burlesques, and pieces of inspired nonsense, suggests a nice metaphor for Leacock's work—the gift of wisdom and common sense found within the extravagantly wrapped package.

## LITERARY LAPSES

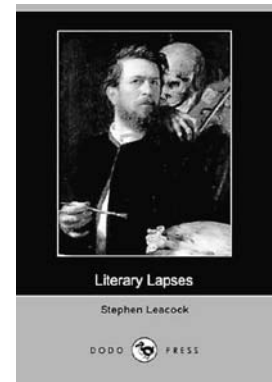
**First published:** 1910

**Type of work:** Short stories

*This little book is a mixture of fanciful short stories, literary parodies, and mock-serious essays by an eccentric persona.*

*Literary Lapses* is Leacock's first book of humor. It is not an easy volume to classify. Russel Nye calls it a collection of essays, but only a handful of the sketches are truly essays. It is composed of twenty-six short pieces, ranging from short stories to burlesques of severely condensed romantic novels to essays that solemnly develop mad premises. Leacock's typical narrator is established in the very first sketch, "My Financial Career." After several ludicrous missteps, he succeeds in opening his first bank account; then, because of the bank's intimidating ambiance, he inadvertently draws a check for the total amount of his deposit. Thereafter, he keeps his savings in a sock.

The literary parodies, although comprising only a fraction of the text, appear to give the volume its title. "Lord Oxhead's Secret" is subtitled "A Romance in One Chapter." The peer's daughter, Gwendoline, is a beautiful "girl" of thirty-three who is being courted by the dashing Edwin Einstein of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. At the climactic moment, as the father and the unsuitable suitor come face to face, Lord Oxhead falls dead, taking his secret with him to the grave. It is too complicated to be of interest anyway, concludes the narrator. In "Getting the Thread of It," the narrator's friend Sinclair attempts, by fits and starts, to familiarize him with the plot of the historical novel that Sinclair is reading. It is set in Italy in the time of Pius the something and features such characters as Carlo Carlotti the Condottiere and the Dog of Venice. "A Lesson in Fiction" is a sort of quiz on the modern melodramatic novel. The reader is asked to predict the behavior of the hero, Gaspard de



Vaux, boy lieutenant, and is able to do so at every juncture of the plot. The critic in “Saloonio: A Study of Shakespearean Criticism” is Colonel Hogshead who, after amassing a fortune from cattle trading in Wyoming, has turned to the study of William Shakespeare. Unshakably fixed in his head is the idea that a character named Saloonio is central to the action of *The Merchant of Venice* (pr. c. 1596-1597, pb. 1600). This notion meets such spirited resistance from the narrator and others that Colonel Hogshead is actually driven to reading the play. The fact that no Saloonio appears in the text, the Colonel finds unpersuasive—the book in hand, he insists, is unlike those that he consulted in Wyoming.

The short stories often have absurdly tragic endings. In “The New Food,” Professor Plumb of the University of Chicago has invented a highly concentrated form of food. A happy family is gathered around the small pill that represents their 350-pound Christmas dinner, when baby Gustavus Adolphus snatches the pill and swallows it. The distracted mother gives him water, a fatal error. After the explosion, only the smiling lips of a child who has had thirteen Christmas dinners remain. In “Borrowing a Match,” the passerby of whom the narrator asks this favor eventually throws away all of his possessions and rips his clothing to shreds in search of the requested item. He finally extracts from the lining of his coat—a toothpick. The narrator pushes him under the wheels of a trolley car and runs. In “An Experiment with Policeman Hogan,” as the officer walks his beat in front of the *Daily Eclipse* at two o’clock in the morning, journalist Scalper is at work in the office above. Scalper writes a column in which he delineates the character of readers by examining their handwriting. As he moves from one sample of handwriting to the next, he drinks from a dark bottle, which he shares with Policeman Hogan by periodically lowering it to the street on the end of a string. Scalper’s analysis of each sample coincides suspiciously with the degree of his progressive inebriation, so that by five o’clock in the morning he is telling Emily, a timid maiden in her teens, that she is on the verge of delirium tremens and that her liquor habit is so advanced as to preclude all hope.

A few of these pieces are dated, but it is a testimony to Leacock’s understanding of human nature and to the subtlety of his style that the public

found sketches written twenty years earlier still fresh and amusing. Indeed, a century after their composition, most are still fresh and amusing.

## SUNSHINE SKETCHES OF A LITTLE TOWN

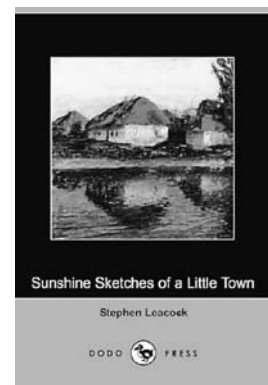
**First published:** 1912

**Type of work:** Short stories

*A deadpan narrator amusingly describes the character types and the folkways of a fictional Canadian town.*

The episodic plot of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is developed through a conversation between Leacock’s chatty narrator and another resident, or former resident, of Mariposa. The reader takes the part of the former resident, whose responses are minimal and are recorded only occasionally as the narrator repeats them. Mariposa is a sunlit town of five thousand, according to the Canadian census, or ten thousand, according to the natives, lying along a hillside next to little Lake Wissanotti. The narrator is extremely proud of the progressive nature of Mariposa, the showplace of Missinaba County. He purports to take every occurrence at face value, never challenging the way that the characters represent their actions or their motives. The discrepancy between the interpretations of the narrator and those of the reader account for much of the book’s humor.

Leacock presents a fine gallery of small-town characters. Josh Smith is a hotel keeper who possesses an imposing size and manner, as well as a shadowy past. Some of his business practices are sharp almost to the point of criminality. He is also the deus ex machina of the novel. When, during the Knights of Pythias’s Excursion Day on Lake Wissanotti, the *Mariposa Belle* sinks (in six feet of water), it is Mr. Smith who raises her. When the heavily mortgaged (and insured) sanctuary of the Church of England





burns to the ground, it is Mr. Smith who saves the rest of Mariposa. Evidence that Mr. Smith was seen earlier carrying a can of kerosene through the streets is quite sensibly dismissed by Judge Pepperleigh, who immediately finds for the Church of England and against the insurance company. In the novel's penultimate chapter, Mr. Smith stands as the Conservative candidate from Missinaba County. He finds his inability to read and write no true impediment and, by means of his usual skillful maneuvering, defeats the long-entrenched Liberal member, John Henry Bagshaw.

Other residents of Mariposa are Jefferson Thorpe, barber and speculator in mining stocks; Golgotha Gingham, undertaker and longtime Liberal, who announces on the day of Mr. Smith's election that he supported Bagshaw only with the deepest misgivings; Peter Pupkin, heroic junior bank teller who, along with Gillis, the caretaker, foils a robbery of the Exchange Bank at three o'clock one morning—both men fire at the intruder, and Pupkin is slightly wounded when the robber fires back (although, strangely, only two shots are heard by witnesses); and Myra Thorpe and Zena Pepperleigh, beauties who quicken the pulses of young Mariposan males. One of the most appealing characters is the elderly Dean Drone. The dean's poor head for arithmetic has sunk his church deep into debt. He insists that the fault lies with the mathe-

matical professor at the Anglican college who, fifty-two years earlier, stopped the lesson right at the point where the book discussed logarithms.

The final chapter in the book is an equal mixture of humor and nostalgia. The reader has become a rich businessman in the city. At the Mausoleum Club, he nods and dreams of returning to the little sunlit town of his birth. Yet, of course, he never has—and he never will.

## SUMMARY

Stephen Leacock published almost a book for each year between the appearance of his first collection of humor, *Literary Lapses*, and the posthumous *The Boy I Left Behind Me*. He wrote in a number of genres: scholarly studies in his academic specialty, humor, literary biography, literary theory, and autobiography. At the time of his death in 1944, he was regarded as one of the finest writers in Canada and the foremost humorist of North America.

His fame has diminished with the passage of time, and newer Mark Twains have been put forward by the critics. Still, the droll persona of his narrator, the tolerance and generosity of spirit that soften his satire, and the simplicity and clarity of his style have not lost their appeal.

Patrick Adcock

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*Nonsense Novels*, 1911

*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, 1912

*Behind the Beyond, and Other Contributions to Human Knowledge*, 1913

*Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, 1914

*Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy*, 1915

*Further Foolishness: Sketches and Satires on the Follies of the Day*, 1916

*Frenzied Fiction*, 1918

*The Hohenzollerns in America: With the Bolsheviks in Berlin, and Other Impossibilities*, 1919

*Winsome Winnie, and Other New Nonsense Novels*, 1920

*My Discovery of England*, 1922

*College Days*, 1923

Stephen Leacock

*Over the Footlights*, 1923  
*The Garden of Folly*, 1924  
*Winnowed Wisdom*, 1926  
*Short Circuits*, 1928  
*The Iron Man and the Tin Woman, with Other Such Futurities*, 1929  
*Laugh with Leacock*, 1930  
*Wet Wit and Dry Humour: Distilled from the Pages of Stephen Leacock*, 1931  
*Afternoons in Utopia: Tales of the New Time*, 1932  
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*Model Memoirs, and Other Sketches from Simple to Serious*, 1938  
*Laugh Parade*, 1940  
*My Remarkable Uncle, and Other Sketches*, 1942  
*Happy Stories Just to Laugh At*, 1943  
*Last Leaves*, 1945

DRAMA:

"Q": *A Farce in One Act*, pr., pb. 1915 (with Basil Macdonald)

NONFICTION:

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*Baldwin, Lafontaine, Hincks: Responsible Government*, 1907, enlarged 1926 (as Mackenzie, Baldwin, Lafontaine, Hincks)  
*Adventures of the Far North: A Chronicle of the Frozen Seas*, 1914  
*The Dawn of Canadian History: A Chronicle of Aboriginal Canada and the Coming of the White Man*, 1914  
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*Lincoln Frees the Slaves*, 1934  
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*Canada: The Foundations of Its Future*, 1941  
*Montreal: Seaport and City*, 1942  
*Our Heritage of Liberty: Its Origin, Its Achievement, Its Crisis, a Book for War Time*, 1942  
*How to Write*, 1943

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine the device of self-deprecating humor in Stephen Leacock's work. How does he keep readers from taking this self-deprecation too seriously?
- What is the difference between Leacock's parody and burlesque?
- Contrast the use of nonsense in Leacock's *Literary Lapses* and the Alice books of Lewis Carroll, which Leacock admired.
- Why should gentle humor, like that in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, infuriate the people of the town on which it is based?
- Why has Leacock's reputation declined, while those of Carroll and Mark Twain have not?

*Canada and the Sea*, 1944

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*The Boy I Left Behind Me*, 1946 (memoir)

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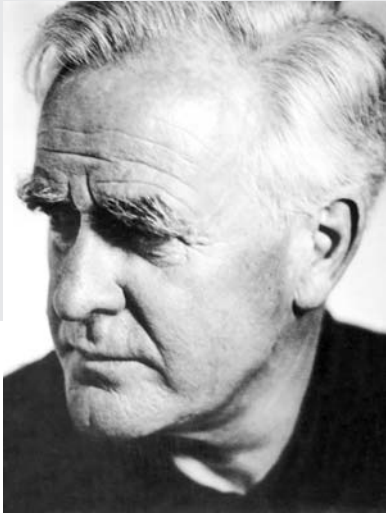
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The Douglas Brothers

## JOHN LE CARRÉ

**Born:** Poole, Dorsetshire, England  
October 19, 1931

*Le Carré wrote spy novels that were more realistic and intelligent than those that previously typified the genre, thereby demonstrating that they could be serious literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John le Carré (luh kah-RAY), the pseudonym of David Moore Cornwell, was born in the town of Poole in Dorsetshire, England, on October 19, 1931, the son of Ronald Thomas Archibald Cornwell and the former Olive Glassy. His mother deserted the family when John was a little boy; his father had numerous mistresses who created emotional confusion in the boy's life by serving as unreliable transient mothers. The early loss of his mother may explain why betrayal is the major theme of all le Carré's fiction. Le Carré's semiautobiographical novel *A Perfect Spy* (1986) paints a picture of a lonely, hypersensitive boy whose father was a philanderer, a heavy drinker, and a flamboyant con artist who once served a term in prison for fraud. Le Carré was sent to prestigious English boarding schools but felt out of place because he did not belong to the same social class as the majority of the students. His father caused him humiliation by paying the tuition with bad checks. His precarious situation left him with ambivalent feelings toward the upper class; he was taught to share their values but did not identify with them. These feelings are evident in many of his novels, but particularly in *A Perfect Spy*.

Le Carré attended Berne University in Switzerland for a year, where he perfected his knowledge of German. He has stated that "the strongest literary influence was all that German literature that I

devoured either compulsorily or voluntarily." Because he was fluent in German, he spent his obligatory period of military service as an intelligence officer in occupied Austria in the aftermath of World War II. Le Carré became a retiring and secretive man, reticent about his activities as an intelligence officer; many broad hints of his former life are given in *A Perfect Spy*, which is the most comprehensive source of information about his life. After his period of national service, le Carré attended the University of Oxford, where he specialized in modern languages. Upon graduation, he obtained a position as a German instructor at Eton. He was not happy there. He never really liked the English upper class and made his feelings apparent in many of his novels.

After quitting his post at Eton, le Carré engaged in somewhat ambiguous pursuits. Many people have claimed that he was working for a branch of the British Secret Intelligence Service. He himself says, "I have always tried to deny it and keep away from the subject, and I intend to go on doing so." On the strength of his knowledge of European languages, le Carré joined the British Foreign Service in 1960, and it is widely believed that he continued to work as a spy, using his diplomatic cover to recruit agents in foreign countries.

Le Carré was still employed by the Foreign Office when he wrote his first three novels. He was required by department rules to use a pseudonym, and he chose the name John le Carré. His first two novels, *Call for the Dead* (1960) and *A Murder of Quality* (1962), feature a protagonist named George Smiley, who acts more as a private detective than as a secret intelligence officer. Both books were well reviewed but had only modest sales. It was not until

le Carré published *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* in 1963 that he became famous in both Great Britain and the United States and began to earn enough money to devote his full time to writing.

Since 1964, he has been one of the world's most successful writers. Many of his novels have been made into motion pictures, including film adaptations of *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983), starring Diane Keaton, *The Russia House* (1989), starring Sean Connery, *The Tailor of Panama* (1996), starring Pierce Brosnan, Geoffrey Rush, and Jamie Lee Curtis, and *The Constant Gardener* (2000), starring Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz. The most faithful and the most aesthetically satisfying adaptations were the British productions of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) and *Smiley's People* (1980), both starring Sir Alec Guinness as George Smiley.

Le Carré, a tall, distinguished-looking man, is an accomplished raconteur and mimic. His two marriages produced four sons. He settled in a secluded home in Cornwall, England, with his second wife.

## ANALYSIS

John le Carré does for the spy novel what Raymond Chandler did for the detective novel in works such as *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940). Le Carré demonstrates how a popular genre can be used to explore serious issues in a realistic manner. His first two novels, though they are impeccably written, are rather inhibited and conventional detective-type novels. It was with the publication of his third novel, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, that he found himself as a writer.

Before le Carré's time, most spy thrillers featured impossibly patriotic, courageous heroes who were always getting involved in violent action. The hero's country was always right and the other side always wrong. The hero used ethical methods and acted in self-defense, while the villains could be counted upon to use murder and fiendish physical and psychological torture. One of the rare exceptions was W. Somerset Maugham's intellectual spy-hero, who appeared in a series of short stories collected under the title *Ashenden: Or, The British Agent* (1928). These realistic stories attempted to show spies and counterspies as real human beings. Other exceptions to the stereotypical romantic spy thriller, and another major influence on le Carré, were the thrillers or "entertainments" of Graham Greene. Greene's brooding, paranoic *Stamboul*

*Train: An Entertainment* (1932; published in the United States as *Orient Express: An Entertainment*, 1933), *A Gun for Sale: An Entertainment* (1936; published in the United States as *This Gun for Hire: An Entertainment*, 1936), and *The Confidential Agent* (1939) still make excellent reading after more than half a century. A third important influence on le Carré was Joseph Conrad, who was known primarily as an author of sea stories but turned out one memorable spy story in his novel *The Secret Agent* (1907).

The best representative of the romantic spy-heroes before le Carré's time is the famous James Bond. While the Bond stories such as *From Russia, with Love* (1957) and *Dr. No* (1958) have given readers and filmgoers many hours of escapist entertainment, even their own author, Ian Fleming, never took them seriously. Le Carré had plenty of exposure to the unpleasant realities of espionage in his years of government service. Just as Raymond Chandler wanted to show how real cops and real crooks talked and acted, le Carré wants to show how real spying is conducted and what sort of people are involved. In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, le Carré reveals to the reading public what Phillip Knightley has called "the sordid world of espionage with its easily bought loyalties, loose morals, mind-boggling complexities, and, if it were not for its murderous consequences, comic inanity."

That novel is impressive in its characterization and apparent authenticity; however, it still has unmistakable traces of the old-style spy thriller, with its action-oriented hero taking on the whole Communist world single-handedly and throwing his life away in a final romantic gesture. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was only le Carré's third novel. He had started writing fairly late in life; he was still struggling to find the right creative groove. It is obvious from his writings that le Carré's own personality is more cerebral than athletic and that his experience as a secret agent must have involved more organizational work than derring-do. He finally found the right formula for his spy fiction by focusing on the character of George Smiley and giving Smiley a formidable counterpart on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Smiley is the least heroic hero ever featured in genre fiction. The character he most closely resembles is the sedentary, hyper-intellectual Sherlock Holmes. While James Bond was appropriately por-



trayed on the screen by the handsome, dynamic Sean Connery, George Smiley was portrayed equally appropriately by the pudgy, soft-spoken Sir Alec Guinness. While James Bond is a man of action, Smiley is definitely an intellectual. Bond is an extrovert and Smiley is an introvert. Bond likes high-powered cars and exotic weapons; Smiley does not like to drive at all and never carries a gun. Bond is famous for his affairs with beautiful women, while Smiley is extremely shy with both men and women and is married to a woman who is outrageously unfaithful. Bond represents the kind of man the average male reader would like to be, while Smiley represents the kind of man the average armchair spy suspects himself to be.

*The Quest for Karla* (1982)—a trilogy consisting of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), and *Smiley's People* (1980)—represents the high point in le Carré's career. Besides George Smiley, the three novels contain other memorable characters. The Lenin-like Karla becomes one of fiction's great characters even though he remains offstage until the last chapter of the third book. The rivalry between these two strong-willed, brilliant antagonists resembles nothing in literature so much as the classic rivalry between Sherlock Holmes and Professor James Moriarty ("The Final Problem," 1894). It took an author with le Carré's intelligence, creativity, and insider knowledge to capture in fictional form the essence of the worldwide ideological, propagandistic, diplomatic, economic, technological, and military struggle called the Cold War. With the spy-heroes of Conrad, Maugham, Greene, and Fleming, the reader is confined to the agent level of espionage; with le Carré, the reader is admitted to the highest levels of spying and diplomacy.

*A Perfect Spy* reads like an addendum to *The Quest for Karla*, dealing with a minor theater of the Cold War but focusing with revealing autobiographical detail on the personality of a British spy turned traitor. The hero, Magnus Pym, resembles George Smiley in being a man who relies on his brain and his powers of persuasion rather than on brawn and athletic ability. *A Perfect Spy* reveals the psychological stress experienced by the British, as well as the Europeans in general, and even members of the developing world, as they were crushed between the enormous economic, military, and ideological pressure being exerted by the United States and

the Soviet Union, with the threat of nuclear annihilation facing humankind for more than forty years.

What made le Carré's spy novels so engrossing was that they were set in the Cold War years, and the stories he told and the issues he raised were current and relevant and resonated with the reader. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union, le Carré turned to other topics, and not always as successfully as in his Cold War novels and in the struggle between Karla and Smiley. *The Night Manager* (1993) centers upon a criminal conspiracy, and *The Tailor of Panama* is closer to Graham Green than to earlier le Carré in its non-Cold War and non-nuclear concerns, while *The Constant Gardener* depicts the greedy ambitions of the pharmaceutical industry and allied political and business interests. In *Absolute Friends* (2004), the moral ambiguity of the Cold War novels has vanished in the author's harsh political critique of America's war in Iraq. These later novels are readable, but they do not always reach the same level of psychological complexity and involvement that le Carré achieved in his earlier novels.

## THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

**First published:** 1963

**Type of work:** Novel

*A British spy deliberately disgraces himself in order to get recruited as a double agent by the East Germans in a story of multiple betrayals.*

*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* begins with a dramatic nighttime scene in which a British spy is shot down while trying to escape from East Germany. Alec Leamas, a British agent, harbors hatred toward Hans-Dieter Mundt, second in command of the Abteilung (East German intelligence service), who is responsible for the extermination of Leamas's entire spy network. Back in England, Leamas is recruited for a sting operation against Mundt. Leamas is dismissed from the "Circus" (a special department of the British Intelligence Service) and pretends to go through a period of moral disintegration in order to make himself seem like a good candidate for recruitment as a double agent. During this period he meets Liz Gold, a shy, lonely

librarian, who falls in love with him. She happens to be a member of the British Communist Party but is more interested in personal relationships than in causes.

Leamas is approached and agrees to betray his service for a price. He is taken into East Germany, where he meets Jens Fiedler, a brilliant Jewish intellectual deeply committed to Marxist-Leninist ideology. Fiedler is Mundt's chief rival in the Abteilung. Leamas disingenuously feeds Fiedler rehearsed information intended to make it appear that Mundt has been working for the British. The zealous and ambitious Fiedler accuses Mundt of treason, and a trial is staged with Leamas as the star witness. Leamas, however, learns that George Smiley and his associates at the Circus have been clumsily covering up his tracks in England. For example, it is brought out by Mundt's defense that Leamas had "friends" who paid his overdue rent and other bills.

Then Gold is called as a surprise witness. She has been lured to East Germany on a bogus tour for members of the British Communist Party. She reveals that men calling themselves friends of Leamas came to her apartment and gave her money. One had identified himself as George Smiley, well known to the Abteilung as a highly placed member of the British Secret Intelligence Service. Leamas cannot understand how Smiley could have been so clumsy but begins to realize that the whole scheme was concocted to make it appear that Fiedler has been involved with the Circus

in a conspiracy to destroy Mundt. That is exactly what the court decides is the truth. Fiedler is arrested and is certain to be executed as an agent provocateur. Mundt, a neo-Nazi and longtime British mole, is totally exonerated and obviously destined to become the most important figure in the Abteilung.

Leamas will probably be executed. Gold is heartbroken; she feels responsible for betraying her lover. The disgusted Leamas

tells Gold: "What do you think spies are: priests,

saints and martyrs? They're a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives." Here le Carré is spelling out the theme that would serve to structure all of his future spy novels. In the Cold War, both sides are equally despicable. Human values are being outraged by the ideological clash of communism and capitalism.

Mundt proves the correctness of these conclusions by releasing Leamas and Gold and providing transportation to the Berlin Wall. Here is an echo of traditional spy novels, featuring daring escapes from enemy territory under a hail of bullets. Le Carré, however, deliberately violates the conventions of the genre by allowing hero and heroine to be caught in spotlights while trying to scale the Berlin Wall and dying within sight of freedom.

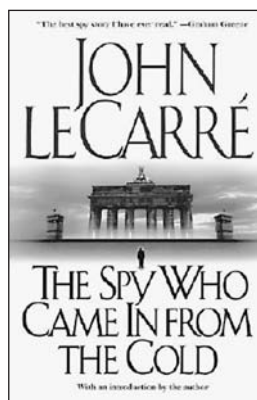
## TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY

**First published:** 1974

**Type of work:** Novel

*George Smiley is brought out of forced retirement in a desperate attempt to uncover a traitor in the British secret service.*

*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* is the first novel in a trilogy that came to be called *The Quest for Karla*. The novels are set in different parts of the world but have in common the British protagonist George Smiley and the Soviet antagonist known only as Karla. Oddly enough, Karla actually appears only at the very end of the last novel; yet his powerful personality, his unbending will, and his fanatical disregard for human feelings are felt throughout the approximately one thousand pages that make up these three books. The novels were inspired by the most famous case of treason in British history. Kim Philby, an upper-class, Oxford-educated intellectual who rose to the top echelon in the British Secret Intelligence Service, defected to Russia and was discovered to have been a mole—a double agent who had been revealing ultrasensitive information to Moscow Centre for decades. What made Philby's treachery even more devastating was that he had been in close contact with the American



Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in Washington, D.C., and was in a position to betray vital American secrets as well. This treachery poisoned relations between the secret services of the two allies. The British and Americans were unable to have confidence in their informants or operatives anywhere in the world.

In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Smiley is brought back out of semiretirement on a mission of the utmost urgency and confidentiality. It has been learned through a Soviet defector that Moscow Centre has a high-placed mole in the Circus who has been taking orders directly from Karla for years and has been systematically sabotaging the Circus. The mole has caused loyal employees to be fired and probably has been responsible for hiring agents who are working for Moscow Centre. Since Smiley has no way of knowing whom he can trust, he has to act as a counterspy against his own organization. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* contains little overt action. Smiley spends most of his days and nights examining musty files, trying to trace people's movements and link them with significant events. He is greatly aided by one of le Carré's most interesting characters, Connie Sachs, an arthritic, asthmatic old lesbian with a brilliant mind and a photographic memory.

The shy, self-effacing Smiley discreetly interviews various individuals and eventually finds a pattern of activities that enables him to identify the mole. He sets up an elaborate trap to lure the traitor to a safe house for a supposedly secret meeting with a Soviet agent.

When the highly regarded Bill Haydon appears, he is caught red-handed and confesses that he has been the Soviet mole since his undergraduate days at Oxford. It is common knowledge within the Circus that Haydon had an affair with Smiley's aristocratic wife, Ann. Smiley is horrified and outraged by the realization that Haydon initiated the affair on Karla's orders because Karla considered Smiley his most dangerous opponent and wanted Haydon

to obtain confidential information through the unsuspecting Ann Smiley. George Smiley is reinstated and becomes acting head of the Circus with the awesome responsibility of repairing all the damage that has been done throughout the years.

Jim Prideaux, one of the men whom Haydon betrayed, murders this former friend and superior while Haydon is being held in custody. As a character, Prideaux exists in order to provide some physical action in this otherwise highly intellectual plot; however, his role is tangential to the story and mostly covered in flashbacks. On the other hand, in the sequel, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, le Carré attempts to create a role for a vigorous, sexually active young hero while retaining the sedentary Smiley in the vital role of master planner.

## THE HONOURABLE SCHOOLBOY

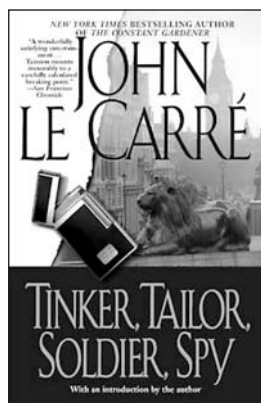
**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*George Smiley, now head of the Circus, sends an agent to war-torn Asia to capture a Soviet mole in the Communist Chinese government.*

In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, le Carré moves to a different theater of the Cold War, the Far East. Smiley learns that Karla has a mole in Communist China supplying him with information. Capturing this mole would help revive morale within the Circus and also help repair its relationship with its counterparts in the United States. It would also damage relations between China and the Soviet Union and secure badly needed information about what is going on inside mainland China.

Smiley sends a young agent named Jerry Westerby to Hong Kong to obtain information about a secret bank account into which Karla has been funneling American dollars for years. Westerby, posing as a journalist, spends much of his time drinking and womanizing. His investigations take him to various theaters of one of the bloodiest wars in history. Guerrilla armies in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, aided and abetted by the Chinese communists, are trying to topple the established governments, which are being held together only by massive military and economic support from the



United States. The descriptions of military action, streams of fleeing civilians, the total demoralization of the population, and the collapse of the Western presence on the Asian mainland represent some of the best writing le Carré has ever done.

In this novel, le Carré makes his anti-American sentiments more obvious than in any of his other works. He deplores the way in which the Americans are obliterating ancient cultures with napalm and other explosives dropped indiscriminately on innocent civilians. Le Carré is popular with American readers in spite of the fact that he has never treated American characters kindly and has never been successful in portraying them.

Westerby discovers that the mole inside China is Nelson Ko, brother of a powerful Hong Kong businessman named Drake Ko. On Smiley's orders, Westerby begins leaking such sensitive information that Drake realizes he must get his brother out of mainland China before he is exposed. Unfortunately, Westerby falls in love with Drake Ko's English mistress, Elizabeth Worthington, and nearly foils the entire Anglo-American plot by trying to make a private deal with Drake to exchange Nelson for Elizabeth. Westerby is killed by the Americans. Nelson is captured and taken to the United States for interrogation. Smiley's operation is successful, but he has been double-crossed by his own associates in the Circus, who have colluded with their American counterparts to force Smiley out and replace him with Saul Enderby, a stupid aristocrat who toadies to the CIA.

While the plot abundantly illustrates le Carré's favorite themes of betrayal and dehumanization, *The Honourable Schoolboy* is weakened by being broken into two widely separated points of view: that of Westerby in Asia and that of Smiley in England. When Smiley comes to Hong Kong in the final chapters to participate in the capture of Nelson Ko, it is an awkward attempt to tie the two separate plotlines together for artistic neatness. In *Smiley's People*, however, le Carré finally writes the perfect spy novel by making George Smiley both the thinker and the doer, the intellectual and the man of action, all in one central hero.

## SMILEY'S PEOPLE

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*George Smiley organizes a complex multinational espionage operation to force his archenemy Karla to defect from the Soviet Union.*

*Smiley's People* brings to a satisfying conclusion the battle of wits that has been going on between Smiley and Karla for many years. Smiley is called out of retirement to help the Circus investigate the recent murder of a former Soviet army general living in exile in London. The general had been in contact with a Russian woman living in Paris who had recently been approached by Soviet agents with an offer to allow her daughter to leave Russia and move to France. Smiley deduces that the general was assassinated because the old man suspected that Karla was only using the woman's daughter to create a false identity for some young woman he wanted to send to France. Smiley goes to the European continent to investigate. Smiley appears as a major or minor character in many of le Carré's earlier novels, but *Smiley's People* is the first book in which the reader is able to develop a full appreciation of his talents as a secret agent. He is in grave danger because Karla can have people murdered by agents in any country of the world and would certainly eliminate Smiley if he suspected that the British secret service agent was trying to unravel his secret.

Karla had an illegitimate daughter named Tatiana who is now in her early twenties. Tatiana is a schizophrenic, and Karla has had her secretly moved from Russia to a sanatorium in Switzerland, where she can receive better treatment. The nuns who operate the sanatorium know virtually nothing about her. Karla sends money to pay for her treatment via a minor official named Grigoriev. Karla must keep this a dark secret because his enemies in the Kremlin could destroy him if they could show he was using the Soviet diplomatic and espionage apparatus to further his purely personal interests. Smiley gets damaging information about Grigoriev's adulterous affairs and forces him to become a double agent, promising him safe asylum in Australia. Through the terrified Russian diplomat,



Smiley sends a confidential letter to Karla, offering him a carrot-and-stick proposition: If Karla will defect to the British, he will receive asylum and Tatiana will continue to receive high-quality psychiatric care; otherwise, Smiley will expose him. Karla will be executed, and his daughter will become a charity case without money, friends, or even an identity.

At the appointed deadline, Smiley and his assistants wait in the fog. If Karla crosses the bridge into West Berlin, it will be the greatest triumph in the history of the Circus. They will be able to learn everything about Soviet internal and external affairs. Suspense mounts as minutes tick by. Finally Karla, disguised as a working man, crosses the bridge, hesitates, and then delivers himself into British hands.

Characteristically, Smiley is not exultant. He feels ashamed for using Karla's genuine paternal love to destroy his archenemy. One of le Carré's major concerns in all of his novels has been the destruction of human values by the clash of godless ideologies. Smiley realizes that he has not really defeated Karla because he has not proved that Western values are superior to those of Communism. Furthermore, Smiley cannot help but reflect that Karla destroyed his relationship with Ann, condemning him to a life of loneliness, and that in a sense Karla destroyed Smiley as a human being long before Smiley was able to do the same thing to Karla.

## A PERFECT SPY

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*A high-ranking member of the British diplomatic corps reveals in a lengthy confession that he has been a double agent for many years.*

*A Perfect Spy* is the most autobiographical of all le Carré's novels. Since many of the facts about his life are obscure, it is difficult to determine exactly how much of the novel is factual and how much has been fabricated for dramatic effect. The central theme probably comes close to the truth about the author: His father was the most important influence in his life. Rick Pym, the father of the hero Magnus Pym, closely corresponds to what is known

about le Carré's own father. It was through Rick that Magnus learned how easy it is to deceive people if it is done with charm and on a lavish scale. Both the fictional and the real father expected the most of their sons but set for them bad moral examples.

In the novel Magnus Pym is a high-ranking diplomat who secretly manages espionage operations in foreign countries. He creates great alarm in government circles by disappearing without informing his wife about where he is going. The suspicion is that he has defected to the Soviet Union, in which case all the undercover agents behind the Iron Curtain who were known to him would be in immediate danger.

Pym is actually living in a private home on the Devon coast with an old woman who has no knowledge of his true identity. Miss Dubbers mothers him, and he treats her with kindness and generosity, revealing that he is a good man who had been led astray by circumstances beyond his control. His relationship with his landlady is central to the story. Like le Carré himself, Pym lost his mother at an early age and, because of his loveless childhood, was never able to relate to people in a normal manner.

Pym is writing an elaborate confession and suicide note in the form of a letter to his own son. This letter makes up much of the novel. He reveals how he began to take delight in secretly betraying people even as a boy in boarding school. His whole life has been a pattern of winning people's confidence, learning their secrets, and then betraying them. His only real friendship appears to have been with the brilliant Axel Hampel, whom he met while attending a university in Switzerland. Their relationship comes suspiciously close to being overtly homosexual, the type of thing at which le Carré often hints in his works but that he never explores in detail.

Eventually Axel becomes a spy for the Eastern Bloc, operating out of Czechoslovakia. He and Pym hit upon the scheme of exchanging secret information to advance their careers, and both are spectacularly successful for years. Then their superiors on both sides begin to deduce the truth. With the British secret service closing in on his pathetic foster home, Pym puts a pistol to his head and pulls the trigger.

The convoluted story leaps backward and forward in time and shifts to several different view-



points, most notably that of Jack Brotherhood, Pym's older, father-figure friend who is trying to track Pym down. In addition to being made up of many lengthy flashbacks, the story leaps about geographically, with scenes taking place in England, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and the United States. It is le Carré's most autobiographical, complex, experimental, and ambitious novel. It is only partially successful because it departs from the conventions of the espionage genre to some degree but does not do so completely; it is neither mainstream nor genre fiction.

## THE CONSTANT GARDENER

**First published:** 2000

**Type of work:** Novel

*After his social activist wife is murdered in Africa, a British diplomat pursues the reasons for her death.*

Justin Quayle is a British diplomat, a member of Her Majesty's foreign service, stationed in Nairobi, Kenya. Middle-aged and upper-middle-class, Quayle personifies Britain's traditional political and social establishment, and while conscientious enough in his professional duties, he devotes his free time to his garden, cultivating temperate flowers which grow well in Kenya's highlands. His much younger wife, Tess, is the opposite, a crusading lawyer who is very much the antiestablishment figure. Empathizing with the majority of Africans—poor and black—she is deeply committed to social justice. With Arnold Bluhm, a Belgium African doctor, she discovers that a major Swiss pharmaceutical firm, amorally pursuing profits, had, in connivance with other business interests and the Kenyan government, embarked on a campaign to distribute Dypraxa, a new antitubercular drug, to Africa's poor. The drug, while promising in the long run, has been released without sufficient testing and even with willfully inaccurate tests, and Africa's poor are to be the guinea pigs. Too many political and economic interests are threatened by Tess and Arnold's exposures, and they are brutally murdered. Justin is apparently intentionally unaware of the extent of Tess's involvement, spending his time tilling his garden.

British officials, such as Sandy Woodrow in Kenya and Sir Bernard Pellegrin in London, while superficially sympathetic to Justin's loss, do not want to jeopardize Britain's political influence or economic position in Africa and refuse to become involved in Tess's murder. Instead, they publicize the claim that Arnold, who was black, had murdered Tess, a white woman, in a fit of sexual passion, although in reality there was no sexual relationship and Arnold was probably homosexual.

Upon his return to London after Tess's funeral, Justin is advised to take a long leave, get some counseling, and recover from the trauma before accepting a new assignment. Instead, he makes the commitment to cultivate Tess's garden and discover where her campaign had led and what it had unearthed. He flees England with a fraudulent passport, first traveling to Italy, then to Germany and western Canada, and finally returns to Kenya, generally only a step or less ahead of the economic and political powers that have reasons to prevent his quest from succeeding. He does unearth the several conspiracies that led to Tess's death and mails his findings to sources in Britain, but when he visits the site of Tess's murder, he, too, is murdered. Whether his findings are going to have any ultimate effect on exposing the nefarious medical-economic-political bureaucracies and conspiracies is doubtful. After all, this is a le Carré novel, and his novels rarely have happy endings.

Le Carré is a brilliant writer, and his ability to take the reader into a place or capture the essence of a character in a few words is one of his strengths of *The Constant Gardener*. In addition to his portrayals of Justin and Tess, le Carré captures the duplicitous ambitions of Sandy and his wife, Gloria, Justin's diplomatic colleagues in Nairobi. The author's sense of place, such as the slums of Nairobi or an establishment London club, are uniformly excellent. However, the characters and the plot lack the murky moral ambiguities of his earlier Cold War works. Instead of the complicated amorality of many of his earlier figures, here people are either saints, such as Justin, Tess, and Arnold, or villains, many of whom are opportunists and self-servers, such as Woodrow or corrupt politicians both in London and Kenya. In this work, which reads as much as investigative journalism as a novel, an angry le Carré wears his idealism on his sleeve. In an era of increasing globalization, corporate

corruption is a legitimate issue, particularly when the poor and the powerless are victimized, but many of le Carré's "constant" readers found this novel less compelling than his Cold War efforts.

### SUMMARY

John le Carré's early experiences fitted him for a career as a spy novelist. He had the creative genius to see that the spy, living from day to day in paranoid terror, was the ideal symbol of the alienated modern individual living in the shadow of nuclear annihilation. Le Carré elevated the spy thriller to the level of enduring literature. His best novels will outlive many more pretentious contemporary literary works and will reveal to future readers more about the psychological and moral issues of the Cold War than any number of scholarly history books. His post-Cold War novels have not been as popular, neither among general readers nor among most critics.

*Bill Delaney; updated by Eugene Larson*

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*A Murder of Quality*, 1962

*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, 1963

*The Looking-Glass War*, 1965

*A Small Town in Germany*, 1968

*The Naive and Sentimental Lover*, 1971

*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, 1974

*The Honourable Schoolboy*, 1977

*Smiley's People*, 1980

*The Quest for Karla*, 1982 (omnibus; includes *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Honourable Schoolboy*; and *Smiley's People*)

*The Little Drummer Girl*, 1983

*A Perfect Spy*, 1986

*The Russia House*, 1989

*The Secret Pilgrim*, 1991

*The Night Manager*, 1993

*Our Game*, 1995

*The Tailor of Panama*, 1996

*Single and Single*, 1999

*The Constant Gardener*, 2000

*Absolute Friends*, 2004

*The Mission Song*, 2006

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Can George Smiley be considered an English patriot? Why or why not?
- What is John le Carré's attitude toward government bureaucracies in his Cold War novels? In his post-Cold War novels? Are there any differences, or does it remain consistent?
- What makes *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* one of the iconic novels of the Cold War?
- What are the character differences between Smiley and Karla?
- In le Carré's novels, are his American characters as realistic and as fully developed as his British and even his Russian characters?
- Compare and contrast le Carré's George Smiley and Ian Fleming's James Bond. Which better reflects the reality of the Cold War, and why?
- Discuss the theme of betrayal in le Carré's novels.
- What are the possible explanations why le Carré's post-Cold War novels have been less popular than his earlier novels?

SCREENPLAYS:

*Dare I Weep, Dare I Mourn*, 1966

*The End of the Line*, 1970

*The Tailor of Panama*, 2001 (adaptation of his novel; with Andrew Davies)

TELEPLAYS:

*Smiley's People*, 1982 (adaptation of his novel; with John Hopkins)

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Franz Rottensteiner

## STANISŁAW LEM

**Born:** Lvov, Poland (now Lvov, Ukraine)  
September 12, 1921

**Died:** Krakow, Poland  
March 27, 2006

*Writing primarily in science fiction, a genre that is often dismissed as lacking artistry and has long been dominated by American and British writers, Polish science-fiction writer Lem achieved both international popularity and a sterling literary reputation.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Stanisław Lem (leh-m) was born in Lvov, Poland (now Lvov, Ukraine), on September 12, 1921. His father, Samuel, was a physician who served for a time with the Austro-Hungarian military. In 1915, during World War I, Samuel had been taken prisoner by the Russian army. He was nearly executed for being a class enemy but was saved when an old acquaintance interceded at the last minute.

After the war, Samuel Lem became a successful otolaryngologist in Lvov. By the time Stanisław was born, Samuel and his wife, Sabina Wollner, were very prosperous. Unlike many who lived in Poland between the world wars, the Lems had a fine home, where young Stanisław was cared for by a French governess and never lacked for toys. As a young boy, Lem's reading consisted largely of his father's medical books, at which his father forbid him to look. One of his prized possessions from this time was a science book that his father had given him and that cost seventy zlotys, the price of a suit of clothes.

According to Lem's own account of his life, he was a quiet and imaginative young boy. He preferred solitude to a life among friends, and to amuse himself he created fantasy kingdoms where he had great power and high prestige. Each element in his imaginary life was legitimized by a complete file of papers, including passports, diplomas, and certificates of various kinds. Although he ad-

mits that this love of fantasized power and reputation might indicate childhood insecurities, he remembers having had no such feelings.

In 1932, Lem began college at the Karol S. Szajnocha II State Grammar School, graduating in 1939. He went on to study medicine at Lvov University from 1940 through 1941, but his schooling was interrupted by the advent of World War II. During the war, Lem became aware of his Jewish ancestry as a result of the anti-Semitic measures introduced by the invading Nazis.

Despite the many hardships they endured, the Lems escaped confinement in the Jewish ghetto because Samuel had obtained false papers to hide the family's true identity. During the occupation, Lem worked as a mechanic helper and welder for a German company recycling raw materials. He visited the ghetto on occasion and performed acts in support of the resistance movement, but through a combination of careful planning and sheer luck he managed to survive the occupation, unlike many of his friends. His luck in living through the war made the element of chance an important theme in many of his later novels. He resumed his medical studies in 1944, when the Soviet army liberated Lvov.

In 1946, the Lems moved to a one-room apartment in Krakow. The family was now poor, having lost everything they owned during the war. Under these adverse conditions, Lem, then in his mid-twenties, began writing poetry for a weekly Catholic paper called *Tygodnik Powszechny*. He also wrote

his first novel, *Człowiek z Marsa* (the man from Mars), which was initially serialized as several episodes in a weekly dime magazine in 1946 and published as a book in 1994. His meager literary earnings helped to support his poverty-stricken family. He also enrolled at Jagiellonian University to continue studying medicine.

In 1947, he began to work as a junior researcher for Konwersatorium Naukownawcze. The founder of the organization, Mieczysław Cholnowski, liked young Lem and became his mentor, encouraging him to read widely. It was during this period, when Lem also worked as a surveyor of trends in world science and began writing for and editing a monthly state-financed magazine called *Życie Nauki* (the life of science), that he gained much of his understanding of genetics, cybernetics, and the several other scientific fields that influenced his fiction.

Lem ultimately stalled in his medical ambitions because he refused to accept the Soviet-sanctioned views of the now-discredited geneticist Trofim Lysenko. He credited his intensive reading during the postwar years with providing scientific depth and an augmented literary power to his works, particularly his novels *Eden* (1959; English translation, 1989), *Solaris* (1961; English translation, 1970), and *Niezwyyczajony i inne opowiadania* (1964; *The Invincible*, 1973).

In 1951, Lem and Roman Hussarski cowrote a play, *Jacht Paradise* (yacht paradise), which was produced by a theater group in Szczecin. He also wrote scientific articles for the weekly *New Culture* from 1952 through 1955. While continuing to write prolifically, Lem took time to attend to family matters. In August, 1953, he married Barbara Lesniak, a radiologist; the couple's son, Tomasz Lem, was born in 1968. Lem's father, Samuel, died in 1954.

The city of Krakow awarded Lem the Golden Order of Merit in 1955, the first of many accolades he would receive throughout his career. His books, which were translated into more than forty languages and sold more than twenty-seven million copies worldwide, earned him membership in the Polska Akademia Nauk (the Polish Academy of Sciences), Polska 2000, Polska Akademia Umiejętności, and the Polish Writers Association. He was made an honorary member of the Science Fiction Writers of America but was later expelled due to his outspoken disdain for most American science

fiction. In addition, Lem was named an honorary citizen of the city of Krakow; received honorary degrees from Wrocław Polytechnic, Opole University, the State Medical University of Lvov, and Jagiellonian University; and won a prize from the Polish minister of foreign affairs for popularizing Polish culture abroad, a literary prize from the Polish ministry of culture, the Polish State Prize, the Austrian State Prize for European Culture, the Austrian Kafka Prize for Literature, the Medal of the White Eagle, the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation Award, several Nebula Award nominations, and a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

It was after the first award, according to scholar Richard E. Ziegfeld in his book *Stanisław Lem* (1985), that "Lem's period of mature writing began." During this time, he produced numerous works, including several science-fiction novels, ten collections of science-fiction short stories, a science-fiction play, and three television plays. He also composed *Summa technologiae* (1964), a 650-page treatise on cybernetic sociology.

In 1982, Lem and his family departed Poland for West Berlin, where he studied at the Wissenschaftskolleg on a one-year scholarship. The Lems then moved to Vienna, where they lived for the next five years. During this time abroad, Lem would write his last two science-fiction novels, *Fiasko* (1986; *Fiasco*, 1987) and *Pokój na Ziemi* (1987; *Peace on Earth*, 1994). During the 1990's, he primarily wrote magazine articles about futurology and contributed to the Polish edition of *PC Magazine*. His collected articles appeared in book form in *Tajemnica chińskiego pokoju* (1996), *Dziury w całym* (1997), *Bomba megabitowa* (1999), and *Okamgnienie* (2000).

On March 27, 2006, Lem died in Krakow after a long battle with heart disease.

## ANALYSIS

Lem wrote that his career could be divided into three phases: a period of utopian optimism compatible with Soviet standards of hopeful expectation for the human future, a period of exploration of existing science fiction and other literary forms for use in expressing a more complex and often darker vision of human life, and a period of experimentation with new modes of expression for many of these same complex themes. Although some overlap exists from one career phase to another,



the general movement of Lem's creative life has been from simplicity to complexity, from traditional to more experimental forms, and from a relative optimism to a satiric darkness.

The two works most closely associated with Lem's optimistic period are *Astronaucci* (1951; the astronauts) and *Obłok Magellana* (1955; the Magellan nebula), novels that helped establish his popularity in the Communist world but which he later repudiated and refused to reprint. Set in the years 2000 and 3000, respectively, these novels, according to Lem, have "nothing Communist Party about them" but "could evoke in a certain sense the communist utopia." His short-story collection, *Dzienniki gwiazdowe* (1957, 1971; *The Star Diaries*, 1976, and *Memoirs of a Space Traveler: Further Reminiscences of Ijon Tichy*, 1982), is a work of travel literature as well as science fiction, and its style and satiric tone have been compared to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Centering on spaceman Ijon Tichy, these stories humorously portray a universe in which human attempts at heroism, communication, and control are frustrated by the baffling randomness of cosmic forces, the bizarre otherness of nonhuman intelligence (both organic and mechanical), and the general weaknesses of humanity. Although many of his later works are more somber in tone than *The Star Diaries*, Lem's various books about the adventures of Ijon Tichy and his stories about Pirx the Pilot and the robots Klappaucius and Trurl allow the author to display his genius for bizarre comedy.

*Eden*, despite its title, shows Lem's drift toward darker views of the human condition, but it is in *Solaris* that Lem gives definitive expression to the second phase of his artistic development. Kris Kelvin, the scientist hero of the novel, seeks to comprehend the mysteries of the oceanic intelligence that surrounds the planet Solaris, but he discovers instead that he has no real understanding of his own nature and the nature of others of his own species. *Powrót z gwiazd*, 1961 (*Return from the Stars*, 1980) continues the theme of the need for human-to-human communication and understanding and further warns of the dangers impending if the utopia envisioned by the technocrats is someday achieved. *The Invincible* attacks human technical arrogance in a different way, this time by having a product of technology, the ironically named spaceship of the title, wrecked by minuscule cybernetic

entities. *Głos pana* (1968; *His Master's Voice*, 1983) returns to the theme of the difficulty of human-to-human and human-to-alien communication as twenty-five hundred ego-driven experts attempt to decipher a message from the cosmos.

In his later novels, Lem attempted to transcend traditional science-fiction forms in order to examine his complex humanistic themes. Through the device of writing nonfictional commentaries on fictional books, either as prefaces or critical analyses, Lem discussed the relationship of the human to the nonhuman and explored the interactions of organisms with mechanisms.

## THE STAR DIARIES

**First published:** *Dzienniki gwiazdowe*, 1957  
(English translation, 1976 and 1982)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*The well-intentioned but sometimes inept Ijon Tichy experiences the bewildering challenges of life as a wandering citizen of the cosmos.*

Written over a period of approximately two decades, *The Star Diaries* constitutes a diverse collection of comic tales playing on the full range of world travel literature and of science fiction's reworking of that literature, while adding much that is Lem's own to an already rich tradition. Suggestive at one moment of Marco Polo's accounts of cultural discovery, at another of the pure fantasy of Sinbad's voyages, and at still another of the acerbic satire of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, these tales exhibit a variety of styles and purposes reflective of Lem's multifaceted genius.

One story, "The Seventh Voyage," exemplifies the book's exuberant diversity. The story relates Tichy's attempts to repair the rudder of his spacecraft after an accident in the vicinity of Betelgeuse. Although traveling alone, Tichy discovers that the repair job requires the cooperative efforts of two people, an indication of technological human's lack of foresight. He finds himself with multiple opportunities to solve his problem, however, when he falls through one after another of the 147 gravitational vortices in the local space-time continuum and encounters diverse other versions of himself.

At each new encounter, Tichy exhibits a different way in which humanity's mixed rational and emotional nature prevents productive cooperation, and it is only when two child Tichys ignore the alternating violence and committee-directed stagnation of the adult Tichys that the repair work is completed. A brilliant parody of tales of paradoxical time travel, like Robert A. Heinlein's "All You Zombies," "The Seventh Voyage" is also a sly commentary on human social deficiency.

In "The Eighth Voyage," Tichy represents the earth at the General Assembly of the United Planets as humanity is being considered for membership. After nearly setting off an interplanetary confrontation by mistaking a diplomat from Rhohch for a soda machine, he ineptly attempts to help prepare humankind's case for galactic recognition by discussing the destruction of Hiroshima, explaining that most governmental funds are spent on the military, and running through an inventory of ingenious bombs. During the debate over Earth's admission, a knowledgeable alien gives an account of humanity's place within galactic taxonomy. Roughly translated, the nomenclature he uses labels humanity as "deviate screwheaded corpse-loving abominable howlmouthed stinking meemies," and much of what follows is an account of human bloodshed. The horrors of the human past turn out not to be humanity's fault, however, as a second alien reveals that two intoxicated creatures named Gorrd and Lod purposely set off the monstrous evolutionary process that produced humanity by dumping spoiled food on Earth, giving its molecules a twist to the left (etymologically, the "sinister" direction of evil), and then sneezing on the abominable mixture. Tichy suddenly awakens to discover that this voyage was literally a nightmare, but the dream vision framing device, common to much past theological literature, hardly lessens the satiric message of human brutality and pretensions to divine origin.

"The Twentieth Voyage" also takes up the theme of origins and suggests that, if there have, indeed, been good intentions behind the shaping of the cosmos and the directing of human destiny, those intentions have gone sadly astray. In this tale, a reluctant Ijon Tichy is recruited to head a project called THEOHIPPIP (Teleotelechronistic-Historical Engineering to Optimize the Hyperputerized Implementation of Paleological Programming and

Interplanetary Planning), in essence, a bureaucratic effort to undo the mistakes of history. Tichy and his colleagues put prodigious energy into their attempts to create perfection, but like the flawed God described in the final pages of Lem's novel *Solaris*, they botch the job. As they work to remake time and space, they set off ice ages, kill off the dinosaurs, destroy a planet and thereby create the asteroids, thrust the intelligent dolphin into its anomalous home in the sea, invent the biological ugliness of human sexuality, turn humans into hairless and superstitious carnivores, trigger the Diaspora and the beginnings of anti-Semitism, initiate the witch hunts of the Middle Ages, inspire the careers of Napoleon I and Adolf Hitler, cause the 1929 stock market crash, invent the atomic bomb, and in various ways become responsible for all the disasters of creation. So much for divine providence and the power of benevolent love to right every wrong.

## SOLARIS

**First published:** 1961 (English translation, 1970)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A space traveler attempts to cope with being psychologically manipulated by a powerful alien intelligence.*

The opening of Lem's best-known novel, *Solaris*, illustrates his capacity, reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke's, to create believable accounts of futuristic technology, but the book's central concerns are with the psychological and the theological rather than the technological.

The novel begins with a meticulous description of cosmic adventurer Kris Kelvin's shuttle flight from the starship *Prometheus* to a research station on planet Solaris. The scientific verisimilitude of this introductory scene is followed by a mystical and claustrophobic tale of guilt and love by means of which Lem examines profound questions of identity, communication, creative thought, and divine power.

The central premise of the plot is that several generations of experimenters and theoreticians have attempted, without success, to comprehend

and make contact with the godlike oceanic life form that surrounds the planet Solaris, an effort which is continuing. In the past, much of the research, which Lem describes by using his frequently employed device of elaborate digression, has involved cataloging complex architectonic structures on the planet's surface and speculating on what thought processes might lie behind their appearance, evolution, and reabsorption. These speculations, a vehicle for conveying Lem's own meditations on the nature of creative thought, vary from attributing nothing more than a mechanical origin to the structures to seeing them as something akin to the imaginings of Aristotle's unmoved mover.

Most recently, a team of scientists has bombarded portions of the oceanic entity with high-energy X rays in the hope of eliciting a response. Ironically, the result is that the scientists themselves are experimented on by the intelligence they seek to understand. They exhibit the limits of their ability to comprehend and communicate with their own species. Gibarian, Snow, and Sartorius, the experimenters, have each been visited by neutrino replicas of people with whom they have had a past passionate entanglement, and each is driven to the brink of madness as he attempts to determine what his visitor is and how to behave toward it. By the time Kris Kelvin arrives and is haunted by his own companion, Gibarian has already killed himself and Snow and Sartorius are behaving bizarrely. Rheyra, Kelvin's visitor, is a nearly perfect replica of the beautiful young woman he had driven to suicide ten years earlier, and in relating to her, he must cope with the common science-fiction problem of how to treat an artificial human and the more original problem of how his past failed relationship with the replica's model should affect his relationship with the replica. At first, he treats the new Rheyra as a monster from whom he must escape, but gradually he accepts her individuality and refuses to abandon or destroy her despite the fact that he must remain on the planet to assure her continued existence. Although he sees her as a being separate from the woman he once wronged, by loving and protecting her he finds a way of expiating his past guilt, and she, in turn, frees him by accepting annihilation at the hands of the other scientists.

By the novel's end, the planetary intelligence,

which has put Kelvin in touch with his own humanity but at the cost of terrible torment to himself and others, remains as aloof from direct contact as always. His experiences on Solaris have suggested to Kelvin a paradigm for God, which solves the problem of the presence of evil in the world without attributing the creation of evil to God's conscious choice. Perhaps God, like the oceanic entity, is "limited in his omniscience and power, fallible, incapable of foreseeing the consequences of his acts, and creating things that lead to horror." Perhaps he is "sick" and driven by "ambitions" which "exceed his powers." Here as elsewhere in Lem's work, however, these suggestions are neither affirmed nor denied but simply left as tantalizing possibilities.

A film adaptation of the book was made in 1972 by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, and in 2002, Steven Soderbergh directed an epic Hollywood version starring George Clooney and Natasha McElhone.

## RETURN FROM THE STARS

**First published:** *Powrót z gwiazd*, 1961  
(English translation, 1980)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A space traveler returns from an interstellar voyage to discover that humanity has lost both its violence and its sense of adventure.*

In its use of time dilation to separate its hero from the culture that produced him, *Return from the Stars* is a disguised time-travel story very much in the tradition of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895).

The central character, Hal Bregg, has been away from Earth on a journey to Arcturus for a mere 127 years, hardly an instant in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of years crossed by Wells's time traveler, but Bregg experiences at least as acute a social disorientation. As a result of the relativistic time shifts associated with travel near the speed of light, Bregg has aged only ten years, but during his absence human civilization has undergone a transformation to passivity parallel to that which produced Wells's race of Eloi. A process called Betri-

zation has shorn humanity of its aggressions and, while rendering human beings incapable of intentionally killing or injuring one another, has also removed the urge for discovery that sent Bregg and his companions to the stars. The very technological progress that produced the star drive has tamed the human spirit and has also produced breakthroughs in robotics and parastatics, the latter a term indicating gravitation control that has provided humanity with an enslaving prosperity and protection from every potential bump and bruise.

Having refused more than token help from Adapt, the government agency intended to provide aid for returning space travelers, Bregg finds it nearly impossible to trace his way out of the spaceport where he has landed from Luna base. The vocabulary of the new world confuses him, and he finds the transportation system baffling. Once he discovers a bar, he makes the first of several human contacts that move him toward readjustment. With Nais, he learns for the first time of Betrization and becomes aware of the fear his non-transformation causes among his docile fellow humans. When Nais learns that Bregg has not undergone Betrization and is thus not susceptible to the calming properties of the "brit" she offers him almost ritualistically as he enters her apartment, she panics out of dread of what she falsely believes is her coming rape. Her helpless nonviolence is characteristic of most of the human race in the dystopian world into which Bregg has descended.

The next woman in Bregg's life, Aen Aenis, reacts differently to the dangerous side of Bregg, inviting him home with her in full expectation of a sexual encounter with this muscular primitive. Ironically called a "realist" because she acts in the "reals," Lem's futuristic version of the cinema, she embodies the false glamour of the world of entertainment, and she provides Bregg with even less sense of substantial connection with the new world than had Nais.

Next is Eri, whose name suggests both Eros, the goddess of love and beauty, and Eris, the goddess of discord, deities whose combined natures, for the ancients, symbolized the dynamic totality of life. Bregg meets Eri while he is renting a villa on the

sea, where he has come to rediscover his connections with earthly life. Having bought an automobile, an archaic machine long superseded by vehicles called "gleeds," he enjoys the thrilling speed of the mechanism he associates with his past, but he also enjoys the more timeless life-restoring waters of his pool and the sea. He then discovers Eri, who, with her new husband, is sharing the villa. The cosmic adventurer and the young bride are soon drawn to each other and become involved in a sexual encounter, at once both innocent and deeply impassioned, which renews his faith in the essential goodness of humanity and his sense of engagement with the human race.

Before accepting that he is, in fact, now an inhabitant of the new Earth, however out of place he may feel in a world made safe and prosperous at the cost of human aspiration, Bregg attempts to resume friendships with his fellow space travelers. For a time, he and his former boon companion Olaf reestablish their camaraderie, largely through bloody but invigorating fisticuffs, but gradually they drift apart, with Olaf seeking sanctuary in a hoped-for return to the stars while Bregg maintains his ties to Eri and his home planet.

The final scenes of the novel symbolically recapitulate the struggles of Bregg's life and underline the accommodation he has made with a disappointing future, but a future connected with the place of his roots. He climbs to a snowfield above his home valley, just as he had previously climbed to the stars, and looks down in mingled sadness and satisfaction, alone but not a stranger to Earth, on the scene below. Then, with light blazing above and shadows deepening below, he acts out the choice he has made, a choice between the stars and Earth, and descends in melancholy acceptance "to his home."



## FIASCO

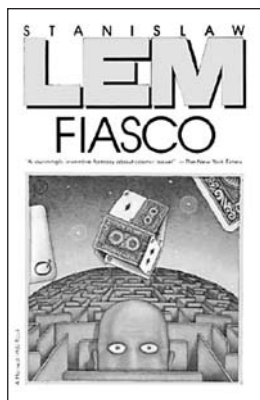
**First published:** *Fiasko*, 1986 (English translation, 1987)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Space travelers from Earth seeking knowledge find a planet of aliens who have no wish to be contacted.*

If Lem's novel *Solaris* is preoccupied with the possibility of communicating with an alien species, then *Fiasko* is almost the polar opposite in that it shows how it may not be possible to communicate with alien life at all—especially if the aliens do not want contact.

*Fiasko* opens in the time of Pirx the Pilot on Saturn's moon, Titan. A man from that time has a mishap and is flash-frozen. He wakes up centuries later on the spaceship *Hermes*, heading to the planet Quinta, where the crew hopes to find knowledge and brotherhood with an alien life-form believed to be within a "window" of opportunity allowing for communication.



When they get there, however, there are no bipeds, no anthropomorphic aliens, no form of life that remotely resembles anything the humans recognize. Instead, they find a planet whose surface is marred by ugly mounds and weblike netting draped from poles and aliens with a totally different evolutionary history, as well as physical and psychological differences.

These aliens resemble the termites of Earth, a reference which is cleverly disguised as a novel within the novel, for the entertainment and edification of the crew.

The Quintans are embroiled in a planetary war between "hives." The battle has reached insane proportions. The space around the planet is bombarded with signal jamming and nasty nanomechanical weapons that attack anything entering that space.

Throughout the encounter, the crew of the *Her-*

*mes* is attacked in various insidious ways, and the crew members, rather than responding in either a reasonable way or retaliating, allow their primitive emotions and instincts, as well as a deep desire to achieve contact no matter what, to lead them deeper into Quinta's planetary madness. The struggle ends when the humans use their advanced technology, including a supercomputer named Deus (a bad pun referring to the theatrical device of the *deus ex machina*), which resembles the psychotic HAL from Arthur C. Clarke's novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), to obliterate the planet.

Interwoven throughout the novel are Lem's fascinating discourses on extraterrestrial civilization, artificial intelligence, and even future gravitational physics, displaying his remarkable ability to make up "information" that sounds realistic and scientifically plausible. He also includes fascinating details on the "hive" mind, a bit of history in the manner of the Spanish conquest of the New World, and interesting insights into the human psyche.

*Fiasko* could have been a fiasco. According to Lem's Web site, "In a certain sense this book was 'made to order' in a period when I emigrated from Poland after Martial Law. The publishing house Fischer made a tempting offer—a very high advance for a nonexistent novel. This was the only case in my career as a writer that I decided to accept such an offer. I didn't even know what the book would be about, except it would tell a story about a great cosmic enterprise that will lead to a spectacular fiasco."

The novel made the short list for the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1988 and was Lem's last work of fiction.

## SUMMARY

Stanisław Lem's immense erudition allowed him to meditate on the present and future state of technological humanity with a fully informed authority. In his thematically diverse science fiction, he presents his speculations on the nature of God and the cosmos, the relationship between the organic world and the world of the machine, the mysteries of consciousness, the comical deficiencies of the human personality, and the possibility or impossibility of communication between intelligent beings. Indeed, his total body of work is thematically diverse; though he is best known for his science fiction, he also wrote an autobiography, book



reviews, cybernetic theory, detective fiction, fantasy fiction, film scripts, literary criticism, philosophical essays, poetry, radio plays, scientific essays, sociological essays, stage plays, and television scripts. All of his works are so stylistically and tonally varied that they seem to be the product of several writers rather than of one supremely gifted man and, as Richard E. Ziegfeld says in his book *Stanisław Lem*, “any reader intent on pigeonholing writers by genre will have a difficult time categorizing Lem works.”

*Pamela Kett-O'Connor and Robert O'Connor;  
updated by Daryl F. Mallett*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How is Stanisław Lem's medical background expressed in his fiction?
- How does living in former Eastern Bloc countries affect Lem's writing?
- Similarities have been suggested between Lem's work and that of H. G. Wells, Arthur C. Clarke, and Gregory Benford. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
- Does Lem's work differ significantly from other Eastern Bloc science-fiction writers, such as Boris and Arkady Strugatsky or Yevgeny Zamyatin?
- How is religion portrayed in Lem's fiction, if at all?

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## MIKHAIL LERMONTOV

**Born:** Moscow, Russia  
October 15, 1814

**Died:** Pyatigorsk, Russia  
July 27, 1841

*In his native Russia, Lermontov is widely considered the greatest Russian poet after Alexander Pushkin; he also distinguished himself as a playwright and novelist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mikhail Yurievich Lermontov (LEHR-muhn-tawf) was born in Moscow, Russia, on October 15, 1814. He was the only child of retired army captain Yury Petrovich Lermontov and Mariya Mikhaylovna Arsenieva, whose wealthy family strongly disapproved of the marriage. The Lermontovs moved to Tarkhany, a country estate 350 miles from Moscow owned by Mariya's strong-willed mother.

When Mariya died three years after Mikhail's birth, Elizaveta Arsenieva took custody of her grandson. Crucial to his future development as a writer, she took him with her on journeys to the Caucasus Mountains to take the waters at the spa town of Pyatigorsk. The Caucasus was the wild frontier of the Russian Empire. The native mountain tribes were waging a guerilla war against the czar's occupying troops. With its atmosphere of bravado and intrigue, the Caucasus made such an impression on Lermontov that it became central to his literary work and to his tragic death.

When he was fourteen, Lermontov was admitted to a Moscow school with a renowned literary tradition. He excelled in writing and translating poetry, and learned enough English to read the works of the English Romantic poet Lord Byron. He felt a deep affinity with Byron, whose life and attitudes in many respects paralleled his own.

Two years later, in 1830, Lermontov entered the

University of Moscow. He continued to write lyric poetry and verse plays, including an autobiographical melodrama, *Stranny chelovek* (wr. 1831, pb. 1935; *A Strange One*, 1965). Lermontov fell in love with Varvara Lopukhina, the model for Vera in his semiautobiographical novel *Geroy nashego vremeni* (serial, 1839; book, 1840; *A Hero of Our Time*, 1854). He never got over the betrayal he felt when, in 1835, Varvara married a wealthy man twice her age.

Lermontov's disillusionment extended beyond personal to political issues, fostered by the aftermath of the revolt in December, 1825, against the repressive regime of Czar Nicholas I. The revolt, led by liberalist nobles, had been ruthlessly quelled and a severe secret police regime instituted. The spirit of opposition was kept alive by the young intellectuals of Moscow University. Lermontov developed his passion for freedom there, along with a cynicism that sprang from frustrated idealism. In 1832, Lermontov entered the military academy in St. Petersburg. He was assigned to the Life Guard Hussars, a cavalry regiment composed of the social elite.

In 1837, he achieved instant literary fame and political notoriety with his poem about the death of Alexander Pushkin. The poem included a scathing attack on courtiers whose malicious gossip had led to Pushkin's death in a duel. As soon as the authorities discovered who the author was, Lermontov was arrested and exiled to the Caucasus.

Lermontov was delighted to find himself once more in his spiritual home. He wrote to a friend: "I would gladly remain in this place and watch its scenery to the end of my days." The exile marked

the beginning of his maturity as a poet. Later in the year, Lermontov was recalled and was soon back in St. Petersburg, where he was lionized as Pushkin's successor. Before long he again incensed the authorities by duelling with a Frenchman. In April, 1840, he was exiled to the Caucasus for the second time.

Ignoring his official assignment, Lermontov asked to join the forces attempting to capture the Caucasian prophet-warlord Shamyl. Lermontov saw action in the Caucasus, and distinguished himself in hand-to-hand battles. He was recommended to receive a gold saber inscribed "for courage," but the czar crossed his name off the list, and he received no decoration. Lermontov's second exile produced his greatest works, set against the romantic backdrop of the Caucasus.

After a leave in St. Petersburg, Lermontov returned to the Caucasus in April, 1841, taking the waters at Pyatigorsk. There, he met Nikolay Martynov, a retired major whom he had known for years. Martynov was in the habit of wearing exaggerated native dress, for which Lermontov mercilessly taunted him.

The offended Martynov insisted they fight. A duel took place on July 27, outside town, in an eerie replay of the duel in *A Hero of Our Time*. At the meeting, Lermontov declared that he refused to fire at "that fool," and made no attempt to shoot. Martynov, however, advanced and shot Lermontov in the heart, killing him instantly.

## ANALYSIS

Lermontov is often called Russia's only true Romantic poet. Several major themes run through his work: the tragic nature of love, demonism (the idea that one is fated to destroy what one loves), disillusionment, vengeance, a passion for freedom, and the longing for a return to original innocence.

He also displayed a sharp psychological insight into the workings of passion in human relationships. This insight is visible in early works and in the mature work *A Hero of Our Time*. It is further developed in another play, *Maskarad* (wr. 1834-1835, pb. 1842, pr. 1917; *Masquerade*, 1973), a reworking of William Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622), which examines the effect of jealousy on a marriage.

On a broader canvas, Lermontov's preoccupations extended to analyzing the tragedy of his gen-

eration in the 1830's, in the sad aftermath of the Decembrist revolt. The strengths and talents of this lost generation were denied expression and fulfillment by a regime so repressive that personal correspondence was inspected and artists and intellectuals were exiled for having "dangerous thoughts."

This political atmosphere gave a new twist to the common Russian literary character, the superfluous man, typified by Pushkin's Eugene Onegin. Superfluous men were men set apart by their superior talents from a mediocre society, doomed to waste their lives through lack of opportunity to fulfill themselves and also through lack of inner purpose. In *A Hero of Our Time*, Lermontov suggests that superfluity is not only an isolated personal malady but a tragedy of his time, an inevitable epidemic fostered by an unhealthy regime.

Lermontov's work was influenced by other writers, especially the German playwright Friedrich Schiller and the poets Pushkin and Byron. When it came to creating his characters, however, Lermontov knew only one hero whom he repeatedly projected into his works—himself.

During his early writing career, Lermontov's preferred vehicle of self-expression was drama. He wrote his first play when he was sixteen. The play is a Schiller-influenced melodramatic demand for personal and social freedom, expressed in the authorial voice of an angry young man. Defiance and frustration in the face of repression is a theme that would run through Lermontov's work throughout his life, reaching a peak in his narrative poems, such as *Demon* (1841; *The Demon*, 1875).

The autobiographical element is also discernible in the melodrama *A Strange One*, a self-portrait of Lermontov during his years in Moscow, and in his lyric poems. In "Parus" (1841; "The Sail," 1976) the sailboat becomes symbolic of the poet's lonely soul, driven not by joy but by its quest for storms, "as if a storm could bring it peace." Lermontov was notorious for his tendency to seek out conflict with others, perhaps in an attempt to quell his sense of isolation. These Byronic traits—isolation and desire for conflict—link many of Lermontov's heroes, including the demon in *The Demon* and Pechorin, the protagonist of *A Hero of Our Time*.

Even when apart from the superficial evils of society, however, Lermontov was continually haunted by a powerful image of internal evil—the image of the demon. As a youth he wrote that he was, like the



demon of the poem, chosen for evil. The attraction of evil for Lermontov lay not only in its negative power but also in the intensity of the experience of damnation. Like his heroes, he identified the intensity of life with the intensity of torment. He sought it out as proof of his uniqueness and heroic status. Always with Lermontov, however, there is a polarization of opposites. On one hand there is the demon, absorbed in evil. On the other hand, there is the angel, or angelic woman, whose goodness he craves. The demon is balanced with an angel. This craving for what is good is always frustrated, however, since the demon figure always destroys whom-ever he loves. Tamara in *The Demon* and Bela and Vera in *A Hero of Our Time* are innocent women who fall in love with the demon figure, only to be destroyed by him. Such contradictions were externalizations of Lermontov's own divided personality, romantic by nature and yet cold and skeptical in his mind. Lermontov never reconciled the psychic divisions that gave his work such tortured energy. Instead, he idealized them in the tragedy of *The Demon*, and he finally analyzed them coolly in *A Hero of Our Time* as a malady that had to be faced and accepted.

### "THE NOVICE"

**First published:** "Mtsyri," 1840 (collected in *Narrative Poems by Alexander Pushkin and by Mikhail Lermontov*, 1983)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A novice monk, captured in the mountains as a boy by the Russians, lives confined in a monastery until he escapes.*

Lermontov found the subject matter for this narrative poem while visiting a monastery in the former Georgian capital Mtskheta on his way to exile in the Caucasus. A monk told Lermontov how as a boy he was captured by Russians in his native mountains. They wanted to take him to their own country, but he fell ill and was left with the monks of the monastery. The monks nursed him back to health and let him stay there. He became a novice,

but the memory of his free life in a mountain village haunted him day and night. He found his prisonlike existence so intolerable that he escaped. Trying to reach his village, he wandered in the forest until he lost his way. He was found, starved and exhausted, by the monks, who brought him back to his cell. The futility of his flight made him decide to stay in the monastery, where he remained ever since.

Lermontov made significant changes to this story. He concentrated all his poetic power on the novice's flight, as well as on the magnificent scenery in which it took place, leaving out the resignation with which the recaptured fugitive stayed on in the monastery. The poem thus embodied a spirited bid for freedom at a time when the very word "freedom" was banned in Russia. The novice's adventures in the virgin forest also distracted the censor from the symbolic significance of the poem.

One night, the novice meets a hungry panther, which he kills with his stick after a desperate struggle. This fight is among the finest passages Lermontov wrote, both in terms of the vividly sensual descriptions and the flowing music of the verse. After three days and nights, the sound of the familiar church bell tells the novice that instead of gaining freedom he has moved in a circle. Exhausted, he falls to the ground and only regains consciousness after he has been brought back, near death, to his cell by the monks, who have been looking for him.

The noble impulse that ends in frustration and suffering is an often-repeated theme in Lermontov's works, but also typical of Lermontov is his hero's resolute defiance. The novice, though defeated, remains proud and unrepentant to the end. Talking to his father-confessor, he tells him that his only regret is that his flight to freedom was abortive.

The poem contains no overt political allusions, but many readers must have identified the novice's prison with the political prison of Russia.

Readers of the poem in its original Russian will discover riches easily lost in translation, such as the brisk narrative rhyme scheme and the poem's musical rhythm, assisted by such devices as parallel grammatical constructions, alliteration, and assonance.

## THE DEMON

**First published:** *Demon*, 1841 (collected in *The Demon, and Other Poems*, 1965)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The Demon, a fallen angel, falls in love with a mortal woman but destroys her with his immortal's kiss.*

*The Demon*, originally circulated in manuscript in 1839, is Lermontov's best-known tale in verse. Like "The Novice," the poem is a piece of defiance and frustration, but on a grander scale. Once again there is a restless soul trapped in a prison, but instead of a monastery, the prison is the cosmos. The Demon sees in Tamara the same mirage of happiness that the novice sees in the mountains. Like the novice, the Demon fails to assuage his loneliness or escape his fate.

The Demon is symbolic of rebellion and isolation. Many critics see him as more closely connected with Lermontov's own nature than any of his other creations. He constantly reworked the poem from 1829 to the end of his life in 1841. Lermontov's Demon is a former rebel angel, expelled from paradise and doomed to roam eternally through the universe. A vindictive, sad exile, he sows evil wherever he appears. In the end, evil bores him. One day, flying over the Caucasus, the Demon sees the beautiful maiden Tamara, and falls in love with her.

The Demon feels his love for Tamara might reconcile him to God and the universe. He tempts her, and her guardian angel tries to intervene. The guardian angel soon gives up, and Tamara surrenders to the Demon's wooing. No sooner does he touch her lips with his immortal's kiss than she dies—an example of the Lermontovian theme of the lover-destroyer. Her soul is carried away by a good angel, while the Demon is doomed to dwell in loneliness till the end of time.

The chief problem in *The Demon* is its lack of dramatic tension. In contrast to the Demon, whose energy and persistence hold the reader's attention, Tamara remains passive. One wonders too at the passivity of the angel sent to protect her. Lermontov also passes up opportunities for conflict within his hero: The Demon, in love with Tamara and supposedly inspired to a new life of goodness, has no

compunction about having her bridegroom killed so that he can possess her totally. A struggle with his newly awakened conscience would have added depth to the story.

In spite of these weaknesses, the poem's glories are many: the musicality of the verse and the incandescent images. The description of the Caucasian landscape is matchless. The scene in which Tamara dances on the roof of her father's castle while far away her bridegroom is being treacherously killed on his way to the wedding has the ironic emotional intensity of which Lermontov was master.

## A HERO OF OUR TIME

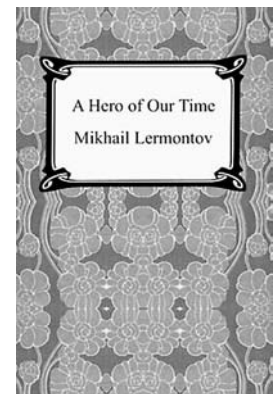
**First published:** *Geroy nashego vremeni*, 1839, serial; 1840, book (English translation, 1854)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The book is a portrait of the life and character of a man who, Lermontov suggests, is typical of his age.*

*A Hero of Our Time* is one of Russia's greatest novels. All the characters, with the possible exception of Vera, are drawn with consummate art. In Pechorin, the novel's hero, Lermontov gave the first psychological portrait of the literary archetype, the superfluous man. Lermontov analyzes Pechorin as a victim of the conditions he was doomed to live in, hence the ironic label, "hero of our time." As a representative of the lost generation of the 1830's, Pechorin's creative genius finds no legitimate channel of expression and thus turns in on itself and grows destructive. In analyzing Pechorin, Lermontov analyzed the sickness of the age.

The first two of the five narratives, "Bela" and "Maxim Maximych," show Pechorin through the eyes of others. "Princess Mary" is in the form of Pechorin's diary, and "Taman" and "The Fatalist"



record some of his adventures in the Crimea and the Caucasus.

In "Bela," the bored Pechorin, stationed at a fort, becomes infatuated with the Tartar girl Bela, daughter of a local chieftain. He kidnaps her with the help of her own brother, whom Pechorin rewards with a horse stolen from the girl's Tartar suitor Kazbich. Bela, frightened at first, falls in love with Pechorin, whereupon he loses interest in her. One day, she goes for a walk outside the walls of the fort and is mortally wounded by Kazbich. The story is told by Captain Maxim Maximych, who has befriended Pechorin. The Captain is a kindly man who develops a fatherly affection and concern for Bela. He provides a counterpoint to the coldly manipulative Pechorin, who is largely responsible for Bela's death yet unmoved by it.

In "Maxim Maximych," Maxim is overjoyed at the prospect of seeing his old friend Pechorin once more. Pechorin shows little enthusiasm for the encounter, and when he does finally turn up, his manner is cool. Pechorin has for so long cultivated a mask of indifference that he can no longer discriminate between mask and self.

"Princess Mary" is a psychological analysis of Pechorin in the form of a diary. In the spa town of Pyatigorsk, Pechorin starts, from boredom, a love intrigue with Princess Mary, a young beauty courted by the poseur Grushnitsky. Once he is sure of Mary's love, he loses interest. Complications arise when Vera, his old love, enters the scene. Pechorin wreaks destruction on all around him:

He kills Grushnitsky in a duel, reopens an old wound for Vera, and breaks Mary's heart.

In a passage recalling "The Sail," Pechorin asks himself why he refused to tread on the road of gentle pleasures and peace of mind. He compares himself to a seaman born and bred on the deck of a pirate ship, who is so accustomed to storms and battles that on land he feels bored. The novel succeeds because Pechorin's actions—couched in an engaging black humor—are shown with unerring psychological truth. In Pechorin's own words, he is a vampire, his ego feeding off the suffering and joys of others. Unable to believe in any purpose, he is doomed to be an analytical observer or mischief-maker.

### SUMMARY

Mikhail Lermontov was the supreme psychological analyst of the superfluous man—the man isolated and exiled from society by virtue of his superior gifts and perceptions. Sometimes, as in *The Demon*, Lermontov idealizes this figure, while at other times, as in *A Hero of Our Time*, he puts the figure under the microscope and coolly examines his life and motives. Modern readers will find plenty to fascinate them in Lermontov's works. The mixture of alienation, strong passions, love of beauty and freedom, cold-blooded manipulation, iron will-power, and cynical humor embodied in his characters is as vivid and engaging today as it was in Lermontov's time.

Claire Robinson

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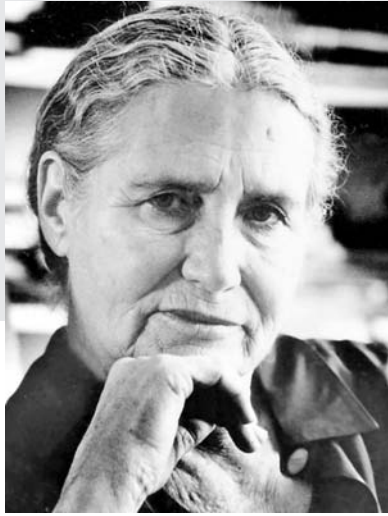
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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What conditions of Russian life in the 1830's forestalled the appearance of major Russian Romantics other than Mikhail Lermontov?
- Compare Pechorin of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* with Alexander Pushkin's Eugene Onegin as "superfluous men."
- What works of Lord Byron seem to have impressed Lermontov most?
- From Lermontov's descriptions, compose a short account of the Caucasus.
- Lermontov lived less than twenty-seven years. What deficiencies of his work would he most likely have overcome had he lived longer?



Ingrid Von Kruse

## DORIS LESSING

**Born:** Kermānshāh, Persia (now Bākhtarān, Iran)  
October 22, 1919

*A major post-World War II novelist, Lessing uses her craft to explore the educative value of human experience and to examine the effects of institutions, or collectives, on the human psyche.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Doris May Tayler Lessing was born in Kermānshāh, Persia (now Bākhtarān, Iran), on October 22, 1919, the daughter of Alfred Cook Tayler and Emily Maude McVeagh. As a soldier during World War I, Alfred Tayler sustained a serious injury that left him an amputee. While convalescing, he fell in love with his nurse, Emily McVeagh, and married her. After the war ended, they moved to Persia, where Alfred began working in a bank. Soon after the young couple were settled in Persia, financial incentives enticed them to try their luck in Southern Rhodesia, a recently established British colony in Africa. They made plans to relocate; by the time that Alfred and Emily were ready to move into their Rhodesian farmhouse, a daughter, Doris May Tayler, had been born. Once engaged in farming, Alfred and Emily Tayler found that the dream that they had pursued did not bring the promise of riches envisioned earlier. For one reason or another, their expectations for amassing wealth were never realized, and they were forced to accommodate themselves to a life that was disappointingly modest by local white standards.

As a young girl growing up in frontier country, Lessing did not feel the disappointment of her parents. The veld, bordering their farm, held for her an array of attractions. As an adolescent, she would take long solitary walks across the unspoiled countryside, often carrying a rifle to shoot small game.

Given unlimited opportunity to observe nature on the vast canvas of the veld and given countless occasions to pit her cunning and skill against the survival instincts of prey, she became unusually independent and introspective, traits that influenced greatly the paths that she chose to explore as a writer.

Lessing began her schooling in Salisbury, about one hundred miles from her home. She enrolled first in a Roman Catholic convent school and later attended Girls' High School. Although a lover of books, she increasingly grew to despise the regimentation of school life. At age fourteen, she dispensed with formal education and went to work as an au pair in Salisbury.

Two years later, Lessing returned to the family farm and began to write. Books by such nineteenth century realists as Fyodor Dostoevski, Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Anton Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev, and Leo Tolstoy helped her shape her ideas and learn the elements of good writing. She was also influenced philosophically by her reading of political and social tracts, which included Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925-1927; English translation, 1933) and the sexual studies of Havelock Ellis.

In 1938, Lessing yet again declared her independence and went to work as a telephone operator in Salisbury. The following year, she married a civil servant named Frank Wisdom. During their four-year marriage, two children were born. Finding the lifestyle of a suburban housewife constricting, she joined a Marxist group in 1942. Political and domestic conflicts probably contributed to the dissolution of her marriage and familial responsibilities in 1943. After resuming a single lifestyle, later that same year, she published her first pieces of short



fiction and poems in local journals. In 1945, she married a German refugee and fellow Marxist by the name of Gottfried Anton Lessing. This marriage produced a son, Peter. When it ended in divorce in 1949, Lessing (retaining her married name) decided to take her son and move to London, England.

Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature on October 11, 2007, eleven days before her eighty-eighth birthday. She was the oldest person and the eleventh woman to win the literature award. In announcing the prize, the Nobel judges described Lessing as “that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny.”

### ANALYSIS

The years spanning Lessing’s adolescence and her young adulthood provide seed plots for her five related novels, the Children of Violence series, which were written over a twenty-year span. The first novel in the series, *Martha Quest*, was published in 1952. It was followed by *A Proper Marriage* in 1954, *A Ripple from the Storm* in 1958, *Landlocked* in 1965, and *The Four-Gated City* in 1969. Between the appearance of these serial books, Lessing wrote two other novels, as well as a considerable number of plays and short stories. Her most significant work, written during an interval between the Children of Violence novels, is *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which first brought her world acclaim. More than any other work, *The Golden Notebook*, still considered her masterpiece, affirmed her reputation as a major talent. The five books in the Children of Violence series and the single most definitive of Lessing’s novels, *The Golden Notebook*, are representative of the author’s prolific body of fiction, in that they contain all the themes and dominant imagery appearing throughout her work. Her reworking of basic material reveals the variety of her narrative techniques, that is, her ability to rework ideas through different story lines with novel and engaging effects.

Lessing’s fascination with opposition may be traced to her early experiences on the veld, where she was first impressed with the majesty and wonder of nature, deriving her first inkling of the human capacity for reaching a state of harmony with the universe. The integrity of the veld presented a

sharp contrast to the divisions that she observed in her colonial community. Living in a divided society stratified by race and class caused her to develop an understanding of the opposition between the privileged and the oppressed. The cruelty of the collective that claimed her as one of its own not only sharpened her sense of morality but also sparked her intellect and instilled in her the drive to examine the system and its larger ramifications. Lessing, therefore, deliberately embarked upon a long process of self-education. At different times in her life, she became involved in most of the significant political and intellectual movements of her day: Jungian and Freudian psychology, Sufi mysticism, existentialism, sociobiology, futuristic scientific theories, Communism, and Marxism. Her narratives reflect the influence of all of these movements. In her stories, she uses insight gained from these various theories of the world to define and explore other opposites, such as the gap between the public self and the private self and the gap between the visionary and the pragmatic.

The reality of the ethical conflict that often exists between collectives and the commitment that one must make to his or her inner being is at the heart of Lessing’s fiction. On at least one occasion, she expressed surprise when critics, in their reviews of the first two books in the Children of Violence series, missed the point that she had written the series as a study of the relationship between individual conscience in opposition to the demands of the collective (*A Small Personal Voice*, 1974).

Lessing weaves her plots around a core of imagery that recurs in a number of key scenes throughout the novels. Visions of the veld, houses, and cities materialize at critical moments to represent conditions related to either the individual or the collective in different situations. The prevailing image of the veld comes straight from Lessing’s childhood experiences—the veld being the enduring reality that can be equated to unity and wholeness. The symbolic meaning of the veld as representative of the cosmic whole is contrasted with the compartmentalizations people make in their civilizing activities of building houses and cities.

Houses as images can represent one’s inner world or the socially constructed outer world at various times. For example, when Martha, the protagonist of the series, envisions herself in *Landlocked* as a house with many rooms but without a center to

hold the compartments together, she perceives the condition of her inner being and concludes that the space will have to be filled by some outside unifying agent, a man. When the image of the house appears in *The Four-Gated City*, however, Martha is herself the free agent wandering inside the divided, uncentered structure that represents the various duties imposed by collectives that she had neglected. At this point, Martha places herself inside the empty space to begin the healing process for her life. Also, in this final book, houses are used to represent the public world. The four houses that Martha enters during the course of the novel become, as Frederick Karl points out, a “microcosm” of British society, fragmented and out of harmony with nature.

The image of the city can also have both public and private applications depending on the situation in which the image appears. When the vision first comes to Martha Quest on the veld, it is not the *city*, but rather the *City*—a noble construction with “flower bordered terraces” and “splashing fountains.” It is a human-made place but still in harmony with nature. It is a place on the veld where all groups “smile with pleasure at the sight of children” and all races of children “walk hand in hand” (*Martha Quest*). Yet the city that Martha Quest encounters in England in *The Four-Gated City* and in *The Golden Notebook* is in opposition to nature. It represents nature compartmentalized by the collective mind.

Through her writings, Lessing expresses faith in the ability of humankind to transform both the individual and the world despite the proclivity of the collective mind to pervert nature and cause individuals to act often against their own best interests. Indeed, the abiding message of the author’s narrative, as she states in *A Small Personal Voice*, is: “though we may not be able to prevent evil, we are capable of reinforcing a vision of good and using it to defeat evil.” At the end of *The Four-Gated City*, Lessing’s optimism for humanity is summarized in her vision of evolution. She conceives of the future as belonging to a new kind of evolving individual—one who will transcend history and ultimately will be assessed by his or her ability to endure suffering and grow as a result of it.

## MARTHA QUEST

**First published:** 1952

**Type of work:** Novel

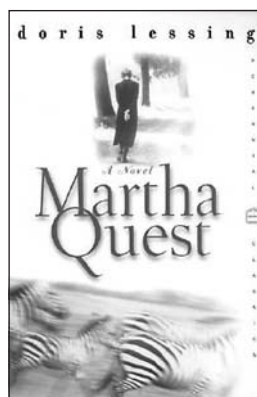
*In a complex, racially stratified society caught between two world wars, a confused young girl renounces the conventional prejudices of her elders and seeks fulfillment through a man.*

*Martha Quest*, the first book in the Children of Violence series, covers the years 1934 to 1938. The central character of the novel, Martha Quest, experiences an adolescence of disquiet, troubled by the turbulence of a world recently rocked by one world war and fast approaching a second. She is an intelligent observer of a world that seems to have gone awry. She feels at odds both with the awesome history of human beings acting in large collectives and with the reality of their petty pursuits in smaller social arenas.

From the time that Martha Quest notices discrepancies between the words people speak and their behaviors, she begins to feel displaced and unhappy. To allay despair, Martha turns to literature for ideas and spiritual support, usually borrowing books from two young Jewish intellectuals living in town. As she uses great books to structure her theory of the world, she is compelled to face the grim realities of her own life:

She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past.

Hoping to escape her current misery and dismal prospect for her future, fifteen-year-old Martha decides to leave her provincial rural community and live in the nearby fictional city, Zambesia, South Africa.



Although Martha is learning to fear biological and historical entrapment, she ironically decides that her salvation has to include sexual relations with a man. Martha's search for self-expression and fulfillment through a romantic liaison leads her to make several unfortunate choices. Finally, she allows a Jewish musician, Adolph (Dolly, for short), to enter her life and become her first sexual partner. Martha chooses to have relations with Dolly not because she feels real passion for him but because the anti-Semitism directed toward him makes him seem more worthy than he actually is.

During the first two years of Martha's independent life, she becomes a regular with a loosely knit gang of irresponsible white semiadults from a variety of national backgrounds. Her time is divided between work and sundowner parties at local restaurants.

As the winds of World War II gather, Martha enters into a relationship with Douglas, a civil servant who is several years her senior. War fever causes a wave of marriages and pregnancies among Martha's contemporaries, and nineteen-year-old Martha is influenced by the tide, as well. She, like her friends, is carried along in a rush to the altar. Despite the fact that she does not love Douglas, Martha decides to legitimize her relationship; they marry. Martha is puzzled by her madness:

It was as if half a dozen entirely different people inhabited her body, and they violently disliked each other, bound together by only one thing, a strong pulse of longing; anonymous, impersonal, formless, like water.

The novel ends with Martha trying to persuade herself that what she feels overall for Douglas could pass for love, not merely sexual desire. Yet a nagging, unvoiced conviction makes her understand that this marriage will not last.

## A PROPER MARRIAGE

**First published:** 1954

**Type of work:** Novel

*Biology and history are portrayed as determining factors for the limitations that women face in life.*

*A Proper Marriage* covers the years 1939 to 1941 in Martha Quest's life. After leaving home and symbolically taking her life into her own hands, Martha is confused by the events that have placed her in a situation that is no more free than the one that she left. Lessing's ironic view of the gap between one's personal desires and the compelling power of collectives is brilliantly focused through the protagonist's inexplicable acts of self-sabotage.

The first few weeks of Martha's marriage to Douglas Knowell are marked by strange physical sensations, the early signs of pregnancy. When Martha recognizes the symptoms, she realizes that she must have been pregnant before her wedding. Immediately, she feels trapped. Feeling that her choices thus far have eliminated her options, however, she decides to suppress her repulsion toward pregnancy and to surrender to her maternal instincts. While concentrating on her pregnancy, she is uneasily aware that she is reenacting a basic process in evolution. Additionally, she fears more than ever that her future will become a replication of her mother's life. Although Martha recognizes the awful possibility, she still lets the fog of happiness envelop her as long as she can envision the eventual pleasure of regaining her own body.

Meanwhile, Martha is influenced by the patriotic hoopla surrounding the advent of World War II, and she enrolls in Sister Doll's Red Cross course. One day after starting classes, Martha suddenly realizes that all her recent actions have been drawing her closer to the repetitive circle of history. She now sees herself in her mother's position during World War I, when Mrs. Quest and her female contemporaries assisted in the campaign and lost their lovers to the machines of war. It now seems possible to Martha that Douglas could become her war sacrifice, and that she might carry his memory as her mother's generation of women was carrying its memories.

To be near Martha during her pregnancy, Mr.

and Mrs. Quest move to the city. Initially, Martha reacts negatively to their relocation. In her mind, their separation from the veld signifies severance of her childhood roots. Martha becomes reconciled to the change, however, after she impulsively joins another pregnant friend in a ritual-like mud bath on an open field one rainy night, symbolically merging herself and her unborn baby with the wholeness of the veld. Soon after this reconnecting event, Martha's daughter, Caroline Knowell, is born.

Meanwhile, Douglas becomes a soldier and leaves Martha alone for nearly a year. Upon his return, he and Martha resume conjugal relations, but Martha becomes fearful of another pregnancy. She is further harassed by Mrs. Quest, who tells her that she looks pregnant and criticizes her for allowing her servants too many privileges. While Martha silently rejects her mother, she gains sudden insight. She sees Mrs. Quest as a woman so disappointed in her own life that she needs to live vicariously through her daughter. Martha reasons that, in the light of Mrs. Quest's experiences, her behavior is "natural . . . even harmless and pathetic." Making a cognitive leap, she sees what may lie in store for her. She realizes that, if she continues to act against her own desires, by age fifty she could be like Mrs. Quest: "narrow, conventional, intolerant, insensitive."

Once Martha discovers that she is not again pregnant, she hastens to end her marriage. As the marriage dissolves messily, Martha finds direction for her life in the Communist Party. Communism seems to offer both the bases for the eradication of the family and an end to Martha's fear of repetition. Ironically, as Martha seizes communism as a means of liberation, she once again uses a man to lead the way. By the end of the novel, Martha is romantically entangled with William, a comrade in communism and a member of the British Royal Air Force.

## A RIPPLE FROM THE STORM

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Novel

*After expending incredible amounts of energy working for the local Communist Party, Martha Quest is overtaken by a strange illness; after recovery, she sinks further into depression.*

*A Ripple from the Storm* covers the years 1941 to 1943. The portrayal of Martha Quest's emotional, personal life and her tenuous relationship to the mainstream society of white South Africa continues in this novel. Her deep involvement in the secret world of communism adds further complications to her life.

Following the example of her friend Jasmine, Martha—recently divorced and alienated from her mother and daughter—becomes the ideal hard-working communist. Believing that Russia has created the framework for an ideal society, Martha glorifies the country at every opportunity. Her worship of Russia, however, is assailed when Solly Cohen, Martha's childhood friend, informs her that Joseph Stalin is responsible for executing Red Army officers. Although she does not at first accept this information, subsequent corruption from within her local party forces her to see that comrades do not have an automatic claim to virtue.

As Martha continues to present herself as a willing tool for the good of the Communist Party, she reaches a point of physical breakdown and has to take extended bed rest. During her illness, she is nursed by Anton Hesse, leader of the local Communist group. As Anton guards Martha's well-being, her former lover, William, fades into the background. Martha allows Anton to take over her mind and body. Her lack of spunk also allows her to accept passively Mrs. Quest's accusation that she has abandoned Caroline, her daughter.

Despite the fact that she does not love Anton and realizes that they are sexually incompatible, Martha moves in with Anton after she recovers. Later, she marries him to save him from an internment camp. For a period of time, she allows herself to think that they can live together harmoniously because she truly respects Anton's mind and his position in the local party. Soon after the marriage, however, Martha sees that Anton wants to live with

a “real” wife, not a fellow communist; she grows to despise him. Still, she stays in the marriage so that Anton can remain in the country.

When the communist group dissolves, mainly because of Anton’s overbearing manner and snobbery, Martha is overwhelmed by feelings of futility. Nevertheless, she believes that the end results were inevitable. At this point in her life, she loses her faith in communism and despairs of ever finding her true self: “I am not a person at all, I’m nothing yet—perhaps I never will be.” Her journey toward self-identification seems to have ended in a blind alley.

## LANDLOCKED

**First published:** 1965

**Type of work:** Novel

*Suffering from a sense of self-division, Martha Quest seeks to unify her fragmented character by finding the right man and, in the process, learns something about the nature of self-destruction.*

*Landlocked* covers the years 1944 to 1949 in Martha Quest’s life. In an irrational world of organizational corruptions and personal frustrations, Martha enters a love affair and finds a temporary solace. Paradoxically, this relationship becomes both a balm for her troubled soul and the most profound emotional experience of her entire life. The visionary heights that Martha achieves through her sexual expression with her new lover reflect Lessing’s view that, from the release of intense feeling and passion, one can achieve a sense of connection and balance in the universe.

At the outset, Martha is offered a promotion at her law firm. Instead of being happy for the opportunity, she refuses the offer, believing further commitment to a collective that she does not esteem will only detract from her search for self. After refusing the job, she dreams that she is a “large house . . . with half a dozen different rooms in it,” but that in the center the house is empty, ready to be filled. She accepts the dream as an “image of her position” and reasons that a man is needed to fill her inner space.

Martha’s choice becomes Thomas Stern, a Polish Jew who escaped from Poland but discovered

later that the Nazis murdered all members of the family that he left behind. Thomas’s passionate outrage toward Nazis stirs Martha and alerts her to his potential for filling her empty center with emotions that could ignite her true self. Although Martha is still married to Anton Hesse, she has no reservations about becoming Thomas’s lover because the marriage is an acknowledged sham by both herself and Anton. She responds to Thomas in a way that she can compare only to pregnancy. With Thomas, her body becomes “a newly discovered country with laws of its own.”

Yet Thomas is a tormented man, having the “eye of an insane artist.” The lack of continuity in his life because of his loss of generations to the Holocaust proves too much for him to bear. Feelings of alienation lead him to “the long process of breaking down.” As Martha watches Thomas slip into madness, her imagination expands, and she starts to comprehend the incipient darkness that she knows will soon take him away.

By the end of *Landlocked*, Martha has ended her “in name only” marriage; she has abandoned her revolutionary dream; she is now suspicious that, in leaving Caroline, her daughter, she has not released her from being victimized by history; finally, she has lost the love of her life to a bizarre illness, which he has recorded in a final rambling manuscript. With these disappointments from the outside world heavy on her mind, Martha makes the decision to look inward and develop her inner self.

## THE FOUR-GATED CITY

**First published:** 1969

**Type of work:** Novel

*In continuing her self-development, Martha Quest works through the roles that she had shunned in the past, traveling a road to spiritual growth that takes her to the edge of madness and then to self-integration.*

*The Four-Gated City* covers the years 1950 through 1997, focusing centrally on Martha Quest’s middle-age years. The novel derives its title from the book of Revelation, but the title refers specifically to four types of houses that represent for Lessing the



human-made world. Martha's passing between the houses connects the gates of the houses in postwar London, which she depicts as violent and corrupt. It is little wonder that perfect sanity seems like insanity in such a world. The question of mental balance in an imbalanced world is one that Lessing undertakes in this novel.

Since Martha has severed all ties with the collectives that once had placed restrictions on her life, she now relinquishes her public self, Matty, and asserts her inner character, Martha. Soon after her arrival in London, she finds sexual communion with a man named Jack. During a critical sexual experience with him, she has a vision in which she sees the golden age of her youth on the veld and a picture of herself as a middle-aged woman living in a house filled with sad-faced children.

When financial necessity presses Martha to find a job, she accepts a position as secretary to an aristocratic English novelist, Mark Coldridge. Her duties expand as Mark's eccentric family life becomes more complicated. Soon, Martha is running the entire household, which consists of Mark's insane wife, Lynda, Mark's troubled, orphaned nephew, Paul, and Mark's own star-crossed son, Francis. Martha functions as a surrogate wife to Mark and as a surrogate mother for the two boys. When Mark's nieces, Gwen and Jill, enter the picture, Martha also extends herself to them.

In a central scene in the book, Martha walks through the Coldridge house announcing dinner and daydreams that the house has no center. While suspended in this surrealistic state, she loses part of her memory and then realizes that, like the house, she does not have a center; there is nothing to hold the pieces of her life together. This experience is followed by news that Mrs. Quest is coming to London to see her. The impending visit causes Martha to panic and sends her back to the psychiatrist, who tells her that she has to work through her troubled bond with her mother.

In preparation for Mrs. Quest's visit, Martha places herself mentally at the center of the Coldridge house. She becomes so attuned to members of the household that she can overhear what they are thinking. When Martha shares this information with Lynda, she learns that Lynda has the same sensitivity and that it was this ability that first caused society to label her insane. Martha wishes to learn more about Lynda's insanity, which she

now believes was induced by collectives in society. Through starvation and wakefulness, she descends with Lynda into the dark world of sound and begins to understand different psychic levels where people like Lynda can be trapped. Martha learns how to move through this frightening psychic world, developing resources that allow her to eradicate her guilty feelings about her mother.

At the end of the book, about the year 1965, Martha has put her life into focus, and she has reached a stage of self-integration. The futuristic appendix to the book takes the reader up to the year 1997 and charts events leading to some kind of nuclear holocaust. Survivors of the catastrophe are stranded in remote places, and the future of the world now seems to belong to the developing nations.

## THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

**First published:** 1962

**Type of work:** Novel

*A fragmented woman writer, seeking to avoid chaos, writes about different pieces of her life in four notebooks; during a breakdown, imagined reels of her experiences merge to make a coherent film, and she is healed.*

*The Golden Notebook* encompasses the years 1950 through 1957. It is divided into five sections called Free Women 1-5. The first four sections contain a part of the main story (the conventional novel) and excerpts from four differently colored notebooks. The fourth section of the novel also contains the golden notebook. The last section is a straightforward ending to the main story, which presents an integrated character who no longer needs to compartmentalize experiences. When the story begins, the central character, Anna Wulf, has already published a single successful book, "Frontiers of War," set in central Africa, detailing "colour-bar hatreds and cruelties." This 1951 novel was so successful that Anna has been able to live off the royalties from it for the next six years while she suffers from writer's block.

The main story line evolves around two women, Anna and Molly, who seem to be extensions of each other politically and responsively. Their common

enemy is Molly's former husband, Richard, a rich business executive who seems a perfect specimen of the British capitalist society. Richard continues to be very intrusive in Molly's life because they share a son, Tommy. Consequently, Richard assumes a relationship with Anna that is much like his relationship with Molly. Even Richard's second wife, Marion, becomes a part of the circle, vacillating, in an inebriated state, between Molly and Anna, trying to unburden herself of hurt feelings stemming from her bad marriage.

Once Tommy reaches the age when he should decide upon a career, he is torn between the idealistic world of his mother and Anna and the capitalistic world of tycoons. The "paralysis of the will" that Tommy suffers reaches its highest point when Tommy goes to Anna to have her confirm for him that her lifestyle, which seems to him morally superior, is truly viable. After reading Anna's notebooks, Tommy understands the chaos awaiting a person who tries to operate outside collectives; yet he cannot formulate the proper balance necessary for advancement. In a fit of depression, Tommy shoots himself in the head. Against the odds, he survives, though he is left totally blind. Ironically, he eventually leads the life of a successful businessman and joins forces with Marion, who leaves Richard to be with him.

At the end of *The Golden Notebook*, Molly decides to remarry, and Anna sees the end of yet another affair. Nevertheless, Anna has gained a better understanding of herself as a result of working through dark areas of her personality with a sexual partner who was in crisis himself during their relationship. He, too, is able to heal his life.

A brief description of the contents of each of the notebooks follows:

In the black notebook, Anna gives the African background for her novel "Frontiers of War." Although the first entry in this notebook is 1952, entries flash back to 1944. The story is a study of the cruelty of the colonial mind as seen through the eyes of the young idealist, Anna.

The red notebook is the contemporary notebook in which Anna records everyday events. It contains her present politics and gives an account of her disillusionment with the Communist Party. In it are a number of parodies of dedicated communists and newspaper clippings of such horrors as the testing of the hydrogen bomb, the bombing of Quemoy and Matsu, and the execution of the Rosenbergs in the United States.

The yellow notebook is a novel-within-the-novel. It contains Anna's fictional, unpublished second novel, called "The Shadow of the Third." The characters and actions in it are direct doubles for the main story.

The blue notebook is used by Anna as a diary. It contains commentary on her affiliation with the British Communist Party; details of the most intense love affair of her life, a five-year period when she truly loved a man named Michael; reports on her lengthy psychoanalysis with Mrs. Marks, whose therapy helps lead Anna into an emotional transformation when Anna has an affair with Saul Green, the man with whom she descends into chaos and learns how to self-unite.

*The Golden Notebook* symbolizes Anna's ultimate recognition that experience is fluid and connected. It is the notebook that both she and Saul Green want to use. They both contribute to it, and, through it, they give each other new beginnings.

## SUMMARY

Although Doris Lessing is a writer of a great narrative range, the themes that run throughout her work have been constant. Her concentration on such important extraliterary themes as colonialism, racial inequities, male-female relations, nuclear war possibilities, and the continuing evolution of humankind reveals her commitment to the betterment of humanity and underscores her belief in the serious role of the artist in society.

In reading a Lessing book, one soon realizes that the undertaking is essentially expansive, for the writer's intent is not only to engage the reader's imagination through a literary experience but also to enlarge the reader's concept of what it means to live in harmony with oneself, with the world, and with the universe.

Sarah Smith Ducksworth



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways did Doris Lessing's knowledge of the veld animate her fiction?
- Summarize Lessing's insights into the relationship between blacks and whites.
- Lessing's *Martha Quest* had a tendency to repeat some of her mistakes. What evidences of maturation do you see as her career develops?
- Compare the sexual attitudes of *Quest* and *Anna Wulf*.
- Does Lessing's career suggest a conviction that only by becoming a member of a collective or of a sexual relationship can one understand such relationships?
- Did the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Lessing in 2007 depend more on the short fiction than on her sequences of novels?

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Bernard Gottfryd/Archive Photos

## PRIMO LEVI

**Born:** Turin, Italy  
July 31, 1919

**Died:** Turin, Italy  
April 11, 1987

*Esteemed and admired for his writings about the Holocaust, Levi brought the clarity of rational scientific inquiry to all of his work as a chemist and author, a trait enhanced by the humane integrity that informed everything he did.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Primo Levi (LAY-vee) was born in Turin, Italy, on July 31, 1919. His family had been living in the nation's Piedmont region since the early decades of the fifteenth century after leaving Spain because of the anti-Semitic policies of the Spanish monarchy. The Levi family was involved in financial practices until Primo's father, Cesare, took advantage of a more tolerant social situation to attend Turin's Royal School of Applied Engineering, graduating in 1901 with a degree in civil engineering. He met Primo's mother, Ester Luzzati, in 1915, when he returned from work in Hungary, and the Luzzati family gave the newlyweds the apartment in Turin, where Primo was born, as a part of their dowry.

Primo's name—from *primogenito*, or "first-born"—was not common in Italy but was in keeping with Jewish custom in a nonobservant family.

Cesare Levi was fond of buying or borrowing books from the bookstores in his neighborhood, and Primo was drawn to his scientific and naturalist volumes, particularly those with full-color plate illustrations. His sister Anna Maria, eighteen months younger, stated that Primo had learned to read and write by his fourth birthday, and he was eager to help her to read and learn other subjects as well. "My brother simplified mathematics for me," she recalled.

Primo was often the winner of various scholastic

awards, and he began to develop an interest in the natural world on mountaineering expeditions, pushing beyond his ability on hikes as a kind of a test of fortitude and adaptability. He joined the Avanguardia ski patrol in 1933 as a means of satisfying fascist public demands without supporting any of Benito Mussolini's fascist positions.

Levi's friendship with Mario Piacenza, a classmate, led to an interest in chemistry when both boys began to spend time in Piacenza's older brother's makeshift laboratory. Levi's choice of his vocation was made after he ordered, from England, the British Nobel physicist William Bragg's *Concerning the Nature of Things* (1925), and he was given a manual on microscopy by his father, who further encouraged his son with the purchase of a fine Zeiss instrument in 1934.

Although generally nonpolitical, Levi, who was now the coeditor of his school's literary magazine, was asked to contribute something to a rebel journal published in 1936 after the official magazine was censored. Levi's effort, his first published writing, was a poem, "You Don't Know How to Study!" which Levi biographer Ian Thompson describes as "mock-heroic doggerel and highfalutin allusions to botany," and which included parodies of one of Petrarch's sonnets and the work of the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus. Levi's courses in the humanities were built on a classical curriculum, which included the works of the writers Dante, Giovanni Boccaccio, and William Shakespeare. Although Levi was disappointed with his relatively mediocre scores on his final examinations, he had

been given, in biographer Thompson's estimation, "an excellent training in Italian literature."

By 1938, Levi was in his second year at the University of Turin and had become an outstanding student, recognized by his classmates and professors as intellectually spirited and devoted to and excited by learning. In July, 1938, Mussolini's government issued a decree that destroyed nearly a century of tolerance and cast Italian Jews—many of whom were supporters of his regime—as aliens. Through a series of further oppressive measures as World War II began, Italian Jews were subject to social humiliation and personal danger. Levi completed his degree in 1940 and was accepted as an intern by Nicolo Dallaporta, an individualistic non-conformist and antifascist, at the Experimental Physics Institute.

In June, 1941, Levi passed all of his exams, earning only the second first-class honors degree granted in twenty-five years. However, because he was a Jew, Levi was offered no fellowships to continue his work. With no other prospects, he accepted a position as a chemist at an asbestos mine, extracting nickel from the soil, working illegally under a non-Jewish pseudonym. He moved to Milan in July, 1942, to work on a project that attempted to develop synthetic insulin. As the Allied air forces began to bombard Italian cities, Levi responded to the destruction with his first serious attempts at poetry, capturing the moods of Italian citizens who hated the fascists while under siege from their adversaries. He also moved beyond his previous distant disdain for Mussolini's regime, joining the Action Party, an underground precursor of the active resistance forming throughout Italy, even though he was not fully aware of the genocide of Adolf Hitler's forces, remarking later, "Our ignorance allowed us to live."

On July 25, 1943, Pietro Badoglio was named premier of Italy as Mussolini's government fell, but the Germans recaptured the northern sections of Italy. Levi went into hiding with his mother and sister in the little town of Amay near the Swiss border and joined the Resistance in October, 1943. His small band was infiltrated by a fascist spy, who betrayed them to the Gestapo, and they were arrested on December 13, 1943. Levi was sent to a camp in northern Italy, which passed into German control in February, 1944. On February 22, Levi, with 650 other Jews, were placed on a train that carried

them to the Polish town of Auschwitz, where Levi survived in the concentration camp until the Germans fled the advance of Russian soldiers on January 25, 1945.

There was total chaos as the Russian troops gained control of the area, and it took Levi nine months to reach Italy on a circuitous route, passing through various Russian territories until he was repatriated. He arrived home in Turin on October 19, 1945. Driven by a need to recount what he had lived through, he turned toward poetry and his first attempts at short fiction. He found employment with the Du Pont de Nemours paint company in Milan in January, 1946, and began to make fragmentary notes of his time in Auschwitz. Following several rejections and considerable polishing, the manuscript of *Se questo è un uomo* (1947; *If This Is a Man*, 1959; revised as *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, 1961) was accepted by publisher Franco Antonicelli and issued by his firm in October, 1947, one month after Levi married Lucia Morpurgo.

Levi and Lucia moved into his family apartment with Levi's mother, Ester, where they lived for the rest of Levi's life. He found employment with Federico Accati's Società Industriale Vernici e Affini (SIVA), a firm making industrial varnishes and similar products, where he worked for the next thirty years. Although he had put aside an ambition to be a professional writer to concentrate on his work as a chemist, he wrote a dozen stories based on his colleagues at SIVA during the next four years. Levi represented the firm on trips to Germany, visiting Buchenwald, the site of a concentration camp, in 1954. In 1955, Giulio Einaudi offered to republish *If This Is a Man*, but financial difficulties prevented the book from reappearing until 1958. The following year, an English translation that Levi worked on with the Oxford historian Stuart Woolf was published by Orion Press in Great Britain and the United States under the title *If This Is a Man*, followed by a German translation in 1961. Levi had also begun to write science-fiction fantasies, but he was unable to convince writer Italo Calvino, an admirer, to endorse them for publication.

A further account of the months following his time in Auschwitz had been on Levi's mind since 1947, and in 1961, he began work on *La tregua* (1963; *The Reawakening*, 1965), patterned after

Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614), a hybrid combining fiction, allegory, and direct address to the reader. The book was published in 1963, and Levi's reputation as a European writer of importance was taking shape. In the United States, the book was translated as *The Reawakening*, and mostly overlooked by reviewers when it appeared in 1965.

In 1973, Levi turned to a book he had been thinking about for many years, a retrospective view of his life from 1935 to 1967, using some of the elements of the periodic table as emblems for interesting people he had known. Levi retired from his full-time position at SIVA in 1974, remaining as a consultant, which permitted more time for writing. This resulted in the publication of a volume of poetry, *L'osteria di Brema* (1975; the Bremen beer hall), as well as the completion of *Il sistema periodico* (1975; *The Periodic Table*, 1984), which was received with many enthusiastic reviews when it appeared in 1975 but did not win any of Italy's major literary prizes.

His prominence in European literary circles enabled Levi to continue work on larger projects, like a book on the world of work, *La chiave a stella* (1978; *The Monkey's Wrench*, 1986), while writing more than sixty articles during the late 1970's for the Turin paper *La Stampa*, pieces akin to *The New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town." *The Monkey's Wrench* was awarded the Strega Prize, Italy's most prestigious honor, in 1979, and Levi started work on a collection of essays about the Nazi death camps that was eventually published as *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986; *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1988). He also wrote a novel about partisan resistance somewhat based on his contacts with Yiddish culture in Auschwitz, *Se non ora, quando?* (1982; *If Not Now, When?*, 1985), which was awarded both the Viareggio Prize and the Premio Campiello, partially as compensation for overlooking some of his previous work.

The elevation of Levi's stature in the twenty-first century as one of the greatest writers of the previous century began with the initial publication in Great Britain and the United States of *The Periodic Table*. Raymond Rosenthal's translation for the American edition, which Levi especially liked, was instrumental in bringing Levi's work to a much wider audience than those who knew him from his writing about his incarceration. Levi was treated as a celebrity, which he appreciated but disliked, on

trips to the United States in 1985 and Great Britain in 1986. Unfortunately, his physical and psychological state was deteriorating rapidly, and his death from a fall in his apartment in 1987 resulted in a continuing controversy about the lingering effects of his struggles with Nazism to the detriment of an understanding of his full capacity as an artist and a man.

## ANALYSIS

The moral force of *If This Is a Man* and the unique style and insight of *The Periodic Tables* suggest that Primo Levi twice found a subject and form so perfectly suited to his style and sensibility that this convergence of author and material resulted in the production of two works whose creation was especially fortuitous. However, both of these books were born out of necessity. For *If This Is a Man*, it was the necessity of circumstance, as Levi felt that he must write about his experience in Auschwitz; for *The Periodic Table*, it was the necessity of inward reflection, as Levi came to realize that he was meant to write about the linkage of scientific scrutiny and its metaphorical resonance for revealing human character.

However, in spite of the enduring power of both of these books and the singular nature of each of them, to understand their strengths, Levi's life as a writer and a scientist must be seen as the intertwining of two disciplines, which developed concurrently and which he insisted were not incompatible. As he would often say to people who expressed surprise that he was both a chemist and a writer, it was because he was a chemist that he wrote. Still, from 1947 to 1958, he wrote only intermittently. His pattern of thinking in terms of written expression throughout his life did not come into full focus until the publication in 2007 of *A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories of Primo Levi* (that is, unpublished in the United States), which revealed how much he had thought in literary terms while he was earning a living as a working chemist.

One limiting factor was Levi's statements that after Auschwitz he had a need to tell what had happened—to "bear witness" in the now classic formulation—so strong that it was like "an immediate and violent impulse." After finding his way back to Turin, he felt impelled to relate to acquaintances, friends, and family members moments of his imprisonment and to make notes about it on almost

any available scrap or fragment of paper. He did this for sixteen weeks before launching the manuscript of *If This Is a Man*, which was written “in order of urgency.” However, as he later admitted, “the work of tightening up is more studied, and more recent,” as is clear from the differences between the initial publication in 1947 and the revised edition of 1958. *If This Is a Man* appeared when the full extent of the Holocaust was essentially unknown, and Levi was aware of the shock and horror that would accompany the revelation of what the Nazis had done. Consequently, his immediate concern was to avoid the overly emotional and to write with the careful, scrupulous exactitude of the true scientist determined to be accurate. For this reason, he prized directness and clarity and avoided adornments of style or hyperbole, seeing that the use of rhetorical devices to maximize dramatic impact was unnecessary and even destructive to his intentions. As he wrote, “My model (or, if you prefer, my style) was that of the ‘weekly report’ commonly used in factories; it must be precise, concise, and written in a language comprehensible to everybody in the industrial hierarchy.” However, this was not the totality of his personality, and the stories in *A Tranquil Star* indicate the range of his imagination, as does an examination of the ways in which he fictionalized the people who he included in various books, perhaps most notably *The Periodic Table*. His audience was both the “industrial hierarchy” of his peers and everyone else who was not equipped or inclined to think like a rational, trained scientist.

It is his more playful, less somber, sensitively emotional qualities that emerge in his stories and poems. As serious as he was as a scientist searching for a verifiable truth, and as determined as he was as an industrial chemist working on specific problems requiring applicable solutions, he was also fascinated by the “other” worlds he could explore in speculative fiction. His 1966 volume *Storie naturali*, attributed to “Damiano Malabaila” (“evil nurse” in Piedmontese dialect), is an ironic projection of the disparity between the ambitious claims of technologists and the reality of the frustrations humans encounter when actually using these devices, satirizing the priests of scientific prophecy for their misplaced confidence.

As writer Anita Desai contends, the stories in *A Tranquil Star* are directed by the ancient human

query, “What if?” The story “Nel parco” (1971; “In the Park”) has the delicious conceit of a kind of theme park for literary characters, including “Leopold Bloom, Kim, Moll Flanders, and Holden Caulfield,” who “can’t stand one another.” Conspicuously, there are unidentifiable characters with no face, who “don’t last long. They are unsuccessful characters. . . . They disappear in the space of a few months.” This turns out to be the fate of the protagonist. The theme of impermanence is common to the stories, as in “The Magic Paint,” which makes a person invulnerable, but comes off while bathing. Similarly, “The Fugitive” depicts a poet who writes the poem of his life, but cannot make it permanent because the copier fails, the copy paper disappears, and the poem seems to develop limbs and releases itself from the page. The mood of these stories is somewhat melancholic, though aspects of Rabelaisian extravagance tend to resist sadness.

Levi’s novel *If Not Now, When?* was criticized for static characters, melodramatic situations, and a shallow understanding of Yiddish culture. In his stories, however, Levi, unencumbered by any previous concepts of form, discovered his own manner of narration. The stories rarely have a tight conclusion, seeming to continue after the initiating action has effectively ended, a speculative future awaiting the characters.

His poems, which were composed throughout his life, are a register of his deep, abiding interest in language itself. The opening chapter of *The Periodic Table*, “Argon,” is, among other things, an investigation of the linguistic transformations that took place as Levi’s family moved from a Spanish region to Italy’s Piedmont. In an interview in 1972, Levi said, “Poetry is a mysterious necessity through all ages, all generations, and all human civilizations. It is a powerful language, natural and artificial at the same time, whose origins are more ancient than those of prose.” His own poetry permitted the entrance of emotion and instinct into the appealingly reasonable vision of a humane, sensitive man, as he understood that the method of the scientist was not sufficient for an examination of the psychological foundations of human behavior. The poems that Levi wrote are designed to have the riveting power of heightened language; he placed poems at the beginning of his most important books, like his version of the prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, set be-



fore the first chapter of *If This Is a Man*: “I commend these words to you./ Carve them in your heart.”

The opening poem of *L'osteria di Brema*, his first poetry collection, carries a mood of resignation following intense experience resembling the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer* (c. 1000). The poem represents a man “like an extinguished flame,” who “fears nothing, hopes nothing, expects nothing,/ But stares fixedly at the sun,” a kind of postapocalyptic reflection by one who has seen a vision too awful to forget.

Levi chose a lyric mode less frequently, but his insistence on a Jewish identity without an acceptance of a deity led to the injunction in “Gedale’s Song”:

We are the sons of David, the stubborn of Masada,  
Each of us carries in his pocket the stone  
That shattered Goliath’s forehead.  
Brothers, way from the Europe of the graves:  
We will climb together toward the land  
Where we shall be men among men.

The optimistic echoes of the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah” (“The Hope”), and the spirit of Zionism prior to the founding of Israel are evident here. An exuberance not typical in his writing occurs in a celebration of vitality in “Cuore di legno” (“Wooden Heart”), where he playfully personifies a chestnut tree as a symbol of natural strength:

My next-door neighbor is robust;  
It’s a horse-chestnut tree in Corso Re Umberto:  
My age, but doesn’t look it.

The trials of existence are overcome, as the poem concludes:

Under the bark hang dead chrysalises  
That will never be butterflies.  
Still, in its sluggish wooden heart  
It feels, savors the seasons’ return.

The aspects of a self-portrait are apparent, as is the poet’s pleasure in the familiar. The poem demonstrates Levi’s inclination toward the positive, even as he carried the burden of speaking for all those lost in the Holocaust. As he ranged over the three decades of his productive life in *The Periodic Table*, his pride in his scientific powers and his capacity

for shaping language into a new element with special properties are combined in that book, which gave him the greatest pleasure to write. *The Periodic Table* is his strongest proof that the chemist and the writer were part of a conjunction of attributes rather than conflicting calls to his essential self.

## IF THIS IS A MAN

**First published:** *Se questo è un uomo*, 1947  
(English translation, 1959; revised as  
*Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on  
Humanity*, 1961)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Levi’s account of the ten months he was  
incarcerated in the Nazi death camp in Poland.*

The passage of time, the context of history, and even a familiarity with the awful facts of the Holocaust cannot shield the reader from or lessen the impact of Levi’s incarceration in what he called *Il buco nero*—The Black Hole—of Auschwitz. As he told writer Philip Roth in a revealing interview the year before his death, he wrote *If This Is a Man*, “struggling to explain to others, and to myself, the events I had been involved in.”

The gripping, heartbreaking intensity of his recreation of the human-fashioned hell that Levi, using a purposely paradoxical term, said he was “lucky” enough to enter, has the force of Walt Whitman’s proclamation about living through a world of degradation and death: “I was the man; I suffered; I was there.” Levi’s “luck” was part of the random process that enabled him to survive, not dependent on individual virtue or merit. “I have seen the survival of shrewd people and silly people, the brave and the cowardly, ‘thinkers’ and madmen,” Levi maintained. In addition, he described his time in Auschwitz as “in technicolor,” the remainder of his life in “black and white,” declaring that “I remember having lived my Auschwitz year in a condition of exceptional spiritness” as he strove to understand “an environment that is monstrous but new, monstrously new.”

The title chosen by Collier Books, the American publisher, *Survival in Auschwitz*, was an understandably commercial attempt to reach an audience, but it completely missed the point of Levi’s choice.



What he wanted to express was his naturalist's curiosity about the human beings who had built the death camp, who operated it, and who lived and died there. When he arrived, Levi was stunned by the nightmare world; in keeping with his scientist's orientation, after his identity has been reduced to a number inscribed on his arm, he begins a search for meaning, persisting in asking "Why?" even after a guard replies, "*Hier ist kein warum*," which Levi understands as "There is no why here." For a rational scientist, there is always an explanation, so amid the absurd and initially incomprehensible brutality of the concentration camp, Levi continues to try to understand why some live, some die, and why people behave and react as they do.

Amid the fear and pain, Levi's mind is keenly alert, to the point that he can analyze and reflect on himself as a specimen in a hideous experiment, noting physical signs of deterioration or recovery like indices on a laboratory chart. Similarly, conventional measures of time become pointless. Events like the beginning of air raids, the approach of the Russian army, and the incredible good fortune of being selected to work in a laboratory are not taken as signs of progress toward survival but as things in themselves, "the gift of good fortune to be enjoyed as intensely as possible and at once."

When Levi was released as the Germans fled from the Russian advance, he was as stunned by his survival as he had been by the staggering events of his arrival. "It is a miracle that I am alive," he wrote, but added, "It is not that I thank Providence, because if there really was a Providence, Auschwitz and Birkenau would never have existed." As Levi's biographer, Myriam Anissimov, explains, "With scrupulous honesty, he always spoke solely about what he himself had seen, but his voice was raised in the name of all of those—he called them 'the true witnesses'—whom the *Lager* [concentration camp] submerged." His mentor, Professor Dalla-porta, told him he "must write all this down," confirming his own feeling that he "returned from the camps with an absolute, pathological narrative charge."

It was all the more impressive, then, that his narrative is marked by composure without lessening its impact. The always sharp, observant eye of the scientist recorded the physical phenomena that the writer brought to vivid life in the evocative detail of a masterful stylist. The shy, decent man, who un-

derstood that an individual's personal survival always took precedence, never lost a sense of other people. The last sentence of the book contains the hope and humanity that was not crushed by the Holocaust. Referring to his friend Charles, he says, "We have exchanged long letters and I hope to see him again one day."

## THE PERIODIC TABLE

**First published:** *Il sistema periodico*, 1975  
(English translation, 1984)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*A personal history organized by a linkage between people and the basic elements of the tangible world that Levi knew intimately through his work as a chemist.*

Nearly thirty years after Levi had stepped out of the hell of Auschwitz, he felt that he was ready to write *The Periodic Table*, an imaginative map of the world that he loved. In an instance of inspiration, he planned a kind of memoir with interludes of fantasy in which elements arranged on the periodic table would operate as emblems of the personality traits of people who had mattered to him. The originality of his conception is evident, but he was working in an archetypal tradition that includes the medieval European idea of a man controlled by various "humors" based on different organs of the body.

His friend, Italo Calvino, called the book "a moral biography," since Levi celebrated the work he did as a chemist as a counter to the hideous parody of valuable work encapsulated in the notorious sign at the entrance to Auschwitz, *Arbeit macht frei* (work makes one free). At the start, Levi set his own motto, a Yiddish proverb, *Ibergecumene tsores iz gut tsu derseylin* (troubles overcome are good to tell).

The book is composed of twenty-one chapters,



each one under the heading of a particular element. The first one, “Argon,” is a capsule history of Levi’s family, a reclaiming of the heritage that the Nazis tried to wipe out. It establishes a tone of genial expectancy as Levi fondly recalls how a hybrid language developed from a convergence of Spanish, Italian, and Yiddish, as his family adjusted to the particularities of a new habitation. The metaphor that informs the chapter is the reluctance of inert gases to combine or change.

The direction of the narrative is controlled by the demands and challenges of working with the natural substances that a chemical engineer encounters, while the substance of the narrative is developed through an exploration of the inner consciousness of the people who dealt with these challenges. As Levi writes about Lanza, who is heating a boiler to distill sulfur, “the dance of thoughts and images” in his mind runs parallel to his careful attention to the pressure in the boiler. Shifting the perspective from Lanza’s consciousness to the narrator as amiable guide, Levi advises, “On your feet, Lanza, we have arrived at 180 degrees.” This is the way Levi keeps the reader involved with the people who are under scrutiny.

The chapters loosely follow Levi’s own experiences, from his first contact with Hydrogen as a novice experimenter, to his life as a young chemistry student in “Zinc,” to his meeting with a man of Iron who became a treasured friend. Then follows an interlude conceived as fable in which Lead and Mercury operate as allegories of involvement in which fixity and transmutation define character. Levi’s capture by the Germans is dealt with in “Gold,” the precious substance standing for the opportunities of life itself, and in “Cerium,” which depicts his use of his knowledge of compounds to procure a commodity that could be traded for food that kept him alive at Auschwitz.

After several chapters covering his exploits as an industrial chemist, “Vanadium” takes Levi back to his imprisonment, as he begins a correspondence with a German industrialist who, he discerns, was the man who managed the laboratory where he labored in Auschwitz. There is no resolution or satisfaction from this exchange, but no rancor either. In an extraordinary final chapter, “Carbon,” Levi traces the transformation of a carbon atom from its bondage in limestone through a series of changes to become a part of Levi’s mind, where it literally en-

ergizes the hand that writes the words, “to impress on the paper, this dot, here, this one,” a vital record of life that is a tribute to the continuance, in the face of hazard and peril, of the human soul and spirit.

## THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED

**First published:** *I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986  
(English translation, 1988)

**Type of work:** Essays

*Levi’s retrospective assessment of his experiences and their meaning, including some lessons to build on and the judgment that his life validates.*

Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved* is the distillation of his experiences with the Holocaust, from his capture by the Germans to his eminence as a commentator on that tragic episode in human history. His essential theme in *The Drowned and the Saved*—a title he had used for one of the chapters of *If This Is a Man*—is how to measure the ways people dealt with the horrors of the Nazi program of genocide during its operation and since that time.

The title is designed to lead into an examination of what it meant to be saved in a spiritual context, since some who survived physically were lost in a moral sense, while some who died had by the example of their lives reached a level of salvation, which Levi celebrates. He concluded the book with letters he had received from German citizens in an effort to summarize and reconcile his own recollections of the Holocaust with the extensive historical studies that appeared since his first book, as well as with responses from Germans living at the time and from generations born after the war. In conjunction with this, Levi was determined to prevent the reoccurrence of anything like Auschwitz by making it impossible to forget or suppress the facts, by protecting and preserving memory without limiting discussion, by resisting those who tried to distort or shape a historical record for their own purposes, and by attempting to penetrate as far as possible the depths of the human psyche to try to understand how people could behave as terribly as they did.

Beyond the recapitulation of experience, it is his exploration of human motivation and insights illuminating character that make the chapters of the book so compelling. His lucid, vibrant, supple writing style—expertly conveyed by Raymond Rosenthal’s translation—establishes a voice that instills confidence, inviting the reader to follow on a dreadful journey in the company of a man who

can be trusted to tell the truth, to offer whatever enlightenment is possible, and who never loses a humane sense of compassion, even when casting judgment.

At the center of the narrative is the chapter called “The Gray Zone,” which considers the range of response of all those brought by the Germans to what he calls, with appropriately coarse terminology, the *anus mundi*, the “ultimate drainage site of the German universe.” Around this central chapter are variants of the title’s primary division, depending on such determinants as whether people

chose to speak or remain silent (“Communicating”), to rely on or refute religion (“Useless Violence”), or to conform to or defy expectations (“Stereotypes”). In each case, the primary separation is confounded and complicated by Levi’s subtle introduction of distinctions, which compel increasingly more complex contemplation. When he renders judgment about the Holocaust, it feels earned and appropriate.

## SUMMARY

Primo Levi set a quatrain from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) before the text of *The Drowned and the Saved*, proclaiming:

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
The agony returns,  
And till my ghastly tale is told  
This heart within me burns.

Like so many of the allusions and quotations within his work, it is an accurate and illuminating citation. For Levi, no matter what he achieved, the “agony” remained; the “ghastly tale” could never be forgotten, but the fire in the soul cast a light that brightened the dark passages of the human universe.

Leon Lewis



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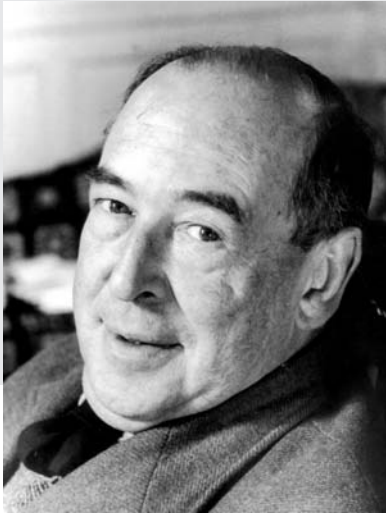
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the spiritual aspects of Primo Levi's writing with respect to his sense of himself as Jewish but neither observant nor doctrinal.
- Consider the ways in which Levi's writing style effectively conveys his fascination with the worlds of scientific certainty and human fallibility.
- Trace the rise in Levi's reputation from the initial publication of *If This Is a Man* to his final volumes and account for its shifts and alterations.
- How does Levi balance the positive and negative aspects of technology in his work?
- What are the particular qualities of *If This Is a Man* that have made it still stunning after the appearance of many other Holocaust memoirs?



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## C. S. LEWIS

**Born:** Belfast, Ireland (now in Northern Ireland)  
November 29, 1898

**Died:** Oxford, England  
November 22, 1963

*An important scholar of English medieval and Renaissance literature, Lewis is best known as a novelist and religious apologist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

C. S. Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland (now in Northern Ireland), on November 29, 1898, the younger son of Albert and Flora Hamilton Lewis. His pleasant childhood with his brother Warren ended at age ten when his mother died. Already Lewis had begun to compose stories of imaginary worlds, featuring talking animals. After their mother's death, both boys were sent to English boarding schools, a separation that permanently estranged Lewis emotionally from his father. The next six years were the worst of his life, as Lewis makes clear in *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (1955). Finally, in 1914, Albert sent him to a tutor, W. T. Kirkpatrick, who had instructed Albert himself, to prepare for college. Kirkpatrick strengthened Lewis's atheism and his skills in language and debate.

In 1916, Lewis won a scholarship to University College, Oxford; he failed the university entrance examination, however, because of weakness in mathematics. He was permitted to attend in 1917 so that he could join the army through enlistment in the University Officers' Training Corps. He left for France in November, 1917, was wounded in April, 1918, and returned to England.

While he convalesced, Lewis maintained a friendship with the mother of an Oxford companion, Paddy Moore. Both had promised to care for the other's family should his friend be killed, and

Moore's death led Lewis to fulfill his promise. He supported Mrs. Moore and her daughter Maureen until Maureen reached adulthood; Mrs. Moore lived in his home until her death in 1951. Lewis's relationship with Mrs. Moore is unclear; he may have found a mother figure in her that replaced the loss of his own mother. She was not apparently sympathetic either to his academic work or to his later conversion to Christianity. During his convalescence, *Spirits in Bondage* (1919), a book of poems, was published.

Lewis returned to Oxford in 1919, graduating in 1922 with a B.A. while earning highest honors in classics and philosophy. Unable to find work, he continued his studies in English literature, completing the standard two-year program in less than a year with highest honors. A temporary teaching position led in 1925 to a post as tutor in English at Magdalen College, which he held until his election to Cambridge in 1954. His position involved weekly meetings with students to discuss readings and essays and college-wide lectures. In 1926, his poem *Dymer* was published. His friends in these years included fellow scholars such as J. R. R. Tolkien, who shared his love of Norse literature.

In 1929, Lewis's father died in Ireland. After selling the family home, the brothers purchased property in Headington, a suburb of Oxford, and moved there with Mrs. Moore and her daughter. Although they had never been close, his father's death struck Lewis very deeply. Over a number of months, Lewis was led to reflect on religious issues, and his friends Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Hugo Dyson all discussed Christianity with him. His athe-



ism, representing fifteen years of his life, he abandoned by 1929. He described himself only as a theist, however, believing in a God, until in 1931 he became a convert to Christianity. Central to his conversion, as he wrote in *Surprised by Joy*, was his pursuit of “Joy,” a longing for something wonderful that this world cannot supply. He illustrated this quest in his allegorical narrative *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933). His scholarly reputation was made with *The Allegory of Love* (1936), although he was professionally active throughout his career. Other scholarly publications included *A Preface to “Paradise Lost”* (1942). Nineteen years of study resulted in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1954), a volume in the Oxford History of English Literature series.

He found support from a group of colleagues, known as The Inklings, who met twice a week to discuss works in progress. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) was first read in this context. The group also heard Lewis’s first theological essay *The Problem of Pain* (1940); *The Space Trilogy*, three science-fiction novels (1938-1945); *The Screwtape Letters* (1942); and *The Great Divorce* (1945).

*The Screwtape Letters* established his popular audience. Originally serialized weekly in the newspaper *The Guardian*, when the letters were published together Lewis had a best seller. Subsequent speaking engagements produced the famous wartime radio addresses collected as *Mere Christianity* (1952). Later, his lectures linked teaching with values in *The Abolition of Man* (1943). From 1947 to 1960, he wrote three more works on Christian doctrine. In the same period, his children’s books, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), appeared.

Lewis’s life changed dramatically in the mid-1950’s. Professionally, his election in 1954 as professor of medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge permitted him freedom to lecture on topics of his choosing. Personally, it meant marriage. In the early 1950’s, he had met Helen Joy Davidman, the wife of William Gresham. The Gresham marriage was failing, and after her divorce, she and her sons moved from the United States to Oxford in 1955. Their friendship influenced his most mature novel, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (1956). In 1956, they were married in a civil ceremony, in part to secure British citizenship for Joy and for her sons. Joy was shortly afterward diagnosed with bone cancer, and in March, 1957, while Joy was hos-

pitalized, they were formally married by an Anglican priest. Her almost miraculous recovery permitted them a honeymoon, and the next two years were the happiest of Lewis’s life. Her cancer returned, however, and she died in July, 1960. Lewis recorded his loss in *A Grief Observed* (1961).

In his last years, he published little original material beyond *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961). He remained active at Cambridge until, in 1963, in failing health, he resigned his position. He died at his home in Oxford on November 22, 1963.

## ANALYSIS

As a literary scholar, as well as a creative writer, Lewis was sensitive to issues of technique, style, and purpose in writing. In his essays, he suggested some of his preferences about literature generally. Published after he completed his science-fiction novels but before he began the Narnia stories, his essay “On Stories,” included in the anthology *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947), illuminates some of these concerns. He distinguishes between exciting, suspenseful plots and the “whole world” of a novel. He rejects an adventure novel such as Alexandre Dumas père’s *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1844; *The Three Musketeers*, 1846):

The total lack of atmosphere repels me. There is no country in the book—save as a storehouse of inns and ambushes. There is no weather. When they cross to London there is no feeling that London differs from Paris. There is not a moment’s rest from the “adventures”: one’s nose is kept ruthlessly to the grindstone.

Lewis’s critics occasionally fault his fiction for its conventional plot structure, similarity of characterization, and occasionally unnatural dialogue. In “On Stories,” however, he argues that to be preoccupied with character or plot is to miss an even more compelling element of the story. Plot, he suggests, is “a net” to “catch something else,” a sense of perceiving another world. Against Dumas, he cites David Lindsay’s science-fiction novel *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), where “physical dangers . . . count for nothing”:

He is the first writer to discover what “other planets” are really good for in fiction. No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realize that idea of otherness which is what we are

always trying to grasp in a story about voyaging through space. . . . To construct plausible and moving “other worlds” you must draw on the only real “other world” we know, that of the spirit.

Lewis sees stories, then, as opportunities to portray spiritual journeys, to discover “otherness.” All of his novels are conventional “quest” stories, involving tasks to be fulfilled and knowledge to be gained. In his first two science-fiction novels, the character Ransom is taken off Earth, undergoes psychological, physical, and spiritual trials, and returns with knowledge and faith that yield him a new perspective on his society. Common to these stories and to his children’s novels is the education of the spiritual innocent. Variety in his plots lies chiefly in the types of obstacles that confront characters and the means to overcome them. Often, a trial turns out to be quite different from its initial appearance, so that the protagonist’s intellect, as well as courage, is tested.

In the process, characters must often learn to see the world around them in radically new ways. The earliest example of this is Ransom, in *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), who is unable at first to perceive the giant shapes around him on Mars as mountains, since they seem unnaturally tall because of that planet’s lighter gravity. “Reperceptions” can be physical or moral, as when Jane Studdock, in *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy Tale for Grownups* (1945), discovers the existence of a moral hierarchy in which she is called upon to subordinate herself to God and to her husband. Similarly, her husband Mark sees his callous treatment of Jane and his selfishness as a moral and spiritual failure.

Occasionally, the novels appear static as characters are caught up in moral and religious argument, as in *Perelandra* (1943) and *The Silver Chair* (1953). In both novels, characters must defend the intellectual integrity of their beliefs. While Lewis was a well-known debater, and the scenes illustrate his concern for an intellectually informed faith,

they are rare in his fiction. Instead, where Lewis places his energy—in creating the “atmosphere,” the “weather” of another world—he is extremely successful. In creating Malacandra, Perelandra, or Narnia, he invests sensory details with a suggestion of the symbolic and the mythic. Narnia varies little from England in its plants and animals, yet it contains centaurs, dryads, and talking beasts. Its charm lies in part in its distance from mechanized England, so that time slows down and moments may be savored. Lewis’s only novel written about contemporary England, *That Hideous Strength*, points up the contrast: Only in Bragdon Wood, where the magician Merlin is buried, and at St. Anne’s, where Ransom is, are there moments of stillness and joy.

Lewis has been accused by some of writing allegory, particularly in the Narnia stories, in which Aslan the lion, creator of Narnia, appears to take on the qualities of Christ. He responded to the charge by describing the genesis of the stories in scenes recalled from dreams and commenting that the central figure, Aslan, suddenly intruded into *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), the first story, unbidden. A distinction that Lewis made in *Perelandra* seems appropriate, that between myth, truth, and fact. In the sacraments, particularly in Holy Communion, participants eat bread and drink wine or grape juice, in *fact*; yet they participate in and reenact a *mythic* celebration, in which a man who said he was God offered himself for all humanity. Lewis’s fiction, then, has sometimes been described as “sacramental” in this sense; it is not allegory, which Lewis did use in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Allegory implies a simple retelling of a story with different names—England becomes Puritania, the church becomes Mother Kirk. Instead, characters in his fiction are called to act as Christ might have acted, or to act on His behalf, in their separate stories. This is as true of the human “patient” to be tempted in *The Screwtape Letters* as it is of the Pevensie children in Narnia.

## THE SPACE TRILOGY

**First published:** *Out of the Silent Planet*, 1938;  
*Perelandra*, 1943; *That Hideous Strength*,  
1945

**Type of work:** Novels

*Contemporary Englishmen discover that they  
are participants in a battle against spiritual  
powers seeking to enslave humanity.*

Lewis's science-fiction trilogy is sometimes called the Ransom Trilogy, after the central figure of *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. Elwin Ransom, a middle-aged linguistics professor at the University of Cambridge, grows in the course of the novels from a lonely independence to find relationships with others, maturing into a leader against hostile nonhuman forces. Lewis transforms a conventional science-fiction pattern by making his villains demoniac powers and his protagonists Christians literally on the side of the angels. While science fiction has frequently dealt with issues of religion, Lewis lays aside the typical dualistic "good against evil" plot for an explicitly Christian worldview. All three of the novels attempt to make believable the presence of a spiritual reality transcending the everyday life.

*Out of the Silent Planet* opens as Ransom, on a walking tour of England, falls in with two acquaintances, one an old friend from his prep school. His friend Devine and the scientist Weston kidnap Ransom, carrying him to Mars, or Malacandra, in Weston's spaceship. Late in the voyage, Ransom learns that the others were commanded to bring another human back as the condition of their return. When they land, Ransom escapes. The novel is so far entirely conventional: mad scientist, greedy assistant, innocent victim, threatening aliens.

Here, however, Lewis diverges from convention. Ransom finds Mars inhabited by three species of rational beings, all friendly. More, he finds present a fourth species, the eldila, something on the order of angels. After Ransom learns the Martian language, he is reunited with Weston and Devine, who have killed a Martian. Judged by the ruling eldil, the Oyarsa, all three are exiled to Earth. Ransom learns from the Oyarsa that Earth is the "Silent Planet" because of the rebellion of its Oyarsa millennia ago. It becomes clear to Ransom, already a

Christian, that the biblical story of the incarnation of God in Christ is historically true, one incident in a war that has left Earth isolated and dominated by evil powers.

Two elements of the story are particularly significant: first, the minimal place of "science" in the action, and second, the "reperceptions" that Ransom experiences. The "good society" of the Martians is almost Rousseauian in its rejection of technology, and the one species with which Ransom spends much time is a tribe of hunters and farmers. Ransom must repeatedly adjust his perception of the landscape, his understanding of culture, and his sense of what it is to be "human." He discovers a new sense of his own place and that of humanity in a universe of many intelligent species and a new humility, in that humankind is the sole species in need of redemption.

In *Perelandra*, Ransom is summoned to Venus to defend its inhabitants from an unknown threat. He discovers that only two "humans" have been created, the Adam and Eve of their race. Like Adam and Eve, they have a single commandment given them, which they must obey to show their love for God. Weston's sudden arrival in a new spaceship makes clear the nature of the threat. Proclaiming himself the servant of the demoniac Oyarsa of Earth, Weston begins a campaign of temptation against the unfallen Eve, the Queen.

Lewis's study of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) lies behind many of the novel's scenes; the temptation, for example, recapitulates Milton, not the Bible. Like Milton, Lewis faced the problem of portraying "goodness," unfallenness, in the Queen. The difficulty of successful characterization is enormous: She is simultaneously innocent, gracious, wise, and naked. At the same time, Lewis must portray the decaying personality of Weston as suggesting the sterility and misery of the Satanic.

Ransom matures in this novel, and at its climax he must physically battle Weston, in a scene recalling *Beowulf* (c. sixth century) or Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614). Before he can bring himself to kill Weston, however, his understanding of Christianity itself must change. Previously, his faith had been intellectual and passive; he discovers that as a Christian warrior he stands, for the moment, in the place of Christ defending innocence.

In treating the temptation that the Queen endures, for the first time Lewis focuses on the necessity of intellectual maturity in Christians. The twisted arguments Weston develops, suggesting the abuse and perversion of language itself, Lewis had foreshadowed in a comic scene in *Out of the Silent Planet*. In *Perelandra* and in *That Hideous Strength*, the intellectual theme of armament against evil is much more prominent.

*That Hideous Strength*, the only story set in modern England, Lewis subtitled *A Modern Fairy Tale for Grownups*. He seems not to suggest the simplicity of the traditional tale but its associations with magic intruding into everyday life. That is precisely what happens. The story is not told from Ransom's perspective but from that of an ordinary English university community. The protagonists, Jane and Mark Studdock, are a modern, well-educated post-war newlywed couple; Mark teaches sociology at Bracton College, and Jane is working on a degree in literature.

Both long for professional success and personal recognition. Neither realizes the selfishness these goals represent or what means they must use to achieve them. Mark, greedy for peer approval and power, joins a scientific and industrial combine, the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments (NICE). Behind the NICE, however, is a demoniac conspiracy to conquer England. Jane's latent psychic powers make her a desirable pawn to NICE, as well, and she eventually flees to sanctuary in Ransom's household.

In the previous novels, Lewis's criticism of modern life had been a minor element. Here, he sharpened his critique of Western culture, particularly its materialism and skepticism. Jane and Mark, in their self-enclosed worlds, are forced to reckon with a spiritual reality and authority their culture has denied. What eventually saves them is a core of genuine love for one another, which leads them to repentance. Many in the novel, however, never rise above a self-consuming self-love.

## THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

**First published:** 1942

**Type of work:** Novel

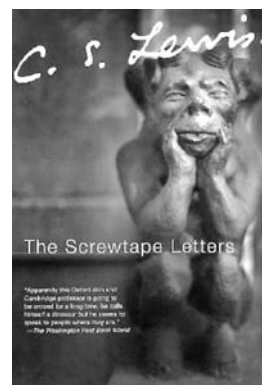
*In a series of letters, a senior tempter advises a junior devil how to succeed with a patient.*

*The Screwtape Letters* made Lewis's popular reputation. An epistolary novel from a senior tempter, Screwtape, the letters advise his junior colleague and nephew, Wormwood. The narrative traces Wormwood's attempts to enslave the soul of a "patient," a human on Earth, so that he may end in Hell at his death. Over the course of thirty-one letters, set in contemporary England during the Blitzkrieg, Screwtape reviews strategies based on exploitations of human nature.

Lewis's purpose is frankly didactic, although his use of Screwtape as a narrator means that readers must often "invert" the truths he reveals. In the process, Lewis's satire ranges over much of modern life, for Screwtape is ironically aware of human failings invisible to humans. Yet Screwtape himself is satirized, too; at moments he appears confused, contradicting himself, admitting truths about God that he later denies. Lewis succeeds in creating both a character and an atmosphere: Hell is the mind-set in which selfishness becomes self-absorption.

Early in the novel, the patient experiences a religious conversion, permitting Screwtape to discuss how the Christian life may itself be perverted. This development becomes the major interest of the work, for the church is the real enemy of the demoniac. As Screwtape provides advice, Lewis is able to portray the Christian faith in opposition to those facets of modern life that are diabolical.

Over the course of the novel, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to promote four illusions held by moderns. The first is that total freedom and independence lie in casting off inhibitions and that God is somehow opposed to this. By contrast, Screw-





tape casually notes that God intends that humans grow to maturity and intellectual and emotional independence. God intends that they be free from whatever might enslave them, including themselves, and thus offers them the power of self-transcendence through the church. He lures them toward his freedom with joy and love, and to that end provides both in human life as shadows of what awaits those who love Him.

A second illusion lies in modern beliefs about the Christian church. Screwtape reveals that the church is, first of all, mostly invisible, for it includes all of its members in time and eternity. The church opposes modern culture in its emphasis on interdependence, while industrial life emphasizes competition. Screwtape notes that interdependent life in community can be maintained only by love, while selfishness motivates competition. Since Christianity demands love and condemns selfishness, competitive attitudes are a direct threat to it. Further, the church offers access to permanence and security, while modern culture perceives these as stodginess.

A third illusion is that emotions, rather than the intellect, are trustworthy. Lewis implicitly stresses repeatedly the role of reason in everyday life, especially for the Christian. Screwtape cautions Wormwood to confuse, rather than argue with, his patient, and especially to employ jargon or emotion-laden terms to motivate him.

Finally, Screwtape gives the lie to the belief that personal faith has no social implications. He urges Wormwood repeatedly to separate his patient's convictions, especially his religious faith, from outward conduct and habits. Because most men and women lack consistent intellectual and moral beliefs, they remain inactive when called to moral choice. To Lewis, a mature Christian life is one in which the central attitudes and beliefs work their way into every moment. Screwtape reviews a catalog of occasions to separate conduct from belief, including relationships within the family, moments under stress, attitudes toward Christians of differing faith, and relationships with non-Christian companions.

## THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

**First published:** *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 1950; *Prince Caspian*, 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 1952; *The Silver Chair*, 1953; *The Horse and His Boy*, 1954; *The Magician's Nephew*, 1955; *The Last Battle*, 1956

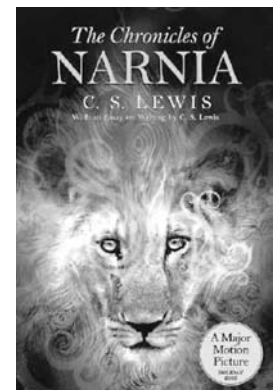
**Type of work:** Novels

*Into the parallel world of Narnia come a series of English children who meet the lion Aslan, confront evil, and grow to maturity.*

*The Chronicles of Narnia* traces the experience of a number of modern children in their encounter with a "medieval" world. Lewis apparently envisioned key scenes in the story when he was in his adolescence but may have had no thought of developing a series of stories until he was well into them. Into the stories flow memories of the works of authors such as Kenneth Grahame, E. Nesbit, and George MacDonald.

Each story portrays the growing maturity of the children who find their way into Narnia, and the plots are, in that respect, very similar. Each child must confront wickedness, spiritual evil localized in some individual, and overcome it. Perhaps more significant than the plot, Lewis creates settings that are richly described, in which magic is possible and everyday actions may have deeply symbolic value. If any of his fiction succeeds in creating that longing for "Joy" that he experienced in his own life, the Narnia stories do.

*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* introduces the Pevensie children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, who discover Narnia, where the White Witch has brought a hundred-year winter without Christmas. Although the children enter Narnia apparently by accident, they are expected, and welcomed. Humans are meant to rule in Narnia, despite the fact that its chief inhabitants are talking beasts and creatures such as centaurs, satyrs,





nymphs, and dryads. When the children learn that a prophecy of their arrival means that humans may help to free Narnia, three enlist to fight the White Witch. Yet she has already enchanted Edmund into betraying them.

Christian truth is never far under the surface of Narnia, though children who read the stories may not notice it. Each story demonstrates the necessity of relying on Aslan, the lion who is a thinly veiled image of Christ. His entrance into *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* transforms it from fairy tale to spiritual romance. Edmund is saved when Aslan offers himself to the White Witch to die as a substitution, and Lewis thus makes understandable to children the incarnation and Crucifixion of Christ. One of the novel's most effective scenes is Aslan's return to life the next morning. With his power, the children swiftly defeat the witch's army of monsters, and spring is renewed.

*Prince Caspian* returns the Pevensies to a Narnia again enslaved. This time the materialistic humans, the Telmarines, are at fault. Fearful of the talking animals and other intelligent Narnian creatures, they first drove them out to the forest and then in later years denied their existence. The Telmarine Caspian's battle on behalf of "Old Narnia" fails until he depends on Aslan, and the Pevensie children similarly must listen to Aslan and trust him before they can be effective. A comic element of the story is the failure of adults to recognize the moral authority of children when directed by Aslan.

*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* brings together Caspian, Lucy, and Edmund. They return to Narnia, this time with their cousin Eustace Scrubb, an insufferably modern child. Caspian has resolved to find seven missing noblemen who sailed east from Narnia. At first glance, the story might simply be an adventure like any other children's novel. Again, however, Lewis develops lessons of religious truth through the children's adventures. The journey results in a literal transformation of Eustace, who must be freed from a physical enchantment and, simultaneously, from the enchantment of modern skepticism.

*The Silver Chair* returns Eustace to Narnia with a schoolmate, Jill Pole. They arrive in Aslan's country, escaping the persecution of schoolchildren at their "modern" school, and are dispatched to rescue Caspian's grown son, Rilian, kidnapped by a witch. The children and a companion eventually

defeat the witch's enchantment in what is explicitly a test of faith, of faithfully remembering Aslan's directions. At the novel's conclusion, Lewis includes the comic scene of Jill, Eustace, and Caspian, still in armor, terrifying the bullies who had persecuted Jill.

*The Horse and His Boy* is an episode from the rule of the Pevensie children during the time of the first novel. The story line reminds one of intrigue and mistaken-identity novels, or even of William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* (pr. c. 1592-1594, pb. 1623), and is the slightest of the stories in symbolic depth. Shasta, a young boy, though the son of the King of Archenland, near Narnia, had been kidnapped as an infant. Later, he escapes to Narnia with a Calormene girl, Aravis, and two Narnian talking horses. In the process they foil a planned Calormene attack on Narnia. Aslan appears to guide Shasta and disciplines Aravis, whose selfishness has resulted in suffering for others.

In the last two books of the series, Lewis completes the story of Narnia by narrating its creation and its final destruction. *The Magician's Nephew* describes how Digory and his friend Polly discover Narnia and inadvertently bring evil into it. Lewis's picture of the creation as spoken and sung by the power of Aslan's voice is a remarkable evocation of the biblical story in Genesis. The story accounts for several mysteries in the series, not the least of which is the source of evil in an unfallen world.

*The Last Battle* is Narnia's version of the book of Revelation. Narnia is overthrown; the servants of evil triumph; and Eustace, Jill, and the Narnian defenders are flung into a stable to die. What they find inside, however, is another Narnia, one so intensely real that the world outside the door seems a shadow. This is Heaven, and Aslan welcomes them and the Pevensies to their real home. When Aslan judges and unmakes the world, they see him retain in the new Narnia all the good things in the old. It is clear that Lewis focuses in this last novel on consolation, both for the fears children have about death and for their anxiety at the scriptural theme of the end of the world. Yet, as in *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis attacks the unbelief, decadence, and corruption of modern life, which make inevitable the final battle. Further, he shows the self-destructive nature of evil, for the triumph of evil is the occasion for Aslan to end Narnia itself.

**SUMMARY**

C. S. Lewis's fantasies center on the discovery of the reality of the supernatural. In an age when the "theology" of most fantasies is confused or dualistic, he employs the tools of fiction to awaken audiences to Christianity. One may fairly argue that Lewis never varies his essential plot—the story of individuals whose moral choices move them either toward themselves or toward God. He might have responded that all stories can, finally, be reduced to this. His real strength lies in the creation of fantasy worlds that are "desirable," in which audiences can sense the otherness that leads to a new perception of human life.

*Richard J. Sherry*

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*Christian Behaviour*, 1943

**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- Compare C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* with J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books as children's literature that has attracted wide adult readership.
- Who were the Inklings, and how did they contribute to Lewis's literary career?
- What explanation can be offered for the popularity of Lewis's religious works with readers who often share little of his religious enthusiasm?
- In what ways do Lewis's science-fiction novels differ most strikingly from science fiction in general?
- Characterize the humor in *The Screwtape Letters*.
- In what ways has Lewis's command of medieval literature contributed to the success of his fiction?

C. S. Lewis

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## WYNDHAM LEWIS

**Born:** Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada  
November 18, 1882

**Died:** London, England  
March 7, 1957

*Lewis applied principles of the graphic arts to writing, promoted vorticism, and produced more than forty volumes, including novels, short stories, essays, poetry, autobiography, and criticism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

A beginning like Percy Wyndham Lewis's could hardly yield a conventional adult. Lewis first saw the light of day aboard the family yacht anchored off Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada, on November 18, 1882, when his British mother, Anne Prickett Lewis, gave birth to him. Although his father, Charles Lewis, was an American who had attended West Point, been an army officer, and fought in the Civil War, the infant was officially a Canadian citizen, bearing for life the citizenship of neither parent.

When Percy Lewis was six, the family, which had lived in coastal Maine and on the Chesapeake Bay, resettled in England. The Lewis marriage was teetering and before long ended. Anne's finances were limited although Charles had sufficient means to live the life of a gentleman, having no pressing need to work. Young Percy, as he was then called, lived with his mother in genteel poverty.

The lad, nevertheless, was able to enter the Rugby School in 1897, supported in part by his father. Percy proved a disappointing scholar who ranked last in his class. At Rugby, however, he acquired the bearing and accent of a proper British gentleman; he was also encouraged in his art work, probably because art was the only pursuit for which he showed both an enthusiasm and an aptitude.

Lewis's mother encouraged the boy's painting. She used some of her meager resources every summer to take Percy abroad for as long as she could af-

ford to stay. He was regularly exposed to the art works of the Louvre and the museums at Luxembourg. It was natural that when Lewis finished Rugby, he would seek instruction in the one thing at which he was good. He entered London's Slade School of Art in 1898 and remained there for three years, receiving a scholarship to help finance his final year of study.

Slade was not the sort of school to push its students in daring artistic directions. Its teaching was traditional and conventional. Still, Lewis benefited greatly both from the regularity that the school's routine imposed and from the basic instruction that taught him something about form, graphic representation, and art forms that were practiced in other parts of the world. He also began associating with artists who were alive with ideas, among them Augustus John and William Rothstein, with whom he remained friends for the rest of his life.

Upon leaving Slade, Lewis traveled abroad extensively, financed by an allowance that his father settled upon him. He traveled to the Continent, haunting museums and formally studying painting in Paris, Madrid, Haarlem, and Munich, imbibing the best of the artistic techniques that these disparate cultures had to offer. During the seven years that he spent abroad, Lewis spent most of his time in Paris.

Although Lewis's stay in Paris occurred more than a decade before the literary excitement of the "lost generation" infected the city, the Paris of Lewis's day bristled with ideas and was a magnet to many literary figures. Lewis's first novel, *Tarr*



(1918, 1928), is based upon his life in Paris and on the artists and writers whom he knew there. During this period, Lewis strove to shake the conventionality of being the British gentleman that Rugby had sought to make him and became something of an enfant terrible, doing everything he could to be outrageous in an effort to attract attention and publicity.

When he returned to England in 1909, Lewis turned to his mother for support, although he was beginning to attract art commissions and was regarded as an important emerging painter. He was working on *Tarr* at this time and also tried unsuccessfully to market a trashy novel that he had written to make some quick money. It was during this period that Lewis began friendships and long associations with Ezra Pound, Rebecca West, William Butler Yeats, and Ford Maddox Ford. Lewis's first published story, "The Pole," appeared in Ford's *English Review*.

Lewis associated regularly with people trying experimental literary and artistic forms, including T. S. Eliot. Pound had moved a step beyond Imagism to vorticism, an art that emphasized detachment and geometric form. Before long, Lewis was viewed as the organizing force of the vorticists. In June, 1914, Lewis published the first issue of *Blast*, a journal devoted to cubism, futurism, Imagism, and other forms of modern art. Although this journal survived for just two issues, it marked a significant direction in painting and literature.

As World War I raged, Lewis volunteered for military service early in 1916. After training as a gunner and bombardier, he was commissioned in 1917 and sent to France, at the time that the serial publication of *Tarr* began in *The Egoist*. Avoiding combat, he survived the war and by 1919 was back in London, where he published *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where Is Your Vortex?* (1919), a call for an ideal in architecture.

For the next six years, Lewis remained semiretired, painting, reading, and writing criticism. With the publication of *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), he entered a highly productive period of writing. His political conservatism was now pronounced, and several of his books of the early 1930's diminished his reputation.

Lewis's *The Apes of God* (1930) satirized savagely the Sitwells and the Bloomsbury Group, causing much of London's genteel literary community to

eschew its author. To make matters worse, Lewis published *Hitler* (1931) the following year, casting his lot with the national socialism that the Nazis were spreading in Germany. His *Men Without Art* (1934) attacked Ernest Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence mercilessly, further alienating Lewis from segments of the literary community.

When World War II erupted, Lewis was lecturing in Canada. He and his wife remained in North America throughout the war, eking out an uncertain living on Lewis's lecture fees and painting commissions. At war's end, the Lewises were literally on the first passenger ship to leave Canada for England. Lewis's vision was failing; by 1953, he was totally blind. He continued, however, to write, producing eight books between 1948 and his death in London on March 7, 1957.

## ANALYSIS

Lewis was not good at school things and turned in a weak performance as a student at Rugby. It is interesting, therefore, to realize how, by cultivating the one field in which he had both an interest and an aptitude, he opened other opportunities for himself. Essentially, it is through his work as an artist that he developed his interest in literature and established himself as a productive writer and critic. That his writing often makes its impact through visual means suggests that it is the artist's keen eye and sensitivity to form that shaped it.

The intellectual ferment that Lewis experienced as an art student in Paris became a part of his life in London after he returned there in 1909. Meeting Pound was crucial in Lewis's life, because Pound was at that time emerging from his Imagist period, in which he sought to write precise, spare, visual poetry aimed at projecting single, vivid images and was moving toward vorticism, a literary and artistic movement closely connected to Imagism. Lewis, attracted to this new movement, became its reigning guru.

The overt art of the vorticist is a geometrical art of surfaces. It was this element of vorticism that affected Lewis's writing. He wrote of surfaces, not of substrata. He is not the penetrating psychological writer that Henry James was, because it would have been philosophically abhorrent to Lewis to write that way. In *Men Without Art*, he calls James a creator of "great disembodied romances," something he himself never could or would be.

Lewis spent his first thirty years trying to find himself. Just as he was finding his niche, World War I intervened. The society that he had created for himself was disrupted by the war. *Blast*, his greatest literary triumph to that point, was discontinued in 1915. Within the year, Lewis was in military service, although much of his service was as a member of the Canadian War Artists rather than as a combatant. He was involved in only one combat, the battle of Passchendaele; within a short time, he was reassigned to London to do two large war paintings. His war experience, however, left him bitter. He believed that it had robbed him of productive time.

Philosophically, Lewis had already revealed some of his feelings about Friedrich Nietzsche in *Tarr*; where the notion that artists must dominate women is a central theme. His association with Pound, Yeats, and Eliot confirmed his own elitist views and encouraged his political conservatism. Just as Pound became a voice for the Fascists in Italy, Lewis sided with Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party that was beginning to take hold in Germany in the late 1920's.

Although Lewis repudiated his earlier, pro-Nazi stand in two long essays, *The Hitler Cult* (1939) and *The Jews, Are They Human?* (1939), his image as a Fascist sympathizer was difficult to dispel. The same currents that underlay his pro-Nazi sympathies were reflected in much of his superbly written literary criticism, which, despite its excellence of style, was based upon such wrongheaded prejudices that it created a breach between him and some of the most notable intellectuals of his day.

Lewis's attack in *The Apes of God* on the Sitwells and the Bloomsbury Group was in a sense an outgrowth of the vorticism that he had earlier tried to promote. Satire is always cutting, but Lewis's satire has an acerbic quality beyond all expectation. This quality emerges again in *Men Without Art*, in which Lewis's attack upon Hemingway so infuriated the renowned novelist that he eventually retaliated by presenting a scathing portrait of Lewis in *A Moveable Feast* (1964).

Lewis's earliest writing was characterized by vigor, by strong visual imagery, and by striking use of stream of consciousness. All of these characteristics became hallmarks of his style as his writing progressed. He was a writer well in control of language and all of its effects. His juxtaposition of characters

creates the dramatic tensions that make his books bristle with excitement. The cutting satiric edge that discomfited some readers of Lewis's books is clearly evident in *The Art of Being Ruled* and *The Apes of God*, both of which are polemical. *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in Shakespeare's Plays* (1927), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *The Childermass* (1928), and *Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting Pot* (1929) are all products of the same approach to society, each of them addressing the ills of the world in heterodox ways.

Lewis's emphasis is usually on the place of artists in modern society. He examined the artists of his day—Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, and others—and found them sometimes superficial and derivative, practitioners of style at the expense of ideas. He had unqualified kind words for few writers of his own period.

Along with his bitterness about the war, Lewis later cultivated a bitterness at not having received the recognition that he felt was his due. He turned against democracy, adapting an attitude quite like that of the American journalist and writer H. L. Mencken, whose term "boobocracy" coincided well with Lewis's view of government by the people. In Lewis's eyes, fascism offered artists greater hope than a government that had no elite class. He considered Hitler a man of peace and downplayed his anti-Semitism. The publication of his ill-conceived and badly researched *Hitler* in 1931 drew harsh condemnation and resulted in Lewis's losing a number of painting commissions.

Lewis's writing of the 1930's did not sell well. Additionally, Lewis suffered from continuing bouts of ill health, some of it related to venereal diseases contracted almost two decades earlier. He lived a financially precarious existence, which caused his bitterness to accelerate. The six-year exile in North America that World War II imposed upon him did little to assuage his feeling of alienation and neglect. When they returned to England, the Lewises found a nation in disarray. They endured food shortages and other inconveniences, but perhaps Lewis felt more at home in England now than ever before. His *Rotting Hill* (1951) is a collection of stories that depicts postwar Britain, and it has less invective than Lewis's earlier work. He entered into a period of intense productivity that continued until his death.

## TARR

**First published:** 1918

**Type of work:** Novel

*Lewis focuses on a group of artists in Paris before World War I, using the protagonist, Tarr, to espouse his own aesthetic and moral philosophy.*

Although *Tarr* is concerned largely with two artists, one English and one German, involved with the same woman, Lewis is concerned more broadly with reaching generalizations about the English and German temperaments and about the perceptions of life peculiar to each society. Frederick Tarr is a British artist who, not unlike Lewis, lives in Paris during the Edwardian period. Tarr, like Lewis, has no great fondness for Germans, although he is engaged to Bertha Lunken, a German art student. His need for her is largely physical, and once that need has been satisfied, he finds it inconvenient to have her around.

Bertha is a stereotypical German—that is, a German built on Lewis's personal, quite negative stereotype of Germans. Tarr wants to end his engagement because he finds Bertha tedious and uninteresting. His sexual attachment to her is also fading, a fact that he attributes to his devoting all of his creative energies and imagination to his art, leaving little for his sexual indulgences. Tarr clearly is plotting his break with Bertha in such a way that he will be perceived as taking the moral high road. He will sacrifice his personal relationship for the greater good: his art.

Tarr goes to Bertha's flat, decorated with egregious kitsch that offends Tarr's artistic and tasteful soul. He tells her as gently as he can that marriage is not in their future. Bertha makes a prototypically bourgeois retreat into heaving sobs, reinforcing the Irish author Oscar Wilde's observation that "tears are the refuge of plain women but the ruin of pretty ones." Tarr leaves, feeling quite the cad, but he promises to see Bertha soon again.

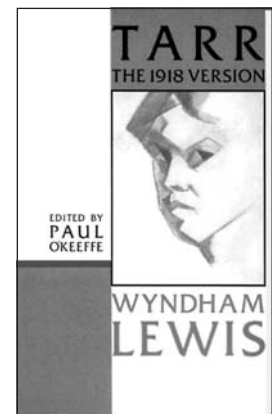
Meanwhile, Otto Kreisler, a German artist living on a pittance that his father doles out fitfully, returns to Paris from Italy. Kreisler four years earlier shed one of his paramours, who promptly married his father, leaving Otto's inheritance diminished. The father, a bourgeois German businessman, dis-

approves of his son's artistic pursuits and wants him to return home and do something worthwhile—to wit, go into business. Kreisler's allowance is late, and when he arrives in Paris, he is destitute. He tries to borrow from a well-heeled friend who had helped him in the past, but this friend, Ernst Volker, has tired of him and has replaced him with Louis Soltyk, a Pole. Ernst knows from experience that Otto never repays his debts.

Otto goes to a café to eat and there meets Anastasya Vasek, to whom he is greatly attracted. He pours out his woes to her in a sequence that shows how Lewis views German sentimentality as a commingling of love and sorrow. He accepts an invitation to a dance that he knows Anastasya will attend, but before it occurs, he comes upon Anastasya and Soltyk in a café. He is insulting to Soltyk and through much of the rest of the book seeks Soltyk out in public so that he can insult and humiliate him, obviously setting the scene for a duel.

Meanwhile, Otto meets the spurned Bertha on the way to the dance and uses her to humiliate the other guests. He and Bertha kiss quite publicly. When this is reported to Tarr, he writes to tell Bertha that he is returning to London. The day after the dance, Otto's overdue allowance arrives with a command from his father that he return to Germany. Otto replies that he will kill himself in exactly one month. Tarr does not actually go to England but merely moves to another part of Paris so that he can work without interruption. When he finally sees Bertha and Otto together, he befriends Otto because he thinks it is ironically appropriate that these two exemplars of German sentimentality be paired. Tarr now finds that he is attracted to Anastasya and has deep aesthetic conversations with her.

Meanwhile, Tarr observes Otto's increasing aggressiveness toward Soltyk. Otto several times rushes up to Soltyk in public and slaps his face. A duel is inevitable. When the morning of this encounter finally comes, their seconds try to effect a compromise. Suddenly, Otto agrees to forget the duel if Soltyk will kiss him publicly.



Solyk leaps upon Otto, pummeling him, while the seconds engage in their own combat. As they seek to lead Solyk away, he strikes out at Otto, who fires his pistol and kills him. Five days later, Otto is captured and jailed. He hangs himself in his cell, delivering on his promise of suicide.

Back in Paris, Tarr and Anastasya are having an affair as Tarr gradually ends his relationship with Bertha. When he learns, however, that Bertha is pregnant with Otto's child, he marries her out of pity. He continues to live with Anastasya. After two years, Bertha divorces Tarr to marry someone else. Tarr and Anastasya never marry, but Tarr fathers three children by another woman.

This novel, Lewis's first, is a satire on the decadence of the Edwardian era. Tarr's main function is to espouse Lewis's philosophy. Otto Kreisler emerges as a more fully developed character than Frederick Tarr. Realizing this, Lewis later admitted that perhaps he should have called the novel "Kreisler" rather than *Tarr*.

## THE REVENGE FOR LOVE

**First published:** 1937

**Type of work:** Novel

*This political satire views the political Left in Spain during its civil war and in London in the 1930's, making trenchant comments about politics and art.*

*The Revenge for Love* is generally regarded as Lewis's most successful novel. Despite its sometimes stinging satire, the book has a warmth and gentleness that distinguishes it from Lewis's other writing, particularly his writing of the 1930's. The novel is arranged in seven parts; Lewis is slow but calculated in bringing together its various characters and situations. The writing is vivid. The novel's visual effects are meticulous and detailed.

The setting of the first section is Spain during its civil war. Percy Hardcaster, a Briton who is in Spain as a Communist organizer, is in prison waiting to be tried. A verdict against him will result in his execution. Rather than await the outcome, Percy, with the help of a Spanish double agent posing as a prison guard, escapes. The guard, Serafin, is shot and killed; Percy is injured and loses his leg.

The novel then shifts to London, where Lewis introduces a number of leftist intellectuals and artists. Among them are Victor Stamp, an Australian painter, and his wife, Margot. They are impoverished, and Victor is losing confidence in himself as an artist. In the next section, Jack Cruze, a tax consultant, is introduced, along with a successful young painter, Tristram Phipps, and his wife, Jill. Jack is interested in Tristram because he paints nudes. He quickly falls in love with Tristram's wife and one day, accidentally seeing her nude, is totally inflamed with passion. By the next section, Jack and Jill are having a torrid affair (one inevitably recalls what happened to Jack and Jill in the well-known nursery rhyme).

The fourth section of the book is pivotal. It involves a party at the home of Sean O'Hara, a gun-runner. At the party, Lewis juxtaposes armchair leftists and committed leftists who fight for their beliefs. Percy Hardcaster represents the latter element. Jill, as a representative of the former, articulates her views, which Percy denigrates. Jack beats Percy up for insulting Jill. In this section, Lewis shows clearly his suspicion of the leftist views among intellectuals in London during the early 1930's.

In the next section, Victor Stamp and Tristram Phipps, who cannot support themselves on their art, become art forgers in an art factory that turns out old masters to order. Lewis comments satirically on artistic integrity and how it can be compromised in a society in which artists cannot support themselves legitimately. He had written about this problem much earlier, addressing it in his early essays in *Blast* and the *Criterion*.

Ultimately, Victor is persuaded to go back to Spain with Percy to run guns that the leftist Spanish forces will use against the Fascists. In the book's final section, Victor and Margot are in the Basque country on the French/Spanish border. Margot has had dire premonitions of what the outcome will be, but she cannot dissuade Victor from running the guns until the last minute, when she frightens him by telling him that he is soon to be arrested. The two strike out to cross clandestinely into France. Meanwhile, Percy is captured by the Spanish Civil Guard and imprisoned.

In prison, he reads of how Margot and Victor wandered off in the rain and fell off a cliff to their deaths. Percy's tears are both for the loss of his

friends and for the loss of ideals that he has held dear. *The Revenge for Love* is an anti-Communist manifesto of sorts. It reflects Lewis's intellectual conservatism and explains to an extent his flirtations with Fascism, which, in his eyes, offered artists more than Communism could.

This novel differs from Lewis's other works in that it is compassionate and, at times, warm. The characters are well developed and exceptionally well balanced against each other. The dramatic tensions both in Lewis's characters and in his basic situations are sustained and assure a high level of reader interest.

## SELF CONDEMNED

**First published:** 1954

**Type of work:** Novel

*History professor René Harding leaves England in 1939 for Canada to wait for the war to end and in so doing comes to realize the difference between history and reality.*

It is easy to read *Self Condemned* as an autobiographical novel, although to take it as point-by-point accurate autobiography would be a mistake. The book's protagonist, René Harding, and his wife, Hester, leave Britain for Canada in the year that World War II erupts and, like Lewis, settle around Toronto. Harding arrives in Canada with little notion of what he will do there, but soon he is employed at the University in Momaco, whose anti-British faculty members do not accept him and make him feel always the outsider.

The Hardings endure the cruel winters holed up in the Blundell Hotel, where the boring routine of their lives oppresses and depresses them. The news that they get from the radio is discomfiting, and the future seems tenuous at best. When the hotel burns down, the Hardings are further dislocated. Lewis writes of the fire as the Italian poet Dante wrote of the tenth circle of Hell. Fire and ice intermix in the cold Canadian night as firefighters pour water into the inferno.

When the hotel's manager finds that the owner set fire to the building to collect the insurance, Mr. Martin, the owner, murders her to avoid detection. Shortly after the fire, Harding is invited to teach in the College of the Sacred Heart, which offers a more hospitable environment than he found in Momaco. The priests, eyeing him as a possible convert, treat him with warmth and deference.

If Harding feels disembodied in Canada, his wife feels even more alienated. She becomes hysterical at times, and Harding tries to ignore her, retreating into his work. Hester suffers a breakdown and ultimately throws herself in front of a lorry, which squashes her, but spares her head. In the morgue, Hester's head seems strangely dissociated from her body, a heavy-handed indication of Lewis's separation of emotion from intellect. In this image, intellect prevails. Although affected by her death, Harding views it as her final attempt to derail him from his professional pursuits, but he will not allow that to happen. Emotionally spent, he accepts a teaching position at an American university, where he functions successfully even though he is thoroughly disillusioned.

In part, Lewis is pointing in *Self Condemned* to the dislocations that war wreaks upon a populace. More than that, however, he is pitting history against life's daily realities, questioning perhaps the validity of history or at least cautioning readers not to put absolute faith in it. The interplay of intellect and emotion is evident throughout the book both overtly and symbolically. The interplay of fire and ice when the Blundell Hotel burns is a major part of this symbolism, which is—in this case, quite consciously—derived from Dante's the *Inferno*, the first canticle of *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802).

The Hardings are involved in a marriage that has become pointless and is strained nearly to the breaking point by the exile into which the couple is forced. This exile, however, is the glue that holds the union together. The Hardings are in a trap. The husband finds his escape from that trap when he ignores his wife's excesses of emotion. She, however, pursues a more active course and, by her suicide, tries to regain her control of René from the grave.



## BLASTING AND BOMBARDIERING

**First published:** 1937

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*Lewis recounts the effects that the war had on his life from 1914, when Blast was first issued, to 1926, when The Art of Being Ruled was published.*

Perhaps *Blasting and Bombardiering* was an attempt at exorcism. Lewis was disenchanted with the role of the artist in society long before World War I erupted, but his war experiences deepened that disenchantment and added to it a cynicism that festered within him for much of the remainder of his life. The title of the book, of course, refers to Lewis's editorship of the avant-garde journal *Blast*, which, although suspended after two issues, made a significant artistic statement in its day, and to his training as a bombardier after he entered military service in 1916.

The book is divided into five sections, the first of which deals with the London literary scene as the war became a reality, focusing on the publication of *Blast*. The next two sections have to do with Lewis's entry into military service and with his service, first as a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery serving in France and later as a painter of war pictures attached to the Canadian army and stationed in London.

The next section deals with postwar England, a period when Lewis was semiretired, trying to find himself after the shock of the war. He was a dedicated womanizer and lived to a large extent on the patronage of various rich women with whom he had liaisons. The period from 1919 to 1926 was a fallow one for Lewis, although he was working regularly on his writing and published six important books between 1926 and 1929. These books were all in the formative stages during his semiretirement.

The final section focuses on Lewis's three closest literary associates: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce. He regards Pound as brilliant and im-

portant for his influence on other writers, most notably Eliot. He discusses Pound less charitably in some of his other writing. Lewis thinks that Eliot was lackluster, with occasional moments of artistic brilliance. He considers Joyce idiosyncratic but extremely promising. His view of these three writers was tempered by the fact that war intervened in all of their lives, diverting them from their true courses, which would inevitably have led to a more classical art, to a detached literature.

Although *Blasting and Bombardiering* extends for nearly a decade beyond the end of World War I, the impact of that war is evident on every page. The central theme of the book has to do with the inroads that war (and by extension, philistine society) makes upon art and artists.

A valuable side benefit in this book is found in Lewis's thumbnail sketches of some of the intellectuals of his day, aside from those aforementioned. His comments about Nancy Cunard, Rebecca West, T. E. Lawrence, Augustus John, T. E. Hulme, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, William Butler Yeats, and others with whom he was closely involved as an artist and a writer are highly subjective and largely unsubstantiated, but they provide shrewd and sharp insights into these people.

### SUMMARY

Wyndham Lewis will likely be long remembered for his support of the Fascists in the late 1920's and early 1930's. His ultraconservative views during that time stemmed from his dislike of the Germans, who had plunged the world into World War I, and from his cynicism engendered by that conflict. Yet that is an oversimplification of a highly complicated personality whose cynicism cannot be laid to a single cause.

The fact remains that Lewis was prodigiously productive and that he had some of the keenest critical insights of his day. His own novels were well crafted. His essays, although often wrongheaded, were brilliant in presenting heterodox views of society. Lewis as a provocateur served a valuable function in his day, and his ideas continue to provoke contemporary readers.

R. Baird Shuman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain how the artistic training of Wyndham Lewis helped generate and enhance his writing career.
- What were the principles of art that guided Lewis in both his visual and literary art?
- What values in such writers as members of the Bloomsbury Group, Ernest Hemingway, and D. H. Lawrence encouraged Lewis's satires of them?
- What validity is there in Lewis's assertion that Fascism was better for artists than communism?
- How much of Lewis's success can be attributed to the vigor of his attacks on literary contemporaries?

Wyndham Lewis

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# Li Bo

**Born:** Xinjiang Uygur, China (now in Chinese Turkistan)  
701

**Died:** Dangtu, Anhwei Province, China  
December, 762

*Widely celebrated as one of China's greatest lyric poets of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), China's golden age of literature, Li Bo is equally legendary for his bohemian lifestyle.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Though legends about Li Bo (lee boh)—also known as Li Bai, Li Po, or Li Pai—abound, relatively little reliable biographical information about him has been preserved. Despite claiming an illustrious background, he, in fact, was born to an obscure family (the origins of which are impossible to trace, though it is variously thought to have been from Iran, Turkey, or Afghanistan) in 701, in Xinjiang Uygur, China (now in Chinese Turkistan). Wherever his birthplace, early in his life his family moved to Szechwan, a mountainous province in southwest China known for its sizable foreign merchant community; perhaps in that fact lies a clue to his family's occupation. His undistinguished origins meant that in the capital, where prominent family and political connections were critical, he had to rely on his own innate wit and talent; although he did so to great success, he seems always to have felt himself to be the outsider who had to prove himself.

In approximately 725, Li Bo left Szechwan, to which he never returned, and traveled for a few years, studying Daoist mysticism, one of his lifelong passions, as well as visiting noted poets, whose acquaintance he hoped could further his career. In 730, he settled down for a while and married the daughter of a minor provincial official of modest means. Evidence of Li's desire for illustrious connections, however, can be found in his declaration in a letter that he had married into a renowned noble family. This first wife eventually divorced him, and he married three more times; two of his wives died, and his fourth outlived him. His poetry suggests that he had at least one son and one daughter.

Within ten years of his first marriage, Li Bo left home to wander again and to attempt to better his fortunes. He had a stroke of luck in 742, when Emperor Xuanzong, an avid supporter of the arts, appointed him to a post at the Han-lin Academy in the capital city of Zhangan. Li found himself in eminent company: scholars, artists, entertainers—all of whom were privy to the emperor's inner court. His job was to write documents for the emperor, as well as poems for special court occasions. One thing that he refused to do after coming to Zhangan was take the civil service examinations, which were considered imperative for success in the capital; his refusal is difficult to explain, and it cost him the respect of some important people in the capital.

Perhaps he was one of the world's earliest practitioners of a public relations campaign, because he put considerable effort into promoting himself as both a poetic genius and a bon vivant. His time in the capital city and in the inner court circle provided numerous famous anecdotes of his free-wheeling life with his friends and of his drunkenness. Indeed, legends about Li Bo are much more numerous than facts. One tale that indicates his popularity with the emperor tells of Yang Guifei, the emperor's favorite concubine, holding Li's inkwell for him while he wrote; another tells of an important palace eunuch being forced to kneel and remove the drunken poet's slippers for him. Yet another anecdote tells of the emperor himself seasoning Li Bo's soup for him, but a less charming story tells of his drunkenly vomiting on the emperor's robes.

Still, he amused the emperor, who tolerated his

indiscretions and lack of regard for authority and decorum, though one famous story tells of Emperor Xuanzong putting him to the test. Once, when Li had been drinking all day, the emperor summoned him to the palace and insisted that he draft an important document, a duty that Li fulfilled even in his inebriated state. He had cultivated the public image of a cheerful, free-drinking poet who dashed off his works spontaneously rather than laboring over them, and he was able to prove his case in this instance. How much of Li Bo's behavior was genuine and how much was a cultivated persona is hard to say. His nickname, "Banished Immortal," acknowledges both his poetic genius and his occasionally outlandish behavior, implying as it did that he was a demigod who had been exiled from heaven for misconduct.

Li's job was secure only as long as he held imperial favor, and in 744 he lost or left his position in the Han-lin Academy. Stories vary as to whether he was dismissed following scandal or chose to resign, but he left Zhan-gan and wandered again, managing to make a living by his reputation as a popular poet and eccentric and by visiting old friends who held provincial posts. It was during his travels that he met fellow poet Du Fu, a young unknown who admired and emulated the famous older poet. Later generations were to venerate them as the two greatest poets of the Tang Dynasty, China's golden age of literature.

In 755, eleven years after Li Bo had left Zhan-gan, a rebellion occurred, and Emperor Xuanzong was forced to abdicate. Li once again gained court connections, this time in a minor position with Li Lin, prince of Yung, the sixteenth son of Emperor Xuanzong. Though the prince was supposedly fighting rebel troops, he apparently had thoughts of starting a rebellion himself. When the prince's army was destroyed, and he was executed, Li fled but was captured and imprisoned as a traitor. Eventually released and pardoned, he resumed his wanderings for the last few years of his life and embraced fully the Daoist mysticism that he had studied as a younger man and in which he had an abiding interest for most of his life. Once again, he hoped to find a place for himself in the government, but his hopes were not to be fulfilled, for he died in 762, in Dangtu, Anhwei Province, China. The legend of his death is in keeping with his life: He is said to have drowned when, inebriated, he

fell out of his boat while trying to embrace the reflection of the moon on the water.

## ANALYSIS

Although the Tang Dynasty saw the introduction of several new poetic forms, Li Bo was not an innovator. What he did accomplish was to raise tradition-bound lyric poetry to its pinnacle of beauty and power. Many of the approximately one thousand poems attributed to him continued the established verse forms and subjects of his predecessors. For example, he was apparently happiest with the ancient *shih*, a lyric form that employed a predominantly four-, five-, or seven-character (syllable) line, and the *yueh-fu*, ballads or folk songs with lines of irregular length. Even so, he occasionally ignored formal restrictions and wrote verse in irregular meter when it suited his purpose; some of his poems have as few as three or as many as ten or eleven characters. Critics believe that he was influenced in this usage by the popular music of his time.

Li Bo's work cannot be understood apart from the tradition from which it sprang. Many aspects of Chinese poetry distinguish it from Western poetry. For instance, Chinese poetry relies very little on the most common poetic devices familiar to Western readers such as symbolism, figures of speech (metaphor and simile), and personification. There again, however, Li Bo is unusual in occasionally personifying elements of nature.

Typically, Chinese poetry is spare and concentrated, implying and suggesting ideas through images rather than lavish description. (This feature of Chinese poetry has influenced modern Western poets, especially the Imagists.) Most often, these images are drawn from nature. Many of Li's subjects, too, were long established in Chinese poetry: the emperor's concubine hoping for her ruler's favor or, more commonly, lamenting the loss of it; the lonely wife longing for her husband, who is far away; friends celebrating their friendship or bidding farewell when parting; or a journey to visit a hermit, who turns out not to be at home. These subjects on which Li Bo wrote were very familiar to his audience since they had appeared in Chinese poetry since the fifth century B.C.E., when Confucius supposedly collected and first recorded China's earliest poetry in the *Shi jing* (c. 1066-541 B.C.E.; *Book of Songs*, 1937); that Li Bo knew the *Book*



of *Songs* by heart by the age of ten indicates its importance in Chinese culture. Li's reputation as one of the greatest poets of China stems, then, not from technical or thematic innovation, but from the great skill with which he managed to surprise his readers in presenting the unexpected within the familiar.

Li startled his readers by upsetting their assumptions that his poetry would follow fixed patterns of development. In a poem on the traditional topic of visiting a holy man in the mountains, for example, Li's reader would have expected him to establish the scene and the occasion, but instead he opens with the sound of a barking dog. Another of his poems begins with a wild cry of the poem's speaker. Repeatedly, he violated his readers' sense of decorum, and they loved him for it.

Another characteristic of Li's poetry is his playful wit, especially in his personification of natural elements, which goes far beyond a Daoist identification with nature. For example, he makes the moon his drinking companion, says that a star spoke to him, or claims that he and a mountain gaze long at each other without either becoming bored. Such humorous, fanciful images were most unusual in Tang poetry and contributed to his readers' surprised delight.

Yet another distinctive aspect of Li's poetry is the dream vision. Such poems concern fantastic voyages, his own or the gods', through the cosmos, riding the tail of a comet, pulled by a phoenix, or flying on one's own power. He catches sight of the Queen of the Skies in the light of a rainbow, climbs a cloud ladder, sees fairies, and hears dragons roar—then awakens in bed, filled with longing.

Li Bo is frequently compared to the European Romantics, whose lyric poetry and emphasis on the individual would seem to parallel his, and yet, for all that he did to promote his public image, his poetry itself contains little of biographical note. Thus, scholars have found it all but impossible to assign dates to his poems.

Many English translations of his work exist; perhaps some of the most famous are those in *Cathay* (1915) by twentieth century American poet Ezra Pound, who did not know classical Chinese but worked from the notes of a translator, who had himself studied Li Bo's works with a Japanese master. Thus, for all of their fame, they are more reflections of Pound's poetic genius than a faithful

rendering of Li Bo's originals. Because of the significant grammatical and syntactical differences between Chinese and English (nouns are neither singular nor plural but stand for the idea of the thing itself, verbs do not have subjects, verb tenses do not exist, for example), English translations of the same work can vary widely. Rhyme, substitution of words to preserve rhyme scheme, antiquarian diction or neologisms, contractions such as "twas"—all found in different translations of Li Bo's poems—do not preserve the integrity of the original lines.

Li Bo is the Chinese poet most widely known outside of China. Those only superficially acquainted with him sometimes think of him as the "bad boy" of Chinese poetry because of his popular reputation as a hard drinker who loved women and good times with his friends. It is true that he cultivated his reputation as a cheerful man who could never succumb to sorrow as long as there was a cup of wine to drink. To see him only in the light of that persona, however, is to miss the richness and complexity of his combination of established poetic forms and themes with his own humorous, sometimes mystical vision of the world.

### "IN THE DAI-TIAN MOUNTAINS"

**Written:** c. 718-720 (collected in *Li Po and Tu Fu*, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Wandering in the mountains in search of a reclusive holy man, the poet does not find him at home.*

In his poem "In the Dai-tian Mountains, Failure to Find the Wise Man," Li Bo addresses a topic very familiar to his Chinese audience. Many Daoist masters turned away from their society and lived simple, austere lives in the mountains, which the Chinese considered to be very spiritual places. While his topic may have been a conventional one, his presentation of it is somewhat unorthodox.

Li opens the poem with the sound of a dog barking, an indecorous beginning. His audience would have expected him, instead, to establish the occasion and set the scene; barking, if it appeared at all,

would properly have come later in the poem. Typically, however, Li Bo liked to startle his audience.

The poet moves from one sound to another—the bark is heard over the roaring of rushing water—and at last visual images appear: wet peach blossoms, deep woods, a deer. Ironically, the sound he could actually expect to hear is missing; at noon, he pauses in his journey and notices that no noon bell is struck.

The images leap forward as he climbs on through tall bamboo, green against a bright blue sky, to a waterfall, whose spray hangs in the air. There he expects to find the holy man, but no one knows where he has gone. The poet makes no direct statement about his feelings, and interpretations vary as to whether he is disappointed or content. The dreamily beautiful images have assumed an almost magical quality, so it is easy to believe that his is not merely a physical journey, but a spiritual quest that has not been in vain, whether or not he finds the hermit.

This poem brings together Li Bo's fascination with the Daoist recluses and his affinity with the mountains as places charged with the supernatural, where he could experience a mystical union with nature. As different as this poem is from his drinking poems, each represents equally a true love of Li Bo.

### **“MARBLE STAIRS GRIEVANCE”**

**Written:** c. 740 (collected in *Cathay*, 1915)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A palace lady waits hopefully for the emperor's visit, but as the night grows late she sadly realizes that he will not come.*

Li Bo's famous “Marble Stairs Grievance” is of that large body of Chinese poems that treat the subject of the palace lady, abandoned and forgotten by the emperor. The poems are always subdued but filled with longing and sadness. The poetry accurately reflected historical fact; many beautiful young girls were selected as the emperor's concu-

bines, and to be chosen brought honor both to the young woman and to her family. Many grew old and lonely at the palace, however, rarely seeing the emperor but considered still in his service. A subcategory of this subject is that of the mocking treatment of the older palace lady, who still adorns herself with makeup and finery and waits for the emperor's visit.

In the first stanza, the dew that has formed on the marble stairs indicates, on a literal level, the lateness of the hour, thus the fact that the emperor is not coming; but the dew could also refer to tears on the lady's face. Her beauty is suggested by her clothing in the reference to her silk stockings and in the smoothness of her marble (sometimes translated as “jade”) cheek. The fact that her stockings are now dew-soaked underscores the poignance of her long—and fruitless—vigil.

In the second stanza, she sadly lowers the curtain and looks at the autumn moon through glittering crystals. Beaded curtains made of rock crystal were used in the palace, so the reference could be taken literally, but again, the suggestion is strong that the clear, glittering drops are her tears. The specific naming of an autumn moon intimates that she is no longer a young girl.

In a brief scene contained in a two-stanza poem, Li Bo portrays the pathos of the cruel plight of the abandoned palace lady; without the attentions of her lord, her life is meaningless. Li conveys both her sorrow and the idea that she has waited and hoped many times—and will do so many more.

### **SUMMARY**

Contemporary readers often want a poet to enable them to see the familiar world afresh, but Li Bo's readers expected his work to reveal knowledge of ancient poetic traditions. He gave them what they wanted—and more. To the old familiar subjects and themes, he brought a fresh vision that charged his poetry with spontaneity. His unrestrained vitality gives a scattered, exuberant energy to many of his poems. The inebriation that is so often associated with the man and his work could serve as poetic metaphor; life and nature in his poetry come across as intoxicating.

*Linda Jordan Tucker*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In the poem “In the Dai-tian Mountains,” is Li Bo affirming that the search for a holy man is more important than finding him?
- If Chinese poetry has influenced Imagist poets and yet seldom conveys symbolism, metaphor, or personification, what qualities does an Imagist poet convey?
- What must one know about Daoism to become a successful reader of Li Bo’s poetry?
- “Marble Stairs Grievance” is about an “older palace lady.” Would any Western figure resemble this lady, and can the poem tell us about her or him?
- Can a poet like Li Bo emerge more satisfactorily in a free translation, such as one by Ezra Pound, or in a more conventional translator’s version?

## CLARICE LISPECTOR

**Born:** Chechelnyk, Ukraine, Soviet Union (now in Ukraine)

December 10, 1925

**Died:** Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

December 9, 1977

*Lispector's lyrical narratives place her in the vanguard of the post-World War II experimental novel, both for her tradition-defying fiction and for her unique approach to women's writing.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Clarice Lispector (leh-SPEHKT-ur) was born in a tiny village in Ukraine, then a part of the Soviet Union. Pedro and Marian Lispector left Ukraine with their family as soon as possible after her birth and settled in northeastern Brazil, where they lived for eleven years. Although the family was more or less impoverished, Pedro Lispector being first a farm laborer and then a sales representative, Clarice was undiscouraged by hardships and directed her lively intelligence toward story-making. The future writer disguised her sorrows in merri-ness. She created, with a friend, a long story before they could read or write. At a young age, she wrote children's stories and sent them out to publishers who took children's work, but perhaps because even then she was an experimentalist, they were not published. In 1932, the Lispector family moved to Rio de Janeiro, and the city provided food for the young writer's intellectual development. Here she read major fiction writers Fyodor Dostoevski, Hermann Hesse, and Katherine Mansfield, as well as current Latin American writers. She decided to become a professional writer but she allowed herself to be persuaded to obtain a law degree at the National Faculty of Law, probably because her defenses of student rights made it clear to many that she would be an excellent lawyer. She did not, however, practice law, but instead worked for a newspaper, *A Noite*, and did editing work. Her first novel, *Perto do coração selvagem* (1944; *Near to the Wild Heart*, 1990), was published by the newspaper with the agreement that the newspaper would keep the profits.

This first novel, a richly symbolic psychological

portrait of a woman whose inner life contrasts drastically with her outer life, gained critical success for its daring violation of novel form. However, Lispector did not become known outside Brazil until her first collection of short stories, *Laços de família*, was published in 1960. It was translated as *Family Ties* in 1972. These stories of flashes of insight into women's inner worlds gained international attention. This growing respect for Lispector was increased by a novel, *A maçã no escuro* (1961; *The Apple in the Dark*, 1967). The novel describes the quest for identity of Martim, a man who is running away—from the authorities who are pursuing him for attempted murder and from his former self.

Other complex stories and essays written in the next few years continued to develop Lispector's tendency to undercut traditional narrative structures and to focus on the complex relationships between language and life. Two of these books were *A legião estrangeira* (1964; *The Foreign Legion*, 1986), a group of stories and essays, and the novel *A paixão segundo G. H.* (1964; *The Passion According to G. H.*, 1988). Perhaps her most popular novel is *Uma aprendizagem: Ou, O livro dos prazeres* (1969; *An Apprenticeship: Or, The Book of Delights*, 1986). This novel, closer than most of Lispector's other books to traditional novel structure, shows the psychological development of Lori, a girl who must accept her existential freedom before she can love Ulysses, a young philosophy teacher who is also learning how to live.

Lispector's last few years were marked by a flurry of publications, including several collections of short stories and a short novel, *A hora da estrela* (1977; *The Hour of the Star*, 1986). *The Hour of the Star*

is a metanovel in which a male narrator, Rodrigo S. M., describes the tragic, brief life of an impoverished young woman who is so lacking in self-awareness that she does not realize she is unhappy until a fortune-teller tells her so. When the young woman dies after being knocked down by a car, Rodrigo proclaims that he, too, is dead—"Macabéa has murdered me . . . I have died with the girl." The inseparability of the literary creator from his or her creation and the dependency of life on words are two of Lispector's most constant themes. *The Hour of the Star* was published in the year of Lispector's own death, and was possibly influenced by the onset of her final illness. That the author's life was rapidly approaching its end adds another dimension to the tangle of writer, subject, and text represented in this novel.

The years between Lispector's first novel and her international acclaim were mostly taken up with childcare and other family responsibilities. Lispector's marital life was relatively quiet. She married Mauro Gurgel Valente, a fellow law student, in 1943, and the couple had two sons, Paulo and Pedro. When her husband entered the foreign service, Lispector moved abroad; the family spent time in Italy, Switzerland, England, and the United States. Lispector raised her sons, took care of her many duties as a diplomat's wife, and still found time to write, although she always missed Brazil and felt displaced in other countries. After they returned to Rio de Janeiro in 1956, the couple divorced. The solitude Lispector had described and courted in her novels now became hers. She continued to write novels and newspaper essays until her death in 1977 from cancer.

## ANALYSIS

Clarice Lispector gives a woman's perspective on existential angst. This is the anxiety or uneasiness that comes from the sense that an individual is free to choose, and that what he or she becomes depends on these choices. To the existential thinker, one does not have an essential nature that is followed and fulfilled by the choices one makes, but rather one simply is, or exists, before being anything in particular. This sense of total freedom, the freedom, one may feel, of the void, causes nausea and paralysis. The existential thinker must get beyond this initial paralysis to take self-creative action. This notion is explored by the French writers

Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others. Lispector gives readers a woman's attempt at resolving the existential dilemma in *An Apprenticeship* and elsewhere. In *An Apprenticeship*, Lori, the main character, begins with feelings of physical nausea and mental paralysis, but she goes through various stages of enlightenment or self-awareness until she is free enough to have a love affair with Ulysses, her tutor. He is going through a parallel process of learning to live.

Another of Lispector's major themes is the tangled relationship between words and life. Many of her stories ask the question: Do the words of things alter their nature? The answer seems to be, to a greater or lesser extent, that yes, words affect their referents. In *The Hour of the Star*, the young woman Macabéa is on the lowest level of awareness because she knows so few words, and her rare moments of understanding come from words. Her creator Rodrigo is so entangled with the words of her existence that he claims he will not survive her. In *The Apple in the Dark*, Martim is running from the police—but the prison he finds himself in, the prison of self, has words for walls. Lispector uses innuendo and double meanings in ways that are difficult to translate. Language becomes both the means of self-awareness and the obstacle to it.

Allied with both these themes are Lispector's social and political concerns. Her novels and stories usually focus on the lives of women in a society that has clearly defined female roles. Her women struggle with their limitations and either transcend them or fall victim to them. Their success is often linked to their ability to use words powerfully, to articulate themselves—as the impoverished young woman in *The Hour of the Star* could never do.

Poverty and oppression are found in her stories and novels, too, sometimes in the margin, as in the references to the poor schoolchildren that Lori clothes as well as teaches in *An Apprenticeship*, and sometimes at center stage, as in the description of the poverty-stricken heroine of *The Hour of the Star*. The hardships Lispector observed and lived during her first years in Brazil were not forgotten.

What most sets Lispector's work apart is its style. Its violation of the conventions of fiction owes much to the French New Novel. In this revolutionary kind of antinovel, expectations of chronological development, consistent point of view, and clear causality in a coherent plot are intentionally



not met. The New Novel also tends toward a flat, emotionless surface. Words are subjected to punning and fracture. With intuitive leaps and a focus on moments of development within a consciousness, Lispector's work violates expectations of plot development. She emphasizes the free forming and reforming of self in her flowing, long sentences, in images of water and wind, and in violations of the conventions of punctuation. She also uses the pun, although her wordplay is diminished or lost in translation. In *The Hour of the Star* and other later work she also affects some of the flat tone of the New Novel, although usually if passion is not on the surface, it is evident beneath.

Lispector's novels are more flowing and unstructured than her short stories, which tend to conform more to tradition. In the typical Lispector short story, a moment of self-awareness comes to the female main character through the medium of a chance event. In the novels, the main characters, usually but not always women, reach self-knowledge in stages. Lispector's descriptions of a distinctively female consciousness through works structured according to intuition and laced with a rich symbolism make her a startlingly original writer.

### "THE SMALLEST WOMAN IN THE WORLD"

**First published:** "A menor mulher do mundo," 1960 (collected in *Family Ties*, 1972)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Everyone reacts differently to the reported discovery in a remote jungle of a tiny pregnant woman, and her discoverer feels a mixture of attraction and repulsion.*

"The Smallest Woman in the World," a story in the *Family Ties* collection, has a combination of realistic and surrealistic elements that is frequently called Magical Realism. Marcel Pretre, a French ex-

plorer, finds a tiny pregnant woman in the Congo. She is one of the remaining members of a race that has been almost completely destroyed by predators. There is a tension between the finder and his discovery, whom he names Little Flower. He finds her both attractive and repellent: repellent because of her strangeness and her primitive qualities and attractive because of her odd dignity.

The discovery, when reported in the newspaper, sparks a variety of responses, from the desire to make a pet of Little Flower to total rejection of her. Some readers are scientifically interested in her; others fear some element in her. The explorer is amazed to find her laughing: She laughs because she has not, as she expected, been eaten. She loves him because he did not eat her. He does not know what to do with the tiny woman's profound love.

At the end of this brief tale, the explorer is keeping his baffled feelings at bay by distancing himself with scientific observation. The other observers, those who look at the phenomenon only through the news stories, dismiss the marvel. They say such things as: "Well, as I always say: God knows what He's doing."

This story can be read as an allegory about oppressors and oppressed, and about the profound strangeness that people find in each other. It describes the process of otherizing—making a person into a thing—that people frequently substitute for an attempt at understanding. It makes a comment on sexism, too, as the little woman remains resolutely human and individual. She ends the tale in possession of herself, despite the odds against her.

Lispector's short stories are a good introduction to her work because they are clearly structured and direct. Many of her stories examine moments of discovery in the lives of women, mostly urban women, who come to positive or negative conclusions about themselves after the insight provoked by some incident. In "The Smallest Woman in the World," the expected unhappy exploitation of Little Flower does not take place; instead there is a positive recognition of her humanity and of the possibility of safety.

## AN APPRENTICESHIP: OR, THE BOOK OF DELIGHTS

**First published:** *Uma aprendizagem: Ou, O livro dos prazeres*, 1969 (English translation, 1986)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Lori, a young Brazilian grade-school teacher, must learn to accept her freedom to make choices before she can truly love Ulysses, her mentor, who is also an apprentice to life.*

*An Apprenticeship* may well be Lispector's most accessible novel, although it deals with some of the same issues as her more complex and difficult works. At the novel's beginning, Lori, the main character, is preparing to meet her suitor and mentor, the young philosophy teacher Ulysses. Waves of nausea overcome her and she feels she must cancel the appointment. Her nausea stems from feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness when she considers the vastness of being. She knows that her life has no determined shape, and that only she can give it shape, but this knowledge results at first in imprisonment in dread rather than liberation. She does not accept her freedom to shape her own life, and to give and accept love. Her predicament is symbolized by an event in her past when, lost in a foreign city, she did not remember the name of her hotel, and in a panic asked the taxi driver to keep driving, hoping that she would find her way back.

Lori does finally choose to keep the appointment, which is a first step toward freedom. Through a series of meetings with Ulysses, through meditating on what he says, and through prayer toward an undefined, impersonal god for courage to live, Lori draws closer to full participation in life. She learns to accept her body, and to live in it. She learns to take part in social occasions and withstand the gaze of the world, to enjoy the pleasures of natural beauty, and to give of herself. While Ulysses is courting her, he is also going through a parallel experience. Although Ulysses' apprenticeship seems to be more intellectualized, he, too, is learning to accept his freedom.

The final scene of the novel is the consummation of the affair between Ulysses and Lori. They are now ready for each other, and ready to give up what needs to be sacrificed for full participation in

a relationship. "Do you think love is a mutual gift of one's solitude?" Ulysses asks. Lori will say only: "... my search has come to an end." The novel ends with a colon, as Ulysses is about to speak.

*An Apprenticeship* is strikingly lyrical, moving along according to a series of epiphanies rather than according to chronological time. The reader goes from one crisis of realization within Lori's subjective experience to another. The recurrent motifs of water, of the breeze, and of moving vehicles suggest the flowing nature of Lori's experience and the natural quality of her development. This is a novel that allows the reader to watch Lori become herself as one might watch a fish take shape swimming upward toward the watcher.

## THE HOUR OF THE STAR

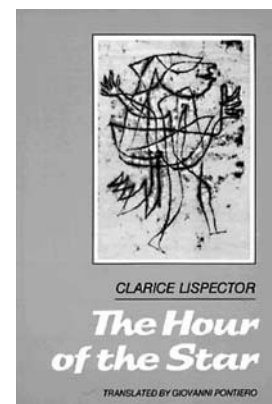
**First published:** *A hora da estrela*, 1977 (English translation, 1986)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The trials of Macabéa, a poor girl from northeast Brazil trying to survive in the city, are chronicled by a writer who becomes engrossed with his unattractive character.*

This brief, densely written novel explores the relationship between writer and work and subject and object in a way that casts doubt on traditional categories. The novel is about a man writing about a woman. The writer, Rodrigo, is educated, sensitive, and politically aware. The woman, Macabéa, is deprived, impoverished, and barely aware of her own existence.

The title refers to the writer's idea that at death everyone is a star, presumably since at death, the great mystery is revealed. Macabéa in her few short years experiences misery, desire, and rejection, and then after finally being made aware of her unhappiness by a fortune-teller, she is run over by a Mercedes and



killed. Lying in the street, she has her “hour of the star”: “She felt like vomiting something that was not matter but luminous. Star with a thousand pointed rays.” When she does die, her creator, tangled in her story, feels that in some sense he dies, too. Macabéa’s biographer is, however, still alive at story’s end, pondering: “Dear God, only now am I remembering that people die. Does that include me?”

Written just before Lispector’s death from cancer and published in the year of her death, this novel raises important questions about the meaning of death, the relationship between author and work, and the isolation of the individual, but it does not provide answers. It suggests, rather, that there are none. Its uncertainty is suggested by the fact that Lispector offers thirteen alternative titles for the novel. Some of the titles include suggestions of self-mockery, and there are strongly comic events that show the girl’s naïveté. Lispector also includes her signature in the list of titles.

*The Hour of the Star* also looks back to Lispector’s own childhood in its choice of heroine. Macabéa comes from poverty-stricken northeast Brazil, where Lispector spent her formative years. It is interesting to note the contrast between this heroine and that of *An Apprenticeship*. Macabéa, perhaps because she has no self-awareness to speak of, is doomed. There is no doom for the self-creating heroine Lori; she is able to choose her future.

## SUMMARY

Clarice Lispector’s work is noted for its stylistic innovations, its portrayal of the feminine consciousness, and for its addressing issues about the complex relationships between author, text, and body. Lispector’s flowing, lyrical narratives, with their subjective experience of time and their delicate probing at levels of awareness, reinvent reading by requiring a new kind of relationship between reader and text.

Janet McCann

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- Do Clarice Lispector's early children's stories suggest that an experimental writer can communicate well with young readers?
- How do women's existential dilemmas differ from those conveyed by writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus?
- Does Lispector's failure to observe a consistent point of view confuse readers or stimulate them to a more challenging literary experience?
- Does an imaginative writer like Lispector have a better chance of overcoming "otherizing"—making a person into a thing—than, say, a philosopher or clergy member addressing the same issue?
- Does Lispector convince the reader that two apprentices, like Lori and Ulysses in *An Apprenticeship: Or, The Book of Delights*, can help each other learn to accept freedom?
- What sort of reader can benefit most from Lispector's challenge to "reinvent reading"?

# MALCOLM LOWRY

**Born:** Liscard, England

July 28, 1909

**Died:** Ripe, Sussex, England

June 27, 1957

*Famous only for his novel* Under the Volcano, Lowry fashioned its main character as a version of himself, representing in religious and psychological symbolism the self-destructive ambivalence afflicting him and his age.

## BIOGRAPHY

Clarence Malcolm Lowry (LOW-ree) was the son of a rich British industrialist, Arthur Osborne Lowry, and was supported meagerly by his father throughout his life. After his early years, Lowry lived among the poor; however, he was partly distinguished from his neighbors by his receipt of monthly paternal stipends—an alienating situation that he could not leave behind as easily as he eventually deleted his first name. Indeed, his alienation also had various roots in his childhood, including his being largely or wholly blind from nine to thirteen, occasioning much bullying by the other boys in the private schools where his parents left him from the age of seven onward. At eighteen, he sailed to the Far East as a cabin boy, teased by the other sailors because of his father's wealth. His most notable alienation, however, was that from the age of fourteen he remained a heavy drinker, to the horror of his Methodist father, a teetotaler. This alienation often expressed itself in physical and psychological wandering.

Lowry returned from his cabin-boy experience, first to German studies in Bonn, then to a writing apprenticeship with Conrad Aiken in the United States, and then for somewhat longer to Cambridge University, from which he vacationed by working on a Norwegian freighter in order to meet the pro-Communist novelist Nordahl Grieg, author of *Skibet gaar videre* (1924; *The Ship Sails On*, 1927).

The only relative success of Lowry's university studies was his thesis, the novel *Ultramarine*, published in 1933, but to indifferent reviews. That year,

he had a reunion with Aiken in Europe, where Lowry met and married Jan Gabriel, an American. This was a fairly productive period, with Lowry placing his short fiction in the American magazine *Story*. By 1935, however, his drinking had caused him to be committed briefly to Bellevue Hospital, and his marriage was floundering. In 1936, he tried unsuccessfully to save his marriage during a trip to Mexico, where he was inspired to begin the long process of writing *Under the Volcano* (1947).

In 1937, Lowry spent two months with Aiken, a reunion that also significantly influenced *Under the Volcano*, as well as Aiken's *Ushant: An Essay* (1952), where Lowry appears as the drunken character Hambo. Indeed, Aiken and Lowry drank much together. In the same year, Gabriel finally left Lowry.

The greatest influence on *Under the Volcano*—Lowry's long relationship with Margerie Bonner—began in 1939. Sister of the Hollywood star Priscilla Bonner, Margerie had acted in *King of Kings* (1927), *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), and *Cleopatra* (1934), but by the time she fell in love with Lowry, hopes of advancing or even continuing that career had faded. Because visa problems prevented Lowry from remaining in the United States, he went to Vancouver, British Columbia, where Margerie followed him, illegally. They lived in a squatter's shack. After Lowry's divorce from Gabriel was final, he married Margerie in 1940.

The next year, he began submitting a draft of *Under the Volcano* to publishers, but he returned to rewriting it after twelve publishers rejected it. In 1944, a fire cost him his manuscript "In Ballast to the White Sea," reportedly a longer, happier work



than *Under the Volcano*. After the loss of his manuscript and his shack, his drinking, for a while kept under control by Margerie, accelerated in the ensuing depression, even though she managed to save a draft of *Under the Volcano* from the flames. Along with Gabriel, Margerie was a model for the character of Yvonne in *Under the Volcano*; in addition, Margerie worked as an editor, helping Lowry with the novel day and night. Margerie also brought in money by writing the mystery novels *The Shapes That Creep* (1946) and *The Last Twist of the Knife* (1946), as well as by turning out radio scripts for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Thus in 1947, thanks largely to her, *Under the Volcano* was at last accepted for publication. By then, Lowry had rebuilt the burned shack in Canada, but he had drifted to Mexico, from which he was deported. Later wanderings included New Orleans, Haiti, the Panama Canal, France, Italy, New York, Los Angeles, and Sicily, with long stays in Canada. By 1955, he was in London, undergoing psychiatric treatment. Two years later, he died in Ripe, Sussex, England.

Thereafter, Margerie authorized Conrad Knickerbocker to compose a biography of Malcolm, but Knickerbocker committed suicide during the writing. Nonetheless, Margerie increased the posthumous attention to Lowry by arranging for his remaining unfinished works to be edited and published.

## ANALYSIS

Lowry began writing at the same time as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, when the fashion was to interweave bits of other authors' texts into one's own, a way of maintaining tradition in the midst of Jazz Age modernity. At his best, Lowry mixes allusions together into a heady tonic. His derivative-ness, however, limits the effect of all his works except *Under the Volcano*, whose success consists precisely in the style's being awash with the drunken flow of the main character's memories. Joyce, however, had already achieved such inebriated stream of consciousness in a long section of *Ulysses* (1922). The originality of *Under the Volcano* consists in its not reconciling contradictions, even as tentatively as Joyce's *Ulysses* or Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Instead, Lowry's characters are dependent personalities, who need to lean on one another, but influenced by the mutually antagonistic diversities of

their world, they betray and thus destroy one another. Neither previously nor thereafter did Lowry ever again achieve this felicitous harmony of form and content.

His first novel, *Ultramarine* (1933, revised 1962), was nicknamed "purple passage" by Aiken because it presents Lowry's emotional sufferings in the merchant marine so pretentiously that it elicited more boredom than sympathy. His posthumously published works include the unfinished novella *Lunar Caustic* (1968), an account of his time in Bellevue; an unfinished novel, *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid* (1968), a meditation on the trauma of having written *Under the Volcano*; and another unfinished novel, *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970), a philosophically and psychologically elaborated recollection of a voyage Lowry took with Margerie. Some of his short stories have been collected in the volumes *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961) and *Malcolm Lowry: Psalms and Songs* (1975), while his *Selected Poems* (1962) and the *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (1965) have also appeared. An excerpt from his most fragmentary manuscript, "La Morbida," was published in *The Voyage That Never Ends: Fictions, Poems, Fragments, Letters* (2007). Because they are unfinished, his posthumous works are at best a tantalizing taste of what might have been, and they are often intuitions of how his meditative time in the beautiful Canadian wilderness could have begun to heal him if he had overcome his alcoholism.

## UNDER THE VOLCANO

**First published:** 1947

**Type of work:** Novel

*During twelve hours on November 2, 1938, ending with his murder, Geoffrey Firmin, a British consul in Mexico, drinks instead of working at that profession, or laboring on the occult book he wants to write, or reconciling with his estranged wife.*

In the most symbolically charged scene of *Under the Volcano*—a garden, with a snake, where Geoffrey keeps talking about Eden—he proclaims that ownership of property was obviously the original sin. This is, of course, not the only theme of the com-

plex book, but it is its core, holding together its social, religious, and literary vision. The fundamental problem of property takes many forms. For Geoffrey's brother Hugh, it includes his greedily plagiarizing others' songs as his own, even while stealing his publisher's wife. For Geoffrey's estranged wife Yvonne, it is memories of her lost material success as an actress, dragging her away from Geoffrey. For Geoffrey himself, it is his position as paid defender of British territories in the period when he had some complicity in German soldiers being burned alive. The different forms of guilt that the characters feel are variations of the way coveting or defending property divides people from one another.

By the final draft of the novel, Lowry's long fascination with the supernatural had brought him under the influence of the occultist Charles Stansfield Jones (also known as Frater Achad), whom Lowry met in Canada. Based on Jones's synthesis of various kinds of mysticism, including Jewish Kabbala, Lowry associated the divisive power of property with the metaphysical idea that, in the beginning, God's divine energy entered vessels that broke, with the tragic consequence being the multiplicity of the material world where there should have been divine unity. As Lowry explained in his preface to the French translation of the novel, Geoffrey should have been a prophet, whose consciousness was bringing the world back toward that unity. Being infirm instead of firm, Geoffrey, as broken as those vessels, fails as a prophet, occasionally glimpsing the future, but through an alcoholic haze. Lowry adds in that preface that Kabbala likens misused magical power to alcoholism (such as Geoffrey's drunkenness). Throughout the novel, Geoffrey keeps pretending that liquor brings a universal brotherhood, but the plot of the novel shows that, quite the contrary, as a material substitute for the divine, liquor provides only an illusion of sharing, sabotaging the reality.

*Under the Volcano* begins on the Mexican Day of the Dead in 1939, the anniversary of Geoffrey's death. Dr. Vigil and Jacques Laruelle, two of his friends, while themselves drinking, deplore the tragedy of the consul's alcoholism and demise. Such mournful thoughts are appropriate to the Day of the Dead, and the two feel some guilt for the consul's passing. Vigil was then focusing on his own problems rather than on what he diagnosed as

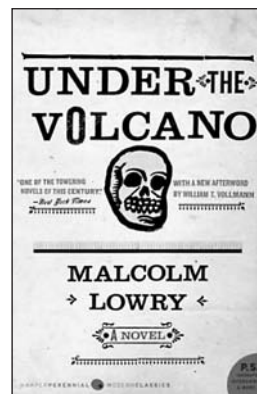
Geoffrey's sickness of the soul. More disturbingly, Laruelle had committed adultery with Yvonne, thereby undermining her marriage. Having lost his idealism, Laruelle, who once dreamed of improving the world through filmmaking, has declined into collecting Mexican "idols," material substitutes for the divine.

The locale of the novel is the Mexican city of Quahnahuac, described as "tortuous and broken." As Lowry often stated in later explanations of his novel, its twelve chapters (like the twelve hours of its main action) constitute a symbolic number, fitting with the many other symbolic numbers in the work, which together suggest that a fated drama is transpiring, with cosmic resonances.

The second chapter moves back to the previous Day of the Dead, in 1938, when Yvonne arrived in Quahnahuac to see if her marriage could be saved. Both through repeated references to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play *Faust: Eine Tragödie* (pb. 1808, 1833, pr. 1829, 1954; *The Tragedy of Faust*, 1823, 1828), whose protagonist is saved by the "eternal feminine," and through allusions to Kabbala, where God's saving presence, the Shekinah, is feminine, Lowry implies that Geoffrey's salvation depends on such a reconciliation. On entering Quahnahuac, Yvonne hears an ominous phrase about a corpse coming by express, a foreshadowing of how little time she will have before Geoffrey dies.

In chapter 3, as the consul walks with Yvonne through the garden, he imagines at his side some additional person, who interprets his tragedy as an alienation from nature. He and his wife almost make love, but he thinks of the cantina, the mood passes, and he takes up a whiskey bottle instead. Soon he is asleep.

Chapter 4 takes place the next morning, when Hugh sends a brief dispatch to London about how Germany is stirring up anti-Semitism in Mexico. Particularly given the importance of Jewish mysticism in his novel, Lowry probably intends Hugh and Geoffrey's generally pro-Semitic attitude as a redeeming quality. Having managed a small good



deed by sending the dispatch, Hugh is able to see Yvonne as a luminous being, standing in the garden, but his desire for her is adulterous and thus culpable. He is dressed like a cowboy, and therefore, because her material success was in Western films, Hugh plays a role comparable to the filmmaker Laruelle, whose attraction for Yvonne also reminds her of her cinematic career.

Chapter 5 begins with Geoffrey dreaming about India, the land where he was born. He is climbing a heavenly mountain, but at the thought of drink the scene turns hellish. He wakes with a hangover. Rather than visit his wife, he wanders into the garden, where he sees a sign in Spanish, urging people not to let their children destroy it. Geoffrey, however, mistranslates it as a warning that destroyers will be evicted. This begins a long sequence dominated by imagery of Adam's eviction from Eden. The chapter ends with Geoffrey suffering hallucinations of swarming insects and voices cautioning him.

Chapter 6 opens in Italian with the first line of Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), about a middle-aged man's waking to find himself (except that the English swearword "bloody" is inserted in the quotation). Ironically, instead of rising to self-awareness, Hugh, approaching middle age, is dropping onto a daybed. He is recalling how he gave up music and went from ridiculous job to job, without widening his understanding of life. As Yvonne walks away with Laruelle, Geoffrey and Hugh look at a postcard from her that has just arrived after its wandering the world—a card that might have brought the couple together if it had come in time.

Chapter 7 develops the relationship between Laruelle and Geoffrey, the former once smaller than the latter, though now their standing is reversed because physically and otherwise Geoffrey stopped growing in late adolescence. Chapter 8 recounts a bus trip, the subject of the short story from which the novel grew. Geoffrey, Yvonne, and Hugh encounter an impoverished Spaniard, who robs a seriously wounded Indian—a theft likened to one source of World War II, when Italy stole Abyssinia while the world watched. The Spaniard's theft from a native Mexican also mirrors the original Spanish conquest of Mexico and is meant to show how complacently many people witness crimes. As in chapter 7, in which Geoffrey was compared un-

favorably to Laruelle, this chapter contrasts his amoral passivity (shared by most of the bus passengers) to Hugh's frustrated desire to intervene. Disconcertingly, in chapter 9, Yvonne feels cheered by Geoffrey's indifference, seeing it as a fortunate quality, which may help them to rise above tragedy together. She imagines their going to a shack in the wilderness (like the one where Lowry was writing this novel), but despite saying that he loves her, Geoffrey is heading toward another bar.

In chapter 10, Geoffrey drinks and talks about how countries are stolen. Chapter 11 sends Yvonne and Hugh out together. Instead of taking the right path, they choose a circuitous one that will allow them to visit more cantinas. A runaway horse, a connection to Yvonne's time in Westerns, kills her, and while dying she imagines that she is in that distant shack with Geoffrey, but it is burning (probably suggested by the building fire that occurred when Lowry was finishing the novel).

Chapter 12 begins with Geoffrey's ordering mescal and ends with policelike criminals shooting him and throwing him over a cliff, along with a dog. This ending alludes to the conclusion of Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (1925; *The Trial*, 1937), where the murder of the main character by court officials is likened to the killing of a dog. Lowry's conclusion also alludes to Goethe's *Faust*, in that Lowry connected the dog (referred to repeatedly in the novel) and the canine form of the devil in *Faust*. Without a redeeming reconciliation with Yvonne and without a sustained connection to God, Geoffrey dies screaming, falling downward, like the evil magician in Christopher Marlowe's drama *Doctor Faustus* (pr. c. 1588, pb. 1604)—another of the sustained metaphors throughout the novel. The closest the ending comes to a conciliation is when the trees near the site of Geoffrey's fall look like they are pitying Geoffrey, the overlooking trees embodying the positive quality that Lowry assigned to nature.

## SUMMARY

The writing of *Under the Volcano*, Malcolm Lowry's only significant literary accomplishment, was dominated by his ambivalence toward alcohol and most other aspects of his life, with the possible exception of his feelings for his second wife, Margerie Bonner. The novel evidences his love and hatred of Mexico, of his (burning) shack in Canada, of his

first wife, Jan Gabrial, of the material beauties of life, and of himself. Even his chief love, writing, is parodied in Geoffrey's futilely planning an occult book, as Lowry had been planning his own occult book for ten years. As a Kabbalist, Lowry might hope to draw his readers' attention to God, thereby helping to unite the world, but opinions differ on how serious he was about that grand design.

James Whitlark

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*October Ferry to Gabriola*, 1970

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*The Voyage That Never Ends: Fictions, Poems, Fragments, Letters*, 2007 (Michael Hofmann, editor)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How accurately does Malcolm Lowry depict the debilitating effects of alcoholism in *Under the Volcano*?
- Does Lowry's description of Yvonne rise above old-fashioned, unrealistic depictions of women as angels and/or demons?
- Does Lowry's style well represent the erudite, albeit wandering mind of the Consul?
- Is *Under the Volcano* optimistic or pessimistic about humanity?
- How seriously do you think Lowry intended his references to occultism?
- How well does Lowry evoke Mexico?
- To what extent is Yvonne a representation of Jan Gabrial (Lowry's lost wife) and to what extent is she a portrait of Margerie Bonner, who was editing the manuscript while he wrote it?
- How effectively does Lowry use foreshadowing?

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## LU XUN

**Born:** Shaoxing, China  
September 25, 1881

**Died:** Shanghai, China  
October 19, 1936

*A great writer of the twentieth century, Lu Xun contributed significantly to the development of the modern short story, prose poetry, and personal essay genres.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Lu Xun (lew shewn; also known as Lu Hsün), whose real name was Zhou Shuren, was born on September 25, 1881, into a family from the gentry class in Shaoxing, China, a small town south of the Yangtze. In childhood, he received a solid education in the classics, and he loved ghost stories, fantasies, and folk art. When he was thirteen, his grandfather Zhou Jiefu, an editor at the Imperial Academy in Beijing, was charged with receiving bribes at provincial service examinations and was jailed for seven years. Lu Xun's father, Zhou Boyi, fell ill after his grandfather's imprisonment, remaining an invalid until his death in 1886. The family decline transplanted Lu Xun to the border world between wealth and poverty, sharpening his perceptive power. Lu Xun's mother, Lu Rui, the daughter of a scholar, had been brought up in the countryside but had taught herself to read. She had great influence on her son; Lu Xun adopted the word "Lu" in his pen name from his mother's name.

Lu Xun left Shaoxing in May, 1898. Under the influence of social Darwinism and Thomas Henry Huxley's scientific visions of evolution, he believed that science and technology could save China. Sent to Japan by the Chinese government after he graduated from the School of Mines and Railroads, he turned to medicine, not only because of his belief

that the impetus for Japan's Meiji restoration was the introduction of Western medical science but also because of his father's experience with illness. According to Lu Xun, his father was tortured to death, rather than cured, by quacks practicing traditional herbal medicine. While at Japan's Sendai Medical College, he saw a slide of a Chinese spy being beheaded by the Japanese military while many Chinese stood by, callously watching. Lu Xun suddenly realized that what was wrong with the Chinese was not their body but their spirit. He then decided to abandon medicine for literature, which he considered the best medium to change the spirit of the Chinese.

To promote literary innovation, Lu Xun wrote an essay promoting the Nietzschean concept of the superman. He also collaborated with his brother Zhou Zuoren in introducing foreign authors through translation, showing a personal preference for Russian and East European authors. In May, 1918, Lu Xun published "Kuangren riji" ("The Diary of a Madman," 1941) in *Xin qingnian* (new youth), a magazine that guided the New Culture movement. The story, with its innovative vernacular style and bold challenge to feudalism, shook the nation. Overnight, Lu Xun was recognized as a leader of a new literature. In the following eight years, Lu Xun wrote twenty-five stories, including the well-known novella *Ah Q zheng zhuan* (1921; *The True Story of Ah Q*, 1926), "Yao" (1919; "Medicine," 1954), "Zhufu" (1924; "The New Year's Sacrifice," 1954), and "Shang shi" (1926; "Regret for the Past," 1954). Before being forced to leave Beijing by the warlord government in 1926,

Lu Xun had also written *Yecao* (1927; *Wild Grass*, 1974), a collection of twenty-three prose poems, and *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* (1923-1930; *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, 1959). In 1928, he founded the magazine *Benliu* (the torrent). When the China League of Left-Wing Writers was established in March, 1930, Lu Xun began his service as its chief leader, keeping his post until 1936. During the last dozen years of his life, Lu Xun focused on essay writing. His sixteen volumes of essays, written in his distinctive style of humor and satire, have proven him to be a pioneer thinker and a giant in China's cultural revolution. In 1925, Xu Guangping fell in love with Lu Xun and became his lifelong companion. On September 27, 1929, his only son, Haiying, was born. After a long, arduous fight with right-wing writers and with tuberculosis, Lu Xun died on October 19, 1936. More than ten thousand people attended his funeral. His coffin was covered with a white banner inscribed with the words "The Soul of the Nation." Lu Xun's works have been translated into more than fifty languages in more than thirty countries.

## ANALYSIS

Literature to Lu Xun was neither a political vehicle nor an aesthetic game, but a medium for promoting social change. Three questions that preoccupied Lu Xun throughout his writing career were What is wrong with China? What defects dwell in Chinese national character? and What blocks an individual's spiritual development? Although Lu Xun's essays, which have the lyrical fluidity of Roland Barthes's personal essays and the sarcasm of Henry Louis Mencken's satirical essays, form a large part of Lu Xun's writing, his short stories and prose poems represent the core of his literary creativity. "The Diary of a Madman" heralded the iconoclastic May Fourth movement. It diagnosed the disease of China as ubiquitous cannibalism. The protagonist finds, in his paranoid sensitivity, that China has a four-thousand-year history of eating people. All Chinese, including himself, he discovers, are participating in the game of eating and being eaten. This cannibalism cannot function without its victim's collaboration. Lu Xun urges the spiritual transformation of every Chinese. Lu Xun observed that the Chinese national character has been affected by China's being twice enslaved by barbarians. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, he repre-

sents what he considers to be the vices of every Chinese, which include egomania, self-deluding optimism, and a tendency to bully the weak and cower before the strong. In "Gong yiji" (1919; English translation, 1960), Lu Xun ridicules the inability of old intellectuals to adapt themselves to a changing society. In "Gudu zhe" (1925; "The Misanthrope," 1954), he warns intellectuals against collaboration with corrupted authority. In "Yijian xiaoshi" (1919; "An Incident," 1954), he examines the smallness of the self in contrast with the nobility of a rickshaw man.

Lu Xun gave special attention to the plight of women in his time. He actively participated in debates concerning women's liberation and published such famous essays as "Nala zouhou zenyang" (1924; "What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?" 1959) and "Wode jielie guan" (1924; "My Views on Chastity," 1959). In "The New Year's Sacrifice," Lu Xun portrays a country woman who is driven mad by the joint forces of feudal marriage, religion, superstition, and the gullibility of the villagers and herself. In "Regret for the Past," Lu Xun offers criticism against women's caging themselves and against men's abandoning women. Although the spearhead of his satire is always aimed at a larger system beyond the individual's power, the individual can still choose to act differently. For this reason, Lu Xun can, to some extent, be considered an existentialist.

Considering Lu Xun's social concerns, one may assume that his writing would fall into the category of realism. In fact, the styles of his writing are various and are influenced by writers whose works do not follow the tenets of realism. "The Diary of a Madman," for example, is influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's subjectivity, Nikolai Gogol's irony, and Leonid Andreyev's psychological symbolism. The story established Lu Xun as the father of Chinese modern fiction and as the first Chinese writer in the Western modernist tradition. In "Medicine," Lu Xun employs what has been called symbolic narrative. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, he uses the form of a mock epic. In "Toufa de gushi" (1920; "The Story of a Hair," 1941), he uses a sustained monologue. In the collection *Gushi xinbian* (1935; *Old Tales Retold*, 1961), Lu Xun uses parody to rewrite Chinese myths and legends with modern ironic sensitivity.

Lu Xun's short fiction is famous for composite

characterization and humor. Although most of his protagonists represent individual types or even national types, they are extremely vivid and concrete. Ah Q is an example. The author's impressionistic eye captures, in blurred but emotionally accurate detail, a protean Everyman in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. The character's composite nature is manifested by the narrator's inability to trace a family name for Ah Q. Ah Q's spirit and psychology, however, not his appearance or rootlessness, make him a national type. Ah Q embodies the Chinese slave mentality. This diseased mentality produces a typically Chinese black humor that can turn any defeat into a self-deceiving, spiritually consoling, victory. This humor resorts to escapism for survival.

Lu Xun combined the prose and poetry of classical Chinese to invent the hybrid genre of prose poetry. The collection *Wild Grass*, which represents his most famous contribution to this genre, was written between 1924 and 1926, published in 1927, and published in English in 1974. In the face of severe censorship, Lu Xun had to "use rather ambiguous language" to paint "small pale flowers on the edges of the neglected hell." "Hell" refers to Chinese society and to the abyss of his psyche, with its ceaseless dark vision, pessimism, and despair. Lu Xun's prose poetry does not intend to make the reader share in his despair; instead, it reveals to the reader Lu Xun's struggle with the paralysis caused by the darkness or despair and encourages the reader to struggle together with Lu Xun for hope. His prose poetry is full of binary images of darkness and light, hope and despair, life and death. In "Si huo" (1925; "Dead Fire," 1974), he dreams that he revives a dead fire with his body warmth, setting the fire free even as he is crushed to death by a large stone cart. Such, in a metaphorical sense, was Lu Xun's self-sacrificing mission as a writer.

## "THE DIARY OF A MADMAN"

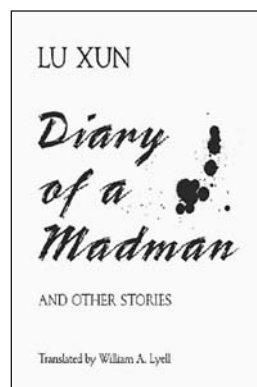
**First published:** "Kuangren riji," 1918  
(collected in *Call to Arms*, 1981)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A man who suffers from a persecution complex discovers ubiquitous cannibalism in Chinese society.*

The story contains thirteen fragments from the diary of a man who has lived in confusion for thirty years and suddenly gains spiritual insight from the moon. This lunatic sensitivity leads him to paranoia. Barking dogs, people's glances, children's stares, a mother's cursing words to her son, a brother's caring, and a doctor's treatment—all converge, in his mind, into a sinister scheme about eating him. On a sleepless night he reads through a Chinese history with "Virtue and Morality" written on each page but finds the words "eat people" between the lines. Then he discovers his brother's accomplice in the plan for eating him and realizes that his mother is also collaborating. He even discovers his unwitting involvement in eating his sister's flesh. The story ends with the madman's desperate cry: "Save the children." In addition to revealing the cannibalistic nature of four thousand years of Chinese history and its governing ideology and ethics, "The Diary of a Madman" exposes the ubiquity of such cannibalism and how everyone is an accomplice in the game of eating and being eaten.

Lu Xun uses realistic characterization to compose an intriguing story and symbolic realism to convey his moral concern. In a preface to the story that is fiction cloaked as nonfiction, the author states that he copied out a part of a patient's diary for the purpose of medical research. Lu Xun's previous study of medicine and his knowledge, in his own life, about a mad cousin undoubtedly helped him to portray convincingly a paranoid person's symptoms. In turn, the camouflage of framing the



story as a medical case history enables Lu Xun to be detached from the story, eliminating the burden of spelling out the point of the satire. The tongue-in-cheek preface is of vital importance to the story. First, it is written in classical Chinese, a foil to the vernacular style of the diary. Second, its explanation of the recovery of the madman and his acceptance of an official post gives the story a bitterly satiric irony. When the diary ends with the madman's realization of his own part in the cannibalism and of the urgency of saving the children, one expects him to change the system by changing himself as the first step. Instead, he not only denies the truth but also abandons the "madman" who discovered the truth. Many critics believe that this denial reveals Lu Xun's pessimism. On the other hand, the story's implicit denunciation of the cannibal/madman/government official exemplifies Lu Xun's hope in his readers' abilities to see and to change. Once the truth is revealed, it can never be fully covered up again. "The Diary of a Madman" was an overnight sensation in China largely because of its revelation of cannibalism. The diarist's surrender makes clear Lu Xun's deliberate warning to the reader against any collaboration with authority after learning the truth.

"The Diary of a Madman" was Lu Xun's first story. In the preface to the first collection in which it appeared (*Na-han*, 1923; *A Call to Arms*, 1941), Lu Xun compares China to an iron house with many people asleep inside. Although they will soon die of suffocation, if one cries out to wake a few up, one only makes them suffer more. Lu Xun nevertheless chooses to "call out, to encourage those fighters who are galloping on in loneliness, so that they do not lose heart." To Lu Xun, writing was an act of defiance against fate.

## "REGRET FOR THE PAST"

**First published:** "Shang-shih," 1926  
(collected in *Wandering*, 1981)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In the feudalistic world of early twentieth century China, two cohabitants meet their tragic fate.*

"Regret for the Past" is set in the 1920's, when Chinese youth felt lost in their quest for free love. Cohabitation, the boldest gesture of free love, often resulted in the lovers' being disowned by their relatives and in general ostracism. On December 26, 1923, Lu Xun gave a talk titled "Nala zouhou zenyang" ("What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?") at the Beijing Women's Normal College. His message, resembling Virginia Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own*, is that women must have economic rights. Without economic power, Nora, after leaving home, will either be a puppet in the hands of her sympathizers, die in poverty, or become a prostitute. Lu Xun's desire for radical social and political reform led him to consider the practical steps and basic obstacles between Chinese society as it was and how he would have it.

"Regret for the Past" tells of Zijun, the woman, and Juansheng, the man. Zijun experiences romantic love with "a childlike look of wonder." This naïve love, which enables the heroine, temporarily, to become her own mistress and defy her society, cannot survive long. Zijun escapes the fate of traditional marriage, but she falls into the cage of traditional married life. She becomes dependent on her man. She reduces herself to a housewife, devoting herself to waiting on him. Her fight with neighbors for her chickens and dog indicates how trivial her life has become. The dog, whose name means "Follow," mirrors the fate of Zijun. Zijun's body and mind are both vulgarized by poverty; ultimately, she fails to understand or follow her man. She is abandoned, as the dog is abandoned in a pit in the wilderness. The tragedy of Zijun lies in the fact that she does not have a profession with which to earn economic independence. Zijun, whose father takes her back into his home, dies, not from lack of livelihood but from the death of love. Without love she can no longer endure the sternness

and cold glances of her hostile world.

It may be argued that while Lu Xun pities Zijun for her foolishness in making love her whole existence and in falling into a second cage after breaking away from her first, his mockery of Juansheng is merciless. Juansheng is cowardly and hypocritical as well as self-righteous. He uses imitative romantic passion and beautiful words of sexual equality to procure Zijun's love. He constantly blames Zijun for her inability to communicate with him intellectually but never realizes that he has enslaved her and left her no room for growth. It never occurs to him that a woman should have a career or that they can fight together for survival. Instead, he treats Zijun as an obstacle to his starting a new life and even wishes her dead. The irony is that after Zijun's death, he still wants his fresh start in life and yet remains unable to act. The romantic love that gave expectancy, meaning, and happiness to Juansheng's empty life eventually leaves him in remorse. If he forgets Zijun and hides the truth, he will be doomed to eternal emptiness.

The subtitle of the story is "Juansheng de shouji" (Juansheng's notes). The narrative is pure male subjectivity, saturated with egotism.

## "REVENGE"

**First published:** 1924 (collected in *Wild Grass*, 1974)

**Type of work:** Prose poetry

*Describing two tableaux, the author satirizes the apathy of the onlooker and the thoughtless participant in cruelty.*

"Revenge" is written in the form of prose poetry—a subgenre of Chinese literature invented by Lu Xun. Lu Xun's prose poetry can be seen as a poetic interpretation of the essay. The conflict between the loner and the crowd is a persistent concern in Lu Xun's short stories. The loner is the writer, fighter, seer, madman, revolutionary, and revenger, while the crowd is the passersby, the onlookers, the cowards, the walking bodies without a

soul. The gullible crowd is made up of either indifferent and passive spectators or fierce and cruel persecutors. Lu Xun admitted in 1931 that "Revenge" was written out of revulsion at the number of bystanders in society.

"Revenge" has two parts. The first part is typical of Lu Xun's metaphorical lyricism. Visual images of thin, peach-colored skin with hot blood beneath convey the dualistic nature of human desire and revenge, forever locked in love and hate, or in embracing and killing. Lu Xun presents the reader with an allegorical tableau of revenge: "The two of them, stripped naked and grasping sharp knives, confront each other in the vast wilderness." In Lu Xun's short stories, the revengers always sacrifice their lives to gratify the passersby. In a symbolic twist, Lu Xun freezes the tableau. The two would-be fighters can neither embrace nor kill, and the passersby are reduced to an eternal standstill.

In part 2, he uses the story of the Crucifixion to expose the persecuting nature of passersby. The enemy's torture brings Him pain but the senseless complicity of the passersby gives Him the greater agony. "Those who reek most of blood and filth are not those who crucify the Son of God, but those who crucify the son of man," Lu Xun writes. The style of part 2 is quite different from that of part 1. It reads like a sermon, full of Biblical cadences, and is sensual, imagistic, and allegorical. Its fluid style and musical refrains make it a true prose poem. Its story, free from the restraints of realism, is timeless and metaphysical.

## SUMMARY

Lu Xun's moral ethos refuses to ignore either the moral failure of the individual or the moral failure of the group. Lu Xun's short stories and prose poems demonstrate his unique creative power and rare talent. In spite of his tragic vision and constant wrestling with despair, he was not a pessimistic writer. His works are a call to arms for a brighter future. His achievement in artistic experiment has not been surpassed by any writer of modern Chinese literature.

Qingyun Wu



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Which of Lu Xun's proposals for setting China right seems to make the most sense today?
- What is the basis of Lu Xun's assessment of China's "slave mentality," and how did he expect China to overcome it?
- What are the proportions of prose and poetry in Lu Xun's *Wild Grass*? What does the latter contribute to the former?
- In "The Diary of a Madman," can the reader successfully distinguish the character's insight from his mental confusion?
- Distinguish between Lu Xun's tragic vision and his optimism. How convincing is the basis of his optimism?

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Courtesy, Avon Books

## COLLEEN McCULLOUGH

**Born:** Wellington, New South Wales, Australia  
June 1, 1937

*McCullough consistently excels as a storyteller able to evoke a sense of place and to combine elements of romance with a host of other genres.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Colleen McCullough (muh-KUHL-uhk) was born in Wellington, New South Wales, on June 1, 1937. Her father, James McCullough, was an Irish emigrant who arrived in Australia in the 1920's. His wife was a New Zealander with Irish Catholic roots. The family lived primarily in Sydney, Australia. The father, who was a sugar cane cutting contractor, was often absent. Colleen later described him as cold and disinterested in family. The household was expanded by Colleen's mother's nine brothers, who often lived with them during the 1930's and 1940's.

McCullough was educated as an Irish Catholic, attending parochial school for twelve years, then going on to Holy Cross College, and she graduated with honors in English, chemistry, and botany. She then intended to ensure her future financial well-being by attending the University of Sydney to study medicine. This plan was abandoned because of a lack of funds. After a stint away from school working as journalist, teacher, library worker, and bus driver, McCullough returned to the University of Sydney and obtained a degree as a medical technician specializing in neurophysiology. She worked in neurophysiology in Australia, London, Birmingham, and finally in the United States at the Yale University School of Internal Medicine.

While at Yale, McCullough decided to supplement her income by writing a novel. Using her evenings to work at a characteristically feverish pace, she finished ten drafts in three months and

emerged with *Tim* (1974). The next year she began to write *The Thorn Birds* (1977). At this time McCullough was still working full time at Yale and writing in the evenings. She spent such long hours at the typewriter that she wore surgical gloves to keep her arms from rubbing against the desk and support hose to relieve her legs and feet from swelling. She finished the entire work in one year. *The Thorn Birds* soon became a best seller and made publishing history by commanding the highest paperback reprint price to date at that time—\$1,900,000.

At the time of the success of *The Thorn Birds* McCullough was scheduled to begin nurses' training in London. Once publicity for the novel raised her to celebrity status, however, she changed her plans. As a new millionaire she felt she would have been too conspicuous in any hospital, and her presence would not have aided either the patients or her own research for future books.

McCullough's next work reflected her interest in nursing. *An Indecent Obsession* (1981) is the story of an Australian military nurse in a ward for mildly emotionally disturbed soldiers at the end of World War II. Critics considered it a more serious work than *The Thorn Birds*. McCullough considered it her whodunit.

At this point in her career McCullough decided that fame required a buffer and began to search for a more secluded place to live. She moved to Norfolk Island, a tiny bit of land off the coast of Australia with a policy which required that one be approved to live there. The remote location and absence of distractions allowed her to indulge her many hobbies, which have included reading, cookery, painting, gardening, and astronomy. She

wrote a book on Australian food called *Cooking with Colleen McCullough and Jean Easthope* (1982). In 1984, she married Ric Robinson, another Norfolk Island resident.

Once settled in her new life McCullough continued her literary efforts. To her offbeat romance *Tim*, her family epic *The Thorn Birds*, her mystery *An Indecent Obsession*, and her cookbook she added a futurist novel called *A Creed for the Third Millennium* (1985), and an altered fairy tale entitled *The Ladies of Missalonghi* (1987). The latter work elicited cries of plagiarism from some readers, who saw in it a distorted reflection of *The Blue Castle* (1926) by Lucy Maud Montgomery. McCullough's response to the allegations was to point out that both novels are basically retellings of the tale of Cinderella and both happen to be placed in similar settings and time periods. The heroines, however, have very different motivations and are quite distinct from each other. Since the two books were similar in concept but not execution the charges of plagiarism were not accurate.

McCullough's next foray was into the world of historical fiction with *The First Man in Rome* (1990). A painstakingly detailed account of the Roman republic before the time of Julius Caesar, it was the first book in Masters of Rome series. The series continued with six more novels: *The Grass Crown* (1991), *Fortune's Favorite* (1993), *Caesar's Women* (1996), *Caesar: Let the Dice Fly* (1997), *The October Horse* (2002), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2007).

## ANALYSIS

McCullough's skill lies in her ability to tell a good story. She has been faulted for not being a serious literary stylist. Admittedly, her characters are sometimes stereotyped, their perceptions about each other tend to be too detailed and too accurate and her plots swing along on coincidences. Still, readers believe in the story and care about the people. She has the knack of weaving the reader into her tales to the extent that incongruous events become believable.

McCullough's work is decidedly old-fashioned. She places most of her stories in the past, she employs a straightforward narrative style, and her characters are embroiled in timeworn dilemmas of love versus duty, desire versus prohibition, and the importance of honor. Her women are strong, and the men are sympathetically drawn. Strength, how-

ever, does not buy happiness for her characters, although it may buy contentment.

Although *The First Man in Rome* is McCullough's first foray into the genre of the historical novel, she has consistently employed the technique of distancing events from the reader by setting the story in a different era. This provides a buffer between the reader and the events of the work, allowing the author to focus on the characters without having to factor in current events. While this "once upon a time" technique is a standard practice in romance novels, she saves her work from becoming mundane by her attention to her themes of duty, honor, and simple perseverance. The love affairs in McCullough's books are never easy. They involve, for example, an older woman and a young retarded man, or a young girl and an older priest. Events such as war, rigid social convention, droughts, and storms further complicate the characters' lives.

A persistent character in all of McCullough's work is the place where the novel is set. From Drogheda in *The Thorn Birds*, to the city of Rome in *The First Man in Rome* and its sequels, she constructs a picture of the setting so detailed that it takes on a life of its own and is a constant influence on the human characters. Even the futuristic United States depicted in *A Creed for the Third Millennium*, with its unending winter, is drawn convincingly and is the major motivating factor for the events of the story. Whether the book is set in a small tropical island in World War II or in ancient Rome, McCullough focuses not on the great, sweeping events of the time but upon the minute points of domestic life. The era is made real by descriptions of putting up corned beef for the winter, or sealing windows to keep out the unending cold, or the care of gardens in a Roman tenement building. Her imaginative and well-placed use of slang in dialogue adds an extra dimension to the characters.

Detail is an integral aspect of McCullough's work. Subtlety is not. Her characters are as sympathetic as real people because she surrounds them with details and problems. Plot, on the other hand, takes a definite back seat in importance. In order to move the story along or give the characters reason to perform an action or make a decision, coincidence abounds. The characters may simply sense they need to do something and follow that hunch. A nurse can simply look at a mental patient and see

that he is not really disturbed, that he is a strong person put into an unfeasible situation. McCullough's language often lacks polish and is even stilted in the style of romance novels, especially when McCullough is writing about something outside her field of experience. While this may mar the tale for a reader sensitive to such features, the author sweeps on and concentrates on her areas of expertise: character and place.

The charge of plagiarism attached to *The Ladies of Missalangi* may be a product of this lack of subtlety. McCullough asserts she set out to write a new twist on the Cinderella story. The plot of the Cinderella tale is standard romance fodder: An unhappy woman in a restrictive family situation is rescued by unlikely intervention and achieves life with Prince Charming. McCullough's work is set in a small town at the end of the nineteenth century. McCullough's primary focus is on the character and how she deals with her situation, not the situation itself.

McCullough brings a good deal of herself to her work. She grew up reading old-fashioned novels, she has said, up to forty a week, which plainly shows in her unadorned narrative style. She was surrounded in childhood by Irish Catholicism, with its emphasis on dutiful love, adherence to conventions, and inevitable punishment for deviance. These are all major themes in her work. Her family life in Australia, with a cold father, a horde of single uncles, and the lesser valuation of women in the society is represented most strongly in the semiautobiographical *The Thorn Birds*. Her family history also influences her characterization in other novels. Her medical training has provided her with fodder for many of her stories. She describes herself as a child as fat, ugly, and ambitious, as well as very smart. This view of herself may have contributed to her tendency to excel in the research of her novels and to work harder than anyone else.

## THE THORN BIRDS

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*Three generations of the women in the Australian Outback survive hardship as the family rises to power.*

*The Thorn Birds* is Colleen McCullough's second novel, and her most widely read work to date. Its publication propelled her to immediate literary stardom and ensured her status as a widely read author. It is also a showcase for the themes and literary styles that recur in her later works.

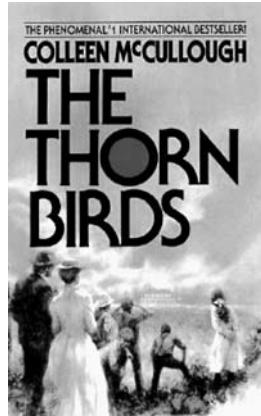
Meggie Cleary is the central figure in *The Thorn Birds*. The only daughter in a family of six sons, she is "the perfect female character, passive yet enormously strong." While she is still very young she and her family move to Drogheda, a massive plantation in the Outback owned by Meggie's aunt, Mary Carson. Natural disasters occur at every turn and are almost entirely unrelieved by human warmth, especially for a mere girl like Meggie. She is befriended, however, by a handsome and ambitious priest, Father Ralph de Bricassart.

With this beginning the course of events at Drogheda are set. Meggie grows up encompassed by Drogheda, which her aunt wills to the church rather than to the family. She feels a duty to it and to the land that is more compelling than a desire for happiness for herself. Ralph feels a duty to his own ambitions to become cardinal which are, for him, more compelling than his relationship with Meggie. Within the confines of Catholicism they both accept that love must be subordinated to his career as priest and to her responsibility to contribute to the survival of Drogheda. Characteristically for McCullough, the women of the novel have the strength to hold the social fabric together, as is their duty as women, while the men use their strength for personal advancement, either on the plantation or in ascent to a cardinalship, as is conventional for them.

Meggie's sporadic forays toward happiness invariably end in disaster. She marries a cane cutter who looks like Ralph only to find him cold. Her relationship with her daughter is never warm. A brief affair with Ralph gives her a son she loves but whom she eventually loses to the priesthood and an early



death. Like the legendary thorn bird of the title, which spends its life seeking a thorn to impale itself on so it can sing one lovely song while dying, pleasure is bought at the price of devastating pain. The characters have the duty to realize and accept this. To feel sorry for oneself would be to avoid this obligation, to defy convention. Meggie's daughter, Justine, eventually abandons Drogheda to be an actress, but even this unconventional act is validated by a man, slipping her back into the dutiful female role after all.



## AN INDECENT OBSESSION

**First published:** 1981

**Type of work:** Novel

*At the close of World War II, a nurse in charge of a ward for mildly disturbed soldiers must deal with a new arrival.*

In *An Indecent Obsession* McCullough has constructed an enclosed world, a microcosm in which a controlled population of characters interact with no relief expected from outside influences. This isolation causes emotions to run high and causes reactions to events to be more intense than they might be otherwise.

Honour Langtry is in charge of the “troppo” ward, a hospital barrack for soldiers who need a rest. It is located in part of an almost evacuated hospital camp on a remote island. She has only five patients and expects the situation to be stable over the few weeks remaining before everyone goes home. Even more than the typical McCullough heroine, she is obsessed by duty. She feels responsible to do as much as possible for her patients, although she is hampered by having no special psychological training. Her solution has been to form them into a supportive family unit with herself as the matriarch.

At this point Michael, a new patient, arrives.

Honour is immediately attracted to him, which upsets the balance in the ward as well as her own sense of her responsibilities. McCullough thus incorporates most of her standard themes—duty, family, forbidden love, and the influence of the environment upon people's lives. Although the story has a human villain, Luce, an arrogant, twisted man who enjoys torturing the others, it is the island and the ward, in which the characters' military responsibility compels them to remain trapped, that are the catalysts for the more catastrophic events of the book. McCullough describes the humidity, the mold, the insects, and their effects upon each character with a vividness which leaves little doubt as to their centrality to the story.

Honour and Michael attempt to place personal satisfaction above duty, with predictably dire results. Although they both subsequently devote themselves to selfless lives bounded purely by responsibility, their infraction marks them and they continue to pay for it. Only when Honour realizes that duty is “only another name for love” and surrenders to it without hoping for anything more, does she regain some measure of tranquillity.

This is one of McCullough's shortest novels, and it trespasses further into the language of romance than her other works. McCullough has also allowed these characters more insight into one another's thoughts and motivations than is perhaps believable. At the same time, the novel deals harshly with the characters, who are not allowed the slightest grain of personal happiness.

## THE FIRST MAN IN ROME

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Novel

*Gaius Marius rises from relative obscurity to power in ancient Rome.*

*The First Man in Rome* marked a stylistic departure for McCullough, as well as a new genre to explore. It is the first of a series of novels, something new for McCullough. Also new is that the primary characters are male. Finally, as a historical novel rather than a romance with a historical setting, it adheres to historical fact. Of necessity, a historical novelist knows the large events of a story before be-

ginning to write. The historical novelist's only literary freedom lies in details such as personality and domestic life. Such details are McCullough's chief strength.

Gaius Marius is the primary character of *The First Man in Rome*. He is an aristocrat from the far provinces, a man of wealth but little social standing in a society that values ancestry highly. Through marriage to a daughter of the Caesar family and a brilliant military career, he obtains prestige and fame, becoming in time the first man in Rome. This is the accepted title for a man whose natural attributes allow him to outshine all others.

More than in any other work, except perhaps *The Thorn Birds*, McCullough uses setting as a major character in the novel. The aristocrats of her Rome devote themselves to their country. They are expected to be politicians and military generals, and they are reared with a sense of duty to value Rome above all. The women also are bounded by well-defined and rigid rules of duty to home and family. Their adherence to these rules allows the men to concentrate on politics and war.

The novel is dense with detail. Included in the book are several maps, a glossary, a pronunciation guide for Latin names and phrases, and a list of characters. In the narrative, the buildings, streets, clothes, and attitudes are depicted with minute ac-

curacy. While this makes for slow reading, the narrative constructs a fully rounded, embracing picture of Rome that allows the reader to sense just how the state could so encompass the lives of its inhabitants. It also allows McCullough to reconstruct the ancient world for a modern reader.

As a result of the limits of historical accuracy, the characters in this book are not subjected to the same extremes of fortune that the characters in McCullough's other novels are. Disasters do occur; battles are won or lost; a lucky thought promotes a person to fame and an unlucky chance causes death. The causes, however, are inherent in the individuals, or are likely chances. Working within a story that has already been lived allows McCullough to concentrate fully on her characters and reduces the number of coincidences moving the plot along.

## SUMMARY

Colleen McCullough's works contain meticulously researched worlds that envelop the reader in detail. Her characters are ordinary people who possess a recognizable humanity. They are compelled by old-fashioned concepts of duty and adherence to convention to the exclusion of personal happiness.

Konny Thompson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Colleen McCullough resembles many famous storytellers in her reliance on coincidences. Are readers today more or less able to accept coincidences in narrative than were readers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?
- To what extent do McCullough's characters' inclinations to follow hunches mirror her own lifestyle?
- Compare McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* with its cinematic version. Allowing for the differences owing to different media, has the movie accurately reflected the novel?
- As "the first man in Rome," Gaius Marius was important in political and military life. Which aspects of his life would have led McCullough to choose him rather than a republican or imperial figure as "first man"?
- To what extent is Honour Langtry an admirable nurse? Are her failures the result of irresponsibility or an imprudent obsession with responsibility?
- Examine McCullough's concept of happiness as revealed in her fiction.

# HUGH MACDIARMID

**Born:** Langholm, Scotland

August 11, 1892

**Died:** Edinburgh, Scotland

September 9, 1978

*Scotland's greatest modern poet, MacDiarmid created a language—synthetic Scots—which revitalized a cultural and linguistic heritage.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Hugh MacDiarmid (muhk-DUR-muhd) was born Christopher Murray Grieve in the border town of Langholm, Scotland, eight miles from England, on August 11, 1892. His father was a postal worker and a strong trade unionist, while his mother supplemented her wages as a domestic servant with work in the town library, where Grieve became so familiar with the stacks that he “could find any book . . . in the dark.” Adept at the subjects he liked, indifferent to those that did not hold his interest, Grieve agreed to pursue a course in teacher training in Edinburgh in 1908 to mollify his parents, who were horrified by his declaration that he was going to be a poet.

In Scotland's capital, Grieve became involved in nationalist politics, joined the socialist Fabian Society as well as the Independent Labor Party, and became editor of the literary magazine at the Broughton Junior Student Center. Although he was a genial, often gregarious companion, Grieve also had a disputatious tendency that resulted in a lifelong pattern of quarrels with organizations that employed him. He left school after a misunderstanding involving a prank gone out of control in 1910 and found work with the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* as a reporter, a vocation he relied on during frequent periods of economic stress. He was dismissed after a clash with the editor, worked briefly for the *Monmouthshire Labor News* before being fired after challenging the editorial committee on grounds of hypocrisy, and returned to Langholm in 1912, launching a characteristically ambitious program of production typical of the periods in his life when his enormous energy enabled him

to work simultaneously on a variety of literary and political endeavors.

Living near Aberdeen, he wrote for three local newspapers, began to write lyric poetry, started a series of essays on Scottish nationalism, and experimented with mildly erotic short fiction in the mode of D. H. Lawrence, whose stories he had read in the *English Review*. Initially declining to become involved in “England's war” with Germany, he enlisted when a close friend was killed in battle. He was posted to Greece in 1916 and wrote war poetry there in the style of Rupert Brooke as well as barracks songs similar to Rudyard Kipling's. On medical leave with a recurrence of a malarial infection, he married Margaret Skinner in 1918 and then returned to Scotland in 1919 to launch a review of Scots cultural activities called *Northern Numbers*. He accepted the editorship of the prestigious *Montrose Review* in 1921, and his involvement with nationally controversial questions of Scots home rule and Scottish cultural identity led him to create the pseudonym of Hugh MacDiarmid, a vehicle for the expression of his intense nationalist convictions in poetic language. Although he had been writing in English, his decision to reverse his previous position of avoiding the Scots vernacular enabled him to begin the composition of his landmark long poem, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). He began to employ a language called synthetic Scots, which was a revivification of the tradition of greatness (exemplified in the writing of Robert Dunbar) and a modernist experiment in the mode of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

He published a book of prose sketches, entitled *Annals of the Five Senses*, under the name C. M.

Grieve in 1923. The first publication signed by MacDiarmid (actually M'Diarmid) was a collection of lyrics, *Sangschaw* (song festival) in 1925. The writer Edwin Muir described the book as a synthesis of the riches of all the Scottish dialects. At that time, MacDiarmid attacked what he considered spurious examples of a weakened, sentimental version of Scottish culture and was preparing the first drafts of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Following its appearance, he began work on his next major project, *To Circumjack Cencrastus: Or, The Curly Snake* (1930). He continued his political activities by founding the Scottish Center of PEN, campaigning as a member of the Scottish Home Rule Association, and supporting candidates who shared his nationalist opinions.

With his wife and two children, MacDiarmid moved in 1929 to London to edit *VOX*, a journal devoted to the radio arts, and then to Liverpool to write publicity for the City Council when *VOX* folded. He agreed to a divorce after his wife had an affair with a wealthy mine owner and was stunned by the decree that prohibited him from seeing his children. Valda Trevlyn, whom he met in 1930, gave him encouragement, and he plunged ahead with his usual vigor. Following the publication of *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, he produced four other books of poetry in the early 1930's, wrote constantly on Scots cultural issues, joined the British Communist Party in 1934, and married Valda that same year. MacDiarmid moved with his new wife and child to the Shetland Island of Whalsay, an isolated community of fishermen, in 1933 and worked on so many separate commissions during the next two years that he was hospitalized with an onset of nervous exhaustion. Upon recovering, he began his last really ambitious poem, the *Cornish Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn*, which was never completed in its original form but which provided the stem of many of his later published poems.

In spite of his age and previous service, MacDiarmid was called up in 1942 for industrial service. His irritation with many aspects of the social and political world was channeled into the first volume of his autobiography, *Lucky Poet* (1943), which mingled childhood recollection with opinion, literary theory, and attacks on many adversaries. By this time, he was sufficiently famous for an edition of his selected poems, *Speaking for Scotland* (1946), to be published in the United States. He also con-

tinued to lead a vigorous existence, combining pub talk, public pronouncements, political and poetic debates, and frequent contributions to newspapers, journals, and anthologies. His connoisseur's consumption of single malt Scotch whiskey—a life-long practice—had no apparent adverse effects on his health but led to occasional incidents that contributed to his growing legend as a wild man. The honors he received (a pension of £150 per year from the government in 1950; an honorary doctor of laws degree from Edinburgh University in 1957) did not diminish his instinct for controversy. He rejoined the British Communist Party in 1957, twenty-two years after his expulsion, demonstrated for nuclear disarmament, argued with Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy, and others at the Edinburgh Festival of 1962, and challenged the election of Sir Alec Douglas-Home (“a zombie, personifying the obsolescent traditions of an aristocrat”) as prime minister. During the 1960's and 1970's, his life was brightened by a reunion with his children and the publication of his poetry in continuously revised editions, as well as the opportunity to meet writers he admired. By the time of his death in 1978, at the age of eighty-six, he had become a national celebrity, whose “essential vitality” and “disarmingly courteous manner” made him a welcome companion, but one who never curtailed his knife-edge wit when confronting what he considered slights to his artistic or cultural integrity. In Scotland, his reputation at the end of the twentieth century remained as much a subject of debate as it did in the 1920's when he first emerged into national consciousness. His poetry has continued to find an audience throughout the world.

## ANALYSIS

One thing that inspired Christopher Grieve's imaginative conception of himself as Hugh MacDiarmid was the publication of James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses* in 1922. MacDiarmid had the same kind of epic ambition as Joyce. Fascinated by the scandal concerning the publication of *Ulysses*, excited by Joyce's extraordinary linguistic invention, and encouraged by the efforts of a man he saw as a fellow Celt at war with the British literary establishment, as well as his countrymen's narrowness, MacDiarmid was struck by the thought that he could use the Scots language in a similarly inventive fashion. Even when he was writing as Christo-



pher Grieve, MacDiarmid was moved by a very strong nationalist sentiment, deeply frustrated that poetry in Scotland in the early days of the twentieth century was either expected to be a replica of standard English forms or a bad imitation of Robert Burns. Grieve saw the great Scots poets of earlier times—figures such as Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, and Gavin Douglas—as a foundation for a renaissance. The Middle Scots language they used could function as a base for a creative transformation that would combine the traditional strengths of the older culture with those of highly original modernism.

Grieve's choice of the name Hugh MacDiarmid was a rejection of a dominant English culture, which he regarded as an adjunct to imperialism and an assertion of cultural value, since Hugh means divine wisdom. MacDiarmid also tried to include in his work an amalgam of sometimes contradictory philosophical positions and social strategies. Brought up as a Christian, MacDiarmid often used biblical allusions, frequently referred to God or Christ in his poetry, and saw the act of poetic composition as akin to a holy mission. On the other hand, he disdained any theological dogma, practically worshipped Fyodor Dostoevski, and asserted that he purposefully "got rid of that name" that means Christ-bearer. His intellectual idols were Friedrich Nietzsche, whose elitist doctrines supported MacDiarmid's sense of his own superior mental capability and Vladimir Lenin, whom he addressed almost as a confidant in three poems called "Hymns to Lenin." His version of Marxism, however, was so eccentric that he was expelled from the British Communist Party for incipient nationalism. He was expelled in turn from the National Party of Scotland for Communism. The Nietzschean arrogance of some of his social declarations was balanced by his egalitarian appreciation for the "rugged faces" of "auld border breeds." His portrait of his home ground, "Kinsfolk," was one of his most heartfelt works and a tribute to the legacy of the ordinary people he respected and wrote about often.

MacDiarmid put these elements into the linguistic mix he fashioned from the Scots words he studied in etymological dictionaries and from those he still heard spoken around him. The synthetic Scots language was of his own devising; even most native Scottish readers could only grasp it

with the help of a glossary. MacDiarmid used this language in poems that for all their modernist influences were still built on familiar structures like the ballad quatrain. MacDiarmid, for all of his intellectual power, sought a place in the Gaelic oral tradition. He was frustrated that the academic approach to English literature stressed the page as a source of study; he maintained that it was "the association with music and words that I was concerned with, particularly in early lyrics." His first poetry to exemplify his singular style was published in the book *Sangschaw*, which included the groundbreaking poem "The Watergaw" (an indistinct rainbow), which MacDiarmid initially presented as the work of a friend of Christopher Grieve in a column for the *Dunfermline Press* in 1922. MacDiarmid's sophisticated, intricate rhythmic linkage gave the twelve-line lyric a density consistent with the modernist contention that innovative form can be a revelation of content.

At the time that his early lyrics were published, MacDiarmid was at work on what is considered his masterpiece, one of the exemplary works of the modernist movement. *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* was conceived as a Scots equivalent of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Best understood as a poetic sequence, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* is a meditation in the form of a dramatic monologue. It represents the flow of consciousness of a man fallen drunk into a ditch on the way home from a tavern. It utilizes symbolist technique (thistle equals Scotland; intoxication equals artistic inspiration), but it rejects the limits of formal structure as dictated by current literary convention and seeks new patterns of coherence. The fact that the poem sold poorly did not prevent MacDiarmid from writing *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, an even longer, more uneven sequence in which he charts and celebrates Gaelic culture.

Along with his massive, inclusive efforts reproducing the map of his culture, MacDiarmid also often concentrated his attention in very tightly crafted lyric poems such as "On a Raised Beach," "In the Slums of Glasgow," "The Glass of Pure Water," and "Diamond Body." He demonstrates his linguistic proficiency in "Water Music," a delightful echo of Joyce's "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). "Water Music" compares the rivers near his home in Langholm to Joyce's Liffey. MacDiarmid succeeded in his ultimate goal

of drawing serious attention to Scotland's literary and cultural life. He has not, however, been given the close, appreciative scrutiny that his work warrants. The effort required to read or understand his poetry is not that great. It is not any harder than grappling with the myriad references in Pound's *Cantos* (1928-1940), and it is similarly rewarding. As MacDiarmid's contemporaries among the modernist masters continue to occupy a major position in twentieth century literature, MacDiarmid's writing remains in a curious kind of limbo, its presence inescapable, its outlines not entirely clear.

## A DRUNK MAN LOOKS AT THE THISTLE

**First published:** 1926

**Type of work:** Poem

*Through a night of reflection, a man intoxicated by the awesome possibilities of life and art confronts his personal demons and undergoes a spiritual transformation.*

In a letter to his publisher in 1926, MacDiarmid described *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* as a "long poem . . . divided into several sections having within the sections a great variety of manners and measures of verse." The various forms MacDiarmid employed were designed to demonstrate the poet's intellectual alliance with the most advanced currents of thought of his time. The basic stanza of the poem, the *abcb* of the classic Scots folk ballad, roots the poem in a cultural context that the poet wished to elevate to international significance. The drunk man who is the narrative consciousness of the poem is somewhat ironically labeled the "village drunk." He is a representative of the poet's ambitions and a Scots Everyman. His spiritual quest to become something like "A greater Christ, a greater Burns" is treated with considerable humor as the narrative action—patterned after Burns's "Tam O'Shanter"—shifts abruptly to follow the fleeting moods, emotions, and ideas of the poet's imagination. The poem is about visionary experience.

Joycean influence on the poem includes a final section in which a woman named Jean gives the poet—as Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* gives her husband Leopold—the promise of love. MacDiarmid also

incorporates elements from Dante (a man in a dark wood), from the French surrealist poet Paul Valéry, from a number of Russian writers, and especially from T. S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* is quoted in the poem and who is directly addressed. The thistle that is the object of the poet's attention is a traditional symbol for Scotland, and the poet sees it as both a "wretched weed" (a version of himself) and an emblem of Scottish strength—"The stars like thistle's roses floo'er." An important aspect of this flowering is the power MacDiarmid invests in the Scots language, the vernacular that he has taken from the past. MacDiarmid concluded that since English society was exhausted, its formal language was bereft of redemptive possibility. He could follow Pound's dictum to "make it new" only by exploring the energy latent in fallow linguistic fields.

MacDiarmid needed every resource he could find to sustain a poem that took a year to write, has 2,685 lines, and ranged from the intensely personal to the epic and cosmic. Its collage of texts, mixture of modes, and erratic symbology is held together by the force of the poet's convictions. It has a compelling mental presence that assumes a distinct personality through the masterful manipulation of a language foreign to almost all of its readers. In the poem, he declares a faith in his land, his culture, and ultimately his art, which he believes is strong enough to accomplish the most difficult and necessary of human tasks—a reconciliation with the trials of existence.

## "WATER MUSIC"

**First published:** 1932 (collected in *Scots Unbound, and Other Poems*, 1932)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet celebrates the "liquid features of the Langholm landscape," the home ground of his youth.*

This poem appears in *Scots Unbound, and Other Poems* (1932). MacDiarmid's admiration for James Joyce is apparent in much of his work and is most explicitly expressed in the poem "Water Music," which is written as a tribute to Joyce's dazzling language in the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" section of

*Finnegans Wake*. Just as Joyce evokes the river Liffey, MacDiarmid captures the spirit of the rivers near his boyhood home in Langholm by creating a rhythmic structure that duplicates the sound of the rushing waters and the surrounding landscape. Beginning with a direct address to Joyce, MacDiarmid then builds, in closely rhyming quatrains, an effect like that of water cascading over rugged ground. The rhythms are compelling, but MacDiarmid's most engaging technique in the poem is his employment of many old Scots words. Some have no direct English cognates. The impression the poem gives—either on the page or spoken—is akin to the syllabic experimentation of E. E. Cummings, in which sheer sound enchants even as meaning is elusive or unobtainable.

MacDiarmid, however, does not sacrifice meaning for an engaging aural performance. The Scots words have been chosen for both sound and sense. With the assistance of a glossary, the reader may fully appreciate MacDiarmid's evocative description of the landscape of the border country.

Appreciation of the poem and of much of MacDiarmid's best work depends on knowledge of his synthetic Scots. When described in his language, the rivers, streams, and rills begin to assume a distinct personality. "They mimp and primp, or bick and birr," MacDiarmid writes.

The poet becomes inspired or reflective in response to the scenery, until in conclusion he asserts, "And weel I ken the air's wild rush," proclaiming his knowledge of the forces of the natural world and stressing his recognition of its importance. This is a poem of origins, in which the Scots land itself is offered as a source of strength and vitality, and the language that MacDiarmid uses has also been closely examined for an insight into the primal energy of words themselves. MacDiarmid's deep love for Scotland and his love of language are in close harmony in "Water Music."



## "ON A RAISED BEACH"

**First published:** 1934 (collected in *Stony Limits, and Other Poems*, 1934)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet meditates on the harsh but strangely appealing landscape of the outer Shetland island of Whalsay.*

This poem appears in *Stony Limits, and Other Poems* (1934). To convey the treeless, windswept, almost uninhabited world of the Shetland Islands where he lived during the mid-1930's, MacDiarmid attempted to craft another dialect, using technical vocabulary. Employing modern scientific terminology, MacDiarmid begins "On a Raised Beach" with a catalog of geologic terms:

All is lithogenesis—or lochia,  
Carpelite fruit of the forbidden tree,  
Stones blacker than any in the Caaba,  
Cream-coloured caen-stone, chatoyant pieces,  
Celadon and corbeau, bistre and beige,  
Glaucous, hoar, enfouledered, cyathiform,  
Making mere faculae of the sun and moon . . .

The geological allusions are mingled with references to religious phenomena (the Caaba is a shrine holding a sacred black stone). The poet joins his feelings of isolation with an exceptionally close scrutiny of the terrain in order to avoid spiritual desolation. MacDiarmid felt he was in a kind of exile, but he thought if he could enliven the bare and forbidding terrain with a creative appreciation of its beauty, then he could thereby demonstrate the redemptive power of art.

After establishing the setting, MacDiarmid turns toward an extended philosophical consideration of the stones on the beach. In long lines and measured cadences, MacDiarmid develops a mood of meditative reflection, raising some of the most fundamental questions of human existence. While insisting on the literal qualities of the stones, the poem aims toward transcendence. The stones stand for permanence ("There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones"); MacDiarmid recognizes that a refocusing of attention is required to establish a connection with higher realms. Acknowledging his somewhat in-

temperate nature—"Hot blood is of no use in dealing with eternity"—MacDiarmid creates a serious context for inquiry, his long lines echoing biblical verse.

The poem is more than four hundred lines in length, and while MacDiarmid was accustomed to working in long forms, he knew that the intense mood he was developing could not be sustained until the conclusion. Consequently, he balances philosophical propositions with images of landscape. The language of science helps him reach an "abode of supreme serenity" in which the largest questions, if not answered, have at least been posed.

## SUMMARY

Hugh MacDiarmid's combination of Scots nationalism, Marxism, modernism, and Christian mysticism has long fascinated and confounded his readers. His extraordinary capabilities with language have earned him admirers and made his work much less accessible than that of other writers of similar ability. Writing long poems in synthetic Scots, which resembles but does not correspond precisely to standard English, MacDiarmid succeeded in his ambition to be a national poet of international importance. He would not have been displeased with the controversies that continue about his life and art.

*Leon Lewis*

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MISCELLANEOUS:

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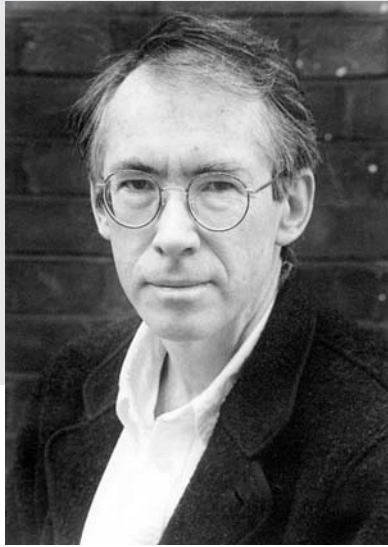
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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What personal qualities and intellectual proclivities have most likely undermined Hugh MacDiarmid's attempt at fostering a Scottish literary Renaissance?
- Given MacDiarmid's conviction that bad imitations of Robert Burns ruined Scottish poetry, was he wise to write as many dialect poems as he did?
- Analyze the comic elements in MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*.
- Examine the range of symbolic potentialities in MacDiarmid's thistle.
- Characterize the Scottish environment as MacDiarmid presents it in "Water Music."
- Which is the greater challenge to the reader: MacDiarmid's reconstructed Scottish dialect in his earlier poems or the weight of knowledge he brought to his later English poems?





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## IAN MCEWAN

**Born:** Aldershot, England  
June 21, 1948

*With his novels and short stories, McEwan has established himself as a leading British author who has moved away from the writing which earned him the nickname of “Mr. Macabre” to fiction of penetrating insight and compassion for human limitations.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ian McEwan (muhk-YEW-uhn) was born on June 21, 1948, in Aldershot, England, where his mother, Rose Moore, a widow with two children, married his father, David McEwan, a Scotsman who had joined the British army in the 1930's and rose to the rank of sergeant major, a social move upward as well as a military promotion. McEwan attended a government-supported boys' boarding school and completed a degree in English and French at the University of Sussex before beginning an M.A. degree in English at the University of East Anglia. He was the student of the English novelist Malcolm Bradbury, whose specialty was American writers. McEwan has said that Bradbury's encouragement to read the works of novelists such as Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and Vladimir Nabokov had a large impact on his own early writing, including some of the stories that appeared in his two collections, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978). In 1978, McEwan published his first novel, *The Cement Garden*.

In the 1980's, McEwan also became interested in writing plays for the stage, television, and screen. His dramatic works include *The Imitation Game: Three Plays for Television* (1981); *Or Shall We Die?* (pr., pb. 1983), an oratorio with music by Michael Berkeley (1983); a screenplay, *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983); and another screenplay, *The Innocent*

(1995), a film adaptation of his 1990 novel. His novel writing continued with the bizarre narrative *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), in which a couple befriend another couple in a city like Venice, Italy, and one husband murders the other. Another novel, *The Child in Time* (1987), is a transition to his later writing: There is a bizarre event, but it occurs two years before the story begins and the focus is on the psychological devastation that it produces.

McEwan's fiction has been respectfully received by book reviewers, despite their occasional disapproval of his subject matter or approach. His collection *First Love, Last Rites* won the Somerset Maugham Award for a notable first book, and he received the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award in 1987 for *The Child in Time*. Among his other honors were being named a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1984 and receiving an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the University of Sussex, in 1989. His novels, beginning with *The Comfort of Strangers*, have often appeared on the short list of nominees for the Man Booker Prize, which he received for *Amsterdam* (1998). His novels *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Innocent*, *Enduring Love* (1997), and *Atonement* (2002) have been adapted for film.

McEwan married Penny Allen in 1982; after fifteen years and two sons, the marriage ended in divorce. In 1997, he married Annalena McAfee.

### ANALYSIS

Much of McEwan's early career was shaped by the stories he wrote while a student of the British novelist Malcolm Bradbury. McEwan's interest in

the grotesque and perverse encouraged reviewers and critics to dub him “Mr. Macabre.” In “Solid Geometry,” for example, a man keeps a pickled penis in a jar on his desk, and in “Homemade,” an adolescent loses his virginity with his ten-year-old sister. The publisher Secker and Warburg encouraged him to expand “Homemade” into a novel, and there are similarities between the story and McEwan’s first novel, *The Cement Garden*, a macabre tale of children who bury their widowed mother’s corpse in the cellar. In his later work, McEwan’s attraction to the macabre gave way to a deeper psychological exploration of his characters, yet some of the earlier interest in the bizarre persists. In *Amsterdam*, for example, the two main characters murder each other in the name of euthanasia.

The critical consensus is that *The Child in Time* was McEwan’s breakthrough novel. Because the setting is a few years into the future, it might be classified as dystopian fiction. The abduction of his three-year-old daughter has turned Stephen Lewis, a writer of children’s books, into a zombie. Stephen serves on a subcommittee of an ultraconservative government bent on imposing its notion of child care. It is a meaningless position, obtained through his friend Charles Darke, who wrote the subcommittee’s report before it met. Darke is regressing to the age of ten with the approval of his physicist wife, Thelma. As a result of a reconciliation, Stephen’s wife, Julie, becomes pregnant and he delivers the baby, compounding the themes of innocence and time.

*The Innocent*, set in the Cold War Germany of 1955, has elements of the thriller and the macabre, such as the cutting up of a corpse by an engineer who is in Berlin doing American and British intelligence work. *Black Dogs* (1992) is told by Jeremy, a politically motivated man, who became estranged from his wife after she underwent a religious conversion, associated with black dogs. Both novels mark McEwan’s increasing interest in history.

*Enduring Love* is typical of a narrative structure to which McEwan has been increasingly attracted: the story of how lives are altered by a single event. In *Enduring Love*, the narrative is set in motion when Joe, a science writer, is about to propose marriage to Clarissa on a picnic; impulsively, he joins several men attempting to hold down a hot air balloon with a boy in its basket that the wind is blowing away. Joe and the others struggle in vain to hold the

basket down, and one by one let go, except for a physician, who holds on too long and falls to his death. Jed, one of the failed rescuers, begins a long and futile campaign to persuade Joe that he is in love with Jed, a campaign that almost destroys Joe’s relationship with Clarissa and leads Joe to shoot Jed after Jed attacks Clarissa with a knife. The novel’s action is bizarre but engrossing in its psychological implications, and it excels in demonstrating how a brief event can have a huge impact on one’s future.

McEwan’s readers noted an increasing philosophical and psychological depth in the novels written after *Enduring Love*. He is preoccupied with innocence in a violent world, especially the recognition that the innocent have no special protection from destruction. These novels, such as *Atonement*, reveal how dangerous the innocent can be. McEwan has also become preoccupied with time, both as a theme and as an element in narrative technique. The latter is apparent in the severely restricted time spans of his novels. Each section of *Atonement*, for example, takes place in fewer than twelve hours, as does the main section of *On Chesil Beach* (2007); *Saturday* (2005) takes place on one day, Saturday, February 15, 2003. Such time compression enhances dramatic intensity but also focuses on the “moment,” often a brief experience that changes a character’s life.

## AMSTERDAM

**First published:** 1998

**Type of work:** Novel

*After composer Clive Linley and newspaper editor Vernon Halliday agree to perform euthanasia if a fatal disease makes it impossible for either to ease his own passing, the two have a falling out and end up killing each other.*

Despite mixed reviews—*The Washington Post* thought it a “minor work,” while the *Christian Science Monitor* called it “a deadly little masterpiece”—*Amsterdam* won the prestigious 1998 Man Booker Prize for the best British Commonwealth or Irish novel of 1998.

At the funeral of their former lover, Molly Lane, Clive Linley, a composer, and Vernon Halliday, a

London newspaper editor, are so frightened by the horror of suffering a slow death from a fatal disease with no one to assist their suicide that they agree to be each other's Dr. Death, if needed. Aware of Molly's infidelity with Vernon (and Clive), her husband, George, offers Vernon photographs of Adrian Garmony, an ultraconservative foreign secretary with ambitions of becoming prime minister. George assumes Molly took photographs of Garmony in women's clothes and expects Vernon to embarrass Garmony by printing the photographs to boost circulation. If there is a backlash against Vernon for exposing Garmony, George will be avenged on both.

Struggling to complete a "Millennial Symphony" he expects to cap his career, as the *Ninth Symphony* capped Ludwig von Beethoven's, Clive goes to the Lake District. There, he encounters a couple having what he initially thinks is a rural assignation but eventually recognizes as an attempted rape. When he refuses to intervene because he is about to grasp the musical theme to complete his great symphony, guilt causes Clive to lose it anyway, even though he deludes himself into believing that he has grasped it. Later, his symphony is panned as an embarrassing imitation of Beethoven's *Ninth*.

After the photographs of Garmony are published, Garmony's wife lies to the press about her husband's cross-dressing, claiming that she knew about it and loved him enough to let him enjoy himself. She attacks Vernon for having the "mentality of a blackmailer and the moral stature of a flea." As Clive is embarrassed that his last symphony is panned, Vernon is ridiculed for his smear campaign. To make matters worse, Clive sends Vernon a postcard applauding Mrs. Garmony's attack, and Vernon returns the favor by reporting Clive as a material witness in the Lake District rape.

After the former friends arrange each other's "mercy killing" in Amsterdam, the narrative returns to a conversation between Molly's husband, George, and Garmony, who bears George no ill will, since he has become an object of public sympathy. George reveals himself as the master plotter behind the publication of the cross-dressing photographs, complimenting Garmony on surviving a scandal that would have forced lesser men to hang themselves. Internally, George compliments himself; he missed Garmony, but paid back Vernon,

and Clive, whom he appears not to have targeted. The perverted comedy of "getting even" and "getting away with murder" may take an even sicker turn if George kept Molly alive, not because he could not let her go but because her wanted to make her pay for her infidelity.

## ATONEMENT

**First published:** 2002

**Type of work:** Novel

*On the day Robbie Turner falls in love with Cecilia Tallis, he is falsely accused of rape and sent to prison, where his sentence is commuted after he volunteers to fight in World War II.*

For many, *Atonement* is McEwan's best novel. The reviews were positive, with some grumbling about the ending. *Atonement* contains three parts—the first set in 1935, the second two in 1940—followed by an epilogue occurring in 1999.

Part 1 opens in the country home of the Tallis family. It includes the "Old Man," as his children call their father, absent in London, perhaps preparing for war or evading the wife with headaches; his son, Leon, twenty-three; daughter Cecilia, twenty-two; and daughter Briony, thirteen. The family almost includes the cleaning lady's son, Robbie Turner, because the "Old Man" virtually adopted him after Robbie's father ran off when Robbie was six. Mr. Tallis paid Robbie's way at Cambridge and may send him to medical school. Like Cecilia, Robbie is an English major, and he finished his degree with a "first," or "A," compared to her "third." The Tallises are presently hosting Mrs. Tallis's niece, Lola, fifteen, and twin nephews, whose mother ran away with another man. Leon has invited his friend, Paul Marshall, heir to a chocolate factory, to visit. When Cecilia strips to her underwear to retrieve the missing piece of a Meissen vase from the garden fountain, Robbie suddenly falls in love with her.

In the letter he writes to declare his love, Robbie makes a disastrous Freudian slip by referring to Cecilia's genitalia with a word he had just read in D. H. Lawrence's notorious novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). To compound his tragic error, he enlists Briony as the letter carrier; she reads the letter and

later witnesses Cecilia and Robbie in the library, making love so passionately that she misinterprets it as rape. Searching for the missing twins that night, Briony encounters Lola and a rapist, whom she misidentifies as the insatiable Robbie. Robbie is tried and condemned to a long prison sentence.

Part 2 jolts the narrative forward to World War II, when Robbie, now a soldier, is part of the British retreat to Dunkirk. Amid incredibly realistic war-time reportage—remarkable because, like Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), McEwan never was a soldier—the narrative focuses solely on Robbie’s consciousness and his memories of Cecilia. These memories keep him alive, especially those of love-making in the library, interrupted by Briony’s intrusion. The scene of passionate sexual initiation has been praised by the American novelist John Updike and the English critic Terry Eagleton as the most beautifully erotic scene since Lawrence.

In part 3, Cecilia works as a nurse in London, living with a recuperating Robbie. Briony is also a nurse in London, and she is now willing to testify that Robbie was not a rapist. After Briony visits Cecilia and Robbie, she attends the wedding of Cousin Lola and Paul Marshall, where it is revealed that Marshall was the man who raped Lola. Most readers are unprepared for the next jolt, as part 3 ends with the words, “BT, London, 1999.”

The “BT” is Briony Tallis, a successful novelist, who is seventy-seven years old in 1999. She, not some unidentified third-person narrator, has been telling this story.

The epilogue takes place in a few hours as Briony prepares for a birthday party at Tallis House, now a hotel, where the dinner guests are to assemble in the library. After Briony introduces several unimportant relatives, she reveals the novel’s major epiphany: The ending to “her” novel in part 3 was pure fiction. Robbie actually died of blood poisoning in Dunkirk, and Cecilia died in a London bombing three months after Lola and

Paul Marshall’s wedding. After many drafts of the novel, this is the version she will publish once the Marshalls have died, the only version with a happy ending, which she thinks is the best form of atonement for her false accusation that Robbie was the rapist. Soon, all the “real” people will be dead, but Robbie and Cecilia will live out the ages in Briony’s novel, reunited in the end.

## SATURDAY

**First published:** 2005

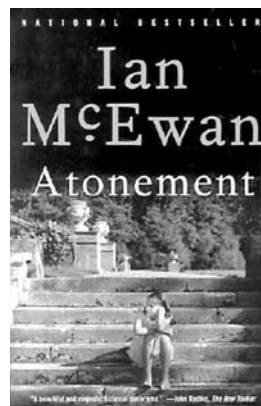
**Type of work:** Novel

*After neurosurgeon Henry Perowne collides into Baxter’s car, Baxter, seeking revenge, breaks into Perowne’s home, threatening the family with violence.*

*Saturday* takes place on a single day—Saturday, February 15, 2003. Before dawn, Henry Perowne, a prominent neurosurgeon, watches a plane crashing toward London, possibly a terrorist attack. The plane foreshadows how Perowne’s day of playing squash with a colleague, shopping for a family dinner, and visiting his widowed mother will be interrupted by an automobile collision with Baxter, who is driving with two other young thugs. Perowne escapes being beaten to death by quickly diagnosing Baxter as having Huntington’s disease and offering help.

Later, Baxter and his buddy, Nigel, invade the Perowne home, where the family has gathered to celebrate the publication of daughter Daisy’s first volume of poems and to reconcile Daisy with her maternal grandfather, also a poet. Baxter forces Daisy to strip naked and read one of her poems, while he holds a knife at her attorney mother’s throat. When Daisy complies, the plot offers an epiphany by revealing that Daisy is pregnant. The stakes are now raised because violence to her body could precipitate a miscarriage and the destruction of a genuinely innocent life. Instead of desecrating one of her own poems, Daisy recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” Luckily, Baxter is even less familiar with poetry than Daisy’s father and seems moved by the sentimental, Victorian poem.

Baxter makes good on threats of violence by





breaking the jaw of Daisy's grandfather. Sensing the need to do something, Perowne lures Baxter upstairs to his study, where he tells him he has information about Baxter's medical condition. After Perowne and his son's effort to subdue Baxter leads to the invader's tumbling down the stairs and Nigel flees, Perowne reveals himself as a dedicated professional by performing emergency surgery on Baxter before this Saturday ends. The semblance of domestic tranquillity is restored. However, like other families who have experienced burglaries or other home invasions, the Perownes are unlikely to recover their earlier sense that their space is inviolable.

## ON CHESIL BEACH

**First published:** 2007

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the summer of 1962, Edward Mayhew and Florence Ponting spend their disastrous wedding night in a seaside hotel and separate the next morning, never to see each other again.*

Chesil Beach, where Edward and Florence spend the first (and last) night of their marriage, is on the English Channel. The beach is distinctive for its "shingle," or pebbles washed up along its eighteen miles, graded by the sea with larger ones to the east. Locals claim they can identify where a pebble was found by its size.

When the novel appeared, McEwan indicated he had a few Chesil pebbles on his mantle and immediately gained notoriety as a "pebble snatcher" in the London tabloids, facing a \$4,000 fine. American filmmakers in England to produce a short promotional film for the novel generously offered to film the safe return of the pebbles. The media attention did nothing to hurt the fame of the novel, soon becoming the bookmakers' favorite to win the Man Booker Prize for 2007. (The prize, however, was awarded to *The Gathering* by Anne Enright.)

*On Chesil Beach* begins with the lines, "They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. But it is never easy." Readers unaware of

McEwan's other fiction might well expect a brief and racy read, harking back to D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the present time of *On Chesil Beach* is 1962, three years after the unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was judged legal to sell in the United States and two years after the United Kingdom followed suit. "Annus Mirabilis," a poem by the English poet Philip Larkin, has been much quoted by reviewers because the "remarkable year" he celebrates is 1963, the beginning of the Sexual Revolution. The poem opens: "Sexual intercourse began/ In nineteen sixty-three . . . / Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/ And the Beatles' first LP."

The novel's present comprises no more than twelve hours in which Edward and Florence eat a heavy, unappealing dinner; attempt unsuccessfully to consummate their marriage; argue on the beach, where he follows her after the failed attempt at sexual intercourse; and then separate. Interspersed with passages of the present, in which the narrator switches back and forth from the consciousness of first one and then the other newlywed, are flashbacks to the past year, in which the couple met, fell in love, and married. Both are bright, well-educated young people with promising futures. Florence is a gifted violinist who aspires to lead her string quartet into fame and fortune. Edward completed his studies with a "first," or "A," in history and aspires to write short biographies of semifamous people. They are very much in love.

Still, there are intimations that their marriage is a misalliance, especially in the United Kingdom, where social class is important. Florence's family is upper middle class: her father is a prosperous businessman, her mother, a professor of philosophy at Oxford. Edward's father is a beleaguered elementary school principal, who must manage the household because a freak accident has left his wife brain-damaged.

The misalliance is not only social but sexual. At twenty-three, Edward is a virgin because he has found "easy" girls unappealing. Like Florence, he has grown up in a culture of sexual repression, in large part because of the unavailability of reliable means of contraception and the stigma of unwanted pregnancies or hasty marriages. In 1962, the birth control pill is still only a rumor. For Edward and Florence, sex is simply not a topic for discussion. Edward anticipates marriage as the venue



for licit sexual intimacy and waits impatiently for his “due” as an attentive but not aggressive suitor. He practices “self-pleasuring” daily, but its gratification is laced with guilt and the sense of having to resort to a poor substitute for intimacy. Because he is a virgin, he has anxiety about his performance when it is finally legitimized, and he prepares for the wedding night by abstaining from solitary pleasures for a week.

Florence has refused to confront her repugnance toward physicality. Her sole source of information is a marriage manual, which only makes matters worse with terms like “glans” and “penetrate,” the latter suggesting she is like a drawing room that Edward will “enter.” Even the presence of Edward’s tongue in her mouth can threaten nausea. Several reviewers have directed attention to a brief memory of Florence: As a girl of twelve or thirteen, she shares the cabin on a ship crossing the Channel with her father. There is no evidence of unfatherly attention, merely the sounds of his removing his clothes for bed, but the smell of the sea from the honeymoon site on the Channel may recall the incident.

Much as the disaster of intimacy is difficult to represent without veering into off-color humor, the novel leads readers through the painful episode with admirable restraint. Florence steels herself to “perform,” but she has only to touch Edward’s genitals for him to ejaculate over much of her body. His embarrassment is followed by her disgusted and frantic efforts to wipe away what he had been scrupulously saving for her before she runs out onto the beach. The narrator offers an admirably evenhanded representation of the newlyweds, making it possible for both female and male readers to understand the characters and to feel the pain of two people who love each other. Love seems insufficient, however, to overcome their inexperience. Anger and recrimination replace the understanding of a more experienced couple, who might laugh at the mess they have gotten themselves into and

agree to give themselves a second chance the next morning.

The shortness of the novel—even the author refers to it as a “novella”—and the limited space of the honeymoon suite make for an intensity and claustrophobia readers may long to escape. Even more, readers are likely to read faster in the hope that Florence will return after she leaves Edward, or that Edward will run after her to save their relationship. Florence herself offers the astounding proposal of an “open marriage,” a decade before the term became current; Edward can love her as his wife and have sexual relations with other women. In his inexperience, however, Edward is insulted by this immodest proposal, and the future of their marriage evaporates.

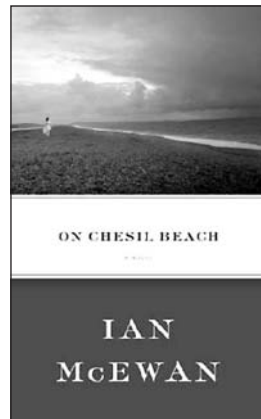
In the few pages remaining, the novel goes from low gear to overdrive with an epilogue moving the characters into the twenty-first century. Florence achieves artistic success but never marries again because she still loves Edward, while he “drops out” and moves from one relationship to another, accomplishing little.

*On Chesil Beach* may be painful, even for readers in the new millennium, in which many believe that they are light years away from poor Florence and Edward. McEwan confronts the downside of the privacy most people require for sexual intimacy, which is the isolation and ignorance of the success and failure of others’ lovemaking. It has been suggested that the aged Edward may be writing this novel to explore a moment of personal failure that stunted his fulfillment. The notion may not be so far-fetched, given the ending of *Atonement*.

## SUMMARY

The novels Ian McEwan has published since 1997 demonstrate his increasing mastery of narrative technique and his ongoing interest in themes of time, innocence, love, and “the moment” in which someone’s future may be determined. Love, especially its sexual expressions, is central to his outlook and represented as extremely fragile, whether in the disastrous wedding night of Florence and Edward or the separation of Robbie and Cecilia. Love becomes central for McEwan because he understands lovers’ physical and psychological vulnerability, which requires that they have compassion for and protect each other.

Earl G. Ingersoll



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*The Comfort of Strangers*, 1981  
*The Child in Time*, 1987  
*The Innocent*, 1990  
*Black Dogs*, 1992  
*Enduring Love*, 1997  
*Amsterdam*, 1998  
*Atonement*, 2002  
*Saturday*, 2005  
*On Chesil Beach*, 2007

#### SHORT FICTION:

*First Love, Last Rites*, 1975  
*In Between the Sheets*, 1978

#### DRAMA:

*Or Shall We Die?*, pr., pb. 1983 (oratorio; music by Michael Berkeley)

#### SCREENPLAYS:

*The Ploughman's Lunch*, 1983  
*Soursweet*, 1989 (adaptation of Timothy Mo's novel *Sour Sweet*)  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How is time both a technical and thematic concern in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*?
- How do *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam*, and *Saturday* demonstrate that the "moment" can have long-range consequences?
- What are *Atonement* and *Saturday* saying about the irruption of violence into our lives?
- In what ways are *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach* exploring the implications of innocence?
- How are *Atonement*, *Saturday*, and *On Chesil Beach* dependent upon historical contexts?
- What is the role of sexuality in *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, and *On Chesil Beach*?

# JOAQUIM MARIA MACHADO DE ASSIS

**Born:** Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

June 21, 1839

**Died:** Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

September 29, 1908

*Through numerous genres, especially novels and short stories, Machado de Assis developed an exceptional style and technique that offered precise, penetrating, psychological analysis of the ambiguous motives and ironic consequences of the human pursuits of love, desire, and material satisfactions.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (muh-SHAH-dew dee ah-SEES) was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 21, 1839. Growing up in very limited circumstances, he nonetheless became his country's greatest writer. His father, Francisco José de Assis, was a mulatto who made a living painting houses and doing odd jobs; his mother, Maria Leopoldina Machado de Assis, was of Portuguese descent. They lived in a *favela* (slum), and his mother died while he was still a boy. His father remarried, and his stepmother made sure that "Machadinho" (little Machado) went to elementary school, the only formal education he had. The boy had a fragile build, stuttered, and was subject to epileptic fits. Nonetheless, he was resolute in pursuit of knowledge and culture. He learned French from the kindly owner of a bakery. He had access to a library run by a Portuguese cultural organization and read voraciously in literature and philosophy.

In his late teens he obtained his first salaried employment as a typographical assistant in the national government printing office. A noted novelist of the time recognized his precocious talent and befriended him. The aspiring young writer entered into a literary circle that met in a bookstore, which was also a publishing house. Some of the most prominent writers of the time regularly gathered there. In his late teens, Machado de Assis was already writing plays, fiction, literary criticism, and newspaper articles and translating works of French into Portuguese. Enamored of the theater, he obtained a position as a government censor of plays, allowing him open access to all drama productions.

Rising in the bureaucracy, he was appointed assistant editor of the *Diário Oficial*, the government legislative gazette. In 1869, he married a white, Portuguese woman, Carolina de Novaes. Her family opposed this interracial marriage; nonetheless, their relationship, which he considered the greatest enrichment of his life, lasted until her death in 1904.

As Machado de Assis rose in the civil service of the ministerial bureaucracy, his income and free time became more secure. Machado de Assis witnessed and participated in some of the most gripping events of Brazilian history: the war with Paraguay from 1864 to 1870, the abolition of slavery in 1888, the overthrow of the Empire of Brazil in 1889, and the subsequent establishment of the Brazilian republic. Both the imperial and republican governments honored him for his public service and cultural distinction. In 1897, he was one of the principal founders of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, modeled on the French academy, and was elected, for life, as its first president. The headquarters of the academy are named after him, the Casa de Machado de Assis (Machado de Assis house).

Chronic health problems and a heavy workload forced him to rest in a mountain retreat from late 1878 to early 1879. This interlude proved quite transforming, not only for his health but also for his literary development. The period after 1880 is considered the late or mature phase of Machado de Assis, marking a notable development in his mastery of the novel and short story, transforming him into Brazil's greatest writer and one of the

most notable in world literature. His most noted fiction now appeared, such as the short story "Missa do galo" (1894; "Midnight Mass," 1963) and the novel *Dom Casmurro* (1899; English translation, 1953), stunning for their concise perception and sophistication.

The culminating crisis of his life occurred in 1904, when his wife, Carolina, died. The tenderness of his affection for her was expressed in a sonnet published two years later and reprinted in the dedicatory of his last novel in 1908. That novel, *Memorial de Ayres* (1908; *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*, 1972), seems a summary autobiography. Its theme deals with how one acquires literary craftsmanship and achieves a loving, selfless life. Shortly after it appeared, Machado died, aged sixty-nine, from complications of intestinal infections and mouth cancer.

#### ANALYSIS

Machado de Assis was a skilled and prolific writer in various genres: the novel, short story, poetry, the essay, and literary criticism. His productive career lasted for nearly half a century, in which he published not only numerous books but also voluminous material for newspapers and magazines. Due to his precarious health, he traveled little beyond his native city, Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the Empire of Brazil until 1889 and of the Brazilian republic after that date. The universe he so penetratingly and wryly perceived, therefore, was essentially that of a tropical, metropolitan port city during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. His work reflected the emerging world of a Brazilian urban bourgeois. His perspective advanced from Romantic to realistic, yet it always held a measure of exceptional incisiveness through its ironic humor and penetrating assessment of human foibles.

His novels are divided into two phases, an earlier Romantic one and a later realistic one. His first novel, *Resurreição* (1872; resurrection), recounts the love affair of a wealthy, young man, fractured by jealousy, for a beautiful widow. For the rest of the decade, Machado produced works with a similar theme: the contradictions and dilemmas of love affairs among bourgeois youth. After a prolonged illness at the end of the decade, the Romantic writer elaborated his tendency to write in a more psychologically realistic style. Still writing of romance, he

focused on the causes, character, and evolution of an individual's emotions. The first novel in this new vein appeared in 1881, *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, 1951; better known as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, 1952), in which a man of little distinction offers a benighted accounting of his life. The work demonstrates Machado's growing skills in narrative dynamic and penetrating character analysis. There followed *Quincas Borba* in 1891 (*Philosopher or Dog?*, 1954; also as *The Heritage of Quincas Borba*, 1954) and *Dom Casmurro* in 1899 (English translation, 1953). Returning to the theme of jealousy, as in *Resurreição* of twenty years earlier, this time Machado analyzes the sentiment in terms of how validly a character assesses such a sentiment and how conclusively a reader can trust the evidence of such a character. All the works are replete with themes of irony, self-absorption, dissembling, and callousness. A repeated lesson is that self-love and shallow self-absorption defeat the needs for intimacy, accomplishment, self-knowledge, and even sanity.

Machado de Assis wrote numerous short stories, most of which have not been translated into English. Many of the best, however, have been. They are notable for their subdued insight and penetrating irony, usually revealed not so much by the action of the characters but by their dialogue and interior thoughts. One of the most famous is "Midnight Mass." A provincial adolescent has arrived from the country, living in the family home of an attractive older, married woman. He is waiting on Christmas eve in the parlor with her before going with a friend to midnight mass. The peaceful, settled domestic atmosphere contrasts with a tense, repressed sensuality the boy feels and which, enigmatically, may be reciprocated by the woman. Parlor gentility trembles on a chasm of frustrated intimacy. "*O alienista*" ("The Psychiatrist") exposes a medical scientist's confident perverseness in trying to determine who is or is not sane. "*O enfermeiro*" ("The Companion") demonstrates how a supposedly conscientious care giver rids himself of an inconvenient elderly invalid. Machado disabuses readers of any benign illusions regarding human character.

Although devoted to the theater, Machado was productive but often not effective as a playwright. As a poet he also was not as distinguished. Among his most moving and sensitive poems is a sonnet, "A

*Carolina*” (“To Carolina”), that he wrote to his wife after her death. A nonfiction genre in which he excelled was the *crônica* (chronicle), a Brazilian literary format that consisted of short essays appearing in newspapers or magazines. They reflected and commented on routine daily activities or the passing events of the time. It is through them that much of his sociopolitical views are known. The concise format ideally suited his incisive, subdued observation.

As an author and civil servant, Machado de Assis was a man of great probity and dedication. Although he admitted that he was a pessimist, nonetheless his work proved he was not a nihilist or negativist. Despite the gripping way in which he portrayed human selfishness and ignorance, he believed that people could save themselves from their failures through a literature imbued with penetrating and vivid insight. Indeed, his own definition of pessimism was that it was idealism, since pessimists expressed dismay at human actions and thereby expected more from human effort.

Writing in Portuguese, the obscure language of a distant underdeveloped country, and rising in life despite grave socioeconomic and personal disadvantages, Machado de Assis has come increasingly to be recognized for his singular role in the forefront of the literary craft. He has entered the pantheon of world-renowned authors. Like Gustave Flaubert, he possessed an acutely refined diction; like Guy de Maupassant, a commanding sense of setting and atmosphere; like Henry James, a nuanced, and possibly suppler, analysis of human character; and like James Joyce, an innovative prose technique and integrated composite of style and content that solidified thematic impact. Unlike Joyce, however, he was never obscure. Uniquely, he was a master of enigma, ambiguity, and irony.

## EPITAPH OF A SMALL WINNER

**First published:** *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, 1881 (English translation, 1952; also translated as *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, 1951)

**Type of work:** Novel

*From the grave, a narrator candidly recounts the events of his life, yet reveals to the reader that in reality he does not understand what has motivated his character or weighed the balance of his life.*

*Epitaph of a Small Winner* was the first novel in the later, more mature phase of the work of Machado de Assis. A bleak irony envelops the work. Characteristic of this sentiment, Brás Cubas dedicates these posthumous memoirs to the first worm that has gnawed into his casket. Through first-person narrative, Brás attempts to evaluate his life. Initially he recalls a money-making scheme in which he was absorbed toward the end of his life, inventing a device to protect against depression. He then recalls his final illness and visits from a woman, Virgília, with whom he had a shallow, self-absorbed, adulterous affair.

The narrator proceeds to recall the most significant events of his life from his birth in 1805 to his death in 1869. He reveals a selfish, shallow, hypocritical person. Able to expose his defects, he ignores analyzing how his character was formed. The reader acquires an increasingly interactive role with Brás Cubas, both as a witness to the candid boldness of his testimony and as a judge or evaluator of his ultimately naive and self-serving assessment. Although he speaks candidly, such frankness does not mean he has done so critically; he may know his character, but what insight of it does he have?

Spoiled by his father, Brás Cubas develops as a mean and mischievous child. One of his self-satisfied uncles introduces him to his first lover, Marcela. Though he is in love with her, she is interested only in the financial advantages of their relationship. To end the affair, his father sends him to study in Portugal. Wasting his years there, Brás returns to Brazil on the death of his mother, an event he recounts with no emotion. For reasons of political advantage and family distinction, his father



wants him now to marry Virgília. Brás is attracted, however, to another woman and rejects the match. Virgília thereafter marries another but then has an affair with Brás, reflecting the corrosive self-love that absorbs everyone's action. His father dies, an event that once again the son relates with no emotion.

A woman with whom Brás wants to marry and raise a family dies. He establishes an ineffectual political career but never reaches his goal of becoming a cabinet minister. He never completes his antidepressant invention. Nevertheless, he concludes that his life has been that of a "small winner": He has not passed on the problems of human life to any offspring. The reader, as involved now in the work as the narrator and author, concludes quite the opposite: What Brás Cubas considers the insight and small victory of his life, neither loving nor having offspring, is actually its defeat.

## PHILOSOPHER OR DOG?

**First published:** *Quincas Borba*, 1891  
(English translation, 1954; also  
translated as *The Heritage of Quincas  
Borba*, 1954)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A decent man inherits a fortune, along with a  
materialist philosophy, and these isolate him from  
his roots, corrode his life, and leave him insane.*

The questions readers ponder as *Philosopher or Dog?* unfolds concern the nature of winning and losing, the value of what is won in relation to how victory has been achieved, and the efforts of human ambition as either idealism or madness. Rubião is a modest, former schoolteacher from the provincial interior of Brazil who unexpectedly becomes heir to the wealth of Quincas Borba, an unbalanced philosopher who preaches the value of egotism and survival of the fittest. Along with the fortune, Rubião acquires responsibility for the dog of the deceased, also named Quincas Borba.

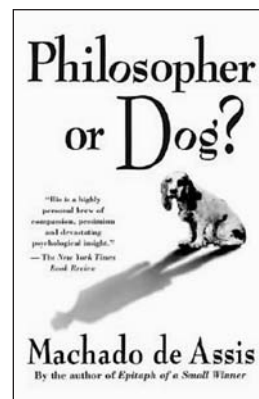
A third-person narrator balances Rubião's recounting of the characters' actions and dialogue, so a reader can evaluate appearance versus reality and intentions against actions. Rubião decides he no longer wishes to reside in his provincial home-

town, going to live in Rio de Janeiro, seat of the imperial court. On his journey there, he meets Palha, a colleague who is indebted to him, and his alluring wife, Sofia. As Palha hears of the fortune Rubião has inherited, he and his wife resolve to capitalize on it to their benefit. Enamored of Sofia, sending her expensive gifts, and secretly imagining adultery with her, Rubião is taken in by the pair. Palha encourages the attraction. Sofia nurtures her vanity.

Another predator is Camacho, a shiftless politician, who sees how easily he can manipulate the naïve Rubião, who has just rescued a boy from an accident. Rubião thinks his action commonplace; nonetheless, Camacho plays up its heroics, publicizing it and inflating his victim's vulnerable ego. Rubião, a simple person, had led a settled provincial life. Now his life has become unbalanced, torn by people seeking advantages from him and divided by guilt over his wealth and sinful thoughts. Attempting to steady himself, he exaggerates his importance, falling finally under the delusion of considering himself emperor of the French.

Those who used him now ignore his plight. Even the child he rescued taunts him in a street gang. Nonetheless, in the midst of this inhumanity, a young woman who only distantly knows Rubião shows understanding and sympathy both for him and his dog. The dog responds naturally to the affection. Rubião is committed to an asylum, but he escapes, trying to return to his old home and the settled life he had enjoyed. Quincas Borba, the dog, faithfully follows him.

Rubião, however, does not recover. Along with wealth, he absorbed the spirit of the philosophy of Quincas Borba the man: egotism and self-love. When Rubião observes in conclusion that to the victor go the spoils, the reader is struck with an insight that escapes the commentator. What do winners gain from avarice and materialism that ends in madness, that cannot recognize the simple balm of affection and generosity a kind stranger or dog may offer?



## DOM CASMURRO

**First published:** 1899 (English translation, 1953)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Prey to a corrosive jealousy, ruining himself and his family, a man recounts the events of his life and marriage in a manner that allows a reader progressively to penetrate the illusion under which he has lived.*

Initially *Dom Casmurro* seems to be about jealousy, a husband's suspicions about the fidelity of his wife. Ultimately, however, it is about the certainty one can have of how one person perceives another. The involving theme of the work is not only about whether the husband can trust the wife but also whether the reader can trust the husband as a narrator. The novel traces the corrosive consequences of gnawing jealousy, a person losing what he has due to suspicion of losing it. The ultimate certainty of the work is that rampant fear of loss causes loss.

The novel unfolds as Bento Santiago recalls his life and marriage. The narrative reveals him to be a withdrawn, diffident individual who has gained a nickname of mild mockery, "Dom Casmurro," meaning "Lord Keeps-to-Himself." Intended for the priesthood by his mother, Bento is sent to a seminary. He immediately wishes to escape, having fallen in love with Capitú, his young neighbor and first sweetheart. He confides his passion to a new school colleague, Escobar, whom he admires for his force and masculinity. Both eventually leave the seminary. Bento marries Capitú, and Escobar marries Sancha.

In an encounter with Sancha, Bento realizes he has an adulterous attraction to her. Escobar suddenly dies, and at his funeral Bento notes the attention with which Capitú contemplates their dead friend. Bento now becomes riveted by the suspicion that his wife had been unfaithful with Escobar.



In looking at his son, Ezekiel, a boy with a tendency to imitate adults, Bento now notices what seems a striking resemblance to Escobar.

Attending a production of *Othello*, Bento does not see the misguided jealousy of the Moor and is the more convinced of Capitú's guilt. As the fury of his jealousy mounts, he accuses Capitú of infidelity and tells Ezekiel that he is not his legitimate offspring. Ordering them away, they both die separated abroad. The years advance and other members of Bento's family and entourage pass away, isolating him.

Progressively the reader grasps the corrosive dilemma in which Bento has cornered himself. He must rage on against Capitú, proving that her infidelity caused the ruin of his life. He dare not confront the possibility that he wronged her, such error causing not only his own ruin but also that of his family. Such a tortuous state has resulted from his self-absorption and insecurity.

The critical acclaim that *Dom Casmurro* has received can be attributed to the extraordinary manner by which Machado engaged the reader as witness and judge of the central character's thoughts and actions. The reader actively accompanies the denouement of the narrative, must be attentive to gestures and diction, and must be alert to perspectives and thematic developments. It is the range and force of techniques that engage the reader in the dynamic of the unfolding tale that comprise the singular accomplishment of Machado's literary craftsmanship.

### SUMMARY

The sustaining theme in the work of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis is the nature of love and the destabilizing consequences of egotism. While initially treating this theme within the context of Romantic comedy and bourgeois society, progressively he wrote more within the context of a psychological realism with universal applications. While dismayed by human failures that he exposed with sardonic humor, he believed nonetheless that individuals were capable of better and that literature could prove an effective vehicle in conveying such transformation. In this respect, therefore, he was a consummate craftsman, productive in all forms of literature but masterfully distinguished in fiction.

*Edward A. Riedinger*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Although written mostly in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the work of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis only began to appear in English in the latter part of the twentieth century. What factors do you think effected this delay?
- Machado de Assis evolves from a Romantic writer given to droll humor to a realist of penetrating psychological analysis. What is meant by Romanticism and realism and what evidence of them appears in his work?
- What might have motivated the development of Machado de Assis from Romanticism to psychological realism? What other authors can you cite who show similar changes of outlook or orientation over the course of their careers?
- Some authors are identified with certain locations and times, such as Mark Twain and the frontier Mississippi River, or Charles Dickens and Victorian London. Machado de Assis is invariably identified with late nineteenth and turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro. What were the socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions and changes occurring in Rio and Brazil then that are reflected in the work of Machado de Assis?
- Racial intermixture is a dominant characteristic of Brazilian social history. How are racial tolerance, prejudice, or indifference reflected in the life and work of Machado de Assis?



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## NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

**Born:** Florence, Italy  
May 3, 1469

**Died:** Florence, Italy  
June 21, 1527

*Machiavelli has achieved literary fame, particularly for The Prince, which stresses political realism and pragmatism as opposed to the idealism found in works of ancient philosophers. Machiavelli also produced plays and other works which were influential in the development of Italian literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Niccolò Machiavelli (mah-kee-uh-VEH-lee) was born into a venerable Florentine family whose members had held political office in the past, but his parents were not wealthy. His father, Bernardo di Niccolò di Buoninsegna, was a lawyer and a lover of books. He died in May, 1500. Some surviving letters and other documents indicate a close relationship between Machiavelli and his father. His mother was Bartolomea de' Nelli, who had an interest in poetry and likely introduced it to her son. She died in October 11, 1496. Machiavelli had two sisters and one brother.

The Florence of Machiavelli's lifetime was economically successful, and the leading family in that city was the Medici family, who had gained wealth and power from banking. Maurizio Viroli, a biographer of Machiavelli, calls them the "true lords of the city." The Medicis had power in Florence during most of the fifteenth century. Lorenzo de' Medici, known as Lorenzo the Magnificent, died in 1492. Piero de' Medici fled Florence in 1494, when King Charles VIII of France was ready to attack the city. A great council was formed to govern the city once the Medicis were exiled. Friar Girolamo Savonarola was very prominent in Florence from 1494 to 1498, and he influenced many political leaders, but he was executed for heresy in 1498.

Savonarola's death presented an opportunity for great political change in Florence.

There is little known about Machiavelli's early life, but it appears that he had an education grounded in classical literature. There is some evidence that suggests he worked in business from 1487 to 1495; there is also some evidence that suggests he was secretary for an office holder in the Second Chancery between 1495 and 1498, but not all scholars believe that he served in political life during this period.

On May 28, 1498, just after Savonarola's death, Florence's Council of Eighty nominated Machiavelli as secretary of the Second Chancery, a position responsible for foreign affairs and the administration of territories outside of the central city. He was later named secretary of the Ten of Liberty and Peace, a position with executive authority. He was formally approved on June 28. In his political role he attempted to settle many disputes with other powers in the region, both within and outside of Italy.

During his time in office he undertook many diplomatic missions and met with many other political figures, such as Cesare Borgia, Louis XII of France, Ferdinand II of Aragon, and Pope Julius II. It was during this time that he observed many military and political strategies and identified those that were successful and those that were not. He managed to find time for some writing during this period, including work on an ambitious lengthy poem, *Decennale primo* (1504; *First Decennial*, 1965),



which describes the political struggles in Florence from 1494 to 1504. Between 1503 and 1506, he also had responsibility for obtaining the resources needed for defending Florence. In 1501, he married Marietta di Ludovico Corsini, and in the course of their long marriage they had six children.

Machiavelli's fortunes changed when the Medici family regained power in Florence in 1512, and he was driven from political office. He spent the remainder of his life in exile, separated from the political machinations of Florence. Others who had been exiled from Florence later reentered politics, but not Machiavelli. He lived only seven miles outside of Florence, but in reality he was very far from power.

It is during this time in political exile that he wrote all of his prominent works. He began work on what became *Il principe* (wr. 1513, pb. 1532; *The Prince*, 1640) immediately after his exile. He devoted significant time to studying and writing about the works of Livy, the ancient Roman historian, resulting in *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (wr. 1513, pb. 1531; *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, 1636). This work is generally considered to be an exposition of the principles of republican rule. Between 1518 and 1520, he wrote *Dell' arte della guerra* (1521; *The Art of War*, 1560), in which he combined his knowledge of contemporary military operations with examples of ancient strategy and tactics. He also wrote plays, including *La mandragola* (pb. c. 1519, pr. 1520; *The Mandrake*, 1911) and *La clizia* (pr. 1525, pb. 1532; *Casina; Clizia*, 1961), as well as poetry and a novel. He completed a lengthy work, *Istorie fiorentine* (1525; *The Florentine History*, 1595), which was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, who went on to become Pope Clement VII. The commissioning of this work suggests that Machiavelli had rehabilitated his relationship with Medicis to a degree.

Machiavelli died in Florence on June 21, 1527, at the age of fifty-eight. While some of his works were published during his lifetime, his publica-

tions did not earn him literary renown while he was alive. However, after his death his literary reputation was established with the wide circulation of both *The Prince* and *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*.

## ANALYSIS

In a letter to Francesco Vettori dated December 10, 1513, Machiavelli describes his days in exile as time spent overseeing his estate and talking with local peasants. He indicates that he takes time for reading great Italian poets, such as Dante or Petrarch. His evenings are dedicated to study, however. He says that "when evening comes, I return home and go into my study." In that place he enters "the antique courts of the ancients where, being welcomed by them, I taste the food that alone is mine." He describes himself as being in conversation with the ancients and that he has "written down what [he has] gained from their conversation." The work he has written down eventually became *The Prince*.

One important aspect of *The Prince* is Machiavelli's use of particular words. He uses the Italian word *virtu* not in a traditional sense of virtue but primarily as a synonym for "exercise of power." Machiavelli also uses the Italian words *lo stato* to mean "Where one has dominion." In this sense, *lo stato* is similar to the modern term "political state."

In *The Prince* and the play *The Mandrake*, Machiavelli presents a world in which individuals can gain what they desire through guile and power. In *The Prince*, he describes the means by which princes can gain and maintain power. Most significantly, political leaders should prepare for war at all times in order to ward off foreign threats and to unite the people. Political leaders must not practice traditional morality because that would likely undermine their political positions.

*The Mandrake*, while not about political power per se, portrays a protagonist with a great desire who uses guile to obtain what he wants and does so with immunity. This character overturns traditional morality through his actions.

## THE PRINCE

**First published:** *Il principe*, 1532 (English translation, 1640)

**Type of work:** Political treatise

*In this classic political treatise, Machiavelli advises how princes should acquire and maintain political power and analyzes the operations of Italian Renaissance principalities.*

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* within two years after he was driven from office. A surviving letter indicates that the first title for it was “On Principalities.” The work was not published until 1532.

The first eleven chapters of *The Prince* examine types of principalities, or principates, with examples from both ancient and contemporary history, and strategies for governing these principates. These are not lengthy chapters; some of them are only a few paragraphs long.

Machiavelli asserts that hereditary principates can only be conquered when one who wishes to conquer lives in that principate or establishes a colony there. In the second chapter, Machiavelli speaks of adding territory to an existing principality, advising that one must do so with force and “extinguish the line of the prince” in that territory; by doing so, a conqueror will prevent a counterinsurgency. He cites the Romans as best exemplifying this strategy of conquest. Machiavelli does not criticize the desire to acquire new territories through conquest; instead, he calls it a “very natural and ordinary desire.”

Machiavelli particularly praises Alexander the Great and those leaders who followed him for their success in governing the territories they conquered. He makes a distinction between governing subjects who had previously been ruled despotically and subjects who had some practice of self-government. Those who had previously been ruled with absolute power will be harder to take over, but once they have been conquered, they will be easy to govern. Those who have been used to some degree of self-government will be harder to govern; a conqueror must “ruin” such a city, because if he “does not destroy it, he waits to be destroyed by it.”

In chapter 6, Machiavelli provides a list of great conquerors, who did so by their virtue, including Cyrus the Great of Persia, Romulus of Rome,

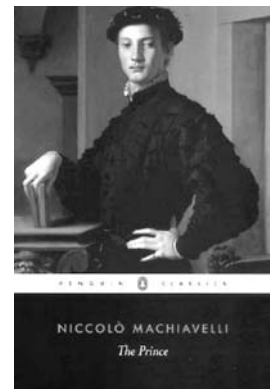
Theseus of Greece, and Moses of Israel. Machiavelli presents them as gaining a political territory through their own skill and cunning; they win not because of divine assistance, but because they are armed. Here Machiavelli tells his readers that “all armed prophets conquer and unarmed ones are ruined.” In chapter 8, Machiavelli praises King Agathocles of Sicily, who is said to have “virtue,” even though he attained a position of rule through treachery and violence.

Machiavelli criticizes rulers who are the opposite of great conquerors. One who inherits a position of political authority will often lose that political power; the same is true for one who gains power through others’ military assistance. These rulers may gain power easily, but this authority is also lost easily.

Chapter 11 focuses on “ecclesiastical principates,” Machiavelli’s term for the authority exercised by the Catholic Church. Machiavelli treats the Church as a temporal power, like all other political orders. He says the Church has “subjects which they do not govern.”

Chapters 12 through 14 discuss how a political leader should deal with enemies. Enemies must be treated with military power; nothing else is effective. If a political leader has a strong military, there will be no need to concern oneself with laws. Machiavelli makes the distinction between the different types of arms (or military forces) available to a leader. Some arms are the prince’s own, some are mercenary, and some belong to others. Mercenary arms are the worst because “those arms are disunited, ambitious, without discipline, unfaithful; valorous among friends, cowardly among enemies.” When one uses mercenary arms, one depends upon the strength of others.

Using the arms of another political leader can also be harmful. Machiavelli cites Cesare Borgia, who briefly used mercenary and auxiliary arms but then stopped using them and depended on his own arms. Machiavelli also cites examples of ancient political leaders, in-



cluding King David in the Old Testament, who depended on their own power. In chapter 14, the central chapter of the work, Machiavelli emphatically states that “a prince, then, ought to have no other object . . . nor take anything else for his art, but war,” and that “he ought . . . never to lift his thoughts from the exercise of war.”

Chapters 15 through 23 examine how a prince should treat his subjects. Machiavelli states that it might be useful for a prince to have the appearance of some traditional virtues, but it is not necessarily useful to truly exemplify those virtues. For example, Machiavelli asserts that it might be useful to have a reputation for generosity, but it certainly is not necessary to have that reputation. Being truly generous might lead one to deplete one’s resources. However, one can be generous with the things one takes from others. He cites Cyrus, Julius Caesar, and Alexander the Great as military leaders who rewarded citizens with possessions taken from others.

This section includes the famous passage in which Machiavelli states that if the prince must choose between being loved and being feared, the prince should choose to be feared. Importantly, the prince should be feared in such a way that he will avoid being hated. According to Machiavelli, “being feared and not hated can go very well together.” One cannot depend on being loved, but Machiavelli believes subjects will be loyal to their leaders. Machiavelli also suggests the use of “pious cruelty,” a term for the use of religion to gain political support. He cautions political leaders about those who are close to them; a leader needs a few people close to him who will speak the truth to him, but flatterers should be avoided.

Machiavelli treats fortune in chapters 24 and 25. He does not sympathize with political leaders who lose power because of fortune. Instead, he maintains that leaders should be prepared for what might happen and should seek to overcome the results of fortune through impetuous action. In another famous line from *The Prince*, he states that, “it is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman, and if one wishes to keep her down, it is necessary to beat her and knock her down.”

The final chapter is different than the other chapters in the book. It is a patriotic appeal to Italians to expel foreign armies from the region.

## THE MANDRAKE

**First produced:** *La mandragola*, 1520, first published, c. 1519 (English translation, 1911)

**Type of work:** Play

*This play presents several individuals who are able to forgo traditional morality in order to obtain the objects of their desires.*

Machiavelli wrote several plays, including *The Mandrake*, which biographer Maurizio Rivoli called Machiavelli’s “finest theatrical piece.” The play begins with a song that succinctly presents the theme of the play: “Let us follow our desires . . . because whoever deprives himself of pleasure . . . doesn’t know the tricks of the world.” The prologue then presents the outline of the play and introduces the characters. The play consists of five acts, and the action takes place within a single day.

*The Mandrake* tells the story of Callimaco, who had lived in Paris but is now in Florence. He has learned of a woman there, Lucrezia, who is of extraordinary beauty. Callimaco desires to be with this woman, but he must devise a ruse in order to do so because she is married to a Florentine judge and has a reputation for her moral purity. Callimaco conspires with Ligurio to trick Master Nicia, Lucrezia’s husband.

Callimaco poses as a doctor who tells the childless Nicia that he can administer a potion made of mandrake root that will enable Lucrezia to become pregnant. However, the first man who has sexual relations with Lucrezia after she has taken the potion will die. Callimaco then convinces Nicia to bribe a local friar, Frate Timoteo, so the friar will convince Lucrezia to take the potion and sleep with a stranger because the greater good of having a child will be gained.

Lucrezia agrees to the plan, and in the evening Callimaco, who is in disguise, is brought to see her. Callimaco and Lucrezia spend the night together. In the morning, he reveals himself to Lucrezia, and she accepts Callimaco as her lover. Callimaco is then invited to be a part of the household.

All the characters engage in some form of deception in order to obtain something they desire. Nicia wants a son, Callimaco wants sexual pleasure, and Frate Timoteo wants financial reward. In the

end, Nicia, who appears to be a respected citizen, is the most deceived and has enabled the adulterous partner of his wife.

### SUMMARY

Niccolò Machiavelli was a major figure in the development of political theory. His treatise, *The Prince*, broke from the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, who believed that the purpose of politics was to encourage virtue, and instead advocated that in politics, the ends justified the means. In his other works, he made important contributions to historical accounts of Italy and to Italian Renaissance drama.

Michael L. Coulter

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*Rapporto delle cose della Magna*, wr. 1508

*Ritratto di cose di Francia*, wr. 1512-1513

*Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, wr. 1513, pb. 1531 (*Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, 1636)

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*Discorso delle cose fiorentine dopo la morte di Lorenzo*, 1520 (*Discourse on the State of Florence After the Death of Lorenzo*, 1965)

*Discursus florentinarum rerum post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medices*, wr. 1520

*La vita di Castruccio Castracani*, 1520 (*The Life of Castruccio Castracani*, 1675)

*Dell'arte della guerra*, 1521 (*The Art of War*, 1560)

*Discorso: O, Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*, 1525 (*Discourse: Or, Dialogue About Our Language*, 1961)

*Istorie fiorentine*, 1525 (*The Florentine History*, 1595)

##### DRAMA:

*Andria*, pb. c. 1517 (based on Terence's play; English translation, 1969)

*La mandragola*, pb. c. 1519, pr. 1520 (*The Mandrake*, 1911)

*La clizia*, pr. 1525, pb. 1532 (based on Plautus's play; *Casina*; *Clizia*, 1961)

##### POETRY:

*Decennale primo*, 1504 (*First Decennial*, 1965)

*Decennale secondo*, 1509 (*Second Decennial*, 1965)

*Serenata*, 1513-1514 (*Serenade*, 1965)

*L'asino d'oro*, 1517, 1549 (*The Golden Ass*, 1965)

*Canti carnascialeschi*, 1523-1524 (*Carnival Songs*, 1965)

*Lust and Liberty: The Poems of Machiavelli*, 1963

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How do the first eleven chapters of *The Prince* demonstrate Niccolò Machiavelli's concern for realism over idealism?
- What, according to Machiavelli, should be the political leader's view of war and the preparation for war?
- In chapters 15 through 23 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli speaks of several commonly recognized virtues. According to this account, when, if ever, should one be concerned with traditional codes of behavior?
- What is Machiavelli's view of fortune?
- In what way is *The Mandrake* a play about exercising power?
- How is Callimaco in *The Mandrake* a Machiavellian character?

LONG FICTION:

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## HUGH MACLENNAN

**Born:** Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, Canada  
March 20, 1907

**Died:** Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
November 7, 1990

*Recognized as Canada's outstanding man of letters of the mid-twentieth century, MacLennan expressed the Canadian national character in internationally respected novels and essays.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Hugh MacLennan, the only son of dour Calvinist surgeon Samuel MacLennan and his vivacious, artistic wife, Katherine MacQuarrie MacLennan, was born in the mining town of Glace Bay on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada, on March 20, 1907. Though three generations of MacLennans had lived on Cape Breton, the doctor thought of himself as Scottish. Like the Scots in the homeland, he had aspirations of improvement through education. Consequently, in 1912 and 1913 he decided to take specialist training abroad, his family joining him in the summer, and at the beginning of World War I he moved to Halifax, where both he and Hugh would have more opportunities. There Hugh witnessed his father's departure to war and his return as an invalid. The boy also witnessed in 1917 the carnage wrought by the explosion of a TNT-laden ship in Halifax Harbor.

In accordance with his father's aspirations—indeed, demands—MacLennan studied the classics, in 1928 took an honors B.A. from Dalhousie University, played championship tennis, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and took a B.A. from Oriel in 1932. While in Oxford, he also traveled considerably in Britain and the Continent, observing firsthand the economic and political conditions that led to World War II. He also wrote poetry. Unable to find a publisher for it, a failure that he blamed on the Depression, MacLennan turned to fiction with Ernest Hemingway as his model.

Unable to find a job in 1932 because of the Depression and colonialism—the two classics positions available at Canadian universities went to

Englishmen with no better qualifications than his—MacLennan followed his father's insistent advice and accepted a fellowship for a Ph.D. at Princeton University. In 1935, Princeton awarded him the degree for a study, based on papyri, of the decline and fall of Oxyrhynchus, a Greek city in Egypt, in the third century. Princeton published the thesis.

Yet MacLennan was unable to find a publisher for the novel that he had written by 1935 and could not get a teaching position at a Canadian university. He thus became a schoolmaster at Lower Canada College, a private high school, in order to be able to marry and support Dorothy Duncan, an American whom he had met on the ship from England in 1932. Despite the demands of his teaching, MacLennan continued to write. When no publisher would take his second novel, MacLennan took the advice of his wife, also a writer, to create a Canadian consciousness, realistic Canadian characters, and the Canadian scene in literature.

The next book, *Barometer Rising* (1941), centered on the Halifax Explosion of 1917. Published in 1941, it was a popular and critical success. Deemed “a first novel of unusual quality” and “a landmark in Canadian writing,” the novel fixed MacLennan in the category of “literary nationalist.” The success of *Barometer Rising* contributed to his obtaining a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on a second novel about the French and English duality. That novel, *Two Solitudes* (1945), merited the Governor-General's Award.

Although sales of his books never made him rich, the success of *Two Solitudes* enabled MacLennan to resign from Lower Canada College and to secure a summer home in North Hatley, Que-

bec. His next two books, the novel *The Precipice* (1948) and *Cross-Country* (1949), won Governor-General's awards, but Canadian critics panned *The Precipice* because its Canadian-American theme diluted MacLennan as a "distinctly Canadian novelist," and it did not sell well in Canada. During the early 1950's, then, to augment his finances, MacLennan accepted commissions for many magazine articles, and in 1951, the year that *Each Man's Son* was published, he took a part-time professorship in English at McGill University to get medical insurance for his wife, who had had a rheumatic heart from childhood. MacLennan found teaching congenial, he received even more recognition in the 1950's, and he published essays widely. Dorothy, however, died in 1957. The powerful novel of 1959, *The Watch That Ends the Night*, is the story of a woman with a weak heart but enormous spirit.

*The Watch That Ends the Night* was a great financial and critical success, and MacLennan in 1959 married a lovely old friend, Frances Walker. He published the essay collections *Seven Rivers of Canada* (1961, revised as *Rivers of Canada*, 1974) and *Scotchman's Return, and Other Essays* (1960). An influential teacher, he was made a full professor at McGill in 1968, the year after the publication of *Return of the Sphinx* (1967), a novel, as the name might imply, about the cycles of history and generational conflict, demonstrated in the inflammatory French separatist movement in Quebec.

Although he continued to teach, to write essays, and to work on his last novel, the 1970's were not golden years for MacLennan. *Two Solitudes* became a disastrous 1978 film. Separatist terrorism developed as, in *Return of the Sphinx*, he had said it would, and he, a symbol of English Canada, became a target for terrorist attack. Then scholars began a reassessment of his work. "It is time," said one, "to remove MacLennan from the pantheon"; "this is the man who prepared the way for everyone else, but, you know, Moses never entered the promised land," said another.

Nevertheless, in his seventies MacLennan completed *Voices in Time* (1980), a foreboding survey of the twentieth century and its future. In 1984, he looked to his roots in *On Being a Maritime Writer*. In the 1980's, scholars began a more balanced appraisal of the previous decade's reassessment of his literary worth. Despite continuing personal misfortunes and his concern for the turbulence of the

times, MacLennan wrote shortly before his death in Montreal on November 7, 1990, "I have really enjoyed my existence." *Maclean's*, the Canadian news-magazine, concluded that "he was a fine man and a great writer, and we were lucky to have lived in a time and place that had him for its town crier."

## ANALYSIS

After a publisher had rejected one of MacLennan's first novels, suggesting that it needed a stronger sense of locale, the publisher became an external force that directed the young writer's focus to the Canadian scene. When, in 1960, the great American editor and critic Edmund Wilson found in MacLennan's essays "a Canadian way of looking at things which had little in common with either the 'American' or the British colonial one and which has achieved a self-confident detachment in regard to the rest of the world," he set his seal on the reputation of MacLennan as a Canadian nationalist. Although it is true that his seven published novels are set in Canadian culture and that his heroes, like the author himself, come home again, it is also true that MacLennan's world travels and his studies of classics and history in universities of three nations, as well as his Canadian heritage, have informed his thinking and his novels.

In his doctoral research in 1935, for instance, MacLennan found that the private enterprise responsible for Rome's greatness "was also responsible for the reduction of democratic communities to quasi-feudal serfdom." As early as *Two Solitudes*, MacLennan warned against the dangers of uncontrolled capitalism. In his next novel, *The Precipice*, the same message appears as a denial of the value of the American Dream. Later, in 1960, MacLennan identified another element of the cycle of history. From a book by Gordon Rattray Taylor, MacLennan adapted the Freudian notion that "the extreme father-identifier, the 'patrist' is compelled by hidden psychological needs to crave authority," whereas the mother-identifier, the matrist, "hates conflict . . . is bored by power . . . tends toward democracy" and "softens by corruption any authoritarian institutions he has inherited." In history, matrist and patrist political systems alternate. Disturbed by the permissiveness of the 1960's and 1970's, MacLennan foresees in *Voices in Time* democratic freedom declining into chaos and ushering in a new authoritarianism as antidote.

All of MacLennan's novels treat the conflicts of father and son, not only because MacLennan spent years coming to terms with his own stern father, but also because MacLennan knows his Freud and his Sophocles. Scholar Alec Lucas points out numerous Oedipus motifs in the novels: "heroes with physical defects," "separation from the father; the search for a father during which . . . [the son] discovers himself," "kindly foster-parents, and sexual attraction to a member of one's own family or a maternal female." In MacLennan's first three novels, *Barometer Rising*, *Two Solitudes*, and *The Precipice*, the rebellious sons never come to terms with their fathers or their fathers' sexuality. In *Each Man's Son*, however, the middle-aged son gives up the ghost of his father, and in *The Watch That Ends the Night*, MacLennan turns Dr. Jerome Martell, a parallel to his own father, into a Christ figure. By 1980, MacLennan himself has turned into a father, critical of the permissive younger generation; but his author figure, childless John Wellfleet in *Voices in Time*, becomes the kindly teaching father to the children of the future.

MacLennan scholar T. D. MacLulich says that MacLennan's historical study leaves him uncertain as to whether society's course is determined by forces beyond human control. The play of human will against externally determined destiny is also the subject of Sophocles' great Oedipus tragedies, which MacLennan loved. The thinker who grew up with a Calvinist father and who came to manhood during the Great Depression might well be inclined to see the external as determiner. Yet critics who fault MacLennan for the use of external determiners are unwise. Such events as the Halifax Harbor explosion in *Barometer Rising*, which frees Neil Macrae from a disgrace (also externally caused by a false accuser), are actual determiners in real life; and it is his reaction to the suffering caused by the explosion that frees Neil from the desire for revenge. Yet the lesson of tragedy and of life is that the noble individual must struggle against determinism or, unable to prevail, accept fate with dignity and self-control. MacLennan and his heroes do one or the other; they are never craven.

The great myth of the struggle of life—of will against determinism—is that of Odysseus. That myth recurs in all the novels. Like Odysseus, Neil Macrae in *Barometer Rising* comes home unknown to Halifax from World War I, wounded and dis-

graced, to reclaim his identity and his place in society, to take vengeance on his enemy, and to restore his house. Neil and his faithful Penny and their son are reunited in seasoned happiness like that of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus. In *Each Man's Son*, structured like the *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614) with counterpointed scenes at home and in the world, Archie MacNeil, a boxer, lacks Odysseus's cunning to survive the exploitation of prizefighting, and his wife, Mollie, lacks the strength to resist her suitor. On his return, Archie kills Mollie and her lover and dies, but "Telemachus" (the son) survives to live with Dr. Ainslie, a Calvinist mentor at last grown wise. In *The Watch That Ends the Night*, Dr. Jerome Martell, like Odysseus an "oddly pure sensualist so many experimenting women had desired," returns from war and wandering to bring Catherine, his dying former wife, and her husband, George, to terms with their past, to enable them to affirm her remaining life and accept her death. This affirmation of life and death is a major theme of the *Odyssey*. Scholar George Woodcock calls the *Odyssey* "the product of a people in the process of becoming aware of itself . . . [appropriate] to illuminate" the rise of a "Canadian national consciousness." It is also a myth of communication with the world. MacLennan's novels and his Canada are part of the world.

## TWO SOLITUDES

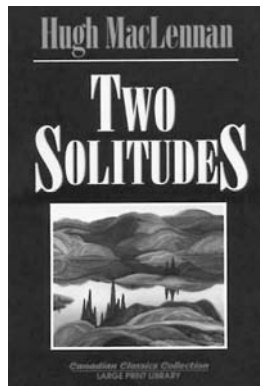
**First published:** 1945

**Type of work:** Novel

*The lives of three generations of two Canadian families are bound up in the conflict between French Canadian and Anglais ideas and aims for Canada.*

A Galsworthian family saga, which of course includes intergenerational conflicts, bildungsroman, and love stories, *Two Solitudes* presents the bipartite consciousness for "European" Canada and urges reconciliation through reciprocal understanding: "Love consists in this," says the epigraph from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, "that two solitudes protect, and touch, and greet each other." In the account of the older generation from 1917 to 1921, Athanase Tallard, member of

Parliament and seigneur of the agricultural community of St. Marc, represents the French tradition, Catholic, communal, “bound in sacred trust to the soil”—although he is critical of the Church, advocates scientific education, and has taken as his second wife a sensuous Irish Catholic girl. Typical Anglais are represented by the self-made capitalist Huntley McQueen, and by Janet Methuen,



who has married into an old moneyed English family of Montreal, one with manners but very little noblesse oblige. Janet’s father, John Yardley, a retired sea captain who buys a farm in St. Marc, is the sort who should help bring about conciliation. Honorable, humane, exuberant, attuned to nature, Captain Yardley earns acceptance in the community. The parish priest, Fa-

ther Beaubien, who opposes Yardley and Athanase, embodies the Church’s antiassimilationist policy. In the interest of controlled progress, Athanase collaborates with McQueen to set up industry in St. Marc. When he loses his place in his own community and can no longer be useful to McQueen, the tycoon bankrupts him. Yet it is Marius, the son of Athanase and his ascetic, sanctimonious first wife—Marius, “sexually puritanical, politically ambitious, a tool in the hands of the Church and the fledgling separatist movement,” ultimately a failure—who destroys his father in the French Catholic community.

Paul Tallard, the son of Athanase and his Irish second wife, Kathleen, is the focus of the episodic account of the next generation. Educated in French and English, humanely and scientifically, living as little lord of the country manor and then in urban poverty in Montreal, studying at university and then traveling the world for five years (1934 to 1939), Paul would seem ideal for developing the unified Canadian consciousness in the world, and so he is. In Athens, the cradle of his civilization, he thinks that “in spite of all the things he had done and the places he had seen, he [is] essentially unchanged: a Canadian, half French and half English, still trying to be himself and stand on his own

feet.” In 1939, Paul goes home to write—for Paul is an incipient writer—about “naturally vital people” in Canadian society, and to marry Heather Methuen. The daughter of Janet Methuen and granddaughter of Captain Yardley, Heather has denied the mercenary values of her mother and has sought breadth and independence by studying art in the United States. Like Paul, she is faithful to Canada. Like her grandfather, she is full of joy. Though theirs is a romance of individuals, their marriage points the way toward national reconciliation.

The novel ends with declaration of war against Germany. Paul will volunteer, his first act as a unified Canadian being the defense of the civilization of which both the French and the English are a part. Among the French and English Canadians, MacLennan concludes, “there woke . . . the felt knowledge that together they had fought and survived. . . . The country took the first . . . steps toward becoming herself,” alone but in touch with a world of nations.

## VOICES IN TIME

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the twenty-first century, an aged survivor of political and physical cataclysm tries to recover and record historical knowledge as a help to the renewal of civilization.*

*Voices in Time* is at once a futuristic and a historical novel. When André Gervais, one of a new generation stirring in the 2030’s, born after “the Great Fear,” “the Destructions,” and the establishment of the repressive, simplistic Third Bureaucracy, discovers buried records of a Wellfleet family in Metro (once Montreal), John Wellfleet, a seventy-five-year-old “inoperative” in the new society, organizes his family’s experiences into a model of what went wrong in the twentieth century. Since John tries to recount the stories of his family members in their own voices, his resulting book is structured as a montage written in a variety of styles.

Central to the novel is the elegant voice of Conrad Dehmel, John’s stepfather. The son of a German naval officer bound utterly to pride, disci-

pline, and duty and a gentle, war-loathing mother, Conrad develops liberal values. Studying history in England in the 1930's, he falls in love with Hannah Erlich, a German Jew. Both return to Germany right before World War II. As part of a plan to save Hannah and her psychologist father from extermination, Conrad joins the Gestapo, but the plan fails; Hannah and his own family die under the Nazis, their fates determined by Adolf Hitler's horrible misuse of power. Tortured terribly, Conrad survives and emigrates.

The second major voice—one of late twentieth century vulgarity—is that of John's older cousin, Timothy Wellfleet. Like Conrad, he is the son of a military man, a man who, however, never disciplined his son; Timothy becomes a representative member of late twentieth century society. First an advertising agent, he later becomes a radical-chic television interviewer, the kind of "media" newsman who belittles his guests from established society and makes himself the star of the show. When Timothy sympathetically features terrorist separatists whose kidnapping and murder trigger the government crackdowns of Canada's October Crisis (1970), his producer, a Jew who is also his mistress, accuses him of encouraging terrorism. She leaves him and his program.

Timothy and Conrad's stories come together when Conrad, a respected history professor who feels duty bound to warn North Americans that the young generation's loss of confidence in civilization makes conditions right for an upsurge of fascism, appears on Timothy's program. Using garbled information from a Marxist-terrorist source, Timothy accuses Conrad of his Gestapo connections and of responsibility for Hannah's death. A Holocaust survivor, having mistakenly identified him from television as a Nazi torturer, kills Conrad, then, seeing his mistake, kills himself. Undisciplined Timothy's banal misuse of banal power has wrought horrible results.

In the book that he edits, John Wellfleet and his voices suggest a pattern of history: After Germany's defeat in World War I and its suffering in the Depression, Hitler appealed to the Germans' need for an authority figure, a superego to approve their doing anything to recover their pride. In late twentieth century North America, undisciplined young people and their permissive elders also were demoralized; they felt the need for authority and discipline that they could not give themselves. According to MacLennan's apocalyptic story, an authoritarian regime (the Second Bureaucracy) did follow a time of license and terrorism (the Great Fear), but its strength was not real: Its uncontrolled war computers caused the Destructions. In the Third Bureaucracy, there is hope in the cycle of history: André Gervais, his colleagues, and his children may restore civilization; John Wellfleet's history book may guide them. MacLennan may have hoped that the warning of his novel might forestall the destruction that he prophesies.

#### SUMMARY

Critics of Hugh MacLennan's novels deplore his conservative techniques: his didacticism, his allegorizing the stories of individuals, his heavy use of local color, his oversimplified and moralistic characterization, his describing rather than evoking, his use of external circumstance, his basically chronological narration, his prudish and clichéd accounts of sex. Defenders counter that his "reconstructive reporting" of historical events is superb and commend his development of counterpoint, memory, and montage narration. Future assessments will probably praise his capturing, as he said, "the conflict . . . between the human spirit of Everyman and Everyman's human condition"—Everyman, of course, wearing twentieth century Canadian garb.

*Pat Ingle Gillis*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is the determinism of Hugh MacLennan based more on Greek tragedy, Calvinism, Freudianism, or some combination?
- How well does MacLennan reconcile French and English Canada?
- Assess MacLennan's "Canadian way of looking at things."
- Was MacLennan's view of the future determined chiefly by the time and circumstances of his early life?
- Explain and exemplify MacLennan's montage narration.

## LOUIS MACNEICE

**Born:** Belfast, Ireland (now in Northern Ireland)

September 12, 1907

**Died:** London, Great Britain

September 3, 1963

*One of a number of poets who turned poetry toward social concerns in the 1930's, MacNeice later skillfully wrote long poems, brief lyrics, and radio dramas.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Louis MacNeice (muhk-NEES) was born in Belfast, Ireland (now in Northern Ireland), on September 12, 1907. His father was a pastor in the Church of Ireland; his mother had been born in Connemara in the west country. When he was still a very young child, his father received a parish in Carrickfergus, at that time a small town in the countryside outside of Belfast. He had an older sister and a younger brother who was afflicted with Down syndrome. In 1914, his mother died of tuberculosis after a lengthy illness, and the young Louis was devastated. This experience seems to have made him perpetually reserved and shy and rendered him vulnerable to the fear of loss.

MacNeice's father, despite his church affiliation, supported home rule, a position which made his life among his fellow Protestants rather uncomfortable and went a long way toward isolating the MacNeice family from their neighbors. His political sympathies did not make him friends in Catholic Ireland, either. In order to remove Louis from the tensions of Irish life, his father sent him to school in England, first to Sherborne, and then to Marlborough College. All his life, MacNeice was troubled by his mixed Irish and British cultural inheritance.

Despite his father's calling, MacNeice's faith seems not to have been strong, and his education at the English schools seems to have confirmed in him a lifelong skepticism that scarcely ever showed signs of thawing. At Marlborough, he knew Anthony Blunt and the later poet laureate, John Betjeman. While there, his interests in literature were ignited, and with his schoolmates he plunged

eagerly into the works of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats. He was also introduced to Marxism, but although he found many of its arguments compelling, he was always skeptical about it.

MacNeice went on to Merton College, Oxford in 1925, and although his father was a Christian, who later was made bishop of Down, he lost his faith completely there. Just before graduation he married Giovanna Marie Therese Babette Ezra. He graduated with firsts (honors) in "greats" (classics and philosophy) and "mods" (history and literature).

After graduation, he and his new wife moved to Birmingham, where he lectured in the classics. While there he became more and more interested in the life of the common man and shook off, as he put it, the values of an exaggerated sense of beauty. As a result, in the thirties he resolved to write a poetry that avoided the esoteric interests of Eliot and Pound and instead concentrated on reaching the ordinary educated man.

His son Daniel was born in May, 1934. He divorced his wife on November 2, 1936, after which he lived a bachelor father's life for some years. He was then appointed lecturer in Greek at Bedford College of the University of London, where his 1936 translation of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.E.) was performed. In 1937, he traveled to Iceland with W. H. Auden, a trip which later produced the book of poems *Letters from Iceland* (1937) written jointly with Auden. During the publication process, he met and became friends with the poets Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Dylan Thomas. His next publishing venture was the long

poem *Autumn Journal* (1939), a chronicle of the poet's feelings and thoughts on many public subjects, including the continuing Spanish Civil War and life in general in England in 1938.

In 1939, MacNeice traveled to the United States, where he taught at Pennsylvania State University and at Cornell University. In 1941, he was hired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a scriptwriter, a job he kept through the war and on into 1954. He developed his skill at writing radio drama. His father resigned his bishopric and died shortly after in 1942; MacNeice then met and married singer Hedli Anderson, who remained with him until his death. In 1943, the marriage produced a daughter. Between this time and his death in 1963, MacNeice continued to publish books of poems, radio plays, and translations, most notably his 1951 translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (pb. 1808, 1833, pr. 1829, 1854) for radio production. His last significant public act was the delivery of the Clark Lectures, in Cambridge in the spring of 1963. The lectures were printed posthumously as *Varieties of Parable* (1965). He died on September 3, 1963, while supervising the production of his last radio play, *Persons from Porlock* (pb. 1969). He was nine days short of his fifty-sixth birthday.

## ANALYSIS

Louis MacNeice is probably best known for his friendship and poetic collaborations with Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis. These poets reacted against the so-called elitist and metaphysical themes of Eliot and Pound and instead supported, in different degrees and in different ways, the socialist and Marxist movements of that time.

MacNeice's poetry lacks the hard brilliance of Eliot at his best and tends toward a conversational tone and looser rhythms, sometimes showing the influence of the jazz rhythms popular at the time. Some criticize his longer poems for being perhaps too commonplace, too journalistic. For example, the long poem *Autumn Journal* is often simply a diary in verse. MacNeice, however, felt that his personal feelings and opinions were valid material for poetry. Perhaps this conviction is part of his contribution to the thematic range of modern poetry.

On the other hand, MacNeice is not a carbon copy of any of the other poets of his day. He was never as enthusiastic about Marxism as Spender

and Auden, and his poetry is less formal than that of Day Lewis. He called his own book on poetry a plea for impure poetry. He believed that too strong an emphasis on form makes poetry irrelevant to life, but that poetry with too strong an influence on content ceases to be poetry. The poet is neither a pure entertainer nor a propagandist. He or she should be, instead, a conscience for the community.

MacNeice, as a poet, lives up to such standards. He gathered his subject matter from the concerns of common men and women, and his images came from what people see about them. Often he wrote of the Irish peasants, though he admits to idealizing them. He tended to contrast the "real" life of work and family with the "artificial" life of the intellectual. In walking this tightrope between subject and form, he tried to find the form within the subject.

Unlike Auden and Spender, he did not quite trust Marxist solutions to the problems of the 1930's. He believed that comradeship was a socialist substitute for romance and that in extremes it led to an idealization of homosexuality.

MacNeice's poetry up to 1942 tended to revolve around a dream, if not an ideal, of a satisfactory society. Being a classical scholar, he seems to have had the Greek city-state as a model: In the Greek city-state the poet is seen as the person who, by his reflective ability and imaginative insight, acts as the guide for humane community policy. The poet, then, must write about politics and human relations but not neglect topics that befit a higher civilization: beauty, love, entertainment, and the life of the intellect.

After 1945, his poetry became more formal and less conversational. He performed dazzling formal maneuvers with rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and the cross-relationships of imagery. In addition to his usual interests in politics and love, his subject matter began to deal with death and religion. It is almost as if he had become less a commentator and more a seer and prophet, though he would never have used such names to describe himself. He still wrote, after 1945, long poems of social commentary. In 1954, he published *Autumn Sequel: A Rhetorical Poem in XXVI Cantos*, a sequel to *Autumn Journal*. The later collection is about the same length as the previous one and deals with many of the same topics. The latter poem, however, is written in a rather

strict terza rima, whereas the former uses a rather loose approximation of the form.

MacNeice, unlike many writers of serious literature, was long involved in a new kind of writing, the radio script. The advent of television in the early 1950's almost totally doomed this form of writing. MacNeice quickly became a master of this form after being hired by the BBC in 1941. He understood that a play without a stage or any visual elements had to use the conventions of radio drama to communicate to a listener. He knew that every visual image had to exist in the words and that any dialogue had to immediately identify the characters. His first complete effort was a rousing success. His most celebrated radio play is probably *The Dark Tower* (pb. 1947), based broadly on the Robert Browning poem. In the introduction to this drama, MacNeice defended the parable play as a viable form, maintaining that pure realism was almost finished, and that even works with a realistic surface like Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (1925; *The Trial*, 1937), or Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The Magic Mountain*, 1927), were valued for their symbolic core rather than for their realism.

All in all, MacNeice fares better when one reads large amounts of his work; the quality of his verse is more or less constant. His short poems are neatly and cleverly structured. His long poems, with the exception of a few early ones, are engrossing and rhythmical. In all his work he followed what he himself preached to other poets: Be neither an elitist, sitting in the corner weaving aesthetic fancies, nor a propagandist, selling to one's readers a pre-fabricated dogma.

### "THE SUNLIGHT ON THE GARDEN"

**First published:** 1937 (collected in *Poems*, 1937)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem says that nothing can save the beauty of a moment.*

"The Sunlight on the Garden," published in the collection *Poems*, is one of MacNeice's earlier works and is probably the most anthologized of all his

short poems. It is a four stanza poem, each stanza having six lines rhyming *abcba*. All the lines are loose three-beat lines except line 5, which has two beats.

The poem begins with an almost commonplace statement about the inability to keep any moment; the habit of time is to run on, taking with it each moment of joy. The sixth line makes the statement that "we cannot beg for pardon." The logical connection, perhaps, being that time's passage prevents one from atoning for one's sins as well as from cherishing one's happy moments.

The second stanza lists freedom itself as one of those moments and foretells its end, with a pun on the word "lances." The poet adds to the list of disappearing things, birds, sonnets, and dances. Stanza three brings war to mind. The joy of using the sky for flying will also end. Having defied the church bells' moral imperative, now there will be sirens to deal with, and the airplanes will come, bringing bombs, fire, and death. The stanza ends with an allusion to the final words of Marc Antony in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (pr. c. 1606-1607, pb. 1623), "We are dying, Egypt." As Antony represented the Roman world, so the poet represents the British empire, which is also dying.

The last stanza reverses the rhyming pattern of the first; line 1 of stanza 1 ends in "pardon," and line 5 ends in "garden." In the last stanza the reverse is true. Since the rhyming words are reversed, perhaps the meaning and feelings of the poem are also reversed. The poet begins the last stanza not expecting pardon. He accepts the passage of time and refuses to wish for something he cannot have. The word "hardened" which in stanza 1 modified "sunlight," in effect freezing it in place, here modifies "heart" with paradoxical results: accepting this "hardening of heart," refusing to ask for "pardon," brings on gladness. The moment in the garden gone, the poet says that he can be thankful to an unspecified "you." Not for sunlight, but for having "sat under Thunder and rain with you." Finally, the poem ends on an affirmative note with the poet grateful for the sunlight on the garden.

The underlying suggestion is that by using his formal skills, the poet is capable of reversing, in his own way, the passing of time by preserving time in a formal structure. It also suggests that the poet's skill can reverse the doom hurrying toward everyone.

## “THE BRITISH MUSEUM READING ROOM”

**First published:** 1939 (collected in *Poems, 1925-1940*, 1940)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet muses on the strange people who occupy the reading room of the British Museum library.*

This poem is made up of three seven-line stanzas with a loosely organized metrical pattern and a rhyme scheme in which only lines 3 and 7 rhyme. Lines 3 and 7 are shorter than the other lines, which vary rhythmically from five to six beats, while the short lines are three or four beats long.

Stanza 1 opens with the image of the domed reading room compared to a beehive with its busy occupants moving up and down the aisles, which contain “the cells of knowledge.” The readers, however, are described as “stooping” over their work and “haunted” by their desire for knowledge.

The conceit continues in line 3, calling knowledge honey and wax; the phrase “the accumulation of years” gives a slightly negative connotation: Why are these bees hoarding all this knowledge? Is the accumulating wax like wax in the ears, which impairs one’s hearing?

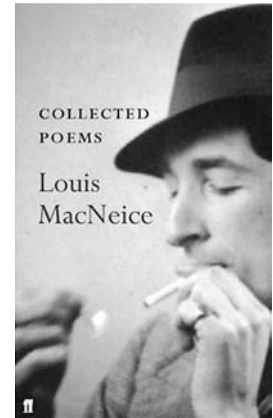
Lines 4 through 7 give the reasons for these people’s being here: some to make money, some because they like learning, and some to escape an unidentified “demon” “drumming . . . in their ears.” Is the only use for knowledge for some people to escape a life that is otherwise unbearable?

Stanza 2 further describes the denizens of the place. They are all strange. The poet calls them cranks, hacks, poverty-stricken scholars, all in some way outcasts from the social order. “In pince-nez, period hats or romantic beards,” they are all out of fashion. In line 10, he describes their work as a hobby (therefore unimportant) or a doom (an obsession). The stanza concludes with other negatives. They are too alive or too asleep; they are like bats “in a world of inverted values.” This last is a fine ambiguous phrase. Is it the values of the reading room that are inverted or do they appear upside-down because the larger world is the world of inverted values?

Stanza 3 takes the reader outside, where the pi-

geons are doing what pigeons do: court, walk about “puffing their ruffs,” and sunbathe. The last four lines are obscure, but they seem to take the reader into the museum itself, where the sculptures and artifacts are kept. There is, it seems, an ancient terror under the totem poles. Out from under these poles and “between the enormous fluted Ionic columns” of the Greek temples comes something alien: “The guttural sorrow of the refugees.”

The intellectual life has become a refuge from living. Living is the puffing, the courting, and the sunbathing of the common English pigeon, and, by extension, of the common person. Is learning itself open only to the exiles from life? Are the only people who become intellectuals those for whom everyday life is intolerable? Such are the questions generated by the poem.



## “THE TRUISMS”

**First published:** 1960 (collected in *British Poetry Since 1945*, 1970)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem is a parable concerning a young man who ignores his father’s good advice and later finds it valuable.*

This is a late poem that shows some of MacNeice’s efforts to turn toward the more universal topics of religion and death. It is a three-stanza poem with five lines in each stanza. The lines are all approximately four-beat lines and are rhymed loosely.

The poem is a parable, telling the story of the departure and return of an unnamed youth. It opens with the young man receiving, as a gift from his father, a “box of truisms,” that is, “words to live by,” the kind of advice fathers have always given their sons. The box is shaped like a coffin, so the young man considers the words dead and of no use



to him. He leaves the box on the mantelpiece. The young man suspects that the truisms are children's toys that he has outgrown. What is more, his father has died and is also in a box, "skulking."

In stanza 2 the young man leaves home, leaving the gift box behind. He travels into the world of experience where he "met love, met war,/ Sordor, disappointment, defeat, betrayal." All of this leads to "disbeliefs." Apparently the man loses his faith in his youthful ideals. It is through "disbeliefs" that he "arrived at a house" that "he could not remember seeing before." The strange negative in that line indicates that the negative experiences have led him back to his childhood.

Stanza 3 reveals what he finds there. When he walks inside, he discovers that through his disbelief he has arrived "where he had come from," his childhood world. Curiously enough, something there tells him how to behave. He has perhaps relearned something of his youthful instructions. Two events confirm this fact: The truisms come out of the box and perch familiarly on his shoulder, and a tall tree has sprouted from his father's grave, revealing that his father is still a source of life.

The box is the central conceit of the poem and is a source of an amazing diversity in unity. The box is a gift box, an heirloom passing from father to son, and a coffin. It holds dead ideas and is identical to the father who is in a box in the ground. Like Pandora's box, all the son's troubles "come out," leaving only hope. It is the disbeliefs of line 9 that cause the wandering son to return to where the box, with its immense treasures, lies.

## SUMMARY

Louis MacNeice was born one generation after Eliot and Pound, and his early poetry reacts against these figures by being less concerned with aesthetics and more with social problems. He wrote both long and short poems with considerable technical skill. After World War II, he concentrated on radio plays, but he also wrote some of the most finely etched poetry of the twentieth century. He never ceased believing that poetry was a gift for the community and that the job of the poet was to be the community's conscience.

Robert W. Peckham

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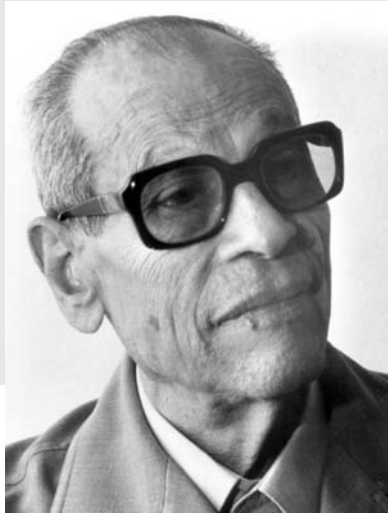
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What was the basis of Louis MacNeice's concern about his "mixed Irish and British cultural inheritance"?
- How relatively socialist was MacNeice with respect to his literary friends?
- What has been lost in the virtual end of radio drama as practiced by MacNeice?
- How does the form of "The Sunlight on the Garden" support its thesis?
- Does MacNeice supply or suggest positive answers to the questions raised by "The British Museum Reading Room."
- Assess MacNeice's success as his "community's conscience."



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## NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

**Born:** Cairo, Egypt  
December 11, 1911

**Died:** Cairo, Egypt  
August 30, 2006

*Mahfouz's skillfully crafted novels offer a large cast of urban Muslims who are challenged to respond to social and political transformations in Egypt.*

### BIOGRAPHY

No authoritative biography has been written about Naguib Mahfouz (MAHK-fewz). Egyptian culture respects privacy. The celebrated writer, though accessible, assumed an impersonal role. After accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, Mahfouz offered only glimpses of his experiences.

Mahfouz was born on December 11, 1911, in Gamaliya, a middle-class quarter of Cairo. His grandparents were merchants; his father was a government clerk. When he was six years old, his father became business manager for a copper merchant, and the family moved to a fashionable suburb of Cairo.

The youngest of seven children (four girls and three boys), who was born ten years after the next-youngest child, he developed a close relationship with his mother. He lived with her until his marriage in 1954. She cultivated his love for history and literature, teaching him folk songs and stories and taking him to museums and the pyramids. She also instilled in him an appreciation for music; he studied at the Institute of Arabic Music, where he learned to play the *qanun*, a stringed instrument.

As a teenager, he played soccer, went to the cinema, and explored the streets and cafés in old Cairo neighborhoods. There he gleaned materials for stories, which he began writing at age seventeen. In secondary school, he liked philosophy, English, and French. An avid reader of English fic-

tion, he would rework detective novels, substituting Egyptian characters and situations. While a university student, he translated books to improve his English and was able to publish his Arabic translation of an English study on ancient Egypt.

In 1930, he enrolled in the undergraduate program in philosophy at Cairo University. After receiving his bachelor's degree in 1934, he enrolled in a master's program in philosophy. Meanwhile, he published essays in the monthly *al-Marifa* on diverse philosophers, including two who have influenced his thinking: Henri-Louis Bergson and William James. Mahfouz planned to write but did not complete a thesis on aesthetics about the concept of beauty in Islamic philosophy. Instead, he took a job at the university and at night pursued a literary vocation. He wrote for at least two hours a day and studied the works of both Arab and Western masters.

Mahfouz worked in the offices of the university administrators until 1939, when he embarked on a long career as a civil servant in several agencies. He worked for the Ministry of Endowment Estates and later served in the loan department of charitable foundations. In 1955, he was transferred to the Ministry of Information, where he performed such tasks as writing film scripts (many based on his own stories) and managing book publication. Promoted to director of the cinema organization, he supervised film production. He retired from government service in 1972.

Unlike some writers in Egypt, Mahfouz did not suffer during the regimes of either Gamal Abdel Nasser or Anwar el-Sadat. Mahfouz did not, how-

ever, entirely avoid politics. In 1972, Mahfouz and a group of intellectuals petitioned the Egyptian government to cease its conflicts with Israel. His pro-Western, secular, liberal views infuriated Islam's militant fundamentalists, who censured his fiction as blasphemous and attempted to assassinate him.

Mahfouz and his wife, Atyat, were the parents of two daughters, Fatma and Om-Kalthoum. While his wife maintained traditional customs, both daughters were graduated from the American University in Cairo. After his retirement, Mahfouz followed a daily routine that included breakfast at the Aly Baba café, composing narratives, and preparing a weekly column for the newspaper *Al-Ahram*. His literary credentials confirmed, the master presided regularly at coffee hours and dinners with disciples who wished to converse with him.

In 1957, Mahfouz received the National Prize for Letters for his major work, *Al-Thulāthiya* (1956-1957; Cairo trilogy). In 1972, President Sadat offered him the Collar of the Republic, Egypt's highest honor. In 1988, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. For personal reasons (dislike of travel and physical ailments—diabetes, poor vision, hearing loss), he sent his daughters to Stockholm to accept the prize in the name of Arabic literature. He allocated one-fourth of the prize money to each family member and donated his share to a fund for people with maladies of the kidneys or heart.

In July, 2006, Mahfouz fell and injured his head. He died at the age of ninety-four in a Cairo hospital on August 30, 2006. The following day, he received a state funeral with full military honors in Cairo.

## ANALYSIS

In his novels and short stories, Mahfouz interwove autobiographical and historical facts, the background ranging from rebellions opposing the Hyksos occupation of 1500 B.C.E. to conflicts with Israel in the twentieth century. His works reflected developments in the aesthetic, philosophic, and political thinking in Cairo.

Mahfouz identified his Egyptian masters. One, Taha Husayn, academic and novelist, advocated the primacy of reason over tradition. His adherents campaigned for and were successful in obtaining changes in social structures, creating opportunities in education and employment for men and women. Likewise, Mustafa al-Manfaluti's sketches of daily life instigated social reform. Third, Salama

Mousa fostered Mahfouz's acceptance of scientific socialism, with the works of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx shaping his form of literary realism. Lastly, in seeking stylistic accomplishment in Arabic literature, Mahfouz turned to the prose narratives of the Koran and *The Thousand and One Nights*.

When he abandoned his coursework in philosophy, Mahfouz pursued a self-study program for reading masterpieces of world literature. The Nobel laureate's works reveal the strong influence of Western writers, especially that of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevski, Gustave Flaubert, Émile Zola, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Henry James, and William Faulkner.

In the late 1930's, Mahfouz wrote three historical novels in the romantic style, using Sir Walter Scott's works as models. Fascinated by such archeological discoveries as the tomb of Tutankhamen, he set the action in ancient Egypt, criticizing covertly the Egyptian government of his time. Two of the novels describe despotic pharaohs, who reflect the behavior of King Farouk I. The third describes the Egyptians' triumphant insurrection against the Hyksos rulers, paralleling endeavors in his own times to oust the British occupiers.

Having sanctioned the conventions of literary realism and naturalism, Mahfouz focuses on people from the lower-class quarters of contemporary Cairo. He highlights Muslim religious practices and social customs. Mahfouz's dynamic and unforgettable characters are products of their neighborhood.

In addition to offering veiled criticism of his era, Mahfouz used stylistic techniques in his early period that inform his later works as well. For example, he uses dualistic oppositions, such as old/new, good/evil, light/dark, and chaos/order.

At the opening of *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* (1947; *Midaq Alley*, 1966), an old bard arrives at the café to intone his tales. The men ignore him and listen, instead, to the new radio. He is the first of the numerous people in Mahfouz's fiction who are displaced, rejected, fired, or jilted because of social and political changes. The modern is more interesting than the old; people forgo tradition and disregard ancestors. Good luck and money or material possessions, rather than religious or ethical values, guarantee moral standing.

While Mahfouz did not espouse Zola's theories

of the novel as scientific experiment, the Frenchman's twenty-volume saga on the Rougon-Macquart family informs Mahfouz's masterpiece, the Cairo trilogy, a milestone in the history of the Arabic novel for which he gained honors in Egypt and abroad. Like most of his later works, the trilogy was serialized in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* and then published in book form. Each of the three books of the trilogy takes its title from the name of a street in the quarter of the al-Husayn mosque. The characters live within a rich context of time, place, and heredity. Cultural, intellectual, and political events provide motivations for their actions.

Mahfouz paints with epic grandeur the dilemmas and aspirations of three generations of the family of Ahmad Abd al Jawad, from 1917 to 1944. The first volume, *Bayn al-qaṣrayn* (1956; *Palace Walk*, 1990), focuses on the patriarch's interactions with his wives, mistresses, children, and business associates. The second, *Qaṣr al-shawq* (1957; *Palace of Desire*, 1991), takes place between 1924 and 1927. Named for the street where a character lives, it focuses on the rebellious sons and especially on the emotional and intellectual struggles of Kamal, a university student. The third, *Al-Sukkariya* (1957; *Sugar Street*, 1992), which takes place from 1935 to 1944, offers a stage for the political roles played by the sons of the patriarch's two daughters.

Following the revolution of July 23, 1952, Mahfouz endorsed a Sufi-oriented, democratic view of life. In 1959, he serialized *Awlād Ḥarātīnā* (book, 1967; *Children of Gebelawi*, 1981, also known as *Children of the Alley*, 1996). An allegorical novel advancing a negative view of religions not providing solutions to the problems of existence, it caused much controversy among fundamentalists, who had it banned in Egypt. Mahfouz returned to this topic. In his short stories especially, he examines the estrangement and the loneliness of humanity without God.

In the 1960's, Mahfouz published six novels and two collections of short stories. Most of these works tell about the crisis of intellectuals, who are suffering from disillusionment and despair caused by civil strife, wars with Israel, and other forms of cruelty. Written in an impressionistic style (a few details evoke environment and situations), the novels indict the Egyptian government for failing to assist

leaders of the revolutions. These books include *Al-Liṣṣ wa-al-kilāb* (1961; *The Thief and the Dogs*, 1984), *Al-Summān wa-al-kharīf* (1962; *Autumn Quail*, 1985), *Al-Ṭarīq* (1964; *The Search*, 1987), *Al-Shaḥḥādh* (1965; *The Beggar*, 1986), *Mirāmār* (1967; *Miramar*, 1978), and *Tharthara fawq al-Nīl* (1966; *Adrift on the Nile*, 1993). The Nobel committee praised the structure of *Adrift on the Nile*, in which members of Cairo's intelligentsia assemble on a houseboat on the Nile and, in drug-induced stupor, ridicule bureaucracy and Nasser's regime.

Mahfouz adapts psychoanalytical methods to disclose the inner lives of his alienated characters, who seek self-justification. Mahfouz uses the stream-of-consciousness technique. A character's ruminations unveil his inner world. Mahfouz also subscribes to Proust's use of interior monologue, which discloses a character's associative reactions to a sensory stimulus.

The works produced during the 1970's and the 1980's also reflect on political issues. They also deal with quests; characters search for the father, for honor, or for political identity. *Malḥamat al-ḥarāfīsh* (1977; *The Harafish*, 1994) is an epic of the common people who are oppressed by poverty, but who also suffer from vices (pride, dishonesty, lust, greed) that are sources of cruelty and obstacles to greatness.

Mahfouz experimented with conventions of narration. For example, he used surrealistic techniques. In many stories, he used the narrative techniques of the Arabic tradition to which he is heir. These stories have a loose, episodic structure and rely on accumulation of details to produce a roundness of vision. For the most part, however, Mahfouz's works are tightly constructed and offer a cohesively unified worldview. The beginning announces the principal themes that are woven throughout the text, and the end reiterates them.

Most Egyptians embraced Mahfouz's works, either in printed form or in the films based on his stories. Mahfouz created filmscripts, as well as plays, out of many of his prose works, and some of his narratives reflect his experiences as a screenwriter. Cinematic techniques are evident in *Afrāh al-qubbah* (1981; *Wedding Song*, 1984). His theatrical experiences also inform this work, which is presented in dialogue form.



## PALACE WALK

**First published:** *Bayn al-qasrayn*, 1956  
(English translation, 1990)

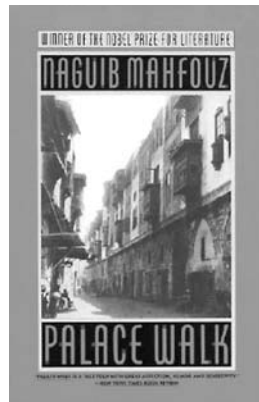
**Type of work:** Novel

*Egyptians prefer this volume of the trilogy, which is about a Cairo family, their social customs, cultural values, and political concerns.*

Family conflicts parallel political turmoil in *Palace Walk*, which covers the period between November 10, 1917 and April 8, 1919. Great Britain opposed, at that time, Egypt's request for independence. The novel focuses on the patriarch, Al-Sayyid (the master) Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, a middle-aged merchant. In his comfortable home at Bayna al-qasrayn, the martinet imposes strict standards of behavior on his family, upholding traditional values, which are undergoing change. Al-Sayyid's personality, however, has other facets. In his house, he forbids music, considered unreligious, but he is an expert on music. His new mistress is a singer. One son, Yasin, learns of Al-Sayyid's philandering and is shocked to witness his father's gaiety and singing. At the end of the novel, Al-Sayyid is shocked to learn that another son, Kamal, has inherited his fine voice.

Al-Sayyid married his wife, Amina, daughter of a sheikh, when she was thirteen. He trained her to submit to his rule, for he had failed to do so with his first wife, Yasin's free-spirited mother. Grateful to be Al-Sayyid's only wife, Amina considers welcoming him home at midnight her duty. She nevertheless resents his spending evenings out and suspects that he lives a different life with his friends.

Mahfouz, examining the rights of women, begins the novel from Amina's point of view. Her tasks—caring for five children and running the household with the help of a maid and two daughters—are dull, but she finds solace in passages from the Koran, which are woven throughout the novel.



Sequestered, she watches the male members of the family leave the house from behind the latticed balcony, which conceals the women from public view. For diversion, she tends to her rooftop garden and looks at the neighborhood and its minarets. She has left home twice in the past twenty-five years, veiled and accompanied by her husband, to visit her mother.

The major event in the novel involves Amina's leaving the house. When her husband is away on business, she and her youngest son, Kamal, go to al-Husayn mosque. On their return, she is hit by an automobile, a symbol of scientific progress. Al-Sayyid, calm until her recovery, banishes her to her mother's house. The sons visit her in secret. Her husband invites her back because of social obligations, arranging marriages for their daughters.

*Palace Walk* ends with jubilation in Cairo but sorrow for Al-Sayyid's family. The nationalists victorious, Fahmy asks his father to forgive him for having defied his orders not to participate in the revolt. Fahmy then leaves to celebrate Sa'd Zaghlul's return from exile. The British open fire on the demonstration, and Fahmy is killed. Students inform Al-Sayyid, who must go to face his wife's grief as well as another challenge to his authority. Unlike his return in chapter 1, in which he receives respect, he is not expected at the coffee hour. He is disoriented when he hears Kamal's song, and he realizes that the family disobeys his codes of behavior in his absence. Throughout the novel, the ingenuous, modern child, Kamal, who is the chief protagonist of the second novel of *Al-Thulathiya*, serves as a foil for the duplicitous father.

## THE THIEF AND THE DOGS

**First published:** *Al-Liṣṣ wa-al-kilāb*, 1961  
(English translation, 1984)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Mahfouz offers a psychological study of an idealistic revolutionary who refuses to adapt to change and must be judged a rebel and a thief.*

Following Western conventions, time in *The Thief and the Dogs* is marked by the rising and setting sun. The novel begins on the morning Said

Mahran is released from prison, after a four-year sentence for robbery, and it ends with his death approximately seventeen days later. This framework points to Mahfouz's source, the case of Ahmad Amin Sulayman, a criminal who tried to kill his adulterous wife and her paramour. The police killed Sulayman on April 1, 1960.

In the exposition, Said walks from prison to his old home in Cairo, and, en route, he offers his self-justification in an internal monologue. Once home, he plans to demand two things: his books and Sana, his six-year-old daughter. He also plans to take revenge on Ilish Sidra, an associate who turned Said in and who then, after Said's incarceration, secured everything that Said had—home, money, and his wife, Nabawiyya. While his neighbors greet him respectfully, the police, who are providing Ilish with protection, are hostile. Unfortunately, Sana has ruined his books, and she is startled when her father talks to her. Her look of rejection saddens Said.

Said visits Ali al-Junaydi, his late father's religious counselor. The Sufi sheikh offers him food, advice, and sanctuary. Said accepts the hospitality and spends his first night of freedom at the sheikh's house. Within the next three weeks, he returns there twice, after criminal deeds. The sheikh's lessons in ethics enable the reader to judge Said's acts. On Said's last visit, a gathering of men chant verses. Mahfouz records a poem on the passage of time and the vanity of human pursuits, which suggests analogies to Said's situation.

Wishing to be a journalist, Said goes to Rauf Ilwan, his mentor in both socialist ideologies and crime. Now living in a neighborhood that they used to burglarize, the editor hands Said cash but refuses to give the thief a job. Such treachery is unpardonable; Said must fight this dog as well.

Two people who live on the fringes of the city and of society help him to effectuate his plans. Nur, a prostitute, offers him shelter, food, and companionship while he is hiding from the police. Tarzan, café owner and pariah, gets him a gun. According to Said, fate and scoundrels foil his schemes. Rauf catches him breaking into his house. Said's bullet misses its target and fells Rauf's porter. Said kills an innocent man instead of Ilish, who has relocated. The police trap Said in the cemetery, where their dogs "hound him down." In a final review of his ideals, he recalls Sana's rejecting gaze. He renounces

rebellion and succumbs beside a tomb. Said's final reflections might be considered an allusion to the disillusionment of Egyptian intellectuals whose revolution, in July, 1952, failed.

## RESPECTED SIR

**First published:** *Ḥaḍrat al-muḥtaram*, 1975  
(English translation, 1986)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The protagonist's mission to obtain the promotions that define his sense of respectability requires sacrificing his other interests to his career.*

The first novel written in the ironic mode in Arabic literature, *Respected Sir* demonstrates how an individual's character and family background may determine his or her achievements. The first chapter introduces the protagonist, Othman Bayyumi, as well as the key topics. Othman is among a group of new employees who are taken to meet the director general in his office. The only words that the director utters announce changes in the educational system, a major concern in the novel. He says that students currently receive diplomas, rather than primary and secondary certificates, so he is surprised to see that Othman has a certificate. Hired for the lowest position because of his lack of education, Othman is overwhelmed by this experience. He describes the office in flowery religious diction. Othman's reverence for an ordinary office highlights the novel's irony and warns the reader to keep an intellectual distance from Othman, who yearns to become director general.

Othman's father wanted him to work rather than go to school. He considered his son educated once Othman knew prayers and passages from the Koran. The father, however, followed his sheikh's advice and sent Othman to school. The best student in the neighborhood, Othman could not complete secondary school because both parents died, and he had to work. Three siblings, who link this novel to previous works, also died. One brother was killed in a demonstration, another died in prison, and his sister died of typhoid fever.

In painting the bureaucrat's climb to the top and the politics of government hierarchy, Mahfouz

draws on his experiences as a civil servant. Details from the author's career are found in Othman's tasks (preparing translations, writing a newspaper column), his interests (studying English and French), and his temperament.

Mahfouz is not sympathetic, however, toward Othman, even if they have things in common. Othman is an excellent worker and is promoted with the shifting of positions. The self-made man loses all sense of measure and fails to understand that stress may kill him before he reaches the top. In his ambition and pride, Othman eschews ethical principles.

As part of his goal to become director general, Othman's desire to marry becomes an all-consuming pursuit. With the possibility of having a powerful position, he cannot marry his childhood sweetheart. He needs someone who can help further his career. Matchmakers, however, cannot find anyone from a good family who can marry him, because of his humble background. He treats a potential mate, a schoolmistress, with great cruelty. He fails to understand that his raping her, rather than bad

luck or the unjust social order, causes her downfall. He marries Qadriyya, a prostitute, because prostitution is to be abolished, and he wishes to make her a respectable woman. In middle age, he longs for children, so he marries a young civil servant with a bachelor's degree in history. This woman, Radiya, is also an opportunist. When convalescing from a heart attack, he learns that she married him because of his prestigious job. He is stunned and loses his will to live, even though he has just been promoted to director general.

## SUMMARY

Naguib Mahfouz was a masterful storyteller. He used his literature to comment on social injustices and current events. His fiction projected a human dimension to history by showing how government decisions affect the people. In depicting alienated people confronted with existential problems, the Nobel laureate transcended the boundaries of his country and expressed issues of universal concern.

Irene E. Gnarra

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- The reputation of Naguib Mahfouz in Egypt is puzzling. Was he a trimmer (someone who expediently changed his opinions)? What principles governed his social conscience?
- What do Mahfouz's literary techniques suggest about his literary training and influences?
- How does Amina's situation in *Palace Walk* parallel Egypt's in its dependence on Great Britain?
- What psychological perspective does Mahfouz employ in *The Thief and the Dogs*?
- How does Mahfouz use his knowledge of civil service in his novels?





## STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

**Born:** Paris, France  
March 18, 1842

**Died:** Valvins, France  
September 9, 1898

*Mallarmé drew on imagery employed in traditional forms by the Romantic poets to create a new, complex poetic expression moving toward free verse. His use of images that take on detailed meanings from their contexts established the genre of Symbolism as central to modern poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Stéphane Mallarmé (ma-lahr-MAY) was born on March 18, 1842, in Paris at 12 rue Laferrière. He was the son of Numa-Florence-Joseph Mallarmé, a government administrator, and his wife, the former Elizabeth-Félicie Desmoulins. His mother died when the poet was only five years old, and Stéphane was then raised by his grandmother. He later attended the Lycée de Sens, where he began to write his first poetry.

In 1861, when the second edition of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*, 1931) was published, Mallarmé came under this literary influence that would inspire much of his early composition. The following year, he also discovered the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and published his own first poetry and prose in the small periodical *Le Papillon*. In 1862, Mallarmé was attracted to a young German girl, Maria Gerhard, with whom he traveled to London. When Mallarmé returned to France, he was certified to teach English in secondary schools, an employment which he pursued and which supported his poetic activity through much of his life.

On August 10, 1863, Mallarmé married Maria Gerhard. They moved to Tournon, in the Ardèche region of France, where Mallarmé began teaching English. They moved again, to Avignon in 1867 and then back to Paris in 1871. Finally, in 1875 they settled on the rue de Rome, where over the years

Mallarmé would entertain many of the leading writers of Paris. From 1880 on, he was at home there every Tuesday for literary conversations. It is quite unfortunate that detailed records of these discussions were not made, as they undoubtedly explored many issues central to the evolution of modern poetry.

Mallarmé's daughter, Geneviève, was born on November 19, 1864, and a son, Anatole, followed on October 25, 1871. Mallarmé would be deeply upset by Anatole's death just before his eighth birthday on October, 6, 1879.

Mallarmé maintained extensive friendships and correspondences with other authors and artists of his time. Having begun under the influences of Baudelaire and Poe, he was soon linked to the poets Théodore de Banville, Catulle Mendès, Auguste, comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and others. Perhaps Mallarmé could not refuse his role as a teacher. Even when he personally found difficulties in expressing himself in poetry, he remained extremely supportive of a whole generation of younger writers.

Poetry underwent a significant change in the nineteenth century. A form of expression that had been personal and emotional during the Romantic period became increasingly philosophical and concerned with the expression of abstract ideas. Mallarmé was at the center of this transformation, and his intellectual biography is increasingly dominated by his attempt to write what he called his "Great Work." Frustrated at the attempt to put tran-

scendent ideas into words, Mallarmé went through periods when he experienced a depressing inability to write. Images of blankness and sterility haunted him as he contemplated the emptiness of the untouched, white page.

In contrast to such deeply intellectual preoccupations, however, Mallarmé was capable of considerable productivity in varied styles calculated to appeal to popular tastes. In 1874 and 1875, for example, he published a fashion magazine, *La Dernière Mode*, for which he wrote a good portion of the copy under a variety of pen names. These essays, intended to advise women on everyday matters, such as fashion, their children, and their homes, are perhaps as far from philosophical abstractions as writing could be. Mallarmé not only dealt with such subjects, but he projected a variety of personas to go with the various identities he assumed in order to represent women of varying social stations.

Such was the dualism of Mallarmé's life. On the one hand, he was the provident family man settled in his teaching position and dealing easily with the practicalities of life. On the other, he lived in his own intellectual world. The dissolute life of Paris that claimed many of his contemporaries had no appeal to him. He sought a different sort of intoxication in imagined departures toward his poetic vision.

Even though Mallarmé found understanding in his circle of literary friends, none of them seemed to share his complete vision of poetry. In "Prose (pour des esseintes)" (1884), a poem he addressed to the fictional hero of the novel *À rebours* (1884; *Against the Grain*, 1922), written by his friend Joris-Karl Huysmans, Mallarmé invoked a character who had retreated from human society. Mallarmé never retreated physically, but he knew that his poetry was a world apart. At his death, at Valvins, France, on September 9, 1898, he left many manuscripts, including notes on what was to have been his Great Work. His instructions to his family, however, were that they should burn it all. He must have felt that no literary executor could carry out the work he had undertaken.

The sad paradox remains that, in a sense, much of the literature in the following century evolved from Mallarmé's work. Younger poets studied what work remained and followed what they perceived to be Mallarmé's intentions.

## ANALYSIS

As a central figure in Parisian literary circles for much of his life, Stéphane Mallarmé was influenced by and in turn influenced other poets. During his lifetime, poetry was evolving from the regular forms and clearly expressed emotions of Romantic verse to the fluid and often more obscure forms that would produce modern free verse and the prose poem.

The major influence on Mallarmé's early poetry was the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. The first edition of Baudelaire's collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857; *Flowers of Evil*, 1931) was withdrawn from circulation in 1857 because censors ruled that six of its poems were obscene. When the second, censored but greatly expanded edition appeared in 1861, Mallarmé was among the numerous poets in both France and England who were deeply impressed by Baudelaire's use of imagery.

During 1841 and 1842, Baudelaire sailed around Africa to Mauritius. While Baudelaire had originally resisted making this trip, the memories of tropical landscapes he retained from it later seemed to represent an earthly paradise contrasted with the cold and foggy climate of Paris. Contrasting groups of positive and negative images in *Flowers of Evil* reinforce the meaning of each image because of its role in the larger context.

Mallarmé took from Baudelaire both the pattern of repeating images to build up nuances of their meanings, and, especially in his early poetry, a good number of the images themselves. "Brise marine" (1866; "Sea Breeze") uses generalized ocean imagery to evoke a departure from Mallarmé's everyday life. He says he would like to flee to a place where birds are drunken as they fly over unknown seas. The birds draw on an image Baudelaire used repeatedly for the attempt to transcend the limits of the earth. The birds' flight represents both a rising toward heaven and the poet's flight of poetic inspiration. Drunkenness for Baudelaire also meant much more than intoxication. It could be any kind of intense engagement and often involved a kind of escapism.

The scene from which Mallarmé departs also involves concepts from Baudelaire. In the second part of "Sea Breeze," Mallarmé suffers from feelings of "ennui"—a word that means much more than boredom and which Baudelaire had identified with a monster that caused human suffering.

Mallarmé's suffering here involves images of domesticity, including his garden, his wife, and his daughter. However, another image intrudes that had not appeared in Baudelaire's work, the empty whiteness of the page. This image, entirely Mallarmé's own, represents his fear of being unable to write, to soil the white page. This fear might lead him to flee, even if his departure at the end of the poem is associated with the disaster of a shipwreck.

The ideas and expression of "Sea Breeze" are easy to understand compared with those of "Hérodiade" (1869), a poem Mallarmé began early but rewrote often, publishing only a part of it during his lifetime. The poem draws on the biblical story of Salome as told in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In the biblical story, however, the primary action is that of Herodias, the wife of King Herod. Here the entire poem concerns her daughter's dance and the subsequent beheading of John the Baptist. The narration is not clearly spelled out but conveyed in three scenes using the dramatic voices of the dancer (here renamed Hérodiade), her nurse, and John the Baptist.

The first scene, a long monologue by the nurse, suggests through an elaborate series of nature images the drama about to unfold. The second, a dialogue between Hérodiade and her nurse as Hérodiade prepares to dance, uses many abstractions, including images of gardens, light, and feminine beauty to suggest the dual suffering of Hérodiade, who does not want to dance, and of John the Baptist, who will die. The third scene, a brief lyric ostensibly uttered by John's head as it falls from his body, conveys the tension of the moment but ends with a hint of salvation.

The new style developed in this poem relies on images to evoke emotions and on shifting sun and shadow to represent the passage of time without ever stating exactly what is going on. In such a composition, it helps to have a biblical story as background. Mallarmé can elaborate on it while relying on the readers' prior knowledge to furnish the exposition. In later poems, Mallarmé would require his readers to work out the meanings from relationships among images often used in unconventional ways and with no background story.

The sonnet "Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" (1885; "The virgin, vivacious and beautiful today . . ."), a poem with no separate title

but which is referred to by its first line, incorporates all of this difficulty, along with another trait of Mallarmé's writing described as his broken syntax. For example, "today," a word often used as an adverb, is used here as a noun since it is modified by an adjective. With such substitutions, plus frequent rearrangement of normal word order, Mallarmé made his poems even more mysterious.

This sonnet continues the theme of the white page haunting Mallarmé with poetic sterility. Here a complete white-on-white image develops of a swan trapped in the ice of a frozen lake because he had failed to migrate in time to a warmer climate. The day cited in the first line is actually the rising sun of a new day that the swan hopes will melt the lake and set him free. Readers know that this hope will not be realized, however, and that the swan will remain frozen in the ice, just as the poet must continue to struggle with his inability to write.

Failure to write would not have been so bad if Mallarmé had not had a dream of a Great Work through which he desired to make a definitive poetic statement. Such a vast enterprise was doomed to fail, but one text survives that has been regarded as Mallarmé's closest attempt to write the Great Work. *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, 1897 (*A Dice-Throw*, 1958; also as *Dice Thrown Never Will Annul Chance*, 1965) says that throwing dice in a game of chance, an act clearly representing poetic creation, will never abolish fate. That is to say that writing one poem or casting one number can never be definitive because fate may substitute other poems or other numbers.

To write *A Dice-Throw*, Mallarmé moved to an even more advanced style. He scattered words and phrases in four different typefaces across ten sets of double pages composed of a verse and following recto. Seemingly random groupings of words coalesce into constellations of meaning that, at the end of the poem, point to a fixed point, an idea that transcends the text, just as the stars of the Big Dipper can locate the North Star that lies beyond it. Such innovative manipulation of text was central to the development not only of the fluid forms of much modern poetry but also to the reader-response theories of criticism that hold the reader responsible for finding meaning in an initially confusing text.

## THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

**First published:** *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, 1876 (English translation, 1956)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A faun awakens from what may have been a dream.*

Among Stéphane Mallarmé's poems, *The Afternoon of a Faun* has become especially well known, probably because of the 1894 musical composition by Claude Debussy that it inspired. In interpreting the text, the reader might wish for the immediacy of music that, unlike the poem, need not be translated into a specific meaning.

The poem represents an extended monologue by a faun who awakes from a nap on a warm summer afternoon and reacts to the sight of two beautiful nymphs. Because a faun, a mythic creature traditionally portrayed as half man and half goat, is associated with strong sexual desires, the faun desires the nymphs in their traditional form as beautiful maidens. A problem occurs, however, when he is not sure whether or not they exist. They may have crossed the field just as he woke up, or they may have been creatures of his dream.

Just as the faun must sort through his perceptions to determine whether he really saw the nymphs, the reader must sort through Mallarmé's multiple images to understand what is happening. From the opening line, when the faun refers to "these nymphs," one wonders what the reference means since there has been no previous context. Then nature images, roses for the nymphs and night for the faun's doubt, build up the more detailed vision.

At the end of the poem, the faun has not regained his sight of the nymphs and thus bids them farewell. Other images referring to the faun himself, ripe fruit suggestive of his sensuality and his own heavy body succumbing again to sleep, replace the former images of female beauty. The evolution of the faun's thought is conveyed by the symbolic values of the images.

## LES POÉSIES DE STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

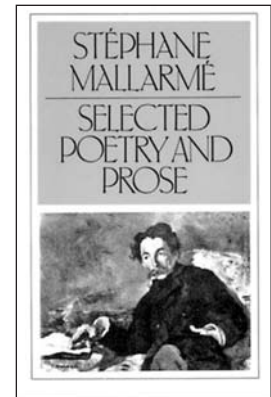
**First published:** 1887 (English translation collected in *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry in English Translation with French Originals*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*This collected volume of his poetry includes Mallarmé's best-known works.*

In *Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé*, Mallarmé combined examples of his various poetic styles and documented his own intense relationship with the creative process. Throughout the collection, the poems' moments of renewed optimism collide with emblems of failure.

Early poems composed in the 1860's typify the period when Mallarmé was under the influence of Baudelaire. "Le Sonneur" ("The Bell Ringer") uses both the sonnet form and contrast of high and low objects that had appeared often in *Flowers of Evil*. Here the octave of the sonnet describes the situation of a child who has been sent to ring a church bell to announce the Angelus. The call to prayer rings forth in the morning air, but the child himself, inside the church, can hear it only faintly.



In the sestet, Mallarmé likens himself to the bell ringer in that he can not hear the poetry he longs to create. Unable to sound out his ideal, he desires night, emblematic of death, and considers suicide. While this sonnet expresses Mallarmé's continuing desire, the use of imagery in which the bell ringer and night are explicitly paired with the poet and death marks this as an early composition.

A similar theme and even more Baudelairian images appear in "L'Azur" ("The Azure"). Mallarmé sees the powerless poet traversing a sterile desert, mocked by an azure sky that is described in terms of flowers. Flowers, emblematic of both life in nature and poetic productivity, remain in an

inaccessible, heavenly realm. By the end of the poem, however, Mallarmé incorporates a musical element that goes beyond the visually paired images. The sky itself reasserts its presence like a ringing bell that haunts the poet.

As Mallarmé's style matured he incorporated more varied and less defined allusions in his verse. Another sonnet, "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe" ("The Tomb of Edgar Poe"), commemorates the American poet in a style that requires the reader to interpret its meaning. When Mallarmé writes that eternity has made the poet even more himself, readers must interpret "eternity" as meaning death and be aware that Edgar Allan Poe's poetry was characterized by themes involving death.

Poe also represents the superiority and the isolation of the artist. The public appears with the classical image of the hydra, a serpent with multiple heads that may represent a crowd. The public does not understand the poet, who gives a new, superior meaning to common language.

Mallarmé seeks above all to honor poetry and the poet. In the sestet, he states that he would commemorate Poe with a monument made of the stone of a meteorite, a thing fallen to earth from heaven and thus representative of the link the poet establishes between this life and a transcendent vision.

## DIVAGATIONS

**First published:** 1897 (English translation, 2007)

**Type of work:** Essays

*This essay collection presents many of Mallarmé's ideas about literature.*

The title of Mallarmé's *Divagations* might be translated as "ramblings" and serves to unite a varied series of prose pieces presenting both literary history and criticism. In bringing together a number of pieces, some of which were previously published elsewhere, Mallarmé sought to recognize the foremost poets and artists of his time.

The first to be recognized is appropriately Baudelaire. In "Autrefois, en marge d' un Baudelaire" ("Formerly, on the Margin of a Baudelaire"), Mallarmé recognized the intense poetic inspiration

and use of nature imagery that had influenced his own early work. After this a series of essays, "Quelques médaillons et portraits en pied" ("A Few Medallions and Full-Length Portraits") describes the lives and work of poets and artists Mallarmé admired. The first is his good friend Auguste, comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, followed by Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. The list continues to include English-language poets Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Poe and concludes with the painters John McNeill Whistler, Édouard Manet, and Berthe Morisot.

After this literary and artistic section, Mallarmé turns to the theater with an essay on Richard Wagner. Mallarmé especially admired Wagner for combining the arts of music and theater. Next, a series of essays, "Crayonné au théâtre" ("Jottings at the Theater"), analyzes the nature of this public form of literary expression with special attention to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. 1600-1601, pb. 1603), various forms of dance, and pantomime.

Mallarmé tried constantly to define literature. In "Jottings at the Theater," he recognized differences of national styles in contrasting Wagner's work to French poetry. Still, Mallarmé sought a new absolute form of expression yet to be achieved. In "Crise de vers" ("Crisis of Verses"), he outlined the changes occurring in French poetry as new writers moved on from the influence of Victor Hugo. Next, "Quant au livre" ("As for the Book") explores the public role of literature and "Offices" ("Holy Rites") the religious nature of literature. Finally, "Grands Faits divers" ("Great News Items") gathers various influences from Mallarmé's life that had been important to his writing.

## SUMMARY

Stéphane Mallarmé occupies a pivotal place in modern literature. After the Romantic movement had freed poetry from earlier traditional forms, it provided Mallarmé both with an important set of nature images and with a literary atmosphere that encouraged him to use images more innovatively. The resulting poetry explores both the free forms and the linking of subjective narratives to philosophical absolutes that would inform poetry for subsequent generations.

Dorothy M. Betz



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Stéphane Mallarmé believed that artists are detached from the rest of society. What effect does his view have on his writing?
- How does Mallarmé attach varied meanings to images? Is this rooted in shared human perceptions?
- How important is rhyme? What defines a work as a poem if Mallarmé does not use rhyme?
- If Mallarmé's text is confusing, to what extent are we justified in reading ideas into it?
- Mallarmé sought to write a "Great Work." Is it possible for a poem to express a single view that everyone will share?

## OSIP MANDELSTAM

**Born:** Warsaw, Poland, Russia (now in Poland)

January 15, 1891

**Died:** Vtoraya Rechka, near Vladivostok, Soviet Union (now in Russia)

Probably December 27, 1938

*Mandelstam, one of modern Russia's best poets, won respect both at home and abroad for his uncommon poetic skills.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Osip Emilievich Mandelstam (muhn-dyihl-SHTAHM) was born on January 15, 1891, in Warsaw, Poland (then part of the Russian empire), to a Jewish family from the province of Kurland. His father, Emil Veniaminovich Mandelstam, had been intended to be a rabbi but became a leather merchant instead. He was a highly literate merchant, reading German poets and William Shakespeare in German. His mother, Flora Osipovna Verblovskaya, was a native of Vilno (now Vilnius, Lithuania). The family was not very religious and this attitude was transferred to the young Mandelstam. The family moved to St. Petersburg when Mandelstam was very young; he would consider it his native city. He ran away to Berlin at the age of fourteen, where he studied Friedrich Schiller and the eighteenth century philosophers. After moving on to Paris, he became acquainted with the literature of the French Symbolists. His early sojourn abroad led to his vacillation between the Jewish atmosphere at home—"the Judaic chaos," as he called it—and the West European culture embodied by Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, by Catholic universalism, and by "the aristocracy of the spirit" of the Middle Ages. In addition, he fell under the influence of kindred Russian thinkers, such as Pyotr Chaadayev.

Mandelstam began to write poetry in 1908, and he published his first poems in 1910. He was immediately acclaimed for his unquestionable talent and the innovative spirit of his poetry. He soon joined a literary group called the Acmeists and quickly became one of their leaders. As a member of that group, he published his first book of poems,

*Kamen* (1913; *Stone*, 1981). When the Russian Revolution of 1917 broke out, Mandelstam was ambivalent, having been an apolitical person all his life. He gave the impression of accepting and rejecting it and in the process was arrested by both sides. He changed his domicile several times and finally settled in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg). His second book of poems, *Tristia* (1922; English translation, 1973), was published there. During the period of New Economic Policy (1921-1928), he was very active writing poetry, prose, and literary essays, while at the same time translating French, German, and English works. In his autobiography, *Shum vremeni* (1925; *The Noise of Time*, 1965), he captures the spirit of Jewish life in prerevolutionary Russia in a witty and sensitive style. Another prose work, *Yegipetskaya marka* (1928; *The Egyptian Stamp*, 1965), deals essentially with similar material. A book of critical essays, *O poezii* (1928; *About Poetry*, 1977), as well as the essay *Razgovor o Dante* (1967; *Conversation About Dante*, 1965), reveals Mandelstam as a sensitive and somewhat unorthodox literary critic. His prose is available in *Sobranie sochinenii* (1955, 1964-1971, 1981; *Collected Works*, 1967-1969).

After 1928, only a few poems and prose pieces appeared in periodicals. His last published work, *Puteshestviye v Armeniyu* (1933; *Journey to Armenia*, 1973), records his impressions of a trip to Armenia, where he tried to escape from his political detractors in Moscow. The reason for this dearth of publication after 1928 was that Mandelstam had already become a marked man. He was an anachronism in the changed atmosphere of postrevolutionary Russia and he increasingly expressed dissatisfaction

with the Communist regime. To no one's surprise, he was arrested in 1934 for having written a derisive epigram about Joseph Stalin. With the help of some fellow writers, notably Boris Pasternak, he was released after he had attempted suicide, only to be confined in the central Russian city of Voronezh. He was allowed to return to Moscow after three years. In May, 1938, he was arrested again and this time he was sent to a concentration camp in Siberia. Exhausted physically and mentally, on the verge of insanity, beaten by his fellow inmates in the camp, suffering from a persecution complex suggesting that he was about to be poisoned, and scavenging his food from garbage dumps, he died a pitiful death at Vtoraya Rechka, near Vladivostok, probably on December 27, 1938. His death was unknown to the outside world until many years later.

Much about Mandelstam's difficult years in the last decade of his life is known primarily because of his wife Nadezhda Yakovlevna, who in two volumes of her memoirs recorded his heroic struggle to survive against a monstrous adversary and who also preserved most of his unpublished poetry.

#### ANALYSIS

When Mandelstam first appeared as a poet, he was a shy young man in awe of the great achievements of the Russian poets who had gone before him. There were the poets of the nineteenth century and those of the brief but glorious reign of the Symbolists in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. He did not succumb to the lure of Symbolism, however; instead he chose to join the Acmeists, a small but talented group of poets attracted to the notions of clarity of expression (as a reaction to the Hermeticism of the Symbolists) and of high craftsmanship. He quickly became one of the leaders of that group. At the same time, Mandelstam crafted his own ideas regarding poetry in his prose works and criticism. Deeply rooted in the Russian poetic tradition and magnificently versed in classical literature (hence his love for a mythical Mediterranean culture), he nevertheless developed his own poetic idiom and become one of the leading poets of all Russian literature.

Mandelstam was proud of his Jewish background, but it was not easy for Jews to establish their cultural identity in Russia. When he discovered the world of antiquity during his sojourns in

Germany and France, he adopted it as part of his cultural inheritance, at the same time trying to reconcile it with the Jewish and Russian traditions of his youth. It is no surprise that his poems are suffused with Greek and Roman poetry, history, and mythology and with Christian culture. Later, when his concern with the perennial themes of beauty, death, love, and nature were obliged to give way to the political demands of the Soviet period, Mandelstam was forced to camouflage these abiding themes.

Mandelstam's early poetry is characterized by brevity of form, clarity of image and rhythm, and a certain coldness and solemnity in the treatment of themes. Although he maintained these characteristics throughout his career, as he matured his poetic acumen grew in the thematic sphere and his technical abilities expanded. References to both antiquity and the present—Homer, Ovid, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Notre Dame, the churches of Moscow, the building of St. Petersburg, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, and the works of Jean Racine and Charles Dickens, to give only a few examples—attest to his intellectual development. He used these examples not only to show cosmopolitan spirit but also to identify them with his innermost concerns and dilemmas, especially in the Soviet period.

The change of political system in Russia after the revolution was to have profound consequences not only in Mandelstam's poetry but also in his life. It is futile to conjecture what his further development would have been like had it not been for the revolution and his untimely death. The constant struggle for survival, as dramatically described in his wife's memoirs, and the constant atmosphere of fear and uncertainty led to a mood of sadness and forlornness in him. They also led to the poet's increasing withdrawal from the outside world into an inner realm to which he clung despite all the dangers and hopelessness. In one untitled poem he complains of the "wolf-century" that has set upon the people and is threatening their existence. He also defiantly says that he is not a "wolf in his blood" and that he cannot do as a wolf does. At the same time he wistfully—and with uncanny premonition—wishes to be transported to Siberia where it is peaceful and beautiful and where the silver foxes roam. The poem in a clear indication that he had become disgusted with his age and had lost

his sense of purpose although not his inner self. Mandelstam's disillusionment with his age is especially evident in the poems he wrote while in exile in Voronezh.

Despite persecution and at times a denial of his existence on the part of the authorities, Mandelstam's works have survived. A long-delayed edition of his poems was published in Leningrad in 1973, long before the fall of the regime that hounded him to death. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, he is regularly published in Russia and discussed as an important writer. His metaphor of a horseshoe in "Nashedshii podkovu" ("The Horseshoe Finder") that was found after many years, polished with wool until it shone, and placed lovingly over a door, has found in the resurgence of Mandelstam's works a prophetic confirmation.

### "THE AGE"

**First published:** "Vek," 1922 (collected in *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilievich Mandelstam*, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem carries on an argument with its time, expressing pessimism at the beginning of a new age.*

There are four stanzas of eight-syllable lines in "The Age." In line 1, the poet addresses his age directly and immediately equates it with a beast ("My age, my beast"); this central metaphor sets the tone for the entire poem. He is puzzled about his age and wonders who can fathom its true nature. He sees that the present world is being built of blood; it is gushing from the throat of the earthly things, so that only a parasite is trembling, in expectation of good things. The mood of the first stanza is bleak.

That mood continues in stanza 2. The poet maintains that every creature must carry its backbone and that every wave plays with this invisible spine. He calls the present age an infant and equates it with the tender cartilage of a baby. Life is being sacrificed. To what, the poet does not say, although at the beginning of stanza 3 he speaks of captivity. If one is to liberate himself from this captivity, one must "tie the knotty elbows/ Of days together with a flute." The flute represents poetry.

This is the force that can bring about liberation. The poet again refers to the nature of the age as one of melancholy: an adder in the grass becomes its "golden measure."

In the final stanza, the poet rejoices briefly at a possible salvation that would come when the buds would swell again and the green shoots would spurt, but he quickly reminds the reader that the backbone of the age is broken. He ruefully calls his age both beautiful and pitiful, cruel and weak, looking at the past with a senseless smile, like a beast that, once supple, looks at the tracks of its own paws. The poem ends on a resigned note, seemingly without a solution to the dilemma postulated at the beginning and explored in the middle of the poem.

"The Age" is the testimony of the poet's own encounters with the beast of the new age. Mandelstam believed in the high mission of art, and particularly of poetry, as represented by the flute. Amid the horrors of destruction and the rejection of everything that was not the accepted dogma, he still hoped that art could save humanity. The beast that was once "beautiful" and "supple"—a reference to the unfulfilled promises of the revolution—can now only look at the tracks of its own paws. "The cranium of life has been sacrificed" once again—this time with frightening finality.

### "THE HORSESHOE FINDER"

**First published:** "Nashedshii podkova," 1923 (collected in *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilievich Mandelstam*, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poem

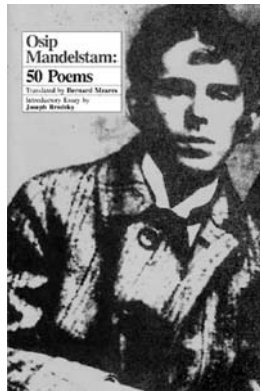
*With an emphasis on history and art, the poet muses on the passing of an era and on the capacity of art to survive through the ages.*

"The Horseshoe Finder" opens with a chorus-like description of a pine forest with numerous tall trees. The chorus looks at the forest, wondering how many ships could be built from these trees and how the ships would fare in storms. The seafarer, "in his thirst for space" and eagerness to go to sea, is also trying to figure out how a ship can be built, comparing the raggedness of the sea to the firmness of the earth.

The point of view of the chorus is maintained in stanza 2. The chorus empathizes with the planks and boards of the ship built long ago, not by the peaceful carpenter of Bethlehem but by another one, the father of wanderings and friend of seafarers, presumably Odysseus. The chorus envisages, now in retrospect, that the boards were once tall trees standing on a mountain ridge. After the introduction, the poet is ready to “tell the story,” but he is uncertain where to begin. The scene shifts to a more modern time, in which everything “cracks and rocks” and the ships are replaced by two-wheeled vehicles breaking themselves to pieces at a racetrack.

In stanza 3, the poet hails the maker of a song, not an anonymous maker but the one who put his name to his or her songs, thus assuring its long life and gaining the laurels reserved for heroes of antiquity. Stanza 5 presents the poet’s musing about the transformation of the air into water, of water into crystal, and finally of crystal into earth, tracing the process throughout history. Unexpectedly, after being concerned with the course of history and the passage of time, in stanza 6 the poet makes a statement that divides the poem in half: “The fragile reckoning of the years of our age is nearing its end.” Expressing gratitude for all that has transpired in the past, the poet, switching to the first person, complains of confusion. The poet has lost count; what was a glorious era now rings hollow. Even though the sound is still ringing, the stallion lies in the dust, unable to run anymore.

At the end, the poet is resigned to fate. The poet has nothing more to say, even though his lips still keep the shape of the last word. Yet not everything is hopeless. Someone finds a horseshoe of the stallion long gone, polishes it, and puts it over the door. Even though time and the era have cut the poet like a coin, so that “there’s not even enough of me left for me,” the final prognosis is that there will still be horseshoes and coins to be found by later generations. Thus, the metaphor of the horseshoe



stands for the glory that has been lost and the value that has been recovered, making this poem, in the last analysis, one of Mandelstam’s more optimistic ones.

## “TRISTIA”

**First published:** 1919 (collected in *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilievich Mandelstam*, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this poem of parting, Mandelstam, through his knowledge of classical antiquity, foreshadows his personal experiences of separation from his loved ones.*

“Tristia,” the title poem of a book published in 1922, reflects the mood of a person leaving his home, city, and possibly, country. The four-stanza poem opens with Mandelstam’s statement that he has learned the “science of parting.” The parting is accompanied by the weeping of women after a long night’s vigil, by the rooster’s crow, and by red eyes gazing into the distance. The women’s lament mingles with the Muses’ song. Many of these details closely follow Ovid’s elegy of the same title.

In stanza 2, the parting is still accompanied by sorrow, uncertainty, and fear. The departing poet watches, like Ovid, the fire burning in the acropolis as he passes by. In the middle of the stanza, however, the poet shifts his vision somewhat and speaks of the dawn of some new light, in accordance with the rooster’s crowing, which normally heralds a new day. This clashes with the poet’s, and Ovid’s, mood of sadness at the beginning of the poem. The poet himself questions this change, using the image of an ox chewing lazily in his stall and of a rooster flapping his wings loudly on the city wall—the former expressing indifference or stoicism, and the latter the dawn of a new, vigorous day.

In stanza 3, the departing one is preoccupied with fresh memories of home, of peaceful and happy activities such as spinning at the loom, for example. He recalls a barefoot Delia—from classical mythology and from Alexander Pushkin—who flies toward him and descends upon him like swans’ down. This leads the poet to muse about the fleeting nature of joy and laughter. Life passes in



anticipation and rediscovery. What has been before, will be repeated. The only real joy is to be found in the act of recognition.

The final stanza tells of a resigned poet, who leaves worry about the future to women. Men are born to fight battles, while women die telling fortunes. The poem ends on a upbeat note, in contrast to the melancholy and sorrow at the outset.

"Tristia" gives expression to Mandelstam's melancholy mixed with stoicism, to his hope mixed with despair, and to his tacit understanding of what life is about. It is one of his most representative poems. At the time he wrote this poem, Mandelstam was subjected to numerous dangers and had several close calls. The possibility of involuntary parting from his family must have occurred to him often. His excellent knowledge of classical literature enabled him to give perfect artistic expression to such thoughts and sentiments. The formal aspects of the poem, typical of Mandelstam, are striking

images and metaphors, a mixture of lyrical and reflective passages, sporadic departures from the main train of thought, frequent interjections from the poet, and a unique rhythm. These features make "Tristia" a perfect example of his craft.

## SUMMARY

"I have studied the science of saying good-bye/ in bareheaded laments at night," Osip Mandelstam states in one of his poems. These lines serve as a summation of his fate as a poet. The harsh realities in the last decades of his life resulted in frequent partings and unfulfilled plans and promises. That he was able to accomplish what he did is a testimonial to his enormous creative power. He left behind a body of sensitive, beautifully crafted poetry and perceptive, highly cerebral prose works, all of which are now greatly admired in his homeland and abroad.

Vasa D. Mihailovich

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What were the literary principles of the Acmeists, whom Osip Mandelstam joined early in his career?
- Which of Mandelstam's initiatives seems the most courageous?
- Examine the theme of war in Mandelstam's poetry.
- Discuss Mandelstam's difficulties in being true both to Russia and his Jewish heritage.
- Mandelstam believed that art could save humanity. To what extent might his poetry be called salvational?
- Contrast the attitudes of the departing poet and the women left at home in Mandelstam's "Tristia."



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## THOMAS MANN

**Born:** Lübeck, Germany

June 6, 1875

**Died:** Zurich, Switzerland

August 12, 1955

*Mann is generally regarded as the finest German prose writer of the twentieth century and the greatest German literary figure since Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Mann (mahn) was born in Lübeck, Germany, on June 6, 1875. He was the son of Johann Heinrich Mann, a wealthy businessman, and Julia da Silva-Bruhns, of Brazilian origin; the Mann family was very much like that described in the author's novel *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie* (1901; English translation, 1924). Thomas was not the only person in his family with literary talent. His older brother, Heinrich, was an important novelist in his own right, and for a time his works were better known than those of Thomas. Mann's father died in 1891, and the family's fortune declined rapidly afterward. Mann attended the University of Munich and was briefly an insurance agent before settling down into his career as a full-time author.

Mann's first publication was a collection of short stories, *Der kleine Herr Friedemann* (1898), and it met with general critical acclaim. Three years later, the novel *Buddenbrooks* firmly established Mann as an important author with an international reputation.

In 1905, Mann married Katja Pringsheim, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish banking family. Because of this marriage and the large sales of his books, Mann became independently wealthy. Together, Thomas and Katja Mann had six children. One of their children, Klaus, became an impor-

tant author in his own right and is best known for his novel *Mephisto* (1936), which details events concerning his sister's unhappy marriage to the famous actor and Nazi collaborator Gustav Gründgens.

The 1920's were particularly fruitful years for Mann. In 1924, he published his novel *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The Magic Mountain*, 1927), and five years later he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Mann family lived in Munich until 1933, when the Nazis came to power. Abhorring the policies of the new regime, Mann became an outspoken proponent of liberal democracy. He was publicly denounced by the new government, and by a large number of creative artists who were sympathetic to the Nazi regime, after the publication of his essay "Leiden und Grösse Richard Wagners" ("Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner"). Fearing for the safety of his family, Mann immigrated first to Switzerland and then to the United States. During his years of exile, Mann continued to write prolifically. In 1944, he became a citizen of the United States, and during World War II he made radio broadcasts to Germany imploring German citizens to resist the Nazi government.

Mann wrote some of his greatest works in exile, including the tetralogy *Joseph und seine Brüder* (1933-1943; *Joseph and His Brothers*, 1948) and his masterpiece, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (1947; *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, 1948). In 1952, he returned to Europe and settled in Switzerland. Mann died in Zurich, Switzerland, on August 12, 1955.

Mann's works have been the subject of literally thousands of scholarly articles and monographs. His novels and stories have been adapted for television, film, stage, and opera. His reputation and popularity remain supreme over those of all other German writers of the twentieth century. In his own way, Mann has come to dominate and symbolize his era as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe dominated the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

### ANALYSIS

In a creative life as prolific and varied as Mann's, it is very difficult to enumerate one or several overall themes that permeate his literary output. One general theme is the search for spiritual meaning in one's life, which is necessarily concerned with banal details of business, family relations, and everyday activities. The dichotomy between spirit (*Geist*) and life (*Leben*) in Mann's work has an authentic ring inasmuch as Mann himself was both a member of the upper bourgeoisie and a creative artist of the highest caliber. This concern with the spiritual dimension of life led Mann to investigate the philosophical and religious thought not only of German civilization but also of the Greek, ancient Hebrew, and Oriental cultures. In his novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912; *Death in Venice*, 1925), Mann examined the influence of the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy of ancient Greece and the effect it had upon the story's protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach. In the tetralogy of novels *Joseph and his Brothers*, the biblical story of Joseph and his return from the pit into which he was cast by his brothers is utilized as a metaphor for human redemption. In the novella *Die vertauschten Köpfe: Eine indische Legende* (1940; *The Transposed Heads: A Legend of India*, 1941), the Eastern concept of reincarnation and its consequences are examined in great detail.

For Mann, the internal psychological life of a character was generally at odds with the external events and situations in which the character was found. The conflict between the real life of a character and his or her ideal psychological yearnings (in German this is termed *Zerrissenheit*) motivated much of Mann's writing. In *Buddenbrooks*, for example, the mundane, bourgeois existence and its attendant business and civic duties of Thomas Buddenbrooks, the scion of a wealthy Lübeck fam-

ily of merchants, are at odds with Thomas's spiritual yearnings and repressed artistic proclivities; they eventually manifest themselves in Thomas's wife (who is a brilliant violinist) and their child Hanno, who suffers a tragic death from typhoid fever at an early age.

Also of great significance in Mann's works is the idea of decadence, the feeling that past standards are being obviated in the present. This idea occurs on personal, artistic, and cultural levels. For Mann the spiritual and/or physical decadence of an individual is often analogous to the decline of individual artistic creativity or a general decadence of the culture at large. A common device utilized by Mann is to allow physical disease to symbolize spiritual degradation. This depiction is seen to greatest effect in the novel *Doctor Faustus*, in which the syphilis suffered by the protagonist, composer Adrian Leverkühn, serves as the symbol of his spiritual and creative decline, which in turn serves as the symbol of the decline of German civilization into the barbarities of the Nazi regime.

Mann's prose style is lofty and elegiac, a beautiful embodiment of the finest prose attainable in high German. He is given to philosophical discourse, oftentimes of a very complicated nature, which displays the tremendous influence of the German philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche. Yet simultaneously present in Mann's prose is a pervasive ironic quality, at times verging on the comic. When close scrutiny is given to the statements made by Mann's most serious characters, it is often revealed that they are contradicting themselves or coming to illogical conclusions.

Mann was also a master of descriptive detail of both the physical settings of his novels and the psychological states of his characters. He was an astute observer of human nature and manners and, in this regard, he compares most favorably with the American novelist Henry James. Mann was a man of great culture and learning, as evidenced by the range and depth of subject matter presented in his works. A common theme in his novels is the role of music in German culture, particularly the music of the German opera composer Richard Wagner.

Mann's novels are permeated by direct and paraphrased quotations from other literary works, philosophical and historical treatises, the popular press, and other sources. His novels assume on the

part of their readership a general understanding of the history of Western civilization and its cultural monuments. In this regard, Mann, who carried the traditions of the nineteenth century novel into the twentieth century, was very much a modernist writer. In his own way, the myriad references to external events and sources found in his novels follow a general pattern established by such modernist literary figures as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot. Mann's technique of putting all of these external references and literary symbols into a unified structure is referred to most commonly as the montage, a term that is derived from the montage techniques of the visual arts and the editing techniques of cinema. The montage technique is probably seen to greatest effect in *Doctor Faustus*. Another technique used by Mann is the leitmotif, the use of a continually recurring phrase, image, symbol, or idea throughout a literary work. The idea of the leitmotif was taken by Mann from the musical works of Wagner, whose lengthy operas were unified by the use of short, recurring melodies.

## THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN

**First published:** *Der Zauberberg*, 1924  
(English translation, 1927)

**Type of work:** Novel

*On the eve of World War I, a young man visits a relative at a tuberculosis sanatorium, stays there for seven years before recovering his physical and spiritual health, and then leaves to fight in the war.*

*The Magic Mountain* is essentially a bildungsroman, the story of the education and spiritual development of a single character. The individual in this case is Hans Castorp, a young engineer who, before assuming his position in a shipbuilding firm, decides to go to a sanatorium to visit his cousin Joachim, a soldier who is recovering from tuberculosis. At the sanatorium, a spot is detected on one of Castorp's lungs, and he decides to stay for a few weeks to take some treatments. Weeks stretch into months, and Castorp remains at the sanatorium long after Joachim has gone. In fact, Castorp stays for a total of seven years. The disease

that is really afflicting Castorp, however, is a spiritual malaise. Castorp encounters a wide range of characters at the sanatorium, each of whom has an effect on him. Shortly before the end of his stay, Castorp finds himself hallucinating while hiking after a severe snowstorm. This hallucination serves as a catalyst for Castorp's decision to reenter the world, which he does by volunteering for military service in World War I. The impression is left with the reader that Castorp's reintegration into the world is ambivalent at best.

*The Magic Mountain* shows to great effect Mann's use of physical disease as a metaphor for spiritual malaise. At its very worst, Castorp's tuberculosis is a mild case. His decision to stay at the sanatorium is, in reality, a flight from the duties and mundanities of the world. The existence that Castorp leads at the sanatorium is one of contemplation, not unlike the existence of a monk at a monastery. Castorp's struggle is entirely of an internal nature. He is well-to-do and lives in a world of comfortable, if remote, luxury.

The internal struggle in Castorp's mind is exemplified in the dialectical relationship between Herr Settembrini and Herr Naphta, the two most intellectual patients at the sanatorium. Herr Settembrini represents reason, while Naphta symbolizes the will-to-power of the suprarational philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Naphta's eventual suicide, like the hallucination in the snowstorm, is a vivid jolt to the comfortable existence to which Castorp has become accustomed.

Another image that motivates the novel is the idea of a physical ascent (the action of Castorp ascending to the sanatorium on top of a mountain), symbolizing the attainment of wisdom or spiritual awareness. That Castorp's struggle to ascend the mountain of self-realization has been an internal struggle, rather than a battle with external forces, is best exemplified by Mann in the final page of the novel, likening Castorp's time at the sanatorium to a dream. As in all dreams, no one interpretation may be universally valid, and, therefore, the destiny of Hans Castorp, as he descends from the mountain to return to full participation in the world, is left open to debate.

*The Magic Mountain* also exemplifies the author's preoccupation with music. In this regard, the novel serves as an important link between his earlier short stories that deal with or refer to music



and his later masterwork *Doctor Faustus*. In *The Magic Mountain*, however, musical performances have a redemptive quality. Toward the end of Castorp's stay at the sanatorium, a new Victrola has been added to the amenities of the establishment, and Castorp avails himself of this new device on an almost daily basis. In one memorable section of chapter 7 titled "Fullness of Harmony," Castorp listens to five musical selections: the last two scenes from Giuseppe Verdi's *Aïda*, Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*), the second act of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, Franz Schubert's "Lindenbaum," and Valentine's aria from Charles Gounod's *Faust*. These five musical selections have obvious metaphorical value in the novel. Death by suffocation in *Aïda* has a certain morbid appropriateness in a novel whose main characters are suffering from tuberculosis. The dreamlike quality of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* approximates the dreamlike existence of Castorp and his fellow patients, who must of necessity emphasize their mental, rather than physical, existence. *Carmen* represents the dangers of passion, dangers that constantly threaten the sanatorium's inhabitants. The Schubert song (from the composer's song cycle *Winterreise* (winter journey) evokes the memory of Castorp's own "winter's journey" and its resulting hallucinations. Valentine's aria represents the acceptance of duty and death and is, in many ways, a foreboding of death.

These five musical selections, therefore, operate collectively as a summation of the novel's main thematic ideas. Yet the selection from Gounod's *Faust* functions not only as part of a recapitulation but also as a foretelling of future events. Valentine's dedication to duty, even in the face of death, is a metaphor for the premature departure from the sanatorium by Castorp's soldier-cousin Joachim. Likewise, Valentine's aria presages Castorp's departure from the sanatorium and his joining the military at the outbreak of World War I. Valentine's aria is also played on the Victrola later during the séance, in which the spirit of the now-dead "Joachim" appears. This episode demonstrates the perfection of Mann's literary technique. The leit-motif, montage, and frequent use of extended metaphors combine in such a way as to bring about an unprecedented complexity of meaning to the novel.

## DOCTOR FAUSTUS

**First published:** *Doktor Faustus*, 1947  
(English translation, 1948)

**Type of work:** Novel

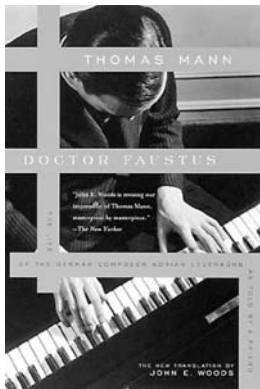
*A German avant-garde composer, whose personal life parallels the events of German society up to the end of World War II, creates influential musical compositions, contracts syphilis, and eventually dies of the disease.*

*Doctor Faustus* is arguably one of the most significant novels of the twentieth century in any language. Acclaimed as a masterpiece at the time of its original publication, *Doctor Faustus* has been the subject of hundreds of scholarly articles and books.

The story centers on the life and career of Adrian Leverkühn, a preternaturally gifted man who is born into the Germany of the Second Reich in the generation following the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). The novel follows Leverkühn's life and career until his death in 1943. Leverkühn is born into a provincial middle-class farming family. His parents are conventional, but his father does harbor some eccentric scientific interests. During his childhood, Leverkühn becomes lifelong best friends with Serenus Zeitblom, who serves as the novel's putative narrator. Originally attracted to both mathematics and music, Leverkühn goes to college to study theology, a course of study that he eventually abandons in favor of music. Leverkühn's prowess as a composer advances rapidly, but it is not until after he contracts syphilis from a prostitute (his only sexual experience) that his music becomes totally original and groundbreaking. As the syphilis proceeds to destroy Leverkühn's physical and mental states, his creativity as a composer increases. After having achieved the first fruits of international success, Leverkühn suffers a complete nervous and mental breakdown and spends the last ten years of his life as an invalid.

The most significant aspect of the novel is the author's use of the Faust legend, the age-old story of a man who sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for wealth, power, and sexual prowess. Although the only situation in the novel overtly similar to the traditional Faust story is the imaginary dialogue

between Leverkühn and the Devil, which occurs in chapter 25, the Faust legend is a very powerful presence in Mann's novel. Central to the Faust legend is the contract, the *quid pro quo*, between the Devil and Faust. The Faustian contract for Leverkühn involves his contracting syphilis from a prostitute. At the price of the loss of his physical and mental health, the syphilis unleashes untold powers of creativity within Leverkühn. The syphilis from which he suffers is, in turn, a symbol of the "disease" of extreme nationalism and ethnic chauvinism that eventually led the Germans to embrace Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. In both cases—Leverkühn's contraction of syphilis and the coming to power of Hitler—Mann makes it clear that the parties involved have entered into their "agreements" by their own volition, just as the original Dr. Faust entered into his demoniac pact of his own free will. Significantly, Leverkühn's final composition of his creative career is a cantata titled "The Lamentations of Dr. Faustus."



As in *The Magic Mountain*, Mann uses physical disease as a symbol for spiritual and cultural decline. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, syphilis was an incurable disease with a mortality rate approaching one hundred percent. Its symptoms could be mitigated and temporarily halted, but the disease was inevitable in its effects until the discovery

of penicillin. Therefore, the selection of syphilis as a symptom of spiritual and cultural decline was significant because the disease was irreversible. Mann uses syphilis symbolically to suggest the inevitability of the decline of German civilization.

Mann uses Leverkühn's life to parallel events occurring simultaneously in German politics and society. Leverkühn's lifetime roughly approximates that of Hitler, the implication of which is that the same historical forces that brought the Nazis to the fore had a similar effect on Leverkühn's art. Leverkühn's final physical and mental collapse occurs in 1933, the year in which the Nazis came to power in Germany. Leverkühn dies in 1943, a year

in which the war in Europe turned decidedly against the Axis Powers, leading to their eventual defeat.

The selection of a composer as the symbol of Germany's moral and cultural decline is significant in that music is generally regarded as the most German of the arts. One composer, Richard Wagner, held a particular fascination for both Mann and Hitler. Wagner's operas based on Teutonic myths were a great enthusiasm of Hitler's, as were Wagner's anti-Semitic racial views, as expressed in the composer's book-length diatribe, *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1869; *Jewry in music*). Mann had an ambivalent attitude toward Wagner; he greatly admired the composer's music but was repelled by the man himself. It was Mann's essay "The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner" that led to Mann's public denunciation and eventual exile to America. In a real sense, then, music and politics were intricately related in the nightmare of events occurring in Nazi Germany.

Adrian Leverkühn's *daimon*, the catalyst whose function it is to see that the protagonist's fate is fulfilled, appears in many guises, but perhaps never more significantly than in the being of Wendell Kretzschmar, the American expatriate music master and Leverkühn's only real teacher of composition. Kretzschmar's significance as a *daimon* extends not only to Leverkühn's choice of a career as a composer—it is Kretzschmar who ultimately supplies Leverkühn with the justification to abandon theological studies and return to music—but also to the course that Leverkühn's musical career will follow.

Leverkühn's years of theological study at the University of Halle cause him to be influenced by several versions of his *daimon*. Professor Kolonat Nonnenmacher instructs Leverkühn in Pythagorean philosophy and reinforces Leverkühn's long-held fascination with an ordered cosmos, particularly one susceptible to mathematical reduction. Nonnenmacher's lectures also deal with Aristotelian philosophy and stress the philosopher's views on the inherent drive to the fulfillment of organic forms—in other words, the urge toward the unfolding of destiny. These lectures have a profound impact on Leverkühn, who comes to the realization that his personal destiny is not necessarily of his own making.

Leverkühn's *daimon* finds a different and more

subtle version in the form of Ehrenfried Kumpf, Mann's caricature of Martin Luther. Kumpf's theology rejects humanism and reason and embraces a rather lusty appreciation of life, including its sensual pleasures, of which music is but one facet. Although Kumpf is a minor figure in the novel, his influence is long-lasting on Leverkühn, who adopts the former's archaic German phraseology and syntax and who eventually abandons the rationality and "coldness" of theology for the "warmth" of music.

Of all Leverkühn's professors at Halle, none leaves a more permanent impression and is more overtly a manifestation of Leverkühn's *daimon* than Eberhard Schleppfuss, the mysterious theologian whose very difficult lectures combine the tenets of Christianity with a blatant Manichaeism. Schleppfuss views evil as a necessary concomitant to good and posits a sinister interpretation of the nature of creativity.

Leverkühn's involvement with music is made permanent, however, only after the liaison with the prostitute Esmeralda, which, interestingly enough, occurs after Leverkühn has witnessed the Austrian premiere of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* (based on Oscar Wilde's visionary Decadent drama). This liaison is a curious phenomenon in that neither lust nor intellectual curiosity appears to be its root cause. In many ways, Leverkühn is as irresistibly drawn to the prostitute Esmeralda as the symbolic butterfly *hetaera esmeralda* of chapter 2 is susceptible to visual or olfactory stimuli. There is a certain inevitability in both cases in which moral laws and the individual will are transcended by reflex actions firmly based in the instinctive domain. Additionally, Leverkühn's brief sexual encounter permits the appearance in rapid succession of two other manifestations of his *daimon*, namely Dr. Erasmi and Dr. Zimbalist, both of whom are thwarted from treating Leverkühn's syphilis in its incipient stage.

Leverkühn's fall is akin to the fall of Adam; both are terrible yet necessary for the evolution of the human condition. One can no more imagine a Christian view of history without Adam's transgression than a continuation of musical evolution beyond Wagner without the imposition of a seminal figure such as Leverkühn. The connection between Leverkühn and Adam is further strengthened by the fact that one of Leverkühn's first ma-

ture works is a setting of William Blake's poem "A Poison Tree," with its references to the poisoned fruit and the serpent who despoils an altar. In the end, however, as Mann always makes clear in his writings, untempered creativity ultimately consumes its creator. All knowledge, all fruits of artistic genius carry with them a terrible price in the imaginary world of Mann's fiction.

## TONIO KRÖGER

**First published:** 1903 (English translation, 1914)

**Type of work:** Novella

*A young German author experiences and comes to terms with the difference between his artistic temperament and the healthy, yet sterile, bourgeois society.*

*Tonio Kröger* is one of Mann's best stories and was the author's favorite work, understandable inasmuch as many of the details of the story are autobiographical in nature. The protagonist is the scion of a very respectable upper-middle-class family. The father is a north German patrician, while the mother, Consuelo, is of southern European origin. This dichotomy is apparent not only in the unusual combination of names of the protagonist but also in the inability of Tonio to resolve the conflict between his artistic nature and the expectations of bourgeois society.

The quintessence of the bourgeois world is symbolized by Hans Hansen, Tonio's best friend, and Ingeborg Holm, the object of Tonio's unrequited love. Hans excels at everything that is expected of the son of a respectable family—school, sports, social activities—while Tonio's accomplishments, other than those pertaining to his artistic ambitions, are lackluster and indifferent.

Tonio's father dies, his mother marries an Italian musician, and Tonio leaves his northern German hometown to live in the south. While he is in southern Europe, his health declines, but his artistry increases. His first publications meet with critical and popular acclaim, and for the first time in his life he experiences the success that had so eluded him in the past.

Some time later, Tonio is living in Munich and

runs into his friend, the painter Lisaveta Ivanovna. After a lengthy and heated discussion, Lisaveta declares Tonio to be a failed bourgeois. At the end of the summer, Tonio decides to take a vacation in north Germany and Denmark, in essence retracing his bourgeois youth. He arrives at his resort in Denmark and has a pleasant, uneventful stay, until one day near the end of his sojourn. Hans and Ingeborg appear at the resort to attend a dance. The couple do not recognize Tonio, but he recognizes them. While he is watching the couple dancing, Tonio reminisces about the dancing lessons that the three of them took when they were little. His confidence and spirit restored, Tonio writes to Lisaveta and says that in the future his writing will be concerned with his love of the ordinary, uncomplicated lives of his north German compatriots, who were really the inspiration for his art in the first place.

Once again, one sees the stress that Mann places on the idea of a dichotomy existing between the “healthy” bourgeois world and the “diseased” world of the artist. This dichotomy also has a geographical dimension for Mann: Northern Europe is “healthy,” safely bourgeois, and stable; southern Europe, however, is mysterious and “diseased,” but it is also the source of artistic creativity.

One important literary device utilized by Mann in *Tonio Kröger* is the leitmotif. For example, whenever Tonio’s mother is mentioned, she is described with the same phrase: “who played the piano and the mandolin so enchantingly.” *Tonio Kröger* is an extremely important work in Mann’s literary output in that he developed many of the techniques and themes that he would perfect in his later major novels.

## DEATH IN VENICE

**First published:** Der Tod in Venedig, 1912  
(English translation, 1925)

**Type of work:** Novella

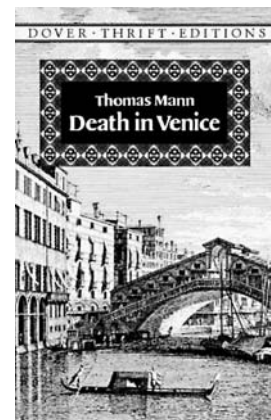
*A famous writer suffers from an emotional crisis while on vacation in Venice, becomes infatuated with a young boy, and dies of cholera.*

*Death in Venice* is one of the greatest novellas of the twentieth century and has been adapted for

film (1971, directed by Luchino Visconti) and opera (1973, with music by Benjamin Britten and libretto by Myfanwy Piper). In this story, Mann further develops many of the ideas that he had so successfully explored in *Tonio Kröger*.

The story is centered on Gustav von Aschenbach, a famous writer who has come to Venice for a vacation. Aschenbach is suffering from fatigue and world-weariness, the result of intense literary efforts and an incipient emotional crisis. When Aschenbach arrives at his hotel in Venice, he notices a Polish family that is also on vacation, in particular, a young boy named Tadzio. Aschenbach’s serenity is disrupted by his emotional response to the boy’s youthful beauty and athletic grace. Wherever Aschenbach goes, he manages to run into Tadzio and his family. He begins to think of the boy as a character from Greek mythology. Rather than admit his ambivalent feelings toward Tadzio, Aschenbach makes plans to leave Venice, partly because the city is beginning to suffer from a deadly cholera epidemic that is being covered up by civil authorities worried about the loss of tourist revenues. When Aschenbach arrives at the railway station to leave, he discovers that his luggage has been sent ahead to the wrong destination. Aschenbach goes back to his hotel and once again follows Tadzio and his family around various Venetian locations. Disquieting dreams plague Aschenbach, who imagines that Tadzio is a participant in Dionysian revels. One day, after most of the guests have departed the hotel, Aschenbach goes to the beach, where he sees Tadzio and his family. Feeling weaker and weaker, Aschenbach dies of cholera.

*Death in Venice* brings to the fore the major themes that were to dominate Mann’s later writings, particularly the tension involved in the mind’s struggle between self-control and reckless, emotional irrationality. Aschenbach is the paradigm of the objective thinker, a man whose mental processes are under such fine control that he appears to be lacking any true emotion or sentiment.





tality. The floodgates of emotion are released in Aschenbach only after he views Tadzio. Yet Aschenbach's turmoil is entirely internal in nature; Tadzio is the catalyst by which the strings of mental self-control within Aschenbach's mind are released. Aschenbach, in fact, never speaks to Tadzio, and it is suggested that Tadzio and his family are completely unaware of Aschenbach's presence.

The internal emotional struggle Aschenbach is undergoing is represented by Mann in classical terms. Mann uses the ancient Greek gods Apollo (god of reason, knowledge, and the arts) and Dionysus (god of sensuality, drunkenness, and boundless creativity) to represent the dichotomy between reason and irrationality. The Apollonian side of Aschenbach is present during his waking hours, when he can use his finely developed powers of self-control to subdue his attraction for Tadzio; while he is asleep, however, the Dionysian aspect of Aschenbach's psyche is released, and his imagination runs rampant with emotional speculation about Tadzio.

Another classical aspect of the story is the seeming inevitability of its outcome, an end that is rooted in the protagonist's destiny, much like the role that destiny and fate played in the classical dramas of ancient Greece. Wherever Aschenbach goes, he runs into Tadzio; when Aschenbach tries to leave Venice, his luggage is accidentally shipped to the wrong destination. It is unclear whether

Aschenbach is being controlled by forces beyond his control or whether he is subconsciously creating these "accidents" so as to prevent his leaving Tadzio. In the end, however, the side of Aschenbach's psyche that served him so well in his career as a successful author (Apollonian self-control, health, northern geographical location, and bourgeois normality) succumbs to the mysterious inner workings of the id (Dionysian abandon, disease, southern geographical location, repressed homosexuality).

### SUMMARY

Thomas Mann's prose works exemplify the problems faced by humankind in the twentieth century: the loss of community, the decline of personal and cultural standards, and the reaction of the individual to both totalitarian governments and conventional society. Although Mann's prose style stemmed from the traditions of the nineteenth century, it embraced the innovations of the modernists. His works also display the influence of the other arts, in particular, music, which served not only as a source of thematic material but also as a repository of formal procedures, such as the leit-motif. Mann's works are extraordinarily complex and densely filled with metaphors and other types of allusions; however, they remain popular and accessible to readers at large.

William E. Grim

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Consider the relationship between physical and spiritual health in the fiction of Thomas Mann.
- What problems did Mann face in his admiration for Richard Wagner, who in certain ways also appealed to the Nazis?
- Contrast northern and southern German culture as seen in Mann’s works.
- Does today’s greater knowledge about homosexuality enhance the modern reader’s appreciation of *Death in Venice*?
- Examine the concept of German patriotism in Mann’s fiction.
- How does a literary leitmotif differ from a musical one?
- What were Mann’s chief literary successes while living in the United States?

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## KATHERINE MANSFIELD

**Born:** Wellington, New Zealand

October 14, 1888

**Died:** Fontainebleau, France

January 9, 1923

*Mansfield broke conventions and chiefly used precise images and pointed dialogue to reveal her characters' shifting emotional states.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Katherine Mansfield was born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp in Wellington, New Zealand, on October 14, 1888. During her life she used many names: her family called her “Kass,” and she took “Katherine Mansfield” as her name in 1910. Her father, Harold Beauchamp, was a businessman who rose to become chairman of the Bank of New Zealand. He was knighted in 1923.

In 1903, the Beauchamps sailed for London, where Kass enrolled at Queen’s College, a school for young women. She remained at Queen’s until 1906, reading authors such as the Irish novelist and playwright Oscar Wilde and the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. She played the cello and published several stories in the college magazine. After her parents insisted that she come back to Wellington in 1906, she published her first stories in a newspaper. In 1908, when she was nineteen, she left New Zealand for London, never to return.

Her next decade was characterized by personal problems and artistic growth. She was sexually attracted both to women and to men. At Queen’s College, she met Ida Baker, who would become her friend and lifelong companion. After she returned to London, she fell in love with a violinist named Garnet Trowell, whom she had met in New Zealand. Then on March 2, 1909, she abruptly married

a man she hardly knew, George C. Bowden, and just as abruptly left him. At her mother’s insistence, she traveled to Germany, where she suffered a miscarriage. The Bowdens were not divorced until April, 1918.

In Germany she met the Polish translator Floryan Sobieniowski. In the opinion of her biographer Claire Tomalin, it was his fault that she became infected with venereal disease. Mansfield would suffer from many medical problems for the rest of her short life: rheumatic symptoms, pleurisy, and eventually tuberculosis. Most of them probably were the result of this infection. Back in London, Mansfield met the editor and literary critic John Middleton Murry. They were married on May 3, 1918. Their relationship was stormy, but it endured until her death. After Mansfield died, Murry edited her stories, letters, and journals. Meanwhile, World War I had begun. Her brother, a soldier with the British army, was killed in France. His death and her own worsening health may have strongly influenced her stories.

Mansfield and Murry knew many famous writers and artists, particularly those who gathered at Garsington, the country estate of the famous hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell. There Mansfield met the biographer Lytton Strachey, the novelist Aldous Huxley, the economist John Maynard Keynes, and the American poet T. S. Eliot. She and the novelist and feminist Virginia Woolf had an off-and-on friendship and professional association. Mansfield had a serious relationship with the mathematician, pacifist, and philosopher Bertrand Russell. The Murrys’ closest friendship was with novelist D. H.

Lawrence and his wife, Frieda; the character Gudrun in Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) is said to be based on Mansfield. Both Woolf and Lawrence were influenced in their writings by Mansfield; both made negative remarks about her before her death.

When she was in Germany, she read stories by the Russian author Anton Chekhov. His influence has been seen in some of the bitter stories with German settings she collected in her first book, *In a German Pension* (1911). For the next seven years, Mansfield experimented with many styles and published stories in journals such as *New Age*, *Rhythm*, and *The Blue Review*. Her first truly great story, "Prelude," was published as a booklet in July, 1918, by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press.

Mansfield's health continued to deteriorate. From the time she learned she had tuberculosis, in 1917, she spent most of each year outside England. Accompanied by Murry or Baker, she traveled to France, Switzerland, and Italy, trying to fight off her disease. In 1922, her search led her to a rest home near Paris. She seems to have been moderately happy there until her death on January 9, 1923, in Fontainebleau, France.

During her last five years, Mansfield wrote most of the stories for which she is best remembered. They were usually published in journals such as *Athenaeum*, *Arts and Letters*, *London Mercury*, and *Sphere*. Many were then compiled in *Bliss, and Other Stories* (1920) and *The Garden Party, and Other Stories* (1922). She also wrote poems, literary criticism, fragments of plays, and the beginning of a novel.

## ANALYSIS

Mansfield once described in a letter two of the things that compelled her to write. One is the "joy" she felt when, in "some perfectly blissful way," she is "at peace." At that time, she said, "something delicate and lovely seems to open before my eyes, like a flower without thought of a frost." Everywhere in her work she communicates the exhilarating delicacy of the world's beauty: "A heavy dew had fallen. The grass was blue. Big drops hung on the bushes and just did not fall."

Her second motive is almost the opposite: "Not hate or destruction . . . but an extremely deep sense of hopelessness, of everything doomed to disaster, almost willfully, stupidly." She summed up this second motive as "a cry against corruption . . . in the

widest sense of the word." Her story "Je ne parle pas Français" is such a cry. The central character is an amiable young Frenchman who seems to be a sympathetic friend to a young Englishman and his intended bride. The friend, however, reveals himself as a depraved, heartless hustler. More frightening is the central character of "The Fly." He is a businessman who grieves when he thinks about his son who was killed in World War I. He appears to be an unpleasant man when he treats an old employee badly, but readers do not understand the full horror of the story until he sadistically tortures and kills a fly that has landed in his ink pot.

Not all of the hopelessness expressed in Mansfield's stories is so rooted in corruption. Mansfield continually shows the yearnings, complexities, and misunderstandings of love; men and women spar at cross-purposes. Sometimes they fail to love because they are timid. Sometimes one person rejects another because he or she simply has more important goals to pursue. Sometimes the rejected person is sick or old. In one story, appropriately titled "Psychology," two artists, a male and a female, are so painfully conscious of the ebb and flow of their relationship that it eventually fails. Finally, in some stories, individual yearnings are complicated by sexual confusions with homoerotic overtones.

Society, according to Mansfield, is corrupt and destructive. She is brilliant when she renders the vapid conversation of fashionable, artistic figures. They prattle on about the latest fashions or recite silly poems, while ignoring the drama of real feelings that is going on around them and destroying the lives of people better than they. She is equally brilliant in portraying the banalities of more common people. Even when her characters mean well, many of them cannot say anything that makes a difference.

Not all corruption involves blame. Mansfield's work expresses the idea that life itself seems corrupt when one realizes how many people are failures. Failure is most vividly apparent in the life of a lonely person, often a woman, playing a guitar with no one to hear, looking out a hotel window, writing a letter, noticing the happiness of lovers or reflecting on what has gone wrong with her own relationships. Often in Mansfield's stories, the reader senses the ultimate in corruption: the ceaseless erosions of time and forgetfulness. The natural world itself is not always consoling. Its beauty is

sometimes frightening and ominous. Its power, especially the power of the sea, can be indifferent.

Mansfield's style is economical; she has edited her prose so that there is seldom an unnecessary or insignificant word. Yet although she is noted for her precise descriptions, her exact meanings are not always easily understood. Her tone is complex; she mixes witty satire with shattering emotional reversals. Moreover, because she uses dialogue and indirect speech extensively and does not often seem to speak directly in her own voice, the reader is not always sure what to believe.

The action of her stories does not surge powerfully forward. People talk and think; they do not ride horses or shoot rifles. Their lives do not move toward climaxes that reveal something definite. Often her stories are designed, by means of quick changes in time and by surprise turns, to lead the reader to epiphanies, unexpected moments of illumination. It is vital for readers to understand that Mansfield does not conceal a hidden "message" in her stories. If a story appears to point in many directions, not all of which are logically consistent, that is the way Mansfield feels the whole truth is most honestly communicated. In this she resembles Chekhov.

Mansfield's descriptive passages repay careful attention, for they are always significant. Her descriptions are always more than a mere record of what New Zealand or England was like. For example, in the short story "At the Bay" a young girl visits an empty house and finds, among other things, only "a lump of gritty yellow soap in one corner of the kitchen window sill." That is not a very pretty picture. It suggests that the girl is unhappy to leave her home because it has been reduced to such ugly things. Mansfield has provided details that a girl would notice and that suggest what the girl is feeling. In this technique, she is among the innovators of her day. During the years she was writing, new poets such as T. S. Eliot tried to provide not statements about emotions but concrete details that would evoke a desired emotional response in the reader—a literary device called an objective correlative. Similarly, Mansfield does not usually state what her characters feel. She presents details that will make the reader feel what they feel.

Sometimes, however, at very important moments, Mansfield's details become even more suggestive or symbolic. The sea is used to suggest the

power of time. A girl's party hat in a room with a corpse suggests frivolity. Often, Mansfield builds trees into symbols. Both the pear tree in "Bliss" and the aloe tree in "Prelude" must be considered both as natural details and as symbols. What they symbolize is not simply an arbitrary idea, such as hope or death. Each tree is different, and what it symbolizes can be understood only as each story is read.

As noted above, Mansfield's finest stories are also characterized by epiphanies. That term, popularized by the Irish novelist James Joyce, refers to a sudden revelation triggered by an ordinary experience. In Mansfield's stories, epiphanies happen to characters, but readers can also experience epiphanies when they are led to an unexpected moment, as when they realize that a silent, wretched little girl has remembered not how a snobbish woman has hurt her, but that she has seen a marvelous tiny lamp in a doll's house.

### "MISS BRILL"

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *The Garden Party, and Other Stories*, 1922)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The happiness of a middle-aged woman sitting in a park is shattered by a young couple's unfeeling remarks.*

"Miss Brill" brings to life one of Mansfield's many lonely women, and the reader lives through this story in the main character's mind without the author's making any obvious comment. As the story opens, it is a Sunday afternoon in the autumn; a chill is in the air. In her room, Miss Brill, a lonely English teacher, prepares to go as usual to the Public Gardens in what appears to be a French city. She happily unpacks the fur she will wear for the first time this season, a piece that includes the head of a small animal, perhaps a fox. Miss Brill strikes the reader as imaginative, for she pretends she hears what the dead animal is thinking after being in storage for many months. She then feels a tinge of sadness. In her introductory paragraph, Mansfield's details evoke the fragility of Miss Brill's happiness.

At the Gardens, Miss Brill listens to the band play and watches the people. It is her idea of bliss.



Though she yearns to talk to them, she must be content to listen. An old couple disappoints her, for they are silent; last week she heard a memorable conversation about eyeglasses—memorable to her, but trivial to the reader. Then Miss Brill takes her first step away from the superficiality of the afternoon. She reflects that most of the people she sees at the Gardens are old and strange. She hopes for their happiness.

In a surprise ending typical of the author, Mansfield then includes two very short paragraphs. The first points beyond the gardens to the sky and sea, as if to suggest that there is a wider world than what the reader has experienced so far. The second brings the reader back to the banality of the park, as it reproduces the sound of the band.

Miss Brill's experience deepens. She does not simply listen; she imagines what the people she sees are saying. Mansfield employs dramatic irony when she hints that the woman who Miss Brill thinks is innocently chatting is actually a prostitute. Then Miss Brill stumbles on a kind of truth: They are all acting in a play. She (Miss Brill) is in the play too, with a role that she plays every week. Miss Brill has turned her understanding of how drama underlies public events into a consolation for her state. Even so, she knows all people are not happy. She has a vision of them all singing together.

Mansfield has artfully brought the reader to sympathize with Miss Brill as her love flows out to all she sees. Then comes a shock. A young couple, rich and in love, sit down on the end of her bench. They wonder aloud why she is sitting there, wonder who would possibly want her company, and compare her prized fur to a fried fish.

The reader has lived through the story within Miss Brill's mind. Now Mansfield backs away and asks the reader to imagine what this shock is like. Miss Brill silently goes back to her lonely room. She says nothing. When she puts her prized fur piece away in its box, she imagines she hears a cry. Her imagination has projected her own sorrow. The dead, unfashionable fox has become a symbol to her of her own life, and a symbol to the reader as well.

"Miss Brill" is a typical Mansfield story in that it has little action. It dwells in the mind of a lonely person, as she deepens her understanding and receives a shock. The reader is drawn into sympathy with the brave, sad, central character.

## "BLISS"

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *Bliss, and Other Stories*, 1920)

**Type of work:** Short story

*After Bertha, a young wife, thinks that she has found a loving friend at a party, she discovers that her friend is being intimate with her (Bertha's) husband.*

"Bliss" begins with Bertha, a young wealthy woman married to Harry Young, in a state of bliss. As usual, Mansfield can evoke the wonders of being alive. The spring afternoon is brilliant, the fruit has arrived for her to arrange, her lovely baby seems happy with her nanny, some sophisticated friends are coming to dinner, and her house looks beautiful. Bertha sees herself in the mirror, and she thinks that something wonderful is about to happen.

Things are not quite so nice as they seem. Once again, the details tell the story. The nanny bosses Bertha around. Bertha herself is a bit childish. Harry will be late; when he does arrive, he makes an abrasive remark. One guest, Miss Fulton, is mysterious, as are some cats prowling around in the garden. A tree, however, bodes well, a tree described with Mansfield's customary evocativeness. Bertha sees "the lovely pear tree with its wide open blossoms as a symbol of her own life."

The guests arrive, and Mansfield shows her ability to satirize the social world of poets and painters. One guest wears a dress that shows a procession of monkeys; married couples call each other by silly names; a languid homosexual playwright has had a bad experience with his taxi driver. Harry, Bertha's down-to-earth husband, forms a contrast, as does the cool Miss Fulton, who arrives dressed all in silver.

Up until now, the story's action has seemed haphazard, and the reader has been given few clues as to what may happen. Then Mansfield delivers her surprise, a series of events that may have shocked her original readers. Bertha touches Miss Fulton's arm and feels a "fire of bliss"; a look passes between them. Through the inane dinner conversation, Bertha wonders at her experience. She waits for "a sign" from Miss Fulton with little idea of what such a sign would mean.

Its meaning soon becomes more clear. Miss Fulton seems to give a sign, and they go to the garden and gaze at the pear tree that Bertha views as a symbol of her openness and vulnerability. What exactly does it suggest now? No matter what, to Bertha the women achieve a perfect, wordless understanding. Again Mansfield is ambiguous. What have they understood? Something feminine? Something about desire? Has Miss Fulton really participated in this experience, or is Bertha imagining their communion, their epiphany?

Mansfield has more surprises. As the guests prepare to leave, Bertha's feelings take a new twist: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband." Not many writers can dramatize so effectively how a young women's homoerotic feelings could so quickly shift to heterosexual ones. Then Bertha's bliss is shattered. She glimpses Miss Fulton and her husband intimately whispering together, arranging for a rendezvous. Bertha is left alone, wondering what will become of her life. Mansfield does not ask the reader to draw a conclusion. Is he or she to understand that Bertha is trapped in an evil world? That her happy, childish life is over? Or that she is a free adult at last?

### "AT THE BAY"

**First published:** 1922 (collected in *The Garden Party, and Other Stories*, 1922)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Many members of a family live through a day in which they face the realities of sex, love, indifference, failure, and death.*

Mansfield set two longer short stories in her native New Zealand: "Prelude" and "At the Bay." In both, she drew extensively upon details of her own extended family and employed an unusual structure peculiarly her own.

"At the Bay" is composed of thirteen short episodes in which a number of lives intertwine. Readers are set down in an unidentified place among unidentified characters. Soon it becomes clear that the story takes place in a settlement of families living in separate houses at the side of a bay. What is known of Mansfield's life makes readers assume that this is Wellington Bay in New Zealand,

but they must guess at the characters' relationships. That the reader must work to discover these things is part of the story, a result of Mansfield's narrative technique. Most of the characters are relatives of Kezia, who most resembles a young Katherine Mansfield. They are Kezia, a young girl, about seven years old; Stanley Burnell, her father; Linda Burnell, her mother; Isabel, her older sister; Lottie, her younger sister; her baby brother; aunt Beryl, Linda's sister; Uncle Jonathan Trout, and Pip and Rags, his sons; Mrs. Fairfield, Kezia's grandmother, Linda and Beryl's mother; Alice, a servant; Mrs. Stubbs, Alice's friend; and Mr. and Mrs. Harry Kember.

Each episode is separate. They are not usually joined by obvious transitions, but the reader gradually senses that "At the Bay" has a kind of unity. The same characters appear and unexpectedly reappear. The story lasts for a complete day, from early morning until late at night. Most important, the characters live in a web of delicate interrelationships, some of which satisfy, some of which do not. The life of almost every character shows a variation on a central theme: To live is to yearn for something more and only occasionally to be calm and happy. Characters yearn most strongly for what is seldom possible. Each must face moments in which his or her hopes are thwarted.

The first and last episodes frame the story with descriptions of nature. Both provide descriptions of the bay, the sea and the waves, and the plants and the buildings on the shoreline. The first episode sets the scene as a peaceful but vibrant place that waits for what the day will bring. At the beginning, the only moving beings are some sheep, a sheep dog, and a shepherd. They enter and leave. In the very brief last episode, no living thing appears. The concluding episode is more obviously symbolic.

The day opens with Stanley Burnell jumping into the bay for an invigorating swim. He is the most masculine force in the story, a competitive man who proudly thinks that he is the first in the water. Stanley finds, however, that another man, Jonathan Trout, has beaten him to it. Trout is as good a swimmer as Stanley, more imaginative and less impatient. No wonder Stanley is irritated and leaves. Trout muses on the encounter: Poor Stanley makes work out of pleasure, he thinks. The episode ends with a suggestion that Trout is in poor health.

Mansfield begins her story with its only adult males, each of whom is severely limited.

Mansfield is at her best in evoking many different lives at the same time. Episode three depicts the Burnell household while Stanley gets ready to leave for work. Stanley is the center of attention. He questions, accuses, blusters, and irritably orders everybody about. The man of the house is leaving for work, and everyone must know it. Just as he leaves, he notes that his sister-in-law Beryl, though attentive, has her mind elsewhere.

The reader has suspected all along that Beryl has some private secret. The other women have their secrets as well: The child Kezia has her own way of eating porridge, Isabel is consciously full of virtue, Mrs. Fairfield privately responds to the beauty of the sun's illuminations, Linda's mind is miles away, and Alice is critical of men in general. Beryl believes that the women have a kind of communion after Stanley is gone—the wonderful day will be theirs. Her mother and sister do not seem to share this feeling so ecstatically.

Succeeding episodes show the various strands of the story belonging to the children, the servant Alice, Mrs. Fairfield, Beryl, and Linda. By constructing her narrative in parallel stories, Mansfield insists on the separateness of the individual minds and on the problems they have in communicating. By having characters cross from strand to strand and by showing parallels in their lives, Mansfield implies that people's lives have many things in common.

The following exchange, involving children, illustrates the beginning of power struggles based on gender. As usual on a fine morning, the Burnell girls go to the beach, where they play with their male cousins, the Trouts. Later, they regroup for a childish card game. The girls bicker; the whole group is dominated by Pip, the oldest Trout boy. In another scene, sexual tensions are the point of Alice's visit to Mrs. Stubbs, a storekeeper, who frightens Alice by saying that she prefers being without a man. A third exchange describes how Kezia confronts death when she spends her siesta with her grandmother. Mrs. Fairfield has the wisdom of age; though her heart still aches for her dead son, she is resigned to the fact that he is dead. When Mrs.

Fairfield tells the girl of this, Kezia rebels. Kezia will not die, and she demands a promise that her grandmother will not die either.

Linda is Mansfield's most enigmatic figure. She strikes everyone as listless, vague, and detached. She seems to be past yearning, much as her mother was. The reader often lives in her private thoughts, though she touches the lives of three males. With Jonathan, her brother-in-law, she listens sympathetically though distantly to his complaints about his weakness and his fate. Her attitude toward Stanley is more complex. She remembers transferring her affections from her adored father to Stanley—loyal, loving, tongue-tied, uncomplicated, sincere Stanley. She loves him but resents having to support his ego as one would that of a big child. Her listlessness appears to be the result of her children. She dreads having more and does not love the ones she has. Then, in a moment in the middle of the story, she looks down at her baby boy. For a moment, she may love him. The moment is over, and she is alone again.

Beryl is younger than Linda, in years and in experience. (Perhaps the sisters and their mother show three stages in women's lives.) The young Beryl is secretive with Stanley, impatient with Kezia at breakfast, and vibrant with hope in the morning. Her crisis begins when she meets the ominous Mrs. Harry Kember at the beach. Mrs. Kember is married to an extremely handsome man ten years her junior. She is rich. Her body is long and narrow. She smokes and plays bridge. She talks like a man. When Beryl disrobes before putting on her bathing suit, Mrs. Harry Kember teases her about her beauty. Beryl is startled and feels "poisoned," but she is fascinated as well.

That night when everyone else is asleep, the aroused Beryl imagines a perfect lover. As she blissfully fantasizes, she hears a noise outside her window. It is Harry Kember himself. Although she is persuaded to come outside, she is terrified and revolted when she sees the smile on his face, a kind of smile she has never seen before. When she breaks from his embrace, he is puzzled and angry. Beryl, like Linda, and before that her mother, finds that sexual love is not what she had imagined.

## “THE GARDEN PARTY”

**First published:** 1922 (collected in *The Garden Party, and Other Stories*, 1922)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Laura enjoys a garden party, even though a man next door has died. She then visits his grieving widow, sees his corpse, and is greatly moved.*

“The Garden Party” may be Mansfield’s most famous story. It is exceptional and typical at the same time. Laura, a vibrant young woman, is the central character. The story also depicts a worldly older woman (Laura’s mother), a sophisticated social gathering (the party itself), some moderately dense males, and a disturbing event to which they all react differently. The action of the story, more conventionally straightforward than that of “At the Bay,” is also typical of Mansfield. It leads both Laura and the reader to an epiphany—an enigmatic moment of revelation that, in this story, is comic and overwhelming at the same time.

Unlike “At the Bay,” where Mansfield took readers into many minds, readers live through this story in only one. Laura appears to be about sixteen, a young woman on the edge of adulthood. Not only do readers hear her talk, they listen in on her thoughts. She is a bit afraid of the men who put up the tent for the party but enjoys hearing their good-natured banter. Readers sense her joy at being alive when she



reacts ecstatically to the spots of light the sun makes on an inkpot. Mansfield brings the reader close to Laura in another typical way. Even the opening description of the day and the flowers seems to be in a character’s mind, not the storyteller’s. To many readers, that mind soon becomes Laura’s.

The opening scenes all suggest a wealthy, normal, and happy family. Laura appears to supervise the tent, but is not allowed to decide where it should be placed. Her sisters strike sophisticated

poses; one sings a gruesome song and flashes a big smile. Laura’s mother protests that she will leave the arrangements to her children but organizes the party anyway, providing expensive flowers, a band, and dainty sandwiches. As usual, Mansfield suggests moments of happiness with telling details and evocative descriptions.

Then comes the news that turns Laura’s day around: A man has been killed in an accident, a man who lived in a lower-class cottage almost next to their home. Laura’s instinctive reaction is that the party must be stopped, since the man’s family might hear the band playing. Her sisters and her mother argue with her. She does not change her mind until she sees herself in a mirror—a lovely girl with a spectacular black hat trimmed with gold daisies—and until her brother Laurie compliments her. The party goes ahead, a typically exciting, shallow Mansfield party. Guests compliment Laura, especially on her hat. When the party is over, her mother tries to make amends by filling a basket with party leftovers and sending Laura with it to the dead man’s cottage.

The journey at dusk is frightening. Laura walks into a different world, a lower-class world of grieving, ill-dressed, unsophisticated people. At the dead man’s house, she gives the widow her basket. She is led against her wishes to the bedroom where the corpse has been laid out. Laura, however, is not horrified, but sees the corpse as merely sleeping. She sees death as something calm and even beautiful, something far removed from her silly afternoon. “Forgive my hat,” she says. She has had an epiphany. Her reply is woefully inadequate, but the reader has been shown a character’s moment of understanding and growth. The reader has had an epiphany as well, though it is not the same as Laura’s.

The story ends ambiguously. Laura heads home and meets her brother. She tries to say something but cannot find the words. She thinks he understands, but whether he does is left unclear. As usual, Mansfield does not push her case too far.

## SUMMARY

In her short stories, Katherine Mansfield exemplifies innovative literary techniques that have influenced many later short-story writers. Her stories do not depend upon showing a chain of actions or upon explanations by the author. Rather, they dra-

matize webs of personal thoughts and interrelationships and evoke these relationships in descriptive, suggestive, and even symbolic details. Her stories often lead the reader to moments of revelation. Her themes are those of her time and were also taken up by later writers: joy in beauty, yearnings for happiness (particularly by women), disappointment, callousness, and cruelty.

George Soule

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Exemplify Katherine Mansfield's use of objective correlative.
- Contrast the use of epiphanies by Mansfield and James Joyce.
- Why does Bertha in "Bliss" suddenly desire her husband?
- What principle or principles govern the structure of Mansfield's episodes in "At the Bay"?
- What does Laura come to understand in "The Garden Party": the lower class, death, her own values, other matters, a combination of things?
- To what extent do the concerns of Mansfield's young women characters resemble those of Virginia Woolf?



# CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

**Born:** Canterbury, England

February 6, 1564

**Died:** Deptford, England

May 30, 1593

*An Elizabethan playwright and poet, Marlowe was a pioneer in creating English tragedy and dramatic blank verse.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury, England, on February 6, 1564, the eldest son of a shoemaker. He was baptized exactly two months before William Shakespeare was baptized at Stratford—a significant detail, as Marlowe exercised an enormous influence on Shakespeare and is generally believed to be the rival poet of Shakespeare's sonnets.

As a pupil at the King's School, Canterbury, Marlowe was elected a "Queen's scholar." He entered Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1580 and was again awarded a scholarship. In 1584, he earned his B.A. degree and entered into graduate study of divinity in preparation for taking holy orders. Just before Marlowe was to receive his M.A., the university proposed to withhold the degree. The decision was based on rumors that, after spending time at the seminary for exiled English Catholics in Reims, France, Marlowe meant to take Catholic holy orders. The seminary was a hotbed of Catholic insurrection against Elizabeth I's Protestant rule. Marlowe was awarded his M.A. only after the exceptional intervention of the Privy Council, which dealt with matters of national security. Records imply that Marlowe may have gone to Reims as an intelligence agent in the employ of Elizabeth's secretary of state, Sir Francis Walsingham.

Marlowe left Cambridge for London in 1587 without taking holy orders. Literature, not divinity, preoccupied him. Among works believed to date from his Cambridge years are *Elegies* (1595-1600), a translation of Ovid's *Amores* (c. 20 B.C.E.); *Pharsalia* (1600), a translation of Lucan's *Bellum civile* (first century C.E.); a play, *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (pr.

c. 1586-1587, pb. 1594); and *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I* (pr. c. 1587, pb. 1590). Some scholars add to this list his epic poem *Hero and Leander*, though it was not published until after his death, in 1598.

Marlowe's rise to fame as a playwright was rapid. The opening performance of *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I* was enthusiastically received. With its ruthless conquering hero and vivid pageantry, the play tapped the popular mood of feverish excitement at the prospect of war with Spain, and Marlowe quickly followed up with *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* (pr. 1587, pb. 1590). Few plays were more imitated, satirized, and joked about in print than the *Tamburlaine* plays.

*Doctor Faustus* was produced around 1588, and the first quarto edition appeared in 1604. This play gripped the imagination of the public and was frequently performed into the Jacobean Age. *The Jew of Malta* (pr. c. 1589; pb. 1633) was also a theatrical success. Around 1592, Marlowe offered a new play, *Edward II* (pr. c. 1592, pb. 1594), to the Earl of Pembroke's players. All of his other plays were performed by the Lord Admiral's men. A minor play, *The Massacre at Paris* (pb. 1594?), was produced in 1593.

Marlowe's personal life did not run as smoothly as his career. His impetuous and rebellious character frequently led him into trouble. In 1589, he was arrested and briefly imprisoned, then pardoned, as a result of his involvement in a fight in which a man died. Less than three years later, a constable sought the protection of the law against Marlowe.

In 1593, his heterodox opinions brought him into serious danger with the authorities. He was sharing living quarters with dramatist Thomas Kyd

when Privy Council agents searched Kyd's papers and discovered a treatise containing "vile heretical conceits denying the deity of Jesus Christ our Saviour." Under torture, Kyd disclaimed the paper, saying it was Marlowe's. Kyd was not alone in charging Marlowe with free thinking. More evidence came from Richard Baines, one of Walsingham's former intelligence agents. Baines testified to Marlowe's "damnable Judgment of Religion, and scorn of God's word." According to Baines, Marlowe doubted the historical truth of the Bible and held that "the first beginning of Religioun was only to keep men in awe." Baines added that "almost into every company he cometh he persuades men to atheism, willing them not to be afraid of bugbears and hobgoblins."

Marlowe's works reinforced charges of religious skepticism, containing as they did attacks on all major religions. In 1588, the year after the first performances of the *Tamburlaine* plays, Marlowe's Cambridge senior, Robert Greene, accused the playwright of "daring God out of heaven with that atheist Tamburlaine." To complicate the issue, on the evidence of *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe was well versed in the lore of witchcraft; Shakespeare suggests in Sonnet 86 that he dabbled in it.

Privy Council suspicions against Marlowe were fueled by the company that he kept. Among his friends were Sir Walter Raleigh, famous for his so-called School of Atheism, and astronomer Thomas Harriot, labeled an atheist. (Both might more accurately be described as deists.) Marlowe was arrested on May 20, 1593. He was instructed to report daily to the Privy Council while they deliberated, yet he was never to face the consequences of his nonconformism. On May 30, Marlowe spent the day at an inn in Deptford, England, with companions of his friend Sir Thomas Walsingham. At the end of the day, a dispute about the bill arose between Marlowe and Ingram Frizer, Walsingham's business agent, who had, it seemed, invited him. Marlowe, in a fit of anger, drew Frizer's dagger and cut him over the head. Frizer retrieved his dagger and stabbed Marlowe above his right eye. Marlowe died instantly. Frizer was later pardoned as having acted in self-defense.

## ANALYSIS

Marlowe is often called the father of English tragedy because *Tamburlaine the Great* was the first

tragedy to combine a grand concept, a strong central character capable of carrying the action of the play, and suitably heightened verse style. The extent of the revolution in drama that Marlowe initiated cannot be understood without considering his contribution to English verse. The poetry of *Tamburlaine the Great* was a kind never before heard on the English stage, with passages of exultant magnificence and lyrical sweetness. Its power was attributable largely to Marlowe's discovery of true blank verse style. Previous dramatists had experimented with an unrhymed decasyllabic line with five iambic feet (each foot having a weak stress followed by a strong one). Consider as an example these lines from an earlier play, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorbuduc* (pr. 1561, pb. 1565; also published as *The Tragedy of Ferrex and Porrex*): "Your lasting age shall be their longer stay,/ For cares of kings, that rule as you have ruled." Each line has five pairs of two syllables, each pair consisting of a weak stress followed by a strong one (the iambic foot); the strong stresses are uniform in weight; and this iambic rhythm is never varied. The result is tiresomely repetitive.

Marlowe had a sufficiently sensitive ear to perceive that though the norm of blank verse should be this regular iambic rhythm, and though the audience's awareness of that norm should not be lost, few lines should conform to that pattern. The strong stresses per line should be fewer than five; the line should be broken into four, three, even two groups of sounds, separated by a minuscule pause; moreover, different kinds of feet other than the iamb should be introduced. In applying these discoveries, Marlowe exploited the flexibility and expressiveness of blank verse and cleared the way for other poets such as Shakespeare, John Milton, and William Wordsworth. Compare the *Gorbuduc* lines with the following passage from *Doctor Faustus*: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships?/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?/ Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss." The first line is regular, with five iambic feet and five stresses. The second is regular in rhythm but has only four strong stresses, and the line falls into three sound groups. The third, however, diverges completely from the regular meter, beginning with a foot of two strong stresses and having a foot of two weak and one strong stresses ("me immor-") in the middle. Such changes in the basic rhythm emphasize

emotionally charged words and phrases, increasing the expressive power and enlivening the listener's attention.

Marlowe was an innovator also in his choice of themes. Religious skepticism recurs throughout the plays. *Tamburlaine the Great* challenged both Christian and Moslem faiths; *The Jew of Malta* confounded Christianity and Judaism alike. Marlowe's questioning of humanity's place in the universe reached its height in *Doctor Faustus*, an agonized cry of defiance against an orthodoxy represented as chaining humankind's unquenchable thirst for knowledge. One cannot, however, assume that Marlowe was atheistical in the modern sense of materialistic. If there is anything of Marlowe in the solemn speech given to Orcanes in *Part II*, act 2 of *Tamburlaine the Great*, one may infer that the dramatist accepted the existence of a nondenominational supreme intelligence.

At the core of Marlowe's heterodoxy was his fascination with humanity's aspirant spirit and illimitable mind—a theme that did not fit easily into contemporary Christian thought. Marlowe's heroes are self-made, fired by a sense of their own power and greatness, in strong contrast to Shakespeare's, with their orthodox assumption of the privileges and honor due to noble birth.

Marlowe's treatment of this theme became more complex over the years. Faustus shares with the earlier hero Tamburlaine aspirations for worldly power at any cost. Both plays display the immense power of the individual to unleash massive forces for good or ill. Yet Faustus's odyssey, unlike Tamburlaine's, is intellectual rather than physical, internal rather than external. Whereas *Tamburlaine the Great* was a play of action and show, *Doctor Faustus* is a play of ideas—hence, perhaps, its more enduring fascination. Tamburlaine's approach to life is never seriously challenged, whereas the obstacles placed in Faustus's path form the premise of the play.

Marlowe's other major plays contain views as controversial as those in *Doctor Faustus*, for different reasons. The action of *Edward II*, remarkable for the time, revolves around a homosexual relationship between Edward II and his favorite minion, Gaveston. Marlowe, who according to Baines said that "all they that loue not Tobacco & Boies were fooles," often treated the subject of homosexuality sympathetically. *The Jew of Malta* also adopts

an unorthodox standpoint, this time in public matters: The play is a cynical commentary on the corruption and greed of social and political life, after the theories of Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli.

## TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT

**First produced:** *Part I*, c. 1587 (first published, 1590); *Part II*, 1587 (first published, 1590)

**Type of work:** Plays

*In Part I, the Scythian shepherd Tamburlaine conquers many Eastern countries, becomes king of Persia, and marries the soldan of Egypt's daughter Zenocrate; in Part II, Tamburlaine continues his conquests, Zenocrate dies, and Tamburlaine slays his cowardly son and finally dies.*

When *Tamburlaine the Great* burst upon the Elizabethan stage in 1587, it took audiences by storm. The most popular tragedy of the time had been Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (pr. c. 1585-1589, pb. 1594?), which featured a strong dramatic sense but unmemorable verse. *Tamburlaine the Great*, in contrast, was written in poetry of the scope and magnificence that moved Shakespeare to write of "the proud full sail of [Marlowe's] great verse" (Sonnet 86).

Vital to the play's success was the figure of Tamburlaine. The prologue introduces him in lines that were to become famous: "Threatening the world with high astounding terms,/ And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword." Tamburlaine's power comes from his limitless self-concept, not from his birth, which was that of a humble shepherd. In Marlowe's world, a person's worth is measured by his or her actions. Thus Tamburlaine declares, "I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove—/ And yet a shepherd by my parentage." His thoughts, he says, are coequal with the clouds, and his aspiration is immortality such as the gods enjoy. Indeed, he claims to gain his authority to terrorize the world from Jove himself, whose scourge he is.

As for the traditional enemies of the aspirant—Death and Fortune—the plays contain frequent

references to Tamburlaine's mastery over them, as in the passage in *Part I*, act 1, where he claims that he has bound the Fates in iron chains and turns Fortune's wheel with his own hand. He appears to have assumed the role of Fate in condemning the virgins of Damascus to death for their failure to surrender before he symbolically decked his tents in black: His Customs, he says, are "as peremptory/As wrathful planets, death, or destiny."

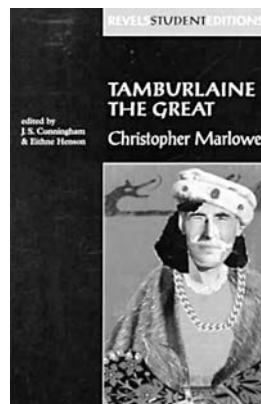
Such assertions are hubristic in the extreme and, in a Christian context, would merit a downfall such as Faustus's. Tamburlaine, however, moves freely in a non-Christian setting. His death, when it comes, occurs through illness. He is never punished for his past exploits; rather, he is lionized by all save his enemies. "Nature," he says, ". . . doth teach us all to have aspiring minds"; our souls are ever "climbing after knowledge infinite." Compare this blithe celebration of the illimitable mind with the Chorus's fearful and bitter epilogue to *Doctor Faustus* lamenting the tragic fate of inquiring minds who are tempted to explore forbidden knowledge.

Christianity makes a brief appearance in *Part II* in the unsympathetic character of Sigismund, a Christian king. Sigismund makes a treaty with the Muslim king Orcanes only to be persuaded to break it on the grounds that oaths made with heathens are not binding. When Orcanes defeats the treacherous force of Sigismund, he wonders whether his victory was attributable to his invocation of Christ's wrath on the enemy or to Mahomet's favor. The skeptical Gazellus pointedly suggests that the cause lies in neither prophet, but in the fortunes of war. Marlowe's casual dismissal of Christ and Mahomet as a couple of rival prophets is indicative of his skeptical attitude toward all religions and their claims to a monopoly on truth.

The taste of the theatergoing public has changed since the Elizabethan Age, and modern audiences may view the bloody acts of ruthless tyrants with less enthusiasm. The negative sides of Tamburlaine's character—his cruelty, vengefulness, and extraordinary amount of machismo—may put him in danger of losing the audience's sympathy altogether. Scenes that spring to mind are, in part I, his slaughter of the virgins of Damascus after the town's surrender and his inhuman treatment of Bajazeth. *Part II* depicts his self-indulgent act of burning the town where Zenocrate dies; his deliberately cutting his arm to show his sons that a wound is nothing, and his insistence that they wash their hands in the blood; his slaying of his son for cowardice; and his harnessing of the captured kings in his chariot.

Yet evidence exists that the Elizabethan response to Tamburlaine's overweening arrogance was not without a certain tongue-in-cheek humor. Tamburlaine's words to the harnessed kings as they draw his chariot onstage—"Holla, ye pamper'd jades of Asia!"—apparently brought the Elizabethan house down, since the line was the subject of jokes and was imitated and satirized in the works of different authors for years to come.

*Tamburlaine the Great's* appeal has diminished also because of its lack of inner dramatic conflict. Even its external conflicts—the battles—lack any threat to Tamburlaine's invincible status. The play's appeal to the modern mind more often lies in its grand images and breathtaking poetry. Take, as an example, Tamburlaine's glorious hymn to his own boundless spirit in act 4 of *Part II*. Delivered just before he stabs his son, it exemplifies the vast cosmic images that sustain the heightened effect of the plays. Lines memorable for their loveliness abound. Some examples are Callapine's description of the Grecian virgins, "As fair as was Pygmalion's ivory girl,/ Or lovely Io metamorphosed," and Tamburlaine's speech to the dying Zenocrate punctuated by its lyrical refrain. The part of Tamburlaine's soliloquy in act 5 of *Part I* dealing with poetry's attempts to capture the essence of beauty has attained the status of a set piece.



## DOCTOR FAUSTUS

**First produced:** c. 1588 (first published, 1604)

**Type of work:** Play

*A brilliant scholar sells his soul to the Devil in return for forbidden knowledge and worldly power.*

Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* is generally considered his greatest. The play shares certain elements with its ancestor, the medieval morality play: the opposing admonishments of good and bad angels; the characters of Lucifer and Mephostophilis; and the appearance of the Seven Deadly Sins. Yet it breaks with tradition in two important respects: in the sympathy evoked for the straying hero, and in the questions raised against the cosmic order of conventional Christian doctrine.

Faustus pursues his grand aspirations in what Marlowe portrays as a repressive climate of Christian orthodoxy, which, in designating certain knowledge as forbidden, blocks fulfillment of his desires and effectively becomes his antagonist. The play opens with Faustus in his study. He has plumbed the depths of all disciplines and found them unfulfilling. He will settle for no less than a dominion that "Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man"—a world of physical beauty, sensual delight, and power over life and objects. He decides his best hope is necromancy, an art forbidden by Christian doctrine.

Thus, the scene is set for Faustus's tragic decline. Planted in the text, even from the beginning, are warnings of the terrible fate awaiting Faustus. A master of dramatic irony, Marlowe has these warnings go unheeded by his hero while they build an uneasy tension in the audience's awareness. An example is Faustus's remark on his own great powers in conjuring up Mephostophilis. Only a few lines later, it is revealed that Mephostophilis has come more out of his own and Lucifer's self-interest than in deference to Faustus's wishes. Similarly, when Mephostophilis tells Faustus that Lucifer was thrown from Heaven for aspiring pride and insolence, the audience recognizes that Faustus exhibits the same faults and may meet the same fate. There is ambivalence, too, in Faustus's repeated exhortation to himself to be resolute in his damna-

ble course of action. The word, used more often in connection with Christian virtue, gains an ironic weight, rendering *Doctor Faustus* a negative version of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684).

Counterbalanced against this carefully crafted tragic inevitability is the hope that Faustus *will* repent and save himself. Marlowe keeps the conflict in Faustus's soul active until the end. In the moving soliloquies, Faustus's initial confidence in his pact with Lucifer alternates with regret and determination to turn back to God. Despair however, prevails. In his second soliloquy, Faustus is turned back from repentance by his sense of God's indifference to him and his own indifference to God: Faustus serves only his own appetite. In one profoundly moving scene, Faustus announces, "I do repent" only to have Mephostophilis threaten him with having his flesh torn into pieces for disobedience to Lucifer. Faustus effects a hasty turnabout of meaning in an ironic echo of his previous phrase: "I do repent I e'er offended him."

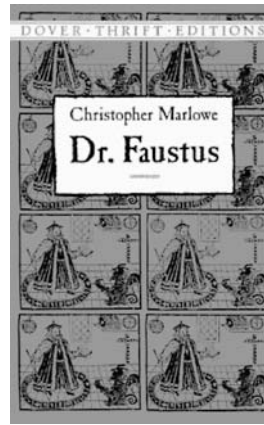
Yet just as God failed Faustus in his aspirations, so does Lucifer. Disillusionment follows rapidly on his pact. Faustus asks for a wife; but marriage is a sacrament, so Mephostophilis cannot provide one. When Faustus questions him about astronomy, Mephostophilis tells him nothing the scholar Wagner could not have told him. Although the Chorus reveals that Faustus attains fame for his learning, his achievements are superficial and empty in comparison with his grandiose intentions at the outset. He humiliates the pope (a typically Marlovian scenario), avenges some petty wrongs done to him by Benvolio by attaching antlers to his head, and entertains the duke and duchess of Vanholt with insubstantial illusions. At the play's start, no area of knowledge is large enough for Faustus's overweening sense of self; toward the end, fear and despair have so diminished him that he wants only dissolution and oblivion: "O soul, be chang'd into little water drops,/ And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found."

In spite of the intellectual nature of the play's premise, it contains scenes of a striking visual immediacy. The first entrance of Mephostophilis, too ugly for Faustus's taste, and the appearance of Helen of Troy are examples. Often, scenes of horror are not directly represented on stage but chillingly evoked in words. Faustus's blood congeals as



he attempts to sign his soul away to the Devil; a Latin inscription meaning “Fly, O man!” appears on his arm. That the audience is told this by Faustus rather than seeing it for itself lets it experience the terror through his awareness. Similarly, a chill of fear is produced by Faustus’s words to the Scholars: “Ay, pray for me, pray for me; and, what noise soever ye hear, come not unto me, for nothing can rescue me.” The image is as powerful in its understatement as the explicit horror of the final scene, where devils drag Faustus off to Hell.

Marlowe’s verse reached its full emotional power in *Doctor Faustus*. Faustus’s soliloquy beginning “Ah, Faustus,/ Now hast thou but one bare hour to live” is an example of the emotional intensity of which Marlowe was capable. Faustus’s request that the spheres of Heaven cease their motion to give him time to repent is heartrending because of its very impossibility. Desperation is conveyed in the rapid and diminishing series of time extensions that he demands. His violent re-



versals of mood—from calling on God to anguish at being dragged downward by devils, from the vision of Christ’s blood streaming in the firmament to the pain of Lucifer’s tortures—move the audience with him from despair to hope. His spiritual agony is summarized in the evocative and poignant line, “O lente lente currite noctis equi” (“Slowly run, O horses of night”).

The traditional morality play affirmed Christian virtue and faith and condemned the vices of those who strayed from the path. *Doctor Faustus* offers no such comfortable framework. It does not offer a reassuring affirmation of Christian faith or a straightforward condemnation of Faustus. Instead, it presents a disturbing challenge to the cosmic order as defined by Christian orthodoxy. Listeners are invited “Only to wonder at unlawful things,/ whose deepness doth entice such forward wits/ To practise more than heavenly power permits.”

The question with which the play ends is whether the tragedy of Faustus is individual, the

tragedy of one man’s fall from grace, or universal, the tragedy of Everyman in a system of belief that offers no place or path for the growth of the illimitable human spirit.

## HERO AND LEANDER

**First published:** 1598

**Type of work:** Poem

*Leander falls in love with Hero, who lives on the opposite side of the Hellespont, and tries to seduce her.*

Marlowe left *Hero and Leander* unfinished at his death. It was completed by dramatist George Chapman in very different style and published by him the following year. (This analysis deals only with the part of the poem that Marlowe wrote, the first two sestiams.)

*Hero and Leander* is the most famous example of a favorite Elizabethan genre, the brief epic. It circulated in manuscript for some years before publication. During this time, it was certainly read by William Shakespeare, whose poem of the same genre *Venus and Adonis* (1593) was influenced by it, and whose plays contain strong echoes of its lines. The brief epic was a poem on an erotic and mythological subject, often drawn from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 C.E.). *Hero and Leander* is Ovidian in character, though the story actually comes from a later version of the myth by Musaeus. Most adaptors of Ovidian subjects indulged in a high degree of moralizing, a factor dispensed with by Marlowe.

*Hero and Leander* is an exuberantly sensuous poem enlivened by an irrepressible comic spirit. Having fallen in love with the beautiful Hero, Leander wastes no time in attempting to bed her. He uses the commonplace arguments of Renaissance naturalism: Since virginity has no material reality and is imperceptible to the senses, it is nothing—and therefore nothing to preserve or anything of which to be proud. Such specious logic is meant to be enjoyed as flights of wit and audacity, and would only be taken at face value by someone of Hero’s naïveté. Leander’s devious sophistry is pointed out in lines whose rhymes anticipate Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819-1824, 1826): “At last, like to a bold sharp sophister,/ With cheerful hope he

thus accosted her.” Also enlisted into the argument is a theme shared by Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and his sonnets, the sterility and waste of youth and beauty’s keeping its gifts to itself in the virginal state.

In spite of Leander’s sophistication in the art of persuasion, in the art of love he is an innocent. In a passage of comic understatement, he toys with Hero “as a brother with his sister,” “Supposing nothing else was to be done”—“yet he suspected/ Some amorous rites or other were neglected.” Hero is able to deflect Leander’s inept advances and greets the morning still intact. Leander returns home, and the narrator’s ironic comment on his encounter with his father sustains the comic detachment: “His secret flame apparently was seen,/ Leander’s father knew where he had been.” Mock-heroic images also contribute to the poem’s comic tone, as in the passage in sestiad 2 likening Leander’s attempt to touch the reluctant Hero’s breast—exaggeratedly described as a globe “By which love sails to regions full of bliss”—to a siege. She “did as a soldier stout/ Defend the fort, and keep the foeman out.”

Another comic episode shows Leander, determined to see his love, swimming the Hellespont to reach her home. He is nearly frustrated in his aim by the sea god Neptune’s taking a fancy to him. Neptune mistakes Leander for Jove’s page Gany-mede and, in a scene of intense homoeroticism as funny as it is sensuous, tries to seduce the unwitting young man. Leander, at cross-purposes with Neptune, protests that he is no woman. The worldly-wise Neptune smiles at his innocence. It is not the first homoerotic element in the poem: Leander’s feminine beauty is described in unusually intimate detail, from the point of view of the male narrator and of other male admirers.

The imagery of the poem creates a world of intoxicating sensuality. Leander’s beauty exceeds that of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. Hero worships Venus at a temple sumptuously described; about her neck, she wears chains of pebble-stones that shine like diamonds.

## “THE PASSIONATE SHEPHERD TO HIS LOVE”

**First published:** 1599 (collected in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, 1599)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This work is one of the best-known Elizabethan lyrics and was endlessly imitated, parodied, and answered well into the seventeenth century.*

“The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” comprising six stanzas of four lines each, is an intellectual’s vision of pastoral life, in a tradition going back to the Roman poets Theocritus and Vergil. Its undoubted emotional power hinges on its yearning evocation of an idyll that never was and can never be. The wistful invitation of the poet to his love to live with him in this impossibly perfect place evokes the pathos of unfulfilled desire and longing.

The work is rich with images chosen to delight the senses. There is the visual feast of the pastoral landscape and of the belt with coral clasps and amber studs, the soft touch of the gown made from wool pulled from lambs, the sounds of the birds singing melodious madrigals and of the shepherds’ songs, the smell of the beds of roses and of the thousand fragrant posies.

The regular rhyme scheme, of two pairs of rhyming couplets per stanza, the smooth iambic rhythm, and the use of alliteration add to the songlike quality of the poem, and indeed, an adapted version of one of its stanzas appears as a song in Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (pr. 1597, revised, c. 1600-1601, pb. 1602).

### SUMMARY

Christopher Marlowe was a brilliant innovator and an intellectual nonconformist, with much to tell and much to question about power, desire, sensuality, greed, and suffering. His poetic images, vast in scale and cosmic in conception, as well as his larger-than-life characters of grand aspirations and prodigious sensual appetites, inspired critic Harry Levin to dub Marlowe “the overreacher.” No better word could be chosen to characterize the magnificence, the vehemence, and the violent egotism that give his genius such an intensely personal stamp.

Claire Robinson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Identify the characters in Christopher Marlowe's plays who might be called "overreachers."
- Analyze metrically a group of Marlowe's lines that you find effective and determine the nature of the variations.
- How might Marlowe's subject in his early play *Dido, Queen of Carthage* have influenced William Shakespeare's choice of dramatic subjects?
- To what extent was *Doctor Faustus* a rejection of "the cosmic order of conventional Christian doctrine"?
- What makes Dr. Faustus's goal more shocking than those of Tamburlaine and the Jew of Malta?
- What qualities in "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" made it irresistible to the other poets who composed "replies" to it?



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**Born:** Winestead-in-Holderness, Yorkshire, England  
March 31, 1621

**Died:** London, England  
August 18, 1678

*Marvell's work, which embodies the best qualities of Metaphysical poetry, is marked by a distinctive ability to present and resolve seemingly irreconcilable opposites, a trait that allows him to examine complex situations and issues with great depth and sensitivity.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Marvell was born in Winestead-in-Holderness, Yorkshire, England, on March 31, 1621. His father, Andrew Marvell, was a local vicar, and in 1624 the family moved to Hull, where Marvell's father had been appointed lecturer at Holy Trinity Church. Marvell was educated at Hull Grammar School, and in 1633 he left Hull for Trinity College, Cambridge. At Cambridge, Marvell read widely; his studies included the works of Roman poets such as Horace and Juvenal, which would influence Marvell's own later poems. In 1637, his first verses, in Latin and Greek, were published. During this year, he also experienced a brief conversion to Roman Catholicism and ran away from Cambridge to London. His father, however, found him and forced him to return to the university. He received his B.A. and left Cambridge after his father's death in 1641. For the next several years, Marvell traveled extensively, visiting Holland, France, Italy, and Spain. In Rome, he visited the English Catholic priest and poetaster, Richard Flecknoe, who was to become the subject of satirical poems by both Marvell and, later, John Dryden. Although few details are known about Marvell's life during the 1640's, it appears that his lengthy travels abroad kept him from taking any direct part in the bloody and divisive English Civil War.

In 1650, Marvell took a position as tutor to Mary

Fairfax, the young daughter of Lord Thomas Fairfax, a Parliamentary general who resigned from military service in June of that year. Marvell lived for two years with the Fairfax family in their home, Nun Appleton House, in Yorkshire. It was during this time that Marvell is thought to have written much of his finest lyric poetry, including a lengthy poem celebrating the virtues of the Fairfax home and its master. John Milton, a friend and mentor, recommended Marvell for an appointment as Latin secretary to the Council of State, but the post was not awarded to Marvell until four years later. In the meantime, Marvell was appointed tutor to William Dutton, who would later become a ward of Oliver Cromwell, the English soldier and statesman. During Cromwell's years as lord protector, Marvell wrote poems in praise of Cromwell and his government, including "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" (commonly known as "An Horatian Ode") and *The First Anniversary of the Government Under His Highness the Lord Protector* (1655). Despite Marvell's admiration for Cromwell, both as a man and as a political force, and his enjoyment of Cromwell's favor, Marvell was not a fanatical partisan or a Puritan zealot, and he seems to have weathered the Restoration of the monarchy without difficulty. Marvell was instrumental in protecting Milton, who had been a vocal anti-Royalist, from retribution under the restored monarchy.

Marvell was elected to Parliament as a representative for Hull in 1659. He remained a member of

Parliament for the rest of his life, a span of nearly twenty years. During his tenure in Parliament, he continued to travel widely, accompanying the earl of Carlisle on a tour of Russia, Sweden, and Denmark, returning to England in 1665. Though Marvell is little remembered today as a politician, he was in his day an active and conscientious supporter of his constituents' interests, as his numerous letters to the mayor and aldermen of Hull show. After the Restoration, Marvell was sometimes outspoken in his criticism of Charles II's government, and in 1667 he wrote "Last Instructions to a Painter," a poem satirizing various politicians and political affairs of the day, particularly the conduct of the 1667 naval campaign against the Dutch. He also gained some notoriety as a political pamphleteer, most notably for his two-part *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* (1672-1673), a clarion call for religious tolerance in the face of a campaign for religious conformity being waged by Samuel Parker, a Church of England divine. In the early 1670's, it was feared that Charles II was conspiring with the Catholic Louis XIV of France to curtail the religious and political freedom of his subjects; in reaction, Marvell, operating under an assumed name, took part in a clandestine, pro-Protestant campaign designed to influence English foreign policy and compel Charles and the English forces to conclude hostilities with the Dutch. When Marvell died on August 18, 1678, in London as a result of a physician's mistreatment of a fever, it was rumored that he was the victim of a political murder.

During Marvell's life, few of his poems were published, and he was known in his day primarily for his pamphlets and a few verse and prose satires. In 1681, three years after his death, a collection that included many of his lyrical pastoral poems was published from papers brought forward by his housekeeper, Mary Palmer, who claimed to be his wife. Although these poems enjoyed some popularity at their publication, Marvell remained relatively unknown as a poet until his "rediscovery" by later writers such as Charles Lamb and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in the nineteenth century and T. S. Eliot in the twentieth.

## ANALYSIS

Marvell is a poet attracted by complexity and paradox, and he is reluctant to oversimplify the themes and experiences that he explores in his po-

ems, be they pastoral lyrics or overtly political works. His best poems frequently display an ambiguity and irony that is not a mere stylistic device but rather a reflection of Marvell's penchant for seeing many sides of an ostensibly simple situation. In addition, Marvell was artistically influenced by other Metaphysical poets such as John Donne, who avoided hackneyed poetic conventions and used clever, convoluted logic and incongruous imagery to bring fresh perspectives to bear on traditional poetic subjects such as love and death.

The term "Metaphysical poet" is not one with which Marvell would have been familiar. Although it was first used by Dryden in criticizing Donne for his use of farfetched, extravagant metaphors and abstract logic in poems dealing with emotional subjects, it gained a nonpejorative status and wider currency as a result of Eliot's seminal 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets." Eliot's essay praises the Metaphysical poets (including Marvell) for their harmonious uniting of reason and emotion. Some qualities of Metaphysical poetry that Marvell shares are a logical and analytical strain in dealing with emotional subjects; the use of extended, incongruous metaphors, or "conceits," that link dissimilar images; a fondness for puns and paradox; and, occasionally, a deliberate roughness or unevenness of meter designed to add vigor to the lines.

"The Definition of Love" illustrates some of these qualities. In it, Marvell explores the paradox of an unrequited love that by its very impossibility achieves perfection. Marvell inverts traditional poetic images, referring to "Magnanimous Despair" and "feeble Hope." Like Donne, who compared his love to a compass, Marvell employs mapmaking imagery to describe the separation from his lover. He and his beloved are like "the distant Poles," around whom the entire world turns. He speaks of love in terms of oblique angles and infinite parallel lines that can never meet, and he invokes the oxymoronic image of a planisphere (literally a flat sphere, a term used to describe two-dimensional representation of the globe) to illustrate the impossibility of their union. He "defines" his love by these images of impossibility.

Many of Marvell's earlier poems deal with the subject of retirement or withdrawal from public life to a life of private contemplation. Indeed, many critics divide Marvell's work into two bodies: his



early poems in praise of the contemplative life and his later poems that address more explicitly political subjects and advocate engagement in public, political life. Many of his poems praising retirement employ imagery of gardens and green woods, a trait that has led to his being called "the green poet" or "the garden poet" for his pastoral works.

"The Garden" exemplifies this type of poem. In it, Marvell wavers between whimsy and melancholy as he describes the joys of solitude in a lush, green garden. The garden is the home of "Fair Quiet" and "Innocence," far from the "busy companies of men." Paradoxically, the lack of human company results in a higher form of civilization: "Society is all but rude,/ To this delicious solitude." In arguing that solitude in the garden is superior to love, he inverts romantic images from classical mythology, claiming that Apollo was rewarded, rather than thwarted, when Daphne, his romantic quarry, was metamorphosed into a tree; likewise, he suggests that Pan pursued Syrinx "Not as a nymph, but for a reed." In typical fashion, however, Marvell subtly qualifies the paradisiacal scene, suggesting that the garden may not be as perfect as the speaker describes. The speaker stumbles over fruits and vines and says "Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass," recalling Adam's fall in Eden. As the speaker withdraws further and further into inward contemplation in the garden, his thoughts destructively begin "Annihilating all that's made/ To a green thought in a green shade." Marvell moves this vaguely unhealthy solipsism into hubris as the self-absorbed speaker criticizes the Divine plan, saying "Two paradises 'twere in one/ To live in paradise alone." As in many of Marvell's poems, the meaning rests on the reader's interpretation of the tone. Despite the subtly qualifying negative imagery, the garden is portrayed throughout as beautiful and peaceful. Marvell appears neither to embrace wholeheartedly nor to reject entirely retirement in the garden, and his equivocal lyrics seem to suggest an ideal of balance between total withdrawal and engagement in society.

Marvell explores the issue of pastoral retirement versus engagement in worldly affairs in other poems such as "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn," which offers the garden as a fragile refuge from violent society, "The Emigrants in the Bermudas," which posits the necessity of escape from corrupt society in order to achieve spiritual perfection, and the several "Mower" poems, which depict meadows and gardens as wholesome retreats from unhappy social relations. The subject receives its fullest treatment in the lengthy "Upon Appleton House." As in "The Garden," the positive values of retirement are expounded through garden imagery. In this work, however, Marvell is more openly ambivalent about the virtues of retirement. The poem celebrates the character, home, and family of his employer, Lord Fairfax. Fairfax embodies all the positive qualities that Marvell sees as springing from a life of retirement and contemplation. Marvell suggests, however, that Fairfax has a responsibility to bestow the benefits of his virtue on society by taking active part in the politics of the day. Unlike "The Garden," "Upon Appleton House" does not ignore the political and social exigencies of the day; Fairfax cannot live in a kind of horticultural vacuum. Instead, Fairfax must cultivate and cherish the values nurtured in retirement but use them in the service of society. That is achieved metaphorically through the marriage of Fairfax's daughter Mary, as she takes the values of Appleton House out into the wider world.

"Upon Appleton House" can be considered a bridge to Marvell's later poems advocating active engagement in society and politics. Marvell recognized that the extraordinary times in which he lived required individuals of integrity and ability to take an active role in the conduct of the state. As Marvell himself became increasingly involved in public life, his work was likewise concerned more and more with political topics. Among his politicized writings are several poems praising Cromwell, satires such as "Last Instructions to a Painter," which severely criticized English policies and politicians, and a number of political pamphlets.

## “TO HIS COY MISTRESS”

**First published:** 1681 (collected in  
*Miscellaneous Poems*, 1681)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The swift passage of time and its attendant decay is a compelling reason to enjoy life's pleasures in the present, but it may also be as strong an argument for religiously motivated abstinence.*

“To His Coy Mistress” is a witty exploration of the traditional *carpe diem* theme, and it can be read on several levels. On the surface, it functions extremely effectively as a lover’s argument in favor of pursuing pleasure. The speaker begins by assuring his lady that, “Had we but world enough, and time,” he would be well content to love her at a slow pace, devoting thousands of years to adoring each part of her. Time in this stanza is an agent of growth, as the speaker assures his beloved, “My vegetable love should grow/ Vaster than empires, and more slow.” The initial stanza moves at a leisurely metrical pace as the speaker uses extravagant and playful images to persuade the lady of his devotion and his wish that he could love her with the slow thoroughness that she deserves.

In the second stanza, the speaker shifts to images of swiftly passing time to impress upon his love that they in fact do not have the leisure to love at this slow rate. “At my back I always hear/ Time’s winged chariot hurrying near,” he says. Now time is destructive, and the meter moves rapidly. The speaker resorts to images of decay that are at once whimsical and frightening as he attempts to convince the beloved of the need to consummate their love in the present. Though images of death and decay are not unusual in *carpe diem* lyrics, Marvell’s images are particularly graphic and alarming: “in thy marble vault . . . / worms shall try/ That long-preserved virginity:/ And your quaint honour turn to dust.” The speaker employs dark humor as he ironically comments, “The grave’s a fine and private place,/ But none, I think, do there embrace.”

The third stanza exhorts the beloved to action. While they are still young, able, and desirable, he urges, they should “sport” while they may, and “Rather at once our time devour,/ Than languish

in his slow-chapped power.” By seizing the initiative and enthusiastically embracing life and pleasure, they can win a victory over destructive Time: “Thus, though we cannot make our sun/ Stand still, yet we will make him run.”

As always, though, Marvell is aware of an equally compelling counterpoint to his argument, and he chooses ambiguous imagery to communicate it subtly. In the first stanza, Marvell uses explicitly religious terminology to describe the enormous length of time that he would like to devote to the wooing of his lady: “I would/ Love you ten years before the flood:/ And you should, if you please, refuse/ Till the conversion of Jews” (it was a traditional belief that the Jews would convert to Christianity at the end of the world). Marvell thus evokes a specifically divine or eternal time frame, with overtones of judgment (the Flood was divine punishment for the human race’s corruption) and salvation.

Similarly, the following stanzas are studded with religious references. Marvell conjures up an image of the “Deserts of vast eternity” that lie before the lovers, an image that may spur his beloved to action in this life but may just as well remind her of her eternal afterlife. He argues that time will turn her honor to “dust” and his lust to “ashes,” suggesting the terminology of the Christian burial service. He refers to the way (in reality or perhaps merely in his hopes) that her “willing soul transpires/ At every pore with instant fires.” Conjoining images of souls and fires cannot help but suggest hellfire and eternal damnation.

The final stanza, in which he urges action, presents a problematic vision of love. He compares himself and his lover to sportive animals, specifically “amorous birds of prey,” an odd image to use in attempting to win his lady. The love that he describes seems rough and violent: He suggests that they “devour” their time and says, “Let us . . . / Tear our pleasures with rough strife/ Thorough the iron grates of life” (“thorough” here means “through”). The lines have a rather strange and unromantic ring and qualify the speaker’s ostensibly enthusiastic description of love. Love as described in this stanza is not conventionally sweet and sentimental but rather vaguely dangerous and threatening; beneath the surface, Marvell seems to be issuing a warning as much as an exhortation.

More than a love poem, “To His Coy Mistress” is

a meditation on time and death. Marvell dramatizes the questions: What are the implications of physicality and mortality? In using time most wisely, should one focus on this life or the afterlife? Marvell avoids a simple, conventional answer, and the poem works well as an argument for either view.

### “AN HORATIAN ODE”

**First published:** 1681 (collected in  
*Miscellaneous Poems*, 1681)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Cromwell, the hero and prime mover of the English Civil War, which led to the overthrow of King Charles I, is celebrated as a valorous man of action, but Marvell warns that his exercise of power must be tempered with prudence and restraint.*

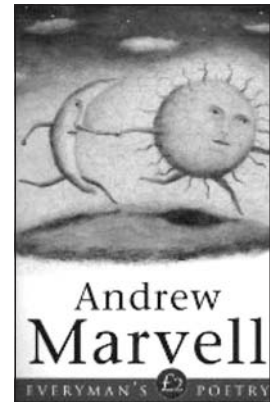
Like “To His Coy Mistress,” “An Horatian Ode” operates on several levels. On the surface, it is a conventional celebratory ode about a military and political hero, praising his exploits and virtues. One can infer from Marvell’s other laudatory poems about Oliver Cromwell that the poet genuinely admired the lord protector; the tone of the poem is not openly ironic. Woven into the praise, however, or hidden behind it, are subtle signs indicating an equivocal attitude toward Cromwell and his achievements.

Cromwell is depicted as a larger-than-life figure, a conqueror who is almost as much a force of nature as a man; Marvell compares him to “three-forked lightning” and calls him a “greater spirit.” He is likened to a scourge of God, sweeping away corruption. “’Tis madness to resist or blame/ The force of angry heaven’s flame.” He is a conqueror on a par with “Caesar” and “Hannibal.” Yet intermingled with this praise for Cromwell is a sense of regret at the destruction of ancient institutions. The effect of Cromwell’s revolution has been “to ruin the great work of time,” in other words, society and government as it had been. Marvell calls Cromwell an instrument of fate and power rather than one of righteousness when he says “Though justice against fate complain,/ And plead the ancient rights in vain:/ . . . those do hold or break/ As men are strong or weak.”

Of course, the greatest institution that Cromwell succeeded in destroying was the monarchy. Marvell treats the scene of King Charles I’s execution with great sensitivity and sympathy. The king is likened to an “actor” playing his final scene on a stagelike scaffold, while all around “the armed bands/ Did clap their bloody hands.” Marvell praises the dignity and courage of the king: “He nothing common did or mean/ Upon that memorable scene . . . / Nor called the gods with vulgar spite/ To vindicate his helpless right.” In describing the king’s execution, Marvell seems more concerned with the human drama than with the political circumstances surrounding the event; the king is not a tyrant or an enemy, but an admirably brave prisoner.

Beyond this open ambivalence are more indirect qualifications to the praise of Cromwell. The whole poem is rife with puns and double meanings, from the opening lines describing Cromwell’s supporters as “forward” (either “eager” or “presumptuous”—or both) to the sly description of Cromwell’s progress from farmer to conqueror and statesman. Before his emergence as a public figure, Marvell says, Cromwell labored in his “private gardens . . . / As if his highest plot/ To plant the bergamot.” The pun on “plot” is apparent, but the choice of “bergamot” is interesting. A bergamot is a fruit tree whose etymological name means “prince’s pear”; the reference is perhaps a swipe at Cromwell’s aspirations to rule.

A kind of resolution, or at least an acknowledgment, of the tensions established by his equivocal praise is achieved toward the end of the poem when Marvell openly expresses his concerns about Cromwell’s rule. Though he praises Cromwell for being responsive to the wishes of the people, having “his sword and spoils ungirt,/ To lay them at the public’s skirt,” he offers an explicit warning, both to Cromwell and to the people, about the exercise of absolute power and the possible necessity of further bloodshed to uphold it: “The same arts that did gain/ A power, must it maintain.”



## SUMMARY

Andrew Marvell's poetry offers a clear, distinctive reflection of both the events and the issues of his time and of his own unique and penetrating mind. With wit and intelligence, he offers novel perspectives on poetical commonplaces from love to virtue (both individual and social) to death. By treating the conventional in a highly unconventional way, Marvell is able to reveal an astonishing complexity to his subjects, what T. S. Eliot calls "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible." Marvell's conclusions are never forced or obvious; he subtly manipulates language and

tone to hint at rather than clearly delineate his views and invites the reader to draw his own conclusions.

Marvell's work incorporates the best features not only of Metaphysical poetry but of all poetry: His depiction of individual consciousness is worthy of the Romantic poets, and his vivid treatment of public events and themes is equally adept and incisive. His harmonious blending of reason and passion as he treats the inner world and the outer world with equal ease assures him of a lasting and prominent place in the literary canon.

Catherine Swanson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Andrew Marvell's favorite poetic scheme of rhymed tetrameter couplets enforce the complexity of his themes?
- Are Marvell's images as "dissimilar" as T. S. Eliot asserts in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets"?
- What is the significance of mowing in Marvell's poems?
- Consider the denotations and connotations of the adjective in "To His Coy Mistress."
- Is "To His Coy Mistress" really addressed to a coy mistress?
- Should Marvell's poetry be associated less with the other Metaphysical poets and more with that of the seventeenth century Cavalier poets?

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# MATSUO BASHŌ

**Born:** Ueno, Iga Province, Japan  
1644

**Died:** Ōsaka, Japan  
October 12, 1694

*Although Bashō did not originate the haiku, he is credited with perfecting forms earlier made popular by such masters as Matsunaga Teitoku and Nishiyama Sōin.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Matsuo Bashō (maht-suh-oh bah-shoh), poet, essayist, critic, and writer of travel journals, was born Matsuo Kinsaku in Ueno, in the Iga Province in the western part of Honshu, the largest of the Japanese islands, in 1644. His father, Matsuo Yozaemon, is thought to have been a low-ranking samurai, and Bashō entered the service of Tōdō Yoshitada with the idea of following in that tradition. His master enjoyed writing *haikai*, or linked verse; thus, Bashō became interested in this form of poetry and began to write poems under the name of Sōbō. The earliest of his surviving verses, largely humorous and with clever wordplay, date from 1662. In 1666, his master died unexpectedly, and Bashō resigned his service, abandoning his hope of becoming a samurai, and began to travel. He continued to write *haikai* and published a collection of poems in 1672.

Also in 1672, Bashō moved to Edo (now Tokyo), where he gradually developed a literary reputation. Most of the early poems are of little literary value but are historically important. He acquired a large number of students, and this enabled Bashō to publish a collection of poems by twenty of these students.

Before the end of 1692, Bashō moved into a small hut in the Fukugawa district of Edo and began calling himself Bashō (“banana hut”) because of the association that people made between the poet and the banana trees planted near his hut. He studied Zen Buddhism for a time; some believe that Bashō, although now comfortable and fairly well known, was not spiritually at peace with himself during this period of his life. His poems

changed in both style and form, suggesting that he wished to break down convention and add variety to his work.

In the fall of 1684, Bashō began the first of four famous journeys. While he continued to write *haiku*, these travels also provided the opportunity to write travel journals, a type of writing well known in Japan. The first trip extended from Edo westward to Ueno, his hometown area; he then moved on to Nagoya, Nara, Ōgaki, and Kyōto before returning to Edo the following summer. This journey resulted in the production of five volumes of linked verse by a team of poets, as well as the travel journal *Nozarashi kikō* (1687; *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, 1966). The journal, though uneven in quality, has a serious theme: the search for freedom from self-doubt. This journey seems to have been helpful in finding that freedom.

The next journey, of about ten months, retraced his first one only until he arrived in Ueno; there he continued to Suma and Akashi, on the Inland Sea, and then on to Sarashina in the Japan Alps. In addition to *haiku* inspired by the trip, Bashō wrote two more poetic diaries, *Oi no kobumi* (1709; *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel*, 1966), which covers the journey as far as Akashi, and *Sarashina kikō* (1704; *A Visit to Sarashina Village*, 1966), which describes his travels through the mountains to Sarashina. The first volume sounds almost didactic, as if he were teaching a lesson.

Having had a successful second journey, Bashō headed north on his next venture. This trip was a long period of 156 days and about fifteen hundred miles of travel through some of Japan’s less developed areas. He left in the late spring of 1689, travel-

ing through a number of cities that he had not visited before, and concluded his journey at Ōgaki. This journey was also a significant one in his literary career. He composed some of his best poetry, developed the principle of *sabi*, a nonemotional kind of loneliness associated with beauty, and produced one of the greatest of the Japanese poetic diaries, *Oku no hosomichi* (1694; *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 1933).

Following this northern trip, Bashō spent about two years in the Kyōto area, where he produced some of his most mature work before returning to Edo in the winter of 1691. He had some heavy responsibilities during this period and became quite depressed. In 1694, however, he set out again on a westward journey during the summer, but while he was in Ōsaka, he developed a serious stomach condition, from which he died on October 12, 1694.

#### ANALYSIS

The works of Bashō represent a high point in the history of Japanese poetics. He is chiefly known as a writer of the *haiku*, a tiny poem that, unless irregular, contains seventeen syllables in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables each. Actually, in Bashō's lifetime, the term *haiku* had not yet come into use. *Haiku* comes from the blending of *haikai*, or linked verse, and *hokku*, the starting verse of a *haikai*. Over time, the *hai* of *haikai* was combined with the *-ku* of *hokku* to form *haiku*. Thus, the opening verse of a group of linked verses came to stand independently as a poem.

In addition to his mastery of the *haiku* and of travel diaries, Bashō was also an excellent teacher of verse writing. His poetic ideas were never recorded as a poetic theory, and some of them are very difficult to comprehend. Some of the most important of these ideas were those of the poetic spirit, *sabi*, *shiori*, slenderness, inspiration, fragrance, reverberation, reflection, plainness, and highness. Actually, the concept of the poetic spirit is central, and the rest could almost be considered various aspects of the poetic spirit. This poetic spirit can be categorized into a style that has both qualities transcending time and place and a quality that is rooted in the taste of the times.

Bashō's poetic spirit is the source of all art and goes back to the source of the universe. It is something of a return to a beautiful nature whose creation and appreciation differentiate the civilized

and the uncivilized. The two major aspects of Bashō's poetic spirit are a high spiritual attainment, on one hand, and a mundane enjoyment of pleasure in the modern world, on the other. The goal of enlightenment is at the center of spiritual attainment, while enjoyment of the world includes such ideas as plainness and lightness.

Some of the values that contribute to attaining enlightenment include *sabi*, *shiori*, and slenderness. *Sabi* connotes a kind of objective, nonemotional loneliness, not grief or sorrow, which are emotional traits. Bashō's kind of loneliness is enjoyable and is associated with impersonal nature, not human life. It has been said that Bashō found *sabi* in this *haiku*:

Under the blossoms  
Two aged watchmen,  
With their white heads together.

*Shiori*, unlike *sabi*, which manifests the poet's attitude toward life, derives loneliness from the structure of the poem itself. *Shiori* can mean "to be flexible" or "to drop" or "wither." Both meanings seem to apply in Bashō's usage. Thus, a poem with *shiori* may have several layers of meaning open to several interpretations while at the same time creating an atmosphere of loneliness. Bashō found *shiori* in the following *haiku*:

The Ten Dumplings  
Have become smaller, too—  
The autumn wind.

Also important to an analysis of the *haiku* are the concepts of the "cutting word," *kireji*, and the "season-word," *kigo*. The cutting word often follows the subject, but a verb is missing, forcing the reader to supply one; this omission results in a kind of ambiguity that is vague and impersonal. *Kigo*, the season-word, is a part of the traditional rule that a *haiku* must contain a word associated with a particular season, for according to Bashō, each poem must present an atmosphere of nature, which, of course, is seasonal. Fall is the season mentioned in this translation of one of Bashō's poems:

On the Stone Mountain  
It is whiter than the stones:  
Autumnal wind.

Slenderness can perhaps be explained best by imagining the mind as being so slender that it is able to pierce and enter any kind of object and reach and touch its innermost life. Bashō used as an example of a poem with slenderness one of his own:

The salted sea bream's  
Gums are chilly, too,  
At the fish shop.

With this mental slenderness, not actual physical touch, the poet feels the chilliness in this objective, impersonal poem.

Another term necessary to an understanding of some of Bashō's *haiku* is synesthesia, the process of describing one of the senses in terms of another. Thus, the fragrance of peach blossoms may be described as being whiter than that of daffodils; a duck's cry is white; the autumn wind is whiter than the rocks of Ishiyama (which are noted for being white). Using these surprising comparisons seems to imply an interrelatedness of all things; the descriptions are not made for their shock effect, but rather because they employ the essence of the natural, simple, even primitive, in nature.

Later in his life, Bashō developed the idea of lightness, by which he seems to have meant a kind of beauty that is always plain, simple, ordinary. On one occasion, Bashō illustrated the concept by comparing vegetable soup (light) and duck stew (heavy, dark). It is a beauty that is unsophisticated, simple, and delicate rather than sophisticated, ornate, and heavy in any way. Thus, this concept of lightness does not indicate lightness in the sense of frivolousness or lack of substance, although humor may not be missing. For the unenlightened Buddhist who views life as constant suffering, detachment from the cares of the world enables one to see the humor of things, that is, to take a "light-hearted" attitude toward things, to smile in a world full of grief.

For Bashō, then, the essential element for a successful *haiku* is complete impersonality, the ability to view things as nature does, devoid of emotion. His success in perfecting the *haiku* form resulted in his enjoying a reputation that few other Japanese poets have enjoyed. His influence is so pervasive that no poet after him could write a *haiku* without an awareness of that influence. Nor has that influence stopped on the shores of Japan: The writing of

*haiku* is international, even attempted in Western languages.

## "ON A WITHERED BRANCH"

**First published:** "Kareeda ni," c. 1673-1680  
(collected in *A Zen Wave: Bashō's Haiku and Zen*, 1979)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The small black body of a crow on a dead tree limb is contrasted with the dull darkness of an autumn night.*

"On a Withered Branch" is a well-known *haiku* written by Bashō during the developing stage of his career. During this period, from 1673 to 1680, he often used the technique of the surprising comparison. Coming fairly early in his career, the poem also contains elements characteristic of some earlier work in which the poem was intended to amuse with puns, or play on words. Both in identifying wordplay and in counting syllables, English translations can rarely render the poem satisfactorily. One must see the Japanese version to understand some of the important elements of the *haiku*:

Kareeda ni	On a withered branch
Karasu no tomari keri	A Crow is perched—
Aki no kure	Autumn evening.

*Kareeda*, translated as "withered," is understood to be a "dead" branch, thus providing a contrast with the living bird perched upon it. The word *karasu* ("crow") is the same as the transitive verb form *karasu*, meaning "to cause to wither" or "to kill," thus showing some wordplay typical of Bashō's early work. *Tomari* ("perched") signifies stopping or staying, as a temporary stopover at a hotel. *Keri* is an example of the "cutting word"; a literal translation would be simply "crow's perch." There is no word for "is." Thus, the *keri* leaves the relationship of the perched crow to the poem's next line vague and impersonal. The autumn nightfall is simply juxtaposed with the preceding concept, allowing readers to make their own connections. The Japanese lines follow a 5-9-5 pattern rather than the typical 5-7-5: ka-re-e-da-ni, ka-ra-su-no-to-ma-ri-ke-ri, and a-ki-no-ku-re.

The image of the small (relative to a tree) living crow, with shiny black feathers, perched on the dead tree limb, provides an interesting contrast with the dull darkness of nightfall on an autumn evening. The darkness of the night is of a very different order of blackness from that of the bird. Another convention of the *haiku*, the “season-word,” is provided by the reference to autumn. Autumn, also the “fall” of the year, suggests the dying period of the year, even as the tree limb is a dead one.

All together, the images come together to evoke a certain kind of loneliness as the outline of the crow is viewed against the background of the immense universe.

### “THE SEA DARKENS”

**First published:** “Umi kurete,” c. 1685  
(collected in *Bashō’s Haiku: Selected Poems of Matsuo Bashō*, 2004)

**Type of work:** Poem

*As night approaches, the call of a wild duck is interpreted in terms of color rather than sound.*

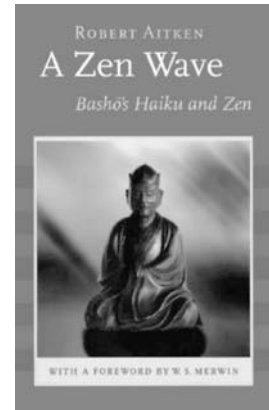
“The Sea Darkens” belongs to a period of Bashō’s career in which he was searching for his unique identity as a poet. Most critics agree that he reached at this stage a peak level in the composition of *haiku*. To see how the poem distributes the seventeen syllables among the lines in a 5-5-7 (irregular) pattern, it is necessary to look at the Japanese words:

5		
Umi kurete		The sea darkens
5		
Kamo no koe		The cries of the wild ducks
7		
Homokani shiroshi		Are faintly white.

Bashō wrote this *haiku* on the first of his four long journeys. The poem, written on a day spent on the seacoast, appeared in a travel journal of that trip, *Nozarashi kikō* (1687; *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, 1966), in 1687.

Bashō uses synesthesia as a significant convention in this poem. Synesthesia refers to one sense being described in terms of another. Thus, the

sound of the duck is described as being a color, white. The cosmic loneliness, or stillness, amid the approaching darkness is broken by the sounds of the ducks flying overhead and is interpreted as “seeing white,” so to speak, rather than as “hearing sound.” Thus, a vision of the ultimate interrelatedness of all things and events in the universe is captured in this tiny poem.



### “OLD POND”

**First published:** “Furuike ya,” c. 1686-1691  
(collected in *A Zen Wave: Bashō’s Haiku and Zen*, 1979)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A frog leaping into an old pond provides a contrast between the small finite and the vast infinite.*

“Old Pond” is possibly the best-known *haiku* in English translation. Written sometime between 1686 and 1691, it is a product of the poet’s peak period. During this time, a number of the poems focused on the manifestation of *sabi*, that objective, nonemotional loneliness so difficult to define clearly in English, or in Japanese, for that matter.

This *haiku* follows the classical pattern of a 5-7-5 arrangement of the seventeen syllables in three lines:

5		
Furuike ya		Old pond:
7		
Kawazu tobikomu		frog jumps in
5		
Mizu no oto		water-sound.

A number of translations have been made of this famous *haiku*. W. G. Aston’s rendition is perhaps

among those closest to the actual Japanese wording, and it exemplifies the notion of juxtaposing images without using connecting words.

The colon at the end of the first line denotes the *ya*, or the “cutting word” that separates the subject from the rest of the poem, leaving the reader to make an appropriate association between the elements. The first image here is an ancient, ageless, primeval natural phenomenon, the pond. Possibly for centuries it has existed in stillness—infinite, timeless. In an instant, that quiet is broken by the intrusion of the splash of a small, living (and hence recent, immediate) object. This contrast elicits the accepting, perhaps welcomed, feeling of loneliness as the two elements make contact. Harold G. Henderson provides a Zen interpretation by attributing symbolism to the frog’s leap: The jump into the pond symbolizes a sudden leap to *satori*, or spiritual enlightenment.

### SUMMARY

Matsuo Bashō is credited with perfecting the *haikai* form, following the lead of such masters as Matsunaga Teitoku and Nishiyama Sōin. It would

be largely the efforts of Masaoka Shiki to establish formally the independence of the *hokku*, the opening verse of the *haikai* (linked verse), to form the term *haiku*.

While Bashō never wrote a theory of poetry, his poetic ideas focused on several elements that include, in particular, the concept of the poetic spirit, which is manifested in such qualities as *sabi* (loneliness); *shiori*, a loneliness produced out of the poem’s structure, manifested in great flexibility in meaning; slenderness, inspiration, fragrance, plainness, and lightness. *Haiku* need not be logical in its internal structure, but it must be objective and impersonal. Understanding the feelings of the ordinary individual in everyday life was of great importance to Bashō, and this belief is echoed in the subject matter of the *haiku*. Bashō may have anticipated the difficulty that some readers would have understanding some of his *haiku* when he commented that if they could not understand them naturally, they would have trouble understanding them at all.

Victoria Price

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*Oku no hosomichi*, 1694 (travel; *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 1933)

*Sarashina kikō*, 1704 (travel; *A Visit to Sarashina Village*, 1966)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent does the view of the world found in Matsuo Bashō resemble Epicureanism?
- What are the obstacles to translating a Japanese *haiku* effectively into English?
- What poets writing in English have used synesthesia in Bashō’s manner?
- What forms of lyric poetry seem to come closest to *haiku*?
- Explain the effect of the “cutting word” in *haiku*.
- What does Bashō mean by “lightness”?



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## W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

**Born:** Paris, France  
January 25, 1874

**Died:** Nice, France  
December 16, 1965

*A prolific novelist, short-story writer, and playwright, Maugham, who wrote unabashedly for popular audiences, was a skilled craftsman and satirist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Somerset Maugham (mawm) was born in the British Embassy in Paris, France, on January 25, 1874, and was therefore a British subject. French was his first language, however, and he spent much of his life in France. His father, Robert Ormond Maugham, an attorney whose firm, Maugham and Sewell, was located in Paris, was married to Edith Mary Snell Maugham, twenty-one years his junior.

Willie, as Maugham was familiarly called, was the family's fourth son and was reared virtually as an only child. He was six years younger than his next youngest brother Henry Neville, who, with the other two brothers, Frederic Herbert (born in 1866) and Charles Ormond (born in 1865), was sent to the Dover School in England before Willie knew them well.

When Maugham was eight, his mother, suffering from tuberculosis, died a week after bearing another son, who also died. Two and a half years later, Robert Maugham succumbed to cancer, leaving Maugham an orphan. The boy was sent to England to live with his uncle, a stolid, humorless clergyman, in Kent. He attended the junior annex of King's School in Canterbury until he was sixteen. Leaving King's School in 1891, Maugham spent an academic year in Germany, where he enrolled in

Heidelberg University to study philosophy and literature. It was there that he had his first homosexual encounters and began to act on the sexual impulses that would help define his life.

Enrolling as a medical student at St. Thomas's Hospital in London in 1892, he received the medical degree in 1897, the year in which his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), based on his hospital experiences, was published. England was still gripped by Victorian prudery. In 1895, Oscar Wilde was convicted under the Sexual Offenses Act of 1867 for having sexual liaisons with Alfred Lord Douglas and was sentenced to a prison term. This conviction sent a chill through the homosexual world and caused the homosexual minority, including Maugham, to become more repressed than ever before.

The publication of *Liza of Lambeth* allowed Maugham to abandon his medical career to pursue writing. For the next six years, during which he traveled extensively in Spain and Italy, his writing received little notice. His books, which included *The Making of a Saint* (1898), *Orientations* (1899), *The Hero* (1901), *Mrs. Craddock* (1902), *The Merry-Go-Round* (1904), *The Land of the Blessed Virgin: Sketches and Impressions in Andalusia* (1905; also known as *Andalusia*, 1920), *The Bishop's Apron* (1906), *The Explorer* (1907), and *The Magician* (1908), attracted small audiences but are meaningful because they affirm the fact that Maugham never stopped writing. His first really successful novel was the autobiographical *Of Human Bondage* (1915).

Maugham's first play, *A Man of Honour* (wr. 1898-

1899, pr., pb. 1903) was performed in 1903. In 1907, his play *Lady Frederick* (pr. 1907, pb. 1912) had its premiere at the Royal Court Theatre, and a year later, Maugham had three other plays—*Jack Straw* (pr. 1908, pb. 1911), *Mrs. Dot* (pr. 1908, pb. 1912), and *The Explorer* (pr. 1908, pb. 1912)—running in London.

In 1906, Maugham began an affair with Sue (Ethelwyn Sylvia) Jones that lasted for almost eight years. When she declined to marry him, he began a liaison with Syrie Wellcome that culminated in his marrying her in 1916. She divorced him in 1927; they had one daughter, Lisa, born in 1915.

During the first year of World War I, Maugham served in a British ambulance unit in France. At about the time *Of Human Bondage* was published, he was moved to Military Intelligence in Geneva. During 1916, he and Gerald Haxton, whom he had met during his service in the ambulance unit and whom he called the most significant male love of his life, traveled to the South Seas, where Maugham first saw Paul Gauguin's paintings and found the germ of his novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919).

After the publication of *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham returned to the South Seas and embarked on several years of world travel. Now that his writing was reaching extensive audiences, his literary future seemed assured. The year after Maugham was divorced from Syrie, he purchased Villa Mauresque at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in southern France, near Nice. Except for the six years he lived in the United States during World War II, Maugham spent the remainder of his life at Villa Mauresque, although he traveled abroad for about half of every year.

After settling into his new estate, Maugham wrote *Cakes and Ale* (1930), generally considered his most successful novel. In 1933, he stopped writing for the theater and concentrated on novels, short stories, and autobiographical works, producing numerous books between 1928 and his death in 1965. The most noted of these were *The Summing Up* (1938), *Strictly Personal* (1941), *The Razor's Edge* (1944), and *A Writer's Notebook* (1949). During the 1940's, Maugham, working intermittently in Hollywood, spent his winters in South Carolina and his summers at Edgartown on Cape Cod. *The Razor's Edge* was made into a successful film, and the well-received film *Quartet* (1949), based on four of his

short stories, was followed by *Encore* (1951), based on three of his stories, and *Trio* (1950), for which he wrote the screenplay.

Maugham never recovered fully from his mother's death in 1882, and he frequently dissolved into tears when he thought or spoke about her. He was deeply shaken as well by the death in 1944 of Haxton, his lifelong friend who had served as his secretary. In 1945, Alan Searle, with whom Maugham had had a love affair that began at about the time Syrie divorced him, became his secretary and continued in that capacity until the writer's demise. Searle handled most of the details of Maugham's day-to-day existence and was sufficiently comforting to him that in 1962 Maugham adopted Searle legally, in part to prevent his daughter and other members of his family from being appointed guardians.

On December 10, 1965, Maugham fell and cut his head. He was taken to a hospital in Nice, where his condition became grave, and on December 15 he slipped into a coma. He died in the hospital on December 16.

## ANALYSIS

Somerset Maugham never claimed to be a deep intellectual, a writer in whose work future generations of critics would reveal deep, arcane meaning. Rather, he considered himself a storyteller whose stated objective was to entertain. Perhaps in billing himself thus, Maugham sold himself short. Although a few academic critics—most notably Richard A. Cordell, who wrote seriously about Maugham's work produced from the 1930's until after Maugham's death—paid him more than condescending attention, most have scored his work. Some, like Brigid Brophy, Michael Levey, and Charles Osborne, wrote viciously about him, saying in *Fifty Works of English and American Literature We Could Do Without* (1968) that Maugham worked always "at the frontiers of his meager imagination" and contending that the talent he possessed was not enough "to sustain one's interest in his narrative." Despite such vitriolic expressions of derision from various quarters, Maugham's writing delighted an enthusiastic reading public for half a century.

That Maugham wrote with a conscious artistry and with remarkably even craftsmanship is undeniable. His reputation suffered in his time from vari-

ous accusations that had little to do with his artistic achievement, notably his homosexual lifestyle, his seeming indifference to his daughter, his seeming misogyny, and his supposed anti-Semitism. Ted Morgan, one of his posthumous biographers, fueled anti-Maugham sentiments in his biography, *Maugham* (1980). Morgan demonstrates homophobia and a self-righteous misunderstanding of the role that homosexuality and male friendships played in the author's life. Robert Calder's *Willie: The Life of W. Somerset Maugham* (1989) sets right many of the misapprehensions set forth in Morgan's book, which, although thoroughly researched and well written, proceeds from such a biased point of view as to be frequently misleading.

Maugham is at his best when he writes from his own experience. His most celebrated work, *Of Human Bondage*, is consistently autobiographical. *Liza of Lambeth* grew out of situations Maugham encountered as a medical student. Much of his work focuses on the role of artists in society and on the sacrifices they make for the sake of art. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, for example, Maugham writes about Charles Strickland, a stolid, socially correct British businessman with the requisite wife and children. He secretly yearns to be a painter. Strickland finally leaves his secure life, goes to Paris, and paints. His wife, thinking that he has left her for another woman, follows him, believing she can win him back. When she learns, however, that the mistress with whom she is competing is art, she has to admit defeat. She returns to England and Strickland goes off to the South Seas, much as the painter Paul Gauguin had done, where he lives the remainder of his life painting the lustrous scenes of his land of heart's desire.

Maugham certainly had experienced the emotions he attributes to Strickland. In his mid-forties, he was married to a woman with whom he had a child out of wedlock. He also had a homosexual lover and was obsessed by a burning desire to travel as much as he could. He was a successful writer who had a distinct plan for the remainder of his creative life, but that plan was not really consistent with the life he found himself living.

Maugham knew that the life of an artist, no matter how successful, is always a precarious one. He had lived through Oscar Wilde's disgrace and had seen this notable playwright and salon dandy ruined both personally and financially by his conviction

for committing homosexual acts. Over and above this, Maugham was never sure of the love of other people. Had not his mother, who loved him dearly, abandoned him by dying when he was eight years old?

Maugham's stories often focus on artists struggling to be artists, as in his notable short story "The Alien Corn," in which the protagonist, George, refuses to stand for Parliament because he wants to be a pianist. Philip Carey, the protagonist in *Of Human Bondage*, faces the struggle of justifying himself as the artist he needs to be.

Perhaps Maugham's incredible and steady productivity was part of his daily struggle to justify himself. Nuances in much of his writing suggest this, and a letter from Maugham to the French scholar Paul Dottin written on October 23, 1927, clearly outlines what Maugham hoped to accomplish artistically in the next decade. He was beginning to have a sense of his own mortality—he would turn sixty-five in 1939—and he outlined for Dottin his literary plans for the years before he reached that age.

He told Dottin that he hoped to write three short stories to accompany the three others that came to constitute *Six Stories Written in the First Person Singular* (1931); a novel set in the Malay, which became *The Narrow Corner* (1932); another book of short stories that did not materialize; a book set in Spain, which became *Don Fernando* (1935); a book of Malay stories, resulting in *Ah King: Six Stories* (1933); a picaresque English novel, *Cakes and Ale* (1930); and a final volume written to assess his work and life, *The Summing Up* (1938). Few authors have made such long-range, systematic plans, and the few who have did not adhere to them as doggedly as Maugham did.

Maugham did not foresee, apparently, that by 1938 he would write four more books other than those on his outline: *Ashenden: Or, The British Agent* (1928), *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong* (1930), *Cosmopolitans* (1936), and *Theatre* (1937). He also failed to realize that he would live for twenty-seven years after the publication of *The Summing Up* and would produce a score of books in those years.

Maugham surmises in *The Summing Up* that his position in literary history is not likely to be a secure one. He notes that few serious critics have analyzed his work and that "clever young men who

write about fiction” do not include him in their considerations. Despite such expressions, Maugham’s stock rose considerably in his later years and has gained even more ground since his death. Two major bibliographies, one of his writing and one of Maugham criticism, appeared in the early 1970’s. At least ten scholarly books about him have been published since 1970, and scholarly articles about him continue to appear in recognized journals.

## OF HUMAN BONDAGE

**First published:** 1915

**Type of work:** Novel

*Philip Carey, after the loss of his mother, undergoes a difficult education that leads to his accepting life as a compromise.*

*Of Human Bondage*, published when Maugham had just ended his fourth decade, was a highly polished, considerably more mature book than its unpublished antecedent, “The Artistic Temperament of Steven Carey,” written during a sojourn in Spain and unpublished first because Maugham did not want it published at once, and later because no publisher would accept it. Any disappointment that ensued from that book’s rejection was well assuaged over succeeding years when Maugham—now a mature writer with considerable experience in writing plays, short stories, and novels—returned to the manuscript around 1911 and began to rewrite it, this time renaming the protagonist Philip Carey. The result was *Of Human Bondage*, probably Maugham’s best-known novel and certainly among his two or three most artistically successful ones. The philosophical scope of this book far exceeds that of the earlier version, presumably because Maugham had now matured into middle age.

By this time he realized that he did his best writing when he wrote about his own experience. Also by this time he had experienced considerable success as a playwright and was able to apply to his prose writing some of the techniques he had learned as a dramatist, thereby bringing greater dramatic tension into his fiction.

Philip Carey’s story, with certain artistic alterations, is Maugham’s own story. The novel opens

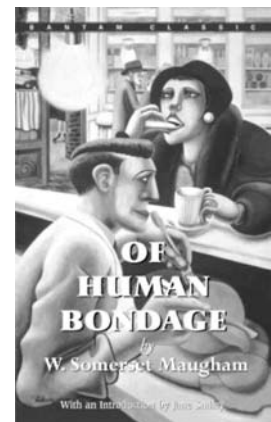
when the young Philip is informed of his mother’s death. The boy went to his mother’s closet, just as young Willie did, and wrapped his arms around as many of her dresses as possible, burying his face in them, inhaling the lingering vestiges of his mother’s perfume. Like Maugham, Philip is soon sent to England to live with his uncle, a vicar, and his Aunt Louisa. Philip differs from Willie in that he has a club foot, but this touch is simply a substitution for Willie’s affliction: stuttering. The young Maugham stuttered badly, particularly after the death of his parents, and suffered from this problem throughout his life. As Philip was abused by the students and masters of the school he attended at Tercanberry, so was Maugham ridiculed for his stuttering by his masters and fellow students at King’s School.

Through Philip, Maugham broaches the question of his own loss of religious faith. Young Philip hears that if one prays fervently enough, all one’s prayers will be answered. When he puts this guarantee to the test by praying as fervently as he can that his club foot will be made whole, his prayers are not answered. This disappointment unleashes a doubt that finally causes Philip to reject the religion in which he has been reared.

Now, no longer willing to tolerate the brutality of his schoolmasters, Philip goes to Heidelberg to study. It is there, in his close association with two intelligent friends and his immersion in the study of philosophy, that Philip disabuses himself of the notion that there is a God. He finds this revelation liberating. On his return to England, he meets Gertrude, his aunt’s German friend, and with her has his first sexual experience.

Philip is expected to be practical and to become self-supporting. He tries accounting but finds it unbearable. Reminiscent of Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Philip flees to Paris, where he studies art for two years, only to conclude that his talent is insufficient to justify further study.

Needing to find a way to support himself, Philip





returns to England and, although his uncle opposes it, becomes a medical student at St. Thomas's Hospital, there meeting Mildred Rogers, a waitress at a nearby restaurant. He has an affair with her, but it ends when Mildred runs off with someone else. Then Mildred returns and announces that she is pregnant. Philip takes her in, imposing upon himself one of the bondages referred to in the book's title. Mildred, like Sue Jones in Maugham's own life, is less interested in him than he is in her.

When Mildred returns to stay with Philip, however, he has just met Norah Nesbitt, who is more interested in him than he is in her. As soon as Mildred leaves again, Philip seeks out Norah only to find that she has now made plans to marry someone else. Mildred, now a streetwalker, returns yet again, and Philip takes her in, but they obviously have no future together, and Mildred finally leaves for good.

When Philip's old Parisian friend, Cronshaw, dies, Philip recalls Cronshaw's comment that the meaning of life can be found in a Persian rug. He muses that life has no inherent pattern, that it is up to each individual to find a pattern and impose it upon life.

Finally, almost by default, Philip falls into an affair with Sally, the daughter of his friends, the Athelnys. After a scare that Sally might be pregnant proves to be groundless, Philip decides that he wants to marry her even though he does not love her. He needs the pattern that such a marriage will provide, just as Maugham apparently sought a similar pattern in his abortive marriage to Syrie Wellcome.

A major theme that emerges from *Of Human Bondage* is the futility of human relationships. Humans, having only themselves to depend upon, make compromise after compromise searching for the patterns that give order to their lives. Maugham's agnosticism and some of his cynicism about humanity are important elements in this novel.

## THE RAZOR'S EDGE

**First published:** 1944

**Type of work:** Novel

*Larry Darrell, an enigmatic young man, is involved in a spiritual quest that intrigues and mystifies those around him.*

*The Razor's Edge* is quite similar to T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (pr. 1949, pb. 1950). Celia Copplestone is a uniquely spiritual person surrounded by a group of people who have no notion of what she is about. Larry Darrell is the fiancé of Isabel, the niece of Elliott Templeton, who invites Mr. Maugham (referred to hereafter as *Mr. Maugham* to distinguish the character from author W. Somerset Maugham), who is visiting in Chicago, to dinner. Templeton is an old friend of Mr. Maugham, who that evening meets Templeton's niece Isabel, her mother Sophie (a friend of the family), and Gray, who eventually will marry Isabel.

Darrell, having just returned from the war, lives very much in his own world, surrounding himself with an invisible carapace that outsiders quickly realize they cannot penetrate. The air of mystery that surrounds Larry intrigues Mr. Maugham, who is impressed and curious to know more about him.

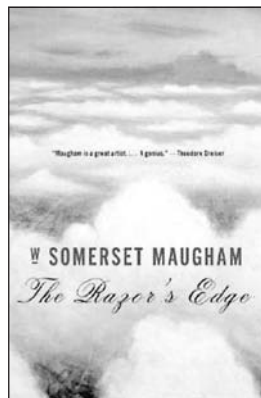
Soon Mr. Maugham learns that Larry has postponed his impending marriage to Isabel to go abroad, first to Paris and then to the East in an attempt to find the meaning of life, much as Celia Copplestone goes off to Kinkanja to seek her destiny. Further into the novel, Mr. Maugham also learns that Larry has come face-to-face with death in the war and that one of his close friends died saving him. A sensitive person, Larry has to find answers before he can get on with his life.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Maugham carries his readers with him, involving them intimately in Larry's quest but sharing with them, both as the author and as a character in his own novel, an inability to reach the spiritual pinnacle that Larry finally achieves. Although the novel is about Larry Darrell, readers learn little about him. He reveals little of himself and, in chapter 6, when the author records a conversation that Mr. Maugham had with Larry, he begins the chapter by telling his readers that they can skip it without losing the thread of the story. He goes on to say that had he not had this

conversation, he would not have written *The Razor's Edge*.

It is a novel of spiritual quest, much as *The Moon and Sixpence* and *Cakes and Ale* were. *The Razor's Edge*, however, is more mystical than those novels. When he was working on this book, Maugham himself was on a quest that led him to consult his friend, Christopher Isherwood, and Isherwood's guru, Swami Prabhavananda, to find the precise meaning of a passage in the *Katha Upanishad* (c. 1000 B.C.E.), that was, indeed, rendered "the razor's edge" or "the edge of the razor." The razor, in this *Upanishad*, represents a narrow, painful path. Swami Prabhavananda equated it with enlightenment. He pointed out that some translations suggest that the path is difficult to cross, whereas the real problem is that of discovering how to walk upon the razor's edge. The Eastern mysticism in this novel represents a turning for Maugham and reminds one of *The Cocktail Party* and of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), a book Maugham did not particularly admire.

The particular skill Maugham demonstrates in this book is his ability to engage his readers in a mysterious quest in which he and his readers are both participants, all of them functioning on an equal basis. This device of engagement is unique and, in this case, highly successful, although it is a device that puts an author at risk because it could easily veer out of control. That Maugham could control it masterfully is evidence of an artistic advancement in a writer who was entering the eighth decade of his life. The amazing thing about Larry is that, once having achieved his spiritual quest, he can return



to New York City—perhaps to support himself as a taxicab driver—and rise above the materialism and corruption in what was then the world's largest city. Maugham allows Larry to shape the pattern in his Persian rug much as Maugham had been trying to do.

## “RAIN”

**First published:** 1921 (collected in *The Trembling of a Leaf: Stories of the South Sea Islands*, 1921)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The Reverend Mr. Davidson sets out to reform the beautiful prostitute Sadie Thompson, but, overcome by his repressed desires, finally rapes her.*

Originally titled “Sadie Thompson,” “Rain” was the second story in Maugham’s collection, *The Trembling of a Leaf: Stories of the South Sea Islands* (1921). Clearly his most famous short story, in 1925 it was turned into a highly successful drama, adapted by John Colton and Clarence Randolph, that ran for 648 performances on Broadway. The story is a finely tuned satire in which Maugham depicts the hypocrisy of conventional morality in devastating terms. He found his material for “Rain” on a trip he took with Gerald Haxton in 1916. The two sailed from San Francisco, first to Hawaii, then, aboard the *Sonoma*, to Pago Pago in Samoa. Among the passengers on board was a Miss Thompson, a prostitute from Honolulu who had, as it turned out, fled Hawaii after a police raid on the establishment in which she worked. She hoped that she could ply her trade in Western Samoa.

Using Miss Thompson’s actual last name and giving her the first name “Sadie,” Maugham wove an exceptionally well-balanced story involving two couples, Dr. and Mrs. McPhail and the Reverend Mr. and Mrs. Davidson, who became fast friends on a long, transpacific journey. They share a condescending attitude toward their fellow passengers, particularly those not traveling in first class. Dr. McPhail, a medical doctor, is about forty.

When the *Sonoma* is quarantined in Pago Pago, the McPhails and the Davidsons are housed, with their fellow passengers, in a hotel. They soon become aware of Sadie Thompson’s presence because boisterous laughing and loud music come from her room. Davidson decides that it is his duty to reform the unregenerate Sadie, and he goes about his task with a missionary zeal of which the two women approve but that Dr. McPhail views with some suspicion, despite his admiration for the clergyman, who, unlike the retiring and timid doctor, is stouthearted, self-assured, and stalwart.

Throwing himself fully into the moral challenge before him, Davidson, a trembling mass of repressed desire, finally rapes Sadie. The aftermath of this assault is an uncontrollable guilt that results in the clergyman's committing suicide. As the story ends, music and laughter drift in from Sadie's room. Sadie can be heard complaining that all men are beasts.

In this story, Maugham is in total control, balancing his characters against each other with an admirable precision. McPhail is the moderate. His wife is in the Davidsons' camp, and the Davidsons, of course, know what righteousness is and are determined to make everyone righteous whether they desire salvation or not. The ironies in the story contribute to a tightly constructed plot that, on a philosophical level, turns out to be quite profound.

This story, more than anything else Maugham wrote, is an encomium to those who hover around the bottom of the social ladder, people such as Liza in *Liza of Lambeth* or Mildred in *Of Human Bondage*. Perhaps as he developed the character of Davidson, Maugham thought back to the days when he lived with his cleric uncle in Whitstable or when he bore the taunts of his self-righteous masters at King's School.

### "THE ALIEN CORN"

**First published:** 1931 (collected in *Six Stories Written in the First Person Singular*, 1931)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A Jewish youth rejoices in his ethnicity. Refusing to stand for Parliament, he goes to Germany to study music, then, realizing his mediocrity, commits suicide.*

"The Alien Corn" is included in Maugham's short-story collection, *Six Stories Written in the First Person Singular* (1931), and is a telling story in terms of what it reveals about the author's values and concerns. The story was adapted for film in 1949 as one of the four parts of *Quartet* (1949).

The story has to do with a Jewish family trying hard not to appear Jewish. Sir Adolphus Bland, who calls himself Freddy and whose name was originally Alphonse Bleikogel, is the nephew of Ferdy

Rabenstein, a flamboyant patron of the arts. Ferdy owns a period mansion in Sussex and has acquired the trappings of elegance. His son, George, is the apple of his eye.

George, unlike his younger brother, does not look Jewish, but ironically, he does not want to pass as a Gentile and cherishes his Jewish heritage. His brother, who does not want to appear Jewish, looks Jewish. George has just finished his studies at Oxford, and it is assumed that he will return to Sussex and live the life of a gentleman, standing for election to Parliament in a race he would likely win.

George, however, wants to be a concert pianist and announces that he plans to go to Munich to study music. He quarrels animatedly with his father over dinner and finally, breaking down in tears, moves the rest of the family to tears.

George's grandmother, the sister of Ferdy, volunteers to give George five pounds a week to enable him to study music as he wishes. She will finance him for two years, but if at the end of that period he is not judged excellent, he will return to Sussex and, in accordance with his father's wishes, stand for Parliament. Thus subsidized, George goes to Germany and studies for the agreed-upon period. When his time there expires, he is judged not to have exceptional ability, and it is evident that he will have to return home. Rather than do that, he kills himself.

The theme of this story—the struggling artist—is one to which Maugham returned several times during his lifetime. In *Of Human Bondage*, Philip Carey goes to Paris to study art and is, like George, found wanting. He lives with this defeat and accepts compromises that enable him to live. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, Charles Strickland goes to Paris to study art and succeeds, but the price he pays is exile and the loss of his family. Maugham, who long feared that he was a mediocre writer, as many statements in *The Summing Up* reveal, had only one desire in life: to write. He was certainly familiar with the uncertainties and insecurities he wrote about in "The Alien Corn."

Some critics have accused Maugham of anti-Semitism and have read such a bias into "The Alien Corn." This story obviously considers the problems of Jews who try to fit into mainstream society and who, in doing so, deny their heritage. Maugham, however, is reporting a common social phenomenon and, in this story does so objectively and amiably.

## SUMMARY

W. Somerset Maugham was a highly competent dramatist who succeeded best in his fiction after he had learned to apply the devices he had used successfully in drama to other genres. His novels prior to *Of Human Bondage* lacked the dramatic tension and thematic intensity of such works as that autobiographical novel and of such later novels as *The Moon and Sixpence*, *Cakes and Ale*, and *The Razor's Edge*. If sophisticated literary scholars found his work disappointing, the general readers whom he defined as his audience read his novels and short stories with considerable appreciation and enthusiasm. In their eyes, he was a highly successful author who entertained them genially and who, in novels like those mentioned in the preceding paragraph, caused them to think.

R. Baird Shuman

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- Has critical displeasure with W. Somerset Maugham's success with audiences contributed to the harsh criticism he has received?
- Trace the influence of Maugham's medical training in his fiction.
- Does the theme of the futility of human relationships developed in *Of Human Bondage* reflect or contradict the lifestyle Maugham chose?
- What is the attitude toward religion that Maugham implies in *Of Human Bondage*? In "Rain"?
- Examine the importance of the image of the razor's edge in the novel *The Razor's Edge*.

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## GUY DE MAUPASSANT

**Born:** Château de Miromesnil, near Dieppe, France

August 5, 1850

**Died:** Passy, Paris, France

July 6, 1893

*Maupassant helped move the short-story form away from the primitive folktale to modern psychological realism in the late nineteenth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born on August 5, 1850, in the imposing Château de Miromesnil, near Dieppe, France, Henri-René-Albert-Guy de Maupassant (moh-puh-SAHN) was the first son of Laure Le Poittevin and Gustave de Maupassant. Although both parents were from fairly well-to-do families, they were only renting the château where Maupassant was born. According to biographers, he probably was born in a small house nearby but was immediately taken to the château so his birth announcements would look more impressive. When the boy was eleven, his parents were legally separated, and he spent most of his youth with his mother, who became a powerful influence on his life.

As a member of the upper middle class, Maupassant was enrolled at a school suitable for him, a small seminary near Rouen. The place, however, was not to the boy's liking, and he purposely got himself expelled before completing school. After returning home to his mother, he fell under the tutelage of his uncle Alfred and a friend of the family who was later to become his most famous and important influence, the writer Gustave Flaubert.

When he was eighteen, Maupassant tried to complete his education by enrolling at Lycée de Rouen, but his law studies were disrupted soon after by his enlistment in the Franco-Prussian War. As

a result of his military experience, he was able to get a position after the war as a clerk in the Naval Ministry in Paris, where his primary job was the supervision of printing supplies. Yet his real ambition was to be a writer, and under the guidance of Flaubert he began publishing his poetry and stories in a number of small journals. His work was also encouraged by his membership in an informal group of writers who met at Flaubert's house and included Émile Zola, Alphonse Daudet, and Ivan Turgenev. His first story to appear in a published book was in a collection of stories by various writers, including Zola; it is a story that remains one of his best, "Boule de suif," translated "Roly-Poly" or "Ball of Fat." Because the story received so much praise from Flaubert, Maupassant was encouraged to quit his government job and spend all of his time writing. He soon realized that his special skill lay in the area of the *conte*, or short story, a form that was highly popular at the time in newspapers and magazines. Like his American counterpart O. Henry and his Russian counterpart Anton Chekhov, Maupassant learned to master the short-story form by writing anecdotal sketches and articles for newspapers.

Maupassant's first collection of short stories was published in 1881, taking its title from the longest story in the collection, "La Maison Tellier," translated as *Madame Tellier's Establishment, and Short Stories* (1910). The book was a commercial success and made Maupassant's name so well known that his work was soon solicited by many additional newspapers and magazines. In the following twelve years, Maupassant published twelve collections of

short stories, six novels, and two plays. Of the 250 short stories that he published during his relatively brief career, Maupassant is probably best known for such ironic-ending stories as “La Parure” (“The Necklace”) and “La Ficelle” (“A Piece of String”), although at the time that his stories were published he received the most attention for what was called his unwholesome naturalistic presentation of peasant characters and street people. In addition to his anecdotal, surprise-ending tales and his realistic stories of the lower class, Maupassant also mastered the mystery tale, a form that he helped to bring out of the nineteenth century and into the modern era by making what was previously presented as supernatural events the result of hallucinatory experiences of obsessed narrators.

The years 1883 and 1884 were high-water marks in Maupassant's career, for during this period he published his first novel, *Une Vie* (1883; *A Woman's Life*, 1888), and his most famous short story, “The Necklace”—a story so well known that it has become synonymous for many readers with the short-story form as a genre. By this time, however, Maupassant had already contracted syphilis, which was to take his life. In an era before the discovery of penicillin, there was little that the medical profession could do for him except to watch helplessly as he showed increasing signs of mental disintegration.

After 1890, Maupassant was unable to continue his writing, for his eyesight began to fail, he suffered from severe migraine headaches, his memory faded, and he suffered from delusions. He tried futilely to recuperate through a sea voyage and a stay on the Riviera, but in 1892 he attempted to kill himself and had to be taken to a sanatorium in a straitjacket. On July 6, 1893, a month short of his forty-third birthday, Maupassant died in Passy, Paris, France.

## ANALYSIS

Maupassant occupies an ambiguous place in the history of modern literature. On the one hand, his short fiction has been disparaged as, at its best, mere trickery, and at its worst, probable pornogra-

phy. O. Henry, who was highly influenced by Maupassant, bridled at comparisons with Maupassant, saying he did not wish to be compared with a “filthy writer.” On the other hand, the Russian short-story writer Isaac Babel gladly acknowledged his debt to Maupassant by devoting one of his best short stories to him, acknowledging that Maupassant knew the power of a period put in just the right place. At the end of the nineteenth century, only Anton Chekhov loomed larger than Maupassant as a powerful influence on the short-story form. In fact, British short-story writer A. E. Coppard once said that if he ever edited a collection of stories, it would be an easy job, for half would be by Chekhov and half by Maupassant.

In the range of short-fiction subtypes, it is obvious that Maupassant's work falls on the side of the patterned anecdote, while Chekhov's work is more impressionistic and lyrical. Whereas Chekhov's stylized realism has influenced such twentieth century writers as Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Raymond Carver, Maupassant has influenced the work of such short-story masters as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Bernard Malamud. Maupassant falls somewhere in between writers such as Ivan Turgenev and Chekhov, who are admired for their lyricism and realism, and writers such as Ambrose Bierce and O. Henry, who are scorned for what are called narrative tricks. On the one hand, he had the ability, like Chekhov, to focus in a highly perceptive way on a small group of characters in a meaningful and revealing situation; on the other hand, like Bierce, he was able to create tight little ironic masterpieces that depend, as all short stories do, on the impact of a luminous ending. Maupassant perfected the technique originated by Edgar Allan Poe, and continued by modern short-story writers as seemingly diverse as Hemingway and Malamud, of creating a fictional realm in which everyday reality takes on a hallucinatory effect and hallucination assumes the concreteness of the physical world. It is unfortunate that, like his predecessor Poe, his lifestyle often receives more attention than his work.

## “MADAME TELLIER’S HOUSE”

**First published:** “La Maison Tellier,” 1881  
(collected in *The Necklace, and Other Tales*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A group of prostitutes attend the First Communion of the Madame’s niece in a small French village and are welcomed as if they are fine ladies.*

“Madame Tellier’s House” (sometimes translated as “Madame Tellier’s Excursion”) is often called Maupassant’s masterpiece, although it is not as generally well known as his ironic-ending story “La Parure” (“The Necklace”) or his psychological thriller “Le Horla” (“The Horla”). Written while he was still under the influence of his mentor Gustave Flaubert, the story is unlike his later works in that it depends more on realistic detail and detached comic tone than on anecdote and narrative irony. The story begins with a brief portrait of Madame Tellier, who, although she keeps a house of prostitution, is herself quite virtuous. The girls in the house are described as the epitome of each feminine type so that each customer might find the realization of his ideal: the country girl blond, the mysterious Jewess, the plump “ball of fat,” and two others representing the classic French and the classic Spanish woman.

The central event of the story is a simple one. The Madame is invited to the First Communion of her little niece, and since she cannot leave her frequently quarreling girls alone, she closes the brothel and takes them all to the country with her. The arrival of the prostitutes in the small town is a classic comic scene as they march down the street in their flashy elegance while the townspeople peek out their windows in amazement. It is the scene in the church during the communion, however, that constitutes the center of the story. Remembering their own communions, the prostitutes begin to cry. Soon, throughout the church, wives, mothers, and sisters are struck by a pervasive sympathy, and everyone begins to cry. Something superhuman pervades the church, a “powerful breath of an invisible and all-powerful being.” It is as though the Holy Spirit has visited the occupants of the modest country church, a “species of mad-

ness” that passes over the people like a gust of wind. Thus, a more general communion than that of the niece is effected, and all are united in harmony and peace.

At the end of the story, the prostitutes return to Madame Tellier’s house and to their lives there, not with a sense of guilt but with a sense of having had a holiday that makes it possible for them to return to work refreshed and rested. The quarrels that formerly plagued the house no longer exist, for a true sisterhood is affirmed. Only Maupassant could carry off such a potentially sentimental situation as the whores crying in church about their lost innocence and not have it lapse into banal sentimentality. It is his genuine identification with the prostitutes, his refusal to reduce them to objects of either pity or ridicule, and his consequent elevation of them, with no hint of sarcasm, to the rank of true ladies that makes the story a masterpiece of comic realism.

## “THE NECKLACE”

**First published:** “La Parure,” 1884  
(collected in *The Necklace, and Other Tales*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A young woman loses a borrowed necklace, works for ten years to pay for it, and then discovers that it was made of paste.*

What makes Maupassant’s famous story “The Necklace” so popular is not merely the ironic shock that the reader feels at the end when Madame Loisel discovers that she has worked long and hard to pay for a worthless bit of paste, but rather the more pervasive irony that underlies the entire story and makes it a classic exploration on the difference between surface flash and hidden value.

The story begins with a pretty young girl who thinks she is really a lady and feels that she needs only the external trappings of her true status. Although she is married to a simple clerk, she acts as though she has fallen from her proper station; she feels that she was born for luxuries but must endure poverty. Determined to make the best of an opportunity when she and her husband are invited to an elegant party, she borrows a necklace from an

acquaintance to impress those not easily impressed and, like Cinderella at the ball, has all of her desires

fulfilled as she is transported into the fairy-tale world about which she has dreamed. All of this comes crashing down to reality, however, when she reaches home and discovers that the necklace is missing. Her husband exhausts his meager inheritance and then borrows the rest, mortgaging their life away to buy a replacement for the necklace.



Now that Madame Loisel knows true poverty, she shows herself to be made of something more valuable than her petty desires for surface flash have suggested. With heroism and pride, she shoulders her responsibility with her husband and for ten years does brutal manual labor until she has paid for the necklace. When the reader discovers that the necklace was made of paste, it is a momentary shock; on closer reflection, this final knowledge proves to be anticlimactic, for one realizes that the story is about deeper ironies. What was taken to be real is found to be false. What looked rich on the outside is actually very poor. Yet Madame Loisel, who has looked poor on the outside, turns out to be genuine inside. “The Necklace” is a classic example of the tight ironic structure of the short story in which the unified tone dominates every single word.

## “THE HORLA”

**First published:** “Le Horla,” 1887 (collected in *The Necklace, and Other Tales*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A man slowly goes mad as he is seemingly possessed by an occult external force.*

“The Horla,” a story almost as famous as “The Necklace,” is often considered the first sign of the syphilis-caused madness that eventually led to Maupassant’s death. As a story of psychological

horror, however, it is actually the pinnacle of several stories of madness with which Maupassant had experimented previously. The predominant mode of these stories is not the manifestation of the ghostly supernatural in the traditional sense; rather, the focus is on some mysterious dimension of reality that exists beyond what the human senses can perceive.

Told by means of diary entries, the story charts the protagonist’s growing awareness of his own madness, as well as his understanding of the process whereby the external world is displaced by psychic projections. The narrator begins considering the mystery of the invisible, the weakness of the senses to perceive all that is in the world, and the theory that if there were other senses, one could discover many more things about the reality that surrounds human life. Another predominant Maupassant theme here is that of apprehension, a sense of some imminent danger, a presentiment of something yet to come. This apprehension, which the narrator calls a disease, is accompanied by nightmares, a sense of some external force suffocating him while he sleeps, and the conviction that there is something following him.

This sense of something existing outside the self but not visible to the ordinary senses is pushed even further when the narrator begins to believe that there are actual creatures who exist in this invisible dimension. This conviction is then developed into an idea that, when the mind is asleep, an alien being takes control of the body and makes it obey. All of these ideas lead easily into the concept of mesmerism or hypnotism; under hypnosis, it seems as if an alien being has control of an individual’s actions, of which, upon awakening, he or she has no awareness. Although the narrator doubts his sanity, he also feels that he is in complete possession of all of his faculties, and he becomes even more convinced that an invisible creature is making him do things that his own mind does not direct him to do. Thus, he finally believes that there are Invisible Ones in the world, creatures





who have always existed and who have haunted humankind even though they cannot be seen.

The final event that persuades him of the external, as opposed to the psychological, existence of the creatures is a newspaper article about an epidemic of madness in Brazil, in which people seem possessed by vampire-like creatures that feed on them during sleep. He remembers a Brazilian ship that sailed past his window and believes that one of the creatures has jumped ship to possess him. Now he knows that the reign of humanity on earth is over and that the forces of the Horla, which humankind has always feared—forces called spirits, jinn, fairies, hobgoblins, witches, devils, and imps—will enslave the world.

Finally, he “sees” the creature in the mirror when its presence blurs his own image by coming between him and the mirror. He decides to destroy the creature by locking it in his room and burning his house to the ground. As he watches the house burn and realizes that his servants are burning too, he wonders if indeed the Horla is dead, for he considers that it cannot, like a human being, be prematurely destroyed. His final thought is that, since the Horla is not dead, he will have to kill himself; the story ends with that decision.

What makes “The Horla” distinctive is the increasing need of the narrator to account for his madness as being caused by something external to himself. Such a desire is Maupassant’s way of universalizing the story, for he well knew that human beings have always tried to embody their most basic desires and fears in some external but invisible presence. “The Horla” is a masterpiece of hallucinatory horror because it focuses so powerfully on that process of mistaking inner reality for outer reality, which is indeed the very basis of hallucination.

### SUMMARY

Guy de Maupassant had as much to do with the development of the short-story genre in the late nineteenth century as Anton Chekhov did, albeit in somewhat different ways. Yet because such stories as “The Necklace” are so deceptively simple and seem trivial, Maupassant’s experiment with the form has often been ignored. Not until the short story itself receives the recognition that it deserves as a respectable literary genre will Maupassant receive the recognition that he deserves for his contribution to the perfection of the form.

Charles E. May

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*Yvette*, 1885 (*Yvette, and Other Stories*, 1905)

*Contes du jour et de la nuit*, 1885 (*Day and Night Stories*, 1924)

*Toine*, 1885 (*Toine, and Other Stories*, 1922)

*La Petite Rogue*, 1886 (*Little Rogue, and Other Stories*, 1924)

*Monsieur Parent*, 1886 (*Monsieur Parent, and Other Stories*, 1909)

*Le Horla*, 1887 (*The Horla, and Other Stories*, 1903)

*Le Rosier de Madame Husson*, 1888

*L’Inutile Beauté*, 1890 (*Useless Beauty, and Other Stories*, 1911)

*Eighty-Eight Short Stories*, 1930

*Eighty-Eight More Stories*, 1932

*Complete Short Stories*, 1955

## Guy de Maupassant

### LONG FICTION:

*Une Vie*, 1883 (*A Woman's Life*, 1888)  
*Bel-Ami*, 1885 (English translation, 1889)  
*Pierre et Jean*, 1888 (*Pierre and Jean*, 1890)  
*Fort comme la Mort*, 1889 (*Strong as Death*, 1899)  
*Notre cœur*, 1890 (*The Human Heart*, 1890)

### POETRY:

*Des Vers*, 1880 (*Romance in Rhyme*, 1903)

### NONFICTION:

*Au Soleil*, 1884 (*In the Sunlight*, 1903)  
*Sur l'eau*, 1888 (*Afloat*, 1889)  
*Le Vie errante*, 1890 (*In Vagabondia*, 1903)  
*Lettres de Guy de Maupassant à Gustave Flaubert*, 1951

### MISCELLANEOUS:

*The Life Work of Henri René Guy de Maupassant*, 1903  
(17 volumes)  
*The Works of Guy de Maupassant*, 1923-1929 (10 volumes)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Are the endings of many Guy de Maupassant stories genuine surprises? Should the ending of a short story be a surprise?
- Why do Americans have so much more difficulty responding favorably to a story like "Madame Tellier's House" than do French readers?
- What makes the denouement of "The Necklace" anticlimactic?
- Is the narrator of "The Horla" unreliable? Is this story told the only way it could be told?
- Explain why the short story is or is not "a respectable literary genre."



## VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

**Born:** Bagdadi, Georgia, Russia (now Mayakovsky, Georgia)  
July 19, 1893

**Died:** Moscow, Soviet Union (now in Russia)  
April 14, 1930

*Mayakovsky altered the traditions of Russian poetry with his personal style and revolutionary social content.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Mayakovsky (mah-yuh-KAWF-skee) was born on July 19, 1893, in the small village of Bagdadi in the province of Georgia, then a part of the Russian empire. His father was a Cossack and a forest ranger, and his mother, Alexandria Alexeyevna, was a Ukrainian. The family moved to Kutayis in 1901, so that Vladimir might attend school there. Vladimir showed early political leanings, supporting the Bolsheviks; he took part in demonstrations against repressive actions by the czarist government. As a result of the demonstrations, his school was closed in October, 1905.

In February, 1906, the poet's father died, and the family moved to Moscow. Mayakovsky enrolled in Moscow High School and soon after became a member of the Bolshevik party. He was arrested a number of times for distributing leaflets against the government. This early experience as a revolutionary was not antithetical to his poetry. Rather, it was to become a part of even his most lyrical love poems.

In 1911, Mayakovsky entered the Training College of Painting and Fine Arts. He had already written his earliest poems and planned to pursue a career as a painter or poet. He met Boris Pasternak at this time, who was to become a friend and supporter, although they did not always agree on poetic theory. His first collection of poems, *Ya*, was

published in 1913. Mayakovsky was always asserting the presence of his ego in his poems, and some critics have seen all of his poems as thinly disguised autobiography.

In 1913, Mayakovsky became connected to the Russian Futurist movement. The movement rejected earlier traditions in art and poetry and celebrated the machine. He did reject the Futurist program of the Italian Filippo Marinetti after meeting him and hearing him lecture. Mayakovsky believed that Marinetti's movement was opposed to or indifferent to the social action he thought was necessary to change czarist society. He continued, however, to be influenced by the aesthetic ideas of the Futurists.

In 1915, Mayakovsky completed his first important poem, *Oblako v shtanakh* (1915; *A Cloud in Pants*, 1945). The poem was championed by Maxim Gorky, but many other readers found the poem vulgar and strange. It was experimental in style and structure, but it included one of the most conventional and traditional elements of poetry, a declaration of the speaker's love for a woman, who is called Maria in the poem. This love, as were so many in Mayakovsky's life and poetry, is described in exaggerated terms. He always needed a grand passion in his life and believed that life was impossible without love.

The Russian Revolution broke out in 1917, and Mayakovsky participated in various committees and conferences. He was a strong supporter of the Bolshevik cause and included pronouncements supporting its program in his poems and plays. He wrote agitprop poems and created posters against

foreign intervention during the revolution. Pasternak was disturbed by what he thought was a misuse of Mayakovsky's true nature and art. As Mayakovsky later wrote, he "crushed under foot/ the throat/ of my very own songs."

Even though Mayakovsky was a dedicated Bolshevik and Communist, he ran into trouble with the authorities about his poetry and drama. A play, *Misteriya-buff* (pr., pb. 1918; *Mystery-Bouffe*, 1933), was opposed by the state publishing house and, after a production in 1918, none of the theaters in Moscow would present it. A long poem in celebration of the Russian proletariat, *150,000,000* (1920; English translation, 1949), was published in 1920 in an edition of five thousand copies, but Soviet leader Vladimir Ilich Lenin thought it was wrong to give official recognition to such an obscure and difficult poet.

Mayakovsky published a journal, *Lef*, beginning in 1923. It folded in a few years. Its name is an acronym for *Levy front iskusstva* (left front of art). An independent group of avant-garde artists and writers, of which Mayakovsky was the leader, also had this name. Also in 1923, he published one of his most important poems, *Pro eto* (*About That*, 1965). The poem is about being divided between the need for love and the necessity of social action. This division seemed to mark nearly all Mayakovsky's work. The woman who refuses him in the poem is based on Lili Brik, the great love of Mayakovsky's life. She and Osip Brik were Futurists and took part in the movement with Mayakovsky.

In 1925, Mayakovsky traveled to Mexico and later to New York. He loved travel and was constantly seeking out new places. He often visited Paris and Berlin and seemed to like an international lifestyle, but he never could bear to leave Moscow for long, even with all of its difficulties.

He next produced two important plays, *Klop* (pr., pb. 1929; *The Bedbug*, 1931) and *Banya* (pr., pb. 1930; *The Bathhouse*, 1963). Both were satiric plays that exposed the corruption of the revolutionary bureaucracy. The following year, he created an exhibition of his work, but it was badly received and few important officials attended. Mayakovsky was having difficulties with the artistic restriction of the early Stalinist era and felt increasingly isolated. His love for a woman named Tatania was unrequited; she refused to leave Paris and come to Moscow to be with him. On April 14, 1930, he shot himself in

the head and died shortly thereafter. Some have said that he was playing Russian roulette with the pistol, since he was an inveterate gambler. Most critics have believed that his increasing isolation and despair resulted in his suicide.

## ANALYSIS

Mayakovsky passed through a number of literary movements and styles in his brief life. He was first associated with Futurism. The movement exalted the machine and rejected symbolism and the "cult of beauty," along with most traditional poetic styles. Its origins were in Fascism in Italy. Mayakovsky had difficulties throughout his later career because of his previous connection with the very uncommunist Futurism. The dominant art movement in the Soviet Union was Socialist Realism. To be a Futurist was to be condemned to obscurity, or worse.

Some of Mayakovsky's most enduring and important influences were British and American. A number of his poems are direct echoes of the poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman's declaration of the poet's selfhood was very much like Mayakovsky's solipsistic focus on the "I" in his poems. Another influence was the British poet Lord Byron. Byron's exaltation of the self and of the heroic stance can also be found in many poems of Mayakovsky. *A Cloud in Pants* has a dramatized self that comes directly out of the tradition of Whitman and Byron.

Mayakovsky's two main subjects are love and revolution. Often they are yoked together in strange ways. Both were seen by Mayakovsky as essential for the fullest life, and both are principles of transformation. Sometimes a social transformation is only mentioned at the end of the poem, and although it claims to resolve conflicts it is not a strong presence in the poem. Mayakovsky consistently rejects religion, especially Christianity. Saviors do appear in his poems but they are social ones, or the poet himself appears as a Christ figure. Traditional religion was, to Mayakovsky, a tool of reactionary interests and a power that rejected any experimental art.

In 1924, he published an elegiac poem on the death of Lenin, *Vladimir Ilich Lenin*, translated into English in 1939. This effort was highly praised by the authorities, in contrast to their reaction against so many other poems of Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky, however, did use the poem to protest against creat-

ing a cult of personality around the dead Lenin. He believed that there should be no statues or mausoleum but that the deeds of Lenin—and the poet—should live in the people. Joseph Stalin would soon create a cult of personality about Lenin that exceeded Mayakovsky's worst fears.

In addition to the poem on Lenin, Mayakovsky wrote a number of directly political, or agitprop, poems. One example is *150,000,000*, a poem whose rhythm is supplied by “bullets,” and of which “no one is the author.” The poem arises from the people; for once, Mayakovsky eliminates his ego from the poem.

Mayakovsky often wrote against the philistines of his own society. The philistines were those who rejected art or the artist, or those who found a safe niche in the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. They are the enemies the heroic poet is fighting against in poems such as *Vo ves' golos* (1930; *At the Top of My Voice*, 1940). He was not able to defeat them.

One other important subject in the poems is suicide. Mayakovsky dramatized his suicide beginning with some of his earliest poems. It was as if he were rehearsing it in verse until it finally came true. This pattern is another side of the egotistic romantic poet. Mayakovsky liked to portray himself as being on the verge of self-destruction. One reason was that he believed he did not receive the recognition he deserved as a poet. Whether it was the rejection by leaders such as Stalin and Lenin or the opposition of philistine bureaucrats, he believed that the Soviet Union's artistic environment was not fruitful for him. Yet his art was in large part about the Soviet Union that the revolution had brought into being. The Russian language was his tool and the Russian people his subject.

Mayakovsky's idiomatic style is hard to appreciate in English translations, but some aspects of it do come through. He ignored traditional Russian metrics and broke his lines into smaller units, often arbitrarily. He preserved rhyme, although often his rhymes are used for comic or satiric effect. Also notable is his use of common or vulgar words. To use a word such as “pants,” let alone to include it in the title of the poem, was startling at the time. Mayakovsky often invented words or neologisms and used them as rhymes or to comic effect in poems.

Mayakovsky's poetic structures are loose and rambling, although they do have a clear thematic organization. In *About That*, for example, the need

of rescuing a man on a bridge brings a focus to the various actions that the speaker performs in the poem. He searches—and fails to find—someone in all of Moscow to save him. *A Cloud in Pants* is organized around four cries against ideals that have failed: love, art, revolution, and religion. Each section is very loose and rambling, but there is an overall plan.

Mayakovsky uses a number of repeated image patterns or clusters in his poems. The poems are filled, for example, with images of animals. Mayakovsky often portrays himself comically as an animal such as a bear. Another image pattern is the city. He was one of the earliest poets to focus on the city as a subject for poetry. He includes lists of streets and specific addresses in Moscow in his poems, even the phone number of Lili Brik.

## A CLOUD IN PANTS

**First published:** *Oblako v shtanakh*, 1915  
(English translation, 1945)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet cries out against the failure of love, poetry, revolution, and religion as ideals.*

*A Cloud in Pants* was Mayakovsky's first important poem, and it was immediately recognized by critics, especially Maxim Gorky, as a new direction in Russian poetry. The speaker, style, and structure were very different from traditional Russian poetry.

The poem begins with a prologue that announces the theme and presents the hero—the speaker of the poem—who is a “handsome,/ twenty-two year old.” The celebration of self in that description comes directly out of Walt Whitman's “Song of Myself.” The speaker has a divided nature; he shifts and changes throughout the poem. He can be “furious” or “extraordinarily gentle.” He is not a man but rather a cloud in pants.

Part I of the poem deals with the speaker's unrequited love for Maria, whom he met “in Odessa.” He stresses the “fact” of that meeting; the relationship is not poetic fantasy. She was to meet him at four but failed to come and so he is thrown into despair. In an unusual metaphor, his “nerve” dances



so madly that the ceiling crashes down. Maria enters only to announce that she is getting married. The marriage is one of convenience, not love; she has been bought or stolen. He then compares himself to a volcano. Like a volcano, he is most dangerous when he is “absolutely calm.” In a last exaggerated metaphor, his heart is a building that is on fire; firefighters are called to extinguish the blaze but have little effect. At the end of the section, he utters: “My last cry/ you, at least,/ shriek through the ages that I’m ablaze.”

In part 2 of the poem, he defines his poetry as rooted in the street; he rejects the romantic language and pose of the usual poet. The nail in his boot has more meaning to him than all the books in the world. He then portrays his own history as a Futurist who was rejected by the people. He becomes a crucified Jesus. If poetry has failed him, he will “tear out my soul for you,/ to make it big/ stamp on it!/ and hand it to you, bloodstained as a banner.” The banner is the banner of revolution, which Mayakovsky predicted would come in 1916. He later cut this only slightly incorrect forecast out of the poem.

Part 3 of the poem deals with that revolution. First, he rejects love and the poetry that celebrates it and, for a moment, is in harmony with the universe. The world is soon disrupted, however, by repressive murderers, such as Galliffet, who killed the supporters of the Paris Commune. A revolutionary future will follow these and other deaths, and the poet’s verses will become sacred symbols that will be used to christen children.

The last part of the poem returns to Maria; the speaker fruitlessly asks her for love and refuge. If she cannot love him, is God love? No, he is “only an illiterate puny little godlet.” His challenge to God is met only with silence. “The universe sleeps/ resting on its paws,/ with ticks of stars, an enormous ear.” The metaphor deflates the infinite to a mangy and flea-bitten dog that can neither frighten nor help anyone.

## ABOUT THAT

**First published:** *Pro eto*, 1923 (English translation, 1965)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Love for a specific person grows into universal love and brotherhood.*

The prologue suggests the theme of the poem—love. Mayakovsky insisted on writing on what was an unpopular theme in Russia in 1923. He describes the theme as a universal one; it will “erupt in a fury—having dared to repress it.” He never uses the word “love,” however, to identify the theme; it remains an ellipsis that the reader has to fill in.

Section 1 is titled “The Ballad of Reading Gaol.” The speaker of the poem is imprisoned in his apartment in Moscow as Oscar Wilde was in Reading Gaol. The first reference is not to imprisonment but to saving the man on the bridge over the Neva. The man is about to commit suicide. The poem then shifts to the speaker’s unsuccessful attempt to contact Lili Brik on the telephone. This unrequited love turns him into an animal, a polar bear who is howling. In his cold room, he becomes even more isolated; he is “Clambering on the ice-floe,/ a white polar-bear,/ on my ice-flow pillow I float by.” He returns to the man on the Neva. The man is clearly the poet himself, who is crying for help. The next section is called “Xmas Eve,” and it portrays the speaker wandering around Moscow and being insulted by passersby. A “Savior” appears in the form of a member of the Young Communist League, but he too is caught up with “the gypsy love song” and contemplates suicide, so he is of no help to the beleaguered poet.

The poem then shifts to the poet’s family; they welcome him, but they think his demand to rescue the man over the Neva is madness. Family can offer no help.

The last section of the poem, “A Petition Addressed To. . .,” redefines the Christian gospel. “Faith” deals with the afterlife; the speaker first thinks it an easy task to go from death “into the life ideal.” It is not God who will accomplish this, however, but a scientist who may or may not resurrect the speaker. The section ends in a plea for, rather than the achievement of, resurrection. “Hope” sounds close to despair: “My earthly life I never

lived out to the end./ On earth,/ my love I never could fulfill." The speaker is willing to accept a love that may not be fulfilled: "Let it be. . . / you live and pain becomes dear." "Love," the last section, ends the poem on a more positive note. His love will be resurrected, and if only for his faithful love, he also will be resurrected and joined with his beloved. This love, however, expands into the world and will "flood the universe." There will be no "victims" and "our father,/ at least, will be the world,/ the earth,/ at the very least—our mother." Love for one person becomes a larger revolutionary social principle that makes the whole world a sustaining family.

### AT THE TOP OF MY VOICE

**First published:** *Vo ves' golos*, 1930 (English translation, 1940)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem is a spirited defense of the poet's life and work that lapses into despair at the end.*

*At the Top of My Voice* is divided into two parts. In a subtitle, the poem is called a "First Prelude to a Poem on the Five Year Plan," which suggests that the poem is about Stalin's controversial economic plan. It might more accurately, however, be called a defense of the life and work of Vladimir Mayakovsky. Part 1 describes the survival of Mayakovsky's work after the "petrified s—t" of the centuries has been removed. The speaker describes his poetic function as a "cesspool cleaner" who has been "mobilised and drafted/ by revolution." His poetry has not been lyrical, but "my pages of fighters;/ pass in review." He uses military metaphors rather than ones drawn from nature. His poetry is rooted in the triumph of the revolution. He learned "dialectics" not from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel but from actual conflict.

As in the Lenin poem, he rejects any statues of himself, calling them "marble slime." Instead, he is to have a "common monument" with all the "brothers and mates" who fought for the revolution. The first part of the poem ends with a demand to "step

hard on the throttle" for the five year plan. The poet is content with "clean-laundered shirts," no greater honors are necessary. In a defiant final declaration he offers a defense of his life: "I'll lift up high,/ like a Bolshevik party-card,/ all the hundred volumes/ of my/ Com Party books." Mayakovsky did not possess a Communist Party card; that honor was given to the bureaucrats who served Stalin. Mayakovsky's works, however, will entitle him to a higher and truer honor.

Part 2 of the poem is unfinished, fragmentary, and very different in tone. It was as if Mayakovsky had given up the possibility of winning favor from such a corrupt government. He hopes only that "shameful common-sense" does not ever come to him. He will no longer badger his colleagues in the party with "express telegrams." The struggle no longer has meaning, "The love-boat of life/ has crashed on philistine reefs./ You and I/ are quits." In the last section, he declares his faith in the power of his poetry. "I know the power of words." Words can make "coffins" burst from the earth and stride forth. The powerful may "reject" him and he may remain "unpublished, unprinted." The power of his words, however, will live on in the centuries to come. The last line and sentence of the poem, however, were not completed. Mayakovsky had, apparently, given up his belief in the power of words to alter his situation in the Stalinist Soviet Union. He would soon commit suicide.

### SUMMARY

Vladimir Mayakovsky was an innovative poet who used many modernist styles and structures in poems that startled his early twentieth century audience. He persisted in writing a personal and erotic poetry at a time when poems in praise of the Soviet state were the only ones to receive official recognition. Unable to resolve the conflicts inherent in his life and work, he took his life. Stalin later rehabilitated Mayakovsky's diminished reputation by stating that it was a crime not to honor Mayakovsky's achievements. Such official recognition would not have made him happier. He has, instead, lived on in the hearts of the Russian people.

*James Sullivan*

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*Kak kto provodit vremya, prazdniki prazdnuya*, pr. 1922, pb. 1934

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*Banya*, pr., pb. 1930 (*The Bathhouse*, 1963)

*Moskva gorit*, pr. 1930, pb. 1936 (*Moscow Is Burning*, 1973)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What circumstances would make a Russian born in 1893 like Vladimir Mayakovsky enthusiastic about the Bolshevik revolution?
- What does it mean that the Russian Futurists "celebrated the machine"?
- Contrast Mayakovsky's Reading Gaol and that of Oscar Wilde.
- Was a social revolution as important to Mayakovsky as a personal one?
- Is love in Mayakovsky's works regularly one-sided?

## A. A. MILNE

**Born:** London, England  
January 18, 1882

**Died:** Hartfield, Sussex, England  
January 31, 1956

*Although a competent playwright in his day, Milne made by far his greatest contribution to the literary world in his poetry and stories for children, which continue to be read the world over and reveal a wit and literary flourish that also captivate adult readers.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alan Alexander Milne was born at Henley House in the Hampstead district of London on January 18, 1882. Henley House was a school at which his father, John Vine Milne, taught. The youngest of the three sons of John and the former Sarah Maria Heginbotham, he displayed his love of language early and was writing letters to family members by the time he was four. Among the books he loved as a young boy were *Reynard the Fox* and Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus books. Two years before Milne's birth, Ernest Howard Shepard, who would illustrate his books for children, was born in the same neighborhood, but the two did not meet until their adult years. When Milne was eight years old, he wrote "My Three Days' Walking Tour," which appeared in a publication of the school. It is significant because the setting, Ashdown Forest, would eventually become the model of the Hundred Acre Wood, the abode of the characters in the Winnie-the-Pooh books.

His early education took place at Henley House, where one of his teachers was H. G. Wells. Wells, who would become one of England's illustrious writers, remained a friend and supporter of his former student. Alan Milne and his brother Kenneth, who were always close, enrolled in Westminster School in 1893, where Alan prepared for Trinity College, Cambridge, which he entered in 1900. There he edited *Granta*, a publication sometimes referred to as "the Cambridge *Punch*," referring to the famous English humor magazine. In the meantime he decided that he did not want to follow his father into teaching. His father, although disap-

pointed, supported Milne in his efforts to become an established writer until 1906, when the young man obtained a position as an assistant editor of *Punch*.

Milne married Dorothy de Sélencourt, usually called Daphne, in 1913. Early in 1915 he volunteered for the military and served as a signal officer in World War I, but he still found time to write plays while he was in the army. In 1920, a child named Christopher Robin was born; Milne gave this name to the boy in his children's books, but the real Christopher was called Billy when young and Moon for many years thereafter. At one point in 1922, five of Milne's plays were being performed, three in the United States and two in England. Although popular at the time, his plays mirrored their time; there have been no significant revivals of them. In them he exhibited a talent for humorous and witty dialogue that he learned to use even more successfully in the timeless children's books that he developed in the mid-1920's. First came an immensely popular book of poems, *When We Were Very Young*, published in 1924, followed in the next few years by his two narrative classics, *Winnie-the-Pooh* in 1926 and *The House at Pooh Corner* in 1928. A second book of poems, *Now We Are Six*, appeared in 1927. These works delighted not only children but also the adults who read them to their children. Milne was not a close friend of E. H. Shepard, but the latter's illustrations have become as integral a part of the books as Milne's prose and verse.

By 1924, the Milnes purchased Cotchford Farm near Hartfield in Sussex on the border of Ashdown Forest. Milne continued to write but bade farewell

to Christopher, Winnie, and the other characters of the Hundred Acre Wood in the final story in *The House at Pooh Corner*. One of his better-known plays, *Toad of Toad Hall* (1929), was an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). Otherwise he wrote essays, novels, a pacifistic rejection of war called *Peace with Honour: An Enquiry into the War Convention* (1934), and an autobiography, *It's Too Late Now: The Autobiography of a Writer* (1939). Although firmly against war, he eventually wrote that war could not be abandoned until "Hitlerism" was killed.

Milne died at the age of seventy-four on January 31, 1956, but his children's books have remained alive ever since. The Pooh books have been translated into many languages, even into Latin.

### ANALYSIS

An important theme in Milne's stories and poems is the relationship between adults and children. Adults appear fairly often in the poems, seldom in the stories. When they appear, they are shown as perceived by the children or by the animals, who are, with one exception in the Pooh stories, themselves children. Having apparently lost the sense of being a child (a loss which Milne himself clearly avoided), adults in Milne's books fail to understand children. They ask tiresome questions about their wellness, which children must take pains to answer, as in the poem "Politeness," while secretly wishing that the adults would discard the habit. Children do not rebel against parents in Milne's work so much as express displeasure while acknowledging the inevitability of adults' ascendancy.

The one exception to adults' exclusion in the stories is Kanga, the diligent mother of Roo. When this little family of kangaroos comes into the Hundred Acre Wood, the other animals immediately object to the "Strange Animal." Part of Kanga's strangeness is her habit of carrying her son in her pocket, which they see as an excessive way of maintaining adult oppressiveness. Kanga is extraordinarily watchful when Roo is out of the pocket trying to enjoy himself. She is constantly insisting that it is time for them to go home and that Roo must be given two things which children are inclined to dislike: medicine and a bath. The other animals quickly decide to take action against Kanga. Their plan to steal Roo away from her avoids the starkness

of real rebellion, they think, because they sneak a substitute, Piglet, into her pocket. However, Kanga's mastery of adult watchfulness foils the plot. She takes Piglet home, pretends that he is Roo, applies the bath and the medicine, and adds withering criticisms of Piglet. Fortunately for the little pig, Christopher Robin appears and insists that Roo is back with animal friends but apparently cannot recognize the newly bathed Piglet.

Christopher, however, is for all the animals a gentle version of adulthood. He represents the kind, helpful, unassuming presence for which the animals long. He regularly appears when his assistance is truly needed. At the end of the first Kanga and Roo story, of course, the other animals and the new residents become friends. There are intimations, however, that Christopher is destined for the role of adulthood. He is away from home much of the day, for he is being educated, being prepared for adulthood.

In some of the early poems children play at being adults or, as in "Nursery Chairs," scaring adults. The speaker of the "second chair" scares her nanny by pretending to be a lion in a cage. In "Disobedience" the child tells of a mother who has sinned in the manner of a child by running off "to the end of the town" and getting herself lost. A mother who runs away from home is a humorous and impossible situation to the young spirits of the Hundred Acre Wood.

For the most part Milne's children and animals simply behave like children. They live in a world fashioned by adults, but they make it their own by imposing convenient regulations on themselves beyond the imaginative capacities of adults. They imagine that a "bear" will get them if they step on the lines between sidewalk tiles, or they sit "halfway down" a stairway because it is not the top or the bottom but a place that "isn't really anywhere." An even better escape is the journey to places in the natural world left unappropriated by adults: uninhabited islands, hills, and—especially in the Pooh stories—the forest. These places are children's territory where exciting things can happen, like the appearance of the Heffalump, a mythical being that Milne knows needs no description because every child can imagine his own Heffalump. They are enchanted places, but the chief enchantment is the absence of adults and the conviction that these places are made for children and animals and in



part by them, such as their dwellings, chiefly in hollow trees that conveniently incorporate remoteness and domestic necessities.

Many other themes have been discovered in the Pooh stories. Milne's animal characters exaggerate, almost caricature human traits, somewhat like those in the characters of Charles Dickens's novels, often with characteristic sayings. For instance, Pooh is a creature of "very little brain," as he freely admits. He is struggling to succeed in the face of a formidable personal limitation—as is the typical reader. Eeyore, the melancholy donkey, needs constant cheering up but in the process cheers the reader with his humorous self-deprecation. On his birthday, for instance, he offers thanks for his nonexistent birthday cake and the candles that are not there either. Tigger has an eating problem. He knows just what he likes until he tries it, in the way of many children, and discovers that he does not like it after all. Piglet, as with many children of small stature, is inclined to feel inconsequential.

As friends they help each other compensate for their deficiencies. They are presexual, preadult creatures who appeal to children not yet bewildered by these later problems, whereas adult readers are transported back to the time when their world also was one of birthday parties, unfailing friendships, and exciting adventures in which threatened catastrophes are regularly circumvented.

The style of Milne's stories and poems is simple, humorous, and, like the characters, playful. The characters wrestle with words and their permutations and confront polysyllables such as "expedition" and "resolution," which insist on coming out in the animals' mouths as "expotition" and "risso-lution." The stories have a large proportion of efficient dialogue that moves the action along and reinforces the characters' traits. Milne was also very fond of nonsense words of the type that Dr. Seuss later perfected: expressions such as "woozle," "squch," and "mastershalums." In the poems, Milne achieves little surprises with unexpected rhymes of the sort later associated with Ogden Nash: "Copses" leads to "wopses"; "quickly" leads to "tickly."

Milne's originality often begins with a borrowed idea that is promptly enhanced. The teddy bear began as a nickname for Theodore Roosevelt, but it surely came to fruition in Milne's poem "Teddy

Bear" and in his later Pooh. Milne could adapt medieval materials, such as romances, even an alchemist, to poems for children. He could make a kind of child's pastoral by combining in one poem two venerable characters from children's rhymes, Little Bo-Peep and Little Boy Blue. Like many original writers, he knew how to make appropriated features his own.

## WHEN WE WERE VERY YOUNG

**First published:** 1924

**Type of work:** Poetry

*At a time of sentimentality and silliness in children's poetry, Milne speaks to children not in baby talk but in simple but rational English.*

When published in 1924, *When We Were Very Young* became an immediate best seller, and, like the children's books that followed, attracted adults also. It contains forty-five poems that only occasionally veer toward the infantile vocabulary characteristic of children's poems in the early 1920's.

The last poem in *When We Were Very Young* was written first, in 1922. Based on Alan and Daphne Milne's observation of their two-year-old son at prayer, it was first published early in 1923. Ann Thwaite, Milne's biographer, calls "Vespers" an ironic poem by a man little interested in prayer or conventional religion. The boy in the poem is given their son's own name, Christopher Robin, a name that would later become that of the boy in the two collections of Winnie-the-Pooh stories.

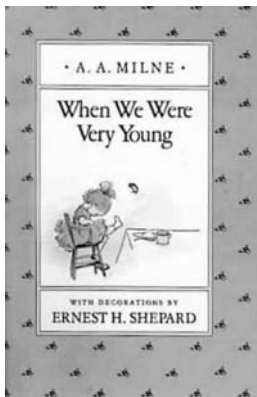
The book also includes in its introduction the name Pooh, which the real Christopher had given to a swan. It also introduces Edward Bear, known as Teddy, a "short and stout" bear, which would later become Winnie-the-Pooh. Otherwise the animals in these poems are not the animals of the later stories.

"Independence" is one of the shorter poems and one of the most emphatic. It represents the voice of a child swinging on a tree branch and expressing his disdain of incessant cautions from overprotective parents. Parents, however, remain benighted, so there is no point in telling them. Children in Milne's poems are not rebels but wearily docile subjects, because complaining to adults

accomplishes nothing. They just do not understand.

In a longer and more remarkable poem, "Disobedience," Milne reverses the roles. A three-year-old named James Morrison orders his mother never to "go down to the end of the town" without consulting him. Not heeding his advice, his wayward mother goes but never comes back. More often, however, the children of this book are seen

when they are free of parents. They are wandering, in reality or imagination, in fields, on islands, by brooks, among trees, or solitarily, sitting on a particular stairway in their home. They are being themselves, which does not mean running wild, for they impose their own limits, such as the time-honored one of traversing paving stones without ever stepping on the lines.



## WINNIE-THE-POOH

**First published:** 1926

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Milne brought animal toys in his son's nursery to life by making them speak and act like real children and adapting them to a natural setting attractive to children.*

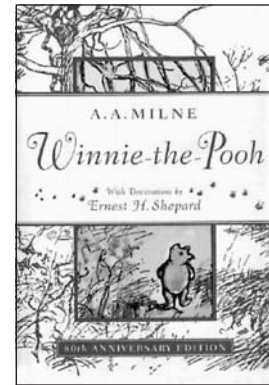
In the first Pooh story, "Edward Bear" of the earlier poem becomes Winnie-the-Pooh. Pooh was the name the real Christopher Robin had given to a swan. When Pooh becomes a bear, Milne's reason for the distinctive hyphenated "the" is not known, nor is the significance, if any, of the fact that he lives "under the name of Sanders." The name may simply ridicule the adult habit of appropriating things in nature by naming them. In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, versions of children's animal toys appear in a wood that has been appropriated by animals that have gained the likenesses of people—particularly children.

Milne immediately establishes what became perhaps the most famous Pooh motif, the fact that the little bear eats honey to excess. Eating is often discussed and done in the stories, and in the second story Pooh, after doing his morning "stoutness exercises," overeats while visiting Rabbit and gets stuck in the hole that

is the latter's doorway, a good example of the application of Pooh's status as a "Bear of No Brain." In both stories Christopher rescues the bear, in the second one reading to him for a week while the dieting Pooh grows slender enough to permit his many friends to yank him from the hole.

This pattern predominates in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Either Pooh or one of his animal friends faces a problem or an embarrassment, but the wise young human, Christopher, and helpful friends extricate them from their trouble. Whenever there is a problem, there is a discussion, usually humorous, of a possible solution, and one member of the little community is a potential victim and another an often unexpected hero. Despite his small brain, for example, Pooh is the one who discovers how to save little Piglet in a flood. Friendship works in all directions in *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

One of the most delightful aspects of this book is its attitude toward mistakes. They happen, cause worry, but are eventually overcome. There is much fun about errors in such basic lessons as learning to count and spell. Another shortcoming is aping the mistakes of elders; Owl, for instance, falls into tiresome adult rhetoric and must be suppressed firmly but politely. The friends survive even mistakes in human relations. Eeyore, for example, somehow gets it into his head that a party for Pooh, who has just rescued his friend Piglet, is for him and begins a speech of self-praise. Christopher sets him right, and they charitably ignore Eeyore's clumsy attempts to come to terms with his humiliation. Pooh's gift, a Special Pencil Case, gives the donkey the chance to air his view that "this writing business" is much "over-rated."



## THE HOUSE AT POOH CORNER

**First published:** 1928

**Type of work:** Short stories

*The second Pooh book offers another ten stories of the group's friendships and adventures but works toward an awareness that childhood must come to an end.*

After publishing a second book of poems, *Now We Are Six*, in 1927, Milne issued his second and last Pooh book in 1928. In many respects it is like his first one, although he introduces one new character, Tigger, whose bounciness signifies his impulsive and reckless character, to enliven the scene.

The last story, however, is very different. It is a goodbye to Christopher and the Hundred Acre Wood. It is the whimsically gloomy Eeyore, probably the funniest of all Milne's creatures, who celebrates in a verse of his own construction Christopher's "going." The poem itself exemplifies one of the author's favorite techniques: the speaker's interruption of his own poem to complain about such things as the difficulty of finding appropriate rhymes or other suddenly discovered poetic weaknesses. When the poem is recited to the animals, Pooh alleges that it is better than the poem he had meant to contribute, to which Eeyore replies that "it was meant to be."

As Christopher reads the poem later, the animals depart until only Pooh is left. He tells Pooh that they will take a walk together. When Pooh asks where, his answer is "nowhere," and he tells Pooh that the thing that he prefers doing is "nothing." Their walk, he points out, is a good example of "nothing." Christopher talks of some of the things that he is learning, all unfamiliar to Pooh, and then, simulating a ceremony of knighthood, dubs Pooh his most faithful knight. Pooh, however, not understanding Christopher's intention, supposes that his failure represents a failure of his own. Next Pooh is distressed to learn that Christopher will do "nothing" no more, or at least much less often because "they don't let you." Then the two trail off to-

gether. *The House at Pooh Corner*, as well as Milne's contributions to children's literature (other than a dramatization of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, which appeared in 1929) have come to an end after just a few short years in Milne's writing career.

It seems clear that the fact of Christopher and Pooh going off together signifies both the end of childhood adventures and their imperishable persistence in memory. Milne apparently needed a young son to keep him in the Winnie-the-Pooh vein, and by 1928 the real Christopher was turning eight, beyond the toys and ways of his younger years, and would soon be attending a prep school. Milne admitted that his interest in children's books was then fading. He thought that perhaps it would return when he became a grandfather, although, as it turned out, his only grandchild was not born until after his death.

As his son reported in his book *The Enchanted Places* (1976), Milne considered writing to be, among other things, a "thrill." At a certain point the thrill of a certain kind of accomplishment fades. The writer may still accede to the demand for more of the same, and readers would certainly have welcomed more Pooh stories, but Milne chose to end when the thrill had passed.

### SUMMARY

A. A. Milne's originality as a writer for children begins with his translation of children's animal toys to a woods, where they take on the being of characters with distinctive personalities, speech habits, and a desire to fashion their own kind of life. Milne's animals play with each other and with language itself. He had an extraordinary ability to assume and express a childlike point of view. The only significant human in these books is a child, but to Pooh and Piglet and the other animals he serves as a helpful and sympathetic substitute parent. The Hundred Acre Wood is as safe as a nursery but more exciting because it is a place where adventures and small misadventures sometimes end instructively but always end happily.

Robert P. Ellis

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How do A. A. Milne's animal characters reflect the personalities of real people?
- Was it a good idea for Milne to give his fictional Christopher Robin the same name as his real son?
- What characteristics of the Pooh stories seem more appropriate for adults than for young children?
- What features of Milne's literary style seem to have most influenced other writers of children's books? Which contemporary writers seem to have learned the most from Milne?
- Have illustrator Ernest H. Shepard's artistic contributions to Milne's books been sufficiently appreciated?
- One critic has argued that Milne's humor derives from pushing logical ideas to "the point of absurdity." Does this criticism adequately explain the basis of Milne's humor?

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## CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

**Born:** Šeteiniai, Lithuania

June 30, 1911

**Died:** Cracow, Poland

August 4, 2004

*Miłosz was a Nobel Prize-winning poet whose work captured both the depths to which human beings have fallen in the twentieth century and the heights to which they continue to aspire.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Czesław Miłosz (MEE-lawsh) was born on June 30, 1911, in Šeteiniai, a small village near Wilno (now Vilnius) in Lithuania to Aleksandr and Weronika Kunat Miłosz, Polish-speaking descendants of Lithuanian gentry. In his autobiography, *Rodzinna Europa* (1959; *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, 1968), Miłosz reports that his first memories are of exile: Like thousands of other refugees, his family fled Lithuania for Russia when the Germans invaded at the beginning of World War I. After the war, Miłosz's family returned to a rural Lithuania that he describes as steeped in religion, superstition, and nature in his lyrical second novel *Dolina Issy* (1955; *The Issa Valley*, 1981).

Miłosz attended Zygmunt August High School and King Stefan Batory University in Wilno—a city that he often recalls in his poetry—and was a founding member of the poetry group Zagary and its literary magazine. In 1931, he traveled to Paris, where he met the French poet Oscar de L. Miłosz, a distant relative whose work and mystical temperament were a major influence on the young Czesław's own intellectual development. In 1933, Miłosz published his first book, *Poemat o czasie zastygłym* (a poem on frozen time). In 1934, he earned a law degree, won an award from the Polish Writers' Union, and received a fellowship that allowed him to spend another year in Paris.

When Miłosz returned to Wilno, he worked at its Polish radio station and published his second book of poems, *Trzy zimy* (1936; three winters). In 1937, he moved to Warsaw, where he joined a group of poets known as the catastrophists because of their apocalyptic view of the future of Europe and Western civilization. In 1939, the catastrophists' worst nightmares were realized when Germany again invaded Poland and the Nazis quickly occupied Warsaw. During the occupation, Miłosz was an active member of the Polish Resistance and a major contributor to the city's elaborate underground culture. He edited *Pieśń niepodległa* (1942; invincible song), a mimeographed anthology of resistance poetry, translated Jacques Maritain's *À travers le désastre* (1941), an attack against French collaboration with the Germans, and wrote poems such as "Świat poema naiwne" ("The World: A Naive Poem") and "Głosy biednych ludzi" ("The Voices of Poor People"), which were published by the underground presses and passed from hand to hand in the desolated city. When the Communists took power in postwar Poland, a volume of his collected poems, *Ocalenie* (1945; rescue), was one of the first books published by the new government.

As a prominent anti-Nazi, resistance figure, and poet, Miłosz's support was eagerly sought by the new regime. At first, he gave it: Between 1946 and 1950, he served as a Polish cultural attaché to Washington and Paris. In 1951, however, he broke with the government and became an exile in Paris. At a time when most French intellectuals were still enamored of Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union, Miłosz courageously spoke the unwelcome truth

about intellectual life in the East in the essays published as *Zniewolony umysł* (1953; *The Captive Mind* 1953)—a book that the critic Irving Howe has described as a “central text in the modern effort to understand totalitarianism.” In the same year, Miłosz’s first novel, *Zdobycie władzy*, 1953 (*The Seizure of Power*, 1955), was published and awarded the prestigious Prix Littéraire Européen.

In 1960, Miłosz accepted a position as a professor of Slavic languages at the University of California at Berkeley and moved to the United States, where he lived and worked for many years and became an American citizen. Since 1960, his books have included *The History of Polish Literature* (1969); numerous books of poetry, including in *Miasto bez imienia* (1969; *Selected Poems*, 1973), *Bells in Winter* (1978), *The Separate Notebooks* (1984), *Nieobjęta ziemia* (1984; *Unattainable Earth*, 1986), *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (1988), and *Provinces* (1991); and three collections of essays, *Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision* (1977), *Widzenia nad zatoką San Francisco* (1969; *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, 1982), and *Ziemia Ulro* (1977; *The Land of Ulro*, 1984). In 1978 Miłosz was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature by the University of Oklahoma. In 1980, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Swedish Academy. He died in Cracow, Poland, on August 4, 2004, at the age of ninety-three.

## ANALYSIS

In the West, Miłosz observed in *Świadektwo poezji* (1983; *The Witness of Poetry*, 1983), “the separation of art and the public has been an accomplished fact” since the time of Charles Baudelaire. Yet “in Central and Eastern Europe,” he wrote thirty years earlier in *The Captive Mind*, “a poet does not merely arrange words in beautiful order. Tradition demands that he be a ‘bard,’ that his songs linger on many lips, that he speak in his poems of subjects of interest to all the citizens.” Czesław Miłosz was himself such a bard.

For thirty years after Miłosz went into exile in 1951, none of his books was officially published in Communist Poland. Yet during the years that he was an “unperson”—a poet whose name could not be mentioned in print and whose writings had to be circulated in underground samizdat editions and tape recordings—he became Poland’s unofficial poet laureate. When Solidarity first emerged

and a monument was erected in 1981 to the memory of the Polish workers slain in the Gdansk food strikes of 1970, the words on its base were quite naturally taken from one of his poems: “You who wronged a simple man . . . / Do not feel safe. The poet remembers/ You can kill one, but another is born./ The words are written down, the deed, the date.” When the first officially sanctioned edition of his collected poetry since the war was published in Poland in the same year, two hundred thousand copies sold out within a month.

“The poet remembers. . . .” To Miłosz and his Polish readers, that is more than merely a warning or a promise. It is a definition of vocation. What Miłosz did in each of his books was, above all, to remember: to keep his and his era’s past alive in the present through the power of his words. Because those words are written mostly in Polish, Miłosz can be read in the United States only in translation. He always understood this predicament. “The abyss for me was exile,” he wrote in *The Captive Mind* shortly after immigrating to the West. “My mother tongue, work in my mother tongue, is for me the most important thing in life.” When he finally broke with his country, he said in *The Captive Mind*, he fully expected the consequences to be not merely exile but “sterility and inaction.”

“Wrong Honorable Professor Miłosz,” he wrote sardonically of himself in the poem “A Magic Mountain,” “Who wrote poems in some unheard-of tongue./ Who will count them anyway.” In one section of the cycle “Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kedy zapada” (“From the Rising of the Sun”), he summarized his situation with even greater irony and wit. “Oh yes,” he writes, “not all of me shall die, there will remain/ An item in the fourteenth volume of an encyclopedia/ Next to a hundred Millers and Mickey Mouse.” Nevertheless, Miłosz remained faithful to both his native language and his Eastern European sense of the poet’s vocation. “Whatever I hold in my hand, a stylus, reed, quill or a ballpoint,” he announces in the opening section of the same cycle, “Wherever I may be . . . / I attend to matters I have been charged with in the provinces.”

Memory has always been his muse, he declared in the early poem “Sroczosć” (“Magpiety”). In his Nobel lecture (1981), he explained why. “Perhaps our most precious acquisition is . . . respect and gratitude for certain things which protect people from internal disintegration and from yielding to

tyranny,” he wrote. Paramount among those things is memory. Yet, he went on to say, “our planet that gets smaller every year, with its fantastic proliferation of mass media, is witnessing a process that escapes definition, characterized by a refusal to remember.” Under these circumstances, he insisted, the poet’s role must be to see and to describe. Yet “‘To see’ means not only to have before one’s eyes. It may also mean to preserve in memory. ‘To see and to describe’ may also mean to reconstruct in imagination.”

The reader of Miłosz’s poetry is immediately struck by this effort “to reconstruct in imagination,” to make memories live again through description. Poem after poem is built of powerful and recurrent images of his Lithuanian boyhood, his World War II youth, and his California émigré adulthood. The poems vary in tone, of course—many strive to make affirmations in the face of the historical tragedies that he has seen in his long life. The strongest and most memorable poems, however, are those in which he recalls the war years and their aftermath with a survivor’s painful guilt.

### “DEDICATION”

**First published:** “Przedmowa,” 1945  
(collected in *New and Collected Poems*,  
1931-2001, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This keynote poem is one of the first expressions of Miłosz’s lifelong commitment to understand and testify to the history and experience of his Europe.*

“Dedication,” written soon after the occupation and destruction of Warsaw, is an homage to those who died from one who survived. In it, Miłosz acknowledges the difficulty of speaking about the unspeakable, reveals his guilt at having lived to tell the story of those years, and dedicates himself to writing poetry that will grapple with history and memory.

It begins by directly addressing those to whom it is dedicated—“You whom I could not save/ Listen to me”—as if the poet sees them before him and must speak to give their spirits rest. He then confesses his own lack of skill and expresses his deci-

sion to abandon the aesthetic of complexity that characterized his prewar writing: “Try to understand this simple speech as I would be ashamed of another./ I swear there is in me no wizardry of words.” In the second stanza, he tries to understand why he survived and fails. All he can say is that, somehow, “What strengthened me, for you was lethal.” He then recalls the excitement of the prewar years, when the catastrophists and other talented young people, now dead, faced anxiety with energy and art. “You mixed up farewell to an epoch with the beginning of a new one./ Inspiration of hatred with lyrical beauty,/ Blind force with accomplished shape.”

The third stanza links the dead with the destroyed city, nearly burned to the ground by the Germans while the Soviet army watched from the opposite bank of the Vistula River. “Here is the valley of shallow Polish rivers. And an immense bridge/ Going into white fog. Here is a broken city.” The white fog literally describes the smoldering city. It also suggests that what lay on the far side of the bridge—the Soviet Army, doing nothing to help—was shrouded in silence in Communist Poland, where official dogma whitewashed the Soviets and made them the city’s saviors.

In the fourth stanza, the elegiac tone of the first three stanzas is replaced by an angrier, tougher voice, a voice that seems to rebuke the poet himself, while insisting that after this destruction poetry can never be the same. “What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or people?” the poet asks. He then quickly and absolutely answers his own question: “A connivance with official lies,/ A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,/ Readings for sophomore girls.” The poet clearly speaks from bitter experience. Only now does he see what poetry must be and do. Moreover, while he does not condemn totally his own earlier efforts in a different poetic vein, he strongly feels the need to move beyond them. “That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,/ That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,/ In this and only this I find salvation,” he says. That “late” is a profound self-indictment that echoes throughout the remainder of Miłosz’s career—an indictment to which he pleads guilty and of which he will never quite exonerate himself.

In the final, haunting stanza, the young poet who wanted to escape the provinces for the cosmopolitan worlds of Paris and Warsaw (see his 1980

poem, “Bypassing Rue Descartes”) finds himself returning to his roots, as he compares the book that he is dedicating with the village ceremonies of his childhood in Lithuania. “They used to pour millet on graves or poppy seeds,” he recalls. “To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds./ I put this book here for you, who once lived/ So that you should visit us no more.” It proves to be a vain hope. In the other poems in his first postwar book, and in many of the poems that will follow, Miłosz is drawn back, again and again, to these same memories of the war and its dead.

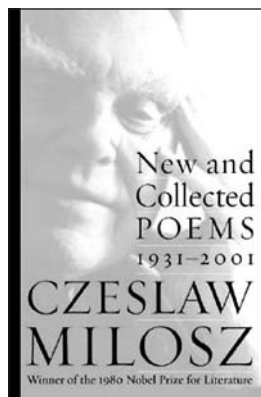
### “IN MILAN”

**First published:** 1962 (collected in *New and Collected Poems, 1931-2001*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem reveals the conflict that Miłosz always felt between his commitment to writing a poetry of history and memory and his attraction to an art celebrating beauty and the senses.*

“In Milan,” which was written in France in 1955 but first published in his 1962 collection *Król Popiel i inne wiersze* (King Popiel, and other poems), expresses the conflict that Miłosz faced as an artist throughout his career. As “Dedication” shows, he felt compelled to use his art to bear witness to his time. Yet he always felt an equally strong attraction to embracing the beauty of existence and the pleasures of the senses, to transcending his experience of history through mysticism, nature, and art. These two impulses are apparent in the mix of poems that he chose to include in each of his collections. Occasionally, as for “In Milan,” they become the subject of the poems themselves.



The poem begins with two brief stanzas. The first recalls a time, years ago, when the impulse to celebrate the beauty of life led the poet to write poems on Italy. The second recounts a charge made by a friend as they walked at night through a piazza: that Miłosz’s art was “too politicized.” The third, longest stanza records Miłosz’s reply—a response that is both deeply felt and tinged with regret.

He would love to write poems about the beauty of the world, Miłosz says: “I am for the moon amid the vineyards . . . I am for the cypresses at dawn.” He could “compose, right now, a song/ on the taste of peaches, on September in Europe.” In fact, “I would like to gobble up/ All existing flowers, to eat all the colors./ I have been devouring this world in vain/ For forty years, a thousand would not be enough.” He would desperately like to be “a poet of the five senses”—because those senses are so powerful, because it would be easy to lose oneself in their pleasures—but “That’s why I don’t allow myself to become one.” Because “Thought has less weight than the word lemon,” it needs a poet to express it, to defend it, to insist on its importance.

In this poem, Miłosz manages to have it both ways. In a poem of ideas, which regrettably insists on his commitment to ideas in poetry, he creates an occasion that allows him to write exactly the kind of poem that he claims he must not allow himself to write: a poem full of beauty, emotion, and sensuous imagery.

### SUMMARY

“Have I fulfilled anything, have I been of use to anyone?” Czesław Miłosz asks in “From the Rising of the Sun.” The self-doubt seems genuine and is still evident in an extraordinary later poem such as “Far Away,” published when he was eighty. Yet while Miłosz could not stop asking himself these questions, his readers certainly may. He created a body of poetry and prose that serves as an eloquent testament to the human spirit struggling with the extremes of twentieth century experience. In that—in his poetic witness—Miłosz was, indeed, “of use” to everyone fortunate enough to have discovered his work.

*Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr.*



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- How does the memory of a poet like Czesław Miłosz differ from the memory of a historian?
- Does Miłosz ever “escape the provinces”?
- Peter Filkins has written about the poetry and antipoetry of Miłosz. What is the latter and how does it relate to the former?
- Which seem more successful: the poems that Miłosz wrote during World War II or the later poems recollecting the war?
- Miłosz lived and wrote for many years in the United States and assisted in translating his poems into English. Can he be considered in any sense an American poet?

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## JOHN MILTON

**Born:** London, England  
December 9, 1608

**Died:** London, England  
November 8, 1674

*Milton, author of the last and greatest epic poem in English, Paradise Lost, is generally considered to be second only to William Shakespeare as the greatest English poet.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Milton was born in Bread Street, Cheapside, London, England, on December 9, 1608. His father, John Milton, was a very successful scrivener, one who copied legal documents and performed some of the services associated with banking and finance. His mother's name was Sara Jeffrey Milton. Though the younger Milton was never rich, his father made enough money to guarantee his son's financial independence throughout the great poet's lifetime. Milton was a precocious child, demonstrating a particular facility with ancient and modern languages. By the time he was graduated from college, Milton read, spoke, and wrote Latin nearly as well as he did English and was competent in Greek, Hebrew, French, and Italian. From approximately the age of nine to twelve, Milton was tutored at home, and from the age of twelve to sixteen he walked about three blocks to attend St. Paul's School at the famous London cathedral.

Milton started college in 1625, a few months after turning sixteen, attending Christ's College, Cambridge, where he earned the nickname "the lady of Christ's" because he took meticulous care of his appearance, had delicate features, and disdained many of the masculine activities, such as drinking and visiting brothels, that occupied many of his schoolmates. He may have been "rusticated," or suspended from school, briefly, in 1626, because

of a conflict with one of his teachers, but he returned to earn his B.A. in 1629 and his M.A. in 1632. Initially, Milton had planned to be a minister, but as a Puritan, or radical Protestant, he came to believe that the Anglican Church was too much like the Catholic church and decided to dedicate his life to poetry instead. While in school, Milton began writing poetry, mostly in Latin, and in December, 1629, just after his twenty-first birthday, he wrote, in English, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," which in effect signaled his great promise as a poet.

In the early 1630's, Milton's family moved to Horton, Buckinghamshire, seventeen miles west of London, where Milton's father retired to a country estate. After leaving Cambridge in 1632, Milton lived with his family for six years (usually called the Horton period). During this time, he read voraciously, attempting to complete his education by reading everything that was written in the languages that he had mastered. While at Cambridge and during the years of the Horton period, Milton wrote many of the early works that helped to make him famous during his lifetime—the twin "mood" poems "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," the masque, or play, *Comus* (pr. 1634, pb. 1637), the pastoral elegy "Lycidas," and several of his familiar sonnets, such as "How Soon Hath Time." Some poems, such as "Lycidas," were published under very particular circumstances and can be easily dated, but most of Milton's early poems circulated in manuscript well before they were formally published for the first time in his collected poems of 1645.

In August, 1638, Milton set out on his Grand

Tour, a trip on the European continent that most educated men undertook in Milton's day to complete their studies and to polish them as gentlemen. Milton traveled mostly in Italy, where he met many important people, including the great astronomer Galileo. He returned home somewhat prematurely in August, 1639, because England was nearing its momentous civil war.

The English Civil War, which began in 1642, was caused by a power struggle between the monarchy and Parliament. In 1625, Charles I had taken over the throne from his father, James I, and by 1629 had dissolved Parliament in an attempt to govern autocratically. Parliament, however, insisted on a more representative form of government, and years of political infighting culminated in armed conflict in August, 1642. In 1647, the king's forces were defeated, and the king was taken prisoner. Then, in an act unprecedented in English history, Charles was executed on January 30, 1649. This began the period of the Puritan commonwealth, ultimately headed by Oliver Cromwell. These historical events are important in Milton's life because after his return from Italy he published relatively little poetry between "Lycidas" in 1638 and *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). Milton spent twenty years writing prose in support of various personal and political causes; most of this prose is only read now by highly specialized scholars.

Of the approximately twenty prose works that Milton published between 1641 and 1660, the most widely known are *Of Education* and *Areopagitica*, both published in 1644. The first outlined an ideal system of education, and the second argued against censorship, with the latter now considered one of the world's most important defenses of freedom of the press. In fact, Milton's *Areopagitica* helped inspire the writing of the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights.

Between 1643 and 1645, four of Milton's prose works argued for more liberal divorce laws, presumably because of the crisis of his first marriage. In June, 1642, Milton had married the first of his three wives, seventeen-year-old Mary Powell. Within six weeks of the marriage, she left him, returned to her father's home in Oxford, England, and did not rejoin Milton until 1645. Her motives are still not entirely clear—she may have been responding to family or political pressures, but the passion of Milton's divorce tracts indicated consid-

erable marital discord. In 1643, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, the first of Milton's four divorce tracts, made him quite infamous, and he was often portrayed throughout his life as "Milton the Divorcer," a sexual libertine, because of his liberal opinions on divorce. After returning to her husband, Mary Powell gave birth to four children and died in 1652 after giving birth to their last. In 1656, Milton married his second wife, twenty-eight-year-old Katherine Woodcock, who also died giving birth two years later. This death probably inspired one of Milton's greatest sonnets, "Methought I Saw My Late Espousèd Saint," though some contend that the poem refers to Mary Powell. In 1663, he married Elizabeth Minshull, who outlived him. The divorce pamphlets made Milton infamous, but the prose works that caused Milton the most controversy in his lifetime were the four that he wrote between 1649 and 1654 to justify the execution of Charles I. Almost as soon as Charles was executed, there was a backlash of negative sentiment all over Europe, as well as England, and Milton came to be known as the defender of regicide as well as of divorce.

In the 1650's, then, Milton's life was anything but happy. Scorned in many quarters for his views on divorce and the regicide, embroiled in politics rather than fulfilling his calling as a great national poet, suffering from the death of two wives, Milton also went totally blind early in 1652. Modern ophthalmic research generally agrees that Milton's blindness was caused by glaucoma, but the more romantic theory is that it was caused by years of reading and writing by low candlelight. Whatever the cause, Milton's blindness was a great burden for one who by then was planning to write the next verse epic to rival the great epics of Homer, Vergil, and Dante. In Milton's most widely known sonnet, "When I Consider How My Light Is Spent," Milton describes this anxiety but ends the poem with an assertion of calm faith that God will use his talents as He sees fit.

Ironically, Milton's blindness probably helped save his life when the commonwealth collapsed and the monarchy was restored. When Cromwell died in 1658, his son Richard was not able to maintain power. Parliament invited Charles II, the son of Charles I, to return from exile in France, and the restoration of the monarchy took place in May, 1660. Many of those involved in the execution of

Charles I were then executed themselves, but Milton was spared in spite of his active and public role in the justification of the regicide. Yet he was severely punished, despite being relatively old at fifty-one, being totally blind, and possessing a considerable literary reputation. Besides a short period of imprisonment, he lost his government position as secretary for foreign tongues (Latin secretary), paid a fine, and suffered the confiscation of most of his property. The playwright Sir William D'Avenant and the poet Andrew Marvell, who had been his assistant as Latin secretary, may have helped Milton earn clemency by speaking in his behalf.

After 1660, Milton returned to writing poetry and later published his three major poems, *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), *Paradise Regained* (1671), and the classical tragedy *Samson Agonistes* (1671), the last two printed in one volume in 1671. The precise dating and even the sequence in which Milton wrote these works is still a matter of scholarly conjecture, but after his blindness he wrote with the help of an amanuensis, someone who served as a secretary to record, usually every morning, what Milton dictated while composing the verses in his head. Sometimes Milton's daughters served in this capacity, sometimes paid assistants. Milton published additional prose works in these last years of his life, most notably *The History of Britain* (1670). He also completed the monumental Latin work *De doctrina Christiana libri duo Posthumi* (1825), a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine, which attempted to bring the Old and New Testaments into harmony. Although willed to one of his secretaries, the manuscript disappeared and remained unpublished until 1825. Milton died on November 8, 1674, in London, one month short of his sixty-sixth birthday, from complications arising from gout.

### ANALYSIS

Milton is not "easy reading" for the modern student of literature. Extremely well-schooled in the Bible, the Greek and Latin classics, and the learning of his own time, Milton frequently alludes to materials that were common knowledge for his educated seventeenth century audience but that are usually simply arcane footnotes for today's readers. The modern reader also confronts vocabulary no longer in use, highly figurative language, and a convoluted syntax influenced by Milton's lifelong study of Latin. Yet the effort is always worth the

trouble; the modern reader who becomes more comfortable with Milton's style discovers a majesty and delicacy of expression in both verse and prose that can be found in few other authors. In act 2, scene 2, of William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (pr. c. 1606-1607, pb. 1623), Antony's friend, Enobarbus, says of Cleopatra, "age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety." The same can be said of Milton and his literary achievements.

Like Shakespeare, Milton remains a literary giant hundreds of years after his death because he completely mastered the wide variety of literary forms that he attempted. On one hand, Milton perfected the fourteen-line Italian sonnet, which demanded poetic significance in a brief form. On the other hand, he was the last poet in English to rise to the level of Homer, Vergil, and Dante in the epic poem, his massive and flawlessly sustained blank verse of *Paradise Lost* covering twelve books and more than ten thousand lines. Between these two extremes, Milton wrote "Lycidas," which the critic Marjorie Hope Nicholson calls "the most perfect long short poem in the English language"; *Samson Agonistes*, which might be the last great classical (and Christian) verse tragedy; and the "brief epic" sequel to *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*.

In some cases, even Milton's minor verse has survived the passage of time. For example, in 1631, Milton joined many of his fellow Cambridge students in commemorating the death of Thomas Hobson, the eccentric university "carrier," who drove a coach carrying students and mail between Cambridge and London for sixty-seven years until his death in 1630. In two poems titled "On the University Carrier," Milton adopts a witty style very different from the "grand style" associated with his major works, yet he manages a poetic depth and genuine pathos astounding for so slight an occasion.

The "infinite variety" of Milton's work refers as well to the evocative power of the single line, even the single phrase or word. The poetic force of the emotionally charged and intellectually rich details in all of his poems is sometimes hard for beginning students to see, given the difficult context of Milton's poetry; however, focusing on some of the more familiar examples of this quality can lead the patient and industrious student to many other examples. For example, at the end of "Methought I



Saw My Late Espoused Saint,” the blind Milton wakes from the dream in which he “sees” her: “But O, as to embrace me she inclined,/ I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.” The rich, evocative quality in the words “day” and “night” suggests both his grief for Katherine and the crushing burden of his blindness. In his dream, Milton imagines actually seeing Katherine for the first time, since he had married her after the onset of his blindness; but as the literal day returns, he experiences both a literal and a figurative night, on one hand unable again to see, and on the other tormented by his sense of loss and loneliness. “Night” can also suggest the political difficulties that Milton was experiencing in a declining Puritan government. Throughout Milton’s works, the student will find such rich details that reward continued study and revisitation.

Finally, the ageless appeal of Milton’s works comes from his effective treatment of some of the most significant themes that literature can offer. From *Comus* to *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained*, Milton is investigating the nature of good and evil, the nature of temptation, and the power of reason, patience, and faith to create a meaningful human existence. Milton’s dominant Christian theme beginning with *Comus* concerns his concept of Providence and the idea that God’s destiny for humans mysteriously includes freedom of choice. At the end of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve learn that obeying Providence provides them with “a Paradise within thee, happier far.” Yet Milton’s works can be read either within the boundaries of Christianity, as Milton intended them, or in a more secular way, as many twentieth century critics chose to do. As early as 1900, the Scottish critic Sir Walter Raleigh could admire *Paradise Lost* even though he considered it “a monument to dead ideas.” A more secular reading of the poem finds great pathos in the image of human beings struggling to make sense of a world where death, pain, unhappiness, and failure are daily reminders of a less-than-perfect existence. Milton is essentially attempting to explain the presence of evil in a world that he believes is completely in the control of a benevolent, supernatural deity. Yet his Christian explanation can be secularized and remain very much the same: Evil in the world exists because of the failure of human choice, the refusal to follow reason—the best available guide for human conduct. Finally, however,

Milton survives as a great poet of hope, celebrating the power of learning, patience, faith, and endurance. The final scene in *Paradise Lost*, of Adam and Eve forever banished from the perfection of Eden but conquering their despair and fear to face an unknown, new world, is as powerful an image as any in literature.

## “LYCIDAS”

**First published:** 1638 (collected in *Poems of Mr. John Milton*, 1645)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In the form of a pastoral elegy, Milton mourns the death of a fellow Cambridge student, Edward King, who drowned in the Irish Sea in 1637.*

The nominal subject of “Lycidas” is the death of Edward King, a fellow student one year behind Milton at Cambridge, who died when his boat capsized in the Irish Sea on August 10, 1637. In a commemorative volume of poems, Milton saw an opportunity to test his poetic skill and comment on those whom he considered to be the corrupt clergy in his day. He chose the form of pastoral elegy, wherein a shepherd laments the death of a fellow shepherd, because the pastoral elegy was a classic type of poem rooted in Greek and Roman literature that allowed for the presentation of allegorical meaning. As the poet speaks of an idyllic rural life of shepherds, it is understood that he can be talking about contemporary life and universal truths at the same time. Milton uses a traditional pastoral name, Lycidas, to refer to King, and he employs a number of other pastoral conventions.

It is customary to see “Lycidas” as a poem in three parts, opening with a conventional pastoral lament for the premature death of the friend, portrayed as a fellow shepherd. The surviving shepherd has a responsibility to commemorate the friend in song, so he asks the Muses to inspire the song/poem he has now undertaken. This invocation is followed by another convention of the pastoral elegy, the accusation that protective forces (in this case, the pastoral nature deities) failed to prevent the death. In a poem filled with associative leaps, Milton moves at this point to a complaint

about being an artist in an unappreciative world. Even Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, was not able to save from destruction her own son, the poet Orpheus, when the mob, or “rout,” disapproved. It is clear, continues the speaker, that the poet’s task in this world is a thankless one. Why then does the poet persist? The pursuit of fame is the most obvious answer, but fame can be denied by premature death, as was the case with Lycidas. The final answer to this line of questioning, provided by Phoebus Apollo, the god of poetic inspiration, is that “Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil.” True fame is winning the salvation of Jove (or God). With this consolation, the first section of the poem ends.

In the second section of the poem, Milton criticizes the church government of his day, much as he would in his antiepiscopal prose tracts of the early 1640’s. To lead into and allegorize this criticism, Milton begins the section by having his shepherd-poet call forth Triton, spokesman for Neptune, the god of the sea, who explains that Neptune, the sea, was not responsible for Lycidas’s death. Triton reports that the sea and winds were calm that day; the drowning was caused by the defective ship in which Lycidas was sailing, “that fatal and perfidious bark,/ Built in th’ eclipse.” Allegorically, this ship is the church, and Saint Peter, the founder of the Christian church and the keeper of the keys to Heaven, arrives to deliver a stern rebuke. Peter says that Lycidas was far superior to those who dominated the church in Milton’s day, those who do not care about their congregations or flocks: “the hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.” Yet Peter warns that proper punishment awaits these negligent leaders: “that two-handed engine at the door/ Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.” Exactly to what Milton intends this “two-handed engine” to refer is hotly debated—it is one of the famous “cruxes” of Milton scholarship—but it is clear at least that the punishment will be severe and final.

The last section is far less angry and more clearly pastoral in its setting. The valleys come and bring flowers to spread on the waters of the river Alpheus in memory of Lycidas’s passing. In the final consolation, the poet tells his fellow shepherds to stop their weeping because Lycidas is not really dead. Just as the sun sinks in the west but rises again every morning in the east, Lycidas is rising in Heaven.

From this point, Lycidas will be the protective deity of all those who sail the Irish Sea. The lament now done, the shepherd poet, having sung since morning, watches the sun sink below the bay, rises, and departs: “tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.”

Milton’s poem has survived as great art because it is much more than a memorial for a dead friend or even an attack on seventeenth century clergy. Milton transcends these immediate purposes and creates a hauntingly evocative testimony to the fragility of human life. It is a poem about the fear of premature death, a fear that Milton felt keenly, given his great aspirations to become a national poet and his slow progress toward the great epic poem that would fulfill his aspirations. “Lycidas” is a poem that faces the fears of premature death and overcomes them because it is also a poem about rebirth, specifically a Christian rebirth, but also a more abstract rebirth that can give hope to all people, hope that life can be meaningful in the face of corruption, apparent chance, and disappointment. What began in part as a formal exercise, an attempt to demonstrate skill in a classic poetic form, became one of the world’s greatest poems, a personal expression of fear and anger balanced with a final affirmation of faith in cosmic order.

## PARADISE LOST

**First published:** 1667, 1674

**Type of work:** Epic poem

*After being cast out of Heaven, Satan leaves Hell, travels to the newly created world, and succeeds in tempting Adam and Eve to sin against God.*

In the tradition of the epic poem, *Paradise Lost* begins in medias res, in the middle of the story, showing in the first two of twelve books how Satan and his followers gathered their forces on the burning lake of Hell and sought out the newly created race of humans on Earth. (The revolt and resulting war in Heaven that preceded this action and earned the devils their place in Hell is reported in books 5 and 6.)

In book 3, God observes Satan traveling toward Earth, predicts the fall of human beings, and asks

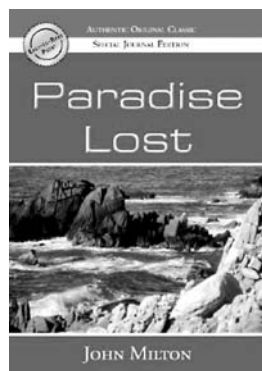
for someone to ransom them. Christ, the Son, accepts. In book 4, Adam and Eve are introduced, as Satan lies hidden in the Garden of Eden. Satan appears in Eve's dream, encouraging her to taste of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, and in book 5 God sends the angel Raphael to warn Adam and Eve of their danger. Raphael begins the story of Lucifer's revolt in Heaven, which he completes in book 6, and in book 7 Raphael tells of how God responded to Satan's revolt by creating a new world, the earth, and a new race in Adam and Eve. In book 8, Adam describes to Raphael his and Eve's creation, and Raphael delivers his final warning and departs. Book 9 tells the story of Satan's successful temptation of Eve, the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and the resulting discord between Adam and Eve. In book 10, Christ passes judgment on Adam and Eve, and Sin and Death build a bridge from the gates of Hell to Earth as Satan is returning to Hell. At the end of book 10, Adam and Eve resolve their discord and petition God for forgiveness, which is granted in book 11 as God sends the archangel Michael to give Adam a vision of the future for humans. In book 12, after the vision of Christ's sacrifice and redemption of the human race, Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden.

This brief synopsis, of course, does not communicate the grandeur and emotional intensity of Milton's great poem. Milton begins *Paradise Lost* with two captivating books set in Hell and featuring Lucifer, or Satan, who rallies his defeated forces and vows eternal war on God before journeying toward Earth to destroy Adam and Eve. In Hell, Satan has a kind of heroic splendor, and such apparent grandeur led English Romantic poets such as William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley to identify with Satan as a tragic rebel and to proclaim that Milton subconsciously admired Satan. Although Milton's subconscious mind must forever remain a mystery, this interpretation is very dubious, and generations of readers misled by Blake and his followers should read the poem more carefully. Milton be-

gan his epic with this larger-than-life portrait of Satan in order to provide God (who will obviously win) with a worthy adversary. Yet Satan's pseudoheroic size is severely diminished in all of his appearances outside the first two books, and by the end of the poem Satan is not at all prominent, the heroic focus having shifted to the figure of Christ and the tragic focus having shifted to Adam and Eve. By the end of the poem, Satan is defeated and overshadowed by the larger themes of redemption and human responsibility.

One of the main causes of this Romantic distortion of *Paradise Lost* is the contrast between the first two books and book 3, where God the Father delivers theological lectures and clears Himself of blame for the Fall that He foretells but does not predestine. Compared to Hell and Satan, the figures of God and Christ the Son discoursing in Heaven seem dull, at least to most modern-day readers. It is almost with relief at the end of book 3 that the reader finds Milton returning to the description of Satan, who nears the Earth and passes through what is called the Paradise of Fools.

Only when the reader meets Adam and Eve is there a narrative interest to compete with Satan's pseudoheroic stature, but the success of Milton's poem comes from the fact that the two human characters, who finally become much more interesting even than the diabolical Satan, are domestic rather than heroic figures. Gradually, Adam and Eve become characterized as much by their conflict with each other as by their conflict with Satan. In what are now seen as strikingly sexist characterizations, Milton describes Adam as "for contemplation . . . and valor formed" while Eve is formed "for softness . . . and sweet attractive grace." Yet the love between them is so convincingly real that even Satan is jealous as he watches "these two/ Imparadised in one another's arms." When Eve falls to Satan's temptations in book 9, she is attempting to rise toward Adam's supposedly superior status, and when Adam accepts sin and death with her, knowing the consequences, he does so out of "uxoriousness," or excessive love for and submission to a wife. The immediate consequence is domestic bickering, each blaming the other for what has happened. Then Eve initiates a reconciliation, Adam suggests praying for forgiveness, and the poem ends with the first married couple walking "hand in hand" out of Paradise.



This rich quality of domestic tragedy has helped make *Paradise Lost* significant and powerful for twentieth and twenty-first century readers. It also may have had some effect on the creation of the modern novel. It can be argued that eighteenth century writers, overwhelmed by Milton's achievement in *Paradise Lost*, were too intimidated to attempt again the epic scope in poetic form. Since no one was going to be able to surpass Milton in verse, the artistic impulse to work with epic size shifted to prose, and the novel was born in the eighteenth century with Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. Certainly by shifting the epic subject from the traditional subjects of war and valor to marriage, *Paradise Lost* elevated domestic subject matter for centuries to come.

## AREOPAGITICA

**First published:** 1644

**Type of work:** Essay

*Milton addresses the English Parliament and urges it to protect the freedom of the press by not permitting the licensing, or censorship, of books.*

*Areopagitica* is the most famous of Milton's prose works because it has outlasted the circumstances of its original publication. On June 14, 1643, the English Parliament passed a law called the Licensing Order, which required that all books be approved by an official censor before publication, and on November 23, 1644, Milton wrote *Areopagitica*, pleading for the repeal of the law. His arguments were not successful—official censorship of books in England lasted until the nineteenth century—but *Areopagitica* has long been an inspiration for those demanding a free press. In fact, its arguments against censorship are nearly as fresh and convincing today as they were in the middle of the seventeenth century.

Milton realized how difficult it would be to change Parliament's opinion, so he marshaled his argument with great subtlety. His title alludes to a famous speech by the Greek educator Isocrates, and Milton uses a classical argumentative structure and many techniques of classical rhetoric that would have commanded respect from his seventeenth century audience. Yet the modern reader,

unaware of classical rhetoric, can still marvel at the cleverness and logic that Milton uses to persuade his contemporary lawmakers. He begins by praising Parliament for its defense of liberty in the past. He then offers a historical review of censorship, pointing out that freedom of the press was highly valued in ancient Greece and Rome. Milton traces the tradition of tyrannical censorship to the Roman Catholic Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition, both of which found few champions among the members of the English Protestant Parliament. As Milton points out, the Roman Catholic church was a traditional enemy of the freedom-loving Parliament.

Milton's next tactic is to disarm the argument that censorship serves society by destroying bad books. In a world where good and evil are often intermingled and difficult to discern, the reading of all books—good and bad—contributes to the human attempt to understand and pursue Truth. God gave human beings Reason as a reliable guide, and judgment is the exercise of Reason; true Christian virtue rests in facing trials and choosing wisely. In one of the most famous passages from *Areopagitica*, Milton says:

He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed. . . . That which purifies us is trial and trial is by what is contrary.

Milton then shows that external restraint is futile in the attempt to make human beings good. The temptations to evil are infinite, and to protect humans from all harm, the number of censors would have to be infinite as well. Even if censorship were limited to books, too many censors would be required for the great number of books to be examined, and the work of reading so many bad books would be tedious drudgery. Those best qualified to judge would be disinclined for this work, and censorship would fall to ignorant and less qualified men.

Milton's final points are that censorship will discourage intellectual activity, impede the pursuit of Truth, undermine the nation's respect for scholars, and cast doubt on the ability of ordinary persons to think for themselves. Furthermore, censor-

ship will limit the pursuit of new truths since its activity is by nature conservative; only accepted truths would ever pass examination. Yet truth is never stagnant and never simply accepted uncritically from an external authority. Human beings come to know Truth from constant testing and discussion, a process that can be tolerated because Truth is so powerful: "And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field. . . . Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"

In the face of such eloquence, there is only one disappointment in *Areopagitica*: Milton is not willing to give the same freedom from censorship to books espousing Roman Catholicism. Milton, most Puritans, and many Englishmen saw Catholicism as tyrannical, even evil. In his journey to Italy, Milton had seen a Catholic government imprison Galileo for asserting that the earth was not the center of the universe. In England, on November 5, 1605, the Roman Catholic conspirator Guy Fawkes had come dangerously close to blowing up the king, his ministers, and Parliament with twenty barrels of gunpowder (the Gunpowder Plot). It stands to reason that a lawful society cannot tolerate what would destroy it, and the radically Protestant Milton saw Roman Catholicism as a serious threat to social order: "I mean not tolerated Popery, and open supersti-

tion, which as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate, provided first that all charitable and compassionate means be used to win and regain the weak and the misled."

In spite of this flaw in Milton's argument, *Areopagitica* remains one of the most eloquent defenses of an essential social freedom and therefore an invaluable document in the history of Western society.

## SUMMARY

If John Milton had written only *Paradise Lost*, he would still be considered one of the world's greatest poets; but, like Shakespeare, Milton graced nearly everything he touched, from delicate Italian sonnets, such as "Methought I Saw My Late Espousèd Saint," to the sonorous majesty of his great verse tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*. Milton wrote the greatest pastoral elegy ever written, "Lycidas," and one of the greatest defenses of a free press, *Areopagitica*. Shakespeare is almost universally appealing to the twenty-first century because his work seems less learned and doctrinaire than Milton's, but after becoming well acquainted with Milton, the modern reader will find universal meaning, poetic grace, and emotional intensity second only to that found in Shakespeare.

Terry Nienhuis

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What literary tradition encouraged John Milton to write a pastoral elegy early in his developing poetic career?
- Investigate the relationship between Milton's *Areopagitica* and the American Bill of Rights.
- Is it possible to detect whether Milton favors the mood of "L'Allegro" or "Il Penseroso"?
- Given the history of sonnets written in English before his time, which topics in Milton's sonnets seem most unusual?
- *Paradise Lost* begins in the traditional manner of an epic. How does the syntax of the first sentence obscure this fact?
- Explain whether Milton's depiction of God is more or less convincing than Dante's in *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802).
- Was *Paradise Regained* a relative failure?

# YUKIO MISHIMA

**Born:** Tokyo, Japan  
January 14, 1925

**Died:** Tokyo, Japan  
November 25, 1970

*Japan's best-known writer after World War II, Mishima blended patriotism, sex, and death into a series of fictional works that chronicle Japan's rise to a modern nation, while lamenting the loss of traditional values and morality.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Yukio Mishima (mee-she-mah), whose name at birth was Kimitake Hiraoka, was born in Tokyo, Japan, on January 14, 1925, to a family descended from samurai nobility. His father was Azusa Hiraoka; his mother, Shizue Hashi Hiraoka. Kimitake, who took the name Yukio Mishima when he began to write in 1941, was a frail child who, perhaps because of his lack of physical prowess, became enamored at an early age with the warriors of feudal Japan who followed *bushido* as a code of conduct. *Bushido*, which means “way of the warrior,” stressed self-sacrifice, indifference to pain, control of both mind and body, and loyalty to the Japanese emperor. Mishima came to live and die by this code. Reared largely by his grandparents during his early years, he was enrolled in 1931 at the Gakushuin (Peers’ School), advancing in 1937 to the middle school and in 1942 to the senior school. During this time, Mishima began to distinguish himself in literature. His first long work, *Hanazakari no mori* (1944; the forest in full bloom), was published in the school magazine when he was thirteen and later, in 1944, as a book. In fact, he was graduated first in his class from the Gakushuin in 1944 and was awarded a silver watch by Emperor Hirohito.

Coming to maturity in the 1930’s and 1940’s, during Japan’s imperialist wars with China and the United States, Mishima was kept out of military service by poor health. Instead of dying nobly as a warrior in combat, he was assigned by the War Ministry to work in an airplane factory. After the war, he returned to his schooling, this time to Tokyo University, where he studied law, but writing was becoming

more and more compelling. He discontinued his studies in 1947 to work for Japan’s Ministry of Finance and quit that job the following year to write full time. His first mature publication, *Kamen no kokuhaku* (1949; *Confessions of a Mask*, 1958), appeared in 1949 and was an immense success.

Discontented with his frail body and fragile health, he began to lift weights in the mid-1950’s and to practice martial arts such as samurai swordsmanship and kendo, the Japanese art of fencing with bamboo swords. By his mid-thirties, Mishima was an astonishingly handsome and muscular man, a perfect embodiment of the young, bronzed manhood that he came to celebrate in such works as *Hagakure nyūmon* (1967; *The Way of the Samurai*, 1977) and *Taiyō to tetsu* (1968; *Sun and Steel*, 1970). Yet he was a man of many contradictions. Although he married and had children, Mishima retained his strongest sexual feelings for men. An intensely private man, he was a public performer as both a stage and a motion-picture actor—he played the leading role in a film version of “Yūkoku” (“Patriotism”), one of his own stories—and he entered into public debates with left-wing college students. A fervent nationalist, Mishima lived on the outskirts of Tokyo in a Western-style home and collected British antiques.

During the 1950’s and 1960’s, Mishima wrote prolifically, publishing novels, short stories, essays, and plays. He published more than 250 books in Japan during his lifetime, and the collected edition of his works in Japanese runs thirty-six volumes. Novels such as *Kinjiki* (1951) and *Higyō* (1953; both translated as *Forbidden Colors*, 1968), a controversial

account of homosexuality in Tokyo; *Shiosai* (1954; *The Sound of Waves*, 1956); *Kinkakuji* (1956; *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, 1959); and *Utague no ato* (1960; *After the Banquet*, 1963), a novel of Japanese political life, earned for him an international reputation as Japan's greatest contemporary novelist. He came to the United States three times and traveled to many foreign cities. His revival of No plays, the classical drama of Japan, was a great success not only in Japan but also all over the world; several one-act plays were staged in New York late in 1960. In addition, he wrote many popular Japanese detective novels and commercial books.

In 1967, Mishima formed what came to be considered his own private army, the Tate No Kai, or Shield Society. This group of student warriors trained at Japanese army bases and swore to restore the prestige of a defeated Japan, raising it to its old imperial glory. Mishima and his Shield Society were never taken seriously by their own compatriots, and Mishima's right-wing politics seemed strident and out of date in a rapidly developing, prosperous Japan.

Increasingly frustrated in effecting his imperialist views, Mishima and four of his young followers entered the Tokyo headquarters of Japan's Eastern Ground Self-Defense Forces on November 25, 1970. They took its commander hostage, and Mishima, dressed in full Shield Society uniform and wearing a samurai headband, proceeded to address the troops below from a balcony but received only heckling in return. Finally, he shouted, "Long live the emperor!" and went back inside. There, he stripped to the waist, knelt on the floor, and began the rite of *seppuku*, the ancient ritual suicide whereby a warrior performs self-disembowelment. After plunging a knife into his left side and cutting open his stomach, Mishima lowered his head, and a young follower standing behind him decapitated him with one stroke of his sword. Mishima's suicide shocked the world. He died at the age of forty-five, on the very date that he had given his publisher the final pages of his last masterpiece, *Hōjō no umi* (1969-1971; *The Sea of Fertility: A Cycle of Four Novels*, 1972-1974). His art and his life came to an end within hours of one another and with a single act.

## ANALYSIS

When the war ended in 1945, the code that Mishima glorified ended with it. Japan was no lon-

ger a muscular military nation whose young warriors died for the glory of the emperor. The emperor, in fact, was forced to renounce his claims to deity after the war, and a new constitution was adopted that stripped the emperor of all power, abolished the military, and ended the nation's foreign influence. Mishima increasingly came to deplore the new Japan that developed between 1945 and 1970. Although the nation was swiftly becoming a prosperous industrial giant, Mishima felt that it was crass, materialistic, and vulgar, a nation that had forsaken its glorious traditions of the past, lost its spiritual focus, and betrayed the proud young warriors who had died for it during the war.

Mishima's writings reflect the changing historical period. His last great work, a series of four novels called *The Sea of Fertility*, give a panoramic view of Japan from 1913 to the 1970's, moving from romance and idealism to opportunism and decay. The Japan of the final novels is one of Coca-Cola signs and litter, cruelty and sexual perversion. Yet Mishima is far from a gloomy writer. His work abounds in the Japanese love of flora, fauna, and natural surroundings, and there is in his writing a deep sensuality and spirituality. Not a particularly religious man, Mishima nonetheless has a deep reverence for things and a sense of the heart-breaking loveliness of mortal and fleeting life. Mizoguchi, the young monk in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, one of Mishima's best novels, can achieve freedom only by destroying the ideal beauty of Kinkakuji (the Golden Temple), a fifteenth century Zen temple. The greatest beauty is a beauty that does not last.

While Mishima is quintessentially Japanese in many of his values and sensibilities, he is also a very Western author. Among his favorite writers were Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Fyodor Dostoevski, and the classic Greek dramatists. Like Mann, the German author of *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie* (1901; English translation, 1924), and Proust, who wrote the epic *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927; *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1922-1931, 1981), Mishima is concerned with the tragic implications of a developing commercial world and the destruction of art, spirit, and morality. Like Russian novelist Dostoevski, Mishima explores inner dualities of good and evil, mind and body, reality and imagination. He has been compared to Ernest Hemingway in his masculine code of violence, to Edgar Allan

Poe in his coupling of love and death, and to Walt Whitman in his masculine eroticism. Mishima felt at home with all of these writers.

It is his peculiar eroticism that many readers find repellent. Mishima, like the boy in *Confessions of a Mask*, finds sexual arousal and beauty in the sight of bloody young males dying in agony, and in the thought of young men, such as the kamikaze pilots of World War II, plunging gloriously to their death in suicide attacks. One of his most difficult works, "Patriotism," is the story of a young military officer and his wife who, after making passionate love to one another, commit ritual *seppuku*. The scene is portrayed in gory and nauseating detail. As if in preparation for his own death, Mishima directed a film version of the story and played the role of the young officer.

It is too easy to see in all of this simply the mind of a sadomasochistic deviant. The contradictory pulls of Eros and Thanatos, love and death, are strong within each individual, and for Mishima, death had a greater attraction than life, as it does for many saints and martyrs. In espousing an eroticism that many find repellent, he is to be applauded for his courage. Mishima looked into his own heart and stated what he found there with honesty, candor, and conviction. The same is true for his unpopular political views. While his politics seemed antiquated and slightly ridiculous even to his fellow Japanese, his beliefs were nonetheless intelligently formulated and passionately held. Further, he had the courage of his convictions; Mishima was willing to die for what he believed.

What is most important about Mishima, however, is his artistry. His books are rich in background and historical detail, his descriptions of Japanese life are accurately observed and beautifully described, and his characters are sharply focused and often memorable. He has a remarkable eye for the quirky and eccentric behavior of individuals, and he is a candid explorer of the human soul, often taking readers where few other writers have gone. Finally, he is a deeply personal writer who bravely faced the worst in himself, transforming these private insights into public works of art. Mishima transforms his readers as well, making them see and feel in new and unsettling ways. That is the mark of a major writer.

## CONFESSIONS OF A MASK

**First published:** *Kamen no kokuhaku*, 1949  
(English translation, 1958)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Growing up in Japan in the 1930's and 1940's, a young boy discovers the contradictions and confusions within his nature, the reality behind the mask that he wears for the world around him.*

*Confessions of a Mask* has been compared to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915, serial; 1916, book) and D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). Like those novels, Mishima's work is a bildungsroman, the story of a young man's growth to maturity. Yet while Joyce and Lawrence emphasize the struggle of a boy to achieve a conventional, heterosexual manhood, Mishima emphasizes the seemingly aberrant de-

sires of his young protagonist, whose struggle is to face his feelings honestly and openly.

The confession begins with the narrator's earliest memories, almost all of them connected with either sex or death. Almost dying at the age of four of autointoxication (Mishima himself suffered from this chronic illness), he remembers at the same time the image



of a young man carrying buckets of excrement and becomes strangely aroused by his handsome face and close-fitting trousers. The image associates sex and filth, just as the boy's later arousal by marching soldiers combines beauty and death. These dualities occur throughout the novel, as do masks and false appearances. Captivated by a picture-book illustration of a knight holding a sword aloft on a white horse, the boy is later shocked to find out that it is the picture of a woman, Joan of Arc, not of a man. Like the boy, the knight's sex is masked and is not what it appears to be. A later book illustration, that of Saint Sebastian, whose body was pierced by

arrows, arouses him even further. Finding exquisite beauty in the saint's white flesh dripping blood, the boy finds sexual arousal in agonizing masculine death.

The narrator's first strong sexual feelings are for a young tough named Omi, a fellow student at school. Omi is the opposite of the frail, thin, unhealthy narrator. Omi is physically strong, mentally weak, and, being older than the other boys, sexually mature. The narrator falls in love with him, desires him carnally, and longs to see his naked body, a desire that is fulfilled one day in gym class. Omi's beautiful nakedness, however, fails to satisfy the boy's longing. It merely makes him feel jealous, ashamed of his own comparative ugliness.

The boy soon learns to mask his true feelings, pretending to desire the opposite sex and to anticipate sexual fulfillment with women. Yet he has no adolescent fantasies about women (though he does for young sailors and soldiers on the streets) and only achieves sexual satisfaction through masturbation. At the age of twenty, he begins to see the sister of a schoolmate, a girl named Sonoko, and it is even expected that he will become engaged to her. He tries to convince himself that he is deeply in love with Sonoko: They exchange love letters and photographs, hold hands, and eventually kiss. Still, the young man has no sensation of pleasure, no sexual arousal. Finally, in order to discover if he is a "normal" male, he goes to a prostitute but is unable to have sexual intercourse with her.

By the end of the novel, he has ended his relationship with Sonoko, who then marries someone else. In the final scene, he meets Sonoko, now a married woman, in a chance encounter, and she hints that she still loves him, is even willing to have an extramarital affair with him. Yet as she tells him this in a tawdry Japanese dance hall, he glances at a nearby table at a young male, a gang tough who has removed his shirt and is flexing his muscles. Burning with sexual desire, the protagonist knows what his destiny will be. He can wear a mask no longer.

## THE SEA OF FERTILITY

**First published:** *Hōjō no umi*, 1969-1971

(English translation, 1972-1974);

includes *Hara no yuki*, 1969 (*Spring Snow*, 1972); *Homba*, 1969 (*Runaway Horses*, 1973); *Akatsuki no tera*, 1970 (*The Temple of Dawn*, 1973); *Tennin gosui*, 1971 (*The Decay of the Angel*, 1974)

**Type of work:** Novels

*Widely recognized as Mishima's masterpiece, this series of four novels offers a sweeping view of modern Japan, chronicling the nation's changing values from 1913 to 1970.*

*The Sea of Fertility: A Cycle of Four Novels* is a tetralogy whose title is taken from a name on the surface of the moon. It suggests both the fertile sea of earthly life and the arid sea of the cosmic moon—being and nothingness. Mishima said that he put everything he knew about life into these four novels; the very last words of the final book were written and submitted to his publisher on the day that he died.

*Spring Snow* is Mishima's version of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1597). A story of star-crossed lovers, Kiyo Matsugae and Satoko Ayakura, the novel is romantic, poignant, and tragic. As the title suggests, spring is the season of love, while snow is the cold, life-covering element of death, and this novel combines the two. Satoko, the daughter of a nobleman, is engaged by imperial decree to a prince of the court, while Kiyo, also from a noble family, is a student at Peers' School who falls in love with her. By doing so, however, he challenges the emperor himself. The lovers meet secretly, love passionately, and take terrible risks. Emotionally weak and immature, Kiyo tries to distance himself from Satoko, who becomes pregnant, gets an abortion, and, in disgrace, isolates herself in a nunnery. Kiyo, guilty and desperately ill, comes daily to see the cloistered Satoko and eventually dies for love.

Two minor characters in *Spring Snow* figure prominently in the second novel of the cycle, *Runaway Horses*. Before Kiyo dies, he tells his school friend, Shigekuni Honda, of a dream in which he sees his friend Honda again, beneath a waterfall.



Another minor character, Kiyo's tutor, Shikeyuki Iinuma, also reappears in the second novel, which takes place some eighteen years after Kiyo's death. Honda, now an associate judge in the Ōsaka Court of Appeals, meets Isao Iinuma, son of Kiyo's tutor, who is now headmaster of his own academy. When Honda sees the boy bathing beneath a waterfall near the shrine, he notices three small moles on the left side of the boy's breast—the same three moles that Kiyo had. He concludes that the boy is Kiyo reincarnated, the incarnation of Kiyo's earlier dream.

Whereas Kiyo was a romantic dreamer, Isao is a political idealist who wants to purify the corrupt Japanese government of Westernized financiers and restore the empire's former glory. Using as his model The League of the Divine Wind, a group of student rebels who tried to overthrow the Japanese government in 1873, Isao forms his own student rebel group, whose members pledge to assassinate the most prominent financiers in Japan and to kill themselves by *seppuku* if their plan fails. The assassination plan indeed fails, and the rebel students are imprisoned. Honda, convinced that Isao is the reincarnation of his old friend Kiyo, resigns from the court and becomes defense counsel for the students, who are given their freedom and treated as patriotic heroes. Isao, however, more in love with romantic death than political reform, carries out his plans of assassination by killing a financier named Kurahara and then taking his own life by *seppuku*.

Reincarnation, something in which Mishima did not personally believe, also plays a part in the final two novels of the tetralogy. In *Runaway Horses*, Kiyo/Isao has a dream in which he becomes a woman. In *The Temple of Dawn*, he becomes that woman, a Thai princess named Ying Chan; later, in *The Decay of the Angel*, he will reappear as a boy named Toru. In both novels, Honda is again the central controlling sensibility through whose eyes are seen Kiyo's various incarnations.

Both *The Temple of Dawn* and *The Decay of the Angel* emphasize the decay of the final book's title. From the earlier two novels of romantic passion and patriotic sacrifice, readers descend to a world of ugliness, corruption, and death. In *The Temple of Dawn*, Thailand is a place of drizzling rain and frag-

mented images, India a nation of beggars, lepers, and public crematoriums, and Japan a defeated nation of bombed-out ruins and perverted sexuality. Honda has become materially wealthy but physically and morally impoverished. Trapped in a sterile marriage, he is reduced to peeping at the sexual activity of others through holes in walls and behind bushes. Ying Chan, the object of Honda's sexual fantasies, turns out to be a lesbian and dies from a snakebite after returning to Thailand. There is equal sterility in *The Decay of the Angel*. Honda, now seventy-six years old, dreams of angels; going to Udo Beach, where a mythical angel supposedly descended in the fourteenth century, he finds a shore littered with Coca-Cola bottles, food cans, plastic bags, and garbage. Meeting Toru, a young signalman who has the distinctive three-mole marking on his breast, Honda adopts the sixteen-year-old, but Toru turns out to be evil incarnate, a destroyer of human life and spirit, a malevolent genius who ends up blind, helpless, and isolated.

Mishima's four novels move from spring, youth, and love to old age, senility, and death, from the romantic idealism of early twentieth century Japan to a crass, decaying, and valueless society of the 1970's. Like his principal character Judge Honda, who serenely looks forward to death at the end of the tetralogy, Mishima himself saw at the end of his life only an empty garden, no memories, nothing.

## SUMMARY

Yukio Mishima has been compared to the American author Ernest Hemingway in his masculine code of violence and death, to the British author D. H. Lawrence in his mystical sense of primitive impulses, to the French author André Gide in his candid treatment of homosexuality, and to the great Japanese writers of the past.

Yet Mishima is always uniquely himself. His way of combining beauty and death, his peculiar eroticism, and his conservative political and social views make him unlike any other author, and while he often repels his readers, he just as often fascinates them. While every age produces very good writers, it produces very few geniuses. Mishima was such a rarity—a writer of genius.

Kenneth Seib

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Yukio Mishima revived No plays. What are the features of these plays?
- What did Mishima see as the chief reasons for the decay he saw in Japan?
- Is the capacity to see beauty in the death of young warriors a defect in Mishima or primarily an unfortunate consequence of the circumstances through which he lived?
- Mishima “bravely faced the worst in himself” and made art of the experience. Can you think of other writers of whom such a statement might be said?
- Does the confessional mode of *Confessions of a Mask* contradict the expectations of a bildungsroman?
- Is Mishima’s finding “an empty garden” at the end of his life a disappointing conclusion or a satisfactory one?

*Yukio Mishima*

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## GABRIELA MISTRAL

**Born:** Vicuña, Chile

April 7, 1889

**Died:** Hempstead, New York

January 10, 1957

*Mistral was an innovator whose lyric poetry brought a new and complex blend of powerful feeling, natural imagery, and technical mastery to Latin American literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, whose pen name was Gabriela Mistral (mee-STRAHL), was born on April 7, 1889, in Vicuña, a small village in the remote mountain region of northern Chile. Although her father abandoned the family when Mistral was three, he left her a double legacy. He was the village schoolteacher, and he occasionally wrote verses. By the time she was fifteen, Mistral was teaching in the rural schools of the region and publishing poems in the local newspapers. The most important and enduring legacy she received was the rugged, wild landscape in which she played and worked. In the early years it became a part of her being, and the rhythms and images of its life were to inform all of her poetry.

Before she was twenty-one Mistral had endured the one great love affair of her life, a passionate relationship with a young railroad worker, Romelio Ureta, that ended in a bitter separation. When, after several years of estrangement, Ureta took his own life, Mistral was overwhelmed with grief and guilt. Out of these conflicting and painful emotions she composed three of her most famous poems, “Sonetos de la muerte” (1914; sonnets of death).

Her first volume of poetry, *Desolación* (1922; desolation), was published in New York at the urging

of a group of American high school Spanish teachers who wanted Mistral to make available more of her poetry. The frank physical descriptions in the love poems in the book shocked conservative literary critics, but the book was generally hailed as the debut of a refreshingly distinctive and original lyric voice.

In 1922, Mistral began the series of journeys that was to make her renowned as an educator and humanitarian as well as a poet. She spent two years in Mexico helping to organize that country’s rural education program. She then traveled through the United States and Europe. Her second book, *Ternura* (1924, 1945; tenderness), was published in Madrid and demonstrates the range and variety of her poetic gifts. The lullabies and children’s songs that make up the book represent Mistral’s single-handed attempt to begin a tradition of children’s literature in Latin America.

In 1935, she was named Consul for Life by the Chilean government and spent the 1930’s and the war years of the 1940’s in several European cities. She viewed with horror the growing violence and political chaos as the world prepared for war. *Tala* (1938; felling of trees), her third collection of poems, was intended to alleviate at least a part of the suffering she witnessed. She rushed the book to press in order that the proceeds from its sale might help the Basque children displaced from their homes by the Spanish Civil War.

In 1945, she became the first Latin American writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her response upon hearing the news is characteristic of her self-effacing attitude toward her literary work:

"Perhaps it was because I was the candidate of the women and children."

Mistral made one final, triumphant journey to Chile in 1954 and marked the occasion by publishing her fourth book, *Lagar* (1954; winepress). She spent her last years in Roslyn Harbor on Long Island, New York. Her health was failing but she continued her writing and her work to further the cause of human rights. Among her final projects was a long narrative poem, *Poema de Chile* (1967; poem of Chile), which was published posthumously. On January 10, 1957, she died in Hempstead, New York. She was buried near her childhood home in her beloved valley of the Elqui River where she had once shared her dreams with the trees and her songs with the mountain winds.

### ANALYSIS

The pseudonym Gabriela Mistral chose for herself reveals the two primary sources of her poetic themes and techniques. Gabriela is from the archangel Gabriel, who will sound the trumpet raising the dead on Judgment Day. Mistral is the name of a strong Mediterranean wind that blows through the south of France. Thus, in Mistral's poems her redeeming Christian faith is united with nature to create a unique vision of human experience. The establishment of unifying relationships between different, often contradictory levels of existence lies at the heart of all her poetry. She spiritualizes the most mundane events of the life and, in turn, expresses moments of transcendence in the most homely and familiar of images. The power that achieves such unity, in poetry and in life, is love.

Mistral's development as a poet closely parallels the publication of her four volumes of poetry. *Desolación*, her first book, demonstrates the variety of subject matter and the intensity of feeling that is characteristic of all her work. The collection is divided into sections, including "Life," "The School," and "Nature." The love poems of the "Grief" section are the most strikingly original and the most frequently read. These frank celebrations of physical love, with their heights of passion and depths of sorrow and, above all, the absolute, uncompromising honesty of their feeling, establish the distinctive characteristics of Mistral's lyric voice. In poems such as "Ecstasy" and "Intimacy," the lover refines her physical experience to a point at which, having reached its bodily limit, it is transformed into a spir-

itual encounter. Such extremes of passion are continually accompanied by fears that either the young man or love itself will prove weak and, finally, false. When these fears are realized (her lover betrays her by dying), the poet explores, in poems filled with bitterness and rape, the emotional effects of loneliness and abandonment. Throughout her work, loneliness and the fragility of human feeling remain the chief threats to love, happiness, and fulfillment.

Mistral's next book, *Ternura*, is a collection of lullabies and children's songs. Its simple, innocent verses, meant to be sung to and by children, seem far removed from the fierce and complex love poems of *Desolación*. Instead of a harmony between man and woman, these songs strive for a similar spiritual harmony between a mother and her child. A lullaby in *Ternura* may, for instance, build correspondences among the sea rocking its waves, the night wind rocking the wheat, God the Father rocking his thousands of worlds, and a mother rocking her infant to sleep. The motion of rocking and the love that inspires it unite the human, natural, and divine levels of existence, assuring the safety of the child and the dignity of the mother's vocation.

Mistral's final two books, *Tala* and *Lagar*, are less accessible and therefore less popular than either *Desolación* or *Ternura*. They contain the poems most admired by literary critics and by her fellow poets. In many of the poems of her later books, Mistral extends her lyric voice to dramatize the plight of those people, particularly women, whom the modern world ignores or forgets. Exiled from their native lands, destined by an inscrutable fate to outlive all their loved ones, these women must endure a succession of empty, lonely years. They perform for no one the daily rituals of planting, cleaning, and cooking and can only look forward to a death among indifferent strangers. These are not happy poems, but they fulfill Mistral's promise to give a voice to the millions of people throughout the world who suffer in silence. She once said that "love without words is a knot that strangles." It was to undo such a knot that Mistral focused upon the outcast and the abandoned. By giving them words, she hoped to bring them once more into a human community united by love.

In her later work, Mistral also attains a full and remarkable mastery of natural imagery. She isolates a single natural object and, by tracing the



stages of its organic life, figuratively presents the subtle shifts in her own emotional life. Mistral successfully transforms the world of nature into a symbolic language that gives shape and substance to her emotional and spiritual experiences. Mistral once advised her fellow poets that it was their obligation as artists to mirror in their works the beauty of nature. In this way they would be certain to extend and affirm the creative activity of God, the model for all artists. In her later poetry Mistral frequently comes as close as possible to following her own advice.

### “SONNETS OF DEATH”

**First published:** “Sonetos de la muerte,”  
1914 (collected in *A Gabriela Mistral Reader*, 1993)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poems trace Mistral’s attempt to overcome the grief and guilt caused by her first failed love affair.*

The “Sonnets of Death” are Mistral’s most famous poems. They are also the poems that established her reputation in her native Chile. In 1914, she submitted them to a national poetry contest and won first prize. She was forced out of anonymity and into the literary life of her country.

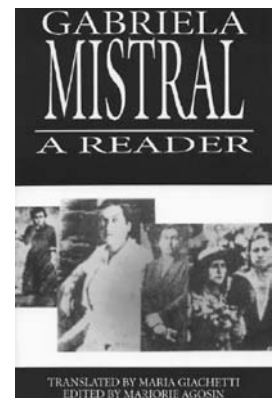
The poems grew out of Mistral’s love affair with Romelio Ureta, a young man she met in her early years as a rural schoolteacher. The relationship broke off when Ureta became engaged to another woman. Before the marriage, however, he took his own life. The three sonnets trace Mistral’s attempt to sort out and reconcile the grief, remorse, disappointment, anger, and guilt that Ureta’s abandonment and death raised in her.

The sonnets contain the intense, direct feelings, the natural imagery, and the search for some permanent state of harmony that are the distinctive characteristics of Mistral’s poetry. In the first son-

net, for instance, the poet imagines visiting the cemetery and taking from a frozen niche the burial urn containing the ashes of her lover. Rather than causing sadness, however, the occasion elicits a gleeful sense of triumph. She will scatter rose dust over the dead man’s remains, and she will leave the graveyard singing songs of beautiful vengeance. The source of this unexpected happiness is revealed in the final two lines of the poem. The poet now is certain of the constancy of her lover, for she is sure the rival woman will not quarrel with her for possession of the “handful of bones,” which is all that remains of him.

In the second sonnet, the poet imagines an almost macabre afterlife for her lover and herself. When she has died and has been buried beside him, she anticipates an eternal and intimate conversation between them, carried on beneath the ground in the “quiet city” of the dead.

In the final sonnet, the poet begins to glimpse a truly plausible and satisfying resolution to her dilemma. This resolution is typical of those Mistral would reach in many of her later poems. She shifts the perspective in the poem from the human to the divine level by calling on Christ to act as protector and guide for her dead lover. She asks Christ in the closing couplet to verify and approve the sincerity, constancy, and holiness of her love. Only Christ, who is to judge her in the next life, can fully understand the depth of her feeling in her present human life. These lines attain a short but hard-won moment of peace within the imagined presence of Christ, and they bring to a close the most extreme and bitter period of Mistral’s mourning. The process of writing poetry becomes her means of experiencing a temporary redemption.



## “WE WERE ALL TO BE QUEENS”

**First published:** “Todas íbamos a ser reinas,” 1938 (collected in *Women’s Writing in Latin America: An Anthology*, 1991)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Mistral recalls, from an adult perspective, the lost innocence and unrealized possibility of her childhood.*

In “We Were All to Be Queens,” Mistral follows the dreams and hopes of childhood as they are thwarted and destroyed by the realities of adult life. The opening stanzas recount the dream shared by four young girls, the poet among them, who expect to marry kings as powerful and gifted as the biblical King David and to reign over distant kingdoms. These faraway lands are to be fruitful, filled with “trees of milk” and “trees of bread.” Most importantly—in an image repeated throughout the poem—the kingdoms will border the mysterious and magical sea. The girls, sequestered for years behind the tall mountains of the Andes, will at last have their dreams fulfilled when, as queens, they see and touch the ocean. They will be liberated and transformed by contemplating the broad expanse of water and the distant horizon.

The second half of the poem tells the sad fate of the girls’ dreams as each girl grows to adulthood. Rosalie is the only one of the four to kiss a genuine sailor. Ironically, the real sea, not the sea of her fantasies, devours her lover in a storm. Soledad raises seven brothers and leaves her “life-blood in the bread” she bakes. Her eyes remain “forever black/ for never having looked on the sea.” Efigenia follows a stranger, but he does not lead her to the sea. Lucila, who is Mistral as a child, alone receives her kingdom; but it is an entirely imaginary place where the future poetess counts her sons among the clouds and sees her husbands in the rivers. Such, in fact, was to be Mistral’s fate; she never married or had children of her own. Her poetry and her students were to be her only children.

The poem ends with a vision of the future generations of young girls who will continue the cycle of dreaming and disappointment, longing from their remote valley for a glimpse of the mythical sea,

without ever achieving it. This is not a bitter ending, nor is the poem simply pessimistic. The poem is a part of the insulated, innocent world of the girls and of the larger adult world beyond it. By blending these two perspectives, Mistral attains the kind of harmony that characterizes much of her poetry. The result in this poem is a sweet sadness in which the naïve hopes of the young girls are preserved and cherished even as their inevitable disappointment is acknowledged. Such a subtle and difficult balance demonstrates Mistral’s ability to hold two contradictory, often mutually destructive human experiences in a creative tension. In “We Were All To Be Queens,” an acceptance of an unimaginatively literal adult reality makes the dreams of childhood all the more precious and necessary. In the space of memory between these two conflicting poles of experience, Mistral creates her poem.

## “FINAL TREE”

**First published:** “Último árbol,” 1954 (English translation, 1971; collected in *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Mistral represents her approaching death as the act of bequeathing her body, with its history of joys and sufferings, “to the last of my trees.”*

Mistral chose “Final Tree” as the epilogue for her last book, *Lagar*, and ever since it has been printed as the closing poem in collections of her work. This placement is fitting not only because of the poem’s subject matter but also because it is one among many of the later poems that demonstrate the furthest refinement of Mistral’s ability to express her inner life through natural imagery.

The speaker of the poem is anticipating her own death. She represents the event figuratively as the act of returning her body, fulfilled and completed like a piece of “fretwork,” to the last of her trees. She fears that, in what she calls her “second life,” she will lack the “solace/ of freshness and silence” the tree offers her and that all she has learned and experienced will have been taken from her. To prevent such a wasteful forgetting, the speaker be-

queaths to her final tree, for safekeeping, the experiences that have matured her body and educated her spirit. Among these are her times of mourning and her times of joy, her moments of silence and her moments of song, and the solitudes she has brought upon herself and those forced upon her by the betrayal or absence of others.

It is not inappropriate to see in this list of leave-takings a final tribute to Mistral's art. It is entirely fitting that the poet who, as a girl, spent hours in her father's garden talking to flowers and birds should choose a tree as the symbol of her poetry. To this last and most faithful companion, the sole survivor of a now vanished forest of friends, she entrusts her most precious memories before she departs this life. In this way she guarantees that the essence of what she has lived and learned will be preserved by the protective final tree in case she passes again through the world and needs a comforting place to rest.

Such a reading of the poem also helps to explain the unexpected turn it takes in its final three stanzas. In these stanzas, the poet slips into a dreamy confusion. She wonders if she may already have died without realizing it and is now singing her song in death from beneath the restful shade of her final tree. If this magical tree represents Mistral's poetry, the otherworldly dream she enjoys within its sheltering foliage may be the figurative equivalent

of the creative process itself. Only within this privileged space, where the distinctions and separations of daily existence are dissolved, can the poet create new harmonies and achieve a mystical consciousness that blends present and future time, natural and transcendent experience.

It is understandable that Mistral should close her last book of poems with this grateful memorial to her art. "Final Tree" celebrates the transforming processes out of which she created her poetry.

## SUMMARY

In a century marked by rapid and radical innovation and enervated by doubt, isolation, and fear, Gabriela Mistral stands out as a remarkable paradox. While other poets experimented with new styles and succeeded only in confusing and alienating their readers, Mistral combined the new with the traditional to create a poetry read and appreciated by a large and diverse audience. In an era in which artists seemed cut off from the social and political realities of their world, Mistral devoted her life and her art to humanitarian service. She attained the position of the genuinely engaged artist that her more radical contemporaries frequently wrote about but seldom achieved. This was possible because her poetry grew directly out of the principles that guided her life.

Lawrence Byrne

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Gabriela Mistral wrote three sonnets about the death of her lover. Why would she use such an exacting form on a subject of great emotional significance to her?
- Examine the tone of "We Were All to Be Queens." How should the reader take these accounts of unfulfilled dreams?
- What experiences of her life made Mistral particularly sensitive to the plight of the exile?
- Determine why there was no tradition of children's literature in Latin America before Mistral's *Ternura*.
- What literary models did Mistral have for her *Poema de Chile*?

## ROHINTON MISTRY

**Born:** Bombay (now Mumbai), India  
July 3, 1952

*Though he usually sets his fiction in his native Bombay, the Canadian Mistry transcends the limits of time and place in his vivid and moving portrayals of the human condition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on July 3, 1952, the second of four children of Behram Mistry, an employee of an advertising agency, and Freny Jhaveri Mistry. The family were members of Bombay's Parsi community. Rohinton was educated at the Villa Theresa Primary School and St. Xavier High School. During his high school years, he learned to play the guitar and the harmonica, and he became a member of a band that played British and American folk-rock songs. At nineteen, while attending a music school, Mistry struck up an acquaintance with Freny Elavia, who would eventually become his wife.

Both Mistry and Elavia continued their schooling at the University of Bombay. Mistry studied mathematics and economics at St. Xavier's College, graduating with a B.S. degree. Meanwhile, Freny Elavia, who was now his fiancé, had gone to Toronto, Canada, for a year's visit with relatives. In 1975, Mistry immigrated to Canada, became a citizen, and married Elavia.

The couple settled in Toronto. Mistry found employment as a clerk at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, where he eventually became head of customer services. Mistry also attended night classes, first at York University and then at the University of Toronto, where he concentrated on literature and philosophy. There he became familiar with the works of the Irish writer James Joyce and those of the nineteenth century British novelists Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, authors to whom Mistry would later be compared by reviewers. In 1983, Mistry received a B.A. from the University of Toronto. During this period, Mistry's wife, Freny, had also been furthering her educa-

tion. In 1981, she earned a B.A. from the University of Toronto. The following year, she received a bachelor of education degree from the same school and was promptly employed as a high school teacher in nearby Brampton.

Although Mistry had done a little writing while he was at the University of Toronto, he had not submitted works for publication. However, at Freny's urging, he decided to enter a short story in the 1983 Hart House Literary Contest. For his subject matter, Mistry turned to what he knew best: life among the Parsis in Bombay. His story "One Sunday" earned him first prize and \$250, and the following year, "Auspicious Occasion," which was set in the same apartment house as its predecessor, again won the Hart House competition. With the encouragement of the well-known Canadian writer Mavis Gallant, who had been one of the judges for the contest, Mistry continued to turn out short stories and to submit them for publication. It was Gallant who was indirectly responsible for having Mistry's work included in an anthology of new Canadian writing. Another person who aided him immeasurably in those early years was Ken Adachi, a literary critic for the *Toronto Star*. Mistry credits Adachi for making sure that Canadian publishers did not overlook the short stories he submitted to them.

In 1985, after receiving a grant from the Canada Council, Mistry decided to resign from his position with the bank and devote himself full time to his writing. The wisdom of his decision became evident when that same year he won the Annual Contributor's Award from *Canadian Fiction Magazine*.

Since Mistry was now able to travel at will, in 1986 he accompanied his wife to Long Beach, California, where she had accepted a teaching position



in a local high school. However, the Mistrys were both so appalled by the violence all around them, which Rohinton Mistry saw as the result of persistent racism, that they did not wish to remain in the United States. As soon as Freny's year was up, they returned to Canada.

Mistry's first book-length publication was a collection of short fiction with a single setting, the fictional Bombay apartment building called Firozsha Baag. This was the place where the author had set his first two prizewinning short stories, both of which were included in the volume. *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was published in Canada in 1987 and in 1989 in the United States, where it was retitled *Swimming Lessons, and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. In 1988, the book was short-listed for the prestigious Governor-General's Award for Fiction.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), was also set in a Parsi apartment building in Bombay. However, though the book reflects the author's sympathy with the Parsis, who in 1971 must deal with their plight as a relatively powerless minority in the new, Hindu-dominated nation of India, it emphasizes the need for understanding, no matter what one's beliefs, and for behavior in accordance with a universal moral code. *Such a Long Journey* won the Governor-General's Literary Award for Fiction in 1991 and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Trillium Award, and the Smith Books/*Books in Canada* award for best first novel in 1992. It was also a finalist for the 1991 Man Booker Prize in the United Kingdom. A film based on the novel was successful in Canada and was later released in the United States.

Most of Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), takes place in a city that, though unnamed, is much like Bombay. The book is much longer and more complex than *Such a Long Journey*; it has four protagonists, two of them Hindus and two Parsis, as well as a saintly Muslim tailor. *A Fine Balance* won the 1995 Giller Prize, the Canada-Australia Literary Prize, the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize, the 1996 *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction, and the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Novel. It was short-listed for the 1996 Man Booker Prize. In 2001, it became the first Canadian work to be chosen by television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey for her book club. A theatrical version of *A Fine Balance* was staged in 2006, and the next year there was a critically acclaimed

revival of the production at the Hampstead Theatre in London.

Although *Family Matters* (2001) is more limited in scope than its predecessor, again it demonstrates that Muslims, Hindus, and Parsis can live together in harmony. Ironically, in this novel they are sometimes kinder to each other than the members of the small family unit that is central to the narrative. *Family Matters* won the 2002 Kiriama Prize and was short-listed both for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction and the 2002 Man Booker Prize. In 2006, Mistry won the Timothy Findley Award from the Writers' Trust of Canada.

### ANALYSIS

There was never an apprenticeship period for Rohinton Mistry. The first short stories he submitted for publication were admired by critics for their highly polished style, their precise descriptions, and their vivid revelations of character. These qualities have placed Mistry in the first rank of Canadian writers.

Mistry is, above all, a realist. All of his fiction is firmly rooted in time and place. Most of it is set in his native Bombay, though he may venture briefly into the country, as he does in *A Fine Balance*, or even use Canadian settings, as he does in "Swimming Lessons," the final story in his collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. However, the central reality in every one of Mistry's works is Bombay, and, more specifically, a particular building in an area inhabited primarily by people who, like Mistry himself, are Parsis. Firozsha Baag is the name of the apartment complex where the stories in his first book take place. In *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, the apartments where the characters live symbolize their way of life, their security, and their independence.

Mistry's realism is evident in the way he lingers over descriptions of everyday life, showing a woman at her morning chores, a family eating dinner, or children doing their homework. His lavish use of detail in these passages effectively introduces readers to a place and a people that might otherwise seem alien to them. However, these scenes have another important function: they make it all the more horrifying when the lives of such ordinary people are disrupted by outside forces.

One source of such disruption is religious intoler-

erance. The older characters in the novels can recall a time when Indians of various faiths—Parsis, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims—lived together in harmony. However, that all ended with the bloodbath that followed Indian independence and the division of the subcontinent along religious lines. Mistry points out that people of different faiths can still coexist and can even become friends. In *A Fine Balance*, for example, a kindly Muslim tailor accepts two Hindu boys as apprentices, and later they save his life from Hindu extremists. As a realist, however, Mistry knows that too often intolerance wins out. Like Vikram Kapur, the shopkeeper in *Family Matters*, Mistry's decent people are often martyred.

Mistry's characters also live in fear of powerful, wealthy men and of corrupt government officials. The injustices that were perpetrated during Indira Gandhi's tenure as prime minister of India are major themes of two of Mistry's novels, *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, both set in the 1970's. In *A Fine Balance*, a wealthy local leader has a man who attempts to vote his convictions tortured and his family killed. In the same novel, a bureaucratic decision to force sterilization maims two characters and makes them beggars.

However, one should not conclude that Mistry takes a totally bleak view of the human condition. Though it is clear that human beings have very little control over what happens to them, they do have the power to choose between good and evil. Those who choose good, even at the cost of their own lives, are the real heroes and heroines of Mistry's fiction.

## SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

**First published:** 1991

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Parsi bank clerk and devoted family man deals with one crisis after another, including his own innocent involvement in government corruption.*

Gustad Noble, the protagonist of *Such a Long Journey*, is a well-meaning man with a highly developed sense of duty. Lesser men might well have be-

come embittered by the losses that his family has incurred. Noble's grandfather had a thriving furniture business; his father, a successful bookstore. Mismanagement by Noble's dissolute uncle resulted in bankruptcy and the loss of everything the family had accumulated over the years. Though Noble sometimes recalls those earlier days of relative luxury, he tries to make the best of his modest circumstances.

As the novel opens, he is praising Ahura Mazda and contemplating his own good fortune. At fifty, Noble is healthy; his wife, Dilnavaz, is attractive, good-natured, and efficient; his son, Sohrab, has just been admitted to the Indian Institute of Technology (ITT); and both his younger son, Darius, and his daughter, Roshan, are intelligent, obedient children. Noble's only worries are the stench outside his apartment building, caused by passersby urinating on the wall; the repression of the Bengalis in East Pakistan; and, more immediately, a letter from his old friend, Major Jimmy Bilimoris, asking Noble to make bank deposits that will provide relief for Bengali refugees.

That very day, things begin to go wrong. Sohrab announces that he no longer wants to go to ITT, and his frustrated father evicts him. Roshan develops a stomach disorder, and her parents cannot agree as to how to treat her. Neither the folk remedies of Dilnavaz nor the expensive medicines of a backstreet doctor whom Noble trusts seem to help. Noble's only success in that troubled period of his life involves the wall: he hires an artist to cover it with religious figures representing every faith, and immediately the urination ceases.

When packets of bills begin arriving from the major, Noble begins to think that he has made a mistake. At first, he hides the money in his apartment, thinking that it might be best to return it, but vandalism and explicit threats change his mind. Then Noble is informed that the major has been arrested, and he discovers that the money was never meant to aid refugees but was intended to swell the coffers of high officials, including the prime minister herself.

In the end, though the major is executed, Noble escapes prosecution and keeps his job; his daughter gets well; and Sohrab and he are reconciled. However, Noble has lost his innocence. He can no longer be certain about the future. It seems as unreliable as the wall he had preserved and beauti-

fied, which in the final pages of the novel is being knocked down in accordance with a government order.

## A FINE BALANCE

**First published:** 1995

**Type of work:** Novel

*Three men and a widow, brought together by chance, struggle to survive in a corrupt and brutal society.*

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, is a long, complex work, with four protagonists and a variety of settings. Moreover, although most of the events in the novel take place in the mid-1970's, there are also lengthy passages tracing the early lives of the major characters, thus placing them within the context of their families and their communities. These accounts are also important because they explain why the three men left home to come to what is assumed to be the city of Bombay and also why the widow, Dina Dalal, whose older brother has a home there, is living alone, attempting to support herself.

The first chapter of *A Fine Balance* is devoted to Dina. She was born Dina Shroff, the daughter of a Parsi physician, a good man too idealistic to have earned much money or to have saved anything for the future. Dina's brother, Nusswan, who is eleven years her senior, viewed his father with contempt;

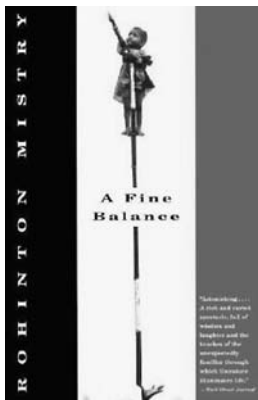
by the time he was sixteen, Nusswan had already decided to go into business and spend his life looking after himself. By contrast, Dina wanted to be a doctor just like her father, and she was bright enough to fulfill her dream. However, when Dr. Shroff died on one of his mission trips to a remote area, Nusswan took charge. There was no question of further

macist. They made a home together and were blissfully happy. However, on their third anniversary, Rustom was run over and killed. Dina cannot live with her tyrannical brother. She returns to Rustom's flat, starts a tailoring business, and, when her eyes begin to fail, she decides to find two tailors to work for her, though she must conceal them from the rent collector, since the flat is not supposed to be used except as a residence.

Narayan and Ishvar Darji were born in a rural village. As leatherworkers, their family belonged to the lowest Hindu caste, the untouchables, and were the prey of everyone from a higher caste. Determined to give them a better life, their father apprenticed them to a kindly Muslim tailor. Eventually the boys save their mentor from rioting Hindus. Narayan returns to his village, sets up shop, marries, and has a son, Omprakash, who eventually goes to town to be Ishvar's apprentice. Thus Omprakash and Ishvar are not present when, after attempting to vote independent of the local political leader, Narayan is tortured and killed, and his whole family is burned to death. With their Muslim friend's business declining, Omprakash and Ishvar go to the city, hear about Dina, and become her employees.

The fourth protagonist, Maneck Kohlah, is the son of one of Dina's school friends, who with her husband runs a profitable general store in the north of India. After Maneck finishes college, he wants to return home and spend the rest of his life there. Meanwhile, he is far happier as Dina's lodger than when he was living in the college dormitory.

At first, all goes reasonably well. Dina's wholesaler accepts the garments that the tailors turn out; they find a slum shanty where they can live; and they seem to appreciate the kindnesses shown them by Dina and Maneck. Gradually the four become a family, and in that context, the others forgive even Omprakash's periodic rebellions, as a family would the sullenness of a boy who is still young. However, the four of them fall prey to ambitious and corrupt government officials who take their cues from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of emergency. The slum village where the tailors live is bulldozed. Then, just when Omprakash is about to return to his village to be married, he and his uncle are bused off to be forcibly sterilized. Ishvar loses his legs, Omprakash, his future, and both become beggars. Trapped by the



schooling. Dina became the household drudge. Then she met and married Rustom Dalal, a phar-

rent collector, Dina loses her home and her business; she has to return to her brother and a life of drudgery. Maneck, too, abandons his dream. Having lost his faith in the human race, in life itself, he cannot return to that innocent world he left, and he takes his own life.

## FAMILY MATTERS

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*When an elderly man becomes a bedridden invalid, each member of his extended family must decide how to deal with the situation.*

As the title suggests, *Family Matters* is a story about relationships. The central character in the book is Nariman Vakeel, an elderly Parsi widower. Nariman lives in a spacious flat in an apartment building in Bombay, along with his unmarried stepdaughter, Coomy Contractor, and his stepson Jal Contractor, who is also single. Nariman is a retired English professor, a kindly man whose students remember him with affection. However, because they blame him for their mother's tragic death, Nariman's stepchildren loathe him so much that even though he adopted them legally, they refuse to use his name, though they are perfectly willing to share his home.

As Nariman's health fails and his memory becomes unreliable, Coomy avenges herself on him by systematically humiliating him. She forbids Nariman to take his usual walks around the neighborhood; she even puts him on a schedule for visiting the bathroom. Then he breaks his ankle, and Coomy and Jal dump him unceremoniously at the small, two-bedroom apartment where Nariman's daughter, Roxana Chenoy, lives with her husband, Yezad, and their two sons, Murad and Jehangir. Supposedly, Nariman is to remain there only until his cast comes off. However, when Coomy deliberately damages the ceiling of his bedroom, it becomes obvious that she does not intend ever to let him return to his home.

By contrast, Roxana is always kind to her father. Though she may weep in private, she never lets him see how exhausted she is. Her sons love their grandfather and like having him near; nine-year-

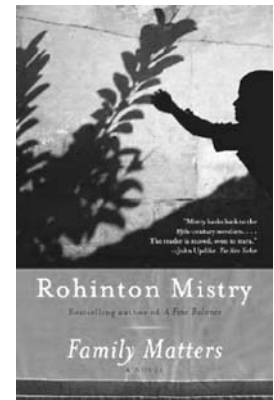
old Jehangir becomes his constant companion. However, Yezad resents having his household disrupted, and because Coomy and Jal are not there to take the blame, he lashes out at his wife and his sons. Moreover, Nariman's presence soon pushes the family to the brink of financial disaster. The pittance Jal contributes to Nariman's keep is not enough to feed the invalid properly, much less to buy his medicine. In desperation, Yezad decides his only option is to ensure his own promotion to store manager by persuading his high-principled employer, Vikram Kapur, to go into politics, as he has long threatened to do. Reasoning that an encounter with Hindu extremists will push Kapur into a decision, Yezad arranges an attack on his shop. However, the hoodlums murder Kapur, leaving Yezad unemployed and consumed by guilt.

In the end, Coomy is killed, and a repentant Jal not only takes his father-in-law back home but also persuades the Chenoy to move in with him. However, Mistry is too much of a realist ever to let compassion win a total victory. Whereas earlier in the novel he showed Parsis, a Punjabi, and a Muslim living together in harmony, in the epilogue to *Family Matters* Yezad has become so fanatical that he has turned against his best friend and is alienating his own family.

## SUMMARY

Though his fiction contains some lighthearted scenes, Rohinton Mistry is too much a realist to be optimistic about human existence. His characters are subject to disease, old age, and eventual death: that is simply a given. However, they also live in fear of each other. In Mistry's India, a knock on the door or a riot on the street outside can spell doom for someone who has never harmed anyone else. Although his novels stress the need for political reforms and for creating bridges between religious groups, they also emphasize a spiritual truth: In the final analysis, human beings have control only over their own behavior.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman



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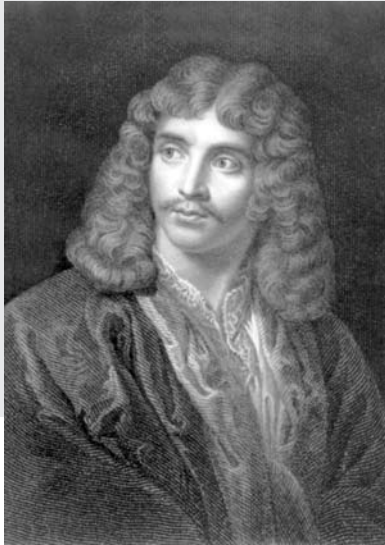
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Which of Rohinton Mistry's characters are meant to be viewed as models of human behavior?
- How does Mistry define a community? What are the advantages of strong communal ties?
- Do the arranged marriages in Mistry's novels seem to be successful? Why or why not?
- How does a corrupt government affect the lives of characters in Mistry's novels?
- How do religious beliefs affect the lives of Mistry's characters?





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## MOLIÈRE

**Born:** Paris, France  
January 15, 1622 (baptized)  
**Died:** Paris, France  
February 17, 1673

*By adding realistic characterization and penetrating social criticism to conventional farce, Molière produced a new type of French comedy and earned a reputation as France's finest comic playwright.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was born in Paris, France. Although his date of birth is not known, he was baptized on January 15, 1622. Jean-Baptiste was the oldest child of Marie Cresse Poquelin and Jean Poquelin, a prosperous upholsterer who was connected with the court. The boy was educated at the Jesuit College of Clermont, then studied law, becoming a notary in 1641. Meanwhile, his father had arranged for Jean-Baptiste to inherit the court office, which he himself had purchased from his brother. The young man's future seemed assured.

Jean-Baptiste, however, had fallen under the spell of the theater, in the person of the actress Madeleine Béjart, whose parents were neighbors of the Poquelin family. With Madeleine, her brother Joseph, her sister Geneviève, and nine other actors, Jean-Baptiste, or Molière (mohl-YEHR), as he now called himself, founded the Illustre Théâtre and began to present plays. Molière's action was much more than a change of profession; in his day, actors and actresses were considered disreputable, even, according to many in the Roman Catholic Church, destined for eternal damnation. Therefore, when Molière became an actor, he lost his social standing, his security, and seemingly his future.

The new troupe did not prosper in Paris. After being imprisoned for debt, Molière, now the man-

ager, decided to take his company on a tour of the provinces. Little more is known about Molière's life during the next thirteen years except the names of some of the towns and cities where the company appeared. Evidently, at this time Molière polished his skills as an actor, alternating in leading roles and, incidentally, excelling in comedy. Molière also began to write for his troupe. At first, he produced short farcical sketches; by 1655, however, his first full-length comedy had been presented. Three years later, Molière believed that his company was ready once again to try its luck in Paris, where the court of Louis XIV was the center of not only political power but French culture as well.

In Paris, Molière's company became the "troupe de Monsieur." The name signified that it was under the protection, or sponsorship, of the king's oldest brother, who, according to long-standing tradition, was called simply Monsieur. On October 24, 1658, at the Louvre, Molière's troupe appeared before King Louis XIV, his brother, and the rest of the court, presenting a tragedy by Pierre Corneille and a farce by Molière himself. Although the tragedy was not well received, the king was particularly enthusiastic about Molière's play, and as a result, he granted the troupe permission to perform at the *salle du Petit-Bourbon*, or the Petit-Bourbon Theater, which initially was shared with an Italian company but later was assigned solely to the troupe de Monsieur.

On November 18, 1659, the company produced *Les Précieuses ridicules* (pr. 1659, pb. 1660; *The Af-*

*fect Young Ladies*, 1732). It was Molière's first comedy of manners. In it, he satirized the pedantry and the folly, the affectations and the snobbishness, that were characteristic of Parisian society, and especially of those women who aspired to higher social standing. The play was the troupe's greatest financial success to that point. In 1660, Molière first appeared as a character named Sganarelle, playing the part of the bourgeois husband in a delightful comedy called *Sganarelle: Ou, Le Cocu imaginaire* (pr., pb. 1660; *Sganarelle: Or, The Imaginary Cuckold*, 1732). Later, perhaps thinking that it brought him good luck, Molière used the name of Sganarelle for quite different characters in other comedies. He always insisted on playing the Sganarelle role himself. Interestingly, all the plays in which some Sganarelle appeared happened to be successful.

Although as manager Molière could make decisions about casting and production, he had no power to prevent his jealous rivals from injuring him and his company, in one way or another. In 1661, they managed to have a court official obtain approval for a new colonnade; oddly, the new construction necessitated the demolition of Molière's theater. Unwilling to countermand the orders of his official, the king instead arranged for Molière's troupe to be moved to the Palais-Royal Théâtre, where they were to remain for the rest of Molière's lifetime. There, they continued to present plays by various writers, regularly introducing new works by Molière, some of which were highly successful and some of which were failures. One of the latter was the first play produced in the Palais Royal, a heroic comedy. The second play presented after the move, however, *L'École des maris* (pr., pb. 1661; *The School for Husbands*, 1732), in which Molière played another Sganarelle, was very popular. The play was based on a work by the Roman writer Terence, in which the playwright contrasted two kinds of education, harsh and permissive. Molière decided to examine this issue in regard to girls, not boys. The side of harshness in his play is represented by the foolish Sganarelle, who has kept his ward in strict seclusion, intending eventually to make her his wife. In contrast, there is another guardian, Ariste, who has put no limits on the girl's sister. As the play proceeds, Sganarelle's rebellious ward manages to trick her guardian into helping her marry her young lover.

The story of the older man and the young

woman was repeated over and over again in Molière's plays; it was also relevant to his own life. In 1662, the forty-year-old Molière married the actress Armande Béjart, who was probably the sister of his friend and former mistress Madeleine Béjart. Armande was a spoiled girl of twenty. Her hard-heartedness and infidelity are reflected in many of Molière's plays, such as *L'École des femmes* (pr. 1662, pb. 1663; *The School for Wives*, 1732). It is a mark of Molière's capacity for artistic detachment that, although he makes fun of coquettes like Armande in such plays, he also satirizes older men like himself, who marry young women and then suffer the torments of jealousy.

In the last decade of his life, Molière was troubled by domestic unhappiness and besieged by his personal and professional enemies. In addition, he had contracted tuberculosis, and, in the vain hope of a cure, he found himself forced to rely upon the medical profession, which, it is obvious from his plays, he deeply distrusted. Despite these personal difficulties, it was during this period that the playwright produced his greatest comedies.

In Paris, on February 17, 1673, even though he was ill, Molière insisted on appearing in the title role of *Le Malade imaginaire* (pr. 1673, pb. 1674; *The Imaginary Invalid*, 1732), which is, ironically, the story of a man who merely thinks himself to be unwell. Shortly after finishing the performance, Molière collapsed and died. Because he had not received the final rites of the Church, the clergy, never his friends, found an excuse to refuse him burial in consecrated ground; however, after the intervention of the king, Molière was buried in Saint-Joseph's cemetery in Paris.

## ANALYSIS

Molière's art derived from two sources. The first was the French farce, a story of trickery, punctuated with physical action, which had delighted simple audiences during the Middle Ages and continued to please more sophisticated audiences in Molière's own century. The second was the *commedia dell'arte*, which had originated in Italy and had only recently been introduced to France. These were plays with set situations but with improvised dialogue, presented by actors in masks, who represented character types. In developing his own kind of comedy, Molière depended for his plots on farce, with its elaborate schemes of deception, mis-

taken identity, disguise, and misdirection. The commedia dell'arte, however, suggested possibilities for stylization in production and even in dialogue. Furthermore, the characters who are the targets of Molière's satire, for example, the miser, the greedy doctor, the jealous husband, and the coquette, are based on the stock characters of the commedia dell'arte. What Molière did with these characters was to individualize them and to place them in the society of his own time, while still retaining in them the outlines of the universal types that they represented.

Molière's comedies are structured like the old French farces, which first identified the person to be deceived, then played a number of tricks on him, and finally exposed and humiliated him. At the beginning of the play, Molière establishes some obsession in the dupe, which justifies his being embarrassed or thwarted, and similarly, he gives enough good qualities and appropriate goals to his tricksters so that at the end of the play, when they win, the audience is delighted. An example of such a gull would be Sganarelle in *The School for Husbands*. Because he is obsessed with his distrust of women, he deserves to be tricked. The ward and her young lover are attractive, their love is appealing, and their goal is to marry each other. Obviously, the audience identifies with them as they try to outwit the tyrannical Sganarelle and is delighted when they succeed.

In most comedies, as in this one, the tricksters are the disempowered, the servants or slaves instead of their masters, the young instead of the old, and women instead of men. It is for this reason that one does not disapprove of the lies and deception to which such characters must resort, for, after all, a person without power must triumph over the powerful by wit alone.

In neoclassical comedy, there is also a *raisonneur*, or a man of reason, who speaks for the author, while also reflecting the dominant intellectual tendencies of his time. In the speeches of Molière's *raisonneurs*, the audience would recognize Aristotle's theory of the Golden Mean, which in most cases placed virtue in a middle place between two extremes, for example, praising financial prudence as being neither extravagance nor miserliness. The obsessions of Molière's gulls would be examples of these extremes, where neither reason nor virtue dwells. The *raisonneur* would exemplify

the ideal of the age, the *honnête homme*, the moderate, polite, honest gentleman, who is both rational and good.

If Molière's plays were nothing more than a dramatization of the advantages of moderation, however, they would be amusing but hardly memorable. Molière's best comedies not only warn of the consequences of obsession; they are also reminders that, by nature, human beings are obsessive creatures, and that although obsession may lead to embarrassment or even to tragedy, it is also obsession, not bland moderation, that creates lovers and saints. It has been suggested that Molière's plays reflect his own realization that two selves were at war within his own nature. One of the selves stressed the advantages of moderation; the other was at the mercy of his own emotions. Thus, Molière could see how foolish the lovesick older man might be, but he himself was tormented by his own love for his young, faithless wife; similarly, he could understand the need for discretion, but he could not deny his own idealism, and he castigated hypocrites wherever he found them, thus risking his career and even his freedom. Molière's best comedies do justice not only to the prudent plan for life that is the playwright's official stance, as voiced by his *raisonneur*, but also to the idealism, the passion for justice, and even the illusions whose loss, if perhaps necessary for survival, gives a tragic dimension to human existence.

## THE SCHOOL FOR WIVES

**First produced:** *L'École des femmes*, 1662 (first published, 1663; English translation, 1732)

**Type of work:** Play

*An older man discovers that he cannot manipulate a young woman as if she were a mere object.*

The first scene of *The School for Wives* establishes the pattern of the drama. Arnolphe is the man in power, the guardian and virtual jailer of his young ward Agnès, whom he has kept in seclusion and in ignorance so that she will make him a virtuous wife. He refuses to listen to his friend Chrysalde, the *raisonneur*, who warns him against carrying out his

plans. It soon becomes clear that Arnolphe deserves to be thwarted, not only because of his treatment of Agnès but also because he has other unappealing qualities. He is ill-natured, a man who spreads vicious gossip about husbands whose wives have cuckolded them; he is also a social climber, who has changed his name to “Monsieur Delafield” in order to pretend that he is an aristocrat.

This change of name makes possible a confusion of identity central to the plot. Because he is unaware of the name change, young Horace, the son of Arnolphe’s friend Oronte, is soon innocently confiding in Arnolphe himself about the progress of his love affair with a girl whom he knows only as the ward of a Monsieur Delafield.

Although at first it seems that Arnolphe will be able to outwit the lovers, actually his advantage is very slight, because he discovers their encounters only after they have occurred. In scene after scene, Horace tells Arnolphe how his preventive measures have only served to benefit the young lovers. For example, when, in obedience to her guardian, Agnès threw a brick at Horace, she attached a love letter to it. Later, when Arnolphe set a trap for Horace, in the commotion, Agnès managed to escape from the house where her uncle had been keeping her a prisoner.

In their first conversation, Chrysalde warned Arnolphe that merely keeping Agnès ignorant would not keep her virtuous; in fact, he argued that a well-educated, rational woman would be better able to deal with her world than one who was too innocent to suspect wrongdoing. Certainly, the conversations that Agnès has with her guardian support Chrysalde’s position. It is fortunate that Horace is honorable, for Agnès easily concludes that anything that brings her such pleasure as Horace’s embrace could not possibly be wrong. Yet even if Agnès is too innocent to be skeptical about such delights, she is not stupid. It does not take her long to realize that the book about women’s duties that Arnolphe gives her to read is biased; every maxim in it is intended to persuade women that they exist only for the pleasure of men. Not surprisingly, she prefers Horace’s romantic devotion to Arnolphe’s obvious distrust of women. Furthermore, Agnès is manifestly unwilling to remain passive, the mere ball of wax that Arnolphe boasts that he can mold as he wishes. Just as Chrysalde warned it would, Arnolphe’s plan for producing a faithful

wife fails, as it deserves to fail, because it is based on his own overwhelming egotism.

Agnès, however, does live in a hierarchical society, where women’s freedom is extremely restricted. Therefore, in order to bring the lovers together, Molière must turn to fate or coincidence. In the final act of the play, Oronte appears with his long-absent friend Enrique. The two men have agreed on a marriage between Horace and the daughter of Enrique, whose identity has long been kept secret, but who in actuality is Agnès herself. Thus, Arnolphe loses his intended wife, and the lovers are married with the blessing of their parents.

There are a number of themes in this play. Obviously, one of them concerns the status of women. Molière is proving that men will be happier with women who are educated, respected, and trusted than with those who are deliberately kept in ignorance. Another is the theme of irrational obsession, as embodied in the character of Arnolphe. Essentially, Arnolphe’s nastiness toward unfortunate husbands, his tyranny over Agnès, and his snobbishness, as reflected in the assumed title, are all aspects of a single character flaw, the fact that Arnolphe has no sense of himself, but only a consciousness of externals. That is the point of Chrysalde’s long speech in act 4, where he attempts to persuade Arnolphe that he has misdefined honor, thinking of it as reputation, when it should be internal integrity. That is, of course, the ideal of the *honnête homme*. Chrysalde then says that he is not advocating the kind of tolerance that rejects all moral values; that would be the other extreme, not the Golden Mean. Instead, he is insisting on the middle way of the prudent man, who, unlike Arnolphe, finds his security not in the conduct or the opinions of others but in himself.

The very fact that *The School for Wives* was so successful inevitably brought bitter criticisms of the play from Molière’s rivals. In order to answer them, he wrote a one-act sketch, meant to accompany the play whenever it was performed. *La Critique de “L’École des Femmes”* (*The Critique of “The School for Wives,”* 1957) was first presented on June 1, 1663. It is an interesting commentary on Molière’s art. For example, he describes his characters as realistic but defends himself against the charge of personal ridicule by arguing that his satire is universal. To those who object to his double entendres, Molière re-



sponds that sexual suggestions come from the reader, not the writer. *The Critique of "The School for Wives"* makes it clear that Molière was not only an inspired dramatist but also an extremely careful craftsman who took his work very seriously.

## TARTUFFE

**First produced:** 1664 (first published, 1669;  
English translation, 1732)

**Type of work:** Play

*A decent but gullible man is nearly ruined by the machinations of a religious hypocrite.*

With *Tartuffe*, Molière moved further away from the simple structure derived from French farce. In this play, there is again a middle-aged man, Orgon, who can be tricked because of his obsession. Yet, although the trickster, Tartuffe, is a person outside the power structure, in this case he is a vicious hypocrite who must be stripped of his power over Orgon if poetic justice is to prevail. Therefore, there is another pair of tricksters—Orgon's wife Elmire and his servant Dorine—who must set things right and aid the usual young lovers.

The structure of this play is also unusual in that the title character does not appear until the third act. In the first two acts, the characters voice their opinions of Tartuffe, this mysterious, seemingly pious man whom Orgon, the head of a prosperous Parisian household, has taken into his home as an honored guest. Except for Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother, the family members are unanimous in voicing their dislike of the man. Orgon's young wife, Elmire, her stepson Damis, her stepdaughter Mariane, and her brother Cléante, the *raisonneur*, as well as the impertinent servant Dorine, all see Tartuffe for the hypocrite that he is.

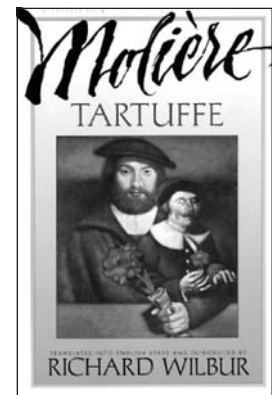
After this preparation has been made, Orgon enters, and Molière begins to substantiate the fact that he is indeed besotted by this stranger. In a hilarious dialogue, Dorine attempts to report on the family, only to be answered over and over again by Orgon's anxious inquiry, "And Tartuffe?" followed by a heartfelt "poor fellow." Since Tartuffe's activities involve gluttonous eating and a good deal of sleeping, Orgon's concern about the man is ridicu-

lous. The fact that Orgon's infatuation could have serious results is soon made clear, when he reveals his plan to make Tartuffe a member of the family by giving him his daughter in marriage. It is at this point that Elmire and Dorine begin to formulate plans to deceive the deceiver by attacking his own weaknesses.

Tartuffe's susceptibility to lust is revealed as soon as he makes his long-awaited entrance in the third act, when he begs Dorine to cover her bosom, so as not to tempt him to sin. Elmire's plan seems foolproof: She will lead him to make his designs upon her explicit and then threaten to tell Orgon unless Tartuffe relinquishes his claims on Mariane. The plan fails, however, and Tartuffe plays upon Orgon's emotions so skillfully that he manages to get Damis disinherited and himself made Orgon's heir. Now both of Orgon's children are powerless, and, of course, the *raisonneur* is still being ignored. Somehow, Elmire and Dorine must expose Tartuffe's perfidy so that even Orgon cannot deny it. They do have an ally, Tartuffe's own weakness.

Actors, directors, and critics agree that the nature of that weakness is the central issue of *Tartuffe*. There is no doubt that Tartuffe is bent on having his way with Elmire. Yet even in the scenes where he attempts to seduce her, he can be seen as dominated by the desire for power. Whether his later arrogance is the result of his humiliation by Elmire or merely his true nature, Tartuffe viciously seeks to deprive his former patron of his property, his freedom, perhaps even of his life, and he is stopped only by the intervention of the godlike King, who Molière says cannot be deceived.

This graceful compliment was not only politic but also probably expressed Molière's gratitude to Louis XIV, who had supported the playwright through his various attempts to stage this play. For some time, Molière had been suspect in the eyes of an influential group at court, which considered itself the guardian of public morals. This group managed to have two versions of *Tartuffe* suppressed,





first in 1664, then in 1667. Only after Louis XIV obtained the opinion of a theologian who was too prominent to be refuted was the final version of *Tartuffe* presented. Within its first year, it was performed fifty-five times. It has continued to be one of Molière's most popular plays, and it is considered one of his greatest masterpieces.

## THE WOULD-BE GENTLEMAN

**First produced:** *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, 1670 (first published, 1671; English translation, 1675)

**Type of work:** Play

*A commoner who wishes to climb the social ladder becomes an easy dupe.*

Even during his final decade, when he was producing comedies as complex and thought provoking as *Tartuffe*, Molière sometimes wrote works that were much more like French farce in their simplicity and lightheartedness. *The Would-Be Gentleman* is such a play.

The gull in this comedy-ballet is M. Jourdain, a commoner who has inherited some money and now wishes to become something that he is not, a gentleman. Like so many of Molière's obsessed characters, Jourdain defines what a person is in terms of externals. In contrast, his practical wife, Madame Jourdain, sees clearly what he is, what she is, and where they belong in society. Perhaps because this play takes place among the bourgeoisie, not among the gentry, there is no *honnête homme* in it to serve as the voice of reason. Instead, the function of the *raisonneur* is filled by Madame Jourdain herself, who, along with the servant Nicole, points out the merits of moderation.

As far as structure is concerned, *The Would-Be Gentleman* consists of a series of episodes, each one act long, which are brightened by songs and separated by interludes of dance. In each episode, tricksters take advantage of M. Jourdain's social ambitions. In the first act, a musician and a dancing

master are instructing him; in the second, they are joined by a fencing teacher, and finally by a master of philosophy, who astonishes M. Jourdain by convincing him that he has been talking prose all of his life. M. Jourdain's willingness to be duped is illustrated when he sees his new coat, made with the flowers upside down; all his tailor has to say is that this is the fashion of the gentry, and once again M. Jourdain denies his reason and accepts the coat. If he can be so easily fooled by tradespeople, the would-be gentleman is no match at all for an impecunious nobleman. For some time, Count Dorante has been "borrowing" money from M. Jourdain. Now he has plans to maximize his profits by persuading his victim that the aristocratic Dorimène might become his mistress, if only M. Jourdain will send enough magnificent gifts to her.

Throughout all of these incidents, the audience remains delighted but disengaged, sympathetic only with the sensible wife who, like all *raisonneurs*, is certain to be ignored. When the happiness of two young lovers is threatened because of M. Jourdain's social ambitions, however, it is time for a trickster of a different kind. As so often in these comedies, this turns out to be the thwarted young man. Because he is not a nobleman, Cléonte has been refused the hand of M. Jourdain's daughter. In a wonderful fifth act, Cléonte takes advantage of M. Jourdain's reliance on appearances. Dressed as the Grand Turk and speaking in gibberish, he wins his lady, and the play ends with several marriages, including that of Dorante to Dorimène, and, of course, the final ballet.

It is obvious that, except for the use of a woman as *raisonneur*, *The Would-Be Gentleman* is much like Molière's simpler early plays. Because it avoids the dark possibilities of plays such as *Tartuffe* and satirizes the pretentious bourgeoisie for an audience that considered itself vastly superior to it, *The Would-Be Gentleman* produced no controversy at court. It is interesting that Louis XIV pronounced it his favorite of Molière's works. The play has continued to delight later audiences even as it once pleased Molière's king.

## THE MISANTHROPE

**First produced:** *Le Misanthrope*, 1666 (first published, 1667; English translation, 1709)

**Type of work:** Play

*An idealist who insists on being honest finds that he cannot survive in society.*

Although in some of Molière's plays the protagonist is deceived because he is both egotistical and foolish, in more thoughtful works, such as *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*, it is an excess of virtue that makes him vulnerable. In *Tartuffe*, Orgon was obsessed by religion; in *The Misanthrope*, Alceste is obsessed by honesty.

*The Misanthrope* begins with a conventional opening dialogue between the central character, Alceste, and his friend, the easygoing Philinte, who is the *raisonneur*. In this scene, Alceste states his determination to speak nothing but the truth, and the horrified Philinte vainly attempts to warn him of the consequences. In society, Philinte points out, a little dishonesty is essential. Otherwise, there would be open warfare. Alceste, however, is adamant. The scenes that follow trace the consequences of his resolution, from the failure of a lawsuit to the loss of his beloved Célimène.

It is Célimène who is Alceste's one irrationality. Ironically, he is in love with the most deceitful woman at court. As far as the play is concerned, Célimène fulfills the function of the trickster. Her only motivation, however, is a selfish one: She lies so as to accumulate as many admirers as possible. Obviously, she is, in her own way, as obsessive as Alceste, without the excuse of virtue. Therefore, it is not surprising that she is finally exposed through some carelessness about letters. Nevertheless, she dashes Alceste's hopes; she would agree to marry him, she says, but not at the cost of leaving society, as the disillusioned Alceste has resolved to do. She

would rather replace the lovers who have abandoned her than spend her youth in a desert.

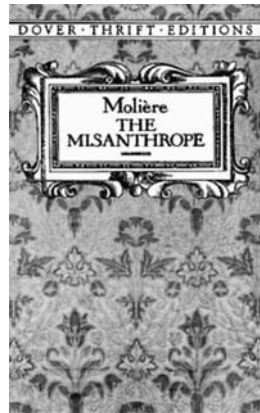
Although Alceste loses Célimène forever, there is another match at the end of *The Misanthrope*, which actually materializes through Alceste's own insensitivity. Throughout the play, the gentle, rational Éliante has shown no interest in Philinte, who loves her and who sees in her the social but virtuous female counterpart of himself. Unfortunately, Éliante is as irrationally in love with Alceste as Alceste is with Célimène. Unlike Alceste, however, who always makes excuses for Célimène, Éliante can see the unpleasant truth about someone whom she loves. After Alceste has been rejected by Célimène, he churlishly offers to marry Éliante, making it quite clear that she is his second choice. At that moment, Éliante realizes that Alceste is less than a perfect person. Although honest, he is insensitive and inconsiderate. Without a second thought, Éliante rejects him, and, suddenly aware of the virtues of her friend, the devoted Philinte, she accepts his proposal of marriage.

With so slight a plot, *The Misanthrope* depends for its interest on characterization and on theme. Molière's contemporaries recognized in his characters most of the types present in aristocratic society, for example, dilettantes such as Oronte, empty-headed fops such as Acaste and Clitandre, and hypocritical prudes such as Arsinée. Through Célimène's admittedly catty descriptions, Molière includes other character types who do not actually appear on stage: the incessant talker, the dramatically mysterious man, the name-dropper, the tediously dull woman, and the equally boring egotist. The result is a comprehensive view of a society that obviously deserved to be satirized.

As to Molière's own attitude toward that society, critics continue to disagree. Although Philinte and Éliante obviously represent good sense and moderation, some argue that Molière identifies more closely with Alceste. There is good reason for Philinte to remain loyal to his friend, who, unlike most of the other courtiers, takes life seriously. As a satirist, Molière could hardly do less.

### SUMMARY

From the plots and character types familiar to his audience, Molière developed modern comedy. His plays vary from simple to complex, from farce and comedy-ballet to comedy of manners and what



might be termed comedy of character. Whatever their nature, they play beautifully. The words, the situations, and the scenes are as funny to twenty-first century audiences as they were in Molière's time. Furthermore, in the plays that are considered Molière's masterpieces, such as *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*, audiences find something more than humor: a realistic view of the world as the home of fools, along with a belief that good will ordinarily triumph over evil, but only by the narrowest margin.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What do Molière's plays reveal about his attitude toward society?
- Although the word "farce" has acquired pejorative meanings, it is a legitimate theatrical form. What are the characteristics of farce?
- Very often comedies end in unions, in marriages, but for Molière, marriage is sometimes the trouble. In such cases, does he have a different formula for concluding a comedy?
- Are the troubles in Orgon's family seventeenth century ones, or are there contemporary equivalents?
- Consider the fact that Tartuffe is not only a foolish person but also a dangerous one.
- Molière is considered to be the developer of modern comedy. What comic playwrights today most closely reflect a world-view like his?

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# MICHEL EYQUEM DE MONTAIGNE

**Born:** Château de Montaigne, Périgord, near Bordeaux, France  
February 28, 1533

**Died:** Château de Montaigne, Périgord, near Bordeaux, France  
September 13, 1592

*Montaigne, in The Essays, created a new literary form, the personal essay, which writers elsewhere would develop into a major literary genre.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (mon-TAYN) was born to wealthy parents, Pierre Eyquem and Antoinette de Louppes, in the family château in southwestern France on February 28, 1533. From childhood, he was taught to speak Latin even before his own native language, for his German tutor knew no French and instructed his pupil exclusively in the language of antiquity. Consequently, during his first ten years, Montaigne knew little French at all. From classical languages, however, he learned clarity of expression and thought, and his writings are enriched by references to Roman history, mythology, and authors such as Cicero, Vergil, and Seneca.

Montaigne's training in classical languages and literature was also an indication of his century. The rapid spread of Greek and Roman classics and the newly revived humanistic learning of the Renaissance was no more than a quarter of a century old in France when he was born, and it was not unusual for children such as Michel to learn Latin. Earlier, however, the Latin that he was taught would have been church Latin, but Montaigne learned the secular Latin of the great poets and orators of the past. Montaigne went on to become one of the principal proponents of this classical learning, called the New Philosophy, and its insistence upon the individual as the measure of all things and upon a healthy skepticism in the pursuit of truth. Montaigne, in fact, took as his motto "Que sais-je?" ("What do I know?"), reflecting his rejection of authority, his tolerance for all ideas, and his restless and searching mind.

Montaigne's father, a wealthy merchant, sent his

son to the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux from 1539 to 1546 and later to the University of Bordeaux to study philosophy. Later still, in 1559, Montaigne studied law at the University of Toulouse. In 1557, his father was elected mayor of Bordeaux, leaving his post as counselor in the parliament of Bordeaux and passing it on to his son. Montaigne served as counselor until 1570, during a time of great religious and political upheaval in France. A series of civil wars between Catholics and Protestants (who acquired the derisive name Huguenots) divided the country, culminating in 1572 with the ambush slaying of twenty thousand Huguenots on St. Bartholomew's Day (August 24).

One of Montaigne's fellow counselors on the Bordeaux parliament was Étienne de La Boétie, a gifted poet, dedicated humanist, and distinguished civil servant, and the two men developed a close friendship. La Boétie died suddenly in 1563, at the young age of thirty-two, and his death was one of the great losses of Montaigne's life. Montaigne's essays are filled with references to friends and friendship, and years after La Boétie's death Montaigne noted in his diaries his still painful recollections of his friend.

In 1565, Montaigne married Françoise de la Chassaigne, the daughter of a fellow counselor. They had six daughters, only one of whom, Léonore, survived infancy. The marriage itself seems to have been a reasonably happy one, but the subject is much debated by Montaigne scholars. The *Essais* (books 1-2, 1580; books 1-2 revised, 1582; books 1-3 1588; books 1-3 revised; 1595; *The Essays*, 1603) are full of acerbic comments about wives and mar-



riage, and in his essay “De la diversion” (“Of Diversion”), Montaigne admits that he made himself fall in love to distract himself from the overpowering grief of La Boétie’s death. In another essay, he insists that a good marriage—and there may not be one, according to Montaigne—is based not on love but on friendship. Whether of love or of friendship, his marriage lasted twenty-seven years.

When his father died in 1570, Montaigne retired to the family estate that he inherited. There he spent the greater part of his time writing and thinking in the tower library of his chateau. For his career as a civil servant, he was ordained in 1571 into the Order of St. Michael, and King Charles IX gave him the title Gentleman of the King’s Chamber. Mainly, though, he led the secluded life of a philosopher-author, and in March, 1580, the first edition of *The Essays* appeared for the amusement of a few friends and relatives.

After nine years of self-imposed exile to write a book, Montaigne set out on a seventeen-month journey to Italy via Switzerland and Germany. In part, the trip was intended to relieve the intense pain of a kidney stone, an illness that had killed his father, and Montaigne took curative waters and treatment at various foreign spas. While he was away, his fellow citizens of Bordeaux nominated and elected him mayor in 1581, a post that he held until 1585, at which time he resigned and left Bordeaux when the plague broke out. Montaigne and his family wandered from place to place for six months, returning home around the end of 1586.

Montaigne lived the remainder of his life in retirement and seclusion, and he continued to write. A second edition of *The Essays* appeared in 1588 with some additions, and a final version came out in 1595 that included three books of essays and was almost twice as long as the 1580 book. It is this volume, the work of a fully mature mind, that stands as Montaigne’s final monument. He died in his family chateau on September 13, 1592, and was buried in a small church in Bordeaux. Three centuries later, in 1886, his remains were placed in the entrance hall of the building of the faculties of theology, science, and letters of the University of Bordeaux. They remain there to this day, appropriately secluded in a place of books and learning, the two principal passions of Montaigne’s life.

## ANALYSIS

The word “essay,” a familiar literary term today, was coined by Montaigne, but the word had a meaning that is different from its modern meaning. Essay derives from the Latin word *exagium*, a weighing, and from the French word *essai*, a trial or test. Montaigne’s writings were weighings of himself and his beliefs, in the same way that one would weigh, or “assay,” precious ore to determine its worth. They are equally a test of his judgments, a testing of ideas and random thoughts, and an attempt to assess himself and his experiences at various points of his life. The subject of his essays, as he says in many places, is always himself, and his task as an author is to see himself as accurately as he can and to be truthful about what he believes.

Montaigne, however, never thought that his own life and thoughts would hold fascination for centuries of readers. What, then, has attracted readers to Montaigne over the centuries? First, there is his common sense and universality. He is attractive to readers precisely because he is so much like them that his thoughts often seem commonplace. Second, preceding Sigmund Freud, Montaigne had a strong sense of the divisions within the human psyche, the conflict of humanity against itself, and the inability of human reason to solve all of humankind’s problems. What Montaigne seeks is what one would today call “the integrated personality,” a unified sense of being and an orderly view of life. Finally, readers appreciate Montaigne’s clarity of thought and expression, his confessional style, and his mordant wit—all qualities found in the best contemporary essayists such as Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe.

Exactly how to categorize Montaigne’s thought, however, is not an easy task. He has been called a hedonist, a skeptic, a stoic, and even an existentialist, but none of these seems fully adequate. He is a hedonist in his love of life and enjoyment of sensual pleasures, but in essays such as “De la moderation” (“Of Moderation”), he warns that a person can become a slave to his or her senses. His essays on idleness, lying, cruelty, cowardice, vanity, and drunkenness testify to his skeptical view of humankind’s innate goodness, but these are equally balanced by essays on constancy, friendship, virtue, repentance, and moderation. Montaigne’s stoicism is clear in his thoughts on death, and he titles one of his essays “Que philosophe c’est apprendre à

mourir” (“To Philosophize Is to Learn to Die”), but he also emphasizes the enjoyment of this life. Finally, like the existentialists of the twentieth century, Montaigne sees life in a continual flux, making the attainment of absolute truth impossible. Yet if the absurdity of the human condition prevents people from having true knowledge, they can at least know themselves in their perpetually changing condition.

Perhaps the best term for Montaigne is one suggested by Donald Frame, professor emeritus of French at Columbia University. Montaigne is an “apprehensive humanist,” a lover of reason and books, and a student of human custom and behavior, who is uneasy about the human condition. While the mass of humans may be ignorant, stupid, lazy, and lustful, they can still accomplish occasional great things. Life is paradox and contradiction—composed, Montaigne says, of contrary things—and one must learn to accept human contrariness.

Finally, Montaigne’s use of paradox and irony, of balanced phrase and metaphor, are masterful, and perhaps no one has written in the French language with greater elegance and grace. *The Essays* are stylishly written reflections upon the oppositions of humanity and God, good and evil, action and inaction, faith and reason. If Montaigne reaches no conclusions, his journey consists of fascinating intellectual twists and turns; and if he continually asks, “What do I know?” he always does so with wit, modesty, and candor.

## “OF CANNIBALS”

**First published:** “Des cannibales,” 1580  
(collected in *Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, 1957)

**Type of work:** Essay

*What people call barbarism is merely vanity and ignorance on their part, for the behavior of “civilized” people surpasses the barbarism of supposedly “uncivilized” people in every way.*

Montaigne’s age was one of adventure and exploration, and many travelers returned to Europe with tales of strange and fascinating people else-

where. During a French expedition to South America in 1557, the explorer Villegaignon encountered a tribe of cannibals in what was then called “Antarctic France” but what is now called Brazil. Some of them returned with the crew. Montaigne not only met one of these cannibals at Rouen in 1562 but also employed a servant who had spent a dozen years living among them in their native land.

From this firsthand knowledge, Montaigne in “Of Cannibals” reverses the egocentric European belief in the superiority of Western culture. Not simple, ignorant, and barbarous as some would insist, cannibals live in harmony with nature, employ useful and virtuous skills, and enjoy a perfect religious life and governmental system. Instead, it is the European who has bastardized nature and her works, while the so-called savage lives in a state of purity. Much like American author Herman Melville, who later chronicled his life among the cannibals in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), Montaigne sees more barbarous behavior among his immediate neighbors.

As evidence, Montaigne cites everything from language usage to architecture. The cannibals have, he says, no words for lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, and other vices. They have no slaves, no distinctions between rich and poor, and no mania for owning things. They live in a land of plenty, eat only one meal a day, and spend the whole day dancing. Their religious and ethical beliefs are admirably simple. They believe in the immortality of the soul, in a kind of heaven and hell, and in divine prophecy. They have, in fact, tribal prophets who, if they fail to prophesy correctly, are immediately put to the sword, a swift justice that Montaigne does not condemn, for false prophets should be severely punished. As for their priests, they daily preach only two virtues: love and courage.

In wars with nations beyond their territory, the cannibals know neither fear nor cowardice even though their battles often end in bloodshed. Each man brings back the head of an enemy as a trophy and hangs it over the entrance of his dwelling. The enemy prisoners brought back are slain and eaten, not for nourishment but for revenge. Such behavior has earned for them the name “savages,” but Montaigne sees more savagery in the European practices of torturing or burning alive—and, what is worse, doing it in the name of religion. While the

cannibals clearly violate rules of reasonable behavior, Montaigne concludes, the Europeans surpass them in every kind of barbarity and cruelty.

There is little doubt that Montaigne romanticizes “the noble savage” in his essay, as authors were to do for centuries afterward, but he is one of the first great thinkers to question the Eurocentric view of human behavior, the notion that the standard for human behavior is white, Christian, and European. While it is doubtless true that he idealizes the life of Brazilian tribal peoples, nonetheless he sees the dignity, nobility, intelligence, and harmony of their lives. He forces the readers to confront themselves and their own social behavior; as Montaigne notes, there is such a distance in character between the cannibals and his audience that either the cannibals are savages or his readers are. Montaigne tries hard throughout his essay to find fault with the cannibals’ behavior and way of life but can offer only one, slightly humorous, observation: They do not wear trousers.

### “APOLOGY FOR RAYMOND SEBOND”

**First published:** “Apologie de Raimond Sebond,” 1580 (collected in *Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, 1957)

**Type of work:** Essay

*People are incapable of true knowledge, for they exist in an eternal flux while truth is immutable and unchanging.*

Raymond Sebond was a fifteenth century Spaniard who taught philosophy and theology at the University of Toulouse, dying there in 1436. His book *Theologia naturalis* (natural theology) was published posthumously in 1484 and was a popular success in France. It argues for the truths of Christianity on the basis of the natural world—the book of nature—and Sebond claims that God is in evidence in the Creation more than in theology or Scripture.

The “Apology for Raymond Sebond” is three times as long as any other essay that Montaigne wrote, and it is by far his most puzzling work. Supposedly a defense of Sebond’s Christian doctrine,

the essay has been seen as an attack on authoritarian religion and a covert undermining of Christian faith. Less than one-tenth of the essay defends Sebond’s ideas at all. Primarily, the work argues the impotence of human reason and humanity’s inability to determine truth, set as a counterargument to a group of Sebond’s critics.

Montaigne begins with the first objection to Sebond’s theology—that the divine can be conceived only by faith, not by human intelligence. Montaigne admits that faith is more apt to solve the mysteries of religion than reason, yet humans seem improperly suited to divine faith. Humankind’s often immoral behavior testifies to the inability of faith alone to raise it above itself. Faith must be accompanied by ideas and reasonings in order to set humanity on the road to knowledge, to make it capable of the grace of God.

It is at this point that Montaigne addresses the issue of human knowledge, the heart of the essay, and his reflections reveal a deep despair about the human condition, an undercurrent of pessimism found in such other Renaissance works as William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603) and John Donne’s sermons and devotions. Humankind is a puny and miserable creature, swollen with vanity, who calls itself master of the universe while unable even to master its own passions and weaknesses. Viewing itself as the equal of God, it is actually no better than an animal. “When I play with my cat,” Montaigne says, “who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?” Citing the Renaissance notion of the Great Chain of Being, an orderly universe in which each thing is in its properly fixed place, Montaigne insists that there is a natural order that constrains and limits humanity’s vain ambitions to become a god, and that people must be forced to accept the barriers of this order.

If people are made in God’s image, then God is, like them, an animal. If He is an animal, then He has a body, and if He has a body, then He is also sub-



ject to corruption. However, if God has no body, then He has no soul, for the soul exists only in the body. This paradox is unthinkable to Montaigne. Similarly, if a person has a divine soul that knows all things, then it would at least know itself, if nothing more than its outward body. Montaigne sees medical doctors everywhere disputing even simple matters of human anatomy, however, and for all its science, arts, and learning, humanity knows very little about itself. Therefore, Montaigne concludes, the human mind can never penetrate the dark recesses of hidden truth. Learning consists of nothing more than an infinite confusion of opinions, and people are in agreement about nothing. They can never know truth.

The ultimate truth is knowledge of God, and at the end of the essay, Montaigne more or less returns to Sebond, adding a few paragraphs stating that humankind is nothing without God and that God must lend a helping hand if humans are to attain knowledge of Him. By then, however, it is too late. Montaigne has raised profound questions about humankind, God, and human knowledge, and his candid reasoning has led him (and the reader) to unsettling conclusions.

### **SUMMARY**

Michel de Montaigne's place in the history of world literature has been secure for more than four hundred years. He is not only the father of the modern essay form but also a writer of singular artistry who has been admired down through the centuries by such noted authors as Lord Byron, Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Virginia Woolf, André Gide, T. S. Eliot, and many others. His epigrammatic style makes him an often-quoted author, while the clarity of diction, the balanced phrasing, and the proper words in proper order make his statements ring with truth and stay in the mind.

### **DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What does the etymology of the word “essay” reveal about the intentions of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne?
- Francis Bacon was a contemporary of Montaigne and is also famous for writing essays. How do Bacon's essays differ from those of Montaigne?
- What does Montaigne tell the reader in “Of Cannibals”?
- In an essay called “On the Inconsistency of Our Actions,” Montaigne tells readers that they must examine their “innermost recesses,” but then he calls this activity “high and hazardous” and judges that it would be better if “fewer people meddled with it.” Can you resolve Montaigne's own inconsistency here?
- Montaigne tells readers that “It is myself I portray.” This does not seem like an unusual activity today. What made it unusual in the late sixteenth century?

“Free association artistically controlled—this is the paradoxical secret of Montaigne's best essays,” said British novelist and essayist Aldous Huxley. “One damned thing after another—but in a sequence that in some almost miraculous way develops a central theme and relates it to the rest of human experience.” Perhaps the American essayist Emerson summarized him best: Montaigne is “never dull, never insincere, and has the genius to make the reader care for all that he cares for.”

*Kenneth Seib*

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Courtesy, Archives of Ontario

## L. M. MONTGOMERY

**Born:** Clifton, Prince Edward Island, Canadian  
Maritime Province (now New London, Prince  
Edward Island, Canada)  
November 30, 1874

**Died:** Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
April 24, 1942

*A pioneer in developing novel series about young girls' coming-of-age, including her novels about Anne of Green Gables, Montgomery emphasizes imagination, ambition, and education, along with conventional social graces and domestic skills.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Although descended from prominent Canadian families, Lucy Maud Montgomery considered herself an orphan and outsider. Shortly after Lucy's birth, her mother, Clara, developed tuberculosis, and the Montgomerys moved to the Macneill farm near Cavendish (the model for Avonlea) to live with Clara's parents, Lucy and Alexander Macneill. When Montgomery was about two, Clara died; her wake remained Montgomery's most vivid early memory.

For years, Montgomery's father, Hugh, traveled on business, leaving Montgomery to be raised primarily by the Macneills. Supposedly, her paternal grandfather, Donald Montgomery, was a talented storyteller, but the Macneills were strict disciplinarians. Montgomery was unhappy, except during visits to a cousin's farm (the model for Green Gables). She attended the local school (the model for Avonlea School), where she competed for top honors with Nate Lockhart (a possible model for her character Gilbert Blythe).

After Hugh settled in Saskatchewan and remarried, Montgomery, now fifteen, went to live with his new family. Although her comments about her father were always positive, emphasizing his loving treatment of her, she seemed to feel that her stepmother treated her as a servant, making her miss

school to babysit her young siblings. She also was homesick for Prince Edward Island, so after a year she returned to live with the Macneills.

A positive result of Montgomery's homesickness was her poem "On Cape LeForce," published in the *Daily Patriot*, a newspaper in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, when she was sixteen. She published several additional poems in other regional newspapers, and her career as a writer was launched, though success as a novelist would come much later.

Montgomery first became a schoolteacher. She attended Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown, completing the two-year teacher certification course in one year. The next year she studied literature at Dalhousie University in Halifax. During Montgomery's first teaching job, in a fishing village, she was briefly engaged to someone she later said she respected but did not love. The next year she taught in a farming community, boarding with the Leard family. Montgomery fell in love with their son, Herman, but considered the match unsuitable. Herman's death from influenza two years later may have inspired the account of Anne's despair when Gilbert nearly dies of influenza in *Anne of the Island* (1915).

Montgomery returned to Cavendish after her grandfather's death in 1898. When a cousin agreed to live with her grandmother, however, Montgomery moved to Halifax and worked for the *Echo*, the evening edition of the *Chronicle*, from 1901 to 1902.

Although she enjoyed newspaper work, she eventually returned to Cavendish to care for her ailing grandmother, remaining there until her grandmother died.

In Cavendish, Montgomery met the local Presbyterian minister, Ewen MacDonald, to whom she became engaged in 1906. They did not marry until 1911 because Montgomery refused to leave her grandmother. Shortly after their marriage, MacDonald accepted a post at Leaskdale Manse in Uxbridge, Ontario where their three children were born: Chester Cameron in 1912; Hugh Alexander, stillborn in 1914; and Ewan Stuart in 1915. The family remained at Leaskdale Manse until 1926. Ewen MacDonald began suffering from depression and left the ministry in 1935. The couple then settled in Toronto in a house Montgomery called Journey's End.

Montgomery received many honors. She was the first Canadian woman to join the British Royal Society of Arts, she was a fellow of the Literary and Artistic Institute of France, and in 1935 she became an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. In 1937, Canada honored her by creating the Green Gables Heritage Site at the Prince Edward Island National Park.

Despite Montgomery's publishing success, her later life was difficult. Like many of her contemporaries, she was deeply disturbed by World War I, but more significant were her copyright battles with the L. C. Page Company and her husband's continuing mental problems. On April 24, 1942, she died of congestive heart failure. In 1943, Canada declared Montgomery a person of historic significance.

## ANALYSIS

Montgomery's strength is her ability to create female characters, especially preadolescent females. Generations of readers have recognized themselves and their acquaintances in Anne and her friends: ladylike Diana, flirtatious Jane, malicious Josie, and the loyal Gilbert. Most appealing, though, is Anne, whose concerns are those common to young girls. Anne wants to be pretty but realizes that Diana, with dark hair and dimples, more nearly resembles the ideal beauties in romantic novels. Anne considers her red hair and freckles a liability, though she believes the shape of her nose to be an asset. In *Anne of the Island*, Anne, now in

her twenties, finally learns that there are several types of beauty, and her lively personality and slender figure make people forget that she is not conventionally beautiful.

Anne also resembles Montgomery's young readers in her desire to be accepted at Avonlea. Initially, Anne cannot remember when she was not a lonely outsider; she has developed a vivid imagination to fill her surroundings with companionship and compensate for her feeling of not belonging. She talks incessantly to fill awkward silences and win friends.

Until the Cuthberts adopt Anne, no one has tried to teach her manners, and she has spent little time in school. Thus, she seems almost a child of nature, acting and speaking impulsively, then apologizing profusely for her mistakes. Because adults and classmates realize that she is good-hearted, she makes friends quickly; her successes become models for Montgomery's young readers.

Anne's most modern characteristic is her ambition, especially her drive to gain an education. Determined to be at the head of her class, she works hard to achieve her goals, winning prestigious scholarships and teaching to earn money for her degree. The adult females whom Anne knows are less fully developed characters. Many are somewhat stereotypical or essentially passive until Anne enters their lives. For example, Marilla is a conventional reticent spinster; though her affection for Anne grows quickly, she has difficulty expressing emotion or laughing. Rachel Lynde initially is the typical neighborhood busybody, but acquaintance with Anne helps her develop a sense of humor.

Anne's schoolmates also generally are less complex personalities than she. In childhood, Diana follows Anne's lead, but almost immediately Anne realizes their adult lives will take different paths. Diana will always be loyal, but she lacks Anne's imagination or ambition. In contrast, Philippa, Anne's college friend, also possesses imagination and intellectual ambition; in fact, she may be the model for the protagonists of other Montgomery series.

Montgomery's male characters also are relatively conventional. Davy Keith is the typical mischievous small boy, and Paul Irving, the most fully developed of Montgomery's young boys, seems little more than Anne's masculine alter ego. Even Gilbert Blythe, Anne's patient schoolmate and

suitor, demonstrates little character complexity. Because Anne does not see him clearly, the reader also does not, and he remains more or less one-dimensional.

Montgomery portrays three father surrogates in some detail. Matthew Cuthbert in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) becomes Anne's confidant, though he does not always understand her imaginative flights and fancy rhetoric; until his death, he is her most loyal advocate. In *Anne of Avonlea* (1909), Mr. Harrison occupies a similar paternal role, advising Anne about her writing, teaching, and civic improvement projects. Perhaps the most appealing of these characters, though, is Captain Jim in *Anne's House of Dreams* (1917), who not only entertains with tales of maritime adventures but also helps Anne deal with the loss of her first child.

For Montgomery's preadolescent readers, however, the series' real appeal is the ongoing romantic theme. Like most young girls, Anne and Diana fantasize about ideal romantic suitors, but Diana is content to marry their childhood chum. Likewise, instead of the rich, handsome husband she envisioned, Philippa marries a poor, ugly clergyman. Even Anne, whose romantic dreams appear to come true, realizes that extravagant romantic gestures are less important than compatibility in personality and goals. Especially throughout the Anne novels, Montgomery implicitly comments on how a young woman should choose an appropriate husband.

If youthful readers see Anne as someone they would like to know or become, adult readers are drawn to Montgomery's lyrical descriptions of the Avonlea landscape, and each year many readers travel to Prince Edward Island. From Anne's special apple tree to the echoes at Echo Cottage, Montgomery gives readers mental pictures of the natural environment Anne loves, and Anne's imaginative language adds to readers' appreciation of trees, brooks, and even a pond. The more mature Anne no longer names each landscape feature, but she still appreciates quaint little cottages and the gardens surrounding them. In *Anne's House of Dreams*, Montgomery describes in detail Anne's view of the seascape at different times of day and in different weather. Anne gains peace viewing the sea, the rocks along the shoreline, and Captain Jim's lighthouse. In her novels, Montgomery only sketchily describes cities, even towns; like Anne,

she seems to find contentment in the physical landscape, perhaps because she shares Anne's love of nature.

## ANNE OF GREEN GABLES

**First published:** 1908

**Type of work:** Novel

*Anne of Green Gables chronicles the six years between Anne's arrival in Avonlea as an outsider and her completion of her first-class teaching license.*

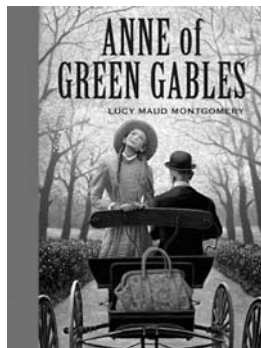
Montgomery's journal for 1904 contains the germ for her first published novel, *Anne of Green Gables*: An elderly couple intend to adopt a young boy, but the orphanage sends a young girl instead. Spinster Marilla Cuthbert and her brother Matthew decide to adopt an orphan boy to help Matthew with chores. Complications occur when Matthew, a shy bachelor, is completely overwhelmed by the imaginative girl waiting at the train station. Anne talks all the way to Green Gables, explaining how imagination helps her cope with the unpleasantness of life as an orphan; she creates personalities for trees, brooks, ponds, even a geranium at the doorstep, giving each an imaginative name. This love of nature seems excessive to many in Avonlea, but Matthew is charmed, insisting that she remain. Anne declares Matthew the first "kindred spirit" she encounters in Avonlea.

Eventually, Marilla decides Providence sent Anne to Green Gables. She never completely understands Anne, and she has difficulty expressing affection, but Marilla's pride in and love for Anne grow throughout the novel. Seeing her role as disciplinarian, Marilla allows Matthew to spoil Anne, while she tries to inculcate religious principles, etiquette, and a degree of practicality, but she too insists that Anne have the best life the Cuthberts can afford.

Impetuous and quick-tempered, Anne must learn tact, restraint, and etiquette before she moves from outsider to part of the community. Her hasty words and rash actions offend adults like Mrs. Lynde and Josephine Barry, Diana's rich, elderly aunt, but Anne's profuse, heartfelt apologies charm the injured parties.

Anne also learns that problems can result from carelessness. The special cake she bakes for the new pastor and his wife is seasoned with anodyne liniment instead of vanilla because Anne has not checked the bottle's contents. In a similar mix-up, she serves Diana currant wine instead of raspberry cordial; though neither girl recognizes what is happening, Diana becomes drunk, and only Anne's dramatic rescue of Diana's younger sister reconciles Mrs. Barry to their continued friendship.

Anne considers Diana a kindred spirit but recognizes her "bosom friend's" more limited imagination. It is Anne who tells stories of the Haunted Wood, making both of them scared to walk there alone after dark. Anne also nearly drowns when she decides to dramatize the story of Elaine, the lily maid, using a flatboat on the creek. Fortunately, Gilbert rescues her.



Anne's relationship with Gilbert is a continuing plot line. Her pride prevents acceptance of his attempts at friendship, and his pride will not allow him to continue trying. Their classmates believe they will eventually reconcile and marry; Marilla secretly hopes that the son of her one-time beau will someday marry her adopted daughter. For Anne, though, the presence of Gilbert spurs her ambition, making her determined to win the highest academic honors and give the most effective dramatic readings. The two become friends only at the novel's end, when Gilbert gives up the Avonlea school so Anne can teach there and help Marilla save Green Gables.

Despite Matthew's death and Marilla's failing eyesight, the novel ends on an upbeat note as Anne renounces her scholarship to Redmond College, taking the teaching job in Avonlea. Anne says she is staying because she loves Green Gables; in fact, she also loves Marilla and feels responsibility toward her. Realizing Gilbert's sacrifice, Anne approaches him and apologizes for her stubbornness. The two agree to study together to prepare for Redmond.

## ANNE OF AVONLEA

**First published:** 1909

**Type of work:** Novel

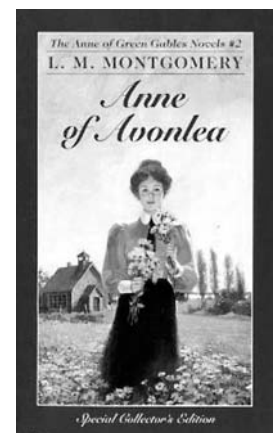
*Anne of Avonlea chronicles Anne's two years teaching in Avonlea, helping Marilla, raising the orphaned Keith twins, and founding the Avonlea Village Improvement Society.*

Returning to Avonlea, Anne immediately finds herself at odds with a neighbor, Mr. Harrison, because her cow repeatedly breaks into his fields. Harrison, one of Montgomery's eccentric older men, is soon charmed by Anne, becoming a trusted friend and adviser. He is also helpful in Anne's efforts to curb the boyhood pranks of Davy Keith.

Marilla agrees to keep her friend's six-year-old twins until their uncle returns. Davy and Dora Keith repeat the pattern of Anne and Diana. Davy is impetuous, as Anne was, and quite a bit more mischievous, locking Dora in a toolshed, ruining pies Anne has made for an important luncheon, and breaking Miss Barry's willowware platter; periodically he insists that he simply cannot behave, and he pesters Anne with dozens of outlandish questions. In contrast, Dora is pretty, neat, and so well-behaved that even Marilla finds her monotonous.

Davy's nemesis is Paul Irving, Anne's favorite student and an imaginative kindred spirit whose mother is dead. His father lives in Boston, so Paul is living with his grandmother. When Anne introduces him to Miss Lavendar Lewis of Echo Lodge, the two become friends immediately.

Miss Lavendar is the first of Montgomery's middle-aged brides who eventually reconcile with the beau of their youth. She lives alone in a charming cottage in the woods; her only companions are the echoes when she rings a dinner bell and a succession of servant girls respond, all of whom she





calls Charlotta. After Paul writes his father about her, Stephen Irving returns to be reunited with his boyhood sweetheart. Their marriage is this novel's climax. Paul rings the bell, the echoes become wedding bells, and Paul has the "new" mother he has wanted.

Now good friends, Anne and Gilbert Blythe work together to form the Avonlea Village Improvement Society and make Avonlea more beautiful. As a practical joke, they publish predictions in the newspaper. Amazingly, their predictions come true. A new resident is married, though actually Harrison (the new resident) is already married and simply reconciles with his estranged wife. Another item mocks Uncle Abe's prophecies of severe thunderstorms. Uncle Abe has never been right before, but this time a storm destroys Avonlea's crops.

Anne's friendship with Diana continues, although Diana becomes engaged and Anne feels somewhat left out. Anne's misadventures likewise continue. Her town hall improvement project results in the building being painted a vivid blue; she inadvertently dyes her nose red when she meets a famous writer she admires; and searching for a replacement for Miss Barry's platter, she winds up falling through the roof of a virtual stranger's duck house. Anne has grown up, but her impetuous nature still gets her into trouble.

As the novel ends, Montgomery prepares for a sequel. Rachel Lynde's husband dies, so she moves in with Marilla. Richard Keith dies, leaving money for the twins' care. Anne has saved enough money for one year of college, and Marilla offers money for a second. Gilbert tries to tell Anne of his love, but Anne refuses to be more than friends; thus, the suspense involving their relationship continues.

## ANNE OF THE ISLAND

**First published:** 1915

**Type of work:** Novel

*Anne of the Island chronicles Anne's four years of personal and academic success at Redmond College and her various marriage proposals.*

As *Anne of the Island* begins, Anne half-reluctantly leaves Avonlea. Fortunately, Priscilla Grant and Gil-

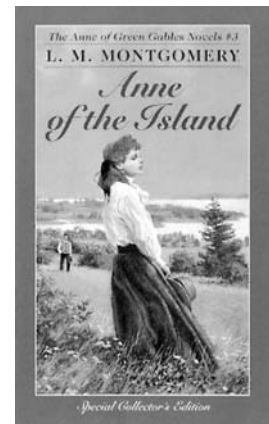
bert Blythe are also traveling to Redmond. Anne and Priscilla soon meet Philippa Gordon, whose major personality trait is inability to decide anything. These three and Stella, a friend from Queen's College, decide the next year they will rent a house with Stella's Aunt Jamesina as their housekeeper and chaperone. Anne notices a "To Let" sign on Patty's Place, a quaint cottage in an exclusive neighborhood. When the girls inquire, Anne's impetuous declaration that she "loves" the house causes Miss Patty to rent it to them at a reduced price, and Anne happily heads for Avonlea.

In Avonlea, though, Anne no longer feels completely at home. After all her romantic dreams about her first marriage proposal, she is astounded when a childhood friend proposes for her brother. Courtship and marriage are a key theme in this novel. Over the next three years, several other proposals follow, including one from Gilbert, but Anne rejects them all. When she meets Roy Gardner, she thinks he is her romantic ideal, and she anticipates accepting his proposal. At that moment, however, she suddenly realizes the superficiality of her girlhood fantasies, so she rejects Roy also.

Meanwhile, Anne succeeds academically, winning a scholarship that funds a year of college. An inheritance from Miss Josephine pays for the remainder. As usual, Anne's primary competition is Gilbert, but Philippa is also at the head of the class. At year's end, Philippa finally chooses her husband—a poor clergyman. She acknowledges he does not fit her preconceived ideas, but significantly her answer to Anne's teasing is that Anne does not know what true love is. For the second time, Anne is a bridesmaid.

Much of the humor in this novel comes from the letters of Davy and Rachel Lynde. Davy continues to ask dozens of outlandish questions, and Mrs. Lynde describes incidents, such as the time the new minister, coming to the back door, is knocked down by a stray hog.

Anne's writing career begins when she submits a





romantic story from her student days in Avonlea. After several rejections, she decides to quit writing, but Diana secretly submits Anne's story to a contest sponsored by a baking powder company. Anne is humiliated when her story wins first prize and wide publicity; Diana cannot understand Anne's attitude, especially since she won twenty-five dollars. Later, heeding Harrison's advice, Anne submits a sketch about falling through the duck house roof. The editor accepts it, asking to see more of her work.

The middle-aged romance in this novel involves Janet Sweet, Anne's landlady during her summer teaching. Anne recognizes the true love between Janet and John Douglas, her beau of twenty years. Despite Anne's meddling, John finally proposes, and Janet accepts.

As the novel concludes, Anne feels isolated from her childhood friends: Jane marries a millionaire and Diana gives birth to a son. Then hearing that Gilbert is dying, Anne suddenly realizes she has always loved him. When she learns that he is recovering, she fears that he no longer loves her, but taking her to their special childhood haunt, he proposes. She accepts, agreeing to postpone marriage until he completes his medical education in three years.

## SUMMARY

L. M. Montgomery published more than thirty novels for children and adults, an autobiography, more than four hundred individual poems, and more than five hundred short stories, in addition to other works. Montgomery's favorite books were her novels *The Story Girl* (1911) and *Emily of New Moon* (1923), but readers are better acquainted with the Anne novels, which were the subject of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) television musical in the 1950's, a popular play in the 1970's, a widely distributed film released in 1985, and a television series that aired in 2000.

For generations of preadolescent girls, Anne has been a role model, embodying characteristics Montgomery wanted readers to emulate. Montgomery also seems to have been drawn to Anne, repeating many elements of Anne's personality in the protagonists of both her adult and young adult novels, and in the last novel published during her lifetime, *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), she returned to Anne and her children.

Charmaine Allmon Mosby

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- The Anne series by L. M. Montgomery traces the relationship between Anne and Gilbert, from their initial childhood meeting through their education to their eventual marriage. At the same time, Anne repeatedly hears stories of women who have quarreled with fiancés and allowed pride to ruin their lives. How are these stories similar to, and different from, Anne's story?
- Although conforming to conventional social rules of the early twentieth century, Anne seems surprisingly modern, especially in her independence and ambition. Illustrate these personality traits with examples from the series.
- When Anne's impulsiveness gets her into awkward situations, she usually can extricate herself using her verbal skills and ability to gauge other people's personalities. How do these talents help her gain community acceptance, win respect from her students, and achieve other goals?
- Anne's imagination usually improves her circumstances, but occasionally she carries it a bit too far. Cite examples of both the positive and negative results of Anne's imagination.
- In *Anne of Avonlea*, Anne is teaching in the village school. How are her students like her schoolmates in the first novel? How are they different? Specifically, how do Marilla's foster children, Davy and Dora, resemble Anne and Diana?
- The Anne series chronicles several of Anne's life stages. How does Anne change, and how does she remain the same, at the various stages? In what ways does her life resemble Montgomery's?

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# JOHN MORTIMER

**Born:** London, England  
April 21, 1923

*In novels, short stories, and plays for the stage, television, and radio, Mortimer creates characters and plots that deftly combine humor, mystery, and social commentary.*

## BIOGRAPHY

John Clifford Mortimer was born in London, England, on April 21, 1923, the only child of Kathleen May Smith Mortimer and Clifford Mortimer, a barrister. Reared in London and at his parents' country home in Oxfordshire, young Mortimer was educated at the Dragon School in Oxford, Harrow in Middlesex, and Brasenose College, Oxford. His weak eyesight exempted him from military service during World War II. Instead, he worked as an assistant director and scriptwriter with the Crown Film Unit, which made documentaries and training films. His first novel, *Charade* (1947), is based on this wartime experience.

In 1948, he began practicing law in London as a barrister in divorce cases. The following year he married novelist Penelope Fletcher. When they were divorced in 1972, he wed Penelope Gollop. He had two children from each marriage, and in 2004 acknowledged a son, raised as Ross Bentley, by actress Wendy Craig. After becoming Queen's Counsel in 1966, he dealt mainly in criminal law, often arguing for the defense in censorship cases, and partly through his efforts the Lord Chamberlain's authority to censor plays was abolished by the Theatre Act of 1968. Made master of the bench, Inner Temple, London, in 1975, Mortimer pursued two careers, one in law and the other in literature, until he retired from the former in 1986 to write full time.

Having written five novels by 1954, the next year he turned to a different genre, the radio play, adapting his novel *Like Men Betrayed* (1953). Mortimer's first original drama for radio, *The Dock Brief* (1957), won the Italia Prize in 1958, the same year he debuted as a stage dramatist with a double bill consisting of a revised version of *The Dock Brief* (pb. 1958) and *What Shall We Tell Caroline?* (pb.

1958), the first play he wrote specifically for the theater. Over the next two decades, he not only wrote radio plays but also created original scripts and adaptations for motion pictures and television. He did his most important work, however, for the stage, primarily comedies of manners and sex farces, a number of them one-act plays in the manner of Anton Chekhov. The autobiographical *A Voyage Round My Father* (pr. 1963, radio play, 1970, staged, pb. 1971) is his major play, and he adapted it for television in 1982. A year earlier, his multi-episode television version of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945, 1959) was acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic; later, however, it was revealed that though he was credited as writer, his scripts were not used.

By the 1980's, Mortimer had for the most part stopped writing original works for the stage, though he continued to do translations and adaptations, including *A Little Hotel on the Side* (pr. 1984, pb. 1985), a farce by Georges Feydeau and Maurice Desvalliers; the opera *Die Fledermaus* (pb. 1989, pr. 1990); and Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (pr. 1994, pb. 1995). In 2001, however, he returned to writing original stage plays with *Naked Justice* (pr., pb. 2001), about inadequacies in the judicial system, and *Hock and Soda Water* (pr., pb. 2001), a nostalgic reverie on old age. He also interviewed public figures for *The Sunday Times* of London and published two collections of these pieces, *In Character* (1983) and *Character Parts* (1986). In addition, he wrote four memoirs, *Clinging to the Wreckage: A Part of Life* (1982), *Murderers and Other Friends: Another Part of Life* (1994), *The Summer of a Dormouse* (2000), and *Where There's a Will* (2003; published in the United States as *Where There's a Will: Thoughts on the Good Life*, 2005).

In the mid-1970's, Mortimer began a series of witty detective stories about barrister Horace Rumpole, which he adapted for television. Partly due to actor Leo McKern's characterization, the series and the stories became widely popular. Mortimer also created *Under the Hammer* (1993), a television series featuring two employees of an art auction house who become part-time sleuths; it, too, was written both as short stories and teleplays, but had limited success. After a break of almost thirty years, Mortimer resumed writing serious novels, the first of which was *Paradise Postponed* (1985). Mortimer wrote this novel after Thames Television asked him to write a teleplay about post-World War II England. Rather than adapt someone else's book, Mortimer decided to write his own novel and then adapt it; the result was *Paradise Postponed*. Both the novel and teleplay were favorably received by British and American readers and viewers and led to a sequel, *Titmuss Regained* (1990), again written as a novel and television miniseries. As in Mortimer's early novels, the plots of these Rapstone Chronicles include mysteries and detection.

Such is also the case in the non-Rumpole fiction he has written since the mid-1980's. *Summer's Lease* (1988) is about an English family that rents an Italian villa and becomes involved in the strange circumstances surrounding the absent owners. (Mortimer wrote a four-part television adaptation of this novel in 1989.) Though some events in *Dunster* (1992) also occur in Italy, it takes place primarily in familiar Mortimer milieus: a corporate board room, an English country house, and a London law court. *Felix in the Underworld* (1997) is about a novelist who joins the ranks of the homeless to escape a woman who claims he fathered her illegitimate son, though Felix's publicist thinks news of a former mistress and illegitimate son would help book sales. In *The Sound of Trumpets* (1998), Mortimer returned for the third time to Leslie Titmuss, now in his fifties and a peer officially retired from politics, but still meddling and as unscrupulous as always.

Beyond his work as barrister, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, memoirist, and journalist, Mortimer has served on the National Theatre Board and the boards of the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Court Theatre. He was knighted in 1998; that and a painting in the National Portrait Gallery in London are official recognition of his achievements as a literary and cultural figure.

## ANALYSIS

Although John Mortimer self-deprecatingly has said that a writer "can only work within that narrow seam which penetrates to the depths of [his] past" and that his own choice of subject matter "was dictated by myself, my childhood, and such education as I was able to gather," his considerable work in several genres reveals an impressively versatile talent. Common thematic strains run through his work: a social conscience that is sometimes iconoclastic, but less interested in destroying institutions than in reforming them; sympathy for the underdog or outcast, among the aristocracy as well as the criminal class; the intrusion of the past upon the present; the conflict between business and traditional social attitudes; and a concern with what he has called "the tottering course of British middle-class attitudes in decline." Further, in almost everything, he tempers seriousness with humor, believing that "this despairing world . . . is far too serious to be described in terms that give us no opportunity to laugh." In this regard, he echoes such acknowledged mentors as Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and P. G. Wodehouse.

Despite his beliefs and activities regarding stage censorship, Mortimer's own plays do not test prevailing boundaries of propriety. He has not boldly experimented with form and style; he is a traditionalist rather than an innovator. This makes him unlike many of his contemporaries in the theater. He often is in step, however, with his peers as far as theme and language are concerned: His atypical social conscience focuses upon people's inability to communicate with each other.

He also has demonstrated the artistic and commercial viability of the one-act comedy, of which he has been a diligent practitioner. Some of his short plays, such as the sex farces *Mill Hill* (pr. 1970, pb. 1971) and *Marble Arch* (pr. 1970, pb. 1971), are mere whimsies, but others are more substantive, including *The Fear of Heaven* (pr. 1976, pb. 1978), about two Englishmen dying in an Italian hospital; *What Shall We Tell Caroline?*; and *The Dock Brief*. The last two, presented as a 1958 double bill, are sensitive character studies that exemplify Mortimer's practice of celebrating those who are isolated or failures, and he has likened both plays to the surrealist drama of Eugène Ionesco. In *What Shall We Tell Caroline?*, an overprotected eighteen-year-old girl stoically observes her parents' domestic spar-



ring, but at the end announces her departure for London, where she will live and work, away from the “tormenting, blank silence” of her home. *The Dock Brief* is about an unsuccessful old barrister randomly selected to defend an accused murderer. After carefully rehearsing trial strategy with his client, he becomes tongue-tied in the courtroom and loses the case. When the judge frees the convicted man because of the barrister’s incompetence, the two misfits take refuge in the rationalization that the counsel’s “dumb tactics” have won the day. Though Mortimer would not begin to think about Rumpole of the Bailey for another fifteen years, this early play foreshadows his later stories and television series, which often show the predatory quality and ineptitude of lawyers, who have, according to Mortimer, “an almost pathetic dependence on the criminal classes, without whom [they] would be unemployed.”

In two full-length plays from the same period, Mortimer also focuses upon the law, both times unfavorably. *Two Stars for Comfort* (pr., pb. 1962) has as its central character a solicitor turned publican who seduces young girls. *The Judge* (pr., pb. 1967) is about a jurist whose reputation for severity masks the guilt he suffers for abandoning a presumably pregnant girl years earlier. Returning to his hometown for a last assize before retirement, he asks to be judged rather than to judge. The play is an interesting (though not wholly successful) study of obsession and a disturbing look at the unpredictability of the legal system. Mortimer deals with similar characters and situations in the Rumpole tales, but more lightly, mixing satire and other humorous devices with his mysteries.

His major play is the full-length *A Voyage Round My Father*, an autobiographical drama that began as a radio play produced in 1963. Aside from its intrinsic merits, it is a landmark work because introspective memory plays are uncommon on the English stage. Having been regularly produced on West End stages, Mortimer was so familiar to English theatergoers that a critic said his “world is consistently and instantly knowable.” However, none of his previous plays had prepared audiences for *A Voyage Round My Father*, which was first presented at the Greenwich Theatre in 1970 and then, slightly revised, at London’s Haymarket Theatre on August 4, 1971.

When he resumed writing novels after a thirty-

year hiatus, Mortimer also produced a family chronicle developed largely through flashbacks. *Paradise Postponed* and its sequels, *Titmuss Regained* and *The Sound of Trumpets*, are social histories that combine the expansive form of the Victorian novel with the mordant satire of Evelyn Waugh. While they reveal their author’s liberal bias, both portray flawed people at all points of the political and social spectrums. Supported by their false myths, even the author’s favorites lie, embrace futile causes, and are self-serving, but Mortimer is a benevolent judge of his saints and sinners, except for Leslie Titmuss, whose deceit and unscrupulous ambition make tolerance and forgiveness impossible. Mortimer’s stance in this regard has been consistent over the decades.

## A VOYAGE ROUND MY FATHER

**First produced:** 1963 (radio play), 1970  
(stage play)

**Type of work:** Play

*Through flashbacks focusing on his father, a son creates an affectionate, moving, and funny tribute.*

*A Voyage Round My Father* is an autobiographical memory play comprised of chronological episodes spanning two decades. A reflective narrator links past and present and is a unifying force, participating in the action (as man and boy) and stepping out of it to address the audience. The narrator reveals a symbiotic yet strangely distant and unemotional relationship between the son and his father, a blind barrister. As the title suggests, the son never gets as close to his father as he desired, partly as a result of the blindness, but also because the older man regarded life as a game and built an impenetrable emotional barrier between himself and everyone else, even the wife upon whom he totally depended. Despite his father’s coldness and self-absorption, Mortimer intends *A Voyage Round My Father* as a loving tribute.

The play starts with the old man having his adult son describe the family garden. After the son as narrator gives the audience some background, the action reverts to the past, with youthful initiation

episodes at home and school. When the son must decide upon a profession, the old barrister, who regards the law contemptuously, encourages his boy to choose it, primarily because it will give him spare time for writing. In the second act, the young man is working in a wartime propaganda film unit in lieu of military service; there he falls in love with a married woman. After her divorce, by which time he is a barrister, they marry, but since his income from divorce cases is inadequate, he works part-time for a legal aid society and starts writing plays.

Having been instructed by his father on the nuances of cross-examinations, the son finally wins a major domestic case, though the victor did not deserve to prevail. The son thinks he has become like his father, of whom he says: "He had no message. I think he had no belief. He was the advocate who can take the side that comes to him first and always discover words to anger his opponent." In the last scene, the garden deteriorates as the father dies, and the play concludes with the narrator telling the audience: "I'd been told of all the things you're meant to feel. Sudden freedom, growing up, the end of dependence, the step into the sunlight when no one is taller than you and you're in no one else's shadow. I know what I felt. Lonely." In his 1982 memoir, Mortimer says that after he wrote the play, "a man who had filled so much of my life seemed to have left me and become someone for other people to read about and perform."

Many American memory plays are products of their authors' imaginations, with autobiographical elements presented in highly stylized ways, and Oedipal or other psychological concerns the thematic centerpieces. Mortimer's play, in contrast, is largely reportorial, a kind of personal essay in dramatic form. Further, while he has altered some details, situations and events faithfully represent the past. An atypical work for him in subject matter, its form also departs from the traditional pattern of his other stage works. *A Voyage Round My Father*, which unequivocally demonstrates his mastery of

the full-length serious play, was a critical success, had a 1971 London run of 501 performances, was adapted for television in 1982, and has been subsequently revived.

## PARADISE POSTPONED

**First published:** 1985

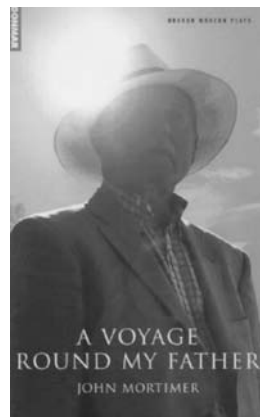
**Type of work:** Novel

*The book is a family chronicle, set in post-World War II England, in which a rector disinherits his family and his sons try to learn why.*

*Paradise Postponed*, which Mortimer wrote as a novel and television miniseries, is both a family chronicle and social commentary on England in the decades following World War II. Its conventional form (aside from flashbacks) and some of its plot (such as the prospect of lengthy litigation over a will) bring to mind novels by Dickens and Trollope. Like his nineteenth century predecessors, Mortimer tempers a sometimes poignant story of malaise with wit. Propelling the plot is a mystery that is not unraveled until the end, at which time the full significance of the title becomes clear. The earthly paradise that the main characters strive to achieve remains elusive, even to the one person who seemed to have it within grasp.

The main setting is a seemingly idyllic village, Rapstone Fanner. Rector Simeon Simcox, a socialist whose family owns the local brewery, devotes more time to ban-the-bomb marches and other political works than to his ecclesiastical duties. His wife is patient and indulgent. His older son is a novelist whose idealism Hollywood corrupts. His younger son is a self-effacing idealist, a country doctor who plays with a local jazz combo. The two brothers become involved with the same woman, who becomes pregnant by the younger, marries the older, eventually divorces him, and later rekindles the flame with the younger.

Intertwined with this Simcox saga is that of Leslie Titmuss, whose father is a brewery worker and whose mother was a maid at the local nobleman's home. An amoral social climber, young Titmuss sets his sights on a seat in Parliament and proceeds with guile to attain his goal by surrepti-



tiously engineering the defeat of the incumbent Conservative and setting the stage for his own candidacy in the next election, when he beats the Labourite. He abets his social and political rise by a loveless marriage to homely Charlotte, the nobleman's daughter, which produces a son, Nicky. A few years later, Charlotte is accidentally killed by a police vehicle during a women's demonstration against military weapons.

When the Reverend Simeon Simcox leaves his estate to Titmuss, his sons attempt to learn what motivated a socially conscious leftist to leave everything to a money-hungry Conservative. They believe their father had gone mad, until their mother reveals that Charlotte was Simeon's illegitimate child, and by leaving his estate to Titmuss, grandson Nicky eventually would benefit. A final ironic shock is the revelation that the inherited brewery stock is worthless.

Titmuss, whose ambition leads him to renounce his working-class origins, epitomizes what Mortimer believed was wrong with the United Kingdom that Margaret Thatcher led into the 1980's. The government and Titmuss lacked moral purpose and compassion for the country's poor. Using his political base, Titmuss orchestrates business takeovers and land grabs that destroy others' careers and fortunes, and though styling himself Conservative, his political and financial activities ignore traditional values. At novel's end, he and his kind are in control. In the sequel *Titmuss Regained*, having moved higher in the government, Titmuss seems to get his comeuppance, but in a third novel in the chronicle, *The Sound of Trumpets*, he rises again.

## RUMPOLE À LA CARTE

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Short stories

*London barrister Horace Rumpole demonstrates his deductive and legal talents in six comic detective tales, most of whose characters are present in other Rumpole stories.*

Mortimer has written numerous comic detective tales featuring defense barrister Horace Rumpole; *Rumpole à la Carte* is one of the many collec-

tions of these stories. Although Rumpole has not become a Queen's Counsel and handles mainly Old Bailey crime cases that his colleagues shun, he is satisfied with his lot, possibly because he almost always bests nominal superiors, including judges and the boorish head of his chambers.

The Rumpole stories, which Mortimer also adapted for television, have at least two complementary plots, courtroom and personal, the latter either a domestic crisis between Rumpole and his wife Hilda ("She Who Must Be Obeyed") or a problem involving the courts or the aging barrister's colleagues. These subplots not only entertain but also further characterize the unlikely hero, who sometimes selflessly rescues the reputations and careers of ambitious younger barristers, and whose insights and slyness enable him to shape people and situations to his own purposes.

In an early story, Rumpole confesses that although he only feels "truly alive and happy in Law Courts, [he has] a singular distaste for the law." Indeed, his advocacy on behalf of mainly worthless clients does not rely as much upon his knowledge of the law as upon his detective skills and ability to judge character, talents that link him to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, from whom Rumpole often quotes. Many of the stories, in fact, follow the Sherlockian pattern, which is no surprise, since Mortimer as a child listened to his father recite Holmes's adventures from memory.

The stories in this collection include familiar details from other adventures, such as Rumpole's rejuvenating visits to Pommeroy's Wine Bar, his love for steak and kidney pudding, and his speechifying on behalf of an accused. Several of the tales, though, place the crusty hero in unfamiliar milieus. In the title story, for instance, he confronts "the terrible curse of nouvelle cuisine" in a three-star restaurant to which Hilda's expatriate cousin takes them. Later, the owner-chef, whose food and establishment Rumpole had roundly insulted, hires the barrister to defend him. In "Rumpole at Sea," Hilda books the couple on a two-week cruise over her husband's objections, and among the passengers is one of Rumpole's high court nemeses, Mr. "Miscarriage of Justice" Graves. The adversaries become involved in a shipboard mystery that Graves bungles but Rumpole solves. In "Rumpole for the Prosecution," as the title reveals, he becomes, for the first time in his career, a prosecuting

attorney, but even in this murder case his shrewd instincts prevail, and he ends up securing an acquittal for the accused.

Within a format of mystery mixed with humor, Mortimer also presents his insider's view of England's legal system, with its hypocritical barristers and biased, even ignorant, judges. Rumpole, an iconoclast fighting the establishment, sometimes is a nonconformist who upholds his own interests, but more often he struggles on behalf of a kindred soul, also an outsider of some sort.

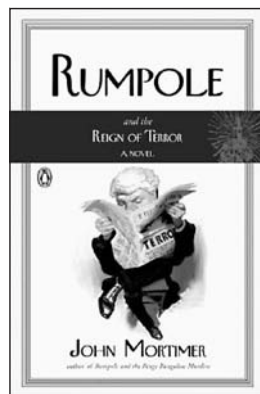
## RUMPOLE AND THE REIGN OF TERROR

**First published:** 2006

**Type of work:** Novel

*To defend a Pakistani doctor detained as an Al Qaeda operative, Rumpole must overcome new antiterrorism laws, as well as his usual judicial adversaries.*

Having written dozens of Rumpole stories, Mortimer in 2004 published his first novel featuring the Old Bailey advocate, *Rumpole and the Penge Bungalow Murders*, which recalls the early case that made his reputation and incidentally led to marriage with Hilda. *Rumpole and the Reign of Terror* also is a novel, with Hilda as conarrator and aspiring memoirist. Notwithstanding this new narrative approach, there is much that is familiar from earlier entries in the Rumpole saga: his antiestablishment attitude, especially toward the judiciary; his sympathy for society's outsiders; his almost paternalistic attitude toward the Timsons, the clan of petty thieves who are his frequent clients; and multiple story lines. In addition, recurring characters make cameo appearances: "Soapy Sam" Ballard, Q. C., hapless head of chambers and Rumpole's nominal superior; Claude Erskine-Brown, an ineffectual colleague whose wife's legal career puts his



to shame; Ferdinand Ian Gilmour Newton, also known as Fig Newton, Rumpole's private investigator, who always has a cold; and Dodo Mackintosh, Hilda's old school friend and occasional guest, whose dislike of Rumpole is matched by his antipathy toward her.

While defending a Timson client, Rumpole is engaged by another family member, Tiffany Timson Khan, but not to finesse a burglary charge. Rather, her husband, a London physician whose family had emigrated from Pakistan in the 1970's, was arrested as a terrorist and faces indefinite imprisonment. Because of new antiterrorism statutes, the government can withhold information about the case, even potentially exculpatory evidence; thus stymied, Rumpole resorts to unconventional means to develop his defense. Thanks to a fortuitous coincidence, the Old Bailey hack learns potentially embarrassing information about the home secretary, whom he pressures (indeed, blackmails) to remove some of the new legal obstacles in this instance. Thus unfettered, Rumpole embarks upon a vintage courtroom performance and exonerates his wrongly accused client.

Meanwhile, the presiding judge, an erstwhile Rumpole rival, Leonard Bullingham (dubbed "The Mad Bull" by court denizens), who has become Hilda's afternoon bridge partner, starts to woo her and suggests marriage. Domestic subplots, standard in the Rumpole canon, are more than gratuitous diversions. Here, Mortimer reduces a high court judge, Rumpole's present courtroom nemesis, to a would-be seducer of a married woman. Flattered though she is by Bullingham's attention, Hilda's commitment to Rumpole is unwavering; she is as loyal and selfless a spouse as Tiffany and quite the opposite of manipulative and ambitious Benazir Whiteside.

The Hilda narrative also provides a contrasting view of the government's tampering with legal traditions, for Hilda supports actions against the United Kingdom's immigrant population, whom she distrusts. Dr. Khan is a "ghastly terrorist," properly imprisoned, she says, and believes that "most sensible people" agree with her. When Rumpole confronts her with allusions to the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, she responds that "there were no suicide bombers and no Al Qaeda when King John signed up to the charter on the island of Runnymede." This contrast between the Rumpoles

focuses reader attention upon Mortimer's deeply held belief in liberty and freedom of speech for all.

Having prevailed once again for his clients over hypocrisy and the more powerful, and in this instance over questionable laws, Rumpole the liberal iconoclast looks ahead to more closing speeches and cross-examinations, troubled only by the prospect of Hilda publishing her memoirs.

### SUMMARY

During a time of revolution in English drama, John Mortimer was more a traditionalist than an innovator. Nevertheless, he made two enduring contributions to the stage: Demonstrating the artistic and commercial viability of the one-act comedy and writing a memory play that stands as a landmark work of the period. As a novelist, he wrote family chronicles in the Victorian manner for late twentieth century readers. Further, inspired by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, he created in Horace Rumpole a detective whose international popularity rivals that of Sherlock Holmes. Finally, his television scripts have enhanced the stature of the genre.

Gerald H. Strauss

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- John Mortimer's major fictional creations are Horace Rumpole and Leslie Titmuss. Is it correct to say that they are total opposites?
- How does Mortimer attain freshness and variety in the Rumpole stories, even though they are formulaic narratives?
- What is the role of the British class system in Mortimer's drama and fiction?
- What is the source of Rumpole's "singular distaste for the law," and how does it affect his work as a barrister?
- How does Mortimer fuse the comic and tragic, optimism and pessimism, in his fiction?
- Why is *A Voyage Round My Father*, an autobiographical play, enduringly popular? Does it have a universality to which audiences respond?

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*John Mortimer*

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*No Hero*, 1955

*Like Men Betrayed*, 1955

*Three Winters*, 1958

*Personality Split*, 1964

*Education of an Englishman*, 1964

*Mr. Luby's Fear of Heaven*, 1976

SCREENPLAYS:

*Ferry to Hong Kong*, 1959 (with Lewis Gilbert and Vernon Harris)

*The Innocents*, 1961 (with Truman Capote and William Archibald)

*Lunch Hour*, 1962 (adaptation of his play)

*I Thank a Fool*, 1962 (with others)

*Guns of Darkness*, 1962

*The Running Man*, 1963

*Bunny Lake Is Missing*, 1964 (with Penelope Mortimer)

*A Flea in Her Ear*, 1967 (adaptation of his play)

*John and Mary*, 1969

*Tea with Mussolini*, 1999

TELEPLAYS:

*David and Broccoli*, 1960

*The Exploding Azalea*, 1966

*The Head Waiter*, 1966

*The Other Side*, 1967

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*Rumpole of the Bailey*, 1975, 1978, 1979

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Courtesy, Author

## FARLEY MOWAT

**Born:** Belleville, Ontario, Canada  
May 12, 1921

*One of Canada's foremost authors, Mowat is primarily concerned with nature, environmental issues, the ethics of modern life, and governments that seemingly have no regard for tradition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Farley McGill Mowat (MOH-aht) was born in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, on May 12, 1921, to Angus and Helen Thomson Mowat. After completing his public school education in Ontario, he joined the Canadian army in 1939, rising to the rank of captain in the infantry and serving overseas during World War II. In 1945, Mowat returned to Canada and received his B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1949. That year, he married Frances Elizabeth Thornhill, with whom he had two children, Robert Alexander and David Peter; the marriage ended in divorce, and Mowat married Claire Angel Wheeler in 1961. He and his wife settled in Port Hope, Ontario, during the winter and in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, during the summer.

The author of more than thirty books ranging from autobiography to children's literature, Mowat began his writing career as a result of his conflict with his employer, the Canadian government. After returning from military service, he accepted a job as a biological researcher for the Dominion Wildlife Service in the Barren Grounds Nature Reserve in northern Canada to observe what effects the wolves had on the caribou herds. While there, Mowat became friends with a small Eskimo tribe, the Ihalmiut, who called themselves the People of the Deer because the caribou provided them with food, clothing, and shelter. In response

to what Mowat perceived as the Canadian government's negligent attitude toward these people, he began a crusade to help them preserve their heritage, a campaign that not only failed but also cost him his job. Mowat's first book, *People of the Deer* (1952; revised, 1975), chronicles his experiences, and its sequel, *The Desperate People* (1959; revised, 1975), describes the Ihalmiut's defeat. Both books were later revised and reissued to temper what some critics saw as misrepresentations of natural and social history. In 1954, *People of the Deer* won the Anisfield-Wolfe Award for its contribution to interracial relations.

*People of the Deer* begins Mowat's career-long engagement with issues relating to the far north country of Canada; he views himself as more of a storyteller than a naturalist, despite what he considers to be misguided attempts to categorize him as such. Mowat seeks to explore the complicated relationships between species: wolf and humankind, caribou and Eskimo, and the hunter and the hunted.

A summer spent in Churchill, Manitoba, with his uncle, western Canadian ornithologist Frank Farley, first introduced the author to the beauties of the Canadian north country; this tundra world is a place to which Mowat returns again and again in his writing. Besides *People of the Deer* and *The Desperate People*, Mowat pursues this interest in *Ordeal by Ice* (1960), *The Polar Passion* (1967), *Tundra* (1973), *Walking on the Land* (2000), *High Latitudes: An Arctic Journey* (2002; also known as *High Latitudes: A Northern Journey*, 2002), and *No Man's River* (2004). In *Canada North* (1967), Mowat wrote the text for the photographic volume that was published in conjunction with the Canadian Centennial project.

*Sibir: My Discovery of Siberia* (1970; published in the United States as *The Siberians*, 1970) recounts Mowat's experiences on his 1966 and 1969 visits to Siberian communities in the Soviet Union. *The Snow Walker* (1975) contains short stories and sketches of the people of the north country as they fight a harsh natural environment and the encroachments of modern technology.

Mowat lived for many years in Newfoundland, and his work reflects his connectedness to that region. In the 1950's, Mowat worked on two books about the maritime salvage industry: *The Grey Seas Under* (1959) and *The Serpent's Coil* (1961), both of which look at people in contact and often in conflict with their natural surroundings. Yet in 1967 he left his home at Burgeo, Newfoundland, after becoming embroiled in a bitter and unsuccessful fight with local residents and government bureaucrats to save a trapped whale; his experiences resulted in *A Whale for the Killing* (1972).

While much of Mowat's work reflects his personal interests broadened to include a more global perspective, a fair amount of his writing is also autobiographical: *Never Cry Wolf* (1963) tells of his first job as a wildlife researcher; *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float* (1968), which won the Leacock Medal and was named to *L'Étoile de la Mer's* honors list, describes his 1967 adventures sailing along the Newfoundland and Maritime Provinces' coastlines; *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* (1957), which won the Canadian Women's Clubs Award, and *Owls in the Family* (1961), which won both the Hans Christian Andersen International Award and the Boys' Clubs of America Junior Book Award, tell of pets that he had as a child; *And No Birds Sang* (1979) describes his experience of what he labels "The Worm That Never Dies," the terror of war; and *My Discovery of America* (1985) recounts his exclusion from the United States in 1984 as a result of being labeled an undesirable. (Besides Mowat's leftist political beliefs, his Federal Bureau of Investigation file contained a copy of the March 22, 1968, issue of the *Ottawa Citizen* that reported that he once tried to shoot down a United States Air Force bomber that flew over his house in Burgeo.)

Mowat's work in the 1980's received high praise as well as popular attention. *Sea of Slaughter* (1984) is his account of the decimation of the wildlife populations off the northeastern coast of North America; *Woman in the Mists: The Story of Dian Fossey and*

*the Mountain Gorillas of Africa* (1987) is Mowat's biography of the American naturalist murdered in 1985 after her vigorous attempts to preserve the wild gorillas in Rwanda, Africa. Three of Mowat's books have been made into films: a television production of *A Whale for the Killing* in 1981, the movie version of *Never Cry Wolf*, released in 1983, and *Gorillas in the Mist*, the film version of *Woman in the Mists*, released in 1988.

In the 1990's and the twenty-first century, Mowat returned to some themes he had explored in earlier books: autobiography in *My Father's Son* (1992) and *Born Naked* (1993), the environment in *Rescue the Earth! Conversations with the Green Crusaders* (1990), and his travels in *Aftermath: Travels in a Post-War World* (1995) and *Bay of Sprits: A Love Story* (2006).

Mowat has received many honors, including the President's Medal, University of Western Ontario, 1952, for best Canadian short story of 1952; the National Association of Independent Schools Award for juvenile books, 1963; the Hans Christian Andersen Honors List for juvenile books, 1965; the Canadian Centennial Medal, 1967; doctor of literature from Laurentian University, 1970, the University of Victoria, 1982, and Lakehead University, 1986; Vicky Metcalf Award, 1970; Mark Twain Award, 1971; doctor of law from Lethbridge University, 1973, the University of Toronto, 1973, and the University of Prince Edward Island, 1979; Curran Award, 1977, for "contributions to understanding wolves"; Queen Elizabeth II Jubilee Medal, 1978; Knight of Mark Twain, 1980; and officer, Order of Canada. The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society named a ship and the Ottawa school system a school in his honor.

## ANALYSIS

In a 1987 interview, Mowat characterized himself as someone

interested in writing about wildlife, but that's secondary. I am basically a storyteller. . . . [I]t's my life. . . . [M]ore and more I'm being categorized as a nature writer. That's nonsense. I'm not a nature writer. I write about life on this planet, and that includes human life and nonhuman life. I'm concerned about what's happening to all forms of life.

For Mowat, nature provides the arena in which to explore the interconnectedness of all life and to assert the legitimacy of the many ways of living on this



planet. The primary targets of his work are bureaucracy, technology, and cultural imperialism and the ways in which industrialized societies have arrogantly ignored the needs and rights of the other inhabitants of the globe, including those inhabitants that are not human.

Mowat's strong personality reverberates throughout his work, a style that has been labeled "subjective nonfiction" by one of his critics. He does not shrink from confrontation or from assigning blame where he thinks it lies, as in the case of the Canadian government in *People of the Deer*. This pugnaciousness often earns him criticism, or, as in the case of the events that prompted him to write about the Ithalmiuts, the loss of his job. Pleasing the powers that be has never been one of Mowat's concerns, however; he instead is determined to make his views known and, by doing so, to raise public awareness and effect change.

The Canadian north country and the tundra provide Mowat with ample opportunity to accomplish both goals. *The Siberians*, for example, is his account of two trips that he made to the Soviet Union, visiting remote settlements where people lead a self-contained and self-respecting way of life. In the case of both the Siberians and the Ithalmiut Eskimo in *People of the Deer*, Mowat finds people who tread softly on the earth, who are in tune with rather than up in arms against nature. These people do not destroy for the sake of the hunt; rather, he says, "they kill to eat, to keep themselves going, but they don't kill for fun, they don't kill for greed, they don't kill from any of the motivations that we have." Mowat repeatedly looks at the Canadian wilderness and sees it as a staging ground for exploitation and neglect, for human arrogance and greed, and for disregard for a more widely focused ecological balance and harmony. His examination of the early polar explorers in *Ordeal by Ice* and *The Polar Passion* clearly demonstrates the futility of battling against nature, which always wins.

Mowat's angry reverence for nature and his accusatory stance against arrogant technological aggression on the part of the Canadian government may be seen in such books as *Never Cry Wolf* and *A Whale for the Killing*. He and others have pointed out the irony in the Canadian government's disregard of his findings concerning the tundra wolves. In *A Whale for the Killing*, Mowat could not convince his neighbors that a trapped whale had a right to be

freed rather than tortured, and he used the creature's story to explore the wholesale slaughter of sea creatures and the negligence of the Canadian government. *Sea of Slaughter* represents a broader consideration of the issues that Mowat raised in the previous two books and clearly demonstrates his anger at the senseless injuries that people inflict on other species. Mowat makes a strong case against the exploitation of both the land- and the sea-dwelling animals along the Atlantic seaboard from Cape Cod to Labrador. To strengthen the impact of *Sea of Slaughter*, he offers a historical account of the area beginning in the sixteenth century, clearly demonstrating the frightening and unnecessary changes that humans have caused as they pillaged both land and sea: pollution, overhunting, destruction of habitat and food sources, poaching, and government-sanctioned cullings of seal and other animals.

Mowat sees himself as a rebel and seems to relish the opportunity that his confrontations with government, academia, and other representatives of the establishment, such as business and industry, afford him for driving his message home. He sometimes uses wry humor to make his points, as in *My Discovery of America*, in which he describes his attempts to discover why he had been denied permission to enter the United States for a speaking tour in 1984. Mowat speculates that he had been accused of anti-American sentiments; his pugnacious attitude surfaced in his refusal to come to the United States despite that country's Immigration and Naturalization Service having belatedly granted him admission, refusing because the United States' government had yet to apologize for its mistake.

## NEVER CRY WOLF

**First published:** 1963

**Type of work:** Natural history and autobiography

*The wolves of the Arctic wilderness are not the fierce predators that their detractors have accused them of being.*

*Never Cry Wolf* recounts Mowat's experiences as a biologist and naturalist sent by the Canadian gov-

ernment to study a group of wolves in the Canadian tundra of the far north. It had always been assumed that the wolves were a threat to other wildlife populations and, by extension, to domestic herds because they needlessly destroyed large numbers of animals. Mowat's experiences living in the midst of the tundra, the wolves, and the caribou herd stand in direct contradiction to the Canadian government's assumption that the wolves were to blame for the decline in those caribou populations. As Mowat was to discover, however, his findings were not information that government bureaucrats wanted to hear. Unlike the Canadian government, which did nothing to alter its negative treatment of the wolves, when *Never Cry Wolf* was translated into Russian, the Soviet government banned the slaughter of wolves, animals that it had previously considered dangerous predators.

*Never Cry Wolf* is as much about the way in which humans misperceive the behavior of other species as it is about the true behavior of the wolves that Mowat observed. The story brings the social dynamics of this wolf population to light; Mowat describes wolves as animals representing a complex family network, one making little impact on the ecosystem in which it lives. As well as these two issues, Mowat gives readers a humorous and revealing look at himself as he changes his mind about the "threats" that these animals pose, not only to the greater population but also to himself as the lone observer living in close proximity to them on the tundra. The book achieves its power because it is both a global treatment of what might be called species imperialism and shortsightedness on the part of humans and a "local" portrait of one wolf group and the one human who must live in and adapt to their world, a place that is oftentimes harsh and unpredictable.

In order to see his wolves, whom he names George and Angeline, Mowat clearly had to learn to think like a wolf, to see the world as wolves see it, to hear what they hear, and to respond to what mat-

ters to them. Sometimes the results are comical, as when Mowat resorts to marking out his territory in the same way as George had done, with urine. The book describes wolves, and their observer, going about the day-to-day business of surviving, and it is this act of making do in a stubbornly hostile environment that gives the book its power and allows Mowat to invest the wolves with great dignity. He concludes that wolves take from nature only what they need—principally field mice and a few ailing caribou; the lesson that his observations teach is obvious, but one that the Canadian government did not heed: The wolves have as much right to be where they are and do what they are doing as any other species.

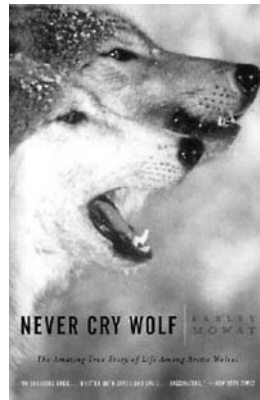
*Never Cry Wolf* was adapted into a successful motion picture of the same name starring Charles Martin Smith and released in 1983.

## A WHALE FOR THE KILLING

**First published:** 1972

**Type of work:** Natural history and autobiography

*A man stands up to the people of his hometown in an attempt to save a stranded fin whale.*



*A Whale for the Killing* presents a time when Mowat was forced to stand up to the people among whom he had chosen to live, people whom he had admired for their rugged individualism, their tenacity in the face of nature's harshness, and their refusal to give in to adversity. In his attempts to force the townspeople of Burgeo, Newfoundland, to rescue a stranded eighty-ton fin whale, he learns that not everyone has the same reverence for nature as he and his wife and that the Canadian government is less concerned about protecting its natural heritage than it is about public relations.

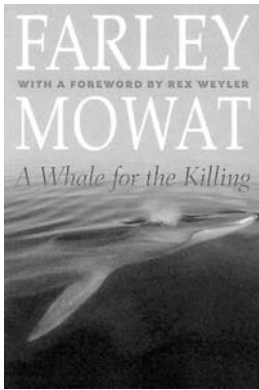
This autobiographical narrative goes beyond recounting the erosion of the friendships that Mowat and his wife had established over many years in Burgeo; it also becomes a means by which Mowat can offer insight into the destruction brought about over time by the whaling industry. Interwoven in his account of the whale's inhumane treatment and slow death are sections that explore

the decimation of the North American North Atlantic fishing grounds and that give vivid accounts of the slaughter of whales, animals that in earlier times ranged the ocean in vast pods. The behavior of the people of Burgeo—tormenting the whale with speedboats and shooting endless rounds of ammunition into its body, inflicting wounds that would eventually make it prey to infection and great suffering—parallels the rapacious nature of the whaling industry. Mowat's book thus works on

two levels: as a local story and as an account of humankind's wanton destruction of anything and everything for its own use, without giving thought to the balances that might be upset in the process.

*A Whale for the Killing* presents what Mowat perceives to be a direct relationship between the destruction of the normal natural balance in nature and the rise of technologi-

cally "superior" industrial cultures. The connection that once existed between humankind and the rest of the animal kingdom is broken; the reverence once felt for other beasts is replaced by vicious sport and selfish destruction. Yet while Mowat blames the villagers of Burgeo, he accuses the Canadian government and the global scientific community for failing to come to the aid of the whale, an animal that could have been saved. The tensions that he depicts between the people doing what they please and a greater "good" are interesting because these people have been predisposed by their culture to behave as they do toward the fin whale. Thus, Mowat's demanding that they cease their behavior is, in effect, asking that they deny the culture in which they have managed to live. His ultimate response to the incidents—the torture and death of the whale and Mowat's neighbors' growing hostility and denunciation—is to leave the place that he had formerly considered the embodiment of rugged virtue.



## THE FARFARERS: BEFORE THE NORSE

**First published:** 1998

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Mowat argues that North America was discovered and colonized by the pre-Celtic inhabitants of the British Isles and northern Europe.*

In *The Farfarers: Before the Norse*, Mowat revisits a theme he previously discussed in *Westwiking: The Ancient Norse in Greenland and North America* (1965) and *The Curse of the Viking Grave* (1966): the pre-Columbian exploration and settlement of North America. He begins with the Celtic invasion of northern Europe in the seventh century B.C.E., when the Celts killed, drove out, or enslaved the people who were already there. Mowat names these earlier people the "Albans" and cites as examples the Aquitainians, the Picts, and the builders of Stonehenge. He speculates that the Albans eventually fled to the Orkney and Shetland islands off northern Scotland. He further theorizes that they developed a maritime culture that used advanced oceangoing fishing boats with hulls made of hides, rather than wood. Mowat calls these boats "farfarers," which, he says, enabled the Albans to sail to and eventually colonize Greenland, Iceland, Newfoundland, and Labrador.

Mowat observes that Iceland appears on ancient maps centuries before it was discovered and settled by the Norse. He argues that the Albans got there first because they were following the walrus herds to harvest their ivory. His sources include the Norse historians, who mention that the Norse found people on Iceland, and the Greek explorer Pytheas, who sailed from the Mediterranean to Iceland around 330 B.C.E. Mowat argues that the Norse eventually drove out the Albans, who drifted to Greenland. A few generations later, the Norse followed them to Greenland and from there to North America. Unfortunately, the Albans could not roam further west because the aggressive Thule people, a Native American nation who were the ancestors of the modern Inuit, were moving into the area as well.

On an expedition to northern Canada in 1966, Mowat saw low stone walls in northern Quebec,

which, after a visit to the Orkney Islands, he concluded provided a foundation for upturned boats to be used as winter dwellings on the beaches there. While in the Orkneys, he had observed such structures still in use. He also cites the similarity of stone structures found in North America and the British Isles. He then argues that the Albans settled Newfoundland after they were pushed out of Labrador by the Thule and the Norse. Finally, Mowat speculates that the Albans were gradually driven into the interior of Newfoundland by the English and French in the seventeenth century and that a group of Newfoundlanders known as the Jakatars, thought to be a mixture of French and Native American ancestry, might actually be the last genetically distinct Albans. Otherwise, the Albans disappeared into the gene pools of other peoples.

Some scholars dismissed Mowat's theory, charging that the book was highly provisional and that Mowat drew radical conclusions from limited evidence. Some people also disqualified the book as a scholarly work because Mowat included fictional passages to describe the Albans. For his part, Mowat acknowledged that his book made "no pretence at being history in the academic sense" but he believed it to be a "true story" of a "vanished people."

## SUMMARY

Farley Mowat maintains a deep interest in the interrelationship between the human species and the other creatures with whom it shares the earth. His interests range from correct use for the land to appropriate interactions between humans and other species to bureaucratic, academic, and technological arrogance. Sometimes Mowat makes his point through what some people categorize as children's fiction—stories about animals; other times, he does so by interweaving current events and natural and social history.

In his work, Mowat demands that readers view themselves from the perspective of the global village, a setting that includes all species and the rights of all animals and all peoples. Although he denies that he writes natural history, his work is certainly natural history in its broadest context: considerations of the interconnectedness of events, peoples, and creatures. He asks that his readers look critically at the many dangerous ways in which industrial, technological cultures are changing and damaging the complex balance of lives on the earth. Although Mowat characteristically focuses much of his attention on the far northern regions of his native Canada, his work carries many more far-reaching implications.

Melissa E. Barth; updated by Thomas R. Feller

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*People of the Deer*, 1952 (revised 1975; sociology and autobiography)

*The Dog Who Wouldn't Be*, 1957 (autobiography)

*The Desperate People*, 1959 (revised 1975, sequel to *People of the Deer*; sociology and autobiography)

*The Grey Seas Under*, 1959

*The Top of the World* trilogy, 1960-1973 (natural history; includes *Ordeal by Ice*, 1960; *The Polar Passion*, 1967; and *Tundra*, 1973)

*The Serpent's Coil*, 1961

*Owls in the Family*, 1961 (autobiography)

*Never Cry Wolf*, 1963 (natural history and autobiography)

*Westviking: The Ancient Norse in Greenland and North America*, 1965 (maps and drawings by Claire Wheeler)

*The Curse of the Viking Grave*, 1966 (illustrated by Charles Geer)

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*Virunga: The Passion of Dian Fossey and the Mountain Gorillas of Africa*, 1987

*Woman in the Mists: The Story of Dian Fossey and the Mountain Gorillas of Africa*, 1987 (natural history and biography)

*Rescue the Earth! Conversations with the Green Crusaders*, 1990

*My Father's Son*, 1992 (autobiography)

*Born Naked*, 1993 (autobiography)

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*The Farfarers: Before the Norse*, 1998

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#### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Farley Mowat's attitude toward civilization and its expansion into wilderness areas?
- How does Mowat view Native Americans?
- Mowat admires rugged individuals. How did his attitude toward the inhabitants of Burgeo, Newfoundland, change?
- *Never Cry Wolf* and *A Whale for the Killing* are about humanity's relationships with animals. What is the proper relationship between humans and wolves? Humans and whales? Between the Inuit and the caribou? Between the hunters and the hunted?
- *The Farfarers* discusses the slaughter of walrus for their ivory. What part do images of animal slaughter play in other books by Mowat?
- Mowat has the reputation of not allowing the facts to get in the way of a good story. How does this help and/or hinder him in his arguments?



# MULTATULI

**Born:** Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
March 2, 1820

**Died:** Nieder-Ingelheim, Germany  
February 19, 1887

*With the power of a single novel, Max Havelaar, a searing indictment of corrupt Dutch colonial government in Indonesia, Multatuli redefined the direction of Dutch narrative literature by his audacious experimentation with formal techniques that anticipated European modernism by nearly a half century.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Multatuli (muhl-tuh-TEW-lee) was the pseudonym of Eduard Douwes Dekker, who was born to modest circumstances in Amsterdam on March 2, 1820. His father, a sea captain, had spent his life on the open seas, but he wanted his son to pursue a less adventurous career as an accountant. Young Eduard, however, thought being an accountant would be a dull job; before he completed the equivalent of a high school education, he went to work as a clerk in a textile factory. After three years, however, he was bored and sailed with his father for the East Indies, where the Dutch maintained a significant colonial presence.

Over the next several years, Dekker maintained a number of posts until in 1842 he was awarded an administrative appointment in Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), where he was virtually the entire civic government for the lonely jungle outpost. Initially Dekker was appalled at the conditions under which the local natives were managed and further incensed over evidence of colonial corruption and bureaucratic insensitivity.

It was there that he made his first writing efforts, an unpublished novel “Losse bladen uit het dagboek van een oude man” (loose pages from an old man’s diary), which relates the tragic story of a young boy whose earnest altruism ends up costing him his life, when he dies trying to save his brother from drowning. Importantly, the work tells the story of the doomed young boy from the perspective of an older man who is unable to understand entirely the impetus for the boy’s courageous gen-

erosity, a frame narrative that anticipates Dekker’s later formal experiments.

After a brief suspension from his job from 1843 to 1844, when his bookkeeping irregularities were exposed, Dekker was reinstated and in 1857 was given a plum appointment as deputy commissioner at Lebak on Java, where the sugar and coffee plantations made it one of the most important trading posts in the Dutch East Indies archipelago. Within six weeks of his appointment, however, Dekker raised a public outrage over the exploitation of the Javanese people who lived in abject poverty and were subjected to the cruel practices of vicious tribal regents, whose power was assured by the Dutch occupational government. Indeed, Dekker went public with his indictment when he feared his predecessor, who had also threatened to expose the corruption, had been poisoned. This was to prove his downfall; his charges were dismissed by the colonial administration as precipitous, and Dekker was compelled to resign.

Dekker returned to the Netherlands, determined to expose the colonial system, and he did so in a series of newspaper editorials and scathing pamphlets. It was the publication of his novel *Max Havelaar: Of, De koffij-veilingen der Nederlandsche handelsmaatschappij* (1860; *Max Havelaar: Or, The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*, 1868), however, that catapulted him into international prominence. The novel was written under the pseudonym Multatuli, which Dekker had taken from a Latin phrase in Horace’s *Ars poetica* (c. 17 B.C.E.; *The Art of Poetry*, 1567) that translates as “I

have suffered much." A polemic that has since been compared to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the novel, written in a single month, triggered government investigations into colonial administration. *Max Havelaar* would influence a generation of strident anticolonial writers, most prominently Joseph Conrad.

Dekker himself, however, would struggle to match the success of his first work. *Minnebrieven* (love letters), published in 1861, is an inventive epistolary narrative that features a three-way correspondence between the writer-persona Multatuli; his long-suffering, if unimaginative wife; and Fancy, the muse who demands nothing less than the revelation of truth. The work turns quickly into a bitter, often satiric look at the ironic fate of a radical visionary and seer, who must, nevertheless, sell books to the very middle class he despises. The work found little audience.

For nearly fifteen years, beginning in 1862, Dekker published a massive seven-volume series, known collectively as *Ideën* (ideas), that put forward a revolutionary agenda reflecting his free-spirited sense of inquiry. In it, he favored women's rights, deplored the lingering control of the Catholic Church, dismissed as inefficient the centuries-old monarchical system, and advocated a range of controversial, provocative ideas from atheism to free love. (Dekker himself pursued numerous public liaisons with a series of mistresses.) *Ideën* contained the story "Wouterje Pieterse," which retold the Faust legend, using a precocious child who grows up with the quixotic desire to understand nothing less than love itself. The story was later published as a novel, *De geschiedenis van Woutertje Pieterse* (the history of Woutertje Pieterse), published posthumously in 1890.

Disgusted by his lack of market success in the Netherlands and frustrated by the government's lack of real reform in Indonesia, Dekker moved to Mainz, Germany, to live openly with his mistress while his wife moved to Italy. He attempted to write for the stage, but he lacked a compelling sense of scene and character, using the form, as Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg would with much greater success, to espouse social reform. After briefly returning to the Netherlands after his wife's death, Dekker returned to Germany and took up residence in Wiesbaden in the Rhineland. For most of the last ten years of his life, Dekker pub-

lished nothing, and he died in relative obscurity on February 19, 1887, at Nieder-Ingelheim.

It was only much later, when, with the rise of narrative experimentation in the early twentieth century, novelists as diverse as D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce found in *Max Havelaar's* complex design a fascinating early example of upending the novel's form. Within a generation, that single work positioned Multatuli as the Netherlands' premier novelist of the nineteenth century, a man who brought to a national literature that lacked any real novel tradition a sensibility that merged the social activism of Charles Dickens, the caustic satiric vision of Daniel Defoe, and the narrative intricacy of Joyce. In June, 2002, the Society for Dutch Literature hailed Multatuli as the greatest Dutch writer of all time.

#### ANALYSIS

Long before he turned to literature, Multatuli was shaped by his admiration for the altruism of Christ, although he disdained institutional Christianity, and the outspokenness of Socrates. Their influences, coupled with Multatuli's fascination for the bold egocentrism of Napoleon I, shaped his literary sensibility. During an era of tectonic cultural, political, and social upheaval across Europe, Multatuli was possessed of a heroic imagination that conceived of literature as a force for broad change, a way to confront convention, challenge complacency, and reform the status quo. Because he came to literature after nearly twenty years in public service, Multatuli, with the crusading zeal of a self-appointed prophet, targeted not only what he perceived as the corruption of colonial administrative protocols but also, on a far wider scale, what he perceived as the moral bankruptcy and casual hypocrisy of the complacent Dutch middle class. Much like his contemporaries Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, and Mark Twain, Multatuli was a compassionate, if scathing, social realist. After all, long before he turned to literature, his life was grounded in the immediate: He was raised during one of the Netherlands' frequent economic depressions; minimally educated, he was trained as a bookkeeper and worked at a factory; and he was a career civil servant.

To read the works of Multatuli, however, is to be aware of how galvanized he was by the Romantic vision. His social realism is charged by his concep-

tion of himself as a heroic outcast, a Byronic misfit, a truth-sayer whose thorny vision and uncompromising dedication to the truth made him an unsettling presence and more than justified, in his mind, the obscurity in which he lived most of his later years. Like the Romantic heroes whom he admired, he was given to extreme passions: He maintained numerous public romances while he was married; he was a gambling addict whose legendary runs of bad luck at casinos damned him to penury; and he was noted for a trigger temper and a penchant for picking fights. In merging social realism and Romantic individualism, Multatuli's writings are both compelled by idealism and compassion and undercut by a mocking bitterness that perceived the collective culture as too blind to realize any significant change. Long abandoning the idea of a controlling deity because he found such notions superstitious, Multatuli conceived of the material universe as driven by a kind of necessity, a heartbreaking certainty that the arrogance and intolerance of the small-minded, the entrenched status quo, inevitably rejected daring change. Paradoxically hopeful and despairing, he tirelessly championed truth as the goal of the writer. Forsaking the chic fin-de-siècle fascination with beauty and the aesthetic appeal of a literary form, Multatuli sought truths that he perceived came not from the intellect but from the gut, a conception of truth as an intuitive sensibility.

Although neither social realism nor Romantic idealism had found specific expression in Dutch national literature before Multatuli, his sensibility and his philosophy were nevertheless part of the European mind-set of his era. What is not so clear about Multatuli's writing, however, is the impetus for his formal experimentation, his avant-garde sense of challenging inherited conventions of narrative technique itself. Although certainly his social advocacy and his idealism would encourage him to reject inherited notions of literary expression, his writings anticipate a revolution in structural techniques that was still more than a half century away. Ironically, Multatuli's stinging social criticism and his incendiary reform ideas gave him whatever celebrity he realized in his lifetime, while his narrative techniques were largely ignored, or, as was most often the case, dismissed as the careless work of an undisciplined civil servant turned scrivener.

Today, of course, the opposite holds true: Whereas his themes are period-bound and often dated, his formal techniques are audacious and even shocking and place him among the precursors of the most innovative literary modernists. Although often unacknowledged, as his works have not been extensively translated, Multatuli is a direct ancestor of writers, including Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, who in the years surrounding World War I broadly experimented with how to tell a story. Among the techniques that Multatuli's writings exhibit that would become staples of modernism include experimenting with framing narratives, specifically stories-within-stories; deploying unreliable narrators as thematic devices; shattering conventional plot into recursive nonlinearity; splicing different genres and multiple tones within the same work; manipulating the premise of metafictional self-reflexivity by using an authorial presence often through both direct and indirect intrusion into the work; indulging an unapologetic sense of excess and a relish for hyperbole as a way to create and manipulate irony; and introducing into a narrative excessive supplemental materials—asides, epigraphs, footnotes, annotations, and digressions—as a way to create an awareness of the text as a written thing and to satirize the busy pointlessness of academics.

Contemporary readers coming to Multatuli face challenges. His reputation rests largely on a single groundbreaking work—even his most ardent apologists find his other works lesser productions. In addition, although *Max Havelaar* has been translated into more than forty languages, the vast majority of Multatuli's work still awaits translation into English. Much of his social philosophy gathered in the encyclopedic *Ideën* can seem dated. Of course, his harsh criticism of colonial imperialism and his passionate defense of a native people exploited by economic occupation gave him cachet among anti-colonial literary movements of the second half of the twentieth century, most notably the literatures of the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean basin. However, Multatuli's signature tone—that tender faith in the possibility of reform leavened by a querulous sense of denunciation and a bitter hopelessness—and the intricate architecture of his most accomplished works have secured his place in nineteenth century European letters.

## MAX HAVELAAR

**First published:** *Max Havelaar: Of, De koffij-veilingen der Nederlandsche handelsmaatschappij*, 1860 (English translation, 1868)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An idealistic Dutch colonial administrator in Java unsuccessfully tries to correct bureaucratic corruption and improve the abhorrent conditions imposed on native workers.*

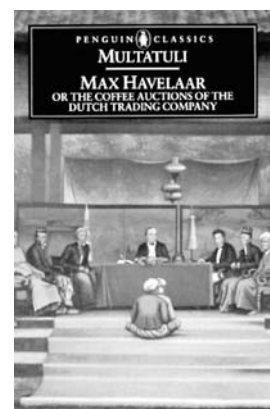
*Max Havelaar: Or, The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* is a contested narrative—a narrative within a narrative within yet another narrative in which the framing stories underscore the social and cultural problems revealed by the central imbedded story of the quixotic civil servant, Max Havelaar, who does not even enter the story for nearly sixty pages. Multatuli's agenda is clear: alert the indifferent and complacent middle-class Dutch back home of the system they had imposed on the peoples of the East Indies. For more than two centuries, the Dutch had maintained a considerable empire in the East Indies. At the time Multatuli wrote this novel, the government, rather than private trading companies, controlled the colonies and had imposed harsh production quotas for the islands' chief exports, primarily coffee and sugar. This policy, coupled with crippling taxation imposed on local farmers, created a system rife with corruption and brutality.

The narrative actually begins with a parcel of manuscripts. A successful middle-aged coffee broker, Batavus Droogstoppel, is accosted on the streets of Amsterdam by an impoverished figure he identifies only as Sjaalman, or the Scarfman, because of the ragged scarf he wears against the cold. The man, a struggling writer who is an old school chum of Droogstoppel and who once saved him from a beating by bullies, thrusts a parcel at the coffee broker, manuscripts he had written, in the hopes that his friend might help him get the works published. Droogstoppel, who has little regard for literature, reluctantly agrees. When he reviews the contents, he is interested only in one essay on Javanese coffee plantations. That, he decides, would be worth pursuing, as his entire life is about coffee.

He assigns a young German clerk named Stern (or "star") to oversee the compilation of the manuscript into something publishable. Stern agrees on two conditions: that his boss agree not to alter anything he writes and that the struggling writer, Sjaalman, be given a ream of paper and ink and pens. It is only then that the story of Max Havelaar commences—we are to assume it is a text arranged by Stern to be written by Sjaalman, who is most likely Havelaar himself, returned from the disastrous appointment in Java. That narrative in turn will be interrupted midway, when Droogstoppel, who has apparently listened to Stern read the manuscript he has prepared, feels obliged to insert his objections to the story, praising Dutch colonial administration and suggesting that whatever discipline the Dutch apply to the locals was justified, as they were not Christian.

As the story of Havelaar unfolds, the newly appointed colonial administrator at Lebak quickly discovers the depth of the abuses routinely inflicted on the natives at the hands of local regents whose hereditary power (and brutalities) had been buttressed by the Dutch, who are interested only in maintaining a system that guaranteed the uninterrupted flow of spices, coffee, and sugar back to lucrative European markets. In one particularly heartrending story, Havelaar meets a young local, Saïdyah, whose father had lost all his property to the extortions of the local regent and whose betrothed is then brutally murdered by Dutch occupational troops when she attempts to join the revolutionary Javanese underground. Driven by desperation, Saïdyah himself attacks some soldiers and is impaled by bayonets.

Havelaar accumulates considerable evidence of such wrongdoings, and, suspicious that the previous administrator had been poisoned, attempts to file a report with his superiors. He is roundly dismissed and cautioned not to pursue his allegations—indeed others within the post are aware of the injustices but refuse to stand up to them for



fear of losing their positions. Havelaar, however, refuses to abandon his crusade and maneuvers to have the local regents imprisoned. Ultimately Dutch authorities quash Havelaar's efforts and reassign him to an obscure outpost on the island. Havelaar, understanding that the same conditions would await him there, resigns after one last futile attempt to secure an audience with the island's governor-general. He returns to the Netherlands, bitter, angry, and out of work.

It is at this point, as the novel closes, that Multatuli introduces yet a third narrative frame; his own persona, identified as Multatuli, interrupts the story, laments his own clumsy writing skills, dismisses Stern and Droogstoppel's work as ineffectual fictions, and vehemently denounces the coffee broker as sanctimonious and hypocritical. Multatuli proclaims his own profound disgust with the subjugation of thirty million Javanese people within the exploitative Dutch colonial system. He closes by appealing to no less than the Dutch king, William III, to address the conditions in the islands. It is that outrage, the authorial persona claims, he wants his readers to share.

Within two years of the publication of *Max Havelaar*, government investigations had found Multatuli's indictment substantially valid, although the colonial presence in the East Indies would remain well into the twentieth century. What is more fascinating, however, is Multatuli's decision to contain that considerable outrage within a complex narrative frame, essentially deploying three narrators: the coffee broker, the clerk, and the writer-persona. Clearly, the arrogant and complacent Droogstoppel satirizes what Multatuli thought was a far more insidious problem than the conditions in the colonial outposts: specifically, the indifference of the Catholic Christian Dutch themselves to

a colonial system that had built them a commercial empire. The young German, Stern, locked into a dreary apprenticeship with the narrow-minded philistine coffee merchant, represents the idealistic impulse in Multatuli; inspired by the German Romantics, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, Stern seeks to have the courageous idealism of Havelaar promulgated as an exemplar of the crusade for truth and justice. Finally, Multatuli introduces his own writing persona into the narrative, promptly shatters any illusion of the fictional construct, and closes the narrative with a direct appeal to the Dutch people. That narrative experimentation sustains *Max Havelaar* beyond a period piece or a historic artifact.

## SUMMARY

Positioned within a European culture that challenged centuries-old institutions—among them the Catholic Church, the aristocracy, and the monarchy—in the name of freedom and equality, the works of Multatuli confronted with uncompromising honesty the social, political, and economic problems he perceived the Dutch were facing. In so doing, he endorsed literature's privilege to inspire, outrage, and challenge a culture to authentic change. Grounded in the controversial liberal ideas of the late Romantic era, Multatuli struggled with the nagging fear that literature, finally, could do little but raise awareness. Although Multatuli was criticized at the time for what appears to be the raw and chaotic construction of his work, readers much later came to recognize how intricately Multatuli manipulated multiple narrators and multiple genres to create an avant-garde originality to his works, an artistic vitality that is finally the ultimate expression of his fervent belief in freedom.

Joseph Dewey

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*Minnebrieven*, 1861 (satire)

*De geschiedenis van Woutertje Pieterse*, 1890



DRAMA:

*Vorstenschool*, pb. 1875 (*School for Sovereigns*, 1970)

NONFICTION:

*Ideën, eerste bundel*, 1862

*Ideën, tweede bundel*, 1864-1865

*Ideën, derde bundel*, 1870-1871

*Ideën, vierde bundel*, 1872

*Ideën, vijfde bundel*, 1873

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Critics have suggested that Multatuli satirizes the coffee merchant, Droogstoppel, by simply letting him speak. Cite moments when the broker inadvertently reveals negative aspects of his character.
- How does Multatuli use the secondary character of Mr. Verbrugge to underscore Max Havelaar's heroism?
- Critics have argued that the oppression of the Javanese people was a joint enterprise by both the Dutch and the indigenous leaders. What is particularly despicable about the character Radhen Adhipatti?
- What is the emotional impact of the story of Saïdyah?
- What are the implications of the translation of the Latin phrase "Multatuli" that Eduard Douwes Dekker used for his pseudonym?
- *Max Havelaar*, despite its grim subject matter, has been described as a funny book. Do you agree or disagree with that characterization, and why?
- Does the narrative experimentation in *Max Havelaar* interfere with the story? In what way is the experimentation part of the book's larger theme of freedom from oppression?



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## ALICE MUNRO

**Born:** Wingham, Ontario, Canada  
July 10, 1931

*Munro, with her sharply detailed settings and her fully realized characters, contributed to the resurgence of the short story's popularity.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born on July 10, 1931, in rural southwest Ontario, Canada, in the region east of Lake Huron, Alice Munro and her younger brother and sister were the children of Robert Eric Laidlaw, a farmer, and Anne Chamney Laidlaw, a former elementary school teacher turned homemaker. The family always seemed to be struggling financially. With the failure of his fox-farming business in 1948, Munro's father became a night watchman in a local foundry and began raising turkeys in 1952. In 1943, when Munro was twelve, her mother began a long decline because of Parkinson's disease, which led to her death sixteen years later.

Although her mother hoped that her daughter would escape their hometown of Wingham, Ontario, Munro's future was expected to be that of a farmer's wife. From the age of nine, however, she wanted to be an author. At fifteen she started writing, spending her school lunch hour composing stories while her classmates, who lived closer to the school, went home to eat. She finished a novel—a romantic, gothic work that later was stored in her father's basement and eventually thrown out by her stepmother.

In 1949, she received a scholarship that enabled her to attend the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, where she majored in journal-

ism, a more explainable choice, she thought, than writing. While an undergraduate, she published her first story, "The Dimensions of a Shadow," in a university journal and sold another to Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) Radio. On December 29, 1951, she married James Munro, a bookseller, left the university, and moved to Vancouver, British Columbia. During the twelve years the couple lived in Vancouver, she cared for the family house and tended to the needs of her two daughters, Sheila, born in 1953, and Jenny, born in 1957. Another daughter, Catherine, was born in 1955 and died shortly after her birth. Writing but discarding much of what she wrote, Munro did sell a few stories each year to small journals, such as the *Canadian Forum*, *Mayfair*, *Montrealer*, and *Queen's Quarterly*. In 1963, the family moved to Victoria, British Columbia, where Munro and her husband opened a bookstore, Munro's Books. Another daughter, Andrea, was born in 1966.

In 1968, at age thirty-seven, Munro published her first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. For these stories, Munro drew on the familiar. The characters share traits with her, her family, and her neighbors. The setting—the small towns of southwest Ontario—was the landscape of her childhood. For this volume she received the Governor-General's Award in 1969, the most prestigious literary prize in Canada. The book's publication in the United States in 1973 brought her a wider audience.

Munro's next book was a novel, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), set in the fictional Ontario town of Jubilee. This book follows the development of Del Jordan as she comes to terms with her parents, sex, and her desire to become a writer. The somewhat

autobiographical work received the Canadian Booksellers Association International Book Year Award in 1972 and was chosen as an alternate Book of-the-Month Club selection in Canada and in the United States. In 1973, one section of the book was adapted for the television series *CBC Performance*, with Munro's seventeen-year-old daughter Jenny playing the lead.

In 1972, with her marriage over, Munro returned to London, Ontario, with her two youngest daughters, intending to make writing her career. In 1974, she accepted a one-year position as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. This position was one she would fill over the years in numerous universities, including one in Queensland, Australia. In 1976, with her divorce final, she married Gerald Fremlin, a geographer and retired cartographer. They settled in the house of his birth in Clinton, Ontario, a small town twenty miles from Wingham.

In 1974, Munro published *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Thirteen Stories*. Unlike her first two books, which are about the experience of growing up, this collection focuses on the problems of adulthood. In 1978, she published *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which was retitled *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1979) for publication in the United States. This collection, a series of linked stories focused on the protagonist Rose, resembles a novel. As the collection went to press, Munro insisted on and paid for substantial changes. She deleted three stories that were later published in *The Moons of Jupiter: Stories* (1982), rewrote three others, and added one so that the entire volume concentrated on Rose.

In the 1970's, Munro was gaining recognition as a major writer. In 1978, she was awarded the Canada-Australia Literary Prize, was a runner-up for the United Kingdom's Man Booker Prize, and was awarded her second Governor-General's Award for *Who Do You Think You Are?* Her scripts were being accepted by the CBC. Her stories were appearing in major magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ms.*, *McCall's*, *The Canadian Forum: A Monthly Journal of Opinion and the Arts*, and *Redbook*.

Consistent with her practice of publishing a collection of short stories every three or four years, *The Moons of Jupiter* appeared in 1982, *The Progress of Love* in 1986, which earned Munro her third

Governor-General's Award, and *Friend of My Youth: Stories* in 1990. Her later stories, while bleaker and darker than the earlier ones, nevertheless portray characters, usually middle-aged women, who are survivors and who approach the future with hope. In 1994, she published *Open Secrets: Stories*, winning the W. H. Smith Award in Britain. The stories in this collection for the most part investigate sexual tensions. The collection *The Love of a Good Woman: Stories* (1998), winner of the W. H. Smith Award and the Gillen Award, focuses on the hidden secrets of the residents of a small town in Ontario. *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) explores some of the darker realities of life, death, aging, and infidelity. In 2001, she received the Rea Award for lifetime achievement in the short story. Her collection *Runaway: Stories* (2004) won her a second Gillen Award. In 2006, *Carried Away: A Selection of Short Stories*, her second collection of selected stories (the first was in 1996), and *The View from Castle Rock* were published; the latter is based on Munro's family history reaching back to eighteenth century Scotland and continuing to their descendants' experiences in Canada.

## ANALYSIS

Munro is one of Canada's major writers and one of the best short-story writers anywhere. While she tried writing a novel with *Lives of Girls and Women*, her preferred form is the short story. She argues that a novel implies a continuity that is not mirrored in the lives of real people, who seem to move disjointedly from one experience to another. With the short story she can focus on the "intense . . . moments of experience" that constitute a life. With the exception of one novel, all of her published works have been collections of short stories.

The majority of Munro's stories are set in Canada, often in southwest Ontario, now sometimes called "Munro Country," the region of her childhood. Her hometown of Wingham, Ontario, becomes Hanratty in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Dalgleish in *The Moons of Jupiter*, or Jubilee in *Lives of Girls and Women*. The rural countryside, the poverty-stricken small towns, the farms, and the salt mines are well documented, as is the Canadian climate, which can be bleak, dark, and foreboding with its bitter cold, its snowstorms, and its ice. Even though some stories might be set in Victoria or Toronto, generally the protagonist has moved to the

city and still retains some provincialism. Similarly with the stories set in Australia or Scotland, the protagonist is Canadian and comes into these new environments with Canadian eyes. In all of Munro's stories, the reader gets a clear sense of place, whether the story is set in the Canada of today, of a hundred years ago, or of somewhere in between. In many cases the past and the present are juxtaposed so that there is a sense in which the past, though distant, is always present.

Just as Munro writes of the places that she knows, she also writes of familiar people. Her works, like those of many other writers, are autobiographically based, so much so that her hometown paper, the *Wingham Advance-Times*, once complained: "Sadly enough Wingham people have never had a chance to enjoy the excellence of her writing ability because we have repeatedly been made the butt of soured and cruel introspection on the part of a gifted writer." Munro would deny the accusation. On the copyright page of her most autobiographical book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, she included, "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbors and friends did not serve as models." Yet there is no mistaking the similarities of characters and events in her stories with those in her life. Her mother died from a slow, debilitating disease, as does the narrator's mother in "Ottawa Valley," the last story in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. Her father's turkey farm serves as the setting for "Turkey Season" in *The Moons of Jupiter*. She and her first husband had many of the same differences in background as the protagonist and her husband in the stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Much of her life finds its way into her fiction, but that does not mean the fiction should be read as a documentary. Instead, Munro takes these experiences and rearranges them, filtering them through her imagination and forging them into stories of sensitivity.

The majority of Munro's stories feature either girls or adult women as the central figures. The young girls, such as Rose in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, are slated to escape their impoverished beginnings primarily because they are sensitive and observant. Other stories chronicle the lives of ordinary, lower-middle-class women who have married young, have realized that life should be more than accommodating a husband and caring for chil-

dren, and have left the safety of their homes to explore life's possibilities. They go back to school, find a career, and form new relationships. The stories focus on moments in their lives in which the past has been discarded, the present is being confronted, and the future is uncertain. These women, though faced with strong evidence of the fragility of male-female relationships, seek lovers. As the narrator in "Hard Luck Stories" in *The Moons of Jupiter* explains, "There's the intelligent sort of love that makes an intelligent choice. That's the kind you're supposed to get married on. Then there's the kind that's anything but intelligent, that's like a possession. And that's the one, that's the one, everybody really values. That's the one nobody wants to have missed out on." Munro's women willingly take risks in order to find that second type of love. The relationships might not last, but the women survive, wounded, perhaps, but intact.

Munro explores the intricacy of personal relationships, examining the ties that bind people together. She does not interpret the lives of her characters as much as involve the reader in the complexity of their lives, creating an unsentimental drama out of the personal experiences of her ordinary characters. As she suggests, "A story is a spell, rather than a narrative." She examines the mother-daughter relationship from the perspective of the daughter in the stories of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which range from the daughter being punished as a child in "Royal Beatings" to her committing her old, and increasingly senile, stepmother to the county home in "Spelling." In "Moons of Jupiter" in the collection of the same name, the narrator is both parent and daughter. She is parent to her adult daughters, who have dismissed her from their lives, and is daughter to her hospitalized father, who has a serious, and soon fatal, heart condition. There are stories about the relationships of friends, such as that of Georgia and Maya in "Differently" from the collection *Friend of My Youth*, who share confidences about their marriages and their dreams; the sharing of a lover shatters their friendship. There are also stories about husbands and wives and lovers. Margot in "Wigtime," also in *Friend of My Youth*, deals with her husband's affair with a teenage girl by extracting from him a promise of a new house in exchange for her silence. The stories are about the hopes, dreams, disappointments, and betrayals that constitute per-

sonal relationships. Munro explores what the narrator in “The Stone in the Field” in *The Moons of Jupiter* calls “the pain of human contact.”

For Munro the truth can be suggested but never known completely. She relates her stories as though she and her reader are slowly discovering, or at least nearing, the truth. Her stories offer conflicting or multiple interpretations of the same situation. Sometimes the different versions result from the passage of time. Her stories, shifting effortlessly between the past and the present, suggest not only that the past influences the present but also that the present colors the interpretation of the past. Sometimes the same event might be viewed differently by several characters. For example, in the title story of *Friend of My Youth*, the narrator’s mother believes that the life of Flora, who had twice been denied the love of the same man, was one of noble self-sacrifice, but as the narrator says, “I had my own ideas about Flora’s story. . . . My Flora would be as black as hers was white. . . . What made Flora evil in my story was just what made her admirable in my mother’s—her turning away from sex.” In a Munro story, certainty is approachable but never reached.

Munro is praised for her craft in fashioning her stories. Realistic details and a few carefully chosen words create precise images and often suggest an entire life. She has been compared to Anton Chekhov for her understanding of the human psyche. Her characters are recognizable as the people one meets at work, at a party, or in a store. Her structuring of the narrative suggests the texture of real life with all of its doubts and uncertainties. She is a highly skilled writer whose stories are thought-provoking as well as entertaining. With the 1984 film adaptation of her story “Boys and Girls” and the 2007 adaptation of “The Bear Came over the Mountain” as the film *Away from Her*, Munro is reaching a larger audience.

## “HALF A GRAPEFRUIT”

**First published:** 1978 (collected in *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Rose and Flo*, 1979)

**Type of work:** Short story

*This work portrays a young girl who experiences self-discovery and comes to terms with her stepmother and her dying father.*

“Half a Grapefruit” was first published in *Redbook*, then in the collection *Who Do You Think You Are?* in Canada, and the following year in the United States, with the volume being retitled *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*. It was thought that readers in the United States would not be familiar with the implication of the title’s question: a criticism of aiming above one’s origins. That is precisely one of the issues that “Half a Grapefruit” explores.

Even though the stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* are each complete and self-contained, they can be read as a bildungsroman, chronicling the development of Rose as she grows up in poverty; spends a few years at a university; experiences marriage, rearing a family, and divorce; and finally reaches a measure of success as an actress and university professor. The stories are arranged chronologically, but each story is a blend of the past and the present. Thus, even though “Half a Grapefruit” focuses on Rose’s high school days, it concludes with a reference to Rose coming back to her hometown to make arrangements at a nursing home for her stepmother.

Rose, on her way to her high school, crosses the bridge that marks the boundary between her impoverished side of town, West Hanratty, and the more prosperous Hanratty. The only one from her West Hanratty grade-school class to attend high school, she keenly feels the difference between herself and the students from Hanratty. When the students are asked about their breakfasts, Rose lies, responding with “half a grapefruit” rather than “tea and porridge”—which would have marked her as a country girl. Her presumption is recognized, however, and for weeks, and even years, she hears, or imagines, people calling softly after her, “half a grapefruit.” It is the schoolmate’s equivalent of “Who do you think you are?”



Just who is Rose? She is not like her crass stepmother, Flo, who encourages the tales Rose brings home from school about lost Kotex or about one girl's sexual encounters under a dark porch. Rose does not tell Flo about her own uncertainties or her dreams. Flo responds with tales about herself working in a glove factory at the age of fourteen. Nor is Rose entirely like her father. They share a love of books, but she lacks his discipline and ability to work with his hands. Worse, she is a "disgrace" to him because her bookish tendency does not correspond to her gender; in his eyes a woman "should be naïve intellectually, childlike, contemptuous of maps and long words and anything in books, full of charming jumbled notions, superstitions, traditional beliefs. Women's minds are different," he tells Rose.

Rose will eventually leave this harsh life but will have to endure the taunts and insults of her classmates, her stepmother, her father, and the townspeople to do so. Insulating herself, she becomes an observer and a limited participant. She watches the decline of her father's health with the detachment of a stranger; she is able to verbalize the word "cancer" when no other family member can. Yet she can never entirely leave her childhood behind. Before her father's final trip to the hospital, "[S]he understood that he would never be with her more than at the present moment. The surprise to come was that he wouldn't be with her less." The past is always part of the present.

### "BARDON BUS"

**First published:** 1982 (collected in *The Moons of Jupiter: Stories*, 1982)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The narrator, a middle-aged woman, is struggling to loosen herself from the grip of a broken love affair.*

"Bardon Bus" appears in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), a collection of eleven stories, all of which focus on "intense . . . moments" in the lives of the female protagonists, most of them middle-aged. The opening of the story sets the tone for what follows. Had the narrator been an old maid in an-

other generation, she would have perhaps saved a letter and dreamed about an affair while continuing to milk the cows and scour the tin pails. She would have fantasized about surrendering herself completely to a lover who perhaps was a soldier, or "a farmer down the road with a rough-tongued wife and a crowd of children," or a preacher. Yet though she is of a later generation, and though her actions reflect that, her obsessions are the same.

The narrator, writing a book on the history of a wealthy family, is staying in Toronto at a friend's apartment. As part of her research on the family, she recently spent a few weeks in Australia, where she met an anthropologist whom she had known slightly in Vancouver when she was a married college student. She, now divorced, and he, traveling without his third wife, embark on an affair that, because of the imposed brevity, seems perfect. On returning to Canada, however, she becomes obsessed with him, with the same intensity as the old maid of an earlier generation.

The narrator, like other middle-aged women populating Munro's stories, is moderately successful in her career but is still rather fumbling in managing her relationships. The men in the story are no more adept at love, but their options are more varied. As Dennis, the anthropologist's friend, points out, men can choose young women and start a new life with a new family. Older women, faced with wrinkles and menopause, cannot deny their mortality as easily as a man with a young wife can. The narrator, reacting to the inevitability of the aging process, chooses new clothes and gets a haircut but realizes that "you have to watch out for the point at which the splendor collapses into absurdity. . . . Even the buttercup woman I saw a few days ago on the streetcar, the little, stout, sixtyish woman in a frilly yellow dress well above the knees, a straw hat with yellow ribbons, yellow pumps dyed-to-match on her little fat feet—even she doesn't aim for comedy." The narrator is a survivor and wills herself free of her obsession and depression: "At the same time I'm thinking that I have to let go. . . . There is a limit to the amount of misery and disarray you will put up with, for love, just as there is a limit to the amount of mess you can stand around a house. You can't know the limit beforehand, but you will know it when you've reached it." The narrator is ready, and able, to move on.

## “THE BEAR CAME OVER THE MOUNTAIN”

**First published:** 1999 (collected in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 2001)

**Type of work:** Short story

*After almost fifty years of marriage, Fiona enters an assisted-living facility, where she forms a close relationship with a resident to the extent of ignoring her husband on his visits.*

In “The Bear Came over the Mountain,” Munro explores how individuals react to their own aging or to the aging of their companions. The story opens with a scene of a young, vivacious Fiona proposing marriage to Grant. This incident is followed by another with Fiona, now seventy, preparing to enter Meadowlake, a new assisted-living facility. Grant and Fiona have been married for almost fifty years when she begins displaying signs of dementia. At first it is amusing; she leaves notes about her daily schedule, but then the notes start identifying the contents of the kitchen drawers. Soon she cannot find her way home. Fortunately they can afford Meadowlake.

Munro juxtaposes scenes from the past with the present, so the reader sees a saucy Fiona contrasted with a Fiona who seems not to recognize her husband. In a Munro story, ambiguity rules. Perhaps Fiona, in her actions, is now extracting vengeance for Grant’s earlier erasure of her in his numerous affairs.

The story also explores how people negotiate long-term commitments and how they rationalize their failure to uphold these commitments. Using flashbacks, Munro presents Grant’s earlier years as a professor who may have received his position because of Fiona’s father’s largesse to the university. Grant seduces his students; some are married women but some are identified as girls. Rational-

izing his behavior, he argues that the times promoted free sex or that the older women longed for some excitement. He rationalizes his betrayal of Fiona by countering that he, unlike some of his colleagues, stayed in the marriage.

Although there is no suggestion that Fiona is aware of his infidelity, her behavior in Meadowlake can be explained by it. There she carries on a flirtation with Aubrey, a wheelchair-bound patient who was placed there by his wife, Marion, while she took a much-needed Florida vacation. When Aubrey leaves, Fiona, inconsolable, starts to deteriorate so much that a move to a more restrictive floor is contemplated.

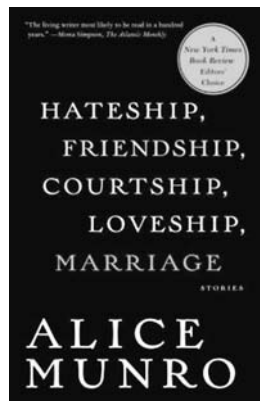
Grant, desperate, visits Marion to suggest that her husband visit Fiona. Marion’s reaction is unexpected. She is not jealous but instead is concerned about the inconvenience of the visits and with protecting her financial security. She fears that Aubrey might prefer to live in the expensive facility. However, Marion is lonely and soon calls Grant, inviting him to a Legion dance. Although Marion is very different from the cultured and beautiful Fiona, Grant realizes that he can barter sex and a little companionship in exchange for Aubrey’s visiting his wife. When Grant sees Fiona again, he brings Aubrey. She is much improved, reading in a chair and not weeping in bed, playing a silly word game with him, and seeming to recognize him.

The story ends ambiguously, as many of Munro’s stories do. The reader is uncertain what causes Fiona’s improvement. The reader also wonders about Grant. Does he enter into an affair with Marion because of his concern for Fiona or is that just another of his rationalizations? Munro does not moralize; she presents her characters, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions.

### SUMMARY

Alice Munro, writing about ordinary people in ordinary situations, creates a portrait of life in all of its complexities. In her richly textured stories, she explores the nuances of relationships, the depths of emotions, and the influence that one’s past has on the present. With a few details, she is able to evoke someone’s personality or an entire geographical region. She is a master at creating a short story that is as fully developed as a novel.

Barbara Wiedemann



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many of Alice Munro's characters grow up in a small town. How does the provincial culture influence their adult lives?
- How do Munro's characters face the problems associated with their aging and accept the inevitability of their mortality?
- In Munro's stories, relationships between men and women, especially between husbands and wives, are examined. What seems to be the primary difficulties encountered in these relationships?
- In Munro's stories, do women have a harder time achieving autonomy than do men? Explain why this would be so.
- Munro does not pass judgment on her characters. She suggests that the truth can never be known with any certainty. As seen in some of her stories, what are some of the obstacles to discovering the truth?

# HARUKI MURAKAMI

**Born:** Kyōto, Japan  
January 12, 1949

*Arguably the most popular Japanese writer of his time, Murakami has been acclaimed for his postmodern approach to fiction.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Haruki Murakami (mur-ah-kah-mee) was born on January 12, 1949, in Kyōto, Japan. The family moved two years later to Ashiya, a suburb of the port city Kōbe, where his parents taught Japanese literature. An only child, Murakami was rebellious, an attitude that led to his estrangement from his parents when he was twenty. Considering Japanese literature boring, young Murakami became obsessed with American popular culture. He studied English in school and eagerly bought American paperbacks that Kōbe's used book stores acquired from servicemen. He was especially fond of the hard-boiled mysteries of Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain, drawn to the lonely but independent lives of their antiheroes.

Murakami studied film and drama at Tokyo's Waseda University beginning in 1968. Because of disruptions created by the student protests of the era and financial difficulties, Murakami did not graduate until 1975, writing his thesis on the journey motif in American films.

Murakami had hoped to become a writer but felt he did not have the necessary life experiences. Instead, he and his wife, Yoko Takahashi, a fellow student he married in 1971, opened the Peter Cat, a café during the day and a jazz club at night, located on the outskirts of Tokyo. Murakami made sandwiches and served drinks while live or recorded music played. He became a devotee of American jazz after he was given a ticket to a concert by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers as a fifteenth birthday present.

While attending a 1978 baseball game between the Yakult Swallows and the Hiroshima Carp, Murakami had an epiphany when American player Dave Hilton doubled, and Murakami decided to

try writing again. *Kaze no uta o kike* (1979; *Hear the Wind Sing*, 1987), a coming-of-age novel named for a Truman Capote story, won the Gunzo Prize and sold 150,000 copies. Murakami brought back his protagonists for *1973: Nen no pinbōru* (1980; *Pinball, 1973*, 1985). While the success of these books allowed him to sell his jazz club and become a full-time writer, Murakami has disavowed them as immature and considers *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (1982; *A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1989), in which some of the same characters appear, his first true novel.

He and Yoko lived on a Greek island, the setting of *Supātōniku no koibito* (1999; *Sputnik Sweetheart*, 2001), from 1986 until 1989, followed by sojourns in Athens and Rome. Murakami has said that he did not develop an interest in Japanese literature and history until he came to the United States, first as a visiting fellow in East Asian studies at Princeton University from 1991 to 1993, and then as writer-in-residence at Tufts University from 1993 to 1995.

In addition to his prolific production of fiction, Murakami has also translated the works of many American writers, including Capote, Raymond Carver, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Irving, Tim O'Brien, Paul Theroux, and Kurt Vonnegut, each of whose fiction has some similarity to his own.

## ANALYSIS

Murakami slowly gravitated from pulp fiction to such authors as Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevski, whom he has identified as major influences. While such writers focus on alienation and the powerlessness of humans caught up in an indifferent universe, Murakami's approach to these themes is less dark. He offers a more benign alienation, to which his characters respond not with rage but shrugs. While violence occurs occasion-

ally, for the most part his characters sit around talking about whatever pops into their heads. Given his concern with loss and meaninglessness, his fiction is surprisingly sweet-natured.

Early in his career, Murakami was attacked by older Japanese writers for not writing in the accepted style. He has striven to write in a more relaxed, colloquial style, resulting in complaints about his use of slang. While his predecessors focus on society as a whole, Murakami is interested in the individual. He has pointed out that the word “identity” has no Japanese equivalent. Family is of consummate importance to earlier Japanese writers, but Murakami’s fiction is full of broken marriages and strained relations between parents and children. His protagonists are typically divorced men in their mid-thirties with missing wives, girlfriends, and cats. There are frequent subtle musings on the nature of Japanese society, including its predilections for conformity and consumerism.

Murakami has described his fiction as post-modern, and he is often deliberately self-conscious, including stories within stories and lengthy digressions, inspired by the improvisational nature of jazz. His protagonists often feel they are characters in stories being controlled by others.

Music, literature, and films are extremely important in his work. The narrator of *Sekai no owari to hāodoboirudo wandārando* (1985; *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, 1991) describes having a drink in bed while reading and listening to music as being a precious experience. The novels the characters read, the music they listen to, and the films they watch are frequently reflections of their emotional and physical states. Feeling almost like a captive in his apartment, the narrator of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* watches John Huston’s hostage drama *Key Largo* (1948). He compares his lover’s walking away as resembling the end of the film *The Third Man* (1949). In *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru* (1994-1995; *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, 1997), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (1791; *The Magic Flute*) becomes a metaphor for a husband’s longing for his missing wife, and Gioacchino Rossini’s *La gazza ladra* (1817; *The Thieving Magpie*) acts as a motif, almost like music on a film soundtrack.

Murakami has said that *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* was influenced by David Lynch’s television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), and the novel features

nightmare sequences reminiscent of Lynch’s off-beat style. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, the protagonist’s girlfriend disappears on a Mediterranean island, as in Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *L’avventura* (1960). The confused adolescent protagonist of *Umibe no Kafuka* (2002; *Kafka on the Shore*, 2005) resembles the hero of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which Murakami has translated. *Noruei no mori* (1987; *Norwegian Wood*, 2000) takes its title from a Beatles’ song and *Dansu dansu dansu* (1988; *Dance Dance Dance*, 1994) from a tune by the Dells.

Murakami’s books have been best sellers in Japan, with *Norwegian Wood*, his most conventional novel, selling more than two million copies. With such contemporaries as Kyoji Kobayashi, Ryu Murakami (no relation), and Banana Yoshimoto, Murakami is said to have led a thematic and stylistic revolution in Japanese literature.

## A WILD SHEEP CHASE

**First published:** *Hitsuji o meguru bōken*, 1982  
(English translation, 1989)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The postcard image of a sheep leads an advertising executive on a quest.*

In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Murakami’s first novel to attract international attention, the nameless narrator has been abandoned by his wife, who has run away with his friend. Bored with his job as an advertising copywriter, he thinks of himself as utterly mediocre. A lyric from Irving Caesar’s 1929 song “Just a Gigolo” describes his life: “The world goes on without me.”

His placid existence begins to unravel when a mysterious man threatens to shut down the advertising business because of a picture of sheep grazing that was published in an insurance company newsletter. Because the threat comes from a representative of a powerful right-wing manipulator known as the Boss, it must be taken seriously. The protagonist copied the photograph from a postcard sent by a friend in Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan.

En route the narrator meets an old acquaint-



tance, J, a bar owner who has never had a drop of liquor, a typical bit of Murakami whimsical paradox. J encourages the narrator to accept that there are no rules that say things have to follow a certain pattern. Acceptance of the unexpected, of the randomness of events, is a major Murakami theme.

The protagonist learns he is seeking a single sheep, one with a star-shaped birthmark, the same symbol representing the Boss's organization. He learns how the Boss gained his power and the mysterious part played by this particular sheep. Arriving in Hokkaido, the narrator stays at the Dolphin Hotel. Once the Hokkaido Ovine Hall, it retains a sheep reference room, one of many libraries where Murakami's characters seek guidance. He meets the hotel owner's father, known as the Sheep Professor, into whose consciousness the star-marked sheep entered in 1935. In telling about this sheep, the professor sees sheep as a metaphor for Japanese society, which he criticizes for learning little from other Asian cultures. The sheep, which plans to transform humanity, left the professor for the Boss, who is dying because the animal's spirit has abandoned him.

One of the reasons so many Murakami characters do not have names is their tenuous grasp on reality and their identities. The narrator confesses to his girlfriend that he is not convinced of the usefulness of names. When the Boss's chauffeur names his nameless cat Kipper, the narrator is surprised to recall that he has a name, too. The identity theme is also represented by the Sheep Professor's uncertainty over how much of himself is him and how much is the sheep's shadow. The narrator's quest is as much for a better sense of himself as it is for the sheep.

From the professor, the narrator learns about the site in the photograph. Accompanied by his girlfriend, he makes his way to a mountain villa belonging to the Rat's father. There he meets the Sheep Man, a diminutive gentleman dressed in a sheep costume. The narrator realizes he is on a quest for his identity, the adventure of the search providing a respite from the meaninglessness of his life. He discovers that the Rat and the Sheep Man are the same person. Psychological doubles occur frequently in Murakami's fiction. A conversation with the spirit of the Rat, who has committed suicide, brings matters to a resolution of sorts. The narrator becomes reconciled to his existence; no

matter how boring or mediocre it may seem, it still has value. The narrator's girlfriend disappears, and his search for her is only one of several quests in *Dance Dance Dance*, the sequel to *A Wild Sheep Chase*.

## HARD-BOILED WONDERLAND AND THE END OF THE WORLD

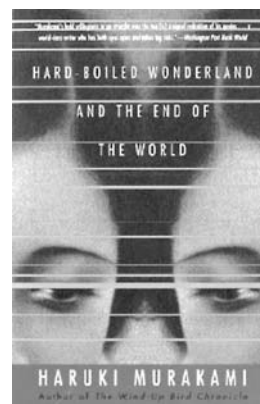
**First published:** *Sekai no owari to hāodoboirudo wandārando*, 1985 (English translation, 1991)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Separate stories of a young man pursued by thugs and another reading dreams in a walled town eventually converge.*

*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* tells two separate but related stories in quite different styles. The "Hard-Boiled Wonderland" chapters resemble the style of American hard-boiled detective fiction, though in a science-fiction setting. The narrator finds himself caught up in a conflict between the Calcutechs, who work for the quasi-governmental System, and the Semiotecs, criminals who work for the Factory. Calcutechs provide and protect information, while the Semiotecs, many of whom are discredited Calcutechs, steal data and sell it on the black market. The narrator works for a Calcutech scientist and becomes friends with the scientist's assistant, his adolescent granddaughter. His job is to recode numbers by passing them from his right brain to his left brain.

The protagonist of the "End of the World" chapters finds himself in "the Town," which is surrounded by an ominous forest. These allegorical chapters have a denser, more formal prose, offering more descriptive writing than elsewhere in Murakami's fiction. With the help of the Librarian, whom he thinks he recognizes, he reads dreams



from the skulls of unicorns and becomes the Dreamreader. His counterpart in “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” also has what seems to be a unicorn skull, as well as a relationship with the helpful reference librarian from his local library. This librarian describes libraries as paradises where information is free and no one fights over it. Murakami provides numerous other parallels between the narrators as both halves of his novel seem to be commenting on each other, exploring the same themes from different perspectives.

The scientist wants to prevent the world from falling apart, a prospect the narrator finds difficult to grasp. He considers the events he is caught up in so fantastic that he would not believe them in a novel. The librarian brings him *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1967; *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, 1969) by Jorge Luis Borges. The Magical Realism of Latin American fiction is a major influence on Murakami, never more so than here. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* is less science fiction or fantasy than reality pushed to its limits, resembling the paranoid world depicted in Franz Kafka’s fiction.

Matters for the narrator become more uneasy with a visit from two thugs he calls Junior and Big Boy. Big Boy is a quiet hulk, while the diminutive Junior is a fast talker, just like stereotyped hoodlums in American gangster films. The narrator initially sees them as jokes before taking their threats more seriously after they cut his abdomen and reveal they work for the System.

Like the hero of *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the Calcutec decides that his life is meaningless, that he has accomplished nothing. His dream of retreating to a mountain cabin to read, listen to music, and watch films is a mere fantasy of escape from the inevitable. His “End of the World” counterpart sees the library as a refuge, an escape from the advance of time outside.

The girl tells the Calcutec that her grandfather has been researching him for two years and that he is the only survivor among twenty-six subjects. The others died of some vague brain malfunction resulting from the scientist’s experiment. A former film editor, he has attempted to visualize and manipulate the consciousnesses of his subjects. He found the Calcutec’s consciousness to be the most satisfactory, with the coherence and logic of a novel or a film.

The narrator learns his consciousness is that displayed in the “End of the World.” The walled town is his brain. Murakami is not exploring alternative realities in a true science-fiction sense but using the narrator’s divided selves as a metaphor. In the real world, he lives an aimless, pointless existence. In the Town, he strives for meaning, even if he does not truly understand what the dreams of the skulls are all about. Reclaiming one world inside another, he longs for a more active life beyond the passive acceptance of the real-world side of himself. Murakami constantly shows options for his often lackadaisical characters without being judgmental about their choices. The narrator is not certain whether his version of eternal life is reward or punishment but wants to risk all by returning to his original world.

### THE WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE

**First published:** *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru*, 1994-1995, 3 volumes (English translation, 1997)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A search for a missing cat leads a man into encounters with fascinating people.*

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* has a studied, leisurely pace, even for a Murakami novel. Toru Okada is thirty, lives in a Tokyo suburb, and is unemployed. His cat, named for his brother-in-law, Noboru Wataya, goes missing. While searching for the cat, Toru’s wife, Kumiko, also disappears. Toru is another Murakami protagonist who loves music, literature, and films. The best thing about being unemployed is that he can read whatever he wants whenever he wants. Without ambition, he is content to drift through life.

The novel’s title is supplied by May Kasahara, a teenage neighbor Toru meets while searching for the cat. He tells her about hearing every morning a bird that sounds like it is winding a spring, so she calls him Mr. Wind-Up Bird. Because they do not know what kind of bird it is and do not even see it, the name suggests the unknowable, ineffable qualities of life. Life and art overlap when Toru hears “Bird as Prophet,” one of Robert Schumann’s

*Waldszenen* (1851; *Forest Scenes*). A radio announcer explains that the piece is about a mysterious bird who foretells the future.

Because Toru's life is in a bit more turmoil each time he hears the bird, he begins to associate it with chaos. A mysterious mark that appears on his face also suggests that his life is out of kilter.

The cat is named for the brother-in-law, even though both Toru and Kumiko despise him, an academic whose first book is hailed as a new perspective on economics, leading to his becoming a media celebrity with political potential. Toru and Kumiko see him as overbearing and arrogant and his popularity as an indication of how the public is susceptible to false impressions through the media.

As Toru searches for the cat and meets more people, he senses they are taking over the flow of his life, leading him into unexpected directions. He enlists the aid of Malta Kano, a psychic. Creta, her younger sister and assistant, was once raped by Noboru. Toru dreams of having sex with Creta, who resembles Kumiko. Creta calls herself a prostitute of the mind.

Creta tells Toru her life story, as does Lieutenant Mamiya, a World War II veteran who arrives with a keepsake, actually an empty box, bestowed by Toru's former landlord. Mamiya's war stories include the atrocities inflicted upon Japanese soldiers by Soviet troops in Manchuria. The graphic violence of these accounts is unusual for Murakami, who has said he feels an obligation to keep the memory of this side of World War II alive.

Toru creates an artificial solitude within his loneliness by spending hours at the bottom of an empty well near his home. When the cat returns after a year away, Toru takes his reappearance as a sign that things will finally change for the better, that life need not always be chaotic and meaningless. Toru begins the healing process by renaming the cat Mackerel. The cat was named Noboru Wataya as a joke, but life is no joke. Giving him a more personal identity might lead Toru to solidifying his own.

Nutmeg Akasaka is not the real name of the woman who, attracted by the mark on his face, hires Toru to work for her fashion design firm. Cinnamon, her son and assistant, chooses not to speak, communicating through hand signals. Nutmeg, whose father knew Mamiya, recounts a massacre of

zoo animals witnessed by her veterinarian father in Manchuria during the war. Cinnamon gives Toru a computer containing sixteen stories under the title "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle." Storytelling becomes a metaphor for the attempt to make sense of life, of imposing order on its chaos.

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* ends, like most of Murakami's novels, with muted ambiguity. Except for the return of Mackerel, few of its story lines and themes are resolved. Murakami always leaves his characters awaiting the next unexpected disruption of their passive calm.

## KAFKA ON THE SHORE

**First published:** *Umibe no Kafuka*, 2002  
(English translation, 2005)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A teenager and an elderly man conduct separate searches for their destinies.*

Fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura has a bad relationship with Koichi, his sculptor father, and his mother left with his sister when he was four. The insensitive Koichi has told the boy that one day he will have sex with both his mother and sister, a prophecy tainting his desire to find them. Kafka runs away from home, and Murakami alternates his story with that of Satoru Nakata, an elderly man from the same Tokyo neighborhood. Nakata has lost his memory and the ability to read and write following a mysterious accident when he was a schoolboy in 1944. He lives on a government subsidy and the money he makes from finding lost cats, with which he can communicate much better than with humans. Nakata is an extreme example of Murakami's patented passive protagonists. He simply accepts what life offers, enjoying its simple pleasures.

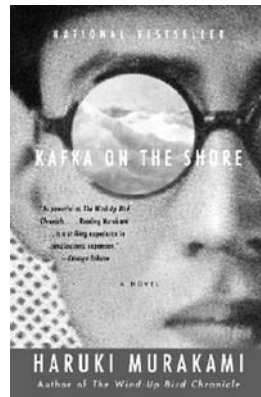
Kafka makes his way to Takamutsu on the island of Shikoku and to the Komura Memorial Library, where a wealthy man's collection resides. He meets Oshima, a library assistant, and Miss Saeki, the library director. She was once famous for composing and singing a popular song, "Kafka on the Shore," but retreated from the world following the death of her lover, the son of the Komura family. Kafka be-

comes Oshima's assistant in exchange for room and board and finds himself visited by the spirit of the younger Miss Saeki, whom he suspects may be his mother. He also meets Sakura, a young hairdresser, and is torn between wanting to have sex with her and wanting her to be his lost sister. Kafka and Oshima discuss the Oedipal nature of his quandary.

Nakata flees Tokyo after a psychopath calling himself Johnnie Walker, actually Kafka's father, forces the old man to kill him. Nakata makes his way to Takamutsu, site of his accident, with the help of Hoshino, a young truck driver. There, his and Kafka's destinies overlap. The characters are similar in their reliance upon daily routines to give the impression of order in a disorderly world.

*Kafka on the Shore* is another of Murakami's quest novels, with neither protagonist truly understanding what they are seeking. Kafka, Nakata, Oshima, Miss Saeki, and Hoshino resemble each other in being incomplete. The sexually ambiguous Oshima tells Kafka about the Greek belief that all people are searching for their missing halves. Murakami uses quests to explore such themes as individual freedom and the individual's responsibility to a larger good.

*Kafka on the Shore* is one of Murakami's most whimsical novels, with several talking cats—or at least cats who talk to Nakata. Hoshino meets a metaphysical construct taking the form of Colonel Sanders, the Kentucky Fried Chicken symbol, and battles a creature out of a science-fiction film. Nakata, who has the power to make fish rain from the sky, discovers he is seeking an entrance stone mentioned in Miss Saeki's song. As with Latin American Magical Realism, these fairy-tale elements seem logical within the context of the novel.



More important, Murakami uses whimsy to delineate character and reveal themes.

The usual frequent references to Western arts appear throughout *Kafka on the Shore*. Kafka listens to such popular music acts as Radiohead to maintain his sanity. Kafka renames himself because of his admiration for Franz Kafka's short story "In der Strafkolonie" (1919; "In the Penal Colony," 1941). The novel's fantastical qualities resemble those in Sir Richard Francis Burton's *Arabian Nights* (1850), a rare edition of which Kafka reads at the library. Murakami departs from his usual practice by having Kafka read and discuss Japanese literature: *Kof* (1908; *The Miner*, 1988) by Soseki Natsume. The magic powers of the arts are illustrated when Hoshino, a bit of a slacker, is transformed by hearing Ludwig van Beethoven's *Archduke Trio* (1810-1811) in a coffee bar.

With its allusions, libraries, librarians, and cats, *Kafka on the Shore* recalls other Murakami novels. Additional similarities include Kafka's retreating to a mountain cabin, as in *A Wild Sheep Chase*. In this solitude, Kafka begins to find himself. Understanding the difference between letting things happen and exerting some control over his destiny, Kafka makes progress toward discovering his identity.

## SUMMARY

Haruki Murakami stands out not just among Japanese novelists but all fiction writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries for his distinctive, highly accessible, contemplative style, with a rhythm similar to music. Surrealistic passages help give his fiction a dreamlike quality. As with the narrator in his well in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Murakami's characters confront the chaos of contemporary life not by panicking but by ruminating over its vicissitudes. If they wait calmly, a solution to their dominant problem may arise. If no such resolution appears, they simply go on. Murakami puts a nonjudgmental, postmodern spin on the quiet desperation of ordinary lives.

Michael Adams

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(*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, 1991)  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Teenagers appear in several of Haruki Murakami's novels. What does he seem to be saying about growing up?
- Compare the protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore* to Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).
- Compare the identity theme in two or more of Murakami's novels.
- Murakami's fiction is said to resemble the works of American writers. Beyond the references to American films, literature, music, and products, what is especially American about Murakami?
- Animals play central roles in several of Murakami's works. Explain how he uses animals to develop his themes in one novel or short story.
- Many Murakami protagonists live alone and have little contact with friends or relatives. What does he seem to be saying about loneliness, or is it fair to call the condition of these characters loneliness?
- Explain how one or more Murakami works have musical qualities beyond simple references to music.
- Is *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* a parody of or a tribute to detective stories and science fiction?



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# MURASAKI SHIKIBU

**Born:** Kyōto, Japan  
c. 978

**Died:** Kyōto, Japan  
c. 1030

*Murasaki is renowned as the author of *The Tale of Genji*, the world's first novel and generally acknowledged to be Japan's most important literary work.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Murasaki Shikibu (mur-ah-sah-kee shee-kee-bo) was born in Kyōto, Japan, in or about 978. Little is known for certain about her life. The name by which she is known today was probably not her name while she lived. “Shikibu” means “Bureau of Ceremonies,” a court position that her father, Fujiwara no Tametoki, once held, and “Murasaki” is a nickname derived from one of the main female characters in her novel, *Genji monogatari* (c. 1004; *The Tale of Genji*, 1925-1933). Her family belonged to a minor branch of the powerful Fujiwara clan that dominated Japanese politics during the Heian period (794-1160). Her father was a respected Confucian scholar who wrote poetry in both Japanese and Chinese. Her mother, Fujiwara no Tamenobu, was a member of another minor branch of this large clan. She died when Murasaki was an infant, and her death may account for some of the most poignant passages in *The Tale of Genji*. Genji, the central character, and the Murasaki of the novel, as well as other characters, suffer this early loss. Many people on both sides of her family were known for their literary talents, and her brother, Nobunori, became a well-known poet.

Of her early life, evidence indicates that in 996 Murasaki accompanied her father to a province north of Kyōto (Japan's capital at that time and the setting for *The Tale of Genji*), to which he had been appointed governor. Records show that by 998 she had returned to the capital to marry Fujiwara no Nobutaka, a man considerably older than her and who had a number of other wives. At that time, Japanese aristocrats and officials practiced polygamy, and romantic liaisons outside marriage were also

common and to a certain extent condoned, which a reading of *The Tale of Genji* makes clear. Tradition has it that Murasaki's marriage was a happy one, although it did not last long. Her husband died in an epidemic only three years after their marriage and a year after the birth of their only child, a daughter.

After her husband's death, Murasaki was called to serve as a lady-in-waiting to Akiko, a daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga (the most powerful of the Fujiwaras) and a consort of the Emperor Ichigo. Then, as now, the Japanese emperor was the spiritual and social head of Japan but wielded little real political power. At court, the fine education that Murasaki had received from her learned father was useful. She could read Chinese and was familiar with the Chinese classics, and of course she practiced the traditional arts of Japan—painting, calligraphy, poetry, and probably music. With the exception of her knowledge of Chinese (which many courtiers considered inappropriate for women), these accomplishments were expected and appreciated in court circles.

Most accounts of Murasaki's life date the beginning of her work on *The Tale of Genji* from the five- or six-year-period following the death of her husband and before she entered service at court. Certainly by 1008, portions of it had been widely circulated, and her fame as a writer seemed fairly well established by the time that she was made lady-in-waiting to the emperor's consort. A short diary that Murasaki kept for about a year and a half describes both the pleasure she took from the respect that her writing received, as well as the jealousies that this respect provoked. Many of Murasaki's fic-

tional characters suffer the jealous hatreds that trail in the wake of their accomplishments, especially if their court ranks are not high.

Murasaki continued in Akiko's entourage even after the death of Emperor Ichigo in 1011. The last definite mention of her at court is in 1013. She died in or about 1030 in Kyōto. Yet *The Tale of Genji* has continued to live. When changes evolved in the Japanese language, eventually making the original text difficult for all but scholars to read, it was translated into current Japanese. Its episodes have been dramatized on the stage, and Japanese poetry has drawn allusions from it from Murasaki's time to the present. It has also served as a model for many other works of Japanese fiction. Through her novel, Murasaki has joined the immortals.

### ANALYSIS

*The Tale of Genji* seems to invite analysis, and more than a thousand books interpreting it have been written in Japan. Since it has been translated into a number of Western languages, interpretive books and essays have appeared, and continue to appear, around the world. Probably nothing in the twentieth century has contributed more to its status as a world masterpiece than its translation into English by Arthur Waley, completed in 1933. Some scholars have criticized the freedoms that Waley took with Murasaki's text, but they all acknowledge that his translation is itself a classic of English prose. In 1977, Edward Seidensticker produced a more accurate translation, and English readers are fortunate in having both versions in print. For readers intimidated by such a long novel—*The Tale of Genji* is nearly twice as long as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-1869; *War and Peace*, 1886)—abridged versions of both translations have been published.

Analyses of *The Tale of Genji* usually deal with the cultural breadth of its three-generational narrative and the psychological depths of its characterizations. Western commentators have admired Murasaki's romantic idealism, especially as it is combined with keenly observed social detail. In Japan, it has been especially admired for its expression of classic aristocratic values, values that continue to be reflected as major themes in Japanese literature.

Its most prominent themes are an intensely melancholic sense of life's beauty that grows from an awareness of its impermanence (*mono no aware*),

the pain of unrequited love and the resignation of those bereft of love through separation or death, the impact of the passage of time on character, and the harmonizing of human moods and feelings with the seasons and other manifestations of the natural world. Other notable themes deal with social disillusionment, the limits to personal realization set by social circumstances, and the ultimate triumph of fate over desires and aspiration. For Buddhist Murasaki, fate reflects the working out of karma—the belief that behavior in successive phases of a person's existence has consequences in this life. Genji frequently blames his bad fortune on his misdeeds in former lives.

Because *The Tale of Genji* is so long, Murasaki is able to dramatize the themes of her novel under various circumstances and over long stretches of time. The novel's three-generation time span makes backward glances to better or more promising days almost irresistible and manifestations of cultural decline, as well as personal loss, inevitable. The first third of the novel deals with the young prince Genji's triumphs and misfortunes as he contends for position in court and fulfillment in love. Although his father is the emperor, his mother is a relatively low-ranking concubine, and that makes Genji's court position shaky. This fact, and some indiscretions in his many amorous adventures, force him into self-exile when the emperor dies and his son by his principal wife ascends the throne. Genji's triumphant return to Kyōto and the great love of his life, Murasaki, when he is nearing his thirtieth year, is perhaps the high point of his life. Murasaki's languishing death in the fortieth chapter (two-thirds of the way through the novel) sends Genji into seclusion. Two chapters later, he is dead, and the final twelve chapters, which take place eight years after Genji's death, deal with his world in decline. The main setting for these last chapters has shifted from the capital, with its dazzling pageantry, to a gloomy rural district on the Uji river several miles from Kyōto.

The love themes of *The Tale of Genji* have probably attracted more attention through the ages than those of social and personal disillusionment, although they are closely related. The patterns of courtship and love in the Heian court were every bit as elaborate and intense as those depicted in the medieval romances of Europe. Love affairs in the Heian court, like those in King Arthur's court,

involve impassioned correspondence, seduction, adultery, and other forms of betrayal.

Yet unlike European medieval courts, which idealized the fealty and sacrifices of the chivalric lover, the Heian court tolerated a good deal of what Westerners would consider promiscuous behavior. As the people in traditional East Asian cultures did not find it difficult to embrace more than a single religious view (a Heian aristocrat was at once a Buddhist, Shintoist, and Confucian), they saw nothing unnatural about being in love with more than a single person. In the West, men who seek many romantic adventures are usually considered shallow “Don Juans,” but in classical Japan, if the feelings are sincere and the emotional commitments real, such behavior is not considered superficial. Genji, who was created as an ideal courtly lover, does not “love them and leave them.” He does not fall out of love, and to the best of his ability he fulfills his emotional commitments and maintains his relationships throughout all of his life.

## THE TALE OF GENJI

**First published:** *Genji monogatari*, c. 1004  
(English translation, 1925-1933)

**Type of work:** Novel

*At the height of Japan's aristocratic Heian period, Prince Genji and his successors strive for personal and social fulfillment through love affairs, friendships, rivalries, and political intrigue.*

Except for a short diary, *The Tale of Genji* is Murasaki's only literary work, but it is generally considered Japan's most important literary achievement. While it is difficult to summarize its eleven hundred tightly printed but loosely plotted pages or to consider the nearly one hundred characters that move through this vast novel in a brief discussion, one can say that it focuses mostly on the life of its introspective hero, Prince Genji. The novel traces rather obliquely his rise, as the son of a minor consort of the emperor, to a position in society second in importance only to the emperor. It deals much more directly, however, with Genji's life as an adventurous exploration, even a quest, for the ulti-

mate possibilities that can be realized in the cultivation of personal relationships—wisdom, excitement, love, friendship, rivalry, and the private and shared experience of beauty and joy, triumph and tragedy. Somehow, to the extent that one person can be fulfilled as a human being living by the values of the Heian court, Genji succeeds.

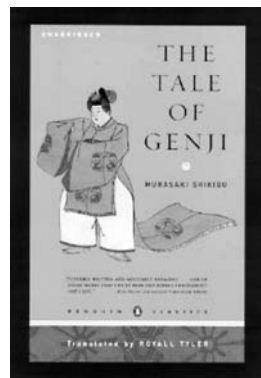
Genji's career consumes more than two thirds of the novel, during which he struggles to establish and maintain his position in court. Probably more significant to him, as well as more interesting for the reader, however, are his intimacies with a number of women. While still an adolescent, he falls in love with Fujitsubo, his stepmother and the emperor's consort. Their very secret affair results in the birth of a boy who, because he is presumed to be the emperor's son, eventually becomes an emperor himself. At about the same time that Genji is attracted to Fujitsubo, a marriage is arranged for him to the sister of his best friend, To no Chujo. Genji's relationship with his wife, Princess Aoi, is probably the least satisfactory in his long experience with women. Aoi dies shortly after giving birth to their son, Yugiri, when Genji is about twenty-three years old. After Aoi's death, Genji's most important relationship, and the main focus of his affection for the rest of his life, is Murasaki, the young niece of Fujitsubo. Since the Heian aristocracy was not only exclusive but also small, each character in the novel is related in one way or another to every other character.

Despite his abiding affection for Murasaki, Genji is intimate with many other women throughout his life. His most important liaisons are with Yugao (the mistress of his friend To no Chujo), Lady Rokujo (an imperious aristocrat whose jealousy results in the death of both Yugao and Aoi), and the secluded Lady of Akashi. Genji's daughter by Lady Akashi later marries an emperor, and their son, Niou, becomes a central character in the last section of the novel.

Toward the end of Genji's life (he dies during his fifty-first year), he is betrothed to Nyosan, the daughter of an emperor who wishes to see her well married before he retires. It was customary at that time for emperors to retire soon after they had reared an adolescent son. Nyosan deceives Genji by taking a lover, Kashiwagi, the son of Genji's friend To no Chujo. The child of this illicit relationship is Kaoru, another of the central characters of the last

section of the novel. The Kashiwagi-Nyosan affair echoes Genji's affair with his stepmother and is viewed by him as a kind of karmic retribution for his own transgressions. Many such relational echoes occur over the three generations of characters who inhabit *The Tale of Genji*.

After Genji's death, eight years pass before the narrative resumes. The main setting has shifted from the capital, with its dazzling pageantry, to a gloomy rural district near the Uji river, about ten miles from Kyōto. This last section, which for most readers is also the most compelling part of the novel, is integrated with the main section by having the spirit that ennobled Prince Genji continue to live, albeit divided and denatured, in the characters of his amorous grandson, Niou, and his son (or, more accurately, his wife's son by her lover), Kaoru. The creative tension generated in these sections by the hero's amorous impulses, on the one hand, and his concern for the properties of Heian society, on the other, is transformed into an unbalanced rivalry between the impetuous Niou and the sensitive but indecisive Kaoru. Still, with Genji gone, much of the life-enhancing spirit of romance has dissipated from court life, and with it respect for social forms also degenerates. While courtship retains its elaborate pattern and society its traditional form, these social structures grow ever emptier. Niou is no ideal courtier and lover but a dashing Don Juan bent on conquest for its own sake. The combination of Niou's unerring successes in court and in bedchambers, together with Kaoru's inability to exert his sensitive nature in any way that advances his own or anyone else's life, bears dramatic witness to a civilization's decline.



The novel ends inconclusively with the woman whom Niou and Kaoru have courted for more than a hundred pages, Ukifune, contemplating the taking of holy vows and entering a Buddhist nunnery. The social and emotional stress of their courtship has so harassed her that she desires only to escape the complications of courtship and society for the simplicity of temple routines. That, too, recalls Prince Genji, who frequently contemplated “leaving the world” for Buddhist retirement. Only his responsibilities for others prevented him from following this path, the one followed by many Heian emperors and high officials. By Ukifune's time, Murasaki's tale suggests, there is even more reason to consider this retreat.

### SUMMARY

For the Japanese, *The Tale of Genji* depicts an ideal aristocratic society whose inhabitants loved elegance and were themselves paragons of grace, culture, and artistic skill. In barely a hundred years after it was written, Murasaki Shikibu's novel had become almost an object of religious veneration—an ideal representation of better days to which, following the collapse of Heian civilization and the civil unrest that followed, the Japanese people looked back nostalgically.

Since the novel's translation into English, Western readers have experienced similar responses. It is universally admired not only for the insight that it offers on a fascinating civilization but also for its intrinsic psychological interest, the beauty and intensity of its great scenes, and the artistry and penetration of its characterizations. Most particularly, it is admired for its profound expression of perennial human themes, not least of which is its celebration of human affection and emotional tenderness, feelings that make the pain of existence not only bearable but also meaningful for people in times and places far removed from the story's exotic civilization.

Dan McLeod



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#### POETRY:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Except for a few scattered works, literary productions now called “novels” do not seem to exist before the eighteenth century. How can one account for a Japanese novel by Murasaki Shikibu that is a thousand years old?
- Lovers of the type Murasaki presents have had a bad reputation in Western literature. Has that situation changed? Can readers today accept lovers who are intimate with many partners?
- Does the conclusion of *The Tale of Genji* suggest that women could not accept courtly lovers like Genji?
- What can *The Tale of Genji* tell the modern reader about friendship?
- Why would modern Japanese people continue to admire a work like *The Tale of Genji*, which in so many ways reflects an unfamiliar way of life?



Thomas Victor

## IRIS MURDOCH

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland

July 15, 1919

**Died:** Oxford, England

February 8, 1999

*Widely recognized as the most prolific and influential British novelist of her generation, Murdoch also emerged as an important and original theorist of fiction.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean Iris Murdoch (MUR-dok) was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 15, 1919, the only child of Anglo-Irish parents. Her mother, Irene Alice Richardson, came from a Dublin family. She had a beautiful soprano voice and had trained to be an opera singer, but she gave up her ambitions when she married a man of County Down sheep-farming people, Wills John Hughes Murdoch. It proved to be a successful marriage. Iris Murdoch was reared in London from the age of nine but returned to Ireland on holidays during a childhood that she often described as happy. In her latter years, she expressed a somewhat different view of her childhood: "I feel as I grow older that we were wanderers, and I've only recently realized that I'm a kind of exile, a displaced person. I identify with exiles."

Murdoch attended the Froebel Institute, the progressive Badminton School in Bristol, and later entered Somerville College, Oxford. She read widely in ancient history and philosophy at Oxford and earned a degree in classics. There, along with many young intellectuals of the 1930's, she joined the Communist Party but later left it in disillusion.

Upon leaving Oxford, Murdoch followed in her father's footsteps and joined the civil service, entering the British Treasury in 1942. During this period she began to write novels; one was submitted to the British publishing house Faber but was rejected. In 1944, Murdoch left the Treasury and

joined the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in order to take a more active part in World War II. She worked in a camp for refugees in Austria, where she saw a "total breakdown of human society." Murdoch found it instructive; the experience provided her with models for the refugees and the homeless who appear frequently in her novels.

She also worked in Belgium at this time, and there she met Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, novelist, and dramatist. His theories became the subject of her first published book, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, which appeared in 1953, almost a decade after she had met him. The book explores Sartre's investigations into existentialism and his view of the novel as an important mode of human inquiry. Sartre's existentialist concern for freedom in human action is a theme in many of Murdoch's novels.

After she left the United Nations in 1946, Murdoch spent an unsettled period reading and thinking in London and other cities in Europe. From 1947 to 1948 she studied philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, becoming particularly interested in the work of the Viennese-born British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. During this time, she collected material for her book on Sartre and continued to write fiction.

Murdoch returned to Oxford in 1948 as fellow and tutor in philosophy at St. Anne's College and kept this position until she gave up full-time teaching in 1963. Her first published novel, *Under the Net*, appeared in 1954 and earned warm acclaim from critics and the public. Two years later Murdoch mar-

ried John Bayley, a literary critic and scholar who also wrote novels and poetry. He was appointed Thomas Wharton Professor of English Literature at Oxford. For many years the couple lived in Steeple Aston, a village near Oxfordshire. Their union became one of the most fruitful literary partnerships of the twentieth century. In 1986, they moved into a house in North Oxford.

From the mid-1950's onward, Murdoch's steady flow of fiction attracted more consistent attention than the work of any other postwar novelist. By 1965, critics were beginning to recognize the importance of her work. In that year, the critic A. S. Byatt's *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* appeared, an important study of Murdoch's early novels. By the late 1960's, Murdoch's novels grew longer and changed in tone but continued to appear almost annually.

After 1963, although she was a successful and widely read novelist, Murdoch continued to teach philosophy part-time at the Royal College of Art in London. Although she subsequently found it impossible to continue with a regular teaching post, she remained in close contact with the academic world through philosophical publications and well-attended lecture tours.

The Irish Academy elected Murdoch a member in 1970, heralding a decade in which she received much public recognition. She became an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1975 and was appointed honorary fellow of her former college, Somerville, in 1977. She was named Commander, Order of the British Empire, in 1976 and Dame of the British Empire in 1987.

Murdoch's individual novels similarly won acclaim. In 1973, *The Black Prince* appeared and won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize; *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, published in 1974, earned the Whitbread Award. With her international readership already established, Murdoch was awarded Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Man Booker Prize, for *The Sea, the Sea* in 1978.

In addition to writing more than two dozen novels, several plays and dramatic adaptations of her novels, and a volume of poetry in less than forty years, Murdoch continued to publish technical papers in her academic specialty, moral philosophy. She wrote much about the Greek philosopher Plato, whose ideas often inform her fiction. She also published less technical papers linking aes-

thetics to moral and political concerns. One of the best known of these first appeared in *Encounter* in January, 1961. Originally titled "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," the essay has been reprinted many times under the title "Against Dryness." In it, Murdoch illustrates her belief in the connection between art and morality, a key concept in understanding her work. Murdoch's work was an important presence on the British intellectual scene to a degree unusual among writers.

Murdoch was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1994, and she died in 1999 at the age of seventy-nine. After her death, her husband, John Bayley, published *Elegy to Iris* (1999), in which he recounted the couple's forty-year relationship and his brilliant wife's descent into dementia. The book was adapted as a film, *Iris* (2001), which starred Kate Winslet as a young Murdoch and Judi Dench as the author in her old age.

## ANALYSIS

In her essay "Against Dryness," Murdoch writes:

The connection between art and the moral life has languished because we are losing our sense of form and structure in the moral world itself. . . . [W]hat we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons.

In novel after novel, Murdoch addresses the problems of living a moral life, as her characters strive painfully to seek the Good. In a series of Gifford lectures delivered in 1982, Murdoch speaks about Plato's allegory of the cave and the sun. The soul, traveling through four stages of enlightenment, continues to discover that what it considered realities are only shadows of something else. Thus moral change may be considered a progressive discarding of the false "good," of images and shadows that are eventually recognized as false.

Central to this concept of moral change is the idea of Eros, or love. Sexual love and transformed sexual energy are a major motif in Murdoch's novels, particularly in *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The Black Prince*, and *The Sea, the Sea*. In novel after novel, love both blinds the characters and allows them a clearer vision of reality in a typical Murdoch dichotomy. Maturity is often achieved by falling "out of love." No other writer does a

better job of evoking the changed consciousness that love brings.

Yet for all of their philosophical underpinnings, her novels provide a brilliant and satisfying entertainment. Murdoch said that she sought to write in the realistic tradition of nineteenth century English and European fiction. Prominent features of her plots include such time-honored novelistic devices as unexpected meetings, lost or found letters, forgotten keys, coincidence, and accidents. All of them testify to the role of chance in human affairs.

Although critics have carped that her novels are “over plotted” and uneven, she has a gift for intricate double plots. This dual patterning is one of the characteristics of her fiction; the characters are frequently paired with one another symmetrically, such as the pairing of Martin and Antonia with Anderson and his half sister, Honor Klein, in *A Severed Head*. The action itself is often repeated with slight variations, as in *The Bell* (1958) and *A Word Child* (1975).

As to the characters themselves, Murdoch tends to create upper-middle-class worlds peopled with certain types who reappear from novel to novel. Young, cunning women who are fierce in their pursuit of older men are often present. The older men are usually self-centered charmers who are weak, self-indulgent, and skeptical. They are often found out as adulterers and practice petty deceptions as long as they can. Her male characters are not of the conventionally firm, masculine kind, but they usually change during the novel.

Some of the most interesting of Murdoch’s creations are power figures, whom Murdoch once called “alien gods.” These are frequently men (although Honor Klein, in *A Severed Head*, falls into this category), and they are mostly Middle European refugees—rootless, suffering types. Sometimes Jewish, these figures are often demonic in their effects on others; when they do not function this way, they are simply mute, passive sufferers. Murdoch always keeps such characters at a distance, and the reader is never afforded an inner view of their nature.

The women in her novels cannot be classified as easily, although the vague, artsy “mistress” type does appear often. Murdoch’s women are difficult to discuss because of their great variety. Although critics have remarked that her characters sometimes become subordinated to the plot of the story,

at her best she lavishes a kind of love on the persons she depicts.

Murdoch had an intense, visual imagination and could describe people, places, houses, clothes, and even dogs with a luminous accuracy. London is a real presence in her novels; this tendency is most apparent in her first novel, *Under the Net*, in *Bruno’s Dream* (1969), and in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970). Because of her precise depiction of the city, including almost daily reports of the weather, she is considered the most important heir to the tradition of Charles Dickens.

One of Murdoch’s most distinctive traits as a novelist might be called “transcendent realism.” Her novels open with all the accepted realistic conventions of character, setting, and plot. Then within a set scene something outrageous, quirky, or fantastic will happen that seems far removed from the premise of the novel. Much of the humor of her novels flows from her characters’ very British reserve in the face of the wildly fantastic. This intrusion of the unexpected is, for Murdoch, a testament to the richness of reality.

Murdoch’s intense descriptive powers are not limited to the visual. She also excels at evoking the inner world of fantasies, projections, demonic illusions, and altered consciousness. She resembles no other contemporary novelist, partly because she is a religious fabulist whose fables are submerged in the conventional techniques of the novel.

## UNDER THE NET

**First published:** 1954

**Type of work:** Novel

*The protagonist, Jake Donaghue, is asked to leave his residence and sets out on a lonely and confused journey, seeking love as well as free digs among his old friends in London’s City district and Paris’s Left Bank.*

Murdoch’s first novel and the only one that is clearly derivative, *Under the Net* was strongly influenced by French writer Raymond Queneau, to whom the book is dedicated, and author Samuel Beckett. The book is a combination of a picaresque novel and a philosophical enquiry. Although the work is not as tightly plotted and lacks the integra-

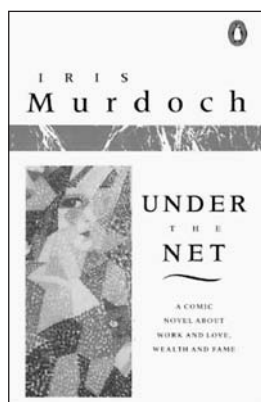
tion of her later novels, *Under the Net* exhibits many of the qualities that would become hallmarks of her style: a fast-moving story; precise, detailed descriptions of settings; strong use of contingency as a plot device; and philosophical deliberations about truth, love, and freedom.

Jake is a failed writer who earns money translating the works of a French writer. He is in love with Anna Quentin, a singer, and enormously influenced by Hugo Belfounder, a successful entrepreneur whom he meets at a clinic. There, they have serious dialogues about art and truth. When Jake is banished from his rooms, he tries to get in touch with Anna again. Through intricate and sometimes hilarious plot twists, he finds that Anna is in love with Hugo, and that Anna's actress sister, Sadie, is in love with Jake. To complicate the plot further, Hugo is in love with Sadie.

This cast of main characters is rounded out by several minor characters who exhibit Murdoch's remarkable inventiveness: Finn, Jake's man Friday who eventually returns to Ireland; Lefty, a socialist organizer to whom Hugo donates a great deal of his wealth; Sammy Starfield, a self-made millionaire who used to be a bookie; and Mrs. Tinkham, the keeper of a

dusty, dirty, corner newspaper shop where she sells ice cream, reads the merchandise, and offers a haven to drifters like Jake.

Jake starts out at the beginning of the book seeing everyone in relationship to himself. At the end, however, when he accepts that Anna will never be his, Anna exists for him as a separate being for the first time. He realizes that this, too, is a guise of love.



## A SEVERED HEAD

**First published:** 1961

**Type of work:** Novel

*A vain wine merchant's wife leaves him for his best friend, after which he learns some hard truths about his own capacity for self-delusion.*

*A Severed Head*, Murdoch's fifth published novel, is considered the best of the comedies of manners that Murdoch was writing early in her career. The cast of characters is largely restricted to the wealthy bourgeoisie; the decadent atmosphere is evoked by careful descriptions of richly decorated rooms, heavy drinking, and romantic misconceptions. The characters suffer frequently from languor and fatigue. Yet the structure of *A Severed Head* is Murdoch's own: A bumbling male protagonist lives through a series of events that destroy his complacency and teach him to recognize the separate reality of other people.

The protagonist, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, tells his own story. He is happily married to Antonia, a society beauty five years his senior. Martin's easy complacency is shattered when Antonia declares she is going to leave him for her psychiatrist, Palmer Anderson, who is Martin's close friend. Although Martin is repelled by Antonia's suggestion that he remain rational about the affair, he allows Antonia to live with Palmer and remains friendly with them both.

Unknown to both Antonia and Palmer, Martin has long kept a mistress, a young teacher named Georgia Hands. Although Martin professes to love Georgia, he has denied her the trip to New York on which her heart was set and encouraged her to have an abortion. After Antonia's revelation, Martin finds that he is extremely ambivalent toward his own mistress.

Events suddenly become more complicated when Antonia asks Martin to pick up Palmer's half sister at Liverpool Station. In a scene both comic and portentous, Martin meets the dour Honor Klein on a rainy night that smells like "sulphur and brimstone." As they drive toward Palmer's house in dense fog, Martin almost collides with a truck. When Honor hangs her head out the window to see, Martin first apprehends her as a headless body.

Honor Klein falls into a category of the power



figures that act as agents of change in many of Murdoch's novels. Loved and feared like the gods they mimic, they engender complications that, when finally resolved, leave other characters in closer touch with reality. Yet Honor is no caricature; she is entirely individualized. She is Jewish and has dark, almost oriental eyes and a cap of shiny black hair. She has devoted her life to the study of anthropology. Other characters recognize that she has mystical knowledge, perhaps gained from breaking the taboo of incest. She is the "severed head" of the title, an object of awe and veneration.

Although Murdoch carefully forecasts Honor's strange relationship with her half brother, Palmer, Martin is too preoccupied with his own entanglements to notice. Indeed, he notices so little about Honor that when he discovers he has fallen desperately in love with her, he imagines that she is free of other ties and may even be a virgin. When he arrives without warning at her house in Cambridge to declare his love, he finds her in bed with Palmer. At this crucial point in the book, Martin realizes that his perception of Honor has been based on his own fantasies and has nothing to do with the real person.

The balance of power now shifts to Martin, since he knows Palmer's guilty secret. Antonia, sensing a change in Palmer, returns to Martin, who is still hopelessly in love with Honor. A short time later he is confronted with another confession: Antonia has had a long-standing love affair with Martin's brother Alexander. This final revelation shakes Martin to the core. He now realizes that his whole adult life has been based on self-delusion and an inability to see the truth about anyone else. Although he suffers great emotional pain, he also feels more sure about himself. Martin has grown up.

The end of *A Severed Head* is a fine example of Murdoch's device of pairing. In the last scene, Honor leaves Palmer and returns to Martin to accept his love or at least to take a chance on it. Georgia Hands, once Martin's mistress, goes to the United States with Palmer Anderson; Antonia is traveling in Europe with Martin's brother.

The theme of the novel is love, power, and the relationship between them. The plot resembles Restoration comedy not only for its series of appalling revelations but also in the way it reveals love as war and power play.

*A Severed Head* was adapted as a play produced in London in 1963, the script a collaboration between Murdoch and the popular British novelist and playwright J. B. Priestley. The play proved so popular that it was later made into a film in 1971.

## THE NICE AND THE GOOD

**First published:** 1968

**Type of work:** Novel

*An investigation into a suicide at London's Whitehall affects the life of a group of friends on the Dorset coast.*

In an interview, Murdoch referred to *The Nice and the Good* as the most open novel she had yet written. This "openness" appears to refer to a looser plot structure and to more separate and free characters. The plot is really two equal subplots; one line follows John Ducane's investigation of an apparent suicide in the government offices at Whitehall in London, while the other follows a group of friends on a Dorset estate named Trescombe as they struggle toward an ideal of love.

Connecting the London plot and the Dorset plot are Octavian Gray, John Ducane's superior at Whitehall, who owns Trescombe and spends much of his time there with his wife Kate, and Ducane himself, who lives in London but is a frequent guest at Trescombe. Ducane is in love with Kate Gray, who encourages him yet confesses every secret kiss to Octavian.

In addition to Kate and Octavian, some of the characters at Trescombe are Mary Clothier, a widow; Mary's fifteen-year-old son, Pierce; Paula Biranne, a divorcé and schoolteacher; Paula's nine-year-old twins, who have "great souls"; Barbara, spoiled teenage daughter of Kate and Octavian; and Willie Kost, a refugee who has survived the Dachau concentration camp.

In his London life, Ducane is involved with Jessica Bird, his occasional mistress, and manipulated by Gavin Fivey, his manservant. In the course of his investigation, Ducane also becomes entangled with Richard Biranne, Paula's former husband; Peter McGrath, office messenger and blackmailer; and McGrath's wife Judy, a beautiful woman of dubious character.

Ducane, a legal adviser, is one of Murdoch's flawed, culpable male protagonists, smart and successful but smug, who needs to think of himself as a good man. In addition to his investigation of the suicide and his quest for "the good," Ducane acts as confessor and adviser to the large group of "free" characters who live at Trescombe as friends of the Grays.

Much of the book is seen through Ducane's eyes. He is elevated to godlike status by many of those with whom he comes in contact, largely because of his ability to elicit confidence. Yet his predicament is complicated by a lack of personal decisiveness. He is appalled by his own muddled involvement with Jessica Bird and Kate Gray and is strongly attracted to Judy McGrath. Eventually, the surrounding characters come to perceive him as an ordinary mortal after all.

There are many motifs in the book, among them roundness. On the beach Ducane muses that "Everything in Dorset is round. . . . The little hills are round, these bricks are round . . . the crowns of the acacia, the pebbles on the beach. . . . Everything in Dorset is just the right size. This thought gave him immense satisfaction and sent out through the other layers and compartments of his mind a stream of warm and soothing particles." Octavian is described as round, and the cat, which is a striped cube, has the singular talent of being able to make its hair stand on end and become a fluffy sphere. Roundness indicates contentment, fulfillment, and proper proportion.

The theme of the novel is the search for a perfect proportion of the nice and the good in order to attain a rounded life, "nice" representing the claims of the body and "good" representing the spirit. Each of the adult characters except Kate and Octavian have guilty pasts because of the harm they have done to others. In every case, the harm was done by a failure of love. Mary Clothier regrets the death of her husband, who rushed out of the house after a marital spat and was hit by a car. Paula Biranne wrestles with a broken marriage and a love affair that led to her husband's mutilating her lover. Willy let two people die in Dachau through inattention.

Kate and Octavian live entirely in the flesh and are the hedonists of the group. Not only are they happy, but they make the people around them happy, too. This depiction does not diminish the

distance between pleasure and virtue; it only suggests that life is not as simple as an allegory.

The ending of *The Nice and the Good* involves a carnival of reconciliation that resembles Shakespearean romantic comedy. When Ducane unravels the tangled causes of suicide and discovers that Richard Biranne was involved, he decides to dispense "private justice" and uses his knowledge to reconcile Biranne with his former wife, Paula. Ducane and Mary fall in love, teenaged Barbara returns Pierce's affection, Jessica pursues Willy, and even the dog and cat finally share a basket. As John learns when he and Mary discover they are in love, "it is the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is, in some part at any rate, a love of what is good."

## THE BLACK PRINCE

**First published:** 1973

**Type of work:** Novel

*A fifty-eight-year-old author develops a ruinous obsession for the twenty-year-old daughter of his best friend and protégé.*

In *The Black Prince*, Murdoch returns to her preoccupation with love, exposing the sometimes horrifying face of the love god, Eros. Although Bradley Pearson, a novelist and the narrator, describes this work as "a simple love story," it is really his competitive friendship with successful writer Arnold Baffin that creates the tension at the core of the work.

What distinguishes Bradley from others in the novel is his sense of guilt and his prudishness. He insists that morality is a simple affair and is shown trying to live by these simplicities. Bradley is wrapped in self-righteousness, although it does not prevent him from acting badly. His friend Arnold, on the other hand, accepts life as it is and does not try to be perfect. He enjoys the self-satisfaction that Murdoch often uses as a second-best virtue.

The tension between the two men arises from their respective erotic entanglements and their different attitudes toward art. Aesthetically, Bradley believes in concentration and patience to achieve high art; he has published only three books. He believes that art is connected to the quest for a good life. Arnold writes prolifically, sells very well, and

considers his work fun. Their erotic life echoes their professional rivalry. Bradley has a very brief liaison with Rachel, Arnold's wife, then later becomes involved with Arnold's daughter Julian. At the same time, Arnold is engaged in an affair with Christian, Bradley's former wife. Yet both men are doomed. At the end of the novel, Arnold is murdered by his wife, and Bradley, who is wrongly convicted of the crime, dies of cancer in prison.

The erotic and aesthetic themes mesh in Bradley's belief that a great love will induce him to produce a great book. His obsessive love for young Julian results in his writing *The Black Prince*, which he claims is the fruit of his passion. Readers must judge for themselves whether Eros has fertilized Bradley's muse. This realistic love story, however, is not all the reader has to consider. There are two forewords and six afterwords added to the narration; four of the afterwords are by characters involved in the story who feel the need to vindicate themselves and correct Bradley's narration. The enclosure of Bradley's tale by forewords and afterwords forces the reader into a world of multiple, sometimes conflicting, points of view. The resulting irony is the primary literary device in the framed structure of *The Black Prince*, yet the multiple viewpoints reveal more than Bradley's ironic delusion. Irony is used to expose the ultimate duality of the human condition—the highly developed comic sense alongside the inevitable pain of human existence.

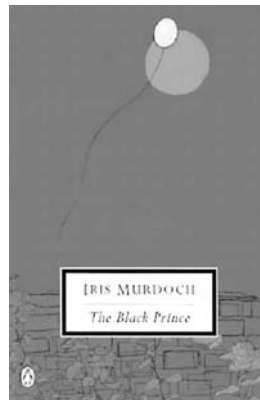
The experience of a violent passion is described in great detail in *The Black Prince*—the various phases of the passion, the transformation of the lover in the eyes of his friends, the delusions caused by the passion, and the moral consequences of such obsession. Although these moral consequences are serious enough to cause a suicide and a violent murder, one of the richest ironies is that the passion does result in a work of literary art.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603) provides a touchstone for Murdoch in *The Black Prince*, but it, too, is touched

with irony. Bradley and Julian's first innocent meeting is a discussion of the meaning of *Hamlet*. Quotations and allusions to the play run throughout the novel. Bradley's erotic energies are suddenly focused on Julian when she mentions that she once played Hamlet, thus identifying herself with the play's ambiguities. After several failures, Bradley manages to make love to Julian when she is fancifully dressed as Hamlet. Julian's interest in the play forces Bradley to think it through again, and in so doing he understands the pain of tragedy for the first time. Later, on his deathbed, Bradley realizes that his affair with Julian was not tragic after all, but ironic.

The black prince of the novel's title clearly refers to Hamlet and to Julian when she is dressed as Hamlet; "B. P." are Bradley Pearson's initials, as well. Yet there is evidence that the black Eros, a dark god who is constantly evoked in the book, is the real black prince. As Bradley sees it, the catalyst that the talented creator needs, the god whom he awaits, is the mythic Eros. Eros rules not only the erotic life of all human beings but also the creation of art. Bradley thinks that after he encounters this god he will create a great work. Yet as the plot progresses it becomes apparent that Bradley completely misunderstands this god.

Many of Murdoch's readers consider *The Black Prince* her finest work. In the way it challenges its own conclusions in the afterwords and speculates on what fiction is, it is Murdoch's greatest departure from the realistic nineteenth century novel.



## A WORD CHILD

**First published:** 1975

**Type of work:** Novel

*Hilary Burde, the narrator, attempts to atone for a horrible mistake in his past but only repeats it.*

*A Word Child* is a stylish novel in the gothic tradition of the nineteenth century that develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and deals with aberrant psychological states. Murdoch's use of gothic conventions is an exploration of the tensions between the interior world of the mind and the outer world of reality. The narrator of *A Word*

*Child*, Hilary Burde, haunts himself with fantasies of power, possession, and betrayal. The narrative is divided into the days of a diary, reflecting Hilary's rigid approach to life.

Hilary is a prostitute's child who starts life as an illiterate orphan. After a schoolmaster discovers his linguistic gifts, he achieves a certain success at the University of Oxford under the patronage of don Gunnar Jopling and his wife, Anne, who also show unusual kindness to Hilary's half sister, Crystal. Hilary is obsessed with Crystal and, although he loves her, wields absolute power over her life. She is indeed a Crystal Burde in a less than gilded cage.

The relationship between Hilary and Gunnar is central to the narrative. While teaching at Oxford, Hilary falls in love with Anne Jopling and tries to persuade her to leave Gunnar and her young son. Anne, panicked by her recent discovery that she is again pregnant, provokes Hilary to crash his car in an accident that proves fatal to her. The Oxford careers of both men are ruined, and after a year of debilitation Hilary goes on to a dull civil service job in London.

After twenty years of self-inflicted suffering (and inflicting a certain discomfort on all who know him), Hilary finds that Gunnar has just been installed as head of the government department in which Hilary works. An unexpected chance for expiation of guilt arrives when Gunnar's second wife, Lady Kitty, approaches Hilary and tells him of Gunnar's similar preoccupation with the past. She suggests the two men get together to resolve their obsessions. Hilary, again infatuated, continues to meet Lady Kitty secretly. Murdoch skillfully distinguishes here between Hilary's fantasies about Lady Kitty's goodness and the reader's ability to see the foolishness of her behavior, particularly her suggestion that Hilary should provide her with a child. Gunnar surprises Hilary and Lady Kitty in the midst of a secret meeting, and in the scuffle that follows Lady Kitty is knocked off a jetty into the Thames River and dies of overexposure. Hilary's struggle to atone for the death of Gunnar's first wife, Anne, leads instead to a doubling of his guilt.

Yet Hilary, despite the fact that he has nothing to show for his ordeal, has a changed perception of his own role in the order of things. At the end of the novel he realizes that a large part of everyone's life is ruled by chance. He is finally able to recognize that his involvement with the Joplings is not a trag-

edy in the Shakespearean sense, since tragedy imposes too great an importance on his own part in the universe. Chance, rather than will, rules people's lives. With this realization comes a hint that Hilary will, perhaps sometime in the future, be able to forgive himself.

*A Word Child* is a fine example of Murdoch's gift for intricate double plots, as well as an exploration of her concern with moral freedom.

## THE SEA, THE SEA

**First published:** 1978

**Type of work:** Novel

*Charles Arrowby, a famous director and playwright, has retired in his sixties to a remote seaside house where his goal is to enlarge his spirit in the pursuit of truth and goodness.*

Told in the form of a diary/memoir, Charles first records his impressions of his new home and then reviews his past life largely through memories of a series of love affairs with various actresses. He also delineates his relationship with his one living relative, his cousin James, a soldier and a Buddhist, by whom Charles always felt overshadowed. Charles receives a friendly letter from James when he is ensconced in his new home, Shruff End, indicating James's desire to get together. Yet more important than all of these affairs is a schoolboy romance he had with a girl named Mary Hartley Smith, which was unconsummated yet lives in his mind as the most important relationship he ever had. Before Charles was twenty, Hartley (as he calls her) disappeared from Charles's life and married another man. Charles believes he has never married because Hartley was the only pure, true love he ever encountered.

Although Charles does not get along with the townspeople and in fact becomes a figure of fun to them, he is isolated for only a short time before he is deluged with a series of visits from former friends, rivals, and lovers, which lead to several dramatic scenes and mysterious phenomena. These tangled relationships, however, leave Charles indifferent once he discovers that Hartley, now called by her married name Mary Fitch, lives with her husband, Ben, in the nearby village. His initial encoun-

ter with Mary rekindles his desire for her, although Mary is now about sixty years old, wrinkled, and faded. Overwhelmed by what he considers his consecrated, holy love for Mary, he engages in a series of ploys and ambushes to win back her heart. He convinces himself she is unhappily married and, with the help of her adopted son, Titus, he kidnaps her and keeps her locked in an upstairs room in his house, thereby reducing her to a frightened, whimpering, helpless woman.

Charles's assembled cousin, friends, and old lovers understand the absurdity of the situation while Charles cannot, and they convince Charles to let Mary return to her home and her husband. Yet this is not a return to reality for Charles, for he develops an intense hatred for Ben Fitch. Charles believes that Ben is trying to kill him by pushing him into a blowhole below his property, where the waves are lethal. To complicate the mystery, Charles is pulled from the blowhole in what seems to him a strange miracle. Although these plotlines are tied up by the end of the novel, Charles does not give up his fantasy of reuniting with Mary until, snooping around her house one day, he is surprised by a neighbor who shows him a happy postcard that Mary sent from Australia, where she and Ben have suddenly immigrated.

Told in the first person by Charles, the novel depends upon the quality of the narrative voice, and

Charles writes grandly most of the time. Murdoch is a stylist who never disappoints, and she cleverly has Charles reveal himself as a supreme egotist, blinded by self-delusion, in his own voice. One of the central ironies of the novel is that although the reader and the characters surrounding Charles see through him, he is lacking in self-knowledge despite his endless self-examination. Another of the ironies is that of all the characters, only Mary and Charles's cousin James are really "good" people, a goal Charles set for himself on the way to becoming a monster.

### SUMMARY

The novels of Iris Murdoch comprise a rich chronicle of the manners of the mid- and late twentieth century British upper-middle classes. Although considered a realistic writer, she is not afraid to take risks. In the carefully ordered, stable worlds she creates, the unpredictability of her characters stands out in bold relief. Saints and sinners, martyrs and mystics, villains and holy fools stumble toward an ideal of love in a modern age of terrors. Murdoch employs extremes of arbitrary coincidence, melodramatic manipulation of plot, and temporal compression to depict characters struggling for a vision of goodness in a secular world.

Sheila Golburgh Johnson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why are Iris Murdoch's novels often called realistic?
- What are the various symbols the sea suggests in *The Nice and the Good* and *The Sea, the Sea*?
- How does Murdoch's training in philosophy influence her novels?
- What use does Murdoch make of the subconscious in her novels?
- One of Murdoch's hallmarks is the detailed description of food, clothes, and room interiors. What function do these descriptions serve in her novels?

# ROBERT MUSIL

**Born:** Klagenfurt, Austria

November 6, 1880

**Died:** Geneva, Switzerland

April 15, 1942

*Musil is a writer of major high modernist works in German, especially novels on par with the foremost achievements of world literature, such as novels by James Joyce in English and Marcel Proust in French.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Robert Musil (MEW-zihl) was born in the Austrian town of Klagenfurt in 1880. His father, Alfred, an engineer, was elevated to nobility in 1917, but Robert chose not to use the family's aristocratic title "Edler von." His mother, Hermine, was involved with another man, somewhat openly, a situation even tolerated by her husband. This not only alienated Musil from both his parents but also was reflected in his literary treatment of erotic themes. In addition, it has been speculated that the death of Musil's sister before the author's own birth created an image of the "lost sister" as "an unobtainable unity and wholeness" according to critic Roger Kimball, which was later embodied in Agathe in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-1943; *The Man Without Qualities*, 1953-1960).

Following his father's wishes, Musil attended military boarding schools in Eisenstadt (from 1892) and Mährisch-Weiskirchen (from 1894). His experiences of these settings, especially of the latter school, provided the background of his first novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (1906; *Young Törless*, 1955). In 1897, Musil enrolled in the Technical Military Academy in Vienna but dropped out in 1898, when he began studying mechanical engineering. After completing his studies and finishing his military year in 1901, Musil worked at the Technical University at Stuttgart in 1902 and 1903, then moved to Berlin, where he studied philosophy, mathematics, and physics. In 1908, he was awarded his doctorate for a dissertation on the philosopher and physicist Ernst Mach.

In 1911, Musil moved back to Vienna and married Martha Marcovaldi. That year, he published a

collection with two stories, *Vereinigungen*, 1911 (partial translation as *Unions*, 1965). He worked as a librarian at the Technical University of Vienna until 1914, when he first took a job as newspaper editor and then joined the military as an officer during World War I, during which he was decorated several times. After the war, he returned to Vienna, where he was employed as a civil servant from 1919 to 1922. From 1922 on, Musil was a freelance writer. Although his work was critically acclaimed, he suffered from never-ending financial troubles and failing health.

Musil's drama *Die Schwärmer* (pb. 1921, pr. 1929; *The Enthusiasts*, 1983) was published in 1921 (although not performed until 1929) and awarded the prestigious Kleist Prize in 1923, the year in which his next drama, the farce *Vinzenz und die Freundin bedeutender Männer* (Vincent and the girlfriend of important men), was first performed. This was followed in 1924 with his collection of stories *Drei Frauen* (*Tonka, and Other Stories*, 1965). Musil began work on his monumental novel *The Man Without Qualities* in the 1920's, although early plans for it go back as far as 1905. The novel's first two volumes were published in 1930 and 1933, respectively, and Musil, a heavy rewriter, spent the rest of his life trying to complete this work, which, although it remains unfinished, is one of the most important high modernist novels.

In 1933, the publisher was no longer willing to pay advances to Musil, who then returned with his wife to Vienna from Berlin, to where they had just moved in 1931. From 1934 to 1938, he received financial support from a private society named after him. In 1936, a Swiss publisher published a collec-

tion containing Musil's newspaper articles. Now under Nazi control, Musil's German publishing house stopped all payments to him in 1938. Also in 1938, Musil and his wife emigrated via Italy to Switzerland, where they first lived in Zurich and then (from 1939 on) in Geneva. Musil died from a cerebral hemorrhage on April 15, 1942. His ashes were scattered in a forest near Geneva.

## ANALYSIS

Musil is a major modernist writer. Modernism was the literary response to the type of modernity that emerged from roughly 1890 to 1910. As mass communication and transportation, such as telephones and cars, revolutionized daily life, people shared the widespread realization that their world had become complex in an unprecedented way, which they experienced as a loss—that is, the loss of their moral “center,” or faith in once agreed-upon values. The modernists responded with complex art to represent the complex world and a search for a new center, typically a new style or a new myth (or, as in Musil's case, both).

Musil's work is prototypically modernist in its complexity, style, and exploration of myth. The complexity is a matter not just of Musil's style but also of his worldview: He saw life as a fusion of opposites—such as reason and emotion, the real and the unreal, the material and the spiritual—that had been typically treated separately prior to modernism. *Young Törless* takes a glimpse at this “two-world” condition, which takes center stage in Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* in the conflict between the senses of reality and of possibility.

Musil's style closely traces his complex worldview. This is evident from *Young Törless*, whose protagonist struggles to comprehend his confusing experiences, as well as from the essayistic style of *The Man Without Qualities*. Taking its name from the French verb for “to attempt” (*essayer*), a literary essay tries to approach the world tentatively without any preconceptions. Musil fictionalizes his essayism so that it appears as a literary character's reaction to events or as part of a dialogue. “Essayism” even describes the lifestyle of Musil's alter ego Ulrich.

At the same time, essayism leads to an ironic style because nothing ever can be said with certainty; consequently, as so many modern novels do, *The Man Without Qualities* narrates and reflects

upon its own difficulties of narrating. The result is not a crisis, as often claimed, but instead a triumph of the novel as a form. After all, modernist novels proved that they were still able to narrate the world at a time when storytelling was considered difficult, although they may no longer follow conventional plots. What is more, these novels incorporated this very difficulty into their form. Musil's contribution to the novel genre was his essayistic and tentative style.

Musil's tentative style matched his search for a myth, to which his teleological and erotic themes added subtle ironies. Musil's term for the goal for the search was “the other condition” (“*der andere Zustand*”), which he understood as the experience of mystical oneness. These elements work in Musil's novels because it is more important that the search, rather than the myth, resonate with the readers. While Törless glimpses the existence of the “other condition,” Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities* experiments with his version of the brother/sister myth to achieve “the other condition.”

In addition, Musil's work had a political component. *Young Törless* looks at sadism as a force that turns some individuals into oppressors and others into victims; this has been understood as an uncanny foreshadowing of the rise of Nazism as such a sadistic political force. *The Man Without Qualities* presents people who are absorbed either in their own private desires or in grandiose, yet irrelevant, political dreams; that is, the novel evokes a “spiritual vacancy” (Kimball) that was readily filled in real life by Nazism.

## YOUNG TÖRLESS

**First published:** *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless*, 1906 (English translation, 1955)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An adolescent boy develops an adult sense of self by confronting the sadistic treatment of a fellow student in a military boarding school.*

The German title, translated more literally as “the confusions of the schoolboy Törless,” both situates the story in a school setting and introduces

the novel's main theme. The school is a military boarding school, similar to those of Musil's own experience; however, rather than realistically described, the novel's setting and atmosphere reflect the confusions of young Törless's adolescent growing pains.

The surface plot focuses on a small group of four students. As money is stolen from Beineberg and other students, the student Reiting figures out that only Basini, one of their fellow students, could be the thief. Reiting and Beineberg take it upon themselves to punish Basini during secret and sadistic nighttime meetings. Törless is drawn into these meetings but tries to keep his distance. His dual attraction to and repulsion from the sadism, as well as homosexual acts in which Basini engages separately with his punishers, show Törless struggling with his confusions.

Over just a few weeks, Törless matures and learns to form his own opinion and stand up for it. As Reiting and Beineberg increase their mental torture by planning to expose Basini in front of the school, Törless convinces Basini to turn himself in to the headmaster. The school officials attempt to keep the ensuing scandal as small as possible; however, although Törless succeeds in obscuring the full extent of his involvement, he is implicated in the events and, at the close of the investigation, is told to leave the school—a decision that is imposed on him but, at the same time, reflects his inner growth: He is ready to leave this school.

This novel—Musil's only great success during his lifetime—touches upon several major themes. First, the sadistic and sexual elements take on a symbolic function representing power and its abuse in general. Because the school's rigid structure reproduces the rigid structure of Austrian society at the end of the nineteenth century, the school metonymically stands for that society. The group dynamic among the students not only copies social structures but also warns of the dangers of unchecked power as Reiting's and Beineberg's sadism ignores Basini's humanity. Later critics have praised this aspect as Musil's astute prediction of what rigid social structures may lead to: political sadism in the form of Nazism and its crimes against humanity.

Second, the psychological confusions are embedded in a profound crisis that defined modernism itself: understanding the world anew as a fusion

of the rational and the irrational. Musil presents this artistic struggle in terms of Törless's adolescent experiences, when Törless perceives another level of reality behind normal reality. This other level seems irrational and unfathomable. Although Törless cannot fully express his insight into the duality of the world, his emotional maturity is evident in his intuition that this insight will remain part of his life.

Third, *Young Törless* is a perceptive and subtle study of the psychological struggles of adolescents. Törless has learned to tell right from wrong; therefore, he stands up against his schoolmates' sadism. He has learned to accept the duality of the world; therefore, he stands up for his insight when he tries to explain it during the investigation, although he expects that the investigation board will not understand. The novel ends with Törless's adult sexual gaze, with which he is now also able to see his mother when she arrives at the school to take him home. This final metaphor emphasizes his successful individuation. The acceptance of life's contradictions is a sign of maturity; as a result, Törless was confused by challenging experiences, but in the end he proved to be strong enough to learn from them and to mature.

## THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES

**First published:** *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930-1943 (English translation, 1953-1960)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A man in his early thirties searches for life's potential, rather than life's realities, in a grandiose patriotic project and in an intimate relationship with his sister.*

In a typically modernist "plot" line, in which the plot itself is less important than the main character's reflections on life, the main character, Ulrich, in *The Man Without Qualities* is drawn into planning the great patriotic celebration of the seventieth anniversary of Francis Joseph as Austrian emperor in the year 1918, called the Parallel Campaign in competition with celebrations for the German emperor. This project provides some degree of action

and considerable, intended irony and satire in the novel's two-part first book. Started in the mid-1920's, the novel clearly implies that the Parallel Campaign, which Ulrich joins at the beginning of the novel in 1913, was doomed because the emperor was dead in 1916 and by 1918 his empire lay torn to pieces by World War I.

The second book opens with the appearance of Agathe, Ulrich's long-lost sister. As brother and sister get reacquainted, they experiment with new ways of belonging. The experiment becomes the novel's new center, while the Parallel Campaign continues. Although Ulrich is five years older than his sister, they are so close that they consider each other not only twins but conjoined twins and even refer to the myth of the androgynous being, retold in Plato's *Symposium* (399-390 B.C.E.; *Symposium*, 1701). Human beings were double—that is, they had two heads, four arms, and so on—but the gods cut them in half. From that time each “half” has been looking for his or her original other half. In this sense, Agathe emerges as Ulrich's “other.” The mention of ancient myths, such as that of Isis and Osiris, extends the possibility of the brother/sister relationship to include sexuality.

The actual transgression of incest is part of a manuscript chapter, “Die Reise ins Paradies” (“The Journey into Paradise”), not published until 1952. It may be understood in the context of three observations. First, the Ulrich/Agathe experiment is set up in terms of both mythology and the novel's sense of possibility. It may be a provocative act or merely a provocative possibility to bring about the “other condition,” that is, not simply a different lifestyle but a truly higher level of experience—something that is beyond the conventional morality of good and evil. Second, the experiment itself fails because any transcendent “other condition” cannot have real permanence. This type of literary “reality check” is akin to Romantic irony, when a goal cannot be reached because there is always another obstacle that emerges. Third, Musil wrote the focal chapter of the Ulrich/Agathe story in the mid-1920's, when he started working on the novel, which had the working title “The Twin Sister.” Over time, Musil may have increasingly doubted the validity and even morality of the brother/sister plot, which, in turn, made it impossible for him to complete the novel. This explanation, however, remains speculation because the mid-1920's focal

chapter already concluded with the failure of the Ulrich/Agathe plot.

Even unfinished, *The Man Without Qualities* is a major modernist achievement because it exhibits the modernist search for a new style and myth. Since plot never was the main function but mostly a vehicle for Musil's (and his protagonist Ulrich's) essayism—that is, for observation, reflection, irony, and experiment—readers may enjoy the novel's main quality: that it does not have “qualities,” that it always leaves room for doubt and speculation. What readers may enjoy, then, are the fluctuations of life itself. In this respect, each reader is like Ulrich.

It turns out that Ulrich, the novel's man without qualities, whose last name is never mentioned, possesses certain qualities. The readers first meet Ulrich on a fine summer day in Vienna in August, 1913, only after they have read the narrator's speculations of whether the person in the street might be somebody else. Ulrich is thirty-two years old, single but quite popular with women although somewhat shallow in his relationships. As a result, readers may fluctuate between finding Ulrich a likable character for some of his qualities yet not likable for others. In a similar way, Ulrich cannot make up his mind about his own life. So far, he has tried different careers (the same ones as Musil): first, military officer; then, engineer; finally, mathematician. Although not undistinguished, he was unfulfilled in each career for not becoming a person of importance. Taken aback by the description of a race horse as having “genius,” he decides early in the novel to take a year off from all obligations and to make sense of his life. The novel follows Ulrich on his personal search.

A man without qualities, however, may mean “modern” man in general. The term may indicate nihilism; consequently, Ulrich may be understood as a man without values. This may be seen negatively as a statement about a world without values. A neutral understanding could imply that human beings are simply dependent on impulses from the outside (a concept from Ernst Mach's philosophy, about which Musil wrote his dissertation); hence, Ulrich appears primarily passive, observing and responding to what goes on around him. In a positive interpretation, “no qualities” may refer to the standards set by old values, yet Ulrich is looking for new values. Musil seems to favor the last option by con-



trasting the sense of reality with the sense of possibility. Possibility is perhaps reality, that is, that part of reality that has been filtered out by cognitive economy when human consciousness constructs “reality” (another concept from Mach). Finally, German mystic tradition suggests that only a pure soul, that is, the individual purged of all accidental and temporal qualities, is capable of a mystical union with God—which corresponds to Musil’s utopian “other condition.”

The novel’s characters come together through Ulrich in one way or another. On one hand, this can be seen as a characteristic of the “lyric” novel, a novel whose content is filtered through the protagonist’s consciousness so that reality becomes difficult to distinguish from the character’s projections. On the other hand, the characters seem to vary Musil’s theme of Plato’s androgynous myth;



that is, every character in the novel is incomplete and looking for fulfillment by relating to others, above all to Ulrich. Among the novel’s many characters, the most important ones are Ulrich’s sister, his friends, and the members of the Parallel Campaign. Some of the characters gain an additional dimension because they are patterned after actual people.

Ulrich’s friends Walter and Clarisse, who are in an unhappy marriage, are based on friends of Musil. To an extent, Walter provides a foil to Ulrich as another man who showed promise but has settled for mediocrity, leaving Clarisse, who wants to be married to a great man, deeply frustrated. The serial sex murderer Moosbrugger is a further illus-

tration of fluctuating judgment: For one expert witness, Moosbrugger is competent to stand trial for his crimes; for another, Moosbrugger is insane. Ulrich contemplates the possible consequences, and Clarisse, herself slowly going mad, feels drawn to Moosbrugger.

A group of influential Austrian citizens is engaged in planning the Parallel Campaign. Ulrich’s father wants his son finally to accomplish something, so he arranges for Ulrich to meet with a female cousin whom Ulrich has not met before. This cousin, nicknamed Diotima by Ulrich, has established a salon in her house that becomes the center of the Parallel Campaign. The immensely rich German Dr. Arnheim (based on the politician Walter Rathenau) joins the group. Like others in the novel, Diotima and Arnheim represent the discrepancy between true motives and appearance.

## SUMMARY

Living in the age of modernity, whose dizzying speed was often experienced as deeply disconcerting decline and insanity, Robert Musil was searching for what he called the “other condition,” an embodiment of utopian hope for society. *The Man Without Qualities* explores individual insanity (Moosbrugger, Clarisse) and collective stupidity (the Parallel Campaign) in Kakania (Musil’s ironic term for Austria), while the utopian element of the brother/sister plot is delayed, although the author had planned its failure from the beginning. Musil’s other novel, the earlier *Young Törless*, made the author famous with its psychological study of a schoolboy who has to deal with, among other experiences, confusing visions of the “other condition” before he can achieve an adult sense of selfhood. Törless’s attempts at finding clarity are related to Ulrich’s difficulties defining his middle-aged self.

Ingo R. Stoehr

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*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930-1943 (unfinished, 3 volumes; *The Man Without Qualities*, 1953-1960 [3 volumes], 1995 [2 volumes])

SHORT FICTION:

*Vereinigungen*, 1911 (partial translation as *Unions*, 1965)

*Drei Frauen*, 1924 (*Tonka, and Other Stories*, 1965)

*Five Women*, 1966 (includes stories from *Vereinigungen* and *Drei Frauen*)

DRAMA:

*Die Schwärmer*, pb. 1921, pr. 1929 (*The Enthusiasts*, 1983)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are the modernist elements of Robert Musil's novels?
- How do the rational and irrational, the material and the spiritual, relate to each other in Musil's novels?
- What is the role of sexuality in Musil's work? Is it gratuitous, motivated, meaningful, and/or appropriate?
- What types of irony are there? Which ones does Musil use in *The Man Without Qualities*?
- What is a "man without qualities"? Is it something one can choose to be?
- What is more important—the sense of reality or the sense of possibility?



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## VLADIMIR NABOKOV

**Born:** St. Petersburg, Russia  
April 23, 1899

**Died:** Montreux, Switzerland  
July 2, 1977

*Nabokov, a novelist, short-story writer, poet, playwright, scholar-critic, translator, lepidopterist, and chess problemist, was a pre-eminent figure in twentieth century English and Russian literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (NAB-uh-kawf) was born on April 23, 1899, in St. Petersburg, Russia. He was the eldest son of Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, a prominent liberal politician and Anglophile aristocrat, and Elena Rukavishnikov, a member of a prominent family of industrialists. Young Vladimir, the favorite child, grew up amid great wealth and cultural privilege. Trilingual from childhood, he had live-in tutors and attended a private school. From his idolized father he inherited a love of nature, especially butterflies, and of chess; from his mother he acquired a passion for the visual arts, particularly painting, and for the marvels of memory and commemoration. His early life was divided between the family's elegant town house in the imperial capital of St. Petersburg and summers on its nearby country estate.

The family's gracious existence ended when it was forced into exile following the Russian Revolution of 1917. However, the cultural bounty acquired during those early years sustained Nabokov for the remaining sixty years of his life.

Although his family settled in Berlin, the young Nabokov was sent to England's University of Cambridge, where he spent the years from 1919 to 1923. He then returned to Berlin, where he was to live until 1938. Tragedy struck when his father, now a newspaper publisher, was assassinated by right-wing Russian monarchists in 1922.

Nabokov had published his first volume of poetry in 1916, and he soon followed it with another collection. Adopting the pen name V. Sirin, he now published two additional volumes of poetry while contributing stories, poems, chess problems, the first Russian crossword puzzles, and reviews to the émigré Russian press. In addition to his journalistic endeavors, he supported himself by giving language and tennis lessons, working as a film extra, writing cabaret skits and plays, and translating.

Nabokov married Vera Slonim in 1925, and he shortly began work on his first novel, *Mashenka* (1926; *Mary*, 1970). Between 1925 and 1940 he established himself as the leading new writer of the Russian emigration with a string of novels, stories, and poems. After *Mary* came the novels *Korol', dama, valet* (1928; *King, Queen, Knave*, 1968), *Zashchita Luzhina* (serial, 1929, book, 1930; *The Defense*, 1964), *Soglyadatay* (serial, 1930, book, 1938; *The Eye*, 1965), *Podvig* (1932; *Glory*, 1971), *Kamera obskura* (1932; *Camera Obscura*, 1936, revised as *Laughter in the Dark*, 1938), and *Otchayanie* (serial, 1934, book, 1936; *Despair*, 1937, revised, 1966). The best of the Russian novels were the last two: *Priglasenie na kazn'* (serial, 1935-1936, book, 1938; *Invitation to a Beheading*, 1959) and *Dar* (serial, 1937-1938, book, 1952; *The Gift*, 1963).

With the rise of Adolf Hitler, life in Germany became increasingly difficult, and in 1938 the Nabokovs and their four-year-old son, Dmitri, immigrated to France. Nabokov sensed that his old European life was ending and now undertook his

first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). The Nabokovs were to spend only two years in France before fleeing once again just as the German forces were invading.

The Nabokov family arrived in New York in May, 1940, but Nabokov's hard-won reputation as a Russian writer was meaningless in the United States. At forty-one he started anew, this time as an American writer. First, however, he had to provide for his wife and son. During the early years, he taught at Wellesley College and worked as a lepidopterist at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. He became an American citizen in 1945.

Nabokov's responsibilities left him little time for writing, but by 1947 he had completed his first "American" novel, *Bend Sinister*, a dark modernist fantasy about a philosopher who vainly tries to stand aside from political tyranny. More important for his American reputation were the autobiographical vignettes that appeared in *The New Yorker* in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Revised and collected as *Conclusive Evidence: A Memoir* (1951) and *Drugie berega* (1954), then revised once again as *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966), the pieces constitute an intensely artistic exploration of the writer's first forty years.

In 1948, Nabokov accepted a position as a professor of European literature at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, where he would spend the next decade. He taught in the winters, went on butterfly-collecting expeditions throughout the American West each summer, and continued his writing. Much of his time was devoted to the translation of Russian classics into English. The short novel *Invitation of a Small Guest* (1957) was also written during the Cornell years, as was Nabokov's most famous work, *Lolita* (1955).

The story of a young American girl and her perverted stepfather, *Lolita* was rejected by several American publishers before Nabokov's agent offered it to Maurice Girodias of the Paris-based Olympia Press. Apparently neither author nor agent knew that besides publishing avant-garde literature, Girodias also dealt in outright pornography. Upon its publication in the United States in 1958, *Lolita* became a best seller, but only gradually did it emerge from the ensuing scandal that Nabokov had written an American masterpiece. Suddenly the wealth that he had lost thirty years before in the Russian Revolution was restored to him.

He resigned his teaching post and returned to Europe for what was intended to be a visit.

As time passed, however, the Nabokovs realized that a grand hotel in Switzerland would be their permanent home. At sixty, Nabokov was an international literary superstar. From his hotel suite in Montreux, there emerged a stream of books that would assure his place as one of the masters of twentieth century world literature: *Pale Fire* (1962), a display of literary pyrotechnics taking the form of a long poem and a deluded commentary upon it; *Invitation of a Small Guest* (1969), a richly embroidered fantasy of brother-sister incest that gained for its author a cover story in *Time*; the ghost story *Transparent Things* (1972); and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). As Nabokov's stature as an English author grew, interest reawakened in his Russian work, which now began to appear in English and many other languages.

Nabokov died on July 2, 1977, in Montreux, leaving instructions that the novel he had been unable to complete, "The Original of Laura," be destroyed. In 2008, however, his son Dmitri announced that he would allow the manuscript to be published.

## ANALYSIS

Nabokov was often praised as a master of language and style but criticized for a perceived absence of general ideas, social relevance, and even morality in his novels. Russian literature has always had a strong moral, social, and political orientation. At times, this didactic tendency has overshadowed and even displaced the artistic element. First in his novel *The Gift* and later in a collection of interviews, *Strong Opinions* (1973), Nabokov argued for the independence of art. This is not to say that Nabokov did not incorporate serious ideas and moral considerations in his art, but rather that they are secondary to artistic considerations. Such themes are deeply woven into the texture of his works so that only the careful reader will recognize their presence.

It was only after Nabokov's death that his widow pointed to the presence of a master theme throughout her husband's work, a theme that she called "the hereafter." Is death really the end of everything? If not, does personal consciousness survive? Nabokov's novels rarely address these questions directly. Close examination shows that Nabokov

kov's novels contain not one but two (or more) worlds. One of these is, within the framework of the novel, regarded by the characters as the one and only world. A chosen few of Nabokov's heroes, however, notice inexplicable coincidences and patterns, which lead them to suspect the presence of a controlling mind that has created them and their universe. This creator lives on another world. When these favored characters face death, either their own or that of a loved one, they become obsessed with the possibility of the hereafter, another world, that of their creator, with its promise of immortality and reunion with their loved ones. Intimations of a higher world are strongest in dreams and madness, but the real answer can come only at the moment of death. In some of the novels, such as *Bend Sinister*, the controlling presence of the author reaches into his created world and rescues his hero. The character dies and returns to the mind of his author-creator and in doing so acquires the wider consciousness of his author. All the secret coincidences of the previous "fictional" universe are now explained. Implicit in this scheme is the idea of the artist as god. It is an art-centered view of the meaning of life, an extension of the relationship between the creator and his character to the realm of a personal philosophy.

Readers of *Speak, Memory* cannot help being struck by Nabokov's incredibly detailed recall of the minutiae of the past and his ability to bring it to life by the verbal precision of his writing. The theme of memory gains its greatest importance in connection with Nabokov's master theme of another, parallel world. The ability of Nabokov's heroes to detect signs and symbols hinting at the existence of another world depends upon the power and precision of their memories. Without memory, everything happens as if for the first time and is meaningless. Most of Nabokov's fictional characters fail to recognize these signs of a master hand. In a sense, readers of Nabokov's novels are in the same position as his characters. They must recall the scattered details that constitute the patterns and coincidences signaling the other world.

Nabokov has remarked that the real history of a writer is the story of his style. Nabokov is indisputably one of the greatest masters of both Russian and English. Yet style is also what makes him a difficult writer for many readers. His novels are filled with word games and hidden allusions that some-

times hint at the presence of the other world or that add new dimensions of meaning. In the ghost story "The Vane Sisters" (1959), the doubting narrator's skepticism about the hereafter is undermined in his last sentence by an acrostic that he himself fails to notice. The acrostic is a message from the dead sisters of the story. More often, hints of the other world come in the form of allusions. In *Bend Sinister*, the presence of the other world is signaled by the recurrence of a footprint-shaped puddle that is the point of transition between the worlds of the author and his character. In *Ada or Ardor*, the secret brother-sister relationship of heroine and hero is hinted by allusions to English poet Lord Byron and French writer François-René Chateaubriand, both of whom were rumored to have had incestuous relationships with their sisters. To appreciate fully Nabokov's novels, the reader should have a good grasp of Russian, French, and English literary history and, ideally, a knowledge of these languages.

Nabokov was a difficult, modernist writer who basically wrote for an elite audience. Such writers, although admired by literary specialists, are rarely read outside the classroom. The most amazing aspect of Nabokov's literary career is that he became a best-selling author, his name a household word. This development occurred in large part because of the scandal surrounding *Lolita*. His continued popularity, however, arose from literary qualities rare in a "writer's writer." Nabokov's novels have strong, interesting plots and are marked by an elegant if often Rabelaisian sense of humor. They are enjoyed by a wide audience, as well as by literary specialists.

## MARY

**First published:** *Mashenka*, 1926 (English translation, 1970)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Russian émigré learns that he must break with the past and seek his happiness elsewhere.*

*Mary*, Nabokov's first novel, is set in the large colony of Russian émigrés who had fled the Russian Revolution for Berlin. The novel's events take



place during the first week of April, 1924, in a boardinghouse whose residents, once well-off but now poor, live in a state of suspension. They feel that their real lives were left behind in the Russia of their dreams and desperately hope to return. Meanwhile they wait in a cold, alien city and dream of the past.

Ganin, the hero, is a former White army officer who fought against the victorious Reds before escaping. Although of sterner fortitude than his fellow lodgers, he too has fallen into an irritable malaise. He wishes to move on, perhaps to France, but lacks the resolve to break off a dreary love affair and go. The novel opens in a setting symbolic of the plight of its characters. Ganin and a new lodger named Alfyorov find themselves temporarily trapped in the dark between floors on an elevator. Alfyorov, an effusively cheerful vulgarian, tells the taciturn Ganin that his (Alfyorov's) wife, Mary, from whom he was separated by the revolution, will at last be rejoining him. Later in his room, he shows Ganin her picture. Ganin leaves without a word.

The girl in the picture is Mary, Ganin's first love. For the next few days Ganin walks the streets of Berlin in a trance, reconstructing scene by scene, the entire story of their affair, the happiest time of his life. Ganin's memories reinvigorate him. He abruptly stops seeing his mistress and prepares to leave Berlin. At a party the night before Mary's arrival, Alfyorov, with Ganin's help, becomes very drunk and is put to bed. Mary's train is to arrive at eight o'clock in the morning, but Ganin sets Alfyorov's alarm for eleven. Early in the morning, Ganin sets off with his bags to meet Mary at the train station. The world once again seems new, full of possibilities. As he walks, Ganin comes to a sudden realization, whereupon he catches a taxi to a different train station and sets off alone to begin a new life.

Mary's theme is simple. Mary, Ganin's first love, is identified with his Russian homeland. His reawakened love for her is intertwined with his debilitating nostalgia for his lost past. Only after reliving that love can he put the past behind him and start anew. Like many first novels, *Mary* has a strong autobiographical element. As Nabokov indicates both in his introduction to the novel and in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, *Mary* is based on his own first love affair and even incorporates passages from letters that he received from Mary's prototype.

## THE DEFENSE

**First published:** *Zashchita Luzhina*, 1929, serial; 1930, book (English translation, 1964)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Luzhin, a Russian émigré and International Grand Master, engages in a losing chess game with madness and death.*

*The Defense*, Nabokov's third novel, established him as the leading new writer of the Russian emigration. As the novel opens, Luzhin, a gloomy, friendless lad, learns that he must start public school in St. Petersburg. The boy soon begins cutting school to visit the home of his vivacious aunt, where he learns to play chess. When his father learns of his secretive son's gift, he launches the boy's career as a chess prodigy. Under the strain, Luzhin eventually falls ill and is taken to a German spa to recuperate. As it happens, a major international chess tournament is in progress there, and the boy becomes an international star.

Sixteen years pass before the reader again meets an unkempt, thirty-year-old Luzhin, who finds himself once again at this same resort. A homeless international wanderer who can barely cope with life's ordinary demands, Luzhin has returned to the resort to prepare for a major chess tournament in Berlin. At the resort the boorish, inarticulate Luzhin meets a young woman who is not put off by his eccentricities. After a bizarre courtship, Luzhin leaves for Berlin. For the first time in many years, he plays brilliantly, moving toward a play-off with his nemesis Turati, who has previously defeated him. Luzhin has even prepared a special defense against his opponent. At length, the final game begins, but Turati does not make the expected opening attack. When the game is adjourned for the night, the exhausted Luzhin vaguely hears a voice saying, "Go home." As he makes his way back to his hotel, he collapses.

Luzhin awakens in a rustic mental hospital, where a psychiatrist, together with the patient's fiancé, tells him that he must give up chess if he is to save his sanity. Out of his asylum window, Luzhin sees a scene reminiscent of the Russian countryside of his youth and thinks, "Evidently, I got home." Soon released, Luzhin marries and settles

down with his new bride. He seems to have put chess out of his mind. All is well until Luzhin encounters a former schoolmate who remembers him as a former chess prodigy. Luzhin denies his past, but that night he is plagued by a feeling that a secret attack is unfolding against him. Suddenly, he realizes that each stage of his new, chess-free life is subtly replaying one of the stages in his childhood that led to his initial encounter with chess and, ultimately, to his breakdown. He tries to devise a defense, but his every move is anticipated and thwarted by his unseen opponent. Recognizing his inevitable defeat, Luzhin resigns the hopeless game by leaping through a window to his death.

Nabokov often pointed to the similarities of the composition of chess problems and literary works. *The Defense* illustrates these similarities in many ways, most prominently in its intricate plotting. The technical problem is to insert each of the subtly disguised repetitions of the key events leading to Luzhin's final breakdown in such a way that their essential similarity to a previous event is not immediately evident. This covert patterning sometimes extends to the smallest details. The careful reader must be superior to Luzhin in recognizing the presence and implications of these patterns. Luzhin mistakenly believes himself to be a player in a chess game against madness and death. In reality, he is merely a pawn in a chess problem designed by his author.

## INVITATION TO A BEHEADING

**First published:** *Priglasenie na kazn'*, 1935-1936, serial; 1938, book (English translation, 1959)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Condemned to death in a mythic totalitarian society, the young hero struggles to attain the free world flickering in his imagination.*

*Invitation to a Beheading* was Nabokov's next-to-last Russian novel. Cincinnatus, the hero, is a quiet rebel against the stifling mediocrity of imagination and consciousness of his world. He has an intuition of another world, one in which imagination is king and there are other people like him. Cincinnatus has been condemned to death for the crime of

"gnostical turpitude," which seems to refer to his unique sense of unknown, unnamed things in a world where all things are already named and known to everyone.

The events of *Invitation to a Beheading* take place in a mythic country, with no indication of temporal or geographic setting, although the characters speak Russian. The story covers the last three weeks in the life of Cincinnatus, a youthful teacher of defective children. On the novel's opening day, Cincinnatus hears his death sentence pronounced and is remanded to the hilltop prison fortress, where he is to await the fall of the ax. At first, Cincinnatus is the only prisoner in the fortress, where he is attended by his bluff jailer, Rodion; the unctuous, frock-coated director Rodrig; and his lawyer, Roman, who beleaguers him with inane legal formalities. The careful reader soon realizes that the three characters, like actors, sometimes exchange costumes and roles.

Cincinnatus wishes only two things from his jailers: the date of his execution and a last visit from his callous, unfaithful wife, Marthe, and their two deformed children. Nothing can be learned on either score. Cincinnatus is soon joined by a new inmate, the plump, complaisant Pierre, who intimates that he has tried to help Cincinnatus escape. A cheerful vulgarian who seems to enjoy odd privileges for a prisoner, Pierre forces his friendship upon Cincinnatus, who wishes only to be left alone to explore his thoughts.

Cincinnatus devotes himself to keeping a prison diary in which he explores his sense of his differentness from all others in his society and his intimations of another, better world: "I am the one among you who is alive—Not only are my eyes different, and my hearing, and my sense of taste—not only is my sense of smell like a deer's, my sense of touch like a bat's—but most important, I have the capacity to conjoin all of this in one point." This point is that he knows "a paramount thing that no one here knows." He has come to believe that the world in which he is imprisoned is an illusion. While still fearing the executioner's ax, Cincinnatus suspects that death is a doorway between this wretched, delusional world and another, brighter, real one. Through some ghastly mistake, he has been born into the "wrong" world, and only death will rectify the error.

The day of Cincinnatus's public beheading ar-

rives, and he is escorted from the prison by Pierre, who proves to be the executioner. Strangely, Cincinnatus's cell starts to disintegrate and as they move toward the fatal square, statues and buildings begin to crumble like decrepit stage sets. As Cincinnatus ascends the scaffold, the crowd starts to fade into transparency. The ax falls, and "amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery, Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him."

The intuitions of Cincinnatus, the quiet loner and heretic, have been confirmed. He has been trapped in a false, nightmare universe in which he is the only "real" person. His imagination and awareness, which make him a criminal in the eyes of his fellow citizens, also give him his intuition of a better world, to which he, with the help of his author-creator, gains entrance at the moment of his beheading. His death in the evil world is his birth into the ideal world fashioned by his creator.

*Invitation to a Beheading*, composed in a matter of weeks during 1934, is Nabokov's most poetic, artifice-saturated, and technically sophisticated novel. There is no pretense of realism in Nabokov's most overt venture into high modernism. There is no attempt to create rounded, believable characters, nor would they be appropriate to what is patently a false, antihuman fictional universe. The plot revolves around the relative reality of Cincinnatus's two universes—his prison world and the free world suggested by his imagination. Nabokov has interposed these two worlds into his dystopian novel in a subtle and ingenious way that is more evident in the Russian original than in the English translation. The presence of the two worlds is almost subliminally woven into the text through the use of the words "here" and "there" signifying the false and the real worlds. Cincinnatus's creator, Nabokov, has structured his story around these contrasting terms, affirming what his character can only suspect. Stylistically, *Invitation to a Beheading* is Nabokov's most brilliant novel.

## THE GIFT

**First published:** *Dax*, 1937-1938, serial; 1952, book (English translation, 1963)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Russian émigré writer gradually masters his art and finds love in the Berlin of the 1920's.*

*The Gift*, Nabokov's last and greatest Russian novel, is set in Russian émigré Berlin in the late 1920's. The hero, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, is a young poet and writer seeking to find his own voice and place in the Russian literary tradition. The former aristocrat, forever barred from his homeland, leads a pleasantly precarious existence giving lessons, doing translations, and selling an occasional poem. *The Gift* has a dual plot line: the evolution of Fyodor's art, and the course of his love affair with fellow émigré Zina Mertz.

As the novel opens, Fyodor, who just published his first book of poems, is settling in at a new rooming house. That evening he visits Alexander and Alexandra Chernyshevski, who have befriended the young poet after the suicide of their son. Exercising his artistic imagination, Fyodor tries to enter the mind of each of the people present. Alexander Chernyshevski is on the verge of madness, and through Alexander's eyes Fyodor sees the shadowy figure of his dead son, Yasha, among the guests.

A few months pass, and Fyodor receives a visit from his mother, who lives in Paris. They reminisce about their idyllic family life in Russia before the revolution. Their greatest concern, however, is the fate of Fyodor's father, a famous explorer who disappeared while returning from Tibet. Although he is presumed dead, both mother and son still hope for his return. An austere scientist as well as a man of action, Fyodor's father possessed an aura of secret knowledge that set him apart from others. Fyodor, who idolizes his father, decides to write his biography. After many months, he abandons the project, feeling that he is unable to capture his father's mysterious essence. Fyodor has not yet mastered the themes and techniques that will mark him as a great artist.

The young writer must once again change his lodgings, and he takes a room in the apartment of a

Russian family named Shchyogolev. Zina, Mrs. Shchyogolev's daughter from an earlier marriage, proves to be a longtime admirer of Fyodor's poetry, and the young people are drawn together. Meanwhile Fyodor, an accomplished composer of chess problems, has come across an excerpt from the diary of Nikolai Chernyshevski in a Soviet chess magazine. Nikolai Chernyshevski (who is not to be confused with the novel's other Chernyshevskis) was a radical nineteenth century Russian literary and political journalist exiled by the czar. The inept Chernyshevski became a political martyr revered by the liberal Russian intelligentsia. So respected was he that his primitive, social utilitarian aesthetic views came to dominate much of Russia's cultural development for more than a century. Fyodor, the young aesthete, sees Nikolai Chernyshevski as the bad seed of Russian cultural and political history and decides to write a book about him. The slight volume, which constitutes chapter 4 of *The Gift*, outrages almost all segments of the reading public and gains for Fyodor a certain notoriety.

Zina has served as Fyodor's muse throughout the writing of the Chernyshevski biography. The lovers, although living under the same roof, are never alone together. Their problem is unexpectedly solved when Shchyogolev obtains a job abroad and sublets the family apartment. Until the new tenants arrive, Zina and Fyodor can stay. The young lovers, whose relationship has remained unknown to the Shchyogolevs, see them off at the train station. As they spend their last money on dinner in a sidewalk café, Fyodor outlines the plan of his major novel, which proves to be *The Gift*.

*The Gift* is especially rich in themes. The most prominent is that of the artist's creative process. Fyodor's artistic development is illustrated through four stages: the early poems, the aborted biography of his father, the witty and elegant biography of Chernyshevski, and *The Gift* itself. In each case, the actual development of Fyodor's creative process is followed from its tiny, inconsequential beginnings to the finished work, for Nabokov's novel is a biographical study of the creative gift from which the novel draws its title. The second major theme is Nabokov's radical reassessment of Russian cultural history and literature. The theme is associated with Fyodor's withering biography of Nikolai Chernyshevski and with his relationship with a character named Koncheyev, a poet and literary

critic. It is in Fyodor's conversations with Koncheyev (all of which are imaginary) that Nabokov advances his own aesthetically based reevaluation of Russian literature. The third major theme is the hereafter. This theme centers upon Alexander Chernyshevski and, to a lesser extent, upon Fyodor and his father. The demented Chernyshevski at times believes that he is in touch with the spirit world, but at other times he rejects the idea. As he lies dying, listening to water drumming outside his curtained window, he murmurs, "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards. . . . It is as clear as the fact that it is raining." In fact, the sun is shining, and a neighbor is watering her plants. The theme surfaces again near the end of the book when Fyodor receives a night summons to come meet his returned father. The sequence proves to be a dream, but other clues throughout the novel suggest the ghostly presence of Fyodor's father.

*The Gift*, the most complex of Nabokov's Russian novels, is also the most deeply rooted in Russian history and culture. Beyond that, what at first seems to be a traditional realistic Russian novel in fact proves to be another example of Nabokov's artistic ingeniousness, for his novel is plotted on the model of a chess problem composed by Fyodor in the course of the book. Both a loving tribute to and a parody of the traditional Russian realistic novel, *The Gift* is a fitting climax to Nabokov's career as a Russian writer.

## "SIGNS AND SYMBOLS"

**First published:** 1948 (collected in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 1995)

**Type of work:** Short story

*An elderly couple visit their son in a sanitarium and subsequently receive a series of unsettling telephone calls.*

Originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, "Signs and Symbols" illustrates Nabokov's talent for enfolding closely observed details of everyday life into a larger conceptual framework.

An aging Russian immigrant couple are making a difficult trip by subway and bus to their son's sanitarium to give him his twentieth birthday present, a

selection of jellies in a basket. The young man is suffering from “referential mania” and imagines that every object and event has something to do with him. Upon arriving, however, the parents learn that their son has once again tried to commit suicide and should not be disturbed. The weary couple return home with the basket, but cannot sleep. They decide that despite the difficulty involved, they must bring their son home to care for him.

As they work out the details of their decision, the telephone rings, and the wife answers it with trepidation, for it is now past midnight. When a voice she does not recognize asks for “Charlie,” she explains with relief that the caller has the wrong number. Moments later the phone rings again, and the same young girl asks for Charlie again. The wife explains that the caller is still misdialing, after which the couple return to the simple pleasures of their late-night tea. The telephone rings a third time, at which point the story ends.

Although Nabokov describes the aging couple and their travails in homely detail, most readers’ initial reactions to “Signs and Symbols” focus on the telephone calls that end the story. Given the condition of the young man and the late hour, it is natural that readers share the couple’s trepidation over the calls, for the sanitarium may be trying to inform them that their son has finally succeeded in killing himself. It is at this point that careful readers may think back on the condition from which the son suffers—a mania in which he believes that everything relates to and revolves around him. In their response to the telephone calls, his parents share a version of the same mania, as do the story’s readers, who not unnaturally assume that every detail of the work before them must somehow relate to its “meaning.” Nabokov seemingly leaves the issue unresolved, yet the lack of a resolution merely heightens the impulse to find a pattern where there may not be one.

## LOLITA

**First published:** 1955

**Type of work:** Novel

*Humbert Humbert marries a widow in order to be close to her daughter, and he embarks upon an affair with the girl after her mother’s death.*

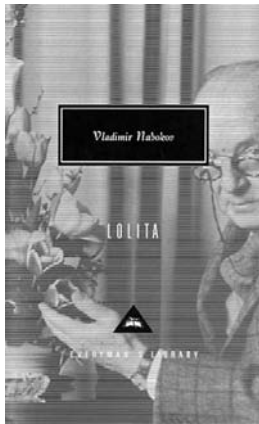
Generally regarded as Nabokov’s most important work, *Lolita* opens with a foreword, ostensibly written by a psychiatrist, reporting that the narrator of *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, died while awaiting trial. Several other characters treated in the text, including Mrs. Richard F. Schiller, have also died.

Humbert Humbert proves to be an elusive and ambiguous narrator, apologizing for yet celebrating his love for the underage Lolita. He describes his early years in Europe; his love for Annabel Leigh, who died soon after he met her, instilling in him an attraction to “nymphets”; and his immigration to the United States after World War II. In New England he rents a room from widowed Charlotte Haze after laying eyes on her twelve-year-old daughter Lolita. Humbert eventually marries Haze in order to remain near Lolita, and then he plots to kill his new wife—an act he is prevented from carrying out when she dies by accident. Humbert removes Lolita from her summer camp and takes her to a hotel named The Enchanted Hunters. In an ironic twist, the young woman seduces the older man.

There follows a description of Humbert and Lolita’s long journey across the United States by automobile, a trip in which the girl is essentially Humbert’s willing prisoner. After a year the pair return to New England, where Humbert places his stepdaughter in a private boarding school. After taking the lead in a play called *The Enchanted Hunters*, however, Lolita expresses a desire to travel again, but on this trip Humbert senses, correctly, that they are being followed. Lolita is abducted and eventually abandoned by another man, although Humbert does not learn the details until Lolita writes him some years later. Now married to a veteran named Schiller, she reluctantly reveals the identity of her abductor, an old family friend named Clare Quilty. Humbert then tracks Quilty down and kills him.



A brief plot summary does *Lolita* little justice, for the novel is densely textured and exceedingly complex. It is replete with literary allusions to such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, who married his thirteen-year-old niece and wrote a poem about love and early death entitled “Annabel Lee” (1849). The coincidences in which the novel seems to abound are evidence of larger if elusive patterns. For example, Humbert finds it pleasant that the play *Lolita* partic-



ipates in shares the name of the hotel in which he and she became lovers. Yet it eventually becomes clear that Quilty was at the hotel that night, that he immediately grasped Humbert's involvement with Lolita, and that he actually wrote the play. In effect, Quilty and Humbert are both “hunters” who find themselves “enchanted” by Lolita. Lolita also admits that Quilty was the only man she had ever loved.

*Lolita* is frequently lauded as a comic masterpiece, but despite its ribald wordplay it is a somber work, and not only because it deals with pedophilia. Humbert Humbert announces at the end of his manuscript that it is to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive, but it comes as a shock to realize that the “Mrs. Richard F. Schiller” referred to briefly in the work's foreword is after all Lolita, and that she died shortly after Humbert Humbert himself, giving birth to a stillborn daughter. Thus Humbert Humbert's last words, in which he praises the “refuge of art,” are particularly pertinent: “And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.”

## PALE FIRE

**First published:** 1962

**Type of work:** Novel

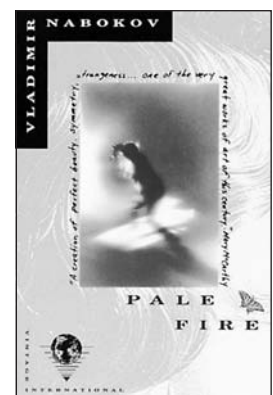
*A demented critic detects hidden meanings in a colleague's final work.*

*Pale Fire* is undoubtedly Nabokov's most challenging novel. It opens with a self-indulgent “Foreword” by one Charles Kinbote and continues with a long poem (also entitled “Pale Fire”) by his late friend and colleague John Shade, a professor at a northeastern college and a poet somewhat in the mold of Robert Frost. A wayward, extended “Commentary” and a brief “Index,” both by Kinbote, conclude the novel.

Shade's poem is written in 999 lines and divided into four cantos. An autobiographical rumination on death and the possibility of life after death, it reaches a poignant apogee in describing the suicide of Shade's beloved but ungainly daughter Hazel. In his “Foreword,” however, Kinbote argues that the poem is actually “about” something else, and encourages readers to consult his “Commentary” before studying the poem. Kinbote has been regaling his patient friend with absurd stories involving the exiled king of Zembla, Charles the Beloved. Although there is an arctic island called Nova Zembla, there is no country called Zembla outside Kinbote's imagination. Yet Kinbote is convinced that Shade has incorporated Kinbote's stories into his poem, and proves it, at least to his own satisfaction, in his bizarre notes.

It may seem obvious that Kinbote is mad, although it is possible to determine from his remarks the general course of events and the particulars of his friend's fate.

Having finished (or nearly finished) “Pale Fire,” Shade visits Kinbote and, mistaken for the judge from whom Kinbote rents his house, is shot and killed by an escaped criminal named Jack Grey. Believing that Kinbote has heroically tried to save her



husband's life, Shade's widow Sybil gives Kinbote permission to edit and publish her husband's last poem.

The levels of possible interpretation of *Pale Fire* are multitudinous and extend far beyond the subject matter of Shade's poem. Charles the Beloved may well be Kinbote's alter ego, but on the other hand Kinbote may actually be the Russian-American scholar V. Botkin mentioned in the "Index." In addition, the mysterious Zemblan revolutionary Jakob Gradus discussed in Kinbote's "Commentary" may be Jack Grey.

*Pale Fire* takes its title from William Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens* (pr. c. 1607-1608, pb. 1623): "The moon's an arrant thief,/ And her pale fire she snatches from the sun." Nabokov's treatment of stolen identity (and thus stolen meaning) is audacious, although the success of *Pale Fire* is open to question. Some critics greeted *Pale Fire* with extravagant praise, but many readers

have found Kinbote, who occupies center stage throughout most of the novel, insubstantial and unsympathetic—a monomaniac defined entirely by his obsession.

## SUMMARY

The critic George Steiner suggested that many of the writers who have left lasting marks in twentieth century literature share a characteristic that he termed "extraterritoriality." In the past, writers were closely bound to their own countries and cultures. Their settings and their points of view were restricted to their own background. Vladimir Nabokov, like James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Jorge Luis Borges, lived in a multilingual, multicultural world. By drawing on his multicultural heritage, Nabokov revitalized the novel, creating master works for a new international audience.

*D. Barton Johnson; updated by Grove Koger*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Vladimir Nabokov's attitude toward memory?
- How does Nabokov treat moral concerns in his works?
- How does Nabokov suggest the possibility of an afterlife?
- How does Nabokov utilize the game of chess in his works?
- What are the characteristics of Nabokov's style?
- Many of Nabokov's narrators are unreliable. How can readers determine the validity of what they have to say?

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Thomas Victor

## V. S. NAIPAUL

**Born:** Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago  
August 17, 1932

*Described by many as England's greatest living writer, Naipaul explores the postcolonial world in his novels and nonfiction.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (NI-pawl) was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago, on August 17, 1932, of Hindu parents whose forebears had emigrated from India. Vidiadhar's father, Seepersad Naipaul, was reared in poverty because of the early death of his own father. After completing his education, however, Seepersad married into a large, powerful Brahman family. At the time of Vidiadhar's birth, Seepersad was staff correspondent for the *Trinidad Guardian*, reporting on events in the small town of Chaguanas. There he and his wife lived, along with dozens of relatives, all crowded into the large family home and dominated by his wife's mother. Two years after Vidiadhar's birth, when the crusading managing editor of the *Trinidad Guardian* lost his job, Seepersad was reduced to a position as stringer, or occasional writer. Lacking privacy or respect at home and deprived of the vocation that had given his life order and meaning, Seepersad had a nervous breakdown. For some years he moved from one odd job to another and from one place to another, while his wife and children remained in the big house in Chaguanas.

Although his father was to be a major influence on his career, V. S. Naipaul said he did not come to know him until 1938, when Seepersad was hired by

the *Trinidad Guardian* to cover Port of Spain and moved his wife and five children to the city, where for two years they were finally able to live by themselves. During that period, which he calls the happiest in his life, the boy started reading his father's old press clippings, which gave him an insight into life in Chaguanas, as well as an interest in writing.

Later, the Naipaul family was again absorbed by relatives, living first in the country and then, when World War II broke out, back in Port of Spain in a house crowded with family members who had come to the city to work. Because conditions at home were so chaotic during most of his childhood, Naipaul was developing a need for order, which he found at school and, interestingly, in reading draft after draft of the stories that his father was writing for his own pleasure. In this process, he came to share his father's conviction that writing was the noblest vocation of all because it enabled one to work toward a just order in a chaotic and unjust world. By the time he was eleven, even though he himself had done no writing, Naipaul knew that he was to be a writer.

By the time Seepersad could finally buy a house for his family, V. S. Naipaul was fourteen years old. At eighteen, he left home. Having completed his studies at Queen's Royal College, he won a scholarship from the government of Trinidad, and in 1950 he left for Oxford, planning to study English in preparation for his career as a writer. Unfortunately, his father did not live to see his son's success. In 1953, at the age of forty-seven, Seepersad Naipaul died.

When he left Oxford a year after his father's death, Naipaul stayed in London, living meagerly on the income from a part-time position with the British Broadcasting Corporation's Caribbean ser-



vice. In his "Prologue to an Autobiography," published in *Finding the Center: Two Narratives* (1984), Naipaul dates his writing career as beginning late one afternoon in the office where he worked, when, for no particular reason, he typed a sentence about someone named Hat shouting to his neighbor Bogart back in Port of Spain. Naipaul's imagination was fired. He kept writing, and in time he had finished a book. Although it was to be four years later, in 1959, that *Miguel Street* would be published, from the moment that Naipaul pecked out that sentence, with which the novel begins, he had begun to fulfill his father's dream. When he decided to remain in England after leaving Oxford, Naipaul was in effect choosing his lifetime home.

In 1955, he married a British woman, Patricia Ann Hale, with whom he would live in historic Salisbury, near Stonehenge. Despite his long residence there and the acclaim that he has received from English readers, however, Naipaul always describes himself as an exile in England, in the same way that he would have been an outsider in Trinidad.

For his first four novels, however, Naipaul drew on the experiences of his childhood. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) are all set in Trinidad and all have obvious autobiographical elements. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for example, is the story of a poor man, much like Naipaul's father, who is doomed to live with his wife's relatives but determined to get a house of his own.

In 1962, Naipaul published his first nonfiction work, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French, and Dutch—in the West Indies and South America*, which concentrates on the status of societies that, like the West Indies, are still influenced by their colonial heritage. During that decade, Naipaul wrote a variety of works, for example, the novels *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), set in England, and *The Mimic Men* (1967), about a West Indian expatriate in London, as well as short stories and other nonfiction books.

In the years that followed, Naipaul further broadened his scope, publishing novels set in Africa and nonfiction about India. *A Turn in the South* (1989), a travel book about the American South, illustrates Naipaul's continuing curiosity and flexibility. His increasing concern about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism is reflected in his 1981

work *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* and in the even more controversial book *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998). In 2001, his novel *Half a Life* appeared, and the sequel, *Magic Seeds*, was published three years later. Naipaul also published two important essay collections, *The Writer and the World* (2002) and *Literary Occasions* (2003). Naipaul's achievement as a writer won him many awards and honors, among them, a knighthood in 1990 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001.

## ANALYSIS

Although his works vary widely in subject, in form, and in tone, Naipaul's primary interest throughout his literary career has been the relationship of the individual to society. He is unlike such twentieth century authors as Eudora Welty of Mississippi or R. K. Narayan of India, who wrote about the traditional societies in which they were reared. Naipaul does not deal with a static society, whose rules an individual must accept or defy, but with multicultural societies in which the various cultures themselves are changing because of the breakdown of old traditions, old beliefs, or the old, often colonial, governments that gave them stability.

Even a relatively peaceful society, such as that described in Naipaul's Trinidad novels, can be extremely complex. There are the white, Christian residents, the old governing class of the colonial period. There is a black majority, with its own customs, even its own language. Finally, there is the Indian minority, most of whom are descended from immigrants who worked out their passage as indentured servants but who are now far from homogeneous. Some are rich, others are poor. Some are Hindus, some are Muslims. Some are religiously orthodox, others are not. As Naipaul indicates in "Prologue to an Autobiography," however, they do have one common quality: Most of them, even if they have abandoned their religious practices, still retain ties to an India that many of them have never seen. This fact is reflected in Naipaul's account of his grandfather, who after spending his life in Trinidad, returned to India to die. The persistence of social prejudices brought from the older society is revealed in the conversation of Naipaul's elderly aunt, who remembers her cruel and miserly father with pride because by inheritance he was of high

caste. Yet, as Naipaul points out in the same essay, those very Indians who endured their exile in Trinidad by thinking of India as their real home often discovered that they were cherishing an illusion. He describes vividly the terror of the Indians who, ecstatic to be docking in Calcutta, were almost trampled by people who had been repatriated on the last boat and were now desperate to return to Trinidad.

Like these immigrants, Naipaul's characters are often caught between two worlds. His protagonist in *The Mimic Men*, for example, feels ill at ease in London, but when he returns home he is just as much out of place as he was in England. One reason for his alienation is, of course, the fact that while he has been absent, both he and his childhood home have changed. Certainly, this kind of experience is a universal phenomenon. The Indians who returned to an India they remembered, however, encountered not only the differences that the passage of time brings to any society but also the dizzyingly accelerated change resulting from the death of colonialism and the painful birth of a new society.

Much to the distress of some of his readers, Naipaul is not optimistic about attempts at democracy in formerly colonial countries. *The Suffrage of Elvira* is a comic treatment of the coming of democracy, defined as corruption; a West Indian island is the setting in *Guerrillas* (1975), a grim novel about the horrors of revolution. In his works about newly liberated African countries, Middle Eastern Islamic countries, or about India itself, Naipaul stresses his own perception that twentieth and twenty-first century change does not seem to be resulting in progress and peace but in disruption, violence, and the willful destruction of all that earlier generations have built.

Deprived of the support of traditional societies and stable governments, Naipaul's characters, like Naipaul himself, yearn for order in the midst of chaos. In some cases, like Man-man of *Miguel Street*, who decides to be crucified in order to prove his holiness, they are eccentric or mad enough to be doomed to failure, even in the most traditional society. In other cases, like that of Naipaul's own father and the protagonist of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, their problems seem to be the result of a number of factors, including chance, their own weakness or gullibility, and an encounter with particularly

clever and vicious predators. In some of his works, however, such as *In a Free State* (1971), the fate of the characters is a direct result of a breakdown of society. Such characters are totally isolated, separated from their native countries, from their cultural traditions, and from one another. This vision of alienated characters in a society that has lost its structure may well be Naipaul's prophecy of the future.

Given the bleakness of his viewpoint, it would seem that Naipaul's works would hardly be rewarding reading. Yet although most of the characters in the early novels set in Trinidad are destined to fail, Naipaul's comic treatment of their problems and his satire of the social relationships with which they are so obsessed prevent his readers from taking either the characters or their entanglements very seriously. Not until *A House for Mr. Biswas* is there any hint of the tragicomic, or even tragic, tone of Naipaul's later novels. Even works such as *In a Free State*, however, whose vision of the future is extremely depressing, are compelling because of Naipaul's skill in constructing exciting plots, as well as his genius in creating fascinating, vital characters.

Naipaul's nonfiction works have much in common with his fiction. In both, there is brief, precise, and evocative description and a heavy reliance on accurately rendered dialogue. Whether his people are the fictional residents of Miguel Street or the real residents of the Deep South, Naipaul lets them speak for themselves. In the novels, dramatic dialogue keeps the plot in motion; in the nonfiction works, it just as effectively propels the reader forward to the next chapter, where there is sure to be an opposing viewpoint, or at least a marked variation in interpretation.

All of his technical virtuosity would be of little value if Naipaul did not have such valuable insights. Obviously, he believes that no efforts to produce a just order in society can succeed if they are based on illusions either about the past or about the present. If some misread Naipaul as yearning sentimentally for nineteenth century colonial society, they are ignoring the fact that he satirizes that world and those who are nostalgic for it, just as clearly as he satirizes the simple-minded idealists who have underestimated the difficulty of creating new orders and who, in their foolish optimism, have permitted the rapacious and the vicious to

take control of societies in which there is now neither order nor justice. Some critics feel that Naipaul is basically a misogynist, so trapped in his own rage that he cannot feel compassion even for the fictional characters he has created; others insist that he should be classified as a satirist, who believes that by telling the truth he can make reform possible.

## THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Novel

*In a new West Indian democracy, a candidate for office struggles to win, and to buy, the votes necessary for his election.*

*The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul's second published novel, has been described as a comedy of manners. Certainly, as the first chapter demonstrates, it is comic in tone. On one hand, Naipaul is dramatizing the desperate anxiety of Mr. Surujpat Harbans, as he drives his old truck up Elvira Hill on the way to arrange support for his election to the legislative council. On the other hand, the omens that so terrify Harbans seem hardly to justify his fears. Two American women stop their bicycles so unexpectedly that Harbans cannot help sliding into them, and he later hits and slightly injures a black dog, which is wandering about in the middle of the road with about as much sense as the women.

The fact that both the women and the dog do indeed prove to be recurring obstacles in Harbans's attempt to win the election not only unifies the plot but also points out the failure of democracy, that is, universal suffrage for adults, just four years after it was so nobly declared. Indeed, at the beginning of the second chapter, Naipaul defines what democracy has meant to the islanders: put simply, new possibilities for profit.

As a candidate, Harbans must try to win the election without spending so much money that the post will be unprofitable. As his backers, the Muslim leader, a tailor, and the Hindu leader, a goldsmith, try to spend as little of their own money as possible, while using the election to consolidate

their power and, if possible, to get some immediate cash benefits. By rights, Harbans thinks, it should be a simple matter of paying these leaders a reasonable sum to deliver the votes. That is the way democracy should work.

Unfortunately, Harbans's opponent very nearly outwits him by benefiting from human irrationality. For example, the women on bicycles, who are Jehovah's Witnesses, persuade the Spanish voters, who were committed to Harbans, that God does not wish them to vote, since the end of the world is imminent. The dog, too, causes trouble. One of her puppies, which keeps appearing and disappearing, is seen variously as a curse and a blessing; to offset the harm that this puppy has done to the campaign, the dead puppies in the litter must be publicly displayed so as to discredit the Jehovah's Witnesses and send the Spanish voters on their way to the polling place.

Although *The Suffrage of Elvira* does not deal with courtly aristocrats as traditional comedy of manners does, it resembles that form in being both dramatic and satirical. Many of the passages consist of colorful dialogue, which has the quality of a scene from a play. Furthermore, the targets of satire are not only individuals but also universal types, such as the Muslim leader's haphazard son, whose schemes and slogans alike very nearly cost Harbans his victory.

Like audiences at comedies of manners, Naipaul's readers begin by laughing at foolish, ignorant people in a fictitious place; however, they should end by realizing that these characters actually exaggerate their own flaws. If no democracy has managed to exclude citizens who see that form of government merely as a means of enriching themselves, it is equally true that even the most principled electorate finds itself influenced by slogans, rumors, sexual scandals, calculated character assassination, appeals to religious convictions, and even free drinks and parades. There is typical Naipaulian irony in the comment made about Elvira voters and intended to be the highest praise: Once they are bought, they stay bought. One wonders if that is the most that can be expected of a democracy, whether in the Third World or in the former colonial powers.

## A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

**First published:** 1961

**Type of work:** Novel

*A poor man spends his life in the quest for self-respect, financial security, and, above all, a house of his own.*

*A House for Mr. Biswas*, the fourth and last of the early novels, is important to the study of Naipaul for several reasons. Although it resembles its predecessors in that it is set in Trinidad, in this work for the first time the comic tone becomes more nearly tragicomic. While Naipaul still treats many of the characters satirically, his protagonist, Mohun Biswas, is likable, even admirable, in his struggle to gain self-respect and the respect of others and to make enough money to buy his own house. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is also important because it is Naipaul's most autobiographical work, reflecting closely his father's life and his own childhood. For this reason, the author comments in his foreword to the 1984 Vintage Books edition of the work that, of all of his books, this is the one that means the most to him. Naipaul's critics also place a high value on the novel. Many of them consider it to be his masterpiece.

Naipaul's initial chapters generally indicate the theme and the major motifs of his novels. The prologue to *A House for Mr. Biswas* is really the end of the story, describing as it does the disastrous ending of Mr. Biswas's life, when, at forty-six, the father of four children, penniless, debt-ridden, and ill, he is fired from his job and lies waiting to die in the ill-constructed house that was his life's goal.

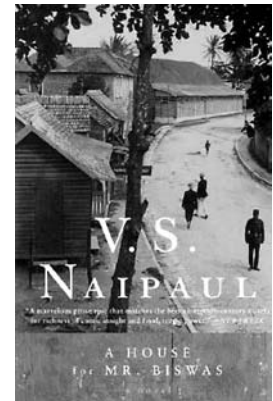
In the first chapter of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as in the prologue to *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul uses what seem like trivial events to set the pattern of the novel. Mohun's being born backward and having a sixth finger should not be blamed for his later troubles. It is soon evident, however, that the boy cannot keep his mind on his business, and through an improbable chain of events, his forgetting to watch a calf indirectly causes his father's death, which in turn sentences the family to poverty. As a poor

young man, then, Mohun Biswas later becomes fair game for the predatory Tulsi family, which is always on the lookout for malleable sons-in-law.

The rest of Mr. Biswas's short life is spent in search of employment, prosperity, and a home of his own, where his wife and his children will treat him like the head of the house. Yet he fails in one job after another, and he also fails to make a home for his family. When he leaves the Tulsis, his wife refuses to go with him; when he stays with them, he is no more than a shadowy presence, who can assert himself only by sarcasm. The only relief that Mr. Biswas has from his despair comes in the developing love and loyalty of his son Anand, and even that is not enough to prevent his ultimate nervous breakdown. Like Seepersad Naipaul, Mr. Biswas eventually becomes a journalist in Port of Spain. He has, however, no real security. During his brief residence in the house that he knows is rickety, he looks back on his life, attempting to explain to himself every disastrous choice that he has made.

The story is tragic, but as the final paragraphs of *A House for Mr. Biswas* illustrate, Naipaul is writing now with a new complexity of tone. First, he treats the death of Mr.

Biswas with appropriate compassion. Then, when the Tulsis, his favorite comic characters, invade the house at the time of the funeral, threatening its immediate collapse, the mood becomes farcical. Yet there is irony in the comedy; one realizes that the survival of the house, despite the Tulsis, is a symbolic triumph for the deceased. Finally, when Naipaul describes the return of the family to the empty house, the note is tragic. Naipaul was never again to write a purely comic novel; instead, he incorporated the comedy as merely one of a number of viewpoints from which his situations and his characters are to be seen.





## A BEND IN THE RIVER

**First published:** 1979

**Type of work:** Novel

*Old residents try to prosper, or even to survive, in a newly liberated African state.*

In *A Bend in the River*, as in all of his later works, Naipaul's dominant theme is alienation. The characters in this novel are not simply outsiders, such as Mr. Biswas among the Tulsis, but bewildered individuals attempting to survive in a rapidly changing society, where the rules are changed daily. The setting is a state in central Africa that has recently undergone a revolution and a civil war. The new government is under the control of a president, actually a dictator, who rules his country with the use of informers, youth squads, disappearances, and executions.

Into this reign of terror comes the protagonist, Salim, an East African Indian who has left the coastal area where his family has lived and traded for generations and bought a shop in an isolated village located on a bend in the river, which he believes should make it an ideal trading place. On his drive across Africa, as he bribes his way through road blocks, at times Salim questions his own sanity. He reaches his destination and settles down in the partially deserted village, hoping for peace and profit, but secure in the fact that he does have a home to which he can return. Unfortunately, he soon learns that his coastal village has been destroyed in a revolution and his family has dispersed. Now Salim is truly marooned.

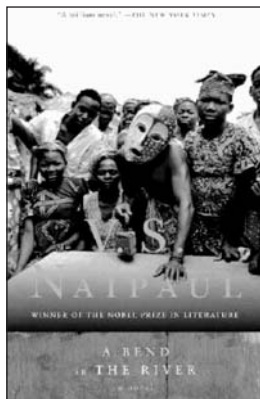
One of the points that Naipaul makes in *A Bend in the River* is that one does not have to be alone to be isolated. Salim is not alone. There are a number of expatriates in the village, Belgians, Greeks, Asians, and Indians, many of whom have remained through the turmoil, who now are waiting for life to stabilize. Every family, however, is preoccupied with itself and its own survival; though there is civil-

ity, there is no sense of community. Even his best friends, an elderly Indian couple, Shoba and Mahesh, are so preoccupied with themselves that they ignore the people and the country around them, seemingly convincing themselves that they are really living in India. When Salim visits them, there is no conversation; it is as if by ignoring the world outside their door, they can be safe from it. It is this kind of isolation that prevents the villagers from expressing outrage when the highly respected scholar and priest, Father Huismans, is murdered and mutilated, evidently because he had collected ritual masks and therefore seemed to be mocking the native religion. Many of the expatriates seem to see his death as an object lesson: this is what happens when one ventures forward, when one attempts to develop a community among peoples so different from one another.

For a time, the optimism of Father Huismans seems to be justified. Mahesh emerges from his isolation to acquire the Bigburger franchise. The president begins to construct a model town, the Domain, on the site of the old colonial suburb. Salesmen and consultants arrive from Europe, and Salim's childhood friend, the university-educated Indar, appears, a guest of the government, to work at the university turned polytechnic, whose chief function now is to train young men to be members of the president's staff. Salim's life becomes even more interesting when he has an affair with the wife of the president's white adviser. When he recognizes that he is beginning to believe the president's pronouncements, however, Salim feels the need to get some perspective and takes a trip to London.

When he returns to Africa, Salim finds that the promise of progress was an illusion. Caught between the oppressive president and his trigger-happy troops and a newly formed liberation army, everyone is terrified. Salim's business is nationalized, he loses most of his savings in the difficult process of getting money out of the country, and, finally, he is jailed, warned, and forced to flee the country.

The situation in *A Bend in the River* is what Naipaul finds characteristic of the Third World: For all the talk about a master plan, the leaders of these new countries have no real direction in mind. They cannot decide whether to destroy the vestiges of Europe or to mimic it, as the president did with





his Domain, and they cannot seem to develop an orderly, progressive society. The only perceivable pattern is the survival of the vicious. As Salim says, to someone who does not live in these countries, their governments appear comic, and certainly there are many comic scenes in *A Bend in the River*. Yet, as Salim realizes, one who does choose to stay in the postcolonial chaos can lose everything, including one's life.

## THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL

**First published:** 1987

**Type of work:** Novel

*In rural England, an expatriate discovers that traditional societies are as susceptible to change as the Third World country from which he came.*

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul turns to the situation of the expatriate who lives as an alien in a traditional society. The narrator, a writer from Trinidad, has come to settle in the English countryside. From his cottage near Salisbury, he ventures forth to look at remnants of the past, prehistoric Stonehenge, deserted farm cottages, and rusting reminders of World War II, and to discover that even this seemingly unchanging landscape and the people who inhabit it are not exempt from change.

The structure of *The Enigma of Arrival* is more like that of an extremely digressive travel book than a work of fiction. One idea leads to another in the mind of the narrator, who is so close to Naipaul himself as to make it difficult to remember the distinction, and one anecdote suggests another. The connection is thematic and psychological, not chronological. Thus, in the second part of the book, the narrator moves from a journey to England that he has recently completed to his first journey out of Trinidad eighteen years before, while revealing his first impressions of airplane travel, of New York, and of London.

Although there is a great deal of lyrical description of nature in *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul also tells the stories of people whom he has met along the way, such as Angela, an older, more worldly Italian girl at his London boardinghouse who became one of his closest friends. Late in his Salisbury stay,

the narrator receives a letter from Angela, whom he has not seen for thirty years. Outside his window the aspens sway, and he thinks of watching them grow, seeing two of them fall; inside, he sees the variations in Angela's handwriting as she relates the events of her life, and he is acutely conscious of the fact that though one circles in life, sometimes returning, everything is in constant flux.

In the third segment of *The Enigma of Arrival*, symbolically entitled "Ivy," the narrator focuses on the people who have clung for decades to the area where he is living, especially on those associated with the manor, such as the gardener Pitton, his elderly father, and the car-hire man, all of whom can describe what it was like on the estate when there were sixteen gardeners instead of only one. Then the reclusive landlord emerges from his seclusion and takes an interest in the world around him. The narrator gets to know the landlord's cousin, a personable man who calls himself a writer. There is a brief season when everyone seems to be happy.

Naipaul, however, always points out that the only thing on which one can rely is the certainty of change. The gardener is fired; the landlord returns to his isolation; the would-be writer becomes an alcoholic and commits suicide; the caretaker dies; his wife remarries; the little children's house on the estate is closed off with barbed wire; and the narrator knows that it is time for him to leave. In his epilogue, "The Ceremony of Farewell," he explains the new insights that came during his stay in Salisbury, involving primarily a new acceptance of the mystery of life itself.

## HALF A LIFE

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*An Indian of mixed ancestry seeks a sense of his own identity first in England and then in Africa.*

*Half a Life* is another of Naipaul's stories of alienation. In this case, however, the central character is not merely frustrated in his efforts to attain a particular goal; when the book ends, he has reached middle age without finding a purpose for his life.

The book begins with a seemingly simple ques-

tion. Willie Chandran, the protagonist, asks his father why his middle name is "Somerset." At this point, the author turns the narrative over to Willie's father. His explanation begins in the 1890's, when Willie's great-grandfather, a priest, left his impoverished temple for the court of the maharaja, thus beginning his family's movement up the social ladder. Willie's father was meant to attend a professional school and to marry the daughter of his college principal. However, he decided to rebel against his Brahman family by taking up with a black, low-caste girl. Since he did not love or even like the woman he had chosen, his home life was miserable. Realizing that their two mixed-race children, Willie and Sarojini, had no future in India, the elder Chandran tried to obtain a college scholarship for his son by contacting English visitors to India with whom he had become casually acquainted, including the writer W. Somerset Maugham, for whom Willie was named. However, either his pleas were ignored or, as in Maugham's case, received a perfunctory response.

The author now takes control of the story. Willie's father has obtained a scholarship for him at a mediocre college in London. There Willie finds he can invent himself, glamorizing his lineage by making his mother a member of an ancient Christian sect and calling his father one of the maharajah's courtiers. Willie becomes a member of a bohemian immigrant group, writes a radio script for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and produces twenty-six short stories, which are published in book form. He even gains some badly needed sexual expertise. However, a visit from his sister Sarojini shakes his growing self-confidence. As Sarojini points out, Willie's scholarship will soon expire, and he still has no plans for the future. An encounter with Ana, a girl from Portuguese East Africa who also has a mixed racial background, seems providential. They fall in love,

and Willie decides to go home with her. The narrative now jumps ahead eighteen years. Willie tells Ana that he wants a divorce. He is leaving because, as he says, he can no longer live her life.

The final section of the book is Willie's account of those eighteen years in Mozambique, told to his sister Sarojini at her home in Berlin, Germany. Willie and Ana had both assumed that he would make himself useful on her estate. However, he spends his time socializing with the local landowners, most of them of mixed racial backgrounds, all of them boastful and pretentious. When violence erupts and it becomes clear that the colonial empire is doomed, they begin to flee, and Willie leaves, too, evidently still searching for his identity and for the purpose of his existence so he can live more than "half a life."

## SUMMARY

Although he must be admired for his skill in plotting and characterization and for the beauty of his language, V. S. Naipaul is perhaps most important because he addresses the most difficult problem of modern humanity—the sense of alienation. Even in the early comic novels, Naipaul suggests how deeply his characters fear being expelled from the cultural groups that give them a sense of identity. Most of his later works take a grimly realistic look at the Third World, where political and social change has deprived people of their identities, leaving them isolated in chaotic, corrupt societies, where desperation too often leads them into fanaticism and mindless violence. In *Magic Seeds* (2004), the sequel to *Half a Life*, Naipaul seems to have abandoned hope for humanity. However, taken as a whole, his works provide such valuable insights into postcolonial societies that they may well make constructive change possible.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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*In a Free State*, 1971  
*Guerrillas*, 1975  
*A Bend in the River*, 1979  
*The Enigma of Arrival*, 1987  
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*India: A Wounded Civilization*, 1977  
*"The Return of Eva Perón" with "The Killings in Trinidad,"* 1980  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How is the influence of colonialism reflected in V. S. Naipaul's novels?
- Some characters in Naipaul's novels feel they have no real homes. Why do they feel that way?
- What elements in British culture make it difficult for Third World immigrants to fit in?
- How important are family ties to Naipaul's characters?
- How do Naipaul's Indian characters view sexual relationships? What is their attitude toward marriage?
- What is Naipaul's assessment of Islamic fundamentalism? Why does he think it appeals to so many Muslims?
- How does *Guerillas* dramatize the problems in postcolonial African countries?
- What does Naipaul see as the major problems in India, his ancestral home? How do his views change from one book about India to the next?



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## R. K. NARAYAN

**Born:** Madras, India  
October 10, 1906

**Died:** Madras, India  
May 13, 2001

*Through his novels set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi, Narayan made ordinary and spiritual life in India come alive for readers around the world.*

### BIOGRAPHY

A teacher's son, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan (nah-RAH-yan) was born in Madras, a major South Indian city, where he attended Lutheran Mission School and Christian College High School. In the early 1920's, the family moved to another South Indian city, Mysore, where Narayan's father served as headmaster at Maharajah's College High School. Taking advantage of the library privileges granted by his father, the young Narayan read voraciously, mainly in the English classics.

In 1926, Narayan entered Maharajah's College in Mysore. After graduating in 1930, he took a teaching position but soon gave that up. He started to write, determined to become an English-language novelist. Marrying in 1933, he then worked as a reporter in Mysore for *The Justice*, a Madras newspaper. Narayan recalled in his autobiography, *My Days* (1974), how this experience brought him into "close contact with a variety of men and their activities" and gave him material that he was to use in his future fiction.

His first novel, *Swami and Friends*, appeared in 1935. Rejected by several English publishers, the manuscript eventually came to the attention of Graham Greene, the British novelist, who was immensely impressed by Narayan's narrative tech-

nique and the way he had recorded South Indian life. Greene lent his prestige to finding a publisher for the young Indian's first novel.

Once *Swami and Friends*—a story about boyhood in South India—was published, Narayan stopped working for *The Justice* and began contributing articles to various magazines to make a living. In 1938, Narayan's daughter, Hema, was born and his third novel, *The Dark Room*, appeared. During that year he also received a grant from the Indian state of Karnataka, an undertaking that offered him the opportunity to travel in all parts of the large and varied region. While traveling, he gathered an abundance of material that would not only fulfill his governmental assignment but would also serve as sources for his later work.

In 1939, Narayan began his long association with *The Hindu*, a Madras newspaper, to which he would through the years contribute hundreds of stories and sketches. In June of that year his young wife died of typhoid.

Firmly established as a leading Indian writer in English, Narayan published novel after novel, as well as collections of short stories and shortened prose translations of the Indian classics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Even though he published many collections of his short stories, including *Malgudi Days* (1941) and *A Horse and Two Goats, and Other Stories* (1970), Narayan is most widely known for his novels.

He received numerous awards and grants, including the National Prize of the Indian Literary Academy, the Padma Bhushan Award in India, the English-Speaking Union Book Award, and

a Rockefeller Foundation grant for travel in the United States in 1956. He later visited the United States several times, serving residences at Vassar College in 1983 and at the University of Texas at Austin in 1989.

Narayan continued to record daily events in Malgudi, the imaginary city he created through a lifetime of writing. He was always something of a recluse, rarely granting interviews, attending literary gatherings, or commenting on his own work. He died in Madras on May 13, 2001, at the age of ninety-four.

### ANALYSIS

Narayan's fiction may be described as an extended experiment in serious comedy, which blends the realism of Western thought with the mythology of traditional India. He accomplished this wedding of two extremes in the following ways. First, he created the imaginary city of Malgudi that is both realistic and mythical in nature. Next, he populated this city with characters who face conflict in their lives and who search for a solution, often finding themselves caught between the realistic and the supernatural. Narayan's world, though, is not a hollow one, not full of despair and defeat, but a place where the characters can and do discover wholeness. This struggle Narayan recorded with narrative simplicity and a sympathetic understanding of human foibles. Such, then, is the basis for approaching any one of Narayan's novels or short stories.

From Narayan's first novel, published in 1935, and through his subsequent work, he constructed the South Indian city of Malgudi, brick by brick, street by street, building by building, neighborhood by neighborhood, until it has become a familiar place to his readers in all corners of the world. Malgudi lies next to a river and has its full share of schools, cafés, temples, street vendors' stands, shops, fine houses, and slums. As a creation of the imagination, Malgudi recalls William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional Southern region where the American writer set most of his fiction.

By not placing his stories in an actual Indian city like Delhi, Bombay, or Calcutta, Narayan was able to exercise total control over place and to create a world he could manipulate without being bothered by his audience's preconceived notions of re-

ality. To a degree, the bustling city of Malgudi serves as the central character in Narayan's fiction.

Further, Malgudi possesses a static and constant quality, which offers stability amid turmoil. It is largely untouched by the upheavals that have afflicted twentieth century India. Unlike other Indian novelists in English, such as Mulk Raj Anand and Nayantara Sahgal, Narayan did not take up the caste system, poverty, inequality, politics, the treatment of women, and the usual postcolonial concerns of displacement, national identity, and economics. Instead, his world of Malgudi emerges as antihistorical and thereby provides a sense of a permanence in which the essential conflicts of the human condition can be worked out.

Those working out such conflicts come from a wide range of social classes. Consequently, a colorful gallery of Indian characters appeared in Narayan's fiction. The central personage may be a professor at the local college as in *The English Teacher* (1945; also known as *Grateful to Life and Death*, 1953), a hustling tour promoter as in *The Guide* (1958), a money lender as in *The Financial Expert* (1952), or even a tiger as in *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983). Most often a male, this main character is surrounded by varied members of the Malgudi community, ranging from street vendors and shop owners to relatives and friends to priests and mystics. Each character, no matter how minor, finds a voice of his or her own. Sometimes the characters are not named but identified by an outstanding quality. The crowded streets and bulging houses of India, the busy temples and noisy shops and cafés, the human chaos that seems to prevail in an Asian city are all fully realized in the novels.

While the shortcomings of human beings do not miss Narayan's keen eye, he never undercuts his characters or treats them in a condescending manner, no matter how foolishly they may act. Here the seriousness of his comedy comes into the picture. All the novels and short stories focus on a serious problem the major characters face. As the events unfold and the characters work toward a solution to their conflicts, they often become involved in absurd situations and meet any number of ridiculous people. Many times in their thoughts these seekers are altogether self-deprecating, fully aware of their shortcomings and foolishness. Finally, though, they gain the sense of wholeness that they seek. No matter how comic the journey to



understanding has been, a seriousness takes over as the less-than-heroic figures realize their duty and attain a balance between the demands of daily life and those of the ever-present supernatural forces that so dominate Indian life. Once this balance between reality and mythology has been gained, the characters reach a sense of completion, and they are ready to take their rightful places in the family and community.

Ignoring the fashions of narrative technique that had developed since he started writing, Narayan told his stories simply, in unadorned prose. The narrative evolves from the characters' actions and reactions as they move through the houses and streets of Malgudi. Events unfold in a natural manner; at times it appears that not much is happening, that the action is static. Yet each event, no matter how trivial, builds to the story's climax, which is often a realization on the part of the troubled characters who inhabit Narayan's fictional world. In Malgudi, the conflicts that the narrative sets into motion are always unraveled to assure an orderly universe, which begins with the individual and extends to the community.

## THE ENGLISH TEACHER

**First published:** 1945

**Type of work:** Novel

*The young and idealistic hero finds a way to cope with grief after his wife's death.*

*The English Teacher* was republished in 1953 under the title *Grateful to Life and Death*. Gratitude for an understanding of life and death is exactly what the main character, Krishna, gains in the course of the narrative. The fact that he teaches English in an Indian college, while important to the story, is not the novel's central concern, as the new title suggests.

The story is based on Narayan's own loss of his wife to typhoid in 1939. Like Narayan, the bereaved Krishna is left with a young daughter. The author and character also share a thorough knowledge and appreciation of English literature, as well as a distaste for teaching it to uninterested Indian students. It is only a matter of speculation, however, whether or not Krishna's struggle to overcome

grief and his handling of his distraught state follow the author's own experience.

As the novel opens, Krishna's wife Susila and baby daughter Leela finally join him after an extended stay with her parents, and Krishna somewhat reluctantly gives up his free life in the faculty quarters. Soon, though, he relishes his role as a householder, but this happy state comes to an abrupt close a few years later when Susila dies. The major portion of the novel recounts the aftermath of Susila's death, which leaves Krishna devastated. At the same time, the event forces him to examine his own life.

He admits that he hates his teaching career. He has always been questioning why Indian students should be studying English literature at all. As Krishna puts it: "This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage." The conflict between East and West, as expressed in this observation, is a recurrent theme in Narayan's work. Further, Krishna once fancied himself a promising poet, but finally realizes the absurdity of this ambition. Such dissatisfaction with work and the discarding of false hopes lead to the central question in Narayan's fiction: What value do worldly gain and success have in relation to the spiritual side of life?

Once Krishna is forced to contemplate this universal riddle, the novel moves from a realistic mode into a mythical one, then continues to shift from one mode to the other. As time passes and his life falls "into ruts of routine, one day following another," Krishna fails to overcome his grief and finds himself turning into a bitter, hateful, and purposeless man. His salvation comes when he begins to communicate with his dead wife, first through a medium, then by himself. These passages Narayan presents in a matter-of-fact way, as though such contact was not in the least extraordinary. This is a typical handling of such phenomena by Narayan. Krishna finally achieves peace by accepting his wife's presence, not in the physical sense but in the spiritual. This awareness leads him to resign his hated job and become a teacher in an experimental school. The school is run by a mystic; many appear in Narayan's novels.

Solidly set in the altogether authentic city of Malgudi, *The English Teacher* typifies Narayan's fic-

tional world. The major character finds himself torn between the rigors of reality and the temptation to escape into the spiritual realm. He manages to blend the two courses, so that he may be a productive member of the community while quietly seeking his own inner peace.

## A TIGER FOR MALGUDI

**First published:** 1983

**Type of work:** Novel

*In an unusual autobiography, a tiger relates his life story, which begins in the wilds and ends in a zoo.*

When asked in an interview which of his novels he favored, Narayan named *A Tiger for Malgudi*. The reason for his choice is readily understandable. The book offers an engaging animal story, even as it works out once again Narayan's preoccupation with gaining a balance between the demands of the everyday world and the attractions of the spiritual realm. The novel is also a highly successful experiment in narrative voice. Although Narayan never followed the dictates of fiction slavishly, this book departed more radically from convention than any of his other works.

In the preface, Narayan explains that the idea for the novel came to him after reading about actual Indian holy men whose only companions are tigers, the animals roaming freely from place to place with their human companions. Narayan also notes in the preface how the *sannyasi* (a person in India who renounces the world in order to go on a spiritual quest) approaches the tiger:

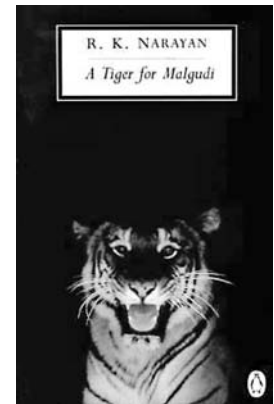
That, deep within, the core of personality is the same in spite of differing appearances and categories, and with the right approach you could expect the same response from a tiger as from any normal human being.

Such is Narayan's approach to the tiger as well, which suggests that he pictures a world far more expansive than one made up only of human beings living out their mundane lives and believing they are the center of the universe.

In fact, humans generally do not fare very well in the tiger's story. During his early days the tiger enjoys an idyllic life in the jungle, but he soon learns that humans are not to be trusted. First, his mate and their cubs fall prey to hunters. Then, left alone, the tiger begins to raid villages and spreads terror among the inhabitants. Unable to get any official help, the villagers finally find a circus owner who is willing to capture what they describe as a man-eating tiger. Narayan takes the opportunity to satirize Indian bureaucracy as the villagers try unsuccessfully to get government assistance in ridding their territory of the tiger.

Once in the circus, the tiger hero undergoes a long period of severe training before becoming the show's star performer. At first he is a model circus animal, but one day in a fit of rage he kills his trainer, escapes from the circus, and ends up hiding in the Malgudi college's main building. After a hilarious scene in which the tiger terrorizes the entire city, a *sannyasi* arrives and rescues the frightened animal, taking him into the wilderness where they live in perfect contentment and harmony for many years. When the *sannyasi* realizes the time for his death is nearing, he places the tiger, now aging as well, in the Malgudi zoo to live out his final years. The holy man assures his longtime tiger friend that he will bring happiness to the Malgudi community, especially the children, as an attraction in the zoo.

Through the recounting of these events by the tiger narrator, new aspects of day-to-day activities in Malgudi surface, in particular the colorful details of Indian circus life. The story also develops in a strikingly original way the recurrent themes in Narayan's fiction: the quest for fulfillment, the inevitable separation from loved ones, endurance in the face of misfortune, and the discovery of a place in the community. It is a charming story that embraces the essence of Indian philosophy.



## THE WORLD OF NAGARAJ

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Novel

*A would-be writer who never writes finally sets aside his unfulfilled ambitions and accepts his limitations.*

In *The World of Nagaraj*, the central character fancies himself as a man with a mission. Nagaraj does not fully understand the nature of this mission, even though he expends considerable energy pursuing it. His main purpose, he believes, is to write a biography of the mythological character Narada, who traveled through the human and heavenly worlds telling stories. No ordinary weaver of tales, Narada was a talented gossip whose revelations planted distrust and raised suspicion wherever he went.

In spite of having such excellent material at hand, Nagaraj can never complete his project, only make preparations. Thus the novel may be read on one level as a satiric examination of the would-be writer who talks about his or her plans, yet never settles down to work. Although a dilettante, Nagaraj still emerges as a likable character who comes to understand his own limitations. Perhaps Nagaraj's greatest shortcoming lies in his inability to engage in the life around him, for he fails to grasp that in order to write about life he must immerse himself in the doings of his fellow human beings. Narayan thereby describes the irony that afflicts writers, who must not only observe and participate in the world but must also shut themselves away in order to practice their art.

Despite Nagaraj's faults or pretensions, he emerges, as Narayan's characters always do, as a thoroughly decent man. Altogether uncomplicated, he achieves nothing of significance, only dreams of the grand gesture, and at the end he retires satisfied as the most ordinary of men.

Published in Narayan's eighty-fourth year, *The World of Nagaraj* could be read as a retrospective examination on the part of Narayan himself, who for more than sixty years told stories, much like the mythological character Narada. What, he might be asking, has he accomplished? Has he fulfilled his mission or, like Nagaraj, did he never fully grasp the nature of the mission? The novel may also be a kind of comic reminiscence of Narayan's own struggles and misgivings in his long career.

In whatever manner *The World of Nagaraj* might be read—as satire on would-be writers, or as an aging storyteller's reminiscence or self-examination—the novel is fully engaging. The sounds and smells and bustle of Malgudi, as well as those who people it, once more come alive in all their variety. Further, the subplot of family conflict between Nagaraj's nephew and his domineering father suggests that changes are afoot in Malgudi as the youth rebel against traditional family discipline. As far as Nagaraj is concerned, he will simply ignore the noise of human activity around him. For at the end he makes his plans: "I shall also acquire a lot of cotton wool and try and pack it all in my ear so that even a thunderclap may sound like a whisper." It is no small wonder, then, that Nagaraj fails as a writer.

### SUMMARY

In more than sixty years of writing fiction, R. K. Narayan created a memorable world whose center was the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. From that insignificant center, life radiated in all its drabness and fullness, its richness and poverty, its daily tedium, and its rare moments of spiritual discovery. While Narayan consistently revealed men and women in their absurdity, he never condemned them. Instead he probed beneath the layers of human foolishness in search of the admirable spirit that lies within all creatures. He always discovered that spirit and made it evident.

Robert L. Ross

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*The Financial Expert*, 1952  
*Waiting for the Mahatma*, 1955  
*The Guide*, 1958  
*The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, 1961  
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*Malgudi Days*, 1941, expanded 1982  
*Dodu, and Other Stories*, 1943  
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*An Astrologer's Day, and Other Stories*, 1947  
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*My Days*, 1974  
*Reluctant Guru*, 1974  
*The Emerald Route*, 1977  
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#### TRANSLATIONS:

*The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*, 1972 (of Vālmīki)  
*The Mahabharata: A Shortened Prose Version of the Indian Epic*, 1978

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- R. K. Narayan has made Malgudi a city both realistic and mythical. Are there any equivalents in Western novels?
- Narayan was educated like a Westerner and sought to be accepted by Western readers, but these factors have not displeased Indians. What does this fact suggest about Indian culture?
- Is *The English Teacher* autobiographical?
- Is the tiger in *A Tiger for Malgudi* symbolic? If so, of what?
- Can a novelist like Narayan succeed without immersing himself in other people's activities? Does he sacrifice his perspective by doing so?
- Was Narayan uncritically optimistic about human potentiality?

MISCELLANEOUS:

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## PABLO NERUDA

**Born:** Parral, Chile

July 12, 1904

**Died:** Santiago, Chile

September 23, 1973

*One of the major poets of the twentieth century, Neruda is remembered for his widely influential use of the deep image, or surreal and emotionally accessible metaphor.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto in a small village in central Chile, the poet, at fifteen, changed his name to Pablo Neruda (nay-REW-duh), after the nineteenth century Czech writer Jan Neruda, after winning a national poetry competition in 1919. His mother died of tuberculosis just a month after his birth, but his father, who worked for the railroad, remarried two years later and moved the family, which included a brother and a sister, to the town of Temuco in southern Chile. Neruda's relation with his stepmother was close, and his boyhood in the remote milltown in Chile's rainy forests appears to have been happy.

The headmistress at his school in Temuco was Gabriela Mistral, a poet who was, in 1945, the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. She introduced the sensitive young man to the works of the French symbolists. In 1921, he went to the capital city of Santiago, where he studied French at the University of Chile, wrote for the student newspaper, and continued writing poems.

Neruda's first collection of poems, *Crepusculario*, appeared in 1923, when he was only nineteen. The year after, his first important book, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924; *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*; 1969), appeared. This small book pleased a wide audience of

readers with its lyrical, passionate, and erotic portrayal of romantic love. Immediately successful, the book continues to be read both in Spanish-speaking countries, where for years lovers have memorized its verses, and elsewhere in translation.

In 1927, Neruda traveled to Rangoon, Burma, as honorary consul from Chile, and until 1931, he served in various consular posts. Economic hardship and estrangement from his homeland made these difficult years for him, and his marriage to a Dutch Indonesian woman, Maria Antonieta Hagenaar, was not happy. His only child, a daughter who died in 1942, was born after his return to Chile and his subsequent appointment as consul to Barcelona in 1934.

Neruda was much happier in Spain, where he became friends with the renowned poet Federico García Lorca and where he met his second wife, Delia del Carril, an Argentinean painter. His sojourn in Spain was disrupted by the Spanish Civil War, which brought the fascist government of Francisco Franco to power. The three volumes of poetry published as *Residencia en la tierra* (1933, 1935, 1947; *Residence on Earth, and Other Poems*, 1946, 1973) reflect his stay in the Orient (1925-1931), in Spain before the Civil War (1931-1935), and the war and its aftermath (1935-1945). The first-person speaker in these poems is troubled, alienated, and given to reflections on disintegration and death.

In the late 1930's, Neruda's poetry increasingly reflected his growing sense of social and political involvement, and by 1940, when he was posted as consul to Mexico, he was at work on sections of

what is considered his foremost achievement, the epic *Canto general* (1950; *Canto General*, 1991). This remarkable poem in fifteen parts runs more than four hundred pages in most editions. Neruda had joined the Communist Party in 1945 and was elected to the Chilean senate, but his blistering attack on Chilean president Gonzalez Videla, whom he accused of turning against the people and siding with the wealthy landowners, led to an order for his arrest. He escaped to Argentina in 1948.

In 1955, following a separation from his second wife, Neruda moved to Santiago and married Matilde Urrutia, with whom he had been having an affair for a number of years. The 1950's saw publication of three books of "elemental" or "elementary" odes, simple poems cast in short (often one-word) lines that celebrate the ordinary, common things of life, from socks to scissors, from chairs to artichokes.

By the 1960's, Neruda was beginning to attract attention in the United States, despite his Communist affiliation, and in 1965 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Oxford University. His later books include *Estravagario* (1958; *Estravagaria*, 1972), a collection of love poems, and *Memorial de Isla Negra* (1964; *Isla Negra: A Notebook*, 1981).

Neruda had settled at the fishing village of Isla Negra by 1958, in a home overlooking the Pacific, but he continued to be active in politics, running for the presidency of Chile as a Communist in 1969. In 1971, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. A friend and supporter of President Salvador Allende, Neruda died of cancer in 1973, the year that Allende's government was overthrown and replaced with a military junta. Neruda was one of the most prolific poets of all time; eight books of his poetry have been published posthumously.

### ANALYSIS

In 1954, Neruda wrote, "I am the foremost adversary of Nerudism." What makes reading Neruda's poems so entertaining, although sometimes challenging, is that his voice varies in almost every book. He can be passionate lover, visionary mystic, political radical, historian, or naturalist. His voice can be lyrical, conversational, meditative, playful, metaphysical, personal, or satiric. His poems are sometimes rich with imagery and dense with surreal metaphor. At other times his poems are direct and readily accessible.

In *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* the twenty-year-old poet writes of love and its absence with great intimacy, but without falling into sentimentality. These poems are rich in imagery, some of it fairly obvious, as when the speaker tells his beloved she is like his soul, "a butterfly of dream," or when he tells her that her silence is "that of a star, remote and candid." Neruda also shows his mastery of surreal metaphor, as in poem 8, in which he writes, "Your breasts seem like white snails./ A butterfly of shadow has come to sleep in your belly." Such metaphors do not need to be understood or analyzed, but to be accepted and enjoyed.

In the process of writing the three cycles of *Residence on Earth, and Other Poems*, between 1925 and 1945, Neruda's themes and his manner of expressing them changed in various ways. The poems of the first two cycles are introspective and are filled with images of alienation. In one poem, for example, he writes: "I wrench hell's captain from my heart/ and lay down sad, equivocating phrases." In another poem, the speaker sees himself "on some sad coast,/ surrounded by the stuff of the dead day," waiting for someone to come and touch his heart, but the only sound he hears comes from "a shell of shadows" which offers only "shreds of sound" and a "grid of misery . . . by the shores of the solitary ocean."

In his third cycle, however, Neruda shifts to social and political themes and toward a poetry of commitment. Critics have observed an increased tendency throughout the cycle to capture a "spoken voice," a less rhetorical and more realistic use of language. The spoken voice is evident in the third cycle's political poems, for example: "You are going to ask: and where are the lilacs?/ and the poppy-petalled metaphysics?" Neruda decries the Spanish Civil War, in which "bandits with black friars spattering blessings/ came through the sky to kill children." His sometimes strident protests run close to propaganda in places. One poem, for example, ends, "Come and see the blood/ in the streets!" Neruda's social commitment is most pervasive in *Canto General*, in which he traces the history of Latin America from pre-Columbian times, through the conquest and the liberation, and into the exploitation of its resources and people in the twentieth century. Hernán Cortés, for instance, is described as "a chilling/ thunderbolt, a cold heart clad in armor." Another poem decries Standard

Oil, which is run by “obese emperors/ from New York . . . suave/ smiling assassins.” Amid the poems of protest, however, are sublime celebrations of Neruda’s native country’s mountains, deserts, and long coastline. The *Canto General* is, as its title implies, a sort of encyclopedic poem, covering vast stretches of history and geography.

Just four years after the appearance of the *Canto General*, Neruda changed his voice, form, and subject matter altogether with the first volume of *Odas elementales* (1954; *The Elemental Odes*, 1961). Written for the common man, these short-lined poems deal with the ordinary objects of everyday life. “Oda a las cosas” (“Ode to things”) which consists of 120 lines, begins

I have a crazy,  
crazy love of things.  
I like pliers,  
and scissors.  
I love  
cups,  
rings,  
and bowls—  
not to speak, of course,  
of hats.

In a poem for an artichoke, Neruda describes the vegetable as warlike in its spiky armor, but María buys it and drops it in the pot, and “This is how/ the career/ of the armored vegetable/ we call an artichoke/ comes to a peaceful end.”

Often an individual volume of Neruda’s poems is a collection of several self-contained parts or sequences. *Isla Negra: A Notebook*, for example, consists of five fairly distinct books, which together form an introspective autobiography. The single collection *Extravagaria*, noted for its conversational tone, consists of almost seventy poems, one of which runs over ten pages. “It seems I still haven’t learned/ the harsh speech of frogs,” Neruda writes: “If all this is so, how am I a poet?” Pablo Neruda felt the urgent necessity of communicating virtually everything in the world. “So, gentlemen,” he playfully concludes one poem, “I am going/ to converse with a horse; let the poetess excuse me,/ the professor give me leave./ I shall be busy all week,/ I have to listen incessantly./ / What was that cat’s name?”

## “WALKING AROUND”

**First published:** 1935 (collected in *Residence on Earth, and Other Poems*, 1946)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem from the second Residence on Earth cycle depicts a visionary poet, out of tune with his urban surroundings.*

“Walking Around” opens casually: “It happens that I am tired of being a man.” The poem’s visionary experience starts with a painful awareness of alienation.

In the first eleven lines, bracketed by the phrase “It happens that I am tired,” the first-person speaker sees himself as “withered” and “impenetrable” like a swan made of felt on a sea of “origins and ashes” when he goes to tailor shops or to cinemas. Both establishments concern appearances instead of realities. The swan afloat on an ocean of ashes implies the rejection of conventional poetic attitudes. The speaker also rejects the pleasant aromas of barbershops, gardens, merchandise, eyeglasses, and elevators, an almost random assortment of nouns associated with various aspects of being human. The speaker even turns against his own feet, fingernails, hair, and shadow.

In the next fourteen lines the speaker pivots: “Yet,” it would be “delightful” to “scare a notary with a cut lily” or to “kill a nun with a jab to the ear.” That is, he could still get some joy from shaking up the bureaucracy (by threatening it with a flower, something antithetical) or by taking on the church (a more demanding task). It would be nice, he says, to “walk down the street with a green knife/ and whooping it up till I die of the shakes.” He insists he does not want to live “like a root in the dark,” as an underground man in a “cellar of corpses,” cold and stiff.

In the next fourteen lines the speaker says Monday burns like oil when it sees his jailbird’s face showing up again. The speaker sees himself as a prisoner of time and routine. The first working day of the week turns against him. “Something,” perhaps time, shoves him into “damp houses” and hospitals “where bones fly out the windows.” In such places sulfur-colored birds loom at doors hung with “horrible intestines.” In this nightmare world dentures are forgotten in a coffee pot and mir-

rors weep in shame to be reflecting the ugliness of life.

Amid the umbrellas, poisons, and belly buttons, the speaker determines, in the last six lines, to pass on calmly in his “rage and oblivion.” Arguably, however, the speaker cannot simply forget what he sees (if he could, the poem would not exist), for the last image is of “underpants, towels and shirts which weep/ slow dirty tears.” The ordinary things of the human world cry out to him, and despite the speaker’s anger, he cannot help being compassionate.

## THE HEIGHTS OF MACCHU PICCHU

**First published:** *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, 1948 (English translation, 1966)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Usually regarded as a single poem, this twelve-part sequence from Canto General is a meditation on time and death.*

Neruda wrote *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* following his visit to the spectacular Incan ruins high in the Peruvian Andes in 1943. The experience affected him deeply and caused him to alter his plans from a projected long poem on Chile to an epic concerning all of Latin America. The ruins testify to the sophistication of pre-Columbian culture. Symbolically in the poem, the ruins represent the junction of the human and the natural, of time and eternity, and of life and death.

In the twelve cantos the first-person speaker undertakes a quest that leads to a conversion of sorts. In the first two cantos he reviews his past life, which he depicts as aimless: “From air to air, like an empty net,/ I went on through streets and thin air.” He sees himself in a descent, wrapped up in the trivial passions of urban life. The soul is pictured sitting “among clothes and smoke, on the broken table,” where “man kills and tortures it with paper and hate,/ stuffs it each day under rugs.”

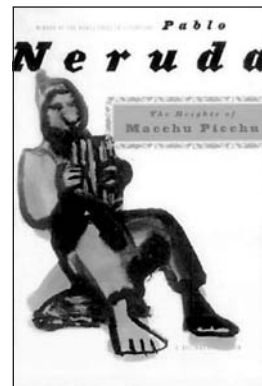
In cantos 3-5, Neruda surveys the dismal life of contemporary man: “each day a petty death, dust, worm, a lamp/ snuffed out in suburban mud.” The speaker, however, feels drawn by “the mighti-

est death,” and he sees himself taken “to the iron edge . . . / to the stellar emptiness of the final steps/ and dizzying spiral highway.” This foreshadowing of his eventual ascent of Macchu Picchu is a desire that is frustrated as he roams around “dying of my own death” and suffering from “a cold gust” that passes through “loose gaps in the soul.”

In the pivotal canto 6, the speaker rises from this low point as he climbs Macchu Picchu, where the human and the natural intersect, where “men’s feet rested at night/ next to the eagles’ feet.” Unlike the many petty deaths of the present, Neruda points out in canto 7, the Inca “plummeted as in autumn/ to one sole death,” and instead of urban litter, Macchu Picchu offers “a permanence of stone and word,” “the permanent rose,” “a life of stone after so many lives.” As if aware that these stony symbols of permanence might seem too cold, Neruda opens his canto 8 with an invitation to love: “Come up with me, American love.” “Kiss the secret stones with me,” he says in this, the longest of the cantos, where he begins to question the ruins: “What do your tormented flashings say?”

Canto 9 is a collection of one-line epithets in praise of Macchu Picchu, terse metaphors that constitute, in a way, the missing language of the Incas: “Window on the mist, hardened dove./ Nocturnal plant, statue of thunder./ Root of the cordillera, roof of the sea.” Neruda offers forty-three such lines, which give a voice to Macchu Picchu, ending with “Volcano of hands, dark cataract./ Silver wave, direction of time.” Canto 10, however, poses the crucial question: Where was humanity in all of this? Neruda asks the ruins if they were built “stone upon stone on a base of rags,” constructed, that is, out of human toil and misery. Now it is the missing “hungry people” that he wants to know about, and he ends canto 10 with a question for “buried America”: “did you keep in the deepest part/ of your bitter gut, like an eagle, hunger?”

In canto 11, Neruda appeals to the ruins to forget their “sovereign symmetry” and allow him to



“plunge” his hand inside and “let there beat in me, like a bird a thousand years imprisoned,/ the old forgotten human heart!” He now has a vision of “the ancient human, the human slave” whose identity has been lost, and he ends the canto by reciting the supposed names of the slaves and inviting them to “rise to be born with me.” This line also opens the final canto of the poem, which is often considered as part of the jargon of Marxism, Neruda having joined the Communist Party in 1945. Canto 12 does read as a paean to the working class, but whether Neruda’s political affinities mar the ending is debatable. “I come to speak through your dead mouth,” he writes, and in the last line, he implores, “Speak through my words and my blood.”

### “THE HUNTER IN THE FOREST”

**First published:** “El cazador en el bosque,” 1964 (collected in *Isla Negra: A Notebook*, 1981)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this poem Neruda reaffirms his connection with the earth and the cycles of nature.*

“The Hunter in the Forest” is the opening poem of the fourth section of *Isla Negra: A Notebook*, Neruda’s deeply introspective autobiography in verse. The section title, “Hunter of Roots,” indicates the necessity for humankind to seek its proper connection with the earth. Only in the natural process of decay and regeneration, Neruda argues, can the fear of death and meaningless disintegration be overcome.

The welcome solitude (as opposed to the earlier sense of alienation) is implicit in the later poems, as the speaker goes into the beloved forests (Ne-

ruda grew up in Chile’s woodlands) in order to communicate with the earth, which he finds to be “mute.” The mature poet recognizes that the earth will be silent until he begins to be “dead and living matter.” The earth itself is a vast and secret language that gives birth but that also thrives on death: “Whatever dies, it gathers in/ like an ancient, hungry creature.”

Even the sun “rots/ and the broken gold/ it sheds/ falls into the sack of the jungle” where it is transformed into flour. Although the poet enters the forest “with my roots,” he goes “to look for my roots” in a deeper sense. Parting from the social and political vision of the *Canto General*, Neruda is alone in this quest for the root that nourishes his blood. In the deep silence that root “creeps on, devouring,” and it drinks water, passing up through the tree the “secret command” of life. The poem ends with the sort of surreal or “deep” image common to the best of Neruda’s writing: “Dark is the work/ that makes the stars green.” The process that makes life, that resurrects and regenerates, is mysterious (dark), but the fact that the stars themselves are green, the color associated with life on earth, suggests that life itself is of the highest value.

### SUMMARY

In his long and prolific life as a writer, Pablo Neruda assumed a great variety of masks. He is consistently, however, a poet who sustains the worth of the individual vision, whether that vision be personal, political, or mythic. He is also a poet of the earth and of the common man who resides on it. Concrete images and metaphors from nature predominate in his writing. The character woven into most of his poems is Pablo Neruda himself, a man of passion and compassion who searches into life’s mysteries.

Ron McFarland

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does Pablo Neruda mean in “Walking Around” that he is “tired of being a man”?
- *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* contains a number of epic features. How do they enhance the experience of the speaker?
- Trace the woodlands imagery in “The Hunter in the Forest” and in other poems by Neruda.
- Which American poets does Neruda most resemble?
- Compare the imagery of Neruda’s love poems with love images in William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet* (pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1597), which Neruda translated into Spanish.

LONG FICTION:

*El habitante y su esperanza*, 1926

DRAMA:

*Romeo y Juliet*, pb. 1964 (translation of William Shakespeare)

*Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta*, pb. 1967 (*Splendor and Death of Joaquín Murieta*, 1972)

NONFICTION:

*Anillos*, 1926 (with Tomás Lago)

*Viajes*, 1955

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# NGUGI WA THIONG'O

**Born:** Kamiriithu village, near Limuru, Kenya  
January 5, 1938

*The first East African writer to be published in English, Ngugi is a pioneer in African, especially Kenyan, literature in his role as novelist, dramatist, journalist, and critic.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (ehn-GEW-gee wah tee-ONG-goh) is a member of the Gikuyu tribe of Kenya. He was born James Thiong'o Ngugi in Kamiriithu village, near Limuru, Kenya, on January 5, 1938, to Thiong'o wa Nduucu and Wanjika wa Ngugi, the fifth child of the third of his father's four wives. He lived for a while in a household of almost thirty children. His father was a tenant farmer and the family lived in poverty. His parents separated when he was about eight years old; he lived afterward with his mother and six siblings. His family neither converted to Christianity nor practiced the religious rituals of the Gikuyu because of his father's religious skepticism. As a young man, Ngugi practiced Christianity for a while but later turned his back on it.

From 1952 to 1956, the Land and Freedom Army, called the Mau-Mau by colonial settlers, advocated violent resistance to British domination, causing the British government of Kenya to declare a state of emergency. Ngugi's family was affected by these historical events. One of his brothers was a guerrilla fighter, and for this reason his mother was imprisoned for three months and tortured. Coming home from his first term of high school, Ngugi found that his home and village had been reduced to rubble by the colonial government's counterinsurgency forces. Ngugi managed to receive an education in spite of the state of emergency in his country.

Ngugi was educated first in a missionary-run elementary school, where he learned to speak English, and then in a school run by Gikuyu nationalists, where students were taught Kenyan songs, literature, and dance in opposition to colonial culture and religion. When that school was closed, he

won a place at the prestigious Alliance High School in Kikuyu which, he was later to say, trained bright African students to serve unquestioningly the British Empire. At the time, school authorities warned him about his outspokenness on political matters. It was at the Alliance that Ngugi's early interest in literature and writing was sharpened.

After high school, Ngugi attended Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, where he graduated in 1964 with honors in English. While at the university, Ngugi began his career as a writer in a period of dazzling productivity. He wrote two novels, three one-act plays, a full-length play, and several short stories. These were later published, respectively, as *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *This Time Tomorrow: Three Plays* (pb. 1970), *The Black Hermit* (pr. 1962, pb. 1968), and *Secret Lives, and Other Stories* (1975). In 1965, *Weep Not, Child* won prizes from the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal and from the East African Literature Bureau.

After completing his undergraduate education and before beginning graduate work in England, Ngugi was a reporter and columnist on the Nairobi newspaper *Daily Nation*. At the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, England, while working on a master's degree in Caribbean literature, Ngugi wrote *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and avidly read political and economic theory. Returning to Africa in 1967 without having earned the master's degree, Ngugi accepted a post as lecturer in English at University College in Nairobi. While there, he was instrumental in replacing the English department with the departments of African literature and African languages. In 1969, when students staged a strike to protest repressive policies at the university, Ngugi resigned in support of the students and accepted a

fellowship at Makerere University. It was at this time that he decided to stop using his Christian name, James Ngugi, because he was no longer a Christian.

After he completed his fellowship at Makerere, Ngugi accepted a position as visiting professor in African literature at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. While at Northwestern, he began writing *Petals of Blood* (1977). Returning to Kenya in 1971, Ngugi was senior lecturer and then eventually the head of the department of literature at University College in Nairobi. With Micere Githae-Mugo, he wrote the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (pr. 1974, pb. 1976).

In 1976, in an effort to share his learning with local people, Ngugi became chairman of the cultural committee of the community education center for the village of Kamiriithu, near his birthplace. It was there that his next play, written in collaboration with Ngugi wa Mirii, was produced in a two-thousand-seat theater built by local villagers. The play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (pr. 1977, pb. 1980; *I Will Marry When I Want*, 1982), was a highly political attack on postcolonial society and the effects of Christianity in Kenya. Authorities viewed the play as a political threat, and in December, 1977, Ngugi was arrested and locked up in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, near Nairobi, where he was held for a year as a political prisoner. He was never brought to trial nor given an explanation for his incarceration.

While imprisoned, Ngugi wrote *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981) and the novel *Caitani Mũtharaba-Inĩ* (1980; *Devil on the Cross*, 1982); these works, which were confiscated and then returned to him, were written on toilet paper. When he was freed in 1978 in a general amnesty following the death of Premier Jomo Kenyatta, he had lost his job at the university. He seemed, in fact, to have become suddenly unemployable, so he spent the next two years translating *Devil on the Cross* from Gikuyu into English and writing his second essay collection, *Writers in Politics* (1981), which elaborates his political, literary, and social ideas. He also remained involved with the Kamiriithu community education center, for which he wrote another play. Although the rehearsals were seen by many, in 1982 the government suppressed the play, banned the drama group, and destroyed the village theater.

In 1982, while Ngugi was in London on business, there was an attempted coup in Kenya. Subse-

quent government strictures made Ngugi fearful of further reprisals against him and prevented him from returning to his homeland. In 1986, he published *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, a collection of his lectures delivered at Auckland University, New Zealand. It was, he said, his final book in English; from that point on, he would write only in his native language. Also, in 1986, he published his second novel written in Gikuyu, *Matigari ma Njiruungi* (*Matigari*, 1989), which was confiscated and banned in Kenya. In 1989, the exiled Kenyan author began a three-year teaching appointment at Yale University, and in 1993 he accepted a position at New York University.

In the 1990's and the early twenty-first century, Ngugi continued to produce fiction and to publish his thoughts on the role of the writer. In 1993, he published *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. This was followed by the 1998 publication of *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Toward a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*, based on a series of lectures he presented at Oxford University in 1996. Another novel, *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, was published in 2004, with the English translation appearing two years later as *Wizard of the Crow*.

While on the faculty at New York University as a professor of comparative literature and performance studies, Ngugi founded *Mutiiri*, a Gikuyu-language journal. He later pursued his vision of cultivating dialogue among languages and language groups as a professor of English and comparative literature and the director of the International Center for Writing and Translation at the University of California, Irvine. His efforts as a writer and social activist won him honors and accolades, including the Zora Neale Hurston-Paul Robeson Award of the Council for Black Studies (1993), an honorary doctorate in humane letters from Albright College (1994), and the Fonlon-Nichols Prize for Artistic Excellence and Human Rights (1996).

In 2004, after twenty-two years of exile, the changing political conditions in Kenya enabled Ngugi to return to his native land for a monthlong visit.

## ANALYSIS

The inevitable conflict between the people and tribal ways of Kenya and the imported culture, reli-

gion, and politics of the colonists is the subject of most of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works. The importance of reclaiming the land, which has not only economic but also spiritual value to the natives, is one of his frequent themes. He portrays the devastating consequences of imperialism on a national, local, and personal scale. Some of the most painful effects of the encroachment of white culture are manifested in fractured family relationships and friendships. His novels are often set in small villages that stand symbolically for the whole of Africa in its struggle for independence and identity. Similarly, his broken families and severed friendships are meant to be representative of the breakup of Gikuyu society as a whole. Ngugi's vision is highly political. His early fiction was conservative; it eventually became more liberal and militant, but later in his career he expressed more moderate opinions.

Central to Kenyan consciousness, and therefore to Ngugi's fiction, is the sacredness of the soil. The Creator, Murungu, gave the land to the first man and woman, Gikuyu and Mumbi, and told them to rule it and cultivate it. This myth of the land as an emblem of sacred trust is always in the background, and often in the foreground, of Ngugi's fiction. When foreigners seize the land, Kenyans are not only displaced and financially ruined but also alienated from the deity and their heritage.

Most of Ngugi's characters feel the urgency of reclaiming the land but are unable to agree on how this should be achieved. The older generation cites the prophecy that a leader will arise from the hills someday and lead the people from their bondage, so they are willing to wait for that savior. The younger generation, however, is less patient and more militant. Ngugi portrays the clashes between the generations and the devastating effect their divisiveness has on their resistance to the colonists. This divisiveness also strains families and friendships. In *Weep Not, Child*, generational conflict is depicted in the tragically broken relations between Ngotho and Boro, father and son. An additional source of conflict comes from those natives, like Joshua in *The River Between*, who embrace white humanity's religion and customs, shunning their own people and condemning their ways.

The impact of colonialism on traditional ways of life is another key theme in Ngugi's fiction. A conflict between natives devoted to an important tribal

custom and Christian missionaries who oppose the practice is at the heart of *The River Between*. The missionaries do not understand or accept the significance of the circumcision ritual as the means whereby young men and women attain full standing in the tribe and receive secret tribal knowledge. Ngugi opposes this ritual but also opposes the Christians' condemnation of it. He makes it a riveting symbol of the clash of cultures. Ngugi portrays the ways in which the colonists punish the Kenyans when native and Western ideologies conflict; for example, the missionaries in the novel refuse to make education available to the young people who have been circumcised. In Ngugi's early fiction, education is a key to solving Kenya's problems, so depriving the children of schooling is a serious blow, although education provided by the missionaries comes with a liberal dose of religion. Thus, Waiyaki in *The River Between* is often warned by his father to take the white man's education but eschew his ways and his faith.

The scenario at the missionary school illustrates another of Ngugi's themes, that of the exploitative role of Christianity in Kenya. Ngugi believes that Christianity has served the purpose of colonial expansion and the obliteration of native cultures, and his Christian characters are often depicted as rigid and uncharitable, if not downright unscrupulous. In the play *I Will Marry When I Want*, Ngugi depicts a wealthy Christian businessman who uses religion and the church to defraud a farmer of his land. In spite of his opposition to the faith, Ngugi often employs Christian symbolism in his fiction because it is a widely known and useful point of reference for readers. Ngugi opposes not only Christianity but also all non-African religions in Kenya, including Islam.

Ngugi's vision is remarkably evenhanded in its treatment of the problems of Kenya. In addition to portraying oppression by the British settlers, he unflinchingly explores those weaknesses of the natives that impede their ability to free themselves from the usurping whites. He portrays tribalism, messianism, self-doubt, and naïveté as among the greatest problems of the people. Tribalism stands in the way of a larger, more politically effective unity. Self-doubt paralyzes those who could be leaders; on the other hand, there are those who have visions of themselves as messiahs. Naïveté is deadly to the leadership of those who would settle



on a single issue, like education, as the rallying point of freedom. In Ngugi's fiction, education is effective only when wedded to political action. Even those who take action may create unforeseen consequences; Ngugi, for example, portrays the Mau-Maus as having a destructive effect on family solidarity. Ngugi is also troubled by the oppression of women in Gikuyu society and frequently addresses this topic in his work.

In fact, beginning with *Devil on the Cross*, subtle but important shifts in the treatment of women, as well as in symbolic representations of the body, perspectives on sources of oppression, and modes of narration emerge in Ngugi's fiction. In addition to featuring female protagonists, *Devil on the Cross* and *Wizard of the Crow* both pay sustained attention to social problems, such as battery and sexual exploitation, which plague women. The women are not just depicted as victims, however. In *Devil on the Cross*, Wariinga is able to act in defense of herself and others. Likewise, in *Wizard of the Crow*, Nyawira organizes a tribunal of women to address cases of wife battery.

While Ngugi's artistic vision has always promoted the concept of unity, in his later works that collectivism is presented as the antidote to a culture of fear. Challenging this culture of fear is important because it is, in part, what stifles the peoples' dissent. This shift in attention to the corrupt leadership which promotes the culture of fear is reflected in the emphasis on the grotesque and altered bodies of African elites. Whereas in the earlier work it was the settlers' whose corrupt nature was signified by their large sagging bellies, in *Devil on the Cross* and *Wizard of the Crow* the enormous belly is associated with the African elite as a sign of their corruption. Additionally, in *Wizard of the Crow* the theme of self-inflicted bodily alteration introduced in *Devil on the Cross* is exploited to expose the willful complicity Ngugi associates with this class of Kenyans.

Additionally, in *Wizard of the Crow* the use of the storyteller figure is centralized. Significant portions of the narrative are filtered through the perspective of the character Arigaigai Gatherer, known primarily as A. G. At the beginning of the narrative A. G. is a constable of the police force, but by the end he earns his living as an itinerant storyteller. His transformation from a representative of the state to a storyteller whose main material cele-

brates the impact of the Wizard of the Crow illustrates Ngugi's concept of the artist's role in society. Not only does A. G. celebrate the Wizard's triumph over the state, but also throughout the novel he reminds the reader of the value of multiple perspectives on the same events. All of these changes together suggest Ngugi's ongoing commitment to art as a tool to explain, invigorate, and explore the social experiences of those who are marginalized, and thus to enrich human consciousness.

## WEEP NOT, CHILD

**First published:** 1964

**Type of work:** Novel

*A family gets caught up in the forces of upheaval during Kenya's state of emergency in the 1950's.*

*Weep Not, Child* was the second novel Ngugi wrote and his first novel to be published. Set in Kenya in the turbulent 1950's, the novel tells the story of a family and how it is affected by the open antagonisms between natives and colonists. When the novel opens, the family is poor but happy and harmonious; the course of the novel traces the disintegration of the family. The protagonist, Njoroge, is a young boy who wants more than anything to receive an education and is thrilled to attend a missionary school. His father, Ngotho, is a tenant farmer on land owned by Jacobo, a wealthy African farmer. Ngotho works for the British Mr. Howlands on a tea plantation that is Ngotho's ancestral land. He waits patiently for the time when the gods will fulfill the prophecy and deliver his people from their oppression. His older son, Boro, has returned from military service in World War II, bitter, disillusioned, and having learned of the white man's violence.

Boro loathes his father's passivity. In an effort to appease Boro, Ngotho becomes involved with a strike and leads an attack on Jacobo, who attempts to quell the strikers. Consequently, Ngotho loses his job. Boro becomes a guerrilla leader and political activist who ultimately kills both Howlands and Jacobo. Although Boro is arrested and sentenced to be hanged, Ngotho confesses to killing Jacobo and is tortured and killed. Njoroge, who is now

about nineteen, is arrested, though innocent, as his father's accomplice. He too is tortured. He is also denied the thing he wants most for himself: further schooling. The novel ends with Njoroge's plan to hang himself, but as he stands under a tree with the rope in his hands, his mother comes looking for him and takes him home.

This novel shows the effects of the Mau-Mau Uprising on ordinary villagers. The main characters of the novel represent the social forces in conflict with each other during the state of emergency in Kenya. The British planter Howlands, in his role as a district officer, is brutal in his repression of the Mau-Mau Uprising. Jacobo is a ruthless collaborator with the colonial government. Boro represents the young generation of Kenyans who do not share

the patience and passivity of the older generation (represented by his father), but who rather wish to overthrow the colonial government, using whatever violence is necessary. Ngotho stands for the plight of the landless, disfranchised Gikuyu peasants. Njoroge is representative of the many innocent villagers whose lives are devastated by events over which they have lit-

tle control. Njoroge has naïve fantasies about himself as a savior in the crisis, remembering David and Goliath. The colonial government is ruthlessly brutal and responsible for the breakup of Ngotho's family and the larger society of which it is a microcosm. The Mau-Mau Uprising is motivated by pure destructiveness and therefore also accountable for some of the suffering of the Gikuyu.



## THE RIVER BETWEEN

**First published:** 1965

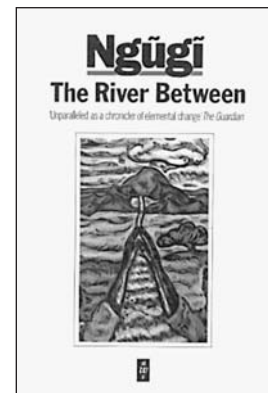
**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Gikuyu leader fails to unite his people, who are divided by tribal rivalries.*

*The River Between* was written for a literary contest that Ngugi entered while he was in college; the entry won first prize. Events in the novel take place about twenty-five years earlier than the action of *Weep Not, Child*. Set in Gikuyu territory, the novel portrays the struggle among natives of the ridges of Kamenno and Makuyu, who have conflicting ideas about the presence of the white man. The two main forces are the traditionalists, led by Kabonyi, and the converts to Christianity and Western ways of thinking, led by Joshua. Finding some merit in both tribal traditions and Western thinking, but not subscribing completely to either, the protagonist Waiyaki is pulled by both sides as he attempts to educate his people. His father, Chege, who believes his son is the prophesied messiah, sends Waiyaki to the mission school to learn all that he can of the wisdom of the white man, but he warns Waiyaki to remain true to his people and their ways.

Waiyaki takes his place as an adult member of the tribe when he participates in the circumcision ceremony. The missionary school vehemently opposes the rites, and when his friend Muthoni dies of an infection after her circumcision, the missionaries refuse to allow the circumcised students to attend further classes at the mission school. Waiyaki returns to the ridges and sets up his own schools. His great enthusiasm for education earns the respect and affection of his people, who see him as their savior against the domination of colonialism.

Waiyaki finds himself in love with Nyambura, the daughter of Joshua, a man who has embraced Christianity and turned his back on the tribal customs of his people, especially the circumcision



ritual for women. The dead girl, Muthoni, was Nyambura's sister, greatly conflicted in her desire to be both Christian and Gikuyu. Joshua had forbidden her to participate in the rituals, but she disobeyed him in order to be part of the tribe. Joshua is an unforgiving, unyielding father and leader.

The other political force to be reckoned with is the Kiama, a militant organization devoted to the protection of tribal ways. The Kiama requires an oath of loyalty to uphold tribal purity. Waiyaki is vulnerable to the Kiama because of his political naïveté; he thinks only in terms of education as the key to helping the Gikuyu, not political action. His other point of vulnerability is his love of Nyambura. He is seen with her and will not deny his feelings for her; he and she are turned over to the Kiama for justice. Waiyaki's opponent and the leader of the Kiama is Kabonyi, and he has effectively turned the Kiama against Waiyaki. Presumably Waiyaki and Nyambura will be executed.

The dominant theme of *The River Between* is the role of education and political activism in the resistance movement. Waiyaki's idealistic response to the needs of the people gives them only part of what they need from him. They need the education he brings to their children, but decisive political action is also called for, and he seems too preoccupied with his schools and with his feelings for Nyambura to be aware that he is ultimately failing the people and placing himself in danger. Like Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*, he has a messianic vision of himself but is not able to fulfill it.

## WIZARD OF THE CROW

**First published:** *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, 2004  
(English translation, 2006)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An ordinary man accidentally becomes the Wizard of the Crow and the unwitting symbol of a people's resistance against a despotic ruler.*

*The Wizard of the Crow* reflects the global political changes which have occurred since Ngugi first began writing. Because it attempts to present a historical account, the novel includes many characters. However, all of the events that take place in the

fictional land of the Free Republic of Aburiria relate in some way to four central characters: Kamiti wa Karimiri, the man who will become known as the Wizard of the Crow; Grace Nyawira, the chairperson of the Movement for the Voice of the People; the nation's second independence-era leader, known only as the Ruler; and Titus Tajarika, a businessman, then minister, and, finally successor to the Ruler.

Kamiti and Nyawira find themselves allied in opposition to the Ruler's despotic quest for personal glorification at the expense of the well-being of the nation's citizens. This quest is represented by the Ruler's attempt to secure a loan from the Global Bank to build the world's tallest building, a monument to the Ruler called Marching to Heaven, in a time of mass unemployment. Though Kamiti and Nyawira triumph in the sense that they evade capture, survive the attacks on their lives, and expand the Movement for the Voice of the People, the novel ends with their success as a counterpoint to the beginning of a new cycle of exploitation. The Ruler has been succeeded by Tajarika (now known as Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead), loans from the Global Bank have been secured, and the plans for Marching to Heaven have been transformed to the construction of a modern coliseum in honor of the emperor.

In this novel, the central themes of Ngugi's early work, such as generational conflict, education as a means of social advancement, and traditional ways of life, recede. Instead, emphasis is placed on describing the centrality of capitalism in contemporary life. In addition, there is a shift from Kenya as the primary locale to a fictionalized locale meant to be representative of postcolonial African nations more generally. The Free Republic of Aburiria is used to illustrate the processes by which many postcolonial nations are incorporated into the global economy. In the novel, this idea is given the name "corporony." Though Ngugi sees the elite's cooperation as seriously compromising the well-being of the nation and the masses of its people, he conveys this criticism humorously. The Ruler's greed, for example, is symbolized by the malady from which he suffers through a great deal of the novel—an inexplicable, proportional, physical inflation that medical specialists name and copyright as "self-induced expansion" (SIE).

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi examines a new set

of themes. Attention to the dynamics of global exchange, both positive and negative, replaces the emphasis on local identity. The novel identifies capitalist expansion and corrupt governments as obstacles to social equity in many postcolonial nations and emphasizes the importance of challenging authoritarian rule, even when success is qualified.

## THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI

**First produced:** 1974 (first published, 1976)

**Type of work:** Play

*The play is an imaginative re-creation of the Mau-Mau leader's trial, interspersed with scenes of his career and Kenyan history.*

*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, written in collaboration with Micere Githae-Mugo, is Ngugi's response to colonialist writings about the Mau-Mau movement, which traditionally depicted the movement and its leader, Dedan Kimathi, as mentally unbalanced and vicious. Ngugi and his collaborator choose to counter this image with a portrait of Kimathi as a man of great courage and commitment. This was how he was seen by many of the peasants and laborers of Kenya.

Kimathi was captured and put on trial in 1956. The two playwrights make no attempt to re-create

the trial realistically. In place of a tightly woven dramatic narrative, the plot consists of disparate but thematically connected episodes. The scenes in the courtroom are interspersed with others that depict episodes from Kenyan history of the preceding two hundred years, scenes of Kenyan people attempting to help Kimathi escape, scenes of Kimathi's interactions with guerrillas, scenes of Kimathi in prison, and scenes of his torture. The play includes Gikuyu songs and dances, and even mime. Ngugi's portrayal of the Mau-Mau movement, ambivalent in other works, is less so here.

In this play Ngugi looks back at history in an effort to revise it and to expunge deliberately propagated falsehoods. In this way, he attempts to help his country cast off its legacy of oppression.

## SUMMARY

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's body of work portrays pre-colonial, colonial, and postindependent Kenya. He movingly depicts the deadly effects of imperialism on an indigenous people, both in the clashes between cultures and the conflict created within the native culture. In Ngugi's fiction, once Kenyans have freed themselves from the domination of the white colonists and have reclaimed their sacred trust—the land—they must then confront the problems that come with independence. There is great struggle and suffering in Ngugi's fiction, and it is not always neatly balanced with hope.

*Linda Jordan Tucker; updated by Beauty Bragg*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- The representation of women and women's experiences has changed over the body of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work, as has his depiction of men and men's experiences. What differences do you see between male figures in the early works and male figures in later works?
- In what ways might the experience of the English-speaking reader of Ngugi's translated texts be affected by a lack of familiarity with Gikuyu?
- What are some of the countries with which the characters in *Wizard of the Crow* have contact? What do these encounters suggest about Ngugi's vision of global exchange?
- Throughout *Wizard of the Crow*, the Christian soldiers are on the hunt for the devil. What are some things that the devil could symbolize?
- Most of the characters in *Wizard of the Crow* wish not to be associated with sorcerers or "superstitious" behavior and yet consult the Wizard. How does Ngugi represent the Wizard's practice?





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## FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

**Born:** Röcken, Saxony-Anhalt, Prussia (now in Germany)  
October 15, 1844

**Died:** Weimar, Germany  
August 25, 1900

*Nietzsche, a German philosopher, essayist, and poet, was a highly original thinker who exerted great influence in the fields of rhetoric, literature, and philosophy. Even the harshest critics of his ideas acknowledge his masterful writing style and command of the German language.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Friedrich Nietzsche (NEE-chuh) was born in 1844 in the small Prussian town of Röcken, near Leipzig. The son of a Lutheran pastor, he was given the name Friedrich Wilhelm in honor of King Frederick William IV, whose birthday was the same as his. He had one sister, Elisabeth, and a brother who died early in childhood. When Nietzsche was just four years old, his father died from a brain injury resulting from a fall. The family then moved to Naumburg, where they lived with his paternal grandmother and his father's two unmarried sisters.

After attending a private elementary school, Nietzsche enrolled at the local gymnasium (classical high school) in Naumburg, where he demonstrated outstanding talents in language and music. In 1858, he was awarded a full scholarship to study at the prestigious boarding school, Pforta, only a few miles from his home. At Pforta, despite migraine headaches and other health ailments, he acquired a strong background in classical philology, the term for the languages and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. In addition to his school work, he spent much of his time writing poetry and just barely made passing grades in mathematics.

While still in secondary school, Nietzsche became convinced that the miracles and other supernatural claims of Christianity were untenable. The

development of this skepticism was partly a result of his reading books, such as David Strauss's critical biography of Jesus. The fact that most Germans at the time professed the Christian faith reinforced his condescending attitude toward his fellow citizens. Both his mother and his sister Elisabeth were extremely upset to discover these atheistic convictions, and Elisabeth even tried to give him counterarguments. In his famous response of June 11, 1865, Nietzsche admitted that religious faith often comforted and elevated people, but he insisted that this was the function of any faith, not proof of a religion's "objective reality." He concluded, "Here is the way men divide: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and happiness, then believe; if you wish to be a disciple of truth, then inquire." This revealing letter anticipated his later anti-Christianity, as well as his distinction between the weak-minded majority and courageous elite.

Following graduation in 1864, he entered the University of Bonn, where he specialized in classical philology. Apparently he spent a good deal of time in beer halls, to the extent that he later referred to his time in Bonn as a "lost year." His favorite philology professor was Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl, whom he followed to the University of Leipzig the next year. While a student in Leipzig, Nietzsche published a few essays and impressed the faculty as a brilliant philologist. In 1869, with Ritschl's help, Nietzsche secured a professorship at the University of Basel in Switzerland. The Univer-

sity of Leipzig awarded him a doctorate without either a thesis or an examination, which was highly unusual. Although the classes he taught at Basel were small, his students considered him to be a very good teacher.

When Nietzsche published his first books, however, the reactions from his professional colleagues were extremely negative. Seeking a wife, he proposed marriage to Mathilde Trampedach in 1876, just a few hours after meeting her, but she turned him down. Increasingly he felt isolated, and his health, which was always precarious, continued to deteriorate. In 1879, he decided to resign his professorship in order to devote all of his energies to writing. During the next nine years, despite his bad health, he would write numerous books and many essays and poems. He lived on his modest pension, while also receiving aid from friends. Attempting to find a climate compatible with his health needs, he moved frequently to a variety of cities in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Occasionally visiting his family at Naumburg, he and his sister Elisabeth had cyclical periods of conflict and reconciliation. In 1882, he met and spent the summer with Lou Salomé, but she also declined his proposal for marriage.

Following the breakup with Salomé, he began to write his most famous book, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (1883-1885; *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1896), which summarized his mature ideas in the form of a poetic parable. In 1886, he published at his own expense *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (1886; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1907), expanding on his theories about morality and the aesthetic ideal.

During his final years of sanity in the late 1880's, Nietzsche published several major books, including two angry diatribes against Christianity and a strong attack on composer Richard Wagner. During this time, he was further developing his ideas about the will to power, which he intended to expand into a large volume. Early in 1888, his health seemed to improve, but by the end of the year he was showing signs of mental derangement, with symptoms suggesting that he was likely suffering from the later stages of syphilis.

On January 3, 1889, in Turin, Italy, Nietzsche collapsed on the street while reportedly trying to assist a horse that was being abused. After he awoke, he was no longer able to formulate co-

herent ideas, as demonstrated in the so-called *wahnbriefe* (madness letters) that he sent to friends and colleagues. Incurably insane for the rest of his life, he died from tuberculosis on August 25, 1900.

## ANALYSIS

Nietzsche's writings have elicited a large variety of reactions and interpretations. Often writing in enigmatic aphorisms rather than rational arguments, Nietzsche never attempted to formulate a philosophical system, and he did not hesitate to change his mind about fundamental issues. He had a tendency to make bold generalizations without making necessary qualifications and exceptions. A highly emotional man, he usually wrote rapidly and in a spontaneous style, apparently considering the aesthetics of literary expression more important than precision of thought. Nietzsche's unhappy life, health problems, and loneliness, moreover, probably contributed to the apparent pleasure that he took in shocking bourgeois society.

His writings are commonly divided into three periods. During the early period, 1872-1876, he attacked modern culture as superficial and empty in comparison with that of ancient Greece, attributing most of the blame to the modern emphasis on science rather than on art and myth. During the middle period from 1877 to 1882, he acknowledged the value of science and sought a naturalistic understanding of human life. In his late period, 1883-1888, his writings became more accessible, and he grew increasingly strident in attacking conventional morality and orthodox Christianity. Some scholars, however, reject the three-part schema, arguing that he never freed himself from the Romantic inheritance of the early period and never ceased to engage in metaphysical speculation, despite his assertions to the contrary.

In his early period, Nietzsche was particularly influenced by the music of Richard Wagner and the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Like many people, he was overwhelmed by Wagner's artistic skill and mythical vision of Germany's heroic past. Schopenhauer's major book, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819; *The World as Will and Idea*, 1883-1886), asserted that the essential reality of the universe is an irrational and mindless cosmic force that he called either the "will to live" or simply the "will," which is indifferent to human needs and aspirations. Believing that this ubiquitous force pro-

duces evil and suffering, he recommended denial of the will through an ascetic cessation of desire, but he allowed for temporary escape by way of art and aesthetic experiences, especially in music. For several years, Nietzsche appeared to look upon this metaphysical perspective as a key to unlocking the meaning of human life.

The influences of Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner were clearly seen in Nietzsche's first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872; *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, 1909). Likewise, his four lengthy meditations, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1873-1876; *Thoughts out of Season*, 1909), continued to use Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian ideas to criticize modern culture and elevate art over science. In his unpublished essay of 1873, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne" ("On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"), which is considered his most important discussion of language and rhetoric, he insisted that all claims of objective truth were illusions based on chains of metaphors. He also asserted his influential theory of perspectivism, emphasizing that a person's perspective profoundly affects the nature of the reality that is observed.

By 1876, Nietzsche was ending his friendship with Wagner, who was now speaking favorably of Christianity, the German Empire, and anti-Semitism, three things that Nietzsche detested. He was also beginning to view Schopenhauer's nonempirical speculations as superfluous, in part a result of his new appreciation for the French Enlightenment and empirical science. His philosophy during this period is best seen in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches: Ein Buch für freie Geister* (1878; *Human, All Too Human*, 1910, 1911).

By the time he wrote *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882, 1887; *The Joyful Wisdom*, 1910), which inaugurated the final period of his writings, Nietzsche had returned to a hostile stance toward rational science, again praising human instincts and advocating an aesthetic perspective of life. This book included the famous aphorism in which a madman proclaimed the death of God, as well as another aphorism which asked readers to reflect on the possibility that their entire lives would recur throughout eternity. Until his breakdown in 1888, Nietzsche continued to emphasize these two themes, which he combined with two others: the coming *Übermensch* (literally translated as "Superman" or

"Overman") and the "will to power."

In using the term *Übermensch*, Nietzsche was primarily referring to a person of superior aesthetic and intellectual qualities who has overcome the weaknesses of the "common herd" of humans. This Overman was expected to remain apolitical and to sublimate his will into contemplation and artistic creation. In contrast to the Nazis' racist idea of a superior Nordic superrace, he held that the development of the superior type of persons can be found among different racial groups and cultures of the world.

Nietzsche claimed that the "will to power" provided a comprehensive and compelling explanation for human motivation. He wrote, "What is good?—All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man." By "power," Nietzsche apparently meant the capacity to obtain one's desired goals through any number of means, including persuasion, prestige, money, warfare, artistic ability, or even self-control. He apparently did not consider the possibility that his unqualified glorification of all forms of power could be exploited to justify extreme militarism and aggressive nationalism. In 1906, his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who later supported Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, published a controversial selection from his later notes, *Der Wille zur Macht* (*The Will to Power*, 1910).

Although there is a general consensus that his sister's choice of aphorisms reflected her own ideology more than his, historians disagree about the extent to which Nietzsche's ideas were compatible with those espoused by the Nazis. Nietzsche's many defenders emphasize that he frequently denounced Otto von Bismarck's aggressive wars of expansion, and that he rarely expressed anti-Semitic views, except in the context of the similarities between Christianity and the Jewish religion. Critics of Nietzsche concede that he opposed German racism and nationalism, but they nevertheless find that his ideas and those of the Nazis shared much in common, particularly his antidemocratic tirades and his defense of exploiting the common people in the interests of the *Übermensch*.

Nietzsche's idiosyncratic book of autobiographical reflections, *Ecce Homo* (1908; English translation, 1911), written a few weeks before his mental breakdown, summarized the ideas that he had expressed over the years, but it was not very revealing

about the details of his life. One of the unusual aspects of the book is the extent to which Nietzsche boasted about his intelligence and his place in history. He wrote, for example, “My destiny ordained that I would be the first decent human being. . . . I was the first to discover truth. . . . Mankind can begin to have fresh hopes, only now that I have lived.” Nietzsche’s critics interpret such statements as indications of extreme megalomania, while some of his admirers view them more as demonstrations of his sense of humor and irony.

## THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF MUSIC

**First published:** *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1872 (English translation, 1909)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Nietzsche argued that classical Greek drama grew out of religious music, and he championed artistic expression as the noblest task of humanity.*

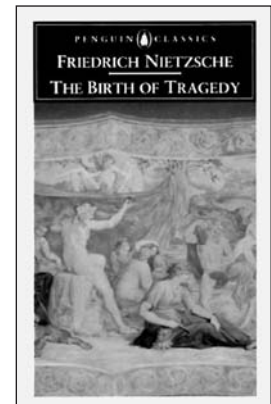
*The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche’s first book, defended an aesthetic view of life, which was one of the major themes of all his early writings. Dedicated to Richard Wagner, the book expressed the perspective of the German Romantic movement, glorifying the senses and traditional mythology, with disdain for the Enlightenment tradition’s emphasis on reason and modern science. Asserting that the ancient Greeks were able to endure the horrors of human existence as a result of their art, particularly their drama and music, Nietzsche praised the tragic dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles, which presumably had emerged out of the dithyrambs (or emotional songs) devoted to Dionysus, the god of intoxication, spontaneity, impulsiveness, and unrestrained life force. While emphasizing the value of the Dionysian principle, Nietzsche argued that Aeschylus and Sophocles balanced their tragedies with the Apollonian principle, which was personified in the god Apollo, who represented order, sobriety, individualism, and rationality.

Nietzsche used Dionysus and Apollo as metaphors for these contradictory aspects of human

culture. He asserted that the age of great tragedies had ended because of the elimination of the Dionysian element at the hands of the playwright Euripides, under the pernicious influence of Socrates—a metaphor for modern science. As a result, the Apollonian element had been dominant in Western thought since the time of Socrates, but a renaissance of the Dionysian element could occur by applying two of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s insights: first, that a nonrational “will to exist” underlies human creativity, and second, that humans can escape this destructive force through aesthetic experiences, particularly through music, the most noble of the arts. In addition, Nietzsche argued that German Romanticism (especially the music and drama of Wagner) was destined to bring about a rebirth of Dionysian art, providing for the aesthetic needs of nineteenth century Europeans.

In celebrating the Dionysian aspects of ancient Greece, Nietzsche was rejecting the widespread pro-Enlightenment interpretation of Greek culture held by most German scholars of the period. He was also expressing a Romantic conception of an artist as a genius, with the semideification of the artist as the oracle or priest capable of endowing life with a metaphysical dimension. Naturally this was a viewpoint that Wagner and other artists welcomed. Most scholars of Greek philology, in contrast, dismissed *The Birth of Tragedy* as a product of unscholarly speculation and Wagnerian propaganda.

In his middle period, as Nietzsche became more sympathetic toward science and reason, he rejected many of the assertions in the book. His revised edition of 1886 included a preface, “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” in which he wrote that the earlier edition was excessively “pessimistic” and hostile to modern culture. He even described the first edition as “badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental . . . [and] without the will to logical cleanliness.” Many of Nietzsche’s admirers, nevertheless, continued to view the book as a masterpiece.





## THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

**First published:** *Also sprach Zarathustra*,  
1883-1885 (English translation, 1896)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*A teacher comes down from his mountainous cave to teach humanity about God's death, eternal recurrence, the will to power, and the future appearance of the "Overman."*

*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's most popular work, is fundamentally different from his other publications and has been called a parable and a poetic fable. In form it imitates parts of the New Testament and the Platonic dialogues. The style is lighthearted, while the message is ironic, frequently ambiguous, and Dionysian. The book is full of metaphors and humorous allusions to specific philosophers and writers. Nietzsche later wrote that it summarized all the important ideas in his writings.

The teachings of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, of course, have almost nothing in common with those of the Persian prophet who founded the Zoroastrian religion. Nietzsche explained in his autobiography the reason for choosing the name: Zarathustra was considered "the first" to teach the notion of a cosmic conflict between good and evil, and it was therefore appropriate for him to be the first to expose the errors of such a morality and to preach the "gospel of a new humanity."

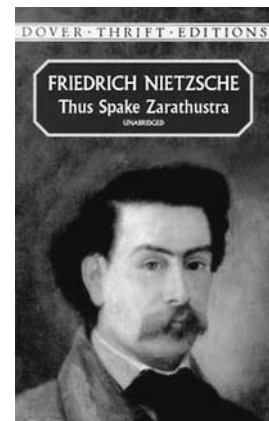
After contemplating for ten years in a mountainous cave, according to Nietzsche's story, Zarathustra descended from his cave at the age of forty to bring enlightenment to humanity. The narrative is divided into four parts, of which the first three are a unit describing Zarathustra's travels after the multitudes reject his message. Visiting many lands, Zarathustra spends his time arguing, dreaming, and delivering sermons. Finally returning to his cave in the fourth part, he finds eight "higher men," each of a particular type, waiting for him. They hold a blasphemous festival in which they worship an ass as God, after which Zarathustra has discussions with each of them. He explains that these higher men are unable to rise to the exalted status of the Overman because of the influences of a decadent society. In the penultimate chapter,

Zarathustra replaces existing religious commandments with exhortations to laugh, to be joyful, and to ridicule everything serious. Finally, the appearance of a lion pleases Zarathustra, because he takes this as a sign that the Overman will soon appear.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares that the Overman "shall be the meaning of the earth!" When using the word "man" (or *mensch*), he appears to primarily refer to an individual of the male gender. He is highly suspicious of female standards of integrity and considers the female intellectual to be dangerous. "When a woman has scholarly inclinations," he declares, "there is usually something wrong with her sexuality." He teaches that men "should be trained for war and women for the recreation of the warrior; all else is folly." Likewise, he approves an old woman's advice: "Are you visiting a woman? Do not forget your whip!"

Zarathustra frequently praises the human will for power. He explains that rulers and government officials exercise this will by commanding obedience and punishing disobedience. Weak persons, in contrast, obey the strong because "the will of the weaker persuades it to serve the stronger; his will wants to be master of those weaker still." Zarathustra accepts the existence of a drive toward self-preservation but interprets it as only an indirect consequence of the will to power. He says that a strong will to do evil is preferable to a weak will to do good; the will of a Cesare Borgia is preferable to that of a Christian saint. Although conceding that the will to power could produce despicable results, Zarathustra insists that the will must be overcome or "sublimated," not destroyed.

Zarathustra also emphasizes the strange doctrine of "eternal recurrence," or the assertion "that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us. . . . I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life." Although such a statement is open to many interpretations, he apparently





meant much more than that similar things in history reoccur within cycles. Nietzsche's critics commonly view the doctrine of eternal recurrence as an absurd form of metaphysical speculation. In contrast, some defenders argue that the doctrine was a reasonable deduction from nineteenth century ideas about probability and the indestructibility of matter.

A number of scholars, however, have argued that Zarathustra's assertion of eternal recurrence is only a metaphor, an "as if" fiction, not an assertion about a cosmological reality. According to this view, it was simply a test to judge how people perceive their place in the world. This is suggested in Zarathustra's question: "Can you bring yourself to will the eternal recurrence of everything in your life down to the last detail?" In other words, a person of superior qualities should be able to affirm that there is no future he would prefer to the repetition of the exact life that he was living.

## BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

**First published:** *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886 (English translation, 1907)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Nietzsche argues that noble persons needed a new system of morality based on aristocratic values, including a radical transformation in the conventional criteria for judging what is good or bad.*

In using the title *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wanted to emphasize his belief that persons of noble character need an ethical system that is more sophisticated than the rules and principles found in the conventional moralities of both the bourgeoisie and the lower classes. Although sometimes denouncing the very notion of morality, he strongly condemned ethical nihilism, while acknowledging the societal need for standards of "good and bad" in the sense of "noble and despicable." He insisted, however, that many acts and attitudes that were judged to be "evil" or "sinful" in conventional morality were noble according to his aristocratic criteria. There was an urgent need, therefore, for a thoroughgoing "transvaluation

of values." Certainly Nietzsche reacted strongly against the rigid mores and folkways of the Victorian age, but this was only part of his complaint.

Glorifying the strong "will to power" of superior humans, he distinguished between the "master morality" and the "slave morality." He viewed the former as an affirmation of life, while the latter was only a grumbling of resentment and weakness. He also described the former as a "life-enhancing" morality and the latter as a "life-denying" morality. One of the reasons for his contempt for Christian morality was his belief that it had evolved out of a slave morality, as epitomized in precepts like "blessed are the meek" and "turn the other cheek." He also asserted that the French Revolution was an expression of the slave morality, even though he viewed Napoleon I as the last great representative of the aristocratic ideal. Writing condescendingly of the slave "whose gaze resents the virtues of the powerful," he was alarmed to observe the growth of democracy with its "morality of the herd animal," which he perceived to be an heir to Christianity.

Although endorsing the aristocratic morality of the slaveholder, Nietzsche did not advocate the re-introduction of slavery in the traditional sense. On the other hand, he never expresses any ethical judgments against the exploitation and suffering of ordinary people. Rather than condemnation, he believed the development of the Overman requires a "healthy aristocracy" in which there are "gradations of rank and differences of worth." The essential thing is that a society should not exist for its own sake but rather as a foundation to make the higher forms of noblemen possible. For the sake of cultivating such men, therefore, society "with a good conscience" must accept "the sacrifice of innumerable men" who would "have to be suppressed and reduced to imperfect men, to slaves and tools." Considering it natural for women to exercise a "secondary role," Nietzsche told his readers that "both good and bad women need the stick."

In order to clarify and expand on the ethical theories of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote a second book, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1896). Since there are only minor differences in the ideas of the two books, they are frequently considered together. The latter is considered to be somewhat more readable.

## SUMMARY

Friedrich Nietzsche praised the values of artistic achievement, intellectual courage, nonconformity, and an affirmation of secular life. A militant opponent of Christianity and conventional morality, he called for a new moral system not based on any religious foundation. In most of his works, he expressed distrust for modern science, and he sometimes, but not always, rejected the existence of objective truth, emphasizing how different intellectual perspectives determine the ways that people perceive reality. His controversial aphorisms about the Overman and the will to power are open to a large variety of interpretations. Although the Nazis exploited these two ideas, most scholars emphasize the great differences between his essentially aesthetic point of view and the goals of Nazi ideology.

Although largely ignored during his lifetime, since his death many writers and literary critics have admired Nietzsche's distinguished writing style, his focus on aesthetics, and his theories on rhetoric and metaphor. Avant-garde artists have particularly been attracted to his glorification of art and the Dionysian approach to life. Theorists of twentieth century existentialism and postmodernism, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, have acknowledged his influence. Likewise, numerous novelists and poets, including Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Stefan George, have also been inspired by his writings. Many partisans of democracy, the Enlightenment, and empirical science, however, have either ignored Nietzsche or expressed strong disagreement with his doctrines.

Thomas Tandy Lewis

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why has Friedrich Nietzsche had such a widespread influence on writers and literary critics?
- What were Nietzsche's theories about truth and rhetoric?
- What were Nietzsche's beliefs and values in the realm of ethics?
- Should an "Overman," as Nietzsche described him, be admired or condemned?
- Was Nietzsche justified in his contempt for democracy and ordinary people?
- Did Nietzsche have a valid understanding of the morality and values of Christianity?
- Did Nietzsche's insanity have any influence on the content of his ideas?
- In what ways did Nietzsche anticipate the ideas of contemporary existentialism and postmodernism?

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## EDNA O'BRIEN

**Born:** Tuamgraney, County Clare, Ireland  
December 15, 1930

*O'Brien is widely known for her lively fiction detailing the maturation of Irish girls and for her later portrayals of Irish women responding to their changing society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The youngest child in a shabby, genteel farm family, which included a brother and two sisters, Josephine Edna O'Brien was born in Tuamgraney, County Clare, Ireland, on December 15, 1930, and grew up in rural western Ireland. If her fictions are to be believed, and in broad outline the facts are substantiated by her on-the-record comments, her father, Michael O'Brien, drank too much, and her mother, Lena, fully assumed the classic martyr's role. O'Brien was educated at the local primary school in Scarriff and at the Convent of Mercy, Loughrea, County Galway. From this repressive, priest-ridden home and rural environment, with its many social and sexual taboos, she "escaped" in the late 1940's to Dublin to study pharmacy in the work-study system then in vogue.

Always a reader, in the city of Dublin she encountered for the first time, and with great delight, the stimulation of venturesome writers, such as fellow Irish national James Joyce, and the realistic stories and plays of the Russian Anton Chekhov. She contributed pieces to the *Irish Press* newspaper. In 1951, O'Brien married the older, established Czech writer Ernest Gebler. Their sons Carlo (a novelist in his own right) and Sasha (an architect) were born in 1952 and 1954, respectively. In 1959 the family moved to London, where O'Brien established permanent residence.

O'Brien's necessary physical departure from the community where she was raised and eventually from Ireland freed her—as it freed Joyce, Sean O'Casey, and other Irish writers in voluntary exile—to write about her homeland for a lifetime. Her best work, most readers agree, is set among the Irish and involves social and family relationships, searches and conflicts, not unlike O'Brien's own experiences in a vanishing Ireland that she knows and re-creates extremely well.

During her first month in England, O'Brien wrote the very successful novel *The Country Girls* (1960), which was nevertheless burned in her village and banned throughout Ireland, as were her six subsequent books. She followed this novel with the other books in a trilogy: *The Lonely Girl* (1962; reprinted in 1964 as *Girl with Green Eyes*) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). O'Brien and Gebler, who divorced in 1964, have argued in print over how much help he provided with the trilogy; whatever the truth behind their dispute, O'Brien was launched on a successful, jet-set, high-profile career, receiving counseling with the celebrated psychiatrist R. D. Laing, and making frequent television appearances whenever a feisty, auburn-haired spokesperson for Ireland, or for Irishwomen, was called for. *The Lonely Girl* was made into a film, *Girl with Green Eyes* (1964), starring Rita Tushingham.

Based in London, successfully rearing her sons on her own, O'Brien had two most prolific decades of work in a variety of genres, although her sexually explicit scenes and criticism of church personnel caused her continuing problems with the Irish censors. The novels accumulated: *August Is a Wicked Month* (1965); *Casualties of Peace* (1966); *A Pagan Place* (1970), her favorite work and chosen by the

*Yorkshire Post* as novel of the year; *Johnny, I Hardly Knew You* (1977; published in the United States as *I Hardly Knew You*, 1978); and, after what was for O'Brien a long gap between major publications, *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* (1986) and *The High Road* (1988).

Beginning in 1962, she wrote dozens of short stories on the general themes she also explores in her novels—love, loss, and connection. These stories were published in *The New Yorker* and other magazines. Some of O'Brien's best short fiction appears in her collections *The Love Object* (1968), *A Scandalous Woman, and Other Stories* (1974), *Mrs. Reinhardt* (1978; better known as *A Rose in the Heart*), *Returning* (1982), and *Lantern Slides* (1990).

Along with her prose fiction, O'Brien involved herself in journalism, writing travel books based on her personal experiences, including the provocative, eccentric *Mother Ireland* (1976). She edited the anthology *Some Irish Loving* (1979) and published literary criticism of Joyce's work that would later culminate in a magnificently lyrical biography, *James Joyce* (1999). O'Brien also continued to pursue her interest in the theater by writing stage plays, teleplays, and screenplays, including *A Cheap Bunch of Nice Flowers* (pr. 1962); *Time Lost and Time Remembered* (1966); *X, Y, and Zee* (1972), a film adaptation of her novel *Zee and Co.* (1971), which starred Elizabeth Taylor, Michael Caine, and Susannah York; *The Gathering* (pr. 1974); *Virginia* (pr. 1980), about Virginia Woolf; *Triptych* (pr., pb. 2003); and *Iphigenia* (pr., pb. 2003).

More than many other prolific writers, O'Brien's biography is the avowed raw material for her fiction. In 1984 and 1986, respectively, she published an elegant pair of matched volumes: *A Fanatic Heart*, a collection of the best of her previously collected stories, and what many consider her best work, a new edition of *The Country Girls Trilogy* with an entirely new *Epilogue*. This epilogue's narrator is Baba, the more extroverted of O'Brien's dual heroines; the more introverted Kate, readers are told, is dead. It seemed as if, as O'Brien approached sixty, the well of her previous inspiration was drying up, and she was putting her literary estate in order, or she was about to take a new direction, as represented by the confident "Baba" voice.

In 1988, however, after ten years without publishing a novel, O'Brien published *The High Road*, to mixed reviews. *The High Road* is set again in the

world of the expatriates' Mediterranean and its multinational cliques, and O'Brien's new direction was denied. In 1990, O'Brien, most secure in her literary reputation in the United States, was back in New York, where she was writer-in-residence at City College. At the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), she gave a dramatic reading of "Brother," one of the stories from her newly published collection, *Lantern Slides*; it is a vengeful monologue of an Irish woman contemplating the arrival of her brother's new bride at the farmhouse that the two of them had shared together for many years. Amid a crowd of fans, O'Brien also signed copies of her brief, autobiographical poem, *On the Bone* (1989).

Like her idol Joyce, O'Brien fled Ireland to avoid stultifying repression, yet she never really left, returning frequently in later years while maintaining a residence in London. O'Brien was named an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was appointed adjunct professor at University College, Dublin, in 2006.

## ANALYSIS

O'Brien's recurring themes, her stylistic experimentation with received forms and narrative stances in the pronouns used, and her success in communicating that an Irish microcosm has a universal significance are all clearly present in *Mother Ireland*, the most accessible and instructive work with which to make O'Brien's literary acquaintance. This personal response to her dear native land is not at all likely to be promoted by the Irish Tourist Board. Her Irishness, however, is something of which O'Brien is proud: "It's a state of mind," she claims. She is not, however, blind to Ireland's faults, appreciating that there must be something "secretly catastrophic" about a country that so many of its people leave. After an iconoclastic opening chapter on Irish history, with its uncanonized patron saint, Saint Patrick, and its paunchy Firbolgs, *Mother Ireland* continues with six chapters in which O'Brien sketches her dominant themes: loneliness and the search for love; the longing for adventure (often sexual); the repressive Irish Roman Catholic Church and rural society; the constraints of family ties, particularly as they involve a martyred mother and her daughter; and the courageous hopelessness with which life at best must be lived.



It would be a melancholy prospect indeed for her almost-always female protagonists ("Clara," from her short-story collection *A Rose in the Heart*, has one of O'Brien's very rare male narrators) if it were not for O'Brien's saving graces of irony, sometimes at her own expense, and of humor. At her best, she skillfully roots her observations in the sensual details of an actual Irish world, now quickly vanishing. The late twentieth century proliferation of television antennae on cottage roofs, the problems of widespread unemployment, and other political issues make no inroads on the consciousnesses of her heroines. Problems of a practical nature (the need for grocery money) or of a provincial or national political nature (the Northern Ireland question) impinge not at all on O'Brien's fictional characters' search for fulfillment. Instead, her people, and her readers through them, inhabit an Ireland now almost gone. All five of their senses are engaged by a world of wet batteries for radios, ink powder to be reconstituted in school by highly favored students, private estate walls with fragments of bottles embedded in their tops to deter trespassers, Fox's Glacier Mints, orange-crate furniture, and lice fine-combed from a child's head onto a newspaper: in other words, the world of the 1940's and 1950's.

From the beginning of her literary career, it appeared as if O'Brien had fallen upon, or decided upon, in whatever mysterious way inspiration works, the mechanism of splitting her heroines into two separate, complementary, personalities. In *The Country Girls*, the shy and sensitive Caithleen tells her story, and she shares the action with her alter ego, the volatile and sometimes malicious Baba. They inhabit a world divided largely into warring camps—male and female, young and old, church and laity, country and town—where Caithleen's aspirations toward love are doomed to failure. Expelled from their repressive convent school for writing a ribald joke, the girls, in their late teens, come to Dublin. Caithleen's Mr. Gentleman, the first of a long line of largely unsympathetic men in O'Brien's work, disappoints her. With the ebullience and resilience of youth, Caithleen is "almost" certain that she will not sleep again. Yet she does, and in *The Lonely Girl* her education continues. Caithleen's tutor in this novel is the cultivated snob whom she marries, Eugene Gaillard, whose initials, Grace Eckley noted in her study, *Edna*

*O'Brien* (1974), are the same as Ernest Gebler's, O'Brien's husband at the time. At the novel's conclusion, Caithleen and Baba are still seeking romantic relationships as they sail on the *Hibernia* for Liverpool and London.

For the first time, in the third part of their saga, *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Baba assumes the first-person narration, alternating with an omniscient voice distancing O'Brien and the reader from Kate's (as Caithleen now wishes to be known) role. The women are now in their mid-twenties, and there is a splendid, blustery, Celtic quality to the scapegrace Baba's style. The subject is still the female search for love in a healthy relationship with a man. In general it may be said, though, that, with few exceptions, the men whom O'Brien provides for her heroines are very poor risks, being either already married or in some other way unable to give themselves fully to any relationship. It is a doomed search on the evidence in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, as readers observe Kate's failing marriage. Occasionally, as in the story "The Mouth of the Cave," or in the novels *The Love Object* and *The High Road*, O'Brien offers a lesbian connection for her female narrator (not to be confused with the sisterly rapport between Kate and Baba). Still, it remains predominantly in a heterosexual connection that O'Brien's characters' hopes for happiness seem to lie.

In subsequent novels, O'Brien, like her characters, learns and develops her skills. Her protagonists shift back and forth between two poles of experience, two responses to life that are represented by the romantic Kate and the realistic Baba of her earliest works. In *August Is a Wicked Month*, the narrator, Ellen, is a Kate-like figure whose attempts at self-liberation, largely through her sexual activity, bring her great guilt and pain. The balancing continues in *Casualties of Peace*, where Willa and Patsy are both victims of male violence. Patsy's love letters are reminiscent of the earliest of those exchanged between James Joyce and his eventual wife, Nora Barnacle, in their correspondence with each other.

After a *Pagan Place*, in which a young girl is nearly seduced by a priest; in *Zee and Co.*, where Zee is no patsy; and particularly in *Night* (1972), O'Brien's optimistic Baba-type character is back and on the offensive. The new attitude is best shown in *Night's* Mary Hooligan, whose aggressive, coura-

geous, nightlong monologue forms the entire substance of the work. Family, community, and marriage settings are again explored. Mary, like Joyce's character Molly Bloom, or indeed Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath, is indomitable. Such an optimistic focus, however, does not last for O'Brien. With *I Hardly Knew You*, the narrator, Nora, takes readers back to the violent world first encountered in the earliest works. "I am proud," says Nora, "to have killed one of that breed [men] to whom I owe nothing, but cruelty, deceit and the asp's emission," contradicting O'Brien's oft-stated support for "human decency" and kindness among people of whatever sex.

This ambivalence, or offering of choices, continues in *Epilogue*, which seems to promise a return of Baba, and *The High Road*, which revives the old Kate figure in O'Brien's generic, less successful Mediterranean setting. In short, the graph of her fictional split personalities is by no means a straight line. What remains is that O'Brien is a writer from Ireland, whose first thirty years there profoundly influenced her view of the world. The effects are most clearly seen in her depiction of women's relationships.

Moving beyond a world so intensely female, O'Brien's later novels deal more broadly with contemporary Irish life. A second trilogy explores three themes that O'Brien considered vital to Ireland and to herself: political consciousness, sexuality, and the importance of the land itself. In the impressive *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), she employs a viewpoint alternating between an Irish Republican Army fugitive and a doughty widow, confronting "the essential problem of Irish history . . . English colonialism." *Down by the River* (1996) follows a notorious 1992 case in which a young incest victim petitions for an abortion, while *Wild Decembers* (1999) traces the destructive effects of an ancestral feud over the possession of land. Yet, even though *In the Forest* (2002) is modeled on an actual murder case in Ireland, *The Light of Evening* (2006) moves back into familiar territory, probing the uneasy relationship between a daughter and her dying mother who, like O'Brien's own, once traveled to America to work as a domestic.

At her best, O'Brien's ability to re-create settings, particularly in Ireland, and her Joycean zest for language and humor reveal through her characters' poor choices her own support for those who

dream of love achieved through kindness and decency and her greater empathy with the human condition.

## THE COUNTRY GIRLS TRILOGY AND EPILOGUE

**First published:** 1986; includes *The Country Girls*, 1960; *The Lonely Girl*, 1962 (reprinted as *Girl with Green Eyes*, 1964); *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, 1964

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two young girls make their escape from the repressions of western Ireland by going to Dublin and eventually find love and marriage in London.*

With *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*, Edna O'Brien served notice that there was a new voice on the literary scene. From the detailed, evocative first page, with its shock to the senses of the cold linoleum on bare feet (her bedroom slippers are, on her mother's orders, to be saved for visits to uncles and aunts), the preteen Caithleen Brady arises to the smell of frying bacon. She is anxious; her father has not come home after his night out. Shy and sensitive, she tells her first-person story, and she shares the action with her friend and alter ego, the volatile and sometimes malicious Bridget Brennan (Baba). O'Brien quickly establishes what will be recurrent themes in her fiction: the dysfunctional family, with the drunken, brutal father and the martyred, overprotective mother, the search of her protagonist for a personal identity with which she can be happy, against the splendidly realized world of Ireland in the 1940's and 1950's.

It is a world divided into warring camps, male and female, church and laity, and country and town, where Caithleen's aspirations toward romantic love are doomed to failure. Her mother having drowned, Caithleen spends her mid-teen years boarding in a strict convent school, with its lingering smell of boiled cabbage, from which she and Baba contrive eventually to be expelled for writing a "dirty" note. In their late teens, joyously, they come to Dublin, Baba to take a business course, Caithleen to work as a grocer's assistant until she can take the civil service examinations. Loneli-

ness, however, follows them: Baba contracts tuberculosis; Caithleen's man-friend, Mr. Gentleman (Jacques de Maurier), disappoints her. He is the first in a long line of rotters whom O'Brien's heroines encounter, such as the ugly father, Eugene Gaillard, Herod, and Dr. Flagger. In O'Brien's fictions, such unsavory types far outnumber the few good men with decent inclinations, such as Hickey the servant-man, and, in *Casualties of Peace*, the black man, Auro.

*The Lonely Girl* continues the girls' saga; Baba is healthy again. It is, however, largely Caithleen's story, and she is the narrator. The repressive effects of Caithleen's family, her village community, and her convent education are again graphically shown. Caithleen becomes romantically involved with Eugene Gaillard, whose face reminds her of a saint and who is about the same height as her father; he is a cultivated snob and is often cold in bed and in the salon. He begins the further education of his still naïve, prudish "student." At the novel's conclusion, Caithleen, wild and feeling debased "because of some dammed man," is learning and changing. She is, as she says, finding her feet, "and when I'm able to talk I imagine that I won't be alone." Still seeking their connection, she and Baba sail for England and London. They effect their escape (physically, at least) from the constraints of their home environment. This development occurs despite the blandishments of Caithleen's suitor from western Ireland, who declares to her, by way of enticement, "I've a pump in the yard, a bull and a brother a priest. What more could a woman want?" O'Brien's humor and ear for the best of conversational exchanges is a saving grace in an otherwise grim situation.

*Girls in Their Married Bliss* continues the story of the two women in London, where, for the first time, Baba assumes the first-person narration. She alternates with an omniscient voice, distancing both O'Brien and the reader from the role of Kate. (This is a technique that O'Brien will carry even further in *A Pagan Place*, where her heroine is removed and distanced to the second-person pronoun, "you.") The women, now about twenty-five years old, have not left all of their Irishness behind with their arrival in England. There is a splendid,

Celtic rush to Baba's style. Kate, too, has her share of one-liners, word associations, epigrams, and zany metaphors. "Self interest," she observes, "was a common crime."

In these early novels, as she shows her heroines learning and developing, O'Brien is polishing and improving her writing skills. In *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, the topic is still the search for a loving connection, though the plot involves a precisely observed and psychologically sharp account of the disintegration of Kate's marriage to Gaillard. People, in the context of women's roles in society, are shown to rub exquisitely on one another's nerves; in the smaller context of bedroom politics, it is noted, "Men are pure fools." Marriage, at least for the reasons that women enter it in this story, is evidently not a solution to the quest for happiness. Baba makes a calculated move for comfort; Kate sees that her interest in people is generated solely by her own needs. They have both matured to the point where they no longer believe much in romantic plans. In the 1967 Penguin revision, this pessimistic tone is deepened when Kate has herself sterilized. She will not make the same mistake again; she will not have another child who will, in its turn, become a parent.

The 1986 reissue of the complete *Country Girls Trilogy* contains a brief *Epilogue* in the form of a monologue delivered by Baba, in which O'Brien takes care of what might have been regarded previously as a split personality. The ebullient Baba brings readers up to date on past events. The despairing Kate is dead; she drowned, and readers are led to think that she might have committed suicide.

The resolution of the split-heroine narrators in O'Brien's fictions however, is not final. In the weak *The High Road*, readers are thrown back once again into the narration of a "Kate" figure, a London-Irish woman who has gone abroad to try to forget a failed love affair in the company of the jet-setters on the Mediterranean, an environment and group with which O'Brien is, as a whole, less successful than she is with the Ireland and Irish, who particularity and universality she feels and captures much more deftly and convincingly.

## NIGHT

**First published:** 1972

**Type of work:** Novel

*In a solo harangue from her bed in England, Irish Mary Hooligan delivers a spirited, courageous account of her life and loves.*

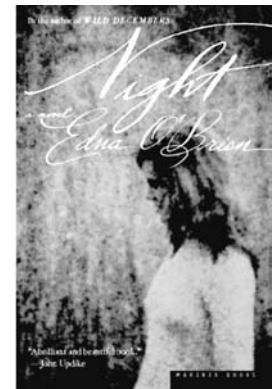
*Night* is O'Brien's most Joycean of novels, very clearly reminiscent of Molly Bloom's concluding monologue in *Ulysses* (1922) in its mature female narrator, who is defiantly, and more optimistically than in James Joyce's novel, taking stock of her life and loves. It is indeed an exuberant tour de force in the zany realization of its narrator and in its stream-of-consciousness form.

Over the course of one winter night, which gives the novel its title, Mary Hooligan, approaching middle age, divorced, with a grown son, reviews her life and loves. In the character of Mary, O'Brien succeeds, for the moment, in fusing the spontaneous, activist Baba and the doomed dreamer Kate. For most of the work, however, it is the former voice that predominates. Mary is aggressively courageous in her determination to endure and to enjoy without whining whatever life sends her way. Her joy is manifest in her exuberant use of the English language: "I've had better times of course—the halcyon days, rings, ringlets, ashes of roses . . . chantilly, high teas, drop scones, serge suits, binding attachments, all that."

She weaves time back and forth from the present as she remembers significant people and places in her life. The novel has no plot development in any traditional sense. Foremost in importance to Mary are her mother, Lil, whose specialty is the spittled-on mother's knot; her alcoholic father, Boss; her son, Tutsie, whom she realizes she loves too much; her former husband, the cold, authoritarian Dr. Flaggler, "one of the original princes of darkness"; and her childhood home in the Roman Catholic barony of Coose, in the west of Ireland, rendered in all of its sensory detail of "occidental damp and murk." The arrival of dawn and a telegram announcing the imminent return of the owners of the house brings Mary's reverie to an end. "Moriarity, here I come," she says, projecting a reunion with her stonemason friend, with whom she feels she has a connection rivaling that of any family knot.

All of O'Brien's perennial themes are evident, bound up in Mary Hooligan. At her best, which is often, Mary is a joy. Iconoclastic and frank, her sense of humor rarely fails to elicit sympathy for her blundering search for an enduring and loving relationship with a decent man. Reflecting on Nick Finney, the crooner back in the west of Ireland with whom she first had sexual intercourse, she says, "It was St. Peter and St. Paul's day, and hence a holy day of obligation." Her words and syntax rush along. At her worst—and that side of her personality is but hinted in her exchanges with her pessimistic friend Madge—she, or any woman, or any person, can become depressed and depressing. "Everyone has a grubby fantasy when you get past the bullshit," Madge says; such a person more often than not is a loser, is willing to settle for the possible. For Mary, "the puny possible has always belonged to others." Hers is the philosophy of excess. In her eclectic religion, free from the constraint of the Irish Catholic guilt of so many of O'Brien's heroines, Mary is relatively at peace with herself, her self-image relatively intact.

O'Brien did not easily achieve this positive realization of personality, nor would it last. Yet for the moment and this enduring work, readers can rejoice that her verdict goes to Mary, and her progenitor Baba, of *The Country Girls Trilogy*. Employing her astonishing, imaginative, dramatic recall of places—particularly Irish places—O'Brien affirms people, their words, and the central importance of genuine self-knowledge and honesty. Such qualities foster hope, which Mary Hooligan only once, very briefly, considers abandoning. She quickly retracts a death wish: "Do I mean it? Apparently not. I am still snooping around, on the lookout for pals . . . cronies of any kind, provided they . . . leave me . . . my winding dirging effluvia." Connection and involvement with others, in Mary's view and in O'Brien's, must be maintained, so that she, and her readers, may carry on.





## A FANATIC HEART

**First published:** 1984

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Drawn largely from her four previously published collections, these stories reveal O'Brien's perennial themes of love and loss, most often narrated by Irishwomen.*

The title of *A Fanatic Heart* is drawn from William Butler Yeats's "Remorse for Intemperate Speech," cited as an epigraph to introduce the volume. Indeed, in these lines are summarized O'Brien's ongoing, dominant themes of Ireland and the women of Ireland in their "maimed" search for loving relationships.

O'Brien continued to write short stories all of her life, and she began publishing in this genre in the early 1960's. "Come into the Drawing Room, Doris" (ironically retitled "Irish Revel" in *The Love Object* and given the same title in *A Fanatic Heart*) first appeared in *The New Yorker* on April 25, 1962. Set in Ireland, this story, very clearly after the manner of James Joyce in "The Dead" in his *Dubliners* (1914), is an indictment of an entire society. Sprinkled with holy water by her overly protective mother, Mary, the heroine, who is observed by the omniscient narrator, sets off from her farm home on her bicycle to the shabby Commercial Hotel in the village and to her first party.

It turns out to be a miserable work-party for her; the married artist with whom Mary had danced two years before, and about whom she had fantasized, is not there. Only eight locals are present for the roast goose and the liquor. Eithne and Doris are there—brash village girls who complement Mary's innate, refined naïveté; they amuse themselves "wandering from one mirror to the next." "Doris" is the name that the drunken, truculent O'Toole three times calls Mary, having spiked her orange drink, wanting her to come out of the room with him. Doris is an unlikely identity for the discreet Mary, but her image, O'Brien indicates, is in trouble anyhow: Her mother had already converted into a dustpan the sketch of her drawn by the artist whom she had romanticized. The party is a failure.

As the final paragraph indicates, "Mary could see her own little house, like a little white box at the end of the world, waiting to receive her." In this

story, the family battle lines are not developed. The omniscient narrator leaves it at that, in a well-crafted tale, rich in the evocative minutiae of daily living and balky bicycles in the west of Ireland in the 1940's. It is a picture rich in its natural descriptions of, for example, the blood-red fuchsia, and rich, too, in its cast of characters, who all have their stories. Some of these characters, such as Hickey, readers have already met (*The Country Girls Trilogy*), and some will appear later. The themes suggested here—overprotective mothers, the unfortunate search for a companion, and an ignorant, brutal society set among natural beauties—will also recur, as O'Brien increasingly and carefully works and reworks her fictions.

O'Brien's pessimism about much of the female condition shows little alleviation in her short-story collection, *A Rose in the Heart*, or in the collection *Returning*, where the external topography in all nine stories is the familiar west of Ireland and the craggy community there. A young girl is present in all of the stories, either as the ostensible narrator or as the subject for more mature reflection on the part of a now-experienced woman. The American novelist Philip Roth isolates this then-and-now tension between the innocence of childhood and the experience of fifty years of living as the spring for these stories' "wounded vigor."



## LANTERN SLIDES

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction, Lantern Slides offers twelve bittersweet glimpses of Irish daily life.*

The pages of *Lantern Slides* are bracketed by two stories that neatly illuminate the book's title. The "lantern" is an old-fashioned magic lantern, an early kind of slide projector that throws images



upon a screen, just as these stories are images of the lives that O'Brien displays. The first, "Oft in the Stilly Night," takes its title from a song by Thomas Moore, the nineteenth century Irish poet whose lyrics mourn a romanticized past. The story is virtually plotless, a series of vignettes featuring the inhabitants of an Irish village: the music teacher who keeps hens in her house, a defrocked young priest who lives with his mother, a woman who believes she has been attacked by a lily. These sad eccentrics flicker on and off the screen.

Paying homage to James Joyce with unmistakable allusions to "The Dead" and *Ulysses*, the title story is the true jewel of this collection as it observes a cross section of Dublin society at an elaborate surprise party for Betty, who has been deserted by her husband. Mr. Conroy, a rather pompous fellow (like Gabriel Conroy of "The Dead"), fleetingly remembers a dead lover as he escorts Miss Lawless, who daydreams of her first seducer. Other guests include the crude Mr. Gogarty (recalling Oliver St. John Gogarty, once Joyce's roommate and the model for Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses*), an argumentative young woman, and the requisite drunkards. These partygoers are updated, seemingly more successful and cosmopolitan than Joyce's, yet they too are emotionally stunted—gossiping, dissatisfied people waiting for something to happen to change their lives. Like Joyce's characters, they are passive, already "dead," but the wicked humor is entirely O'Brien's.

Between these two lie other stories, centered largely on dysfunctional families or unsatisfactory love affairs. One of the best is "A Demon," the tale of a disaster waiting to happen. Young Meg, the narrator, travels with her parents to fetch her ill sister from her boarding school because the nuns there are worried. They are accompanied by the doctor's wife, whom Meg's mother has attempted to befriend without success. Even though the hired car is late, Meg's quarreling parents become jovial and the doctor's wife thaws, as the mother

struggles to please her guest by secretly procuring gin for her. As Meg's sister Nancy, coughing and wrapped in a blanket, is taken home, Meg sees that Nancy's abdomen is swollen and "knew without knowing" that things can only get worse.

In "What a Sky," a daughter returns to Ireland to visit her elderly father and treat him to a little outing, but mutual anger and bitterness thwart their reconciliation. Vicious village gossip in "The Widow" ultimately destroys a good woman, revealing the cruelty of cramped little lives. A sort of resignation exists in these stories, often laced with a strong dose of irony, as if the worst will happen regardless of what anyone does to prevent it. As one character remarks, "You see, everyone is holding on. Just."

## SUMMARY

Historically, Irish women writers have been marginalized, but as a rebellious woman and rebellious writer, Edna O'Brien was one of the early few who managed to succeed. At her best, she demonstrates over a long writing career in many genres the gift she has worked hard to perfect: the capacity to transport her readers into the felt situation of her women—whether they are sensitive, romantic losers, or pragmatic, realistic winners. However they may deal with life, her central characters seem uneasily aware of its deficiencies. With the frequent saving grace of her humor, as well as her flair for the vivid use of the English language for what people, at their best, might say, particularly if they are Irish, O'Brien opens for her readers a sympathetic perspective on the gloomy situation to which her heroines and their society both contribute. Critics have pointed out that her later work achieves "new areas of political and social consciousness," making clear "the human aspects of Irish history" and enlarging her perspective to encompass a broader, universal realm.

*Archibald E. Irwin; updated by Joanne McCarthy*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Critics often comment that Edna O'Brien's work seems more effective when set in Ireland, rather than in other locales with which she is also familiar, such as England or the Mediterranean. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- How does she appeal to the reader's physical senses?
- Find examples of different voices in which O'Brien writes, such as lyrical, ironic, humorous, and even bitter.
- What effects does she create by using a child as her protagonist or narrator?
- Discuss O'Brien's treatment of her male characters as opposed to her female ones. Is there any noticeable shift in her later work?
- Much has been said of O'Brien's typically dysfunctional families, but does she depict any relationships that might be described as functional? Give examples.

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## SEAN O'CASEY

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland  
March 30, 1880

**Died:** Torquay, England  
September 18, 1964

*An internationally acclaimed dramatist, O'Casey was also a member of the pantheon of writers who established an Irish national literature in the early twentieth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Sean O'Casey was born John Casey in Dublin, Ireland, on March 30, 1880, to Michael and Susan Casey. He was the youngest of thirteen children, eight of whom died in infancy. Dublin at that time was among the most slum-infested cities in Europe, and the visual problems from which O'Casey suffered throughout his life began in this poverty-ridden environment. The family belonged to the least-known social class in the Ireland of the day, the Protestant proletariat. This fact led to the young O'Casey's sense of being an outsider. In addition, the early death of his father increased the family's difficulties, while making Susan Casey the dominant influence in the playwright's life. The interaction between economic difficulty and personal strength was to become a fundamental feature of the mature O'Casey's plays.

Despite the limitations of his background and personal circumstances, O'Casey was already a personage of some note in Dublin political circles before his first success as a playwright at the comparatively late age of forty-three. Although obliged to earn his living as a laborer, he involved himself in the various cultural and political activities of the time. The period in question, from 1891 to the establishment of an independent Irish state in 1921, is one that is distinguished not only by the triumph of Irish nationalism but also by the decisive and original influence of literature on the course of national life. This influence had its most important expression in the foundation of the Abbey Theatre Company, in effect Ireland's national theater, in 1904. An organization that appealed more than the Abbey to the young O'Casey was the Gaelic

League. Founded in 1893, this organization was dedicated to the restoration of the Irish language. O'Casey's identification with this aim is preserved by his change of name, first to the Irish Sean O'Cathasaigh, and from that to a hybrid version. Settling finally on the hybrid name may be considered an expression of O'Casey's critical relationship with his times.

For somebody who was almost entirely self-educated, involvement with cultural organizations was instructive and influential. More important than this type of involvement, however, were O'Casey's political commitments. As a member of the working class, he became involved in Dublin labor politics. The rise of labor unions in Ireland was consistent with the general rehabilitation of national identity to which contemporary cultural organizations were dedicated. O'Casey became a prominent member of the most important union, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. His commitment to the cause of labor found its most significant expression when he became secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, a militia formed to defend workers in the aftermath of the bitter strike and lockout of 1913. During the years immediately before the nationalist rebellion of Easter, 1916, O'Casey was a regular contributor to the organ of the labor movement, *The Irish Worker*.

Although he was no longer with the Citizen Army by the time of its participation in the Easter Rebellion, O'Casey wrote a brief history of the organization, *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army*, published in 1919. This work is his first publication of note, but by the time it appeared O'Casey was moving away from journalism and toward writing for the theater. After

a number of rejections from the Abbey, his first play, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (pr. 1923, pb. 1925), was successfully produced there in 1923. There then followed the two other plays upon which O'Casey's reputation is largely based; these, along with *The Shadow of a Gunman*, constitute the most substantial act of witnessing and the most comprehensive artistic representation that the momentous political and social events in Ireland have received. These plays are *Juno and the Paycock* (pr. 1924, pb. 1925), produced in 1924, and *The Plough and the Stars* (pr., pb. 1926), produced in 1926, both Abbey productions.

The latter play irritated nationalist sensitivities in the audience to such an extent that riots plagued its weeklong first run. This reaction tainted O'Casey's reputation as a playwright, a development from which his subsequent career was never entirely free. Although the Abbey management supported O'Casey during *The Plough and the Stars* hostilities, it rejected his next play, *The Silver Tassie* (pb. 1928, pr. 1929), a work that was a challenging dramatic and thematic departure from his initial successes and one that is his most important play apart from them. This rejection, which O'Casey brought to the attention of the press, was instrumental in the playwright's decision to settle permanently in England, which he did in 1928. He continued to write plays, but though some of these—*Red Roses for Me* (pb. 1942, pr. 1943), *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (pr., pb. 1949), and *The Drums of Father Ned* (pr. 1959, pb. 1960)—are striking for their artistic ambition, O'Casey never regained the strength of his early work. His nearest approach to doing so is to be found in his six-volume autobiography, the first volume of which, *I Knock at the Door*, appeared in 1939. Having cut himself off from Dublin, the only source of raw material that was of passionate interest to him, O'Casey identified with a naïve and sentimental communism. This ideology did not provide him with an adequate substitute for what he had left behind.

In 1927, O'Casey married Eileen Carey, an actress who had appeared in English productions of his work. They had three children. O'Casey spent his later years in Torquay, England, where he died on September 18, 1964.

## ANALYSIS

O'Casey's first three great plays set the tone for the rest of his work. In them, he portrays characters

from society's lower levels entangled in conflicts that they cannot control, understand, or accept. Such fundamental conflicts form the basis of his plays.

Two important features make the conflicts in O'Casey's plays urgent and persuasive. One is his selection of character types. O'Casey's characters are generally poorly educated, powerless, and vulnerable. Typically, they are the people whom society considers ignoble and lacking in value. Basing his imaginative concerns on such characters was, at the time O'Casey did it, both artistically daring and culturally provocative. Doing so is an aspect of his contribution both to world drama and to the literature of his own country, whose originality can easily be overlooked. Moreover, while O'Casey was not the first playwright to put such characters on the stage, and not the first Irish playwright to do so, his insightful and vivid delineation of their lives and times gives them a stature that they otherwise have difficulty in attaining.

The second factor that makes the basic, age-old conflicts in O'Casey's work seem more immediate is its clear appeal to twentieth century audiences. The playwright's first three plays were each greeted with varying though undeniable expressions of keen interest. As O'Casey's subsequent career in the theater reveals, however, their appeal is by no means confined to their own time, or even to Irish audiences. The continuing international success of *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, in particular, not only confirms the wide appeal of their plots also reminds their audiences of their own historical experiences. The basic drama of these two works concerns what happens when history comes knocking at the door. Modern audiences are especially well qualified to identify with that concern.

The conflicts that O'Casey dramatizes are those between the individual and history, between private need and public duty, and between principles and compromises. These conflicts are always enacted in a specific social context. As his absence from Ireland grew longer, O'Casey was unable to provide the action of his works with much particularity. Yet even his late plays always carry a socially relevant message. O'Casey's consistent social awareness derives partly from his political orientation. It also reveals a debt to his most important theatrical mentor, George Bernard Shaw.



O'Casey's plays do not resolve the conflicts that they present. Rather than being resolved, problems are seen as forces that are impossible to tame. In these works, death often takes the place of peace. In general, the world of O'Casey's plays is not a particularly rational place. Events are brought about by complicated offstage actions. Typically, the plays open at a moment of difficulty. As the play develops, this moment becomes a state of crisis. The plays end when the full severity of this state has been experienced. The endings of O'Casey's plays usually represent conditions as being worse than they were when the action commenced.

Open and unresolved endings are a dramatically effective means of involving the audience in the fate of the characters. Solving the characters' problems would perhaps give the audience an experience of detachment and coziness. O'Casey's intention is to eliminate the artificial, formal barrier between observed and observer. By so doing, he reduces the gap between the audience's privileged social and cultural position and the downtrodden, neglected, and helpless condition of his characters. O'Casey's theater is democratic in spirit. One of the most powerful impacts that his plays make is through the spectacle of that spirit being frustrated or denied.

The social vision of O'Casey's plays is for the most part grim. The conclusion that Captain Boyle reaches at the end of *Juno and the Paycock* is that "the whole world is in a state o' chassis." The futility of his own career fully supports this point of view. The chaos, or "chassis," to which he refers pervades both the world of the play and the supposedly real, historical world outside the play.

As in many of O'Casey's works, violence and the threat of violence are never far away, and in his most important works, the action revolves around a violent incident and its inescapable repercussions. In O'Casey's view of the world, nobody gets away with anything, or gets away for long. While the depiction of shocking acts of violence is as old as the theater itself, O'Casey's presentation of them is modern in a number of important ways. He reveals violence as an instrument of official policy. Its application is unexpected, irrational, and unreasonable. It is also reckless in its disregard for civilians. By asking his audience to accept the reality of what he represents, O'Casey is also challenging public

awareness to examine the implications or consequences of that reality. The note of shock, struck by the violence of O'Casey's work, is followed immediately by a note of interrogation and criticism, aimed, in effect, to stimulate the audience to reject much of what it has been shown.

Yet for every Captain Boyle, O'Casey also presents a Juno. He reveals a dual perspective, each element of which is equally significant. Strength of individual character offsets the world's difficulties and violence. This basic arrangement of forces may be seen in all the playwright's work. The arrangement draws attention not only to the comprehensive nature of O'Casey's vision. It also alerts the audience to the fact that, like many Irish playwrights of his generation, O'Casey's theater is one of character.

All of his plays are well populated, which, in the case of *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars*, and *The Shadow of a Gunman*, incidentally helps to give a vivid sense of the crowded conditions and absence of privacy typical of tenement life. Despite the fact that virtually all O'Casey's characters come from the same social class, each of them is vividly distinguished from the others, an indication that social status in itself is not enough to stifle vitality. Even when the characters are not particularly admirable, their foibles and failings are treated unsentimentally and with the overall intention of depicting the variety of human nature. O'Casey does his characters the honor of taking them seriously, even when they appear to be caricatures. By doing so, he integrates his characters more plausibly with the serious concerns of his plots. As a result, the playwright also underlines his refusal to dismiss as unworthy of attention characters such as the ones whom he presents.

O'Casey paints his characters in broad strokes. In certain respects, they seem one-dimensional, distinguished by one obvious trait, such as laziness, cowardice, or deviousness. There again, however, he uses a dual approach. He escapes the risk of creating one-dimensional characters by the vivid language that he gives them. O'Casey's characters are dramatically intriguing and appealing as much for what they say as for what they do. O'Casey drew on the speech of the ordinary people among whom he lived. Yet his sense of language is not a matter merely of vocabulary. The violent events that destroy the lives of O'Casey's characters are often the

product of something that has been said and cannot be unsaid. The essential artistic ingredient of O'Casey's theater, its language, is the means by which his characters are ensnared in the drama of their existences, and in the elemental conflicts that those dramas represent.

## THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN

**First produced:** 1923 (first published, 1925)

**Type of work:** Play

*Illusion and reality clash violently and tragically in the Irish War of Independence.*

Although it was not the first play that O'Casey wrote, *The Shadow of a Gunman* was the first play of his produced. It was premiered at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on April 12, 1923, and was an immediate success. The reason for its success is its setting, the Irish War of Independence. This war was fought, largely in guerrilla style, between volunteers of the Irish Republican Army and British forces. The nature of the war is very well reflected in the play's use of abrupt and vicious turns of fortune. These are reflected in the play's three central characters.

Donal Davoren, the poet, Seumas Shields, the opportunist, and Minnie Powell, the heroine, represent not only the twists of fate brought about by the action of the play. They may also be considered as an introduction to O'Casey's people. Most of the men in *The Shadow of a Gunman* are all talk. This quality is evident in O'Casey's decision to make Davoren a naïve, youthful, romantic versifier. Davoren's self-pity and self-involvement make him blind to the realities around him. Poetry, which is often thought of as a diagnosis of life's challenges, is Davoren's means of escape from those challenges. It is not surprising that his poetry is weak and inadequate.

Yet in this portrait of the artistic temperament, O'Casey is not only presenting a character for whom the image and self-deception define his relationship to the world. He is speaking to an audience of contemporaries who knew that many of the leaders of the Easter, 1916, rebellion were poets and dreamers. The violent circumstances of the

play draw on the historical reality that was a direct result of that rebellion. In that sense, also, the gunman's shadow lies behind the activity of some of Irish nationalism's purest idealists.

Shields, on the other hand, is a down-to-earth exploiter of the main chance. He is Davoren's opposite, and the somewhat implausible fact of their sharing a room brings their differences into sharp focus. While Davoren does not fully appreciate the danger that his illusions can cause, Shields is fully alive to the perils that pass for normal life in a community at war. Seen in the larger context of the events that inspired the play, Shields may be seen as the unprincipled hanger-on, willing to do anything to survive. Shields never says that he knows there might be something amiss about the bag that Maguire leaves in his care. Although Shields is apparently Davoren's opposite, the result of both men's behavior is the same. Like Davoren, Shields talks about everything except what needs at all costs to be addressed. The magnitude of these costs is revealed when Minnie Powell pays with her life. She is the victim of Davoren's speech and Shields's silence. She is the one character in the play who attempts to take life as she finds it. As the play indicates, the challenge is to find something for which life is worth living, to emerge from the gunman's shadow. O'Casey's awareness of the severity of this challenge is one of the main reasons he subtitled *The Shadow of a Gunman* a tragedy.

In some respects, *The Shadow of a Gunman* reveals O'Casey as still something of an apprentice playwright. The plot is thin, and the minor characters sometimes seem to be too great a distraction from the main action. At the same time, however, these characters are necessary to enrich a sense of the play's theme. O'Casey compensates for such deficiencies by the richness of his characterizations and by his use of language. He not only equips his characters with colorful vocabularies but also bases much of the play's costly conflict on what people say and what they do not say and on the moral consequences of the appropriate use of language. O'Casey's relentless exposure of self-deception, hypocrisy, and cowardice, however, enables the play to transcend its immediate context to become a potent reflection on the distorting and destructive effect of historical events on ordinary people.

## JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK

**First produced:** 1924 (first published, 1925)

**Type of work:** Play

*The tragedy of the Boyle family unfolds  
against the background of the Irish Civil War.*

The Abbey Theatre production of *Juno and the Paycock* had its premiere less than a year after the successful staging of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, on March 3, 1924. The production consolidated O'Casey's reputation as the leading dramatist to emerge in the immediate aftermath of Irish independence. *Juno and the Paycock*, however, is far superior to the earlier work in terms of its scope, its ambition, and its tragic impact. Yet the play's opening sequence may strike the reader as a continuation of *The Shadow of a Gunman*.

The time is two years later, and the historical context is the Irish Civil War, which followed the attainment of Irish independence in 1921. Johnny Boyle initially opposed Irish independence on the terms agreed to with England. He was unable to maintain this position, however, and this led to his betrayal of Robbie Tancred, his former comrade. The fact that Tancred was also a close neighbor brings home graphically the murderous intimacy of the Civil War. Yet it also sets the stage for the bitter domestic strife that consumes the Boyle family. Public and private experience are reflected in each other, as they are in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, though in a much more elaborate and assured manner.

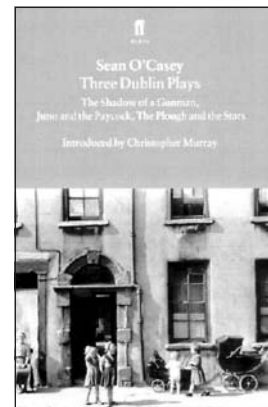
Not only is Johnny's situation a public version of his family's inner conflicts; it is also reflected in what happens to his sister, Mary. At the beginning of the play, she also is presented as a person of principle. Yet she is unable to uphold her beliefs. The consequences of this failure are not as severe as they are in Johnny's case. At the same time, it is her affair with Bentham that brings about the final rift in the family, a rift that the end of the play does not suggest can be healed. When, at the end, Captain Boyle drunkenly intones that the blinds are down, he is referring to the custom in Ireland of lowering the window shades when there is a death in a household. The death in question is that of the Boyle family.

In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, O'Casey's emphasis

is on the destructive force of political circumstances. In contrast, *Juno and the Paycock* concentrates on the economic facts of life. Johnny's contribution to the family's crisis is by no means insignificant, but it does not occupy the center of the work. Instead, the force that destroys the Boyles is money—or rather, money is the means by which the Boyles's vanity and vulnerability are exposed and exploited. The exchanges early in the play between the Captain, Joxer Daly, and Juno are often played as comedy, yet what is being presented is a picture of a grim and hopeless state of economic affairs. Moreover, though Juno regards this economic reality in a light that is directly in contrast with the view of Joxer and the Captain, she also suffers economic oppression. That makes her, as a working woman, socially, as well as biologically, related to Mary. Thus, it is fitting that they should be the ones to continue working on their lives at the end of the play.

Such a perspective is necessary in order to understand why the family falls for Bentham. Everything about this character is fraudulent, from his appearance to his so-called education. That a spirited character such as Mary should fall for such a specimen suggests how desperate she is to improve her lot. She does not believe that this improvement can be made by the man from her own class and background, Jerry Devine. It is also because of its persistent experience of poverty that the family spends the money in a hasty and irresponsible way. The tragedy of *Juno and the Paycock* is based largely on the social and cultural poverty that prevents the Boyles from knowing how to handle the revolution in their private lives.

The only character unaffected by the actions of the play is Joxer. Like Seumas Shields in *The Shadow of a Gunman*, Joxer is interested merely in his own survival. Such an outlook cannot be maintained by the Boyles. To that extent, they show how human they are. To the extent that they are human, however, they are vulnerable to vanity, gullibility, idealism, and a desire for improvement. The bleakness



that results from their vulnerability is what the Captain acknowledges as “chassis,” a world without order or coherence, a world in which hope for tomorrow turns out to be a cruel joke.

## THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS

**First produced:** 1926 (first published, 1926)

**Type of work:** Play

*The human consequences of historical events are depicted in the context of the Irish rebellion of Easter, 1916.*

Set in the turbulence of the rebellion of Easter, 1916, *The Plough and the Stars* is a landmark in O'Casey's career for a number of reasons. First, it is the powerful conclusion of his Troubles Trilogy (the struggle for Irish independence is familiarly known as “the troubles”). It is also a more complex and far-reaching play, both formally and intellectually, than its predecessors. Unlike O'Casey's earlier plays, *The Plough and the Stars* draws on O'Casey's own personal experience as a member and subsequent critic of the Irish Citizen Army. *The Plough and the Stars* also gave the playwright his first taste of theatrical controversy in the hostile reaction of the audience to the first production, which was staged at the Abbey Theatre on February 8, 1926.

The play's title refers to the flag of the Irish Citizen Army. In this way, O'Casey identifies his principal characters in terms of their class and their organization. As a result, the social and economic vulnerability that has typically affected the characters of O'Casey's earlier works is less evident here. Nora Clitheroe not only aspires to respectability, which is what Mary Boyle expected Charles Bentham to provide in *Juno and the Paycock*; she can also afford some of respectability's trappings. This line of thought makes Uncle Peter, who is Nora's uncle, not entirely a figure of fun. Through him, O'Casey introduces the audience to working-class ritual and grandeur, though, in contrast to Jack Clitheroe's uniform, what Uncle Peter's regalia represents is laughably out of date.

These details establish a basis for introducing more important distinctions within the play's community of characters. O'Casey's view of the prole-

tariat is striking in its range. Thus, Bessie Burgess is militantly opposed to the cause of Irish freedom. While Nora can entertain romantic dreams of nest-building, Mollser is dying of consumption virtually alongside her. For all of his ideological speech making about the working man, The Covey lacks the courage of drunken Fluther. The Irish nationalist known as The Figure in the Window has to share his scene with Rosie Redmond, a prostitute. It was this last contrast that caused audiences to riot in protest during the play's first production.

The strong sense of contrast that is provided simply by noting the range of characters in the play leads, in turn, to an appreciation of the play's central conflict. It takes place between the two characters who are least equipped to handle it, Nora and Jack Clitheroe. When the challenge to their marriage comes, each responds in the way that the other is least able to accept. With this human conflict as a focus, *The Plough and the Stars* both retains the immediacy of its historical context and rises above that context to appeal to audiences regardless of their background. The significance of the rift between Jack and Nora is emphasized, as in other O'Casey plays, by suffering. Nora and Jack are the play's only couple. Their being together offers a model of possibility, romance, and, above all, love, which is the opposite of war. The promise that they represent, however, is not realized. On the contrary, those with the most to live for lose the most as the play proceeds.

O'Casey dramatizes this emphasis on loss through the fate of Bessie Burgess. The character who seems least likely to behave in a neighborly way turns out to be the play's clearest example of Christian charity in action. Like Jack and Nora, she also suffers disproportionately for her attempt to make good what has been destroyed. Bessie's fate leaves only the remnants of the community at the mercy of the occupying forces. The contrast between the optimism and vitality of the play's opening and the scene of death and destruction with which it closes could hardly be more graphic. This contrast is brought out with devastating irony in the soldier's closing chorus, particularly as the stage directions indicate that, offstage, the city is burning. In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey meshes the private chaos that befell Captain Boyle and the destructive forces that struck down Minnie Powell to produce his most powerful play.



## MIRROR IN MY HOUSE

**First published:** 1956

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*This six-volume experiment in autobiography is as noteworthy for its style as for its content.*

O'Casey's experiment in autobiography, *Mirror in My House*, consists of six separately published volumes. The project began in 1939 with the appearance of *I Knock at the Door* and continued through *Pictures in the Hallway* (1942), *Drums Under the Windows* (1945), *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* (1949), and *Rose and Crown* (1952), before concluding with *Sunset and Evening Star* (1954). As though to confirm the significance of the author's Irish experiences, volumes 1 through 4 cover the first forty-six years of his life, from his birth to his departure from Ireland. His life in England up to 1953, roughly, is the subject of the two concluding volumes.

Some readers may be critical of *Mirror in My House* because it unequally divides attention between the two basic phases of O'Casey's life. It might be thought more appropriate to reverse the work's emphasis by concentrating less on the formative Dublin years and more on the period when O'Casey achieved international renown as a playwright and political notoriety because of his communist associations. Yet while critical opinion on the value and significance of *Mirror in My House* was divided as the individual volumes appeared, it is generally agreed that the overall project constitutes one of the more important literary autobiographies of the twentieth century.

One of the main difficulties of *Mirror in My House* is its experimental character. O'Casey's original approach to autobiography has two surprising aspects. The first and most important of these is that O'Casey refers to himself in the third person throughout. The effect is challenging and significant. It is one of the means by which O'Casey, who was generally skeptical of artistic innovation, associated himself with the works of some of his most illustrious literary contemporaries, such as William Butler Yeats and James Joyce. The works of those two writers reveal the fluctuations and variety of human personality. O'Casey acknowledges their relevance by the self-consciousness of his autobio-

graphical presence. Over the course of six volumes, however, the justification for this approach is not sufficient to outweigh its tiresomeness.

The second important feature of *Mirror in My House* is its language. O'Casey adapts the verbal style of his characters to his narrative style. The effect is to give an extremely vivid picture of O'Casey's life and times. The accounts of hardship, suffering, and neighborliness in the work's opening volumes are particularly noteworthy. They also reveal the sources of the sympathy and revulsion that animate his plays. In addition, the exaggerations and poetic effects of the language in *Mirror in My House* are an interesting reproduction of how life seems in memory, rather than how life actually was. As is appropriate for a work of autobiography, the overall effect of O'Casey's verbal vitality is to create the history of a personal consciousness rather than a reliable chronicle of the author's life and times. He draws a sharp and culturally important distinction between biography and autobiography. Judged on its own terms, however, *Mirror in My House* remains one of the twentieth century's most elaborate, sustained, and artistically ambitious works of literary autobiography.

Yet despite the depiction of the life of a sickly child in Dublin's Victorian slums and other powerful scenes of poverty and pain, there remains a sense of striving too hard for effect. To some extent, this makes the work resemble those written by O'Casey in exile. Their thematic material is too heightened and lacking in a sense of authentic detail to be persuasive. It is not true to say that *Mirror in My House* lacks substance. Particularly in the later volumes, however, it lacks the texture and the sense of intimacy between author and material that is to be found in the Troubles Trilogy. Those three plays are the works upon which O'Casey's lasting reputation is deservedly based.

### SUMMARY

Sean O'Casey's long and prolific career is noteworthy for a number of reasons. In the first place, like all important writers, he drew the public's attention to ways of life and modes of perception that had previously not been considered subjects for art. In addition, his dynamic and colorful language subtly establishes and exposes the limits of his characters' worlds. The way people suffer when they have reached those limits is the overall theme of



O'Casey's dramatic works. His greatest plays are suffused with an awareness of life's practical considerations, often presented from an economic point of view.

Yet these plays also remain sympathetically alive to his characters' human need to dream. The range of sentiment, action, and reflection evident in his plays, but especially in his first three major productions, is most vividly expressed in his use of language. This verbal skill disguises O'Casey's somewhat mechanical sense of plot and underlines his overwhelming responsiveness to the vagaries of human nature.

George O'Brien

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the following: Few writers have had a more difficult early life and have made more of it in their writing than Sean O'Casey.
- Are O'Casey's ill-educated characters ever eloquent?
- Are O'Casey's female characters heroic or merely long-suffering?
- Assess O'Casey's relationship with the Abbey Theater.
- Examine the way comedy and tragedy intermingle in O'Casey's plays.
- Near the end of his autobiography O'Casey writes, "Though man may be foolish, men are not fools." What does he mean? Is the shift from singular to plural significant?

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## KENZABURŌ ŌE

**Born:** Ōse, Shikoku, Japan  
January 31, 1935

*Basing his writing on significant events in his own life, Ōe explores feelings of betrayal, dislocation, and alienation on both a political and personal level.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Kenzaburō Ōe (oh-ay) was born in 1935 in the village of Ōse on the island of Shikoku, Japan, the smallest and most isolated of the four main islands. The third son of seven children, he was six when Japan entered fully into World War II. On August 6, 1945, when Ōe was ten years old, the United States Army dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. On August 15, Emperor Hirohito for the first time spoke on the radio in a “human voice,” announcing the unconditional surrender of Japan. This event was a defining moment in Ōe’s life. Up until then, he had been taught, like all Japanese schoolchildren, to fear the emperor as a god and to promise to die for him if he were asked. Every day his turn came to be called to the front of the classroom and be asked: “What would you do if the emperor commanded you to die?” Trembling, Ōe would reply, “I would die, Sir. I would cut open my belly and die.” So the truth of the emperor’s divinity, as Ōe had been taught it, was declared a lie. He felt betrayed, and his anger became his motivation as a writer as he witnessed the suffering of many Japanese people who were affected by the war.

In 1954, Ōe entered Tokyo University, where he majored in French literature. While there, he published his first story in the student newspaper and received the May Festival Prize for it. Ōe’s first commercially published story, “Shisha no ogori” (1957; “Lavish the Dead,” 1965), missed the coveted Aku-

tagawa Prize by one vote, but he did win that prize the following year for his acclaimed story “Shiiku” (1958; “The Catch,” 1966). Ōe was a brilliant student of language and philosophy, but he kept to himself. Withdrawn by nature and ashamed of his provincial accent and his stutter, he remained a loner. He lived in a rooming house near the campus, where at night he set about pursuing his writing career in earnest.

Ōe’s first novel, *Memushiri kouchi* (1958; *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*, 1995), reflects his provincial background and was favorably compared with William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954). His next novel, *Warera no jidai* (1959; *our age*), brought the wrath of the critics down on Ōe’s head. Critics deplored the bitter pessimism and honesty of the book, which was published at a time that was being heralded as a bright, new beginning for Japan’s reemergence from the devastation of World War II.

In February, 1960, Ōe married, and later that year he traveled to Beijing, China, as a representative of young Japanese writers. In 1961, he traveled to the Soviet Union and Western Europe. His fascination with European culture has been lifelong. In June, 1963, his first son, Hikari, was born with serious brain damage. Devastated, Ōe put everything else aside and wrote *Kojinteki na taiken* (1964; *A Personal Matter*, 1968), for which he won the Shinchosha Literary Prize. The baby boy, whom he called “Pooh,” drastically altered his world. He describes his anguished relationship with the child in *Warera no kyōki o ikinobiru michi o oshieyo* (1969, 1975; *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness: Four Short Novels*, 1977).

While Hikari was growing up, a strong, intensely private bond developed between father and son. In

a strange and painful way, Ōe and this fragile, deformed child became each other's best friend, embracing each other as if each carried the key to the other's destiny. Shortly after Hikari was born, Ōe ordered two gravestones to be placed side by side in the cemetery in his native village, for he was convinced that when Hikari died, he too would die.

In the summer of 1965, Ōe traveled to the United States for the first time to participate in the Kissinger International Seminar at Harvard University and to deliver a speech about the survivors of Hiroshima. He also visited Hannibal, Missouri, home of Mark Twain, whose *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) was a major influence on Ōe's work. In 1967, Ōe published *Man'en gan'nen no futtoboru* (*The Silent Cry*, 1974) for which he won the Tanizaki Prize. In 1967, he also traveled to Australia, in 1968 to the United States, and in 1970 to Southeast Asia.

In 1973, Ōe published a two-volume novel, *Kōzui wa waga tamashii ni oyobi* (the waters have come in unto my soul), which won the Noma Literary Prize. In 1976, he taught at the Colegio de Mexico as a visiting professor. That same year he published *Pinchi ran'nā chōsho* (*The Pinch Runner Memorandum*, 1994). Ōe published a collection of short stories in 1980 and two others in 1982.

In 1989, the Belgium-based Europelia Arts Festival hosted Japan and named Ōe the recipient of the Europelia Award. Ōe was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1994. In the announcement of his prize, Ōe was described as an author "who with poetic force creates an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today."

## ANALYSIS

American readers can best approach Ōe's works through his fascination with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ōe first read the book when he was fifteen, and he was keenly affected by Huck's pilgrimage down the Mississippi River. It was Huck's moral courage that captured Ōe's imagination. With the fearless determination to turn his back on the constraints of a rule-bound and racist society, *Huckleberry Finn* became the model for Ōe's own heroes, who bravely assume responsibility for carving out their own destinies. As he read more American fiction, Ōe found kindred spirits in such other Americans writers as James Baldwin, J. D. Salinger, Philip

Roth, Saul Bellow, Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, all of whom were rebellious in their own ways. These writers' young heroes possessed the independence and resolution that Ōe's heroes realize they must acquire if they are to survive in a world caught between the collapse of the old order and the creation of the new.

Ōe's early heroes find themselves banished from the security of childhood and thrust into a world that bears no relation to their past. The values that regulated life when they were growing up vanish in the aftermath of the atomic bomb. The postwar world they now face is a gaping hole, a blank, a terrifying nothingness. They know the penalty of surrendering to despair but are all too aware of the difficulty of solving the riddle of survival. They feel they need to cling to their anger and to employ their hostility as a weapon against bewilderment and apathy. Terrorism is a temptation. Ōe's protagonists fantasize about throwing hand grenades into the emperor's limousine or joining the Foreign Legion, but they cannot bring themselves to act on their fantasies. Instead, they dabble in perversions that temporarily relieve the ache but never really fill the void that causes it.

Ōe's writing style has been the subject of much controversy in Japan. On one hand, it is refreshingly experimental, honestly brutal, and challenging; on the other hand, it can be merely undisciplined, trivial, and annoying. Ōe tries hard to avoid the tendency toward vagueness, which is said to be inherent in the Japanese language. He deliberately ignores its natural rhythms and pushes the meanings of words beyond commonly acceptable limits. To many it seems clear that he is in the process of evolving a language and vocabulary all his own, a language that can express the vitality of his imagination. There are critics in Japan who are offended by his breaking with literary tradition. They say that Ōe's prose "reeks of butter," meaning that he has corrupted the purity of Japanese with borrowings from European languages. To them, he offends traditional notions of what constitutes the spirit of Japanese language. This is hardly surprising, however, considering that it has always been Ōe's intention to attack traditional values. Like Huck Finn, his heroes are searching for their identity in a perilous wilderness. It is only fitting, then, that their language is graphic and untamed.

In addition to objecting to his style, critics have

expressed disenchantment with Ōe's subject matter. While his early works were received enthusiastically, critics expressed disappointment with what followed. His stories between 1958 and 1964 are generally about the life of a college student in Tokyo, unable to fit in, aimless, politically ambiguous, morally unrestrained, and with very little hope. Critics and readers alike objected to the sordid world he portrayed, as well as to his use of explicit language. It was clear that he was far ahead of his times.

Depressed by this response but unrepentant, Ōe chose not to tone down his language but to continue to write graphically about troubled young men who wander aimlessly in dangerous territory, rootless and dispossessed, no longer innocent boys but not quite adults. The student unrest of the 1960's had a tremendous influence on Ōe's narratives. Suspicion of the adult world became a major theme in his works.

When *A Personal Matter* appeared in 1968, American reviewers responded enthusiastically to this English translation of *Kojinteki na taiken*. It marked the debut, in English, of a major Japanese writer whose treatment of postwar youth was rendered with uncompromising realism. In 1977, when *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* was published in the United States, Ōe was described as a brilliantly obsessive writer.

Although Ōe is not a joiner, he has deep political convictions. That he feels strongly about his role as a writer in society is apparent both in his essays and his speeches. In his speeches, he has discussed many of the sociopolitical issues, such as nuclear disarmament and Japan's need to take a leading role on the world stage, that many people would rather politely avoid. Critics have objected to the lack of romantic love in his fiction and to the relegating of female characters to secondary roles. Defenders argue that all Ōe's characters are more symbolic than real, and that the men stand for characteristics common to all people. While it is true that he may view the world from a masculine perspective, he does not excuse the often insensitive treatment of female characters by male ones. He uses such behavior to illustrate human failings in the larger sense.

Ultimately, Ōe's works read like diaries of the modern soul, rudderless and adrift, stumbling about in a darkening world.

## A PERSONAL MATTER

**First published:** *Kojinteki na taiken*, 1964  
(English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The father of a deformed child is at first devastated but ultimately redeemed as he becomes devoted to his brain-damaged son.*

*A Personal Matter* was the first of a series of novels whose main character is the young father of a brain-damaged child. Called Bird because of his birdlike appearance, the young father is a frustrated intellectual and unhappy husband who dreams of flying off to Africa. When Bird's wife gives birth to a baby with a hideously misshapen head, Bird sees the baby as a threat to his dream. Convinced that the baby will not live long, Bird arranges with one of the doctors to dilute the baby's milk, but miraculously the baby thrives on this potentially lethal diet. Overwhelmed by the infant's instinctive power to survive, Bird resolves to devote his life to his son regardless of the cost.

The baby is not only the cause of the father's personal anguish but also the symbol of the anguish of humanity faced with calamity. The connection between personal and universal tragedy is made at the moment when Bird, as he is about to murder the baby, hears a news broadcast announcing the Soviet resumption of nuclear testing. In a flash Bird sees the world's destiny mirrored in his own. Whether it is one life or a million lives, the act of murder is equally evil.

The moment he perceives the connection between the baby's fate and the fate of humanity, Bird decides he must take care of the baby. He knows the odds are against him, that he will be creating misery for himself while sustaining a life that means absolutely nothing to the world. Accepting these odds, he says to himself: "It's for my own good. It's so I can stop being a man who's always running away. . . . All I want is to stop being a man who continually runs away from responsibility." Bird does not ask what is wrong with himself or what he had done to deserve this tragedy. Instead he assumes that his fate has a purpose and that he will come to understand that purpose. With his commitment to the baby, the father embarks on a



new life. His happiness will come from nurturing the life, not causing the death, of his son. Near the end of *A Personal Matter*, Bird gradually begins to identify with his son. At this point, he seems to be emerging from something like a trance, during which he has gained the strength to face a world intolerant of any deviation from the norm. His devotion to the baby has already begun to liberate Bird from the self-indulgence he was prey to when he saw a deformed child as merely an obstacle to his own happiness.

Bird is the first of Ōe's heroes to reject the central fantasy of life—"pleasure with responsibility"—because he knows that morally he has no choice. In the end he learns to substitute forbearance for hope.

### "THE CATCH"

**First published:** "Shiiku," 1958 (collected in *The Catch, and Other War Stories*, 1981)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A black American prisoner of war becomes a hero to the children of a remote Japanese village, only to die a tragic death.*

"The Catch," a story in the collection *The Catch, and Other War Stories* (1981), begins with the capture of a black American soldier whose plane has been shot down in a remote part of Japan near the end of World War II. The narrator, the older of two brothers, is given the job of keeping the black soldier (the catch) alive. Gradually the black soldier becomes an accepted part of village life as the narrator, his brother, and their best friend, Harelip, learn to communicate with him without the means of spoken language. When word arrives that the prisoner must be handed over to the army, the narrator tries to warn the black soldier who, in desperation, holds the boy hostage. In the end the black soldier is killed by the boy's angry father, who also seriously wounds his son.

"The Catch" is Ōe's way of expressing the shock he felt when, at the end of the war, he heard the emperor's surrender speech on the radio and knew the emperor was not a god but an ordinary man. It is a story of the passing of the innocent world of the village in the valley and of how the war finally in-

trudes into the lives of two devoted brothers. In the center of this world is the catch, a powerful, black giant of a man who is worshiped by the village children. The story reaches its richest and most moving point when the narrator describes how the black soldier joins the children for a swim in the village pond. It is a celebration of summer and high spirits. Totally unrestrained, and yet totally unspoiled, the swimmers abandon themselves to the ancient ritual of cleansing and rebirth.

To the young narrator, the black soldier becomes a symbol of an uncorrupted world in which people and animals live happily together. The black soldier is even described as "a rare and wonderful domestic animal, an animal of genius." The young narrator instinctively understands the natural rhythms of pastoral life. For a moment there is peace and harmony and joy and passion of the purest intensity. The narrator thinks that it will never end. It does end, and it is the memory of this mystical moment that makes the end all the more devastating.

"The Catch" also explores the bond between the two brothers and the way it helps the older brother survive his ordeal as a hostage. Later, it is his younger brother who is the only person who can comfort him during his convalescence. The younger brother's innocence and caring resolve help heal the narrator, who cannot remain in despair in their presence. When the narrator comes to realize, however, how dependent he has become on his brother, he knows he must put his childhood behind him and enter the adult world.

### AGHWEE THE SKY MONSTER

**First published:** *Sora no kaibutsu aguwē*, 1964 (English translation, 1977)

**Type of work:** Novella

*A young father kills his newborn son, who returns as a phantom baby the size of a kangaroo, wearing a white cotton nightgown.*

The main character of *Aghwee the Sky Monster* is a young composer and father who kills his newborn baby by giving him only sugar water. When the autopsy reveals that the baby had only a benign tu-

mor, the father goes into seclusion and gradually becomes obsessed with the idea that his baby flies down from the sky and visits him. This phantom baby, described as being the size of a kangaroo and dressed in a white cotton nightgown, descends from the sky at odd times and always out of doors.

The narrator of *Aghwee the Sky Monster*, a young man the same age as the composer, is hired as a companion by the composer's father, a banker who is concerned that his son is demented and will do something embarrassing or dangerous. The composer, known only as D, is the only one who can see the phantom. It soon becomes clear that the baby is D's conscience and that it appears from the sky to torment the father with a reminder of his crime. This illusion also suggests that the father wants desperately to communicate with the child who, during its brief life, uttered only one word: "Aghwee!" In the end, the father wants to go beyond communication and actually join the baby. To the narrator, who is starting to believe in the apparition, it seems as if the baby is able to fulfill the father's wishes. As the two men are out walking one day, the baby suddenly appears, and the father runs out into a busy intersection to pursue what to him is a beckoning figure. This is the first time the father has actually followed the baby. The father is struck by a car and killed. At this point the narrator begins to wonder if the baby is an angel of mercy or of vengeance.

The focus in this story, as in many of Ōe's stories, is on the narrator, who begins as a skeptic and ends as a would-be believer. At the point when D runs into traffic in pursuit of Aghwee, the narrator is just about to make the leap of faith. He pulls back, however, fearing he has been misled, and at that moment he is hit in the head by a rock and suffers a serious eye injury. As D is being carried away in the ambulance, the narrator tries to get a straight answer from him, but all he gets is an ambiguous smile. Even so, he is haunted by what D has said about sacrificing his own livelihood for the sake of the child whose life he cut short. It is another example of Ōe's concern about accepting responsibility, especially for those to whom one has given life.

## ROUSE UP, O YOUNG MEN OF THE NEW AGE!

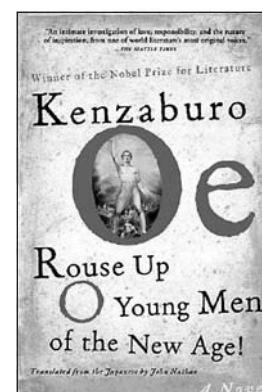
**First published:** *Atarashii hito yo mezameyo*, 1983 (English translation, 2002)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Inspired by the poetry of William Blake, the famous novelist K attempts to redefine himself and to pass his wisdom on to his mentally retarded son Eeyore.*

In *Rouse Up, O Young Men of the New Age!*, the novelist-narrator reflects on many difficult challenges facing him in life. The narrator's career path bears many similarities with that of Ōe, who published other autobiographical novels about distressed fathers of disabled children. This novel recounts the harrowing circumstances of Eeyore's birth (also described in *A Personal Matter*), when the baby was born with two brains, one protruding outside his skull that was surgically removed. The protagonist's single-letter name alludes to *Kokoro* (1914), a novel by Natsume Sōseki, in which the character K impedes the path of the protagonist toward ideal love. In the same way, K's son Eeyore provides a constant stream of funny, disheartening, and shocking statements that cause the narrator to stumble. As K attempts to understand Eeyore's peculiar behavior, he is propelled toward new definitions of life, death, love, and human compassion.

On one of his frequent trips out of Japan, K happens to buy an edition of the *Complete Works of William Blake*, the eighteenth century British poet, visionary, composer, and engraver. K recalls that many years ago he had attempted his own translation of a Blake poem in the midst of a writing project. As the father of a severely handicapped son, K feels his imagination being drawn toward the world of Blake as a means of explaining suffering and life's ironies. Blake's poems become a powerful subtext and running commen-



tary on K's life as an author and parent. Unable to sleep in his Frankfurt hotel room, K reads his volume of Blake poems, seeking comfort from the mind-numbing stress and chaos of being the parent of a mentally challenged son. Eeyore is almost twenty years old and has reached a physically intimidating size. He is a mental infant inhabiting the body of a powerful man. K fears the increasing unpredictability of his son, whose hulking presence preempts the needs of his other two children.

Looking back over his career as a writer, K recalls a promise that he would transcribe all the dominant themes of life in a manner so simple that even his retarded son could understand. Blake felt compelled to redefine the major themes of Christianity and European history. As a dutiful parent, K is obligated to leave instructions and wisdom behind him after his death. K soon realizes that this goal is impossible. Instead, K chronicles the changing directions of his imagination under the powerful influence of Blake. Each chapter of *Rouse Up, O Young Men of the New Age!* takes the title of a Blake poem such as "Let the Inchaind Soul Rise and Look Out" (chapter 6).

K closely monitors Eeyore's schooling, his attempts to work at jobs, and various disastrous accidents, such as the time a student kidnaps Eeyore

and abandons him at a train station in protest of K's liberal politics. Ultimately, Eeyore finds his true calling when he begins to write and perform classical music. The book's culmination takes place when Eeyore rejects his nickname and refuses to join the family at dinner until they call him by his real name, Hikari, which means "light."

## SUMMARY

By giving events in his own life universal significance, Kenzaburō Ōe broadened the scope of the autobiographical novel. In so doing, he defied Japanese literary tradition, which insisted that personal narratives be straightforward and factual. The main reason this approach works for Ōe is that his heroes are self-aware and never self-pitying. They can even be unreliable narrators at times, a device Ōe admires in Western writers. Ōe has two themes: the loss of innocence and the acceptance of responsibility. Ōe's heroes are very modern; they begin by deceiving themselves and trying to make bargains with fate. Eventually they discover that avoiding truth is a kind of madness. Learning how to outgrow this madness becomes, ultimately, their purpose in life and their salvation.

Thomas Whissen; updated by Jonathan L. Thorndike

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Given that Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is Kenzaburō Ōe’s favorite American book, how do the themes of exploration and moral courage appear in his novels?
- In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Ōe quoted the Danish philologist Kristoffer Nyrop: “Those who do not protest against war are accomplices of war.” How do Ōe’s views about Hiroshima, nuclear disarmament, and the peace movement show up in his novels?
- Describe the circumstances of the birth of Ōe’s son, Hikari, and how his relationship with his son figures into two different works. Would Ōe have achieved fame without Hikari’s unusual development and career?
- How does Ōe’s interest in people at the peripheries, marginal groups, and nonnative ethnic people influence the style of his fiction?
- What topics in Ōe’s novels have been most controversial in Japan, and why?
- In what ways do Ōe’s novels celebrate Japanese culture, and how do they undermine or challenge it?

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Archive Photos

## BEN OKRI

**Born:** Minna, Nigeria  
March 15, 1959

*Okri's poetry and fiction examine the political and social crises of contemporary Nigeria, while celebrating the resilience and spiritual strength of its people. His creative use of realism, modernist narrative techniques, African storytelling, postmodernist experiment, and allegory makes Okri one of the most original writers of his generation.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ben Okri (OHK-rih) was born on March 15, 1959, in Minna, central Nigeria, to Grace and Silver Oghekeneshineke Loloje Okri. His father held a management-level position at the Nigerian Railway but wished to pursue a law degree in England. As a result, the Okri family moved to London, where Ben began his education at the John Donne Primary School in Southwark. He returned to Nigeria with his mother shortly before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. Okri's education continued at the Children's Home School in Ibadan, the Mayflower School in Ikenne, and the Urhobo College (secondary school) in Warri, from which he graduated at the age of fourteen.

Okri's early years had a profound impact on his writing. His exposure to both European and African cultures gave the future novelist the breadth and richness of perspective that marks his mature work. The experience of the Nigerian civil war, also known as the Biafran war, introduced Okri to the painful reality of contemporary African politics that was to become one of his central literary preoccupations. During the 1967-1970 conflict, which followed a failed military coup and secession attempt, the Igbo ethnic group became the target of violent retaliation. As a half Igbo, Grace Okri was forced to go through a period of hiding, remembered by her son as a time of uncertainty marked by frequent changes of address and the necessity of flight. This childhood experience of destabiliza-

tion sharpened Okri's awareness of the strong ethnic and political tensions within the newly independent, modern Nigerian state.

After completing his secondary schooling, Okri worked toward a correspondence degree in journalism while holding a job as a clerk in a paint store. During this period, he wrote poetry, fiction, and journalism, occasionally publishing short stories in newspapers and magazines. He also read voraciously, drawing both on his father's extensive library of Western literary classics and on the work of his great contemporaries, including Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Okri's father, having received his London law degree, opened a legal practice serving the disenfranchised populations of Lagos. His clients lived in some of the poorest areas of the city and became the inspiration for Ben Okri's disquieting depictions of urban poverty and deprivation.

In 1978, Okri was granted a government scholarship to attend Essex University, where he studied philosophy and literature. Because of Nigeria's economic difficulties, however, the scholarship was cancelled, and Okri went through a period of homelessness and destitution. In the 1980's, he began working for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service as a broadcaster for the program *Network Africa* and served as poetry editor of *West Africa Magazine*. His short fiction appeared in a number of journals, including the *Paris Review*, *New Statesman*, and *PEN New Fiction*. His first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, was published in 1980, followed shortly by *The Landscapes Within* (1981). In

the next several years, Okri published two highly successful short-story collections: *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986), which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Africa in 1987, as well as the *Paris Review* Aga Khan Prize for Fiction, and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), which was short-listed for the Guardian Fiction Prize. In 1987, Okri became a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Okri's next novel, *The Famished Road* (1991), brought him worldwide literary recognition, receiving, among other honors, the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1991 and the 1993 Chianti Ruffino-Antico Fattore International Literary Prize. Following the success of *The Famished Road*, Okri continued to develop the narrative of its main characters in two more novels: *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). The 1990's were Okri's most prolific decade: Alongside the *Famished Road* trilogy, he published *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), *Birds of Heaven* (1996), and *Dangerous Love* (1996), which received the Italian Premio Palmi award. He also published work in genres other than fiction, including the 1992 poetry collection *An African Elegy* and the 1999 epic poem *Mental Fight*. A selection of Okri's essays, including meditations on art, literature, and politics, as well as tributes to his contemporaries Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, came out in 1997 under the title *A Way of Being Free*.

Okri then published the novels *In Arcadia* (2002) and *Starbook: A Magical Tale of Love and Regeneration* (2007). His work from this period explores, in allegorical form, the questions of spirituality and self-knowledge that have been Okri's lifelong interest. Brought up in a Christian family, Okri witnessed his father's turn to animism in search of a spiritual language better capable of expressing the complex transformations of contemporary African culture. Okri's own search led him toward martial arts, meditation, and Taoism. He calls himself a "universal spiritualist" and has emphasized, in both interviews and writings, the central importance of spirituality to his political and artistic convictions.

In the course of his successful literary career, Okri has been a board member of the Royal National Theatre, a fellow commoner in creative arts at Trinity College, Cambridge, and vice president of English PEN. He was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Westminster in 1997 and the University of Essex in 2002; he received the

Crystal Award from the World Economic Forum in 1995 and the Order of the British Empire in 2001.

## ANALYSIS

Ben Okri belongs to the second generation of modern African novelists. While the work of the preceding generation gravitates toward questions of identity in pre- and postindependent African states, Okri's writing has been criticized for its insufficient involvement in national politics. A close look at Okri's oeuvre, however, reveals a profound interest in political problems considered from a broader philosophical perspective. Okri focuses on the phenomenon of collective consciousness, examining the ways in which it is shaped, destroyed, and nurtured by the forces of history. His work denounces the materialism and shortsightedness of contemporary political elites, while pointing toward a possibility of renewal grounded in Africa's rich imaginative and spiritual heritage. Okri's fiction, poetry, and essays call for a transformation of African consciousness, a task he considers to be as important as the transformation of political structures.

The artistic trajectory of Okri's fiction leads from realism combined with modernist narrative methods, through bold experimentation with oral models of storytelling, to innovative use of allegory. His two earliest novels, *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within*, are firmly rooted in the realist and modernist traditions, offering an unflinching picture of contemporary urban Nigeria seen through the eyes of highly sensitive, introspective protagonists. The first work is a bildungsroman, or novel of education. It traces the journey of Jeffia Okwe, the son of a wealthy businessman, from a state of childhood ignorance to a painful adult knowledge of the corruption and violence that marked his father's career. In this debut novel, Okri evokes the atmosphere of late twentieth century Lagos, offering vivid descriptive details and introducing dialects to indicate his characters' social background.

Similarly set in a modern-day urban milieu, *The Landscapes Within* is a *Künstlerroman*, or the story of artistic maturation. Its artist-protagonist is Omovo, a young painter trying to reconcile his inner life (the "landscapes within") with the external social reality of corruption, censorship, and brutal violence that he observes around him. Through

the creation of canvas “scumscapes,” Omovo expresses the shocking chaos of Nigerian metropolitan life. The novel’s twin epigraphs, taken from James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915, serial; 1916, book) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), point to Okri’s dual allegiance to the African and European narrative traditions.

In his two short-story collections, *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*, Okri continues to explore troubling modern landscapes through a combination of realist and modernist fictional techniques. Scenes of seedy dance halls and dilapidating city blocks alternate with images of wartime violence and everyday deprivation. While the continuities with his previous work are apparent, both collections move beyond the familiar territory mapped by Okri’s early novels. His short fiction has been compared to the narratives of Franz Kafka and Gabriel García Márquez, indicating a new interest in departures from a traditional realist agenda. Dreams and visions begin to play an increasingly important role in the characters’ lives, as seen in the first volume’s title story. “Incidents at the Shrine” recounts a newly fired library worker’s return to his native village, where he reconnects with the hidden power of ancestral spirits through a series of rituals and hallucinatory journeys. Okri’s new artistic direction is even more apparent in the second volume, where dreams, shamanistic visions, and folklore-inspired figures invade the fictional world with increasing frequency.

Okri’s interest in spirituality and traditional oral storytelling finds its full expression in his next novel, *The Famished Road*. Told from the point of view of Azaro, an *abiku*, or spirit-child, who travels between the worlds of the dead and the living, the story explodes conventional notions of novelistic structure, plot, and characterization. Rather than following a linear narrative pattern, the novel takes its readers on interlocking visionary journeys through the equally dangerous realms of spirits and preindependence politics. Okri returns to the same cast of characters in *Songs of Enchantment*, which follows two love quests undertaken by Aza-

ro’s father. Both the political conflict between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor introduced in *The Famished Road* and the spiritual conflicts taking place in the characters’ dreams and visions are intensified in this sequel. In contrast to its widely acclaimed predecessor, however, *Songs of Enchantment* has been criticized for excessive authorial intrusions and direct moralizing. *Infinite Riches* is the last volume of the trilogy, bringing Azaro’s story to the eve of national independence. Dominated by a violent apocalyptic mood, the novel provides a forceful finale to Okri’s epic narrative sequence.

One of the dominant themes of the *abiku* trilogy is transformation: Both the novels’ characters and the narratives themselves undergo a series of metamorphoses, acquiring unexpected forms and characteristics. Similarly, Okri’s fiction continues to evolve in new directions. *Astonishing the Gods* is a modern fable set in an invisible quasi-mythical land. *Birds of Heaven* transcends traditional genre distinctions, offering a “secular sermon” followed by a series of aphorisms. *Dangerous Love* is a creative reworking of Okri’s early novel, *The Landscapes Within*, reintroducing the protagonist Omovo and his search for artistic identity. *In Arcadia* draws on the tradition of allegory, taking a group of dissatisfied characters on a search for the real Arcadia. The subtitle of Okri’s 2007 novel, *Starbook: A Magical Tale of Love and Regeneration*, points to the author’s continued interest in fairy-tale and allegorical conventions, which he combines with social commentary to create a richly symbolic narrative structure.

Okri’s work famously defies attempts at literary classification. Critical categories applied to his writing include Magical Realism, spiritual realism, animistic realism, shamanistic realism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, but the energy and boldness of Okri’s creative imagination render all labels unsatisfactory. Like so many of his characters, Okri’s oeuvre is a metamorphic creature: never fixed, always changing and renewing itself, deeply committed to the task of endless transformation.

## THE FAMISHED ROAD

**First published:** 1991

**Type of work:** Novel

*An abiku boy recounts his childhood experience of political violence, material deprivation, spiritual wealth, and familial love in a preindependence African city.*

Azaro, the narrator-protagonist of Okri's *Famished Road*, is an *abiku*, or spirit-child, destined to undergo a recurring cycle of birth, early death, and rebirth. Azaro betrays his *abiku* destiny by choosing to remain among the living when he sees the sad face of his mother. He belongs both to the world of humans and the world of spirits, a double identity that gives him insight into the hidden nature of people and phenomena. Azaro's double vision is also the vision of the novel: Okri constructs a multi-dimensional universe in which appearances give way to surprising realities and all things have their spiritual, as well as material, aspects.

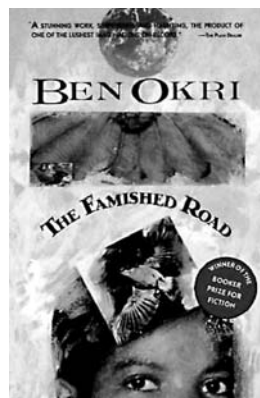
The multidimensionality of *The Famished Road* is apparent in the twin metaphors of its title. The road is one of the novel's central images, recurring on various levels of narrative structure. Sometimes it is a literal road, where characters travel or lose their way. Sometimes it becomes a mythical creature, the Road King, eternally hungry for victims. It represents the spiritual journeys of the protagonists and the meanderings of the story itself. At times it is a river, echoing the powerful fluidity of the narrative, as well as its characters. Okri's concept of hunger is similarly flexible. It is the literal hunger of families struggling to survive, but it also is the greed of the powerful, the deprivation of the powerless, and the spiritual yearning of a suffering people. Food is the central currency in the novel's social and symbolic economy: It is stolen, poisoned, rationed, and withheld, but also shared in moments of familial and communal feasting. Both hunger and the

road function in the novel as versatile metamorphic symbols, carrying the text's structural and philosophical complexity.

Like his symbolism, Okri's characters are never static. Azaro travels back and forth between waking life and the realm of the spirits, which he traverses in visions and hallucinatory journeys. His father fights political enemies but also supernatural opponents who leave him drifting through strange liminal zones between death and life. Azaro's mother encounters beings from realms beyond the human during her long days at the market. Madam Koto, a powerful local businesswoman, is rumored to possess magical abilities and is pregnant with spirit-triplets. Drawing on traditional West African mythology, as well as his own nondenominational mysticism, Okri creates a fictional universe that is, at its core, a universe of the spirit. While his characters are subject to harsh political and socioeconomic realities, their battles for survival and dignity are also fought in the realm of dreams, visions, and the imagination.

The importance of dreams in Okri's fiction goes beyond the private mental life of his subjects. Azaro has the ability to enter and influence the dreams of other characters, as well as understand the unconscious desires of his people. All of the spirit-child's visionary adventures are played out in the context of the human community, reinforcing the ties that bind Azaro to his nuclear family and neighborhood compound. This emphasis on communal connections is a central feature of *The Famished Road*, reflecting Okri's interest in the collective forces that shape contemporary African society. As John Hawley argues, Okri's work is concerned with the question of collective consciousness, seeking to redefine not only the political but also the aesthetic and spiritual boundaries of colonial oppression.

The oppression experienced by Azaro's people has many sources: the legacy of colonialism, political corruption, the greed of landlords, lack of will, and the workings of malignant spiritual powers. The boy's story is set against the background of a vicious partisan struggle between the Party of the Poor and the Party of the Rich, whose campaigns mock the ideals of democracy with their hypocrisy, lies, and brutal coercion. While the two parties clash, the inhabitants of Azaro's compound continue to suffer daily deprivation. *The Famished Road* offers overwhelmingly powerful images of pain, both mental



and physical, perhaps best captured in the figures of the starved, deformed beggars befriended by Azaro's father. Suffering is a constant presence throughout the narrative, constituting, as Okri confirms in an interview with Jane Wilkinson, one of its most important characters.

*The Famished Road* is a tale of violent juxtapositions: the rich and the poor, hunger and excess, brutality and tenderness, spirits and humans. Another contrast developed in Okri's novel is that between a traditional African way of life based on ancient beliefs and values and the encroachment of modernity with its ambiguous blessings. The old order manifests itself in the community's medicinal practices, ritual blessings, and religious observances. The new order enters with the appearance of electricity and motor vehicles, viewed with a mixture of amazement, envy, and deep suspicion. While some characters, notably Madame Koto, capitalize on these improvements, their main effect on the compound's inhabitants is a deepening of social contrasts and the reinforcement of preexisting power structures.

Okri's epic narrative offers an account of life in an African neighborhood on the eve of national independence, mapping its tensions and crises, as

well as its moments of grace: the warmth of family meals, the love of Azaro's parents, the pleasures of storytelling. The novel's structure departs from Western literary conventions, turning to the oral narrative tradition for its nonlinear, recursive, and highly symbolic patterns. This combination of the mythical and the historical gives *The Famished Road* its richness and originality, qualities that inspired worldwide admiration and established the novel's status as a classic of modern Nigerian literature.

## SUMMARY

Over the course of three decades, Ben Okri's work has evolved from realistic depictions of modern Nigerian life to innovative fictional explorations of contemporary spiritual identity. Expanding the boundaries of the novelistic form, Okri's narratives combine European and African storytelling traditions in surprising and original ways. Although his work is grounded in the political and social realities of his times, Okri's main focus is the journey of human consciousness as it negotiates its place in a complex and ever-changing universe.

Magdalena Maczynska

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does the metaphor of the journey function in Ben Okri's writing?
- What is the importance of dreams in Okri's work?
- What are the literal and metaphorical functions of landscape in Okri's fiction?
- How does Okri portray encounters between African and Western cultures?
- What is the symbolic importance of the *abiku* child in Okri's trilogy?
- How does Okri's use of nonlinear narrative structure reinforce the themes of his work?
- What narrative genres and traditions does Okri employ and transform in his novels?

# OMAR KHAYYÁM

**Born:** Naishapur, Persia (now in Iran)

May 18, 1048 (?)

**Died:** Naishapur, Persia (now in Iran)

December 4, 1123 (?)

*Omar Khayyám wrote poetry celebrating the joys of life in spite of the limitations of human existence. His poetry was later collected and published under the title The Rubáiyát.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Little is known for certain about the life of Omar Khayyám (OH-mahr ki-YAHM). His family name means “tent maker” in Persian, so many assume he had some connection with that trade. He was born in the 1040’s in Naishapur, Persia (now in Iran), a thriving city at an oasis on the Silk Road, the caravan route that brought exotic products from China to the Middle East in those days. This was a chaotic period in the history of Persia. A few years before Omar Khayyám was born, his province of Khorassan was invaded from Turkey by the Seljuk conqueror Toghril Beg. The Seljuk Empire quickly expanded to include Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and most of Iran. The contemplative life of a man of science and letters, desired by Omar Khayyám, was not easy to achieve or maintain in this turbulent environment.

Legend associates Omar Khayyám with Hassan ibn Sabbah, the infamous founder of the sect of assassins known as the Hashishin. Omar Khayyám is reported to have studied with Hassan at the feet of the Persian wise man of the time, Imam Mowaffak. Joining them was a third student by the name of Nizām-al-Mulk, who later became a powerful minister in the Seljuk Empire. Because of a schoolboy agreement, both Hassan and Omar Khayyám came to Nizām-al-Mulk later in life to collect on promises he had made to them. As the story goes, Omar Khayyám only wanted a modest pension and the indulgence of the empire to pursue his studies. Hassan ibn Sabbah claimed a prestigious administrative position, but his keen ambition created problems, and he was dismissed. In bitter recrimination, Hassan founded his notorious gang of

drug-crazed assassins, killing Nizām-al-Mulk as one of his first victims.

The revenge of Hassan ibn Sabbah took many years, however, and Omar Khayyám was able to enjoy the patronage of the empire during that time. He wrote a number of books on mathematics and one on music before he turned twenty-five. In 1070, he moved to the ancient, fabled city of Samarkand in what is now Uzbekistan. There, with the support of Abū Tahir, a prominent jurist, he wrote his most famous book on mathematics, *Maqalat fi al-Jabr wa al-Muqabila* (1070; *The Algebra of Omar Khayyám*, 1931). This book developed the first method for classifying cubic equations, using the intersections of parabolas. Omar Khayyám went a long way toward the unification of algebra and geometry, anticipating the work of René Descartes about five hundred years later. This feat is especially impressive because neither named variables nor algebraic notation had been invented at that time, so Omar Khayyám had to imagine the problem and then solve it using ordinary language.

In 1073, he was invited to Esfahan, the capital of the Seljuk Empire, by his old friend Nizām-al-Mulk, who had become Malik-Shāh’s vizier. Omar Khayyám was put in charge of a team of astronomers commissioned to reform the calendar. This work resulted in the adoption of a new era called the Jalali, which began on March 15, 1079. The new system of reckoning time resulted in an error of only one day every five thousand years.

Things became more difficult for Omar Khayyám after the assassination of Nizām-al-Mulk by the Hashishin in 1092. According to some accounts, Malik-Shāh was killed a month later by the same

terrorist group. Whatever the cause of his death, Omar Khayyám fell out of favor when the shah's widow subsequently assumed control of the empire. He was also under pressure from orthodox Muslims, who were suspicious of his free thinking. Finally, in 1118, Malik-Shāh's third son, Sanjar, came to power and moved the capital of the Seljuk Empire to Merv (now Mary, Turkmenistan). Omar Khayyám went there and was able to continue his work in an atmosphere of greater freedom.

Omar Khayyám was not well known as a poet during his lifetime. His livelihood and his reputation came from his accomplishments as a mathematician and astronomer. Presumably, his poetry was an avocation, a hobby that he pursued for relaxation. No reference to poetry by Omar Khayyám can be found until almost fifty years after his death. In an anthology of Khorassan poets published then, four verses of two lines each in Arabic are attributed to Omar Khayyám.

Arabic was the language of learned discourse in that part of the world at that time, the same role played by Latin in the Middle Ages in Europe. Therefore, Omar Khayyám did his scientific writing in Arabic, but his literary fame comes from *The Rubáiyát*, which was written in the Persian language.

No verses attributed to Omar Khayyám in Persian can be found until the early thirteenth century. In fact, some scholars doubt whether any of the Persian poetry attributed to him was actually written by him. Literary fashion of the day tolerated minor poets signing the names of more famous writers to their own work in order to attract a wider readership. Most researchers do accept that the mathematical genius, Omar Khayyám, is also the author of *The Rubáiyát*, but the evidence is debatable.

## ANALYSIS

Since the biographical details of the life of Omar Khayyám are shrouded in legend and uncertainty, textual questions are central to an understanding of his importance as a poet. The collection of his work that led to his international literary fame was not discovered until 1855, and it was included in the Sir W. Ouseley Collection at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. The manuscript is believed to have been compiled around 1460 in Shiraz, Iran. It contains 158 poems

and was brought to light by Professor E. B. Cowell of Cambridge University. Cowell passed it on to Edward FitzGerald to be translated from Persian to English. FitzGerald weeded out poems he considered to be of doubtful authenticity and published seventy-five of those remaining in his first edition of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in 1859.

FitzGerald also had access via Cowell to a manuscript from Calcutta, India, which contains 516 poems. Since 1855, well over one hundred different manuscripts have been discovered containing thousands of poems attributed to Omar Khayyám. Which manuscripts are dated correctly, however, and which poems really came from Omar Khayyám are questions that continue to be debated. Other translations into English and versions of *The Rubáiyát* include those done by Edward Whinfield in 1883, Arthur Talbot in 1908, and Richard Brodie in 2001. FitzGerald himself published three more versions of *The Rubáiyát* before his death in 1883.

All the poetry collected under the presumed authorship of Omar Khayyám, however, does have one thing in common: Each individual poem is written in the form of the *rubá'ī*, which is one of the four main forms of Persian poetry. The *rubá'ī* is believed to have been discovered when a Persian poet overheard a group of boys playing marbles with walnuts. They were using *rubáiyát* (the plural of *rubá'ī*) to describe the action in a kind of play-by-play commentary. From these authentic folk roots, the *rubá'ī* became the only purely Persian verse form, and, according to many, the most perfect form of epigram in all of literature.

Other Persian verse forms are less known in the West. The *qasida* is a long poem with lines all ending in the same sound, usually in praise of some individual or idea. The *masnavi* is composed of rhyming couplets and is usually used for heroic or romantic, narrative verse. The *ghazal* is a shorter poem in monorhyme, usually used for amorous or mystical themes. Omar Khayyám's chosen form, the *rubá'ī*, is a short poem composed of four lines having five accents, each with a rhyme scheme of *aaba*. It is a poetic form well suited to display the keen wit of the poet using it.

In the case of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, this form has also been a challenge to the keen wit of the translator. In addition to selecting *rubáiyát* that are authentically written by Omar Khayyám, the precise rendering of each poem into English, or

any other language, will determine the overall meaning. Therefore, interpretation is even more open to debate in Omar Khayyám's poetry than it is in most.

Perhaps the central issue in understanding the meaning of this work is the extent to which Sufi insight is present in it. Sufism is the part of Islam that addresses itself to the mystical aspects of religion. It emphasizes the individual's internal struggle, or jihad, to develop the true faith within oneself. Sufis believe that God can be experienced directly in this world, in a kind of preview of paradise, through various techniques of breathing, dancing, and meditation. The Persian cultural tradition, in a sense, sees all true poets as Sufis and all true Sufis as poets.

FitzGerald, the first and most famous of Omar Khayyám's translators, was not interested in the Sufi aspect of his poetry. He believed that *The Rubáiyát* was a celebration of the pleasures of this world, pure and simple, an invitation to hedonistic self-indulgence. In his foreword to the third edition, FitzGerald attacks a contemporary French translation of Omar Khayyám for promoting this mystical dimension. Thus began a debate about the spiritual significance of Omar Khayyám's poetry, which has continued for more than 150 years. FitzGerald does concede, however, that considering the longevity and accomplishment of his life, Omar Khayyám obviously wrote more about hedonistic self-indulgence than he practiced it.

## THE RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM

**First published:** 1859

**Type of work:** Poetry

*This famous collection of short poems starts with the break of day, develops a number of vignettes celebrating the joys of drinking wine, and ends with the appearance of the moon.*

What is the purpose of life? Several possible answers are suggested in *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, but all are rejected in favor of the joys of drinking wine.

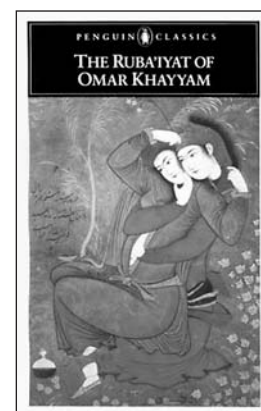
Should people devote their energies in this world to the accumulation of wealth and to attaining status in society? The number one goal of many

people, perhaps most, in life is to make as much money as possible. However, do people who are so obsessed with wealth have any opportunity to really enjoy the fruits of their labors? The slave and the sultan are both invited to the huge party imagined by Omar Khayyám, and both have a great time. After all, the miser and the spendthrift leave this world on the same terms, each without money. According to Omar Khayyám, it is better to have another drink and not worry about status or money.

What about the life of the mind? Omar Khayyám writes that the wise words of all the learned sages are only dim dreams muttered by zombies in a trance, who soon fall back to earth and whose mouths are finally stuffed with dust in the end. He says he was once wed to reason, but he divorced her and took the daughter of the vine for his bride. After challenging the most profound mathematical questions of his day, Omar Khayyám confesses that the deepest understanding he ever attained was at the bottom of a glass of wine. His reformation of the calendar meant nothing compared to the ability to shrink all time to the present, majestic moment through the magic of wine.

All that remains is God, but the consolations of religion are also seemingly disparaged in the imagery of *The Rubáiyát*. Instead of burning, the bush of Moses has trapped him, and he reaches out to readers with a pale and lifeless hand. The psalmist, David, has fallen mute and sings no inspiring songs. Jesus Christ breathes deeply from his earthy tomb, but he does not arise. Many in Omar Khayyám's society pined for the paradise promised by the prophet, Muhammad. These promises are described in *The Rubáiyát* as the rumble of a distant drum, and they are considered far inferior to a glass of wine in the hand, here and now.

There is one very curious omission, however, in this list of life's futile pursuits. The translation of *The Rubáiyát* by FitzGerald makes no mention of the joys of sex or the children who come from sexual activity. The only sexual imagery involves peo-



ple kissing pots of wine, not other people. Perhaps Omar Khayyám presumes that drinking wine will naturally lead to lowering inhibitions and making joyful love. Strict publishing taboos may have discouraged explicit mention of such things. Or perhaps the author, the translator, or both had no interest in sex, love, or children.

Drinking wine as the way to a happy life might be more expected in a Christian context. The first miracle performed by Jesus Christ was turning water into wine when he was attending a wedding party and the guests ran out of wine. In the sacrament of Communion, Christians consume wine symbolically, as the blood of Jesus, to celebrate their faith. Today, this element in Christianity is not emphasized, and even suggesting such a connection might be offensive to some people.

In Islam, however, wine is even more controversial. Many strict Muslims believe that drinking any form of alcohol is completely forbidden by Allah. Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula in a desert climate of extreme heat. Since alcohol dehydrates the body, depleting it of the water that is vital for survival, extreme caution about alcoholic consumption there is very sensible.

Much of Iran does not have such an extreme climate, though, and there is a special ambivalence toward wine in Persian culture. Jamshyd was the founder of the city of Persopolis, the capital of the ancient Persian Empire. He is also celebrated as the inventor of wine. The legend says that his wife fell very seriously ill one time and drank the mysterious, fermented beverage believing she would die and that her misery would come to an end. Instead, she fell into a delightful sleep and was cured. Since the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, how-

ever, this story has been viewed in Iran with increasing suspicion.

The Sufi interpretation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* resolves the contradiction by interpreting the wine in the poems as purely symbolic. It is seen as representing an intense, ecstatic awareness of the power of God, which really has nothing to do with alcohol itself. This kind of personal possession by the holy spirit can be compared to that celebrated every spring at the Christian Pentecost.

#### SUMMARY

*The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* is one of the most popular collections of poetry ever published. Getting a clear idea of the meaning of this famous work of literature, however, is complicated by a number of factors. First, scholars know very little for sure about the life of the writer. Second, scholars disagree about which of the individual poems were actually written by Omar Khayyám. Third, unless the readers can understand the original Persian, they are at the mercy of the translator's inevitable bias when trying to grasp the true meaning of the author. Finally, there is a basic disagreement about whether the extensive mention of wine in the poems should be understood in a literal or symbolic sense.

The things that are criticized in the poems, however, are fairly clear. Human pride in having money, in high social status, in political power, in intellectual accomplishment, or in the appearance of moral perfection is seen as futile and ridiculous considering humankind's basic ignorance of its ultimate fate.

Steven Lehman



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Under what circumstances was *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* first published? What is the significance of these facts?
- What was Omar Khayyám best known for during his lifetime? Describe his accomplishments outside the literary field.
- What is the symbolic importance of wine in many interpretations of *The Rubáiyát*?
- What is Sufism and how might it be relevant to understanding *The Rubáiyát*?
- Who are Hassan ibn Sabbah and Nizām-al-Mulk and what was their relationship to Omar Khayyám?
- What special problems does translation into English, or any other language, pose for understanding *The Rubáiyát*?
- What is the verse form used by Omar Khayyám in *The Rubáiyát*? What is its importance in the history of Persian literature?



Courtesy, Picador Publicity Department,  
London

## MICHAEL ONDAATJE

**Born:** Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)  
September 12, 1943

*Ondaatje has fused his interests in poetry, history, narrative, and filmmaking to create a new fiction with unconventional approaches to chronology, character, and historical accuracy.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Philip Michael Ondaatje (on-DAHT-chee) was born in what is now Sri Lanka on September 12, 1943, the son of Philip Mervyn Ondaatje and Enid Gratiaen Ondaatje. His paternal grandparents had a successful tea plantation, and Ondaatje's memories of his early life there with his large extended family and with his unconventional parents are reflected in his autobiographical work *Running in the Family* (1982). There he records the power that the beauty of Sri Lanka held over him. He evokes his grandparents' lives in the tight-knit community of Europeans and describes his father's losing battle with alcoholism, conveying both the comedy and tragedy of that battle.

Ondaatje's parents separated when he was five. In 1952, his mother brought Ondaatje and his brother and sister to London, where he continued his early education at Dulwich College. Ondaatje, however, was unwilling to prepare for the O-level mathematics exam required by the English educational system. He was interested only in studying English, and at the age of nineteen he immigrated to Canada, where he joined his brother Christopher in Montreal.

Ondaatje entered Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Quebec, and majored in English and history. During that time, he began to read twentieth

century poetry. He also met contemporary Canadian poets. These influences, combined with the enthusiasm fostered by one of his teachers, led Ondaatje to begin writing.

Ondaatje completed his B.A. at the University of Toronto, where his poetry attracted the attention of established writers. His work was included in an anthology of young writers, and he won the university's Epstein Prize for poetry. The connections he made in Toronto led to the publication of his first book of poetry, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967). Ondaatje went on to complete an M.A. at Queen's University in 1967; his thesis was on the poet Edwin Muir.

In 1964, Ondaatje married an artist, Kim Jones. Their two children joined with Jones's four children from a previous marriage to create a busy household. Themes of domestic life are important both in Ondaatje's first book and later in another poetry collection, *Rat Jelly* (1973). In the late 1960's, Ondaatje began working on a sequence of lyrics that told the true story of a Scottish woman who had been shipwrecked off the coast of Queensland, Australia, lived among Aborigines there, and was finally rescued by an escaped convict. Ondaatje's poem *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969) explored several themes and approaches that would appear in his later work, particularly the fictionalizing of a historical event and the use of multiple points of view. In that book, the woman's story is told through her voice as well as those of the convict and the narrator.

Ondaatje's experience with those techniques prepared him for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (1970), a work that combines lyrics with conventional narrative, news stories, and

interviews to tell the story of the American outlaw. The work won the Governor-General's Award for 1970. Ondaatje adapted *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* for radio and stage, an activity that sparked his experiments with filmmaking in the early 1970's.

In 1971, Ondaatje left the University of Western Ontario, where he had taught since 1967, to take a position at Glendon College in Toronto. There he began work on *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), a novel that continued the experimental techniques he had used in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. This novel offers a version of the life of Buddy Bolden, one of the earliest of the New Orleans jazzmen. Ondaatje did extensive research to create a life for Bolden, about whom little factual information exists. In 1976, Ondaatje visited Sri Lanka for the first time since his childhood; the experience resulted in a section of poems in his collection *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1963-1978* (1979) and later inspired his family story, *Running in the Family* (1982).

In 1980, Ondaatje and his wife separated. He later married author Linda Spalding, and their relationship inspired him to write another collection of poetry, *Secular Love* (1984). The couple have coedited *Brick*, a literary journal. In 1987, Ondaatje published *In the Skin of a Lion*, a work he has called his first formal novel. This novel features characters who are involved with the industrial growth of Toronto in the early twentieth century. It also introduces two characters, Caravaggio and Hana, who return in *The English Patient* (1992), the novel for which he won the Man Booker Prize that year. Ondaatje has taught at numerous universities in Canada and the United States.

## ANALYSIS

Some reviewers have noted that Michael Ondaatje's work is thoroughly original. Few writers draw less on conventional ideas about matters such as form, point of view, chronology, or the relationship between historical truth and fiction. Indeed, one writer has pointed out that Ondaatje has found Canada's lack of a ponderous literary tradition to be a liberating force for his work. Certainly he has felt free to combine elements of lyric poetry and the visual arts along with historical fact and the traditional approaches to narrative in order to create a new sort of fiction.

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* offer examples of his technique. Both works involve the lives of real people, and Ondaatje conducted extensive research to uncover biographical details about his protagonists. For the latter work he traveled to Louisiana, interviewed elderly jazz musicians, and read accounts of jazz history and of Storyville, the New Orleans district where jazz was first popularized. He even read the records of the East Louisiana State Hospital, where Buddy Bolden spent his last years. He made similar efforts to unearth information about the life of Billy the Kid.

Details from this research permeate these books, but Ondaatje's interest is never the simple re-creation of a distant historical setting. In fact, as his notes at the end of *Coming Through Slaughter* make clear, he often changes dates and alters details to suit his needs. That he is not interested in historical realism might best be demonstrated by examining the voice he creates for Bolden, an African American musician born about 1876 in the Storyville district. Ondaatje portrays an artist whose tragic career blossomed briefly in the midst of poverty and violence in the late nineteenth century. Much of the story is told by Bolden himself; many other parts are told by his friends and lovers. For their voices, however, Ondaatje never uses African American dialect. Instead, he gives his characters a simple, direct, and often poetic speech which conveys the intensity and violence with which they lived. He uses similar techniques to create a voice for Billy the Kid. Both works contain transcriptions from historical documents, such as news reports and interviews. Ondaatje uses the same technique, though less extensively, in *The English Patient*.

Ondaatje's willingness to interrupt his narrative with other materials (frequently poems) is an indicator that he is not primarily interested in narrative in any conventional, linear sense. He does not describe chains of events that lead inevitably to a climax. Instead, he looks at his characters and events through multiple lenses, presenting them to the reader from different points of view. The story may be told by several of its main characters as well by a narrator. The result is that the reader may be left uncertain about the truth of some events.

Ondaatje is concerned with how artists deal with truth. A powerful image for him is an early photograph from the period when photographers were

first learning what sort of truth they might capture on film. The first page of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, for example, contains a frame followed by a photographer's claim that the picture demonstrates what he is able to accomplish with his new, fast shutter. The frame is empty. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, the historical photographer E. J. Bellocq, whose photographs recorded early Storyville life, becomes a character in the novel. Photographs mislead, however, by showing only one side of the truth; in that way they resemble narration from a single viewpoint, never allowing the viewer to see more than the photographer sees through a lens.

The photographer and the musician are both artists, however, and artists are another theme of interest to Ondaatje. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, the narrator identifies with the tormented artist Bolden, whose madness strikes in the midst of his career. At the novel's end the narrator asks rhetorically what it was that drew him to Bolden's story. The answer lies in his desire to understand Bolden.

Some similar impulse drew Ondaatje to Billy the Kid's life. The ambiguities of the outlaw's bloody career, the juxtaposing of his violence and his tenderness, seem to make him a metaphor for the artist. The artist's task is like the illegal acts of Billy the Kid that society rejects.

Beginning with Ondaatje's first volume of poetry, violence has been an important theme in his work. Violence defines Billy the Kid's career; it surrounds Bolden; even *Running in the Family*, for all its pleasure in recording Ondaatje's unpredictable family, has a dark vein of violence in his father's alcoholism and in the forces of nature. Violence is particularly important in *The English Patient*, with its wartime setting and its title character, who is burned beyond recognition, as well as in *In the Skin of a Lion* and *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

Ondaatje brings to his prose a poet's precise attention to sensory impression. His writing is studied with evocative imagery. He finds the details that communicate the heat of a Sri Lankan afternoon. He creates the visual picture of a shooting victim's neck vein pecked out by a chicken and drawn across the yard in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. In *The English Patient*, he uses sensory details, such as Hana feeding the patient a peeled plum to suggest the strangely erotic relationship between them. Such imagery goes beyond scene

setting; it offers the reader a key to the psychology of the characters. Some critics have suggested that his reliance on minute description gives Ondaatje's work a static quality. Certainly his earlier works show more interest in descriptive moments than in sequenced events. Although linear narrative is never Ondaatje's intention, in *The English Patient* the reader finds both. The narrative line moves steadily (though sometimes its movement is circular rather than forward), all the while illumined by Ondaatje's startling images—the image of the young Indian sapper, for example, lying on his back to look through a rifle's scope at the ceiling paintings of the Sistine Chapel while flares provide the light. Images like these define the power of Ondaatje's fiction.

## THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY THE KID: LEFT HANDED POEMS

**First published:** 1970

**Type of work:** Poetry and prose

*Eyewitness accounts, poems, and legends tell the story of the outlaw William Bonney's bloody career and death.*

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* depicts the last year of the outlaw's life, his twenty-second, when Pat Garrett is made sheriff to clean up New Mexico. Shortly after Billy turns twenty-one, Garrett kills Tom O'Folliard, one of Billy's gang, on Christmas Eve. "Blood a necklace on me all my life," Billy says. Ondaatje tells the story in a series of pictures (sometimes literal pictures) that gradually moves the reader to the final confrontation between Billy and Garrett. Along the way, passages are spoken by various friends and enemies of Billy. Some of the pictures are poems, many in Billy's voice.

The book is not intended to make a linear account of events, nor are the voices intended to evoke any characteristics of period speech or outlaw speech. Instead, Ondaatje wants to look at the mind of a man who became the subject of legend because of his cold-blooded killings. He wants to examine the meaning of that term "outlaw."

Ondaatje offers several scenes that show Billy as part of the ordinary world of human friendships, particularly in his appearances at the Chisum ranch and his friendship with Sallie Chisum, who recalls him as gentle, dapper, even witty. Garrett knew the Chisums, too, and he describes a time when Billy brought Angela D., his fiancé, to the ranch. Billy's shooting of Sallie's sick and aged cat ends that episode. Garrett says that Angela seemed terrified by this action. On a different visit to the Chisums, Billy recalls being told a story about a man who created a pack of spaniels so inbred, deformed, and vicious that the only thing they were fit for was destruction.

Billy also relates the sequence that follows his capture by Garrett. Garrett, earlier described as the "ideal assassin," ties Billy and his men to their horses for the whole of a grueling five-day trek across the desert. Billy is even bareheaded; under the sun, he says "the brain juices begin to swell up." By the end of the trip to jail, the whole episode is packed with nightmarish images of suffering. In a temporary jail, Billy recovers enough to give a lively interview to the *Texas Star*; and shortly after that he escapes, only to be killed by Garrett in the home of a friend.

The prose is interspersed with poems from Billy that demonstrate his distorted perceptions of the world. As a narrator, he cannot be trusted to tell the truth that others see. This misperception is a quality that makes him interesting to Ondaatje. Billy's solitude and his habit of seeing things differently seem to suggest the outlaw quality of the artist, a subject Ondaatje addressed in later work.

## COMING THROUGH SLAUGHTER

**First published:** 1976

**Type of work:** Novel

*Jazzman Buddy Bolden created music in the midst of poverty and violence until he disappeared and later went mad during a performance.*

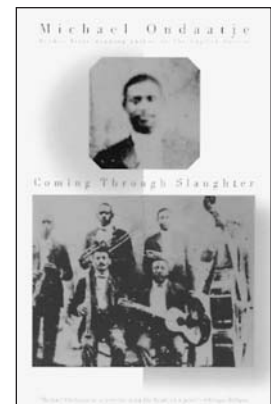
*Coming Through Slaughter* chronicles the life of Buddy Bolden, one of the founders of Dixieland

jazz. Little factual material is known about Bolden, who lived in poverty and played cornet in the Storyville district of New Orleans during the 1890's. From the fragmentary evidence produced by his research, Ondaatje portrays Bolden as a man driven by the demands of his art, as well as by his human attachment to his family and friends. Tension mounts in Bolden until he feels forced to disappear. He reappears briefly and returns to his music, but the stress is too much for him, and he is precipitated into madness. Bolden was born in 1876; in 1907, he was committed to an insane asylum, where he died in 1931.

As in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems*, Ondaatje tells the story through shifting points of view, sometimes speaking as Bolden himself, sometimes through Bolden's friend Webb, the detective who finds Bolden when he disappears. Even E. J. Bellocq, the historical photographer who documented New Orleans life in the late nineteenth century,

has a voice. Once again, Ondaatje explores the isolation of the artist, and once again he is uninterested in the sociological implications of his subject. Bolden's oppressed position as a black musician and his poverty are never explicitly discussed.

The novel's early sections portray Bolden as a lively man, a barber and writer for a local broadside as well as a musician. Despite his heavy drinking, he manages to juggle these jobs successfully. At the same time, he seems to be happy in his marriage and he obviously is solicitous of his children's well-being, walking them to school and telling them jokes. Then he disappears. His old friend Webb, a detective, goes to see him, only to be told by Bolden's wife, Nora, that Bolden has left her, his job, his writing, his music, everything. The central part of the novel is a detective story. To trace his friend, Webb goes first to the photographer Bellocq and manages to get a picture of Bolden from him. The picture, a group shot of Bolden's band, is reproduced on the title page of the novel. Webb finally finds Bolden living with some old friends. He





has been gone for nearly two years; in that time he has not played a note.

His return home is brief. Bolden is changed, erratic, and detached from his old life. A few days later, he joins a parade where his music somehow achieves all he has ever wanted it to be. “God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this.” That is when he goes mad. He is taken by train to the hospital, passing through little towns in northern Louisiana, including Slaughter, but in a larger sense Bolden has been coming through Slaughter all his life.

## IN THE SKIN OF A LION

**First published:** 1987

**Type of work:** Novel

*The story of the role of Canada’s immigrant population in founding Toronto is told thorough the experiences of native-born Patrick Lewis.*

Ondaatje offers two epigraphs for *In the Skin of a Lion*. One is from the ancient epic of *Gilgamesh* and refers to the hero’s sorrowful search for his dead friend. The second is from the novelist John Berger; it asserts that no story is the only story. Both epigraphs apply to the multiple threads of narrative in this novel, which in part tells the story of Patrick Lewis’s journey from backwoods Canada to Toronto; of his love affair with an actress, Clara Dickins; his introduction to radical politics; and his later love affair with Clara’s friend Alice Gull. However, the novel also incorporates historical events from the life of Toronto millionaire Ambrose Small, including his mysterious disappearance. Also woven throughout the work are several building projects—a bridge, viaduct, tunnel, and water purification plant—all of which grew from the labor of Italians, Greeks, Finns, and Macedonians—the whole body of immigrants whose sweat built the city.

When Patrick leaves home for the city, he leaves behind his first connections with immigrants—the loggers for whom his father worked as a dynamiter. With Ondaatje’s typical interest in visual effects, one of the novel’s many powerful images is of Finnish loggers, ice skating by night, lit by torches made of flaming cattails. In the city, Patrick meets actress Clara Dickins, and their love affair flourishes despite her position as Ambrose Small’s mistress. When Ambrose disappears (this historical event dominated the news in the 1920’s), Clara disappears as well, and Patrick becomes one of Canada’s many “searchers” who sought the missing millionaire. As he often does, Ondaatje has blended two historical figures, Small and Clara, with a cast of fictional characters, including Patrick and Clara’s friend, Alice.

Patrick’s real search is for Clara; when he finds her, she insists that she must stay with Small, and Patrick returns to Toronto to work on a huge tunnel under Lake Ontario, part of a water purification plant. He also begins a love affair with Alice, who takes him to some secret meetings of labor organizers. Participants come from every part of Toronto’s immigrant workers’ world, a world in which Patrick gradually becomes comfortable. He also enjoys his life as a foster father to Alice’s daughter Hana, the same Hana who later appears in *The English Patient*, as does the neighborhood thief Caravaggio.

In the novel’s climactic events, Patrick and Caravaggio sabotage the water plant as part of a labor protest. After a term in prison, Patrick returns to the city and to Hana, who has lived with a Russian family after her mother’s death. She and Patrick now form a miniature family that, at the novel’s end, is about to be increased by Clara’s return.

The novel is developed in a series of oblique pictures in which various characters sometimes hold the spotlight. Indeed, sometimes the building projects themselves seem to become central characters. The result is an unusually rich weave of character and event in a relatively short work, one in which every story seems part of other larger stories.

## THE ENGLISH PATIENT

**First published:** 1992

**Type of work:** Novel

*In Italy at the close of World War II, Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip care for a burn patient, who may be a spy.*

*The English Patient* is Ondaatje's most conventional novel, but it retains many characteristics of his earlier works in its shifting viewpoints, its use of historical documents, and its insistence on the ambiguity of truth. It won the Man Booker Prize in 1992.

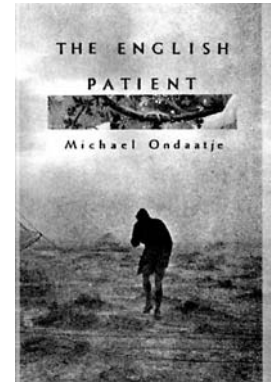
As the novel begins, Hana, a young Canadian nurse, has been left in charge of a badly burned patient who seems to have been shot down while flying over the desert. They are the only inhabitants of the Italian villa that had been used as a hospital until the close of World War II, when staff and patients moved elsewhere. Hana often puzzles over the notebook the patient has made from an old copy of Herodotus's *Historiai Herodotou* (c. 424 B.C.E.; *The History*, 1709). Most of his entries concern the Arabian desert.

Hana is joined in the villa by Caravaggio, a thief whose thumbs have been cut off. He accuses her of being in love with the English patient, but she denies it, saying that she thinks he is a "despairing saint" whom she wants to protect. Soon the three are joined by Kip, a young Indian explosives expert. Kip is a detached and solitary person who sleeps in his tent at the edge of the villa's grounds. After Hana helps him defuse a bomb, they are drawn into a love affair, although Caravaggio is also vying for Hana's attention.

The novel's fourth section concerns the events that happened to an expedition from the London Geographical Society into the Arabian desert in the 1930's. The expedition was searching for a lost oasis, Zerzura. One of the party, Geoffrey Clifton, brought along his bride, Katharine. She and Almásy, the narrator of this section (and apparently the English patient), eventually begin a passionate affair. Caravaggio later identifies Almásy as a Hungarian spy for the Germans in North Africa. Even Caravaggio's extensive inquiry, however, cannot confirm that Almásy is the patient. The patient's story jumps to 1942, when, stranded in the

desert, he remembers that the earlier expedition left an airplane hidden in the desert caves. In the cave, he finds Katharine's mummified body. She had died at her husband's hands, and her husband had then killed himself. Attempting to fly her body out of the desert, Almásy crashes and burns. This, at least, is one version of the story. Parts of it are retold in ways that cast doubt on its truth.

Kip has told Hana how he was selected for special explosives training by the kindness of Lord Suffolk. He spent the early years of the war in England, a country he much admired. When the atomic bomb falls on Hiroshima, he realizes that he is essentially Asian and, after a tension-filled confrontation with the others in which he threatens to shoot the English patient, he leaves. Caravaggio also leaves. The novel's end moves into the future, when the Indian sapper and the nurse are still solitary, ever altered by their affair in the closing days of the war.



## ANIL'S GHOST

**First published:** 2000

**Type of work:** Novel

*Returning from the United States to her native Sri Lanka to investigate what caused the death of some newly discovered skeletons, Anil Tessera, a forensic anthropologist, must confront the effects of political terrorism on her homeland.*

The terrorism which has thrived in Sri Lanka since the early 1980's forms a backdrop for this novel, although the historical factions involved in its ongoing guerrilla war are never explicitly named. Instead, Ondaatje's focus is on themes of family, history, identity, and the effects of violence on these important elements of humanity. The novel is developed with Ondaatje's characteristic indirection, but it is told primarily from Anil's point of view, moving backward and forward

through her own history as she grapples with the problem of collecting evidence which will prove that the skeleton with which she is entrusted met with a recent and violent death.

Anil's life has been privileged. She grew up in a well-to-do Sri Lankan family and studied first in London and then in the United States, where she participated eagerly in the strange community of forensic investigators. Now she has been called by a human rights organization to use her considerable analytical skills in her native country, a nation which feels familiar to her in many ways. She knows its language, food, clothing, and customs; she even has a few acquaintances left in the capital city. However, she is also aware that the country's political turmoil means that no one can be taken at face value; no secret is entirely safe. For that reason she cannot feel quite sure that Sarath, the archaeologist with whom she must work, can be trusted when she realizes that the skeleton they have named "Sailor" was surely murdered in the near past. Nor can she be sure that Sarath is really cooperating as they try to identify the skeleton, the first step in assembling evidence which might locate and convict his killers.

Ondaatje's descriptions of the novel's Sri Lankan settings are particularly vivid, a product perhaps of both the author's feelings about his homeland and his life as a poet, as well as a novelist. Thus the country's greenery and flowers, its pools and ancient temples take on their own weight as characters in the work. Vision is often a powerful theme for Ondaatje; in this novel it is realized in the char-

acter of Ananda, a nearly blind sculptor whom Anil and Sarath hire to reconstruct a bust of Sailor in hopes that someone in the area will recognize him. Anil's part of the novel concludes with her defeat by corrupt government officials, the same ones who probably ordered Sarath's death. In the novel's final images, Ananda has been hired to paint the eyes in a reconstructed statue of Buddha, thus using his art to confound the terrorists who destroyed the original.

## SUMMARY

Michael Ondaatje's artistic interests extend beyond the novel to include poetry and film. The former interest informs his fiction with careful language. Ondaatje is quick to include words for technical elements of viaduct-building or words from Sinhalese, the language of Sri Lanka. His interest in history threads through his work at every level, as he incorporates historical events into his fictional worlds. His concern with film is surely part of his strong consciousness of the look of things—a painting, a sculpture, a rain forest, an old monk—all the vivid pictures which give his work its texture. Finally, Ondaatje's novels are characterized by his indirection, his use of discontinuous time, and his occasional shifts in point of view. He asks for careful attention from his readers, and he rewards that attention with stories whose power lies not only in character and event but in the pulsing world his art creates.

Ann D. Garbett

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What use does Michael Ondaatje make of historical events in his fiction? What is the effect of his occasional "rewriting" of history?
- What does Ondaatje's use of shifting points of view suggest about his understanding of "truth" in his stories? What other elements of his writing suggest this attitude?
- What does Ondaatje gain by abandoning traditional chronological order for the events of his fiction?
- What passages in *Anil's Ghost* reveal Ondaatje's interest in poetry?
- Many of Ondaatje's characters are involved in violence. Does the author condone this? Why does he include it?

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## GEORGE ORWELL

**Born:** Motihari, Bengal, India

June 25, 1903

**Died:** London, England

January 21, 1950

*Widely recognized for both his novels and his essays, Orwell, especially during the last decade of his life, worked "to make political writing into an art."*

### BIOGRAPHY

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, Bengal, India, on June 25, 1903, the son of Richard Walmesley Blair, a minor official in the British government, and Ida Limouzin Blair. In 1904, Orwell's mother took him to England, where the family lived at Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. Orwell had two sisters, one five years older and the other five years younger. According to his own account in his essay "Why I Write," Orwell, until he was eight years old, barely saw his father. Consequently, Orwell developed a habit of solitude that resulted from his developing "disagreeable mannerisms" that made him "unpopular" throughout his schooldays.

Orwell's schooldays were spent at Sunnyslands, an Anglican convent school in Henley. He also spent time as a boarder at St. Cyprian's preparatory school in Eastbourne, Sussex, and as a King's Scholar at Eton. He attended one term at Wellington College in 1917.

Upon completing his formal education, Orwell prepared for the India Office examinations, after which he became assistant superintendent of police in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, a position that he held from 1922 to 1927. Because of his disdain for British imperialism, reflected in such later essays as "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Ele-

phant," Orwell resigned his post, moved to Paris, and gradually began his career as a writer.

His first works, written while he was working as a dishwasher in Paris and later as a hop picker near London, were published under his birth name, Eric Blair. These works include "A Scullion's Diary" (1931), which is an early version of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), and "A Hanging." Perhaps the best overview of Orwell's early writing comes from Orwell himself. In "Why I Write," he recounts his first experiences as a writer. He says that he wrote his first poem, dictated to his mother, at the age of four or five. As Orwell reflects on this poem, he thinks it was probably "a plagiarism of William Blake's 'Tiger, Tiger.'" His first published poem, "Awake Young Men of England," is a patriotic poem written during World War I. It was printed in the local newspaper, the *Henley and South Oxfordshire Standard*, when Orwell was eleven years old. In his early years, Orwell also attempted a few short stories, but he considered the attempts "ghastly failures" and abandoned the genre.

Mostly, Orwell regarded his earliest writing as insignificant except insofar as he was aware that he wanted to be a writer. He begins "Why I Write" with an acknowledgment of that awareness:

From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books.

From 1932 to 1933, Orwell taught at a small private school in Hayes, Middlesex. It was then that he began to write books. In 1933, he published his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, under his pseudonym George Orwell, a name that he used for the rest of his books. In the next seven years, eight of Orwell's books were published: *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), *Coming up for Air* (1939), *Inside the Whale, and Other Essays* (1940), and *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941). His two most highly acclaimed novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), were yet to be written. During these years, prior to 1945, Orwell was gaining the personal and political experience that went into his final works.

In 1936, Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy; in 1944, they adopted a one-month-old baby. In March, 1945, Eileen died during an operation. Also in 1936, Orwell began a series of economic, social, and political experiences that gave him a deeper understanding of his earlier experiences in Burma and in Paris. For three months in 1936, he investigated working-class life and unemployment, a process that undoubtedly gave him insight into the despair that he felt at entering a hospital in Paris in 1929 during a time of personal poverty. He recalled the experience in his essay "How the Poor Die." During the summer of 1936, Orwell attended the Independent Labour Party Summer School. In early 1937, he was part of a detachment on the Aragon front in Spain. Orwell was wounded in the throat and honorably discharged.

Orwell says his experiences in 1936 and 1937 were a turning point:

The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it.

Politics and writing, for Orwell, had become interwoven. He continued both his writing and his political involvement despite his ill health. In 1938, Orwell entered a tuberculosis sanatorium and later went to Morocco for his health. In 1940, back in London, he joined the Local Defence Volunteers

(Home Guard). From 1941 to 1943, Orwell was in charge of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcasts to India and Southeast Asia. In 1945, he was a war correspondent for *The Observer* in Paris and Cologne. In June and July, he covered the first postwar election campaign. In August, 1945, *Animal Farm* was published.

*Animal Farm* is a culmination of Orwell's wide-ranging socioeconomic and political observations. In this novel, Orwell succeeds in making "political writing into an art." *Animal Farm* was followed by *Critical Essays* (1946; published in the United States as *Dickens, Dali, and Others*) and, finally, by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. More than four hundred thousand copies of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sold within the first year of its publication.

During the final years of Orwell's life, he was in and out of tuberculosis sanatoriums and other hospitals. In September, 1949, he was transferred from Cotswold Sanatorium, Cranham, Gloucestershire, to University Hospital in London. There, on October 13, only a few months before his death, he married Sonia Brownell, an editorial assistant with *Horizon*. Orwell died suddenly, on January 21, 1950, of a hemorrhaged lung. He was buried in the churchyard of All Saints, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire.

## ANALYSIS

Orwell's writing of both novels and essays divides fairly distinctly into two parts, the periods prior to, and after, 1936. Orwell himself, in "Why I Write," makes the division, citing as the turning point his participation in the Spanish Civil War and alluding to other events occurring in the same year.

Orwell's writing up to 1936 includes essays recounting his experiences in Burma, India, Paris, and London. These works sharply criticize British imperialism, economic inequity, and class barriers. The works are highly analytical narratives, characterized by flashes of insight into humanity. In "A Hanging," for example, Orwell narrates his participation in the hanging of a man in Burma. As Orwell and the other executioners escort the condemned man to the gallows, the man sidesteps a puddle. At this moment, Orwell says, he realizes the "unspeakable wrongness" of cutting a man's life short when it is in "full tide." Again, in "How the Poor Die," Orwell recounts his experience of admitting himself, while impoverished, to a hospital in Paris. He concludes that the fear of hospitals

that one finds among the poor is warranted. Yet again, in "Shooting an Elephant," Orwell narrates an experience in Lower Burma during which he unnecessarily destroys an elephant because he fears losing face with the natives. He suddenly realizes that he has no choice in his actions, and that one of the effects of imperialism is that it changes him, as well as others like him, into a sort of "hollow, posing dummy." He acknowledges, during this flash of insight, "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East." Similarly, in his books during these early years, Orwell recounts his experiences in Burma, India, Paris, and London. *Down and Out in Paris and London* explores his experiences as a dishwasher in Paris and as a hop picker in England; his novel *Burmese Days* examines his experience as an officer in the Indian Imperial Police from 1922 to 1927.

Orwell's writing after 1936 is consciously focused political commentary, sometimes in works such as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and other times in essays such as "Politics and the English Language." In "Why I Write," Orwell states that his purpose is "to make political writing into an art."

Evident also in Orwell's later writings are other philosophical changes stemming from his sharply focused worldview. These later works often reflect a lack of faith in the human capacity to survive, and they point to the inevitability of oppression. To Orwell, oppression seems inevitable insofar as people are deceived by, and deceive others with, political language—that is, with discourse aimed at deception rather than expression. In *Animal Farm*, for example, the animals reject the totalitarian rule of the cruel humans and try to erect a democratic socialism, only to become victims of new tyrants, the pigs and dogs. The oppressed animals are repeatedly deceived by clever political language and, thereby, allow themselves to be victimized. In the end, it matters little to the oppressed animals whether their oppressors are humans, hogs, or dogs.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* explores these themes even more fully. Critics have called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a satire, a dystopian novel, and a negative utopian novel. These labels all fit. They all capture the grim, cheerless worldview evident in this, Orwell's last novel. The protagonist, Winston Smith, tries to free his mind and body from the rigidly totalitarian

controls of Big Brother, the figurative leader of Oceania. Smith struggles for freedom of thought, freedom to have an accurate picture of history, and freedom to love, only to discover that Big Brother has monitored his every move. Not only is Smith physically destroyed; he is, more horribly, also mentally remade into a creature without a will. His final submission is to acknowledge his love of Big Brother, who, mercifully, shoots Smith in the back of the head. The novel, often compared to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and the Russian Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My* (wr. 1920-1921; pb. 1927, 1952; *We*, 1924), ends with the total defeat of humanity. Orwell depicts not only a society in which power is a means to an end but also one in which power itself is the end. The final image of total oppression, as in *Animal Farm*, is tied to the pernicious effects of political language. Smith himself has, ironically, spent his career rewriting history and erasing from the language those words that permit people to talk about or even think about freedom and humanity. He is left with only enough autonomy to admit to his beloved Julia that he has betrayed her. Orwell carefully interweaves the horror of oppression, the decay of language, and the loss of humanity.

These are themes that he explores in his nonfiction, as well. For example, in "Politics and the English Language," Orwell characterizes modern English prose as a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence." His thesis is that "political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible," that such language is used by people who want "to name things without calling up mental pictures of them." Orwell's conclusion in "Politics and the English Language," however, is not so grim as his conclusions in the final two novels are. The essay is, rather, a call to action to stop the decline of language, to reclaim its clarity.

In both his novels and his essays, Orwell succeeds in interweaving politics and language. More than that, however, Orwell the stylist holds a place in Western literature. He has, in fact, made political writing into an art. Often anthologized are such essays as "A Hanging," "Shooting an Elephant," "Why I Write," and "Politics and the English Language." Orwell is recognized as a careful stylist, conscious of his writing down to the word level, carefully using anthropomorphism in "Shooting an Elephant," painting scenes in Burma vividly

with sensory images and fresh similes, and artfully sustaining dramatic moments. Readers are drawn to his strong narratives, his flashes of insight, and his clear analysis. Finally, his greatest appeal may be his honesty, his absolute candor with himself and others, what he calls his “power of facing unpleasant facts.”

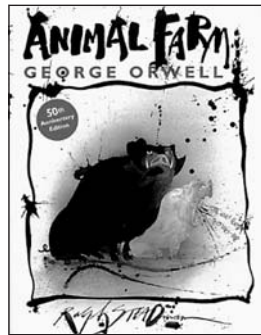
## ANIMAL FARM

**First published:** 1945

**Type of work:** Novel

*In what Orwell calls a “fairy story,” animals overthrow the cruel humans only to fall into their own oppressive social structure.*

George Orwell says of *Animal Farm*, a novel subtitled *A Fairy Story*, that it was the first book in which he tried, with “full consciousness” of what he was doing, “to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.” Set at Manor Farm, run by Mr. and Mrs. Jones, *Animal Farm* begins with a sketch of farm life from the perspective of the animals. Jones, who drinks excessively, and his non-descript wife do little to care for the animals while living off the animals’ labor. It is old Major, the prize Middle White boar, who speaks in his old age of better times when the animals will set their own laws and enjoy the products of their labor. He tells the farm animals, “All the habits of Man are evil,” and he warns them to avoid human vices, such as living in houses, sleeping in beds, wearing clothes, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, touching money, and engaging in trade. It is old Major who leads the farm animals in their first song of solidarity, which they sing so loudly that they wake the Joneses. Jones, hearing the ruckus and assuming that a fox is responsible for it, fires shots into the darkness and disperses the animals. Three nights later, old Major dies peacefully in his sleep. With him dies the selfless belief system needed to enact his vision.



As old Major has predicted, the overthrow of the Joneses and Manor Farm occurs. Jones, increasingly incapacitated by alcohol, neglects the animals and the fields and finally leaves the animals to starve. In their desperation, the starving animals attack Jones and drive him off Manor Farm. Mrs. Jones flees by another way. Though the humans have been overthrown, it is not harmony but a lengthy power struggle that follows.

In this power struggle, essentially between the two young boars Snowball and Napoleon, one sees at first a sort of idealism, especially in Snowball, who speaks of a system that sounds much like Orwell’s particular vision of “democratic Socialism.” The animals begin by renaming Manor Farm as Animal Farm and by putting into print their seven commandments, designed primarily to identify their tenets and to discourage human vices among themselves. At first, the new order almost appears to work: “Nobody stole, nobody grumbled. . . . Nobody shirked—or almost nobody.” In fact, Orwell’s animals have human weaknesses that lead to their destruction. Mollie, one of the horses, is vain and does not want to forfeit ribbons and lumps of sugar. The sheep, hens, and ducks are too dull to learn the seven commandments. Boxer, a horse, believes blindly in the work ethic and the wisdom of Napoleon. Benjamin, a donkey, is cynical, refusing to act or become involved because he believes his actions are irrelevant. He believes “hunger, hardship, and disappointment” are “the unalterable law of life.” In fact, the one action that Benjamin takes, a desperate attempt to prevent Napoleon from sending his friend Boxer to the glue factory, is futile. When he acts, his actions make no difference. Nothing changes.

Gradually, the pigs begin claiming the privileges of an elite ruling class. They eat better than the other animals, they work less, and they claim more political privileges in making major decisions. The outcome of the power struggle between Snowball and Napoleon is that Napoleon and his trained dogs drive Snowball into hiding. Snowball becomes in exile a sort of political scapegoat, a precursor to Emmanuel Goldstein in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Napoleon, now the totalitarian ruler of Animal Farm, rewrites history, convincing the other animals that Snowball was really the cause of all their problems and that he, Napoleon, is the solution to them.



Under Napoleon's rule, Animal Farm declines steadily. As the pigs break the commandments, they rewrite them to conform to the new order. The sheep bleat foolish slogans on Napoleon's behalf. Napoleon's emissary, Squealer, a persuasive political speaker, convinces the increasingly oppressed animals that nothing has changed, that the commandments are as they always were, that history remains as it always was, that they are not doing more work and reaping fewer benefits. Squealer, in his distortion of history and his abuse of language for political purposes, is a precursor of Winston Smith and the other employees in the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who spend their days rewriting history and stripping the English language of its meaning. Ironically, all the animals pour their energy into creating a system that leads to their oppression.

The final decay of Animal Farm results from the pigs' engaging in all the human evils about which old Major had forewarned them. The pigs become psychologically and even physically indistinguishable from the humans. The pigs wear clothing, sleep in beds, drink alcohol, walk on two legs, wage wars, engage in trade, and destroy their own kind. Ultimately, despite old Major's vision, nothing has changed. The pigs and their dogs have become bureaucrats and tyrants: "neither pigs nor dogs produced any food by their own labour."

Though *Animal Farm* is antitotalitarian, it cannot really be called prodemocratic Socialism, except in the sense of a warning, because the animals have no choice; the course of their fate appears inevitable. Even if they had been given a choice, little in the novel indicates that it would have mattered. The final image in the novel is of the oppressed "creatures" outside the house looking through the window at the pigs and men fighting over a card game. They "looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."

## NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

**First published:** 1949

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the year 1984 in the oppressive society of Oceania, the protagonist Winston Smith futilely tries to preserve his humanity.*

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a grim satire directed against totalitarian government, is the story of Winston Smith's futile battle to survive in a system that he has helped to create. The novel is set in 1984 (well into the future when the novel was written) in London, the chief city of Airstrip One, the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania, one of three world powers that are philosophically indistinguishable from, and perpetually at war with, one another.

Smith, thirty-nine, is in marginal health, drinks too much, and lives alone in his comfortless apartment at Victory Mansions, where he is constantly under the eye of a television surveillance system referred to as Big Brother. Smith's wife, Katharine, who lived with him briefly in a loveless marriage—the only kind of marriage permitted by the government—has long since faded from Smith's life, and his day-to-day existence has become meaningless, except insofar as he has memories of a time in his childhood before his mother disappeared. In the midst of this meaningless existence, Smith is approached clandestinely by Julia, a woman who works with him in the Ministry of Truth. She passes him a note that says, "I love you."

The next several months are passed with "secret" meetings between Winston and Julia. From Mr. Charrington, a shopkeeper from whom Winston has bought a diary and an ornamental paperweight, they secure what they believe is a room with privacy from Big Brother's surveillance. During these months together, Winston and Julia begin to hope for a better life. Part of this hope leads them to seek out members of the Brotherhood, an underground resistance movement purportedly led by Emmanuel Goldstein, the official "Enemy of the People." In their search for the Brotherhood, Winston and Julia approach O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, a man who they believe is part of Goldstein's Brotherhood. Smith trusts only Julia, O'Brien, and Mr. Charrington. He feels that he can



trust no one else in a society in which friend betrays friend and child betrays parent. Both he and Julia know and articulate their knowledge that, in resisting the government and Big Brother, they have doomed themselves. Still, they seem to hope, much as the oppressed animals in Orwell's *Animal Farm* embrace hope in a hopeless situation.

Winston and Julia's small hopes are destroyed when they are arrested by the Thought Police, who surround them in their "private" apartment. They are further disillusioned when they learn that Mr. Charrington is a member of the Thought Police and that their every movement during the past months has been monitored. Winston realizes further,

when he is later being tortured at the Ministry of Love, that O'Brien is supervising the torture.

Evident in both the Ministry of Truth, where history is falsified and language is reduced and muddled, and in the Ministry of Love, where political dissidents and others are tortured, is Orwell's preoccupation with the effects of paradoxical political language.

Even the slogans of the Party are paradoxical: "War Is Peace," "Freedom Is Slavery," and "Ignorance Is Strength." The Ministry of Truth, particularly, is concerned with reducing language, moving toward an ideal language called Newspeak. To clarify the purpose of the language purges, Orwell includes an appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," in which he explains that Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, has been devised "to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism." Once Newspeak is fully adopted, "a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable." It is because Winston Smith still knows Oldspeak that he has been able to commit Thought Crime.

In the Ministry of Love, Smith comes to under-

stand how totalitarian control works, but he continually wonders about the reasons for it. Why, for example, should Big Brother care about him? It is O'Brien who provides Smith with the answer: power. Power, as O'Brien explains, is an end in itself. Power will destroy everything in its path. O'Brien concludes that, when all else is gone, power will remain:

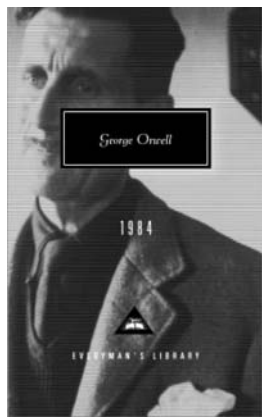
But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.

The purpose, then, of totalitarian government becomes only that of sustaining its feeling of power.

Still, even late in the novel, when O'Brien forces Smith to look into a mirror at his naked, tortured body and his "ruined" face, Smith clings to the idea of his humanity. He says to O'Brien, "I have not betrayed Julia." Yet Smith is stripped of this last tie to his humanity before Orwell's bleak vision is complete.

After a brief time of physical recovery, Smith wakes from a dream, talking in his sleep of his love for Julia. He has retained some part of his will and concludes of Big Brother and the Party: "To die hating them, that was freedom." Whatever he says in his sleep is, of course, being monitored by Big Brother. As a result, Smith faces his ultimate horror, the horror that makes him betray Julia. Physically and mentally ruined, Smith is released from the Ministry of Love to await the death that O'Brien has promised him. Smith retains only enough self-awareness to tell Julia, during their final brief meeting, that he has betrayed her. She, too has betrayed him.

Winston's final defeat is encapsulated in the last words of the novel, seconds after the "long-hoped-for bullet" is "entering his brain." He has become convinced of the insanity of his earlier views; his struggle is finished: "He loved Big Brother."



## “SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT”

**First published:** 1936 (collected in *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays*, 1950)

**Type of work:** Essay

*In a narrative account of shooting an elephant unnecessarily, Orwell argues that the experience showed him the “real nature of imperialism.”*

Based on Orwell’s experience with the Indian Imperial Police (1922-1927), “Shooting an Elephant” is set in Moulmein, in Lower Burma. Orwell, the narrator, has already begun to question the presence of the British in the Far East. He says that, theoretically and secretly, he was “all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British.” Orwell describes himself as “young and ill-educated,” bitterly hating his job.

Orwell’s job, in this instance, is to respond to a report of the death of a local man who was killed by an elephant in musth. Orwell finds the man “lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to the side.” The corpse grins with “an expression of unendurable agony.” At this point, Orwell feels the collective will of the crowd urging him to shoot the elephant, but Orwell, knowing that the elephant is probably no longer dangerous, has no intention of shooting the elephant. He begins to anthropomorphize the elephant, changing the pronouns from “it” to “he,” referring to the elephant’s “preoccupied grandmotherly air,” and concluding that “it would be murder to shoot the elephant.”

Despite Orwell’s aversion to shooting the elephant, he becomes suddenly aware that he will lose face and be humiliated if he does not shoot it. He therefore shoots the elephant. The death itself is sustained in excruciating detail. After three shots, the elephant still does not die. Orwell fires his two remaining shots into the elephant’s heart. He sends someone to get his small rifle, then pours “shot after shot into his heart and down his throat.” Still, the elephant does not die. Orwell, unable to stand the elephant’s suffering and unable to watch and listen to it, goes away. The elephant, like the Burmese people, has become the unwitting victim of the British imperialist’s need to save face. No one is stronger for the experience.

Orwell candidly depicts his unsympathetic actions both in shooting the elephant and in the aftermath, when he is among his fellow British police officers. He is relieved, he admits, that the coolie died, because it gave him a pretext for shooting the elephant. As far as his fellow officers are concerned, he did the right thing. As far as the natives are concerned, he saved face. Yet Orwell concludes, “I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.”

Throughout the essay, Orwell weaves his thesis about the effects of imperialism not only on the oppressed but on the oppressors, as well. He says that “every white man’s life in the East was one long struggle not to be laughed at,” that “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys,” and that the imperialist “becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib.” Orwell’s essay, however, is more than one person’s riveting narrative about the beginning of an awareness. “Shooting an Elephant” captures a universal experience of going against one’s own humanity at the cost of a part of that humanity.

## “POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE”

**First published:** 1946 (collected in *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays*, 1950)

**Type of work:** Essay

*Orwell analyzes the corrupting influence of political language on clear thinking and concludes that “political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible.”*

“Politics and the English Language,” though written in 1946, remains timely for modern students of language. In this essay, Orwell argues that the English language becomes “ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.” To illustrate his point, Orwell cites writing from two professors, a Communist pamphlet, an essay on psychology in *Politics*, and a letter in the *Tribune*. All these examples, Orwell argues, have two common faults: staleness of

imagery and lack of precision. In his follow-up analysis, he discusses general characteristics of bad writing, including pretentious diction and meaningless words. His purpose in the analysis is to show “the special connection between politics and the debasement of language.”

Orwell maintains that, in his time, political speech and writing are “largely the defence of the indefensible.” That is, the actions of ruthless politicians can be defended, but only by brutal arguments that “do not square with the professed aims of political parties.” He gives examples of the British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, and the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan. In order to talk about such atrocities, Orwell contends, one has to use political language that consists “largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” Orwell translates for his readers the real meanings of such terms as “pacification,” “transfer of population,” “rectification of frontiers,” and “elimination of unreliable elements.” He concludes: “Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

This premise is one that Orwell explores more fully in his novels *Animal Farm*, particularly in the pigs Napoleon and Squealer, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Big Brother, Newspeak, and the Ministry of Truth. Orwell’s conclusion in “Politics and the English Language” is less bleak than are his conclusions in the two novels. In the novels, the damage to language is irreversible. In the essay, Orwell calls

his readers to action. He asserts that bad habits spread by imitation “can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble.” He concludes that “one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase . . . into the dustbin where it belongs.”

Orwell’s 1946 essay is still calling readers to action. In 1974, for example, the National Council of Teachers of English began handing out its annual Doublespeak Awards for misuses of language with potential to cause harm or obscure truth. The awards, named in honor of Orwell, are meant to identify deceptive uses of language and to jeer them out of existence. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there is no shortage of nominees.

## SUMMARY

George Orwell’s novels and essays have contributed to current literary and political writing an awareness of the connections among language and thinking and political actions. Particularly in his later works, Orwell focused his purpose on writing, merging art with politics, attacking the effects of the power motives of totalitarian governments in one’s humanity, warning his readers of the dangers inherent in “groupthink” and “doublespeak,” and grimly satirizing the human traits that have let oppressed peoples become the victims of those intoxicated by power. Though Orwell’s writing career, by twentieth century standards, was fairly short, several of his essays and novels hold for him a place in Western literature and in political thought.

Carol Franks

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- How does George Orwell, in such works as "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant," make vivid the evils of imperialism?
- What does *Animal Farm* owe to the medieval bestiary?
- What is a dystopian novel? Is a dystopia an intended utopia that has somehow gone wrong?
- Looking back at two of the most famous twentieth century works of the type, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which seems like a more prophetic book?
- Is Orwell correct about the extent of political influence on the English language, or is the "indefensible" use of the English language primarily a result of other influences, such as advertising?



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## JOHN OSBORNE

**Born:** London, England  
December 12, 1929

**Died:** Shropshire, England  
December 24, 1994

*Osborne's powerful domestic drama, *Look Back in Anger*, established the character of the "angry young man" in modern British theater. Subsequent plays developed and enlarged that character and its literary context.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John James Osborne was born in Fulham, a grimy district of south London, England, on December 12, 1929, the only son of Thomas Godfrey Osborne, who worked as a copywriter for an advertising agency, and Nellie Beatrice Osborne, who worked as a barmaid. Osborne's father died when Osborne was ten, and at least partially sentimental portraits of fathers and grandfathers figure prominently in Osborne's plays, as do unflattering portraits of mother figures, as Osborne's relationship with his mother was not very satisfactory. His unhappy middle-class childhood and adolescence are vividly portrayed in the first volume of his autobiography, *A Better Class of Person: An Autobiography, 1929-1956* (1981). The second and last volume of his autobiography, *Almost a Gentleman* (1991), covers an additional decade.

At fifteen, Osborne was expelled from St. Michael's, an undistinguished boarding school in Devon, for hitting a teacher. Three years later, while working as a journalist for trade magazines, Osborne drifted into his theater career, which began when he took a job as an assistant stage manager, actors' understudy, and tutor of juvenile troop members. After working seven years touring English provincial theaters and writing plays in his spare time, Osborne became an overnight sensa-

tion at the age of twenty-six when his third play, *Look Back in Anger* (pr. 1956, pb. 1957), was accepted by the English Stage Company and performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, under the artistic direction of George Devine.

*Look Back in Anger* opened on May 8, 1956, and in a review in *The Observer* on Sunday, May 13, the legendary theater critic Kenneth Tynan hailed Osborne's work as "the best young play of its decade," adding, "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*." A Royal Court Theatre publicist described Osborne as an "angry young man," and that phrase came to designate a whole generation of British male writers, both playwrights and novelists, who came to be known as "the angry young men." Their work was typified by their working-class backgrounds, their irreverence for the traditional British establishment, and an intolerance for anything "highbrow" or "phoney." In the theater, Osborne's ruthless honesty with language and subject matter inspired a generation of vigorous British playwrights, including Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard. *Look Back in Anger* ran for a year and a half, was transferred to New York, and for years enjoyed enormous success in various touring productions around the world.

Osborne's next two plays, *The Entertainer* (pr., pb. 1957) and *Epitaph for George Dillon* (pr., pb. 1958), were also big hits. In 1959, however, *The World of Paul Slickey* was a critical and commercial disaster. Many more plays, television scripts, and film scripts followed in the 1960's and 1970's, but



the general impression created by Osborne's work was that he was not fulfilling the promise he had exhibited in *Look Back in Anger*. Highlights in this relatively disappointing period included *Luther* (pr., pb. 1961), a dramatization of the life of Martin Luther; *Inadmissible Evidence* (pr. 1964, pb. 1965), in which a middle-aged lawyer tries to justify his disappointing life; *The Hotel in Amsterdam* (pr., pb. 1968), in which three couples meet in a first-class hotel and define their lives by their hatred of a tyrannical film producer; and the first volume of his autobiography, *A Better Class of Person*.

In 1958, Osborne joined with Tony Richardson, the original director of *Look Back in Anger*, to form Woodfall Films. His greatest popular success in screenwriting was winning an Academy Award for writing *Tom Jones* (1963), his adaptation of the 1749 novel by Henry Fielding. Among his many other projects, he successfully adapted three of his own plays for film: *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *The Entertainer* (1960), and *Inadmissible Evidence* (1968). Osborne also received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (1957, 1963) and the Tony Award (1963). In 1991, Osborne published the second volume of his autobiography, and in 1993 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writers' Guild of Great Britain.

In 1958, Osborne had bought a twenty-three-acre estate in Kent that subsequently served as a refuge for his reclusive way of life. In 1978, he married his fifth wife, Helen Dawson, a drama critic. Osborne died in Shropshire, England, on December 24, 1994, of heart failure.

## ANALYSIS

It is traditional to say that Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* represents a turning point in the history of British theater, ending the era of the 1930's and 1940's and ushering in the new, more contemporary style of the 1950's and 1960's. In British theater, the 1930's, 1940's, and early 1950's had been dominated by the esoteric verse dramas of T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry, the aristocratic drawing-room comedies of Noël Coward, the commercial successes of Terence Rattigan, and the revivals of time-tested classics. In *Look Back in Anger* and subsequent plays, Osborne offered different fare.

His subject was not genteel, upper-class life but the life of contemporary, rough, and often unsophisticated working-class people. He was critical of

British culture both past and present. Detesting the British elitism that emphasized class distinctions, Osborne questioned the conventional pride in England's Edwardian past and was equally critical of England's post-World War II welfare state, scoffing at anything "highbrow" or "phoney." His style was robust, even coarse, rather than elevated or dainty. These qualities of political attitude and style were the features that brought Osborne so much attention when he became a London phenomenon in the late 1950's. Since then, the more enduring feature of Osborne's drama has become the Osborne hero, modeled after the original "angry young man," Jimmy Porter in *Long Back in Anger*; Archie Rice in *The Entertainer*; George Dillon in *Epitaph for George Dillon*; Bill Maitland in *Inadmissible Evidence*; Pamela in *Time Present* (pr., pb. 1968), and perhaps even Martin Luther in *Luther* are all, more or less, heroes in the Jimmy Porter mold.

Like Jimmy, these heroes are often outspoken and irreverent in their criticism of contemporary British society, frequently angry, alienated, bitter, caustic, insensitive, and critical of people and things around them. Sometimes these characters brutalize those closest to them as they strike out from their personal pain. They are often failures, but not simply because they suffer from class distinctions. Mainly, they suffer and fail because they experience the past as a terrible burden. They often look back at their lives and find them very unsatisfactory. These are not genteel characters one can analyze from a distance with a detached attitude. These characters demand an emotional, complex, and often sympathetic response. In an oft-quoted statement, Osborne had said, "I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling. They can think afterwards." The richness and complexity of Osborne's art in these characterizations is that in spite of their many unpleasant characteristics, these Osborne heroes are often still compelling. They are what American critic Harold Ferrar has called "the bastard we can't help caring about."

Yet the quality and prevalence in Osborne's drama of this kind of character also constitute a literary deficiency. At his best, Osborne creates an unforgettable portrait that may live forever in theatrical history; such a portrait was achieved in Jimmy Porter. This sort of angry hero, however, often becomes so dominant in Osborne's plays that other characters seem one-dimensional and card-

boardlike in comparison. This charge is sometimes even made about *Look Back in Anger*, in which Jimmy's friend, Cliff, is seen as a cartoon sidekick, and Helena, a friend of Jimmy's wife, Alison, is seen as an unconvincing contrivance of plot when she suddenly accepts the abusive Jimmy as a lover at the end of act 2 and then gives him up just as suddenly in the last scene when Alison returns. Furthermore, the heroes who succeeded Jimmy Porter generally pale in comparison with their startling original counterpart, and Osborne seemed to be repeating himself without adding depth or dimension.

Some of Osborne's most interesting, if flawed, developments as a dramatist came after his great early successes. Though his later experiments were not tremendously successful, Osborne did move on to more technically innovative work. In *The World of Paul Slickey*, for example, Osborne made a clumsy attempt at the musical form. In his teleplay *A Subject of Scandal and Concern* (1960), Osborne attempted to employ historical materials for dramatic purposes, even though he did not achieve that harmonious blend of past and present that makes such materials come alive onstage.

In *Luther*, Osborne achieved more artistic success in shifting from a contemporary to a historical hero, though Osborne focused more on the unsophisticated and troubled personal psychology of Martin Luther than he did on the historical context of the Protestant Reformation. To many commentators, this play's focus on Luther's obsession with constipation seems distracting and not artistically effective, a retreat from the potential significance of such a monumental historical subject. Simon Trussler (*The Plays of John Osborne*, 1969) found a way to bring the two subjects together: "the evacuation of the bowels and the purification of the church are thus conceived as parallel processes in the life of the eponymous hero." More to the point, perhaps, is that Osborne was here enlarging the portrait of his typical hero, this time working out, on a great historical stage, his hero's difficult past relationship with his father.

In Osborne's boldest and perhaps most successful technical experiment, *Inadmissible Evidence*, Bill Maitland's mental breakdown is portrayed in a dream sequence that locates the play's action in the courtroom of Maitland's mind. In *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, Osborne seemed to be attempting to

break from his focus on a single hero to create more of an ensemble approach to drama.

Osborne's historical importance is assured because *Look Back in Anger* altered the style and subject matter of a whole generation of British writers. The great nineteenth century poet and critic Matthew Arnold insisted that historical importance should not be confused with artistic importance, but *Look Back in Anger* is both a historical watershed and a significant artistic success.

## LOOK BACK IN ANGER

**First produced:** 1956 (first published, 1957)

**Type of work:** Play

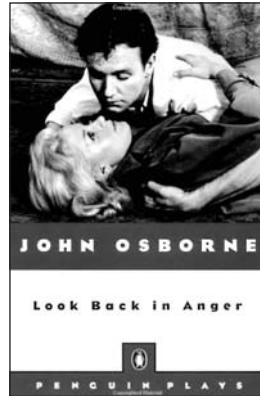
*A pathologically unhappy and bitter young man vents his anger on all around him and is estranged from but then eventually reconciled with his wife.*

*Look Back in Anger* opens on a lazy, mid-1950's Sunday afternoon in a one-room attic apartment in a town in the English Midlands. As usual, Jimmy Porter and his friend and business partner, Cliff Lewis, are reading the Sunday papers while Jimmy's wife, Alison, irons. As usual, Jimmy is verbally bashing everyone and everything around him, including Cliff and Alison—who seem to take his anger in stride.

What makes Jimmy so angry? To support a political reading of *Look Back in Anger*, critics cite Jimmy's famous speech near the end of the play, "there aren't any good, brave causes left," suggesting that Jimmy's anger comes from his disappointment that the faded Edwardian glory of England can no longer be real and felt with conviction and enthusiasm. This interpretation is supported by an earlier passage in the play in which Jimmy is quite nostalgic about the Edwardian world of Alison's father, Colonel Redfern: "all home-made cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms . . . what a romantic picture." Jimmy admits that "if you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's."

In his contemporary England, Jimmy sees only political decay and the pretense of continued health. As an intelligent, articulate, and educated

twenty-five-year-old, Jimmy has not been able to find work that matches his skills, so he earns a meager living running a street-corner candy stand with Cliff as his partner. Part of him reaches for more success, symbolized most eloquently in his frequent, offstage riffs on his jazz trumpet, but part of him mistrusts success because he does not trust aspiration in a country where aspiration is associated with all that is false and hollow. From his demeaning social position, Jimmy lashes out at all the self-important people around him. His anger strikes at everything associated with British bureaucracy, but, unhappily, it also overflows into mistreatment of his wife and his friend Cliff.



A more psychological and domestic interpretation of the play often points to Jimmy's pain over his father's death. When Jimmy was ten years old, he spent a year watching his father die. To him, the rest of the family did not seem to care, and Jimmy sees a similar lack of sensitivity in Alison. He calls her "Lady Pusillanimous" (meaning cowardly), a "monument to non-attachment," and in one of his verbal tirades even wishes that some catastrophe would shock her out of her lethargy, even something horrible such as having a child die. This is indeed what happens, and that tragedy serves, ironically, as the reconciling force in their marriage.

There are other interpretations of Jimmy's anger, but his complexity derives from the fact that the precise cause of his discontent remains elusive. In fact, audiences and critics find Jimmy compelling because the richness of his pain defies final analysis.

Jimmy's anger cools a little at the end of the play but only because his conflict with Alison is resolved at a very great price. When Alison discovers that she is pregnant, an old friend, Helena Charles, comes to stay with the Porters, and Jimmy's badgering intensifies; his harassment is eventually directed toward Helena. In reaction, Helena convinces Alison that she should leave Jimmy and live

again with her father, and Alison leaves. At the end of act 2, however, Helena is drawn by some strange attraction to Jimmy and offers herself to him, becoming his mistress. When act 3 begins, it is Sunday afternoon again and Jimmy and Cliff are once more reading their Sunday papers. Now, however, in a mirror image of the opening of the play, Helena has replaced Alison at the ironing board.

Both the resolution of the conflict and the end of the play come as Alison returns, having lost both the baby and her fertility. In a scene that some critics find insufficiently motivated, Helena leaves and gives Jimmy back to Alison. The play ends with Jimmy and Alison reconciling, in part because Jimmy is satisfied that Alison's pain has brought her more in tune with his own suffering. The reconciliation is richly ambiguous. Have Jimmy and Alison repaired a marriage worth saving, or have they simply hid from problems they cannot face and handle? The enduring quality of *Look Back in Anger* is that either of these readings, and more, can be defended.

## THE ENTERTAINER

**First produced:** 1957 (first published, 1957)

**Type of work:** Play

*A third-rate music-hall comic fails as the father of a thoroughly unhappy family.*

In *The Entertainer*, Osborne's hero is Archie Rice, a pathetic music-hall performer whose domestic life is as much a failure as his comedy act. Himself an admirer of the English music hall and its vaudevillian traditions, Osborne alternates domestic scenes of the Rice family with scenes of Archie's coarse patter in the music hall to symbolize the decline of imperial England. In its late nineteenth and early twentieth century heyday, the music hall was an important expression of urban working-class pride, an entertainment that avoided anything "highbrow," serious, or intellectual. By the 1950's, the music hall had been replaced by cinema and television, degenerating into an even more decadent popular art, and in this mid-1950's music hall Archie is merely a comic setup man for a tacky striptease.

The family unit headed by Archie is equally disappointing. As a father, Archie is self-centered and insensitive, viciously ridiculing his own doddering father, Billy, who lives with the family in their dilapidated and noisy slum apartment. Archie's wife, Phoebe, is a pathetic alcoholic who endures Archie's sexual infidelity by retreating mindlessly to the cinema. The play's action takes place in 1956, during the Suez conflict, when Egypt seized control of the Suez Canal. Frank, Archie and Phoebe's elder son, is a conscientious objector, fresh from six months in prison. Frank works two menial jobs. Mick, Archie and Phoebe's younger son, has accepted the call for army service in Cyprus but has been captured and made a prisoner of war. Jean, Archie's daughter by his first marriage, is a more sensitive person, having thrown off the old-fashioned and sexist attention of her conservative boyfriend, Graham, but, under the influence of a little too much gin, Jean seems equally incapable of strengthening the family unit. As the family members squabble throughout the play, it is clear that they all exist in their own little worlds, seldom listening to or really communicating with one another. In many ways, *The Entertainer* can be seen as an English version of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (pr., pb. 1956); both are portraits of profound domestic failure.

The climax of the action comes with the news that Mick, thought to be released and on his way home, has been killed. Compounded with that grief is the soon-to-follow funeral for Billy; Archie had attempted to get Billy back onto the music-hall stage in order to revive Archie's own career. In the last scene, Archie is on stage and the symbolic tax man, whom Archie has been cheating for the last twenty years, is waiting in the wings, like death, to take Archie to jail. Archie is supported in his last minutes by Phoebe, but there is no hopeful vision of an improved marriage as the lights snap out for the last time. Osborne's vision of the domestic future of the Rice family is as bleak as his vision of England's future as a world power.

One of the most interesting theatrical aspects of *The Entertainer* is that the renowned British classical actor, Sir Laurence Olivier, took the role of Archie Rice in its initial London production. In *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne had made himself into a literary phenomenon by belittling the British establishment. Olivier was a significant member of that es-

tablishment's theater wing, but when he expressed an interest in Osborne's work, Olivier was cast as Archie Rice; Olivier's star status, along with a chillingly real performance, made *The Entertainer* a smash hit. It was soon transferred to London's West End and then was made into a successful film. After his first two plays, Osborne was himself a bona fide "star," part of a new establishment.

## LUTHER

**First produced:** 1961 (first published, 1961)

**Type of work:** Play

*A young man rebels against his father by becoming a monk and then rebels against the Catholic Church by leading the revolution that creates Protestantism.*

In the first of its twelve episodic scenes, *Luther* opens in Germany in 1506 with the young Martin Luther joining an Augustinian monastery against his father's wishes. Luther has chosen a life of austere asceticism, while his father, a miner with entrepreneurial aspirations, had wished for his son a professional life with greater social stature. In this and subsequent scenes covering much of Martin's life, Luther displays naïveté, anger, and an almost pathological self-hatred. At one point, Martin says, "I'm like a ripe stool in the world's straining anus." Throughout the play, Martin is obsessed with physical health and, most specifically, with the working of his bowels.

In the second scene, a year later, Martin prepares for and performs his first Communion Mass, with his estranged father in attendance. In the crucial third scene of the play, Martin talks with his highly judgmental father after the celebration of the Communion, and an argument ensues in which Martin's father accuses his son of running away from life. At one point, Martin says "you make me sick," and this otherwise casual, colloquial phrase is the key to the scene. Martin's chronic constipation is a symbolic representation of his frustrated love for his father, his failure to please his father, and his conflicted attempt to run away from his biological roots. During the play, Martin adopts a more positive father figure, a high-ranking

member of the Augustinian order, Johann von Staupitz, but that relationship clearly never compensates for Martin's initial loss of his father.

Martin's revolt against the Catholic Church is an extension of his conflict with his biological father, and Martin's friendship with Staupitz is an attempt to find peace with authority figures. In the scenes comprising the middle of the play, Martin battles several authority figures in the established Church—a seller of phony papal indulgences, a distinguished cardinal, and even the pope himself. Martin's father had believed that humans were not saved by their works, their good deeds; Martin adopts this view, adding to it the revolutionary notion that faith alone was the spiritual alternative to Catholicism. Consistent with the play's scatological theme, Martin reports that his inspiration for his famous and revolutionary Ninety-five Theses came to him while he was straining to empty his bowels.

In leading the Protestant Reformation, Luther liberated the common people to approach Christian salvation individually, without patriarchal intermediaries. Osborne, however, implies that this great historical revolution might have had a very

prosaic foundation. In the penultimate scene of the play, the unruly Peasants' Revolt in Germany of 1524-1525 has failed, and Martin helps to crush it. In the final scene, set in 1530, Martin is a tired, middle-aged man, now married to a former nun and the father of a child himself. In the last moment of the play, Martin tenderly and hopefully addresses his own infant son, named Hans after Martin's father. The cycle of father and son relationships has come full circle.

## SUMMARY

John Osborne's historical importance in modern British drama is seldom questioned. His play *Look Back in Anger* gave a name, "the angry young men," to a whole generation of British writers. There is also no doubting the solid theatrical quality of his first big hit, since the compelling portrait of Jimmy Porter continues to command the stage wherever Osborne's play is revived. His prolific output includes more than forty other stage, screen, and television plays.

Terry Nienhuis

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Make a list of at least five important qualities that help characterize the "John Osborne hero." Then find fictional heroes from contemporary literature and film who resemble the "Osborne hero."
- Research the state of the British Empire shortly after World War I and then its disintegration after World War II. Use this research to summarize in detail what Jimmy Porter might have been aware of as he contemplated the decline of Britain as a world power in the mid-1950's.
- Male anger is a crucial part of Osborne's plays. What role do women play in Osborne's drama?
- Some of Osborne's plays deal with the dysfunctional relationship between fathers and sons. Characterize these dysfunctional relationships and then compare them with the relationships between fathers and sons, both fictional and real, with which you are familiar.
- Discuss alienation and isolation in Osborne's plays.
- Examine Osborne's plays for theatrical qualities, that is, those qualities that are most evident when audiences see these plays performed on a stage.
- Compare *Luther* to *The Life of Galileo* (pr. 1943, pb. 1955) by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht or to *A Man for All Seasons* (pr., pb. 1960) by British playwright Robert Bolt. How are the plays similar and/or different?



## OVID

**Born:** Sulmo, Roman Empire (now Sulmona, Italy)  
March 20, 43 B.C.E.

**Died:** Tomis, on the Black Sea, Moesia (now  
Constanța, Romania)  
17 C.E.

*One of Italy's most renowned poets of the Augustan Age, Ovid influenced medieval and Renaissance authors and wrote a masterpiece that preserved for history many Greek and Roman myths.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ovid (AH-vuhd) was born Publius Ovidius Naso into a relatively wealthy family in Sulmo, Italy, on March 20, 43 B.C.E., one year after the assassination of Julius Caesar. Ovid's father's name is thought to be Leonides. From an early age, Ovid showed a great interest in writing poetry, but his father discouraged him because he considered poetry an unprofitable pursuit for his son. At the age of twelve, Ovid was sent from his small town in the mountains of central Italy to Rome, less than a hundred miles away, where he was to be educated for a career in politics. This same year, 31 B.C.E., saw the Battle of Actium bring defeat to Cleopatra and Marc Antony at the hands of Octavian, the future Emperor Caesar Augustus; for the rest of his life, Ovid would be under the influence of Augustus.

Ovid learned from the best rhetoric teachers in Rome. In addition to writing and public speaking, he probably studied the language and literature of Greece. Roman writer Seneca was several years older than Ovid, but many years later Seneca wrote of observing the boy Ovid in class and said that even as a youth he displayed a talent for writing and that his prose was always poetic. In 26 or 25 B.C.E., when Ovid was in late adolescence, he read and recited some of his poetry in public.

After completing his schooling in Rome, Ovid probably spent his early twenties studying in Ath-

ens and traveling in Asia Minor, as was customary for educated young men. His knowledge of Greek and Roman poetry, drama, and myth was becoming impressive. Returning to Italy, Ovid settled in the capital of Rome. He was married early in life, but the marriage was not successful, nor was a second one, although it produced his only child, a daughter. Eventually, Ovid married a third time, and this marriage was long and apparently very happy.

For a brief time, he held minor political offices but decided quickly that politics had no appeal for him; at the age of twenty-three he chose, instead, to devote his life to the passion that had held him captive since childhood: writing poetry. It was a good time to be a poet in Rome because the emperor, Augustus, supported the arts as a means of reestablishing the old Roman virtues of hearth and home, patriotism, and morality. Unfortunately, Ovid's first publishing venture did not address those values.

Borrowing a traditional Roman subject, Ovid wrote a collection of erotic love poems. The precise date that *Amores* (c. 20 B.C.E.; English translation, 1597) was first published is unknown; no copy of it has survived, but a second edition of the work, also of unknown date, indicates that the original was published in five books, while the second edition was reduced to three. The *Amores* is a collection of fifty poems written in elegiac couplets, the meter that Ovid used for all of his poems except the *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 C.E.; English translation, 1567). Although the poems are written in the first person,

the object was to present a wide range of experiences that any young Roman man might have had under the spell of love. Some of the experiences that the poet claims are conventional ones in love elegies; thus, critics warn against trying to find biographical information about Ovid himself in these early poems. Still, the poetry does contain a vivid portrait of Roman daily life at the races, at the theater, and at the banquet table, some of it fairly decadent.

While still writing the *Amores*, Ovid probably began another work, the *Heroides* (before 8 C.E.; English translation, 1567), a collection of fifteen letters written in the voices of mythological and legendary women. The letters are directed to the men in their lives at a moment of great emotional upheaval, heroic men whose stories were and are well known: Penelope to Ulysses, Medea to Jason, Dido to Aeneas. Ovid found an untold feminine perspective in the famous myths in the stories of the women who were swept aside in the wake of the hero and conveyed the poignance of their suffering.

Perhaps inspired by his work on the *Heroides*, sometime before 8 C.E., Ovid wrote his only play, the tragedy *Medea*, which was very well received. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus called it one of the greatest of Roman tragedies, but all that remains of it today are two lines quoted by his contemporaries. Given the play's apparent success, it is hard to imagine why he never wrote another. In any case, by this time his works had earned him quite a popular reputation. Sometime after his success with the drama, Ovid added to his earlier *Heroides*. The original work had contained only letters from women to their men; he added six more letters, this time from the heroes to their women and the women's replies. For example, Paris's love letter to Helen, while still a guest in her home in Greece, and her reply reveal the tentative beginnings of a passion that was to result in a long, heroic war.

By the time that Ovid was in his early forties, around 2 B.C.E., he wrote one of his most famous and influential books, the *Ars amatoria* (*Art of Love*, 1612). It was a type of work that was quite popular in Rome at the time, instructional poetry. The great author of the *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553), Vergil, for example, had written his *Georgics* (c. 37-29 B.C.E.; English translation, 1589) on methods of agriculture and animal hus-

bandry. Ovid's latest work, however, contained lessons on the art of seduction.

The *Art of Love* may have proved to be the undoing of Ovid in the eyes of Augustus Caesar. The emperor was a generation older than Ovid and, unlike him, had lived through war and civil strife. At a time when moral standards were lax and divorce and adultery were rampant, the emperor was trying to effect sweeping moral reform in dissolute Rome; he promoted humble living, encouraged religious piety, upheld chastity and sanctity of marriage, and imposed laws against sexual misconduct. In short, he wanted Romans to return to the values and virtues of a simpler past that Ovid had not known. Ovid's work would seem to mock much that the emperor held dear. Ovid had written, for example, that others could pine for old times if they wished, but he preferred the present, and his *Art of Love* instructed men on such things as the best places in Rome to meet women and informed women on how to communicate secretly with their lovers at a banquet when their husbands were present. It was a sophisticated, titillating, and wildly popular work that seemed to fly in the face of the emperor's campaign, and just as the book reached its peak of popularity, the emperor discovered that his own daughter was an adulterer. Although Ovid must have been an irritant to the emperor, Augustus took no action against him at the time of the book's appearance; nonetheless, he apparently harbored a grudge against the poet and later made him pay dearly for his irreverence and lack of discretion.

As Ovid was approaching middle age, he began what would prove to be his masterpiece, a collection of about 250 stories from Greek and Roman mythology, linked by the theme of bodies transformed into new shapes, hence the title, *Metamorphoses*. His professed intent is to tell the history of metamorphosis chronologically from the beginning of time until his own times. His pseudohistory has the sweep and scope of an epic, for it not only begins with the creation of the world but also ranges through most of the known world: Europe, Africa, and Asia. Every hero and heroine of Greek and Roman legend and myth appears in the *Metamorphoses*; because the stories evolved from oral traditions and from written works that have vanished, Ovid's masterpiece preserved for history this rich Greco-Roman legacy.

By 8 C.E., Ovid was working on his final version of the *Metamorphoses* and had half completed a long poem about the holidays and rituals of the Roman calendar, the *Fasti*, for which the work is named, when disaster befell him. Emperor Augustus banished Ovid from Rome to Tomis, a bleak, semibarbarous outpost on the Black Sea (in modern Romania). A further indignity was that the emperor had all Ovid's books removed from public libraries. Since censorship was unusual in Rome, this action speaks loudly of the emperor's conviction that Ovid's works were morally degrading. The full reason will never be known, for Ovid would always insist that he had done nothing illegal or immoral, but he did say that his poetry was part of the reason for his downfall. Augustus had recently discovered that his own granddaughter, Julia, was an adulterer, as her mother had been. It is possible, therefore, that Ovid became a scapegoat for the emperor's inability to control his own family, much less reform Roman society.

Ovid was spared the harsher punishment of exile, which would have stripped him of citizenship and of property. He retained both, but because his beloved wife had to stay in Rome to oversee their estate and finances, they were separated forever. She wanted to accompany him to Tomis, but he refused, optimistically believing that the emperor would relent and let him return. As soon as he arrived in Tomis, Ovid immediately began attempts to ingratiate himself with Augustus, but as time passed and it was clear that Augustus would not be moved to show mercy to him, he was devastated. Ovid's remaining works would be written far from the people and the city that he loved, and almost every word that he wrote was to enlist sympathy for his cause and to persuade Augustus to recall him to Rome.

The first of Ovid's works in exile was a collection of poetic letters entitled *Tristia* (*Sorrows*, 1859), written between 8 and 12 C.E.; the poet's voice is filled with the sorrow of a man suffering loss and separation. He disguises the identities of the friends to whom the letters are written out of concern that association with him may be detrimental to the recipients. In truth, in some ways his banishment enhanced his fame, but at the same time some of his friends abandoned him. His next work, *Ibis* (after 8 C.E.; English translation, 1859), is an attack on just such a former friend whom historians

have never been able to identify. His final work was *Epistulae ex Ponto* (after 8 C.E.; *Letters from Pontus*, 1639), another collection of letters that were not private missives but were clearly meant to be circulated and to be brought to the attention of Augustus. So that he would not be forgotten by the Romans, Ovid wrote a considerable amount of autobiography into his last works. For several years, Ovid humbled himself and argued his case, but Augustus remained deaf to his pleas and justifications. The emperor's death in 14 C.E. renewed Ovid's hopes of being returned to Rome, but Augustus's successor, Tiberius, also refused to relent.

For the first years of his banishment, Ovid was despondent; a man of great culture and learning, he was cast among barbarians whose language he did not speak. Despairing and ill because of the frigid climate, he felt isolated physically, emotionally, and intellectually. He was too social a creature, however, to remain set apart for long, and eventually he learned the language of the natives and, consummate poet that he was, composed a poem in it. Therefore, when Ovid died in Tomis at the age of fifty-nine or sixty in 17 C.E., far from the Rome that he loved, he was buried with honor by the local people with whom he had forged a mutual love and respect. Today, in Romania, a marker commemorates the great poet of Rome.

## ANALYSIS

Along with Vergil, Ovid is the preeminent artist of Augustan Rome, and he has remained popular in part because of his subject matter. He glorifies human experience and, in the process, reveals a keen understanding of psychology and the human psyche. His books on finding love, his ability to represent the feminine perspective in male-dominated literature, and his portraits of heroes and gods (who are immortal and yet as flawed as any mortal) brim over with insights into the workings of minds, hearts, and souls. His human and humane concerns no doubt explain his great popularity through the ages and his huge influence on Western European arts and artists—medieval writers Dante and Geoffrey Chaucer, Renaissance writers Petrarch and, later, John Milton, as well as modern poet T. S. Eliot. Painters, sculptors, and composers, too, have been influenced by this prolific writer of Augustan Rome.

Ovid was famed for his great knowledge and use

of myths in his art, and in his masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*, he assumes the Herculean task of weaving 250 varied and complex stories into a coherent narrative. The work is a richly textured tapestry of stories that conform, for the most part, to his theme of eternal change.

The quality that most readers associate with Ovid is a sly, sophisticated wit. At a time when the emperor wanted nationalism and virtue celebrated in art, Ovid gave readers a taste of Roman humor. His own humor is never biting or sarcastic but good-natured. Additionally, he was fond of using irony as a comic device. His playfulness manifests itself in his work not only in his subject matter but also in his diction; he draws the reader's attention to the message and to the medium by using such techniques as plays on words, overstatement, paradox, echoes, and other devices. He was also one of the earliest writers to experiment with narrative perspective, the point of view from which a story is told. His *Heroides* presents famous stories from the perspective of characters traditionally regarded as secondary.

Realism is one of Ovid's great strengths as a writer; he had a keen eye for the telling details that breathe life into his stories. Capturing the exact pose, word, or physical detail, he burns the moment or scene into the reader's memory. One trait, however, for which both modern critics and his own contemporaries fault Ovid is his prolixity. Although his style itself is spare, he seems unable to offer only a few examples to support a point; instead, he piles example upon example upon example, soon wearying his reader.

The characteristic of Ovid's writing that makes him seem most modern is his inclination to express the point of view of women. In his love poetry, he includes advice to women about finding satisfactory love relationships, and he insists that the act of love should be a pleasure to both parties. In *Heroides*, he looks at the scene behind the hero, finds the forgotten or cruelly used woman, and gives her a voice, an opportunity to tell her story, which has usually been left out of the total picture.

Ovid was not given in general to philosophical musing or religious devotion; although his works are filled with gods and goddesses, to most Romans, religious observances were more form than substance, so that deities in Ovid's work would have commanded little credulity. What seems to have

been most sacred to him are human experience and art. These are the subjects that he celebrates again and again in his writing.

## METAMORPHOSES

**First published:** c. 8 C.E. (English translation, 1567)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Beginning with the transformation of shapeless matter into the created world, the gods have, throughout all history, changed bodies from one form into another.*

The *Metamorphoses* represents Ovid's greatest artistic challenge, 250 stories from Greek and Roman mythology, legend, and history woven into a loosely chronological continuous narrative, starting with the creation of the world and ending with the assassination of Julius Caesar. Written in the meter of epic poetry, dactylic hexameter, the stories concern the transformation of bodies into different forms, such as animals, plants, or stars, each story evolving from the preceding one. Almost every deity, hero, or heroine from classical times is represented in these tales. In fact, most of the myths with which modern readers are familiar were preserved by the *Metamorphoses*.

One important element that helps to hold this massive work together is the voice of the poet himself; instead of remaining completely outside the events that he narrates, Ovid asserts his presence in the poem by addressing the reader, as well as the characters, on occasion. The voice is witty, sophisticated, occasionally sympathetic, frequently mocking.

Ovid begins his tales with the ultimate metamorphosis, the transformation of primal cosmic matter into the beautiful, fruitful earth. He then describes the four ages of the earth, Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron, which saw the transformation of humanity from peaceful, innocent beings into bloodthirsty, deceitful exploiters of other humans and of the earth itself. An angry Jove intervenes in human affairs by sending a great flood and starting afresh with a new race of mortals, and the *Metamorphoses* begins, telling the story of one transformation after another through all of history and through



most of the known world and Olympus. Some of the metamorphoses are grotesque, some humorous, some quaint, and some touching.

After the introductory material on the creation and on the first transformation effected by Jove, the poem divides into three parts that deal with the deities, heroes and heroines, and actual historical figures (although these divisions are blurred by Ovid's frequent digressions). The deities of the *Metamorphoses* frequently have the same flaws and foibles as the mortals in these stories. They can be petty, jealous, unfaithful, vengeful. In fact, the story of Apollo and Daphne stems from the revenge that Cupid takes on Apollo, who, in his arrogance, has offended Cupid. In retaliation, Cupid shoots him with a gold-tipped arrow that causes Apollo to fall helplessly in love with Daphne, who shuns him because Cupid has shot her with a lead-tipped arrow that makes her reject love completely. Thus, Apollo can only feel thwarted and frustrated as he seeks to woo the beautiful demigoddess who inspires his passion but cannot share it. Ironically, then, in this story, love becomes ruinous to the beloved.

As arrogant as he was with Cupid, Apollo calls Daphne foolish for fleeing him and reminds her that he is no common shepherd or farm boy but a great and powerful god. Ovid, typically sensitive to the woman's perspective, conveys vividly Daphne's distress at her unwanted suitor and then her terror as Apollo chases her relentlessly through woods where briars tear at her legs. Pale, panting, feeling his breath on her hair, she engages the reader's profound sympathy in this heart-pounding scene of near rape, for she is a suffering pawn used by one god in a game of vengeance against another.

She pleads for release from her torment, and, as she is metamorphosing into a laurel tree, still shrinking from Apollo's touch and kiss, he triumphantly claims, in her form as a tree, the woman whom he could not possess as a flesh-and-blood being. He declares that, always green and shining, she will be his personal plant for all time, and he will always wear a wreath of laurel on his head. Ovid makes a respectful acknowledgment of his emperor by having Apollo foretell that the laurel will be worn in triumph by great Roman military leaders of the future and will decorate the portals of Emperor Augustus. Her metamorphosis, then, is poignant, yet satisfying.

During the time that Ovid was working on the *Metamorphoses*, a revival of an old Greek philosophy was underway in Rome. In the sixth century B.C.E., the Greek philosopher/mathematician Pythagoras had devised a humane philosophy opposing animal sacrifice and advocating vegetarianism. In Ovid's day, this doctrine was being rekindled and preached around Rome. Critics have argued about whether Ovid himself was a neo-Pythagorean; nonetheless, he includes a lengthy section on the teachings of Pythagoras near the end of his *Metamorphoses*.

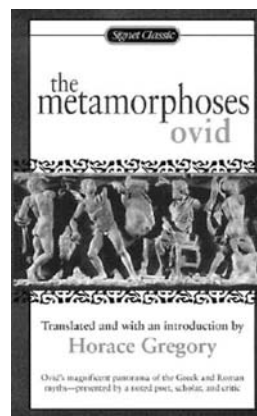
The historical figure Pythagoras lends himself quite well to this collection of tales of transformations, for he believed in the transmigration of souls from humans to animals or animals to humans and therefore shunned the eating of meat. Underlying his philosophy was a deeply compassionate concern for the living creatures that share creation with human beings. Ovid presents Pythagoras's philosophy compellingly and persuasively.

In the opening lines, he establishes Pythagoras's authority as a learned, wise man who understands the workings and the nature of the world and then allows Pythagoras to speak in his own voice. Pythagoras admonishes people that the earth provides a rich abundance of healthy foods—fruits and vegetables, milk and honey—which do not require bloodshed. He further strives to awaken compas-

sion and respect in the hearts of his hearers toward animals because these creatures are fellow workers and beautiful and innocent in their own right. His last and strongest case against slaughtering and eating animals is his theory that souls transmigrate. Souls are deathless, he argues, and when the body housing a soul dies, the soul finds a new dwelling place.

The souls of humans move into the bodies of animals and vice versa. Hence, eating animal flesh is akin to cannibalism.

Pythagoras speaks at length of the perpetual flux of the universe, asserting that nothing is unchanging. Referring to natural phenomena—the



tides, the seasons—he draws attention to the mutability of all forms, while arguing that the underlying matter remains constant. Thus, he says, humans should never fear death because the soul is deathless. To include such a philosophy near the end of this work is to suggest a rationale for all the other metamorphoses presented: change as a universal principle. It is not possible to assert with finality whether Ovid personally was a neo-Pythagorean or whether he included the philosophy because it provided a fitting climax to his work, whose theme was transformations. The rather serious consideration of philosophy in this section of the *Metamorphoses* might not seem well assimilated with the other stories, but in fact it corresponds to the creation scene of the first book of the work in its cosmic implications.

## HEROIDES

**First published:** before 8 C.E. (English translation, 1567)

**Type of work:** Letters in verse form

*In letters to the men whom they love, mythical and legendary women vent their feelings of love, longing, or abandonment.*

Most epic, drama, myth, and history of the classical period focuses on the stories of men and their exploits, but in the *Heroides*, Ovid finds the feminine point of view that is often missing from these stories. The epistolary format is really another way to present a soliloquy or monologue, in this case of a secondary character whom Ovid depicts, thus adding to, not supplanting, the reader's understanding of the original story. In this collection of letters, the women whose names are familiar but whose perspectives have been given little consideration by the reader—or, for that matter, by the hero—present their thoughts and feelings at a moment of emotional turmoil or crisis.

Readers of Homer's *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611) are familiar with the famous quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, when Agamemnon seizes Achilles' war prize, the girl Briseis. She is treated as chattel, passed between the men like an inanimate object with no regard whatever for her feelings as a human being. In

Homer's story, Achilles is furious at losing her to Agamemnon, not so much because he cares for her personally but because he has been insulted and humiliated by Agamemnon's action. In Briseis' letter to Achilles in the *Heroides*, she even comments that he gave her up with no apparent reluctance and wishes that he had at least shown some resistance, whereby she would know that he had feelings for her. In Homer, when Agamemnon's envoys offer Achilles great riches and the return of Briseis if he will rejoin the battle, Achilles refuses; in Ovid, Briseis sees his refusal as a rejection of her and asks what she has done to earn his disfavor. She has heard that he has threatened to sail for Greece and is distraught; she asks to whom she is now to be left. When she refers to her husband and brothers who were killed in the battle when she was taken captive, the reader understands her clinging to Achilles, her captor. She has been left with nothing: no homeland, no family, no security. Achilles represents at least a future for her. Thus, Ovid shows a complex human being who was, in the *Iliad*, a flat figure.

The character of Medea must have been a greater challenge for Ovid because her story was so widely known and had been told magnificently by the fifth century B.C.E. Greek dramatist Euripides. The difficulty, then, was to present her in a way that did not diverge from the well-known myth and yet to capture something of her that had not been explored before. Ovid immediately captures her disordered state of mind by beginning the passage in the middle of a sentence. This suggests that her feverish thoughts have focused relentlessly on her abandonment by Jason, and anything she says or writes on the subject is indeed the continuation of an inner monologue. Like Euripides' Medea, Ovid's recounts the numerous deeds, both foul and fair, that she had done in the past for Jason's sake. Unlike Euripides' character, Ovid's Medea says, whether sincerely or not, that her current pitiful state is her punishment for the harm that she did to others on Jason's behalf. Whereas Euripides has portrayed her as a woman much like Achilles, a woman who will have vengeance and be remembered for it, Ovid conveys the idea that in her heart of hearts, Medea feels helpless, powerless. She recalls several examples of her magical prowess and laments that she is unable now to use magic on herself to cure her grief, bitterness, and pain. Because

the reader knows that Medea will ultimately commit infanticide, she does not, finally, come across as more likable than the woman of Greek drama, but for a moment the reader can see a vulnerability in her that is not usually portrayed.

Although the letter of Hermione to Orestes concerns a marriage contract that she was forced to obey, a fascinating subplot emerges in her letter. Hermione is the daughter of Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world, who abandoned her husband and child to run away to Troy with her lover Paris. The main part of the letter to Orestes concerns their betrothal in childhood, which she regards as a marriage. Now, however, she has been given against her will to Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles. What is revealed is the portrait of a woman whose whole life has been filled with loss: Her mother abandons her, her father leaves to fight for ten years to retrieve his wife, she is betrothed to her childhood companion but then is given to another man, who treats her unfeelingly. She begs Orestes to rescue her, but it is the poignant look at the childhood loss of her mother that is the truly memorable part of this letter. She recalls the tumult left in the wake of Helen's betrayal

of her family: She remembers tearfully asking her mother why she was leaving her, she laments never having had a mother to hold her, and finally she recalls seeing her mother at last when Helen was returned to Greece, not knowing her face but recognizing her only because of her great beauty. In her portrait, Ovid has presented a lost and lonely soul, buffeted by the egocentric, heroically proportioned figures in her life, this time both male and female.

### SUMMARY

Ovid was noted for his exploitation of myth, and in the *Metamorphoses* he combines 250 diverse tales into a richly textured narrative that exemplifies the theme of universal change. Change is also apparent in the letters of the heroines of the *Heroides*, whose destinies are altered eternally as a result of their relationships with the heroes.

Ovid's literature embodies a profound understanding of the human psyche, a gentle wit, incisive realism, and an innovative feminine perspective, all of which have made his works universal and lasting.

Linda Jordan Tucker

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Show how Ovid, in *Heroides* and in his works on love, achieves a mastery of literary point of view that was rare in his time.
- How seriously is the reader expected to take Ovid's *Art of Love*?
- Was Ovid's message to classical poets "Make love, not war"?
- Establish the relationship of Ovid's *Amores* to Latin love poetry as it then existed.
- By what techniques was Ovid able to absorb so many myths into the unified *Metamorphoses*?
- What qualities make Ovid's *Metamorphoses* much more than a handbook on mythology?
- How does Ovid's influence on Renaissance writers differ generally from his influence on medieval writers?



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## WILFRED OWEN

**Born:** Oswestry, England  
March 18, 1893

**Died:** Sambre Canal, France  
November 4, 1918

*Owen wrote about the horror and pity of World War I in poetry that challenged the conventional view of war as a romantic adventure.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born in Oswestry, England, on March 18, 1893, the son of Thomas and Susan Owen. A man who loved sports and male companionship, Owen's father often had trouble understanding his son's introspective nature and his love of books. Owen was much closer to his mother, Susan, who seemed to approve and encourage his interest in art and nature. When Owen was ten, his mother took him on a holiday excursion to Brixton by the Hill, a nature trip that Owen would later describe as his birth as a poet. Although Owen's experiences in World War I would cause him to lose faith in his mother's more orthodox Christianity, he still retained his love for her, writing in a letter that it was his mother and not his motherland (England) that gave him the strength to carry on during the heavy fighting.

At age eighteen, Owen found that he did not have enough money to attend the University of London. His mother, who had always wanted him to become a cleric, urged him to discover whether he might have a religious calling, and so Owen went to work as an unpaid lay assistant to a vicar in Dunsden, Oxfordshire. There, he helped with the care of the poor and sick in the parish, further developing the sympathetic nature that would speak so strongly in his later poetry. It was also as a parish

worker that Owen began to believe that the Church of England did not do enough to help those in need. After leaving the parish and spending two years in France teaching languages, Owen returned to England in 1915. Believing that it was his duty to fight since his country was at war, Owen enlisted. The next time Owen journeyed to France, in January, 1917, he went as a commissioned officer to the Western Front in order to serve his country in World War I.

Like many young men of his generation, Owen went to war imagining that it would be a glorious adventure. Politicians had said that it was noble and heroic to die for one's country; religious leaders had described the battle as a holy war and the men as Christian soldiers fighting in a just cause; poets through the ages had written war poems that made fighting sound like a romantic adventure, a chance for individuals to prove their strength in combat. Owen's first letters from the front praised his company's "fine heroic spirit" and romanticized the sound of its guns as having "a certain sublimity."

Yet only two days later, after Owen had actually seen combat, the tone of his letters changed. Gone was the earlier belief in war as a heroic adventure. Now, Owen described the blasted battlefield as an "inferno" of "mud and thunder." He admitted that his earlier visions of glory were horribly mistaken; politicians, priests, and poets were wrong about what it was like to be a soldier. On January 8, 1917, Owen and his men slogged through two and a half miles of trenches that had filled with rainwater, turning the dirt to heavy mud. Because of the con-



stant firing, there was rarely any chance for soldiers to change their wet, frozen clothes. The shrill wail of incoming shells made it impossible for the men to get any sleep. One night, Owen was blown right out of his trench by a shell that landed only six feet away; he discovered that the officer next to him had been buried alive in the blast. On March 19, Owen was hospitalized for a brain concussion caused by an accidental fall into a fifteen-foot-deep shell hole. He seemed to recover, but after suffering from terrible headaches later diagnosed as symptoms of shell shock, Owen was sent back to a hospital in England to recuperate.

After being moved several times, Owen finally entered Craiglockhart Military Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was there, in August, 1917, that he met Siegfried Sassoon, an army captain and poet who befriended Owen and encouraged him to write war poetry of his own. Sassoon's antiwar poetry shocked the public and provoked Owen to write more realistic verse. Owen had been writing poems since his teens, but his early work was mostly sentimental nature and love poetry inspired by such English Romantic poets as Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Under Sassoon's influence, Owen began to write war poetry that revealed the true horrors of battle. Like other shell-shocked soldiers, Owen was accustomed to stammering when he spoke, but with Sassoon's friendship and guidance, Owen became newly articulate, learning to speak and write poetry with confidence. Most of Owen's best poems were written from August, 1917, to September, 1918, a short period of amazing productivity begun by his meeting with Sassoon and brought to a premature end by Owen's death.

Owen returned to the fighting in France in August, 1918, believing that his firsthand experience of the horrors of battle would make him a more credible witness, enabling him to plead on the soldiers' behalf for an end to the war. When Owen received the Military Cross in October, 1918, he was pleased, not for himself, but because he felt that winning this award for bravery in action would make more people believe him when he wrote poetry about the need to stop the war. Owen's words of warning were not heard in time for his own life to be saved. At age twenty-five, trying to get his company across the Sambre Canal, north of Ors, France, Owen was killed by machine-gun fire on November 4, 1918, one week before the armistice.

Most of Owen's poetry was published posthumously. Written by a decorated soldier who was killed in action, Owen's poems may finally have had the extra credibility that he wanted for them. His friend and fellow soldier-poet, Sassoon, collected and published twenty-three *Poems by Wilfred Owen* (1920).

## ANALYSIS

Before his death, Owen wrote a brief preface for the volume of poems that he had hoped to see published while he was still alive. It is in this preface that Owen specified his beliefs as a war poet. "This book is not about heroes," Owen wrote, and he added that he is "not concerned with Poetry." Owen believed that too many of the war poems written in the past had been glorifications of war, praising soldiers as if they were heroes dying noble deaths. Owen intended to write antiwar poetry; he would flout convention and take words and phrases that earlier poets had used to romanticize war and alter them so that they told the truth: War is a senseless waste of young lives, and is not about the making of heroes. Owen wanted readers to be shocked by the violent and bloody meaninglessness of war, but he also wanted them to feel sympathy for all the dead and dying. As he put it, "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." If people could be brought to feel sympathy for the loss of life on both sides of the conflict, maybe they would be less eager to continue the deadly fighting or to start another war once this one was over. Owen did not want his readers to be consoled: He intended his gruesome-but-true depictions of death in battle to stand as a warning to his generation that war must be stopped. Nevertheless, Owen hoped that there would one day come a time, perhaps for future generations, when his poems could serve as a consolation, helping people who had learned their lesson to mourn the dead and get on with life.

A poem such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth" shows both sides of Owen the poet: his intent to give shocks as warnings, and his desire to evoke the reader's sympathy for suffering. The poem begins as if it were going to be a traditional Christian elegy mourning the dead, but then it shifts abruptly to emphasize the un-Christian brutality of a soldier's death in battle: "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" Owen makes striking use of ono-

matopoeia (words whose sound imitates their sense) to describe the ironic prayers these fast-dying soldiers receive on the battlefield: "Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle/ Can patter out their hasty orisons." The repeated sounds of the letters "r" and "t" represent the jarring effect of gunfire, totally at odds with the solemn service that these men might have received had their deaths been truly sanctioned by God. Owen uses the octave (first eight lines) of this sonnet to argue against religious leaders who persuaded young soldiers that they were dying for a holy cause.

The sestet (last six lines) of the sonnet then proceeds to change the mood from shock to pity, as the poem shifts its emphasis from the brutality of death in battle to the sadness of those at home who mourn their dead brothers, sons, and would-be bridegrooms. Owen again displays his gift for poetic effects, but now they are more subtle and subdued as befits a scene of mourning. When he writes that "The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall," his wordplay is very serious and sensitive, suggesting that the whiteness of grief-stricken faces is a truer sign of sympathy for the dead than any orthodox religious rite. The last line of the poem, with its heavy stresses on the opening words and its long, drawn-out syllables, beautifully conveys natural human sadness at the loss of these men's lives: "And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds."

Unlike his fellow war-poet Sassoon, whose ironic and satirical verse inspired Owen to write more realistically about the horrors of war, Owen often introduced another dimension into his poetry: the pity of war, a deep sympathy for the suffering. Even when Owen would use disturbing diction (choice of words) and ugly sounds, as he often did in his characteristic off-rhymes ("flashes"/"fleshes," "winds"/"weaned"/"wounds"), he still tried to save some room for tenderness and compassion, as if looking forward to the world of brotherhood that might be created if all wars were to cease. In his poem "Dulce et decorum est," Owen mocked the deadly sentiment expressed by the Latin poet Horace that "It is sweet and fitting to die for the fatherland," exposing this belief as a lie. Yet in other poems, such as "Strange Meeting," he soothes the living and the dead with words of sympathy: "Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot wheels,/ I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,/ Even with truths that lie too deep for taint."

## "STRANGE MEETING"

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *Poems by Wilfred Owen*, 1920)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A soldier imagines that he is dead and in Hell, where he meets the enemy whom he killed in battle.*

"Strange Meeting" is probably Owen's most celebrated poem. He may have taken his title from a line in *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), a poem by the British Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. In Shelley's poem, two warriors are reconciled in life, but Owen's poem is more pessimistic: His soldiers can become friends only after both have died and are no longer fighting for their respective countries, England and Germany. Owen implies that as long as men and women live, they will fight wars.

The tunnel down which the speaker escapes in the first stanza could be a trench, the speaker's unconscious, or the classical underworld, where people were supposedly sent after death. Owen describes this tunnel as having been "scooped" by many wars to indicate that what he has to say in this poem applies to wars throughout the ages, not merely to World War I. People have always realized too late that the so-called enemy was really a friend, no matter how strange or foreign that enemy may have seemed at first. Owen's use of off-rhymes emphasizes the digging pain of war ("groined" and "groaned") and forces readers to see the lines that death etches into human faces ("grained" and "ground"). At the same time, the fact that these words almost rhyme suggests that these sworn enemies are really very much alike in their vulnerability to pain and in their shared mortality.

The speaker realizes that he and his enemy shared the same hopes while alive and that each was, in a sense, the other's hope: Each might have made the other man laugh in fellowship; each might have done something, if he had lived, to make the world a better place for others. Perhaps most important, each might have told others about the truth of war, about how unglorious and merely wasteful death is. Instead, both men are now dead, and the truth about war will die with them. The ignorant people back home who do not realize the

true horror of war will only continue the meaningless fighting. They will be quick to act, but quick in the sense of rash and fierce, like a mindless animal “swift with swiftness of the tigress.” They will go looking for grand adventure, but by going to war they will make a journey back into barbarism, a “trek from progress.”

The poem ends with the strange friend suggesting that he and the speaker, now that they have fought and killed each other, should now go to sleep. At least in death, they are at peace. Fortunately, the truth about the horror of war does not have to die with them. Owen’s poem conveys it and suggests that readers take pity on other people and on themselves—before it is too late.

### “DISABLED”

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *Poems by Wilfred Owen*, 1920)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A depressed war veteran, having lost both legs and an arm, recalls a time when he thought that war would be glorious.*

To dramatize the terrible consequences of war, “Disabled” presents an ironic contrast between a strong-limbed, handsome youth eager to be a hero in battle and the wrecked body in a wheelchair that the man becomes as a result of being horribly wounded. In the first stanza, the voices of boys playing in the park can only sound sad to the disabled veteran, who feels the painful difference between their freedom and his forced immobility.

The next two stanzas bring memories of what a physically attractive young man the veteran had been. Only the year before, he seemed so very young, “younger than his youth” in terms of innocence and inexperience. Now, suddenly, he is old with a terrible wisdom, having learned of the destruction that war can do to the body. By saying that he “threw away his knees,” Owen emphasizes the carelessness with which the young man went to war, not giving a thought to the mutilation that might befall him. As a result of his injuries, women are now loath to touch him, as if his wounds were some-

how contagious like a “queer disease.” Owen makes an ironic reference to love poetry when he describes blood from the man’s leg as a “leap of purple” that “spurted from his thigh.” This spurt is not the sign of a virile young man’s love. War is not the place where he proves his manhood; it is where he loses it.

Ironically, as the fourth stanza reveals, the young man seems to have gone to war in hope of winning the approval and admiration of women. Owen’s description of these women as “giddy jilts” implies some anger toward young females who would get excited at the thought of a man in army uniform, then flee from him in fear when he returns wounded from the war. A further irony in this stanza has to do with the very real difference between violence in sports and the violation of war, a difference that the young man did not understand until he discovered it the hard way. He had considered a bloody leg to be a sign of pride, proof that he had played a fierce game of football, having used his body to its full potential. Yet war is not, as he thought, another game; rather than developing his body, war causes it irreparable damage. Owen uses this poem to warn future young people that war is not fair or fun like football: It is a “game” in which what is lost can never be regained.

### SUMMARY

The British poet Cecil Day Lewis believed that Wilfred Owen’s poems were “certainly the finest written by any English poet of the First War.” Owen’s warning remains as valid today as it was when he wrote it. He depicted the horrors of war with sometimes shocking realism. The pity that he felt for people who knew no better than to kill one another comes through strongly in his poems. What also comes through, in the fact that he wrote such passionate antiwar poetry, is his hope that the war—and all war—would end soon.

*Douglas Keeseey*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Which idea does Wilfred Owen's poetry convey better: that people can and must overcome the tendency to go to war, or that, given human nature, war is inevitable?
- Are the disabled soldiers you have heard about like the one in Owen's "Disabled," or are they more positive—or is it impossible for other people to know?
- Discuss Owen's use of sonnets as forms to describe war experiences (including "Dulce et Decorum Est," which is very much like two sonnets wrapped together).
- Does Owen's war experience assist or damage his poem "Miners"?
- Had Owen not died a few days before the armistice, would he have been maligned as a bitter opponent of a heroic military endeavor?



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## AMOS OZ

**Born:** Jerusalem, British Mandate of Palestine (now in Israel)  
May 4, 1939

*Oz was the first novelist born in Israel to make the Israeli experience accessible to readers from around the world and to capture the distinctiveness of Jewish and Israeli history as represented in the lives of his characters.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Amos Oz (ohz) was born Amos Klausner on May 4, 1939, at the home of his parents in Jerusalem, when that city was in the British Mandate of Palestine. His father, Yehuda Klausner, was an émigré from Eastern Europe and was part of a family that had attained great distinction in the study of literature and religion. Yehuda's uncle, Joseph Klausner, was the author of a study of Jesus as a representative of Jewish tradition, which had shocked the more conservative elements of the Jewish world but which was well received in the general intellectual community. When Joseph Klausner arrived in what would later be the nation of Israel, he was hailed as a leading light of the country and given a position at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Yehuda Klausner was eager to follow in his uncle's footsteps, but he never managed to achieve that degree of recognition and spent most of his career working as a librarian at the university.

Oz's mother, Fania, came from a family that had been associated more with business than with scholarship. They had also come to Palestine in response to the growing sense of persecution against the Jews in Eastern Europe. Fania herself was an imaginative child who maintained that fondness for stories into adulthood. While she was a serious student, her vision of the world blended literatures

from different languages and cultures creatively rather than in a scholarly fashion.

Oz was the beneficiary of attention in large measure from both parents, and he saw himself early as having the responsibility of fulfilling the dreams of both of them. He wanted to be a writer but also a scholar, who would take on the mantle of his great-uncle in a way that his father never could. His father had fairly strong political views that were influenced by Vladimir Jabotinsky, a right-wing ideologue, but he did not take an active political role himself. Oz recalled endless political discussions within the family and the neighborhood at large. Schools were chosen for young Amos with some eye toward their political orientation, but scholarship came first. He retained a vivid sense of the role teachers had in shaping his literary ambitions by introducing him to the use of language by authors past and present. Family friends included Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the first Israeli to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, although Agnon's fondness for Jewish tradition made him unwelcome to Joseph Klausner.

While Oz was still living at home, it was impossible to avoid political factors in the world around him. World War II broke out within the first year of his life. Even after the defeat of Adolf Hitler, however, there was the more local issue of interaction with the Arab community. The young Amos had positive and negative relationships with various Arabs, but when political differences intensified, there was a separation that he could not help regretting. The partition plan from the United Nations that led to Israeli independence and the cre-



ation of a Jewish state in 1948 was achieved after many people had lost their lives, and Oz remembered the deaths of his friends in a way that left him ambivalent about Palestinian-Israeli relations.

Perhaps the most influential event of his youth, however, was the suicide of his mother when he was twelve. His mother seems to have felt increasingly isolated from the family and from the rest of the world, which did not match up to the imaginings of her childhood and her reading. While Oz remained at home for a year or two after his mother's death, it was one of the factors that led to a drastic alteration in his life. He left his father's home, went to live on a kibbutz (a collective farm which practiced the virtues of socialism on a day-to-day basis), and changed his last name to Oz (pronounced with a long *o*). The word *oz* is the Hebrew word for "strength," and it was partly intended to indicate that he was giving up on the world of his father, in which discussions went on interminably without resolution or action, and joining in the world of the young Israelis who were making the desert bloom.

Even in Kibbutz Hulda, however, Oz remained something of an outsider, still moved by words in a way that his contemporaries were not. After the customary range of activities on the kibbutz, he served in the Israeli army, during which time he met the Israeli prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. When his army service was over in 1960, he married Nily Zuckerman, whom he had met on the kibbutz and with whom he had three children. He received his undergraduate degree after studying at Hebrew University. After a number of years on the kibbutz, he and his family settled in Arad, Israel, which remained Oz's home even as he traveled around the world as a speaker and writer. He has held the chair in Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University, thereby fulfilling his father's dream for academic success.

Oz began writing for publication in the 1960's and has continued to produce both short stories and novels that have been translated into English and a variety of other languages. His first short-story collection, *Artsot hatan* (1965, revised edition 1976; *Where the Jackals Howl, and Other Stories*, 1981), came out in 1965. The next year saw his first novel, *Ma'kom a'her* (1966; *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, 1973), and the publication of *Mikha'el sheli* (*My Michael*, 1972) in 1968 was his first best seller. It was also his first book to be published in an English-language trans-

lation, although the earlier works were subsequently translated into English. His work has been recognized by many awards, such as the Bialik Prize, the Prix Femina, and the Israel Prize.

Beginning in the 1980's, Oz became more conspicuous because of his involvement with the Israeli peace movement. Despite his ambivalence about the cordiality of relationships between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Muslims, he accepted early on that there would have to be compromise and sacrifice on both sides. In his book *How to Cure a Fanatic* (2006), he argues for the importance of compromise on the part of both Israelis and Palestinians so that neither nation will have to lose its children in a continuing conflict. While his literary work does not portray Arabs in an especially sympathetic manner, his political opinions recognize the presence of Palestinians and the creation of a Palestinian state as an essential part of the solution.

## ANALYSIS

In his novels and other fiction, Amos Oz has worked out the experiences of his own life and the lives of his family and the Jewish community that came to Israel to create a Jewish state. His fiction about the current world contains echoes from generations past. He has also sought to find room for many Hebrew literary influences. Among the leading influences from his childhood, and especially through his mother, are Russian authors like Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevski, and Anton Chekhov. In addition, however, he has also managed to find room for the adventure stories of which his mother was fond, such as the novels of Jules Verne. Captain Nemo and Michael Strogoff, characters from Verne novels, also play a role in the imaginations of the characters in Oz's work.

Oz has tried to describe the atmosphere of the Palestine and Israel that he knows. In *Panther barmartef* (1994; *Panther in the Basement*, 1997), he captures the sense of being an adolescent in the last days of the British Mandate and the political uncertainties of that time. Other novels that describe families living through the years of Israeli independence do not paint a rosy picture of the country, even though the government has changed from British supervision to a Jewish state. If anything, Oz's characters are readier to complain about the state of things when their coreligionists are run-

ning the country than they were when they could not expect much from a British administration.

Oz portrays Israel and Israeli society as a family writ large. His experiences with his father's family and his mother's isolation from contemporary events shaped his later life, and his mother's suicide introduced an element of irrationality into his world. As a result, the female characters in Oz's novels often play a disruptive role, picking up the lives of those around them and shaking them until they arrive at a new configuration. In particular, Ilana, the central figure of *Kufsaḥ shehorah* (1987; *Black Box*, 1988), seems continually able to disrupt the lives of her first and second husbands, as well as her son, while the men in that novel seem able to reach an understanding with one another. Critics have sometimes criticized this attitude as misogynistic, but the female characters in Oz's fiction do not always leave a shattered world behind them.

Another element in Oz's fiction is the role played by the Arab characters, a group given special scrutiny because of Oz's political activity. While he has stood firm in his conviction for the need to compromise with the Arab population on the political scene, in his novels Arab characters often take on roles that are defined in the imaginations of the Jewish characters with whom they interact. In *My Michael*, for example, the narrator recalls the Arab boys with whom she spent her childhood with affection, but their role becomes increasingly threatening as the story proceeds. This may be an expression of the difficulty Oz felt in separating himself from the Arab friends of his childhood as political issues drove them apart.

Within Oz's fiction dwells the city of Jerusalem, where his early experiences in walking with his parents enabled him to appreciate the subtle differences between one neighborhood and another. There were the secular neighborhoods, the religious neighborhoods, the socialist neighborhoods, and the nationalist neighborhoods, and then there were the neighborhoods in which the non-Jewish population was ensconced. One of the reasons that Oz left his family as a teenager in order to live on a kibbutz was to live the Zionist dream of casting off the recollections of Eastern Europe and making their new country fruitful. His characters from the kibbutzim have the same problems as those who come from more traditional backgrounds.

The desert also plays a role in Oz's fiction. While the desert may seem threatening by virtue of its proximity to Arab territory, it is also a source of liberation from the constraints of the streets of Jerusalem. It is not surprising that he chose to live far from Jerusalem and close to the desert.

## MY MICHAEL

**First published:** *Mikha'el sheli*, 1968 (English translation, 1972)

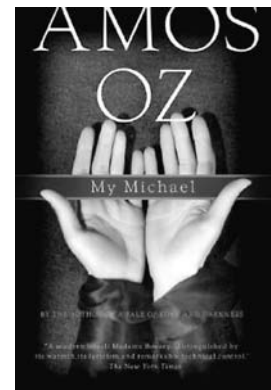
**Type of work:** Novel

*The narrator, a young Israeli woman of great imagination, marries a scientist and drifts away from him into the world of her own imagination.*

*My Michael* was the first of Oz's novels to enjoy wide sales in the original Hebrew-language edition and his first novel to be translated into English. The narrator of the book is often seen as a fictionalized version of Oz's mother, although the novel does not conclude with the narrator's death. Instead, the novel ends with the narrator's descent into a world of her own, where the visions that she described earlier take on an apocalyptic character. There is an air of destruction in the closing pages that is reminiscent of *Moby Dick* (1851), one of the novels that influenced Oz.

From the beginning of the book, there is a sense that the narrator and her husband, the Michael of the title, are mismatched. The warmth of their relationship is tepid, at best, and the wife maintains a sense of distance from her husband and from the subjects in which he is interested. The fact that he is a geologist, while she is a student of the humanities, serves as an excuse for her to ignore his scholarly work. When she eventually pays a visit to the university where he works, there is a sense on both of their parts that this is a merely a gesture of politeness.

Politeness is not something the narrator values in the dream world in which she comes increas-



ingly to reside. In that world, she sees herself as a queen, with servants like Michael Strogoff from Jules Verne's novel of that name and with foes out to destroy the realm over which she rules. She remembers an illness during her childhood when she was confined to bed and how much she enjoyed the solitude, being allowed to spend time with her dreams. In an adult world she still manages to find an excuse for succumbing to illness in order to keep the world at arm's length.

Almost the only character with whom the narrator interacts in a personal fashion is a teenage poet who lives nearby. She is inclined to tease him, but it may be partly because he is closer to the age at which she saw herself as happiest. Her effect on his life is disruptive, but he recovers and is sent off to a different environment. Her husband is unable to play a role in her imagination, and his efforts at restoring their relationship do not succeed. The failure of the narrator to fit into the world around her is characteristic of the disruptive effect of women characters in Oz's fiction.

Two characters that appear in her visions are Arab brothers whom she knew in childhood. From a relatively benign presence, they become more and more threatening, until by the end of the book they are cooperating with her in an effort to blow up Jerusalem. One can argue that these are Arab individuals, who, in reality, could easily be part of a constructive environment but who, in dreams, become dangerous allies. Even in the closing pages, Oz maintains a vision of the real Jerusalem that surrounds the narrator, while she is preoccupied with Danzig and other cities she knows only by name. The descent into madness takes place while the rest of the world goes on, and the internal life betrays its inhabitant.

## BLACK BOX

**First published:** *Kufsah shehorah*, 1987  
(English translation, 1988)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The correspondence of a woman, her former husband, and her current husband reveals how much playacting is involved in the words they exchange and the lives that they live.*

The "black box" of the title refers to the piece of equipment carried on airplanes that provides an exact recording of what goes on in the cockpit. It is designed to help investigators determine why an airplane crashed. In this novel, the black box is the sequence of letters and telegrams exchanged by the characters that provide an account of the actions they take and the motivations for those actions. By contrast with the black box on a plane, however, these communications are always subject to revision and contradiction, so that none of the characters or the reader can be sure of what can be believed.

Oz claims that he did not start out trying to write an epistolary novel, but that the characters and the action dictated the form as it went along. Unlike some of his earlier novels, which were centered entirely on Israel, the characters in this novel go to Europe and the United States, in part a recognition of the extent to which *yeridah* (emigration out of Israel) has become a feature of Jewish life.

Ilana initiates the correspondence by writing to Alec, her former husband, a successful military leader turned scholar, who has made a study of fanaticism and is now living in Chicago. Ilana's current husband, Michel, is an observant Jew, and her opening letter to Alec is full of protestations of love for Michel. The only reason she is writing her former husband, she claims, is out of concern for Boaz, the son the two had.

As the novel unfolds, almost every aspect of the initial letter becomes open to question, and the statements in subsequent letters from Ilana's former and current husbands express some of that uncertainty. Mixed in with the relationships between those three are Boaz, Alec's legal representative in Israel, and Ilana's sister. Alec is prepared to give his son some money, but he distrusts the influ-

ence of Michel, whom he sees as a fanatic. Alec's legal representative tries to corrupt Michel and succeeds admirably. The problem is that the corrupted Michel is still a human being, and he is puzzled by the extent to which his wife still seems captivated by her former husband.

Boaz takes on the responsibility of running a commune and wishes a plague on the houses of both his father and stepfather. Ilana admits to retaining an affection, with a strong physical component, for Alec, and she reunites with him by the end of the book, telling Michel that Alec is dying and needs someone to look after him. Michel is inclined to cite biblical texts in his correspondence, even if the point is not always clear to the recipient. The tone of Ilana's final letter to Michel echoes many of the details of her initial letter to Alec.

The men in this novel are characteristic of various aspects of Israeli society. Ilana, however, is a force capable of disrupting the men's lives and rearranging them as she chooses. After expressing herself in the strongest possible terms in a letter, she will admit in the next letter that what she had previously written was a lie. One detects an echo of the suicide of Oz's mother, deceiving those who thought she had not lost touch with the realities of life.

## A TALE OF LOVE AND DARKNESS

**First published:** *Sipur' al ahavah ve-hoshekh*, 2002 (English translation, 2004)

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*After a lifetime in which he refused to speak about his mother's suicide, Oz writes an autobiography of great complexity in which that event is the focus.*

In this autobiographical account of his family and his early life, Oz tries to penetrate the background that led to his mother's suicide when he was twelve and to his subsequent desertion from family tradition and even from his name. The "love" of the title refers to the crosscurrents of affection through his family and perhaps to the glimmerings of romance that become visible toward the

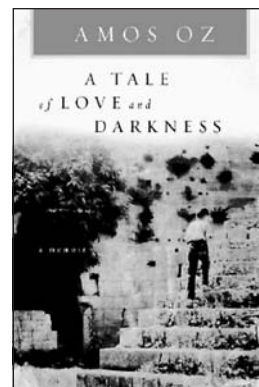
end of the book. While those unfamiliar with Oz's life may not know in advance what the "darkness" will be, there are plenty of moments at which the approaching suicide is foreshadowed.

The structure of the book is an exercise in symmetry. As this autobiography proceeds, it oscillates between events that occurred before he was born and from his early years to those in later life. The oscillations become narrower as the book proceeds, and it becomes clear only at the end of the book that their center is his mother's suicide.

While in his novels Oz was inclined to list the suburbs of Jerusalem, in this book he stretches the Hebrew language to its grammatical limits. Sentences run on at length to capture the actions of the characters and the responses of family members. The flavor of the Hebrew is well rendered into English by translator Nicholas de Lange, who has worked on Oz's novels for more than thirty years.

Oz describes the wealth of the intellectual heritage in which he grew up, but even as a child he is torn between the scholarship of his father and the tales brought by his mother from Europe and reminiscent of a countryside that he had never seen. As a child he was a part of a literary culture that included many of the eminent writers in Israel, including his own great-uncle. The life of scholarship by itself was not enough to attract Oz, perhaps because he saw the difficulty of his father in achieving the position he deserved. On the other hand, the tales that his mother told did not bring her happiness or change the world, so he could not see himself solely as an artist outside of political considerations.

The autobiographical elements serve to underscore the political convictions for which Oz is best known. Oz's uncle and cousin were killed by the Nazis, which serves as evidence for the inability of the Jews to trust European civilization, however much it may be appealing. In and around the Jews' own country of Israel, there are Arabs who seem



prepared to take Israeli lives for no purpose. As a result, Oz is not inclined to trust European civilization or his Arab neighbors. The Holocaust is evidence enough for why the Jews deserve a state of their own. While it may be hard on the Palestinians to have been displaced, the Israelis are not going to leave, but they need to accommodate the rights of their predecessors in that land. As a result, both Israelis and Palestinians must be prepared to give up something to attain peace; although neither side will be entirely happy or satisfied, the children of both nations will not be killed in the conflict and will be able to reach adulthood.

### SUMMARY

In his novels and nonfiction, Amos Oz reflects on aspects of Israeli life both before and after the War of Independence. His characters interact with the land around them and with the uncertainties of life for both Arabs and Jews. The creation of a Jewish state provides a refuge for the Jews but creates new problems because of the conflict with Palestinians.

The absence of solutions to these problems comes from the fact that societies are simply families on a larger scale. After thousands of years of living in families, human beings have yet to figure out how to communicate with one another or to promote the welfare of others. Oz describes how countries and societies are equally unable to communicate and to live together harmoniously.

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Do women have a positive role to play in Amos Oz's novels?
- Are there any examples of happy families in Oz's works? How is that a reflection of his own childhood?
- Oz changed his name when he left home to live in a kibbutz. Could he have written his novels under the burden of his birth name?
- Some observant Jews object to the portrayal of sexual scenes in Oz's books. Is that the only reason that they might find his novels unsympathetic?
- Why does Oz like to give lists of place names in his novels? Is this to add an air of realistic setting to a fictional narrative?
- Oz has compared Anton Chekhov's tragedies with those of William Shakespeare's and noted that, however unhappy the characters are in the former, they are alive at the end. Can one describe Oz's novels as tragedies in the Chekhovian mode?

Thomas Drucker

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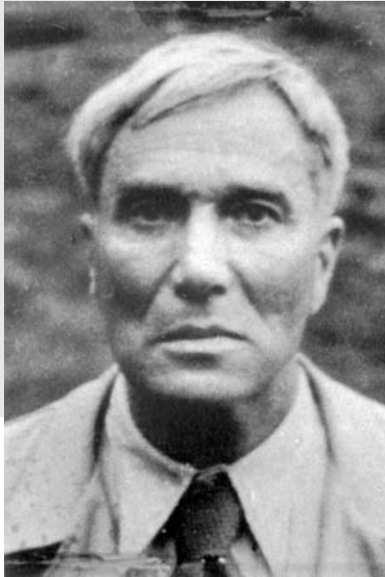
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## BORIS PASTERNAK

**Born:** Moscow, Russia

February 10, 1890

**Died:** Peredelkino, near Moscow, Soviet Union (now in Russia)

May 30, 1960

*Known outside Russia as a novelist, Pasternak was also a master of short fiction and one of Russia's greatest twentieth century poets.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Boris Leonidovich Pasternak (PAS-tur-nak) was born in Russia in the city of Moscow on February 10, 1890 (January 29 by the Julian calendar used in Russia until the Bolshevik Revolution of October, 1917). His family was well known and comfortable, his father, Leonid Pasternak, a famous artist and his mother, Rozaliya Kaufmann, a professional pianist. Young Boris grew up in a house frequently visited by writers, composers such as Aleksandr Scriabin and Sergei Rachmaninoff, painters, and scholars.

The young Pasternak studied philosophy and literature at Moscow University and took courses in musical composition at the famous Moscow Conservatory, hoping to become a professional musician. In 1912, he traveled to Marburg, Germany, where he studied European philosophy. He returned to Moscow and graduated from the university in 1913, yet he decided to become neither a musician nor a philosopher but chose to be a poet instead. His first book of verses, *Bliznets v tuchakh* (1914; a twin in rainclouds), was published a year later, and a second collection, *Poverkh barierov* (1917; *Above the Barriers*, 1959), appeared in 1917.

Exempted from military service, Pasternak spent most of World War I in the Ural Mountains. He returned to Moscow after the revolution of

February, 1917, that had swept away the czar's government. He was generally sympathetic with the revolution of October, 1917, which brought the Bolsheviks to power. During the years of revolution and civil war that followed, Pasternak wrote feverishly. He published *Sestra moia zhizn': Leta 1917 goda* (1922; *My Sister, Life*, 1964; also known as *Sister My Life*), his first broadly acclaimed book of poetry, in 1922 and another book of highly personal, extremely complex lyric verses, *Temy i variatsii* (1923; *Themes and Variations*, 1964), a year later. At the same time he was also writing prose, the best example being "Detstvo Liuvvers" (1923; "The Childhood of Liuvvers," 1945), which critics agree was the beginning of a novel.

In the mid-1920's, under pressure from Vladimir Mayakovsky, the official poet of the Bolshevik Revolution, Pasternak sought to change from his personal themes to more socially responsible writing. In 1923, he joined for a time Mayakovsky's Lef (left front of art), a group dedicated to putting modern art at the service of the revolution. He composed a verse "epic" about the first (aborted) Russian revolution of 1905, *Devyatsot pyaty' god* (1926; *The Year 1905*, 1989). In 1931, he published a novel in verse about the 1917 revolution.

Pasternak's first marriage was breaking up about this same time, which may explain in part why at the end of the 1920's he started an autobiography, *Okhrannaya gramota* (1931; *Safe Conduct*, 1945). The last part of this book describes his youthful fascination with Mayakovsky and the shock produced by the Soviet poet's suicide in

April, 1930. With the verses of *Vtoroye rozhdeniye* (1932; *Second Birth*, 1964) Pasternak turned away from the extreme complexity of his earlier writing.

He attempted to play the role of officially sanctioned poet, making speeches and traveling in a Soviet delegation to Paris in 1935. As the terror unleashed by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin intensified, however, Pasternak found it prudent to cease efforts to publish original poetry and instead turned his attention to translating. Holding himself to a high standard, Pasternak translated from English, German, Georgian, and at least four other languages. Among his translations are William Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603), *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608), *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622), and *Romeo and Juliet* (pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1597), which remain the accepted Russian translations to this day.

With the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 came an easing of restrictions on writers. Pasternak managed to publish two more books of his verses, *Narannikh poezdakh* (1943; *On Early Trains*, 1964) in 1943 and two years later *Zemnoy prostor* (1945; *The Vastness of Earth*, 1964). Both reflect his developing interest in Christian morality. He suffered a heart attack in 1953, after years of intensifying political criticism and the arrest of his third wife, Olga Ivinskaya.

In 1956, he submitted a novel *Doktor Zhivago* to the journal *Novy Mir* for publication but was refused. The manuscript was taken out of the Soviet Union, translated, and published in Italy in 1957; an English translation, *Doctor Zhivago*, appeared in 1958. A masterpiece, the novel did not adhere to the official ideology of the Soviet government. Pasternak was awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958 and was subjected to a hail of abuse from literary officials in the Soviet Union, some calling for his exile. He was compelled to refuse the prize and to petition Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev to be allowed to remain in his homeland. He died at the end of May, 1960, and was buried in a ceremony attended by thousands of admirers. His beloved wife Olga was rearrested and sentenced to prison a short time later.

## ANALYSIS

Pasternak's creative work is traditionally divided into two periods, with the break coming around

1932-1934. In the earlier period, he was a full-fledged member of a school of writing that demanded innovation in poetic form above all. Innovation could come at the price of obscure or difficult work. In the later period, Pasternak openly repudiated much of his earlier work, claiming that it had been unnecessarily obscure, and that simplicity and clarity were indispensable characteristics of all meaningful writing.

In the years before World War I, Pasternak took part in the heated arguments among Russia's poets about the future of art. Like mathematicians of the late nineteenth century, who had started to examine shapes that exist not in three but in four or more dimensions, or atomic physicists who claimed that matter is made up of many essentially empty submicroscopic particles, poets and other artists no longer felt that merely reproducing the outward appearances of things, the goal of realism, was an ambitious enough task. Pasternak for a time was drawn to the Futurists, a group of poets who believed that the so-called great writers of the past should be discarded along with their way of writing poetry. In Russia, this would mean the end of well-wrought lyrical sentiments or philosophical statements expressed in elegantly rhymed and measured verses. Pasternak was especially drawn to one of the leaders of the Futurists, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who by 1913 was already known in Russia for his flamboyant personal behavior and extravagantly egocentric poetry filled with stunning metaphors and exaggerated emotion. Pasternak soon decided to follow his own path, yet with the Futurists he learned to regard poetry as the free manipulation of the material of language, undertaken to explore truths beyond the logical definitions of words.

There were personal as well as historical reasons for the daunting complexity of Pasternak's early writing. His early interest in philosophy had led him to some unconventional ideas about what are normally accepted as givens, such as the relationship between cause and effect. This extended to artistic creation as well. Very early in his career, Pasternak became convinced that poems found their author and not the other way around. For him and his contemporaries as for the Romantic writers in the nineteenth century, the world was teeming with symbols, not merely lofty, conventionally poetic ones, but emphatically mundane ones that pressed themselves on the receptive

mind of the poet and served to uncover the secret connection of all things in the world. When he wrote in one poem that poetry is “a night that covers leaves in hoarfrost,” he meant that such nights are true poetry in themselves as well as signs showing the inner workings of poetry. Both were things of fragile beauty wrought in the cold and dark where they must remain or else melt away and disappear.

At the same time he believed that the poetic mind itself reverses the usual causal order and brings about changes in reality by mere perception. He wrote in his first autobiography, *Safe Conduct*, that in art there is “a record of a shift in reality brought on by emotion.” Emotions cause the connections between a word and its logical meanings to weaken. Suddenly the similarities in the sound of two words shows them closer together than previously realized. In his rhymes and other sound repetitions (assonances and alliterations), Pasternak is a master at revealing these striking, multilayered similarities. In one poem he explores in a single line the suggestive sound patterning and logical connections in the Russian words for “tear,” “blind,” “dry,” and “salt”: *slyezy*, *slyepa*, *vysyxli*, and *sol*, though the line itself seems a puzzle, the solution of which is just out of reach: “Salt went blind. And tears dried.”

Many passages of Pasternak’s earlier writing will show the reader this kind of splintered world, the parts of which seem to have nothing in common. Often the reader must put the poet-perceiver back into the middle of this maelstrom of perceptions to glean sense. In Pasternak’s prose, for example, the word “however” is used to join two notions that have no other discernable connection than that they have occurred to the same person. For this reason the great Russian language theorist Roman Jakobson said that Pasternak’s work depends more than most writing on metonymy, that is, the relationship of things by their physical contiguity. A character in a story may, for example, think of two disparate events or objects otherwise unrelated to one another. There is great humanizing power to this approach in that, in this way, Pasternak continually underscores the uniqueness of the experience of every sentient being. This uniqueness of perception (and therefore experience) is crucial for people caught up in the mass destruction of war, civil strife, and Soviet collectivization of everything from farms to poetry cafés.

It was the abject ugliness of Soviet life that set Pasternak, in the second half of his life, to consider the link between a sense of beauty and moral behavior. He evolved the notion, set forth in living detail in *Doctor Zhivago*, that poetry, in seeking to show the contiguities that link objects and ideas, is a moral act. It is an expression of faith in the worthiness of this world and a belief that unifying love is stronger than forces that demand murder of one’s enemies or, failing that, suicide.

### “DEFINITION OF POETRY”

**First published:** “Opredelenie poezii,” 1922  
(collected in *My Sister, Life*, 1964)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In a list of oblique but revealing intuitions, a word painting of poetry’s nature takes shape.*

This poem appears in Pasternak’s *My Sister, Life*, a collection of poems that is among his most popular with Russian readers. It is placed at the beginning of a section of the book called “An Exercise in Philosophy,” but it has little in common with abstract thinking about art.

The outer form of “Definition of Poetry” is conventional: four four-line stanzas. Each line is made up of three anapestic feet, that is, two weakly accented syllables followed by a strongly accented one, as in the word “Montreal.” In the first eight lines of the poem, seven finely chiseled images are arranged in neat verses. At the middle of them, Pasternak sharpens a gentle, timeworn poetic image with the claim that poetry is “two nightingales dueling.” He seems to say that to write poetry is not just to record moments of one’s intuition. Instead, it is the struggle of two equals, a vision that sees new connections.

Pasternak’s methods are not always readily apparent in translation. The rhythm is symbolic in itself, but almost impossible to reflect accurately. To the Russian listener, this particular meter creates an impression of solemn pronouncements, of a finger regularly stabbing the paper while pointing out inescapable truths. It tends, after a time, toward monotony, as does all sententiousness. Pasternak plays a game with the high seriousness of his topic,

at times enhancing the solemnity, such as in the repetitions of “it is,” at other times allowing the images to clash with the staid meter. Ambivalent feelings about his theme are hinged neatly at the very middle of the poem, where he concludes that poetry is “Figaro crashing like a hailstorm down from music stands and flutes into a flowerbed below.”

Translation creates another problem for Pasternak’s reader in that the presence of certain words in his poetry is not motivated by logical dictionary definitions. Instead, words appear because they share similar sounds with other words. This similarity suggested to Pasternak and many of his contemporaries that the things such similar words refer to must also be somehow related. The word for “peas” is connected in this way in the poem with the word for “being overgrown” and in turn to “deepness” and then “deafness.” Then the pea pods are opened, where poetry, now tears of the universe, is found. The Russian for “tears” and “universe” are related by sound. Pasternak claimed that nature very often affirmed his intuitions about these secret connections. Indeed, if one breaks open a pea pod freshly picked in the garden, inside one finds a crystalline drop of sap, silently reflecting all that surrounds it.

## SAFE CONDUCT

**First published:** *Okhrannaya gramota*, 1931  
(English translation, 1945)

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*The poet examines the people and experiences that confirmed the choice of a life in poetry.*

*Safe Conduct* is the earlier of Pasternak’s two autobiographies. The quirky method of its composition demonstrates, no less than Pasternak’s prose fiction, the persistence of his search for poetry in life as he lived it. As a story about a person’s life it is a puzzling work. There is little discussion of his family life; there is only a weak story line with few dates to help situate the seemingly disjointed events. The writing at times is like Pasternak’s early poetry. Cause and effect are often turned around so that, for example, the spring months strive to invent the earth so that they would have somewhere

to return each year, and steam whistles carry trains through mountain tunnels.

In the first of the book’s three parts, Pasternak describes his boyhood through the impressions made on him by a family friend, the Russian composer Aleksandr Scriabin. The point of view is not that of a middle-aged writer reflecting on his past, but rather of the precocious teenager Pasternak was at the time. As one would expect from a dreaming adolescent, the importance of events is exaggerated. He allows his future in music (for which from the age of two he had studied for fifteen years) to be decided by an offhand answer to a question put to his idol, Scriabin. He also makes the penetrating observation that his poetry was unique, perhaps, because for the first decade and a half of his life he abstained from words for the sake of sound (that is, for music).

In the second part, Pasternak tells of his days as a philosophy student at the university in Marburg, Germany, and then as a tourist in Italy. This serves as a point of departure for musings on the nature of art, to which he would eventually dedicate his life. Pasternak sees poetry, his name for any perceived beauty, as nothing less than transcendence. To tell truths, he writes, is to be captured in time. Life moves on and truths change, but to capture the image of an instant is to preserve truth for eternity. Emphasizing the passivity of the artist, he often said this poetry was not created but came freely to the poet, an idea borrowed from German Romantic thinkers of the nineteenth century.

This leads logically to the topic of the third part, which is a kaleidoscopic portrait of the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had killed himself the year before *Safe Conduct* was published. True to Pasternak’s tendency to capture the essence of an object by examining what is connected to it, he communicates the uniqueness of Mayakovsky’s poetic gift by observing the awe it engendered in those around him.

*Safe Conduct* stands at approximately the middle of Pasternak’s life as a poet. He was then just a year over forty and at the end of his first marriage. He was nearing the end of his illusions about the direction that the Russian revolution had taken. More important for his poetry, he was beginning to realize he would have to write in a new way. The task would be the same: finding a name for the moment at which the poet suddenly sees the world as it has



never before been seen. The name, Pasternak was coming to realize, must be as transparent to the understanding of all as a biblical parable.

## DOCTOR ZHIVAGO

**First published:** *Doktor Zhivago*, 1957  
(English translation, 1958)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Russian physician, in the midst of storms of war and revolution, struggles to return harmony to his world through poetry.*

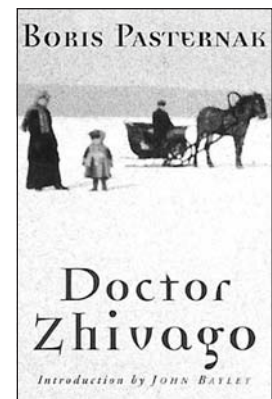
*Doctor Zhivago* is Pasternak's last major work of prose fiction and represents a kind of summing up of all the beliefs that had survived with him through the fires of two revolutions, two world wars, a vicious civil war, the Sovietization of Russia, and Joseph Stalin's oppression. He wrote the novel in part because he had survived when most of his fellow writers had not. In death they joined the perhaps forty million Soviet citizens killed in wars, famine, or concentration camps.

Pasternak's main intent is to show the mass of interconnections tying the hero, Urij Zhivago, to the whole of Russia. The great number of characters brought on stage are all shown to be connected, however tangentially, to him. Family members, friends, and officials who decide his fate or that of his friends and family are all linked to Zhivago. Improbable coincidences bring characters together across vast spaces. This continues Pasternak's lifelong tendency to examine in his writing the sometimes invisible links that make the world an organic whole. The novel is not explicitly political; it was seen as an affront to Soviet authoritarian ideology, with its cult of the Communist Party and its contempt for all other groups.

The names Pasternak gives his characters reflect their relationship to life itself: Zhivago (the living) recalls the gospel story of the resurrection: "Why seek thee the living among the dead?" His lover, Lara (from "laurel"), is life's reward for the true poet, the perfect example of Russian womanhood. Her family, Russified Belgians, represents the debt owed to the rest of Europe for some of the best things in Russia. Komarovsky, a Bolshevik function-

ary and formerly a rapacious businessman who seduced Lara in her youth, has a name derived from the Russian for "mosquito." Pasha Antipov, a young intellectual and Lara's husband, has a good Russian surname, but upon becoming a revolutionary he takes an underground code name, Strelnikov (the gunman). These are only the novel's most obvious symbols. As in a good poem, every detail of the novel can be shown to have symbolic importance. Zhivago's escape with his family from turmoil in Moscow eastward to the Urals is covered by a concealing blanket of snow. So too are his brief moments of bliss with Lara insulated from the menacing surroundings by heavy snow. Candles burn throughout the novel as a symbol of the passion for life. Lara and Pasha, linked by the traditional folk image of the blood-red rowanberry, eventually perish, victims of Stalin's blood lust. The railroad is perhaps symbolic of Pasternak's method. It runs through the entire novel, linking one set of characters or episodes with the others.

Zhivago is like many Russian literary heroes, a weak man endowed with a poetic soul. What makes this novel a unique and important event in Russian literature is that this hero does not just talk about, recite, or feel poetry; he has the power to re-create through his writing what he has seen and felt. The last chapter in the book includes twenty-five poems of searing beauty ostensibly composed by Zhivago at various stages in the novel's progress. They prove by their existence poetry's unique ability to preserve, and in the end to resurrect, what has been: love, courage, longing, beauty, and faith.



## SUMMARY

Boris Pasternak asks his reader to make a radical reevaluation of what passes for everyday reality. He insisted that all poetry, in which he included both verse and prose, tends to the realistic because the poet "does not invent metaphors, rather they are found in nature ready to be reproduced." A poet's originality is to be prized, but not as if it were cre-

ation itself. It is precisely when poets, like his idol Vladimir Mayakovsky, turn to helping earthly powers create facts that they lose their poetic vision, crush their talent, and neutralize their moral sense.

Lawrence K. Mansour

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*Slepaya krasavitsa*, pb. 1969 (*The Blind Beauty*, 1969)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What philosophical influences on Boris Pasternak made his continued adherence to Bolshevik principles impossible?
- What resemblances are there between the patterns of Pasternak's poetic images and those of T. S. Eliot?
- What might account for the fact that Pasternak's poetry has had less impact than *Doctor Zhivago* on non-Russian readers?
- What resemblances are there between Pasternak's and Leo Tolstoy's ways of conveying history through fiction?
- Did Soviet censors in effect assure the worldwide popularity of *Doctor Zhivago*?

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## ALAN PATON

**Born:** Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa  
January 11, 1903

**Died:** Botha's Hill, Natal, South Africa  
April 12, 1988

*Gifted and compassionate, Paton made the world understand the tragedy of South African apartheid and the oppressive exploitation, racist intolerance, greed, and fear that destroy a nation's soul.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alan Stewart Paton (PAT-uhn) was born in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa, on January 11, 1903. He attended high school at Maritzburg College, received a bachelor of science from the University of Natal in 1923 with distinction in physics, and was student representative to the first Imperial Conference of Students in London. He taught privileged youngsters mathematics and chemistry at Ixopo High School, Natal, from 1925 to 1928, then joined the staff of Maritzburg College in 1928. He married Doris Francis the same year; they had two children.

Stricken with enteric fever, he redirected his life and in 1935 became the principal of Johannesburg's Diepkloof Reformatory for some four hundred delinquent African youths. He immediately instituted major changes to upgrade their quality of life, restore their dignity, encourage improved behavior, and provide job training and paid work opportunities. A decade later, in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), a pleasant, young reformatory counselor proudly describes these enlightened policies. *Debbie Go Home* (1961; published in the United States as *Tales from a Troubled Land*, 1961) also recounts reformatory life. Success at Diepkloof earned Paton an international reputation for penal reform. Ineligible for military duty, he be-

came the wartime chair of the combined Young Men's Christian Association and Toc H War Services. In 1942, he was appointed to the Anglican Diocesan Commission to report on church and race; the next year, he began a series of articles on crime, punishment, and penal reform for *Forum*. In 1946, while studying correctional institutions in Europe, the United States, and Canada, he wrote *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which he says poured from his soul.

In 1948, when the proapartheid National Party won the election, Paton resigned from Diepkloof to serve as honorary commissioner for Botha's Hill, Natal; to head the antiapartheid Liberal Party until the government banned interracial parties in 1968; and, much like Arthur Jarvis in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, to write about injustice and responsibility. In 1954, he toured the United States, writing on race relations for *Collier's*, receiving a doctorate in humanities from Yale University (the first in a long series of honorary degrees), and addressing the World Council of Churches. In 1956, as trustee of the Treason Trial Defense Fund, he gave mitigating evidence on behalf of Nelson Mandela and other black Africans. He received a bachelor's of education from the University of Natal in 1966, the year the Defense and Aid Fund was banned. His wife, Doris, died in 1967; two years later he married Anne Hopkins. He founded and edited *Reality: A Journal of Liberal Opinion*, served as honorary president of the South African National Union of Students, and opposed foreign sanctions and divestiture as means of combating apartheid. In 1977, he lectured at the University of Michigan at Flint,

Western Michigan University, and Michigan State University. Despite heart surgery in 1982, he celebrated his eightieth birthday by touring the western United States. In 1986, he lectured at Harvard and La Salle universities. He received numerous awards for writing about and supporting human rights. He died at home in Botha's Hill on April 12, 1988. A social, religious, and antiapartheid political activist, he was too actively engaged in the obligations of life to achieve the level of literary production of which he was capable.

### ANALYSIS

Paton accurately labeled his works "a compound of truth and fiction," for these fictional treatments of South African realities are firmly based in Paton's own experiences as a youth growing up in Natal and working in Johannesburg, a city of which the omniscient narrator of *Cry, the Beloved Country* says, "No second Johannesburg is needed upon the earth. One is enough." The changes wrought by the discovery of gold at Odendaalsrust; the miners' strike for better treatment, higher wages, and the right to be near their families; increased rates of prostitution, crime, and violence; the benign policies of the Diepkloof Reformatory; the legal consequences of the "Immorality Act" on interracial affairs; and Afrikaner fear of an overpowering black majority—these are historical threads of truth worked into the fabric of Paton's fictional depiction of the personal consequences of such events and patterns. *Tales from a Troubled Land* captures the pain of being "colored," accepted by neither whites nor blacks, while "A Drink in a Passage" explores a favorite Paton theme: racial opposites crossing social barriers to make tentative, fleeting personal contact.

Paton's unique, modern style blends Western and African patterns and themes. It builds on strategies and concerns from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—fragmented voices, interwoven symbolic images, a vague sense of futility and loss, the disruption of natural harmony, progression toward decay, pollution, and erosion, communication breakdowns, alienation, dying children, and hollow men. South African critics find the characters' speech an English re-creation of Zulu sounds and syntax, pointing to techniques others have labeled "biblical" or "Greek"; they note an economy of dic-

tion, a heavy reliance on repetition and parallelism, a formality and stateliness that lend weight and dignity to simple words, a preference for proverbs and aphorisms, and a use of metaphors connecting humankind, earth, and plants. The description of Msimangu's speech typifies this "biblical" or "Zulu" pattern, with its repetition of "voice . . . of gold," its image of a voice like "a deep hollow bell": "it was the voice of a man whose heart was golden, reading from a book of golden words." The words capture a mystical sense of rural wisdom and traditional oral storytelling. *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) echoes the motifs and patterns of Greek tragedy as it depicts the inner struggle of a divided soul—war hero, soccer star, police lieutenant, and father, but also sexually driven breaker of social and legal taboos, tragically destroyed by pride and passion.

When Paton describes the land past or future, his voice rings lyrical and mellifluous. A dramatic quality infuses his language and plots. Paton's style changes to fit voice; short, sharp alternating lines of stichomythia heighten dramatic tension and capture contrasting perspectives. His dramatic vignettes turn on the complexity and irrationality of behavior and motive—for example, Gertrude, a prostitute and would-be nun.

Thematically, Paton explores words and acts that divide fathers and sons, and failed reconciliations. For example, Stephen Kumalo in *Cry, the Beloved Country* loses his beloved son to the city and cannot comprehend his deeds. James Jarvis, in the same book, fails to take his son seriously until death separates them but resolves that contact with his grandson will be closer. Jacob van Vlaanderen's harsh punishment of young Pieter for his failure to achieve scholastic superiority in *Too Late the Phalarope* leads to permanent estrangement. The black father in "The Waste Land" finds himself forced, in self-defense, to kill one of three young robbers who pursue him through a junkyard; the youth proves to be the man's own son.

Contemtuously of authoritarianism and compelled by a deep-seated love of freedom, Paton studies crime and punishment, justice and law in novels featuring trials. The accused in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a product of bad laws that speed the disintegration of tribal values, deserves punishment, although perhaps not to the degree awarded. The accused in *Too Late the Phalarope*,



however, is victimized by the fear, ignorance, jealousy, and righteous indignation of his fellow citizens. Other concerns raised in Paton's books are the devastating effects of the migration of rural populations to urban industrial wastelands, the inhuman plight of squatters and shantytown dwellers, and the Afrikaner's obsession with racial purity. Paton captures and holds the imagination by delving into the secret heart of humanity and infusing personal desolation with a sense of hope despite obstacles.

Paton's depiction of Napoleon Letsitsi, an agricultural demonstrator, typifies this balance of faith and despair. The young man is the answer to Stephen Kumalo's prayers for renewed values and restoration of a lost past. Letsitsi transforms the land step by step but understands the practical difficulties of the ruined soil, the sullen, silent villagers myopically centered on immediate personal advantage, and unchecked population growth that could undo all progress. He is one of Africa's new men, educated, and employed by whites, but looking to an Africa in which black Africans also have a say in what will happen to them and their land. Paton lets him have the final words of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, words of hope but also of the need for responsibility.

## CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY

**First published:** 1948

**Type of work:** Novel

*When a black clergyman's son murders a white landowner's son, together the grieving fathers battle the ignorance, poverty, and racism that divide their nation.*

The title of *Cry, the Beloved Country* echoes throughout the book. It first appears as a lament after the senseless murder of Arthur Jarvis, a courageous young white South African, a dedicated, enlightened fighter for justice for African blacks. His death forms an irony central to Paton's argument, an irony best stated by the Reverend Msimangu, who fears that when the whites finally turn to "loving," blacks will already have turned irreconcilably to "hating." Jarvis was shot by a frightened Zulu youth (one of three would-be robbers) while writ-

ing an impassioned treatise arguing that the white South African's destruction of the tribal system and its failure to offer anything positive in its place was the reason that black youths resorted to crime. The dead man's moving, sympathetic analyses of white-black relationships gone awry, read posthumously by his father to understand the stranger who was his son, provides clear intellectual statements of what Paton suggests dramatically through sad, lyric passages bemoaning the black experience. In a dramatic rendering of the black African heart, Paton uses multiple voices: "Cry for the broken tribe, for the law and the custom gone," cry for the dead and bereaved, but most of all "Cry, the beloved country" for the violence, death, separation, and suffering "not yet at an end." The "cry" continues through descriptions of the injustices and daily humiliations of apartheid, the senseless cries and the anguish deeply felt.

The cry encapsulates the fears of a rural people who have lost a traditional way of life and who move among strangers in a disorienting urban wasteland, its rules and customs not their own. Paton effectively communicates general fear and despair through individual fear and despair—the brother whose sister turns prostitute, the father whose wayward son missteps, the mother whose infant dies from starvation and disease. His lines, "Cry . . . for the unborn . . . inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply," verbalize another poignant thematic concern: the contrast between a land of poetic beauty "lovely beyond any singing of it" and the ugliness of the overgrazed, scorched, eroded valleys of the black reserves, where the titihoya cries no more and the red hills stand desolate, their "red blood" streaming away. Paton draws parallels between earth and humankind, with the ravaged soil no longer able to support the men and women who stream into the cities on a tide of blood.

Despite shifting perspectives and a dramatic rendering of multiple and dissonant voices, the novel centers on the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, a simple, devout rural Zulu clergyman from Ndotsheni, and his disturbing contact with Johannesburg, the boomtown where all roads lead. His eyes record the breakdown of community and values, the disintegration of a people. The story begins with Kumalo receiving a disturbing letter from a fellow clergyman, Msimangu, urging him to come

to Johannesburg to assist his “sick” sister, Gertrude. The trip is costly, but Kumalo decides to make the sacrifice and perhaps, at the same time, find news of his son and of his brother, both of whom disappeared into the shantytowns of Johannesburg long before.

Kumalo’s first quest ends quickly, and, with the help of his new friend Msimangu, Kumalo rescues his sister and her daughter from the squalor and shame of prostitution and alcohol. His second quest, for his son, proves far more difficult. During it, he rescues from potential disaster his son’s girlfriend, pregnant with his grandchild. He also finds his missing brother, a self-important man who has rejected his roots and whose stirring oratory gives him

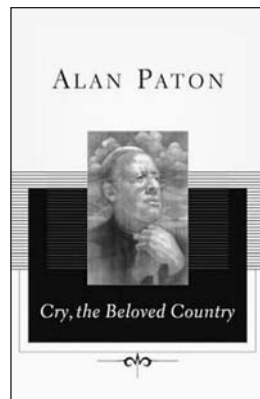
great destructive powers, powers he is too cowardly to use fully against the white establishment he privately denounces. He has no real loyalties and is easily corrupted, as he later proves when his own son is accused as an accessory to murder. Everywhere Kumalo hears disturbing tales of his son but fails to find him. His search provides Paton with the opportunity to explore Johannesburg and its people. Caught up in a bus strike, Kumalo is persuaded against public transportation by those committed to change. He witnesses the forces that built a shantytown overnight. He shares in the pain and loss of the city’s black citizens. He hears of exploitation in the gold mines but also experiences the kindness of white strangers who go out of their way to give him a lift, who maintain model schools for blind natives, and who take pride in the good wrought in the “reformed” juvenile reformatories. When Kumalo finally finds his son, he is too late to save him, for young Absalom Kumalo has unquestionably murdered Arthur Jarvis out of fear and greed. His trial is swift but just, and, despite the counsel of a white attorney who works “pro deo” (for God), he is condemned to death—a sad young man in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong friends. His words of repentance are empty in the face of his deed and his fear. His father tries to redeem what

he can, arranging a marriage to legitimize his grandchild-to-be, taking his new daughter-in-law’s child home with him, but he cannot help a son infected by city ways and needs.

The first part of the book depends on the relationship between the two clerics, on the kindness and understanding between them as they deal with a changing world in which they feel increasingly alienated. There is strength in their hopes and dignity in their efforts to cope. Msimangu tells Kumalo, “Something is happening that no Bishop can stop.” Ultimately, Msimangu opts for the monastic life and, in a last act of goodwill, gives Kumalo his entire savings. Kumalo, in turn, returns home to face parishioners with his son’s misdeeds.

The second part of the book depends on the relationship between James Jarvis, the father of the murdered, and the father of the murderer, Stephen Kumalo. Kumalo is appalled that his son has killed a man dedicated to improving conditions for black Africans. Neither the parish members nor James Jarvis blames the father. At first, Jarvis wants revenge. After understanding the depth of Kumalo’s suffering and studying his own son’s life and writings, however, he realizes that the best memorial is to practice his dead son’s beliefs, to take the first steps to account for past injustices. Inspired by a grandson very much like his dead son, Jarvis sends milk to hungry children, assigns an agricultural demonstrator to restore soil fertility, replaces bad seed with good, and begins building a dam to assure land restoration. After a wet night with Kumalo in the leaky wooden church, he vows to build a new one. Critics find Jarvis’s generosity unrealistic, but Paton modeled him on a true benefactor, Acting Prime Minister Jan Hofmeyr, who unselfishly endowed programs to assist the education and training of black Africans and whose biography Paton wrote.

Paton makes convincing the unspoken communication between the two saddened fathers. His novel ends hopefully, with both fathers vowing to fight the moral paralysis that grips their land and to build constructively on the ruins of tragedy. Jarvis’s grandson learns the Zulu language and empathizes with its speakers. Jarvis is committed to transforming his valley and to assisting the natives who share it. Kumalo goes into the mountains to await his son’s dawn execution. His final cry is a lament for the lost, wasted lives of Africa’s wayward sons;



but it is also a cry of hope for a future of bettered relationships, of revitalized land, of a dawn for black Africans. Kumalo sees darkness still engulfing the land—"the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear"—but believes the dawn of black emancipation must come as the morning dawn "has come for a thousand centuries, never failing." *Cry, the Beloved Country* is a paean to Africa: its misery, its suffering, its beauty, and its potential.

Paton offers no simple solutions, no positive answers, only individual courage, personal responsibility, and an uncertain hope that someday blacks and whites, untouched by greed, will work together for the good of a country that is theirs together. His well-rounded characters are complex individuals with strengths and weaknesses. Kumalo may be named for the saintly martyr Stephen, but his anger and urge to punish sometimes overpower his Christian charity. Paton condemns a social order destructive of human values and life but also emphasizes individual differences that make one person choose right, no matter how difficult, and another choose wrong, no matter how much help, encouragement, or support he or she receives.

## SUMMARY

Alan Paton's literary creations are inseparable from South Africa and its politics. As Edward Callan so aptly states, the vision of his novels encompasses South Africa's nationwide conflict "between black aspirations to human dignity and white fears for the loss of power and privilege." His writings—most particularly *Cry, the Beloved Country*—speak to the heart in a simple, clear, dramatic way that cannot be ignored. They are intellectually honest, infused with a love of Africa, and exhibit a belief in the essential dignity of all humankind and a sadness at the suffering of a people and nation. They capture the human condition, looking uncompromisingly at desolation, despair, cruelty, violence, and fear yet finding hope in small acts of kindness, in a bird's song, in fleeting moments of interracial understanding. As long as differences of race, color, or creed produce oppression, *Cry, the Beloved Country* will continue to be read as avidly as it has been read since its publication.

Gina Macdonald

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did Alan Paton's early career prepare him for the novels he wrote?
- What aspects of Paton's literary style have impressed critics most?
- Demonstrate the influence of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) on Paton.
- Examine the wisdom of fathers in *Cry, the Beloved Country*.
- Cite "small acts of kindness" that make a difference in Paton's novels.
- What events since Paton's death have substantiated the hope that he felt for his native land?

## CESARE PAVESE

**Born:** Santo Stefano Belbo, Italy  
September 9, 1908

**Died:** Turin, Italy  
August 27, 1950

*One of the leading writers of post-World War II Italy, Pavese produced short stories, novels, and poems that underscore the essential loneliness of the individual.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The rugged hill country of the Italian Piedmont was not only the region where Cesare Pavese (pah-VAY-say) was born and spent his childhood but a source for the writer's imagination throughout his brief career. When Pavese was only six years old, his father died, leaving him and his older sister to be raised by a mother who, the writer implies in his journal, was domineering and abusive. Later, critics were to question this picture of his mother, suggesting that Pavese dramatized his account in a journal he meant ultimately to be published. In any case, his mother saw to it that Cesare was given a good education in first-rate schools in Turin.

The young man proved a scholarly and creative student, though his teacher and mentor, Augusto Monti, was quick to discern a streak of morbidity, an unhealthy melancholy, in his star pupil. Already at fifteen, Pavese was becoming depressed and solitary. He read widely, especially the Romantic poets of the period.

By the time Pavese entered the University of Turin at the age of eighteen, he had become convinced that suffering was necessary to the production of art. A writer, he believed, confirms his or her art by the act of pain, emotional, intellectual, and physical. At the university he was attracted to American literature. Though the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini ignored American studies for political reasons, Pavese was a private, self-absorbed intellectual, indifferent to politics. He enjoyed the colloquial breeziness of American English and among his favorite writers were Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Ernest Hemingway. He also read heavily in the Greek and Roman classics.

Pavese's mother died in 1930. Pavese considered going to the United States but never pursued the idea. By the early 1930's, he had joined the Fascist party—not out of a sense of political conviction but from a need to earn a living. He wanted to teach and needed a state-approved license.

Of more significance, however, was Pavese's association at this period with a circle of intellectuals, among whom were his old mentor, Monti, and a group of editors and writers. Antifascists, they favored the advancement of Italian culture through exposure to foreign ideas. *La cultura*, the magazine devoted to this aim, featured articles on American writers by Pavese. Meanwhile, he was teaching in the public schools and his position as translator and young critic was building him modest recognition.

This recognition soon brought him before the Fascist authorities. For having been editor of *La cultura* for a brief time, Pavese was arrested as a radical. In 1934, he was sentenced to three years' exile in Calabria, southern Italy. Increasingly despondent and introspective, Pavese began his journal. *Il mestiere di vivere: Diario, 1935-1950* (1952; *The Burning Brand: Diaries, 1935-1950*, 1961; also known as *The Business of Living*), was published posthumously. The entries of this period show a petulant, sardonic personality. He felt alone and abandoned. He had fallen in love, but the relationship ended with Pavese in yet deeper despair.

Released after eight months, Pavese returned to Turin. His first important work, *Lavorare stanca* (1936; *Hard Labor*, 1976), was published in 1936. Though original, it failed to gain immediate recognition. By the late 1930's, Pavese had no real job



and little income. The instability of his career as a part-time editor, translator, and critic deepened his melancholy; his journal of the time shows him on the verge of suicide.

In spite of such personal torment—or perhaps because of it—Pavese wrote and published several novels. *Paesi tuoi* (1941; *The Harvesters*, 1961), was begun in 1939 and appeared in 1941. Another novel, *Il carcere* (1949; *The Political Prisoner*, 1959), was obviously inspired by his exile in remote Calabria; its central idea of confinement reflects more of a personal alienation than a merely physical one. The theme of solitude and self-doubt is at the heart of most of his work.

The decade of the 1940's was to be the most productive of Pavese's career. In the span of ten years, he published nine novels, a collection of short stories, and a volume of poetry. He also continued to translate English-language works, including novels by William Faulkner and Gertrude Stein. His sense of English idiom fueled his own experiments in a colloquial Italian style.

As World War II advanced and brought social chaos to the country, Pavese was horrified and repelled. He joined the Communist Party in a half-hearted attempt to assert his need to feel politically and morally responsive to the suffering and injustice about him. He was not, however, a political creature. Privately he began to escape into a world of literary theory and contemplation.

By 1944, Pavese had withdrawn into the hill country above Turin and lived out the war in meditation and self-analysis. For about a year he lived in a monastery, studying theology and religion in an attempt to find final certainty. This period of contemplation amid the closing days of the war was the prelude to the great burst of creativity that followed. From 1945 until his death five years later, Pavese produced a remarkable series of novels, notably *La casa in collina* (1949; *The House on the Hill*, 1956); a philosophical dialogue, *Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947; *Dialogues with Leucò*, 1966); and his putative masterpiece, *La luna e i falò* (1950; *The Moon and the Bonfire*, 1952; also translated as *The Moon and the Bonfires*).

After the end of another unhappy love affair, this time with an American actress, Pavese took his own life by an overdose of sleeping pills on August 27, 1950. He was forty-one.

## ANALYSIS

Comprising an impressive body of short stories, poems, novels, and critical essays, Pavese's work at once summarizes literary trends and ideas of the period while forging an innovative technique reflecting its author's suffering as a writer and human being.

Literature in prewar Italy, particularly in the 1930's when Pavese began to write, was marked by a diluted Romanticism: poetry and prose that recorded the private, subjective experience of the writer in conflict with the values of society or the external world. Poetry was often lyrical, as in the work of Gabriele D'Annunzio, and the prose often experimental or impressionistic, as in the work of Italo Svevo. The so-called Hermetic school, whose leading exponent was Salvatore Quasimodo, often produced difficult, abstruse poems that sought escape into a kind of private, self-centered world.

Pavese was influenced by this literature, which he found congenial to his own introverted personality, but also crucial in his creative development were his discoveries in American literature. He wrote his master's thesis on the poetry of Walt Whitman, who was to be a source of inspiration for his own poetical style in *Hard Labor*: American writers such as Whitman and Herman Melville gave Pavese a new way of viewing experience, of making a connection with the outside world. He saw in American writers a creative "virility"—his own word—a freedom in the treatment of character, event, and language.

His characters are often peasants, laborers, and whores. Many are violent or use violence to cope with the world around them, a world of war, as in *The House on the Hill*, or the world of personal, solitary agony, as in *The Moon and the Bonfire*. Sometimes the violence of the world is symbolized in the act of giving birth, as in some of the early stories.

Set against this world of peasants and workers is the narrator or protagonist, often a teacher (as was Pavese) or an intellectual. Throughout his work a major tension is presented between the country types and the urban intellectual who lives among them and who, despite his cynicism, learns from them. Such a tension suggests that the narrator is somehow incomplete as a personality until he can fully relate with the people and life of the countryside. It is this inability of the narrator to take hold

of his life, to relate sexually or emotionally, that makes him brooding, lonely, and unfulfilled.

Loneliness is the most central and compelling theme of Pavese's work. His characters are often struggling against the external world of observation and the inner world of doubt and uncertainty. The protagonist's own knowledge, his cynical perception of the world, conflicts with the basic, almost intuitive experience of the peasants and workers, who have committed themselves to the act of living.

Not only the subject matter, but the method of exploring such matter in a colloquial idiom was suggested to him by his studies of American literature. The poetry of *Hard Labor* is marked by a fresh use of the colloquial. Its language is crisply informal, casual yet incisive. The plain, unemotional prose of *The House on the Hill* recalls the unadorned styles of Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, whose works Pavese knew well.

Characteristic of Pavese's work, therefore, is the particular meshing of the sensitive, highly allusive style of the previous generation of Italian writers with the seemingly open, objective, almost casual narrative voice of the Americans he read. His fiction seems to build upon the minutiae of everyday experience—playing cards, walking the hills, sitting at a table under the trees—and to resolve this into personal insight and emotions. Finally, the Italian countryside, descriptions of which fill his books, serves as a mystical, stabilizing force in the lives of all the characters. The countryside gives meaning to their lives in a world of violence and uncertainty.

## HARD LABOR

**First published:** *Lavorare stanca*, 1936  
(English translation, 1976)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*This first published work presents a series of short narrative poems that can be seen as forming a kind of spiritual autobiography.*

This collection of poems is important for two reasons. First, in its conversational rhythms, the book is an attempt by Pavese to construct a realistic,

twentieth century Italian poetic language rich in narrative detail and colloquial spontaneity. His indebtedness to American literature, and to Whitman in particular, is evident both in the spirit and structure of the collection. In an early appreciative essay on Whitman, Pavese declared that the American poet was the first to "see things with a virgin eye." Whitman was the poet who comprehended the world in his own being. For Pavese, the vignettes of *Leaves of Grass* are not separate entities, but part of the all-embracing understanding.

Such an interpretation can be applied to the structure of *Lavorare stanca*. Like Whitman, Pavese set about in this work to create a new poetry, strong and honest in its presentation of life. All the poems in the collection tell stories or develop as vignettes. Just as *Leaves of Grass* begins with "Song of Myself," a long poem that establishes for the poet a personality who assumes all, so Pavese opens *Hard Labor* with his longest poem, "I mari del Sud" ("South Seas"), which introduces a narrator who begins his quest for identity. The narrator of "South Seas," wrote Pavese in his journal, was his "spiritual personality." In its rhythms, the poem is a kind of Italian equivalent of Whitman's free verse, though Pavese's poetic line is firmly rooted in traditional metrical cadences.

"South Seas" begins with the narrator recalling his silent walk in the hills with his cousin, who has just returned from a journey around the world. Among other things, the cousin tells the narrator of his seafaring life and of his adventure hunting whales. In contrast, the narrator ponders his own uneventful life, his childhood among the hills, and his loneliness.

In the contrast between the worldly cousin and the naïve narrator, the poem establishes a theme of frustration and uncertainty. The peasant narrator and the urbane cousin are obvious spiritual kin, each part of the personality of the poet. Neither part is fulfilled; each is at odds with the other.

This conflict of the private, peasant personality with the public, urban personality is a central theme in Pavese's work and is the second foundation for the book's importance. Other poems in the collection outline a similar tension and develop related polarities between youth and age, innocence and sophistication, reality and illusion, commitment and withdrawal—all reflections of Pavese's own personal crisis.

## THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

**First published:** *La casa in collina*, 1949  
(English translation, 1956)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the closing days of World War II in Italy, a teacher finds himself unable to act, either as an individual or as a member of the resistance movement.*

About midway through the novel, the narrator, Corrado, is walking through a war-torn section of the city of Turin. The city is braced for the violence inevitable at the retreat of one army and the advance of another. Cate, the woman with him, angrily accuses him of not understanding the suffering of the people. “You people’ can’t refer to me,” he responds. “I’m alone. I try to be as alone as possible. . . . Only a man alone can keep his head.”

The remark encapsulates both the theme and the characteristic predicament of the narrator—his inability to understand and to commit to love. The major image in the novel is the house on the hill. The narrator goes to the house at the beginning of the book to live out the war as it rages in the valley and in the city below. News of the war is heard on the radio or from people who straggle in. From time to time the narrator descends, goes into Turin and witnesses the violence for himself.

The action of the book recalls the basic pattern of some of the poems in *Hard Labor*, especially “South Seas.” In the novel the narrator sets out on a kind of quest, but unlike that of “South Seas,” the quest is both a literal and metaphorical descent into violence and uncertainty. Like that of “South Seas,” the quest is also a search for meaning.

Part of that meaning is symbolized in the narrator’s uncertainty of his relationship with Dino, a young boy whom he befriends and suspects to be his son. Cate, the boy’s mother, refuses to tell the narrator whether he is the boy’s father, but the narrator believes that Dino is his son, just as he believes that he still loves Cate. He left her years before. Yet Corrado, the narrator, remains noncommittal; he is cynical regarding Cate, the war, and his own ability to relate. He is, by nature, solitary, unable to commit himself to loving Cate or to acting as a re-

sponsible member of society by joining the resistance movement.

The novel follows a pattern of departure and return, a duality further strengthened by the contrast between country and city, peasant and urbanite. In the house on the hill, Corrado is able to live the solitary life of the self-centered and the selfish. Elvira, the other woman in his life, loves him, but Corrado does not return her love. He lives in the country setting, immured from commitment and responsibility. He voices opinions but does not act on them.

Conversely, his descent into Turin brings him the pain of knowing the suffering brought on by the war, a pain he is able to ignore by returning to the house on the hill. The hill is a controlling symbol of Corrado’s detachment from the life of action and responsibility. Such detachment is underscored by the flat, bland, dispassionate tone of the prose, which identifies love, people, and war as if they were all insignificant.

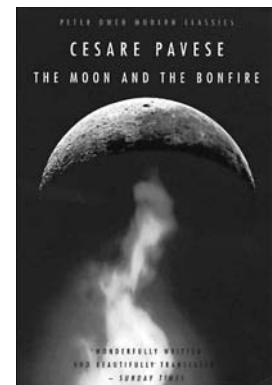
## THE MOON AND THE BONFIRE

**First published:** *La luna e i falò*, 1950  
(English translation, 1952)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A man returns home to seek meaning in life through a recollection of his past.*

*The Moon and the Bonfire* is Pavese’s last and greatest work. On one level it recapitulates the themes of loneliness and quest that characterize his earlier prose and poetry. In this novel, the narrator has become like the world traveler in “South Seas.” In this case, however, he has returned not from the sea but from America. As the novel opens, the narrator is walking amid the hills of his native Piedmont with his friend, Nuto. The war is over, and the narrator has returned to his roots to find himself through a recollection of his youth. He befriends Cinto, a lame boy, the son



of a neighbor, a violent man who burned down his house before killing himself. The boy—reminiscent of Dino in *The House on the Hill*—is drawn to the narrator as a symbol of romance and the exciting life of adventure in the new world. For the narrator, however, life in America was not romantic but lonely and bitter. He recalls spending a night in the cab of a truck on the edge of a vast desert. His only romance was with a woman as lonely and frustrated as he. She left him one morning, and he never saw her again.

The vague, almost dreamlike description of life in America cannot be interpreted solely as a failure on Pavese's part, since he had never seen America, but as a correlative to the narrator's own state of mind. America is not a place but a symbol of the bitter loneliness mirroring the narrator's life.

*The Moon and the Bonfire* is more than a recapitulation of earlier work. The book is an artistic advance in its treatment of natural symbols. The narrator's return to his natal ground is a salvific experience, unlike the barren years in America. In the Piedmont hills, which are described evocatively and poetically, the narrator finds a connection between himself and the land—a connection in time. Nuto's self-assuredness, his insistence that the moon is a symbol of destiny and of endurance, and his remark about bonfires renewing the fertility of the land, suggest to the narrator that he has, indeed, come home. Despite the violence of the past,

the unrequited loves and the deaths of friends, the narrator understands that he has become part of a process of regeneration.

Nuto, the good friend, and Cinto, the boy, thus form antipodes that the narrator reconciles by his understanding. Nuto is the peasant, the man of feeling, of instinct. Cinto is youth, innocence, promise. Between them is the narrator, who has come from the cities and deserts of the new world and has seen through recollection of his past so that he may find a place in this world of hills and bonfires. The novel achieves a dramatic tension between the narrator's cynicism and despair and his desire to become a part of the process of living.

## SUMMARY

Cesare Pavese plumbed his own experiences for the core of his material. His works could readily be understood in the context of the lonely, despairing personality of his journal and letters. Pavese was not, however, simply an autobiographical writer. His solitary protagonists seeking meaning in a violent world express the doubts and anxieties of many, while his colloquial style and poetic evocation of landscape give his work a timeless, universal quality. The secret of his art is its honesty, the fusion of personal anguish with the unflinching rendering of objective reality.

Edward Fiorelli

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Was Cesare Pavese a man born in the right place but at the wrong time?
- Explain why a young Italian in Pavese's circumstances might join first the Fascists and then the Communists.
- What are the difficulties of a young twentieth century Italian poet using Walt Whitman as a model, as Pavese does in *Hard Labor*?
- Examine the symbols indicated in the title *The Moon and the Bonfire*. Why is the bonfire a particularly useful symbol for Pavese?
- Could Pavese's characters resolve the loneliness that he himself never could resolve?



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## OCTAVIO PAZ

**Born:** Mexico City, Mexico  
March 31, 1914

**Died:** Mexico City, Mexico  
April 19, 1998

*A poet and essayist of international stature, Paz championed the poet's struggle against alienation and the corruption of language.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Octavio Paz (pahz) was born in Mexico City, Mexico, on March 31, 1914, the son of Octavio Paz, a mestizo, and Josephina Lozano, a woman of Spanish descent. His father, a lawyer and journalist who defended the peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and helped implement agrarian reform in Mexico after the revolution, made Paz aware of social justice issues. Paz grew up in his grandfather's house in the small village of Mixoac. His grandfather, a popular novelist, introduced Paz to literature. Paz also lived and attended school in the United States for almost two years while his father was in political exile during the Mexican Revolution.

Paz began his literary career in his late teens, publishing his first book of poems, *Luna silvestre*, in 1933. He reacted against the fierce nationalism dominant in Mexican culture after the revolution and allied himself with Mexican poets interested in world literature. Nonetheless, he was very concerned about Mexico's identity and future in the revolution's aftermath. In 1937, Paz went to Yucatán to work in a rural school, leaving behind his university studies. He did not want to be a doctor or lawyer as his family desired. He wanted to be a poet whose poetry would help to change the world.

In 1937, Paz also went to Spain in support of the Spanish Republic. After trying unsuccessfully to enlist as a soldier to fight in Spain's civil war, he de-

fended the Spanish Republic with his poetry. He met many poets in Spain: Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, Antonio Machado, and Stephen Spender, among others.

Paz returned to Mexico in 1938, determined to further the cause of the Spanish Republic through *Taller* (1938-1941), a literary magazine that he edited. With the Spanish Republic's defeat, a disillusioned Paz realized that political action could not save the world from evil. He turned to poetry as a means for changing the world for the better, believing that poetry opposes evil by creating an alternative reality with language.

In 1943, Paz left Mexico to travel extensively for two years in the United States on a Guggenheim Fellowship. He entered the Mexican diplomatic service in 1945 and was stationed in Paris from 1946 to 1951. While in Paris, he became friends with André Breton, the founder of Surrealism. Paz was attracted to Surrealism because it maintains that poetry is a moral force capable of subverting the established social and political order. Paz saw poetry as a vehicle for the cultivation of inner values, such as love, imagination, and fantasy. In the aftermath of World War II, Paz believed that it was imperative that poetry defend the human spirit in the face of the isolation and alienation characteristic of modern industrial society.

Paz firmly established himself as a major literary figure in the 1950's. He returned to Mexico in 1953, after an absence of almost eleven years. Paz's meditations on Mexican identity and psychology resulted in his much acclaimed study of Mexican culture, *El laberinto de la soledad: Vida y pensamiento*

de México (1950; *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, 1961). In 1956, he published *El arco y la lira* (*The Bow and the Lyre*, 1971), a defense of poetry as a force for social change. In his book-length poem *Piedra de sol* (1957; *Sun Stone*, 1963), Paz uses the Aztec calendar and its circular conception of time to express the poetic quest for freedom and communion through lovemaking.

During his life, Paz personally experienced love in three relationships; the third one lasted for the rest of his life. In 1938, he married the Mexican writer Elena Garro, with whom he had a daughter. They divorced in 1959. That same year he went to Paris with his lover Bona Tibertelli de Pisis, an Italian painter. In 1965, the relationship ended and he married Marie-José Tramini, a French woman with whom he spent the rest of his life.

Paz served as Mexican ambassador to India from 1962 to 1968. His contact with Oriental cultures and thought made him more conscious of the role of silence and empty space in poetic composition. In *Salamandra* (1962), the spacing of the words on the page is as important as the words themselves. In the long poem *Blanco* (1967; English translation, 1971), the layout and the use of different typefaces allow for several alternative readings of the poetic text.

Paz resigned from his position as ambassador to India in October, 1968, when the Mexican government killed more than three hundred student demonstrators in Mexico City. In 1968, Paz began to devote himself to teaching and lecturing abroad, mainly in the United States. He edited and published *Phural*, a magazine dedicated to art and politics, from 1971 until 1976. He became the editor of the literary magazine *Vuelta* in 1976. His many honors and prizes include the Jerusalem Prize in 1977, the Cervantes Prize, the most important award in the Spanish-speaking world, in 1981, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1982. In 1990, Paz received the Nobel Prize in Literature; he was the first Mexican to be so honored.

Through the early 1990's, Paz wrote extensively about politics and culture in Latin America. A maverick championing freedom and democracy, he criticized both capitalism and communism for exploiting human beings for the sake of economic goals. He incurred the wrath of many Latin American intellectuals for his criticism of leftist revolu-

tionary movements in Latin America. Insisting that he had no political affiliations, Paz continued to view poetry as a vehicle through which people can resist all ideologies that alienate and dehumanize them. As the author of numerous books of poetry and prose, Paz was considered to be not only one of the greatest poets ever in the Spanish-speaking world but also the most prominent intellectual in Latin America. He died in Mexico City on April 19, 1998.

## ANALYSIS

Paz not only was a poet of international stature but also incorporated the influences of different and even opposing cultures and literatures: Mexican culture with its pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial traditions and its modern revolution, Spanish art and literature, the French Surrealism of Breton, the works of Stéphane Mallarmé, and Oriental myth and philosophy. Throughout his life, Paz was concerned with the problem of how human beings can recover their wholeness and innocence in a fragmented and corrupt world. He turned to French Surrealism and Oriental philosophy to take a moral stand against the harmful effects of modern society.

For Paz, as for the Surrealists, the primary values of life are love, liberty, and poetry. Although he was not drawn to Surrealist techniques, such as automatic writing, Paz adopted wholeheartedly Surrealism's call to practice poetry as rebellion against society's suppression of human freedom. Poetry, he believed, invites the reader to experience ecstatic union with "the other" (woman, nature, or language), an occurrence discouraged, when not forbidden, by society. The world is dominated by science, reason, and materialism, while poetry champions the values of the spirit. Through love, imagination, art, and dreaming, the poet is inwardly transformed, thereby introducing changes in society.

In "Más allá del amor" ("Beyond Love"), Paz exalts woman as the other who makes it possible for him to leave the domain of time. He identifies history as the force that alienates humanity and divides it into national, ideological, and religious camps. As an antidote to the tyranny of time, Paz advocates the poetic moment, an experience of unity and wholeness outside time.

In "Himno entre ruinas" ("Hymn Among the

Ruins”), Paz attributes to poetry the power to redeem a world destroyed by World War II. The poem’s pyramid structure and references to Aztec ruins evoke Mexico’s Aztec past. The poet seeks the ultimate origins of humanity and language as an archaeologist seeks to uncover buried treasures of the past, hoping to bring humanity to authentic life. When alienation is conquered, language is alive and makes fully present what it signifies. Words are simultaneously flowers, fruit, and action.

In his collection of prose poems *¿Águila o sol?* (1951; *Eagle or Sun?*, 1970), Paz combines his quest to recover Mexico’s pre-Columbian past and his own childhood with his experience as a Surrealist in Paris. In the first section of the book, “Trabajos del poeta” (“Works of the Poet”), the poet fights with language, striving to transcend it so that duality gives way to unity. The need to choose between eagle or sun yields to the realization that eagle and sun are one. The poet purges himself of corrupt language so that from inner silence he might give birth to a new untainted language and escape alienation. In the last section, “Hacia el poema” (“Toward the Poem”), the poet describes the consequences of restoring language’s purity. Poetry becomes an instrument for changing consciousness and creating a new ideal society.

*Sun Stone* is one of Paz’s finest poems. It is the culmination of the first period of his poetic work, before he became Mexican ambassador to India in 1962 and incorporated Oriental philosophy into his poetry. The poem addresses Paz’s principal themes: the relationship of self and other, the theme of alienation, and the quest for communion and transcendental experience. The poet searches for true freedom by experiencing the poetic moment in lovemaking. While the poem’s structure is Surrealist in that it is composed of many unrelated images, Paz evokes his Mexican heritage by organizing the poem around the Aztec calendar and employing its notion of circular time.

*Salamandra* marks a change in Paz’s poetic technique. In this collection, Paz employs fewer words and more space, making his poems visual, as well as

oral. Using more space brings the role of silence to the forefront in his poetry. It represents the silence that the reader and poet enjoy beyond words. It also refers to the infinite potential of all meaning available to the still and silent mind. In the title poem, “Salamandra,” Paz attacks science for dehumanizing life. Paz liberates the word “salamander” by associating it with air, fire, water, wind, and many other images in the poem. The word “salamander” thus assumes multiple meanings and is no longer limited to only one. Through wordplay, the poet rediscovers the latent possibilities of language and brings it to life. Liberated and purified language frees people from the grip of alienation.

Paz integrated Oriental thought, especially Buddhist philosophy, into his poetry after he became Mexico’s ambassador to India in 1962. His poetry also evidences his constant reading of Mallarmé. In both Mallarmé and Buddhism, Paz found the concept of the negation of the ego. The poet uses poetry to transcend the ego by disappearing into the poem. Like Mallarmé, Paz allows his words to hang suspended in the whiteness of the page. Surrounded by nameless white space, the word is liberated from fixed meanings and freed for the reader to explore an infinite play of meanings.

*Ladera este* (1969), a collection of travel and love poetry, reflects Paz’s years in India. The long poem *Blanco* (1967; English translation, 1971) continues the experimentation with the relationship of poetic text and space begun in *Salamandra*. The poem was originally published on a single continuous sheet of paper. It was printed with black and red ink and several typefaces. Through the use of blank space, ink color, and typeface, Paz breaks the one long poem into several shorter but complementary poems. In *Blanco*, Paz establishes an analogy between writing a poem and making love to a woman. The woman’s white body is like the paper on which the poet writes his passion. It draws from the Buddhist Tantric tradition, which advocates lovemaking as a technique and ritual for spiritual liberation. Poetry, like woman, leads man to unite with a timeless reality beyond words.

## SUN STONE

**First published:** *Piedra de sol*, 1957 (English translation, 1963)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet embraces women because love allows him to overcome his alienation and the evils of death, destruction, and war.*

In *Sun Stone*, the poet searches for the experience of the poetic moment through making love. The quest is framed by a structure modeled after the Aztec sun stone, a calendar divided into 584 days. The poem is composed of 584 lines and opens and closes with the same six lines. Setting the tone for the entire poem, these six lines invoke a world free of alienation, a paradise outside of time. *Sun Stone* rushes forward without any breaks, leading to an ending that returns the reader to the beginning. Even as the calendar is round, time is cyclical. The protagonist's experience is also repetitive, alternating between ecstasy and alienation.

The opening lines of *Sun Stone* point to a reality outside the passage of time where opposites are united. The poet describes a river flowing backward and forward, always returning to the same point. On its bank is a tree at once firmly rooted and dancing.

Alienation intrudes. The protagonist becomes disoriented and confused in the urban landscape. He cannot even remember his name. He is confronted with the horrors of history: bombings, concentration camps, and assassinations. He recalls Socrates' death, the assassination of Julius Caesar, the betrayal of Montezuma, the murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico. Yet in Madrid, in 1937, in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, the protagonist manages to overcome the atrocities of history through love. Love brings human beings to a timeless paradise where individual identity is lost in oneness:

these nakednesses, woven together,  
can overleap time and are invulnerable,  
nothing can touch them, they go to the origins,  
there is no You nor I, tomorrow, yesterday, names.

After the protagonist has succeeded in stepping out of history through love, he finds himself once

again subject to alienation. He feels isolated, separated from others by barbed-wire fences, spikes, and bars. Love is his only defense against isolation and death. Through love, he is free from all forces that dehumanize him. The world changes when love is practiced. It is a means for transforming society: "The world grows fresh and green while you are smiling and eating an orange." The bliss of lovers anticipates an ideal world where all are lovers and poets.

The protagonist pays tribute to woman, who makes him whole. Woman is a goddess, the female principle that redeems him from isolation and the horrors of history. He evokes women from many times and places, figures of myth and women immortalized in famous poems: Laura, Isabel, Eloise, Persephone, and Mary. Woman is the gateway to vision and knowledge. Alienation is broken by ecstasy, and history is undermined through the mediation of the woman. She is the "flower of resurrection and grape of life."

*Sun Stone* is perhaps Paz's most important poem. The reader experiences a full cycle of history, starting and ending with an eternal present before time and history. Through the mediation of woman, the protagonist is able periodically to escape the tyranny of history and his own alienation.

## BLANCO

**First published:** 1967 (English translation, 1971)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet compares writing poetry to making love to a woman.*

In *Blanco*, Paz experiments with poetry as a visual and oral art form. The poem was first published on one continuous sheet of paper, using various typefaces and two colors of ink. A single column of text alternates with two parallel columns. These in turn are either spaced separately or joined together and are only distinguishable from each other by their contrasting typefaces. Paz arranges the poetic text in such a way that the words are able to interact with each other. On the theory that the poet should not manipulate language, he



denies his ego any role in the creative process. Paz applies the Tantric tradition to the poetic text. The words set free on the page, surrounded by space, assume a life of their own. They are erotic objects free to attract, repel, and unite with each other. The use of different columns of text running separately or parallel to each other allows many alternative readings. This one long poem has fourteen texts that can be read separately or in different combinations.

The poem begins with a wordplay about the origins of language before its corruption by history. The text of the single central column deals with the poet's labor to bring forth poetry. The lamp represents the poet's alertness. He waits patiently for language to rise into his consciousness. When it does so, the words of the poem flow forth, and the poet dissolves with his mistress in an experience of pure language.

The double column is a love poem. The two columns separate and join together, opening and closing like legs in imitation of Tantric texts. The poet penetrates his beloved. He fertilizes words, and they ascend the stalk that produces the flow of poetry in the central column.

The influences of Mallarmé and Tantric Buddhism are most evident in this long and very complex poem. *Blanco* likens writing poetry to making love. Paz follows Mallarmé's position that living language is carnal and that words have flesh like a woman. The graphic layout of the poem and the use of white space between the words encourage the reader to explore the infinite possibilities in words. In Tantric Buddhism, erotic love serves as a means to gain spiritual liberation. In *Blanco*, erotic love and the inception of poetry are aspects of the same experience of transcending time and language.

## THE LABYRINTH OF SOLITUDE

**First published:** *El laberinto de la soledad: Vida y pensamiento de México*, 1950 (English translation, 1961)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Within the labyrinth of solitude, which is everyone's existence, Mexican identity has created itself and Mexican history has evolved into the modern Mexico.*

Although *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* is a work of prose, it has been hailed as Paz's greatest poetic achievement. It is written in a rich, poetic language, and it explores the themes and ideas that Paz expresses in his poetry.

In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz discusses Mexican identity, what it means to be Mexican, the history of Mexico and its importance in shaping the Mexican identity, and finally the solitude which is the condition not only of Mexicans but of all human beings. The book is composed of nine essays, each of which can be read as an independent work. The first four essays deal with who the Mexicans are, their identity, and how they acquired it; these essays reflect the influence of existentialism on Paz.

The first essay, "El pachuco y otros extremos" ("The Pachuco and Other Extremes"), looks at the pachuco, or Mexican living in North America, who emphasizes his difference and yet is ashamed of his ancestry. He is an individual who does everything possible to isolate himself, to shut himself off from everyone else, including his own compatriots. This solitude surrounds the Mexican, who, caught between his Indian and his Spanish past, between primitive religion and Spanish Catholicism, is deprived of an origin that he can embrace.

"Máscaras mexicanas" ("Mexican Masks") explores the concept of solitude and expands upon



Paz's belief that the Mexican refuses to reveal his true self. He hides behind masks until he becomes the mask. Paz discusses the Mexican preference for order and ceremony. Inherited from both Indian and Spanish tradition, this desire for regulation and stability derives from the need to protect oneself, to hide one's true self. At its extreme point, the mask provides nonexistence for the Mexican; he seeks not only his own nonexistence but also the nonexistence of others.

In contrast to this desire for nothingness, the Mexican's love of fiesta and noisy celebration is examined in "Todos santos, día de muertos" ("The Day of the Dead"). The fiesta is a true explosion of the individual; he opens out in chaos and excess. Yet this excess leads to the void and connects the Mexican to death—his constant companion. Death, like life, has no meaning for him.

In "Los hijos de La Malinche" ("The Sons of La Malinche") Paz examines the Mexican attitude toward women, work, the working class, and language and how these attitudes isolate the Mexican from his past and from others. His solitude is all around him as he rejects his traditions, whether they are Indian or Spanish.

The next four essays treat Mexican history. Paz concentrates on the different concepts of land-ownership and the problems caused by eliminating the common lands, the inadequacies of the revolution, and the difficulties faced by the intelligentsia

who are participating in government while critiquing it objectively.

In the final essay "La dialéctica de la solitud" ("The Dialectic of Solitude"), Paz examines solitude as the lot of each human being. He analyzes how social control virtually eliminates the experience of love, which is the escape from solitude. He postulates that what humankind seeks is a return to freedom and primitive purity and the flinging away of the masks.

## SUMMARY

Octavio Paz's poetry champions the ecstasy that takes people beyond the tyranny of time, history, and alienation. The poet redeems his isolated individuality through a union with woman. Poetry allows the poet to experience oneness beyond time and language. Paz sees poetry as the antidote to the isolation and spiritual desolation of humankind in the modern world. The need to escape isolation and alienation is also a central theme of his acclaimed prose work, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

For Paz, writing poetry is an ethical act that contributes to the creation of a better world. Through his poetry, he seeks to liberate language, the reader, and the poet, so that all are able to experience a primal unified reality beyond the layers of dead language and alienated egos that bring so much suffering to life.

*Evelyn Toft; updated by Shawncey Webb*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What role does history as a force play in Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*?
- What do masks symbolize in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*?
- Explain the title *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.
- How does Paz's experimentation with the physical placement of the poem on the page reflect Stéphane Mallarmé's influence?
- What is the significance of making love for Paz and how does he portray it in his poems?
- According to Paz, what is the poet's role in society?
- Does contemporary society and its rules make love almost impossible, as Paz believed?

Octavio Paz

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## SAMUEL PEPYS

**Born:** London, England  
February 23, 1633

**Died:** Clapham, England  
May 26, 1703

*From 1660 to 1669, Pepys kept an informative and entertaining Diary, which provides modern readers with a detailed and unparalleled portrait of Restoration London.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Pepys (peeps) was born on February 23, 1633, in Salisbury Court, close to St. Bride's in Fleet Street, London, England. He was the fifth of eleven children of John Pepys, a tailor, and Margaret Kight, of whom little is known except that she was a washmaid and the sister of a butcher. Samuel grew up in a sturdy, middle-class Puritan family that boasted connections to the wealthy and powerful Mountagu family of Huntingdonshire. Of Pepys's childhood there is almost no record except for rare references in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1825), which indicate that Pepys acquired his love of music from his father, that he was introduced to the theater—another lifelong passion—before the Civil War closed all the theaters for a time, and that he and his brother Tom spent some time in the country, probably for health reasons.

The *Diary* reveals that Pepys attended Huntingdon Grammar School some time before 1645 or 1646 when, evidence suggests, he returned to London and entered St. Paul's School, which was then a staunchly Puritan institution. At St. Paul's, Pepys came under the influence of Dr. Samuel Cromleholme, a fine scholar and bibliophile, with whom Pepys continued to correspond long after he left school—even up to the time of the *Diary*. From St. Paul's, Pepys went to Cambridge, where he established residence at Magdalene College shortly after his eighteenth birthday and became a student of Samuel Morland, who had acquired an impressive reputation as mathematician and Latinist, as cryptographer and engineer, as historian and inventor. The influence of Cromleholme and Morland on Pepys is evident in the *Diary*, which records

Pepys's lifetime interest in books, his membership in the Royal Society and fascination with science, and his passion for classical literature.

In 1654, Pepys took his degree at Cambridge and returned to London. By December, 1655, he was married to Elizabeth St. Michel, a beautiful, penniless fifteen-year-old of French and Anglo-Irish parentage. By this point, Pepys was also employed by his aristocratic cousin, Sir Edward Mountagu, as some kind of steward. When Pepys joined his cousin's staff, Mountagu was already firmly ensconced in the inner circle of the government of Oliver Cromwell, the English soldier and member of Parliament, and was thus able to assist the young and ambitious Pepys, who acted as Mountagu's agent while Mountagu served the Commonwealth government as a general-at-sea. Through Mountagu's influence, Pepys was appointed one of the tellers of the exchequer, a position that allowed him to learn the intricacies of public administration and cultivate powerful friends.

The year 1658 was an important one for Pepys, both personally and politically. Plagued for years with pain from a stone in the bladder, Pepys finally consented to a lithotomy—called “cutting for the stone”—which was one of the few serious operations possible in 1658. He survived the surgery, and his *Diary* records his celebrations of the anniversary of his ordeal with thanksgiving dinners for his friends. In September, 1658, Cromwell died and was succeeded by his son, Richard, who, incapable of governing his unruly citizens, was forced by the army generals to dissolve Parliament and reenter private life. Although Pepys was unaware of it, the

careful Mountagu had already contacted the future Charles II, then in exile in France.

The next year was an eventful one as England endured political unrest, an unsuccessful royalist uprising, and an ineffective Parliament. As 1659 ended, Pepys decided to begin keeping a journal in the new year, and in preparation he purchased an octavo notebook and drew margins in red ink. The first entry, dated January 1, 1660, is a record of Pepys's continuing good health and comfortable life and a commentary on the political confusion in England.

Pepys got his first taste of glory in May, 1660, when he accompanied Mountagu, now an admiral, on the voyage that brought King Charles II from Holland to England. Shortly thereafter, Mountagu was created earl of Sandwich, and through his patronage, Pepys, now twenty-seven, was appointed to a position in the Navy Office as clerk of the acts, an appointment that gave Pepys considerable prestige, a fine salary, and an official residence.

Although Pepys remained in the service of the navy for much of his life, his natural curiosity and energy involved him in a number of other ventures and activities. He joined the Royal Society in 1665 and became its president in 1684; he carried word of the Great Fire of London to the king and helped with the efforts to contain the blaze; he traveled to Paris and Brussels with his wife, Elizabeth, just before her death in 1669; he was elected member of parliament for Castle Rising in 1673; he became master of Trinity House and governor of Christ's Hospital in 1676, and master of the Clothworkers' Company the next year; he served two terms as a member of Parliament for Harwich from 1679 to 1689; finally, he was appointed deputy lieutenant of Huntingdonshire, his family home. Among the offices that he held were commissioner for Tangier, secretary to the Office of Lord High Admiral of England, and secretary for Admiralty Affairs.

Like so many prominent Englishmen of the Restoration, Pepys had his share of problems. In 1679, he was forced to resign his position with the Admiralty and was imprisoned in the Tower of London on the charge of selling naval secrets to the French government. Released in July, he spent a year preparing his defense, but the charges were dropped, and Pepys was reinstated into the good graces of the king. In 1690, Pepys was arrested on suspicion

of Jacobite sympathies, but the charges against him were dropped within a few months.

Pepys retired from public life in 1689, and in 1701 he left his beloved London and moved to Will Hewer's country home at Clapham, England, where he died on May 26, 1703. He was buried at St. Olave's in London, next to Elizabeth.

## ANALYSIS

The Restoration gave English literature a new kind of prose, different from that practiced by John Milton, John Donne, Sir Thomas Browne, and other great stylists of the Renaissance. New discoveries in science and mathematics during the late seventeenth century demanded a written discourse that was free of the elaborate flourishes and figurative language that had marked the work of earlier writers; what was required was a prose that was notable for its clarity. The Royal Society required that its members report the proceedings and activities of the society in the plain, utilitarian, natural prose style best suited to the dissemination of scientific truths; the very public nature of the age gave rise to a written language that closely approximated the clear, urbane, elegant conversations that became a hallmark of the Restoration and the eighteenth century.

Like the deliberately public writings of his contemporaries, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* is a model of uncluttered, simple, lyrical prose writing. Further, because Pepys wrote in Thomas Shelton's system of shorthand, he was able to record the events of his life without fear of discovery or exposure, and the result is an autobiographical account notable as a straightforward, unself-conscious, exceedingly detailed narrative that chronicles both the public and the private lives of its writer.

Pepys, like the early epic poets, delighted in catalogs and lists. His *Diary* delights readers with its insistence on detailed listings—of the notables present at a dinner or fete, of the specific foods Pepys consumed at a late-night supper, of the beautiful women he ogled at the theater, of the excessive and expensive purchases made by his wife at a bazaar, of the separate items of clothing that constitute an outfit that Pepys wore to a special occasion, of the emotions Pepys felt at having to end an affair. Pepys enumerates his household expenses, the plays he has seen, his sister's faults, and the friends with whom he socializes. He carefully documents

historical events and personal encounters, family squabbles and political confrontations, births and deaths. These details—appealing or crude, minute or expansive, personal or public, comic or serious—draw readers into Pepys’s world and into the mind and life of a late seventeenth century English citizen.

A theme that unifies the varied sections of the *Diary* is the importance of a life properly lived. The *Diary* is a constant reminder of the Puritan virtues, a compendium of examples of Pepys’s ongoing attempts to master his soul and order his existence. Pepys smugly records his successes at moderation and contritely details his little falls from grace. Concerned with accountability and almost obsessed with thrift, he agonizes over the price of the telescopes and microscopes that his fascination with science has led him to purchase, and he complains about his wife’s spending habits. Disturbed at having indulged in expensive dancing lessons, Pepys records his attempts to silence his conscience by dropping a gift of fifteen shillings into the nearest poor box. Many entries in the *Diary* reveal that Pepys spent much time dealing with his accounts and other business matters—in fact, his descriptions of daily activities are often couched in the language of accounting. Puritan at heart that he was, Pepys frequently wrote about his gratitude to God for various benefits that came his way, his recognition of his moral errancies, and his feelings of repentance and attempts to live a better life. Overindulgence appears to be one of Pepys’s most dominant faults; his diary records his vows to spend less, eat less, refrain from chasing women, and avoid wine and strong drink.

As an account of the first nine years of the reign of Charles II, Pepys’s *Diary* has no equal. Pepys was privileged to be on board the ship that brought Charles Stuart back to England as the nation’s first monarch after the Commonwealth, and the *Diary* provides eyewitness descriptions of the royal arrival and also of the splendid coronation ceremonies. Major historical events—Charles’s marriage to Catherine of Braganza, the Dutch Wars, the succession of short-lived Whig-dominated Parliaments—are all carefully inventoried by Pepys. The *Diary* years coincide with the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London, both events on which Pepys reflected at length with his characteristic combination of factual detail, moral analysis, and eager

curiosity. That same combination colors Pepys’s frequent entries detailing visits to theatrical performances. Pepys the Puritan believed it sinful to attend plays; Pepys the bon vivant delighted in the tremendous variety of performances that crowded the English stage after Charles’s accession reopened the theaters; and Pepys the Restoration gallant reveled in the opportunities to ogle both the actresses and the women in the audience.

The appeal of the *Diary* lies in its richness of detail; in its tone of unalloyed enjoyment of life and experience; in its delighted chronicling of the everyday juxtaposed with the significant; and in its candid revelation of the mind of an indefatigable, curious, and intelligent English citizen of the late seventeenth century.

## THE DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS

**First published:** 1825

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*A middle-class English civil servant records the events of his life in a cultural and historical context from 1660 to 1669.*

*The Diary of Samuel Pepys* opens with an entry dated January 1, 1660. The author was twenty-seven years old and already well on his way to a lucrative career in the service of the English crown. “Blessed be God,” begins the entry, “. . . I was in very good health.” Pepys continues with a brief description of his household—himself, his wife, Elizabeth, and a servant named Jane—and then goes on to note “the condition of the State.” These opening sentences are significant in that they contain many of the distinctive subjects discussed in the *Diary*. Pepys was clearly a moral and religious man—in a very general and philosophical way; his journal entries often begin with an invocation to God, and he records a considerable amount of soul-searching coupled with resolutions to live a better life. Almost as important to Pepys as his religion was his health, which is mentioned, discussed, and analyzed at regular intervals. The early trouble with his bladder left Pepys with an obsessive consciousness of the workings of his body, and his concern with various ailments is a notable feature of the *Diary*. Other topics of major interest to Pepys were his wife and

their ongoing servant problems and the affairs of the government, to which he devoted so much of his time and energy.

The opening lines of the *Diary* are important not only for their content but also for their tone and language and for the order in which Pepys—a very methodical man—arranged the details he included. Pepys's tone throughout the *Diary* is always calm and matter-of-fact, even when he reports unsettling or disturbing events. Thus it is that in a time of great political and social upheaval, he records dryly, "The officers of the army all forced to yield," in reference to the fact that General George Monck, one of the architects of the Restoration process, was marching south with his men to take Whitehall from the Parliamentary generals. Yet the concise sentences do not make for dull reading. On the contrary, because Pepys so carefully chooses his words, the details that he records stand out in clear and precise relief against the urbane but utilitarian prose that he employs. The *Diary* reflects the importance to Pepys of certain aspects of his life, mentioned in order of significance—God, health, family and household, politics. Pepys was, of course, vastly interested in a number of other subjects, but those five mentioned early are the topics to which he returns over and over in his narrative.

Through the *Diary*, modern readers enter the life and mind of one of the most remarkable Englishmen of all time, a man typical of his era and representative of it in both his virtues and his flaws, a man who lived a recognizably and humanly average life during a century that history recognizes as one of England's most turbulent. Therein lies one of the paradoxes of the *Diary*. Pepys records meals, sleepless nights, marital spats, lazy servants, colds and fevers, a pet dog, a sulking sister, new gloves and shoes, even (infrequent) baths as notable elements of a life that also included visits to the royal apartments, suppers with the aristocracy, speeches before Parliament, promotions and appointments to desirable posts, and friendships with the rich and famous. Pepys the private soul-searcher is also Pepys the avid theatergoer, Pepys the jealous husband is Pepys the philanderer, and Pepys the recorder of ailments is the same as Pepys the Royal Society man. Again and again, the *Diary* reveals the extent to which the private and the public met during the Restoration.

The *Diary* is especially valuable to historians for its evocative and vivid accounts of some of the most important events of the 1660's: the return of Charles Stuart to England, his coronation as King Charles II, the Great Plague of 1665, and the Great Fire of London in 1666, among others. Also of historical and literary importance are Pepys's descriptions of theatrical performances. He comments on the architecture of the theaters, on the new practice of casting women in female roles, on stage machinery, on specific plays, on actors and actresses in various roles, on the audience. Although theater historians have long recognized Pepys's *Diary* as a valuable source of information on the Restoration theater, social historians also owe Pepys a great debt. The *Diary* is a prime source of information on the elements of Restoration society and culture, music (one of Pepys's passions), the decorative arts (furniture, silver, and china), architecture, painting, science and medicine, clothing, and books. Unlike Jonathan Swift's fictional Gulliver, Pepys

was not a naïve observer, and his *Diary* reveals his opinions, his preferences, his biases, and his analyses of his own actions as well as those of others.

In 1669, Pepys began to fear that he might go blind. He had long had trouble with his eyesight, possibly the result of close scrutiny of naval documents and accounts and even household records; he even records that the

candlelight in the theaters "did almost kill" him. On May 31, 1669, Pepys penned the last entry in the *Diary*, remarking in his characteristic plain style his readiness for possible loss of sight, "for which . . . the good God prepare me!" The *Diary* ends as it begins—quietly, calmly, concisely.



## SUMMARY

With all of its richness, variety, and detail, the one singular element that unifies *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* into an intriguing whole is the portrait that it paints of Samuel Pepys himself. Clearly a man who embodied most of the beliefs and confusions of his age, he is the ultimate Restoration man, and

in his personal narrative he illustrates and exemplifies the contradictions and confusion, the faith and intellectual curiosity, the frivolity and practicality of one of England's most interesting decades.

E. D. Huntley

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Samuel Pepys's *Diary* reflect his Puritan background?
- How does Pepys's *Diary* reflect his anti-puritanical interests?
- What does it mean to say that Pepys was "the ultimate Restoration man"?
- Explain how Pepys's exceptional powers of observation have vitalized our knowledge of the Great Plague and of the Great Fire.
- In what way did Pepys's concern with his health limit our perspective on his time and place?
- What picture does the reader get of Pepys's wife in his *Diary*?
- How does Pepys contribute to our knowledge of the culture of later Stuart England?





Centro de Turismo de Portugal

## FERNANDO PESSOA

**Born:** Lisbon, Portugal  
June 13, 1888

**Died:** Lisbon, Portugal  
November 30, 1935

*Foremost poet of the modern Portuguese language and a leader in his country's modernist movement, Pessoa produced poetry of acute sensitivity and introspection under his own name and that of numerous identities, termed heteronyms, created by him.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa (PEHS-wah) was born on June 13, 1888, at the home of his parents in Lisbon, Portugal. His mother was Maria Magdalena Pinheiro Nogueira and his father was Joaquim de Seabra Pessoa. In addition to being employed in the Ministry of Justice, Pessoa's father was also a part-time music critic. Pessoa's father died in 1893 and his mother remarried two years later. In 1895, the six-year-old poet wrote his first verse, "À minha querida mãe" (to my beloved mother). His mother had two sons from her first marriage, but Fernando's younger brother died in infancy. With her second husband she had five children, two dying in infancy. Her second husband was the Portuguese consul in Durban, South Africa, where the family moved in 1896.

Living in Durban until 1905, Pessoa studied in British-modeled primary and secondary schools. He attended a grade school run by Irish nuns, completing its five-year course in three. He graduated with honors from Durban High School, its teachers nurturing his interest in the classic English poets. English became his second language. He won the Queen Victoria Memorial Prize in 1903 for the quality of his English prose; however, he failed to be admitted to the University of the Cape of Good Hope.

In 1905, he returned to Lisbon in order to study literature at the University of Lisbon. However, he

almost immediately abandoned his classes. He took business courses and became a freelance writer and correspondence secretary, in English and French, for foreign companies. Such work allowed him free time for his own writing but economically only modestly sustained him. Until his widowed mother returned to Lisbon in 1920, he lived with relatives or in rooming houses, moving frequently. No longer in school, he read extensively in Greek and German philosophy and French poetry. His maternal grandmother, with whom he had lived for a time and who was mentally unstable, died in 1907. She left him a small inheritance, which he used to set up a printing and publishing business, Empresa Ibis (Ibis Enterprise). It immediately went bankrupt.

Political and social turbulence mounted during this period. The socioeconomic state of Portugal had plunged drastically since its heroic Age of Discoveries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the Brazilian gold rush of the eighteenth. In 1908, the king of Portugal was assassinated, along with his heir; two years later, a republic was declared. In 1918, an authoritarian government under a military leader, Sidónio Pais, took over. Hailed by some as a savior, a "president/king," he was assassinated the same year. Pessoa dedicated a poem to him. A more enduring authoritarian government emerged in the late 1920's under the economist and dictator António Salazar. His regime would last until well after World War II. In this atmosphere of political chaos and economic and historical decay, Portuguese cultural figures, such

as Pessoa, emerged and sought to achieve the revival of a glorious national past through a modernizing renewal.

Pessoa considered 1914 to be the most significant year of his life. On March 8, he was inspired to begin creating the “heteronyms” for which he is most famous. This term is in contrast to a pseudonym, through which an author conceals his identity by use of a fictitious name. By a heteronym, Pessoa meant a literary figure, distinct from himself, with a separate biography and body of work, albeit created by Pessoa.

Throughout his life Pessoa suffered periods of depression. The writing he produced under his own name and that of his heteronyms seemed to balance his mental state. He is known to have had only one brief emotional relationship with a woman. Although he chain-smoked and drank excessively, he was rarely known to appear publicly drunk. Photographs from the late 1920’s and later show him rapidly aging. In 1935, he died of cirrhosis of the liver, having published the previous year *Mensagem* (*Message*, 1992), a prize-winning work that was his only book in Portuguese to appear in his lifetime.

After Pessoa’s death, a large trunk was found in which he had stored nearly thirty thousand scraps of paper. Pessoa published rather sparsely during his own life. However, over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the dense archive of poetry and prose that he had stored was edited and published by his friends. Over the decades, the contents of the trunk have culminated in a multivolume, posthumous oeuvre, the steadily amassing foundation of the poet’s reputation.

## ANALYSIS

Fernando Pessoa is the preeminent representative of modernism in Portugal, a movement that dominated Western culture from the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. It established a new canon of absolutes in terms of form and content, challenging the previous dictates of classicism, Christianity, and the Enlightenment. Ultimately it produced the postmodernist denouement, which dissolved all absolutes, considering all perspectives relative and inconclusive.

Pessoa knew and respected the old canons yet was absorbed by modernism. He anticipated the

disorienting dilemmas of postmodernism. Pessoa explored esoteric philosophies, such as theosophy and Rosicrucianism; adhered to the Portuguese version of Arthurian mysticism, known as Sebastianism; and employed esoteric technologies of astrology and numerology.

He joined *Renascença Portuguesa* (Portuguese Renaissance), a modernist movement that published the vanguard literary journal *A Águia* (The Eagle). In it, he published his first poems, along with a series of controversial essays on the sociological and psychological aspects of modern Portuguese poetry. Pessoa was associated with the short-lived literary journals *Orfeu* (Orpheus) and *Portugal futurista* (Futurist Portugal). Such journals, together with newspapers, were the principal means by which he published his work during his lifetime. His poem “Antinous,” about the male lover of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, and the booklets or chapbooks entitled *Thirty-five Sonnets* (1918) and *English Poems I-III* (1921), published under the pseudonym Alexander Search, were published in his lifetime. They received unenthusiastic literary reviews in Great Britain, discouraging him from his ambition to become an English-language poet.

Crucial to understanding the work of Pessoa is recognizing that his ideas on the philosophy and the creation of poetry are expressed through the life and work of his principal heteronyms: Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis. The principal heteronyms he created in 1914 suggest both his awareness and resolution of the dilemma of conflicting absolutes and looming relativism. He could see the general validity of other poetic perspectives but not their individual validity for himself.

Alberto Caeiro is the master poet, and the others, including Pessoa, are his disciples. Caeiro is the poet’s poet; born in 1889 and dying of tuberculosis in 1915, he is raised as a peasant, and his roots lie in a rural, natural environment. He rejects any philosophy of poetry. For him, poetry is the unadorned expression of direct, immediate feelings. Being a poet is not a career ambition but a way of being. His representative works are two series of poems, *O guardador de rebanhos* (published in *Obras completas*, 1942-1974; *The Keeper of Sheep*, 1986) and *O pastor amoroso* (also published in *Obras completas*; the amorous shepherd). In these poems, he is not concerned with fitting sentiments into aesthetic or lit-

erary molds but seeks to convey their emotional impact as directly and naturally as possible.

Álvaro de Campos is a very structured poet, convinced of the relevance of modern technology and progress. Born in Portugal in 1890, he is a cosmopolitan professional, trained as a naval engineer in Scotland. Returning to live in Portugal, he founds a modernist literary journal in Lisbon and adheres to a sequence of vanguard literary movements. He is a consistent admirer of Caeiro but eventually dissolves into a nihilist. One of his most noted poems, “Tabacaria” (“The Tobacco Shop”), originates from this perspective. He confesses that he is and always will be nothing, that he has no ambition to be something, yet nonetheless he harbors within himself all the dreams of the world.

Also a formalist, Ricardo Reis adheres not to modernism but to a classicist poetic tradition. Educated by Jesuits and imbued with classical Latin learning, he is trained as a doctor. Neither the dates of his birth nor of his death are clear. He goes into exile in Brazil after the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic in Portugal. Nonetheless, returning finally to Portugal, he visits Caeiro, greatly admiring him but recognizing he can never be his poetic equal or reach his poetic authenticity. His representative poetic works are odes, expressing both epicurean and stoic sentiments enveloped in a lingering sadness.

Having created Caeiro, Pessoa reasserted his identity by immediately composing under his own name the vanguard collection *Chuva oblíqua* (published in *Obras completas*; oblique rain). He then proceeded to create Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis. Pessoa conceived of the poet as a dissembler, someone who dissembles so well that he ends up imitating the very sentiments he most acutely feels. The noted American literary critic Harold Bloom and the Chinese Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian consider Pessoa among the most representative poets of the twentieth century. Pessoa achieved his capacity for multiple perspectives not by concentrating a fractured whole but by consolidating a multifaceted diffusion. Beyond his literary achievement, his sustaining personal achievement may have been to create a multifaceted personality from a fractured one.

## MESSAGE

**First published:** *Mensagem*, 1934 (English translation, 1992)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*This modernist lyrical epic traces a tripartite cycle ranging from the iconic glories of Portugal's past to esoteric speculations about its future.*

The first group or cycle of poems from the three sections of *Message* views Portuguese history through its principal heroic and princely figures. Pessoa produced the work within the tradition and under the shadow of the premier epic of Portuguese literature, *Os Lusíadas* (1572; *The Lusiads*, 1655), by Luis de Camões. This poem recounted the heroic exploits around the globe during Portugal's Age of Discoveries. *The Lusiads* themselves were written under the influence of the heroic national epics of Rome, the *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553), and of Greece, Homer's *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611) and *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614).

The first poem of the initial cycle of *Message* views Portugal as the face of Europe, which sees the future from the perspective of the past. The next poem describes the arbitrary will of the gods and observes that while a life may occupy a small amount of time, a soul extends over a much greater length. There follows a sequence of eight poems, grouped as “The Castles,” referring to the stalwart figures of the founding and development of Portugal. The first figure is Ulysses, mythical founder of Lisbon, the Portuguese capital. Myth is considered a narrative made of nothing but which suffuses everything. The next poems concentrate on Portuguese monarchs and princes. In one poem, Pessoa speculates on nations as mysterious worlds unto themselves, begetting kingdoms and then empires.

The next cycle of poems, entitled “Portuguese Sea,” concentrates on the Age of Discoveries and begins with a poem on the death of Crown Prince Sebastian. His death in battle ended the dynasty of the discoveries and sparked the myth of Sebastianism, the idea that a royal figure would return to restore Portuguese glory. The section culminates with poems on the discoverers themselves: Bartolomeu Dias, Ferdinand Magellan, and Vasco da Gama. It begins with the observation that the de-

sires of God become the dreams of men, prompting the work for their accomplishment. It culminates with a poem on the price for the Portuguese of the discoveries. Rhetorically, it inquires of the sea how much of its salt has come from Portuguese tears. Wondering whether the cost was worth the effort, the inquirer responds that anything not small-minded is worthwhile. God made the dangerous depths of the ocean yet its surface reflects an arching sky.

A third and final cycle, "The Covered," gathers poems of a mystical nature, seeming to foretell or anticipate a culminating climax for Portugal and humankind. An air of mystery or of the mystifying permeates the poems. This section achieves this atmosphere through esoteric and numerological frames of reference and visionary interpretations of Portuguese heraldry.

*Message* was the only book in Portuguese published in Pessoa's lifetime and under his own name,

not a heteronym. It was compiled from poems written in the late 1920's and early 1930's, with a few going back to the period of World War I. They were compiled in order to compete for a 1934 prize in poetry, which he won, sponsored by the Secretariat of National Propaganda. The work's dedicated nationalism complemented the nationalist objectives of the Portuguese dictatorship of the time, although Pessoa maintained he was opposed to authoritarian government.



## THE BOOK OF DISQUIET

**First published:** *Livro do desassossego*, wr. 1912-1935; pb. 1961, 1982 (English translation, 1991)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Published posthumously, this collection of journal-like entries jotted down over two decades gathers reflections on existential dilemmas and the nature of the self.*

*The Book of Disquiet* (also translated as *The Book of Disquietude*) has a format somewhat like a journal or diary and is also a collection of vignettes and reflections. Begun in 1912, Pessoa made entries for it throughout his life, especially in his later years. He described it as a collection of fragments. Although originally written under his own name, he eventually attributed the book to Bernardo Soares, whom he considered a "semi-heteronym," even a mutilation of himself, who is described as an assistant bookkeeper in the city of Lisbon, a minor, anonymous clerical bureaucrat. Some critics attribute earlier parts of the work to another heteronym, Vicente Guedes.

What has impressed most readers of the book is its serene, succinct insights, as scintillating as they can be paradoxical. Though *The Book of Disquiet* is a work in prose, it is of a singularly poetic nature. The dominant theme or spirit of the work is introspection and self-reflection. This steady pursuit of self-inquiry gives the work a serenity that often belies its tortuous insights. Pessoa speculates that a heart would stop if it could think. Solitary reflection results in anguished isolation. Interested in everything but attached to nothing, he describes himself as a bisected individual, Siamese twins that are separated. The intensity of self-analysis leads him to conclude that his true dimension should not be measured in physical height but the size of his imagination.

The work also contains ironic reflections. Thinking of the banality and tensions of his life, he wryly observes that he



suffers from a headache and the universe. He punctures pretensions by noting that while someone may have touched the feet of Christ, they should not be excused for lax punctuation. There are also lyrical recollections of the haunts of Lisbon, its cafés, bars, and byways, and of dreamlike delights.

A significant part of the work consists of reflections on prominent literary figures and their works. The literary masters for the author are Dante, William Shakespeare, and John Milton. He considers Shakespeare's *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608) to be defective; nonetheless, he is envious of its creator for what the drama does accomplish. He admires classical authors, such as Homer, Vergil, and Horace. The most exotic figure in his canon is the Persian poet and scientist Omar Khayyám. Recognized also are nineteenth century writers, such as François-René de Chateaubriand, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Heinrich Heine. The author is moved by the vibrant writings of Charles Dickens and the severe reflections of Thomas Carlyle.

*The Book of Disquiet* was not published in Pessoa's lifetime, and how he would have organized it for publication is not known. Those who discovered the multitude of jottings that compose it were only able to organize and publish it after his death, in 1961. It quickly attracted favorable critical attention and was translated into numerous languages, with several admirable editions in English.

Ironically, while the author recognized it as a collection of fragments and conceived of it as a book, he never assembled it as such. Moreover, its creator had little sense of himself as an identifiable person. Thus the work has been described as a nonbook by a nonauthor. The word *pessoa* means "person" in Portuguese, although even Pessoa thought of himself as a nonperson.

While the chronological development of the work can be traced, its narrative continuity is nonexistent; it could be organized by either time or theme and has neither a beginning nor an end. One can dip into its thoughts at any point, drawn along on the serpentine allure of its insights. The work has neither a beginning nor an end, either as a genre or a pursuit.

## SUMMARY

The most recognized modern Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa was notable but little distinguished in his own time. His reputation advanced as his archived writings were posthumously published. Composed under multiple identities, his work represents the varied nature and production of poetry over time, examines the character and dilemmas of poetry's creation in modern times, and reflects on the existential inconsistencies and contradictions of life and self-identification. Esoteric strains thread through both his poetry and prose.

Edward A. Riedinger

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Although a small, obscure country in modern times, Portugal has a very distinguished history. What were its main achievements in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?
- What was Fernando Pessoa's attitude toward the historical achievements of Portugal?
- What is Sebastianism? How would you compare it to the tale of King Arthur or other national "returning savior" legends?
- What are "heteronyms" and why did Pessoa use them?
- How does a heteronym differ from a pseudonym? What authors have used pseudonyms?



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## PETRARCH

**Born:** Arezzo, Tuscany (now in Italy)

July 20, 1304

**Died:** Arquà, Carrara (now in Italy)

July 18, 1374

*Recognized as one of the three greatest Italian writers, along with Dante and Giovanni Boccaccio, Petrarch influenced generations of love poets and served as a pivotal figure in the literary transition into the Renaissance.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Francesco Petrarca—or Petrarch (PEE-trahrk), as he came to be known—was born in Arezzo, Tuscany (now in Italy), on July 20, 1304, to Pietro di Parenzo and Eletta Canigiani. He spent his early years in Incisa, near Florence, where, in 1307, his brother Gherardo was born. Around 1316, Petrarch began to study law at the University of Montpellier, a vocation for which he had little love. Still, under pressure from his father, he continued his studies there for four years and then studied for three years at Bologna, where he also came into contact with the vernacular (Tuscan) poetry of the region, literature that influenced the best of his poetry.

Upon his father's death in 1326, Petrarch and his brother settled in Avignon. There, in the Church of St. Clare on April 6, 1327 (Good Friday, by Petrarch's poetic re-creation), he spied and fell in love with a young woman whose identity is still somewhat uncertain. This lady, named Laura in his poetry, was to become for Petrarch what Beatrice was for Dante: the object of his love, the theme of his poetry, and his poetic inspiration, even after her death of the plague in 1348. Indeed, from among the poems that he wrote about Laura, Petrarch finally assembled his most famous work, the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (1470, also known as *Canzoniere*; *Rhymes*, 1976). Composed mainly of sonnets and odes, the *Canzoniere* is one of only two

major works, besides the *Trionfi* (1470; *Tryumphs*, 1565; best known as *Triumphs*, 1962), that Petrarch wrote in Italian. Ironically, it is this work upon which Petrarch's poetic reputation primarily rests, even though he believed that his Latin work would secure for him the fame that he so deeply desired.

In 1330, Petrarch's friend Giacomo Colonna was appointed bishop of Lombez. Petrarch accompanied him there, where he met several other young men who shared Petrarch's literary and scholarly interests and who would be important colleagues in Petrarch's attempts to revive interest in classical learning. These interests characterized Petrarch and his friends as Renaissance humanists. Also in Lombez, Petrarch received his first clerical appointment, chaplain to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna. That and future appointments provided Petrarch with an income that would support him while demanding few duties, thus allowing him important time for his own literary pursuits.

In 1333, Petrarch began a period of travel, ultimately establishing a residence in Vacluse, a secluded town near Avignon and where he would reside, off and on, until 1353. During this period, he visited France, the Low Countries, and Germany. In 1336, he and his brother climbed Mt. Ventoux, the mountain that had been a real presence in Petrarch's early childhood. His accounts of this ascent, describing the beauty that he encountered and the keen tension between his desire for worldly fame and the urge for spirituality, illustrate the sharp introspection that characterizes most of his poetry. By the time that he settled at Vacluse,

Petrarch was already known as a man of strong personality, high intelligence, classical learning, and an impressive writer of Italian verse. At Vacluse, he began work on two of his important Latin works, *De viris illustribus* (1351-1353; later reorganized as *Quorundam virorum illustrium epithoma*) and *Africa* (1396; English translation, 1977), an epic with Scipio Africanus as its hero.

As a classicist, Petrarch was aware (however inaccurately) of the tradition of crowning a renowned poet with laurel, signifying his ability in letters. Eager for fame, Petrarch hinted that he felt coronation would be appropriate for him, and in September, 1340, Petrarch received two invitations for a coronation, one from the University of Paris and one from the senate of Rome. Petrarch chose Rome, and, having first been examined by King Robert in Naples, he arrived in Rome in the winter of 1341. For his coronation Petrarch prepared a classical oration, structured as a medieval sermon but focused on a text from Vergil rather than the Bible and filled with classical allusions. In the first part of the oration, he discusses the difficulty of the poetic endeavor, in the second, he examines the allegorical character of poetry, and in the third and perhaps most eloquent, he presents the rewards of the poet's calling. The coronation itself took place on April 8, 1341 (Easter) and was not only a moment of great pomp, providing Petrarch with much of the fame that he desired, but also a public announcement of the Renaissance.

Returning from Rome, Petrarch stayed a short while in Parma, completing a draft of *Africa* before moving on to Vacluse in 1342. In April of that year, Gherardo took orders as a Carthusian monk, a decision that seems to have caused Petrarch renewed self-analysis and a loss of companionship. Also at this time came the birth of his daughter Francesca (another illegitimate child, a son, had been born earlier). Unlike her brother, who was to cause Petrarch much pain, Francesca (and later her husband) was to be a source of joy and comfort for Petrarch. The complexities of this period in his life led Petrarch to work on one of his most significant, and typically "Renaissance," Latin pieces, the *Secretum meum* (1353-1358; *My Secret*, 1911), a searching self-inquiry, presented in the form of a dialogue between two characters: Augustinus (Saint Augustine), who gives voice to the traditional and institutional views of the religious ideal,

and Franciscus (Petrarch), who, while admitting his faults, nevertheless strongly defends secular and poetic values. While Augustine accuses Petrarch of being bound by two chains—Laura and the desire for fame—Petrarch never renounces them, even though troubled by the discussion. In rejecting as givens the values of the medieval church, Petrarch again moves more fully into the more secular (and classical) world of Renaissance humanism.

The fame that Petrarch had sought and won, however, provided more problems than joy for the writer. A man renowned for his mediative qualities, Petrarch was often asked to serve diplomatic missions, an arduous task in this time of warring Italian city-states. Consequently, Petrarch had less and less time to spend on his writing.

In 1350, Petrarch left Vacluse for Rome to celebrate the Jubilee of 1350. On the way, he stopped in Florence to visit Giovanni Boccaccio, the famous author of the *Decameron*: *O, Principe Galetto* (1349-1351; *The Decameron*, 1620), with whom he had long been in correspondence. Boccaccio acknowledged Petrarch as his master and importuned him to establish residence in Florence. Instead of settling in Florence, however, Petrarch moved to Milan in 1353, where he resided until 1361, serving the lords of the city in a variety of posts. His work allowed him ample time for writing now, and he completed several works that had been in process, among them *My Secret* and several poems for the *Canzoniere*.

The plague drove Petrarch from Milan in the spring of 1361, and he moved first to Padua and then to Venice, and he alternately lived in those cities until he finally moved to Arquà, a small village near Padua, in 1370. During the remaining years of his life, despite declining health, he continued his writing and entertained the numerous visitors who traveled to converse with the great writer and humanist. On July 18, 1374, in Arquà, he died quietly.

## ANALYSIS

Petrarch's importance for literature and culture is twofold. As one of the humanists, that group of thinkers influenced by classical literatures and intent on reinstating classical learning and values, Petrarch was most influential through his Latin writings: *Africa*, in which he painted a picture of a pagan and classical hero; *De sui ipsius et multorum*

*ignorantia* (1367; *On His Own Ignorance and That of Many*, 1948), in which he defended classical poetry; and *My Secret*, wherein, through his development of an individual voice, he became a paradigm for later Renaissance writers, among them the French essayist Michel de Montaigne.

In truth, the critical trend to call the period of Petrarch (and stretching into the seventeenth century, in some parts of Europe) the Early Modern period rather than the Renaissance helps to understand his pivotal position. Petrarch anticipated modern sensibilities in his individualism, his emphasis on the experience of the poet rather than the nature of the object, and his constant self-analysis. Yet he was also as much someone who belonged to a “renaissance,” a rebirth, specifically of classical antiquity. The one work that endures as Petrarch’s most influential, the *Canzoniere*, displays many of those characteristics.

Composed of 366 poems, mostly sonnets—fourteen-line poems of iambic pentameter, usually with the *abbaabba cdecde* rhyme scheme that Petrarch perfected—the *Canzoniere* is a roughly narrative recounting of the influence that a woman named Laura had on Petrarch. The sequence was composed over a number of years, the entire collection being completed near the end of Petrarch’s life. The unique contribution of the sequence is that the lyrics in it are combined in such a way as to create a sense of narrative unity and to focus the reader’s attention on the voice of the poet, a presence at once unifying and individualizing. The sequence itself is divided into two main sections: poems 1 to 266 about Laura in life and 267 to 366 about Laura after death, the final poem taking the reader beyond human time and Laura’s death into heaven and eternity.

Besides its purely structural aspects, the *Canzoniere* is significant for the ways in which it ties together the three poetic strands that influenced Petrarch: classical Latin poetry, Romance (predominantly French) literature, and Augustinian meditation. From the classics Petrarch derived many of his conventional *topoi* (a *topos* is a type of recurrent poetic formula, such as the poet speaking outside his beloved’s door), his secularity, his pastoral vision of the landscape, and, above all, his urbane accommodation of much of Ovid’s language. From the Romance tradition, he assimilated the cultivated poetic and cultural sensibilities of Pro-

vence, the aristocratic worldview. Finally, from Augustinianism he developed his confessional and introspective voice. It is that voice—dignified and confessional, aristocratic and personal, tortured and inspired—that unites the *Canzoniere*.

Through that central persona, the *Canzoniere* develops three major themes, all interrelated—the meaning of Laura, the nature of the external landscape, and the question of time. For the speaker of the poem, the character of Laura goes well beyond any particular woman whom Petrarch may have seen in church on Good Friday, 1327. Through the *Canzoniere* her significance changes constantly. At times, she seems to be the historical person whom Petrarch saw, as in sonnet 3. Other times she becomes linked to the laurel crown of poetic fame, and as such she becomes suggestive of the poet’s own quest for glory and fame (which ended in his being crowned poet laureate). Again, she becomes linked to the idea of poetic inspiration and moral guidance (Petrarch often puns on Laura’s name, *l’aura* meaning “breeze,” a traditional symbol of poetic inspiration), much like Beatrice did for Dante. Another Laura in the *Canzoniere* allows Petrarch to investigate the theme of love, both secular and profane; this Laura causes Petrarch both pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, hope and despair, and it is this Laura who, perhaps more than any other, became so influential in the Petrarchan poetry that developed throughout Europe.

Yet as important as Laura is for the sequence, finally it is not Laura but rather her effects on the speaker that become the center of Petrarch’s concern. Often he shows her influence by discussing the world of nature, a nature that becomes a reflection of his inner state. This external world reveals the melancholy, the springtime hope and despair, the comfort of solitary nature, and the reflections of the transience of life that Petrarch discovers in his own experience.

A third major theme in the *Canzoniere*, the relationship between the poet-speaker and time, again reveals Petrarch as a Renaissance writer. The speaker generally notes the transience of time and learns that the beauty of his world and his beloved must be grasped, either through experience or memory—as, for example, he suggests in the famous Sonnet 90 (“She used to let her golden hair fly free”) or the meditative Sonnet 272 (“Life hurries on, a frantic refugee”). Such poems are part

of the *carpe diem* (seize the day) tradition that stretches back to the classical poets, but they are also part of the early modern sensibility that sees in the remorseless march of time not so much a theological or moral lesson as an indication of the “human condition” of which Montaigne would later speak. Ultimately, only in the final poem of the *Canzoniere* (Sonnet 366), the poem that transcends human time, does Petrarch finally arrive at any resolution of this tension with time, tension encompassing the questions of love, Laura, fame, and vocation.

## SONNET 1

**First published:** Rime I, 1358 (collected in *Rhymes*, 1976)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet renounces his earlier life and sets himself and his story forth as an example for the reader.*

Although this first lyric, Sonnet 1, in *Canzoniere* was probably written well after many of those poems eventually included in the collection, Petrarch placed it first as an entry piece for the reader. The poem is by no means “original” in the modern sense of the term, for the rhetorical technique of renouncing previous positions was already conventional in poetry by the time that Petrarch wrote the piece. In this acceptance of poetic tradition and convention, the poem is typical of much in the *Canzoniere*. Later poets would follow this example, notably Sir Philip Sidney in *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) and Edmund Spenser in the *Amoretti* (1595). As an “entrance poem,” the sonnet introduces some of the major themes and characteristics of the entire collection.

The poem is a typical Petrarchan sonnet, with a rhyme scheme of *abbaabba cdecde*, and the syntax adheres to the octave/sestet structure, each portion composed of a single sentence. In the octave, the speaker renounces his former foolishness, the “errant youth” that he had spent pursuing the “vain and empty hope” of earthly “Love.” He presents himself as “Another man,” one who has learned from his experience and is now imploring “Pardon” and “Pity” from the reader. This first speech

of the unifying persona of the *Canzoniere* not only creates the speaker and the audience but also establishes the relationship between the audience and the speaker by direct address to the reader. By indicating shared experience with the reader (the common experience that “Love can sear”), the speaker introduces one major motif of the collection, especially “Part I: Laura Living”—the destructive qualities of passion and its utter vanity (though these are still, in part, merely conventions of love poetry).

The sestet, as is common in Petrarch’s sonnets, presents a reversal and completion to the movement of the octave, noting the wisdom gained (“nought but shame my vanities have bred”) and the resolution to the sequence, the vision of the transience of earthly matters and the value of the spiritual (“earthly joys are dreams that swiftly pass”). The opening of the sestet, the “now,” also establishes the fictive structure of the sequence, a narrative of the speaker’s life of love.

The major themes of the *Canzoniere* are all in embryo form: the role of Love (Laura) in his life, the tension between the secular and the sacred, the passing of time. Likewise, in focusing on the personal effects of these themes, the poem provides for the reader an indication of the Renaissance perspective of the poet.

## SONNET 269

**First published:** Rime CCCX, 1358  
(collected in *Rhymes*, 1976)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In the spring, when signs of new life abound, the poet mourns the loss of his beloved.*

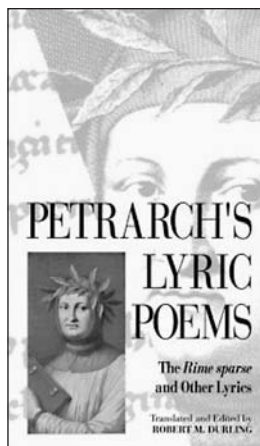
This famous Petrarchan sonnet, Sonnet 269, the basis for the translation “The Soote Season” by Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, was probably written in the spring of 1352, after the death of Laura (1348). A traditional Petrarchan sonnet divided into an octave rhymed *abbaabba* and a sestet with the rhymed variation of *cdecde*, the poem is both a lament over the loss of Laura and a meditation on the relationship between the speaker and the natural world around him.

The opening of the poem, with its classical refer-



ences to Zephyr (the spring wind), Procne (the swallow), and Philomel (the nightingale), invokes the substance and ethos of classical poetry. Yet the opening is also ironically poignant, for the western wind, Zephyr, has replaced the poet's own breeze, Laura (*l'aura*, "breeze" in Italian), and left him without the hope generally associated with spring. The poet paints a concrete picture of the details of the season—the birds, the colors, the fair sky, the "glad" fields—yet notes the paradox that, while all around him the earth is in repair, he experiences only a "sweet despair," the typical Petrarchan oxymoron describing the experience of love.

Indeed, the second part of the poem, the sestet, shows that the poet is at odds with his context. While the life-giving wind comes to nature, he experiences "only heavy sighs" since Laura has gone to her "heavenly sojourn." Despite the renewal of



the world around him, the speaker's internal landscape, the world of his experience, is precisely the opposite—"Where deserts burn/ The beasts still prowl on the ungreening sand"—and he finds no resurrection of hope.

The poem is one of the best instances of Petrarch's use of the natural world as an indicator of human experience. While in other poems the landscape had been an adequate mirror of his own emotional state, however, he now finds nature almost mocking his despair and tormenting with hope when he finds none.

### SUMMARY

Along with Dante and Boccaccio, Petrarch is considered to be one of Italy's three greatest writers. His influence as a love poet is universal. Through the development of the sonnet form, the creation of a fiction of narrative development and a unifying and focalizing persona, the revivifying of classical tropes, and the pervading themes of love, nature, and time, Petrarch, in the *Canzoniere*, establishes himself as one of the first major writers of the Renaissance. He also provides a model for much of the poetry of the succeeding centuries, at least into the seventeenth century.

Daniel L. Colvin

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*Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, 1470 (also known as *Canzoniere*; *Rhymes*, 1976)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why has Petrarch's Laura influenced subsequent love poetry more than Dante's Beatrice?
- What besides the subject of Laura has made Petrarch's *Canzoniere* so important?
- What makes Petrarch's sonnet form difficult to accomplish in English?
- Why have writers on Petrarch attached such importance to the fact that he climbed Mt. Ventoux?
- Describe the influence of Petrarch on Giovanni Boccaccio.
- Millions of people have read Petrarch's *Canzoniere* in Italian or in translation; in general, only scholars read his Latin works. Why are the latter so important?

# PETRONIUS

**Born:** Unknown

c. 20 C.E.

**Died:** Cumae (now in Italy)

c. 66 C.E.

*By his complex, multileveled fiction and poetry in one literary work, The Satyricon, Petronius has increasingly been recognized as the only ancient Roman writer to realistically present everyday life in the Roman Empire while simultaneously and skillfully satirizing virtually all of ancient Roman civilization.*

## BIOGRAPHY

The scanty details of the life of Petronius (puh-TROH-nee-uhs) are drawn from what was written about him by other Roman writers of his time, including most famously by Tacitus. In book 16, chapters 17-19 of *Annales* (c. 116 C.E.; *Annals*, 1598), Tacitus described the events leading up to Petronius's suicide on the order of Emperor Nero in 66 C.E. Thus, more is known about the last days of Petronius's life than about the previous forty-odd years of that life, and even about those last days there is considerable uncertainty. However, it is generally known and agreed that Petronius was well educated and of artistic temperament; that he became governor of Bithynia and later a consul; and that during his last years he was in the inner circle of the infamous Emperor Nero, probably the most decadent and destructive of the Roman emperors.

It is also agreed that Petronius occupied the position of arbiter for Nero in the particular area of entertainment. Petronius's job seems to have been to review all entertainment activities and performances proposed for Nero's pleasure and to decide which performances Nero actually witnessed and in which entertainment activities the emperor actually engaged. Although there is uncertainty as to whether Petronius was actually involved in many, if any, of Nero's debaucheries, it seems clear that he was either involved or knew others well who were and who related the details to him. This is obvious from Tacitus's explanation that after Petronius was framed by a rival and perjured testimony provided to Nero about Petronius's supposed col-

lusion with a conspirator against Nero, and after Nero's message that Petronius was to kill himself, Petronius wrote a detailed account of Nero's debaucheries. This account included the names of all of Nero's sexual partners, male and female, and a list of all of Nero's sexually deviant activities, and Petronius sent the account to Nero himself. Thus, even if Petronius was himself an Epicurian (worshipper of pleasure), as seems likely from his position in Nero's circle, he clearly retained a satiric sense of the perversity of Nero and had the courage to communicate that perception, albeit after his own suicide freed him from personal reprisals by Nero for the communication.

Petronius's courage and satiric vision, his ability to perceive the ironic disconnect between appearance and reality, between pretension and achievement, between selfish motive and rationalization, are also evident in his refusal to follow the custom of willing a substantial portion of his property to the emperor. In fact, Petronius destroyed some of that property, including a fluorspar wine dipper worth 300,000 sesterces, so that Nero would not receive it, as reported by Pliny. In addition, Plutarch indicates Petronius's courage and satiric tendency in noting that Petronius sneered at the reckless and wasteful spending and the pettiness and sordidness of Nero and others of Rome's elite class.

It is clear from the scanty biographical information that Petronius was a humanist with a sense of justice and fair play, also essential beliefs of the successful satirist. This humanism and sense of justice are evident in Tacitus's description of Petronius rewarding some of his slaves and punishing others

prior to his death, and then destroying his signet ring—his seal of authority from Nero—so the ring could not be used to harm others.

Thus, the overall biographical picture of Petronius that results from the scanty details of his life is that he was well educated and artistic; that he was an Epicurian, yet retained a sense of enlightened decorum that caused him to abhor the extremes of debauchery that he witnessed at first hand or learned about from firsthand sources; and that he possessed an ironic perspective on the excesses of all aspects of life during the late Roman Empire. He also possessed the courage and sense of justice and fair play to satirize those excesses while recognizing his own, albeit more limited, participation in those excesses, which would eventually lead to the fall of the Roman Empire itself.

## ANALYSIS

Petronius's style is unique in ancient literature in that it combines sophisticated literary allusiveness and symbolism with earthy, realistic situations, events, and characters; unites a variety of literary genres and modes; and combines complex satiric denunciation with a humorous and humanistic perspective that effectively captures both the comic and tragic nature of human life.

The repeated allusions to and deliberate parallels with the works of other ancient writers have produced a virtual cornucopia of scholarship tracing these allusions and parallels. They include direct references to Sophocles, Euripides, Pindar, Plato, Demosthenes, Thucydides, Hyperides, Cicero, and so many other ancient writers as to be virtually impossible to count. Ancient mythology also figures prominently in Petronius's work, including references to Athena, Mount Helicon, Minerva, Mercury, and others, yet these are also worked realistically into Petronius's writing as a reflection of the beliefs of the multitude of characters who populate that writing. For example, in the most famous section of *Satyricon* (c. 60 C.E.; *The Satyricon*, 1694), entitled "Dinner with Trimalchio," frescoes depicting scenes from Greek mythology and from Homer's *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611) and *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614) line the walls of the home of Trimalchio, a wealthy merchant. In addition, as is typical in ancient literature, figures from mythology actually appear as characters in the work, including, for

example, Circe's appearance to tempt Encolpius, the first-person narrator of *The Satyricon*, to have sexual relations with her.

However, unlike in ancient epics, this literary and mythological allusiveness in Petronius's work is deliberately combined with a decidedly non-heroic set of characters and situations, as the characters are uniformly in pursuit of pleasure, mostly sexual, while they usually attempt to maintain the public facade of other, more socially acceptable, purposes. This, of course, creates great potential for satire, as when the scholar/poet Eumolpus at one point in *The Satyricon* is in hot, lusty pursuit of a homosexual relationship with the narrator's slave-boy, Giton, and later declaims sonorously against "perversion everywhere."

Petronius's work is also uniquely a combination of literary genres and modes. Functioning overall as a fictitious travel narrative, *The Satyricon* also includes elements of Greek romance, including the requisite separation of lovers by shipwreck. The work features epic poetry, particularly Eumolpus's lengthy poetic recitation of Roman historical warfare that is one of the longer sections of the work. In addition, *The Satyricon* contains sections of declamatory rhetoric, as in the rant by the scholar Agamemnon that begins the work.

Much of the humor of *The Satyricon* derives from its mock-epic aspects, particularly those instances in which the heroic travels and adventures of Odysseus are parodied by the much less heroic misadventures of the narrator, Encolpius, whose name translates roughly as "the crotch."

In one humorous episode, Encolpius attempts to keep his sexual relationship with his slave-boy, Giton, despite the lusty pursuit of the handsome young Giton by Encolpius's best friend, Ascyltus, and by the scholar/poet Eumolpus. At one point, Encolpius encourages Giton to hide from Ascyltus by clinging to the underside of a bed, and Petronius makes the parodying, mock-epic parallel by indicating the similarity to Odysseus's escaping detection by the Cyclops by clinging to the belly of a ram. The dissonance between Odysseus's heroic struggle to save his life and return to family and country and Giton's attempt to hide from one of his homosexual lovers at the behest of another is humorously and satirically very effective.

Similar mock-epic parallels abound throughout *The Satyricon*, including the meeting between Circe

and Encolpius, modeled after and contrasting with Odysseus's encounter with the same goddess in *Odyssey*. In Petronius's version, Encolpius's crotch hilariously fails him, as he is impotent with Circe despite the enchantress's beauty and sexuality. Upon that failure, Encolpius renders in epic poetry his attempt to sever his disobedient penis but inability to do it, and he then delivers an impassioned apostrophe to his penis, which of course hides its head in shame. The humor generated by the mock-epic parallels is probably the most effective aspect of Petronius's writing and the aspect most unique among ancient literature, and there was no really equivalent mock-epic written until Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714).

Another important dimension of Petronius's writing is the combination of satiric denunciation with a humanistically tragicomic perspective. The bitter diatribes of most ancient satire are totally lacking in Petronius's work, in which all are implicated in the shortcomings presented. For example, in the final sections of *The Satyricon*, Petronius very effectively satirizes the greed of those who prey on the wealthy elderly in order to receive their property, but he does it by having all of his main characters concoct a plan for preying on those in Croton who prey on the wealthy elderly. These main characters decide to have the scholar/poet Eumolpus arrive in Croton and pretend to be a rich, elderly merchant as a way to get the legacy-hunters in Croton to bestow gifts upon him in hopes of receiving his estate. The plot works, and so does the satire; the humor is provided by the narrator's humanistic ambivalence about participating in the scam and his tragicomic fear that the ruse will be discovered and that he and the others will be deservedly punished. In Petronius's tragicomic, humanistic, and profoundly satiric vision, no one is free of responsibility for the chaos of the world.

## THE SATYRICON

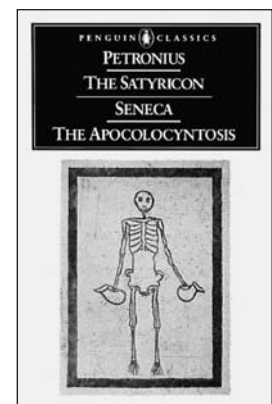
**First published:** c. 60 C.E. (English translation, 1694)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Through the sexual and other decidedly unheroic misadventures of his main character, Petronius satirizes not only the heroic tradition but also the many excesses of ancient Roman civilization.*

Understanding of *The Satyricon* (the name connoting both satire and satyr, a mythological sexual beast) needs to begin with the fact that the extant work is only a fragment of the original as Petronius wrote it. There are many gaps where entire sections and episodes have been lost. In fact, *The Satyricon* as it exists today is probably less than one-half of the original. Still, given the unique structure of the work, as a combination of fictitious travel narrative, epic poetry, rhetorical declamation, Greek romance, and mock-epic, it is likely that enough exists to suffice in understanding Petronius's purposes and achievement.

The overall structure of the work is best understood as a deliberate parallel to and parody of Homer's *Odyssey*. Like Odysseus, Petronius's main character, Encolpius ("the crotch"), has offended a deity, in this case Priapus, the lord of lust, and thus embarks on a diverse series of sexual and other misadventures. These include the loss of his slave-boy Giton, with whom he has an intimate homosexual relationship; temptation by the goddess Circe, with whom Encolpius cannot perform, despite her perfect beauty and sensuality; and endurance of the "cure" for his impotence by the hag Proseleunos, who among other activities inserts a leather phallus into Encolpius's rectum after covering the phallus with oil, pepper, and ground nettle seed. Implicit in all of these misadventures is the humorous mock-epic parallel with *Odyssey*, with Petronius





satirizing the excesses of the ancient Roman world and showing human nature much more realistically than is shown in Homer's epic.

Manifestations of the satire include the hag Proselenos, who, drunk and frantic with lust, chases Encolpius down the street, and the slave-boy Giton, who skillfully manipulates the narrator and other lovers to achieve his sexual and monetary satisfactions. More importantly, there is Trimalchio, the wealthy merchant who is the focus of the longest section of the work, entitled "Dinner with Trimalchio." An obese, decadent man whose ostentatious wealth and wastefulness are epitomized by a meal of seemingly endless courses, Trimalchio cannot keep his hands (and his mouth) off of his slave-boys, even in the presence of his own wife; his narcissistic self-indulgence (symbolic of all Roman self-indulgence in the time of Nero, when Petronius wrote) is epitomized by his drunken display of dressing in funeral attire, lying down, and demanding that his dinner guests pretend that he is dead and sing his praises.

However, probably the ultimate satiric message of *The Satyricon* derives from the last section of the work, in which Encolpius and friends, before arriving at Croton, concoct a plan to victimize legacy-hunters who prey on elderly people with wealth in order to receive their property. The plan is that Eumolpus will pretend to be a wealthy merchant, with extensive land, capital, and slaves in Africa, so as to entice the legacy-hunters to donate property

to him in the belief that the gifts will generate much greater gifts after his death. The double-edged satire is obvious, but Petronius makes it even more so, showing human beings' mutual attempts to devour each other by having Eumolpus write a will requiring that each devisee, in order to receive his property, eat a portion of Eumolpus's dead body. A more negative satiric assessment of human beings is difficult to imagine. However, at the same time, Petronius's humorously tolerant perspective on the weaknesses of all of his characters saves *The Satyricon* from the bitterness of other satires, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and combined with the inventive mock-epic structure, makes *The Satyricon* a unique, and uniquely valuable, work of ancient Roman literature.

#### SUMMARY

Only by the broadest definition a novel, Petronius's *The Satyricon* really defies categorization, but it is best understood as the first mock-epic narrative in any literature. By an original, inventive combination of elements from a multitude of literary genres and modes, Petronius effectively both depicts and satirizes Roman life under Emperor Nero, and he does so with such compassionate, earthy, and tragicomic humanism that *The Satyricon* richly deserves its recently acquired status as one of the greatest works of literature of the ancient world.

John L. Grigsby

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways does Petronius's *The Satyricon* show the influence of Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614)?
- In making parallels to and contrasts with *Odyssey*, is Petronius's purpose to ridicule first century C.E. Roman life as he knew it, or to ridicule Homer's work, or both, or neither? If neither, what is Petronius's reason for using the parallels and contrasts with *Odyssey*?
- In what ways does *The Satyricon* reflect the worldview, philosophy, and religion of the ancient Greek and Roman world?
- How is Roman slavery as reflected in *The Satyricon* similar to and/or different from slavery in the American South before the Civil War?
- What opinion does Petronius seem to want the reader to formulate about Trimalchio? Does he seem to want the reader to admire Trimalchio, to be disgusted by him, or both, or neither? If neither, what attitude does Petronius want the reader to have toward Trimalchio?
- How does hyperbole (deliberate overstatement) contribute to the humor in *The Satyricon*?
- Who is the most despicable character in *The Satyricon*, and why? Who is the most admirable character, and why?



Jastrow

## PINDAR

**Born:** Cynoscephalae, near Thebes, Boeotia, Greece  
c. 518 B.C.E.

**Died:** Argos, Greece  
c. 438 B.C.E.

*The most gifted of all the lyric poets of ancient Greece, rivaled only by Sappho, Pindar is best known for his victory odes honoring athletic victors at the Olympia and other Panhellenic festivals.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Pindar (PIHN-dur; also known as Pindaros) was born in the small village of Cynoscephalae, which was controlled by the city-state of Thebes in the region of Greece called Boeotia. This was a mountainous and rustic territory, which also contained the most important religious site among the ancient Greeks, namely the cult and oracle of Apollo at Delphi. There was a popular story that Pindar was actually born during the Delphic, or Pythian, festival held every four years in honor of the god. If so, the year of his birth would have been either 522 or 518 B.C.E. Boeotia was also a region famous for producing poets, especially those who specialized in choral lyric song, and so Pindar would have been born into a lively musical culture centered on religious festivals, like those held at Delphi.

Five accounts of Pindar's life survive but they are all from late antique or Byzantine sources and their reliability in most matters is suspect. Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct the outlines of Pindar's biography from what he tells readers in his poems and from what others said about him. His family appears to have been connected with the Aegeids, a clan which is mentioned in mythical sources as belonging to both Sparta and Thebes. This would give him an outstanding aristocratic pedigree, and even if the claim of descent from the Aegeids is an

exaggeration, it is likely that Pindar was born into a noble and wealthy Theban family. The name of his father is disputed: Daiphantus and Pagonas are given as possibilities, while Corinna, another Boeotian poet, says he was called Scopelinus, meaning "rocky."

As a boy growing up in Thebes, Pindar would have received the schooling in music and poetry that was an important part of the education of well-born males, along with physical and military training. At some later stage, he was sent to Athens to study the poetic arts and there would have had the opportunity to associate with that city's cultural and social elite. He seems to have developed a close link with one of the most powerful Athenian families, the Alcmaeonids, whom he praises in some of his later poems. While studying in Athens, he may have been tutored by the musician Agathocles, but the tradition that he was taught by Lasus of Hermione and Simonides of Ceos is probably false. He would, however, have been significantly influenced by the dynamic innovations in choral singing that occurred in and around the Great Dionysia festival during this period.

Thus it was, in all likelihood, a combination of his inborn talent and his broad education that turned Pindar into one of the leading poets of his day. At this time, the most successful poets traveled across the Greek world to perform in various towns and cities, and Pindar is known to have visited Thessaly and the island of Sicily. Yet what makes him unusual is the close bond he managed to maintain with his native city of Thebes, of which he

speaks often and fondly in many of his poems. The fact that he continued to express his admiration for Thebes even after the city had sided with the invading Persians when Xerxes attacked Greece in 480 B.C.E. is eloquent testimony to his patriotic zeal. Thebes's long-standing enmity with Athens, and its general unpopularity after the Persian wars, do not appear to have affected Pindar directly, as he seems to have been largely uninterested in politics.

Pindar is credited with the composition of seventeen books of lyric poetry of various kinds. He started out by composing songs for religious occasions and songs of praise (paean) for particular cities and islands, including one of his favorite locations, Aegina. He made his career, however, with a series of epinikian odes (*Epinikia*, 498-446 B.C.E.; *Odes*, 1656), composed for victors in the athletic competitions held at the four great Panhellenic festivals: the Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian. In these complex compositions, myth and history are blended with elaborate metrical forms and a highly metaphorical language to produce a unique encapsulation of the Panhellenic ideal as it was embodied in the achievement of a victorious athlete. Pindar's success in Sicily, where he composed epinikians for Hieron, the ruler of Syracuse, secured his reputation as the leading exponent of choral lyric.

Pindar arrived in Sicily around 476 B.C.E. and remained there for several years. He returned to the mainland a wealthy man and a much sought-after performer. He built a temple of Rhea and Pan near his home in Thebes and continued to travel widely. Criticized for being too friendly with tyrants and for being too concerned with getting paid, in his later years Pindar was forced to endure personal reproaches along with the praise that continued to be heaped upon his poetry. The political weakness of Boeotia and of his native Thebes in the face of rising Athenian power must also have been a cause of some distress. Even his poetic reputation came into question, as he is reported to have engaged in heated arguments over style and content with the Boeotian female poet Corinna. According to the tradition, he died in the Peloponnesian city of Argos around 438 B.C.E., breathing his last breath on the knees of a boy whom he loved. He had lived for about eighty years.

## ANALYSIS

In his epinikian odes, of which forty-five survive, grouped under the names of the four great Panhellenic festivals—the Olympia, Pythia, Nemea, and Isthmia—Pindar strives to express what has often been labeled as the Panhellenic ideal. To understand what this means, it is vital to realize that ancient athletic competitions were primarily events of religious and cultural significance, rather than simple displays of physical prowess. The victory ode would originally have been written more or less on the spot by the poet commissioned for the purpose and performed on the evening of the contest; most of Pindar's, however, were composed after an interval of some time and then delivered to the home city of the victor. In such an ode, the victorious athlete was celebrated as the finest specimen of male virtue available and was associated with the realm of the divine through his achievements. Thus, while it often comes as a surprise to modern readers, an epinikian ode has little to say about the particular athlete's appearance or how he won his victory crown.

In his poems, Pindar strives to express the religious and cultural traditions that all Greeks shared as a common heritage. The unifying concepts included the two great poems of Homer, the *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611) and *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614), the mythological tradition of stories about the gods and heroes, and the centrality of such holy places as Delphi, with its oracle of Apollo. Thus every ode contains a large mythological component, often focused on one major figure, such as Heracles, Jason, Apollo, or Perseus, but the stories are rarely told in a conventional, straightforward narrative form. Fleeting references to well-known events are combined with more detailed descriptions of minor incidents or complicated allusions to obscure, lesser-known parts of the myth. Chronological disruption is frequent, so that the end of the story may be mentioned before earlier parts of the tale are told. One of Pindar's favorite devices is to mix into his mythological material some references to the home city of the athletic victor in order to involve the victor's achievement with the great deeds of past heroes.

The epinikian ode extols the virtues, or the outstanding qualities, which have enabled the athlete to achieve his victory in whatever event he com-

peted, be it wrestling, boxing, running, or the pentathlon. Certain key terms appear again and again, the most important of which is *arête*: in Greek, this covers a range of meanings, including “courage,” “excellence,” and “skill.” It is the excellence of spirit that has brought the athlete to the rewards of the highest skill a mortal can reach. Such excellence—which the poet believes he shares—at the same time requires an appropriate sense of modesty and restraint in order to avoid incurring the jealousy or anger of the gods. Pindar also speaks much of such praiseworthy attributes as loyalty, filial devotion, and respect for the gods. His poems are the product of a basically conservative outlook, one which has reverence for traditional institutions and religious practices. They are also tied to the aristocratic elements of Greek society, which were increasingly threatened by ideas about democracy and wider political participation. He often comments, for example, on the superiority of inborn or inherited qualities to those skills which can be taught or learned.

While the ideas expressed in Pindar’s poems are derived from a common storehouse of Panhellenic and aristocratic ideology, the language in which they are expressed is unique in the ancient world. At the root of Pindar’s skill as a poet is his mastery of all the varied meters in which Greek lyricists composed. His metrical forms and versification are extremely complex and were imitated by later poets, such as the Roman poet Horace. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to reconstruct the music or dances that were an integral part of the original performance.

The other remarkable element of the Pindaric ode is its language, especially in regard to word choice and word placement. Imaginative vocabulary and vivid metaphors run throughout the poems, and he is the master of the striking juxtaposition and the surprising turn of phrase. The focus of the poem shifts quickly, often unexpectedly, so that a general impression of speed and vitality is created. At the same time, the elaborate sentence structure, numerous asides and interjections, and difficult grammar all contribute to a sense of fluidity. It could be said that Pindar’s poetry is “experienced” rather than “understood” as it unfolds.

Each epinikian opens with an invocation of the Muses or some other divinity and moves to praise

the individual victor and his city and family. Then comes the mythical content, which usually takes up the central part of the poem. The piece concludes with further praise of the victor or his homeland, as well as some praise of the poet himself, and some tribute to the presiding god of the festival, such as Zeus or Apollo. Although there are some variations, this pattern holds for the overwhelming majority of the odes.

Readers, ancient and modern, have reacted with varying enthusiasm to the Pindaric mode of expression. The ancients were fascinated by the notion that Pindar quarreled with his fellow Boeotian, the celebrated female poet Corinna, over style and content; she is reputed to have criticized him for “sowing with the whole sack” of myths, rather than concentrating on one story, as she appears to have done in her own, sparsely written, poetry. After Pindar, the epinikian form all but disappears. The world for which he wrote was changing rapidly, and, to a considerable degree, he was already looking back nostalgically to an era and a value system whose zenith had passed.

## OLYMPIAN ODE 1

**First published:** 498-446 B.C.E. (English translation, 1656)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Celebrating Hieron of Syracuse’s victory in the horse race at the Olympia, Pindar offers advice on rulership via the myth of Tantalus and Pelops.*

*Olympian 1*, which opens the collection of Pindar’s forty-five victory odes, sets the template for all of his subsequent poems in this genre. It was produced to celebrate the victory in the horse race at the Olympia of Hieron of Syracuse in 476 B.C.E. At this time, Hieron was master of most of the Greek settlements on the island of Sicily and was establishing himself as a patron of the arts, especially poetry. Pindar, who was invited to Syracuse in 476, was an eyewitness to the magnificence of Hieron’s court and to his benevolent, if autocratic, rule. *Olympian 1* is a response to what he saw and contains a mixture of praise and advice to the victor.



The ode opens with the famously impenetrable phrase “Best of all is water” and celebratory remarks on the Olympic festival and its patron deity, Zeus. Then Pindar moves to praise of Hieron and his city of Syracuse as worthy subjects for poetic song, along with the horse who was ridden to victory, Pherenikos (“Victory-bringer”). By interweaving references to Olympia and Sicily and deploying a connected series of metaphors and images, Pindar is able to link Hieron and his present-day actions with a long tradition of historical and mythical events.

After the introduction, the central part of the poem consists of the myth of Tantalus and Pelops, which Pindar retells in his own unique fashion. His purpose is to sanitize the story of its most disturbing—and, to Pindar, immoral—details, especially the notion that Tantalus tried to feed his son Pelops to the gods in a stew and that they replaced his shoulder with a piece of ivory when they put his chopped up body together again. The implication, of course, is that the gods actually ate part of his flesh before they discovered what Tantalus had done.

In Pindar’s version, this is dismissed as a mere tale invented by envious humans. Tantalus’s crime becomes the less horrifying act of stealing divine ambrosia and nectar to give to his mortal friends. Nonetheless, the behavior of Tantalus is an instance of hubris, namely an arrogant disregard for the laws of the gods. Thus the moral message of the myth is clear: One’s conduct should be guided by moderation in all things and by respect for the gods. This has direct applicability to Hieron, who although a popular and generally benign ruler, was an autocrat, or in Greek terminology, a “tyrant.” As Pindar knew well, many tyrants had turned out to be abusive and violent rulers (hence the negative connotations of the word today).

The story of Pelops’s famous chariot race for the hand of King Oenomaus’s daughter, which ultimately led to the foundation of the Olympic festival, is given only in a truncated form because Pindar has run out of time and space. He does, however, include Pelops’s prayer to the god Poseidon, which is a model of what Pindar would consider religious piety and heroic virtue. This leads readers back to Hieron, who is now praised for a second time but reminded that a god now watches over his labors. The ode concludes with an invoca-

tion of the Muse, who watches over Pindar’s poetic labors, and with a wish that he can share in friendship with the victors in the games.

## PYTHIAN ODE 1

**First published:** 498-446 B.C.E. (English translation, 1656)

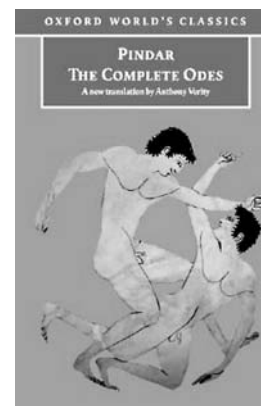
**Type of work:** Poem

*Hieron’s victory at the Pythia offers the opportunity to praise him as an ideal sovereign and to celebrate his military triumphs.*

*Pythian 1* was written to celebrate Hieron’s victory in the chariot race in the Pythia of 470 B.C.E. and as a hymn of praise on his military successes and his virtuous actions. It is addressed to Hieron of Aetna to mark his recent foundation of that new city on the eastern coastline of Sicily. By this stage, the island was under Hieron’s control, and he had defeated foreign enemies, including the Carthaginians and the Etruscans. In spite of Hieron’s harsh treatment of his political opponents within Sicily, Pindar presents him as almost the incarnation of the ideal ruler.

The ode commences with a standard address to the Muse and to Apollo’s lyre, which has the power to subdue all powers in the human and divine realms. The eagle of Zeus is imagined as sleeping to the sweet melodies of choral song, while Ares, the god of war, lays down his weapons and has soothing dreams. The mention of Zeus takes readers into the first mythological excursus, namely the story of Typhon, the fire-breathing monster who was buried under Mount Aetna after he attacked the king of the gods. Rather unusually for Pindar, the mythical elements in this ode are brief.

There follows a description of a volcanic eruption on Aetna, which must have been inspired by first-hand experience during Pindar’s period of



residence on the island of Sicily. The vivid images of fire, smoke, and lava make for a dramatic scene. This leads Pindar back to the city of Aetna and Hieron's victory at the Pythian games. He predicts that the city will win numerous victories in the future, as its athletes set sail across the sea to the great Panhellenic festivals on the Greek mainland. Apollo is asked to "make this land a mother of brave men."

A second mythological reference occurs in the third segment of the poem, to Philoctetes, who was left to spend the Trojan war on the island of Lemnos because he was suffering from a festering wound in his foot. When he was finally brought to the battlefield, after being persuaded by Odysseus and Diomedes, he shot Paris with his arrows and shortly thereafter Troy fell to its besiegers. Pindar draws a parallel with Hieron, although its precise import is left ambiguous; perhaps it is a general reference to the growth of Hieron's power and prestige, but one suspects there is somehow more to it than that.

Next, Pindar mentions the Greek victories in the battles of Salamis (480 B.C.E.) and Plataea (479 B.C.E.), which brought an end to the Persian invasion led by Xerxes. In the same passage, reference is made to the defeat of the Carthaginians and the Etruscans in two naval battles in which Hieron played a leading role. The implication is that Hieron's actions were akin to those of those other heroic Greeks who "saved Hellenic civilization" from the barbarians. This leads back to Hieron's athletic victory and Pindar's role as the poet who is to record it in song. It is his duty to be both effective and concise in this role, he says.

Perhaps because he has been so generous with his praise of him, Pindar ends the poem by proffering some advice to Hieron. He alludes to the dangers of envy and "hidden anger," as well as the need for the ruler's words to be "forged on the anvil of truth." Moderation, once again, is the key to good governance, both of one's self and one's subjects.

Better to be remembered, like Croesus, for being generous, than, like the tyrant Phalaris, for acts of cruelty. The most important goals in the contest of life, Pindar advises, are to win good fortune and preserve an honorable name; that is the greatest victory crown of all.

### SUMMARY

The subject of Pindar's poetry, as evidenced by his forty five victory odes, is not the description of how an athlete won his particular event but the elucidation of the moral qualities that enabled him to achieve the status of an ideal human exemplar, one who is in touch with the laws of the gods. It is the virtues of courage, moderation, and piety that can elevate a man to the highest glories of achievement. This is an attitude grounded in the aristocratic system to which Pindar was politically and culturally attached.

*David H. J. Larmour*

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why does Pindar use athletic victors as the hinge for a discussion of moral virtues?
- What does Pindar have to say about the importance of family background?
- How are metaphors and images used in Pindar's poetry to convey his ideas about human achievement?
- How does Pindar associate his own poetic skills with those of the victorious athlete?
- In what sense is Pindar's outlook an "anti-democratic" one?
- Why does not Pindar simply tell his myths in a straightforward manner?

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R. Jones

## HAROLD PINTER

**Born:** London, England  
October 10, 1930

**Died:** London, England  
December 24, 2008

*One of the most critically acclaimed postmodern British playwrights, usually associated with minimalist or absurdist theater, Pinter combines elements of conventional naturalism with an oblique symbolism to forge an offbeat, idiosyncratic Pinteresque style that has had a major influence on contemporary drama. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, a working-class suburb of East London, England, on October 10, 1930, the son of Hyman and Frances Pinter. Even though the neighborhood was a rough area of abandoned warehouses, dilapidated tenements, and, at times, roving bands of fascists, his father was able to provide his family with a terraced house in a fairly comfortable middle-class setting. During the air raids on London in World War II, Pinter was evacuated from the city, and the themes of restrained panic and impending violence that recur in his plays suggest how deeply his war experience affected his writing.

Pinter expressed an early interest in acting. While attending Hackney Downs Grammar School, he won acclaim in the school magazine for his performances in several dramatic roles, although he remained ambivalent toward his academic studies. As he recalled in a 1966 interview with *The Paris Review*: “The only thing that interested me at school was English language and literature. . . . I was mostly in love at the time and tied up with that.” He did, however, develop a keen interest in sports—especially cricket and track—and motifs of sports and games often surface in his plays.

At eighteen, Pinter refused mandatory military duty as a conscientious objector, but not on religious grounds. He faced a possible jail term for his

actions, but he was fined only thirty pounds and released. That same year, 1948, Pinter received a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art but dropped out after two terms to travel, recording his experiences in poetry and short prose pieces. Meanwhile, he developed a sharp ear for dialogue, especially for the silences that punctuate ordinary conversation, and for the nuances and the anomalies of everyday language.

By 1950, Pinter had published poems in *Poetry London* and was working as a professional radio and television actor. Soon he was touring with Anew McMaster’s acting company in Ireland; in 1954, under the stage name of David Boren, he worked in various provincial repertory theaters all over England. It was while he was on tour that he met and married actress Vivien Merchant in 1956. Pinter told *The Paris Review* that his wife was “a very good actress and a very interesting actress to work with,” but he claims that he never wrote a part for her, even though she has appeared in many of his plays. In 1980, he divorced Merchant and married British writer and socialite Lady Antonia Fraser.

It was also on tour in 1957 that a director friend asked Pinter to write a play for the Bristol University theater department. Pinter promised it in six months but delivered it in four days. The play was *The Room* (pr. 1957, pb. 1960), which received little notice but did impress the London *Sunday Times* critic Harold Hobson, who championed Pinter’s next play, *The Birthday Party* (pr. 1958, pb. 1959),

which nevertheless closed after its first week. Pinter's reputation, however, was growing. Hobson dubbed him "the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London." After a 1960 production of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* (pr. 1959 in German; pr., pb. 1960 in English) was transferred from the Hampstead Theatre Club to the Royal Court, *The Caretaker* (pr., pb. 1960) opened and began earning enough money to convince Pinter that he could make a living writing full time.

While *The Caretaker* ran for twelve months in London, then opened in New York for another successful run, Pinter continued writing at a feverish pace, producing short theatrical pieces, plays for radio and television, and several screenplays, mostly adaptations from other writers' novels. By the end of the 1960's, Pinter's reputation as one of the most distinctive and innovative contemporary playwrights was firmly established on both sides of the Atlantic. After the success of *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, Pinter scored again with his next full-length play, *The Homecoming* (pr., pb. 1965). Perhaps his most masterful piece, it confirmed his status as a major talent.

Having received over two dozen prestigious awards—among them the New York Film Critics Award (1964), Commander, Order of the British Empire (1966), New York Drama Critics Circle Award (1967, 1980), a Tony Award (1967), the Laurence Olivier/BBC Award for Best New Play (1979), the Companion of Literature (1990), the Laurence Olivier Special Award (1996), the *Sunday Times* Award for Literary Excellence (1997), the PEN/S.T. Dupont Golden Pen Award (2001), the Critics' Circle Special Fiftieth Year Award (2004), and Legion d'Honneur (2007)—Pinter is regarded by many critics as Britain's greatest playwright of his generation.

A lyrical dramatist, Pinter was impatient with epic plays involving multiple scene changes and large casts, preferring instead one set with a small cast. Pinter was also skeptical of "message" plays, or plays aesthetically compromised by social didacticism. He told *The Paris Review*: "I don't think I've got any kind of social function that's of any value. . . . I distrust ideological statements of any kind." His cool, detached perspective reflects the attitude that so exemplified the 1960's.

As Pinter began to explore the formal, structural properties of theater, developing meaning more by

design than by plot or characterization, his poetry of language began to evolve into a poetry of images; and while he continued to write short plays, sketches, and bits for radio and television, Pinter's experiments with form in theater fueled his interest in cinema—film being by its nature more plastic and therefore more malleable a medium than the stage. Pinter's static plots and his clipped, elliptical dialogue, which was so innovative in the dramatic arts, proved perfectly suitable for his transition from the confines of stage to the freedom of film. His experiments with cinematic techniques created original treatments of several screenplays of other writers' novels, including *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990). Four of his own plays have been filmed: a version of *The Caretaker* entitled *The Guest* (1964), *The Birthday Party* (1968), *The Homecoming* (1971), and *Betrayal* (1983).

Despite his disavowal of an ideological context in his work, Pinter has always been a controversial playwright who refused to compromise his progressive political activism. His anti-Soviet rhetoric during the Cold War caused his plays to be banned in the former Soviet Union. Later, as an outspoken critic of British and American foreign policy—he adamantly opposed the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003—he was applauded by liberal groups and condemned as a traitor by those supporting the war. In 2005, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and though he had been weakened by treatment for cancer of the esophagus in 2002, Pinter was feisty and confrontational in his acceptance speech, when he famously called for the prosecution of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush for "blatant state terrorism."

In February, 2005, Pinter decided to abandon his career as a playwright and put all his energy into politics, though much of his later work reflects his long-standing concern with human rights and the global political arena. *Mountain Language* (pr., pb. 1988), for instance, is set in a prison for political dissidents in an unnamed country in which communication is forbidden and language has become the tool of oppression. *Family Voices* (pr., pb. 1981), *Victoria Station* (pr., pb. 1982) and *A Kind of Alaska* (pr., pb. 1982; revised, 1984), produced as a trilogy entitled *Other Places* (pr., pb. 1982) at The National Theatre, Cottesloe, in 1982, illustrate Pinter's in-



terest in language as a weapon and the disconnect between the conceptual world and reality. In *No Man's Land* (pr., pb. 1975), Pinter suggests that the present is merely a series of faulty memories, reality only a series of misunderstood events, a "no man's land . . . which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever icy and silent."

## ANALYSIS

In his introduction to *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1972), Arthur Ganz writes that Pinter "shares the reluctance of many writers to have the full evocative experience of his work reduced, or altered, to an intellectual formation." In Pinter's case, however, this reluctance is tempered by his conscientiously designing plays that, in Ganz's view, "demand analysis even as he frustrates inquiry." Pinter's willful obscurity was often viewed as a breach of contract between the playwright and his audience, which left many theatergoers dissatisfied, feeling cheated or foolish, as if they had missed something, while critics and scholars attacked Pinter for his frustrating dismissal regarding the "meaning" of his plays.

Those most hostile to his early work complained that Pinter intentionally teased viewers into expecting certain revelations that were never delivered. It was, however, this very technique of creating symbolic resonance in otherwise naturalistic action that would earn for Pinter his distinctive reputation.

Much of the confusion surrounding early public reaction to Pinter's work stems from the fact that his plays are neither clearly absurd nor clearly realistic; his style derives its distinctiveness by its quirky combination of elements from both schools. Pinter blends the authentic, mimetic behavior usually associated with realism—evoking a world that the audience recognizes as the everyday world that it inhabits—with the absurdist vision of a senseless, purposeless world to create, out of seemingly ordinary situations, symbolic overtones that invite interpretation.

For example, the room in his first short play, *The Room*, is a real room, but it is also a symbol of sanctity and violation, of security, betrayal, and displacement. Likewise, in *The Dumb Waiter*, the idea of two men receiving instructions from a serving hatch implies a theme larger than the surface

meaning of the play: It details two guilty souls confronting an implacable, unseen, and unreasonable power beyond their understanding. In a similar way, *The Caretaker* is about two brothers and a tramp, but it is also a psychological study of power, allegiance, innocence, and corruption, just as *The Homecoming* is about both a bizarre family reunion and an ironic treatment of Old Testament myth, psychological disengagement, and familial archetypes.

The nineteenth century Irish wit and playwright Oscar Wilde once said in a letter that "it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances." Pinter would agree. According to the British critic John Russell Taylor in *Anger and After* (1966), Pinter, when asked about the meaning of his plays, replied that they were about "the weasel under the cocktail cabinet," a statement that exemplifies the difficulty of critically coming to terms with Pinter's perverse style. Is it nonsense or enigma? In a 1971 interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, Pinter said that his remark was meaningless, meant only "to frustrate this line of inquiry." Ganz, however, suggests that the statement is a metaphor central to an understanding of themes in Pinter's plays, that of "the violence and bestiality that lies beneath the surface of our society and our selves."

Frequently labeled an absurdist, Pinter distances himself from any school of theater. He has, however, acknowledged the influence of Irish novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett. The lyrical dialogue, the meaningful silences, the intentional obscurity, the mordant humor, and the cryptic plots are all Beckettian techniques that Pinter has assimilated into his own style. Yet there are marked differences between Pinter's plays and those of Beckett. For one thing, where Beckett generally abandons any pretense to realism in his plays, Pinter strives to maintain a tentative surface realism that, like a thin veneer of logic, covers the menacing uncertainty beneath the action of the play. Another difference between Pinter and Beckett has to do with each playwright's attitude toward his characters. Beckett's players tend to be held in a sort of dramatic limbo, whereas Pinter's people are thrust into decisive encounters that radically change their lives. Additionally, whereas Beckett treats his characters mainly as vehicles for his ideas, Pinter shows them less contempt than compassion: The suffering in Pinter's plays is acutely hu-

man, and he is quick to shun subtle abstract truths in favor of more personal revelations of human nature.

For example, in Beckett's famous *En attendant Godot* (pb. 1952, pr. 1953; *Waiting for Godot*, 1954), two tramps inhabit a minimalist landscape obviously intended to be more representational than realistic. Their dialogue is laced with overt poetical and mythological allusions, and the entire structure of the play implies a larger metaphor of humanity's general despair, spiritual alienation, and debilitating nihilism. In contrast, Pinter handles similar themes in *The Caretaker* but without the heavy-handed symbolism and thematic posturing. The setting never pretends to be anything but what it is—a cluttered room—and there is no question as to what motivates the characters in their struggle for allegiance.

Though Pinter's is a private world, his style paradoxically has roots as much in the "kitchen sink" school of social realism as it does in the absurdist theater. Kitchen sink—a trend in British theater during the 1950's—was popularized by the so-called angry young men, playwrights such as John Osborne, John Arden, and Trevor Griffiths, whose plays focused on the problems of the working class. Pinter, however, while maintaining the often sordid realism, discards the moralistic concerns of kitchen sink drama. His plays tend to ignore the causes of social strife, presenting instead more spiritual conflicts involving the uncertainty of experience and the existential dilemma of identity, what Martin Esslin in *Pinter: The Playwright* (1984) calls "coming to terms with one's own being."

The theme that life is inscrutable, more a creation of the mind than an actual set of discernible facts, recurs throughout Pinter's work and underscores his disdain for both the use of language to make sense of the human predicament and of logic to explain absurd political dialogue. The Nobel Academy described his work as restoring theater "to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of each other and pretense crumbles." As one character explains in *Old Times* (pr., pb. 1971), "There are some things one remembers even though they never happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them they take place." In Pinter's world, experience is reality, the past can-

not be verified, and no one possesses "the truth." Memory, in this context, can arm or disarm, depending on the speaker's intent.

## THE DUMB WAITER

**First produced:** 1959, in German; 1960 in English (first published, 1960)

**Type of work:** Play

*In a basement room, two thugs awaiting their next assignment receive directions from a serving hatch—a "dumbwaiter."*

*The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter's second play, was his first critical success. A short one-act piece, it opened in English performance at the Hampstead Theatre Club in 1960 as a double bill with Pinter's first play, *The Room*, and immediately established Pinter's reputation as an important new voice in contemporary theater. Though Pinter draws his theme and plot from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the treatment is highly original and contains all the stylistic trademarks that Pinter developed in his later work.

The most distinctive Pinteresque touch in the play is how the primary action acquires a secondary, allegorical meaning while never compromising the realistic grounding of the story. Moreover, while none of his other plays invites such a clearly allegorical interpretation, this technique of creating situations that, no matter how concrete, suggest larger, more abstract meanings became a standard device in Pinter's writing.

The plot of *The Dumb Waiter* is so straightforward that it is deceptively simple. The story concerns the lives of two thugs—possibly killers—on the night of a new assignment. The uncertainty of their situation, however, is remarkable: They do not know who has hired them or who their victim will be. They are merely waiting for their orders. For diversion, Ben concentrates on his newspaper, while Gus, the more inquisitive of the two and ultimately the most vulnerable, nags him with questions about their assignment. The menacing tone becomes more pronounced as Ben begins reading newspaper accounts of violent deaths—an elderly man crushed under a truck, a child killing a cat.

Then suddenly the two begin receiving requests for food from upstairs via the serving hatch. The more ridiculous the requests—from a braised steak to Char Siu and scampi—the more desperate the men's reactions: The absurdity is unsettling, as much for the audience as for the characters.

As if to regain a sense of allegorical equilibrium, Gus and Ben begin sending up stale cakes, potato chips—finally everything in their packs—as if their gesture of offerings might appease the unseen force upstairs, with whom they are soon communicating through a speaking tube that they find attached to the dumbwaiter. At a decisive moment, Gus leaves the room and Ben receives his instructions. When Gus reenters, he is disarmed, stripped of his coat, vest, and tie, and is clearly the intended victim of the night's assignment.

Much of the power of the play is derived from its haunting abstract dimension of existential doubt within the otherwise concrete reality on the stage. The situation is presented in realistic detail, but the absurdity of the action is disconcerting: The situation is as unintelligible to the audience as it is to the two men in the play. The orders from the dumbwaiter are specific but improbable and essentially meaningless. Who is sending down the orders? Why? American writer and critic Susan Sontag, in her influential 1964 essay "Against Interpretation," insists that "to interpret is to impoverish." Moreover, while *The Dumb Waiter* does not necessarily attempt to confound meaning, the dramatic effect of the play challenges the impulse of the audience to interpret the action in order to create in the viewer a more general acceptance, an immediate experience, of what is there "in reality."

Much of the suspense involves the attempts of the men to explain logically a basically illogical action; in this way, the play becomes self-referential: The experience of the characters on stage mirrors the experience of the audience; that is, just as the two men must try to make sense of what appears to be incomprehensible, so too must the audience try to decipher the apparently meaningless events on stage. The controlling allegorical theme, therefore, implies that the ways of God—the dumbwaiter—are often inscrutable to humankind—as ultimately the ways of Pinter, the playwright-god, are often inscrutable to his audience.

## THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

**First produced:** 1958 (first published, 1959)

**Type of work:** Play

*A retired musician hiding out in a dilapidated boardinghouse is visited by two men apparently sent to kidnap and possibly murder him.*

*The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play, opened in 1958 to terrible reviews at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. One performance reportedly played to exactly six people. Most critics found the play confusing, obscure, and unconvincing. The general theatergoing public, conditioned by the popular media, were equally dismissive, and the play closed after only a week. It seems that neither the public nor the critics were aesthetically or culturally prepared for Pinter's style, accustomed as they were to the established genres of the day, which, aside from musicals, consisted of strict realism or drawing-room comedies—the one an act of forceful social engagement, the other a clever, farcical escapism.

The play did, however, attract the attention of Harold Hobson, theater critic of the London *Sunday Times*, who had championed Pinter's first play, *The Room*, when it was produced at Bristol University in 1957. Following the critical and commercial success of Pinter's next full-length play, *The Caretaker*, *The Birthday Party* finally proved itself worthy of Hobson's accolades (and prescience) with a successful 1960 revival in London. Later that same year, it was televised by the British Broadcasting Corporation, and in 1968 it opened on Broadway. Along with *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, *The Birthday Party* is generally considered to be one of Pinter's most significant plays, perhaps one of the most important plays of the mid-twentieth century.

The play, in three acts, centers around Stanley Webber, a retired musician in his late thirties, who is living at a boardinghouse in a resort town on the coast of England. Apparently, he is hiding from some unspecified event in his past that has forced him into exile, isolated from the world outside the confines of his room. Living in the house with Stanley are the proprietors, Petey and Meg Boles, both in their sixties. Petey works at a beachside hotel,

while Meg manages the house. Aside from an occasional visit from a young woman named Lulu, their lives are dull and ordinary, punctuated only by habit.

The uneventful, monotonous life at the house, however, seems to be exactly what Stanley needs to maintain his isolation. The order of his routine provides him with a measure of security against the contingent forces that he fears outside. In fact, Petey and Meg form a sort of family unit: Petey is the father, absent at work and play, Meg is the fussy, doting mother, and Lulu completes the illusions of middle-class normality as “the girl next door.”

If Stanley’s withdrawal from the world represents a retreat back into childhood, however, his dream of infantile security turns to nightmare when two men, McCann and Goldberg, arrive to “do a job.” It is the night of Stanley’s birthday, and Meg has planned a party—hence the title of the play. She believes the occasion is merely an innocent celebration, which reinforces her surrogate sense of motherhood; for Stanley, the birthday party becomes a grim ritual of psychological terror. This contrast between Meg and Stanley’s understanding of the party is eerily illustrated at the end of act 1, when Meg gives Stanley a drum for his birthday. Stanley hangs his present around his neck and plays it, at first rhythmically, then erratically, his face “savage and possessed.”

Act 2 begins with Stanley’s initial encounter with McCann and Goldberg. Stanley tries to persuade them that they have come for the wrong man. The situation becomes increasingly violent as the men begin accusing Stanley of a series of offenses. Charged with “crimes” ranging from betraying some unnamed organization to “driving that old lady off her cork,” the accusations at first seem trivial, but soon it is clear that what Stanley has com-

mitted are existential transgressions. In his refusal to act, in his withdrawing from the world, he is not, as he hoped, free: He is still a man with a past, which he must acknowledge. Just because he is no longer active, no longer vital, he is not excused from being acted on. Apathy is no refuge from responsibility.

As the interrogation continues, McCann and Goldberg use more progressively absurd logic to break down Stanley’s defenses, both the tactical strategies that he has devised to hide from his enemies and the psychological barriers that he has erected against his own sense of guilt, until finally Stanley is unable to answer even the childish riddle of why the chicken crossed the road. By the time Meg and Lulu join McCann, Goldberg, and Stanley for the party, Stanley’s breakdown is nearly complete.

After a vicious game of blindman’s buff, Stanley tries first to rape Lulu, then to strangle Meg. His resistance having snapped, he finally accepts his role as a sacrificial victim trapped in a fate that he can no longer deny. By act 3, Stanley’s transformation is complete. He is an image of a broken man, compliant, no longer able to speak.

Even though his next play, *The Caretaker*, would be more immediately successful, *The Birthday Party* represents a turning point in Pinter’s career. He not only proved that he could sustain a full-length work but also demonstrated an uncanny control of suspense. A sense of horror is sustained throughout *The Birthday Party* by Pinter’s contrasting the vicious attacks on Stanley and his increasingly pathetic denials with the harmless pretensions of Meg and Lulu, whose complicity in the plot against Stanley only increases the irony of their ignorance. Finally, *The Birthday Party* marks a change in Pinter’s approach to his material, from his cerebral, often abstract early plays to plays that were less about ideas and more about people. It was this shift in focus, from the philosophical concerns of the playwright to the human concerns of the characters, that assured Pinter his later critical and commercial success.



## THE CARETAKER

**First produced:** 1960 (first published, 1960)

**Type of work:** Play

*One of two brothers sharing an East London house brings home an old tramp, who then tries to displace his benefactor.*

Pinter's second full-length play, *The Caretaker*, opened in London in 1960, and, after a twelve-month run it moved to Broadway, where it was acclaimed as a critical, if not commercial, success. *The Caretaker* has been described as Pinter's most naturalistic play. The British theater critic Kenneth Tynan called it "a play about people," which, in Pinter's case, marks a significant turn in his approach to theater. His early work, such as *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*, was laden with symbolism and was heavily influenced by the absurdist theater of Samuel Beckett and Romanian-born French playwright Eugène Ionesco. In *The Caretaker*, however, Pinter eschews latent meanings and focuses instead on the lives of the three characters, presenting the action realistically, in naturalistic fashion. The setting—a cluttered room—has no overt symbolic significance: It is, as is often the case in Pinter's plays, a realistic vision of isolation and withdrawal, nor does Pinter force any allegorical message into the story. The characters are readily identifiable as localized people in ordinary circumstances.

Nevertheless, the play is anything but conventional. The characters seem unfinished, indeterminate, with no stable, verifiable stake in life. Davies, an inveterate liar, claims that he has "papers" in Sidcup that will establish his identity, but it is never made clear exactly who he is or where he has been or what the papers in Sidcup would prove. Aston, the benevolent brother who befriends Davies, recites a poetic soliloquy that describes his incarceration and treatment in a mental institution, but why he was committed is never established. He says only that, at some point in his life, he saw things too clearly and talked too much where he worked. Mick, his brother, who is more hostile to Davies, seems to improvise his past, whimsically concocting stories that confuse Davies while providing no real information regarding his identity. Their

plans about the future are especially vague. Davies hopes to get his papers from Sidcup but makes no real effort to go there. Aston hopes to build a shed, but the idea sounds more like a pipe dream than any project he could actually complete. Mick mentions several projects involving renovation and a van, but he is never specific; when he offers details, no conclusions can be drawn from what he says.

Another characteristically unconventional tactic Pinter uses in *The Caretaker*, which gives it that quality of uncertainty that has become the trademark of his plays, is the way the meager plot belies the psychological complexities of the characters as they strive to discover and maintain their separate identities. Aston finds Davies one night after the homeless tramp has been fired from his job, and he offers to share his living quarters with him. Davies is a self-righteous bigot, a cantankerous reprobate, ungrateful, untrustworthy, and exceedingly selfish. Aston, who is laconic, withdrawn, and passive to a fault, overlooks the old man's negative traits and tries, inexplicably, to make him comfortable, offering him money, a bed, and a key to the house. As soon as Aston leaves the room, however, Davies is assaulted by Mick, who treats him like a burglar, an intruder, and asks him, "What's the game?" Mick has been trying to develop Aston's interest in some projects, hoping to help him adjust after his treatment at the mental institution. Mick sees Davies as a manipulator who is trying to take advantage of Aston's condition. He immediately engages Davies in a series of verbal encounters that serve to disorient the old man and protect Aston, all the while realizing that Aston must reject Davies voluntarily, thus assuring himself that he can deal independently with people and situations in his life. In the end, after talk of Davies becoming "caretaker" of the property, Aston sees through the tramp's machinations and tells him to leave.

The irony in the title of *The Caretaker* evolves from Davies's being offered a job as "caretaker" when, in fact, he is capable of neither caring for himself nor expressing care for others. It is his rejection of basic human kindness, his need to manipulate instead of trust, his choosing lies over honesty, that finally result in his being rejected by the brothers. Cynically, the play suggests that the innocents of the world are at risk and that to sur-



vive without being threatened, one must develop the defensive tactics that, it seems, Aston is still learning, but which Mick has already mastered.

## THE HOMECOMING

**First produced:** 1965 (first published, 1965)

**Type of work:** Play

*A son, who has been living in America, returns to England with his wife to visit his family, whom she has never met.*

By the time that *The Homecoming* opened in London in 1965, Pinter's career as a major playwright had been firmly established. His name was synonymous with contemporary theater, and the public had grown accustomed to his style. In addition, by this time *The Caretaker* had been filmed, his screenplay of *The Servant* was in production, and his early plays were being revived at major theaters in England and abroad. *The Homecoming* would open in New York in 1967.

The play, in two acts, is deceptively realistic. Its themes of emotional blackmail and manipulation, of seduction and jealousy, are delivered in bizarre deadpan. The situation—an estranged son comes home to introduce his wife to his family—is cliché, and the painfully ordinary, middle-class set—with “a sideboard . . . a mirror . . . a radiogram”—appears to be nothing more than standard fare for a family drama. Yet Pinter's version of this “homecoming” is anything but traditional, and what appears realistic quickly shifts into parody.

The father, Max, is an embittered old man, fawning when he seeks advantage, striking out when cornered, soured by the world. His brother Sam is an ineffectual hanger-on and a latent homosexual. Son Lenny is a vicious pimp; son Joey, a hopeless, fledgling boxer. Indeed, their ineffectiveness fuels their aggression.

Into this acrimonious, all-male household (Max's wife died years before), Max's eldest son, Teddy, introduces his wife, Ruth. Teddy is bookish, objective, a “specialist” uneasy outside his field. Ruth is more intuitive, cagey, hungry to restore sexual vitality to her life. Yet like her husband, she too can be coolly detached, calculating—a game player.

Teddy, emotionally and intellectually isolated from the others, has lost touch with the basic needs of marriage—even with human relations—and finds himself literally “outside” the family. Ironically, however, Pinter suggests that emotional detachment is, at least, a strategy to maintain some sense of control in one's life, a sense of order that would otherwise be threatened by passion. Both Ruth and Teddy can remove themselves from their emotions, and this disaffection becomes a source of strength for them as the rest of the family's emotional fits underscore their weaknesses and reveal their vulnerabilities.

Eventually, after an abrasive reception, the men attempt to seduce Ruth, each man (except Sam) measuring her by his need. The men are motherless, wifeless, consumed by love-hate relationships with women. Lenny claims to have beaten the women who annoy him. Joey simply rapes them. Max is as quick to whine about his wife as he is to berate her. Their obsession is to restore harmony to the family, the male-female balance that is missing in their lives, so that they both fear and crave Ruth's attention. Like Ruth in the Old Testament legend, who by her strength and resolve restores order to a broken family, Pinter's Ruth in *The Homecoming* achieves her power and status by exploiting male desires.

By the end of the play, the pimps, boxers, and braggarts (Lenny, Joey, and Max) have been reduced to groveling at Ruth's feet. Lenny gets a dance and a kiss; Joey gets two hours of “love play.” Max suggests that they call her “Spanish Jacky” and “put her on the game.” The plan that they devise is preposterous: Ruth will stay in England and work as a prostitute, while ministering to the sexual needs of the family as well. The scheme is possible, but not probable, yet the irony is in how matter-of-factly the men propose the idea—as if it were not unusual in the least—and in how casually Ruth and Teddy accept it. The effect is both comic and disturbing, and in one of the most hauntingly funny scenes in all of Pinter's plays, Ruth agrees to the



plan (strictly on her own terms), and Sam falls unconscious on stage, while the others ignore him and continue their negotiations.

The incongruity between the outrageous plan that the family concocts and Teddy and Ruth's equally outrageous reaction to it establishes *The Homecoming* as one of Pinter's most absurd plays; yet, on another level, the discrepancy between the audience's expectation and the jarring behavior of the characters provides Pinter with a perfect vehicle through which he comments on the irony inherent in human relationships. In *The Homecoming*, to be disconnected is an act of supreme virtue; to act without involvement or emotion a laudable goal. That Ruth can be so callous and Teddy so indifferent suggests that their marriage—and their relationship with their families—is nothing but a game of savage logic, where stability is purchased at the expense of humanity and where the intellect triumphs over feeling.

## SUMMARY

Harold Pinter established himself as one of the most significant playwrights writing in English since the 1950's. Even as he devoted more and more of his time to writing for the screen rather than for the stage, revivals of his early plays continued to draw audiences to mainstream productions both in London's West End and on New York's Broadway, as well as to smaller regional and university theaters. Many critics consider his full-length plays, especially *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Homecoming*, to be among the best plays written after World War II. His plays, a quirky combination of absurdism and social realism, or what one critic has called "expressionistic naturalism," revitalized popular theater in the 1960's and 1970's, and his Pinteresque style remains indelibly original.

Jeff Johnson

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*Accident*, 1967  
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*The Heat of the Day*, 1990 (adaptation of Elizabeth Bowen's novel)  
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*Party Time*, 1991 (adaptation of his play)  
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LONG FICTION:

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POETRY:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Define what critics mean by “Pinteresque.”
- How does Harold Pinter use ellipses—the implied pauses in the characters’ lines—to create dramatic tension in his work?
- Discuss how Pinter’s work can be read as both “realistic” and “absurdist.”
- Define “kitchen sink” elements in Pinter’s work.
- Pinter often explores family relationships being threatened by intrusions from outsiders. Find examples of this dramatic technique in his work and discuss how these threats to the family unit are resolved.
- Discuss how Pinter’s plays are both humorous and frightening.

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## LUIGI PIRANDELLO

**Born:** Girgenti (now Argigento), Sicily, Italy  
June 28, 1867

**Died:** Rome, Italy  
December 10, 1936

*Pirandello transformed both the form and the content of drama, and his characters continue to fascinate and haunt audiences.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Luigi Pirandello (pihr-uhn-DEH-loh) was born in Girgenti, Italy, on June 28, 1867, to Stefano and Caterina Pirandello. He and his older sister, Lina, grew up in a comfortable home, for their father was the wealthy owner of a sulfur mine. His father expected him to run the business eventually, but the sensitive and introspective son had different dreams. The child enjoyed listening to family stories about heroic struggles for political independence, as well as their servant's ghost stories, which helped Luigi to develop his imagination and interest in literature.

During his privileged youth, Pirandello became an avid reader. He began to question traditional customs and beliefs, and he learned to be self-assertive. He observed the masks of submission that his mother adopted in response to his father's adulterous affairs and his violent encounters with the Mafia. Also, he noted the preferential treatment that he received from teachers and clerics because he was the son of a prominent figure. He reacted to such hypocrisy by renouncing the Catholic church.

Pirandello received a fine education. He attended the elementary school in Girgenti, and, in 1880, the high school in Palermo. There, he wrote skits for classroom performances, and, at age sixteen, he began to write poetry. He studied classical

languages and literature at the University of Palermo until he became engaged to an older cousin whom his father did not want him to marry. Therefore, Pirandello was sent to study at the University of Rome, where he took courses from 1887 to 1889. He then left for Bonn, Germany, to prepare for his doctorate.

While mastering German, translating Romantic verse, preparing two of his four collections of poetry for publication, and studying philology at Bonn University, Pirandello wrote his dissertation on the sounds and phonetic development of the Girgenti dialect. After earning the degree of doctor of philosophy in 1891, he taught Italian at the university for one year and studied philosophy.

Upon his return to Italy, Pirandello broke his engagement and joined a writer's colony near Rome. In January, 1894, he married Antonietta Portulano, the daughter of his father's business associate. With a generous allowance, the couple established their home in Rome. They had two sons and a daughter and enjoyed life, until their families lost their fortune in 1903: A landslide and flood destroyed the sulfur mine.

This crisis provoked his wife's nervous breakdown, and she never recovered her sanity. She suffered from paranoia and constantly accused her husband of infidelity. In discussing her tantrums with his biographer, Frederico Nardelli, Pirandello explained that his wife used her illness to control him. In addition to running the household, rearing their children, and teaching linguistics at the Istituto Superiore di Magistero (a teacher's college for women), he wrote much during her illness. In that "imprisonment," he discovered creative free-



dom and produced some of his most original works: four of his seven novels, short stories, essays on literary criticism and theory, and the first twelve of his forty-four plays. One of these novels, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904; *The Late Mattia Pascal*, 1923), featured elements of his difficult life during this period, upon which Pirandello fantastically elaborated; the book was an immediate success and established his critical reputation.

Political events increased the couple's stress as well, for both sons were drafted and fought in World War I. After his daughter shot herself, Pirandello sent her to live with an aunt in Florence. In addition, after his wife tried to kill him, in 1918 he committed her to a sanatorium, where she soon died.

Because of the successful performances of his plays after the war, Pirandello's royalties increased. Hence, he quit his teaching job and devoted himself to his creative interests. Except for one novel, *Uno, nessuno, centomila* (1925; *One, None, and a Hundred Thousand*, 1933), which shows the dissolution of the personality, and some short stories, he focused his attention on the theater. His support of the Fascist regime assured him success, and he enjoyed dictator Benito Mussolini's enthusiastic reception of his plays. With a government grant, the playwright founded a theater company, the Teatro d'Arte di Roma. From 1925 to 1928, he produced both his own and foreign plays.

Pirandello's contact with professional actors marked a new stage in his career. Between 1922 and 1933, he wrote seven plays for his leading lady, Marta Abbea; he starred with her in three of them. In 1925 and 1926, he traveled with his troupe to introduce his plays to the major cities of Europe and South America. Lauded as the new voice in the theater, Pirandello became a member of the Italian Academy and was awarded France's Legion of Honor in 1929. In 1934, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Also, he received a contract to interpret the role of the father in the American film version of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (pr., pb. 1921; *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1922). He died of pneumonia in Rome, on December 10, 1936, before it was produced.

## ANALYSIS

Pirandello had a penetrating, critical mind. While reflecting upon his life and works, he sug-

gested to his biographer that the time and place of his birth—the Càvusu (Sicilian for “chaos”) district of Girgenti, during a cholera epidemic, which did not spare his father—informed the themes and style of his work. Besides indicating an intimate relationship between his life and the vision of the world communicated in his writing, Pirandello articulated his love for the disparate that marks the unity of his works, from his first collection of poetry *Mal giocondo* (1889; painful mirth) to his seminal analysis of the nature of the comic in *L'umorismo* (1908; revised, 1920; *On Humour*, partial translation, 1966, complete translation, 1974) and his avant-garde plays. In his dramas, Pirandello juxtaposes contradictions, fuses past and present, and interweaves tragedy and comedy. Analysis of the factors that helped him to develop a new dramatic mode permits comprehension of the subtleties of irony, as well as appreciation for his spiritually isolated characters, intellectually demanding situations, and dynamic theatricalism. The Sicilian sun, which awakens his characters' passions, shines most brilliantly in his poetry, early fiction, and folk comedies. Southern attitudes are present even in his later plays, however, where overtly lighthearted characters clash with the desperate.

In the 1890's, Pirandello joined a literary circle that included the Sicilian writers Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga. With their encouragement, he wrote naturalistic fiction about life among the lower classes in Sicily and transformed some of those narratives into plays. Written from an objective point of view, Pirandello's regional studies paint a Sicilian landscape in which his characters, with primitive passions and irrational fears, are overwhelmed by uncontrollable destiny.

From folk comedies, some written in his native dialect, such as *La giara* (pr. 1917, pb. 1925; *The Jar*, 1928), he broadened his scope and wrote about situations that were familiar to his audience. Foreign influences pervade these dramas. Some comedies have plots that resemble the French realistic drama. The “well-made plays” by Eugène Scribe, for example, focus on a specific incident. They have tightly constructed linear plots, leading to a major scene of reversal at the climax, and that “crucial episode” enforces the thesis. Genteel characters discuss social problems of the outside world in their parlor; and, because the parlor's “fourth wall” is removed, the audience overhears their skillfully

delivered speeches. The realistic plays of Henrik Ibsen also inspired Pirandello, especially the Norwegian's use of the analytic technique (retrospective unraveling of the past) and his questioning of ethical standards in such plays as *Gengangere* (pb. 1881, pr. 1882; *Ghosts*, 1885).

Both the themes and the dramatic conventions in Pirandello's plays show the influence of his experiences in Germany. He absorbed elements of the northern, Protestant temperament, reflected in the scientific analyses of phenomenological and metaphysical questions, as well as in the brooding subjectivity of German Romantic literature. He acquired the ability to bracket concepts and to dissect ideas, and his training in philology helped him to capture the rhythms and flavor of colloquial speech. A master of prose with a love for dialectical argument, Pirandello has each character express himself or herself in a particular style. They use words that have unique meanings for them individually, while their interlocutors interpret what is heard according to their own perceptions, thus creating tension. While some characters attempt to safeguard their individuality, others accept new linguistic systems, proving that meanings of words can be altered by common consent. Hence, Pirandello demonstrates that language can reflect the dialectics of life and that lack of communication can lead to alienation.

Pirandello's pessimistic temperament and anguished memories of coping with a demented wife, who lived simultaneously on different planes of reality, helped him to develop attitudes about existence that he wished to dramatize. In his experimental plays, he brings to the foreground themes already introduced in his narrative fiction: masks and the multifaceted personality, the relativity of truth, humankind perplexed by the flux of time, and the problems of artistic creation. Within the intellectual framework of philosophy and psychology, he presents dramatic embodiments of the inner world of the self, but he enlivens the stage with theatrical tricks.

Pirandello was hailed as an innovator after the premiere of *Così è (se vi pare)* (pr. 1917, pb. 1918; *Right You Are [If You Think So]*, 1922). The characters offer different versions of an incident, thus dramatizing the impossibility of knowing anything objectively. The character-spectator acts, reacts, and reflects about his or her conception of the

truth; the playwright challenges the audience to analyze their own perceptions and to respect the views of other people.

Last, Pirandello's dramatic techniques show the influence of the popular entertainment *commedia dell'arte*, in which masked stock characters followed a plot outline of a "crucial episode." During the performance, each character improvised dialogue—with much buffoonery—corresponding to his or her persona and helped construct a play justifying the important scene.

Pirandello strove for similar vivacity in several plays, especially in *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (pr., pb. 1930; *Tonight We Improvise*, 1932). A play-within-the-play, the action takes place in the aisles, as well as on the stage, where actors attempt to transform a story of a tragedy into a play. Disagreements about aesthetics frame the improvisation, which turns out to be a series of melodramatic tableaux. The theatricality makes the spectators distance themselves from the stage and realize that they are not looking through a fourth wall; rather, they are watching a play.

Pirandello's plays of contrasts and paradoxes reveal his brilliant sense of dramaturgy. Offering an exciting theatrical experience, they had universal appeal in the postwar climate of chaos and despair.

## SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

**First produced:** *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, 1921 (first published, 1921; English translation, 1922)

**Type of work:** Play

*A family in mourning interrupts a play rehearsal, and the father insists that their torment be dramatized.*

*Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a parody of the "well-made play." All theatrical conventions and functions of personnel are examined in the play-within-the-play, which operates on different temporal planes.

A troupe plans to rehearse a play, and the introductory remarks underline the necessity of following Pirandello's directions. The Actors' clothing

and mirthful comportment contrast with those of the disintegrated family who appear on stage to be immortalized in art. The rehearsal is postponed, and a theater workshop ensues. As the title suggests, the Characters offer a play-in-the-making, which, like the *commedia dell'arte*, justifies a “crucial scene.” Their attempt to generate a play, based on a sketch that a writer had made before abandoning the project, constitutes the inner play, while the comments of the Director and Actors, as audiences, form the outside comedy. Their improvisations, however, are judged unsatisfactory; they know neither how to create a play nor how to interpret roles. Without a literary text, the theater, too, must reject them. That is their tragedy.

Even though the Characters cannot agree about the facts, a linear plot emerges, and two events are staged. In the first melodramatic tableau, the Father visits Madame Pace’s boutique, a front for a brothel. While he is embracing his wife’s daughter, the Mother instinctively intervenes to safeguard the girl’s virtue. Unlike those of realistic plays, this pivotal scene does not lead to the resolution of a

problem. Instead, its repetition shows that the Father refuses to be judged on one act and that the Stepdaughter seeks revenge. The scene is narrated, performed by the Father and Stepdaughter, interpreted by the Actors, and discussed by the troupe and the Characters. Reflected in distorted mirrors, the scene questions the veracity of subjective interpretations of reality.

During the first improvisation, Pace miraculously appears on cue, offering another example of the distinctions between spontaneous actions and incoherent events in life, on the one hand, and artificially structured episodes that freeze characters in an eternal present in art, on the other. She also juxtaposes past and present, and her speech raises the issue of the truth of language.

The widowed Mother agrees to return to her husband’s home, and their Son verbalizes his wish to eliminate the Mother’s illegitimate children:

Girl drowns, Boy commits suicide, Stepdaughter departs. Because the Director sees box-office potential in that story, he prepares the stage for the second tableau. Props are arranged, provoking discussion about the transfer of life to the stage. The truth is not always plausible, so the Director aims for verisimilitude. The Characters prefer photographic representation, which is impossible in the theater. The stage of illusion only pretends to dramatize life.

## HENRY IV

**First produced:** *Enrico IV*, 1922 (first published, 1922; English translation, 1923)

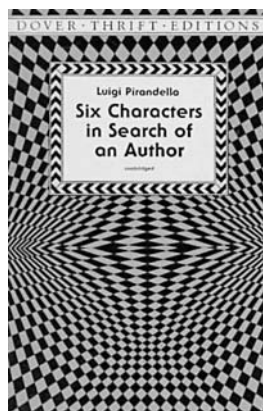
**Type of work:** Play

*Disguised as Emperor Henry IV, an Umbrian fell from his horse in a cavalcade, lost his sanity, and has continued the masquerade for twenty years.*

In his three-act tragedy, *Henry IV*, Pirandello unveils pretenses and the subconscious to reveal that a person’s illusions constitute the only viable reality. Like the actor in classical theater, the mock emperor becomes his mask.

Pirandello uses the analytic technique to reconstruct the history of the emperor. In the expository scene, he alerts the audience to the relativity of words. The new man, prepared to work for the English king, learns that the name “Henry IV” can refer to two kings, as well as to the emperor. The actor must transform himself and adopt another linguistic system. Thus, what takes place at the subconscious level issues as concrete reality. Moreover, the spectator identifies with that employee; both are foreigners in a strange land, ignorant of history and of the dynamics of Henry’s magic theater.

In preparation for the carnival, the Umbrian became an expert on, and assimilated the life of, his persona. Henry IV rode in the cavalcade with his beloved (Mathilda of Tuscany) and in front of Belcredi, his rival in love. Henry fell from his horse and hit his head. When he regained consciousness, the mask was fused to his face; he has lived for the past twenty years in the medieval palace that his sister constructed in her villa. Later, Henry recov-



ered his sanity; however, he feared growing old in a hypocritical society and chose to remain in isolation in the temporal zone of a twenty-six-year-old Henry IV. His mask affords him the will to survive. Since then, he has reenacted his humiliation at Canossa. Before her death, his sister intuited a recovery and asked her son to have Henry examined by a physician. DiNolli engaged one who devises a scheme that should provide shock therapy and cure Henry. Hence, they plan a visit to Henry's court.

In the first interview with Henry, they dress in eleventh century costumes to enter into his world. His beloved, Mathilda, is disguised as Adelaide, mother of Henry's wife whom he wishes to divorce. Belcredi is a monk, but Henry insists that he is his enemy, Peter Damian, who refuses to grant him a divorce. Henry acknowledges their disguises, and his tirades oscillate between eleventh century history and regret about the passage of time. Mathilda, understanding his veiled words, is moved by the pathetic scene; but the physician, accepting appearance for reality, diagnoses a pathological case. Ridicule turns on the psychiatrist, who cannot analyze Henry's speech to determine that his masquerade is an act.

In their second encounter, Frida and DiNolli, resembling the portraits of Mathilda and Henry, stand in the frames. That scheme fails, too. Never-

theless, their presence stirs Henry's memories, and he moves in and out of madness on different temporal planes (historical past, adolescence, his exile, the present), trying to answer the question, "Who/What am I?" Spontaneously, he remembers that Belcredi made him fall from his horse and, outraged, stabs his rival. With deliberate duplicity, Henry escapes to his world of pretense to avoid scandal. He renounces a relationship with Mathilda, however, in preferring Art to Life. Thus, Henry's mask represents Humankind's fate.

## SUMMARY

Luigi Pirandello's renown rests upon his achievements as a playwright. With adroit stagecraft, he contrasts Art and Life. His magic mirrors reflect illusions of appearance and reality, while his analysis of the structures of personality reveals that people wear masks to survive in society. Humanity condemned to self-deception merits the audience's compassion.

His masterpieces, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*, incorporate the main ideas of his immense literary production. They have an international audience and have influenced the authors of the Theater of the Absurd, who consider him the creator of contemporary drama.

Irene E. Gnarra

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## Luigi Pirandello

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Luigi Pirandello parodies the “well-made play.” Determine the essentials of this type of play.
- What were Pirandello’s motives for parodying the well-made play?
- What does it mean for characters to lack and want “an author”?
- Is Pirandello correct that humans prefer art to life?
- Cite instances of Pirandello’s influence on playwrights devoted to “the absurd.”



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## PLATO

**Born:** Athens, Greece  
c. 427 B.C.E.

**Died:** Athens, Greece  
347 B.C.E.

*Regarded as one of the greatest philosophers in the history of the world, Plato has had enormous influence through the centuries, especially on the development of Western thought.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Plato (PLAY-toh) was born in Athens, Greece, around 427 B.C.E. The eighty-year span of his life covered one of the most dramatic and tumultuous periods in Greek history. During his boyhood and youth, for example, his homeland witnessed the last stages of the Peloponnesian War, a struggle for dominance between the city-state of Athens and her arch-rival, Sparta. Plato's father, Ariston, and his mother, Perictione, both came from distinguished families, and as a member of the aristocracy Plato was reared in the most favorable surroundings and enjoyed the best education available. Given this background and the many natural talents that he displayed as a youth, it seemed inevitable that he would one day enter public life and distinguish himself in politics.

In fact, his life was to take an entirely different course. The more closely Plato observed the world of politics, the less inclined he was to become involved in it. One event in particular was to have a lasting effect on him, and that was the trial, condemnation, and execution of Socrates in 399 B.C.E. Socrates had been Plato's teacher, and Plato had profound respect for him. That his supposedly enlightened city could have killed so noble a man as Socrates was, for Plato, shocking and disillusioning. It was this event that turned him to philosophy, following in his great teacher's footsteps.

Plato left Athens after the death of Socrates and apparently stayed away from the city for about ten years. He resided for a time in the city of Megara, and he may also have traveled to Egypt and Cyrene. It was during this period that he began to write. The dialogue form, in which he recorded his ideas, is like a transcription of a conversation between two or more people, a conversation in which provocative questions are asked and then pursued with great energy and thoroughness. Plato presents his ideas in very attractive attire, and this is a principal reason for the continuing appeal of his philosophy.

Altogether, Plato wrote some twenty-six dialogues of varying lengths. The exact dates of the composition of these dialogues are uncertain. It is customary to group them into three general periods, early, middle, and late. The dialogues that Plato wrote during the decade or so immediately following Socrates' death, then, would belong to the early period. It was during this period, from 399-390 B.C.E., that he wrote the *Apologia Sōkratous* (*Apology*, 1675), the *Charmidēs* (*Charmides*, 1804), and the *Euthyphrōn* (*Euthyphro*, 1804). Among other dialogues belonging to this early period are the *Prōtagoras* (*Protagoras*, 1804) and the *Gorgias* (English translation, 1804).

Around 387 B.C.E., Plato journeyed to southern Italy and Sicily to study with a group of philosophers called Pythagoreans. During this trip, he met Dionysius I, the king of Syracuse. The following year, Plato returned to Athens and founded a school, the Academy. The purpose of this school was to train men to be both politicians and philosophers who would conduct public affairs with perfect jus-

tice. For the next twenty years, Plato pursued this ambitious ideal with the utmost seriousness, and in due course the Academy was to become famous and influential. He also continued his writing during this middle period, from 388-368 B.C.E., producing such works as the *Symposion* (*Symposium*, 1701), the *Politeia* (*Republic*, 1701), and the *Parmenidēs*, (*Parmenides*, 1793), and, from 365-361 B.C.E., *Sophistēs* (*Sophist*, 1804) and *Politikos* (*Statesman*, 1804).

In 367 B.C.E., Dionysius II, the successor to Dionysius I as king of Syracuse, invited Plato to come to his court and educate him so that he might be able to rule as a philosopher-king. Plato made the trip to Syracuse, but after four months there he abandoned the project. Six years later, he was persuaded by Dionysius to try once again, but a second visit to Syracuse, this one lasting a year, was no more fruitful than the first. In July, 360 B.C.E., Plato arrived back in Greece, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Plato continued to teach and write almost to the day of his death. During his third period, from 360-347 B.C.E., he wrote works such as the *Timaeos* (*Timeaus*, 1793), *Critias* (English translation, 1793), and the *Nomoi* (*Laws*, 1804). When he died, in 347 B.C.E. in Athens, he was justifiably esteemed as one of the most learned men in the Greek world.

## ANALYSIS

A key feature of Plato's style is the fact that he not only wrote about matters of intrinsic and enduring importance but also wrote about them well. Not many philosophers are known for their impressive literary style, but Plato is a sparkling exception in this regard. Because he was a poet as well as a philosopher, he succeeded in transforming the philosophical work into an art form. He communicated his ideas through the medium of what might be called a drama of ideas. In these dramas, or dialogues, there is to be found an array of fascinating characters who command attention not only for the ideas that they articulate but also because they are interesting people in and of themselves.

In reading Plato's works, one quickly becomes convinced that philosophy is a vibrant and significant subject. A Platonic dialogue presents philosophy in action. Plato does not simply provide conclusions; he also shows the ways in which he arrived at them. Sometimes those ways lead over hill and

dale. Sometimes they follow a line of thought up a certain road, only to reach a dead end. On occasion it will happen that a dialogue will be concluded without all the problems treated in it having been neatly resolved. There are loose ends—questions that have not been answered, or answered only in a tentative, incomplete manner. Yet rather than detracting from the worth of the dialogue, this method is a reminder that the ultimate concern of philosophy is the truth, and that a philosopher must not be satisfied with easy solutions if they are not true solutions.

Plato's lively manner of communicating his ideas suggests something else about him that is quite important: For him, philosophy was not simply an intellectual exercise, but a way of life. As Plato saw things, the philosopher's goal is not merely to be a good thinker, one who reasons well; he must also be a good man, one who lives well. There is, then, a distinctly moral dimension to the whole of Plato's philosophy.

Of the many characters that are to be found in the Platonic dialogues, there is none that enjoys a more prominent place or plays a more critical role than Socrates. Exactly how is the Socrates of the dialogues to be understood? Because Socrates was an actual historical figure and was, furthermore, Plato's own teacher, the question naturally arises: Is the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues the historical Socrates? The most appropriate answer to that question would seem to be "yes and no." In the early dialogues of Plato, a reliable picture of the historical Socrates, both the man and his ideas, is being presented. The philosophy learned from these dialogues is, in the main, the philosophy of Socrates. The Socrates confronted in the later dialogues, however, is more fictional than historical, in the sense that he acts mainly as a mouthpiece for Plato's own ideas. Plato's philosophy was built upon a Socratic foundation, but over the years he refined and developed ideas that he had originally learned from Socrates. In some instances, he moved into areas of investigation that had not formed major parts of Socrates' philosophic concerns.

One of the major elements in Plato's philosophy is what is called the doctrine of the Forms, or Ideas. This doctrine expresses Plato's notions concerning the fundamental nature of reality. According to him, the essence of reality is nonmaterial, spiritual.

He believed that material things enjoyed a kind of second-class existence. In the case of a physical object such as a chair, for example, Plato taught that it exists only to the extent that it somehow shares or participates in the Form of a chair, which exists from all eternity in a realm that transcends the earthly, material realm.

In the doctrine of the Forms, one finds a definite personalistic dimension, as well as Plato's ever-present concern for morality. Plato believed that the transcendental realm of the Forms is the place where the human race found itself before it became earthbound. There, human beings were in direct contact with the Good and, as a result, were supremely happy. Then something happened. Human beings somehow managed, through their own fault, to alienate themselves from the Good, and they were therefore deprived of their heavenly home. By way of further punishment, they were encased in matter, their bodies, and placed upon this earth to endure a period of exile.

For Plato, a human being, the real person, was essentially a soul. The present earthly state of human beings, then, is in the deepest sense unnatural. Because their proper home is the realm of pure spirit, human beings are hindered by their bodies from attaining true humanness. It is as if the body were a prison, severely inhibiting the freedom of the soul. Because of its immersion in matter, the sensitivities of the soul have been dulled. In their previous existence in the realm of the Forms, human beings were filled with perfect knowledge. When they were transferred to the earthly realm, however, they forgot all that they once knew. What in their present state is called learning is simply a matter of human beings' recollecting what they knew in their former state.

Plato believed that the whole purpose of the earthly life of humans was to discover who they really are, and then, eventually, to get back to where they really belong. The importance of the philosopher in this matter is to act as a guide for his fellow human beings. The philosopher attributes worth to material things only to the extent that they point him toward the deeper realities that are immaterial and eternal. He lives a simple life, unencumbered by useless possessions. When his life draws to a close he displays no fear of death. To the contrary, he welcomes death, for it represents a release from bondage, allowing him to return to his true home.

## APOLOGY

**First published:** *Apologia Sōkratous*, 399-390 B.C.E. (English translation, 1675)

**Type of work:** Philosophical dialogue

*Socrates, having been put on trial by the city-state of Athens, courageously defends his way of life.*

In the *Apology*, Plato has provided posterity with one of the most memorable portraits of his teacher Socrates. In Plato's view, Socrates was a paragon of virtue. Perhaps the essence of his virtue can be summarized in a single word—integrity. Socrates' dedication to the truth was so total and so unswerving that the very thought of compromising that truth was repugnant to him.

One of the things that makes the *Apology* so effective a piece of literature is the fact that it is, at bottom, the account of a trial. By their very nature, trials tend to be dramatic and interesting affairs, especially when, as was the case with Socrates, the stakes are high. Yet what gives this particular trial—surely one of the most famous in the history of the world—a special twist is that, although Socrates was on trial for his life, he did not fight for his life. He fought for something that he regarded as immeasurably more important—the truth.

In the spring of 399 B.C.E., when Plato would have been in his late twenties, Socrates was accused by Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon of two criminal offenses: corrupting the youth of Athens and adopting an atheistic attitude toward the gods of the city. The trial was held before a large assemblage of people, very likely numbering in the thousands, but the verdict was to be decided by a corps of five hundred judges. Although the *Apology* is in dialogue form, it tends at times to be more of a monologue, with Socrates himself doing most of the talking. There were no lawyers in ancient Athens, and those who were accused of capital crimes were expected to defend themselves. By the same token, their accusers were obliged to face them in public, and the accused had the right to examine these accusers before the court.

Socrates begins by giving a general explanation of his philosophical way of life. Why does he behave the way that he does, roaming about the city and

constantly questioning the citizens? He realizes that his manner of life is irksome to many people because he exposes their ignorance to public view. The whole business started, Socrates explains, when a friend of his brought back from the sacred shrine at Delphi the divine oracle that declared Socrates to be the wisest of men. This message baffled Socrates completely. On the one hand, he firmly believed that the gods do not lie; on the other hand, he was equally convinced that he was in fact not wise. What, then, could the oracle possibly mean? In attempting to answer that question, he made a practice of approaching people who had the reputation of being wise—politicians, poets, artists—with the purpose of trying to discover the nature of their wisdom. What he actually discovered, however, was that these people, despite their reputations, were not wise at all. Although in fact ignorant, they labored under the illusion that they were knowledgeable. Socrates found the clue to the meaning of the Delphic oracle in this discovery. Socrates himself was ignorant, but unlike all the supposedly wise people whom he had met, he admitted his ignorance. A wise man, he decided, is one who is ignorant and does not pretend that he is otherwise. Put another way, a wise man is simply one who is honest with himself.

When Socrates examines one of his accusers, Meletus, he makes short work of him, revealing the complete absurdity of the charges that had been leveled against him. This scene makes it evident that the real reason that Socrates is on trial is to satisfy his enemies' desire for revenge. That does not mean, however, that his execution, or even a lesser penalty such as being sent into exile, is inevitable. Socrates is astutely aware of the fact that if he were to "cooperate"—to abandon his principles—he could gain his freedom.

Yet Socrates also knows that his enemies are able to inflict upon him the supreme penalty. The possibility of death, however, does not intimidate him. In fact, he emphasizes the point that the fear of death is foolish, for death is not at all the worst thing that can happen to a human being. For a person to betray what he knows to be true is worse than death. Socrates would not abandon his commitment to philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, if he

were to be set free. Furthermore, Socrates boldly informs his judges that if they were to execute him, they would be doing a great disservice to Athens. Painful though it might be at times, his pursuit of wisdom is, in the final analysis, a benefit to them. He is like a gadfly that is incessantly pestering the lethargic horse that is Athens, so as to prevent that horse from going astray. In other words, he is the conscience of the city.

The vote is taken, and Socrates is found guilty. At this point, the defendant has the right to propose to his judges what punishment he thinks is most fitting for him. After facetiously suggesting that he should be made a ward of the state, Socrates reviews the three alternatives to the death penalty: imprisonment, a heavy fine, and exile. He concludes that none is acceptable to him. If he were to agree to accept exile, for example, that would be almost the same as agreeing to death. In exile, he would not be able to live the inquiring life of a philosopher. The unexamined life, he tells his judges, the life of the nonphilosopher, is not worth living.

A second vote is taken. Socrates is condemned to death. He accepts the decision calmly, but not silently. He reiterates an attitude that he has maintained consistently throughout the trial; his concern is not to avoid death but rather to avoid unrighteousness, at all costs. Then, addressing himself directly to those who condemned him, he prophesies that they will live to regret their decision. For those who supported his cause, he has words of encouragement. He frankly admits that he does not know for certain what death involves, but that there are at least two possibilities to be considered. One is that after death, there is eternal, peaceful sleep. Socrates would gratefully welcome that. Another possibility is that life continues after death; in such a life, he could have exciting encounters with great men and women of the past, with whom he would talk philosophy. Socrates would most gratefully welcome that. Either way, Socrates concludes, death is good, and he cannot lose by accepting it.

The dialogue ends with Socrates having the last word: "The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows."



## SYMPOSIUM

**First published:** *Symposion*, 388-368 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1701)

**Type of work:** Philosophical dialogue

*Socrates demonstrates that love, in its deepest meaning, refers to that profound impulse by which human beings seek eternal beauty and goodness.*

In ancient Greece, a symposium was an after-dinner drinking party that commonly included such amusements as music, dancing, and conversation. The symposium that this dialogue, the *Symposium*, describes was held in the house of Agathon, and its purpose was to celebrate the fact that the host had recently won a prize for a drama that he had written. Because much celebrating already occurred on the previous day, the guests at this gathering decide that they will go easy on the drinking and devote their energies chiefly to conversation. They agree that the topic of their conversation will be love, and that each guest will be required to address the subject. For the ancient Greeks, love was considered to be a god. There was no consensus, however, concerning the precise nature of love's divinity, as is shown by the diverse views found in the speeches recorded in the *Symposium*.

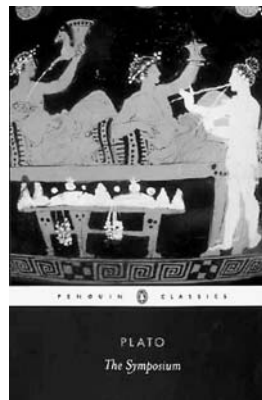
Socrates is among the guests at Agathon's house, and he is the last to give his speech. The first speeches are given by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and the host, Agathon. The speakers agree that love is somehow a divine being, but opinions differ as to his origin and his exact relationship to the other gods. The speakers agree that love plays an important role in the lives of human beings, but they do not agree on the quality of love's influence. Is it good or bad? Much is revealed in these speeches about prevailing attitudes toward human sexuality. When it comes to his turn, Agathon offers a scintillating display of his po-

etic ability, and his speech receives an enthusiastic response. Next comes Socrates, and it is apparent that he has a difficult act to follow.

He is, however, equal to the task. In addressing the subject of love, Socrates takes an approach that was typical of the way that he handled many other subjects. He begins by setting aside the conventional notions of love and then proceeds to talk about it in an entirely new light, bringing to it fresh and penetrating insights. All the previous speakers had spoken of love in terms imposed upon them by Greek mythology. Despite their attempts to spiritualize love and raise it to lofty heights, love nonetheless seems tediously hedonistic and earthbound.

In effect, Socrates treats everything that has thus far been said about love as so much empty chatter. His own point of departure is unique. He claims to know the truth about love, a truth that was once revealed to him by a wise woman named Diotima, of Mantinea. It was she who made him realize that love was essentially an impulse that causes human beings to rise above the deceiving appearances of this world and to seek beauty in its absolute and purest form. To spend all of one's energies in striving to attain beauty is of the utmost importance, for upon it depends nothing less than one's true fulfillment as a human being. That is so because absolute beauty is one and the same as absolute goodness, and it is precisely goodness that all human beings seek if they are genuinely in pursuit of happiness, for goodness, and goodness alone, is capable of making them happy.

Yet if absolute beauty, a beauty that transcends all earthly experiences, is the true goal of love, does humanity reach that beauty by attempting to ignore the world around it and leaping directly into the transcendent realm? Not at all. According to Socrates, individuals reach absolute beauty, or Beauty, through the specific manifestations of beauty in the material world—the beauty of a flower, for example, or of another human being. Particular beautiful things are explained only in terms of absolute beauty; they exist only because absolute beauty exists, somehow participating and sharing in that absolute beauty. When people respond with delight to the beauty of a flower, the delight indicates a deep longing on their part for absolute beauty, which alone is capable of satisfying them. Ideally, particular instances of beauty urge people on and encourage them in their pursuit of



absolute beauty, which is the ultimate goal. Nothing could be more disastrous, however, than to become so enamored of specific instances of beauty that Beauty itself is never attained.

When Socrates finishes his speech, all the guests concede that he has made the most valuable contribution to their discussion on love. The *Symposium* ends with an episode in which a new character, Alcibiades, is introduced to the drama. Through him it is revealed that Socrates is possessed of many other virtues besides the ability to philosophize in a brilliant and profound manner. Socrates is revealed as a person who is impressively superior, not only intellectually but also morally.

## REPUBLIC

**First published:** *Politeia*, 388-368 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1701)

**Type of work:** Philosophical dialogue

*The essence of morality, for individuals as well as for societies, is, first, to focus attention upon absolute goodness, the Good, and then to pursue it relentlessly.*

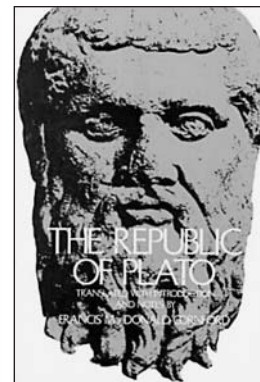
The *Republic* is among the longest of Plato's dialogues, and it is very probably his best-known and most popular work. There are only seven characters in the dialogue, despite its length, and three of these, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adimantus, carry the conversation. Like most of Plato's dialogues, this one is characterized by a dominant theme, which, in the case of the *Republic*, is justice, or, more broadly, morality. What is the essence of morality? To state the problem with greater precision, what is the nature of a truly good human being, one whose life points toward a genuine fulfillment of one's humanity? The rich and multifaceted discussion found in the ten books of the *Republic* is an attempt to answer that question.

Early in the discussion, it is decided to seek the nature of morality on the level of society as a whole rather than on the level of the individual. Because everything on the level of society is on a larger scale, it would therefore be more easily observed and studied. This approach reveals an interesting feature of Plato's thought, his conviction that what-

ever is discoverable about the nature of morality on the level of society will, with appropriate qualifications, be applicable on the level of the individual. He did not believe that there were two separate types of morality, one for individuals and one for societies as a whole. Plato taught that there is but a single morality, and that it applies with equal force to both individuals and societies.

After providing a brief sketch of how the organized state first came into existence, Socrates and his two fellow philosophers carefully develop a detailed picture of what they conceive to be the ideal state. Such a state would comprise three major divisions, or classes. It would be governed by a very special type of aristocracy, composed of people possessed of both profound philosophical knowledge and moral righteousness. An individual in this class would have gained his philosophical prowess through long years of difficult study; his moral superiority would result from having experientially arrived at a certain degree of understanding of absolute goodness. This absolute goodness, which is the same as the absolute beauty found in the *Symposium*, and to which Plato refers simply as the Good, is the supreme principle of all reality. It is the foundation and source of morality, not only for the philosopher-kings, the members of the Guardian class, but also for all members of the ideal state, if indirectly.

The second class, a considerably larger one, has the name Auxiliaries, and its principal function is to protect the state against external aggression and internal dissension. The Auxiliaries could be regarded as a combination of an army and a national police force. Although not as philosophically sophisticated as the Guardians, the Auxiliaries are closely allied to, and cooperate fully with, the leaders of the state. The Auxiliaries' main task is to implement the enlightened directives of the Guardians. Both the Guardians and the Auxiliaries lead a rigorous, highly disciplined life. They cannot own private property, for example, nor can they marry in the conventional sense and raise a family. They



sleep in dormitories and have their meals in common. The purpose behind the strict regimentation is to allow the Guardians and Auxiliaries to devote all of their attention and energies to the good of the state.

Perhaps the best way to identify the third class in Plato's ideal state is to say that it comprises all those who are neither Guardians nor Auxiliaries. In other words, this class comprises the vast majority of the populace and would include professionals, artisans, wage laborers, and farmers. Unlike the upper two classes, the members of this class are free to marry and establish families, and they own property. Although the three classes are quite distinct, they are not isolated from one another, and there is fluid movement among the membership of each. As far as individuals are concerned, one's membership in a particular class is determined, not simply by one's birth, but rather by one's talents, and by how one takes to education. Therefore, someone born into the lowest class could end up as a Guardian, whereas, conversely, the child of a Guardian could be demoted to the lowest class for failure to display the characteristics expected of a future Guardian.

Education plays a strategically important role in the ideal state, for on it depends the citizenry's being rightly oriented to the Good. The chief task of education is to produce Guardians, philosopher-kings. In the same way that there can be no real difference, in a Guardian, between intellectual and moral excellence, so also in the education that is dedicated to producing Guardians, equal emphasis must be given to both intellectual and moral formation. Plato's theory of education, as found in the *Republic*, never separates these two. Children must not be exposed to art forms such as epic poetry and the drama, or to certain types of music.

These would have a corrupting effect upon them. Art is corrupting to the extent that it provides children with a distorted view of reality. In the ideal state being contemplated, girls are provided with the same education as boys, and the reason for this is the belief that the only difference between men and women is purely physical. Women are eligible for all the positions that are open to men, including Auxiliary and Guardian.

The society that Plato delineates in the *Republic* is ideal. Yet it would be incorrect to consider it a utopia, if doing so implies the understanding that Plato was committed to the possibility of establishing upon this earth a perfect social organization that would completely fulfill the human person. As is evident in the last book of the *Republic*, which includes a stirring "last judgment" scene, Plato believed that human beings could not completely fulfill themselves in this life. That is something that comes only after death, with the vision of the Good.

## SUMMARY

Plato's artistically expressed philosophy can be called idealistic in the sense that it teaches that the bases of reality are eternal, immaterial Ideas or Forms. Material things exist only because they participate in the existence of the Ideas or Forms. Physical matter is inferior to spirit, and that is why the human person, who is essentially pure spirit, is hampered in this life by the physical body. The philosopher is one who is able to distinguish between the deceptive qualities of material existence and the real reality that is nonmaterial. Philosophy is a way of life, the two foundations of which are a sound intelligence and a sound morality. Its sole purpose is to attain the Good. For Plato, Socrates was the prime example of the model philosopher.

Dennis Q. McInerney

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Although Plato's individual works cannot be dated with exactness, there is consensus among scholars as to a four-part division into early, middle, later, and last periods.

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*Ion* (*Ion*, 1804)

*Gorgias* (English translation, 1804)  
*Lachēs* (*Laches*, 1804)  
*Charmidēs* (*Charmides*, 1804)  
*Euthyphrōn* (*Euthyphro*, 1804)  
*Lysis* (English translation, 1804)  
*Hippias Elattōn* (*Hippias Minor*, 1761)  
*Hippias Meizōn* (*Hippias Major*, 1759)  
*Apologia Sōkratous* (*Apology*, 1675)  
*Kritōn* (*Crito*, 1804)

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*Euthydēmos* (*Euthydemus*, 1804)  
*Menexenos* (*Menexenus*, 1804)  
*Phaedōn* (*Phaedo*, 1675)  
*Parmenidēs* (*Parmenides*, 1793)  
*Theaetētos* (*Theaetetus*, 1804)

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*Sophistēs* (*Sophist*, 1804)  
*Politikos* (*Statesman*, 1804)

Last period works (360-347 B.C.E.):

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did Plato have the right to make Socrates a spokesman for himself in some of his dialogues?
- To what extent does the *Apology* reveal the reasons for the enmity against Socrates?
- What indications of his audience's reaction to Socrates' remarks do you see in the *Apology*?
- By what techniques does Plato in the *Symposium* draw the contrast between the theory of love proposed by Socrates and love as commonly understood by his contemporaries?
- Socrates, as presented by Plato, resembles Jesus in his inclination to use dramatic and literary devices to enhance his message. Compare their use of one such device, such as the parable.
- Plato is one of the most readable of philosophers. What stylistic trait or traits would you identify as most outstanding in this respect?



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## PLUTARCH

**Born:** Chaeronea, Boeotia, Greece  
c. 46 C.E.

**Died:** Chaeronea, Boeotia, Greece  
after 120 C.E.

*As one of the creators of literary biography, Plutarch is remembered not only for the specific examples of the genre and the details of significant historical personalities but also for the subsequent impact those examples had upon a wide range of modern European narrative and drama.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mestrios Ploutarchos, or Plutarch (PLEW-tawrk), was born around 46 C.E. during the Roman imperial administration of Claudius I. His birthplace was Chaeronea, Boeotia, in central Greece, some twenty miles east of Delphi. Plutarch could trace his paternal lineage to his great-grandfather, Nikarchos, through his grandfather, Lamprias, and his father, Autoboulos. His grandfather appears in dialogue or conversational contexts, some of which are set in his father's house and some in Plutarch's own house, as best illustrated by Plutarch's nine-volume philosophical treatise, "Symposiacs" ("Table Talk"). Of the maternal line nothing is known, not even the name of his mother.

He had at least two brothers, Lamprias and Timon. A son of one of the brothers, his nephew, Sextus of Chaeronea, was a well-known Stoic philosopher, a tutor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Plutarch was married to Timoxena, the daughter of Alexion. They had four sons, Soklaros, Charon, Autoboulos, and Ploutarchos, and a daughter, Timoxena, who died when she was four, about whom "Paramythetikos pros ten gynaika" ("Consolation to His Wife") survives among Plutarch's varied essays. This essay was written from Tanagra in eastern Boeotia, since Plutarch was not at home at the time and could not arrive before the funeral. It remains among the most moving of his works and one of the most revealing of his personality, since it

provides perspective on his understanding of the meaning of life. It reveals that two of the older boys, the eldest, probably Soklaros, and "fair Charon" had preceded their sister in death. Patrokleas, who participates in the "Table Talk," is, in Greek, called Plutarch's *gambros*, which is usually translated as "son-in-law," implying another daughter, but no name is known, nor are other particulars of the family known. The traditional account indicates that another son, Lamprias, otherwise unknown, "wrote a list of all his father's writings on the whole of Greek and Roman inquiries." Minimal traces from inscriptions indicate familial successors for some two centuries.

Essentially, Plutarch was a hometown teacher, although he traveled widely within his world, knowing Athens well, visiting Egypt, and lecturing at Rome. He had a wide circle of friends, some of whom were influential within the imperial administration. It was from one of them, Lucius Mestrius Florus, that Plutarch took the gentile name, Mestrius, presumably in recognition of an honor done him by Florus, ostensibly in the reign of the emperor Trajan. From that time he gained Roman citizenship. To another friend, the Roman consul Sosius Senecio, the *Bioi paralleloi* (c. 105-115 C.E.; *Parallel Lives*, 1579) was dedicated.

For the last thirty years of his life, Plutarch was a priest at Delphi. When the emperor Hadrian came to assist in the celebration of that shrine's past, in about 126 C.E., he found that his statue had been erected by the shrine's council near the beginning



of his reign. Upon it, according to the preserved inscription, there is a record of Plutarch as officiating priest. Plutarch did not long survive after that occasion, though in these later years he held several honorary local offices for Chaeronea. He died in Chaeronea sometime after 120 C.E.

Although an extensive amount of Plutarch's writing has survived, there is little exact chronological information about his work or his life. In his essay "Peri tou E tou en Delphi" ("The E at Delphi"), a passing reference is made to his being old enough to appreciate a philosophic discussion while studying in Athens in the year that the emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus visited the city (66 C.E.). It is upon this reference that Plutarch's time of birth is usually fixed. An incident in another of Plutarch's essays, "Peri Isidos kai Osiridos" ("Isis and Osiris"), involves "armed strife between two Egyptian districts over their respective local cults" and has been dated to 117 C.E.

Plutarch is the second most extensively preserved author of classical antiquity, exceeded only by the voluminous medical writer Galen, of whom well in excess of 2.5 million words exists. Plutarch's output totals a little more than 1.1 million words, well in advance of the much-better-known Aristotle, from whom less than one million words survive. In addition to the fifty biographies in *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch's other surviving work is *Ethika* (after c. 100 C.E.; *Moralia*, 1603), a collection of seventy-eight essays, including "Table Talk," and "Consolation to His Wife." These two publications, however, are but a fraction of the known titles that he wrote. Lamprias's list identified 227 items and does not include all that have survived.

## ANALYSIS

Plutarch understood his main literary activity was to involve the education of men. He clearly stood within the intellectual tradition of Greek philosophy. This philosophical base had been defined as consisting of three concerns upon which the divergent "philosophizers" focused: nature, morals, and rationality itself, so that there were three corresponding kinds of philosophy: natural, moral, and logical. It was with the moral or ethical that Plutarch principally dealt, though by no means to the exclusion of the others. His essays "Aetia physica" ("Causes of Natural Phenomena") and "Peri tou emphainomenou prosopou toi kukloi tes selenes"

("Concerning the Face Which Appears in the Orb of the Moon") reveal attention to topics within natural philosophy. On the latter, the early modern astronomer, Johannes Kepler, composed a Latin translation with commentary of significance to the development of seventeenth century science.

The various essays in the collection now called *Moralia* were composed generally before those in the collection called *Parallel Lives*. Richard Chenevix Trench, archbishop of Dublin, writing on Plutarch in 1873, noted that the *Moralia*, in contrast to the *Parallel Lives*, speak "of the points of view, moral and religious, from which he contemplated not this man's life or the other's, but the whole life of men." Thus, the two collections are complementary: *Parallel Lives* being concerned with "what the ancient world had accomplished in the world of action" and *Moralia* with what it "had accomplished in the world of thought."

It can also be noted that few of Plutarch's writings are individually of any great length, though the overall corpus is quite extensive. Of the seventy-eight essays included in the *Moralia*, the average length is less than seven thousand words, with but twenty-six of them exceeding that number, and with only the "Table Talk" being of a substance approaching ten times the average length. By comparison, *Parallel Lives*, while not a single discrete entity, is a composite work of some 518,504 words. Of its fifty "lives," the average length is a little more than ten thousand words, with two, the "Pompeius" and the "Alexander," each exceeding twenty thousand. If the pairings of "parallel" lives are considered, then all the pairs exceed twelve thousand words, and the most extensive, "Alexander with Julius Caesar," is more than thirty-seven thousand, with two others, "Agesilaus with Pompeius" and "Demetrius with Antonius," more than thirty thousand words.

The fifty surviving biographies in *Parallel Lives* were not the only ones written, nor do the first written appear among the survivors. Plutarch, by his own references, began with "Augustus" Caesar, evidently pursuing examples in isolation before he turned to his famed pairing. Among the caesars, these individuated examples included "Tiberius," "Gaius," "Caligula," "Claudius," "Nero," and "Vitelius"—none of which is known. The idea was not unlike that of the somewhat younger Latin author, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, whose *De vita*

*Caesarum* (c.120 C.E.; *The History of Twelve Caesars*, 1606; best known as *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*), written after the death of Domitian, alone provides an example from classical antiquity of imperial biographies from this transitional period in Roman history. While it is not quite clear about how many of the caesars Plutarch wrote, only the individuated examples of the poorly known “Galba” and “Otho” still exist. A comparison of the corresponding examples written by Suetonius show Plutarch’s to be longer. Yet one learns little from Plutarch’s biography of Otho, since his “life” is the shortest written. Otherwise, there are preserved examples only of “Aratus,” a political and military figure from the Greek city-state of Sicyon, involved in the third century struggles against Macedon; and “Artaxerxes” II, one of the Persian kings.

Even the oldest of the pairs, the Greek “Epaminondas” with the Roman “Scipio Africanus,” does not survive. That is unfortunate, for not only was Epaminondas the person most admired by Plutarch, but the absence of the text prevents the reader from seeing how Plutarch came upon the rather novel idea of pairing lives. The descriptive usage, “parallel lives,” is Plutarch’s own indication of his self-consciousness in having created a unique form.

With the exception of the four independent lives, the other forty-six are in parallel pairs. In one instance, two Greeks were paired with two Romans: the kings of Sparta, “Agis” IV and “Cleomenes” III with the two Gracchi brothers, “Tiberius and Gaius,” both reforming dictators in the later and declining period of the Roman republic. Otherwise, each of the *Parallel Lives* juxtaposes one Roman with one Greek figure of renown. Plutarch normally wrote the Greek life first and then sought a Roman personality wherein the educational lesson intended by the former might find genuine comparison in the latter. While Plutarch ranged widely chronologically for his Romans—from the founder, Romulus, to the caesars—for his Greeks he took a broader Hellenistic view that permitted him to consider ten Athenians, five Spartans, two Thebans, two Macedonians, and one each from Sicily, Cardia, Corinth, Megalopolis, and Epirus, but over a shorter period of time.

Many of the twenty-one examples thus created admirably perform the intended function or at least did so in Plutarch’s own mind. Modern critics

have frequently found fault, usually from some perspective not reflecting Plutarch’s own notions of virtue. He defined virtue as an art, making close analogy of the writer of “lives” to the painter of portraits. In contrast to virtue was *kakia*, too often mistranslated as “vice,” since it could imply “badness” of character, whereas for Plutarch it was simply the absence of virtue, as in the cases of the paired “Demetrius” and “Mark Antony.”

## PARALLEL LIVES

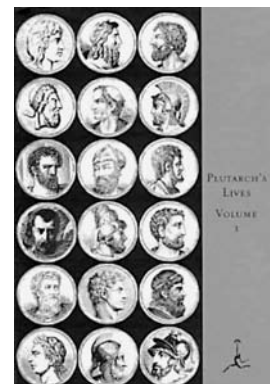
**First published:** *Bioi paralleloi*, c. 105-115 C.E. (English translation, 1579)

**Type of work:** Biographical essays

*The Parallel Lives, written as moral influences upon the reader, illustrate diverse virtues through the medium of pairing a famous Greek personality with a correspondingly famous Roman personality.*

Customarily, in the *Parallel Lives*, the parallel pairs are accompanied by an introduction. Within these stand whatever dedicatory or prefatory statements that Plutarch wished to make. Many provide clues not only to the specific point of the given pair but also to the general theory of *bioi* (“lives”) under which Plutarch worked. He clearly distinguished “lives” from “researches,” which meant, as he put it in the “Alexander,” that the most brilliant exploits often tell readers nothing of the virtues or vices of the men who performed them, while on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal more of a man’s character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshaling great armies, or laying siege to cities.

Since these introductions are typically found with the Greek “life” that was written first, an edition or a reading focusing exclusively upon the Roman half of the pair may well lose the sense that



Plutarch intended. That must be said since it is common to look at subgroupings of *Parallel Lives* to obtain from these quasi-biographical essays information of a historical nature. That is especially the case in instances in which a period of time or a personality is otherwise poorly covered because of the loss of sources from which Plutarch worked.

It is appropriate to consider not only Plutarch's knowledge of Roman sources but also his apparently rather poor knowledge of the Latin language. Nevertheless, much can be gained by reading all the lives appropriate to the end of the Roman republic. The lives of "Caius Marius," "Sulla," "Crassus," "Lucullus," "Pompeius," "Cicero," "Julius Caesar," "Cato the Younger," "Brutus," and "Antony" have so much in common by interplay with one another that Plutarch's treatment becomes significant precisely in the minute amount of distinctive, if not contradictory, data about these several individuals that he provided.

The order of Plutarch's composition remains in dispute, but it is possible to distinguish four subgroups on the basis of the purposes that underlay the writing. Plutarch had begun "at the request of his friends," continued "for his own satisfaction," turned to examples "whose career may serve as a warning," and concluded the whole with those "of the founding fathers and legislators of Greece and Rome." Whether for others or "his own satisfaction," the choices made illustrate that sense in which figures from the past can be "object-lessons in a particular virtue" for persons of the present.

The absence of any life of a woman, like the absence of any woman from the "Table Talk," should be noted. Truly none constituted the primary focus of Plutarch's work, though the "Consolation to His Wife" has received remark. From the *Moralia* could be added "Gamika parangelmata" ("Advice to Bride and Groom"), the "pithy remarks" attributed to Spartan women in "Apothegmata Lakonika" ("Sayings of Spartans"), but especially the "Gunaikon aretai" ("Bravery of Women"). Plutarch lived within a world with its own notions of sexual status. Yet that fact should not ignore the

role given to women, nor the particular and peculiar virtues assigned to women within the literary lives of the men. The example of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi brothers, illustrates well the contrasting point. In the same context, emphasis must be placed upon Plutarch's assumption that education itself, the very purpose of all of his essays in *Moralia*, as well as in *Parallel Lives*, was exclusively the prerogative of that wealthy and leisured minority "able to attend the lectures of philosophers" or to share with Plutarch in his kind of lifestyle.

The use of a Greek with a Roman was meant to educate both peoples regarding the values inherent within the other. The frequent presence of a *synkrisis* (comparison) was intended to find whether or not those values were present in the "lives" of the persons chosen. The use of introductions to the *Parallel Lives* adds to these stylistic devices. All contribute to an understanding of not only Plutarch's intentions in the writing of this kind of "moral essay" but also how his result was of such potent literary force. Throughout subsequent history, he was read with intensity as providing models for men in different eras and under divergent political manifestations. The *Parallel Lives* are indeed examples within the "ethics" of political philosophy.

## SUMMARY

Plutarch was essentially a teacher whose work is that of an essayist not given to excessive wordiness. Yet Plutarch had concerns that led him to say the things that he wanted said. While many of these lay in the development of character, he also gave attention to a great variety of topics, some of a traditional nature, some much more issues of the immediate moment. *Parallel Lives* was an ideal way of writing topics in moral philosophy for a wider audience by employing the device of human biographies. He gave them an additional dimension by juxtaposing one life from one culture in one age with another life from another culture in another age.

Clyde Curry Smith

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What literary virtues have made Plutarch one of the few biographers before the eighteenth century to be highly regarded?
- Plutarch, like many biographers after him, was much interested in inculcating moral principles. What are the dangers of this approach for a biographer?
- What relationship between ancient Greek and Roman culture provided a basis for *Parallel Lives*?
- What uses did William Shakespeare make of Sir Thomas North's sixteenth century translation of Plutarch?
- What did Samuel Johnson learn from Plutarch? What did James Boswell learn?



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## ALEXANDER POPE

**Born:** London, England  
May 21, 1688

**Died:** Twickenham, England  
May 30, 1744

*An outstanding moralist and satirist of the neoclassic period in English literature, Pope extended the use of literary criticism and renewed interest in the mock epic as a genre.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alexander Pope was born in the City of London, England, on May 21, 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution. He was the only child of Catholic parents. The Pope family lived on Lombard Street until Alexander was five years old. A portrait of him painted when he was about ten shows his face to be round, pretty, and of a fresh complexion. Later, an illness disfigured him. In the same year that he was born, an act of Parliament prohibited Catholics from living within ten miles of the City of London. This act became a major factor in determining the course of Pope's life.

Pope received his first education when he was about eight years old from a priest named John Banister. Later, he attended Twyford School near Winchester, a school for Catholic boys. At the age of twelve, Pope's father decided to move the family from London in order to conform to the act restricting Catholics. Whitefield House and seventeen acres of land in Windsor Forest near Binfield became the new home. This move brought Pope's formal education to an end, and thereafter he educated himself. About 1704, at the age of sixteen and now suffering from the dreaded Pott's disease, a form of spinal tuberculosis, he thought he was about to die. His farewell to the Abbe Southcote caused him to secure the services of Dr. John

Radcliffe, an eminent physician of the day, who successfully treated Pope. His advice to Pope, to exercise and ride each day, worked.

During these years of growing up at Binfield, the young poet was not only extending his reading and perfecting his poetry, he was also developing his literary acquaintances. He got to know many literary wits at Will's Coffee House, including William Trumbell, William Walsh, Samuel Garth, William Wycherley, William Congreve, and the actor Thomas Betterton. Pope became especially friendly with Wycherley and Walsh. He helped Wycherley prepare his verse for publication, and from Walsh he received the famous advice to make correctness his study and aim. Walsh was referring, of course, to literary decorum.

The period of 1709 to 1717 was the experimentation period for Pope. During these eight years, he tried his hand at half a dozen different kinds of poetry, ranging from pastoral and georgic, such as *Windsor Forest* (1713), to didactic, such as *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), to elegiac, as in "Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," to heroic, as in *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), to mock epic, such as *The Rape of the Lock* (1712; expanded, 1714), to actual epic, as in *The Iliad of Homer* (1715-1720), a translation of Homer's *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611).

These years were also a time of great expansion in his personal and social life. They mark a period during which Pope spent more time in London than at any other stage in his life at the same time as he continued to visit his Catholic acquaintances around Binfield. Now he made new friends, includ-



ing John Gay, Jonathan Swift, John Arbuthnot, and First Viscount Bolingbroke among literary and political circles, and the Carylls, Englefields, and Blounts among Catholic folk. He also met Martha Blount, for whom he developed a love that, despite all barriers that existed, endured until his death.

When Pope's father died in 1717, various changes in Pope's life followed. His father had left Binfield in 1716 and moved to Chiswick, possibly to avoid the heavy taxes then being levied against Catholics. With his father gone, Pope decided to move in March, 1719, with his mother into a small villa on the bank of the Thames at Twickenham. The last twenty-five years of Pope's life were spent there, except for occasional excursions into the countryside. His major endeavor now was to improve the house, garden, and grotto at Twickenham. His life took on a much quieter aspect. At first, he was engrossed in finishing his translation of Homer's *Iliad*. After the completion of the translation, he began editing. His main project in editing was an edition of the work of William Shakespeare that would improve on Nicholas Rowe's edition. Pope's Shakespeare edition finally appeared in six volumes in March, 1725. The other major work belonging to these years was his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E., English translation, 1614). This effort made Pope the first writer in English letters to be able to live off his writings without the aid of a patron. His financial independence was now secure.

The completion of such projects thus brought a distinct change of direction in his literary interests. Being free now to write what he chose, he adopted satire as his forte. This period is when he produced the first volume of *The Dunciad* (1728-1743). All the while, Pope's health had been deteriorating. A trip to Bath did not help. The five years from 1728 to 1733 were the most painful that Pope had yet had to suffer. Meanwhile, he was working on *An Essay on Man* (1733-1734). Yet the first poem to be published after *The Dunciad* was actually the *Epistle to Burlington* (1731). This poem caused him to gather new enemies in addition to those whom he had made from *The Dunciad*. For this reason, when the first three epistles of *An Essay on Man* finally appeared in 1733, they did so anonymously. Pope published two other poems at the same time, the *Epistle to Bathurst* (1732) and the *Imitations of Horace* (1733-1737).

As Pope grew older, his life assumed a mellow and more assured quality. He could now make friends according to his own beliefs and not feel pressured to impress anyone. His closest friends became the most valuable aspects of his life. Another change, however, was about to occur in his life: His mother would soon die.

Probably the greatest change as a result of his mother's death was the kind of traveling he now undertook. Although he did not follow the traditional pattern of the learned man and go on a Grand Tour of the Continent, he did travel the breadth of southern England. That does not mean that he neglected Twickenham. Like Horace on his Sabine Farm, Pope continued to pay close attention to the pastoral setting here. Horace became the major influence in Pope's writing. Although several of Pope's poems were patterned after the works of Horace, the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) says much about Pope's literary career. In the poem, Pope builds his image by demonstrating his own literary development. Also, the publication of his *Mr. Pope's Literary Correspondence* (1735-1737) after his mother's death lent a more positive image, for there he shaped his character for public display. During the period from 1733 to 1738, Pope wrote at least fourteen imitations of Horace. In addition, in these last years he reworked *The Dunciad*, completing the work in 1743. The major change was the substitution of Colley Cibber for Lewis Theobald as the King of the Dunces. It was Pope's last published work. He was in critical physical health, and on May 30, 1744, Pope died in Twickenham.

## ANALYSIS

Pope has often been thought of only as a personal satirist, a small man in ill health, with a crooked back, spitting out vengeance on the world for his state of affairs. That famous epithet describing him as the "wicked wasp of Twickenham" is a part of the stereotyped image that he bears. Yet Pope is much more than that. The poetic activity in which he discovered the actual shape of his world and its ideal possibilities was the same as that in which he discovered his own feelings, values, and role as a poet within it. As one matured, so did the other.

From youth to adulthood, Pope was busy attempting a variety of poetry to ascertain where his strength lay. After his early Vergilian *Pastorals* in

1709, he wrote his well-known poem of criticism titled *An Essay on Criticism* in 1711, following the pattern of French poet Nicolas Boileau and that poet's concern for good poetry writing. Again Boileau and also Garth influenced him in writing another form, the mock epic, to be fulfilled eventually in *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope's *Windsor Forest* of 1713 is an attempt to continue the tradition established earlier by John Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1642), the poetry of landscape utilizing the pastoral motif. Moreover, *Eloisa to Abelard* and "Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" are best seen as imitations in part of Ovid's *Heroides* (before 8 C.E.; English translation, 1567).

An early poem, "Epistle to Miss Blount," shows how much he inherited from the seventeenth century and its Metaphysical wit. The poem's closest affinities are with Andrew Marvell. It demonstrates a light, teasing intimacy. In "Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," Pope draws on formal modes from the seventeenth century and tends to see himself as a poet in a corresponding way. Both these poems exhibit an attempt to make obvious to his society the meaning of order, reason, virtue, and decorum—those things accepted in Pope's time as indicative forms of civilized life.

Pope also attempts to clarify as central to his whole moral outlook the relationship between the chaotic forces of life and the conscious sense that he made of it. A good reminder is in *The Rape of the Lock*, when he points out that, although beauty must decay and locks will turn to gray, the woman who scorns a man will die a maid. In his *Eloisa to Abelard*, Pope heightens the romantic trappings of the mode to a positively sub-Miltonic degree; he seemingly exploits the Ovidian implications more fully than any Elizabethan except perhaps Shakespeare. He uses *Eloisa's* case as a means of reflecting the paradoxes and metamorphoses of love.

*Eloisa to Abelard* and "Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" were published in the first collected volume of his poems in 1717. This collection contains some of Pope's best work, including the revised version of *The Rape of the Lock*, *An Essay on Criticism*, and the musical versification of the *Pastorals*. Pope in later years made a distinction between these earlier "fanciful" poems and his mature work, in which he wrote of Truth. These early poems do indeed demonstrate a great deal of rococo fancy. This fancy is at its most luxuriant in portions

of *Windsor Forest*. In a passage such as the description of Old Father Thames rising from his oozy bed to hail the Peace of Utrecht, one sees Pope at his best with such fancy. In such writing, he was challenging two of the greatest predecessors of such poetry, Edmund Spenser and John Milton, with their river catalogs. Also, there is within the piece the long tradition of the court masque. It is in allegory an exceptionally elaborate compliment to Queen Anne and her efforts to bring the long war to an end.

Although Pope was triumphant in *Windsor Forest*, it is *The Rape of the Lock* that foreshadows more of his future successes. That rococo fancy is still at work as one sees the gilding of the brazen world of Hampton Court, but Pope "stoops to Truth" much more and shows the world as it is. This poem is as much a social satire as it is a personal satire of the family of the Fermors. Ladies at court shift the moving "Toyshop of their heart" and feel the same susceptibility to a stain upon their honor as to a stain upon a new brocade; it is a world where "wretches hang so that Jurymen may dine"; and it is a world wherein Pope can show which things lost on earth are treasured in the "Lunar sphere." In this poem, one finds Pope's first considered view of the world about him. As he moralizes his satire, the reader is reminded of Sarpedon's address to Glaucus from the *Iliad*, which is placed in the mouth of the serious Clarissa, with her attention to beauty decaying, while recognizing that decay is simply a natural part of life to be accepted as reality.

After ten years of translating and editing and making his true fortune, Pope's sympathy with the world evaporated. The reasons for his growing bitterness are not fully clear. Some like to argue that it was his growing physical pain resulting from his tubercular disease, causing him to give up his love of visiting the coffee houses and engaging in lively conversation. Some suggest that it was primarily attributable to the stress of fighting with the dunces, added to his growing friendship with Swift at this time. Whatever the reasons, Pope began to survey the world as one with ever-growing corruption.

He first observes this corruption in the version of *The Dunciad* published in 1728. Many view *The Dunciad* as simply a settling of old scores with enemies, yet the poem in its various stages is much more than that. It is the deterioration of society, from his point of view, that is at the heart of the se-

ries. He makes the reader aware of the gradual deterioration of standards, but he sees that same deterioration in other arts, too. The prophecy that he had allowed Old Father Thames to make in *Windsor Forest* about a new age of architectural splendor did not come true. Many churches and palaces were being left undone and untouched and lavish spending was occurring in the wrong places. From the misuse of money by those who could show only their lack of taste, Pope proceeded to a more general survey of the standards of the moneyed classes in a series of *Moral Essays* (1731-1735), of which the *Epistle to Burlington* was the first to be published.

Pope was not necessarily a systematic thinker. Scraps of Platonism, Deism, optimism, positivism, and Epicureanism provide a host of negative treatment from professional philosophers. Yet even these allow the value of his moral intuitions. Among his moralistic concerns is his advice for happiness: Happiness is found in a serenity of mind, not a dependence on intellectual pursuits, or the prospect of fame, and certainly not on a dependence on money. These are not new bits of advice, but in Pope's day readers did not resent being told the same things over again, so long as they were true and were told with fresh convictions. Therefore, Pope presents the commonplace in an uncommon way. It is a characteristic of Pope that he usually saw the good and the bad. The strong antipathy of good to bad he explains in the *Epilogue to the Satires* (1738) as the provocation of his satire. It pleases him to represent two conflicting sets of values: the Roman simplicity of his secluded home at Twickenham, where virtue ruled, versus the luxury and deceitfulness of city and court life.

To accomplish his purpose with such a subject, he found that imitation of Horace's epistles and satires was more effective than continuing his *Moral Essays*. In this new series of 1733-1737, the words of Horace are translated and applied to modern conditions in Pope's fight against modern conditions and corruption. His best poem in this series in accomplishing his purpose of showing moral and political contrast between two sets of values is his *Imitation of the First Epistle of the First Book of Horace*, addressed to Bolingbroke, the unofficial leader of the political opposition. The new Whig financiers were gaining control of trusts and charities, with purchasing of favors on the rise. In denouncing the political situation, Pope could also

universally denounce this condition that promotes corruption in general. However, Pope does not allow his poem to settle in total darkness. He provides the reader with righteous men as examples, also. They are to be found in the ranks of the Parliamentary opposition, the Tories. If the reader has been disgusted with the examples of meanness and depravity, he or she can find the worthy Cornbury; if the reader thinks that the spirit of patriotism is dead, he or she can find Lyttelton pursuing it; if the reader is appalled at greedy and grasping politicians, he or she can turn to St. John, Wyndham, and Marchmont, who dare to love their country and "be poor."

Pope's epigrammatic style is one of many things often noted, some saying that he is still the second most-quoted English writer, Shakespeare being the first. Although the style is found in much of his work, he seems to have found a home for it in *The Dunciad*. The final work has many couplets or pairs of couplets that appear to have been modeled independently of their context. Such lines, of course, live separately as epigrams. *The Dunciad* is more than that, of course; it is remarkable also for its grandeur of extended passages and for its wit and imagery. One especially notable section is the celebration of the final triumph of Dulness. Another splendid passage is the book 3 burlesque of Aeneas being guided by the Sibyl into Hades. In the journey, the reader sees dunce after dunce slaughtered. Some have compared Pope's dealing with his enemies in *The Dunciad* with the oyster forming the pearl. It is built out of the ugly, the trivial, and the commonplace, but the result is the sublime.

## AN ESSAY ON CRITICISM

**First published:** 1711

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this work, Pope indicts false critics, demonstrates why they are false, and then shows what good critics are like.*

*An Essay on Criticism* was published when Pope was relatively young. The work remains, however, one of the best-known commentaries on literary criticism. Although the work treats literary criticism in particular and thus relies heavily upon an-

cient authors as type masters, Pope still extends this criticism to general judgment about all walks of life. He demonstrates that true genius and judgment are innate gifts of heaven; at the same time, he argues, many possess the seeds of these gifts, such that with proper training they can be developed. His organization takes on a very simple structure: the general qualities of a critic; the particular laws by which he judges a work; and the ideal character of a critic.

Part 1 begins with Pope's heavy indictment of false critics. In doing so, he suggests that critics often are partial to their own judgment, judgment deriving, of course, from nature, like that of the poet's genius. Nature provides everyone with some taste, which may in the end help the critic to judge properly. Therefore, the first job of the critic is to know himself or herself, his or her own judgments, his or her own tastes and abilities.

The second task of the critic is to know nature. Nature, to Pope, is a universal force, an ideal sought by critic and poet alike, an ideal that must be discovered by the critic through a careful balance of wit and judgment, of imaginative invention and deliberate reason. The rules of literary criticism may best be located in those works that have stood the test of time and universal acceptance: namely, the works of antiquity. Pope points out that, in times past, critics restricted themselves to discovering rules in classical literature, whereas in his contemporary scene critics are straying from such principles. Moderns, he declares, seem to make their own rules, which are pedantic, unimaginative, and basely critical of literature. Pope does admit that certain beauties of art cannot be learned by rules, intangible beauties that must be found in an individual way by true masters, but he goes on to warn readers that few moderns are able to acquire such tastes, especially those who exceed their grasp too quickly.

Part 2 traces the causes hindering good judgment. The reader is advised to avoid the dangers of blindness caused by pride by learning his or her own defects and by profiting even from the strictures

of his or her enemies. Inadequate learning is another reason critics err; critics who look too closely at the parts of a poem may find themselves preferring a poem dull as a whole yet perfect in parts, to one imperfect in part but pleasing as a whole. What Pope seeks is the unity of the many small parts into one whole, the latter being the more important. According to Pope, some critics err in loving parts only; others confine their attention to conceits, images, or metaphors. Still others praise style and language too highly without respect to content. The true critic generally abides by rules of tolerance from extremes of fashion and personal taste. Pope advises that the true critic will not be a patron of a special interest group. He even admits that moderns may have a contribution to make, along with the ancients. Above all, critics should not err by being subjective. The true critic must put aside personal motives and praise according to less personal criteria.

Finally, part 3 outlines the ideal character of a critic. It lists rules for manners and contrasts the ideal critic with the bad poet and the erring critic. This part concludes with a brief summary of literary criticism and the character of the best critics. It is not enough for critics to know; they must also share the qualities of good people. Integrity stands at the top of the list of qualities of a good critic. Modesty, tact, and courage are necessary for a true critic. Pedantry and impertinence are not part of a critic with integrity. The learned fool rushes in "where angels fear to tread." Having outlined the characteristics of true critics, Pope then in classic fashion catalogs the most famous critics of Greece and Rome: Aristotle, Horace, Dionysius, Quintilian, and Longinus. In closing the work, Pope reminds the reader that at the fall of Rome, most good criticism stopped. Erasmus revived it in the early Renaissance and Nicolas Boileau of France advanced it more in Europe. Thus, says, Pope, one must return to the "juster ancient cause." With *An Essay on Criticism*, the neoclassic world of Pope has a helpmeet.

## THE RAPE OF THE LOCK

**First published:** 1712, expanded 1714

**Type of work:** Poem

*This is a wonderful mock epic poem poking fun at not only the Fermor family and its foibles but also those of humankind.*

*The Rape of the Lock* was written by Pope to chide gently the Fermor family when Lord Petre cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair on a certain fateful day and such dire results followed. Pope started something that resulted in a piece of literature that has remained to this day a leading example of the mock epic satire. John Caryl, a good friend to Pope, asked him to write a little poem about the affair in order to help heal the wounds of the two families. The poem became a trivial story of the stolen lock of hair as a vehicle for making some thoroughly mature and sophisticated comments on society and humankind. Pope draws on his own experience in the classics in combining epic literary conventions with his own wit and sense of values. The entire poem is written in five cantos, making use of the popular rhymed iambic pentameter verse, along with balance, antithesis, bathos, and paranomasia.

The story is relatively simple. In canto 1, the reader finds Belinda (representing Miss Fermor) asleep but awakened about noon by her lapdog Shock. Before she awakens, she dreams about Ariel, a Rosicrucian sylph, who whispers praises in her ear and warns her to beware of jealousy, pride, and especially men. When she does awaken, she finds a love letter on her bed and, after reading it, quickly forgets all the advice that Ariel has given her. She has been invited to sail up the Thames with friends to Hampton Court palace and have fun and games with her host. She devotes much time to her cosmetics and hair in preparation for the trip.

Lord Petre, a suitor, is seen admiring a lock of her hair and vowing that he would have it by any means. The modern reader must remember that, until the 1920's, few women of character would cut their hair, an act symbolizing the loss of virtue, even chastity. The reader next sees the crew sailing up the Thames, with everyone but Ariel apparently

pleased with the state of affairs. Worried, Ariel summons his helper sylphs and reminds them of their duty in helping to protect Belinda, one especially to guard her fan, one her watch, another her lock, and Ariel himself her dog. A host of sylphs are assigned to guard her petticoat, a literal device of armor in older times, protecting the female's sexual chastity.

After the cruise on the Thames, canto 3 sees Belinda, the Baron (representing Lord Petre), and the rest of the party arriving at the palace. There Belinda decides to play a Spanish card game called Ombre with two of her suitors. During the game, coffee, recently introduced into England by Queen Anne in order to help with the alcohol problem, is served, and fumes from the hot liquid open the rational mind of the Baron, providing him with new stratagems. With the help of a female crony named Clarissa, he manages to cut off the lock of Belinda's hair during the card game. At this rape, Belinda cries out in horror, and the Baron cries out in triumph. Ariel weeps bitterly because he was not able to prevent the deed.

In canto 4, a bad sylph named Umbriel takes advantage of the chaos and chooses to increase the woes by flying down to the Cave of Spleen to get more woes to dump onto Belinda. With his trusty key, "Spleenwort," in his hand, he enters and secures from the queen of Spleen a bag of horrible noises and a vial of tears, sorrows, and griefs. One of Belinda's friends, Thalestris, demonstrates "fair weather friendship" when she announces that everyone is talking about the rape of the lock and that she is afraid that she, too, will be branded as "loose." Thalestris attempts to get her brother Sir Plume to demand that the lock be returned. Sir Plume is unsuccessful.

Canto 5 shows Umbriel casting the vial of woes upon Belinda so that she is almost drowned in tears. She longs for simple, country life. Clarissa, the one who helped the Baron earlier in his successful venture, gives an interesting moral sermonette about vanity and age and the need of women to use good sense in the battle of the sexes. Soon a battle of teacups ensues, disturbed by the Baron's sneezing from the snuff that he is using; this causes the lock to fly high into the air, never to be rescued. Some think that the lock has gone to the moon, where love letters and other love tokens find themselves eventually, but others think that the lock became a star.



The poem is a wonderful example of burlesque, a form that takes trivial subjects and treats them seriously, with the effect being comic. Many epic conventions are used here: the epic question is asked; Belinda's toilet becomes the epic putting on of armor; there is the conference of protective gods; there are the games and the banquet; there is the descent into the underworld; and there are heroic encounters and apotheosis. The poem deals with an actual event and thus pokes fun at the two families, but more than that it shows the vanities of humankind. In doing so, much social satire of the fads of the day are presented. The conclusion shows that eighteenth century reason is strongly advocated; whatever one thinks of Clarissa's early actions in the poem, it is difficult to ignore her advice near the end, advice that advocates the use of reason in all matters of life.

## THE DUNCIAD

**First published:** 1728-1743

**Type of work:** Poem

*This satirical poem pokes fun at the authors of Pope's day who promote dull writing.*

*The Dunciad* was first published in three books anonymously, with the authorship finally acknowledged in 1735. The entire work was initiated by the poet laureate Lewis Theobald's reaction to Pope's edition of Shakespeare. The poem attacks Dulness in general, making Theobald its first hero. Eventually, all the authors of the day whom Pope disliked received attention. Individual invective, however, is extended to literary vices in general, in both the 1728 version and the later versions where Theobald is replaced as leading dunce by Colley Cibber.

The first book is organized into three parts. Part 1 describes the reign of Dulness. Part 2 consists of games in which poets, critics, and booksellers contend. The focus seems to be on the critics and their games, tests to decide if they can stay awake while certain material is read for them. Spectators and critics both fall asleep.

Book 3 has the king transported to the Elysian Fields, where he has visions of the past and future triumphs of the empire of Dulness and how they shall extend to the arts and sciences.

The general scheme of the poem shows Pope's reliance upon John Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* (1682) and upon classical models. It begins, in fact, with a parody of the *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553) in its invocation, directed to the patrons whose purses inspire the dull writing that will be attacked in the entire work. Pope describes in complete detail the abode of Dulness and shows her with various allegorical figures gathered round her throne, including Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, and Poetic Justice. Dulness looks out upon the ingredients of dull writing and its numerous creators. She soon finds a hero and anoints him king. The third book contains grandiose heroic couplets and numerous parallels with classical visits to the underworld. John Taylor represents Charon; Elkanah Settle takes Anchises' part as mentor and seer of the future. The highlight of this book is the crowning of the king with a poppy wreath by Bavius, the worse of the ancient poets, according to most critics.

In 1742, Pope published a new version of the book using Colley Cibber as the new chief dunce. It shows the subjugation of the arts and sciences to Dulness, the growth of indolence, the corruption of education, and the consummation of all of these in the restoration of darkness and chaos. The new version demonstrates a more mature outlook in the poet, in that the first of 1728 was much more vindictive. This version is far more concerned with institutions than with individuals, even though Cibber is the chief dunce. One finds Pope using more classical names than individual personal ones, so greater universality is ensured. Pope presents evil omens presaging the coming destruction as Dulness ascends her throne, where Science, Wit, Logic, Rhetoric, and other abstractions in chains rest around the queen. Various people come to testify to the victory of Dulness over the arts and sciences. The first to appear is a harlot, representing Italian opera. Boastful editors tear apart good poets, and a specter comes to comment about the condition of education. Hair-splitting grammarians are satirized; science and religion are also attacked, the latter becoming a mechanistic thing rather than something of spirit and meaning.

Readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have problems with this work because most of Pope's contemporary allusions are not intelligible. Even so, the poem is full of wonderful universal sa-

tirical comments on the conditions of society that seem never to die, thus making *The Dunciad* a poem worthy of the genre of the mock heroic.

### SUMMARY

Like other significant writers of his time, Alexander Pope's life revolved around the London literary scene and his wide circle of friends. Among his most important works are *An Essay on Criticism*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Dunciad*. Through his early fancy to his more mature universal satire, Pope created for his time a true reflection of society. He is firmly established as one of the truly outstanding poets of English literature.

John W. Crawford

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does Alexander Pope do in his rhymed couplets to make them so often outstanding?
- In *An Essay on Criticism* Pope defines "true wit" as "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." Is this a shallow definition?
- Discuss the effects of using a word like "rape" to describe a silly act in the poem *The Rape of the Lock*.
- Early in *An Essay on Man* Pope claims to "vindicate the ways of God to man," paraphrasing John Milton's "justify the ways of God to man" early in *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). How do you account for the enormous differences between the two works?
- To what extent would Pope have to alter *The Dunciad* to make it apply to society today?

MISCELLANEOUS:

*The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope, 1717-1741*

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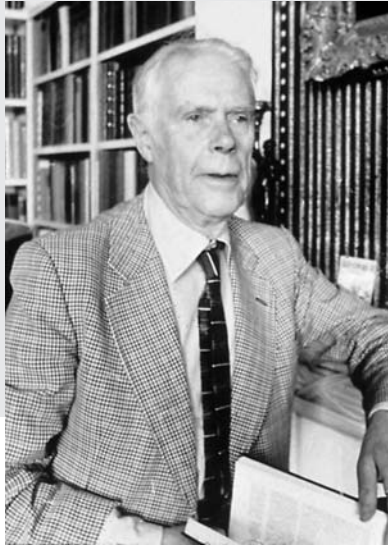
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## ANTHONY POWELL

**Born:** London, England  
December 21, 1905

**Died:** Frome, Somerset, England  
March 28, 2000

*While Powell's work as an author of independent novels, memoirs, plays, and biography has been much admired, it is his twelve-volume sequence novel, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, upon which his literary reputation rests.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anthony Dymoke Powell (AN-toh-nee pohl) was born in London, England, on December 21, 1905, the son of P. L. W. Powell and his wife, the former Maud Wells-Dymoke. Few novelists of manners have led lives so ideally suited to their art as Powell. Born in 1905 of, on his father's side, an old military family with its roots in Wales, and, on his mother's side, a line of prominent Lincolnshire landowners, Powell was educated at Eton from 1919 through 1923 and at Oxford's Balliol College, where he earned a B.A. in history in 1926. His experiences provided him with an insider's privileged view of the changes in middle- and upper-class English society since World War I. Because his father's duty in the army kept the family on the Continent after the war, Powell was also familiar with European society.

Various literary occupations, as well as travels, broadened Powell's view of society and provided settings for his fiction. After taking his degree, he entered publishing with Duckworth, the firm that published his first novel, *Afternoon Men* (1931). *Venusberg* (1932), his second novel, set in a fictional Baltic state, makes use of his knowledge of European manners. Powell deals with English provincial manners, particularly hunting, the aristocracy, unconventional military men, and artists with social ambition, in his next novel, *From a View to a Death* (1933).

Shortly after his marriage in 1934 to Lady Violet Pakenham, daughter of Brigadier the Fifth Earl of Longford, Powell left publishing to write film scripts for Warner Brothers of Great Britain. His satiric view of the film industry is reflected in *Agents and Patients* (1936). During the later 1930's, he contributed book reviews to the London *Daily Telegraph* and wrote *What's Become of Waring* (1939), a novel about a literary hoax. This novel, his last for twelve years, marked the end of Powell's apprenticeship as a writer.

Powell's fiction was interrupted by World War II. Commissioned in 1939 to a territorial battalion of the Welch Regiment, Powell served as an infantry second lieutenant for eighteen months. In 1941, he was transferred to the intelligence corps, where he acted as liaison officer between the War Office and Polish, Belgian, Czech, and French forces. By 1943, he was a major, and by the end of the war he had been decorated by the Czech and Belgian armies. On leaves from the war, Powell collected material for a definitive biography of the seventeenth century biographer and antiquarian John Aubrey, which was published as *John Aubrey and His Friends* (1948, 1963). Powell's first son, Tristram, was born shortly after his enlistment, and his second son, John, was born shortly after his discharge in 1946.

Powell returned to publishing fiction in 1951 with the release of *A Question of Upbringing*, the first novel of what was to become the twelve-volume sequence eventually entitled *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951-1975). The purpose of this monumental project was to draw on his entire life experience

in order to produce a work that included everything in English society that interested him. While the narrator of the series has nearly the same education, jobs, literary career, and military experience as his creator, the work should not be called autobiographical simply because it draws on its author's experience. His narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, like Powell himself, is more concerned with observing character and dramatizing the social and intellectual currents of his generation than revealing his personal life, as the traditional novelistic protagonist might.

Powell became chief review editor for *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1947. Six years later, he became the literary editor of the popular British humor magazine *Punch*, where his reviews and parodies appeared regularly until 1959, when he left to devote his literary energies entirely to *A Dance to the Music of Time*, as well as resuming regular reviewing for the *Daily Telegraph*. His reviews for this prominent, right-of-center British daily newspaper appeared biweekly. He also reviewed occasionally for *The New York Times*, as well as other British newspapers and magazines.

Powell's sequence was published entirely by one firm, Heinemann, in England and, after the fourth volume, was published by the Boston-based firm Little, Brown in the United States. Despite the quintessentially British aspects of his fiction, Powell's books sold basically as well in the United States as in Great Britain, and many American fans were among his most consistent correspondents.

With *Lady Violet*, Powell also continued to travel on the Continent and in the United States, which he had first visited in 1937 while searching for screenwriting work in Hollywood. In 1961, Powell lectured at a number of American universities, and in 1965 he returned to visit his youngest son, John, who was a student at Cornell University. He also published "*The Garden God*" and "*The Rest I'll Whistle*": *The Text of Two Plays* in 1971. These plays are comedies of manners; the plot of *The Garden God*, set on a cruise which visits a Greek island, anticipates the plot of his later novel *The Fisher King* (1986) in several respects, whereas *The Rest I'll Whistle* is set in the Welsh border country and provides a comic perspective on motifs borrowed from Greek tragedy.

Powell was sixty-nine when he finished *A Dance to the Music of Time*, a suitable age to produce a

memoir. His four-volume memoir, *To Keep the Ball Rolling* (1976-1982), recalls *A Dance to the Music of Time*, not only because it was issued in installments and covers the same period as his fictional masterpiece, but also because it, too, shifts back and forth in time and has almost as much to say about its narrator's friends as it does about its narrator.

In the 1980's, Powell returned to fiction with the publication of a novella titled *O, How the Wheel Becomes It!* (1983), which deals with the repercussions of a slight romantic liaison in the 1920's on a literary critic in the 1980's. *The Fisher King* is a much more complex and significant work of fiction set around 1979, but like *A Dance to the Music of Time*, its narration is extraordinarily subtle, and its narrative is entangled with past events, many of them simply speculative. Despite the richness of this novel and the cleverness of his five prewar novels, it is *A Dance to the Music of Time* that remains Powell's masterpiece.

Later in his life, Powell also won acclaim for his *Journals*, published from 1995 through 1997. Powell began keeping a journal in early 1982, when he was beginning to write *O, How The Wheel Becomes It!* After he completed writing *The Fisher King* in 1985, the journal became the major vehicle for his creative output. Three volumes of the journal were published, the last chronicling events up to the end of 1992. Often compared to the work of other celebrated British diarists, such as James Lees-Milne, Virginia Woolf, and Frances Partridge, the journals not only record invaluable information about Powell's friends, who included authors V. S. Naipaul and Alison Lurie, but significant details about the writer's literary sensibility and creative process.

## ANALYSIS

Powell is a very "British" writer. The characteristics of his fiction, its style and themes, are of a piece with the mainstream of the British novel of manners. Writing in this tradition stems from Henry Fielding and Jane Austen and includes William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Benjamin Disraeli, William Hurrell Mallock, and Ford Madox Ford. Among Powell's contemporaries, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Barbara Pym, and Kingsley Amis are all of this tradition. What all of these novelists have in common is their concern for the social customs and mores of a special group—generally, but not always, drawn



from the upper classes—and a commitment to realistic narrative techniques. More particularly, Powell has drawn on the ironic techniques of Austen, Ford, Huxley, and Waugh. He shares with the first two a concern with the formal qualities of composition, especially the subordination of parts to the whole—the whole being the exploration of the relationships between the characters and their relationship to society. Powell's novels, particularly his first five, reflect many of the same character types, settings, and stylistic mannerisms of Huxley and Waugh. Like all of these writers, Powell dramatizes social values through his attention to manners.

The analytic style and complex structure of *A Dance to the Music of Time* grew from the spare, unobtrusive style and brief cinematic scenes of Powell's first novel, *Afternoon Men*. With each successive prewar novel, Powell increased his narrative commentary and cut his dialogue, lengthened his scenes and reduced their number. These developments reflect a shift from an almost purely dramatic to a more reflective approach to fiction. The aimless social world of his early novels is dramatized in witty, empty dialogue and frequently shifting, but never changing, party scenes. In these novels, Powell expresses his view of social life through a montage of futile gestures toward friendship, love, and personal identity. Powell describes the same society in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, but in this work he concentrates his narrator's attention on a few long scenes. The social implications of these scenes are reflected in the narrator's reactions, and are frequently reconsidered from the perspective of a different time and social context in a later volume.

The most significant technical development of Powell's fiction is in point of view. The short chapters of his first two novels are linked by the presence of their central character in every scene. Powell relaxes his grip on this device in his next two novels, which have a few omnisciently narrated chapters and a point of view that occasionally shifts from the central character to other characters. His last prewar novel, *What's Become of Waring*, is narrated in the first person with no loss of detachment or objectivity. Unlike its predecessors, *What's Become of Waring* does not describe a vivid social scene; so involved is its unnamed narrator in uncovering his own and Waring's identity that he rarely looks

up long enough to notice his social milieu. In *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Powell has enough room to develop the first-person point of view into a subtle means of dramatizing the shifting identity of an entire society.

The characters in Powell's early novels tend to be one dimensional, their traits highly selective and consistent. With a line or two of introduction, Powell fixes them in the reader's imagination. While more of their character may be revealed, particularly in their dialogue, they do not develop. Yet with each succeeding novel, Powell's characterizations become fuller.

All the early novels treat aspects of social themes that Powell continued to explore throughout his long literary career: the unexpected interrelatedness of lives, the change of values in a disintegrating society, the ironic interplay of human involvement and detachment, and the relationship of power and character. Yet not until Powell turned to *A Dance to the Music of Time* did he have a form large enough to deal with the passage of time—the essential element in his treatment of the personal impact of social change.

Despite their differences, each of the five novels that Powell published during the 1930's anticipates some theme or technique of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. The qualities most admired in Powell's mature work—his restraint, his wit, his understanding of English society—are all found in varying degrees of development in his early work. The major themes of the early novels—the shifts in behavior among Britain's upper classes, the loss of illusions, and the difficulty of sustaining meaningful relationships—are continued in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, where ideals and traditions worth defending vie with the pragmatic values of commerce and the professions.

Structurally, all Powell's prewar novels prefigure his later "dance." Each novel ends about where it begins, its circular construction reinforcing the futility and resignation underlying the action. Moreover, having traveled a full but futile circle, Powell's characters rarely understand what they have done, what has happened to them, or where their gyrations have led them. In the early novels, experience is no teacher, and the reader is left with a lingering sense of the inexorable fatality of character, only partially obscured by Powell's comic surface. In *A Dance to the Music of Time*, this pervasive interplay of

form and content is most powerfully expressed in the title's shaping metaphor, an allegorical painting by the French artist Nicolas Poussin of the Four Seasons dancing in a circle to Time's flute, "unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the . . . dance."

The sprawling structure of *A Dance to the Music of Time* owes its coherence to Powell's narrative point of view. His narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, whose experience links the diverse threads of the sequence, looks on life as a dance in which people appear and reappear, with various combinations of partners, moved by the changing tunes of time. Through his expanding awareness of the patterns revealed in "the seemingly meaningless gyrations" of the people whom he knows, Jenkins attempts to make sense of his society and the lives of his friends, including the melancholy Charles Stringham, the vigorous and hearty Peter Tampler, and the most memorable character in the sequence, the loathsome and opportunistic Kenneth Widmerpool, one of the great villains in English literature.

The style, theme, and structure of the entire sequence is suggested in the opening passage of its first novel, where a middle-aged Jenkins watches a group of street workers warming themselves around a small coal fire in a bucket on a snowy morning. This evocative passage (from which the short quotations used in the previous two paragraphs have been drawn) is echoed in the last sentence of the sequence's last novel, where another autumn fire again recalls "the formal measure of the Seasons. . . . suspended in the wintry silence." The workmen's movements around their fire in the opening scene remind the aesthetic Jenkins of Poussin's mythological scene of the rhythmic movement of Seasons, and then of his own experience of the movements of men in society:

The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance.

The slow rhythm of this remarkable sentence is characteristic of the sequence's stunning reflective passages. Like the lives of Jenkins's friends and the changes in their society, such sentences rise and fall, weave and interweave. Like the concept of the sequence itself, moreover, these reflective sentences tend to be long, involuted, qualified by parentheses and haunted by afterthoughts. Finally, they are utterly appropriate to the subject of Powell's vast canvas, a kinetic portrait of his generation drawn from the experience of five decades of social change.

## A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME

**First published:** *A Question of Upbringing*, 1951; *A Buyer's Market*, 1952; *The Acceptance World*, 1955; *At Lady Molly's*, 1957; *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, 1960; *The Kindly Ones*, 1962; *The Valley of Bones*, 1964; *The Soldier's Art*, 1966; *The Military Philosophers*, 1968; *Books Do Furnish a Room*, 1971; *Temporary Kings*, 1973; *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, 1975

**Type of work:** Sequence novel

*Fifty years of social change among Britain's upper classes are reflected in the recollections of Nicholas Jenkins, an urbane, self-effacing literary man.*

The twelve volumes of *A Dance to the Music of Time* are usually grouped into four "movements" of three novels each. The first novel of the first movement, *A Question of Upbringing*, covers its narrator's years at school and at the university (Eton and Oxford, in the early 1920's, although Powell gives them no name). The action shifts to the social life of London in the late 1920's in *A Buyer's Market*, and *The Acceptance World* concludes the movement with a school reunion in the early 1930's. Each movement and novel are, in their own way, independent fragments of the whole sequence, but as the sequence develops, the novels certainly become less meaningful for readers unfamiliar with characters and events arising in earlier volumes.

Typically, the novels that constitute *A Dance to the*

*Music of Time* consist of about four fifty-page episodes interspersed and sandwiched by page-long reflective passages, such as the one that opens the sequence. These episodes, with their attendant reflections, generally revolve around a small group of characters and a single action, usually a party or an outing. The last novel of each three-novel movement usually serves as a kind of climax for the sequence to that point. The school reunion and its immediate consequences, which conclude *The Acceptance World*, draw to a thematic close the various matters of upbringing and initiation into adult society that have concerned all three novels of the first movement. *The Kindly Ones*, the sixth novel in the sequence and the final novel of the second movement, cuts across the whole period of the first half of the sequence. It begins with a flashback to Nicholas Jenkins's childhood at the outbreak of World War I and ends with England's entrance into World War II, chronologically bracketing the entire first half of the sequence.

The first three novels cover Jenkins's life from age fourteen to about twenty-five, but readers learn less about him than about his school friends, Charles Stringham, Peter Templer, and Kenneth Widmerpool. Stringham and Templer, like the narrator, are sons of upper- or upper-middle-class families, although only Stringham has any links to the actual "aristocracy." Widmerpool, the son of a Nottinghamshire liquid fertilizer dealer, is an outsider who is viewed as a humorless misfit at school, always training to run races in which he invariably loses. Throughout the sequence, Widmerpool cuts a ridiculous figure, but by the end of the first movement, Jenkins sees that others take the stolid, self-important, and strong-willed misfit seriously. During the intervals of time between Jenkins's meetings with him after leaving school, Widmerpool becomes increasingly accepted in powerful business and political circles. Because their relationship is friendly but not intimate, their meetings are infrequent and usually coincidental. Yet these "Widmerpool scenes" are not only among the most comic in the sequence, but they also advance Powell's social theme. With each encounter, Jenkins grows less and less inclined to trust his snobbish public school view of society, which led to his misreading not only Widmerpool but also, to a lesser degree, Templer and Stringham, for whom success in the world seemed assured when Jenkins knew

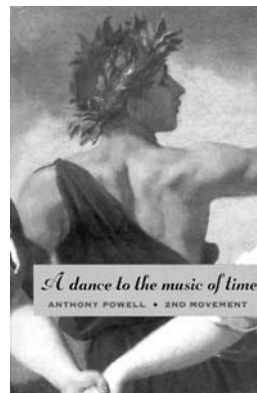
them at school. Templer, whose main interests are business and women, fails with both. The charming and even better-connected Stringham seems destined for a brilliant career in anything that attracts him, but his interests are unfocused, and his talents are dissipated by alcohol, family troubles, and aimless distractions. He fails at everything, but with grace, good humor, and modest detachment. Widmerpool's successes are accompanied by none of these endearing qualities.

By the end of the first movement, Powell's narrator has lost most of his early illusions about upbringing, character, and success in a world that he discovers is changing more rapidly than establishment attitudes are able to comprehend, let alone control. Jenkins's preoccupation with the loss of illusions is an even more pervasive theme in Powell's second group of three novels—*At Lady Molly's*, *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, and *The Kindly Ones*—covering the ominous years between 1934 and 1939, through the Depression to the edge of World War II. As Jenkins observes in the first chapter of *At Lady Molly's*, these are "times when the ice floes of life's river are breaking up . . . to float down-stream, before the torrent freezes again in due course into new and deceptively durable shape."

The fluidity of these times is suggested by the techniques, especially structural, of *At Lady Molly's*. The action is concentrated into a few months of 1935, but there is no sustained focus on any of the major characters. The title, as well as the

tone, of the novel derives from Lady Molly Jeavons's household, the setting of many socially heterogeneous gatherings. There, Jenkins meets or hears about the two dozen or so new characters (largely friends and relatives of his friends and their relatives from the first movement) who will figure in the novels of this movement. Lady Molly represents the idiosyncratic mixture of several

strains of English social life. Once the wife of a lord, she has been reduced since the end of World War I and the death of her husband to the disorderly life of her perpetual open houses.



The cultural confusion of English society between the wars is further suggested by the title of the second novel in this movement, *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, which deals less with professional and high society than with the troubled domestic lives of Jenkins's artist and musician friends. Tangled love affairs and intolerable domestic lives dog Powell's men of the imagination more than they do his men of power, for whom failures with women represent no serious setback in their plan of life. Throughout *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Powell uses the instability of domestic arrangements to suggest the dissolution of society.

With *The Kindly Ones*, a novel suffused with the ominous and heedless atmosphere of England at the brink of World War I and then World War II, Powell concludes the second movement and his account of English social life in the 1920's and 1930's. *The Kindly Ones* contains the only flashback in the sequence, its first section concentrating on the young Jenkins's boyhood on the verge of World War I. Hardly noticeable, because they are so completely integrated into the scenic structure of the novel, are Jenkins's reflective passages, which move allusively backward and forward in time, enlarging and enriching the significant context of each scene. The title of this novel refers to a euphemism for the vengeful Furies of Greek mythology, who were sometimes called "the kindly ones" in the vain hope that they would indeed behave this way. Powell's point, and the theme of his novel, is the intrusion of war into a peacetime society and how military conflict necessarily changes the lives and values of societies engaged in their own self-defense.

In the third movement, to which Powell refers as "the war trilogy," Widmerpool has risen to the rank of colonel and, from his position as the military assistant secretary to the Cabinet Office, is indirectly responsible for sending Templer to his death on a secret mission behind enemy lines in the German-occupied Balkans. Widmerpool is also responsible for having Stringham, who enlists as a private and is assigned as a mess waiter, reassigned to a mobile laundry in Singapore. Here, he is captured by the Japanese and dies as a prisoner of war. Early in the third movement, Widmerpool selects Jenkins, as the best of an unpromising lot of new officers available to him, to act as his junior assistant. By the movement's end, many of Jenkins's friends have been killed in the war, but Widmerpool appears to

thrive on the opportunities of the war years and is untouched for long by any considerations except power.

The action of *The Valley of Bones*, the first volume of the war movement, takes place during the period known as "the phony war"—the early part of 1940, after England had declared war on Germany but before any fighting involving British troops had begun. Jenkins, now a thirty-five-year-old second lieutenant, is in training, first in Wales, then in Northern Ireland, then back in England. A new set of characters is introduced in the first two chapters, nearly all of them former Welsh bank clerks who are now army officers. Considerably younger than Jenkins, and his social inferiors besides, these former bank clerks are his military superiors.

The fighting is still far away, and life for the officers and men of Jenkins's company is largely involved with routine details made bearable by prospects of promotion. The contrast of the catastrophic events in Europe with the boredom, the self-important posturing, and the antagonisms of petty ambitions provides natural material for the social novelist. This scrambling for position also serves Jenkins with a meaningful link between civilian and military life; in both worlds, men of will, such as Widmerpool, triumph over men of imagination, such as Stringham or Jenkins.

Only one of the four chapters in *The Valley of Bones* is concerned with life outside the army, but with techniques developed in the earlier movements, Powell keeps the reader informed of the condition of nearly all the major characters. A chance encounter with a character last seen in *A Question of Upbringing* brings news of Templer and other friends, and various guests at a house party supply information from their own spheres. Such coincidental encounters, more than any other technique in the entire sequence, reveal the cohesive pattern of relationships underlying upper-class life in spite of the general social breakdown.

*The Soldier's Art*, the second novel of the war movement, covers events between the German occupation of Paris in June, 1940, and the invasion of Russia a year later. Two of its three long chapters deal with Jenkins's continuing problems in the home army, while the other, set in London, reflects the war's impact on English society. People very significant to Jenkins are killed by a German air raid over London.



The last vestiges of the old order of Jenkins's society fall to the exigencies of war in *The Military Philosophers*, a chaotic state of affairs reflected even in the structure of the novel. More fragmented than either of the volumes that closed the earlier movements, this novel provides an appropriate close to the war trilogy. *The Military Philosophers* covers the years from 1942 to the end of the war in Europe, a period of momentous events for the world, including the massacre in the Katyn Forest of Polish officers by a Soviet Union that later became England's ally in the struggle against Nazi Germany. For Jenkins, however, now serving as a liaison officer to various Allied armies in exile, these events, like most of the events reported in the sequence, are experienced at secondhand. Overriding the military conflicts and squabbles among the military attachés with whom Jenkins works is sex—throughout the sequence, the most formidable disturber of the peace. Nothing short of death (and death punctuates nearly every episode of this movement) affects the patterns of Powell's dance as much as romantic entanglements. Among the new characters introduced in *The Military Philosophers* is Pamela Flitton, Stringham's niece, whose constantly redirected romantic attentions wreck havoc wherever she goes, and in this novel she does get around. Considered individually, her romantic attachments mean almost nothing, but in the aggregate they suggest a kind of social upheaval. Her engagement to Widmerpool is announced in the last chapter of the novel.

The final movement of *A Dance to the Music of Time* looks at postwar society in England from 1945 to 1971, largely from the perspective of the literary scene. Jenkins has returned to his own modest literary career, and as the first novel of the final movement opens, he is at his old university, conducting research for a book on Robert Burton, the seventeenth century antiquarian and author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Later, Jenkins is to become the book review editor of a new left-wing literary magazine, *Fission*. For the most part, however, Jenkins is less directly involved in the action of this movement than in any previous one. In earlier parts of the sequence, he has been more often witness than participant, but in these final three novels Jenkins is less witness than listener. Presumably, his own life comprises his work as a writer and the satisfactions of a happy home life, punctuated with

occasional appearances at parties, reunions, weddings, and funerals. These occasions allow Powell to draw together characters from earlier novels that have news of yet other characters, but readers hear little about Jenkins himself. By the final movement, except for a few key scenes, Jenkins relies on the accounts of others. Even when he is present in the scenes that he describes, it is more than ever as a disengaged spectator.

While characters from the earlier part of the sequence are more often heard about than seen, a number of interesting new characters become central in the final movement. So important are these new characters that readers unfamiliar with the previous nine volumes might be able to enjoy the last three independently without much confusion. These last novels are also among the most traditionally plotted for the sequence, each of them having a more distinct beginning, middle, and end than is usual for Powell.

*Books Do Furnish a Room* is set in and around London, although it opens at Oxford during the winter of 1945 and closes at Jenkins's old school in the fall of 1947. The most important new character is the flamboyantly self-dramatizing novelist X. Trapnel, who Jenkins meets and likes through his work on *Fission*. Trapnel falls in love with Widmerpool's femme fatale wife, Pamela, runs off with her, and suffers the fate of most of the men who have loved her. Only Widmerpool, now a Labour member of Parliament in the House of Commons and utterly confident that Pamela will return, seems unaffected by this fascinating, but extremely disturbed, woman. After an argument over the conclusion of a novel that Trapnel has completed, she throws the manuscript into a canal and leaves Trapnel. Crushed, he becomes a drunkard, turns to hack work, and within five years is dead.

The first and second chapters of *Temporary Kings* are set in Venice, where Jenkins and a number of his acquaintances are attending an international writers conference during the summer of 1958, eleven years after the close of *Books Do Furnish a Room*. The next two chapters take place at gatherings in various fine homes in England over the next year, and the brief final chapter is composed of Jenkins's recollections of events during the autumn of 1959. The novel introduces two attractive American characters, Russell Gwinnett and Louis Globber. Gwinnett is a professor doing research for



a biography of Trapnel, and Globber is a publisher, playboy, and, latterly, a film producer. Globber plans to transform Pamela's version of Trapnel's lost novel into a film starring Pamela herself. He is, of course, smitten by her, but Pamela develops a consuming passion for Gwinnett and dies consummating it. Meanwhile, Widmerpool has been elevated to the House of Lords for service to the Labour Party after losing his seat in the House of Commons in the Tory victory of 1955. In the final chapter, he is under suspicion for espionage or treason. Of all the novels in the sequence, none has a more dramatic plot than *Temporary Kings*. That is particularly remarkable because almost none of its crucial episodes have been witnessed by the narrator; nearly all the events are reported indirectly, some of them filtered through several layers of hearsay.

*Hearing Secret Harmonies*, the concluding novel of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, skips yet another decade to 1968 and then to the autumn of 1971. Again, most of its events (the psychedelic world of hippie cults and rioting college students) are related at secondhand to Jenkins, who has fallen even further from direct involvement in the narrative. Widmerpool reappears first as a chancellor of a new university and then as a supporting member of a hippie commune. He dies as absurdly as he has lived, collapsing while attempting to stay in the lead of a naked jog with his commune. His death recalls his first appearance in *A Question of Upbringing*, puffing out of the mist as he trains for races that no one believed he could win.

## TO KEEP THE BALL ROLLING

**First published:** *Infants of the Spring*, 1976; *Messengers of Day*, 1978; *Faces in My Time*, 1980; *The Strangers All Are Gone*, 1982

**Type of work:** Memoirs

*Powell's memoirs provide a nonfictional equivalent to the material he covered in fictional terms in A Dance to the Music of Time.*

Powell's memoirs were published in individual installments from 1976 through 1982; a one-volume abridged edition, *To Keep the Ball Rolling*,

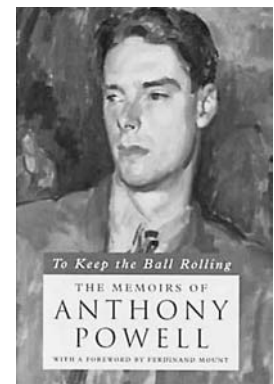
appeared in 1984. Powell prepared the abridged edition himself.

The first volume, *Infants of the Spring*, chronicles Powell's ancestry on both sides of his family, his immediate forebears, and his childhood and youth. Memories of several prominent classmates at school and the university, including the writers Henry Green, Harold Acton, and George Orwell, are prominently featured.

In the second volume of the memoirs, *Messengers of Day*, Powell describes his early years on the London writing and publishing scene, providing vivid details of his brief residence in the bohemian London district of Shepherd's Market. Sections are also devoted to Powell's longtime friend, peer, and rival, Evelyn Waugh; to his close friendship with the composer Constant Lambert (the model for the character of Hugh Moreland in *A Dance to the Music of Time*); and to a detailing of the key books, ranging from the works of Petronius to those of more modern writers, such as Marcel Proust and Fyodor Dostoevski, which influenced Powell throughout his career.

The third volume, *Faces in My Time*, covers Powell's marriage to Lady Violet and his military service. He also records his literary friendships with writers as diverse as F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom he met while seeking out work as a scriptwriter in Hollywood, and T. S. Eliot, whom he encountered at a seaside resort and liked despite not totally identifying with his literary and religious views.

The final volume, *The Strangers All Are Gone*, records Powell's move, with his family, to a house called The Chantry near the market town of Frome in Somerset, in England's West Country. It also records Powell's extensive travels, which included trips to India, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand. In addition, Powell provides his opinions about William Shakespeare, from whose work derives the titles of the four individual memoirs; the title of the one-book abridged version is from Joseph Conrad. Powell argues that Shake-



spere's sonnets revealed a real homosexual passion for a biographical individual. He closes with a quote from the artist Michelangelo, who compared art to a snowman, saying that art "is sometimes worth making, even if it is, inevitably, temporary."

Powell's memoirs, like his novels, are more about other people than himself; he was not prone to self-revelation. They thus lack the deep introspection of the best autobiographies, nor are they replete with scandalous literary gossip. Nonetheless, their very self-effacement allows them to serve not only as a functional social history of twentieth century Britain but as a window upon the literary mind—how it works and how it operates based on a writer's specific experiences.

## SUMMARY

While there is no general aesthetic of the sequence novel or *roman-fleuve* (a multivolume work of fiction chronicling the history of a family or social group), writers who work in this form are usually attempting a more comprehensive picture of character and society over longer periods of time than can be attained in a single novel. To accommodate the range of his social vision and narrative genius, Anthony Powell needed a more expansive form than that provided by his pre-World War II fiction. Even though his five prewar novels and the two independent novels published after *A Dance to the Music of Time* are interesting in themselves, the essence of Powell's art is expressed in the panoramic view of society developed with his twelve-volume sequence novel.

Dan McLeod; updated by Nicholas Birns

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*From a View to a Death*, 1933

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*O, How the Wheel Becomes It!*, 1983

*The Fisher King*, 1986

#### LONG FICTION (*A DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF TIME*):

*A Question of Upbringing*, 1951

*A Buyer's Market*, 1952

*The Acceptance World*, 1955

*At Lady Molly's*, 1957

*Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, 1960

*The Kindly Ones*, 1962

*The Valley of Bones*, 1964

*The Soldier's Art*, 1966

*The Military Philosophers*, 1968

*Books Do Furnish a Room*, 1971

*Temporary Kings*, 1973

*Hearing Secret Harmonies*, 1975

#### POETRY:

*Caledonia: A Fragment*, 1934

DRAMA:

*"The Garden God" and "The Rest I'll Whistle": The Text of Two Plays*, pb. 1971

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did Anthony Powell's choice of the sequence form make *A Dance to the Music of Time* different from his prewar novels?
- Describe the personalities of the characters Charles Stringham, Peter Templer, and Kenneth Widmerpool.
- What role does Powell's artistic vision play in his depiction of British society?
- How does Powell's narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, differ from the conventional novelistic protagonist?
- What effect did World War II have on Powell's career?



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## J. B. PRIESTLEY

**Born:** Bradford, Yorkshire, England  
September 13, 1894

**Died:** Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England  
August 14, 1984

*One of England's most prolific and versatile writers, Priestley wrote essays, novels, and dramas, first to entertain and second to address the social and political issues of his day.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Boynton Priestley was born at home in Bradford, England, on September 13, 1894, the son of solid, loving, working-class parents, Johnathan Priestley and Emma Holt. His father, a schoolmaster with a reputation for personal study and a passion for teaching and community involvement, instilled in him a love of literature and a firm commitment to social issues. The Bradford of Priestley's youth also provided him with a rich variety of experience and became the background—as Bruddersford—in his most popular novel, *The Good Companions* (1929). Priestley took advantage of every available cultural opportunity, knowing as he gained experience that what he most wanted was to write. He had several articles published in the local newspapers, including a Labour weekly, which reflected his acceptance of local socialist politics. The glory days and optimism of his youth ended abruptly in 1914 when England entered World War I. Priestley volunteered for the military and served five years in France, where he saw most of his friends killed. He was wounded when a mortar shell landed within two yards of him. Throughout his life Priestley remained bitter toward “the murderous imbecility” of World War I.

Although he felt higher education to be pretentious, Priestley reluctantly decided to study first En-

glish and then modern history and political science at Cambridge University. He did not care for university life or for his classmates, who he believed looked down on him, even when his work was published in the *Cambridge Review*. Upon graduation he moved to London with fifty pounds, his wife, Pat Tempest, two daughters, and a handful of good reviews for his first collection of essays, *Brief Diversions: Being Tales, Travesties, and Epigrams* (1922). Priestley worked as a freelance writer, publishing essays in periodicals such as *The Spectator* and *Saturday Review*. He also published several volumes of literary criticism, including the highly regarded *Fools and Philosophers: A Gallery of Comic Figures from English Literature* (published simultaneously in the United States as *The English Comic Characters*) in 1925.

Priestley's literary output during the early 1920's was remarkable, considering the shambles of his personal life. His father died, his wife contracted cancer and was suffering a slow, painful death, and he had an affair with a married woman who gave birth to his third daughter. One year after his wife's death in 1925, he married by-then-divorced Mary Holland Freeway Lewis. During this stressful time, Priestley discovered that hard work saw him through life's difficulties and, in addition to his constant stream of essays, he wrote three books. In 1927, his first two novels, *Adam in Moonshine* and *Benighted*, were published but attracted little attention. Priestley became a close friend of novelist Hugh Walpole, who agreed to collaborate with him on a novel of correspondence, *Farthing Hall* (1929), which was thereby assured of critical notice. On its completion, Priestley immedi-

ately began work on *The Good Companions*, the long narrative novel that established him as a popular writer. *Angel Pavement*, which was published in 1930, was also a success.

Priestley's career as a playwright began in 1931, when he collaborated with playwright Edward Knoblock on a stage version of *The Good Companions* (pr. 1931, pb. 1935). Although the play was successful, critics complained that a novelist could not write in the succinct style of a playwright. Priestley decided to prove them wrong and wrote, in one week, *Dangerous Corner* (pr., pb. 1932), which, for three decades, was the most often performed play by a living English writer.

Priestley lived the next fifty years as a prolific literary celebrity. In the 1930's, he became interested in theories of time, and he based his plays *Time and the Conways* (pr., pb. 1937) on British military engineer J. W. Dunne's time theory (serialism) and *I Have Been Here Before* (pr., pb. 1937) on Russian journalist P. D. Ouspensky's theory of three-dimensional time. In the 1940's, Priestley became Britain's most popular radio commentator, providing both solace and optimism to a country at war. He wrote patriotic novels such as *Daylight on Saturday: A Novel About an Aircraft Factory* (1943) and concluded the war years with a drama, *An Inspector Calls* (pr. 1946, pb. 1947), his only play to enjoy an enduring success like that of *Dangerous Corner*. Priestley married his third wife, renowned anthropologist Jacquetta Hawkes, in July, 1953. The 1950's were filled with plays, novels, and screenplays that paid handsomely but that have not endured the test of time. The 1960's brought literary success in the theater, with the adaptation of *A Severed Head* (pr. 1963, pb. 1964) in collaboration with Iris Murdoch, the novel's author, and his own masterpiece, written at age seventy-four, *The Image Men: Out of Town and London End*, a novel published in two parts, *Out of Town* (1968) and *London End* (1968). The last of his more than 150 works was autobiographical, *Instead of the Trees* (1977). Priestley's health slowly deteriorated after his eightieth birthday, though he remained as active as possible until his death, a month prior to his ninetieth birthday, on August 14, 1984.

## ANALYSIS

Between 1922 and 1977, J. B. Priestley wrote more than one hundred books. These include nu-

merous novels and about forty plays, together with literary criticism, social histories, essays, autobiographies, and travelogues, but do not include his screenplays and teleplays. For decades his novels were the most read and his dramas were the most often produced of any living English writer. Only one decade after his death, his novels were almost forgotten, and only two of his plays were still produced with any regularity. The reasons for his unprecedented success and for his fleeting preeminence are the same: He addressed the issues of his time to the people of his time. The effect of his writing was powerfully immediate but without the universality that allows literature to transcend its own day.

Priestley's novels are difficult to categorize because he is not associated with any particular movement and the influence of many schools of thought can be found throughout his fiction. This results from the enjoyment he derived from the technical challenge of creating in different styles. Priestley wanted to tell a story, to cause his reader to laugh, to cry, and to think, but he always based his writing on the belief that people read primarily to be entertained. Given his working-class background and experiences at Cambridge, it is not surprising that Priestley never wrote for the intellectual or professor of literature. This disregard may have contributed to his almost never being included in courses on the modern English novel. History has also demonstrated that critics are usually disdainful of popular artists. The broad enthusiasm with which his books were received by two generations of the general public contributed to the critics' dismissal of his works as typical light fare from "Jolly Jack" Priestley.

Priestley's novels can be broadly grouped into three categories. One is the suspense thriller, such as *Saturn over the Water* (with the subtitle *An Account of His Adventures in London, South America, and Australia by Tim Bedford, Painter; Edited with Some Preliminary and Concluding Remarks by Henry Sulgrave and Here Presented to the Reading Public*, 1961). The second is lighthearted satire, such as *Sir Michael and Sir George* (with the subtitle *A Tale of COMSA and DISCUS and the New Elizabethans*, 1964), a sparkling tale of the last days of two competing arts councils. The third is the thoughtful social commentary of his best novels, such as *Angel Pavement* (1930), a piercing examination of the struggling lower-middle-



class workers in a small London office, and *Bright Day* (1946), about a screenwriter's loss of innocence. Priestley's novels usually reflect a romantic view of life. Even in his darker tales, such as *Blackout in Gretley: A Story of—and for—Wartime* (1942), Priestley reflects an enthusiasm for life, sometimes to the point of sentimentality, which explains his usual happy endings. A favorite device, which he perfected in his first major success, *The Good Companions*, was to gather a group of characters, each with a unique background, and allow them to struggle together toward their various goals. Through this struggle they learn the importance of community and of responsibility to one's fellow human beings.

Priestley valued clarity. He never wrote in a cryptic manner. His storytelling is straightforward and his themes are always explained. His keen sense of observation and description in such novels as *Faraway* (1932) generated the criticism that his novels are mere reporting. This ability to characterize and describe enabled his unsophisticated readers to remain with him even when he wrote his esoteric novels and plays about the nature of time. Priestley conjectured that people do not live in linear time but in circular time. Life repeats until the inner self discovers or learns how to change and improve, at which time the circle becomes a spiral and the self escapes to a higher plane of existence. This is best described in the novel *The Magicians* (1954).

Priestley is remembered almost exclusively as a playwright. *Dangerous Corner* and *An Inspector Calls* both have the distinction of being, for several decades, the most often produced plays on five continents by an English writer. In 1971, drama critic and anthologist Stanley Richards selected *Dangerous Corner* as one of the ten best mystery and suspense plays of the modern theater. From 1993 to 1994, *An Inspector Calls* had a successful revival in London's West End and then on Broadway. Although neither are great dramatic literature, both plays contain all of the elements necessary for successful suspense drama: interesting characters, intriguing situation, and ingenious construction

with an unexpected twist at the climax. *Dangerous Corner* is the better of the two, with its theme (that a chance remark may completely alter the course of one's life) heightened by surprisingly modern subthemes of homosexuality, drug use, and criminal cover-up. *An Inspector Calls*, on the other hand, is peopled with caricatures, obvious in its devices, and preachy in its condemnation of the disregard of individuals for one another. According to Priestley, it was meant to be an allegory for the history of England in the first half of the twentieth century. Interestingly, it was first produced in Moscow and became a favorite play in communist and socialist countries.

Priestley was known to write his plays quickly, often within seven to ten days. His critics complained that they did not wish to be subjected to unrevised plays. His champions extolled his ability to define a unique situation, delineate characters, and recreate the rhythms of conversation and dialect from various locations and classes of England. These qualities are in full evidence in the best of his social comedies and farces, such as *When We Are Married* (pr., pb. 1938), a delightful, if dated, comedy created on the premise that three respectable couples discover that their marriages are illegal and that they have been living in sin for these past twenty-five years.

Priestley also wrote "time plays," such as *I Have Been Here Before*, in which he disrupts the linear flow of time in order to present an alternative reality. In *Time and the Conways* the first and third acts take place in 1919, with the second act set in 1937. The audience experiences the ironies of the Conways' lives because so much more is known about the characters than they know themselves.

Whether writing novels and plays to satirize, to theorize about time, or to encapsulate social philosophy, Priestley believed that people read first to be entertained, and he wrote to accommodate them. His ability to create exotic and familiar locations, intriguing situations, interesting characters, and tell a good tale attracted a popular audience throughout the world.

## THE GOOD COMPANIONS

**First published:** 1929

**Type of work:** Novel

*An unlikely group of people joins together in an attempt to preserve a troupe of traveling performers in spite of its dwindling audience.*

In *The Good Companions*, Priestley perfected a favorite device of throwing together a disparate group of people who attempt to achieve a common goal. He succeeded in his intent to write a long, old-fashioned novel, creating a relaxed, bittersweet tale, told in good humor. His most popular novel, *The Good Companions* has remained in print since its first publication. Its style and popular success place Priestley alongside the masters of the long English novel, Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. It most closely resembles the Victorian style, with its humorous chapter subtitles, for example: “Inigo Jumps Out of a Train and Finds Himself in Love.”

Priestley constructed *The Good Companions* like a three-act play. In Book One, strangers meet and band together. Mr. Oakroyd is escaping the burden of job and family. Elizabeth Trant is on her own after years of nursing her sick father. Inigo Jollifant is a former schoolteacher with a knack for knocking out a quick tune on the piano. United by a need to flee responsibilities and to find happiness, they befriend a broken-down theatrical troupe called the Dinky Doos.

In Book Two, they set out to tour the provinces with a new name, The Good Companions. The dreams, frustrations, hard work, and joys of the traveling performers are chronicled. Secondary characters are quickly drawn as stereotypes, immediately identifiable as personalities associated with the theater and the townspeople they encounter. There is Morton Mitcham, banjo player, as nimble with the truth as he is with his instrument, and the stars of the troupe, Jerry Jerningham and Miss Susie Dean. Priestley demonstrates a unique ability to capture the rhythm and dialect of each character and locale. This ear for language later became a distinguishing feature of his stage dialogue. The world of Priestley’s novel may now seem distant, but it was absolutely realistic for its initial readers.

Book Three relates the inevitable demise of The

Good Companions. Members of the troupe disperse to their various lives. Miss Trant marries an old Scottish admirer. Miss Susie Dean pursues a career in the musical theater while a pining Inigo Jollifant tries to follow her star. As in many Priestley tales, the optimistic theme of a diverse group finding individual fulfillment by helping one another is obvious. Not everyone gets what he or she wants, but they all discover that happiness can only be found in the heart. *The Good Companions* succeeds because it creates a wonderful world in which to escape. Its popular appeal and romantic optimism led critics to dub the author “Jolly Jack” Priestley, a nickname that he hated and that he tried to shed for the rest of his life.

## DANGEROUS CORNER

**First published:** 1932 (first published, 1932)

**Type of work:** Play

*A chance comment leads to the revelation that a suicide was really murder and that seemingly respectable friends are actually corrupt.*

*Dangerous Corner*, Priestley’s first solo effort for the theater, was written in only one week to prove a novelist could write a play. He demonstrated a talent for developing the interesting characters and intriguing situations required for suspense drama and added a unique time twist that resulted in the play’s continuing success on stage.

In the British version (the play was “laundered” and given an American context for Broadway), *Dangerous Corner* opens with the timeworn theatrical device of a shot in the dark and a woman’s scream. When the lights come up it is revealed that there is no murder. A group of women have been listening to a radio drama and discussing the program’s title, “The Sleeping Dog.” Priestley believed



that analogies should be clear, that there should be no question about the meaning of an author's symbols. Truth is the sleeping dog that they should let lie, specifically the truth regarding the mysterious suicide of Freda's brother-in-law, Martin. When the men join the group, Stanton agrees that the truth is often as healthy as speeding too fast around a corner. "And," Freda declares, "life's got a lot of dangerous corners."

Like most suspense plays, the success of *Dangerous Corner* results from the ingeniousness of the situation, the cleverness of the resolution, and an unexpected twist at the play's climax. With the philosophical foundation laid, the characters settle in for an evening of small talk. Olwen recognizes a musical cigarette box and remembers that it belonged to Martin. When Freda pointedly disagrees, there is a pause as they "look at one another steadily." Here is their dangerous corner: Will Freda let this comment pass? She does not. This chance remark dredges up the truth of everyone's secret associations with Martin. The confessions of adultery, homosexuality, drug abuse, theft, and criminal cover-up destroy every relationship and reveal that Martin was, in fact, murdered.

These are the ingredients of modern melodrama. It is the unexpected twist at the climax that raises *Dangerous Corner* above most other suspense plays. Devastated by the revelations, Martin's brother, Robert, exits as the stage lights dim. In the blackout, the shot and woman's scream are repeated. Surprisingly the lights come back up on the exact scene that started the play. In a foreshadowing of Priestley's later "time plays," the story begins again. This time, however, as the characters approach the "sleeping dog" of truth, Olwen's chance remark is left unchallenged, the dangerous corner is successfully negotiated. Priestley does not allow the truth to change, merely the characters' knowledge of it. This device, where ironies are made manifest because the audience knows more than the characters, became a favorite technique in many of his works.

## AN INSPECTOR CALLS

**First produced:** 1946 (first published, 1947)

**Type of work:** Play

*A mysterious inspector calls on a respectable family and reveals how each member was partly to blame for a terrible suicide.*

Like *Dangerous Corner*, *An Inspector Calls* is a suspense play that investigates a suicide through self-incrimination. It also reflects Priestley's consuming interest in time theory. In spite of these similarities, the two plays were written for very different purposes.

*An Inspector Calls* is a parable on the responsibility of the individual toward one's fellow beings, and it succeeds in spite of its heavy-handed sermonizing. Arthur Birling and his family are celebrating their daughter Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft. This will also merge two corporate competitors, resulting in higher profits. Priestley relies on the audience's knowledge of recent events to color Birling's optimism with irony as he extols the wonders of the *Titanic*, which is about to set sail into a world that will avoid war. These ironies also foreshadow the impending disaster about to strike the Birlings when Inspector Goole unexpectedly arrives. True to his name, the inspector resembles a ghoul as he glares at the family, relentlessly repeating his message that a young woman has killed herself by drinking disinfectant.

The details of the woman's hideous and painful death are described repeatedly as Goole methodically reveals how each member of this respectable family was partly responsible for her untimely death. Birling fired her for requesting a small raise. In a spoiled rage, Sheila Birling insisted she be fired from her next job. After Croft had an affair with the girl, she picked up with a wild young man who left her alone and pregnant. Mrs. Birling used her influence to deny the girl charity, contending that the "unknown father" should be found. The drunken father is her own son, Eric. The inspector condemns them all for their part in this tragic suicide.

It is the unexpected twist at the end that makes the play palatable in spite of its obvious structure, stereotyped characters, and heavy-handed lectur-

ing. After the inspector leaves, Priestley adds dimension and substance to the play. The family first rationalizes and then questions the legitimacy of the so-called inspector. Phone calls prove that there is no Inspector Goole and that there has been no suicide. It has all been a joke. As the family returns to normal, forgetting their terrifying lessons, the phone rings: A woman has just killed herself by drinking disinfectant and an inspector is on his way to question them. Priestley's fluid use of time leaves the audience gasping.

Priestley's theme of the individual's responsibility to society is obvious. The play's historical references are not enough, however, to manifest the intended allegorical level of the play as the history of twentieth century England. *An Inspector Calls* suc-

ceeds as suspense drama, but not as an allegory of how no one is blameless.

## SUMMARY

For more than fifty years, J. B. Priestley was among the most prolific, versatile, and best-loved English writers, with scores of novels, plays, essays, travelogues, critical analyses, and autobiographies to his credit. He entertained his audience with likable characters in well-told tales that responded passionately to his times. His works are noted for their versatility, romantic optimism, and for his experiments with time. His books and plays provide a valuable interpretation of the issues facing the British through five decades of the twentieth century.

Gerald S. Argetsinger

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is it a necessary development or an unfortunate one (or both) that so much of J. B. Priestley's fiction has been forgotten?
- Did Priestley's attitudes toward the academic life in effect cut him off from critical acceptance?
- Does a play like *An Inspector Calls* receive more credit now than it did in 1946? If so, why?
- Can a reader learn more about the society in Priestley's time from him than from more highly regarded writers of fiction on social issues?
- What previous literary works seem to have been models for *The Good Companions*?

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## V. S. PRITCHETT

**Born:** Ipswich, England  
December 16, 1900

**Died:** London, England  
March 20, 1997

*Universally recognized as a consummate artist of the short story, Pritchett elevated the genre to social comedy by the use of memorable character portrayals, genial wit, and bittersweet irony.*

### BIOGRAPHY

V. S. Pritchett (PRIH-chiht) was born into a middle-class family on December 16, 1900, in Ipswich, England. He was the firstborn son of Walter Pritchett, a Yorkshireman, and Beatrice Martin, a Londoner. Within six years three other children, Cyril, Kathleen, and Gordon, were born. The Pritchett family led miserable lives inasmuch as Walter possessed an unstable nature, indulging in frequent job changes and forcing his family into an itinerant life of moving from one relative's home to another. (Although unwilling to discuss much of his private life, Pritchett referred to the negative, and sometimes brutal, aspects of his father in his autobiographies and fiction.)

Pritchett attended Alleyn's Grammar School for two years and at sixteen left the classroom to enter the leather trade. This experience, providing him with ample opportunity to meet British people of all classes, was an invaluable one for his future writing. At twenty-one Pritchett, tiring of the business routine, left for Paris, where he lived for two years, working in a photography supply company. His penchant for languages was evident at an early age; in Paris he further perfected his French. Always an omnivorous reader, he immersed himself in reading French writers in French and also began to read Russian literature, especially authors such as Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, and

Fyodor Dostoevski. Pritchett soon began to feel the irresistible urge to write. Having been introduced to Christian Science in England, he approached *The Christian Science Monitor*, offering the newspaper some impressionistic articles and short stories; the newspaper accepted a few articles. After two years in Paris, his money exhausted, he returned to London. Through luck, in 1923 he was assigned by *The Christian Science Monitor* to cover Dublin and the civil war. While in Ireland he traveled extensively, an important factor in his later fiction.

Pritchett in 1924 married Evelyn Maude Vigers, an actress. Subsequently, he was transferred to Spain. In the Iberian Peninsula he met a wide variety of students, professors, poets, and journalists at Madrid University. The stark country, much of it the color of burnt sienna, intrigued him after the green of England. He now began to read and study famous Spanish writers such as Miguel de Unamuno and Pío Baroja and the Italian art critic Benedetto Croce. All in all, he spent two years in Spain as a correspondent. Although he was successful in journalism, he began to weary of writing for the newspaper and yearned to begin writing fiction full time. He did write a few short stories but then accepted *The Christian Science Monitor's* offer to report from North Africa, eventually visiting Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Eventually, he visited the United States. *The Christian Science Monitor* finally terminated Pritchett's contract, and he returned to London. Jobless, he returned to Spain to collect material for writing a travel book. After a three-month walking tour, he wrote *Marching Spain* (1928), which was accepted by a London publisher.

Then followed the publishing of *Clare Drummer* (1929), a novel, and a collection of short stories. Another novel *Shirley Sanz* (also published as *Elopement into Exile*) appeared in 1932.

Pritchett's marriage to Evelyn Vigors ended in divorce. In 1934, he married Dorothy Roberts, who became his literary assistant. At this juncture he experienced a heightened creativity in his writing. He attributed it to having fallen passionately in love with Dorothy and often spoke of the fusion of love and passion with writing. The Pritchetts had two children, Josephine, born in 1938, and Oliver, born in 1940.

In the next several years, he published several other novels, collections of essays, travel articles, and some short stories. During World War II, he was attached to the Ministry of Information and served with the Home Guard. In 1945 the *New Statesman* appointed him its literary editor, a job he retained until 1949, when he resigned. Two years later he became director of the *New Statesman*. In 1948, with Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene, two well-known English novelists and short-story writers, Pritchett collaborated in writing *Why Do I Write?*

Despite Pritchett's limited formal education, from his varied travels and experience in writing journalistic pieces, novels, and short stories he became known for his urbane wit and genial demeanor and for his rich insight into literature. Princeton University offered him the Christian Gauss Lecturer post in 1953. The University of California at Berkeley invited him to accept the Beckman Professorship in 1962; Smith College asked him to become a writer-in-residence; Brandeis University appointed him a visiting professor in 1968; the University of Cambridge in 1969 offered him the Clark Lectureship. During these years he published some of his best short-story collections, including *The Sailor, The Sense of Humour, and Other Stories* (1956); in 1961 he published his most beloved short story, "When My Girl Comes Home." Pritchett's impressionistic travel books include *London Perceived* (1962) and *New York Proclaimed* (1965).

He also published two autobiographies, *A Cab at the Door* (1968) and *Midnight Oil* (1972), both books including carefully selected personal details about his family life but considerable material about his travels and his reading and literary influ-

ences. Pritchett wrote not only literary essays for journals but also books on literary figures: *George Meredith and English Comedy* (1970), *Balzac: A Biography* (1973), and *The Gentle Barbarian: The Life and Work of Turgenev* (1977).

He received honorary doctorates of letters from Leeds University, England, in 1972 and from Columbia University in 1978. A particularly distinguished award was bestowed on Pritchett by Queen Elizabeth II in 1975 when he became Sir Victor, knighted for his services to literature. There were other international honors that placed him among the premier writers of the world. He was elected president of the English International Association of PEN in 1971, became international president of PEN in 1974, and was made an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1971. In 1977, he was elected president of the Society of Authors. In addition, he received the Heinemann Award in 1969, the PEN Award in 1974, the W. H. Smith Literary Award in 1990, and the Golden Pen Award in 1993. Pritchett died of a stroke in London on March 20, 1997, at the age of ninety-six.

Pritchett wrote five novels, all of which were rather unsuccessful. His forte was the short story, a genre that he thought to be particularly apt because it reflects the fractured life of twentieth century society. The title stories of the various collections are some of the most poignant and ironic creations of this world-famous and respected short-story writer.

## ANALYSIS

Pritchett's novels never received much praise. One of the earliest is *Clare Drummer*, much influenced by Joseph Conrad, the famous Polish-born writer of consummate prose and psychological depth. The story line is unfocused and the characters are not fully realized. *Shirley Sanz* bears the imprint of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857; English translation, 1886), wherein Shirley is a fellow romantic who marries, goes to Spain, has a child, becomes bored with country living, has an affair, and then renounces her lover. Although at times exciting, the novel lacks a sharply focused theme and suffers from too much coincidence of episodes. *Nothing Like Leather* (1935), based on Pritchett's years in the leather trade as a tanner, shows growth and development in the writing of



his novels. Nonetheless, the main protagonist is not sharply delineated, the plot lacks sustained development, and the theme is not clearly explicated. Dealing as it does with ambition and greed in a technological society, the theme does engage the reader.

Pritchett's *métier* almost reaches perfection in his short fiction. Many critics, including Frank Kermode, Irving Howe, and Eudora Welty, praised him as a "pleasure giver," a writer's writer, with almost no equal in England in the short-story form. He was outstanding for creating a wide diversity of characters from all classes of people, although mainly from the English middle class. These characters vary, from sailors, divers, and auto racers to blind and neurotic men, frustrated wives, botanists, and artists. Many are ordinary people who live in quiet desperation, some finally sensing their plight and others never aware of their limitations or the reasons for their frustrations.

Pritchett's themes are many and varied. Infidelity is featured in "The Accompanist," anger and disappointment is highlighted in "Handsome Is as Handsome Does," and male domination almost ruins a relationship in "The Wedding." All of these stories feature unforgettable men and women with whose sensibilities Pritchett empathizes, even while mocking them with gentle wit and irony. Relationships are crucial in a Pritchett story, although few end with the starkness of suicide, as in "The Two Brothers," one of the most haunting tales in his canon.

A typical story contains two characters at odds with each other, a flashback technique smoothly worked into the central focus, economy of language, well-defined incident, artful description, and a well-disguised simplicity. Relationships are introduced in *medias res* (in the middle of things) and often left unresolved. One of the most telling characteristics of Pritchett's short fiction is his use of the Joycean "epiphany," a moment of sudden realization or insight.

Through ironic and witty dialogue, Pritchett created cameo characters, people who linger with the reader long after the story is finished. His satire is genial and kind, Horatian rather than Juvenalian, which is vicious and unsparing. Often the reader is left with a clear empathy and identification with the characters and a realization that Pritchett is describing all of humanity and its foibles,

some almost despicable and others stupid and self-centered; yet Pritchett is always gentle in his characterizations.

Although Pritchett's gentility permeates all of his fiction, he cannot be accused of a Dickensian sentimentality. Anger plays a central role in many of his stories, as does ironic backlash, especially in stories such as "A Debt of Honour" and "A Fig Tree."

A visible presence in much of Pritchett's short fiction is one that resembles the great Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov, a medical doctor who relinquished his practice to become a writer. Like him, Pritchett shows a sharp power of observation and a bittersweet wit. "The Wheelbarrow" is the story of a near-seduction by Evans, a local preacher, who is helping Miss Freshwater's niece to empty an entire house of the flotsam and jetsam left by the late Miss Freshwater. Evans is hypnotized by a lovely wheelbarrow and is in turn repulsed and attracted by the niece. He lusts for the wheelbarrow rather than the woman, and when she repulses him and gives him this coveted prize he minimizes its value but inwardly is ecstatic (his ersatz climax) over becoming the proud possessor. Evans never senses an epiphany; the niece does, and the story ends as she is leaving after emptying the house. She passes the tent where Evans is speaking and his cant reverberates at the story's end.

In almost every story there is ironic humor fusing character, episode, and theme. "The Key to My Heart" portrays a young man whose father owned a bakery but who died with many of the accounts recorded only in his head. Typical of many of Pritchett's stories, this one is told by the son. The young man is given the unenviable job of collecting a fairly large debt owed the bakery by a Mrs. Brackett, who in turn vilifies and pacifies the young man but does not pay him. There is much humor in the story as Pritchett satirizes the rich when, for example, this woman and her lover race their expensive cars around the fields after each other in their love-hate relationship. Because the baker's son, narrating the story, unsuspectingly helps the lover to escape, Mrs. Brackett finds out and penalizes him by paying all the other tradesmen their bills but deliberately overlooking the baker's bill. Although the reader may have cause to despise this affluent woman and dub the narrator a fool, the irony and satire of the story provide the insulation needed to empathize with both main figures.

Another facet of Pritchett's stories that often deal with basic relationships between mates or lovers concerns a May-December liaison. "On the Edge of the Cliff" presents Harry, more than seventy years of age, and Rowena, in her twenties, who delight in their amour. Harry still has the capacity to love, an important theme. To prove his energy for life and for love, he goes swimming on a particularly cold day and emerges from the sea showing his sinewy body. This exposure emphasizes his age to Rowena, but later, going to bed with her "Ancient Mariner," as she says, the earlier disrobing causes no diminution of their relationship. Still another delightful story, "The Skeleton," features an ancient man, George Clark, a crotchety bachelor who is a rank narcissist. He becomes ill when he refuses to dress adequately in the cold English winter and is tended by a younger woman who has in the past ruined George's favorite painting. He experiences his moment of epiphany, Pritchett's favorite technique, when he realizes that the woman who supposedly betrayed him, and who is riddled with faults and is growing old, has helped him. He who thought he was fearless and needed no one becomes aware of the need for and the beauty of another soul. Pritchett's motif of the epiphany reverberates in his short fiction, and the Chekhovian irony is transmuted into an English setting and an English sensibility.

In the final analysis, Pritchett's urbane wit and charm imbued his odd, eccentric collection of characters with a humanity and warmth that remain a hallmark of this brilliant teller of tales.

### "WHEN MY GIRL COMES HOME"

**First published:** 1961 (collected in *The Pritchett Century*, 1997)

**Type of work:** Short story

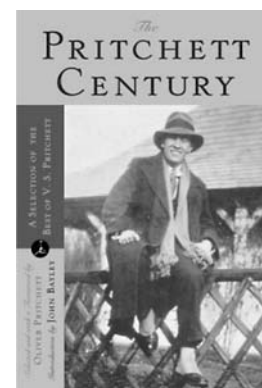
*A young girl, believed to be suffering in a Japanese prison camp, returns to surprise and disappoint the neighbors, making them question their moral attitudes during World War II.*

"When My Girl Comes Home," Pritchett's favorite story, uses a disjointed narrative and shifting ambiguities to reflect the theme of the story. Hilda

Johnson was the darling of Hincham Street, London, when she married an Indian and went East. She was reported to be incarcerated in a Japanese war camp under brutal conditions. For two years the entire street forged together and, despite the stone wall of several nations' bureaucracies, persisted in obtaining information about her—and about her final release. Returning home, she is not pale or wan but well-fed and sleek, even sprightly. Hincham Street is shocked to hear that she married a Japanese officer and thus escaped the deprivations and suffering of a foreigner. Mrs. Johnson had been sewing for years and saving money for her girl's homecoming; Mrs. Johnson becomes the moral center of the street.

The story portrays a woman who must have used her wiles (Pritchett is vague about many details and the reader must reconstruct the evidence) not only in Japan but also during her return trip, during which she met two Westerners who showered gifts on her. Gloster, one of the men, promises to find her and take her and her mother away to France. Gloster never comes. The tale, containing a multitude of characters, careens from one character to another, but the limited narrator is Harry Fraser, who provides the reader with fragmentary accounts. A real prisoner of the Japanese, Bill Williams, survived through all kinds of deal-making: The reader believes that Hilda did as well. These two form an odd union, involved perhaps in illegalities. Eventually, Williams pursues Hilda in a number of ways, then ransacks her apartment and disappears. Hilda, too, after her mother's death, leaves her home. Her whereabouts are unknown until one day when the neighbors receive a photograph of her and two men; one of them is Gloster, who has written a book not about Hilda's experiences in Japan but about Hincham Street.

Hilda's homecoming, long awaited by the neighbors, disappoints them and causes them to face their moral views of the war, as Hilda did not when she married a Japanese officer. Many on Hincham Street inflicted self-injury, committed



perjury, or escaped their duty to serve during World War II in duplicitous ways. Whether in a pub, a chance conversation in the street, or a gathering of friends, the war always paralyzed the citizens when they came to the closed door of their conscience. Hilda and Bill were not the only ones to compromise (to survive in Japan); the people of Hincham Street had done the same then (during the war) and now (after the war) in refusing to confront their moral dilemmas and conscience. Pritchett's theme of illusion and reality both during and after the war is portrayed with ambiguities. The shifting relationships of the characters do not permit the reader to grasp any clear resolution. The ideal symbol of Hilda is shattered on her return, and the symbol of her mother as a center of moral gravity is splintered when Mrs. Johnson dies. Hincham Street remains shorn of ideals and discomfited by moral festering.

### **"BLIND LOVE"**

**First published:** 1969 (collected in *Blind Love, and Other Stories*, 1969)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A lawyer and his housekeeper, both scarred, brandish their disabilities like weapons and eventually, through loss of pride, find mutual understanding and love.*

"Blind Love" is one of Pritchett's most poignant and compelling short stories. Through an almost unnoticeable flashback technique the reader perceives a full delineation of the character of Mr. Armitage, a lawyer who has been blind for twenty years, and Mrs. Johnson, a secretary/housekeeper, who has a huge scar extending from the neck down across her chest. Armitage, who has a house in the country, is wealthy; he travels regularly into London to carry on his business affairs. For two years, these two have led a quiet but rather satisfying life. Mrs. Johnson goes regularly to church. Both have been divorced by their mates: Armitage's wife departed because of her husband's blindness, while Mrs. Johnson's husband, on their wedding night, was disgusted with her unsightly scar. Mrs. Johnson had not told her husband of this disfigurement, conceding in retrospect that she had been blinded

by love. Armitage has instructed Mrs. Johnson that nothing is ever to be disturbed. One day, however, while in the garden, he is tripped by his dog near the swimming pool; he falls into the water and is rescued. In her kind attempt to help her employer, Mrs. Johnson enters his bedroom and starts to help him obtain dry clothes. She breaks the cardinal rule, and Armitage demands that she get out and leave him alone. Mrs. Johnson, rebuffed by his rudeness, decides that since she has not enjoyed the country she should leave Armitage's employ. Shortly thereafter, Armitage apologizes and presses sexual attention on Mrs. Johnson, and they make love. Still defensive, Mrs. Johnson considers the lovemaking an act of revenge against her former husband. At this point neither person's handicap is a barrier to sex, one of the ironies for which Pritchett was famous.

Throughout the story, religious imagery prevails. Both Armitage and Mrs. Johnson fall into the pool, experiencing a kind of baptism. Armitage makes Mrs. Johnson rub spittle and dirt on his eyes to cure his blindness, just as Christ cured the blind man in Scripture. Both characters have wounds. There is an attempt at faith healing when Armitage goes to Mr. Smith, who preaches the spiritual life but who is obese and has two of everything. When Mrs. Johnson falls into the pool, is rescued, and cries that Mr. Smith saw her sunbathing near the pool nude and perceived her as a "plate of liver," she and Armitage experience a moment of epiphany. The story ends with the two aware that they no longer need to view their handicaps as weapons. Although both have been physically and emotionally scarred by fate, their defects have led to self-understanding and to a love for each other. Both have lost their pride as they sense their mutual need. They wed, the reader believes, and go to Italy, where Mrs. Johnson becomes the eyes for both of them as they visit churches, museums, and architectural wonders.

This story emphasizes the flawed marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Smith, whose union is based on inequality and routine; it is contrasted with the love of Armitage and Mrs. Johnson, who both rise above their physical disabilities to experience a richness and freshness of love beyond the merely physical. The images of flawed human nature are obvious, but the bittersweetness of tone changes to the quiet joy of acceptance at the end.

## “THE CAMBERWELL BEAUTY”

**First published:** 1974 (collected in *The Camberwell Beauty, and Other Stories*, 1974)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A former antique dealer attempts the seduction of a woman married to an older man and finally separates the worlds of art and reality.*

“The Camberwell Beauty,” the title piece of a collection, is one of Pritchett’s mature, haunting tales. The setting is London’s antiques world and becomes a metaphor of the world at large. The antique dealers would give almost anything to possess their own particular object of art; they brood on these acquisitions for their entire lives. Isabel is the Camberwell beauty who yokes together August, her uncle and an ivory collector, with Pliny, an elder bachelor who lusts for, among other artifacts, Dresden figures. The narrator, a former antiques dealer, intrudes into this world and presents the reader with a host of men who, although specialists in their own antiques, are ordinary people.

Isabel is eventually discovered by the narrator to be Pliny’s wife, although she is simply another art acquisition by Pliny, who uses other women to satisfy his lust. The narrator, with unwitting humor, attempts to seduce this young woman. She is often left alone in an empty shop, with only the sound of drumbeats to indicate that something is amiss. Isabel, unaware of her manipulation, is made to dress like a soldier and to bang a drum to keep burglars away. When the narrator discovers Pliny’s ruse, he begins to attempt his seduction. Pritchett’s bizarre details provide irony. Throughout many attempts to lure Isabel, the narrator fails. When the narrator taunts Isabel with Pliny’s being a husband in name only, Isabel replies that he is indeed a good lover because he likes to take off her clothes, look at her, and tell her that she is his most precious possession. In this revelation, Pritchett is satirizing both the naïveté of Isabel and her function as a work of art. At the same time, the narrator, like Pliny, is perceiving the Camberwell beauty as an unconsummated sex object. In his final attempt to win the girl, the narrator is discovered by Pliny and a tobacconist. The narrator feebly insists that he came to offer Pliny a piece of Dresden. Both Pliny and his wife say that they have no interest in

Dresden, and the narrator emerges into the sodium light of a London street, aware that the artificial light reflects only the unreality of people. Pritchett is suggesting that there is cruelty, cant, and hypocrisy in the people who surround themselves with beautiful antiques. The world of art may uplift the spirit, but the people who collect rare antiques are commercial vendors who devalue art with their mean acquisitive methods. Pritchett is suggesting that the world, too, may lust after art and overlook the real.

Seemingly, no moment of self-awareness occurs in any of the participants in this drama of the art world. Nothing has changed. Isabel symbolically descends by becoming a work of art to Pliny and a prey for the narrator. No one is illuminated except perhaps Isabel, who remains true to her marital vows. Pritchett’s ironies are at play, but at the end the human comedy continues as the narrator, the intruder, is ejected.

## “THE WEDDING”

**First published:** 1970 (collected in *Complete Collected Stories*, 1990)

**Type of work:** Short story

*An educated woman, having married into wealth and then divorced, and a cattle farmer, opposing change, resolve their differences and marry.*

“The Wedding,” set in a provincial English countryside, is the occasion for a counterpoint between the educated and the rustic, the return of a sophisticated woman to her hamlet, a wedding that ignites a series of developments, and a dénouement that satisfies the major participants. With vivid descriptions, a sly humor, and a portrayal of various people and their foibles, Pritchett enfolds the tale of Mrs. Christine Jackson, who left the town when she married a wealthy man but returned as a teacher at a local college. She encourages Tom Fletcher, a forty-year-old widower, to permit Mary, his daughter, to go on to the university since the young woman is brilliant. Tom demurs, because after Flo, his other daughter, is married, he will be alone—and besides, Mary will need only the rudiments of running a household when she marries.

The story is developed through a number of narrators. At the very beginning, Tom is talking to his friend Ted and makes a number of rude and sexually belittling remarks about Mrs. Jackson. At the wedding, Mrs. Jackson talks with a number of various people, mostly common folk. The mood, as is usual at weddings, is festive as the guests remember their own weddings with a mixture of hope and sadness.

Pritchett's dialogue is witty and provincial as Tom gives away his daughter. The wedding feast is Oriental, and after the guests have eaten, there takes place a local custom of lassoing of women by men. Most of the women accept the sport with humor. When Mrs. Jackson begins to leave, Tom urges her to remain, but she says she must leave. Suddenly, Tom lassoes her and she loses her hat, her balance, and her dignity as the rope pinches her waist. Her student Mary is aghast. Suddenly, Mrs. Jackson asserts the initiative as she pulls the rope out of Tom's hands and summarily and angrily departs. As she leaves, someone shouts that Mrs. Jackson is leaving with Tom's rope.

Overwhelmed by embarrassment and angry that she has been exposed to this unbecoming rural custom, she stops her car until she regains composure. When she returns home, Mary appears, distraught and ashamed of her father's action. Mary says that she has run away. Mrs. Jackson insists, lying, that she found the lassoing rather a compliment and, urging Mary to return home, drives her back. Tom has been scouring the countryside for Mary. As Mrs. Jackson leaves, he shouts that he will see her tomorrow for his rope.

When Tom appears the next day, Mrs. Jackson indignantly tells him that she is not cattle. Yet she agrees that it was, after all, only a country junket. Pritchett uses his usual irony when Tom says that he wants to make a deal: If Mrs. Jackson returns to the farm, he will do whatever she wishes about Mary. He begins to fondle her, and she demurs, but Tom insists. Finally, Mrs. Jackson asks him to lock the door. The schoolmistress leaves her job, sells her house, and marries Jackson, and all three of them are seen driving around the countryside.

The rope is a metaphor with multiple levels. It reminds Mrs. Jackson of her youth when hope was high and spirits were carefree. Now it is a symbol of limits and indignities. Yet it is a sign of selection of her by Tom, who separates her from the others. It is, finally, a mark of her grasping of fate, for she frees herself of the rope and commandeers Tom's possession. It is also the occasion of their meeting, during which there is a compromise and a proposal.

There is great fun and vivacity in the tale. The structure reveals men discussing women irreverently, Mrs. Jackson's soliloquies, and conversations with country bumpkins. Mrs. Jackson's divorce is lamented and her intellectual endowments ridiculed by Tom, who ironically later marries her. She might have been lassoused, but it is Tom who eventually is lassoused out of his prejudices and limitations as he permits his daughter to leave the traditional ways. Pritchett in this story again reveals an uncanny ability to analyze people, to laugh at them, and finally to convey their sense of dignity and geniality. His merging of the educated and the untutored brings thoughtful pleasure to the reader. The rope brings to Mrs. Jackson and Tom Fletcher their moment of epiphany.

#### SUMMARY

V. S. Pritchett's impact on the world of literature rests on his many and varied short stories. They encompass eccentric characters, multifarious settings, and appealing "plots" through which he develops a microcosm of society. Life is filled with challenges, a theme he developed in his short fiction, but the most significant is the interrelationship of people who must compromise with others or come to terms with their own foibles and flaws. With ironic satire and wry humor, Pritchett genially fashioned his world of fiction through Joycean epiphanies. Many of his eccentrics never glean insights into the human soul, but those who do live their fates with mutual tolerance toward their acquaintances, families, and friends. V. S. Pritchett transformed the ordinary into the sublime.

*Julia B. Boken*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Since V. S. Pritchett is skilled at depicting relationships, an important element in the novel, what limitations in his long fiction keep it from being as effective as his short stories?
- What does Pritchett's "When My Girl Comes Home" reveal about the effects of a war upon civilians?
- What are the implications of Pritchett's use of a title seemingly based on a cliché, "Blind Love"?
- Is Pritchett condemning the collecting of antiques or any particular aspect of collecting in "The Camberwell Beauty"?
- Cite several instances of Pritchett conveying a sense of dignity in characters whom he has introduced comically.

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## MARCEL PROUST

**Born:** Auteuil, France

July 10, 1871

**Died:** Paris, France

November 18, 1922

*Proust greatly contributed to the form of the novel and is known for the subtle and profound analysis of the psychology of his characters.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Marcel Proust (prewst) was born in the Parisian suburb of Auteuil, France, on July 10, 1871. His parents were Adrien and Jeanne Proust. His father, from a modest Catholic family, became a famous doctor, and his mother came from a wealthy Jewish banking family. His brother Robert was also to become a doctor. Proust was baptized into the faith of his father. As a young child, he struggled with asthma, and the resulting close relationship with his mother was to inspire much of his writing.

The study of philosophy at the Lycée Condorcet impressed him greatly. There, he met Jacques Bizet and Daniel Halévy, sons of the famous musicians. They were also interested in literature and the arts. With them, Proust wrote for the high school literary magazine, *La Revue lilas*. He also took great interest in the salons of the wealthy and worldly, where he met poet Anna de Noailles and Nobel laureate Anatole France. The years spent in high society gave Proust the reputation of a snob, but they also afforded him many details that he would later analyze and from which he would draw his own psychological insights.

Proust spent a year in the army and studied law and political science. He received an honorary position in the Mazarine library. Travel took him to the resort towns of the Atlantic and to Venice. The Italian city would later figure as an important

part of his work. Venice's interest for Proust centered upon its architecture and the study that the English aesthete John Ruskin made of it. With the help of Marie Nordlinger, Proust produced *Le Bible d'Amiens* (1904), a translation of Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens* (1880-1885). The translation helped Proust become more familiar with his Judeo-Christian heritage.

In 1896, he published his first collection of essays and short stories, *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (*Pleasures and Regrets*, 1948), prefaced by Anatole France. The work did not receive much praise. Other articles on Ruskin and Parisian salons and cathedrals appeared in one of the leading Parisian newspapers, *Le Figaro*. In a series of pastiches, he demonstrated his assimilation of the style of nineteenth century French writers such as Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers. Many articles and pastiches were published under the title *Pastiches et mélanges* (1919).

His father died in 1903, and his mother's death in 1905 was to affect him even more severely. Her influence is evident in his book *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954; *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*, 1958), which Proust wrote in 1908 and was published posthumously in 1954. Proust later transformed and developed that work into *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927; *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1922-1931, 1981), along with *Jean Santeuil* (1952; English translation, 1955), another posthumous publication.

After the loss of his parents, Proust gave himself more seriously to writing and reading. In 1913, Proust published *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913; *Swann's Way*, 1922), the first volume of *Remembrance*

of *Things Past*. Finding a publisher was not easy. Though Grasset agreed to publish it, Proust had to pay for publishing costs. He approached the *Nouvelle Revue française*, a newly founded literary review that grouped aspiring writers. One of them, André Gide, was later to admit his mistake in not accepting the manuscript. Proust eventually found much support from this group and especially from Jacques Rivière, a young writer later killed in World War I. The second volume, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919; *Within a Budding Grove*, 1924), won France's prestigious Prix Goncourt for literature. During an exhibit of Dutch painters at the Jeu de Paume museum, Proust suddenly felt ill. He died on November 18, 1922, in Paris.

### ANALYSIS

The journalist Maurice Montabré once asked Proust what type of work he would have pursued had he chosen a trade. Proust answered that he would have exercised the very same trade, that of the writer. He said that he was pleased to give the world its "daily bread," letting his spirit guide his labor. Proust's response illustrates some of the themes of *Remembrance of Things Past*. One of these is the relation of the written word to the reader. In the first lines of Proust's work, his hero wonders whether he is the subject of the work that he is himself reading. Such wonder is even extended to the naming of the hero, since there is a certain amount of uncertainty about it. Were he given a name, it might possibly be Marcel.

Style for Proust is not a matter of technique but of vision. His incredibly long sentences, laden with imagery that is a compendium of his vast culture, invite the reader to partake of his writing, to choose among the many examples that he presents to the imagination. Proust once wanted to be a playwright, and this emphasis on the visual is perhaps a transformation of that original desire. His characters are often found in theatrical situations where the speculative and the spectacular await them.

Besides anticipation, the work also centers upon memory, which for some readers is the main image of Proust's writing. The title, translated into English, betrays the importance that the translator himself gives to memory. "The search for lost time," while rather literal, would be more inclusive of other themes. The search is also for time that has been lost in dissipation. Proust's hero, in the image

of his creator, realizes that only mortification will allow him to assume the writer's task. Once assumed, that search would lead him to the reading of many art forms.

The search for love also punctuates the work. Love would be fraught with deception or disappointment. Homosexuality, sadism, jealousy, selfishness, and suspicion mark the characters. The hero speculates about his relationships with his mother and grandmother. The worldly and powerful salons are founded upon death and cruel exclusions amid intermittent outpourings of the heart. Time spent in chasing after a lovely woman gives as a reward only the realization that one has not indeed been in love. For Proust, each person seems to be alone, and the endeavor to leave self is almost an impossibility unless it be through writing, through time well spent.

### REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

**First published:** *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-1927; includes *Du côté de chez Swann*, 1913 (*Swann's Way*, 1922); *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 1919 (*Within a Budding Grove*, 1924); *Le Côté de Guermantes*, 1920-1921 (*The Guermantes Way*, 1925); *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 1922 (*Cities of the Plain*, 1927); *La Prisonnière*, 1925 (*The Captive*, 1929); *Albertine disparue*, 1925 (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, 1930); and *Le Temps retrouvé*, 1927 (*Time Regained*, 1931)

**Type of work:** Novels

*At the end of the nineteenth century, a young man discovers the changing world that he would like to fix permanently in a work of art.*

In *Swann's Way*, the first volume in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust presents Marcel in bed wondering where he is, what he is reading, whether he is asleep, and finally remembering the places where he has spent his life. This scene reminds one of the meditative reflections of René Descartes, the seventeenth century philosopher. Proust then presents the reader with a more traditional plot

and introduces many of the characters who will figure in the intricate work: his mother and grandmother, his father, Aunt Léonie, the maid Françoise, Charles Swann, the baron Charlus and other members of the Guermites family, and a host of others.

The description of Combray, seen as a church, occupies a great part of Proust's first volume. Many of the activities are presented against a background of ecclesiastical imagery. Aunt Léonie wants to know whether Mme Goupil has gotten to church on time. She awaits the visit of Eulalie, who should be able to tell her, as she spends so much time there. Léonie, a hypochondriac, fulfills her Sunday obligations by praying next to a bedside table that resembles an altar. Her nephew, Marcel, and his parents spend their time going to church and taking walks near Combray. When not walking or reading, Marcel spends his time witnessing the maid Françoise's cruelty toward her own helper.

Swann's own anguish and jealousy are material for Proust's psychological insight into human relations. Swann seems to be more successful in the world of art than he is in the search for love. This quest takes him into the Verdurin salon, where love of the arts and fear of being excluded from high society are a constant concern. Once married to Odette, he realizes that she is not really his type of woman. When he contemplates her, it is to transform her into the biblical figures portrayed by the Italian painter Sandro Botticelli.

In *Within a Budding Grove*, Marcel continues to discover that people are not who they seem to be. He attends the theater and is disappointed with the interpretation of his favorite actress, La Berma. He realizes that the play of his imagination, the play in anticipation, gives him more pleasure.

He experiences his first love for Swann and Odette's daughter, Gilberte. His friendship with Odette evolves into a closer relationship with the Swanns in their home, a kind of sanctuary filled with artworks. The world of art and his understanding of it continue to be marked by revelations, for it is in Odette's salon that he hears Vinteuil's sonata. He does not realize that Vinteuil is the music teacher whom he had known in Combray and who then had seemed quite ordinary. In the Swanns' salon, he meets the writer Bergotte, for whom he recognizes some affinity.

A trip to Balbec, a resort town of the Normandy

coast, allows Marcel to continue his appreciation of architecture and to learn the ways of the wealthy. Through the savor of cake dipped in a cup of tea, he discovers that chance often brings people together

as much as it resurrects the past. He recognizes the baron Charlus, the nephew of Madame de Villeparisis, to have been Odette's lover. Marcel also establishes ties with Charlus's nephew, Robert de Saint-Loup, and the socially conscious Bloch family. One day, he visits the painter Elstir in his studio. Elstir talks to him of church architecture and introduces him

to Albertine Simonet, whom he had known only from afar and who will later become his lover.

The action of *The Guermites Way* is centered in Paris and in the military town of Doncières, where Saint-Loup is garrisoned. Marcel travels to Doncières to visit Saint-Loup in the hope that he will be introduced to Oriane de Guermites. When he returns to Paris, he finds his grandmother gravely ill. On an excursion in the Parisian suburbs, he meets Saint-Loup's mistress, Rachel, and discovers in her the prostitute whom he had once known in a brothel.

The spectacle of the world is played out in the receptions that Marcel attends. There, he is able to analyze more closely the poetry of the Guermites family against a background of exclusion and snobbery. At home, he witnesses the slow deterioration of his grandmother and the approach of death.

The smallest detail serves for the analysis of character. When Albertine visits Marcel in Paris, Marcel is finally able to kiss her. The kiss becomes a point of departure for reflection, a palimpsest of thought about architecture and photography and the phenomenon of knowing the human person. Oriane de Guermites is more concerned about her red shoes than the sickness of her friend, Swann. Even though a close cousin is dying, she and her husband, Basin, will not be kept from going to an evening party. Marcel slowly learns to shed all illusions about the aristocracy as he delves beyond the brilliance of their names.





*Cities of the Plain* continues Proust's voyage of discovery. Marcel becomes the spectator of the chance meeting of two homosexuals, Charlus and Jupien, the latter a servant of the Guermantes family. Proust humorously writes that the biblical angels must not have done their work very well since so many homosexuals still inhabit the earth. The Princess de Guermantes's evening party becomes the occasion for other incursions into high society, into its mechanical forms, as well as its games of exclusion and insolence. The party allows Proust to analyze the changes threatening French aristocracy, the homosexual bents of some of its members, and to reflect upon the Dreyfus Affair.

On a second trip to Balbec with his mother, the past relives as she takes on the habits and dress of her own mother. Proust reiterates some of his psychological discoveries as he adds mother and daughter to the list of hereditary doubles: Léonie and her mother, Bloch and his father, uncle Charlus and nephew Saint-Loup. The nonaristocratic Verdurin salon members climb the social ladder and receive Charlus, who is able to direct their activities until Mme Verdurin excommunicates him from her group. Though not always enjoying the company of the bourgeoisie, Charlus manages to entertain a mercurial relationship with the young violinist Morel. The young musician just happens to be the son of the valet de chambre employed by Marcel's uncle, Adolphe. Chance looms large in Proust's work, for in another scene, Charlus finds his lover in the company of the Prince de Guermantes. Marcel's own sentimental education is crowned with his decision to marry Albertine.

*The Captive* describes Marcel's life with Albertine in Paris and his struggle with suspicions that she might be a lesbian. He seeks the help of the Duchesse de Guermantes, as he wants to offer Albertine dresses designed by the famous decorator Fortuny. Though the young girl of Balbec now lives with him in Paris, the robes of Fortuny would assure him that the art world of Venice is also present. That is one aspect of Proust's writing. While one may consider it an overlay or variation of Cubist simultaneity, the writing also reveals itself to be the transformation of many artworks.

Just as Marcel finds it difficult to know Albertine, so does Morel escape the close scrutiny of Jupien's niece, who has now become his fiancé.

The niece is favored by Charlus but does not perceive his homosexual interest in Morel. Marcel realizes that, in his relations with Albertine, habit has its formative role, as it has in so much that is human. His one philosophical consolation is that he has plucked from among all the beautiful young girls of Balbec the most beautiful rose. His doubts persist, and he decides to separate himself from her, only to learn that she has already left him.

The Verdurin salon makes much progress as to the composition of its elite members. The Verdurins exclude Charlus when he tries to promote his lover Morel. Morel plays a Vinteuil composition that was transcribed by his daughter's lover. For Marcel, this musical piece becomes a symbol of the communication of souls and witnesses indirectly to Marcel's desire to leave himself. Art allows one to enter the world seen by another.

*The Sweet Cheat Gone* recounts Marcel's suffering at the loss of Albertine. He has his friends, Bloch and Saint-Loup, look for her. The news finally arrives from her aunt, Madame Bontemps, that she has been killed in an accident, perhaps an allusion to the death of Proust's lover Agostinelli. Marcel wonders if he had known her only in his thoughts. He sends Aimé, former headwaiter at the Balbec hotel, to gather information about Albertine's hidden life. His suspicions are verified. Marcel leaves Paris with his mother for Venice, and the city becomes a marvelous variation of Combray. At Combray, he did not want to be separated from his mother; now he resists leaving the city with her. Once back in Paris, he continues to discover that the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah are ever present among his friends and in the salons that he visits.

In *Time Regained*, Marcel wonders whether he will ever begin to write and whether he will write memoirs or some form of the *Arabian Tales*. He notes the influence that the war has had on Paris and its inhabitants, the infidelity of friends and the loyalty of others as they play out their roles in the space granted them by time. He finally realizes that paths he thought would never meet do so in the most unexpected marriages. Time is not fugitive. It may be seized in works of art. Such works are not necessarily those that hang on the walls of museums. One's personal experience of a copy of an artwork may bestow more value upon it than upon the original. The implicit suggestion is that reading Proust's own work makes time stand still.

## SUMMARY

Marcel Proust once wrote that he could understand how Noah, in spite of being shut up in his ark, could best see the world from it. Proust defined style not in terms of technique but as the statement of a vision. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, he shares his vision from his cork-lined room where, with the works of other artists, he re-creates a world of time and space.

Proust's work also stands as a monument to the relation that the person entertains with his culture. Few works invite the reader to the pleasure of reading as does the above, since an essential part of its problematic theme is the deciphering of the relationship of the reader to literature.

Peter S. Rogers

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*À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 1919 (*Within a Budding Grove*, 1924)

*Côté de Guermantes*, 1920-1921 (*The Guermantes Way*, 1925)

*Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 1922 (*Cities of the Plain*, 1927)

*La Prisonnière*, 1925 (*The Captive*, 1929)

*Albertine disparue*, 1925 (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, 1930)

*Le Temps retrouvé*, 1927 (*Time Regained*, 1931)

*Jean Santeuil*, 1952 (English translation, 1955)

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*Les Plaisirs et les jours*, 1896 (*Pleasures and Regrets*, 1948)

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#### TRANSLATIONS:

*Le Bible d'Amiens*, 1904 (of John Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*)

*Sésame et les lys*, 1906 (of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Was Marcel Proust a snob? How is snobbery treated in *Remembrance of Things Past*?
- It has been suggested that the title *Remembrance of Things Past*, alluding to a phrase in the thirtieth of William Shakespeare's sonnets, is not as accurate a translation of Proust's title as *In Search of Lost Time*. Do you agree?
- What changes does Swann undergo during the course of the novel?
- What aspects of Marcel's character does his grandmother bring forth?
- What portrait of pre-World War I Paris society does Proust give?
- How did the war change Proust's world?
- What can a reader learn about reading from *Remembrance of Things Past*?
- Proust wrote thousands of letters. What do they reveal about his habits of literary composition?

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## MANUEL PUIG

**Born:** General Villegas, Argentina  
December 28, 1932

**Died:** Cuernavaca, Mexico  
July 22, 1990

*One of the most famous Latin American novelists, Puig built a reputation based on his brilliant technical innovations, portraits of Argentine life, and political observations.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Manuel Puig (pweeg) was born in General Villegas, a dusty village on the Argentine pampas, one much like those he examines with such telling detail in his novels. His father, Baldomero, was a businessman, and his mother, Maria Elena Delle-donne Puig, was a chemist.

For many years readers have had to rely on Puig's own observations in interviews for most information about him. He was, by his own account, a sensitive, timid youth in a small town that valued authority and machismo; these were two things that Puig thought he lacked. He escaped this situation by immersing himself in Hollywood fantasies, going to the cinema at least four times a week.

In contrast to most writers, Puig was not enthralled by the medium—fiction—that would make him famous but by the world of Hollywood films. He read literature, but probably no more than other young Argentines of artistic inclinations, and what reading he did was almost exclusively of foreign authorship. He deliberately avoided Spanish literature for being tainted with the machismo that he despised. He also held Argentine films in contempt for much the same reason.

His education moved Puig in the direction in which he was already inclined. After enduring the small-town schools of General Villegas, Puig studied at the University of Buenos Aires, starting in 1950, and then won a scholarship to study directing

in Rome, where he worked for a time under the famous film director Vittorio De Sica. Instead of this being the answer to his dreams, however, he found the world of filmmaking to be merely another institution based on power and subordination. He did not abandon the cinema—he would never do that—but he did lose much of his interest in directing.

He turned his attentions to screenwriting instead. He insisted on writing in English rather than Spanish, evidence that his old attitude toward his native culture had not substantially changed. One of his first completed scripts was a 1930's-style comedy, less an original creation than a thinly disguised copy of the Hollywood films he had watched in his youth. He later would use such material in a fresh and innovative manner in another medium (fiction), but in the world of cinema it was merely stale imitation and was a failure.

At this time he received perhaps the best advice of his life when friends told him to write what he knew. What he knew best, like it or not, was Argentina. In taking notes for a new script set in Argentina, he discovered his notes on characters were getting longer and longer. He concluded, much to his surprise, that the best medium for his pursuits was fiction rather than cinema.

Considering that contrasted with most other writers Puig had relatively little experience either reading or writing fiction, the success of his first novel, *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (1968; *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, 1971), is truly amazing. Critics praised his technical innovations and his at once witty and compassionate portraits of small-town

life. That first novel was soon followed by *Boquitas pintadas* (1969; *Heartbreak Tango: A Serial*, 1973), which was praised just as highly, if not more so. After publishing only two novels, then, Puig had already established himself as one of Latin America's most famous and brilliant writers.

His third novel, *The Buenos Aires Affair: Novela policial* (1973; *The Buenos Aires Affair: A Detective Novel*, 1976), was also warmly received by readers and critics around the world, but not so at home. The repressive Argentine authorities apparently felt the book was too sexually explicit, and it was banned. Puig subsequently left his homeland and spent most of the rest of his life living in the United States, England, and elsewhere.

His writing during this period turned more emphatically political. *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976; *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 1979) was praised by some as his best novel, and it was turned into a film scripted by Puig himself. Other novels did not fare so well. Although some praised such novels as *Maldición eterna a quien lea estas páginas* (1980; *Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages*, 1982), many others objected that in his later novels Puig was too enamored of style at the expense of content and too intent on political goals to create profoundly human characters.

Over the last eight years of his life Puig worked on drafts of a new novel but turned increasingly to drama and screenwriting. He died of a heart attack in Mexico in 1990.

## ANALYSIS

Just as a single Puig novel may offer a variety of technical strategies and tones, Puig's career as a whole is marked by continual experimentation and changing subjects and themes. Change is one of the three Puig constants. The other two, which became increasingly interrelated as his career progressed, are small-town life (and lower-middle-class people in general) and political concerns, especially the politics of power and authority.

In almost all Puig novels the first thing the reader notices is his technical brilliance. The reader should not insist on looking for what Puig refuses to deliver—a conventional introduction of setting, main characters, and conflict, and then a chronological complication and climax—but instead should take pleasure in solving the author's technical puzzles.

Puig's first two novels—*Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* and *Heartbreak Tango*—are perhaps his most stylistically varied and innovative. In both Puig employs disrupted chronologies. The reader may not be supplied with information necessary to fully understand an incident first mentioned in the novel until that incident is alluded to again, perhaps only indirectly, later on. For example, in *Heartbreak Tango*, Nene wonders why the letters she writes to the mother of her late lover go unanswered. It is not until much later that the reader learns the answer: Nene's letters have been intercepted by her lover's sister.

Altered and piecemeal chronologies are just one of Puig's technical flourishes and are not truly an innovation, being a favorite strategy of such earlier writers as Ford Madox Ford, Virginia Woolf, and especially William Faulkner. More distinctive and truly innovative are the varied sources of information presented the reader. The fact that the information does not come from a single source imparts a richness to the novels—and, admittedly, a greater degree of difficulty.

In *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* and *Heartbreak Tango*, for example, Puig constructs his narratives out of letters, newspaper excerpts, memos, diary entries, police reports, advertisements, telephone and other conversations where the speakers generally are not identified (and sometimes only one side of the conversation is given), and interior monologues (rambling meditations of certain characters). The best analogy for the Puig style, especially in his early novels, is the collage. The total effect comes from an assemblage of apparently disparate parts. Puig used the collage less extensively in his later works but almost all later strategies are prefigured in these first two novels. *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, for example, except for a series of footnote commentaries, is composed almost entirely of dialogue between two characters, without the usual dialogue tags to identify the speakers. The same is true of *Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages*. The most nearly conventional of Puig's novels, in style at least, is *Pubis angelical* (1979; English translation, 1986), but even in that novel one finds sections of dialogue without attribution and a mixing of three different plot lines.

Puig's novels reflect and employ various aspects of Argentine popular culture that intrigued the author. *The Buenos Aires Affair* is written in the style of



the hard-boiled detective novel. *Heartbreak Tango* pulses to the rhythms and passions of the tango (excerpts from which introduce each chapter), while the characters play out roles reminiscent—in their own minds, at least, if not in reality—of the film serials suggested by the subtitle. In fact, films are almost omnipresent in Puig's fiction. The characters attend them, dream about them, discuss them at great length, and let their thinking, dress, and mannerisms be influenced by them. Puig's novels are clearly not themselves examples of popular fiction, but he does employ aspects of popular culture in his fiction to the extent that the reader is convinced of its importance in Puig's Argentina.

Technical innovation is such an important and fascinating feature of Puig's fiction that the reader may forget that the novels are also about something. Indeed, his style always serves his subjects and themes; in Puig, as in all great writers, style and content are one. Popular culture, for example, works its way into Puig's style because it is an important aspect of Argentine culture. Moreover, his characters immerse themselves in films, songs, fan magazines, and radio programs because their lives are devoid of romance and drama. Similarly, one-sided conversations, letters to which there are no replies, and interior monologues may be technical strategies, but they also underscore the desperate aloneness of so many of Puig's characters.

Ultimately, Puig's fascination with his characters rivals his fascination with technical experimentation. His earliest interest was in the people of small-town Argentina. Even when he later broadened his canvas to include city dwellers or persons living outside Argentina, his interest rarely strayed beyond the working- and lower-middle classes. The generals, starving peasants, and hacienda owners so favored by other Latin American novelists are not so much in evidence in Puig's fiction as are clerks, policemen, maids, and housewives. Their lives tend to be narrow—narrower than their dreams, at least—and their futures more limited than their hopes.

Starting with *The Buenos Aires Affair*, Puig moves away from powerfully evoking the mundane lives of the characters and focuses more on the causes of their unhappiness. Their problems are rooted in politics. Puig first cast his critical eye on the repressive regime in his native Argentina (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*) but then broadened his scope to include

the nature of power and powerlessness in general (seen most tellingly in the exploited women of *Pubis angelical*).

Puig is as technically inventive a writer as may be found in post-World War II fiction, with profound sympathies for ordinary human beings and intellectual breadth to match.

## HEARTBREAK TANGO

**First published:** *Boquitas pintadas*, 1969  
(English translation, 1973)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A dying man and the women who loved him recall their relationships.*

*Heartbreak Tango: A Serial* dates from the first stage of Puig's career, before his interest in small-town life was overshadowed by political concerns. The novel's title indicates something of its style and tone. Like film serials, it is episodic in structure, and it is filled with the passion, intrigue, and drama (even melodrama) of tangos.

The novel's episodic structure is not quite so simple as weekly installments of film serials. Instead, the story is told through letters, memos, quotations from newspapers, police reports, and other sources. The reader must reconstruct a coherent chronology of events from this variety of incomplete, apparently random, and sometimes contradictory information. This task is one of the great pleasures of the novel.

At the center of the novel is Juan Carlos Etchepare. The distance between the illusion—that he is a Don Juan among fainting females—and banal reality—Etchepare is a consumptive government bookkeeper—exemplifies Puig's view of small-town Argentines, who struggle to make a living as civil servants, clerks, and policemen while dreaming of romance and adventure—dreams that are fulfilled only in the artificial world of films, fan magazines, and pop music.

The novel begins with a newspaper notice of Juan's death. There follow letters from the woman who apparently loved him the most, Nene, to his mother, expressing her condolences and recalling Juan's and her relationship. From these and other

sources, the reader learns about not only Juan's life but also the lives of the women who loved him. The transformations they undergo over the courses of their lives differ in detail but are similar in the essentials. Juan, for example, at the earliest point in the chronology is a dashing, athletic man-about-town. He has an affair with not only Nene but also his sister's friend Mabel, among others. Then comes the onset of tuberculosis. His relationships with women begin to sour as he spends increasing amounts of time in a sanatorium. His last affair is with an older woman, with children, who is more mother and nurse than lover to Juan in his dying days.

A graph of Juan's life, then, would show a downward movement, a pattern also evident in the women who loved him. Nene moves from the high point of her romance with Juan to the grimmer reality of married life with a depressingly ordinary man. Mabel, another of Juan's conquests, begins as an envied beauty and ends as an aging schoolteacher with a history of affairs. Celina degenerates from the proud, even arrogant sister of the handsome Juan to a waspish, venomous spinster. Fanny aspires to no more than a life with the father of her baby but ends in murdering him.

Although there is indeed an undercurrent of satire in this collage of small-town life, Puig is less judgmental than compassionate, and his characters are less comic or even pathetic than profoundly, sadly human.

## KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN

**First published:** *El beso de la mujer araña*, 1976 (English translation, 1979)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two men in an Argentine prison struggle to find hope and dignity in an environment of fear and degradation.*

Written at the height of his powers, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is arguably Puig's best and most famous novel. It was his first novel written after Puig left Argentina to escape political repression, his previous novel, *The Buenos Aires Affair*, having been banned for sexual explicitness. In light of this, *Kiss of the Spi-*

*der Woman*, whose two main characters are a homosexual and a Marxist communist, may be seen as Puig's public refusal to accommodate himself and his art to the forces of fear and bigotry.

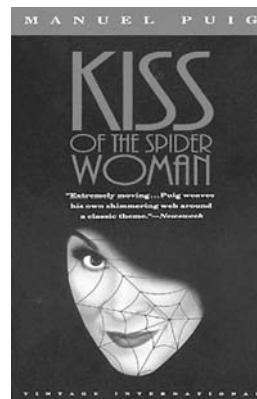
The novel hardly has a plot in the usual sense, that is, a series of events building upon one another to a clear climax and resolution. The novel is composed primarily of dialogue between the characters: Molina, a thirty-seven-year-old window dresser, imprisoned for being what he is, a homosexual, and Valentin, a twenty-six-year-old Marxist imprisoned for political activities.

At the beginning of the novel the two seem to be antagonists, not so much due to bigotry but because each sees the other's philosophy and lifestyle as irrelevant. Valentin does not look down on

Molina because he is homosexual so much as he finds a commitment to homosexuality a selfish waste in a world that cries out for political reform. To Molina, Valentin's political philosophy is an airy abstraction that does not measure up to the individual need for love and passion.

Molina dominates the dialogue, at least in terms of who talks more, and he demonstrates his love of beauty and passion by describing in ever-greater detail the plots of some of his favorite films. Valentin's near-constant interruptions are, in part at least, deliberate attempts to destroy the flow of Molina's narratives, thus underscoring Valentin's scorn for what Molina holds dear. When, less frequently, Valentin holds forth on leftist political doctrine, Molina returns the favor with his own interruptions.

A reader may note, however, that over the course of apparently trivial exchanges, important transformations are occurring in both characters. Valentin, secretly being poisoned by the authorities, begins to view Molina's narratives as a welcome distraction from his suffering; his newfound sensitivity reaches a culmination when he makes love to Molina. For his part Molina—consumed by self-interest to the point of agreeing to extract information from his cell mate in return for a prom-



ise of early release—comes to view Valentin with sympathy and compassion, risking his own privileged status with the warden to get better treatment for Valentin.

The novel ends tragically, with Molina gunned down while trying to deliver a message to Valentin's comrades and with Valentin tortured horribly, hallucinating a vision very similar to Molina's film plots. Still, the novel is hopeful in the sense that two persons seemingly irreconcilably opposed finally learn to accept and love each other.

## PUBIS ANGELICAL

**First published:** 1979 (English translation, 1986)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Three women from different times and countries confront a world dominated by men.*

A novel dating from late in Puig's career, *Pubis angelical* continues his exploration of the politics of power and subjugation. In this case the power is held exclusively by males; those subjected to male power and desires are women. Puig dramatizes his concerns by focusing on three women from different cultures and times.

The novel's structure reinforces the interrelatedness of the three women's experiences. Instead of telling the women's stories consecutively, Puig alternates sections of the three stories so that the novel forms a braid of narrative, a single thematic statement composed of three individual strands.

The first plot line concerns The Mistress, a beautiful Austrian actress recently married to a wealthy German munitions manufacturer (The Master). The Master keeps her a virtual prisoner until eventually she discovers that he has acquired her (she is little more than a possession) because he wants to learn about experiments in mind reading supposedly conducted by

her late father. Eventually she escapes, falling in love with the man who aids her. She comes to believe that this man's motives are no purer than The Master's, murders her new love, falls in love again, suspects the motives of this third love, and finally is killed trying to escape.

The second plot line concerns Ana, an Argentine who has fled an unhappy marriage and the political problems in her homeland only to be hospitalized with cancer in Mexico. Over the course of her conversations with her friend Beatriz the reader learns that Ana's relationships with men have been no happier than the actress's, although certainly less dramatic. The final blow comes when she realizes that her latest love, Pozzi, wants to manipulate her for his own political ends.

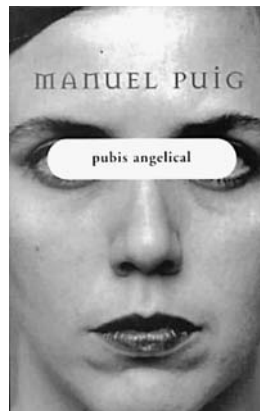
The last plot line is set sometime in a grim future totally dominated by men. The principal character is W218. The plight of women has reached the point that W218 does not even realize, at first, how degraded her life is. She is a prostitute in a government-run health clinic. Like the other two women, W218 is nearly redeemed, but ultimately betrayed, by love; and at the end she is dying of venereal disease, still working as a prostitute, in a camp for criminals and misfits.

The most common interpretation of *Pubis angelical* is that the actress and W218 are fantasies of Ana. Whether this is true or not is less important than the common elements of the three narrative lines. All three women are manipulated by men. All three seek escape and redemption through love of a man who at first seems to be sensitive. All three are failed by their new loves and in the end are either dead or dying. *Pubis angelical* is a grim parable of the fate of women in a male-dominated society.

## SUMMARY

Great writers accomplish two things: They make their chosen corner of the world profoundly real and universal. They also push at the boundaries of their chosen medium, opening up unexpected vistas for succeeding writers and readers. Manuel Puig is therefore a great writer. He has adventurously tested the conventions of the novel and has shown what new possibilities of structure and voice are available to writers. His experiments were not for their own sake but helped him bring small-town Argentina vividly to life.

Dennis Vannatta



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*Maldición eterna a quien lea estas páginas*, 1980 (*Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages*, 1982)

*Sangre de amor correspondido*, 1982 (*Blood of Requited Love*, 1984)

*Cae la noche tropical*, 1988 (*Tropical Night Falling*, 1991)

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*El beso de la mujer araña*, pb. 1983 (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 1986; adaptation of his novel)

*Bajo un manto de estrellas*, pb. 1983 (*Under a Mantle of Stars*, 1985)

*Misterio del ramo de rosas*, pb. 1987 (*Mystery of the Rose Bouquet*, 1988)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did Manuel Puig's early interest in films influence his sense of novel structure?
- Is it helpful to the readers to be told how they "should take pleasure" in Puig's novels?
- Is the construction of a Puig novel based on a presumed conception of the typical reader's presumably short attention span?
- Is *Pubis angelical* a misandrist novel?
- Can Puig's novels be called tragedies?



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## ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

**Born:** Moscow, Russia

June 6, 1799

**Died:** St. Petersburg, Russia

February 10, 1837

*Pushkin is widely recognized in Russia as the greatest of all Russian poets. He developed Russian as a literary language and showed its possibilities in prose, as well as poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (POOSH-kuhn) was born in Moscow, Russia, on June 6, 1799, the second of three children of Sergey Lvovich Pushkin and Nadezhda Osipovna Hannibal. Her grandfather was born in Africa and served as a page to Peter the Great. Both his father and his uncle, Vasili Pushkin, were writers, with the latter enjoying popularity among his contemporaries. Pushkin was exposed at a very early age to the literary world, in addition to having access to his father's extensive library. Pushkin came from the old Russian aristocracy and was particularly proud of his heritage. The family had lost much of its wealth by Pushkin's time but retained the title and continued to enjoy the lifestyle and the privileges of the landed aristocracy. Both his aristocratic lineage and his lack of money would play a significant role in the course of his life.

Pushkin began writing poetry while still in preparatory school. His early literary attempts reflect the literary currents of the time. The classical and sentimental traditions of France, in particular, provided a formative influence for the young poet. Most of the poetry that Pushkin wrote as a student is in a lighthearted manner and concerns love and drinking. After completing his studies in 1817, Pushkin moved to St. Petersburg to accept a position with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The po-

ems written during his first years in St. Petersburg (1817-1820) reflect the influence of political liberalism. His poem "Vol'nost': Oda" ("Ode to Freedom") established his popularity among the liberals but also drew the unwanted attention of the czar. This poem and his other political verse, such as "Derevnya" ("The Village") and "Skazki Noël" ("Fairy Tales"), were circulated in manuscript form or memorized, since they could not be published. It was not long before Pushkin came to be regarded as the voice of liberalism in St. Petersburg. Consequently, his peers began to fear the possibility of his exile. Czar Alexander I decided that rather than exile the young poet, he would transfer him to a position outside the capital.

Pushkin wrote his first long poem, a comic epic, titled *Ruslan i Lyudmila* (1820; *Ruslan and Liudmila*, 1936), during this period. This romantic poem, based on Russian folklore, already contains elements characteristic of his mature verse. The narrator in the poem is characterized by a detached ironic attitude and indulges in lyrical digressions at times. During the years of 1820 to 1824, Pushkin also completed several other narrative poems that reveal the influence of the English poet Lord Byron. The heroes of *Kavkazskiy plennik* (1822; *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, 1895) and *Gavriiliada* (1822; *Gabriel: A Poem*, 1926) share many features of the brooding Byronic hero.

In 1824, Pushkin was dismissed from government service entirely and was exiled to his family estate at Mikhailovskoe. Although the years spent on the family estate were lonely and disheartening, they were among his most productive years as a



writer. During this time, he wrote his first drama, *Boris Godunov* (wr. 1824-1825, pb. 1831, pr. 1870; English translation, 1918), a historical tragedy in blank verse based on the life of a sixteenth century czar. He also completed a great number of lyric poems, among them "K moriu" ("To the Sea") and "Prorok" ("The Prophet"), and several narrative poems including *Tsygany* (1827; *The Gypsies*, 1957) and *Graf Nulin* (1827; *Count Nulin*, 1972), and he began work on his masterpiece, *Eugeny Onegin* (1825-1832, 1833; *Eugene Onegin*, 1881). With the death of Czar Alexander I, Pushkin was finally allowed to return to St. Petersburg. Pushkin was still closely watched by Czar Nicholas I, however, who appointed himself as Pushkin's "personal censor." During this time, Pushkin began to experiment in prose narrative while continuing to write lyric poetry.

In 1830, Pushkin became engaged to a society beauty, Natalya Goncharov. The period of his engagement again marks a very productive time in his writing. He wrote a number of "little tragedies" during this time; the best known among these are *Motsart i Salyeri* (pr., pb. 1832; *Mozart and Salieri*, 1920) and *Kamyenny gost* (wr. 1830, pb. 1839, pr. 1847; *The Stone Guest*, 1936). He also completed his novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*, in 1831. Pushkin then turned to prose, finishing a cycle of short stories titled *Povesti Belkina* (1831; *Russian Romance*, 1875; better known as *The Tales of Belkin*, 1947). Pushkin's elation over his marriage did not last long. The poet was plagued by monetary troubles. His money problems were aggravated by his wife's attachment to life in high society. His wife's lack of appreciation for his poetry deepened the rift in their marriage, as did her flirtations with men at the court. Pushkin, however, continued to write during this time and produced some of his masterpieces of poetry, as well as prose. He completed *Medny vsadnik* (1837; *The Bronze Horseman*, 1899), a narrative poem about St. Petersburg and the destiny of Russia. Pushkin also finished *Pikovaya dama* (1834; *The Queen of Spades*, 1858) and several short stories and a novel, *Kapitanskaya dochka* (1836; *The Captain's Daughter*, 1846).

Pushkin attempted to resign from his government post at this time but was refused by Czar Nicholas I, probably because the czar wanted to keep Pushkin's lovely wife at his court. It became clear during this time that Natalya was having an affair

with a handsome Dutch cavalryman she had met at the royal court. Pushkin challenged the Dutchman, Baron Georges-Charles D'Anthès, to a duel. The duel took place on February 8, 1837. Pushkin was fatally wounded and died two days later in St. Petersburg.

## ANALYSIS

The essential characteristics of Pushkin's style are clearly marked and remain constant throughout much of the poet's literary career and through all the various genres in which his work appeared. Pushkin's language conformed to that of the educated classes and to the standards of elegance that the eighteenth century had sanctified. Although he made innovations and greatly enriched the language of poetry, he remains a classical poet in his balance, restraint, and harmony. Associated with his predilection for cool simplicity and elegance is a wonderfully light touch and a delicate wit. Pushkin possessed the ability to make the most complex matters appear easy and even amusing.

Pushkin shows great powers of insight and observation in his verse. According to him, it was not literature's function to serve a moral or didactic purpose. His aesthetic sensibility remained far stronger than any moral impulse in his works. It is this characteristic that differentiates him from many other Russian writers of the nineteenth century.

Yet most Russians regard Pushkin as their national poet. That might come as a surprise to Western readers, who are probably more familiar with the works of Leo Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoevski than with any of Pushkin's work. Pushkin assimilated previous literary traditions and added to them touches of his own genius. He forged much of Russian literary language and set an aesthetic standard. It is generally maintained that Pushkin heard the Russian language and saw Russian life with unprecedented clarity.

Pushkin's early poetry displays the influence of French classical poets and Russian poets of the eighteenth century. These poets taught him neatness, clarity, and restraint, which remained dominant in his writing throughout his career. Pushkin's fundamental classicism had deep roots in his own genius—namely, in the precision of his language, his artistic concentration, his sense of balance and harmony. He had a strongly developed

literary taste and with it, the ability to assimilate and transform many various literary styles.

During the years 1820 to 1823, Pushkin came under the influence of Byron. From Byron, he borrowed the loose narrative form, aspects of the disillusioned hero, and a sweeping lyrical tone. Pushkin's "Byronic" poems are notable for their mellifluous language and euphonic effects. Pushkin abandoned this manner for a style with a subtler correspondence between rhythm and intonation. Much of his greatest lyric poetry, composed between 1823 to 1830, is in this later manner. The lyrics written during these years are marked by the poet's increasing awareness of his isolation in society, a profound disquiet at life's aimlessness, and a preoccupation with the passage of time.

Though Pushkin applied himself increasingly to prose in the last years of his life, his poetic output at this time shows the same mastery. His style became more austere and increased in aphoristic concision. At the same time, his works acquired a tragic dimension from his heightened awareness of humanity's defenselessness before the powers of time and fate. Pushkin's works exhibit, in these later years, a growing concern with paradoxical human situations. This concern is expressed powerfully in *The Bronze Horseman*, which shows the unresolved conflict between the ruthless workings of power and the individual's claim to happiness.

Pushkin's prose pieces exerted a strong influence on the development of fiction in Russian in the nineteenth century. For Pushkin, it was essential that Russian prose be simple and to the point and that the language should be rid of all poetic effusiveness. He wrote mostly short stories characterized by their concision and sparing detail. He also experimented with the form of the historical novel in *The Captain's Daughter*; a story that grew out of his historical research on the Pugachov Revolt of 1773-1774, a popular uprising that occurred during the reign of Catherine the Great.

During his relatively brief writing career, Pushkin explored many different kinds of writing. He has often been described as a writer of protean genius. His works exhibit a variety of tones from cynical to passionate, meditative to vehement, frivolous to solemn. While his work may lack the central vision that characterizes the work of some other writers, there are important recurrent themes. Pushkin's poetry expresses a zest for life, an appre-

ciation of wit, and an intense feeling for beauty, poignantly contrasted with the irretrievable passage of time and the vulnerability of human life.

## EUGENE ONEGIN

**First published:** *Eugeny Onegin*, 1825-1832, 1833 (English translation, 1881)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young, provincial girl's love for a disillusioned playboy is rejected, but years later the tables are turned.*

*Eugene Onegin* is considered Pushkin's most outstanding and characteristic work. It has been called the first Russian novel because of its firm grasp of character and its realistic presentation of scenes of Russian life. Pushkin combines the virtues of slow development of character and situation of the novel with the quick epigrammatic wit of the discursive poem. He combines the pathos of a psychologically plausible affair of the heart with the charm of genre painting. The work reflects the author's own gradual growth as a writer, since it was written and revised over a period of nearly ten years.

The novel is written in fourteen-line stanzas, known simply as the Onegin stanza, since there have been no other attempts to create a work using this verse form. The stanza implements an intricate rhyme scheme, which ends in a couplet. The couplet rounds off the stanza and invites an epigrammatic or aphoristic conclusion. The typical stanza contains a proposition, an exposition elaborating it, and a summation with a final flash of wit.

The plot of the novel is very simple, and its loose form allows for a wealth of description and poetic excursus. Only approximately one-third of the novel is concerned with the plot. The rest consists of descriptive passages and the narrator's digressions on the theater, literary or social polemics, amorous recollections, or soliloquies on literary art.

The events of the novel are set in the early 1820's, and the settings are St. Petersburg and the Russian countryside. After an abrupt description of the hero traveling to visit his moribund country uncle, the plot moves to a flashback describing the

education of the young St. Petersburg playboy, his introduction to St. Petersburg society, and his gradual withdrawal from society life to the country estate that he has inherited. There he is drawn into the family circle of a typical squire of the period. The shy, bookish, elder daughter, Tatyana, falls in love with him and writes an ingenuous declaration of her feelings. She is overcome and confused by emotions that she has never before experienced outside novels and throws herself upon his mercy. Onegin is touched but ultimately rejects her, lecturing her and sighing that his days of love are over.

Meanwhile, Lensky, an idealistic poet and Onegin's friend, has won the affections of Tatyana's sister, Olga. After a party, during the course of which Onegin flirts with Olga to tease Lensky, the latter challenges Onegin to a duel. Onegin, a seasoned duelist, accepts out of pride and kills Lensky in the duel. Onegin leaves the countryside in a state of even greater disillusionment than at his arrival, although Olga quickly recovers and marries a young cavalry officer.

The plot now turns to Tatyana, who visits Onegin's abandoned manor and examines his library. Her family decides to take her to Moscow and there convinces her to marry a middle-aged dignitary. Years later, Onegin returns to St. Petersburg and recognizes Tatyana, now a regally poised society beauty, at a ball. He writes a declaration of his devotion to her and implores her to renounce her marriage in favor of him. She candidly admits that she still loves him but will be faithful to her husband.

The plot is artfully woven with descriptive passages and the narrator's digressions. Onegin and Tatyana are the only extensively drawn characters. Lensky and Olga, the supporting couple, are kept deliberately sketchy as foils to the others. Pushkin treats his semiautobiographical hero with ironic detachment. He comes to the conclusion that Onegin is a product of his age to some degree. The most helpful clues to his character are those that Tatyana discovers on reading his books. Pushkin sketches an inventory of the literary ancestors of the "superfluous man," a man disgusted by, and, at the same time, bored with, society. Tatyana, too, is characterized by the sentimental novels that she has read, as well as by her faith in folktale superstitions.

The author's role in the work consists of three

parts: that of the narrator, of an acquaintance of the hero, and of a character in the poem. This division creates a variety of levels to the narrative similar to that of Pushkin's first long poem, *Ruslan and Liudmila*. This structure results in a lighthearted interplay of plot, description, digression, and confession. Discourse on poetic technique and literary polemics is often cast in the form of conversation with the reader.



*Eugene Onegin* has had an inestimable formative influence on the development of the novel in Russia. The contrast between a disillusioned but gifted man and an earnest, sweet girl has become an established tradition in Russian literature. Since his novel

in verse was written over the span of much of Pushkin's writing career, it engages many of the themes and images characteristic of his verse, as well as tracing his development as a writer.

## THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

**First published:** *Medniy vsadnik*, 1837  
(English translation, 1899)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this complex narrative poem, the creation and destiny of Russia are contrasted with the destiny of one individual.*

*The Bronze Horseman* is regarded as one of Pushkin's masterpieces. Pushkin created the poem out of a complex web of personal, literary, and political themes, so that it is not surprising that interpretations of the poem have differed widely.

The poem consists of an introductory section and two parts. The title is taken from the statue of Peter the Great that stands in St. Petersburg on the banks of the Neva. Pushkin based the poem on a historical incident, namely the devastating flood that hit St. Petersburg in 1824. The introduction, however, begins many years before the flood. Peter

the Great is depicted as standing on the site that was to become St. Petersburg, looking out over the desolate waters of the Baltic. He sees only swampy marshlands and dark woods but fatefully declares the founding of a great city that will “open a window onto Europe.” One hundred years have passed since Peter’s vision, and there is a prosperous city in place of the marshland. The thoughts and impressions of the narrator become enmeshed with the description of the city. He speaks of his love for the austere harmony of the city, praising Peter’s creation.

In part 1 of the poem, there is an abrupt change in tone. It is a cold, windy day in St. Petersburg as a young man named Eugene makes his way home. Once safely home, he tries to go to sleep but is kept awake by his own worries. He wants to gain his share of financial independence, even though he will have to work hard to do so. He is also kept awake by thoughts of the rising river. If the bridges are flooded, he will be separated from his betrothed, who lives on one of the islands in the Neva.

The next morning the city is flooded. Pushkin’s description of the flood is one of the most famous passages of Russian literature. The scene is one of chaos and destruction, such that even the czar is powerless. Eugene sits astride a marble lion near the statue of Peter the Great to escape the rising water. As he worries about his beloved, Parasha, he is contrasted with the statue. The Bronze Horseman, namely Peter the Great, is oblivious to the destruction.

The floodwaters subside at the opening of part 2, revealing the death and destruction caused by the storm. Eugene hires a boatman to take him to Parasha’s house. Nothing remains where her home once stood, and Eugene begins to show signs of madness. Life quickly returns to normal in the city, except for Eugene. He wanders the streets aimlessly, until one day when he comes upon the statue of the Bronze Horseman. His mind grows clear, and he recognizes the man who founded the city. He confronts the statue of the czar and threatens him. In response, the face of the statue changes expression to one of intense anger. Eugene flees and hears the gallop of the Bronze Horseman after him. The poem concludes with the depiction of a small island, where a dilapidated house was washed ashore by the flood. Eugene was found lying dead on the threshold.

Pushkin’s style in the poem varies according to different moods, situations, and personalities. The majestic sonority of the lines about Peter the Great is contrasted with the abrupt, jerky rhythms of the lines about Eugene. The poem also contains a wealth of images intensifying the sensation of constant movement and restlessness, which pervades much of the poem, and personifying the river and the city itself.

The destiny of Russia is contrasted with the destiny of one man. There is, on one hand, the affirmation of Peter’s achievements and the promise of fulfillment of Russia’s destiny as a great power. Yet, on the other hand, these accomplishments are questioned by the destiny of one poor, insignificant man. The city was founded in defiance of nature by building it upon hostile marshland. It is only through the iron will of the czar, who acts as the embodiment of Russia’s destiny, that St. Petersburg was built and had prospered. It is also through the sacrifice of the individual that the city endures. It becomes apparent that one important theme in the poem is in challenging the notion that the individual must be sacrificed for historical necessity.

Eugene is the prototype of a series of characters in Russian literature who were rendered mad by the oppressive atmosphere of this unnatural city. Eugene is the victim of Peter’s city, of an indifferent metropolis. Pushkin’s acute powers of social observation, combined with his personal feelings about the callousness of the city, rendered a portrait of St. Petersburg that has become emblematic in Russian literature.

## THE QUEEN OF SPADES

**First published:** *Pikovaya dama*, 1834  
(English translation, 1858)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A cautious man orchestrates a deception to obtain a gambler’s secret of a sure bet but is himself deceived in the end.*

*The Queen of Spades* stands at the peak of Pushkin’s achievement in prose writing. The story was popular with the general reading public at the time, particularly for its striking plot. The story

opens with a number of young officers conversing after a card game. One of them, Narumov, wonders why his grandmother, who possesses the secret of winning at the game of faro, never plays. It is revealed that she was once an avid gambler and was given the secret of the game on the promise of using it only once to save her from poverty.

Hermann, a German engineering officer who usually never gambles, becomes obsessed with discovering the secret from the countess. He begins a correspondence with the countess's young companion, Lizaveta, who hopes that Hermann will deliver her from her poor position. They arrange to meet, but once inside the house, he confronts the old countess. When she refuses to reveal the secret, he pulls out a gun, and she dies of fright. During the countess's funeral, it seems as if the corpse winks at Hermann, and that night her ghost visits him and gives him the secret of winning. Hermann places the bets over three consecutive days. On the third day, he loses on the last card, the queen of spades. Having lost all of his money, he goes mad.

The story is a society tale, and part of its appeal, particularly at that time, was its depiction of the cold glamour that characterized fashionable society. Pushkin achieved the ultimate concision of detail, using adjectives and other sorts of description sparingly. Most of these details are doubled. If a theme or image is mentioned once, it is repeated later in the story. One example of this doubling are the roses that adorn the countess's hair, which echoes an earlier image of the roses in her hair in the portrait.

It is often assumed that the plot of the story is based on fantastic events, but, on closer examination, these supernatural occurrences are based on Hermann's developing monomania. Pushkin notes that "it seemed to Hermann" that the corpse

of the countess winked. The queen that appears in the cards at the end is easily explained by the rules of the card game. The countess's posthumous visit to Hermann's room is actually a dream.

Pushkin's characterization of Hermann is one of his most successful to this point in his career. He is one of the first characters in Russian literature who seems three dimensional. One of the salient features of his character is his dualism. His German side is cautious, calculating, and thrifty—yet another side to his character is developed as the plot progresses. It is revealed that he is also proud and superstitious. Psychological states are suggested by a compact description of physical reactions.

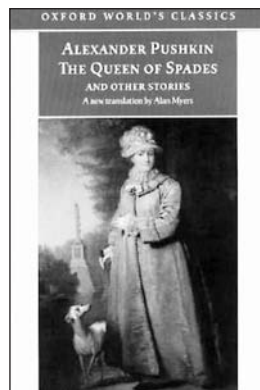
Card games have been seen traditionally as metaphors for life, where fate decides the outcome. In Pushkin's story, the symbolic and realistic levels are intertwined, so that, in the end, Hermann loses at cards and at life. According to fortune-telling books at the time, the queen of spades signified an old, evil woman. The countess and Hermann, then, are joined by means of cards and the theme of the incomprehensibility of their characters.

Pushkin's tone in the story, and particularly in his attitude toward the characters, is ironic. Pushkin forces the reader to see the humor in these situations and to see them seriously. The irony is pervasive but not destructive. It enables him to parody certain literary types and situations while still communicating humankind's powerlessness against fate.

## SUMMARY

Alexander Pushkin's greatness lies essentially in his lyric gifts, but he has also been influential as a prose writer. Pushkin's poetic world is striking for its multiformity. Through countless transformations of form and tone, however, his style is always marked by its compact, balanced, lyrical language, which expresses the poetic impact of love and life. His intrinsic, classical qualities and his seminal influence on future generations of Russian writers make him one of the most significant Russian writers of the nineteenth century.

*Pamela Pavliscak*





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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What French poets influenced Alexander Pushkin most?
- How did St. Petersburg society differ from that of Moscow?
- Were the aristocratic influences on Pushkin more helpful or damaging to his literary career?
- Is *Eugene Onegin* more of a novel or more of a poem?
- In what respects is the influence of Lord Byron most emphatic in *Eugene Onegin*?
- What has been Pushkin's influence on later Russian writers?

## Alexander Pushkin

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## BARBARA PYM

**Born:** Oswestry, England

June 2, 1913

**Died:** Oxford, England

January 11, 1980

*Pym, a novelist of manners, is remarkable for her humorous and ironic treatment of middle-class women and small-town happenings in twentieth century England.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Mary Crampton Pym (pihm) was born on June 2, 1913, in the village of Oswestry, Shropshire, England, near the Welsh border. She was the older daughter of Frederick Crampton Pym, a solicitor, and Irena Spencer Pym. Her sister, Hilary, with whom she lived in later life, was born in 1916; the sisters enjoyed a secure and happy childhood. At twelve, Barbara was sent to a boarding school, Liverpool College, Huyton, where she excelled chiefly as chairperson of the Literary Society. In 1931, she went to St. Hilda's College, Oxford, to study English. After finishing her degree in 1934, she traveled in Europe and worked on her first novel, which was to become *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950). In 1938, she went to Poland, planning to teach there, but was forced to leave by the outbreak of World War II. During the war, she served in the Royal Navy and was stationed in Italy toward the end of the conflict.

In 1946, Pym went to work for the International Africa Institute in London, where she edited a journal and got to know many anthropologists and linguists. She was not keenly interested in Africa, although she worked for the institute for twenty-eight years. Her paid work enabled her to write novels in her spare time and taught her much about the world of anthropologists, a world that she often depicts in her novels. Also important to her writing were the Anglican churches that she attended and in which she worked during her years in London.

In 1950, the publisher Jonathan Cape published *Some Tame Gazelle*, which Pym had reworked several times. The book was a critical success and was fol-

lowed by *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), and *No Fond Return of Love* (1961). These books enjoyed steady popularity, critical acclaim, and modest financial success. In the early 1960's, however, Cape felt that the taste for her novels had diminished and so rejected her novel *An Unsuitable Attachment* in 1963. Her attempts to publish the work elsewhere failed, but she continued to write. Pym even attempted to change the themes with which she dealt in such works as *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978) and *An Academic Question* (1986), but she remained unpublished for sixteen years.

In May, 1971, Pym had an operation for breast cancer, made a good recovery, but suffered a stroke in 1974. She retired from the International Africa Institute and moved to a cottage in the village of Finstock near Oxford with her sister Hilary. During these days of ill health and poor publishing success, she came to know the poet Philip Larkin, who encouraged her to keep writing. In January, 1977, a list of underrated modern writers was compiled in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and Pym was cited by both Lord David Cecil and Larkin. Suddenly, publishers were interested in Pym again, and Macmillan printed *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), which was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize. *Quartet in Autumn* was widely praised in Britain and America, and a new audience discovered Pym's older works.

Sadly, Pym's cancer returned, and her health declined. She spent her last years writing *A Few Green Leaves* (1980), which was published posthumously, and reworking earlier rejected novels for later publication. One of these rejections, *An Unsuitable At-*

*tachment*, was posthumously published by Macmillan and E. P. Dutton in 1982.

Pym died on January 11, 1980, in Oxford. She had been taking notes for her future writing up until the very end of her life.

Pym never married, although she had a number of romantic relationships with various men over the years. Although she had lived in London for a number of years, she was very attached to Oxford and Finstock and often depicted small-town life in her books.

### ANALYSIS

In several interviews and in her private journals, Pym often said, "The Anglican Church and English Literature—these are the two important things in my life." A reader of Pym's novels can certainly see these attachments reflected in her work. Most of her books depict a single woman of middle years who involves herself in the Anglican Church and often loves literature.

In her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, two spinster sisters, Belinda and Harriet Bede, whom Pym based on Hilary and herself, live in a small village and are involved in all aspects of village life. Belinda has a twenty-year crush on Archdeacon Hoccleve, pastor of the local Anglican church, who is married to a bossy, efficient wife. Belinda recognizes the many (and humorous) faults of the archdeacon but is involved in all aspects of church life, as are most of the characters in the book. This first novel is more humorous than some of Pym's later work, but like all of her novels of manners, it examines small-town concerns, both religious and temporal.

Belinda and Harriet Bede are the prototypes of a long line of "excellent women" whom Pym examines in her later novels. In her second book, *Excellent Women*, Pym defines the type: "[Excellent women] are not for marrying. . . . They are for being unmarried and by that I mean a positive rather than a negative state." Men accord these women esteem and respect but do not generally become involved with them romantically. The women may make a show of kowtowing to the men around them, but they will not relinquish the core of their personalities to a masculine view of the world; Pym's women are self-defined even though their world may be a small one.

As a counterpoint to her excellent women, Pym

depicts a series of feckless men who depend on the women. Archdeacon Hoccleve of *Some Tame Gazelle* is the first of a line of ineffectual clergy sprinkled throughout the rest of Pym's novels. Pym's clergy display a number of differences, but they are all remade by her excellent women. Beginning with her third novel, *Jane and Prudence*, Pym draws a connection between her fictional clergy and the anthropologists whom she begins to introduce into her work. Like the clergy, Pym's anthropologists are involved in the study of esoteric rituals and are dependent upon capable women to perform tedious tasks, such as typing and indexing, often gratis. Pym depicts both the clergy and the anthropologists being disconnected from the vital concerns of everyday life.

Closely allied to Pym's study of the Anglican clergy is her depiction of the Anglican Church itself. Through the course of her novels, the church and the clergy recede in importance to the larger community: The church is central to *Some Tame Gazelle* but is barely visible in *Quartet in Autumn*, published twenty-seven years later. The real Anglican Church actually suffered such a descent in the mid-twentieth century. By highlighting the decline of the church, Pym examines the question, "What constitutes community in the late twentieth century?" For an answer, she looks to other entities, such as the world of work and civic groups. In her last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, she depicts physicians and socialized medicine as attempting to assume the work of the clergy and the church. In truth, neither entity provides the social cohesion formerly found in the nineteenth century Anglican Church.

Pym has often been called "a modern Jane Austen" by reviewers. While this is a compliment to Pym, it is more of a comment on the novel of manners than a critical assessment of her work. Like Jane Austen, Pym depicts everyday life with an ironic and witty touch. One major difference between Austen and Pym, however, is that Austen's heroines always marry, presumably to live happily ever after at the end of her books, while Pym's women usually end up alone. In the few books, such as *Jane and Prudence*, *A Glass of Blessings*, and *An Unsuitable Attachment*, in which Pym's heroines do marry, their husbands are depicted as understated, even drab, and are certainly not the heroes of romance.

Another nineteenth century British novelist to

whom Pym has been compared is Anthony Trollope, the author of the six Barsetshire novels. Like Trollope, Pym writes about the Anglican clergy, but both the Anglican Church and clergy were more central to community life in Trollope's era, and Pym faithfully records the diminished role of the church in the twentieth century. Certainly, Pym was a great admirer of Austen, Trollope, and other British writers who wrote about the church and clergy.

In her twelve novels, Pym depicts a world of diminished expectations for women, the church, and English society as a whole, a depiction that reflects the actual state of affairs in mid-twentieth century Britain. In other hands, such a picture might appear drab and unpromising, but while some of Pym's books contain sad elements, she is often very funny and always ironic, witty, and astute. Pym's characters seem to have adopted the motto of the writer V. S. Pritchett, whom Pym often quoted: "The secret of happiness is to find a congenial monotony." Pym's women are caught in a very trivial round, but one that affords them quiet satisfactions. In Pym's books, such mundane occurrences as afternoon tea, the church rummage sale, and flower arranging are invested with meaning and significance and afford the author great opportunities to show her human nature at its most venal and humorous. All of her books show life as sometimes absurd but always worth attention and a good laugh.

## EXCELLENT WOMEN

**First published:** 1952

**Type of work:** Novel

*Mildred Lathbury, a thirtyish office worker in London, is attracted to the Reverend Julian Malory but decides that her single lifestyle suits her well.*

*Excellent Women*, Pym's second published novel, is often cited as typical of her mature style. Mildred Lathbury, the first-person narrator, is the daughter of a deceased cleric. She works part-time for an organization that aids impoverished gentlewomen, lives in a tiny flat, and spends much of her time on church work. Father Julian Malory, the rector of

the church, refers to his flock of doting spinsters, including Mildred, as "excellent women." A good-looking, ascetic man of forty, Malory tends to his ritualistic duties in a kindly, vague way, hardly noticing Mildred or the other excellent women who harbor wild romantic notions about him while his unmarried sister Winifred makes a home for him.

Mildred is also involved in the domestic squabbles of her neighbors, Rocky and Helena Napier. The plot becomes complicated when Allegra Gray, an attractive cleric's widow, moves into the parish and becomes interested in Malory. Malory and Gray become engaged, but the latter immediately starts scheming to turn Winifred out of the house. Mildred, who has felt some attraction to Malory herself, is also a friend of Winifred and must assist her when she turns to Mildred for help. Mildred comes to realize that Malory is an ineffectual, naïve person who does not recognize the scheming of Gray and is unable to deal with either Gray or his sister. He breaks his engagement and is living with his sister at the end of the novel. The reader concludes that he will probably never marry.

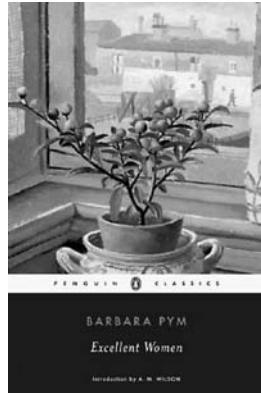
Another important secondary character in *Excellent Women* is the anthropologist Everard Bone, whom Mildred meets through Helena Napier. Pym draws a connection between anthropologists, represented by Bone, and the clergy, represented by Malory; both groups of men work at a distance from the everyday concerns of life and often take advantage of excellent women. Throughout the novel, Mildred is pulled between helping Malory with church work and indexing and proofreading for Bone. Malory clearly leaves most of the real work of the church to the women, while Bone leaves all the tedious, boring work of anthropology to Mildred.

By using Mildred as the narrator, Pym is able to show her main character's attitude toward the people around her, especially Malory, Gray, Bone, and the Napiers. Mildred lets Malory, Bone, and, briefly, Rocky Napier take advantage of her and induce her to perform tiresome tasks on their behalf, but she maintains an ironic detachment from her own life, which enables her to criticize and laugh at them. Pym's depiction of the interior life of Mildred is one of the strong points of *Excellent Women*. By the end of the novel, Mildred has exemplified the ideal traits of one of Pym's excellent women. She has tactfully reconciled a small breach between



the Napiers; she has reconciled Malory and his sister while allowing the insensitive cleric to maintain the illusion that she had been so deeply in love with him that his engagement was a severe blow; and she has transferred her own romantic interests from Malory to Bone, knowing full well that Bone is taking advantage of her as much as Malory ever did.

Mildred Lathbury is a type of woman whom Pym created in *Some Tame Gazelle* in the characters of Harriet and Belinda Bede; Pym continues to develop and change the excellent woman model in all of her novels, except for *The Sweet Dove Died*, *An Academic Question*, and *Quartet in Autumn*. Through Mildred and her other “excellent women” characters, Pym asserts that women will often accede to the preferences and desires of men but keep their own counsel and harbor their own views of the men whom they serve. Pym implies that the interior lives of women and their relationships to other women follow female rules and help them to remain self-defined actors on a male stage. *Excellent Women* and its main character, Mildred Lathbury, convey Pym’s ironic depictions of women’s lives with great aplomb.



## LESS THAN ANGELS

**First published:** 1955

**Type of work:** Novel

*A group of anthropologists, based in London, vie for position in the academic community and are shaken by the death of one of their number in Africa.*

*Less than Angels* revolves around the world of anthropology more than that of the church, but occasionally the two intersect as they do in *Excellent Women*. Catherine Oliphant, a writer of romantic fiction, is the sometime mistress of Tom Mallow, an anthropologist who spends much of his time on research trips to Africa. Mallow is angling to add the

other principal character of the book, Deirdre Swan, a young anthropology student, to his list of romantic conquests. Deirdre’s mother and her aunt, Mabel Swan and Rhoda Wellcome, respectively, live together and form a bridge between the world of anthropology and that of the church, since they function as excellent women to the clergy in their parish.

*Less than Angels* depicts the rivalries among anthropologists, which are usually trivial and often humorous in the same way that Pym’s squabbles among the clergy amuse by their pettiness. The roles of cleric and anthropologist merge in the figure of Father Gemini, a Roman Catholic missionary and linguist of bushy beard and peculiar temperament. Also important to the world of anthropology is Gemini’s assistant, Miss Gertrude Lydgate, with whom he practices the guttural sounds of lost African languages spoken by only a handful of people. Professor Felix Mainwaring, a retired anthropology professor, and his assistant, Miss Esther Clovis, compete with Gemini for research grants. Miss Lydgate and Miss Clovis function as helpmates and overworked assistants to the anthropologists in the same manner as some of Pym’s other female characters serve the Anglican clergy.

Rhoda Wellcome and Mabel Swan are at the beck and call of Father Tulliver, the rector of their Anglican church, just as Gertrude and Esther are to their anthropology researchers. Tulliver becomes a major comic character as he attempts to bully the women into helping him.

Tom Mallow, the attractive anthropologist, is a typical Pym male character as he takes advantage of Catherine Oliphant, who sincerely loves him, while flirting with Deirdre, who is only mildly interested in him. Two male anthropology students, Mark Penfold and Digby Fox, complete the Mallow circle as they admire his work and are willing to assist Catherine and Deirdre; ironically, Mallow’s death devastates Catherine but hardly moves Deirdre, who has gone on to a new anthropologist.

By the end of *Less than Angels*, Gemini has inveigled a large grant, which others were promised, from a rich old lady and happily trots off to Africa while the other anthropologists denounce him out of envy. Rhoda and Mabel, ever the excellent women, invite Catherine to stay with them while she is recuperating from Mallow’s death. Deirdre

teams up with Fox; the two of them, along with the other young anthropologist, Mark Penfold, pursue youthful pleasures, little noting the pain of others. In *Less than Angels*, Pym renders the world of anthropology as quite humorous but also sadly sterile and devoid of true human emotions. The study of remote cultures, tribal customs, and almost-extinct languages absorbs all the energies of the anthropologists, leaving them little time or energy to concern themselves with the people around them. Like Charles Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* (1852-1853), Pym's anthropologists cannot see anything closer than Africa, least of all their own families and friends.

The warmest characters in the book, Catherine, Mabel, and Rhoda, are not connected to anthropology. Catherine, the writer of romances, meets Alaric Lydgate, the brother of Gertrude Lydgate, at the end of the novel and encourages him to burn the anthropology notes that he took years before when he hoped to write a book. His sister is distraught at the burning, but Pym makes clear that this is a healthy step for him. It appears that Catherine will draw him away from anthropology and into the real world of emotions. Pym's career at the International Africa Institute in London introduced her to many anthropologists, a group that never held much appeal for her. In *Less than Angels*, Pym has pointed out the besetting sins of the profession in a manner both humorous and, at times, poignant.

## A GLASS OF BLESSINGS

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Novel

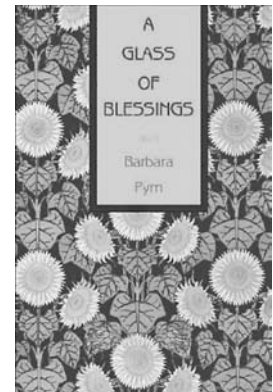
*Wilmet Forsyth flirts with two men in her circle, toys with doing church work for Father Thames, but decides to devote herself to her husband.*

*A Glass of Blessings* takes place in a small Anglo-Catholic parish, St. Luke's, in London. The first-person narrator is Wilmet Forsyth, an attractive young matron with time on her hands. The novel traces her attempt to fill her time and find meaning in her life.

Through her friend, Rowena Talbot, Wilmet meets Rowena's brother, Piers Longridge; like Wilmet, he is underemployed and works part-time as a teacher of Portuguese. Wilmet begins the study of the language and engages in a mild flirtation with Piers before learning that he is homosexual. Harry Talbot, Rowena's husband, is romantically interested in Wilmet, who is initially pleased by his attention but becomes skittish and nervous when he gives her an expensive enamel box. Wilmet is not seriously interested in either Piers or Harry but flirts with them to pass the time.

More assiduous than either Harry or Piers in annexing Wilmet to his circle is Father Thames, the rector of St. Luke's Church. Thames lives in the rectory with his assistant, "mild, dumpy Father Bode," and their housekeeper, Wilf Bason. A worldly minister, Thames collects expensive curios such as Fabergé eggs and attempts to enlist women to do all the work of the parish not performed by Bode. Complications arise when a new curate, Father Ransome, is sent to be the third minister of the parish. Thames is so selfish that he will not give Ransome a room in the large rectory; consequently, the newcomer must take a room with an unmarried friend of Wilmet, Mary Bearish. She is the typical Pym excellent woman. She works very hard for the church, lets the clergy order her around, and finally marries Ransome at the end of the book. The reader feels sure that Ransome will never do another day's work with Mary toiling away at his side.

Thames attempts to induce Wilmet to perform good works at St. Luke's, but it soon becomes clear that Thames's idea of good works consists of rendering services to himself such as ironing clothes and cooking meals. Wilmet wonders to herself "whether many men, perhaps the clergy especially, went about cajoling or bullying women into being the answer to prayer." Observing the activities of Wilmet from the sidelines with a bemused tolerance is her mother-in-law, Sybil Forsyth, who re-



marries at the end of the novel. Her son Rodney, a civil servant and Wilmet's husband, has been engaging in a modest flirtation in his office in London but returns to his wife. Rodney and Wilmet realize that they suit each other very well.

*A Glass of Blessings* depicts what happens to people with too much time on their hands. In the end, Wilmet and Rodney decide to occupy their time together, Father Thames retires to the Villa Cinerentola (Cinderella) in Siena, Italy, and Harry and Rowena Talbot draw closer together. Wilmet has a midlife crisis, Pym style, which does not include flaming affairs or rushing off to become a missionary in Africa but merely a few lunches and Portuguese classes with other men and collecting clothes for the rummage sale at St. Luke's Church. The preciousness of Thames and Ransome, as well as Bason and Longridge, is contrasted with the steadier virtues of Sybil and Mary, which Wilmet comes to appreciate. In the end, she develops her own brand of steady virtue, which differs from that of both Sybil and Mary. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet finds herself amid the distractions of the church and romance, distractions that Pym depicts with great wit and charm.

## QUARTET IN AUTUMN

**First published:** 1977

**Type of work:** Novel

*The failure of four elderly London office workers to connect with one another when two of their number retire leads to the death of one of them.*

*Quartet in Autumn* studies the lives of four office workers, two men and two women, and discovers the fates of the two women when they retire. The quartet functions as a team at work, but their private lives are detached from one another's and from those of other people; in fact, they are such faceless people that none of them is replaced when he or she retires because no one is sure exactly what work any of them does.

The first member of the quartet, Letty, lives in a rented room and shares the kitchen and bathroom with the owner of the house. In retirement, she

plans to live with an old school friend, Marjorie, an arrangement that is upset when Marjorie becomes engaged to a much younger man, cleric David Lyell. Letty moves to new quarters and is welcomed by the neighbors, including the priest of an African sect, but is put off by their exuberance and retreats to her solitary life. Also living alone is the bachelor, Norman, whose only human contact is his deceased sister's husband, Ken, who tries to include Norman in his life but is rebuffed. Norman is a thoroughgoing misanthrope. The other male member of the quartet is Edwin, a widower, who owns a home and is active in the Anglican Church. Edwin is the most outgoing of that group and ultimately takes Marcia to the hospital and stands in as her next of kin.

Marcia, the catalyst for most of the action in the novel, is unmarried like Letty but has the good fortune to own a nice house, which she has allowed to deteriorate. Always peculiar and isolated from other people, Marcia completely withdraws from humanity after her retirement. She obsessively saves hundreds of milk bottles in her garden shed, remembering wartime shortage when the rule was "no bottle, no milk." Marcia also hoards canned food but eats very little, usually only her deceased cat's leftover food, preferring to save her own tins against a future shortage such as her envisioned milk-bottle dearth. Pym depicts a woman seriously out of touch with reality who is slowly starving herself to death; Pym also takes the reader inside Marcia's mind to show her confused motivations and her indignation at offers of help.

Pym examines the offers of help that Marcia does receive and tones the roles of the other members of the quartet, the British welfare state, and the Anglican Church. Edwin engineers a lunch get-together four months after Marcia's retirement and is shocked by her thinness and weak appetite but presumes the welfare state is taking care of her via social workers. Letty makes a few gestures toward Marcia, which the latter rebuffs. Norman and Marcia are said to have felt a brief attraction in earlier years, which was never acted upon; however, Norman does nothing for Marcia except to walk by her house one day, then hurry away when she sees him. Ironically, in her will, Marcia leaves Norman her house, but the book closes with his preparing to sell it and stay in his old rented room.

Marcia's coworkers fail to help her, and she has

no friends, but the state does try to assist her. A perky young social worker, Janice Brabner, keeps trying to visit Marcia, who resents her visits. Marcia's neighbors, Priscilla and Nigel, also volunteer to help repeatedly but are rebuffed. When Janice Brabner and Norman find Marcia collapsed in her house, Brabner correctly observes that it is very hard for a safety net to save someone such as Marcia, who is determined to isolate herself and who dies as a by-product of her isolation and delusion. The Anglican Church and clergy are largely absent during Marcia's illness and death. She has never been active in the church, and the one cleric depicted, Father Gellibrand, who is Edwin's good friend, is busily involved in a world of ritual and ceremony and has very little outreach toward others.

In *Quartet in Autumn*, Pym has faithfully recreated the sterile modern urban world where people are isolated and elderly pensioners fall through the safety net of social services. Pym's quartet has forgotten the motto of the British novelist E. M. Forster, "Only connect." The lack of connection

that Pym depicts has fatal consequences for Marcia and lonely ones for the other members of the quartet; indeed, the description of the group as a quartet is ironic, as they are solo players from start to finish.

## SUMMARY

Barbara Pym's twelve novels depict the lives of mid-twentieth century British women in small communities either in London or in the country. In general, the women are underemployed and turn their considerable talents to church and community work. Although most of her women live alone, they lead rich interior lives and maintain a detached view of the lives around them. Pym's earliest novels, such as *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Excellent Women* are quite amusing, but her vision darkens as her style matures. *Quartet in Autumn*, a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, is a vision of detachment in a city with little sense of community. A sense of community is always essential to Pym's worldview.

Isabel B. Stanley

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is the basis of the humor that Barbara Pym finds in the anthropological life?
- Can depictions of social cohesion be found in Pym novels?
- How does Pym explain why her women characters generally do not choose to marry?
- What are the reasons for Pym's interest in the Anglican Church? Is her perception of the church generally negative?
- Are manners more important than morals to Pym?





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## FRANÇOIS RABELAIS

**Born:** La Devinière, near Chinon, France  
c. 1494

**Died:** Paris, France  
April, 1553

*One of the first and greatest fiction writers of the French Renaissance, Rabelais satirized the church and society and anticipated many modern techniques.*

### BIOGRAPHY

François Rabelais (RAH-buh-lay) is generally thought to have been born circa 1494 at La Devinière, a family estate near Chinon, in the old province of Touraine, France. His father, Antoine, was probably a lawyer and petty official who eventually became village mayor, but he may have been an apothecary or tavern keeper. Legend places François in a convent school at an early age. It is certainly true that he was a fifth son, and thus likely to have been “given” to the church as a candidate for Holy Orders; inheritance rights rarely extended that far down the family line. The same legend makes him a schoolfellow of the du Bellay brothers, later to become powers in the church and the state, and the protectors of Rabelais. By 1519, he is on record as a Franciscan canon (priest) and minor official.

Rabelais, as his writings suggest, resented the Franciscans, a relatively strict order. In 1524, he persuaded his friends to reassign him to a more relaxed Benedictine house with easier access. Eventually, however, even this stalled. A parish priest by 1530, he left that to enter medical school at Montpellier that fall. Six weeks later, he received his first medical degree; before the end of the school year, he was lecturing on the standard authorities. He returned to Montpellier periodically.

The following year, 1532, was pivotal. He moved to Lyons, the center of Humanism, where his rare talents could shine. He served as physician there, lectured on anatomy, and edited important medical texts. He also published the first edition of *Pantagruel* (1532; English translation, 1653), his first great book, telling the birth, education, and going off to war of the young folklore giant. To protect himself from the church, Rabelais used the anagram “Alcofribas Nasier” as his pseudonym. The book was a sensation. Within weeks, it had sold out and was being read by everyone. The adventures of the wine-guzzling giant, his quick-witted sidekick Panurge, and his merry men altered the course of literature, especially since Rabelais employed physical images from the barnyard and outhouse.

Publication brought reprisals. Within a year, the book was condemned by the Sorbonne; since the church had power to punish deviance by imprisonment and worse, Rabelais was in trouble. His home life did not help. Like many uncommitted clergy of that time, Rabelais did not scruple over his vows. He was living openly with his mistress and their first child. Fortunately, influential friends rescued him. His childhood friend Jean du Bellay invited him to serve as physician in Rome. On his first visit, he translated a description of the city, which was published upon his return.

In the summer of 1535, Rabelais was again in Rome with du Bellay, who was now a cardinal with enough clout to protect his protégé from church penalties and allow him to practice medicine as a Benedictine. During this time, he also published

*Gargantua* (1534; English translation, 1653), a sequel that actually precedes *Pantagruel*. In fact it is a parallel volume, relating the birth, education, and war campaign of the father of his previous hero. His satiric targets remain ecclesiastical and monastic corruption and hypocrisy, denial of the body and its pleasures, arrogance and officiousness of authority, abuses in education, and manipulation of the common people by those in power. The volume ends by depicting Rabelais's utopia, the Abbey of Thélème, a nirvana for Humanists. Two years later, Rabelais earned his doctor's degree.

Thereafter, Rabelais moved between Italy and France in the service of nobles or clerics, often a du Bellay and once even Francis I. During this time, he published *Gargantua et Pantagruel* (1532-1564; *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 1653-1694, 1929), which toned down several controversial passages. He also brought out his masterpiece, *Tiers Livre* (1546; *Third Book*, 1693), book 3 of *Pantagruel*, which appeared in 1546; it bore the royal *privilege* and was published in Rabelais's own name. It excels in vision and craft. The two previous books seem improvised and semiautobiographical; book 3 is sustained and tightly integrated, and the parts dovetail in a comprehensive double theme. One focus relates love to a satisfactory life; the other emphasizes good humor. They coalesce in Panurge's desire for a successful marriage.

Late in the reign of Francis I, ecclesiastical persecution heightened, and not even the king could protect writers; one of Rabelais's friends was executed. Unable to find safety in France, Rabelais spent the period of 1546 to 1549 in Lorraine and Rome, returning in 1550. Sections of *Le Quart Livre* (1552; *Fourth Book*, 1694) appeared during the next four years, before publication in 1552. Though lacking sustained, integrated brilliance, book 4 is vintage Rabelais. It continues the story of the quest for the Sacred Bottle by Pantagruel and his crew. The voyage allows much incidental social satire before arriving at the oracle in the fragmentary *Le Cinquième Livre* (1564; *Fifth Book*, 1694), published eleven years after Rabelais's death. The delayed revelation is obscure, reflective of Rabelais, of whom the best single-word description is "enigmatic." The oracle's word reveals the secret of Rabelais's vision of life: "Drink up."

Rabelais died in Paris, France, in early April, 1553.

## ANALYSIS

Rabelais remains a great unread master; as time passes, he seems doomed to become still more obscure. The past, as a great literary historian noted, grows increasingly remote: People become progressively less able to project themselves into it. Yet more lies in the character of Rabelais himself. Living at the dawn of the "modern" (his age invented the term and the concept), he pioneered what today is considered "game fiction," fiction that refuses to take itself seriously, rejecting the assumption that fiction "represents reality." This fiction presents rather than represents, and what it presents is a parallel universe in which commonplace expectations are suspended. It simply does not make sense, or not in the usual way. Yet, in not making sense, it opens readers' eyes and minds to possibilities previously unseen and unthought; it reveals deeper realities beneath the surfaces. The work of Rabelais anticipates surrealism, stream of consciousness, and metafiction.

In terms of conventional plot, not much happens in Rabelais's fiction; in terms of conventional characters, his figures are caricatures, stick figures. In fact, plot and character are pretexts for exploiting comic, satiric, and linguistic possibilities. He simply makes fun of everything: his characters, their lives, their society, the church, the whole preposterous busyness of life, and the habit of taking oneself too seriously. The most important thing in life is having a good time; the most important virtue is the good humor that makes for good times.

Rabelais's fictional starting point illustrates his ideas perfectly. Following a tradition begun by Plato in *Symposion* (388-368 B.C.E.; *Symposium*, 1701) and imitated by many classical writers, Rabelais uses the drinking party as the fictional opening. In Plato, this became a convivial, civilized, erudite conversation. Rabelais turns it into a drunken romp, a conversational brawl. He uses the persona or mask (imagined personality) of the wine-sodden monk-scholar Alcofribas, a reincarnation of the Goliard, the social student who drinks and wenches and sings instead of studying. Rabelais takes this undergraduate radical antiestablishment pose as the norm. From this start much follows. Like the Goliards, Rabelais concludes that license is a law unto itself. That is, humans pursue excess. All that counts is recognition; the one with the most toys at the end wins. The pagan motto was

“Carpe diem!” (“Seize the day!”) It is a continuing precept.

Rabelais, however, is mostly paying lip service to this way of living. His real hero—the hero of four of the five books, who embodies most of his philosophy—is Pantagruel. Although Pantagruel certainly is earthy and physical, he principally demonstrates Pantagruelism. Rabelais nowhere defines this quality, but it combines generosity, loyalty, fellowship, and love—the feeling that binds a group together. One aspect is team spirit, and much of it appears in different aspects of play in the books. The spirit of play and the impulse to playfulness constitute the Rabelaisian universe.

Rabelais plays with everything: He takes little at face value, and less seriously. Making fun is the common act of society in the book, from the drinking party at the beginning to the oracle of the bottle at the end. Some of it is mere fun; but the rest subverts whatever prevents fun, self-expression, freedom, and wholeness. Subversion is integral to Rabelais’s technique: He does so to rectify and purify, to get clear of interference and constriction. He is a great humorist, but he is a greater humanist and reformer.

Yet Rabelais is not easy or straightforward. He is easily the most cryptic, confusing, perverse, and apparently obscure major European writer before the twentieth century. Even where he seems transparent, he can prove baffling. For example, the common interpretation of his giant-heroes held for more than a century and a half that he had adapted folklore about an epicurean giant and folk hero. Late twentieth century research, however, has discovered no such folklore. Rabelais invented the character of the friendly, convivial, monumental swiller and good guy. The folklore followed—and continues today as team mascots (the New York Giants, warriors on the battlefield but sponsors of charities) and as commercial hucksters (the Jolly Green Giant).

Thus opposed interpretations abound, and scholars still disagree, even about Rabelais’s themes. Sometimes the disagreement is basic: Equally reputable critics have maintained that he is simply a buffoon and a sage and sober moralist, or that he is neither, or both. One famous example occurs at the end of the *Third Book*, where Pantagruel prepares his expedition to the Sacred Bottle. Rabelais inserts a panegyric on the herb pantagruelion,

an indispensable item in the cargo. If it is anything botanical, it is hemp; but this plant possesses remarkable properties not normally attributable to hemp—for example, a mineral form. Questions follow: What does it mean? Why does it hold this crucial position in his most significant book? If it is so important, why does he drop it?

Rabelais devotees typically dismiss objections of this kind, giving the response that Louis Armstrong gave those asking him to explain jazz: If you have to ask, you cannot understand. In this case, Rabelais is spoofing the inflated descriptions in botanical manuals, often puffed up to promote a wonder drug just brought from the Indies—tobacco, for example, or hemp itself. Yet Rabelais probably has more in mind. The *Third Book* examines the just society; pantagruelion is termed an instrument of justice (most obviously because the best ropes for hanging are hempen), and the book’s central question is whether Panurge should get married. Hemp may provide the answer. Rope-guided sails may lead him to the oracle; rope may hang him, rendering the question moot; or the asbestos form may insulate him against burning, making marriage unnecessary. Rabelais endures because he continues to provoke interpretation. Besides, he is funny.

## GARGANTUA

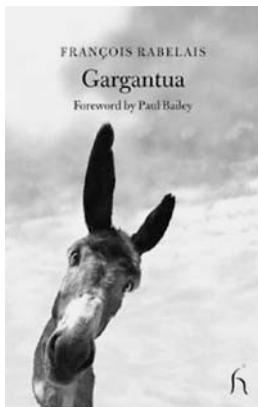
**First published:** 1534 (English translation, 1653)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The giant Gargantua, the patron saint of revelry, is conceived, born, and educated, comes of age, and conducts a successful war.*

Although not the first of Rabelais’s novels published, *Gargantua* begins the chronological adventures of the giant family. It promises to chronicle the life of the hero, as in the hagiographies (sacred biographies, or edifying lives of the saints) widely circulated in monasteries. It begins as a parody of these testaments to piety, inverting their conventions. Thus, instead of addressing the devout, it singles out different readers: glorious drinkers and chasers after love—especially those within the church.

Yet deeper meanings emerge. The persona through which Rabelais speaks, Alcofribas Nasier, is a mock-scholar, caught in his cups; his academic specialty is drinking. This characterization creates more fun but hints at hidden meanings. Rabelais establishes a parallel between Nasier's dialogue and the dialogue form of Plato's *Symposium*, which is also based on drinking party conversation, which contained Socrates' teaching on love. He also repeats Alcofribas's description of Socrates, which contrasts Socrates' rough physical exterior with his rich internal wisdom. This book also has unexpected depths.



That these depths remain unexpected is a tribute to Rabelais's art, for on the surface not much happens. After the prologue, Gargantua is conceived and born, clothed and fed. He travels to Paris for several "gigantic" experiences. He exposes abuses in the system of education and proposes a new method. Returning to the countryside, he encounters a cake sellers' war, a dispute expressed in epic terms. Gaining control, Gargantua distributes provinces to his comrades but cannot find a place for Friar John, a renegade monk and his henchman. For him Gargantua creates the Abbey of Thélème, a fantasy community of personal freedom and self-realization. Rabelais inserts verbal games of every description: parodies of scholarly prose, satires on legal and social practices, comic verse, monastic jokes, academic jokes, dirty jokes. Some of the book remains undeciphered to this day, and much requires explanation, but Rabelais's humor and vision of humanity suffering from repression make the book rich.

## PANTAGRUEL

**First published:** 1532 (English translation, 1653)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The son of Gargantua, Pantagruel essentially relives his father's life: He is born a giant, is educated, and launches a campaign against the Dipsodes, the Chronically Thirsty.*

Like *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel* has an elaborate introduction by Alcofribas, but it is less allusive and revealing because it is written earlier. Accordingly, this book has less unity and thematic integration. Yet it is, in the end, more important, since it lays the foundation of the series and characterizes Pantagruel and Panurge, who dominate the later books.

The structure of *Pantagruel* parallels that of *Gargantua*, although the two are absolutely different in detail and incident. The opening recounts the hero's birth and upbringing. Both heroes are appropriately enormous; Rabelais devises ingenious techniques of feeding and clothing them. Finally seeking his own education, Pantagruel visits many of the leading universities, exposing outmoded educational methods. After exploring the libraries of Paris, he receives a letter from his father containing Gargantua's prescription for education. Rabelais drops the ironic mask and gives advice that is more than sound: He suggests educational reforms at least a century before their time.

In Paris, he meets Panurge, the archetypal graduate student as social climber and sidekick. Together, the two expose a series of academic humbugs, in the process accumulating a gang of sympathizers. Hearing that the Dipsodes are overrunning Utopia, Pantagruel feels fated to establish order there. To do so, he designs a successful campaign of schoolboy ingenuity. At the end, Pantagruel must administer his conquest, including distribution of wine.

*Tiers Livre* (1546; *Third Book*, 1693), book 3 of *Pantagruel*, superficially continues the latter, but it actually departs radically in format and structure. It is Rabelais's masterpiece. Rabelais drops the mask of Alcofribas and speaks in his own person. He can do this because the book has the *privilege* of the king—that is, the author has immunity from

prosecution. He begins with the unfinished business of *Pantagruel*, disposing of it quickly to address its central topic: the *querelles des femmes*, or woman question, the major literary and social controversy of the mid-sixteenth century. A number of circumstances had combined to alter the perception and the role of woman and the function of love in marriage. Rabelais examines this by depicting Panurge as suddenly obsessed with marriage. He wants a guarantee of female fidelity. This obsession directs the rest of this book and the two following. Book 3 reaches no conclusion, but it ends with the description of *pantagruelion*, which humans should cultivate in order to live happily.

## SUMMARY

François Rabelais is one of those rare writers who define and test the boundaries of fiction, especially of comedy. The range of his comedy is broad, running from the coarse physical to the arcane intellectual. Like the greatest comic writers, however, his underlying purposes are quite serious. He ceaselessly attacks hypocrisy and repression and advocates personal freedom and self-expression through his characters, the giants Gargantua and Pantagruel.

James L. Livingston

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Does it appear that François Rabelais's work will be read only by scholars?
- What aspects of Rabelais's early life may have suggested the character of Gargantua to him?
- How does Rabelais take literary advantage of his medical training?
- Can broad comedy of the type Rabelais practiced blunt the force of his satire?
- Who were the Goliards, and why is Rabelais like them?



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## JEAN RACINE

**Born:** La Ferté-Milon, France  
December 22, 1639 (baptized)

**Died:** Paris, France  
April 21, 1699

*Racine was the greatest tragic playwright of France. His eleven tragedies combine stylistic elegance with extraordinary psychological depth.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean Baptiste Racine (ra-SEEN) was born in the small French town of La Ferté-Milon and was baptized on December 22, 1639. His parents, Jean and Jeanne Racine, were relatively poor. His mother died in childbirth on January 28, 1641, and his father died on February 6, 1643. Racine and his sister were adopted by their maternal grandmother, Marie Desmoulins. In 1649, she left Racine's sister with a cousin in La Ferté-Milon and moved to Paris so that she could become a nun in the Jansenist convent at Port-Royal des Champs, where her daughter Agnès was the abbess. The young Racine became a pupil at the Port-Royal School, where he received a superb classical education. The quality of the teaching at the Port-Royal School was held in the highest esteem even by those who did not agree with the Jansenists' efforts to make major reforms in French Catholicism. Racine read Greek and Latin with equal fluency.

In 1661, he moved to the small French city of Uzès in the vain hope that a cousin would find a good position for him, but Racine soon tired of Uzès and returned in 1663 to Paris, where he met Molière, who was both a famous comic playwright and the director of the Palais-Royal theatrical company. Molière's troupe performed Racine's first two tragedies, *La Thébaïde: Ou, Les Frères ennemis* (pr., pb. 1664; *The Theban Brothers*, 1723) and

*Alexandre le Grand* (pr. 1665, pb. 1666; *Alexander the Great*, 1714), but only two weeks after the first performances of *Alexander the Great*, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, which was then the other important Parisian theatrical company, started performing the same play. The Hôtel de Bourgogne performed all eight plays that Racine wrote between his first great dramatic success, *Andromaque* (pr. 1667, pb. 1668; *Andromache*, 1674), and *Phèdre* (pr., pb. 1677; *Phaedra*, 1701), the last play that he wrote before his first retirement from the theater. It has always been assumed that the members of the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe had offered Racine more money than Molière had. Because of the poverty of his youth, Racine never neglected an opportunity to make money. He was elected to the French Academy in 1673. His brilliant tragedies, based largely on classical mythology and history, were very well received by Parisian theatergoers, and he soon supplanted the aging Pierre Corneille as the major French tragic playwright of the 1660's and 1670's. Although he did write one comedy, *Les Plaideurs* (pr. 1668, pb. 1669; *The Litigants*, 1715), which is a free adaptation of Aristophanes' *Sphèkes* (422 B.C.E.; *The Wasps*, 1812), it is generally considered to be less significant than any of his last nine tragedies. On January 1, 1677, *Phaedra* received its first performance. *Phaedra* is almost universally recognized as the most profound French tragedy ever written.

For reasons that have never been fully explained, Racine retired from the theater at the age of thirty-seven in order to accept a position as the historiographer of King Louis XIV. Critics have hypothesized that Racine made this decision either

for financial reasons or because of his belief that he could not possibly write anything better than *Phaedra*. Whatever his motivation may have been, Racine applied himself to this well-paying position and composed numerous well-crafted poems in praise of Louis XIV. In 1677, Racine married Cathérine de Romanet. They had five daughters and two sons. Their youngest child, Louis, wrote lyric poetry and a biography of his father.

In 1689, King Louis XIV's second wife, Madame de Maintenon, asked Racine to compose an edifying tragedy on the biblical story of Queen Esther for the young students at Saint-Cyr, the first school in France for girls. As the founder and chief benefactor of this school, the queen wanted young students to appreciate the beauty of the French language and to practice reciting well-written dramatic verse. Two years later, he wrote a second biblical tragedy, *Athalie* (pr., pb. 1691; *Athaliah*, 1722), for the same school. During Racine's lifetime, these moving biblical tragedies were performed only by the pupils at Saint-Cyr, but they have been performed regularly in France since the eighteenth century. Racine's loyalty to the royal family was appreciated by the king, who paid him a good salary for the remainder of his life. In 1695, Racine was even named an adviser to King Louis XIV. It was an extraordinary honor for a subject such as Racine whose parents had been so poor. Racine died on April 21, 1699, in Paris. At his request, he was buried at Port-Royal des Champs, where he had been educated.

### ANALYSIS

Although he did write one witty comedy, *The Litigants*, Racine has remained famous almost exclusively for the nine tragedies that he wrote between *Andromache* in 1667 and *Athaliah* in 1691. His first two plays, *The Theban Brothers* and *Alexander the Great*, are rather weak tragedies, and critics generally agree that there is a significant difference in quality between these two early plays and his later tragic masterpieces. Like Corneille, who was the other great French tragic playwright in the seventeenth century, Racine depicted very effectively the use and abuse of political power, but Racine also developed profound connections between love and violence and created both sympathetic victims and psychologically complicated and fascinating villains.

*Britannicus* (pr. 1669, pb. 1670; English translation, 1714) illustrates beautifully Racine's creative method. This tragedy deals with very famous historical characters whom the Roman historian Tacitus had analyzed in his *Ab excessu divi Augusti* (c.116 C.E.; *Annals*, 1598). Although the title character in this tragedy is the half brother of Emperor Nero, Racine affirms in his preface that the main focus is not Britannicus but the evil Nero. Racine speaks of Nero thus:

I always considered him to be a monster. But here he is a monster being born. He has not yet set fire to Rome. He has not yet murdered his mother, his wife, his governors.

Spectators fully expect Nero to be depicted as the violent and dangerous criminal that he was. In *Britannicus*, there are six major characters. The three virtuous characters are Britannicus, his beloved Junie, and Nero's good adviser, Burrhus. The three amoral characters are Nero, his mother, Agrippina, and his evil adviser, Narcissus. Against the wishes of her late husband, Emperor Claudius, Agrippina had Nero placed on the throne instead of Britannicus. Now that he is emperor, Nero has no further need for his mother. He has begun to act violently. Although he knows that Britannicus and Junie love each other very much, he has Junie abducted "in the middle of the night." She fears being killed or raped by him. Narcissus encourages his master to satisfy his every desire, and this advice pleases Nero immensely. Racine describes Nero as a sadist who enjoyed making Junie suffer and weep. Nero tells her that if she confesses her love to Britannicus, he will have his half brother murdered. As the lovers talk, Nero listens in the wings. Junie is terrified, and Britannicus cannot understand why his beloved is now so distant.

In act 3, Junie is finally permitted to express her true feelings for Britannicus and tries in vain to persuade him to flee from Rome. The hypocritical tyrant Nero returns to the stage and affirms that it is only just for him to have Britannicus arrested because his half brother dared to criticize the abduction of Junie. In act 4, Nero tells his mother that he has no intention of obeying those laws that interfere with the satisfaction of his violent sexual desires. For him, murder and rape are permissible, but he promises to Agrippina that he will spare the

life of his half brother. Although Agrippina is deceived by Nero, the spectators are under no such delusions. They know that Britannicus will soon be killed. Burrhus describes how Nero himself murdered his half brother. While proclaiming his friendship for Britannicus, Nero gave him a cup of poisoned wine. The unsuspecting Britannicus died instantly, and the witnesses realized that Nero had poisoned his half brother. Although the spectators are angered by the death of Britannicus, there is some poetic justice in this tragedy. As Junie fled from the imperial court in order to reach safety with the Vestal Virgins, Narcissus attacked her in the streets. The onlookers killed Narcissus in order to prevent the rape or murder of Junie.

Although much violence takes place offstage in Racine's tragedies, his style is consistently elegant and refined. Racine is a very effective dramatic poet. His virtuous and villainous characters express themselves in similar styles, but the spectators learn to distinguish very carefully between the way that Racine's characters speak and act. Appearance and reality are quite different in his tragedies. In *Athaliah*, for example, the title character is a monstrous grandmother who tried to kill all her grandchildren in order to seize power in Judea. She learns that her grandson Joas is still alive and is being protected by the high priest in the temple in Jerusalem. When Athaliah describes herself as a loving grandmother whose sole wish is to see her only surviving grandchild, neither the high priest Joad nor the spectators are deceived. They realize that she is a lying hypocrite whose eloquent language belies her criminal nature. Although there is a clear distinction between moral and amoral characters in Racine's tragedies, the villainous characters are often much more interesting, largely because they try so hard to deceive others, and it often takes much time for the virtuous characters to appreciate the full moral turpitude of these villains who misuse political power for their own selfish reasons.

## ANDROMACHE

**First produced:** *Andromaque*, 1667 (first published, 1668; English translation, 1674)

**Type of work:** Play

*As a prisoner of the Greeks after the end of the Trojan War, Andromache must overcome her hatred for the Greeks in order to save her young son, Astyanax, from death.*

*Andromache* was Racine's first tragic masterpiece. This play describes the destructive links between love and violence and shows how the four major characters tried to destroy one another through manipulation and threats. As this tragedy begins, Andromache (widow of the Trojan military hero Hector) is a prisoner with her young son Astyanax in Epirus, where the Greek king, Pyrrhus, reigns. Pyrrhus is engaged to the Greek princess Hermione, whom he wishes to repudiate so that he can marry Andromache. Hermione still loves Pyrrhus, but she is loved by Orestes, whom other Greek cities have sent as an ambassador to Epirus to demand that Pyrrhus execute Astyanax. The Greeks have an irrational fear that if Astyanax reaches manhood, he will avenge his father's death and conquer Greece. *Andromache* begins a full year after the destruction of Troy.

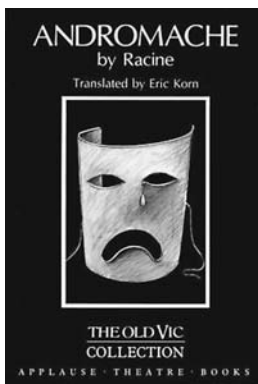
In act 1, Pyrrhus seems to be a very sensible monarch who values human life. He argues that it is morally unacceptable for the Greeks to seek the death of an innocent child. Pyrrhus is, of course, correct. In the very next scene, however, Pyrrhus is revealed as a hypocrite. In a very formal style, he tells Andromache that Astyanax will be promptly executed unless she agrees to marry him. His extreme brutality and overt abuse of political power inspire terror in Andromache. When Hermione first appears in act 2, she describes herself as a vulnerable and unstable character with a tendency toward violence. She had encouraged the Greeks to seek the death of both Astyanax and Andromache because Hector's widow was her rival for the love of Pyrrhus. Orestes loves Hermione, but he allows himself to be manipulated by her because he is afraid of losing her. He does not object when she asks him to prove his love for her by assassinating Pyrrhus if he marries Andromache.

The residents of Epirus are enraged because they realize that influential people such as Pyrrhus, Hermione, and Orestes are willing to use violence in order to satisfy their own sexual desires. An uprising is becoming more and more likely. As a prisoner, Andromache does not know that Pyrrhus may soon be overthrown by his own subjects. She is haunted by a recurring nightmare. She keeps seeing the deaths of her husband, parents, and cousins during the sacking of Troy and cannot forgive the Greeks, who killed so many Trojans before her eyes. The past weighs heavy on Andromache, who has become a prisoner of her terrifying memories. She

finally decides to marry Pyrrhus, but she intends to commit suicide immediately after the marriage ceremony. She hopes that Pyrrhus will keep his promise and preserve Astyanax from death. Between acts 4 and 5, however, Pyrrhus is killed just before his marriage to Andromache can be celebrated.

Racine wrote two separate versions for act 5 in

*Andromache*. In the original 1667 version, Andromache returns to the stage after the assassination of Pyrrhus and seems to relish her new political power. She has been transformed into a rather unsympathetic politician. In the 1676 version of *Andromache*, she does not return to the stage after the death of Pyrrhus. In this version, spectators retain a much more favorable opinion of her profound dignity. This tragedy ends very badly for the violent characters. Hermione commits suicide, and guilt drives Orestes mad. The spectators realize, however, that little hope for a better world exists because the innocent Astyanax will die at a young age. *Andromache* is a very effective tragedy that continues to fascinate.



## PHAEDRA

**First produced:** *Phèdre*, 1677 (first published, 1677; English translation, 1701)

**Type of work:** Play

*Phaedra is torn between the duty that she feels for her profligate husband, Theseus, and her love for her stepson, Hippolytus.*

*Phaedra* is the most problematic tragedy written by Racine. Ever since its first publication in 1677, critics have been proposing the most diverse interpretations for this tragedy. As *Phaedra* begins, Hippolytus announces his intention of leaving his homeland, although he is unwilling to explain the reasons for his decision. In the following scene, Oenone, who is Phaedra's confidant, informs Hippolytus that Hippolytus's stepmother, Phaedra, is exceedingly depressed and cannot receive visitors. When she is alone with Oenone, Phaedra speaks of her fatalistic view of the world. She believes that "everything is conspiring to harm" her. Although she realizes that it is wrong for her to feel passion for her stepson because her husband is still alive, Phaedra cannot resist this forbidden love, which she describes as "Venus completely attached to her prey." Spectators and readers of *Phaedra* can never determine with any certainty if Phaedra is deceiving Oenone or if she truly considers herself to be a victim of love and fate. *Phaedra* is a marvelously ambiguous tragedy.

Near the end of act 1, a false report is given that Theseus has died during his travels. Oenone suggests that the death of Theseus renders legitimate Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus, but there are two major obstacles. First, Hippolytus loves and wishes to marry Aricia, a royal princess from Athens. Racine describes Hippolytus and Aricia as sympathetic young lovers who are afraid that their parents will object to their marriage because the two come from different regions of Greece. Secondly, Phaedra learns in act 3 that her husband is still alive. During the second act, Phaedra confesses her passion to her stepson, who reacts with disbelief. When she realizes that Hippolytus has rejected her love, she takes Hippolytus's sword. Just before Theseus returns, Phaedra learns to her horror that Hippolytus loves Aricia. The enraged Phaedra



seeks revenge. She tells her husband that Hippolytus tried to rape her and assures Theseus that she grabbed his sword in order to defend herself from her violent stepson. The self-righteous Theseus, who had seduced and raped several women, calls upon the gods to punish his son with death. A terrible injustice is committed when the gods send a sea monster, which kills Hippolytus. Theramenes, who had been a father figure to Hippolytus, describes his death in a long speech. Theramenes' narrative is almost universally recognized as the most moving and eloquent speech ever written by Racine. It is difficult not to weep when listening to Theramenes' description of the death of this innocent young person. Phaedra then returns to the stage, admits the baseness of her accusations against Hippolytus, and states that she has swal-

lowed poison. She leaves the stage in order to die. The repentant Theseus offers to serve as a father for Aricia, but she will have nothing to do with the tyrant who was responsible for the death of her beloved Hippolytus.

### SUMMARY

Jean Racine was both a very fine poet and a profound playwright whose tragic vision of the world continues to fascinate theatergoers and readers almost three centuries after the end of his literary career. Racine had the extraordinary ability of transforming famous episodes from ancient history and mythology and from the Old Testament into powerful tragedies that express with refined eloquence the intense suffering of his characters.

Edmund J. Campion

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*Andromaque*, pr. 1667, pb. 1668 (*Andromache*, 1674)  
*Les Plaideurs*, pr. 1668, pb. 1669 (*The Litigants*, 1715)  
*Britannicus*, pr. 1669, pb. 1670 (English translation, 1714)  
*Bérénice*, pr. 1670, pb. 1671 (English translation, 1676)  
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- Abrégé de l'histoire de Port-Royal*, 1742 (first part), 1767 (full text)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain how Jean Racine, along with Molière and Pierre Corneille, made the later seventeenth century a great era in French drama.
- What are the origins of the material from which Racine made *Phaedra*?
- What were the principles of French classical tragedy?
- Explain the differences between the two versions of act 5 of *Andromache* and how they alter our conception of the heroine.
- What were Racine's chief virtues as a poet?
- What are the chief differences between the tragedies of Corneille and Racine?

*Jean Racine*

POETRY:

*Cantiques spirituels*, 1694

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## ERICH MARIA REMARQUE

**Born:** Osnabrück, Germany  
June 22, 1898

**Died:** Locarno, Switzerland  
September 25, 1970

*Author of one of the world's most famous war novels, Remarque made additional contributions to literature in a series of novels about alienated war veterans and political exiles.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Although the success of his thirteen novels, notably *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929, 1968; *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929, 1969), eventually allowed him the indulgences of a glamorous lifestyle and international notoriety, Erich Paul Remark began life in modest circumstances. He was born in imperial Germany in the ancient city of Osnabrück on June 22, 1898. The Remarks were Catholic in a predominantly Protestant region and both his mother and father (Peter Remark was a book printer and binder) descended from generations of Franco-German craftsmen. Both pride in his family's French origins and dismay over the inadequacy of his early writing led Erich in 1923 to change his name to Erich Maria Remarque (ruh-MAHRK), the name by which his readers knew him.

Erich's parents and his two younger sisters moved often in Osnabrück to avail themselves of low rents. Since many of Remarque's writings were semiautobiographical, the settings familiar to these dwellings later emerged in his novels. So, too, did some of his childhood interests: collecting butterflies, stamps, and stones painting, playing the piano and organ, and writing. Teaching piano, in fact, earned him his early pocket money and a prizewinning essay in 1916 brought him his first money as a writer.

Opportunities for the upward mobility of intelligent working-class children were limited in Wil-

helmine Germany. Educated in Catholic primary schools between 1904 and 1912, Erich at fourteen had almost no choice except to enter an inexpensive Catholic preparatory school where he underwent instruction preliminary to becoming a schoolteacher—an occupation he later found hidebound and mind-numbing. Meantime as Germany entered its second year of war, he joined an artistic and literary group whose members soon provided material for characters in his early novels.

War caught up with Remarque in November, 1916, when he was drafted into the army, thereby setting in motion experiences from which sprang *All Quiet on the Western Front*. After basic training, he and several other Osnabrückers were detailed to a guard reserve division behind the Arras front in northwestern France and were then moved forward to a sapper company. Late in July, 1917, Remarque carried a wounded comrade from under fire, though the man later died from his wounds. A few days later, as the Battle of Flanders raged, Remarque himself was wounded in the left leg, neck, and right arm by British shell fragments. From July, 1917, until November, 1918—a time during which his mother died of cancer—Remarque was hospitalized. His reassignment to active duty came four days before the armistice that ended the fighting on November 11. Those men with whom Remarque served accounted him a good comrade and a calm, competent soldier. They were surprised, however, when after the war Remarque affected a rank that he never held and sported medals that he never earned.

Between 1919 and 1922, when he was not unem-

ployed, Remarque taught school—which he disliked as much as his superiors disliked him. At other times he sold dry goods, worked for a stone cutting firm, and published *Die Traumbude* (the dream room) in 1920, a novel whose shortcomings mortified him. From 1922 until 1924, he held his first good job as the publicity director for the Continental Rubber Company and editor of its advertising and trade journal. It was a post that helped improve his writing, allowed him extensive travel, and initiated his lifelong interest in race car driving. By 1925, he had married and taken a new job as illustration editor for a Berlin sports paper that soon serialized some of his writings.

Publication of *All Quiet on the Western Front* dramatically altered Remarque's life. It secured him an international readership along with considerable fame. It also immersed him in acrimonious controversies with German ultranationalists, as well as with literary critics. The novel was written in six weeks and was published in book form in 1929 after prior serialization in a German newspaper. Assured of readers, Remarque settled into a writing career that resulted in the creation of ten more novels between 1931 and 1970.

A very private man, Remarque nevertheless lived what appeared to be a glamorous and newsworthy life. Handsome, charming, urbane, and elegant in dress, he loved driving race cars, despite accidents. He gained stature as a skillful art collector. His wit and conviviality facilitated acquaintanceships throughout society and brought him a wide range of friends, among them comedian Charlie Chaplin, writers Stefan Zweig, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and songwriter Cole Porter. Remarque divorced his first wife after four years of marriage. He remarried her in 1938 solely to aid her escape from Nazi Germany and then divorced her again. He was intimately associated with beautiful and accomplished women, notably Greta Garbo and the German American film actress, Marlene Dietrich. Driven from Germany and stripped of his German citizenship by the Nazis in 1939, he acquired American citizenship in 1947. For several years he had homes in Switzerland, New York, and Los Angeles, where, in Hollywood, many of his novels were filmed and where he met and later married the beautiful and intelligent film actress Paulette Goddard.

Remarque's life, however, was not without tragedy.

He lost his mother and a number of friends during World War I. He was grieved by the loss of his German citizenship. A beloved sister was beheaded by the Nazis, largely because of his writings. Osnabrück, the city dear to him in his youth, lost its appeal for him, although the city eventually honored him for his writings. In addition, literary critics, particularly in Germany, tended to be harshly unappreciative of his work. Moreover, in time, despite his affection for the United States, the ugliness of American life persuaded him to live abroad for lengthy periods. Not least, a series of heart attacks in the 1960's diminished the quality of his writings. Years of heavy drinking contributed to his death on September 25, 1970, in Locarno, Switzerland.

## ANALYSIS

Remarque's creative life was encompassed by World War I and the collapse of imperial Germany, the atrophy of German democracy in the 1920's, the rise of Nazism, and the outbreak of World War II. These historic episodes were unprecedented in human experience. Western values, where they survived, were continuously under political and intellectual assaults for more than half a century. Remarque's novels focus on the plights of ordinary men and women—common soldiers, demobilized and alienated veterans, displaced persons, political exiles, and victims of totalitarian regimes. His characters are people uprooted from their pasts. Unable to turn backward for strength, they lose a sense of who they are. They live constantly in harm's way. The hazards to which they are exposed and their helplessness cause them to question whether life has any meaning.

This was Remarque's question, one to which he had an answer (no) confirmed by the cataclysmic events of his times. Scholars and critics who have examined Remarque's works disagree about his contributions to literature. They agree overwhelmingly, however, that he had abandoned most of his faith in humanity even before the Nazis' acquisition of power in 1933 and that any faith he may have retained disappeared after that. Remarque quite specifically surrendered hope in the humanity of Germans. He believed that Nazism and its horrors were manifestations of a Faustian bargain, which, figuratively, the Germans had struck with history.

Since life had no meaning for Remarque, his novels are filled with ironies and paradoxes that he considered integral to existence. Through his characters he hammered the theme that life is unfair, that good things happen to bad people, and that humanity's dreams and its hopes for miracles were bound to be dashed. Remarque's stories are rich in contradictions and opposing symbols. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, he draws a sharp contrast between the fighting front and conditions at home. In *Der Funke Leben* (1952; *The Spark of Life*, 1952), the contrast is between the lives of concentration camp inmates and those of people who live in a white house on a nearby hill, which to them symbolizes order and hope. When they are liberated, it proves to have been an illusion. Similarly, in *Schatten in Paradies* (1971; *Shadows in Paradise*, 1972), Remarque's antithesis is between the precarious existence of refugees and the unrealities of the American paradise. In *Drei Kameraden* (1938; *Three Comrades*, 1937) and *Der Himmel kennt keine Günstlinge* (1961; *Heaven Has No Favorites*, 1961, also known as *Bobby Deerfield*, 1961), his juxtaposition is between the town and the sanatorium, while in *Der schwarze Obelisk* (1956; *The Black Obelisk*, 1957), it is between the town and the asylum. Remarque's characters are full of contradictions and are almost uniformly unable to make sense out of these opposites.

Given his perception of life, Remarque avoided using his novels as petitions for or against any political ideology. Still, his work does incorporate observations—numerous ones in fact—about the chief political, social, and economic issues of his time. To the extent—and it is considerable—that he deals with the plights of refugees, with unemployment, with the devastations wrought by totalitarianism (and all other forms of political extremism), and with the lives of underdogs in materialistic societies, he was a political author. Critics often excoriated him for his failure to grapple directly with the grand philosophical and ideological problems of his times. By way of answer, Remarque made it clear in his writings that philosophical debates and ideologies simply magnified the cruelties that were already endemic to life. At the same time, he spoke to humanistic values and individual dignity as they endured in this context.

Remarque sought to be a spokesman for his generation of Europeans, so many of them oppressed,

disillusioned, war weary, and adrift from their traditions. In this capacity, he is an eminently readable author and therefore a popular one. His novels often sold by the millions. They were translated into scores of languages and in some instances were transformed into film classics. Such success is what many critics considered damning evidence of his works being *Unterhaltungsliteratur*—mere recreational reading. Remarque attracted his readership, however, because his narratives were honest and authentic and because his style was dramatic and compelling.

Critics accurately noted Remarque's weaknesses, such as his lapses into clichés, flawed or repetitive plottings, and sentimentality. What some critics and many readers found engaging about Remarque's writings was that he raised questions important to them—to which, wisely, he supplied few answers. His generation of Europeans had had many wrong answers forced upon them. Remarque went to the heart of their experiences by affirming that answers to humanity's questions were as insubstantial as dreams. Nothing, he noted, was ever really possessed, and life ended in the oblivion of death. In the interim, everyone is alone.

## ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

**First published:** *Im Westen nichts Neues*, 1929  
(English translation, 1929)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young, once idealistic German soldier and his comrades are plunged into a war that devastates their values and destroys them.*

*All Quiet on the Western Front* earned Remarque international popularity and established his writing career on firm financial and literary foundations. By the time of his death in 1970, perhaps fifty million copies of the novel had been sold and it had been translated into fifty-five languages. In the 1990's, it was still widely regarded by many readers and critics as the greatest war novel of the twentieth century. Others ranked it with several very different, but esteemed, German war novels, such as Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* (1920; *Storm of Steel*,



1975), Fritz von Unruh's *Der Opfergang* (1919; *Way of Sacrifice*, 1928), and Ludwig Renn's *Krieg* (1928; *War*, 1928).

*All Quiet on the Western Front* was Remarque's therapy for the depression and sense of desperation that had plagued him since World War I. It is an unconventional work in several ways. It is episodic, almost documentary or diary-like in nature, and it lacks a consistent plot. The narrator and principal character, Paul Baumer, is a young German soldier who serves on the Western Front. A second narrator is introduced only at the end to announce Baumer's death.

Baumer's narration, Remarque confirmed later in an interview, provides a worm's-eye view of war—the view of one common soldier and his comrades' physical and psychological trials imposed by their horrific experiences. It is not a literal work. Scenes Baumer describes are not found in factual guides to battlefields, with their precise designations of troop positions. Remarque, in fact, was criticized

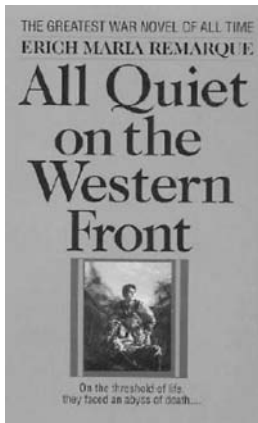
for Baumer's failure to be just that specific. Literal-minded criticism, however, misses the point. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is not Baumer's description of war as what occurred in various places at specific times but describes war as a condition. Like the art that Remarque admired and later collected, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is impressionistic.

The novel consists of twelve brief chapters, which in the original version amount to only 288 pages. In each chapter, Baumer leads the reader along his descent into hell. Young and idealistic, he is inspired by a teacher's patriotic exhortations to enlist. The shock of basic training is worsened by a sadistic drill sergeant, and the shocks grow more frequent and profound with his transfer to the front, to the ghastliness of trench warfare, and the influence of veterans for whom the sole value was survival. Baumer's recording of patrols, attacks and counterattacks, gassings, artillery barrages, madness, desertion, dead and wounded comrades, hospitals, food, rats, and

worse are narrated with laconic fatalism as he too becomes preoccupied with survival.

The narration is often "we" rather than "I." Baumer's comrades—such as Tjaden, the peat digger, Detering, the peasant, and Katczinsky, the unphilosophical veteran who watches over Baumer and younger soldiers as might a parent—are deftly sketched as working-class victims of Prussian officialdom. The murderous government is represented by its lowest social orders: Kantorek, the teacher, and Himmelstoss, the postman. Baumer and his comrades are all doomed. Remarque poignantly and subtly highlights this fact, successively describing a dying man's boots, scenes of beauty, the troop's bumbling plunder, bashful sex briefly managed behind the front, and Baumer's home leave, which demonstrates to him that his experiences are beyond civilian comprehension. Remarque also employs contrasting, self-explanatory symbols: birds singing on the battlefield, cackling geese along a route of march, innocent horses wounded or slaughtered by artillery fire, the earth as a protecting mother, blossoms, and butterflies—the beauty Baumer is reaching for when shot dead.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* is a truthful novel but not a documentary or a memoir. Remarque's characters and materials are well handled, and his vision of war as a mirror of the human condition engages readers with its authenticity.



## ARCH OF TRIUMPH

**First published:** *Arc de Triomphe*, 1946  
(English translation, 1945)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Terrorized by Nazis, a political refugee experiences love, avenges himself upon his Gestapo enemy, and learns he can survive.*

*Arch of Triumph* focuses upon the experiences of a German political refugee, known by his pseudonym, Ravic. Before escaping the Nazis, Ravic, whose real name is Ludwig Fresenburg, had been head surgeon in a German hospital. Having fled to Paris, Ravic illegally employed his medical skills as a "ghost" surgeon for two French doctors. Meanwhile in 1939, he was living relatively comfortably

in a refugee hotel whose inhabitants represented a cross section of Russian, German-Jewish, and Spanish exiles.

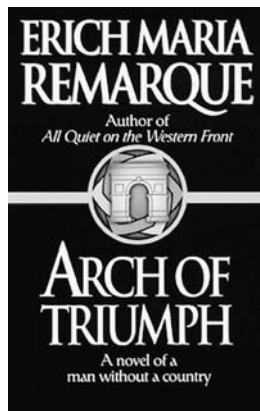
The drama unfolds as Ravic meets and falls in love with Joan Madou, a beautiful but unpredictable woman. Their affair is seriously troubled and soon complicated by outside events. Ravic is arrested by the French police after rendering first aid to an accident victim and is deported to Switzerland. Months later, when he returns to Paris, Joan is living with an actor. As Ravic tries to reestablish his relationship with Joan, the jealous actor shoots her. Ravic's surgical skills fail him as he tries to save her, and after reaffirming their love, Ravic, in order

to end Joan's agony, mercifully kills her by administering a lethal injection.

Joan is the second love that Ravic has lost to fate. In 1933, before his flight from Nazi Germany, Ravic and Sybil, his girlfriend, were arrested for helping friends flee the Gestapo. Ravic and Sybil were tortured by Haake, a Gestapo officer, before Ravic was sent to the concentration camp from which he later

escaped to France. Sybil, presumably, dies. Until emotionally rescued by his subsequent love with Joan Madou, Ravic has a completely negative view of life. Ravic avenges himself against his Gestapo torturer when by chance he meets Haake in Paris and Ravic, unrecognized, is able to lure Haake to his death. After Haake's death, Ravic acquires new inner strength. Although the symbol of France, the Arch of Triumph, is plunged into darkness with the outbreak of war, and although Ravic faces a grim future of internment, he nonetheless is emotionally equipped to survive.

*Arch of Triumph*, Remarque's second most successful novel, continues one of the author's favored themes about powerless and alienated individuals who find the inner strength for survival under totalitarian oppression.



## THE SPARK OF LIFE

**First published:** *Der Funke Leben*, 1952  
(English translation, 1952)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Weak, tortured, and terrorized, inmates of a German concentration camp discover the will to live by mounting resistance.*

*The Spark of Life* required five years to research and write since it deals with the lives of German political prisoners consigned to concentration camps, a subject about which Remarque knew nothing firsthand. Too weak to endure forced labor, the prisoners are installed in a small labor camp where their captors expect them to die within weeks.

The novel focuses upon Skeleton 509 and five other prisoners. Skeleton 509's real name is Friedrich Koller, a former journalist, who refused to inform on people sought by the Gestapo. The others are Joseph Bucher (the son of a left-wing editor), Ruth Holland (Bucher's girlfriend), Old Ahasver (an aged survivor of several camps), Leo Lebenthal (a former businessman), and Karel, a Czechoslovakian boy whose parents have died in Nazi gas chambers.

Contrasted with the inmates are their guards, notably the camp commander, Bruno Neubauer. Neubauer was once a minor civil servant who saw Nazism as the route to personal success; he epitomizes the banality of evil. Remarque traces in parallel with the main story the essential elements in the rise of Nazism. Through Surgeon Major Wiese, who conducts deadly medical experiments upon "volunteer" inmates, Remarque adds a dimension of science gone mad.

Remarque's fictitious labor camp and its inmates form a microcosm of the perversions that characterized the Nazi regime: torture, dismemberment, cruel and bizarre medical experiments, and a grotesque array of other physical and psychological techniques designed to dehumanize "enemies of the state."

Against this background, the novel's impetus stems from the fact that Koller and other inmates realize that the Allied war against Germany is being won. A nearby town, Mellern (modeled precisely

on Osnabrück), is bombed by Allied planes. Commandant Neubauer, in anticipation of the camp's liberation by Allied troops, cosmetically changes its records and appearance. Surgeon Major Wiese no longer kills prisoners who fail to "volunteer" for his experiments. Camp guards become noticeably lenient.

Koller and the others seize the moment and mount a resistance. Koller slays Weber, the German guard who tortured him, and then is slain himself as the camp comes under the guards' fire. There are survivors, however, like Joseph Bucher and Ruth Holland, whose lives justify the fight and testify to the spark of life that inspired Koller and his comrades to assert their right to exist.

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*Liebe Deinen Nächsten*, 1941 (*Flotsam*, 1941)  
*Arc de Triomphe*, 1946 (*Arch of Triumph*, 1945)  
*Der Funke Leben*, 1952 (*The Spark of Life*, 1952)  
*Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben*, 1954 (*A Time to Love and a Time to Die*, 1954)  
*Der schwarze Obelisk*, 1956 (*The Black Obelisk*, 1957)  
*Der Himmel kennt keine Günstlinge*, 1961 (*Heaven Has No Favorites*, 1961; also as *Bobby Deerfield*, 1961)  
*Die Nacht von Lissabon*, 1962 (*The Night in Lisbon*, 1964)  
*Schatten im Paradies*, 1971 (*Shadows in Paradise*, 1972)

#### DRAMA:

*Die letzte Station*, pr. 1956 (adapted by Peter Stone as *Full Circle*, 1974)

#### SCREENPLAY:

*Der letzte Akt*, 1955

## SUMMARY

One of the twentieth century's most popular authors, Erich Maria Remarque did not receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Most literary critics would not rank him among the great German authors. His most influential work, *All Quiet on the Western Front*—not by literary standards his best novel—deeply touched millions of twentieth century readers. A powerful book, it is remarkably honest about the terrible fates encountered by ordinary men in a century of total wars. Similarly, Remarque's subsequent novels give expression to the lonely, dehumanizing experiences of political prisoners, refugees, and other victims of ideologies and political extremism.

Clifton K. Yearley

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did World War I bring out the best and the worst in Erich Maria Remarque?
- Was World War I the cause or the occasion of the view of life that Remarque expressed in his novels?
- Has Remarque more to tell readers about the combat or the home front in the war?
- Was it necessary for Remarque as a novelist to grapple with deep philosophical problems?
- Has anyone written a better novel about World War I than *All Quiet on the Western Front*?
- Does the fact of critics' and readers' concentration on *All Quiet on the Western Front* unfairly diminish Remarque's reputation?

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## MARY RENAULT

**Born:** London, England  
September 4, 1905

**Died:** Cape Town, South Africa  
December 13, 1983

*Renault, renowned for her historical novels set in ancient Greece, was among the earliest modern authors to address intelligently and sympathetically in her writing the subject of homosexuality.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Queen Victoria died four years before Mary Renault (rehn-OHLT), the pen name of Mary Challans, was born. Victoria's death, however, did not end the spirit of Victorianism in England. Renault lived much of her first thirty years rankling under the prudish Victorian constraints that her father, Frank Challans, a physician, and others imposed on her.

Mary's mother, Clementine Baxter Challans, daughter of a dentist, apparently never loved her husband nor their first child, Molly, as Mary Challans was nicknamed. Losing a boy in childbirth, Clementine in 1911 gave birth to Frances Joyce Challans, always called Joyce. What small affection she had to bestow was reserved for Joyce, who ultimately became Clementine's sole heir.

Throughout the period of her life that Renault lived with her family, her mother made no pretense of being fond of her, always preferring Joyce. Clementine nagged her husband incessantly and argued with him. At his funeral, Clementine made a point of walking into the church with Joyce, leaving a solitary Molly to trail behind.

In her parents' eyes, Renault's future was determined at birth: She was to become an obedient wife and dutiful mother. When she showed signs of being bookish, her mother was horrified, knowing that bookish women do not find husbands. Molly began a relentless and clandestine course of reading around six, hiding in her father's crumbling stable with favorite books. She quickly graduated from reading cowboy-and-Indian stories to immersing herself in medieval romances. At the

Levicks' School she studied French and the Bible and enjoyed singing hymns.

Joyce was the frilly, compliant little girl Clementine needed. Molly was the out-of-control tomboy but always off reading books, she at least stayed out of the way. So invisible was she that her parents apparently did not notice that her front teeth protruded, a condition that her maternal grandfather could easily have remedied had it been called to his attention.

During World War I, Frank Challans served his country in the medical corps in India. Molly and Joyce were packed off to Buckinghamshire to escape the air raids. At war's end, Molly returned to the Levicks' School, relearning the lessons she had been studying when she left. In 1920, she entered the Clifton Girls' School, where she completed her secondary education.

The school's headmistress, a graduate of St. Hugh's College, Oxford, which had only a short time before begun to accept women, encouraged Renault to apply for admission, which was eventually granted. The Challanses, however, were unenthusiastic about her going to St. Hugh's and offered Renault only an allowance of twenty pounds a year, some sixty pounds short of what her education would cost. Borrowing money from her aunt, Renault entered St. Hugh's and, four years later, received an Oxford degree. By that time Renault had dropped the name Molly. Everyone knew her as Mary.

Following her graduation, the Challanses did not encourage Renault to do anything except stay at home and hope for marriage, squeaking by on



the twenty-pound annual allowance they still gave her. Renault, however, was sufficiently strong-willed that she left home and managed a marginal existence, making just enough money at various menial jobs to feed herself meagerly and to keep a roof over her head. Malnutrition resulted in her falling ill with rheumatic fever, which forced her to endure a protracted convalescence at home.

Until 1933, when she was twenty-eight years old, Renault lived largely in her parents' unhappy household on the allowance they granted her, trying to write but being continually discouraged by both parents. In that year, however, she bolted, entering Radcliffe Infirmary as a nursing student. There she met Julie Mullard, a senior nursing student six years her junior. They soon began a relationship that lasted the rest of Renault's life. They fell naturally into the affair that defined their sexual orientation.

Renault and Mullard, living in a Procrustean social and professional milieu, endured hardships and long separations, but they never considered abandoning each other. Despite working long and irregular hours, Renault found time for her writing and, in 1938, completed a novel set in a hospital, *Purposes of Love* (1939). It was published in the United States shortly thereafter and retitled *Promise of Love* (1940). Renault, who had been living on less than £100 a year, suddenly had the heady experience of receiving a £250 advance from Morrow. Headier still was a preponderance of positive and encouraging reviews.

Renault and Mullard worked as nurses during World War II, and Renault published two more novels, *Kind Are Her Answers* (1940) and *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1944; American edition, *The Middle Mist*, 1945), by the war's end. Both novels were eclipsed by war news; the few reviews they received were lukewarm. After the war, however, Renault published two more books, *Return to Night* (1947) and *North Face* (1948), before *The Charioteer* (1953), which quickly became a best seller. With these books she solidified her reputation as a noteworthy novelist. Although all of her books until *The Charioteer* include homosexual subplots, *The Charioteer* was the first one to deal so unflinchingly with the issue.

This book was followed by *The Last of the Wine* (1956), a perennial best seller and the first of the historical novels about Greece that would occupy

Renault for most of her remaining years. *The King Must Die* (1958), *The Bull from the Sea* (1962), *The Mask of Apollo* (1966), *Fire from Heaven* (1969), *The Persian Boy* (1972), *The Praise Singer* (1978), and *Funeral Games* (1981) all gained cultlike followings and continue to be widely read.

In 1948, two years after Renault earned the \$150,000 MGM Award for *Return to Night*, she and Mullard, weary of Britain's postwar austerity and eager to escape the clutches of voracious tax collectors, sailed for South Africa, settling first in Durban and later in Cape Town. They spent the remainder of their lives there, taking South African citizenship in 1950 but retaining their British citizenship.

The two mingled prominently in South Africa's extensive homosexual communities and, in 1964, Renault became the president of the Cape Town chapter of PEN (International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists), a post she hoped would be ceremonial but one that, with the problems of apartheid, became increasingly political. Renault, diagnosed in 1970 with cancer, succumbed in 1983.

## ANALYSIS

Mary Renault's career may be divided into two periods: one of novels set in roughly contemporary time, and one of novels set in ancient Greece. When she began to write seriously, Renault was working full time, but she was employed as a boarding school nurse; the demands on her time were sufficiently light to afford her the time she needed to write. Seeking subject matter, she wisely chose to write about what was most familiar to her.

Her first novel, *Purposes of Love*, is set in a hospital where Vivian, a nurse, and Mic, a pathologist new to the hospital, have a romance. Mic is a friend of Vivian's brother Jan, on whom he had a boyhood crush. His basic attraction to Vivian is attributable to her resemblance to Jan. Renault also introduces a lesbian nurse, Colonna, into the story and has her make advances to Vivian, who is neither enticed nor repelled. Colonna is having an affair with another nurse, Valentine, and when this affair ends, Colonna faces a bleak, lonely future.

The central story in *Purposes of Love*, which critics commended and compared to the work of such authors as Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, revolves around a conventional heterosexual attachment. Renault, however, is bent on demonstrating

in this book that love has many faces, none being any more legitimate than another.

Each of Renault's next four books contains homosexual elements. *Kind Are Her Answers*, rushed into print because of the anticipated exigencies of an impending war, tells the story of Kit Anderson, like Renault's father a physician in general practice, whose marriage to Janet, a vacuous socialite, founders after Janet has a miscarriage and a hysterectomy. Kit falls in love with Christie, the niece of one of his patients.

It turns out that Janet is a lesbian. Renault, however, shows her in neither a complex nor understanding light but rather uses her sexual orientation as a means of disposing of Janet. She falls in love with another woman on a trip to South America, leaving Kit and Christie to their own devices. Renault realized the weaknesses of this book and its lack of the compelling detail found in her first novel, but because war was about to erupt, Renault's American publisher pressed her into submitting a manuscript that rethinking and rewriting would have strengthened.

*The Middle Mist* has strong autobiographical elements, which are found in much of Renault's writing. The protagonist, Leo, is a young writer driven from home by her parents' bickering. Leo shares a houseboat with Helen, a woman somewhat like Julie Mullard, and is described as being manlike and tomboyish, much as Renault's mother viewed her firstborn.

Into the story are introduced a young physician, modeled on Renault's friend Robbie Wilson, convinced that he can cure patients with love, and Joe Flint, an American neighbor. Joe claims Leo's virginity, which she thinks will be a turning point for her, but it is not. She leaves Joe, and at the end of the novel, not much has changed. Leo and Helen are still together, presumably in a lesbian relationship.

*Return to Night* is a tougher book than the two that preceded it. Hilary Mansell is a physician in love with one of her patients—Julian Fleming, eleven years her junior. She saves Julian's life by performing emergency brain surgery on him. Upon recovering, Julian begins to court Hilary, but his possessive mother scuttles his romance. Finally, Julian, bisexual and dominated by his mother, wanders into a cave, where he is about to commit sui-

cide. Hilary saves him a second time, but she realizes that a shared life can hold nothing for the two of them. The mother theme that always intrigued Renault is well developed in this novel.

*The Charioteer* is Renault's most overtly homosexually oriented novel of her first creative period. Whereas her earlier novels deal only obliquely with homosexual love, this best-selling novel deals directly with it, tracing the sexual development of Laurie Odell from age five through manhood.

In this novel one finds Renault's characteristic (and sometimes confusing) use of names that can be either masculine or feminine. Also depicted are the kinds of troubled family relationships that were a fundamental part of her own childhood. She also broaches the question of pacifism and of standing up for what one believes in the face of public vilification. The book is infused with the ethics found in the early Greek literature that Renault was devouring at the time, particularly Plato's dialogues about Socrates' trial and death.

For the next thirty years, Renault's writing centered essentially on Greek themes, although she was always quick to point out that in dealing with such themes, she was also dealing obliquely with many of the social problems of her own age, particularly those brought about by McCarthyism in the United States and apartheid in South Africa.

*The Charioteer* was rejected by Renault's American publisher, Morrow, because in 1953, when it was published in the United Kingdom, McCarthyism was stifling a great deal of creative expression in the United States. In that year, Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill prohibiting government employment of homosexuals. *The Charioteer* was not published in the United States until 1959, when Pantheon, then a minor publisher, not only published it but also launched a publicity campaign that made Morrow's efforts in marketing Renault's earlier books pale in comparison.

The books that followed *The Charioteer* are essentially the ones upon which Renault's literary reputation rests. Her Alexander Trilogy, despite its historical setting, reflects a great deal of what she and Mullard were going through in the later years of their relationship, and the last of the Alexander books, *Funeral Games*, presages touchingly what Mullard's life would likely be after Renault died.

## THE LAST OF THE WINE

**First published:** 1956

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel covers thirteen years of Alexias's life, from fifteen to twenty-eight, as Alexias shares it with Lysis, his lover and mentor.*

*The Last of the Wine*, typical of Mary Renault's historical novels, provides voluminous information about notable Athenians—Socrates, Plato, Kritias, Phaedo, Xenophon—but presents it through the eyes of a more ordinary Athenian. Alexias, a youth on the brink of manhood, suddenly has adult responsibility thrust upon him by the report of his father's death in battle.

When Alexias's mother dies in childbirth, Alexias is so sickly that his father intends to expose him to the elements, thereby allowing the Fates to decide whether he will live or die. A Spartan attack, however, forestalls this. Alexias grows up with no real father figure until Lysis courts him and becomes his lover, providing the youth with a father surrogate. As was customary, Lysis also informally becomes Alexias's teacher, helping to prepare him for a manhood in which he will marry and have children, as Lysis himself plans to do.

Alexias's father takes a young bride and with her sires a daughter. When news of his father's death reaches Alexias, he is catapulted into being the man of the house, even though he is ill prepared to assume that responsibility. He grows deeply attached to his stepmother, becoming a surrogate husband.

Alexias prevails in the footrace at the Isthmian Games, but his joy at winning soon turns to disillusionment when his beloved Lysis is nearly killed by

a wrestler during competition. Renault here shows what happens when the athletic ideal of developing a fine body is overshadowed by a meretricious concentration on winning, a change in attitude that eventually led to the decline of Greek athletics.

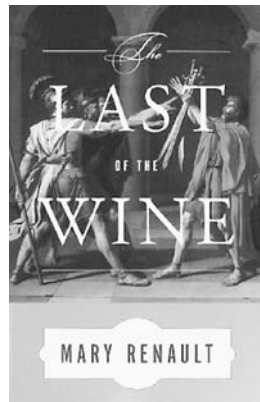
Alexias is severely shaken when it turns out that his father was not killed but taken prisoner. The father resurfaces, now a disenchanted, bitter man, whose land has been usurped by invaders. He turns on his son, whom he thinks has been taken in by dangerous revolutionaries. The father sides with the conservative aristocrats, who fault the liberal democracy that has led Athens to its present state.

To escape this hostile environment (broadly reminiscent of Renault's family situation), Alexias and Lysis go off to fight at Samos, siding with those who favor democracy over oligarchy. The oligarchy is overthrown and the two return to Athens only to find that a similar situation exists there and that Alexias's father is strong among the oligarchs.

The political situation grows increasingly unstable as power shifts from the people to the oligarchs and back again several times. Finally, after the Athenian fleet is lost at Aegospotami, Lysander, the Spartan general, blocks all transport into Athens, starving it into submission. He foists upon the city the Thirty Tyrants, who impose a rule of terror.

Kritias, expert at using the logic Socrates has taught him, uses his skill cynically to gain power. Kritias has learned rhetorical technique from Socrates but has failed to learn the great thinker's most important lesson, that of pursuing the highest ideals of good and beauty.

Eventually, Kritias murders Alexias's father. Alexias and Lysis join the revolutionaries outside the city walls. The Spartans now abandon the Thirty Tyrants and the people again rule, but Athens is severely weakened. Alexias kills Kritias, but in the confusion of the fight, Lysis is killed. The people have won, but Renault forces her readers to consider whether this victory is to the good if those in control are driven by motives other than the Socratic ideals of good and beauty.



## THE KING MUST DIE

**First published:** 1958

**Type of work:** Novel

*Theseus, returning to Athens, pauses in Eleusis, where he kills the king and replaces him, then escapes being sacrificed and goes on to create a male-dominated society in Athens.*

Renault, given her strained relations with her mother, often wrote about mothers' relationships with their children. In her novels, she frequently portrayed mothers as vacuous, manipulative, injudicious, and destructive. In her later novels, Renault deals quite harshly with women in general. She made it clear in her social life that she preferred the company of men, usually homosexuals, and in interviews she vehemently denied being a feminist, nor did she wish to be viewed as a woman author, regarding herself simply as an author.

In *The King Must Die*, Renault is concerned with the matriarchal social and political structure of ancient Greece. The book is about Theseus, who vanquishes the king, a man who, through established tradition, was chosen by the queen and, after a year of marriage, sacrificed and replaced with a new king, who would also be sacrificed after his year of marriage. Renault's Theseus is small but wiry. He has exceptionally quick reflexes.

Theseus, passing through Eleusis en route to Athens, wrestles the reigning king to his death, snapping his neck like a twig, whereupon Theseus becomes king. When his year ends, however, he eludes being sacrificed by killing his wife's brother and pressing on to Athens, where he seeks to weaken Medea's hold on his father's court. He then volunteers to go to Crete as a performer in the bull court, a ceremony dedicated to the mother-goddess.

Theseus, in keeping with Greek legend, goes into the labyrinth for a meeting with Ariadne,

priestess of the mother-goddess, who gives him the thread that will enable him to retrace his steps. He ultimately marries Ariadne, only to abandon her on the island of Naxos. Departing from the classical legend, in which Ariadne kills herself, Renault has her instead join the Bacchae in their revelry.

Theseus sails to Athens, but, on approaching the city, fails to unfurl the white sail, a prearranged signal that he is safe. His father, Aigeus, dies, thinking Theseus has been killed, thereby leaving it to Theseus to eliminate the old order, end the female domination of Athenian society, and usher in the Golden Age of Athens, which he turns into a thriving, male-dominated society.

In *The King Must Die*, Renault pushes her disdain of mothers into a broad arena. In choosing to write about the fall of the classical matriarchal system, she seems to be casting her lot with a male-dominated society.

## THE PERSIAN BOY

**First published:** 1972

**Type of work:** Novel

*Bagoas, a Persian eunuch, seduces Alexander the Great, a Macedonian, who falls in love with him.*

The Persian boy in this novel, Bagoas, is a beautiful eunuch who seduces the swashbuckling Alexander the Great, cleverly making Alexander think that he is the seducer. In this middle novel of Renault's three books about Alexander, the pair's love is intense but very brief. Alexander dies in Babylon, with Bagoas whispering in his ear that he loves him.

There is a sense in this novel of love's conquering all. Bagoas is exactly what Alexander needs. Given Renault's residence in South Africa when she was writing this book, one cannot ignore the fact that Alexander and Bagoas are ethnically different and that their love transcends such considerations. The two are loyal to each other, as Renault and Mullard were throughout their nearly fifty years together. The novel in many ways mirrors their unwavering relationship.



## SUMMARY

Mary Renault's novels are concerned most significantly with her conviction that love between two humans, be they of the same or opposite sexes, is beautiful. Renault went on record as suggesting that in an age of overpopulation, homosexual relationships made good sense and should probably be encouraged for purely practical reasons. Renault was also fundamentally concerned with the dynamics of families, particularly with the relationships of mothers to their children. She extended this concern into a global consideration when she investigated the matriarchies of Greek society and wrote about them. The approval that Renault's family consistently withheld from her finally came from an enthusiastic reading public.

R. Baird Shuman

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did her parents' concern for her future turn out to be an advantage for Mary Renault?
- Explain how Renault's interest in Greek literature allowed her to deal significantly with the problems of her own time.
- Renault was not unusual in writing about homosexual relationships, but was she more candid than her contemporaries in treating this subject?
- Many writers of historical fiction take generous liberties with history. Where does Renault stand in this respect?
- What did Renault learn as a nurse that helped her in writing fiction?

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## JEAN RHYS

**Born:** Roseau, Dominica Island, West Indies

August 24, 1894

**Died:** Exeter, England

May 14, 1979

*Many of Rhys's works treat realistically the concerns of the jobless single woman. Her mixed English, Welsh, and Caribbean heritage also contributed to her depiction of the confusing role of the white woman in the West Indies.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ella Gwendolen Rhys (reese) Williams was born in Roseau, Dominica, the West Indies, on August 24, 1894 (some authorities say 1890 because Rhys was not always truthful about her age); she was one of five children born to Dr. William Rhys, a Welsh doctor trained in London, and Minna Lockhart Williams, a third-generation Dominican Creole. Despite being one of five children, she spent a rather lonely childhood, according to her book *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (1979). She attended school at The Convent, Roseau. At the Catholic convent school, Rhys experienced what she described in *Smile Please* as a "religious fit." She was fascinated by the rituals of Catholicism and wished for a while to convert from Anglicanism. Another appeal of Catholicism was the integration of blacks and whites in the church service. Her attraction to the rituals of Catholicism and the island magic of the blacks is reflected in her work.

In 1910, she emigrated to England to study acting for one term at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. After leaving drama school, she toured England as a chorus girl in a musical comedy during World War I. In 1919, she married Jean Lenglet, a French Dutch songwriter and journalist, and went to live on the European continent. Her daughter Maryvonne was born in Brussels in 1922. In 1927 she divorced Lenglet and returned to England. In 1936, Rhys and Leslie Tilden-Smith visited Dominica, the only time she returned to her homeland. She married Tilden-Smith, a publisher's reader, in 1938, and the couple settled in Cornwall, England. Tilden-Smith died in 1945, and in 1946, Rhys mar-

ried the poet and retired naval officer Max Hamer, who died in 1947. Rhys spent the rest of her life in England, where she died at Exeter Hospital, near her cottage home at Devonshire.

According to her biographers, Rhys had always kept a sort of diary, but she did not think seriously of writing until a time when she was desperate for money coincided with the discovery of her writing talent by her mentor and sometimes lover, British novelist Ford Madox Ford. After her divorce from Lenglet and her return to England, Rhys published a short story collection, *The Left Bank, and Other Stories* (1927), with a preface by Ford. Ford played an important role in the development of her writing career, but once she began to write she became a serious professional writer on her own. In 1928 she published a novel, *Postures*, which the following year was published in the United States as *Quartet*. Three more novels, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), were part of her early prolific years.

Although she continued to write, her work was neglected for a great many years. The adaption of *Good Morning, Midnight* into a radio play by Selma Vaz Diaz was broadcast in 1957, causing a rediscovery of Rhys. Her most famous and most widely read novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), written when she was in her seventies, was hailed by the literary world as a magnificent comeback. She spent eight years completing the manuscript of *Wide Sargasso Sea* because of her poor health, depression, heavy drinking, and sporadic writing of the short stories that would later become the collection *Sleep It off*,

*Lady* (1976). In the meantime another eight short stories were included in *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (1968).

Rhys received the W. H. Smith Award and Heinemann Award, both in 1967, for *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1966. She received the Arts Council of Great Britain Award for Writers in 1967, and was named Commander of the British Empire for service to literature. Ironically, the fame and honors associated with *Wide Sargasso Sea* came very late in her life. Her life exemplifies the plight and struggle of many women writers for recognition and fulfillment. After the long years of obscurity and the belated recognition in her old age, she died on May 14, 1979.

### ANALYSIS

Of importance to an understanding and appreciation of the fiction of Jean Rhys is a recognition of the way in which her fiction reflects an attitude toward life often in opposition to traditional middle-class values. This attitude was shaped partly by her unusual cultural background but also by her life experiences. She is brutally honest and darkly humorous in her presentation of the isolated, abandoned world of her women characters, who passively ache for lost beauty and passion, but who always attempt to survive. Rhys presents those women from the perspective of a displaced person. Along with her general focus on the displaced person, her writings that reflect her West Indian heritage pursue themes of alienation and rejection endured by the white Creole woman in the Caribbean and her marginalization in England.

In *Smile Please* Rhys tells of her early fascination with books, stating that before she could read, she “imagined that God, this strange thing or person I heard about, was a book.” Her former editor, Diana Athill, in the foreword to *Smile Please*, says that Rhys wrote “because she had no choice.” Her early life in Dominica is also reflected in her perspective about marriage; she noted that a white girl’s goal in life was to marry in order to be happy. While noting that married women seemed less happy than unmarried ones, Rhys also noted that while marriages did not take place frequently among them, the blacks she knew seemed very happy. Another element of the black woman that appealed to Rhys was the warmth of native black women caretakers, in

contrast with her own mother, whom she depicts as distant. These various influences appear throughout her writing.

The Rhys heroine appears in her first four novels (*Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark*, and *Good Morning, Midnight*) and later in a more complex form in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which has the added complication of focusing on a character created by nineteenth century British novelist Charlotte Brontë. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) is set in the 1830’s; *Wide Sargasso Sea* likewise is set in that time.

In *Quartet*, the reader sees the emergence of the Rhys heroine. Marya Zelli was a chorus girl in England (as Rhys was) and later, in 1926, is in Paris with a charming but irresponsible Pole she has married. After her husband is sent to prison, Marya is befriended by a couple, the Heidlrs. He is a middle-aged picture dealer and his wife is a domineering Englishwoman. This couple assumes that Marya should become the husband’s mistress. Heidler is a cold, anglicized German who may be modeled on Ford Madox Ford. Marya is first revolted by Heidler and then falls in love with him, living in both fascination and fear at the ensuing triangle, which lasts until her husband comes out of prison. Marya ends up losing both men.

*After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* also begins in Paris about 1928. Julia Martin has been “pensioned off by a former lover” and leads a lonely life in a cheap hotel. When the former lover refuses to send any more money, she is left penniless and is old enough to be unsure of her attractiveness to men. She decides to go to London to look up other former lovers in the hope of getting money from them. The trip is not successful; she is met with annoyance and disapproval. After an affair with a young man goes awry, she returns to Paris to face an empty future.

*Voyage in the Dark* is told from a first-person point of view and has greater immediacy than the first two novels. The novel also incorporates more autobiographical material with its memories of the lush and tropical West Indian island, which Rhys uses as contrast to the coldness of England. The metaphorical pattern appears earlier in *Smile Please*, as Rhys records the effect of the change from warmth to coldness in her trip to England. The time frame of *Voyage in the Dark* is 1914, and the central character is Anna Morgan, who is nineteen and touring

the provinces in the chorus of a pantomime, again suggested by Rhys's personal experience. Again the woman is depicted as a victim, but a survivor. After an unsuccessful love affair with a young man, she is abandoned and becomes a prostitute. The novel concludes with Anna recovering from an abortion.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the reader encounters the heroine, Sasha Jansen, returning to Paris for a visit in 1937. Again using first person, Rhys presents Sasha as now over forty, distrusting of men, and drinking heavily. Sasha becomes involved with a young gigolo in a complicated relationship of mutual teasing. The novel ends with a scene of ironic tragedy, leaving the reader uneasy about whether the character will survive. Critics generally agree that this novel is Rhys's darkest work, characterized by fear and violence.

Rhys herself at this time seemed to disappear from the literary scene. She lived a life somewhat akin to that of Sasha Jansen. Her books went out of print. Her next novel was not published until 1966. Having long been fascinated with Brontë's madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, Rhys wrote her *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a defense of the transplanted Creole woman locked away in England and looking for a voice to tell her side of the story. The setting is in the 1830's, in both the West Indies and England. Again, Rhys establishes the polarity of climates to symbolize the polarity of temperaments in the passionate West Indian and the cold Englishman.

Rhys's short stories fit into two chronological groups. One group, written in the 1920's, were published in *The Left Bank*. The second group of stories, written in the 1960's and 1970's, are more tightly structured and employ a variety of plots, settings, and characters.

## VOYAGE IN THE DARK

**First published:** 1934

**Type of work:** Novel

*Rhys's familiar heroine, a destitute, powerless chorus girl, abandoned by lovers and left pregnant, must cope alone.*

*Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys's third major novel of her early period, reflects a more experienced style than was evident in the two earlier novels. It remained Rhys's favorite work. The unprotected female protagonist and her situation are familiar, but stylistically the novel reflects fully developed strategies: flashbacks to Dominica, floating memories and dreams that disrupt the text, distortions in syntax, and a concluding section that is akin to stream of consciousness.

The experiences of Anna Morgan, the heroine, are very similar to the experiences of Rhys when she came to England as a young woman. The work is fiction, but it is highly autobiographical. The first-person narration is appropriate to Rhys's content, which includes recollections and memories of a childhood in the West Indies and Anna's reaction to the English climate. Early in the novel, Anna says: "I didn't like England at first. I couldn't get used to the cold."

The use of climate for metaphor is prevalent in *Voyage in the Dark*, suggesting that Anna's entire set of experiences in England are a voyage in the cold and dark. Anna's nostalgia for the West Indies includes memories of her desire to be black, to be part of the culture she was drawn to, and of Francine, a black caretaker of Anna's childhood who was warm and cheerful. Descriptions of Catholic religious services also reflect for Anna the Caribbean and for Rhys her spiritual experiences in the Catholic convent in Dominica.

The bare outline of the plot—young woman falling victim to older man, becoming pregnant, drifting into prostitution, and having an abortion—suggests a sordid and sad life that early critics tended to judge on moral rather than literary grounds. Rhys's understated style and economy of language present instead a rather gallant young woman who will go on.

The concluding section of the novel, following Anna's abortion paid for by an earlier lover, is the

most interesting stylistically. Reacting to pain and alcohol, Anna narrates a kind of delirious monologue in which time and place tend to become lost.

After the abortion Anna hears the doctor saying, “She’ll be all right” and “Ready to start all over again in no time, I’ve no doubt.” These last lines provide ambiguity because the reader does not know whether Anna will survive as a prostitute or will be able to start a new life. The original conclusion of the novel depicted the death of Anna after the abortion, but Rhys’s publishers convinced her to change the ending. Rhys was never happy with the change, as she confided in a letter in 1934.

## WIDE SARGASSO SEA

**First published:** 1966

**Type of work:** Novel

*Rhys retells Jane Eyre from the point of view of the mad Creole, Bertha Mason, who is locked up in the upper story of an isolated English mansion.*

*Wide Sargasso Sea* allows Bertha Mason, the madwoman married to Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s famous novel, to tell her story. Rhys creates a voice, a history, and a rationale for why Bertha is mad. She has been driven insane by the cold rejection of an embittered Englishman.

In this novel Rhys integrates a mature style and sensibility with the experience of her childhood in Dominica. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the most structurally demanding of her novels. She had to write in the context of a previously written novel and blend this context into the story of her own life and that of Bertha.

In Rhys’s novel, Bertha has a different name, her own name, Antoinette. She is small and delicate, rather than large and swarthy as Brontë describes her. Rochester calls her Bertha; this name is hateful to Antoinette.

The novel is structured around Antoinette and Rochester’s alternating points of view and is divided into three parts. The first and second parts al-

ternate between the voices of Antoinette and Rochester and are set in the West Indies. The third part is limited to Antoinette’s voice, after she has come to England and has been locked in the attic of Thornfield.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Caribbean is depicted in rich and sensual imagery. In the novel, the Caribbean is at a turning point. The white Creole is being rendered homeless because the cruelties of slavery are coming to an end. Antoinette is called “whitey cockroach” by the blacks with whom she feels a strong sense of kinship. Nostalgia does not lead Antoinette into the misconception that the old ways were better. She also is in no position to be blind to the cruelties the former slaves visit upon their former masters.

Antoinette is caught in a double bind: There is first the conflict in her own culture and second the rejection by Rochester, who is initially attracted to her. Rhys does not totally condemn the character of Rochester. In sections of narrative told from his point of view, he accounts for his own bitterness and rejection as a second son. He is forced to marry, for money, someone of his father’s choosing, and he believes that he has been lied to about Antoinette’s mother’s mental breakdown and the hint of black blood in her ancestry. He in turn rejects and betrays Antoinette, driving her into madness.

In Rhys’s conclusion of the novel, Antoinette takes off down a dark passage thinking, “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do.” Her last thought is about the candle: “I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage.” This conclusion fits the general pattern of endings of Rhys’s novels. Rhys offers ambiguity, an oblique suggestion that somehow Antoinette will survive and perhaps triumph even in her madness.





## “SLEEP IT OFF, LADY”

**First published:** 1976 (collected in *Sleep It off, Lady*, 1976)

**Type of work:** Short story

*An old, alcoholic woman, broken by neglect and derision, dies, destroyed by cruel neighbors.*

“Sleep It off, Lady” is perhaps the best short story written by Rhys. By using third-person narrative, Rhys distances herself from both the victim and her tormenters. Miss Verney, an aging woman who drinks too much and complains too much, irritates others. This story, written in Rhys’s later years, embodies several themes familiar to Rhys’s readers: Old age is a crime; cruel neighbors can destroy a person who lives alone; a doctor is sympathetic but ultimately of little help.

Miss Verney, the protagonist, is in her seventies and alienated because she is old, she is a woman, and she is single. She has a major goal—to rid her property of an old ugly shed. The story takes on elements of the absurd and becomes surrealistic in its imagery: The shed itself is hideous and sagging. A huge rat, which the neighbors think is a figment of a mind foggy from too much alcohol, terrorizes Miss Verney. Neighbors and workmen refuse to listen to her, first when she tries to hire men to destroy the shed and later when she cries out for help.

The final and most devastating image is that of Miss Verney collapsed next to the dustbin, “with her legs stretched out, surrounded by torn paper

and eggshells. Her skirt had ridden up and there was a slice of stale bread on her bare knee.” This image suggests that old people in society are thrown out with the garbage and left to be picked up and carted off.

The title of the story comes from Deena, a twelve-year-old neighbor girl. When Miss Verney collapses and appeals to her for help, Deena assumes that the old woman has been drinking and replies, “Sleep it off, lady!”

The doctor attributes her death to heart disease. The death is truly of heart disease but in a spiritual more than a physical sense. Rhys presents a character who is destroyed by the neighborhood in which she lives.

The last four stories in her short-story collection, *Sleep It off, Lady*, which treat the loneliness and degradation of old age, reveal that Rhys at age eighty had not lost her skill as a storyteller.

## SUMMARY

Jean Rhys’s fiction treats the lonely and alienated woman through the various stages of her life, from adolescence through adulthood to old age. Rhys’s heroines are presented not with sentimentality but rather with irony, dark humor, and an economy of style that leaves the central character with a sense of dignity in spite of her circumstances. Alternating harsh reality with dreamlike musings, employing a strong controlling metaphor, and adjusting point of view, Rhys created a body of work that makes a powerful contribution to twentieth century literature.

Betty Alldredge

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine Jean Rhys's use of climate for metaphor in *Voyage in the Dark*.
- Does Rhys's reworking of material from *Jane Eyre* (1847) for *Wide Sargasso Sea* contribute in any way to our understanding of Charlotte Brontë's novel?
- Explain how Rhys uses depictions of household places to depict Antoinette's madness.
- Is *Smile Please* an important source for understanding Rhys's fiction?
- What does Rhys have to say about interracial friendships, especially among young women?



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## SAMUEL RICHARDSON

**Born:** Mackworth, Derbyshire, England  
August 19, 1689 (baptized)

**Died:** London, England  
July 4, 1761

*Often called the father of the modern novel, Richardson wrote three epistolary novels, the first two penetrating the feminine psyche with an understanding that no previous prose writer had attained.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Richardson was born in 1689 in Mackworth, Derbyshire, England, to Samuel Richardson, a woodworker who excelled at ornamentation, and his second wife, Elizabeth. The exact date of his birth is uncertain, but he was baptized on August 19, 1689. The Richardsons were once landowners, but their fortunes had dwindled. The family moved to London, where the young man spent his formative years. He entered the Merchant Taylors' School in 1701, but strained finances forced his withdrawal the following year. He worked for his father between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Although painfully shy, Richardson was a favorite among young ladies in his neighborhood, who quickly made him their confidant. They had him write letters to their suitors. Writing these intimate letters made Richardson acutely aware early in his life of the disparities between what love-struck young ladies felt and what they expressed.

Richardson, a circumspect listener with whom people felt secure sharing their deepest secrets, was an astute observer of life and an avid reader. When he chose an apprenticeship, this combination of interests led him to work with a printer, John Wilde. In 1715, two years past his apprenticeship, Richardson became a freeman of the Stationers' Company. He helped the widow of printer

John Leake run her printing shop. On her death in 1721, he bought her printing business, leasing John Leake's house, in which it was situated. In 1721, Richardson, now thirty-two, married twenty-three-year-old Martha Wilde, daughter of his former master. The following year, he was admitted to the livery of the Stationers' Company, and, in 1727, he was elected to office in that company. He gained recognition printing Tory tracts and providing money for the defense of some incarcerated political dissidents. Despite these activities—perhaps because of them—Richardson was appointed printer for the House of Commons in 1733, establishing him financially.

Between 1722 and 1730, the Richardsons bore six children, five of them boys. None survived infancy or early childhood. Martha died in 1731. In 1733, Richardson married Elizabeth Leake, daughter of the printer whose business he now ran. They had six children, four of whom—all girls—lived to adulthood.

When Richardson began to write his first novel, *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740-1741), he had suffered, in a two-year period, the deaths of eleven close family members and friends. He fell ill with symptoms now recognized as incipient Parkinson's disease, an illness that plagued him until he died.

Richardson was a published author before beginning to write novels. His guide, *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum: Or, Young Man's Pocket Companion* (1733), was widely read. It was, however, *Pamela*, in two volumes, that first captured the public imagination in Britain and throughout Europe. The

novel was motivated, apparently, in the autumn of 1739, when Richardson began to write *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions* (1741) for a company of booksellers. This book was a letter-writing guide, but writing it apparently suggested to Richardson the possibility of writing an epistolary novel based on his intimate understanding of women. He began to write *Pamela* in November, 1739, and, remarkably, he completed the two-volume work two months later. In its first year, *Pamela* went into five editions. It was dramatized by Voltaire in France and Carlo Goldoni in Italy, as well as by Henry Giffard in Britain. Richardson wrote two additional volumes of *Pamela* that appeared in the new 1741 edition.

Richardson's next book was another epistolary novel, *Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady* (1747-1748), twice the length of *Pamela*. The book went through extensive revision before the last of its seven volumes finally appeared in 1748. A third novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-1754), the story of a dandy who loved two women, was published in seven volumes during 1753 and 1754.

By now, Richardson was a master of the Stationers' Company. Grief over the deaths of many of his friends and family, however, had left him in an unsettled state. By 1755, he had decided to write no more novels and showed a disinclination to write anything. His health, fragile for some two decades, became an increasing burden. Paralysis made it difficult for him to maintain his voluminous correspondence, a central element in his life. On June 28, 1761, he had a stroke and survived for a week, dying in London on July 4.

## ANALYSIS

Richardson was concerned with what George Sherburne has labeled "the distresses of love." Coming to the most creative part of his career relatively late in life, Richardson had prepared well for it, not only reading voluminously but also—more significantly—listening to the inmost revelations of dozens of young women who confided in him, finding him a ready listener and a nonthreatening companion. Richardson came to know and understand women better than any prose writer before him. His greatest triumph as a writer lay in his ability to create the complex fantasies out of which his stories grow. This complexity is achieved by Richardson's apparent realization that every major sen-

timent his characters reveal in their letters must be paired with a countervailing sentiment shown by characters in their responses, epistolary or reported. The tension that this sort of complexity exacts is the dramatic tension that keeps Richardson's mammoth novels moving.

Richardson's most celebrated novels, *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, are centrally concerned with virtue that is sorely tried by the sexual cravings of, respectively, Squire B. and Robert Lovelace. When Squire B. is on the brink of raping Pamela Andrews, a cleric's fifteen-year-old daughter who has come into the household as a servant for his late mother, the girl's innocence and sincerity unman him. He becomes putty in her hands and ultimately marries her, rewarding Pamela's virtue. In the two final volumes of *Pamela*, Richardson deals with another problem, that of determining how a simple girl, low of birth, can survive and function in a stratum of society higher than that to which she has been accustomed. Clarissa Harlow is less fortunate than Pamela Andrews: Lovelace, an earl's nephew, succeeds in raping her. Psychologically, both books offer remarkable insights. *Clarissa* moves beyond *Pamela*, however, because it deals sensitively with the emotions of the male and female protagonists, especially as these emotions are revealed in extensive correspondence from both of them to their two confidants, Anne Howe and Jack Belford.

Richardson's basic morality in *Pamela* is not unlike that found later in Charles Dickens's novels. Goodness is rewarded, evil punished. The reward, as in *Pamela*, can be either material or, as in *Clarissa*, simply the satisfaction of knowing and doing what is right. Richardson had a sufficiently puritanical attitude toward sex that he avoided reporting direct, explicit sexual situations, although he perhaps titillated his readers more than he could have had he described in late-twentieth century detail what went on behind the closed doors and voluminous tapestries.

Each of Richardson's major protagonists—Pamela Andrews, Clarissa Harlowe, and Charles Grandison—is faced with difficult decisions. Pamela has to decide, after her mistress's death and Squire B.'s advances, whether to remain in Squire B.'s house or to do the obvious thing and return to her parents. She makes her decision and in so doing must realize what the consequences are likely to be. Her later attempts to escape from Squire B.'s

estate are so ineffective as to be hardly attempts at all. Clarissa Harlowe, raped by the libidinous Lovelace, also has a decision to reach: Having been raped, will she marry Lovelace, or will she go through life bearing her shame and being shunned by her family? Opting for the latter alternative, she dies soon afterward. Charles Grandison had to contend with similar divisions of mind. His major problem was whether he would marry an Italian Catholic or a more conventional British Protestant. These two women represent for him the temptation of the mysterious versus the secure. Such indecision is characteristic of Richardson's characters; it is this indecision that supplies the well-controlled dramatic tension in his rambling works.

Richardson himself was of a divided mind. He was blindly—or at least myopically—admiring of rank and class, but he firmly believed as well in the triumph of virtue and morality over their opposites. In most of his writing, he struggled to work out the dichotomy between morality and the established social order, which was strongly ingrained in him.

Richardson deviated from the epistolary style when it suited his purposes and reverted to using a diary or journal style, as is seen in material he presents about Pamela after her removal to Lincolnshire. In his other novels as well, many of the letters revert to journal form. The epistolary style helps to excuse some of the one-sidedness in Richardson's presentations. The characters who write the letters cannot see themselves as they really are and as others see them. The epistolary style also adds to the story an immediacy that no other method achieves.

## PAMELA

**First published:** 1740-1741

**Type of work:** Novel

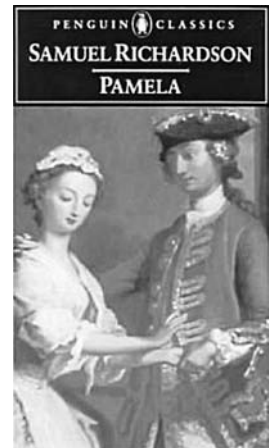
*Pamela Andrews, an innocent servant, resists the advances of her master, Squire B., who finally marries her.*

*Pamela* is really two, closely related novels. The first two volumes of 1740 have the full title *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded. In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel, to Her Parents. Now First*

*Published in Order to Cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of Both Sexes.* The additional volumes that followed in 1741 were published in a new two-volume set titled *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded. In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Damsel, to Her Parents: And Afterwards, in Her Exalted Condition, Between Her, and Persons of Figure and Quality, upon the Most Important and Entertaining Subjects in Genteel Life. The Third and Fourth Volumes. Published in Order to Cultivate Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of Both Sexes.* The subtitles are significant because they reflect the didactic intentions of the author as well as the expectations of the audience Richardson sought.

The first two volumes of *Pamela* tell how the fifteen-year-old Pamela Andrews left her parents' home to become a servant in the country home of a lady of substance in Bedfordshire. The latter dies almost immediately, leaving Pamela alone in the rambling estate with Squire B., the lady's libidinous son. Squire B. promptly tries to impose himself upon the wide-eyed, nubile Pamela, who, being a proper girl, resists his advances and flees from Bedfordshire. Squire B., however, will have his way. He has Pamela abducted and brought to his estate in Lincolnshire, a household run by his housekeeper, Mrs. Jewkes. Throughout all her traumas, Pamela is scribbling away, writing frequently to her parents and then in her journal, reporting with great immediacy the pulse-quickenings assaults upon her cherished virtue. In providing Pamela with no friend in Mrs. Jewkes, Richardson used every means at his disposal to inform his readers (who knew it already) that the social codes of the day were tolerant of people of the upper class who seduced their servants.

Pamela, however, abjures hanky-panky, and when Squire B. tries to force himself upon the hapless Pamela, she resists with her only weapons—innocence and vulnerability—and in so doing, gains a moral superiority over her would-be seducer. If rape has to do with power, as contemporary psy-





chologists contend, by the end of volume 2, readers of *Pamela* see a complete power shift from Squire B. to the virtuous girl, hence the words “Virtue Rewarded” in the subtitle. Pamela, by the sheer force of moral rectitude, reduces the proud squire to a sniveling penitent. She has endured kidnapping and imprisonment, her attempts to gain her freedom have been thwarted by the unprincipled Mrs. Jewkes, and even Parson Williams, the local curate, has been unable to help her. She has contemplated suicide, realizing that the entire establishment within which she must exist favors rank over righteousness. As in many eighteenth century British novels, however, virtue prevails. Squire B., unnerved by all that has happened, grants Pamela her freedom, but then, realizing he loves her, recalls her and marries her.

The second half of the four-volume work has to do with Pamela’s adjusting to her transformation from humble servant to lady of a powerful house. Underlying all that Richardson writes about here is the implicit question, “Is quality a birthright, or can it be earned?”

The novel was radical for its time. It deals with age-old questions of the individual versus the establishment, of class struggle, and of the sexual politics that exist between men and women. It questions established social norms. Society at that time viewed unmarried ladies of the upper class as inviolable because they were, in a crass sense, economic commodities. Through them the establishment propagated itself. Women of the lower class, however, did not matter; they were fair game for any gentleman with a libido.

One may question—as many did—Pamela’s innocence. Some people, including Henry Fielding, considered her a conniving and manipulative young lady who knew what she wanted and set about getting it. In Fielding’s *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742), a shameless parody of *Pamela*, Pamela’s brother, Joseph, emerges as an obverse image of his almost-too-good-to-be-believed sister. Fielding’s other attack, *A Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* (1741), was among many debunking reactions to Richardson’s novel.

Some critics label Richardson humorless and naïve. A literal reading of *Pamela* supports such a conclusion. Beneath the surface, however, lurk arcane suggestions, oblique comments about prob-

lems that concerned Richardson deeply. Squire B.’s attempts to deprive Pamela of writing materials makes one wonder whether Richardson is commenting indirectly about the Licensing Act, which imposed strict censorship on the London stage at about the time Richardson wrote *Pamela*. In 1735, he published a tract in support of the Licensing Act. That was the politically correct stand for a prominent printer to take—but was that his real stand?

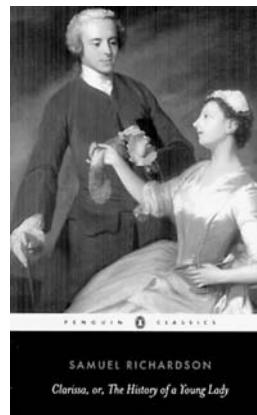
## CLARISSA

**First published:** 1747-1748

**Type of work:** Novel

*Raped by the aristocratic Robert Lovelace, Clarissa Harlowe must decide whether to marry him or to bear her shame alone.*

The seven volumes of *Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady*, published in 1748, are a shortened version of the novel—the longest in the English language—that began to flow from the author’s pen sometime before 1744. Various people read manuscript versions of the book from that date forward. Subsequent editions in 1749 and 1751 were drastic revisions of the first and restored some of the earlier deleted material.



Clarissa Harlowe is the second and favored daughter of a good family. In a break from tradition, she has been left an estate by her grandfather. She is pursued by Robert Lovelace, an aristocrat, who cannot marry her until he finds a way to make her less attractive older sister, Arabella, reject him.

In a convoluted plot, Clarissa’s brother James fights with Lovelace and then, vengefully, arranges for Clarissa to be married to Mr. Solmes, a man she deplors. Ultimately, Lovelace tricks Clarissa into going off with him to London, where he installs her in a brothel. Clarissa suspects Lovelace’s motives

and escapes to lodgings in Hampstead, but Lovelace follows and prevails upon her to seek refuge with his cousin and aunt, who are really prostitutes posing as relatives.

They take her to a brothel where Lovelace drugs and then rapes her. Following this event, Clarissa lapses into a period of madness and is faced with the crucial decision of whether to marry Lovelace. Readers, through being exposed to Lovelace's correspondence with Jack Belford, know more about him than Clarissa does, and this knowledge engages their sympathy for her.

Clarissa, after escaping from the brothel, finds shelter with a kindly family, but her security does not last long. She is soon thrown into debtors' prison. Belford secures her release and befriends her. By now, Clarissa's health is broken, and it deteriorates further when she learns of plots Lovelace has launched against her, partly because of her rejection of him and partly because of his own guilt.

Clarissa prepares for death alone in London. She is now free from Lovelace and her family, which avoids visiting her. Upon her death, she is returned to Harlowe Place for burial. Lovelace, hearing of her death, is consumed by such guilt that he

becomes temporarily insane. Finally, having recovered, he travels to the Continent. Clarissa's cousin, ignoring one of Clarissa's last wishes, follows Lovelace and kills him in a duel.

*Clarissa* is perhaps Richardson's greatest triumph. By using two sets of correspondents, he overcame some of the problems he encountered in *Pamela* and also provided the kinds of multiple views that help to weave an intricate plot.

## SUMMARY

In many respects, Samuel Richardson can legitimately be called the first British novelist of note. His deep and accurate psychological understanding of women makes him seem eerily modern as one reads him today. Although Richardson was a circumspect person, his ideas were radical for his time. He expressed them so subversively in his writing that many of them remain undiscovered.

Modern novelists, directly or indirectly, all owe a debt to Richardson. He led the way for such novelists as Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, Tobias Smollett, the Brontë sisters, and—perhaps his most obvious literary descendant—Charles Dickens.

R. Baird Shuman

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#### LONG FICTION:

*Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*, 1740-1741

*Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady*, 1747-1748

*Sir Charles Grandison*, 1753-1754

#### NONFICTION:

*The Apprentice's Vade Mecum: Or, Young Man's Pocket Companion*, 1733

*Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions*, 1741

*A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflections, Contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison*, 1755

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why did Samuel Richardson prefer epistles as the basis of his novels?
- Did Richardson's *Pamela* deserve to be satirized by Henry Fielding?
- Does Richardson differ significantly from other eighteenth century novelists, who tended to emphasize the external aspects of social relationships rather than psychological ones?
- Lovelace, in *Clarissa*, is an early example in English fiction of the seducer. Is he a credible character or just a projection of sexual villainy?
- Does Clarissa have any vitality beyond her fierce defense of her chastity?
- Is Richardson important primarily as an early and influential English novelist, or can he speak to readers of the present time?



Christopher Morris

## MORDECAI RICHLER

**Born:** Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
January 27, 1931

**Died:** Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
July 3, 2001

*One of the most highly regarded Canadian novelists, Richler satirizes the foibles of Canadian, English, and Jewish life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mordecai Richler (RIHCH-lur) was born on January 27, 1931, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, the son of Moses Isaac and Lily Rosenberg Richler. His Polish grandfather, whose name, Reichler, was misspelled by an immigration officer, came to Canada in 1904 to escape the pogroms of Eastern Europe accompanying the Russo-Japanese War and settled with other Jewish immigrants in the east end of Montreal. Richler's grandfather was a peddler, and his father operated a junkyard.

Richler grew up in a narrow, self-contained Jewish society that feared both French- and English-Canadians. He attended Jewish parochial school, studying the Talmud and modern Hebrew, and was expected to become a Hasidic rabbi like his maternal grandfather. Through his English-language instructors, he learned of the world beyond the Jewish ghetto and rejected orthodox religion.

His parents, who had long had an unhappy marriage, were divorced in 1944. In response to the disruption in his family life, Richler joined Habonim, a Zionist labor group, and dreamed of settling in Palestine. Many of Richler's protagonists are also the products of broken homes. The autobiographical basis of much of Richler's fiction becomes clear in the details of Montreal Jewish ghetto life provided in the autobiography of his mother, writing

as Leah Rosenberg, *The Errand Runner: Reflections of a Rabbi's Daughter* (1981).

At the predominantly Jewish Baron Byng High School, Richler became further aware of the non-Jewish world while thinking of himself more as both Jewish and Canadian. Considering the prejudices mutually felt between Jews and Canadians, he found being Jewish and Canadian a paradox. Ironically, when Jews fleeing Adolf Hitler's Germany settled in Montreal, Richler's friends and relatives found themselves defending things Canadian, the nation's culture in particular. Still, the Canada of Richler's childhood was an unfriendly environment for Jews. There were restricted hotels and country clubs; swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans were painted on buildings. In *The Street: Stories* (1969), his slightly fictionalized account of growing up in Montreal, Richler writes of the atmosphere during World War II: "The democracy we were being invited to defend was flawed and hostile to us. Without question it was better for us in Canada than in Europe, but this was still their country, not ours."

Since Richler's high school grades were not good enough for him to attend prestigious McGill University, he went to Sir George Williams University for two years, majoring in English. He was an editor of the student newspaper and worked part-time for the *Montreal Herald*, covering college basketball and amateur theatricals. Attracted to the academic life but afraid of becoming enervated by it, Richler redeemed an insurance policy for eight hundred dollars and left Canada for Europe. He wanted to be a writer, having started writing when he was fourteen, but he felt he could not create in a

country as culturally barren as he believed Canada to be. He spent two years in Europe, mostly in Paris, where he became friends with such fellow exiles as James Baldwin, Mavis Gallant, Herbert Gold, and Terry Southern. In 1950, he published his first story in *Points*, a Parisian magazine for young writers.

Richler came down with scurvy in Paris because of poor diet and returned to Montreal in 1952, working at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a radio news editor. After his first novel, *The Acrobats* (1954), which he had begun in Europe, was published, he left for London with his first wife, Catherine Boudreau, from whom he was divorced shortly afterward. He wanted to test himself against the publishing standards of London and New York, not simply those of Toronto. He felt challenged by the more vibrant literary climate of England and found it easier to write about Canada as an exile. Richler thought of himself, however, as an outsider in England. He shared an apartment with Toronto-born Ted Kotcheff, who would direct several television plays and four films written by Richler.

After publishing two more novels, Richler achieved his first major success with *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959). He married Florence Wood, an actress and model from Montreal, in 1959. They returned to Montreal for a year in 1968 when he served as writer-in-residence at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University). Considering Canada no longer culturally backward and worried about being away too long from what he called the roots of his discontent, Richler, his wife, and their children, Daniel, Noah, Emma, Martha, and Jacob, returned to Canada permanently in 1972. He was a visiting professor at Carleton University in Ottawa from 1972 to 1974. Two of his novels, *Cocksure* (1968) and *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971), received the Governor-General's Award for Fiction, Canada's highest literary award.

Richler's screenwriting work began when director Jack Clayton asked him to write the uncredited final revision of *Room at the Top* (1959); the screenplay won an Academy Award for an earlier writer on the project. Subsequently, Richler adapted two of his novels, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Joshua Then and Now* (1980), for the screen. His script for the former was nominated for an Academy Award and was named best comedy of the year by the Screenwriters Guild of America. The film

was the highest-grossing motion picture in Canada to that date. Richler received the Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award for his first children's book, *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (1975).

He continued to write numerous essays and reviews for Canadian, British, and American magazines, the best pieces being included in such collections as *Hunting Tigers Under Glass: Essays and Reports* (1968), which won the Governor-General's Award for nonfiction. In his journalism, Richler became a frequent, often controversial critic of his native country. He ridiculed Canadian nationalism, the National Arts Center in Ottawa, various politicians, and Canadian publishing and filmmaking. His opposition to the Québécois separatist movement resulted in a long-running feud with the Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* and to death threats, including one to blow up the hospital where he was recovering from kidney cancer in 1998. Richler was awarded the Order of Canada in 1999. He died of complications from cancer in Montreal on July 3, 2001.

## ANALYSIS

Being both a Jew and a Canadian amid the chaos of the twentieth century is the central concern of most of Richler's fiction. While not all of his protagonists are Jewish and not all of his novels are set in Canada, they are united in their concern with the difficulty of living in a world of pogroms, simplistic nationalism, ethnic tensions, political and personal hypocrisy, materialism, greed, and exploitation.

Richler fits into at least three distinct literary schools. His unease with class distinctions places him among the "angry young men," such as John Osborne, John Wain, John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, and David Storey, who dominated English fiction and drama in the 1950's and 1960's. His insights into North American Jewish life align him with Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Bruce Jay Friedman, and another Montreal native, Saul Bellow. The outrageous, often profane comedy of his later fiction resembles that of such black humorists as Thomas Berger, J. P. Donleavy, and Joseph Heller. The diversity of Richler's fiction can be attributed to the wide range of writers whom he has identified as influences, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Evelyn Waugh, Nathanael West, and P. G. Wodehouse.

Richler's satire results from a morally conservative viewpoint that leads him to rage at society's ex-



cesses. His protagonists are adrift in a world where acquiring money and status and satisfying sexual appetites seem to be the only reasons for existence. They seek some moral absolute that will allow them to make sense of their lives, but their quests for meaning are as likely to end in self-disgust as self-discovery. The typical Richler heroes long to establish their identities, to make meaningful connections with others, to find a home, a place where they will experience at least a tenuous sensation of belonging. Often self-deluding or self-destructive, his characters' greatest obstacle is usually themselves. Underscoring all of these concerns are constant references to the sufferings of the Jewish people and the evil of Nazism.

Richler's early fiction is predominantly realistic. *The Acrobats* examines the guilt experienced by Richler's generation for having been too young to have taken part in the Spanish Civil War and World War II and considers the self-destructive lengths to which they will go to assuage their guilt. The Jewish protagonist of *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) is frustrated by being cut off from the larger Canadian world, by the class distinctions not only in that society but also among Canadian Jews, and by his need to rebel against the shallowness and dishonesty that he sees everywhere. *A Choice of Enemies* (1957) uses Richler's experiences in radio and television to depict American and Canadian expatriates in the world of London show business. This often existential novel looks at the moral implications of the choices made by the individual. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, one of the most highly regarded coming-of-age novels in twentieth century literature, moves Richler closer to finding his comic voice.

*The Incomparable Atuk* (1963), published as *Stick Your Neck Out* in the United States, is Richler's first overtly satirical novel. He uses an Eskimo poet lionized by Toronto society to poke fun at Canadian culture, nationalism, consumerism, and pretensions. *Cocksure*, a jaundiced look at the swinging London of the 1960's, is even stronger satire, attacking a mindless consumer society that accepts the images fostered upon it by television and film as the gospel of a new reality. Richler's protagonist longs to uphold decency and honor in a world where such qualities are despised and is punished as a result. *Cocksure* was banned by a chain of bookstores in Great Britain because of its sexual explicit-

ness, a key element in Richler's depiction of the excesses of his time.

*St. Urbain's Horseman*, with its comic yet angry portrait of a Canadian Jew desperate to establish his identity, proved to be the major work toward which Richler had been building. *Joshua Then and Now* examines Richler's generation in uneasy middle age. In attempting to impose order on the chaos of his personal life, its hero learns about communication, love, and responsibility, all significant Richler themes. *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989), his most stylistically complex novel, covers more than 150 years in the lives of a family of Canadian Jews as Richler vents his outrage at several famous historical events. This treatment of greed, stupidity, and anti-Semitism is his darkest satire. *Solomon Gursky Was Here* is perhaps Richler's most complete vision of his disappointment in his native land: "Canada is not so much a country as a holding tank filled with the disgruntled progeny of defeated peoples." *Barney's Version* (1997), his final novel, depicts the guilt of a television executive over his three marriages and a friend's mysterious death. The narrator's reliability in interpreting his life is hampered by the development of Alzheimer's disease.

Richler's characters are never comfortable with being either Jewish or Canadian. Everything about Canada appears inferior to its parallel in the United States, Great Britain, or France. His Canada is much like the world encountered by Jews: full of ghettos, torn by prejudices and petty jealousies. Richler's characters are defined by their Jewishness and confined by it. For them, traditional Jewish attitudes have become irrelevant in the modern world. Battered by ethnic, religious, cultural, and psychological tensions, they can never feel truly at home anywhere.

Richler's novels are quests in search of identity, a sense of belonging, of fulfillment. What he is seeking in his fiction "are the values with which in this time a man can live with honour." His protagonists are on quests for absolute truths needed to cure their indecisiveness. In this spiritual quest, they reject one world for an apparently better one and then struggle to come to grips with both the world they have abandoned and the new values confronting them. They are unable to distinguish between whether they are more concerned with escaping one world or searching for a new one.

## THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ

**First published:** 1959

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Canadian Jew determined to build a summer resort tries numerous money-making schemes.*

David “Duddy” Kravitz, the title character of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, grows up in the Jewish ghetto of Montreal with his widowed father, Max, a taxi driver and part-time pimp, and his older brother, Lennie, a medical student. Duddy worships his grandfather, Simcha, a shoemaker, who believes that a man is nothing without land. Duddy, fifteen when the novel opens in 1947, is an unsophisticated, loudmouthed, obnoxious liar. A harassing telephone call to one of his teachers contributes to the death of the man’s invalid wife. Duddy’s favorite topic is sex. His friend Jake Hersh tells him, “Nothing’s good for you unless you can make it dirty.” Adults consider him “mean, a crafty boy” and hope his family will not suffer too badly from his antics. Duddy longs to emulate Jerry Dingleman, a gangster who grew up with Max.

After high school, Duddy works at a Jewish summer resort, where he is the only waiter who is not a college student. The other waiters are appalled by his crudeness, and one, Irwin Shubert, plots to destroy Duddy by winning all of his money in a crooked roulette game. Irwin justifies his actions by claiming, “It’s the cretinous little money-grubbers like Kravitz that cause anti-Semitism.” Irwin is forced to give Duddy back his money, and the guests feel sorry for him and give him even more. Throughout *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the protagonist profits from bad experiences.

Duddy arrives at his plan for success when Yvette Durelle, a waitress at the resort, shows him a beautiful, unspoiled lake. He plans to buy the land surrounding it and build his own resort with a plot set aside as a farm for his grandfather. His first scheme to make the necessary money involves hiring the alcoholic Peter John Friar, a blacklisted English director of documentary films, to make films of Bar Mitzvahs and weddings. The first such film is the comic highlight of the novel, as Friar adds stock

footage to create an unintentionally hilarious anthropological study of Jewishness, as well as a parody of documentary pretentiousness.

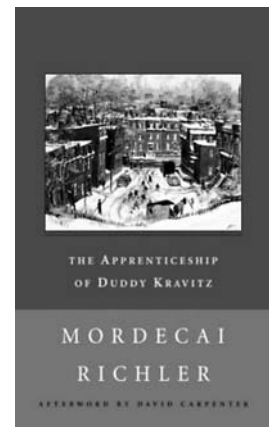
Duddy begs Max to introduce him to Dingleman, who takes the teenager to New York, where Dingleman’s friends laugh at Duddy’s gaucheness. Dingleman then tricks Duddy into smuggling heroin back into Canada.

When Lennie runs away after he has botched an abortion on a rich girl, arranged by Irwin Shubert, Duddy tracks Lennie down in Toronto, brings him home, and convinces the girl’s powerful father not to have Lennie expelled from medical school. The rich man is impressed by Duddy’s courage, honesty, and loyalty.

Duddy hires the epileptic Virgil Roseboro to drive a truck for him, but Virgil has an accident and is paralyzed. Desperate to buy the last plot of land, Duddy forges Virgil’s name on a check. When he proudly takes his family to see what he has accomplished, his grandfather refuses to accept the farm because Yvette has told him what Duddy has done to Virgil: “I can see what you have planned for me, Duddel. You’ll be good to me. You’d give me everything I wanted. And that would settle your conscience when you went out to swindle others.”

Like Philip Roth, Richler has been accused of anti-Semitism for his portrayal of such characters as Duddy. He says that his intention has been misunderstood: “Duddy Kravitz was not meant to be a metaphor for the Jewish people. He was a character typical of his time and place.” Richler makes this point clear by having Dingleman take Duddy to see Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (pr., pb. 1949). Like Miller’s Willy Loman, Duddy is an Everyman who has allowed himself to ignore his darker side in his pursuit of success. Like Loman, Duddy will be liked but not well liked.

That Richler intends the reader both to despise and to admire Duddy is typical of his ambivalence toward Canadians, Jewishness, materialism, and



success. Duddy lacks a clear identity, vacillating between his grandfather's morality and the corrupt ruthlessness of Dingleman. Richler makes him sympathetic by portraying him as a victim of his class. Duddy is morally superior to Irwin because he does not use others simply out of maliciousness. He takes advantage of Virgil but tells himself he will make it up to his victim.

Duddy is desperate for success, not just for itself but to create a better world beyond that of the ghetto. This need is shown by his creation of an imaginary older brother, Bradley, who lives on a ranch in Arizona and will invite Duddy to stay with him at any moment. He is even more desperate for the love and affection of Simcha, Max, and Lennie. He is forever hugging his father, knowing that Max cares more for Lennie. When his father agrees to introduce him to Dingleman, Duddy exclaims, "That means you think I'm like O.K. now."

Richler presents Duddy as a larger-than-life figure with equally good and bad qualities. The novelist does not sit in judgment of him, avoids any simplistic morality, and forces the reader to examine all sides of a complex character.

## ST. URBAIN'S HORSEMAN

**First published:** 1971

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Canadian film director in exile in England has his life thrown into turmoil by a rape charge.*

In *St. Urbain's Horseman*, Jake Hersch is a successful thirty-seven-year-old film director. He lives comfortably in London in 1967 with his wife, Nancy, and their three children until Ingrid Loebner, a German au pair girl, charges him and his friend, the disreputable Harry Stein, with rape. Richler delays the details of the charges until late in the novel, flashing back to depict Jake's life before this ordeal.

Growing up with Duddy Kravitz on St. Urbain Street in Montreal, Jake finds his life disrupted when his parents' marriage ends. He retreats into hero worship of his cousin, Joey, who has been a minor league baseball player, actor, folksinger, soldier in the Spanish Civil War, gambler, gangster, and communist. Jake slowly evolves an elaborate myth

about Joey, the Horseman, whom he sees as the redeemer of the Hersch family, the St. Urbain neighborhood, and Jews in general.

The teenaged Jake decides to become a director and moves to Toronto to work on television and stage productions. After he and his playwright friend Luke Scott feel that they have conquered Toronto, they seek the even greater challenges of London. Jake gradually becomes jealous of Luke, who finds success first. Jake marries Nancy, becomes a film director, and continues his search for Joey, who disappeared twenty years earlier. After finding Ruthy Flam, who claims Joey proposed to her, took her money, and abandoned her, he discovers evidence that Joey may be tracking down Joseph Mengele, the infamous Nazi war criminal.

Through Ruthy, he meets Harry, a Cockney Jew who forces his friendship upon Jake. A twice-convicted felon whose hobby is pornographic photography, Harry represents the uninhibited side of his nature that Jake keeps restrained. Allowing Harry to use his house while he is in Montreal for his father's funeral and Nancy and the children are in the country, Jake returns early and stumbles into Harry's orgy with Ingrid. Jake throws her out when she insults his Jewishness, the police find her in tears, and a trial results in seven years of imprisonment for Harry. Learning that Joey has been killed in an airplane crash in South America, Jake refuses to relinquish hope that the Horseman may still be alive and in pursuit of Mengele.

*St. Urbain's Horseman* displays Richler's typical ambivalence toward his subjects, offering several opposing views of Canada. It is "Thousands of miles of wheat, indifference, and self-apology." Yet Jake feels "increasingly claimed" by Canada. He leaves it "with a sense of loss, even deprivation, and melancholy." The insecure Jake identifies with Canada since the nation has been rejected by both England and France.

Despite his successful career and loving family, Jake is never at ease, seeing himself as a disappointment, a cliché: "His life until now read to him like any Jewish intellectual journeyman's case history." Feeling undeserving of his good fortune, he fears something will intrude to destroy his perfect life.

This sense of having lived too safe an existence explains Jake's attraction to the dangerous Harry Stein. When Jake refuses to pay Ruthy the seven hundred pounds she says Joey took from her,

Harry, who works for Jake's accountant, turns him in to the tax authorities and telephones a bomb threat to disrupt Jake's flight to Cannes. Instead of being outraged, Jake admires Harry's audacity. As a victim of the class system, Harry touches Jake. Their class differences are the main reason that Harry goes to prison while Jake is merely fined.

A major contribution to Jake's alienation is his feeling that his generation was born both too early and too late, a recurrent theme in Richler's writings. They missed the war and do not fit in with the youth culture of the 1960's: "Always the wrong age. Ever observers, never participants. The whirlwind elsewhere." Jake fears that they will be "dismissed as trivial, a peripheral generation." No one will become impassioned by the values Jake sees himself as representing: decency, tolerance, honor.

For solace, Jake turns to thoughts of the Horseman, convinced that Joey offers answers to the questions that perplex him: "Going into production, whether in television or film, he tried above all to please the Horseman. For somewhere he was watching, judging." Joey is all that Jake longs to be: adventurous, heroic, mysterious, dangerous, sexually attractive to every woman whom he encounters.

What is most important is not Joey Hersh himself but the myth that Jake has created about his cousin. He ignores all the evidence that Joey is merely out for himself. Jake's Uncle Abe tells him that if Joey were to find Mengele, he would not kill the Nazi but blackmail him. Nancy points out that, if not for his obsession with Joey, Jake would not have met Ruthy and Harry and fallen into disgrace and even stronger self-doubt. Yet Jake perseveres in his belief. The reality of Joey is less substantial than the myth. Disillusioned by religion, politics, and art, it is all that Jake has.

## JOSHUA THEN AND NOW

**First published:** 1980

**Type of work:** Novel

*This work is the conclusion of what is seen as a trilogy of novels about ambitious young men growing up Jewish in Montreal.*

The only son of Reuben, a former boxer who works for a gangster, and Esther, an exotic dancer performing as Esty Blossom, Joshua Shapiro has a chip on his shoulder about being Jewish, Canadian, and poor. Obsessed with the Spanish Civil War, the subject of his first book, Joshua feels he has been left out of life's great adventures, its noble causes, and strives to make up for this lack by becoming rich and famous as a journalist and television personality in England and Canada. More than in most of his fiction, Richler presents a non-linear narrative as forty-seven-year-old Joshua, hospitalized with multiple fractures, looks back at his life and the choices he and those close to him have made. The novel constantly jumps back and forth in time and place (Montreal, London, Paris, Hollywood, Spain) to suggest the chaotic, peripatetic nature of its protagonist's life.

As a young man, Joshua falls desperately in love with Pauline Hornby, the well-to-do daughter of a Canadian senator. A few years later in London, he begins an affair with the married Pauline and eventually marries her. Marriage, fatherhood, and a successful career fail to provide the happiness Joshua desires. He never feels worthy of Pauline, always placing obstacles between them, and constantly fears losing her. He is ambivalent about everything in his life, especially his celebrity because he dislikes television and those who shine in the medium.

Joshua also dislikes Jack Trimble, a successful investor who pretends to be English, and resists the advances of Jack's sexy wife, Jane, Pauline's best friend. He also feels jealous of Pauline's flamboyant, athletic, ne'er-do-well brother, Kevin, with whom she appears to have an almost incestuous relationship. Jack's hiring Kevin creates even more tension in Joshua's life.

There are repeated flashbacks to Joshua's visit to Ibiza in the early 1950's, as he seeks the remains of

the lost cause of the Spanish Civil War and finds much more than he expected in the arms of a beautiful, libidinous French tourist. A return to the same spot years later finds the place, like Joshua, much changed, without its seedy glamour.

For the friends with whom he grows up in the St. Urbain neighborhood, Joshua is never a famous, influential personality but the boy whose mother performed a striptease at the party following his Bar Mitzvah. Joshua and his friends, who hold a boisterous annual reunion, remain united by their Jewishness and their amused tolerance for the eccentricities of their fellow Canadians.

Joshua's best friend, from his London days in the 1950's, is the English novelist Sidney Murdoch. As a prank when they are young men, they compose letters to each other posing as homosexual lovers. When these letters come to light after Murdoch's death, Joshua's haphazard existence grows even more tempestuous, with Richler satirizing the excesses of the news media.

A major theme of *Joshua Then and Now* is time, hence its fragmented structure, and the acceptance of foibles that comes with aging. Tinged by nostalgia for the passions of the past, Joshua becomes sadder but wiser.

## SUMMARY

Mordecai Richler's novels are satirical attacks upon the sins of his times, but his approach to his fiction denies his readers any sense of moral superiority, rubbing their noses in the excesses of the twentieth century. Richler is an unusual novelist because he is moralistic without being didactic or sentimental. He has no pretensions to having any answers to life's dilemmas, content merely to pose the questions. Richler's fiction is as notable for its compassion as much as its anger. Making rogues such as Duddy Kravitz and Harry Stein sympathetic is typical of his greatest talent: his skill at vivid characterization.

Michael Adams

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is distinctively Canadian about Mordecai Richler's fiction?
- Richler's Canadian characters often live in exile, usually in England. How do their exiles affect their views of themselves and their native country?
- Many of Richler's novels are about growing up. What does he seem to be saying about the pains and joys of adolescence?
- Friendship is one of Richler's most consistent themes. Compare how he examines friendship in two or more novels.
- Like many male writers of his generation, Richler has been accused of failing to create completely realized female characters. Is this charge justified?
- Many of Richler's protagonists, Duddy Kravitz in particular, are not particularly likable. Why does Richler deliberately make it difficult to identify with such characters?
- *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, and *Joshua Then and Now* are said to form a trilogy, though they involve different characters. How are they alike thematically?



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## RAINER MARIA RILKE

**Born:** Prague, Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire  
(now in Czech Republic)  
December 4, 1875

**Died:** Valmont, Switzerland  
December 29, 1926

*Rilke, a twentieth century lyric poet, infused his writing with his own personal myth of omniscient and omnipotent feeling.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rainer Maria Rilke (RIHL-kuh) was born on December 4, 1875, in Prague, Bohemia, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in the Czech Republic), as René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke. His father, Josef Rilke, aspired to a military career, but circumstances forced him into an early retirement. His mother, Sophia Entz, grew up in an aristocratic atmosphere; her father had been a merchant and an imperial councillor. Dissatisfied with her husband's humble social status, she attempted to create the illusion of affluence in the family.

Due in part to his mother's pretentious and hypocritical display of Catholicism, Rilke later abandoned Christianity entirely. His hostile attitude toward established religion, combined with a genuine and profound spiritual tendency in his nature, was to lead Rilke to search for a divinity within and for a means to express it. This search for "God" contributed to some of the central images and themes in his writing.

Rilke's personal and artistic development was seriously affected by another element in his mother's personality. His mother, prior to giving birth to Rilke, had lost a female child; he then became the girl whom she never had. For his first five years, Rilke was kept in long curls and dresses and was given dolls with which to play.

Although their marriage was a troubled one almost from the start, Rilke's parents separated in 1884, and in 1886 Rilke was sent to a military school, where he remained for five years. It was there that he began to write, as much from loneliness and desperation as from a desire to explore and represent the world around him. Rilke left military school in 1891, at the age of sixteen, ostensibly for health reasons. The next year, his parents sent him to trade school in Linz to prepare for a business career. In 1895, Rilke entered the Karl-Ferdinand University in Prague as a philosophy major. Within six months, he had switched to law, and by September, 1896, he had left Prague for Munich to study art history.

While living in Prague, Rilke tried to establish himself as a writer. His style, however, was sentimental and imitative. Passionately interested in the theater, he wrote several plays heavily influenced by naturalism; two of them were performed at the German Volkstheater in Prague. Between 1894 and 1896, he also published three volumes of poetry.

In October of 1896, Rilke moved to Munich. There, he became acquainted with Lou Andreas-Salomé, a critic, novelist, and writer of philosophical essays. Married and fourteen years Rilke's senior, she was to become one of the most influential people in his life. She would become his mistress, companion, teacher, and mother figure for three intense years; she also remained a correspondent and distant confidant throughout his life. It was upon her insistence that he changed his non-German and, in her view, feminine-sounding name from René to Rainer. Andreas-Salomé sent Rilke to

Florence to study art and architecture, and in the spring of 1899 they traveled to Russia together. Russian culture was to have a deep impact on Rilke's life and work from that time forward. Rilke's thoughts on such issues as the relation of God and art or the importance of humility and patience were given form and substance in Russia.

When Rilke's mistress began to tire of his overly dependent and demanding nature, the poet decided to stay with a painter friend, Heinrich Vogeler, in Worpswede, where he became intimately involved with a group of visual artists. The idea of *schauen*, of seeing in an active, participatory way, was to become an important dimension of his own art. There, he became friends with the painter Paula Becker and the sculptor Clara Westhoff, whom he married in 1901.

After living under impoverished circumstances for some time, the couple moved to Paris. Clara returned to her studies with Auguste Rodin, and Rilke was commissioned to write a monograph on the sculptor. Paris was a turning point in Rilke's life for many reasons. Although he and Clara remained close friends and often lived near one another in Paris, Rome, and Munich, they never again shared a home. Also, Rilke learned from Rodin the lesson that poetry was not only an inspiration but also a craft.

During the next several years, Rilke traveled extensively. In 1906, he was fired from a clerical position given to him by Rodin; that same year his father died. Then, in 1907, Paula died. Feeling the sadness, guilt, and loss over her death, he wrote one of his most personal and moving poems, "Requiem für eine Freundin" ("Requiem for a Friend").

Rilke returned to Paris, where he completed the second book of the two-volume *Neue Gedichte* (1907-1908; *New Poems*, 1964) and his novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910; *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1930)—an endeavor that cost him much of his health and energy. During his extensive travels in 1910 and 1911, he met Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis, a well-read, older woman with contacts in the artistic and aristocratic worlds of Europe. She became a wise, motherly, and powerful patron to Rilke. The princess placed her two castles, at Duino near Trieste and at Lautschin in Bohemia, at Rilke's disposal; it was at Duino that he was inspired to write the first of his

great elegies. In gratitude to his hostess, he called them the *Duineser Elegien* (1923; *Duinese Elegies*, 1930, better known as *Duino Elegies*).

During the next several years Rilke's health began to deteriorate. In 1914, World War I began, and after spending some weeks in basic training, he was released from the army. He then returned to Munich, where he remained during the remainder of the war. In the summer of 1919, he was invited to Switzerland to give a series of poetry readings. A Swiss friend, Werner Reinhart, rented a tower for Rilke, the Castle of Muzot, and later bought it for him. There, he not only completed the *Duino Elegies* but also wrote another book of poems, *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1923; *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1936).

In 1924, Rilke entered a clinic at Valmont, Switzerland; however, there was no visible improvement in his health. In January, 1925, he left for Paris but returned to Muzot nearly a year later. At that time, he made a will and arrangements for his burial. In November, Rilke returned to Valmont, where he fought an intense battle against an extremely rare and painful form of leukemia. He refused to be given drugs that would make him lose consciousness and did not allow his doctor to tell him the diagnosis or to speak of death. He died in Valmont a few weeks after his fifty-first birthday, on December 29, 1926.

## ANALYSIS

While Rilke has often been read as a religious poet or mystic, Rilke's outspoken attitude toward organized religion, particularly Christianity, negates this interpretation. His own unique concept of divinity was a fusion of myth, legend, and personal belief. Rilke's maturity is reflected in his works, which underwent a focusing process. At first, he wrote of a type of anthropomorphic god, related to the Christian one but not identical with it. Later, this god became more clearly associated with creativity. Eventually, God disappeared from the works and was replaced, in the final years, by the angels of the *Duino Elegies*: superhuman beings, aloof and omniscient, with whom humanity was required to come to terms. Rilke increasingly described the process of artistic creativity and investigated the poet's relationship to the world. While these motifs remain central to Rilke's writing, the focus varies in individual works—from the artist in

the earlier works, to the artistic object, to a search for the nature of humanity's creative task in *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

There are, in addition, numerous specific concerns that occupy Rilke's work. Prominent among these is death. Rilke addresses it in several requiems; it assumes an almost medieval character in some works, becomes a dark figure on a path through the bog in his discussions of Worpswede, and appears as a glorious display of light and fountains in other works. Rilke developed the idea that each person has a death of his or her own, as unique as his or her life had been. He frequently uses the image of death as the core or seed of a fruit: Death is placed within the individual to ripen. For women, giving birth also implies bearing a death along with each life that is created.

Also of importance in Rilke's work is the idea of *schauen* (looking, seeing). There are numerous references to light and darkness, to color, and to mirrors in his work. Rilke, as a highly visual poet, emphasizes the seen world; moreover, he calls the reader's attention to the act of seeing. For him, it becomes more than just a sensory act; it is a skill to be cultivated and finally becomes a philosophical stance toward the world.

The past also plays an important role in Rilke's works. Many works contain historical figures who represent themselves within the world of their day and at the same time become bearers of the author's concerns. For Rilke, the past, especially that of great families, implies a way of life that is valuable in itself: elegant, aesthetic, well balanced, and humanistic. This view of the past is related to another important characteristic of his works: his interest in and respect for inanimate objects. These range widely from buildings to art objects to everyday objects. Also, objects from the natural world appear—rain, flowers, and, especially, roses. Rilke often focuses on an object from the past, both as something inhuman, with a life and purpose of its own, and as a link to another era, filled with human associations, anecdotes, and experiences.

Aside from nature, landscape, and animals, certain human types also recur frequently in Rilke's work. Children are for Rilke vehicles of innocence, but they are also victims of adults. In his works, children are often portrayed as being lost among uncomprehending adults, attending schools that brutalize them; yet they are also beings who explore,

experience, and create their own world. Lovers are also a significant element of Rilke's writings, particularly young women whose love is unrequited or impossible. Over the years, Rilke developed a vision of an ideal love, an objectless or possessionless love in which the lover is so strong and sure in his or her love that the object, the specific person, becomes superfluous. The lover loves outward in an expenditure of pure energy, of pure, intransitive loving.

Through the years, there has been a proliferation of styles evident in Rilke's work—neoromanticism, satiric expressionism, impressionism. Progressively, however, in whatever medium Rilke wrote, there is a growing sense of ambiguity and experimentation, and a consistent mastering of the dynamics and the infinite possibilities of language.

## DUINO ELEGIES

**First published:** *Duineser Elegien*, 1923  
(English translation, 1930)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*Rilke's poems take a long, critical, and sometimes despairing look at humankind, attempting, to discover its place in the grand scheme of existence.*

With regard to the *Duino Elegies*, the word "elegy" was first used as a formal term in distichs—paired lines, usually in dactylic hexameter, treating a variety of subjects. Later, the term was applied specifically to poems expressing lamentation, renunciation, or melancholy. *Duino Elegies*, a cycle of ten long poems, continues both of these traditions.

One of the most striking images in the *Duino Elegies*, and one that unites the various poems, is the figure of the angel. The Rilkean angel, however, departs from the traditional biblical figure. As Rilke himself stated:

The angel of the Elegies is that being which stands for the recognition of the invisible as a higher level of reality. Therefore "terrible" for us, since we, its lovers and transformers, still cling to the visible.

The dichotomy of visible/invisible that Rilke stresses is a central image in the *Duino Elegies*. The poet's task—as well as the reader's—is to praise the world, thereby immortalizing it, by transforming the visible into “invisible” objects of language, imagination, and spirit.

In the opening lines of the first elegy, the angels appear aloof, unaware of humankind's inferior presence. Humanity is pictured as having no genuine connection to the rest of creation. The speaker wonders whether there might be hope for humankind in its lovers, but this idea is rejected as self-delusion. In the second elegy, the notion of the angels' vast superiority to humankind is reiterated. First, the speaker elevates their glorious and luminous nature. The remainder of the elegy presents by contrast humanity's feeble essence. Once again, in lovers there is “almost . . . the promise of eternity,” but love is fleeting. The desire for permanence is a complex and ambivalent emotion that persists throughout the cycle. While the second elegy laments the transitory, insubstantial nature of humankind, later in the cycle the desirability of permanence is itself called into question.

The third elegy is entirely devoted to earthly things, to the dark, sexual, subconscious aspect of life. The speaker invokes a mother figure who represents safety and peace, but even she cannot defend the speaker against human nature. The fourth elegy returns to the themes of alienation

and once again compares humankind's chaotic behavior with the harmony of nature. The speaker, referring to the human proclivity for conflict, declares that lovers, instead of bringing mutual liberation, often limit one another's horizons. The fifth elegy focuses on a troupe of traveling acrobats about to perform. The poem emphasizes, once again, humankind's

temporary and unintegrated existence, exemplified by the performers who are tossed and bent like toys by “an insatiable will” outside themselves. The image of a fig tree opens the sixth elegy. The fig tree bears almost no blossoms; it seems to focus

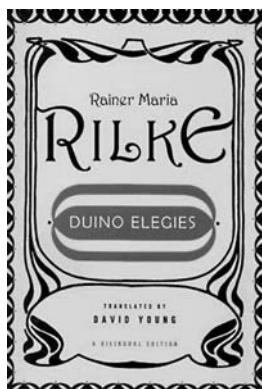
its energy into producing fruit. Unlike the tree, however, the speaker asserts that humans linger in life at the blooming stage and focus on appearances.

In the seventh elegy, the speaker refers pejoratively to the modern world of electricity and power plants, of indifference to the old and sacred. His advice is to cling to the man-made forms that have withstood time. In humanity's capacity for creativity the speaker discovers a piece of eternity. After this expression of pride in being human, the eighth elegy comes as a surprise; it represents a sudden plunge back to the edge of despair. In a striking image of a bat, a creature born of a womb but doomed to fly, Rilke creates one of his most vivid images of disorientation and disharmony. He then turns to the plight of alienated humanity, whose efforts at ordering the world are likened to the seemingly pointless, frenetic movements of the bat.

When people die, they take nothing concrete with them. Rilke presents as a metaphor for this fact the wanderer, who, upon returning from the mountaintops to the valley, brings back, not a handful of earth, but “a pure word.” Humankind's new task will resemble the poet's: to take words on its journey as the symbol and vessel of its experiences. Rilke's solution, however, is not a purely aesthetic one, intended for poets or artists alone. What human beings all share is the ability to transform the world into words that cannot die.

The tenth elegy focuses on lamentation, but the mood is calmly triumphant. The poem presents a scathing allegory of modern life in the form of the *Leidstadt*, the City of Pain, and its surrounding suburbs and fairgrounds. The speaker denounces false piety, institutional religion, and peddlers of moral values of all kinds. Just beyond the fence enclosing this city, however, reality begins. There are children, dogs, and lovers—three of Rilke's positive types presented in contrast to the noisy falseness of the city and fair.

In the final striking image of the poem, a dead youth climbs into the mountains of primeval pain and accepts the burden of lamentation as the spring rains begin to fall. The rains will bring new life from the earth. Humanity must, Rilke implies, unlearn its habitual responses to the world, specifically to sorrow and death. He reiterates the idea that death itself is the key to wholeness.





## SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

**First published:** *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, 1923  
(English translation, 1936)

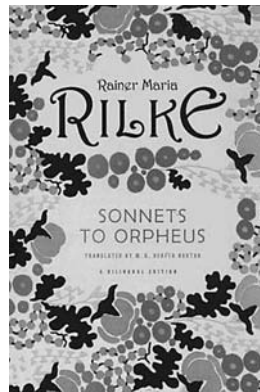
**Type of work:** Poetry

*Through the descent into the realm of death is accomplished an ascent to life.*

*Sonnets to Orpheus* comprises a series of fifty-five poems. Vera Knoop, the friend and dancer whose early death is commemorated in the dedication of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, assumes the same mythological status as the “singing god” at whose side she appears. Many of the poems in the cycle are sonnets only in the broadest definition of the term. All have fourteen lines, and all are divided, in the style of the Petrarchan sonnet, into an octave (two quatrains) and a sestet (two tercets). The rhyme scheme and line length, however, are extremely varied. Some lines seem purposely constructed to defy scansion, to defy the established order.

In the third poem of the first set, the speaker asks how a mere mortal can achieve the clarity and distance demanded by poetry. One hears reiterated the underlying complaint of the *Duino Elegies*: humanity’s ambivalence, ineptness, and inability to grasp the essence of things. In the second quatrain, the speaker suggests that poetry is not mere experience or emotion; experience must first ferment within the individual before it can reemerge as truth or as poetry.

Orpheus exercises his symbolic function in various guises in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. He charms the beasts out of the forest with his singing and represents the sought-after union of life and death. Or-



pheus is familiar with death from his descent into Hades to retrieve Eurydice, and from his own death at the hands of the jealous maenads and his subsequent resurrection and repeated death. Rilke mixes the Orphic legend with that of Dionysus, the god of wine, ever dying and reborn. Orpheus is equated with the poet. Orpheus has sung among the dead, and the mortal poet is encouraged to do the same.

Related to the figure of Orpheus is the motif of transformation that appears in the first set of sonnets and dominates the second. Some of the most elegant and convincing poems of the cycle are those dealing with the topics of transformation and growth. Sonnet 12 of the second series begins with a command: “Will transformation. Oh, be crazed for the fire/ in which something boasting with change is recalled/ from you.” Thus, it is not enough to hope passively for change; the individual must desire it and seek it. The poems contain references to all four of the basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water—thus symbolically embracing the entire spectrum of physical transformation.

The second quatrain begins with an invitation to imitate Orpheus, to “Be dead forever in Eurydice,” and ends with the invocation to “be a ringing glass that shatters as it rings.” The poet urges humankind to take risks, to sing out even if the act of singing means destruction. This act becomes a typically Orphic transformation of the visible (the glass) into the invisible (the shattered glass leaves pure sound).

The final poem in the cycle intensifies and focuses the message of previous poems; it also echoes their images. The reader is urged to “Know transformation through and through./ What experience has been most painful to you?/ If the drinking’s bitter, turn to wine.” The reader is exhorted to identify precisely what is painful and to know it intimately. In Rilke’s poetic vision, it is humanity’s task to exert its will and imagination over the randomness of existence and to create order from chaos. Individuals make the world immortal through the language of praise.

## “THE PANTHER”

**First published:** “Der Panther,” 1907  
(collected in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1982)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem speaks of a search for the essence-characteristic of an object and its inner rhythm.*

“The Panther” is the oldest poem in Rilke’s first volume of the two-volume *Neue Gedichte* (1907, 1908; *New Poems*, 1964). The poem deals with a panther who paces endlessly in its cramped cage in the zoo. Its physical appearance is that of a free beast, but its spirit and instincts have been dulled by long captivity. This poem is placed between several others that reflect and illuminate it by their similar subject matter. Preceding it is the two-part sequence titled “Der Gerfangene” (“The Prisoner”). There, the thoughts of a man in prison are punctuated by the numbing, repetitious drip of water in his cell. In the second of the two sequences, the prisoner tries to portray, for someone on the outside, the madness and horror of his life. Placed immediately after the panther poem is one called “Die Gazelle” (“The Gazelle”). This poem also portrays an animal in a zoo. Instead of being dulled by captivity, however, the gazelle is raised to an image of lightness, self-containment, and beauty.

Placed between these poems, “The Panther” represents a particular reaction to imprisonment. Although a portrayal of one particular animal, the poem also becomes a portrayal of all captive creatures—the poet included.

One of Rilke’s best-known and most widely discussed poems, the work is a masterpiece of suggestion and indirection. While a cage is never mentioned, there is no doubt in the reader’s mind that one exists. It seems to the panther that the bars are “passing back and forth,” until they have become a dynamic and absolute reality. Nor is the panther itself ever mentioned again once the title has introduced the animal. The sound, rhythm, and tactile quality of the cat’s pacing are presented through both the meaning and the sound of the words of the second stanza.

In the first two lines, the panther’s movement is characterized as “a dance of strength”; it is both graceful and powerful. Yet this harnessed power

has been short-circuited and circles endlessly on itself, devoid of purpose. The “great will” of the cat does not move with its body, which seems animated by some automatic, mechanical force; instead, it “stands numbed” at the center of the circle, incapable of decision.

In the final stanza, there is a moment when it seems to the onlooker that the animal’s integrity has not been totally destroyed: when its eyes receive a message from beyond the bars. The image passes through the body, which has ceased its endless circling and seems to await a command. Yet when the image reaches the animal’s heart, it disappears without a trace, leaving the cat to pursue its pacing in the void and leaving the reader to feel sadness at the waste.

In its form, the poem reflects the content. Like the activity of the panther, the poem is circular, although this fact is not evident in the translation. In the original, the first word, *sein* (his), and the last, *sein* (to be), are homophones. The poet has brought the reader back to where he began, just as the panther always must return to the same spot. In addition, lines 6 and 7, describing the small, tight circle of the “dance of strength around a center,” fall at the precise center of the poem. Finally, Rilke uses fairly regular iambic feet, with alternating feminine and masculine rhyme, so that a swinging, sinuous rhythm is produced. The last line, in which the image ceases to exist in the heart of the cat, is, however, short by a foot. The abruptness of this line echoes that of the extinction of the image and closes the door on any possibility of renewal.

## “REQUIEM FOR A FRIEND”

**First published:** “Requiem für eine Freundin,” 1909 (collected in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1982)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem elucidates the persistent pressure of “normal” life against the full development of the individual, in particular, the artist.*

Rilke wrote “Requiem for a Friend” in memory of a young painter friend of his, Paula Modersohn Becker, who died at the age of thirty-one shortly af-

ter giving birth. Although her name is never mentioned, it is apparent that she is the subject of the poem.

The speaker of the poem addresses the woman, who, unlike other dead figures—friends and figures from his poems—does not rest in peace but returns to haunt him. He believes that she comes with some request of him, the nature of which he tries to ascertain. He offers to travel to a distant land where she has never been, but which is spiritually part of her. There, for her sake, he will see and learn as much as possible. About a third of the way into this long poem, Rilke introduces the first of a series of significant facts regarding Paula: She was a painter whose insight, skill, and objectivity he admired.

Much personal detail is condensed in this section. In the speaker's opinion, among the best of Paula's works are a number of still lifes with fruit. Yet she also painted many admirable pictures of the women and children of Worpswede. In these paintings each face is uniquely itself, as distant and distinct as a piece of fruit or a watchful animal. The phrase "you balanced their weight with colors" introduces into the poem an important facet of Rilke and Paula's relationship. It was Paula who first made Rilke aware of the artist Paul Cézanne, and by weaving ideas about Cézanne into his discussion of her art, Rilke is both acknowledging a debt to her and praising her own work.

The section in which Paula steps naked before her mirror is a reference to her nude self-portraits, particularly to one of her final ones, in which she stands posed only in an amber necklace, gazing at the viewer with an expression as detached as the fruits in her paintings. Her gaze is "without possession," an echo of Rilke's conception of love; also, it is full of "true poverty," an echo of the virtue espoused in the figure of Saint Francis in Rilke's collection *Das Stundenbuch* (1905; *Poems from The Book of Hours*, 1941). These key Rilkean phrases are applied, however, in a new context. With respect to the notion of *schauen* (looking), the artist is asked to be so detached that he or she possesses and desires nothing, but only sees and portrays. In Paula's gaze, Rilke finds the highest degree of such creative renunciation. That is, in her own eyes she had become a pure thing, an object among objects.

Next, the speaker reveals another crucial fact about Paula's life, and he gradually realizes that it

is the key to her current presence in his life. He says, "Let us lament together that someone/ took you out of your mirror." As an artist, she had been in the process of transforming all of her powers into seeing and creating, but then, chance had forced her back into the world, where she gradually succumbed to its biological demands when she became pregnant. The words that Rilke uses to describe this transformation are brutal and culminate in the image of Paula digging up the unripe seeds of her own death and eating them before they are able to blossom into fruit. He further describes how she did violence to herself by diverting her blood toward the new life within her, while trying to persuade herself that her actions were not permanent or irrevocable. After the birth of her child, Paula steps in front of her mirror once more, but her reflection is deceptive. The mirror of truth becomes distorted. The death that follows is not her own, since she has eaten its seeds prematurely by abandoning her calling and her true nature, and by returning to the world.

In the next section, Rilke mourns his version of Paula (the woman who had sacrificed herself in vain) but then moves from mourning to accusation. He does not blame her husband directly for her death. Rather, he accuses all people, himself included, who are infected with the disease of possessive love. The section closes with one of Rilke's strongest affirmations of possessionless love: "For that is guilt, if anything is:/ not to increase the freedom of a loved one/ by all the freedom that one has at one's disposal."

In "Requiem for a Friend," Rilke is clearly expressing genuine sorrow at the loss of a friend. That he was also thinking of himself becomes evident in the final section of the poem. The roles are reversed: At the beginning of the poem, Paula, a restless ghost, comes to the poet with a plea; now, Rilke turns to her, as one artist to another, and asks for help. He fears succumbing to life's demands as she had: "For somewhere there is an old enmity/ between life and a great task."

## SUMMARY

As a lyric poet, Rainer Maria Rilke focuses on the microcosm of human consciousness. The past, a heightened state of awareness and inwardness, and the subtle play of intellectual distinctions are important aspects of his poetry. The extraordinary in-

tensity of Rilke's sensory and emotional perception combines with a unique and intuitive way of seeing things.

The specifically modern dimension of Rilke's poetry lies in its view of the reality of humanity as something outside and apart from any conception of fate, as something beyond any given situation; what Rilke's poetry expresses first and foremost is pure, unadulterated Being, feeling made tangible.

Genevieve Slomski

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Was Rainer Maria Rilke religious or irreligious?
- What themes do you see in Rilke's animal poems, especially those focused on felines?
- Into what elegiac tradition can Rilke's *Duino Elegies* be placed?
- What is the relationship between transformation and growth in *Sonnets to Orpheus*?
- Why does Rilke call his sonnet collection *Sonnets to Orpheus*?
- What is a requiem? Is the emphasis in "Requiem for a Friend" on praising the friend or on coming to terms with the fact of a loved one's death?

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## ARTHUR RIMBAUD

**Born:** Charleville, France

October 20, 1854

**Died:** Marseilles, France

November 10, 1891

*Rimbaud's revolutionary poetic accomplishments, experiments with free verse, concept of the voyant, and desire to change life through poetry make him one of the most prominent figures of literary history.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud (ram-BOH) was born on October 20, 1854, in Charleville, a town near the Belgian border in northeastern France, and grew up there. He was the second of five children. His father, Frédéric Rimbaud, an army officer, left the family to go to the Crimean War when Arthur was six years old. Vitalie Cuif, the poet's mother, came from a peasant background and was narrow-minded and fanatically religious. In 1870, a young teacher, Georges Izambard, arrived at Arthur's school. Himself a poet, he encouraged Rimbaud and lent him books by François Villon, François Rabelais, Victor Hugo, and the Parnassian poets. In an irate letter, Rimbaud's mother complained that the teacher had lent her son a "dangerous book," Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862; English translation, 1862). That same year, Rimbaud composed twenty-two poems. Describing nature, dreams, pagan eroticism, and the rebellion against Christianity, the young poet also wrote one of his masterpieces, "Le Dormeur du val" ("The Sleeper of the Valley"), about a young soldier dead in the Franco-Prussian War.

Because of the war, the schools closed, Izambard left Charleville, and Rimbaud dreamed of doing likewise. Boarding a train for Paris without money to pay his fare, the fifteen-year-old was promptly thrown in prison upon arrival in the capital but was

rescued by Izambard, his former teacher. Although he was sent back to his mother, the young poet escaped again, only to be brought home by the police. When the schools reopened, the sixteen-year-old refused to return.

On May 15, 1871, Rimbaud wrote to his friend Paul Demeny the famous "Lettre du voyant" ("Seer Letter") expressing his theories about poetry and life. In proposing to make himself a *voyant*, a poet-prophet-visionary, Rimbaud vows to practice the "long, immense and reasoned deranging of all the senses" in order to reach a transcendent state, called the "unknown." The letter expresses Rimbaud's desire to experience "all the forms of love" and thus foretells his liaison with the poet Paul Verlaine. It also claims that he will exhaust "all the poisons, to keep only their quintessences," thus explaining Rimbaud's use of alcohol, hashish, and other intoxicants. Rimbaud claims to be aware that the knowledge that he is seeking will be reached only through madness and finally through death. Several months later, another of his most famous poems, "Le Bateau ivre" ("The Drunken Boat"), repeated the pattern of rebellion leading to ecstasy and death outlined in the letter.

Four months after composing his manifesto, Rimbaud wrote to Verlaine saying that he needed to leave Charleville to become a poet. Verlaine, who promptly invited him to Paris, was then twenty-six, married, and soon to become a father, yet shortly after Rimbaud's arrival he abandoned his family to live with the younger man. Verlaine introduced his protégé to the Parisian literary world,

where Rimbaud immediately scandalized the public. In July, 1872, the two poets left France for Belgium and England. In the next few years, Rimbaud wrote most of his poetry, including *Une Saison en enfer* (1873; *A Season in Hell*, 1932) and *Les Illuminations* (1886; *Illuminations*, 1932).

On July 10, 1873, in Brussels, Verlaine, drunk and irate at Rimbaud's talk of leaving him, shot the young poet in the wrist. Verlaine went to prison, and Rimbaud returned to his mother's farm, where he completed *A Season in Hell*. The section of this work titled "Deliriums I" is a rendition of the life that Rimbaud led with Verlaine. Rimbaud was eighteen when he finished *A Season in Hell*, and by the time that he was nineteen or twenty, he had stopped writing poetry. It is difficult to date the strange, hallucinatory poems of the *Illuminations*, which were first published in 1886 without Rimbaud's knowledge, since he was then living in Africa.

From his twentieth year until his death, Rimbaud traveled, often on foot, working from time to time, in Europe, Africa, and Egypt. In 1876, he joined the Dutch colonial army but soon deserted. He dealt in skins and coffee, studied Arabic and Abyssinian, and did some exploring, even publishing a report with a geographical society in Paris. He attempted to sell guns to an Ethiopian king but lost much of his capital in the process. There is much speculation, but little evidence, to explain Rimbaud's renunciation of poetry in favor of the life of an adventurer in the colonies. Letters to his family show him as very ambivalent toward Africa. If he was often unhappy there, however, he seems to have felt that he would have been still more miserable in Europe.

In 1891, Rimbaud did return to France, suffering from a tumor, possibly of syphilitic origin, in his right knee. He died on November 10, 1891, in Marseilles, France, at the age of thirty-seven, unaware that in Paris his works were being published and admired. Verlaine had introduced his works, devoting a chapter of his book *Poètes maudits* (1884; *cursed poets*) to his former protégé. Verlaine also edited the *Illuminations*, published by *La Vogue* in 1886. *A Season in Hell* was first printed in Brussels in 1873 but did not become well known until 1891, when Verlaine introduced the Vanier edition.

## ANALYSIS

Rimbaud, like his friend Verlaine and their great predecessor Charles Baudelaire, is one of those poets who is at least as well known for his scandalous lifestyle as he is for his poetic production. The prototype for the henceforth famous *poètes maudits* (damned poets), Rimbaud believed that the goal of poetry was to change life. In his opposition to the hypocrisy of European bourgeois materialism and nineteenth century positivism, the poet pioneered the use of shock as a tool of political statement.

Remy de Gourmont, the symbolist poet and theoretician, praised Rimbaud's "magnificently obscene violence." Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Camille Pissarro, committed as they were to the liberation of painting, enthusiastically followed the work of the literary anarchist Rimbaud. In his poem "Le Voyage" ("The Trip"), Baudelaire had insisted that his goal was to "find the new." Rimbaud experimented with new language and poetic form in order to continue on the road marked by *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857, 1861, 1868; *Flowers of Evil*, 1931). Thus, Rimbaud created the poem-illumination, an explosion of sound, feeling, and movement, aiming, through sensual experience, to achieve a merger of reality and dream.

Breaking down the traditional patterns of rhyme and meter for poetry, Rimbaud's poems "Marine" ("Seascape") and "Movement" ("Motion") were two of the first free-verse works published in French. During the final years of the nineteenth century, the Symbolist poets acclaimed Rimbaud for this sort of innovation. His sonnet "Voyelles" ("Vowels") became a manifesto for many of them. The assignment of a specific color to each vowel was a striking example of his use of synesthesia. The subjective association of a visual stimulus to the sound experienced proclaimed the sovereignty of individual perception.

Far more important than Rimbaud's influence on the Symbolists was the role that he played for the Dadaists and the Surrealists. Dada was a movement grounded in anarchy, in revolt against all established aesthetic values. It therefore recognized in Rimbaud a precursor both in his work and in his life, especially in the fact that he eventually stopped writing poetry. The Surrealists were drawn to the visionary side of the poet's writing. Their desire was to explore the unknown, to express the dark side of

experience, and to reach the language of what Sigmund Freud called the unconscious. They considered Rimbaud a poet-chemist, who, by overthrowing reason and deranging the senses, sought new knowledge. “Rimbaud is a Surrealist in the practice of life and elsewhere,” wrote their spokesman André Breton in his *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924; *Manifesto of Surrealism*; 1969).

Rimbaud’s acceptance of evil as an instrument for self-liberation and for the transformation of human existence, his unwillingness to compromise the purity of his vision and to settle for bourgeois values, have inspired many twentieth century artists. The American poet Hart Crane quoted a line by Rimbaud, “It can only be the end of the world, ahead,” as the epigram for *White Buildings* (1926). Another rebellious American writer, Henry Miller, devoted a prose poem of 150 pages titled *The Time of the Assassins: A Story of Rimbaud* (1956) to Rimbaud, whom he saw as a patron saint.

An extraordinarily gifted young man, Rimbaud produced the main body of his poetry between the years 1870 and 1873, that is, from the ages of fifteen and a half to nineteen. Rimbaud’s adolescent revolt against bourgeois society—marked by his running away from home, taking drugs, and generally scandalizing the public—does not really distinguish him from countless young men of his time and up through the present. What does distinguish him is his poetry.

Rimbaud’s first attempts at verse were presented in traditional mold, but soon, under the influence of Verlaine, the young poet experimented with new forms. After “The Drunken Boat,” each poem seeks a form organically connected to its message. Thus, it becomes impossible to distinguish between form and content. Form, as merely decorative, poetry as convention, and consecrated cultural value are clearly despicable to Rimbaud. The prose poem, on the other hand, which Rimbaud inherited from Baudelaire and uses so successfully in *Illuminations* and *A Season in Hell*, attempts to free itself of conventional poetic trappings.

The *Illuminations* were given two subtitles, “painted plates” and “colored plates,” by Verlaine. These subtitles, insisting upon the connection between the visual and the verbal, recall Rimbaud’s efforts, in the sonnet “Vowels,” to mesh color and sound.

This volume illustrates Rimbaud’s theory of po-

etry as bedazzlement. In order for the texts to furnish a revelation in one fleeting burst of light, however, readers must accustom themselves to experiencing periods of groping in the dark. As a protest against the plodding, step-by-step logic of Western rationalism, Rimbaud favors the technique of ellipsis as revelation through juxtaposition. According to twentieth century French poet St. John Perse, Rimbaud is “the poet of ellipsis and of leaps.” Yet if breaks in logic appear between images, leaving readers to bridge them as best they can, those non sequiturs are nothing more than the equivalent of the lack of coherence in the modern world.

The famous “The Drunken Boat” was written a full year before Rimbaud had ever seen the sea. The poet’s most often quoted phrase, “Je est un autre” (“I is another person”), from the “Seer Letter,” puts into succinct form the alienation experienced by modern humankind faced with its own creative experience in a world that does not really make sense.

For I is another. If brass awakes as a bugle, it is not at all its fault. This is plain to me: I am a witness to the birth of my thought: I look at it, I listen to it: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths, or comes with a leap upon the stage.

## “THE SLEEPER OF THE VALLEY”

**First published:** “Le Dormeur du val,” 1888  
(collected in *Rimbaud Complete*, 2002-2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In harmonious sonnet form, Rimbaud paints a tender picture of a young soldier dead in the midst of a peaceful natural setting.*

“The Sleeper of the Valley,” in manuscript form, dates from October, 1870, and therefore conjures up an image linked to the Franco-Prussian War. Research has shown that there was no fighting in the area around Charleville at the time that the sonnet was written, and it is therefore unlikely that Rimbaud, who was just sixteen at the time, saw the

scene described otherwise than in imagination.

This work is one of the best-known and most loved of Rimbaud's poems. It was not published by the poet himself but first appeared in the *Anthologie Lemerre*, a collection compiled in 1888. The form of the poem is a traditional one, "The Sleeper of the Valley" being a sonnet in four stanzas, two quatrains followed by two triads. The rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd eef ggf*. The poet also alternates masculine and feminine rhymes, consonant sounds with vowel sounds in the final syllable of each line. The form, obeying these traditional metrical rules, makes the poem look something like an exercise. The first noun appearing in the poem, *trou*, or "hole," used to describe the natural setting of the scene, comes back in the final line, where it serves as a revelation. Color images alone differentiate the green spot (*trou*) of the opening line from the two red holes in the soldier's side in the final vision. The repetition of a simple word such as this one renders the formal organization of the sonnet even tighter.

The first stanza is a description of the natural setting; no human figure is yet perceived, yet nature is personified and thus seems very much alive. Its characteristics are positive. The river "sings," wetting the grass and "silvering" it "gayly," the mountain is "proud," and the "little" valley is "quivering" with pleasure under the rays of the sun. The colors of the first stanza are green and silver, and there are numerous references to light.

The second stanza introduces the "young soldier." The physical description tends to accentuate his vulnerability: "mouth open," "head bare," "neck bathing in the fresh blue watercress." Blue is added to the "green" of his "bed," and he is "pale." The light of the first stanza is somewhat attenuated since the young soldier is seen sleeping "under a cloud" and "light rains on his green bed." The image of light raining constitutes an oxymoron, a union of opposites, and serves as a warning that all is not as idyllic as it seems.

In the third stanza, the soldier is called a child, and he is seen smiling "like a sick child would." His feet are in wild yellow irises, an image that may seem pleasant and positive, but which also suggests the flowers heaped around a funeral bier. The stanza ends with an apostrophe to Nature, who is begged to "rock the child warmly" for "he is cold."

The final stanza opens on a negation: "The per-

fumes do not make his nose tremble." The reader is told that "he is sleeping" for the third time, which may begin to make the reader suspicious. His hand is on his chest, which is "still," even as his nose was in the first line of this three-line stanza. All the movement in the poem has been attributed to nature. The final sentence of the poem, "He has two red holes in his right side," is brutal in its dry, matter-of-fact succinctness.

"The Sleeper of the Valley" is an excellent example of the poetic mastery attained by the adolescent Rimbaud. Its message, a subtle yet forceful one, can be seen as a denunciation of the society responsible for the young man's death.

### "THE DRUNKEN BOAT"

**First published:** "Le Bateau ivre," 1883  
(collected in *Rimbaud Complete*, 2002-2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The desire to break the bounds of ordinary life  
and to discover the unknown leads to  
disillusionment as the speaker foresees no end to  
his journey.*

"The Drunken Boat" is perhaps one of the poems that Rimbaud presented to the poet Paul Verlaine as an introduction upon arrival in Paris in 1871. There is no manuscript in the hand of the poet, but the work was no doubt written shortly before being given to Verlaine. It was first published in a journal, *Lutèce*, in 1883 and then in Verlaine's *Poètes maudits* in 1884. "The Drunken Boat" is a work upon which Rimbaud counted to make his reputation. It is mysterious and remains so even after generations of scholarly readings. Many people see it as a succession of images noted by a youngster who had been reading adventure stories such as those of Jules Verne and James Fenimore Cooper. Other readers have discovered metaphysical intentions and esoteric symbols.

Some of the obscure images in the poem become clearer if one rereads Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and "The Manuscript Found in a Bottle," as well as Jules Verne's *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers* (1869-1870; *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1873).

Rimbaud had not been to America, nor had he seen the ocean, when he created these images of shores haunted by Indians, of violet sunsets and

phosphorescent waves. In spite of the fact that many of the strange images in the poem are borrowed from Verne's voyage of the *Nautilus*, "The Drunken Boat" has little in common with an adventure story. It is Rimbaud's effort to render in poetic form his painful disillusionment during the winter of 1870-1871. The real literary point of departure for Rimbaud is no doubt

Baudelaire's poem "Le Voyage" ("The Trip"), which also tells of dreams of escape followed by despair.

This long poem comprises twenty-five quatrains using the *abab* rhyme scheme and the classical twelve-syllable Alexandrine line throughout. Thus, the form of the poem is extremely traditional.

"The Drunken Boat" is written in the first-person singular; the prominence of the speaker is apparent from the start and gives the poem a strong impression of being a subjective vision. The first seven stanzas of the poem celebrate the freedom of the solitary sailor in the midst of an exotic maritime world. Yet with the "I know" at the beginning of the eighth stanza, the speaker's ennui, or boredom, becomes apparent: "I saw at times what man believed he saw." The poem proceeds largely through enumeration of colorful images drawn from adventure stories, yet which seem Surrealist here, divorced as they are from any logical explanation. The speaker identifies with the drunken boat, a ship that has lost all human guidance and has become a restless "martyr":

A martyr tired of poles and zones, at moments  
the sea whose weeping fed my gentle roll  
lifted up shadow-flowers with yellow suckers  
towards where I rested like a woman kneeling.

In the twenty-first stanza, the speaker confesses, "I long for the old parapets of Europe." The exaltation of the opening stanza has given way to fatigue and disillusionment: "Yes, true, I've wept too

much." Since there is nothing left to see and nothing else for which to hope, the speaker aspires to end his purposeless voyage at the mercy of the blind waves. Perhaps the most famous line of the poem is the final verse of the twenty-third stanza, "Oh let my keel burst! Let me find the sea!" This wish is somewhat ambiguous, since the boat is already out to sea. In spite of first impressions, however, this is not an invitation to a voyage, but rather a desire to sink to the bottom of the sea, to oblivion.

There are several references to children in the poem. The twenty-fourth stanza provides one positive, but inaccessible, image. After exhausting the marvels of the whole world, the boat longs for "a cold black pool where one unhappy child/ Kneels and releases towards the balm of dusk/ A boat frail as a butterfly in May." "A Drunken Boat" chronicles the vision of a poet who dared to explore what few of his contemporaries could know and who despaired of ever recapturing the innocence of childhood.

## "DAWN"

**First published:** "Aube," 1886 (collected in *Rimbaud Complete*, 2002-2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Through a dream landscape, the speaker pursues and captures the goddess Dawn, before losing consciousness in her embrace.*

"Dawn," one of the prose poems included in Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1886), is particularly representative of the concerns in most of his writing. Subjectivity, underlined by the use of a first-person speaker; erotic desire, rendered by the image of pursuit of the object; and a final depersonalization accompanied by fainting are the principal themes of the work.

The poem begins and ends with short declarative sentences, each of them forming its own paragraph or stanza. In between, the poet has arranged his dream-narrative in five brief paragraphs of approximately equal length. After the first sentence, "I embraced the summer dawn," which in fact summarizes the entire action of the poem, the story is presented chronologically. The final sentence



questions the reality of the action evoked.

Perhaps the most striking literary technique apparent in the first stanza is personification. The façade of the palaces is called a “forehead.” The water is “dead.” Shadows are “encamped,” and nature is “breathing,” while precious stones “watch” the speaker. By attributing life to the inanimate, the poet tends to make it more active than his speaker.

The next short paragraph reinforces the notion that the speaker is passive. “My first enterprise was, in the path already filled with cool pale glimmers, a flower that told me her name.” Not only is the flower personified, but the “enterprise,” a word that suggests action, is not really that of the speaker at all, for the only initiative belongs to the flower.

The fourth paragraph, or stanza, represents the center of the poem. It is a sort of climax as the speaker catches a glimpse of the “goddess.” Rimbaud uses a neologism in French, *wasserfall*, for waterfall, and the strange but comprehensible word renders the goddess exotic, yet accessible. Personification is still present, for the waterfall is “blond” and “tosses its hair.”

In the next stanza, the speaker becomes more active “lifting, one by one, her veils.” The erotic encounter is the unveiling of a mystery. The technique of personification still has an important part to play as the speaker seems to communicate with nature by waving his arms, clearly demonstrating an intimate relationship. “I betrayed her coming to the cock” attributes reactions to the cock that are not usually his. The speaker assumes considerable power, able now to “betray” the divinity. Dawn “fled,” “running like a beggar.” The goddess, hitherto evoked in terms of gold, silver, and precious stones, has suddenly lost her prestige. The speaker is now definitely active: “I pursued her.”

The physical limits of the speaker become vague; perhaps he is disembodied as he “surrounds” Dawn. Her body is felt as “immense”—but what kind of body does he have if he can “surround” her? The reversal of active/passive elements, effected through the use of personification, continues as the goddess becomes finite and even degraded while the speaker dissolves into the whole. Then, the poem makes an abrupt shift from a first-person narration, where the speaker assumes responsibility for the action, saying “I,” to a third-person narration: “Dawn and the child

plunged to the bottom of the wood.” The plunging fall suggests a loss of consciousness at the paroxysm of emotion.

If the speaker suddenly becomes a child, this transformation of the poem may be linked to the final sentence: “Upon awakening it was noon.” The English translation would read more smoothly, “When I awoke,” yet it is important to note that Rimbaud has left the final sentence without an agent. The speaker has in fact disappeared from the poem as though his only reality were a dream existence. The absence of the speaker in the final sentence, and the transformation of the “I” into a “child” in the second-to-last sentence, may seem to function as a disavowal of the erotic content of the dream-poem.

Sigmund Freud has noted that one of the functions of dreams is to allow the dreamer to continue sleeping. In this case, the final line of the poem, “Upon awakening it was noon,” presents a definite letdown. Dreaming about Dawn has occupied the entire morning; The poet seems to imply that imagination is preferable to waking reality.

## “BARBARIAN”

**First published:** “Barbare,” 1886 (collected in *Rimbaud Complete*, 2002-2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Evoking various sense impressions, both pleasant and horrible, the poem proceeds by enumeration and seems to convey a difficulty in renouncing hallucinatory experience.*

“Barbarian” is a free-verse poem included in the volume *Illuminations*. The structure of the poem is a loose one in which repetition seems to abolish temporal reference. The poem functions as a tension between two networks of images, one of them agreeable and feminine and characterized by softness, the other violent and threatening. The jumble of imagery has often been seen as revealing Rimbaud’s experimentation with drugs to induce vision.

In the French title, “Barbare,” with its repetition of two identical syllables, producing an echo effect, several elements of the poem are introduced. The

word “barbarian” can function either as an adjective or as a noun. The reader does not yet know who or what is qualified as barbarian. The barbarian suggests first of all that which is not civilized. A certain violence may be implied, along with the notion of otherness.

The free-verse form of the poem, consisting for the most part of noun clauses, presents a high degree of repetition, but no apparent structure. Ending as it does with the beginning of a repetition followed by three dots, the poem seems unfinished. Several temporal indications are present from the start of the poem. The first line begins “Long after,” while the third begins with “Delivered” and continues with “far from.” If verbs are present in the text, they tend to be there in participle form, that is, functioning as nouns and thereby losing their active role, as well as their temporal value. The open nasal sound is very frequent. It is found in many words but especially in the present participle ending: “*viande*” (“meat”), “*saignante*” (“bleeding”), “*fanfares*” (“fanfares”), “*encore*” (“still”), “*pleuvant*” (“raining”), “*vent*” (“wind”), “*diamants*” (“diamonds”), “*éternellement*” (“eternally”), “*entend*” (“hears”), “*virement*” (“veering”), “*flottant*” (“floating”), “*blanches*” (“white”), “*bouillantes*” (“boiling”), “*volcans*” (“volcanoes”). In addition, the poem makes great use of the other nasal vowel sounds, creating an overall impression of homogeneity of sound, which reinforces the echoing impression left by the title.

Several elements in the poem seem to refer to other pieces in the volume. If “*Matinée d’ivresse*” (“Morning of Drunkenness”) is set among the fanfares in “*Le Temps des assassins*” (“The Time of the Assassins”), “*Barbarian*” declares itself “delivered from the old fanfares” and “far from the old assassins.” Yet these distancing ideas may simply be wishful thinking. The use of present participles would tend to abolish time in favor of an eternal present. The poem admits that the fanfares “still attach our heart and our head.” The next line, beginning “far from,” ends with “that are known, that are felt.”

The abundance of oxymoron, the union of opposites, in the “Blazing coals, raining in squalls of hoarfrost,” “fires in the rain of the wind of diamonds,” “rain hurls down . . . eternally carbonized,” “Blazing coals and froths,” “collision of ice

with the stars’ white tears, boiling,” and finally “volcanoes and arctic grottoes,” suggests that the “old flames” of “*Morning of Drunkenness*” are not really “far away” at all, but very much present. The memory of these sensations provokes an exclamation: “*Douceurs*” and “*ô douceurs*” (“delights,” or “sweetness”) while music is heard, suggesting a state of euphoric ecstasy. Is it the result of drugs, or the effect of having abandoned their use?

The meaning of certain images has posed problems to many critics. “The banner of bleeding meat” against the “silk of seas and of the arctic flowers” is certainly mysterious but may simply convey the heightened sensual experience, the “reasoned deranging of all the senses,” which Rimbaud set as his goal in the “*Seer Letter*.” In the two places where the image of arctic flowers is given in the poem, it is followed by the remark, “they do not exist.” Rimbaud thus juxtaposes not only discordant images but also different orders of existence, that of vision, hallucination or dream, and that of mundane reality.

The poet has effectively covered his tracks, in this case making a definitive interpretation of the poem impossible. Questioned once as to the meaning of an image, Rimbaud is reported to have said; “I meant it literally and in every sense of the word.” The three dots of the last line of “*Barbarian*” ensure that the final impression will be one of open-endedness.

## SUMMARY

The few short years that Arthur Rimbaud devoted to poetic creation have had an overwhelming impact on modern poetry, not only in France but in other countries as well. His works prepared the way for such movements as Symbolism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. He is a continuing reference for vanguard literary thought today—Rimbaud’s poetry is not only an exercise in shocking and beautiful imagery but also a synthesis of intellectual, emotional, and sensual response purposing a tormenting exploration of the self in the modern world. In his continuing disrespect for established values and his demand for innovation, Rimbaud has had a liberating effect on poetry and on life.

Nancy Blake

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What influences in Arthur Rimbaud's life seem most vital in helping him to be a poet at such an early age?
- What principles of literary construction, if any, did Rimbaud's *Illuminations* exemplify?
- Rimbaud's poem "Dawn" begins conventionally: "I embraced the summer dawn." Trace the unconventional development that follows.
- Some works in Rimbaud's *Illuminations* are written in recognizable verse forms, and some are not. Does there seem to be a thematic or other recognizable difference between the works in these two forms?
- Does the later part of Rimbaud's life suggest that he had come to reject the idea that poetry should change life?

# CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

**Born:** London, England  
December 5, 1830

**Died:** London, England  
December 29, 1894

*One of the leading poets of the late Victorian era, associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti also wrote short stories and a variety of religious prose works.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Christina Georgina Rossetti (roh-ZEHT-ee) was born in Portland Place, London, England, on December 5, 1830, the youngest of four children of Gabriele and Frances Mary Polidori Rossetti. All three of her siblings achieved some measure of fame: Maria Francesca (1827-1876) as a Dante critic, Dante Gabriel (1828-1882) as a poet and painter, and William Michael (1829-1919) as an art critic and essayist. Her father Gabriele had been a noted liberal reformer and poet in Italy who was exiled to England in 1826, the year of his marriage.

When Christina was a year old, her father was offered a professorship of Italian at King's College, London, which meant that the family's situation was much less precarious than it had been for Christina's brothers and sisters. Christina grew up surrounded by some of the finest minds of her time, and she matched her own against them at an early age. While a young girl she engaged in sonnet-writing contests with her brothers, and in 1847 her maternal grandfather published privately a collection of her early verses. By 1849, at the age of nineteen, Rossetti was publishing verse in the London *Athenaeum*, one of the leading literary journals of late Victorian England.

When her brothers and other London painters and intellectuals formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the fall of 1848, Christina took an important role in the group's discussions, as well as serving as a model for many of their most important paintings. She sat for the painting that launched her brother Dante Gabriel's career, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849). At about the same time she received her first marriage proposal, from James

Collinson, a painter in the Brotherhood, which she declined for reasons of religious incompatibility. She would refuse him again in 1850, and refuse a proposal from Charles Cayley in 1866.

The first issue of the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ* appeared in December of 1850, and though dominated by her brother Dante Gabriel's writings, it contained several poems by Christina. She would continue to write verse over the next decade, publishing very little. In 1851, she helped teach in her mother's day school in London (Mornington Crescent), and the following year took a position as a private tutor. In 1853, she moved with her parents to the Somersetshire village of Frome-Selwood, nearly one hundred miles southwest of London, to run a day school. A year later, however, the family returned to tend to her ailing father, who died in 1854.

In 1861, Rossetti made her first visit to the Continent with her mother and brother William, visiting Normandy and Paris. In the following year, she collected her verse from the previous decade in her first commercially published volume, *Goblin Market, and Other Poems* (1862).

As she wrote verses for her next collection, *The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems* (1866), Rossetti continued to sit for paintings and photographs. Lewis Carroll, best known as the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), photographed her in 1864. In 1865, she made her second trip to the Continent, this time visiting her ancestral Italy, which she had not seen before. Surprisingly, the Italian trip did not make itself felt in the poems of *The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems*, nor did a shorter trip in 1866 to Penkill Castle in Scotland.

Rossetti's short fiction first appeared in *Commonplace, and Other Short Stories* (1870), though the critics rightly pronounced them inferior to her poems. In 1871, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease, a thyroid condition resulting in swelling in the eyes and throat, as well as nervousness. It subsided by 1873. Her book of children's verse, *Sing-Song* (1872), became an instant classic of children's literature, still widely read. Though she continued to write poetry for the remaining two decades of her life, little of it measures up to the standards set by her first three books of verse. Her religious prose, *Annus Domini* (1874), *Seek and Find* (1879), *Called to Be Saints* (1881), *Letter and Spirit* (1882), *Time Flies* (1885), and *The Face of the Deep* (1892), was widely read but generally undistinguished. Perhaps realizing her failing poetic powers, Rossetti twice published collected editions of her earlier poems, with some additions, in *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems* (1875) and *Poems* (1882; revised edition, 1890). Devotional verse in *A Pageant, and Other Poems* (1881) and *Verses* (1893), which also collected the incidental poems from her earlier prose books, occasionally rivaled the quality of her earlier poetry. In 1892, Rossetti began to show signs of the cancer that took her life in 1894.

### ANALYSIS

Two equally strong but antithetical voices speak in Christina Rossetti's poetry: the sensuous, which is with some justice associated by critics with Pre-Raphaelitism, and the ascetic, which is not confined to her devotional verse, but speaks also in her secular poems. The critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have defined the aesthetics of renunciation as the key element of all Rossetti's writing, and they suggest that her aesthetics derived less from her ascetic Christianity than from her position as a woman poet in Victorian England. The tension between the sensual and the ascetic, between revelry and renunciation, however it may be interpreted, is central to Rossetti's poetry.

One temptation is to view this tension as the meeting of two intellectual movements in Victorian England: the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art and poetry and the Oxford Movement in theology, both of which profoundly influenced Rossetti's thought and art. The Pre-Raphaelites got their name from their conviction that after the Italian painter Raphael (1483-1520), European art and

poetry took a wrong turn toward representational realism and away from symbolism and simplicity. The poetry and art of the English Pre-Raphaelites, consequently, celebrated sensuality, minute detail, formal simplicity, and a symbolic system emulating medieval iconography. It is true, as Rossetti's most recent critics have maintained, that she cannot be considered merely a passive learner of Pre-Raphaelitism—indeed, she must have influenced it as much as it influenced her. She was there at its beginning, and *Goblin Market, and Other Poems* was the first poetic voice of the movement, shining in popular and critical praise while the poetry of William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti lingered unnoticed. Her connection with the movement may be overemphasized, but it cannot be ignored.

The Oxford Movement, on the other hand, influenced Rossetti in more subtle ways. To begin with, she was not directly connected with it. It began at Oxford when she was little more than two years old. A group of young Anglican clerics, led by John Keble and John Henry Newman, sought to counter a tendency toward liberalism and secularism, and away from tradition, in the English church. One result was the development of a segment of the English church, known as the high church, whose piety looked back to earlier forms of devotion. It favored the concerns of the next world over the vanities of this one. In poetic imagery this piety takes the form of the renunciation that Gilbert and Gubar speak of.

The influence of such Oxford Movement piety is typically presented as a counterpoint to the Pre-Raphaelite sensuality of Rossetti's poetry, but there is one common impulse in both movements. High-church devotion and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics were attempts to recapture earlier traditions: the Pre-Raphaelites in art and the Oxford Movement in religion. T. S. Eliot, in his famous essay on the metaphysical poets, saw Christina Rossetti as continuing the poetic line established by the seventeenth century religious poets.

Next to the confluence of sensuality and renunciation in Rossetti's poems, the most characteristic themes concern death and thwarted love. Her poems about death are remarkable for their attempt to adopt the point of view of the dead toward the living. In such poems as "Song" (1862), "Dream Land" (1850), "After Death" (1862), and "Sleeping



at Last" (1893), the speaker of each poem is recently dead and looks back on life not with regret but relief at her escape. Her consistent image of death as sleep or rest from an ordeal may seem morbid or quietistic, but it also may be seen simply as an expression of the doctrine of soul sleep, the belief that the souls of the saved remained in a trance from the time of their deaths until Judgment Day.

The motif of love denied certainly suggests an autobiographical element: Rossetti refused three marriage proposals from two men between 1848 and 1866. A twentieth century biographer has contended that her love poems were inspired by a married man, William Bell Scott. Thwarted love can also be related to the renunciation theme in her writings. When the narrator of the brief lyric "No, Thank You, John" (1862) charmingly declines a marriage proposal, there is no sense of regret or loss, and in the poem "Amor Mundi" (1865) love is represented as a trap to be avoided. The title story of her first volume of fiction, "Commonplace" (1870), centers around a series of marriage proposals and rejections in the Charlmont family. The youngest sister, Jane, marries for money and languishes in a loveless marriage. Middle sister Lucy turns down many proposals, waiting for her ideal beau Alan Hartley, who ends up marrying another. Eldest sister Catherine remains single to devote herself to God, a choice strikingly like Rossetti's own.

Rossetti's sonnet "A Triad" (1862) is a similar analysis of three women thwarted in love, though Catherine's religious option is not presented in the poem. One woman "shamed herself in love." The second married respectably but, like Jane in "Commonplace," without real love. The third remained a spinster, but unlike Catherine died still yearning for earthly love. In the sonnet, as well as in the short story, earthly love is neither an end in itself nor a guarantee of happiness, even if it is not the danger it seems to be in "Amor Mundi." "A Triad" was first published in *Goblin Market, and Other Poems*, but reaction against the disturbing implications about love and marriage was so sharp that Rossetti deleted it from her collected volumes of 1875 and 1890. It did not appear in print again until after her death. A *Spectator* reviewer of "A Triad" called its "voluptuous passion" worthy of her brother Dante Gabriel, which was not meant as a compliment. A

century after her death, critics still consider the conflict of passion and renunciation central to her poetry.

## "GOBLIN MARKET"

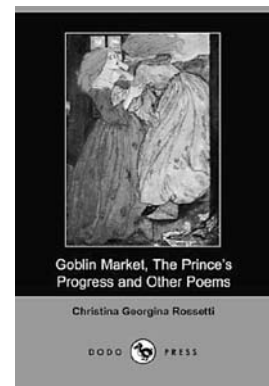
**First published:** 1862 (collected in *Goblin Market, and Other Poems*, 1862)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Despite her sister Lizzie's warnings, Laura succumbs to the temptations of the magical fruits offered by goblins and must be rescued by Lizzie.*

"Goblin Market," Rossetti's most anthologized and discussed poem, is also, at 567 lines, one of her longest. A narrative poem (a rarity for Rossetti), it tells the story of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, and their close brush with a sinister group of goblin merchants. The first of the twenty-nine irregular stanzas simply records the cries of the goblin men for someone to buy their magical fruits. Lizzie warns Laura not to succumb to their temptation, reminding her of the fate of their friend Jennie who, tasting the goblin fruit, wasted away and died. Laura ignores the warning and buys the enchanted fruit with a lock of her golden hair.

The enchantment of the fruit is one of addiction: Having tasted it, the victim desires nothing but another taste, which the goblins refuse. Like Jennie, Laura pines away for the fruit, dwindling and turning gray. This image of the dangers of temptation is typical of Rossetti's later religious poetry, though here the spiritual import is embedded in allegory. When Lizzie realizes her sister is dying, she goes to the goblins, wears them down with heroic resistance to their temptation, and returns to Laura, not having tasted the fruit, but having its juice and pulp smeared all over her face by the struggle. When Laura kisses her sister, she tastes the juice, which removes the curse of the goblin fruit and restores Laura's youth and



health. While the poem is not overtly Christian in the way that Rossetti's later devotional verse is, the Christlike nature of Lizzie's salvific sacrifice is unmistakable. The final stanza of "Goblin Market" is an epilogue in which the sisters, each having married and had children, use the story of the goblin market as a lesson to their children of the salvific virtue of sisterhood.

The theme of renunciation central to this poem seems a traditional Christian attitude of rejecting the sensual, yet many critics have noted an ambiguity in the way sensuality, represented by the goblin fruit, is depicted in the poem. Laura's devouring of the fruit, and later her sensuous sucking of the juices off her sister, is described in a lushness of physical imagery. The overt moral on the value of sisterhood, found in the final six lines of "Goblin Market," is often disparaged as an afterthought, unrelated to the rest of the poem. A close study of Lizzie's sacrifice, however, reveals that the themes of renunciation and sisterhood are related. Lizzie's resistance is merely temperance at first, but later, when it saves Laura, it takes on a sacrificial quality. Lizzie's Christlike self-giving defines sisterhood, and makes her even more Christlike as Laura's savior, resurrecting her from the death-in-life caused by the evil fruit—an obvious parallel to the story of Eden.

### "THE PRINCE'S PROGRESS"

**First published:** 1866 (collected in *The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems*, 1866)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Succumbing to a series of temptations, a prince delays going to his bride. When he finally arrives, he is too late—she is dead.*

The title poem of Rossetti's 1866 volume, "The Prince's Progress" is her only other important narrative poem besides "Goblin Market," and second only to that poem in length. Her first impulse in poetry was lyrical; she does not sustain narrative well, neither in fiction nor in verse. The poem began as a sixty-line lyric entitled "The Alchemist," composed

on October 11, 1861, and published in *Macmillan's* magazine for May, 1863. This original poem constitutes the end (lines 481-540) of "The Prince's Progress." The other 480 lines represent, according to biographer Edith Birkhead, the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who urged his sister to tell the story implicit in the song.

The poem has a similar fairy-tale quality to "Goblin Market" and a similar metrical inventiveness that echoes the folk ballad and the nursery rhyme. The narrative portion (the first 480 lines) consists of eighty six-line stanzas rhyming *aaabab*. The great number of rhymes on the same sound lends a singsong quality to the verse and taxes Rossetti's rhyming powers. There are generally four beats per line, except in the last line of each stanza, which has only three, signaling an ending.

The prince of the title is continually warned by the voices of the ladies waiting on his bride (which seem to find him magically across the miles) that she awaits his arrival, and that he must not tarry. He does, however, delayed by several temptations: A milkmaid offers him refreshment, but her fee is that the prince stay with her that day; an old alchemist offers him lodging, but his fee is that the prince work the bellows to create his "elixir of life"; the prince is rescued from drowning by lovely ladies who urge him to stay with them. Finally he heeds the voices of his bride's attendants and rushes to her, hoping that the alchemist's elixir of life will justify his delay. He is too late: He arrives to find his bride dead. The stanza form changes slightly for the last sixty lines. The last six stanzas are ten lines each, alternately long and short, and rhyming *abcbdbefbf*—only the even-numbered lines rhyme. This portion is simply a rebuke addressed to the prince for his delay.

Several of Rossetti's characteristic themes come together in this poem. The picture of thwarted love, seen throughout her early verse, is seen here in the bride pining away for her prince who will never come to her. The theme of seizing the moment, which would normally be antithetical to Rossetti's ethic of renunciation, is here appropriate, for the moment the prince must seize is sacred union with his bride. He squanders the time, and he pays for it by losing his bride.

## **“MONNA INNOMINATA: A SONNET OF SONNETS”**

**First published:** 1881 (collected in *A Pageant, and Other Poems*, 1881)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The speaker, beloved by one of the many love poets before Dante and Petrarch, expresses her frustration.*

*Monna innominata* means “unknown lady,” and indicates the situation of the speaker of the sonnets. In a brief prose introduction, Rossetti explains that the most celebrated ladies of two Italian poets—Dante’s Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura—left behind no writing of their own to record the women’s experience of love. In Rossetti’s own century, Elizabeth Barrett Browning did leave such a sonnet record, but her experience, Rossetti says, was happy, and therefore did not match the emotional tensions of Dante or Petrarch’s sonnets. It appears that “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets” is intended to fill that gap.

The fourteen poems of “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets” are truly a sequence: Though each is an artistic whole, there is a progression from one to the other that links them. Rossetti clearly considered them inextricably connected: In an 1883 letter responding to a request to anthologize some of her poems she insisted that none of the individual poems of “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets” be published separately. They are intended to be read as a single work. The subtitle, “A Sonnet of Sonnets,” refers to more than the fact that a sonnet is a fourteen-line form, and the sequence has fourteen sonnets. The development of the whole group matches the form of the Italian sonnet.

The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet is twofold in structure, with an eight-line first part, called the octave, rhyming *abbaabba*, and a six-line conclusion, called the sestet, with various rhyme patterns, but

never more than three rhymes. Thus, there is usually a turning point, which the Italian sonneteers called a *volta* in the ninth line, signaling the change from the octave to the sestet, matched by a similar change in thought. “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets” mirrors this pattern in the overall structure of the sequence, its first eight sonnets depicting a tension between divine and earthly love in the speaker’s relationship with her lover, and the ninth suddenly announcing that the love she hoped for cannot be.

“Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets” explores the familiar Rossetti theme of the conflict between romantic love and the love of God. The first four sonnets do not mention God’s love at all, establishing the situation of the earthly lovers: the pain at separation (sonnet 1), the attempt to recall their first meeting (sonnet 2), the preference of dream love over reality (sonnet 3), and the immeasurability of love (sonnet 4). The next four sonnets introduce the preeminence of God’s love, ending with a comparison to the Biblical lover Esther (sonnet 8). Sonnets 9 through 12 move toward a reconciliation that is completed in sonnet 13, with the speaker renouncing her claim to her lover. The last sonnet reveals that the pangs of earthly love remain, despite the idealized sentiments of resignation.

### **SUMMARY**

The twin strains of emotion in Christina Rossetti’s poetry—a yearning for God and a yearning for human love—sometimes seem so different to critics that they speak of two Christina Rossettis, the saint and the romantic. Comparison of Rossetti with other English religious poets, such as the Metaphysicals, suggests that such tension of divine and human is natural in devotional poetry. Rossetti’s early mastery of metrical forms gave her a playful yet disciplined ear for the music of poetry. Perhaps it is this quality that has made her children’s poetry particularly successful.

*John R. Holmes*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What was the impulse that began the Pre-Raphaelite movement to which Christina Rossetti contributed?
- "Goblin Market" was once considered primarily as one of Rossetti's children's poems. What features of the poem suggest that she did not intend it particularly for children?
- Examine the theme of sisterhood in "Goblin Market."
- Many sonnet sequences are not as well connected as Rossetti's. Comment on the structure of "Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets."
- Examine and characterize the tone of Rossetti's death poems.
- Rossetti and Emily Dickinson were both born in 1830, and both succeeded as lyric poets. Their poems differ in many ways; in what ways are they similar?



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## JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

**Born:** Geneva (now in Switzerland)

June 28, 1712

**Died:** Ermenonville, France

July 2, 1778

*Influential in many fields from education to political science, Rousseau made autobiography an important literary genre while paving the way for the Romantic movement.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (roo-SOH), the man whom Immanuel Kant called “the Newton of morality,” was born in Geneva (now in Switzerland) on June 28, 1712, and, as he notes in *Les Confessions de J.-J. Rousseau* (1782, 1789; *The Confessions of J.-J. Rousseau*, 1783-1790; commonly known as *The Confessions*), his life was marked from the beginning by misfortune. Rousseau’s birth cost the life of his mother; Suzanne Bernard, and his father, Isaac Rousseau, was never able to embrace his son without shedding tears. The infant’s health was poor, and indeed Jean-Jacques spent so much of his life experiencing such illness that he often expected an imminent death.

Rousseau’s early life was unsettled. He was reared by a pastor and his sister in the country and was later apprenticed to an engraver who mistreated him. Rousseau’s first period of exile from his homeland was motivated by an apparently trivial incident. After a Sunday walk in the country, he returned too late to reenter the city before the gates were closed. Rather than face the master’s anger, the youngster ran away and began the life of wandering that was to be his lot.

*The Confessions* insist upon the accidental meetings that continually changed the course of the writer’s life. Penniless and without a destination,

the young Rousseau was directed to a lady, Mme de Warens, who had been converted to the Catholic religion; as her beauty and kindness impressed him, he soon left for Turin, Italy, to be catechized and become a Catholic. The trip enabled him to learn Italian and see a bit of the world, but he was still unable to earn a living and so returned to Mme de Warens, whom he was soon addressing as “Mamma.”

Rousseau discovered a taste for music and attempted to learn enough about the art to make a profession of it. The young man’s health was always so poor that he could not make much progress with his studies. After a short, idyllic country life under the protection of Mamma, he undertook an unsuccessful trip to the medical center of Montpellier, where he hoped to be cured, but returned to Switzerland only to find his place with Mme de Warens occupied by another young man. Thus, Rousseau went to Paris to make his fortune. Before beginning the literary career that he considered a means of reforming society, Rousseau had intended to make his living as a musician. At the age of thirty, he had invented a new system of writing music, which he presented to the Academy of Science in Paris and then published. He composed an opera, *Les Muses galantes* (pr. 1745; the gallant muses), which was presented, but with less success than the composer had hoped.

In Paris, Rousseau joined the advanced intellectual circles as a self-taught man. One day in October, 1749, he was on his way to Vincennes to visit the French philosopher Denis Diderot, incarcerated there for his *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749; *An Essay on*



*Blindness*, 1750; also as *Letter on the Blind*, 1916). As he walked, Rousseau was looking through a newspaper when he noticed a question proposed for an essay contest: "Has the progress of the arts and sciences contributed more to the corruption or purification of morals?" In *The Confessions* years later, Rousseau says that, at that moment, his mind was flooded with ideas. He was inspired to show the contradictions that he saw in all social and political institutions. In particular, he believed that humanity is naturally good and that it is only as a result of the influence of social systems that it becomes evil. For Rousseau, this moment was a metaphysical crisis: He saw that he had a mission to fulfill.

Back in Paris, Rousseau wrote the first of his discourses, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750; *The Discourse Which Carried the Praemium at the Academy of Dijon*, 1751; better known as *A Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, 1913), which Diderot corrected and sent to the Academy of Dijon. One year later, Rousseau learned that he had won the prize. His ideas were so original, so contrary to accepted opinion that the essay provoked numerous, contradictory responses. During the Enlightenment, the notion of human progress was generally assumed to be self-evident, yet Rousseau showed that society was progressively denaturing humankind. Rousseau felt obliged to answer the objections to his essay, and as he did so his thoughts became progressively clearer.

In six months' time, Rousseau had become a celebrity. At the age of forty, after attempting for the past twenty years to establish a reputation as a musician, he was a literary figure. His career would be a relatively short one, for with the exception of his autobiographical works, *The Confessions*, *Les Dialogues: Ou, Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* (1780, 1782), and *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782; *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 1783), which are posthumous, all of his great works appeared in the next sixteen years.

Though he gained fame in Paris, Rousseau was incapable of becoming a Parisian. The more he experienced the mannered formalities of the Parisian salon, the more he idealized the simple manners of Geneva. Rousseau believed himself incapable of elegant conversation, and he considered Parisians cold and hypocritical. The supposed freedom of the metropolis seemed licentious to Rousseau, a native of Calvinist Switzerland.

Rousseau's relations with women were always troublesome. Once, in Italy, he had allowed himself to be introduced to a prostitute simply because he was ashamed to refuse. Immediately afterward, Rousseau summoned a physician, for he was certain that he had caught a disease, and for three weeks he remained severely depressed while his doctor had great difficulty convincing him that he was in perfect health.

The author's hypochondria is one of the salient features of *The Confessions*. He desperately needed a woman to care for him. Always in great financial difficulties, the writer frequented shabby boardinghouses, in one of which he met a servant, Thérèse Le Vasseur, who was to become his companion. Rousseau presents her as a woman of limited intelligence and no education but with a great capacity for devotion. As he had called Mme de Warens "Mamma," he called Thérèse "Aunt." Rousseau makes a point of insisting that he had never promised marriage to Thérèse. In all, five children were born to the couple, all of whom were abandoned to a foundling's hospital at birth. Rousseau, who would later become famous for his theories on the education of the young, was to suffer much from the use that his enemies made of the knowledge that he had refused to rear his own children.

As Rousseau became a well-known author, he was offered the protection of several influential people. One of the most important of these was Mme d'Épinay, who provided him with a country retreat, the Hermitage, where he was able to live in peace with Thérèse and devote himself to his writing. Between 1756 and 1758, Rousseau produced an imaginary correspondence between lovers, published as *Julie: Ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761; *Eloise: Or, A Series of Original Letters*, 1761; better known as *The New Héloïse*), which was to obtain a success as immediate as it was overwhelming. The publication of *Du contrat social: Ou, Principes du droit politique* (1762; *A Treatise on the Social Contract: Or, The Principles of Politic Law*, 1764, commonly known as *The Social Contract*) and *Émile: Ou, De l'éducation* (1762; *Emilius and Sophia: Or, A New System of Education*, 1762-1763; commonly known as *Émile*) upset all Rousseau's plans for a quiet life. Within a month, *Émile* was condemned in Paris, and the man who had once claimed to be the only man in France who believed in God was forced to flee the defenders of the faith. He took refuge in Switzer-

land, but even this sanctuary was only temporary. Geneva condemned not only *Émile* but also *The Social Contract* and issued a warrant for Rousseau's arrest if he entered the territory of the city-state. Other cities followed Geneva's example, and Rousseau was forced to spend the next four years as a refugee moving from place to place. Thus began the effort to defend himself against all attacks that was to become *The Confessions*. More and more, Rousseau became convinced that the pretended friends of liberty, led by Voltaire, were plotting against him.

In 1766, Rousseau was offered refuge in England by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. At first, the writer was acclaimed by the British, but it was only a few months before Rousseau and Hume had a falling out. In 1767, the wanderer left England and in 1770 finally returned to Paris, where he lived until his death on July 2, 1778, in Ermenonville, France. In 1794, the new French Republic honored him as a national hero and removed his body to the Pantheon.

#### ANALYSIS

Rousseau is one of the thinkers whose moral position prepared the way for the French Revolution. He proposed reforms in education, morals, politics, law, and even in religion. He consistently refused to accept the official responsibilities that were offered to him through the influence of highly placed admirers, many of whom were great ladies. Although his financial situation was increasingly precarious, he said he preferred to earn his living as a humble music copyist, even while his health was giving out, rather than lose his independence. One of his great moral principles was never to accept a legacy so as not to profit by the death of anyone who loved him. Rousseau's contemporary Thomas Jefferson would have liked to see the American republic abolish all inheritance in order to avoid the inequality of citizens based upon accidents of birth. Rousseau's principles were rightly considered by many to form a condemnation of the social fabric of Europe where authority could

be exercised without competence and where self-interest outweighed all other motivations.

The importance of the intellectual, scientific, and social innovations of eighteenth century France sometimes obscures another development of the age: the rise of the novel. The significance and popularity of the genre was given impetus by the only extended work of fiction written by one of the most famous men of the century, Rousseau. *The New Héloïse* reached an enormous reading public, not only in France; almost immediately translated, it swept England and America, too. The epistolary novel greatly changed the way that people saw love and nature and prepared the way for innumerable Romantic novels.

Strict as he often appears, Rousseau also presents a paradoxical position on many questions. He was a man of letters who despised and criticized the knowledge that can be obtained from books. The beginning of the love affair between Saint-Preux and Julie in *The New Héloïse* is punctuated by quotes from love poetry. As the young lovers are educated by misfortune, however, they abandon such artifices and consult only their feelings. Toward the end of the story, one character questions the value of books, for "you need only to learn to read the book of nature in order to be the wisest of mortals." In another genre, Rousseau's very influential treatise on education, *Émile*, develops this preference for nature over civilization, while *The Social Contract* examined an ideal for human society based upon the principles of nature.

For posterity however, Rousseau is usually most closely connected not to the works that he published while alive but to his posthumous *The Confessions*, *Les Dialogues*, and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, which form one of the main references for the nineteenth century vision of the solitary artist and provided one model for the sensitive Romantic hero. While the eighteenth century prized good form, Rousseau, the self-taught upstart, introduced the directionless, disordered, passionate eloquence of emotion. Style henceforth would be subservient to sincerity.

## THE NEW HÉLOÏSE

**First published:** *Julie: Ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761 (English translation, 1761)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In their letters, Saint-Preux and Julie celebrate a passionate love leading to a return to virtue.*

*The New Héloïse* is Rousseau's release from a life of frustration as a lover. That the book was successful proves that the eighteenth century was ready to identify with Rousseau's ideals. The setting is the country of the author's youth, along the shores of Lake Geneva, where he lived out his idyll with Mme de Warens. By eighteenth century standards, the plot of this epistolary novel is a simple one. The first three parts of the novel exalt the mutual passion of Saint-Preux, Rousseau's projection of himself, and his ideal woman, Julie. The last three praise Julie's return to her duties as daughter, wife, and mother. Saint-Preux thus learns the value of renunciation.

While living at the Hermitage, a country home provided for Rousseau by one of his admirers, Mme d'Épinay, Rousseau composed the book that was to make him famous. He had been accompanied in his retreat from Paris by Thérèse Le Vasseur, a woman who was obviously devoted to him but with whom he found no outlet for his sensibility. Suffering from a sense of almost unbearable solitude, he took refuge in his imagination. In *The Confessions*, he reveals that he imagined not one but two complementary heroines, Julie and her cousin, Claire, "but I admitted no rivalry, no quarrelling, no jealousy, because it is difficult for me to imagine painful feelings, and I did not wish to mar this charming picture by anything which degraded Nature."

The reading public immediately thrilled to Rousseau's forceful portrayal of passion. Some of Saint-Preux's phrases have become passwords for French lovers. Of Julie's home, the hero says: "That

place alone is inhabited; all the rest of the universe is empty." When Saint-Preux succeeds in learning from his beloved the value of sacrifice, he is able to admire her husband, Wolmar, and live in relative tranquillity with the family. While the beauty of nature had already served as a metaphor for the lovers' passions in the first part of the novel, it becomes the image of virtue in the second. Julie has a secret garden, Elysium, which looks uncultivated and wild. The heroine becomes Rousseau's mouthpiece for reflections on art and nature: "It is true . . . that nature has done everything, but under my direction, and there is nothing here which I have not ordered." The garden is a symbol of the harmony of nature, which is no longer chaos but has become spiritualized, just as in Julie herself passion and emotion have been purified.

The novel's references to nature permit Rousseau to expound his theories of economy, domestic happiness, and especially the education of children. Julie and Wolmar's country home is a model for a new sort of aesthetic: The billiard room has been replaced by a wine press, the peacock shed had been replaced by a dairy, flower beds have gone to make way for a kitchen garden, and the lindens bordering the avenue have been replaced by walnut trees. Everywhere, Rousseau sees the "gloomy dignity" of eighteenth century taste giving way to the idealized rustic look of the prerevolutionary period.

The sentimentalism of the novel owes much to the Anglomania that had begun to undermine neoclassical French literature in Rousseau's day. *The New Héloïse* is a cousin of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady*, (1747-1748), not only in the epistolary form but also in the praise of simplicity and virtue. Even though Voltaire called the success of the novel one of the infamies of the century, *The New Héloïse* became one of the precursors of the Romantic period and certainly earned for Rousseau a place next to Voltaire as one of the major influences on European thought.

## ÉMILE

**First published:** *Émile: Ou, De l'éducation*, 1762 (English translation, 1762-1763)

**Type of work:** Essay

*A rich, noble orphan is reared in the country by a devoted tutor according to Rousseau's theories of a natural education.*

Rousseau opens his treatise on education, *Émile*, with a phrase that could summarize his entire philosophy: "Everything is good when it comes out of the hands of the Author of creation, everything degenerates in the hands of man." Through the death of his mother and the carelessness of his father, Rousseau's own education had been left to chance. As a tutor, he was singularly unsuccessful and preferred to abandon that career even if it meant great material difficulty. His own five children were abandoned to the foundling hospital in Paris at birth. Given all this, it seems strange that he should presume to write on education.

In fact, however, the upbringing of children was one of Rousseau's earliest concerns. He is addressing an age when parents lived quite separately from their children, who were first sent to nurses in the country and only brought home to be confided to the mercenary care of tutors and governesses before being sent out again, the boys to schools and the girls to convents. Moreover, education seems to be intended to make children into miniature adults. This goal is strikingly illustrated in the manner in which children are represented in eighteenth century painting. Rousseau argues that children should be as children, that understanding and love are more important to them than books.

The nature of humanity is to be free, and the first principle of Rousseau's plan of education is to respect the liberty of the child. The master should intervene as little as possible. Since religion is incomprehensible before the age of sixteen, a natural education is a negative one. The second principle is to treat the child as a child and not an adult. An attractive and progressive system of education will never demand of the child an effort beyond the capacities of his or her age. The third rule is to form the heart before worrying about the mind.

Humankind is naturally good, not naturally knowledgeable. Then, after giving much consideration to the heart, Rousseau prefers educating judgment rather than imparting information. The head should be accustomed to functioning, not simply filled with knowledge. Some knowledge is of course necessary, but if *Émile* has not learned everything, it will be easy for him to do so when he wants because he has learned to learn. A person's only true profession is to be an eternal apprentice. *Émile*'s education lasts for twenty years. Like most authors of his time, Rousseau neglects the organization of his work. Digressions abound. The essay follows a chronological order and is divided into five sections of unequal length.

Some of Rousseau's ideas seemed scandalous at the time. He thought women should nurse their own children, but husbands like M. d'Épinay found the idea perfectly shocking and ridiculous. Public education would be too ideologically biased, according to Rousseau, who preferred to have children educated in the home. Most books are banished from *Émile*'s library, with a notable exception, Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner, Written by Himself* (1719; commonly known as *Robinson Crusoe*), the story of humankind in nature. *Émile* learns from personal experience more than from the experiences of others. It is only at the age of eighteen that he is ready to discover God. This section of the book is the famous "Profession of Faith by the, Savoyard Vicar." Rousseau presents a natural religion, a theism that he considers preferable to all established cults.

The fifth book of *Émile* is consecrated to woman, studied in herself and in relation to man. The two sexes will not receive the same education. While the male is reared in nature, the female will learn the arts of society, music, dance, lace making, and especially coquetry. Sophie is the companion whom Rousseau imagined for *Émile*, but Rousseau was much less daring in inventing an educational scheme for her.

Although Rousseau's work was condemned by the state, its influence was enormous, especially with women. Under the revolution, his educational theories were proclaimed ideal. By the beginning of the Romantic period, *Émile* was acclaimed in every layer of society.

## THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

**First published:** *Du contrat social: Ou, Principes du droit politique*, 1762 (English translation, 1764)

**Type of work:** Essay

*Examining the models for democracy, Rousseau specifies the conditions necessary to a society.*

*A Treatise on the Social Contract: Or, The Principles of Politic Law*, commonly known as *The Social Contract*, is a product of Rousseau's retreat from Paris. This examination of government appeared in 1762, the same year as *Émile*, his treatise on education. In *The Confessions*, Rousseau emphasizes the awkwardness that he felt in society. He was a deeply solitary man who found social life distracting and distasteful. Yet when he reflected on society, Rousseau created a work that provided posterity with the vocabulary, with the terms and assumptions that would be employed, consciously or unconsciously, to address social issues for the next two centuries and beyond.

"Man is born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains." Thus Rousseau opens his treatise on human government, establishing his unique point of view. He continues: "Those who believe themselves the masters of others cease not to be even greater slaves than the people they govern." Rousseau is himself a master at noting the contradictions underlying all generally accepted values. Perhaps that is one explanation for the enormous influence of the work.

*The Social Contract* is a major source, for example, of the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Almost all modern states claim to be "people's states." Public deliberation, mass demonstrations, voting, plebiscites, all rituals for arousing a popular will are as necessary to authoritarian states as to liberal ones. It is generally accepted that *The Social Contract* exposes a doctrine that is valid. The only argument concerns its interpretation.

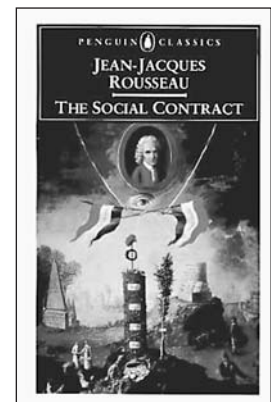
Rousseau, whose master in political philosophy was Plato, knew that the problems of contemporary democracy arise from the fact that the ideals of that form of government were developed in the intimate community of the Greek city-state and are inapplicable to the needs of the centralized and technological nation-state. Yet, as a moralist, Rous-

seau is mainly concerned with the principles of political rightness. His analysis was complicated by a nostalgic idealization of ancient city-states and his own native city of Geneva. Rousseau's ambition in *The Social Contract* is to establish a political jurisdiction. He does not intend to describe law as it is but rather as it should be. In other words, his concern is to specify the conditions for a just society. Might does not make right, nor does the fact that a system exists mean that it exists for good. Rousseau speaks as a philosopher rather than a historian.

The central problem of the social contract is to determine the type of social organization that will ensure security to each individual. Security is, in fact, the necessary condition for happiness in society. The desire for security is the motive for the evolution from the state of nature to civilization. Yet security must be made compatible with freedom, for the sacrifice of freedom is the sacrifice of the essence of humanity. In Rousseau's theory, the recurring problems of the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and of John Locke are reconsidered. Security and liberty are the two criteria according to which the State is organized.

Rousseau rejects any authority based on natural advantages or the rights of force. The only legitimate basis for authority is a contract or covenant between the parties concerned. Under that authority, the people must be allowed to exercise their rights. The sovereignty of the people is "inalienable" and "indivisible." In a social system, each individual has a pact with himself or herself. "Obedience to a law that one has given oneself, is freedom." To the question as to how a person may be free while subject to law, Rousseau answers with the often misunderstood notion of the "general will."

This principle is for Rousseau the cornerstone of any democracy. It is reflected in his famous dictum that people may be forced to be free: Even convicts are free in the sense that they are imprisoned by their own general wills, which require that people who follow their private wills in the way that they





have shall be punished. The individual who differs from the community is private, wrong, and enslaved; the individual whose will is unified with that of the community is general, right, and free.

Those who were tired of apologies for the ancien régime found in the general will an instrument for reducing public affairs to simpler terms. The middle class, increasingly insulted by the distinction that separated them from the nobility, found in the general will a version of its own dignity and political intelligence. In particular, Rousseau's inference that government is simply the servant of the people inspired those who were opposed to the existing regime, while, to its defenders, seemingly undermining the very basis of social order. *The Social Contract* insisted so much on the obligations of government to the people that, to those in power, it seemed to be an open invitation to permanent revolution. The censorship by Rousseau's native Geneva consecrated the revolutionary force of his tract.

## THE CONFESSIONS

**First published:** *Les Confessions de J.-J. Rousseau*, part 1, 1782; part 2, 1789  
(English translation, 1783-1790)

**Type of work:** Autobiography

*Convinced that the persecution that he has experienced is the result of the absolute originality of his thinking, Rousseau presents the story of his life.*

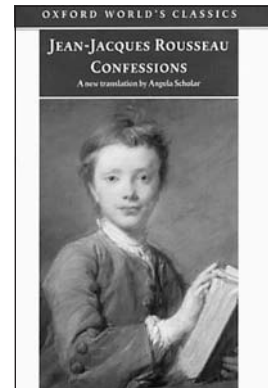
*The Confessions of J.-J. Rousseau*, commonly known as *The Confessions*, opens with a proclamation of originality: "I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator." The reasons for the singularity of this undertaking are twofold. First, Rousseau claims to be absolutely honest, to hold back nothing of the "truth of nature." Second, he feels he is different from all other people, and it is the value of this difference that he desires his reader to judge.

*The Confessions* were written between 1765 and 1769 in an effort to react to the persecutions that Rousseau suffered even at the hands of former

friends. They are divided chronologically into two parts. The first, which follows the formative years of the philosopher, is the most accessible and most often studied. Although much of what he has to tell is embarrassing, Rousseau seems to delight in dwelling on the pleasure that he felt in being spanked by the Mlle Lambercier, the sister of the pastor to whom his early education had been confided. He is willing to indulge his reader in scenes of food stealing while he is serving his apprenticeship and to reveal the humiliation of being replaced by another young man in the affections of Mme de Warens.

There is, in fact, a great difference between the two books, and Rousseau was well aware of this difference. While the first book reveals his confidence in recounting the details of his early life, the second book is full of hesitation. The closer Rousseau gets to the time of the writing, the more he claims to be uncertain about chronology. The emotional impact of the persecutions endured in the recent past seems to have upset him, to the point where he is unable to recall exactly what happened. While the first book may seem exhibitionist, the second becomes more and more paranoid. Thus, he explains the unsatisfactory account given of some incidents: "I am surrounded by spies, and I am obliged to accomplish, inefficiently and in haste, a task which would require peace of mind and leisure which I do not enjoy." Yet the way that the author seems to savor the incidents of his early life gives no impression that he lacks time to tell them.

One interesting element in *The Confessions* is the way in which Rousseau gives his reader the means of understanding his character without seeming to comprehend what he himself is saying. He does not omit the mention of incidents that explain the part that he played in his own persecutions. The concluding sections of *The Confessions* relate how Rousseau was hounded for irreligion while under the protection of Frederick the Great, king of Prussia, protector of Voltaire and well-known freethinker.



Rousseau had chosen to live in the territory of Neuchâtel but never seems to have reflected that the Armenian costume that he had adopted seemed to advertise a connection with the religion of Islam. As he walks about the Swiss countryside dressed in a caftan and fur cap, he is an easy prey for the rabble who have been aroused against him by the clergy. Although he says he was the victim of stoning, he never seems to have attempted to make himself less conspicuous.

Students of psychology can read *The Confessions* as a case study, all the more revealing for the fact that the speaker does not realize the full impact of his statements. Near the end of his story, Rousseau is a refugee living on a small island and tormented by the idea that he may someday have to leave it. He dreams of being imprisoned there. The desire that had already expressed itself in the pleasure in punishment during early childhood is here clearly apparent: "It is little enough that I am permitted to live here; I could wish to be condemned, to be forced to remain in this island."

While this work was influential for many aspects

of nineteenth and twentieth century thought, it is the one that has most inspired Rousseau's followers. Memoirs, journals, and autobiographical novels flourished in succeeding generations with *The Confessions* for a model.

## SUMMARY

As the internal contradictions of the ancien régime prepared the way for the revolutions that marked the end of the eighteenth century and established an intellectual basis for the modern era, the solitary figure of the self-taught rebel Jean-Jacques Rousseau came to symbolize the new individual. Though he or she may well be a victim of the prejudices of society, the artist may find consolation by expressing his or her passions. The proper method of expressing sensibility is as disordered, lawless, and excessive as the feelings to be expressed. Whether it be in the form of the philosophical essay, the novel, or autobiography, Rousseau's work took his century by storm and laid the groundwork for Romanticism.

Nancy Blake

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes that in school “the master should intervene as little as possible.” Is this principle commonly observed in elementary education today? Should it be observed more or less than it is now?
- *The Social Contract* begins with an assertion much like that at the beginning of *Émile*. Humanity, Rousseau says, is in chains. Is Rousseau antiauthoritarian, or can authority and liberty proceed together?
- What is the basis of law as Rousseau sees it in *The Social Contract*?
- Rousseau maintains that *The Confessions* was unprecedented and inimitable. What seem to be earlier works that might be called models for *The Confessions*?
- How well does *The Confessions* exemplify Rousseau’s principle that autobiography should not hesitate to portray a person’s vices?
- Of all the advice that Rousseau gives, which seems most impractical?
- Rousseau tended to distrust books as sources, but he wrote a great deal. Would a modern Rousseau have found a nonliterary way of expressing his thoughts?



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## J. K. ROWLING

**Born:** Chipping Sodbury, Gloucestershire, England  
July 31, 1965

*The unprecedented commercial success of Rowling's Harry Potter series changed the nature of children's fiction, generating a massive wave of investment by demonstrating that children's books could make enormous amounts of money and setting new benchmarks for what writers for children could do in terms of textual length and the treatment meted out to characters.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Joanne Kathleen Rowling (ROHL-ihng) was born in Chipping Sodbury, a small town in Gloucestershire, England, the daughter of an engineer working for Rolls-Royce. When she was nine the family moved to the small village of Tuthill, near the Welsh border in the Forest of Dean; she was educated thereafter at Wydean Comprehensive and went on to study French and classics at Exeter University. She then went to Moray House Teacher Training College in Manchester but did not immediately seek work as a teacher; instead, she went to London to work as a secretary and as a research assistant for Amnesty International. It was while traveling between Manchester and London by train in 1990 that she was first struck by the idea of writing the Harry Potter series.

In 1991, Rowling went to Portugal in order to teach English as a foreign language in Oporto. Because she worked in the afternoons and evenings she was able to spend her mornings writing, but her progress was slow and her produce mostly consisted of voluminous notes and disconnected chapters. She married a television journalist named Jorge Arantes in 1992, but the marriage soon failed; following her divorce in 1993, Rowling returned to Great Britain with her infant daughter, Jessica, and took up residence in Edinburgh, Scot-

land, with her younger sister Dianne, who had formerly worked as a nurse but was now studying law.

The cost of child care made it uneconomical for Rowling to work, but she also found it difficult to continue writing while suffering from the emotional fallout of her failed marriage. She formed the habit of taking long walks, which put her daughter to sleep, and then working on the first volume of the projected series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997; published in the United States as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 1998), in coffee shops. It took her until 1995 to finish the book, and it was not accepted for publication until 1997. The initial advance was only £2,500, but she was able to obtain a grant from the Scottish Arts Council in order to buy a computer on which to write the second volume in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998).

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was carefully marketed by its initial publisher, Bloomsbury, which gave away most of the first edition to schools, hoping to obtain word-of-mouth publicity for the subsequent paperback. The ploy worked and ensured that most of the hardcover copies sustained sufficient wear and tear to make the remainder fabulously valuable. The novel won the Smarties Book Prize Gold Medal and was short-listed for the Guardian Fiction Award and the Carnegie Medal. The American rights were sold at auction in September, 1997, for a then record sum of \$105,000. The United States edition was retitled (inaccurately) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* on the assumption that American children were more likely

to be sympathetic to the idea of sorcery than to the concept of philosophy.

Warner Bros. bought the film rights to the series in 1999, the year in which the third novel, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, was published. It was then that the magnitude of the burgeoning phenomenon was fully revealed, as the three novels shot to the top of the American best-seller lists. Rowling rapidly became the highest-earning woman in Britain, and the second wealthiest, after the queen. In 2001, she bought Kilchassie House, a nineteenth century mansion in Perthshire, to serve as a home for the new family created by her second marriage to physician Neil Murray. In 2001, she also produced two brief spinoff volumes from the Harry Potter series for the benefit of the charity Comic Relief: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, written under the pen name of Newt Scamander, and *Quidditch Through the Ages*, under the pseudonym Kennilworthy Whisp.

Bloomsbury made the launch of the fourth volume in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), into a large-scale public event, which was so successful that the publisher had to narrow the focus of subsequent events of the same sort, doing everything possible to control not merely the day of release but the moment; the remaining books were all released on the stroke of midnight, with potential purchasers often lining up for hours or days beforehand. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) set a new world record for the rapidity of sales of a book, which was then broken by *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005).

Although the bans on premature release proved unenforceable, this public relations strategy succeeded in maintaining a high level of anticipatory excitement, especially regarding the seventh and final volume, in which it was widely rumored beforehand that the hero might die; this was a possibility that would have previously been unthinkable in a children's book but seemed not unlikely in the new context of expectation that Rowling had created. Although *The New York Times* broke ranks by publishing a review of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) on the day before publication, the reviewer was careful not to reveal the ending.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* sold 2.7 million copies in its first twenty-four hours of publication on July 21, 2007, beating its predecessor's record comfortably. By that time, the first six volumes

had sold 325,000,000 copies worldwide, and it seemed inevitable that the series total would eventually exceed four hundred million. Rowling's net worth was then in the tens of millions; her agent, Christopher Little, who had put the book into the reject pile unread when it was submitted to him because he thought that children's books never made any money, also became a multimillionaire, thanks to the office assistant who took the typescript out of the pile to read because it had an attractive binding.

Rowling's career provides a sharp illustration of the haphazard way in which the publishing industry operates. The major publishing conglomerates all rejected *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* before Bloomsbury, then a small independent company whose economic situation was rather precarious, took it on. Although it is unclear whether any of the editors who rejected it actually bothered to read it, the fact starkly emphasizes the lottery element in literary submission. Rowling might easily have remained an impoverished French teacher for the duration of her adult life.

## ANALYSIS

It is always difficult to explain why particular books sometimes break out of their own restricted market to become cultural phenomena of a different order, but certain aspects of the Harry Potter series did lend themselves very readily to that process. Most books that become such near-universal subjects of conversation, which even people who never read books feel compelled to read, are individual volumes, whose internal stories are complete before their external stories begin, such as Dan Brown's best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Sequels and segmental series very often follow, but they can rarely be anything more than hollow imitations and formulaic recyclings. Rowling's series, by contrast, was always planned as a seven-volume set that would evolve toward a single ultimate climax. It was, therefore, able to build on its medium-term success far more spectacularly than any previous breakthrough enterprise. In order to do so, though, it had to break the existing mold of children's publication in more than one way.

Children's publishing is usually organized according to the age ranges of its readers, so that a series of books marketed for nine- to twelve-year-olds



will stay within that range. If the series has an eleven-year-old central character, that character will usually remain eleven throughout the series (even if, as in the case of Richmal Crompton's William, the series extends over decades of background history). Rowling always intended to track her hero from the aftermath of his eleventh birthday to the aftermath of his seventeenth, marching across the marketing categories from the nine-to-twelve range to the summit of the "young adult" slot. Initially, the plan was for the target audience to grow older at the same rate, but Rowling was unable to deliver a book every year, so contemporary eleven-year-old readers of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* were twenty-one by the time that *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* appeared. This proved no inhibition to readers eager to follow the series to its conclusion.

Because the Harry Potter saga was an evolving rather than a segmental series, the endings of its first six volumes could be no more than subclimaxes, whose magnitude had to be carefully orchestrated to produce a crescendo effect. Such careful escalation is not easy to achieve; the pressure of melodramatic inflation propels most fantasy series to apocalyptic conclusions in three volumes. Rowling planned for it by carefully reducing her archvillain, Voldemort, to near-impotence as a result of his first, already-distant encounter with Harry, so that his gradual recovery of his powers within the texts is carefully matched to Harry's slowly accumulated knowledge and maturity. By the time Voldemort is ready to make his bid to take over the clandestine society of magically talented individuals, which would automatically give him absolute power over the world of nonmagical "muggles," Harry has enough wisdom, capability, and support from his friends to take him on, with one of those one-in-a-million chances of winning that so frequently come off in melodramatic fiction.

In spite of this ingenious adjustment, there would have been no scope for Rowling to increase the magnitude of the individual hazards that Harry has to face in the seven volumes had she not been able to shatter the limits of diplomatic constraint formerly applied to children's fiction; seven escalating degrees of threat could hardly stop short of extremes of violence not normally tolerated in children's fiction. In this respect, Rowling benefited

considerably from the new license granted in the wake of a 1990's boom in children's horror fiction spearheaded by the work of R. L. Stine. This boom had helped transform Rowling's American publisher, Scholastic, from a staid publisher of didactic aids into a trendsetter. Rowling was able to show such restraint in the early volumes that the death of Harry's mentor, Albus Dumbledore, came as a genuine shock in the sixth volume, but it still secured the plausibility of the awful possibility that Harry might have to sacrifice his own life to stop Voldemort in the seventh. The reality of that possibility proved enormously valuable in maintaining the taut dramatic tension of the seventh volume.

The license borrowed from the children's horror boom not only enabled Rowling to create some genuinely scary monsters to serve as minor adversaries in contriving her preliminary subclimaxes but also enabled her to develop another device crucial to the series' melodramatic inflation. The early volumes all have a strong mystery component, in which it is profoundly unclear—to Harry and his readers alike—who his potential allies and covert enemies are. In some instances, as with Sirius Black, who is initially represented as a lethal adversary but turns out to be a key ally, such confusions are firmly resolved, but in many instances the uncertainties linger. One of the most remarkable features of the series is its continual blurring of moral boundaries.

Even Voldemort, the series' epitome of evil, is depicted as a victim of awkward circumstance, and several of his faithful lieutenants prove capable of good deeds, or at least of crucial hesitation in doing evil. The chief subvillain, Severus Snape, is especially ambiguous in this regard. On the other hand, few of Harry's allies are without their darker side, mostly in a less explicit fashion than Remus Lupin, who suffers under a lycanthropic curse. The fact that the apparently saintly Albus Dumbledore has his own moral weakness is ingeniously put to use in explaining why he is extremely reluctant to tell Harry everything he knows, thus prolonging all manner of mysteries. The intricacy of the series' play with moral judgments was unprecedented in children's fiction, although it did stop short of testing the ultimate taboo; Harry's dead mother remains whiter than white, the true agent of his salvation in the first and final challenges.

The handling of the series' mystery component

is the author's greatest achievement. Each of the first six books has two levels of mystery; there are puzzles which have to be solved in order to bring about the subclimax and denouement of that particular volume, and there are puzzles whose solution will not become clear until the end of the entire series. The puzzles of the second sort are required to accumulate, occasionally being refreshed or recomplicated, a process that puts a heavy strain on writer and reader alike. The fact that the "deathly hallows" vital to the understanding of the whole do not make their debut until halfway through the final volume suggests that crucial authorial improvisations were still taking place at that point, but the materials of mystery built up in the early volumes are never wasted. Loose ends and tantalizing hints left dangling at the end of the first and subsequent volumes were conscientiously and productively integrated into the weave of the seventh, a remarkable achievement, given the density of the subplots and the complexity of the overall scheme.

One of the effects of this double layering of mystery was to greatly inflate the length of the later volumes of the series, producing page counts in volume 4 (636 pages) and volume 5 (766 pages) that would previously have been considered unthinkable for children's literature. Volume 7, at 606 pages, seemed very modest by comparison, given that it covered far more narrative ground than either of those predecessors. Volumes 4 and 5, however, are hybrid texts in a sense that volumes 6 and 7 are not, and their hybrid status reflects the transition that the series underwent as it crossed the boundary between age-range marketing categories. In the first four volumes, the melodramatic plots are secondary to other narrative material, celebrating the essential coziness of the boarding school environment to which Harry has been removed from an utterly wretched home life. From then on, however, the joys of friendship and playing sports are gradually and painfully displaced by clandestine guerrilla warfare; in volume seven, Hogwarts Academy no longer functions as a school but as Armageddon's last redoubt. The fact that it does so effectively is a testament to the skill with which Rowling handled the series' development and metamorphosis.

## HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE

**First published:** *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 1997

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the first novel in the series, Harry learns that he has inherited magical powers and begins his education at Hogwarts Academy, where he makes friends and makes his first attempt to thwart the ambitions of his nemesis, Voldemort.*

At the beginning of the novel, Harry Potter is living in a cupboard under the stairs, suffering appalling maltreatment at the hands of the Dursley family, to whose care he was confided as an infant following the death of his parents; his mother was Mrs. Dursley's sister. On his eleventh birthday, however, it is revealed to him, despite the Dursleys' best efforts, that he has inherited magical abilities and is scheduled for education in wizardry at Hogwarts Academy, a key pillar of the British magical community, which lives in strict covert isolation from untalented "muggles." This message is delivered by the intimidating Hagrid, who lives on the school grounds on the edge of a Forbidden Forest. Hagrid, who is fascinated by all manner of magical creatures, becomes Harry's first fast friend.

Having obtained essential equipment from the magical mall in Diagon Alley, Harry catches the Hogwarts Express from platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station and is carried away to his new life. He finds that his reputation has preceded him to Hogwarts. While still preconscious in his cradle, he survived a magical assault by the infamous dark wizard Voldemort (whose name is so terrible in its effects that only Harry and Hogwarts' headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, dare pronounce it), deflecting a killing spell back upon its sender and reducing Voldemort to helplessness. Despite the resentment generated by this reputation among the children of Voldemort's former sympathizers—including fellow pupil Draco Malfoy and the disciplinarian teacher Severus Snape—Harry finds life at Hogwarts idyllic and makes two more firm friends in the bookish Hermione Granger and the hapless but willing Ron Weasley.

Initially, the only strong evidence of Harry's tal-

ent is provided on the sports field, where he becomes an expert player of quidditch, a game played on flying broomsticks. Voldemort, however, is in hiding at Hogwarts, beginning to recover his powers and enthusiastic to get rid of his nemesis. Voldemort also wants to get hold of the philosopher's stone, which was entrusted by the famous alchemist Nicholas Flamel to Dumbledore. With the aid of Hermione and Ron, and encouragement from Dumbledore and Hagrid, Harry contrives to thwart Voldemort's ambition in a tense climax, but he realizes that he is engaged in a contest that is likely to be long and desperate.

## HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN

**First published:** 1999

**Type of work:** Novel

*Harry faces tougher challenges in his third year at Hogwarts Academy, when the infamous Sirius Black breaks out of Azkaban Prison and may be planning to kill him.*

Having further penetrated the mysteries of Hogwarts Academy, where Voldemort had once been a pupil under the name of Tom Riddle in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry faces sterner challenges in his third year at the school. The infamous Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban—the magical prison to which Voldemort's key supporters, the Death-Eaters, were sent when his first campaign was thwarted—and is rumored to be making his way to the school in order to kill Harry.

Harry begins to realize that the matter is more complicated when he has a terrifying encounter with a Dementor—one of the hideous, soul-sucking entities which guard the prison—on the Hogwarts Express. Even Dumbledore seems to doubt his testimony in this regard but is determined to keep him safe, with the aid of Remus Lupin, the new teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts (a post with a remarkably high turnover). Harry has further trouble with both Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy, and his situation is further complicated when Hagrid becomes distraught after one of his unruly protégés, the hippogriff Buckbeak, is condemned to be put down.

It transpires that Sirius Black is actually Harry's nearest living relative and staunchest defender, having once been part of a group of friends with Harry's father and Remus Lupin, whose affliction with lycanthropy the group had striven to protect. The true enemy and cause of Harry's troubles is, as always, Voldemort, who has subverted Azkaban and now has the Dementors at his beck and call. Harry is able to call upon the aid of the Marauder's Map, which allows the locations of the academy's inhabitants to be determined, as well as a time-bending watch, but he, Hermione, and Ron are tested to the limit of their strength and ingenuity by the quest to save Sirius and Buckbeak and to thwart Voldemort's plans for a third time.

## HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

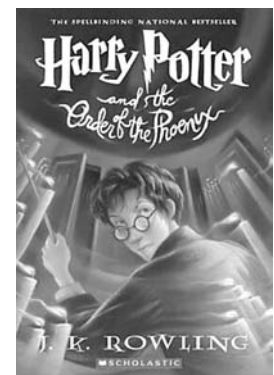
**First published:** 2003

**Type of work:** Novel

*Life becomes more difficult for fifteen-year-old Harry, when a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Magic institutes a reign of persecution at Hogwarts Academy and the battle against Voldemort intensifies.*

Having confronted Voldemort in person for the first time at the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, unexpectedly surviving a second attempt to destroy him, Harry is in an awkward position at the beginning of the fifth volume in the series. The government of the hidden magical world, the Ministry of Magic, run by the bumbling Cornelius Fudge, refuses to admit that Voldemort is alive and has branded Harry a liar for asserting the opposite.

Harry's adult supporters form the secret Order of the Phoenix to prepare for the impending war against Voldemort, but Harry's safe refuge at Hogwarts is undermined when the ministry appoints one of its most officious bureaucrats, Do-



lores Umbridge, to overhaul its educational standards. Umbridge also turns out to be a sadist, inflicting painful punishments on Harry when he persists in his assertions.

When Defense Against the Dark Arts is dropped from the curriculum on Umbridge's orders, Harry begins teaching the subject as best he can to a group of dissident students he calls Dumbledore's Army. When his scheme is discovered and he is threatened with expulsion, this label enables Dumbledore to take responsibility instead. However, the headmaster's subsequent sacking results in Umbridge being installed as High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, instituting a reign of persecution.

This time, Voldemort's proximal target is not located at Hogarts but in the vaults of the Ministry of Magic, where a prophecy concerning his mysterious and potentially fatal relationship with Harry is secured. Hagrid's crucial relationships with various fantastic creatures and his giant kinfolk prove crucial in permitting Harry, Hermione, and Ron to get out of Hogwarts in time to join the Order of the Phoenix in a pitched battle within the ministry. Although the Order of the Phoenix suffers serious fatalities, the ministry's official position becomes untenable, and the battle against Voldemort becomes a matter of open warfare.

## HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

**First published:** 2007

**Type of work:** Novel

*In the last volume of the series, Harry engages in his final battle against Voldemort, a fight that turns out to be more complicated than Harry imagined.*

Following another deeply troubled year at Hogwarts, described in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, at the end of which Dumbledore is killed by the ever-deceptive Severus Snape, Harry begins the final volume of the series in hiding. When the spell that has kept him safe until his seventeenth birthday expires, he and his helpers are immediately attacked by Voldemort, suffering casualties.

Unable to return to Hogwarts, Harry is forced to go on the run with Ron and Hermione, hunting desperately for the "horcruxes" that contain fragments of Voldemort's soul and thus maintain his invulnerability. The search for the horcruxes is complicated when Harry learns of the existence of another set of magical objects—the "deathly hallows"—which might also be vital to the settlement of the final battle. Voldemort is unable to give his complete attention to the quest to kill Harry because he is searching for one of the hallows: an undefeatable wand.

Uncertain as to whether to give priority to the remaining horcruxes or the hallows, Harry continues to evade death, albeit narrowly, until he is forced to return to Hogwarts in order to complete his search. The castle housing Hogwarts Academy then becomes the last fortress holding out against Voldemort's rise to power, subject to intensive siege and violent bombardment.

The remnants of Dumbledore's Army and the Order of the Phoenix mount a heroic defense of Hogwarts in the attempt to win Harry enough time to finish his quest, suffering heavy casualties in the process. The conflict reaches the limit of desperation when it becomes evident that Harry harbors one of the fragments of Voldemort's soul in his own flesh. It appears that Harry cannot kill his enemy without sacrificing himself in the process, but that sacrifice might also make Voldemort invincible.



### SUMMARY

All children's fiction consists, in essence, of parables of maturation, but the remarkable structure of the Harry Potter series enabled it to become the most elaborate and complex of all such parables. That, rather than its enormous sales, is the series and author J. K. Rowling's most significant literary achievement.

Brian Stableford

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is J. K. Rowling's conscientious Hermione Granger a better role model for school-children than the homework-neglecting and quidditch-addicted Harry Potter?
- To what extent does the Dursleys' cruel treatment of Harry Potter reflect the usual behavior of untalented people toward the talented?
- How much justification is there for the deeply cynical attitude toward government bureaucracy reflected in Rowling's characterization of such characters as Cornelius Fudge and Dolores Umbridge?
- Is Voldemort merely a product of his unfortunate upbringing?
- If Voldemort is merely a product of his upbringing, is it the case that other "Dark Lords" are bound to emerge continually, that the same social forces will enable them to recruit similarly powerful armies, and that the ability to learn from the lessons of history will eventually enable one of them to succeed where Voldemort failed?
- Is it the case that, by virtue of encouraging young people to take a keener interest in magic, the Harry Potter series is deleterious to the cause of science or religion?



## ARUNDHATI ROY

**Born:** Shillong, Meghalaya, India  
November 24, 1961

*Roy's novel The God of Small Things, written in an unusual voice and delineating the decline of a wealthy, provincial, Indian family, caused a stir in the publishing world, won the coveted Man Booker Prize, and became an international best seller.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Suzanna Arundhati Roy is the child of a Christian mother from the south Indian state of Kerala and a Bengali Hindu father, who was the administrator of a tea plantation. She grew up in Aymenem, Kerala, India, where she attended an unconventional school, Corpus Christi, operated by her mother, Mary Roy. Both the social atmosphere of the varied religions of Kerala (Hindu, Muslim, and Christian) and the natural history of the rural area are part of the background and atmosphere of her novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). By her own admission, Roy grew up very much as the children in the novel did. Her mother was divorced, and the vulnerable family lived on the outskirts of the village.

When she was sixteen, Roy left home to be on her own, and for a while she lived a precarious existence in a squatter's camp in Delhi. After some time she enrolled in the Delhi School of Planning and Architecture, which had an influence on her writing. She brought the same structure of recurring motifs that she found in architecture to her novel, which she shaped by the way words, paragraphs, and punctuation fall structurally on the page. Roy married a fellow architectural student, Gerard da Cunha. Da Cunha eventually went on to receive the Prime Minister's National Award for Excellence in Urban Planning and Design, offered by the Ministry of Urban Development, in 2006. His marriage to Roy, however, lasted only four years, and during that time they moved to Goa to sell things on the beach and live like flower children. Unhappy in such a commercial tourist destination, Roy returned to Delhi and found a job in the National Institute of Urban Affairs.

The Indian film director Pradeep Krishen noticed Roy one day and offered her a small role in the film *Massey Sahib* (1985). Soon after, she received a scholarship to study the restoration of monuments in Italy for eight months. Roy realized she was a writer while in Italy. She married Krishen, and together they planned a television epic in twenty-six episodes for Doordarshan, the public television broadcasting company of India. ITV, an independent television production company, scrapped the serial after a few episodes, severely disappointing Roy and her husband. Roy met Bhaskar Ghose, then director general of Doordarshan, who offered to finance a screenplay she wanted to write. The result was *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*. Released for television in 1989, the story is set in the 1970's and is a humorous tale of architecture students in their final year of college. Roy portrays herself in the film, which was shot at the Delhi School of Planning and Architecture, where she went to school. Continuing her film work, Roy wrote the screenplay for the film *Electric Moon*, which had a few good reviews when it was released in 1992 but was not a success. She later admitted she did not have enough cinematic experience to fully translate her concept into a film.

Returning to India, she wrote a criticism of the widely acclaimed and celebrated Indian film, *Bandit Queen*, which resulted in a lawsuit against her. In the aftermath, she left the public sphere for private life to concentrate on her writing, which developed into *The God of Small Things*. The novel was written in English because it is the only common language throughout India. Although the novel catapulted Roy to fame and celebrity, it also garnered a certain amount of notoriety because of its sensitive subject

matter. In the novel, the divorced mother of young children crosses ancient caste lines when she has an affair with a *Dalit*, or untouchable. *Dalits*, according to India's three-thousand-year-old caste system, are not traditionally considered part of human society but are polluters of higher-caste people, which is why they are untouchable. Roy turned to a defense of the *Dalits* after the book's publication by speaking out against their oppression and appearing at a reception in Kerala to establish herself as an advocate of their cause. She also donated royalties from the Malayalam translation of her novel to support *Dalit* writings.

Following the publication of *The God of Small Things*, Roy used her talents and status to publicize some of the important choices India faces. In 1998, she published an article in *The Nation* concerning the testing of nuclear weapons in India. Some of her controversial essays have been collected in several books, including *Power Politics* (2001) and *War Talk* (2003). She attacks global capitalism, the spread of poverty, and the fact that more than four hundred million citizens in India remain illiterate. In a collection of essays published in 2004, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, Roy takes on the administration of President George W. Bush, exposing what she perceives as the hypocrisy of Bush and his cabinet and reminding readers that the power of the people to oppose their leaders' tyranny is the foundation of democracy. She advocates using nonviolent organizing to sabotage the war in Iraq and draws attention to the subtle connections between globalization in India, devastation in Iraq, and poverty among African Americans.

## ANALYSIS

Arundhati Roy has had the advantage of being brought up with great freedom to develop her individual interests and strengths. Her mother, a social activist, founded her own school and let her daughter learn informally, which allowed Roy to follow her inclinations and listen to her inner voice without being bound by restrictive rules. It is this unique voice that lifts *The God of Small Things* beyond the category of mainstream novel to a work of art. As arresting as the action is in the novel, it is the element of style, in this case an idiosyncratic voice for the seven-year-old twins who largely narrate the story, which continues to captivate and enchant the reader from beginning to end.

This remarkable voice is present in the first important scene in the novel, the funeral of Sophie Mol, a cousin to the twins Rahel and Estha. During the funeral service, a small bat climbs up the sari of Baby Kochamma, the twins' great-aunt, and when the bat reaches her flesh, Baby Kochamma screams. Roy describes the event as follows: "The singing stopped for a 'Whatisit? Whathappened?' and for a Furrywhirring and a Sariflapping." In this passage, Roy runs words together, rhymes gerunds, and records the event as it might have been understood by the children. These techniques, as well as some invented words, are used throughout the book and are just some of the odd uses of language that give the prose its magical, fairy-tale quality.

Acrostics come into play in the scene in the police station, when the twins observe police behavior that is insulting and degrading to their mother, while behind the policeman is a sign with the word "Police" printed vertically, with each letter standing for a benign quality, such as "O for Obedience," "L for Loyalty," and "C for Courtesy." The children understand this scene as one in which the actions do not match the words, a type of irony that forces the twins to create their own reality in the midst of so many events they do not understand.

The construction of the novel is also innovative. *The God of Small Things* opens with Rahel's return to the village of Ayemenem twenty-three years after the main action of the novel—when she and her twin brother were children. She has a strange reunion with Estha, who, according to her aunts, no longer speaks. The penultimate chapter of the novel is taken up with an incestuous act between the now adult twins as they seek consolation and surcease from grief in each other's arms, which connects to Rahel's arrival in the first scene. Finally, the last chapter is a description of their mother Ammu's brief and doomed affair with Velutha, the untouchable, which had taken place years before. Thus, the novel is framed by the actions of the adult twins, with the final scene reaching back to the middle of the novel to illustrate what had happened previously. The events are told as flashbacks or flash forwards, and time is so fragmented that it is difficult for the reader to recognize that the entire novel takes place in one day.

Other twinned events give the novel a highly stylized surface. Velutha, the untouchable, is described more than once as the person the children

loved by day and their mother loved by night. Both Ammu and her brother are divorced parents. Both Ammu and her own mother, Mammachi, suffered violent abuse at the hands of their husbands. The most conspicuous parallel in *The God of Small Things*, however, is the great love and understanding that the twins feel for each other and that their mother and Velutha also feel for each other. Both couples act out a transgression of norms: The twins' coupling defies an almost universal taboo, and Ammu and Velutha's coupling defies a centuries-old tradition which is still powerful in India.

Before winning the Man Booker Prize, *The God of Small Things* received a great deal of media attention, both positive and negative. It was declared derivative of James Joyce, Salman Rushdie, and William Faulkner. The style was called overheated, pretentious, and clichéd by various reviewers. In India, media pundits expressed dismay about the backward and disgusting picture of Kerala presented in the novel. Some held Roy responsible for misrepresenting historical fact in her representation of the local Communist Party of the time. Soon *The God of Small Things* received academic attention as well. Several collections of essays on Roy and her novel were published by Prestige Books in New Delhi, and within a few years hundreds of essays on the novel appeared in academic journals in the United States and abroad. Scholars gave the book a variety of theoretical interpretations, including feminist, postcolonial, deconstructionist, Marxist, post-Freudian, and other readings. Other analyses emphasized the novel's use of the techniques associated with a traditionally Western, postmodernist style, such as filtered voices, fragmentation of self, and events recounted by more than one person.

## THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

**First published:** 1997

**Type of work:** Novel

*Velutha, an untouchable who is employed in the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory, has an affair with Ammu, a member of the family who owns it, which leads to his death and the family's disgrace.*

*The God of Small Things* opens at the chronological end of the story. In the early 1990's, Rahel visits her family home in Ayemenem, in the Indian state of Kerala. She has come home to see her twin brother, Estha, who had unexpectedly returned. The twins, who were inseparable as children, have not seen each other for twenty-three years, ever since their English cousin, Sophie Mol, drowned in the river after their boat capsized during a Christmas visit. The precocious and indefatigable twins are at the Ayemenem home because their beautiful, sensuous mother, Ammu, married a weak and abusive man whom she later left to return to her family. The twins live in a fantasy world of their own making, trying to hide the more painful events of the novel in denial. For example, Rahel, described as "fiercely vigilant and brittle with exhaustion from her battle against Real Life," is convinced that Sophie Mol is awake for her own funeral. Although the novel is told by a third-person narrator, the events are seen largely through the eyes of Estha and Rahel.

Ammu is merely tolerated at the Ayemenem house because of her shameful, unwise marriage, but the other residents also have an air of disgrace and eccentricity, as if the house were a retreat for those who could not quite make it in the larger world. Uncle Chacko, Ammu's brother and Sophie Mol's father, is an Oxford scholar and Marxist who returned home from his own failed marriage in England. He has taken over the Kochamma family business, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, from Mammachi, the matriarch of the family, whose skull still bears scars from the beatings that her husband gave her. Also living in the house are Baby Kochamma, a great-aunt who fell in love with a priest, converted to Catholicism, and became a nun to be near him. When this proved futile, she returned to the family home and eventually became

addicted to television, which brings the greater world she had missed right to her sitting room. She is, however, a fearful person who is frightened by the Marxist-Leninist menace which she heard about on a British Broadcasting Corporation newscast. She does not even trust the twins.

Another important character in *The God of Small Things* is Velutha, the untouchable, who lives in a tiny hut on the other side of the river that flows through the Kochammas' property. He lives with his father, Vellya Papan, who has a glass eye, and his paralyzed brother, whom Velutha tends when he is not repairing machinery at the pickle factory or mending appliances at the family's home. The Kochamma family first met these untouchables when they showed up at their back door to sell coconuts, and they stayed to do odd jobs. Mammachi noticed Velutha's extraordinary skill with his hands when he was young and sent him to a carpentry school, where his talent developed and enabled him to become a cabinetmaker, furniture designer, wood carver, and eventually a machinist. Estha and Rahel were forbidden to enter Velutha's hut, but they did. He carved animals from bits of wood for them, made Rahel her lucky fishing rod, and taught her and Estha to fish. He and the twins grew to be fast friends. Later, when the children found an old rowboat covered with vines and rot, he helped them clean and repair the boat, and after that they visited him every day. The twins and Sophie Mol were riding in this rowboat when it capsized after heavy rains had swollen the river. The twins, used to swimming, reached shore, but Sophie Mol's body was found in the river the next morning.

The rowboat was also used by Ammu in her nightly trysts with Velutha. The family is unaware of this until Velutha's father, Vellya, shows up at the back door one night and is absolutely horrified be-

cause he has seen, with his one good eye, Ammu crossing the river to be with Velutha. Vellya has even seen Ammu returning at dawn. Between tears and terrified shaking, he relates the facts to Mammachi, who refuses to believe that her daughter, Ammu, and the son of an untouchable are having an affair. She kicks Vellya down the stairs. The maid, however, has overheard the conversation and relates it to Baby Kochamma.

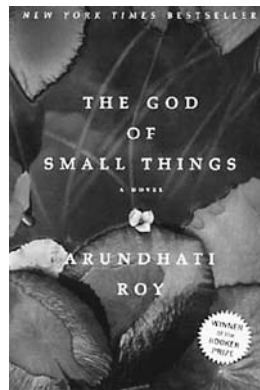
After tricking Ammu into her room and locking her in, Baby Kochamma convinces Mammachi that Vellya's story must be true. Baby Kochamma then goes to the police station and reports to the chief inspector that Velutha has tried to rape Ammu, changing the story to protect the family.

Events spin out of control. The police patrol finds Velutha asleep in his hut, beats him viciously, and drags his unconscious body back to the police station. The twins are summoned to the station to identify Velutha, and Rachel sees the broken, bloody body of the person she has loved, the God of Small Things. Although she identifies Velutha to the police, in an attempt to protect her twin brother she tells Estha that the man she saw at the police station was not Velutha after all.

## SUMMARY

Arundhati Roy's concerns in her novel *The God of Small Things* are the same ones she writes about in her nonfiction essays: injustice in social caste systems, inequality of opportunity—and even dignity—between the affluent and the poor, imperialism, and war. In *The God of Small Things*, however, she has all the various techniques of fiction at her command, and the novel creates a wholly imaginary world in which scientific realism is cast aside and emotions and instincts of every kind are tested. In addition to the social issues raised, the novel also intensely examines the motivations and secrets of the human psyche. Many other young South Asian women writers have been influenced by Roy's novel, and the book has the power to enrich South Asian writing in new and innovative ways.

Sheila Golburgh Johnson



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#### TELEPLAY:

*In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, 1989

#### NONFICTION:

*The End of Imagination*, 1998

*The Cost of Living*, 1999

*The Greater Common Good*, 1999

*Power Politics*, 2001 (also known as *Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin*)

*The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 2002

*War Talk*, 2003

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In *The God of Small Things*, what are Ammu's motivations for becoming involved with Velutha?
- How does Arundhati Roy use images of nature to enhance the plot of *The God of Small Things*?
- How does the issue of personal freedom play out in *The God of Small Things*?
- What is the community of Ayemenem willing to do to maintain the status quo?
- What are Baby Kochamma's motivations for reporting Velutha to the police?
- Did anyone actually intend to kill Velutha?
- How does Sophie Mol's death change the family?





Courtesy, McGill University

## GABRIELLE ROY

**Born:** Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, Canada  
March 22, 1909

**Died:** Quebec City, Quebec, Canada  
July 13, 1983

*As a French Canadian writer acclaimed for her social and psychological realism, Roy made an extraordinary contribution to the novel and short story.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Gabrielle Roy (rah), the youngest of eleven children, was born on March 22, 1909, in Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, a francophone community in predominantly anglophone western Canada. The linguistic heritage and cultural hegemony of which Roy was enormously proud did not blind her, however, to the existence of other ethnic groups on the Manitoban prairies. Moreover, it made her acutely sensitive to the aspirations of other nationalities new to the province. Her father, Léon Roy, was a federal colonization agent who assisted the settlement of Ruthenians, Dukhobors, Mennonites, and Hutterites. The young girl grew up, therefore, at a time when the prairies were being extensively settled by pioneers of diverse ethnic background, individuals whose language, customs, and singular physical appearance, in some instances, afforded different perceptions of life that would manifest themselves later in her prose.

In 1927, Léon Roy died, leaving Gabrielle's mother, Mélina, and Gabrielle to support themselves. After attending the Winnipeg Normal School from 1927 to 1929, Roy began an eight-year teaching career, a profession that had been heartily approved by her mother. Her works, *La Petite Poule d'eau* (1950; *Where Nests the Water Hen*, 1950) and *Ces enfants de ma vie* (1977; *Children of My Heart*, 1979), are inspired by her teaching experiences.

Despite the satisfaction that she felt in teaching, Roy was destined to travel, a recurrent theme in her fiction, in which life is perceived as a voyage, following a circular movement that brings the individual, often in memory, back to the initial point of departure.

Her return to Quebec in 1939, after travels in Europe, proved to be of extreme importance in the development of her aesthetics, her perception of life, with its joys and troubles, and her humanistic philosophy. Living first in Montreal, Roy worked as a freelance journalist for *Le Bulletin des agriculteurs*, *Le Jour*, and *Le Canada*. Her pieces reflect her profound sensitivity to diverse social contexts and to difficulties faced by the working class, as well as an unwavering compassion for the human condition, often perceived as being directed by a destiny that engenders solitude, suffering, and imprisonment.

Roy's first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945; *The Tin Flute*, 1947), bears testimony to the sensitivity and creative intuition that characterize her work. For this work, Roy received the Prix Fémina and the Lorne Pierce Medal of the Royal Society of Canada. French Canada's first urban novel, it evokes with historical authenticity Montreal during World War II, the misery and poverty of a working-class area of the city. Roy's preoccupation with social issues, the mechanization of a modern society that no longer values the work of artisans, the social position of women in relation to that of men, and, finally, the image of life as being a voyage into the future, or in some cases, toward the past, reveal her compassionate vision of existence and her need to understand it better.

In 1947, Roy married Dr. Marcel Carbotte, like herself a Franco-Manitoban, and the couple spent the next two years in France, where Carbotte undertook medical studies. It was during this stay that Roy wrote *Where Nests the Water Hen*, the first of her works dealing with her life on the Manitoban prairies. The prairies remained an integral part of Roy's psyche, inevitably returning as a permanent landscape feature of her Manitoban works. The prairie is doubly significant because of its symbolic importance, representing both spatial and temporal infinity, perpetual movement, and the future that looms ahead, resplendent with promise.

In 1954, Roy and her husband established a permanent residence in Quebec City, the capital city of Quebec, Canada's largest francophone province. The publication of *Alexandre Chenevert* (1955; *The Cashier*, 1955) reconfirmed Roy's preoccupation with the common man, in this case the principal character indicated by the title.

Roy's aesthetic evolution during this period in her life led her to a type of self-discovery, in that she became the focus of her own scrutiny. Her childhood, her travels, and her vocation as a writer became important focal points of her creativity. It is evident, for example, in *La Route d'Altamont* (1966; *The Road Past Altamont*, 1966), in which Roy interweaves fiction and semiautobiographical details to create both a subjective and an objective retelling of periods in the life of Christine, the work's main character. Roy's introspection at this stage in her life reveals an individual who is unceasingly curious and unrelentingly committed to her art. As Roy herself said, her works did, in a sense, compensate for not having children. The characters in her works, as varied and complex as they are, therefore constitute the writer's true family. In 1967, Roy was named Companion of the Order of Canada, and in 1968 she received a Canada Council Medal for her work.

Roy died from a heart attack in Quebec City on July 13, 1983. A prolific writer, she made an invaluable and permanent contribution to the literature of French Canada. She is also, through the many multilingual translations of her works, a figure of international reputation, whose messages travel far beyond the boundaries of her country.

## ANALYSIS

Journalist, short-story writer, and novelist, Roy created a corpus of works that influenced greatly

the evolution of French Canadian literature. The publication of *The Tin Flute* in 1945 was of enormous importance in the development of the French Canadian novel, for it cast a penetrating look at the French Canadian reality of the time. The aesthetics of traditional novels, evoking an idyllic natural setting—countryside, forest, and mountain inhabited by simple, robust, rural characters—gave way to the urban novel, realistic in inspiration, unbiased in the presentation of both character and milieu. More important perhaps than this shift in focus and treatment is the ideological noteworthiness of such an endeavor. *The Tin Flute* represents a mosaic of French Canadian characters, depicted in a working-class microcosm, created without political partisanship, despite linguistic and nationalistic conflicts that existed between anglophone and francophone at that time, as well as forty years later. Roy's focus, therefore, is on the existential level of depiction. She does not participate in political debate concerning Canada's future as a confederation with or without Quebec's membership. This detailed and probing examination of the average citizen living in an urban setting during a period of economic depression elevated the novel of Quebec to a universal level. Roy's characters, whether semiautobiographical or fictitious, form a profoundly compassionate vision of humanity through a style that is consistently rich, evocative, and inviting.

Roy's use of characters, as well as of characterization, is distinctly her own. The individuals whom she creates are hardly unidimensional people serving to reinforce a given ideological or philosophical stance. In the same way that the ideals of French and British realism of the nineteenth century attempted to reveal reciprocal influences between individual and milieu, and the ways in which determinism guides a character's development, Roy's intention is, without exception, to demonstrate through her commitment to social realism and strong psychological portraits the place of men and women in society. The threads of individual portraits are intertwined by the writer to create the social fabric of the worlds that she depicts. The characters in Roy's writings are therefore fundamentally social beings, for their desires, acts, successes, and failures exist because of the place they occupy in the larger scheme of existence. Psychological depth, glimpses of the past contemplated in

the present, interpersonal relations, and links with societal structures, such as employment and education, are elements that anchor Roy's characters in an authentic and complex world.

Recurring thematic structures in her work give Roy's corpus, be it her fictionalized or semiautobiographical works, a distinct consistency, both in style and in content. Evasion from the present through dream, the impossibility of recapturing the past, the solitude of the individual, the difficulty in achieving true communication, the material and spiritual troubles imposed upon the individual by a modern society—these are some of Roy's preferred themes.

Translated into nine languages, *The Tin Flute* is Roy's most successful novel. Set in Montreal's working-class district, Saint-Henri, during the end of the economic crisis of the late 1930's, as well as during World War II, the novel recounts the life of the Lacasse family, an urban family facing unemployment, sickness, and poverty. The sensitivity to the plight of the common person is a distinctive trait of Roy's literary world. The work is inspired, in fact, by the flood of emotion that she experienced when first visiting this area of Montreal. The photographic realism that characterizes her style in this particular novel lays the foundation for social commentary. With minute detail, Roy re-creates a microcosm inhabited by original characters, some of whom will succeed in extricating themselves from the destiny that awaits the majority of the individuals depicted in this context. It is, of course, paradoxical that the war brings an end, through the creation of employment, to the physical suffering of the Lacasse family. This twist reinforces Roy's rendering of a society that devalues and exploits the common person, ignores his or her value as a human being, and extols the virtue of a materially successful life without addressing spiritual needs.

*The Tin Flute* was followed by another urban novel, *The Cashier*, which focuses on a solitary and despairing bank teller, overburdened by social injustices and unsettling current events, such as the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Arab-Israeli War, and overpopulation in China. The main character, Alexandre Chenevert, carries the weight of the world on his own shoulders, and in this way, he represents on an existential level the powerlessness, alienation, and suffering faced by the individual in a modern technological society. This theme

is underlined by the symbolic nature of the bank booth that imprisons Chenevert, a small cagelike structure with three glass walls, from which the teller observes the monotony of his life, but from which he is not able to escape.

The opposition between city and countryside present in *The Tin Flute* figures also in *The Cashier*. As in the former novel, the attempt to extricate oneself from the complexities and tribulations of city life by returning to the countryside is doomed to failure in this work. While Chenevert does find temporary solace at Lac Vert (Green Lake), representative of a simple, natural way of life cut off from mass media that bombard the protagonist with worrisome news items, he is drawn inexorably back to the metropolis. Before his death, he comes finally to experience a sense of fraternity with fellow patients at the hospital and ultimately undergoes a liberating death that relieves him from the universal human suffering, as well as his own suffering, that preoccupied him during his lifetime.

Some of Roy's works are also semiautobiographical in orientation but do not lose focus, however, on the psychologically compelling portrait of the individual. *Where Nests the Water Hen*, *Rue Deschambault* (1955; *Street of Riches*, 1957), *The Road Past Altamont*, and *Children of My Heart* are inspired by Roy's life and teaching experiences on the Manitoban prairies. *The Road Past Altamont* is an especially beautiful and revealing rendering of the naïveté, intellectual evolution, and aspirations of the main character, Christine, clearly resembling Roy herself. Composed of four short stories, "Ma Grand-mère toute puissante" ("My Almighty Grandmother"), "Le Vieillard et l'enfant" ("The Old Man and the Child"), "Le Déménagement" ("The Move"), and "La Route d'Altamont" ("The Road Past Altamont"), the work can be seen as a whole that depicts the development of Christine from childhood to adulthood, from fantasy and dream to vocation and reality. Understanding through death the creation of life in a cyclical fashion, realizing one's own desires and potential, viewing life as an unending journey—these are all lessons learned by the young Christine and reflected upon by her, the mature writer endeavoring to retrace the past in order to understand and appreciate the present more fully.

Allusion to the future is a recurring element in the conclusion to many of Roy's works. It serves to

indicate her quiet optimism and, once again, her conception of existence as a voyage that continues inevitably toward a future space and time of discovery.

## THE TIN FLUTE

**First published:** *Bonheur d'occasion*, 1945  
(English translation, 1947)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This work, Roy's most famous novel, retraces with acute realism working-class life in Montreal during World War II.*

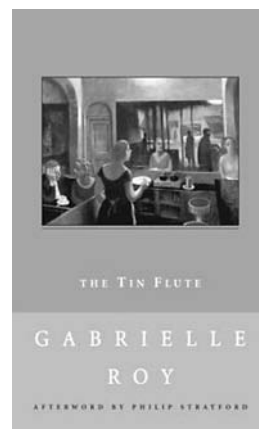
Social realism and photographic detail characterize *The Tin Flute*, set in Montreal during World War II. This urban novel recounts the joys and sorrows of the Lacasse family: of Azarius, the negligent father and dreamer; of Rosa-Anna, the stoic maternal figure; and of their eight children. The thematic structure of the work is built on oppositions between past and present, dream and reality, as well as the roles and privileges that distinguish men and women during this period. It is, above all else, a poignant portrayal of the working class in Saint-Henri, an underprivileged francophone neighborhood at the foot of a mountain, at the top of which lies Westmount, the anglophone enclave of wealth and power.

Social history provides the foundation for this literary world. Unemployment and industrialization create the backdrop against which characters struggle to attain freedom—personal, spiritual, and material—while, in the case of female protagonists, for example, endeavoring unsuccessfully to extricate themselves from an implacable destiny. Florentine Lacasse, the eldest daughter of the family, works as a waitress in a working-class café in order to help support her family, since her father is not capable of holding down a job and since her mother must take care of the other sickly children at home.

From the opening line, one discerns Florentine's desperate attempt to escape the reality of her employment, of her family situation, and of her future. Living in a world of unattainable dreams, this sickly, fragile-looking young woman imagines herself the elegant seductress who will be rescued by a

man of extraordinary means and appearance. She is clearly, therefore, searching for happiness through "the other." In this case, she becomes involved with Jean Lévesque, a young man of uncommon discipline and ambition, who, in contrast to Florentine, creates his own destiny, for his dream is to ascend the mountain and to live in the comfort and security of Westmount. The reader has no doubt, in fact, that he will succeed in his goal and is constantly reminded through Roy's poetic symbolism that Jean Lévesque is an untouchable. Florentine frequently sees him from the back; he is forever moving away from her, out of her field of vision, propelled during solitary walks in the streets of Montreal by wind and snow toward the realization of his dreams.

However, in becoming pregnant with Jean Lévesque's child, Florentine does nothing more than set in motion the destiny common to the female protagonists, which will be her own. Like her mother and her grandmother, both of whom are physically and spiritually exhausted after years of motherhood, sacrifice, and struggle, the character of Florentine exists on a temporal level structured by the succession of pregnancies that ordered the life of the women who came before her. This rigid temporality, however, does not govern the male characters, who disappear and reappear at will. Escape for the male characters is, therefore, possible. The female protagonists are bound to live out an existence that seems hereditary. Jean Lévesque is the incarnation of the privileged male, who does not live in the same time or space of the female whom he has come to dominate in deed and in word. He evades Florentine, who must choose a happiness that is not the one of her dreams but rather one that, on a pragmatic level, will fulfill material needs and will allow her to care properly for her family. By marrying Emmanuel Létourneau, a soldier and idealist from a comfortable middle-class family, she hopes to achieve at least this level of contentment.





The original title, *Bonheur d'occasion*, bears more than one meaning. "Secondhand happiness" or "grab-bag happiness" would be approximate translations that render, particularly well, the nature of the "happiness" ultimately attained by Florentine. The English title refers to the tin flute that her young brother, Daniel, receives while in the hospital as he is dying from leukemia. This little instrument represents his own personal and ephemeral happiness.

## STREET OF RICHES

**First published:** *Rue Deschambault*, 1955  
(English translation, 1957)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*This semiautobiographical work retraces, through eighteen stories forming a whole, the psychological and intellectual development of a young girl growing up on Manitoba's prairies.*

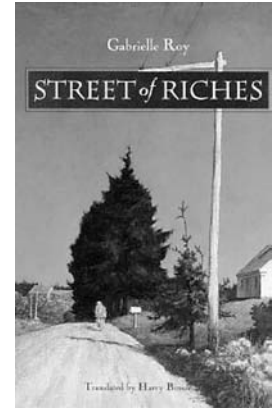
*Street of Riches* is a semiautobiographical work, evoking childhood memories and experiences through a veil of fiction. The original title, which refers to Deschambault Street in Saint-Boniface, Roy's birthplace, serves to anchor the eighteen stories forming the work in a psychological topography traveled from early childhood to adolescence by the main character, Christine, whose narrative focus is continued in *The Road Past Altamont*.

For Roy, childhood is undeniably a magical time, filled with curiosity, discovery, hope, and nurturing. It is also the period to which adults return, following the cycle of life, which Christine herself comes to experience. It represents potential, growth, and learning, all of which define in later years the sensibilities and values of Roy's adult protagonist. The use of the first-person narrative reinforces the quest for truth and knowledge. "Know thyself": This is indeed what the young Christine attempts through interactions with her own inner being, with family members, as well as other individuals who loom large in her life.

In such pieces as "Petite Misère" ("Little Miss Misery"), "Mon Chapeau rose" ("My Pink Hat"), "Ma Coqueluche" ("My Whooping Cough"), and "Il s'en va gagner notre vie" ("To Earn My Living")

Christine poignantly retraces her personal development from the extremely sensitive little girl, who, nicknamed "Little Miss Misery" by her father, flees to the attic to escape this brutal name, to the young woman, heedful of the call to write, but who begins a teaching career to support herself and her mother. The wide-eyed curiosity that characterizes Christine's perception is a constant in this work. Roy captures admirably well and with a realism that astounds the reader the reactions, words, and inner thoughts of this delightful character.

"Les Bijoux" ("The Jewels") reinforces the search for identity associated with the evolution of the young girl to the mature woman. Aged fifteen in this story, Christine succumbs to the dazzling attraction of costume jewelry and other "adult" accoutrements (as Florentine does in *The Tin Flute*) before realizing the artificial nature of such decorations. Shedding this role, Christine contemplates leaving for Africa to nurse the lepers. Her values and personality are in metamorphosis, her identity not yet formed, but through her evolution Christine is unwavering in her apprenticeship of life, a process that affects her in permanent ways to be communicated in *The Road Past Altamont*. Despite the economic hardships evoked in *Street of Riches*, Christine and her family do enjoy, indeed, the richness of imagination, the closeness of family life, and a present that will be forever active in the creative process of the mature Christine, the writer.



## SUMMARY

Gabrielle Roy's vision of existence is evoked through fictionalized and semiautobiographical works that communicate an ardent desire to achieve fulfilling and open relationships between men and women, children and adults. The solitude and sometimes interior exile described in her works, however, is an existential constant, but it does not carry a bleak message. Rather, it incites the reader to reassess, as many of her characters do,



the importance of life in a collectivity and the power of individual desires in order to understand oneself better.

Kenneth W. Meadwell

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did the impact of *The Tin Flute* divert Gabrielle Roy for a number of years from her own native province, Manitoba, about which she ultimately had more to say than about eastern Canadian cities?
- What experiences of childhood does Roy celebrate most successfully in *Street of Riches*?
- To what extent is loneliness an incentive to the young characters in Roy's fiction?
- Explain the relationship between childhood and old age as seen by Roy's character Christine.
- Compare the depictions of Manitoba in the works of Roy and Margaret Laurence.



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## JUAN RULFO

**Born:** Barranca de Apulco, Sayula, Jalisco, Mexico  
May 16, 1918

**Died:** Mexico City, Mexico  
January 7, 1986

*Rulfo's fiction pioneers the techniques of modernism and Magical Realism to highlight the straitened conditions of Mexican Indians. In spare, poetic language he re-creates the harsh landscapes of his native Jalisco and the struggles of the people to survive against social injustice, illness, poverty, violence, and death.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Juan Rulfo (REWL-foh) was born in 1918 in Barranca de Apulco, a small town in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, and grew up in neighboring San Gabriel, a small town approximately three hundred miles northwest of Mexico City. Rulfo spent his entire life in various places in Mexico, including the cities of Guadalajara and Mexico City. The various locales and people of Mexico serve as the inspiration for Rulfo's most important work, the short-story collection, *El llano en llamas* (1953, revised 1970 and 1980; *The Burning Plain, and Other Stories*, 1967), and his influential novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955, revised 1959, 1964, 1980; English translation, 1959, 1994).

Rulfo's early years were touched by family tragedy. His father, Juan Nepomuceno Perez Rulfo, was murdered during the Cristero Revolt, and his mother, Maria Vizaino Arias, died of a heart attack in 1927. Rulfo lived for a short time with his grandmother in Guadalajara, where he took advantage of her being the caretaker for the library of the local priest. He read voraciously in the collection of books, many of which were adventure stories, for which he developed a great fondness.

Rulfo was eventually sent to an orphanage in Guadalajara, where he studied accounting, and, at the age of fifteen, moved to Mexico City to study accounting, law, and literature at the university while

living with an uncle. Shortly thereafter, without completing a degree, Rulfo was compelled by financial necessity to take a job at the Mexican immigration department, where he worked for more than ten years. During World War II, as part of his responsibilities, he processed German and Italian prisoners from ships impounded in Mexican waters.

It was also during this time that Rulfo turned to writing. In the early 1940's he had published several short stories in provincial magazines near Guadalajara and began a novel, which he later destroyed. During his time at the immigration department, he became acquainted with Efrén Hernández, a coworker who was also an established short-story writer. Hernández inspired Rulfo to turn to writing in earnest and helped him develop his technique.

Rulfo left the immigration department to become a salesman for the B. F. Goodrich Company, where he worked from 1947 to 1954. He married Clara Aparicio in 1947, and the couple eventually had four children: Francisco, Pablo, Juan Carlos, and Claudia. During this time he received a fellowship from the Centro Mexicano de Escritores, which allowed him to complete and publish his short-story collection, *The Burning Plain, and Other Stories*, in 1953. Following critical acclaim, Rulfo received Rockefeller Foundation grants in 1953 and 1954, which allowed him to produce his highly influential novel, *Pedro Páramo*.

In the years following the publication of his novel, Rulfo worked for the Mexican government on a variety of development projects and became the director of the library archives at the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística in Mexico City in 1958. In 1959, Rulfo and his family moved to Guadalajara, where he handled the publicity for the state television station, Televisión.

In the next ten years Rulfo worked on the novel “El gallero” (the cockfighter), which, although it was never published, was made into a 1964 film *El gallo de oro* (*The Golden Cock*). Film versions of *Pedro Páramo* were also produced during this period. Rulfo continued work on another novel, “La cordillera” (the packtrain), which remained unfinished at the time of his death. One of Rulfo’s most successful projects during this time was a book of photographs of Mexico, *Inframundo: El México de Juan Rulfo* (1980; (*Inframundo: The Mexico of Juan Rulfo*, 1983). For a writer whose work deals so intimately with the Mexican landscape, this book chronicles both the settings that became important in Rulfo’s fiction and discusses the writing of *Pedro Páramo*.

In the later years of his life, Rulfo was awarded the Mexican prize, the Premio Nacional de Letras (1970); received the Spanish prize, the Príncipe de Asturias (1983); and was inducted into the Mexican Academy of Letters (1980). Rulfo died in Mexico City of a heart attack in 1986.

## ANALYSIS

From the time of Spanish colonialism until the present day, Mexico has been forced to deal with issues of social justice. Class struggles between large landowners and native Indian farmers over land ownership were the basis for revolutions in 1810, 1855, and 1910 and continue to be an issue of contention in Mexico. In the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican novelists such as Mariano Azuela and Martín Luis Guzmán highlighted these questions of social injustice and turned the novel into an instrument of social reform. Out of this background, in the 1940’s and 1950’s other Mexican writers used these social concerns as an implied background for their stories and turned their attentions to the individual stories of people affected by these conditions. Juan Rulfo is one of these writers.

Standing at the forefront of both modernism

and Magical Realism, Rulfo pioneered a new style of writing that turned the microscope on the everyday harsh realities of individuals. Both in his choice of subject and in his choices of style and narrative structure, Rulfo turned away from the explicit goals of social realism and turned toward the expression of a more interior reality conditioned by the harsh strictures of life, the torments of memory, and an everyday existence shaped by the concrete realities of the present and the myths and religious beliefs of the past.

Rulfo’s style and narrative structure in his two major works, *The Burning Plain* and *Pedro Páramo*, are striking. As in modernist poetry, his prose strips away nonessentials and relies upon dialogue and stunning visual imagery. In *Pedro Páramo*’s memories of his youth, the drops of rain moisten the roof tiles, shake the branches of the pomegranate tree, and awaken his memories of his love, Susana San Juan. In the short story “Nos han dado la tierra” (“They Gave Us the Land”), the men walk like insects across the parched and cracked land, featureless in the dust, almost becoming part of the dry landscape.

The most unusual feature of Rulfo’s brief novel *Pedro Páramo* is the use of disrupted narrative. The story begins in a fairly straightforward manner but rapidly becomes a series of brief vignettes that shift rapidly and often with little explicit transition to a series of stories spanning three generations of the town of Comala. Shadowy characters come and go, and sometimes the reader hears only voices. The reader eventually learns that all of the characters in the novel are dead, even the narrator Juan Preciado. The technique is reminiscent of other modernist works, such as T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) or the novels of William Faulkner.

Rulfo is often credited with being a forerunner of the technique known as Magical Realism, a technique most associated with Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Magical Realism introduces surreal elements of fantasy in startling juxtaposition with realistic narrative. This technique in Rulfo, however, underscores the reality of the unreal in the minds of Rulfo’s characters. Miracles, myth, memory, and imagination are as real in the lives of Rulfo’s characters as are eating lunch or drawing water from the well. Partly this reflects the importance of ancient myth as a vital part of the lives of contemporary Mexican Indians, and partly

it reflects the strong tradition of Catholicism. Even though religion is often a negative and corrupting influence in Rulfo's work (witness the ineffectual and corrupt priest Father Rentería in *Pedro Páramo*), its traditions form an integral part of the lives of the people.

The lives of the characters in Rulfo's works are circumscribed by violence, poverty, death, and an unforgiving landscape. His characters struggle to survive, but they have little optimism. Women are subject to sexual predation and a lack of opportunity and power. Men are apt to become murderers or the victims of murderers and live lives where no amount of hard work can cause crops to spring from infertile soil or the rain to fall. One of Rulfo's particular concerns is the relationship between fathers and sons. The premise of *Pedro Páramo* is Juan Preciado's search for his father. Not only does he wish to meet his father, but he wishes to be acknowledged by him, to be validated. In *Pedro Páramo* he finds only a failed and corrupt father. Father Rentería, the spiritual father of Comala, also fails as a father, succumbing to the corruption of Pedro Páramo and failing to be absolved by the priest of the neighboring village. Rulfo's bleak, fatalistic, yet visually stunning portraits of the lives of the Mexican Indians of the inhospitable plains of central Mexico have made his work influential among other Latin American authors and, in translation, for readers throughout the world.

## THE BURNING PLAIN, AND OTHER STORIES

**First published:** *El llano en llamas, y otros cuentos*, 1953, revised 1970 and 1980 (English translation, 1967)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*These fifteen varied stories chronicle the harsh living conditions and threats of violence and death the Mexican Indians endure on the harsh plains of central Mexico.*

Juan Rulfo's collection *The Burning Plain, and Other Stories* contains a variety of short stories ranging from brief character sketches such as "Macario," an interior monologue by a mentally deficient boy;

to longer, more complex tales such as the title story, "El llano en llamas" ("The Burning Plain"), which follows the skirmishes of a band of revolutionaries led by Pedro Zamora; or the haunting but humorous "Anacleto Morones," in which a flock of women dressed in black descend upon the porch of the narrator to interrogate him about the death of Anacleto Morones. In one story, "Luvina," the narrator describes moving to the village of San Juan Luvina with his family to become the schoolteacher. He finds a dried-up town, where the old women flock like bats and nothing grows. This story in particular recalls the deserted town of Comala in Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo*.

Although the stories in the collection are varied in terms of length, point of view, and narrative method, certain common features emerge. Death is a constant in all of the stories. In "Talpa," a dying husband, his wife, and the husband's brother make a pilgrimage to a sacred site in hopes of a miraculous cure for the husband. The wife and the brother-in-law are in love, and they know full well that the husband will probably not survive the trip. In stories like "La cuesta de las camarades" ("The Hill of the Comadres"), "¡Díles que no me maten!" ("Tell Them Not to Kill Me!"), and "Anacleto Morones," men confess to murders and fully expect to be punished for their crimes. Death is commonplace in stories like "The Burning Plain" and "La noche que lo dejaron solo" ("The Night They Left Him Alone"), which are both set against a background of guerrilla skirmishes in revolutionary-era Mexico.

Women fare poorly in these stories. In "Es que somos muy pobres" ("We're Very Poor"), a twelve-year-old girl risks becoming as sexually promiscuous as her older sisters because the cow upon which her entire financial future rests has drowned in the river. Groups of old women dressed in black in "Luvina" and "Anacleto Morones" are described as sterile, harsh crones who avenge past sins.

Illness and poverty are common in many of the stories. Characters scratch out a meager living and



carry their burdens against unforgiving landscapes. Heat, dust, floods, and infertile soil keep people from escaping their harsh lives. Characters struggle to survive while at the same time succumbing to a kind of fatalism in which they fully expect that poverty, violence, and death are the usual state of affairs.

## PEDRO PÁRAMO

**First published:** 1955, revised 1959, 1964, 1980 (English translation, 1959, 1994)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Juan Preciado, searching for Pedro Páramo, the father he has never known, discovers a village haunted by the memories, secrets, and voices of the ghosts of its former residents.*

Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* stands at the forefront of Latin American works employing the techniques of modernism and Magical Realism. The novel begins in a straightforward fashion with a traveller, Juan Preciado, returning to the village of his mother's birth, Comala. At a fateful crossroads meeting, he encounters his half brother, Abundio Martínez, who serves as his guide as he descends into the village.

As Juan Preciado arrives in Comala, he finds a town totally at odds with his mother's recollections. Instead of the verdant, fertile town of her youth, he finds a deserted and rundown ghost town, whose scarce inhabitants lurk in the shadows and mumble mysterious comments. The novel rapidly becomes much more complex, introducing a series of plotlines in rapid, abruptly introduced vignettes that travel in and out of the minds of such characters as Pedro Páramo, Susana San Juan, Dorotea, Damiana, the village priest Father Rentéria, and Abundio Martínez, and back and forth across time.

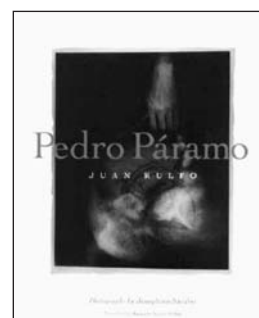
The chronology of the story follows events in Comala from approximately 1880 to the Mexican Revolution in 1910 to the Cristero Revolt of 1926. The earliest events in the narrative describe the childhood and adolescence of Pedro Páramo, Juan Preciado's father, and his love for Susana San Juan. Pedro Páramo grows up in a prominent landowning family in Comala, which has fallen on hard

times as a result of the murder of Luis Páramo, Pedro's father. Pedro grows up to take control of the family through ruthless behavior, violence, and murder, restoring the fortunes and power of his family at the expense of the people of Comala. He routinely preys sexually upon the young women of the town and eventually marries Juan Preciado's mother, Dolores, as a means of seizing her land and wiping out the debt he owes her family. At the same time, however, he yearns for his lost love, Susana San Juan, who has moved away from Comala with her father and who has eventually married another man.

The narrative then follows the wild exploits of Miguel Páramo, the only one of his sons whom Pedro Páramo has ever acknowledged. Miguel sleeps with all of the virgins and young women of the town and roams the countryside at night on his chestnut stallion. One night the stallion returns home without him, and Miguel is found dead at the side of the road, having fallen from the horse.

The widowed Susana San Juan returns to Comala, where she marries Pedro Páramo. Susana declines into ill health and madness and dies, haunted by the memories of her life with her father and by her continuing love for her former husband. Shortly thereafter, a despondent Pedro Páramo and his housekeeper are murdered by Abundio Martínez. The town declines, along with the fortunes of the Páramo family, and lies deserted as Juan Preciado comes to search for his father.

This narrative chronology of *Pedro Páramo*, however, fails to capture the striking method by which these various plotlines unfold. Rulfo's brief novel begins simply and then rapidly disrupts both time and space. Bits and pieces of each story emerge through scenes that go back to Pedro's childhood and then forward to Juan Preciado's search. The voices of the primary characters blend with the multiple voices of the townspeople, the servants, and the local priest to build a story that forces a reconsideration of what is past and present, who is alive or dead, and where and when the events occur.





The most startling discovery of the novel is that all of the characters are dead, including the narrator Juan Preciado. Midway through the story readers learn that he is speaking from the depths of the grave, eavesdropping on the memories of the sleeping dead around him. Comala emerges as a liminal space between life and death, a kind of purgatory, where the rain awakens the dead and stirs their memories. They bemoan their past sins, try to justify the lives they lived, and futilely try to atone for their pasts. Life and death, sanity and madness, good and evil, innocence and oppression, reality and fantasy all play out in Rulfo's story of the generations of the Páramo family in the ghost town of Comala.

### SUMMARY

Although his output of work is small, Juan Rulfo produced two influential works, *The Burning Plain* and *Pedro Páramo*. Rulfo helped initiate the renaissance of Latin American literature by experimenting with techniques associated with European literary modernism and what would become Magical Realism. His portraits of the Mexican Indians of Jalisco come directly from the experiences of his early years growing up near San Gabriel and Guadalajara. Although the lives he depicts are rife with suffering and hopelessness, Rulfo combines rich experience, memory, and emotion into unique narratives told in sparse but poetic language.

Ann M. Cameron

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#### SCREENPLAYS:

*El gallo de oro, y otros textos para cine*, 1980 (partial translation, "The Golden Cock," *Review* 46, 1992)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Juan Rulfo's work is considered to be at the forefront of Latin American modernism and Magical Realism. Discuss Rulfo's use of such techniques as disrupted narrative and time sequences, surrealism, unreliable narrators, and fantasy in both *Pedro Páramo* and *The Burning Plain*.
- Rulfo's work is often set against sterile and bleak landscapes. Discuss how heat, drought, and dust are used to define characters' lives and actions.
- How does Rulfo view family relationships in his work? In particular, what kinds of relationships exist between fathers and sons?
- *Pedro Páramo* is set in a ghost town, where the inhabitants relate their stories in a series of scenes told out of chronological sequence. How does this choice affect the way you read the novel and your understanding of the separation between the living and the dead?
- Several of Rulfo's stories detail various political rebellions taking place in twentieth century Mexico. Research the background of political activism in Mexico and discuss how Rulfo's work chronicles concerns with class divisions and land ownership.
- Sort out the chronological sequence of the plot of *Pedro Páramo*.
- Rulfo is often credited with the ability to create stunning visual imagery through the use of poetic and concrete language. Identify examples of this type of language in *Pedro Páramo* and *The Burning Plain*.
- Rulfo's world is one of violence, vengeance, and pain. What characters are usually the victims of this violence, and how do they react to their suffering?

## Juan Rulfo

### NONFICTION:

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## SALMAN RUSHDIE

**Born:** Bombay, India  
June 19, 1947

*In a series of highly praised and controversial novels that combine fact and fantasy, history and myth, Rushdie has explored the nature of individual and collective identity and has become one of the foremost practitioners of the technique of Magical Realism.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ahmed Salman Rushdie (ROOSH-dee) was born in Bombay, India, on June 19, 1947, two months before India gained its independence from the British, but the place and date that will forever be attached to his name are Tehran, Iran, February 14, 1989. On that Saint Valentine's Day, a writer whose persistent literary themes have been metamorphosis and exile found himself transformed into a target and underground man by Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who issued a fatwa sentencing him to death and encouraging all Muslim believers to find him and kill him.

Like Saleem Sinai, the hero of *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie grew up in an upper-middle-class Muslim family in Bombay, the son of Anis Ahmed Rushdie and Negin Butt Rushdie. Salman and his three sisters were raised in the home described in *Midnight's Children*, and Sinai attended the same British-style school that Rushdie did. At fourteen, Rushdie was sent to England to continue his education at Rugby. Like Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), he was made to feel like an outsider throughout his time at the school and learned to adopt the manners and accent of his peers as a protective mask. In 1964, he enrolled in King's College at Cambridge, where he studied history, read Western and Eastern literature, was involved in the college's theater productions, and earned his M.A. with honors in 1968.

While Rushdie was in England, his family had immigrated to Pakistan. After he was graduated, he purchased a one-way ticket to Karachi and joined his family in their new home, fully expecting to make his life there. Yet he immediately found himself in conflict with the Islamic authorities. A production of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (pr., pb. 1959) that he put together for the government television station was censored because it contained the word "pork." An article that he wrote for a magazine on his first impressions of Pakistan met the same fate. Within the year, he went back to England to live. For a year or so, he worked as an actor in London. During the 1970's, he earned his living as an advertising copywriter and wrote fiction at night. In 1973, he completed his first published novel, *Grimus* (1975), which was variously described as a science-fiction tale, a fable, a fantasy, and a political satire.

In 1976, Rushdie married an English publishing executive, Clarissa Luard; they had a son, Zafar. Rushdie first gained international attention with the publication of his second novel, *Midnight's Children*, which won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1981, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1982, and an award from the English-Speaking Union in 1981. The book's success allowed him to quit advertising and devote himself to his fiction full time. His next novel, *Shame* (1983), was also highly praised. Using a technique similar to that of Milan Kundera's novels, it mixes genres—memoir, political essay, history, autobiography, myth, and fiction—to present a multigenerational saga of modern Pakistan. It was nominated for the Man

Booker Prize and awarded the French Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger.

While working on his fourth novel, Rushdie wrote *The Jaguar's Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (1987) and numerous essays and reviews for British and American periodicals. Collected in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (1991), these essays form an extraordinary intellectual autobiography. During the same period, Rushdie and his wife were divorced, he married the American writer Marianne Wiggins, and he and Wiggins became familiar figures on the London literary and social scene. *The Satanic Verses*, published in Britain in the fall of 1988, was also nominated for the Man Booker Prize and won the other major British publishing honor, the Whitbread Award.

Almost immediately, however, the book turned into an international incident. Because of episodes treating fictional versions of the prophet Muhammad and his wives in a way that many Muslims considered blasphemous, India and most Muslim countries banned it. Riots occurred in Pakistan and elsewhere, leaving dozens dead and hundreds injured; in Bradford, England, Muslims burned the novel and hung its author in effigy. After the ayatollah's fatwa, the novel and its author became the central figures in a worldwide debate about censorship and freedom of expression.

Rushdie issued a statement of regret from his place of hiding in an effort to pacify the Iranian mullahs; his statement was rejected, and, instead a \$5 million price was placed on his head. Bookstores in England and North America were threatened, several were bombed, and the major book chains all announced that they would no longer display or sell the novel. (Later, when the immediate crisis passed, they put it back on their shelves.) Eventually, many writers spoke in Rushdie's defense, pledging their solidarity and support.

Rushdie continued to write. He defended himself in three major essays published in 1990: "Is Nothing Sacred?," "In Good Faith," and "In God We Trust." In 1990, his fable *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* also appeared. Both an extraordinary children's story and a pointed allegory of his own situation, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* demonstrated that its author's imagination and courage had not been destroyed by his isolation. In December, 1990, still in hiding, Rushdie again attempted to make peace with those who had sentenced him to death. After

his Japanese translator was assassinated and an attempt was made on the life of his Italian translator, he issued a statement embracing Islam and announcing that he had agreed to prohibit new translations or an English-language paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*. Once again, his effort at reconciliation was rejected, and the Iranian government renewed its calls for his death.

A year later, Rushdie made a dramatic, unscheduled, and heavily guarded appearance at Columbia University in New York City. He withdrew his earlier decision and asked that an English-language paperback edition be published as soon as possible, so that the novel would be affordable and freely available. If the book is not read and studied, he argued, his years of forced seclusion would have no meaning. In February, 1992, three years after the ayatollah's fatwa, a consortium of publishers announced that they would issue a paperback edition of the book. No publisher was willing to risk issuing the book on its own. Later, it was published by the Penguin Group and has not gone out of print since.

After publishing a collection of stories, *East, West* (1994), Rushdie wrote four more novels. *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) is a variation on both *Midnight's Children* and *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (first transcribed, fifteenth century), which treats the triumph of nationalism, communal violence, and religious fundamentalism in India in apocalyptic terms. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), one of his most popular works, is a reworking of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice through the story of two Indian lovers who become international rock stars. *Fury* (2001), set in New York where Rushdie began living at the beginning of the decade, received the worst critical notices of his career. *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), on the other hand, was widely praised as a recovery of his novelistic powers.

As the decade of the 1990's progressed, Rushdie began to appear in public again, speaking frequently and becoming a regular participant in literary and cultural roundtables and conferences. A second collection of his reviews, essays, and speeches, *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction, 1992-2002*, was published in 2002. Although some Islamic scholars argued that only the Ayatollah Khomeini could withdraw the fatwa—and he died the year after it was announced—in 1998 the Iranian government publicly disavowed the death

sentence. Rushdie then formally declared that he would stop living in hiding. In June, 2007, Queen Elizabeth II awarded Rushdie a knighthood, which again stirred up resentment against him in the Muslim world. New protests erupted in the streets of Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and other Muslim countries; the Pakistani Parliament passed a resolution condemning the knighthood; and the leaders of twelve British Muslim groups wrote a letter describing it as “a deliberate provocation and insult to the 1.5 billion Muslims around the world.”

Rushdie’s numerous honors and awards have included the Austrian State Prize for European Literature, the Booker of Booker’s (awarded to *Midnight’s Children* as the most distinguished recipient in the first twenty-five years of the prize), the British Book Awards Author of the Year and Whitbread Awards for *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and the Budapest Grand Prize for Literature.

### ANALYSIS

“Putting down roots in memory,” Rushdie wrote in *Grimus*, “is the natural condition of exile.” People in this position, he says elsewhere, “are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.” An exile suspects reality: “Having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.”

Since *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie has become the voice of those who have crossed that frontier, of all the migrants, such as himself, who have been torn from their place, their language, and their social norms, and who have been forced to reshape and root themselves in a strange new world. He suggests the instability of their identities by giving his major characters more than one name and, often, uncertain parentage; a physical fall—from the sky in *Grimus* and *The Satanic Verses*, or from a bicycle in *Midnight’s Children*—is his recurring symbol of their loss of the firm footing of home and self. Since the self is, above all, a narrative—a construction of memory—each of his novels is built of the stories that characters tell to define themselves and their worlds. Yet like most products of memory, the stories that fill his novels are flawed, unreliable, skewed by the obsessions and blind spots of their tellers. In such stories, there can be no externally verifiable reality, so Rushdie’s novels cannot

be contained by the conventions of the realistic novel.

Instead, Rushdie’s books are a unique and fascinating blend of literary genres and religious and cultural traditions. To be true to his own sense of reality, his own layered consciousness, he has had to develop a novelistic form that allows him to bring together the widely disparate parts of his own experience—East and West; secular humanism and religious fundamentalism; sacred and profane; Hindu, Muslim, and Christian history and myths; First, Second, and Third Worlds; Bombay cinema and English television; India, Pakistan, and Great Britain. “We are here,” Rushdie has said, “and we’ve never left anyplace that we’ve been.” He once described the perspective that is required to capture this plural experience as “stereoscopic vision,” a vision that allows him to look simultaneously at two societies from both the inside and the outside.

This stereoscopic vision is supported by Rushdie’s spendthrift imagination. His is essentially an aesthetic of excess—of piling episode on episode, character on character, plot on plot, pun on pun, comic name on comic name, digression on digression. Mixing the narrative energy of *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, the playfulness of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767), and the political and psychological ambition of Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* (1959; *The Tin Drum*, 1961), this aesthetic has provided Rushdie with the formal space that he needs to treat the multitude of subjects that press themselves upon him.

### MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN

**First published:** 1981

**Type of work:** Novel

*This saga depicts modern India, told through the eyes of Saleem Sinai, a changeling born at the same moment as his country during the midnight hour of August 15, 1947.*

The central conceit of *Midnight’s Children* is that 1,001 children were born during the first hour of India’s independence, that all of them were born with magical powers, and that the extent of



the powers that they were given decreased as the hour unfolded. Two boys were born at the exact stroke of midnight, and they had the greatest powers of all. One of them, Saleem, is the novel's narrator; the other, Shiva, is his alter ego and nemesis. Saleem is the illegitimate child of a poor family; Shiva, the legitimate son of the wealthy Sinai family. Secretly switched at birth by a nurse-

maid in love with a man who opposed the caste system, they grow up with each other's names, living each other's lives.

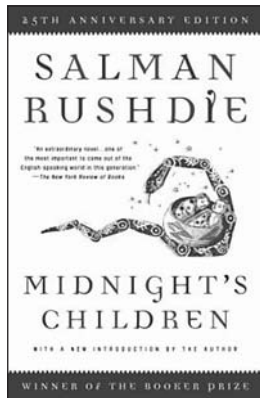
"I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country," Saleem says at the beginning of his tale. A self-consciously postmodern Scheherazade, Saleem relates the story of his ancestors and

his life to his housekeeper, Patma, over thirty-one Indian nights. In the process, he shares his version of sixty-four years of Indian history: the years under the British, Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, the religious and language riots following partition, the conflict between secular nationalism and religious fundamentalism, the wars between India and Pakistan, the birth of Bangladesh, the rise and fall of Sanjay Gandhi, and Indira Gandhi's "emergency." All these events and more tumble onto the page from his faulty memory, with dates jumbled and facts twisted into falsehoods.

Like Tristram Shandy, Saleem Sinai is not born until midway through the novel in which he tells his story. His most important feature is his nose. At age nine, Saleem learns that he has both the power to hear the voices and thoughts of others—including all the other children of midnight—and the power to transmit the thoughts of each to all the others, like a radio. His "antenna" is his long nose. How he suddenly learns that he has this power and how he loses it are two of the novel's most hilarious and inventive scenes.

Rushdie's treatment of Saleem's nose is a perfect example of his literary method and "stereoscopic vision." It is, first of all, outrageously comic and bawdy—as is so much in his fiction. In the

Western literary tradition, it connects Saleem to Pinocchio (thereby undermining Saleem's veracity), to author Nikolai Gogol (highlighting Saleem's monomania and calling his sanity into question), and to Cyrano de Bergerac (forecasting Saleem's fate in love). Yet it also links him to the elephant-headed god Ganesh in the Eastern literary and religious tradition. Ganesh is a comic figure, the patron deity of literature, and is supposed to have sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki to copy down the *Ramayana* (c. 350 B.C.E.) In the myths, Ganesh is both the child of the gods Shiva and Pavarti—names Rushdie assigns to other important characters in Saleem's story—and of uncertain parentage like Saleem. Thus, like so much in Rushdie's fiction, Saleem's nose functions on several levels at once: as a comic device, a plot element, and a literary and religious allusion to the several traditions that Rushdie sets out to blend in his work.



## THE SATANIC VERSES

**First published:** 1988

**Type of work:** Novel

*This exploration of good and evil, sacred and profane, faith and doubt, fiction and scripture, and home and exile is told through two actors who fall from the sky and land in England.*

*The Satanic Verses* begins with its two heroes falling to earth on New Year's Day after terrorists blow up the plane on which they were traveling to London. Is it any surprise that what follows is one of the most extraordinary novels ever written? Although it can be compared to the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Günter Grass, Gabriel García Márquez, and Vladimir Nabokov, only Salman Rushdie could have written it, and it stands as a compendium of all the themes and techniques of his career.

When they miraculously land on the English coast alive, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha find that they have been reborn and transformed. Gibreel, an amoral Indian film star who has been known to play as many as fifty different gods in a single week in the Bombay cinema's theologicals, has lost his faith and had a breakdown but lands

with what appears to be a halo around his head. Saladin Chamcha, an actor who has rejected his Indian roots to become as English as possible, and who has achieved great success in London because he has the chameleon-like power to create exactly the right voice to advertise every product, lands and immediately begins to turn into a cloven-hoofed devil.

The novel that tells their story moves from London to India and the Middle East, from the time of Muhammad to the era of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and the ayatollah, from the day's headlines to the farthest reaches of fantasy. Saladin becomes an outcast. He is rejected by his wife and friends, protected by the immigrants whom he had earlier despised, and transformed into their hope of revenge on the racism of the English before he returns home to India, reconciliation with his father, and a happy ending. Gibreel goes mad; imagines himself as both the Angel Gibreel and the Prophet Muhammad's scribe; rewrites the story of Muhammad, whom he calls by the derogatory medieval name of Mahound; and imagines another prophet, the young girl Ayesha, whom he leads to destruction. Along the way, both have love affairs, fantasies, memories, and adventures that keep the novel whirling like a dervish from one plot to another. As one critic said, *The Satanic Verses* is several of the best novels that Rushdie has written.

Islam prohibits images of Muhammad and holds the words of the Qur'an to be sacred. Early commentators have described an episode of *The Satanic Verses*, in which Muhammad was tempted to accept three local deities in order to win over the people to his new religion of Allah, then renounced the verses that permitted that as dictated by Satan rather than the Angel Gabriel. Modern Islam, however, has rejected this episode as apocryphal and blasphemous. By depicting his prophet as subject to human frailties and giving him an offensive name, by inventing a character who changes the words that the prophet dictates, thereby suggesting that the holy book may not be the sacred word of God, and by inventing an episode in which prostitutes assume the names of the wives of Muhammad in order to improve their business, Rushdie committed unforgivable acts of blasphemy in the eyes of true believers. His explanations that this work was one of fiction, that all the offending pas-

sages were the dreams and delusions of a god-obsessed madman, and that he was not a believer and so could not be a traitor to Islam all fell on deaf ears. The fact that Rushdie had also viciously satirized an exiled imam, who returned in triumph to his country to stop time and tyrannize the people, did not help his case.

Yet the novel deserves to be read as what it was intended to be. It is an exploration of the deepest religious and personal conflicts within its author and many others. It is an attempt to capture the sense of rootlessness and alienation that comes with the displacement and migration. It is, finally, an effort to encompass the extremes of contemporary experience in a form that would allow the freest possible range to its author's talent and imagination.

## SHALIMAR THE CLOWN

**First published:** 2005

**Type of work:** Novel

*Like The Satanic Verses, this novel is a transcontinental tale of worlds in collision. As much a fable for contemporary times as a novel, it also embodies the forces that shape and divide East and West in a gallery of extraordinary characters.*

At the center of *Shalimar the Clown* are Max Ophuls, "one of the architects of the postwar world," a charismatic, larger than life former hero of the French Resistance in World War II, the United States' ambassador to India, head of the American effort to support the mujahadeen during the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan, and world-renowned power broker; Boonyi, the beautiful young Kashmiri dancer he seduces and abandons, who returns to her village in disgrace; Noman Sher Noman (alias Shalimar), Boonyi's childhood sweetheart and husband, who is transformed from a popular entertainer into a terrorist and murderer by their affair; and Max and Boonyi's illegitimate daughter, India, who is raised by Max and his wife and living in Los Angeles when the story begins. The typically rich and eccentric supporting cast includes Olga Volga ("the last surviving descendant of the legendary potato

witches of Astrakhan”), Firdaus Begum Noman (Shalimar’s mother, a snake sorceress), the “Iron Mullah” (a Muslim terrorist leader), Colonel Kachhwaha (leader of the Indian armed forces in Kashmir), a Gujar prophetess, a Filipino terrorist leader, and an Indian film star.

On the second page readers learn that “the ambassador was slaughtered on [India’s] doorstep like a halal chicken dinner, bleeding to death from a deep neck wound caused by a single slash of the assassin’s blade.” Over the

next 394 pages readers learn why, how, and by whom. To answer these questions, Rushdie takes his readers to Kashmir, the novel’s paradise lost, and the idyllic village of Pachigam, where Hindus, Muslims, and Jews have lived for centuries in peace; to the Indian army and Muslim terrorist camps, where the forces that will tear Kashmir and Pachigam

apart are trained, equipped, and ideologically indoctrinated; to World War II France, where the Resistance fights another occupying power through an insurgency of its own; and to polyglot Los Angeles, where race riots erupt in the streets.

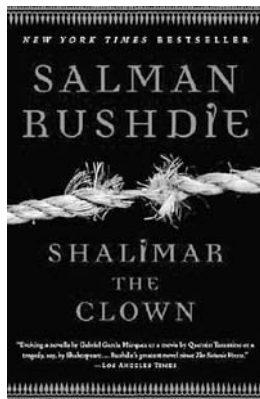
“Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else,” Rushdie has his character, India, think. “Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own,

individual, discrete. This unsettled people. There were collisions and explosions.” There are also murders, rapes, and decapitations; family curses and a flying man; love affairs and betrayals; media frenzies, a televised trial, a “sorcerer’s defense,” and a prison break; puns, pop culture references, and loving descriptions of Kashmiri culture; Magical Realism and vivid attention to the actualities of the distant and near-at-hand; and fiction, history, and fictional history. In other words, the mixture of comedy, seriousness of purpose, and multicultural imagination that are exactly what readers have come to expect from the fiction of Salman Rushdie.

### SUMMARY

“Once upon a time—it was and it was not so, as the old stories used to say, it happened and it never did—maybe, then, or maybe not.” With these words from *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie suggests what connects the ancient storytellers of the East with the contemporary Magical Realists of the West. Drawing on both traditions, he has written novels that consciously blur the dividing lines between fairy tale and novel, myth and fiction. Born at a moment of tremendous change, he has sought to capture and reflect the turmoil and dislocation of his times in his work, only to find himself their victim. His voice and vision are unique, and his novels and essays are important contributions to understanding the conflicts that permeate contemporary culture.

Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr.



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*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 1995  
*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, 1999  
*Fury*, 2001  
*Shalimar the Clown*, 2005  
*The Enchantress of Florence*, 2008

#### SHORT FICTION:

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 "The Firebird's Nest," 1997  
 "Vina Divina," 1999

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Exile involves the loss of "home." How is this loss experienced by some of the characters in Salman Rushdie's later fiction?
- Metamorphosis is also a constant subject, technique, and theme in Rushdie's fiction. Consider its importance in several of his novels.
- Read Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands." How are the ideas it discusses reflected in his work?
- The controversy over *The Satanic Verses* raises fundamental questions about the responsibilities of both writers and readers. What are they?
- What is the role of history and/or politics in Rushdie's novels?
- What techniques does Rushdie use to express what he calls his "stereoscopic vision"?
- Rushdie loves word play, including puns, rhymes, and funny names. Discuss examples of this in his work.
- How does Rushdie balance comedy with the serious, even tragic, elements in his fiction?

# JOHN RUSKIN

**Born:** London, England  
February 8, 1819

**Died:** Coniston, Lancashire, England  
January 20, 1900

*Ruskin was the leading art and social critic of Victorian England. His writing, as well as his political and educational lectures, helped frame the taste of the British public during his lifetime, while his philosophy had an important impact on educational and social reform in the late nineteenth century.*

## BIOGRAPHY

John Ruskin was born in London, England, on February 8, 1819, the only child of John James Ruskin and Margaret Cox. His father was the only son of a bankrupt Edinburgh wine merchant who committed suicide. John James Ruskin had inherited his father's considerable debt and was forced to give up his interests in art and literature to embark upon a commercial career. He obtained a position selling wine for the London firm of George, Murphy & Company, where, through hard work and good fortune, he rose to a position of trust. His prospects brightened even more when he met the son of the Spanish, sherry-producing Domecq family, who were looking for a suitable outlet for selling the family's product in England. Not long thereafter, together with a silent partner, Henry Telford, who provided the capital for the venture, they founded the firm of Ruskin, Telford, and Domecq. The business prospered, and John James Ruskin thus established the fortune that would enable his son to be free from financial worry throughout his life.

Ruskin's mother was her husband's first cousin. Following the early death of her parents, she had been adopted by Ruskin's grandparents and grew up with her future husband in his Edinburgh home. She was a strongly evangelical Christian of intense religious opinions, who dominated her husband and ruled the family with the passionate conviction of her own rightness. Before the birth of her only child, she dedicated him to the service of God and determined to educate him for the ministry.

Following Ruskin's birth, the family moved to

Herne Hill, a suburb south of London, where his parents' extensive gardens, high above the Thames, provided an unobstructed view of the valley from Windsor to Greenwich. His earliest memories evoke the beauty and sense of natural wonder that this vista awakened in his heart.

He led a solitary life as a child, having been educated at home by tutors until his fourteenth year. He also engaged in daily Bible readings and study with his mother from the age of four to fourteen—a practice that had a significant effect upon his poetic and artistic imagination, as well as his literary style, which resonates with biblical cadences, reflecting his intensely emotional and spiritual fervor, as well as his prophetic zeal.

Both of Ruskin's parents were convinced of their son's genius and nurtured it jealously. As a boy, he was allowed few friends outside the family circle of cousins and the children of business associates. His knowledge of the world, however, was broadened by yearly family visits to places of outstanding historical or geographical interest, a practice that intensified Ruskin's lifelong interest in art, architecture, and geology.

In 1832, Telford gave Ruskin an illustrated volume by the Romantic poet Samuel Rogers, *Italy* (1822, 1828), illustrated by J. M. W. Turner, the great artist whose work was to play the primary formative influence in Ruskin's life. That and another illustrated literary work, Samuel Prout's *Facsimiles of Sketches Made in Flanders and Germany* (1833), inspired the Ruskin family to undertake their first continental European tour to observe at first hand some of the monuments described in them.



The family traveled from Dover to Calais and Brussels, up the Rhine to Strasbourg, across the Black Forest to Germany, Switzerland, and the Italian lake district. From there, they returned to Geneva and continued on to England by way of Chamonix, Lyons, and Dijon. Out of this initial family trek arose Ruskin's lifelong admiration for medieval architecture, the romantic vistas of Switzerland, and the French and Italian Alps.

In 1837, Ruskin entered Oxford, matriculating at Christ Church, as a gentleman-commoner, a distinction usually enjoyed only by the sons of the nobility or landed gentry. Although he lived in college, his mother accompanied him to the city, insisting that Ruskin take tea with her every afternoon, as well as dinner on weekends, an event for which his father commuted from Herne Hill. Thus, Ruskin was surrounded by his family at an age when most young men were escaping the parental yoke. Nevertheless, he applied himself assiduously to his studies in his effort to win prizes to do his parents the honor that he believed was their due. Gradually, he became a respected presence at Oxford, and in his fourth year he received the Newdigate Prize in poetry, an honor that resulted in his meeting the poet laureate of England, his boyhood idol, William Wordsworth, who was awarded an honorary degree at the same ceremony.

In 1840, he developed tuberculosis, which caused him to leave Oxford without his degree. He spent the next two years traveling, spending several months in Rome. By 1842, Ruskin had abandoned the idea of entering the ministry and moved with his family to Denmark Hill, a manorial estate outside London, where he wrote the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), the work that established him throughout Europe as a new voice in a new discipline—art history.

Having turned twenty-one, Ruskin began amassing the art collection that foreshadowed the direction of taste and style in Great Britain and elsewhere. That year, he had received Turner's *Winchelsea* as a gift from his father. By 1844, he added the artist's *Slave Ship* to his collection. Meanwhile, his contributions to such periodicals and journals as *The Quarterly Review* continued, and in 1845 he made his first visit to the Continent unaccompanied by his parents. He was then twenty-six years old.

The next year, he published the second volume of *Modern Painters*. In 1848, he married Euphemia Chalmers ("Effie") Gray, the daughter of friends of his parents, whom he had known for several years. Their relationship was not a happy one. The marriage was never consummated and was annulled in 1854. Prior to the annulment of his marriage, Ruskin devoted himself to the study of architecture. He spent the winters of 1849 through 1852 with Effie in Venice gathering material for *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853). During this period, he also published his defense of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in a pamphlet, which succeeded in transforming public opinion about the group's artistic merit. At this time, also, he began his career as arbiter of taste and conscience for the British public, as he turned his studies and his philosophy of art upon the need for educational and social reform. For the next twenty years, his primary concern was the welfare of his country and the means necessary to obtain it.

In 1858, Ruskin's personal life underwent yet another disastrous relationship of the heart when he met the daughter of a wealthy Irish family of French Huguenot descent, Rose La Touche, with whom he fell hopelessly in love. At the time, she was ten years of age and he was thirty-nine. Their relationship was certainly one of the spirit and apparently mutual for all of its seemingly pathological aspects. Ruskin did not reveal the nature of his feelings to Miss La Touche until she was nearly eighteen, when he formally proposed marriage to her. She promised him an answer upon her twenty-first birthday. There followed a break in their relationship, and in the late 1860's, Miss La Touche experienced a long series of physical and mental disorders, which resulted in her death at twenty-six. Meanwhile, Ruskin's career continued in its chosen paths, and in 1870 he was appointed Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. The following year, he purchased Brantwood, a large country estate at Coniston, in the Lake District, where he was to spend the better part of his remaining years.

In 1877, he attacked the American artist James McNeill Whistler in a review of the artist's work. Whistler responded with a libel suit, the results of which amounted to a landmark in modern art history. The artist won his case and was awarded damages of one farthing. Nevertheless, the outcome

resulted in Ruskin's resigning from the Slade professorship at Oxford in 1879, only because he believed that his position impeded him from the ability to express his critical beliefs fully and without fear of public censure or civil action.

The 1880's were marked by intense creative and academic activity on Ruskin's part. In 1883, he was reelected to the Slade professorship at Oxford and delivered a series of lectures, published in one volume as *The Art of England* in 1883-1884. In 1885, he began his last great work, *Praeterita* (1885-1889), his memoirs, an endeavor that occupied the remaining years of his creative life. In 1888, he made his final continental trip, during the course of which he suffered a mental breakdown, from which he never recovered. The last twelve years of his life were spent at Brantwood in total seclusion. He died on January 20, 1900, in the Lake District in Conistone, England, where he is buried.

#### ANALYSIS

Ruskin's principal literary and philosophical focus during his fifty-year-long career centered upon the examination of the moral significance of the function of art and the role of the artist in society. He first expressed that focus at the beginning of his career while at Oxford, when he came most directly under the influence of the artist J. M. W. Turner. Turner's landscape painting at that time remained virtually unknown to the general public and unappreciated by all who were aware of it except for a small circle of admirers and patrons who recognized his genius. Ruskin was among that circle, young as he was, and had already begun collecting Turner drawings following his meeting with the artist during Ruskin's third year at Oxford. When Turner's landscape paintings began to receive hostile commentary because of their impressionistic innovations in such respected London literary journals of the day as the *Literary Gazette* and the *Athenaeum*, such attacks provoked the young Ruskin to set the public right about the true genius of his hero and the true nature and function of art. That he did in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, a work over which he labored for nearly three years before his father, acting on his behalf, submitted it for publication. Appearing under the title *Modern Painters: Their Superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to All the Ancient Masters Proved by Examples of the True, the Beautiful, and the Intellectual, from the Works*

*of Modern Artists, Especially from Those of J. M. W. Turner, Esq. R. A.*, it was published anonymously because both Ruskin and his father feared that exposure of the author's age would detract from the seriousness with which it would be received by the public. Very early in this work, Ruskin reveals his philosophy of art, from which he would never deviate, and which forms the basis of all of his other work and theory. Simply stated, this philosophy avows that a work of art can be judged only according to the values of the artist that are reflected in it.

Ruskin's interest in helping to shape the way in which art and the world of nature would be perceived by his compatriots predated the publication of this seminal work and can be seen, already, in his first serious effort at critical analysis in "The Poetry of Architecture," which appeared in *The Architectural Magazine* in 1837 and 1838 under the pseudonym "According to Nature." There, he expresses his desire to have a positive influence upon the transformation of a materialistic, poorly educated, increasingly industrial, and, therefore, increasingly economically polarized population into a nation that is at once moral and sensible to the beauties of the natural world, as well as the world of individual craftsmanship and personal virtue.

The essay compares the architecture of English and French cottages as they reveal the idiosyncratic nature of the national character of the individuals who inhabit them, with the edge in this comparison definitely falling upon the more meritorious values of the English architects. Finally, the essay examines the ideal that was to become the ultimate goal of Ruskin's lifelong mission: the formation of taste, his parallel commitment to the ideals of Truth and Beauty, as William Wordsworth and John Keats would have interpreted these ideals, an aim that he imparts with evangelical zeal in the preface to volume 1 of *Modern Painters*.

The harmonious connection that Ruskin saw between Virtue, Truth, Beauty, and their expression in great art represents the cornerstone upon which all of his prolific, voluminous examinations of art, history, and literature would rest for the remainder of his life. It is clearly reiterated in one of his public Oxford lectures given during the 1870's, where he once again defines the nexus that exists between the one and the other:

You must have the right moral state first, or you cannot have the art. But when the art is once obtained, its reflected action enhances and completes the moral state out of which it arose, and, above all, communicates the exultation to other minds which are already morally capable of the like.

As Ruskin moved on from the brilliant beginnings of his career as moral arbiter and architect of a nation's taste, his purpose and promise never swerved but increased in recognition until the final decade of his life, when he succumbed to the debilitating pathological depression that prevented him from writing all but the briefest notes to his closest friends and companions. Beginning in the 1860's, he traded the more cloistered audience of the literary and art journals and the private society of a privileged, intellectually attuned, largely academic circle of friends for that of the public lecture platform. There, he transformed a theory of art and culture into a social and political philosophy rooted in the ethical and spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ and coupled with an abiding belief in the ability of human society to be transformed into a paradise of working men and women freed from the tyranny of industrial exploitation and avarice.

During these years, he became a journalist through his workers' newsletter, *Fors Clavigera*, as well as a lecturer and teacher of art in the Workmen's College experiment that transformed British higher education by opening it to laborers and the children of the working class. The thrust of this popularization of his ideals and ideas can be seen flourishing today in ecological and environmental circles throughout the world.

## MODERN PAINTERS

**First published:** 1843-1860

**Type of work:** Art history and criticism

*The greatness of a work of art is measured by its careful observation of the moral and spiritual superiority of the natural or real world over the mechanical.*

*Modern Painters* is the work that gained for Ruskin the recognition of the English world of let-

ters and creativity. Published in 1843, when Ruskin was twenty-four, it represents the young Oxford graduate's defense of his spiritual and intellectual mentor, J. M. W. Turner, the great English Romantic landscape painter, against the adversarial criticisms of the British intellectual press. Although Turner was an associate of the Royal Academy of Art, he was principally noted for his illustrations of such famous British authors as Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott. The work goes far beyond Ruskin's expressed aim, however, as it expresses in its earliest and most seminal form the author's philosophy of art and his most profound spiritual and moral philosophies of life. This philosophy is, perhaps, best expressed in his perception that the appreciation and ability to transform such appreciation into full-blown artistic fruition depends upon a physical sensibility that can aesthetically and truthfully evaluate the physical attributes of beauty and truth and transform them, honestly, upon canvas into a higher expression of the spiritual significance of the natural.

Of all the ideas that art seeks to communicate, Ruskin states—ideas of imitation, of relation, of power, of beauty, and of truth—ideas of truth are of the highest value. Truth, however, is not necessarily easily perceived or, indeed, necessarily perceived at first glance. Thus, when a painting appears to deviate from the representational, it does not necessarily deviate from the truth. Similarly, in art, all truths do not necessarily have the same importance. Thus, for the great artist, only rare and particular truths are worth transmitting. This transmission, moreover, must be accompanied by a true love of subject; otherwise, the artist will in no way surpass the product of a superior photographer. Truth transcends mere representation.

Ruskin then goes on to demonstrate with painstaking detail that with regard to truth of comprehension and passion of execution of all modern painters, Turner is without peer. Indeed, Ruskin states with passionate conviction, "In every new insight which we obtain into the works of God, in every new idea which we receive from his creation, we shall find ourselves possessed of an interpretation and a guide to something in Turner's work which we had not understood before."

The second volume of *Modern Painters* focuses upon the definition and interpretation of the physical, spiritual, and intellectual aspects and impact

of the Beautiful. Stylistically, it is the most Romantic in intensity and outlook of all Ruskin's writing. For him, art represents the summary of all human endeavor—the apex of all that is humanly achievable. As he sees it, poets and mystics have always expressed the inseparable emotions of gratitude and wonder that come from a heightened perception of the natural world—and it is these emotions, in one form or another, that true art always seeks to express. Thus, he sees the deliberate pursuit and contemplation of beauty as humanity's noblest gift, employing the highest faculties and spiritual, as well as moral, endowments of which humanity is capable.

Ruskin then goes on to distinguish between the theoretical faculty employed in the contemplation of the Beautiful and the aesthetic faculty, which he interprets as that which merely perceives and interprets the natural world by means of the senses. The latter, when working alone, is entirely objective. When combined with the theoretical faculty, however, and including the wholly positive and wholly human qualities of joy, admiration, love, and gratitude, it welds to form the necessary genius and desire to inspire and create art.

To achieve the theoretical state whereby one can appreciate the natural world and interpret it through the creation of inspired works of art demands, Ruskin submits, discipline, earnestness, love, and selflessness. In this happy combination arises the creation of true and lasting taste. Such a state, however, he elaborates,

cannot be cramped in its conclusions by partialities and hypocrisies: its visions and its delights are too penetrating, too living, for any whitewashed object or shallow fountain long to endure or supply. It clasps all that it loves so hard, that it crushes it if it be hollow.

This precept is followed by an analysis of the multiple aspects of Beauty and Ruskin's proposition that great art is concerned with either the direct representation or the imaginative metamorphosis of Truth, while bad art is neither truly imaginative nor even accurate in its representation of Nature. He goes on to spell out the intellectual and spiritual attributes necessary for identifying Truth and for distinguishing what is true from what is false. True taste, he submits, pierces to the Truth

and finds Beauty everywhere. Beauty, he posits, can be “felt and found in every human heart and countenance,—to be loved in every roadside weed and moss-grown wall.”

Volumes 3, 4, and 5 of *Modern Painters* were published between 1854 and 1860 and continue Ruskin's literary and critical monument to Turner's eminence, even as they identify the criteria—the philosophical and intellectual foundations—for Ruskin's aesthetic theory.

In volume 3, he defines the laws that govern painting. To be skilled in the evaluation of a work of art requires the kind of study and discipline necessary to embark upon the theory and practice of science. A responsible critic must be familiar with the history and sociological periods of the era of the artist whose work he or she judges. Critics must, as well, be familiar with the religious and spiritual attributes of the age in question, careful, scientific observers of Nature, and conversant with such sciences as optics, physics, botany, geology, geometry, and anatomy. What this volume gives Ruskin the opportunity of doing is to display the remarkable qualifications that he himself possesses with respect to such criteria. Ruskin at the same time reveals his own great literary skills, which approach in their fervor the kind of Romantic zeal and love of nature that one encounters in the poetry of Wordsworth and Keats. This passion he sustains throughout the ensuing works, where his attention falls upon the assessment of those other painters who fall short of, or approach, his beloved Turner in their greatness.

## THE STONES OF VENICE

**First published:** 1851-1853

**Type of work:** Architectural criticism

*The apogee of human artistry occurs in medieval Venice in its execution of the Venetian Gothic, which perfectly expresses the philosophy, purpose, and ethos of humanity working in a state of inspired and communal excellence.*

*The Stones of Venice* ranks with *Modern Painters* as Ruskin's most important work. Of all of his extensive literary output, it was the most influential in his own time and upon the generation of artists imme-

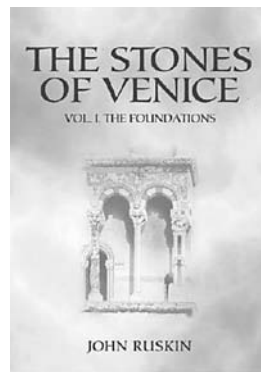


diately following his own. It was, however, in no way the most popular of his works. Its primary influence can be observed in Victorian architecture, where it led to the introduction and popularization of the Venetian Gothic in domestic building. In the realm of ideas, it inspired William Morris's visionary social and economic theories of art and artisanship and had a direct impact upon the development of the Arts and Crafts movement and the historic preservation and wilderness movements in the United States.

This impact was one with which Ruskin himself was not particularly happy, as he saw the misinterpretation of his ideals leading to a proliferation of middle-class villas and public houses throughout the British Isles. Nevertheless, for the author, at any rate, Venetian Gothic represents the architectural ideal—satisfying all the necessary elements that he believed constitute the creation of art. His examination of architecture's constituent elements in *The Stones of Venice*, both as a practical work and as a philosophical treatise on the spirit and the strength of the past, is without peer in the literature of Great Britain in the age of Queen Victoria.

For Ruskin, Venetian Gothic represents the architectural ideal because it was practical, outwardly pleasing, and harmonious and expressed nobly the emotions of its builders and the historical impact of their race. It is honestly constructed and embellished with all the grace and vitality of painting and sculpture in the most economical manner possible.

Ruskin contrasts the ideal manifestations of the Gothic with what he delineates as the decadence of the classic and Renaissance schools of architecture, which he saw as devoid of this vitality and spirit. The Renaissance is imitative and artificial in its architectural contrivances. The Gothic is natural and spontaneous in its honesty and ingenuity. It represents, as well, the product of a community of workers and artisans united in a common goal of adorning their city with grace, fellowship, and, most important, human emotions—joy.



Ruskin then goes on to analyze the significance of this conscious participation in a fellowship of spirit and production and to compare it with the building of a society or development of culture in which these elements are missing. Spontaneity of expression and execution, he submits, is essential for the production of a noble architecture. In contemporary building, this element is particularly missing, or, where not entirely missing, has been reduced to the level of a mechanical and sterile manufacture. Rather than ennobling the workers engaged in such production, their labor renders them more robotic and enslaved than the most servile vassal of the Middle Ages. Such reduction of spirit in modern times, Ruskin suggests, is the germinating force behind the revolutions against wealth and nobility that were then sweeping Europe.

The remainder of volume 1 of *The Stones of Venice* elucidates Ruskin's fundamental philosophy of art and of human existence. This philosophy, simply stated, hinges upon the importance for control of the means of production from start to finish by the team that is in control of the entire work, in contrast to the growing modern practice of the intensive division of labor. The latter separates both individual and team member from even the consciousness of that on which he or she is working, "so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail."

He goes on to belittle the modern ideal of mechanical perfection or sameness, which had its beginnings in classical Greece and emerged once again in the Renaissance with its slavish devotion to the classical past. In contrast, he praises the beauties inherent in human imperfection. It is the absence of this sameness in Gothic architecture that renders it wholly satisfying and ingenious. This delight in the richness of Gothic architecture leads Ruskin finally to his highest encomium of the inspired craftsmanship and joy in invention and design for its own sake that is inherent in his concept of the artist and his or her function in society. Human artistry reached its zenith in the Middle Ages, Ruskin proposes, in its creation of Gothic architecture, which in its childishness and naïveté contains all that is joyful and joyous in the human experience.

Volumes 2 and 3 of *The Stones of Venice* con-



tinue the author's examination of every architectural nook and cranny of the Venetian republic, and the three volumes together created a stir that caused a profoundly negative reaction from the assailed architectural profession of the day. On the other hand, this work, more than any other, served to inspire the younger artists of his day, most notably William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. With a missionary fervor, Ruskin's principles were adapted throughout the British Isles and the United States. They became the vehicle whereby the values of pride in workmanship and community joint craftsmanship, threatened by the onslaught of industry in its exploitation and mechanization of individual merit and its corresponding debasement of human endeavor, truth, and beauty were conveyed to present-day society.

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## SUMMARY

John Ruskin's literary contributions go far beyond that of most of his very eminent Victorian contemporaries, such as John Henry Newman and T. H. Huxley. Stylistically brilliant, a teacher and philosopher by birth, he translated his love of Truth and Beauty and his strong Christian principles into a social theory that attempted to go the extra step necessary to achieve the Kingdom of God for all classes of society on earth. His art criticism, his political and social commentary, and his public lectures all contributed to the dissemination of that theory, which now, more than ever, continues to ring true.

Barbara Miliaras

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Defend or attack John Ruskin's assertion that "you must have the right moral state first, or you cannot have the art."
- According to Ruskin, what is the relationship between poetry and visual art?
- Discuss the influence of *The Stones of Venice* on William Morris.
- Compare the philosophies of art of Ruskin and Walter Pater.
- Has Ruskin had any serious influence on artists or architects in the last several decades?
- Ruskin is considered one of the great Victorian prose writers. Determine some of the characteristics of his style.

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## NELLY SACHS

**Born:** Berlin, Germany  
December 10, 1891

**Died:** Stockholm, Sweden  
May 12, 1970

*Primarily a lyric poet, Sachs wrote in reaction to the Holocaust and evolved a transcendent vision that humanity is an integral part of a continuous, self-renewing cosmos.*

### BIOGRAPHY

In almost eighty years, Nelly Sachs (saks) moved from affluence to poverty, from her native Germany to exile in Sweden, and from obscurity to fame. On her seventy-fifth birthday, in 1966, frail but radiant, she received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The only child of Jewish businessman Georg William Sachs and his young wife, Margarete (née Karger) Sachs, Nelly grew up surrounded by loving adults: her parents, maternal grandmother, and great-grandmother. They lived in richly furnished apartments, with gardens large enough for Nelly to have a roe deer, goats, and dogs as pets. In the evenings, her father played the piano and she danced to the music.

Sachs's emotional suffering first manifested itself when she was seventeen. A brief romantic involvement with a man she never named precipitated anorexia that required her to be hospitalized for more than two years. Her attending psychiatrist, Dr. Richard Cassirer, restored her to health by encouraging her creative writing.

Sachs then returned to the shelter of her parents' home. She began corresponding with the 1909 Nobel laureate, Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf. In 1921, Sachs's first book was published, *Legenden und Erzählungen* (legends and stories). It was a rare

attempt at prose and shows clearly the influence of other authors. Sachs had not yet found her poetic voice.

Sachs's father died of cancer in 1930. Around this time, her interest in German Romanticism led her to Professor Max Herrmann and to new friends in his circle. These contacts were to save her life. Two friends from this circle, Gudrun Harlan and Vera Lachman, were instrumental in the Sachs's escape from Germany.

Like many assimilated Jews, Sachs and her mother reacted to initial reports of Nazi persecution with disbelief. Only after the pogrom in November, 1938, did Nelly write to Lagerlöf to ask for help. Gudrun Harlan, who was not Jewish, traveled to Sweden and obtained a one-sentence request from the ailing Lagerlöf that Nelly Sachs be allowed to come to Sweden. Since Sweden was permitting entry only for purposes of transit, Vera Lachman, who had escaped to the United States, obtained affidavits for the Sachs's. In mid-May, 1940, Sachs received an order to report to a German work camp. At the same time, the Swedish embassy finally had all the necessary papers for her. On the advice of a Gestapo officer, she tore up the German order, exchanged train tickets for plane tickets, and escaped with her mother on one of the last passenger flights out of Berlin.

Before leaving Germany, Sachs apparently again encountered the man with whom she had fallen in love as a seventeen-year-old. She states only that he was not Jewish, was a resistance fighter, and was martyred by the Nazis. Traumatized by his death and the horror of concentration camps,

Sachs again began to write, and in her fifties, in exile, became the voice of all who suffered in Germany. Disregarding her earlier, epigonic work, she considered herself at the beginning of her literary career. Her first volumes of poetry appeared soon after the war, *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (1946; in the habitations of death) and *Sternverdunkelung* (1949; eclipse of stars).

In 1950, Sachs's mother died on her father's birthday, and Nelly suffered a nervous breakdown. In 1951, she published her first drama, *Eli: Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels* (*Eli: A Mystery Play of the Sufferings of Israel*, 1967). *Eli* was her only dramatic work that was successful on stage. Later efforts in the genre combined many art forms and resisted production.

Sachs reached the peak of her poetic career in the 1950's with *Und niemand weiss weiter* (1957; and no one knows how to go on) and *Flucht und Verwandlung* (1959; flight and metamorphosis). She attracted the attention of other German writers and was lauded by perceptive critics. She received many prizes for literature, and some of her work was set to music. Unfortunately, it was composer Moses Pergament's 1959 operatic version of *Eli* that caused Sachs a severe nervous breakdown. She felt her work had been misunderstood, and she spent 1960 to 1963 in a psychiatric hospital. *Fahrt ins Staublose* (1961; journey into a dustless realm) includes the collection *Noch feiert Tod das Leben* (1961; death still celebrates life), which draws specifically on her hospital experience.

Sachs's last poetry, *Glühende Rätsel* (1964-1966; glowing enigmas) and the cycle *Die Suchende* (1966; the seekers), lacks the flow and continuity of the earlier poetry. Sachs was plagued by ill health in her declining years. She had a heart attack in 1967, another nervous breakdown in 1968, and a major operation for cancer in 1969. After dying in 1970, she was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Stockholm, behind her mother's grave and her father's urn, which she had arranged to be brought from Germany.

## ANALYSIS

It was Nelly Sachs's good fortune that in 1944 several of her poems were sent for assessment to Walter A. Berendsohn, who became a tireless champion of her work. On Berendsohn's recommendation, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, editor in

chief of Suhrkamp, the prominent German publishing house, in 1961 undertook the publication of Sachs's entire work with ten thousand copies of each volume. This edition in turn paved the way for Berendsohn's successful recommendation of Sachs for the Nobel Prize in 1966. Of pivotal importance in that recommendation was his praise for *Eli*, the short play that Sachs wrote during the winter of 1943-1944.

The point of departure for the events of the play is not shown on stage but is narrated. *Eli*, a Jewish boy, is playing his pipe when he is struck down by a soldier and killed. The action of the play consists of the search for *Eli*'s murderer, who crumbles when confronted with the facts. Berendsohn interpreted *Eli* as a monumental work because of Sachs's trifold treatment of the fate of Israel. She shows individual suffering during the Third Reich, new beginnings in the form of repairs and children playing, and most important, the collective consciousness of the people. This consciousness reached its external manifestation in the state of Israel, founded in 1948. Berendsohn's analysis is so persuasive that the play itself comes almost as a letdown in comparison. Most critics see Sachs's strength in her poetry, a judgment reflected in the selection of her works for English translation in the two large volumes *Of the Chimneys* (1967) and *The Seeker, and Other Poems* (1970).

Like much twentieth century poetry, Sachs's poetry is without rhyme or regular meter. Stanza length varies, following the dictates of content. One easily recognizable rhetorical device in Sachs's poetry is her repetition of words, phrases, or whole sentences. Her poems are rhythmically alive and demonstrate a rare mastery of language. The German poet Hilda Domin ranks Sachs's poems among the best in the German language. An assessment by author Stefan Zweig in the 1930's is also applicable to Sachs's entire oeuvre. Zweig was sent two of her poems by a friend, and he replied that her poetry showed an "ecstatically rising line." That is an astounding description for a poet who was to find her main theme in the Holocaust, in excesses of human cruelty and depravity, and in the attempted extermination of her people.

One has only to read a little of Sachs's work, though, to discover that she did not consider death in this world to be an absolute end. When reduced to dust, or ashes, people return to the elemental re-

serve from which life will spring again. Furthermore, Sachs, in her work, demonstrates the belief that there is continual recombination of the same elements. The race sprang from Abraham and will continue until the end of time. All the Nazis accomplished by drastically accelerating the deaths of six million Jews was a slight alteration in a phase of the twentieth century, a ripple in the sand of renewal. In death, Sachs argues in her work, life begins.

Sachs's transcendent view of life is not derived from any specific religious doctrine, either Jewish or Christian, but is an eclectic combination of ideas from diverse sources that were meaningful to her. Every mystic finds his or her own way to God. Sachs read widely, but not systematically. She was versed in some books of the Bible and not in others. The German mystics Meister Eckehart and Jakob Böhme exerted a strong influence on Sachs. So too did Kabbalism, the esoteric medieval symbol system based on Hebrew scriptures. For example, some of Sachs's most powerful imagery, that of sand, fin, and wing, may be traced to the concept in Jewish mysticism of the soul in exile rising through increasingly higher forms of existence. Recurrent images or motifs in Sachs's work deserve close analysis.

Each of Sachs's images appears in various forms and means different things in different contexts. The cumulative effect, as the composite picture gets increasingly complex, is that a word suffices to conjure up a wealth of associations, and the reader who is familiar with Sachs's entire work will find individual poems accessible in a way that, on their own, they are not. Her entire body of work is self-referential, giving credence to the frequently reiterated critical opinion that Sachs wrote only one poem, with many component parts.

Sand, ashes, and particles of smoke have the same functional significance. They are perhaps Sachs's most startling images because in these, the most inanimate objects, she sees the wellspring of rebirth. It is smoke rising from concentration camp crematoriums, it is the sand of Sinai containing the continuing history of the Jews, it is the sand of the hourglass, and it is desert sand from which oases spring.

Fish imagery in Sachs's poetry is associated almost exclusively with the suffering of living creatures, suffering inflicted by humanity. In some poems, Sachs identifies with the fish and employs

vivid images of its torn and bleeding gills, empathizing with it in its dying moments. At the same time, there is a sense of the inevitability of its fate, of overwhelming sorrow that this must be so, and recognition that the fish is a symbol for Christ.

Butterflies are Sachs's favorite image for the precious, fragile, ephemeral aspects of human nature. They are innocent children, the future in which Sachs placed her hope. Their delicacy and vulnerability is also a reflection of her own delicacy and vulnerability. A sensitive woman, alone, in exile, she often felt crushed by the brutal forces of the world.

Sachs's poetry was written at night, a time when she found release from preoccupying thoughts. Her poetry may be grouped by three periods. The first, that of the 1940's, deals directly with the Holocaust. The second, that of the 1950's, is more personal. The third, that of the 1960's, approaches the great enigmas of life to which there are no answers. One representative poem from each period is discussed below.

### "WHEN IN EARLY SUMMER"

**First published:** "Wenn im Vorsommer,"  
1949 (collected in *The Seeker, and Other Poems*, 1970)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet expresses anguish at the dichotomy of large-scale human aberration and gentle pastoral scenes existing simultaneously.*

"When in Early Summer" was first published in *Sternverdunkelung*. It is available in English in the book *The Seeker, and Other Poems*. Sachs wanted to omit the poem from the 1961 edition of her collected poetry but was persuaded by the editor, Enzensberger, to include it. The poem contains some of her most vivid images and is one of Sachs's best-known works in Germany.

The sixteen-line poem has five stanzas. Of these, the first three form a progression and the last two commentary. The first stanza, with five lines, describes a night in early summer when nature seems especially alive and humans seem especially attuned to its reassuring messages. All is as it should be, calm and beautiful. "The moon sends out se-



cret signs," the "scent of heaven" streams from the lilies, and, as the crickets sing, one can hear the "earth turning and the language of spirits set free."

It being night, the poet's thoughts move easily from the outer world to the inner world. In the two lines of the second stanza, in dreams, she moves into the mystical state and envisions things beyond the realm of the ordinary. The first image is one of entry into a higher form of being: "fish fly in the air." This is consistent with the ecstatic experience of the summer night. The second image contains a downward motion, "a forest takes firm root in the floor of the room," and indicates that in mystical experience transcendence is always shadowed by determinism.

In the central stanza, the poet moves from one extreme to the other. "In the midst of enchantment a voice speaks clearly and amazed." Twice the voice addresses the world, asking how the world can go on playing its games when "little children were thrown like butterflies,/ wings beating into the flames." The poem has moved from the mundane world, through the sweetness of mystical vision, to a vision of an unfit world.

How can the Holocaust not be punished by God? In the Old Testament, aberrations before the Lord brought some terrible retribution in the natural world. Amazingly, the worst thing done to the Jewish race since biblical times takes place in the twentieth century and divine retribution fails to materialize. "Earth has not been thrown like a rotten apple into the terror-roused abyss." The closing stanza reiterates the poet's surprise: "Sun and moon have gone on walking—/ two cross-eyed witnesses who have seen nothing."

## "END"

**First published:** "Ende," 1959 (collected in *The Seeker, and Other Poems*, 1970)

**Type of work:** Poem

*An intensely personal poem, "End" was written at a time when Sachs's regrets outweighed her expectations.*

"End" is from the collection *Flucht und Verwandlung*. It is available in English in the collection *The Seeker, and Other Poems*. It was written when Sachs

was in her late sixties, in delicate health, and living alone in exile. The end she is referring to is death. The word "end" is not only the title of the poem but also the only word in the first line. Typographically, it has no continuation. The poet is solemnly examining the fact that soon she too will have no continuation. Her anxiety about this is reflected in a number of qualifying statements. The second line attempts to soften the absoluteness of the first by asserting that the end is "only in one room." The thought is left hanging, since the one room is the only room she has.

The remainder of the first stanza deals with a painful fact of the poet's past. Speaking to a second person, she is overwhelmed by a sense of loss. The end has already come in the room, but "it is not your face/ which looks over my shoulder/ but . . . / a mask from beyond." Someone who was once or could have been a significant person in her life is dead. There seem to be two likely candidates for the person she is addressing: Sachs's mother, who died in 1950, or the man Sachs fell in love with when she was seventeen, who was killed in 1940.

The second stanza makes clear that the reference is to the passionate love of Sachs's life, the man she did not marry. Repeatedly in her life Sachs backed away from intimacy. She was able to relate to people only at a distance, not because she was unfeeling but because of her need to protect herself from intense feelings. Thus it is that she remains attracted to or is perhaps even more attracted to the man after his death, when there is no danger of carnal desire. The poet hears a "summons/ encircled by halo made only of blessing/ and not too close/ to flammable reality."

When the summons sounds again, though, at the beginning of the third and final stanza, the butterfly who got dangerously close to the flames in this life faces the fact that the next metamorphosis is death. The opportunity that was not grasped in this life will not present itself again. All that is left is memory, a regressive process, a "creeping/ back into the chrysalis," and then the ultimate dissolu-



tion. Tragically, the only union she will consummate is with death. She sees herself “being finely sieved/ a bride/ into the thirsting sand.”

### “ONCE”

**First published:** “Einmal,” 1966 (collected in *The Seeker, and Other Poems*, 1970)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Musing on the interconnectedness of all life-forms, the poet ponders the balance of predestination and personal responsibility in her own life.*

“Once” is a fifteen-line poem that is part of *Glühende Rätsel*. Published when Sachs was seventy-five years old, it is a mature reflection on the course of her life, and it is written with conscious irony and humility. The wistful opening is reminiscent of the beginning of a fairy tale. It recalls a time in the poet’s life when options were still open. Her fairy tale, however, does not end happily, and she takes personal responsibility for the outcome: “I founded/ the future upon the stone of sadness.” Contrary to what is expected of a princess in a fairy tale, the poet did not get married and live happily ever after.

The prince was there, and she recognized that they were destined for each other. The second stanza speaks of “prenatal reunion.” In other words, the union between the two of them was something that was fundamentally not of this world but foreordained on a level to which there is no access. The union was “made of ocean,” and, sadly, it “ran its course.” The opportunity arose, was not seized, and was lost.

In the third stanza, Sachs seeks meaning for suffering. “Perhaps near the equator a fish/ on the line paid off a human debt.” The implication is that balance is being maintained in the world and that

one’s position in time and place, while beyond one’s control, is not random.

Proceeding from the supposition of interrelated events and fates, the poet applies the concept to the circumstances of her own life, and is ruthless in her self-examination. The line “and then my Thou” signals the change in focus from the general to the specific. As the grammatical subject, “Thou” corresponds to the fish in the previous statement, but whereas the fish paid off a human debt, the function of the Thou remains unstated. So many clauses are introduced to define the Thou that they themselves take on narrative quality, and the poem ends without Sachs having come to the verb. The structure of the poem reflects the nature of the content. There is much conjecture but no definitive statement about the “Thou.” It remains an enigma.

The poet did not spend her life with the man, but she cannot free herself from the idea that she is somehow to blame for what happened to him and to herself. He was kept a prisoner “whom to release I was chosen/ and whom in enigmas I lost once more.” The questions continue beyond his death. Like many of Sachs’s poems, this one ends in a dash. She leaves the reader with a tantalizing glimpse of cosmic connectedness.

### SUMMARY

Nelly Sachs shared the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature with another Jewish author, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, and is often studied in conjunction with other twentieth century German Jewish authors. Although Sachs was a member of a persecuted race and wrote about the Holocaust, her work contains no hatred or desire for revenge. She expresses her feeling of tremendous loss in terms of concern for the effects that such extreme disregard for life may have on the balance of the world. Sachs’s work is not depressing, but it conveys a transcendent vision.

Jean M. Snook

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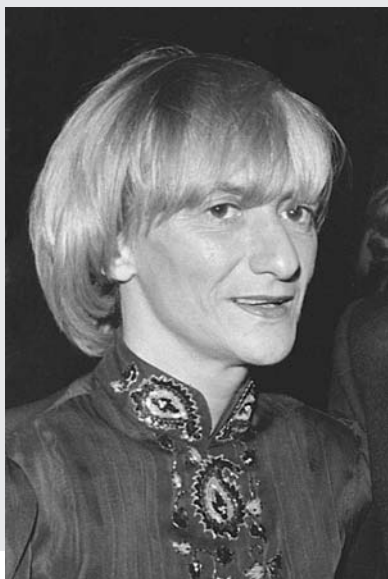
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine the influence of German mystics on the poetry of Nelly Sachs.
- What was the nature of Selma Lagerlöf's assistance to Sachs?
- Comment on the appropriateness of ashes as metaphors in Sachs's poems.
- Among Jewish authors, is Sachs's interpretation of the Holocaust an extremely uncommon one?
- Consider the relationship between love and intimacy in Sachs's lyrics.
- In what ways do the forms of Sachs's poems emphasize their themes?



AP/Wide World Photos

## FRANÇOISE SAGAN

**Born:** Carjac, France

June 21, 1935

**Died:** Honfleur, France

September 24, 2004

*Sagan's first novel, *Bonjour Tristesse*, is also her most famous, published when she was only nineteen. It came to symbolize the new, increasingly privileged generation that arose out of the gloom of the post-World War II period: defiant, intent on enjoying the growing material prosperity of Europe, but marked as well by cynicism and worldliness. She explored these themes throughout her career, during which she wrote many popular novels, plays, screenplays, essays, and other works.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Françoise Sagan (sah-GAHN), the pseudonym of Françoise Quoirez, was born in a wealthy family in southwestern France. Her parents were able to shelter her from many of the hardships suffered by French people during World War II. Though comfortable, her childhood and adolescence were by all accounts marked by strict middle-class conformity. It was in part to escape from this stifling atmosphere that she attempted to become a writer. She sent the manuscript of her first novel, *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954; English translation, 1955), to the publishing house Julliard, which to her surprise (and possibly to the dismay of her parents) decided to publish it.

When it appeared in 1954, Sagan was only nineteen. It immediately became a scandalous best seller, winning a literary prize and gaining the attention of the literary world. Sagan—whose pen name was borrowed from a character in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927; *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1922-1931, 1981), the *princesse de Sagan*—became a celebrity, better known for her lifestyle consisting of glamorous parties, complicated sexual relationships, fast cars, alcohol, and drug abuse, than for her literary accomplishments. This dual fame as a writer and as a media celebrity continued throughout her life.

Sagan paid a high price for her attraction to the kind of behavior that tabloid newspapers love to document. She suffered a near-fatal accident in her Aston Martin in 1957, and yet she continued to drive recklessly. Always a heavy drinker, she became addicted to painkillers as a result of her accident, a harrowing experience she recounts in the autobiographical narrative *Toxique* (1964; English translation, 1964). She gambled frequently, mostly in exclusive casinos. She was arrested several times in the 1990's for cocaine possession. Her addiction to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs contributed to lifelong health problems and caused a famous incident when she suffered a serious respiratory crisis while accompanying friend French president François Mitterrand on a trip to South America in 1985. Despite a large income from her books, screenplays, and other royalties, she always lived beyond her means, and in the last years of her life her constant financial struggles became more acute. She was convicted on a number of counts of tax evasion during this time, as well as on one count of influence peddling, when she accepted money from the French oil company, Elf, to intercede in its favor with President Mitterrand.

Despite her close friendship with Mitterrand during the years of his presidency (1981-1995) and until his death in 1996, Sagan was not known for strong political commitments. In 1971, however,

she participated in the Manifesto of the 343, a document signed by women, many of them well known in French society, who claimed to have undergone abortions; by so doing, they placed themselves in danger of immediate arrest and imprisonment. This very effective protest drew national attention to the issue and was one of the factors leading to the legalization of abortion in France. Often accused of being an intellectual lightweight, in 1980 Sagan visited philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre during the last days of his life, after she published an open letter in which she declared her admiration for him and his determining influence on her career.

Sagan was briefly married twice, first to a French publisher, Guy Schoeller, and then to an American, Robert Westhoff, with whom she had a son, Denis, in 1963. The manner in which her own life mirrored the lives of her fictional characters—or, perhaps more accurately, how her characters' lives were inspired by her own—is one of the defining characteristics of her work.

Despite her dramatic, often chaotic life, Sagan was a prolific writer. In addition to numerous novels, she wrote plays and screenplays and even wrote and directed a feature film, *Les Fougères bleues* (1977; the blue ferns). She cowrote the screenplay of a well-known film by French director Claude Chabrol, *Landru* (1963), and her own works were frequently adapted to the screen. *Bonjour Tristesse*, for example, was made into a film by American director Otto Preminger in 1958. She published a biography of the belle époque actress Sarah Bernhardt, *Sarah Bernhardt: Le Rire incassable*, (1987; *Dear Sarah Bernhardt*, 1988), and also wrote several autobiographical works, including *Avec mon meilleur souvenir* (1984; *With Fondest Regards*, 1985) and *Et toute ma sympathie* (1993; and with all my sympathy). She also produced a book of essays about her own work, *Derrière l'épaule . . .* (behind the shoulder), that appeared in 1998, and which proves that she took the craft of writing more seriously than many people assumed, especially those who knew her primarily from her scandalous public life.

As a rich and troubled celebrity, she was often misrepresented and caricatured in the media. Today, her depth and complexity as a person and as a writer are beginning to receive more attention than they did during her life.

## ANALYSIS

Like her first novel, *Bonjour Tristesse*, many of Sagan's works feature men and women of the leisure class who display a casual attitude toward love, money, and worldly pleasures, while revealing their narcissism and spiritual bankruptcy. One of her better-known novels is *Aimez-vous Brahms?* (1959; English translation, 1960), in which a character named Paula is unfaithful to her longtime lover when she becomes infatuated with a much younger man. In *La Chamade* (1965; English translation, 1966), Lucie lives a life of luxury with Charles, a wealthy bohemian type who supports her; she then falls in love with Antoine, a man whose modest circumstances and real-world concerns symbolize the reality from which she has always been sheltered.

It is significant that in her first novel and other works, the characters who live a life artificially surrounded by money, material possessions, and casual relationships (sexual and otherwise), frequently pay a price for their narcissism. Sagan's works function, therefore, as social commentary, often with a strong satirical and even at times tragic dimension. The effect of her social commentary is, however, mitigated and complicated by the fact that there is rarely any long-term consequence for the selfish, scandalous behavior she portrays. The world of her characters is influenced by existentialism, and Sagan claimed existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as an important influence. In this worldview, people are to be judged by their actions, not their thoughts or beliefs; furthermore, there is no God, and therefore no eternal consequence for people's actions. Human beings exist in the world and are constantly challenged to find a reason to live besides the mere pursuit of physical gratification.

Sagan was always aware of the dangers associated with wealth and glamour, and she addressed those dangers prophetically in her first novel. The manner in which the frivolous, pleasure-seeking world of her characters leads them inevitably toward tragedy and emptiness is a remarkably clear-sighted commentary on the mechanism of popular culture. Since many of her novels became best sellers, especially *Bonjour Tristesse*, they are both examples of and reflections on popular culture in the twentieth century.



## BONJOUR TRISTESSE

**First published:** 1954 (English translation, 1955)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A teenage girl, Cécile, is vacationing in the south of France with her father and his lover, when an old family friend arrives unexpectedly and disrupts the harmony of the household by falling in love with Cécile's father.*

*Bonjour Tristesse* is Françoise Sagan's most famous work, in part because she was only nineteen when it was published and in part because it represented an entirely new sensibility in French fiction. The title, which translates as "hello sadness," is taken from a poem by the French surrealist writer Paul Éluard; Sagan opens the novel with this poem, and it sets a melancholy tone.

The narrator, Cécile, is an intelligent but fairly lazy seventeen-year-old, who sometimes seems to speak in the voice of a much older and more sophisticated person and at other times seems immature for her age. She has recently failed her school exams (part of the French *baccalauréat*, the advanced secondary school diploma that in the 1950's still served as an important sign of social status), and she will have to take them again at the end of the summer. She clearly worships her father, Raymond, a youthful, vain, and charming playboy, who has brought his lover, Elsa, with them on their vacation. Cécile finds Elsa to be frivolous, stupid, and unworthy of Raymond. She is far more impressed by Anne, an old family friend whose unexpected arrival at the summer house soon after the start of the novel sets the plot into motion.

Anne is an accomplished, professional woman, who works in the fashion industry. When Cécile's mother died fifteen years earlier, her father entrusted her to Anne, who was one of her mother's closest friends. As a result, Anne had an enormous impact on Cécile's childhood, nurturing her talent for cultural sophistication and understated elegance. Anne, who is older and darker than Elsa, presents a physical contrast, as well as an intellectual and spiritual contrast, to Elsa. Anne challenges Cécile to better herself, to study for her exams instead of spending all day at the beach, and to take

everything in life more seriously than her father does. Cécile never misses an opportunity to play the disrespectful, adolescent rebel in the older woman's presence. It becomes apparent, however, that her provocations are really a symptom, both of her admiration for Anne's aloof superiority and of her growing jealousy.

When it becomes evident that Raymond is falling in love with Anne, the ugly side of Cécile's character reveals itself. One of the complexities of the novel is that the reader never knows whether Cécile is simply jealous of Anne, or whether she is angry at Raymond for having betrayed their philosophy of uncommitted pleasure-seeking by falling in love. During the time that Anne and Raymond grow closer, Cécile begins a relationship with Cyril, a twenty-six-year-old law student whom she met on the

beach and who falls in love with her. Although he is substantially older and seduces her rather forcefully into losing her virginity, there is the strong sense that she is superior to him in many respects: She is more intelligent, a better strategist, and less sentimental. Most important, she is able to avoid falling in love, which she views as a serious weakness, whether for herself or for others.



The narrator's dilemma is acutely defined by the two older women in the novel: Elsa, the unthinking sybarite whose life is given meaning by sports cars and nightclubs, and Anne, her dark, serious, and contemplative counterpart, whose very presence seems to call into judgment the lives of the other characters. When Anne and Raymond decide to get married one evening, after having abandoned Elsa and Cécile in a nightclub so they could spend the night together, Anne begins to feel as if she has the right to act the role of mother to Cécile. In particular, she forbids her from ever seeing Cyril again and tells her to concentrate on preparing for her exams.

Furious at this invasion of her freedom and intent on destroying the relationship between Anne and her father, Cécile invents a diabolical plot. She

manages to talk Elsa and Cyril into pretending to be lovers by convincing Elsa that in this way she will win back Raymond. Raymond is fooled, and he becomes so jealous that he decides to meet secretly with Elsa. Anne discovers the two of them together and abruptly leaves the house in her car, while Cécile realizes the damage she might have caused and begins to regret it, albeit too late. As Cécile and her father are in the process of writing a letter of apology to Anne, the telephone rings: Anne died in an automobile accident on a particularly treacherous road along the Mediterranean coast. Members of the hospital staff believe that it was just an accident, but Cécile and Raymond immediately suspect that they might have caused Anne's suicide.

In the final chapter, Cécile and Raymond are back in Paris, where they slowly resume the life of leisure and irresponsibility that had been interrupted by the tragic events of the summer. Cécile, however, cannot suppress her guilt concerning Anne's death, causing the "sadness" of the book's title; there is a strong suggestion that her life will never again be exactly as it was before. Although she is likely to continue living for the selfish pursuit of pleasure, she will forever be aware of the potential consequences of her egotistical and deliberately shortsighted attitude.

## SUMMARY

Françoise Sagan burst suddenly onto the literary stage as a kind of girl-genius with the publication of *Bonjour Tristesse* when she was only nineteen. Readers were strongly attracted to the book's novel mixture of youth, innocence, sex, and cynicism, and it quickly became a huge best seller. At the same time, critics recognized the emergence of a new literary voice: bittersweet, melancholy, and jaded, yet at the same time highly sensitive to the narrative literary power to express inner emotion. The eminent Catholic author François Mauriac, who strongly disapproved of the amoral content of her book, nevertheless admired its undeniable power and called Sagan a "charming monster," a description that stuck throughout her career.

Sagan's first book made her a celebrity, a status that she enjoyed her entire life as her books continued to reach a wide audience. The life of the idle rich, including its selfish and dangerous aspects, was an inspiration for her work, as well as an aspect of her own life. Though many believe that Sagan never fulfilled her potential as a writer, her works continue to attract large numbers of readers.

M. Martin Guiney

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*Musiques de scènes*, 1981 (*Incidental Music: Stories*, 1983)

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*Château en Suède*, pr., pb. 1960  
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SCREENPLAYS:

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*Les Fougères bleues*, 1977 (adaptation of her short story "Des yeux de soie")

TELEPLAY:

*Le Sang doré des Borgia*, 1977 (with Jacques Quoirez and Étienne de Monpezat)

NONFICTION:

*Toxique*, 1964 (English translation, 1964; illustrated by Bernard Buffet)  
*Mirror of Venus*, 1966 (with Federico Fellini; photographs by Wingate Paine)  
*Réponses: 1954-1974*, 1974 (*Responses: The Autobiography of Françoise Sagan*, 1979; also known as *Night Bird: Conversations with Françoise Sagan*, 1980)  
*Brigitte Bardot*, 1975 (photographs by Ghislain Dussart; *Brigitte Bardot: A Close-up*, 1976)  
*Avec mon meilleur souvenir*, 1984 (*With Fondest Regards*, 1985)  
*Sarah Bernhardt: Le Rire incassable*, 1987 (*Dear Sarah Bernhardt*, 1988)  
*Et toute ma sympathie*, 1993  
*Derrière l'épaule . . .*, 1998

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In part 2 of Françoise Sagan's novel *Bonjour Tristesse*, Cécile starts to develop self-awareness. Describe this process and the role Anne plays in it.
- Describe how Cécile can be viewed as a kind of "teenage rebel" in the same sense as iconic young antiheroes in post-World War II American culture, for example the James Dean character in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) or Holden Caulfield, the narrator of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).
- Cécile shows herself to be a gifted actress and manipulator of others. Find examples of these skills. How are they presented in a positive light?
- Explain how Cécile changes from the beginning of the story to the end. Do any other characters show a similar degree of change?
- Read one of Sagan later novels, such as *Aimez-vous Brahms?* or *La Chamade*. How does the author deepen and modify some of the same themes that she explores in *Bonjour Tristesse*?

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National Archives

## ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

**Born:** Lyon, France

June 29, 1900

**Died:** Near Corsica

July 31, 1944

*Through his autobiographical works, Saint-Exupéry captures the era of early aviation with his lyrical prose and ruminations, often revealing deeper truths about the human condition and humanity's search for meaning and fulfillment.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Antoine Jean-Baptiste Marie Roger de Saint-Exupéry (sahn-tayg-zew-pay-REE) was born on June 29, 1900, in Lyon, France, the third of five children in an aristocratic family. His father died of a stroke when Saint-Exupéry was only three, and his mother moved the family to Le Mans. Saint-Exupéry, known as Saint-Ex, led a happy childhood. He was surrounded by many relatives and often spent his summer vacations with his family at their chateau in Saint-Maurice-de-Remens.

Saint-Exupéry went to Jesuit schools and to a Catholic boarding school in Switzerland. His dream was to become an officer in the navy, and from 1917 to 1919 he attended the naval preparatory schools École Bossuet and Lycée Saint-Louis. After failing his final exam, he went on to attend the École des Beaux-Arts to study architecture. The year 1921 was a turning point in his life as he started his military service in the Second Regiment of Chasseurs and went to Strasbourg to train as a pilot. He earned his license in a year, and though he was offered a position in the air force, he turned it down because of the objections of his fiancé's family. Eventually, the engagement was broken off, and he started writing and holding several jobs, including that of a bookkeeper and an automobile salesman.

His first publication was a short story, "L'Avia-

teur" (the aviator), which appeared in the magazine *Le Navire d'Argent* in 1926. Thus began many of Saint-Exupéry's writings on flying—a merging of two of his greatest passions in life. At the time, aviation was relatively new and still very dangerous. The technology was basic, and many pilots relied on intuition. Saint-Exupéry, however, was drawn to the adventure and beauty of flight, which he depicted in many of his works.

Saint-Exupéry became a frontiersman of the sky. He reveled in flying open-cockpit planes and loved the freedom and solitude of being in the air. For three years, he worked as a pilot for Aéropostale, a French commercial airline that flew mail. He traveled between Toulouse and Dakar, helping to establish air routes across the African desert. He became the director of Cape Juby airfield in Rio de Oro in the Sahara. He had many accidents, encountering near death experiences in the desert. It was the isolation of the Sahara that inspired his later depictions of the desert in such works as *Le Petit Prince* (1943; *The Little Prince*, 1943) and *Citadelle* (1948; *The Wisdom of the Sands*, 1950).

In 1929, he published his first book, *Courrier sud* (*Southern Mail*, 1933). In the same year, he became the director of the Aeroposta Argentina Company and made many perilous flights over the Andes Mountains. His experiences in Argentina became the basis for his second novel, *Vol de nuit* (1931; *Night Flight*, 1932).

The same year that *Night Flight* was published, Saint-Exupéry married Consuelo Suncin Sandoval, who was a Salvadoran writer and artist. They



had first met in Buenos Aires in 1930; he was a lonely man of grand dreams, and she was a vibrant and exotic young widow. Her personality became the inspiration for the rose in *The Little Prince*. Their relationship was tumultuous, since Saint-Exupéry was often away on his travels and had many affairs. After Saint-Exupéry's disappearance in flight, she wrote a memoir about their relationship, *Mémoires de la Rose* (2000; *The Tale of the Rose: The Passion That Inspired "The Little Prince,"* 2001), which was not published until after her death.

When the Aeroposta Argentina Company closed down, Saint-Exupéry made postal flights between Casablanca and Port-Étienne, and then served as a test pilot for Air France. In 1935, he began writing as a foreign correspondent for various newspapers, traveling all over the world. He tried to set a record in 1935 by flying from Paris to Saigon, but ended up crashing in the Libyan desert, where he and his copilot subsisted on meager supplies and nearly died. They were rescued three days later by the Bedouins.

When World War II began, Saint-Exupéry enlisted in the army and flew for the French air force. He was severely injured in another plane crash in 1938, when he was flying between New York City and Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. He stayed in New York to recover, living in Asharoken on the north shore of Long Island. He ended up becoming a lecturer and freelance writer there and eventually wrote his most famous work, *The Little Prince*. During this time, he also became an important figure in the French Resistance movement.

In 1942, after the American troops had landed in North Africa, Saint-Exupéry volunteered as a pilot for the U.S. Army. At age forty-two, he was declared too old, but on his insistence he was allowed to fly. In 1943, he flew for the French air force again in North Africa.

On July 31, 1944, Saint-Exupéry took off from Sardinia on a reconnaissance mission and never returned. He might have been shot down by enemy aircraft while flying over the Mediterranean, or perhaps he had an engine failure while in flight, or he might even have committed suicide. He was declared missing in action, and a year later he was presumed to be dead. His last manuscript, *Wisdom of the Sands*, was published posthumously.

In 1998, a fisherman off the coast of Marseille

found in his net a bracelet engraved with the name Consuelo. The find triggered the memory of a local diver, Luc Vanrell, who remembered seeing parts of a crashed plane in the sea. Over the span of several years, parts of the plane were gradually dug up. It was not until April 7, 2004, that the French Underwater Archaeological Department finally confirmed that the wreckage was that of Saint-Exupéry's Lockheed Lightning P-38. No bullet holes were found in the wreckage, though only a few pieces of the plane have been discovered. The cause of the crash still remains a mystery.

## ANALYSIS

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's works often contain autobiographical elements and are characterized by poetic lyricism and philosophical meditation. Although he is celebrated internationally for *The Little Prince*, which has become a children's classic, in his native France he is known for his reflective stories on the early days of aviation.

Saint-Exupéry's writings are mostly drawn from his experiences as a pilot. Some of his works are overtly autobiographical, including *Terre des hommes* (1939; *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, 1939), *Pilote de guerre* (1942; *Flight to Arras*, 1942), and *The Wisdom of the Sands*, which was published posthumously. Others are stories inspired by his adventures, including the novels *Southern Mail*, *Night Flight*, and the children's tale *The Little Prince*. As a result of his training and knowledge, his descriptions of flight captured the world of aviation when it was still a developing field. His stories depict various aspects of the pilot's life that resonate on a more universal level—the risk of embarking on a journey; the longing for freedom, solitude, and comradeship; the devotion to duty; and the search for understanding among humankind.

The subject of flying also becomes a vehicle of expression for the author. His stories are steeped in the imagery of flight—soaring, survival, loneliness, and wandering. The journeys his characters take are as much internal as they are external. Even when his stories have a clear narrative, Saint-Exupéry often weaves in the reflections of his characters or of himself as the narrator, as is true of the novel *Night Flight*. In flight and in travel, the characters are in a sort of exile, far from home and in search of a suitable place to land. In their explora-

tions, the characters make note of the people and sights around them, taking on the outside observer's point of view, as the narrator does in *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. In this sense, even while the characters experience the thrill of adventure, there is always the pervasive longing for a deeper connection with another human being. This interconnection is experienced through the companionship of shared experience, just as in the pilots' brotherly support of one another in their devotion to their mission. In *The Little Prince*, friendship is experienced through the time the characters spend gaining understanding of one another.

Flying and writing were the two propelling forces of Saint-Exupéry's life. He has been likened to writer Joseph Conrad in that both were men of action and men of thought. Drawing from his personal experiences and observations, Saint-Exupéry's writing is infused with the life he so fully lived. His tales of adventure, imbued with his ideals of self-transcendence, beauty, and devotion, continue to inspire and captivate readers.

## NIGHT FLIGHT

**First published:** *Vol de nuit*, 1931 (English translation, 1932)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Riviere, the director of the airmail services in Buenos Aires, must keep his company running, even after losing one of his pilots in flight.*

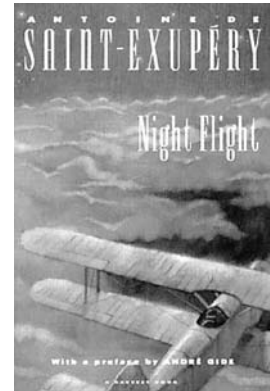
*Night Flight*, Saint-Exupéry's second novel, won the Prix Femina, a French literary prize awarded by a female jury, in 1931, the same year it was published. The award helped establish his fame in the literary world. The book is based on Saint-Exupéry's experiences as a mail pilot and as the director of the Aeroposta Argentina Company. The book's main character, Riviere, is based on Saint-Exupéry's actual operational director in Argen-

tina, Didier Daurat, to whom Saint-Exupéry dedicated the book.

The story is about the pilots who make night flights to deliver mail from Patagonia, Chile, and Paraguay to Argentina. During these early days of aviation, such journeys were extremely dangerous, and these courageous men risked their lives for their work. The two central characters are Fabien, one of the best pilots of the company, and Riviere, the director. One night, Fabien is lost in a storm, and when he does not return from his flight, Riviere is faced with the possibility of having lost his best pilot.

The narrative weaves back and forth between Fabien in flight, Riviere waiting back at the station, and Fabien's wife, who waits in worry at home. The central conflict, however, takes place in the thoughts of Riviere, which make up most of the story. Torn between the devastation of Fabien's disappearance and his duty as operational director, Riviere maintains a stern exterior, even while he grieves over the loss of his pilot internally. He is viewed as severe and even heartless by his men, whom he must continue to send out on night flights to deliver mail in order to keep the mail service running. Riviere also has the responsibility of informing Fabien's wife of six weeks that he has been lost in flight.

This story displays the sort of philosophical rumination that Saint-Exupéry is known for, but it is more strongly rooted in narrative than his other works. Through the characters of Fabien, his wife, and Riviere, Saint-Exupéry portrays the ethical dilemma that Riviere faces between duty and compassion, while at the same time depicting the courage and devotion involved in the glory of flying.



## WIND, SAND, AND STARS

**First published:** *Terre des hommes*, 1939  
(English translation, 1939)

**Type of work:** Memoir

*The author recounts incidents from his flying experiences, including that of a plane crash in the Libyan desert, where he and his navigator survived for several days before their rescue by the Bedouins.*

*Wind, Sand, and Stars* is a collection of interconnected essays reflecting on Saint-Exupéry's experiences as an airmail pilot. It is drawn mostly from the period of his life when he made frequent trips across the Sahara and the Andes. The book won the French Academy's Grand Prix du Roman and the National Book Award in the United States.

Saint-Exupéry portrays the world of flying through descriptions and reflections on the craft of aviation, the equipment, the devotion of the pilots, and the forces of nature to which these men of flight are subject. These musings reveal the humanistic philosophy of Saint-Exupéry, depicting the extraordinary courage and dedication required of the men to embark on these treacherous journeys.

Several incidents are recorded in this account, the most central of which is the plane crash of 1935, when Saint-Exupéry and his navigator, André Prévot, set off to break the record for the fastest flight from Paris to Saigon. They crash in the Libyan desert, somewhere between Benghazi and Cairo, with barely any food and water. The men wander aimlessly in the desert, their bodies quickly succumbing to dehydration. They start to see mirages and then have even wilder hallucinations. They see visions of water and of rescue, and not until three days later are they found by the Bedouins, who give them water and take them by camel to a Swiss engineer's factory in the desert. The men are then transported to Cairo.

The final essay in the book touches on an episode in Barcelona and Madrid, when Saint-Exupéry traveled to the Catalan front during the Spanish Civil War. There he observes at first hand the desperation of the men who are driven by the causes for which they are willing to die. Encoun-

tering anarchists, Fascists, and Loyalists, Saint-Exupéry observes that all humanity alike yearns for freedom and happiness. He questions the need to fight and believes that humankind should be unified in its common goal of comradeship.

As much as it is an adventure story, *Wind, Sand, and Stars* is also a contemplation on humanity. The action of the narrative is held together with Saint-Exupéry's lyrical prose and thoughtful ruminations. He often reflects on what little one person knows of another, and it is this struggle for understanding between people that lies at the heart of the narrator's search. Each of his escapades around the world becomes an opportunity for reflection on the human spirit and on what gives meaning to humankind's existence. This is a book of spiritual adventure and journey through despair and loneliness in order to find companionship and self-fulfillment.

## THE LITTLE PRINCE

**First published:** *Le Petit Prince*, 1943  
(English translation, 1943)

**Type of work:** Children's literature

*After crashing in the Sahara Desert, a pilot meets a young boy from another planet, whose story reveals philosophical truths about life and the nature of humankind.*

Loved for its childlike simplicity and profound wisdom, *The Little Prince* is undoubtedly Saint-Exupéry's most famous work. It has been translated into more than 170 languages and adapted into two operas, a musical film, and an animated television series. Saint-Exupéry wrote the book while he was living in New York City, shortly before he disappeared in flight. Though commonly referred to as a children's story, the book has also been appreciated by adult audiences for its underlying philosophical nature. The story contains reflections on the themes of friendship, love, imagination, and the significance of an individual in the world. It is often published with the author's illustrations, a whimsical series of watercolors.

The book begins with the narrator's reflection on his own childhood and the unimaginative ratio-

nality of adults. The story quickly jumps ahead to the narrator's adult life, to a time when he was stranded in the Sahara Desert after a plane crash. He is awoken one day by a young boy, the Little Prince, who asks him to draw a sheep. The exchange reveals the Prince's childlike imagination, reminding the narrator of the innocent worldview of his own childhood.

The two characters are drawn together by their common exile—the pilot, who is stranded in the desert, and the Little Prince, who is far from his home on the asteroid B612. Gradually, the narrator learns the Prince's story. The Prince lived on a small

planet, where he spent his days weeding his home of baobab trees, tending to his volcanoes, and most of all, taking care of his rose. This mysterious rose was a delicate but vain creature. She was demanding and pretentious, and despite the Prince's love for her, he grew disappointed with her capriciousness.

When he caught her in a lie one day, he became disenchanted with her and left his planet to go exploring.

The simple clarity of the child's point of view, exemplified in the Little Prince, is often contrasted with the narrow-mindedness of the adults. On his journeys, the Prince visits six other asteroid-planets, all inhabited by foolish adults. His encounters include that of a king who believes he controls the movement of the stars, a conceited man who craves attention but lives alone in his vanity, and a geographer who draws maps but does not leave his desk to explore the places he must see in order to draw. Such contradictions leave the Prince bewildered and disappointed.

Upon the geographer's suggestion, the Prince travels to Earth, where he arrives at the desert and meets a snake who forebodingly offers to send the

Prince back home with his deadly poison. The Prince declines and continues on his way. He arrives at a rose garden and is shocked to learn that there are millions of other flowers exactly like his rose, whom he thought was unique. Reaching the lowest point of his disenchantment with the world, the Prince lies down in the grass and cries.

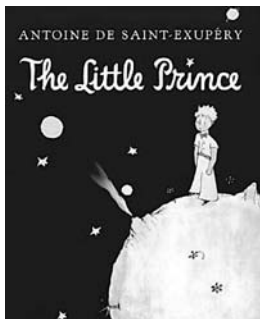
It is then that he meets the fox, the sage of the story. The fox was probably inspired by Saint-Exupéry's encounter with a fennec, a desert sand fox, after his crash in the Libyan desert. In the story, the fox persuades the Prince to tame him, and in so doing, teaches him the value of friendship. It is through friendship that two beings become unique to one another, and through friendship that life gains meaning. The Prince comes to realize that it is the time spent with his rose that has made her unique to him, different from all the other roses in the garden who do not belong to anyone.

Having gained this wisdom, the Prince plans to allow the desert snake to bite him so that he can return to his planet and be reunited with his rose. He shares a final moment with the pilot at a well, where the two find physical and spiritual restoration. They reflect on how the important things in life must be perceived not with the eyes but with the heart. The two part, and when the pilot comes searching for the Little Prince the next day, he has disappeared. The pilot finally finishes repairing his plane. The story ends with the narrator's request for his readers to look at the skies and to remember the Little Prince.

## SUMMARY

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's lyrical and meditative writings, inspired by his experiences as a mail pilot, reveal his idealistic view of humankind's potential. His characters, which sometimes include himself as the narrator, journey through disillusionment and isolation to find transcendence in companionship and devotion to duty.

*Julie Wan*



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#### NONFICTION:

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What meaning does the act of flying take on for Antoine de Saint-Exupéry?
- What are Saint-Exupéry's thoughts on the themes of loneliness and friendship that emerge in his writings?
- In what ways can his writings be viewed as more than an autobiographical account of events?
- What role does nature play in Saint-Exupéry's stories?
- From his writing, would you describe Saint-Exupéry as an idealist? Why or why not?





## SAKI

**Born:** Akyab, Burma (now in Myanmar)

December 18, 1870

**Died:** Beaumont Hamel, France

November 14, 1916

*Hector Hugh Munro, who wrote under the pen name Saki, was one of the leading social satirists and short story writers of pre-World War I British literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Hector Hugh Munro was born in Akyab, Burma (now in Myanmar), on December 18, 1870, the son of C. A. Munro, inspector general of the Burmese police, and Mary Frances Mercer Munro, daughter of Rear Admiral Samuel Mercer of the British navy. Hector's mother died shortly after his birth, and he was sent to England with his brother Charles and sister Ethel to be reared by his father's two sisters and his grandmother.

The children lived at Broadgate Villa, an eighteenth century house, in Pilton on the beautiful coast of North Devon, but they experienced an unhappy childhood. Hector, whose health was delicate, studied at home with his sister's governess until the age of fourteen, when he followed his brother to Pencarwick, a boarding school in Exmouth. According to his sister's memoir, he was much happier at school. In September, 1885, he transferred to the Bedford School in Bedfordshire, but his precarious health forced him to leave in December, 1886, which ended his formal education.

Colonel Munro retired from active service in 1888 and took the children for a series of extended visits to the Continent. They returned to England in 1890 and settled at Heaton Court, also in North Devon, where Hector studied under his father's tutelage. During the summer of 1893 he sailed for Burma to join his brother as a policeman in the im-

perial service. His health deteriorated, and after only thirteen months' duty, he was sent home to recover from malaria.

In 1886, Munro moved to London to begin his career as a professional writer. Using the British Museum reading room, he researched a book on Russia, which eventually was published as *The Rise of the Russian Empire* (1900). It was favorably reviewed by the general press but not by the academic establishment, and Hector abandoned the writing of history. A chance meeting with a celebrated political cartoonist, Carruthers Gould, had a more favorable outcome.

Writing under the pen name of Saki (SAH-kee), Munro published a series of satirical sketches in the *Westminster Gazette* attacking the government's ineptitude in the Boer War. These journalistic pieces, illustrated by Gould, launched his career and were later published in book form as *The Westminster Alice* (1902). Before completing this early phase of his career, Munro wrote three additional series of satirical sketches for the *Westminster Gazette*. One was patterned after Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) stories, another, the Dolly Dialogues, depicted British society through the eyes of a frivolous and wealthy young woman, and the third, a series of Reginald stories, satirized contemporary British institutions and values.

In 1902, Munro began covering the Balkans as a foreign correspondent for the *London Morning Post*. During the following years he reported from Poland, Serbia, and Russia, where his knowledge of the country's language and history were invaluable. While in St. Petersburg he witnessed "Bloody

Sunday” and the Russian Revolution of 1905. He also became the Paris correspondent for the *Morning Post* before returning to England in 1908.

During the final years of his career Munro worked as a freelance writer, largely of short stories that he contributed to the *Morning Post*, the *Westminster Gazette*, and the *Bystander*. Most of this fiction eventually appeared in book form. He also wrote two novels, *The Unbearable Bassington* (1912) and *When William Came* (1913). In 1924, he collaborated with Cyril Maude on a play, *The Watched Pot* (pr., pb. 1924). He also returned to journalism to report on Parliament for the *Outlook*.

Soon after the outbreak of World War I, Munro enlisted in the Second King Edward's Horse but found cavalry life too strenuous and transferred to an infantry outfit, the Twenty-second Battalion Royal Fusiliers. In November, 1915, he went into combat in France, where he saw considerable action. In October, 1916, he was once again hospitalized for his malaria but rejoined his battalion in time for the Beaumont Hamel offensive. He was killed in action on November 14, 1916.

#### ANALYSIS

Munro's pen name, Saki, belongs to a character out of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859), who is cupbearer to the gods. After the failed attempt at writing popular history, Munro began writing short sketches that satirized the hierarchical, stable, and largely aristocratic Edwardian society that he knew. Most of his early work, like *The Westminster Alice* sketches and the animal fables patterned after the *Just So Stories* (1902) of Kipling, drew heavily on the writings of other popular British authors of the period. The high style which became a hallmark of his writing recalled such literary figures as Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm. Munro soon ended his stylistic apprenticeship and developed a distinctive literary voice for which he is still remembered.

His first literary efforts were almost exclusively in the short, topical sketch with a political theme. His editor at the *Westminster Gazette*, J. A. Spender, employed Munro's talents to criticize the government for its inept handling of the Boer War and other follies of the late empire. In addition to the original Alice figure, Munro created other characters to satirize the period. The first of the gilded youth portraits, as they came to be known, were the Dolly Dialogues, in which, through the eyes of a

privileged, rather silly young woman, Munro ridiculed London's best people through a series of shrewd observations of their social conventions. His next series was filtered through the consciousness of the well-heeled, amusing, if somewhat mentally dim Reginald, a character who provided the model for P. G. Wodehouse's later, more benign, Bertie Wooster. Munro enjoyed a huge reputation as a social satirist, and his sketches were collected into best-selling books. As a teenager, Noël Coward discovered Reginald during a stay in the country and was forever indebted to Munro for helping to launch his career.

Munro quickly perfected an arch style and a trenchant social perspective, but he was unwilling to settle for a literary career based solely on light, ephemeral material, so he signed on as a foreign correspondent, taking assignments which would send him to many of the trouble spots of Europe. His travels exposed him to hardships and dangers that did much to alter the tone of his work. In addition, he was also introduced to the rich tradition of European folk literature, which supplied him with both the subject matter and the darker vision that characterizes the best of his later fiction.

From the time Munro returned to England in 1907 until his untimely death in World War I, he wrote an extraordinary number of excellent short stories that bear the stamp of his travels and for which he is best remembered. They are more direct and more heavily plotted than his earlier fiction. Much of the epigrammatic wit and the high style of Munro's earlier work is replaced by a deeper sense of irony and of a darker vision of human nature. Munro's later stories deal with an absurdity in life that is more modern than the topical flippancy of his earlier work. The tales in *Reginald in Russia* (1910), for example, though they resurrect his earlier character, are more somber in tone and subject than are the earlier pieces. As his career progressed, Munro also wrote more about the supernatural. Although humor is often still present in his later stories it is more subdued and ironic.

The two novels he wrote during this period reflect a changed mood. *The Unbearable Bassington* is more scathing than lighthearted. Although the unbearable Bassington at times reminds readers of Reginald, Bassington seems more in tune with Evelyn Waugh's doomed, 1920's bright young

things than he does with anyone experiencing the peaceful, endless Edwardian summer. Munro describes the story as having no moral. It is a tale of evil with no remedy. Maurice Baring, in his introduction to the collected novels, calls it a tragedy, a story of a wasted life of ingrained egotism and lack of consideration, a life which must find its retribution in an isolated death. The bleakness of the ending transforms Munro's stock comic punch line into tragic emptiness. *The Unbearable Bassington* is Reginald and Dolly and Clovis Sangrail, Saki's later version of Reginald, with consequences.

*When William Came* is propaganda, pure and simple. As with *The Unbearable Bassington*, all the author's keen social observation is still there but without the wit and humor. The social criticism is more savage, the personal observations more heartless, and the characters come off badly and not amusingly. This novel is like one of Munro's more pungent short stories, expanded. It reads more like George Orwell than Oscar Wilde.

Munro is an underrated writer. Too often he has simply been categorized as among the lightweight British authors whose work is beyond serious consideration. On closer inspection, however, much of what he wrote has the unmistakable mark of the modernist literary tradition. His prose is much less dated, especially in the later stories, than is usually supposed. Munro's fiction deals with many of the modern subjects, such as irrationality, alienation, and irony. He also stylistically experimented with the well-made story, pushing that form to its limits and extending its potential. How he would have developed as a writer after the war remains, unfortunately, speculation. Whatever potential for literary growth his talent possessed expired with him on a field in France.

## REGINALD

**First published:** 1904

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Reginald, a wealthy, dim-witted man-about-town, makes satirical comments on contemporary social and cultural institutions.*

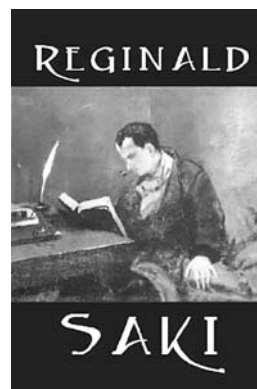
*Reginald* was Saki's third book and, like *The Westminster Alice*, was a collection of the author's satiric

newspaper pieces. With *Reginald*, Saki greatly broadened the scope of his commentary on the social world of Edwardian Britain.

In many of the short sketches, Reginald and the anonymous narrator attend various social and cultural events, such as the theater, the Royal Academy of Art, or a garden party, and Reginald makes satirical comments to the narrator. In the style of Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm, most of his remarks are epigrammatic and often are quite biting.

In addition to social institutions, Munro also targeted for send-ups such topics as the empire, the fiscal question, the Boer War, religion, and peace poems. A good number of these topics are rather obscure to the modern reader, but *Reginald's* commentary is still fresh because it pokes fun at such human traits as vanity, snobbishness, and hypocrisy.

"Reginald Goes to the Academy" provides an excellent example of how the stories work. In it, Reginald goes to the Royal Academy of Art, and he comments on various patrons and paintings. People



at art museums look at the pictures, Reginald remarks, only when they have run out of conversation or if they want to avoid acquaintances. Noting that the Royal Academy is slow to admit painters, Reginald muses that one can see them arriving for years like "a Balkan trouble or a street improvement." On the large size of so many academic

paintings, he says, "by the time they have painted a thousand or so square yards of canvas, their work begins to be recognized." Reginald also philosophizes about life: "To be clever in the afternoon argues that one is dining nowhere in the evening," and "I hate posterity—it's so fond of having the last word."

These small sketches reveal Saki's penchant for the amusing aside as well as the cutting remark. The pieces are delicate and rely heavily on literary style for their effect, which makes them difficult to paraphrase or summarize. Such clever ephemera, however, established Saki's reputation for wit and

insight and made him a model for later twentieth century satirical writers, such as Waugh and Wodehouse.

## WHEN WILLIAM CAME

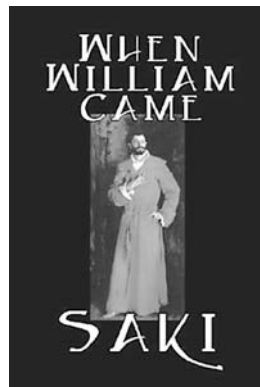
**First published:** 1913

**Type of work:** Novel

*Murrey Yeovil, after recuperating from an illness in Siberia, returns to Great Britain to find that the country has been conquered by the Germans, who now occupy and run it.*

*When William Came* is one of a handful of literary works published before the outbreak of World War I that warned of the dangers of British isolationism. Like Guy du Maurier's popular melodrama, *The Englishman's Home* (1909), and Erskine Childer's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), Saki's novel is a cautionary tale about British military unpreparedness and the need to pay more serious attention to European affairs, especially to German militarism. Saki championed the cause of universal military training in Great Britain, and he wanted to shock those in power out of their smugness and their false sense of security. Like the other prewar jeremiads, *When William Came* took on an increased importance as prophecy in the aftermath of World War I.

The plot of the novel is fairly straightforward, if episodic. Murrey Yeovil is a typical Saki hero, wealthy, upper-class, conservative, British. While hunting in Siberia, he falls ill with malaria, and while recuperating learns of Great Britain's defeat by the Germans. He returns to London, where he finds life pretty much carrying on as usual except that the Germans are in command. On the surface, very little has changed except that the street signs are bilingual, and there are more Germans about. Most of British society has been left alone. Murrey finds that most of his friends have adapted quite well to their conquerors



and mingle with them amiably. He grows disgusted with the acquiescence of the British, especially the upper classes, in their acceptance of their occupation.

Murrey is finally prompted to action by a series of events that begin with the decree barring all Britons from military training. He sees this as a deliberate attempt to weaken the British and to reduce the possibility for future resistance to the Germans. On a trip he discovers groups of patriots nestled in the English countryside who have not yet succumbed to the will of the new government. Emboldened by his discovery, he returns to London to witness the passive resistance of a troop of boy scouts, which confirms his suspicion that the youth of Great Britain offer the only hope for future rebellion against the invaders. The novel ends on this somewhat optimistic note.

## BEASTS AND SUPER-BEASTS

**First published:** 1914

**Type of work:** Short stories

*This collection of short fiction includes stories from the immediate prewar period of Saki's career.*

*Beasts and Super-Beasts* was the last collection of Saki's short fiction published in his lifetime. According to some critics, it is his best. It contains the most representative of his later short stories. The book includes the stories for which Saki is now remembered. A number of the stories feature Clovis Sangrail, Saki's later version of Reginald. There are also a number of ghost or fantasy tales that provide an eerie, unworldly atmosphere. There are some tales that explore the demoniac side of childhood. Most of these short stories have ironic, surprise endings.

The witty commentary that Saki uses to such effect in his earlier short fiction is still present, but the stories in *Beasts and Super-Beasts* rely more on plot than do his earlier efforts. They also establish Saki's reputation for writing about the dark side of human nature. Twenty-first century readers will probably be less shocked by these tales than the prewar audience for which they were written because the stories' bleakness has become a staple of modern writing. It is to Saki's credit that he pio-

neered such a modernist vision. The stories seem less dated than some of his other ones.

In "The Story-Teller," a confirmed bachelor quiets some unruly children in a railway compartment by telling them a story. The story is about a little girl who wins medals for her goodness and is eaten by a wolf. She tries to escape the wolf by hiding in some bushes, but her medals clank, giving away her hiding place. There are also stories that border on the absurd. For example, in "The Stalled Ox," an artist who paints portraits of livestock is called to remove an ox from a neighbor's drawing room. Instead, he paints the beast and creates a sensation at the Royal Academy of Art with his picture, "Ox in a Morning-Room, Late Autumn." "The Dreamer" is about a distracted young man who looks so much like a retail clerk that he is able to sell things to customers in shops that he visits with his aunt. He pockets the money he receives for the goods. A gourmand in "The Blind Spot" covers up a killing committed by his cook because, although the cook may be a murderer, he is a great cook.

The absurdity and somberness of Saki's last stories reveal the modernist tendencies of his writing. The horrors of World War I and the worldwide Depression that followed, not to mention the terrors that the Nazis inflicted on Saki's country, perhaps have better provided his later audiences with a more appropriate worldview for appreciating Saki's work.

## SUMMARY

Saki is often depicted as a minor satirist of the Edwardian period, and his writing is usually described, disparagingly, as being in the same vein as Wodehouse's: witty, airy, and tame. On closer inspection it is possible to detect in the darker nature of his prose a growing alienation from modern life that surfaced more fully in literature of the 1920's. There is a bite, an edge, and a dislocation of reality in the best of his work that should place him among the forerunners of the generation of British writers who produced the modernist literary movements.

Charles L. P. Silet

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What were Saki's specific charges against British foreign policy at the time of the Boer War?
- How did Saki's experiences as a foreign correspondent alter his writing?
- Trace the development of Saki's character called Reginald, then Clovis, over a series of his works.
- Is Saki's humor characteristically satirical or is it more broadly based?
- In what respects was Saki a writer ahead of his time?



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## GEORGE SAND

**Born:** Paris, France

July 1, 1804

**Died:** Nohant, France

June 8, 1876

*Sand, a romantic idealist, expanded the range of issues, particularly of feminist interest, addressed by the nineteenth century novel.*

### BIOGRAPHY

George Sand (sahnd), as she chose to be known from 1832 onward, was born Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin on July 1, 1804, in Paris, France. Through her father, Maurice Dupin, Aurore was descended from an aristocratic line that included King Frederic-Augustus II of Poland. Her father gave up early musical aspirations for a career as a military officer. Through her mother, Sophie Delabord, Aurore was descended from the opposite end of the social scale. Sophie lived by her wits and had entered marriage to Maurice Dupin with a daughter (Caroline) from a previous relationship. Aurore's imperious, aristocratic grandmother, Marie-Aurore Dupin, had little tolerance for Sophie or Caroline. When Aurore was four years old, Maurice Dupin was killed, thrown by a horse he had ridden all the way from Spain. The family was soon separated, with Aurore and her brother staying on their grandmother's estate of Nohant and Sophie forced to go with Caroline back to Paris.

Soon after her mother left Nohant, young Aurore became rebellious, so she was sent to a convent school for the daughters of privileged French families, the English Augustinian Convent in Paris. In Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* (1854-1855; *History of My Life*, 1901), the chapters titled "My Convent Life" give a delightfully fresh and realistic picture of this phase of her childhood. This English background

left many traces. Sand was both an Anglophile and an Americanophile; many of her novels include an English-speaking character, often a positive hero. Sand in turn was to have a strong influence on two English women writers, her younger contemporaries George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Marie-Aurore Dupin brought her granddaughter back to her rural estate of Nohant after only three years. The adolescent Aurore lived a carefree existence, continuing her education in the estate's well-stocked library. Aurore and her grandmother concurred in the choice of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as their favorite writer. Aurore took full advantage of country life and was a passionate horsewoman. Her father's former tutor, François Deschartres, encouraged her to ride and to dress like a boy, the better to hunt.

In 1821, grandmother Marie-Aurore died, making Aurore a wealthy heiress at seventeen. Her mother came back into her life—bringing chaos and unwelcomed attempts at control. The best way out seemed to be marriage to a young man with whom Aurore had little in common, but whom she loved for his good nature: Casimir François Dudevant, a country squire.

Aurore Dudevant was perhaps a perfect test case of whether a traditional marriage, in an age of growing social instability, could hold two incompatible people together. It was a combination of Aurore Dupin Dudevant's education and personality that caused her to throw off convention and pursue her dreams and desires. Not entirely by coincidence, the revolutionary year of 1830 saw her form

the idea of achieving independence by becoming a writer and joining her friend Jules Sandeau, also an aspiring young writer, in Paris. She brought her first, unpublished novel, "Aimée," with her when she arrived in the capital early in 1831.

Her desire for an atmosphere of intellectual and creative ferment was soon fulfilled. Paris was then home to the greatest figures of the Romantic movement, many of whom became her friends, including the writers Heinrich Heine, Honoré de Balzac, Charles-Agustine de Sainte-Beuve, Alfred de Musset, the composers Franz Liszt and Frédéric Chopin, and the artist Eugène Delacroix. Sand was attractive, open, original, bohemian, and lived the romantic ideals. She published her first major novel, *Indiana* (1832; English translation, 1833), under the pseudonym of George Sand (a tribute to Jules Sandeau). In highly romantic terms, this novel addresses the problem that was the crux of Sand's life at that time: a woman's right to break the marital bond.

Sand's second major novel, *Lélia* (1833, 1839; English translation, 1978), reflected Sand's mutually destructive love affair with the poet Alfred de Musset. At the nadir of the affair, Sand cut off her beautiful hair and sent it to him. Having thus turned herself into Joan of Arc, Sand attended the theater dressed like a man. She is captured at that unhappy moment in a portrait by Delacroix, which immortalized her in male attire. During her young bohemian phase, she experimented with all kinds of exotic, self-dramatizing costumes, to which a cigar or hookah was often the finishing touch. When her divorce from Dudevant became final, giving her custody of their two children, she combined her unconventional lifestyle with extraordinary literary productivity to support her household.

Her youth flamed out in the most important and tragic love of her life, the nine-year partnership (1838-1847) with Frédéric Chopin, an émigré composer from Poland. When she rebelled against this tie, it was in the name of maternal passion. Her maturing son Maurice challenged Chopin's position as man of the household, and Sand took Maurice's side. The hard feelings were compounded by Sand's jealousy of her teenage daughter, to whom Chopin was an indulgent father-substitute. They had been, in effect, a family. The break meant the beginning of a premature old age for Sand, and was literally fatal to Chopin. Her side of the story's

happier days is told in her novel *Lucrezia Floriani* (1846; English translation, 1985).

From 1840 onward, Sand contributed to leftist journals and considered herself a socialist, influenced by the doctrines of the Abbé de Lamennais and Pierre Leroux, both her close friends. In 1848, a short-lived socialist republic was proclaimed in Paris. In the general elections that followed, the socialists were roundly defeated and conservative elements were returned to power. As a member of the losing side, Sand found herself ignored, and her prestige went into eclipse. Her virtues of generosity and honesty, however, gave her a new role as the nourisher and mentor of new talent. In particular, the singer and composer Pauline Viardot and author Gustave Flaubert benefited from her steady counsel and friendship. She made Nohant an oasis for friends and family, dying there, after a serene old age, on June 8, 1876.

## ANALYSIS

Sand's literary style is always aristocratic and derives its charm from a high-spirited insouciance, elegance, and assertiveness. In this, the influence of the paternal side of her family, particularly her elegant and witty grandmother, shines. The influence of Sand's mother, whom Sand described as a true gypsy, and Sand's own bohemian life can be felt in Sand's love of mystery and melodrama.

Sand's characters often personify her themes. She also exhaustively analyzes their motives, usually in a declamatory dialogue form that the contemporary reader will find quaint. The earnest, searching honesty with which Sand squarely faced relations between the sexes keeps many of her concerns relevant.

While identified overwhelmingly with her contributions to women's issues, Sand devoted considerable effort to making the reader understand her male characters and their problems. Male and female characters display physical characteristics that cause them to border on being stereotypes. *Indiana*, her first heroine, is an embodiment of the romantic ideal of a fragile, thin, flowerlike, delicate, yet mysterious and exotic female creature; the man who finally wins her is (even to the author) almost too handsome, noble, healthy, and chiseled. Sand gradually modified these stereotypes until, in her last novella, the heroine is pretty but has the "masculine" characteristics of sturdy good health

and common sense, and the hero is handsome but bookish, timid, and naïve. Sand always has a sense of the difficulty of men's position. She treats with understanding the brusque, hearty, egotistical type of man her heroines must flee from, and she reassures the reader that he is not a brute but essentially a good fellow who cannot help being what he is. She also understands how difficult it can be for a sensitive man to take the initiative. In *Indiana* and again in *Mauprat* (1837; English translation, 1870), both hero and heroine must come perilously close to dying before they can admit to loving someone whom they considered only a friend.

Sand's characters are always bedeviled by the romantic ideal of passionate, sexual, but voluntarily unconsummated love, exemplified by such earlier works as Rousseau's *Julie: Ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761; *Eloise: Or, A Series of Original Letters*, 1761; better known as *The New Héloïse*). Although Sand's characters typically consummate their love eventually, such a resolution is prefaced by much agonizing over whether they had not better remain as friends.

Sand did not write for art's sake alone. The bulk of her work, today little read, consists of potboilers written to pay the bills. Her better works, which are still interesting, were also not written for the sake of art alone. She was blessed with a facile and charming style that she simply allowed to take care of itself and with a storyteller's instinct for creating suspense. Her works have a conscious didactic purpose. She had a deeply held sense of the nature and importance of love in human life. She was an absolutist in seeing love as humanity's link with the divine and as the only principle through which men and women alike could attain their full self-realization. The defense of love, therefore, against restrictive convention and against false modesty and hypocrisy was for Sand a holy crusade. For her, the only irreparable tragedy was the defeat of true love. Sand never wrote such a tragedy. The many loves in her works that remain unconsummated are invariably flawed—by subtle hypocrisy or unconscious egotism. Hence their frustration, however agonizing, is never a tragedy. Her didactic purpose in praising ideal love, which rises above selfishness, pettiness, and the desire for control, would not allow her to depict such moral perfection being defeated. Sand was essentially an optimist.

Successful teachers and edifiers of humanity

have always resorted to humor to sweeten the lesson, and Sand is no exception. Among her secondary characters, she offers a gallery of eccentric individualists who often serve as mentors to the heroes. These eccentrics are loosely based upon the didactic figures who guided her youth. The heretical, mildly satirized Abbé Aubert (in *Mauprat*) has elements of the socialist Abbé de Lamennais, a lifelong friend. Aubert's boon companion, the ascetic peasant philosopher Patience, incorporates two of Sand's mentors in disguise: Stéphane de Grand-sagne (no peasant, but a man similarly devoured by intellectual passions) and François Deschartres, a good-hearted, unpretentious man, devoted to helping youth.

## INDIANA

**First published:** 1832 (English translation, 1833)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The title character leaves her husband, is betrayed by her lover, and finds happiness with her cousin.*

*Indiana*, an intricately plotted novel, brought Sand instant fame. The touching innocence of Indiana and her maid, the creole Noun, both from French Louisiana, is partly explained by their roots in the United States, a country of which Sand had only vague notions, but of which she wrote with enthusiasm.

When readers first meet Indiana, now in France, she is married to a tyrannical old brute, the retired Colonel Delmare, whom she met in America. Their permanent guest is Indiana's cousin and childhood sweetheart, Sir Ralph. The situation offers Sir Ralph no scope for action other than small gestures to soften Indiana's fate, unobtrusively calm her husband, and deflect any dangers that threaten. Indiana regards Sir Ralph as merely insipid and her fate as hopeless.

Wishing to shake his wife from her doldrums and hypochondria, Delmare brings her, at the height of the social season, from rural France to the sophisticated social circles of Paris. Sand makes full use of the contrast of scene. The flower from the wilderness, of course, attracts the attention of

the most successful dandy of the moment, Raymon de Ramière. Sir Ralph, who has accompanied the Delmares like a shadow, senses the danger. What few know is that Raymon is already intimately connected to the Delmare household through his torrid affair with the beautiful creole, Noun. When Noun discovers that her rival is her beloved mistress, she commits suicide.

Raymon is for a time in love with Indiana, whose scruples prevent a consummation of their ecstatic romance. Meanwhile, her husband loses his fortune and decides to take Indiana back to America with him. Indiana, trying to elude the ship's departure, flees to Raymon late at night. Raymon, who has grown tired of waiting for her, is at first indifferent. Listening to her tale of woe, he cynically makes up his mind to take her without love and complete her humiliation. At the conclusion of her story, however, Indiana herself calmly rises and leaves.

She considers committing suicide, but she then decides it will be virtually the same to return to America with Delmare. Sir Ralph, matured and chastened by his years of mute suffering, accompanies them as always. In America, Indiana receives an apologetic letter from Raymon, which convinces her to book passage back to France. When she returns, she discovers that Raymon is now married. His bride, a lady of the best society, humiliates Indiana as icily as possible. Indiana is saved from a serious suicide attempt by

Sir Ralph, who has followed her. He too longs for death, and so they resolve to go back to America to commit suicide together, in a particularly sylvan spot. She is unmoved by the good news of Delmare's death by apoplexy.

In his last moments, Sir Ralph's transformation from a timid peacemaker to a fiery romantic is completed. Indiana is inspired to save him, and she does so with great difficulty after lengthy outpourings of eloquence on both sides. They live together happily thereafter, without benefit of a formal ceremony.



## MAUPRAT

**First published:** 1837 (English translation, 1870)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In an entertaining medieval adventure story, the novel contains a serious, optimistic message about education.*

*Mauprat* is, in a sense, an allegory of the last days of feudal France as it yielded to the new ideas brought in by the French Revolution. Sand did not dispute its fairy-tale trappings and format. The Mauprat family, consisting of a father and seven brothers living in lawless isolation in their great medieval castle of Roche-Mauprat, has from time immemorial lorded it over the surrounding countryside. The days are gone when the Mauprats could legally confiscate from the local peasants; the Mauprats now survive by outright robbery. These men embody every vice: laziness, lechery, drunkenness, arrogance, deceit, cruelty, and ignorance. Their only redeeming quality is boldness, inherited from their knightly ancestors. For Sand, Roche-Mauprat represents a crucible in which to test Rousseau's doctrine of humankind's innate goodness.

Into this den of thieves is brought Bernard Mauprat, their orphaned cousin, an uncorrupted child of seven. Can his essential nature and early rearing survive ten years of indoctrination in the Mauprats' vices?

The wicked Mauprats deceive the beautiful young woman Edmée, who has become separated from her hunting companions, into seeking shelter in their lair. Bernard is charged with guarding her. Edmée believes that he is redeemable, if he can be reeducated. She notices that Bernard is falling in love with her. They conclude a bargain: If he will help her escape, no other man will have her before Bernard. Bernard does not wish to marry her, but he knows she is too proud not to keep her word. They both agree to keep the bargain secret. Edmée foresees a loophole, which she keeps to herself: She may decide to marry no one.

The reeducation of Bernard is conducted by Edmée, her father, Patience (a homeless peasant philosopher), and the Abbé Aubert. The sow's ear



is turned into a silk purse. The reeducation, conducted with love, is more than successful.

Edmée remains stubborn. Bernard concedes that he is ready for a civilized life and is ready to marry the woman he loves. Edmée hints that she loves him, yet he cannot win her. Nor will she marry anyone else, saying that her father needs her. Feeling at a loss, Bernard goes off to America to fight in the Revolutionary War. For five years, he fights, brooding over the occasional letters that he receives from Edmée.

At last, there is a joyous homecoming. Even Edmée's father is now impatient to see the two young people married. Edmée presents Bernard with a conundrum: He must unconditionally release Edmée from her promise, and then she will decide whether to marry him, if at all. Bernard has devoted years to making himself worthy of her pledge; the pledge was his motive and inspiration. The more that he loves her, the less able he is to release her.

Fate resolves this problem. The authorities raid the wicked Mauprats. Most are killed, but two survive and go into hiding. They resurface in disguise, with plans to destroy Bernard's life. Edmée is to be killed in an apparent hunting accident, which will appear to be Bernard's fault.

Not one but two trials are recounted in considerable detail. At the first, Bernard is condemned to be hanged. At the second, Edmée miraculously recovers and testifies on his behalf. Her testimony—in order to be convincing and thus save his life—must include a public confession of her love for him. Edmée finally professes her love unambiguously. The jury and the public are won over, and the long self-denying lovers are united at last, to live happily ever after.

## MARIANNE

**First published:** 1876 (English translation, 1883)

**Type of work:** Novella

*Marianne summarizes all of Sand's most persistent concerns and represents a worthy last word from the author.*

The twenty-five-year-old heroine, Marianne Chevreuse, represents the young George Sand as she might have been had she remained Aurore Dupin a few years longer, instead of rushing into marriage. Sand emphasizes the joys and pleasures of an unencumbered existence for an independent woman. Marianne's country estate of Mortsang is very similar to Sand's Nohant. Remaining unmarried, with her horse Suzon as her chief companion, Marianne is gaining the reputation of being a bit eccentric and too fond of solitude. In fact, she is in love with Pierre André, an old family friend who is also her godfather. In a situation typical of Sand, Pierre is so accustomed to Marianne that he cannot see that he loves her. Sand's optimistic view of human nature requires that this common but usually insuperable situation must change.

Pierre is a man of considerable talent and abilities who utterly lacks self-confidence. Life has dashed his early unrealistic dreams, and on the brink of middle age he is about to resign himself to empty bachelorhood. Old school ties, however, lead to the arrival of Philippe Gaucher, a Parisian dandy, into Pierre's life as an unwelcome houseguest. Gaucher is in search of a bride with a dowry, and Marianne has been recommended to him.

Jealousy plays a part in waking Pierre from his lethargy. Sand is at her most deft in delineating attractive, imaginative, worldly people who nevertheless fail to understand what is really important. The charming Gaucher, besides being a man of the world and a connoisseur of beauty, is a dilettante landscape painter. He drives Pierre to despair with his bold and poetic wooing of Marianne. Pierre warns Marianne that Gaucher is trying to compromise her, and he expresses surprise that Marianne never allows her old friend such liberties. In a conundrum typical of Sand, Marianne explains that she purposely never allows anything that would

give rise to gossip about her and Pierre because she wants Pierre to be under no obligation to marry her. The excuse that Pierre would gladly have had for getting married, without admitting love, is removed.

Marianne is an artist in her own way, as expressed in her development of the park bordering her estate. She uses nature to create beauty.



In her view, the dilettante Gaucher is deeply mistaken when he claims that because he is a painter, he sees the beauty of the countryside more clearly than those who actually live there. Marianne summarizes George Sand's aesthetic credo when she tells Gaucher: "Beauty is like God, which exists by itself and gains nothing from all the hymns and paeans of praise lavished

upon it." Angered, Gaucher accuses her of being a philistine and finds that her words "are like a caterpillar on a rose." To this, Marianne fervently replies

that a caterpillar may be just as beautiful as a rose—and indeed, she has never seen an ugly caterpillar.

The ending is happy, not because of sensual bliss, or the triumph of true devotion, or the defeat of the false and empty—though all these come to pass—but because the main characters achieve their best chance to realize themselves through one another. Merely being suited to each other does not ensure that two people will make the match that they seem to be meant for. Sand's heroines must act to bring it about, or it will not happen.

## SUMMARY

George Sand was part of the Romantic movement and followed the idealistic eighteenth century philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed in humanity's innate morality and goodness that was without the need for social convention or organized religion. The effect of Sand's putting Rousseau's moral theories into living practice, while simultaneously popularizing them in her novels, must not be underestimated. The personal freedom enjoyed by women of the Western world is in part a monument to her success.

D. Gosselin Nakeeb

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*Mademoiselle Merquem*, 1868 (English translation, 1868)  
*Marianne*, 1876 (novella; English translation, 1883)  
*Historic and Romantic Novels*, 1900-1902 (20 volumes)

### SHORT FICTION:

*Contes d'une grand'mère*, 1873, 1876 (*Tales of a Grandmother*, 1930)

### DRAMA:

*Théâtre complet de George Sand*, pb. 1877 (5 volumes)

### NONFICTION:

*Lettres à Marcie*, 1837  
*Lettres d'un voyageur*, 1837 (*Letters of a Traveller*, 1847)  
*Un Hiver à Majorque*, 1841 (*Winter in Majorca*, 1956)  
*Histoire de ma vie*, 1854-1855 (20 volumes; *History of My Life*, 1901)  
*Questions d'art et de littérature*, 1878  
*Questions politiques et sociales*, 1879  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did George Sand's "convent life" have any appreciable influence on her writing?
- What is the relationship between love and friendship in Sand's fiction?
- Are Sand's male characters presented as full personalities?
- What was the basis of Sand's interest in the United States?
- Are Sand's happy endings too contrived?
- Is Sand's reputation based more on her life than on her writing?



## SAPPHO

**Born:** Eresus, Lesbos, Asia Minor (now in Greece)  
c. 630 B.C.E.

**Died:** Mytilene, Lesbos, Asia Minor (now in Greece)  
c. 580 B.C.E.

*The most famous of ancient Greek lyric poets, Sappho wrote intense love poems, often addressed to other women—hence the term “lesbian,” alluding to Lesbos, her home.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Since ancient times, the title of Tenth Muse has been bestowed upon Sappho (SA-foh), linking her with the nine goddesses who ruled the arts. Little is known about her, except that she lived during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. in what is now Greece, probably spending most of her life at Mytilene on the eastern edge of Lesbos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea off the west coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). She was of noble birth, her father died when she was six, and both her mother and her daughter were named Cleis; she also had two brothers, Charaxus (who appears in several poems) and Larichos, and possibly a third, Eurygyos.

Sappho is said to have married Cercolas, a wealthy man from the island of Andros. According to tradition, she was once banished to Sicily with other aristocrats—perhaps with her husband or brothers, because of their political activities—but later returned to Mytilene, on Lesbos.

Sappho was a contemporary of the poet Alcaeus (died 570 B.C.E.), another resident of Lesbos, whose poems, unlike hers, record violent politics and class struggles of the day. As did Alcaeus, Sappho wrote in the native Aeolian dialect. The two use similar meters, though Sappho's poems are more varied.

Sappho's most typical extant poems address other women. According to a long-standing hypothesis, Sappho enjoyed the company of younger

female companions who were her students at a school or salon she conducted for well-born girls, instructing them in poetry, music, and the arts. Such informal societies were fashionable in Lesbos at the time. The theory, with some support in her verses, is that Sappho's fame attracted student followers from near and far. Another theory sees Sappho as a cult priestess, with female followers. In the twentieth century, editor and translator Denys L. Page and others regarded both theories as inadequately based guesswork.

At any rate, Sappho's poems suggest that she was emotionally involved with women. In particular, she addresses love poems to girls named Anactoria, Gongyla, and Atthis. The Roman poet Ovid, who knew a large body of her writings, records that Sappho “taught how to love girls.” Though Sappho's reputation as a homosexual dates from classical times, “lesbian” was not used until 1908 to mean female homosexual. Ironically, no proof exists that Sappho was homosexual.

Years after her death, Sappho was parodied and ridiculed among the men who wrote and attended Greek comedies: At least six lost plays are known to have represented her pejoratively. From this body of writings sprang various insulting legends: She was unattractively short and dark, (“a nightingale with misshapen wings”); she was a prostitute; she committed suicide by jumping from the Leucadian Cliff because of unreciprocated love for Phaon, a ferryman. Such stories are discredited.

Sappho's life story is tangled with the narrative of how history has treated her writings. The humanistic Greeks and Romans generally showed tol-

erance or mild disapproval, an attitude that turned into bitter rejection in the Middle Ages, when rigid Christian morality dominated Europe. In 380 C.E., the bishop of Constantinople ordered her works burned, and in the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII orchestrated burnings of her books in Constantinople and Rome. Such eradications, along with the general loss of ancient manuscripts during the medieval period, ensured that not a single copy of Sappho's collected poems survived into the Renaissance.

No other poet, then, is so famous on the basis of such a slender body of verses. Sappho's reputation now rests on surviving fragments—some seven hundred lines—of a canon that once included, perhaps, as many as five hundred complete poems. Quite possibly she never wrote the poems down herself; at any rate, it seems that her verses may have been transmitted orally, through a long series of lyric singers like herself, before being gathered and published. Centuries after Sappho lived, in the era of Alexandrian scholarship that included the third and second centuries B.C.E., her poems as they currently existed were probably first published, in eight or nine volumes. Sappho apparently composed in a wide variety of forms: love lyrics, odes, drinking songs, marriage songs, funeral songs, songs of friendship, epigrams, and elegies. In some Greek plays she is presented as propounding riddles and puzzles.

The Romans published Sappho's writings in two now-lost editions, one arranged by subject, the other by metric structure. When Dracon of Stratonicea published *On the Metres of Sappho* (c.180 C.E.), he used an Alexandrian source, also now lost. Down through Greek and late Roman times, Sappho was frequently quoted and imitated by other writers. From the end of the Middle Ages until 1879, her poems were known only from what others quoted. Since then, additional fragments of the poet's text have been discovered—some in Egypt on papyrus shreds used to stuff mummified crocodiles.

Only one complete poem is extant. It always begins any collection of Sappho's verse, and is also therefore known as the first ode. The rest are fragments, varying from coherent units to single lines and words. The Groden edition, for example, lists meager, separately numbered fragments such as "oh . . . / Adonis . . .," "bringing pain," "a dress," "danger," and "soap." Such remnants cloak the

mystery of their lost contexts. It is intriguing to contemplate whether future scholarly finds will restore more of Sappho's texts.

## ANALYSIS

Characteristic features of Sappho's poetry show themselves in what remains of her work. First, her poems are lyrics—brief, deeply felt, personal verses to be sung or chanted to the strumming of a lyre. Sappho's persona always represents the poet in some aspect, but without conveying any certain biographical truth. Even when the poet has another character in a poem call her "Sappho," that may be merely a rhetorical device. Still, Sappho's poems use "I" recurrently in ways that seem to depict the poet's own intense emotions.

All ancient Greek poets wrote in meter. Greek meter was not accentual but depended, rather, upon the lengths of syllables—some long, some short—as sung texts still do. Sappho's writings feature recurring stanzas, similarly shaped but with varying line lengths. The poet often uses a four-line stanza, employing a meter named after her. Its first three lines have eleven syllables each, and the last line has five. Modern English editions often translate Sappho stanzaically but not metrically.

Most longer poems by Sappho imply a lyric speaker/singer and, often, a listener. A dramatic situation—a past or present action or relationship—can usually be reconstructed; this often gives the poem an implicit subtext. Sappho's lyrics, nonetheless, seem frank and simple. They use vivid imagery, a logical and often argumentative structure, and sensual subject matter that is treated discreetly and with quiet reserve. Sappho is never bawdy. Though some critics contend that Sappho uses no true metaphors, she often employs surprising comparisons. Her writings are not heavy with allusions, though she mentions Hera and Aphrodite in her works.

Sappho writes in the vernacular of Lesbos, generally without foreign or artificial words or topical content. Hers is not a literary dialect. Sappho's poetry is similar to everyday speech, raised to great expressiveness.

One feature of Sappho's lyrics is the anxiety of her persona, who typically displays some heightened emotional state. Her lyrics are not the calm, pretty ones that belong to the stereotype of the classical. Their emotional intensity, in fact, shares much with Romantic writers.



Sappho's body of writings has grown over the years as new fragments have been found and editorial sleuths have deciphered them. In the process, her editors and translators have created divergent renderings. The Volger edition (1810) lists 120 poems or fragments; the Edmonds edition (1958) lists 191; and the Lobel and Page edition (1963) includes 192. Translator Suzy Q. Groden reduced the number to 133 in 1966, arguing that in some cases too little exists to make sense, that some lines are really editors' interpolations, and that other elements come from sources that state: "Sappho said that . . ." but do not record her exact words.

Another problem is that any translated lyric loses its particularity—its connotations and nuances of meaning—and much of its form and style. Sometimes different translations become almost like different poems.

In addition to love lyrics addressing women, Sappho wrote various other poems in which she describes the beauties of nature, chides her brother for his involvement with an Egyptian courtesan, sympathizes with her daughter because of restrictive laws forbidding excessive adornments, and represents bridesmaids ridiculing a male wedding attendant. Even Sappho's smaller verse fragments are interestingly provocative, like bits of songs heard fleetingly.

### "ODE TO APHRODITE"

**First published:** First century C.E., copying older sources (collected in *Poems of Sappho, with Historical and Critical Notes, Translations, and a Bibliography*, 1925)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet prays to Aphrodite, goddess of love, for divine help in gaining the affection of a woman who might be unresponsive.*

The only surviving full text of any of Sappho's lyrics, the "Ode to Aphrodite" is a prayer, an apostrophe written in seven Sapphic stanzas of idiomatic Greek. The poem's subject is a driving passion, bordering on physical and mental illness, that the poet feels for an unnamed woman.

Most stanzas are parts of the poet's address to

Aphrodite, pleading for help. The poem reviews present and past experiences involving the goddess and the supplicant. Finally, in stanza 6, a vaguely drawn female who might resist Sappho's advances comes hazily into view. The poem thus involves three women: a potential lover (the poet), her unsuspecting beloved, and a goddess who might intercede on the would-be lover's behalf. The poem excludes men—even the male gods.

The poet uses rich imagery and figures to characterize herself and Aphrodite. Flattering epithets describe and involve the love goddess. The speaker entreats the goddess to become the speaker's comrade-in-arms in the anticipated love struggle. Stanza 3 shows the poet imagining Aphrodite leaving heaven and coming to earth in a chariot drawn by sparrows. Sparrows in ancient times implied promiscuity and indiscriminate procreation—sparrow eggs were an aphrodisiac—so their association with a love goddess makes sense. Sappho may also be implying that an ordinary pair of sparrows might be drawing down the invisible goddess to aid her.

Details suggesting war and mental distress cluster in the poem. The poet's suffering is depicted in a blending of intense feeling and objective detachment, as if Sappho were fully absorbed in love's pain but concurrently able to stand back and watch it happen.

The poem reveals Sappho's anguish as, lovesick, she fears that her beloved may not return her love, a thought that weakens and paralyzes her. Sharp imagistic details include the speaker's cry, a darkening of all creation, the image of the ailing poet, victimized by madness and desires, needing deliverance. Meanwhile, the beloved sits somewhere, passive, awaiting what the speaker and goddess may do to her. The prayer hints, disconcertingly, at sexual assault.

The poet's universal theme is the power of love to wreck a life and to render lovers powerless. A modern reader may see the figure of Aphrodite as an irrelevant allusive decoration and may consider Sappho's supplication to this Greek deity as merely a way for the poet to voice the feelings that drive and dominate her. The pain and careful scheming of the speaker's confession ring true, however, as does the closing suggestion that love is war.

Readers may hardly know where their sympathies should lie, with the speaker or with the be-

loved. The poet makes her feelings almost palpable and expresses no apology. Her detachment allows readers their private moral judgments.

**“HE IS MORE THAN A HERO:  
OR, FORTUNATE AS THE  
GODS HE SEEMS TO ME”**

**First published:** First century C.E., copying older sources (collected in *Sappho: A New Translation*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Sappho watches a seated couple and, in an aside, addresses the woman—expressing envy for the suitor wooing her.*

“He is more than a hero,” another apostrophe to a woman, comprises seventeen lines and is reasonably complete but probably lacks its original ending. Two quite divergent translations of its opening lines illustrate the creative roles that Sappho’s translators play.

He is more than a hero  
He is a god in my eyes—  
the man who is allowed  
to sit beside you—he  
who listens intimately  
to the sweet murmur of  
your voice . . .

(Barnard)

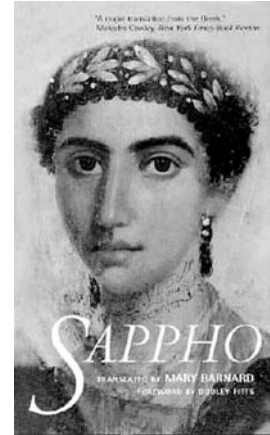
Fortunate as the gods he seems to me, that man  
who sits  
opposite you, and listens nearby to your sweet  
voice

(Page)

The poem is cited, almost complete, in the essay *On the Sublime*, written by the Greek critic labeled Longinus. The poem was freely adapted by the Roman poet Catullus in one of his lyrics. Moreover,

Catullus addressed poems to a woman whose pseudonym is Lesbia, and he employed Sapphic meter. In vivid, lush, and sensuous imagery, Sappho reports how she watches a man in conversation with a woman and identifies with him to an extent that weakens her. The imagery of the poem dramatizes the couple whom the poet observes. The man, sitting by the woman, hears her murmuring voice and her laughter.

The poem’s imagery, expressing and appealing to various senses, seems to make the poet’s own emotions almost palpable. Mary Barnard renders Sappho’s lines this way:



. . . I can’t

speak—my tongue is broken;  
a thin flame runs under  
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears  
drumming, I drip with sweat;  
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than  
dry grass . . .

The poem closes by noting the closeness of “death”—a traditional conceit for orgasm.

The poem has been interpreted as a wedding song but seems more likely to be a lyric expressing personal passion. Sappho’s indirect approach, focusing initially on the man and not the beloved woman, adds an original twist. Sappho’s identification with the “heroic” male is provocative for what it may suggest about her psychology. The care-free, chattering girl whom this man woos provides a dramatic foil, contrasting with the distraught speaker.

**“TO AN ARMY WIFE, IN SARDIS:  
OR, SOME SAY A HOST OF  
HORSEMEN”**

**First published:** First century C.E., copying older sources (collected in *Sappho: A New Translation*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This love note to the poet’s friend Anactoria calls her finer than any military pomp.*

Translator Mary Barnard has titled this twenty-line fragment “To an Army Wife, in Sardis.” Despite missing text, the sense of the Greek is clear; interconnected images suggest a completed poem.

Fearing that “you, being far away, forget us,” Sappho addresses a love letter to a favorite woman, Anactoria, comparing her favorably to the impressive sight of armies in motion and fleets in full sail. The poem—an answer to the riddle: What is finest on earth?—has a three-part structure. Its beginning lines assert that the finest is “whatever one loves,” even though “some” think that military displays are “finest.” To argue the poet’s answer, the middle section of verse offers, as supporting evidence, the story of the mythological Helen and her irrational love for the Trojan prince Paris. The concluding section provides the name of the speaker’s beloved and makes a comparison that echoes the beginning. The poet says that hearing the friend’s footstep and seeing the “light glancing” in her eyes would impress her more than witnessing “glittering” armies on the move. Throughout, hyperbole characterizes the poet’s emotion and flatters the implied auditor, the girlfriend. The poem hints of a past friendship or love affair.

The example of Helen, used in an approving sense, seems problematic, since Helen was usually pictured as a bad wife who forsook her husband and fled with Paris. In so doing, she triggered the Trojan War, which makes the poems’ references to the fine sight of armies and warships particularly telling. When Sappho says that Helen “wandered far” with her lover, she suggests “going astray.” These subtleties create a memorable tension and ambiguity.

The poem has a feminist edge because it belittles the masculine business of waging war, finding in the poet’s girlfriend something finer than all of Greece’s military might. If Anactoria is in fact a military wife, the conceit implies that the friend surpasses her husband and all his war-waging colleagues. Another implication in the poem is that one woman’s actions, Helen’s, required the response of thousands of male troops. An implicit theme—make love, not war—underscores the poem.

### SUMMARY

Sappho’s writings reveal a skilled lyric poet whose technique dramatizes emotional life, particularly her deep feelings for her female friends. It is a tragedy that Sappho’s works have been almost entirely destroyed and lost. Though her roles as an assertive woman and as the original “lesbian” have tended to bring her notoriety from the time of the Greeks to the present, Sappho endures as a powerful artist. Her poems make tangible the raw-nerve feelings that people in love have endured throughout time.

*Roy Neil Graves*

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#### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How can a knowledge of musical construction help the reader to understand the form of Sappho's poems?
- In what senses was Sappho a "lesbian"?
- Barring future discoveries concerning her work, why will it remain difficult to judge Sappho as a poet?
- William Wordsworth wrote of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Is there evidence that Sappho had a similar view?
- What poets have been particularly influenced by Sappho?

# JOSÉ SARAMAGO

**Born:** Azinhaga, Ribatejo, Portugal  
November 16, 1922

*Saramago is Portugal's most important modern author and a major world writer, noted for a complex and innovative stream-of-consciousness style that blends surreal fantasy and everyday reality to form enigmatic political, moral, and psychological fables.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Azinhaga, a small village northeast of Lisbon, Portugal, José Saramago (sah-rah-MAH-goh) was descended from landless farmers called de Sousa; he was mistakenly registered, however, under the family nickname of “saramago,” a wild radish used by peasants to stave off hunger. Saramago was raised in Lisbon after the age of two, but he still spent much time in the country with his maternal grandparents, who helped shape his character and his ideas. His grandfather Jerónimo in particular regaled the young boy with stories both from the past and from his imagination. At the age of twelve, Saramago's parents enrolled him in a vocational school to train as an auto mechanic; after graduating in 1939, he worked for two years at a car repair shop. He spent his free time, however, at the public library, pursuing an interest in literature he had developed while at school.

By the time Saramago married Ilda Reis in 1944, he was working in the Social Welfare Service as an administrative civil servant. In 1947, Saramago's only child, Violante, was born, and that same year he published his first novel, *Terra do pecado* (the land of sin). In 1949, Saramago was forced out of his civil service post for political reasons, but by the end of the 1950's he found happier employment as a production manager for a publishing company, a position that lasted twelve years and led to friendships with some of the major Portuguese writers of the time. For the next thirty years he worked as a translator, magazine critic, newspaper columnist, and editor. He also became more politically active, and at the end of the 1960's he joined the Communist Party, even though it was forbidden under the fascist dictatorship of Portuguese President Antó-

nio de Oliveira Salazar. Saramago did not return to creative writing until 1966, when he published *Os poemas possíveis* (possible poems). In 1970, he published another book of poems and shortly afterward two collections of his newspaper articles.

In 1970, Saramago and his wife divorced, and he began a sixteen-year relationship with the Portuguese writer Isabel da Nóbrega. In 1972 and 1973, he worked for the newspaper *Diário de Lisboa*, for which he wrote essays and commentary on political issues. The fairly peaceful Carnation Revolution of 1974 through 1976, which overthrew the longtime regime of Salazar, brought about a period of Communist control, with the result that in 1975 Saramago became an editor of the newly nationalized newspaper *Diário de Notícias*. While the revolution ushered in a new era in Portuguese society, the Communist Party did not sustain its favored status, and Saramago was dismissed from his job, effectively ending his journalistic career.

This setback proved to be a turning point in Saramago's career as a writer, since it permitted him to concentrate exclusively on imaginative writing. He returned to the novel form in 1976, publishing *Manual de pintura e caligrafia* (*Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, 1994). In the early 1980's, as he approached the age of sixty, Saramago rapidly began to receive both national and international recognition, beginning with the publication of *Memorial do convento* (1982; *Baltasar and Blimunda*, 1987), a fantastic and irreverent love story set during the Portuguese Inquisition. This novel gained him international recognition and marks the beginning of both his major creative phase and his greatest success. Capping this decade of rising literary fortunes, Saramago remarried; in 1988, he



took as his second wife the Spanish journalist Pilar del Rio, nearly thirty years his junior, who became the official translator of his books into Spanish.

In addition to his dedication to his imaginative writing, Saramago also developed a role as a public intellectual, speaking out on various political and religious issues. He interrogated the Catholic Church in such plays as *In nomine Dei* (pb. 1993), which won Portugal's Grand Prize in Theater but also created controversy, including a boycott by Portuguese national television. An outspoken atheist, Saramago became the center of another stormy controversy with the publication of his novel *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* (1991; *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, 1993), in which his characters questioned the virtue of the Christian god and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Political and religious conservatives brought pressure on the government, which refused to allow the novel to compete for the 1992 European Union Ariosto Prize, for which it had been nominated. The novel was eventually allowed to remain under consideration because of international protest, but the cultural and political firestorm prompted Saramago and his wife to relocate to the Spanish island of Lanzarote in the Canary Islands.

In 1998, Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Swedish Academy, which reached its decision with unusual unanimity. Because of his affiliation with the Communist Party and his outspoken political views, the choice of Saramago was the occasion for another series of outcries from some religious sources and political venues. The Swedish Academy, however, emphasized not Saramago's politics but his genius for producing emotionally powerful and strikingly innovative modern fables, and it is on this basis that his work also found favor from both the reading public and literary critics.

## ANALYSIS

One of the most distinctive aspects of Saramago's work is his writing style, which he developed beginning with the 1980 novel *Levantado do chão* (raised from the dead), which won the City of Lisbon Prize. It was in this novel that Saramago developed his distinctive narrative style, featuring winding sentences of considerable length contained within long, fluid paragraphs. Adding to the flow of his narrative was his deliberate omission of capital

letters and the quotation marks that are supposed to mark the difference between narrative and dialogue. Saramago also moved freely between the first and third person, shifting his tenses and points of view unexpectedly and arbitrarily, so that there is a sense of following a process of consciousness rather than a conventional, realistic narrative. He also rarely used periods, creating instead a series of run-on sentences or clauses joined by commas, giving the effect of alternative or internal reality.

Saramago's narratives do not feature simply one consciousness but are peopled by numerous characters who articulate his themes in a blend of voices. These voices contribute a range of competing perspectives, and yet they also mysteriously merge with an authorial consciousness or presence associated with the voice of Saramago himself, which can be melancholy but is also skeptical and even sarcastic in its irreverent interrogation of a variety of evils.

This flow of description, dialogue, and commentary in Saramago's novels produces a dreamlike or even trancelike effect; in their calm, literal acceptance of the surreal and the fantastic, Saramago's narratives also have some connection to the folktales, folk wisdom, histories, and imaginative memories associated with the stories his grandfather told him when he was a young boy. Layered into this melange of fantasy and reality in Saramago's work is a strong essayist aspect, which he has identified as one of its most salient characteristics. As a result, even as Saramago's work became noted for its artistic invention, experimentation, and originality, he also gained a reputation for introducing dark and dissident editorials into his work, which occasionally created controversy in a Portuguese society in which political and religious conservatives still held much power and influence.

Saramago's work in the 1980's reflected a newly liberalized Portuguese society intent on interrogating its past; Saramago's contributions to this new mood were novels that subverted past history by means of surreal alternative or speculative fantasies. His historical novel *Baltasar and Blimunda* reconsidered the Portugal of the eighteenth century, and the speculative fantasy *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* (1984; *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, 1991) was rooted in the context of the corruptions and brutalities that came about with the rise of the Salazar dictatorship. In 1986, *A jangada de pedra*

(*The Stone Raft*, 1994) continued this idiom. Written in the year of Portugal and Spain's inclusion in the European Community, this novel noted that Europe was nevertheless still divided between a dominant north and a disadvantaged south, something Saramago solved imaginatively by allowing Portugal and Spain to mysteriously separate from the mainland and float off into the Atlantic Ocean toward Latin America to reinvent themselves and redress previous colonial abuses. In 1989, *História do cerco de Lisboa* (*The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, 1996) revised Portuguese history by eliminating the Spanish Inquisition and the discovery of America. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* concluded this series of audits of Portugal's heritage, after which Saramago moved from writing freewheeling historical novels to fiction that came to resemble mysterious fables or modern dystopian speculative novels, set in either a possible future or an alternative reality that suggests dire possibilities.

The major novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995; *Blindness*, 1997), for instance, depicted an unidentified but typical modern society destroyed by an uncanny epidemic of blindness. In 2004, Saramago deployed his master metaphor of blindness in a different way with a sequel, *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* (*Seeing*, 2006), in which an entire society lodges a protest against its government by casting blank ballots in an election. *Todos os nomes: Romance* (1997; *All the Names*, 1999) is a dreamlike parable in which Saramago explores the theme of identity, inspired by his decision to investigate the records of his older brother Francisco, who died when Saramago was two years old. This theme of lost identity was further developed in the 2002 novel *O homem duplicado* (*The Double*, 2004), in which a man encounters someone who is his exact twin, throwing into doubt his conviction that he is in any way a unique human being, and, as in *All the Names*, depicting a deadening, inhibiting society that has eradicated the old idea of the self. *All the Names*, *The Double*, and *A caverna* (2000; *The Cave*, 2002) constitute what Saramago came to see as a sequence of three novels addressing an end-of-millennium crisis in Western civilization. A satire in which a shopping center becomes the sacred space of a radically consumerist society, *The Cave* warned against a new, emerging form of totalitarianism connected not to the previous European regimes of communism or fascism but to capitalism and the free mar-

ket. This trilogy of fables frequently features nameless characters in an alternative reality that crushes all individual initiative, but the novels also demonstrate moments in which individuals distinguish themselves in a redemptive way through love, virtue, self-knowledge, or spiritual insight. In a similar paradox, Saramago also blends magic and the supernatural with an opposing perspective rooted in literary realism and political commentary.

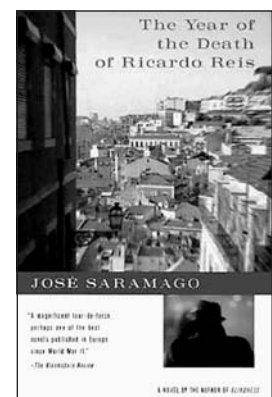
## THE YEAR OF THE DEATH OF RICARDO REIS

**First published:** *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*, 1984 (English translation, 1991)

**Type of work:** Novel

*After a long absence, a Portuguese poet returns to his homeland, which has changed dramatically due to the rise of European fascism.*

*The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* has been praised as the finest of Saramago's series of surreal historical novels. The novel's protagonist is a literary alter ego named Ricardo Reis, a persona originally created by the great Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa. Reis has been in exile in Brazil since 1919, but after he learns of Pessoa's death he returns to Lisbon in 1935, in the early years of a rising totalitarianism found not only in a Portugal but also in the regimes of Francisco Franco, Benito Mussolini, and Adolf Hitler elsewhere in Europe. As Reis wends his way through the labyrinthine streets of Lisbon, he is visited twelve times by the ghost of Pessoa; the two have lively discussions on many subjects, including art, life, politics, religion, and history. These conversations act as an intriguing and complicated counterpoint to an emerging fascistic modern world marked by fear and inhibition. When Reis pays a visit to the



cemetery where Pessoa is buried, it appears to be a mirror image of the city itself, whose inhabitants have become deadened and passive.

Because the difference between the living and the dead is slowly dissolving throughout the novel, it is unsurprising that in the end Reis is led to the graveyard to take his place with Pessoa. While in one way this conclusion suggests that Reis has taken his place among the living dead of fascist-ruled Lisbon, on the other hand he has secured a transcendent bond with Pessoa that is a counterpoint to the terrible times in which he was living. Reis was content to live a contemplative life in a crisis-torn Lisbon because fascism was simply not a part of his interior life. His inner exile into a poetic, literary, and philosophical world secures an identity untouched by the evils of the day.

## BLINDNESS

**First published:** *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, 1995  
(English translation, 1997)

**Type of work:** Novel

*With the exception of one woman, an entire society is afflicted with an epidemic of mysterious white blindness that threatens it with utter collapse.*

*Blindness* depicts an epidemic of blindness that turns everything to an inchoate whiteness, bringing chaos and criminality in its wake. In an effort to cope with the epidemic, the authorities imprison the blind in a former mental institution, where the scarce and putrid food, the crowding and the uncleanness is made worse by the increasingly bad behavior of its blind inmates. The breakdown of morality reaches its nadir with the rise of a band of blind men who victimize and

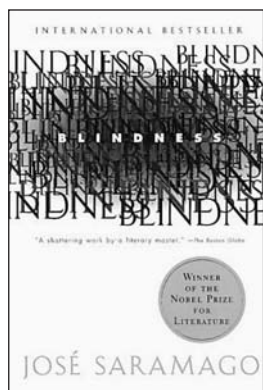
humiliate the other prisoners through such criminal activities as theft, rape, and terror. It becomes

clear that the literal blindness of the city's inhabitants is a metaphor for a pathology of consciousness that locks an individual within himself or herself, depriving that person of the ability to perceive his or her own humanity and the humanity of others. A base spiritual condition, this psychological blindness leads to a degraded world of predators and prey, criminals and victims, with no hope of change or progress.

Within this collapsing society, however, a little group of seven people begin to work together to retain their humanity. The leader of this group is the Doctor's Wife, who has loyally accompanied her ophthalmologist husband to the asylum even though she herself is not blind. She is not only helpful in organizing the group and keeping it safe and fed, she also possesses the greatest spiritual lucidity. Blindness in this regard is associated with the death of the heart and with the loss of concern for other human beings; the sight of the Doctor's Wife, on the other hand, is associated with compassion and the retention of a moral compass.

Yet another woman in the group, a prostitute known as the Girl With Dark Glasses, begins to also demonstrate some of the Doctor's Wife's virtues, voluntarily assuming the care of a small boy and an old man, with whom she falls in love. Another important character is the Dog of Tears, who encounters the Doctor's Wife at a moment of deep despair; when they gaze into each other's eyes, they connect on a deep personal level, a reminder that in this novel it is the seeing eyes that represent the sacred core of each living being. With the return of her morale, the Doctor's Wife manages to secure safety for her little group by leading them to her apartment, a site of both literal and spiritual cleansing as they bathe on her terrace in the rain.

The social conditions elsewhere, however, worsen, with increasing scarcity, disorder, and confusion. It is at this point that the Doctor's Wife wanders into a church, which is filled with people praying for rescue or consolation. The Doctor's Wife sees that all the eyes of the statues of religious figures in the church have been covered by a priest, who has dramatically blinded the icons upon whose existence the people have come to depend. When the Doctor's Wife tells the congregation that the holy images are blind, they abandon the church, and soon everyone regains their sight, as if the demystification of these religious symbols is



somehow linked to the subsequent miraculous recovery that allows the people in the city to restore social order. The powers associated with the images in the church have been transferred to human beings, who are free to use their own moral and spiritual resources—their own eyes.

## ALL THE NAMES

**First published:** *Todos os nomes*, 1997  
(English translation, 1999)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young man working in the powerful Central Registry of Births, Marriages, and Deaths finds he is obsessed with a woman whose name and general statistics he has found on one of the registry's index cards.*

*All the Names* is a nightmarish dystopia filled with nameless people, except for a man known only by his first name, Senhor José, who works in the lowest echelon of a labyrinthine organization called the Central Registry of Births, Marriages, and Deaths. It is the task of this rigid and highly controlled bureaucracy to produce index cards that contain essentially meaningless and impersonal sets of dates and statistics about each individual in the city. The lonely José, whose hobby is to collect information about famous or notorious people, slips into the registry to pick up five more cards, and by chance he also collects a sixth card that records the name and birth, marriage, and divorce dates of an ordinary thirty-six-year-old woman, whose name is never revealed. José feels compelled to learn all he can about her, looking for information from various sources, including the woman's parents, and even breaking into her old school at night to find further information. In attempting to recover the unknown woman's identity, José realizes that he has fallen in love with her, but almost at once he lo-

cates the final piece of information about her—her death certificate. Understanding that she has committed suicide only a few days earlier, he is left with one final destination, the General Cemetery where she is buried.

The godlike Registrar, who heads the organization, has placed José under surveillance the entire time, but instead of punishing him for his independent investigation, he praises him for bringing positive new changes. The Registrar declares that the files of the living and the dead will no longer be separate, and that the living person's recovery and recognition of the lives of those who have gone before will be, in its way, an almost metaphysical act of resurrection. Additionally, in returning her name to the files of the living, Senhor José feels he is also recovering the nobility of his own identity, transforming himself from an unprepossessing cog in the machine of the Central Registry into someone of considerable worth.

## SUMMARY

All of José Saramago's novels are a complicated blend of light and dark, including both hope and despair and sustaining an authorial perspective that is unsentimental but nevertheless sensitive to both the sins and the suffering of humanity. Saramago's later novels build on his earlier deployment of the fantastic and supernatural, but they are more clearly symbolic or allegorical in nature. Saramago's later writing does not address the past but speaks to the present, but it is a present in which his earlier experiences of the totalitarianism of the Salazar regime have not disappeared but have been inventively reinstated in new and mysterious ways. While his work contains strong elements of pessimism, the various evils that Saramago explores never completely destroy the critical intelligence or sympathetic imagination of individual characters, raising the possibility that the human spirit may triumph over even the most dire adversity.

Margaret Boe Birns

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Discuss the way in which his many years living under the repressive Salazar regime has shaped José Saramago's work.
- How do the inner lives of Ricardo Reis and Senhor José act as a contrast or alternative to their external circumstances?
- Discuss the way in which the Doctor's Wife, Senhor José, and Ricardo Reis demonstrate admirable qualities despite their dehumanizing circumstances.
- Discuss the meaning and value of Saramago's innovative writing style, including his use of symbol and allegory and his deployment of fantasy and the supernatural.
- Compare and contrast the three "crisis worlds" of *Blindness*, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, and *All the Names*. What caused these societies to become weakened or ruined?
- Discuss the theme of the overlapping worlds of the dead and the living in *All the Names* and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.
- Why does Saramago avoid the use of names for his characters in *Blindness* or *All the Names*?



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# NATHALIE SARRAUTE

**Born:** Ivanovo Voznesensk (now Ivanovo), Russia

July 18, 1900

**Died:** Paris, France

October 19, 1999

*Sarraute, whose spare novels traced the subtle undercurrents of human relations, was a primary theorist and practitioner of the French New Novel.*

## BIOGRAPHY

The few facts that Nathalie Sarraute (sah-ROHT) relinquished about her life were as sparse and unembellished as her prose. She was born on July 18, 1900, in Ivanovo-Voznessensk, Russia. Her parents, Ilya Tcherniak and Paulina Chatounowski, had met while studying in Geneva to avoid the harassment that prevented Jewish students from attending Russian universities under Nicholas II. After her father obtained a doctorate in chemistry, they returned to Russia, where he opened a textile factory.

When she was two years old, her parents divorced. Sarraute lived with her mother in Paris for most of her early years and spent summers with her father in Russia. She spoke French from early childhood. Her mother remarried several years later and moved to St. Petersburg, Russia, where she collaborated on a literary review and published fiction under the masculine pseudonym of Vichrowski. From a young age, Sarraute had a desire to write that was enhanced by her acquaintance with writers and scholars. At age seven she timidly presented her first novel to a writer friend of her mother. His review, that she should learn to spell before she wrote novels, kept her from writing for almost thirty years.

Sarraute moved with her father, who had also remarried, back to Paris in 1910. As a result of her frequent travel between France, Switzerland, and Russia, Sarraute became fluent in Russian and French at an early age. She was a bright student who consistently earned high marks and was encouraged to pursue her own career by her father. She was reared in a community of Russian émigré intellec-

tuals who fostered her love of music, languages, and literature.

After obtaining her *baccalauréat* and *licence* from the Sorbonne in 1920, she began work in history at Oxford. The following year she traveled to Berlin to study sociology. In 1922, she entered the University of Paris Law School, where she met Raymond Sarraute, whom she married in 1925. She was an active member of the Paris bar from 1925 to 1941. In this period, she also had three daughters: Claude, Anne, and Dominique. Sarraute later said that she greatly valued her legal training. The oral arguments of the court proceedings helped her to reproduce the attacks and parries of spoken discourse in her fiction.

In 1932, Sarraute began to devote herself to writing fiction. She tried to publish a collection of short sketches, *Tropismes* (1939, revised, 1957; *Tropisms*, 1963), with little success. *Tropisms* was finally accepted for publication in 1939, but it passed virtually unnoticed by the critics. During World War II, she was forced to take refuge in the town of Parmain. Sarraute adopted the name Nicole Sauvage and hid from the Germans by posing as the governess of her own daughters. She did, however, continue writing during this period. Her novel *Portrait d'un inconnu* (1948; *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, 1958) was completed in 1946 and published with a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, the noted existentialist writer with whom she corresponded during the war.

Sarraute attempted to explain her unorthodox and, at first, unpopular approach to writing in a collection of essays entitled *L'Ère du soupçon* (1956; *The Age of Suspicion*, 1963). These essays explained

her ideas about the development of the novel and her affinities with contemporary trends in France. She also continued to write fiction, publishing *Martereau* in 1953 (English translation, 1959), *Le Planétarium* (1959; *The Planetarium*, 1960), and *Les Fruits d'or* (1963; *The Golden Fruits*, 1964). *The Planetarium* was well received, and *The Golden Fruits* was awarded the International Prize for Literature. Sarraute also wrote several plays for the radio, including *Le Silence* (1964; *Silence*, 1969) and *Le Mensonge* (1966; *The Lie*, 1969). Her later novels include *Entre la vie et la mort* (1968; *Between Life and Death*, 1969), *Vous les entendez?* (1972; *Do You Hear Them?*, 1973), and *"Disent les imbéciles"* (1976; *Fools Say*, 1977).

Sarraute traveled widely and visited the United States several times to lecture or to serve as a writer-in-residence at various college campuses. Her works were translated into more than twenty languages, and all of her novels were translated into English. Her work deeply influenced the post-World War II generation of writers and readers. She died in Paris on October 19, 1999, at the age of ninety-nine.

## ANALYSIS

Sarraute described her first attempts to write as the almost spontaneous expression of certain sensations, or inner movements, that seemed to underlie everyday speech and gestures. Her aim to seize elusive sensations and preverbal impressions before they enter the consciousness led to an exploration of entirely new modes of expression.

Sarraute described *Tropisms* as a collection of short texts or fragments, containing "all the raw material that I have continued to develop in my later works." They have been, perhaps more aptly, called prose poems or microdramas. The only unifying link in the series of compact vignettes is the concept of tropisms. Tropisms (a biochemical term) are the instinctive movements of primitive organisms that expand or contract under external influences, such as light and heat. She noted similar impulses on a psychological plane that "form the infinitesimal but complex dramas concealed beneath our overt words and acts." Sarraute explores human psychology, then, from a new direction. Rather than depicting unique characters or remarkable individual traits, she describes universal drives and impulses that may not be spoken but that motivate communication and behavior.

Tropisms remained an essential element in Sarraute's writing throughout her career. She presented glimpses of anonymous lives in undistinctive settings and unremarkable situations. Particularities of time, place, and character were absent in Sarraute's works. To reinforce the concept of generality, Sarraute most frequently used the third person, and often the third-person plural. Characters were not named but were referred to as "he," "she," or "they." They are the representatives and guardians of society's values. Although some of Sarraute's sketches may appear as character portraits of certain types of individuals, typical of moral or allegorical tales, it is more accurate to describe her characters as incarnations of a tropism.

In Sarraute's fiction, there is never a unique individual, and there is rarely a special event. Her fiction does not describe a memorable occasion but a habitual mode of behavior or a repeated experience. Even in her more complex novels, there are no specificities of time or place. Her characters exist apart from any social or historical framework. The settings are usually generalized interiors or dreary urban landscapes. Space is confined, just as the characters are restricted. Natural landscapes, aside from a suburban park, rarely figure in Sarraute's works. Internal drama is the focus of her works, so that even minute actions or a few hastily spoken words generate an entire series of repercussions.

Satire is a strong element in Sarraute's writing. The mediocrity of the middle class is most often the target of Sarraute's irony. The frivolous concerns and useless occupations of women are frequently ridiculed as well. Even educated women, in what may be a gesture of self-directed irony, are depicted as bluestockings. Children are already lacking the will to resist the gray conformity of their elders. Throughout her works, there is an abundance of obedient, docile children, who will eventually grow into self-restrained members of society. They adopt the proper behavior and conventionalized attitudes of the adults who groom them to guard the status quo.

The worldview in Sarraute's work is generally pessimistic. There are few moments of delight and no open spaces or bright colors. Her characters are completely isolated, each living a compartmentalized existence. The loneliness of the human condi-

tion can be mitigated only by social interaction, but this contact often brings frustration and disappointment. The need to communicate often leads to hysteria or to debasement. For Sarraute (and for Fyodor Dostoevski, whom she greatly admired), the subsurface of human relationships is a ceaseless struggle for domination and control. Yet the form of Sarraute's novels—dialogues, conversations, and subconversations—substantiates the need for interaction.

In almost every sketch in *Tropisms*, there is an undercurrent of fear and misunderstanding. Misunderstanding results from a breakdown in communication or a failure to envision another's point of view. The inability to comprehend another person is unavoidable and results in the return of Sarraute's characters to their own private spheres. Tentative efforts at contact are usually rebuffed. Behavior is a puzzle without pattern or design, and her characters are watchful for threats to their conception of reality and security.

A surface of clichés, trite words, and trivial observations attempt to render the human condition bearable in Sarraute's work. Language cloaks the truth rather than revealing it. Clichés represent the tacit censorship that people perform on unpalatable or improper issues of human existence, such as sex, illness, and death. Clichés are not what everyone thinks or feels, but rather "what people force themselves to think and feel to avoid the vertigo of reality." The illusion of exerting control over other people or events is provided by the trite expressions of common consensus. A shared vocabulary reinforces the sense of community and excludes those who do not know the language. Repetition figures prominently in Sarraute's writing. Her characters, by repeating the same platitudes, shape existence into a "small, gray pellet." The yearning to escape society's code of communication is occasionally expressed in frustration or annoyance but is rarely achieved.

*Tropisms* exhibits much of the same thematic material and narrative method of Sarraute's later work. Its anonymity of characters, absence of plot, elimination of historical contingencies, and lack of physical description are characteristic of Sarraute's subsequent works. Furthermore, the ambivalent need for contact, the misunderstandings that complicate relationships, and the clichés that mask existential anguish continue to be of primary im-

portance in her later writings. The concept of tropisms, or the subsurface dynamics of human interaction, unified all Sarraute's fiction and represented a unique contribution to the development of the novel in the twentieth century.

## THE PLANETARIUM

**First published:** *Le Planétarium*, 1959  
(English translation, 1960)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A middle-class couple schemes to obtain the apartment of an elderly aunt and enter the fashionable, artistic community of Paris.*

*The Planetarium* has often been called Sarraute's masterpiece and has certainly been her most popular work. The novel is the most approachable of her works for several reasons. There is more evidence of a plot than in her other works, and the progression of the action is linear. There are also recognizable characters who can be identified not only by name but also by personality and relationships. Although there are several narrators, the shift in narration occurs at the beginning of each chapter, making the thoughts of the characters easier to apprehend.

The novel is structured around Alain Gumier's attempt to gain possession of his aunt's apartment and to ingratiate himself with the writer Germain Lemaire. This may seem to be very unpromising material for a novel, but Sarraute succeeds in extracting a range of emotional possibilities from the banal concerns of daily living. The disproportion between the insignificant events and the enormity of the tropisms that emerge from them is apparent from the opening chapter. In the opening pages, Alain's Aunt Berthe excitedly anticipates the installation of an oak door only to become distressed by the cheap nickel-



plated knob and by the nonchalance of the workmen. Typical of the primitive emotions characteristic of tropism, the trivial event assumes cataclysmic proportion, and the workmen become an advancing army of conquerors. Material objects, like the oak door or the leather chairs that Alain's mother-in-law later tries to give him, acquire symbolic importance and bring the tropisms to life.

Alain's maneuvering to ingratiate himself with Lemaire acts as a counterpart to his machinations to acquire the apartment. After a visit at his in-laws, where he unsuccessfully narrates the story of his aunt's oak door and is pressured to accept the leather chairs, which represent the mediocrity and established social code of his wife's parents, he visits Lemaire. Although he feels insecure, he repeats the story of his aunt's oak door to the appreciative response of the famous writer. Alain triumphs by attaining the friendship of Lemaire and the possession of his aunt's apartment.

The omniscient narrator provides information necessary for a reader's understanding, but the reader of *The Planetarium* must learn to recognize each character by his or her emotional states. Because the story is told by several characters, there is no single objective reality but a multiplicity of subjective responses. Certain psychic responses, however, are common to all of them: the desire for approval and acceptance, the need for security, and the wish to dominate rather than be dominated.

Stereotypes become modes of classification in an attempt to achieve stability. Ultimately, ideals and stereotypes alike disintegrate. By the end of *The Planetarium*, Alain loses faith in Lemaire and the symbol of the planetarium becomes clear. Alain had constructed an artificial universe in which Lemaire was a stellar figure surrounded by a cluster of satellites. Seen from a distance, she seemed fixed and perfect. A closer perspective brought change and motion. The planetarium Alain describes late in the novel was a false ideal, a shadowy projection of the real world.

## THE GOLDEN FRUITS

**First published:** *Les Fruits d'or*, 1963 (English translation, 1964)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel traces the discovery, rise to fame, and fall into obscurity of a fictional novel, The Golden Fruits.*

A parable of artistic creation, Sarraute's work describes the reputation of a fictional novel with the same title as her own. *The Golden Fruits* is first discovered by an elite few, championed by the critics, becomes popular with the masses, and then is gradually discredited and forgotten except by a few discriminating readers. Sarraute's work, however, is not a treatise about artistic values but a work about human interaction.

The book, a mundane object, prompts primitive emotional responses of snobbery, timidity, and fear. Sarraute ironically expresses the inner anxieties of even the most self-assured critics. The various shades of response are conveyed through spoken conversation and the counterpoint of unspoken subconversation. Conversation is not linked to individual characters, and the connection between conversations is also difficult to establish.

The response to the fictional book *The Golden Fruits* rarely emerges as genuine—direct contact between the audience and the aesthetic object—but as false, preconditioned by others' responses to the object. Sarraute catalogs the false response to the fictional novel as she depicts its rising popularity. In the first chapter, an elite group of connoisseurs is enthusiastically discussing *The Golden Fruits* as they do other works of art that have not achieved popular recognition. Their membership encourages conformity and security of shared aesthetic tastes. Domination is prominent in the discussions. Members of the group who did not initially like *The Golden Fruits* ignore their convictions to join in praising the work.

As it gains popularity, each passage of the fictional book is mined for meaning. The book is described in increasingly exaggerated terms until it is finally said to mark a turning point in literature. The hierarchy that passes pronouncements on what is considered art overwhelms the reader's ca-



capacity for independent response since opinions are assigned before the reader encounters the book itself. The critics see in *The Golden Fruits* only what they wish to see and are dismayed when they cannot find examples in the text to support their assertions. Two critics withdraw from society and speak of the text in such obscure terms that they draw their own following.

The foundation of Sarraute's satire of critical pretentiousness is the subjugation of the creative to the critical process. The artist's importance is diminished by classifying him or her according to predecessors. After the popularity of *The Golden Fruits* has subsided, the eccentricities of the author are cited as proof of the inauthenticity of the manuscript. The earlier unanimity of acclaim is matched by unanimity of repudiation. A lone voice finally questions the authority of the group. This voice advocates personal experience of the work.

Sarraute's novel concludes that there are no sure values in art just as there is no truth in a world of inauthentic values and mass opinions. The yearning for certainties in judgments of art is part of the search for security that characters pursue in Sarraute's other works. In the end, the reader of Sarraute's novel knows no more about the content of *The Golden Fruits* than do the fictional readers and critics depicted in her work.

## SILENCE

**First produced:** *Le Silence*, 1964 (first published, 1964; English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Radio play

*An anonymous storyteller interprets and questions the silence of his audience.*

Central to Sarraute's work is the desire to communicate and the exploration of language as a vehicle for this communication. Words and silence can trigger an entire range of reactions. In a novel, the silence of a character may not be noticeable, but the prolonged silence of an actor is obvious and disturbing to an audience. In *Silence*, the nonparticipation of one person brings up an entire realm of uncertainties.

As the play opens, M.1 has interrupted himself in the midst of describing an unspecified, exotic locale. He suddenly becomes embarrassed by his romantic effusion and believes that he hears the laughter of Jean-Pierre. Jean-Pierre, however, has been silent throughout the story and continues to remain speechless. Although M.1 is the first to feel intimidated by Jean-Pierre's silence, the group of anonymous spectators begins to feel uncomfortable as well. The force of M.1's reactions to the silence awakens their unease.

During the course of the play, M.1 variously interprets Jean-Pierre's silence, often in a contradictory manner. Jean-Pierre is alternately described as timid, arrogant, sensitive, anti-intellectual, or stupid. In this way, M.1 is transformed into a potential creator who composes and revises a personality for his spectator. The personality he devises for Jean-Pierre arises out of his imagination rather than his observations. M.1 is also keenly aware of aesthetic form, suggesting that his story might have been more acceptable if it were presented differently, for example within a beautifully bound book.

All of M.1's maneuvering is part of a desperate attempt at communication and approval, but he repeatedly confronts a wall of silence. His attentions to his audience shuttle between pleasing Jean-Pierre and courting the rest of his audience. The others gradually mirror M.1's obsession with the silence of Jean-Pierre. Whereas they first tried to distract him, they later attempt themselves to induce Jean-Pierre to speak. His silence eventually develops into perceived superiority.

The silence of Jean-Pierre serves, however, as the impetus for discussion and speculation (and is, after all, the basis of the play). In the play, there is a compulsive need to fill the silence even if it is with hackneyed expressions and clichés. It is only through words that individuals emerge from their isolation. Jean-Pierre remains an enigma and, therefore, an outsider. For that reason, he comes to instill fear and anxiety in the group.

When Jean-Pierre finally speaks, his words are so trivial that he in effect says nothing. Instead of reveling in the power he acquired during his silence, he was oblivious to it. The reactions of M.1 and the others are finally revealed as entirely subjective. Once Jean-Pierre speaks, he is reintegrated into the group and the incident is immediately forgot-

ten. M.I.'s denial of the episode perhaps suggests that the play itself is a dramatization of nonverbal reactions to everyday events.

### SUMMARY

Sartre wrote in his preface to Nathalie Sarraute's novel *Portrait of a Man Unknown* that "by tenaciously depicting the reassuring, dreary world of the inauthentic, she has achieved a technique which makes it possible to attain, over and beyond the psychological, human reality in its very *existence*." Sarraute consistently revealed the minute fluctuations of human behavior and perception in her works. A few words, spoken casually, form the nucleus of an entire internal universe. Evoking spontaneous memories and unconscious drives, the subtle psychology in her novels went beneath the surface of individual idiosyncracies to uncover universal human impulses.

Pamela Pavliscak

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*Les Fruits d'or*, 1963 (*The Golden Fruits*, 1964)  
*Entre la vie et la mort*, 1968 (*Between Life and Death*, 1969)  
*Vous les entendez?*, 1972 (*Do You Hear Them?*, 1973)  
*"Disent les imbéciles,"* 1976 ("Fools Say," 1977)  
*Tu ne t'aimes pas*, 1989 (*You Don't Love Yourself*, 1990)  
*Ici*, 1995 (*Here*, 1997)

##### SHORT FICTION:

*Tropismes*, 1939, revised 1957 (*Tropisms*, 1963)  
*L'Usage de la parole*, 1980 (*The Use of Speech*, 1980)  
*Ouvrez*, 1997

##### DRAMA:

*C'est beau*, pb. 1973 (*It's Beautiful*, 1981)  
*Théâtre*, pb. 1978 (*Collected Plays*, 1980)  
*Pour un oui ou pour un non*, pb. 1982

##### RADIO PLAYS:

*Le Silence*, 1964 (*Silence*, 1969)  
*Le Mensonge*, 1966 (*The Lie*, 1969)

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Nathalie Sarraute's early experience as a writer exemplify the fact that writers sometimes receive the wrong advice about their work?
- Explain the basis of Sarraute's use of the term "tropisms."
- Are the children in Sarraute's works better described as victims of social norms or people who do not exercise their capacity for independence?
- Is Sarraute's view that "language cloaks the truth rather than revealing it" exceedingly pessimistic?
- Determine the symbolic possibilities of some of the material objects in *The Planetarium*.
- What is your interpretation of Jean-Pierre's silence in the radio play *Silence*.

*Nathalie Sarraute*

NONFICTION:

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*Enfance*, 1983 (autobiography; *Childhood*, 1984)

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## JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

**Born:** Paris, France

June 21, 1905

**Died:** Paris, France

April 15, 1980

*Trained during the 1920's as a philosopher, Sartre emerged over the ensuing three decades as a major literary figure, thanks mainly to vivid fictional and dramatic illustrations of his developing existentialist philosophy.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Close kin on his mother's side to the Alsatian doctor and musician Albert Schweitzer, Jean-Paul Sartre (sahr-truh) was born on June 21, 1905, in Paris, France. He lost his father, Jean-Baptiste Sartre, to disease not long thereafter. His mother's name was Anne-Marie. Somewhat frail of health himself, with bad eyesight that would only grow worse with the passage of time, Jean-Paul grew up in a household filled with women and books, deciding early in life to assert his masculinity through writing. Consistently rewarded for his scholastic diligence with honors and high grades, the young Sartre moved quickly from the prestigious Lycée Henri-Quatre to the highly selective École Normale Supérieure, intent upon a career in teaching and scholarship. Already writing, discarding manuscripts that failed to suit him or his readers, Sartre uncharacteristically failed his first attempt, in 1928, at the highly competitive *agrégation*, or teaching credential. Yet he achieved the highest score when he retook the examination the following year. The person with the second-highest score, Simone de Beauvoir, herself a budding writer, would remain Sartre's companion and frequent consort for the rest of his life, even as both rejected the "bourgeois" option of marriage as too confining.

Increasingly involved in leftist politics, Sartre during the 1930's taught philosophy at Le Havre—

presumably the Bouville, or "Mudville," of *La Nausée* (1938; *Nausea*, 1949)—and elsewhere, with occasional breaks for travel and writing on the proceeds of a small inheritance. Although Sartre's creative writing was directed toward prose fiction, he also became increasingly interested in the theater, befriending the distinguished actor and director Charles Dullin, who, as a member of the famous "Cartel des quatre," had helped to revolutionize French dramatic art during the decade immediately following World War I. Encouraged by the success of his short story "Le Mur" ("The Wall"), dealing with the Spanish Civil War of 1936 through 1939, Sartre proceeded to complete and publish *Nausea*, drawing considerable attention as an "experimental" novelist.

Drafted into the French army at the start of World War II, Sartre was captured shortly after the fall of France in 1940 and was briefly held prisoner by the Nazis. It was during his incarceration that Sartre wrote his first play, ostensibly for the entertainment of his fellow captives. Although that effort would never be published and never again performed, Sartre, upon his release, continued to write plays along with essays and fiction, finding in the drama a particularly effective vehicle for his developing thought. Indeed, it was through such plays as *Les Mouches* (pr., pb. 1943; *The Flies*, 1946) and *Huis clos* (pr. 1944, pb. 1945; *In Camera*, 1946; better known as *No Exit*, 1947) that Sartre's philosophy of existentialism first became widely disseminated, few readers having the time or patience to attempt the massive treatise *L'Être et le néant* (1943;

*Being and Nothingness*, 1956), in which Sartre exposed his ideas for an audience of fellow philosophers. By the end of World War II, thanks mainly to his plays, Sartre had become a celebrity, his existentialism an international intellectual “fad” subject to frequent misinterpretation.

By about 1950, Sartre had abandoned prose fiction for good, leaving unfinished the fourth volume of the projected tetralogy *Les Chemins de la liberté* (1945-1949; *The Roads to Freedom*, 1947-1950). Increasingly involved in political journalism as founding editor of the periodical *Les Temps modernes*, with columns reprinted in several volumes under the collective title *Situations I-X* (1947-1975), Sartre had also begun work on literary-biographical studies of French authors. Throughout the 1950’s, however, Sartre would continue to write plays with varying degrees of success. *Les Séquestrés d’Altona* (pr. 1959, pb. 1960; *The Condemned of Altona*, 1960) showed Sartre at the top of his playwriting form but would in fact be his last original effort for the stage.

Although personally committed to Marxism, Sartre continued to refuse “card-carrying” membership in the Communist Party, preserving a spirit of critical independence even as he emerged, worldwide, as the most visible and articulate spokesperson of the radical French Left. In 1964, shortly after publication of his selective autobiographical essay *Les Mots* (1964; *The Words*, 1964), Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he declined for reasons both political and personal. Having long since adopted as his daughter a sometime mistress more than thirty years his junior, Sartre died on April 15, 1980, in his native Paris, with Simone de Beauvoir at his side.

## ANALYSIS

Almost from the start, Sartre tended to dismiss most existing literature as “inauthentic,” both politically and psychologically. Among the earlier literary critics of Marxist orientation, he distrusted the literary “canon” most of all because it depended upon the capitalist system for its mere existence: Publishing is, after all, a business like any other, and publishers are most likely to print, and profit from, books that encourage the political status quo. At a deeper level, Sartre questioned also the “authoritative” stance of traditional prose fiction, in which characters and their actions are fully “determined” by an omniscient narrator. “The

Wall,” a short story written and collected in *Le Mur* (1939; *The Wall, and Other Stories*, 1948), serves in many ways to illustrate Sartre’s developing theories of fiction, most fully expressed in the lecture-essay *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1947; *What Is Literature?*, 1949), which calls for a new kind of narrative prose more closely related to “real life.”

Told in the first person by a most “unprivileged” narrator, a political prisoner awaiting execution at sunrise along with two others, “The Wall” limits exposition to Pablo Ibbieta’s own sensations and immediate reactions. The other characters, Pablo’s captors and fellow prisoners, are seen and portrayed through Pablo’s eyes alone. Militant and “macho,” Pablo tries hard to face death “cleanly” and with dignity, and he is increasingly alone with his thoughts as he observes the other prisoners’ reactions with more than a hint of disapproval. Detained for further questioning after the two others have been shot, Pablo suddenly finds humor in the situation and sends his captors off on a “wild goose chase,” deliberately misleading them as to the whereabouts of his fellow-conspirator Ramon Gris. In a “trick” ending amply prepared by the preceding action, Pablo’s practical joke will “backfire,” leaving him physically alive but psychologically “dead” after Franco’s troops find and kill Gris exactly where Pablo told them to look. Truth, implies Sartre, is frequently stranger than fiction; fiction, in turn, must reflect that strangeness in order to remain honest or “authentic.”

By the time *Nausea* was published in 1938 Sartre had moved somewhat away from “pure” literary experimentation toward the deliberate use of creative writing as a vehicle for his philosophical speculations. In addition to the later stories eventually collected with his first in *The Wall, and Other Stories*, he was recording observations for future use in his projected tetralogy of novels, to be known collectively as *The Roads to Freedom*. Thereafter, Sartre’s prose fiction tended to reflect his philosophy, and vice versa. It was not long, however, before Sartre found in the theater an even more effective outlet for his ideas, given the relative ease and simplicity of expressing character and behavior on the stage. In *The Flies*, upon which he began work not long after his release as a prisoner of war, Sartre managed to illustrate his concepts of “bad faith,” “freedom,” and “choice” in terms instantly grasped by audiences already familiar with the Orestes legend.



For at least fifteen years prior to the first performances of *The Flies*, Parisian audiences had grown accustomed to the use of ancient myths, preferably Greek, as vehicles for stimulating commentary on contemporary themes, thanks mainly to the plays of Jean Giraudoux. In planning and executing *The Flies*, Sartre used Jean Giraudoux's *Electre* (pr., pb. 1937; *Electra*, 1952) both as inspiration and as target, implicitly rebutting many of the older playwright's conclusions through the metaphysics of existentialism. Whereas Giraudoux portrays Electra as a heroine of sorts, Sartre sees and shows her as a coward who prefers the "comfort" of assumed guilt to the "anguish" of responsibility for her actions. There was also, for the play's first audiences, a strong political message implicit in Orestes' existential defiance of the prevailing social order, likened to that of France under Nazi occupation. For his next dramatic effort, best known in English as *No Exit*, Sartre touched only briefly on political concerns, preferring instead to present the psychological implications of his thinking. There, even more than in *The Flies*, his ideas began to take on a life of their own, readily grasped by spectators who knew or cared little about philosophy.

As expressed through his early plays as well as in his essays, Sartre's mature thought draws sharp distinctions between passive "essence" (a form of being that humanity shares, at birth, with rocks, plants, and animals) and active "existence," a uniquely human form of purposive being too often denied. Of all beings, Sartre maintains, the human form alone is capable of choosing itself, of creating itself through continuous acts of choice. Those human beings who refuse to choose or take responsibility for choices already made are guilty of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), a fundamental dishonesty that is in its own way a form of death, at the very least a denial of "authentic" human life. Only after physical death, argues Sartre, should it be possible to define an individual human life, as the sum total of that individual's actions; until that time, any effort to identify or fix labels to oneself, to complete the utterance "I am . . ." with a predicate noun or adjective, amounts to premature living death, a refusal of the change and growth peculiar to authentic human life, or existence. By contrast, those who opt for existence are too busy choosing themselves for labels to be applied either by themselves or by the Other.

The Other constitutes for Sartre the greatest threat to individual freedom and responsibility. Each individual, as the Other, tends to limit "my" freedom by applying labels, by attempting to fix "my" essence; blind to "my" intentions, the Other sees and judges only "my" actions, intent upon completing the sentence "He/she is . . ." with a predicate that is tantamount to murder. Too often, contends Sartre, the individual responds—consciously or unconsciously—to such pressure by accepting, or in rare cases even seeking, the Other's definition, often masquerading as approval.

Combining psychology with sociology and politics, Sartre's mature expression, both creative and expository, continued to reach readers and spectators long after he had stopped writing either plays or fiction. A decade or so after Sartre's death, the rapid decline of European communism, an event he never foresaw and would no doubt have deemed impossible, cast serious doubt upon his powers as a political "prophet." Notwithstanding, the power of his best creative work remains intact, fit to challenge generations yet unborn when it was written.

## NAUSEA

**First published:** *La Nausée*, 1938 (English translation, 1949)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An intellectual records the growing awareness of his own futility.*

Among the earliest of Sartre's extant writings, begun and tentatively completed as early as 1936, *Nausea* first took shape in Sartre's mind under the working title "Melancholia," inspired by Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, which depicts a disrupted and disturbed "thinker." Art, either as product or as process, looms large throughout the work, casting into the foreground Antoine Roquentin's growing sense of superfluity in a hostile, or at least indifferent, universe.

Invited on an archaeological expedition to Cambodia, the trained historian Roquentin, a former archaeology teacher, undergoes a kind of reverse "conversion" upon viewing a Khmer statuette

displayed to him as enticement to make the trip. Suddenly confronted with the immortality or “solidity” of art, Roquentin instantly feels himself “fluid” and “viscous” by contrast. Refusing his colleague’s offer, Roquentin decides to seek immortality of his own through completion of a scholarly project begun some years earlier. His subject is the life and career of the Marquis de Rollebon, a minor

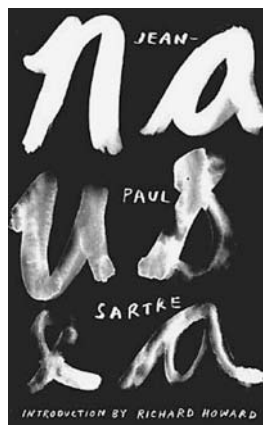
figure in the French Revolution, whose papers his descendants have willed to the public library at Bouville, a port city closely modeled upon Le Havre. Spending much of his time in the public library of Bouville, the remainder in cafés and restaurants, Roquentin becomes increasingly, disgustingly aware of his own weight upon the earth’s surface, of his “existence” as object in a world threaten-

ingly filled with other “existing” objects both living and inanimate. (Significantly, the term “existence” had not yet assumed for Sartre the exact meaning to be applied in his later works.) In one early scene, Roquentin feels that a public park is “smiling” at him, and not in a friendly manner; similarly, a glass half-filled with beer appears to be “watching” him, and his own hand will loom before him as a sudden, monstrous presence, a beached crustacean with hair.

Roquentin’s disorientation, deriving at first from his awareness of nature (including his own) and art, soon extends to include his fellow mortals, living and dead, whose “existence” seems quite as unjustifiable as his own: If he, Roquentin, is superfluous, “in the way,” so, too, are those who have accepted without question their right to “exist.” Particularly odious to Roquentin’s developing consciousness are the capitalist founding fathers of Bouville, immortalized by commissioned portraits hanging in the town museum, and an acquaintance from the library known only as the Auto-didact or Self-Taught Man. A minor bureaucrat, the Self-Taught Man claims to have been converted to “humanism” (in Roquentin’s view, a kind of fuzzy-minded socialism) while serving in World

War I; spending most of his free time in the library, he attempts to fill the gaps in his formal education by reading all the books in alphabetical order, as listed by author’s name. Near the end of Roquentin’s journal, the Self-Taught Man will stand cruelly revealed as a barely repressed ped-erast, banished from the library for life by the Corsican security guard, who has never really liked him anyway.

Thanks to the “alienation effect” of Roquentin’s increasing maladjustment, *Nausea* quickly moves beyond psychological “case history” to scathing—and enduring—social satire, extending outward to embrace politics and art. Also singled out for satire, besides the Self-Taught Man and the bourgeois founding fathers, is Roquentin’s former mistress Anny, a second-rate performing artist whose “real-life poses” he has until now found rather entertaining. In his current lucid state, however, Roquentin quickly sees through Anny’s life of artifice, finding himself quite unable to participate, as before, in her perpetual game playing. Continually haunted by the contingency of human life as opposed to the permanence and “immortality” of certain works of art—including a ragtime tune that he first heard whistled by American soldiers in France in 1917—Roquentin allows his journal to dwindle, lamenting his inability to write a novel that, unlike his unfinished biography of Rollebon, might have enabled him to “make sense” of his experiences.



## No Exit

**First produced:** *Huis clos*, 1944 (first published, 1945; English translation, 1947)

**Type of work:** Play

*United in Hell, a mismatched trio of characters reconsider their botched lives.*

Perhaps the clearest articulation of Sartre’s developing existentialist philosophy, *No Exit* is notable also as a rousing piece of theater, stocked with good “parts” and memorable lines, a perennial favorite with amateur and semiprofessional drama groups. Into a high-rise Hell drawn more from science fiction than from Scripture and presided over

by a nearly silent functionary are cast three recently deceased characters, two women and a man, whose paths never crossed in life and likely never would have. Joseph Garcin, first to arrive, is a journalist whose pacifist convictions are somewhat at odds with his carefully cultivated “macho” image and his exploitative attitude toward women. Next to arrive in the carefully furnished room is Inès Serrano, a postal clerk who makes no secret of her lesbianism or of her parallel disregard for men. The third and last arrival, a vain, stereotypical “brainless blonde” with aspirations toward snobbery, soon polarizes the action by attracting both Garcin and Inès with her charms.

In its themes and language, *No Exit* often moves too close to popular culture, “soap opera” in particular, to be taken seriously as literature. Freely trading accusations, insults, and flirtations as each character seeks to get his or her own way, the trio quickly attracts and holds the spectator’s attention for approximately one hour’s uninterrupted playing time, taking turns as torturer and victim as they act out Sartre’s conviction, restated as a line in the play, that Hell is other people.

With the exception of Estelle Rigault, whose perceived beauty allowed her aunt and guardian to “marry her off” at an early age to a much older man with money, and whose subsequent life was led among the idle rich, the new inhabitants of the room with no exit are hardly surprised to find themselves in Hell; they are surprised only by the details of the place. Garcin and Inès have both died violently, in ways that both feel they richly deserved: Garcin has mistreated his wife, and Inès considers herself responsible for the death of a cousin whose wife became first her lover and subsequently her killer in a murder-suicide. Only Estelle has died a “natural” death, yet she, too, is soon revealed as a murderess, having drowned her newborn “love child,” whose father was too poor to be considered as a future husband.

Throughout the action to follow, it becomes clear that Estelle, although technically guilty of murder, is in Hell mainly because of her passive, unexamined life, lived in “bad faith” and in hopes of pleasing the Other, whomever he/she may be. Garcin, shot by firing squad at the start of World War II, ostensibly for his pacifist convictions, still fears that he might have been considered a deserter and a coward, having been arrested in flight

between Brazil and Mexico City. Inès Serrano, more lucid than the other two about their collective situation, may seem at first glance to be ill-placed in Sartre’s selective Hell, serving so often as the playwright’s “voice” and spokesperson. On reflection, however, it becomes clear that Inès has chosen her own Hell, never having questioned society’s judgment of her homosexual lifestyle; at the time, “damned women” was a common euphemism to denote lesbians, and Inès has accepted the label at face value, without ever trying to reach beyond it in search of genuine self-discovery. Still, it is Inès who will conduct most of the “hearing behind closed doors,” capturing the sense of the original French title. Garcin will remain torn between the two women, Estelle, who, trying hard as ever to please, appeals to his body, and Inès, whose superior intellect dares him to prove that he was not a coward when he fled Rio. Estelle could care less about Garcin’s cowardice, “so long as he kisses well”; Inès, meanwhile, covets Estelle’s affections and keeps Garcin’s advances eternally in check as she renders her “verdict” upon his motivations for leaving Brazil. The characters are indeed dead, the “bottom line” has been drawn beneath their lives, and nothing can be changed. Imprisoned in a fake-looking room that replicates the “bad faith” and falsehood of their lives, they are “doomed” to torture one another for all eternity. “Okay, let’s get on with it,” says Garcin as the curtain falls.



## SUMMARY

As the primary exponent and expositor of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre drew considerable attention from worldwide media during the years following World War II. He consolidated his reputation with memorable essays and with well-crafted plays that brought his philosophical ideas to instant but durable life on the stage, permanently establishing such concepts as “authenticity” and its opposite, “bad faith,” in the common consciousness. His first novel, *Nausea*, discovered outside France only after his plays had reached a wide audi-

ence, had already influenced the development of the French novel and continues to command attention as a minor masterpiece of psychology and satire in prose fiction.

David B. Parsell

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*La Mort dans l'âme*, 1949 (*Troubled Sleep*, 1950; also known as *Iron in the Soul*; previous three novels collectively known as *Les Chemins de la liberté*, in English *The Roads to Freedom*)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*Le Mur*, 1939 (*The Wall, and Other Stories*, 1948)

#### DRAMA:

*Les Mouches*, pr., pb. 1943 (*The Flies*, 1946)  
*Huis clos*, pr. 1944, pb. 1945 (*In Camera*, 1946; better known as *No Exit*, 1947)  
*Morts sans sépulture*, pr., pb. 1946 (*The Victors*, 1948)  
*La Putain respectueuse*, pr., pb. 1946 (*The Respectful Prostitute*, 1947)  
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*Les Mains sales*, pr., pb. 1948 (*Dirty Hands*, 1949)  
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*Kean: Ou, Désordre et génie*, pb. 1952, pr. 1953 (adaptation of Alexandre Dumas, *père's* play; *Kean: Or, Disorder and Genius*, 1954)  
*Nekrassov*, pr. 1955, pb. 1956 (English translation, 1956)  
*Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, pr. 1959, pb. 1960 (*The Condemned of Altona*, 1960)  
*Les Troyennes*, pr., pb. 1965 (adaptation of Euripides' play; *The Trojan Women*, 1967)

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*L'Être et le néant*, 1943 (*Being and Nothingness*, 1956)  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What future for human possibilities does Jean-Paul Sartre see?
- Sartre's *No Exit* has been called good theater but not "to be taken seriously" as literature. Can this highly successful play be considered nonliterary?
- What are the burdens imposed by Sartre's theory of freedom?
- Which does Sartre consider most important in life: art or political philosophy?
- Which does Sartre portray most convincingly in his fiction: existential success or failure?
- Is it necessary to study Sartre's philosophical works to understand his version of existentialism?

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## DOROTHY L. SAYERS

**Born:** Oxford, England

June 13, 1893

**Died:** Witham, Essex, England

December 17, 1957

*Widely recognized for her meaningful contribution to modern detective fiction, Sayers also had unimpeachable credentials as a theologian and a Dante scholar.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in Oxford, England, on June 13, 1893, Dorothy Leigh Sayers (SAY-urz) was the daughter of the Reverend Henry Sayers and Helen Leigh Sayers. Her father was a classical scholar and, at the time of her birth, headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral Choir School. Her mother was the grandniece of Percival Leigh, one of the founders of *Punch*. Sayers always included the initial "L" in her name.

As often happened in the 1890's, Sayers's father was financially responsible for his mother, two unmarried sisters, and a brother who had been crippled by a stroke. He probably also considered himself responsible for their moral and spiritual well-being. When their Brewer Street house could no longer contain them all, they moved to Lincolnshire, where the Reverend Sayers took up the position of a country clergyman.

Sayers lived most of her childhood in an isolated rectory in the Fen Country. Her mother settled happily into the life of a country minister's wife. Her father believed that a good Christian helped others, and he often used his own funds to help his parishioners, even opening his house when necessary. Bluntisham Rectory was enormous but, even in those times, somewhat primitive. While candles and oil lamps lit the rooms, they also threw strange shadows on the wall. Hot water had to be hauled upstairs and then back down again. The entire fam-

ily found it quite a change from their house in Oxford, where they had running water and gaslights. Nevertheless, Sayers had plenty of fresh air and large lawns on which to play whenever her friends came to call.

Her early schooling took place at home. Her father usually taught boys and saw no reason to teach Sayers differently from the way he taught them. By the age of four, she could read; by six she had begun to learn Latin. She was taught French by a governess, and she also mastered German. Sayers entered the Godolphin School when she was sixteen. Her only knowledge about boarding school had come from books, and Godolphin did not quite fit her preconceived notions. Girls, however, were allowed some freedom there, and one of her essays was published in the school magazine. Measles, complicated by pneumonia, forced her to leave Godolphin for a time. She did return to school but chose to continue her studies at home. She won the Gilchrist Scholarship to Somerville College in Oxford.

Oxford challenged Sayers. She made friends and was able to expand her heretofore limited social opportunities with men. Of course, the rules governing behavior between the sexes were strictly enforced, but even so, she developed an unrequited passion for the choirmaster. She was graduated with distinction.

Teaching was one of the few professions considered suitable for women in the early 1900's. Sayers obtained a teaching post in Hull High School for Girls and taught modern languages there from 1915 to 1917. In 1917, her father exchanged par-

ishes with another clergyman and moved even deeper into the country. There was little for Sayers to do there except read and take long walks. The solitary walking scandalized her father's parishioners, as did her occasional cigarette. In those days women simply did not walk about unescorted and certainly did not smoke. She escaped from the country by taking a job with Blackwell's, a publishing house. Blackwell published her poems.

Back in Oxford, she met and fell in love with the man that some contend was the prototype for her most famous detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. Eric Whelpton did not return her love. Surprisingly, she took a post as his assistant at a very prestigious boys' school, Les Roches, in France. Rather than marry a French woman, Whelpton fled back to London, leaving Sayers to wind up his affairs and bring back his luggage.

She set about earning a master of arts degree and was among the first women ever to receive that degree from Oxford. In 1921, Sayers took a job in an advertising agency and achieved some success as an advertising copywriter. Some of her experiences there can be found in *Murder Must Advertise* (1933).

Her first book, *Whose Body?*, was published in 1923. She continued to work in the advertising agency, writing books at night. Despite an often grueling schedule, she published eighteen mysteries; in the next twenty years, she earned an incomparable reputation as a writer of detective fiction.

While all of this was going on, Sayers became romantically involved with a fellow writer named John Courson. Their affair lasted little more than a year. Following that, she quickly entered into a relationship with a motorcycle mechanic and became pregnant. She gave birth to a son in a private clinic and asked an eccentric cousin to rear him. She did not mention her son to even her dearest friends; he did not learn of his mother's identity until much later. In 1926 she married Captain Oswald Arthur Fleming. Fleming called himself a major but was always addressed as "Mac." Mac drank a lot and did not work very much. Perhaps that was one reason why their relationship was somewhat distant. Nevertheless, they stayed together until his death in 1950.

Sayers had stopped writing detective novels by the beginning of World War II. Nevertheless, she commented on the dramatic world events in the "Wimsey Letters" published by *The Spectator*. She

also returned to her first love: scholarly works. She wrote a series of plays about the life of Christ that focuses on the personalities of Jesus and his Apostles, and authored a translation of Dante that emphasized his unique qualities.

Sayers was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Durham. Several of her biographers relate how much she enjoyed that honor. Yet when she was offered an honorary doctor of divinity degree, she declined. Some people suppose that she felt unworthy of that honor because of her unorthodox lifestyle. One could also conjecture that she did so out of deference to the values that she had learned from her father.

Never very health conscious—she was overweight and was also a heavy smoker—Sayers died of a heart attack in Witham, England, on December 17, 1957. Sayers lived in interesting times. She was seven years old at the turn of the century, and when World War I broke out she was twenty-one. She lived through the Victorian era, the Jazz Age, and on into the Atomic Age. Her fiction reflects these momentous changes.

## ANALYSIS

The times in which she lived influenced Dorothy L. Sayers's characterizations as she merged manners and mores into her novels. When she first went to Oxford, women had to be accompanied by a chaperone to their lectures and tutorials. Although women earned degrees, Oxford did not confer them until 1920. Sayers was one of the first women to earn a master of arts degree from Oxford, and her female characters reflect the pioneering attitude necessary for that achievement.

In *Unnatural Death* (1927; also known as *The Dawson Pedigree*), Sayers introduces an ancillary sleuth, Miss Climpson. Alexandra Katherine Climpson, a spinster who has lived most of her life in boardinghouses, is a feisty lady with a large measure of common sense and an adventurous spirit. Over the course of Sayers's novels, Climpson becomes the head of an unusual detective agency that masquerades as a typing bureau and is staffed only by women. In other novels that follow, Lord Peter Wimsey often uses operatives from Climpson's agency to help him solve crimes. *Unnatural Death* revolves around women, one of whom has the distinction of being one of Sayers's most vicious and amoral criminals.

In a time when women were shielded by men from the unpleasant aspects of life, Sayers did not hesitate to introduce controversial, even unmentionable, themes into her books. For example, in *Unnatural Death* some of the characters are lesbians. In *Whose Body?* Lord Peter Wimsey observes a unique religious and biological anomaly that proves that the corpse is not Sir Ruben Levy.

Sayers's biographers and critics often speculate about Lord Peter Wimsey, her most famous detective. Some of them assume that he is an amalgam of the men with whom she was romantically involved, usually selecting Eric Whelpton and John Cournos to prove their point. Yet when Sayers talked about Wimsey she often joked. She once remarked that she interviewed a large number of people before she employed him. She admitted endowing him with the luxuries that she could not afford. A full-blown imaginary playmate for grownups could be another explanation for Wimsey. Given Sayers's sense of time and place, she would have been perfectly capable of inventing a man who would respect women, believe that they were morally and intellectually his equals, and accord them the dignity that they deserve.

Sayers aged and evolved the personalities of her characters. Four novels pairing Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey—*Strong Poison* (1930), *Have His Carcase* (1932), *Gaudy Night* (1935), and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937)—best illustrate this aspect of her writing. Both Vane and Wimsey grow emotionally as their love story develops. *Busman's Honeymoon* is the last full-length novel in which Wimsey appears, although Wimsey and Vane are together again in two short stories. Wimsey welcomes his firstborn son in "The Haunted Policeman." He and Vane find the time to explore a local secret and play practical jokes with their three children in "Talboys." It has been said that Sayers received from her fans an extraordinarily large number of letters giving the Wimseys advice on child rearing. In any case, Sayers reviews the latest theories of rearing children in "Talboys" and concludes that children need to be treated as individuals.

That she was taught by her father and shared her early education with boys undoubtedly helped her to form her underlying assumptions about her identity, abilities, and prospects. That she achieved two college degrees in a time when women generally did not go on to higher education helped her

to develop a sense of purpose and integrity that she imparted to her female characters. In *Gaudy Night*, for example, the women not only display character and integrity, but they take pride in the quality of their work. Her appreciation that words have the power to influence others and evoke their behavior can be found in all of her work.

Sayers understood that personalities are central to the detective novel, and she applied this insight effectively. The human element became one of her central themes, overflowing into her scholarly works as well. Her translation of Dante, for example, helps the reader appreciate him as a historical person.

Sayers used language effectively. With only a few words she could set the stage and "flesh out" a character. This ability is demonstrated on the first page of *Strong Poison*. She employed a wide spectrum of language to develop her characters, ranging from the broad Scots accent found in *The Five Red Herrings* (1931, also known as *Suspicious Characters*) to the sensational speech delivered by one of the characters near the end of *Gaudy Night*. Quotations from learned works and obscure poets can be found sprinkled throughout all of her novels.

Sayers wanted to be known as a scholar, and toward the end of her life she resumed her scholarly pursuits. Yet her scholarship appears even in her detective fiction. She sets forth a puzzle, guides her readers to the finish in a leisurely and often elegant fashion, incorporates plausible and well-researched features into the plot, and manages to impart a sense of time and place. Her place in the pantheon of modern detective fiction cannot be underestimated.

## STRONG POISON

**First published:** 1930

**Type of work:** Novel

*This story offers a potent mix of arsenic, a well-hidden will, a séance, and two people who start to fall in love.*

In *Strong Poison*, Sayers introduces Harriet Vane, the love of Lord Peter Wimsey's life. Vane writes mysteries; Wimsey solves them. A little something in common never hurts a relationship and for

the moment, mysteries are all that they have in common.

With a few deft words Sayers draws her reader into a British courtroom and introduces the jury. Vane, a writer of mysteries, finds herself plunged into the most important mystery of her life. Accused of murdering her lover, and on trial for her life, Vane seems to be on the verge of meeting the hangman: If the jury brings in a verdict of guilty, the punishment will be death by hanging.

Vane had just finished some extensive research about ways to poison people, details that she had planned to use in her next book. She had even bought some arsenic. Vane's lifestyle, morals, and integrity were also called into question by the judge. She was living with, but not married to, the man she allegedly murdered. That was a living arrangement quite unbecoming a woman in the 1930's; in those years, women waited for the ring and the preacher before entering into a sexual relationship. Things do not look good for Vane. She may have to keep her date with the hangman.

Sayers presents Vane as an intelligent, but not conventionally pretty, young woman in her twenties. Although Sayers delineates the rest of the cast of characters, she shrouds Vane in mystery. Not so the victim; Sayers draws a complex portrait of him. These devices keep the reader guessing about Vane's innocence.

Sayers does not divulge Lord Peter Wimsey's reasons for attending the trial. Her readers may deduce, or perhaps assume, that he came to the trial because he believed his friend Chief Detective-Inspector Charles Parker made a serious mistake. Wimsey believes that Parker has arrested and brought to trial the wrong person. Although exhausted by the rigors of the trial, Vane greatly interests Wimsey. He must employ all of his crime-solving abilities if he is to save her. He asks Miss Climpson to help, and she embarks on an adventure that tests her skills and her conscience.

Wimsey eventually falls in love with Vane. As

soon as he has a chance, he proposes marriage. She does not accept his offer until the third book in the series. By this device, Sayers begins a leisurely development of these characters in three more novels. With the final novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, both characters emerge as full-fledged human beings who espouse Sayers's philosophy and ethics.

## GAUDY NIGHT

**First published:** 1935

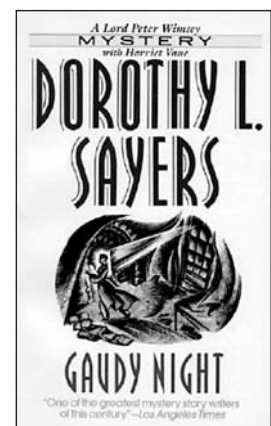
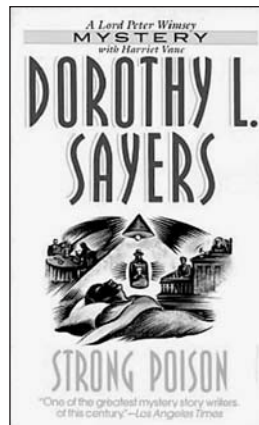
**Type of work:** Novel

*A series of unsettling and extremely unpleasant incidents in staid, respectable Oxford's Shrewsbury College plunge Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey into their most famous case.*

Sayers set this novel in Shrewsbury, a women's college. Sayers uses this novel to explore women's place and rights in the brave new postwar world. She refutes some of the biases attributed to Tertullian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and other early philosophers that are so embedded in language as to be taken as fact. These assumptions still influence women's lives and the laws and social issues that affect them.

Still suffering from the repercussions of the trial and its attendant publicity, Vane decides to attend her college reunion, which has been named a Gaudy Night. Just as she begins to enjoy herself, she finds a particularly vicious note in her academic robe. After the gala weekend is over, some unpleasant incidents that began at Shrewsbury continue and start to escalate. Vane is asked to investigate.

Vane takes up residence at Shrewsbury and, under the cover of scholarly research, begins her inquiries. Inevitably she examines her own wants, needs, and motives. She must, for example, decide



why she calls Lord Peter Wimsey to help her. As Wimsey helps her find the culprit, he helps her come to the conclusion that men and women can love as equals. Vane decides that marriage need not be conducted along the old traditional lines. She discovers that women can retain their identities and their interests. Wimsey offers what he says will be his final marriage proposal, in impeccable Latin. Vane accepts him in equally correct Latin syntax.

By combining romance with mystery, Sayers introduced a subtle variation into the genre. This variation has been taken up by modern authors, and books in this new genre regularly appear on the best-seller lists.

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## SUMMARY

Dorothy L. Sayers played with words just as a poet does. Indeed, some of her first published works were poems. No doubt the discipline of this art form helped her construct the settings and dialogues that make her novels so memorable. Her fascination with the ways in which people use words differently shows up in the conversations she wrote for her fictional characters. She suggested using imagination—giving thought to the reader's situations and evaluations—in interpersonal communication so that better understanding could take place. She knew her tools and used them well.

Maxine S. Theodoulou

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what tradition of detective stories should Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey novels be related?
- What does Harriet Vane contribute to Lord Peter Wimsey's career as an amateur detective?
- Peter Wimsey's manservant, Bunter, is a strong recurring character in Sayers's detective works. How does he contribute to Wimsey's success?
- Sayers argues that, ideally, Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802) should be read "straight through" for the story and the verse but agrees that readers cannot go unaided. Why not?
- What marks of distinction can one find in Sayers's translation of Dante?
- What medieval works other than *The Divine Comedy* did Sayers translate?



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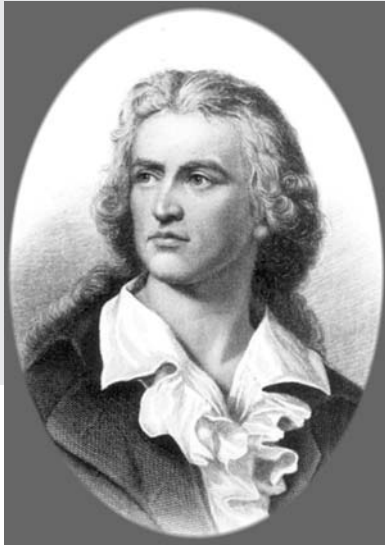
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## FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

**Born:** Marbach, Württemberg (now in Germany)  
November 10, 1759

**Died:** Weimar, Saxe-Weimer (now in Germany)  
May 9, 1805

*Widely recognized as Germany's greatest playwright, Schiller dominates his country's stage to the present day. He was also a superb poet and essayist on aesthetics.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Poet and playwright Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (SHIHL-ur) was born on November 10, 1759, in Marbach, Württemberg (now in Germany). His father was Johannes Kaspar Schiller, a captain, surgeon, and royal forester under Duke Charles Eugene of Württemberg. His mother, Elisabeth Dorothea Kodweiss, was a stout-minded, religious woman who had a strong influence on Schiller's early years. He had five sisters.

Schiller began his education at the age of seven, when he was enrolled in a Latin school at Ludwigsburg to be groomed for the clergy. During his time there, it was discovered that he had a great intellectual gift. When Schiller was thirteen, the duke of Württemberg ordered him to attend his military academy for intellectually gifted students at Karlsschule in Stuttgart. At first, Schiller was forced to study law, but he was allowed to switch to the newly formed medical curriculum. He had no interest in medical studies either but preferred it to law. Students at Karlsschule were allowed no outside visits, letters, or relatives. Their lives were regimented. Schiller managed to study poetry and drama, including the works of William Shakespeare, though it was against school doctrine. He also studied the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement from German theater, which heavily influenced him in his early plays. In 1780,

he completed his medical studies at Karlsschule but was not allowed to practice medicine.

Schiller left Karlsschule with a completed manuscript of his first play, *Die Räuber* (pb. 1781, pr. 1782; *The Robbers*, 1792), written in the Storm and Stress style. In 1781, it was printed—at his own expense. That was the beginning of many debts incurred until the last few years of his life. The following year, it was produced, on January 13, at the Mannheim National Theater, where it created a sensation. After deserting an army position in Stuttgart, Schiller spent the next ten months as a fugitive. During his flight, he wrote two more plays: *Die Verschwörung des Fiesko zu Genua* (pr., pb. 1783; *Fiesco: Or, The Genoese Conspiracy*, 1796) and *Kabale und Liebe* (pr., pb. 1784; *Cabal and Love*, 1795).

Schiller signed on as a resident poet with a one-year contract at the theater in Mannheim. *Fiesco* was performed with only moderate success. On April 13, 1784, *Cabal and Love* was produced and became an audience favorite. Schiller's success marked him as a master of German drama and freed him from the tyranny of the duke of Württemberg. In 1784, he wrote a prose version of a work that he later rewrote as a play, *Don Carlos, Infant von Spanien* (pr., pb. 1787; *Don Carlos, Infante of Spain*, 1798). In its final form, it appears as blank verse. The play marked the end of Schiller's playwrighting for the next ten years.

Schiller turned next to composing poetry and short stories. In 1789, he attempted to write a novel, *Der Geisterseher* (1789; *The Ghost-Seer: Or, The Apparitionist*, 1795), which he later abandoned. The same period also saw the beginning of his his-

torical writings and philosophical essays. He met the great German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who secured a professorship of history for Schiller at the University of Jena. Schiller gave his first lecture in 1789. The new appointment, plus small pensions and stipends from various admirers, made Schiller financially independent, a situation that lasted only two years. In 1793, following the death of his nemesis, the duke of Württemberg, Schiller returned to his homeland and received a hero's welcome. During his years of exile he had become a famous literary personage. He made the trip with his wife, Charlotte von Lengefeld, whom he had married in 1790. During their visit to Stuttgart, a son was born.

The turning point in Schiller's life came the following year in July, 1794, when he became associated with Goethe and his Weimar Theater. Despite a ten-year age difference, the two became close friends. Schiller began writing plays again for Goethe's theater, as well as a number of poems and aesthetic essays. He moved to Weimar permanently in 1799. From that time until his death six years later at age forty-five, Schiller remained busy writing plays, translating foreign dramas by such writers as William Shakespeare and Jean Racine, and adapting other material for the stage. His masterpiece, *Wilhelm Tell* (pr., pb. 1804; *William Tell*, 1841), premiered in 1804.

On May 1, 1805, Schiller suffered acute lung inflammation. Despite his worsening condition, the writer refused to stop working. Schiller died on May 9 in Weimar. First buried in a local cemetery on May 12, his remains were transferred two years later to the vault of Duke Charles Augustus.

## ANALYSIS

Schiller was a German historian, essayist, poet, and playwright. During his short life, he wrote more than a dozen plays and a number of translations or adaptations for the stage. He also wrote history books, numerous essays, and a large number of poems. It was once said that if there was ever any hope of a German Shakespeare, Schiller would be that man. Each year, studies of Schiller's work reveal new essays, monographs, and books. His life, philosophy, and writings have been examined with great intensity. In Germany, he is regarded with intense admiration.

Schiller's achievements are remarkable because

they came at a time when German culture and language were held in ill repute. The country was dominated by the literary examples of foreigners, especially the French, Italians, and English. Even the language was not considered a proper form of literary expression. Schiller changed all of that. Almost single-handedly, he revitalized the language as a means of artistic expression, showing the world the power and importance of German culture. He firmly believed in, and wrote with conviction on, the civilizing, liberating, and cleansing mission of art. No matter which genre he adopted, Germany embraced him as a national hero during his lifetime. Stories are told of how he was lionized and worshiped whenever he appeared in public. His shadow loomed large and influenced such important individuals as Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx.

The key to understanding so complex a figure as Schiller may well rest with his essays on aesthetics and his poetry. He believed that there was a vital connection between art and morality. It was a belief that deepened and changed over the years. In his poem "Die Künstler" ("The Artists"), for example, Schiller exalts art as a unifying force that helps humankind emerge from a bestial existence to a much higher spiritual plane until life itself becomes a work of art. Counter to the prevailing opinion of the time, Schiller refused to compartmentalize life. He believed that intellect, emotions and passions, bodily pleasures and pains, moral values, and the soul's immortality should be viewed not as separate entities but as unified ones. In some of his essays, Schiller argues that art should be complete and perfect in itself, rivaled only by religion. The basic ingredient is good taste, which Schiller applies not only to art but also to morality. He goes further and suggests that good taste applies even to political and social programs.

Schiller's philosophy views each person as a member of the community and art as the primary force of civilization. He places large demands on the artist in society, and rather than viewing that individual as a mere entertainer, he exalts him or her as a leader. His poem "Das Eleusische Fest" ("The Festival of Eleusis") makes it clear that without the cleansing contribution of the artist, all technical, commercial, political, and social advances suffer. In "Der Spaziergang" ("The Walk"), inspired by the tragic events of the French Revolution, he

shows how an artificially contrived urban civilization will, in time, be destroyed by its ferocious and vengeful nature. To Schiller, art inspires philosophy and religion; moreover, the artist is closer to nature than other people are because nature remains his or her true inspiration. In one of his philosophical lectures, Schiller postulated that people of the future would come into complete harmony with nature, becoming one with plants and animals, and would develop a high moral and social code of ethics.

Schiller's philosophy reverberates down through the ages and is still pertinent today. Alfred North Whitehead echoes Schiller's sentiments in *Science and the Modern World* (1925):

[G]reat art is more than a transient refreshment. It is something which adds to the permanent richness of the soul's self-attainment. It justifies itself both by its immediate enjoyment, and also by its discipline of the inmost being. Its discipline is not distinct from enjoyment, but by reason of it. It transforms the soul into the permanent realisation of values extending beyond its former self.

Schiller carried these principles of art into his plays, as well. His heroes, for example, are always inspired by the loftiest of ideals. If they fail, it is invariably because of the ignoble means that they employ or because they are betrayed by the very corruption that they are trying to eradicate. Schiller's quest for idealism in art and life, so well described in his poems and essays, caused serious problems in his dramas. The playwright grossly altered historical events and personages, inventing new characters to suit his purposes. In his play *Maria Stuart* (pr. 1800, pb. 1801; *Mary Stuart*, 1801), Schiller builds the play's conflict around two dominant personalities, Mary, Queen of Scots, and Queen Elizabeth I, meeting in a dramatic confrontation. Critics quickly pointed out that the two avowed enemies never met. Their stage characters were inaccurately portrayed. In addition, the fanatical figure of Mortimer was invented, and important dates and locations were altered.

Schiller took even greater liberties with *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (pr. 1801, pb. 1802; *The Maid of Orleans*, 1835). His St. Joan, called Johanna, is told by the angels that she must never lose sight of her spiritual quest or her powers would vanish. St. Joan

inexplicably finds time for a romantic dalliance with a handsome English officer and, therefore, loses her special magic, as prophesied. She is banished from court and imprisoned by the English but eventually escapes. St. Joan dies at the end, not burning at the stake but with sword in hand on the battlefield, as she leads the French to one last battle against the English.

Schiller laughed at the criticism leveled at him. He stated that art must not be circumscribed by history. The artist must show life as it ideally should be lived and not as it really exists. Unlike the historical figures of *Mary Stuart* and *The Maid of Orleans*, Schiller's last play, *William Tell*, is based on the mythic medieval Swiss hero.

## WALLENSTEIN

**First produced:** *Wallensteins Lager*, 1798 (first published, 1800; *The Camp of Wallenstein*, 1846); *Die Piccolomini*, 1799 (first published, 1800; *The Piccolominis*, 1800); *Wallensteins Tod*, 1799 (first published, 1800; *The Death of Wallenstein*, 1800)

**Type of work:** Play

*General Wallenstein seeks to make peace with his enemies during the Thirty Years' War against the emperor's wishes. His plans are discovered, and he is assassinated. The war is destined to drag on endlessly.*

*Wallenstein* is a huge historical drama spread over three parts. Schiller began the work in 1796, and it was first drama written after his ten-year period of historical and philosophical writing. It covers an equally huge piece of history, the Thirty Years' War, which was fought throughout central Europe from 1618 until 1648. The war was fought between the Catholic forces of the Hapsburgs' Holy Roman Empire, headed at first by Emperor Ferdinand II of Austria, and the various Protestant states of Germany, Sweden, and France. Schiller had studied the period closely and had written a three-volume history of the conflict, *Geschichte des dreissigjährigen Krieges* (1791-1793; *History of the Thirty Years War*, 1799). A later German playwright, Berthold Brecht, used the same historical period in



*Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (pr. 1941, pb. 1949; *Mother Courage and Her Children*, 1941), although Brecht chose to write from the peasants' point of view.

Schiller takes as his hero Count Albrecht Wenzel von Wallenstein (1583-1634), a Bohemian Protestant who had converted to Catholicism. (Bohemia is now the western province of the Czech Republic.) In Wallenstein's youth, the Protestant Czech rulers had been replaced by German-speaking Catholics and incorporated into the Holy Roman Empire again as an Austrian possession. Wallenstein, therefore, has a foot in both camps. Historically, Wallenstein gained power and possessions in an ambitious advance until he was finally put in charge of all of the emperor's forces in the Holy Roman Empire (mainly Germany and Austria) and the Netherlands (Holland and Belgium).

The first and shortest part of the drama is *Wallensteins Lager* (pr. 1798, pb. 1800; *The Camp of Wallenstein*, 1846), which is set in 1633. Its drama mainly lies in the diversity of people and groups within Wallenstein's standing army of some 150,000 soldiers. They range from landless peasants to well-trained cavalry. As the war drags on, these soldiers have been corrupted by the conflict, so that rape, plunder, and murder seem commonplace. Yet they are fiercely loyal toward Wallenstein himself. Toward the end of the play, a monk, apparently sent by the emperor, denounces their many sins, and playgoers are reminded that this "religious" war is no such thing.

The second part of *Wallenstein* is a five-act play, *Die Piccolomini* (pr. 1799, pb. 1800; *The Piccolominis*, 1800). Max Piccolomini is a general brought in from the Hapsburgs' Spanish possessions, with a view to replacing Wallenstein. The emperor knows that Wallenstein is thinking of negotiating with the Swedes against his wishes, ostensibly to bring some sort of peace after sixteen years of fighting, and sees this as betrayal. Piccolomini's son, Octavio, falls in love with Wallenstein's daughter, Thekla. His father demands that Octavio choose between the treacherous Wallenstein and himself.

In the third part of the drama, *Wallensteins Tod* (pr. 1799, pb. 1800; *The Death of Wallenstein*, 1800), the two lovers commit suicide, and Wallenstein is eventually assassinated by some of the small-minded men whom he has trusted. His plans for peace and ambitious dreams for himself come to nothing.

## WILLIAM TELL

**First produced:** *Wilhelm Tell*, 1804 (first published, 1804; English translation, 1841)

**Type of work:** Play

*Legendary Swiss hero William Tell, as chronicled by Schiller, saves his country from the corruption of an evil tyrant and is hailed as a redeemer.*

*William Tell* is considered by most critics to be Schiller's dramatic masterpiece. It was an immediate success after its premiere at the Weimar Hoftheater on March 17, 1804. Schiller directed the production. It is his most widely translated drama and the one play likeliest to be associated with Schiller outside of Germany. Schiller's most popular play is also one of his shortest and the only one to have a happy ending.

Most people are acquainted with the William Tell legend without Schiller or his play. The exploits of the legendary Swiss hero who fought against tyranny and shot the apple off his son's head have now passed into folklore. Tell, as seen through Schiller's eyes, is depicted as a great hero, a man who exemplified the best in the Swiss people.

*William Tell* is a powerful blend of Swiss history and popular legend. Schiller rearranges recorded history, as usual, and eliminates or telescopes important events. Since he framed his play around a fictional character, however, the dramatic alterations are less emphatic than those in *Mary Stuart* or *The Maid of Orleans*. The focus of the play is on the Swiss people's oppression by Albert I, a Hapsburg emperor, who reduced Switzerland to an Austrian dominion. Ruling for him in Switzerland is the sadistic Vogt Hermann Gessler, who overstepped his authority and trampled on the people's rights.

The play opens with great impact. A man is flee-



ing for his life from imperial troops. Tell steps in and rescues him. Soon, the peaceful Tell is embroiled in his country's fight for freedom, which reaches a high point during the apple shoot in act 3, culminating one act later when he slays Gessler with an arrow. In act 5, there is a joyous festival, the arrival of the imperial assassin seeking refuge, and the celebration of Tell as a national hero and liberator.

*William Tell* is a fairy-tale play about a folk hero who triumphs over tyranny. As in any good fairy tale, the hero must do battle and defeat an evil figure, in this play Gessler, to free his people. Schiller uses the mythic legend, however, to advance his concept of political liberation. He takes the exciting conflict between good and evil, the commanding appearance of a likable hero, and a dozen spectacular outdoor settings and fuses them together with a people's struggle to overthrow a dictator. The heady mix makes for a compelling and visually exciting drama.

Schiller began a new dramatic work, "Demetrius," before he died, but only fragments survive; *William Tell* remains his last completed play. Throughout the years, it has received numerous productions. Some critics suggest that it may be the longest-running play in dramatic history. Schiller's success on the stage is rivaled worldwide by the continuing popularity of his poetic works.

### **"THE CONQUEROR," "THE GODS OF GREECE," AND "THE SONG OF THE BELL"**

**First published:** "Der Eroberer," 1777  
(collected in *The Poems of Schiller*, 1851);  
"Die Götter Griechenlands," 1788  
(collected in *The Poems of Schiller*, 1851);  
"Das Lied von der Glocke," 1800  
(collected in *The Poems of Schiller*, 1902)

**Type of work:** Poems

*Schiller's poetry is on a grand and lofty scale, full of philosophical ideas touching on art and morality, while extolling the best in humankind.*

"Der Eroberer" ("The Conqueror"), "Die Götter Griechenlands" ("The Gods of Greece"), and

"Das Lied von der Glocke" ("The Song of the Bell") are representative works belonging to three distinct creative periods in Schiller's life. The first period of his youth to 1784 is full of vigor, enthusiasm, and a certain self-righteous attitude. The poetry is supercharged with passion and reflects his influence by the Storm and Stress tradition that also fueled his early drama. The second period, dating from 1785 to 1789, demonstrates a growing maturity. The poems are still flamboyant, but there is greater concern for philosophical ideas. From 1790 to 1795, Schiller stopped writing poetry altogether, concentrating his energies on historical works and essays. When he resumed in 1795, he had fully matured as a poet. His compositions are confident and dynamic. His style is simple, yet powerful. He draws on a wide range of interests, including history, literature, and philosophy.

Schiller's first important poem, "The Conqueror," was first published in 1777 in *Schwäbischers Magazin*. The poet was energetic and full of revolutionary ardor. He takes aim at despots and their ruthless ambitions. His protagonist is an evil conqueror who has devastated the land with a sword dipped in blood. The warrior dies and ascends to Heaven, where he is judged before God. With arrogance, he sits on the scales of justice, and his deeds are piled opposite him. They balance evenly until the poet invokes a curse that tips the scales, sending the conqueror to Hell. "The Conqueror" is an attack on the despised duke of Württemberg. Schiller soon learned to sublimate his fury.

Schiller's second period witnessed a number of fine poems, of which "The Gods of Greece" is typical. It was first published in the March, 1788, issue of *Der Teutsche Merkur*. Schiller at this time was still full of rebellious spirit. He looked back to ancient Greece, idealizing the past. He contrasted its attempt to help humanity find peace with itself to the soulless concept of Christianity. Schiller later revised the poem in 1793, after its critical reception, by eliminating the passages on Christianity.

Schiller's best-known poetic work, "The Song of the Bell," is in the form of a ballad. The poem's genesis occurred when Schiller visited a bell foundry at Rudolstadt. The poem has a narrator, the master bell maker, who shows his apprentices how casting a bell is similar to living the various

phases of life. Schiller's bell stands for harmony, peace, and the possibility of creating a better society.

Schiller's poetry usually coalesced around a central tenet or idea. His aim was to appeal to the ear and the mind. Like the ancient Greek thinkers whom he admired, Schiller posed philosophical questions in his poetry about what is good, beautiful, and true in life and proceeded to answer them. The poet believed fully in humanity and anticipated a better future. Schiller grew as a poet, and his style changed from passionate and lyrical exultations to a classical mastery of simplicity and clarity.

## SUMMARY

Friedrich Schiller looms like a colossus on the German stage. He dominates the literary history of his period. A writer of strong convictions, he took the subject of humankind as his theme. Liberal idealism is at the foundation of Schiller's work. It permeates his politics, philosophy, historical works, aesthetic writings, poetry, and plays. Schiller ranks today as Germany's leading playwright and poet-philosopher. He has become a part of the nation's cultural heritage. One cannot find a city or town in Germany that does not have a street, square, or statue in his honor. Rarely has any literary figure ever made such an impact on his or her country.

*Terry Theodore; updated by David Barratt*

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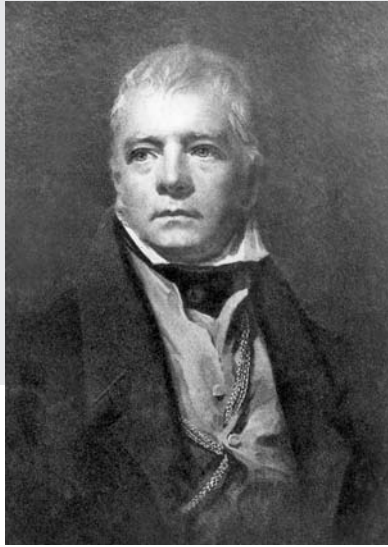
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How far do Friedrich Schiller's tragic dramas adhere to the classical Aristotelian theory of tragedy?
- What did Schiller achieve for German literature? How did he manage to elevate it to the standards and esteem of other European literatures of the time?
- Would you say that Schiller is basically a writer of moral ideas rather than one of psychological exploration?
- How dramatic is Schiller's poetry, and how poetic is his drama?
- Explore the high view of art that Schiller propounds. How is this reflected in the literature he produced?
- What are Schiller's views on heroism and the heroic?
- What are the main developments from Schiller's earlier drama to his later drama?
- How important is history to Schiller? What does he do to it?



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## SIR WALTER SCOTT

**Born:** Edinburgh, Scotland  
August 15, 1771

**Died:** Abbotsford, Scotland  
September 21, 1832

*Beginning as a popular and enduring narrative poet, Scott became the most successful and influential English novelist of the early nineteenth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Descended from long-established families in the Border country, Walter Scott was born on August 15, 1771, in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was the second son of a prominent Edinburgh attorney, Walter Scott, and Anne Rutherford. Although sturdy and precocious at birth, Scott contracted infantile paralysis before age two, which left him permanently lame. Reared in the Border by relatives, he fell in love with the countryside, its lore and legendry. He roamed the burns and heaths at will, by foot and by pony; the landscape imprinted itself in his imagination. He also learned to read at age four, devouring his Aunt Janet's collection of English novels.

Although not an outstanding student at any level, Scott was an extraordinary hobbyist. From his schooldays, Scott had amassed antiques; by high school, his hoard was extensive. Without knowing it, he was helping to invent antiquarianism. By age twelve, he had recovered completely from his illness, becoming as enthusiastic about sports and horseback camping trips as he was about reading. These passions fueled his life.

Learning that most medieval romances were in French, he taught himself enough French to read the *contes* (short tales of adventure). After reading the Italian poets Torquato Tasso and Ludovico Ariosto in translation, he mastered Italian in order

to read the works of Dante. He also read Spanish and German fluently. After graduating from high school at age twelve, he took classes at the local college for three years but left without a degree. He then apprenticed himself to his father for four years and began law school.

Scott read law seriously enough to pass his examinations, but he also joined literary and social clubs, still spending his weekends in country rambles, searching for material. Admitted to the bar in 1792, he limited his practice, successfully soliciting appointments that left time for his recreations. In 1799, Scott became sheriff of Selkirkshire, later becoming clerk of session. He did the prescribed work religiously, but he guarded his free time.

He began writing almost accidentally, starting with a ballad collection. Simultaneously, a vogue for imitation medieval ballads spread from Germany throughout Europe. Enthused by the revival, he translated several ballads and composed imitations of his own. He also translated Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's drama about medieval robber barons, *Götz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand* (pb. 1773, pr. 1774), as *Goetz of Berlichingen, with the Iron Hand* in 1799. In imitation, Scott decided to revive some of the old Scottish legends as verse romances, of the kind represented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." He eventually produced *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), about the folklore hobgoblin Gilpin Horner. When the poem sold out, Scott decided to move to the Border for the solitude required to write. Before selecting an estate in rural Tweedside, however, Scott invested



his savings in an old friend's printing house. The Ballantyne firm would ultimately absorb both his estate and his labors, finally condemning him to literary slavery.

Scott next tried a prose romance, dropping it to edit new texts of major writers. Yet he continued with narrative poems, especially *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field* (1808), *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), *Rokeby* (1813), and *The Lord of the Isles* (1815). Ballantyne nearly failed at the time of *Rokeby*, threatening to draw Scott with it. The crisis was averted, but Scott needed to open a new vein in his literary mine. Besides, the public was neglecting Scott's poems in favor of Lord Byron's.

Scott returned to his unfinished manuscript, transforming literary history in the process. The resulting novel, *Waverley: Or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), published anonymously, created the genre of the historical novel and elevated the novel to a new plane of complexity, humanity, and depth. *Guy Mannering* (1815), *The Antiquary* (1816), and *Old Mortality* (1816), all masterworks, followed. Scott's health failed in 1817, and for three years he slowed down; still, he produced enduring works: *Rob Roy* (1817), *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), and *Ivanhoe* (1819), all the while also doing other writing. Thereafter, he continued to publish novels annually, perhaps ones less breathtaking than the earlier works, but of uniform quality and including masterpieces such as *Redgauntlet* (1824).

In 1825, Ballantyne finally collapsed. Scott's fortunes were inextricably entangled. To reduce the debt, he sentenced himself to his desk for up to twelve hours daily, six days weekly, relentlessly churning out fiction, history, biography. The next novel, *Woodstock* (1826), is well up to previous standards, and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828) contains some of his best scenes and characters; but the other novels are less successful. In other respects, however, he did some of his best work. Somehow, he found time to compose *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott* (1890), which displays some of his most natural and touching prose. *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828-1830) are beautiful, deft retellings of episodes from Scottish history, especially for children.

He made great strides toward reducing the debt, but it finally broke him. In November, 1830, he had a slight stroke; a more severe one followed four months later. He still would have kept to his desk,

but in his illness he came to believe that he had written himself free of his debts. A grateful government provided a vessel for him to tour the Mediterranean while recovering. After a year of touring, however, he began to decline, and he insisted on returning home to die. He died on September 21, 1832, in Abbotsford, near Galashiels, Scotland.

## ANALYSIS

Because late twentieth century literary fashions made Scott's kind of writing unfashionable, his status has slipped; like most of the top Victorian writers—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—he has fallen from favor in the audiovisual age. That is unfair. Scott not only altered the course of nineteenth century literature but also profoundly influenced Western culture. He developed an image of the popular hero that became standard, and this image continues to affect both behavior and education, to shape the values of both individuals and nations.

This influence occurred not just because he was, by any standard, the best-selling novelist of his time and one of the most reprinted of the nineteenth century. Scott was the first English writer to realize a comfortable living from writing; he would have been rich, had he not invested badly. Furthermore, he reaped profits before the passage of any international copyright act protecting him from foreign reprinting and translations. Imitators materialized everywhere; within five years, every nation, and practically every region, boasted of its own Scott—the United States, for example, celebrated James Fenimore Cooper.

The cult of historical fiction that he pioneered transformed novel writing in far-reaching, yet often unperceived, ways. For example, after Scott, practically every major novelist in England adopted the historical point of view. Thus, Dickens has only two professedly historical novels, but all except one are set at least in the previous generation. The same is true of William Makepeace Thackeray, George Eliot, the Brontës, Thomas Hardy, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and most of Joseph Conrad. The major exception is the Anglo-American Henry James, and even he began by using the historical frame. Elsewhere in America, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville all wrote explicitly historical works, as did those who at first sight apparently did not—

such as Mark Twain, Jack London, and even William Faulkner. In France, Alexandre Dumas, père, and Victor Hugo are unthinkable without Scott. It seems unlikely that Scott could have affected the very different Russians Fyodor Dostoevski and Leo Tolstoy, but both record their allegiance to him, and the emphasis on the psychology of human behavior and on history in both *Bratya Karamazovy* (1879-1880; *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1912) and *Voyna i mir* (1865-1869; *War and Peace*, 1886) derive from Scott.

Scott made the Western world conscious of historical precedence in a way that it had not been. In this respect, he helped consolidate the idea of national self-consciousness, which had been expanding since the Renaissance. He also introduced a modified image of the hero and of heroic behavior, which dominated the nineteenth century and still prevails. He helped create an ideal image of behavior, which became incorporated in educational systems. Because of his influential ideas, several generations were indoctrinated with this ideal, and it influenced major political and social policies, in his time and afterward.

This image runs parallel with the common neoaristocratic and colonialist attitudes of the time. It generated most nineteenth century social and political practices and doctrines, including the colonization of Africa, the migration westward in the United States—fueled by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny—and the Germanic movement to the east in Europe and Asia. It is not a radically different image from that of the traditional hero in Western male-dominant, aristocratic society. That is, the hero is primarily the idealistic, intrinsically noble good guy, protector of women, children, and the underprivileged. Typically, he finds himself and his class threatened by those who abuse the law for their own profit. Yet because his loyalty is to the honor of his cause, he does not withdraw. At the collapse of all civilized order, he discloses unexpected reserves of courage, prowess, and chivalry, even of athleticism, and obtains victory by allying himself with the forces of right.

This describes the archetypal Scott hero from *Waverley*, a figure that came to represent the conventional hero. With some variations, this figure continues as the stock hero of popular fiction and

entertainment, appearing every night on television. It has become a powerful cultural force, instilling principles of behavior that people often accept without thinking. It may, for example, predispose people to choose confrontation or violence when responding to apparent threats; it may reinforce a win-at-any-cost policy or an us-versus-them mentality, or, finally, it may cause one to sacrifice individual freedom for the sake of solidarity.

Perhaps Scott emphasizes one side of a complex picture. Yet he simply wanted to revive the principles of heroic chivalry endangered by modern incivility and crassness. Besides, although many of his heroes can be readily stereotyped, others cannot. The hero of *The Heart of Midlothian*, for instance, is female. In any case, Scott usually pays little attention to the putative hero and heroine, treating them as conventions, much like the obligatory “love interest” in mysteries. They serve merely as pretexts for what he is really interested in: in his “life” books, the scenes, pageants, manners, and characters of his ancestors, caught in moments of high national drama; in his “history” books, the distinctive quality of a moment in the evolution of Western culture. He is primarily intent on contrasting past with present to enliven one and illumine the other.

His lovers also serve as foils to highlight the characters whom he wants to spotlight, and in this respect Scott transcends his limitations and becomes a great comic writer. From the beginning to the end of his work, the supporting players, whether stock or rounded, get most of his attention, and he endows them with superabundant, zestful, loving detail. The lovers, already pallid when met, vanish almost at once; no one remembers Edward Waverley. The bit players, however, especially those of low degree, spring, sprawl, and spill forth from the pages. Scott gives them not only life and color; he also gives them speech. In the Scots novels, he elevates dialect to a new stage of character revelation. Previously, dialect was simply another device for poking fun. Scott makes it a supple, musical element, using it almost as a musician uses harmony. He gives his characters voices that echo in readers’ ears long after they finish the novels.

## THE HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN

**First published:** 1818

**Type of work:** Novel

*When her innocent sister faces execution for the murder of her infant, Jeanie Deans travels in 1736 from Edinburgh to London to request the king's pardon.*

Generally considered one of the finest of Scott's novels—though opinions vary widely—*The Heart of Midlothian* deals with the social and political difficulties in Scotland of the years after 1736. The 1707 Act of Union, decreeing a common parliamentary government for England and Scotland, was unpopular in the north. Furthermore, the exiled Stuart line, driven from the throne in 1688, continued to agitate for reinstatement. Rebellion broke out on several occasions, notably in 1715 and 1745, when formidable armies mustered, one even invading England.

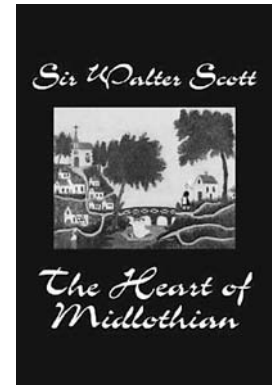
Scott begins with another insurrection, the Porteous Riots of 1736, when a mob stormed the Edinburgh Tolbooth, the ancient city jail and guardhouse, to seize Captain John Porteous, commander of the Guard, sentenced to death for firing on a gathering. Although sentenced, Porteous had been reprieved, according to rumor, by Queen Caroline herself. The mob, led by an escapee, Geordie Robertson, carries along a young clergyman, Reuben Butler. While they ransack the Tolbooth, Butler observes Robertson trying to persuade Effie Deans, arrested for child murder, to escape. She refuses, as does a thief, Jem Ratcliffe. The mob tracks Porteous down and hangs him. In love with Jeanie, Effie's sister, Butler tells her what he saw—perhaps Robertson knows about the missing infant. Old Deans, torn between love for his wayward daughter and abhorrence of her crime, refuses to see her. Jeanie vows to save her. She is summoned to a midnight tryst on a haunted moor; there, the hidden Robertson, the father of the illegitimate infant, declares Effie's innocence, implicates a mentally disturbed woman, Madge Wildfire, and her vengeful mother, and tells Jeanie that only her lying—pretending to have known of Effie's prospective motherhood—can save Effie.

At the trial, Jeanie refuses to lie, though both Effie and her father urge her to do so. After the sen-

tencing, however, she resolves to walk to London, if she must, to gain a pardon. During the trip, she is kidnapped by Madge and her mother but escapes; as she does, the madwoman is killed by a mob, closing that line of inquiry. Jeanie meets Robertson again, learns he is of good family, and is put in touch with the duke of Argyll, who gains an interview with the queen and the king's mistress. Jeanie pleads her case with such simple virtue that they grant the pardon.

She hurries back to her family. The pardon is sent ahead; and even before her return she learns that Effie has eloped with Robertson. Jeanie marries Butler. Years later, she discovers that Effie has become the toast of English society. Effie engineers a final meeting, but her husband is killed in a skirmish with outlaws, one of whom is his illegitimate son.

The novel is full of incident and engaging characters and shows sophisticated handling of the romance and the romantic hero.



## IVANHOE

**First published:** 1819

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Saxon knight returns from the Third Crusade to recover his estate and his betrothed from a Norman supporter of the illegal ruler, Prince John.*

*Ivanhoe* is easily the best-known Scott novel, probably because it became a celebrated Hollywood epic in 1952. This celebrity reflects Scott's success in creating a heroic image that remains current. Yet the novel is rich in illuminating detail and is beautifully constructed; and, although research has found it inaccurate, it established the genre of fantasy romance.

The novel portrays the return of the Saxon Wilfred Ivanhoe from the Holy Land to his alienated ancestral estate. It is the early thirteenth cen-

tury, with King Richard I (or Richard the Lion-Hearted) held captive in Austria. In his absence, his brother John has taken the throne; he uses bribery and extortion to secure his position and intends to suppress the Saxon minority by force.

The first major event is a tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, attended by all the principal nobility. John plans to showcase his power, a propaganda move. Yet events go against him. On the first day, his champions fall in man-to-man combat to a masked warrior, the Disinherited Knight, who awards his winnings to the Saxon lady Rowena. On the second day, in group combat, the Disinherited Knight wins again, though aided by another unknown, The Black Sluggard. Furthermore, a Saxon yeoman archer beats the Prince's Norman marksmen. At the end of the tournament, Ivanhoe collapses from concealed wounds and is taken for treatment to a rich Jewish merchant, Isaac of York, and his beautiful daughter Rebecca. The other knight, incognito, takes refuge in the cell of a hermit.

Returning home several days later, Cedric the Saxon agrees to protect Isaac's caravan when he finds it abandoned. Outlaws, however, employed by Front-de-Bœuf, a Norman baron, capture the train and hold it for ransom. Cedric's servants appeal to the archer Locks-

ley, who rallies his band of real outlaws, augmented by the monk and Black Knight, to storm the castle. Meanwhile, both Rowena and Rebecca are accosted while imprisoned; Rebecca keeps the bedridden Ivanhoe hidden. From the window, she reports the first assault to Ivanhoe; the attackers gain a foothold on the walls. Ulrica, a Saxon victim of Norman pillagers, sets fire to the bedchamber of

the wounded Front-de-Bœuf; he dies roaring, and the flames threaten the defenders. The assault is renewed, this time overwhelmingly. Ivanhoe and Rowena are rescued, but Bois-Guilbert carries off Rebecca. The brigand and the Knight resettle the ravaged land.

Meanwhile, deLacy, a Norman knight, reports to John that Richard has returned. John plots to waylay him, but deLacy resists. Isaac reports the kidnapping of his daughter to the master of the Templars, to which Bois-Guilbert belongs. She is summoned to a tribunal and tried as a sorceress; in defense, she calls for a champion. Richard is ambushed, but he and the outlaws beat back the attack. After revealing his identity, Richard is regaled by the men. He restores Ivanhoe to his inheritance. The band arrives at the Templars' tribunal as the trial of Rebecca is recommencing. The weakened Ivanhoe stands as champion and, though wounded, still overcomes Bois-Guilbert and releases Rebecca. He returns with Rowena to his fief.

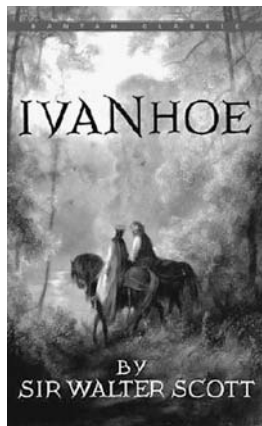
Although inaccurate in historical reconstruction, *Ivanhoe* is the prototype of the romantic fantasy novel; still imitated, it has never been surpassed.

### SUMMARY

Mark Twain hinted at times that Sir Walter Scott was so influential that he caused the Civil War. This remark has some of the exaggeration of humor, but Twain was not entirely joking. He meant that Scott's concept of the romantic hero had so permeated society that armed resistance to perceived insult had become a common obsession. Men were conditioned to throw down the gage.

Scott undoubtedly popularized this image, if he did not invent it. He thus created the hero of popular culture. He also pioneered the modern novel and certain specific forms: the historical romance and the romantic fantasy. Further, he developed dialect as a means of character revelation and created a gallery of unforgettable characters.

*James L. Livingston*



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*Ivanhoe*, 1819  
*A Legend of Montrose*, 1819  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Sir Walter Scott was an extraordinarily popular novelist for many decades, but he was much less popular during much of the twentieth century. How do you account for his decline among readers?
- It has been argued that Scott was in many respects not a Romantic writer at all; for example, he was distrustful of emotionalism and of revolution. Has he been miscast as a Romantic writer?
- Consider why Effie Deans in *The Heart of Midlothian* is one of Scott's most outstanding characters.
- Scott has often been called the inventor of the historic novel. What historical novelists seem to have owed the most to Scott's initiative?
- Judge Scott's contribution to the tradition of Scottish ballads.



*Sir Walter Scott*

*The Field of Waterloo*, 1815

*The Lord of the Isles*, 1815

*Harold the Dauntless*, 1817

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## W. G. SEBALD

**Born:** Wertach im Allgäu, Germany  
May 18, 1944

**Died:** Norwich, Norfolk, England  
December 14, 2001

*In his major prose narratives published in the 1990's and early twenty-first century, Sebald hauntingly explores the nature of memory, loss, despair, destruction, longing, and hope in the aftermath of the Holocaust and in the political and cultural shadows of post-World War II Europe.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Although he lived most of his life in England, Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald (ZAY-bahlt) was born in the southern region of Bavaria, in the small German village of Wertach im Allgäu. One of four children, Sebald was born in 1944 to Georg and Rosa Genovefa Sebald. Sebald grew up in a quiet rural village, but he rarely saw his father. Georg had joined the German army in 1929, fought under Adolf Hitler, and was a prisoner of war in France when Sebald was born. Even after he returned from his internment in France, Sebald's father was not often home, working instead in larger towns where jobs were more plentiful than in Wertach. Georg enlisted in the new German army in 1954, leading to even more separation from his family. Little is known of Sebald's relationship with his mother, but Sebald's maternal grandfather, Josef Engelhofer, became the leading male figure in the young Sebald's life.

From 1950 until 1954, Sebald attended elementary school in Wertach and Sonthofen, and he attended secondary school in Immenstadt and Oberstdorf from 1954 until 1963. During his school days at Oberstdorf, his teachers showed him pictures of the Holocaust, but they were unable to explain adequately the meaning of the pictures to the students. This event haunted Sebald throughout his life, and many of his novels attempt to understand the German inability to come to terms with the Holocaust. In part because of his frustration with this overwhelming silence regarding post-World War II German history and in part because of the crowded classrooms of German uni-

versities, Sebald left Germany to study German literature in Switzerland, receiving a *licence des lettres* from the University of Fribourg in 1966. Sebald's years at Fribourg were the beginning of his lifelong love of French literature, his academic and writing careers outside of Germany, and his love for a fellow student, Ute, whom he married in 1967.

Over the next decade, Sebald completed an M.A. and a Ph.D., moving among teaching positions in England, Switzerland, and Germany. Once he completed his degree at Fribourg, Sebald took a position at the University of Manchester, where he earned his M.A. in German literature in 1968. Sebald then taught elementary school for one year at St. Gallen in Switzerland before returning to teach at the University of Manchester in 1970. In 1969, Sebald published his first book, *Carl Sternheim: Kritiker und Opfer der Wilhelminischen Ära* (Carl Sternheim: critic and victim of the Wilhelmine era), which met with some controversy because Sebald attributed fascist ideas to Sternheim, a Jewish writer. From 1970 to 1975, Sebald taught at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, and received his Ph.D. there. His dissertation, *Der Mythos der Zerstörung im Werk Alfred Döblins* (the myth of destruction in the work of Alfred Döblins), examined the life and work of the writer best known for his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). Although he returned to Munich in 1975 to work at the Goethe Institute, Sebald remained there only a year before returning to England to teach German literature at the University of East Anglia, where he became professor of modern German literature in 1988 and the director of the British Centre for Literary Translation in 1989.

Although he considered himself a teacher more than a writer, Sebald wrote a number of critical works on topics ranging from Austrian literature to contemporary German theater. Perhaps because of his own experience as an outsider, his writings focus on his fascination with exile, longing for home, and both cultural and individual memory. In 1985, he published his study of Austrian literature, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (the description on melancholy: Austrian literature from Stifter to Handke), in which he argues that the melancholy of these writers is an attempt to overcome depression rather than to give in to it. In 1988, Sebald focused on contemporary German theater by editing a volume of critical articles, *A Radical Stage: Theatre in Germany in the 1970's and 1980's*.

In the last decade of his life, Sebald gained recognition and prominence as a novelist. Many critics compared him to the German novelist Günter Grass for the way that Sebald raised questions about the German past, especially political and social questions about the Holocaust and the complicity of individual Germans in that event. Others compared Sebald to Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin for Sebald's exploration of the nature of history and the place of an individual in a bureaucratic society out of control. Mostly, though, critics praised Sebald's beautifully lyrical prose, his haunting and evocative scenes of melancholy exiles wandering through a lost past, and his canny ability to establish a new genre—a mix of documentary and fiction that often included photographs. In fairly rapid succession, Sebald published a collection of poems and novels and won numerous awards for his work.

In 1988, Sebald published his first creative work, *Nach der Natur: Ein Elementargedicht*, which was published posthumously in English as *After Nature* (2002). He was awarded the Feder-Malchow Prize for Lyric Poetry in 1990, and that same year he published his first novel, *Schwindel: Gefühle*, later translated into English as *Vertigo* (1999). In 1992, Sebald published his second novel, *Die Ausgewanderten* (*The Emigrants*, 1996). *The Emigrants* won the Berlin Literature Prize and the Johannes Bobrowski Medal in 1994 and the Heinrich Böll Prize and the Mörike Prize in 1997. *Die Ringe des Saturn*, his third novel, appeared in 1995, and was published in English as *The Rings of Saturn* in 1998, when it was

awarded Best Fiction Book Prize by the *Los Angeles Times*.

In 1999, Sebald's book of critical essays, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, explored the ways that post-World War II German literature failed to come to terms with the bombings of Germany in World War II. This collection was published in English posthumously as *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003). In 2000, Sebald received the Heinrich Heine Prize and the Josef Breitbach Prize. Sebald's fourth novel, *Austerlitz*, appeared in Germany in February, 2001, and was published in an English translation in October, 2001.

In December, 2001, at the age of fifty-seven, Sebald died in an automobile crash near his home in Norwich, England. He received the Literary Prize of the City of Bremen and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, posthumously, in 2002. Sebald's death cut short the budding career of a major critic and novelist.

## ANALYSIS

Not long after *Austerlitz* was published in 2001, Sebald was killed in a car accident, robbing modern literature of one of its most distinctive voices. Critics hailed his work, which became more popular in the United States and Great Britain than in Germany. The literary critic Susan Sontag praised Sebald by proclaiming that his work was a noble literary enterprise and an example of literary greatness. Like Günter Grass, Sebald explores the political despair, social chaos, and individual guilt of post-World War II Germany, especially as individuals attempt to come to terms with loss and search to find explanations for the crimes perpetrated against Jews. Like Franz Kafka, Sebald offers portraits of outsiders living in exile continually trying to find their way into the castle or beyond the gates of the law. Like Marcel Proust, Sebald explores the halls of memory but interrogates its facility to be a repository of truth and examines its power to distort. Like Stendhal, Sebald exploits autobiography and twists it into fictional narratives. Like Jorge Luis Borges, Sebald playfully manipulates the borders between truth and imagination.

In his four novels—*Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*—Sebald explores themes of exile, memory, identity, history, and truth, beauty, and transience. Sebald questions the boundaries of realism by weaving photographs,

real people's names, and fictional characters in his novels. His writings in many ways resemble the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's notebooks, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910; *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1930), with the narrators observing the activities of a variety of characters, including themselves. The narrators of Sebald's books, who are often doubles of himself, find themselves wandering through various urban and rural landscapes in search of themselves and their identities. For example, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* sets off on a walking tour of the eastern coast of England and meditates along the way about such seemingly disparate subjects as the natural history of herrings, Sir Thomas Browne's skull, Joseph Conrad, and silkworms, among other topics. The wanderers of Sebald's novels often end up circling and circling, wending their way down torturous paths to self-identity. Outsiders, they circle through time and space in search of themselves and for some kind of home. In *Austerlitz*, the narrator of the novel observes that the future, the present, and the past are connected in space and that individuals must always go in search of places and people with whom they are connected already in time and space. Thus, the lives of individuals become not only a remembrance of lost time but also attempts to connect the present and the future. In various ways, all of Sebald's books explore the nature of identity and the function of memory.

The narrators of Sebald's novels resemble the pilgrims of Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614), Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). In *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*, especially, the narrators—who always remain nameless but whose first-person narration draws readers intimately into the novel—act as guides on their own pilgrimages, as they conduct readers through the labyrinthine journeys of their own minds and through the littered and haunted past of European history. Above all, these characters are attempting to locate themselves in a larger scheme, and in order to do so they must wander from place to place in search of clues for the meaning of their past and their own identity. Sebald's postmodern quest narratives are intricately laced tales of revelation and self-revelation woven from the bricolage of history, architecture, photography, memoir, art, and literature.

Sebald's books contain such a dazzling array of elements that it is often difficult to think of them as novels. Rather, they are prose fictions in which he blends seamlessly fact and fiction, casts himself in the role of the main characters, features other living authors (and friends)—such as Michael Hamburger in *The Rings of Saturn*—as well as dead authors whom he admires—like Joseph Conrad in *The Rings of Saturn*—and inserts photographs into the narrative, sometimes family photographs purporting to be of his own family, without commenting on the photographs. The structure of Sebald's novels, the blend of fact and fiction, and the mixture of disparate elements often provides a literary challenge for his readers, but his playful tone, his absurdist humor, and his affable first-person narration invite the reader to accompany him, or the narrator, on a journey that reveals the meaning of long-neglected past events, the beauty and mystery of nature, and the despair and hope that motivates the human heart throughout personal and public history.

## THE EMIGRANTS

**First published:** *Die Ausgewanderten*, 1992  
(English translation, 1996)

**Type of work:** Novel

*These biographies of four exiled Germans meditate on the nature of loneliness and the depression that involuntary exile, as result of Jewish identity, brings.*

In *The Emigrants*, Sebald explores the nature of exile through an examination of the lives of four Germans who have voluntarily emigrated from their homeland to various places in Europe. The tales grow longer with each subject, and each story focuses on the loneliness, the pathos, the unreliability of memory, and the glimmer of hope that comes with the territory of exile. These are tales of sadness—each ends in suicide—and of the halting attempts each emigrant makes to start a new life in a world that is strange and uninviting to him. In the final two tales at least, Sebald himself may be the narrator, and one of the stories purports to concern his great-uncle Ambros Adelwarth. Whoever

the subject, each story contains Sebald's characteristic blend of fact and fiction, memory and forgetting, narrative and photography, as the narrator tries to retrace the footsteps of each of the emigrants.

In the first story, the narrator meets Henry Selwyn, a Lithuanian Jew who had immigrated to London quite by accident. Although Selwyn's family originally planned to leave Lithuania to settle in New York City, they settled instead in England when they realized that their original destination was farther than they wished to travel. Although the story opens on a hopeful note—the narrator and his wife are searching for a place to live in an area near Norfolk, England—it soon turns somber as the two come to a graveyard and an old man lying down near it. The opening pages of this story resemble Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and their eloquent description of a run-down house and Malte's speculations about the house's inhabitants. Selwyn lives in the past, feeling guilty for hiding his Jewish identity from his wife (his real name is Hersch Serewyn) and reliving incidents, including a butterfly hunting expedition with writer Vladimir Nabokov, from his former life. The narrator's own memory of Selwyn is sparked on a train trip through Switzerland, when he sees a news story regarding an event in which Selwyn had long been involved. This first tale not only examines the nature of exile but also the reliability of memory.

The remaining three tales of these German exiles work in similar ways to explore the nature of happiness, memory, exile, hope, despair, and identity. The second tale focuses on Paul Bereyter, a schoolteacher modeled on one of Sebald's own teachers. This story begins at the end, when news reaches the narrator that a former teacher had killed himself. The obituary recalls Bereyter as a dedicated teacher who loved his pupils and loved the subjects—art, literature, and music—he taught. Because he is one-quarter Jewish, Bereyter was not allowed to practice his beloved profession during the Third Reich. The narrator learns from one of the teacher's close friends, though, that while Bereyter loved his students, he also held them in contempt for their willful disregard for the beauty of music and literature. Thus, the teacher's devotion to teaching fostered hopefulness in him for the future of the world, but his students' fail-

ures depressed him, leading him to hopelessness about the present and the future, destroying any dreams he had of a more perfect world.

The narrator of the third tale opens the story by remarking that exiles and emigrants tend to seek out their own kind. The story of Great-uncle Ambros Adelwarth concerns family more than the first two stories, and the narrator (Sebald?) inserts many family pictures into the narrative as a way of tracking the footsteps of an uncle whom he had only met once or twice in the past. There are not only family photographs, but there are also photographs of the places the uncle had visited. Adelwarth spent most of his life in New York, where he had a job as a valet for a wealthy family and developed a relationship with the family's younger son, Cosmo. When his lover dies, Adelwarth sinks into a deep depression that marks him for the rest of his life. In a story reminiscent of Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924; *The Magic Mountain*, 1927), Adelwarth commits himself to a sanatorium, where he hopes a variety of medications and therapies might cure him of his depression. The narrator contrasts the darkness of the sanatorium with the brightness and happiness of the French resort, Deauville, where he and Cosmo had spent many happy days. In the end, Adelwarth is exiled not only from his community but also from himself, a distance that leads to his death.

In the final story, Max Ferber—whose name in the German edition of *The Emigrants* is Max Aurach and who is likely modeled on the English Jewish painter, Frank Auerbach—has lived in Manchester, England, for twenty-two years, having moved from Munich in 1939 to Manchester's Jewish community. The opening of this tale is as haunting as some of the previous ones. The narrator, who is himself moving to Manchester (and, again, who might be Sebald), descends in an airplane over strange territory that he does not recognize. When he arrives in Manchester, his Sundays are so lonely that he must take long walks through the apparently deserted city in order to come to terms with his own feeling of exile. When the narrator comes across Ferber, the two begin to meet every day to discuss Ferber's art and to offer each other some kind of comfort and community in a city that is alien to each of them. Ferber's art expresses the lack of unity that he and the narrator feel as exiles in a strange land. Ferber attempts to overcome the loneliness and de-



spair of exile by withdrawing into his studio to practice his art. This withdrawal only results in a greater sense of alienation and a feeling of failure as an artist. When the narrator learns only after Ferber's death that he had been transported to England following *Kristallnacht*, and that Ferber had stopped speaking German on the day he arrived in England, never to speak it again, he begins to understand the tremendous loss of identity and memory that exile fosters.

## THE RINGS OF SATURN

**First published:** *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 1995  
(English translation, 1998)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel is a dreamlike sojourn of England in which the narrator meditates on subjects as far-ranging as Sir Thomas Browne's skull and silkworms.*

Much like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782; *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 1783), James Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785), and the letters between William Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, about his walking tour of the British Highlands, Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* is a journal of a walking tour of eastern England in which the narrator—who at times appears to be Sebald himself—records his impressions and his dreams. Like much of Sebald's other work, the borders between illusion and reality, fact and fiction, and dreams and life are porous and permeable. The novel does not contain a specific plot that can be followed from beginning to end. Much like Joyce's *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *The Rings of Saturn* records the narrator's thoughts in stream-of-consciousness-like fashion as he moves from one topic to another, with various images or events sending him into associative reveries.

As the novel opens, the narrator sets out to walk the county of Suffolk in order to overcome the emptiness he feels after he has completed a long period of work. He feels a joyous sense of freedom while he is traversing the countryside, even as he feels a disabling sense of horror when he encoun-

ters past events of destruction there. One year after he begins his walk, he finds himself in a state of complete immobility and must be taken to the hospital. There he looks out on the world from a small window and finds it difficult to judge reality from illusion; he thinks of himself as Gregor Samsa, the young man in Kafka's story *Die Verwandlung* (1915; *The Metamorphosis*, 1936), who wakes up to find himself transformed into a giant insect and who is no longer accepted by his family. More than a year after his discharge from the hospital, the narrator begins to assemble the recollections of his journey and of his hospitalization.

Chief among his recollections is his search for the skull of Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682), a physician whose best known work is *Religio Medici* (wr. 1635; pb. 1642; authorized version, 1643), a collection of his opinions on religion. Browne also wrote several treatises on medicine, and his *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall* (1658) is a meditation on various means of disposing of the dead that had been practiced in Britain. Browne's skull itself is an image of the interiority of one's self and the tendency of all individuals to look inward in order to discover personal identity. Many of the themes and images in Sebald's novel arise from the narrator's fascination with Browne and his work. Browne, like the narrator, was born under the sign of Saturn. Moreover, both the narrator and Browne are fascinated with death, especially the idea that nothing of the human being endures after death. Life, for the narrator, is a continuing process of transformation (metamorphosis) from one form into another. Death is simply a transformation into the iniquity of oblivion, and ceremonies of burial are attempts by the living to mark this transformation from life into death.

Images of dust, sand, ashes, fog, and mist pervade *The Rings of Saturn*. The ashes contained in the burial urn are much like the particles of sand on a beach or the dust particles that ring Saturn; they are particles of matter that remain after some form of destruction or transformation of organic matter. One of the epigraphs to the novel recalls that the rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and meteorite particles that are fragments of a former moon that was destroyed. The narrator concludes that human civilization, from its earliest times, is little more than a strange luminescence whose waning and fading no one can predict.

The most pervasive theme of *The Rings of Saturn* is journey or quest. Like a modern pilgrim, the narrator sets off on his walk to discover himself and to attempt to assuage the feeling of despair that has overcome him. As he walks into the countryside, the organic unity of all life—with its disorder as well as its order—is revealed to him. Images of ferries, ferrymen (the classical image of the journey from the living to the realm of the dead), and airplanes also pervade the book. As he observes schools of herring and the fisherman who catch them at work, he begins to understand the destructive as well as the transformative power of nature. Along his journey, the narrator lives with his thoughts and his memories, but he also reflects on others who have made similar journeys. He devotes one set of reflections to writer Joseph Conrad, for example, who took his own footsteps into a heart of darkness in order to understand the human psyche and the interior life. Through his journey, the narrator learns that hundreds of fellow travelers—like Browne and Conrad—have preceded him and he cannot quiet the ghosts of repetition that haunt him.

## AUSTERLITZ

**First published:** 2001 (English translation, 2001)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Over a period of thirty years, Jacques Austerlitz struggles to solve the riddle of his identity as he tells the story of his life to a companion.*

More than any of his other novels, *Austerlitz* is Sebald's meditation on the power of memory and its role in the creation, transformation, and destruction of identity. Like his previous books, *Austerlitz* weaves fact and fiction, documentary and reality, photographs and writing into a powerful exploration of human psyche. However, unlike *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, and *The Rings of Saturn*, *Austerlitz* contains a relatively straightforward plot that most readers can follow without much difficulty. The characters often speak interchangeably and without quotation marks to distinguish the speaker, but Jacques Austerlitz does not meander too far off his path when he tells his story.

Late in life, Austerlitz sets out to learn his history. Raised as Dafydd Elias in Wales, he is now living in England, which he believes to be his native country. Austerlitz barely remembers his parents, and it takes some intense archival work for him to discover anything about his early life in Prague. Born in Czechoslovakia, Austerlitz's Jewish mother—who could not leave the country—sent her son to England in one of the many *Kindertransports* organized in Czechoslovakia before World War II to save children. The narrator meets up with Austerlitz in Belgium, where they strike up a friendship based on their mutual love of history and architecture. Ten years later, the two meet again in London, where Austerlitz begins to tell the story of his origins, unfolding for himself and the narrator his own identity and history.

Although his mother's decision to put her son on the *Kindertransport* most certainly rescued him from the Nazis, it shut the door on his ability to know himself. More important, he lost his family, his past, and his language. Much like Max Ferber in *The Emigrants*, who stops speaking German the day he arrives in England and thereby shuts himself off from his past, Austerlitz's loss of his native language shuts him off from his past. As far as he is concerned, he has been erased from life and culture. His family is not aware he is alive; he is no longer aware of his family's fate, and he no longer possesses the one tool that can help him to feel truly a citizen of his culture—his language. Even as he slowly learns about his past, he often panics as he looks at a picture of himself as a five-year-old child and is speechless and incapable of any lucid thought because the power of his absence from his childhood is so strong. He cannot comprehend the laws that govern the return of the past and feels unreal in the eyes of those who are now dead.

Austerlitz's conversations with the narrator enable him to reconstruct his history. Austerlitz discovers himself and his history not only through conversations with the narrator or trips to the archives in the library but also through photographs



of his mother and of places related to his childhood. A picture of a house sparks a clear memory of the home in which he was raised. Photographs complicate the relationship between the living and the dead. On the one hand, the photographs frighten him; on the other hand, they transport him and open the floodgate to memory and his understanding of himself. More than any of his other novels, *Austerlitz* captures Sebald's characteristic themes of loss and reconstruction of history and identity.

### SUMMARY

W. G. Sebald's remarkable novels bequeathed to readers powerful glimpses into the ways that people construct their identities, their memories, and their histories. His invention of a new genre—the docu-novel—allowed him to use facts, photographs, and fiction to probe some of the deepest questions of his time: Who is responsible for erasing the Jews from history—both individually and collectively—in the Holocaust? What is the nature of history? What tools can people use to reconstruct an identity that has been lost to them? How do people use language to oppress and liberate? How can humankind balance the destructive and the orderly forces of nature, and how can it understand its place in nature? How does revelation occur? Sebald's astonishing writings provide a philosophical and literary legacy for many generations.

Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- W. G. Sebald inserts many photographs in his novels. How do these photographs contribute to the power and meaning of the novel?
- In many of Sebald's writings, it is difficult to tell whether he is recording fact or telling a story that has no basis in fact. What are the benefits of weaving fact and fiction together as he does in his writings?
- Sebald often uses images, scenes, and phrases from other novelists. How does his use of these other works of fiction in his own novels enhance your reading of his novels?
- Why does each "biography" in *The Emigrants* grow increasingly longer?
- Discuss the similarities and differences among *The Rings of Saturn*, Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).
- What is the role of language in *Austerlitz*?
- What is quest literature, and how are Sebald's novels examples of such literature?

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## SENECA THE YOUNGER

**Born:** Corduba (now Córdoba, Spain)  
c. 4 B.C.E.

**Died:** Rome (now in Italy)  
April, 65 C.E.

*Seneca's tragedies are the only works of Latin drama to survive, and they deeply influenced Renaissance theater. His essays and letters successfully address a variety of moral and philosophical questions and are widely admired for their crisp style.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (SEHN-ih-kuh), better known as Seneca the Younger, was born in 4 B.C.E. in Corduba (now Córdoba, Spain). His father, Seneca the Elder, was a conservative Roman knight who had achieved fame as an orator and teacher of rhetoric in Rome. His mother, Helvia, was an extraordinarily intelligent, gifted, and morally upright person whose love for philosophy had been checked only by her husband's rejection of the idea of education for women. The familial conflict was passed to the next generation: The oldest of the three brothers, Gallio, pursued a splendid political career, but the youngest, Mela, spent his life making money and educating himself (the poet Lucan was his son). Lucius Seneca, the second child and the bearer of his father's name, was torn between public life in the service of a corrupt state and life as philosopher, writer, and private man.

Coming to Rome at a very early age, Seneca received an education in rhetoric. Not only was it the first step toward becoming an orator with an eye to public offices; it also introduced the youth to the discussion of subtle ethical questions, and thus presented him with a specific model of intellectual inquiry that would shape his literary output. He encountered teachers of Stoic philosophy who taught a life of asceticism, equanimity in the face of adversity, and an evaluation of the daily work of the self,

which laid the foundations of the mature Seneca's eclectic philosophical beliefs.

In Rome, Seneca lived with an aunt who guarded the thin, feeble boy's precarious health. As a result of his aunt's lobbying, Seneca successfully entered public service in 33 C.E. Besides serving the state under the two difficult emperors Tiberius and Caligula, Seneca began to achieve wealth and fame as a lawyer; early works (now lost) made him a celebrated writer, as well. Yet his status at the top of Roman society also threatened his life. Only ill health saved him from the jealous wrath of Caligula, whose mistresses persuaded him of the pointlessness of executing a seemingly moribund man. In 41 C.E., however, the first year of the reign of Claudius I, a struggle for power among the women around the emperor brought Seneca into court on a trumped-up charge of adultery. Found guilty, he escaped death only because Claudius commuted the sentence into banishment to the barren island of Corsica. On Corsica for the next eight years, Seneca dedicated himself to philosophy and the writing of letters; probably, he also began to draft tragedies. The most powerful works completed in this era are his letters of advice and consolation to his mother, *Ad Helviam matrem de consolatione* (c. 41-42 C.E.; *To My Mother Helvia, on Consolation*, 1614), and the essay *De ira libri tres* (c. 41-49 C.E.; *Three Essays on Anger*, 1614).

Seneca was recalled by Claudius after the execution of Claudius's second wife, Seneca's enemy Messalina. Yet the exiled orator and writer, whose fame had grown during his absence, was not al-



lowed to retire to Athens. Instead, he was made the tutor of the young boy Nero, the adopted son of the emperor. Although the dating of all Seneca's nine tragedies is uncertain, most scholars believe that they were written, and privately recited or performed, in this period between his return in 49 C.E. and Claudius's death in 54 C.E., when Nero's accession propelled his tutor to the fore of imperial governance. In a nice demonstration of his characteristically wide range of literary skills, Seneca commenced to write both the official funeral eulogy of Claudius and the brilliant satire *Apocolocyntosis divi Claudii* (c. 54 C.E.; *The Deification of Claudius*, 1614), in which a bumbling and cruel former emperor is consigned to the underworld.

While helping to govern Rome during Nero's early reign, Seneca found time to write more essays, among which *De clementia* (c. 55-56 C.E.; *On Clemency*, 1614) clearly demonstrates a direct concern with the education of the young, absolute ruler. Yet with Nero's awakening thirst for power, Seneca found himself in a position of complicity, and his literary and rhetorical skills were compromised. In 59 C.E., after Nero ordered the assassination of his (Nero's) mother, it was Seneca who drafted the son's speech, which cleverly concealed the facts.

Seneca's final request for retirement in 62 C.E. was refused by Nero, who kept him in Rome, although removed now from the court. Seneca's best philosophical work was written during this time; in his remaining three years, he finished *De providentia* (c. 63-64 C.E.; *On Providence*, 1614) and wrote *Quaestiones naturales* (c. 62-64 C.E.; *Natural Questions*, 1614) and his influential *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* (c. 62-65 C.E.; *Letters to Lucilius*, 1917-1925), in which he establishes the form of the essay. Early in 65 C.E., a probably false accusation implicated Seneca in a conspiracy to assassinate Nero, who ordered him to commit suicide. With Stoic tranquillity and in the tradition of Socrates and Cato the Younger, Seneca opened his arteries and slowly bled to death, dying in Rome. His literary accomplishments survived, and have influenced generations of readers.

## ANALYSIS

Seneca's tragedies, essays, and letters share a keen focus on the processes of making sophisticated ethical and moral choices. To this concern,

Seneca brings a terse and pointed style. In *Troades* (c. 40-55 C.E.; *The Trojan Women*, 1581), for example, Seneca dramatizes the effects of total power on the minds of those who wield it. There, in a chilling dialogue, the two Greek conquerors Pyrrhus and Agamemnon coldly deliberate whether they should kill the captive Trojan woman Polyxena.

PYRRHUS: No law spares a captive or prevents punishment.

AGAMEMNON: What the law does not forbid, shame forbids.

PYRRHUS: A victor can do whatever he likes.

AGAMEMNON: Who can do much should like to do least.

With similar poignancy, Seneca's essay *On Providence* raises the universal question of why bad things happen to good people; as a Stoic, Seneca suggests that negative events test both a good person's ability to overcome evil and his or her commitment to a balanced outlook on life. A wise person should accept with dignity the vicissitudes of life ordered by capricious Fate.

Yet Seneca's Stoicism is not uniform, and his writings always incorporate intellectual positions taken from different sources. In *Three Essays on Anger*, for example, many different philosophers are quoted to support Seneca's anti-Aristotelian argument that there is nothing useful or honorable in even short outbursts of anger. If this eclecticism has earned for Seneca the scorn of some purist critics, it has nevertheless served his practical aims well. Instead of developing a philosophical theory of his own, Seneca tests, and puts into his own language, different answers for such timeless questions as those that concern fulfillment and happiness, death and adversity, or the snares of luxury and power.

In his dramatic works, however, a trade-off is involved in Seneca's decision—influenced by his education as an orator and public speaker—to focus strongly on an ethical problem and to display proudly his epigrammatic brilliancy as a writer of declamatory speeches. Thus, in *The Trojan Women*, the character of Andromache coldly deliberates whether she should sacrifice her son or let the Greeks desecrate the tomb of her husband. While these two choices pose a genuine ethical dilemma, their lengthy analysis all but destroys her dramatic

believability as a grief-stricken mother and widow. Yet it is Seneca's overriding interest in the consequences of the extreme situation with which he confronts his characters that, together with his unmistakably terse Latin style, distinguishes his tragedies from their Greek sources (primarily the plays of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles), with which they share their subject matter, Greek mythology.

Ubiquitous violence is another trademark of Seneca's plays. Unlike his Greek predecessors, Seneca is not content to leave it offstage. Though scholars are still debating whether Seneca's plays were intended only to be read or (as may be the new consensus) were indeed performed for small, private audiences, this crucial formal difference between direct or recorded action sets Seneca apart.

Seneca's *Oedipus* (c. 40-55 C.E.; English translation, 1581) thus actually shows Jocasta's suicide, a desperate act at which she arrives after dramatic deliberations. In *Hercules furens* (c. 40-55 C.E.; *Mad Hercules*, 1581), the hero, deluded by the Furies, kills his wife and his children on stage. In *Phaedra* (c. 40-55 C.E.; English translation, 1581), the bloody limbs of Theseus's son Hippolytus are brought forth for all to see, and Medea kills her second child right before the horrified eyes of Jason (and the audience) in Seneca's version of *Medea* (c. 40-55 C.E.; English translation, 1581).

For Seneca, violence is an ever-present dramatic possibility. Often, the very threat of it chills his audience. Aegisthus's attempt to persuade Clytemnestra to murder her husband, Agamemnon, who has taken Cassandra as a mistress and killed Aegisthus's brothers, lends incredible dramatic power to Seneca's *Agamemnon* (c. 40-55 C.E.; English translation, 1581). In a similar dramatic exploitation of the primal rupture caused by a violent act, *Hercules Oetaeus* (c. 40-55 C.E.; *Hercules on Oeta*, 1581) offers a pointed cathartic depiction of the hero's sufferings after he has lost his skin to the poisoned robe in which his wife, annoyed by his infidelity, has wrapped him.

Seneca's use of violence fascinated Renaissance translators of his plays in Italy, England, and France and is discernible behind such gory masterpieces of the period as John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (pr. 1614; pb. 1623). Beginning in the early nineteenth century, and certainly in the Victorian era,

readers recoiled in horror from Seneca's works. A Romantic preference for individually drawn characters over abstract dramatic conflict further lowered Seneca's stock. Contemporary influences and dramatic interests, such as the emergence of the Theater of Cruelty after World War II, have led to a revived appreciation of Seneca's tragedies. His brilliant examination of the passions that drive humans to acts of carnage and his eternal search for moments of saving grace in the midst of depravity have made him an extremely relevant writer.

## MEDEA

**First published:** c. 40-55 C.E. (English translation, 1581)

**Type of work:** Play

*Faced with the loss of her husband, Jason, and her two sons, Medea kills Jason's new wife, Creusa his stepfather, Creon, and her own children.*

Seneca's *Medea* has its Greek forerunner in a surviving play by Euripides of the same name, yet its brusque style and emphasis on Medea's passionate revenge make it thoroughly his own work. Reflecting Seneca's fondness for the supernatural, the play opens with Medea's prayers to the gods, with whom she seems uncannily familiar. Cursing her husband, Jason, for abandoning her in Corinth to comply with the wish of the local king Creon that Jason marry the king's daughter, Medea implores the "powers of feuding vengeance" to aid her.

Effectively drawing the audience into her confidence, Medea immediately promises "evil actions/of brutality unknown" which will nevertheless let Jason live to face "something worse" than simple death. The Chorus, however, sides with Jason and condemns Medea: The fact that she has helped Jason to steal the Golden Fleece from her father and killed her brother to distract her father from her elopement with Jason makes Medea a monster whom Jason is justified in leaving. Yet the question of Jason's exact culpability is not as important for the play as is Medea's passionate, but incredibly self-conscious, effecting of her revenge. In a tense dialogue with her Nurse, Medea shows clear knowledge that her plans will not only endanger her life

but also place her apart from the rest of humanity.

When King Creon appears, Medea persuades him, against his better judgment, to let her stay in Corinth until the day after Jason's wedding, when she has to leave for Athens. After a Choric interlude, which warns of the effects of human audacity, Medea finally confronts Jason. His argument that he acts only to save both of them from the hatred of the Corinthian king, who demanded his new marriage in exchange for their lives, is scornfully rejected by Medea, who proposes to fight Creon; yet Jason refuses to do so and forbids Medea to take with her their children, whom he loves dearly. Stunned by Jason's utter rejection, Medea gets ready to act; the Chorus warns of her powers.

In a brilliantly stylized scene Medea, granddaughter of the gods Sol (Sun) and Oceanus, now implores the aid of the supernatural in her creation of a poison that, when sprinkled on the robes that she will send to Creusa as her wedding gift, will kill the bearer and burn down the royal palace, destroying Creon as well. After a messenger informs her of the success of her plot, Medea takes a further step and kills her first son. After Jason has rushed on stage, she kills the second child in front of his anguished eyes. Her revenge complete, two flying serpents carry her away while Jason is left to mourn his total loss; full of bitterness, he renounces the existence of all gods.

## PHAEDRA

**First published:** c. 40-55 C.E. (English translation, 1581)

**Type of work:** Play

*Because her stepson Hippolytus does not return her incestuous love, Phaedra accuses him of raping her and moves Theseus, his father and her husband, to have Hippolytus killed; seeing his corpse, Phaedra commits suicide.*

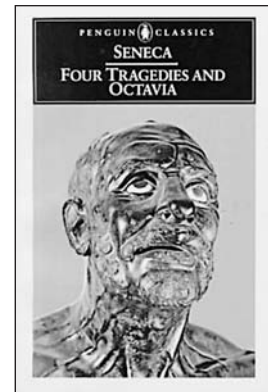
By focusing exclusively on the passionate actions of the human characters, and by reducing the role of the gods so that they become mere instruments of Theseus's bitter rage against his son, Seneca's *Phaedra* becomes a moving study of the force of human emotions.

Pursuing his passion for the hunt with a determination worthy of his mother, the Amazon queen Antiope, young Hippolytus energetically readies his men and his hounds for a chase across the face of the known earth. After he and his teams are gone, Phaedra appears, bitterly scolding Theseus, who married her after Antiope's death, for leaving her in order to explore the underworld. Partly because she is dissatisfied with her lonely life, Phaedra now overtly acknowledges her forbidden love for Hippolytus.

From her first soliloquy to her ensuing discussion with her old Nurse, who tries to reason her out of her mad love but finally decides to help her, Phaedra remains painfully self-conscious of both the clearly dangerous consequences of her passions and her reason's inability to check her emotions.

Intensely aware of her heritage as the daughter of the Cretan queen Pasiphae, whose love for a bull created the Minotaur, Phaedra knowingly, yet also helplessly, embraces disaster. By giving her such a painful insight into her quandary, Seneca creates a complex, introspective character whose spiritual offspring can be found, for example, in William Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*.

After the Chorus reiterates the theme of Cupid's power, the Nurse tries to persuade Hippolytus, who has returned to Athens, to love a woman rather than to spend his time with men and dogs. In lines that fascinated the sonneteers of the Renaissance, the Nurse in vain evokes the pleasures of love. Unmoved, Hippolytus is met by Phaedra, who cunningly swoons and falls into his arms. Gradually confessing her love for him, Phaedra encounters first disbelief, then violent reaction and total rejection from her stepson. Imploring the gods, Hippolytus achieves tragic status by sensing that Phaedra's actions spell his own doom. "I am guilty, I have earned . . . death./ For I aroused my stepmother's desire." Ready to kill Phaedra as she flings herself at him, Hippolytus draws his sword but angrily throws it away once Phaedra tells him that, for her, to die at his hands would signify the consummation of her



love. Acting quickly, the Nurse retrieves the sword and decides to save Phaedra from Theseus's wrath by having her accuse her stepson of rape and using his weapon as evidence. Now, even the Chorus's praise for Hippolytus cannot save him.

As Theseus returns, the Nurse's plot develops according to plan, and Theseus is roused to a violent denunciation of his son. Full of anger and hatred, a slave to blind passion, he orders the gods to kill Hippolytus. In the face of this immense injustice, the Chorus, in hauntingly modern terms, criticizes the gods for the distance from humanity that keeps them from positive intervention. Hippolytus's death is rendered in graphic detail by a messenger, telling of a sea monster that frightened his horses, who in turn dragged the hunter to his death over tree stumps and rocks. The horror of the act is increased further when his bloodied remains are brought on stage, and Theseus collapses with grief; even the Chorus is stunned.

When Phaedra appears and sees what is left of Hippolytus, she is raised to realize how badly both adults have failed him by giving in to their passions. Intensely pained, she accuses her husband: "I am a stepmother, and I bring death,/ but you, a father,

are much worse than I." As a punishment for his rash, harsh, and false judgment, Theseus is left alive, while Phaedra stabs herself with Hippolytus's sword. Trembling with sorrow, he orders "a royal pyre" for his son's funeral and demands that Phaedra's corpse be thrown into a ditch and covered with earth, as one would dispose of a dead animal.

## SUMMARY

Seneca the Younger's focus on practical moral advice and his imaginative use of violence to depict the full force of the decisions forced upon his tragic characters have ensured him a fascinated audience. His witty, poignant, and epigrammatic language, eminently quotable, has further established his hold over the minds and memories of his readers and listeners. His dramatic creation of intensely self-aware protagonists, who, like Medea or Phaedra, fully understand the evil nature of the actions that they are compelled to commit, fascinated Renaissance playwrights and clearly contributed to the creation of William Shakespeare's characters Hamlet and Macbeth.

R. C. Lutz

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The dating of Seneca's plays is approximate; the following were written c. 40-55 C.E.:

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*Hercules Oetaeus* (*Hercules on Oeta*, 1581)

*Medea* (English translation, 1581)

*Oedipus* (English translation, 1581)

*Phaedra* (English translation, 1581)

*Phoenissae* (*The Phoenician Women*, 1581)

*Thyestes* (English translation, 1581)

*Troades* (*The Trojan Women*, 1581)

#### NONFICTION:

*Ad Marciam de consolatione*, c. 40-41 C.E. (*To Marcia, on Consolation*, 1614)

*Ad Helviam matrem de consolatione*, c. 41-42 C.E. (*To My Mother Helvia, on Consolation*, 1614)

*De ira libri tres*, c. 41-49 C.E. (*Three Essays on Anger*, 1614)

*Epigrammata super exilio*, c. 41-49 C.E.

*Ad Polybium de consolatione*, c. 43-44 C.E. (*To Polybius, on Consolation*, 1614)

*De brevitate vitae*, c. 49 C.E. (*On the Shortness of Life*, 1614)

*Apocolocyntosis divi Claudii*, c. 54 C.E. (*The Deification of Claudius*, 1614)

## Seneca the Younger

*De clementia*, c. 55-56 C.E. (*On Clemency*, 1614)  
*De constantia sapientis*, c. 55-56 C.E. (*On the Constancy of the Wise Man*, 1614)  
*De beneficiis*, c. 58-63 C.E. (*On Benefits*, 1614)  
*De tranquillitate animi*, c. 59-61 C.E. (*On the Tranquility of the Soul*, 1614)  
*De otio*, c. 62 C.E. (*On Leisure*, 1614)  
*Quaestiones naturales*, c. 62-64 C.E. (*Natural Questions*, 1614)  
*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, c. 62-65 C.E. (*Letters to Lucilius*, 1917-1925)  
*De providentia*, c. 63-64 C.E. (*On Providence*, 1614)  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Does the stoicism of Seneca the Younger ever undermine the effect of his tragedies?
- What thematic differences are there between Euripides' *Mēdeia* (431 B.C.E.; (*Medea*, 1781) and Seneca's *Medea*?
- What do Seneca's plays reveal about the characteristics of his Roman audiences?
- In addition to some of his characters, William Shakespeare was influenced by Seneca in the construction of his plays, in their supernatural features, and in other ways. Review this influence.
- Investigate Edith Hamilton's assertion that Seneca's tragedies exemplify "the Roman way as distinguished from the Greek way."





AP/Wide World Photos

## VIKRAM SETH

**Born:** Calcutta (now Kolkata) West Bengal, India  
June 20, 1952

*Seth's work shows remarkable versatility and includes several volumes of poems, a surprising novel in verse, an award-winning travel book, the longest novel ever written in English, a novel that exploited his considerable knowledge of music, a libretto for the English National Opera, and a combination biography-memoir.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Vikram Seth (sayt) was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the Indian state of West Bengal. His family moved around a lot and much of his early life was spent at boarding schools. His father was a shoe company executive, and his mother became a judge on the Delhi High Court. He has a younger brother, Shantum, and a younger sister, Aradhana.

Seth attended Welham Boys School and the Doon School, both in Dehradun, and in those years he has said he felt lonely and isolated. He went on to Tonbridge School in Kent, England, and then to the philosophy, politics, and economics program at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He spent the period from 1975 to 1986 studying for a Ph.D. at Stanford University. He also received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing (1977-1978) and worked with the Stanford poet Timothy Steele, whose influence led him to write traditional verse with formal rhyme and meters.

Seth left California to do field research in China from 1980 to 1982, gathering material for a doctoral dissertation that he never wrote. However, the remarkable feat of learning Mandarin Chinese in six months enabled him to translate Chinese poetry and to write the superb travel memoir *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* (1983). The memoir describes his hitchhiking tour

across the Himalayas and inspired some riveting passages, especially his account of the funeral ceremony near the Sera monastery in Lhasa. Seth witnessed human corpses being minced and crushed on a rock, with the human mash mixed with barley meal and the skulls pulverized by rocks before it was all blessed by a monk and served up to the hungry eagles waiting nearby. *From Heaven Lake* won him the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award for 1983.

In his first collection of poems, *Mappings* (1981), Seth displays a talent for nature writing as he "maps" his earlier life. Translations from Heinrich Heine, the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and the Chinese poet Du Fu are graced by allusions to William Shakespeare, Marcel Proust, and other writers. *Mappings* was followed by *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), a collection of poems set in China, India, and California. Some of the best lines in this volume are witty observations about the foibles of his family—a sister "immersed in sociology," his mother drinking ginger tea, and his father "Inveighing against politics and corruption." *The Humble Administrator's Garden* received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for Asia in 1985. His first two volumes of verse were eventually followed by *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990), *Beastly Tales from Here and There* (1992), and *Three Chinese Poets: Translations of Poems by Wang Lei, Li Bai, and Du Fu* (1992).

Seth has not paraded his sexual tastes, but he has not hidden them either, saying in one poem that "Some men like Jack and some like Jill/ I'm glad I like them both . . ." Seth's mother, Leila Seth,

has explained in her memoir how difficult it was for her and Seth's father to understand Seth's homosexuality, but they loved him and accepted his life as he wished to lead it. In a television interview in India on January 21, 2006, Seth attacked the Indian penal code for its harshness toward homosexuals and condemned it as cruel and harmful. Although gay relationships do not dominate Seth's plots, the affair between Ed, who is gay, and Phil, who is mainly straight, is an important strand in the story line of *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* (1986).

Seth has received numerous awards for both his prose and his poetry. Besides the awards for *From Heaven Lake* and *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, his novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) was short-listed in 1993 for the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, and in 1994 it won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for best book, as well as the W. H. Smith Literary Award. In 2001, *An Equal Music* (1999) was honored with the Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award for best novel, and organizations in his native India have also bestowed awards on him.

#### ANALYSIS

Except for the Alexander Pushkin stanzas of *The Golden Gate*, Seth's narrative method is conventional. He does not manipulate time or point of view, nor does he indulge in postmodernist irony, and his characters are generally likable and believable. Seth has frequently been matched against Salman Rushdie, with some critics regretting Seth's choice of straightforward storytelling in the Victorian fashion. Mala Pandurang has defended Seth's technique on the grounds of his interest in social themes. Book 7 of *The Golden Gate*, for example, focuses on issues of nuclear power, with Phil passing out pamphlets in a crowd of antinuclear demonstrators, while Father O'Hare, "Bespectacled, short, nervous, chubby," harangues against "man-made doom."

One powerful theme of *A Suitable Boy* centers around the Zamindar Abolition Bill, which would confiscate the land of wealthy Muslim estate owners and redistribute it among the indigent. The prime advocate for the bill is Mr. Mahesh Kapoor, while one of the people who would lose heavily if the bill passes is Kapoor's old friend, Nawab Sahib of Baitar. The plight of the landless poor emerges when Maan Kapoor accompanies his Urdu teacher, Abdur Rasheed, to Rasheed's village home, where

the superb characterizations of the village people provide a counterweight to the trivial preoccupations of the Chatterji children. Rasheed is an intelligent man, a responsible working-class intellectual, and he awakens in the frivolous but decent Maan a social conscience. Mr. Mahesh Kapoor pushes through the Zamindar Abolition Bill. However, in succumbing to the pressure of an unhappy marriage and his zeal for social change, Rasheed loses his reason and kills himself.

In a concluding note to *An Equal Music*, Seth says that "Music to me is dearer even than speech," and talk of music and musicians is a common thread connecting his novels. For John in *The Golden Gate* (and probably for Seth), "[Arnold] Schoenberg's an ulcer generator," whereas a composition by Johannes Brahms creates "a continuous tenderness/ So deep it smooths out all distress." In *A Suitable Boy*, Nawab Sahib of Baitar invites a friend and the nawab's own two sons to hear the temperamental Ustad Majeed Khan sing *raags*. Seth tells of "The regally slow unfolding of the alaap, the wide vibratos on the third and sixth degrees," language that in its command of its subject anticipates the intuitive grasp of Western music that shines in *An Equal Music*, where Johann Sebastian Bach's *the Art of Fugue* and Franz Schubert's *Trout Quintet* become major characters in the drama. Shirley Chew has written that "Seth's novel can be said to aspire to the condition of music, and the more specific correspondences here are with musical rather than literary works."

Seth recalls in *From Heaven Lake* how moved he was by the flute player he heard in Kathmandu, finding himself drawn by the music into "the commonalty of mankind." This same feeling for music is everywhere evident in Seth's writings, as might be expected of someone who plays the Indian flute and the cello and sings Schubert lieder.

Children, nature, and animals all have minor roles in Seth's novels. In *The Golden Gate*, Ed keeps a green iguana christened Arnold Schwarzenegger—a "Great saurian from realms primeval!"—that fascinates the neighborhood children. "Schwarz" causes no problems for Ed, but John hates Liz's cat, Charlemagne, as much as he does Schoenberg. When Michael Holme, in *An Equal Music*, visits his former lover, Julia McNicholl, he meets not only her young son, Luke, but also Buzby, their "huge brown dog with a black face."

Buzby's antics ease the potentially awkward meeting of Michael and Luke. In *A Suitable Boy*, a bird comes to Lata at the end of part 13 in a poem, "The Fever Bird," from Amit Chatterji's volume with the same title. She is profoundly disturbed by the poem, by the bird's "call that skewers through [her] brain." The bird is also defined six hundred pages earlier as a "hawk-cuckoo," and its "brain-sick triple note" penetrates to Lata's subconscious, where she is struggling to choose a suitable boy to marry.

Seth often composes lovely passages of nature description, rich with details of birds and trees. Such a passage opens chapter 4 of *An Equal Music*, with Michael hoping to meet Julia at Round Pond in an appropriately autumnal scene, which he calls "this season of wood." Julia, however, does not appear, and he is left to muse on the bird song that comes to him through the "bare lattice" of a leafless chestnut tree. Section 12.5 of *The Golden Gate* describes spring in loving terms: The landscape is radiant with quince bursting in "shameless colonies/ On woody bushes," while blue jays croak and Easter lilies "effloresce/ In white and Lenten loveliness."

Seth's diction always sparkles, but nowhere is his language more playful and witty than in *The Golden Gate*. He devises rhymes that Lord Byron would have admired: "volition/Titian," "feisty/Christ—he," and "Marx/ecclesiarchs" are representative. The outrageous epithet, "putrefied orangutan," catches the eye, as does Janet Hayakawa's surname commemorating the famous semanticist and politician, S. I. Hayakawa. Literary allusions are everywhere in *The Golden Gate*, with Thomas Mann and Saint Bede the Venerable showing up in section 1.3 and Horace's cry "Eheu fugaces" about humankind's fleeting years soon following. Seth also refers to *Life's Little Ironies* (1894) by Thomas Hardy and *Zibaldone* (1898-1900) by Giacomo Leopardi, and he includes fragmentary quotations from Robert Louis Stevenson, Hannah Arendt, William Shakespeare's character Cassius, Theodore Roethke, John Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), and Andrew Marvell. However, the most elaborate play on literary sources comes in stanzas 9.24-9.26, where the cult of comic-book character Tintin is stirred up with talk of Bianca Castafiore, Haddock, and Gorgonzola, among others. In this whole complex tissue of cultural references, which appear throughout the novel's thirteen chapters, readers are left on their own.

## THE GOLDEN GATE

**First published:** 1986

**Type of work:** Novel

*Five characters dance around each other in a romantic pas de cinq, creating a lively arabesque until one of them dies in a car wreck.*

*The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse* comprises thirteen books, or chapters, totaling 590 sonnets modeled after Charles Johnston's translation of Alexander Pushkin's long narrative poem, *Evgeny Onegin* (1825-1832, 1833; *Eugene Onegin*, 1881). The lines are written in iambic tetrameter, with an additional unstressed syllable affixed to lines one and three, five and six, and nine and twelve, thereby creating double, feminine rhymes in those lines, such as "fearful" and "tearful," "replying" and "crying," and "tissue" and "reissue." The rhyme scheme is *ababccdddefeggg*.

The novel is set in Northern California in 1980. John Brown, a twenty-six-year-old computer engineer, lonely and set in his ways, calls an old girlfriend, Janet Hayakawa, to lament his loveless plight. The enterprising Jan, who plays drums for a band called Liquid Sheep, quickly advertises on John's behalf in the personals column of the *Bay Guardian*, describing a "Well-rounded and well-meaning square/ Lusting for love." This beguiling plea hooks Liz Dorati, a veteran of Stanford Law School, who answers, "If you flout my charms, you are a tasteless lout." Liz's charms are not flouted and the carnal pleasures are intense, marred for John only by his hatred of Liz's cat, Charlemagne.

While Liz and John are enjoying their idyll, John's old school chum, Phil Weiss, is plodding along with his son, Paul, wondering what happened to his marriage. Then, through Liz and John, Phil meets Liz's brother, Ed, who sees in Phil just the soul mate he yearns for. Their affair is intense, if brief, and soon ends with a fist fight, fol-



lowed by Phil's plea that Ed not torment himself with guilt about their relationship. Phil asks, "What facet of our love outrages/ Your puritanical piety?" Book 8 concludes with Phil's eloquent defense of gay love and a final, exhausting night lying apart on the same bed.

The romance of John and Liz begins unraveling on Thanksgiving Day at the Doratis' home when Liz learns that her sister, Sue, has won a scholarship to study for a year in Paris, and Liz begins to wonder if committing to a life with John is what she wants. Thoughts of Paris evaporate instantly when Liz's father tells her that her mother has cancer. While Liz is absorbing this bad news, John is snooping around Liz's mail lying on the hall table; when he spies a letter addressed in a hand that he recognizes as that of their old friend Phil, he thrusts it at Liz, "With jealous loathing and dismay." This unexpected and unconvincing scene ends with John packing to leave immediately, still not knowing about Mrs. Dorati's condition.

The denouement is swift and tragic. After Phil and Liz marry, John and Jan struggle toward a happy union, dampened by the cold reception given an exhibit of her sculptures, but John's world collapses when Jan dies in a car wreck. John's spiritual condition is evidenced in the weeds that grow thick and rank in his flower beds and in the dust that covers everything in his "disordered rooms." Finally, when he gets Phil and Liz's announcement of the birth of a son they are naming John, he goes to the telephone to dry his tears by calling them with words of love, not bitterness. This tender conclusion makes a superb elegy.

## A SUITABLE BOY

**First published:** 1993

**Type of work:** Novel

*It is the early 1950's in the fictional city of Brahmpur in eastern India, and the widowed Mrs. Rupa Mehra is worrying about finding a suitable boy for her youngest daughter, Lata.*

*A Suitable Boy* is a tale of four families told in 1,474 pages. The widowed Mrs. Rupa Mehra has two sons, Arun, who is married to Meenakshi, a daughter of the prominent Chatterjis of Calcutta,

and Varun, a race track habitu  much picked on by the older Arun. She also has two daughters, Savita, married to Pran Kapoor, and the bright, attractive Lata, whose need for a proper husband preoccupies Mrs. Mehra.

The Kapoors also live in Brahmpur, where Mr. Mahesh Kapoor is minister of revenue for Purva Pradesh. The Kapoors have a daughter, Veena, whose husband, Kedernath Tandon, works in the shoe trade. Veena and Kedernath's nine-year-old son, Bhaskar, is a mathematical genius, who shares the same name as a famous Indian mathematician. (In a similar bit of onomastic play, Mr. Kapoor's secretary, Abdul Salaam, shares, with an extra vowel, the name of the Pakistani winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics for 1979, Abdul Salam.) Pran Kapoor teaches English at the university in Calcutta, while his easygoing younger brother, Maan, indulges himself with courtesans, drink, and gambling.

The other two families are the Muslim Khans of Brahmpur and the Hindu Chatterjis of Calcutta. The Begum Abida Khan lives alone, her husband having abandoned her to live in Pakistan. Her husband's brother, the widower Nawab Sahib of Baitar, oversees the Khans' affairs, which consist mainly of the doings of his married daughter, Zainab, and his two sons, Imtiaz and Firoz. The latter's close friendship with Maan Kapoor results in near-tragedy. The Chatterjis belong to the Calcutta elite. Mr. Justice Chatterji sits on the Calcutta High Court, studies Sanskrit classics, and with his wife entertains lavishly. His pretentious son-in-law, Arun Kapoor, is being cuckolded by his wife, Meenakshi, the Chatterjis' daughter, with Arun's best friend. Meenakshi and her lively younger sister, Kakoli, offend Mrs. Rupa Mehra with their sophistication. The oldest Chatterji son, Amit, studied at Oxford and writes poetry; the middle son, Dipankar, alternates between the mystical and the practical; and the youngest son, Tapan, lurks in the background of the family drama.

A major character outside of these family groups is the enterprising Haresh Khanna, whose social background is far below that of the Chatterjis, the Khans, and the Kapoors, although he suits Mrs. Rupa Mehra just right. He studied at Midlands College of Technology and has mastered the shoemaking business from top to bottom. His accent, his manners, his tastes, and his dress betray his modest



origins, but his industry, his confidence in himself, and his work habits guarantee success with the Czech firm that he brazens his way into. (One of the great pleasures of the novel is the detailed account of the shoemaking business, in which Seth's father also was employed.) Haresh had a serious love interest, but the girl's Sikh religion doomed their relationship.

Encouraged all the way by Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Haresh conducts a serious campaign to win Lata Mehra, who besides having become the rather languid romantic focus of Amit Chatterji has long desired a handsome and talented fellow Muslim student, Kabir Durrani. Kabir's father, Dr. Durrani, is a brilliant but somewhat vague mathematician whose friendship with the precocious Bhaskar constitutes one of the many small delights of Seth's intricate narrative. Kabir is a fine youth and returns Lata's love, but his religion makes their union impossible, and eventually Lata follows her mother's wishes and marries the suitable boy, Haresh Khanna. *A Suitable Boy* thus becomes in many ways an old-fashioned novel with a happy ending.

## AN EQUAL MUSIC

**First published:** 1999

**Type of work:** Novel

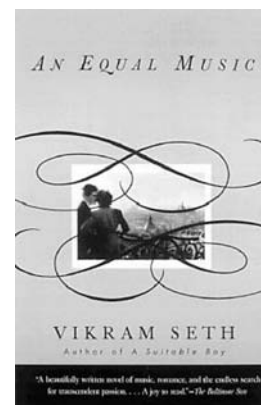
*Michael Holme, second violinist for the Maggiore Quartet, revives an affair with a now married girlfriend, a pianist who is going deaf.*

*An Equal Music* is set mainly in London and gets its title from a sermon by John Donne. Its first-person narrator, Michael Holme, is in his mid-thirties and plays second violin for the Maggiore Quartet. Michael grew up in northern England and studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Michael's former teacher at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, Carl Käll, has been long retired in Sweden, but he remains a powerful presence in Michael's imagination because he had foretold Michael's collapse at a concert: "It was because he had said I would fail, and I could see him in the audience and knew he had willed me to." A second haunting figure in Michael's life is Julia McNicholl, a fellow student whom he had loved and abandoned after his Vienna failure. All

of this happened ten years ago. Julia is now a wife and mother, and Michael bitterly regrets his decisions.

Michael's comusicians in the quartet are Helen, the viola player; Helen's older brother, Piers, first violinist; and Billy, cellist and composer. Leaving Wigmore Hall one night after a program of Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig von Beethoven, Michael runs into Julia, and their old romance is soon rekindled as an adulterous affair. The Maggiore Quartet's success wins it a contract to record Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of Fugue*, as well as an important concert in Vienna. Piers, however, not knowing of Julia's deafness, invites her to join them in playing Franz Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. Ambiguities in their rehearsal force Michael to reveal Julia's deafness, a challenge that is surmounted by providing Julia a strong bass sound to follow, and the program at the Musikverein goes off well, despite Michael's debilitating nervousness.

Julia follows the quartet to Venice, and all is well until Michael reads a loving fax that Julia has sent her husband, and his cruel comments wound Julia beyond reconciliation. Back in London, Julia's husband, James, a former Boston banker, invites Michael to a party at which James's coolness tells Michael that he knows of the affair. Michael soon quits the quartet when he discovers that Julia has scheduled a performance of the *Art of Fugue*, and when he goes to hear her play at Wigmore Hall he leaves at the intermission and walks off in the rain.



## SUMMARY

Despite their broad differences in settings and subjects, Vikram Seth's novels *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Unequal Music* share a gratifying storytelling genius. Moreover, in the twists and turns of their plots they seldom fail to achieve credibility, and their language is always a pleasure.

*Frank Day*



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*A Suitable Boy*, 1993

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#### POETRY:

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*The Humble Administrator's Garden*, 1985

*All You Who Sleep Tonight*, 1990

*Beastly Tales from Here and There*, 1992

*The Poems, 1981-1994*, 1995

#### DRAMA:

*Arion and the Dolphin*, pr., pb. 1994 (libretto; music by Alec Roth)

#### NONFICTION:

*From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, 1983

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Look up information about the Tintin cult and discuss Vikram Seth's use of it in stanzas 9-24 through 9-26 of *The Golden Gate*.
- What role does Seth's love of music, both Western and Eastern, play in his novels?
- What political themes appear in the background of *A Suitable Boy*?
- What is the importance of setting in Seth's novels *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music*?
- How effective is Seth in depicting family relationships?
- Love affairs dominate *The Golden Gate*, *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music*. What conflicts plague all of these love affairs?



AP/Wide World Photos

## PETER SHAFFER

**Born:** Liverpool, England  
May 15, 1926

*One of the most significant innovative playwrights of his generation, Shaffer created plays that are uniquely theatrical and especially effective through imaginative and experimental staging.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Peter Levin Shaffer (SHAF-ur) and his twin brother Anthony were born in Liverpool to Jewish parents, Reka and Jack Shaffer, on May 15, 1926. The family left Liverpool in 1936 and moved around England until 1942, when they settled in London. Anthony also became a prizewinning playwright, best known for the play *Sleuth* (pr. 1970); younger brother Brian became a biophysicist, but after their father's death he took over management of the family's real estate firm.

Peter Shaffer attended St. Paul's School, but World War II interrupted his education and he worked as a coal miner in Yorkshire and Kent from 1944 to 1947. He later attended Trinity College, Cambridge, and earned a baccalaureate degree in history in 1950. While in college he coedited the student magazine *Granta* with his brother.

After Cambridge, Shaffer moved to New York and worked for Doubleday bookstores in midtown Manhattan. In 1951, Peter and Anthony Shaffer cowrote a detective novel, *The Woman in the Wardrobe*, under the composite pen name Peter Anthony. They collaborated on two subsequent novels, *How Doth the Little Crocodile?* (1952) and *Withered Murder* (1955). During these years Shaffer worked in acquisitions at the New York Public Library (1951-1954) and as a symphonic music editor for Bosey and Hawkes in England (1954-1955), and he served as a literary critic for *Truth* (1956-1957). He

later worked as a music critic for *Time and Tide* (1965-1972).

During the 1950's, he began writing radio and television scripts, including *The Salt Land* (1955) for ITV in Great Britain; *The Prodigal Father* (1955), a radio play produced and aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); and *Balance of Terror* (1957), which was produced first by the BBC and later aired on the *Studio One* television series in the United States. Shaffer's theatrical career was launched with the London premiere of *Five Finger Exercise*, a play in two acts, at London's Comedy Theatre on July 16, 1958, directed by John Gielgud. Shaffer's only "well-made," naturalistic domestic drama portraying a family in crisis enjoyed popular and critical success, running for two years in London and winning Shaffer the *Evening Standard* Theatre Award for best new playwright. When it was later produced in New York in 1959, it garnered the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best foreign play.

His next plays, a pair of one-acts, *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye*, premiered at London's Globe Theatre on May 10, 1962, then crossed the Atlantic in 1963 to New York. *The Private Ear* (pr., pb. 1962) concerns a sensitive, artistic, and naïve young man, Bob, who brings home an attractive secretary, thinking she shares his love of music. He fumbles around trying to impress her, but she rejects him when he tries to forcibly kiss her. Its companion play, *The Public Eye* (pr., pb. 1962), echoes back to Shaffer's roots in detective stories with a tinge of tongue-in-cheek humor.

Shaffer next wrote *The Merry Roosters Panto* (pr. 1963), a Christmas pantomime for children that was produced at Wyndham's Theatre in London.

Shaffer's first "think piece" and probably his most mythical play, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (pr., pb. 1964), was first produced in Chichester in 1964, moved to the National Theatre in London in December, 1964, and opened in New York the following year. It dramatizes Francisco Pizarro's conquest of the Incas and his search for the city of gold.

Shaffer was commissioned by Laurence Olivier to write his next play for the National Theatre, an extended one-act farce entitled *Black Comedy* (pr. 1965, pb. 1967). It uses a device that Shaffer refers to as a "Chinese convention" of reversing black and white. The opening scene is dark, as if the characters can see, when suddenly the lights "go out" for the characters but come on for the audience. The remainder of the play is staged in this style, which provides much of the comedy. Its less successful companion piece, *White Lies*, opened in New York together with *Black Comedy* in 1967 but was later revised as *White Liars* for the London stage in 1968.

Shaffer's next play, *The Battle of Shrivings* (pr. 1970), is based on his experiences in New York City. It tells the story of a group of protestors with a charismatic leader and is widely considered his most American play. It suffered a poor reception, so Shaffer rewrote and retitled it simply *Shrivings* (pb. 1973), but it was never produced.

Shaffer hit his artistic stride during the 1970's, however, with two National Theatre productions that would firmly establish his reputation as a major playwright: *Equus* (pr., pb. 1973), a play about a troubled young man, and *Amadeus* (pr. 1979, pb. 1980), the pseudobiographical account of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart from the point of view of his archenemy, Antonio Salieri. *Equus* opened at the Royal National Theatre at the Old Vic in London and then ran for more than a thousand performances at the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway, winning the Tony and the Drama Critics' Circle awards in 1975. *Amadeus* opened in London in 1979 and won both the London Critics Award and the *Evening Standard* Theatre Award. When it opened on Broadway two years later, it also ran for more than a thousand performances and won the Drama Desk Award, the Critics Outer Circle Award, and five Tony Awards, including one for best play. In 1977, Shaffer adapted *Equus* for a film directed by Sidney Lumet, and his screen adaptation of *Amadeus* in 1984 won eight Academy Awards, including one for best adapted screenplay.

Shaffer's next play, a biblical epic entitled *Yonadab: The Watcher* (pr. 1985, pb. 1988), is set in Jerusalem in 1000 B.C.E. It opened at the Olivier Theatre under National Theatre sponsorship on December 4, 1985. The play deals with the incestuous rape of King David's only daughter, Tamar, by his eldest son, Amnon. In the program notes, Shaffer wrote that the play "owes its existence primarily to two sources: The Book of Samuel which I first read as a boy, and the book of Dan Jacobson called *The Rape of Tamar* (1970) which I first encountered in 1970." The modern novel and the ancient text linked in Shaffer's mind, compelling him to create a play: "The terrible directness of the original Testament attracted me as deeply as the emotional paradox discernible under the surface of the novel: the longing for creed in the incredulous, the profound ache for belief in the mockers of belief."

In 1987, Shaffer was awarded the prestigious honorary title of Commander, Order of the British Empire. His next play, *Lettice and Lovage* (pr., pb. 1987), written for the actress Maggie Smith, was first produced at the Theatre Royal in Bath. It is a comedy about an unusual friendship, posing the issue of history versus truth. Lettice Douffet loses her job as museum tour guide because she invents historical anecdotes to entertain and enliven the tourists who visit there. She is befriended by her superior at the National Trust, Lotte Schoen, who fires her but later feels guilty for consigning Lettice to an impoverished life. The two friends amuse each other and enlarge the dreary present by reenacting scenes from England's heroic past, inspired by "lovage," an herb used to flavor Lettice's favorite cordials. The play won an *Evening Standard* Theatre Award for best comedy in 1988 and was taken to Broadway in 1990. Shaffer returned to radio in 1989 with the BBC-aired play *Whom Do I Have the Honour of Addressing?*

In 1992, *The Gift of the Gorgon* (pr. 1992, pb. 1993) was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at London's Barbican Centre. In this play, a young academic travels to Greece seeking information about his father, a playwright who died mysteriously. The son is illegitimate, and he must gain the confidence of his father's widow. Flashbacks reveal that the father was arrogant and revengeful but also gifted. Although the widow is tempted to reveal her husband's suicide to the public, she finally decides to let his reputation remain

intact. The play was poorly received by the critics and the public.

In 1992, Shaffer won the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre. Two years later, he became the Cameron Mackintosh Professor at St. Catherine's College, Oxford, a one-year position created to promote interest in theater. In the 1990's and into the twenty-first century, many of Shaffer's plays were revived and some were considered modern classics. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2001.

### ANALYSIS

Peter Shaffer's plays are distinguished by a unique sense of theatrical design and structure and by a particular fascination with certain themes. One is the psychological conflict between the artistically gifted and the working lot. Although his plays depict the artistically gifted in a sympathetic manner, Shaffer seems to view creativity and imagination as dangerous attributes. His young, artistically gifted characters, such as Clive and Walter in *Five Finger Exercise*, Bob in *Private Ear*, Alan Strang in *Equus*, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in *Amadeus*, exhibit more than a tendency toward self-destruction. Some of the other characters in these plays are simultaneously contemptuous and envious of the characters with artistic ability and sensitivity, unable to understand why the creative characters are different from other people. In *Five Finger Exercise*, for example, the obvious affection juxtaposed with a profound misunderstanding between father and son is a major point of contention within the family dynamic. In *Amadeus*, Antonio Salieri rails against a God who has rewarded an obscene boy (Mozart) with a superior gift that Salieri cannot hope to match, and the burnt-out psychiatrist in *Equus*, Martin Dysart, envies Alan's ability to experience great emotions and passions.

Another dominant theme in Shaffer's plays is a quest for religion versus spirituality. He examines the religion of the Incas in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Alan's equine god in *Equus*, and biblical mores in *Yonadab: The Watcher*. Critics have noted that a particular recurrent character type is present in many of Shaffer's best plays: older men, experiencing a crisis in faith, who are confronted with primitive impulses that only exacerbate their situations. Pizarro and Martin Ruiz in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Martin Dysart in *Equus*, Antonio Salieri in

*Amadeus*, and Mark Askelon in *Shrivings* all experience profound dissatisfaction with their cultures and lives. Shaffer shows how modern society has failed to provide a constructive outlet for ritualistic worship. To compensate, Alan in *Equus* manages to fabricate his own subjective faith and a form of ritualistic worship out of his fascination with horses and his mother's conventional Christianity.

Many of Shaffer's characters are mythic figures set within the framework of ritual drama. This is especially evident in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Equus*, two plays structured upon quest figures. In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Pizarro describes his mission as "God hunting," and he views the Inca people as a primitive god in whom he wishes to believe. Like Dysart in *Equus*, Pizarro is fated to kill the god. Dysart and Pizarro are cynics, symbols of despair, and neither one succeeds in achieving his spiritual goal. Salieri is another despairing cynic who kills his young rival, whose talent he regards as godlike. It is Salieri's fate to outlive his reputation and to grow old as a forgotten man confined to an asylum.

The victims of these plays are younger than their adversaries. The dramatic conflict on a larger plane is, in all instances, between innocence and experience. Atahualpa, an Inca, trusts Pizarro; Alan Strang trusts Dysart, the doctor who will cure him by killing his spiritual potential; and the naïve Mozart trusts Salieri, who pretends to be his friend. In these plays there is conflict between the primitive and civilized worlds, with the suggestion that the first is bound to lose against the guile and treachery of the latter. In *Amadeus* the most devious character is the highly sophisticated Salieri. To a lesser degree, this dichotomy is depicted between the family and Walter in *Five Finger Exercise*. It is the family members whom Walter trusts and, in the end, it is they who destroy him. The conflict of the civilized and restrained against the primitive and romantic may be seen as a facet of the general clash between experience and innocence.

Shaffer is highly skilled in constructing a distinctive theater of spectacle. He has managed to translate symbolic action effectively into theatrical presentation by working with director John Dexter, and Shaffer incorporated Dexter's sets and props for *Equus* into the published text of the play. Many of Shaffer's plays, particularly *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Equus*, depend upon flexible, inventive designs to advance the productions. The two key ac-

tions of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* are presented in mime—the ascent of Pizarro’s army into the Andes Mountains and the massacre of the Incas. The second of these actions, like the mutilation of the horses in *Equus*, would be repugnant if represented literally and naturalistically.

Some critics have pointed out that Shaffer’s plays are male-dominated, relegating women to the margins of the major conflict as wives, mothers, lovers, and sisters. This is certainly true of his early and major plays; however his later plays, notably *Lettice and Lovage* and *The Gift of the Gorgon*, present middle-aged female protagonists who are not dependent upon a male presence and are fully developed as characters with motivations, objectives, and independent choices. M. K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh comments in her book *Peter Shaffer: Theatre and Drama* (1998) that they “emerge as finer human beings than the men with whom they deal since not only do they survive victimization at their hands, but they also refuse the option of vengeance against them.”

Shaffer has had the courage to take on large themes and has been criticized by some for being pretentious. He described *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* as being “about a man’s search for immortality,” explaining that the play was written to create spectacle and to make magic, “to convey the kind of excitement I believed could still be created out of ‘total’ theatre.” In writing for the stage, Shaffer intends to create “an experience . . . entirely and only theatrical.” Few would argue that he achieved this goal most successfully with *Equus*.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Shaffer’s work is his innate understanding of the medium for which he is writing. Having written novels, teleplays, radio plays, stage plays, and screenplays, his understanding of what makes a work successful cinematically versus theatrically is a rare talent. His own film adaptation of *Amadeus* is probably the best example of his abilities in this area. Overall, however, Shaffer will be remembered first and foremost as a playwright. He has made theatrical magic, questioned the values of the contemporary world, and pursued lost myths and rituals in an impressive canon of work. Through his plays Shaffer has reminded audiences of what the theater is about—ritual representation of human ideals and aspirations.

## FIVE FINGER EXERCISE

**First produced:** 1958 (first published, 1958)

**Type of work:** Play

*A family is forced to deal with undercurrents of resentment when a visiting tutor brings their emotions to the surface.*

Originally titled *Retreats*, the current title, *Five Finger Exercise*, is a clever and symbolic reference to a piano exercise for pianists. The play has five characters that must “exorcise” their conflicts, and piano music is used throughout to underscore and punctuate dramatically heightened moments. Shaffer has admitted the autobiographical nature of the play, stating in the preface to his collected plays that it “expressed a great deal of my own family tensions and also a desperate need to stop feeling invisible.”

The play focuses on the Harrington family, who are spending a holiday together in their cottage in Suffolk, England. There is a snobbish mother, Louise, who fancies herself a Parisian aristocrat; a working class father, Stanley, who has done quite well for himself and his family in the furniture business; a troubled and sensitive son, Clive, who is just entering college, drinks too much, and is trying to find himself; and a smart-mouthed, feisty, fourteen-year-old daughter, Pamela. The fifth character is a young German music tutor, Walter, employed by the Harringtons to teach Pamela to play piano.

Walter acts as a catalyst for the family in bringing their underlying resentments out into the open for discussion and resolution. Louise resents Stanley for stifling her creative nature, while Stanley dismisses Clive’s yearning for something more fulfilling than making furniture. Pamela thinks her brother is spoiled, and Clive feels unappreciated and misunderstood by his father. Walter, however, expresses only happiness and gratitude that he has found a family and a safe place to live. In conversations with each family member, Walter helps them see their situations more objectively, which helps them find solutions to their problems. He is the model of what Clive should become: an independent, self-sufficient, educated, and artistic young man, who is comfortable with himself.



Clive is jealous of his mother's attentions toward Walter and tells his father that they are having an affair, but he later regrets it when Walter proves to be his true friend. Once Louise and Stanley agree to go away together in an effort to save their marriage, Louise turns against Walter and asks Stanley to dismiss him. Although Walter begs to stay with the family, they remain firm, blaming Walter for their children's problems.

While Walter plays his gramophone upstairs, Louise learns about Clive's lie and rejects his apology. In the midst of their argument, Walter's record skips, and when Stanley knocks on his door he discovers that Walter has attempted to commit suicide by turning on the gas in his room. The others galvanize to save him, as they seem to suddenly realize what Walter has done for them, and he is resuscitated. The play ends with Clive praying for courage, which Gene A. Plunka, in his book *Peter Shaffer: Roles, Rites, and Rituals in the Theater* (1988), defines as "adhering to one's own norms and values no matter how different they are from the . . . accepted societal mores and standards."

This play deals in part with the difference between the truly artistic, romantic, and sensitive versus those who do not understand them. Shaffer explores this theme again in *Private Ear* and most effectively in *Equus*, when creativity and theatricality in his playwriting reach a summit.

## THE ROYAL HUNT OF THE SUN

**First produced:** 1964 (first published, 1964)

**Type of work:** Play

*The play dramatizes Francisco Pizarro's conquest of the Incas, his search for the fabled city of gold, and his extending the frontiers of the Spanish empire.*

"This story is about ruin," says Martin Ruiz at the beginning. Old Martin, a soldier of Spain now worth millions, serves as the chorus, telling the story of how Francisco Pizarro, a man in his sixties, managed to conquer an empire of twenty-four million Incans with an expeditionary army of one hundred and sixty-seven men. Ruiz regrets the day he first set eyes upon Pizarro.

The action then goes back forty years, when Pizarro is recruiting soldiers in Spain for his Peruvian expedition. Young Martin, at the age of fifteen, is schooled in the codes of chivalry and is an idealistic advocate of his king and religion. He eagerly enlists his services. The next scene introduces the churchmen: Valverde, the Dominican chaplain; his associate, the Franciscan de Nizza; Pedro de Candia, cavalier from Venice, in charge of weapons; and the arrogant Miguel Estete, overseer in the name of King Carlos who threatens to challenge Pizarro's authority in the New World. The expedition departs into the forest.

The third scene introduces the God-king Atahualpa, sovereign Inca of Peru; Villac Umu, his high priest; and Chalcuchima, his general. Atahualpa believes the white god is coming to bless him. This naïve belief will be his undoing.

The action alternates between the Inca court, fortified high in the mountains, and the approaching Spanish army. After six weeks, the army passes through the forest and arrives at the border of the Inca Empire, finding a road fifteen feet wide. The army is met there by the Incan General Chalcuchima, who brings commands that the Spaniards should visit the God-king at Cajamaarca, a month's march up into the mountains. After the Spaniards arrive, the sovereign Inca demands to see their god, whom he believes to be Pizarro. Valverde, angered by this blasphemy, orders Pizarro to attack. The first act ends with the mime of the great massacre. The Incans are massacred and Atahualpa is taken hostage. Pizarro crowns himself king.

Act 2, "The Kill," is about the conflict between Pizarro and the captive Atahualpa, who still has the power and authority to crush Pizarro and his army. Communication is at first complicated by Felipillo, the treacherous Incan interpreter, who lusts after the Inca's wife, but young Martin has learned enough of the Incan language to recognize Felipillo's deceit and advises Pizarro. The tactful and honest Martin from that point forward becomes the interpreter, and he is therefore "pry to everything that passed between them during the next months."

Pizarro, a cynic mainly interested in plunder, promises to set Atahualpa free if the Inca will fill with gold a room twenty-two feet long by seventeen feet wide. The trusting Atahualpa commands that

the gold be gathered from across his empire. Coming from a more honest culture, he does not entertain thoughts of Spanish treachery. During the time required to accumulate this treasure, Atahualpa debates the nature of divinity with the churchmen and the nature of kingship with Pizarro.

The Spaniards put pressure on Pizarro to kill the Inca, which he would rather not do. Pizarro soon realizes, however, that his reputation as conqueror will only be assured if he murders his Incan counterpart. Atahualpa calmly believes he cannot be killed because of his divinity. He tells the sixty-three-year-old Pizarro: "You will die soon and you do not believe in your god. That is why you tremble and keep no word. Believe in me." Torn between desire and duty, Pizarro finally allows a Spanish court to accuse Atahualpa "of usurping the throne and killing his brother; of idolatry and having more than one wife." The God-king is found guilty and murdered, failing the ultimate test of his divinity. Pizarro curiously seems to want to believe in Atahualpa's divinity and is devastated.

## EQUUS

**First produced:** 1973 (first published, 1973)

**Type of work:** Play

*A magistrate calls upon a skilled psychiatrist, Martin Dysart, to treat an adolescent boy who has blinded six horses with a metal spike.*

The success of *Equus* was attributable partly to the staging designed by John Dexter, who has also directed *Black Comedy* and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. Dexter helped Shaffer visualize the abstractions that give the play its power and the rituals that inform the play's spectacle. The play is about madness, and Shaffer manages to dramatize the fantasies of a disturbed boy's mind, as well as the frustrations of the psychiatrist, Martin Dysart, who is asked by his friend Hesther Salomon to cure the boy who has, for no apparent reason, blinded the horses.

Act 1 is a search for motive and meaning as Dysart interviews the boy and his parents. The boy is at first uncooperative but later comes to trust Dysart and reveals his psychological secrets. Using hypno-

sis, Dysart gets the boy to remember the experience and manages to put the boy on the road to recovery. Dysart seriously questions, however, whether he should treat the boy at all. The boy, Alan Strang, has a vitality and twisted imagination that fascinate the doctor. Dysart questions whether he should rob Alan of his uniqueness and make him normal, which is to say, ordinary. The play is shaped by Dysart's monologues and by two spectacles, Alan's "wild midnight ride" at the end of act 1 and his blinding of the horses at the climax of act 2.

Alan is a friendless loner, ignored by his parents. His worship of horses is solitary, not communal, reflecting Shaffer's own distaste for organized religion. Dysart becomes the boy's spiritual father, recalling the story of Abraham and Isaac as he sacrifices Alan to social norms. Alan trusts Dysart as his spiritual father, just as Isaac trusted Abraham, but Abraham trusted his God, as Dysart does not. The obedient Abraham is far different from the doubting Dysart; the parable is twisted to fit a new context. There are also biblical echoes of the Book of Revelations in Alan's incantations during his midnight ride.

The themes of *Equus* are primitive and elemental (worship, passion, and bestiality), psychosexual (masturbation, sexual frustration, and confusion), contemporary (professional burnout and the dysfunctional family), and ethical (the duty of the doctor to heal and to alleviate pain). All the male characters seem to have sexual problems. Alan and Dysart seem to have a problem in the way they relate to women. Frank, Alan's father, frequents pornographic film houses.

The key theme of *Equus* is reiterated by Dysart in his mad and rambling monologue that begins and ends the play: "Extremity is the point." Dysart is driven to distraction by what Shaffer has described as the "continuous tension" between "the Apollonian and the Dionysian," symbolized by Dysart and Alan, and between "the violence of instinct and the desire for order and restraint."



## AMADEUS

**First produced:** 1979 (first published, 1980)

**Type of work:** Play

*Composer Antonio Salieri feels threatened by the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and plots to destroy him out of spite and jealousy.*

Shaffer has described *Amadeus* as “a fantasia on Mozartian themes.” The play is not a documentary biography, but Shaffer asserts that many of the elements of the play are true and that in no way has the specific nature of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart the man or the composer been violated. On the other hand, one might protest that the Italian composer Antonio Salieri has been slandered by the drama.

The play is set in the imperial Austrian court in Vienna, musically dominated by Italians, foremost of whom is the court composer Salieri, who has pledged his soul to God in hopes of becoming the greatest composer of his age. Salieri has the ear of his emperor, but he is ironically forced by his own understanding of music to recognize a far greater talent in the foul-mouthed, vulgar libertine, Mozart, who is capable of creating music of sublime beauty.

The action is framed by the demented recollections of Salieri at the end of his life, in 1823. He is no longer a famous composer but a forgotten man made bitter and crazy by envy and cynicism. Salieri’s story begins in 1781, when Mozart performs for the archbishop of Salzburg. From that point on Salieri does everything in his power to conspire against Mozart and block his advancement at court. He hires a maid who spies on Mozart and reveals family secrets. After Mozart’s estranged father, Leopold, dies, Salieri, after seeing a production of the opera *Don Giovanni*, understands the composer’s sense of grief and guilt over his father’s death and devises a demoniac plan

that brings Mozart to the point of exhaustion and death.

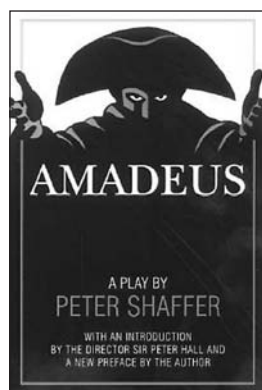
The set for the play is abstract, a rectangle of wood set into blue plastic. It serves as Salieri’s salon, Mozart’s apartment, reception rooms, and opera houses. In addition, there is an upstage playing space enclosed by a proscenium that Shaffer describes as a light box, a useful device for theatrical trickery. Action originally designed for this space had to be modified for the film adaptation. For the screenplay, Shaffer also had to reinvent the play’s opening, provided by a chorus of voices of the citizens of Vienna. His solution was to begin with Salieri’s slashing his throat, which comes at the end of the original play’s text, and to frame the story with Salieri’s account of his dealings with Mozart. The film version creates a first impression of incoherent madness. The madness becomes more rational and controlled as Salieri tells his story to a bewildered and shocked priest, gradually building in intensity toward a climax of renewed madness. The old, mad Salieri finally calls out: “Forgive me, Mozart! Forgive your assassin!”

Even though the London production of 1979 proved to be the most popular play ever mounted by the National Theatre to that time, Shaffer, ever the perfectionist, continued to revise the play before its New York opening. “One of the faults,” Shaffer notes in the preface to the American edition, was “that Salieri had little to do with Mozart’s ruin.” The American version puts Salieri “where he properly belonged—at the wicked center of the action.” Later still, Shaffer revised the script all over again for the film version, creating one of the most remarkable film adaptations in the history of cinema. The film won eight Academy Awards.

### SUMMARY

Peter Shaffer’s plays use unique theatrical design—including sets, props, mime, and stylized action—to present his abstract, psychological, and metaphysical themes in the proper theatrical context: a conflict between people. His plays often depict the victory of the experienced, the civilized, and the godless over the naïve, the primitive, and the romantic. Shaffer’s works have been successful on both sides of the Atlantic and on stage and screen.

*James M. Welsh; updated by Jill Stapleton-Bergeron*



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*The Private Ear*, pr., pb. 1962 (one act)  
*The Public Eye*, pr., pb. 1962 (one act)  
*The Merry Roosters Panto*, pr. 1963 (music by Stanley Myers, lyrics by Lionel Bart)  
*The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, pr., pb. 1964  
*Black Comedy*, pr. 1965, pb. 1967 (one act)  
*The White Liars*, pb. 1967, 1968 (one act; originally as *White Lies*, pr., pb. 1967)  
*Equus*, pr., pb. 1973  
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#### RADIO PLAYS:

- The Prodigal Father*, 1955  
*Whom Do I Have the Honour of Addressing?*, 1989

#### SCREENPLAYS:

- The Public Eye*, 1972 (adaptation of his play)  
*Equus*, 1977 (adaptation of his play)  
*Amadeus*, 1984 (adaptation of his play)

#### TELEPLAYS:

- The Salt Land*, 1955  
*Balance of Terror*, 1957

#### LONG FICTION:

- The Woman in the Wardrobe*, 1951 (as Peter Antony; with Anthony Shaffer)  
*How Doth the Little Crocodile?*, 1952 (as Peter Antony; with Anthony Shaffer)  
*Withered Murder*, 1955 (with Anthony Shaffer)

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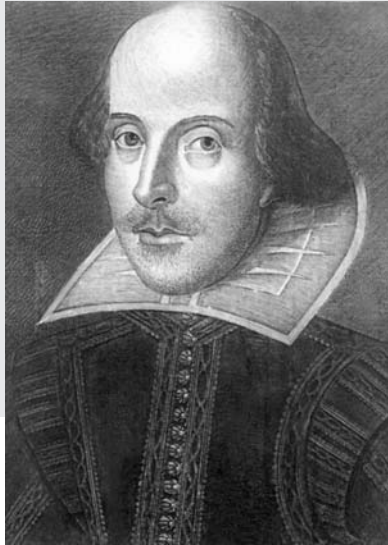
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Peter Shaffer deal with the issue of religion in his plays? Does he deal with spiritually differently than he does religion?
- In *Lettice and Lovage*, Lettice is fired for making up stories about historical events to entertain the tourists. Is it acceptable to alter historical details for dramatic purposes? How historically accurate are *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Amadeus*? Judging from his plays and not his remarks, what is Shaffer's opinion on the issue of historical accuracy?
- How does Shaffer portray women in his plays? Does his dramatic treatment of them change significantly, and, if so, how?
- Why does Shaffer rework and rewrite his plays to be produced on the screen? Are there different writing requirements for a film than for a play? How successful has Shaffer been in translating his stage plays into screenplays?
- Some critics have suggested that John Dexter's staging of Shaffer's plays, especially *Equus* and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, made them more successful in production than they would have been with a less inventive director/designer. Would you agree? What is the importance of a director in the theater? Should playwrights always collaborate with a director in developing their plays?
- In *The Gift of the Gorgon*, Shaffer portrays a rather unlikable playwright who calls drama teachers "dry sticks" because they misinterpret his plays. Which matters most—what the playwright says about the play or what the playwright says with the play? Is it necessary or even important to know anything about the playwrights in order to understand and interpret their plays?

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## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

**Born:** Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England  
April 23, 1564

**Died:** Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England  
April 23, 1616

*Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in English and one of the greatest writers of all time, famous for his use of language, character portraits, and keen insight into human nature and human problems.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Like many commoners who lived and died during the Renaissance, William Shakespeare left only a meager record on which scholars have been able to make inferences about his life both in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon and in London. Nevertheless, painstaking research of available church and civic records has allowed biographers to construct a reasonable portrait of the man commonly considered the greatest English writer and one of the world's most significant literary artists. The documentary record, collected and analyzed painstakingly in scholarly monographs such as Samuel Schoenbaum's *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975), suggests Shakespeare led a comfortable middle-class life, marketing his plays and managing a successful acting company, the profits from which made him wealthy and allowed him to spend considerable time in Stratford-upon-Avon during the final years of his life.

Baptismal records in Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, indicate that Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564; working backward, scholars have fixed by common agreement the date of his birth as April 23 of that year. He was the eldest son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, respectable city business people who achieved some status in the little community along the Avon River in western England. John Shakespeare rose to become an

alderman and served for a time as bailiff, the highest office in the city. His son was undoubtedly educated in the grammar schools there. If the plays are any indication, William received a sound grounding in Christian ethics, rhetoric, and classical literature. He obviously understood Latin and possibly even some Greek, though Ben Jonson complained that Shakespeare's classical education was seriously wanting. Because he did not attend a university, he did not benefit from the kind of entrée into polite society that contemporaries such as Jonson and later John Milton would have experienced. By the time Shakespeare began writing plays, he was conversant with ancient and modern historians and with philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne. His clear use of writers, such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer, supports the claim that he was also quite familiar with literary works of the Continent and his native England.

In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years older than he. The couple eventually had three children: a daughter, Susanna, and twins, a boy the Shakespeares called Hamnet and a girl, Judith. No doubt at some time during the decade of the 1580's the aspiring playwright left his family in their Stratford-upon-Avon surroundings to make his fortune in London. There is no evidence that during his time away from his hometown Shakespeare was ever estranged from his wife and children. On the contrary, available evidence suggests he took great pains to maintain his domestic ties during the decades that he spent working in London.

By 1592, Shakespeare had become sufficiently well known in literary circles to be the object of a now-famous attack by the English poet and playwright Robert Greene, who complained that the young upstart was being presumptuous in trying to compete with more distinguished members of the literary establishment. Contemporary records refer to Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III* (pr. c. 1590-1592, pb. 1594-1595) as early as 1589, and from that date until 1613 his comedies, histories, and tragedies were performed in open-air theaters and later in the private venues frequented by nobility and well-to-do citizens. During the 1590's, Shakespeare also tried his hand at nondramatic poetry, publishing *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). He also began writing sonnets, a fashionable practice in the 1590's, eventually completing a sequence of 154 poems which were published in 1609.

Sometime around 1595 Shakespeare became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Company, an acting troupe. In addition to his work as a playwright, he also performed on stage, appearing in his own works and in those by others, including dramas by rival playwright Jonson. Shortly after the ascension of James I to the English throne in 1603, he joined the King's Men, a troupe that enjoyed the special patronage of the sovereign. During these years of intense business activity in London, he maintained close ties to Stratford-upon-Avon, purchasing property and occasionally finding himself the plaintiff or defendant in various lawsuits there. Meanwhile, every year saw the introduction of one or more new Shakespeare plays into the London "season." In 1608, he had become sufficiently well off to enter into a contract with half a dozen other theatrical entrepreneurs to purchase the second Blackfriar's Theater in London. By 1610, it appears he had tired of London life. Evidence indicates that in that year he returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he enjoyed a life of active retirement. He continued to work on various dramatic productions, collaborating with younger playwrights on a number of scripts. He died at his home in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616, and was buried there two days later.

## ANALYSIS

The high opinion in which Shakespeare has been held since the middle of the eighteenth cen-

tury has often led to hyperbole in discussion of his literary merits. In *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1974), Harry Levin has observed that Shakespeare's works have been "accorded a place in our culture above and beyond topmost place in our literature. They have been virtually canonized as humanistic scriptures, the tested residue of pragmatic wisdom, a general collection of quotable texts and usable examples" for guiding human actions. The dramatist's works rank beside the Bible as the documents most referred to when explaining and illustrating the variegated qualities of human nature.

Any analysis of the general qualities of Shakespeare's plays must focus initially on the writer's ability to create characters. More than any other author in English, Shakespeare has been able to bring to life individuals who have the mark of reality about them. Throughout the dramas, Shakespeare tries to avoid the use of type characters, working instead to individualize his creations through patterns of speech and thought. In an age when society believed people were governed by "humors" and the dominant characteristics one exhibited were a consequence of these physical states, Shakespeare was somewhat unusual. His great contemporary, Ben Jonson, prided himself on his ability to capture the essence of types in his dramas. Shakespeare, on the other hand, strives always to achieve distinction among his kings, fools, lovers, and villains.

Like most of his contemporaries, Shakespeare makes extensive use of both literary and historical sources for his dramas. Almost nothing in the Shakespeare canon is wholly original. Some of the earliest works are highly derivative; *The Comedy of Errors* (pr. c. 1592-1594, pb. 1623), for example, is taken from a Roman comedy. As he matured in his art, Shakespeare was able to transform materials from diverse sources, such as Plutarch's *Bioi paralleloi* (c. 105-115 C.E.; *Parallel Lives*, 1579) and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) into original works of dramatic art. His Julius Caesar and Brutus, his Richard II and Prince Hal, are modeled on the figures Shakespeare discovered in the histories he read. He was not at all averse, however, to changing his characters' motivations or even making them younger or older than they actually were if the dramatic interest of his plays was better served.

As important to him as the historical records

on which he drew were the writings of both ancient and contemporary philosophers, whose ideas Shakespeare incorporates into his dramas. His writings are filled with allusions to various ancient authors, as well as to works by his contemporaries. He seems to have been especially influenced by the new movement in Humanism, exemplified best by the works of the French essayist Michel de Montaigne. Many of Shakespeare's plays exhibit an appreciation for the Aristotelean concept that virtuous action is a kind of golden mean between two extremes; for example, heroism lies between cowardice and foolhardiness.

Among Shakespeare's most notable contributions to literature was his innovative use of language. Like many of his contemporaries, he wrote much of his work in blank verse, the unrhymed iambic pentameter lines first used in English by Chaucer almost two hundred years earlier. He freely invented words and phrases that have since passed into the English language; to him is attributed the first use of words such as "lonely," "laughable," and even "critic." Additionally, his ability to turn out particularly apt and pithy phrases has resulted in the elevation of many of his coinages into aphorisms. "The devil can quote scripture" and "All that glitters is not gold," both adapted from *The Merchant of Venice* (pr. c. 1596-1597, pb. 1600), are but two examples. Many of the speeches he created for his characters have been taken out of context and recited as philosophical or patriotic dicta: Jacques's discourse on the seven ages of man in *As You Like It* (c. pr. 1599-1600, pb. 1623), or John of Gaunt's poetic survey of his homeland, "This royal throne of kings. . . This blessed plot . . . this England," in *Richard II* (pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1600), are examples of many that could be cited.

Because the Elizabethan stage was usually a bare platform with little scenery and few props, Shakespeare often uses language to paint the scene for his audience. Direct references spoken by the characters make it clear to the audience, in the theater or at home with their texts, where a scene is taking place: "This castle hath a pleasant seat," King Duncan says upon arriving at Macbeth's home, notifying the audience that the scene has shifted; the young exiles in *As You Like It* are told that "This is the forest of Arden," so that the audience, too, will know where the action is now occurring.

More than any other dramatist, Shakespeare

makes extensive use of metaphor to drive home a point. What some have dismissed as excessively "flowery" language is actually the dramatist's way of creating vivid pictures in the imagination of playgoers and readers. Hence, when Richard II returns from the wars in Ireland, he acknowledges his joy by comparing himself to "a long-parted mother with her child" who, upon reunion, "plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting." In the same play, when the soon-to-be-deposed king realizes how little support he has, he complains to his henchmen that it is now time to "Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes/ Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth." Among Shakespeare's favorite metaphors is that of the garden, to which he compares both individuals and the state. In *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622), the villain Iago dismisses the excuses made by Othello's rival, Roderigo, for failing to win Desdemona by reminding him that "our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners." In both *Richard II* and again in *Henry IV, Part I* (pr. c. 1597-1598, pb. 1598), the state of England is compared to a garden, which is in disarray because of the civil strife brought on by the king's profligacy and his usurper's inability to unite the rebels after Richard is deposed. Through the use of such language, Shakespeare makes his audience aware of the state of both individual and political affairs, drawing them into the action and allowing them to see the consequences of human acts.

## HENRY IV, PARTS I AND II

**First produced:** *Part I*, c. 1597-1598 (first published, 1598); *Part II*, 1598 (first published, 1600)

**Type of work:** Play

*An errant young prince learns how to rule his people before ascending the throne as England's greatest monarch.*

It is no surprise that, near the beginning of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare and others in England were much concerned about the problems of royal succession. The aging Queen Elizabeth I had no direct heirs. Some feared a bloody

war among potential claimants to the throne. As a means of illustrating what might happen should usurpation occur, the playwright drafted four plays centered on the deposition of an earlier monarch, Richard II, and the eventual rise to power of one of England's greatest monarchs, Henry V.

The two parts of *Henry IV* dramatize the rebellion that plagued the reign of Henry IV, who had replaced his weak cousin, Richard II, as England's ruler. At the play's opening, the king's forces are assembled to battle those of the rebels, led by Henry Percy, called Hotspur. While political machinations go on at court, Henry IV's eldest son, Prince Hal, spends his time consorting with a group of dissolute brigands headed by the fat, life-loving Sir John Falstaff. Not until battle is imminent does Hal join his father; yet on the field at Shrewsbury he acquits himself well, felling Hotspur and leading the king's forces to victory.

In the second play, which continues the story after the Battle of Shrewsbury, Hal seems to slip back into his old habits. Falstaff appears to be leading the prince into a life of crime, and the Lord Chief Justice enters the fray to arrest the criminals Hal calls friends. At the end of the second play, however, when Henry IV dies, Hal assumes the throne and immediately banishes his friends, including Falstaff, directing that they be tried and punished for their crimes.

One of the enduring critical questions about these plays is why the prince turns on his friend almost immediately after ascending the throne. The answer lies in a clear understanding of the dramatist's thematic interests. In both plays, Shakespeare is concerned with the issue of regal succession. Even more important, however, he is interested in displaying the development of Prince Hal as a monarch. The young prince deals throughout with two "fathers": his real father, Henry IV, whose whole life is consumed with politics, and Jack Falstaff, who recognizes no laws but those that satisfy his own interests. That Hal must eventually choose between the two is made apparent in a long scene early in *Part I*, when the prince and Falstaff engage in role-playing. Speaking in his father's voice, Hal tells his friends that, when the time comes, he will indeed banish Falstaff. Such is the way, he suggests, that kings must act. Even before this point, however, he acknowledges he is merely humoring himself by associating with Falstaff and his band of rob-

bers, learning from them how the commoners view their ruler. In his first soliloquy, he says, in reference to them, "I know you all, and will awhile uphold/ the unyok'd humor of your idleness." Hal may enjoy cavorting with Falstaff and his crew, but he recognizes he will one day be required to assume his rightful position as England's ruler.

Hal's progress throughout the two plays dramatizes the proper education for kingship. He is intent on mastering the qualities that mark a good monarch: majesty, grace, and courage. In *Part I*, Hotspur and Falstaff serve as foils for the prince; the former's rash behavior leads to the downfall of the rebels, while the latter's cowardice almost costs the king's forces a victory. Similarly, in *Part II* Falstaff stands in opposition to the Lord Chief Justice, as Hal is able to see how important adherence to the law is for a man who would rule well.

## AS YOU LIKE IT

**First produced:** c. 1599-1600 (first published, 1623)

**Type of work:** Play

*Four couples explore the nature of love and discover its importance to society while wandering in the forest of Arden.*

*As You Like It* is typical of Shakespeare's great comedies in many respects. The action of the play occurs in two locales, so that the values taken for granted at court may be presented for examination in the foreign setting of the forest. What might be described as the pattern of pastoral comedy is played out in this drama. The heroes and heroines of the play are forced to leave the city and retreat to the forest, where they learn the simple values of rustic life.

The dramatic action is precipitated by the usurpation of the country's throne by Duke Frederick, who deposes his elder brother, Duke Senior. When the play opens, Duke Senior has retreated to the forest of Arden. His daughter Rosalind has been allowed to remain at court, but her popularity makes Frederick jealous, so she too is banished. Frederick's daughter Celia, bound to Rosalind by strong ties of affection, accompanies her to Arden. They are pursued there by Orlando, also a victim of per-



secution; his older brother Oliver hates him simply because he also is popular. In the forest, Rosalind disguises herself as a man for safety's sake. Her disguise allows her to test Orlando's love and to offer sage advice to other pairs of lovers, notably the shepherd Silvius and his beloved Phebe; the fool, Touchstone, and the object of his desire, Audrey; and Celia and Oliver who, while visiting Arden in search of his brother, is converted miraculously from his hatred for Orlando when the latter saves him from an attack by a lioness.

In the forest of Arden, Rosalind and Orlando discover what mature love really is: not something simply earthy or entirely ethereal, but rather a total, healthy appreciation of the beloved that allows one to recognize faults but forgive them readily.

The other three pairs of lovers serve as counterpoints to Rosalind and Orlando, representing the various forms of incomplete love. Throughout the play, the lovers are reminded of the tenuous nature of their feelings by the melancholic Jacques, who sees that all human efforts eventually end in death. The fool Touchstone, whose name signifies his role as a judge of others' actions, also

serves to call the other characters "back to earth" in a way, pointing out the irrationality of so much of their behavior when they are spurred on by love.

At the end of the play, however, all four pairs of lovers are married, signifying what for Shakespeare is the proper culmination of sensible courtship. The triumph of love at the end of the drama suggests Jacques's cynical view of life and society can and must be overcome if people are to create a harmonious society. Even Duke Frederick is cured of his greed and reconciled with his brother when he pursues the fugitives into the forest. It is significant, too, that most of those who have come into this magic land of Arden agree to return to the city after the marriage ceremony. There, presumably, they will live more wisely and fully, having learned the power of love and its role in perpetuating what is best in society.



## HAMLET

**First produced:** c. 1600-1601 (first published, 1603)

**Type of work:** Play

*The prince of Denmark plots to avenge the death of his father but dies tragically in trying to overthrow his uncle.*

There is little debate that Shakespeare is the greatest Renaissance tragedian, and that *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608) and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* are the best examples of his work in that genre. Since its first production at the beginning of the seventeenth century, *Hamlet* has been the subject of intense critical inquiry, and the figure of Hamlet has been among the most intensely studied of any of Shakespeare's creations. Intellectual, self-reflective, alienated, and seemingly paralyzed by doubts about both himself and the circumstance in which he is called upon to act as an agent of revenge, Hamlet has come to be considered the quintessential modern hero.

For the subject of his drama, Shakespeare turned to a story already popular in English theaters; at least two earlier productions of the sad tale of the Danish prince had appeared in London playhouses. In many ways, *Hamlet* is typical of a subgenre immensely popular in Shakespeare's time: the revenge play. Most of these were bloody spectacles in which almost every character dies in the final act. The body-strewn stage in act 5 of *Hamlet* continues this tradition, as does the central action of the drama: the need for the young Hamlet to avenge the death of his father, the king, whose ghost informs Hamlet early in the play that he (the king) had been poisoned by Hamlet's Uncle Claudius so Claudius could become king and marry Hamlet's mother, the queen Gertrude.

The central dramatic interest in the play is the character of its hero. Hamlet sees himself as the "scourge and minister" of some higher order, returned from school in Germany to set right the disorder in his realm caused by his uncle's murderous action. Unfortunately, the sensitive prince is not callous enough to ignore the doubts he has about the exact cause of his father's death. He has been told by his father's ghost that Claudius committed



murder; other hints to that effect abound. The prince feels he must delay his revenge, however, until he is certain Claudius is guilty.

Compounding Hamlet's problem is the fact that his mother, whom he loves dearly, has married his uncle soon after the old king has died. It is not at all clear to Hamlet whether his mother has had a hand in the murder, whether she is simply unaware of Claudius's treachery, or whether she believes Claudius is innocent. Much is made of the mother-son relationship; Hamlet spends considerable time trying to convince his mother that she has made a mistake in marrying Claudius. Only when she finally comes to accept his view that the new king is somehow guilty does Hamlet decide to act. His decision is precipitated by several other actions as well, most notably the efforts of his supposed friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have him killed.

Many critics have observed that Hamlet is really too sensitive to effect the revenge that he intends. He is by nature melancholic, possessing a fatalistic disposition that borders on the suicidal. His most famous soliloquy focuses on the virtue of

ending his life. "To be, or not to be," he begins his musings; that is, indeed, a central question for him, since he sees little benefit in continuing to live in a world where injustice reigns. Nevertheless, he decides to act to avenge his father's murder—once he is certain he knows who has been involved in the plot to kill him. Viewing the world as a place where

things are seldom as they seem, he spends a good portion of his time trying to sort appearance from reality. He invents various devices to help illuminate the truth, such as his elaborate arrangement for a dumb show that will re-create the murder of his father in the presence of Claudius to try to make the king reveal his guilt. Hamlet is not satisfied simply to take vengeance on his uncle clandestinely; he wants Claudius to admit his guilt.

For centuries, scholars have debated Hamlet's inability to act even when he has the opportunity to do so. Early in the play, his inactivity can be attributed to his lack of assurance that Claudius is guilty.

Were he to kill the new king without justification, he would be seen as no better than a murderer himself, and no good would come of his action. Nevertheless, when he does appear to have sufficient evidence of Claudius's role in his father's murder, the prince still seems paralyzed. In a crucial scene after Claudius has seen the dumb show and left the room visibly upset, Hamlet finds his uncle praying in the castle's chapel. It is a perfect chance to slay the king, but Hamlet refrains because he says he does not want to send his uncle's soul to heaven. Such casuistry has been reason for several critics to claim that Shakespeare is simply drawing out the drama until the final catastrophe. By the final act, Hamlet has become totally fatalistic. Having killed Polonius accidentally, he has already bloodied his hands; he accepts the challenge of Polonius's son, Laertes, with resignation, knowing that he will probably be killed himself. In the final scene, all of the principals meet their end—and almost all by some mischance of fate. Despite the resounding encomium pronounced over the body of the slain prince, the bleak ending offers little encouragement for an audience who has witnessed this great tragedy. Surprisingly, however, the ending seems justified, in that order has been restored to the Danish kingdom, although won at a terrible price. Such is the lesson of most great tragedies, and *Hamlet* ranks with the very best examples of the genre.



## THE TEMPEST

**First produced:** 1611 (first published, 1623)

**Type of work:** Play

*Under the guidance of a statesman turned magician, a group of castaways on a Mediterranean island learn what it means to be truly human.*

When Shakespeare came to write *The Tempest* in 1610, the recent establishment of English colonies in the New World spurred interest among the dramatist's contemporaries in the differences among peoples in the two hemispheres. That led to philosophical speculations about human nature itself: Are all people the same, no matter where they live? How much does one's environment affect one's be-

havior and, more importantly, one's outlook on life? These are the questions that underlie Shakespeare's last drama, a play that transcends the traditional definitions of tragedy or comedy to encompass elements of both.

The action in *The Tempest* is set on a remote island where Prospero, the rightful duke of Milan, has been living in exile with his daughter, Miranda. They are attended by airy spirits and by the subhuman creature Caliban. As the play opens, Prospero creates a storm that causes a shipwreck. The castaways from the ship include the young nobleman, Ferdinand, whose interest in Miranda becomes apparent from the moment he sees her. For her part, Miranda does not know how to respond to Ferdinand's attention. She has never seen a man other than her father, although Caliban, certainly a male, displays some lurid interest in her, and she is appropriately repulsed by him. While the young lovers are working out their relationship, Prospero's brother, Antonio, who had usurped Prospero's throne, arrives at the island in search of Ferdinand. Prospero takes this opportunity to set things right, convincing his brother to give up his claims to the throne. At the play's end, everyone is ready to return to Milan, fortified with what they have learned about virtue while on the island.

More than one critic has pointed out the highly metaphoric nature of this drama and the extensive use of lyrical language throughout. *The Tempest* may be Shakespeare's most poetic play. That is not surprising, since Prospero is the dramatist's most definitive portrait of the artist. Like the poet (the word comes from the Greek, meaning "maker") who creates from nothing an illusion of reality and a commentary on truth, Prospero sustains the world around him on the island largely through his own efforts, and others are dependent on him for their very lives.

Hence, a central theme of this play is the investigation of the nature of reality itself. Throughout, Shakespeare deals with problems of reality and illusion. His central character, Prospero, has the powers of a magician; he is able to cast spells, affect the elements, and influence action by invoking mystical powers. This master of illusion suggests on more than one occasion that what is real is not always what one perceives, and that life itself is merely an illusion, a fiction grounded in reality but transcending it. In fact, the implication is that what

is most valuable about human nature cannot always be explained in realistic terms. Equally important is Shakespeare's contrasting nature with art or artifice. Prospero's world is one that he has constructed (often, it is suggested, with the help of his magic) out of the natural world that he has found on the island. Through this contrast, Shakespeare is able to explore an issue that was becoming of significant concern to his contemporaries: Are individuals better in their natural state, or in the civilized society that they have created? If one assumes Caliban is the playwright's example of "natural man," it is clear on which side of the debate Shakespeare rests. Order, decorum, and artifice are held in high esteem by the admirable characters in this drama—and, by implication, they are the values in which Shakespeare himself believes.

## SONNETS

**First published:** 1609

**Type of work:** Lyric poetry

*In a series of 154 poems, Shakespeare tells the story of an older poet captivated by a younger man and simultaneously enthralled by a sensual woman.*

To appreciate Shakespeare's accomplishments in creating his sonnets, it is important to understand the history of the genre. Both the form of the individual sonnet and the idea of the sonnet sequence were developed in the fourteenth century by Petrarch, who wrote a series of poems celebrating a beautiful but unattainable woman he called Laura. Petrarch's formula became a model copied by poets throughout Europe during the next two hundred years. Generally the speaker in the poems is a man who explores his feelings for a particular woman and laments the fact that she will not reciprocate his feelings. These fourteen-line poems are divided into two major sections; usually a problem or argument is presented in the octet, and a resolution provided in the sextet. A tight rhyme scheme binds each section together, making the construction of a sonnet particularly challenging.

By the 1590's, a number of English poets had tried their hands at composing sonnets; among the more notable sequences were those of Sir Philip

Sidney and Edmund Spenser. It is not surprising, then, that Shakespeare took up the challenge of writing a sonnet sequence. Like his contemporaries, he initially circulated his poems in manuscript; the first publication in 1609 may have occurred without his consent. Unlike most other sonneteers, however, Shakespeare modifies the form of the Petrarchan sonnet, substituting for the octet-sextet pattern a format of three quatrains followed by a concluding couplet. Working with his new rhyme scheme, he takes greater liberties in constructing his arguments. Rather than posing a problem in the first eight lines and offering a resolution in the concluding six, he often uses the quatrains to develop a theme or examine a subject from three different perspectives before bringing his argument to a close in the couplet.

Even more importantly, he abandons the convention of having his speaker address his works to an unattainable lady. Instead, he creates a cast of characters whose story is told through the individual poems. His speaker is an older poet who has developed an affection for a younger man. That young man's attentions are also courted by a rival poet and by a sensual woman who is the older poet's mistress. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to the young man; in most of the remaining ones the older poet speaks to or about the woman. This complex dramatic situation allows Shakespeare to explore in his sequence of 154 poems three major themes: the nature of love, the vicissitudes of time, and the permanence of poetry.

While individual sonnets may be understood without reference to their place within the sequence, an appreciation for the tensions created by the overarching structure of the sequence gives added poignancy to particular poems. For example, Sonnet 18 opens with a question, asking "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" The poem is an extended comparison of the young man to a natural phenomenon. In some ways this sonnet is Petrarchan, in that the first two couplets work together to present an argument, while the final six lines offer an answer to the dilemma posed in the first eight lines. In the first and second quatrains the speaker points out some of the unpleasant aspects of a time of the year often thought of as decidedly pleasurable. The "rough winds" often shake the newly sprung flower buds. The season itself is short. The sun, that "eye of heaven"

thought to give gentle warmth and a golden hue to the day, is sometimes too hot, or its aura dimmed by the vagaries of climate. The stress is on the changeability of the natural world. By contrast, in the sextet the poet promises that the young man's "eternal summer"—his beauty and youth—will not fade, because the speaker has the power to make these qualities permanent through his verse. The speaker personifies the concept of death in order to continue his argument, stating "Nor shall death brag" that the young man "wander'st in his shade"—that is, that the young man has died. Of course, the youth may die physically, but he will live on in the "eternal lines" of this poem, since as long as "men can breathe, or eyes can see," this sonnet will keep the youth alive to readers.

The poet makes a similar argument in Sonnet 65, in which the ravages of time are compared to a number of tempestuous natural occurrences, asking in a series of four questions how can "beauty" compete against the inevitability of decay and change. The first two quatrains lay out a litany of destruction in which Time is personified as a ravaging, vengeful, and jealous enemy. "Sad mortality" is stronger than the strongest manmade objects ("brass") or natural phenomena ("boundless sea"). There seems no way simple beauty ("summer's honey breath") can withstand the ravages of nature, when "Time decays" even "rocks impregnable" and "gates of steel." In the third quatrain the poet asks how he might protect the young man from what seems to be his inevitable fate. Comparing him to a jewel, the poet wonders how he might lock away this treasure to keep Time from gathering him up. He ponders further how he might keep back the "swift foot" of Time from running off with the young man—that is, stealing away his beauty and eventually his life. Again, the solution presented in the couplet suggests that the "miracle" of immortality lies in the "black ink" of poetry. Because the poet has written about the young man, the youth will be forever present and forever young in the lines of the sonnet.

Just how far Shakespeare was willing to go in flaunting conventions of the sonnet sequence can be seen in Sonnet 130, in which the older poet describes the woman with whom he is in love. This is the same woman who is angling to seduce the young man who has captured the older poet's affections. Whereas the traditional lady addressed in

sonnets is blond, fair-skinned, and ethereal, the “mistress” spoken of in this poem is dark and earthy. Shakespeare uses a series of contrasts to emphasize her qualities, beginning by noting her eyes “are nothing like the sun”—not bright and dazzling. “Coral” is more red than her lips; her breasts are not white like snow, but “dun.” He calls her hairs “black wires,” and finds her cheeks lack the soft pallor of roses. In one of the more stunning comparisons, he says there is much more delight in perfumes than in his mistress’ breath, which “reeks.” Nevertheless, although her voice is raspy and unmusical, he loves to hear her speak. Unlike the women praised by other sonneteers who are supposedly akin to goddesses, his mistress “treads on the ground”—that is, she is a real woman whose attractions are likewise commonplace yet substantial. As a result, the poet says his beloved is as “rare” as any woman who has been compared—somewhat ridiculously, in his view—to heavenly objects. This anti-Petrarchan comparison not only gives a touch of humor to Shakespeare’s sequence but also suggests that his ideas of sexuality and human relationships are grounded in reality rather than clouded with some form of Platonic idealization.

Since their publication in 1609, Shakespeare’s sonnets have generated considerable interest from both critics and biographers. Many attempts have been made to determine the identities of the people whom Shakespeare immortalizes in his sonnet sequence. For centuries critics attempted to explain away the hints of homosexuality suggested by the older poet’s fascination with the young man;

more recently those tendencies have been addressed more dispassionately, or even celebrated. The technical mastery of individual poems has been the subject of thousands of commentaries, most noting Shakespeare’s exceptional ability to use metaphor both as a means of description and as a vehicle for offering insights into the perennial issues of human love, the nature of mutability, and the function of poetry.

## SUMMARY

William Shakespeare’s status as an artist is succinctly captured in the opening line of Matthew Arnold’s sonnet dedicated to the dramatist: “Others abide our question; thou alone art still.” Although eighteenth century writers, critics, and playgoers found his work too artificial, too complicated, and too much given to extravagant wit and wordplay, since the nineteenth century he has been accorded primacy of place among English writers of all genres. Even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when new critical approaches to literature caused serious revision in the reputation of many other writers, Shakespeare remained universally revered as a writer of the first order, able to bring to life fictional creations in situations that teach the reader some of the eternal truths about human nature. To use another of Arnold’s phrases, Shakespeare continues to serve as a touchstone against which artistic excellence is measured.

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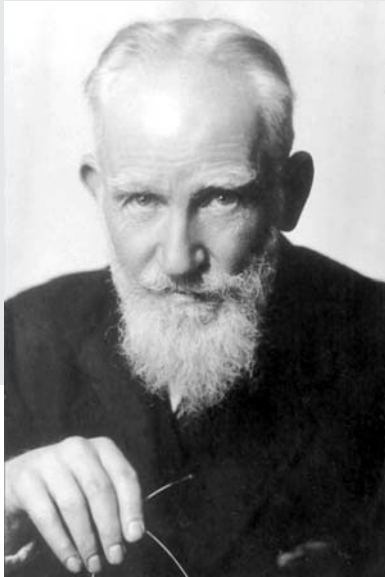
## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does William Shakespeare consider the proper relationship between rulers and subjects in society?
- In his sonnet sequence, Shakespeare writes repeatedly about poets and poetry. What does he see as the role for poetry in society?
- What would Shakespeare consider to be the ideal relationship between parents and children?
- How does Shakespeare make use of history in creating the plots of his plays?
- What dramatic use does Shakespeare make of minor characters in his plays, especially characters from the lower classes?
- In portraying women, in what ways is Shakespeare bound by attitudes toward gender relationships common to his own age? Is there evidence that he represents a more modern view regarding such relationships?
- Many of Shakespeare's works deal with matters of romantic love. How does he use conventions from the medieval courtly love tradition, and in what ways does he present more progressive views of romantic relationships?
- How does Shakespeare make use of Renaissance conventions of dramatic tragedy? How does he modify these for specific thematic purposes in plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, or *Julius Caesar*?



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## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland

July 26, 1856

**Died:** Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire, England

November 2, 1950

*While he is widely considered the most important and innovative British dramatist of the twentieth century, Shaw was also an essayist and critic.*

### BIOGRAPHY

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 26, 1856, the son of English Protestants. He left school at the age of fourteen and worked for five years in a land agent's office. At the age of twenty, Shaw left Ireland for London. Two years earlier, Shaw's mother had moved to London together with his two sisters, leaving her alcoholic husband and following her voice teacher. Her instructor arranged for the young Shaw to write several articles on music for a satirical weekly review, *The Hornet*. Shaw remained without any fulfilling employment or literary success during his first decade in London. After initially working as a clerk, he soon turned to literature, writing several novels between 1886 and 1905. None of these was successful. Most notable among them are *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1886) and *Love Among the Artists* (1900).

During this time societies for philosophical discussion were flourishing in London. Shaw joined the humanist and progressive Zetetical Society and the Dialectical Society, as well as literary societies. In order to overcome his shyness, he forced himself to speak at every meeting. After attending a lecture by the American Henry George in 1882 and, in 1884, reading Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867, 1885, 1894; first translated as *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1886, 1907, 1909), Shaw turned to social-

ism, which was to remain a strong presence in his plays. For the next twelve years he spoke as a socialist propagator once or twice a week all over London. This experience taught Shaw to present his arguments in dialectic dramatic form and to enliven them with his humor.

Socialist politics dominated Shaw's career as a local government councillor in St. Pancras in North London from 1897 to 1903. Shaw's politics also led him to become one of the founders of the Fabian Society, for which he edited *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889) and wrote many well-known socialist tracts. The Fabian Society did not have a proletarian element but was a group of middle-class intellectuals who shared Marx's criticism of middle-class institutions. Its members believed in the gradual promotion of socialism rather than revolution. Shaw was never a conventional socialist: His political views were influenced by his admiration of vitality and power as well as by his belief in an active and individually willed kind of evolution, urged on by what he called the Life Force.

From 1886 to 1889, Shaw wrote unsigned art criticism for the *World*. He then worked until 1890 as music critic for the newly founded *Star* newspaper before becoming the *World's* music critic. Shaw admired Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Richard Wagner and introduced new standards for judging performers and composers, often mocking conventional taste and fashionable preferences. From 1895 to 1898, he wrote drama criticism for the *Saturday Review*. His reviews were deliberately provocative and challenged contemporary English ideas about plays and acting. During this period he also

wrote *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) and *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on "The Ring of the Nibelungs"* (1898), tributes to artist-philosophers whom he admired. In 1898 Shaw married the wealthy Charlotte Payne-Townshend and subsequently devoted himself almost exclusively to writing plays.

His music and drama criticism, as well as his socialist politics, were to shape his career as a playwright. Shaw used conventional dramatic structure and even conventional themes for highly unconventional purposes. From the beginning, Shaw hoped to shock his audiences into taking a new look at their society and its moral problems. His first play, *Widowers' Houses* (wr. 1885-1892, pr. 1892, pb. 1893), was begun in 1885 with his friend and fellow socialist William Archer. Shaw finished the play independently in 1892. *Widowers' Houses* deals with slumlords, revealing through techniques of inversion and reversal the social and economic conditions responsible for the problem. Shaw's next play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (wr. 1893, pb. 1898, pr. 1902), discusses prostitution, well-meaning brothel keepers, and the laws of supply and demand. Since his plays were short-lived on stage, Shaw published them at his own expense. In 1898, *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant* appeared with long, provocative prefaces addressing a variety of issues, including theatrical censorship. The collection included Shaw's first two plays, as well as *Arms and the Man* (pr. 1894), *The Man of Destiny* (pr. 1897), and *Candida: A Mystery* (pr. 1897), the first of a series of portraits of remarkable women. These early plays voice the need for a more creative and vital approach to life, a theme that is further developed in *Three Plays for Puritans* (pb. 1901), containing plays produced between 1897 and 1906. Those plays continue Shaw's attacks on petty bourgeois morality, advocating instead original virtue and defiance of accepted codes.

At the end of the beginning of the twentieth century, Shaw became famous first in continental Europe, then in the United States, and then also in England. He met the actor-director-playwright Harley Granville-Barker, who contributed to the success of his plays at the Court Theatre from 1904 to 1907. Shaw's belief in unconventional morality, and his admiration of vitality, dominate *Man and Superman* (pr. 1903, pb. 1905) and *Back to Methuselah* (pb. 1921, pr. 1922). Shaw's plays of the early

twentieth century include *John Bull's Other Island* (pr. 1904, pb. 1907), a play about Ireland's grievances against England, *Major Barbara* (pr. 1905, pb. 1907), and *The Doctor's Dilemma* (pr. 1906, pb. 1911), which deals with the moral problems of doctors and artists.

After he had been investigated by the Joint Select Committee on Stage Censorship in 1909, Shaw wrote a series of plays that attempt to separate pure religion and morality from muddy social standards. These include *The Shewing up of Blanco Posnet* (pr. 1909, pb. 1911), *Pygmalion* (pb. 1912, pr. 1913 in German, pr. 1914 in English), *Androcles and the Lion* (pr. 1912 in German, pr. 1913 in English, pb. 1916), *Heartbreak House* (wr. 1913-1919, pb. 1919, pr. 1920), and *Saint Joan* (pr. 1923, pb. 1924). Shaw's morality of complete individual responsibility, self-discipline, and heroic effort without reward is detectable in all of these plays.

In 1925, Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He continued writing almost until his death at the age of ninety-four, but his later plays have received little attention. His late prose works, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928) and *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932), are better known than plays such as *The Apple Cart* (pr. 1929, pb. 1930), which discusses the problems of monarchy and democracy, *Too True to Be Good* (pr. 1932, pb. 1934), and *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (pr., pb. 1935). He died on November 2, 1950, in Ayot St. Lawrence, Hertfordshire, England. Although Shaw left no school and few avowed disciples, his influence continues to be felt.

## ANALYSIS

Shaw became a playwright who knew the conventional tricks of the theater but was determined to use drama as a means of shaking audiences out of their complacencies, hypocrisies, and thoughtless acquiescence to all kinds of social evil. In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw presented the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen as a realistic and reforming playwright who addressed problems of modern life and introduced genuine discussion in his dialogue, qualities that Shaw admired and emulated. Shaw was not drawn to Ibsen's more profound and symbolic plays but valued instead those that attacked middle-class conventionality and hypocrisy. In the wake of Ibsen, Shaw abandoned the Victorian idol-

ization of William Shakespeare and opened British theater to social criticism and political debate. He wanted to displace the artificialities of the Victorian stage (which he called “Sardoodledom” after the French playwright Victorien Sardou) with a theater of vital ideas about society and ethics.

Following what he considered to be the quintessence of Ibsen, Shaw saw his role as that of a prophet who must suggest to his society ways of developing into a better civilization. He once proclaimed, “I am by profession what is called an original thinker, my business being to question and test all the established creeds and codes.” Therefore he undertook a moral analysis of contemporary civilization. Like the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens, one of his influences, Shaw wanted to be a radical reformer as well as a synthesizer of all that was best in the thinking of his time. While he was joined in his critical and humorous look at contemporary society by fellow Irishman and dramatist Oscar Wilde, Shaw’s ultimate goal was reform, whereas Wilde’s was ridicule.

Although he did not reject all traditional norms and commonly accepted standards, Shaw questioned everything. Through dramatic action and intellectual debate in dialogue, his early plays often initially persuade the audience that the conventional hero is the villain and the conventional villain is the hero. Then Shaw usually swings everything around again so that the conventional hero can again become the hero. What now makes him a hero has been drastically redefined. Shaw follows this pattern in *Candida*, *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, and *Arms and the Man*. He shows paradoxes that arise from the conventional views and hypocrisies of his audience. Having thus destroyed the audience’s self-confidence, Shaw then allows one of his very vital heroes to proclaim the Shavian vision of society or politics or religion.

This vision was shaped by Shaw’s socialism and his secular religion, which is based on a belief in humanity’s will to improve. Shaw adopted the view that willpower is the driving force of human existence from the German pessimistic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Shaw called this energetic will the Life Force, which became the God of his secular religion. In Shaw’s life-preserving philosophy, the will to improve is collective. The desire for personal well-being is subordinated to the desire for the common good. Yet the will to live better lives

is imperative. In “The Revolutionist’s Handbook,” which is contained in *Man and Superman*, Shaw writes that the eighteenth century believed in a

deus ex machina, the god who helped those who could not help themselves, the god of the lazy and incapable. The nineteenth century decided that there is indeed no such god; and now Man must take in hand all the work that he used to shirk with an idle prayer.

Since humanity is responsible for its own destiny, it needs to rely on the Life Force to guide it toward an improved kind of existence.

Shaw has created a variety of characters that embody this Life Force or parts of it. In *Man and Superman*, which is concerned with the breeding of a superman as the ultimate goal of willed evolution, Don Juan is the spokesman for the Life Force in the play’s “Don Juan in Hell” sequence. He defends the ecstasy of philosophical thought and the joy of humanity’s creative evolutionary urge for a better world and for self-improvement against Everyman’s barren worldliness and the Devil’s view that humankind is destroying itself. Shaw admires Don Juan as a strong character who is driven by his own will instead of having anything forced on him and as someone who believes that humanity is improving and must be further improved.

The theme of creative evolution is further explored in *Back to Methuselah*. Shaw himself considered this play his masterpiece. Here the Life Force enables people to perfect their species to the point where they can live for three hundred years, long enough to acquire enough experience and wisdom to become disembodied intellects. Unlike the evolutionist Charles Darwin, who had argued that evolution is a process of adapting to one’s environment, Shaw believed that people are driven to change by their will to live better lives. In his preface to the play, Shaw wrote that:

God helps those who help themselves. This does not mean that if Man cannot find the remedy no remedy will be found. . . . What it means is that if Man is to be saved, Man must save himself. There seems no compelling reason why he should be saved. He is by no means an ideal creature.

Shaw considered it his task to make his spectators and readers more ideal creatures by compelling

them to question conventions and traditional belief systems. His plays achieve this education through intellectual discussions between the characters that are enriched by Shavian wit and comedy.

## CANDIDA

**First produced:** 1897 (first published, 1898)

**Type of work:** Play

*The socialist speaker, reverend Morell, comes to realize that it is his wife Candida who makes his success possible.*

*Candida: A Mystery* is included among “Plays: Pleasant” in George Bernard Shaw’s first collection of plays, *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). Like each of the other “Plays: Pleasant” (*Arms and the Man*, *The Man of Destiny*, and *You Never Can Tell*), *Candida* presents a youthful figure whose informal moral reflections help other characters to understand their lives better. This youth is the nervous eighteen-year-old nobleman Eugene, who returns with Candida to her house and husband in London. Candida’s husband is the socialist reverend Morell, a famous speaker who also runs his household in an egalitarian fashion; since there is only one maid, Morell, his wife, and his secretary assume some of the household chores. Morell seems very much in control of his world until Eugene tells him that he (Eugene) is in love with Candida and that she is probably repulsed by Morell. Eugene’s revelation and reflections undermine Morell’s apparent security and control and show his fragility. An additional complication arises when Morell’s despised father-in-law, the unscrupulous businessman Burgess, comes to talk to Morell for the first time in three years. Burgess is appalled at Morell’s suggestion that they would get along fine if they agreed to be honest with each other. Morell should openly consider Burgess a scoundrel and Burgess should openly call Morell a fool.

Morell and Eugene ask Candida to choose between them. After expressing her indignation, Candida chooses the weaker of the two men, her husband. She reveals that while she does everything to make Morell believe that he is the master of the house, the responsibility for their family and

household rests in fact on her shoulders. She knows that Morell has always been spoiled by success and that she therefore has to act as his mother, his sister, his wife, and the mother of his children all at the same time. Morell’s security crumbles as he realizes how dependent his prominent position is on his protective wife. While at the beginning of the play his heroism seemed to be based on his own strength and skills, ultimately it rests on the recognition of his own weakness and on his acceptance of Candida’s hidden protective leadership.

Shaw referred to *Candida* as his version of Ibsen’s *Et dukkehjem* (pr., pb. 1879; *A Doll’s House*, 1880). Unlike Ibsen’s play, Shaw’s version presents the man and not the woman as the doll. Morell is the one controlled by Candida, not vice versa. Shaw considered this situation reflective of English society, which he saw as ultimately in the hands of women.

*Candida* is Shaw’s most naturalist play. Naturalist drama shies away from discussions of abstract ideas and seems to be concerned only with the scene and characters shown on the stage. Like Ibsen in his plays, Shaw had to find covert means in *Candida* to comment on the dramatic situation and characters and to show the wider social implications of this situation. Although *Candida* seems as simple and straightforward as its heroine, the play is Shaw’s most elaborately written and enigmatic early dramatic work. When it was published in 1898, Shaw subtitled it *A Mystery*, whereas he had called it “A Domestic Play” in the original manuscript.

## MAJOR BARBARA

**First produced:** 1905 (first published, 1907)

**Type of work:** Play

*An arms producer convinces his family that his business is necessary rather than immoral and that it helps eradicate poverty, the worst of evils.*

*Major Barbara* is a literary use of myths and their cultural references. Its conception was facilitated by the two-volume 1890 publication of Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and its treatment of the Christian Gospel story as only one myth



among others. Shaw based *Major Barbara* on several Christian legends; the myth of Barbara, the patron saint of gunners and miners, is linked with a version of Christ's mission, betrayal, passion, and ascension. These Christian elements are combined with the myth of Faust, who sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for knowledge and power. The combination and alteration of these myths as well as numerous discussions on ethics and religion make *Major Barbara* one of Shaw's most ambiguous plays, one that continues to provoke rival interpretations.

In a kind of drawing-room comedy, the play's first act introduces the Undershaft family: the bourgeois Lady Britomart, a caricature of the grande dame; her husband, the weapons producer Andrew Undershaft, from whom she has been separated for decades; their daughters Barbara and Sarah and their fiancés; and the slow-minded, pampered son Stephen. Lady Britomart invites her husband to her house in order to ask him for more money to support their children and to make him reconsider his decision that in keeping with tradition his weapons enterprise can be inherited only by a foundling. Their daughter Barbara, a Salvation Army major, invites Undershaft to see her shelter. He agrees to do so if she will visit his weapons factory.

The play's second act is set in Barbara's Salvation Army shelter, a Dickensian illustration of poverty. While looking for his girlfriend, the strong, unruly Bill Walker slaps two women. He feels remorse for his deed and offers one pound to be forgiven, but Major Barbara does not accept his money. She wants to convert his soul instead. As she is about to convert him to the Salvation Army and to Christian behavior, her superior accepts five thousand pounds each from a whiskey distiller and from Undershaft. These donors embody alcoholism and violence, evils that Barbara has been fighting. She resigns over this undermining of principles. Simultaneously, a man who had apparently

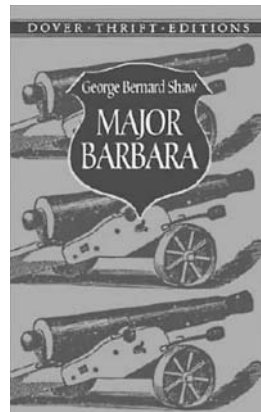
been converted to the Salvation Army only hours earlier steals Bill's pound. Barbara loses her grip on Bill's soul and must realize that she has failed in her work as a missionary.

Shaw stressed in his preface that in Andrew Undershaft he has created a man who understands that "the worst of our crimes is poverty" and that humanity's foremost endeavor must be to avoid poverty. Upon seeing the poor in his daughter's soup kitchen, Undershaft says that,

Poverty blights whole cities; spreads horrible pestilences; strikes dead the very souls of all who come within sight, sound or smell of it. . . . [The millions of poor people] poison us morally and physically: they kill the happiness of society: they force us to do away with our own liberties and to organize unnatural cruelties for fear they should rise against us and drag us down into their abyss.

Therefore the eradication of poverty is Undershaft's main goal. He can achieve it in his own factory town, in which the play's third act is set, through the production of weapons, which he sells indiscriminately to anyone who can pay for them. While Barbara is preserving her moral ideals but failing in her battle against poverty, Undershaft is presented as disregarding traditional morality but succeeding in using the profits of an objectionable business for providing for all the needs of his workers. Although Undershaft announces that his philosophy is based on "money and gunpowder," describing himself as "a profiteer in mutilation and murder," he is doing more good for his workers than Barbara is for the poor in the Salvation Army shelter.

The happiness of its inhabitants, and its deadly purpose, make Undershaft's factory town an ambivalent place between heaven and hell. When the inheritance is discussed again, Barbara's fiancé Adolphus Cusins, an unemployed professor of Greek, turns out to be a foundling. Cusins accepts the inheritance of the tempter/devil Undershaft even though he is still planning to "make war on war." Barbara realizes that the factory town will be a better place than the Salvation Army to save souls because there nobody will convert out of a need for charity or food.



## PYGMALION

**First produced:** 1913, in German; 1914, in English (first published, 1912)

**Type of work:** Play

*A phonetics professor teaches a flower girl to talk like a duchess but fails to treat her like one.*

Like *The Doctor's Dilemma* (pr. 1906, pb. 1911), *Pygmalion* is a problem play that examines a social issue. Shaw deals here with the assumptions of social superiority and inferiority that underlie the class system. He demonstrates how speech and etiquette preserve class distinctions. As he wrote in the play's preface, "It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him." *Pygmalion* therefore tries to illustrate the arbitrariness of basing a person's worth on his or her pronunciation.

The phonetics professor Henry Higgins is an expert in dialects and accents. At Covent Garden he phonetically transcribes all that the innocent flower girl Eliza Doolittle says. Since he boasted of his successes in educating social climbers in speech, Eliza comes to Higgins's house the next day, asking to be taught to speak like a lady so that she might be employed in a classy flower store. A fellow phonetics professor, Colonel Pickering, offers to cover the expenses of the experiment if Higgins can pass Eliza off as a duchess at a garden party six months later. Sure of his abilities, the tyrannical and condescending Higgins is enticed by the Frankensteinian challenge "to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her."

While Higgins is successful in transforming Eliza in terms of speech, his rough manners, rudeness, and swearing do not teach her the accompanying social etiquette. Eliza betrays her lack of refinement at a parlor party not through her pro-

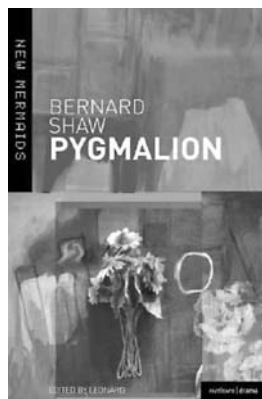
nunciation but through what she says. The comic climax is reached when she uses the vulgar expression "Not bloody likely," although she pronounces it in a ladylike manner.

Higgins and Pickering seem unaware that their experiment has transformed Eliza not only in terms of her speech. Even after she has successfully passed for a lady at a garden party, Higgins still does not treat her like a lady. Higgins's excuse is that while Pickering may treat a flower girl like a duchess, he would also treat a duchess like a flower girl, since he believes in treating everyone equally, regardless of his or her social class. Feeling disappointed and humiliated, Eliza leaves Higgins by night, no longer willing to be treated like a servant. She believes that she has risen to a higher social class and claims that social class is not determined by one's pronunciation but by the respect with which one is treated.

In the meantime, money has been left to Eliza's father by a rich American. This unexpected wealth has transformed him from an alcoholic dustman into a middle-class man in terms of behavior and ideology, although not in terms of pronunciation. Since it is based on money and not on accent, his character transformation seems more secure than his daughter's, although both seem ambivalent about their new status.

Although the play leaves Eliza and Higgins's future open, Shaw wrote in his afterword that she will marry the petit bourgeois Freddy and open a flower and vegetable shop with him instead of continuing to endure Higgins's unrefinement and rudeness. She has been struggling throughout the play to liberate herself from the professor's tyranny.

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw links the Cinderella story of a transformation from rags to riches with a Frankensteinian creation of a new life. Underneath the play's comedy, questions are raised about the justifiability of social distinction and the role of women in a patriarchal society. Although Shaw felt ambivalent about the feminist movement of the early twentieth century, he presents Eliza as suffering degradation and escaping from it with the help of Pickering's civility, Mrs. Higgins's understanding, and her own awakened self-reliance. *Pygmalion* was later made into the popular musical comedy *My Fair Lady* (1956).



## SAINT JOAN

**First produced:** 1923 (first published, 1924)

**Type of work:** Play

*The country girl Joan assumes command of the French army in the fight against the English; after leading France to victory, she is burned as a heretic.*

In the protagonist of *Saint Joan*, Shaw has created his most lasting embodiment of the Life Force, a figure who is superior in character and vision and who tries to elevate ordinary people to her level by becoming their leader. Shaw's Saint Joan is funny and self-confident; she is guided by practicality and common sense but does not fit the traditional image of a religious martyr. Although *Saint Joan* is filled with comic moments, it is considered Shaw's only tragedy. Yet it has also been called a comedy containing one tragic scene.

Joan's legend had been revived in France during World War I; an ambitious Hollywood film, *Joan, the Woman*, had been released in 1917; and in 1920 Joan was canonized. The ensuing interest in Joan of Arc also seized Shaw and especially his wife. In Joan's assertion of her will against institutional restraints Shaw recognized so many of his convictions that, as the famous drama critic-historian Eric Bentley has written, Shaw would have had to invent Joan had she never existed. In the play's preface, Shaw praises "the vigor and scope of her mind and character, and the intensity of her vital energy."

Although she is a warrior, Joan is also a preserver of life. As she appears on the scene, the hens start laying eggs again. In her enthusiasm she appeals to the French soldiers because "she's so positive." Joan's affirmation of life and the indestructibility of her vital energy are felt throughout the play. Even when Joan is burned as a witch, the executioner admits that

Her heart would not burn; and it would not drown. I was a master at my craft . . . but I could not kill The Maid. She is up and alive everywhere.

Guided by voices, the eighteen-year-old country girl Joan is set on liberating France from the English, who are occupying half of the country in

1429. Through perseverance and persuasiveness she manages to be appointed commander of the French army by the Dauphin Charles. Joan leads the soldiers to victory by giving them back their courage. In something of a miracle, Orleans becomes the first city to be freed from English occupation.

When the English are losing battle after battle, the Earl of Warwick and his chaplain persuade Cauchon, the bishop of Beauvais, that Joan must be a witch because she could not have been so successful otherwise. He calls her death a "political necessity." While Cauchon is not convinced that Joan's military victories make her a heretic, he is angered by what he perceives to be Joan's pride and her disregard for the Church. He blames her for asserting that she is guided by God and not by the Church and for crowning Charles herself in the cathedral of Rheims. What her accusers also cannot accept is Joan's unwomanly behavior and attire. She dresses as a soldier and protests, "I will never take a husband. . . . I am a soldier: I do not want to be thought of as a woman."

Joan falls victim to the Church's intolerance of nonconformists and to the revenge of the English. In the figures of Warwick and his chaplain, Shaw criticizes English nationalism and patriotism. At her trial Joan is unwilling to put her obedience to the Church above her obedience to God. She refuses to comply with the Church's demand that she denounce her voices as those of the devil. Although Joan is pronounced guilty, the Inquisitor, in private, calls her "innocent." Nonetheless she is burned as a witch.

In the play's epilogue Joan appears to King Charles in a dream twenty-five years after her execution. Her guilty verdict has been annulled. She is joined in Charles's dream by those responsible for her death and is universally hailed. Finally, a papal messenger of the year 1920 announces that Joan has just been made a saint. As she offers to come back into the world, however, all shy away. Joan must realize that she is ahead of her time. Her famous last words are: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" Shaw believed that the ordinary world was not yet sufficiently prepared for the superior being he envisioned. His epilogue makes *Saint Joan* less a historical play than a passion play, reminiscent of

Christ's Passion. It connects the past to Shaw's present, illustrating that little has changed. *Saint Joan* remains Shaw's most popular play, although he himself did not rate it that highly.

### SUMMARY

In his nearly forty plays and numerous other writings, George Bernard Shaw's primary goal was not the entertainment but the education of his audience. His socialist vision created fictional worlds designed either to present a more ideal form of human existence or to criticize what he considered to be the flaws of his society. While his plays typically present a character who embodies the vitality that he considered essential for reform and the creation of a better world, he saw his contemporaries still far from achieving the kind of enlightened and egalitarian society he envisioned.

Josef Raab

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What did George Bernard Shaw's early music and drama criticism contribute to his own dramatic development?
- What did Shaw learn from Henrik Ibsen?
- Did Shaw have an excessive optimism about human nature?
- Explain how Shaw's Life Force animates his play *Major Barbara*.
- What view of religious duty does Shaw communicate in *Saint Joan*?
- Does the musical *My Fair Lady* do justice to *Pygmalion*, the play on which it was based?

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## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY

**Born:** London, England  
August 30, 1797

**Died:** London, England  
February 1, 1851

*Shelley's reputation rests on her technically flawed, thematically rich masterpiece of imagination, *Frankenstein*.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in London, England, on August 30, 1797. Both of her parents were celebrated political radicals. Mary Wollstonecraft, her mother, authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) and was an early advocate of sexual equality. William Godwin, her father, was a utopian-anarchist best known for his *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793). Despite their free-thinking ways, Wollstonecraft and Godwin were wed five months prior to their daughter's birth. Mary's birth was difficult. Her mother became ill and died ten days later.

Concerned with Mary's welfare, Godwin courted numerous women, intent upon finding for her a suitable mother. On December 21, 1801, Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont. She had two children of her own, six-year-old Charles and four-year-old Jane (later called Claire). The marriage was flawed by money problems and lifelong friction between Mary and her stepmother. Mary came to idealize her natural mother, whose works she read avidly. Though not a literary person, the new Mrs. Godwin did possess business sense, encouraging Godwin to become a publisher. Godwin's vocation

and reputation as a man of letters granted Mary valuable exposure to such literary giants as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Despite being deprived of the formal education that her natural mother would have wished for her, Mary thus became deeply acquainted with the literary and philosophical issues of her day.

Mary's intellectual development did not make her relationship with her stepmother any more cordial. Distance was required, and Mary did manage to get away from the household, most notably living in Dundee, Scotland, from 1812 to 1814, with the relatively conventional Baxter family. Mary's imagination soared in the ruggedly beautiful Scottish countryside, and life with the Baxters proved to be a revelation.

Visiting her father in November, 1812, Mary had met Percy Bysshe Shelley for the first time. An as yet unknown poet, Percy Shelley was drawn to William Godwin by the latter's radicalism. Indeed, Percy took some of Godwin's ideas more seriously than Godwin himself. Not unrelated to this was Percy's whirlwind courtship of Mary upon her permanent return from Scotland in May of 1814. Godwin was not pleased. Percy was already married, albeit unhappily, and, in Godwin's eyes, Mary was prohibitively young. The two lovers remained unswayed by Godwin's opinion and ran off on July 28.

The relationship was both deeply romantic and somewhat bizarre. The young couple went to Europe, ready to live on love, and sometimes having to do just that. Percy and Mary became true soul mates, sharing abundant enthusiasm for literature

and ideas. On the other hand, the two were not alone. Mary's half sister Claire (formerly Jane) accompanied them. Just why she did so is not clear, but the fact that the three were so often together ultimately raised scandalous rumors. In addition, Mary often was agitated by Claire's presence. She thought Claire wished to compete for Percy's attention.

Plagued by money woes, the trio returned to England in September, 1814. In February, 1815, Mary gave birth to a daughter, the first of her four offspring with Shelley. Unfortunately, the baby died two weeks later. The following January (1816) saw the successful birth of a son, William. That May, under pressure from creditors and again accompanied by Claire, Mary and Shelley returned to Europe, this time residing in Switzerland. At this point, they made the acquaintance of Lord Byron, already a celebrated poet. It was after an evening of reading ghost stories at Byron's mansion that Mary first conceived the plot of *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). In addition, Byron and Claire became lovers, though definitely not soul mates.

The Shelleys returned to England at the end of August. In December, Percy Shelley's wife, Harriet, apparently committed suicide, as did Mary's half sister Fanny, who was in love with Percy. At least partly in order to gain custody of his children by Harriet, Shelley married Mary on December 30, 1816. (The attempt to gain custody was, however, unsuccessful.) In 1817, Mary finished *Frankenstein*, gave birth to a daughter, Clara Everina, and published her *History of a Six Weeks' Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland* (1817), a journal of her European travels.

On March 11, 1818, *Frankenstein* was published and the Shelleys departed on a third European odyssey. In September, Clara died after a brief illness. William, who so far had lived the longest, contracted malaria and followed her to the grave the next June. This last death was an especially tough one for Mary. She continued to work during this period, however, researching her second novel, *Valperga: Or, The Life of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), and beginning preliminary work on *Mathilda*, published posthumously in 1959.

On November 12, 1819, Mary gave birth to Percy Florence, the only one of her children who would live to adulthood. The Shelleys continued to

live in Italy, visited by a gallery of friends and literary figures. Sadness, however, once again overshadowed the Shelley household. In June, Mary suffered a miscarriage that might have been fatal if not for quick action by Percy. Then, in July, Percy and a friend died in a boating accident. Mary's magical liaison with the poet had ended.

Mary was now a widow. More than that, she was the great Shelley's widow, expected by some very different sorts of people to be faithful keeper of the flame. Returning to England, she did this rather skillfully. According to the wishes of her father-in-law, Timothy Shelley, upon whom she depended for income, she withheld publication of her biography of Shelley. She did, however, produce valuable annotated editions of Shelley's poetry and prose. She also continued to write prolifically on her own, supplementing her income and giving vent to her considerable creative and analytic energies. Over the last twenty-five years of her life, she published four novels—*The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), and *Falkner* (1837)—and found time to produce a revised version of *Frankenstein* (1831). She also published a travelogue, *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844), numerous short pieces (mostly stories, but occasionally poems and incidental nonfiction), and was a busy contributor to the biographical volumes of *Lardner's Cabinet Encyclopedia*.

In addition to financial pressures, Mary's later life was plagued by blackmail attempts and a falling out with most of her friends. She was helped through these troubled times by her son Percy. As a man of ideas, Percy was a disappointment to Mary. She came to appreciate, however, his loyalty and quiet affection. When Percy married in 1848, his wife also became a faithful companion to Mary. Spurned by the pretentious literary and social world in which she had never quite felt comfortable, Mary was sustained by the warmth of family ties. She died, after a series of strokes, on February 1, 1851, at Chester Square, London, and was laid to rest in St. Peter's Churchyard, Bournemouth, England, between her illustrious parents.

## ANALYSIS

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley produced a multitude of correspondence, novels, and other sundry works. Criticizing her work as a whole is difficult for a number of reasons. First, the range of her work—

from historical romance (*The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*) to horror (*Frankenstein*) and futuristic tragedy (*The Last Man*)—is extremely broad. No two of Shelley's novels are of precisely the same genre. Second, she does not fit neatly into the literary categories of her time. Though *Frankenstein* is sometimes mistaken for a gothic novel, it eschews that genre's love of the supernatural and is uncharacteristically cerebral. Finally, literary analysis of her work as a whole is still at a relatively underdeveloped stage.

Despite these problems, several common threads emerge as basic to Shelley's work. The first of these has to do with style. For her time, Shelley was a highly economical and dispassionate writer. Her works are rarely overwhelmed with weighty details or convoluted language. On the other hand, she often sacrificed characterization and plot for the sake of narrative flow.

Thematically, Shelley's work is characterized by a strong autobiographical tendency, a consistent concern with the apparent and real nature of family life, and a sophisticated treatment of larger philosophical and social questions. The geographical settings of Shelley's novels reflected her own travels, and many of the characters in her later novels, especially, were said to be based on literary celebrities whom she had known. In *The Last Man*, for example, Shelley herself is represented by both Lionel Verney (the narrator and "last man" of the title) and his sister Perdita. The utopian Adrian would seem to be modeled after Percy Bysshe Shelley, while the egotistic Lord Raymond represents Lord Byron. Shelley's penchant for basing her fiction on real-life models is probably best illustrated by *Mathilda*. In this tale, a young woman resembling Shelley herself experiences an incestuous relationship with her father and is saved from her own guilty depression by a young man again resembling Percy Bysshe Shelley. That the novel was suppressed, partly by Shelley and partly by her father, is an indication not that such an incestuous relationship took place but that Shelley's readers were conditioned to see her work as autobiographical in a more literal way than she or her father wished.

As the topic of incest suggests, Shelley often treated the question of family ties in greater depth than was usual for her time. No doubt this reflected her own disappointments in this regard. Birth and death were inextricably linked for Shelley. Her own

birth had resulted in the death of her mother, and she had lost three of her own children in infancy. In addition, her husband had died while still a young man, and her father was distant, distracted at different points in his life by Shelley's stepmother and by persistent money problems. These concerns are reflected in a number of Shelley's novels—perhaps, in one way or another, in all of them. *Lodore*, for example, presents the story of a mother who sacrifices everything for her daughter, arriving at the conclusion that all of life's rewards are illusory except for the honest affection felt for a loved one. In *Falkner*, Shelley provides an apology for her husband's first marriage, attempting to absolve him of the blame for Harriet's suicide.

Shelley's concerns were not limited to real and ideal versions of hearth and home. She could apply her art to a much broader canvas—to the formation of the English monarchy in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* or to the future of the human race in *The Last Man*. Set in the twenty-first century, the latter novel presents an image of broad social progress. Yet all is not well in the world. Freedom has not quashed the seeds of conflict in human nature. The use of a new weapon lets loose a tragic plague, one that ultimately brings an end to the human race. Shelley describes a future in which humanity's moral progress lags sadly behind its technological capacity for destruction.

## FRANKENSTEIN

**First published:** 1818

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young scientist discovers the secret of animating dead tissue, with hideous consequences.*

*Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus* is the work for which Shelley is remembered by the general public. The story unfolds in a series of letters from Robert Walton, an enterprising arctic explorer, to his sister in England. Walton reports the sighting of a giant manlike creature driving a dogsled in the icy distance. This scene is followed by the rescue of a man whose sled had become stranded in the ice floe. This man is Victor Frankenstein.

As he recovers his health, Frankenstein relates

his story. He tells of his warm family life in Geneva and of his early enthusiasm for the speculative natural philosophy of alchemists such as Cornelius Agrippa. At the age of twenty-one, he leaves to study science at Ingolstadt. There, he learns the difference between modern science and mysticism. He embraces scientific method but holds onto one of the dreams of his former models—the creation of life. Ultimately, he completely embraces this goal, assembling a being of huge scale in order to simplify its construction. When his creature gains life, Frankenstein is instantly revolted. He exits the flat and wanders about, hoping that the spark of life in the creature will expire spontaneously. The following day, the creature has disappeared, and Victor is visited by his best friend, Henry Clerval, who, unaware of the creature's existence, helps Victor to regain his composure over the next several months. In early May, Victor's younger brother William is murdered outside Geneva. A servant is accused of the crime. Upon his return home, Victor catches a brief sight of the creature, whose existence has nearly slipped Victor's mind. He senses that the creature is responsible for his brother's murder, but he remains silent as the servant is convicted of the crime. After the trial, while vacationing in the Alps, Victor meets the creature on a glacier. There, he learns of the creature's cruel rejection by humankind, its self-education (the creature is easily the most articulate character in the book), and its subsequent revenge on its creator. Though the creature did indeed murder William, Victor is torn between hatred and sympathy. Reluctantly, he agrees to animate a female companion for the creature.

After months of indecision, Victor retires to the Orkney Islands (north of Scotland) to begin the work that he has promised. Midway through, in sight of the creature himself, he becomes fearful of the havoc that might be caused by a race of such fiends. He destroys the lifeless torso over which he stands. The creature vows to be with Victor on Victor's wedding night (he is engaged to a cousin) and departs. After murdering Victor's friend Clerval, a crime of which Victor is briefly accused, the creature disappears. Victor is wed in Geneva and awaits his confrontation with the creature. Instead, the creature slips into his bedroom, murders his bride, and escapes. Finally, Victor goes to the authorities. Finding no hope there, he pursues the creature

himself, winding up on Walton's ship. There, he dies from the exhaustion of the hunt. The novel closes with a visit to Walton's ship by the creature. The creature laments the death of his creator and departs, vowing to take his own life.

As is clear, Shelley's novel is not quite the grave-robbing horror story associated with the original Hollywood version starring Boris Karloff. Instead, the book exemplifies all the characteristics of Shelley's work noted previously. Stylistically, Shelley moves the narrative along at a rapid pace, avoiding weighty details or intricate plotting. The result is a book that is easily read and in which the geographic settings are striking, in part because they have so little with which to compete in the way of description. On the other hand, there is only one well-realized character, the creature himself, which, in this case, happens to be enough. In addition, *Frankenstein* is—to put it frankly—hopelessly contrived, with coincidence appearing as a law of nature. Indeed, one reason for the distortions of the film and dramatic versions of the story has been the need for a narrative that makes a little more sense than the novel does when held up to critical scrutiny.



the book's geographic settings come right out of the author's various travels. For another, the creature's reading list, including John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) and Plutarch's *Bioi paralleloi* (c. 105-115 C.E.; *Parallel Lives*, 1579), closely mirror Shelley's own reading fare at the time that she wrote the novel. On a more profound level, the novel reflects Shelley's experience with the traumas of birth and rejection.

This discussion raises the issue of family. Victor Frankenstein turns his back on an idyllic family life in favor of an unsavory scientific quest. Yet the creature aches for the nurturing affection and guidance that can be provided by a loving family. Finally, the novel can be seen as a tale of what happens when women are omitted from the process of



procreation. The result is a creature who is unnatural and unloved. This last omission is the direct cause of the creature's hideous crimes.

Larger philosophical themes also abound in *Frankenstein*. One might begin with the reference to Prometheus in the subtitle and the references to *Paradise Lost* in the text. Prometheus is best known as the mythic figure who stole the secret of fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, an act for which he was severely punished. This association suggests that Victor is a victim of his own hubris in seeking the divine power of creation. Less well known is the myth in which Prometheus creates the human race, providing a clear parallel with Victor. Milton's work poetically examines the fall from grace in Eden according to the Old Testament. Frankenstein's creature expressly compares himself to Adam. In this case, paradise is not lost; it was never part of the bargain according to Victor's foggy conception of his task.

*Frankenstein* also suggests the dangers of amoral science or unrestrained rationality, the imperfection of civil justice, and the superficiality of human judgment. It is perhaps most basically a book about the concurrent limits and limitlessness of human nature and human knowledge. It encourages one to remember that the power to create may produce consequences that cannot be foreseen or controlled.

## SUMMARY

While Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* myth has become a caricature in the public mind, her novel stands up well across the centuries. Moreover, Shelley's other works are emerging from obscurity. In the twenty-first century, Shelley's vision of the then-distant future in *The Last Man* should continue to gather new readers.

Ira Smolensky and Marjorie Smolensky

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Does Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's literary work reflect her mother's preoccupations?
- Why is Shelley's *Frankenstein* the only gothic romance that has found a considerable reading audience in recent decades?
- What makes *Frankenstein* different from typical gothic romances of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?
- Has *Frankenstein*'s influence on modern horror writers been unfortunate?
- Does *Frankenstein* raise questions similar to issues now raised by stem cell research?

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## PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

**Born:** Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, England  
August 4, 1792

**Died:** At sea off Viareggio, Lucca (now in Italy)  
July 8, 1822

*Among the most prolific and versatile of all poets, Shelley wrote some of the most surpassingly beautiful lyrical and philosophical works of the English Romantic movement.*

### BIOGRAPHY

In a way, life was good to Percy Bysshe Shelley—and not so good. He was born on August 4, 1792, in Field Place, Sussex, England, the firstborn son of a wealthy Whig aristocrat, Timothy Shelley, whom he loathed, and Elizabeth Pilford. His life became a permanent rebellion against parental and every other kind of authority. His verse envisions a reformed world where people would eat no flesh and thereby grow healthier, gentler, and more loving; where women would be freed from wedlock; and where all would be liberated from the restraints imposed by authority. For this, he was shunned by polite society, excoriated by literary critics, and ignored by the public.

Shelley spent part of his education at Eton and at Oxford. He was expelled from Oxford for refusing to claim authorship of *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), a pamphlet that he had printed and sent to professors and bishops to provoke debate. Reduced to living off pocket money donated by his sisters, he met and married Harriet Westbrook after her father threatened to send her away to school. She was a girl of sixteen. He took her first to Edinburgh, Scotland, and to York, where his best friend tried to seduce her, thence to Ireland and several towns in Wales, where Shelley was nearly assassinated for rescuing sheep from slaughter, and finally back to London, all in three years' time. Soon Shelley abandoned Harriet and their children to

run off with a girl of sixteen, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, daughter of reformer William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary's half sister Claire Claremont joined them and became their constant companion. Upon their return from a second romp through Europe in 1816, two women in their circle committed suicide: Harriet and Mary's half sister Fanny, who was hopelessly in love with the poet. Free to marry, Shelley and Mary were wed. After a judge ordered him to relinquish custody of his children by Harriet, Shelley left England with Mary and Claire for Italy, fortified by a large income from his grandfather's inheritance.

Such were the external events of Shelley's youth, the rocky soil in which the seeds of his genius took root. First came a slim volume of poems called *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* (1810), written with his sister Elizabeth, and then the gaudy *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813; revised as *The Daemon of the World*, 1816), a diatribe against wealth, aristocracy, tyranny, and its tool, religion. Late in 1815, Shelley embarked upon a mythic quest for a perfect counterpart in love in *Alastor: Or, The Spirit of Solitude, and Other Poems* (1816), a motif that recurs in *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) and *Epipsychidion* (1821). The latter two works are veiled autobiographical allegories of his relations with several women, including the Contessina Emilia Viviani, daughter of the governor of Pisa, whose confinement to a nunnery until the governor could find a groom who demanded no dowry struck Shelley's pity for victims of parental abuse.

In 1816, the Shelleys took Claire to a tryst with the poet Lord Byron at his home near Lake

Geneva. Shelley commemorated his friendship with Byron in *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation* (1824). The excursion had unexpected literary repercussions. While they were amusing themselves with ghost stories one evening, Byron's physician proposed a contest to see who could write the best horror story. He himself produced a tale of vampires. Byron and Shelley quit after a first try. Mary, however, produced the greatest horror novel ever, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

Under the influence of the ancient Greek poets and philosophers, Shelley was growing more idealistic, and his poetry undertook higher aims. In "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and *Mont Blanc* (1817), lyrics of a finer grace and timbre, Shelley discerned the ultimate object of his mature work, an "unseen Power" moving through Nature, an ideal form of truth available to the imagination in moments of awe and wonder. For reasons of health and a fear that custody of his children by Mary might be taken from him, Shelley went to Italy in 1818. There, he produced the works on which his reputation depends. In "Ode to the West Wind," he manages to harness his creativity to the "unseen Power" behind Nature. In *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts* (1820), his most comprehensive myth of human renewal and change, he explores its remote, godlike character. That is followed by three quite diverse dramas: *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama* (pb. 1822), a glorification of liberty inspired by the Greek insurrection; *Oedipus Tyrannus: Or, Swellfoot the Tyrant* (pb. 1820), a mockery of King George IV, a work that was suppressed by the government after only a few copies were sold; and *The Cenci* (pb. 1819, pr. 1886), a dramatic poem based on an actual Italian case at law involving a count who raped his daughter and was killed in revenge. Some critics have called it the greatest verse drama in English since William Shakespeare's plays. Shelley penned a grotesque attack on the poet William Wordsworth titled *Peter Bell the Third* (1839). There were several political outbursts as well, most notably *The Mask of Anarchy* (1832), expressing outrage at the massacre of workers at Manchester. In a scant three days, Shelley wrote *The Witch of Atlas* (1824), a puzzling frolic on the power of poetry, somewhat akin to *Queen Mab*. The years in Italy were as versatile as they were prolific.

Yet frailty and disappointment were taking their

toll. Feelings of dejection and despair mounted with the recurrent lapses of health, the deaths of two children, Mary's depression, and the years of public scorn. As he mourns the death of the poet John Keats in *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821), Shelley seems resigned to death as a victory over cruel life. His last, unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life* (1824), depicts the gloomy spectacle of Life vanquishing virtually all great individuals and artists.

Death came to Shelley unexpectedly on July 8, 1822, off Viareggio, Lucca (now in Italy), by drowning. His boat was sunk during a storm, probably overrun by a larger vessel manned by men determined to steal money from Byron. Weeks later, his corpse was identified by the book of Keats's poems thrust into his pocket. Shelley's body was burned on the beach, his remains interred near Keats's at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome.

## ANALYSIS

Although he stands accused of sentimentality, wild impulse, and lyrical flights of fancy, Shelley was a deep thinker whose poetry asks and answers the fundamental questions in life: What is the hidden Power behind Nature? What is its moral purpose? Can humans connect with it and be saved from the hard knocks of experience? Rejecting orthodox beliefs, Shelley formulated his own myth to explain the mysteries of the universe.

Shelley's thinking matured with remarkable rapidity. In a poetic career of scarcely a dozen years, he passed from skeptical materialism to Platonic idealism and a resigned despair. Fascinated with scientific experimentation, Shelley early insisted that belief be based only on what is verified by sensory experience or on what can be logically deduced from it. This materialism led him to deny the claims of religion. His agnostic faith in the human imagination lasted a lifetime. In early writings, he agitated for liberal causes: free expression, vegetarianism, Catholic emancipation, and self-rule for Ireland. He adopted Godwin's Necessitarianism, a belief that reason will undo the tyranny of class and wealth, ushering in an age of perfection.

Soon after his liaison with Godwin's daughter began, however, Shelley formed an ideal concept of love that supplanted Necessitarianism. *Alastor* depicts the poet lured from self-absorbed solitude by a female soul very like his own. Yet the quest is

doomed because his soul cannot be embodied in another. In "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and *Mont Blanc*, he pursues an ideal Spirit of Beauty and an "unseen Power." The demon of materialism has been expunged, for Shelley has decided that beauty is in neither the beholder nor the object beheld but in the Platonic idea of beauty itself, separate from examples of beauty in nature, available only to the imagination.

In "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills," the poet, viewing Venice below, contrasts the beauty of nature with the misery of humanity that science cannot comfort. In his mind, he imagines a union with the unseen Power, yet, lacking love, his heart goes unfulfilled. Shelley achieves that personal union with the unseen Power that moves through Nature in "Ode to the West Wind." As the destructive Autumn gales lift clouds, waves, and leaves before them, the poet prays to the wild Spirit to lift him, too. Being human, however, his connection with the Power is more intimate, for it stimulates his imagination to produce glorious thoughts.

Shelley's idealistic vision attained its fullest victory in *Prometheus Unbound*, a myth to explain how love releases the creative imagination from bondage in the self. Jupiter has punished Prometheus by nailing him to a rock. Cut off from his lover, Asia, his powers divided against themselves, he gains wisdom from suffering. Prometheus is renewed as his hatred for Jupiter dwindles to pity. Asia rejoins him, and awesome Demogorgon overthrows Jupiter to release humankind from the tyranny of heaven. Shelley's apocalypse is at hand: Humankind achieves love, wisdom, power, and goodness. Freedom allows human imagination to enjoy the fourfold excellence that eluded Shelley's poet-quester. With "The Cloud" and "To a Skylark," two sublime lyrics from the same period, Shelley again evokes the evanescent Spirit of Beauty and the unseen Power of Nature.

One more victory is granted the poetic imagination in *The Witch of Atlas*. Created by magic and perfect in beauty, the Witch symbolizes the power of poetry. She emerges from her cave to dispel the illusions of nymphs who think they can dwell amid Nature's beauties forever. She tells them that such beauties must fade, that even the ocean will dry up like a drop of dew. Then she departs in a magic boat with a robotic hermaphrodite that she has

fashioned. Together, they travel the world, overturning political and religious authorities as they fan the flames of human desire. So great is her power that she undoes the doom of death for the most beautiful people whom she finds. Encompassing both sexes in one, her companion finalizes the Alastrian quest, but something is missing: It is an artifact, incapable of loving interrelationship.

Shelley's vision was turning dark. The optimism of *Prometheus Unbound* is utterly reversed in *The Cenci*, with its gory incest, torture, sexual perversion, and murder. In *Epipsychidion*, the Alastrian quest is revisited. Yet the poet's high aspiration fails because physical and spiritual love cannot be one and the same. The poem ends with the poet cursing his own words as chains that keep him from scaling the heights of heavenly love. Its broken rhyme scheme suggests an inability of any poem to keep the promises that imagination makes.

*Adonais* mourns the death of Keats and also Shelley's own frustrations with human experience in life. The remote and often heartless Power behind Nature never fails to bring the plants back to life in the Spring. Yet it snuffs out a poet's creative spirit once and for all. This despair pervades Shelley's final effort, *The Triumph of Life*, a work dominated by the poetry of Dante in the Purgatorial tone of the whole fragment, down to the terza-rima form of its stanzas. As Dante was guided by Vergil in Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), so Shelley is guided by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the self-deluded high priest of Natural Religion, now hideously deformed and blinded by the glare of the chariot. Among the sorry parade of Life's victims, they recognize the great artists and most powerful people in history, all of their hopes dashed. Shelley realized that human experience keeps the real and the ideal from uniting. People who strive to do good discover that the means of doing good may actually be far from good. Even a poet discovers that the poem cannot make a dull reader feel the warmth of imagination that the poet felt when first inspired to write it.

In the end, Shelley accepted the fact that compromise and delay would thwart his hopes for a radical reformation of society. He even resigned himself to accepting death as a blessed victory over the cruel injustices of life. Yet he always affirmed his



faith in the redeeming transformation of imaginative insight, which can reveal the permanent ideals of truth and beauty and love that make life joyful.

## “ODE TO THE WEST WIND”

**First published:** 1820 (collected in *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*, 1820)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet seeks to unite the powers of his imagination with the wild Spirit that flows through all of Nature.*

In “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley defies the remote, impersonal character of the unseen Power behind Nature and strives to establish a personal relationship with it. The poem manages to reconcile the poet’s terrific emotional intensity with the elegant, even stately formal pattern of the regular Horatian ode. Using heroic meter (iambic pentameter) throughout, Shelley made each of the five stanzas into a sonnet with four terza-rima tercets and a closing couplet. The poetical effect is rather unlike that of the usual sonnet. Shelley’s interlocking rhymes sweep a reader along like gusts of wind, and the couplet pounds its message home with direct clarity and force.

The first three stanzas, addressed to the wild west wind, praise its irresistible power, marking its effects on all things in nature: clouds in the air, waves on the sea, leaves in the forest, even “the oozy woods which wear the sapless foliage of the ocean.” Poets usually address the mild, warm winds of Spring that bring nature to life, but Shelley confronts the cold, wild “breath of Autumn’s being,” which acts as both destroyer and preserver. The hidden Power behind Nature is not always friendly to humankind. The morality or immorality of its operations may not be discernible. Thus, the poet stands, appropriately, in awe of it. Each of the first three stanzas ends with a plea for the wind to take heed and hear the poet’s prayer.

The fourth stanza turns introspective. The poet wonders whether he might be used as the leaves have been, tossed about and left for dead by the indifferent force. He humbles himself, admitting that his powers have faded since boyhood, when

I would ne’er have striven  
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

Then in the final stanza the poet casts off the humility with the simile and claims a more intimate, metaphoric, mythic relationship with the wild Spirit. “Make me thy lyre,” he demands, first to accompany the Power and turn the wind into sweet music, and then boldly to become it, “Be thou me.” The poet has found that “soul out of my soul.” He yokes the great hidden Power to his own imagination to scatter among humankind the glowing spark of his verse “to quicken a new birth.” Thus, the Shelleyan poet becomes the prophet of an apocalyptic revolution to redeem humankind from torpid experience.

Then, suddenly, after such thunderous bursts of emotion, the poem ends as quietly as a sigh with perhaps the finest, most wistful and haunting line in all English poetry, a question: “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”

## PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

**First published:** 1820

**Type of work:** Lyrical drama

*A modern myth is made to show how love unleashes creative powers that free humankind from tyranny.*

Shelley’s reputation is based on the 1820 volume of verse containing *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama on a cosmic scale that presents more fully than any other poem Shelley’s philosophy of life.

In ancient mythology, Prometheus was the smartest of the Titans. He separated humanity from the gods and gave it fire, symbolizing imaginative powers of thought. Jupiter punished him by nailing him to a rock in the Caucasus mountain range. Shelley begins his sequel to Aeschylus’s play *Prometheus desmôtēs* (date unknown; *Prometheus Bound*, 1777) with Prometheus still in that predicament after some time has elapsed. The Titan de-

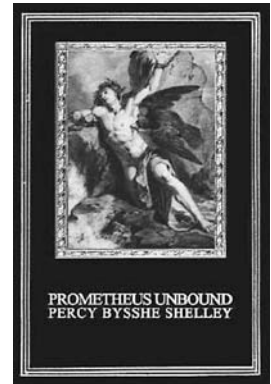
scribes his ordeal and tells the hopeful Ione and the faithful Panthea that he has secret knowledge of the time when Jupiter will fall from power. Misery has made Prometheus wise. He has realized that hatred makes one like the object of hate, and thus his bondage is primarily internal, self-imposed, and even within his will to end. His hatred for Jupiter having cooled to mere pity, Prometheus wants to gather his sundered strength, reunite with his beloved Asia, and recall the curse that he had cast upon Jupiter. However, he cannot remember it and Nature is too fearful to utter it, so he summons the Phantasm of Jupiter to repeat it. Once divulged, the curse is repudiated by Prometheus, who declares, "I wish no living thing to suffer pain." Earth mistakenly thinks Jupiter's victory is now complete, and Mercury carries that message to Jupiter while Panthea goes in search of Asia. As the first act closes, Prometheus has been regenerated, but the creatures of earth are still slaves to the tyranny of heaven, still split apart by self-hate, blaming themselves for committing sins and abandoning ambitions.

In the five scenes of the second act, Asia learns of Prometheus's change of heart and sets out on a symbolic journey to rejoin him. She passes through the world of sensuous experience to the higher level of ideal Truth and Beauty. That is the realm of Demogorgon, an awesome deity not named in the classical pantheon but invented by Shelley. Gazing into his cave, Asia beholds the deep Truth and finds it imageless. Only the radiant reflection of her own beauty appears. Demogorgon is beyond the forms and shapes and images of things; utterly fundamental, he is sheer process, the inevitability of change. Asia's love has stirred him to action. When she asks him the fateful hour of Jupiter's fall, he responds, "Behold!" This work is no stage play. Shelley has collapsed the familiar dimensions of time and space into an ideal, eternal moment and place within the human mind.

Jupiter opens the third act by confidently declaring his omnipotence. However, his fate is about to be sealed, for it had been prophesied that his son would return to overthrow him at the destined hour, just as he himself had overthrown Saturn. Indeed, that fatal child is Demogorgon, now making his way toward Jupiter's throne in the Car of the Hour. He arrives and delivers his ultimatum, "Descend, and follow me down the abyss." Thus, Jupi-

ter is deposed and free will is restored to humankind. Hercules releases Prometheus to rejoin Asia. The rest of the drama surveys the regeneration of humanity and nature in the new Promethean age of perfection. Earth sings out the joys of Shelley's apocalypse, when Man as one harmonious soul sports gentle and free in the familiar world made newly beautiful by love. The last word belongs to Demogorgon, who professes Shelley's artistic credo:

To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.



## ADONAI: AN ELEGY ON THE DEATH OF JOHN KEATS

**First published:** 1821

**Type of work:** Poem

*The death of a great poet in youth is pondered by another great poet who soon followed him to an early grave.*

*Adonais*, Shelley's lamentation on the death of John Keats, has been called the greatest pastoral elegy in English. It belongs to a tradition some twenty-three centuries old stemming from laments by ancient Greek poets Bion and Moschus. Similarly, and like John Milton's "Lycidas," Shelley's elegy contemplates the larger tragic implications of the loss of a gifted poet, which subtracts from the world its most precious asset, genius.

The pastoral elegy is a highly conventional form. Typically, it includes reference to the deceased as a shepherd, the trappings of pagan mythology, the mourning of all nature, a procession of mourners, a contrast between revival in spring and the finality of

death, and a praise of immortality. Shelley adapted these elements from tradition but jettisoned the conventional mechanics in a final strophe, an inspired Platonic exaltation. Throughout, the poet employed the elegant Spenserian stanza: two cross-rhymed quatrains in heroic meter with a final Alexandrine, using but three rhymes, *ababbcbcc*.

Shelley and Keats had met but were not close friends. Learning of his illness, Shelley invited Keats to live with him in Italy, but the arrangements were never completed. Shelley wrote *Adonais* four months later.

Shelley blamed hostile literary critics for the poet's death and so enhanced a theme developed elsewhere in his own neglected verse, the mortifying effects on civilization of the common person's contempt for genius. He depicts the poet as a shepherd whose flocks are "quick Dreams . . . passion-wingèd Ministers of thought," but after his death and "after their sweet pain/ They ne'er will gather strength, or find a home again." Thus, the first part of the poem urges all to weep for Adonais, who is dead. (The name is a form of Adonis, the handsome young man loved by Venus and killed by a wild boar and lamented by Bion. It also recalls Adonai, the holy name of God used in place of the ineffable name Yahweh.) Indeed, all nature weeps, so profusely that a mourner can wash the corpse with starry dew. Spring, for grief, throws down her kindling buds, moving the poet to state the central tragedy of the situation: "Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,/ But grief returns with the revolving year." The gross forms of nature die to be revived in Spring, but the unique creative power of a poet vanishes forever when he dies.

To the funeral come the mountain shepherds, Keats's poetical friends recognizable among them: Byron, the famous "Pilgrim of Eternity," Leigh Hunt, "gentlest of the wise," and Shelley himself,

one frail Form,  
A phantom among men; companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm  
. . . . .  
A pardlike Spirit beautiful and swift—  
A Love in desolation masked;—a Power  
Girt round with weakness.

The critics also come, in the forms of snakes, wolves, beaten hounds, ravens, carrion kites, and

vultures. The poet bids "Hot Shame" to burn upon their brows.

Then, in the last seventeen stanzas, Shelley's whole tone shifts. He bids the reader not to mourn for Adonais, since Death is dead, not he, and Adonais has only awakened from the dream of life. Now made one with Nature, he has become a portion of the loveliness he once made more lovely. Adonais is transformed into a star, radiant and eternal. Shelley contrasts his eternal white radiance with the temporary distortion of life, symbolized by a dome of many-colored glass that stains the white light until Death tramples it to bits. The light of day may eclipse the twinkling stars, as ordinary life may dim the power of genius. Yet death conquers life and frees the eternal Spirit to find pure beauty and love in the abode of the Eternal. In Shelley's myth, a genius defeated by life wins from death a permanent afterlife.

## A DEFENCE OF POETRY

**First published:** 1840

**Type of work:** Essay

*A great Romantic poet explains the essence of poetry to critics who think that it is useless in the modern world.*

Shelley wrote *A Defence of Poetry* as a reply to Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). Peacock thought that poetry grows less relevant as society advances and that Romantic poetry is barbaric and childish. Shelley admitted that some people and ages are less poetical than others, but he argued vehemently that poetry is humanity's highest mental faculty, relevant to every age. Shelley sees poetry as the power of understanding and imagining new combinations of thought. Thus, it is the source of all knowledge and progress. He rejects small-minded definitions of poetry as word games played with rhymes and meters. Even prose can be poetry inasmuch as it expresses the imagination.

A poet sees a world not yet seen by most people. He grasps order hidden beneath chaos, truth scrambled by superstition, beauty smeared by corruption. Poets create new forms of opinions and action that enable society to progress. Thus, they

wield more power in society than politicians and business executives. "Poets," Shelley declares, "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." For example, Dante gave medieval Europe a new Christian myth that made it less violent and more free. Ultimately, poetry enlarges the mental and moral capacities of humankind.

Shelley contrasts poetry with reason. Reason is calculating selfhood; poetry, the impulse toward pleasure and love. "Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world," he states. For Peacock to insist on poetry serving commerce is to turn everything upside down. Reason is under humanity's will, but poetry works under an invisible influence, like the wind, which makes coal burn brighter. Similarly, inspiration fans the flame of a poet's imagination, and he or she writes as if under the direction of an outside force. Such a heated exercise of imagination is, for Shelley, better than the resulting poem, for the poem is necessarily a thing; the poem, however, can impart to others something of the poet's contact with a new truth.

In an age of commerce or an age of reason, when the unpoetical principle of selfish greed gains ascendancy, even the poets may grow less and less poetical. Yet poetry has the power to flash out

again, like "a sword of lightning . . . which consumes the scabbard that would contain it." Finally, in rebuttal to Peacock's attacks on Romantic poets, Shelley predicts, rightly, that they will be remembered for their intellectual achievements. What he says of their works is surely true of his own as well, that they are impossible to read "without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words."

## SUMMARY

Percy Bysshe Shelley created a Romantic myth to compete with religions and philosophies that explain humanity's relationship to the world. His agnostic faith was, by turns, drawn to materialistic and idealistic viewpoints. Finally, he despaired of radically reforming the world in his life, but he maintained his faith in the power of the human imagination to glimpse ideal truth and beauty that lie beyond experience. The cosmic power that runs the world remains remote for Shelley, and, unmindful of human desire, so nature's beauties are false idols. Only in surges of creative imagination can humans unite with this power, a spirit that cannot be embodied in experience.

John L. McLean

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Compare the imagery of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" with that of John Keats's "To Autumn" (1819). What do the differences suggest about the poets' attitudes toward nature?
- What is a lyrical drama? How is it meant to be experienced?
- Is *Prometheus Unbound* a rejection of Aeschylus's tragedy?
- How does Shelley's *Adonais*, a pastoral elegy, illustrate aspects of coming to terms with death that exist in life today?
- In *A Defence of Poetry*, what is Shelley's understanding of the relationship between reason and imagination?
- Investigate the numerous verse forms, some of them very difficult, which Shelley employed.
- How does Shelley's appreciation of nature differ from that of William Wordsworth?



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## NEVIL SHUTE

**Born:** Ealing, Middlesex, England

January 17, 1899

**Died:** Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

January 12, 1960

*Shute's characters show that hard work, ingenuity, and compassion can lead to extraordinary accomplishments, while laziness, pride, and complacency lead to real and lethal danger.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Nevil Shute (shewt) was born Nevil Shute Norway in Ealing, Middlesex, England, the second and only surviving child of Arthur Hamilton Norway, a civil servant working for the post office, and the former Mary Louisa Gadsden. Shute spent a few miserable early years at Hammersmith School, but after a period of truancy was sent to Lynam's School in Oxford. Shute recalled this time as a happy introduction to Oxford, where he eventually returned to Balliol College as a mathematics student, graduating in 1922. During the Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland, in April, 1916, Shute served as a volunteer stretcher-bearer and later entered the Royal Flying Corps. He was discharged because of a stammer he developed during early childhood.

In 1922 Shute joined the de Havilland Aircraft Company as an aeronautical engineer. He was deputy chief on the rigid airship project, building the R100, one of the last of the British airships. During the next six years, Shute worked as a deputy chief engineer during the day and in the evenings wrote his first novels, of which two were published: *Marazan* in 1926 and *The Mysterious Aviator* (also known as *So Disdained*) in 1928. At this time, he wrote two other novels, *Stephen Morris* and *Pilotage*, which were posthumously published in one volume entitled *Stephen Morris* in 1961.

In 1930, after the crash of the government-built R101 virtually ended the aircraft industry in England, Shute founded his own company, Airspeed, Ltd., which designed and manufactured airplanes. From 1930 to 1938, Airspeed, Ltd. produced a number of small recreational and commercial airplanes, immersing Shute daily in intense aeronau-

tical design and construction. During this time, he met his future wife, Frances Mary Heaton, a young doctor, at a recreational flying club. Despite his busy schedule, Shute continued writing in the evenings and published two more novels, *Lonely Road* in 1932, and *Kindling* (also known as *Ruined City*) in 1938.

By 1939, Shute felt economically secure, so he decided to try writing full time. However, with the advent of World War II a few months later, he joined the British navy and was assigned to the Admiralty's Department of Miscellaneous Weapons Development, remaining there until 1944. During these years, while serving as the head of the engineering section, he wrote five more novels: *Ordeal* (1939; also known as *What Happened to the Corbetts*), *An Old Captivity* (1940), *Landfall: A Channel Story* (1940), *Pied Piper* (1942), and *Pastoral* (1944). After the war ended in 1945, Shute published *Most Secret* (1945), a novel he had written in 1941 but had been censored during the war because of its sensitive subject matter. He served as a correspondent for the Ministry of Information and traveled to Burma, where he wrote a film script, *Vinland the Good* (1946), and gathered material he later used in *The Chequer Board* (1947).

In 1948, he published *No Highway*, an aeronautical mystery concerned with the recent discovery of metal fatigue; flew his own plane to Australia and back; and researched three new novels: *A Town Like Alice* (1950), *Round the Bend* (1951), and *The Far Country* (1952). Shute suffered a heart attack in 1952, after which he decided to move his family to Australia. After that move, his novels generally were about his adopted country. He wrote *In the Wet*

(1953), expressing his many concerns about the future of the British Empire. He also wrote his autobiography, *Slide Rule: The Autobiography of an Engineer* (1954), primarily covering his life up to his founding of Airspeed.

After recovering from his heart attack, Shute explored the Australian outback and traveled to the United States to explore the Rocky Mountains. While he traveled, he gathered material for two more novels: *The Breaking Wave* (1955; also known as *Requiem for a Wren*) and *Beyond the Black Stump* (1956). Despite suffering a second heart attack, Shute bought a sports car, took up racing, and began his most widely known novel, *On the Beach* (1957). He completed another novel, *The Rainbow and the Rose*, in 1958, and began *Trustee from the Toolroom* (1960), a novel that was interrupted by a major stroke. Despite his physical infirmities, Shute managed to finish *Trustee* and began work on a major memorandum for the Australian government concerning the economic conditions for artists in Australia. In November, 1959, Shute started his last novel, the unpublished, "Incident at Eucla," a work which was in his typewriter when he died on January 12, 1960.

## ANALYSIS

Although Nevil Shute wrote full time for twenty years, he never thought of himself as an author; instead, he considered himself to be a middle-class engineer, who wrote for other middle-class people. Work provided the focus for Shute's life, and the characters he created reflect his devotion to his job and his belief about the importance of work in the lives of his characters. Shute's own moral character and devotion to duty are characteristics he gave his characters. They are decent, moral, and heroic without being boring or stuffy; indeed, they are often fascinating. Another facet of Shute's characters is their ability to work hard at arduous tasks. Shute himself liked to do two jobs at a time, theorizing that working on more than one job provided relief from stress, especially if the second job was very unlike the first. In *An Old Captivity*, the main character, a pilot, can see that the entire work of an expedition to Greenland will fall on his shoulders; nevertheless, he goes ahead and does it all.

Shute believed that in any situation the ordinary person would respond as decently as possible. At the end of *Ordeal*, the main character's wife notes

that the couple had always tried to live quietly and decently and do their jobs. His characters are also heroic and willing to sacrifice themselves. In *Landfall: A Channel Story*, a young test pilot volunteers to test a new type of plane to be shot off the deck of an aircraft carrier. The government has pressed for the testing, and although badly injured, the pilot manages to survive to tell the developers what they ought to do to make the new plane work. Although young, the pilot is heroic in his determination that the tests must not fail, lest the war itself be lost.

Shute's plots came from many sources: from work, from anecdotes he heard from friends, or from fears or concerns about items he read in the newspaper. He carried a notebook to keep track of ideas, words, and jokes to use in his novels. Once Shute heard about a fatal practical joke involving a plane flying, with landing lights on, at low altitude toward an oncoming train. Apparently the plane could not be maneuvered quickly enough and smashed into the engine, and both pilot and train engineer were killed. With typical economy, Shute used the incident in *Beyond the Black Stump* to dispose of a minor character. Shute also used his notebook to help him remember interesting incidents that could be used for novels. While in the Far East after World War II, Shute heard about a group of women and children who had been forced to march all over Malaya during the war because the Japanese did not have a prisoner of war camp where they could be sent. That story was the basis for *A Town Like Alice*.

As Shute grew older, he became increasingly concerned about the proliferation of atomic weapons and pessimistic about his government's ability to deal with modern crises. That concern appeared in two novels, *In the Wet* and *On the Beach*. *In the Wet* is an allegory that reflects his fears about the growth of socialism in postwar Britain. He applauded the lessening of class structure and called for more opportunities for the educated middle-class. *In the Wet* is set in a dreary 1980's, where the only British institution that has grown is the civil service. Here, Shute argues for a "meritocracy" rewarded by more than one vote per person. Everyone of age would have one basic vote; a college degree would bestow a second vote. Additional merit for foreign travel or earning a living abroad would earn another vote, as would raising two children to age fourteen without divorcing, with a fifth vote for

founding and running a business, a sixth for being a church minister, and the last at the queen's pleasure. Such a system would guarantee that those who worked hard would be rewarded by having more say in important government issues.

Shute's youthful optimism was modified later in his career. His early novels hint that people only had to do their duty and everything would turn out all right. Sometime in the late 1940's and 1950's, however, Shute's vision darkened; he began to write about people haunted by a lack of religion, hounded by love, and destroyed by an increasingly insensitive society. He began to wonder whether work might not serve as religion for people too busy for traditional modes of worship. *Round the Bend* presents just such a proposition. The narrator, Tom Cutter, runs an airline in Bahrain. The airline has become his life and his family, yet he is not happy or satisfied. He hires a friend, Connie Shaklin, as his chief engineer. Suddenly the airline is running much smoother; the employees are happier. When he notices that the employees spend their lunchtime listening to Shaklin preach, Cutter is intrigued and joins them. He hears Shaklin say that becoming perfect demands doing a perfect job, and that you cannot separate the two. Soon Cutter has to send Shaklin away because many people are following him and proclaiming him a messiah for workers. In his new position, Shaklin continues to teach his message that good work and morality are the same thing.

Although *Round the Bend* was not especially well received by the critics, it put into words what Shute had believed his entire life about the importance of work and especially about aeronautics: laziness and a lack of attention to detail were great evils. He always thought that accidents happened because someone was foolish, negligent, or lazy, not because God willed them. Shute warns his readers to take stock of how they are living and working and forces them to look into the future to see the results of uncontrolled technology. He asks his readers to assess their own lives, as does the narrator of *In the Wet*, who says that people can make their own heaven or hell in their daily lives, finding the kingdom of heaven within them while they live.

## A TOWN LIKE ALICE

**First published:** 1950

**Type of work:** Novel

*The story of a woman who survives a Japanese death march and of the Australian who helps her, even at the cost of his life.*

*A Town Like Alice*, more than any other work, reveals Shute's feelings about Australia. Shortly after his first visit, Shute decided to move there. He bought a little farm in Victoria, and over time decided to make it his permanent home. He came to love and respect the hard-working people he met there, and he was fascinated by the distances people had to travel to get ordinary things like groceries, clothing, or medical care.

The "Alice" of the title is Alice Springs, a town right in the center of the continent, halfway between Darwin and Adelaide. Originally founded as a service center for the ranchers in the area, Alice Springs had grown to a delightful small city in the years after World War II.

The novel opens as the narrator, lawyer Noel Strachan, describes the history and establishment of a trust, as well as his dealings with the legatee, twenty-six year old Jean Paget. To him, she seems a pleasant enough woman, but she has an enduring sadness about her. Although she smiles, she doubts that she will ever marry or have a family. Over the course of the next few meetings, he learns her history. The child of English settlers in Malaya, Jean had worked as a typist. When Malaya fell to the Japanese army during World War II, Jean found herself among a group of thirty women and children forced by the invaders to march throughout Malaya because the Japanese lacked a female war camp on the island.

As Jean tells him her story, Noel is shocked at the hardships she faced. Most of the women and children died, some were victims of diseases like cholera or malaria, some succumbed to snakebite or starvation, while others were just worn out by the relentless walking in tremendous heat and humidity. Only Jean and a few others are left when, at one village, she meets another prisoner, a young Australian, Joe Harmon. Forced to serve as a truck driver and mechanic by the Japanese, Harmon is touched by the plight of the English women and

manages to get small items for the group—soap, medicine, and some meat in the form of five roosters he steals from the local Japanese commandant. His punishment is swift and horrible; he is crucified in front of the whole village.

When the Japanese commander dies, the women and children beg to be allowed to stay in the village, and they spend the rest of the war there. Jean returns home to England, but as she later tells Noel, she drags around as if she were in her seventies. When she receives the first money from her legacy, she goes back to Malaya to build a well for the villagers who had taken pity on the captives. She decides to go on to Australia to find Joe Harmon's home, an outback settlement, Willstown. In Willstown she is surprised and delighted to learn that Joe did not die but has survived. She finds him and they fall deeply in love. The rest of the novel tells how they marry and how she is able to help the lonely little outback town by building a factory to employ the locals.

## ON THE BEACH

**First published:** 1957

**Type of work:** Novel

*A small group of people face the end of the world, making plans that they cannot fulfill and hoping for a miracle that does not come.*

If *A Town Like Alice* is an old-fashioned love story, *On the Beach* is a dark tale of the atomic age. A nuclear war has eliminated all life in the Northern Hemisphere, leaving only Australia to await the spread of radioactive contamination that will end human life on Earth. Shute depicts people faced with inevitable doom, but his characters do not despair. They spend their last months of life as normally as they can, planning their gardens, going to work, watching car racing, and even going back to school. Nowhere does Shute better exemplify his belief in the decency, morality, and conscientiousness of the ordinary middle-class person. There are several different nationalities, professions, and social classes portrayed, yet even while facing their greatest fears, the characters are brave up until the end.

Dwight Towers is the last American naval com-

mander left in the world. He has been appointed commander in chief of a combined American-Australian navy, and following the nuclear holocaust he abides by the rules of a navy that no longer exists. He is also faithful to his wife, even though she has died halfway across the world from him. He never gives more than a kiss to Moira Davidson, the more than willing daughter of a wealthy farmer, because he tells her that he would like to think of his family alive until September, the month the atomic cloud is expected to reach Australia.

Throughout, Shute peoples this novel with characters facing their destruction boldly and staying busy until the end. Admittedly there are a few more loud parties and a bit more drinking, but generally everyday events move forward at Shute's usual leisurely pace. Peter and Mary Holmes plan their garden. Having a new baby, Mary refuses to accept the fact that the life she has so recently borne will be taken away. She talks about radiation sickness as if it were a cold or the flu from which they might all recover. Eventually Mary comes to accept her fate and is happy that they will all die together on the same day—no one will have to remain behind alone.

The character who develops most completely is Moira Davidson. At first she deliberately gets drunk, meaning to stay that way until the bitter end. After she meets Dwight Towers, however, she changes. She helps him in many ways, not only in dealing with the painful thoughts of his distant family but also in the purchase of gifts to take home to his children—a fishing rod for his son and a pogo stick for his daughter. Mary Holmes is aghast at the thought that Dwight and Moira are living in some sort of never-never land, but Moira gives Dwight the greatest gift she can: the freedom to go to his death without a guilty conscience. Moira's essential goodness shines through as she fights her normal desire for a husband in order that she be fair to a dead woman, half a world away. Moira reflects Shute's confidence in people's





ability to restrain their desires so they can achieve a greater good.

While Shute is sympathetic to his characters, he has only scorn for whatever government caused the nuclear catastrophe. The war apparently was of very short duration and not much is known about it, save for the sketchy information Dwight Towers brings to Australia. No one is sure who dropped the first bomb, but there were about 4,700 bombs dropped in all. No one knows who dropped the cobalt bomb that released the deadly radiation cloud drifting steadily southward. Shute does away with the notion that people are too sensible or rational to risk a nuclear war. He says the war was caused by nuclear proliferation, with every country amassing a stockpile of atomic weapons. From there it was inevitable that all the bombs would one day be used.

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## SUMMARY

Nevil Shute was a modern stoic who faced his strokes, heart attacks, and failing health with fortitude as he continued to write. As an engineer, he could have presented a world in which science and technology gave humanity glorious opportunities. Instead, he presented a warning. It is interesting to note that *On the Beach* is set in 1963, only a year after the actual Cuban Missile Crisis occurred. At that time, reality brought the world very close to the fate that the novelist had described. It is a warning that only the ordinary people of the earth can save it and an affirmation that people, even in the face of death, can know how to live.

Julia Meyers

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Nevil Shute's opinion of warfare? What does he seem to think are the shortcomings displayed by government institutions at wartime?
- Is Shute's view of humanity optimistic or pessimistic? Can the characters in his novels ever really escape the consequences of their own actions?
- What is Shute's opinion of work? How do his characters' careers affect their viewpoints?
- Why do airplanes repeatedly appear in Shute's novels? How does the use of airplanes and flying act symbolically in his novels?
- How is technology presented in Shute's works?
- What is Shute's view of marriage? Does he support or challenge traditional marital roles for the men and women in his works?

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NONFICTION:

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## SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

**Born:** Penshurst, Kent, England  
November 30, 1554

**Died:** Arnhem, the Netherlands  
October 17, 1586

*A major literary figure of the English Renaissance, Sidney wrote poetry, a prose romance, and a pioneering critical treatise that are considered classics.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Penshurst Castle in the southern English county of Kent was the setting for Philip Sidney's birth on November 30, 1554. His circumstances were privileged ones; not only had his father, Sir Henry Sidney, served as gentleman of the Privy Chamber to Edward VI, but his mother, Lady Mary Sidney, claimed membership in an aristocratic family—her father, John Dudley, having been created duke of Northumberland in 1551. Upon the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, Sir Henry was appointed to a series of important political posts. As his tenth birthday approached, Philip Sidney was enrolled in Shrewsbury Grammar School; matriculation at Oxford followed in 1568. A particularly promising young man who was expected to inherit the title of earl of Leicester from his uncle, Sidney was sent after his graduation on a three-year Grand Tour of the Continent to prepare him for a life of leadership by allowing him to mingle with influential people and learn the art of politics at first hand. At some point upon his return, he came to know Walter Devereaux, earl of Essex, who wished to promote a marriage between young Sidney and his daughter Penelope. Although this union never materialized, Penelope became the Stella of the first great sonnet sequence in English, Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591).

In 1577, Mary, Sidney's younger sister, married

Henry Herbert, earl of Pembroke, and went to live at Pembroke's Wiltshire mansion, Wilton House. Thereafter, Sidney often visited there, and later that year at Wilton began to write a long romance that he called *Arcadia* (1590, 1593, 1598; originally titled *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*). During this period, Sidney performed minor diplomatic missions for the queen but was often bored by inactivity. The first public evidence of his writing ability, however, are his *Discourse on Irish Affairs* (1577), a defense of his father's regime as lord deputy of Ireland, of which only a fragment exists, and *The Lady of May* (1578), an entertainment for the queen.

Sidney had several poet friends, including Fulke Greville, with whom he had gone to school, and Sir Edward Dyer; in 1579, he met another, Edmund Spenser, who worked as a secretary to Sidney's uncle, the earl of Leicester. These men discussed the weak state of English poetry in contrast to the healthy situation in France and Italy; all of them were destined to contribute to the resurgence of English verse. Two of the many books dedicated to Sidney in 1579 were Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*, usually considered the first important work of the English literary rebirth, and a curious attack on the drama and literature generally, by a man named Stephen Gosson. Embarrassed and angered by Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), Sidney wrote the most comprehensive defense of literature yet attempted by an Englishman, *Defence of Poesie* (1595), also known under an alternate title, *An Apologie for Poetry*. Although not published until 1595, well after Sidney's death, this treatise un-

doubtedly circulated in manuscript form considerably earlier.

It was apparently another unpleasant event for Sidney, the marriage of Penelope Devereaux to Lord Rich in 1581, that sparked the composition of *Astrophel and Stella*. Although there is no independent evidence of an affair between Sidney and Penelope, the extravagant praise of Stella and the indignant allusions to Rich ("rich fool") in this sequence of 108 sonnets and 11 songs suggest some sort of continuing involvement of the two after the earlier marriage scheme had failed. Sidney continued working on the romance that he now called *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* in honor of his sister. After completing a 180,000-word version of the work in 1580, he began a longer and more intricate revision thereafter, which he did not live to complete. Whichever version is considered, *Arcadia* stands as the most impressive work of prose fiction in English before the era of the English novel began in the eighteenth century.

In the fall of 1583, Sidney married Frances Walsingham, daughter of a man who held the key office of principal secretary in Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council. Also in that year, Sidney was knighted by the queen. Still underemployed as late as 1585, Sidney, who had supported colonization schemes of Martin Frobisher and Sir Walter Raleigh, decided to accompany Francis Drake on a voyage to the New World, but upon being appointed governor of Flushing in the Netherlands, he abandoned this plan. England was then engaged in a continuing struggle with Spain for control of the Netherlands, and Sidney led military expeditions against Spanish forces. In September, 1586, he was seriously wounded in one of these efforts, lingered for some weeks, and died at Arnhem, the Netherlands, on October 17, 1586, before his thirty-second birthday. He was mourned throughout England and a good portion of Europe. Spenser, Raleigh, Greville, and Sidney's sister the countess of Pembroke were among the two hundred or so people who composed elegies on his death.

## ANALYSIS

In the Elizabethan era, aristocrats, who tended to regard literature as an inappropriate vocation, rarely published their writings. Nonetheless, some of them, including Sidney's good friend Fulke

Greville, wrote poetry of high quality that they circulated privately among their friends. Sidney, who probably would have become an earl had he lived a few more years, shared the attitude of the English nobility and published none of the works that today are regarded as his greatest. He spoke slightly of his writings, for example referring to his *Defence of Poesie* as an "idle, ink-wasting toy." Such conventional behavior should not mislead today's readers into supposing that Sidney was not a serious writer. It is true that he did his writing in periods of enforced idleness, and it is possible that he might have written little or nothing if the queen had given him more employment of the diplomatic or administrative sort for which he felt qualified. The point is that he did write brilliantly and, like all first-rate writers, surely recognized the literary value of his works.

Of his three most important works, the one that he probably began first (there is no way to be sure), *Arcadia*, illustrates his developing interest in many aspects of prose narrative. It began as a pastoral romance, a genre that Greek writers had practiced as far back as around 200 C.E., and that Continental writers had revived earlier in Sidney's century. In the pastoral, the setting is rural, the characters are mainly shepherds (or rulers of a land of shepherds), the pace is deliberate, and life is uncomplicated. There are young lovers, of course, and their frustrations are usually domestic ones, such as family opposition, perhaps because a set of parents have their own candidate for spouse of their son or daughter. Such situations generate a certain amount of conflict and narrative interest but do not allow for the larger issues of war and politics dear to composers of epics. The *Old Arcadia*, as it is usually called, is a skillfully composed romance of this type.

The unfinished *New Arcadia* reflects the adventurous man of the world that Sidney was. Chivalry and heroic deeds become prominent, and reflections on law, government, and morality are sprinkled throughout. Sidney built into his story dozens of poems in forms both traditional and experimental. Since the narrative breaks off in the midst of a sentence in the third book (the original version was in five books), it is impossible to tell how it would have ended. Subsequent editors tried to blend the *New Arcadia* with a modified version of the clearly inappropriate old ending, but the old conclusion does not suit the later work.

It may be a disservice to Puritans to call Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* a puritanical document, but clearly Gosson intended it to appeal to readers who regarded literature as at best idle and at worst dangerous to moral health. He directed his charges particularly against the drama, and a half century later Puritan feeling against plays became strong enough to close down all the London theaters. Sidney chose to enlarge his discussion, for he considered an attack against any good literature on moral grounds an attack against all literature.

Although Sidney had probably been thinking about the nature of poetry for some time, Gosson's attack drove him to a comprehensive defense of, or "apology" for, poetry. It should be noted that "defense" and "apology" are synonyms; there is nothing apologetic in the common sense of the word about Sidney's treatise. He attempted to blend the best things, old and new, that had been said in behalf of poetry, which for Sidney signified what today would be termed, more broadly, "literature"—as one of his statements therein—"It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet"—implies. The *Arcadia* wove together considerable "rhyming and versing" with a lengthy prose narrative and in Sidney's mind may well have been more of a work of poetry than his sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*. The form of *Defence of Poesie*, a classical oration, indicates that Sidney deemed it a serious subject worthy of a "classical" treatment. Sidney (who was capable of very blunt and direct language), chose for his defense a formal and elegant style of prose, and he responded to Gosson's charges that literature promoted immorality by devising a powerful argument for the moral worth of poetry.

Sidney's verse, aside from the poems contained in *The Lady of May* and the *Arcadia*, consists of a collection of varied poems and translations under the title *Certaine Sonnets* (1598), verse translations of the first forty-three Psalms, *The Psalmes of David, Translated into Divers and Sundry Kindess of Verse* (1823), and *Astrophel and Stella*. Not all the poems of *Certaine Sonnets* are sonnets in the modern sense, but two that are, "Thou blind man's mark, thou fool's self-chosen snare" and "Leave me O Love, which reachest but to dust," have been anthology favorites and demonstrate Sidney's moral and religious sensibility. The latter ends with a pledge to "Eternal Love." The Psalms translations, a favorite exercise among Christian poets of the Renais-

sance, also show his fondness for experimentation with many types of poetic line and stanza.

*Astrophel and Stella* is a blend of the old and the new. Sonnets and sonnet sequences date back at least to the time of Dante—the late thirteenth century—and in the following century another Italian, Petrarch, composed a celebrated sequence of love sonnets about a woman named Laura. Other Continental poets, especially French ones, enthusiastically imitated this Italian form, but it was not until well into the sixteenth century that English poets began to practice the sonnet. With Sidney, the English extended sonnet sequence began, its characteristic theme most often a stormy or unhappy love affair. With the publication of a pirated edition of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* in 1591, a vogue of sonnet writing swept England, producing within a few years notable sequences by Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, and, of course, William Shakespeare.

Sidney lived in a time of intense interest in the drama, and though he did not write plays other than the semidramatic entertainment *The Lady of May*, his sonnet cycle is intensely dramatic. Individually, the poems are a series of lyrical outbursts of feeling or meditations on a theme related to love, but collectively they imply a situation that, characteristically, is only vaguely sketched. There is no story in the strict sense, and although the sketchily portrayed situation can in the case of Sidney's sequence be associated with his relationship to the young woman Penelope Devereaux, it is a mistake to take it too autobiographically. In fact, one of Sidney's most impressive accomplishments is the creation of the character of Astrophel.

## DEFENCE OF POESIE

**First published:** 1595 (also known as *An Apologie for Poetry*)

**Type of work:** Essay

*The effects of poetry are to delight readers and motivate them to the practice of the virtuous life.*

In response to Stephen Gosson's narrowly moralistic condemnation of poetry *The Schoole of Abuse*, Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* sets forth a large-minded



justification of literature as a legitimate pleasure that is at the same time an incentive to the practice of virtue. He leads up to this moral defense with a series of lesser, but nevertheless important, defenses, beginning with poetry's long-standing reputation. In nations long admired, such as classical Greece and Rome, poetry was a "nurse" and a "lightgiver," the kind of thing that was presented to young children as a preface to "tougher knowledges." If societies such as these gave precedence to poetry, it surely must be a worthy thing.

Closely related to reputation are the good names that poetry has borne. In Rome, Sidney says, the poet was a *vates*, which signifies a seer or prophet. In other words, he or she was considered to be a person who possessed a special fund of knowledge like that of those who were able to predict the future. In Greece he was a *poietai*, which meant "maker" and which forms the basis of the English word "poet." Thus, the poet is both a seer and a maker.

Sidney goes on to consider the "principal object" of poetry in relation to other occupations, all of which have some aspect of the natural world as the object of their attention. Astronomers study the stars; musicians, sounds; physicians, the human body. The poet, however, "not tied to any subjection," ranges throughout nature for his or her material and even goes beyond nature, because he or she can imagine things better than nature has actually produced. Poets are the maker of makers, and therefore the Greek name for a poet is particularly appropriate.

Sidney then gathers together two of the most famous definitions of poetry from the ancient world. Aristotle thought of poetry as a mimetic art—that is, an art of imitation. Horace defined it as an art that both teaches and delights. For Sidney, these two notions are quite compatible, and it remains for him to reinterpret these Aristotelian and Horatian concepts according to his own understanding of poetic art.

Before undertaking this task, Sidney classifies poets into three categories. The first category, religious poets, includes David in his Psalms and Homer in the hymns attributed to him. Philosophical poets are those such as the Roman Lucretius, who wrote the philosophical treatise *De rerum natura* (c. 60 B.C.E.; *On the Nature of Things*, 1682), which sets forth an atomic theory of the day. The

last category, however, the one that interests Sidney the most, he refers to as "indeed right poets." They imitate, for the purpose of teaching and delighting, not merely what has been, is, or will be in the world, but also what may be and what should be.

In this respect, the poet as a teacher has great advantages over philosophers, who guide people in thinking, including, of course, thinking about morality, but who do not normally inspire them to act, and over historians, who can supply many examples of virtuous activity in the past but who do not provide precepts for guidance. These teachers have other defects, as well. Philosophers, for example, are often obscure and difficult, while historians must report incidents of wickedness going unpunished, which might actually encourage wickedness in the reader. Like the philosopher, the poet is concerned with moral precepts; like the philosopher, the poet's art is concrete and able to stir the audience with accounts of deeds and events expressed in vivid images. The poet, however, suffers none of the disadvantages of philosopher or historian. As Sidney summarizes the poet's superiority, "He doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it."

Sidney professes himself unable to understand the sort of criticism that Gosson (whom he never mentions by name) has made of poets. He reviews—very favorably, of course—the various forms that "right poetry" can take: heroic, lyric, tragic, comic, satiric, pastoral, and others. He finds nothing to justify the charges of poetry's enemies. While it is true, he concedes, that comedy shows people misbehaving, the effect of a good comedy is to arouse contempt for such people.

A classical oration must contain a substantial refutation of charges by opponents, so Sidney patiently answers Gosson's. Perhaps the most interesting is Plato's banning of poets from his ideal republic. To Sidney, Plato himself is "most poetical" of all philosophers; therefore, Sidney would hate to confess him to be an enemy of poetry. He argues, however, that Plato did not intend to ban all poets but only those who spread false religious ideas, and that, in his *Iōn* (399-390 B.C.E.; *Ion*, 1804), Plato spoke more favorably of poetry.

It remains for the patriotic Sidney to survey briefly the history of English poetry—the first such survey of its type. From the medieval period he

mentions only Geoffrey Chaucer, who was indeed the only poet before the Renaissance who was well known in the era of Queen Elizabeth I. From his own century Sidney praises the earl of Surrey, like Sidney a writer of sonnets, his friend Spenser, and Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (pr. 1561; pb. 1565), a play usually considered the first English tragedy. At the time of the composition of *Defence of Poesie*, of course, Shakespeare was only a youth, and many of the other great achievements of the English literary renaissance were yet to come.

Sidney closes his defense with a highly charged summation that reiterates his deep conviction (one that he shared with Spenser) that poetry does not merely lead its audience to accept virtuous principles but also motivates people to the practice of virtue. At the very end, he utters a semiserious curse against the person who cannot appreciate poetry: that, owing to lack of skill in sonnet writing (so important in winning the heart of a loved one), such a person will “never get favor” and, after death, will be forgotten “for want of an epitaph.”

## ASTROPHEL AND STELLA, SONNET 31

First published: 1591

Type of work: Poem

*The lover Astrophel expresses to the moon his melancholy over Stella's failure to respond.*

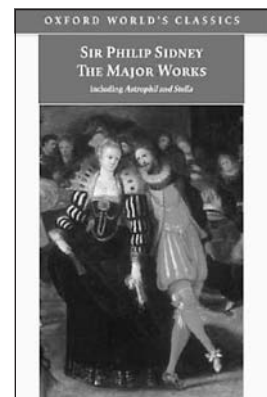
The thirty-first sonnet in the sequence *Astrophel and Stella* begins with the line “With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies.” Like many other sonnets in this sequence, it is modeled after the form of the sonnet made famous by the Italian poet Petrarch. The poem is made of two main parts, an eight-line “octave” and a six-line “sestet.” The octave rhymes *abbaabba*, where *a* represents the first rhyme used and *b* the second. This scheme is the almost invariable rhyme pattern of the Italian sonnet; the sestet, in this poem *cdeede*, permits other variations.

Sidney also follows the traditional form in tailoring the content to the form; it, too, has two parts. In the octave, Astrophel asks the moon, which looks somehow sad to him, whether it, too, is subject to

the emotion of love; he uses the traditional figure of Cupid's arrow, which characteristically wounds lovers. Surely, the moon, having observed many lovers, knows the feeling of unrequited love, and Astrophel judges the moon to be a kindred spirit.

Having established this relationship with the moon, the lover asks a series of questions, the effect of which is to reveal more clearly the sorry state of his love affair. He asks first whether “constant love” on the moon is taken as a lack of “wit” (intelligence). Behind this question lies his perplexity that Stella cannot appreciate his fidelity to her. He asks whether beautiful women on the moon are as “proud” as they are on earth. Whereas the lover is humble in his allegiance, the fair beauty remains distant and proud. His next question, whether scornful lunar beauties nevertheless “love to be loved,” shows more than a tinge of resentment. He cannot be sure that Stella loves him, but she clearly enjoys his attention. His final question, whether on the moon “ungratefulness” is considered virtuous, is his most bitter one. Given the fact that Astrophel has already recognized (in Sonnet 25) Stella's beauty as the beauty of virtue, his doleful conclusion is that her failure to appreciate him must be an aspect of her virtue.

The language of this sonnet is vigorous and direct. The ten one-syllable words of its first line set a deliberate pace for the musing lover, and words such as “sad,” “silently,” and “wan” in the first two lines immediately establish the mood. It is probably not possible for the moon to serve poets in quite the way it did Sidney now that humans have visited it and walked in its dust, but lovers still feel able to communicate over great distance by gazing at it concurrently, and disappointed lovers such as Astrophel can still think of it as a silent companion to which their sorrows can be told. Thus, Sidney's sonnet still speaks as eloquently of a lover's disappointment as it did four centuries ago.



## ASTROPHEL AND STELLA, SONNET 74

**First published:** 1591

**Type of work:** Poem

*The lover, unschooled in the art of poetry, explains how he has become successful at composing sonnets.*

Sonnet 74 of *Astrophel and Stella*, “I never drank of Aganippe well,” comes at a later stage of Astrophel’s pursuit of Stella. It should be noted that a sonnet sequence with love as its theme implies, but does not tell, a story. It is not a continuous narrative but the expression of the various emotional states, situations, and reflections of its speaker.

In the case of *Astrophel and Stella*, there are reasons for identifying its speaker with its author. The latter’s nickname appears in the character’s name, while the first part of that name, in addition to being a word for “star” (making him a “star-lover,” for “phil” is also a Greek root meaning “love”), calls to mind another Latin word for “star,” one of whose forms, *sideris*, looks very much like “Sidney.” Furthermore, Stella has been explicitly identified as the wife of the Lord Rich who married Penelope Devereaux, the woman once proposed as a wife for Sidney. Therefore, it is easy to imagine these poems as expressing Sidney’s own thoughts and feelings.

Although there may be a considerable amount of Sidney in Astrophel, nevertheless Sidney is not Astrophel. Sonnet 74 furnishes some evidence that Sidney is quite capable of distancing himself from his character, in this case through humor. The Aganippe well is at the foot of Mount Helicon and is sacred to the Muses, the deities who inspire creative endeavor. Astrophel asserts that he has never had anything to do with the Muses and, as a matter of fact, disclaims any knowledge of how poetry is produced. Nor has he stolen any ideas from any other poet. He insists, however, that he has been able to compose smooth flowing verse. How has he managed to do it? The answer, which he reveals in the last line, is that his “lips are sweet, inspired with Stella’s kiss.”

He has not exactly gotten a kiss from Stella, but he has managed to give her one while she was sleeping, and that kiss has not only restored his good

spirits but also inspired a string of sonnets, including number 74.

Astrophel there is a plainly comic figure, almost a bumpkin. His “smooth” verse includes a line such as the following: “But (God wot) wot not what they mean by it.” (“Wot,” by the way, means “know.”) He is conducting a dialogue with himself, as though he himself cannot understand what has suddenly turned him into a poet, until it suddenly comes to him like a burst of inspiration.

This poem inclines toward the English form of the sonnet, which Shakespeare later made famous. The rhyme scheme of the octave is *abababab*; that of the sestet, *cdcdce*. The pattern of alternating rhymes comes close to the *abab cdcd efef gg* pattern that Shakespeare later used, a scheme that resulted in three quatrains and a couplet rather than the Petrarchan octave and sestet. This poem, however, retains the characteristic turning point at the end of the octave. It is in the octave that Astrophel insists that he has never been a poet before, while in the sestet he raises the question of how he has suddenly become one, answering it in the ending couplet. There, as often in Shakespeare, the couplet has a distinctive function: It tersely answers Astrophel’s question.

## ASTROPHEL AND STELLA, SONG 11

**First published:** 1591

**Type of work:** Poem

*The lover pleads with Stella beneath the window of her room but is finally dismissed.*

Unlike many sonnet cycles, Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* contains eleven songs interspersed among the sonnets. Not all Renaissance compositions called songs are in fact singable, but Sidney’s are, particularly number 11, “Who is it that this dark night . . . ?” which has received several musical settings. It consists of nine five-line stanzas, each an exchange of two lines sung by Stella and three by Astrophel. In the ninth stanza, she urges him to “begone.” It is the climactic part of the sequence, coming after Sonnet 104; in the last four sonnets, he will attempt, with only partial success, to come to terms with his rejection.

Stella has previously urged him in another dialogue song (8) to end his suit out of respect for her “honor” (presumably because she is married—though unhappily so), but she left it open for Astrophel to admire her from afar. His presence beneath her window now indicates how difficult it is for him to follow this advice. In this poignant dialogue song, she parries in succession each of his pleas. First, she expresses surprise that he is there at all and that his interests have not shifted to someone else. When he vows that he cannot change, she suggests that absence from her will probably solve the problem. He admits that the passage of time in many cases makes lovers forget their old passions, but he will remain “faithful” to her. Surely he will meet more beautiful women, Stella points out, but he claims that he will see their beauty as merely “counterfeiting” hers. Reason, Stella says, counsels him to cease indulging in such emotions; his love for her is actually based on reason, he responds. She concedes that his unavailing love for her inflicts “wrongs” on him that should bring it to an end, but he proclaims himself willing to suffer any pain that this love inflicts.

Realizing that Astrophel will counter any argument that she can make, Stella suggests that someone may be listening and that, if he stays longer or returns, she will be angry. Because Astrophel does not want to “endanger” her, he agrees to leave, complaining of the injustice of his fortune and, bitterly in the final line, of the fact that he must yield to “louts.” It is clear that Astrophel considers Stella’s husband a “lout.”

*Astrophel and Stella* is one of the most dramatic of Renaissance sonnet sequences, and this eleventh song brings the conflicts within, and between, the lovers to a high point. The expression of love is all on Astrophel’s side; each pair of lines that Stella speaks sounds curt and detached. The reader knows from earlier poems that Stella really does love Astrophel, however, and that she is now stifling all feeling because she knows that, if she gives him the slightest encouragement, he will never stop pursuing her. He pours his feelings out, but he loves her enough to recognize the discomfort and even danger that a continuation of their relationship may produce, and so he leaves.

## CERTAIN SONNETS 32

**First published:** 1598

**Type of work:** Poem

*A speaker weary of earthly vanities rejects as futile all love except heavenly love.*

Sonnet 32, beginning “Leave me, O Love, which reachest but to dust” appears at the end of the *Certain Sonnets*, which the countess of Pembroke published in 1598, a dozen years after her brother’s death. The sentiment of the poem, together with its position in this rather miscellaneous group of poems, has led commentators over the centuries to regard it as Sidney’s “last word” on the subject of love and even to think of it as a coda to *Astrophel and Stella*, rejecting love of the sort that Astrophel professes. Its cry of “farewell, world” in its next-to-last line has even suggested the possibility of its being a deathbed effort.

Manuscript evidence, however, has nearly established that this fine sonnet was written before Sidney even began his sonnet sequence. He probably wrote it in 1581, at the age of twenty-seven, when he had no reason to suppose that he would be leaving this world soon. It may seem contradictory that Sidney, after composing a poem of this sort, should then probe so elaborately into the kind of love “which reachest but to dust,” but his imagination was versatile and his approach to his art flexible. He may have sincerely believed what he says in this sonnet and still have been able to plunge energetically into an imaginative investigation of what it was like to be Astrophel—and, to repeat, there was certainly some Astrophel in Sidney.

Interestingly, this sonnet takes the Shakespearian *abab cdcd efef gg* form, which indicates that, later in *Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney went back to the Italian type—more difficult to do in English because rhymes do not come so easily as in Italian. The organization of the content also reflects the English form, for each of the three cross-rhymed quatrains reiterates with different imagery the speaker’s disgust with earthly love and his determination to focus on “higher things.”

In the first quatrain, the rhyme on “dust” and “rust” characterizes the love that fades. In the second, images of seeing and light develop the notion of the superiority of heavenly “beams,” while in the

third the speaker seeks to “take fast hold” of divine love and reject the evil that might cause him to “slide” away from his heavenly destination. The final couplet is a “farewell” to the world and a final entreaty to “eternal love” to uphold him. If not Sidney’s last thoughts on love, this sonnet states eloquently the conviction that the greatest of earthly pleasures pale in the light of eternity.

### SUMMARY

Sir Philip Sidney may be England’s finest example of the Renaissance man. Along with Edmund Spenser, he not only did more than anyone else to inaugurate the great age of English Renaissance poetry, but also displayed diverse talents as writer, diplomat, administrator, and soldier. Few writers have excelled at fiction, poetry, and criticism, but Sidney, in *Arcadia*, *Astrophel and Stella*, and *Defence of Poesie*, made lasting contributions to each of these genres despite the fact that his were pioneering attempts in English literature. Both the sonnets and his treatise on poetry continue to be essential items for students of Elizabethan literature.

Robert P. Ellis

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#### DRAMA:

*The Lady of May*, pr. 1578 (masque)

*Fortress of Perfect Beauty*, pr. 1581 (with Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke; Phillip Howard, the earl of Arundel; and Baron Windsor of Stanwell)

#### NONFICTION:

*Discourse on Irish Affairs*, 1577 (extant only in a fragment)

*Defence of Poesie*, 1595 (also as *An Apologie for Poetry*)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Consider Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* as a synthesis of the best critical ideas about poetry available to him.
- What was Sidney’s initiative in discussing prior English poetry?
- As an early English sonnet writer, what did Sidney contribute to the form in *Astrophel and Stella* and his other sonnets?
- The speaker in Sonnet 74 of *Astrophel and Stella* is a character to be distinguished from the author. How does Astrophel characterize himself, and how is the reader expected to understand him?
- What are the literary sources of Sidney’s original *Arcadia*?
- How did Sidney’s approach change when he undertook the *New Arcadia*?
- William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55 (“Not marble, nor the gilded monuments”) has been interpreted by some as referring to Sidney’s “powerful rhyme.” How convincing do you find this theory?



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## HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ

**Born:** Wola Okrzejska, Poland  
May 5, 1846

**Died:** Vevey, Switzerland  
November 15, 1916

*In his trilogy of historical novels set in seventeenth century Poland, Sienkiewicz produced a great national epic for his homeland. In Quo Vadis, his novel of ancient Rome, he raised universal issues about the future of civilization, while at the same time creating a compelling adventure and love story.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Henryk Adam Aleksander Pius Sienkiewicz (shehn-KYAY-vihch), a descendant of minor Polish and Lithuanian nobility, was born in 1846 in the Russian-ruled part of a Poland that had been taken over and partitioned by Russia, Prussia, and Austria in the previous century. Although he came to be regarded as the great literary spokesman for the Polish nation, that nation did not legally exist throughout his entire lifetime, not regaining its independence until two years after his death.

Sienkiewicz's parents pushed him to study law at the University of Warsaw, but he soon transferred, first into medicine, and then into history and literature, where his true interests lay. He left the university in 1871 without completing his degree and began a career in journalism, writing reviews and columns for the *Gazeta Polska* (Polish gazette) and other publications, using the pen name Litwos. He also wrote an early novel, *Na marne* (*In Vain*, 1899), which appeared in installments in the journal *Wieniec* (garland) in 1872.

In the late 1870's and early 1880's, in addition to his journalism, he wrote a number of short stories, including "Szkice węglem" ("Charcoal Sketches"), "Bartek zwycięzca" ("Bartek the Conqueror"), "Latarnik" ("The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall"), and "Janko muzykant" ("Yanko the Musician"), most of which focus on the lives of simple

peasants, in keeping with the teachings of positivism, a philosophy popular in Polish literary circles at this time.

In 1874, Sienkiewicz became literary editor of *Niwa* (field), a weekly Polish publication. He also translated the French writer Victor Hugo and began traveling, first within Europe and then, in 1876, to the United States on an expedition with fellow writers, artists, and intellectuals to establish a commune in California. The commune failed because none of the writers and intellectuals knew how to farm, but Sienkiewicz gathered valuable experience on the trip, some of which he used in articles for the *Gazeta Polska*, later collected as *Listy z podróży do Ameryki* (serial, 1876-1878, book, 1896; *Portrait of America: Letters*, 1959), and some of which—for example, his experiences on the plains with native Indians—is said to have inspired his fictional descriptions of the wild lands of the Ukraine and the Cossacks who lived there. He himself compared the American Wild West to the Ukrainian wild lands.

After returning to Poland in 1879 and marrying Maria Szetkiewicz in 1881, Sienkiewicz became editor of the daily newspaper, *Slowo* (the word) and also began work on the trilogy of historical novels that first made his name: *Ogniem i mieczem* (1883-1884, serial, 1884, book; *With Fire and Sword: An Historical Novel of Poland and Russia*, 1890), *Potop* (1884-1886, serial, 1886, book; *The Deluge: An Historical Novel of Poland, Sweden, and Russia*, 1891), and *Pan Wołodyjowski* (1887-1888, serial, 1888, book; *Pan*

*Michael: An Historical Novel of Poland, the Ukraine, and Turkey*, 1893; also known as *Fire in the Steppe*, 1992), published in serialized installments. *With Fire and Sword* was an instant success in Poland, and by the next decade Sienkiewicz was also becoming well known abroad; the novel was translated into thirty languages, with the first English translation, by Jeremiah Curtin, appearing in the United States in 1890. Translations by Curtin of the second and third volumes of the trilogy appeared in 1891 and 1893, respectively.

In 1891, Sienkiewicz traveled to Egypt and other parts of Africa, contracting malaria, but also gathering material for another set of "letters" from a foreign continent, *Listy z Afryki* (1891; letters from Africa), and for a children's book, *Wpustnyi i puszcz* (1910, serial, 1912, book; *In Desert and Wilderness*, 1912). He also published two contemporary novels in this period, *Bez dogmatu* (1889-1890, serial, 1891, book; *Without Dogma*, 1893) and *Rodzina Połanieckich* (1895; literally "the Połaniecki family" but translated as *Children of the Soil* in 1895).

Sienkiewicz also began turning his attention to the ancient world at this time, publishing the short stories "Wyrok Zeusa" ("The Verdict of Zeus") and "Pojdźmy za Nim" ("Let Us Follow Him") in 1890 and 1892, respectively. The latter story, about two pagans converting to Christianity, anticipated the central theme of Sienkiewicz's next great success, the novel *Quo Vadis*, serialized in 1895-1896 in Polish and quickly translated into English (*Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, 1896) and many other languages. The novel was a worldwide best seller and was adapted into plays, ballets, films, and an opera. The name *Quo Vadis* was even used for cigars, restaurants, and a racehorse.

For the next decade and a half Sienkiewicz was the most famous Polish writer in the world, but *Quo Vadis* marked the end of his most productive period. He spent the next four years on another historical novel, *Krzyżacy* (1900, serial, 1906, book; *The Knights of the Cross*, 1900; also known as *The Teutonic Knights*, 1943). After that he produced only two more novels for adults, *Na polu chwały* (1903-1905; *On the Field of Glory*, 1906), a short, unsuccessful historical work, and four years later a contemporary novel expressing disapproval of revolutionaries, *Wiry* (1908-1910, serial, 1910, book; *Whirlpools: A Novel of Modern Poland*, 1910). He also published some short stories, a children's novel, and a pam-

phlet in defense of Polish schoolchildren against Prussian repression.

Honors began to pour in, though. He was called one of the greatest Poles of all time, ranked alongside the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. In 1905, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature, primarily for his historical trilogy, the citation singling out his achievement as an epic writer and the presenter of the award saying that Sienkiewicz had concentrated the essence of his nation in his works.

When World War I broke out, Sienkiewicz moved to Switzerland, where he died and was buried in 1916. In 1924, after Poland had won its independence, his remains were sent to Warsaw to be reinterred in St. John's Cathedral.

## ANALYSIS

Under the influence of the Polish positivist movement, which emphasized the need to educate the people and gradually improve society, and which called for literature focusing on the middle class and the common people rather than on the aristocracy, Sienkiewicz at the beginning of his career wrote stories about the plight of the peasants. In "Bartek the Conqueror," he wrote about a simple Polish peasant, drafted to fight on the Prussian side in the Franco-Prussian War, who ends up torn between obeying his Prussian superiors and aiding some fellow Poles who are fighting on the side of the French.

This issue of divided loyalties is a recurring theme in Sienkiewicz's works, from the Polish soldier Kmicic in *The Deluge* having to decide whether to follow his traitorous commander, to the Cossacks in *With Fire and Sword* having to decide whether to rebel against the Polish Commonwealth, to Marcus Vinitius in *Quo Vadis* deciding whether to stay true to Rome and its traditions or to join the new movement of Christians. There is even Prince Yeremi in *With Fire and Sword*, who has to decide whether to obey his government's orders to negotiate with the rebel Cossacks or disobey them in the name of the greater good of saving the commonwealth.

This issue of divided loyalties is a personal and psychological one, but it is connected to social causes, in particular the cause of Poland as a nation threatened or ruled by others. Even in *Quo Vadis*, which on the surface is a tale of ancient Rome, the issue is how to deal with a tyrannical empire much

like the Russian empire of the late nineteenth century.

Thus although Sienkiewicz drifted away from positivism, writing more about upper class characters or characters like Yanko the child musician, who has a talent that does not fit with his peasant status, he still focused on social themes in the manner of the positivists, in his case the theme of Poland's status as a nation. It is possible to see most of the themes and situations in his fiction as reflecting the Polish national situation. Many of his heroes, such as Pan Yan in *With Fire and Sword*, Marcus Vinitius in *Quo Vadis*, and Kmcic in *The Deluge*, spend much of their time ill or wounded, tended by others, waiting helplessly while others step forward to rescue them or the women they love, all suggesting the situation of helpless Poland, divided between three conquering empires and unable to rescue itself.

Similarly, the Hamlet-like indecision of the hero of *Without Dogma* has been seen to reflect the paralysis of Poland in the nineteenth century. One message of Sienkiewicz's fiction seems to be that Poland is unable to assert its nationhood. Indeed, he may even be saying it would be imprudent to do so, if the early Christians of *Quo Vadis* represent the Poles of the nineteenth century. The Christians resolutely refrain from fighting back against Roman tyranny; they preach acceptance of suffering, patience, and forgiveness, and yet Sienkiewicz frequently reminds the readers of *Quo Vadis* that Christianity conquers Rome in the end.

The message would seem to be one of prudence, of patience in the face of Russian rule. Yet Sienkiewicz is also the novelist of battle. Especially in the trilogy, he depicts one battle after another. He is celebrated for his ability to depict scenes of war. Even in *Quo Vadis* the most memorable scenes are the ones of the gladiators and wild animals in the arena, and the most gripping moment involving a Christian is not any of the passive deaths that most of the Christians allow themselves to be led to but the fight put up by the strongman Ursus. Thus though on the one hand Sienkiewicz seems to preach prudence, on the other he seems to be wishing for conquest and victory by force. He decries revolution in *Whirlpools*, but he is at his most enthusiastic depicting uprisings, battles, and similar events in the trilogy.

The trilogy is also a great celebration of Polish

nationhood, harking back to a time when there was a great Polish empire in Europe. It is true, though, that Sienkiewicz chooses a time period when the Polish empire was under threat; each of the novels of the trilogy shows the empire embattled. In *With Fire and Sword*, there is an uprising of Cossacks against Polish rule; in *The Deluge* there is a Swedish invasion; and in *Pan Michael* there is a threat from the Turks and Tartars.

In other words, Sienkiewicz in this way also is a novelist in conflict; he is both celebrating Polish greatness and indicating its precarious nature. What is more, to a certain extent he is questioning the morality of old Polish rule, for in *With Fire and Sword* Pan Yan, the Polish officer, is forced to admit that the Cossacks have legitimate grievances against their Polish rulers. Perhaps all empires lead to tyranny, or perhaps Sienkiewicz for a moment is letting the Polish empire of the seventeenth century represent the Russian one of the nineteenth.

There is also the issue of the decline of European civilization. Especially in *Quo Vadis*, though the Roman empire of Nero may be a despicable tyranny that deserves destruction, it does put on grand spectacles that Sienkiewicz delights in portraying. He also delights in portraying the elegant aristocrat, Petronius, who is very much attached to the old world, even though he despises Nero. If Rome falls and the pure and virtuous Christians triumph, is that entirely good? Though he seems to be celebrating the early Christians, Sienkiewicz also seems to be suggesting that some aspects of the old empire might be worth retaining, and though he seems to be preaching the virtues of purity and egalitarianism, he also seems to be identifying with the luxurious snobbishness of Petronius.

If Sienkiewicz is thus not a thoroughgoing proponent of throwing out the old order in the social and political sphere, he is also very much a traditionalist in terms of literary form. Not for him any of the innovations associated with modernism, and thus after the first decade of the twentieth century his popularity began to fade, and he came to be regarded as somewhat passé. Some critics also dismiss him as a writer of soap operas and second-rate epics, a teller of adventure tales in the mode of Alexander Dumas, *père*, rather than a true epic author like Homer.

## WITH FIRE AND SWORD

**First published:** *Ogniem i mieczem*, 1883-1884, serial; 1884, book (English translation, 1890)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The forces of the Polish Commonwealth with great difficulty suppress a rebellion by Cossacks.*

*With Fire and Sword* is the first volume of Sienkiewicz's celebrated trilogy of life under the Polish Commonwealth of the seventeenth century. It opens almost in the midst of battle between the rebellious Cossacks of the Ukraine, in the southeasternmost reaches of Polish-ruled territory. Led by Bohdan Hmyelnitzki, the rebellious Cossacks press into the interior of the commonwealth from the wild lands on the border. Hmyelnitzki has allied himself with the foreign Tartars, which appalls Pan Yan, the Polish officer sent by Prince Yeremi to keep order. There are all sorts of shifts and maneuverings, along with murders, as the two sides sort themselves out. Hmyelnitzki first must get rid of some Cossack rivals, which he does by accusing them of traitorous association with a Polish spy. To a certain extent, Hmyelnitzki seems more concerned about internal rivals than the ostensible enemy.

Intertwined with the military adventure story is the story of Pan Yan's love for the princess Helen, a sweet and pure girl mistreated by her greedy relatives. Throughout the book Pan Yan is both trying to defeat the Cossack rebellion and get back together with Helen, who has fallen into Cossack hands. He has trouble doing this, however, because he himself is captured at one point and at another point is ill and exhausted, so it is his servant Jendzian and his friend Zagloba who rescue Helen.

Zagloba, who is often compared to William Shakespeare's lovable rogue Falstaff, is a celebrated character in the novel. Though given to drink and jocularly, he is serious when he needs to be.

Another popular character in the novel is the Lithuanian knight Longinus, who is comical in his self-imposed purity but also appealing and a good fighter.

After an army of the Polish Commonwealth is defeated by the Cossacks, much to the despair of

Pan Yan, who looks on helplessly as a prisoner of war during the graphically described battle, Prince Yeremi enters the fray, but even he is forced to retreat at first, and then he is kept from acting because the new leaders of the commonwealth decide to negotiate rather than fight.

While all this is going on, Pan Yan, now set free, searches for his beloved Helen, but never quite finds her; instead he hears various depressing rumors about her fate, including a false one that she is dead. In fact, she is still alive, imprisoned at first by a Cossack who wants her to marry him and then put in the custody of a witch and a dwarf, in a section of the novel with fairy-tale overtones.

Despite the desire of his government for negotiations, Prince Yeremi decides that the Cossacks must be crushed and so renews the war. The climax of the book is the siege of Zbarajh, which Pan Yan helps lift by slipping through enemy lines to bring help. The result is a crushing defeat of the Cossacks and a victory for the Polish Commonwealth.

## QUO VADIS

**First published:** 1895-1896, serial; 1896, book (English translation, 1896)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Early Christians struggle to survive in the Rome of Nero.*

*Quo Vadis* is a novel set in ancient Rome at the time of the Emperor Nero and the early Christians. The title, a quotation from the New Testament, is Latin for "where are you going?" and on the most literal level refers to the scene in which the Christian apostle Peter has to decide whether to stay in Rome or leave it. In the scene, Peter is on his way out of Rome when he is confronted by a passerby who asks him the question; Peter's response is that he is returning to Rome to make that city the Christian capital in accordance with visions he has seen.

On one level, this is a statement that the Christian church will find its center in Rome rather than in the Middle East, where Christianity originated. On another level, if the novel is in some way referring to the relationship between Poland and Russia in the nineteenth century, then the title question



can be seen as a question for Poland and its future. The scene with the “Quo vadis” question comes near the end of the novel and looks forward to the ultimate triumph of Christianity that the narrator discusses in the closing chapters.

The opening chapters of the novel place the reader in the very non-Christian milieu of Nero’s imperial court, with its orgies and spectacles. Christianity comes into the story because the young Roman officer Marcus Vinitius falls in love with a Christian girl named Ligia, the daughter of a foreign king defeated by Rome. Ligia is drawn to Vinitius but is put off by his crude advances and flees with the help of her strongman servant Ursus.

Both angry and love-sick, Vinitius enlists the help of his uncle Petronius, the arbiter of elegance at Nero’s court, and a Greek soothsayer, Chilo, to find Ligia, who has gone into hiding. Chilo is the one who discovers that Ligia is a Christian being harbored by fellow Christians. Vinitius goes to seize her with the help of a Roman gladiator, but Ursus kills the gladiator and wounds Vinitius, who ends up being nursed by the Christians.

Vinitius, a dedicated soldier and supporter of Rome, is astonished by what he learns about the Christians’ devotion to virtue, purity, and forgiveness. He thinks their approach to life is madness, and yet he is drawn to it as if by a magic spell. Eventually, he converts and is reunited with Ligia, their union blessed by the Christian leaders Peter and Paul, who reject the ascetic denunciation of love voiced by another Christian, Crispus.

Meanwhile Nero, who fancies himself an artist and who wants a spectacle about which to compose a grand poem, decides to set Rome on fire so that he can write about a devastated city. The idea of

Rome burning has been foreshadowed many times in the novel, and finally Nero does have the city put to the torch. When the populace reacts angrily to this destruction of their home, Nero puts the blame on the Christians, whom he has rounded up and sent to their death in the arena.

Ligia is one of the Christians rounded up, and Vinitius is in despair over losing her again, though he tries to follow the Christian teachings of acceptance and looks forward to seeing her in Heaven. When Ligia is sent into the arena, however, along with her servant Ursus, Ursus is able to kill the bull that would have killed them, and the audience roars its approval and insists on their going free.

They end up escaping to Sicily and living happily ever after, but the novel switches away from them at the end to depict the last days of Petronius, who has fallen out of favor at court and must die. Petronius never fully understood his nephew’s conversion to Christianity, but he did his best to help him and his new Christian friends, which is part of the reason he falls out of favor. Petronius comes across as a most sympathetic and appealing character, almost contradicting the novel’s apparent celebration of Christian purity because he is so appealingly impure and dedicated to immediate pleasure.

## SUMMARY

Henryk Sienkiewicz is very much a novelist of Polish nationalism. In his great trilogy, he conjures up the glories of the Polish past to comfort nineteenth century Poles, whose very country had disappeared. Even in *Quo Vadis*, his famous novel of ancient Rome, he seems to be writing about the Polish situation, with the repression of the Christians by the Roman empire representing the repression of nineteenth century Poles by the Russian empire. Sienkiewicz became world famous through his historical epics, being celebrated for his ability to intertwine military adventures with love stories, but his fame faded with the coming of the modernist movement.

Sheldon Goldfarb



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### By the Author

#### LONG FICTION:

*Na marne*, 1872 (*In Vain*, 1899)

*Ogniem i mieczem*, 1883-1884 (serial), 1884 (book;  
*With Fire and Sword: An Historical Novel of Poland  
and Russia*, 1890)

*Potop*, 1884-1886 (serial), 1886 (book; *The Deluge:  
An Historical Novel of Poland, Sweden, and Russia*,  
1891)

*Pan Wołodyjowski*, 1887-1888 (serial), 1888 (book;  
*Pan Michael: An Historical Novel of Poland, the  
Ukraine, and Turkey*, 1893; also known *Fire in the  
Steppe*, 1992)

*Bez dogmatu*, 1889-1890 (serial), 1891 (book; *With-  
out Dogma*, 1893)

*Rodzina Połanieckich*, 1895 (*Children of the Soil*, 1895)

*Quo vadis*, 1895-1896 (serial), 1896 (book; *Quo Va-  
dis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, 1896)

*Krzyżacy*, 1900(serial), 1906 (book; *The Knights of the  
Cross*, 1900; also known as *The Teutonic Knights*,  
1943)

*Na polu chwały*, 1903-1905 (*On the Field of Glory*,  
1906)

*Wir*, 1908-1910 (serial), 1910 (book; *Whirlpools: A Novel of Modern Poland*, 1910)

*Dzieła*, 1948-1955 (60 volumes)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*Yanko the Musician, and Other Stories*, 1893 (includes “Yanko the Musician” and “The Lighthouse Keeper of Aspinwall”)

*Lillian Morris, and Other Stories*, 1894

*Hania*, 1897 (includes “Tartar Captivity” and “Charcoal Sketches”)

*For Daily Bread, and Other Stories*, 1898

*Let Us Follow Him, and Other Stories*, 1898

*Sielanka: A Forest Picture, and Other Stories*, 1898

*Life and Death, and Other Stories*, 1904

*Tales*, 1931

*Western Septet: Seven Stories of the American West*, 1973

*The Little Trilogy*, 1995

#### NONFICTION:

*Listy z podróży do Ameryki*, 1876-1878 (serial), 1896 (book; *Portrait of America: Letters*, 1959)

*Listy z Afryki*, 1891

#### CHILDREN’S LITERATURE:

*W pustyni i puszcz*, 1910 (serial), 1912 (book; *In Desert and Wilderness*, 1912)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent does Henryk Sienkiewicz sympathize with Petronius in *Quo Vadis*?
- To what extent are Sienkiewicz’s writings in the tradition of Polish positivism?
- Why does Sienkiewicz choose the troubled seventeenth century as the setting for his trilogy about the glories of the old Polish Commonwealth?
- Sienkiewicz’s novels have been dismissed as soap operas. To what extent is this a fair judgment?
- Discuss the parallels of ancient Rome with nineteenth century Poland in *Quo Vadis*.
- If Sienkiewicz is a supporter of the Christian virtues of forgiveness and turning the other cheek, why does he write so enthusiastically about military battles?

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## GEORGES SIMENON

**Born:** Liège, Belgium

February 13, 1903

**Died:** Lausanne, Switzerland

September 4, 1989

*Belgian writer Simenon created French detective Jules Maigret, featuring the character in more than eighty novels. Using his own name and numerous pseudonyms, the prolific Simenon wrote more than four hundred novels and novellas and more than a thousand short stories.*

### BIOGRAPHY

George Joseph Chrétien Simenon (see-muh-NAWN) was a man ruled by his passions. Whatever he loved, he did to excess. This was true in both his professional and personal lives. Simenon was an able publicist for himself, and one of his passions was retelling tales of his own life. He wrote two autobiographical novels and four autobiographies. After his retirement in 1973, he stopped writing fiction to concentrate on his memoirs, of which he produced twenty-one volumes. For his biographers, the challenge was not too little information but too much, and much of the information provided, even from Simenon's own hand, was often contradictory.

One of the most prolific writers in the history of literature, Simenon kept to a rigorous creative schedule that would leave him nearly exhausted at the end of each work. Not only could he write a book in twelve days, he did this as his routine: seven days to write the book and five days to edit it. Typing in excess of eighty pages per day, Simenon would lock himself away in his study and produce several books each year. A legend grew around Simenon's writing speed. According to the legend, Simenon once contracted to write an entire novel while sealed in a glass case. No evidence exists that this really happened, but it was a commonly held belief. Any accounting of Simenon's work is based on estimates or best guesses. Having written in so many genres, using varied pseudonyms, and having written a prodigious amount of material make an exact count impossible. He wrote under such names as Bobette, Germain d'Antibes, Jacques

Dersonnes, Georges d'Isly, Luc Dorsan, Jean Dorsange, Jean Dossage, Jean du Perry, Georges Martin Georges, Gom Gut, Kim, La Deshabilleuse, Monsieur Le Coq, Plick et Plock, Georges Sim, Gaston Vialis, G. Violis, and Christian Brulls.

Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, on February 13, 1903, the eldest of two sons born to Désiré and Henriette Simenon. Simenon's relationships with his father and mother were contrasting. While he adored his father, who often made allowances for Simenon's youthful indiscretions, his relationship with his mother was strained for his entire life. His mother made no secret that she preferred Simenon's younger brother, Christian, and she would not spend the money Simenon gave her when he was earning a fortune as the most widely published author in the world. When Simenon was fifteen, his father, an accountant, suffered a heart attack, and Simenon subsequently left school.

The following year, Simenon joined the newspaper *Gazette de Liège* as a reporter. He began associating with a group of young men who saw themselves as brilliant artists and thinkers. They called their group La Caque (The Cask), which was an appropriate name because they spent most of their free time drinking. Simenon was a fringe member of this group that was ultimately more renowned for its troublemaking than its genius.

It was through members of La Caque, however, that Simenon met Regine Renchon, the woman would become his first wife and the mother of his oldest son. Simenon called her Tigy, and he would refer to her by this name for the rest of his life. Simenon had an odd habit of changing the spell-

ing of the name or completely renaming the significant women in his life.

Early in his life, Simenon had wanted to join the priesthood, but at the age of twelve he had his first sexual encounter, with a girl of fifteen, and he developed an enormous sexual appetite. He was especially fond of prostitutes, once having traded his father's watch for sex with a black woman. It is impossible to discuss Simenon's work without mentioning his sex life. It was central to everything he did. Simenon once boasted of having had sex with more than ten thousand women, and he was known to need sex several times each day. His sexual partners would include his wives, his nurses, his maids, his cooks, his housekeepers, and, of course, countless prostitutes. No matter where he lived, it was said Simenon always knew the location of the nearest brothel. His wives accepted his unfaithfulness and in some cases encouraged it. Sex for Simenon was like any of his other passions, such as smoking, collecting pipes (he had hundreds of them), or changing his address.

He became engaged to Tigy in 1921. That was a very important year in Simenon's life: his beloved father died and his first novel, *Au Pont des Arches*, was published. Continuing to work in newspapers, writing under various pen names, Simenon began to distance himself from his past. One of Simenon's La Crique friends was Joseph Kleine, a drug addict and failed art student. Kleine committed suicide one night shortly after having talked with Simenon. Kleine's death, the death of Simenon's father the same year, and his strained relationship with his mother all contributed to his decision to finally leave Liège for Paris.

Though he sailed all over the world, lived in five different countries, and moved several times within France, Simenon was forever associated with Paris. After World War II, when Nazi collaborators were sought, Simenon struggled to protect his reputation with the French people. While it was true Simenon was popular during the Occupation and German filmmakers admired his novels, there was no evidence Simenon went out of his way to aid the Germans. Single-minded Simenon wanted most of all to be left alone with his family and his work.

Simenon moved his family to Canada in 1945. Denyse Ouimet (spelled "Denise" by Simenon) was hired as resident secretary. She soon became Sime-

non's mistress and eventually his second wife and mother to his three youngest children. The family soon left Canada, settling in Bradenton Beach, Florida. After a 1947 tour of Havana, the family settled in Arizona. Simenon's family life became complicated, living with his wife, his son, and two mistresses. After Denise became pregnant, Simenon married her and divorced Tigy on subsequent days in Reno, Nevada, in 1950. Denise and Simenon moved their home to Lakeville, Connecticut. Simenon lived in the United States for ten years, producing some of his best novels including, *Trois Chambres à Manhattan* (1946; *Three Beds in Manhattan*, 1964; also as *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan*, 2003), *La Neige était sale* (1948; *The Snow Was Black*, 1950; also as *The Stain in the Snow*, 1953; and *Dirty Snow*, 2003), and *Feux rouges* (1953; *The Hitchhiker*, 1955; also as *Red Lights*, 1975). Simenon considered becoming an American citizen, but he was discouraged by McCarthyism in the 1950's.

The Simenon family returned to Europe in 1955, first living in Cannes, France, and then settling in a castle near Lausanne, Switzerland. In 1961, Denise hired a new maid, Teresa Sburelin. She would become Simenon's mistress and his companion for the rest of his life. Denise and Simenon had three children: John, Marie-Jo, and Pierre. At Epalinges, in the Swiss Alps overlooking Lake Geneva, they built their dream home in December, 1963. Four months later, Denise left for a psychiatric clinic and never returned. In 1970, Marie-Jo suffered a nervous breakdown, and Simenon's mother died.

The last Maigret novel was written in early 1972, and Simenon moved to a small house with Teresa and Pierre. Simenon retired from writing fiction, spent the remainder of his life writing his memoirs, and rarely gave interviews. In 1978, Marie-Jo committed suicide in her Paris apartment. An autobiographical account of her personal struggles was published posthumously in tandem with her father's work, *Mémoires intimes* (1981; *Intimate Memoirs*, 1984).

Simenon died at age eighty-six at his home in Lausanne. His ashes were mixed with Marie-Jo's and spread in the family garden in the shade of Simenon's favorite tree. His surviving children were informed of his death by radio, after his cremation.



## ANALYSIS

Paris in the early 1920's was one of the world's cultural centers, the beacon for free thinkers, young artists, writers, and performers. It was inevitable that a man of Simenon's talents would be drawn to the City of Light. While working in Paris, writing under his favorite pseudonym, Georges Sim, he was repeatedly rejected by Colette, the noted French author and editor of *Le Matin*. After several unsuccessful attempts, she called him in for a consultation. She told him his writing was "much too literary." This criticism, along with his experience as a journalist, led Simenon to look at his work more critically and to pare his work so that every word of every sentence performed some necessary role. In 1923, Tigy and Simenon, then twenty, were married in Liège, and Simenon began to live solely on the money he made from writing.

Simenon had a torrid love affair with African American entertainer Josephine Baker, who epitomized Paris chic in the 1920's. This relationship proved too intense for Simenon, who grew jealous of Baker's attention to other men. To escape the affair, Simenon set sail with Tigy and her maid, Henriette Liberge, who was called Boule by Simenon. Sailing on canals in France and Belgium aboard their ship *The Ostrogoth*, the many towns and cities they visited provided background and all-important atmosphere in Simenon's later novels.

Simenon's novels are usually thought of as two different brands, one named for himself, or Simenons, and the other for his most famous creation, or Maigrets. The Simenon brand is a psychological novel, usually dark in atmosphere. The Maigret brand is more formulaic, but, like the Simenons, also tightly written. The character of Inspector Jules Maigret is diametrically opposed to his author. Maigret is reliable, faithful, patient, and a steady influence. Both author and detective, however, do share a fondness for pipes. Maigret seeks to understand the criminal mind, not to judge it. He does not work by clues so much as by intuition. In a Maigret novel the lines dividing good and bad are blurred. Moral values are unassigned, and the books end with the perpetrator being brought to justice, but one feels sorry for the criminal because his motivations have been laid bare by the author

and noted and then analyzed by Inspector Maigret.

Simenon's first Maigret novel, the first novel to be published under his own name, *Pietr-le-Letton* (1931; *The Strange Case of Peter the Lett*, 1933; also known as *Maigret and the Enigmatic Lett*, 1963), was published in 1931. Like Dorothy L. Sayers or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Simenon had a love-hate relationship with his detective character. Simenon would stop the detective series and swear to never write another title, only to resume after several years. Like Sayers and Doyle, Maigret thought he had better books to write. The *roman policiers* (police novels) paid the writer's bills. Simenon had extravagant tastes, wives, family, and mistresses to support. The last forty years of his writing career were spent jumping back and forth between the detective novels and the serious novels he preferred to write.

The *roman durs* (hard novels) were built on atmosphere, terse dialog, little scenery, dark themes, and sympathetic characters with minor flaws that became major problems when exposed to the proper circumstances. Simenon always pushed his characters from behind, a little at a time, until the crises they faced were fully revealed to both them and the reader and their fates unmistakable to both as well.

As a writer, Simenon was respected in his lifetime. André Gide considered Simenon one of the greatest of French writers and maintained years of correspondence, mostly about Simenon's writing methods. In 1937, Simenon announced to the world that he would win the Nobel Prize in Literature within ten years. Sadly, he never did win the prize. He sat by and watched as lesser writers won distinction. Critics waited for a major opus, a large work that would serve as a capstone to Simenon's career. It never came. Simenon once said that all of his smaller novels should be viewed together as one work. It was unknown whether Simenon's lifestyle, his brashness, his brevity, or his prolific output prevented him from winning greater acclaim, but he was admired and respected by other writers. Simenon himself admired Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain. One can see his influence on their work and their influence on his work.

## THREE BEDROOMS IN MANHATTAN

**First published:** *Trois Chambres à Manhattan*, 1946 (English translation, 2003; also as *Three Beds in Manhattan*, 1964)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A lonely man and woman without direction find each other in New York City and experience the intensity and uncertainty of new love.*

*Three Bedrooms in Manhattan* is semiautobiographical, based on Simenon's meeting with his second wife, Denise Ouimet. In Simenon's role is French actor François Combe, a man jilted by his more-famous French actress wife. He has come to New York to escape his demons, not to mention his former wife, her younger lover, and the French press.

Combe has been in the city for several weeks, moving into a series of more decrepit apartments. He is ashamed to have anyone see his latest residence. He walks into a neighborhood bar late one night to escape the squalor. Sitting at the bar is a fairly attractive woman, and she strikes up a conversation with Combe. Her name is Katherine, but Combe likes to call her Kay.

Simenon describes the chance encounter of two desperately lonely people. As Kay is perched on her barstool, temporarily homeless, she tells herself that she will become attached to the next man she meets. She meets Combe. Meanwhile, Combe tells himself that he is just visiting New York, and he can go home and resume his career any time he wants. He spends his days drinking and carousing with his fellow French show business expatriates. Combe is more than fifty years old now and unbelievable in leading man roles. He is reduced to walk-on character parts requiring a middle-aged Frenchman. Kay calls him Frank.

Their first night together resembles a forced march through a desert; the hot, unforgiving desert is replaced by the cold night and the equally unforgiving city streets. They latch on to each other like two people who are drowning, each hoping the other knows how to swim. Clinging to each other, they walk and walk, stop for a drink, play a tune on the jukebox, and repeat the process over

and over until the sun comes up and exhaustion claims them.

Since she has no home and he is ashamed of his, they find a seedy hotel. It is their first bedroom in Manhattan. After passionate love making, they fall asleep as the city awakens to start the day.

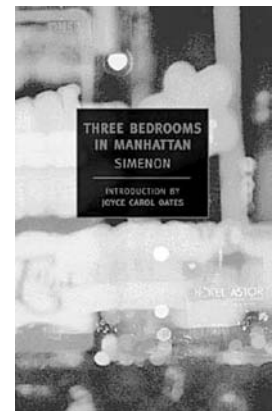
After the initial thrill of the physical encounter, Kay and Frank speed through the early stages of romance. Frank is the more emotionally damaged of the two. He is tormented by his failed marriage, and he is deeply paranoid and distrustful of Kay. He imagines her past dalliances, and they haunt him. His jealousy is wild and threatens to destroy their relationship before it has a chance to grow.

After only two days, Frank realizes that Kay loves him. In a few short days, Frank and Kay go through all the stages of young love: blind romance, all-consuming physical fire, and hopeless addiction to each other. Frank can not stand to be away from her. He is afraid to leave her alone, afraid he will return to find her gone.

As they begin to settle into a routine in his apartment, Kay receives word that her only child, her daughter, is gravely ill in Mexico. She must be with her. Frank realizes she must go, and he grudgingly takes her to the airport, and with fear he watches her walk away. As the days pass without her, his doubts return with a vengeance. He spends the aching hours alone, and he begins to revert to his life before Kay, drinking heavily and carousing with theater friends.

While with his friends, he talks of nothing but Kay, and a pretty young woman listens intently. Her name is June. Still professing his great love for Kay, he takes June to his and Kay's bedroom. They make love, and the next morning while still lying in bed together, the telephone rings. It is Kay. She is on her way home. She hears something in Frank's voice and asks him what is wrong. He tells Kay nothing that he should. June leaves, and Frank decides to tell Kay everything.

Frank takes Kay directly from the airport back to



the diner where they first met. They walk and they drink much as they did that first night, and they finally arrive at the apartment, and he has not cleaned up the mess. Everything is just as he and June left it, as if to say, "Here is what I have done. Deal with it."

Kay deals with it. It is at this moment that Frank says to Kay what he has never said: He loves her. He says it, and he means it. Through the night, they stay in the apartment, though not on the bed. They leave first thing the next morning, closing the door behind them.

## DIRTY SNOW

**First published:** *La Neige était sale*, 1948  
(English translation, 2003; also translated as *The Snow Was Black*, 1950, and *The Stain in the Snow*, 1953)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In an occupied country lawlessness prevails, and one disturbed young man searches for his own humanity while struggling to understand the essence of decency.*

Frank Friedmaier is a young man who lives on the third floor of a tenement in an unnamed city under foreign occupation. Frank shares his apartment with his mother, Lotte, who runs a brothel, and various prostitutes in her employ. Frank is a pimp, and he is the antihero of *Dirty Snow*, a novel often critically acclaimed as Simenon's greatest work.

Almost all of Simenon's novels are studies of a single character. Simenon explores the world through Frank's sociopathic perception. Early in the novel, Frank kills a man he does not like but hardly knows in order to impress other men he hardly knows who do not like Frank. Law has been replaced by a perverted state of nature, dividing citizens into two camps: those who quietly endure or secretly resist the occupation, or those, like Frank and his mother, who cater to the occupiers.

Frank's great obsession is his neighbor, Gerhardt Holst, and Holst's virgin daughter, Sissy. Sissy is infatuated with Frank, and Frank abuses Sissy's affection in order to capture her father's attention.

Holst represents dignity and decency and paternal discipline, qualities Frank has never experienced but seeks to understand.

One of the key events in the novel is when Frank leads Sissy to what she believes will be her first sexual experience, but Frank substitutes his friend, Fred Kromer, for himself, and Kromer rapes Sissy while Frank listens at the door. Frank wants to be recognized, to get attention for his awful deeds, and especially to force Holst to deal with him as a person. However, Holst continues to ignore him, even as Sissy suffers a nervous breakdown and a lengthy illness.

Defying authority, Frank yearns to be arrested, to undergo correction. Frank wants discipline, a father figure. One day, with no warning or any resistance on Frank's part, he is arrested. His crime, one he is unaware of committing, is possessing stolen currency.

Frank languishes in prison, and every morning a group of prisoners is marched into the courtyard and executed. He is treated like an animal, isolated from the other prisoners, tormented by his interrogator, a man Frank thinks of as "the old gentleman."

Months pass, and Frank's mother and her prostitutes come to visit. Frank is questioned routinely in long sessions with "the old gentleman" punctuated by beatings. Finally, Holst and Sissy come to visit him. In Frank's tired, twisted mind this visit vindicates his existence, provides him with redemption. Holst finally recognizes Frank's existence, and Frank finally surrenders his will. He confesses everything. He only wants to die at a place and time of his captor's choosing. One rainy morning, at long last, he joins a line of prisoners and is taken out into the yard and shot.

This sobering book is Simenon's war novel, though written in 1948 in the comfort of the United States. Simenon did not abandon France during the Occupation, but Simenon was not French, and the occupation he writes of is not based on the occupation of France in World War II but is based more on the occupation of Simenon's home country of Belgium during World War I.

The occupation Simenon knew best was that of Liège, when, as a boy, he learned that everyone cheated the system in order to survive. Simenon believed that a man learned most of what he needed to know by the age of eighteen, and if he

had not learned a lesson by then, he probably was not going to learn. *Dirty Snow* represents what Simenon learned, as a youth, of enemy occupation.

## RED LIGHTS

**First published:** *Feux rouges*, 1953 (English translation, 1975; also as *The Hitchhiker*, 1955)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An alcoholic husband and his long-suffering wife, caught in a loveless marriage, survive a crisis that pulls them together.*

Steve Hogan and his wife Nancy are traveling by car from their Long Island home to pick up their kids from a summer camp in Maine. The annual trip brings heavy traffic over the weekend, when city dwellers escape to the country. *Red Lights* portrays the mundane that has turned dangerous, the worst-case scenario brought to reality.

Steve has not admitted his alcoholism to himself or to anyone else. Like many of Simenon's characters, Steve is dancing on the rim of the abyss, one misstep away from disaster. Simenon gives Steve that little push, not even a shove, closer to a nudge, but it is just enough.

Steve is in denial about his drinking and about his marriage. Steve and Nancy's marriage is in trouble. They seldom even speak to each other, living their lives in separate orbits.

During the long car trip, Steve and Nancy are left no choice but to interact. Steve is a weak man, and the strain proves too much. He fortified himself with a stiff drink on the way home before leaving for the trip, and he had another drink at dinner, and he needs a third drink instead of just wanting it. A few hours into the trip, city traffic behind them, Steve makes his first tavern stop. Nancy waits in the car.

Another few hours of driving and Steve gets the urge to stop again for another drink. His drinking becomes the topic of conversation between them. If he stops again, Nancy says, she will go on without him. He will have to find his own way to Maine. Steve, asserting his manhood, is in the mood to show Nancy who is boss. He stops at another tavern, and he takes the keys with him.

While sitting at the bar, Steve begins to contemplate the meaning of manhood. What makes a real man? Steadily advancing into a stupor, Steve strikes up a conversation with the strange man who sits down by him at the bar. The radio in the bar plays in the background, and a story about an escaped convict from Sing Sing Prison has the barflies talking. As time passes, Steve begins to imagine that the man sitting next to him is the escaped convict. The man quietly leaves the bar. Steve thinks this stranger, this escaped convict, is a real man.

Enough time has passed, and Steve thinks Nancy will have learned her lesson. He staggers out to the car, gets behind the wheel, and finds Nancy gone. The note that she left says she has walked to the bus depot. In her place is the stranger from the bar. Steve is right; the stranger is the escaped convict.

The convict is Sid Halligan. He has a gun and persuades Steve to drive. It does not bother Steve's conscience to drive. He thinks Nancy will be fine. As Steve drives on through the night, harboring the criminal in his car, avoiding police roadblocks, he wishes that he had Halligan's nerve. Steve wishes that he were more of a man, more like Halligan.

Steve drives off the road, waking Halligan. The car has a punctured tire, and Steve is without a spare. Steve passes out by the side of the road, and morning finds him alone with his wallet missing.

With the few bills he has left in his shirt pocket, Steve slowly begins to pull himself together. He calls Maine, but Nancy is not there. Steve walks to a roadside diner. He looks and smells like he has been drinking all night. He attempts breakfast.

As he picks at his food and wonders about Nancy's whereabouts, the locals discuss a "mystery woman" found along the side of the highway last night. Steve's ears perk up when the description matches Nancy. Panicked, Steve calls the local hospitals until he finds the right one. He has his car repaired and finds his way to Nancy's bedside at a hospital in a small Massachusetts seaside town.

Nancy does not want to speak to him. She might be afraid of him or ashamed of herself. Steve does not understand, at first, what has really happened to Nancy. The police spell it out for him. She was raped by Halligan. Nancy blames herself for leaving Steve, and Steve blames his drinking. With help from the police, Steve cleans himself up and begins

to act responsibly. Meanwhile, Halligan is finally captured and positively identified by both Nancy and Steve.

As the novel concludes, Nancy believes their marriage had been a happy one but it will never survive this crisis. Steve believes their marriage can survive but that their marriage had not been a happy one for many years. Steve and Nancy come to terms and agree to stay married. They will go on with the kids and with each other, but the future will be different. Steve will stop drinking, and he and Nancy and their family will face life honestly and without fear.

### SUMMARY

The two brands of Georges Simenon novels—the Maigret novels, or *roman policiers* (police novels), and the Simenon novels, or *roman durs* (hard novels)—have some important similarities. Both benefit from tight writing, a stingy use of vocabu-

lary, and a complete lack of extraneous or superfluous detail, and they all explore the human character. The human character in Simenon is most often represented by one person, and that one person is trapped in a predicament of his own making. Simenon pushes the character to his breaking point, testing his mettle.

In *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan*, *Dirty Snow*, and *Red Lights*, each man experiences desperation. Each man is desperate to resolve inner conflict, whether it is an inability to love, a lack of humanity, or a refusal to recognize one's own faults. Simenon pushes each man to the abyss of personal crisis, prodding him with truth until the man either plunges to his fate or steps back from the brink of disaster to commence his salvation. The purpose of this exercise, repeated in each novel, is always to understand and never to judge.

Randy L. Abbott

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- La Tête d'un homme*, 1931 (*A Battle of Nerves*, 1939)
- Le Charretier de la "Providence,"* 1931 (*The Crime at Lock 14*, 1934; also known as *Maigret Meets a Milord*, 1963)
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*Les Gens d'en face*, 1933 (*The Window over the Way*, 1951)  
*L'Homme de Londres*, 1934 (*Newhaven-Dieppe*, 1942)  
*Le Locataire*, 1934 (*The Lodger*, 1943)  
*Les Suicidés*, 1934 (*One Way Out*, 1943)  
*Maigret*, 1934 (*Maigret Returns*, 1941)  
*Quartier Nègre*, 1935  
*Les Demoiselles de Concarneau*, 1936 (*The Breton Sisters*, 1943)  
*Faubourg*, 1937 (*Home Town*, 1944)  
*L'Assassin*, 1937 (*The Murderer*, 1949)  
*Le Blanc à lunettes*, 1937 (*Talatala*, 1943)  
*Chemin sans issue*, 1938 (*Blind Alley*, 1946)  
*L'Homme qui regardait passer les trains*, 1938 (*The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By*, 1945)  
*Monsieur la Souris*, 1938 (*The Mouse*, 1950)  
*Les Inconnus dans la maison*, 1940 (*Strangers in the House*, 1951)  
*Il pleut, bergère . . .*, 1941 (*Black Rain*, 1949)  
*Le Voyageur de la Toussaint*, 1941 (*Strange Inheritance*, 1950)  
*La Maison du juge*, 1942 (*Maigret in Exile*, 1978)  
*Les Caves du Majestic*, 1942 (*Maigret and the Hotel Majestic*, 1977)  
*La Veuve Couderc*, 1942 (*Ticket of Leave*, 1954; also known as *The Widow*, 1955)  
*Oncle Charles s'est enfermé*, 1942 (*Uncle Charles Has Locked Himself In*, 1987)  
*Cécile est morte*, 1942 (*Maigret and the Spinster*, 1977)  
*Signé Picpus*, 1944 (*To Any Lengths*, 1958)  
*L'Inspecteur cadavre*, 1944 (*Maigret's Rival*, 1979)  
*Félicie est là*, 1944 (*Maigret and the Toy Village*, 1978)  
*L'Âiné des Ferchaux*, 1945 (*Magnet of Doom*, 1948)  
*La Fuite de Monsieur Monde*, 1945 (*Monsieur Monde Vanishes*, 1967)  
*Trois Chambres à Manhattan*, 1946 (*Three Beds in Manhattan*, 1964; also known as *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan*, 2003)  
*Le Clan des Ostendais*, 1947 (*The Ostenders*, 1952)  
*Lettre à mon juge*, 1947 (*Act of Passion*, 1952)  
*Maigret à New York*, 1947 (*Maigret in New York's Underworld*, 1955)  
*La Neige était sale*, 1948 (*The Snow Was Black*, 1950; also known as *The Stain in the Snow*, 1953; also as *Dirty Snow*, 2003)  
*Les Vacances de Maigret*, 1948 (*Maigret on Holiday*, 1950; also known as *No Vacation for Maigret*, 1953)  
*Maigret et son mort*, 1948 (*Maigret's Special Murder*, 1964)  
*Pedigree*, 1948 (English translation, 1962)  
*Les Fantômes du chapelier*, 1949 (*The Hatter's Ghosts*, 1956)  
*La Première Enquête de Maigret*, 1949 (*Maigret's First Case*, 1958)  
*Le Fond de la bouteille*, 1949 (*The Bottom of the Bottle*, 1954)  
*Les Fantômes du chapelier*, 1949 (*The Hatter's Ghosts*, 1956)  
*Les Quatre Jours du pauvre homme*, 1949 (*Four Days in a Lifetime*, 1953)  
*Maigret chez le coroner*, 1949 (*Maigret at the Coroner's*, 1980)  
*Mon ami Maigret*, 1949 (*My Friend Maigret*, 1956)  
*L'Amie de Mme Maigret*, 1950 (*Madame Maigret's Own Case*, 1959; also known as *Madame Maigret's Friend*, 1960)  
*L'Enterrement de Monsieur Bouvet*, 1950 (*The Burial of Monsieur Bouvet*, 1955)  
*Les Volets verts*, 1950 (*The Heart of a Man*, 1951)

*Maigret et la vieille dame*, 1950 (*Maigret and the Old Lady*, 1958)  
*Les Mémoires de Maigret*, 1951 (*Maigret's Memoirs*, 1963)  
*Maigret au "Picratt's,"* 1951 (*Maigret in Montmartre*, 1954)  
*Maigret en meublé*, 1951 (*Maigret Takes a Room*, 1960)  
*Maigret et la grande perche*, 1951 (*Maigret and the Burglar's Wife*, 1969)  
*Une Vie comme neuve*, 1951 (*A New Lease on Life*, 1963)  
*Le Révolver de Maigret*, 1952 (*Maigret's Revolver*, 1956)  
*Maigret, Lognon, et les gangsters*, 1952 (*Inspector Maigret and the Killers*, 1954; also known as *Maigret and the Gangsters*, 1974)  
*Antoine et Julie*, 1953 (*The Magician*, 1955)  
*Feux rouges*, 1953 (*The Hitchhiker*, 1955; also known as *Red Lights*, 1975)  
*Maigret a peur*, 1953 (*Maigret Afraid*, 1961)  
*Maigret et l'homme du banc*, 1953 (*Maigret and the Man on the Bench*, 1975)  
*Maigret se trompe*, 1953 (*Maigret's Mistake*, 1954)  
*Crime impuni*, 1954 (*The Fugitive*, 1955)  
*L'Horloger d'Everton*, 1954 (*The Watchmaker of Everton*, 1955)  
*Le Grand Bob*, 1954 (*Big Bob*, 1954)  
*Les Témoins*, 1954 (*The Witnesses*, 1956)  
*Maigret à l'école*, 1954 (*Maigret Goes to School*, 1957)  
*Maigret chez le ministre*, 1954 (*Maigret and the Calame Report*, 1969)  
*Maigret et la jeune morte*, 1954 (*Maigret and the Dead Girl*, 1955)  
*Le Grand Bob*, 1955 (*Big Bob*, 1972)  
*Les Complices*, 1955 (*The Accomplices*, 1964)  
*Maigret et le corps sans tête*, 1955 (*Maigret and the Headless Corpse*, 1967)  
*Maigret tend un piège*, 1955 (*Maigret Sets a Trap*, 1965)  
*En cas de malheur*, 1956 (*In Case of Emergency*, 1958)  
*Le Petit Homme d'Arkangelsk*, 1956 (*The Little Man from Archangel*, 1966)  
*Un Échec de Maigret*, 1956 (*Maigret's Failure*, 1962)  
*Maigret s'amuse*, 1957 (*Maigret's Little Joke*, 1957)  
*Dimanche*, 1958 (*Sunday*, 1960)  
*Les Scrupules de Maigret*, 1958 (*Maigret Has Scruples*, 1959)  
*Maigret voyage*, 1958 (*Maigret and the Millionaires*, 1974)  
*Maigret et les témoins récalcitrants*, 1959 (*Maigret and the Reluctant Witnesses*, 1959)  
*Une Confiance de Maigret*, 1959 (*Maigret Has Doubts*, 1968)  
*L'Ours en peluche*, 1960 (*Teddy Bear*, 1971)  
*Maigret aux assises*, 1960 (*Maigret in Court*, 1961)  
*Maigret et les vieillards*, 1960 (*Maigret in Society*, 1962)  
*Betty*, 1961 (English translation, 1975)  
*Le Train*, 1961 (*The Train*, 1964)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Frank's self-imposed exile in *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan* compare to Georges Simenon's own self-imposed exile in the United States?
- How might Simenon's relationship with his mother have influenced his behavior with other women?
- Does Simenon's writing style, fast and brief, prevent him from receiving more serious consideration as a writer of literature?
- In *Dirty Snow*, what does Frank Friedmaier's experience with foreign occupation say about Simenon's opinions of having endured life in both occupied Belgium and France?
- What does Simenon's aim in writing fiction—to understand and not to judge—suggest about Simenon's own life?
- In *Red Lights*, how does Steve and Nancy's inability to communicate with each other contribute to the crisis they experience?

*Maigret et le voleur paresseux*, 1961 (*Maigret and the Lazy Burglar*, 1963)  
*La Porte*, 1962 (*The Door*, 1964)  
*Maigret et le client du samedi*, 1962 (*Maigret and the Saturday Caller*, 1964)  
*Maigret et les braves gens*, 1962 (*Maigret and the Black Sheep*, 1976)  
*La Colère de Maigret*, 1963 (*Maigret Loses His Temper*, 1964)  
*Les Anneaux de Bicêtre*, 1963 (*The Patient*, 1963; also known as *The Bells of Bicêtre*, 1964)  
*Maigret et le clochard*, 1963 (*Maigret and the Bum*, 1973)  
*La Chambre bleue*, 1964 (*The Blue Room*, 1964)  
*Maigret et le fantôme*, 1964 (*Maigret and the Apparition*, 1975)  
*Maigret se défend*, 1964 (*Maigret on the Defensive*, 1966)  
*La Patience de Maigret*, 1965 (*The Patience of Maigret*, 1966)  
*Le Petit Saint*, 1965 (*The Little Saint*, 1965)  
*La Mort d'Auguste*, 1966 (*The Old Man Dies*, 1967)  
*Le Confessionnal*, 1966 (*The Confessional*, 1968)  
*Maigret et l'affaire Nahour*, 1966 (*Maigret and the Nahour Case*, 1967)  
*Le Chat*, 1967 (*The Cat*, 1967)  
*Le Voleur de Maigret*, 1967 (*Maigret's Pickpocket*, 1968)  
*L'Ami de l'enfance de Maigret*, 1968 (*Maigret's Boyhood Friend*, 1970)  
*La Main*, 1968 (*The Man on the Bench in the Barn*, 1970)  
*La Prison*, 1968 (*The Prison*, 1969)  
*Maigret à Vichy*, 1968 (*Maigret in Vichy*, 1969)  
*Maigret hésite*, 1968 (*Maigret Hesitates*, 1970)  
*Maigret et le tueur*, 1969 (*Maigret and the Killer*, 1971)  
*Novembre*, 1969 (*November*, 1970)  
*La Folle de Maigret*, 1970 (*Maigret and the Madwoman*, 1972)  
*Maigret et le marchand de vin*, 1970 (*Maigret and the Wine Merchant*, 1971)  
*La Cage de verre*, 1971 (*The Glass Cage*, 1973)  
*La Disparition d'Odile*, 1971 (*The Disappearance of Odile*, 1972)  
*Maigret et l'homme tout seul*, 1971 (*Maigret and the Loner*, 1975)  
*Maigret et l'indicateur*, 1971 (*Maigret and the Informer*, 1972)  
*Les Innocents*, 1972 (*The Innocents*, 1973)  
*Maigret et Monsieur Charles*, 1972 (*Maigret and Monsieur Charles*, 1973)

SHORT FICTION:

*Les 13 coupables*, 1932 (*The Thirteen Culprits*, 2002)  
*Les Dossiers de L'Agence O*, 1943  
*Les Nouvelles Enquêtes de Maigret*, 1944 (*The Short Cases of Inspector Maigret*, 1959)  
*Nouvelles exotiques*, 1944  
"La Pipe de Maigret," 1947 ("Maigret's Pipe," 1977)  
*Maigret et l'inspecteur malchanceux*, 1947 (also known as *Maigret et l'inspecteur malgracieux*)  
*Maigret se fâche*, 1947 ("Maigret in Retirement," 1976)  
*Un Noël de Maigret*, 1951 (*Maigret's Christmas*, 1951)

NONFICTION:

*Le Roman de l'homme*, 1958 (*The Novel of Man*, 1964)  
*Quand j'étais vieux*, 1970 (*When I Was Old*, 1971)  
*Lettre à ma mère*, 1974 (*Letter to My Mother*, 1976)  
*Mémoires intimes*, 1981 (*Intimate Memoirs*, 1984)  
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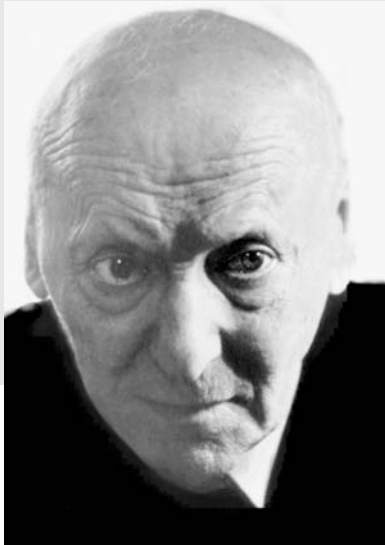
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## ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

**Born:** Leoncin, Poland

July 14 or November 21, 1904

**Died:** Surfside, Florida

July 24, 1991

*Generally considered the outstanding Yiddish fiction writer of the twentieth century, Nobel laureate Singer immortalized a vanishing way of life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born on either July 14 or November 21, 1904. Although his birth was recorded in nearby Radzymin, his actual birthplace was Leoncin, Poland, a village near Warsaw. Isaac's mother was Bathsheba Zylberman Singer, the daughter of the Orthodox rabbi of Bilgoray. His father, Pinchas Mendel Singer, was the Hasidic rabbi of Leoncin. Isaac had an older sister, Hinde Esther Singer, and an older brother, Israel Joshua Singer. Two years after Isaac's birth, Bathsheba had another boy, Moishe. After Pinchas Mendel Singer had lived in Leoncin for ten years, he and his family moved to Radzymin, where the rabbi was supposed to direct a yeshiva, or talmudic college. There seemed to be no provision for a salary, however, and financially desperate, in 1908 the family moved to Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, where Pinchas Mendel made a meager living from fees earned as judge of an ecclesiastical court.

Even as a young child, Singer was already asking questions about the meaning of life and joining in the family discussions about theology, morality, and politics. In his home, Singer encountered very different viewpoints. His father was scholarly and mystical; his mother, practical and rational. His brother Israel Joshua was a rationalist and, eventually, a socialist and a Zionist, who at twenty-one left home to live a bohemian lifestyle and write secular fiction.

In 1917, when he was fourteen, Singer went to Bilgoray for a visit with his grandparents and remained there for four crucial years. During this time, he was not only observing life in a village that had remained essentially unchanged for centuries, but he was also reading non-Jewish philosophy, science, and literature, and thus venturing out of the restricted environment in which he had been reared. Thus, at the same time he was absorbing the traditions of his people and moving away from them. His family, however, still expected him to become a rabbi. In 1921, he was sent to the Tachkemoni Rabbinical Seminary in Warsaw, but after a year of miserable poverty and intellectual boredom, he left. In 1923, Singer began working for a literary magazine; he supported himself by proof-reading and translating and, like his brother, worked at his writing.

Both Israel and Isaac had chosen to write in Yiddish. As for genre, the first works by Isaac to be published were short stories, while Israel was producing novels. Israel's second novel sold so well in the United States that in 1934 he decided to move to New York.

With Adolf Hitler consolidating his power day by day and intensifying his campaign of hatred for the Jews, Isaac, too, decided to leave Poland for good. There was nothing to hold him there. His common-law wife, Runya, a Communist, had left him to go to Russia, taking their little son, Israel, with her; she was never to return but would rear her child in Israel. Singer's novel *Der Sotn in Gorey* (1935; *Satan in Goray*, 1955) had met with a lukewarm reception. Furthermore, he missed his older



brother, who was his closest friend and his mentor. In 1935, Singer left Poland forever.

During his first ten years in New York, however, Singer had great difficulty writing. There are several possible explanations for his creative block: his discovery that Yiddish, in which he was writing, seemed to be a language whose readership was disappearing; his concern about his family in Poland; and perhaps even feelings of inadequacy because his brother was now famous under the name of I. J. Singer. At any rate, although he was a regular contributor to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Isaac seemed unable to write any publishable fiction for five years. Then, in 1940, he married an immigrant from Germany, Alma Haimann Wassermann. Perhaps his marriage helped him to emerge from his depression; perhaps he was becoming adjusted to his new home. Whatever the cause, he began to write short stories. Even after his brother died unexpectedly in 1944, leaving him bereft, Singer continued his writing. The following year, his novel *Di Familye Mushkat* (1950; *The Family Moskat*, 1950) began to appear serially in the *Jewish Daily Forward*. In 1950, as *The Family Moskat*, it was the first of Singer's novels to be published in English. The sales figures made it clear to Singer that his financial success would depend not on Yiddish publication but on translations from the Yiddish. From that time forward, Singer worked very closely with his translators, including Joseph Singer, the son of I. J. Singer, who was responsible for the English versions of many of his works, and his own son from his first marriage, Israel Zamir, who produced Hebrew versions of Singer's short stories.

The next two decades were very productive. Singer's first collection of short stories in translation, *Gimpel the Fool, and Other Stories*, appeared in 1957. Furthermore, as they would throughout his life, his novels continued to appear as serials in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, written in Yiddish and later translated into English. They included the family epic *Der Hoyf* (1953-1955; *The Manor*, 1967, and *The Estate*, 1969). Singer was also writing books for children, including *A Day of Pleasure: Stories of a Boy Growing Up in Warsaw* (1969), which won a National Book Award the following year.

During the 1970's, Singer continued to work in a variety of genres. His short-story collection, *A Crown of Feathers, and Other Stories* (1973) won another National Book Award. Two autobiographical

volumes, *A Little Boy in Search of God: Mysticism in a Personal Light* (1976) and *A Young Man in Search of Love* (1978), received high praise from critics. Singer also turned to drama. A number of his short stories were made into plays, including *Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy*, which was produced on Broadway in 1974, then filmed as *Yentl* in 1983. The 1989 film adaptation of *Enemies: A Love Story* (1972), originally published in Yiddish as *Sonim, de Geshichte fun a Liebe* (1966), received two Academy Award nominations, one for best actress and the other for best screenplay.

In 1978, Singer received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The citation praised him for his art in narrative and noted that although the background of his works was the Polish-Jewish tradition, they revealed the human condition, which transcends cultural barriers. In his acceptance speech, Singer commented on the values that he had learned from the humble people whom he had known in childhood, who spoke in a vanishing tongue, the language of a people in exile.

In the final decade of his life, Singer published one of his least successful novels, *Der Bal-Tshuve* (1974; *The Penitent*, 1983), which lacked the humor and the complexity of his earlier works. Many critics believe that his real masterpiece is *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1982). After a series of strokes, Singer died in Surfside, Florida, on July 24, 1991.

## ANALYSIS

The world of Singer is an extremely limited one. Almost without exception, his characters are Eastern European Jews or Jewish residents of the United States who emigrated from Eastern Europe. All of his settings are Jewish communities, whether they are the little Polish villages, where so many of his short stories take place, the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, a Jewish section of New York City or of Miami Beach, or the Jewish homeland, Israel.

Even though Singer's characters and his settings are limited, his novels may be placed three hundred years back in time or set in the present. *Satan in Goray* and *Der Knekht* (1961; *The Slave*, 1962) both take place in Poland in the middle of the seventeenth century, when Bogdan Khmelnytsky and his Cossacks were committing the most barbaric atrocities and destroying whole Jewish villages. *The Manor* is set in the latter half of the nineteenth cen-

tury; *Der Kuntsnmakher fun Lublin* (1958-1959; *The Magician of Lublin*, 1960), at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century; and *The Family Moskat*, in the first half of the twentieth century, ending with the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. At the beginning of *The Penitent*, Singer indicates that he is quoting a story told to him in 1969.

The historical setting of the novels is important because they are realistic works. It is difficult, however, to date many of Singer's stories. This timeless quality results from their setting, the little Jewish villages of Eastern Europe, where life remained relatively unchanged for centuries, and from their folkloric content; the demons in these stories might be playing their tricks two hundred years into the past or during the years of Singer's own childhood. On the other hand, those stories that deal with the breakup of the traditional society, with Jews lost in non-Jewish Warsaw or lost in America, before and after the Holocaust, are tied to their particular time in history.

As a whole, Singer's fiction shows his preoccupation with the loss of an old way of thinking, feeling, and believing, which resulted both from the seductive appeal of the modern world and from the Nazis' annihilation of millions of those who adhered to the tradition. The uncertainties and the disagreements of critics, as they attempt to define Singer's attitude toward traditional Judaism, seem to reflect the author's own vacillations and uncertainties.

For example, *The Penitent* is a brief, seemingly simple novel. At the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, Joseph Shapiro, an American, approaches Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose disciple Shapiro had been in New York, reading all of his books and faithfully attending his lectures. They arrange to meet, and the rest of the book is Shapiro's account of his disillusionment with modern life and his return to traditional Judaism, which, ironically, includes his abandoning the reading of secular books such as Singer's.

*The Penitent* was serialized in Yiddish in 1974. Nine years later, when it was published in translation, Singer appended a note, insisting that while he believes in God, he cannot see His mercy in the world that He created, and that while he agrees with Shapiro's diagnosis of the sickness of modern humanity, he does not believe that he or anyone

else can escape temptation simply by immersing himself in orthodoxy. Even after reading this note, Singer's critics were uncertain to what degree the anger in Shapiro, which Singer had noted, was really the anger of the author himself. Therefore, some of them considered the book his worst, a mere diatribe, while others thought it to be a deliberately constructed masterpiece of irony.

This kind of confusion may be explained by Singer's ability to hold a number of opposing convictions at any given time. Therefore, his readers find it almost impossible to persuade themselves that Singer is in sympathy with whatever position they hold. Those who have embraced the modern world are troubled by Singer's disgust with it and by his advocacy of traditional restraints, as well as by his mysticism; on the other hand, those who advocate a return to orthodoxy are shocked by his attitude toward sex, which Singer seems to consider a joyful, rather than an evil, experience, and by the impish humor that tends to overcome him at the most serious moments.

As Sarah Blacher Cohen pointed out, the play *Yentl*, which was developed from one of Singer's short stories, illustrates his habit of showing both sides of an issue at the same time in order to point out that whatever choice a human being makes will have disadvantages and may even lead to disaster. *Yentl* is a young girl in a nineteenth century Polish village who wishes to know as much as she can about her faith. Unfortunately, she lives in a society that bars women from theological studies. Therefore, because of her devotion to her God, *Yentl* commits a sin: She rejects her own female identity, disguises herself as a man, and enters a yeshiva. Then, when she falls in love with another student, Avigdor, she cannot admit her femininity. In fact, she actually marries a woman, thus committing another sin. At the end of the play, *Yentl* has lost Avigdor to her own unlawful wife, and she must leave the community, probably once again to study in the disguise of a man, thus sinfully rejecting her own sex forever.

Singer is obviously sympathetic to *Yentl*'s problems, which, after all, arise from her desire to serve God, rather than from any intent to defy Him. On the other hand, Singer does not justify *Yentl*'s action. As a traditionalist, he clearly feels that, by denying her womanly desire to marry and have children, as well as by engaging in deliberate deceit,

Yentl has made a wrong choice. Perhaps, as Cohen suggests, it is God who must be indicted for somehow making a mistake, putting a man's soul into a woman's body. To question God's decisions, as Singer frequently does in his works, is as traditional as the Torah itself. Yet though he himself broke from his orthodox background, Singer expresses his uneasiness about abandoning the old customs by emphasizing the sense of alienation felt by all individuals in his fiction who similarly abandon their ancient customs. Even though he cannot go back in time, as Shapiro is attempting to do, it is clear that Singer identifies Shapiro's problem as his own and as the problem of every Jew in the modern world.

## THE SLAVE

**First published:** *Der Knecht*, 1961 (English translation, 1962)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Although love causes a Jewish man to reject the laws of his people, that love also brings him to even more profound devotion.*

On the most superficial level, *The Slave* is simply a historical novel, set in the seventeenth century, about a Jewish man, Jacob of Josefov, who, at a time when many Jews were being massacred, was fortunate enough simply to have been captured by robbers and sold to a farmer, Jan Bzik, in a remote area of Poland. There are, however, many kinds of slavery described in the book. If at first Jacob is enslaved by the Poles, later he is the slave of lust and then a slave of the prejudice both of the Christians and of his Jewish brothers.

*The Slave* is also the story of alienation. Because he is a faithful Jew, Jacob is an alien among the Christians; however, because of his forbidden love for a non-Jewish woman and his deepening religious awareness, he is also an alien among his own people. Singer's choice of his protagonist's name underlines the importance of the theme of alienation. After the biblical Jacob's lost son, Joseph, rose from the depths of slavery to become the pharaoh's adviser, it was Jacob who moved his family to alien Egypt.

*The Slave* is divided into three parts. In the first

part, Jacob is desperately trying to keep his religious laws among debased and violent peasants who, though they think of themselves as Christians, are actually primitive pagans, governed by no moral law. When Jacob attempts to keep himself physically clean, when in obedience to his dietary laws he refuses to eat their nonkosher meat, and, above all, when he avoids taking part in their drunken debauches and sexual orgies—in other words, when he emphasizes his otherness—most of the peasants become distrustful and angry. Only the protection of Jan Bzik and the sympathy of his daughter, Wanda Bzik, keep Jacob from being killed. Yet even Wanda, who aids Jacob in his religious observances, cannot understand why, although he will sleep with her, he refuses to marry her. She is so deeply in love with Jacob that she offers to take his faith, even though by doing so she would risk her death, as well as his. Then emissaries from a Jewish community arrive with ransom money, and Jacob leaves.

After he has settled in the village of Pilitz, Jacob finds that he cannot get along without Wanda. His feeling for her is more than lust; it is love. Therefore, despite the danger, Jacob risks his life to bring her out of the mountains. Wanda has no problem about becoming Jewish. Neither the Christians in the area nor the Jews of Pilitz, however, must know that Wanda was a Polish Christian. Therefore, Jacob and Sarah, as she is now named, decide that she will pretend to be a mute, because by speaking she could easily expose her own background. For a time, their deception is successful. She is accepted as “dumb Sarah.” When Sarah goes into labor, however, she calls out in Polish, thus betraying the fact that she is not Jewish. Shocked, as well as fearful of Christian retribution, the village immediately treats her as an outcast, refusing to feed her or to help her in any way. After she dies in childbirth, Jacob flees with the newborn baby, whom he has named Benjamin, after the youngest son of the biblical Jacob, whose mother also died at his birth.

In the final section of the novel, which takes place twenty years later, Jacob returns to Pilitz, planning to find Sarah's body and to take it back with him for final burial in Israel, where Jacob now lives and where Benjamin is a lecturer in a yeshiva. Over the years, Jacob has grown spiritually, inspired by the example of Sarah, who was more devoutly Jewish than the people who scorned her. Ja-

cob, however, is not able to take her to Israel. In Pilitz, he becomes ill and dies. While he is being buried in the Jewish cemetery, the grave diggers find Sarah's body, which had supposedly been buried outside holy ground. They realize that when the cemetery was expanded, her burial place had been included, perhaps accidentally, but more likely as an indication of the judgment of Providence. Husband and wife are buried together, accepted and honored at last.

### ENEMIES: A LOVE STORY

**First published:** *Sonim, de Geshichte fun a Liebe*, 1966, in *Jewish Daily Forward* (English translation, 1972)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who have made their way to New York City find that they cannot escape the past.*

With *Enemies: A Love Story*, Singer entered a new phase in his literary career. This was the first of his novels to use the United States as its setting and also the first in which almost all of the characters were Holocaust survivors. Of all his novels, *Enemies* is probably the most complex, at least where tone is concerned. On one hand, his survivors are so haunted by their memories of the death camps, so tormented by guilt because they survived, and so tortured by their loss of faith, that they seem more dead than alive. This is the stuff of tragedy.

At the same time, *Enemies* has all the elements of a classical farce. The characters engage in self-dramatization and verbal exaggeration. They shout and throw things. Moreover, the central character, Herman Broder, is a trickster like the scheming servants in the witty plays of the English Restoration period. Because Broder has very little control over his life, he achieves his goals through trickery. He invents elaborate falsehoods in order to conceal his actions from his employer, his girl friend, his mistress, and his wife, even from casual acquaintances. As his affairs become more and more tangled and his lies more and more complex, the pace of the novel becomes increasingly hectic until the inevitable happens: Broder's victims meet, com-

pare notes, confront him, and combine against him.

The most accurate classification of *Enemies* would be as a tragicomedy. Though he does contribute to his own downfall, Broder lacks the stature of a tragic hero. However, he is a man to be pitied. He still has nightmares about the Holocaust, which deprived him of his entire family, including his wife and his children. He is not an ingrate; he has not forgotten that he was saved by the family's Polish maid Yadwiga, who hid him in a hayloft. After liberation, Broder married her in a civil ceremony and brought her to the United States, where she keeps his apartment immaculate, cooks his favorite foods, and displays her love for him in every way she can. Broder supports the household by ghostwriting speeches and articles for a nearby rabbi, who is too busy making profitable public appearances to do his own work. Broder, too, is living a lie: He pretends to Yadwiga that he is a book salesman, who is expected to make frequent business trips; in fact, when he is supposed to be in Philadelphia, he is in bed with his tempestuous mistress Masha, another Holocaust survivor. Having obtained a divorce from her husband, Masha wants Broder to abandon Yadwiga and marry her. However, her hopes are dashed by the reappearance of Broder's supposedly dead wife, Tamara. Broder now has three women to deal with, two of whom insist that they are pregnant. The novel ends with two deaths, a birth, and the disappearance of the man who found that lovers could indeed end up as enemies.

### SHOSHA

**First published:** *Neshome Eksameditseyes*, 1974 (English translation, 1978)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In Warsaw, during the period of Hitler's rise, a young Jewish writer searches for love and meaning.*

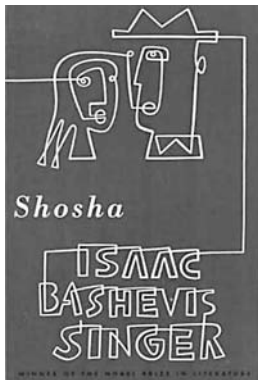
*Shosha* is a realistic novel that is undisguisedly based on Singer's own life. The protagonist, Aaron Greidinger, is the son of a rabbi. Aaron's younger brother is named Moishe. The family even lives



first at the actual address of the Singer family in Warsaw, number 10 Krochmalna Street, then later in rural Galicia. Like Singer, Aaron is an aspiring writer. He moves to Warsaw, becomes a proof-reader and translator, and becomes involved with a Communist girl. In the 1930's, like all the other Jews in Poland, he is living from day to day, waiting for Adolf Hitler's invasion and probably for death.

There are, however, important differences between Singer's life and that of Aaron. Perhaps the most crucial difference is that, in the novel there is

no older brother to guide Aaron, to help him in his career, and eventually to make it possible for him to escape to America. In contrast, Aaron must rely on friends and lovers for affection, for companionship, and for encouragement. *Shosha* is really the story of how Aaron's life and thought were influenced by his relationships with five women and one man.



The man is Dr. Morris Feitelzohn, a philosopher without a university, a nonstop talker with encyclopedic knowledge, and a noted lover of women, whom Aaron meets at the center of bohemian life in Warsaw, the Writers' Club. Aaron's discussions with Dr. Feitelzohn, who has an opinion on every subject, force the young man to think deeply. Furthermore, although Dr. Feitelzohn has no money and even borrows from the impecunious Aaron, he knows everyone. Several of his friends have an important influence on Aaron's future.

One of these friends is Celia Chentshiner, the wife of a wealthy man who encourages her extramarital affairs as long as she continues to mother him. Aaron soon discovers that Celia's only real interests in life are erotic. Even her passion for literature and the arts is based on the fact that cultural conversations with gifted men such as Dr. Feitelzohn and Aaron stimulate her sexually. Celia's affairs with them and with others, however, are in actuality an attempt to conquer boredom. Like many of Singer's characters, she is alienated from her tra-

ditions and unable to find anything to replace them.

Another of Dr. Feitelzohn's friends is Sam Dreiman, a wealthy American, whose mistress, Betty Slonim, is an actress. Unlike Celia, Betty is interested in men primarily so that she can advance her career in the theater. Encouraged by Betty, Sam becomes interested in a story that Aaron intends to write and pays him to write it as a play, with Betty in the starring role. The advance solves Aaron's financial problems; however, the play is no good, partly because Aaron has had to change it radically in order to please Betty, and partly because he has spent so much time with women, including Betty, that he has not really done it justice.

Another of the women who is important in Aaron's life is Dora Stolnitz, a fanatical Communist. Even though his mind tells him that he could well be imprisoned if the police raid her apartment, he cannot prevent himself from spending the night with her. Unfortunately, there is no place in her life for Aaron, who is an anti-Communist.

Tekla, the kind and cheerful Polish maid in Aaron's apartment house, is important primarily because of what she represents to Aaron. Unlike Celia, Betty, and Dora, all of whom make demands on life, Tekla wishes only to give of herself. It is people such as Tekla, Aaron decides, who enable one to believe in the goodness of God.

The woman with whom Aaron falls in love is in many ways like Tekla. Shosha lives on Krochmalna Street, where she and Aaron were childhood playmates. She is neither intelligent nor well educated, but she is totally devoted to Aaron. When, to the horror of his friends at the Writers' Club, Aaron marries Shosha, he is perhaps attempting to return to his childhood and to a world without ambivalence, governed by common beliefs and by unalterable rules.

Thirteen years later, some time after the end of World War II, Celia's husband and Aaron meet in Israel and compare notes about their friends and relatives, most of whom, including Shosha, were either murdered or died of hardship. As the book ends, the two men are still unable to find an answer for the question that Dr. Feitelzohn posed so many years ago: Why, if there is a good God, does He permit such suffering?



## “GIMPEL THE FOOL”

**First published:** “Gimpl Tam,” 1945  
(collected in *Gimpel the Fool, and Other Stories*, 2006)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A good man, who is deceived and mocked by everyone around him, discovers that he is not the fool that they think he is.*

Like many of Singer’s stories, “Gimpel the Fool” takes place in a shtetl, or Jewish village, in Poland, at an unspecified time before the Russian Revolution. Although it is full of details reflecting life in such a village, the story has the universal quality of a moralistic folktale, including the appearance of an evil spirit and a visitor from beyond the grave.

From the beginning of the story, it is indicated that someone called a fool in this world may not really be a fool by other standards. After he introduces himself as “Gimpel the Fool,” the narrator and protagonist proceeds to disagree with the appellation that he has been given throughout his life. He is not really a fool, he says, but simply a man who does not suspect others and, when he finds that he has been deceived, does not like to attack them. In other words, he is trusting and forgiving. Such qualities, Singer’s story suggests, should be valued, not mocked.

In the first section of the story, Gimpel describes all the tricks that were played on him during his youth, when, after he was orphaned, he became a baker’s apprentice. No matter what impossible event that he was told had occurred, he would run outside to see. Because he could be deceived so easily, everyone called him a fool. As the rabbi whom Gimpel consulted told him, however, the real danger in this world is not being a fool, but being evil. Gimpel is not evil.

When the community decides to get Gimpel married, he is certainly not deceived about the character of the bride whom they have chosen for him. Elka is dirty, shrewish, and promiscuous. With the whole village so determined on the match, however, Gimpel consents, assuring himself that once they are married, Elka will respect his authority. Unfortunately, she does not. Even on the wedding night, his wife refuses to sleep with him. Then, when Elka has a son four months after the wed-

ding, Gimpel discovers the reason why the village was so intent on the marriage.

During the next twenty years, Gimpel continues to forgive Elka for her infidelities, to treat her kindly, and to love her offspring. Then, when she is dying, Elka asks her husband’s forgiveness and reveals that none of their six children is his.

It is this shock that enables the Evil Spirit to tempt Gimpel, to urge him to deceive others as they have always deceived him. For the first time in his life, Gimpel does an evil deed. He urinates into his bread dough. Before he can distribute the bread, however, Elka comes to him in a dream and tells him that he is a fool for doing wrong, that he will pay for it in the next world, as she is paying for her evil deeds. Gimpel buries the bread, distributes his money among the children, and becomes a wanderer and a teller of stories. Now he has a new attitude toward lies. In his perspective, all things are possible, and therefore true; it is only the time and place that may be inaccurate. A happy man, Gimpel looks forward to his reunion with his wife, who now comes to him lovingly in dreams, and to life after death in a place where there is no deception.

## “ALONE”

**First published:** “Aleyn,” 1962 (collected in *Collected Stories: “Gimpel the Fool” to “The Letter Writer,”* 2004)

**Type of work:** Short story

*In a corrupt modern world, a man resists seduction by a demon.*

After he moved to the United States, Singer wrote a number of stories such as “Alone,” which reflect his conviction that the modern world is corrupt and doomed. Some of these stories are set in New York, others in Miami. “Alone” is particularly interesting because, although the setting is Miami Beach, instead of a Polish village, the pattern of the story is very much like that of the folkloric tales. There is a protagonist with a lesson to learn, an unwise wish that comes true, and an attack from a demon, which tests the hero’s virtue.

“Alone” is told in the first person. The narrator is a Jewish man who is spending the summer in Mi-

ami Beach, instead of in New York with his wife, because he suffers from hay fever. Tired of the noisy fellow guests in his hotel, he utters his wish: that he could be all alone in a hotel. The narrator's wish comes true. Bankrupt, the hotel where he is staying is closed. The guests he dislikes depart, and he moves to a room in a cheap hotel not far away, where, as he wished, he is the only guest. No one is in this hotel but the hunchbacked Cuban girl at the desk and himself.

Already tired of being alone, the narrator takes a bus to the end of the line and back, musing on the landscape that he is passing, a physical and moral desert, which humankind has disguised in order to indulge its vices, including greed, promiscuity, and cruelty. Later that evening, a hurricane hits, and as it is reaching its height, the Cuban girl asks to be admitted to his room, explaining that she is afraid. Although to him she looks like an animal or a witch, the narrator permits her to stay. Later, begging him to see that she is not a beast but a woman, the girl tells him about her life of abuse, neglect, and poverty. When she concludes by offering herself to him, however, the narrator rejects her, explaining that he must be faithful to his wife, as God mandates. Infuriated, she spits on him and leaves. The next day, the Cuban girl triumphantly tells the narrator that he must leave because the hotel is being closed.

Although to the protagonist the importance of the episode is his successful resistance to the sin of lust, Singer suggests that in fact he is guilty of another sin, that of pride. His initial wish to be alone is evidence of that sin; the narrator does not seem to think of any of his fellow guests as human beings, but only as impediments to his own desires. Even

though he repents of his wish, once again he separates himself from humanity by feeling only revulsion toward the girl at the desk. Because she is from Cuba, a place that he associates with witchcraft—in other words, because she is different from him—he assumes that the Cuban girl is a demon. Even when she tells him her sad story, he shows no pity for her, and at the end of the story, he is still focusing only on what he considers to be her witch's attempt to seduce him. Ironically, as Singer suggests, while one is resisting one kind of sin, the forces of evil may be playing their ultimate trick by sending another to take possession of the soul.

## SUMMARY

The fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer is of great historical importance because it preserves ways of thinking and acting that have almost vanished. In the communities that he describes, religion is the central reality, and behavior is decided on the basis of faith. Although there can certainly be cruelty and deceit within the shtetl—or outside it, as in modern Warsaw, New York, or Miami Beach—when Singer's characters move away from that faith and that sense of community, they feel a sense of alienation and futility.

Singer's works are most valuable not as works in a particular tradition, however, but as universal accounts of human frailty, suffering, and, sometimes, of human goodness. Like *Shosha*, Singer's fiction usually ends not with answers but with questions. It is this kind of intellectual honesty, this insistence on coming to an understanding with his God about the purpose of life in this world, that is Singer's most impressive achievement.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novels and short stories have been classified as tragicomedies. How do his works blend the elements of comedy and those of tragedy?
- How do Singer's works reflect the tradition of storytelling that is so prevalent in small, rural communities?
- Does Singer see the loss of a sense of community as a major obstacle to his characters' happiness?
- Why did the Holocaust cause many Jews to lose their faith?
- Even those of Singer's characters who say they no longer believe in God often feel guilty. Why?
- What does Singer see as the major problems in male-female relationships? What are the problems in marriage?
- How is the theme of alienation reflected in Singer's works?

*Isaac Bashevis Singer*

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## ZADIE SMITH

**Born:** London, England  
October 27, 1975

*Smith is recognized as a vibrant young multicultural voice of the new millennium, arriving on the literary scene in 2000 with a brilliant, wide-ranging, innovative, and humorous first novel depicting the multiracial culture of her native north London.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Zadie Smith was born Sadie Smith on October 27, 1975 in the Willesden area of north London, the daughter of a British father and a Jamaican mother. Willesden would become the setting of her first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), and the novel's main character, Irie, would also be the daughter of a Jamaican mother and an English father. Smith changed her name to the more exotic Zadie as a child. Smith's early interests were in the performing arts; she was a tap dancer until the age of fifteen. She was also an ardent fan of old Hollywood musical films and actress Katharine Hepburn, knowledge she would draw on in writing her second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002). For a time she earned money as a jazz singer; both of her younger brothers are rap singers in Great Britain. Smith attended Hampstead Comprehensive School until the age of eighteen and King's College, Cambridge University, from 1994 to 1997, graduating with a degree in English literature.

While at Cambridge, Smith published short stories in the *May Anthologies*, the annual collection of work by students at Oxford and Cambridge universities. Her work attracted the attention of the publishing world, and while still a university student she was offered an advance of £250,000, or approximately \$400,000, for her first two books. The size of the advance for such a young, unknown writer put her name in the news even before her first book was published.

*White Teeth*, Smith's first novel, was published in January, 2000, when the writer was only twenty-four years old. The book, a saga of three families in multicultural north London, was an immediate best seller, and Smith became a literary celebrity.

As a clever and inventive writer and a young and attractive woman of mixed race at the turn of a new century, Smith became a symbol of a new multiethnic strain of British writing. *White Teeth* won a host of awards, including the Guardian First Book Award, the Commonwealth Writers' First Book Award, and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, all in 2000. *White Teeth* was adapted for British Broadcasting Corporation television, broadcast in 2002, and has been translated into more than twenty languages.

Smith was writer-in-residence at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London from 2000 to 2001 while writing her second novel, *The Autograph Man*, which appeared in 2002. This novel, which was narrower in scope but deeper in character development than *White Teeth*, was not as well received, more than likely because it was impossible to live up to the media attention that had attended the first novel. Set in London and New York, the novel's main character is a Chinese-Jewish autograph collector. One of the themes of the novel is an exploration of the nature of fame and celebrity, possibly in reaction to Smith's experience after the publication of *White Teeth*. *The Autograph Man* won the Jewish Quarterly Review's Wingate Literary Prize in 2003. Also in 2003, Smith was included in *Granta* magazine's list of Twenty Best Young British Novelists.

In 2002 and 2003, Smith lived in the United States, teaching, studying, and writing as a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. While there, she began work on a collection of literary essays.

Smith's third novel, *On Beauty*, was published in 2005. Set in London and on the campus of a fic-



tional American university, the novel depicts the disintegration of the marriage of Howard Belsey, a liberal white art history professor married to a vibrant African American woman, and his collision with his ultraconservative Anglo-Caribbean arch-rival, Monty Kipps. *On Beauty* was short-listed for the 2005 Man Booker Prize and won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2006.

In addition to writing novels, Smith has edited and contributed and written introductions to several anthologies of fiction, and she has been a contributor of short stories to *The New Yorker* and *Granta* magazines. Smith married the poet and novelist Nicholas Laird, whom she had met while a student at Cambridge, in 2004. They settled in Kilburn, north London, not far from where she grew up, and in 2007 were collaborating on a musical based on the life of writer Franz Kafka.

#### ANALYSIS

Zadie Smith is recognized for her wide-ranging, panoramic novels, deeply plotted with an extensive cast of characters. Because of these characteristics, along with the element of social satire, the word “Dickensian” has been frequently used by critics when describing her work. However, Smith’s themes, and the society of which she is a keen observer, are distinctly twenty-first century.

A primary theme of Smith’s work is multicultural identity. Most of her characters identify with more than one culture, country, and ethnicity: Irie Jones, the principal character of *White Teeth*, is the daughter of a working-class white British father and a Jamaican mother living in multiracial north London. Alex-Li Tandem, the protagonist of *The Autograph Man*, is a Chinese-Jewish north Londoner, and the Belseys of *On Beauty* are an interracial couple. Numerous other characters in all three novels are of hybrid ethnicity and/or displaced geographically. The siblings Adam and Esther Jacobs in *The Autograph Man* are black and Jewish, born in Harlem and living in London. The Muslim brothers Millat and Magid in *White Teeth*, whose parents are both immigrants from Bangladesh to Great Britain but who are raised separately, one in Chittagong, one in London, are identical twins symbolically torn in half. Ironically, the brother brought up in Bangladesh becomes a conservative white-wigged lawyer, more British than the British,

while the brother raised in London becomes associated with a militant Islamic group. The message is that each individual must forge his or her own identity, without mirror or model, and that the contemporary world is multiethnic or global to an extent never before known in European history.

Coincidence, chance, and the unpredictability of life in spite of the best efforts of some of Smith’s characters to control outcomes are also themes in Smith’s work. In *White Teeth*, Marcus Chalfen’s FutureMouse project is an attempt to completely control genetics, to the point that every event in the mouse’s short life will be predicted, controlled, and observed. However, in the climactic scene at the end of the novel, FutureMouse escapes, evading Chalfen’s plans. Archie Jones in *White Teeth* bases important decisions on the toss of a coin; Li-Jin Tandem’s autographed pound notes, a central image in *The Autograph Man*, are created while gambling on the outcome of a wrestling match; all of Howard Belsey’s attempts at control are thwarted, from raising liberal intellectual children in his own image to the chaos of his pivotal lecture on Rembrandt, when he arrives late, soaked with perspiration, and without his notes.

Smith is noted for her style, her vivid description of settings and mannerisms, and especially for her ear for speech. While all three novels employ an omniscient third-person narrator, the use of free, indirect speech in the voice of her many characters showcases her use of dialect, ranging from Archie Jones’s working-class speech, to the hip language of the youth of north London or Boston’s Roxbury, to the discourse of academia. Nonlinear plot development heightens an emphasis on coincidence, ambiguity, and unpredictability. Humor and irony abound in her use of language and social satire, which occasionally shades into farce.

Like her characters, Smith’s work is not easily categorized. It is a hybrid: part popular culture and part dense literary writing. Critical reception has been mixed, perhaps because each book is so different from the others, because the scope of her work is vast, and because expectations have been so shaped by the amount of publicity associated with Smith. Nevertheless, each book has been an award-winner and a best seller, greatly appreciated by the public.

## WHITE TEETH

**First published:** 2000

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel is a multigenerational, multicultural saga of three families living in north London at the turn of the millennium: the Joneses, a white working-class Englishman married to a Jamaican woman; the Bangladeshi Muslim Iqbals; and the Jewish-Catholic atheist Chalfens.*

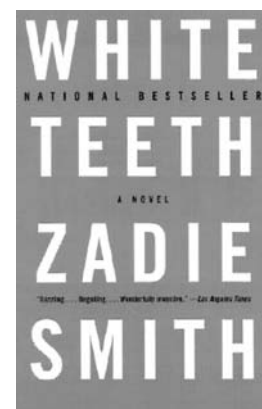
*White Teeth* is a complex and multilayered novel, with a wide cast of characters and a twisting plot ranging over many years and several continents. The story follows the fortunes of two best friends, World War II buddies Archie Jones, a white working-class man married for the second time to the much younger Clara, a Jamaican woman, and Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi who works at an Indian restaurant in London and marries the much younger Alsana. Naturally enough, their children Irie Jones and the twin Iqbal brothers, Magid and Millat, are friends in multicultural present-day north London. Samad, concerned that his boys are losing their culture, sends one brother, Magid, home to be raised by relatives in Chittagong. Irie and Millat, caught smoking marijuana in the schoolyard, agree to be tutored by classmate Joshua Chalfen in order to avoid harsher consequences. The Jewish-Catholic-atheist Chalfens are a stereotypical white liberal family, delighted to welcome such multicultural diversity into their home. Irie Jones has an unrequited desire for Millat; Joshua Chalfen has an unrequited love for Irie.

Marcus Chalfen is a genetic engineer who is working on a project called FutureMouse. Every event in FutureMouse's life will be programmed and predictable; the mouse is to live for exactly seven years, from 1993 to December 31, 1999, the eve of the new millennium. The many threads

of the novel come together at an event where FutureMouse will be introduced to the public. All the living characters are present: the senior Joneses and Iqbals; Irie, who has both embraced her Jamaican ancestry by returning to live with her grandmother and decided to go to university under the influence of the educated Chalfens; Joshua Chalfen, who has defied his father by becoming an animal rights activist; Magid, who has become Marcus's protégé and publicist; and Millat, whose militant Islamic group is determined to disrupt the event. Coincidences abound, chance meetings occur, all attempts to control outcomes fail, and the event ends in chaos and FutureMouse escapes.

The novel ends with a snapshot of the future: On December 31, 1999, Irie Jones and Joshua Chalfen, now lovers, are in Jamaica with Irie's grandmother. Irie's daughter, now seven years old, is with them. Just before the FutureMouse unveiling, Irie had slept first with Millat, then gone directly to Magid, ensuring that, since the twins have exactly the same genetic material, the child's father will never be known. Thus the child carries all the threads of multiethnicity in one body, and the novel ends on a note of hope on the eve of the millennium.

The book, a youthful first novel, has been criticized for this optimistic view of multicultural Britain, which is perhaps unrealistic. Nevertheless, the wide scope of the book, with its rich twists and turns of plot, its abundance of sharply defined characters and the sometimes unexpected connections among them, and its social observation, humor, and language all combine to make the novel technically impressive and popular with readers.



## THE AUTOGRAPH MAN

**First published:** 2002

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel explores the nature of celebrity and loss through the story of Chinese-Jewish north Londoner, Alex-Li Tandem, the professional autograph dealer of the title, who has attempted to escape the reality of his grief at the loss of his father through substance abuse and focusing on the artificial lives of Hollywood film stars.*

*The Autograph Man* is set in a fictional north London suburb called Mounjtjoy. The novel opens with a prologue in which the young Alex-Li Tandem attends a wrestling match with his father, Li-Jin, and his two friends, Mark Rubenfine and Adam Jacobs. They meet Joseph Klein, who introduces the boys to autograph collecting. At the end of the prologue, Alex's father collapses and dies of a brain tumor just at the moment the boys are rushing forward to get the autograph of the wrestler Big Daddy. Throughout most of the novel, the inability to face the death of his father and escaping reality by collecting autographs are Alex's predominant character traits.

Book 1 is set fifteen years later in Mounjtjoy. Alex has become a professional autograph dealer. He especially desires the autograph of 1950's Hollywood film star Kitty Alexander, to whom he has

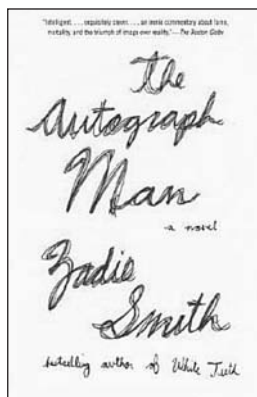
written weekly for thirteen years. The four boys of the prologue are still close friends. Alex has a girlfriend, Adam's sister Esther, but lives a superficial life and seems unable to connect with other people. His friend Adam, a black Jewish mystic, urges him to read the mourner's Kaddish on the anniversary of his father's death, but Alex resists the idea.

Book 1 presents Alex's obsession with the cult of celebrity and the brittle shallowness of this life with satirical and sometimes ribald humor and ends as he finally receives his desire, Kitty Alexander's autograph, in the mail.

Book 2 is set in New York, where Alex is attending an autograph fair and trying to find Kitty at her return address in Brooklyn. When he finds her living in genteel poverty he persuades her to return with him to London, so he can make her rich by auctioning some of her rare autographs and letters. After a television news story wrongly reports Kitty's death, Alex makes even more money than he imagined. Throughout book 2, Alex grows in self-knowledge, and he gives his commission on the sale of Kitty's letters to a dying fellow autograph man as evidence of his character development.

In the final scene of book 2 and the epilogue, Alex places his father's autograph in the place where he had contemplated placing Kitty's and recites the mourner's Kaddish in the synagogue with all of his friends present. He finally acknowledges his connection to his father, a living hero, and elevates him above the artificial heroes of Hollywood films.

Like *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man* observes and satirizes the subcultures of north London's multicultural inhabitants, but Smith's second novel is both narrower in scope and deeper in exploration of character than her first. It is inventive in form and clever in its wide range of references to both popular and literary culture. Irony and metaphor abound. Alex-Li Tandem, the autograph collector, is repeatedly unable to sign his own name, but in the touching moment when he gives his commission from the sale of Kitty's letters to the dying Brian Duchamp, he clearly signs his name to the check, taking possession of his identity in compassion. Alex-Li Tandem has taken a journey from substituting celebrity for reality to compassion and self-knowledge. However, the novel moves quickly back into vulgar humor as Alex follows this act of compassion by getting roaring drunk. One must never forget that Smith's work is funny; humor is always an important component of her commentary.



## ON BEAUTY

**First published:** 2005

**Type of work:** Novel

*Set at a fictional elite university town outside Boston, On Beauty is a social satire that describes the clash between two professors, the liberal Howard Belsey and the conservative Monty Kipps, and the subsequent disintegration of their academic and personal lives.*

The cast of characters in *On Beauty* includes the members of the liberal Belsey family, white English Howard married to African American Kiki, and their three children, Jerome, Zora, and Levi; the conservative Anglo-Caribbean Kipps family, Monty, Carlene, and their children; as well as a host of other students and academics at fictional Wellington College. The novel pays homage to E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) from its opening line, to the cross-cultural friendship of liberal Kiki Belsey and the dying conservative Christian Carlene Kipps, to the conflict between cultural liberals and conservatives.

As the novel opens, the Belsey's oldest son, Jerome, while spending a summer in London, has come under the influence of Howard Belsey's academic and philosophical archrival, Monty Kipps. Jerome has become a believing Christian, to the dismay of his atheist and ultrarational father, and has fallen in love with Monty's lovely daughter, Victoria. The antagonism between the two men is intellectual and academic; they are both art historians specializing in Rembrandt and have radically different approaches to interpreting the artist's work.

Howard is an antihero. As the novel opens he is trying to cover up his affair with a female colleague. Later he engages in an affair with Victoria Kipps. He is sometimes amusing, but his morals are too loose to make him a likable character. His approach to art is purely theoretical; he has spent his career deconstructing other people's ideas of good and beauty to the ultimate detriment of his own soul.

Monty Kipps is not above reproach either; he is having an affair with his graduate assistant while his devoted wife is dying of an unnamed disease. The two rivals' worlds and families collide when Kipps

invited to give a lecture at Wellington. Kiki becomes friends with Carlene, drawn to her by compassion and a mutual love of family. Howard is irresistibly drawn to sexually liberated Victoria Kipps, now a student at Wellington, while his daughter Zora, under the influence of Howard's former mistress, poetry teacher Claire Malcolm, champions Monty Kipps's right to advance his conservative agenda as a free speech issue. Ultimately both men lose their wives, and Howard's valued intellect deconstructs along with his personal life.

Some of the most compelling scenes in this large and ambitious novel concern race and class. The encounter at an outdoor concert on Boston Common, when Zora picks up Carl's Discman instead of her own, is reminiscent of the scene in *Howards End*, when the Schlegel sisters encounter the working man Leonard Bast and take his umbrella home by mistake. Carl, a young black man from the ghetto, is invited to audit a poetry class at Wellington and turns out to be a better poet than most of the students, as well as an objective observer of the sometimes cutthroat campus politics. Levi, the youngest Belsey son, is determined to escape from liberal white Wellington, and in some of the most humorous scenes in the novel he does his best to look and act like a ghetto kid. Class and race boundaries are crossed in both instances.

After a series of rapid plot twists, both families have crumbled. There is no redemption in the ambiguous ending. Carlene Kipps has died, Kiki has left Howard and is involved in a lawsuit with Monty for possession of the valuable painting that Carlene bequeathed to her, and Howard's career is in decay. In another ambitious novel filled with witty observation and commentary on academia, family life, politics, and pop culture, Zadie Smith has accomplished her goal of creating a twenty-first century novel of manners in homage to her literary mentor, Forster.

## SUMMARY

Zadie Smith is a technically gifted young writer whose work crosses racial and cultural boundaries. In her own life, Smith, raised in a multiethnic working-class area, was educated at Cambridge University and became a writer, moving across class boundaries while exploring the blurred lines among ethnic boundaries in contemporary urban life. Her characters are multiracial and global in

their travels, moving easily in time between past roots and present chaos, and in place from London, to various countries of origin and memory, to New York and to New England. Boundaries between liberal and conservative are also crossed, especially in the friendship between Kiki Belsey and Carlene Kipps in *On Beauty*. Smith's witty and contemporary voice, the wide scope of her novels, the vulnerability of her characters, and her social satire are elements of her work which have contributed to her phenomenal success with critics and public alike.

Susan Butterworth

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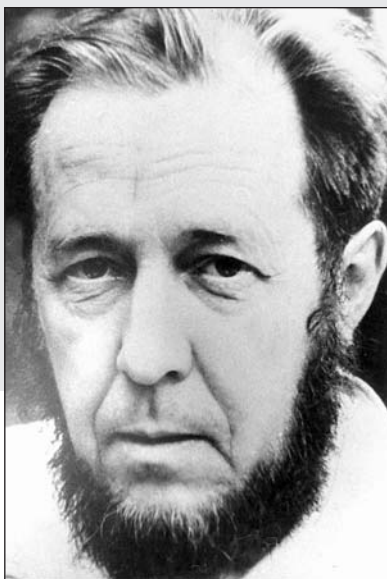
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Crossing racial and cultural boundaries has been a hallmark of Zadie Smith's career. Discuss this idea in the context of each of her books and its characters.
- Many critics felt that Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man*, did not live up to the promise of her widely acclaimed first novel, *White Teeth*. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Some of the scenes in Smith's novels are laugh-out-loud funny, such as the scene in *White Teeth* when Irie Jones decides to have her hair straightened. What scenes in her books made you laugh?
- Smith's work has been described as a brilliant mixture of references to both pop and high culture. List some examples of each type of culture referred to in her books, such as films, pop stars, and literary references.
- One of Smith's themes is the unpredictability of life. Discuss some examples of the role that chance and coincidence play in her work. Archie Jones's tossing of the dice to make important decisions is an image of chance. Can you think of other scenes or images that emphasize life's unpredictability?





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## ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

**Born:** Kislovodsk, Soviet Union (now in Russia)  
December 11, 1918

**Died:** Moscow, Russia  
August 3, 2008

*The author of several seminal works of fiction and nonfiction and a Nobel Prize winner, Solzhenitsyn is generally recognized as one of the leading writers of the twentieth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (sohl-zuh-NEET-suhn) was born on December 11, 1918, in Kislovodsk, a small Caucasus town near Rostov-on-Don in the Soviet Union (now in Russia). Six months before he was born, his father died in World War I in an accident while serving in the czarist army, for which he had volunteered. His mother, Taissa Zakharovna Shcherbak, had a difficult time rearing her family because of their social origin and because of the turmoil in Russia during the revolution and after the war. The family moved to Rostov in 1924, where Solzhenitsyn attended high school and the University of Rostov, studying mathematics and physics. He discovered early that his true love was literature and enrolled in a correspondence literature course. He sent his stories for publication but was repeatedly rejected. He transferred to the Moscow Institute of Literature, Philosophy, and History, married in 1940, and was graduated with honors on a Stalin scholarship in the summer of 1941. In the fall of the same year, he was inducted into the army, where he served with distinction almost to the end of World War II, earning medals and citations and rising to the rank of captain.

In February, 1945, Solzhenitsyn made a near fatal mistake by writing a letter to a friend in which he

blamed “the moustached one” (a reference to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin) for the defeats of the Soviet army. The letter was intercepted, and he was sentenced to eight years in concentration camps. His prison years postponed the realization of his primary ambition to become a writer, but they furnished him with the material for practically all of his works. He devised his works while still in prison and, since he could not write, memorized most of them, such as his first novel, *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* (1962; *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, 1963). For the first four years, he served as a mathematician in a prison research institute near Moscow, and this provided him with the material for his novel *Vkrughe pervom* (1968; *The First Circle*, 1968). He was released in 1953, after having served every day of his sentence in various camps.

After his release, he was not allowed to return to Moscow but had to spend three more years in the so-called inner exile in Kazakhstan, where he taught in local schools and where his stomach cancer was diagnosed, giving him only a short time to live. He overcame the disease, and this experience inspired him to write *Rakovy korpus* (1968; *Cancer Ward*, 1968). He finally returned home in 1956 and taught in a school in central Russia, which he depicted in his best short story, “Matrenin dvor” (“Matryona’s House”). A year later, he was rehabilitated and exonerated from any wrongdoing. He returned to Moscow and resumed his marriage.

Solzhenitsyn was finally able to write down the works conceived and memorized in camps. In 1962, he submitted for publication his novel about a concentration camp, *One Day in the Life of Ivan*

*Denisovich*. Since the Soviet leaders were looking for material to discredit Stalin, the novel was published, creating a worldwide sensation. A few more of his stories appeared, but soon the doors were closed to him. He was unable to publish his larger novels, *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, but, having been circulated underground, they were eventually published abroad. By this time, Solzhenitsyn had become very active in the struggle against the totalitarian system, addressing publicly the leaders and boldly demanding freedom not only for writers and other artists but also for all citizens. In this struggle, he was on a collision course with the authorities, and it was only a matter of time until he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp again. His papers and manuscripts were confiscated in 1965. In 1966, a short story was the last work of his published in Russia for a long time.

The bestowing of the Nobel Prize in Literature on Solzhenitsyn in 1970 was not only a gratifying recognition of his work but also a further salvo in the war between him and the Soviet regime. He divorced his first wife and married another woman while continuing to fight and write. In 1971, he published *Av gust chetyrnadtsatogo* (*August 1914*, 1972), the first of four volumes in a work collectively titled *Krasnoe koleso* (1983-1991; *The Red Wheel*, 1989). In 1973, the first part of another ambitious work, the three-volume documentary *Arkhipelag Gulag, 1918-1956: Opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniya* (1973-1975; *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 1974-1978), appeared in Paris. Apparently that was the last straw for the authorities, for in February, 1974, he was arrested again, but instead of being sent to a prison, he was expelled from the country. He came first to Germany, and after visiting Switzerland and Norway, in 1976 he moved to Vermont, in the United States.

The expulsion from his homeland was not the end of Solzhenitsyn's struggle. He was now free to speak out more openly and to disseminate his views even more widely. He demanded that his confiscated manuscripts be returned to him; surprisingly, the authorities obliged, apparently for fear of antagonizing him further. He made public appearances and made statements, as in his famous Harvard University address, warning the West to be vigilant and resolute in its opposition to the Soviet regime. He completed *The Gulag Archipelago* and

continued to work on *The Red Wheel*. He also insisted that he would return to his homeland when his freedom was granted.

He was able to attain these goals in the 1990's, as the changing political climate in his home country eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1990, the Soviet government restored his Russian citizenship, and the next year his treason charges were formally dropped. Solzhenitsyn and his wife, Natalia, returned to Russia in 1994, settling near Moscow. The Solzhenitsyn Prize for Russian Writing was established in 1997. On June 12, 2007, then-Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Solzhenitsyn's home to present him with an award for his work.

After his return to Russia, Solzhenitsyn published numerous works, including short stories, a series of prose poems, a memoir about his years in the West, and a two-volume book examining the history of Russian-Jewish relations, *Dvesti let vmeste, 1795-1995* (2001; two hundred years together). In the latter work, he debunked the claim that a "Jewish conspiracy" incited the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and he urged Russians and Jews to accept their complicity with the Communist government.

He also continued to generate controversy by criticizing Western materialism and denouncing Russian bureaucracy and the loss of spirituality. He called upon Russians to abandon their materialism and return to the virtues of the Russian Orthodox Church. These views led some Russians to brand him a "reactionary utopian" but were of little interest to Western readers, who had formerly embraced his anti-Soviet writings. Solzhenitsyn died of heart failure in Moscow on August 3, 2008. He was eighty-nine years old.

## ANALYSIS

Solzhenitsyn wrote a number of novels, stories, and works based on documentary, political, and sociophilosophical matters. Several dominant themes recur. First, almost all of his works are autobiographical, directly or indirectly. He was compelled to transform his turbulent personal experiences into artistic expression, transcending the experiences of an individual. In several of his works, Solzhenitsyn himself can be easily detected. Through such methods, he gave his works authenticity and veracity. His artistic acumen, however, al-

lowed him to raise his writings above mere description of his experiences.

Because the everyday life that Solzhenitsyn depicts is inseparable from historical and political reality, his works deal, in one form or another, with the peculiar experiences of his characters before, during, and after World War II. For that reason, his writings are imbued with political and social issues, perhaps more so than those of many other writers of his stature. Consequently, his works can be seen as overly politicized and lacking universal appeal, leaving indifferent those readers uninterested in historical and political issues. Solzhenitsyn's powerful artistic abilities, however, lend his potentially pedestrian subject matter an aura of high artistic quality.

Similarly, because Solzhenitsyn was obsessed with issues that were often a matter of life or death to him, his works seem to lack versatility, and he is in danger of being called a one-theme writer. That, however, is an oversimplification. While it is true that most of his characters are faced with similar dilemmas and ordeals, they also differ enough to make distinct individual responses.

The overriding theme in Solzhenitsyn's works is the relationship between the individual and his or her society. Drawing from his own experiences (incarceration, a long stint in concentration camps, his struggle against an oppressive regime), he presents with an uncanny sharpness and candor the dilemmas that his characters face. The characters continually wrestle with, or openly ask, searing questions: How can the Soviet society treat its own citizens with such unconcern and brutality? Have the people really transgressed against the law, and, if so, is the punishment commensurate with the crime? Why do no extenuating circumstances or leniency exist in civilized societies? Why must the accused always prove his or her innocence while the state is not required to prove his or her guilt? Even worse, why is the state not even concerned with this process at all? Most important, who has given those representing the state the right to judge another individual, imprisoning and often killing that individual? Even though his characters are concerned with other necessities of everyday life, such as food, clothing, work conditions, love, hatred, and rela-

tives left behind, they return constantly to these questions, groping for answers.

The answers that Solzhenitsyn provides are few but convincing. While it is true that his characters are victims of injustice unparalleled in history, they are not without salvation. The author sees that salvation in the need, even the imperative, for each character to preserve his or her dignity in the face of the frontal assault upon it. Solzhenitsyn believed that tyrants are helpless against victims who have nothing left to lose; moreover, the tyrants cannot give back the freedom they have taken away from the victims because they themselves are not free. Furthermore, if the victims can preserve their dignity, they can in the end claim victory even if they pay the ultimate price of death.

In dealing with highly ethical issues, Solzhenitsyn followed the tradition of great Russian writers of the past, such as Fyodor Dostoevski, Leo Tolstoy, and Anton Chekhov. He had more in common with them, however, than simply a concern with morality. His style is closer to that of the nineteenth century writers than to that of his contemporaries. For that reason, some critics consider Solzhenitsyn a throwback—a splendid one, to be sure—to the high standards of the golden age of Russian literature. His style is no simple imitation of the past masters by any means. There is a high dramatic quality in his novels and stories (he has also written a few plays), in his building and resolving of conflicts, and in the interaction of his characters, including a keen understanding of them that at times ranks with the best of Dostoevski. There is also an unmistakable poetic quality in his works (he also wrote poems in prose), which, unfortunately, is often lost in translation.

The fact that Solzhenitsyn wrote in several genres speaks not only for the versatility of his talent but also for his total commitment to his vocation. He is a perfect example of an engaged writer, a writer with theses, common in twentieth century world literature. He was also a writer with a mission, with which he seemed to be obsessed. That mission was to return to human beings the dignity taken away by the unfeeling force of political totalitarianism. He achieved that purpose with the power of his artistic talent.

## ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH

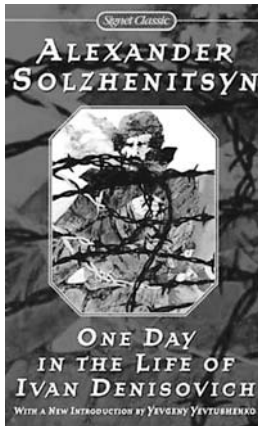
**First published:** *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*, 1962 (English translation, 1963)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Humankind can survive all indignities inflicted upon it by preserving its own dignity.*

The publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1962 created a sensation, both in the Soviet Union and abroad, for three reasons: The author was unknown, the novel showed a remarkable maturity for a novice, and the subject matter was daring and explosive. Solzhenitsyn was soon to become well known worldwide; he quickly proved that he is indeed an accomplished writer; and the subject matter soon ceased to be explosive, even unusual. Yet the novel continues to be praised as a genuine work of art.

To a degree, the reason for its high esteem lies in the novel's remarkable stylistic simplicity. The novel describes one day in a Soviet concentration camp in the 1950's, as experienced by the protagonist, carpenter Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, and a cast of supporting characters. The reader follows in detail every step of the inmates, from the reveille at dawn, through their work at building an edifice that they do not quite understand, until they return to barracks in the evening darkness. The author concentrates on Shukhov's reactions to everyday happenings, on his ability to adapt to situations and, simply, to survive. Even though as a carpenter he cannot be taken to speak for the author,



there is no doubt that many of Solzhenitsyn's own experiences are reflected in Shukhov's actions and reactions.

There is a deliberate reason for the author's building of Shukhov's character almost to the point of an archetype. Undoubtedly, in years of incarceration and isolation from the outside world, Solzhenitsyn had thought often about the reasons for the unjust mistreatment of himself and his compatriots, but also about the answer to such injustice. In Shukhov he found the answer. A simple, hardworking man (it is no coincidence that he is a worker, for whose benefit the revolution was allegedly fought), a good man who bears no grudge even against his torturers, a level-headed and resourceful man who sees a silver lining in every cloud, he accepts the undeserved punishment stoically and without philosophizing about it. He would rather help his fellow inmates than make it harder for all of them; he would rather work than dwell on his misery; and he does not want the circumstances to consume him. Moreover, he takes great pride in his work, as if he were working for himself. Whenever he helps more fortunate inmates, he expects to be rewarded, but if he is not, he does not lose any sleep over it. At the end of the day, as he prepares for sleep, he considers it to have been an almost happy one:

They hadn't put him in the cells; they hadn't sent his squad to the settlement; he'd swiped a bowl of kasha at dinner; the squad leader had fixed the rates well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that bit of hacksaw blade through; he'd earned a favor from Tsezar that evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill.

It is this attitude that, Solzhenitsyn believed, can enable the victim not only to survive but also to preserve human dignity in the ordeal and one day rebuild a seemingly shattered life. Thus, amid grim reality and seeming hopelessness, Solzhenitsyn saw a ray of hope.

## THE FIRST CIRCLE

**First published:** *V krughe pervom*, 1968  
(English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*One who wants to remain a decent human being should not serve the Devil under any circumstance.*

*The First Circle* depicts four days in December, 1949, in a special prison near Moscow where people are conducting research on specific projects for the state and the secret police. Again drawing from his personal experiences, Solzhenitsyn speaks out through the protagonist of the same age, mathematician Gleb Nerzhin, who is serving a ten-year sentence for having been suspected of unspecified activities against the state. He is surrounded by fellow inmates, the assisting personnel (all of them secret police agents), and the authorities. The inmates enjoy a favored status because of their expertise and potential usefulness to the state, which explains the title, taken from Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1820) as the first and the least punishing of the nine circles of Hell designed for sinners in Christian mythology. The inmate specialists are working on two main projects, a decoder of human voice and a scrambler, both of which the state intends to use in controlling the telephone communications of their citizens. Many of the inmates are reluctant to lend their services to the evil intentions of the state, but some want to use their service to attain benefits for themselves, even an early release. The real competitors, however, are prison authorities who are vying among themselves for success of the projects, so that they can impress the ultimate order-giver, Stalin. Within these two spheres, the dramatic tension of the novel uncoils.

Nerzhin is an intelligent, humanistically inclined person, fully aware of the moral dilemma confronting him and other inmates (Zeks, as they

are called). He is torn between pangs of conscience and personal sorrow stemming from the suffering of his faithful wife, who endures much on account of her husband. In constant meetings with his colleagues, Nerzhin discovers that they all react differently to the dilemma: from willingness to cooperate for personal gain, to reluctance to "sell one's soul" to the devil, to outright rejection after a painful soul-searching. Nerzhin belongs to the last category, refusing to help the state entrap other victims; he would rather go to the next, much harsher circle of Hell instead, realizing that it may be ten or twenty-five years before he regains his freedom, if at all. His reasoning is firm, however: "If you know when you die that you haven't been a complete bastard, that's at least some satisfaction." Thus, Solzhenitsyn reduces a complex ethical dilemma to the simple preservation of one's personal dignity, which, in turn, is perhaps the most difficult thing a person can do. As in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, he points at the solution of the central problem that his compatriots are forced to face.

Aside from this central dilemma, the novel offers many other aspects: several sharply sketched portraits of Soviet rulers and officials, from Stalin down to the smallest henchman; the way the Soviet prison operates; several heartrending human dramas, some of which concern love between Zeks and their families and between Zeks and their female assistants; the enormous waste of human potential; a rich variety of psychology of the imprisoned; and various aspects of freedom among both the rulers and the ruled. Solzhenitsyn also depicts the relationship, and conflicts, between the prisoners and guards, prisoners and higher authorities, authorities themselves, prisoners and other prisoners, and prisoners and their own consciences. These concentric circles reinforce structurally the basic premise of the novel, that of the nine circles of "guilt" and punishment. In building such a monumental edifice, worthy of Tolstoy and Dostoevski, Solzhenitsyn wrote a work of lasting and universal value.



## CANCER WARD

**First published:** *Rakovy korpus*, 1968  
(English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Faced with a life-threatening disease, a man is forced to reexamine his entire life and thinking.*

*Cancer Ward* is also based on Solzhenitsyn's personal experiences, this time on his bout with cancer. The protagonist, Oleg Kostoglotov, a thirty-four-year-old political exile, is afflicted with cancer in the prime of his life and approaches it with a mixture of hope and despair. The entire novel takes place in a cancer hospital separated from the world; this circumstance makes for an oppressive atmosphere of isolation, but it also enables the patients to turn inward and reexamine their past. Solzhenitsyn again creates a score of characters, each different in his or her reaction to the illness and in the ability to cope with it, yet all coming to the same conclusion that this experience is an ultimate test of their will to survive, not all of which depends on the doctors and medicines alone. Predictably, all patients show different fortitude and reaction to the blow that fate has dealt them.

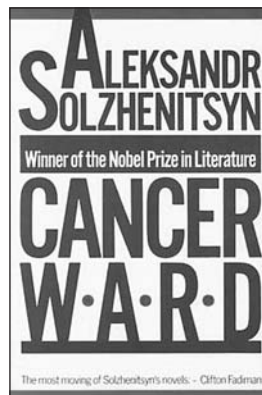
In addition to the patients' silent but excruciating process of reexamination, there is a relationship between doctors and patients to be considered. All doctors make gallant efforts to save their patients, fully aware that their resources are limited; in fact, the main doctor eventually succumbs to cancer herself. Solzhenitsyn uses this relationship to test the ability of medical science to save lives, and also to voice, through Kostoglotov and the doctors, his views about the meaning of life

in general. The final outcome, illustrated by the protagonist's (and Solzhenitsyn's) seeming conquest of the disease, indicates a hope that even such calamitous misfortune can be successfully averted, if only temporarily; the main thing is to keep fighting.

There is a much wider interpretation of *Cancer Ward*. In limiting the action to the hospital inhabited by patients from all walks of life, Solzhenitsyn creates a microcosm in many ways resembling the larger world outside. By forcing patients to wrestle with existential topics such as the meaning of life and death, guilt, punishment, and the relationship between human beings, he symbolically transfers the focus to the whole state, the macrocosm of the Soviet Union. The implication is that the entire state is stricken with a deadly disease and that the only way to overcome it is by reexamining the basic premises of its existence and by fighting through determination and hope toward healing. The brotherhood of pain and the common menace of death thus become the only way of realizing the severity of affliction, personified best by the painful reevaluating process of the main character, Kostoglotov. His insistence on knowing everything about his illness, for example, is a reflection on his suppressed right as a citizen to know the truth.

The supporting cast of characters fits this scheme. A former high official, Pavel Nikolaevich Rusinov, represents the unfeeling ruling class unable to understand how disease can afflict them also. The two chief doctors, Ludmila Afanasyevna Dontsova and Vera Kornilovna Gangart, do everything in their power to help, that is, to right the wrong. The young boy Dyomka, dying from leg cancer contracted by playing football, symbolizes the heavy price that the future of the nation has to pay. Several other patients demonstrate, one way or another, the generality of affliction and the common effort necessary for restoration to health.

To reduce the interpretation of *Cancer Ward* to political symbolism, however, robs it of its much wider application. The novel also applies to all humankind and, in doing so, attains a universal meaning.



## AUGUST 1914

**First published:** *August chetyrnadtsatogo*, 1971; revised, 1983 (English translation, 1972; revised, 1989)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The novel examines the circumstances leading to the Russian Revolution in an attempt to establish the truth about it.*

*August 1914* is the first installment in a four-volume effort under the common title *Krasnoe koleso* (*The Red Wheel*). The first Russian edition was published in Paris in 1971 and in English in 1972; the second, enlarged edition appeared in Russian in 1983 and in English in 1989. The second volume, *Oktiabr' shestnadtsatogo* (1984), appeared in English translation in 1999 as *November 1916*; the third and fourth volumes, *Mart semnadtsatogo* (1986-1988) and *April' semnadtsatogo* (1991), have yet to be translated.

Solzhenitsyn relied heavily on documentary material, obtained from historical archives, and on historical figures active in the first month of the war between the Russians and Austrians and their allies, the Germans. At the same time, he created fictitious characters who serve the purpose of commenting upon the war and expressing the author's views, especially Colonel Vorotyntsev, who is to a large degree the author's alter ego. Solzhenitsyn exchanges the masterfully depicted battle scenes with those of civilian life, all contributing to the reader's understanding of the events. As was customary with him, he surrounds the main figures, such as General Samsonov, with a host of minor characters. The result is a huge, mosaic-like canvas of a historic event in the tradition of Tolstoy.

As in practically all of his works, Solzhenitsyn is primarily after the truth. His prime concern is magnified here by the simple fact that the events in 1914 directly led to the revolution in Russia and that the history of World War I was tailored heavily to reflect the views of the victors—the Bolsheviks. The ultimate truth of *August 1914* is, as Solzhe-

nitsyn saw it, that the czarist government was inept and corrupt and that its weaknesses, rather than the strength of the Bolsheviks, prepared the way for their eventual triumph. This premise is illustrated best at the end of the novel by the generals' blaming Samsonov for the defeat, rather than admitting their own failures.

Solzhenitsyn also pursues his well-established thesis that the responsibility of the individual—that is, his or her dignity—is the ingredient that spells victory or defeat in the constant struggle for a decent life. The treatment of fellow human beings goes a long way toward determining how he or she will react; the better the treatment, the greater the chances for a success, and vice versa. Thus, Solzhenitsyn went beyond the mere writing of a historical novel; he used this book to establish some basic truths about how humans behave as social beings, which could then be used to understand the subsequent events in Russia.

The enlarged edition of *August 1914* contains fifteen new chapters amounting to more than three hundred pages, all running consecutively. They do not change the basic premises of the first edition's plot, but they do add considerable material pertaining to the machinations behind the front lines, as well as further historical background.

### SUMMARY

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn considered his vocation as a mission toward the obtainment of the truth. All of his works serve this goal in one way or another. That he had an ax to grind against the system, which at one point almost cost him his life, was overshadowed by a higher purpose of fulfilling the noble mission of an artist—to serve the truth.

Solzhenitsyn was to a large degree successful in this endeavor, thanks primarily to his powerful artistic qualities, through which he rendered invalid the assertion that he was basically a writer of political and historical works. His meteoric rise to the status of a leading writer in world literature speaks for itself.

Vasa D. Mihailovich

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Investigate the concentration camps in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's works as microcosms of Soviet society.
- Relate *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* to other novels that describe only a single day in the life of a protagonist.
- In what significant ways is Shukhov unlike his creator?
- Explain the significance of Gleb Nerzhin being a mathematician in *The First Circle*.
- Explain the appropriateness of the title *The First Circle*.
- Explain this statement: Kostoglotov in *Cancer Ward* is a character who can best be understood by cancer patients.

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## SOPHOCLES

**Born:** Colonus, near Athens, Greece  
c. 496 B.C.E.

**Died:** Athens, Greece  
c. 406 B.C.E.

*One of the three great tragedians of ancient Greece, Sophocles created dramatic masterpieces that explored the limitations of human knowledge and the cost of heroic perseverance.*

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In modern Athens, Greece, the birthplace of Sophocles (SAHF-uh-kleez) in Colonus stands well within the city limits. Yet at the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E., at the time when Sophocles was born (c. 496 B.C.E.), Colonus remained an identifiable community with its own traditions and heroes. One of those heroes had, according to legend, been an exiled Theban king who vanished mysteriously in a grove at Colonus and who continued to protect the area until Sophocles' own day. The name of this exiled Theban king was Oedipus, a figure who would one day be central to three of Sophocles' most famous tragedies.

Little is known about Sophocles' father, a man named Sophilus. An anonymous biography of Sophocles has been appended to some of the author's manuscripts. This biography suggests that Sophilus may have owned slaves who worked in the construction and bronze-making industries. Moreover, to judge from the quality of his son's education, Sophilus must have been quite wealthy. Sophocles studied music under Lamprus, regarded by the Greek biographer Plutarch and others as one of the most traditional and conservative teachers in Athens at that time.

Tradition indicates that, as a boy, Sophocles sang in the chorus that celebrated the Athenian naval victory over the Persians at Salamis. Later in his

life, however, Sophocles stopped appearing on stage because of his weak voice. As an adult, Sophocles is known to have played the title role in one work and performed the lyre in another. With these exceptions, Sophocles ended the custom by which Athenian playwrights would assume the leading roles in their own tragedies.

The anonymous biography of Sophocles also states that the poet learned the art of tragedy from Aeschylus. It is not clear, however, whether this means that Aeschylus actually served as Sophocles' tutor or merely that Sophocles began writing his works in imitation of the older poet. In any case, the student quickly began to equal, or even surpass, the master. Throughout the fifth century B.C.E., prizes were awarded to playwrights who, in the opinion of judges, composed the finest tragedies at each year's Festival of Dionysus, called the Great Dionysia. In 468 B.C.E., Sophocles won his first tragedy award over Aeschylus with a trilogy of plays that included the *Triptolemus*, which no longer survives. One ancient legend says that, in this initial contest against Aeschylus, the passions of the audience ran so high that the ten Athenian generals awarded the victory rather than the customary ten civilian judges.

Sophocles was to receive the first prize approximately twenty times, more frequently than any other playwright. He often won second prize and never, say the ancient authorities, came in last. In 438 B.C.E., Sophocles won the tragedy victory in his first contest against Euripides, whose plays that year included the *Alkestis* (438 B.C.E.; *Alcestis*, 1781).



Sophocles was universally described by contemporary authors as a kindly and pious man. He held a priesthood in the cult of the healer god Alcon or Halon, founded a shrine of Heracles, and seems to have maintained a special devotion to the god Asclepius. After his death, Sophocles himself was worshiped as a divine hero under the name Dexion.

Sophocles was also actively involved in the political and military life of the Athenians. He held several public offices, was one of the stewards in charge of the treasury of the Athenian empire, and served as general, along with the statesman Pericles. A fragment of the *Epidemiae* by Ion of Chios says that Pericles was not much impressed by Sophocles' military skill and regarded him as no better as a general than any nobleman would be. Ion says that Sophocles later stole a kiss from one of the servants and then remarked, "Perhaps I'm not as bad a strategist as Pericles thinks!"

Another story, possibly legendary, says that near the end of his life, Sophocles was placed on trial for senility by one of his sons, who wished to gain control of the family fortune. Sophocles is said to have defended himself by reading to the jurors passages from his *Oidipous epi Kolōnōi* (401 B.C.E.; *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1729), which he composed while in his nineties. At the end of the trial, Sophocles is quoted as remarking, "If I am Sophocles, then I am not mad. If I am mad, then I am not Sophocles." Sophocles died shortly after this trial in about 406 B.C.E., at the age of ninety or ninety-one, in Athens. The Spartan general Lysander, who was besieging Athens at the time, so respected the poet that he allowed the Athenians to leave their city and bury Sophocles on the road to Deceleia.

## ANALYSIS

Plutarch says that Sophocles himself saw three periods in his work: an early period of ponderous tragedies written in imitation of Aeschylus, a middle period of plays that were bitter and artificial, and a late period in which his tragedies best exemplified fullness of character and were those that he considered his best works. While the poet's judgment concerning his first two periods seems excessively harsh, it does confirm at least one general impression. Sophocles' early plays, such as the *Aias* (early 440's B.C.E.; *Ajax*, 1729) and the *Antigonē* (441 B.C.E.; *Antigone*, 1729), reflect the influence of

Aeschylus. Aeschylus's use of the "double bind"—the situation in which a character will be doomed no matter which course is chosen—in such works as the *Oresteia* (458 B.C.E.; English translation, 1777) and the *Hepta epi Thēbas* (467 B.C.E.; *Seven Against Thebes*, 1777) has affected the presentation of both Antigone and Creon in *Antigone*. Moreover, Aeschylus's preference for long, and sometimes obscure, compound words has a parallel to Sophocles' use of language in such early works as the *Ajax* and the *Trachinai* (435-429 B.C.E.; *The Women of Trachis*, 1729).

Yet Sophocles was not content to write tragedies exactly as Aeschylus had done. Tradition reports that Sophocles introduced several innovations in the staging of Greek drama, such as the use of a third actor, scene painting, and a slightly larger chorus. The real contribution of Sophocles, however, was in his approach to plot and character. The later a Sophoclean tragedy is, the more its plot tends to be focused upon an individual hero. This tendency is quite different from the tragedies of Aeschylus, which usually deal with an entire household or even trace a story over several generations.

In Sophocles, the individual hero is always at the core of the story. Perhaps for this reason, six of Sophocles' seven extant tragedies are named for their central characters. On the other hand, five of Aeschylus's seven extant tragedies took their name from the chorus or from some other group of mythological figures. Perhaps also for this reason, Sophocles, unlike Aeschylus, did not write connected trilogies but allowed each play in a trilogy to deal with a different character and a different story.

Sophocles' approach to character has also affected the construction of his tragedies in other ways. The long passages of monologue, familiar from Aeschylean drama, are now replaced by dialogue. Information that the audience needs to understand the plot is allowed to emerge gradually through conversation between the characters. Moreover, exchanges between characters with differing points of view—Antigone and Creon, Teucer and Menelaus, Oedipus and Polyneices—are able to provide the audience with insight into the psychological motivation of each individual.

This psychological motivation is frequently the key to another element of Sophoclean tragedy: the role of fate. It is frequently noted that nearly every

tragedy by Sophocles hinges upon the fulfillment of an oracle or a prophecy. Yet this does not necessarily mean that Sophocles believed that humanity was a pawn in the hands of the gods. It is always true that, in Sophoclean tragedy, the destiny of the characters follows logically from their own choices. The gods may predict human suffering, but they are rarely the primary causes of disaster in these works. “Character,” the Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, “determines a person’s destiny.” In Sophoclean tragedy, fate is always founded upon this maxim.

One major way in which character determines destiny in these plays is through the “heroic flaw.” In *De poetica* (334-323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705), Aristotle speaks of a tragic flaw, mistake, or error of judgment (*hamartia*) that brings a character from prosperity to ruin. In Sophocles, this tragic flaw is almost always the very same quality that brought about the hero’s greatness. Thus, Ajax’s pride, Antigone’s inability to compromise, Oedipus’s thirst for knowledge, and Heracles’ confidence in his own abilities are initially responsible for the success of these characters. Ultimately, however, these same heroic flaws destroy the persons whom they once made great.

## ANTIGONE

**First produced:** *Antigonē*, 441 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1729)

**Type of work:** Play

*A young woman is condemned to death for burying her brother in violation of the king’s decree.*

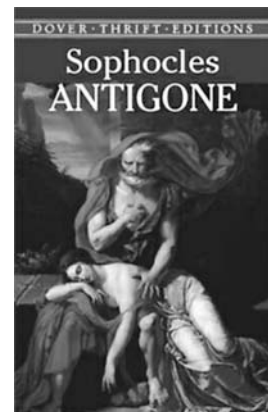
*Antigone*, *Oedipous Tyrannos* (c. 429 B.C.E.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715), and *Oedipus at Colonus* are not a trilogy in the true sense. That is to say, they were not originally written to be performed on a single occasion. Rather, these three plays represent Sophocles’ return to the same body of myths several times during his long career as a dramatist. Nevertheless, the Theban plays, as they are called, together tell the complete story of Oedipus from the height of his power as king of Thebes to the execution of his daughter for the burial of his son, Polyneices.

*Antigone*, although it concerns the last events in the mythic history of this family, was the first of the three plays to be written. In it, certain elements of plot seem to indicate that Sophocles, in this early period of his career, was still imitating the works of his predecessor Aeschylus. For instance, both Antigone and Creon find themselves caught in a “double bind,” a situation in which they are doomed no matter which course of action they choose. Although Antigone suffers because she violates the law of Creon by burying her brother Polyneices, she would have neglected her religious duty had she left him unburied. Creon suffers because he regards his will as more important than the demands of the gods, although political pressures compelled him to punish the traitor of his city.

Antigone and Creon thus represent the two sides that may be taken toward any issue of great importance. Antigone defends the will of the gods, emphasizing the bond that she has to her family more than that which she has toward the state. Creon defends the need for law and order in a community, viewing civil law as more important than the will of the individual.

While these two points of view come into conflict in the *Antigone*, Sophocles does not regard them both as equally correct. Every character in the play, including the chorus and even Creon himself in the end, declares that Antigone was right and that Creon was wrong. Yet the justice of Antigone’s cause is not sufficient to save her. Many characters in Sophoclean tragedy suffer, not despite being right, but because they were right.

The *Antigone* illustrates, therefore, that there is a price to be paid for heroic inflexibility. It is unthinkable that Antigone, as Sophocles has drawn the character, would choose compromise rather than death. Her destruction follows inevitably from her unswerving devotion to the cause in which she believes. Nevertheless, it is one of the ironies of the *Antigone* that Creon also suffers because of his inflexibility and confidence. The very quality



that made Antigone seem admirable makes Creon seem stubborn and petty. In the end, their fates are determined less by the nature of the cause that they defend than by the manner in which they defend it.

## OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

**First produced:** *Oidipous Tyrannos*,  
c. 429 B.C.E. (English translation, 1715)

**Type of work:** Play

*A prosperous king of Thebes learns that, because of a curse, he has unknowingly killed his father and married his own mother.*

The chorus at the end of a Greek tragedy will frequently state that human knowledge is limited and that the gods work in ways that human beings do not expect. No tragedy deals with this theme more explicitly than *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Despite Oedipus's great confidence in his own knowledge, he is shown throughout the play to be wrong about nearly everything. By the end of the tragedy, Oedipus realizes that he had not even known who he was, where he had been born, or how unfortunate he had been. His fate illustrates the dangers of overconfidence: No matter how certain one may be about things, there is always the possibility that one may be wrong.

Oedipus goes from being a powerful and confident king at the beginning of the tragedy to being a blind beggar at the end. In part, this downfall is the result of his own anger. Oedipus states explicitly that it was due to anger that he killed the man who had blocked his way at the crossroads (line 807); this man turns out to have been Oedipus's father, Laius. Yet it is also stated several times that Oedipus was destined to kill Laius (lines 713-714) and to marry his mother, Jocasta (lines 789 to 793). These two views are not at all contradictory; both Oedipus and fate have determined his suffering. The ancient Greek view was that an event need not have but a single cause. Actions could be "overdetermined," that is, caused both by the will of the gods and by the nature of the individuals who perform them.

Moreover, Oedipus is an illustration of Heraclitus's dictum that "Character determines a person's

destiny." It is Oedipus's nature to be confident, brash, and desirous of the truth. These are the qualities that enabled him to defeat the Sphinx and that led to his greatness. These are also the qualities that lead to his downfall in this play. As is often the case in Sophoclean tragedy, the same "heroic flaw" that produced the central character's success also leads to his suffering.

Sophocles contrasts Oedipus with Teiresias, the blind seer, in this play. Ironically, the character who is blind can "see" the truth much more clearly than can Oedipus, who prided himself on his "insight." Only when Oedipus himself is blind does he "see" the truth. Genuine truth, Sophocles suggests, is not derived from mere observation of physical realities. Rather, truth is perceived through an inner wisdom and is possible only when one is not distracted by the things of this world.

## ELECTRA

**First produced:** *Ēlektra*, 418-410 B.C.E.  
(English translation, 1649)

**Type of work:** Play

*After years of waiting, Electra is reunited with her brother, Orestes, who punishes their mother for killing their father.*

The story of Electra was treated by the three major classical tragedians, each in his own characteristic way. For Aeschylus, the story of Electra in the *Choēphoroi* (458 B.C.E.; *Libation Bearers*, 1777) is but a single episode in the sweeping history of a family; it is the second play of the *Oresteia*, a connected trilogy that presents the story of Electra's household from the return of her father, Agamemnon, to the acquittal of her brother, Orestes. For Euripides, the *Electra* was a psychological profile of a woman who had endured outrage and humiliation for nearly a decade; Euripides openly criticized Aeschylus's treatment of this story and changed many details of the plot. For Sophocles, Electra became the embodiment of heroic defiance, a return to many of the themes earlier explored in the *Antigone*.

Indeed, there are many ways in which Sophocles' version of *Electra* bears a closer resemblance to

his *Antigone* than to the treatments of Electra by the other two playwrights. First, Sophocles contrasts both Electra and Antigone with a sister (Chrysothemis and Ismene, respectively) who is willing to compromise in order to live in peace. Both Electra and Antigone, in Sophocles' version of their stories, devote themselves to a cause to such an extent that they forego husband and children; Aeschylus's Electra has at least the serving women for comfort, and Euripides' Electra is even married. Most important, perhaps, Sophocles' *Electra* depicts the vengeance against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as an end to the household's suffering; in both Aeschylus's and Euripides' versions, there is foreshadowing of Orestes' pursuit by the Furies, who will seek to punish him for this murder. Thus, Sophocles' *Electra*, like his *Antigone*, represents the price that must be paid for heroic endurance.

Yet while Antigone paid with her life for defying Creon, Electra emerges triumphant at the end of this play. By the close of the tragedy, Electra's vengeance has been fulfilled, her patience has been justified, and her enemies have been destroyed. The audience is able to witness her joy as vengeance is achieved. Nevertheless, Electra's cries of joy are as chilling as they are deserved. Electra has gained her victory only at an appalling personal cost. She has devoted her youth to the memory of her father and has planned her vengeance for nearly a decade. Heroism comes at a price far higher than the chorus, Chrysothemis, and even most members of the audience would be willing to pay.

## OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

**First produced:** *Oidipous epi Kolōnōi*,  
401 B.C.E. (English translation, 1729)

**Type of work:** Play

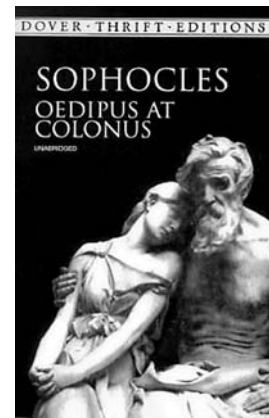
*After years of wandering as a blind exile,  
Oedipus is received in Athens, where he  
undergoes a mysterious apotheosis.*

*Oedipus at Colonus* was written in 406 B.C.E., shortly before Sophocles' death, and was not performed until five years later. Since the play dates to about forty years after the *Antigone* and more than

twenty years after *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is not surprising that the figures of Creon, Antigone, and even Oedipus himself seem somewhat different from Sophocles' earlier presentation of them. Creon, in particular, is wholly unlike his depiction in the other two plays. The Creon of *Antigone* was stubborn and mistaken but he did, at least, attempt to do what was right as he understood it. The Creon of *Oedipus Tyrannus* was patient and reasonable, a minor character who was completely sympathetic during his brief appearance on the stage. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Creon is pure evil; his function is to provide a villainous foil for Oedipus and Theseus, and that he does to perfection.

Creon's role as the stereotypical villain in this work makes *Oedipus at Colonus*, like *Electra*, seem more like a melodrama than a tragedy in structure. For example, there is in this work no fall of a noble character to a more humble position, no reversal of fortune from good to evil, no "tragic flaw." Indeed, by the end of the play Oedipus is elevated from poverty to heroic status and will be worshiped even among the gods after his death. Yet it must be remembered that Greek tragedy did not always adhere to the general outline that Aristotle described. It must be remembered, too, that Aristotle wrote the *De poetica* (c. 334-323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705) more than half a century after the death of Sophocles. To force *Oedipus at Colonus* to fit Aristotle's form of the "perfect tragedy" would damage the work. One of the great appeals of the *Oedipus at Colonus* is that its structure is so unlike that of any other tragedy.

*Oedipus at Colonus* was Sophocles' final homage to the district in which he was born and to that area's most famous hero. Written in a period when Athens was already losing the Peloponnesian War to the Spartans, this play reminds the Athenians of their own glorious past and of the hero who protected them. In the tragedy's most famous ode (lines 668-719), Sophocles celebrates, not only the physical beauty of Athens and Colonus, but also its



civic virtues: its hospitality, its perseverance, its ability to recover even from the most formidable opposition and defeat. These virtues, the poet suggests, could yet be the salvation of Athens if the city's people would renew their confidence in their gods, their heroes, and themselves.

Like the perfected Athens that Sophocles describes, Oedipus in this tragedy draws his strength from some mysterious source. Despite years as a blind beggar, Oedipus becomes restored to moral strength as the plot unfolds. He spurns the treachery first of Creon and then of Polyneices. Finally, without even permitting anyone to guide him (lines 1520-1521), Oedipus himself leads Theseus into the grove where his miraculous transformation will take place. The account given by the messenger (lines 1586-1665) is not the death of a blind, old beggar but the apotheosis of a hero. Like Athens herself, Oedipus may have been guilty of many crimes, but he has been chosen by the gods to be special and is elevated at the very moment when he had seemed most humbled.

### SUMMARY

Sophocles was the poet of the hero. The central characters of his tragedies are each “larger than life” and willing to endure bitter opposition because of their adherence to a conviction. Many times, this same unwillingness to yield both results in the hero's greatness and is the cause of the hero's suffering. A “heroic flaw” makes the hero different from ordinary people; it is the reason why heroes are admired but it is also responsible for their destruction. The hero is simply too great to live in an imperfect world.

To ordinary individuals, for whom heroic excellence is beyond their grasp, Sophocles counsels moderation. Human knowledge is limited, the

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are the formal differences between the tragedies of Sophocles and those of his greatest predecessor as Greek tragic playwright, Aeschylus?
- How do Sophocles' Theban plays differ from typical trilogies?
- Does *Antigone* convey the impression that there is no such thing as justice?
- Is it convincing to explain Oedipus's downfall as the result of a “flaw”?
- How do the surviving versions of the Electra story confirm the greatness of the three principal Greek tragic playwrights?
- How does Sophocles induce readers to empathize with protagonists whose stubbornness overpowers the knowledge which they have and which could preserve them?
- How could Sophocles' audience accept his reimagining of legendary characters that appear in more than one play?

poet argues, and people rarely understand as much as they think they do. Passionate adherence to a principle in the face of logic and opposition can cause grief, even destruction. For heroes, this outcome is an inevitable condition of their greatness. For the ordinary person, however, stubbornness is foolhardy: One must always be ready to be proven wrong.

Jeffrey L. Buller

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##### DRAMA:

*Aias*, early 440's B.C.E. (*Ajax*, 1729)

*Antigonē*, 441 B.C.E. (*Antigone*, 1729)

*Trachinai*, 435-429 B.C.E. (*The Women of Trachis*, 1729)

*Oidipous Tyrannos*, c. 429 B.C.E. (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715)

*Ēlektra*, 418-410 B.C.E. (*Electra*, 1649)



## *Sophocles*

*Philoktētēs*, 409 B.C.E. (*Philoctetes*, 1729)

*Oidīpous epi Kolōnōi*, 401 B.C.E. (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 1729)

*Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments with Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose*, pb. 1897 (7 volumes)

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## WOLE SOYINKA

**Born:** Ijebu Isara, near Abeokuta, Nigeria  
July 13, 1934

*Soyinka's plays, poetry, and other works combine Western and traditional African forms with elements of Nigerian culture to speak for human rights.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka (sho-YIHNG-kah) was born on July 13, 1934, in Ijebu Isara, near Abeokuta, western Nigeria, where he grew up. His parents were from the Ijebu and Egba ethnic groups, both of which spoke Yoruba. "Abeokuta" means "under the rock," referring to the home of the town's guardian deity. Soyinka's parents were Christian, and Nigeria was then under British colonial rule. Soyinka was reared with roots in the Yoruba culture but was heavily influenced by Western thought.

He attended schools in Nigeria until he was twenty and then went on to the University of Leeds in England in 1954. At that time, the university had an unusually active drama department, and Soyinka had the opportunity to see and act in a variety of plays. After graduating with honors in 1957, he remained in England for a few years, working as a script reader and eventually as a writer with the Royal Court Theatre in London. This association gave him the chance to see many of England's best directors, actors, and playwrights at work. He produced his own first play, *The Swamp Dwellers*, at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958.

In the meantime, the Arts Theatre in Ibadan had opened as the first theater presenting Nigerian works to a Nigerian audience. *The Swamp Dwellers* (pr. 1958, pb. 1963) and another one of

Soyinka's plays, *The Lion and the Jewel* (pr. 1959, pb. 1963), were performed there in 1959. Audiences were gratified to discover an African playwright who could create fine characters and dialogue in English. Soyinka was urged to come home.

He returned in 1960, sponsored by a Rockefeller Foundation grant. The grant enabled him to travel throughout Nigeria, studying traditional festivals, art, and literature. He formed a drama troupe and produced, directed, and acted in a performance of his play *A Dance of the Forests* (pr. 1960, pb. 1963). In 1960, Nigeria gained independence from Britain. *A Dance of the Forests*, which won a prize during independence celebrations, depicts the conflicts between traditional African values and the values of British colonialists. Like all of Soyinka's plays, it incorporates Yoruban proverbs and traditional dance and music, demonstrating Soyinka's belief in the need for cultural as well as political independence.

Soyinka taught at Nigerian universities in Ibadan, Lagos, and Ife over the next several years. He produced and published seven more plays that gained increasing recognition in London and New York and helped other Nigerian dramatists produce and publish their work. He also wrote a novel, *The Interpreters*, published in 1965.

In 1965, he was arrested for allegedly contributing to an illegal radio broadcast critical of the government. He was acquitted of the charges. In 1967, as Nigeria moved toward civil war with the eastern region of Biafra, Soyinka published several letters in Nigerian newspapers criticizing the conflict and demanding a cease-fire. He was arrested and jailed without charges in 1967. He remained a political prisoner for two years and two months, spending

fifteen of those months in solitary confinement. Later, he wrote about his experiences in *Poems from Prison* (1969) and in a memoir, "The Man Died": *Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972).

His prison term left a strong mark on his work. Always concerned with social and political matters, Soyinka's writings after prison became more passionate about human rights and social change. He was not afraid to criticize the corruption and greed of Nigeria's postcolonial African rulers. Many of his later satirical plays, including *Madmen and Specialists* (pr. 1970; revised pr., pb.1971), *Opera Wonyosi* (pr. 1977, pb. 1980), and *A Play of Giants* (pr., pb.1984), denounce Nigeria's military rulers. Shortly after his release from prison, Soyinka went into political exile. He lived in Ghana, England, and the United States until 1975, when the regime that had imprisoned him fell.

During the 1970's and 1980's, Soyinka wrote more than a dozen plays, which were produced in Nigeria, Ghana, England, France, and the United States. He edited the journal *Transition/Ch'Indaba* in Ghana, using the journal to criticize Africa's military dictators, in particular Uganda's Idi Amin. He also published volumes of poetry and literary criticism, as well as two fascinating autobiographical volumes, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981) and *Isarà: A Voyage Around "Essay"* (1989), a tribute to his father. *Aké: The Years of Childhood* was named by *The New York Times* as one of the twelve best books of 1982.

In 1986, Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. His Nobel lecture, "This Past Must Address Its Present" (1986), soundly criticizes apartheid in South Africa and affirms the power of art to bring about social change. He continued to condemn political oppression, and by this time familiar with many of the major governmental and resistance figures in several countries, he worked behind the scenes to bring important figures together for diplomatic talks. After the dictator General Sani Abacha came to power in Nigeria in 1993, Soyinka openly worked against him. Faced with threats of arrest, Soyinka fled Nigeria in 1994 and moved to the United States, where he taught at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and continued to write poetry, essays, and plays. The Abacha government formally charged him with treason in 1997.

Soyinka returned to Nigeria in 1999, after Abacha

was deposed, to teach at the University of Ife. In 2006, he published his fifth volume of memoirs, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir*, chronicling his last years in Nigeria and his life as an exile. That year, he was invited to present a keynote address at a writing conference in Bangkok, Thailand, but cancelled his speech in protest of abuses by the Thai military. In 2007, he publicly criticized widespread fraud in that year's Nigerian presidential elections.

## ANALYSIS

It would be simplifying only a little to say that Soyinka's writing can be divided into two phases. All of his work is marked by a social consciousness and a skillful intermingling of Western and traditional West African culture. Soyinka's interment as a political prisoner in Nigeria, however, changed him and his artistic vision forever.

His first plays were performed shortly before and shortly after Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule. The conflict brought about by overlapping and opposing cultures is the subject of the early plays, including *The Swamp Dwellers*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, and *A Dance of the Forests*. In each of these plays, the setting is West Africa, and the main characters are Africans who come into contact with European ways and values.

Soyinka is not a detached observer of cultural clash. His sentiments lean heavily toward the traditional culture. His dialogue contains many Yoruba proverbs. Traditional song, dance, costume, and ritual are also part of his plays; Yoruban deities are invoked. These traditional elements are not presented as interesting curiosities. In these plays, Soyinka emphasizes how Nigeria is politically independent of Great Britain and how his native country must take pride in tradition and claim cultural independence. Nigerian art must use Nigerian elements; artists must help the Nigerian people celebrate their heritage, instead of yearning, as the schoolteacher does in *The Lion and the Jewel*, for a European life that is not theirs.

Serious as these ideas are, the early plays often present them through comedy and satire. Both the village "bale" (leader) and the schoolteacher in *The Lion and the Jewel* are somewhat ridiculous figures. Their exaggerated speeches are funny and demonstrate their weaknesses. *The Trials of Brother Jero* (pr. 1960, pb. 1963) presents a preacher who is

a very humorous buffoon. In *The Road* (pr., pb. 1965), Professor is a comic scalawag, while Samson is a comic coward.

These early plays are also marked by obscurity. The young Soyinka was, in effect, creating the modern English Nigerian theater, and he was determined that this theater would defy the expectations of Nigerians and Europeans alike. Beginning with *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka experimented with different ways to structure his plays. *A Dance of the Forests* has a plot of sorts, and characters and dialogue. On the other hand, the chronology is skewed, the dialogue is filled with hard-to-understand proverbs, and the action is interrupted for dances and rites that are not explained. Critics have argued for decades about the meaning of this play. Experimentation has always made Soyinka's greatest plays hard to understand—often more something to be experienced and felt than to be analyzed and understood.

The work Soyinka produced after his release from prison is clearly the work of the same gifted man. The man is older, however, and more in control. The later plays, while still rich and dense, are not so obscure; these plays also have a note of seriousness and urgency. The political satire of *The Road* still appears, but without *The Road's* softer comic elements. After prison, Soyinka's targets for satire are not Westerners or would-be Western Africans. Instead, he targets the weaknesses and corruption of Nigerian military rule.

Of his work before his prison term it might be said that his chief concerns were for honoring and validating traditional African culture in an increasingly Westernized world. After prison, his attention shifted slightly, so that his focus was on the broader issue of human freedom and on bringing the world's attention to political tyranny in Africa and around the world. In *Death and the King's Horseman* (pb. 1975, pr. 1976), he shows clearly that freedom is tied up with responsibility. *Opera Wonyosi* attacks the greed and tyranny of many contemporary African rulers; this play argues that freedom must mean freedom for all.

Several of Soyinka's works since the 1970's deal directly with specific corrupt regimes in Nigeria, Uganda, or other African countries; apartheid in South Africa received particular attention through the 1980's, and Nigeria through the 1990's and beyond. These specifically targeted works also deal

on a general level with human rights and freedoms, and these plays have been performed and well received throughout the world.

Through his long career, Soyinka has been much more than a playwright, although he will be best remembered for his more than twenty plays. He also is an accomplished actor and has directed plays and films. He has published many articles of literary criticism in African, European, and American journals, collecting the most important of them in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976) and *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (1988). He has published five volumes of memoirs. These volumes demonstrate Soyinka's dedication to African tradition and belief and show how his family and his people became the sources of his creative imagination.

He also has published two novels, *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* (1973), which are not as strong as the plays. *The Interpreters* is an especially difficult novel because of its modernist approach to plot and language and because of many allusions to Yoruba tradition that are not explained.

More than his novels, Soyinka's poetry approaches the greatness of his plays. From his earliest volume, *Idanre, and Other Poems* (1967), through his later works, including *Mandela's Earth, and Other Poems* (1988) and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002), his poetry shows the same concerns for social and political criticism as his drama. He may comment directly on politics, as in his early poem "Civilian and Soldier" or the later "Mandela's Earth." Other poems, such as "Season," use natural imagery to speak of universal truths.

Soyinka has long been recognized as one of the most important African figures in world literature. In 1986, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature—the first African to win that honor. The Swedish Academy praised him for his dedication to traditional culture and to human rights. He has not been universally accepted in Nigeria, where he has been criticized—even imprisoned—by political figures he has challenged. He has also been rejected by left-wing Nigerians, who see him as too European.

Soyinka's writing reflects his life: Immersed in two worlds, it draws on African and Western forms and sources. It uses the English language to bring Yoruba culture to the world.

## THE LION AND THE JEWEL

**First produced:** 1959 (first published, 1963)

**Type of work:** Play

*In a small Nigerian village, a schoolteacher with Western ideas confronts a cunning village chief whose power is threatened by modern ways.*

*The Lion and the Jewel*, written in London, was one of the first of Soyinka's plays to be performed in Africa. It was performed at the Ibadan Arts Theatre in 1959, where it was well received. *The Lion and the Jewel* was the first major play to draw on traditional Yoruba poetry, music, and dance to tell a Nigerian story in English. The play enabled Nigerian drama to become part of world theater.

*The Lion and the Jewel* is a comedy set in the small remote village of Ilujinle. There are three central characters: Lakunle, an eager but naïve schoolteacher who accepts Western ideas and modernity without really understanding them; Baroka, the village chief, who sees modern ideas as a threat to his power; and Sidi, the jewel of the village, a beautiful woman who will choose one of the men for a husband. The characters are exaggerated: Lakunle is arrogant and talks too much, and Baroka is cunning, but they are ultimately likable. Unlike many of Soyinka's later plays, there is no evil in this play, and the author pokes only gentle fun at his characters. In the end, the men will have to deal with each other. As Baroka says, "the old must flow into the new."

The play focuses on several conflicts that Soyinka presents but does not attempt to resolve. Lakunle and Baroka embody the contrary urges toward modernity and tradition. They personify the two sides of the major social and political issue in Africa during the last half of the twentieth century. They are not so far apart as they may think. Both look to the same Yoruban god, Sango. Both are skilled performers. Both are attracted to the same woman. Their conflict also is a universal one, between youth and age. Lakunle has new ideas, but he is inexperienced and brash. Baroka is afraid of progress, but he knows more of life.

The women in the play present other themes. Sidi chooses to marry the lion Baroka, who is much older than she, instead of the younger Lakunle be-

cause Baroka is more experienced as a lover and because he shares her view of marriage. Lakunle refuses to pay a bride price because he thinks the custom is old-fashioned and demeaning. Sidi believes the bride price will guarantee her rights and will not marry without it. Meanwhile, Baroka's senior wife Sadiku seethes inside. Women have little power in the traditional society, but they are beginning to question their role.

Soyinka presents these themes through an artful mingling of Western and Yoruban elements. Scenes of plot and action alternate with flashbacks employing dance and mime. The stage is peopled with Yoruban drummers, dancers, and one masked figure. The play closes with a grand marriage dance, invoking the gods of fertility. Like all good drama, *The Lion and the Jewel* uses local and personal elements to tell a universal story.



## DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

**First produced:** 1976 (first published, 1975)

**Type of work:** Play

*A man refuses to answer a call to give up his life, placing his entire people in disharmony with the world of the ancestors.*

*Death and the King's Horseman*, one of Soyinka's tragedies, presents a representation of the Yoruba worldview. In Yoruba cosmology, there are three worlds: the world of the living, the world of the dead, and the world of the unborn. This play focuses on what connects all three worlds—transition, the pathway on which members of the different worlds meet and interact.

The opening of the play involves the ritual ceremonies for the burial of a dead king. Elesin, the king's horseman, attired in glorious robes, enters



the village marketplace in a majestic dance procession, followed by praise-singers and drummers. Elesin dances until he is in a trance, a state of transition. He performs poetry and song about the world of the ancestors and the connectedness of the three worlds.

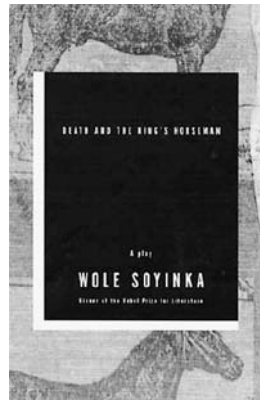
The purpose of this ceremony is to help the dead king travel peacefully to the world of the dead. It should conclude with the suicide of Elesin, whose soul will accompany the king's. Elesin sees a beautiful woman in the crowd and demands one night of love with her before he dies. Iyaloja, the mother of the marketplace, reluctantly agrees.

Also in the village is the British colonial district officer, Pilking. He is well-meaning but unable to understand or respect the Yoruban people. He also performs a dance at a gathering of his own people—a mocking imitation of an African dance in captured regalia. When Pilking hears of Elesin's intention to die, he has him arrested to prevent it.

Soyinka makes it clear in his preface that this is not a mere clash of cultures; this is not simply a case of the white colonialist interfering with native culture. Elesin has failed to perform his duty, and his failure has cosmic significance. The white officer is a catalyst, but he cannot otherwise affect the village. The cosmic world is untouched by colonialism and materialism.

Elesin's son Olunde, a doctor, returns from England. He has heard of the king's death and assumes that his father's death is near. Olunde reveres native culture and has had wide experience of Western culture. He tries unsuccessfully to make Pilking understand Yoruban belief. Ashamed to see his father's failure, he kills himself in Elesin's place.

When Elesin sees his son's body, he takes his own life. This suicide is the result of shame, however, not duty, and it cannot repair the bonds that have been broken. The young bride, pregnant from her one night with Elesin, appears. She ritually closes her husband's eyes as Iyaloja says, "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn."



## "SEASON"

**First published:** 1967 (collected in *Idanre, and Other Poems*, 1967)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Observing the decaying fields at the end of the growing season, the speaker remembers that decay leads to new growth.*

"Season," one of Soyinka's most widely anthologized poems, is in the Grey Seasons section of his first poetry collection, *Idanre, and Other Poems*. The poem is easily accessible to readers around the world because of its simple and universal theme. Many of Soyinka's early poems are of this type. In later poems, Soyinka more frequently turns directly to politics, requiring more knowledge of historical figures and events on the part of the reader.

"Season" is spoken by a narrator who is involved with growing and harvesting. At harvesttime he or she surveys a cornfield and considers how ripening and decay are intermingled. Although the final message is one of hope, the tone of the poem is dark and mournful.

The poem opens with a short statement of the theme: "Rust is ripeness." The word "rust" can carry many meanings, and all these meanings work in the poem. It can be oxidized iron, a symbol of decay. There is a fungus called rust that can attack plants (destruction) but which is itself alive (creation). Rust is also the color of the corn, when ripe, that is grown in many parts of Africa (creation). "Rust is ripeness" points out a central paradox of life.

The poem contrasts two seasons of life, youth and age, using subtle manipulation of verb tense to develop the ideas. The first stanza describes youth—"mating time"—with images of light and dance, leaves and feathers. The mating time is described in present tense, but the speaker remembers that "we loved to hear" the sounds of it. The past tense points out that the time has passed for "us."

The second stanza describes the harvesttime, when the people "draw/ long shadows from the dusk." The imagery is of darkness and dryness, and the verbs are in the present tense. This is not a time without hope. Twice in the six-line stanza Soyinka uses the word "await." At the opening of the stanza,

the speaker is “awaiting rust.” By the end of the stanza, reminded of the creation that follows destruction, he amends it to “we await/ The promise of the rust.”

Critics have pointed out that early in his life, Soyinka took as his personal muse the Yoruba deity Ogun. Ogun is a god of artistic skill but also a god of war. This dual nature—of creation and destruction—echoes the ideas of growth and decay found in “Season.” Soyinka was fascinated with the ambiguities Ogun represented. He turned again and again in his poetry and plays to this idea that destruction and creation were forever tied.

## YOU MUST SET FORTH AT DAWN

**First published:** 2006

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Soyinka recounts his career as an intellectual and an activist, remembering the friends, colleagues, and enemies who shaped his political philosophy.*

*You Must Set Forth at Dawn* is Soyinka’s fifth book of memoirs, but unlike the previous four it does not limit itself to a relatively confined span of time. This long and dense volume, instead, looks back as far as Soyinka’s earliest days as a university student in London, covering more than fifty years in the theater, in the academy, and in the political world, while avoiding mention of his family life.

The first section of *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, placed before the chapters Soyinka labels as “Part I,” is “IBA—For Those Who Went Before,” and it establishes the approach Soyinka takes to the material in this memoir. It opens abruptly, in medias res, as Soyinka is on a plane heading toward Nigeria, remembering past plane trips: his return from exile and his trip to bring back the body of another political exile, his friend Femi Johnson. From here he moves on to an anticipation of and reflection on the loss of cactus in the bush landscape near his home in Abeokuta, and then on to a consideration of the human landscape and its loss of another friend, the late former vice chancellor at the University of Ife, Ojetuni Aboyade. Soyinka moves freely from anecdote to anecdote, from re-

flection to narrative to dialogue to poetry; the section’s twenty-eight pages are broken up into nine separate episodes. While the body of the book is roughly chronological, the frequent digressions and the references to an African history that the author knows far better than many of his readers makes this a challenging memoir for his non-Nigerian audience.

One of the most interesting features of this volume is Soyinka’s vivid and insightful portraits of several of the national leaders with whom he has interacted, including French president François Mitterrand, Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, and others. As the memoir unfolds, Soyinka describes personal relationships with nearly all of the important figures in the history of Nigeria over the past fifty years. He tells, for example, of his admiration for and friendship with African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela; he relates his secret attempts in 1991 to arrange diplomatic meetings between Mandela and his rival for political power in South Africa, Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi, with the aid of another African Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, and of Ibrahim Babangida, then president of Nigeria. Soyinka also describes his relationships with internationally important writers, including Gordimer, the British poets W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, and Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Ken Saro-Wiwa, as well as curators at the British Museum, media executives and personalities, business leaders and military officials.

As the book moves into the twenty-first century and into Soyinka’s late sixties and seventies, he remains a central political figure. While frequently throughout the memoir Soyinka yearns for solitude, for time to fish and read, he never is given—or never chooses—a solitary life. The memoir concludes where it began, at the airport when Soyinka arrives back in Nigeria after years away, surrounded by a cheering, out-of-control throng of well-wishers welcoming him home.

### SUMMARY

Wole Soyinka’s politically committed art has earned him censorship, time in prison, and the Nobel Prize in Literature. His plays incorporate Yoruba and Western traditions in a manner that conveys a realistic understanding of the place of both in postcolonial African life. Soyinka’s works

argue for independence—political, intellectual, and cultural—from all forms of repression. Sometimes difficult and experimental, his plays bring a portrait of Nigerian life to the world stage.

Cynthia A. Bily

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*The Lion and the Jewel*, pr. 1959, pb. 1963  
*A Dance of the Forests*, pr. 1960, pb. 1963  
*The Trials of Brother Jero*, pr. 1960, pb. 1963  
*The Strong Breed*, pb. 1963, pr. 1964  
*Three Plays*, pb. 1963  
*Five Plays*, pb. 1964  
*Kongi's Harvest*, pr. 1964, pb. 1967  
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#### POETRY:

- Idanre, and Other Poems*, 1967  
*Poems from Prison*, 1969  
*A Shuttle in the Crypt*, 1972  
*Ogun Abibiman*, 1976  
*Mandela's Earth, and Other Poems*, 1988  
*Early Poems*, 1997  
*Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*, 2002

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How is landscape important in Wole Soyinka's works?
- How does Soyinka depict power in his works? Is power generally a strengthening or a corrupting force?
- In *Death and the King's Horseman* and other works, how does Soyinka present suicide or sacrifice as a potentially redemptive act?
- How does Soyinka deal with issues of violence in his works? Under what circumstances does he seem to condone violence?
- Based on his literary works, does Soyinka seem optimistic or pessimistic about the human condition?
- In Soyinka's view, why it is important to know about the past? How does the past shape the future?

Wole Soyinka

LONG FICTION:

*The Interpreters*, 1965

*Season of Anomy*, 1973

NONFICTION:

*"The Man Died": Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*, 1972

*Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 1976

*Aké: The Years of Childhood*, 1981 (autobiography)

*Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, 1988

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## MURIEL SPARK

**Born:** Edinburgh, Scotland  
February 1, 1918

**Died:** Florence, Italy  
April 13, 2006

*A poet, critic, biographer, and dramatist, as well as a fiction writer, Spark is best known for her formal, witty novels.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Muriel Spark was born Muriel Sarah Camberg in Edinburgh, Scotland, on February 1, 1918, the daughter of Bernard Camberg, an engineer, and Sarah Elizabeth Uezzell Camberg. When Spark was still very young, she began to write, and later, at James Gillespie's Girls' School in Edinburgh, she was labeled the school poet. She attended Heriot Watt College from 1935 to 1937. In 1937, she married Sydney O. Spark and settled down in Rhodesia. They had a son, Robin Spark. Muriel Spark's attitude toward her life in Africa is reflected in her short stories set in Africa, which show colonial society as meaningless, dull, and occasionally violent. Her attitude was doubtless colored by the fact that her marriage was failing; it was later dissolved. However, because of World War II, she was trapped in Rhodesia until 1944.

On her return to England, Spark became a writer for the propaganda branch of the British Intelligence Service and lived in London for some years after the war. During this period, although she occasionally published a poem or two, her primary concern was supporting herself and her son by various jobs, including writing for a jewelry trade publication and working for a press agent. After editing the *Poetry Review* for two years, she started her own magazine, *Forum Stories and Poems*, which failed after two issues. Even though she was

unable to devote full time to writing, Spark was dedicated to her craft. In fact, although she enjoyed the company of men, she had already decided that she could not be a good wife, as well as a good mother and a good writer, and therefore another marriage was impossible.

Although she was to achieve fame through her novels, Spark's first book-length works were in other genres. An edition of Anne Brontë's work, prepared jointly by Spark and the critic and poet Derek Stanford, never appeared in print, but in 1950 Spark and Stanford published an edition of essays titled *Tribute to Wordsworth*. Spark's first independent critical work was *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1951; revised as *Mary Shelley*, 1987). It was followed by a collection of her own poems, *The Fanfarlo, and Other Verse* (1952), and by other critical works, including that which has received the highest acclaim, *John Masefield* (1953).

While writing her work on Masefield, Spark began to reassess the novel genre. Even though she had won a short-story contest in 1951, up to this point she was committed to poetry, which she considered superior to fiction. Yet she now admired the narrative technique evident in Masefield's novels, as well as in his verse. Evidently she was changing her mind.

Spark was also changing her mind about religion. Although her father was Jewish and her Edinburgh school was Presbyterian, Spark did not have any religious commitment until 1953, when she became a High Church Anglican. Then, after reading the Roman Catholic theologian John Henry Newman and receiving instruction in Roman Catholi-



cism, she was converted to that faith. Spark was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1954.

At this time, Spark was having serious physical and mental problems. Her physical difficulties were solved in part by financial aid from a number of people, which enabled her to obtain better food and much-needed medical attention; her psychological problems were eased after a period of therapy. During her stay in Kent, where she was recuperating from her illness, Spark produced her first full-length novel, *The Comforters* (1957). Its reception set the pattern for later critical reaction to her works: Even though critics praised the book, they disagreed as to how it should be interpreted. They were even more confused by her second novel, *Robinson* (1958), an allegory, which was not a success.

With *Memento Mori* (1959), Spark began a series of realistic novels. Although *Memento Mori* did not fall into the pattern of the rebellious “angry young men” who were then dominating English literature, perhaps because Spark was neither angry nor young and certainly not male, this novel was a financial success, and Spark could now become a full-time writer. The following year, she published *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and *The Bachelors* (1960), novels that are both set in London, where she was now living.

Spark’s skill in developing action through dialogue, which is evident in her novels, is also reflected in her success in dramatic works. In 1961, a number of her radio plays that were written for the British Broadcasting Corporation were published in *Voices at Play*. The next year, her adaptation of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* for radio won the Prix Italia, and her play *Doctors of Philosophy* (pr. 1962) was produced in London. The novel, however, remained Spark’s primary interest.

While the early works had reflected her preoccupation with Catholicism, by 1961 Spark was ready to seek a reconciliation between her new faith and her Jewish heritage. That year, she spent two months in Israel conducting research for a new book. A prizewinning novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), was the result of her efforts.

After eighteen years in England, Spark felt she needed the creative stimulus that a change of residence would provide. In 1962, she accepted the offer of an office from *The New Yorker*, which had published the novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), and for four years she spent most of her time in

New York City. In 1966, however, Spark moved to Italy, dividing her time between an apartment in Rome and a country home in Tuscany. Over the next four decades, she continued to turn out one distinguished novel after another; her final work, *The Finishing School*, appeared in 2004. Spark also published collections of poetry and short stories; wrote *Curriculum Vitae: Autobiography* (1992), which covered her life up to the publication of her first novel; revised her earlier nonfiction works on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and John Masefield; and produced a new critical study entitled *The Essence of the Bröntes: A Compilation with Essays* (1993).

On April 13, 2006, Good Friday on the Church calendar, Muriel Spark died in a hospital in Florence, Italy, at the age of eighty-eight. Spark was buried three days later in the Tuscan town of Civitella della Chiana.

## ANALYSIS

In Spark’s early fiction, one does not find the kind of passionate quest for the meaning of life so familiar in the often autobiographical novels of other authors. When she began to write novels, Spark was already a mature person, who had already arrived at her own certainty. Indeed, she did not publish her first novel until four years after her conversion to the Christian faith and three years after her commitment to Roman Catholicism. While her setting, her subjects, and her techniques varied with the passage of time, the vision of reality that underlies all of her work never changed. It is this vision that explains the many characteristics of Spark’s novels that have most puzzled her critics.

As a Christian, Spark believed that while human beings are on this earth, they live in not one world, but two, the temporal and the eternal. The theme of all of her works, then, involves the relationship between those two worlds. One must never forget that, to Spark, the purpose of life in the temporal world is to prepare for life with God in eternity. Therefore, human successes and failures must be judged rather differently than they are when the focus is on this world alone.

Spark’s religious vision had an important influence on her plots, which seem to swing between the trivial and the tragic with an almost dizzying effect. For example, in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the basic situation is as serious as that in any other adventure story set in the contemporary Middle East.

Despite the warnings of people who have lived in that area for some time, the protagonist, Barbara Vaughan, a half-Jewish Englishwoman, slips into Jordan in disguise, determined to see her fiancé, and, as a result of her foolish action, places herself beyond the protection of her friends or her government. At best, she can be arrested; at worst, she may well be executed as a spy. However, after Barbara is hidden in a house of prostitution, which is also a center for spies, all sorts of improbable people begin to arrive, and, for a time, the novel becomes a comedy, indeed, almost a farce. It is difficult to know whether the author means for her readers to take the intrigue seriously or whether the story is a parody of the form in which it seems to be cast.

In the same novel, there seems to be a disproportion between the difficulties of the lovers, Harry Clegg and the indomitable Barbara, and the author's almost offhand resolution to their problems. Because Barbara is Roman Catholic, she spends a great deal of time agonizing about her liaison with Harry, who is divorced. At one point, she even offers to leave the Church in order to marry him; however, it is clear that, in reality, she will not bring herself to abandon her salvation for love. Finally, through a twist of fate or perhaps an act of Providence, it is discovered that Harry was reared a Catholic, and that since his non-Catholic marriage was invalid, he can marry Barbara after all. While Barbara's spiritual torment has persisted through most of the book, the solution appears with a suddenness reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan. Furthermore, as a number of critics have pointed out, Spark devotes only one sentence to subsequent events, merely stating that Harry and Barbara had a happy marriage.

Spark's abrupt changes of tone, as well as the detachment with which she treats the most tragic events, can be explained by her spiritual convictions. Although she displays compassion for those who suffer in this world, Spark also makes it clear that, in God's view, the fact that Barbara and Harry are finally able to marry is a purely temporal and temporary matter. What is far more important is the struggle for Barbara's soul, which, it is suggested, would have been lost had she abandoned the Church.

Yet Spark must not be accused of simply following the party line. As her interviews made clear, she

was hardly sentimental about her coreligionists. In fact, in her fiction she obviously identifies with her female protagonists, often new converts, who are appalled by narrow-minded, paranoid, and even vicious Catholics, such as Georgina Hogg in *The Comforters*, who seem determined to engulf them.

Spark had no illusions about the Church on earth; she saw it as often being dominated by people who are more interested in attaining power over others than in embodying the principles of Christ. It is no accident that, for her fictional treatment of the Watergate scandal, *The Abbess of Crewe: A Modern Morality Tale* (1974), Spark chose a Benedictine abbey as the setting and an assortment of nuns and priests as the conspirators. These include Alexandra, who manages to get herself elected abbess through bugs, burglary, and slander, and Father Baudouin, a Jesuit priest who helps organize the burglary. Even though Spark's focus is on Watergate, not on the supposed events at Crewe, it is obvious that she recognizes a parallel between political events outside the Church and those within it. Spark repeatedly commented that she became a Catholic because she was spiritually compelled to do so, because she felt that the Church was the way of salvation, not because she felt that it or any other organization composed of human beings was perfect. The Church, too, has both a secular reality and a spiritual reality. Like Dante, Spark was aware of the fact that the attainment of power within the Church in this world does not necessarily mean that one will be similarly honored in the next.

The sense of perspective that Spark received from her faith caused her to create sinners who are appealing and intelligent and saints who seem to be fools. For example, in *The Abbess of Crewe*, the handsome Jesuit Father Maximilian, who is well informed about sin, has no moral scruples about participating in the election plot; similarly, in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, the charming Dougal Douglas manipulates everyone whom he meets for his own purposes, complicating and even destroying their lives. Significantly, Dougal later becomes a monk and then a writer. On the other hand, the ineffectual Freddy Hamilton of *The Mandelbaum Gate* rescues Barbara from her captors and saves her life, while the obtuse Joanna Childe of *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) turns out to be the most courageous young woman in the May of Teck Club.

Spark's sense of perspective also explains the

distance that she maintains from her characters and her willingness to make witticisms at their expense. On a spiritual level, Joanna is to be a superb creature; on a temporal level, however, she is large, humorless, and generally bewildered. Spark does not find it inappropriate to laugh at Joanna's elocution lessons or at her inability to grasp the reality of what is occurring around her. Sometimes Spark even seems to laugh at tragedy. When the stupidest of the girls in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* runs up and down dithering in a laboratory fire, Spark points out that she will later die by behaving exactly the same way in a hotel fire. Some critics have considered such comments to be not merely dispassionate but also heartless; others admire Spark's detachment and enjoy her black humor. Yet it may be that what seems shocking in Spark is, in reality, a revelation of her faith. If this world is only temporary, then the actual departure of a physical being from it is indeed insignificant. Spark saw death as merely a transition to eternity. It is this basic Christian emphasis, this insistence that everyday events are important only as they relate to the development of the eternal soul, which is essential for understanding Spark's novels.

## THE COMFORTERS

**First published:** 1957

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Catholic woman finds herself listening to the novel in which she is a character.*

*The Comforters*, Spark's first published novel, is not only the story of the outlandish actions and interactions of a group of English eccentrics but also a novel about writing a novel. Spark later said that the reason she wrote *The Comforters* was to see whether she could do it; with her new interest in fiction, she was interested not only in writing a novel with the usual characters and plot but also in the process of creation itself.

At any rate, the work can be said to consist of two mysteries. One of them involves Louisa Jepp, a

strong-minded old lady who seems to have a source of income of which her family is unaware. No one has worried much about it until she has a visit from her grandson, Laurence Manders, who possesses, or is possessed by, an obsessive curiosity. Laurence decides to uncover the source of her money; admittedly, her unusual collection of new friends, along with the diamonds hidden in the bakery goods, are enough to make anyone suspicious.

The second mystery involves the protagonist, Caroline Rose, who, like so many of Spark's heroines, is a high-strung young woman, given to bouts of illness, and a recent convert to Catholicism. After she has run away from a Catholic retreat center, made unbearable by the self-righteous bossiness of Georgina Hogg and by the paranoid sanctimoniousness of the others in attendance, Caroline finds herself hearing the sound of typing and of voices saying the words that have very recently appeared in Spark's novel. Naturally, she fears for her sanity and tries to find someone else who can hear what she hears. When she turns for help to her former lover, Laurence, he has two mysteries to solve.

Although the intricacies of the plot and the eccentricities of the characters in the novel produce a comic effect, *The Comforters* also has a serious theme—the exploration of Christian conduct, particularly the matter of Christian charity. This theme is introduced at the beginning of the book, when Caroline becomes so irritated with the other Catholics at the retreat house that she leaves. In contrast, both Laurence's father, Sir Edwin Manders, and his mother, Lady Manders, avoid facing such problems, Sir Edwin Manders by retreating whenever things get difficult at home and Lady Manders by refusing to admit the possibility that there are hypocritical and evil people in the world. Clearly, what Spark is saying is that charity does not mandate blindness or sentimentality and that Christian conduct begins with a realistic look at life. It is no accident that Caroline is both the sincere convert and the accidental novelist. Like the author, Caroline is observing herself as she creates a novel and, at the same time, observing herself as she creates her own Christian life.

## MEMENTO MORI

**First published:** 1959

**Type of work:** Novel

*A number of elderly people are disturbed by an anonymous caller, who reminds them of a truth that they would rather ignore: they must die.*

With *Memento Mori*, her third novel, Spark abandoned the experimentation of her first two works and began to write with the sureness of one accomplished at her craft. Now, too, her efforts were being rewarded financially; it was this novel that established her as a full-time writer. The popularity of *Memento Mori* is not surprising. While, like *The Comforters*, this novel has eccentric characters, complex relationships, and puckish wit, both its subject and the direction of its plot are made clear from the very first chapter.

The subject of *Memento Mori* is death. Its characters are elderly people, who, in the course of the novel, must deal with their friends' deaths and with their own. Their attitudes are revealed by a unifying plot device: A number of them receive telephone calls from someone who says simply, "Remember you must die." What is peculiar is that none of them can agree as to the quality of the caller's voice. Ironically, at the end of the novel, although the characters who have been receiving the calls have all died, the caller has never been identified.

At the beginning of the book, Dame Lettie Colston receives one of the mysterious calls and discusses it with her brother, Godfrey Colston. Dame Lettie is not unduly bothered by the call; she has reported it to the police, and she regards it as more a nuisance than anything else, something to be put out of one's mind. As for Godfrey, he is too busy with old age to think about death. He is always irritated with his wife, Charmian Colston, a successful writer, who is intermittently confused. He is also preoccupied with his sexual needs, which are ful-

filled when he sits staring at women's stocking tops and garters.

Like Godfrey, most of the characters in the novel are still clinging to life as if their time on earth will never end. When they gather for the funeral of Lisa Brooke, her relatives, friends, and former lovers are all preoccupied with their old annoyances. Dame Lettie scolds Godfrey for glaring; Janet Sidebottom snubs Lisa's rapacious housekeeper, Mrs. Pettigrew; and the Amazonian Tempest Sidebottom is as angry as Dame Lettie about the impossible behavior of the poet Percy Mannering.

Unfortunately, at this gathering Dame Lettie decides that Mrs. Pettigrew would be the perfect person to look after Charmian. Despite Mrs. Pettigrew's machinations in regard to Lisa's estate, it never occurs to Dame Lettie or to Godfrey that, if the housekeeper were in their employ, she might be a threat to any of them. What they do not realize is that while class and property once made them secure, age has now made them vulnerable. Simply because she is somewhat younger than they are, a person such as Mrs. Pettigrew can victimize her employers, capitalizing on Charmian's confusion and on Godfrey's sexual needs in order to seize power in the household and eventually to acquire the Colston money.

From the time that Lettie's interest in Mrs. Pettigrew is mentioned to her, Charmian's former companion, eighty-two-year-old Jean Taylor, who is now confined to a public nursing home, warns of the damage that the housekeeper can do. Jean sees all around her evidence of the way in which the elderly are treated, the patronizing flattery and the insulting tirades. Jean also sees that, like their social superiors, the old ladies in her ward spend their last days in bickering.

Only Charmian and Jean accept the approach of death with dignity. Despite Godfrey and Mrs. Pettigrew, Charmian moves to a nursing home, where she can live with the humor and grace that have always been characteristic of her. As for Jean Taylor, she has long ago decided to offer her death up to God. Therefore, she patiently endures the irritability of the other old ladies and the idiocies of the staff. When, at the end of the book, Spark describes the deaths of her various characters, it is clear that, from the vantage point of eternity, the cause of physical death is not important. What is





important is to remember that everyone must die and then to spend one's days on earth in spiritual preparation for that inevitable end.

## THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE

**First published:** 1961

**Type of work:** Novel

*A self-centered teacher manipulates the minds, and influences the lives, of a group of young students.*

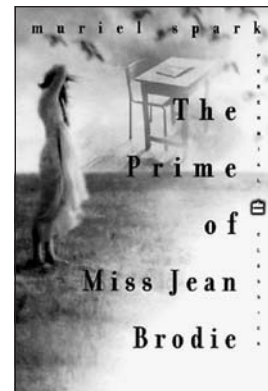
Structurally, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is one of Spark's simplest novels, focusing as it does on a single character's influence upon those who are closest to her. The protagonist is Miss Jean Brodie, a teacher at a staid Edinburgh school. At first, she seems to be a highly sympathetic character because of her passion for teaching and her independence of spirit. Instead of merely drilling her students, she tries to develop their minds. Even her bitterest enemies cannot deny the fact that the small group of girls chosen to be her intimates, "the Brodie set," seem to have a great deal of knowledge about music, art, history, political science, and current events. It would seem that these girls are indeed fortunate.

As Spark describes the gatherings of the Brodie girls, however, it becomes clear that Miss Brodie's influence is not altogether benign. She expects the few girls whom she chooses from her class to be totally loyal to her alone throughout their time in school. She ridicules the concept of team spirit, so that they will have no other attachments in their later years, when they would normally be in other groups. Furthermore, she manipulates the girls by insisting that she can perceive their real identities and by assigning roles to them based on those arrogant assumptions. Thus, Eunice Gardiner is the gymnast, Sandy Stanger, the reciter of vowels, and Rose Stanley, the sexual specialist. It is obvious that, while Miss Brodie continues to explore her own nature, her girls must depend upon her for their own development.

While Spark, in her usual detached fashion, narrates the story of Miss Jean Brodie, she provides enough clues to make it clear that she is describing a person who, while personally appealing, is actually obsessed with pride. One of these clues is Miss Brodie's admiration for the Fascists; with her insistence on blind loyalty to the flawless leader, she operates like the dictators whom she admires. Another is the fact that while Brodie will not permit any questioning of her own authority, she considers herself to be above the rules that apply to ordinary mortals. She sees no need to observe the moral customs of her community, but she boasts to the girls about her sexual adventures, which she fictionalizes until they seem as romantic as the great love stories of history. Similarly, she scornfully repudiates the authority of her headmistress, not on a matter of principle but simply because she refuses to bow to anyone.

Miss Brodie's admiration of excess leads her to suggest Anna Pavlova as a role model for her girls, not merely because she was a great dancer, but, perhaps more important, because of her legendary fits of temperament. As for career goals, Miss Brodie will settle for nothing less than high drama; she wants Rose to be a famous lover and Eunice, a martyred missionary. By the end of the novel, when such talk has resulted in the death of a girl who ran away to fight in the Spanish Civil War, it is clear that Miss Brodie is, in fact, a false messiah.

Convinced that she must be stopped, one of her girls betrays Miss Brodie. Ironically, at the conclusion of the novel, her betrayer, now a cloistered nun, identifies Miss Brodie as the most important influence of her youth. One may ask whether she is emphasizing Miss Brodie's good qualities, which in the tradition of tragedy are overshadowed by her all-encompassing pride, or whether she is implying that, by experiencing a false messiah, she could find the true one.





## THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS

**First published:** 1963

**Type of work:** Novel

*In a London hostel filled with young women, good and evil struggle for dominion.*

*The Girls of Slender Means* illustrates Spark's belief that what may seem like trivialities are actually important events on the path to salvation or damnation. Certainly, in 1945 there is not much serious conversation at the May of Teck Club, a hostel in bombed-out London where some forty girls, mostly students and office workers of good background, can be appropriately housed. Spark can easily summarize the subjects of discourse at the club as being love and money, the latter needed to buy clothes and cosmetics in aid of the former. Except for a few such as Jane Wright, who has ambitions in the publishing business, and Joanna Childe, who, after one failed love affair, has decided to devote her life to poetry, the girls' major amusements are gossip and flirtation. The greatest success at the latter is the beautiful, self-centered Selina Redwood, who collects men of all sorts, including Nicholas Farrington, an irresolute young man, most recently the author of a book in favor of atheism.

The title that Spark chose for this book is particularly apt. In the first sentence, she points out the obvious meaning: The story is set at a time when everyone in England had limited means. When the girls' most exciting adventure turns out to be wriggling through a bathroom window to sunbathe on the roof, however, it is clear that a slender bodily structure is indeed the means to satisfaction. Right at the point when one of the girls is stuck in the window, the comedy turns to drama. An unexploded bomb detonates, destroying the fire escapes, and when a gas main ruptures, a number of girls are trapped on the top floor. Then, of course, the slender ones can slip up to the roof, from which they can be rescued. Meanwhile, the firemen are working frantically to open a blocked-off hatch, so that the remainder can be rescued before the building collapses. At the moment that the last one, Joanna Childe, is on the ladder, the end comes, and the young woman dies in the ruins.

Less important than the matter of who lives and who dies is Spark's description of the girls' behavior during those critical minutes. For example, the slim Selina slips back into the house, not to help the others, but to rescue a prized Schiaparelli dress. On the other hand, Joanna calmly recites the appropriate psalms and waits until last to climb the ladder, missing her own chance to escape by only a few seconds. For Nicholas, who has been on the roof throughout the rescue effort, this episode is a turning point. Inspired by Joanna's faith, he commits himself to Christianity, becomes a missionary, and later, when the survivors have returned to their everyday lives, dies a martyr's death in Haiti.

The conclusion suggests still a third interpretation of the title. Most of the girls, though they are not as evil as Selina, nevertheless are spiritually impoverished. In contrast, Joanna has so rich a faith that she is able to escape from her self. Among Spark's characters, Joanna is one of the few saints. Moreover, because it concludes with spiritual triumph both for Joanna and for Nicholas, in the context of Spark's vision, *The Girls of Slender Means* is a novel with an unequivocal happy ending.

## THE FINISHING SCHOOL

**First published:** 2004

**Type of work:** Novel

*Lust, jealousy, ignorance, greed, ambition, and murderous urges possess the faculty and the students at a so-called finishing school.*

In her final novel, *The Finishing School*, Spark again demonstrated her gift for satirical comedy. The targets of her satire are the proprietors of College Sunrise, a school temporarily based in Lausanne, Switzerland, and the teenage students whose well-to-do parents deposit them there, mistakenly assuming that their offspring will emerge with a store of useful knowledge. What the parents do not know is that Rowland Mahler and his wife, Nina Parker, have set up the school purely as a moneymaking project. Though he teaches creative writing with authority, at twenty-nine Rowland has not yet published anything of note. However, with their income from the school, which is actually run by his long-suffering wife, he has no need to work.

At last he has time to finish the great novel he is sure he has within him. Unfortunately, Rowland finds that he cannot write it: He has developed a severe case of writer's block.

Eighteen-year-old Chris Wiley, who is one of Rowland's creative writing students, has no such problem. He is moving right along with a novel about Mary, Queen of Scots, and despite the author's inexperience and his cavalier attitude toward historical fact, he is already being contacted by potential publishers. Rowland's jealousy of the younger writer, intensified by his unacknowledged sexual feelings for him, rapidly develops into an obsession so overwhelming that Rowland can think of nothing but killing his rival.

Such a plotline could well fit a tragedy or one of the darker mysteries. However, like traditional satirists, Spark is at least as interested in exposing folly and pretense as she is in pointing out instances of vice. Adopting the posture of limited omniscience, she moves from mind to mind, recording the random thoughts of her characters and thus revealing their secret selves. For example, while Nina appears to be totally devoted to her husband and his goal, she envisions a future without him. It is hardly surprising that she ends up in London with an art gallery owner, Israel Brown, whom she met in Lausanne. Chris, too, has thoughts he does not share. Not only does he sense Rowland's sexual interest in him but he even discovers that the tension between them is essential to his own creativity. Even minor characters in *The Finishing School* have secret impulses. Dr. Alice Barclay-Good, a sixty-year-old

guest lecturer, responds with professorial dignity to Chris's questions about Mary, Queen of Scots, her special interest. Later Chris comes to her room to compliment her and to continue the discussion. By the time he slips into bed with her, her mind is on his red hair and his youth, and nothing else matters.

Though in keeping with Spark's Catholic perspective, *The Finishing School* presents examples of all the seven deadly sins, the author approaches her subject by pointing out that human beings fall into sin by deceiving others and deceiving themselves. Like the great satirists who preceded her, she knows that the surest way to reform others is to show them their own errors in the follies of others.

## SUMMARY

In a time when most critics and writers limited their interest to success and failure in this world, Muriel Spark provided an interesting alternative. Like her friend and patron Graham Greene, Spark believed that it is only the spiritual reality that gives significance to temporal events.

Although the wit that enlivens her narratives may be considered a divine gift, Spark's detached tone can be explained by the long-range view dictated by her faith, which considers this world merely a testing ground for the next. Eccentric characters, preposterous plots, swift shifts between comedy and tragedy—all of these are enough like life itself to suggest that Spark's God, too, has a sense of humor.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How do Muriel Spark's novels illustrate the conflict between good and evil?
- What "good" characters in Spark's fiction are not particularly appealing?
- What "bad" characters in Spark's fiction are to some degree sympathetic?
- How does Spark differentiate between the ideal Church and the Church as it exists in this world?
- What is Spark's view of death?
- Which characters in Spark's novels lead what she would consider successful lives?
- How does Spark use wit and humor to distance herself from the characters in her novels?

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AP/Wide World Photos

## STEPHEN SPENDER

**Born:** London, England  
February 28, 1909

**Died:** London, England  
July 16, 1995

*One of the Oxford Group, Spender broke with the poetic aestheticism of the early twentieth century, producing poetry—and later essays, plays, and novels—that became increasingly political.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Howard Spender was the second of Edward Harold and Violet Hilda Schuster Spender's four children. His father, who died when Spender was seventeen, was a journalist and public speaker. His mother suffered from nervous ailments, most likely manic depression. She died before her husband; the children were left to the care of two great-aunts and an uncle.

Before his father's death, Spender earned money by printing medicinal labels on his own press. He collected his poems when he was eighteen and printed them on his press as *Nine Experiments, by S.H.S.: Being Poems Written at the Age of Eighteen* (1928). Two years later, he printed W. H. Auden's first collection, *Poems* (1930).

From 1928 until 1930, Spender attended Oxford University, where he formed a close bond with Auden. He left a year short of completing his baccalaureate. The group of poets with whom Spender is most often associated was referred to as the Auden group, although this was a loose fraternity of writers who held no meetings, did not necessarily know one another, and were dissimilar in many respects. Others prominent in the group were Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Christopher Isherwood.

Isherwood wooed Spender away from Oxford short of a degree, urging him to come to Germany,

at that time bristling with intellectual excitement overshadowed only slightly by the specter of Fascism. Spender mingled happily in the homosexual society of Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna. He was openly bisexual throughout his life. He married Agnes Marie Pearn in 1936, and, after his divorce from her, married the pianist Natasha Litvin in 1941. They had two children, Matthew Francis and Elizabeth.

From 1939 to 1941, Spender was coeditor of *Horizon* with Cyril Connolly. From 1953 until 1966, he held a coeditorship of *Encounter* with Irving Krystol and Melvin Lansky, but he vacated the post immediately upon learning that the magazine was backed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

During World War II, Spender was a fireman, and after the war he was a counselor in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) section of letters. He held the Ellison Chair in Poetry at the University of Cincinnati in 1953, a Beckman Professorship at the University of California in 1959, and had writer-in-residence and visiting professor appointments at such universities as Northwestern, Cambridge, Connecticut, South Carolina, and Vanderbilt during the next twenty years. He served as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress in 1965 and as a fellow at Wesleyan University's Institute for Advanced Studies in 1967.

From 1970 to 1975, Spender occupied the chair in English literature at University College, London. Beginning in 1975, he served as president of the English Centre of PEN International. In 1986, Queen Elizabeth II knighted Spender; fifteen years



earlier, in 1971, he had won the queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

Consistently energetic and productive, Spender published numerous volumes of poetry and collections of essays, seven plays or adaptations of plays, short stories, two novels, an autobiography, a volume of his letters to Isherwood, and his journals from 1939 to 1983. He also edited many volumes of poetry and prose and published translations from German, Spanish, Greek, and French. Spender died in 1995 at the age of eighty-six.

### ANALYSIS

Stephen Spender held few illusions about his poetic stature. While acknowledging that he had a considerable stock of compelling ideas to write about, he realized he did not have the sense of form that results in first-rate poetry. Few scholars challenge this insightful self-criticism.

This is not to say that Spender is a weak poet. In terms of ideas, he is in a class with Britain's great triumvirate of Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century. He has frequently been compared to Percy Bysshe Shelley. He never, however, achieved the technical perfection of his Romantic predecessors. He revised his poems endlessly, but he usually failed to give them the magic that would substantially improve them.

His later poetry does not suggest a significant advance in his ability as a poet. Indeed, some of his best verse was produced before he was twenty-five. After World War II, Spender published less poetry, devoting himself instead to translation, critical essays, and books about travel, politics, social problems, and intellectual history.

Spender and his generation of British poets grew up in the shadow of T. S. Eliot, who, with the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922), was catapulted into an Olympian literary prominence. Spender, having matured in the period between two wars, was fully aware of the economic strife caused by the Great Depression of the 1930's and the political strife that led to World War II. He spent considerable time in Germany and Austria. In the mid-1930's, having joined the Communist Party, Spender was sent to Spain, where the Spanish Civil War was raging.

The social dislocations of Spender's formative years significantly affected all of his writing, most of which railed against the inequities he observed

and much of which was antiwar. He considered Wilfred Owen, who died in World War I, the most outstanding poet of that war.

Owen's writing, rather than that of Eliot, reflected the kinds of pacifist sentiments Spender was most comfortable expressing. In "Two Armies" (1937), for example, he captures the daylight drama of fierce battle, then retreats behind the lines at night and writes about those involved in the battle and its effect upon them. Owen was also much affected by the writing of Rainer Maria Rilke, Ernst Toller, and Federico García Lorca.

Whereas Eliot was concerned centrally with abstract ideas, Spender was concerned with social and economic realities. In "Pylons," published in *Poems* (1933, 1934), Spender celebrates the great steel structures of Britain's rural electrification program rather than bemoaning the loss of a more rustic past.

During the 1930's, Spender, like many intellectuals of the period, was reaching for beliefs that might serve as a framework for his understanding. In *Forward from Liberalism* (1937), he writes of the disappointment of liberalism in an age of economic disintegration and international turmoil. He considered liberalism incapable of dealing with the growing fascism he saw engulfing much of Europe. Spender considered communism the only reasonable antidote to the cancer sweeping across much of the Continent, so he joined the Communist Party.

His involvement with communism, however, was little more than a brief flirtation. He announced his membership in the Communist Party in an article in *The Daily Worker*, but at the same time criticized the party harshly. He went to Spain at the party's behest, but there is no record of his having attended even a single party meeting. Soon his membership lapsed, but not before he had developed his enthusiasm for García Lorca's poetry, which affected his later writing.

Having lived through international chaos during his formative years, Spender was able to write with exceptional compassion, insight, and understanding about the social upheavals of the 1960's, which he chronicled in what, in many respects, was his most successful book, *The Year of the Young Rebels* (1969), a collection of essays about the unrest and violence of young people in the United States, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in the 1960's.

Nearly fifty years separate the publication of Spender's two novels, *The Backward Son* (1940) and *The Temple* (1988). The first is set in a British school for boys similar to the one Spender attended shortly after the death of his mother. His memories of this experience were not happy. *The Temple*, first written in 1929, is about a youth who leaves Oxford in 1929 and goes to Germany, where he falls in with literary and artistic homosexuals, much as Spender did. The last chapter, added years later, deals with the protagonist's return visit in 1932 and with the rise of Adolf Hitler. The book is of considerable historical significance.

Spender admitted early in his life to being fundamentally autobiographical in all of his writing. He is an unfailingly forthright author. Besides his autobiography covering his life to 1939, *World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender* (1951), he published *Letters to Christopher: Stephen Spender's Letters to Christopher Isherwood, 1929-1939*, with "The Line of the Branch"—*Two Thirties Journals* (1980) and *Journals, 1939-1983* (1986), both strongly autobiographical works.

His much-read book about writing poetry, *The Making of a Poem* (1955), is deeply personal, essentially describing Spender's own mode of writing poetry. Even his more detached books of literary and social criticism—*The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (1935), *European Witness* (1946), *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), *Love-Hate Relations: A Study of Anglo-American Sensibilities* (1974), and *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People, 1933-1970* (1978)—are personal statements more bound up in Spender's own life and sensibilities than in scholarly research on literary or social topics.

During the last half of his life, Spender became somewhat disillusioned by society. The vibrant, dynamic causes of his youth had disappeared. He did not express any particular liking for the society that developed after World War II. Much of his later writing focuses nostalgically on a past that perhaps seemed better in distant memory than it was in reality.

## WORLD WITHIN WORLD: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN SPENDER

**First published:** 1951

**Type of work:** Autobiography

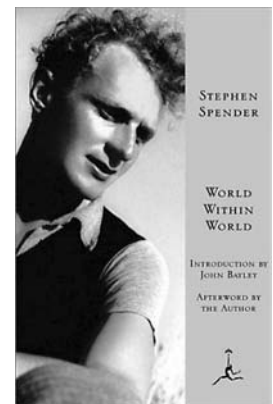
*Dealing with Stephen Spender's first thirty years and mostly with eleven of those years, World Within World occupies a central position in the author's writing.*

Spender is at his best and is most comfortable in writing autobiography. His life consistently was a search for meaning, as is apparent in his choice of the poem with which his autobiography begins. Its first two lines, "To break out of the chaos of my darkness/ Into a lucid day, is all my will," describe the essence of what *World Within World* is about and, indeed, of what Spender's creative life was about. Spender went through life seeking enlightenment, questing after answers to eternal questions.

*World Within World* deals with a number of major themes, which Spender enumerates in his introduction: love, poetry, politics, the life of literature, childhood, travel, and the development of his attitudes toward moral problems. These concerns are played out before a backdrop of a world between two major wars. The heart of the book deals with the years from 1928 to 1939, crucial years in world history, particularly in the history of the world of which Spender was a part.

During those years, Spender's personal conflicts were mirrored on a large scale by the conflicts brought about by the rise of fascism in Germany, Austria, and Italy and by the spread of communism throughout Eastern Europe. Spender, between 1920 and 1937, experienced new cultures—notably German, Austrian, and Spanish—and wrote about them in such works as *Vienna* (1935) and his drama, *Trial of a Judge* (pr. 1938).

At the same time, he was finding his own sexual



identity, which, in his Oxford days, was homosexual. In Europe, he engaged in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships, which he writes about with candor in *World Within World*. Although he experienced some guilt about the homosexual aspects of his life, he found in his encounters with men who shared his intellectual and artistic leanings an identification that he did not find with women, whom he valued more for the intimacy they offered him.

It is ironic that Spender's first marriage ended two months before Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland ignited World War II. On a personal level, this was a time of disintegration for Spender, while on a global level, this was a time of disintegration for the Western World. The analogy was not lost on Spender.

During the 1930's, Spender, with several volumes of verse in print before the end of the decade, established himself as a poet. He is still thought of essentially as a poet, although his writing talents lay more in his essays about literature and politics and in his translations.

*World Within World* captures as well as any book of its day a critical time in the history of Western civilization. It presents the time through the personal vision and reactions of a sensitive artist. It is also more factually reliable than many autobiographies.

## JOURNALS, 1939-1983

**First published:** 1985

**Type of work:** Journal

*This autobiographic journal records Spender's life from the time at which World Within World ends.*

Because *World Within World* details Stephen Spender's life only to his thirtieth year, readers hoped for a second autobiographical volume from him, but he never wrote that volume. Possibly *Journals, 1939-1983*, along with *Letters to Christopher*, with its addenda of journal entries, were Spender's way of adding more autobiographical information to the published material about his life.

A major portion of the journals is concerned

with the period from the end of World War II (1945) to the early 1950's, when the author was moving toward the life of editor and international lecturer that would fill much of his time in the decades ahead. Reprinted in this volume is his diary recounting the dissolution of his marriage and the beginning of World War II. This diary was consciously written for publication, as a considerable number of entries in the journal seem to have been.

Perhaps Spender, badly stung by criticism of his poetry and other writing, appreciated the journal form because it gave him freedom to express himself with little regard to maintaining the sustained form required of poetry or the novel. The Spender that emerges from this collection of journal entries is more a man capitalizing on past recognition than one who is still involved in creating new poems or exploring fresh modes of expression. As in his autobiography, Spender is dependably candid, although he is guarded in talking about his homosexual associates, identifying them quite often with single upper-case letters rather than with whole names.

Spender's portrayals of Christopher Isherwood, Cyril Connolly (his coeditor of *Horizon*), Conrad Aiken, Louis MacNeice, and other literary figures are valuable and honest. His commemoration of Allen Tate is moving. The towering literary presence in the collection, however, is unquestionably W. H. Auden, with whom, as with Isherwood, Spender had a love-hate relationship.

More in the journals than in any of Spender's other writing, readers can peer beneath the surface character that is Stephen Spender. Spender wrote in *World Within World* that in producing autobiography one writes of two people, the person one knows oneself to be and that person as he or she is perceived by society.

The journal form creates a dynamic not often found in autobiographical writing. The real person emerges subtly, almost unbeknownst to the author, between the lines that essentially—especially in journals that were written with an eye toward publication, as these were—depict the subject, often unguardedly, in relation to his or her setting.

In his depiction of Auden especially, Spender reveals much about himself. Auden was often an intrusive element in the Spender household, arriving without warning and demanding full attention

regardless of what else was going on. Spender might have controlled that situation had he been more assertive. He assumed instead the role of victim, although he seems to have convinced himself that he did not enjoy being one.

## COLLECTED POEMS, 1928-1985

**First published:** 1985

**Type of work:** Poems

*Collected Poems, 1928-1985 is the most comprehensive collection of Spender's poetry to date.*

Most of the major collections of Spender's work—*Poems* (1933, 1934), *Selected Poems* (1940), *Ruins and Visions* (1942), *The Still Centre* (1939), *Selected Poems* (1964), and *The Generous Days* (1969, 1971)—contain many of the same poems, but in subsequent editions Spender revised numerous poems. Critics quarrel with many of these revisions, contending that Spender was at his poetic best in the first decade of his productive life—1930 to 1940—and that his revisions of many of the earlier poems have robbed them of their vitality and poetic integrity.

Such considerations aside, it is clear that Spender, seventy-six years old when *Collected Poems, 1928-1985* was published, intended it to represent his poetic career. He personally selected the poems in this collection to give his readers and posterity an overview of more than half a century of his work.

In addition to heavily revising many of the poems for both the 1955 and 1985 editions of his collected verse, Spender omitted some of his best poetry written during the most critical period of his intellectual and artistic development and pub-

lished in *Ruins and Visions*. In that book, he is a young artist dealing with global and personal problems—political upheaval that led to war, an economic depression, the dissolution of his marriage—and writing about them compellingly.

Rather than arranging his work chronologically for the 1985 edition, Spender chose to present the poems in thematic groups such as "Preludes," "Exiles," "Ambition," and "War Poems." The collection also includes some so-called diary poems, focusing on personal matters, that he produced after 1955.

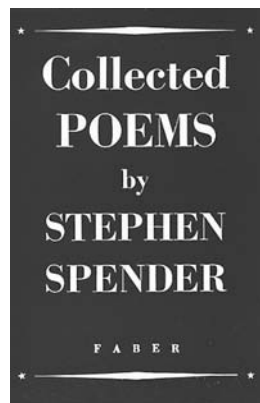
Not all of Spender's revisions did damage to the original poem. An example is "The Uncreating Chaos," which first appeared in *The Still Centre*. It was revised extensively for the 1955 edition and again for the 1985 edition. Both revisions add a vitality and dynamism that the original lacks and a directness and clarity that are missing in the earliest versions of the poem.

On the other hand, in his "Elegy for Margaret," a paean commemorating the death of his beloved sister-in-law, Spender's revision misses the mark by destroying the metaphor he attempted to build. Early in the poem, Margaret is the boat charging through turbulent seas; in the revision, the metaphor changes in midverse. This revision vitiates the image Spender worked earlier in the poem to establish. Despite its faults, the 1985 edition of Spender's poems is important in suggesting the poet's evaluation of his own work.

## SUMMARY

Stephen Spender was a worthy but not a great talent. He was right for his time. With the amelioration of the political conditions about which he wrote most fluently in the 1930's, he found his circle of topics narrowing. Spender overcame this problem by plunging into a broad range of literary activities. As an anthologist, editor, translator, and literary and social critic, he made a continuing contribution to literature. That he is likely to be remembered primarily as a poet is somewhat ironic, because it is in areas other than poetry that he made his most lasting contributions.

*R. Baird Shuman*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Did Stephen Spender write most effectively when his subject was himself?
- What poems of Spender best justify his long and patient dedication to an art that he recognized he could not master?
- Spender had a long writing life. What might explain why so much of his success was based on his experiences while in his twenties?
- What writers did Spender portray most shrewdly in his essays?
- What qualifications prepared Spender for his work on *Love-Hate Relations: A Study of Anglo-American Sensibilities*?



*The Struggle of the Modern*, 1963

*The Year of the Young Rebels*, 1969

*Love-Hate Relations: A Study of Anglo-American Sensibilities*, 1974

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## EDMUND SPENSER

**Born:** London, England  
c. 1552

**Died:** London, England  
January 13, 1599

*Spenser was the leading poet of sixteenth century England and the author of The Faerie Queene, the major English Renaissance epic.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Edmund Spenser achieved recognition during his lifetime as a major English poet; nevertheless, he spent twenty years of his life in Ireland, occupying a variety of positions in the colonial government. His contemporaries described him variously as the English Vergil and as a second Geoffrey Chaucer. Even so, much of what has been written about his life and accepted as biographical fact is elaborated out of Spenser's fictional works or is based on conjecture rather than evidence. Modern scholarship cannot ascertain where and when his works were written, nor can it provide any detailed knowledge of Spenser's patronage connections.

Spenser was born in London, England, around 1552, the son of John and Elizabeth Spenser. He attended the Merchant Taylor's School in London, where the headmaster was Richard Mulcaster, later well known as a humanist educator. On May 20, 1569, Spenser entered Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. He was entered as a sizar, a poor student who acted as a servant to earn his room and board.

Spenser received a B.A. in 1573 and an M.A. in 1576. His university degrees qualified him for a position in the church, a profession that many of his classmates probably chose. He could also have become a schoolmaster, continued at the university while working toward a degree in divinity, or tried to establish himself in the household of a prominent nobleman or in the government. Those who

intended to pursue a career in government usually came from families with strong connections to the court or Privy Council, and they frequently followed their university degrees with legal training from one of the Inns of Court, the four law schools in England. Spenser lacked the advantage of family connections, and there is no record of his having attended one of the Inns of Court.

By 1578, Spenser had become the secretary of the former headmaster of Pembroke College, Dr. John Young, archbishop of Rochester. Spenser later served Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, but anecdotes concerning his close relationship to Leicester and his friendship with Sir Philip Sidney, Leicester's nephew, are unlikely to be true because of the social barriers that would have existed between a mere secretary and powerful courtiers such as Leicester and Sidney. On October 27, 1579, a marriage was recorded at Westminster between Machabyas Chylde and an Edmounde Spenser, possibly the poet. References in later documents to two children, Sylvanus and Katherine, are assumed to refer to offspring from this marriage.

Some scholars have speculated that either a manuscript satire or his first published poem, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), got Spenser into trouble and that he was punished by being sent to Ireland, but the lack of any corroborating evidence makes this hypothesis improbable. It is more likely that Spenser's appointment as secretary to Arthur, Lord Grey of Wilton, was a mark of favor resulting from his patronage connections to Leicester and Sidney. Grey was made lord deputy of Ireland on August 12, 1580, and Spenser accompanied him as

his secretary. Under Grey, he acted as the clerk of the Privy Council for twenty pounds a year. He worked mainly at Dublin Castle, although he may have accompanied Grey on some of his expeditions. In March, 1581, he replaced Lodowick Bryskett as clerk of the Chancery for Faculties; in this post, his duties would have involved administering the licenses and dispensations issued under the authority of the archbishop of Dublin. Spenser may have purchased this seven-year appointment from Bryskett; in any case, since he was still employed as secretary to Lord Grey, he probably hired someone else to do the actual work.

In 1582, Lord Grey was recalled to England in disgrace; he was reported to have been too severe in his treatment of the Irish. Rather than returning with Lord Grey, however, Spenser remained in Ireland, acting as a colonial administrator. The potential economic rewards were attractive. Like many other English colonials, Spenser profited when the lands of Irish rebels were seized by the English and reallocated to loyal subjects of the Crown. In 1586, he was assigned 3,028 acres in Cork from the vast estate of the earl of Desmond, an Irish nobleman who had successfully rebelled against the Crown. In 1589, Spenser succeeded Bryskett as clerk of the Council of Munster.

Spenser may have taken possession of Kilcolman Castle and his lands in Cork in 1588, but that seems unlikely since he did not receive a lease until 1590, when he was granted a perpetual lease for £1,717 pounds a year. Like other Englishmen who were granted such leases, he was called an “undertaker” because he had undertaken to plant a colony at Kilcolman consisting of at least twenty-four households of English settlers. Sir Walter Raleigh owned 42,000 acres around Lismore Castle, located about thirty miles from Spenser’s holdings. Spenser suggests that Raleigh’s encouragement prompted him to publish part 1 (books 1 to 3) of *The Faerie Queene* (1590). He dedicated the first installment of his English epic to Elizabeth I. In recognition of his achievement, on February 26, 1591, the queen awarded him an annual pension of fifty pounds.

Spenser completed the second installment (books 4 to 6) of *The Faerie Queene* in 1596, again dedicating his epic to Elizabeth I. On November 12, 1596, James VI of Scotland wrote to Elizabeth requesting that she punish Spenser for his negative portrait of James’s mother, Mary, Queen of Scots.

Although he was not punished, the second part of *The Faerie Queene* did not result in advancement or specific marks of royal favor. While in London in 1596, Spenser may have written *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (wr. 1596, pb. 1633), a dialogue concerning the administration of Ireland, which, however, was not published until 1633, several decades after his death.

In 1598, Spenser was named sheriff-designate for Cork, but he may never have served as sheriff. The relations between the Irish and the colonial government were growing steadily worse. Spenser’s property in Kilcolman was attacked and burned, and he took refuge with his family in the walled city of Cork. On December 9, 1598, he left for London bearing dispatches from the Munster government to the Privy Council; he delivered these messages on Christmas Eve and was paid the usual stipend of eight pounds.

Two weeks later, on January 13, 1599, Edmund Spenser died in London. Ben Jonson later told his young friend William Drummond of Hawthornden that Spenser died for lack of bread in King Street, but this gossip occurred more than twenty years after Spenser’s death. William Camden, the great Elizabethan historian, however, also reports that Spenser died in poverty, and although modern scholars have pointed to Spenser’s pension and to his having recently received a stipend of eight pounds, the testimony of a contemporary historian must be given substantial authority. Camden has also recorded a poignant description of Spenser’s funeral, which he reveals was paid for by the earl of Essex. Spenser’s body was carried to Westminster Abbey by his fellow poets; they wrote elegies and threw both their verses and the pens with which they had written them into his grave.

## ANALYSIS

In 1600, Camden described Spenser as the leading poet of the age, indicating that Spenser had immediately established himself as a major poet. The body of his work differs from that of many nineteenth and twentieth century poets because each of his works is written consciously within certain literary conventions. Instead of attempting to find thematic connections among his works, each work of art needs to be assessed in relation to the earlier classical, Continental, and English works that Spenser adopted as models.

Many of Spenser's minor poems are also linked to identifiable occasions or with specific patrons: *Daphnaïda* (1591), an elegy on the death of Douglas Howard, wife of Sir Arthur Gorges, was dedicated to Helena, marchioness of Northampton, Gorges's aunt by marriage. *Prothalamion* (1596) celebrates the double wedding of two daughters of Edward Somerset, earl of Worcester, on November 8, 1596. *Fowre Hymnes* (1596) is internally dated September 1, 1596, and is dedicated to the sisters, Margaret, countess of Cumberland, and Anne, countess of Warwick.

Spenser's first major work, *The Shepheardes Calender*, a sequence of pastoral eclogues, appeared in 1579. *The Shepheardes Calender* was licensed in the Stationers' Register to Hugh Singleton on December 5, 1579, and the rights of publication were reassigned to John Harrison on October 29, 1580. Spenser is described merely as the "new poet," and his authorship seems not to have been immediately known. The authorship of the preface and glossary is attributed to an unidentified E. K., but scholars have conjectured that Spenser and his friend Gabriel Harvey were involved in preparing these commentaries on the text. The model for the typographical layout of the woodcuts, arguments, eclogues, and mottoes was the edition of Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia* (1504; *Arcadia and Piscatorial Eclogues*, 1966) printed by Francesco Sansovino in Venice in 1571.

The structure of *The Shepheardes Calender* is remarkably complex. The twelve eclogues are linked to the twelve months of the calendar; they are accompanied by woodcuts, brief prose arguments, commentaries, and notes. The poem makes use of a number of genres, including love complaint, debate poem, pastoral singing match, panegyric, pastoral elegy, parable, and religious satire. Its metrical virtuosity is formidable; only January and December are in the same verse form. Judging from the number of editions printed during Spenser's life, *The Shepheardes Calender* was extremely popular with Spenser's contemporaries. New editions were printed in 1581, 1586, 1591, and 1597. The two later editions may have been printed in response to the interest generated by the publication of *The Faerie Queene* in 1590 and 1596.

*The Shepheardes Calender* illustrates the way in which Spenser wrote within certain conventions. He uses the framework of his classical predeces-

sors, Theocritus and Vergil, to explore a variety of pastoral forms. Instead of expressing his personal feelings in the way that a modern poet might, Spenser consciously plays with forms and themes derived from literary tradition. He expects his readers not only to respond to his poem as a work of art in its own right but also to know how his predecessors handled the conventions of the pastoral elegy and to evaluate his work in relation to literary tradition.

Colin Clout, the central figure of *Shepheardes Calender*, is a shepherd, lover, and poet. Throughout his later works, Spenser used the name Colin Clout for his persona. Colin Clout is the central figure in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595), and later in book 6 of *The Faerie Queene* (1596) Colin Clout again functions as a symbol of the poet-author. Even so, one cannot assume an absolute identification between Spenser and Colin Clout but should approach Colin Clout's love for Rosalind as an artful convention and pay attention to the language and images used to portray his unhappy lover.

The name Colin Clout was inspired by John Skelton's *Collyn Clout* (1522) and carries with it connotations of lower class and rustic. In *The Shepheardes Calender*, Spenser establishes Colin as the disciple of Tityrus, who was understood to be the persona of Vergil, author of the great Roman epic, and of Chaucer. Like Tityrus, Colin (Spenser) wants to write a national epic. Technically speaking, Vergil and Chaucer are not Spenser's sources, nor is he paying tribute to their influence on his work. Using the forms and conventions that they used, he wants to write verse that will challenge comparison with that of two of his greatest predecessors.

It was not until 1590, more than a decade after the appearance of *The Shepheardes Calender*, that the first part of Spenser's greatest work, *The Faerie Queene*, appeared in print. The first three books of *The Faerie Queene* owe much to epic and romance conventions, and each one celebrates a virtue derived from Christian and classical tradition. In book 1, the Redcrosse Knight, representing the virtue of holiness, assists a fair lady, named Una (the one true faith) in freeing her parents (Adam and Eve) from the dragon (sin). Redcrosse's quest will be successful when he has conquered the dragon and restored the lost Eden.

In achieving his quest, he encounters highly

complex figures such as Duessa (double or false religion, Roman Catholicism, and Mary, Queen of Scots) and personifications of abstract states of mind such as Despaire. The battle between Redcrosse and the dragon in canto 11 of the first book should be read allegorically and typologically. Images of ships, seas, and sea monsters associate the dragon with the Spanish Armada, but the dragon is also sin and Satan. Typologically, Redcrosse parallels Saint George, the English fleet, and Christ.

Book 2 turns to the classical virtue of temperance, which is portrayed in the adventures of the knight Guyon. He attempts to achieve the golden mean of “nothing too much.” While it is virtuous to be chaste and rational, it is a mistake to repudiate the sensual and emotional. He visits the cave of Mammon, where he is tempted not only by material wealth but also by honor. In order to prepare for his final battle against sensual intemperance, he visits the House of Alma (soul), where he learns about his own psyche and where his inner fortitude is restored. His principal opponent is Acrasia, who presides over the Bower of Bliss, a beautiful garden in which sensual beauty has become excessive and overshadows spiritual and heroic values. Guyon does not destroy Acrasia; he binds or restrains her, indicating that sensuality has its place in human nature but that it must not be allowed to control the individual.

In book 3, the narrative structure is more loosely organized, but Spenser focuses on Britomart, a female knight who embodies chastity. He interlaces the adventures of Florimell (flowers and vegetation) and Marinell (sea), Amoret (beloved) and Scudamour (shield of love), Belphebe (beautiful Diana, Elizabeth I) and Timias (loyalty, honor, Sir Walter Raleigh), and numerous other figures with those of Britomart. Nevertheless, it is Britomart who completes the quest of freeing Amoret from the house of Busirane. No consensus has been reached concerning the precise meaning of this episode. Some critics think that Amoret needs to be freed from her own fear of sexuality or that Scudamour, her husband to be, has been too bold in his wooing of her. Yet others think that Spenser is elevating chaste married love over the adulterous conventions of medieval courtly love. Britomart’s own connection with Queen Elizabeth seems clear because Britomart’s marriage will create a dynasty

culminating in the birth and reign of the Virgin Queen.

Spenser’s *Complaints* (1591), a collection of satires, meditations, and laments on the world’s vanity and satirize social ills, were published in 1591, but some of the poems may have been written much earlier. *Complaints* was entered in the Stationers’ Register on December 29, 1590, and was printed by William Ponsonby early in 1591. The collection consists of nine separate works: “The Ruines of Time,” “The Teares of the Muses,” “Virgils Gnat,” “Prosopopoia: Or, Mother Hubberds Tale,” “Ruines of Rome, by Bellay,” “Muiopotmos: Or, The Fate of the Butterflie,” “Visions of the Worlds Vanitie,” “The Visions of Bellay,” and “The Visions of Petrarch.”

Ponsonby’s statement that he collected the poems without assistance from Spenser was rejected by an earlier generation of scholars, who assumed that sixteenth century authors “saw their works through the press” and proofread each sheet shortly after it was printed. Since copyright belonged to the publisher or bookseller, authors had far less control over the publication of their work in the sixteenth century than they do presently. None of the corrections made in the text of the *Complaints* during printing would require Spenser’s presence in the printing house.

One of the most intriguing poems in this collection is “Prosopopoia.” Spenser uses the beast fable to describe the adventures of a fox and an ape as they travel through England exposing—and participating in—social abuses. Spenser describes “Prosopopoia” as having been written in his youth, but since no manuscript copies seem to have existed prior to the 1591 printed text, there are no substantive grounds for postulating an earlier version. The poem describes social ills, showing that a simple landowner may be fooled by greedy servants, demonstrating that an ignorant and venial priest may abuse his office and take advantage of his parishioners, and confirming that self-seeking opportunists may rise to prominence in a corrupt court. Except for interest in the topical satire in “Prosopopoia,” the *Complaints* have received little attention from critics, but these meditations and satires offer readers insight into the kind of poetry that Spenser’s contemporaries appreciated.

In *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, Spenser returned to the pastoral as a genre, but, as with



“Prosopopoia,” he remains engaged by the impact of court patronage on courtiers and poets. This long eclogue describes Spenser’s trip to court under the auspices of Sir Walter Raleigh, offers complementary negative and positive views of the court, and pays tribute to contemporary poets and patrons.

The dedication of *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* is addressed to Raleigh and is dated December 27, 1591, from Kilcolman. Spenser revised the poem before its publication in 1595, because in it he alludes to the death of Ferdinando Stanley, earl of Derby, on April 16, 1594. Still, the reference to Kilcolman in the title suggests that “home” for Spenser has become Ireland rather than England. In this eclogue, Spenser describes his meeting with the Shepherd of the Ocean (Raleigh) and the pleasure that they take in reading their verses to each other. He also narrates the story of his trip to the court of Cynthia (Elizabeth I). *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* not only explores love as the subject of poetry but also examines the capacity of the court to support and sustain the needs of poets. Although Cynthia herself remains an untarnished ideal, the court is far from being a congenial place for the poet.

The second part of *The Faerie Queene* was published in 1596 and, like the first part, uses the conventions of epic and romance but is more somber in tone. Book 4, which continues the action of book 3 and begins the second part, is devoted to the virtue of friendship, but included in friendship is concord, a social virtue. Book 5, the Legend of Justice, is divided into three sections concerning English common law, the relationships among law, justice, and equity, and, finally, the application of justice to contemporary events. In this book, Spenser makes use of his own experiences as a civil servant in Ireland. He, however, seems skeptical about the degree to which justice can be understood as governing human experience.

Book 6, the Legend of Courtesy, examines chivalric values in a pastoral context. Sir Calidore falls in love with Pastorella, the fair daughter of the shepherd Meliboe, but his sojourn among the peaceful shepherds is disrupted when brigands attack the community and kidnap Pastorella. Sir Calidore rescues Pastorella as Sir Calepine saves Serena from the cannibals. The principal villain of book 6 is the Blatant Beast, who stands for slander

and the misuse of language; conversely, Calidore’s vision of the Graces dancing on Mount Acidale (canto 10) exemplifies poetry and the harmony of language.

Spenser died before *The Faerie Queene* was finished, but ten years after his death, an addition was made to his epic. The “Mutabilitie Cantos” include canto 6, containing 55 stanzas, canto 7, containing 59 stanzas, and canto 8, containing 2 stanzas. “The Mutabilitie Cantos” juxtapose a solemn inquiry into whether mutability or order controls the universe, and a comic story of the adventures of Faunus, who attempts to spy on Diana when she is bathing. These cantos were not published until they mysteriously appeared in the 1609 folio printed by Matthew Lownes, approximately a decade after Spenser’s death. Since Spenser was not involved in their publication, one cannot be sure how much credence to give the printer’s headnote stating that “both for Forme and Matter, [they] appeare to be parcell of some following Booke of the *Faerie Queene*, under the legend of *Constancie*.” They might also be a remnant of an unfinished mythological poem, but most critics have preferred to think of “The Mutabilitie Cantos” as the conclusion of *The Faerie Queene*.

## THE FAERIE QUEENE

**First published:** Part 1, 1590; part 2, 1596

**Type of work:** Poem

*Books 1 to 3 celebrate the virtues of holiness, temperance, and chastity, while books 4 to 6 praise friendship, justice, and courtesy.*

Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* was published in two parts: the first part (books 1 to 3) appeared in 1590; the second part (books 4 to 6), with which the first part was reprinted, appeared in 1596. The dedication to the 1596 edition is addressed to Elizabeth I, whom Spenser describes as the empress of England, France, Ireland, and Virginia. He adds that he is consecrating “these his labours to live with the eternitie of her fame.” Although *The Faerie Queene* makes use of romance, as well as epic conventions, Spenser intended the poem to function as an English epic, a celebration of the emerging British empire. In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh dated Jan-

uary 13, 1589, he states that the “generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.” Spenser also states that he will use the Aristotelian virtues as a means of organizing the themes of his epic, indicating that he will write a twelve-book epic, portraying in Arthur the twelve private moral virtues that he exercised before he was king. If this work is well received, he adds, he may continue by describing how Arthur came to embody the twelve “politick” virtues after he became king. When the second part appeared in 1596, the title page described the poem as “disposed into twelve bookes, fashioning XII morall vertues,” but no suggestion is given regarding whether the moral virtues are private or public.

One of the most distinctive stylistic features of *The Faerie Queene* involves Spenser’s use of allegory and typology, both of which are unfamiliar to a modern audience and have therefore often been misinterpreted. Renaissance authors inherited a tradition of reading texts allegorically from medieval writers. The method of reading Homer’s works and the Bible in terms of a fourfold allegory derived from Alexandrian exegesis of these texts. According to this method of reading, anything that was not educational or useful in a text should be interpreted figuratively. No level of meaning would be taken literally. A reference to the Temple of Jerusalem, for example, would be interpreted historically as the Temple of Jerusalem, allegorically as the Church on earth, morally as the individual believer, and anagogically or mystically as the final communion of the saints in heaven.

Renaissance readers and writers think of allegory somewhat in the way that modern readers think of symbolism; meanings are concealed in the imagery and narrative. In Spenser’s case, the allegory is not continuous, nor is it consistent. Elizabeth, for example, is represented by the maiden hunter Belpheobe and by Britomart, the female knight, who will marry Artegall (equal to Arthur), the knight of justice. The offspring of Britomart and Artegall will produce the Tudor dynasty culmi-

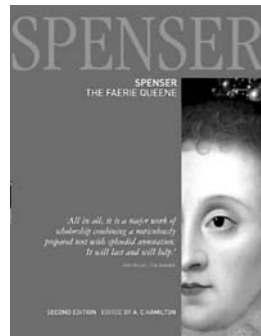
nating in Elizabeth, but in book 5 Elizabeth is also represented in Mercilla, a queenly figure who dispenses both justice and mercy.

A character or event frequently is to be interpreted on multiple levels of significance: In book 1, Redcrosse knight is the champion of the virtue holiness, but he is also the embodiment of Saint George, the patron saint of England and the defender of the one true Protestant church. Instead of trying to arrive at a specific interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*, one needs to be aware of the potential multiplicity of meanings that may be suggested in any one episode.

Interpretation of Spenser’s allegory is rendered more difficult because, during the eighteenth century, the significance of the term “allegory” changed, creating confusion about what a Renaissance author intended when he wrote allegory. Instead of being used to refer to the structure of images and narrative incidents, allegory came to be used as a synonym for personification. Spenser does use personification, for example, in the monsters Error in book 1 and Lust in book 4, but under the rubric of allegory he also includes other genres such as fable, prophecy, and parable and devices such as irony (saying one thing but meaning another), hyperbole, and historical and contemporary allusions.

George Puttenham, in his *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), makes an interesting distinction between mixed allegory, in which the poet tells the readers what the metaphor means, and full allegory, in which the poet allows the readers to determine the meaning. According to Puttenham’s definition, the play *Everyman* (1508) would be considered a mixed allegory because the author reveals that Good Deeds means a Christian who follows Christ’s teaching; on the other hand, William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603) would be considered a full allegory because the character Hamlet is a specific Danish prince but can also represent Everyman. Most modern handbooks of literature reverse these classifications and would consider *Everyman* “more allegorical” than *Hamlet*.

*The Faerie Queene* fits Puttenham’s definition of full allegory. When Spenser refers to his poem as a “dark conceit,” he is alluding to the structure of images and to the narrative and rhetorical techniques in the poem, not to a structure of ideas outside it.



In the letter to Raleigh, he comments: “To some, I know, this Methode will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather have good discipline delivered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, then thus dowlily enwrapped in Allegoricall devices.” The allegory, for Spenser, consists of “cloudy devices,” not of precepts or sermons.

Typology, another device used throughout *The Faerie Queene*, is even less familiar than allegory to modern readers. The term comes from *typos* (Greek, “to strike”). In biblical typology, a type is defined as a detail in the Old Testament that foreshadows its antitype in the New Testament. The detail may be a person (Adam, Moses, and David are all types of Christ); it may be an event (the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea foreshadow the Redemption); or it may be an institution (the Levitical priesthood and the ritual of the old Temple are figures of the blessings of the spiritual priesthood of Christ).

In Nowell’s Catechism, which every sixteenth century reader would have known, the master asks, “Why should not the Decalogue refer to the Israelites alone, because God’s introduction declares: ‘Hear, O Israel, I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the House of bondage.’” The student is supposed to answer that the pharaoh of Egypt is the figure of the devil ready to oppress the Christian and that Moses’ rescue of the Israelites from bodily bondage is a type of Christ’s delivery of all of His faithful followers from the bondage of sin (antitype). Spenser’s readers would have interpreted the battle between Redcrosse knight and the dragon in canto 11 of book 1 typologically. The imagery used to describe the three-day battle makes it clear that Redcrosse is triumphing over Satan, but the imagery also summons images of the Passion and of the harrowing of hell.

In most of Spenser’s verse, including his justly acclaimed short masterpiece, *Epithalamion*, one finds him using the techniques of allegory and typology.

## EPITHALAMION

**First published:** 1595

**Type of work:** Poem

*This work is a hymn in celebration of marriage.*

*Amoretti* (1595), a sonnet sequence printed with the *Epithalamion*, differs from most Petrarchan sequences because instead of depicting the suffering of an unfulfilled lover, *Amoretti* moves from courtship to the lovers’ fulfillment in marriage. The *Amoretti*, a sequence of eighty-nine sonnets, and *Epithalamion*, a verse celebration of a wedding day, were printed together by William Ponsonby in 1595, but they were entered in the Stationers’ Register on November 19, 1594. Ponsonby’s title page describes them as “written not long since,” and they have been interpreted as documents in Spenser’s biography.

Since the *Amoretti* contains references to wooing, it has been assumed that the woman addressed is Elizabeth Boyle, Spenser’s second wife. If Edmund Spenser is the Spenser who married Machabyas Chylde in 1579, Machabyas had presumably died by 1591. According to numerological and astronomical analyses deriving from the sonnet sequence and wedding poem, Spenser married Elizabeth Boyle sometime between 1591 and 1594. Internal references indicate that his *Epithalamion* was probably written for his own wedding, which according to astronomical and numerological images seems to have taken place on June 11, St. Barnabas Day, possibly in 1594. The dedication to the published texts, however, does not specify a biographical link between Spenser’s life and these poems. Ponsonby dedicates the poems to Sir Robart Needham, whom he thanks for having brought the poems from Ireland to England.

The term “epithalamium” derives from Greek and means literally “before the bridal chamber,” but it has come to stand for many different kinds of works, including lyrics praising marriage and actual descriptions of marriage. Conventionally, the spokesman of the wedding poem is a social figure in charge of the festivities or a guest at the wedding, but Spenser varies these conventions because in his poem the bridegroom himself is the poet. His

poem intermixes the conventions of the sonnet sequence and the wedding poem.

The poem has a mythological frame; both human beings and gods are wedding guests, but in stanza 10, the bride is given a *blazon*, a head-to-toe description of her beauty borrowed from the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet. Spenser's bride is first a "mayden Queene," then her neck is like a "marble towre" and her body a "pallace fayre," but Spenser never lets the reader forget the sensuousness of the occasion. The lips of his bride are "lyke cherries charming men to byte," her breast like a "bowle of creame uncrudded." This magnificent celebration of wedded love concludes with Spenser's prayer that his poem, "in lieu of many ornaments," will be to his wife a "goodly ornament," and that his consecration of their marriage in song will be "for short time an endlesse monument."

### SUMMARY

On his tombstone, Edmund Spenser is described as the "prince of poets," high praise indeed for a poet who was born only about ten years before Shakespeare. His *The Faerie Queene* ranks as one of the most important national epics, and it is one of the best Renaissance efforts to preserve medieval romance while emulating the classical epics.

Jean R. Brink

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does the sequence of Edmund Spenser's publications reflect his determination to be a major poet?
- Compare Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney's conceptions of the moral purposes of literature as expressed in the former's dedicatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh regarding *The Faerie Queene* and the latter's *Defense of Poesie*.
- How does Spenser demonstrate his versatility in *The Shepheardes Calender*?
- What epic features are there in *The Faerie Queene*?
- What are the characteristics of Spenser's lady knight, Britomart?
- What original features mark Spenser's *Epithalamion*?
- How do the themes in Spenser's *Amoretti* differ from the themes in most sonnet sequences of his time?

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## CHRISTINA STEAD

**Born:** Rockdale, New South Wales, Australia  
July 17, 1902

**Died:** Sydney, New South Wales, Australia  
March 31, 1983

*Stead's controversial novels and short stories survived both popularity and neglect before they achieved international recognition for excellence.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Christina Ellen Stead was born in a Sydney suburb on July 17, 1902, the eldest child of David Stead, a leading Australian naturalist. Christina's mother, Ellen Butters Stead, was the last of ten children born to a gold miner. Ellen shocked her own devout mother when she married David, an avowed atheist, at the age of twenty-five. Christina was born eleven months later, but before the child was three, her mother died from a burst appendix.

David Stead's sister, Florence, and her young daughter went to live with the Steads after Ellen's death. About two years later, David Stead married a wealthy woman named Ada Gibbons and moved the family into a large house where the couple had six children in ten years. When the house had to be sold to pay off debts, the extended family moved to a modest home in Watson's Bay, at the mouth of Sydney Harbor. An uneasy relationship with her stepmother may have contributed to Stead's early desire to leave home, a story reflected in her autobiographical novel, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940, 1965).

Stead trained at Sydney Teacher's College and taught in the inner city in 1923, but she was transferred several times before she resigned in 1925, finding herself unsuited for teaching. She found an office job and saved for two years to earn money to go to Europe. Within a week after arriving in London, Stead found a job in a bank. Her boss, William Blech, who would eventually become her husband, was an American of Jewish background, steeped in left-wing politics and European art, culture, and history. Blech, although married, was estranged from his wife, who would not agree to a divorce.

Stead flowered under the intellectual stimulation Blech provided, and when he accepted a banking job in Paris in 1929, she followed him. Living with Blech in Paris, she obtained work at the same bank, which would later provide material for *House of All Nations* (1938). The worldwide economic depression confirmed Stead's left-wing political convictions.

Stead had been writing steadily since she left Australia, and Blech, who believed in her talent, presented her work to publishers. In 1934, *The Salzburg Tales* and *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* appeared. *The Salzburg Tales* won critical raves, but her first novel received mixed reviews. The following year saw the collapse of the Paris bank where Stead and Blech worked, and the couple set sail for New York. Stead's *The Beauties and Furies*, a novel of café life in Paris, was published in London and New York in 1936. Blech and Stead left for Spain later that year, but soon returned to New York where they contributed articles to *New Masses*, a journal of the Communist Party of the United States.

Blake (Blech had changed his name) threw himself into writing and political activism while Stead pursued work on what was to be her most famous novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*. The book was praised, but only critic Clifton Fadiman, writing in *The New Yorker*, recognized it as a great book. Stead continued to write for *New Masses*, worked as a Hollywood scriptwriter, and with Blake compiled an anthology from the classics titled *Modern Women in Love* (1945).

During the 1940's, United States government agencies were investigating radicals. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) developed extensive

files on Stead and Blake, and Stead was mentioned in the publications of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (1938-1954) three times. In 1946, the couple returned to war-ravaged Europe, which, compared to the anticommunist United States, seemed safer. Shortly before they left, Stead published *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946), which was vilified as obscene and was eventually banned in her home country, Australia.

For the next decade Stead and Blake wandered about Europe while she kept up a steady output of novels, stories, articles, and reviews. Blake finally obtained a divorce from his estranged wife, and he and Stead were married in London on February 23, 1952. The couple settled in England and endured financial difficulties for the next decade. Stead read for publishers, translated novels, and did some office work, which took a toll on her own writing. In 1962, two stories appeared in a Sydney journal, reviving interest in her work in Australia. Interest was also growing in the United States, where a spate of Stead's short stories appeared and *The Man Who Loved Children* was republished to acclaim in 1965.

Blake's health began to deteriorate. He died in 1968, and Stead was left devastated. The following year, she was offered an Australian National University Creative Arts Fellowship for four months. At the end of 1969, Stead returned to England and spent the next four years trying to regain her old writing rhythm. She published reviews as well as ten short stories, and she worked on a long novel, *I'm Dying Laughing: The Humourist* (1986). These were lonely years of financial hardship and little intellectual stimulation, and in 1974 Stead returned to Australia.

The last decade of Stead's life brought recognition and honors. She served as writer-in-residence at Monash University and at Newcastle University, and she was awarded an honorary membership in the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences and an honorary doctorate from the University of New South Wales. Plagued with loneliness and increasing ill health, she died of septicemia in a hospital on March 31, 1983.

## ANALYSIS

In interviews and essays, Stead repeatedly confirmed that her work was highly autobiographical, yet her fiction is not merely a retelling of her life.

Significant events she experienced are closely connected to her representation of these events in her fiction. Her two best-known novels, *The Man Who Loved Children* and *For Love Alone* (1944), are often mistakenly read as autobiographical documents rather than the accomplished works of fiction they are.

The generally loose structure of most of Stead's novels consists of series of scenes in which there is little description or interpretation and almost no authorial comment. Stead sets up a scene and lets the characters speak. They present and, in a sense, betray themselves; the reader follows their dramatic monologues, dialogues, stream of consciousness, oration, argument, and justification. Her characters reveal themselves through fantasy, dreams, and the subconscious as well as through rational ideas. The hidden and fantastic are as important to each character's reality as the obvious and the rational, lending complexity to the characters and additional layers of meaning to the novels.

Stead declared that she was a naturalist and that she had been trained by her naturalist father. This training began when Stead was very young; she recalled sleeping for a time in a packing case filled with zoological specimens and being told realistic bedtime stories of bird, sea, and animal life. Later, she read books from her father's library on geography, biology, and evolution, as well as William Shakespeare, Friedrich Nietzsche, Lord Byron, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Her family background in natural history provides the realistic details that underpin Stead's work. Naturalism in the novel usually includes the idea that character is formed by heredity and environment, with no connection to a spiritual world. This is a concern that Stead grappled with all of her life, and which she dramatized in her posthumously published novel, *I'm Dying Laughing: The Humourist*. Moral issues of individuality versus conformity lead to a tragic conclusion in the novel. While Stead took care to imply the social influences that drive her characters, she infused them with such spirituality that they transcend what is usually expected of naturalism in fiction.

Love is another major theme in Stead's fiction, a theme brought into sharp focus in her novels *For Love Alone* and *Letty Fox: Her Luck*, both written after Stead had formed an intense relationship with Marxist writer Ralph Fox. He appears in *For Love*

*Alone* as the character Harry Girton, for whom the heroine develops a passion at the same time she is in love with her devoted husband. Stead declared that *For Love Alone* was the first novel she had written about love, a subject very important to her. Although Stead's love for her William Blake was deep and lifelong, her love for Fox marked the beginning of her exploration of love as a creative force.

*Letty Fox: Her Luck* explores the love theme through one of Stead's recurrent character types: the young woman trying to break free of the bonds of tradition in order to achieve self-realization. This character type first appears in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as Catherine, who rejects family ties and respectability, but fails to achieve fulfillment. Letty Fox's picaresque tale is told in the first person and was one of the first novels in English to speak frankly about subjects such as impotence and female sexual aggression. Although Letty pursues a promiscuous life, exploring "free love," she finds her experiences costly, repetitive, and often painful. She finally settles for marriage and pregnancy to provide the self-fulfillment for which she has been looking. Yet an irony exists in Letty's cheerful acceptance of her fate; there is a strong suggestion that Letty is lying to herself as well as to the reader.

Perhaps the most important character type in Stead's work is the tyrannical father. He appears briefly in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and in the story "Overcote" in *The Salzburg Tales*. In the latter he is the smug, egoistic schoolmaster who denies his children independence, spoils their chances of marriage and a career, and then sinks into self-pity when they turn away from him. The same type of character appears as Andrew in *For Love Alone* and as Sam Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*. The tyrannical father is modeled on Stead's own father, yet the fictional representation of him is so powerful that some critics have considered Sam and his fictional wife, Henny, to be almost mythical figures.

Two of Stead's later novels show a deep disillusionment with ideas of social and political liberation that dominated the intellectual scene between the two world wars. *Dark Places of the Heart* (1966; published in England as *Cotter's England*, 1966) and *I'm Dying Laughing: The Humourist* focus on the mundane details of daily life, but the heroines play

out their personal power struggles amid countless political debates. The major stylistic techniques of these two novels are contrast rather than connection, movement rather than reflection or explanation, and repetition and accumulation of detail. One of the great achievements of *Dark Places of the Heart* is the successful blending of the realistic and grotesque into a single vision. These techniques tend to diminish the author's narrative voice and trivialize political concepts in favor of the characters.

Stead's subject is that most traditional of novelistic subjects: human character. Stead's characters are fairly common sorts of people who have a capacity to express themselves more fully than men and women usually do in real life. The people who are overwhelmed in her novels go under because they cannot compromise their individuality; the most memorable of her characters remain stubbornly unique. In every case, there is more to them, and they are more interesting than the environments that shaped them.

## SEVEN POOR MEN OF SYDNEY

**First published:** 1934

**Type of work:** Novel

*The only one of Stead's novels set entirely in Australia depicts a group of young adults trying to find meaning in their lives through politics, religion, or personal relationships.*

Although *The New Yorker* (March 9, 1935) found *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* "disappointing," Australia's *Bulletin* (November 28, 1934) focused on Stead's evident skill: "*Seven Poor Men* is a remarkable book if only for its virtuosity." To readers of the 1930's, who were growing in their awareness of the influence of modernism in fiction, Stead's first novel may have been puzzling, but to later generations it does not seem difficult. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* contains the poetic style, use of monologue to define character, and picaresque structure that were to become hallmarks of her fiction.

The novel has no plot in the conventional sense, although a thematic pattern emerges from the developing personal and social relationships among

family members and friends. The major characters in the novel are Michael Baguenault, an alienated war veteran; his sister, Catherine, an idealistic political activist; their cousin, Joseph, a poor printer of devout Catholic faith; and Baruch Mendelsson, a young Jewish intellectual who works with Joseph. The first two chapters are occupied with Michael, intense and introspective, who rejects his family (except for Catherine), his church, and his school. He falls in love, is rejected, enlists in World War I, and returns to Australia suffering from nervous disorders. He takes up with several young socialists with whom Catherine works in the movement.

The novel shifts focus to Joseph Baguenault and Baruch Mendelsson, who work at Chamberlin's printing press. Business is bad, salaries are in arrears, and Chamberlin is incompetent. Another employee, Withers, is plotting to take over the press. There is much discussion of socialism and capitalism, with each character responding to these ideas according to his or her individual viewpoint. There are flirtations and infatuations, and many minor characters. The story returns to Michael and Catherine and to Michael's increasing sense of alienation. The climax occurs in chapter eight when Michael, after a period of wandering, intoxication, hallucinations, and unfulfilled love, is swept to his death from the treacherous cliffs of Fisherman's Bay. This event drives Catherine to an asylum and shakes Joseph's religious faith, although at the end of the novel Joseph is tranquil as he reflects on the trials of long ago.

Each character is at the mercy of forces beyond his or her control, and each reacts to this fact in individual, different ways. Michael is the only one to surrender to personal and public chaos; the others survive. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is about youthful idealism and the way urban poverty affects human lives. It is more modern than many other novels of its time because of the way it concentrates upon its characters' inner lives in a poetic, expressionistic way. Despite its apparently haphazard structure, the novel develops unity through conflict, a thematic organizing device that recurs in Stead's later novels.

## THE MAN WHO LOVED CHILDREN

**First published:** 1940, 1965

**Type of work:** Novel

*A mismatched couple's bitter marriage ends in the wife's suicide, while the husband's eldest daughter struggles to escape the family.*

An autobiographical novel, *The Man Who Loved Children* is built on series of conflicts of increasing intensity involving the marriage of Sam and Henny Pollit. The conflicts culminate in a tragic climax. The second theme, of Louisa's escalating conflict with her domineering father, is also played out in scenes of her attempts to break free. Another organizing device is juxtaposition: Sam and Henny, the female principal and the male, adults and children, and delusion versus reality.

The antagonism is well established between Sam and Henny as the novel opens. They are not speaking to each other, but soon their silence is broken by Sam's self-serving speeches and Henny's bitter tirades. A protected daughter of a wealthy family, Henny is incapable of running the large household of children and assorted relatives with inadequate finances and Sam's constant attempts to subvert her authority. When Sam joins an expedition, he leaves her, pregnant and in poverty, to spend the winter in a freezing house. On returning, Sam finds that Louisa, his daughter from an earlier marriage, has become increasingly defiant. After Henny gives birth to a boy, Sam receives news that Henny's father has died and their fine house in Washington, D.C., must be sold to pay debts.

Sam loses his job, and when the family moves to a crumbling old house on a mudbank in Maryland, his attempts to retain control of Louisa grow meaner. Henny lives in misery between the noise of Sam's renovations and her scrabbles for money to feed the family. Finding her stepmother's despair unbearable, Louisa prepares a poison tea, but understands the enormity of her action too late. Henny grabs the cup and drinks, knowing what it is. When Louisa tells her father what she has done, Sam refuses to believe her. Louisa eventually defies Sam and finds the strength to leave him for a better life with relatives in Harpers Ferry.

Stead's eye for the details of the sordid under-

pinnings of domestic life is entirely realistic, but the speech used by major characters is artificial. Sam coaxes, badgers, and engulfs the others with a steady monologue of baby talk, song lyrics, foreign dialects, and pious moral pronouncements. Henny also has her speech mannerisms; she sings and jokes with the children, and her tirades are full of hysterical exaggeration and filth. Her tirades are more honest than Sam's, however, for he lies about his life to preserve his ego. Their contrasting speeches about family life lay bare the central irony of the novel.

Louisa also reveals herself in strongly individualized language, and she attains a degree of psychological independence from her father by writing and telling her own stories and poems. Sam finds this threatening, and when Louisa develops a secret language of her own, he is furious. In the symbolic language of myth, fiction, and poetry, Louisa has found the words to defy her father and find her freedom.



## DARK PLACES OF THE HEART

**First published:** 1966 (published in England as *Cotter's England*, 1966)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A left-wing journalist and her charming brother struggle with each other for power against a background of exhaustion, housing shortages, malnutrition, and injury in postwar England.*

The main character in *Dark Places of the Heart* is Nellie Cook, who grew up in the working-class Cotter family in England's industrial north. A bohemian rebel since youth, in middle age Nellie is a shallow, loquacious, restless tyrant with a need to dominate the people in her life. Her particular obsession is her brother, Tom, who returns home after a hopeless affair with a married woman who has died of cancer. Nellie analyzes Tom's affair relent-

lessly, continually trying to prevent him from taking up with any other woman. Tom seduces Nellie's friends one after another.

Nellie is married to George Cook, a labor negotiator who is on the Continent attending labor congresses. Although she works for a socialist newspaper, she has no real grasp of politics or social conditions; her main interest is controlling the unfortunate women she collects in her rambling house in a scruffy London suburb. In this novel the reader sees a culmination of Stead's technique of exposing each character in his or her own words: Nellie constantly describes herself in myths of origin about her family and her supreme importance in Tom's life, while Tom charms everyone he meets with stories of his colorful adventures. Sister and brother both exert a mesmerizing power of speech.

Some of the scenes of the novel take place in Bridgehead, where Nellie and Tom visit their ailing mother, their embittered sister, Peggy, and their ancient Uncle Simon, who is an abused victim in the household. The Cotter family home in Bridgehead is important for the incisive and unsentimental picture it gives of working-class customs, beliefs, and attitudes. There are also hints of childhood incest, mental illness, and other dark secrets in the family's past. In this late novel, Stead merges the political theme with individual character and personal relationships more successfully than in any other of her books.

Nellie's husband, George, is offered a good job in Geneva, and he promises to send for Nellie when he is settled. She remains in England, is betrayed by her friends and husband, fights with her editor, and subsists on tea and alcohol while her lungs deteriorate. Finally, George sends for Nellie to join him in Geneva, where he has a good job, but he dies a short time later in a skiing accident. Nellie invites Tom to the funeral and returns to her house near London with a photograph of herself and Tom, holding hands and smiling at the funeral. Stead's cool sympathy for her characters enables the reader to understand the failures and betrayals of the novel that are made inevitable by ignorance, social conditions, and the powerful drive for personal gratification.

## SUMMARY

Christina Stead staked out her territory exploring the myths and delusions that drive ordinary



people. She writes with startling accuracy of the dark obsessions developed in that intense microcosm of society, the family. Her technique of portraying characters through each one's own words, dreams, and imagination achieves a layered novelistic reality at odds with the details of scenery, interiors, and artifacts of daily life. Always interested in the effects of society on the individual, Stead writes about characters who are often from the lower rungs of the social ladder. Each character is more than a reflection of his or her times, despite the serious political underpinnings of Stead's novels.

Sheila Golburgh Johnson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What factors might have led most critics to fail to recognize the virtues of Christina Stead's novel *The Man Who Loved Children*?
- Naturalism in fiction before Stead's time had little to do with naturalism as practiced by her father. How did Stead blend these two versions of naturalism?
- How common a literary trait is Stead's ability to develop commonplace characters who express themselves very—one might say unrealistically—well?
- Explain how Stead unifies *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* by means of conflict.
- Which characters in Stead's novels evince authentic spirituality?

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## STENDHAL

**Born:** Grenoble, France

January 23, 1783

**Died:** Paris, France

March 23, 1842

*As well as brilliantly depicting the people and morals of his day, Stendhal was one of the most important innovators in the history of the novel.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Stendhal (stehn-DAHL) is the most widely recognized pseudonym of Marie-Henri Beyle. He was born in Grenoble, a provincial city in the southeast of France, on January 23, 1783. He was alive during the time of the great upheaval in French and European society brought about, in the first place, by the French Revolution and subsequently by the rise and fall of Napoleon I. Stendhal had intimate experience with the latter phenomenon.

Grenoble was not a place where Stendhal felt at home. He had little time for its narrow outlook in matters of politics and religion, and its atmosphere was out of touch with the burgeoning spirit of liberty of the author's boyhood. Much of what Stendhal came to oppose in human affairs and behavior he initially found in his father, with whom he was severely in conflict. This antagonism was made worse by, or perhaps had its source in, the death of the novelist's mother when he was seven. In his candid and innovative, though unfinished, autobiography, *Vie de Henri Brulard* (wr. 1835-1836, pb. 1890; *The Life of Henry Brulard*, 1925), he details with almost embarrassing intimacy his love for his mother. This autobiography's title draws attention to Stendhal's love of pseudonyms. He is thought to have used more than two hundred pseudonyms.

In 1799, having completed his education at Grenoble, Stendhal went to Paris and enrolled in the École Polytechnique, intending to study math-

ematics. The attractions of the capital, however, soon militated against study, and by 1800 he had secured a commission in Napoleon's army. His duties took him to Milan, where he began a lifelong love affair with Italy. One of the four Italian words inscribed on his tomb is "Milanese," and it was in his adopted native city, finally free of the constraints of Grenoble, that he entered into the first of many ardent and arduous emotional liaisons.

His first visit to Milan lasted until 1802. In that year, he resigned his army commission and returned to Paris. For a number of years, he attempted to live an artistic life and was a frequenter of literary salons. Unable to afford the lifestyle that his ambitions required, he rejoined the army in 1806 and worked as a quartermaster. This position took him to Germany, Russia, and Austria. Stendhal did not see direct action, but in other respects, imaginative as well as physical, he was profoundly affected by the demands of military life. He resigned his army position in 1813 for health reasons and retired to Milan, where he remained until 1821.

These years saw Stendhal's first publications. These consisted of works of criticism and, as such, are an important introduction to his fiction (though not for their contents). The criticism takes the form of biography, Stendhal's first book being *Vie de Haydn, de Mozart, et de Métastase* (1815; *The Lives of Haydn and Mozart, with Observations on Métastase*, 1817), followed by *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* (1817). Both works are notable for their plagiarism; yet they are also notable for their concern with style and sensibility, matters that are central to

Stendhal's fiction. In addition, the biographical mode is one that his two great novels adapt and develop.

Both these works were published under the name Beyle. *Rome, Naples, et Florence en 1817* (1817, 1826; *Rome, Naples, and Florence in 1817*, 1818) was the first book of his to appear under the name Stendhal. Taken in conjunction with the biographies, it establishes the repertoire of effects upon which Stendhal's fiction was to draw. Like his biographical studies, however, Stendhal's travel works, of which there are a number, are innovative in showing how individual sensibilities may be stimulated and engaged. Travel is not only fundamental to the plot development of Stendhal's fiction but also a means of revealing the way that the world educates his protagonists.

Stendhal spent the years 1821 to 1830 in Paris, again attempting to live the artistic life. This period saw the production of such key works as *De l'amour* (1822; *Maxims of Love*, 1906) and, in the following year, *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823, part 1; 1825, part 2; *Racine and Shakespeare*, 1962), an important document in the widespread cultural debate of the day on the differences between classicism and Romanticism. It was not until 1827 that Stendhal produced his first novel, *Armance* (English translation, 1928). It was followed in 1830 by the first of his masterpieces, *Le Rouge et le noir* (*The Red and the Black*, 1898). The year 1830 also saw a revolution in France. Stendhal accepted the new regime that the so-called July Revolution had brought into power. As a result, he was appointed consul, first at Trieste, then at Civitavecchia, a posting whose gloom was relieved by its nearness to Rome. With numerous leaves of absence, mostly in Paris, where he wrote most of his other travel pieces, memoirs, and fiction, including his second great work, *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839; *The Charterhouse of Parma*, 1895), Stendhal held this posting until his death, of apoplexy, in Paris, on March 23, 1842.

## ANALYSIS

Stendhal's prediction that his work would not be appreciated until fifty years after his death was not entirely borne out by events. In his lifetime, he won the esteem of, among others, Honoré de Balzac, the other major French novelist of the day. Yet, there is a certain amount of truth in Stendhal's forecast, not merely because his first translation

into English did not occur until the later years of the nineteenth century. Translations obviously gave his work a wider audience, but the fact that they came to the attention of an international readership at a time when the criticism of fiction was becoming a more pronounced fact of cultural life led to a more influential appreciation of his distinctive artistic ambitions and accomplishments as a novelist.

It is because of its psychological interest that Stendhal's fiction is regarded so highly. That is also why it is significant that his first publications were works of criticism and of observation in a broad sense. These early works establish the bases for the kind of transition in imaginative prose that Stendhal's novels represent. Many of his concerns may be crudely reduced to his fascination with the dual, and interdependent, relationship between reason and emotion. It is from this fascination that he derives his power as a portrayer of characters. As a result, his fiction was instrumental in elevating character over story.

The shift in emphasis revealed in Stendhal's work is very much part of a larger shift in sensibility that occurred in European culture during Stendhal's apprenticeship as a writer. This transition is from the ostensible stability and sense of proportion of the predominantly neoclassical art of the eighteenth century to the Romantic art of the nineteenth century. Such a reorientation of sensibility did not occur overnight, but gradually, through a publicly perceptible process of realignment. As Stendhal himself suggests, this realignment was not necessarily exclusively revealed in the literature of the day. His most comprehensive investigation of the phenomenon, *Racine and Shakespeare*, involves great writers from other eras and praises Shakespeare for his Stendhalian spontaneity, exuberance, and vividness.

Stendhal is not merely an important analyst of the culture of his day. As his biography reveals, he was also intimately involved with the history of his times. This history, and Stendhal's experience of it, was dominated not merely by the activities of Napoleon but also by his mythic status. Napoleon was perceived by the European mind at large as the spirit of the age. To Stendhal, this spirit was dynamic, ambitious, energetic, resourceful, impassioned, and foolhardy. His response to it, as the characters of Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black*

and Fabrizio del Dongo in *The Charterhouse of Parma* reveal, was generous. At the same time, however, it was impossible for Stendhal to identify completely with it. The youth of a Julien and Fabrizio inspires their daring, verve, and vitality. Yet it also inspires Stendhal's most tenderly ironic critique of such qualities. His artistic ambition is to reconcile the passions of his heroes to his own dispassionate reason.

Stendhal's most important contribution to the development of the novel is his use of it to produce systematic critiques. This use not only underwrites his conception of his heroes but also shows the novel to be a means of reflecting on contemporary individuals and morals. The irony that Stendhal applies to his youthful protagonists is used much more incisively to reveal the hypocrisies, evasions, and trivialities of public life in the wake of Napoleon. It is in the figures of Julien and Fabrizio that Stendhal expresses most cogently the philosophy that he named *Beylisme*. This outlook lauded the energetic, and perhaps even reckless, pursuit of happiness as the highest human calling and the animating power of all activity. Such an emphasis on individuality is a testament to the range, originality, and significance of Stendhal's writings.

## THE RED AND THE BLACK

**First published:** *Le Rouge et le noir*, 1830  
(English translation, 1898)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This story depicts the career of a talented young man in postrevolutionary France.*

Originally published in 1830, *Le Rouge et le noir* first appeared in English translation as *The Red and the Black* in 1898. Its many subsequent editions in different English translations testify to its classic status. Written in an economic and, for the most part, slyly understated style, its claim to be counted among the finest novels of the nineteenth century is undoubted.

Perhaps the only feature of *The Red and the Black* that is not entirely original is its plot. It was taken by Stendhal from a story that appeared in a newspaper, the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, in 1827, concerning

Antoine Berthet, the son of a laborer, whose career had something of the same rise and fall as that of Julien Sorel, the novel's hero. The similarity between the two cases is not merely an intriguing side-light on the composition of *The Red and the Black*. It also speaks directly to the reality of the novel's concerns, which draw not only on the newspapers of the day but also on the recent history of France. As Julien well knows, the example of Napoleon I, to which he is unwisely devoted, has made it possible for someone who is provincial, talented, and ambitious, but without social connections, to have his dreams of success realized.

Julien embodies the duality that Stendhal perceived to exist between spirit and reason. He is a lover who is also a hypocrite, a cleric who becomes a soldier, an innocent who commits a crime. He possesses a winning measure of spontaneity, verve, and daring. Yet these natural qualities are continually placed in the service of a socially inspired image of himself. It is to this image that Julien is enslaved. For all of his success, he spends much of his time unhappy, confused, and on the defensive. He wages two self-promoting campaigns, one in Verriere, the other in Paris. Though he wins a number of battles, he loses the war and becomes, like Napoleon, his idol, that war's most visible and notorious victim.

Stendhal organizes *The Red and the Black* so that his conception of duality becomes inescapable. Its overriding presence is obviously called to the reader's attention in the title. There has been much critical debate as to what "red" and "black" refer. "Red" is thought to suggest the hot-blooded vigor of the Napoleonic era. That era's conservative and small-minded aftermath, on the other hand, is said to be denoted by clerical black. Julien's career seems to confirm what his advisers imply, that the church's uniform is the only one in which he will be able to secure the career to which his talents entitle him. A narrower reading of the color code calls attention to the political climate of





the post-Napoleonic period, with red standing for republicanism and black for clerical conservatism. It is also possible to see the colors as referring exclusively to Julien. His inner life is vivid, while on the outside he seems largely colorless.

While Stendhal allows the reader to ponder the title's various possibilities, he is quite explicit in providing by other means a comprehensive sense of the dual elements in his protagonist's career. Not only does *The Red and the Black* have a two-part structure, but the stories in each of them are counterparts of one another. The natural world of Verriere, with its walks, gardens, and children, yields to the artificial world of Paris, with its salons, carriages, and callow youths. More important, Julien's affair with Madame de Renal is conducted with a ruthlessness that belies his spontaneous nature and exploits hers. The affair with Mathilde de la Mole, on the other hand, shows Julien to be the exploited one, in turn a victim of a loved one's bad faith. Thus, not only is each of Julien's two stories complementary; each provides an ironic commentary on the other. Aware of the twin force of image and reality, artifice and nature, hypocrisy and honesty, but deprived by his character of the power necessary to regulate this awareness, Julien falls afoul, not of the time but of his inability to secure his place within it.

## THE CHARTERHOUSE OF PARMA

**First published:** *La Chartreuse de Parme*, 1839  
(English translation, 1895)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This tale describes a fateful conflict between emotional idealism and political reality, set in early nineteenth century Italy.*

Stendhal's second great novel, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, was first published in Paris in 1839 and had to wait more than fifty years before appearing in an English translation in 1895. Like *The Red and the Black*, its vivid characterizations, intriguing plot, and ironical style immediately confirmed its status as one of the major achievements of the nineteenth century novel.

Almost ten years separate the original publication of *The Charterhouse of Parma* from *The Red and the Black*. The interval did not, however, produce a change in Stendhal's fictional themes or methods. Once again, the protagonist is a young man, and the environment in which he comes face to face with the world and his situation and destiny in it is one of political intrigue. Again, the protagonist's fate seems to be decided by his emotional nature, and the expression of that nature is subject to ruinous social manipulation. The larger backdrop to the novel's plot is the Napoleonic era. Yet it is used to illuminate the character of the protagonist, Fabrizio del Dongo, and to prepare the reader for the struggle for autonomy and individuality that Fabrizio must undergo. As in *The Red and the Black*, this struggle constitutes the bulk of the novel.

What might be referred to as the Fabrizio narrative in *The Charterhouse of Parma* opens with a series of his misadventures in pursuit of military glory. The presentation of an ignorant, inexperienced, confused, but spirited Fabrizio at the battle of Waterloo has long been considered not only a high point in the depiction of the individual in history but also a telling instance of the essentially modern character of Stendhal's imagination. The impetus that inspires Fabrizio to flounder self-deceivingly in the wake of Napoleon's army, however, is the same one that guides his behavior throughout the novel. This impetus is romantic in nature. Its generous and outgoing aspects are dramatized, but with a more sensitive irony than that of *The Red and the Black*.

Fabrizio's angelic appearance is, understandably, taken at face value by those who love him. Yet their acceptance of him is the basis of the tragic experiences that he brings their way. This acceptance places a far greater emphasis on the moral and spiritual dimension of the characters, which the remoteness of the novel's setting accentuates. The persistence with which remoteness of setting is featured throughout, ending in the charterhouse itself, and the fact that it tends



to force the characters to tap their own internal resources, lends the work as a whole a distinctly operatic air, which Stendhal, the author of a biography of Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini and a life-long lover of opera, undoubtedly cultivated.

The interest of *The Charterhouse of Parma* is at once more intimate, more desperate, and of greater human significance than that of *The Red and the Black* because the plot revolves around the inescapable nature of feeling. This orientation is embodied most substantially by the Duchess Sanseverina, who is the novel's most operatic, and most memorable, character. Through his development of the Duchess, Stendhal underlines his conception of duality. The means of doing so are quite different from those used in *The Red and the Black*. There, the focus was on ambition, mediated through the inadequacies of human society. The focus of *The Charterhouse of Parma* is love, mediated through the frailties of human nature. Fabrizio is the most obvious embodiment of these frailties. The manner in which he embodies them, however, reveals their existence more critically in the women around him. Of these, the Duchess is the

most affecting, the most compelling, and the character above all others in Stendhal's fiction who reveals this author's belief that the pursuit of happiness is ironically life's joy and tragedy.

## SUMMARY

Two novels may not seem much upon which to base an enduring reputation, even if they are as distinguished as *The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Yet even without these two novels, Stendhal would still have a place in literary history. His place is secure not only because of the quality and interest of his other work, including his lesser-known, unfinished, and inferior fiction, but also because of the precision with which the man himself felt the pulse of his time. His acuteness can be perceived in the political sophistication that suffuses his novels and his wry regard for the foibles and fashions of the day. Above all, Stendhal is noteworthy for attaining within himself the freedom to express a spirit tempered by reason, and to employ this reason without denying his emotions.

George O'Brien

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#### SHORT FICTION:

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*Rome, Naples, et Florence en 1817*, 1817, 1826 (*Rome, Naples, and Florence, in 1817*, 1818)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is the significance of Stendahl's *Racine and Shakespeare*?
- What explanations of the significance of the title *The Red and the Black* seem most convincing?
- Stendhal claims never to have thought about the writing of novels as a craft. Was he a craftsman who did not realize it?
- What is the basis of Stendhal's psychological knowledge?
- Compare the characteristics of Stendhal's two protagonists in his fiction, Julien and Fabrizio.



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## LAURENCE STERNE

**Born:** Clonmel, Ireland  
November 24, 1713

**Died:** London, England  
March 18, 1768

*As one of the prominent figures writing during the rise of the English novel, Sterne helped explore and define its possibilities.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Laurence Sterne was born on November 24, 1713, in Clonmel, Ireland, to a respected Yorkshire family (his great-grandfather, Richard Sterne, had been archbishop of York). His father, Roger Sterne, was a young ensign, and Laurence spent his early years in towns and cities all over England and Ireland. The second of seven children, only three of whom lived to adulthood, he left at age ten for school in Halifax, England. There he was taken under the wing of his uncle Richard Sterne, a community leader who became a second father to him.

Roger Sterne squandered the family's wealth before his death in Jamaica in 1731. When Richard Sterne died the following year, Laurence, now detached from his mother, was penniless. In 1733, he entered Jesus College, Cambridge; after first working to earn the tuition for his education, he was awarded one of the Sterne scholarships established by his great-grandfather. He studied Latin, Greek, mathematics, rhetoric, and philosophy (which included geography, ethics, and the natural sciences). He admired the Greek philosopher Plato and the English thinkers John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton. Matriculating in 1735, Sterne received his degree, most likely in early 1737.

Already indebted to associates such as his lifelong friend John Hall, Sterne had few options but to go into the church. He was admitted to the Or-

der of Deacons and given an assistant curacy in St. Ives, an unimpressive post. For two decades, he lived a pastoral life, climbing the parochial hierarchy of Yorkshire with the help of political contacts, which included his uncle, the Archdeacon Jaques Sterne. With each post—prebendary of Givendale, vicar of Sutton, commissary of the Peculiar Court of Tollerton—came increased lands and their incomes. Sterne's duties were both religious and political. He preached regularly and oversaw cases in the spiritual courts. As a rising clergyman and nephew to Jacques Sterne, he became involved in Yorkshire's political life, contributing political articles to the *York Gazetteer* and publishing political pamphlets.

On March 30, 1741, Sterne married Elizabeth Lumley. A daughter, Lydia, was born on October 1, 1745, but she died the following day. A second Lydia was born on December 1, 1747; she would grow to be her father's beloved and only child. Elizabeth's health was poor, and the marriage was not happy; Sterne is known to have entertained other women during frequent visits to York. As a country parson, he read widely, played various musical instruments, liked painting and hunting, spoke mediocre French, may have participated in amateur theatricals, and farmed his land with reasonable success.

In 1758, with a staid life, a stale marriage, no hopes for more children, and an awareness of the fragility of middle age, Sterne withdrew from his parochial duties and moved to York in the hope of career advancement. When ongoing feuds with his uncle dashed his hopes, he turned to his favorite avocation, writing. In early 1759, he published a satirical pamphlet, *A Political Romance*. Aimed at po-

litical rival Dr. Francis Topham, the controversial piece was suppressed. Sterne's disappointment led him to a more ambitious project, a two-volume work of biting topical satire called *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767; commonly known as *Tristram Shandy*).

The year 1759 was a tumultuous one. Sterne endured more frequent and violent attacks of the tuberculosis that eventually killed him. His wife and daughter were also ill; Elizabeth was schizophrenic and fancied herself the queen of Bohemia. Both his mother, from whom he had long been distant, and his uncle died that spring. *Tristram Shandy* was rejected by printers.

Sterne sat down to revise it, removing personal allusions, broadening the satire, and infusing the book with sentiment. He borrowed money to publish the two volumes in late 1759. A singer named Catherine Fourmantel, with whom he was passionately infatuated, introduced the book to the influential actor David Garrick. *Tristram Shandy* was an immediate success, selling well in London and garnering both praise for its delightful wit and censure for bawdiness considered unbefitting a parson. Sterne drafted a defense against his prudish detractors, but such charges plagued him throughout his life.

Sterne was a celebrity when he rolled into London in 1760. He was the subject of biographical sketches in magazines, sat for the famed portraitist Joshua Reynolds, and was taken into the favor of the rakish Prince Edward, duke of York. *Tristram Shandy* sold out quickly, and Sterne quickly arranged for publication of two volumes of his sermons, which appeared in May as *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (1760, 1766).

Sterne's life was transformed. He traveled frequently between London, York, and Coxwold, where he was given a living as parson in 1760. He set to work on volumes 3 and 4 of *Tristram Shandy*, which were published in January, 1761, followed by volumes 5 and 6 the following December. Given the sensation that the novel caused, imitations and spurious editions were rampant. Sterne publicly denounced them and finally adopted the practice of personally signing all authentic copies, generally about four thousand per edition. He spent most of 1762 and 1763 in France, returning to England in 1764. Volumes 7 and 8 of *Tristram Shandy* appeared in early 1765.

Sterne passed the winter of 1765-1766 traveling through Italy and then returned to write volume 9 of *Tristram Shandy*. Amid bouts of illness, he solicited subscriptions for a book based on his travels, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768; commonly called *A Sentimental Journey*). In January, 1767, he fell in love with Eliza Draper, the wife of a diplomat in India, and began a diary that would later be published as *Journal to Eliza* (1904). That autumn, Elizabeth and Lydia finally returned to York, staying with Sterne briefly before arranging to live separately under his support.

Sterne went to London in December, 1767, and *A Sentimental Journey* was published two months later. Soon after, he became seriously ill and spent his last weeks in bed surrounded by friends and supporters. He died peacefully in London on March 18, 1768, of heart failure. After his death, Lydia prepared volumes 5 through 7 of *Sermons by the Late Rev. Mr. Sterne*, published in 1769.

## ANALYSIS

Part of Sterne's allure was his capacity for self-portrayal, and the appellations of Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy, and Parson Yorick were, with the arrival of fame and success, interchangeable. Many a writer has produced more starkly autobiographical material, but few have so completely intertwined their real and fictional personas. Thus, while the specific "facts" of Tristram or Yorick's existence differentiate them from their author, their personalities and tempers are completely those of Sterne. He made no effort to draw distinctions: He attributed his own sermons to Yorick and included one in *Tristram Shandy*; he listed actual dates of composition or travel in fictional narratives; and he constantly reminded his readers of his role as a storyteller. In some ways, he was, through his writing, creating the gentleman that he wished himself to be.

This intermixture of real and fictional worlds is a sign less of carelessness than of the assumptions under which Sterne worked. He wrote for a learned audience, many of whom knew him personally. He published serially or by subscription, so his work was responsive to the whims of the market. He composed quickly, and spontaneity is a trademark of his style. During the eighteenth century, the novel as a form was not highly evolved or defined, and calling *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental*



*Journey* novels by twentieth century standards is a generous use of the term. With the exception of the sermons, Sterne's work does not fit established forms but mixes mock and real autobiography, mock and real anthology, travelogue, essay, and political satire. To search for any more recognizable form is to miss the point of Sterne altogether.

Sterne's roots as a writer are in the parsonage. Grounded in classical rhetoric—the formal art of communication and persuasion—Sterne quickly became a skilled sermonist. The careful construction of argument, use of parable and example, and ability to turn a compelling phrase all carry over into his nonreligious writings. In addition, Sterne was erudite, and his familiarity with Renaissance literature and knowledge from military strategy to obstetrics, the doctrine of “humours,” royal lineages, and archaeology give his writing a learned, if not encyclopedic, quality.

Yet amid the erudition, Sterne never loses his humanity, most remarkably expressed in his wit, sentiment, and bawdiness. Wit was a sign of the learned eighteenth century gentleman. Clever punning was in vogue, and satire was a prime source of both entertainment and social change. The roots of Sterne's satire were political, but he was not at heart a political being. Rather, as theatrical metaphors throughout his work convey, Sterne was an entertainer: Both on paper and in court, he was a talented jester. Nothing was safe from the reach of his humor, yet it was never baldly malicious. For Sterne, whose life was marked by disappointment and frailty, laughter was a means of transcending the harshness of reality. More than entertaining others, he was, through humor, feeding his own vitality.

His quick and sharp wit, on the other hand, could easily melt into a pool of sentimentality. That, too, ennobled a gentleman, the combination of patience, empathy, earnestness, innocence, long suffering, and extreme sensitivity exemplified best by Uncle Toby's pain on the death of a fly in *Tristram Shandy* or the various refined love affairs of the Shandys, Yorick, and Sterne. The *Journal to Eliza*, which Sterne may or may not have intended to publish, takes romance and melancholy to striking extremes of pathos and humorlessness.

Finally, Sterne is celebrated for his bawdiness. Certainly, eighteenth century English sensibilities

were not as prudish as their Victorian successors, but even in a society of loose tongues and swaggering rakes, indecencies were not customary from the clergy. Sterne, however, could not deny the connections between the eyes, the mind, the heart, and the sexual organs. Allusions to anatomy and desire are only thinly veiled, and they come in a characteristic spirit of good humor and honesty. His bawdiness is not gratuitous or pornographic; rather, it is integral to his vision of the world. Sterne has been criticized consistently, beginning in his own time, for lasciviousness and impropriety; at the same time, his candor, and the controversy that it arouses, has brought entertainment to millions of readers.

## THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF TRISTRAM SHANDY, GENT.

**First published:** 1759-1767

**Type of work:** Novel

*An easily distracted gentleman attempts to narrate the details of his life and the opinions that he has formed along the way.*

*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* is a long, challenging, and delightful work. Written serially over nine years, it does not exhibit unity of action or tell a single, identifiable story. Rather, it is unified by an overriding purpose—to tell the title character's life and opinions as honestly and completely as possible—and a unique style, whereby that purpose is thwarted and diverted by digressions and embellishments that grow out of the life and opinions themselves.

“Life and Opinions” was an acceptable autobiographical format for an eighteenth century gentleman. Sterne set out both to use it and to ridicule it through the character of Tristram Shandy. “Old Tristram” was the name given to a statue of a bearded beggar at the Halifax parish church from Sterne's adolescence. “Shandy” was Yorkshire slang for “odd” or “crazy.” Together they suggest an offbeat character; Sterne added gentility, charm, and an incapacity for direct thought or action. Tristram is the first-person protagonist of the nine volumes of the book, and in his life and opinions

he introduces an array of other characters: his pompous father Walter, his gentle Uncle Toby, the Corporal Trim, Parson Yorick, the servant Susannah, his brother Bobby, his beloved Jenny, the Widow Wadman, his friend Eugenius, and a variety of other learned gentlemen.

If *Tristram Shandy* can be said to have a plot, it has two: Walter Shandy's attempts to raise the perfect son and Uncle Toby's courtship of the Widow Wadman. Both prove unsuccessful. Their failures figure the novel's large structure, for Tristram's desire to tell his story completely also meets with failure. Underlying all the failures of the Shandy men, however, is a delight in the process of striving, be it Walter's composition of the "Tristrapaedia," by which his son will be educated, or Toby's lawn reenactment of the siege of Namur, where he received the groin wound that would ultimately precipitate his romantic failure.

Moreover, if Tristram's failure is his inability to tell a story like a straight line, it is also his triumph, for interwoven are comments, opinions, anecdotes, diagrams, and entire documents, real and fictional. Digression is the Shandean way, and the reader can expect a surprise around every corner, be it the anecdote about Corporal Le Fever or the cumbersome "Slawkenbergius' Tale." Tristram also uses unorthodox punctuation for effect, liberally litters his text with physical devices—a black page, a marble page, and even missing pages—and spontaneously devotes chapters to a variety of topics, including a "Chapter on Chapters." He directly addresses the reader, characterizing and then either castigating or pandering to him or her, thus creating an important and dynamic relationship.

Critics have debated how to classify the novel, what Sterne means by it, and whether or not he intended the cryptic last chapter, writing as he did with increasingly ill health, to mark the end of the entire work. Whatever the answers to these questions, in *Tristram Shandy* Sterne created a unique work that explores the limits of a fledgling form, the novel, and in many ways prefigures literary experiments and forms to come.

## A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

**First published:** 1768

**Type of work:** Novel

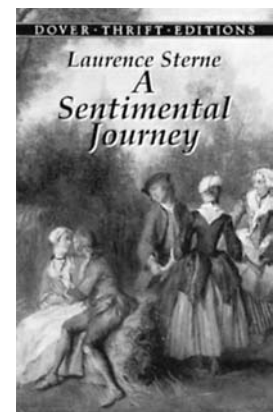
*A British parson recounts his travels and experiences in France and Italy.*

Twentieth century British novelist Virginia Woolf, commenting on the style of *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, wrote:

The very punctuation is that of speech, not writing, and brings the sound, the associations, of the speaking voice with it. The order of the ideas, their suddenness and irrelevancy, is more true to life than to literature. There is a privacy in this intercourse which allows things to slip out unproved that would have been in doubtful taste had they been spoken in public. . . . We are as close to life as we can be.

These comments, which could apply to *Tristram Shandy* as well, underline Sterne's relationship to the stream-of-consciousness style that Woolf, Irish novelist James Joyce, and others would develop and perfect a century and a half later. Sterne did not set out to develop a style, but in *A Sentimental Journey* the combination of urgent delight in the flight from morality and easy familiarity with a specific readership create the immediate and intimate style that Woolf describes.

In volume 7 of *Tristram Shandy*, Tristram recounts his trip through France to escape illness; *A Sentimental Journey*, in a similar vein, is Parson Yorick's account of his travels. Sterne's book is at once a response to contemporary travel books—Tobias Smollett's had appeared two years before—that criticize the host culture and a burlesque of the Grand Tour of Europe that was a traditional part of a gentleman's education. It is also a picaresque narrative in the tradition of the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes's *El ingenioso*



*hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615; *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, 1612-1620), which Sterne greatly admired.

Sterne's Yorick goes to France and Italy seeking understanding, with a heart open to the people and the places that he visits. There are still elements of satire, especially where the upper class and artistic elite are concerned, but Sterne is gentler and mellowed, and Yorick's travelogue comes directly from the heart. While *A Sentimental Journey* incorporates much material from Sterne's own travels, it is a work of imagination, dependent on extrapolation and fancification of actual experience. Yorick is a humorous and sentimental man who delights in the lives of common people and finds himself in ridiculous postures under the influence of love, lust, and infatuation. Yorick's narrative includes descriptions and catalogs of people and places and a wide variety of travel difficulties and accidents that imbue it with humor and pathos. In the end, Yorick is cast as a "man of feeling," in true eighteenth century tradition. Sterne here brings to life *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, which his audience knew and loved well, and through the all-

too-human observations and adventures of a sentimental journeyer, he further educates, edifies, and entertains.

## SUMMARY

In his introduction to a 1935 limited edition of *Tristram Shandy*, Christopher Morley wrote, "Perhaps *Tristram Shandy* should be read first at not over 20 years, and again at not less than 40." Whether Laurence Sterne would have agreed is questionable, but it is clear that his writing offers a dazzling combination of youthful vitality and experienced wisdom that has wide appeal. Though Sterne's contemporary reader was a certain type of eighteenth century aristocrat, Sterne's direct and intimate style speaks to many beyond that limited group and era. His humor and candor, even in more liberal-minded epochs, continue to be disarming in their simple truthfulness. Sterne is not a simple author, for much of his language and erudition is of a past world, yet for readers who approach his works as he approached life, with open heart and ravenous mind, his spirit is unmistakable.

Barry Mann

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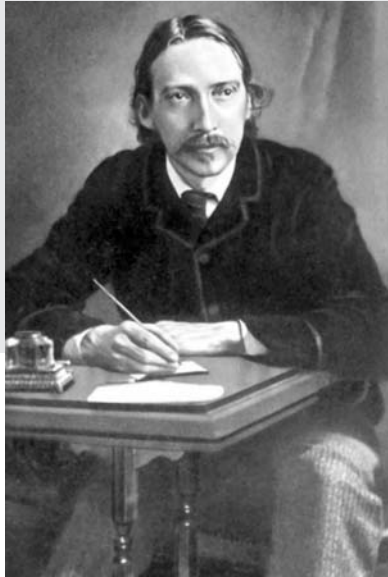
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways do the works of Laurence Sterne defy the emphasis on reason and order which were important in his time?
- What was the basis of Sterne's admiration of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615; English translation, 1612-1620)?
- Is there a relationship between Sterne's Yorick and the Yorick of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603)?
- What is sentimental in *A Sentimental Journey*?
- What stylistic features of *Tristram Shandy* were imitated by twentieth century novelists?
- Why does Walter Shandy fall so far short in his attempt to raise the perfect son?



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## ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

**Born:** Edinburgh, Scotland  
November 13, 1850

**Died:** Vailima, near Apia, Samoa  
December 3, 1894

*Stevenson was a skillful and thoughtful literary stylist who transformed popular genres into genuine works of art.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on November 13, 1850, the only son of Thomas Stevenson and Margaret Balfour. His mother's family and ancestors were primarily clergymen and physicians; his father's family and ancestors were engineers. On both sides of his large extended family (both his mother and father were the youngest of thirteen children) were successful, wealthy, socially prominent professionals. His father's family, in fact, was famous in Scotland. The family firm designed and built lighthouses that had become famous landmarks, and "Stevenson" was a name to reckon with: Robert Louis's father, Thomas, and grandfather, Robert, both appear in Scotland's national portrait gallery. He was born into privilege, therefore, and was expected to carry on the tradition of a wealthy, successful professional life.

When Stevenson was an infant, his mother developed symptoms of tuberculosis, and she was an invalid for much of his first decade. After his third year, Stevenson also became sickly, plagued with fevers and fits of coughing. Eventually, he contracted what was diagnosed as tuberculosis, and much of his adult life was a scramble to stay one step ahead of the disease. He spent much of his childhood, then, as an invalid; the attitudes and habits of mind

that he developed as a result meant that he was destined not to occupy the position that his family expected. He developed the eye and the attitude of the observer. He was destined to become, as it were, a perpetual tourist—a tourist of the imagination.

The day-to-day practical care of the child was given to his nanny, Allison Cunningham ("Cummy" to the family), a very pious Presbyterian who read to the invalid child for hours from the Bible and popular melodramatic literature of the day. Hers was a "blood and thunder" religion, and young Stevenson became conscious at an early age of martyrdom, sin, and judgment. He was a precocious child with a large and unexpectedly grave vocabulary and surprisingly adult concerns about religious matters.

He did not read until he was seven, but he loved to listen to stories told to him not only by Cummy but also by his father, who would invent and recite adventurous yarns to help his son get to sleep on bad nights. By the time he was six, young Stevenson was creating his own stories and sometimes dictating them to his nanny. That is how he came to do his first important piece of "writing." One of his uncles offered a cash prize to the cousin who could write the best history of Moses. Stevenson won the prize. His second important piece of writing, and his first published work, at age sixteen, was also commissioned by his family: When Stevenson was sixteen, his father, impressed by his son's knowledge of Scottish Presbyterian history, asked him to write a history of Scotland's eighteenth century religious, political, and military conflicts. The resulting pamphlet, "Pentland Rising," was paid for by his father.



His father's appreciation of Stevenson's writing ability did not, however, mean that the family expected Stevenson to become a professional writer. He was enrolled in the University of Edinburgh in 1867, when he was sixteen, with the full expectation that he would get an engineering degree and join the family firm. Stevenson was not a good student, however; he attended classes sporadically. He had developed bad study habits and a bad attitude toward academia from the constant interruptions to his schooling that his chronic illness had produced. What Stevenson did with his university time was to explore the streets and byways of Edinburgh, frequenting pubs, observing people, and taking notes in his by-then indispensable journal. He had become a tourist in his hometown—the mark of a writer.

In 1868, he met his first important mentor, Fleeming Jenkin, professor of engineering at the University of Edinburgh. Jenkin invited Stevenson to his home, which was a gathering place for artists, writers, and scholars. There, in an informal setting, Stevenson received the intellectual challenge and discipline that he had not received in the formal college classes that he had avoided. Another person important to him was Charles Baxter, a fellow student who became his lifelong friend and, eventually, literary agent.

When Stevenson finally told his father that he could not be an engineer and had to be a writer, his father made a countersuggestion: Go to law school. His father reasoned that a law degree would be a safety net if the writing did not succeed. Stevenson accepted this suggestion, pursued his studies with reasonable diligence, and was admitted to the bar in 1875. He never practiced law, however; during his law school years, he came to a parting of the ways with his father and met his second important mentor.

In January, 1873, Stevenson's father, a staunch Presbyterian, discovered that Stevenson not only had ceased to be a true-believing Presbyterian but also had lost his belief in Christianity. This discovery precipitated a debate and an estrangement that was not to be fully resolved until 1881, when the father became absorbed in the son's writing of *Treasure Island* (1881-1882, serial, 1883, book).

In the late summer of 1873, at the house of one of his cousins, Stevenson met Frances Sitwell, a thirty-two-year-old woman separated from her

husband, who became his confidant and idealized love object. That relationship, by all accounts, remained platonic, in spite of Stevenson's desires. He also met Sitwell's friend Sidney Colvin, professor of fine art at the University of Cambridge and an "insider" in the world of literary publishing. Colvin, the most important influence on Stevenson's career, became Stevenson's literary and publishing mentor. He guided Stevenson into making a small name for himself in the 1870's by helping him to get his travel and opinion pieces published in literary journals.

Three years after he had met Colvin, and one year after his relationship with Sitwell had cooled, Stevenson met his future wife, Fanny Osborne, an American separated from her husband and temporarily living in France. His attraction and eventual marriage to her either annoyed or outraged Stevenson's friends and family. His mentors and friends felt that he was on the verge of making his mark on literary England, and they did not feel that Osborne was a kindred spirit; they also felt that the emotional drain of caring for an instant family (Osborne had two children) would divert energy away from literary endeavors. His family was shocked by his developing a liaison with a woman who was not yet divorced.

Stevenson pursued the liaison, however, against all objections. After Osborne had been back in California for a year, Stevenson left Scotland to join her there. The trip was physically punishing, and he almost died upon arriving in Monterey, where Osborne was staying. He survived, however, and in 1880 married Osborne in San Francisco. He spent the next two months continuing to recuperate while living in an abandoned miner's cabin on Mount St. Helena, at the head of the Napa Valley.

His trip to California and his stay in the Napa Valley were watershed events; his writing matured, and he became more than a pleasant writer of travel and opinion pieces in literary journals. He became a serious observer of the duality of humankind, a serious explorer into the interior of the divided human heart. Monterey and St. Helena also provided the physical settings for *Treasure Island*, the book that established him.

Stevenson had left for California without the knowledge of his parents, indeed, without leaving them any means of contacting him. His father, however, hearing that he had fallen ill in Califor-

nia, had sent him money. His father, in fact, would support Stevenson and his family as long as the father lived. Stevenson's writing did not make enough money to support a family until the success of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) in the United States earned for him a lucrative contract with Charles Scribner's Sons in 1887, the year of his father's death.

Between 1880 and 1887, Stevenson's life was a continual search for a climate and a location that would ease his pain. He was susceptible to cold, damp, physical exertion, or stress, any of which could cause him to collapse with a fever or with blood filling his mouth. From 1880 to 1884, he lived mainly in rented cottages and resorts in Scotland and on the European continent, but in 1884 his father purchased (as a present to Fanny) a home in Bournemouth, on the southern coast of England, where Stevenson and his family lived from 1884 to 1887. Even in a resort area like Bournemouth, however, Stevenson's life was still a running battle with sickness.

In spite of his physical trials, the period from 1880 to 1887 was extraordinarily productive; during that period, he wrote the principal works by which he is known today: *The Silverado Squatters: Sketches from a California Mountain* (1883), *Treasure Island*, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Kidnapped* (1886). That period also produced his most important friendship; he became friends with Henry James, the only person who fully understood him artistically.

When his father died in 1887, Stevenson used some of his inheritance to finance a sailing trip to the South Seas, still in search of a climate and location in which he could flourish physically. He finally found such a place in Samoa. It was the first place where he could engage in reasonably vigorous physical activity and not suffer days of immobilizing pain. The perpetual tourist had wandered to the ends of the earth, but he had found his home. He and his wife cleared the ground and built a home on the Samoan island of Upolu. In that home, he died of a stroke on December 3, 1894.

## ANALYSIS

Stevenson was a professional writer, in the broadest sense of that term. He was an essayist, a poet, and a writer of fiction (he even tried his hand at plays in collaboration with W. E. Henley, a British

poet and essayist). It is true that, until *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* took the United States by storm in 1887, he could not survive economically without his father's help. Yet his love of words and his delight in their use were strong enough that he had to write, and he would have written no matter what. Writing was not only his occupation, it was his calling. This attitude means that in Stevenson's work one encounters a variety of genres and styles. It also means that technique and "manner" will be foremost; his work will manifest a certain "finish" or "polish." In his nonfiction work, this polish means that his serious themes will be very easy to digest. In his fiction and poetry, it means that his serious themes will hardly be noticed. That is both Stevenson's bane and his salvation. He survives, but in the popular imagination, not in the critical pantheon. Consequently, his books are still in print because readers are still delighted and moved by them, not because readers feel the need to discuss and analyze his works as they would the works of his contemporary Henry James.

Stevenson was an inveterate tourist, even in his own country, so travel writing constitutes a significant part of his literary output. His first commercially published book, *An Inland Voyage* (1878), is an account of a Continental canoe trip with a friend in 1876. *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879), his next two books, were also travel documents. *The Silverado Squatters*, perhaps his best writing in this genre, is an account of his "honeymoon" in the summer of 1880 with his new bride and stepson, plus assorted visitors, in an abandoned miner's cabin. This book is deceptively simple, subtly humorous, and shrewdly perceptive.

Stevenson's first novel was *Treasure Island*, serialized in *Young Folks* magazine in the fall and winter of 1881-1882 and first published in book form in 1883. Evident in this novel are the techniques and themes that dominate Stevenson's fiction. The novel is narrated in the first person in a seemingly transparent, "artless" manner. A plain person is trying to record the facts of his experience as precisely and completely as he can:

Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the

beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen in the year of grace 17—, and go back to the time when my father kept the “Admiral Benbow” inn, and the brown old seaman, with the sabre cut, first took up his lodging under our roof.

A plain beginning, except that the startling phrases “there is still treasure not yet lifted” and “with the sabre cut” provide a brief flash of the vividly colored world into which the reader is about to be seduced. This deceptive straightforwardness is a key element in all of Stevenson’s fiction. His first-person protagonists, plain men that they are, also end up being “hangers-on” in their own stories; there is always a minor character who becomes the focus of the reader’s attention as this character becomes the focus of the narrator’s attention. Jim Hawkins, narrator of *Treasure Island*, is overwhelmed by Long John Silver, the cook on his voyage; David Balfour, narrator of *Kidnapped* and its sequel, *Catriona* (1893), is overwhelmed by Alan Breck, his guide through the highlands of Scotland. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Mr. Utterson, the matter-of-fact lawyer from whose point of view the third-person narrative is told, is overwhelmed by the title characters.

These minor characters assume great importance in their stories because they are vivid mixtures of appealing and repulsive qualities. They are fascinating characters because they combine great capacity for good with great capacity for evil. This dimension raises the issue of Stevenson’s dominant theme: moral ambiguity in human actions. Stevenson is a moralist, but a hard-headed moralist, not a writer of tracts. His novels provide an unflinching examination of the difficulty of either taking the right action or judging actions rightly. Alan Breck has blood on his hands, but he is a loyal and selfless friend to the narrator of *Kidnapped*. The attractive protagonist of the medieval romance *The Black Arrow* (1888) saves a minor character’s life but is nevertheless bitterly reproached by that character for having been put in the life-threatening situation in the first place. Right prevails in *The Black Arrow*, but only after much destruction has made such a triumph hollow. That is the type of world found in the novels that have largely been confined to the children’s literature

bookshelf. The deceptive straightforwardness and “plainness” of the telling, the vividness of the incidents, the fascinating complexity of the characters’ personalities—these divert all but the most careful readers from conscious consideration of the serious themes that dominate Stevenson’s fiction.

*A Child’s Garden of Verses* ranks with *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in long-lasting popularity. In Stevenson’s poetry, as in his prose, however, “transparency” masks subtlety. A contemporary critic, quoted in J. C. Furnas’s brilliant biography of Stevenson, *A Voyage to Windward* (1951), makes the point that *A Child’s Garden of Verses* is

not (as too easily supposed) a book of verse for children, but a book of verse about children. Children, of course, like many of the pieces, but essentially the poems are the disclosure of a child’s mind. . . . Never was there a set of playful verses about children more completely free from mawkishness. There is no attempt to make them songs of innocence.

In his verses, as in his fiction, then, Stevenson the serious artist uses popular genres (travel writing, the adventure story, the gothic horror tale, historical romance, light verse) to exercise his considerable writing skill and flesh out his moral and philosophical values. Stevenson’s advantage and disadvantage, then as now, is a skill so considerable that one revels in the telling and only with difficulty thinks about the values.

## TREASURE ISLAND

**First published:** 1881-1882 (serial); 1883 (book)

**Type of work:** Novel

*In eighteenth century England, a teenage boy entangled in a search for buried pirate treasure receives some complex lessons about trust and loyalty.*

*Treasure Island* was first a map that Stevenson drew for the amusement of his stepson. The map proved so interesting that he created a story to go along with it, reading installments of the story to

his family as he finished them. Stevenson's father, who happened to be visiting on the day of one of those readings, became so attracted to the story that he made plot suggestions, at least two of which were followed (the contents of Billy Bones's trunk and Jim Hawkins in the apple barrel).



The novel was published in serial form in a boys' magazine, *Young Folks*, and it follows the format of the standard boys' adventure novel: A boy is drawn into a fantastic, dangerous adventure, but through courage, integrity, and the help of a heroic mentor, he comes through the adventure unscathed, wiser, and more mature.

Stevenson, however, improvises on this theme. His hero, Jim Hawkins, gets hold of a map made by a famous pirate, Captain Flint, to show the location of a large treasure that Flint had buried. Hawkins enlists the aid of two adult friends to help him find the treasure. So far, Stevenson has established a plucky boy and possibly heroic mentors. The adults, however, have bad judgment in hiring crew for the voyage to Treasure Island, and there are dangerous conflicts among crew and passengers once the island is reached. Those conflicts are resolved partly by luck, partly by shrewdness, and partly by stupidity and superstition. The treasure is finally retrieved, but in a way no one had anticipated. The boy comes through the adventure unscathed, but the major villain is not brought to justice, and the boy's last words in the novel are

Oxen and wain-ropes would not bring me back again to that accursed island; and the worst dreams that ever I have are when I hear the surf booming about its coasts, or start upright in bed, with the sharp voice of Captain Flint [the parrot of the ship's cook] still ringing in my ears: "Pieces of eight! pieces of eight!"

The story does not end, then, with the voice of newly found wisdom. Though *Treasure Island* is a standard boys' adventure on first glance, on sec-

ond glance its themes and attitudes are more adult than juvenile.

*Treasure Island* was originally published as *The Sea Cook*, and the original title shows how big a part Long John Silver, the ship's cook, plays in the story. Jim Hawkins is the protagonist, but, as the original title suggests, Silver is perhaps the most important character in the story. He is certainly the most complex and the most fully realized character. In this, his first novel, Stevenson creates what may be his most memorable character in Long John Silver. The complexity of this character foreshadows Stevenson's techniques and concerns in most of his fiction.

## KIDNAPPED

**First published:** 1886

**Type of work:** Novel

*In eighteenth century Scotland, a teenage orphan who has been kidnapped escapes with the aid of a heroic fugitive, but he must survive a long chase through the Scottish highlands before he can avenge his kidnapping and gain his fortune.*

*Kidnapped*, like *Treasure Island* before it, was serialized in *Young Folks*, the boys' magazine. It is the most Scottish of Stevenson's novels in dialect, vocabulary, and worldview. Like *Treasure Island*, it follows the pattern of a popular genre, in this case the historical romance. Stevenson sets his story in 1751, five years after the defeat of a Scottish rebellion against the English-German King George II. King George has brutally "pacified" the Scottish Highlands, and Stevenson places his protagonist, David Balfour, in conversation with a principal agent of that pacification at the moment when that agent is assassinated (the assassination is a historical fact). Those who witness the assassination suspect Balfour of complicity, and he barely escapes with his life, fleeing for weeks across the Highlands in the company and under the protection of Alan Breck, the man who was historically (and in the novel) accused of the murder.

Under the cover of orthodoxy, however, Stevenson does heretical things with the genre. Morally ambiguous characters abound. Balfour's kidnap-



per, a ship's captain, is an excellent seaman and dotes on his mother. David's uncle is a thoroughly unlikable character, but he suffers more than any other character in the novel. Alan Breck is a deserter and a turncoat, but he is unshakably loyal to Balfour, even at the risk of his life.

Breck and Balfour, the two principal characters, are an odd couple whose developing friendship constitutes the main business of the novel. Their relationship is made vivid and believable by Stevenson's deft hand: Balfour is provincial and stodgy, Breck is worldly-wise and extravagant, but readers can believe that they are drawn to each other because Stevenson's incidents generate the passions in each of them that inevitably make them interdependent. This concern with the niceties of a relationship is another liberty that Stevenson took with this genre.

Once again, then, Stevenson makes of a popular genre something that is more than the sum of its parts. Boys had read *Kidnapped* with fascination in *Young Folks*, but adults read it later in book form with even more fascination. Indeed, Henry James, whom some suspect of never having been a boy, believed that *Kidnapped* was the best thing that Stevenson had done.



## THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE

**First published:** 1886

**Type of work:** Novel

*A lawyer, curious and suspicious about a nefarious character's influence on his (the lawyer's) wealthy, respectable client, finally discovers the horrible truth about their relationship.*

One night, Stevenson's wife was disturbed by the movements and sounds of her sleeping husband;

he seemed to be having a nightmare. She woke him. He was indeed having a nightmare, but he complained, on being awakened, that he had not come to the end of what was proving to be a fascinating tale. That morning, he rapidly wrote down the story that he had dreamed, adding an ending. When he read the tale to his wife, she was dissatisfied; she thought that it was simply a "crawler" (standard gothic horror tale) and that he should develop the moral issues inherent in the tale. He argued with her vigorously but in the end accepted her view and burned the first draft. The tale still had a strong enough hold on him, however, that he composed the second draft (the version that was published) in only three days.

Released to the public, the tale captured the public imagination and has not let go to this day. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* made Robert Louis Stevenson a household name, and it made Stevenson's fortune. In less than a year, "Jekyll and Hyde" was an English colloquialism. In 1887, when Stevenson went to the United States, it was his notoriety from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that induced Charles Scribner's Sons to offer him a lucrative contract. That contract gave him his first taste of financial independence.

The story that produced such wide-ranging effects begins very quietly with a sketch of the passive, observant, tolerant Mr. Utterson, Dr. Jekyll's lawyer, the man from whose point of view this third-person narrative is told. Utterson's tolerance is being strained a little by Jekyll's curious deference to a Mr. Hyde, a man to whom Utterson takes an instant dislike. Only gradually does the intensity of the narrative increase as Utterson becomes more curious and Hyde becomes more disreputable. The story comes to a climax as Utterson helps break down a door to get at Hyde. The lawyer moves, then, from tolerance to judgment, from observer to participant; if it were not for the title of the tale, one would call Utterson the protagonist.

Following this climax is a series of letters to Utterson by a friend of Jekyll, then to Utterson from Jekyll himself; these letters, in effect, tell the story twice more from two new perspectives. These retellings clarify all remaining plot mysteries but preserve as unexplained the central mystery of the human capacity for evil. That mystery, the mystery of moral ambiguity in human judgment and action, intrigued Stevenson throughout his career.



## SUMMARY

Robert Louis Stevenson's life is a study in contrasts, if not contradictions: His parents were wealthy, but he spent the first half of his adulthood one step ahead of genteel poverty. His ancestors for three generations were pillars of the community, but he was a perpetual tourist. His family was very religious, but he became an iconoclast and an agnostic. His family made its living building lighthouses; he was to make his building imaginary worlds. In these contradictions; he rivaled the best of his complex characters. His life was an attempt to contain, and, in a sense, to live up to his own complexity. In time, however, the craftsman, the iconoclast, and the moralist became reconciled and unified, and Stevenson was still growing as an artist and as a man on the day that he died. The deeply rooted family tree flowered in Stevenson's short life.

Isaac Johnson

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*The Black Arrow*, 1888  
*The Master of Ballantrae*, 1889  
*The Wrong Box*, 1889  
*The Wrecker*, 1892 (with Lloyd Osbourne)  
*Catriona*, 1893  
*The Ebb-Tide*, 1894 (with Osbourne)  
*Weir of Hermiston*, 1896 (unfinished)  
*St. Ives*, 1897 (completed by Arthur Quiller-Couch)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*The New Arabian Nights*, 1882  
*More New Arabian Nights*, 1885  
*The Merry Men, and Other Tales and Fables*, 1887  
*Island Nights' Entertainments*, 1893

#### POETRY:

*Moral Emblems*, 1882  
*A Child's Garden of Verses*, 1885  
*Underwoods*, 1887  
*Ballads*, 1890  
*Songs of Travel, and Other Verses*, 1896

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine Captain Silver and Alan Breck as instances of Robert Louis Stevenson's morally ambiguous characters.
- Compare Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with other works by contemporaries, such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Oscar Wilde, that treat divided personalities.
- Did Stevenson's aptness at telling exciting stories obscure other aspects of his artistry?
- In what respects is *Treasure Island* a novel for adults?
- Examine the evidence that *A Child's Garden of Verses* is about, not for, children.

DRAMA:

*Deacon Brodie*, pb. 1880 (with William Ernest Henley)  
*Admiral Guinea*, pb. 1884 (with Henley)  
*Beau Austin*, pb. 1884 (with Henley)  
*Macaire*, pb. 1885 (with Henley)  
*The Hanging Judge*, pb. 1887 (with Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson)

NONFICTION:

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*An Inland Voyage*, 1878  
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## TOM STOPPARD

**Born:** Zlín, Czechoslovakia (now in Czech Republic)  
July 3, 1937

*Stoppard is one of the most important and influential modern British dramatists, praised and imitated for his ability to capture the mood and spirit of the time using references and allusions to literature ranging from William Shakespeare to the present.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Tom Stoppard (STOP-ahrd) was born Tomas Straussler, the second son of Eugene and Martha Straussler, in Zlín, Czechoslovakia (now in Czech Republic), on July 3, 1937. His father was a Jewish physician who worked for the Bata Shoe Company. In 1939, to protect the family from internment when the Nazi invasion was imminent, the company transferred the Straussler family to Singapore. There the Straussler children attended a multinational American school until the Japanese invasion of 1942 sent them fleeing to Darjeeling, India. Stoppard's father, however, remained behind and was killed; his mother later married a British major, Kenneth Stoppard, whose name the Straussler children took. In 1946, the Stoppard family moved to England and settled in the Bristol area in 1950. Stoppard was educated at Dophin School, Nottinghamshire, and Pocklington School, Yorkshire, but did not continue on to a university. His knowledge of the theater and the dramatic arts is mainly self-taught.

Stoppard worked as a journalist for the *Western Daily Press* in Bristol for the next four years and then for the *Bristol Evening World* for two more years. He wrote feature articles, humor columns, and second-string drama criticism. This involvement with theater criticism led to a new career and is reflected in his rapier attacks on drama critics in

*The Real Inspector Hound* (pr., pb. 1968). He next became a freelance journalist and writer. As drama critic for the *London Scene* from 1962 to 1963, he reviewed well in excess of a hundred plays. He also began writing radio and television plays.

A 1964 Ford Foundation grant enabled him to stage his first play, *A Walk on the Water*, in Hamburg, Germany. He married Jose Ingle in 1965; they had two sons before their marriage dissolved in 1971. His first real success, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (pr. 1966, pb. 1967), began as a one-act comedy in verse titled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, the product of a Ford Foundation cultural picnic for promising young playwrights. It was first produced in its present form at the 1966 Edinburgh Festival and then was booked at the National Theatre in London in 1967. The London production, which was followed by a New York production that won several awards, launched his career as a major playwright.

In 1972, Stoppard married Miriam Moore-Robinson, a physician, television interviewer, and writer, and they had two sons. In the mid-1970's, he directed some London productions and began writing screenplays for Hollywood. His screenplay credits include *The Romantic Englishwoman* (1975), *Despair* (1978), *The Human Factor* (1979), *Brazil* (1985), *Billy Bathgate* (1991), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and *Enigma* (2001).

Stoppard has received numerous honors, among them the John Whiting Award (1967), the Prix Italia (1968), the Tony Award (1968, 1976, 1984, 2000), the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (1968, 1976, 1984), the Hamburg Shakespeare Prize (1979), the Outer Circle Award (1984), and

the Drama Desk Award (1984). He was a Theater Hall of Fame inductee in 1999. His screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*, cowritten with Marc Norman, received an Academy Award, Golden Globe Award, and Writers Guild of America Award for the best original screenplay. In addition, he received honorary degrees from the University of Bristol, Brunel University (Uxbridge, England), the University of Sussex (Brighton), Leeds University, University of London, Kenyon College (Ohio), and York University. In 1978, he received the Commander, Order of the British Empire from the Royal Society of Literature; he was knighted in 1997 and received the Order of Merit in 2000.

### ANALYSIS

Stoppard is sometimes linked by critics with his near-contemporary Harold Pinter. Both playwrights share similarities of temperament and background, though the works they produce have little in common. Stoppard and Pinter both come from immigrant families (Stoppard is, in his own phrase, a “bounced Czech”); both reject, at least in their early work, the realistic and naturalistic styles of their predecessors; both began their careers in the aftermath of the “angry young man” period stimulated by John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (pr. 1956, pb. 1957). Both Pinter and Stoppard came to playwriting almost accidentally from practical nonuniversity backgrounds, Pinter from acting and Stoppard from journalism and theater criticism. Since both men began as outsiders breaking into a clannish and traditional field of work, it is perhaps not surprising that they brought with them startlingly original points of view, perspectives from the outside that meshed smoothly with the revolution prompted by Osborne’s play. With *Look Back in Anger* came a new enthusiasm for realistic working-class drama, passionate works that confronted social problems and politics. It was the end of the polite drawing-room drama of the previous era. Yet Pinter and Stoppard changed not only content but also style and approach, the former with his “theater of menace,” the latter with his “high comedy of ideas.”

Perhaps as a result of its originality, Stoppard’s work has been difficult to classify. Most reviewers and commentators agree that he is a writer in love with language, a magician with verbal pyrotechnics who is unmatched in modern drama for the sheer

exuberance of his style. Even the most untrained observer at a live production recognizes this gift in Stoppard—the words and phrases are so rapid and plentiful that a single viewing is never adequate.

Beyond this linguistic agility, however, there is little agreement. Stoppard has been accused by reviewers such as John Simon and Stanley Kauffmann of being facile, shallow, and pretentious. *Jumpers* (pr., pb. 1972), his second major play, was particularly criticized for its author’s tendency to present philosophical debate on stage without integrating it into the stage action. His refusal to be serious even about figures such as Vladimir Ilich Lenin and James Joyce has been interpreted as a refusal to take his role as a writer seriously. The more academic critics of Stoppard, on the other hand, have praised his moral vision, his refusal to capitulate to relativism, and the very frivolity of his approach, which is sometimes compared to that of Oscar Wilde. His avoidance of trendy political and social subjects has sometimes been seen as integrity. Stoppard himself claims to show conflicting characters and statements on stage without taking a personal position; like many writers, he prefers to let his work speak for itself.

Whatever the ultimate judgment of Stoppard’s seriousness or lack thereof, there can be no question about the impact of his major plays and incidental work. He has stimulated a wide range of reaction in the theater, in academia, and in the perception of the general public. He is without question one of the most significant of modern English playwrights.

### ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

**First produced:** 1966 (first published, 1967)

**Type of work:** Play

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, minor characters in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, become the main characters in an absurdist drama about the interpretation and meaning of existence.*

The title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a direct quotation from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601; pb. 1603), a line delivered by the English ambassador

to Horatio at the close of the play. In Shakespeare's play it is but a minor detail, one of the many threads of the play brought to a close at the end of major events. In Stoppard's play it is of major significance, for it marks the death of the main characters. Stoppard's play depicts the "offstage lives" of Hamlet's boyhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and demonstrates how they might feel about being used as pawns who are ultimately executed with no understanding of the reason. As minor literary characters they of course have no lives apart from their roles in *Hamlet*, and this lack allows Stoppard to use them as ideal representatives of modern absurdist-existentialist protagonists—empty, "flat" characters who are uncertain of their identity and their purpose and who thus speculate endlessly about what they should do next. Their only moments of sharp definition come when the characters from *Hamlet* sweep on stage, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern briefly speak the lines and act the parts created for them by Shakespeare.

Meanwhile Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, and the other members of the court go about the serious business of *Hamlet* offstage, and "Ros" and "Guil," as they are called in Stoppard's work, are left to their own trivial devices, such as flipping coins, arguing with the players who put on the play-within-the-play, and alternately disagreeing and making up. Their behavior raises questions about actors and acting and about the nature of reality: Are these characters more "real" when engaged in the fictive role Shakespeare created for two actors to play or when existing "on their own" outside the context of his play? Ros, Guil, and the "Players" discuss the importance of blood, love, and rhetoric in a play and the question of role-playing as reality. Ros and Guil are controlled by the action of Shakespeare's play; yet they remain under the illusion that they have choices to make and debate whether to go home or see how events transpire and whether to go to England with Hamlet. Inevitably, despite their fears and doubts and hesitations, they act as the moment demands, in accordance with the Shakespearean script.

This behavior by the main characters, many critics have pointed out, is heavily influenced by Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (pb. 1952, pr. 1953; *Waiting for Godot*, 1954). Beckett's play is also set in

a "place without visible character," as Stoppard describes it; features two somewhat pathetic figures waiting for some outside person to enter their lives and give them meaning; and explores issues of identity, fate, and probability. Stoppard clearly means for his audience to recognize and enjoy this parallel with *Waiting for Godot* and to allow the resonances of one work to inform the other. In *Waiting for Godot*, Gogo and Didi play word games to pass the time as they wait for Godot, who apparently will come and provide a purpose for their wait. In much the same way, Ros and Guil flip a coin endlessly as they wait for the characters of *Hamlet* to enter and give their lives purpose. Since Ros and Guil seem "modern," the audience is led to consider what has happened to drama and philosophy in the period from Shakespeare's time to their own. The confident, eloquent, and grand in *Hamlet* has become uncertain, banal, and trivial, with a concern not with heroes and kings but rather with trying to make sense of anything at all. Ros and Guil question whether anyone is watching them at all—even the fact of an audience is brought into doubt. Death is the only certainty. Because of its blend of absurdist humor, metaphysical inquiry, and literary allusion, the play's literary and dramatic precursors are often identified as T. S. Eliot and Luigi Pirandello, writers who define modernist concerns.

More than one critic has pointed out that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a long play in which almost nothing happens: The only real "action" is in the brief interruptions by members of the main play and when Ros and Guil board a ship to travel to England and to their deaths. Yet the play seems full of incident, with much coming and going, much speculation about location and time, and many time-consuming activities, such as the flipping of coins. As the first of what Stoppard calls his "high comedies of ideas," this play, like *Hamlet*, raises questions about illusion and reality, about sanity and insanity, about what is relative and what is absolute. It has also been termed a highly intellectual comedy, yet rather surprisingly one that has enjoyed wide popular appeal in Great Britain, the United States, and beyond. As the work that made Stoppard's reputation, it continues to be the object of anthologies and critiques.



## JUMPERS

**First produced:** 1972 (first published, 1972)

**Type of work:** Play

*A retired music-hall singer married to a professor of moral philosophy is investigated for possibly shooting her husband's rival at an acrobatic exhibition.*

*Jumpers* hinges on the absurd but very amusing idea that the members of the faculty of philosophy at a major British university are also members of an amateur acrobatic team, the “jumpers” of the title. Sir Archibald, the vice chancellor, a “first-rate gymnast” himself, has packed his school with gymnastically talented thinkers, a combination admitted to be unique. Stoppard’s witty premise brings a dead metaphor to life through the “mental gymnastics” of Sir “Archie” and George, the professor of moral philosophy, as they argue and debate over philosophical principles and over Archie’s attentions to George’s wife Dotty, who is having an affair with her husband’s superior. George’s attention, however, is distracted by his need to prepare his side of a public debate with Duncan McFee, a rival philosopher who has enjoyed considerably more success than George. Dotty, whose state of mind seems to be just what her name implies, may have shot and killed McFee during an acrobatic exhibition in George and Dotty’s apartment. Inspector Bones, a detective, comes to investigate the murder, but he is so starstruck by Dotty, a retired music-hall singer, that he is easily distracted.

The comedy results in part from conversations based on incorrect assumptions (Inspector Bones thinks George knows of McFee’s murder, but George does not) and from farcical interplay, as when Inspector Bones arrives with flowers for Dotty and is met by George, whose face is smeared with shaving cream and has a bow and arrow in hand.



The confusion does not end with the main characters; there is also a secretary who stripteases on a trapeze, a live tortoise, a dead hare, and two astronauts fighting on the moon. Yet Stoppard is able to bring a fair measure of order out of this chaos, and by the end of the play the audience has begun to accept the logic, or illogic, of this household. Stoppard makes little effort at suspending the audience’s disbelief, however, for his main interest is in the long declamations by George, who continually tests the logic of his arguments for the existence of God and the absoluteness of good and evil by rehearsing them aloud. These declamations allow Stoppard to include a recitation of the logical paradoxes of the Greek philosopher Zeno, who “proved” that an arrow released from a bow can never reach its target because it must first reach a midpoint in its flight, and before that the halfway point to the first midpoint, and so on in an infinite series of midpoints that can never be crossed. The focus on philosophical and logical cruxes such as these and on an ongoing debate between relativistic ethics and philosophical absolutes makes the play intellectually challenging even as the lunatic plot amuses.

*Jumpers* enjoyed less success than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, with a number of reviewers complaining about the shallowness of the characters (little about Dotty is revealed, and the audience is not encouraged to care about George) and the superficiality of the plot (as in the earlier play, there are few “events” beyond what is described above). A just criticism is that the “jumpers” metaphor never really works. One reviewer notes that the practical problems of finding gymnasts who can act or actors who can jump led to a witty sideshow rather than to an integral element of the play, an integration of the sort that occurs with the *Hamlet* sections of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Also, *Hamlet* brings with it its own credibility and seriousness, while George’s maunderings seem too often the self-indulgence of a tiresome old fool, which of course he is. Yet *Jumpers* also seems very much a play of its time, with its nudity, mocking of authority, and attempts to shock the audience with the outrageous. The late 1960’s and early 1970’s were a period of wild experimentation in the theater, and Stoppard’s effort seems in perfect accord with that sensibility.

## TRAVESTIES

**First produced:** 1974 (first published, 1975)

**Type of work:** Play

*Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara, James Joyce, and Vladimir Ilich Lenin become involved with one another and with the British consul in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1917.*

*Travesties* concerns a number of possible travesties (or burlesques), including one by the playwright. First is the artistic philosophy of Tzara, who, like his fellow practitioners of Dada, tries to reverse all the bourgeois notions of the proper role of art and literature; Tzara “composes” a poem by cutting out all the words from a Shakespearean sonnet, putting them in a hat, and pulling them out at random. Another candidate for travesty status is Joyce, who, his genius as a writer notwithstanding, seems to have behaved in a spiteful and money-grubbing way toward someone he might well have thanked. Lenin’s travesty could well be his fleeing his scholarly pursuits in Zurich to lead a revolution that would end with the deaths of millions under Joseph Stalin. Henry Carr, the British consul in Zurich, gets involved in an undignified squabble with Joyce over some theater tickets and a pair of pants, and the case goes to court. The most likely travesty, however, may be the play itself, with Stoppard poking fun at his story, told from the point of view of an aged and confused Carr, about these unlikely characters coming together in Zurich, a conservative and conventional town. This travesty, then, would be Stoppard’s burlesque version of events, his focus on the grotesque in a story that is essentially true in its basic details.

Tzara, Joyce, and Lenin were all, in fact, residing in Zurich at about the same time and must have used the Zurich public library. Stoppard discovered that Joyce, on the lookout for a profit, produced an English-language version of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and that Carr was persuaded to play the part of Algernon, with some success. Joyce and Carr had a dispute over some tickets that Carr had been given to sell and over Carr’s purchase of a pair of pants to wear as part of his costume. Joyce paid Carr only ten francs, “like a tip,” and the two found them-

selves in a Swiss court suing and countersuing, to the credit of neither. Tzara was moving in the same circles, while Lenin was using the library every day to research his book on imperialism and may well have been kept under surveillance by Carr. Stoppard interweaves these historical characters, with Tzara and Carr falling hilariously into the roles and language of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as the poet pursues Gwendolen, here Joyce’s secretary, and Carr chases Cecily, now the Zurich librarian. Throughout, Lenin speaks lines Stoppard gleaned from his speeches and from various biographies and reminiscences about the Russian leader, lending a credible and serious tone to the manic romantic involvements of Carr and Joyce.

The situation allows Stoppard to compare and contrast three revolutionaries—in poetry, in the novel, and in politics—with the perhaps not surprising conclusion that there is little about which they can agree beyond the need for a revolt. Stoppard’s sympathies clearly lie with Joyce’s artistic practice, but he is careful to show Tzara and Lenin in sympathetic lights, allowing each to speak for himself and present his position. The related question of the proper role of art in society is explored directly or by implication in the varying philosophies of each character: Lenin’s utilitarian theory, which would later become socialist realism; Tzara’s goal of dumbfounding the bourgeois with perversity; and the complexities of Joyce’s self-referential psychology. Yet when the tone becomes too serious Stoppard regularly resorts to parody of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, deflating the high grandeur of his world-class revolutionaries. Art is for art’s sake and needs no utilitarian defense.

A final note on the staging may make Stoppard’s approach clearer. In the first production of *Travesties*, staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London in 1974, Henry Carr, played by the immensely talented John Wood, was initially seated at an upright piano to one side of the stage. He represented the “old” Henry Carr, who was remembering his youth in Zurich and his odd associates in 1917, and the play that followed was his distorted reverie. Wood played the piano and sang musical comedy pieces, casting the entire evening as an eccentric entertainment by a possibly senile old man. To search for “truth” within such a framing device is clearly perilous, and Stoppard’s stage directions and other

comments indicate that this stagy burlesque of the seriousness that follows is entirely his intention. He “squats” happily, as one commentator noted, on the fence between the popular and the academic, intriguing both sides but belonging to neither.

## THE REAL THING

**First produced:** 1982 (first published, 1982)

**Type of work:** Play

*Henry, a middle-aged dramatist, leaves his wife and marries again, only to face his new wife's infidelity with a younger man.*

*The Real Thing* refers to true married love, a condition that Henry has to learn to preserve after divorcing his first wife. The play begins with a clever device, a scene between Max and Charlotte, who seem to be husband and wife. Charlotte has just returned from a business trip, and Max has discovered her infidelity. When he confronts her, she walks out on him. The reader then discovers that this scene is actually from a play, “House of Cards,” written by Henry, the main character of *The Real Thing*, who is in “real life” married to Charlotte. Henry is having an affair with Annie, Max’s real wife, so the situation of the play-within-the-play parallels that of the main play, although with a different cast of characters. When Henry leaves Charlotte and Annie leaves Max, Henry and Annie marry and are very much in love. The story jumps forward two years, when Annie is acting in a provincial theater in Glasgow and is tricked into having an affair; the play in which she is performing is John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1633). Henry, one of the “last romantics,” must avoid Max’s failure to keep his marriage intact but must also find some dignity and strength that will attract Annie, in spite of her guilt over committing adultery.

With this play Stoppard departs from his previous experiments in stagecraft and the avant-garde. There is no absurdist-existential empty stage, no acrobats swinging from chandeliers, no Dada poets, and no Russian revolutionaries. Instead, the audience sees the pain and suffering of a middle-aged man and his slightly younger second wife, characters who are mature, articulate, and highly

sensitive to nuance. Both, in spite of their intelligence and skill with language, have made terminal mistakes in their first marriages; both have found “the real thing” in their second marriage but are unsure of how to hold on to it. Annie’s affair is not dismissed cynically by Annie, Henry, or Stoppard as the price of a civilized lifestyle in London; this is not the clever smart-set comedy of Noël Coward. Annie has betrayed her husband, and she and Henry must come to terms with that dishonesty. Yet Stoppard also shows the adultery as a human event for which it is difficult simply to condemn Annie, who has been somewhat neglected by her husband and who intended no harm (she says her lover “came in under the radar”). Henry also recognizes that the harmless flirtation of everyday life, and especially of life in the theater, can lead to irreversible involvement with one small push; it is almost rude not to notice such flirtation, he says.

What is interesting about the emotional and psychological subtleties of *The Real Thing* is that they are so new to Stoppard’s canon. His earlier plays were criticized as superficial, as comedies of ideas without involvement. In this play he is still exploring the existential moment and the need to create meaning and coherence but is doing so in domestic circumstances, in the interstices of everyday lives that all readers can recognize. There may be an autobiographical element in *The Real Thing*, as commentators have noted, since Stoppard was divorced and remarried, but more significantly he exhibits intense human sympathy for the pain of his characters, a sympathy absent and usually impossible in the contexts of his earlier plays.

Yet Stoppard’s intellectual concerns continue in *The Real Thing*. The title, which perhaps should end in a question mark, summarizes the problem for all of the characters: How can one distinguish between the bogus and the true? The “House of Cards” play-within-the-play is not real, although it initially seems to be, just as Annie’s affair initially promises true love. A subplot raises the question of



what true political commitment involves (a question critics have asked about Stoppard) and of what defines true generosity and gratitude. There are repetitions and echoes of earlier scenes, with some acting as mirror images of each other. In spite of the apparent radical departure from his past style, *The Real Thing* remains pure Stoppard.

## THE COAST OF UTOPIA

**First produced:** 2002 (first published, 2002)

**Type of work:** Plays (includes *Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*)

*The historical figure Alexander Herzen and his circle, exiled from Russia in the first half of the eighteenth century, try to provoke revolution in their homeland from afar in a trilogy depicting their disorderly, idealistic “voyage.”*

The title *The Coast of Utopia* derives from the key motivation of almost all of the characters in this dramatic trilogy—the search for a perfect society. Ironically, utopias, as nonexistent (the word literally means “no place”), can have no coast. Yet this truth is repeatedly denied as Stoppard’s huge cast of revolutionaries and fellow travelers (forty-four actors in seventy roles in the New York production) insist that a new secular Eden lies just beyond the horizon, virtually within sight. The main candidates for that paradise are Russia and, briefly, France. The characters’ travels, from Russia to France, Germany, Switzerland, England, and Italy, meld their personal voyages, their political quests, and the coastal metaphor contained in the title of each part of the trilogy: *Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*. The political activists expect a triumphant return home after places of temporary exile, mere jumping off points.

Stoppard’s courage in taking on this massive project is noteworthy. Beyond simple cast size, there is no explicit contemporary relevance to the discussion, and much is firmly anchored in nineteenth-century political history, primarily the painful attempts to drag Russia into the modern world. The central characters may be unrecognizable by the nonspecialist, and the issues—the relative merits of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling’s theories of reality—can be im-

penetrable even to the well-read. *The Coast of Utopia* is not art for art’s sake but is rather political theory for political theory’s sake, an uncompromising eight-hour-plus trek through the intellectual debates and issues of a long-past period. The politics, however, are always conjoined with the domestic lives of the radicals, who have difficult family politics, practicing a clumsy, awkward free love, complicated by a raft of small children running about the stage. Stoppard grounds his political debates in family life and personal relationships, showing how individual personalities shape the debate. The drama lies in the people professing the ideas, not just in the ideas themselves.

*Voyage* begins in 1833 on the estate of Alexander Bakunin, dramatizing the life of this wealthy landowner, his wife, and four daughters. It features his son, Michael, a willful, restless future radical prominent in the later plays; Alexander Herzen, a more restrained revolutionary and intellectual; Herzen’s childhood friend, Nicholas Ogarev; and their political circle, including the wonderfully drawn Vissarion Belinsky, an impoverished literary critic who insists, almost plausibly, that Russia has no literature. Author Ivan Turgenev appears in all three plays as a foil for the committed revolutionaries, creating art rather than trouble.

*Shipwreck* moves to Paris, Dresden, and Nice, following Herzen in particular as the other self-exiled Russians swirl around the Herzen family. The failure or “shipwreck” of the French Republic in 1848 is particularly shattering to the radicals, who nevertheless adopt new theories and models for the reform of Russia.

*Salvage* again features the Herzen household from 1853 to 1865, now in London and Geneva, with Herzen and Ogarev publishing *The Bell* in Russian and sending this muckraking newspaper to émigré groups and into Russia, even as they are superseded by harder-edged, uncompromising successors.

The American premiere of this trilogy, significantly revised by Stoppard, opened in New York City in 2006 to enthusiastic audiences and positive reviews, especially for its spectacle. Unlike earlier more intimate works, *The Coast of Utopia* is a grand mural, an opera of ideas, with all the virtues and drawbacks of a very large, ambitious work, one requiring an equally ambitious and expensive staging.



## SUMMARY

Tom Stoppard's major plays in many ways represent the times in which they were written. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is clearly in the style of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a play out of the 1950's and the existential-absurdist tradition. *Jumpers* has the manic energy and outrageous non sequiturs of swinging London in the 1960's and early 1970's. *Travesties*, although written shortly after *Jumpers*, returns to a slightly more conventional format, while *The Real Thing* is on the surface a play from a much earlier time. *The Coast of Utopia*, in turn, reflects a twenty-first century attempt to reexamine the debates of the past in order to shed light on utopian yearnings. Yet first to last, these disparate works remain uniquely those of Stoppard, with his typical concerns for distinguishing illusion from reality, for finding one's way in a confusing and unforgiving world. Stoppard's work has the conservatism of comedy, keeping one foot firmly planted in the earthiness of the comic, as if in distrust of too many abstractions, too many high-flying ideas. Finally, each play is a linguistic tour de force, inventive, sometimes lyrical, and always hypnotizing.

Andrew Macdonald

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#### DRAMA:

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*The Gamblers*, pr. 1965  
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*Tango*, pr. 1966, pb. 1968 (adaptation of Sławomir Mrożek's play)  
*Albert's Bridge*, pr. 1967 (radio play), pr. 1969 (staged), pb. 1969  
*The Real Inspector Hound*, pr., pb. 1968 (one act)  
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*Dogg's Our Pet*, pr. 1971, pb. 1976 (one act)  
*Jumpers*, pr., pb. 1972  
*Travesties*, pr. 1974, pb. 1975  
*Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land*, pr., pb. 1976

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What thematic concerns and stage techniques seem to run throughout Tom Stoppard's career, from his earlier works, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, to *The Coast of Utopia*? List and briefly describe several concerns and techniques.
- How has Stoppard's work evolved and changed? List characteristics that make *The Coast of Utopia* unique, even for Stoppard's canon.
- In what ways is Stoppard an outsider in British society, both because of his origins and because of the kinds of plays he has chosen to write?
- Stoppard's plays are both connected to real, historical events and written in a style that is at the opposite extreme from documentary and realistic depiction of characters and events. Explain how historical reality and staginess show up in his plays.
- Stoppard's approach might be called "the comedy of serious ideas." What are these ideas? How are they made comic?
- A signature feature of Stoppard's plays is their language, often evident in spectacular speeches meant to dazzle the audience by their rapid sequence of different ideas and their engaging sound. Choose a speech or two and explore how Stoppard tries to dazzle.
- Whether minimal or elaborate, the staging Stoppard describes for his plays is never conventional. Describe the staging that he specifies for one or two plays.
- What makes *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* such a fascinating commentary on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603)? How is it both familiar and strange, old-fashioned, and avant-garde?



*Tom Stoppard*

*The Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*, pr. 1976, pb. 1978  
*Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, pr. 1977, pb. 1978 (music by André Previn)  
*Night and Day*, pr., pb. 1978  
*Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*, pr. 1979, pb. 1980  
*Undiscovered Country*, pr. 1979, pb. 1980 (adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's play *Das weite Land*)  
*On the Razzle*, pr., pb. 1981 (adaptation of Johann Nestroy's play *Einen Jux will er sich machen*)  
*The Real Thing*, pr., pb. 1982  
*The Dog It Was That Died, and Other Plays*, pb. 1983  
*The Love for Three Oranges*, pr. 1983 (adaptation of Sergei Prokofiev's opera)  
*Rough Crossing*, pr. 1984, pb. 1985 (adaptation of Ferenc Molnár's play *Play at the Castle*)  
*Dalliance*, pr., pb. 1986 (adaptation of Schnitzler's play *Liebelein*)  
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*Arcadia*, pr., pb. 1993  
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*Indian Ink*, pr., pb. 1995  
*The Invention of Love*, pr., pb. 1997  
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*Plays: Five*, pb. 1999  
*Plays: Four*, pb. 1999  
*The Coast of Utopia*, pr., pb., 2002 (includes *Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*)  
*Rock 'n' Roll*, pr., pb., 2006

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*M Is for Moon Among Other Things*, 1964  
*If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*, 1965  
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*The Human Factor*, 1979 (adaptation of Graham Greene's novel)  
*Brazil*, 1985  
*Empire of the Sun*, 1987 (adaptation of J. G. Ballard's novel)  
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1990  
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*Medicine Man*, 1992  
*Vatel*, 1997 (translation and adaptation of Jeanne LaBrunne's screenplay)  
*Shakespeare in Love*, 1998 (with Marc Norman)  
*Enigma*, 2001

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*Teeth*, 1967  
*Neutral Ground*, 1968  
*The Engagement*, 1970  
*One Pair of Eyes*, 1972 (documentary)  
*Boundaries*, 1975 (with Clive Exton)  
*Three Men in a Boat*, 1975 (adaptation of Jerome K. Jerome's novel)  
*Professional Foul*, 1977  
*Squaring the Circle*, 1984  
*The Television Plays, 1965-1984*, 1993  
*Poodle Springs*, 1998

LONG FICTION:

*Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*, 1966

NONFICTION:

*Conversations with Stoppard*, 1995

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## DAVID STOREY

**Born:** Wakefield, England  
July 13, 1933

*Storey is a painter, poet, playwright, and novelist, whose reputation is based chiefly on his plays and novels. His close association with the Royal Court Theatre during the late 1960's and 1970's led to productions of many of his best-known plays, while his career as a novelist has earned him many literary awards.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The third son of Frank Richmond and Lily Cartwright Storey, David Storey—professional rugby player, teacher, artist, novelist, poet, and dramatist—was born on July 13, 1933, in Wakefield, a cathedral town in the north of England, famous for the Wakefield cycle of medieval mystery plays. Storey's father, a self-educated miner, consistently encouraged his sons' education as a means of rising to the middle class. For the father, however, the middle class evidently did not include painters or writers. The generation gap between father and son, at least in 1963, posed "no hope of reconciliation." Among the most reclusive of his contemporaries, Storey has preferred to express the inevitable and painful alienation from his working-class roots in his writing rather than in interviews.

In the introduction to the first volume of his collected plays, he writes of an early experience in the theater. At the age of nine, he was taken by an elder brother to see William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603) at the Grand Theatre in Leeds. He recalls his irritation with the absurdity and pretense of the performance. What was missing in the production was drama, something he vividly experienced the next day. Having missed the last bus, he and his brother had to walk the twelve miles to Wakefield, arriving home at dawn. There was, in his words, much agitation, relief, and recrimination on the part of his parents, who had called the police to report their missing sons. That same drama of personal conflicts, with its attendant residue of guilt, remains the thematic hallmark not only of Storey's plays but also of his novels.

His education and early jobs reflect his own at-

tempts to free himself from restricting, centuries-old, working-class routines. He attended Queen Elizabeth Grammar School from 1951 to 1953, and although he was offered a geography scholarship at Reading University, he chose a fourteen-year contract with the Leeds Rugby Club, eventually playing out only four of the fourteen years. He used his first rugby earnings to enroll at the Wakefield School of Art and then at London's Slade School of Art. He commuted for three years between London and Leeds, winning prizes in painting at Slade.

In 1956, Storey married Barbara Rudd Hamilton, a London University graduate from Yorkshire, and they resided in London's Hampstead district. They had two sons and two daughters. To support himself and a family, Storey at various times worked as a postman, show tent constructor, farmworker, teacher in Islington (in north London), and fellow at University College, London. His plays draw strongly on those experiences, as in his play about a schoolteacher, *The Restoration of Arnold Middleton* (wr. 1959, pr. 1966, pb. 1967); another play about the construction and tearing down of a tent at a wedding reception, *The Contractor* (pr. 1969, pb. 1970); another about the activities in the dressing room at a rugby match, *The Changing Room* (pr. 1971, pb. 1972); *The Farm* (pr., pb. 1973); and a play about a school of art, *Life Class* (pr. 1974, pb. 1975). Of his various jobs, only his experience working as a postman has yet to find its way into a play.

During his early years of teaching, he wrote of wanting "to get something down in the shortest possible time that would convey my then feelings of frustration and despair." The despair was caused by having had seven novels rejected by publishers. In three days in 1959, Storey wrote a play, *To Die with*

*the Philistines*, which was similarly rejected by major London theaters but produced at the Traverse Theater in Edinburgh in 1966 under a “suitably revised title,” *The Restoration of Arnold Middleton*. It was then staged a year later at London’s epoch-making experimental theater, The Royal Court. From experiment to establishment, the play eventually found its way to a commercial West End theater, and Storey’s career as playwright was launched. An impressive succession of plays followed, most of them produced at The Royal Court during its heady experimental years. From 1972 to 1974, Storey served as associate artistic director at The Royal Court.

For his play *Home* (pr., pb. 1970), Storey won awards from the *Evening Standard* and the New York Drama Critics Circle. *The Contractor* won both the London Theater Critics Award for Best Play and the Writer of the Year Award from the Variety Club of Britain; *The Changing Room* received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Storey’s novels have also garnered prizes. *This Sporting Life* (1960) won the Macmillan Fiction Award, *Flight into Camden* (1960) earned the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize, *Radcliffe* (1963) won the Somerset Maugham Award, and *Saville* (1976) received the Man Booker Prize.

## ANALYSIS

Storey has said that he is best known in England for his novels and in the United States for his plays. He has spoken also of being dismissed in the theater as a novelist and in literary circles as a playwright. His own attitude toward his work is divided. He feels a sentimental attachment to the novel, but writing plays gives him a sense of control that is lacking in writing fiction.

Central to Storey’s writing is the sense of life as a process of integration, disintegration, and renewal. In his play *In Celebration* (pr., pb. 1969), for example, three brothers return home to celebrate their parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary. They confront their past and then disperse again to their respective lives. Other familial relationships are dramatized in his plays about a football team, a crew of workmen, an art class, or inmates at a mental institution. His novels also depict estrangement from family and friends as a process of changing circumstance.

Storey’s plays deal with changing times, when

the old is about to give way to the new. He is one of a number of dramatists of his generation whose roots are in the working class. In his close association with the Royal Court Theatre he joined in the spirit of the Angry Young Men, a term for such playwrights as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, and John Arden. He shares with Harold Pinter a keen ear for the rhythms of everyday language and an equally keen eye for physical details that eventually translate into a play. The genesis of most of Pinter’s plays is a visual image of two people in a room, one standing and the other sitting. Similarly, Storey recalls having been struck by an image that remains at the end of *The Contractor*—a white metalwork table left on an otherwise empty stage. The table and two white metalwork chairs became the opening scene for his next play, *Home*.

Most of Storey’s novels deal in one way or another with characters from working-class families, depicted with a keen eye for the detail of local color and dialect. Generally, the novels are more thoroughly realistic than his plays, even if they sharply focus on a single character.

Within these broad thematic and stylistic concerns, specific themes, such as the work ethic—particularly the vibrant physicality of work or play—haunt his plays. In communal activity, where rules and rituals are shared, body and soul blend in an artistic entity. At times, the physical and spiritual are mutually hostile, as in Storey’s own experience on a rugby team among players who had difficulty accepting a painter in their midst.

Storey also contrasts the unity of old beliefs and their fragmentation in successive generations. In *In Celebration*, for example, the parents insist on an education for their sons, but their eldest son, in turn, questions the value of education for his own children. Much the same is true of the father-son relationship in the novel *Saville*. Not until the third or later generation does reconciliation seem possible, as demonstrated in his play *Early Days* (pr., pb. 1980). Until then, there are only painful choices to be made and guilt to be endured.

Storey attaches great value to family in both a literal and a figurative sense. The bond formed by family or by mutual endeavor matters deeply. For his characters, work provides a communal bond that may substitute when family ties are weakened or destroyed. This often occurs when the younger generation rises out of the working class. The

term “generation gap,” a fashionable sociological phrase of the 1960’s, is in Storey’s plays a deep emotional and spiritual conflict between youth and age, between the old and the new, between the spiritual and physical. It is, in metaphysical terms, a confrontation between birth and death, as in *Early Days*, a play about an aged, once-successful diplomat who confronts his own decline. In its largest sense, this play is about an incurable sense of loss at the passing of time. Similar issues arise in the novel *As It Happened* (2002), in which an emeritus professor assesses his future after a failed suicide attempt.

With plays as physical as *The Changing Room*, at one extreme, and as artily abstract as *Home*, at the other, Storey’s work has posed some classification problems for critics. No definition of his style is as effective as Storey’s own three-part categorization. Under the heading “poetic naturalism,” he has placed *The Contractor* and *The Changing Room*. *In Celebration* is a “very traditional literary play,” and his “overtly stylistic” plays include *Home*. These four plays are his best known. *In Celebration* is famous for its treatment of the family theme. *The Contractor* and *The Changing Room* are recognized for breaking new stylistic ground. *Home* is remembered for its Beckettian echoes made unforgettable by the acting of Sir John Gielgud and Sir Ralph Richardson.

Storey’s novels, on the other hand, tend to a more direct realistic style. They nevertheless share many of the same thematic concerns. Virtually all of them are vaguely autobiographical, dealing with how characters who rise out of the working class can destroy or badly skew family and personal relationships. The central characters in these stories live in a close, personal world set against a rapidly changing society. Their lives are fragmented and distorted by the forces of class, family, money, and career. The later novels often confront issues of growing old and assessing a life’s value, such as *A Serious Man* (1998), about a successful playwright, or *As It Happened*, about a retired professor.

## THIS SPORTING LIFE

**First published:** 1960

**Type of work:** Novel

*Rising out of the working class, a young man enters into a lucrative career as a professional rugby player but loses his emotional bearings in the process. He ends up isolated and trapped in a world that may soon have no further use for him.*

Storey began his career as a novelist during the 1950’s, writing several novels before finally seeing both *Flight into Camden* and *This Sporting Life* published in 1960. Arthur Machin, the central character of *This Sporting Life*, is a professional rugby player, as Storey himself had been. Rugby is his life. Inside it, he knows his place and takes some pride in what he can do, but outside it he cannot fully relate to anyone. He is aware that two powerful, moneyed men in the mill town that hosts the rugby team dictate the terms of his life. Mr. Weaver and Mr. Slomer, mutual enemies, make things difficult, since deference toward one may be taken as a slight by the other. Launching what could become a lucrative, if short-lived, career in the hard-hitting, brutal sport of rugby, Arthur becomes beholden to Mr. Weaver in several ways, including receiving money advances and automobiles from him.

Standing outside the rugby world is another significant character: Arthur’s landlady, the widow Mrs. Hammond. Arthur rents a room from her when he first joins the team. He helps her with chores and with her two young children, Lynde and Ian. Eventually he seduces her. They begin a regular sexual routine. Yet, he is never quite able to sort out his relationship with her. He stays as her boarder long after he could afford better lodging. He buys her trinkets, a television, a fur coat, and other valuables, making her feel like a kept woman. She gradually becomes bitter and then angry. She throws him out, but from that moment her own life begins to deteriorate. By the end he only relates to her by sitting at her side, holding her hand, as she lies in a coma on her deathbed.

Storey plays two time periods against each other to build the sense of a fragmented, uncontrolled, and alienated life. Events in the present, written in



the present tense, are juxtaposed against those from the past, written in the past tense, that meet with the present at the beginning of part 2. Moreover, the novel is written in first-person, giving an egocentric quality to the narrative. Arthur refers to Mrs. Hammond only as “Mrs. Hammond,” never using her first name, Val, until she is no longer in any condition to respond. He also is alienated from his father and mother because they both view Mrs. Hammond as a loose woman. As a final irony, Storey ends the novel with a long account of a rugby match played after Mrs. Hammond’s death, as if rugby is all that Arthur has left. Sadly, in a few more years he will not have even that.

## IN CELEBRATION

**First produced:** 1969 (first published, 1969)

**Type of work:** Play

*A family reunion turns into a painfully honest confrontation of three sons with one another and with their parents.*

The most recurring of Storey’s themes, family conflicts, is nowhere more forcefully rendered than in *In Celebration*, first produced at The Royal Court. For their parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary, Andrew, Steven, and Colin Shaw—lawyer, teacher, and labor arbitrator, respectively—return to a grimy mining village to take their parents to the best local hotel for a celebratory dinner.

The dinner at the town’s most posh hotel serves as an occasion in act 1 for the renewal of familial relationships. In act 2, the acrimonious purging of family secrets, which for many years had lain unspoken beneath the surfaces of small-town respectability, takes place.

All three sons are the beneficiaries of a university education. Andrew and Steven are married and have families, and Colin is about to marry. All three seem to have fulfilled their parents’ dreams for them. Steven and Andrew have taken on the responsibility of parenthood. Colin, to his parents’ satisfaction, announces his intention to marry, adding that he will do so only because it is “less embarrassing to be married than not to be.”

Yet with rituals established—education, jobs,

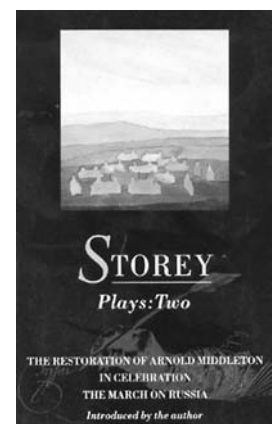
and family—something is amiss. Andrew, the eldest and most cynical of the sons, has given up law to become an artist. Steven has “packed in” the much-talked-about novel he is writing. Colin’s reluctance to marry, having an implication of homosexuality, foreshadows marital problems.

After the elder Shaws have retired and the sons have had a minor quibble about who sleeps where, their sleep is interrupted by Steven’s crying, the result of nightmares he has experienced since early childhood. The four men, safely out of the hearing of the mother, indulge in recriminations about the past.

Andrew has already recounted his mother’s farming him out to a neighbor for six weeks when Steven was born. Andrew had unsuccessfully pleaded to be admitted to her room. Now free to choose for himself for the first time in his life, he exchanges law for painting. He recalls laboring for “a home, a car, a wife . . . a child . . . a rug that didn’t have holes . . . I even married a Rector’s daughter.”

The deepest psychic wound involves the death of Jamie, the oldest brother, at the age of seven, when Andrew was nearly five and Colin nearly two. Mrs. Shaw, six months pregnant with Steven, attempted suicide because of an accumulated sense of guilt for Jamie’s death, ostensibly caused by pneumonia but, according to Andrew, actually caused by “galloping perfection” and beatings from his father. That perfection was marred from the beginning by the Shaws’ marriage, compelled by a pregnancy that greatly dismayed Mrs. Shaw’s family. According to Andrew, his mother was “raised up by a [pig] farmer to higher things than being laid—in a farm field—by a bloody collier.” The brothers eventually leave, Andrew to continue his painting, and Steven and Colin to confront their respective futures.

Some of Storey’s other plays also deal with the breakdown of traditional family relationships, including *The Restoration of Arnold Middleton*, *The Farm*, *Mother’s Day* (pr. 1976, pb. 1977), and *Sisters*



(pr. 1978, pb. 1980). The same theme also appears in several of his novels, including *Flight into Camden*, *Saville*, and *Thin-Ice Skater* (2004).

## THE CONTRACTOR AND THE CHANGING ROOM

**First produced:** *The Contractor*, 1969 (first published, 1970); *The Changing Room*, 1971 (first published, 1972)

**Type of work:** Plays

*The harmony and energy of a rugby team and a construction crew constitute other kinds of families.*

Companion pieces first produced at the Royal Court Theatre, these two plays are the most striking examples of Storey's plot technique of omitting the play's central event from the onstage action in favor of dramatizing the characters' inner states of being. The omitted events consist of a rugby match in one play and a wedding in the other. In *The Changing Room*, Storey substitutes locker-room action and conversation for the game; *The Contractor* substitutes the construction and dismantling of a wedding tent for the wedding ceremony.

The main feature of both plays is the physical activity that creates a bond among the participants and is seldom realized in situations outside of sports or the workplace. What makes the routines in work or play so vibrant and what sets these plays apart is the absence of conflict, except for the communally shared criticism of the outside world. For Storey, teamwork can reach heights that "like art, [can become] something transcending, both to the performer and observer."

The clock in the brutally rough game of rugby runs constantly, and time-outs occur only for disabling injuries. *The Changing Room's* locker-room rituals take place before a game, during a time-out, and at the end. All thirteen men on the team are at one point or another naked and participate in towel-slapping and joking with a flow of energy that is both sensory and rhythmic. Similar rhythms are experienced by the crew constructing a wedding tent for their boss's daughter's wedding in *The Contractor*. Although middle class, the owner of the

company and his family have moments in which they join in the spirit of the work. It is into this physical rhythm and flow of energy that the audience is drawn.

Ordinary lives and dialogue, consisting exclusively of nondramatic conversations that reflect the daily lives of most people, inform the plays. Within the plays' ordinary events the extraordinary is contained. Storey dramatizes life as it is lived. In the fragments of conversational exchanges, characters reveal the dramas of their inner lives. In both plays, Storey creates poetry from the naturalistic dialogue, much of it in local dialect and some of it in bursts of song.

## HOME

**First produced:** 1970 (first published, 1970)

**Type of work:** Play

*Two men and two women in a mental institution find dignity in a haunting and poetic recalling of their pasts.*

The idea for *Home*, first produced at the Royal Court Theatre, occurred to Storey when he was struck by the concluding image of *The Contractor*—a metalwork table on an otherwise bare stage. *Home* opens upon a bare metal table, with two occupied metal chairs, outdoors at a mental institution. That there are only two chairs poses problems of seating when two women join the two men.

The men are middle class. Harry, a heating engineer, and Jack, a distributor of foodstuffs in a wholesale store, exhibit sensitivity and some gentility as they recall fragmented bits of their pasts. Marjorie and Kathleen, on the other hand, are anything but likely companions for the two men. They are concerned with physical matters, particularly their ailments, and they indulge in the kind of gossip and quibbling that have characterized their lives. They bicker especially about chairs, which are continually being carried on and off the stage. For all four, the present is about making things as comfortable for one another as possible.

Within this framework, Storey draws the interior landscapes of his characters in the tradition of the so-called plotless play. Characters freely exchange

bits about their lives and their times in attempts to make sense of things. Christmas, for example, is not the season of good cheer it is supposed to be because “the moment money intrudes . . . all feeling goes straight out the window.” The men discreetly recall their sexual inclinations, the camaraderie of wartime, and the large families of the past. The diminishing of England itself is suggested in Jack’s fragmented references to “this little island.” Harry replies, “Shan’t see its like,” and “The sun has set.” In this personal and historical elegy something is gained: The human bond formed among the four characters has allowed them to give voice to a moving experience of commonality.

## SAVILLE

**First published:** 1976

**Type of work:** Novel

*Colin Saville is the son of a coal miner who rises out of the working class to become a teacher by his early twenties. In the process, his relationships with his family and others become strained.*

Saville is a rich and detailed chronicle, an ambitious undertaking that tracks the progress of Colin Saville, the eldest son of a coal miner, from the 1930’s through the 1950’s and over the span of more than five hundred pages. It is regarded as Storey’s most significant work, and it won the prestigious Man Booker Prize, Britain’s top literary award for fiction.

The Saville family lives in the coal-mining district of Yorkshire. Colin’s father, Harry Saville, leads a life of backbreaking work in the coal pits. Harry hopes for something more for his sons, Colin, Steven, and Richard, but especially for Colin, whose education is a matter of priority. Harry is good-natured but also ignorant and slow-witted. The mother is somewhat depressed and lethargic, and the brothers are distant and unmotivated. Ironically, Colin’s success pulling himself out of the coal-mining life and into a career as a teacher and poet creates resentment and bitterness in the family he leaves behind.

The story is realistic and objective, written in third-person voice. Despite that, the perception

borders on first person, as every episode puts Colin at the center and all other characters are defined in terms of his relation to them—his father, his mother, or his brothers, for example. Nothing in the narrative is outside his direct experience. However, there is an important exception, for the novel begins some years before Colin’s birth. The first chapter and most of the second chapter deal with the birth and early life of Andrew, the son who died six months before Colin was born.

The exception is deliberate, for Storey creates a kind of ghostly presence hovering over Colin, who was expected to be the worthy replacement for Andrew. A much later scene has Colin visiting the cemetery where Andrew is buried and exorcizing his brother’s ghost to liberate himself so he can pursue his own life.

The life of the Savilles in Saxton, Yorkshire, is a microcosm set against the larger world of the Great Depression, World War II, the gradual breakdown of the British class system, and the fall of the British Empire. These forces contribute to Colin’s opportunity to shape a new life beyond the coal pits, but they also drive a wedge between Colin and his family. It is not that the family is cruel, loveless, or untrusting. Colin feels a strong bond and a sense of responsibility for his family. Similarly he develops strong friendships with others in his neighborhood. However, his abilities and his determination take him to new experiences far outside the realm of friends and family.

There are those who would like to pull Colin back and others who unwittingly hamper his ambitions. Among the former are the masters in his school, who like to abuse him verbally and hold him in check, as if they would prefer that he fail to realize his talents. Among the latter are Stafford, a friend and the son of one of the mine owners, whose social status ultimately alienates him from Colin. Colin’s love for Margaret, the daughter of a well-to-do physician, is similarly thwarted by the strictures of society. It is as though he becomes classless and belongs nowhere in that strange, unstable world of post-World War II England. Indeed, Elizabeth, a middle-aged woman who becomes a sort of substitute mother, tells him, “You don’t really belong to anything. . . . You’re not really a teacher. You’re not really anything. You don’t belong to any class, since you live with one class, respond like another, and feel attachment to none.”

In Colin's farewell meeting with Margaret, who stays in Saxton while he moves to London, she says that changing the scenery does not change who one is, and she describes Colin "of belonging nowhere; of belonging to no one; of knowing that nowhere you stay is very real."

### SUMMARY

David Storey's metaphor for life is the family. Much of his work consists of imaginative recreations of his own family. He was himself one of three sons of a Yorkshire coal miner, and many of the families he has depicted in his novels and plays, including *In Celebration*, *Saville*, *A Prodigal Child* (1982), *Present Times* (1984), *Stages* (pr., pb. 1992), and *A Serious Man*, fit a similar description. He often uses the same names, such as Andrew, Colin and Steven, for more than one of his characters.

Even when a family is not literally at the center of the story, the idea of family emerges in relationships formed for a particular occasion, such as a rugby match, a construction job, or recovery from mental illness. In these variations of the family unit, bitter conflicts are absent for the brief time that a communal spirit takes over; rules and rituals make harmony possible. Such harmony may be denied: The Shaw family in *In Celebration*, for example, does not achieve it, and it evaporates toward the end of *Saville*.

In opting for the story whose main event is not dramatized, Storey has made a distinctive, immediately recognizable contribution to modern English drama. He has also created compelling novels out of the material of memory and vivid imagination.

*Susan Rusinko; updated by Stanley Longman*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In what ways did Great Britain undergo radical social changes in the years following World War II? How are these changes reflected in the plays and novels of David Storey?
- Compare the way family is depicted in *Saville* and in *In Celebration*.
- The game of professional rugby figures prominently in at least two of Storey's works, *This Sporting Life* and *The Changing Room*. How does Storey use the game as a way of creating a contrast with the larger world?
- Compare and contrast Storey's plays and his novels. Does writing for the stage require a different approach than writing prose fiction?
- Why do Colin in *Saville* and Arthur in *This Sporting Life* fail to create enduring or meaningful relationships with the women they love?





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## AUGUST STRINDBERG

**Born:** Stockholm, Sweden

January 22, 1849

**Died:** Stockholm, Sweden

May 14, 1912

*Strindberg was one of the leading figures in modern drama. He pioneered the drama of psychological realism and created a form of expressionistic drama that gave dramatic structure to subjective reality.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Johan August Strindberg was born in Stockholm, Sweden, on January 22, 1849, the son of Carl Oscar Strindberg, a steamship agent with an aristocratic background, and Ulrika Eleonora Norling, a domestic servant. When Strindberg was four years old, his father went bankrupt, and the family, constantly on the move, lived under impoverished conditions in which food was scarce. His relationship with his parents was an ambivalent one. Though he admired his father's aristocratic ties, Strindberg frequently saw his father as a hostile force. Though he felt that his mother was violent and unreasonable, he came to see maternity as something sacred. A sensitive and anxious man, Strindberg returned to his youthful experiences for material for his works. Hunger, both physical and spiritual, became a recurrent motif in his later works. Bankruptcy came to represent not only the economic condition of his characters but also their existential condition. The class difference between his parents absorbed him in a constant analysis of class warfare; his ambivalent relationship with his mother carried over into his marriages; and the search for the mother figure became an obsessive theme running throughout all of his work.

When Strindberg was thirteen, his mother died, and his father remarried. Influenced by his mother's evangelical Pietism, Strindberg developed a

scrupulous devotion to religion that eventually became transformed into a fervent skepticism. Religion, skepticism, and the quest for God would remain as focal issues in Strindberg's life and works.

In 1867, the eighteen-year-old Strindberg pursued the study of modern languages at the University of Uppsala, where he found the academic atmosphere stifling. He later became a tutor in the house of Dr. Lamm, who encouraged him to pursue medicine, but Strindberg failed his chemistry examination, left the university, and tried unsuccessfully to become an actor. Acting led him to playwriting, and after writing his verse drama *Hermione* (pb. 1871), he returned to the university to engage in literary studies.

Strindberg launched his career as a dramatist when *I Rom* (pr., pb. 1870) was produced by the Royal Dramatic Theatre. Subsequently, Strindberg received a stipend from the king. After he left the university, he became a journalist and continued to write plays. His *Mäster Olof* (pb. 1878, pr. 1890; *Master Olof*, 1915), a historical prose drama, moved beyond the stilted form of the patriotic chronicle play. He also fell in love with Siri von Essen, a Finnish aristocrat, married to Baron Carl Gustav Wrangel. When she divorced Wrangel in 1877, Strindberg entered his first marriage. In various dramatic forms, Strindberg used the relationship between a lower-class man and an aristocratic woman while the menacing figure of the baron became a haunting presence in his early and later works.

Strindberg became a controversial writer. *Giftas I* (1884; *Married*, 1913), a collection of short stories,

brought him to court on a charge of blasphemy because of sarcastic remarks about the Eucharist. Though he was acquitted, the trial put pressure on his already unstable marriage to Siri, whose acting career was constantly being interrupted. During this period, Strindberg became obsessed with the idea that a league of women was conspiring against him, he thought that his wife was trying to have him committed, and he doubted whether he was the father of his own child. Many of his delusions were fictionalized in *Le Plaidoyer d'un fou* (1893 in German; 1895 in Swedish; *A Madman's Defense*, 1912), an autobiographical novel, and reappeared in his major naturalistic works: *Fadren* (pr., pb. 1887; *The Father*, 1899), *Fröken Julie* (pb. 1888, pr. 1889; *Miss Julie*, 1912), and *Fordringsägare* (pb. 1888 in Danish; pr. 1889; pb. 1890 in Swedish; *Creditors*, 1910). Having corresponded with philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and author Émile Zola, Strindberg began to embrace naturalism, started an experimental theater in Copenhagen in 1889, and began to acquire an international reputation.

After his divorce from Siri, Strindberg moved to Germany and joined a bohemian artists' colony. Later he met and married journalist Frieda Uhl. Again Strindberg's paranoia led to the dissolving of this marriage in 1894. That same year he went to Paris, where he experienced a psychotic breakdown known as his "Inferno" crisis. Feeling himself to be the victim of mysterious powers, he believed it necessary to read symbols and portents in everyday occurrences. After his bout with psychosis, Strindberg questioned the nature of objective truth and saw the world in terms of symbols and signs. He brought these perceptions into play in his drama *Till Damaskus, första delen* (pb. 1898, pr. 1900; *To Damascus I*, 1913).

In 1901, he married actor Harriet Bosse, another career woman. Despite his feelings toward her, Strindberg's jealousy and his other delusions led to their divorce in 1904. During his last years Strindberg continued to experiment with dramatic form, collaborated with August Falck in founding the Intimate Theatre, wrote and produced a series of chamber plays, and settled in Falck's residence, called The Blue Tower. Retired and suffering from stomach cancer, Strindberg continued to be honored by torchlight parades and gala performances. The man who did battle with God and the Devil was said to have held the Bible to his chest, saying, "All

is atoned for." His role as rebel, victim, and pilgrim was played out in his life as well as in his works. He died in Stockholm on May 14, 1912.

## ANALYSIS

Strindberg was a prolific writer. He wrote plays, short stories, novels, poems, autobiographies, literary criticism, histories, works on folklore, political tracts, studies on Chinese language and culture, treatises on chemistry, and reams of letters and journals. He is best known, however, for his work as a dramatist. His dramatic canon has an incredible range. He wrote compact one-act dramas focusing on intense conflicts between several characters as well as massive epics covering vast territories and significant lapses in time. He wrote sardonic comedies, historical dramas, fantasies based on fairy tales, family dramas portraying volatile conflicts between husbands and wives, pilgrimage plays that follow one character's odyssey through life, and symbolic dramas with ghostlike characters. Most of Strindberg's dramas are intensely autobiographical works in which characters caught in the grip of powerful forces engage in the psychological torment of themselves and others.

One recurring theme in Strindberg's dramas is the theme of sexual warfare. Since primitive times, male fantasy has projected the dual image of woman as either good mother or evil seductress, an image that Strindberg adopted. The maternal ideal for Strindberg is seen in a caring and nurturing woman, but this ideal is perverted by the Strindbergian woman's quest for power and dominance. His women are subtle destroyers of men, driving them to insanity or killing them slowly through various means of psychological torment. Even children are used as pawns in a deadly battle to the death. Laura in *The Father* drives the Captain insane and robs him of his paternal power. Julie is both repulsed by and attracted to men and always tries to exert her dominance over them. The mother in *Pelikanen* (pr., pb., 1907; *The Pelican*, 1962) takes on a lover and drives the father to his death with her infidelity.

The male hero in Strindberg's plays is a prototype of the alienated heroes of modern drama. Caught in a world of perpetual doubt and suspicion, he finds himself a victim in a cruel world. He often experiences a paralysis of the will and is controlled by overpowering forces that consciously or

unconsciously manipulate his life. In his quest for an ideal, he finds himself thwarted at every turn by the complexities of the world order. He may search hopelessly for a mother figure, as do the Captain in *The Father* and the Unknown in *To Damascus I*. He may try to break the bond of a stratified social order, as Jean does in *Miss Julie*, or he may seek for an ideal love that transcends the world of social stigmas and existential guilt. Yet no matter how hard he seeks to find a way out of his entrapment, he is left defeated and completely incapacitated.

Many critics consider Strindberg as a subjective dramatist more concerned with his own personal struggles than with social issues. Yet Strindberg is interested in class warfare. In *Miss Julie* and *Spöksonaten* (pb. 1907, pr. 1908; *The Ghost Sonata*, 1916), he shows how flimsy is the base of aristocratic power. A miller prostitutes his wife to purchase a title from the king. Thus originates the aristocratic bloodline of *Miss Julie*. In *The Ghost Sonata*, the Colonel is a fake aristocrat who has gained his military title from an honorary position in the American volunteer service. The power structure is always questioned in Strindberg. The new monied aristocracy, of which Jean is now a part, is as shallow as the old aristocracy. Jean is like Hummel, the capitalist entrepreneur in *The Ghost Sonata* who turns out to be a vampire destroying human lives.

Strindberg also stands at the forefront of modern drama when he focuses on the theme of doubt and uncertainty in a world where truth is impossible to discern. The world of Strindberg's drama is wrapped in lies and deceptions. Fathers do not know that their children are their own. Aristocracy and birthrights are called into question. Two false witnesses determine the truth in a court of law. People are never what they seem to be, and those who try to acknowledge the truth are declared insane. Strindberg also focused on two themes that would become predominant in modern drama: the notion that reality depends on one's subjective perception and the idea that life is built on a series of illusions.

Strindberg's major drama can be classified into three major periods: his naturalistic period, his expressionistic period, and the period of his chamber plays. Discontented with the popular moralistic melodramas of his time, Strindberg created naturalistic dramas that probe the psyches of modern individuals. The motivations of his characters are

complex, multiple, and usually concealed. Driven by psychological and sociological influences, his characters maintain a thin grasp on their identity and possess a fragmented sense of self. The conflict in his naturalistic dramas focuses on a few individuals battling for psychological domination. External action gives way to internal struggles in which one person subtly drives the other to his or her death in a form of psychological murder. The battle is most often played out in sexual warfare in which the woman, the weaker sex, drains the words and ideas from others and often destroys an intellectually superior male. These dramas have few characters, one setting, a short time span, and a singular thread of action. Strindberg also called for realistic acting, a functional set with real props, subtle makeup, stage lighting, and the elimination of the intermission.

After his Inferno crisis, Strindberg moved away from naturalism to expressionism and was again at the vanguard of creating new dramatic forms. His dream plays of this period are intensely personal journeys through the mind of a central consciousness. Character in these plays becomes even more unstable and fragmented. Just as in a dream, characters, reduced to types, split, multiply, and transform themselves so that one character may be seen in many guises. Time and place change at random as one scene fades into another. The structure is episodic, and similar actions recur in different forms. Dialogue varies between the cryptic and the poetic. Objects and people take on symbolic significance. In his expressionistic dream plays, Strindberg recast the medieval drama of sin and reconciliation into a modern psychodrama in which reality becomes a matter of subjective perception.

Late in his career, Strindberg experimented with a more intimate form of drama that he called chamber plays because of their resemblance to chamber music. In these plays, Strindberg returned to the short play with a small ensemble of characters. The form of the chamber play is tighter and more compressed than the expressionistic dream play. The plays are based on thematic movements rather than linear plots. They display a series of images juxtaposed and intertwined like the themes in a sonata. The plays focus on a world of discord, sin, guilt, retribution, and reconciliation. Their mood is somber and elegiac. Combining realistic scenes with grotesque symbolic images, they

envelop the audience in a muted spectacle of sight and sound that borders on the surrealistic. They pave the way toward modern absurdist drama. Strindberg was a relentless experimenter who opened up new vistas for modern drama and influenced many of the great dramatists of the twentieth century.

## THE FATHER

**First produced:** *Fadren*, 1887 (first published, 1887; English translation, 1899)

**Type of work:** Play

*Fighting for control of her child, a wife drives her husband to insanity and death by making him doubt that he is the child's father.*

*The Father* is often seen as a tragedy in which larger-than-life characters engage in a life-or-death struggle centered on a family conflict. Like a Greek tragedy, *The Father* has a tight plot structure, a narrow time frame of twenty-four hours, one locale, and a hint of the fatalistic forces at work behind the scenes. It has often been compared to the story of Agamemnon, who was trapped and killed by his wife Clytemnestra because he had sacrificed their daughter. *The Father* is also similar to Euripides' *Bakchai* (405 B.C.E.; *The Bacchae*, 1781). In *The Bacchae*, Pentheus rejects the god Dionysus and his women worshipers the Maenads, only to be torn to pieces by them. In *The Father*, the Captain rejects feminine forces, both spiritual and physical. Thus, a household of women turns against him and figuratively tears him to pieces. An evil or fatalistic force seems to haunt the house. The Captain senses the web of fate that is being spun around him. His daughter, Bertha, hears maternal ghosts in the attic mourning over a cradle. Bertha's grandmother, who is antagonistic to her father, warns her that spirits who are ignored seek vengeance.

*The Father* not only examines the battle of the sexes but questions the patriarchy, the male power structure, by casting doubts on paternity or fatherhood. The Captain wishes to assert his rights as father and husband. He tells his wife that when she married she bartered her rights in exchange for his financial support of her. Marriage, according to

the societal order, is an exchange in which the woman agrees to be mastered in order to be supported. Thus, masculine law gives the father the sole right to determine the education of his child. Old Margaret, the Captain's former nursemaid, argues that a mother has only her child, whereas the father has other pursuits. The Captain, however, insists that his burden is greater than his wife's because he is responsible for the whole family.

The Captain, a military man who surrounds himself with symbols of masculine power (military tunics, rifles, game bags), represents the power of the patriarchy. However, the play questions the certainty of fatherhood itself. In the very first scene, the Captain tries to get one of his cavalry soldiers to accept the responsibility for impregnating one of the kitchen maids. Nojd admits to having slept with her but implies that there have been others, so that it is impossible to determine who is the father of the child. Nojd feels that it would be drudgery to support another man's child. His wife, Laura, picks up this issue and notes that if fatherhood cannot be determined, how can the father have rights over the child? She says that she can prove that Bertha is not his child. The Captain, who has always held to his patriarchal privilege of passing on his soul to his child and obtaining immortality through his progeny, feels his power slipping away. The play begins to cast doubt on paternity. Johansson was forced to become the father of Old Margaret's illegitimate child when he could not be certain that he was the father. The Captain implies that the wives of both the Pastor and the Doctor were unfaithful, thus questioning their paternity. Fatherhood is called into question, and with it, masculine power. Laura turns masculine law against the Captain by having him declared certifiably insane, thereby divesting him of his power. Since he claimed mastery as provider, she will now discard him and use his provisions.

If fatherhood is being questioned, motherhood is being elevated. The Captain, rejected by his mother, makes his wife his "second mother" and surrenders his will to her like a child. He keeps his old nursemaid with him and she treats him as her "big boy." In the end, the nurse slips a straitjacket over him, pretending that she is dressing a little boy. As he is dying, he longs to lie on a mother's breast. He puts his head down on the nurse's lap, comparing her to the Virgin Mary, thus ironically

replicating the Pietà, the body of Christ in Mary's arms. The play ends with Bertha coming to Laura in the semblance of an ironic Madonna. Behind the personal tragedy, *The Father* encompasses a powerful social drama.

## MISS JULIE

**First produced:** *Fröken Julie*, 1889 (first published, 1888; English translation, 1912)

**Type of work:** Play

*An aristocratic woman sleeps with her servant and commits suicide rather than face dishonor.*

*Miss Julie* is not simply the tragedy of an aristocratic woman with a self-destructive personality and an ambivalent feeling toward men. It is also more than a naturalistic study about a victimized woman torn apart by family strife. *Miss Julie*, a drama of paradoxes and reversals, is about the breakdown of the social order. The play begins on the celebration of Midsummer's Eve, a carnival-like festival allowing for the breakdown of social and sexual distinctions. Miss Julie, the lady of the house, would rather dance with the peasants than visit relatives with her father. Jean, her servant, is more concerned than the reckless Julie about propriety. In keeping with Midsummer's Eve, Julie wants all rank laid aside and asks Jean to take off his servant's livery. Julie and Jean then reverse roles. He drinks wine, she prefers beer; he is concerned about his reputation, she is negligent and foolhardy; he dreams of climbing, she dreams of falling.

In *Miss Julie*, aristocracy itself is a paradox. Jean

fights to become a new aristocrat, but the aristocracy to which he aspires is a sham. Young ladies use foul language, their polished nails are dirty underneath, and their perfumed handkerchiefs are soiled. Miss Julie's family title was obtained when a miller let his wife sleep with the king. Thus, the aristocratic title was earned through sexual corruption. Jean's fiancé, Christine, who is not above thievery and fornication, cannot live in a house where the mistress sleeps with a servant. Jean, who realizes the hypocrisy behind aristocracy, is not beyond buying himself a bogus royal title. He cannot have Julie's noble blood (which was gained by corrupt means), yet he can make their children nobility (by purchasing a less-than-reputable title). In *Miss Julie*, the authenticity of aristocracy is questioned.

In the midst of midsummer madness, not only are class barriers falling but gender distinctions are also becoming confused. Miss Julie's father married a common woman; yet this common woman was given control of his estate. Another reversal of roles has occurred: The commoner ruled over the aristocrat. Julie's mother also reversed gender roles and reared Julie to ride and hunt and to wear men's clothes. Furthermore, she turned the whole estate into a carnival world in which the men did the women's work and the women did the men's work. When the father reexerted his control and restored order, she burned down the estate. He was then forced to borrow her money to rebuild, thus reversing the power structure again. The same ambiguous relationship between commoner and aristocrat is played out between Jean and Julie. Julie, the woman, makes her fiancé's jump over whips like trained animals and delights in having Jean kiss her shoe. She becomes the seducer while he becomes nervous about his reputation. In his bedroom, she is the one who becomes sexually aggressive while he is the one who is shocked.

Banned by the censors, *Miss Julie* was produced at a private performance in Copenhagen in 1899, was later proclaimed a revolutionary naturalistic drama, and is now one of Strindberg's most anthologized plays.





## A DREAM PLAY

**First produced:** *Ett drömspel*, 1907 (first published, 1902; English translation, 1912)

**Type of work:** Play

*The daughter of the Hindu god Indra comes down to earth to discover that humanity is miserable and pitiable.*

*A Dream Play* is an expressionistic drama built on a montage of scenes following the journey of a central character. The Daughter of Indra is a goddess who comes down to earth in the form of a beautiful woman to find out why humanity is so discontent. Like Christ, she experiences the pain of being human. At first, she is hopeful that love will conquer all, but after she listens to the anguished cries of humanity, experiences the pain of family life, and discovers that reform will always be stifled by the self-righteous, she can only look upon humanity with compassion. She finally realizes that human beings are creatures who hopelessly harbor spiritual aspirations but are held down by the weight of their fleshly existence. When she ascends back into the heavens, she throws her shoes into the fire of purification as she leaves a world of never-ending conflicts and contradictions.

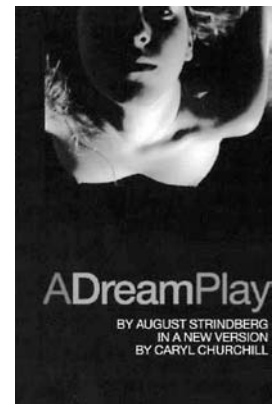
The play is built around the disappointments and dreams of three men: an officer, an attorney, and a poet. The officer is a high-ranking military officer and teacher. As the action of the play progresses, he changes from a youthful, effervescent, well-groomed soldier to an aging, weary, unkempt derelict as he hopelessly spends a lifetime waiting for his dream lover, the opera singer Victoria. Restless and self-pitying, he is constantly irritated by the injustice and repetitiveness of life but continues to hold on to the romantic notion that love will cure all ills. When he rescues the Daughter of Indra from the drudgery of domestic life and takes her to Fairhaven, a romantic paradise, he lands in Foulstrand, a modern-day inferno, where he witnesses

the everlasting misery of the human condition. In his constant failure to find true love, he represents disillusioned romanticism.

The attorney is disgruntled. Through his dealings with the crimes and viciousness of humanity, he has acquired a pale, haggard, and discolored face, along with blackened and bleeding hands. Denied his doctorate by the self-righteous academicians, he becomes a Christ figure who suffers rejection because he defends the poor and the helpless. More of a realist than the officer, he sees human beings as flawed creatures trapped between their commitments to odious duties and their desire for life's elusive pleasures—pleasures that always result in recriminations. He marries the Daughter of Indra and enlightens her on the inhuman torments of living in poverty and the constant antagonisms of family life. Later, he continually reminds her of her sacred duty to her child.

The poet is an erratic visionary who bathes in mud in order to come down from the ethereal regions of lofty thought and to immerse himself in the dirt of life. Caked with mud, he is protected from the flies. Being both idealistic and cynical, he sees through life's injustices and hypocrisies and rails against the gods. Though an earthbound creature hampered by his bodily existence, he still reaches for spiritual rejuvenation. When those around him are abandoning hope, he realizes that human redemption will only come through suffering and death.

In *A Dream Play*, Strindberg felt that he had created a new form. That form, later termed expressionism, was adopted by the German dramatists and became a trend in modern drama.



## THE GHOST SONATA

**First produced:** *Spöksonaten*, 1908 (first published, 1907; English translation, 1916)

**Type of work:** Play

*A young student in search of a beautiful girl enters a house full of ghoulish characters and is surrounded by deception, guilt, and death.*

In *The Ghost Sonata*, Strindberg paints a picture of a fallen world based on illusions and deceptions, where human beings, bound together by common guilt, are condemned to suffer for their sins. Only by escaping this world can one find peace and happiness. In this world, filled with death and decay, people are not what they seem to be. Under the veneer of respectability lies corruption.

*The Ghost Sonata* makes use of both spatial and temporal metaphors. Strindberg sees all humanity as linked by a common network of guilt and sin; the house that the student, an idealistic young man, seeks to enter becomes a symbol for humanity and the social system. The consul, the upper class, lives on the top level; the colonel, the middle class, lives on the ground level; and the superintendent, the lower class, lives below. The poor are found outside the house clamoring at the doors.

Hummel, an old man in a wheelchair, is old enough to know all the inhabitants of the house and understands how they are linked by a chain of guilt and betrayals. The consul (upper class) has slept with the superintendent's wife (lower class); their daughter, the second generation, perpetuates the chain, for she is having an affair with the aristocrat (upper class), who is married to the consul's daughter (upper class). The aristocrat links all the classes in their sins. He has married the consul's daughter (upper class), slept with the colonel's wife (middle class), and is having an affair with the Lady in Black, the daughter of the superintendent's wife (lower class). Thus, all the generations and social classes are interconnected in a house of sin.

The play is also a journey. It begins on a sunny Sunday morning, with steamship bells announcing a voyage. The bright sunlight shines on the student's dream house. As hidden sins are revealed

and ominous pacts are planned, however, clouds appear; eventually it rains. As the student enters the house, the atmosphere becomes gloomy and claustrophobic. The mummy lives in the closet, and the ghost supper provides an eerie scene. As Hummel, who is trying to expose the inhabitants of the house, dies in a closet behind a death screen, the student symbolically invokes the light with his "Song of the Sun." The hope soon proves futile, however, as the ogre cook is persecuting the young lady and draining the nourishment from her food. Finally, the young lady, bathed in radiant light, dies as the vision of the Isle of the Dead appears. Having begun on a Sunday with a Sunday's child seeking resurrection from a night of death, the play ends in a transcendental vision of the dead. The subtle interplay of light and dark intertwines with the play's themes.

In *The Ghost Sonata*, one can see how Strindberg's work foreshadowed modern avant-garde theater. His drama is based on a series of images, not on a linear plot. Motivation is often ambiguous, and the nature of individual identity is questioned. Characters haunted by vague anxieties and grotesque visions are trapped in confined worlds where it is impossible to decipher the difference between truth and illusion. Language becomes an ineffectual means of communication, and often silence is all that is left. A relentless experimenter, Strindberg left a legacy that would influence dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Sean O'Casey, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who said, "Modern drama has come out of Strindberg: We have never gone beyond the second scene of *The Ghost Sonata*."

### SUMMARY

August Strindberg is an influential figure in the history of modern drama. His dramas probe the psyches of alienated, confused, and disturbed characters who are crushed by social, personal, and existential pressures. He brought to the forefront of modern drama the intense struggles and inner workings of troubled sexual relationships. His dramas explore the central themes of modernism: the alienation of the individual, the subjective nature of the truth, the illusory nature of experience, and the existential struggle to create meaning in a meaningless universe. Strindberg also experimented with various dramatic forms: the tightly

constructed and carefully motivated structure of naturalism, the broad, expansive form of subjective expressionism, and the mystical and evocative composition of symbolism.

Paul Rosefeldt

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What do feminist critics have to say about the women in August Strindberg's plays?
- What later dramatists have been most interested in Strindberg's favorite themes?
- To what extent can the traits of Strindberg's expressionistic plays be related to expressionism as seen in other arts, such as painting?
- Were Strindberg's own experiences with women the basis of his preoccupation with troubled sexual relationships?
- Was Strindberg primarily a subjective dramatist?

August Strindberg

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**Born:** Dublin, Ireland  
November 30, 1667

**Died:** Dublin, Ireland  
October 19, 1745

*Straddling the gap between ancient and modern ways of thinking, Swift gave to young and old alike new ways of viewing human life from satirical perspectives.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Swift lived a long, active public life, though its beginning and end were cloaked in darkness. He was born on November 30, 1667, in Dublin, Ireland, to Jonathan and Abigail Erick Swift. His parents had recently moved from England to Dublin, where Swift was born a few months after his father had died. Mysteriously, he was soon separated from his mother, perhaps kidnapped and taken to England, as he later believed. Supported by an uncle, he studied at Kilkenny Grammar School and Trinity College, Dublin.

Late in 1689, he established residence at Moor Park as secretary to Sir William Temple, the man of letters and elderstatesman. Temple had arranged the marriage of Princess Mary to William of Orange; their accession to the throne in 1688 inaugurated the Glorious Revolution, which brought England relative stability after the upheavals of the Puritan Revolution, the Protectorate, and the Restoration. At Moor Park, a strong friendship blossomed between Swift and Esther Johnson, the “Stella” of his famous *Journal to Stella* (1766, 1768). He took the girl of eight under his tutelage, taught her how to write, and, many believe, secretly married her. They remained close friends until she died in 1728.

Swift returned briefly to Ireland in 1690, having

contracted a disease of the inner ear that plagued him until death with fits of giddiness, nausea, and deafness. He soon returned to Temple’s service, ever anxious to obtain preferment from his patron. In 1694, he returned to Ireland; he was ordained an Anglican priest in 1695 and took a parish near Belfast, where he was ill received. On April 29, 1696, his proposal of marriage was declined by Jane Waring, whose counterproposal he would reject four years later.

Returning to Moor Park, Swift became embroiled in the Phalaris controversy. Scoffing at the new science and philosophy then sweeping through Europe, Temple wrote an essay to champion the superiority of ancient learning over modern, foolishly citing as proof the spurious *Epistles of Phalaris* (1695). When the scholar William Wotton criticized Temple, Swift wrote *The Battle of the Books* (1704) to defend Temple and the ancients. Later, the keeper of the king’s library, Richard Bentley, proved that the epistles were a fourteenth century hoax. Swift, however, had discovered his satirical powers. *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) established him as a man of letters, though it probably hindered his career in the church.

In the decade after Temple’s death in 1699, Swift held several posts in the Church of Ireland, but he visited England often on church business or to pursue literary aims. He formed a literary circle in London with the writers Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Alexander Pope. During this period, Swift supported the Whig Party. His first major publication, *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions Between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens*

and Rome (1701), defended the Whig lords against Tory attacks led by Robert Harley, who later became Swift's close personal friend and patron. His comic wit found a fit target in the Dissenting astrologer John Partridge, whom he pilloried in the popular *Predictions for the Year 1708* (1708). Swift left the Whigs in 1710 and became a Tory pamphleteer under Harley, who steadily gained ascendancy in the court of Queen Anne. Whig toleration of religious dissent troubled Swift. *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) and "The Sentiments of a Church of England Man" (1711) set forth his firm belief in central religious authority and intolerance of Dissenters, whom he saw as a threat to the peace of the kingdom, as well as the church.

Swift hoped that his political connections would make him a bishop, but instead he was appointed dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in 1713. Ill-received, he returned to London after his installation. He found himself in a new circle, the Scriblerus Club, with the writers William Congreve, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, Pope, and Harley, who were dedicated to ridiculing false taste in learning. Swift was followed back to Ireland by a young lady, Esther Vanhomrigh (called "Vanessa" in his writings), whom he had met in London in 1707, and who had fallen desperately in love with him. Their relationship was typically perplexed, Swift playing the friendly mentor and guide, she desiring much more. Swift commemorated it in *Cadenus and Vanessa* (1726). There is no conclusive evidence to prove that Vanessa was his mistress and Stella his secret wife.

Though not an Irish patriot, strictly speaking, Swift came to abhor English domination of Ireland and to deplore the disorganization within Ireland that was both the cause and the effect of the English dominance. His *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (1720) urged Irish citizens to keep profits at home by not buying imports from England. The *Drapier's Letters to the People of Ireland* (1735) stopped a scheme to debase Ireland's coinage and made Swift a national hero. Then came *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), an immediate, smashing success, and the only writing for which Swift was ever paid. He continued issuing pamphlets, among them *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People of Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public* (1729; commonly known as *A Modest Pro-*

*posal*). In the 1730's, he wrote some of his best poems, most notably *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D.S.P.D.* (1739), which predicts what people will say of him after he dies, and *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* (1733).

Swift's last years were darkened by senility. In March, 1742, he was ruled mentally incompetent. In September, he was paralyzed and sank into dementia until death came on October 19, 1745, in Dublin. He was buried in St. Patrick's beside Stella, "where savage indignation can no longer tear the heart," according to his epitaph.

### ANALYSIS

Swift lived through times of great change in politics, religion, and learning. Divine authority, medieval scholasticism, and Renaissance humanism were being supplanted by materialistic, mechanistic, empirical skepticism, thanks largely to the work of philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and the incalculable influence of French mathematician René Descartes. Men such as Temple and Swift preferred the serene assurances of the old order based upon rational Christian humanism. They saw the acids of modernism dissolving spiritual authority and the moral values of the landed aristocracy.

From the moment of his precarious birth, Swift was in search of a place in life. Without noble ancestry, he used his talents with words to secure a high standing in society, first under Temple and later Harley, men whose snobbish and repressive instincts he affected. He maintained a stalwart faith in the Anglican establishment and despised free-thinking dissent. He scorned the new money-grubbing middle class and the follies of projectors who meant to perfect society. Yet Swift was also possessed of a diabolical imagination, and from it grew the wildly inventive satires against the very reason and order that he so devoutly defended in other writings. His mind embodied the contradictions of his age. Swift was an orthodox cleric who hated bishops, a rationalist with slight faith in reason, a believer afraid to plumb the mysteries of his faith.

Swift often hides behind a narrational mask, a persona who poses as author, be it Isaac Bickerstaff, M. P. Drapier, or Lemuel Gulliver. The diabolical wisdom or folly is theirs, though a reader surely feels that he or she is face to face with Swift. Yet these masks must not be mistaken for Swift. Very of-

ten he is holding up a persona to ridicule, such as the dispassionate social scientist whose “Modest Proposal” would cure hunger by killing babies. Swift was emotionally incapable of the comprehensive vision of a William Blake, but Swift, too, had intellectually penetrated the contrary nature of humanity and seen through to the heart of darkness. His unblinking insight into human nature, as sane as it is said to be insane, forms the basis for his incomparable ironic satires.

The enormous body of Swift’s writings displays four distinct yet overlapping personalities. First is the straightforward, plain-talking voice of common sense. Most of the pamphlets take this tack. The ideas are quite orderly, the doctrine utterly orthodox, the prose style plain and simple. He adopts this mood to attack political or religious confusion, as in his *The Drapier’s Letters to the People of Ireland, A Project for the Advancement of Religion, and the Reformation of Manners by a Person of Quality* (1709), and *The Conduct of the Allies and of the Late Ministry, in Beginning and Carrying on the Present War* (1711).

Second is the comic wit of roaring laughter to be found in *The Battle of the Books* and the Bickerstaff materials. Swift’s *Predictions for the Year 1708*, which he wrote under the Bickerstaff pseudonym, poked fun at a quack astrologer and predicted that he would die on March 29. When he did not die, Swift nevertheless issued the seemingly factual *An Elegy on Mr. Partridge* (1708). Partridge’s rebuttals were met with *A Vindication of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.* (1709). Swift had scored a hit on the pretensions of a “heavenly” pseudoscientist who was attacking the Anglican Church. London laughed long and hard at Bickerstaff’s urbane barbs. Swift’s comedy masks serious intent. The zany goings-on in *A Tale of a Tub*, for example, ridicule religious enthusiasm.

Third is the diabolical mode of the ironical satirist who pens *Gulliver’s Travels*, *A Modest Proposal*, and *A Tale of a Tub*. Savage indignation lashes out at every corruption of morals or reasoning that humankind is capable of undertaking. Fancy is cut loose from all moorings to lacerate vanities and illusions. Playfully, even inconsistently, by turns this spirit may be witty and light, or coarse and vulgar, even dismally misanthropic. Swift in this humor is unmatched in English literature.

Fourth is the least familiar of Swift’s personalities, the childlike personal friend. The passionless Swift shows himself in poems such as *Cadenus and*

*Vanessa* and in his private letters to Stella to be capable of genuine tenderness and warmth. Long passages from his famous *Journal to Stella* are in baby talk, the most intimate kind of communication by which one friend engages another.

Swift was the first English writer to gauge the full force of the displacement that modernism would work upon traditional values and ways of thinking. His official self longed for institutional order, but his demonic imagination let him know that human nature could not be tamed or improved by so weak a rider as reason. As such, his disgust was enormous, and he dared to show human nature as it is. Little wonder that Swift is understood by children and often misunderstood by scholars and clerics.

## GULLIVER’S TRAVELS

**First published:** 1726

**Type of work:** Novel

*A surgeon sets out on four sea voyages that take him beyond the wildest stretch of his imagination.*

Lemuel Gulliver, the title character of *Gulliver’s Travels*, is a capable, brave, and educated Englishman whose unlucky adventures drive him to sickness and madness. His simple, straightforward way of telling his story suggests that he lacks the imagination to understand what he has experienced.

Gulliver is shipwrecked off the shore of Lilliput and captured by humans only six inches tall. Practical man that he is, he promises to obey their laws controlling him. He finds Lilliput, not unlike Europe, in a state of perpetual and petty disorder. Low-heelers and High-heelers squabble over politics much as do the Whigs and Tories of Swift’s day. Courtiers compete for distinctions by leaping over sticks and other such ridiculous games. Protestants and Catholics are mirrored as Big-enders and Little-enders, who cannot agree on which end of the egg should be cracked first. The war between England and France is parodied in the conflict between Lilliput and its neighbor Blefuscu. Gulliver becomes a hero by wading into the surf and carrying off the tiny Blefuscan navy. When he puts out a fire in the palace by urinating on it, he falls from favor at court and joins the Blefuscans, who help him

salvage the wrecked ship in which he makes his escape.

Gulliver's next voyage takes him to Brobdingnag, the opposite of Lilliput. Proportions are reversed. People stand as tall as steeples. Gulliver is a caged pet exhibited as a freak. The queen buys him and brings him to court, where he is imperiled by the lewd curiosity of the ladies, by a dwarf who nearly drowns him in a bowl of cream, and by a monkey who almost dashes his brains out.

Yet Brobdingnagian society is a utopia, based on useful studies of poetry and history, not on metaphysics, theology, and speculative science, as in Europe. The king rules a prosperous state not torn by strife. In Brobdingnag, a law cannot be written using more than twenty-two words, and to comment on laws is a capital crime. Horrified by Gulliver's description of England's government, the king concludes that Englishmen must be "the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth."

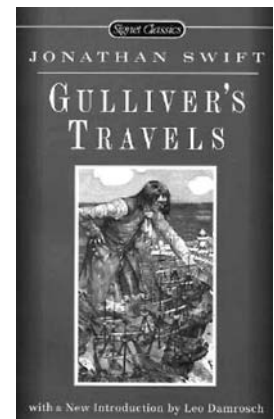
His third voyage, to Laputa and other islands, is the most fantastic of them all. Gulliver finds himself on the airborne island of Laputa. Its people are devoid of practicality, so lost in abstraction that servants must flap their mouths and ears with inflated bladders to keep their minds on conversations. Though bent upon music, mathematics, and astronomy, they lack reason and cannot construct walls perpendicular to the floor. The monarch is proud of his dominion over the island of Balnibari below. Any mutiny can be literally crushed by dropping Laputa upon it, smashing whole towns. Yet the monarch is reluctant to use this power for fear of cracking Laputa, and, besides, Laputians own country estates on the nether island. Swift here satirizes England's dominion over Ireland.

At the Academy of Lagado, Gulliver witnesses the absurdities of misapplied scholarship. There, the projectors experiment with building houses from the top down, making pillows out of marble, extracting sunshine from cucumbers, and the like. He visits nearby Glubbdubdrib, where the governor by sorcery summons dead persons back to life

for a day. Gulliver thus meets with Alexander the Great, Homer, Aristotle, and René Descartes, who admits his philosophy is confounded conjecture. In Luggnagg, Gulliver views the ghastly spectacle of human immortality. The wretched Struldbrugs live forever, not in perpetual youth but in unending decay. From there, Gulliver makes a short trip to Japan, and thence back to England.

Gulliver leaves behind a pregnant wife to make his final journey to a land ruled by intelligent horses, called Houyhnhnms. These purely rational creatures know neither pride nor passion. Without love or lust, they procreate merely to meet a social obligation. They live in stoical calm, without government and without crime. They are served by a despised underclass of Yahoos, depraved, libidinous creatures quite unlike themselves but strongly resembling humans. Gulliver shares the Houyhnhnms' disgust and disdain for them. When a lusty Yahoo woman tries to embrace him, he is repulsed. The Houyhnhnms, however, decide that Gulliver must live as a Yahoo or else leave, so he departs on a Portuguese ship with Captain Pedro de Mendez. Still, Gulliver cannot bear the smell of the captain and crew. He shuns their civilities and tries to jump overboard. He arrives in England only under shackles. Now too proud to associate with humans, whom he sees as Yahoos, Gulliver faints when his wife kisses him, and he abandons his family to consort with horses at pasture.

Gulliver himself has become the object of the satire, for he has lost all reason and proportion. The very Houyhnhnms he so admires do him the greatest wrong, but he scorns humanity with irrational pride. Having seen him from so many different perspectives, a reader recognizes that Gulliver's weaknesses are those of humankind.





## THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

**First published:** 1704

**Type of work:** Essay

*In the library of Saint James, the modern books battle for supremacy over the ancient books.*

Swift wrote *The Battle of the Books* in 1697 to buttress his beleaguered patron Sir William Temple in a controversy over the relative merits of ancient learning and modern learning. Gentlemen with old Tory money or new Whig pretensions affected a haughty disdain for the new philosophy of Descartes and the new social science of Hobbes, and their disdain affected Swift. They saw in modernism a childish self-absorption, disregard for the classics, disrespect for traditional authorities, and bad manners. Swift ridiculed the new trends by contrasting them with the sound wisdom and graceful art of the old masters.

In the library of Saint James, the modern books square off against the ancients in a mock-epic battle. Before they clash, a bee breaks through a spider's web, to the discomfiture of both. The spider chides the bee for destroying its intricate trap. Wiping off the obnoxious threads of the web, the bee spurns the spider for erecting such a petty and disgusting contrivance. Their witty sparring goes to the heart of their differing natures. The spider represents modernism; the bee, classicism. They hurl vituperative charges at each other. The bee accuses the spider of spinning everything out of his own guts, such as the regurgitated threads of its web and the venom that it injects into entangled flies. The spider accuses the bee of being no better than a thief, visiting one beautiful flower after another only to steal nectar and flee. The bee replies that the flowers are multiplied, not destroyed, by his beneficial rapine; he returns to the hive with honey and wax, thus furnishing sweetness and light.

Armed with their ink made of bitter venom, the moderns issue an ultimatum to the ancients: either abandon their glory-smitten summits of prestige or let the moderns come with their spades to level the peaks that overshadow the lower tops of modern mountains. When the ancients refuse, the moderns close ranks. The bumbblings of a modern librarian have caused confusion on the shelves.

René Descartes has been set beside Aristotle, Plato shoulder-to-shoulder with Thomas Hobbes, and Vergil hemmed in between the modern poets John Dryden and George Wither. The ancients are captained by Temple and Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom. The moderns are led by Momus, god of faultfinding, who calls on the malignant deity Criticism in her cave, where she dwells with Ignorance, her father and husband; Pride, her mother; and her children, Noise, Impudence, Dullness, Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill-Manners. Criticism comes to the library to rally her troops, but the moderns fall into disarray. Descartes is felled by Aristotle's arrow. The poet Abraham Cowley hurls his spear at the poet Pindar, but misses. Pindar disables a dozen or so of the Cavalier poets. The modern poet Dryden swaps armor with Vergil (Dryden had translated his epic poem *Aeneid* into English), but he finds Vergil's helmet nine times too big for him. Homer slays the modern poet John Denham. Another modern poet, John Oldham, falls to Pindar. Clearly, the ancients have carried the day, but peace talks are convened, and the matter ends inconclusively.

Swift's mockery is devastatingly effective, witty, and fun. His sarcastic jest is proven true: Some of these modern authors would have been all but forgotten were it not for Swift's record of their clash with the ancients.

## A TALE OF A TUB

**First published:** 1704

**Type of work:** Novel

*A diabolical wit ridicules the attempts of Christian sects to divert the attacks of materialistic science on religious faith.*

*A Tale of a Tub* is Swift's wildest adventure in satirical humor. Speaking through a diabolical persona of his own making, he pillories the corruptions of churches and schools. The title refers to the large tub that sailors would throw overboard to divert a whale from ramming their boat. In Swift's satire, the whale is Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), a political monster born of Descartes's mathematical philosophy. Institutional Christianity is the ship



that might be sunk in such an onslaught, and its timbers have already been loosened by schismatic factions.

The book is an allegory of church history. A father wills suits of clothes to his three sons, with directions that the suits never be altered. Brothers Peter, Martin, and Jack represent Catholic, Anglican, and Puritan sects, respectively. Peter upgrades his garments with gold lace, shoulder knots, and such trappings. Martin removes the false ornamentation from his without tearing the cloth. Jack zealously rips his garment to shreds to get rid of all ornament.

This basic allegory is richly embellished with outlandish digressions, parodies, puns, quibbles, unstructured foolery, and displays of odd erudition. The diabolical narrative takes every opportunity to prick the pretensions of pedants, religious dissenters, and perfectionists whose projects try to remake human society along rational lines. Swift thought that human reason is rather weak, blown flat in fact by the merest gust of desire, and so people should behave themselves and be governed by institutions such as the Church of England. Yet his diabolical narrator weakens this myth of order and reason by showing how vulnerable the mysteries of religion are to skeptical scrutiny.

Dressed in his sanctimonious vestments, Peter looks ridiculous issuing papal bulls on the superstitious doctrine that bread can be turned into mutton. The excesses of religious enthusiasts are reduced to absurdity in Jack's rantings and in a scatological satire on a sect of Æolists, who believe that wind is the essence of all things, the original cause and first principle of the universe. In their most ridiculous rite, Æolists seat themselves atop barrels that catch the wind and blow inspiration into their posteriors by means of a secret funnel. Sacred sermons are delivered by their priests in oracular belches, or bursts of internal wind.

This maniacal conception reemerges in the famous Digression on Madness. There, the modern upsurges in religion, politics, and science are diagnosed as a form of madness, caused when the brain is intoxicated by vapors arising from the lower faculties. This vapor is to the brain what tickling is to the touch. Real perceptions are disordered in a happy confusion. Thus, happiness for moderns amounts to "a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived." In the madhouse world of *A Tale of a*

*Tub*, the modern man cut off from classical culture is lucky to be a fool among knaves, like the book's demoniac narrator.

## A MODEST PROPOSAL

**First published:** 1729

**Type of work:** Essay

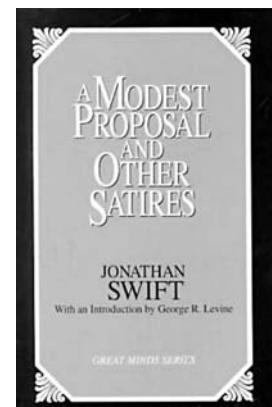
*A social scientist proposes that poor people sell their babies as food to be eaten by the rich.*

Swift's *A Modest Proposal* has been called the greatest work of irony ever written. A dispassionate social scientist surveys the poverty in Ireland and structures his proposal in five parts after the classical rhetorical pattern: *exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (narrative), *confirmatio* (confirmation), *confutatio* (refutation), and *peroratio* (peroration).

The *exordium* evokes the familiar sight of female beggars followed by many children dressed in rags. The image suggests the problem of poverty, overpopulation, and hunger that the narrator proposes to solve with his "fair, cheap, and easy method" of fattening the poor babies for a year and then selling them as delicious delicacies for the tables of the rich.

In the *narratio*, the narrator coldly calculates the number of babies needed. Out of one and a half million people in Ireland, he reckons only two hundred thousand couples are breeders. Subtracting thirty thousand whose parents can afford them, and fifty thousand who die in the first year of life, and sparing twenty thousand for breeding purposes, he figures only one hundred thousand babies will be sold for slaughter each year. Instead of being a burden on families or welfare agencies, these children will contribute to the feeding and clothing of thousands of others, since their skins can also be tanned for leather.

The *confirmatio* explains the public benefits of the scheme. This meat is not seasonal and thus sup-



plies the cyclical scarcity of fresh meat. A poor mother can clear a profit of eight shillings per child. In a land torn by religious strife, the number of Catholics would be greatly lessened. The new industry would push the gross national product higher. Parents would save not merely eight shillings but the far greater cost of rearing the child for years. If poor people saw a profit from pregnancy, they would be more inclined to marry and then to be more tender and caring with the family.

The narrator admits that the population would be lowered, but he thinks it should be. He scorns politicians for overlooking other solutions, such as taxing émigrés and banning imports from England. By including these proposals in the *confutatio*, Swift ironically endorses them. The narrator reminds readers that these are unwanted children who would likely rather be dead. He closes his *peroratio* by professing that he lacks self-interest: "I have no children by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past childbearing."

Of course, Swift was saying one thing and meaning another. He means to condemn the wickedness

of equating human life with monetary value. References to slavery and abortion widen the scope of this satire on the many ways in which people put a price on life. This outrageous proposal is called "modest" because it rejects the extremes of voluntary abortion before birth and euthanasia for the aged and diseased.

## SUMMARY

Readers insensitive to Jonathan Swift's ironies have dismissed him as a crazy man who hated humanity. Others have concluded that he was a humane Christian who valued human life. Upheavals in politics, religion, and learning made Swift think that the modern world was going crazy. He longed for a stable, reasonable order in society based on institutions, such as the church, that seek to correct humanity's vanity and pride. Yet his diabolical imagination told him authority was drowning in change. Swift embodied and recorded the profound contradictions of his era better, perhaps, than any other English writer.

John L. McLean

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Jonathan Swift claims that “his satire points at no defect/ But what all mortals may correct,” but do any of his characters ever correct their defects?
- In a letter to Alexander Pope, Swift proclaimed himself a misanthropist. Was he?
- Is *Gulliver's Travels* in part a satire on travel literature?
- Is a conservative viewpoint essential to a satirist as successful as Swift?
- Is Swift too conservative to be convincing in *The Battle of the Books*?
- Aside from heartless English landlords, whom is Swift satirizing in *A Modest Proposal*?
- Is logic itself one of the targets of Swift's satire in *A Modest Proposal*?



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## ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

**Born:** London, England  
April 5, 1837

**Died:** Putney, London, England  
April 10, 1909

*The author of varied works of verse and prose and an influential member of the intellectual circles of his time, Swinburne is best remembered for his highly personal, and intensely musical, poetic style.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Algernon Charles Swinburne was born on April 5, 1837, in London, England, to Captain (later Admiral) Charles Henry Swinburne and Lady Jane Swinburne. Much of Algernon Swinburne's early life was spent in the wild, idyllic setting of his family's estate on the Isle of Wight, where, with his brother and four sisters, he could enjoy the freedom of nature. This freedom contrasted sharply with the discipline of tutors who were to prepare the young Algernon to enter Eton at the age of twelve.

All of his life, Swinburne was to suffer the effects of his unusual physique. His slight and delicate body, punctuated by a great mass of red hair, might have earned him harsh hazings in the atmosphere of the English public school had his considerable courage not allowed him to stand up to all possible tormenters. He could not escape the physical discipline of Eton, however, and, like many other schoolboys of his time, he retained a perverse desire for the floggings that were then regularly administered. Swinburne's slight physique was joined to a nervous disposition that caused him to alternate between frenzied bursts of energy and corresponding periods of depressed reverie. The same energy that allowed him to read and recite poetry for hours on end turned to violence under the in-

fluence of drink and caused Swinburne to be barred from certain households. Throughout his life, however, he retained loyal friends, whom he frequently entertained with readings in the distinctively high, singsong voice that he was said to have inherited from his mother.

Several of Swinburne's most important friendships, especially those with the poets William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, were formed during his years at Oxford. Swinburne entered Oxford in 1856, and though he never completed the examinations for his degree, he wrote widely for undergraduate publications and began the work on the Tristan legend that would lead to his *Tristram of Lyonesse, and Other Poems* (1882). Although Swinburne's study of Greek may have gotten a comparatively slow start, he had an enduring love for both French and Greek literature, on which he would draw for many of his own works.

After leaving Oxford, Swinburne settled in London near the British Museum and began work on a number of literary projects, poems, plays, and criticism. One of his contributions to *The Spectator* in 1862 introduced the poetry of Charles Baudelaire to the English reading public. Between 1862 and 1863, Swinburne shared a house in Chelsea with Rossetti, whose wife had recently died. This bachelor household received visits from many prominent men of letters but was the scene of so much riotous conduct on Swinburne's part that Rossetti finally asked him to leave.

Thus began a pattern of Swinburne's life for the next fifteen years. Unable to resist a frenzied participation in London social life, he would drive and drink himself to exhaustion, after which he would regain his health through a period of recuperation with his family. These returns home were not always voluntary. Swinburne's father, alerted by his friends as to the poet's condition, came to remove him forcibly from his lodgings, until Swinburne threatened to hide from his family if he were similarly carried off again. After a trip to France and Italy in 1863 and 1864, Swinburne faced one of the great disappointments of his life when, in 1865, his cousin Mary Gordon married a military officer twenty-one years her senior, with whom she went to live in Scotland. Swinburne had been extremely close to Mary and may have entertained the hope of marrying her, although there is no indication of explicit romantic involvement between them.

After the publication of *Atalanta in Calydon* (pb. 1865), a tragedy written in verse, Swinburne was to become famous for his writings. He had for some time been composing the poems that would be included in his *Poems and Ballads* (1866), but his friends advised him not to publish because of the scandalous subjects of some of the pieces. Swinburne, however, was not to be dissuaded, and, upon publication, his work was so violently attacked that the publisher promptly withdrew the balance of the edition from sale. The work was immediately reissued by another publisher. With *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871), Swinburne turned to political questions, supporting freedom in Italy. During composition of this work, he suffered a period of accidents and ill health. In July, 1868, he fainted in the reading room of the British Museum, a room from which he was subsequently to be banned.

In the fall of 1868, Swinburne traveled to France, where he shared a house in Normandy with his friend George Powell and met Guy de Maupassant, who was part of a rescue of Swinburne from drowning when the tide had swept him out to sea. Back in England, Swinburne rejoiced at the fall of Napoleon III in 1870 and was saddened by the definitive rupture of his friendship with Rossetti in 1872. During this time, he was drinking heavily and causing friends and family concern for his health.

After the death of his father in 1877, Swinburne used his inheritance to set himself up in London,

where he would publish *Poems and Ballads: Second Series* (1878). Reduced to sickness by continued heavy drinking, he was finally rescued from himself by his friend Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton. With the cooperation of Swinburne's mother, Watts-Dunton took over the handling of Swinburne's financial affairs. He moved the poet into his own home, "The Pines," near Wimbledon and gradually weaned him from drinking brandy to drinking beer. By intervening as he did in the poet's life in 1879, Watts-Dunton was to give him nearly thirty tranquil years before his death.

In 1882, Rossetti died without ever resuming contact with Swinburne. Late that year, Swinburne traveled to Paris as the guest of Victor Hugo, but his enjoyment of the visit was greatly hampered by his increasing deafness. Despite his affliction, Swinburne would continue until the end of his life to declaim his poetry to avid listeners. He died on April 10, 1909, in Putney, London, England.

## ANALYSIS

Swinburne's lyrical virtuosity knew very few limits. Writing largely in English but occasionally in French, he could mimic the styles of a wide range of other poets. His own very personal style developed early, however, and would mark his major poems as distinctively his own. From the first publication, *Atalanta in Calydon*, that launched his literary reputation, his readers were struck by his heavy alliteration and use of rhythms quite different from traditional iambic pentameter. One of the best-known lyrics from *Atalanta in Calydon* is typical:

When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,  
The mother of months in meadow or plain  
Fills the shadows and windy places  
With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain.

The alternation of anapestic and iambic feet gives these lines an uneven, discordant feel, while the alliteration ("mother of months," "lisp of leaves," "ripple of rain") adds musical echoes that suggest a contrasting harmony. The verse is united as much by the choice of sounds as by the rhythms.

Apart from his unusual meter, Swinburne deliberately set out to shock his readers through his choices of subject matter. His background had exposed him to the traditions of both Catholicism and the Church of England, but Swinburne early



evolved a distinctly antireligious view. His was not a calm opposition. Just as the Black Mass finds its structure in the inversion of normal ritual, Swinburne draws on religious sources to deliver a contrary message. "Dolores," one of the poems that Swinburne's friends had warned him not to publish in the first series of *Poems and Ballads*, posits a heroine clearly the opposite of the Virgin Mary. Swinburne's subtitle to the poem, *Notre dame des sept Douleurs*, reinforces the analogy. Yet while Mary represented virtue, Dolores becomes the emblem of vice: "Seven sorrows the priests give their Virgin;/ But thy sins, which are seventy times seven,/ Seven ages would fail thee to purge in." As Mary represented chastity, Dolores is the power of female seductiveness. Of her lips, Swinburne writes, "Men touch them, and change in a trice/ The lilies and languors of virtue/ For the raptures and roses of vice." She not only sins but also tempts others to sin.

Swinburne's pervasive musicality underlines the seductiveness of "lilies and languors" and "raptures and roses" amid a continuing use of largely anapestic rhythm. Meanwhile, the flower imagery traditionally linked to Mary becomes inverted to described Dolores: "O mystical rose of the mire." For Swinburne, sin becomes an analogy to prayer: "I have passed from the outermost portal/ To the shrine where a sin is a prayer."

Despite his extensive use of Christian allusion in "Dolores," Swinburne also links his heroine to pre-Christian goddesses: "Thou wert fair in the fearless old fashion." That was the worship that Christianity destroyed: "What ailed us, O gods, to desert you/ For creeds that refuse and restrain?" Yet Swinburne predicts that Christianity will in turn "pass and their places be taken" because "the worm shall revive thee with kisses." The fusion of sexuality and death implicit as the worms give Dolores not a kiss of death but one of life reflects Swinburne's overt preference for language that would shock. Not only is Dolores repeatedly invoked as "Our Lady of Pain," a description that might be applied to Mary, but the pain is explicit and graphic: "O lips full of

lust and laughter,/ Curled snakes that are fed from my breast,/ Bite hard."

Such descriptions, together with Swinburne's distinctive rhythms, struck the Victorian public as too outrageous to be taken seriously. Those amused by them, however, attempted parodies of Swinburne's verse. None of these parodies could improve on the poet's own self-parody in "Nephilidia": "From the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through a notable nimbus of nebulous noonshine." The extended line makes room for multiple adjectives and alliterations extended to sets of four words each so that music and description all but submerge meaning.

While Swinburne's self-mockery shows a momentary willingness to allow his music to dominate, his thought should never be submerged. Swinburne was not only widely read in both classical and modern literatures, he also drew on vast sources to create new literary composites. Nowhere is that more evident than in "Laus Veneris," another of his early *Poems and Ballads*, where he transports the classical Venus to a northern setting with the legend of Tannhäuser, the German lyric poet. The poem repeats the confrontation of Christian and pagan elements as the beauty of Venus serves to seduce a Christian knight away from his God.

The knight's story transcends his own case to echo that of humankind's seduction throughout history. Venus has already seduced "the knight Adonis" and "enticed/ All lips that now grow sad with kissing Christ." As he remains enthralled to her, the knight remembers both the pleasures of his fall ("Brief bitter bliss, one hath for a great sin") and his former status: "For I was of Christ's choosing, I God's knight,/ No blinkard heathen stumbling for scant light." While he regrets his loss of heaven, he finds with Venus another immortality because "Soul may divide from body, but not we/ One from another." Swinburne combines anew the elements of many legends to support his personal view of life just as he combined metrical devices in new ways to form his own poetic style.

## “AVE ATQUE VALE”

**First published:** 1868 (collected in *Victorian Prose and Poetry*, vol. 5 in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Swinburne's elegy for Charles Baudelaire calls on the themes of Baudelaire's own work.*

Swinburne wrote a number of elegiac poems of varying quality, but with “Ave Atque Vale,” he produced one of the important elegies of English literature. Not only had Swinburne introduced Baudelaire’s poetry in England with his *The Spectator* review of 1862, he also recognized in the French poet a kindred spirit. The opening lines of his elegy, “Shall I strew on thee rose or rue or laurel,/ Brother, on this that was the veil of thee?” call to Charles Baudelaire as his brother in a deep, spiritual sense.

These lines already convey the basic technique of Swinburne’s poem by drawing upon the words evocative of Baudelaire himself. The allusions to flowers parallel the title of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857, 1861, 1868; *Flowers of Evil*, 1931), and in calling Baudelaire “Brother,” Swinburne echoes “Au Lecteur,” Baudelaire’s opening poem, where the latter addresses his reader as “mon frère.” Swinburne echoes the regular rhythms of Baudelaire’s verse, abandoning in this elegy his frequent anapests for iambic rhythm, though he concludes each stanza with a three-foot line that has the effect of leaving something unfinished, a feeling that one has been deprived, as Swinburne was by Baudelaire’s death.

The fraternity between the two poets lay largely in their exploitation of the unconventional. Rather than fresh flowers, Swinburne suggests “Or wilt thou rather, as on earth before,/ Half-faded fiery blossoms, pale with heat/ And full of bitter summer?,” flowers like the “sickly flowers” Baudelaire had cited to describe his work. This kinship of negative preoccupations reinforces their poetic vocation. Swinburne echoes the Romantic concept of the poet as seer, seeing “Fierce loves, and lovely leafbuds poisonous,/ Bare to thy subtler eye,” just as Baudelaire had characterized the poet as visionary in his work.

Multiple allusions to Baudelaire’s poetry follow

as Swinburne speculates on what sort of existence he has found in the afterlife: “Hast thou found place at the great knees and feet/ Of some pale Titan-woman?” The image from Baudelaire’s “La Géante” posits his form of paradise, while Swinburne adopts Baudelaire’s vision of receding light from “Le Flambeau vivant” as an emblem of his own state: “Our dreams pursue our dead and do not find./ Still, and more swift than they, the thin flame flies.” As communion with Baudelaire has now been made impossible by his death, Swinburne finds consolation in the proximity of his poems: “These I salute, these touch, these clasp and fold/ As though a hand were in my hand to hold.” Yet still he remains on the “chill and solemn earth” that contrasts to the sunny, tropical land that had portrayed Baudelaire’s vision of an earthly paradise.

## “HYMN TO PROSERPINE”

**First published:** 1866 (collected in *Poems and Ballads*, 1866)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Swinburne's invocation of the pagan goddess posits a victory over Christianity.*

With “Hymn to Proserpine,” Swinburne gives positive expression to his rebellion against conventional Christianity. The dual subtitles, *After the proclamation in Rome of the Christian faith* and *Vicisti, Galilae*, define the historical setting. The poem represents

a monologue spoken by a pagan resisting the triumph of Christ. In his despair, he calls on the goddess of the underworld, “Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend.”

The antique gods that Swinburne would resurrect have dual attributes: “Yea, is not even Apollo, with hair and harpstring of gold,/ A bitter god to

follow, a beautiful god to behold?” The combination of beauty with suffering coincides with Swin-



burne's recurring desire for punishment, but his protagonist desires neither pleasure nor pain but the sleep also associated with Proserpine. He is weary of the conflict that he sees around him because "Time and the gods are at strife." This last statement can also summarize Swinburne's feelings about his own century, a time when human progress, particularly in science, was questioning traditional religious views. Swinburne's response, conveyed through his Roman protagonist, combines a rejection of Christianity with an energetic vindication of his personal faith.

Regarding Christianity, his tone is adversarial: "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from thy breath;/ We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death." While Christ may have won humankind's heart for a time, the insistent theme of death undermines this triumph. Christianity depends on a belief in resurrection, but Swinburne insists that "no man under the sky lives twice, outliving his day." If death must come to all, Christ's promise will prove impossible: "Yet thy kingdom shall pass, Galilean, thy dead shall go down to thee dead."

Thus, Swinburne posits a time when people will be freed from Christianity: "I kneel not, neither adore you, but standing, look to the end." Yet in order to describe this future state, he must return to images of the past by resurrecting Proserpine as a

corresponding figure to Mary: "Of the maiden thy mother men sing as a goddess with grace clad around;/ Thou art throned where another was king; where another was queen she is crowned." Proserpine's allure derives from extreme female sensuality, "Clothed round with the world's desire as with raiment." Paradoxically, given that he has just rejected eternal life, Swinburne posits the reward of those faithful to the old gods as an eternity with Proserpine "In the night where thine eyes are as moons are in heaven." The paradox is resolved, however, when it is revealed that this night is death, the oblivion, or sleep, that will obliterate strife.

## SUMMARY

At odds with the dominant culture of his day, Algernon Charles Swinburne turned to the beliefs of pagan antiquity and to kindred poets such as Baudelaire to forge a personal philosophy compatible with his desires. He expressed his views in an equally personal style dominated by alliteration and eccentric rhythms and heavy with description that emphasized female beauty and the desire for pain. While Swinburne may have deliberately exaggerated the unusual elements of his expression, it reflected a sensitive poet ill at ease in his world.

Dorothy M. Betz

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Algernon Charles Swinburne argued that poetry has nothing to do with morality. Is there any moral content in his poetry?
- What qualities that might be called Greek are found in Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*?
- Examine the metrical variety of Swinburne's poems.
- Poems written for occasions often do not outlive the occasions. Why have some of Swinburne's occasional poems outlived their occasions?
- Does a reading of "Hymn to Proserpine" reveal the basis of Swinburne's opposition to conventional Christianity?
- Did Swinburne pursue outlandishness in his life? In his poetry?

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## JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE

**Born:** Rathfarnham, Ireland

April 16, 1871

**Died:** Dublin, Ireland

March 24, 1909

*One of the most prominent Irish dramatists, Synge was a contemporary of William Butler Yeats and one of the most controversial contributors to Dublin's Abbey Theatre.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Edmund John Millington Synge (sihng) was born outside Dublin, Ireland, in Rathfarnham on April 16, 1871, to John Hatch and Kathleen Traill Synge, the youngest of five children. Synge's father died within a year, and he lived most of his life with his mother, who exerted a great influence on him and is believed to have been one of the models for the strong women in his plays. Synge was ill throughout his childhood and was forced to live a reclusive life that resulted in a solitary, independent nature. At age fourteen, he read Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), which transformed him into a confirmed naturalist who broke with his family's devout Protestantism for a private combination of aestheticism and mysticism, a quality that informs his best plays. As a boy, he had little formal schooling but later simultaneously attended Trinity College, Dublin, and the Royal Irish Academy of Music, which encouraged his decision to become a professional musician. In 1893, he left for Germany to continue his musical apprenticeship but returned to Ireland in 1894 to devote himself to a literary career, writing poetry (which he had begun composing in college) and a play in German.

In 1895, he moved to Paris and studied languages and literature at the Sorbonne. For the next seven winters, he would travel to Paris, seeking the

life of a Continental writer and critic. Although he had been studying Celtic civilization and Irish, his meeting William Butler Yeats in 1896 sparked an even deeper immersion in Irish life and culture. In 1898, at Yeats's suggestion, Synge traveled to the bleak landscape of the Aran Islands off Ireland's west coast, the first of five summer visits that would permanently change the course of his artistic development and ultimately establish his place in world literature. His experiences there are rendered in *The Aran Islands* (1907), a unique account that has been described as a collection of essays, a travel narrative, and a writer's notebook. Synge's intention was to record faithfully, yet objectively, the life that he discovered, which, despite its hard particularities, he saw as representative of the human condition. Synge then explored other remote areas of Mayo, Kerry, and the Blasket Islands, which led to a series of articles collected in *In Wicklow* (1910). A less unified volume than *The Aran Islands*, this work also reveals the writer's concern with the timeless patterns of life and nature and with the crippling poverty endured by many of his compatriots.

Between 1900 and 1901, he worked on *When the Moon Has Set* (wr. 1900-1901, pb. 1968), the first play that he submitted to Lady Augusta Gregory and Yeats for presentation at the Irish National Theatre but which they rejected for aesthetic and moral reasons. In 1902, he completed his two one-act plays, *Riders to the Sea* (pb. 1903, pr. 1904) and *In the Shadow of the Glen* (pr. 1903, pb. 1904); the latter set a precedent for the hostile reactions that greeted most of his plays. In 1905, he became a

member of the board of directors of the newly created Abbey Theatre and was deeply involved in the productions of his plays. In the same year, *The Well of the Saints* (pr., pb. 1905) was produced at the Abbey, and the next year he became engaged to the actor Molly Allgood, the inspiration for many of his poems and for the figure of Pegeen Mike in *The Playboy of the Western World* (pr., pb. 1907). He wrote to her nearly every day, and these letters provide revealing glimpses into his love, view of nature, and artistic ambitions.

In 1907, *The Playboy of the Western World* opened to riots in the Dublin streets, and Synge found himself the object of social hysteria, notoriety he neither sought nor enjoyed. In the next year, 1908, *The Tinker's Wedding* (wr. 1903, pb. 1908, pr. 1909) was published; his mother died, and Synge's own health was seriously declining from Hodgkin's disease. Now severely ill, he wrote, but never fully revised, his last play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (pr., pb. 1910), and was at work on the final version of *Poems and Translations* (1909) when he was admitted to a hospital. Synge died in Dublin on March 24, 1909, and was remembered by Yeats as a man "the more hated because he gave his country what it needed, an unmoved mind where there is a perpetual Last Day, a trumpeting and coming up to judgment."

## ANALYSIS

As a result of his own self-promotion, Yeats gave the impression that he molded and shaped Synge into the artist that Synge became, but as numerous scholars have pointed out, such was hardly the case. Synge came to the writing of plays and poetry with his own clearly defined set of interests and aesthetic imperatives, and while Yeats and Lady Gregory encouraged him and provided a forum in which to present his works, Synge was always an independent artist.

Synge's major concern, and the basis for his greatest literary successes, is the distinctive version of Irish-English that he developed. Like other writers in the twentieth century, he sought to demonstrate the possibilities of idiomatic language as a vehicle for expressing complex human interactions and for creating enduring aesthetic experiences. There is no question that his travels in western Ireland brought him in contact with a folk language that inspired that of his plays. His achievement, however, was not the mere incorporation of some-

thing that he found, but an artful manipulation of vocabulary, syntax, and rhythms of Irish-English.

These linguistic features are evident throughout Synge's career, with *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World* representing, in different ways, the most masterful demonstrations of this style. In each of his plays, Synge depicts otherwise unprepossessing figures speaking in a rich, mesmerizing idiom that brings a sense of pageantry and splendor to the commonplace. What the plays assert as much as anything else is that language, the medium that expresses and surrounds all the characters, is perhaps their most valuable resource, without which life would be unendurable.

Closely aligned with his experiments in language is his consistent concern with the peasant class of Ireland. In many ways, such an interest would appear inconceivable for a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, yet Synge was undeniably proud of his Irish lineage, and in the peasants he saw what he regarded as the true Ireland, the last vestiges of a breed of people who had avoided the snares of civilized life and its restricting values. Synge was certainly not the first to depict the Irish peasantry in his plays. In the eighteenth century, in works written by English and Anglo-Irish playwrights, the Irish were depicted in less than flattering fashion. The term "stage Irishman" denoted a cultural stereotype, a figure full of blarney and alcohol given to hopeless malapropisms and clumsiness. Such a character came in two basic forms—a happy, besotted fool or a bumptious, irascible figure. Both versions of the stage Irishman were presented for comic effect and were broad caricatures of an imagined ethnic type.

The push for Irish independence in the nineteenth century under the nationalist leader Daniel O'Connell and the declarations of cultural independence of the Gaelic League and Irish Renaissance had elevated the peasant into a new cultural hero. As could be expected, these versions of the peasant were rife with sentimentality, and they, too, presented stereotypes.

Synge sought an alternative, and having lived among these people, he knew at first hand who they were and how complex their lives actually were. He approaches his peasants as a primitivist would, seeing in them the last remnants of a more authentic human order that the veneer of civilization has obscured. There is no question that he ide-

alizes these figures, depicting them as mystical, wise people, yet he also reveals the hard, brutal dimensions of their existence.

One of his most ambitious experiments came in rewriting Irish myth in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, a tale that both Yeats and Æ (George Russell) had treated in dreamy, otherworldly fashion. When his friend Stephen MacKenna first suggested that Synge devise his own version, the playwright wrote, “No drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid [Cuchulainn, the hero of the Ulster cycle of Irish mythology].” The kings and queens in this play are not depicted as peasants, but neither are they elevated creatures. Synge humanizes them and, in so doing, reveals his interest in the peasant as a symbol of all that is undeniably human.

In the person of the tinker (itinerant Irish Traveller), Synge found another compelling symbol. As he and other writers of his generation saw them, tinkers could be equated with artists because of their solitariness and marginal position in society. Both figures were outsiders to middle-class life and therefore enjoyed a freedom from the tyrannies of social conformity. As Synge described this symbolic figure, “Man is intellectually a nomad, and all wanderers have finer intellectual and physical perceptions than men who are condemned to local habitations.”

They are, furthermore, people who possess an esoteric knowledge unavailable through mainstream experiences. As many critics have pointed out, the tinker is a premier motif in Synge’s work, appearing in four of his plays. Perhaps the most obvious depiction of the tinker as rogue hero appears in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, where an anonymous tinker appears and takes a dissatisfied woman away from the security of her marriage for an uncertain, but romantic, life on the road.

The theme of religious oppression is also strongly evident in Synge’s work. His youthful rejection of religion, his profound suspicion of the Catholic Church, which controlled the Irish people, and his own general irreligiosity surface in many plays. In *When the Moon Has Set*, a young member of the Ascendancy manages to woo his cousin away from her religious order. In *The Tinker’s Wedding*, a priest agrees to marry a pair of tinkers only

after driving a hard bargain and then reneges on his pledge. The Saint in *The Well of the Saints* cures two blind beggars who are undone by their ugliness and the nastiness of the world. Later, after blindness returns and the Saint offers another blessing, they reject him for a life removed from religion and the blandishments of society.

In these figures, Synge depicts religion as stifling and life-denying. In every case, religion represents inflexibility and the stifling of natural impulses. As Synge saw it, religion was invariably tyrannical and repressive, and his heroes reject or escape its restrictions. Conversely, those who are devout are intimidated weaklings who have lost their humanity.

## RIDERS TO THE SEA

**First produced:** 1904 (first published, 1903)

**Type of work:** Play

*Living in a small rural community in western Ireland, a mother and her two daughters are forced to confront the deaths of the last men in their family.*

The first of Synge’s two masterworks, *Riders to the Sea* did not encourage censure or controversy when first performed, but it stands as a perfect articulation of themes and ideas that appear in later plays. Events take place entirely in a single room as two sisters, Cathleen and Nora, hide from their mother, Maurya, the news that their brother Michael, a fisherman lost at sea, has washed ashore far north of their cottage. The remaining son, Bartley, sets off to sign on with another departing fishing vessel, after Maurya fails to persuade him to stay. No sooner is Michael’s death confirmed than Bartley is thrown from his horse into the sea, where he also drowns.

The complex appreciation that Synge held for nature is evident in the play; it is depicted as a grandly magisterial force that envelops and exceeds all life and human comprehensibility. It is seen as a cruel master, remorselessly taking life out of the world, leaving the destitute even more impoverished. As Maurya reveals, she has lost eight men in her life to the implacable forces of nature,

and the same universal patterns that Synge detected on the Aran Islands are at play here.

The setting and characters reveal Synge's interest in peasant life, and the play offers a clear glimpse into the realities of a rural family. Details of domestic economy, farm duties, livestock trading, and fishing are presented with delicate precision. These activities, however—specific as they are to these lives—are significant for revealing a broader human condition. All people must struggle against the contingencies of their lives, and death, nature's great inevitability, visits everyone. The impulse to depict these people as quaint or noble is suppressed; instead, the raw realities of their existence are placed squarely before the reader.

The harshest of these realities is the sense of doom and foreboding that hovers about the play. The sisters resist accepting Michael's death until they examine the paltry remnants recovered from the ocean. Both Maurya and the reader know that he is dead, and when confirmation arrives it comes as no surprise. Similarly, Maurya fears for Bartley, and when returning from seeing him off, she narrates a sinister vision. As Bartley rides off on a white mare, trailing a gray pony, Maurya spies Michael's ghost astride the second horse. She is convinced that it is an evil omen, and, indeed, shortly thereafter neighbors arrive with Bartley's body. She expresses her hopelessness in the play's last lines, "What more can we want than [a grave for the dead]? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied."

Synge's wary view of religion is also subtly at play in *Riders to the Sea*. Nora tells Cathleen of the consolation that a young priest has offered, but in Synge's world God is either a phantom of the imagination or a force absent from the lives of humans. In spite of all Maurya's prayers, the well-meaning words of the priest, and the sprinkling of holy water, divinity does not prevail over the several inevitabilities of nature. Religion offers no hope and only cold comfort against the numbing pain of existence.

## THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

**First produced:** 1907 (first published, 1907)

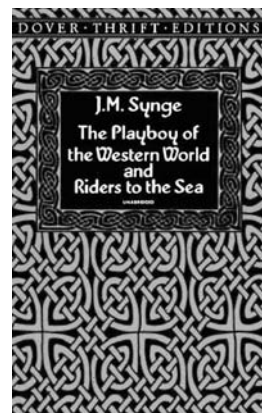
**Type of work:** Play

*A young outsider, believing that he has murdered his father, visits a neighboring village, becomes a hero, and is rejected when his father unexpectedly appears.*

*The Playboy of the Western World* is Synge's masterpiece, capturing his major themes in their most complex form. It is difficult today to discern why the play was so controversial, but the playwright managed to offend not only the repressive sexual mores examined in other plays but also the image of the peasant as a rural saint.

Christy Mahon, a lad from Kerry, is taken into a pub in Mayo, where he tells and retells, each time embellishing more elaborately, the tale of killing his father. The publican's daughter, Pegeen Mike, quickly becomes enamored of Christy, and the two pledge love. When Mahon's father abruptly appears, Christy is discredited and the same people who earlier valorized him suddenly turn against and punish him. In one of the richer ironies, Christy departs in the company of his father, leaving Pegeen to wed Shawn Keogh, a timid boy in thrall to the Church. Christy is another of Synge's nomadic heroes, one who first takes to the road without a father or a place in the world; later, he is a man who still has no home but has arrived at a firm sense of identity. He ultimately opts for a life free of Church and society and seeks a natural freedom. Christy defines tyranny, and although yearning for Pegeen's love, he settles for isolation as an alternative to conformity.

The view of the peasantry is particularly complex; they are suspicious, narrow, bigoted people who, ironically, have a remarkable sensitivity to narrative extravagance and individuality. These are





not idealized figures but people in whom a passion for life is unquenchable. When Pegeen wails, “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World,” she expresses her sorrow over losing a lover and the anguish of realizing that she has betrayed her best instincts and the agent of personal freedom and liberation. In Pegeen, readers will find the same paradox that Synge creates in the peasants in general—people who often realize and desire more than they accept in their lives.

In Christy, Synge presents his most developed view of the artist. He quickly develops from a backward boy into a sophisticated poet who discovers a language he never knew he had in him, a language of the imagination, which sets him apart from quotidian existence. He accepts a life of the imagination, one of complete freedom, where sensibility is raised to its highest pitch. Although decidedly idiomatic, his speech is rich in figurative tropes and densely textured. Synge artfully re-created Irish-English habits of flexible word order, elaborate

turns of phrase, and rhetorical exaggeration as no other writer before him had.

### SUMMARY

While John Millington Synge has been celebrated for his voice, vision, and original contributions to the world stage, readers should keep in mind the literary task that he set for himself. Synge saw himself first and foremost as a realist, a writer rebelling against romantic conventions that he felt robbed literature of its immediacy and importance. In his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, he argues that “On stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality.” He saw himself as rebelling against the dramatic conventions of his day, and he was steadfast in his determination that drama should mirror lives as they are lived.

David W. Madden

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*Riders to the Sea*, pb. 1903, pr. 1904 (one act)  
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*The Well of the Saints*, pr., pb. 1905  
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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What did the poetry of John Millington Synge owe to William Butler Yeats?
- What does it mean to call Synge a primitivist?
- Is Synge a tragic or comic playwright, or does he write works that can properly be called tragicomedies?
- What does the title *The Playboy of the Western World* signify?
- Why did *The Playboy of the Western World* occasion so much more controversy than *Riders to the Sea*?
- Are the voices of Synge's peasants realistic, or are they primarily a translation of peasant dialect into Syngian?



*John Millington Synge*

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## RABINDRANATH TAGORE

**Born:** Calcutta, Bengal, British India (now Kolkata, West Bengal, India)  
May 7, 1861

**Died:** Calcutta (now Kolkata), West Bengal, India  
August 7, 1941

*Though he had long been admired in his native India for his Bengali poems, plays, and fiction, Tagore attained recognition throughout the world only after his *Gitānjali* (Gitanjali Song Offerings) were published in English, winning him the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rabindranath Tagore (tuh-GOR), whose name is sometimes transliterated as Ravindranatha Thakura, was born in Calcutta, India, on May 7, 1861, the fourteenth of fifteen children of Devendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi Tagore. His grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, was a Brahman, a landowner, and the wealthiest Indian merchant of his time, as well as a reformer strongly influenced by the European Enlightenment. Rabindranath's father, Devendranath, was also reform-minded. He became a leader of the Brahma Samaj, a sect founded by Dwarkanath's friend Raja Rammohan Roy, which scandalized traditional Hindus by rejecting polytheism, ritualistic worship, and the caste system. Devendranath's broad-mindedness in religious matters and his emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material is reflected in Rabindranath's thought and in his writings.

Rabindranath grew up in the mansion his grandfather had built in Jorasanko, north of Calcutta. The Jorasanko mansion was the most important cultural center in the area. The Tagores and their friends read and discussed the literature of various countries, speculated about ideas, and made plans for the social, educational, and economic reforms that India so clearly needed. Unlike many Indians of their time, the Tagores did not abandon their own traditions; instead, they sought

to achieve a synthesis between British culture and their own. It is hardly surprising, then, that while Rabindranath knew English well, throughout his life almost all of his creative works were written in Bengali, rather than in English.

Though Rabindranath attended several different schools, he was uninspired by his teachers and rebelled against the rigidity of the system. His learned far more from the discussions he heard at home, from talks with his tutors, and from reading whatever interested him. It soon became clear that he was meant to be a writer. His first poem was published when he was thirteen, and a collection of his poetry appeared four years later. In 1878, the family sent him to England to study law, but after two unproductive years there he returned to India, where Rabindranath and his brilliant older brother Jyotirindranath founded a literary journal and collaborated on an opera. Meanwhile, Rabindranath himself wrote songs, poems, plays, and essays.

In 1883, Rabindranath's father found him a wife, the ten-year-old daughter of an employee on one of the Tagore estates. The family changed her name, Bhabatarini, to the more euphonious Mrinalini. Since she was barely literate, arrangements were made for her to receive some education. The couple had three daughters and two sons. However, their family life was marked by tragedy. Tagore's wife died in 1902, their daughter Renuka in 1903, and their son Samindranath in

1907. In 1905, Tagore lost his father. His eldest daughter, Bela, would die in 1918.

After Tagore returned from a brief trip to England in 1890, his father had decided to give him some practical business experience by making him manager of the family estates in eastern Bengal. There Tagore became acutely aware of the plight of the rural poor. Not only did he make their hardships the subject matter of much of his short fiction, but he also took practical steps to alleviate their poverty by setting up a weaving school, an agricultural cooperative bank, and an agricultural institute. His long-standing dissatisfaction with traditional educational methods also inspired him to establish an experimental school at Santiniketan. Tagore himself conducted many of the classes there. In 1918, the school became an international university, Visva-Bharati.

In 1912, Tagore scheduled a trip to the United States in order to be present when his surviving son, Rathindranath, graduated from the University of Illinois in Urbana. En route, he spent some time in London, where he showed the painter William Rothenstein a collection of his poems, which he had translated into English prose. Rothenstein sent a copy of the manuscript to the famous Irish poet William Butler Yeats, and Tagore was soon the toast of the literary community. In November, 1912, the India Society of London brought out a limited edition of *Gitanjali* (1910; *Gitanjali Song Offerings*, 1912); after it sold out, Macmillan took over publication of the volume. On November 14, 1913, Tagore was informed that he had won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first Asian to be so honored.

During his first visit to the United States, Tagore lectured in Urbana, in Chicago, and at Harvard University. Over the next two decades, he would travel throughout the world, giving readings or lectures, the proceeds of which went to his educational projects. Meanwhile, Tagore continued to turn out creative works. His poems, plays, and fiction were translated into English and then into numerous other languages. In the 1930's, Tagore took up painting and soon attained recognition as one of India's finest artists.

It is ironic that though Tagore had long been recognized in India as the preeminent Bengali man of letters, he did not attain an international reputation until he was in his early fifties, when his works appeared in English and he was awarded the

Nobel Prize. Thereafter, almost every year brought him a new honor. For example, in 1915, Tagore was knighted by the British government, though four years later he resigned his knighthood as a protest against the Amritsar Massacre. On his seventieth birthday in 1931, he was given *The Golden Book of Tagore*, a compilation of tributes from people throughout the world. In 1940, Oxford University awarded him a doctorate in literature, but ill health prevented him from receiving the degree in person. Tagore died on August 7, 1941.

### ANALYSIS

Tagore's works reflect both the pride his family felt in their Bengali culture and their belief in a deity who transcends the limits of time, place, and creed. Unlike other upper-class families who expected their children to receive the equivalent of a British education, the Tagores insisted that in addition to becoming fluent in English and familiar with European literature, their children know both Sanskrit and Bengali and read extensively in works written in those two languages. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the nationalist fervor sweeping across the subcontinent stimulated interest in native languages such as Bengali. The Tagores responded to this movement in 1877 by establishing *Bharati*, a monthly journal in Bengali.

It was there that Rabindranath Tagore's first poems appeared. Though they were highly praised, it soon became clear that this young man did not intend to hold to tradition. He rejected the formal tone of older Bengali poetry, he invented new poetic forms and tried out new meters, and most shocking of all, he wrote in the vernacular. Tagore was just as free-spirited when he set his poems to music, adapting classical forms at will. Since the short story was a relatively new form, Tagore could not so easily be criticized for his short fiction. However, some readers were surprised by his interest in the powerless and by his use of a simple, colloquial style. Tagore's importance as a Bengali writer cannot be overstated. He is credited with single-handedly transforming the Bengali language. Moreover, his experiments with form and content made it possible for his successors to move into the literary mainstream. For these reasons, Tagore is called the father of modern Bengali literature and a major influence on Indian writers.

Even in translation it is evident that Tagore is a

master of description, plot, and characterization. However, another reason for his lasting appeal to readers throughout the world is his spirituality. In *Gitanjali Song Offerings*, it is evident that Tagore regards his deity as an ever-present companion. In Tagore's fiction and his plays, it is equally clear that he sees life as a struggle between good and evil. Neither creed nor class can guarantee virtue; Tagore's noblest characters are often the most powerless, whether because, like Nikhil in *Ghare Baire* (1916; *The Home and the World*, 1919), they live by their principles or because, like the lowly title character in the short story "Kabuliwallah," they are capable of unconditional love. Tagore's sympathy for children, for women, and for the poor is evident throughout his works. His distrust of ritual is shown in the short story "Forbidden Entry," in which the guardian of a temple to Krishna has no compassion for human beings. By contrast, the way in which someone in power should behave is illustrated in his best-known play, *Dākghar* (pb. 1912; *The Post Office*, 1914), in which a king commands that a dying boy's fantasy be fulfilled.

Tagore's philosophy was also evident in the subject matter of his lectures, which were written in English and therefore could be published without having to be translated. One of his most popular volumes, *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913), deals with the problem of evil and the relationship between human beings and the divine. In *Nationalism* (1917), which was drawn from lectures presented in Japan and America, Tagore courageously criticized the nationalistic attitudes of modern nations and specifically of those two. Both that volume and *The Religion of Man* (1931) continued to be reprinted and reread long after Tagore's death.

In *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (1994-1996), edited by Sisir Kumar Das, which contains both works Tagore composed in English and Bengali works that he himself translated into English, it is evident that Tagore could handle the English language as skillfully as Bengali. Therefore scholars can no longer consider Tagore merely an important Indian writer. Though he did play a major role in the development of his native language and literature, he is also considered a predecessor of the many South Asians now writing in English.

## GITANJALI SONG OFFERINGS

**First published:** *Gitānjali*, 1910 (English translation, 1912)

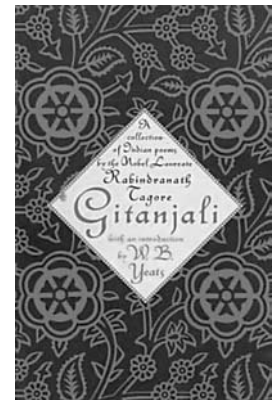
**Type of work:** Poetry

*In a series of lyrical poems, the writer voices his yearning for union with the divine.*

*Gitanjali Song Offerings* is a collection of 103 prose poems, selected by Tagore from among his Bengali poems and translated by him into English. The collection brought Tagore international attention and won him the Nobel Prize in Literature. Although Tagore later published more than twenty additional volumes of his poetry in English translation, *Gitanjali Song Offerings* remained one of his most beloved works.

Western readers immediately noted similarities between *Gitanjali Song Offerings* and the biblical *Song of Songs*, which most theologians insist deals not with a human union but with Christ's love for his church. Though *Gitanjali Song Offerings* also is filled with sensual imagery, there is no doubt that Tagore's subject is the relationship between a human being and the divine. When Tagore mentioned his admiration for Vaishnava poetry in an essay published in 1912, undoubtedly he had in mind the *Gita Govinda*, a long poem written in the twelfth century by the Bengali poet Sri Jayadev, which Westerners have often

called the Indian *Song of Songs*. The *Gita Govinda* shows the god Vishnu, in his incarnation as Krishna, in passionate pursuit of the cowgirl Radha. Since Vaishnavism, or the worship of this very human god, was especially popular in Bengal, Bengali poets often wrote about Krishna's love for Radha. Though Tagore himself, reared a theist, did not adhere to Vaishnavism, he drew upon the Vaishnava tradition for his imagery because he saw the many similarities between the pursuit of a lover and a human being's pursuit of the divine or the reverse.



The Vaishnava tradition also accounts for variations in the poetic voice. Sometimes, as in numbers 49 and 52, the speaker seems to be a woman like Radha, a beggar maid waiting for her king; at other times, the poet is clearly a male, desirous of union with the divine.

Though *Gitanjali Song Offerings* is a collection, not a single narrative, it does have a certain unity. All of the poems are devotional in nature, and they all have the tender tone of conventional love poems. There are also several motifs or subordinate themes that are repeated and recombined throughout the collection. In the first three poems, for example, the writer emphasizes his smallness and his helplessness before his lord. Then the emphasis shifts to what is expected of the writer: He must live a life of truth, purity, and simplicity, thus reflecting the nature of the divinity he serves. However, in several poems, including number 73, the poet maintains that union with the divine does not mean renunciation of the senses but a fuller appreciation of what they reveal, notably the beauties of the natural world.

Though in number 35, the writer asks that his country be led toward reason and freedom, usually the prayers are personal. Naturally, the mood may shift: Though many are poems of praise and joy, some speak of the writer's desperate longing for the beloved, and others express feelings of abandonment. Toward the end of the volume, the writer turns to the subject of time, and finally, he anticipates his own death. *Gitanjali Song Offerings* ends on a note of triumph, with the poet finally united with his beloved God.

## THE HOME AND THE WORLD

**First published:** *Ghare baire*, 1916 (English translation, 1919)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An idealistic husband frees his wife from her traditional role in society, only to have her betray him with the ruthless leader of what proves to be a terrorist movement.*

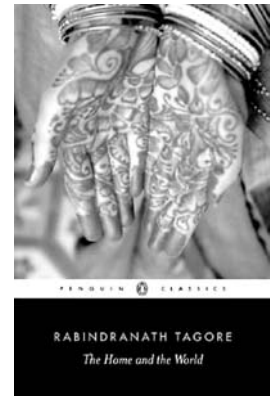
*The Home and the World* is set during the height of the Swadeshi movement, a boycott of British

goods that was initiated in 1905 as a protest against Great Britain's arbitrary division of Bengal into two parts. At first, Tagore was one of the leaders of Swadeshi, but when protests evolved into violent conflicts between Muslims and Hindus, Tagore left the movement. In *The Home and the World*, he explained why he did not approve of what Swadeshi had become.

The novel consists of twenty-three chapters, each of them a first-person narrative by one of the three major characters. The first and the last chapters are both labeled "Bimala's Story," thus emphasizing the fact that the young wife Bimala is the pivotal character in what is superficially a love triangle but, more profoundly, is a conflict between two points of view, one good, the other evil. The other two narrators are Nikhil, Bimala's husband, a wealthy landowner with Enlightenment views and a benevolent nature, and Sandip, a charismatic but completely unscrupulous Swadeshi leader.

Although for some time her husband has urged Bimala to move out into the world, it is not until she meets the charismatic Sandip that she decides to take advantage of the freedom Nikhil has offered her. The first time Sandip comes to dinner, he urges her to remain with the men and take part in the discussion. Nikhil feels that he must invite Sandip to be his guest while he is in the area, but a few days stretch into weeks, and Sandip is still present. Although he admits to the reader that he believes strong men have the right to take whatever they want, he conceals his ruthlessness from Bimala. Instead, he flatters her, calling her the "mother" of the Swadeshi movement, or the "Queen Bee." Though Nikhil's old master, who is visiting, urges him to get rid of Sandip, Nikhil knows that Bimala would not permit him to evict the agitator. However, when he learns that the Muslims are planning to attack his home in order to kill Sandip, Nikhil informs his guest that he must leave.

Meanwhile, Bimala has given her jewels to Sandip, as well as a large sum of money, which she





stole from her husband with the aid of Sandip's young follower Amulya, whom she has taken under her wing. Just before fleeing from the Muslims, Sandip does return the money and the jewels, insisting that for once in his life he has felt pangs of conscience. However, Bimala has recovered from her infatuation with Sandip and his cause. She now realizes that Nikhil is not only good but also wise. Before she can ask his forgiveness, however, her chivalrous husband gallops off to protect some women he hears are being mistreated by Muslim looters. Several hours later, Nikhil is brought back, critically injured. Amulya is dead. Despite the fact that Tagore does not rule out the possibility that Nikhil will live and become reconciled with his repentant wife, *The Home and the World* is often described as Tagore's darkest novel. It is significant that when the noted director Satyajit Ray filmed *The Home and the World* in 1984, he changed the ending: In his version, Nikhil's body is brought back, and Bimala is left with nothing but regrets.

## SELECTED SHORT STORIES

**First published:** 1991

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Peasants and landowners alike choose between compassion and cruelty, virtue and vice.*

In his introduction to this volume, editor and translator William Radice explains his reasons for including only short stories that Tagore wrote during the 1890's, when he was in his thirties. At that time, Tagore was preoccupied with the narrative form, as is evident from the fact that fifty-nine of his lifetime's output of ninety short stories came out of that relatively brief period. Most of the thirty stories in this collection are set in the Padma River region of East Bengal and reflect both his new understanding of peasants like those around him and his appreciation of a particularly beautiful part of his native land.

Several of these stories are supernatural, such as "Skeleton," in which a female ghost appears to tell a story of love and death. Others resemble folktales; in "The Hungry Stones," a man in a railway waiting room describes events in a mysterious ac-

cursed palace, but before he can finish his narrative, a train arrives and he is shown to his compartment, leaving his audience in suspense. "Wishes Granted" is a moral tale like those found in every literary tradition. In it, a father and his son have their wishes granted by a passing divinity, only to find that they were better off before.

However, though Tagore himself suggested in a much later interview that most of the early stories were simple re-creations of village life, in fact they are complex descriptions of human behavior, with ironic or tragic endings. One of the best known, "The Postmaster," is typical. The title character is a well-educated young man from Calcutta, who has been sent to work in a remote village. Ratan, the orphan girl he hires to do his housework, becomes his only companion, and he finds himself very much attached to her. He even begins teaching her to read. When he becomes ill, she nurses him back to health. However, soon afterward he tells Ratan that he has resigned his position and will soon be leaving. To his amazement, she begs him to take her with him, but he refuses. He tries to make up for abandoning her by offering her money, but she will not take it. As his boat sails down the river, the young man consoles himself by musing on mutability, but Ratan is heartbroken. Though the author concludes by pointing out that people allow their hearts to deceive them, in fact, like many of the other stories in this collection, "The Postmaster" is really about the exploitation of the innocent and good by those who are financially better off, more powerful, or just more heartless.

## SUMMARY

Rabindranath Tagore's poetry, his plays, his fiction, and his prose are all infused with the writer's belief that the goal of human life is union with the divine, a being who is always accessible in prayer and in nature. An obsession with material goods, social status, or power shrinks the soul and harms both other individuals and society as a whole. So do rampant nationalism and narrow adherence to religious creeds. Even though Tagore recognizes the fact that in this world the righteous often suffer, he believes that only a soul that is unpolluted can know the joy of that mystic union.

His Bengali writings brought Tagore recognition as the father of modern Bengali literature. His English works and his translations made him fa-

mous throughout the world. However, it is not just his originality and his lyricism that account for the high regard in which he is still held. Above all, he is valued as a profound thinker and a deeply spiritual man.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How are Rabindranath Tagore's religious beliefs reflected in his works?
- How is Tagore's love of nature reflected in his works?
- The Irish poet William Butler Yeats often quoted *Gitanjali Song Offerings*. Which poem from that work most impressed you and why?
- What evidence is there in Tagore's fiction that despite his own aristocratic background, he understood and empathized with the Bengali peasants?
- How does Tagore view women? What does he see as their proper place in society?
- What is the thematic significance of the English title of Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*?

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## ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

**Born:** Somersby, Lincolnshire, England  
August 6, 1809

**Died:** Aldworth, near Haslemere, Sussex, England  
October 6, 1892

*Tennyson achieved fame as the preeminent poet of the Victorian Age and is still considered one of the most melodious lyricists of English poetry.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Alfred Tennyson (TEHN-uh-suhn) was born on August 6, 1809, in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England, where his father, the Reverend George Tennyson, was serving as rector of a church. His mother's name was Elizabeth Fytche Tennyson. Early in life he exhibited intellectual brilliance that caught his father's attention. George Tennyson arranged for his son to attend Louth Grammar School from 1815 to 1820 and gave the precocious youth private lessons thereafter. Life at home was not all serene, however, as Tennyson's father suffered from a form of mental illness that led to a serious breakdown in 1824. In fact, George Tennyson's untimely death in 1831 caused the poet to leave Cambridge without a degree so that he could help settle family affairs.

From an early age, Alfred showed an intense interest in poetry, writing verses modeled on those of James Thomson and, later, Sir Walter Scott. In the same year that he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, 1827, he and his brother published a slim volume of poetry; it was not well received by the critics. At Cambridge, Tennyson was not a good student, but he made several friendships that would figure importantly in his life. The most significant was that with Arthur Henry Hallam, a brilliant young man who was influential in Tennyson's par-

ticipation in the Apostles, a famous Cambridge debating and social club. While at Cambridge, Tennyson published a second volume of poetry; it, too, was reviewed harshly.

After leaving Cambridge, Tennyson traveled with Hallam on the Continent in 1832 and published his third volume of poems. During the following year, however, Hallam, who was then engaged to Tennyson's sister, died suddenly while visiting Vienna. The death shattered Tennyson but stimulated his creative genius: During the next seventeen years, he composed more than a hundred lyrics loosely centered on his grief over the loss of Hallam; in 1850, he published these under the title *In Memoriam*.

By 1837, the Tennyson family had found that it could no longer remain at Somersby, and Alfred supervised the move of the clan to High Beech, Epping. He published nothing during the decade, but he worked at revising earlier poems and writing lyric and dramatic works that he would eventually publish during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1847, he published *The Princess*, a long narrative poem focusing on the question of women's rights and proper relations between the sexes.

Though he had fallen in love with Emily Sellwood in 1836, Tennyson was not able to marry her until 1850, the same year in which he published his elegy for Hallam. That year was a watershed in the poet's life. The poem celebrating Hallam's death became immensely popular, establishing Tennyson's reputation with the British reading public; late in that same year, upon the death of William Wordsworth, Tennyson was named poet laureate of England.

For the next four decades, Tennyson spent his professional life in service to the Crown and the British public, writing occasional poems and several major works that celebrated his country's heritage. In 1855, he published a long, complicated poem titled *Maud*, which combined his interest in the psychological dimensions of human character with his perennial desire to experiment with various forms of poetic meter. His Arthurian poem *Idylls of the King*, which appeared piecemeal between 1859 and 1885, won wide acclaim, as did collections of new lyrical and narrative verse. Profits from his work, coupled with his pension from the Crown, allowed him to provide comfortably for his family and establish himself as a respectable gentleman, though somewhat of a recluse.

In 1851, the Tennysons' first child was stillborn, but in the following year Emily gave birth to a son, whom the poet named Hallam. A second son, Lionel, was born two years later. In 1853, Tennyson moved his residence to Faringford, a country house on the Isle of Wight off the southern coast of England. In 1868, he established a second residence, Aldworth, in Haslemere. To these residences came politicians from England and abroad, writers, and tourists, paying court to the now-famous poet. He was awarded a barony by the monarchy shortly before his death.

During the 1870's and 1880's, Tennyson turned his hand to drama, completing a series of historical plays that received significant public approval. Tragedy struck the family in 1886, when his son Lionel, who had emigrated to India, died during a return voyage to his homeland. Late in 1888, Tennyson himself began to suffer from failing health. He died on October 6, 1892, in Aldworth, near Haslemere, Sussex—clutching a copy of works by William Shakespeare.

## ANALYSIS

An appreciation of Tennyson's achievement as an artist requires that one understand his idea of the role of the poet. For centuries, the Aristotelian idea of the poet as maker and upholder of society's best values had dominated Western thinking; but in the half century before Tennyson began writing, the notions of Romanticism, which celebrated art as self-expression and venerated the poet as rebel and social critic, had taken hold. Throughout his life, Tennyson was forced to choose between being

the public artist, bent on confirming that which was best in his society, and the private mystic, attempting to explore the psychological dimensions of the human character as he experienced the vicissitudes of his own storm-tossed life.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the major themes of Tennyson's poetry is the exploration of the proper role of the poet in society. In early works, such as "The Palace of Art" and "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind," the poet examines the alternatives that he sees for the poet: an active life struggling to right the many wrongs that he sees in the world, or a life of contemplation and the pursuit of art for art's sake, withdrawn from the fray of everyday affairs. Emblematically, in "The Lady of Shallott" he touches on the same theme. In that poem, the Lady, confined in her room, weaving her beautiful tapestry, sees the outside world only indirectly through images in her mirror; she comes to an untimely death when she abandons her safe tower to enter the world in search of the knight whose image she first discerns in her glass. Such may be the fate of the artist, the youthful Tennyson suggests. Later in his life, in poems such as "The Ancient Sage" and "Merlin and the Gleam," he adopts a more public stance, arguing that the poet is actually a prophet whose proper role is to discover truth and bring it to humankind.

As poet laureate for more than forty years, Tennyson was frequently asked by Queen Victoria and others to write celebratory verse, and some of his work is simply "occasional" writing: writing to commemorate events, such as the marriage of Queen Victoria's daughter to the czar of Russia. It would be wrong to dismiss all of his public writing as simply made-to-order work, however; "The Charge of the Light Brigade," prompted by gross errors of judgment in a bloody war of imperialism, aroused the indignation of the British public and helped lead to serious reforms in the military, and his "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" is one of the finest occasional pieces in the language.

Exceptionally well-read and always curious about discoveries in all fields of learning, Tennyson writes frequently of contemporary controversies. His works reflect the Victorians' ongoing struggle to reconcile the advances of science, especially those involving theories of evolution, with traditional religion. While his most significant artistic

work dealing with this subject is contained in the central lyrics of his great elegy *In Memoriam*, other works, especially the meditative monologue “Lucretius,” structure the debate between science and religion as a central theme.

A related issue concerning the advances of science is also central to Tennyson’s poetry: the value of material progress. Like many of his contemporaries, the poet was concerned with the effect of burgeoning industrialism on the quality of life for both the well-to-do and particularly the middle class and the poor. Many of his domestic idylls, narrative poems focusing on family life and often set in rural locales, explore the impact of scientific progress and advances in technology on the traditional lifestyles of farmers, laborers, and other rustics. The results are sometimes poems of exceptional pathos, such as “Dora,” “The Gardener’s Daughter,” or *Enoch Arden* (1864), though the latter poem deals more centrally with issues of love and faithfulness. On occasion, however, Tennyson employs bitter satire to evoke in his readers a sense of horror at the evils of creeping materialism: His scathing portrait of the petty master in “The Northern Farmer” poems, both written much later in his life, are good examples of this style.

In an age that still revered the formal qualities of poetry and gave great concern to consistency in meter, rhyme scheme, and adherence to supposed rules of composition, Tennyson stands as something of a rebel. He was a great experimenter in verse forms, often combining different rhyme schemes, line lengths, and styles within the same work. His early education had given him a sound foundation in the classics, and much of his poetry is filled with allusions to Greek and Latin literature. A strong admirer of Vergil, Tennyson often fills his work with the sense of melancholy characteristic of the great Latin poet’s work. Like his classical predecessors, Tennyson is a careful observer of nature, rendering it in meticulous descriptions that evoke the sensual qualities of the world that he sees. He is equally adept at portraying psychological states, however; poems such as *Maud* and “St. Simeon Stylites” rival the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning in their penetrating insight into the minds of characters whose psychological equilibrium is precariously balanced between sanity and madness.

A lifelong devotee of the Arthurian story, Tenny-

son uses the characters from this legend as subjects of numerous poems. From his early portrayals of idealists such as the maid Elaine (the heroine of his “The Lady of Shallott”) and the warrior Galahad (celebrated in “Sir Galahad”) to his full-length treatment of the legend in *Idylls of the King*, the poet explores the heroic qualities of knighthood. Tennyson reveals how the virtues espoused at Arthur’s medieval court are relevant to the complex society of the nineteenth century. The Arthurian poems also serve as a warning about what can happen when people abandon ideals for easy pleasures or material comforts—a problem that Tennyson saw all around him in his own society.

## IN MEMORIAM

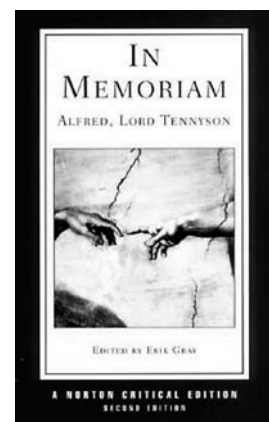
**First published:** 1850

**Type of work:** Poem

*Tennyson explores his feeling of loss at the death of Arthur Henry Hallam and uses the occasion of Hallam’s death to explore other contemporary issues.*

*In Memoriam* is Tennyson’s elegiac tribute to his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, who died suddenly in September, 1833. Hallam’s death dealt a particularly harsh blow to the poet. Almost immediately, Tennyson began attempting to capture his sense of loss and feelings of grief in brief lyrical sketches. He worked on these lyrics for seventeen years, revising and arranging them in a pattern that would give the disparate poems a central unity of purpose.

Tennyson’s work follows the traditional pattern of the elegy, first established by the Greeks and appropriated by English poets such as John Milton in “Lycidas” (1638) and Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821). There is a central figure who speaks in the first person to mourn the loss of a friend; feeling



that he has been left behind in a world that also is touched with this loss, the speaker examines his emotions and looks outside himself for solace. His examination of the world around him leads him to realize that, though gone, his friend is still with him in spirit; that realization gives the one who remains in the world some hope, usually for reunion in the afterlife.

Unusual among the great elegies in English, *In Memoriam* tells its story of loss and recovery through a series of interconnected lyrics, over 130 in all; each remains a self-contained unit, but the collection traces the feelings of a central character who experiences, in turn, grief, confusion, despair, personal resolution, and, finally, hope. Several critics have pointed out the similarities between Tennyson's elegy and William Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, which also carries forward a single story beneath the individual lyrics.

Though the poet employs a first-person voice in almost all the lyrics, the central speaker, or "I," of the poem should not automatically be identified with Tennyson himself. In various notes to his work, the poet cautions that he is sometimes using the speaker to represent all of humankind struggling to understand the sense of loss that has come upon it as a result of scientific discoveries that have shattered its faith in the afterlife. The speaker passes through several emotional stages: from grief and despair resulting from the immediacy and the immensity of his loss, through a period of doubt, to a state of hope based on his faith that there is a divine entity guiding humanity's destiny. The progress of the poet's feelings is marked by the three Christmas seasons celebrated in the work. During the first and second Christmases, the poet's feelings are scarred by his loss; during the third, however, he is able to rejoice in the realization that his friend, though vanished from the earth, awaits their reunion in heaven, where he has gone after fulfilling his role on earth. Hallam becomes for Tennyson a symbol of an idea that the poet and his contemporaries were slowly coming to accept and investigate: the idea of progress. By the end of his elegy, Tennyson is celebrating Hallam as the precursor of a new age that will be greater and more blessed for the world; Hallam, like Christ, is a harbinger of better times, and the poet is able to take solace in having been able to share his acquaintance and love.

The note of optimism in the final stanzas of the epilogue is reached only after the poet has agonized long over doubts about both his personal future and the future of the human race. A particularly poignant series of lyrics (ones often anthologized out of the context of the entire series) deals directly with the implications of new discoveries about evolution, and in them the speaker, comparing himself to "an infant, crying in the night," agonizes over the possibility that "nature, red in tooth and claw" is governed not by a beneficent deity but by senseless forces that serve no higher purpose.

The critic T. S. Eliot once observed that the greatness of *In Memoriam* lies not in its final message of hope, but in the quality of doubt that permeates the central lyrics. Nevertheless, the marriage that Tennyson describes in the epilogue is clearly intended to suggest the resiliency of humankind and the promise that life will continue, if not for individuals, then at least for the human race as a whole. Not only will life go on, Tennyson implies, but it will improve, and Hallam has been an early messenger of these better times. For this the poet is thankful, for he has been able to associate with one who symbolizes the great future that the world is to enjoy.

## IDYLLS OF THE KING

**First published:** 1859-1885

**Type of work:** Poem

*Tennyson recounts the rise and fall of the mythical King Arthur, showing how the ruler's high standards are embraced or rejected by his followers.*

*Idylls of the King* is the culmination of Tennyson's lifelong fascination with the Arthurian legend. At an early age, the poet became taken with the story of the king who had united his country and made a perfect society, only to see it fall into ruins because of the illicit affair between his queen and his greatest knight. In several poems written when he was young, Tennyson did what may be called character sketches of Arthurian figures: the Maid of Astolat, Galahad, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Shortly after the untimely death of his friend Arthur Hallam, he



composed a long narrative on the death of King Arthur; the poem was incorporated as the last of the twelve idylls that now constitute *Idylls of the King*.

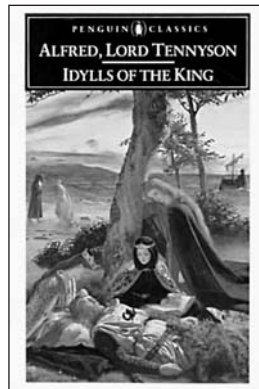
*Idylls of the King* was published in parts between 1859 and 1885, so there has always been a question concerning the unity of the work: Should it be read as a consistent whole, considered a nineteenth century epic? Or is it a collection, in the vein of *In Memoriam*, in which individual poems suggest a thematic whole but are not intended to present a coherent story? Most critics have seen sufficient unity in the assemblage to judge that Tennyson intended his work to be taken as a single long poem, and that he consciously used various epic devices to suggest parallels with works such as Vergil's the *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E., English translation, 1553). The blank verse line, the epic similes, and other devices of phrasing and description recall John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), unquestionably the most ambitious epic in English.

From his own writings about the poem, as well as from internal evidence, it is clear that Tennyson intended *Idylls of the King* to be both a commentary on contemporary society and a kind of allegory about the human spirit warring against the fleshly side of humanity's nature. Arthur is described in the epilogue of the poem as a perfect Victorian gentleman—with clear parallels to Victoria's dead husband, Prince Albert, who is celebrated by name in the dedication to *Idylls of the King* added by Tennyson after the Albert's death in 1861. Throughout the Arthurian story, the poet celebrates Victorian virtues of fidelity to one's spouse—a concept not at all in keeping with the medieval concept of courtly love, wherein a knight might be in service to (and on occasion have an illicit affair with) a woman other than his wife. Further, *Idylls of the King* celebrates the importance of work over fame. In a revealing passage in the sixth idyll, "Merlin and Vivien," the aging magician, Merlin, tells the temptress that it is better to work than to seek glory, that one should revere those who perform the common duties of life. The theme is echoed by the king at

the end of the eighth idyll, "The Holy Grail." When only a few of his knights return from their quest for the cup that was supposedly used by Christ at the last supper, Arthur lectures them about the devastating impact that their vain pursuit has had on the kingdom. While they were away, many necessary chores were left unattended; the king excuses his own unwillingness to seek the Grail by noting that it has been his duty to remain at home governing the land, handling the everyday tasks that befit his position. Such an attitude would have been foreign to the medieval audiences that first heard tales of Arthur and his knights, but this sentiment would have struck a sympathetic chord with Victorian readers.

In the epilogue, Tennyson also describes his hero as "Ideal manhood closed in real man" and mentions that the poem is intended to show the struggle of "sense at war with soul." The highly allegorical nature of *Idylls of the King* may be best seen in the second section, "Gareth and Lynette," in which a young hero, imbued with the ideals that Arthur preaches, fights and defeats four challengers who represent (according to an explanation provided within the poem itself) the various stages of a person's life. The message is clear: Those who live by the high ideals that Arthur promotes will rise above even death itself. The fairy tale quality of "Gareth and Lynette" is not sustained, however, as one by one even the greatest knights and ladies fail to uphold these high standards. Some, such as the villainous Tristan, openly scoff at the King's naïveté; others, such as Lancelot and Guinevere, struggle to reconcile their commitment to those ideals with the very real, physical love that they feel for each other but that they know is wrong because it violates the moral code of the kingdom.

The central theme of the poem is that devotion to such high ideals is nearly impossible in a world beset with materialism. As critic James Kincaid notes in *Tennyson's Major Poems, the Comic and Ironic Patterns* (1975), no outside force causes the downfall of Arthur's perfect society; rather, it falls from within, collapsing because the knights and ladies of the realm are unable to abide by the king's ideals. Tennyson captures the tenuous nature of Arthur's experiment with utopian living in his image of the capital city of Camelot. Gareth, on his way to meet the king for the first time, meets Merlin outside the city and asks if the spires that he sees in the mist are those of





the king's capital. From them, he hears sweet music coming forth, and Merlin says that this is indeed Camelot, which is still being built: "the city is built/ To music," the seer remarks, "therefore never built at all,/ And therefore built for ever" ("Gareth and Lynette"). Like a musical composition, Arthur's kingdom relies on the harmony achieved when every player is working under the direction of a wise composer; when one chooses to play his or her own tune, the harmony is broken, and the music becomes discordant. That image, repeated throughout the remainder of the *Idylls of the King*, captures Tennyson's idea about society: Unless all work in concert with one another and follow high moral standards, civilization itself is doomed to fail.

## "ULYSSES"

**First published:** 1842 (collected in *Poems*, 1842)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The hero of Homer's the Odyssey, living the quiet life at home after his twenty-year sojourn away from Ithaca, vows to set out again to seek new adventures.*

"Ulysses" is ranked with several of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues as the best in the genre. Based on a passage in Dante's *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), the poem depicts the hero of the Trojan Wars sometime after he has returned to his native land. Ironically, the man who had lived away from his beloved wife and son for ten years before the walls of Troy, and who had then wandered the Mediterranean for ten more as a result of a curse from the gods, is now displeased with the quiet life that he finds at home. The discomfort that Ulysses feels is emblematic of the dilemma that many of Tennyson's contemporaries faced: whether to live life quietly, fulfilling one's domestic duties, or to pursue some bold adventure. For Tennyson, the poem had personal significance as well: Written shortly after the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, it was the poet's attempt to answer the question of whether to try to make a new life or to continue to wallow in his sorrow.

If one reads the poem in light of Tennyson's personal comments, then the ending suggests a strong note of optimism. After convincing himself that he should not remain at home—his son, Telemachus, is more suited to rule a land where people have no aspirations for adventure—Ulysses summons a group of mariners to sail away with him to find new adventures. There is a recognized risk in such action: "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down," he warns them, but if he and his men are fortunate, they may "touch the Happy Isles,/ And see the great Achilles that we knew." Whatever they do, they will have the satisfaction of knowing that they have done their best in struggling against the elements (and old age) to make new reputations. The ringing final line, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield," becomes a battle cry for all who need support in their endeavors to make a better life.

Unfortunately, such a glib reading is not fully supported by internal evidence. The mariners whom Ulysses summons are not the same ones that sailed with him before; those men were all lost before the king returned to Ithaca. Further, his call to sail toward the west, and his remark that they may be fortunate enough to land in the Happy Isles, both suggest that this is a voyage to death. Such a reading is supported by external evidence, namely the passage from Dante on which Tennyson bases his account. Like many narrators in dramatic monologues, Tennyson's Ulysses is not to be trusted fully. His is a seductive message, a call to adventure that simultaneously encourages a flight from responsibility. How one is to determine whether Ulysses is a hero or villain is never resolved, of course; this is attributable in part to the peculiar nature of the dramatic monologue form. Readers have no external reference point from which to judge the truthfulness or sincerity of Ulysses' statements. Only a careful analysis of the substance of his request—the message beneath the compelling rhetoric—suggests that he may be seeking to abandon his responsibilities and cloak his escape in the guise of seeking further glory. The enigma may well be intentional, considering Tennyson's lifelong preoccupation with characters who are psychologically complex. There are for Tennyson two sides to every issue, and commitment to one ideal may well result in abandonment of another, equally valid one. Such is the human condition as he sees it.

## “LOCKSLEY HALL”

**First published:** 1842 (collected in *Poems*, 1842)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A young man, rejected by his beloved for a more wealthy suitor, muses on the present state of society and has a vision of a different, better future.*

“Locksley Hall” is typical of Tennyson’s poetry, in that the pattern of the poem follows one characteristic of much of the poet’s work. A personal experience sparks Tennyson’s creative imagination, and he uses that incident as a springboard for investigating issues of greater social concern.

The biographical germ of the poem lies in Rosa Baring’s rejection of Tennyson as a suitor in 1837; the poet’s poor financial position made him unsuitable for her as a husband, and she rejected him in favor of a man of greater means. In “Locksley Hall,” Tennyson transforms his own disappointment and grief over this rejection into a bitter analysis of the society in which materialism takes precedence over love. The speaker of the poem, a young suitor whose beloved Amy leaves him to marry a boorish man of suitable financial means, rebukes both his beloved and her new husband. His maundering attack leads him to consider the world in which true love can be dismissed so lightly, and he eventually begins to daydream about a future in which people, driven by greed, will eventually clash in world war to satisfy their insatiable materialistic appetites. In passages that border on science fiction, Tennyson describes “airy navies” engaging in battle. There is a ray of hope, however; the speaker finally sees an end to nationalistic strife, and the formation of a “Parliament of man,” a worldwide federation that will eventually bring peace to warring nations. All of this is mere reverie, of course,

and in the final couplets the speaker turns away bitterly from Locksley Hall, the place where he wooed his Amy unsuccessfully, and goes off to wander the world in an attempt to suffuse his bitterness.

Written in trochaic couplets, “Locksley Hall” is an excellent example of Tennyson’s ability to sustain a complicated meter and rhyme scheme. Some critics have complained, however, that the jingling nature of the meter works against the serious message of the poem, the speaker’s indictment of modern society. Like the best of Tennyson’s poetry, “Locksley Hall” contains phrases of vivid description and lines that capture the mood of the speaker in such a way as to give his personal feelings a universal significance. The Byronic qualities of the hero of this poem, his brooding over his fate in life, and his somber portrait of the future (even when tempered by his final vision of a world at peace) suggest the darker side of Tennyson’s personality; the poet seems fascinated by characters whose life experiences drive them to the brink of madness as they face frustration and disappointment in a world where money has supplanted love as the highest of human aspirations.

### SUMMARY

Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s immense popularity among his contemporaries was a contributing cause to his decline in critical esteem during the first half of the twentieth century, when the reaction against Victorianism reached its height. Following the sympathetic judgment of mid-century critics, such as the poet’s grandson Sir Charles Tennyson and noted Victorianist Jerome H. Buckley, more recent scholars have rekindled interest in Tennyson’s works and have ranked his best poems—works such as “Ulysses,” “Tithonus,” *In Memoriam*, and *Idylls of the King*—among the finest in the language.

Laurence W. Mazzeno

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*Poems*, 1832 (imprinted 1833)

*Poems*, 1842  
*The Princess*, 1847  
*In Memoriam*, 1850  
*Maud, and Other Poems*, 1855  
*Idylls of the King*, 1859-1885  
*Enoch Arden, and Other Poems*, 1864  
*The Holy Grail, and Other Poems*, 1869 (imprinted 1870)  
*Gareth and Lynette*, 1872  
*The Lover's Tale*, 1879  
*Ballads, and Other Poems*, 1880  
*Tiresias, and Other Poems*, 1885  
*Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, etc.*, 1886  
*Demeter, and Other Poems*, 1889  
*The Death of Ænone, and Other Poems*, 1892

DRAMA:

*Queen Mary*, pb. 1875, pr. 1876  
*Harold*, pb. 1876, pr. 1928  
*The Falcon*, pr. 1879, pb. 1884 (one act)  
*Becket*, wr. 1879, pb. 1884, pr. 1893  
*The Cup*, pr. 1881, pb. 1884  
*The Foresters*, wr. 1881, pr., pb. 1892  
*The Promise of May*, pr. 1882, pb. 1886  
*The Devil and the Lady*, pb. 1930 (unfinished)

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did being named poet laureate affect the working habits of Alfred, Lord Tennyson?
- What parts of *In Memoriam* reflect Tennyson's awareness of scientific issues in his time?
- Compare Tennyson and Robert Browning as composers of dramatic monologues.
- Why is it difficult to interpret Tennyson's "Ulysses"?
- What issues of society in Tennyson's time are present in his medieval legends?
- Why will Tennyson never again be as popular as he was in his own time? Why is it likely that he will be appreciated more in the twenty-first century than he was in most of the twentieth?



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## WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

**Born:** Calcutta, India

July 18, 1811

**Died:** London, England

December 24, 1863

*More than any other writer of the nineteenth century, Thackeray presented a social history of Victorian England; *Vanity Fair* is considered to be the greatest English novel of that period.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Makepeace Thackeray (THAK-uh-ree) was born in Calcutta, India, on July 18, 1811, the son of Richmond Makepeace Thackeray, a collector for the East India Company, and Anne Becher Thackeray, whose ancestry could be traced back to a sixteenth century sheriff of London. His pampered life changed drastically when, after his father's death, Thackeray was sent to live with relatives in England to attend schools in South Hampton and Chiswick. His mother remained in Calcutta, married again, and did not join her son in England for four more years. This period of separation deeply affected Thackeray throughout the rest of his life.

In 1822, Thackeray continued his education at Charterhouse, a London public school. He was unhappy there and made little progress, for Charterhouse also proved to be a brutal place for the nearsighted boy who was poor at games. Thus, Thackeray's hatred of public schools and his critical view of a classical education were formed; later in life, this hostility softened somewhat. Charterhouse is featured in his writings, most notably as Grey Friars in *The Newcomes: Memoirs of a Most Respectable Family* (1853-1855).

Thackeray entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1829, but left only one year later to visit France. From Paris, he traveled to Germany; his happy tour there is reflected in the Pumpnickel chapters of

*Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* (1847-1848). In Weimar, he met Germany's leading man of letters, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Back in London, Thackeray's literary career began with his ownership of *The National Standard*, a weekly literary periodical. He was soon forced to abandon this project for financial reasons, partly because of poor investments and partly because of his compulsive gambling. He had, however, gained a modest entrance to London's literary world and had cultivated friendships with the poets Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Edward FitzGerald.

While at Charterhouse, Thackeray had become interested in what were to become lifelong passions—drawing and painting. With the failure of *The National Standard*, and with most of his inheritance gone, he decided to pursue these interests and went to Paris to study art. This venture proved to be unsuccessful, and to make ends meet, he became a Paris correspondent for *The Constitutional*. Thackeray met and married Isabella Shawe in 1836. The following year, when *The Constitutional* failed, the Thackerays returned to London, where three daughters, Anne, Jane (who died in infancy), and Harriet, were born.

Faced with the responsibility of providing for his family, Thackeray turned full time to professional journalism, contributing to *The Times*, *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, and *The Morning Chronicle*. His work went unsigned or was written under such pen names as Michael Angelo Titmarsh and George Fitz-Boodle.

The next few years proved to be important ones for Thackeray. In 1840, his wife went insane and required institutionalization. Parental responsibility for his daughters was assumed by Thackeray's parents, which enabled him to pursue his writing in earnest. His most significant writings at this time appeared in *Frazer's Magazine* and *Punch*. Thackeray first caught the public's eye as one of the "Fraserians" (critics of Victorian hypocrisy and pretension) with "The Yellowplush Papers," a review of a foolish book of etiquette. This Fraserian approach is also apparent in Thackeray's short novel *Catherine: A Story* (1839-1840). Set in the eighteenth century, this tale of a murderess is based upon an actual event. It is a satirical attack upon the Newgate School of novelists, who glorified the lives of criminals. *Catherine* is an important work in Thackeray's career, for it marks the beginning of his fascination with the artificial life of that period. His first full-length novel, *The Luck of Barry Lyndon: A Romance of the Last Century* (1844), also had a romanticized criminal as a hero.

Literary success came slowly to Thackeray. *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843), an entertaining personal record of a stay in Ireland, bears his signature for the first time. The "Snob Papers," issued in *Punch*, finally brought him fame. In January, 1844, *Vanity Fair*, with illustrations by the author, began to appear in monthly installments, and Thackeray had taken his place alongside other well-respected writers of the period.

Thackeray's greatest distinction was as a novelist, but he was also an essayist and lecturer. In 1851, he began lecturing on "The English Humourists," traveling the following year to the United States, where he was a great success. *The History of Henry Esmond, Esquire, a Colonel in the Service of Her Majesty Q. Anne* (hereinafter referred to as *Henry Esmond*), was published in three volumes in 1852 and revealed his style at its perfection—less powerful than *Vanity Fair*, but much more compassionate. In it, the author's long, platonic affair with Jane Brookfield is reproduced. *The Newcomes* was published in 1853-1855, and a second lecture tour of the United States soon followed. This time Thackeray spoke on the "Four Georges," an indictment of the House of Hanover.

After his second American tour, Thackeray published *The Virginians: A Tale of the Last Century* (1857-1859). He became the editor of *Cornhill Mag-*

*azine* in 1860 and served as such until poor health forced him to retire in 1862. His last novel, *Denis Duval*, though unfinished, appeared in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1864. Thackeray died on December 24, 1863, in London and is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery.

## ANALYSIS

Thackeray's literary significance lies in his contribution to the development of the novel. His reflections upon Victorian England through the use of an intrusive narrator became a new form of fiction, and his sprawling panoramas of eighteenth century England give the reader a psychological treatise of the times. The slow, satiric revelation of his characters and the realistic analysis of topics that other Victorian writers avoided, told in the form of a memoir by a witty, caustic observer, laid the groundwork for the psychological realism of Henry James; Thackeray's experiments with the generational form presaged the works of John Galsworthy.

Thackeray's writing can be divided into four distinct periods. The first, from 1837 to 1843, was a period in which he exercised an almost passionate vigor to point out where society had gone wrong. He places himself outside his writing through his superior attitude toward his characters, lower-class subjects whom he treats in the most disparaging manner conceivable. There is a glimmer of the Thackeray yet to come when he shifts his focus to the middle class, and when, in *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841; later published as *The Great Hoggarty Diamond*, 1848), he presents the likable Sam Titmarsh. Thackeray cast himself as Titmarsh, thereby indicating his concern about class. This concern was to dominate his writing.

Thackeray was unsure about his own place in the rigid English social system. He thus adopted a jauntily unpretentious persona in his social fictions. He developed a talent for the burlesque and began to attack other writers, ridiculing military adventure novels, satirically attacking the Newgate School, and portraying his fascination with the Europe of that time.

The years 1843 to 1848 marked a significant change in Thackeray's development as a writer. His personal involvement in his works became more apparent, and his association with *Punch* height-



ened his understanding of society's injustices. During this period, Thackeray wrote a series of short stories, *Men's Wives* (1843), that illustrate his misgivings about women and marriage. Along these same lines, he wrote several other pieces. One of particular note, "Bluebeard's Ghost," is the tale of a young widow's devotion to her dead partner; in it, Thackeray's love for Jane Brookfield and his jealousy of her fidelity to her husband are clear. The opulence of the eighteenth century, the lives of rogues, the education of gentlemen, and the presence of doting mothers blend in his best work of these middle years, *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*. Although the theme of the novel is social pretension, it is also a deliberate spoof of popular historical, crime, and romantic novels. *The Snobs of England, by One of Themselves* (1846-1874; later published as *The Book of Snobs*, 1848, 1852) is Thackeray's classic assault on pretentiousness. His message is that the remedy for social ills is social equality.

Thackeray's first great novel, *Vanity Fair*, marks the beginning of his literary acclaim. The title, taken from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684), and Thackeray's preface reveal the moral purpose behind his satire.

*The History of Pendennis: His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy* (1848-1850) is an important book in any study of Thackeray's technique, as it presents the background for the persona who was to narrate *The Newcomes* and as it shows Thackeray's struggles with Victorian priggishness. In both *The History of Pendennis* and *The Newcomes*, Thackeray's satirical edge had disappeared. His retreat from satire was quite deliberate; he wanted to appeal instead to the hearts and souls of his reading public. In subject matter the two novels are similar: Each concerns the styles and conventions that separate people from one another. *The Newcomes*, however, illustrates better than *The History of Pendennis* the discursive style that Thackeray adopted in all of his novels—the roundabout manner of narration, the slipping back and forth in time, and the interpolations.

In 1852, Thackeray published what he considered to be his best piece of writing, *Henry Esmond*. The novel may be read on many levels—as a historical fiction, as a novel of manners, and as a romance. *The Virginians* continues the story with Henry Esmond's grandsons, who are born in America. Of all Thackeray's novels, it is the least successful. In it,

Thackeray's eighteenth century scenario has lost its appeal: The courtliness, brawling, drinking, and gambling are seen as tedious even by its chronicler. Thackeray was sick of writing novels, and he admits to this in book 1, chapter 18.

Thackeray's writings constitute a vast imaginative enterprise. For the first time, his panoramic realism gave readers of English literature a sense of living in a distinct yet diverse world. His works offer page after page of sometimes caustic, sometimes playful, sometimes serious, sometimes contemplative, and sometimes hasty observations, all written in his brilliant but seemingly discursive, careless manner, which has come to be known as Thackerayan.

## VANITY FAIR

**First published:** 1847-1848

**Type of work:** Novel

*Becky Sharp ambitiously climbs her way to wealth and social position.*

*Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* is Thackeray's best-known work, and it established his reputation as a master of social satire. The title is taken from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and it is, as Thackeray reveals in the preface, in the same manner a frankly moralistic novel. Posing as the Manager of the Performance, he reminds his readers to avoid simply passing through the emblematic *Vanity Fair* and to experience it in a "contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind," for everyone, including the author, is a part of the fair.

Thackeray's intrusive comments serve the purpose of distancing the reader from the characters, thereby forcing the reader to judge not only the "puppets" but also himself or herself. Thus, the reader cannot feel simple approval or disapproval for any of the main figures, least of all for Becky Sharp, the best character that Thackeray ever created. Indeed, Becky is clever, underprivileged, and courageous; she is also heartless, selfish, and amoral. She takes advantage of the gentle nature of her school friend Amelia Sedley and literally stalks Amelia's brother Jos as a husband who could give her wealth and social position. In characteristic Thackerayan style, Becky's plans are foiled through no fault of her own, and Jos returns to India still a

bachelor. Thus, the vicissitudes of life, over which Thackeray's characters have no control, sustain the story and propel Becky into one adventure after another.

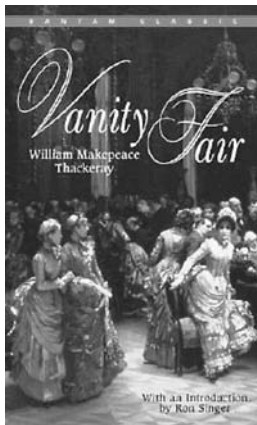
Forced to earn an income, Becky takes a position as a governess for the household of Sir Pit Crawley. At Queen's Crawley, Thackeray begins to introduce the crowd of minor figures that populates the novel and whose purpose it is to authenticate the sprawling, wandering plot and emphasize the profuse and disorganized world in which both the characters and the readers live. The best example of these minor characters occurs in chapter 47 with the Gaunt family, which is given a history; Thackeray even describes Gaunt Square, with its statue of Lord Gaunt.

In Becky and her quest to gain entry into the rich and pretentious life of the upper class, Thackeray expresses his resentment against English society. Becky makes fools of the pretentiously proud Crawleys and triumphs over the aristocratic Bareacres. Her adulterous affair with Lord Steyne and her murder of Jos Sedley (if she is indeed guilty) are far less damning in the reader's eyes than her lack of motherly love. That same motherly love is Amelia Sedley's only virtue. Other than that, Amelia is absolutely vapid. Her self-indulgent devotion to her dead husband's (George Osbourne's)

memory and her unworthy attitude toward Captain William Dobbin are irritating. That Thackeray focuses upon Amelia's motherly love, however, suggests Thackeray's childhood and his separation from his mother at such an early age and reveals the systematic thought that underlies all of his works.

In the end, Becky is reunited with the unsuspecting Jos, and although

she cannot obtain a divorce from Rawdon Crawley, they live as man and wife. Upon Jos's suspicious death, Becky receives a considerable insurance payment and spends the rest of her life as a virtuous widow with a reputation for benevolence and generosity.



If, then, everyone is a part of the vanity fair, to condemn Becky or any of the other characters is to condemn oneself. As the puppets are put back in the box, Thackeray suggests that the best that can be expected is to possess charity toward others and to care for others as one cares for oneself. Otherwise, all is vanity.

## THE HISTORY OF HENRY ESMOND, ESQUIRE

**First published:** 1852

**Type of work:** Novel

*Amid historical events of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a man struggles with his love of two women.*

*The History of Henry Esmond, Esquire, a Colonel in the Service of Her Majesty Q. Anne*, is the book that Thackeray considered to be his best piece of writing. Set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it presents history as Thackeray thought it should be presented. That Thackeray did not have a high opinion of the historians of his time precludes the blend of fact and fiction in this gentleman's memoir. Henry Esmond tells his own story, which is meant to be the hero's autobiography. Thackeray's blend of the relationships of private manners and historical events is characteristic of most of his other works, and the false pathos of the artificial, self-imagined hero collapses when everything is viewed from the porch of everyday life.

Henry Esmond grew up at Castlewood under the guardianship of Thomas Esmond, Viscount Castlewood. Henry was aware of some mystery concerning his birth, and he vaguely remembered living as a very young child with weavers who spoke a language other than English. When the viscount met his death at the battle of the Boyne, young Henry was cared for by his new guardians and distant cousins, Francis and Rachel Esmond, and their children, Beatrix and Frank. Thus begins the major thematic integration of the novel: Henry's love of two women, of Rachel, the loveliest woman he had ever seen, and of Beatrix, her daughter, for whom his courtship becomes almost tedious to the reader.

*Henry Esmond* reflects a very personal part of

Thackeray's own life. His wife, Isabella, was institutionalized for insanity in 1840, leaving him bereft of a family life, something that was very important to Thackeray. As a result of this, he became enamored of the already married Jane Brookfield, but this relationship became a drawn-out platonic affair. While he was writing *Henry Esmond*, Thackeray's love for her came to a sad crisis in September, 1851. His letters of the time indicate his painful feelings during this period,

which greatly affected the tone of this "grave and sad" book.

*Henry Esmond* introduces Thackeray's readers to yet another Victorian fantasy world, much as *Vanity Fair* had done. First, the sexual theme begins when Henry, twelve years old, sees Rachel for the first time. He loves her as a son would, and he identifies her as his surrogate mother. As time passes, the relative ages of son and mother are reversed, and Henry becomes her "tutor"; he appears to be "older" than her, and by book 3, chapter 4, he feels as if he is her "grandfather." Thus, when Henry's love for Beatrix, who is one of the most fascinating women in all of English literature, is dead at last, the reader should not be surprised when Henry at thirty-five, marries Rachel, who is forty-three and, the reader is assured, looks younger than her own daughter.

There is something obviously Oedipal in this relationship, and Thackeray's almost reverential worship of his mother comes to the surface in *Henry Esmond*. Critics and his reading public alike were

quick to sense something was amiss, and charges of incest were levied at the protagonist, Henry Esmond.

The second theme of the story is also a fantasy. When Henry discovers that he is the real Lord Castlewood, the legitimate son of the viscount, he, out of consideration for Rachel, conceals his identity so that she and her children will not be disinherited. When the truth is finally revealed, the aristocrats who have slighted him do him homage. Even Beatrix, previously scornful of the humble Esmond's courtship, repents and considers it an honor to know him.

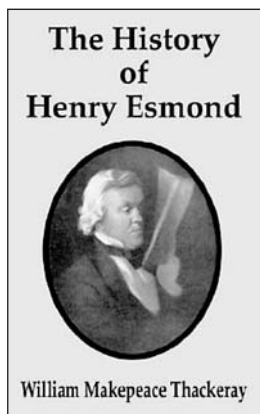
*Henry Esmond* represents, then, the culmination of middle-class wish fulfillment. Its hero is nobler than the nobles, yet he of his own volition remains a commoner. At the end, Esmond immigrates to America, thus rejecting the institutions of the aristocracy.

## SUMMARY

Although William Makepeace Thackeray is sometimes overshadowed by his contemporaries Charles Dickens and George Eliot, his works are essential in the history of the English novel. He is the master of a slow, expository style that, for range of effect, has seldom been equaled in English. His development of the intrusive narrator and his caustic realism greatly influenced writers of later generations, especially the psychological realists.

Born between that period of notable change from the Regency to the Victorian era, Thackeray composed historical pictures that provide a social history of that time. *Vanity Fair* remains his best novel, but his collected works are necessary reading for anyone who wants to understand Victorian England.

Lela Phillips



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*The Luck of Barry Lyndon: A Romance of the Last Century, 1844* (commonly known as *Barry Lyndon*)

*Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero, 1847-1848*

*The History of Pendennis: His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy, 1848-1850*

*The History of Henry Esmond, Esquire, a Colonel in the Service of Her Majesty Q. Anne*, 1852 (3 volumes)

*The Newcomes: Memoirs of a Most Respectable Family*, 1853-1855

*The Virginians: A Tale of the Last Century*, 1857-1859

*Lovel the Widower*, 1860

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- William Makepeace Thackeray wrote much about snobbery. Was he a snob himself, particularly with reference to his early fiction?
- Two bildungsromans, Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* and Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), appeared serially at the same time. In what ways does Thackeray's novel fall short of Dickens's?
- Was Thackeray more interested in the eighteenth century than in his own century?
- What did Thackeray mean by calling *Vanity Fair* "a novel without a hero"?
- Does *Vanity Fair* have two heroines, Amelia and Becky?
- Was Henry Esmond Thackeray's ideal gentleman?

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## DYLAN THOMAS

**Born:** Swansea, Wales

October 27, 1914

**Died:** New York, New York

November 9, 1953

*Thomas is the supreme Romantic lyricist of the English language in the twentieth century, whose love of words and their musical strength gives his poetry a rhythmic power rarely equaled in the history of literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born on October 27, 1914, in the small port city of Swansea, on the South Wales coast across the Bristol Channel from Devonshire. His father, David John Thomas, was a frustrated intellectual who resented the position that he held as a local schoolmaster, which he believed was incompatible with the life of a cultivated literary gentleman. His mother, Florence Williams Thomas, was a deacon's daughter. She had no interest in literature, but she was extremely devoted to her second child, Dylan. The family lived in a relatively genteel neighborhood when Thomas was born, near the hills and rolling farm country that he was to celebrate in poems such as "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October," and within sight of the horseshoe-shaped coastline that rimmed the sea below the house. Although Thomas often felt the lure of London while living in Wales, the cultural ethos of west Wales remained one of his most important points of reference and sources of inspiration. The lyrical flow of talk in the pubs, the singing in the streets and churches, the cadences of Bible-drawn sermons spoken by local ministers who were often relatives, the feel of the rainy weather, and the look of the land all contributed to his formation as a poet.

David Thomas was determinedly agnostic, but

he often recited the Bible to his son in infancy and read him to sleep with selections from the great tradition of English literature: William Shakespeare, the Romantic poets, as well as the contemporary controversial novelist D. H. Lawrence. From the start, Thomas was relatively indifferent to all forms of public education, preferring to browse in his father's extensive library, while behaving in a prankish, mischievous fashion in class. Already verbally precocious (he saw himself as a boy who "swallowed a dictionary"), he was sent to a private school and then to the local grammar school where his father was employed.

His first poems appeared in the grammar school magazine in 1925. By 1928, he was the editor of the magazine and had begun to compile a poetry notebook that would contain in completed or rough form more than two hundred poems by 1933. As he began to think of himself as a poet, his schoolwork deteriorated to the point that he totally failed all of his Central Welsh Board examinations and left school in 1931 to take a job with the *South Wales Daily Post* as a kind of roving reporter and general gadfly. He spent a considerable amount of time with older journalists in pubs and was introduced to the drink-drenched cultural milieu that formed the center of his social life for the remainder of his years. In 1932, he became involved with the Swansea Little Theatre as an actor and writer, and by 1933, when he left the newspaper, he was living in a style that he would essentially maintain for the rest of his life. He effectively removed any impediment to his writing, including any kind of commitment

to earning a living, putting himself in the position of supplicant, which he developed into a personal skill of considerable refinement.

Thomas's disinclination to adopt "regular" hours of steady employment was as much an attempt to reserve all of his energy for writing as it was an attempt to avoid the boredom of routine and responsibility. "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" was published in the *New English Weekly* in May, 1933, his first poem to appear outside Wales, and by August of that year, he had finished twelve of the ninety poems that would eventually appear in his *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (1952). He moved into a flat in London in November, 1934, with two friends from Wales, and the next month his first book of poetry, *Eighteen Poems* (1934), was published jointly by the *Sunday Referee* magazine and the Parton Bookshop. It was followed by *Twenty-five Poems* in 1936, the year that he met Caitlin Macnamara, whom he married in July, 1937. Dylan and Caitlin lived with friends and relatives in England or Wales, or in their own apartment until funds ran out, their marriage turbulent and tempestuous from the start, their life together "raw, red bleeding meat," in Caitlin's words.

Thomas's second book had received favorable reviews, which helped to alleviate their financial difficulties. Thomas had also begun to deliver readings and broadcasts on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), but no matter how much money was available from royalties, readings, or commissions, splurges, gifts to friends, and general carelessness placed Dylan and Caitlin in perpetual financial distress. Thomas spent most of the years during World War II traveling between London and Wales, writing scripts for the BBC and working on projects for Strand Films, eventually contributing to sixteen scripts. As the war drew to a close, Thomas and his family spent time in Blaen Cwm and New Quay, concentrating on his poetry. In a burst of poetic energy, Thomas completed "Poem in October," "Fern Hill," and "In My Craft or Sullen Art," among more than a dozen of his collected poems, his last period of relatively rapid production. Many of these appeared in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), and James Laughlin's New Directions Press issued *Selected Writings of Dylan Thomas* (1946) in the United States later in the year.

Through the efforts of friends and patrons, Thomas was awarded a £150 traveling scholarship

from the Society of Authors, and he and his family spent some time in Italy, where he was limited in his socializing by the language barrier but succeeded in writing "In Country Sleep" in Florence. He completed three film scripts in 1948 and earned more than £2,400 that year, but he had never filed a tax return and found himself in a kind of perpetual debt to the Inland Revenue for the remainder of his life. Because he could count on greater earnings from his prose work, he tended to devote more time to it, and, consequently, his poetic production drastically slowed down. Since he had to spend a great deal of time on each work, he would produce only a few more poems, although these included "Poem on His Birthday" and "In the White Giant's Thigh," as well as his great villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," written in 1951 in loving tribute to his dying father.

In the hope of overcoming his financial difficulties, Thomas made his first of four trips to America in 1950. His exhausting tour of the United States spawned the legend of the wild, bawdy, drunken, raving, romantic delinquent, which made him a celebrity and eventually resulted in what Donald Hall calls "public suicide." Between tours, he began *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices* (1953, public reading; 1954, radio play; 1956, stage play; pb. 1954), saw his *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* published to exceptional reviews, and continued his contentious relationship with Caitlin. In 1953, his body finally succumbed to years of abuse, and he died in a hospital in New York on November 9.

## ANALYSIS

In an unusually candid letter to a student who asked him how he was drawn to the "craft or sullen art" of poetry, Thomas emphasized the allure of words themselves—the "shape and shade and size and noise of words as they hummed, strummed, jiggled and galloped along." Hall has called him "the maddest of word-mad young poets" and describes Thomas beginning a poem from some general idea, sense of place, or pantheistic thought and then building the poem through the sounds of words gradually arranged in the manner that satisfied his ear, as well as some deeper instinct for melody and rhythm. Caitlin Thomas recalls him struggling with single lines in his bicycle shed/studio, "balancing words, line and phrases . . . and he always did this noisily and alone in his shed, chanting

and reciting, making each sound fit."

Because of his ability to write poetry that seemed drenched in word-drunk wonder, some critics have asserted that there is no substance behind the "great lyrical voice of his time." Charles Olson, whose own work depended on a tremendous concentration of mental force, commented, "He is all language, there is no man there." Olson's critique indicates the pitfalls of depending on a sensuous linguistic surface, but, although Thomas does not always succeed in going deeper, his methods of composition depended on more than the magic of words alone. In a letter that he wrote to Pamela Hansford Johnson when he was beginning to take command of the singular voice that he possessed, he suggested that a writer worked either "'out of words' or 'in the *direction* of them,'" as if the word was the source of the idea in the poem. In a review written in 1935, he insisted that "the word is the object," not a symbol or sign of it, and even if he complained that he was "chained by syllables," he believed that both meaning and sound are bound within language, and that it was through his uses of language that human experience could be brought into poetry. While he was not always successful in capturing the "singing light"—the song and insight interlinked—his best poems combine a mastery of sound with his meditations on the central concerns of his life.

One of the most striking features of Thomas's poetry is the absence of any indication that it was written (with the exception of a few topical references) in the twentieth century. Even as Thomas took the ultimate Romantic position that his subject was himself, demanding "Man be my metaphor" and always basing his sense of the human on the "small, bone-bound island" at the center of his own universe, his treatment of the main themes of his art reached back toward some almost prehistoric, semimythic sense of universal human experience. Consequently, when he wrote about his awestruck, ecstatic delight in the presence of the infinitely appealing natural world, his perspective was similar to the rhapsodic declarations of an explorer encountering a garden of paradise. The Edenic aspects of the Welsh landscape in "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October" attest to this. Similarly, when he wrote about death as an inevitable presence in the midst of even the most youthful, vital moments of a person's existence, his poetry was

less a function of a morbid preoccupation and more a reflection of the same ardor that activated his love for language, the natural world, and other things that he appreciated with passion. The poems "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" are expressions of his inclination to sing "like the sea" even while enchained by the inexorable passage of Time; they indicate his desire to overcome what John Tytell calls "the anguish of mutability" brought on by an awareness of Time's constant measure, to which he referred as a "running grave" always with him. The tremendous energy in poems like these, or in "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," is a product of both dynamic rhythmic arrangements and Thomas's feeling that life is yet more sacred because of the inevitability of death. This kind of poem seems to have originated from a perspective prior to or beyond the era of technology.

The extreme body-consciousness and sensuality of Thomas's poetry also attest to a primal condition of apprehension. In the taut lyric "Twenty-four Years," his language bristles with the imagery of the skin, his life described as a "sensual strut," his course illuminated by the "meat-eating sun," his entrance into the world depicted as from "the groin of the natural doorway." In a letter to Johnson, Thomas wrote that what she called ugly was "nothing but the strong stressing of the physical," and that his images were drawn from "my solid and fluid world of flesh and blood." He praises John Donne's description of man as "earth of the earth" and insists that "all thoughts and actions emanate from the body." His eventual disregard for the welfare of his own body may have been as much a rebellion against limits as it was an example of wanton desecration, with his frequent references to sexual matters another illustration of an interest in the fundamental facts of human biological imperatives.

The conjunction in Thomas's poetry of what Tytell calls "dense pockets of enigmatic surrealistic imagery" wrought from "a chaotic cauldron of language" with the great human themes of Time, Death, Nature, and the skin frequently resulted in some poetic confusion. Early reviewers complained about "chaotic rhetoric" and "remarkable ineptness of technique." While some poems undoubtedly suffer from what Cid Corman calls "rid-

dled meanings compiled in stubborn binding rhythms," it is important to recognize that the obscurity was not intentional or the product of carelessness or lack of craft. Many students have noted the evidence of the numerous work sheets that demonstrate Thomas's exhausting practice of writing a line again and again, revising and adjusting until he got what he wanted. Some poems took many months, gradually growing by a line or two added in a four-hour work session. In addition, Thomas was somewhat suspicious of what he thought of as free verse and employed both orthodox metrical patterns and a system based on syllabic count but independent of a regular stress pattern. No single system worked for him, and he eventually used what Daniel Jones calls "cadenced verse," which generally featured an alternation of weak and strong stresses, but which is much more elaborate in its juxtapositions of full rhymes, half rhymes, assonances, and alliterations.

While Thomas ultimately depended on the intricate, sensitive system of his own ear-mind-heart to create the singular, distinctive rhythmic arrangements of his best work, the various designs with which he experimented provided a point of departure, or a means of entrance, and they are a testament to his familiarity with, and dedication to, the complexity of measure in its largest sense. The strongest poems justify their form by their effectiveness and singularity; the less successful ones slide toward unintelligibility or call attention to their cleverness without transcending it. Nonetheless, in almost all of his work, Thomas's total commitment to poetry—his awareness of its possibilities, his passion for its substance—remains undeniable.

### **"THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE GREEN FUSE DRIVES THE FLOWER"**

**First published:** 1933 (collected in *Eighteen Poems*, 1934)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet expresses his awe before the energizing forces of the cosmos and considers the interconnections between life and death.*

Although Thomas was not especially eager to look back on the poems of his youth, "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" was one of which he remained reasonably fond in later years. It was written in a burst of creative energy when Thomas was nineteen, possibly precipitated by the knowledge that his father had cancer and might not survive. The intensity of his feelings are captured by the propulsive power of the first line, which establishes a link between the awesome natural forces of the universe and the poetic consciousness of the young man who felt that his creative instincts were fired by the wonders of the world around him. When he declares that "the force"—a mystic surge of energy that animates and destroys—is the source of both the "green age" in which his youth glows with promise and the "wintry fever" that bends the "crooked rose," he has drawn the terms of the paradox that was to haunt him throughout his life. Even in the presence of life at its most vibrant, Thomas detected the signs of death, and the language that he uses in the poem is both destructive (dried streams, rotted roots) and fructuous (a mouth sucking life, pulsing red blood), joining the joys of passion with an anticipation of its eventual dispersal. The poet recognizes the immediacy of a moment of excitement and the realization that everything is temporary as "time has ticked a heaven round the stars."

The poem is particularly effective because both the passionate excitement and the premonition of extinction are powerfully evoked. The overwhelming rhythmic figure of the first line, typical of Thomas's ability to fashion a striking start almost impossible to extend or expand, conveys the feeling of uncontrollable motion engulfing and overpowering resistance. The poet has no choice but to

submit and takes a fierce delight in his participation. Each stanza begins with a figure for this force, the third suggesting the “hand” of God, the fourth suggesting an incarnation of eternal progression. Then, the images of oblivion crowd the poet, undermining his exultation in the latent energy of the “green fuse,” Thomas’s symbol for the earth/womb at the heart of creation. Blood turns to wax, the wind stirs a shroud, the clay (body) of the poet anticipates its eventual decay. The result of the juxtaposition of the dynamic and the arresting leads to a confusion that Thomas describes as an inability to say or speak (“And I am dumb”), an additional aspect of the paradox since the protestation of dumbness occurs in the poem to declare its condition. In response to the poet’s proclamation of his difficulties in finding a language to describe the process of deterioration—an understandable situation since he directly experiences the life-giving component of the force but can only imagine its shattering side—a metaphysical tableau develops in the fourth stanza, which seems to suggest that some version of “Love” will ameliorate the effects of time’s passage.

Since the poem is an investigation of the poet’s involvement with the mysteries of existence, the language that engages these forces is more important than an explanation of their origins. The deft use of sound for emphasis, from the alliteration and repetition in the first line to the use of slant rhyme (sucks/wax/rocks; head/blood; sores/stars; womb/worm) to the rhythmic pulsation produced by the summary phrase, “And I,” is evidence of Thomas’s ability to make poetry that is intensely alive on the tongue and true to the emotional energy that drew it forth.

### “TWENTY-FOUR YEARS”

**First published:** 1938 (collected in *Selected Poems, 1934-1952*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet contemplates the inevitability of death and sets against it the eternal power of art, which animates his existence.*

Because of his almost obsessive preoccupation with death, each birthday was a milestone that

called for a celebration, and on several occasions Thomas composed a poem that expresses his sense of where he stood as a man and an artist. “Twenty-four Years” is his earliest significant version of this celebratory mode, and it is full of both the exuberance of early manhood and his already familiar feeling that death was imminent. As Paul Ferris describes it, the poem is like an abrupt telegram in which a density of texture leads to a compactness that makes each line and image bristle with evocative power. The pattern of the poem is based on the oppositional tension that Thomas believed made a poem noteworthy, and the intermixture of life-enhancing and death-haunted declarations generates the tremendous energy that drives the poem (and the poet) on a journey toward “forever.”

The first two lines are self-enclosed assertions of the poet’s condition at the moment of creation. Thomas summarizes his life initially by epitomizing its somber qualities and stresses their importance by citing them as a constant source of sadness. Next, struggling to control his fears, he inserts as a chorus/comment the injunction to “bury the dead” so that their shade will not overwhelm everything else. There is a biblical echo in the second line as well, a suggestion that the prospect of death requires sympathy and compassion for a common human dread. Then, in a dynamic reversal of tone, Thomas matches the rhythms of the long second line with a sudden shift to the procreative, placing himself, in an echo of his birth, on the threshold of a poetic path or life journey. In a riveting image, he sees the young poet “crouched” in a posture of readiness, prepared to leap into the light (one of his figures for creative work) of a “meat-eating sun.” His location at the “groin of the natural doorway” fuses the sexual with the poetic; but the fecundity of this conception is immediately undermined by the comparison that the poet crouches “like a tailor/ sewing a shroud”—that is, already preparing, at least subconsciously, for his demise since the light cast by the “meat-eating sun” has the potential for destruction, as well as for creation.

There follows a slight pause, although the poem does not typographically indicate its necessity. The syntax, however, compels a degree of reflective hesitancy before the poet continues his portrait. Although he is “dressed to die,” his poetic life is almost arrogantly portrayed as a “sensual strut” in defiance of the aforementioned dead who “walk to



the grave in labour.” Thomas often uses the word “labor” to connote some kind of burden, and he is calling for a proud stride. The tone of confidence, even brashness, is continued by his claim that his “red veins” are “full of money.” The poet is mocking his recognition that he would never have enough money from his poetry to live as he wished. He is also asserting that, in some utopian situation, “the elementary town,” he could properly profit from his craft. The last lines of the poem extend this note of optimistic idealism. Calling his life/work an “advance,” he insists that its “final direction” or ultimate goal is the time-defying, death-delaying of “forever.” Whether this is a prediction, a plea, or just a series of bold words to combat his fear, the calm measure of certitude substantiates the artist’s claims to be moving in the direction of eternity.

### “POEM IN OCTOBER”

**First published:** 1945 (collected in *Selected Poems, 1934-1952*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet seeks an appropriate arena in which to celebrate his birthday and recalls the delight that he took in the natural world as a boy.*

Thomas wrote very few poems between the taut lyric of “Twenty-four Years,” which marked “my birthday just arriving,” and his famous celebration of what he designated his “thirtieth year to heaven”—the “Poem in October.” In the intervening years of World War II, he was involved with film work in London, and he found that he was generally unable to compose poetry anywhere else but in the familiar home ground of his west Wales landscape. He began the poem in 1941, writing to his friend Vernon Watkins that the first line would be, “It was my twenty-seventh year to heaven” (using one syllable too many, as he must have sensed). He did not, however, complete it until he was again living in the cottage in Blaen Cwm, where he had written poetry since childhood.

During the summer of 1944, when he also wrote “Ceremony After a Fire Raid,” “New Quay,” and “Fern Hill,” Thomas had reached a kind of mid-

point in his life and realized that his tremendous excitement and feeling of wholeness in observation of the realm of nature might be receding beyond recollection. Both as a means of fixing this feeling permanently and as a strategy to remain in contact with one of the originating forces of his artistic passion, Thomas wrote what Donald Hall has called “a long and gorgeous rendition of weather and landscape, bird and water.” What makes the poem so successful is the fact that the familiar sentiments of a very common human emotion have been placed in a form that is uniquely Thomas’s, and that the rhapsodic language at which Thomas excelled has rarely been as well suited to a subject.

There are two specific features of Thomas’s style of composition notable in the poem. The first is his manner of constructing a frame in which details accumulate gradually while the narrative consciousness of the poet remains at a distance; then, when the full dimensions of the image have been developed, the poet’s perspective on the scene is introduced. In the first stanza, Thomas follows the opening declaration (“my thirtieth year”) with a series of sounds that are an invitation to the poet to join the waking world. Then, after the features of the harbor town have been recorded, Thomas gathers the poet, who has already expressed a proprietary interest by the use of the word “my” in the first and second line, into the scene in an immediate present narrative by summarizing “Myself to set foot/ that second” as he sets forth. This technique is used in many of the following stanzas, which are actually written as an extended, continuing line broken by divisions into separate subunits.

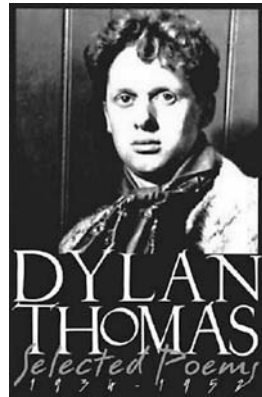
The second feature is Thomas’s use of a kind of compound adjective, as in the well-known description of the seacoast as the “heron priested shore” where the “net webbed wall” marks the boundary of land and water. In later stanzas, he continues this practice with such figures as the “rain wringing wind” and a “lark full cloud” or a “blue altered sky”—the latter figure including a double meaning recalling his lyric beginning in “Altarwise by Owl-Light.”

The long rhythms of each stanza contribute to a song effect in which the interplay of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance within the line help to maintain a high energy level; each linguistic device is like a chime in a series of sonic highlights. The frequency of these sound pulses parallels the surges

of excitement that the poet feels as he is overwhelmed by a display of nature's infinite variety, a phenomenon that he regards as a personal benediction, as if all he sees is a tribute to his being. "My birthday began," he starts the second stanza, as if the world is on show for him, and his description of an ascent from the harbor to the "hill's shoulder" is presented as a climb from birth through a life of "fond climates and sweet singers" toward a summit envisioned as a "wonder of summer."

The action of the poem in the first three stanzas proceeds upward beneath a "springful of larks in a rolling/ Cloud" in a journey that approximates Thomas's life before the intrusion of adult consciousness into the child's world of pure wonder. From the "parables/ Of sun light" through "twice told fields of infancy," Thomas's expressions of "the truth of his joy" as a youth are rendered with a purity of recall that places no distance between the sensation of the experience and its recreation in the poem. Then, in a pivotal middle (fourth) stanza, there is a sudden shift as "the weather turned around." From this point, the recall of the adult is more like a review, in which the experience is seen again through the double perspective of the adult reflecting on the child's experiences. The motion now is reversed, so that the child begins to recede into memory. The focus of the second part of the poem is less a descent (for a youth, in the "sun born over and over," as Thomas puts it in "Fern Hill," there is no summit, merely the possibility of going higher). It is more an awareness now of precipitous possibilities. The goal of the adult poet is to keep the summit in sight.

The turning of the weather parallels the change of seasons from summer to autumn, indicating the passage to the poet's maturity that has occurred in the span of poetic time. There is also an added ele-



ment of poignancy in the poet's recollections, because his awareness of death and time makes him even more sensitive to the temporary beauty of the natural world. The "twice told fields of infancy" relived in the double vision of the man in his thirtieth year permit the poet legitimately to claim of the boy that "his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine." The images of the poem wrought in Thomas's highly charged lyric language are a proof of this sentiment, a convincing demonstration through poetic art that "the mystery/ Sang alive/ Still." This peak of emotion is followed by a pause of reflection. The poet repeats that, amid his recapitulation of the marvelous, "the weather turned around," but that the poem itself has been the occasion for the "long dead child" to emerge and sing "burning in the sun" of a youth temporarily regained. As the poem concludes, Thomas fuses the two moments that he has celebrated, his "thirtieth year to heaven" and his "summer noon," by syntactically pulling the present and the past together. He revivifies the experience of the moment by describing the "town below . . . leaved with October blood"; the autumnal phase of the poet's life is still colored with the passion of creative action.

The final line is a universal prayer for favor and continuance from the forces of the universe. Yielding completely to the ultra-Romantic spirit of the poem, Thomas begins the last line (which is divided into a triad) with the unabashed "O" of countless effusions of feeling. His fervent wish is that his "heart's truth"—the sum of his desire as a man and a poet—will still be sufficient cause for him to "sing" (that is, to write poetry) from a position of strength and confidence ("on this high hill") when another year has passed. There is more than irony in this last wish, since Thomas often stated his fears that his days would be short. In accordance with the mood of the entire poem, he has let the "long dead child" speak at the close. Knowing quite well that he was enchained by circumstance and temperament, he could still choose, as he put it in his other great pastoral celebration of the same year, "Fern Hill," to "sing like the sea."

## **“IN MY CRAFT OR SULLEN ART”**

**First published:** 1945 (collected in *Selected Poems, 1934-1952*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet explains the conditions of composition and for whom he writes.*

Along with the prologue that he wrote for the first edition of his *Collected Poems, 1934-1952* (1952), “In My Craft or Sullen Art” is a carefully designed declaration by Thomas of what he wanted the future to think of him as a poet. The conscious intent to shape his persona, however, does not betray his real convictions, though it tends to direct the reader toward certain areas of concern that he preferred to emphasize. The dual focus of the first line properly stresses the care for craft and the almost mystical connection to what Hall calls “a dark river flowing down there somewhere.” Yet the use of the word “sullen” is a typically inspired choice, revealing the frustrating and unsatisfying aspects of the gift that he carried. The poem continues with the conventional Romantic emblem of the artist at work by night, his passion an antisocial one (“only the moon rages”), his energy drawn from the love/grief of humanity. It then turns abruptly to the kind of booming declaration of power that both Thomas and his audience treasured: “I labour by singing light,” he proclaims. Then, in contradiction to most of the actions of his life and most of the more honest confessions of his poetry, he insists that it is not “the strut and trade of charms” that drives him, but the heart’s truth that he has often celebrated. The mastery of rhythm and the powerful emphasis of careful rhyme are so seductive that the appealing message becomes the reality, although it is important to note that Thomas is actually speaking for some idealized poet as much as for himself.

The second stanza, which, like the first, is as much one long flowing line as it is separated shorter ones, continues the theme of the artist as social exile, denying an interest in political power (“the proud man”) or posterity (“the towering dead”), while emphasizing again the call to poetic expression that originates in the heart’s core. Using the technique of opposing forces, which he found to be one of his most successful structural devices, Thomas sets the superficial reasons for artistic endeavor in sufficiently impressive terms (“towering dead”) that his ultimate commitment to “the lovers” becomes a heroic act of humanistic compassion channeled into poetic art. The relatively unselfish nature of this choice—the lovers “pay no praise or wages/ Nor heed my craft or art”—suggests the Romantic ideal of art for art’s sake, which Thomas implies actually serves the interests of humanity in its support of “the lovers” since his craft/art springs from and validates the human need for love. As in the first stanza, the carefully controlled pattern of rhythmic emphasis and the sure ear for rhyme that makes its appearance inevitable instead of obligatory contribute to the seductive power of the song.

### **SUMMARY**

Even those writers who have strongly supported Dylan Thomas’s work have had their reservations about his accomplishments. Yet the gradual recession of the legend of the wild bard into time and the postmodern regard for the possibilities of meaning in language beyond traditional conceptions of coherence have given Thomas’s work an enduring appeal beyond many original estimates. His great love of language and his ear for the musical, rhythmic power of words produced a body of work that has solidified his stature in the history of English literature.

*Leon Lewis*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Dylan Thomas make “Poem in October” a birthday poem for himself yet avoid egoism?
- Examine the significance of the color green in “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” and in “Fern Hill.”
- Study the relationship between the meter and the rhythm of Thomas’s poetry, especially in “Fern Hill.”
- What is a villanelle? How does this complicated poetic form contribute to “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”?
- What does the subtitle signify in Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*?
- Listen to recordings of Thomas reading his own poems and determine how much the experience expands an understanding of them.

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AP/Wide World Photos

## PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

**Born:** Blora, East Java, Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia)

February 6, 1925

**Died:** Jakarta, Indonesia

April 30, 2006

*Pramoedya Ananta Toer, a political dissident who was imprisoned both by the Dutch and by the Indonesian government after independence, wrote novels and stories examining Indonesian history with a particular focus on the colonial experience under the Dutch.*

### BIOGRAPHY

At the time of Pramoedya (pra-MEW-dee-ya) Ananta Toer's birth, the nation now known as Indonesia was called the Dutch East Indies. The archipelago, or large clustering of islands, that made up the Dutch East Indies had fallen under the domination of the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, when the Dutch East India Company had taken control of the valuable spice trade in the area. Over the course of a century and half, Dutch colonial institutions had grown, and in 1800, the islands were placed under the direct control of the government of the Netherlands.

Pramoedya, as he is called according to Indonesian style, was born on the island of Java, the most politically important part of the Indies. Pramoedya's father was director and headmaster of the Institut Boedi Oetomo (IBO), a nationalist school. Pramoedya completed his elementary education at the IBO, taking ten years to finish the seven-year course. Disagreement with his father over his education delayed him from continuing his studies, but with the help of his mother, a rice trader, he enrolled in the Radio Vocational School in Surabaya in 1940. After he finished his studies in 1941, he was drafted into the radiotelegraph division of the civil defense after the Netherlands and its colonies entered into World War II. Shortly after beginning

this work, however, the Japanese invaded Surabaya, and Pramoedya went back to Blora for a few months.

The Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia was a significant event for Pramoedya, as it was for many Asian nationalists, because a colonial power had been defeated and driven out by an Asian nation, albeit one that had its own imperialist designs. Pramoedya worked for the Japanese Domei news agency while continuing his studies.

After the defeat of Japan in 1945, the Indonesian leader Sukarno declared Indonesia's independence. The Dutch attempted to reestablish their rule, resulting in the Indonesian National Revolution, as nationalist forces under Sukarno and others fought the colonial power. Pramoedya took part in the struggle as a member of a nationalist paramilitary group, and he was therefore imprisoned by the Dutch from 1947 until independence in 1949.

During this imprisonment, he began his career as a novelist with his book *Perburuan* (1950; *The Fugitive*, 1975), which won a national literary award. During this first period of imprisonment, Pramoedya met Arfah Iljas, a young woman whom he married after his release. They had three children before their divorce in 1954. Pramoedya married again, in 1955, to Maimoenah Thamrin, and he had five more children with his second wife.

In independent Indonesia, Pramoedya joined the Marxist literary group Lekra and wrote for

newspapers and journals. He also gave lectures on literary history at the Res Publika University in Jakarta. Although Sukarno, as first president of Indonesia, generally tried to incorporate the left wing into his own political support groups, Pramoedya's criticisms of political corruption alienated Sukarno. Pramoedya was also sympathetic to the Chinese minority in Indonesia, and this gained him enemies among the military. He was briefly imprisoned for a second time, from 1960 to 1961, in Jakarta.

In 1965, the Indonesian military, led by Suharto, staged a coup, claiming that a Communist rebellion, led by elements sympathetic to China, was about to occur. Pramoedya was arrested and imprisoned from October, 1965, until December, 1979. For much of this time, he was held in the penal colony at Buru Island. There, he composed the four historical novels known as the Buru Quartet (1980-1988). He was held under town arrest following his release, and his novels continued to be banned in Indonesia even after Suharto's downfall in 1998. However, he became Indonesia's best-known writer, at home and abroad. In 2006, he died as a result of diabetes and heart disease.

### ANALYSIS

Much of Pramoedya's writing consists of the fictional investigation of Indonesian history, and it shows clear political goals. The writer was interested in teaching his readers about the history of their country and in teaching them in ways that would motivate them to act instead of simply considering historical events from a disinterested standpoint. Thus, Pramoedya's nationalist and leftist politics guided how he presented his characters and the situations that surrounded those characters. Within these political preoccupations, Pramoedya is concerned with questions about how individuals deal with competing claims on personal commitment and loyalty and about how individuals make decisions about where they should direct their loyalties.

Questions of political goals and personal commitments can be seen in Pramoedya's first major work, *The Fugitive*, written while imprisoned by the Dutch. The hero of this novel, Raden Hardo, is an Indonesian nationalist soldier who has worked with the Japanese in pushing the Dutch out of Indonesia. However, Hardo turns against the Japa-

nese and attempts to organize an anti-Japanese coup. One of his fellow conspirators betrays the plan and Hardo is forced to flee, disguised as a beggar. Returning to his home town, he finds that much has changed and that trust is difficult. He is surrounded by possible pitfalls as he attempts to hide his own identity, and those around him make their own decisions in a complex world.

Issues of goals and commitments within the larger setting of colonial history, social awareness, and political struggles shape Pramoedya's great four-book account of Indonesian history, the Buru Quartet. The first three books in this series, *Bumi manusia* (1980; *This Earth of Mankind*, 1982), *Anak semua bangsa* (1980; *Child of All Nations*, 1982), and *Jejak langkah* (1985; *Footsteps*, 1995), follow the protagonist as he gradually comes to understand the nature of colonial and political oppression and enters the struggle against these. The fourth book, *Rumah kaca* (1988; *House of Glass*, 1996), takes the perspective of a collaborator with the Dutch in order to look at colonialism from the inside. In all of these books, Pramoedya sees his own traditional, hierarchical society, with its glorified nobles and despised common people, as an internal evil that is perpetuated and made worse by foreign domination of the homeland. As the protagonist in the first three books gains his political awareness, the author intends to draw his readers along the same path and lead them to the same kind of political consciousness.

Pramoedya uses his writing as a tool for teaching about social and political issues. This has consequences for how he approaches his craft. Pramoedya wrote in Bahasa Indonesia, or Indonesian language, the dialect of Malay that is the official language of Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia is not the first language of most people in Indonesia. The people of Java, for example, will most often speak Javanese in their homes, although Indonesian is the language they will generally hear in the media and the one they will use in speaking with people from other parts of the nation, in which more than three hundred first languages are spoken. Thus, the very language that Pramoedya chose to use was a statement and an act of nation-building.

The writing style in Pramoedya's work tends to be relatively simple and straightforward. The emphasis is not on elegance or on complexity of sentence structure but on the meaning and on the

stories. Although he was involved with literary organizations for much of his life, he did not write for other writers but for his readers. Given the fact that he wrote in the Indonesian language, which is popularly understood only in Indonesia and Malaysia, he was clearly not originally aiming at the worldwide readership he later reached but at people in his own part of the world.

The author's approach to fiction can be identified as realism or social realism. While he was concerned with the psychological dimension of life, his primary concern was with the portrayal of people in social situations and of the struggle among nations and among social classes. He sees a goal of a better society as a point toward which the struggle is moving and as the primary rationale for his own literary efforts.

Pramoedya is at his best in bringing Indonesian history to life and in dramatizing the evils of feudalism and colonialism. He is a skilled storyteller, and readers can easily imagine him recounting tales for his fellow prisoners during his years of imprisonment. Even in his best work, though, characterization is not one of his strong points, and the people in his novels sometimes seem to have no more depth than the puppets in an Indonesian *wayang* (shadow-puppet) play. At their strongest, his characters can dramatize the complex problems of people making decisions about difficult social and political issues. At their weakest, the characters may lapse into becoming mere symbols or mechanisms for teaching partisan history lessons.

## THIS EARTH OF MANKIND

**First published:** *Bumi manusia*, 1980  
(English translation, 1982)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The story of the political awakening of Minke, a young Javanese from the lower nobility, who attends a Dutch school and gradually becomes aware of the injustice of his own society, as well as the injustice of Dutch colonialism.*

*This Earth of Mankind* was the first novel in the Buru Quartet, a series of historical novels that Pramoedya composed while in the Buru penal col-

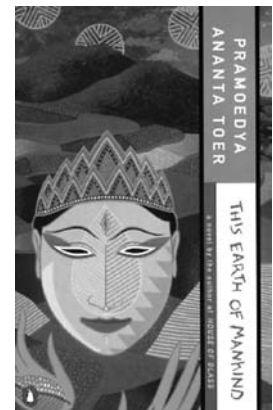
ony. It opens Pramoedya's fictionalized history of the end of Dutch rule in Indonesia. The hero of the novel, a youth named Minke, is from a minor aristocratic family of Java. Minke has aspirations to be a writer, and a number of his works have been published in Dutch-language periodicals. His talents and his somewhat privileged social position have enabled him to attend a high school where all of the other students are of at least partly European ancestry. The snobberies and rejections Minke experiences at the high school begin his movement toward an awareness of colonial inequality, and they also give Pramoedya a means of dramatizing this inequality for readers of the novel.

Minke becomes acquainted with an Indonesian woman named Nyai Ontosoroh. She occupies a position at the margins of both Indonesian and colonial Dutch society because she is the concubine of a Dutch man, Herman Mellema. The Indonesians look down on Nyai Ontosoroh as a concubine. For the Dutch, she can never be a wife or hold a recognized position in the household.

Nyai runs a dairy business and has two half-European children by Herman Mellema, a son, Robert, and a daughter, Annalies. Robert comes to hate Minke, but Minke falls in love with Annalies. He also forms a close bond with the mother, and Nyai urges Minke to follow his own ambitions and become a writer.

Minke and Annalies marry, but Herman Mellema decides to acknowledge his children. While this saves them from being condemned to be natives, it also means that Nyai loses all control over her own children. Annalies is taken away from Minke, their marriage not recognized by Dutch law, and she is sent to the Netherlands to live with her Dutch relatives. When Annalies dies, this is the great tragedy of Minke's life, but it is also a stage in his growing understanding of the world around him.

The two books that follow *This Earth of Mankind* in the Buru Quartet, *Child of All Nations* and *Footsteps*, continue the story of Minke. He begins to



write in Malay (Indonesian), rather than Dutch, and he learns about events in the wider world, particularly the emergence of Japan as a world power. He marries a second time, to a Chinese woman. He founds a native organization and a nationalist newspaper. In the final book of the quartet, *House of Glass*, Minke appears as an opposition leader, but the story is told from the point of view of Pangemanann, an Indonesian with a European education who is charged with destroying opposition movements.

## THE GIRL FROM THE COAST

**First published:** *Gadis Pantai*, 1987 (English translation, 1991)

**Type of work:** Novel

*The tragic story of a beautiful village girl who is forced to become the "practice wife" of a powerful aristocrat.*

The central character of *The Girl from the Coast* was based on Pramoedya's grandmother. This girl, never identified by name, lives with her parents in a fishing village on the coast of Java. When she is fourteen, word of her beauty reaches the local bendoro, a Javanese aristocrat in the service of the Dutch colonial overlords. The nobleman sends word to her family that she is to become his wife. Filled with hope for their daughter's future, her mother and father agree to have her married in a ceremony in which the groom is absent and is represented by a dagger.

The parents accompany their child to the great man's house in the city. There, they find a disturbing omen of their daughter's future. A servant is caring for a baby, the child of a previous wife who had been divorced and dismissed at the bendoro's whim.

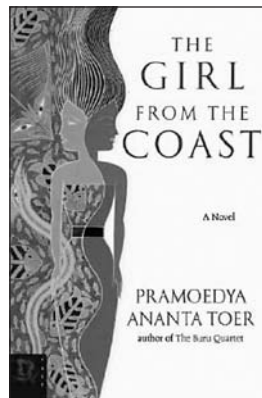
The servant, Mbok, becomes the personal servant and caretaker of the girl. The girl grows to de-

pend on Mbok, who tells her stories and gives her advice on adjusting to the strange ways of the aristocracy. Among the stories is Mbok's own tale of how she and her husband were taken away from their village by the Dutch to work on a plantation. After the pregnant Mbok had been kicked in the stomach by a foreman, killing the unborn child, her husband ran amok and was killed by soldiers. Jailed and then let go to fend for herself, Mbok had eventually ended up in the service of the bendoro. Mbok is sympathetic to the girl, but also aware of her own complete dependence on her employer. Mbok's integrity, courage, and care for the girl lead to the servant's downfall.

After some of the male relatives of the bendoro, who live in the house, help the girl clean her room, the girl's wallet proves to be missing. She is distraught, since this wallet contained money for household expenses. When the relatives respond to Mbok's inquiry with contempt, Mbok brings the matter before the bendoro. The lord discovers the thief and orders him to leave the house, but Mbok is also dismissed. She had dared to accuse a superior and can no longer remain.

Without Mbok, the girl is alone. A new servant, Mardinah, arrives, but Mardinah is a sinister figure. A relative of the bendoro, Mardinah, who is the same age as the girl, has already been divorced. Unlike Mbok, Mardinah refuses to treat the girl as a superior and is often rude. The bendoro encourages the girl to return to her village to visit her parents. Although she does not want to bring Mardinah with her, she does so on the bendoro's insistence.

In the village, the girl finds that the other villagers and even her own parents keep their distance from her and treat her as a member of the nobility. In a bizarre sequence of events, the villagers discover that a woman who has been living in the village is actually a man. Further investigation reveals that the supposed woman is actually a man, who turns out to be the brother of Mardinah, stationed in the village as a spy. Mardinah's bodyguards are found to be planning to murder the girl on their return from the village. Mardinah herself had planned this improbable murder to help the regent in her town of Demak, who wanted to marry his daughter to the bendoro. After Mardinah's confession, she is married to Dul, the village good-for-nothing, storyteller, and tambourine player. The bodyguards are led out to sea, on the



pretense of saving them from attacking pirates, and drowned.

The girl returns to the house of the bendoro. She becomes pregnant and bears a daughter. The daughter, however, is the child of her noble father, and the new mother has no right to the baby. Having finally decided to take a real wife of his own social class, the bendoro orders his practice wife to leave. When she refuses to abandon her child, he beats her and has his servants force her out the gate. For a month afterward, a carriage passes by the gate and someone looks from behind the carriage curtain at the bendoro's mansion.

The Indonesian version of the novel ends with the figure in the carriage. For the English-language reader, however, Pramoedya added an epilogue to take the place of the two lost sequels and to give this surviving work a more satisfactory ending. In the epilogue to this English version, the daughter of the girl, named Sa'idah, grows up in the home of the bendoro and receives an education. At the age of eighteen, almost past marriageable age for an Indonesian woman of her era, Sa'idah becomes involved with an older schoolmaster by the name of Mas Toer, enabling readers to understand that this is a fictionalized version of Pramoedya's family history.

## THE MUTE'S SOLILOQUY

**First published:** *Nyanyi sunyi seorang bisu*, 1995-1997 (English translation, 1999)

**Type of work:** Memoir

*A collection of essays, letters, and notes written by Pramoedya during his imprisonment on Buru Island.*

During his years of imprisonment, Pramoedya kept a number of secret written documents. These

were written quickly and most of the letters he wrote were never sent, not even the letters to his own children, because he had to keep them hidden from the authorities. These documents, collected in *The Mute's Soliloquy*, are not polished pieces of writing, but they have an immediacy that comes from being jotted down as testaments to reflection under the most adverse conditions.

Pramoedya divided the collection into four parts, or chapters. The first, entitled "The Mystery of Exile," deals with the condition of exile in general and with Pramoedya's own imprisonment. The second, "Fragments of My Life," contains autobiographical jottings. One of the most interesting passages in this section, written as a letter, deals with the time he worked for the Japanese during World War II and how this work affected his thinking about Indonesian independence. The third, "Lessons for My Children," consists of letters and fragments of letters containing lessons he would like to have been able to teach to his own children. The final, "Deliverance," contains thoughts written while Pramoedya was waiting for release from prison and his memorial to the dead and the missing from the prison camps.

## SUMMARY

Pramoedya Ananta Toer's writing is social and historical in its orientation. He was concerned with questions of inequality and injustice resulting from colonialism and from the feudalism of traditional societies. Nearly all of Pramoedya's fiction and nonfiction dealt with Indonesian nationalism and with the struggle against foreign and native oppressors. Pramoedya was politically engaged for most of his own life and spent years in a prison camp, where he composed his best-known work, the *Buru Quartet*. His own life as a political writer and his family history furnished him with much of the material for his literature.

Carl L. Bankston III



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novels dealt with Dutch colonialism, but he spent much of his life imprisoned by the government of an independent Indonesia. What historical connections might he have made between colonialism and the Indonesian government that followed colonialism?
- Pramoedya's first novel, his well-known quartet of novels, and the papers collected in *The Mute's Soliloquy* were all written while imprisoned. How do you think imprisonment affected the writer's style and his choice of subjects?
- Does Pramoedya seem to be optimistic about the future of his own country and about the future of humanity, in spite of his sufferings? Why or why not?
- How do characters such as Nyai Ontoso-roh and the girl in *The Girl from the Coast* reject the traditional roles of women?
- How does Pramoedya use fictional characters to bring Indonesian history alive?



Courtesy, Houghton Mifflin Company

## J. R. R. TOLKIEN

**Born:** Bloemfontein, South Africa

January 3, 1892

**Died:** Bournemouth, England

September 2, 1973

*Although popularly known as a fantasy novelist, Tolkien was also an important scholar of medieval English literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (TAHL-keen) was born on January 3, 1892, in Bloemfontein, South Africa, to Arthur and Mabel Suffield Tolkien. His brother, Hilary, was born in 1894. Arthur Tolkien had immigrated to South Africa from England to head a bank and remained behind in 1895 when his family returned to England because of Ronald's health. Arthur's sudden death left the family near poverty. At first, Mabel Tolkien lived outside Birmingham in the country, which delighted both boys, and she educated the children at home. In 1900, against family tradition, she converted to Catholicism with her children. Most of Tolkien's school education was at his father's old preparatory school in Birmingham, where he excelled in languages.

In November, 1904, after a year of illness, Mabel Tolkien died from diabetes. A family friend, Father Francis Morgan, became the boys' guardian. Tolkien continued to develop an interest in languages and literature. He met with school friends regularly to discuss their reading, including the Norse sagas whose spirit lies behind his fiction. After initially failing a scholarship examination, perhaps because of his friendship with Edith Bratt, whom he later married, Tolkien won a scholarship to Exeter College, Oxford, which he entered in 1911.

Morgan forcibly ended the relationship, extracting a promise from Tolkien not to see Edith until he was twenty-one.

In his first undergraduate years, he neglected Latin and Greek to study other languages, and consequently, after unimpressive examinations, he transferred to English studies. In early 1913, he was reunited with Edith, and they became engaged; she converted to Roman Catholicism. Tolkien continued his studies as World War I began, but entered military training with the University Officers' Training Corps. About the same time, he also composed some of the poetry included in *The Silmarillion* (1977). He was graduated in 1915 with first class honors in English and a second lieutenancy. Before departing for military service in France in 1916, he married Edith. Although uninjured, by November Tolkien had returned to England with a persistent fever. He continued to build the mythology of Middle-earth and to invent its language while convalescing. In November, 1917, the Tolkiens had their first child.

After a brief episode in Oxford contributing to *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1884-1928), in 1920 Tolkien began teaching at the University of Leeds. He and his wife had two more children while there, and Tolkien and E. V. Gordon produced the first modern edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925). Later that year, he was elected professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford.

Tolkien's life at Oxford was that of a typical don: tutorials, lectures, committee service, and writing. It was enlivened, in the 1920's, by another child and by his friendship with C. S. Lewis. By 1926, he had accumulated a circle of friends, The Inklings,

including Lewis, who read the Icelandic sagas together. He continued to compose stories of Middle-earth and engage in serious scholarship. He was professionally active, speaking at a number of meetings, and 1936 brought acclaim for a British Academy lecture on *Beowulf* (c. sixth century).

Tolkien, Lewis, and other colleagues met regularly from the early 1930's to listen to and discuss one another's work. In 1937, Tolkien's storytelling to his children and the encouragement of his friends in The Inklings resulted in publication of *The Hobbit*, begun in 1930. In 1938, as a follow-up to *The Hobbit*, Tolkien wrote *Farmer Giles of Ham*, but because of the war it remained unpublished until 1949. His publishers urged him to write another hobbit book, but the project slowly became enormous and complex, emerging as *The Lord of the Rings* (1955; includes *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 1954; *The Two Towers*, 1954; and *The Return of the King*, 1955).

The war years brought professional responsibilities that delayed Tolkien's writing. Delaying him, also, were painstaking habits of revision to produce a consistent text. As he labored over *The Lord of the Rings*, he also elaborated the "invented languages" created for *The Silmarillion* as he "discovered" new races in Middle-earth. A series of obstacles, including a family move to a new residence and election as the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, slowed his work.

Although a draft of *The Lord of the Rings* was substantially complete by 1947, misunderstandings and the publisher's reluctance to accept such a large work delayed acceptance until 1952. Allen & Unwin offered Tolkien an unusual profit-sharing arrangement; he accepted, and the first volume appeared in 1954. Reviews were generally either enthusiastic or sharply critical; sales far exceeded expectations. To his surprise, Tolkien's profits from the book enabled him to retire from teaching in 1959. Over the next few years emerged *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962), *Tree and Leaf* (1964, revised 1988), and *Smith of Wootton Major* (1967).

After Tolkien and his wife had spent forty-two years in Oxford, Edith's arthritis led the couple to move to Bournemouth in 1968. Tolkien continued to work on *The Silmarillion* after his wife's death in 1971, when he moved back to Merton College, Oxford, as an honorary fellow. In 1972, Queen Elizabeth II named him a Commander of the Or-

der of the British Empire, and Oxford awarded him an honorary doctorate of letters. While visiting Bournemouth in 1973, he became ill from an unsuspected ulcer, developed an infection, and died in the hospital on September 2.

Tolkien's novels gained enormous popularity after his death, and he attained an international reputation as an innovator of fantasy fiction. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was adapted for the screen in three successful and critically acclaimed films released between 2001 and 2003; the final film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, swept the 2004 Academy Awards ceremony, winning eleven Oscars, including the award for Best Picture.

## ANALYSIS

Tolkien's interest in fantasy began with his childhood curiosity about languages. Later, his professional linguistic training enabled him to create a Middle-earth in which cultural differences are significant. In the essay "On Fairy-Stories," however, he suggests what underlay this curiosity. In the traditional tales of the past, readers could explore "Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself":

The magic of Faërie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is . . . to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story.

Two key phrases, "survey the depths of space and time" and "hold communion with other living things," suggest the direction of his own fiction. He believed that imaginative participation in stories was possible only when an author invested his creation with a rich, overlaid texture of history, geography, and culture. *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifies Tolkien's intent, set as it is in a world embedded in millennia of history, enriched by an enormous variety of creatures. To borrow Tolkien's phrase, he engaged in "sub-creation":

What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator." He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what

he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.

The true extent of Tolkien’s vision lay undiscovered until the publication of *The Silmarillion*, followed by subsequent volumes of unfinished tales edited by his son Christopher. Readers glimpsed this faintly in the six appendices to *The Return of the King*, which trace events in Middle-earth back several millennia.

Tolkien discusses other “primordial desires” that fantasy may satisfy: recovery, escape, and consolation. Because fantasy allows readers to contemplate alternatives to the present, it may offer hope for change. Recovery, or “‘seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them’—as things apart from ourselves”—means recapturing the sense of wonder, dulled by familiarity, inherent in everyday life. Escape refers to the human need to escape the threat to life and humane values. By “consolation,” Tolkien suggests that stories that nurture communicate the hope that human suffering will end, that happy endings come unexpectedly, a “eucatastrophe,” a “good disaster,” providentially delivered.

This emphasis on the affective purpose of fiction separated Tolkien from contemporary stylistic experimentalists and realists. His fiction looks to the past, as is implied in an audience’s “Recovery,” their regaining something lost. Recapturing a sense of wonder in the natural world, reaffirming the values of human life, occur in examining a simpler age. In *The Lord of the Rings*, “progress,” technology, machinery, and the destruction of nature are linked to evil. Tolkien’s protagonists from another age uphold values that appear outmoded yet impart a sense of dignity, purpose, and resolve. While some readers find the heroic language and formality of epic adventures foreign, these stylistic elements seem essential to Tolkien’s imaginative purposes.

Tolkien’s reliance on Norse and Old English mythology may account for the novels’ heroic atmosphere. The names of many locations and characters and the many “manufactured” words of his fiction are borrowed from the sagas. As an example, *The Song of the Seeress*, an anonymous tenth cen-

tury Icelandic poem, contains the names of fifteen of Tolkien’s characters, including Gandalf. This reliance on the Norse sagas may also explain the “unheroic” endings of the stories once victory is accomplished. In stories such as *Beowulf*, characters always seem aware of ultimate defeat in heroic conflict. Beowulf may kill Grendel, but the dragon will await him in old age.

*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are both very traditional “quest” adventures, in which an untried or uninitiated youth leaves a protected and secure environment to make a journey. The journey may lead to treasure (*The Hobbit*) or to knowledge and glory (*The Lord of the Rings*), but tests and trials await. Success depends on making correct choices and acquiring wisdom; it may lead to disillusionment, too, and reassessment of youthful ideals. The successful return home yields both honor and the need to change the society in which one grew up. Eden does not remain Eden. This mythic pattern, that of all stories from the heroic age, Tolkien makes new in his novels.

In Tolkien’s novels, readers identify with one very ordinary figure against the backdrop of heroic adventures. Tolkien’s “hobbits” fulfill this function. Hobbits are intruders into the heroic world, with “little or no magic about them,” cheerful, youthful, and unreflective, lacking a role in the heroic past. The victories of the heroes in the foreground, however, are impossible without the actions of the hobbits. Readers may admire the heroic Aragorn, but they identify with the struggles of Frodo. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this literally becomes two stories, as Tolkien alternates between Frodo’s struggle and Aragorn’s.

Tolkien’s stories are surprisingly complex morally. In an age of adventure fiction, where personal decisions seem to have no moral consequences, all of his characters confront serious moral issues. Hobbits, in particular, are shown making consciously moral choices. Bilbo’s decisions in *The Hobbit* lead him to reject his companions’ greed, even at the cost of their friendship. Frodo’s successful quest entails physical loss and ongoing pain and humility of personal failure. Good never triumphs without cost.



## THE HOBBIT

**First published:** 1937

**Type of work:** Novel

*A band of dwarfs, one hobbit, and one magician recover the dwarfs' treasure from a dragon.*

Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, a story that has appealed to adults as well as children, provides the background to his larger work, *The Lord of the Rings*. All of these works find their place in the even larger series of stories on which Tolkien had been working from the 1920's, and which were published posthumously by his son Christopher. Tolkien peopled his stories of Middle-earth with a number of traditional fictional races, including elves, dwarfs, and trolls, as well as "orcs," goblins created by sorcery. The hobbit of the title is Bilbo Baggins, representative of a quiet, unadventurous race living in the Shire, in the west of Middle-earth. Gandalf the magician lures Bilbo, who is more adventurous than he himself thinks, into joining a group of dwarfs. They are determined to return to their home, the Lonely Mountain, kill the dragon Smaug, and recover their lost treasure and homeland.

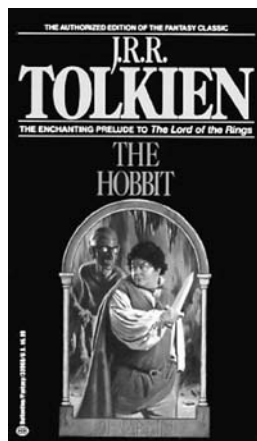
After a number of initial adventures in which Bilbo shows his resourcefulness, they are trapped in a cave by a storm in the Misty Mountains. Caught by orcs and goblins, only Gandalf's magic saves them. During their escape, Bilbo is separated from the group, knocked unconscious, and meets Gollum, a strange cave dweller. This juncture is the turning point of the story; without the help of others, Bilbo must defeat an opponent who will literally eat him if he loses. Providentially, Bilbo has found a ring that Gollum has lost, and after a riddle contest, which Bilbo wins, the hobbit can use the ring's powers of invisibility to make his escape. Eventually, Bilbo makes his way out and rejoins his companions; they continue to travel eastward. The ring proves its usefulness repeatedly on the way, as the supposedly experienced and mature dwarfs blunder into every danger they meet.

Although Tolkien plays with the elements of many serious traditional tales—magic rings, invisibility, and threatening opponents, including spiders—he creates an adventure that is generally cheerful and humorous. The ring eventually makes

the protagonists' success possible, but its use often occasions comedy. With it, Bilbo, though awestruck by events, can act decisively and courageously when necessary. One element appealing to most readers is this picture of Bilbo, neglected, disregarded, literally small, and symbolically unimaginative, triumphing over hostile elves, humans, dragons, and cranky dwarfs.

His integrity and honesty also lead to his role in mediating a serious crisis between the dwarfs and their human neighbors. In the climactic scenes in the novel, Bilbo must demonstrate a maturity unseen earlier. Smaug has left the mountain, seeking revenge for Bilbo's theft of a cup. The dragon attacks and destroys a human city, Lake-Town, and is killed. When the humans who remain seek some share in the wealth—they, after all, killed the dragon—the dwarfs' greed gets the better of them. They blockade the mountain against their former friends. It is left to Bilbo to find a means of mediating peace. Unknown to the dwarfs, he has found and kept a jewel, the Arkenstone, which they have sought. Bilbo's gift of it to Gandalf and the leaders of Lake-Town forces the dwarfs to concede. This development results in a union of the allies against a powerful force of wolves and orcs. Though he is not a typical warrior, Bilbo plays his role as discoverer and mediator very pragmatically, getting done what needs doing. At the novel's end, Bilbo, now wealthy, but, more significant, imaginative and self-confident, returns to the Shire.

*The Hobbit* has many of the elements of a children's story, as befits its origin: a narrative persona sounding much like an adult telling a story to children, some humorous comments along the way suggesting the follies of the dwarfs, and a proper seriousness about evil. The figure of Bilbo, invisible with his ring, lurking about various castles and wastelands, and eventually in Smaug's cave, is the mischief of the sort that children enjoy. At least one element of the children's story that is retained in *The Lord of the Rings*—though most others are not—





is the sense of a providential order that leads to the rescue of the companions. Twice in the novel, Gandalf and the dwarfs are in difficult straits and are rescued by giant eagles who are indebted to Gandalf. At one point, Gandalf returns opportunistically to delay three trolls long enough for them to be transformed into stone by the sunrise. Elsewhere, the ring itself seems a tool provided by providence to accomplish the necessary task. Until the story's end, none of the dwarfs, Bilbo, or Gandalf is even injured. Only the final battle insists that this is a more dangerous world than Bilbo has seen before.

## THE LORD OF THE RINGS

**First published:** *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 1954; *The Two Towers*, 1954; *The Return of the King*, 1955 (published collectively as *The Lord of the Rings*, 1955)

**Type of work:** Novels

*Long ago, men, elves, dwarfs, hobbits, and magicians battle to destroy a magic ring and end the power of its maker.*

Twenty years of continued subcreation mark the difference in tone and design of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Hobbit*'s paternal narrative voice is missing, so that almost from the opening of the trilogy the reader is aware that the issues of the novel are greater.

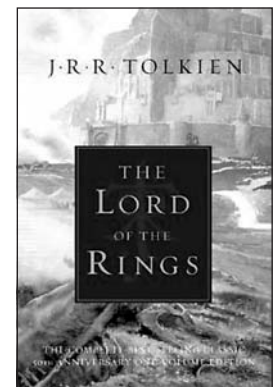
Tolkien's trilogy has spawned dozens of multi-volume quest fantasies using a medieval setting. They range from Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea Trilogy* (1968-1973) to Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* (1977) to Marion Zimmer Bradley's extended *Darkover* series (1972-1988). Each of these authors, including Tolkien, incorporates a theological element into the adventure story. Most appeal to the audience Tolkien awakened, and each has captured a share of a growing market for such fiction. Yet few succeed in the task of subcreation. Tolkien offers readers that possibility for "communion with other living things" that he claims all humans desire, in a world in which differing races have well-documented histories, languages capable of a

range of poetic expression, and differing cultural assumptions. To some extent, too, Tolkien succeeds because one can imagine life apart from adventure in Middle-earth.

*The Fellowship of the Ring*, like *The Hobbit*, begins in innocence. Although the Shire, Gandalf, and Bilbo reappear, almost immediately the story changes direction. Bilbo, sixty years older, surrenders the ring of invisibility to his nephew Frodo and rejoins the elves. After an interval of some years, which Tolkien compresses, Gandalf returns to announce that Frodo holds the One Ring, forged by the magician Sauron, which both empowers its wearer and tempts the wearer to exercise that power selfishly. No one can wear it safely.

Frodo, like Bilbo apparently undistinguished, unimaginative, decent, fair, and quietly stubborn, is the audience's vantage point for the story. Circumstances demand that he outgrow his hobbit isolationism, and indeed, offer himself without reserve or selfishness for a whole world that he does not know. His travels take him out of the Shire and into a land utterly threatening; he is betrayed by a companion, offers forgiveness and redemption to another who betrays him, and carries a burden no good person in the novel can endure. Throughout the novel, he battles the power of the ring itself, which tempts him to use it; he also carries the burden of knowing that his success will mean that the world will change, and some of its goodness, as well as much of its evil, will diminish. In Frodo, Tolkien explores the recurring theme of substitutionary love: Some must be willing to offer their lives that others might live. His quest reverses the movement of the earlier novel; the ring, once found, must now be destroyed in the place of its forging, deep within Sauron's kingdom, Mordor.

Accompanied by several hobbits, Frodo leaves the Shire for Rivendell, acquiring along the way a human companion, the ranger Aragorn, known as Strider. Pursued, Frodo is wounded in battle before they arrive safely at Rivendell. A council repre-



senting all civilization—elves, dwarfs, humans, and hobbits—eventually agrees that the One Ring must be destroyed. That can happen only if it is returned to the place of its making, deep within Mordor. Representatives of the four kindreds agree to accompany Frodo on the journey.

A contrasting quest emerges when one of Frodo's human companions, Aragorn, declares himself the heir of the throne of Minas Tirith, the city that has opposed Mordor for millennia. As Frodo is the naïve initiate, Aragorn is the experienced warrior assuming a heroic challenge of his own. In Aragorn, Tolkien awakens Frodo and the audience to that desire "to survey the depths of space and time," for Aragorn represents a tradition and race coming from a forgotten age of the world, from the land of Numenor.

Before the first volume ends, Tolkien has succeeded in opening to Frodo and his hobbit companions an awareness of a larger world, both older and more varied than they have known. He has also suggested the capacity for growth and heroism in the unheroic, as Frodo has been wounded and has accepted the possibility of death in his willingness to take the ring to Mordor.

*The Lord of the Rings* is most often remembered for its scenes of adventure, particularly the heroic language of warriors confronting their foes. From the first volume onward, however, Tolkien establishes a rhythm of adventure and reflection that serves several purposes. His characters are not always journeying. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for example, Frodo and his companions are entertained both at Rivendell and at the secret retreat of the elves in Lothlorien. The threat of evil to destroy such places is heightened by the enjoyment and tranquillity that these places provide to their inhabitants. Tolkien undoubtedly employed such settings for this purpose, but they serve another equally important role in the narrative, as some of the film and cartoon versions of these stories make evident. *The Lord of the Rings* is not only about adventure but about preserving a world, rescuing and maintaining what is good in that world. Rivendell, Lothlorien, and the Shire are the "real world," where people live, rather than the landscape of adventure through which they travel. Moments of heightened enjoyment simply in a good meal, a song, or companionship around the table or the fire exemplify what the heroes are called upon to preserve.

The magnitude of the opposing evil forces is demonstrated first in Gandalf's apparent death in the dwarf kingdom of Moria and second in the treachery of Boromir of Minas Tirith, who yields to the temptation of the ring and demands it from Frodo. Boromir's seduction by the desire for the power of the ring is also the first instance of an ongoing theme, which comes to dominate the action of the last half of the trilogy. Where evil does not blast goodness utterly, it may twist it or seduce it. The "fellowship" ends with Boromir's death at the hands of Sauron's orcs, who seize two of the hobbits. Frodo and his hobbit friend Sam Gamgee leave the others, attempting to make their way toward Mordor.

Tolkien himself dismissed the notion of the trilogy form, noting that readers must look to the six books of the story. Each volume contains two separate narratives, and in the two final volumes, Aragorn's story makes up books 3 and 5, while Frodo's story occupies books 4 and 6.

In *The Two Towers*, the second volume, Tolkien alternates between the two groups of now-divided companions: Aragorn, the elf Legolas, and Gimli the dwarf pursue the kidnappers of the two hobbits, while Frodo and Sam make their way toward Mordor. This journey allows Tolkien an opportunity to explore the geography of Middle-earth further and to introduce other inhabitants of Middle-earth. Other nonhuman races appear, such as the treelike Ents, who shepherd an entire forest. In *The Two Towers*, both characters confront evil from Sauron. Aragorn's confrontation with evil is conventional: He and his companions must defeat an army directed by the wizard Saruman, allied now with Sauron. The heroic battle at Helm's Deep, the stronghold of the forces of good, is one of the most successful battle narratives Tolkien created.

The conclusion of the book pits Gandalf, returned from death, against Saruman, as Saruman attempts to win over his opponents by his persuasive gifts. The power Saruman still holds, and the depth of his betrayal, contrast with Gandalf's insight and rejection of selfishness. In book 3, Tolkien has set up very obvious tensions. Against Aragorn and Gandalf's years of obscurity and service to others is set the treachery of the wizard Saruman, allied with Sauron to increase his own power. Paralleled as well are groups of lesser figures, such as the Rohirrim, a kingdom of horse-

men whose culture seems descended from stories like *Beowulf*. Having helped lead their defense, Aragorn wins the support of the Rohirrim as he moves toward Minas Tirith. By contrast, Saruman's allies, the morally and physically deformed orcs, serve him for treasure and because of fear. Their defeat and Saruman's downfall depend on the joint efforts of free humans, dwarfs, elves, magicians, and Ents.

On Frodo's journey, the power of evil is brought home repeatedly. Sauron has desolated the landscape around Mordor, and inside the "Land of Shadow" little grows but brambles. Frodo discovers the potential for evil within himself, as well, and its effects on those who serve it. One of these is Gollum, who lost the ring to Bilbo originally. In the process, Tolkien reveals that Gollum was once a hobbit, or close cousin, who through his centuries of possession of the ring has been warped and changed beyond recognition. He has shadowed Frodo since he left the Shire, seeking to reclaim the ring. Book 4 shows Frodo subduing and winning his allegiance and compassionately sparing him. Gollum guides Frodo to Mordor, though he leads Frodo into a trap as the book ends.

In *The Return of the King*, Tolkien continues his divided story, first tracing Gandalf's entrance to Minas Tirith (book 5) and the defense of that city against the enemy, then shifting to Aragorn's part in the action to relieve the city. Tolkien continues to add to his cast of characters with the defenders of Minas Tirith, among whom is Denethor, Boromir's father. He, too, has battled against Sauron, with one of the "seeing stones," the Palantir, which enable the user to become aware of actions at a distance. Sauron, however, as he has used one of the stones to seduce Saruman, so deceives Denethor that he despairs of victory. In the final battle, he commits suicide, another example of the ability of evil to spoil even those committed to good. After the victory, the heroic action draws to a climax with the anticipated final confrontation between Sauron's forces and the allies.

As the allies confront Sauron's forces for a decisive battle, Tolkien breaks off to begin book 6, tracing Frodo and Sam's journey to Mount Doom. Although brief by comparison with book 5—and necessarily brief, in that the reader is waiting for the resolution of the conflict—book 6 seems much longer. After rescuing Frodo from orcs in Mordor,

Sam accompanies his master across miles of wasteland in semidarkness to reach volcanic Mount Doom. They encounter orcs moving at Sauron's command and discover the truth of the biblical proverb, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Within Mordor, Sauron's troops bicker, attack, and murder one another. A kingdom based upon selfishness must fall. Yet, after the journey, Frodo's courage fails him. Once at Mount Doom, he claims the ring for his own. The theme of the seductiveness of power is never more fully demonstrated than when the "ordinary" individual chooses power and self-fulfillment rather than the good of others. In an entirely satisfying moment, sudden and unexpected, Gollum reappears and battles Frodo, eventually biting off finger and ring together, only to perish in the volcano. The "happy ending" out of disaster, which Tolkien calls "eucatastrophe," is both carefully prepared for and felt as entirely providential. Victory both at Minas Tirith and in the final battle occurs because "unheroic," disregarded individuals rise to the heroic challenge.

Tolkien concludes with the elegiac tone of the last episode of *Beowulf*. Aragorn's triumph renews a tradition descended from the earliest ages of the world, but he will eventually die. Frodo's destruction of the ring has both ensured victory and weakened the power that sustains the elves, so that they must depart Middle-earth. Frodo's return home with his companions is also blighted by Saruman's oppression of the Shire; even the most peaceful land in Middle-earth has suffered.

## SUMMARY

The popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasies testifies to the frustrations felt by many of his readers. Modern technological life isolates humans from nature and from one another, and diminishes the "otherness," the sense of the world as marvelous. Tolkien's response was to present a world so compellingly envisioned that both perils and marvels, joys and sorrows seem understandable and real. In the stories, as in real life, ordinary characters must make significant moral choices. In the happy endings of his stories, Tolkien responds to another felt need, the sense that no ultimate purpose exists to make human suffering meaningful.

Richard J. Sherry

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why is *Beowulf* a good point of reference in a discussion of J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction?
- What word other than "escape" might more accurately signify the need to evade threats to life and human values?
- Compare Tolkien's subcreated world with C. S. Lewis's Narnia.
- What does Tolkien's characterization of Bilbo suggest about the author's estimation of the capacities of ordinary people?
- What is the significance of Tolkien's word-play in calling the resolution of *The Return of the King* "eucatastrophe"?

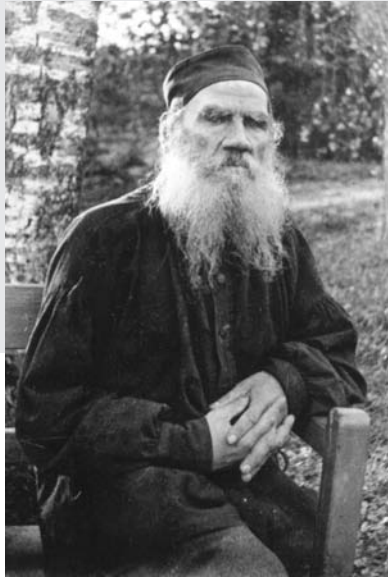
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## LEO TOLSTOY

**Born:** Yasnaya Polyana, Russia  
September 9, 1828

**Died:** Astapovo, Russia  
November 20, 1910

*One of the greatest novelists of the nineteenth century, Tolstoy in later life became world-famous as a social and religious prophet.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Leo Tolstoy (TAWL-stoy), also known as Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, was born at his family estate, Yasnaya Polyana, about 130 miles southwest of Moscow, Russia, on September 9, 1828. His parents came from illustrious, aristocratic families accustomed to spending time at the court of the czar. His mother, Princess Marya Volkonsky, was the daughter of Prince Nikolay Volkonsky, a son of the Enlightenment, who had encouraged her to learn French and read French philosophers, particularly Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His father was Count Nikolay Tolstoy, who served in the Russian army when Napoleon I invaded Russia. Tolstoy lost both of his beloved parents by the time he was nine years old, thus ending his idyllic childhood at home. Until he was able to establish his own family at Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy dreamed of the lost days when his four brothers and sister lived in happiness, following the old Russian traditions. Throughout his life, his estate became an ideal in his mind.

After the death of his parents, Tolstoy lived with his aunt and attended school in Kazan. Aspiring to be a diplomat, he entered the department of Oriental languages at the University of Kazan; the following year, he changed his mind and entered law school. Diplomacy and law were not to be his future careers, however; instead, Tolstoy had begun writ-

ing a diary, an activity that he would continue until his death. Boris Eikhenbaum calls the diaries the laboratory in which Tolstoy perfected his writing craft and investigated moral concerns that troubled him. Tolstoy also began a rigorous reading program that included Russian classics, French novels, Charles Dickens, the New Testament, Voltaire, and his favorite, Rousseau.

Tolstoy's academic career was cut short at age nineteen, when he gained legal control of Yasnaya Polyana. Returning to the family estate, he tried to help the peasants by opening a school for children. His efforts failed because he was spending his time in debauchery. His brother, in an attempt to save him from ruin, convinced him to accompany him to the Caucasus. Tolstoy volunteered to serve in the Russian army and was stationed in a remote Cossack village. Far from his favorite distractions—wine, women, and gambling—he devoted himself to writing and composed his first work, *Detstvo* (1852; *Childhood*, 1862), whose publication attracted the attention of the famous Russian novelists Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoevski. When the Crimean War broke out, Tolstoy fought in the Fourth Bastion at Sevastopol in 1855. Out of his wartime experiences, he wrote *Sevastopolskiye rasskazy* (1855-1856; *Sevastopol*, 1887), which depicted war in such realistic, bloody detail that Czar Alexander II gave orders that Tolstoy's life be protected.

Returning home after the Crimean War, Tolstoy found himself a military and literary hero. At Yasnaya Polyana, he tried to resume his old way of life by improving the lot of his peasants and teaching their children. He also decided that he wanted to

marry and found a suitable candidate on a neighboring estate. Sophia Andreyevna Behrs (Sonya) was an eighteen-year-old girl, who, as a child, had memorized passages from Tolstoy's *Childhood* and *Otrochestvo* (1854; *Boyhood*, 1886). They married on September 23, 1862. In the early days of his marriage, Tolstoy wrote to his Aunt Alexandra, "I didn't think it was possible to be so much in love and so happy." After the honeymoon was over, however, the marriage, which lasted forty-eight years and produced thirteen children, nine of whom survived, was tumultuous.

Tolstoy's greatest literary works, *Voyna i mir* (1865-1869; *War and Peace*, 1886) and *Anna Karenina* (1875-1877; English translation, 1886), were written during the first decade and a half of the marriage. Sonya proved to be a valuable partner in this enterprise. Between childbirths, she not only copied *War and Peace* seven times but also functioned as a critically astute reader.

After laboring so long on *War and Peace*, Tolstoy was near collapse by the time its serial publication was completed in 1869. His state of mind was further worsened as he began working on his next novel, *Anna Karenina*. He was distressed by the theme of the novel, the dissolution of a family, and struggled to finish the work. When the book's final installment appeared, the work as a whole met with great critical and popular acclaim. Unfortunately, Tolstoy was unable to enjoy the book's success. During this period, his beloved surrogate mother, Aunt Toinette, and two of his children died. At the age of fifty, at the height of his powers, he entered the darkest period of his life, filled with religious doubts, the fear of death, and spiritual emptiness. Fearing that he might commit suicide, he avoided guns, ropes, and knives.

*Ispoved'* (1884; *A Confession*, 1885) documents his search through philosophy, religion, and the sciences for some answers to his spiritual malaise. He found some solace in the example of simple Russian peasants, who lived a rough, hardworking life close to nature. He also turned to Christianity and devised his own pragmatic five commandments: avoid anger, avoid lust, never take an oath, never resist evil, and love even your enemies.

In 1881, Tolstoy and his family moved to Moscow in order for his children to receive a formal education. Tolstoy was deeply moved by the poverty that he saw in the slums of Moscow and attempted

to ameliorate the conditions of the poor. When famine devastated Russia in 1891 and 1892, he organized relief efforts and established centers that fed sixteen thousand people daily. Beginning in 1880, Tolstoy devoted nearly all of his efforts to social, religious, and political causes outside literature. As he became world-famous for his moral stances, disciples were drawn to Yasnaya Polyana. Sonya deeply resented these intruders, whom she called "the dark people." Sonya's dissatisfaction with her husband's withdrawal from family life increased in 1883 when Tolstoy met Vladimir Chertkov, who shared many of his social beliefs and encouraged him in publishing ventures that included producing books cheaply so that the poor could afford to buy them. The publication of *Smert' Ivana Il'icha* (1886; *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 1887) briefly convinced Sonya that Tolstoy had not abandoned literature, thus assuring her that he would continue to provide for his family. Nevertheless, in 1891 Tolstoy renounced all the rights to his works published after 1881 and gave away all of his property to his wife and nine children. Sonya was still not satisfied and wanted more of the proceeds from his works.

Tolstoy was also contending with religious and political authorities. In *Voskreseniye* (1899; *Resurrection*, 1899), he attacked the Russian Orthodox Church and its leading official, who subsequently excommunicated Tolstoy. In a letter to Czar Nicholas II, titled "Dear Brother," Tolstoy urged reforms, warning that the Russian people were on the verge of rebellion. In "The Significance of the Russian Revolution," Tolstoy recommended that Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin abolish the private ownership of property.

The end of Tolstoy's life was marred by the struggles of Sonya and Chertkov over his will and diaries. Wakened one night to hear his wife rifling through his papers in his study, Tolstoy decided to flee his home. He wrote his wife a letter thanking her for the forty-eight years of married life that they had shared and asking for mutual forgiveness. In his flight, pneumonia forced him to halt at the railroad station at Astapovo, Russia. He died in the stationmaster's house on November 20, 1910.

## ANALYSIS

Tolstoy displayed two distinctive attitudes toward art during his long career as a writer. During

his early years, he believed that contemporary events, such as the emancipation of women and political reforms, were not the proper subject for art. In a letter to Peter Boborykin in 1865, Tolstoy claimed that art's goals are "incommensurate with social goals." Art, instead, should "force people to love life in all its innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations." Tolstoy's descriptions of Natasha at her first grand ball or Nicholas Rostov on the wolf hunt in *War and Peace* illustrate how magnificently he achieved these artistic goals. His inspiration flowed whenever he was writing about his own past and that of his family. His parents were the models for Nicholas Rostov and Marya Bolkonsky; his wife's family was the prototype for the Rostovs; his wife's sister, Tanya, became Natasha Rostov; he put himself into the characters of Pierre Bezuhkov and Prince Andrew; and Yasnaya Polyana transformed itself into Bald Hills. The past provided a buffer zone in which distant memories could be transposed into art.

He lost his detachment when he began writing *Anna Karenina*, according to Tolstoy's biographer A. N. Wilson. No longer processing past memories, he had to draw on contemporary themes, especially on his own life experiences as he lived them. This mode of operation was extremely painful; he was writing about the dissolution of a marriage in *Anna Karenina*, just as he and his wife were engaging in bitter feuds. Tolstoy believed in general that adultery was a repugnant topic with no redeeming value. In a letter to Nicholas Strakhov in 1875, Tolstoy writes, "My God, if only someone would finish *Anna Karenina* for me! It's unbearably repulsive."

After *Anna Karenina* was completed, Tolstoy turned away from fiction; no great novels would ever again issue from his pen, though he subsequently wrote some good short stories and a novel, *Resurrection*. As a sign that his creative energy was gone, Tolstoy failed to continue his saga of the Decembrists that he had begun in *War and Peace* and eventually abandoned it forever.

By the time that Tolstoy published *Chto takoye iskusstvo?* (1898; *What Is Art?*, 1898), he had long entered his second period as a writer and abandoned his original conception that art should make people love life. He now believed that the artist should be socially responsible and write works that would inspire the people to live Christian lives.

In *What Is Art?*, Tolstoy cites as an example his experience at a rehearsal for an opera. Observing a harried stagehand, he reflects on the downtrodden masses who must labor behind the scenes for the pleasure of the decadent bourgeoisie. He concludes that high culture and its institutions are elitist, exploit the people, and offer nothing of value to them. In contrast, art "flowing from love of God" would nourish the souls of all people.

There is much to value in Tolstoy's views, but, unfortunately, his feelings toward art tend to be totalitarian. For example, he condemns artistic works that do not fit his criteria and authors, such as the Greek tragedians, William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Dante, of whom he does not approve. The publication of *What Is Art?* discomfited Tolstoy's European and American readers, who felt that he had become "a dragon" standing in the path of modern art.

Attempts to interpret Tolstoy's views often emphasize a perceived conflict in his nature. Edward Wasiolek in *Tolstoy's Major Fiction* (1978) argues that "Tolstoy's creative and ideational worlds are of one cloth." That is, Tolstoy in his greatest fictional works attempts to bridge the gap between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit, not separate the two. He sought for a unifying principle that would incorporate both.

In fact, the search for a unifying principle was a common link among the great nineteenth century Russian novelists such as Dostoevski and Turgenev. Their preoccupation with the spiritual lives of their characters was attributable, in part, to their upbringing in the Orthodox Church. That they were neither Protestant nor Catholic produced in them a different conception of the novel's function. The Western churches developed under a tradition of the *disputatio*, based on the practice of medieval scholastics who debated one side of an issue and then the other. The Orthodox Church, on the other hand, urged its followers to practice the *kenotic* ideal and unquestioningly imitate the life of Christ. As a result, the forum for theological debate in Russia did not take place in its churches, where dissent was not allowed, but in the more intellectually open forum of the novel. Almost all the novels of Dostoevski and Tolstoy, for example, center on spiritual quests. While on these quests, the characters speculate on the existence of God, their place in the universe, and the right way to live. In this

context, Tolstoy's novels are, as he says in his defense, exactly "what the author wished and was able to express in the form in which it is expressed."

## WAR AND PEACE

**First published:** *Voyna i mir*, 1865-1869  
(English translation, 1886)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young Russian nobleman searches for the meaning of life in the salons of high society and on the battlefield of Borodino during the Napoleonic wars.*

*War and Peace*, arguably the greatest novel ever written, chronicles the alternating periods of war and peace in Russia during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Tolstoy intended to write the story of a man returning home from exile in Siberia in 1856. The man had been a Decembrist, a member of an enlightened revolutionary movement seeking constitutional reform in Russia before czarist forces suppressed the movement in December, 1825. In order to understand his hero, Tolstoy decided that he first had to write about the man's youth: thus, the story begins in July, 1805.

The reader first meets the unlikely hero, Pierre Bezukhov, at a soirée in St. Petersburg. He has just returned to live in Russia after studying abroad. Awkward, yet brash, his naïve idealism leads him into a political argument, during which he asserts his belief that Napoleon I is the "greatest man in the world." After the soirée, Pierre retreats to the home of his old friend, Prince Andrew Bolkonsky, and the conversation about Napoleon continues.

Meanwhile, war talk is also in the air nearby in the Rostov household. The young son of Count Rostov, Nicholas, has decided to join the hussars, thus increasing the adoration of his cousin Sonia, who is in love with him. After a spat over Nicholas's harmless flirtation with another girl, they kiss. Observing the scene is Nicholas's impish thirteen-year-old sister, Natasha.

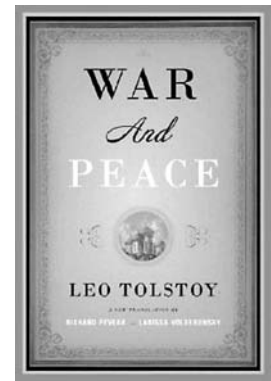
These early scenes of social frivolity and domestic happiness led Tolstoy in the early stages of composition to title his book, "All's Well That Ends Well." Once he reached the sections of the novel

that deal with the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars, however, he became more philosophically introspective. Drawing on his own experiences during the Crimean War, Tolstoy shows how war in its wake sweeps aside individual aspirations, disturbs familial bonds, and changes the destiny of nations forever. No wonder, then, that an important theme of the novel is the search for meaning in lives whose order has been completely overturned because of war.

The novel centers on Pierre's search. He is a good man who is still basically unformed. The fact that he was illegitimate underscores his uncertain sense of identity. His strength as a character is that he searches for his identity down several varied paths.

At the beginning of the novel, he explores the life of dissipation by allowing himself to fall into debauchery with wild companions. Next, he lives the life of the flesh by marrying the cold, beautiful Helene Kuragin. When she can do nothing to assuage his inner emptiness, a chance encounter with a Freemason attracts Pierre to this movement. Freemasonry, a mystical brotherhood based on the ritual and structure of medieval trade guilds, was popular in Russia at the time and appealed to intelligent men such as Pierre, who were searching for the meaning of life. Pierre eventually becomes disillusioned with his fellow Freemasons' shallow altruism.

As a last resort, he stumbles onto the battlefield of Borodino to see what war is like. Deeply upset by the carnage that he sees around him, Pierre resolves to assassinate its perpetrator, Napoleon. Believing that their destinies are linked, Pierre, in search of Napoleon, wanders around in Moscow, which is burning after the Russian army has abandoned it. Pierre is captured as an incendiary by the French, who now occupy Moscow. Spared from execution at the last moment, Pierre meditates on his fate in the company of other prisoners of war. He is particularly struck by the peasant Platon Karatáev, who is "the personification of everything Russian."





Karatáev intuitively seems to know the right way to live, and Pierre wants to learn from his example.

When Karatáev dies, Pierre has a vision of a globe whose surface consists of drops of liquid:

God is in the midst, and each drop tries to expand so as to reflect Him to the greatest extent. And it grows, merges, disappears from the surface, sinks to the depths, and again emerges. There now, Karatáev has spread out and disappeared.

Pierre's epiphany teaches him not to fear death: death is merely a reabsorption into the flow of life. Prince Andrew, mortally wounded at the battle of Borodino, discovers this same truth, unfortunately, on his deathbed:

Everything is, everything exists, only because I love. Everything is united by it alone. Love is God, and to die means that I, a particle of love, shall return to the general and eternal source.

Besides their common philosophical beliefs, Pierre and Andrew are further linked by their relationship to Natasha, a character who intuitively experiences these notions of love. Both fall in love with her and propose marriage. Andrew and Natasha are ill suited to one another. Natasha, full of exuberant, youthful spontaneity, cannot endure the year's postponement of their marriage that Prince Andrew requests in deference to his father's wishes. They do reconcile briefly after Andrew is mortally wounded. Too late, Andrew learns to live by the heart rather than the head. His realization, "Death is an awakening," can only remain an abstract thought, because he cannot experience it.

Pierre's compassion saves Natasha from her grief following Prince Andrew's death. They are the two characters, in particular, who have an in-born generosity and kindness of spirit. They have the capacity to forget themselves when others are in distress. At some risk to himself, Pierre saves the lives of several people during the burning of Moscow. Natasha throws the family's possessions out of the moving carts in order to transport wounded soldiers to safety. Most important, though, Pierre and Natasha save each other by marrying. Natasha, whose emotional life has been undirected toward any goal, can now focus her energies on Pierre and their children. She devotes "her whole soul, her

whole being" to them. Pierre, too, finds in his home a setting in which he can live his vision of the cosmic globe.

Tolstoy ends *War and Peace* by rising above the Bezukhov's domestic scene and surveying the big picture. In the second epilogue, he asks such profound questions as the following: What does this all mean? Why did it happen? What force made people act so? He meditates on Napoleon's power and how easily his soldiers transferred their power to him. Yet, Tolstoy reminds his readers, "A tsar is the slave of history." What freedom therefore does any person possess in the face of such determinism? Tolstoy answers the question by saying that each person has two faculties: reason, which teaches humans the laws of inevitability, and consciousness, which makes them feel free. He goes on to say, "Only by uniting them do we get a clear conception of man's life." Natasha and Pierre both develop their sense of consciousness and, thus, experience freedom. The memorable moments in which they are the most free occur when they are the least aware of themselves. Their example, Tolstoy implies, demonstrates the right way to live.

## ANNA KARENINA

**First published:** 1875-1877 (English translation, 1886)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A married woman's love affair with another man throws her life into such disorder and despair that she kills herself.*

The source of Tolstoy's next great novel, *Anna Karenina*, lies in an idea that he conveyed to his wife in 1870. He wanted to write a story about a married woman who is disgraced by a sexual scandal. He would depict her "not as culpable, but as uniquely worthy of pity." This story he knew from his own family: his only sister, Marya, had recently left her husband for an adulterous liaison with a Swedish viscount. Two years later, he saw firsthand the potential disastrous results of such a passion. One of his neighbors cast off his mistress, Anna Stepanovna Pirogova, who then threw herself under a train. Tolstoy viewed her remains afterward.



Within the year, he began writing *Anna Karenina*. He was stimulated further by his reading of Alexander Pushkin's *Povesti Belkina* (1831; *Russian Romance*, 1875), which he admired. He was struck by the phrase, "The guests were arriving at the country house," and began to write his story around it.

*Anna Karenina* begins with the oft-quoted line, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In this novel, Tolstoy portrays both a happy and an unhappy family. The happy Constantine Levin and his wife, Kitty, resemble Pierre and Natasha Bezukhov in *War and Peace* because of their positive attitudes in the face of adversity and their compassion toward other people. Levin and Kitty's rapport is such that Levin exclaims that he does "not know where she ended and he began."

The marriage of Alexey and Anna Karenin, on the other hand, is a loveless match held in place by the dictates of society. When Anna meets a dashing officer of the guards, Alexey Vronsky, she readily abandons her husband and son for the sake of illicit passion. Far from being an ennobling force, Anna and Vronsky's love leads to chaos, ruin, and, eventually, Anna's death under the wheels of an oncoming train.

Throughout the novel, the characters of Anna and Levin are compared and contrasted. Distantly related through marriage (Anna's brother is married to Kitty's sister), they make life choices that are diametrically opposed to each other. Anna is a young, beautiful, intelligent, vital woman who inexplicably and single-mindedly chooses to destroy herself. After discovering that Anna is in love with Vronsky, Anna's husband suggests a divorce. Yet Anna rejects his offer by saying that she does not want a divorce if it is the result of "his generosity." Vronsky, too, is willing to accommodate her by taking her away from Moscow and marrying her, yet she once again refuses to finalize the divorce. Instead, she torments him with her possessiveness and fits of jealousy. Her last words before she throws herself under the train reflect her vindictive frame of mind against Vronsky: "I will punish him and escape from everyone and from myself."

The origins of Anna's self-destructive nature are not clear—though, in truth, Anna has what is now called an addictive personality. She demands more and more of Vronsky's love because she can never believe that he truly cares for her. Even when he

abandons his career to spend more time with her, she still cries out for more attention. Anna accurately describes the state of their interaction by saying, "My love keeps growing more passionate and egoistic, while his is waning and waning." Their relationship cannot grow in this type of environment, nor does it nourish them at all as individuals. Some critics point out that it is Anna's unbridled sexuality that corrupts her. Edward Wasiolek in *Tol-*

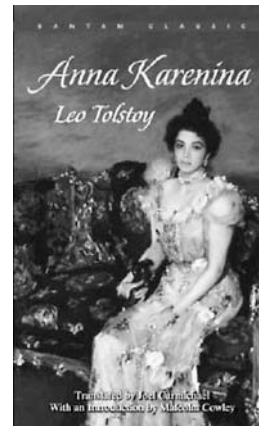
*stoy's Major Fiction* claims that, in Tolstoy's view, sex is "a massive intrusion on a person's being and a ruthless obliteration of the sanctity of personhood." In other words, Anna and Vronsky's sexuality interferes with their spirituality.

Though Kitty and Levin deeply love one another—Levin, in fact, believes that marriage is "the chief affair of life"—the compulsive element that charac-

terizes Anna's sexual passion is missing in their relationship. Their love is grounded in the rural community in which they live; they work, play, love, and have babies in the midst of the active life that is occurring around them.

Levin, like Anna, experiences moments when he would like to escape from the conditions of his life. The period following the death of his brother is a particularly dark time for him. He must consciously avoid ropes and guns so that he will not be tempted to commit suicide. Tolstoy has written some of his own spiritual crisis into this description of Levin's situation. Levin achieves a measure of comfort and spiritual solace by simply experiencing life in the moment in which he is living it. The mowing scene shows him unconsciously living life to its fullest extent.

Later, he gains further insight from the peasant Fyodor, who advises him that a man must live "for his soul" and "not forget God." These wise words penetrate to the heart of Levin's spiritual crisis, and he resolves to transform himself. As Wasiolek points out, Tolstoy's characters, such as Pierre in *War and Peace*, come into touch with reality when they cease their efforts to "possess" it. In Tolstoy's



world, the ego must be subdued in order for people to love correctly and take their place in the flow of existence. Anna fails to adjust her personality to this truth; thus, she is left wondering, “Why not put out the light?”

## THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH

**First published:** *Smert' Ivana Il'icha*, 1886  
(English translation, 1887; collected in  
*Leo Tolstoy: The Death of Ivan Ilych, and  
Other Stories*, 2003)

**Type of work:** Novella

*In nineteenth century Russia, a judge  
accidentally falls and develops a fatal illness,  
which forces him to contemplate death and regret  
the life that he has lived.*

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, one of the greatest stories dealing with the subject of death, marked Tolstoy's return to fiction writing after his religious conversion. In 1881, his imagination was sparked when he heard the story of the death of Ivan Ilich Mechnikov, a judge of the Tula court, who expressed on his deathbed profound regret for the life that he had lived.

As in the real-life story, Tolstoy makes his Ivan Ilyich wake up to the hidden possibilities of life on his deathbed. Before then, Ilyich has lived his life thinking only of himself and his next round of pleasure. In the past, when unpleasant events occurred, such as the death of a few of his children and his wife's growing irritability, he turned away from these domestic concerns and spent time working at the office. His life continues for seventeen years in this manner, until the fateful day when he falls off a ladder while hanging drapes. He develops symptoms, a queer taste in the mouth and stomach discomfort, and, before he knows it, he is on his deathbed.

From a life built around the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of unpleasant reality, Ivan is suddenly catapulted into the world of sickness and death. He recalls, with irony, an old syllogism that he had learned: “Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal.” Never before had he seriously contemplated his own mortality. He tortures himself with the thought, “What if in reality,

all my life, my conscious life, has not been the right thing?”

The horrible truth that he indeed has failed to do the right thing transforms the remaining two hours of Ivan's life. The key to his transformation lies in his relationship to the peasant Gerasim, who does not shun the unpleasant aspects of his illness as does the rest of Ilyich's family and who treats his fatal condition matter-of-factly. Gerasim can “understand and pity him” in a compassionate and loving manner. In his final, agonizing moments, Ivan learns that he, too, can be compassionate and loving. He pities his son, who weepingly kisses his hand, and feels sorry for his despairing wife. He can die in peace, because “In the place of death there was light.”

Though Ilyich takes the last rites of the church in his final dying moments, the novella is not overtly a religious parable. The novella instead celebrates the virtues of pity and compassion that the simple Russian peasant knows and practices. Ilyich's fault was that, during his life, he had lived too much by his head (his surname, Golovin, suggests *golova*, the Russian word meaning “head”). The suffering that he feels in his dying moments awakens him to the suffering of the other people around him and, thus, to the brotherhood of all people. The awareness of death is what holds people together, in Tolstoy's view. Though Ilyich's new life lasts only a couple of hours, Tolstoy suggests that he is a lucky man.

## SUMMARY

Described by the Russian writer Maxim Gorky as “a whole world,” Leo Tolstoy incorporated his life, the past life of his family, and the destiny of the Russian people into his art. He tried to capture the varied facets of nineteenth century Russian reality, as well as discover a unifying truth that would explain the nature of humankind's spiritual existence. In the process, he created two of the world's greatest novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

Not satisfied with this accomplishment, Tolstoy in midlife abandoned art and turned his prodigious energies to social reform. He contributed to the intellectual ferment that ultimately led to the Russian Revolution, which occurred seven years after his death.

Anna Lillios

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* reflects one of the author's views of appropriate subject matter for a novel, *Anna Karenina* another. Both were successful. Can there be such a thing as "inappropriate" subject matter?
- Would Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* be taken seriously if it had not been written by a man of his accomplishments?
- Do the spiritual dimensions of Tolstoy's fiction reflect positively or negatively on the practices of the Russian Orthodox Church?
- Pierre Bezukhov leads a blundering, haphazard life, but he prevails. What are the secrets of his endurance?
- Is the fact that the last section of *War and Peace*, "Part Two," is primarily a long essay evidence that Tolstoy concluded that the novel itself did not accomplish what he had intended?
- Does Tolstoy succeed in presenting Anna Karenina as pitiful rather than guilty?
- Is Levin in *Anna Karenina* a viewpoint character for Tolstoy?

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## GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA

**Born:** Palermo, Italy  
December 23, 1896

**Died:** Rome, Italy  
July 23, 1957

*In a handful of works published after his death, Lampedusa explored the complexities and contradictions of the human condition, most notably through the story of a Sicilian prince who realizes that his class's centuries-old way of life is doomed.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (toh-MAH-see dee lahm-puh-DEW-suh) was born on December 23, 1896, into an impoverished, aristocratic Sicilian family of ancient if generally undistinguished lineage. Lampedusa's great-grandfather, an amateur astronomer of some note, was an exception to this pattern. However, his failure to leave a will at the time of his death plunged his descendants into a ruinous cycle of legal claims and counterclaims that scattered what little remained of the family fortune. It is this intriguing figure, Prince Giulio Tomasi, who would serve Lampedusa as the model for Prince Fabrizio Corbera in his novel *Il gattopardo* (1958; *The Leopard*, 1960).

Lampedusa was a shy, unathletic child who preferred his own company to that of others. He spent most of his early years in the family palace in the Sicilian city of Palermo and retained vivid sensory memories of it and his family's properties in the countryside. According to Lampedusa's biographer David Gilmour, the major influence in his life seems to have been his mother, a talented, attractive woman who figured prominently in Palermo's smart society.

Lampedusa's father hoped that his son would become a diplomat. As a result, the young man attended school in Rome, but with Italy's entry into World War I in 1915, his university career was interrupted. Drafted for military service late that year, Lampedusa served in the artillery and saw active service in 1917 against Austria. He was wounded and captured shortly afterward, but managed to escape.

After the war Lampedusa suffered from a variety of illnesses, some apparently psychosomatic, and abandoned his law studies. He seems to have grown disillusioned with Sicily, and over the next few years he lived for the most part in northern Italy. Although he had given up a university career, he could read a number of languages and had transformed himself into an expert on British and European history and literature.

Lampedusa had met his uncle's married stepdaughter, the Freudian psychoanalyst Alessandra Wolff, in London in 1925, and later visited her family estate in Latvia. The two came to share an intense interest in intellectual matters, and after Alessandra obtained a divorce, she and Lampedusa married in 1932. Lampedusa's mother was anxious for the couple to live in the family's palazzo in Palermo, but the cool welcome that Alessandra received from her husband's mother and from Sicilian society in general led her to spend much of her time in Latvia with her patients. Lampedusa remained in Palermo, and upon the death of his father in 1934, became prince of Lampedusa.

With the approach of war, Lampedusa was called up briefly for active duty, and Alessandra was forced to leave her estate in Latvia. In 1943, the Palazzo Lampedusa was destroyed in an Allied raid, as was the house that Lampedusa and his mother had rented in a distant village in hopes of avoiding the bombing. After the Allied invasion, he was asked to serve as president of the Sicilian Red Cross, a position that he held for two increasingly frustrating years. Shortly after Lampedusa's resignation in 1947, his mother died.



Lampedusa was eventually able to buy a smaller palazzo in Palermo, the chief attraction of which seems to have been that it had once belonged to his great-grandfather, and in 1955 he sat down to write a novel. He had contemplated such a project for decades but seems to have been prompted by two immediate circumstances. His cousin Lucio Piccolo had published his first collection of poetry to wide acclaim the preceding year, and Lampedusa himself had begun offering lectures on literature that were attracting an appreciative audience.

Having finished several chapters of what would eventually be published as *The Leopard*, Lampedusa stopped to compose the opening pages of an autobiography—perhaps an act of psychological therapy undertaken at the suggestion of his wife. Subsequently he added several more chapters to his novel, but the publishers to whom he offered it turned it down. During this time he also wrote two short stories and the opening chapter of a second novel.

Lampedusa died of cancer on July 23, 1957, two days after receiving yet another rejection. It was only after his death that *The Leopard* was accepted for publication. It generated both controversy and acclaim upon its appearance in Italy in 1958 but went on to win the country's highest literary award, the Strega Prize.

## ANALYSIS

Lampedusa's literary reputation rests upon a very small number of works: a full-length novel, the opening chapter of a second novel, two stories, a fragment of autobiography, and a number of lectures on literature. None was published during his lifetime, and if it were not for the posthumous acclaim given the completed novel *The Leopard*, the other pieces would probably never have seen the light of day. However, all were written during the last two and a half years of his life, and as a result reflect the outlook of a mature, thoughtful, and widely read man.

The lucid quality of Lampedusa's writing reflects his regard for nineteenth century French author Stendhal, whose style, Lampedusa wrote, is one "which in its dryness may seem easy but which is in fact the fruit of . . . a continuous labour of elimination." Whether describing the dark ruminations of Prince Fabrizio in *The Leopard* or the amatory reveries of the characters in "La sirena" ("The

Professor and the Mermaid"), Lampedusa strove to eliminate the inessential, creating a prose style that is clear and concise.

Although critics have identified particular works of art that Lampedusa employed as touchstones, his most successful symbols and metaphors operate at an immediate, sensory level. In an early scene in *The Leopard*, Lampedusa uses flowers as emblems of the state of Sicilian psychology. Observing roses whose cuttings he had secured in Paris years earlier, the prince realizes that they "had degenerated; first stimulated and then enfeebled by the strong if languid pull of Sicilian earth, . . . they had changed into things like flesh-colored cabbages." Several scenes in "I gattini ciechi" ("The Blind Kittens") turn upon the quantity and crudely intense flavor of food served in the home of the grasping, upstart Ibba family. In "The Professor and the Mermaid," Lampedusa's irritable scholar registers his disgust toward the vacuous newspapers he is reading by spitting continuously.

In many cases Lampedusa juxtaposed sharply differing images and themes to advance his story. The contrast between the roses that bloomed so gracefully in Paris but so unwholesomely in Sicily is one example of this method. Another involves the prince's dog Bendicò, a great Dane whose wholehearted enthusiasm stands in sharp and repeated contrast to his master's obsessive need to analyze his every action and emotion.

Aside from his lectures on literature and the slightest of his stories, Lampedusa's works share not only a Sicilian setting but also several internal connections. *The Leopard* deals with the most illustrious of the Salinas, Don Fabrizio. "The Blind Kittens," which takes up the chronicle of Sicily approximately where *The Leopard* ends, includes a Salina as a character, while the journalist narrator of "The Professor and the Mermaid" identifies himself as the last of the Salinas, the sole surviving heir of *The Leopard*. "Ricordi d'infanzia" ("Places of My Infancy") deals factually with many of the settings and images that Lampedusa incorporated into his other works.

Lampedusa's feelings for Sicily were complex, and he explored them through his characters' attitudes and conversations. Prince Fabrizio speaks at length of Sicily's long history of subjugation and the sense of lethargy and fatality that it has engendered: "Sleep, sleep, . . . that is what Sicilians

want.” The professor of “The Professor and the Mermaid” speaks lyrically of the beauty of Sicily but adds that it is “inhabited by donkeys.”

Although Lampedusa was criticized after his death for what appeared to be his repeated attacks on his native land, his attitudes were not wholly consistent with Don Fabrizio’s. By dramatizing the prince’s fatalism so memorably in *The Leopard*, Lampedusa managed to reveal its shortcomings.

## THE LEOPARD

**First published:** *Il gattopardo*, 1958 (English translation, 1960)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Realizing that his way of life is coming to an end, a Sicilian prince chooses to cooperate with the forces dooming the aristocracy.*

*The Leopard* is set during the period of the Risorgimento, the popular nineteenth century movement to unite the various states of Italy into a single country. As the book opens, revolutionary leader Giuseppe Garibaldi is invading Sicily. After securing the island and the southern portion of the Italian peninsula (together the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) from the Bourbon regime, he will offer the territory to another monarch, King Victor Emmanuel II of Savoy, who will then rule a united Italy.

*The Leopard* is a leisurely, episodic novel divided into eight chapters, each identified by month and year as well as by title. The first four take place in 1860, and the next two in 1861 and 1862, respectively. The seventh chapter takes place in 1888, and it and the eighth chapter, set in 1910, function almost as codas to the first six.

The book’s first chapter, “Introduction to the Prince,” takes place in May, 1860, and actually functions as an introduction to the entire book, ranging backward in time and involving most of the book’s characters and themes. The prince of the title is Don Fabrizio Corbera, the proud, sensual, intellectually skeptical prince of Salina. An amateur astronomer whose greatest satisfaction derives from studying the heavens, he has discovered and named two asteroids. Don Fabrizio is married to Princess Maria Stella, and their children include a

son, Paolo, and three daughters, Carolina, Concetta, and Caterina.

Although he loves his children, Don Fabrizio finds them conventional. He reserves his highest regard for his high-spirited nephew and ward, Tancredi, who has actually joined the forces of Garibaldi. As Tancredi explains, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” In turn, the bemused Don Fabrizio, who sees a reflection of his younger self in Tancredi, gives him a roll of gold coins to help him in his effort.

Set in August of the same year, “Donnafugata” recounts the Salinas’ annual visit to a distant and peaceful estate, which Lampedusa based closely on his own family’s estate of Santa Margherita. They are accompanied by Tancredi, who has been given a month’s leave from Garibaldi’s victorious army. At Donnafugata the prince hears of the growing wealth and power of the town’s mayor, Don Calogero Sedàra. He also learns that his daughter Concetta has fallen in love with Tancredi but realizes sadly that Tancredi’s ambitions will require a wealthier and livelier wife. That evening Don Calogero’s beautiful, earthy daughter Angelica accompanies her father to dinner at the Salina palazzo, and Tancredi is clearly taken with her.

In “The Troubles of Don Fabrizio,” which takes place in October, 1860, Tancredi asks the prince to approach Angelica’s father to ask for her hand in marriage. The request dismays Princess Stella, but the prince understands the wisdom of Tancredi’s decision and approaches the mayor. Later that month the kingdom holds a plebiscite on the question of unification. Taking Tancredi’s words about change to heart, Don Fabrizio has urged those seeking his opinion to vote “yes,” but Sedàra takes no chances. Recognizing the course that events are taking, he falsifies the vote count to make it appear that, however unlikely, the citizens of Donnafugata have voted unanimously in favor of union.

“Love at Donnafugata” is set in November, 1860, and chronicles the wedding preparations of Tancredi and Angelica. At the same time, Don Fabrizio has been approached by a representative of the new government to serve as senator. Pondering his own life and the events of the past few months, the prince rejects the offer, pointing out that the new government’s dishonesty has nullified whatever promise it might have offered. He then goes on, however, to direct much of the blame at himself

and his fellow islanders: “In Sicily it doesn’t matter whether things are done well or done badly; the sin which we Sicilians never forgive is simply that of ‘doing’ at all.” In what is either an act of foresight or cynicism, or perhaps both, he proposes that Sedàra be appointed senator.

Set in February, 1861, “Father Pirrone Pays a Visit” interrupts the otherwise steady flow of the novel. Focusing on the Salina family chaplain, it draws an ironic comparison between the approaching wedding in Donnafugata and the machinations surrounding a much cruder peasant marriage. “A Ball,” set in November, 1862, describes the wedding ball in Donnafugata and highlights the prince’s increasing impatience with the futility of his own life. In “Death of a Prince,” set in July, 1888, Don Fabrizio recalls the few days and weeks in which

he was truly happy. He experiences death as a beautiful woman, a presence he had detected in the stars but never glimpsed face to face.

The book’s final chapter, “Relics,” is set much later, in 1910, and describes the three Salina daughters, spinsters all. Intensely devout, they have assembled a vast array of what turn out to be fraudulent holy relics that must

be destroyed by a church official. The same afternoon, Concetta finally disposes of the stuffed carcass of Don Fabrizio’s dog, Bendicò. Flung out a window, the animal briefly assumes the proud, upright carriage of the leopard of the family crest, but he then collapses in a heap of dust in the courtyard.

Lampedusa apparently did not know that he himself was dying when he started writing *The Leopard*, but the entire book is imbued with a sense of mortality—a factor that was to play a large part in its reception by publishers. The leading Italian literary figures of the period were concerned with contemporary life, formal experimentation, and social progress. In such an atmosphere, the book’s lugubrious tone, its readability, its focus on the past, and its pessimistic attitude toward change practically guaranteed its initial rejection.



## TWO STORIES AND A MEMORY

**First published:** *Racconti*, 1961 (English translation, 1962)

**Type of work:** Memoir, short story, and chapter of an unfinished novel

*An author recalls details of his idyllic childhood, an aging professor struggles with memories of an extraordinary love affair, and a clan of erstwhile peasants compound their holdings.*

*Two Stories and a Memory* is a nearly complete translation of the collection published in Italian in 1961 as *Racconti*. It includes the pages of “Places of My Infancy,” an autobiography that Lampedusa composed while writing *The Leopard*; “The Professor and the Mermaid,” a short story that develops some of the themes of *The Leopard* in sprightlier fashion; and the first chapter of *The Blind Kittens*, a novel that Lampedusa did not live to complete. It omits a slight and uncharacteristic story called “La gioia e la legge” (“Joy and the Law”) that did not appear in English until 1993.

According to Lampedusa’s widow, she suggested that her husband undertake “Places of My Infancy” as an act of therapy. Although he apparently intended to carry the narrative forward into his adult life, he never did so. As it stands, the autobiography consists of eight sections, each highlighting a particular aspect of his childhood world, including the shocked reactions of his mother and father to the assassination of King Umberto I in 1900, his enchantment with the Lampedusa palazzo in Palermo, and his family’s annual journeys to the Santa Margherita estate. Beyond its particular charms, the work reveals the factual basis for many of the events and locales described in *The Leopard*.

“The Professor and the Mermaid” is set in the mainland city of Turin but concerns an aging professor of Greek and a journalist who discover that they both are Sicilians. Immensely learned but gruff and seemingly uncultivated, the professor gradually reveals himself to be a dreamer who has never shaken off the formative event of his student days, an intensely physical affair with a siren named Lighea. Daughter of Calliope, the classical Greek muse of poetry, Lighea had promised the youth

that he could avoid the sorrows of old age by following her into the sea. Later the journalist learns that the professor has fallen overboard from a ship and disappeared.

"The Blind Kittens" is the opening chapter of a novel that would apparently have dealt with the upstart Ibba clan, members of a new, aggressive middle class that would wrest control of society from the nobility. In this fragment, Lampedusa displays the same narrative assurance that he displayed in *The Leopard*, but his obvious antipathy to both the Ibbas and the aristocrats docilely observing their rise suggests that the novel would have lacked the grandeur that distinguished the earlier work.

Although not in itself a major work, *Two Stories and a Memory* makes it clear that had he not died at the age of sixty, Lampedusa might well have gone on to produce a large body of significant work.

## SUMMARY

Although he and his wife adopted a son late in their lives, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa realized that he was essentially the final member of his line. He had grown up in an atmosphere of faded splendor and had lived to see the destruction of a way of life that generations had taken for granted. Although he never had to earn a living, he seems to have felt a need to sum up not only his personal and familial experience but also that of Sicily itself. *The Leopard* constitutes his most comprehensive literary statement, and although it engendered considerable controversy upon its publication, it has since been recognized as one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century.

Grove Koger

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's attitude toward change?
- Discuss the ambivalence that Lampedusa felt toward his native Sicily.
- How did the work of Stendhal influence Lampedusa's writing?
- Discuss the relationship between *The Leopard* and Lampedusa's other works.
- Why was *The Leopard* rejected by some publishers and attacked by some critics?



Jacques Sassier/Editions Gallimard

## MICHEL TOURNIER

**Born:** Paris, France  
December 19, 1924

*One of the most important French writers of the second half of the twentieth century, Tournier has used traditional literary forms to investigate revolutionary ideas about the individual and society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Michel Edouard Tournier (tur-NYAYR) was born in Paris, France, on December 19, 1924. He was a nervous, sickly child who was deeply affected by the pain and terror of having his tonsils removed when he was four years old. Tournier also was a poor student who eventually attended a dozen public and private schools.

Although Tournier's parents were French, both spoke German and were intensely interested in German culture. Tournier's mother returned every summer to the German boarding school she had once attended, taking Tournier and his siblings with her. Thus Tournier witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany as a child and experienced that nation's occupation of France as a young man. A number of German soldiers were stationed in Tournier's parents' house during World War II, and he remembered the experience as chaotic but happy.

Despite his uneven school record, Tournier received a *baccalauréat* during World War II. He acquired additional degrees in philosophy and law, and after the war he spent four years in Germany studying philosophy at the University of Tübingen. When the time came to take his teaching examination, however, he failed.

Unable to pursue a career as a professor, Tournier worked as a journalist, editor, translator, and

radio and television producer. Among the writers he translated was Erich Maria Remarque, the German author of the antiwar novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929, 1968; *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929, 1969). During this time Tournier wrote three novels of his own that he deemed unworthy and abandoned work on another. His first published work, an ironic revision of Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) entitled *Vendredi: Ou, Les Limbes du Pacifique* (1967, revised 1978; *Friday: Or, The Other Island*, 1969), was an immediate success, winning the Grand Prix of the French Academy.

Tournier's next novel, *Le Roi des Aulnes* (1970; *The Ogre*, 1972; published in Great Britain as *The Erl-King*, 1972), won his country's most prestigious literary award, the Prix Goncourt, by unanimous vote. *The Ogre* sold well, was widely translated, and prompted many critics to declare Tournier France's best living novelist. A reviewer for *The New Yorker* magazine, Janet Flanner, called it "the most important book to come out in France since Proust." Other critics, however, charged that in writing a symbolic account of the rise of Nazism, Tournier had come uncomfortably close to identifying with his subject.

In any case, *The Ogre* was so successful that Tournier was able to devote himself to writing full time. He was also invited to join the Goncourt Academy and to help choose the recipients of its annual prizes.

Tournier next published *Vendredi: Ou, La Vie Sauvage* (1971; *Friday and Robinson: Life on the Esperanza Island*, 1972), a version of *Friday: Or, The Other Island* for younger readers, and a third major novel, *Les Météores* (1975; *Gemini*, 1981). Like *The*



*Ogre, Gemini* was attacked by many for its subject matter, which in this case involves an incestuous relationship between twin boys and the homosexual character of the twins' uncle. Tournier traveled to Canada, Japan, and India to research the novel's settings.

Tournier summed up his life to date and many of his ideas about literature in general and his own books in particular in *Le Vent paraclet* (1977; *The Wind Spirit: An Autobiography*, 1988). Similarly, the collection *Le Coq de bruyère* (1978; *The Fetishist, and Other Stories*, 1983) deals with many of the themes Tournier had previously developed in his novels.

Tournier next published an episodic novel, *Gaspard, Melchior, et Balthazar* (1980; *The Four Wise Men*, 1982), that reworks the story of the Magi and adds a fourth king, Taor, to the traditional three. As he had before, Tournier traveled to research his work, in this case visiting Israel and Africa. Some reviewers praised *The Four Wise Men* for its fablelike quality and its reverence, but others found it obvious and even predictable. Tournier followed this seemingly religious novel with an entirely different work, a short novel he had originally conceived as a television script. *Gilles et Jeanne* (1983; *Gilles and Jeanne*, 1987) analyzes the relationship between the martyr Joan of Arc and her compatriot Gilles de Rais, who was later executed as a mass murderer.

A fourth major novel, *La Goutte d'or* (1985; *The Golden Droplet*, 1987), draws on Tournier's long-standing interest in photography and follows the adventures of a North African shepherd as he travels to France to retrieve the part of his soul that a thoughtless tourist has "stolen" in a snapshot. Four years later Tournier published a second volume of short fiction, *Le Médiocre amoureux* (1989; *The Midnight Love Feast*, 1991). In this collection a couple on the verge of divorce invite their friends to a kind of celebration, but the stories the friends tell reunite the couple.

Tournier devoted the idiosyncratic essays in *Le Miroir des idées: Traité* (1994; *The Mirror of Ideas*, 1998) to familiar pairs of objects and ideas—body and soul, the sun and the moon, salt and sugar, and so on. He went on to draw an implicit comparison between two figures widely separated in time and space in *Eléazar: Ou, La Source et le buisson* (1996; *Eleazar, Exodus to the West*, 2002). In this short novel Tournier describes the experiences of a shepherd—Eleazar O'Braid—who leaves his native Ire-

land for the American West. Eleazar finds himself in the position of the Old Testament figure Moses, who struggled to serve both God and the exiled Hebrew peoples.

## ANALYSIS

Michel Tournier started writing at a time when the form of the New Novel held sway in French literary circles. The New Novel ignores traditional novelistic techniques and even questions the ability of language to convey meaning; its narration tends to be complex.

Tournier's works display the elements the New Novel lacks: plot, character, and suspense. Tournier has stated that he has no interest in revolutionizing the form of the novel, but this does not mean that he writes ordinary books. In *The Wind Spirit: An Autobiography* he states that:

My intention was to avoid formal innovation, to use only the most traditional, conservative, and reassuring of forms, but to fill them with a content having none of those qualities.

The result has been that French critics have sometimes been disappointed in Tournier's works and their lack of verbal experimentation. On the other hand, Tournier is popular with the reading public; each of his novels has been a best seller in France. These same readers, however, have often been upset at the content with which Tournier sometimes fills his conservative forms.

These forms are often versions of preexisting models. The most obvious examples are two pairs of works. One pair consists of *Friday: Or, The Other Island* and *Friday and Robinson: Life on the Esperanza Island*, the latter of which is intended for younger readers. *The Four Wise Men* and the tale *Barbedor* (1980), the latter of which was published separately for children before its inclusion in the adult work, form another such pair.

The first pair of these titles builds on one of the oldest and most famous novels in English, *Robinson Crusoe*, which is itself based on the true story of the shipwrecked sailor Alexander Selkirk. Tournier had been struck by the novel's ethnocentrism (that is, its acceptance of Crusoe's cultural values as being the only ones worth considering), and rewrote it from a viewpoint including modern psychology and anthropology. In Tournier's version, it is Fri-

day who chooses to leave aboard the British ship that has chanced upon the island; Crusoe, who has absorbed Friday's values and come to identify almost literally with the island, remains.

Tournier's two books about the Magi embellish the account in Matthew of the Wise Men who bring gifts to honor the newborn Christ. Tournier supplemented this account with legends that put the number of Wise Men at four and that make one of them black. Tournier also studied a short novel familiar to American readers, *The Story of the Other Wise Man* (1896) by Henry Van Dyke.

Tournier's version of the story has modern social and racial echoes. For example, Gaspar, King of Méroé, states that he is "black but beautiful," and he is delighted to see that Christ is also black. Tournier enlivens the story with various interpolations and introduces a fourth king, Taor, who achieves an unorthodox state of grace.

As its title in English suggests, the novella *Eleazar, Exodus to the West* reaches back to yet another Christian source, the book of Exodus, while utilizing a New World setting. Identifying with Moses and his quest for the Promised Land, Eleazar is searching for what the reader recognizes as its mythic nineteenth century equivalent—the American frontier.

Tournier's most important novel, *The Ogre*, is also based on an earlier literary model, but one less familiar to American readers. The French title of this work, *Le Roi des Aulnes*, which means the king of the alders, is a translation of the title of a famous poem by German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Erlkönig" (1782; "The Erlking," 1853). Goethe's poem is about an ogre (hence the translation of the title) who steals children's souls. Tournier also draws on the legend of Saint Christopher, whose practice was to carry travelers on his shoulders across dangerous streams. According to this legend, Christopher once carried Christ, who in gratitude caused Christopher's staff to bloom. Tournier's protagonist, Abel Tiffauges, finds himself torn between the seemingly opposite poles of good and evil that the ogre and the saint represent.

Tournier's short novel *Gilles and Jeanne* is based directly on historical models: Joan of Arc and her protector, Gilles de Rais. Tournier suggests that Gilles, having seen Joan burned at the stake for her supposed heresy, decides to follow her to Hell by sexually torturing and murdering children. In this case, however, Tournier's peremptory treatment of his subject renders his thesis unconvincing.

Tournier's most complex novel, *Gemini*, also draws on a number of sources, but less obviously than in some of his other works. Its treatment of the twins Jean and Paul (whom others refer to as a single unit, Jean-Paul) relies more on myth than upon literary or historical examples. Myths are ancient stories that seem to explain natural occurrences, or that reveal meaningful patterns behind apparently ordinary events. The Greek myth of the twins Castor and Pollux is highly important in *Gemini*, but myths of one kind or another are seldom absent from Tournier's work. After all, Robinson is as much master of a kingdom (to place him in his mythic dimension) as he is a shipwrecked sailor. Additionally, Abel Tiffauges is as much a savior, or a demon, as he is a mechanic caught up in a war.

Tournier's use of familiar forms and mythic patterns is no guarantee of literary success. His most successful book, *The Ogre*, is above all the story of a believable, if disturbing, character who undergoes a series of events that are by turns gripping, frightening, and puzzling. The novel's other elements, such as Tournier's research into the Nazi period, are subordinated to the story. However, when the ideas behind Tournier's books dictate their structure, as some readers found to be the case in *Gemini*, the result is less compelling.

Tournier himself seems to have sensed this problem with *Gemini*. The novel that followed, *The Four Wise Men*, is lighter in tone and far more focused. Much of Tournier's shorter fiction has also struck a light, even whimsical note. As Tournier himself realizes, he is most successful in conveying his unorthodox ideas when they are presented in entertaining and reassuring forms.

## FRIDAY: OR, THE OTHER ISLAND

**First published:** *Vendredi: Ou, Les Limbes du Pacifique*, 1967, revised 1978 (English translation, 1969)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A sailor shipwrecked on a tropical island comes to understand his true nature.*

*Friday: Or, The Other Island* was Tournier's first published novel and dramatizes the differences between Robinson's Eurocentric values and those of a native of the archipelago in which he is marooned. Tournier assumed that his readers would be familiar with Daniel Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*, and he fashioned his work around it. He follows Defoe's book closely at first but slowly departs from its outline, eventually arriving at a strikingly different conclusion.

As *Friday* opens, Robinson is having his fortune told by his ship's captain. Robinson, the captain announces, is an organizer. Organizers are not skeptical and therefore do not realize that their attempts at creating order are illusory. The captain further predicts that after many travails Robinson will be saved by a child. As the captain enlarges upon these comments, their ship runs violently aground. When Robinson awakens, he finds himself alone on an island, and (it is clear to the reader) begins living out in detail the fortune the captain has told to him.

After a period of gloom in which he names his new home the Island of Desolation, Robinson manages to build a rational, even overorganized,

life for himself. He has periodic bouts of depression in which he immerses himself in a kind of bog, but he always manages to pull himself out, literally and figuratively. He rechristens the island Speranza (hope).

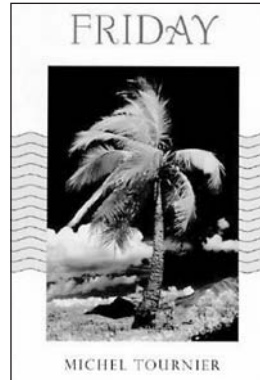
Perhaps most important, Robinson discovers a cave at the island's center. The cave serves not only as a storeroom for the food he grows and the explosives he salvages from the wreck of his ship, it also functions as a womblike retreat from the rigors of the orderly world he has created.

Robinson does not intend to rescue Friday. He first sets eyes on him as the young man is brought from a neighboring island by cannibals to be sacrificed. The captive escapes and is about to lead his captors to Robinson's hiding place when Robinson decides he must shoot him. The shot is deflected and hits one of the pursuers instead. The young man throws himself gratefully at Robinson's feet.

Friday submits indifferently to the rigidly ordered life Robinson offers him but proves nevertheless to be Robinson's rescuer in turn. Finding Robinson's store of tobacco in the cave, he secretly begins smoking it. One day, on the verge of discovery, he tosses his pipe into the cave, sets off the explosives, and destroys everything Robinson has created.

Robinson awakens to Friday's world. Relieved of everything connecting him to his previous life, Robinson embarks upon a new existence. He stops wearing clothes and discovers an entirely different island beneath the skin of the one he has created. He learns to play. He grows his hair long, shaves his beard, and develops a tan, all of which increase his resemblance to Friday. The two are no longer master and servant but companions.

Thus Robinson's world is threatened when a ship eventually arrives. Robinson is appalled, but Friday is fascinated by everything that the ship represents. When it departs, Friday is on board, but Robinson stays, consoled because the cabin boy has jumped ship and taken refuge on the island. Robinson decides to name him Thursday.



## THE OGRE

**First published:** *Le Roi des Aulnes*, 1970  
(English translation, 1972)

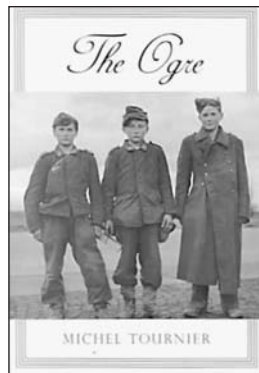
**Type of work:** Novel

*A French mechanic finds himself drawn into the morally ambiguous world of the Third Reich.*

*The Ogre* may be one of the most disturbing books ever written. It follows a simple-minded man into the heart of the Jewish Holocaust and dramatizes his confusion so thoroughly that the reader may find it impossible to escape. By the time Abel Tiffauges realizes the terrible extent of his predicament, he is lost—and the reader is lost with him. This accomplishment accounts for the book's reputation as Tournier's most powerful novel but also explains the dismay it has caused.

As a sickly child, Abel was placed by his parents in a foster home called St. Christopher's. By the time the reader meets him as an adult, he has developed into a strong but emotionally underdeveloped mechanic whose interests in children and photography are easily misinterpreted. When a young girl incorrectly identifies him as a molester, he is arrested, but he escapes prosecution because France is mobilizing for war. He eventually finds himself working with carrier pigeons in the French army but is captured by the Germans and assigned to a labor camp.

Abel comes to love wartime Germany, a nation whose many rules and regulations leave no room for the troubling ambiguity of civilian life in France. From ditch digger he is promoted to driver and eventually to gamekeeper on Field Marshal Hermann Göring's hunting preserve, Rominten. He discerns the elements of a grand plan in everything that has happened to him and is convinced that events, large and small, revolve around him. He sees the fall of France as retribution for the wrong done to him by the incorrect accusation,



and he interprets his rise to a position of some authority in Germany as tacit avowal of his central importance.

An odd event confirms Abel's sense of destiny. While he is delayed on a mission, an unidentified corpse is pulled from a bog, and at first Abel's superiors believe it may be him. On closer inspection the corpse turns out to be that of a man who died two thousand years ago and whose body was preserved in the peat. The scientist examining the body refers to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's haunting and beloved ballad, "The Erlking" (handily neglecting to mention the poem's sinister subject), and suggests that the find be named in its honor. This Erl-King's resemblance to himself is not lost on Abel, and when a second, smaller body is found in the bog, it merely confirms him in his identification. His subsequent reassignment to the Kaltenborn Napola, a Nazi military training camp for boys in the eastern forests of Germany, convinces him that fate is preparing him for a special purpose.

Events develop rapidly. On a mission to gather "recruits" for the camp, Abel discovers a Jewish boy, Ephraim, who makes him realize the extent of the Nazi predations against the Jews. Abel's delusional world totters. Is he Saint Christopher, who carried travelers on his back? Is he the Erl-King, who carried away children's souls? Christ? Adolf Hitler? As Russian troops break through German lines to the east and Kaltenborn Napola is consumed in flames, Abel lifts Ephraim to his shoulders and tries to escape, but the two sink into a bog. The last thing Abel sees is the Jewish six-pointed star revolving in the sky.

## THE FOUR WISE MEN

**First published:** *Gaspard, Melchior, et Balthazar*, 1980 (English translation, 1982)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Four kings in search of enlightenment seek the newborn Christ.*

*The Four Wise Men* marked a turning point for Tournier. It appears to be one of the simplest of his

books and seems to mark a tacit acceptance of Christianity. It is certainly his most humorous work. Beneath its surface simplicity and charm, however, *The Four Wise Men* is a telling examination of the beliefs by which people live.

*The Four Wise Men* consists of seven main sections, a postscript in which Tournier summarizes his sources, and some brief notes. The first three sections consist of the stories of the three traditional Magi: Gaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior, all of whose names derive from nonbiblical sources. Gaspar is a black king of Méroé in southern Egypt who buys two blond slaves and who gradually grows ashamed of his color. His faith in himself is restored when he travels to Bethlehem and sees that the infant Christ is black. Balthazar is the king of Nippur, a region of Babylonia. His great museum has been destroyed by a priest who disapproves of graven images, but Balthazar learns in Bethlehem that art pays tribute to creation and is therefore not sacrilegious. Melchior is a prince of Palmyra, Syria, driven out of his country before he can become king. In Bethlehem he discovers that it is possible to rule without violence and political manipulation, and he decides to found a heavenly city on earth.

There follow three episodes that serve to place the stories of the Magi in perspective. “Barbedor” is an allegory of death and renewal, suggesting the replacement of Jehovah by Jesus. “Herod the Great” is a long and grimly realistic portrait of political life in Palestine. “The Ass and the Ox” accounts the birth of Jesus from humorously unusual perspectives.

Tournier’s account of the fourth Magus, Prince Taor of Mangalore in southwestern India, takes up nearly a third of the book and is obviously its most important section. Taor is so enamored of sweets that he sets off in search of a Divine Confectioner whose imminent appearance has been heralded by prophets. His way is long, his entourage huge, and his progress slow, so Taor misses the birth of Christ. He encounters the other three Magi and listens to their dissimilar stories of what they found in Bethlehem, but he is unable to reconcile their accounts with his expectations of the ultimate sweet he supposes the Confectioner will dispense.

Taor’s subsequent travels strip him of his possessions and his followers. Pursuing an obscure destiny, he ultimately trades away his own life by taking

the place of a debtor sentenced to work in the salt mines of Sodom and is released after thirty-three years. This period of time, of course, leads Taor and the reader to Christ’s last days and to the reader’s realization that Taor has achieved a Christ-like state without the necessity of Christ’s having died to expiate his sins.

Resuming the search he had begun years before, Taor arrives at the table of the Last Supper just after Christ and his disciples have departed. In sampling the remaining bread and wine, Taor becomes the first man after the disciples to receive the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, and he is received into Heaven.

## THE WIND SPIRIT

**First published:** *Le Vent paraclet*, 1977

(English translation, 1988)

**Type of work:** Nonfiction

*Tournier recounts the key experiences of his life and identifies the insights that have shaped him as a writer.*

Despite its subtitle in English, *The Wind Spirit: An Autobiography* might be more accurately called a series of autobiographical essays. While Tournier certainly provides factual details about his life, most serve as springboards for more general comments. The book is studded with ideas, aphorisms, and philosophical observations—many of them highly provocative. Thus his account of his childhood in “Born Under a Lucky Star” includes attacks on the “mutilating, castrating culture” in which he grew up, the rigidly antisexual Christian religion to which he was exposed, and the city of Paris, which he found thoroughly hostile. By contrast, he remembers with delight his grandfather’s seemingly magical pharmacy and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen.

Tournier stresses his family’s identification with Germany and German culture, and in the book’s second (and longest) chapter he traces the origin and gestation of his most highly regarded novel, *The Ogre*. In a particularly striking passage, he describes his adolescent delight in the chaos that followed France’s defeat by Germany in World War II.



He concludes with a moving lament for the culturally sophisticated Germany that Adolf Hitler destroyed. While a novel must be judged independently of its author's comments and opinions, readers of *The Ogre* will find that *The Wind Spirit* provides invaluable insights into the novel's symbolic structure and development.

In another chapter Tournier examines the relationship between the experiences of Alexander Selkirk and the book that those experiences inspired, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. It is the latter that in turn inspired Tournier's first novel, *Friday: Or, The Other Island*, which reinterprets the role of the castaway's "savage" companion. Tournier admits that he considered dedicating the novel to his country's many Fridays, the Third World workers who make bourgeois life so comfortable—a comment that anticipates the subject matter of his fifth full-length novel, *The Golden Droplet*. A subsequent chapter analyzes the philosophical underpinnings of *Gemini*, his controversial fictional treatment of identical twin brothers.

In "The Mythic Dimension," Tournier describes the excitement of his university years and his bitter disappointment at failing the examination that would have allowed him to become a teacher—a failure that set him on the path to writing. He dis-

cusses contemporary literary and philosophical figures, such as Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre, and recounts his adolescent naïveté in "improving" the words of German novelist Erich Maria Remarque, whose *All Quiet on the Western Front* he translated. Typically, Tournier moves from the specific to the general, in this case drawing together his memories and his thoughts to comment on the power of myth. In what might well be his credo as a novelist, he observes: "Man rises above animality only by grace of mythology."

## SUMMARY

In a period in which most French writers have been anxious to concentrate on stylistic experimentation to the exclusion of content, Michel Tournier is an anomaly. He has declared his allegiance to traditional forms, but he has used these forms to investigate the major historical, philosophical, and sociological issues of his time. Tournier's treatment of these issues has often been controversial, but such controversy is to a large extent a measure of his success. However, his subsequent work has not generated the critical excitement that attended the publication of his first three novels.

Grove Koger

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TRANSLATION:

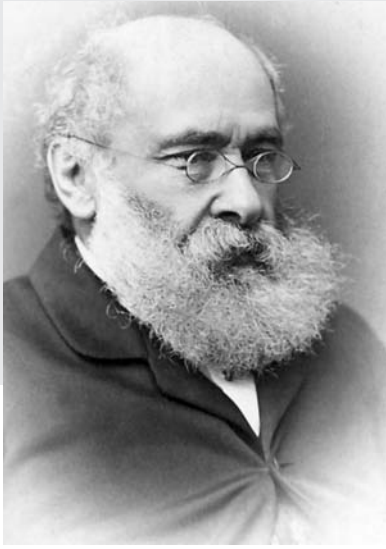
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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- Discuss Michel Tournier's use of myth and legend.
- What is Tournier's attitude toward Germany and German culture?
- What changes did Tournier make in adapting *Friday: Or, The Other Island* for younger readers?
- How does Tournier's account of the main characters in *The Four Wise Men* differ from traditional Christian accounts?
- Discuss Tournier's use of twins and pairs.
- To what extent are readers meant to identify with Tournier's characters?
- What is the significance of geographical setting in Tournier's novels?
- How has Tournier approached literary experimentation?



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## ANTHONY TROLLOPE

**Born:** London, England  
April 24, 1815

**Died:** London, England  
December 6, 1882

*A popular, entertaining writer of the nineteenth century, Trollope established the novel-sequence in English fiction; his fame rests on his six Barchester novels.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Anthony Trollope (TRAHL-uhp) was born in London, England, on April 24, 1815. His father, Thomas Trollope, was a well-educated barrister, but he had a difficult disposition and gradually failed in that occupation. Throughout the first twenty years of Trollope's life, his father tried many and various ways of making money, all ill-planned and mismanaged. His mother, Frances, eventually became the one who held the family together financially.

Trollope began school at Harrow at the age of seven. In his *Autobiography* (1883), one of the most widely read of English autobiographies, he writes of his schooldays as being so horrible as to be indescribable. At twelve, he was moved to his father's former school, Winchester. There, the other boys knew of the unpaid bills due the school for his education and teased and tormented him about his poverty. Trollope was sent back to Harrow as a day boy. At this time, his mother was in America to follow up on one of his father's unsuccessful money-making schemes, and he lived with his unkempt and uncouth father in a decrepit farmhouse, from which he tramped each day to sit among his smartly dressed, well-do-do classmates.

When Trollope's father went bankrupt in 1834, the family moved to Belgium, where his father died. Frances Trollope had already begun to sup-

port her family as an author. She was in her fifties when her first book was published, and when she died at eighty-three, she had written forty-one books. She was a quick, copious writer, and her son undoubtedly was influenced by her style.

Out of necessity, Trollope became a junior clerk in the General Post Office in London in 1834, a job he hated but endured for seven years. He was transferred to Ireland in 1841, and this proved to be an important turning point in his life. He was no longer working in an office under superiors who did not particularly like him. He became good at his work, made many friends, and became fond of what were later to become lifelong hobbies, riding and hunting. While he was in Ireland, Trollope married Rose Heseltine in 1844, was promoted, and soon began to write his first novel. He set for himself the quota of completing forty pages a week, or about ten thousand words.

Trollope's literary career began with *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847), but it was not until *The Warden* (1855), the first novel in the Barchester series, that he began to establish the style by which he is known. Next came *Barchester Towers* (1857), *Doctor Thorne* (1858), *Framley Parsonage* (1860-1861), *The Small House at Allington* (1862-1864), and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867). He considered the last to be his best work.

His next series is known as the Political, or Palliser, novels, after Plantagenet Palliser, who is in all of them. This series starts with *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-1865) and continues with *Phineas Finn, the Irish Member* (1867-1869), *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871-1873), *Phineas Redux* (1873-1874), *The Prime*

*Minister* (1875-1876), and *The Duke's Children* (1879-1880). The two series taken together span more than twenty years of Trollope's writing.

Trollope took pride in his diligent attitude toward his writing. He attributed the quantity of his work (numerous novels, several travel books, biographies, and collections of short stories and sketches) to conscientious work, usually done early in the morning before he went to work at the post office. As soon as he finished one piece of writing, he began another, and he wrote even when he traveled.

In achieving such a number of works, Trollope was more concerned with quantity than with the pursuit of stylistic perfection. Thus, his adverse critics often accused him of simply meeting the popular demands of the literary market with his descriptions of the inner life of young women. Essentially, his stories are a pleasant visit to a world that is disturbed only slightly by small problems and minor disappointments.

Apart from the series of books already mentioned, the following are also important: *The Claverings* (1866-1867), *The Belton Estate* (1865-1866), *Orley Farm* (1861-1862), and *Mr. Scarborough's Family* (1882-1883). Modern critics consider Trollope's finest piece of writing to be *The Way We Live Now* (1874-1875); it is a bitter satire on the power of speculative finance in English life. In it, Trollope anticipates England's submission to American and other foreign speculators.

In middle life, Trollope obtained all that he had yearned for as a child. He became a popular figure in London and in literary society. He was on good terms with the major writers of his time and was a particularly close friend of George Eliot. He traveled, hunted, and rode zealously, dined with his friends at his club, and enjoyed life enormously. In addition, Trollope enjoyed a happy and secure family life and was reading aloud with his family after dinner one evening when he suffered a stroke, from which he did not recover. He died a month later, on December 6, 1882, in London.

## ANALYSIS

The Barsetshire novels are regarded as Trollope's major, if not his only, significant contribution to literature. Interestingly, this viewpoint is shared by critics, literary historians, and the reading public. There are, however, many solid quali-

ties to be found not only in this popular series but also in most of his other works.

In all of his novels, there is a vast array of characters, usually set in motion by Trollope's theme, which in each novel is simply a variation: the finely drawn English opposition of love versus property. This pleasantly complex situational novel makes for interesting reading. No problems of social significance are given serious treatment, for the chief purpose is entertainment. When Trollope did turn to more serious and often satirical fiction in later life, he focused upon English political life. Even though the Political novels are concerned with political maneuvering in upper-middle-class society and in Parliament, the focus is still on the conflicts between love and property. (Probably because of his own failure to gain a parliamentary seat in the elections of 1868, in his political novels Trollope both exaggerates and denigrates the importance of serving as a member of Parliament.)

A typical Trollope novel contains several easily identified common characteristics, and these can be readily found in the two central series he wrote, the Barsetshire novels and the Political novels. He had, first, an imaginative yet genuine concern with moral existence. This concern was his primary means of insight into his characters. Therefore, while the physical characteristics of his characters are rarely made clear, these characters are conscientiously described regarding their moral sensitivities. Trollope presents them through what they say and what they do, and also by directly commenting upon them himself.

Second, the pattern of his novels stays fairly true to form. There is no villain, and most characters are morally average, neither particularly good nor bad, not particularly exciting but not dull. Thus, readers recognize much of themselves in his books.

Third, one recognizes in Trollope's works a disregard for plot. His characters, in keeping with their average morality, lead ordinary, average lives. There are no sensational or complicated situations, no great surprises or shocking situations. Instead, his characters deal with everyday issues that test their moral sensibilities, such as the problems of poor but well-bred young women seeking a suitable husband or the proper use of church endowments.

Last, the repetition of a short phrase at brief intervals and with great exaggeration is a quality that

is often seen in Trollope's works. The repetition is used most often to portray the truth of his characters' actions and to show the truth of their moral sensibilities.

Although it is easy to view Trollope's writings in a superficial manner, doing so creates a misconception of literary worth in the reader's mind. Rather, Trollope's passionate and real interest with moral existence provides for the variety and photographic accuracy of his pictures of the social life of the middle- and upper-middle classes of England in the nineteenth century. In Trollope's novels, the real and the ideal meet; despite the futility of human strivings, his satire provokes laughter; and the irony of the gap between what his characters really are and what they believe themselves to be pricks the moral consciousness of his readers. His influence upon modern writers regarding the development of the novel-sequence and the use of reappearing characters cannot be overestimated.

Trollope's contradiction, then, is a simple one and can be traced back to his deprivation in childhood. He was attempting to gain literary esteem by writing novels in a world where novel writing was not held in high regard. His *Autobiography*, published posthumously, created a furor at its publication. In it, he revealed himself as a writer to whom writing was a methodical, clerical process, much as letter writing had been for him during his early days as a postal clerk. It is, ironically, even today one of the most widely read English autobiographies.

## THE BARSETSHIRE NOVELS

**First published:** *The Warden*, 1855; *Barchester Towers*, 1857; *Doctor Thorne*, 1858; *Framley Parsonage*, 1860-1861; *The Small House at Allington*, 1862-1864; *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, 1867

**Type of work:** Novels

*Set in the rural south of England, these six novels center on the activities of the "squirearchy" and the clergy.*

Trollope's popular fame rests on his six Barchester novels. Taken as a whole, they are interconnected by characters who appear in more than one

of them, a technique that Trollope was to use again in his second series, known as the Political novels. The Barchester series established the novel-sequence in English fiction.

The most famous of the Barchester series is *Barchester Towers*. It is typical, however, of the entire chronicle, with its fine ironic tone and pleasantly complicated situations. Though the type of plot is social satire, no problems of social significance are given serious consideration, as its chief purpose is entertainment.

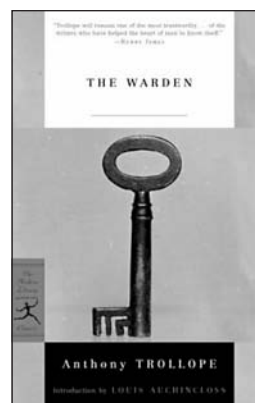
The series was conceived one summer evening in Salisbury, but the settings are, for the most part, in the imaginary west-country county of Barset and its chief town, Barchester. Barchester is a compila-

tion of the many counties Trollope visited in his position as a civil servant. Barchester's railroads and roads, its great lords and their fine castles, its squires and their parks, its towns, its parishes, and its rectors and their churches are all totally fictitious. From his careful observations and memories of his travels throughout England, however, Trollope pieced together a detailed

map of Barchester. Thus, it has a totally convincing reality, based not particularly upon the geographical but rather upon Trollope's sharp insight into the moral physiognomies of his characters.

The first book of the series, *The Warden*, sets a pattern to which Trollope adhered in the later books. In *The Warden*, the focus is upon a problem concerning the proper use of church endowments. Using his vivid imagination, Trollope set in motion the issues and conflicts that surrounded the problem and how it was approached by the various people involved, people with various modes and degrees of moral sensibility.

When Trollope returned to the milieu of *The Warden* in *Barchester Towers*, he introduced a number of subplots, all related to the ecclesiastical power struggle between the new bishop of Barchester (Bishop Proudie) and the former bishop's son (Archdeacon Grantly). The main conflict of the novel involves both parties' intentions to pre-





serve the integrity of the church. In typical Trollope fashion, the irony comes forth in how the two men view themselves versus how they really are—the two clergymen are, in their own minds, fighting for the spiritual power of the church, but they are actually fighting for power over the building, furnishings, and their clerical positions; in other words, they are fighting for the worldly things of the church, not the spiritual.

Many other novels were written in the period during which Trollope was engaged in writing the Barsetshire series. Archdeacon Grantly and his father-in-law, however, continued to live in Trollope's imagination. He created the most solid of his male characters by blending his own personality with theirs, and in his *Autobiography* he explained the novelist's need to "live" with his characters and stressed the importance of recording change and the effects of time on them. Therefore, in *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (the book that Trollope considered his best work), the two have grown older, just as Trollope himself was growing older. The Archdeacon is the character most often described as being akin to Trollope: quick to anger but quick to forgive, generous, warmhearted, worldly. His father-in-law, who had been Warden in the first book, is portrayed at the upper limits of Trollope's moral range. He is virtuous and good, and he grows old among his family and friends. When the older man dies, it is through the mouth of the Archdeacon that Trollope expresses his estimate of both of them.

Regarding the women that he created, Trollope always referred to them as girls. He held the same notions concerning vicarious relationships with his female characters as with his male ones. For the girls whom he created, love never ran smoothly, a plot that endeared him to his readers. The confu-

sion ensued when he brought the demands of property and social status into conflict with the power of love. The problems created by this situation involved the lovers, their families, their friends, and even their circle of acquaintances, just as it would in real life. Trollope used this plot early in the Barsetshire series and continued to use it throughout his career.

It must be noted, however, that not all Trollope's characters are likable or admirable. He was critical of himself, and through his characters one sees this personal criticism. For example, the Archdeacon's worst enemy is Mrs. Proudie, wife of the Bishop. She is one of the best-known bad-tempered women in English fiction. Even after she died (Trollope referred to her death as his having killed her), he indicated that she would still exist for him, even if as a ghost.

Barsetshire, Trollope's fictional country where the Barsetshire series is set, is as impressive as William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Thomas Hardy's Wessex. The novels provide a slice of nineteenth century life, meticulously observed and entertainingly told.

## SUMMARY

Anthony Trollope attributed his success to his imagination, from which he developed an intimate knowledge of his lifelike characters. One of the most prolific of the Victorian writers and one of the most popular, he was in his own day admired as a realist; modern readers, however, tend to view his works in a more comic light, with his characters under the firm control of the writer's irony rather than simply people leading their daily lives. Regardless of how Trollope's works are viewed, they endure as classics of Victorian literature.

*Lela Phillips*

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## Anthony Trollope

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*He Knew He Was Right*, 1868-1869  
*The Vicar of Bulhampton*, 1869-1870  
*The Way We Live Now*, 1874-1875  
*The American Senator*, 1876-1877  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- If Anthony Trollope's books are pleasant visits to a world of small problems and minor disappointments, why does he enjoy a wide and varied readership more than a century after his death?
- Is the predictability of Trollope's characters and plots a strength or a weakness?
- Trollope begins the Barchester novels by introducing a relatively minor clerical figure, Mr. Harding, who dies at the end of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. How does his presence give shape to this sequence of novels?
- Examine the first chapter of *Barchester Towers*, "Who Will Be the New Bishop?", and observe how Trollope establishes character, tone, conflict, and other features of the novel.
- In not seriously challenging the routine and aspirations of Victorian society, does Trollope present that society more thoroughly than could a severe critic?
- Examine Trollope's writing career as an instance of disciplined work habits.

TRANSLATION:

*The Commentaries of Caesar*, 1870

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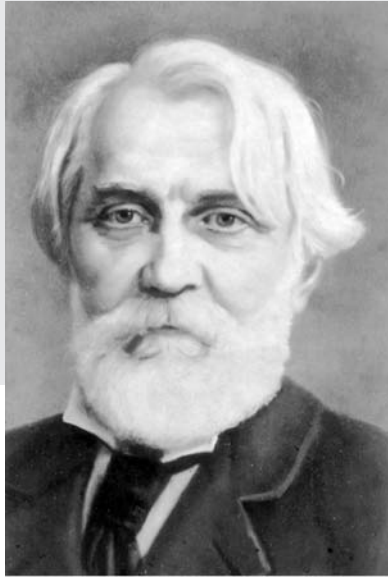
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## IVAN TURGENEV

**Born:** Orel, Russia  
November 9, 1818

**Died:** Bougival, France  
September 3, 1883

*Among major Russian writers in the nineteenth century, Turgenev was the one most assimilated into the culture of Western Europe, where he was admired and widely read.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (toor-GAYN-yuhf) was born in Orel, Russia, on November 9, 1818. His mother, Varvara Petrovna Lutovinov, was a cruel and malicious woman of great wealth. His father, Sergey Turgenev, six years younger than his mother, was a handsome and charming cavalry officer who was descended from an old and distinguished but relatively impoverished family. Turgenev's parents became acquainted when his father visited Spasskoye, Varvara's estate, looking to buy horses for military use. Sergey Turgenev married Varvara Petrovna Lutovinov to save his family from financial ruin. Until he died in 1834, he was regularly unfaithful to his cruel but adoring wife.

In fairness to Turgenev's mother, it must be noted that she had an unhappy childhood. She was all but ignored by her own mother, then abused by her drunken stepfather, then sequestered by the uncle with whom she sought refuge. On the other hand, there is evidence that brutality was hereditary with the Lutovinovs. They seem to have acquired their great wealth by heavy-handed methods. None of this cruelty toward people passed to Turgenev, who grew up to be an excitable but gentle and compassionate man.

In spite of her character, or perhaps because of it, Varvara Petrovna exerted a strong influence on

her son. She encouraged Turgenev's education with a view toward seeing him become an important state official. Turgenev studied first at the University of Moscow, then at St. Petersburg, and then in 1838 he left for Berlin to complete his training. This westerly movement during the course of his education may be seen as a metaphor for Turgenev's thinking, which inclined steadily in the direction of European liberalism and away from the formula of "autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationalism" which expressed the regime of Czar Nicholas I.

Two things happened in 1843 that were important to Turgenev for the rest of his life. He published, at his own expense, a narrative poem, *Parasha* (1843), and in doing so more or less recognized (much to his mother's displeasure) that literature was to be his vocation. Then, in autumn of that year, he met the famous singer Pauline Garcia Viardot and fell in love with her almost immediately. Viardot was married to a theater manager twenty years her senior. Her husband tolerated her admirers, whom she attracted by her beautiful voice and strong character. She was not especially pretty and might be thought of as a benign version of Turgenev's mother. In any case, Turgenev formed an attachment to her that lasted until his death forty years later. The exact nature of the relationship is not clear. Though Turgenev and Viardot may briefly have been lovers, they seem for the most part to have shared romantic friendship, and Turgenev eventually came to be recognized as a curious appendage to the Viardot family, close to wife, husband, and children alike. (The Viardots also reared Turgenev's illegitimate daughter,

Paulinette, born to him and one of his mother's serfs.)

Turgenev's literary fame may be dated from *Zapiski okhotnika* (1852; *Russian Life in the Interior*, 1855; better known as *A Sportsman's Sketches*, 1932), a collection of short pieces that express a highly sympathetic but unsentimental view of the Russian peasantry, who until emancipation in 1861 were largely serfs. Turgenev hated the institution of serfdom (he freed his own serfs when he inherited property upon his mother's death in 1850), and his book is thought to have had something to do with ending that wretched system. *A Sportsman's Sketches* appeared in the same year as Turgenev's laudatory article on Nikolai Gogol, who had recently died in disgrace (from the government's point of view) for writing satiric portraits of Russian life. Turgenev was arrested, briefly imprisoned, and then exiled to Spasskoye for his praise of Gogol; the authorities regarded him with suspicion until things eased at the beginning of the reign of Czar Alexander II. It was during this exile that Turgenev wrote "Mumu," one of his most famous stories. Based on an incident involving Turgenev's mother and one of her serfs, it tells the story of a deaf-mute servant who is forced by his mistress to destroy his beloved pet dog.

*Mesyats v derevne* (wr. 1850, pb. 1855, pr. 1872; *A Month in the Country*, 1924), Turgenev's play suggesting illicit love relations, was finally licensed for publication in 1855. Then, in 1856, Turgenev published *Rudin* (*Dmitri Roudine*, 1873; better known as *Rudin*, 1947), and he might now be considered as entering the major phase of his literary career. *Dvoryanskoye gnezdo* (1859; *Liza*, 1869; better known as *A House of Gentlefolk*, 1894), appeared in 1859. *Pervaya lyubov* (1860; *First Love*, 1884), a novella in which a boy falls in love with his father's mistress, appeared a year later. Turgenev acknowledged that this story was close to his own experience and that the picture given of the father strongly resembled his own father. These works were followed by *Nakanune* (1860; *On the Eve*, 1871), *Ottsy i deti* (1862; *Fathers and Sons*, 1867), *Dym* (1867; *Smoke*, 1868), "Stepnoi korol Lir," (1870; "A Lear of the Steppes," 1872), *Veshniye vody* (1872; *Spring Floods*, 1874; better known as *The Torrents of Spring*, 1897), and *Nov* (1877; *Virgin Soil*, 1877). Most of these short novels present the reader with members of the Russian gentry who are somewhat likable but also inef-

fectual. More often than not, love relationships are frustrated or futile or both. There are elements of humor, but as with Anton Chekhov, the famous Russian writer in the generation after Turgenev, the humor is touched with sadness.

Turgenev settled with the Viardots at Baden-Baden, Germany, in 1863. In 1875, he bought jointly with the Viardots an estate at Bougival, near Paris. He enjoyed a wide literary acquaintance and considerable fame. His health began to fail in 1882. Cancer of the spine caused him great pain before he died on September 3, 1883, in Bougival, attended in his last illness by Pauline Viardot.

### ANALYSIS

Nineteenth century Russia was divided by a cultural debate between Slavophiles and Westerners. Slavophiles were conservatives who tended to regret the effort of Peter the Great to impose the culture and technology of Western Europe on his people. They believed that Russia was different from the West and superior in that difference. Westerners were liberals who were deeply troubled, if not simply contemptuous, of autocratic repression, which they saw most obviously displayed by the serf system, which effectively made chattels of the peasant class. They favored a reordering of Russian society that would liberate the serfs and establish a constitutional monarchy, if not a people's democracy. In this debate, Turgenev sided with the Westerners.

His position and how he expressed it in his art were not readily apparent except for his obvious dislike of serfdom. Turgenev's inclination to a moderate view may be related to the paradoxes in his character. He was a tall, well-made, handsome man who was generally harmless in his relations with women; he seems not to have had much passion in his life despite his attachment to Pauline Viardot. He was a very gentle person who loved shooting game birds. He lived in Western Europe much of the time but almost always wrote of his homeland and native people. Because he saw many sides to life, he could not create stories that would satisfy zealots. He could not divide the world into bad people and good people, but this did not keep him from believing that Russia would be made better by liberal reform.

In January, 1860, Turgenev published the essay "Gamlet i Don Kikhot" ("Hamlet and Don Quixote," 1930) in the *Contemporary Review*. He ex-



presses the thought that the world comprises passive, introspective, ineffectual Hamlets and active, energetic, outward-looking Don Quixotes. He suggested that the Russian problem was too many Hamlets and not enough Don Quixotes, that something in the national character kept Russia from realizing its potential, but it is tempting to see these observations as Turgenev's unwitting revelation of himself. Whether he was consciously dominated by strong women throughout most of his life is a question to be debated but never finally answered. That he wrote fictions that included irresolute men who are perhaps not strong enough for the women whom they desire seems obvious.

In fact, most of Turgenev's novel-length works are studies in character, which tends to encourage a psychoanalytical approach in reading them critically. It does well to remember that Turgenev also wrote plays, for his stories contain more drama than adventure. People gather in a parlor or garden and talk to one another. Characters enter and exit the scene. Then some of the characters move to another location where the same pattern is repeated, with new characters added to replace those who have been left behind. This pattern repeats until the reader reaches the end of things, which is usually a failed love relationship (*A House of Gentlefolk*, *The Torrents of Spring*) or a death (*On the Eve*, "A Lear of the Steppes") or both (*Fathers and Sons*).

What gives Turgenev's stories their interest is the clarity with which he presents his characters and the subtlety of detail by which he makes them individuals. When Turgenev began a novel, he constructed biographies of his characters and became intimately familiar with them. By this method, he was able to create convincing portraits of that part of Russian society in which he lived, particularly the Russian gentry who, it seemed to him, were becoming increasingly irrelevant as the world changed. His novels make clear that he was aware of the larger world and that he had opinions about it, but the people who drew his attention were those who did not quite fit, who were superfluous. The thought that members of Russia's leisured class were largely superfluous had been around since the time of Alexander Pushkin's verse novel *Evgeny Onegin* (1825-1832, 1833; *Eugene Onegin*, 1881).

Except for *A Sportsman's Sketches* and "First Love," most of Turgenev's fiction employs a third-person

narrative voice, which takes the reader into thoughts and feelings of a multiplicity of characters. This technique also promotes impressionistic description of the external world, the look of characters and the Russian landscape that they inhabit. For that matter, Turgenev's first-person narratives are effectively descriptive, but when the story is told by a person within the action itself, nothing more comprehensive than the awareness of that single figure may be included. The author is bound by the narrative vehicle and denied the power of selection that sometimes makes great art.

The point to be made is that Turgenev was an artist. His novels and short stories are frequently cited as examples of the "art" of fiction. Seeing as he did the complexities of life, Turgenev did not incline to a single vision of the human condition that would have given him status as a thinker, but he ranks high among writers of his time for the artistry with which he created his fiction.

## A SPORTSMAN'S SKETCHES

**First published:** *Zapiski okhotnika*, 1852  
(English translation, 1855)

**Type of work:** Short stories

*Hunting for game birds in the Russian countryside, a member of the gentry has repeated encounters with the humble, frequently mistreated peasant class.*

*A Sportsman's Sketches* effectively describes the stories that constitute the collection. They do not always express the concentration of elements toward the resolution of a clearly defined plot that readers associate with modern short stories. In one of the most famous pieces, "Bezhin lug" ("Bezhin Meadow"), the sportsman-narrator loses his way while hunting. At dusk, he stumbles into a camp of peasant boys who have brought horses out to graze in the cool night air. He sits among them, listens to their ghost stories, and leaves them at dawn with a sharpened sense of them as individuals rather than faceless members of the peasant class.

In "Ermolaj i melnichikha" ("Yermolai and the Miller's Wife"), the sportsman-narrator hunts with a serf named Yermolai, who seems to have a clan-

destine relationship with Arina, the miller's wife. Only toward the end of this sketch does Anna's story materialize. She was taken to St. Petersburg to be maid to her master's wife. When she fell in love with Petrushka, the footman, and asked for permission to marry him, she angered her mistress (who would not tolerate the inconvenience that a married servant might entail) and was banished to the countryside, where she now lives in a loveless marriage, dependent on Yermolai for the little happiness that she has.

For all of his sympathy with the peasants, Turgenev is faithful to the realities of the world that he depicts. In "Pevtsy" ("The Singers"), the sportsman wanders into a desolate village where two peasants are about to engage in a singing contest at the local tavern. When the singing begins, the contestants prove by their efforts that beauty can be found even in the voice of a simple peasant, but when the sportsman passes the tavern again at evening, everyone is drunk. In "Biryuk," the forester Biryuk is harsh with the luckless peasant that he has caught cutting a tree before he finally lets him off, but Biryuk, a handsome, vigorous man, has had his own bad luck, for his wife ran away with a traveling peddler. One of Turgenev's finest stories, "Zhiyye moschi" ("Living Relics"), was not added to *A Sportsman's Sketches* until 1874. Seeking shelter from a rainstorm, the sportsman enters a rude hut where he encounters Lukerya, once the most beautiful servant on his family's estate. Yet shortly before she was to be married, Lukerya injured herself in a fall, and for seven years she has wasted away toward death, patiently and devoutly submitting to her bitter fate.

When *A Sportsman's Sketches* appeared in 1852, Nicholas I was still czar of Russia, and direct criticism of his regime was not permitted. Turgenev's "sketches" were perhaps as effective as anything in their time in bringing the plight of Russia's underclass to the attention of a literate public.

## FATHERS AND SONS

**First published:** *Ottsy i deti*, 1862 (English translation, 1867)

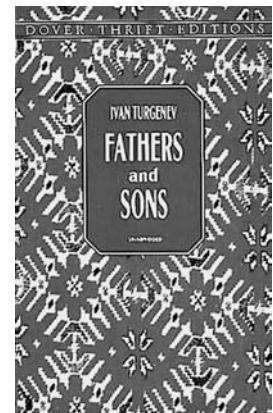
**Type of work:** Novel

*Evgeny Bazarov, a nihilistic disciple of scientific materialism, dies after cutting himself at a carelessly performed autopsy.*

*Fathers and Sons* is probably Turgenev's most famous work. It addresses ideas of the period more directly than most of his other works and creates debate over these ideas as a conflict of generations. The novel's story is simple enough. Arkady brings his friend Evgeny Bazarov home with him at the end of his university studies. Home is a country estate occupied by Arkady's father, Nikolai Petrovich (who is a widower), his uncle Pavel Petrovich, Fenichka (a young woman living under Nikolai's protection), and Mitya, the son whom Fenichka has borne to Nikolai. Nikolai considers himself a progressive; Pavel cultivates the manner of an English aristocrat. Conflict develops when these middle-aged men enter into discussion with Bazarov, who rejects all authority but the evidence of scientific materialism and regards art with amused contempt.

Presently, Arkady and Bazarov pay a visit to town. They meet Sitnikov and Kukshin, a foolish young man and woman who pose as radical intellectuals. Then, at a governor's ball, they meet a young widow, Anna Sergeyevna Odintsov, and her younger sister Katya. Arkady and Bazarov are both smitten by Madame Odintsov and visit her at her country estate. When Bazarov declares his passion to Madame Odintsov, he is rejected. He then takes Arkady to visit his parents, traditionalists who belong to the modest gentry. Bazarov is an only child, deeply loved by his gentle, countrified parents.

After a time, Bazarov and Arkady revisit the Kirsanov estate, where Bazarov and Pavel Petrovich



fight a nonfatal duel over a misunderstanding about Fenichka. Bazarov and Arkady visit Odintsov again, and now it is clear that Arkady is attracted not by Anna Sergeyevna but by her sister, Katya, a pretty but conventional (and marriageable) young woman.

Bazarov returns to his parents. He assists his father, a retired army doctor, in medical proceedings. One day, he participates in an autopsy on a man who has died of typhus. He cuts his finger, neglects to disinfect the cut, and dies of typhus. As the novel concludes, Arkady and his father unite with Katya and Fenichka in a double wedding.

*Fathers and Sons* caused controversy in Russia at the time of its appearance. Conservatives thought Turgenev was too sympathetic toward Bazarov. Radicals thought that he was not sympathetic enough and resented Bazarov's dying while his friend Arkady settled into the conventional happiness of marriage and life on his father's estate. Turgenev claimed sympathy with his ill-fated hero, declaring that he agreed with Bazarov on everything but his view of art. Yet it is difficult not to see

that Bazarov is a half-willing suicide, and this leads the reader to question whether Bazarov himself does not recognize that, without love, which is hardly an element of scientific materialism, life is a dreary business.

## SUMMARY

Ivan Turgenev demonstrated that Russian literature could be written and judged by the standards that obtained in Western Europe. If he was not as profound a thinker as his contemporaries Fyodor Dostoevski and Leo Tolstoy, he was as great an artist and, in his own way, as perceptive concerning the difficulties of the human condition. His novels and stories are not ponderous things to read. He moved easily in literary circles in France and England and even attracted attention from the American novelist Henry James, who wrote an essay expressing admiration for Turgenev's craftsmanship. Turgenev is still read more than one hundred years after his death.

John Higby

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Where did Ivan Turgenev stand in the struggle of Russian intellectuals between Slavophiles and Westerners?
- What influences on Turgenev's life led him to his concern for Russian serfs?
- How did Turgenev contribute to the understanding and betterment of serfs?
- Does Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons* foretell the materialism that would infect Russian society in the following century?
- Did Russian critics' difficulty in judging Bazarov arise from a weakness in Turgenev's characterization or from concerns that they brought to the novel?



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## SIGRID UNDSET

**Born:** Kalundborg, Denmark  
May 20, 1882

**Died:** Lillehammer, Norway  
June 10, 1949

*Undset's novels about medieval Norway gained worldwide popularity for their historical accuracy and examination of the inner lives of memorable characters. She received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928 and Norway's highest award, the Grand Cross of the Order of St. Olav, in 1947.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Sigrid Undset (UHN-seht) was born in 1882 to Ingvald Undset, a Norwegian archaeologist and college professor, and Charlotte Gyth, Danish daughter of the mayor of Kalundborg, Denmark, where Sigrid was born. The family lived there only two years before moving to Norway, where Ingvald Undset could be near museums and universities. Sigrid was a precocious child who readily gained appreciation for history through her father's studies and her exposure to archaeological objects in the home. She was familiar with the Icelandic sagas, as well as classic writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare. Sigrid was eleven when her father died, causing Sigrid, her mother, and her two sisters to adjust to reduced economic circumstances. Unable to afford a college education, she took a one-year secretarial course. Starting at age sixteen, she worked for ten years for an electrical engineering firm in Christiania (renamed Oslo in 1925). During those years of employment, she began writing for publication.

Undset met a Norwegian painter, Anders Castus Svarstad, in Rome. He was a married man with three children at the time. They had a three-year affair before he obtained a divorce. They married in 1912 and had three children of their own. Undset supervised a large household, which included her

three stepchildren, as well as her children with Svarstad. It was not an easy time, as mental disability affected one of the stepchildren, as well as her middle child, a daughter. Her husband was not helpful in supporting or managing the family, and the couple separated in 1919. Then pregnant with her third child, Undset took her family to live at a farm outside Lillehammer. The marriage to Svarstad ended. There are many parallels between Undset's married home life and that of her best-known fictional character, Kristin Lavransdatter. Two of Undset's children predeceased her. Her mentally disabled daughter died just before World War II, and her eldest son was killed resisting the Nazi occupation of Norway in April, 1940. Norway's postage stamp honoring Sigrid Undset features a portrait of her painted by Anders Svarstad.

Undset developed increasingly strong religious beliefs, culminating in her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1924. Once nominally Lutheran, she became convinced that absolute religious truth was revealed through Catholicism, whereas other religious beliefs were the imaginings of human beings. This was an unpopular and unusual move in Norway, with its strong Lutheran leaning. Following Catholicism's view of divorce, she arranged to have her marriage to Svarstad annulled because of his previous divorce. Undset's writings reflect her increasingly fervent religious beliefs, especially after her conversion.

Undset had been openly critical of the rise of Nazism, and her books were burned in Nazi Ger-



many. With Germany's occupation of Norway in 1940, she and her remaining son went into exile. They went first to Sweden and then to the United States. She lived in Brooklyn, New York, then an enclave of many Norwegian Americans. She wrote and gave radio addresses about the horrors of Nazi occupation. Undset returned to Norway after the war and became quite reclusive. She died of a stroke in 1949.

Undset had a prodigious literary output, writing stories which showed many influences from events in her own life. Her novels often took place in the regions with which she was very familiar, such as Trøndelag and Oslo. Her repeated literary themes of sin and redemption mirrored her own changes in religious belief. Many of her contemporary novels depicted the drab lives of working women in Norwegian cities, a plight known to Undset from her own experience.

During her writing career, Undset vacillated between historical and contemporary settings. Her first book was set in medieval times, but it was rejected by publishers. Soon her creative imagination led to publishable stories. Undset's historical novels reflected her familiarity with medieval texts and archaeological objects, as well as her knowledge of Nordic folklore. Her first published book was *Fru Marta Oulie* (1907). This and other early contemporary novels, such as *Jenny* (1911; English translation, 1921), were popular and enabled Undset to become self-supporting. In 1920, she published *Kransen* (*The Bridal Wreath*, 1923; also as *The Wreath*, 1997), the first book of the medieval *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy, which was her most famous literary accomplishment. This was followed by *Husfrue* (1921; *The Mistress of Husaby*, 1925; also as *The Wife*, 1999) and *Korset* (1922; *The Cross*, 1927, 2000). The trilogy was popular in Norway, and translation into other languages soon led to international popularity for *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Charles Archer's English translations of the three books appeared from 1923 to 1927. Tiina Nunnally's English translations, published from 1997 to 2000, are superior because she included scenes deleted by Archer and abandoned Archer's archaic wording, such as "methinks" and "mayhap."

From 1925 to 1927, Undset published another long, somber novel set in the Middle Ages. *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken* and *Olav Audunssøn og hans børn* (1925-1927; *The Master of Hestviken*, 1928-1930,

1934), which consists of four books: *The Axe* (1928), *The Snake Pit* (1929), *In the Wilderness* (1929), and *The Son Avenger* (1930). Some critics, including the storyteller herself, considered the *Master of Hestviken* tetralogy to be superior to the better known *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy. In 1928, Undset was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for her depiction of Scandinavia during the Middle Ages. Only twice before had women received this international honor.

In addition to writing numerous novels, Undset also wrote children's books, essays, and short stories. Her autobiography in the form of a novel, *Elleve år* (1934; *The Longest Years*, 1935), was published in 1934. It described her childhood. *Tillbake til fremtiden* (1942; *Return to the Future*, 1942), published in 1942, was also autobiographical, detailing her flight from Nazi-occupied Norway. With worldwide fame, her writings are increasingly available in English and other languages.

## ANALYSIS

The flesh and blood events of *Kristin Lavransdatter* would suit a soap opera. Here are adultery, inebriation, murder, rape, and treason. Here likewise are strong emotions: revenge, jealousy, sexual obsession, shame, and despair. Even though the novel's characters lived more than six centuries ago, Undset represented them as having the same gripping inner struggles that people experience today.

Undset has been compared to other realistic writers, like Émile Zola. Suitable to this content, her writing flows easily. She does not use stylistic tricks or artificial phrasing. Her writing is straightforward and matter-of-fact. The telling is very rich in detail, including textures, sounds, and smells. The tempo is unhurried, permitting full development of the major characters.

Other authors before Undset had written less effective fiction set in the Middle Ages. Some, like Sir Walter Scott, presented flowery, idealized romances. Gothic novels gushed with sentimental themes. Undset improved upon these depictions with her vast historical knowledge and her unsentimental approach. Her historic fiction excelled at describing accurately the daily life of Norway in the Middle Ages, both among the rich and among the poor. In this stratified feudal system, the two lifestyles were very different. She studied medieval

churches and other ruins in order to correctly paint her landscapes and dwellings. She used her expertise to accurately describe clothing and tools. She detailed the way people ate, slept, raised their children, and worshipped. The historical details are intermixed with the story without calling attention to them. Likewise, the natural background is not emphasized or separated from the human action. The reader visualizes the landscape in passing, but is not distracted by it.

Undset was very religious and her works carry strong spiritual themes. She disliked secular trends in society and felt people should seek to be less worldly, more intent on cooperating with God's will rather than seeking their personal wants. Undset condemned materialism. Kristin Lavransdatter's life was an object lesson about the heavy price which sinners must inevitably pay. Kristin broke church rules against sexual license and disobedience toward one's parents. She consequently lost her reputation, physical health, and emotional health. Kristin learned that it is not a small thing to violate God's rules. Furthermore, people can sin not only in their actions but also in their attitudes. Kristin did not learn to control her attitudes until late in her life. Before that, she was proud, self-absorbed, and lacked humility. Undset once stated that Kristin's greatest sin was pride. These religious themes are very strong in the trilogy, but they do not get in the way of the storytelling. However, some critics feel that in much of her later writing, Undset let her religious themes get in the way of the narrative flow.

Undset used the events in *Kristin Lavransdatter* to show the genuine worth and validity of Christianity over the old, heretical Viking religion. The novel was set during the medieval period, when Norway's people had recently converted to Christianity from pantheism. It was a time when the old pagan ways were still known and secretly practiced. On two occasions in the novel, characters try to exact cures through witchcraft, but these attempts fail.

Undset urged obedience to societal rules, not just church rules. For example, a common theme in *Kristin Lavransdatter* is the importance of honor. Many times in the novel, characters resort to physical violence when they feel a threat to their reputation or that of a loved one. Such a focus on honor was prevalent in the old Norse myths. Undset's

message was that people should rely instead on the peaceful legal system to settle disputes.

Commonly, the characters in Undset's stories undergo a long, trying struggle, followed by resolution. The author directed her attention particularly to the difficult plight of women, showing that they can expect harsh punishment if they act on their sexual feelings. Her female characters obsessively brood over their secret sins. Undset urges them to focus instead on their chief God-given role, which is as nurturing mothers.

*Kristin Lavransdatter* was immediately popular in Norway. In part this was because the country had gained independence in 1905; Norwegians were eager to read depictions of their country's past. With translation, the book later gained worldwide popularity.

## KRISTIN LAVRANSDATTER

**First published:** *Kransen*, 1920 (*The Bridal Wreath*, 1923; also as *The Wreath*, 1997); *Husfrue*, 1921 (*The Mistress of Husaby*, 1925; also as *The Wife*, 1999); *Korset*, 1922 (*The Cross*, 1927; 2000)

**Type of work:** Novels

*Kristin Lavransdatter broke church and societal rules in her youth, paid for her sins through much unhappiness in adulthood, and finally reached contentment through heartfelt acceptance of God's will.*

In *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Undset told the entire life story of the eponymous character in chronological order in three books. A supporting cast of characters grows old with Kristin over the time period 1320-1350 C.E. The author vividly describes the setting in medieval rural Norway. It is a brutal world with much violence and many pagan superstitions. The Viking era had ended when King Olaf Haraldson converted his kingdom to Christianity. However, many of the Viking behaviors continued, such as drunkenness, brutal talk, and vicious fights begun with little provocation. Just as Norway is undergoing a conflict between pagan and Christian ways, the book's characters struggle between spirit and flesh.

The first book, *The Bridal Wreath* (also known as

*The Wreath*), depicts Kristin's idyllic childhood. She grows up secure and well loved on her father's prosperous feudal estate. She is especially close to Lavrans, her father. He is an admirable figure, respected and honorable. Her protected, happy life is interrupted only by an accident that seriously injures her little sister, Ulvhild.

With puberty, Kristin's rebellious nature surfaces. Her childhood friend Arne, a peasant, dies in a fight defending her honor. Her parents arrange her marriage to Simon, a good and wise man of her landowner station in life. Kristin, however, does not love Simon, and to delay marriage she spends a year in a nunnery. The trilogy does not contain much humor, but the nunnery section introduces Kristin's roommate, Ingebjørg, who provides amusement with her vanity and vacuous comments. While staying at the nunnery, Kristin meets the love of her life, Erlend, a worldly knight. Erlend is handsome and charming, but he is also immature and careless. His mistress, Eline, has already borne him two children. Kristin inadvertently contributes to the death of Eline in a confrontation.

Erlend seduces Kristin, who becomes his willing intimate partner because of her sexual attraction to him. Going against the wishes of her parents, the headstrong Kristin marries Erlend as *The Bridal Wreath* concludes. Pregnant and nauseated at her wedding feast, Kristin experiences doubts and regrets. The wedding crown, or wreath, is a great weight upon her head.

In the second book, *The Mistress of Husaby* (also known as *The Wife*), Kristin pays a heavy price for her earlier sins. The book focuses on Kristin's tribulations in playing her traditional female roles as mother and spouse. She gives birth to seven sons who survive infancy. Many of the pregnancies are difficult and in total they wear her out; they prevent her from being emotionally close to her husband. This story line accurately depicted medieval times, when continual pregnancies were common, along with their physical and emotional toll. Kristin finds raising her sons difficult. She is alternately cold and warm toward them. She obsesses about their failings.

Kristin is a complaining, shrewish wife to a husband who does not meet her standards, either as a father or as an estate manager. As a knight, Erlend is often away on military ventures. He allows his feudal manor, Husaby, to fall into decay. These de-

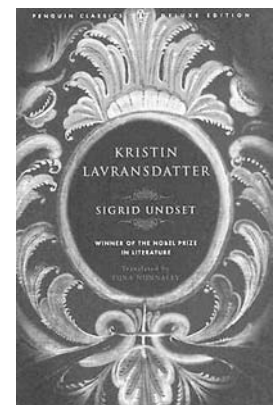
tails of an unhappy home life mirrored many features of Undset's own marriage. Erlend is slow to connect emotionally with his sons, and when he later bonds with them, Kristin is jealous and resentful. In addition to his contentious home life, Erlend has problems with the government. He is tried for treason against the unpopular King Magnus VII. He narrowly escapes conviction, in large part due to the intervention of Simon, the man Kristin's parents had originally chosen for her to marry. Simon has married Kristin's sister, Ramborg, but he continues to love Kristin. He assists Kristin and Erlend on several occasions, causing tensions in both marriages. Erlend loses his feudal estate, and the family must move back to Kristin's ancestral home.

The sad details of Kristin's tribulations in *The Mistress of Husaby* do not end here. She endures the heart-wrenching death of her father. She becomes closer to her mother following his death, but her mother dies soon afterward. Her parents have secrets about their own sexual love, resolved just before their deaths.

Kristin feels remorseful about her sins and makes a painful pilgrimage to the St. Olav shrine. However, in performing this and other rituals meant to achieve repentance, she lacks sincerity, not truly giving herself over to God's will.

The third book, *The Cross*, begins with Kristin's continued misery but ends with her unhappiness resolved through religious faith. Kristin is dissatisfied with her sons, her husband, and her place in the community. She considers many of her sons to be shiftless and fears that they will lose their station in life. She blames Erlend for her troubles, telling him on one notable occasion that he is far below her father in his worth. This insult causes Erlend to move to a mountain

hut where he lives in squalor for several years. Kristin wants him to return but is too proud to admit it. She is mortified to realize that the surrounding neighbors look down upon her and her family. This low community esteem comes to light in a mis-



understanding concerning Kristin's pregnancy during the period when Erlend lives at the mountain hut. Neighbors accuse Kristin of infidelity with the estate overseer, not realizing that she and Erlend had briefly been together. The insult leads to a fight in which Erlend is wounded. He dies of an infected wound.

All this misery eventually is put to rest as Kristin turns to intense religiosity. She realizes that earthly toils are unimportant, and she stops obsessing over her past sins. She finds peace, becoming content with her life. She becomes a lay nun caring for victims of the Black Death. This plotline is realistic because the pandemic arrived in Norway on a ship in Bergen harbor in 1349 and is estimated to have killed half of Norway's population. Kristin succumbs to the plague in a dying scene in which she gives her wedding ring to the church.

## SUMMARY

Sigrid Undset's stories have worldwide admiration because she wrote with such an engaging, straightforward style about the inner life of people. She was particularly adept at describing issues troubling women; this was true whether her stories depicted contemporary or medieval times. Her special gift was bringing her prodigious knowledge of history and her descriptive skills to her stories without losing track of the gripping story line.

Undset's personal life held much difficulty as she dealt with economic woes, a troubled marriage, and the Nazi occupation of her beloved country. Her own acquisition of fervent religious beliefs both aided her own adjustment and shaped her stories.

Nancy Conn Terjesen

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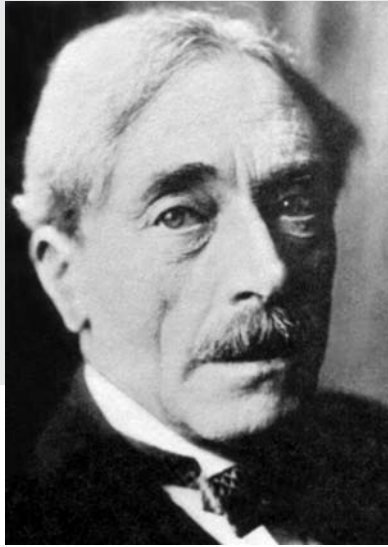
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Many people who read *Kristin Lavransdatter* in the past like and remember the first book but have little memory of the other two. Why do you think this is?
- How did Sigrid Undset's own life experiences as wife and mother influence her depiction of Kristin in these roles?
- Kristin was extremely close to several priests during her life. Describe two of those relationships.
- How did Undset's own childhood affect her writing?
- How would Undset view current trends in marriage and family?
- Contrast Kristin's feelings toward her father with her feelings toward her husband.
- Given Undset's own religious views, what would she recommend that Kristin do, following her marriage to Erlend?





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## PAUL VALÉRY

**Born:** Sète, France  
October 30, 1871

**Died:** Paris, France  
July 20, 1945

*Valéry, remembered most often for his poetry, also made significant literary contributions as an essayist, playwright, and author of philosophical writings.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Paul Valéry (va-luh-REE) was born on the western coast of France in Sète on October 30, 1871, to a Corsican father and an Italian mother. After two years at the Dominican convent, at age five he entered the Collège de Sète (now Collège Paul-Valéry) which sat on cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Memories of the view of the sea from these years strongly influenced his writing. In 1884, the family moved to Montpellier, where Paul attended the lycée. School bored Valéry, causing him to appear disinterested in his work. He began instead to read about architecture, poetry, and mathematics. He created mind games, cultivating an inner world he sensed was unique. At age thirteen, his first attempt at poetry was a satirical parody of Victor Hugo's "Napoléon II." Despite disillusionment with school, he finished his *baccalauréate* in 1888 at the university in Montpellier. Young Valéry continued to write poetry. The principal source of the earliest poems (1887-1890) comes from correspondence with his friend, Gustave Fourment, in which he often included copies of sonnets.

In 1890, several significant literary friendships began. Valéry met Pierre Louÿs, only a year older but far more knowledgeable about literature and acquainted with people in literary circles of Paris. Through Louÿs, Valéry met André Gide, who remained his lifelong friend and correspondent.

Valéry became fascinated with the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé while reading Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *A rebours* (1884; *Against the Grain*, 1922). Louÿs encouraged Valéry to seek advice from Mallarmé. Mallarmé gave Valéry the encouragement he sought, and Valéry's motivation to write poetry increased. A few poems were accepted for publication in 1890, but in 1891, more than a dozen poems were published. In 1891, during his first trip to Paris, Valéry not only met Huysmans but also attended a regular Tuesday evening literary gathering at Mallarmé's with Louÿs. This personal meeting deepened Valéry's admiration for Mallarmé.

In 1892, Valéry finished military service and received his law degree. Following graduation and an unhappy love affair, he went to visit his aunt in Genoa. On the night of October 4, during a frightening storm, Valéry suffered an intellectual crisis and entered upon the twenty years of his life known as the "Great Silence." He decided to turn away from poetry writing to a period of philosophical questioning and contemplation dedicated to the formation of his mind. The silence was not complete, but after having written more than three hundred sonnets from 1890 to 1892, the contrast in output was striking. In 1894, he moved to Paris and became a member of Mallarmé's Tuesday circle. He also began writing daily for hours into what resulted in more than 250 notebooks. These notebooks have been preserved on film.

To earn a steady living, Valéry took a job in the war office in 1897. Mallarmé's death in 1898 had a profound effect on Valéry. The same year, he met

Jeannie Gobillard, a friend of Mallarmé's, and they married two years later. He accepted a job as private secretary to Edouard Lebey, director of the French press service, giving himself time to follow his intellectual pursuits.

In 1912, Gide convinced Valéry to allow him and the publisher Gallimard to publish a volume of his early poetry and prose. He began revising the works and also began *La Jeune Parque* (1917; *The Youngest of the Fates*, 1947; also translated as *The Young Fate* and *The Eternal Virgin*), an obscure poem inspired by the operatic recitatives of the German composer Christoph Gluck. When the poem was published, Valéry was widely recognized as a great poet.

In 1920, his famous poem, "Le Cimetière marin," and the volume of revised early poems in the *Album de vers anciens* (1920; *Album of Early Verse*, 1971) were published. A second volume, *Charmes: Ou, Poèmes* (1922; *Charms*, 1971), contained poetry from 1917 to 1921. Two important dialogues were also published: *Eupalinos: Ou, L'Architecte* (1921; *Eupalinos: Or, The Architect*, 1932) and *L'Âme et la danse* (1925; *Dance and the Soul*, 1951), illustrating his fascination with the beauty and symmetry of architectural and musical forms. After the death of Lebey in 1922, Valéry capitalized on his literary reputation. He published poetry, bits of his notebooks, essays, and prefaces to books, and he lectured all over Europe. The first of five volumes of essays was published in 1924, and he was named coeditor of the literary review *Commerce*. In 1925, he was elected to the Académie Française. Valéry wrote two melodramas, *Amphion* (pr., pb. 1931; English translation, 1960) and *Sémiramis* (pr., pb. 1934; English translation, 1960), with music by Arthur Honneger, which were produced by the Paris Opera. In 1933, Valéry was appointed administrator of the new Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen at Nice. In 1937, a chair of poetics was created for him at the Collège de France, where he taught until shortly before he died.

In 1940, during the German Occupation, Valéry moved to Dinard and began *Mon Faust* (pb. 1946; *My Faust*, 1960), which was published in 1946. His last important lecture was delivered in December, 1944, at the Sorbonne. Upon his death on July 20, 1945, he received national honors. He was buried in the Cimetière Marin of Sète, the subject of his best-known poem.

## ANALYSIS

To study the writing of Paul Valéry is to explore the world of a man who saw irony and paradox in life itself. This is reflected even in his having been sometimes called the "greatest living poet of France" when, in fact, his poems were less important to him than the process by which they were created. Not only a poet, Valéry wrote in almost every medium except the novel, admitting that he saw no purpose in anecdotal fiction.

Valéry's literary career and style follow an unorthodox path of development. Generally thought of first as a great poet, he began writing poetry at about age thirteen. The bulk of his poetic output came early in his life, between the years 1917 and 1922. As a young writer, Valéry rejected the existing Romanticism and adopted a somewhat cynical stance. Often identified with the Symbolist school, which was active in Paris in the early 1900's, he later departed from many of its principles to follow his own course. The man whose work he most admired was Stéphane Mallarmé, a leader of the Symbolists. His early association with writers such as Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine in Tuesday night gatherings at Mallarmé's had a profound effect upon Valéry's own work. The Symbolist ideals of purity, precision, and conscious direction in writing were guideposts in his writing. He detested vagueness and saw in the structure of language an algebraic type of formula which was exhibited in the inherent rhythm of words.

The turning point in Valéry's literary career was the experience called his "Genoa night" in 1892. After a disturbing nightmare, he turned away from writing poetry, which had begun to seem like a false and confining manner of expression, and turned his attention to the cultivation of his mind. The twenty years hence are referred to as the "Great Silence," although he was still producing prose works and making valuable contributions to his notebooks. He studied the works of great artists before him who had looked for new means of self-expression. For example, he analyzed the composition of Richard Wagner's musical dramas with their employment of innovative combinations of literary and musical devices. He was fascinated by the notebooks of the artist Leonardo da Vinci not so much for the sketches of the inventions, but for the process by which the genius arrived at his conclusions. Edgar Allan Poe's ability to manipulate the emo-

tional responses of his readers by word choices and poetic structures made him seem, at one point in Valéry's life, the perfect poet.

Valéry read the works of major philosophers and contemplated the eternal mysteries of life, recording his thoughts daily in notebooks. To him, the mark of genius was the ability to bring apparently unrelated things into one connected system. After years of philosophical and intellectual delvings and the mature realization that absolute knowledge is unattainable, Valéry turned back to poetry. He had begun to see verse not as the limiting form he once had, but as possibly the only form that might allow him the ideal means of expression.

An interest in mathematical and architectural concepts had been part of Valéry's study since college days. The mathematical aspects involved in the meter and forms of poetry and the challenge of relating ideas within the framework of a poem was the impetus he needed. His understanding of the aesthetic experience made revision an important part of Valéry's writing. It was not the actual poem that resulted from his work that he felt was important. He admittedly wrote poetry for himself, to develop his own mind, and it was the act of writing that, for him, was the meaningful experience. Whatever was published he considered simply the state of the poem at that particular moment. It was this attitude wherein the poem itself had no set significance that allowed him to react casually to his critics, feeling it their right to interpret as they saw fit. His poetry represented a systematic study of his own thoughts and the way in which his mind worked. The relationships of the ideas within a poem to each other and to the structure of the whole poem were intricate and delicately balanced. His use of devices such as rhythm, sound, metaphor, and imagery were intended to develop the mind's subconscious involvement with the work. Valéry considered poetry a means of evoking excitement and an awareness of the deeper meanings of life, not only for the poet, but also for the reader. He assumed that for a poem to have true aesthetic value, it should present some of the same struggle for the reader as it had for himself. This is illustrated in some of his most famous poems, which are obscure and difficult to analyze in terms of their symbolism and structure.

Prose, on the other hand, was to Valéry a medium for transmitting information, not emotion. Much of his later writing is prose in the form of essays, dialogues, and jottings from his notebooks on various subjects, containing insights from his intellectual quests. Psychology and psychiatry were of great interest to him and he studied writings from the emerging new fields to help him better understand his own motivations. He considered intellect the sole power by which humanity had transcendent understanding of the different psychological aspects of the mind. The characters in his prose reflected his discoveries and probings. His preparation for the essay on the life of Leonardo da Vinci provided ample opportunity to study the processes of genius. He also created Monsieur Teste, a fictional character on an intellectual and philosophical journey whose story was representative of Valéry's own.

### **"THE CEMETERY BY THE SEA"**

**First published:** "Le Cimetière marin," 1920  
(collected in *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry in English Translation with French Originals*, 1958)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In an imaginary return to his hometown cemetery, the poet attempts to understand one's relationship to the eternal and decide his life's future course.*

"The Cemetery by the Sea" is Paul Valéry's most famous poem, first published in Jacques Rivière's literary journal *Nouvelle revue française* and in 1922 in the collection *Charmes: Ou, Poèmes*. The title has also been translated as "The Graveyard by the Sea." The poet imagines a visit to the graveyard in Sète that overlooks the Mediterranean. He has come as the noon sun, in perfect position, shines down on the white tombstones, reflecting on the sea and the white sails as doves fly overhead. The complicated poem is filled with religious images and language (temple, idols, doves) and deals with one's struggle with life and death, being and nonbeing, and humanity's need to decide its course. Paradox was a constant theme in Valéry's life and writing, and this

poem, with its difficult metaphors and themes, exemplifies the poet's often felt dilemma.

The poem's twenty-four stanzas are each six lines long. The metrical structure is decasyllabic, departing from the more easily flowing twelve-syllable Alexandrine verse of the period. The rhyme scheme is *aabccb*. The form was a welcome challenge to the poet. Some analysts have compared the structure of the poem to that of a clock—a twenty-four-hour day, with sixty minutes to an hour—symbolizing the actual passing of time. Valéry thought that poetry could not be summarized effectively in prose without losing its true meaning, which lay within the structure of the lines themselves. Much of the musical and rhythmical quality of the poem is lost in translation. Many experts have attempted to analyze and to explain Valéry's poetry, especially "The Cemetery by the Sea." In a lecture about the poem, Valéry stated his intentions to write a monologue that was personal but universal, containing the most recurrent themes of his emotional and intellectual life.

Many possible thematic and symbolic interpretations may be made of the poem, but there are some points upon which almost all agree. There are three basic symbols with which the speaker is involved—the cemetery, the sea, and the sun. Each symbol has two sides. The sea is calm on the surface, yet full of turbulence underneath. The sun at noon is bright and changeless, yet casts a dark shadow. The cemetery's tombstones represent immobility, yet beneath them are the souls of the departed. The personal problem being confronted is how the poet will spend the rest of his life. Having just spent nineteen years in silence with respect to his poetic gift, he is at a crossroads in his literary life. The supreme paradox is that even if the poet tries to choose nothingness, he cannot, because he is unable consciously to experience nothingness. He leaves the cemetery with a triumphant conviction to return to poetry.

## THE YOUNG FATE

**First published:** *La Jeune Parque*, 1917  
(English translation, 1947)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The young Fate, representing humankind's inner voice, struggles to choose either love and life or death and immortality.*

*The Young Fate*, also translated as *The Youngest of the Fates* and *The Eternal Virgin*, is the work that catapulted Valéry to the forefront of the French literary scene. Dedicated to André Gide, the person to whom Valéry credits his renewed motivation to write poetry, the poem was written over the period from 1912 to 1917. During the struggle with the composition of *The Young Fate*, Valéry wrote approximately thirty other short works published in the collection *Charmes: Ou, Poèmes* in 1922.

The poet himself agreed that *The Young Fate* was his most obscure poem. The two main reasons that he undertook the poem were to continue the quest for identity already begun in his notebooks during these years and to indulge his preoccupation with form. He desired to create a literary means to show the kind of evolution from form to content that he termed "modulation" in music. He studied the operatic recitatives of Christoph Gluck's *Alceste* (1767), whose purpose was to merge the poetry and the music into a dramatic whole. Valéry observed that the structure of the language and musical form in the speechlike passages functioned to immerse and carry the listener along in the intended mood of the work, unifying structure and feeling.

The poem is composed of 512 lines of Alexandrine verse. Keeping within strict twelve-syllable form, Valéry uses alliteration and inner assonance to give lines a musical quality exhibiting the balanced effects of rhythm and rhyme. This way of handling language not only sets him apart from the emerging Surrealist movement, in which writers attempted to reveal the subconscious mind, but also distances him from the Symbolist poets, whose work had once served as his model.

Some analysts have separated the poem into sixteen sections, making up two acts with introductory and transitional material. The sections repre-

sent evolutions in psychological thought that are represented in the experiences of the poem's main character.

The subject matter is decidedly abstract—thought conscious of itself. Valéry attempts to depict the changes of consciousness or psychological stages as they evolve over the passage of a night. The poem emerged in fragments too abstract to be understood alone, causing Valéry to introduce a secondary subject, providing a more concrete framework for the abstract ideas. The secondary subject is the story of a young woman, Fate, faced with the problems of love and death. The inner voice of the young Fate is the inner voice to whom Valéry felt all people listen. The poem begins with the troubled cries of an awakening young woman who, having been bitten by the Serpent (symbolizing sexual desire), is in a state of confusion between a desire for love and a desire for death. The story has been compared to the classic legend of Cupid and Psyche in which the pull of life's sensuality triumphs; as the sun rises, the young Fate accepts life.

### “AN EVENING WITH MR. TESTE”

**First published:** “La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste,” 1896 (collected in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, volume 6, 1956)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Valéry creates a character who embodies his ideas of pure intellect and creative genius.*

Valéry's philosophical tale first appeared in the literary review *Le Centaure*, published in Paris by Valéry and several friends, including André Gide and Pierre Louÿs. It was not widely read at first; eventually, however, its significant impact dictated several more editions and its translation into at least six languages.

The tale is the story of the narrator's meeting with a strange individual, Edmond Teste, a pure intellectual. Monsieur Teste's motto is: “*Que peut un homme?*,” meaning “Of what is man capable?” Teste has suppressed all unnecessary gestures involved in human relations, such as shaking hands, and has

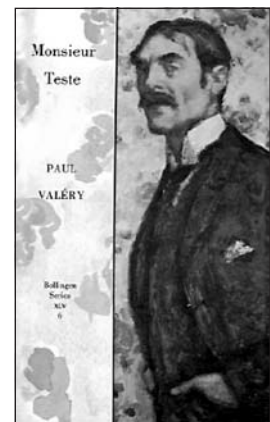
devoted years of study to discovering the laws of the workings of the human mind. Monsieur Teste is Valéry himself. Valéry's notebooks are filled with notations quoting “opinions of Monsieur Teste.” It was through the figure of Teste that Valéry was able to impart to the world his ideas of creative genius and intellect in their purest states. Many of his abstract reflections on mathematics, philosophy, and language are presented via the character of Teste. Valéry explored, with Teste, the conflict between emotion and intellect and being and nonbeing.

Valéry's fascination with the creative process was first truly awakened in his study of the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, which culminated in a commissioned essay about Leonardo in the *Nouvelle revue française* in 1895. The exploration of the same theme continued with Monsieur Teste and is apparent in Valéry's notebook entries generally. His writing on poetic theory, arguing that the process of creation is more important than the eventual product, also revolved around the same ideas. His preoccupation with the workings of his own mind and with the eternal problems of life's choices are central to all his writing.

After publishing the original Monsieur Teste essay, Valéry continued to be fascinated with the character of the superhuman intellectual. Three more Teste essays appeared in 1920. In 1946, five more previously unpublished fragments were added in a posthumous volume. The development of the Teste character throughout all of Valéry's works parallels the development of intellectual theories in the mind of the poet himself. The importance of the essays, therefore, lies mainly in the fact that they afford a glimpse into the workings of Valéry's mind.

### SUMMARY

The writing of Paul Valéry is musical and delicately balanced, yet often obscure. Writing was an exercise by which he clarified his own mind and analyzed the creative process itself, pursuing the





highest intellectual ideals. Although remembered as a poet, his philosophical probing in prose led to the development of aesthetic and poetic theories that had an enormous effect upon later writers and philosophers. The difficulty and intricacy of Valéry's work made it a model for others. His influence is seen in the work of writers such as T. S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Decorated before and after death with national honors, Valéry is one of the most prominent figures in French literature of the twentieth century.

Sandra C. McClain

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#### DRAMA:

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*Sémiramis*, pr., pb. 1934 (musical drama; English translation, 1960)

*Cantate du Narcisse*, pr. 1939 (musical drama; *The Narcissus Cantata*, 1960)

*Mon Faust*, pb. 1946 (*My Faust*, 1960)

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*The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, 1956-1975 (15 volumes)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What aspects of Paul Valéry's poetry differ substantially from the work of a man with whom he is often compared, Stéphane Mallarmé?
- What artistic works other than poems influenced Valéry?
- Specifically, how did Valéry's mathematical knowledge contribute to his poetry?
- What features of the cemetery that Valéry visited helped him back into the active life of a poet?
- For Valéry, what was the challenge and difficulty of making poetry from ordinary language?
- Examine Valéry's theory of the relationship between poetry and abstract thought.

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# CÉSAR VALLEJO

**Born:** Santiago de Chuco, Peru

March 16, 1892

**Died:** Paris, France

April 15, 1938

*One of the world's preeminent twentieth century poets, Vallejo writes poetry with a striking fusion of emotional immediacy, ontological selflessness, and formal ingenuity. His poetry transforms his personal agonies and reflections into universal anthems of suffering, eroticism, and wonder.*

## BIOGRAPHY

The youngest of eleven children, César Abraham Vallejo (vuh-LAY-oh) was born on March 16, 1892, in Santiago de Chuco, a provincial town located high in the northern Andean Sierra of Peru. From that relatively isolated starting point, he grew into one of the most influential and revered poets in the Spanish-speaking world. Moreover, through the diligent work of translators, Vallejo's influence now reaches poets, critics, and readers working in English, Italian, French, German, Russian, Japanese, Quechua, and many other languages.

To contextualize Vallejo's poetry, one might look to the pattern of suffering that emerges from his biography. More specifically, that suffering ranged from the personal to the political, and it extended seemingly from his first breath to his last. In fact, his birth itself embodies the matrix of cultural, religious, political, and psychosocial tensions that would fuel his agonized writing and life, as he was born the grandson of two indigenous Chimu grandmothers and two Spanish grandfathers, both of whom were Catholic priests. At the other end of his life, on his deathbed, he was said to have lamented the failing Republican war effort in Spain.

Early in life, Vallejo also suffered a steady stream of failed love affairs, with one such failure even driving him to attempt suicide. Fortunately his amorous turbulence subsided in January, 1929, with his commitment to live with his future wife, Georgette Phillipart, whom he would marry in 1934. Nevertheless, his life was one of nearly continuous suffering. Complicating that, he felt conflicted over feelings of private despair, which he consid-

ered self-indulgent in relation to the massive, overwhelming sadness and suffering of the universe. Thus, whether gazing upon a star at night or into the eyes of a shackled prisoner, Vallejo continuously sensed a totalizing, universal agony permeating existence and thereby reinforcing his personal ontological insignificance.

One of the early benchmarks of Vallejo's suffering came in 1909, after he had finished his primary education in Santiago de Chuco and his secondary education in nearby Huamachuco. He began a job in the mines at Tamboras, and that exposure to the archetypal agony and exploitation of laborers would mark Vallejo permanently and deeply. In particular, he was pained by the laborers' seemingly unjust and agonizing working conditions, about which he would write in all of his full-length books of poetry, as well as his novel *El tungsteno* (1931; *Tungsten*, 1988), about life at a tungsten mine.

In 1911, Vallejo left the mine and moved to Lima to become a physician, but he dropped out of school within the year. He then moved to Huánaco, where he began to teach for the first time, which is biographically significant for two reasons. First, teaching would prove one of Vallejo's sporadic sources of income throughout his life. Second, in this instance, he was tutoring the children of an affluent mine owner and therefore was exposed again to painful discrepancies in class, wealth, and power.

Vallejo's sensitivity to political inequality was intensified in 1912, when he began to work as an assistant cashier on a sugar plantation. Again he

found the laborers' working conditions to be inhumane, and he found his Catholic upbringing of little help in understanding such agony. This, then, is pivotal as an emergent moment of Vallejo's feelings of the inadequacy of religion to redeem the suffering of human beings, which in turn might be seen as engendering Vallejo's forthcoming passion for politics. A decade later, he would encounter Marxism and seize upon it as a more immediate and plausible solution to suffering than religion.

In the meantime, Vallejo enrolled in La Libertad University in Trujillo in 1913 to study liberal arts. That same year he also published his poetry for the first time. Those early poems, considered his juvenilia, are quite crude in relation to his debut collection, *Los heraldos negros* (1918; *The Black Heralds*, 1990), but they nevertheless demonstrate sparks of his poetic ingenuity. Moreover, one should note that for three years Vallejo was both writing and studying poetry vigorously, earning his B.A. in philosophy and letters in 1915 by writing a thesis on the importance of Romanticism to Spanish poetry.

Quite significantly, Vallejo's endorsement of Romanticism was unusual for the times, as the dominant aesthetic movement of modernism was denigrating such modes of writing as unpoetic. However, demonstrating his fierce intelligence, confidence, and independence, Vallejo refused the faddish ascriptions of certain modes of writing as unpoetic. Of note, his unconventional use of both Romanticism and modernism exemplifies yet another of Vallejo's quintessential traits as a poet: He is many. Vallejo's poetic persona is a multitude of contradictory personae, which is a very modernist notion; yet he also honors poetic tradition, which is antimodernist.

While finishing his bachelor's degree, Vallejo also began to study for a law degree in 1915. However, by 1917 his poetry was displacing his other interests. He was busily publishing individual poems to be included in his debut collection, and his thesis on Romanticism was gaining positive critical attention. Consequently, with his literary reputation burgeoning, he decided to leave law school without a degree and relocate to Lima in 1918. There he met the renowned Peruvian poet Abraham Valdelomar, who embraced Vallejo for his poetic talent. Valdelomar even planned to write the introduction to *The Black Heralds*, though that introduc-

tion never materialized. Meanwhile, to earn an income, Vallejo taught at a primary school in Colegio Barrós, where he would remain until the crucial year of 1920.

Prior to 1920, however, several crucial occurrences in Vallejo's life took place in 1918. In addition to publishing his first book of poetry that year, on June 22, 1918, Vallejo helped to launch the literary review *Nuestra Epoca*, a short-lived but significant addition to the Peruvian literary community. Furthermore, on August 8, 1918, Vallejo's mother died at the age of sixty-eight. Vallejo never recovered from that blow. Initially he was so overcome by grief that he became physically ill, and, after recovering physically, he wrote often of her death, transforming it into one of his poetry's major themes.

The next pivotal year in Vallejo's biography is 1920, when he participated in the events leading to his self-imposed exile from Peru. More specifically, in July, 1920, he traveled to Santiago de Chuco for the annual celebration of the town's patron saint, during which a violent disturbance erupted. It resulted in an act of arson razing a town building, a citizen dying at the hands of the police, and two policemen then being killed by the angry crowd in retaliation. Vallejo was implicated in the mayhem and even identified as inciting the crowd. Consequently he was arrested on November 9, 1920, and spent 112 days in jail in Trujillo.

While incarcerated, Vallejo was exposed yet again to extreme suffering, this time in the form of jailors physically and psychologically tormenting their prisoners. From that experience, Vallejo lost faith in humankind's ability to redeem itself from its suffering, especially due to the human penchant for interpersonal violence and humiliation. This is thematicized throughout his second book of poetry, *Trilce* (1922; English translation, 1973). In June, 1923, to avoid further prosecution for his alleged involvement in the disturbance, he fled Peru forever.

Vallejo resettled in Paris, France, which is significant to his biography for many reasons. First, it rendered Vallejo a lifelong exile, fueling a new sense of suffering and loss in him. Second, while in Paris he met and married Georgette Phillipart, bringing an end to his turbulent string of failed love affairs. Third, Vallejo discovered Marxism in Paris, sparking his political commitments that led to his posthumous collection, *Poemas humanos* (1939; *Human*

*Poems*, 1968), which includes the acclaimed fifteen-poem sequence *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (*Spain, Take This Cup from Me*, 1974), about the Spanish Civil War, and an earlier sequence of prose poems titled *Poemas en prosa* (*Prose Poems*, 1978).

Marxism also led Vallejo to his outspoken defense of the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War, as well as his commitment to the Peruvian Communist Party. Moreover, his political activism included repeated travel to Spain, across continental Europe, and into the Soviet Union, where in Moscow in 1928 he saw the Soviet system as a promising means of alleviating humankind's perennial, pandemic suffering. Thus *Human Poems* is decidedly more political than his earlier work, and he was reportedly so engaged politically that he even grieved the Spanish Civil War from his deathbed.

Vallejo died in Paris on Good Friday, April 15, 1938, of intestinal infection at the age of forty-six, and he was buried at the Cimetière du Montparnasse.

## ANALYSIS

Vallejo ranks among the most important writers of Latin America and certainly among the world's major twentieth century poets. Remarkably, he published only two full-length collections of poetry during his lifetime, his debut collection, *The Black Heralds*, and *Trilce*. Vallejo's third major collection of poetry, *Human Poems*, appeared posthumously in 1939, and it is generally considered his most important book of poetry.

Vallejo also wrote prose prolifically, though much of it went unpublished during his lifetime. Those works include his 1915 thesis, *El romanticismo en la poesía castellana* (1954); a collection of short stories, *Escalas melografiadas* (1923); a Social Realist novel, *Tungsten*; a travelogue, *Rusia en 1931: Reflexiones al pie del Kremlin* (1931); a follow-up to that travelogue, *Rusia ante el segundo plan quinquenal* (1965); five plays; many freelance newspaper articles and essays; and copious letters to friends.

One of the dominant motifs of Vallejo's poetry is absence, rendering him a poet of suffering. This emanates from his focus upon despair, loss, and rupture in both the human condition, in particular, and the universe in general. Paradoxically, then, absence produces Vallejo's distinctly present, iconoclastic voice, which derives from a unique fusion of Catholic rhetoric, personal strife, ontologi-

cal wonder, cultural comparison, and intricate wordplay. That admixture structures and sustains Vallejo's oeuvre throughout its radical formal and political transformations, thereby connecting his life in provincial Peru to that in cosmopolitan Paris.

Moreover, throughout Vallejo's poetry his deepest private struggles and changes transcend their personal concerns, erupting into a new matrix of expression of universal themes of the human condition. In other words, despite the subjective anxieties and details of his poems, they are neither narcissistic nor insular. Instead, they surpass the personal and become pluralistic, if not universal. Thus, when Vallejo grieves in a poem, he is grieving for the entirety of humankind, and even all of existence. As a result his poetry strikingly elucidates the private lives of his readers, thereby earning him a substantial, international readership, despite the specificity of time, place, and language in Vallejo's poetry, not to mention its relative difficulty.

Despite the difficulty of Vallejo's most complex poetry, careful readers will note its purposefulness. For even in the most seemingly hermetic moments, Vallejo's poetry is rife with signification and resonance. More specifically, while Vallejo's most difficult poetry might initially seem incomprehensible, the reader can gain insights into it through assiduous reading and rereading. In essence, that reading will lead to a growing, cumulative awareness of the importance of disjunction to the poetry. That disjunction produces Vallejo's unique, inexplicable, and profound forms of nonlinear and nonlogical communication, as well as his diverse voices, perspectives, and aesthetic concerns. Moreover, disjunction most profoundly manifests itself through Vallejo's intricate explorations of language itself. Consequently, Vallejo can be considered a torchbearer of such fundamental modernist motifs as the protean and/or masked self, the flawed referentiality of language to reality, and the heterogeneity of voices composing the self.

Heterogeneity is particularly important to understanding Vallejo's avant-garde status in the Americas and beyond, for he masterfully uses diverse registers of voice, often within the same poem, and even within the same line of a poem. In doing so, he is struggling painfully to locate and define the meaning of his personal ontological suffering, which paradoxically materializes through his



poetic oeuvre as a multifaceted, protean, and vigorous language seeking always to confront the “Other” in an effort to minimize isolation and suffering. Consequently, he writes in a richly layered language, blending colloquial, religious, medical, economic, linguistic, and/or cultural valences.

Significantly, heterogeneity is also evident in the diversity of poetry influencing Vallejo’s verse. In particular, one can note the prominent importance to Vallejo of *Modernismo*, French Surrealism, the Spanish Golden Age, and *Romanticismo*, among others. Through those antecedent poetics, Vallejo stretches Spanish, both syntactically and verbally by creating powerful transhistorical and transcultural neologisms and phrases, which always serve to augment the consciousness of his poetry and never to celebrate any sort of personal verbal cleverness.

True to Vallejo’s motif of suffering, the neologisms also help him to reckon the ontological significance and insignificance of human suffering in previously unimaginable ways. Consequently, Vallejo’s impact upon his readers is tremendous. His disjunctive voices illuminate fractures in culture, time, place, and language, thereby leading to new, more problematic but also generative means of thinking about existence and the human condition. In other words, Vallejo yet again proves himself to be a torchbearer of modernist concerns.

In short, Vallejo is a bundle of contradictions. They chafe within and between themselves, producing the friction to spark the avant-garde fires of his poetic oeuvre. Poem by poem, one witnesses Vallejo grappling to reconcile the irreconcilable, whether struggling to conflate his Roman Catholic genealogy with his indigenous spirituality, his personal politics with public policy, his infatuation with language with his resentment of its failures, his eroticism with social mores, and so much more. Thus he is always writing from a schism between such incommensurable forces, and that generates a poetry that remains both radically new aesthetically and desperately conservative personally.

## THE BLACK HERALDS

**First published:** *Los heraldos negros*, 1918  
(English translation, 1990)

**Type of work:** Poetry

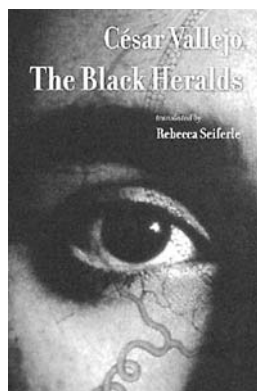
*With this collection, Vallejo announced himself as a poet of intense emotional immediacy and iconoclastic metaphysical vision.*

The release of *The Black Heralds* earned Vallejo a good deal of positive critical attention, much more so than his second book, *Trilce*, would initially garner with its 1922 release. Much of the critical interest in *The Black Heralds* derives from the book’s fervent, unique exploration of the intersections of Catholic rhetoric, indigenous Peruvian culture, personal loss, and Vallejo’s perceptions of the world as brimming with erotic energy and an absurd excess of existential agony. This is exemplified by poems such as “El pan nuestro” (“Our Daily Bread”), “Oración del camino” (“Prayer of the Road”), and “Espergesia” (“Epexegetis”), which transform Catholic motifs and icons into metaphors for the framing of intimate, pained questions about an individual human being’s ontological insignificance. Similarly, the book’s title poem, “Los heraldos negros” (“The Black Heralds”), is a furious defi-

ance of God in His most violent moments, which render one speechless yet vigorously innervated in that silence. “The Black Heralds” is one of the most renowned individual poems in the Spanish-speaking world.

After “The Black Heralds,” the introductory poem in the collection, the book comprises six sections. Most of those sections include at least a

few sentimental and/or melodramatic lyrical poems, which is typical of many young poets. After all, Vallejo had written most of these poems in his early to mid-twenties. However, throughout the book readers can spot the emergence of Vallejo’s voice, which sounds itself most audibly in poems like “La



araña" ("The Spider") and "Los dados eternos" ("The Eternal Dice"). There he works with a swift pace, both intellectually and rhythmically, building a narrative sequence disjointed by iconoclastic juxtapositions of Catholic liturgy, natural metaphor, and a perspective on the cosmos as indifferent to individual suffering on Earth.

The book's fourth section, "Nostalgias imperiales" ("Imperial Nostalgias"), intensifies that mix by adding Vallejo's impassioned, political interest in exploited laborers, cultures, and resources, particularly in relation to the colonial sacking of Peruvian Incan land for its minerals and precious metals. Tangentially, one also should note the book's consistent theme of longing for family, which manifests itself, for example, through the poem "Enereida," honoring his father's dissolution through the aging process, and the poem "A mi hermano Miguel" ("To My Brother Miguel"), eulogizing César's deceased older brother, who died in 1915.

## TRILCE

**First published:** 1922 (English translation, 1973)

**Type of work:** Poetry

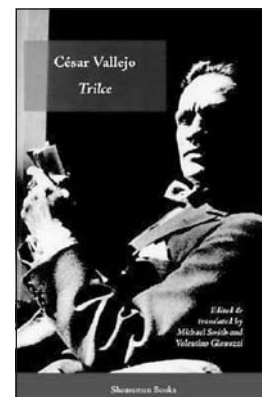
*With this collection, Vallejo offered the world what some consider to be the definitive avant-garde work of Latin American poetry in the twentieth century.*

With its intricate neological wordplay, radically juxtaposed images, and fluttering emotional registers, *Trilce* might initially appear a daunting, if not impenetrable, book to read. Nevertheless, through patient attention, readers can begin to witness the text cohering its disparities and disjunctions into a comprehensible verbal mosaic of new, nonlogical but purposeful relationships between language and lived experience. In fact, it is precisely in such moments that *Trilce* begins to reveal its majesty, which arises from Vallejo's complex and innovative network of verbal, ideological, cultural, and imagistic considerations. For example, the poem "LXV" tenderly eulogizes Vallejo's mother by transforming his agony over her death into a calm tone of seemingly unflappable compassion. Simultaneously, the poem also fetishizes architectural lan-

guage invoking incestuous echoes, and it inverts the mother-son relationship until the son serves as the mother's nurturer.

Certainly the poetry in *Trilce* is Vallejo's most dense and disjunctive writing, and it defies easy intellectual interpretation. However, the poems are also tightly crafted, and patient readers will recognize that *Trilce's* poems are as emotionally layered and aesthetically purposeful as they are metaphorically, tonally, and culturally unpredictable and unstable.

Consequently, if one refrains from initially reading the book for linear, word-by-word transparency and comprehension, then one can learn to absorb the book's unprecedented poetic communication, however challengingly schismatic and multivalent it may be at times.



## HUMAN POEMS

**First published:** *Poemas humanos*, 1939  
(English translation, 1968)

**Type of work:** Poetry

*This collection enjoys critical praise as Vallejo's greatest contribution to global letters.*

Including a series of prose poems elsewhere titled *Poemas en prosa* (*Prose Poems*) and a riveting fifteen-poem sequence about the Spanish Civil War titled *España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (*Spain, Take This Cup from Me*), the poetry in *Human Poems* is more overtly political than in either of Vallejo's previous collections. Consequently, *Human Poems* offers a new and significant form of political poetry. More specifically, this is achieved through his intimate fusion of private hope, fear, and apprehension with a flurry of feverish public ideology, large-scale death by warfare, and the biopoliticization of the body. Furthermore, *Human Poems* starkly and meticulously explores the perils of capitalistic cosmopolitanism, and this situates Vallejo thematically amid

many contemporaneous modernist artists regardless of genre.

Thus *Human Poems* simultaneously individuates Vallejo for his poetic ingenuity while conjoining him to his contemporaries in the arts and politics. As a result, the book paradoxically positions Vallejo as both a timeless iconoclast and a representative of his times; he is a pioneering explorer of Otherness as both a specific historical contingency and an a priori ontological condition. In other words, while his poetry most often pivots emotionally upon notions of suffering, it derives from the incommensurate divide between self and Other, both in time and place and metaphysically. Moreover, throughout *Human Poems* Vallejo agonizes over this divide, which repeatedly illustrates in various manifestations his despair at his inability to integrate himself into the Other and the Other into himself. An example of this is the sonnet “Piedra negra sobre una

piedra blanca” (“Black Stone on a White Stone”), which is among his most famous poems. Interestingly, that poem also seems to foreshadow Vallejo’s death with prophetic vision.

### SUMMARY

Throughout his life, César Vallejo sought redemption from human suffering. However, he never found it. Instead he expressed his tribulations with uncertainty, caution, force, and ingenuity, thereby creating poetry capable of encouraging humankind to more clearly focus its attention to suffering in order to reduce its exacerbation. For his verbal, formal, and ontological iconoclasm, his efforts earned him a reputation as one of the finest poets of the twentieth century, though that legacy by no means redeems his life and oeuvre of continuous suffering.

Seth Michelson

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#### LONG FICTION:

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*El tungsteno*, 1931 (*Tungsten*, 1988)

#### SHORT FICTION:

*Escalas melografiadas*, 1923  
*Hacia el reino de los Sciris*, 1967  
*Paco Yunque*, 1969

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What characteristics of César Vallejo’s oeuvre define his poetry as avant-garde?
- What are the influences, if any, of European modernism upon Vallejo’s poetry?
- How does Vallejo’s poetry relate to *Modernismo*?
- Why and how does Vallejo use neologisms?
- What is the relationship between Catholicism and indigenous Peru in Vallejo’s poetry?
- What is the importance of history to Vallejo’s poetry?
- What is the cultural impact, if any, of Vallejo’s poetry?
- What unique problems, if any, might Vallejo’s translators face?

DRAMA:

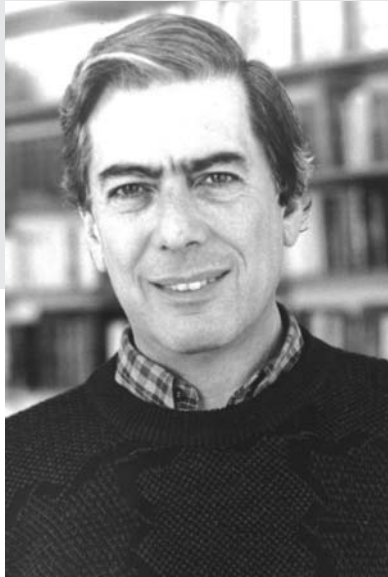
*Colacho hermanos: O, Presidentes de América*, pb. 1979  
*Entre las dos orillas corre el río*, pb. 1979  
*La piedra cansada*, pb. 1979  
*Lock-Out*, pb. 1979  
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\_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Poems*. Translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi. Exeter, England: Shearsman  
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## MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

**Born:** Arequipa, Peru  
March 28, 1936

*Vargas Llosa is extensively recognized for his prose fiction; his plays and critical essays are also noteworthy.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jorge Mario Pedro Vargas Llosa (VAHR-guhs YOH-sah) was born in Arequipa, Peru, on March 28, 1936, the son of Ernesto Vargas Maldonado and Dora Llosa Ureta. His parents, who separated before he was born, divorced shortly after, and his mother took him to Cochabamba, Bolivia, where he lived until the age of ten, attending Colegio La Salle. In 1946, his parents sent him to a parochial school, the life of which he portrayed in *Los cachorros* (1967; *The Cubs*, in *The Cubs, and Other Stories*, 1979), a novella. His father, alarmed at Mario's desire to become a writer, decided to enroll him in the Leoncio Prado, a Peruvian government military boarding school, which he attended from 1950 to 1952. At this institution, he was exposed to a brutal reality that marked him to the core. Vargas Llosa transposed his experiences in the Leoncio Prado in his novel *La ciudad y los perros* (1962; *The Time of the Hero*, 1966), the publication of which provoked a serious official reaction in Peru. After his two years in the Leoncio Prado, Vargas Llosa completed high school in Piura, where he instigated student unrest and a strike that later served as the basis for his short story "Los jefes" ("The Leaders"). This short narrative won him the Leopoldo Alas Prize in Spain.

In 1953, Vargas Llosa enrolled in the School of

Law at San Marcos University in Lima. He became an advocate of socialist causes while studying at San Marcos, although communist ideology turned out to be disappointing to him. In 1955, when he was nineteen years old, he married Julia Urquidi, one of his uncle's sisters-in-law. The economic pressures brought about by his marriage were magnificently re-created in his novel *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977; *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, 1982).

By 1957, Vargas Llosa's short stories were appearing in journals and newspapers, and he was the editor of several literary journals. In 1958, his short narrative "El desafío" (the challenge) won first place in a competition sponsored by the French journal *La Revue française*, and he traveled to Paris. At this time, he also traveled through the Peruvian Amazon jungle along the upper Marañón River, which gave him culture shock but also gave him insight into the lives of the inhabitants of that remote area. His second novel, *La casa verde* (1965; *The Green House*, 1968), and *El hablador* (1987; *The Storyteller*, 1989) reflect the observations made during this and another expedition to the jungle in 1964.

In 1958, he obtained a scholarship to the University of Madrid, Spain. Eventually, he completed a doctoral dissertation on Gabriel García Márquez, an outstanding Latin American writer of his generation, who would win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982; the dissertation was completed in 1971. After finishing his studies in Madrid, Vargas Llosa moved to Paris and requested another scholarship from the Peruvian state educational system, which was denied. Nevertheless, he began to work for the French radio-television network, which allowed him the opportunity to come in contact with other prominent Latin American authors, such as Julio



Cortázar and Jorge Luis Borges from Argentina, Alejo Carpentier from Cuba, Miguel Angel Asturias, a Nobel laureate from Guatemala, and Carlos Fuentes from Mexico. At this time in his life, he began a self-imposed exile from Peru that would last until 1974.

In 1963, Vargas Llosa married his cousin Patricia Llosa. That same year, he won the prestigious El Premio Biblioteca Breve for *The Time of the Hero*. Winning this well-known Spanish prize raised Vargas Llosa's profile in Europe, where he lived for the next few years, as well as initiating his longtime relationship with the Barcelona publishing house of Seix Barral. In 1965, he was invited to Cuba to judge the literary competition sponsored by the journal *Casa de las Américas* and became a member of the editorial board. After the birth of his first son, Alvaro, in 1966, he and his family moved from Paris to London, where he taught literature at Queen Mary College. In 1967, he traveled to Caracas, Venezuela, to receive the Rómulo Gallegos Award for his novel *The Green House*. As his reputation grew, he traveled worldwide and began to participate in the International PEN Club (the Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists), of which he became president in 1976. His second son, Gonzalo, was born in 1967, a year that he spent lecturing in Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States. That year he was also writer-in-residence at Washington State University, where he began to review his voluminous novel *Conversación en la catedral* (1969; *Conversation in the Cathedral*, 1975). In 1969, he taught at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, and in 1970 he established a residence in Barcelona, Spain.

The decade of the 1970's was a prolific one for Vargas Llosa. In 1971, he published his critical essays *Gabriel García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio* and *La historia secreta de una novela*. In addition, his novel *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (1973; *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, 1978), was published in a first edition of one hundred thousand copies and was successfully adapted for a film. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* was also adapted to the cinema. In 1975, he produced another acclaimed volume of critical essays, *La orgía perpetua: Flaubert y "Madame Bovary"* (*The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and "Madame Bovary,"* 1986). In the late 1970's, several journals dedicated issues to the study of his works, and in 1977 the University of Oklahoma dedicated its

Sixth Oklahoma Conference on Writers of the Hispanic World to Vargas Llosa.

His novel *La guerra del fin del mundo* (*The War of the End of the World*, 1984) appeared in 1981. Vargas Llosa also sustained a keen interest in the theater. His two-act play *La señorita de Tacna* (*The Young Lady from Tacna*, 1990), which opened in Buenos Aires and in Lima in 1981, was awarded the Annual Argentine Prize of Literary Criticism. In 1983, his play *Kathie y el hipopótamo* (*Kathie and the Hippopotamus*, 1990) was equally successful. In 1988, his book *Elogio de la madrastra* (*In Praise of the Stepmother*, 1990) was enthusiastically received. He sought the presidency of Peru in 1989, but he was defeated by Alberto Fujimori.

Since then, Vargas Llosa has not embarked on another campaign for political office, but he has continued to make his views known on Peruvian and international sociopolitical issues. He was a fierce opponent of the Fujimori administration of the 1990's and generally aligned himself with right-of-center political forces. However, in 2008 he surprised observers by endorsing the current administration of President Alan García Pérez; Vargas Llosa had sought to succeed García Pérez, who had been president from 1985 until 1990 before he was reelected in 2006. In 2005, Vargas Llosa received the Irving Kristol Award from the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based conservative think tank. Vargas Llosa praised the institute for seeing him as "a unified being," considering both his fiction and his role as a public intellectual.

## ANALYSIS

Vargas Llosa was considered a prodigy among the Latin American authors who emerged during the so-called literary boom of the early 1960's. His love affair with literature and writing began very early. He recalls the pleasure that he found in reading Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), the tales of Sinbad the Sailor from *One Thousand and One Nights*, and other stories. During his adolescence, he immersed himself in the French novel. He learned through his readings the characteristics of modern fiction and began to assess the effects of narrative techniques. In addition, his readings introduced him to the works of Henry Miller, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Marcel Proust, André Malraux, Jorge Luis Borges, and William Faulkner.

An overview of Vargas Llosa's works provides an insight into his narrative techniques and themes. In his first novel, *The Time of the Hero*, which is the story of a young cadet, Vargas Llosa's cinematographic techniques, multiple character point of view, disturbed chronology, and incorporation of taboo language effectively portray the marginalized sectors of society. The military academy Leoncio Prado, where the novel takes place, becomes a fictional microcosm of Peruvian society and its ills.

By the time this book was published in 1962, Vargas Llosa had become concerned with the role of the writer in society. This preoccupation became evident in a speech, "Social Commitment and the Latin American Writer," that he delivered at the conference held in his honor at the University of Oklahoma in 1977. In this speech, he stated the difference between Latin American writers and writers from Western Europe and the United States. In order to fulfill their mission, the former must rigorously uphold their artistic values and their originality to enrich the language and the culture of their countries. On the other hand, Latin American writers must also assume a social responsibility.

His social preoccupations, along with his craftsmanship, were also evident in his second novel, *The Green House*. It is a complex novel developed through five different plotlines that take place simultaneously in two Peruvian locales. Although *The Green House* seems to be a structural puzzle that the reader must solve, the themes of frustration and victimization are evident. Individuals are abused for economic gain or for religious reasons.

The victimization of an entire generation through political oppression is the main theme of his next novel, *Conversation in the Cathedral*. This work provides a panoramic view of Peruvian society during the dictatorship of General Manuel Odria from 1948 until 1956. The reader becomes aware that the brutality of this regime spread through all of Peru. Technically speaking, this novel presents on a larger scale some of the stylistic and structural characteristics of Vargas Llosa's previous novels. The plot development appears fragmented and the characters' relationships become at times extremely complex. Yet the theme that emerges constitutes an indictment against political regimes that bring about social depravity.

Vargas Llosa demonstrates new thematic and

stylistic trends with the publication of *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. These works exhibit a simpler plot development than prior works. In *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, Vargas Llosa satirizes the Peruvian army and ridicules the members of a religious cult. Pantoja, a man endowed with maniacal organizational skills, is charged with the secret task of creating a squad of prostitutes to visit the military posts located in the jungle. He carries out his job with such dedication that he becomes entangled in a web of absurd adventures that produce hilarious results. Although this novel is a light, comic narrative, it contains a serious theme—the social evils of any sort of fanaticism.

*The War of the End of the World* is a historical novel that narrates an upheaval in the backlands of Brazil in the late nineteenth century. As in other works by Vargas Llosa, the reader finds two main settings in this novel: Bahia, a coastal city, and Canudos, a religious community. An argument arises among the conservative (yet also revolutionary) peasant masses, Bahia's urban politicians, and the new Brazilian republican central government. This dispute rapidly acquires the proportions of a civil war of catastrophic consequences. Using cinematographic techniques such as close-ups (Vargas Llosa's first involvement with the Canudos material was when the Brazilian filmmaker Rui Guerra asked him to write a script for a film based on it), Vargas Llosa makes the reader aware of the horrors of war. Moreover, the writer emphasizes the lethal consequences of all ideological fanaticism. The work was inspired by the Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha's great nonfiction account of the Canudos revolt, *Os Sertões* (1902; *Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1944).

In some of Vargas Llosa's later works there appears yet another preoccupation—an insistent inquiring into the nature of writing. The author investigates the process of writing, the creation of fiction, and the difference between a real writer and a scribbler. Some works included in this category are *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, *Quién mató a Palomino Molero?* (1986; *Who Killed Palomino Molero?*, 1987), *Historia de Mayta* (1984; *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, 1986), and even *The Storyteller*. In *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, there is the presence of a writer-narrator who announces that he is going to reconstruct the unknown or ignored story

of the Peruvian leftist revolutionary Alejandro Mayta. He states that it will be a fictional story, but one that will carry the truth of fiction. Moreover, as the writer begins to produce Mayta's story, he reflects on the question of bringing about changes in Peruvian society through revolutionary means. It turns out that Mayta is an insignificant individual who never was able to launch his revolution. At the end of the novel, the apparent underlying theme is intimately related to the production of fiction and the nature of fiction itself.

A new theme appears in Vargas Llosa's novel *In Praise of the Stepmother*, for in it the reader is confronted with the presence of evil in innocence and the difficulties of utopias. It narrates the story of a man who thinks that he has a perfect grip on life until his wicked child seduces his stepmother. This book has some of the characteristics of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and *The Storyteller*, for it presents two clearly noticeable textual divisions.

In sum, the novels of Vargas Llosa move gradually from extremely complex structures to simpler works with substantial themes that are more appealing to the general public. Some critics asserted that there was a correlation between this development and his rightward move politically; as he wrote in more traditional forms, his politics moved more toward the mainstream.

## AUNT JULIA AND THE SCRIPTWRITER

**First published:** *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, 1977 (English translation, 1982)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An eighteen-year-old boy struggling to become a writer marries his uncle's sister-in-law, who is twelve years his senior.*

*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* has become one of Vargas Llosa's most popular novels and has been freely adapted for film under the title *Tune in Tomorrow* (1990); the film was in English and its setting moved to 1950's New Orleans. Like other novels by this author, this narrative presents two definite textual portions telling two different types of stories. The first story depicts the autobiographi-

cal account of the narrator's love affair with his aunt by marriage, Julia. This relationship causes an uproar in the narrator's family, for Julia is not only a distant relative but also a divorcé from Bolivia who is twelve years older than the narrator. Hence, the lovers must elope.

The second textual track contains segments of soap operas composed supposedly by Pedro Camacho, the scriptwriter who figures in the title of the novel. Camacho, a machinelike writer of radio soap operas, eventually overloads his memory and has a nervous breakdown, bringing catastrophic consequences to his works. His characters become entangled in different stories, and situations become chaotic, culminating in apocalyptic tragedies in which the characters expire en masse.

Vargas Llosa's skillfulness becomes evident when he occasionally brings together those two different tracks. These points of contact occur when the narrator's personal affairs begin to acquire the characteristics of Camacho's melodramatic sagas and also when people around the narrator bring up the occurrences in Camacho's stories. The two evident tracks touch each other in this manner. Nevertheless, in between those two plotlines there lies the story of the narrator, who is desperately struggling to become a successful writer. He is searching for ways to achieve realism in fiction. When he urgently needs funds to sustain his relationship with Julia, he engages in a frantic writing activity that his friend Javier calls prostituting one's pen. Javier means that the narrator is producing book reviews and articles for mere profit. The narrator finds this type of writing disgusting, too. On the other hand, when he writes a short narrative, he eagerly shares it with Javier and Julia. Unfortunately, they consistently find his stories unrealistic.

Although Camacho is very successful, the narrator dislikes his style. The scriptwriter's work is a type of wholesale writing to be sent over the air waves for the masses to enjoy. The narrator, however, cannot help but admire Camacho's tenacity



and his fanatical dedication to his work. In the final chapter of the novel, the reader knows that the narrator has finally found the kind of writing for which he longs. Nevertheless, one sees Camacho reduced to a disgraceful state. He has turned into a simple gofer for a sensationalist newspaper. Thus, the roles of the narrator and of Camacho are reversed in terms of success and productivity. *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* constitutes an artistic and humorous novel. In it, Vargas Llosa disguises one of his major themes: the inner workings of creative writing.

## THE STORYTELLER

**First published:** *El hablador*, 1987 (English translation, 1989)

**Type of work:** Novel

*An autobiographical narrator tells the story of a Jewish friend who becomes a storyteller among the Machiguenga Indians of the Peruvian jungle.*

Vargas Llosa initiates *The Storyteller* with the presence of an author-narrator who, while strolling the streets of Florence, sees an exhibit of photographs depicting Peruvian Indians. He notices that one of the photographs shows what he believes to be a Machiguenga storyteller surrounded by his listeners. This encounter prompts him to recall a journey to the upper Marañón River in the Peruvian jungle and his keen interest in the Machiguenga Indians. At the same time, the photographs unleash memories of his Jewish friend Saúl Zurata at San Marcos University, who was well versed in the ways of the Machiguenga.

In the second chapter, the story leaps to the past; the reader becomes acquainted with Zurata, who, from the beginning, appears to be a specially marked individual. He bears an enormous wine-colored birthmark that covers the entire right side of his face and that earns him the nickname Mascarita (Little Mask). Although he is apparently not bothered by unkind comments on his external appearance, and although he seems open and uncomplicated, the reader suspects that he secretly harbors feelings of alienation. One comes to this

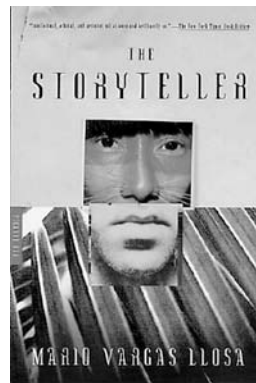
conclusion when the narrator points out Zurata's singular affinity for Franz Kafka's writings, especially *Die Verwandlung* (1915; *The Metamorphosis*, 1936), which he knows by heart. This short story by Kafka centers on Gregor Samsa, a character who is so alienated from his world that one morning he wakes up and discovers that he has turned into an enormous, repugnant insect.

After the presentation of Zurata, the novel presents two well-defined textural divisions. Chapters that present the narrator's relationship with Zurata alternate with chapters in which a Machiguenga storyteller is the sole narrative voice.

The storyteller's discourse depicts the way of life of the Machiguenga, including their rituals, cosmogony, and system of beliefs. One of the most noteworthy accomplishments of Vargas Llosa in these portions of the novel is the creation of Machiguenga speech. It is a mythic narrative style of soothing simplicity that seems to flow forever, joining one story to the next without noticeable pauses. The reader sees the Machiguenga always walking, always moving toward a more secure spot near a river. The author-narrator, who derives great pleasure from probing his Jewish friend about his knowledge of ethnology, is deeply disappointed when, on accepting a scholarship to Spain, he loses contact with Zurata, who seems to disappear into thin air. A missionary mentions having heard the

unending discourse of a Machiguenga storyteller, which prompts the author-narrator to want to know more about this person. This storyteller is an albino with an immense wine-colored birthmark on the right side of his face, which reveals to the reader that the Machiguenga storyteller is Zurata. In addition, the reader finds the storyteller identifying himself as Gregor Tasurinchi

and narrating a horrifying experience; he dreams that he has turned into an enormous, repugnant insect.





## THE FEAST OF THE GOAT

**First published:** *La fiesta del Chivo*, 2000  
(English translation, 2001)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This historical novel centers around the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo—the “goat” of the title—in the Dominican Republic.*

*The Feast of the Goat* has two narrative strands: one set during the time leading up to Trujillo’s assassination and the other set more than thirty years later and focusing on Urania Cabral, a middle-aged businesswoman who remembers her youth under the Trujillo regime. Now living in the United States, Urania returns to Santo Domingo, the capital city that during Trujillo’s administration was renamed Ciudad Trujillo after the dictator. Urania’s trip leads her into reveries and evocations of the traumatic political past of her youth. Her father had been a confidante of Trujillo’s, and his collusion with the dictator led to Urania’s sexual abuse.

As an adult, Urania is celibate and lonely, despite being professionally accomplished. This sexlessness contrasts with the fervid sexual power of many of Vargas Llosa’s other heroines, such as Jurema in *The War of the End of the World* or the title character in *Travesuras de la niña mala* (2006; *The Bad Girl*, 2007), as well as the more creative ebullience of Flora Tristan in *El paraíso en la otra esquina* (2003; *The Way to Paradise*, 2003). Vargas Llosa has often linked the sexuality in his work to the twentieth-century French thinker Georges Bataille’s ideas of excess and expenditure; in contrast, Urania’s asexuality indicates a certain vacancy in her consciousness that still enables it to operate in a keen, observant fashion.

Urania is the muse of astronomy; Urania Cabral’s lack of physical connection with her own sexuality and with the Dominican Republic from which she has long been exiled give her a valuable perspective upon the legacy of dictatorship. What Urania looks back upon are the feverish last days leading up to Trujillo’s assassination on May 30, 1961, which results in the end of an era of dic-

tatorship and its prolongation in a far less exhibitionistic form. Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo’s long-standing right-hand man, outfoxed Trujillo’s son to gain control of the country. The inconspicuous Balaguer becomes an unlikely but ruthlessly effective successor to Trujillo; confirmed by ostensibly democratic elections he nearly always managed to win, he ended up ruling the country for a longer period of time than the more charismatic Trujillo.

Yet it is Trujillo who is the novel’s dominant character, and a good portion of the book is told from within his consciousness. Trujillo is politically masterful yet sexually frustrated, supreme over his own country yet subservient to the United States, which ultimately keeps him in power.

Vargas Llosa, who is often criticized for being too pro-American and too enthusiastic a proponent of free-market economic policies, here tacitly but decisively differentiates his own brand of democratic neoliberalism, which embraces transparency and multiculturalism, from the authoritarian and racist Trujillo. Vargas Llosa interweaves strands of fiction and history with an extraordinary discursive nimbleness, revealing at once the public aspects of Urania’s private trajectory and the deeply pathological inner correlates of Trujillo’s lust for power. Thoroughly based on history, Vargas Llosa’s novel nonetheless crackles with the inventiveness of the alertly observed.

The novel was adapted into a Spanish-language feature film, *La fiesta del chivo*, released in 2005 with Isabella Rossellini in the role of Urania Cabral.

### SUMMARY

Mario Vargas Llosa is one of the most prominent and prolific writers of the literary “boom” in Latin America. His works demonstrate that he has successfully developed a great variety of themes. Social injustice, political oppression that brings about societal decadence, the abuse of human beings, the creative act of writing, the dangers of fanaticism and of utopias, and the intrinsic value found in primitive cultures are some of his major preoccupations. He sees the mission of the Latin American writer as one of a spiritual nature, through which life may become better for all.

*Cida S. Chase; updated by Nicholas Birns*



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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How have Mario Vargas Llosa's politics changed over the years? Can he still be described as being "leftist" politically?
- How was Vargas Llosa associated with Latin American writers of his generation?
- How have critics generally perceived Vargas Llosa's style?
- What is the relation of art to life in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*?
- What is the attitude toward the military school in *The Time of the Hero*?
- What is the nature of the rebellion in *The War of the End of the World*?
- What role do Urania Cabral's memories play in *The Feast of the Goat*?
- How are the personalities of the two leaders, Rafael Trujillo and Joaquín Balaguer, different in *The Feast of the Goat*?

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## LOPE DE VEGA CARPIO

**Born:** Madrid, Spain  
November 25, 1562

**Died:** Madrid, Spain  
August 27, 1635

*Vega Carpio is recognized as both the most prodigious writer of Spanish letters and the creator of the Spanish national theater.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Lope Félix de Vega Carpio (VAY-guh KAHR-pyoh) was born in Madrid, Spain, on November 25, 1562, the son of Félix de Vega Carpio and Francisca Fernández Flores. By the age of five, and before he could write, Vega Carpio was already bargaining with schoolmates to copy his verses for him; at thirteen, he wrote his first *comedia* (comic play), *El verdadero amante* (wr. before 1596, pb. 1620; the true lover). At the universities of Alcalá and Salamanca, Vega Carpio began translating Latin poetry and concentrating on his own literary endeavors. Both parents died when he was a young man. Yet he maintained his parents' passion for living, particularly his father's inclination toward amorous adventures, which structured his lifestyle and career.

In the early 1580's, Vega Carpio, now strongly attracted to the world of the theater, met the daughter of a well-known theater figure, Elena Osorio, with whom he established a love relationship that lasted many years. Osorio's father, however, eventually opposed the relationship and forbade his daughter from seeing the young, aspiring dramatist. Consequently, Vega Carpio wrote several vicious attacks on the Osorio family and was brought to court for his defamations. Only twenty-six years old, he was sentenced to exile from the court for eight years and from the kingdom for two years.

During Vega Carpio's years in exile, he married by proxy Isabel de Urbina and immediately went to fight for the invincible Spanish Armada. During this time, he wrote the twenty-canto poem *La hermosa de Angélica* (1602; the beauty of Angélica). After Spain's defeat against England, Vega Carpio returned to Valencia in eastern Spain, where a popular dramatic school was flourishing. Between 1588 and 1591, he wrote many *romances* (octosyllabic, assonant verse) and *comedias*, which he sent to Gaspar de Porres, his agent in Madrid. It is during these years that he acquired national fame and earned the nickname "fénix de los ingenios" ("phoenix of the witty"). In 1590, his exile completed, he returned to Toledo, a city fifty miles south of Madrid, and was employed as secretary to the duke of Alba. He maintained this position for five years, during which time he wrote *La Arcadia* (1598), a pastoral novel that deals with the theme of love. In 1594, his first wife died in childbirth. Four years later, he married Juana de Guardo, with whom he had three children. Shortly after this marriage, he returned to Madrid to be closer to the theater. There, he met another important female figure, Micaela de Luján. Although still married to Juana, Vega Carpio lived with Micaela and with her had seven children. She is present in many of his poems under the pseudonym Camila Lucinda. Around 1608, however, her name disappeared from his work.

In 1605, Vega Carpio began his employment with the duke of Sessa, for whom he was secretary for twenty-six years. He established an intimate correspondence with the duke, twenty years his junior. Throughout their exchange of letters, Vega Carpio

revealed many intimate details about his life and relationships. A few years later, he wrote his serious study on dramatic principles, *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609; *The New Art of Writing Plays*, 1914), which shaped the characteristics of seventeenth century Spanish drama.

The years between 1610 and 1613 are considered to be the happiest of Vega Carpio's life. *Fuenteovejuna* (wr. 1611-1618, pb. 1619; *The Sheep-Well*, 1936), *El acero de Madrid* (wr. 1606-1612, pb. 1618; *Madrid Steel*, 1935), and *El perro del hortelano* (wr. 1613-1615, pb. 1618; *The Gardener's Dog*, 1903) are all proof of his superior dramatic creations of this time period. His wife Juana died in childbirth in 1614, however, and he fell into an intense depression that led him to take up monastic orders. Shortly after turning to the priesthood, he met Marta de Nevares Santoyo, a married woman with whom he became passionately involved. Her presence is apparent in many of his poems. He wrote about her in his poetry as Amarilis. They were happy together for more than ten years, but in 1632, Marta, blind and insane, died at the age of forty. It was at this time of his life that Vega Carpio produced his famous tragedy, *El castigo sin venganza* (pb. 1635; *Justice Without Revenge*, 1936). He also published *La Dorotea* (1632), a largely autobiographical work written in both prose and verse.

In the last year of his life, Vega Carpio regularly repented for his errors. The last work that he ever created, *Égloga a Claudio* (1637; eclogue to Claudio), focused on a self-critical yet nostalgic reflection on his life. He recorded that he had written more than one hundred plays, each within a twenty-four-hour period, and that the total number ascended to fifteen hundred. After a life overflowing with adventure and emotional trauma, Vega Carpio died on August 27, 1635, in Madrid.

## ANALYSIS

While Vega Carpio's genius extends to all literary genres, he is most recognized as a dramatist. One of his main achievements was to bring all the diverse elements of preceding Spanish theater together and unify them under a few basic guidelines. Although he had been writing plays since the 1570's, it was not until 1609 that he published his poem of practical guidelines for dramatists, *The New Art of Writing Plays*. In this work, he stresses unity of action in a three-act play written in poly-

metric verse. Whether a comedy, tragedy, or tragic-comedy, the drama should have one *gracioso*, a witty servant, either male or female, who parodies the actions and lines of the main characters and who delights the audience with puns and anecdotes. He also states that language should be appropriate to the individual characters and that verse should be appropriate to the scene that it describes. Suspense, however, is important; the audience should not know the ending until the ending. Vega Carpio's major theme, honor, is usually revealed through a conflict between the court and the town, between new Christians and old Christians, or within love triangles. For him, the most important part of the play was the audience's enjoyment, but, at the same time, he never disregarded the didactic importance of his plays. These specifications remained the defining elements of Spanish theater well into the eighteenth century.

After Vega Carpio's death, his protégé, Juan Pérez de Montalbán, attributed 1,800 *comedias* and more than 400 *autos sacramentales*, one-act plays with a religious theme, to his master. Since the 1960's, however, most critics accept that there are 314 plays that are definitely by him and some 187 that may be his.

Vega Carpio's dramatic works can be divided into various categories: plays of *capa y espada* (cloak and sword), which deal with an intriguing love affair usually ending in marriage; religious and mythological plays; and those based on another literary work or a historical event. The cloak-and-sword plays are characterized by a plot that includes jealous lovers, a woman who is covered up or disguised in some way, and some sort of duel. Some examples of this type of drama are *La dama boba* (pb. 1617; *The Lady Nit-Wit*, 1958), *Madrid Steel*, and *Las bazarrias de Belisa* (pb. 1637).

The most celebrated of this group of plays, however, is *The Gardener's Dog*. In this play, he deals with the conflict between honor and love. Doña Diana, the countess of Belflor, falls in love with her secretary, the commoner Teodoro, who does not know his heritage. Her dilemma is a real, modern-day one because the code of honor does not allow the different economic classes to intermarry. She is, like the dog in the proverb that forms the play's title, "the gardener's dog who neither eats nor stops eating." Teodoro's servant, Tristán, convinces everyone but Diana that his master is a real count. Yet

Teodoro, disgraced by the lie, insists that he must leave Diana. She immediately responds that his sense of honor proves his nobility, and, thus, they can marry, and he can become a real count. With spectacular characterization and intrigue, Vega Carpio addresses the conventions of modern-day honor. He insinuates that because honor, in the sense of public reputation, is satisfied by the lies of Teodoro, then the whole concept of honor is a sham.

Vega Carpio's religious plays were important in teaching Christian principles to seventeenth century Spain. Besides the church and public storytellers, plays were the only way for the commoners, almost all of them illiterate, to learn about the Bible. He created many plays that dramatized incidents from the Old Testament. His interpretation of the Book of Esther, *La hermosa Ester* (wr. 1610, pb. 1621; beautiful Esther), is perhaps his most beautiful biblical drama. Stories from the New Testament were strictly supervised by the church and limited to those dealing with Christ as an infant; it was considered indecent to portray Christ's adult life in the playhouses. Vega Carpio wrote numerous biblical comedias, as well as comedias de santos, dramas that interpreted the life of a saint. The mythological plays, written for the court, included spectacular visual effects that the regular playhouses could never have afforded.

Vega Carpio also enjoyed basing his plays on historical events. In this way, history itself would serve a didactic end in the theater. One of his earlier dark tragedies, *El duque de Visco* (wr. 1604-1610, pb. 1615; the duke of Visco) is based on Portuguese history and deals with the difficulty of administering justice. *The Sheep-Well* is based on an actual fifteenth century uprising. A villainous commander abuses his villagers to such an extent that they finally revolt and kill him. When the monarch tries to extort evidence of the guilty party, the village unites, and the whole community takes the blame. Finally, they are pardoned by the king. Vega Carpio brings to the stage the themes of justice, loyalty, and harmony within the state.

## PERIBÁÑEZ

**First published:** *Peribáñez y el comendador de Ocaña*, 1614 (English translation, 1936)

**Type of work:** Play

*In a farming town, a newly wed couple represents the ideals of love and honor by overcoming the obstacles that the lustful commander presents to them.*

*Peribáñez* typifies Vega Carpio's ideas of the necessary ingredients for a successful drama and is truly one of Spain's greatest plays. In this three-act *comedia*, *Peribáñez*, a young farmer, and his bride, Casilda, confront the local commander of Ocaña, their town, in his attacks against their love and honor. The play opens with the wedding scene of the young couple and includes some beautiful verse between the newlyweds proclaiming their love for each other and their individual expectations of their marriage. The day is cursed, however, when the young and noble commander of Ocaña suffers a terrible fall from his horse. *Peribáñez* and Casilda offer their home to the commander so that he may recover from his accident. When he finally

regains consciousness, he sets his eyes on the beautiful bride and immediately falls in love with her. The commander decides that he will stop at nothing to fulfill his desires for Casilda. He plots to bribe the couple with gifts of mules and earrings in the hope of winning their trust and taking advantage of Casilda.

The rest of the first act deals with the young lovers' trip to Toledo, where the king of Spain is celebrating the summer festival, and how the commander follows them there and secretly hires an artist to paint a portrait of the woman whom he so strongly desires. In these descriptions of the wedding and the festivals, Vega Carpio vividly describes the houses and the dresses that the women wear and, in this way, offers the





reader a rich description of the local colors and customs.

In the second act, the overlord, with the help of his two servants, gains entrance to Casilda's house when Peribáñez is away on business. Casilda, however, rejects his propositions using lines from a famous ballad: "far more do I care for Peribáñez in that brown cape of his than for the Commander in his embroidered one." For Casilda, love outweighs wealth and riches. Yet the commander does not take lightly to her scorn. He swears that he will, in the end, have her: "Well, even though you cost me my property, my honor, my blood and my life, I am going to overcome your disdain, I intend to conquer your resistance." As with most cape-and-sword dramas, the hero discovers the stain of his dishonor and tries to recuperate his loss. Peribáñez is in Toledo when he discovers the portrait of his wife in the house of a local artist and deduces the commander's real motives. He quickly returns to Ocaña, fully trusting his wife but unsure of how to deal with the commander. In this act, the conflict is fully revealed, and, as the curtain falls, the audience postulates the outcome of the play.

At the beginning of the last act, the commander decides to knight Peribáñez and put him in command of a squadron of soldiers fighting the Moors. His reasons, of course, are selfish. As the army leaves, Peribáñez and one of the soldiers, Belardo, reflect on life. It has been suggested that Belardo represents Vega Carpio himself as he discusses life, gardening, and the sacristy. In this last act, Vega Carpio integrates historical figures and events into the drama that connect the themes of honor, love, and justice portrayed on the stage to the audience's real world.

That night, Peribáñez secretly returns and awaits the uninvited guest in the bedroom. When the commander enters, Peribáñez runs his sword through him and then kills two others for being traitors to his household. King Henry III hears the story of a commoner slaying a nobleman and immediately offers a reward to bring the guilty man to court for execution. Peribáñez turns himself in and begs that the king listen to his story. The just king grants him the favor, Peribáñez explains, and the king both pardons and praises him for upholding his honor. The curtain closes as the king and queen reward the loving couple for upholding love and honor in the face of conflict.

## JUSTICE WITHOUT REVENGE

**First published:** *El castigo sin venganza*, 1635  
(English translation, 1936)

**Type of work:** Play

*In this tragedy, Vega Carpio exposes the moral hypocrisies underlying the lifestyle of the nobles and shows how "honor" can cruelly govern and instigate unjust paradoxes.*

*Justice Without Revenge*, one of Vega Carpio's last works, is an ironic tragedy based on a short novel written about a historical fact. In this drama, there are three protagonists: the womanizing duke of Ferrara, his illegitimate son, Count Federico, and the young noblewoman, Casandra, whom the duke marries for legal reasons. In the beginning of the play, Vega Carpio develops the relationship between the characters. In contrast to *Peribáñez*, in which the charming heroes win the approval of a just monarch, the protagonists of this drama do not represent upstanding citizens. Yet in spite of their antiheroics, the audience does, to some extent, sympathize with their decisions and actions. The duke regularly frequents the local whorehouses but knows that he has to marry and beget a legitimate heir for his estate. He has little interest, however, in remaining faithful to his young, attractive bride. Federico, his illegitimate son, whom the duke sincerely loves, is selfishly concerned about his hereditary position and has little patience for his father's amorous adventures. Upon seeing his future stepmother, whom he rescues in a stagecoach accident, he falls instantly in love with her. Casandra reciprocates these feelings, although at the same time she accepts her commitment to her future husband, and the two lovers suffer the anguish of not being able to express their love openly.

In act 2, Vega Carpio develops the moral positions of each of the characters. The two young lovers resist their feelings even though the duke continues his nightly adventures with the local prostitutes. Unexpectedly, the duke is called to fight in the religious wars. Federico and Casandra are left alone, and in beautiful and powerful verses they openly admit the intense love that they feel toward one another. This explosive scene is the

climax of the love that Federico and Casandra feel for one another. The audience is torn between sympathizing with the two victims or rejecting them because they do not maintain their family honor.

In act 3, the duke returns from the wars a reformed man, vowing to be faithful to his wife. At this point, Vega Carpio aggrandizes the duke and tries to make him a worthy central figure. Upon his arrival, the duke receives an anonymous letter explaining the truth, technically incest, between his wife and his son. He suddenly realizes his own guilt for what has happened and decides to act, not as vengeful father or husband, but as supreme justice. He punishes his son and wife, although violently, without revenge. First, the duke tricks his son into killing Casandra, who is bound and gagged in a sack. Then, he accuses Federico of killing the duchess for fear of losing his inheritance and sentences him to death. The duke is condemned to live his life knowing that he has killed

the one whom he loves most, his son. In this tragedy, Vega Carpio presents a somber conflict between love and honor, the hypocrisy that surrounds them both, and the pain that is suffered from their clashing.

## SUMMARY

Ezra Pound said that Lope de Vega Carpio was like ten brilliant minds inhabiting one body, and that any attempts to enclose him into any formula would be like trying to make one pair of boots fit a centipede. He lived an adventurous, amorous life, reflected in his prose and poetry. His fame within the Spanish theater is unprecedented. His diversity of themes, spontaneity and naturalness of dramatic characters, concern for the audience's enjoyment, and innovations of seventeenth century theater define him as one of the greatest dramatists of the Western world.

Carolyn A. Nadeau

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*Peribáñez y el comendador de Ocaña*, wr. 1609-1612, pb. 1614 (*Peribáñez*, 1936)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Lope de Vega Carpio was a contemporary of William Shakespeare. How does his place in Spanish literature compare to Shakespeare's in English literature?
- To what sort of Shakespearean character would one compare the *gracioso* of Vega Carpio?
- Honor is an important virtue for Spaniards. How does Peribáñez achieve honor in the play named for him?
- Revenge was often a motive in Renaissance theater. What is the significance of Vega Carpio's title *Justice Without Revenge*?
- Was dealing with governmental authority a larger problem for Vega Carpio than it was for English writers of the same period?

*La buena guarda*, wr. 1610, pb. 1621  
*La hermosa Ester*, wr. 1610; pb. 1621  
*Las flores de don Juan, y rico y pobre trocados*, wr. 1610-1615, pb. 1619  
*El villano en su rincón*, wr. 1611, pb. 1617 (*The King and the Farmer*, 1940)  
*Fuenteovejuna*, wr. 1611-1618, pb. 1619 (*The Sheep-Well*, 1936)  
*Lo cierto por lo dudoso*, wr. 1612-1624, pb. 1625 (*A Certainty for a Doubt*, 1936)  
*El perro del hortelano*, wr. 1613-1615, pb. 1618 (*The Gardener's Dog*, 1903)  
*El caballero de Olmedo*, wr. 1615-1626, pb. 1641 (*The Knight from Olmedo*, 1961)  
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*Amar sin saber a quién*, wr. 1620-1622, pb. 1630  
*El mejor alcalde, el rey*, wr. 1620-1623, pb. 1635 (*The King, the Greatest Alcalde*, 1918)  
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*Rimas sacras*, 1614  
*La filomena*, 1621  
*La Circe*, 1621  
*Triunfos divinos*, 1625  
*La corona trágica*, 1627  
*Laurel de Apolo*, 1630  
*Amarilis*, 1633  
*La gatomaquia*, 1634 (*Gatomachia*, 1843)  
*Rimas humanas y divinas del licenciado Tomé de Burguillos*, 1634  
*Filis*, 1635  
*La Vega del Parnaso*, 1637

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*La Arcadia*, 1598  
*El peregrino en su patria*, 1604 (*The Pilgrim: Or, The Stranger in His Own Country*, 1621)  
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## VERGIL

**Born:** Andes, Cisalpine Gaul, near Mantua (now in Italy)

October 15, 70 B.C.E.

**Died:** Brundisium, Cisalpine Gaul (now Brindisi, Italy)

September 21, 19 B.C.E.

*Vergil, through the pastorals of his youth and the epic of his maturity, created verse which, while Greek in its inspiration, specifically reflects the sophistication of Augustan Rome.*

### BIOGRAPHY

As is the case with many ancient writers who achieved wide popularity in their lifetimes, much of the vast amount of biographical material written about Publius Vergilius Maro during or immediately after his lifetime is unreliable. From the outset of his career, the Roman poet whom readers popularly identify as Vergil (VUR-juhl) was the poet most associated with the patriotism of the Pax Romana (the worldwide Roman Peace) of the emperor Augustus. Furthermore, Vergil's poems went almost immediately into the school curriculum; they became the means by which generations of children learned literary Latin, and the Italy that these works portray became an idealized rendering of the Roman Empire under Augustus. Their creator quickly assumed the stature of patriot-poet, and his poems acquired mystical interpretations tied to Rome's destiny.

Vergil was born on October 15, 70 B.C.E., in Andes, a countrified region near the town of Mantua, in Cisalpine Gaul (now Italy). His background appears fixed in the respectable but not particularly wealthy middle class. That is clear from the solid education that he received at Cremona and Rome. Particularly useful in establishing his family's relatively modest circumstances is the fact that Vergil's education lacked the philosophical component of study at Athens. By contrast, Vergil's

poet-contemporary Horace (65-8 B.C.E.) had enjoyed this advantage. It is also certain that the region of Vergil's birth underwent a dramatic shift in its political allegiance during the first century B.C.E. Though part of Cisalpine Gaul was Romanized, it was not until 49 B.C.E. that the residents of Mantua received the rights of Roman citizenship. Thus, it was not until he had reached the age of twenty-one that Vergil could properly consider himself a fully enfranchised Roman.

Previously, instability and violence had filled Italy. Lucius Sergius Catilina (Catiline), the insurrectionist exposed in Cicero's Catilinarian orations, died fighting against Roman legions; Vergil would have been seven years old at the time. The civil war between Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompeius (Pompey), riots in Rome, Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March (44 B.C.E.), and the civil war between Caesar's heir Octavian (who assumed the title "Augustus" in 27 B.C.E.) and Marcus Antonius meant that war filled twenty-nine of Vergil's fifty-one years. All of these factors plus Augustus's professed determination to create an environment congenial for artists and the flowering of Roman culture could only have led the young Vergil to recognize the special ties that he had with Augustus's vision of Rome and, at least initially, to work toward its realization.

It appears that Vergil's father had been a potter or perhaps a day laborer. Ancient sources testify that Vergil's mother, Maggia Pollia, was of the lower landed gentry and that her family in some way employed the man whom she would marry, but this is



essentially speculation. Similarly, the name of Vergil's mother appears in medieval testimonies as support for belief in the magical powers of Vergil's work, the poet's own name etymologized as from *virga* ("wand"). That accounts for the corruption "Virgil," familiar as the spelling one finds in many modern texts.

Vergil pursued his higher studies in forensics, though he was without gifts in oratory, and tradition has it that he argued only one case at the bar. Convinced that a future in the courts was impossible for him, Vergil began higher studies in Greek literature with Epidius and in Epicurean philosophy, the vogue at the time because of Lucretius. Around this time, 41 B.C.E., former soldiers of Marcus Antonius armed with senatorial approval claimed a number of farms in Cisalpine Gaul, Vergil's among them. The commissioners Gallus, Varus, and Pollio recommended that Vergil petition the young Octavius, and this action saved the family farm. Vergil immortalizes this kindness in *Eclogue* 1 of the *Eclogues* (43-37 B.C.E.; English translation, 1575; also known as the *Bucolics*).

Still, it appears that the emperor's intervention did not reduce the threat to Vergil's life or that of his father. Roving bands of former soldiers, frustrated at not having obtained the lands promised them, ranged the countryside in search of the peasants who rightly held these lands, and this threat caused Vergil and his father to flee south. For a time, father and son resided with Vergil's tutor Siro, then in a villa near Nola and at Naples. It was there that Vergil composed his four-book poem on farming known as the *Georgics* (c. 37-29 B.C.E.; English translation, 1589).

Vergil's pastorals brought him to the attention of Augustus, as Octavius now styled himself. Augustus had a definite vision of Rome as a sophisticated, urbanized empire that derived its strength from its ancient origins and sturdy peasantry. The *Eclogues* and *Georgics* made Vergil the poet most qualified, in the emperor's view, to treat the legend of Aeneas's search for "New Troy" in Italy after the Trojan War. Clearly, Augustus hoped for an epic poem in Latin hexameters corresponding to the *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611) and *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614) of Homer; it was, of course, the magnificent *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553) that he ultimately received.

Augustus almost did not receive the *Aeneid*. Vergil repeatedly delayed in complying when the emperor requested to hear sections of the work in progress. To what degree it was complete when Vergil had returned ill from his tour of Asia Minor is a moot question. He had, it is certain, asked that the unrevised manuscript of the *Aeneid* be burned should he be unable to complete its revision. Just as certain is it that Vergil, whose health had always been delicate, contracted fever at Megara (capital of Megaris, a district of Greece on the isthmus of Corinth), and that his health deteriorated rapidly upon reaching Brundisium (now Brindisi, Italy). On his deathbed at Brundisium, Vergil again requested that his poem be destroyed, since he remained dissatisfied with its degree of revision. Vergil died on September 21, 19 B.C.E. Tradition has it that Augustus's intervention alone saved the *Aeneid* and that the emperor commissioned Varius and Tucca with its final editing. This process took approximately two years, and thus it was that in 17 B.C.E. Latin literature produced the most eloquent tribute to Roman glory ever written.

## ANALYSIS

Vergil's deathbed request that the unfinished *Aeneid* be destroyed is an example of one characteristic of his style: insistence upon perfection. He considered this essential to achieve the civilized, cosmopolitan elegance that characterizes all of his verse. Such urbanity appears even in Vergil's pastorals. The four books of the *Georgics*, for example, took seven years for him to complete. Based on the total number of 2,188 lines, this would mean an average of about one verse per day. Indeed, Aulus Gellius, the second century commentator on assorted literary matters, reproduces a remark attributed to Vergil that he licked his verses into shape the way a mother bear does her cubs.

This slowness toward final form springs partly from Vergil's perfectionism, but even more from the poet's need to reflect a Romanized version of Greek forms. It was Vergil's fate to work in poetic forms in which Greek poets cast an overwhelming shadow, even in the genres of Latin literature: Theocritus and Hesiod in pastoral, and, of course, Homer in epic. To avoid being called a mere Roman imitator of these Greek masters and to push the Latin language to its limits in order to accommodate the style that he felt appropriate to Augustan Rome, Vergil had to proceed slowly.

Some, even among contemporary critics, are content to describe Vergilian poetry as a Latin imitation of Greek models, but that is a convenient dismissal of the specifically Italian character that all Vergil's poetry attains. The shepherds of his *Eclogues* have Greek names; their love affairs and concerns resemble those of the characters in the *Idyls* (c. 270 B.C.E.; English translation, 1684) of Theocritus, but the countryside that they describe is indisputably that of Tuscany and the Campagna. The ten poems that comprise the *Eclogues* are clearly the collection upon which Vergil worked to hone his specifically Roman style. To be overly concerned with their order of composition overlooks the fact that Vergil valued the unity of larger finished products over any single constituent. Thus, although four eclogues (2, 3, 7, 8) reflect the Theocritean debt that Vergil obviously felt he owed, two others (5, 10) describe a specifically Roman and notably Augustan world. The remainder (1, 4, 6, 9) are the least Theocritean of all and are arguably the finest of the entire collection. In their final arrangement, they form a reciprocal pattern. Briefly stated, this pattern yields the themes of recovered land, lost love, and Augustan greatness. The collection evokes the Caesar element in eclogue 5, foreshadowed in the climax of eclogue 1 (the imperial generosity that restores rightful ownership) and 4, which predicts a second golden age heralded by young Augustus. Topical references sprinkled throughout the work (Asinius Pollio and Vergil's rival poets Bavius and Maevius) extend the contemporary Augustan tone Vergil sought.

Escaping the poetic tastes of the poetic generation that preceded his own was another task that Vergil faced. These extended in two directions: the erotic verse of Caius Valerius Catullus and, to some extent, the philosophic poetry of Titus Lucretius Carus. One difficulty simply lay in creating a taste for the specifically Roman poetry that Vergil wrote. Augustus's political program assisted that to some degree, as did imperial subventions to the circle of poets in which Vergil functioned. The enormous financial resources of Gaius Cilnius Maecenas added to Vergil's financial security, for Vergil was primary among a group of poets supported by this wealthy Roman. Developing a literature that simultaneously glorified Roman origins yet looked toward greatness as the empire's destiny became paramount for the Maecenas group, and no poet, not

even Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) or Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid), both of whom also received such subventions, could satisfy these goals as completely as Vergil.

Specifically, Roman concerns emerge even more boldly in the *Georgics*, a four-book didactic poem on agriculture. This work follows the *Eclogues* by eight years and reflects Vergil's maturity as a poet. It owes a nominal debt to Hesiod's *Erga kai emera* (c. 700 B.C.E.; *Works and Days*, 1618) or to Nicander's *Georgika* (c. 100 B.C.E.), but it is not in any sense Hellenic. Vergil's *Georgics* is not an exercise in virtuosic treatment of prosaic subject matter, nor is Vergil (like Lucretius) trying to make difficult subject matter easy, nor does Vergil expect Roman farmers to use the advice that it gives as a practical guide to farming. The *Georgics*, like the *Eclogues*, rather represents concerns central to human life in Augustan Rome. It provides a clear set of moral values, which extend to respect for tools and the work itself; a religious justification for the work of farming; a calendar that specifically relates to the growing seasons of Italy and the varied forms of agriculture one finds there; and a substantial final section on beekeeping. As with the *Eclogues*, there is a clear Augustan message. Hard work and diligent application wrings fertility from infertility, life from death. This remains the work of all farmers at all times, but the *Georgics* casts it in terms of a theodicy for the Golden Age of Augustus. A clear cosmic sympathy watches over Italy under Augustus; given the application of its people, labor yields justice and prosperity.

It is precisely this destiny that favored creation of Augustan Rome, and Vergil develops the theme even further in his *Aeneid*. *Fatum* (fate) through *labor* (work) tempered by *dolor* (sorrow and grief) and *pietas* (piety and humility) led Aeneas to lay aside personal desires for the sake of establishing a "New Troy" at Lavinium in Italy. It would take nearly half a millennium, but the race formed from an amalgam of Trojan and native Italic elements would give rise to that of Romulus. From Romulus and the Roman kings would spring the Roman republic and, ultimately, the empire established by Augustus.

As with both the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, there is also a debt to Greek poetry; obviously, the *Aeneid* owes its inspiration to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Characteristically, however, the similarity is struc-

tural rather than aesthetic. The *Aeneid* is less than half the length of either of Homer's poems. Vergil has arranged its books to recall first the wanderings of Odysseus (*Aeneid* 1-6), then a new war at Lavinium (*Aeneid* 7-12), which corresponds to the Trojan War as described in the *Iliad*. Thus, rather than concealing the literary past upon which the *Aeneid* depends, Vergil effectively flaunts it, making it underscore the thesis of the poem itself: that the past and its difficulties are essential to build the new order of his own present, that of Augustan Rome.

Vergilian epic, despite these similarities, thus differs markedly from that of Homer. Vergil's is an urban, national epic. Critics unfavorably inclined sometimes call it Augustan propaganda, but even if this is so it is also great art and Roman poetry at its highest level of development. One measure of its greatness is the fact that, like Homeric poetry, its style was imitated in a series of works attributed to Vergil. These poems, collectively called the *Appendix Vergiliana* (c.E. first century) but actually the work of an inferior subsequent imitator, reveal not only the profound effect that Vergil had on Roman poetry but also, by contrast, the superiority of the master.

## ECLOGUES

**First published:** 43-37 B.C.E. (English translation, 1575)

**Type of work:** Pastoral poetry

*The ten pastorals of this collection successfully translate the settings, characters, and thoughts of their Greek counterparts to a frame of reference specifically that of Augustan Rome.*

The *Eclogues* is a remarkable achievement of Vergil's late twenties and shows that the poet, even at this early age, intended to develop a style distinct from those of his Greek and Roman predecessors. The ten-poem collection falls into three major categories. *Eclogues* 2, 3, 7, and 8 are the most Theocritean; the rustic characters that they present have Greek names (Corydon, Amoebaeus, Damon, Alphesiboeus), and the situations that the poems describe find their counterparts in the works of Theocritus. *Eclogues* 1, 4, 6, and 9 are specifically

non-Theocritean; these poems deal with matters particularly significant to life in Augustan Rome (exile revoked, respect for right of ownership, arrival of a new Golden Age, warnings of the passing of this Golden Age, and doubts for the future). The collection turns on *Eclogues* 5 and 10, the two Daphnis poems; Daphnis represents Caesar in the first of these, and the poet Gallus becomes Daphnis in the second. The clear result of this arrangement is to introduce Augustan reference into what had been the timeless environment of pastoral. The characters thus acquire a tendency toward introspection and a degree of psychological development unmatched by Theocritus.

Augustan time is always present in Vergil's pastoral world, yet it remains unobtrusive primarily because of the reciprocal pattern of arrangement that Vergil follows. *Eclogue* 1, for example, finds its parallel poem in *Eclogue* 9. In *Eclogue* 1, the content Tityrus explains his happy state of mind to Meliboeus by noting that a god restored his farm. While never leaving the bucolic environment, one imagines the change of scene that takes Tityrus to Rome and an encounter with the young emperor. Vergil never uses the names Octavian, Caesar, or Augustus, yet the automatically generous response of an emperor concerned for his subjects makes the identity of the *iuvenis* (young man) whom Tityrus sees at Rome unmistakable. *Eclogue* 9 answers *Eclogue* 1; both poems refer obliquely to the land seizures of 41 B.C.E., though the ninth pastoral creates a somewhat discordant note. There, a distraught Moeris tells Lycidas that he is about to undertake a similar journey to petition for restoration of his land. This poem specifically recalls the Tityrus poem and implies that Octavian's ascension to the throne has not automatically eliminated treachery. It is impossible to say what intervened in Vergil's life to produce this changed mood, but the realism that this poem introduces adds an element that had never appeared in pre-Vergilian pastoral.

Such reciprocity allows grouping of the collection into two major categories. *Eclogues* 1 to 5 present essentially conciliatory Augustan situations; *Eclogues* 6 to 10 qualify comparable situations. Thus, while *Eclogue* 2 asserts the triumph of reason over essentially unworthy love, *Eclogue* 8 answers by presenting Daphnis bound in the spell of an unworthy love whose consequence is death. *Eclogue* 3

describes a crude and abusive singing contest that ends in peaceful nondecision; its answer, in *Eclogue* 7, presents a similar contest in which the mild Corydon defeats the harsh Thyrsis. *Eclogue* 4, interpreted during the Middle Ages as the “Messianic Eclogue,” predicts the coming of a new golden age under Octavian (again without use of the emperor’s name); *Eclogue* 4 notes the passing of these hopes into a series of unnatural loves and changes in form. Like *Eclogue* 9, it implies the transitory nature of happiness and contentment as part of the human condition. Even Octavian cannot alter this essential fact of life. *Eclogue* 5 presents the death and transfiguration of Daphnis, a poetic masque for Octavian; its answer is *Eclogue* 10. There, Gallus wastes away for unrequited love of Lycoris, who has run off with an unnamed soldier. The final effect of these poetic answers is to connect the historical to the timeless situation and the realistic outcome to the ideal.

## GEORGICS

**First published:** c. 37-29 B.C.E. (English translation, 1589)

**Type of work:** Didactic poetry

*The Georgics represent both a continuation of Vergil’s Augustan program and a departure from pastoral verse in favor of didactic verse.*

The *Georgics* is didactic verse, purportedly instructing readers on matters relating to agriculture. As such, it nominally springs from the tradition established by Hesiod in the seventh century B.C.E. Though its subject provides a rural setting, the *Georgics* is assuredly not pastoral poetry. Similarly, though its structure is more complex than that of the *Eclogues*, there is no exalted theme, nor indeed is there any sustained narrative at all. What the *Georgics* essentially represents is evidence of a mature creative mind, one capable of writing about humble subjects in an elegant way that particularly reflects Augustan Rome.

Though not a narrative, the *Georgics* is a coherent work, one essentially independent of literary predecessors. On one level, the poem is Vergil’s response to his patron Maecenas’s request for a work that heralds the dignity of Roman agriculture. On

another level, however, the *Georgics* reflects Vergil’s own wish for the rehabilitation of rural Italy from the anarchy, decay, and neglect that followed the civil wars. Obviously, it is only superficially a guide to farming; there is little in it that a farmer would not have already learned from experience, and it is difficult to imagine even the most cosmopolitan Augustan farmer consulting it as a manual.

Essentially, the *Georgics* is a virtuosic work of art arranged in four books of verse. Like the *Eclogues*, it follows a pattern of reciprocal contrasts; these are four in number, between books 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 1 and 3, and 2 and 4. Book 1 outlines the farmer’s continual struggle with inanimate nature. The farmer cares for tools as a warrior does weapons, enters the field to do battle with nature, works by the calendar as does a soldier on expedition, and contends with nature’s extremes as with an enemy. Moreover, Jupiter has deliberately made life hard so that humanity might discover civilization. Book 2 answers 1 in the sense that it enumerates the rewards of nature once ordered. Trees and vines yield their fruit in due course and in appropriate varieties. Sound produce yields healthy livestock, and the varied landscapes of Italy, exemplified by Tuscany, Mantua, and Capua, contribute to this harmony.

Book 3 continues the theme through a discussion of the relationship of love and death. Large and small animals mate, and this fertility contrasts with the pestilence represented by weeds, thieves, snakes, diseases, and plague. This book suddenly shifts the emphasis to animate nature, and while never quite personifying the animals that it presents, nevertheless allows understanding of the love-death process in human terms. It finds its reciprocal in book 4, the major section on beekeeping with which the *Georgics* concludes. In one sense, the fourth book mirrors the entire structure of the poem (and the cycle of farming) since it moves from location of the hive to encouraging the swarming needed for reproduction, to harvesting, to regeneration (resurrection) of the bee.

Vergil’s *Georgics* maintains the indefinite outcome that characterizes the *Eclogues*. Essentially, the farmer fights a continuing battle against the deteriorating nature of things. Though the farmer may do all that is possible to ensure a favorable outcome to his work, nature remains a variable that can destroy all efforts. Augustan Rome provides



the best hope for success, but it requires the efforts of all concerned and does not in itself provide automatic solutions.

## AENEID

**First published:** c. 29-19 B.C.E. (English translation, 1553)

**Type of work:** Epic poem

*The Aeneid shows the full development of its author's talent, brilliantly extending the range of Latin literature and providing noble ancient origins for Augustan Rome.*

It is impossible to gauge the seriousness of the dying Vergil's request that his *Aeneid* be burned upon his death. Despite the dramatic command of Augustus to spare it from the flames, it is difficult to imagine that any of Vergil's contemporaries would have taken it upon themselves to destroy what promised to be the most extraordinary poem ever written in Latin, and that is precisely what those who knew the work in progress realized it to be. It is more likely that Vergil's request stemmed from the almost manic pessimism that one notes as counterpoint in both the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. Such resolution through a minor key produces great art, however, and Vergil knew that no poetic form yields more easily to an indeterminate conclusion than epic. The *Aeneid*, despite the difficulties inherent in its composition, thus offered Vergil the surest possibility for ultimate development of his talent.

In one sense, the *Aeneid* obviously depends upon Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for its very creation. Echoes and lines parallel to those of Homer abound within it. Nevertheless, Vergil's purpose and the nature of the verse itself are altogether different, for Vergil's is urban poetry reflecting the Trojan War myths from a Trojan (and consequently Roman, rather than Greek) point of view. Rather than conceal his use of Homer, Vergil's use of the Homeric legacy supports a major part of his thesis: that the present draws from the past and that the quality of what was determines the worth of what is.

Typical Vergilian reciprocity appears in the structure of the *Aeneid*. Its first six books are effectively an Odyssean series of adventures that take

Aeneas and the Trojans from their destroyed city to Dido's North African city of Carthage and ultimately to the Underworld's Italian entrance at Cumae, near Naples. *Aeneid* 1 to 6 are Odyssean only in the sense that the adventures externally parallel those of Odysseus. Aeneas, unlike Odysseus, has responsibility for the collective destiny of his nation, and Vergil consistently distinguishes between his hero's personal preference and what *fatum* (fate) requires him to do. Hence, Aeneas must flee Troy, though he would have preferred to die there. Fate, through the instrumentality of the storm conjured by joint request of Juno (to delay *fatum*) and Aeneas's mother, Venus (to provide rest for her son), casts Aeneas upon Dido's shore. Venus mercilessly causes the flame of passion to grow in Dido, using the young queen as an instrument to ensure that Aeneas may pursue his destiny to found an Italian Troy. The flames that destroyed Troy thus resolve themselves into the flames of passion that ultimately cause Dido's suicide and find final expression in the flames of her funeral pyre. Again, Aeneas must lay aside his obligations toward Dido for the larger obligation that he owes the Trojan people.

*Fatum* thus governs all: the *furor* (anger) that Aeneas must direct at those who would impede founding of a new Troy at Lavinium in Italy; *labor* (work), the struggle to escape and reach the site of the new city; *dolor* (grief), the suffering that requires decisions for the collective well-being; and *pietas* (piety), the humility needed to accept what fate decrees. All of these elements bring Aeneas to his Underworld meeting with the shade of his father Anchises in *Aeneid* 6. It is there that Aeneas beholds a procession of as yet unborn heroes important to the destiny of a city to rise in the remote future. Aeneas knows nothing of Rome and no more of the heroes important to its history, yet he knows that what he witnesses is in some way important. Augustus himself appears among these unborn heroes, and his connection with Aeneas (if ever doubted) becomes explicit in this scene.





*Aeneid* 7 to 12 looks toward Trojan establishment of Lavinium, the city that must rise if Rome itself is ever to rise. These are the Iliadic books, since they describe a second Trojan War with the Trojans cast as invaders of the Italian city on the site fated for Trojan habitation. Lavinia, daughter of King Latinus, thus has a role that corresponds to that of Helen in the Trojan War. Aeneas is destined to marry Lavinia to begin amalgamation of the Trojan and native Italic peoples, but Lavinia is already promised to the Rutulian warrior Turnus. Since Turnus is hardly committed to this marriage agreement, war might have been avoided had it not been for Juno's long-standing anger against the Trojans. The fury that she causes provokes violence that spreads across the countryside, and the Trojan War in Italy begins in earnest.

Preparations for the war allow Vergil to establish the antiquity of the peoples of Italy. Aeneas, for example, journeys north on the Tiber to the Etruscan city then known as Pallanteum, but which is located at the site of what would one day be Rome, the city of Romulus. *Aeneid* 8 takes the reader through Pallanteum, which even then has landmarks familiar to an imperial Roman. Evander, king of Pallanteum, concludes an alliance with Aeneas and gives him men, as well as his own son Pallas, a protégé whose counterpart in the *Iliad* is Patroclus.

Back at Lavinium, Ascanius (the young son of Aeneas, now called Iulus to establish his identification with the Julio-Claudian emperors) distinguishes himself in the fight against the Latins and their allies. A renegade Etruscan king named Mezentius has allied himself and his son Lausus with the Latins. Cast out by his own city of Caere, Mezentius has found refuge with King Latinus and now fights against his own people. This villain paradoxically acquires the reader's sympathy upon the death of Lausus, killed when he interposes himself between his father and the advancing Aeneas. Despite Mezentius's contemptible deeds as king of Caere, and though he hates the gods, Mezentius is still a father, and Lausus has shown him due filial *pietas*. When Mezentius dies immediately thereafter, also at Aeneas's hands, his death assumes a tragic aspect; such is Vergil's skill for the dramatic that he can make pitiable even the death of a villain.

The death of Pallas at Turnus's hands clearly

corresponds to Aeneas's killing of Lausus, and Vergil presents both deaths sympathetically. Obviously, Vergil avoids setting what would have been a more logical contest between young warriors, that of Iulus and Lausus. That is clearly because Iulus, called Ascanius in *Aeneid* 1 to 6, represents the link between Troy past and the new incarnation of that city in Italy. When Iulus distinguishes himself on the battlefield, he does so against uniformly undeveloped personalities in order to allow him alone to hold the central position in the narrative. Accordingly, Iulus remains unscarred by his battlefield contests, almost but not quite succeeding in encountering Turnus.

Meeting Turnus on the battlefield is Aeneas's fate, and Aeneas enters the fray in much the same state of mind as had Achilles in the *Iliad* following the death of Patroclus. The final question that faces Aeneas once he has the Rutulian Turnus at bay is whether to administer the death stroke. He decides to do so as soon as he sees that Turnus wears the belt that he had stripped from young Pallas upon killing him. Thus, the *Aeneid* ends in the middle of events, as is characteristic of epic poetry, but also with the element of qualification that characterizes all Vergil's works.

## SUMMARY

It has become fashionable to declare that Vergil is less of an Augustan patriot-poet than generations have believed. Clearly, there is a dark side to the Italian pastoral landscape of the *Eclogues*, a sense that the struggle against nature is essentially a holding action in the *Georgics*, and a feeling that Aeneas is capable of acting less than nobly in the *Aeneid*. None of this, however, detracts from Vergil as an urbane, sophisticated poet, very much a man of his own times and a poet capable of far greater intricacy of thought and poetic figure than even the Greek masters who inspired him. Indeed, Vergil's greatest gift is his ability to echo Homer, Hesiod, and Theocritus (and, among the Roman poets, Quintus Ennius and Titus Lucretius Carus) without in any sense imitating them. Vergil's skill in doing so through settings in which his own Augustan Rome serves as counterpoint is a measure of his greatness.

Robert J. Forman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What evidence supports Vergil's reputation as an enormously painstaking writer?
- What concerns of Roman society appear in both the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*?
- Why was Vergil's poetry so popular in the Middle Ages?
- How do Aeneas's travels differ from Odysseus's in Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614)?
- Compare Lavinia's role to that of Helen in the *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611).
- What attitudes toward the subject of war do Aeneas's accounts of young warriors in the *Aeneid* express?
- How does Vergil incorporate the theme of Rome's future in the *Aeneid*?



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## PAUL VERLAINE

**Born:** Metz, France  
March 30, 1844

**Died:** Paris, France  
January 8, 1896

*Verlaine's greatest works are brief lyrics that speak with unparalleled metrical and rhetorical elegance of delicate longings and tender-hued nature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Paul Marie Verlaine (vehr-LAYN) was born in Metz, France, on March 30, 1844. His father, Captain Nicolas-Auguste Verlaine, was a gruff, brusque, career military man. His mother, Elisa, had been longing for a child. She had three miscarriages before Paul, her only child, was born. She lavished affection on him, and, in consequence, he became strongly attached to her. His early lack of independence is indicated by the fact that when he was sent to school at age nine, he ran back home on the first day and had to be coaxed to return with sweets and sweet words. Eventually he adjusted to the school regime, going first to the Institution Landry (in Paris, to which the family had moved) and then graduating to the Lycée Bonaparte in 1855. While still in school, he acquired the adult vices of drinking and visiting prostitutes.

At this point, his indulgences did not deflect his life from a straight course. After graduating, he obtained a civil service job in Paris and began getting involved with the group of Parnassian poets. This group, while continuing the themes of Romanticism, advocated greater refinements in poetic technique. Two years after entering the work world, Verlaine published his first book, *Poèmes saturniens* (1866), in which he hewed closely to the Parnassian style. His life continued on its uneven keel; he maintained his government job and his attendance

at artistic salons, while also continuing his nights of drink and debauchery that now often involved him in drunken violence. In three more years, he produced *Fêtes galantes* (1869; *Gallant Parties*, 1912). In this book of poems, he avoided the touches of derivativeness visible in his previous work and, drawing on eighteenth century painting, created a luminescent fantasy world of delicate emotion and discourse.

Perhaps attempting to arrest the course of his dissipation, Verlaine now became engaged to a young girl, Mathilde Mauté, who came from a good family. Thinking of their coming union, Verlaine composed a set of lovely pictures of connubial bliss in verse, published as *La Bonne chanson* (1870). These poems delightfully anticipated their marriage, but, once they were married, in August, 1870, he stopped writing.

His ardor, accustomed to feeding on dreams, cooled quickly after the nuptials, while the marriage was little helped by the dislocations attendant on France's explosive political situation. The country had entered an ill-considered war with Prussia, and, after humiliating defeat in the field, the starved and oppressed people in Paris overthrew the city government and established the revolutionary Paris Commune. Verlaine took a post in the commune and then, when it was overthrown with fire and sword in June, 1871, fled with his wife to his mother's relatives in the country. Verlaine and his wife returned to Paris after the summer, where their marriage met its final blow, the entrance of the sixteen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud, the young prodigy who revolutionized French poetry while

still in his teens. Rimbaud, who had read Verlaine's books, wrote to introduce himself and to ask for money to come to Paris from the provinces. As a calling card, he included a sheaf of astonishing poems. Verlaine forwarded him the necessary funds and Rimbaud came to town, where he quickly proceeded to estrange Verlaine from his friends by his bad manners and obnoxious behavior and to wreck Verlaine's marriage by leading the older poet into a maze of alcohol and homosexual dalliance. Verlaine's homosexual leanings had never emerged openly until this time.

Verlaine's distraught wife, now with an infant son, George, born on October 30, 1871, demanded that her husband choose between her and Rimbaud. Though there was a brief reconciliation in the family, eventually Verlaine chose the young genius. The pair decamped for a vagabond tour of Belgium and England. During this period, Verlaine composed his most celebrated book, *Romances sans paroles* (1874; *Romances Without Words*, 1921). Rimbaud was no charmer as a companion, having about the same regard for love and friendship as he did for poetic tradition. He grew tired of the older man and told him that he was leaving him. Having sacrificed his wife and reputation for Rimbaud, Verlaine lost his temper and tried to kill Rimbaud. He shot and wounded the young poet, resulting in Verlaine's arrest and imprisonment for almost a year and a half. In prison, he worked on his last major work, the book of poems *Sagesse* (1881). In it, he recorded a sincere religious awakening in movingly simple Christian verse.

Unfortunately, his newfound virtue would not long outlast the enforced celibacy and sobriety of prison. He emerged from penal servitude in January, 1875, to find that he was no longer welcome in Paris. His work was rejected, by those who had once welcomed it, as that of a reprobate. For the next five years, he worked as a teacher in the French provinces and in England. He befriended a student, Lucien Létynois, with whom he maintained a cautiously platonic alliance. In 1880, the two took over a French farm, but years later their venture went bankrupt, and the pair returned to Paris.

There, surprisingly, the tide had turned. A new generation of poets, less squeamish about his scandalous behavior, had come to admire the technical precision and delicate moodiness of his poetry. The acclaim at first meant little to him, for his

friend Létynois had died of typhoid in 1883. Verlaine would live for quite a few more years, now lionized and writing a considerable amount, while he continued his drinking and other bad habits, but the spark of inspiration only occasionally flickered. He died in Paris on January 8, 1896, in a ménage with an aging prostitute.

## ANALYSIS

Verlaine's reputation is not as high as it once was, and this is largely because his poetry lacks the depth of that of his greatest contemporaries. Poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé were nearly as technically proficient as Verlaine, but they had thought deeply about life and the relation of poetry to life in a way that Verlaine had not. Rimbaud, contrastingly, was less technically skilled than Verlaine, but Rimbaud's lack of emphasis on poetic form followed from a principled and logically consistent rejection of much of tradition, also indicative of serious thought.

Yet there was a disarming feature of Verlaine. He both acknowledged his shallowness and defended himself by arguing that a kind of mistiness in thought was necessary to convey the type of limpidity for which he strove in his writing. In "L'Art poétique," published in the volume *Jadis et naguère* (1884), he wrote, "De la musique avant toute chose" ("Music before all things"), and stated that it is best to accomplish that by creating verse "où l'Indécis au Précis se joint" ("where the undefined and precise join"). In other words, to capture an ineffable mood it is necessary to have an underlying structure of thought that is itself rather vague and incomplete. It is hard to argue with his advice, especially since his work is preeminent in French literature in being able to convey delicate, illusive feelings.

It is important to be aware of how he speaks of a combination of the precise and imprecise, for it is not merely by the use of vague words that he creates his moods—his effects cannot be achieved so easily. He combines vagueness and concreteness in precisely the right measure. In "Il faut, voyez-vous, nous pardonner les choses" ("You see, we have to learn to pardon all"), his method of combination can be seen. (This poem, like many of his poems, takes its title from its first line.) The speaker is asking for forgiveness, and he wishes that he and the listener could return to their childish innocence.

Exactly what is to be forgiven is left tremulously vague; yet, at the right moment, a concrete image is introduced, a description of frightened little girls who feel enormously guilty for a minor lapse. This image gives the speaker's suit a poignance based in reality, though still a reality only analogically related to his continually unclear original sins.

Three other traits help Verlaine in his quest for distinct indistinctness: musicality, conversational tone, and natural imagery. The verbal music, which he put before all things, was that of an easy lilt and a graceful chiming of vowels and consonants that gave his verse a prettiness that few other poets have matched. In poems such as "Chanson d'automne" ("Song of Autumn") and "Il pleure dans mon cœur" ("It Is Crying in My Heart"), the easy grace of the lines creates a melody that connects sympathetically to the tremulous passages of a weary sadness.

At the same time, adding to the poetry's weight and thus balancing its tendency toward evanescence, is a conversational tone that conceals the artistry of the work by creating the sense of listening to a relaxed monologue. Thus, Verlaine may open a poem with an unaffected statement such as "Tournez, tournez, bons chevaux de bois" ("Turn, turn wooden horses"—carousel horses), or with a casual request, as in "Écoutez la chanson bien douce" ("Listen to the sweet song"). In order to embody this tone, Verlaine made a number of innovations and reemphases in the rather strict conventions of French verse. For one, against the more strident practices of Romanticism, he preferred weak rhymes, ones that called less attention to themselves. He broke with the tradition of having a caesura, a brief pause of sense and sound at the middle of the typical twelve-syllable line. Moreover, he worked less with the preferred twelve-count line than with shorter measures and particularly, unusually, ones of odd-numbered syllables, from five to thirteen. He also practiced enjambment (*rejet* in French), that is, the method of not ending a clause and sense unit at the line's end but carrying it over to the following line. None of these alterations in standard procedures was made as a technical experiment, but each was done to de-

emphasize the rigidity and formality of verse (factors that proclaimed, "this is a poem") in favor of naturalness.

This naturalness, too, helped create the necessary vagueness, which would have been harder to reach within the tougher shell of stricter methods. Verlaine also conveyed this prized quality by choosing to portray nature in its filmy moods. He begins his celebrated "En sourdine" ("Muted") by describing a wooded glade, "Calmes dans le demi-jour/ Que les branches hautes font" ("Calmly in the twilight/ Created by the upper boughs"). "L'Heure du berger" ("Dusk") begins "La lune est rouge au brumeux horizon;/ Dans un brouillard qui danse" ("The moon is red along the smoking horizon;/ In a shifting mist"). In each case, a shuttered half-light and the incompletely discerned shapes of foliage or of the sun draw the reader into a web of a twilight world in which formless emotions appear.

More specifically, what were the emotions of which the poet sang? It might be said that Verlaine's feelings are not those of the will, such as hatred and passionate desire, but those of passivity, such as nostalgia, regret, and unrequited longing. Thus, in "Mon rêve familier" ("My Familiar Dream"), he dreams, literally, of a nameless woman who understands him, saying of her, "Est-elle brune, blond, ou rousse—Je l'ignore" ("Is she brunette, blond, or redheaded?—I do not know"). Perhaps even more representative is a passage in "It Is Crying in My Heart." There, the speaker experiences a piercing yet unaccountable ache in his heart. He concludes, not by diagnosing the feeling's cause, but by finding, "C'est bien la pire peine/ De ne savoir pourquoi . . . Mon cœur a tant de peine" ("It is by far the worst pain/ Not knowing why . . . My heart has such pain"). These lines evoke the immediacy of Verlaine's verse, his ability to make the reader feel the keenness of an emotion whose exact dimensions, such as the dream-woman's hair color, are withheld.

It is paradoxical, in the end, that a man whose emotional life was filled with above-average turmoil and turbulence should be found to have his chief excellence as a poet in the portrayal of moods that lack contour and are nearly indecipherable.



## “GREEN”

**First published:** “Green,” 1874 (collected in *One Hundred and One Poems*, 1999)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The speaker presents a beautiful woman with gifts, his relation to her growing gradually more intimate and more mysterious.*

“Green,” written in the period of Verlaine’s escapades with Rimbaud, can be read as the recording of an impulse toward reconciliation with his wife. It is a complex piece of three four-line stanzas, in which each phrase both fills in more details of the speaker’s immediate relation to the woman being addressed and, simultaneously, shrouds further in mystery the couple’s ultimate connection.

The poem can also be read, in terms of literary history, as an interesting play with the tradition of the harsh mistress. The male Romantic poets, following a convention dating to the Middle Ages, often portrayed unnaturally cruel lovers, who remorselessly broke the hearts of the tortured but loyal lyricists. Verlaine unveils two variations on this motif. First, while the traditional poet’s torments as he described them were undeserved, the speaker in “Green” seems to have some unspecified trespass on his conscience and, so, cannot avoid his sense that rejection by the addressed woman would be richly merited. Second, there is no evidence in the poem, as there would be in the typical Romantic lament, that the addressee is actually disdainful. It is only that the poet, possibly misled by guilt, anticipates that she will be. Thus, in the poem’s opening, the speaker offers her a beautiful plait of flowers, fruits, and sprays (including, as an afterthought, his heart); he then pleads that she not break the offering and cast it aside: “Ne le déchirez pas avec vos deux mains blanches” (“Do not break it with your two white hands”). Such cruelty, however, seems more in the poet’s mind than in reality, since, as it happens, she does not spurn the peace offering and will allow even greater liberties later.

In the first stanza, all that is clear is that the speaker has come in from the garden. The second quatrain suggests that the speaker has been on a long journey, which, complexly, can be seen as endearing him to the woman, as he is weary and pitifully cold with the morning dew; but it may also estrange him somewhat from the listening woman, whom he may have deserted in some sense. Whatever the mix of these elements, he has advanced enough in her estimation—each stanza notes the speaker’s greater physical proximity to the woman—to request that he might lay himself at her feet.

In the last stanza, their bodies move still closer. Verlaine confesses to the reader that she has kissed him, as if in her joy at his recovery from absence, and then, trading on this intimacy, begs that he might lay his head on her breast.

Two interesting points about relationships appear at the end. The speaker remains a pleader. No matter what ground he has crossed in reviving their old feelings, he is still as unsure and abject as he had been at the outset. Verlaine’s view of the game of love seems to be that every conquest of a degree of intimacy leads the conqueror merely to another field with a new series of hurdles blocking communion. The second point is that the ending reveals that the speaker’s desired haven is rest on a maternal bosom. The loved woman, who is young, merges back toward the mother and does so very naturally since the connection suggested up until the end has been loving but not erotic. Without negating the originally portrayed situation between adult man and woman, this return delicately indicates how such scenes, whether of reconciliation or tidy closeness, may be lit from within by evergreen reminiscences of childhood passions.



## “MY GOD SAID TO ME”

**First published:** “Mon Dieu m’a dit,” 1881  
(collected in *Selected Poems*, 1948)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Jesus asks for the addressee’s love, citing His sufferings on Golgotha as reasons to embrace His cause.*

“My God Said to Me” (also translated as “Son, Thou Must Love Me See’—My Saviour Said”) shows interesting variations on earlier Verlaine themes. Many poems in *Romances Without Words* are in the form of a plea, the speaker begging an imagined listener for some favor, some tenderness. In Verlaine’s sequence of ten religious sonnets, of which “My God Said to Me” is the first, appearing in *Sagesse* (1881; the volume following *Romances Without Words*), it is God who is doing the praying. Jesus Christ is begging the listener, who is presumably Verlaine, since he claimed that these poems marked his religious conversion, to love Him.

Another daring departure from Verlaine’s customary style found in this poem is that the emotion felt is presented in a blunt, raw way, which contrasts markedly with the ineffability of emotion that reigns in most of his pieces. It is as if, where Verlaine finds humans to be inexhaustibly vague in their moods, he is compelled to portray God as knowing His own mind. Thus, in the first line, Jesus states forthrightly, “Il faut m’aimer” (“It is necessary to love Me”—addressing the listener).

In keeping with Verlaine’s emphasis on sensation over thought, what God brings forth to motivate the listener to become a Christian are not reasons but wounds. Jesus stands, as it were, in front of the poet as He did before Doubting Thomas and has him examine His pierced side and torn heart.

There is, however, more than show-and-tell to this poem. It is a sonnet, a fourteen-line poem with five rhythmic units per line. Sonnets have been

known for compressed arguments that lead to something of a twist in the concluding thought. Verlaine accepts this tradition, though the argument that he presents is rather startling. He has Jesus pass beyond listing His afflictions to state that the world is primarily a place of the flesh and that, therefore, suffering is what counts above all things. It is the type of argument that would certainly strike a sensualist such as Verlaine. The poem’s ending twist is that, to drive the argument’s point home, Jesus says that His own sufferings are very much like Verlaine’s own. He tells the poet, “N’ai-je pas sangloté ton angoisse suprême?” (“Have not I sobbed in your supreme anguish?”) The line can be taken to indicate either that Jesus’ tortures have been as bad as the poet’s or that Jesus has somehow been suffering Verlaine’s troubles in His own flesh.

Certainly, in one sense the ending smacks of the writer’s self-importance, as if God had to prove that He had suffered as much as Verlaine. Yet in the context of the whole poem, that is only one example of the poem’s most remarkable feature: the intimacy of the appeal from Jesus to a sinner. The Son of God frames His pleas to the bent of the listener and loses no dignity in so doing.

## SUMMARY

If the world had nothing but major poets, there would be a surfeit of grand statements on such themes as love and death, but important lesser matters would be forgotten. A minor poet, such as Paul Verlaine, is not a bad poet. A bad poet is hackneyed or overtaxed by projects beyond his or her capacity. A minor poet has accurately gauged his or her own skills and creates estimable work of less than earth-shaking proportion. Verlaine described a world of reflected light, halfhearted moods, and undrawn connections. With all the craft at his command, he built a diaphanous, yet richly inscribed, tissue of verse.

*James Feast*

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is the woman in Paul Verlaine's "Green" a harsh mistress, or is the speaker simply an inadequate lover?
- What is novel about the speaker's relationship to God in "My God Said to Me"?
- In his poem "L'Art poétique" Verlaine recommends "uneven rhythm" to achieve a musical quality. What examples of this rhythm can you find in his poetry?
- Examine the theme of remorse in Verlaine's poetry.
- Do any of Verlaine's poetic achievements clearly derive from his relationship with Arthur Rimbaud?

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## JULES VERNE

**Born:** Nantes, France  
February 8, 1828

**Died:** Amiens, France  
March 24, 1905

*Admired as a writer for young people, Verne created adventure stories that form a part of contemporary myth.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Jules Gabriel Verne was born on February 8, 1828, the eldest son of a lawyer, in the provincial port of Nantes, France. His education was typical of that of a middle-class nineteenth century family, since his parents intended for him to take over his father's legal office. According to family legend, Verne was a good student, but he entertained daydreams of adventure, leading to an attempt at the age of eleven to run away to sea. As the eldest son, Verne consented to attend law school despite a lack of interest in the subject, while his younger brother Paul was allowed to follow the more exciting career of captain in the merchant marine.

Family legend also attributes to Verne a childhood love for a cousin. In order to get Verne out of the way during her engagement, he was sent to Paris to continue his studies. While in the capital, Verne became close to the popular novelist Alexandre Dumas, *père* and frequented literary and theatrical groups. He was soon trying his hand at vaudeville as well as tragedy.

Although he had successfully completed his law degree in 1848, Verne refused to return to Nantes. He began to publish in the journal *Musée des familles*. In Parisian salons, he met explorers and scientists and began to use what he could learn from them for his stories.

In 1856, Verne met Honorine de Viane, a young

widow with two daughters. Her brother was a financial agent, and Verne decided that that line of work would be the ideal way for him to earn a living while writing. Verne married Honorine in 1857; his only child, a son, Michel, was born in 1861. The following year, Verne met the publisher P. J. Hetzel, who was especially interested in books for youngsters. In 1863, Hetzel published Verne's first novel, *Cinq Semaines en ballon* (1863; *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, 1876). The success of the book owed something to the exploit of the balloonist Nadar the same year. Verne continued to publish serially in the *Musée des familles* and in volume form and published *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864; *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, 1872). The following year, he signed a contract with Hetzel, according to which he agreed to furnish three volumes a year for three thousand francs each. This arrangement gradually allowed him to abandon all other work and devote himself to writing.

In 1867, Verne went to New York aboard the steamer *Great Eastern*. This trip furnished the material for *Une Ville flottante* (1871; *A Floating City*, 1876). He was working at the same time on what was to become *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1869-1870; *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1873), as well as *Autour de la lune* (1870; *From the Earth to the Moon . . . and a Trip Around It*, 1873). Throughout his life, Verne would be correcting the proofs of one book while composing another and often taking notes for a third. His fertile imagination presented him with more ideas than he had time to commit to paper. The following year, he bought his first sailboat, the *St. Michel*, and signed a more favorable contract with Hetzel.



In 1870, Verne received the cross of the Légion d'Honneur. Honorine and her children found refuge in Amiens during the Franco-Prussian War. Verne was horrified by the rebel-backed Paris Commune. His political opinions would always be moderate. After the war, he decided to move to Amiens, but the Parisian social scene did not agree with him. *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1873; *Around the World in Eighty Days*, 1873), published serially, was a huge success, and the volume that appeared in 1872 sold 108,000 copies. It was to be Verne's best-selling work.

Verne's son, Michel, was a source of considerable worry as the author continued to produce book after book. Because some of Verne's books were being translated into Russian, they had to be read by diplomats before publication in an effort to avoid any misunderstanding. The sales of his books permitted him to buy a yacht and to sail around the Mediterranean, but his son's conduct continued to worry him. Michel's debts were significant and, at the age of eighteen, he demanded his independence in order to marry an actress. This marriage did not last long, and soon Michel eloped with a pianist who was also a minor. Verne would be obliged to support his son and his family for a long time.

Verne lived in a very comfortable, upper-middle-class manner in the provincial town of Amiens. In 1866, however, he was obliged to sell his yacht, the upkeep of which had become too expensive. In the same year, he had an unfortunate accident. His nephew Gaston, the son of his brother Paul, shot him in the foot during a fit of temporary insanity. Verne would never recover completely from the wound. Shortly after this accident, his publisher, Hetzel, died, and, although Verne continued working for the same house under the direction of Hetzel's son, his relationship with the successor was not what he had known with the father.

In spite of increasing health problems and lesser financial success, Verne continued to produce book after book. In 1905, acute diabetes was discovered, and Verne died soon after, on March 24, in Amiens, surrounded by his family. His productivity was such that posthumous novels would appear until 1914.

## ANALYSIS

Verne was drawn to the sea and the life of adventure from an early age, yet his biography is remark-

ably prosaic. Aside from a trip to Scandinavia and one to the United States, he spent most of his life in the provincial French town of Amiens. It is true that he owned a sailboat as soon as he could afford to buy one, exchanged it for a larger one, and finally purchased a yacht, but his travels were limited to the Mediterranean coastline. Verne was an adventurer of the mind.

In 1863, when *Five Weeks in a Balloon* first appeared, Verne was an immediate success and was especially recognized as the creator of a radically new type of novel. Under the name of science fiction, works resembling those of Verne would continue to fascinate readers of all ages. His fertile imagination continued to furnish more ideas for novels than he could complete. His success, however, was not entirely attributable to the novelty of the genre. Verne's ideas correspond to the ideology of the second half of the twentieth century. Since antiquity, literature had exploited the voyage as a theme, but Verne's concern for scientific knowledge made his voyages educational as well as exciting. The curiosity that led to exploration and invention during Verne's lifetime also provided an enthusiastic reading public.

The continuing popularity of the stories and their successful adaptation in motion pictures demonstrate that, beyond the scientific apparatus, which now appears dated, Verne's novels appeal through their mythological structures. The epic struggle against evil, the voyage as initiation, and the unfathomable mystery of Captain Nemo still fascinate readers.

## A JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

**First published:** *Voyage au centre de la terre*, 1864 (English translation, 1872)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Upon discovering a coded parchment, Harry, his uncle Professor Hardwigg, and their Icelandic guide, Hans, find a volcanic crater that leads them into the bowels of the earth.*

Like the greater number of Verne's works, *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* is a novelistic descrip-

tion of scientific phenomena. This third of Verne's works is geological and paleontological. The different geological strata of the earth, its minerals, the

formation of the planet, and the different hypotheses concerning its core are reviewed. At the same time, the structure of the work calls upon the archetypal descent of the hero into the underworld.

Verne's characters are conscious that their scientific goals echo those of humanity. Mister Fridriksson, their Icelandic host, who converses with the hero Harry in Latin,

bids them farewell with "this verse that Virgil seems to have written for us: 'Et quacumque viam dederit fortuna, sequamur'" ("And whichever way thou goest, may fortune follow"). Verne knew that others had written of the descent into the underworld, usually as a pretext to criticize society on the surface of the planet, without any scientific pretensions. His motivation is otherwise: to explore scientific data and imagine an adventure story.

The story is told by one of its protagonists, the student Harry, a lover of geology. Verne seems to voice his opinion when the narrator proclaims the scientific validity of the expedition:

No mineralogists had ever found themselves placed in such a marvelous position to study nature in all her real and naked beauty. The sounding rod, a mere machine, could not bring to the surface of the earth the objects of value for the study of its internal structure, which we were about to see with our own eyes, to touch with our own hands.

The characters of the novel are limited to the three of the expedition. Harry's cousin and fiancé, Gretchen, is reduced to the figure of the knight's lady who sends him off on his mission and welcomes him home, a hero, at the conclusion of the adventure. Harry's youthful imagination, his concern with practical details such as eating and sleeping, contrast sharply with the stereotype of the universal scientist represented by his fanatical uncle,

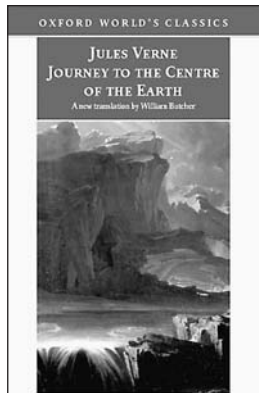
who is unable to imagine danger and is motivated only by scientific curiosity. The third member of the crew, the Icelandic guide Hans, never speaks. He represents instinct, has no interest in the discoveries and, apparently, no fear in the face of dangers. He finds water, constructs a raft, and repeatedly saves the scientists' lives, all for three dollars a week.

A precise date is given at the beginning of the work situating the story in the reader's near past, and at one point the use of the journal or log kept by Harry during the crossing of an interior sea allows the story to be told in the present tense. All of this contributes to the realism of the narration. The cause of realism is served by the didactic side of the work as well: Lists of equipment and scientific instruments for the venture are given; the trip is a lesson in geology and paleontology. Once the expedition reaches the interior sea, however, geological references become rare. Now the voyage seems to allow the explorers to discover humanity's past. Verne's heroes are fascinated by the mystery of humanity's origins. The eternal question of the source of life was accentuated in the nineteenth century by the controversy that followed publication of the theories of naturalists Charles Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.

Once on the interior sea, Harry's scientific hypotheses blend with symbolism. The fantastic appeal of electricity at the time explains Verne's use of it to illumine the Central Sea:

The illuminating power in this subterraneous region, from its trembling and flickering character, its clear dry whiteness, the very slight elevation of its temperature, its great superiority to that of the moon, was evidently electric; something in the nature of the aurora borealis, only that its phenomena were constant, and able to light up the whole of the ocean cavern.

More and more, Harry reveals his impressions of being "imprisoned," of the "awful grandeur" of the scene: "Imagination, not description, can give an idea of the splendor and vastness of the cave." The discovery, first of fossils, then of bones, then of living prehistoric creatures, and finally of a humanoid giant allow for many narrow escapes: "The fact was that my journey into the interior of the earth was rapidly changing all preconceived notions, and day by day preparing me for the marvelous."



When at last their way seems blocked, the travelers do not hesitate to open the earth with explosives. In doing so, they provoke a volcanic eruption that rather miraculously restores them to the surface of the earth, not in Iceland, whence they began their journey, but in an island of the Mediterranean.

## TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

**First published:** *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, 1869-1870 (English translation, 1873)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Shipwrecked, Professor Aronnax, his servant Consul, and a sailor, Ned Land, are taken aboard the submarine of the mysterious Captain Nemo.*

In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Verne created a character, Captain Nemo, who would continue to haunt the imagination of generations to come in the manner of Homer's hero, from whom Nemo took his name. In the *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614), Ulysses calls himself Nemo, or "No one," in order to hide his identity from the Cyclops. Verne's unknown renegade, making war on injustice, has likewise become a myth.

The best known of Verne's works was also the one that took the longest to find its way into print. It is certain that the author was working on a story tentatively titled "Voyage Under the Waters" in 1865. After his exploration of the air in *Five Weeks in a Balloon* and his *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, it was logical that Verne would pursue his pedagogical mission by exploring the bottom of the sea.

This novel, though, was to be different from the others. Verne was very excited about the creation of a hero entirely cut off from the earth and humanity. His publisher, Hetzel, on the other hand, was very uneasy about Nemo. Verne refused to explain who his captain was and what his past had been. Letters show that the author would have liked to have made Nemo a Pole, oppressed by Russia. For commercial reasons, this was impossible, as Verne's books were translated into Russian. The violence of Nemo's hatred of his enemies, and his

cruel sinking of ships, given with many hair-raising details, worried Hetzel, but Verne was adamant in preserving the hero driven by hatred.

As is usual with Verne, the motivation in the novel is a double one: scientific, with the description of the submarine vessel and the underwater world that the submarine allows the heroes to explore, and entertaining, with an unprecedented series of adventures to be encountered. Professor Aronnax is fascinated by the marvels of submarine geology and biology, which he can study in his fantastic underwater laboratory, the *Nautilus*. Ned Land, on the other hand, is a simple sailor, a natural man; his name, Land, makes him incapable of remaining at sea. He remains indifferent to everything except the loss of liberty that Nemo has inflicted upon his "guests."

The story is told by Aronnax, who is capable of understanding both points of view. He comes to admire and pity the genius Captain Nemo, while agreeing with Land that it is impossible to remain with him for the rest of his natural life.

The narrator, Aronnax, is often conscious that his story is an incredible one. In the space of ten months aboard the submarine, he travels twenty thousand leagues—that is, a trip around the world, under the seas. The journal form, which allows the tale to be told in the present tense and makes for considerable suspense as well as an illusion of reality, is used throughout. Many details contribute to the realism of the story: dates, the names of ships encountered, and maps on which the itinerary of the *Nautilus* is traced. Historical references to the American Civil War and the revolt of Crete add to the impression of reality. Probably the most impressive aspect of the narration is the quantity of scientific data given. Interminable lists of submarine plants, shells, and animals serve to present a scientific alibi for the adventure story.

When the story opens, the *Nautilus* has seldom been sighted but has given rise to a legend that there is a new sort of sea monster in the oceans.



When Professor Aronnax agrees to leave his museum and set sail, it is to hunt the monster. Verne has thus given his novel the appearance of an epic adventure. When the narrator discovers the mechanical nature of the submarine, the mythic side of the story does not come to an end. The *Nautilus* is powered by electricity, a phenomenon that remained mysterious enough at the time to allow Verne to play on the fantastic possibilities that it might offer.

Nemo's courage, his intelligence, and his determination excite the admiration of the narrator. Yet when Nemo dreams while improvising on his pipe organ, Aronnax admits that the captain remains essentially a mystery to him. It is the figure of Nemo, at his organ, towering over humanity after having declared war on it, understood by no one, which continues to fascinate generations of readers.

## SUMMARY

Science-fiction writer Ray Bradbury once declared himself "a son of Jules Verne." If the nineteenth century French writer of educational works for young people can be considered a founder of the science-fiction novel, it is not attributable simply to his interest in the techniques and discoveries being made in his own time. There is something timeless about Verne's novels. Like the best science-fiction works, they call upon mythological structures. The voyage, whether it be around the world, to the moon, to the center of the earth, or under the sea, is first of all a quest for the self. All Verne's journeys are initiations, which permit his hero to come to a greater self-awareness.

Nancy Blake

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#### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What is innovative in Jules Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*?
- How do you account for Captain Nemo's enduring appeal to readers?
- What were Verne's sources in his life and reading that enabled him to be the inventor of science fiction?
- Science and the aspirations of science are always advancing. What keeps the science or pseudoscience of Verne's works from becoming uncommonly boring to modern readers?
- What modern artistic works blend an appreciation of scientific possibilities and mythological structures as did Verne's works?





Lyubov Fyodorova Makowska

## VLADIMIR VOINOVICH

**Born:** Stalinbad, Tadjhikistan, Soviet Union (now Dushanbe, Tajikistan)  
September 26, 1932

*Among dissident writers, Voinovich has been amusingly effective in his satiric assaults on power structures.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Nikolaevich Voinovich (voy-NOH-vihch) was born in Dushanbe, Tadjhikistan, in Central Asia, which was a Soviet republic at the time of his birth on September 26, 1932. His father was a journalist, a Russian of Serbian descent. His mother, a mathematics teacher, was Jewish, which Voinovich believes is why he was unable to qualify for flight training when he served in the Soviet military. As a small boy, Voinovich was taken by his family to nearby Khodzhent, renamed Leninabad, where he remembers camels, donkeys, a blind man, a leper wearing a bell, men in quilted robes, and women in veils. He remembers that from time to time harmless stray dogs in the city would be rounded up, slain, and boiled for soap. During this time Voinovich's father disappeared from his home for a period of years, disciplined for an ideological indiscretion in the time of Stalin's purges.

When Voinovich's father was able to return to his family, they all moved to Zaporozhe, in Ukraine. At the outbreak of World War II Voinovich's father enlisted in the army. Zaporozhe soon came under attack from German bombers, and Voinovich went to live with his family on a collective farm. He remained in this environment for the rest of the war. As a boy, Voinovich had discovered reading and books, particularly Leo Tolstoy's *Voyna i mir*, 1865-

1869 (*War and Peace*, 1886). Despite his intellectual promise, he was given limited academic training and enrolled by the state in a trade school, where he learned to be a joiner. He served in the army for four years, from 1951 to 1955. By that time Voinovich felt himself strongly interested in literature and, upon completion of military service, applied for admission to the Gorky Literary Institute, which turned him down.

Settling in Moscow, Voinovich worked at various jobs to earn a living while teaching himself the writer's craft. Even as he felt himself drawn to the art of fiction, he attempted poetry and kept company with other young people of similar interests, thereby attracting some attention from the KGB. Voinovich has admitted that by 1960 he regarded himself as a true Soviet but was nevertheless scornful of Marxist-Leninist Communism. He was received into the Soviet Writers' Union in 1962 as a young man of great promise. It was in this same period that Nikita Khrushchev, standing at Vladimir Ilich Lenin's tomb, recited a bit of Voinovich's poetry in praise of Soviet space ventures.

By the end of the 1960's Voinovich's satiric bent had become evident. He was no longer a favored author of the Communist Party. His position deteriorated until he was expelled from the Writers' Union in 1974 and put under KGB supervision. No longer able to publish in the Soviet Union, Voinovich had his novels and other satiric productions printed in the West, where they were quickly translated into English. *Ivan'kiada, ili rasskaz o vselenii pisatelya Voinovicha v novuyu kvartiru* (1976; *The Ivankiad: Or, The Tale of the Writer Voinovich's Installation in His New Apartment*, 1977), which makes sport of bureaucratic wrangling necessary to se-

cure a better apartment, was soon followed by Voinovich's best-known work, *Zhizn' i neobychnyye priklyucheniya soldata Ivana Chonkina* (1975; *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, 1977). Merciless in its satire of Red Army incompetence, this novel, written in the 1960's, helps to explain Voinovich's unpopularity with officials at home. A collection of short stories and letters, *Putem vzaimnoy perepiski* (1979; *In Plain Russian: Stories*, 1979) appeared next.

The year after, Voinovich was stripped of his citizenship and expelled from the Soviet Union. He moved to West Germany and continued to write. A sequel to Private Chonkin's adventures, *Pretendent na prestol: Novye priklyucheniya soldata Ivana Chonkina* (1979; *Pretender to the Throne: The Further Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, 1981), followed. More satire continued to flow from the exile's pen. *Antisovetskiy Sovetskiy Soyuz* (1985; *The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union*, 1986) was followed by *Moscorep* (1986; *Moscow 2042*, 1987). In the latter work one object of satire is Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who has had himself frozen and then revived in the twenty-first century to lead a conservative reaction as bizarre as anything to be found in the Soviet era. *Moscow 2042* is a clear demonstration that Voinovich's satire is neither politically nor ideologically specific, that he recognizes and is willing to attack one form of tyranny and pretense as quickly as another. *Shapka* (1988; *The Fur Hat*, 1989) appeared next.

In 1990, Russian citizenship was restored to Voinovich and he was offered an apartment if he wished to live in Russia. He eventually divided his time between Munich and Moscow, and he resumed participation in Russian literary life. In 2000, he published his first novel in more than a decade, *Monumentalnaia propaganda* (*Monumental Propaganda*, 2003), in which he satirizes the changing political landscape in the Soviet Union from the mid-1950's through the postglasnost years in the New Russia.

## ANALYSIS

Understanding Voinovich's place in Russian literature might well begin with understanding the historical and cultural circumstances that have surrounded writers in the Soviet period. Many of these writers, Voinovich included, are regarded as belonging to one of three waves of émigrés, artists, and thinkers who fled or were forced to leave Rus-

sia in consequence of the establishment of the Soviet state. The first wave left during or immediately following the civil war of the early 1920's. The second wave left following World War II, and the third wave (including Solzhenitsyn and Voinovich) left in the 1970's and early 1980's. The political regime responsible for these departures also led to an ordering of literary works by three categories: "gosizdat," or state-sponsored publications; "samizdat," or self-published works that do not have official sanction; and "tamizdat," or works published outside Soviet Russia. Voinovich, who during the Soviet regime was forced to publish in the West, belonged to the body of writers and writing categorized as tamizdat.

That Russian writers have had to live as émigrés is at least partly a result of the decision made by Communist officials as early as the 1930's that the proper function of literature was to promote socialist realism. Proletarians and their achievements were to be presented in flattering terms, while people representing bourgeois culture or attitudes were to be drawn as class enemies. What imaginative writers often found was that the reality they undertook to imitate did not always conform to the political or social ideology which they were expected to advance. Socialist realism, or any other "realism" that is required to conform to a political ideology, is a contradiction in terms. Most writers who attempt to represent the real world do not permit themselves the emotional luxury of the politically assured by thinking that human rectitude is specific to a single ideology and its partisans. This was Voinovich's problem as a writer in the Soviet Union.

Voinovich seems to have been able to turn his problem into an artistic advantage. He was obliged to become aware of the eternal and universal nature of human stupidity. His work from before the time of his expulsion from the Writers' Union is openly satiric. His satire has developed considerably from his recognition of disparities between the ideal and the actual in the period of Soviet rule. His most famous work, *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, is not so much a satire on the Red Army, however, as on the inevitable follies of any self-important bureaucracy. Human pretense and ineptitude are conditions of the species. The business of the satirist, a business that will never end as long as people remain people, is

to expose pretense by playing it off against an implied standard of conduct that, if not without blemish, is at least more desirable. The collapse of the Soviet Union does not mean that Voinovich's work is done, only that it is altered in the details.

Critics of Voinovich's work have noted on more than one occasion the absurd character of the world he depicts. This may result from his deflation of the socialist ideal, which has appealed to many in the twentieth century, or it may result from his willingness to attack institutions and attitudes of more than one kind, as if competence and reason are nowhere to be found. Like all good satirists, however, Voinovich does not seem to create a world absurd to the point of hopelessness. The absurdity in his novels results more often than not from a failure in people who ought to be able to do better. From characters who seem entirely fictional to those who bear clear resemblance to prominent figures of the Soviet era, satire seems to be directed at this conditional failure. After all, if the world were absolutely absurd, if there were no scheme of values nor humane goals, satire could not function.

Voinovich is not entirely satiric, moreover. Criticism has also noted him as a writer of comic fiction. The difference seems to be that where Voinovich is comic, the people he represents are benign. Private Ivan Chonkin is somewhat bumptious, harmlessly naïve, and simply funny in his resentment of the pig Borka. Failures of abstinence with sex or alcohol in various fictions are treated as lapses in human conduct that cannot be eliminated and thus must be tolerated. The difference between comic figures and satiric figures is that comic figures cause little suffering. The same cannot be said for the latter. Voinovich is occasionally ironic, implying by circumstance or tone in his writing that human failing can be both harmful and irremediable. More often, though, the manner is satiric, making the point (directly at the end of *Moscow 2042*) that life ought to be easier for people, and that perhaps the goal of the imaginative writer is to achieve that end by attacking things that can be changed.

Most of Voinovich's work is readily accessible and grasped without difficulty. He frequently attacks foibles that seem peculiar to Russian life in the Soviet era, so a certain number of his points are lost on readers not familiar with that time. *The Ivankiad*, for example, might strike some people as a dull book if they are not aware of the hous-

ing shortage that plagued Russia for many years and that led to elaborate ploys for getting something from a bureaucracy not noted for efficiency. Of Voinovich's completed work, *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* appears to have a secure place in modern Russian fiction. Though other books may come to the same status, it seems unlikely that anything will move ahead of it.

### THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN

**First published:** *Zhizn' i neobychnyye prikluycheniya soldata Ivana Chonkina*, 1975 (English translation, 1977)

**Type of work:** Novel

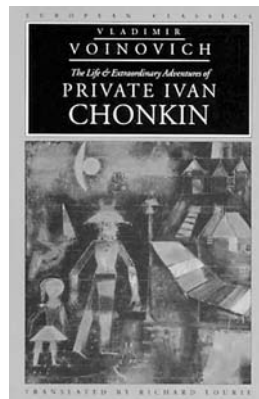
*A Red Army private, detached from his unit to guard a disabled airplane, is later viewed as a deserter and then a German enemy through military bumbling.*

*The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* is a comedy of innocence and a satire of incompetence. The hero, Private Chonkin, is often comic in his innocent but never contemptible behavior. His opponents, functionaries in the Stalinist Soviet Union, are only somewhat funny in their self-approving incompetence. Frequently they are transparent fools.

Just before the beginning of World War II, a Red Army airplane is forced to land on a collective farm in the Soviet Union. Private Chonkin, a humble soldier and object of petty harassment by the military, is sent to stand guard over the downed aircraft. Within a few days Chonkin has settled in nicely, taking up with Nyura Belyashova, the lonely postmistress, and making the acquaintance of Golubev, chairman of the kolkhoz (collective farm), and Gladishev, a warehouseman with scientific pretensions. Members of the farm, which has been named Krasnoye (Red) in honor of the Russian Revolution, are silly in their patriotism and mechanical in their zeal. For example, Delhi cigarettes are suspected of being subversive because

"Delhi" possibly stands for "Down with the Entire Leninist Humanist International." Gladishev, who lives with an unlovely wife named Aphrodite and an infant son named Hercules, spouts Darwinism and aspires to revolutionize agricultural production by developing a hybrid plant that will bear potatoes and tomatoes at the same time. In support of his efforts, he fills his house with pots of fertilizer which give off an overpowering stench of dung. Chonkin manages to accommodate himself to the world he now inhabits and has no problems larger than an irrational jealousy of Nyura's pet hog, Borka. Matters become more difficult with the outbreak of World War II.

The arrival of war leads to chaotic meetings and general hoarding by members of the kolkhoz. One evening Chonkin fails to watch Beauty, Nyura's cow, as she is returning home from the fields, and the cow gets into Gladishev's garden, trampling everything and eating his prized hybrid plant. Gladishev takes revenge by reporting Chonkin to the military as a drunken deserter who questions both Marxism-Leninism and Charles Darwin. The army responds by dispatching soldiers to capture Chonkin. Incompetence and cowardice pervade their efforts. The first detachment, who appear to threaten the airplane Chonkin is guarding, is taken prisoner and put to work as forced labor on the farm. Further bumbling leads to a moment of mutual deception between two groups opposing Chonkin, who has been transmuted into a German fascist. Both sides believe they are talking to Germans, and the confusion costs one man his life. After holding off battalions of soldiers, Chonkin is finally subdued by a large shell which stuns but does not kill him. As the novel concludes, Private Ivan Chonkin, a politically innocent but loyal soldier, is taken into custody.



## "A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS"

**First published:** "V krugu družei," 1979  
(collected in *In Plain Russian: Stories*, 1979)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Comrade Koba (Joseph Stalin), surrounded by terrified sycophants, does a crossword puzzle on the night before Adolf Hitler's forces invade the Soviet Union.*

"A Circle of Friends," a story in the collection *In Plain Russian: Stories*, is set in the Kremlin on the night of June 21, 1941, a few hours before Germany invaded Russia. Joseph Stalin has cultivated an image as a tireless servant of his people, but actually his silhouette before a lighted office window is a foam-rubber dummy. His moustache and pipe are props intended to make him look avuncular. Stalin actually lives in a doorless, windowless room reached by crawling through a safe with a door at both ends. His need for the companionship of a woman is satisfied by periodic sexual encounters with a cleaning lady whose identity is not known and does not matter.

Entertaining a belief in the emotional health of gathering with a few close friends, Comrade Koba receives a group who, like Koba himself, are easily identified with officials of the Soviet Union in the early 1940's. For example, Koba's Ukrainian peasant friend is someone called Nikola Borshchhev, that is, Nikita Khrushchev. The circle of friends undertakes to entertain Comrade Koba while controlling their fear that they will somehow displease him, Koba's displeasure being irrational, unpredictable, and very dangerous.

Early in the evening, strain results from the absence of Comrade Zhdanov, whose wife is dying in a hospital. When Koba has mastered his anger, he turns to a crossword puzzle. Unable to come up with the name of a huge prehistoric animal, Koba telephones an important scientist who will know the necessary word, but he pretends he wants the word because he believes the reintroduction of the animal will lead to increased production of milk and meat for the Soviet people. Pleshivenko, the scientist, furnishes the word while falling all over himself in admiration of Koba's genius in conceiving such an idea.



Further events in the evening follow the same pattern. When Koba utters high praise of Comrade Molokov, Molokov is terrified lest the praise somehow conceal irrational displeasure that will end in brutal vengeance. When Koba desires musical entertainment, Borshchev is made to dance to the piano accompaniment of Zhbanov, who has arrived, presumably from the hospital, and continues his music after being informed of his wife's death. The evening grows late as people turn to card-playing and heavy drinking. Koba falls asleep. Word comes that Hitler, called "Dolph," has invaded the country. At first no one dares wake him. When Koba is awakened and refuses to believe war has arrived, no one dares challenge him. Very late, Koba's companions depart, after which he crawls through the safe with two doors to isolation. In his private room he confronts an ugly, true image of himself in a mirror. This he destroys with a pistol shot. The story soon concludes in an ironic disclaimer that the characters and incidents bear any relation to the actual.

## Moscow 2042

**First published:** *Moscorep*, 1986 (English translation, 1987)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A Russian émigré writer engages in time travel, which takes him forward to the dystopian world of Moscow in the middle of the twenty-first century.*

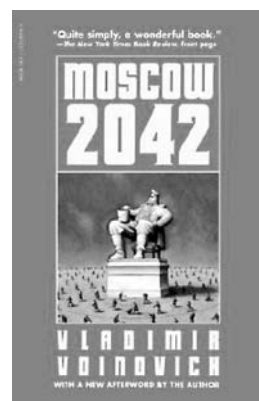
*Moscow 2042* begins in a Munich beer garden in 1982. The central character is a Russian émigré writer, Vitaly Nikitich Kartsev, who bears a strong resemblance to Voinovich himself. In conversation with a German acquaintance, Rudi Mittelbrechenmacher, Kartsev is faulted for his indifference to science fiction and his unwillingness to accept the possibility of time travel, which his friend Rudi assures him is a reality. Kartsev responds by going to a travel agency to seek passage to Moscow in the twenty-first century. His success in making the necessary arrangements means that Kartsev will have direct experience from which science fiction may be written.

When Kartsev's projected travel becomes known,

he is approached by various people who have an interest in future Moscow. John, an operative from the Central Intelligence Agency, poses as a *New Times* magazine representative and offers to pay the cost of Kartsev's expensive trip in exchange for the story he will bring back. Wealthy representatives of a Middle Eastern government abduct Kartsev and offer him money if he will return with plans for a nuclear bomb. Then, before his departure in time, Kartsev is persuaded to fly to Toronto to meet another émigré writer, Sim Simych Karnavalov (Alexandr Solzhenitsyn). Karnavalov wants Kartsev to carry into the future a floppy disk containing the completed "slabs" of a very large work, here called *The Greater Zone*. Kartsev is also given a letter to present to the future leaders of the Soviet Union, which he discards while taking the floppy disk along with him.

Upon his return to Germany, Kartsev boards a time-travel craft and flies forward to 2042. He arrives in Moscow to discover that he has been rehabilitated, is now regarded as a classic writer, and is about to be honored by a jubilee in celebration of his one-hundredth birthday. As Kartsev becomes acquainted with Moscow-in-the-future, Voinovich's novel turns into a dystopian speculation on Soviet communism after another sixty years of refinement.

Moscow is now a fully realized communist center, surrounded by three Rings of Hostility, the most hostile being the most remote, the capitalist enemy. Within Moscow, life is utterly regimented and largely absurd. Recycling has been perfected so far that to secure food (primary matter), residents must turn in secondary matter (human feces). *Pravda* is printed on toilet paper. The Christian church, reformed to eliminate God, has been integrated into the Communist Party structure and worships the Genialissimo, the isolated leader of the state. The chief threat to this system comes from Simites, twenty-first century followers of Sim Simych Karnavalov. Kartsev displeases the Communist Party when he refuses to delete Sim from *Mos-*





cow 2042 after he has returned to 1982, but the moment for eliminating Sim has already passed. Sim Karnavalov had himself frozen and deposited in a Swiss bank in the twentieth century. Toward the novel's end he is revived and enters the future, which leads to a Simite uprising, the collapse of communist Moscow, and the establishment of a militantly reactionary czarist autocracy under the direction of Karnavalov, who believes he has Romanov blood in his veins. Kartsev is allowed to return to 1982, where he hopes, as author of *Moscow 2042*, to encourage reforms that make life "a little easier on people."

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## SUMMARY

The satiric fictions of Vladimir Voinovich, though considerably effective, are topical, bound up with a Soviet Union that no longer exists. Whether Voinovich's work will carry into the future remains to be seen. It is difficult to predict what later writers will find relevant and amusing, and what will seem irrelevant and confusing. Voinovich will remain notable as a Russian novelist whose satiric art became an expression of dissent.

John Higby

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Vladimir Voinovich blend comedy and satire in *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*?
- Did Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn enjoy a literary, if not personal, advantage over Voinovich in being imprisoned instead of being simply evicted from the Soviet Union?
- What motivates the circle of friends in the story so titled?
- Did the revolution that swept away Soviet communism a few years after the publication of Voinovich's *Moscow 2042* render the novel irrelevant thereafter?
- What do you presume will be the future reputation of Voinovich in Russia?

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## VOLTAIRE

**Born:** Paris, France  
November 21, 1694

**Died:** Paris, France  
May 30, 1778

*Voltaire is one of the principal literary and intellectual figures of eighteenth century Europe; few writers have played such an important social role in their century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Although he was born a fragile child on November 21, 1694, in Paris, the capital of France, François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire (vohl-TAHR), was destined to have a long and tumultuous literary life. So great was his influence during the eighteenth century that historians speak of the Century of Voltaire. Few deny that he possessed a brilliant mind that both understood and moved the literary and political events of the time.

The young Arouet received little formal education before the age of nine, when he was sent to the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand. He had, however, been taken under the wing of his deist godfather, the Abbé de Châteauneuf, who was the chief cause—much to his father's chagrin—of Arouet's early introduction into the freethinking Society of the Temple. In this circle, ideas were debated, libertine literature read, and religious dogma examined. He remained under the official care of the Jesuits until, at the age of seventeen, he came home to his father (his mother had died when he was seven), who insisted that his son study law.

After some futile attempts to follow his father's wishes, Arouet began the dangerous activity of writing libelous verse. Composing lampoons against the current French government eventually cost him eleven months in the infamous prison of the

old regime, the Bastille. Never one to idle away his time, he began while imprisoned his epic poem *La Henriade* (1728; *Henriade*, 1732) and revised his play *Œdipe* (pr. 1718, pb. 1719; *Oedipus*, 1761). Released from the Bastille on April 11, 1718, he exited with a new name that he had completely invented, Voltaire. During the ensuing years, the young Voltaire remained ever restless, accepting secret diplomatic missions, courting noble ladies, and always writing with intensity. In December, 1721, his father died, leaving him a considerable inheritance. It was soon augmented with a pension by a forgiving regent. His plays appeared on the stage; his tragedy *Mariamne* (pr. 1724, pb. 1725; English translation, 1761) was particularly successful.

Though an earlier bout with smallpox caused him to be seriously ill, an event soon took place that marked him more deeply. At the end of 1725, while attending a social gathering in Paris, Voltaire believed that he had been insulted by a nobleman, the chevalier de Rohan. Not able to hold his sharp tongue, Voltaire challenged the chevalier to a duel; Rohan declined. Eighteenth century French justice, weighted entirely on the side of privilege and nobility, did not wince when the bourgeois Voltaire was later soundly beaten by Rohan's lackeys.

It was Voltaire who remained confined to the Bastille for two weeks. Upon his release, and at his own request, he departed immediately for England for three years. Voltaire had received a political lesson that he would not soon forget. The old regime could not, however, have chosen a more energetic, intelligent, and prolific enemy with which to cross sword with pen.

In 1726, Voltaire left France known as a gifted poet and playwright. Three years later he returned, one of the foremost writers and thinkers of his time. Literature and patronage had brought him wealth and many friends in England—the Walpoles, First Viscount Bolingbroke, Sarah Marlborough, and Alexander Pope. Voltaire had also come into contact with English institutions, Parliament, commerce, religion, science, and literature (notably William Shakespeare). All of this was to have a profound influence in forming the philosopher who would champion the cause of moderation and tolerance to the rest of the world. Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733; *Lettres philosophiques*, 1734) captures the atmosphere of these years and the opinion of the English about their own customs and institutions. While in England, he had also worked on his play *Brutus* (pr. 1730, pb. 1731; English translation, 1761) and on *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731; *The History of Charles XII*, 1732).

Voltaire returned to France with an even deeper conviction and clearer vision of his own intellectual place among those who would question religious authority and social injustice. His plays *Ériphyle* (pr. 1732, pb. 1779) and *Zaïre* (pr. 1732, pb. 1733; English translation, 1736) were acted on the stage, the latter with much success. In *Le Temple du goût* (1733; *The Temple of Taste*, 1734) Voltaire praised progress and wrote a biting satire of his literary contemporary, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The following year, *Letters Concerning the English Nation* was condemned by the French censor; all copies were seized, and a warrant was issued against the author. Voltaire took refuge in the independent duchy of Lorraine with Mme Émilie du Châtelet (well known in the eighteenth century for her scientific ability) in her famous château of Cirey. There, Voltaire and Mme du Châtelet lived a somewhat idyllic existence, often receiving important guests and conducting their own scientific experiments in Mme du Châtelet's well-equipped laboratory. Voltaire gave his time to the writing of social history, composing much of his great study of universal history, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756, 1763; *The General History and State of Europe*, 1754, 1759), and *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751; *The Age of Louis XIV*, 1752).

During his long sojourn at Cirey, two important plays were completed, *Mahomet* (pr., pb. 1742; *Ma-*

*homet the Prophet*, 1744) and *Mérope* (pr. 1743, pb. 1744; English translation, 1744, 1749), along with his philosophical tale *Zadig: Ou, La Destinée, Histoire orientale* (1748; originally as *Memnon: Histoire orientale*, 1747; *Zadig: Or, The Book of Fate*, 1749). Voltaire and Mme du Châtelet took full advantage of the sizable fortune that the former had accumulated (through both shrewd investments and literary publications) by holding private performances in their own theater and enjoying all the other luxuries that the eighteenth century had to offer.

With the sudden death of Mme du Châtelet in September, 1749, a grief-stricken Voltaire accepted an invitation by Frederick the Great of Prussia to visit Berlin even though the relationship between the two men had become strained. For some time before Mme du Châtelet's death, Voltaire had regained favor with the French government, becoming historian to Louis XV in 1745, and had again attempted to reside in Paris. He simply, however, could not be comfortable in a city where he still felt threatened by those who reigned. Thus, on June 15, 1751, he left Paris for Berlin and the princely court of Frederick.

Frederick had wooed Voltaire to his palace in hopes of presiding over lofty and philosophical discussions on political and social theories. For a time, both great men, if not always in agreement, seemed to have tolerated one another. As always, Voltaire's pen moved lightly across blank pages, finishing such well-known works as his tale *Le Micromégas* (1752; *Micromegas*, 1753). Yet, in spite of Frederick's generosity toward Voltaire and the latter's privileged place at the monarch's table, it was quite impossible for the two temperamental men to get along. The break between them was bitter, and again Voltaire was forced to depart hastily.

His first residence was near Geneva, Switzerland, in a country house he named Les Délices. His *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756; *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake*, 1764) was published during this period. Though having a comfortable home, Voltaire sought to acquire something even more grand; he did this by his purchase of the nearby château Ferney. Henceforth, he became known as the patriarch of Ferney. It was there that the "enlightened lord," surrounded by his niece (Mlle Denis), friends, and villagers, would pass the last years of his life. Voltaire, now driven more than ever by an intense will to create and participate in

every aspect of daily life surrounding the château of Ferney, wrote his philosophical tales *Candide: Ou, L'Optimisme* (1759; *Candide: Or, All for the Best*, 1759; also as *Candide: Or, The Optimist*, 1762, and *Candide: Or, Optimism*, 1947) and *L'Ingénu* (1767; *The Pupil of Nature*, 1771; also as *Ingenious*, 1961), his philosophical pieces *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763; *A Treatise on Religious Toleration*, 1764) and *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764; *A Philosophical Dictionary for the Pocket*, 1765; also as *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1945). While engaging in correspondence with almost all the principal literary and political figures of his day, he found time to build a watch factory, a stocking factory, and a tannery. Nor did he hesitate to come to the defense of citizens whose rights had not been respected.

Voltaire's final triumph came, ironically, in Paris—the city that had so often rejected him. In Paris, the French Academy and all Parisian society received him with much fanfare and rejoicing. He attended several Academy meetings (on one occasion embracing Benjamin Franklin), went to the premiere of his play *Irène* (pr. 1778, pb. 1779) on March 16, 1778, and then, exhausted by fatigue, emotion, and stimulation, died in Paris at the age of eighty-three on May 30, 1778. He had returned to the city to receive his laurels and, eventually, to be buried among other French heroes in the Panthéon.

## ANALYSIS

Very early in his life, Voltaire gained a reputation as the outstanding poet and playwright of his time. Yet although his poetry and plays earned for him fame and considerable sums of money, most are now seldom read or performed. *Henriade*, his one serious epic poem, is considered heavy reading. Some of Voltaire's poetry, however—especially pieces such as *Le Mondain* (1736; *The Man of the World*, 1764) and *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake*—has survived the test of time. His best poetry presents his philosophical ideas in the critical, often satirical, and epigrammatic style that is so characteristic of almost all of his writing. *The Man of the World* and *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake* were vehicles for Voltaire's ideas—ideas that summarized the principal intellectual currents of the eighteenth century, the age of the Enlightenment.

Voltaire held firmly to the idea that reason, human intelligence, was the cure for all ills. He em-

ployed reason as a weapon in his attack against the social and political abuses of the old regime, as well as its religious intolerance. In *The Man of the World*, he stressed the importance of economic progress and the right of individuals to enjoy the luxuries and pleasures that modern society had begun to produce. In *Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake*, written just after the terrible earthquake (1755) in Lisbon, Portugal, which killed some thirty thousand people, Voltaire questioned the philosophical optimism of the famous German thinker Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and the English poet and essayist Alexander Pope. He soundly rejected the notion that “all is well” here on earth and that one should accept Divine benevolence as an explanation for all that befalls humans.

Voltaire's concern for the individual's place on earth, the role that humans play in making their own history, was also apparent in the approach that he took in writing *The Age of Louis XIV* and *The General History and State of Europe*. In both these works, Voltaire broke new ground in the serious writing of social history. He very carefully documented his many volumes, often using unedited texts or securing eyewitness accounts. Even today, his *The Age of Louis XIV* is considered an interesting history of the French king.

From one of Voltaire's earlier works, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, to one of his later works, the *Philosophical Dictionary*, he continued to define and spread far and wide his ideas on liberty, politics, religion, and literature. His *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, the principal literary result of Voltaire's three-year stay in England, had a profound influence when first published on the Continent. “The first bomb launched against the old regime” is the way the well-known French literary historian Gustave Lanson summarized the impact that piece had on France. In much the same style as that of a modern journalist, Voltaire presented ideas and information on English society in clear, direct, and often cutting prose. Readers of his day had little difficulty in understanding that Voltaire was drawing direct comparisons—always to the detriment of the old regime—between the societies of England and France.

While living in England, he wrote especially on the religious and political liberties enjoyed by English citizens. In short “letters,” published in his book *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, he de-



scribed the many religious sects (Quakers, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Unitarians, for example) that tolerated one another and avoided religious persecution. In another letter, this one on the English Parliament, Voltaire underscored the limitations that English government placed on its monarchy; the same restrictions on kings did not exist on the Continent, and Voltaire made a point to highlight the differences in the two political systems. The last letter of the volume, and also the most controversial of its time, was an attack on the religious pessimism of the Jansenist writer Blaise Pascal. Voltaire, concerned with worldly pleasures, refused to accept Pascal's position that humans were fundamentally mean and condemned to be unhappy while on earth.

These themes are continued and elaborated upon in the *Philosophical Dictionary*. Short, caustic, satirical entries titled "tolerance," "torture," and "tyranny" in the *Philosophical Dictionary* are typical in style and content of so much of Voltaire's writings. In these pieces, Voltaire denounces the folly of humanity's intolerance, the despotism of unlimited political powers, and the excesses of religious fervor. The image that finally emerges in these works is that of a mature and measured writer, a writer who has completely mastered his craft. Also appearing in these works is the definition most widely applied to the term "humanist." Voltaire, perhaps more than any other modern Western writer, defined and summarized European humanism and human emergence from the age of despotic religious and political authority. His impious expression *Écraser l'infâme* (to crush the infamous) became one of the slogans of the eighteenth century. It was not so much directed against religion or even the Church of Rome as against those people (enemies of Voltaire) who used religion to justify literary censorship and their own misuse of authority.

The themes of social justice, religious tolerance, and the acceptance of the relative nature of an imperfect world were the central subjects of Voltaire's philosophical tales. Even though he expressed disdain for novels or short stories as a genre, it is these works that are most often read today. Beginning with *Zadig*, he finished some twenty-five philosophical tales. As with all of his tales, *Zadig* was meant to be entertaining without any regard for verisimilitude or the likelihood that so many adventures, or

misadventures, could really befall his heroes and heroines. Voltaire never missed the chance to impart a message or to use literary entertainment as a means of propaganda. *Zadig*, the hero of the tale, tries in vain to understand rationally why some humans are happy and others are not. In the end, having become ruler of oriental Babylon, he opts to reign wisely in his own kingdom in order to establish peace for his subjects. *Zadig* (unlike the French monarchy) became the enlightened sovereign, giving his people abundance and glory.

The tale *Micromegas* was written while Voltaire was at the château of Cirey with Mme du Châtelet, and her scientific influence on Voltaire was evident. *Micromegas*, an intergalactic traveler, has more than one brush with the principal scientific theories of the age. Voltaire took the opportunity to ridicule the prestigious French Academy of Sciences for still adhering to Cartesian astronomy (named after René Descartes, the French philosopher and mathematician) and ignoring the explanations posited by Sir Isaac Newton (the English scientist, mathematician, and philosopher). Ridicule and exaggeration were at once part of Voltaire's style and philosophical message. Exaggeration in *Micromegas* took the form of actual physical size: While visiting different planets of the universe, *Micromegas* is alternately viewed as a giant and a lilliputian. Voltaire meant to underscore the importance of maintaining an open mind and of avoiding a slavish devotion to one's own perspective.

*Candide*, the most widely known of all Voltaire's works, is the philosophical tale of young *Candide*'s fall from paradise (the château Thunder-ten-tronckh) and of his sojourns from Europe to Latin America and finally to Constantinople. Voltaire had recently arrived at his last home, the château of Ferney, and he was still shocked by the number of lives that had been lost in the huge 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. *Candide* became his angriest cry against those who would explain away both natural and human-made disasters by appealing to Providence. Voltaire's prose was never more sarcastic and ironic in its condemnation of war, dogmatism, and intolerance than in this tale, which takes its readers from the torture chambers of the Portuguese inquisition to the golden streets of Eldorado and, finally, to the simple garden cultivated by *Candide* and his beloved Cunegonde.

## ZADIG

**First published:** *Zadig: Ou, La Destinée, Histoire orientale*, 1748 (originally published as *Memnon: Historie orientale*, 1747; English translation, 1749)

**Type of work:** Philosophical tale

*Zadig, a wise and just man, seeks the definition of happiness in a chaotic and capricious world.*

*Zadig: Or, The Book of Fate*, Voltaire's first published philosophical tale, was written at a time when the author was finally receiving official recognition for his many literary accomplishments. In 1745, Monsieur Arouet de Voltaire received a court appointment from the king of France, Louis XV. As royal historiographer and later ordinary gentleman of the king's bedchamber, Voltaire moved easily through the long galleries of the royal palace of Versailles. A close look at courtly pettiness, intrigues, and plotting served only to reinforce Voltaire's already low estimation of palace royalty and bootlicking government officials. This time was also the period when Voltaire's long love affair with Mme de Châtelet was ending. She had chosen a younger man over him, and for a time Voltaire was in a jealous rage.

*Zadig*, a tale set in eighteenth century Persia, reflects both the personal circumstances of Voltaire and the more profound philosophical questions concerning the nature of free will and happiness. Voltaire asks the same question on almost every page of the story: Can an honest and wise person lead a happy life in a world filled with liars, scoundrels, and cheats? In a story with a very thin plot, the reader follows the intelligent and kind *Zadig* through his travels among dishonest, deceitful, and cruel people who attempt to do him harm at every turn. First married to one of the most noble, desirable, and beautiful women of all Babylon, *Zadig*, to his great dismay, learns that his wife is unfaithful. Having been disappointed by an aristocratic woman, a woman from the court, he next turns to a woman chosen among the people. Again he has no luck: She also proves to be lacking in true love for *Zadig*.

Though a person of bourgeois origin, *Zadig* so

distinguishes himself for his intelligence among the citizens of Babylon that he comes to the notice of the king and queen. *Zadig's* name is mentioned as one of the persons deserving of a prize that King Moabdar intends to give to his subject who has performed the most generous action during the year. With no attempt at disguising his ironic allusion to life in the French royal court of the eighteenth century, Voltaire has King Moabdar grant the most wonderful prize in all Asia (a golden goblet studded with precious stones) to *Zadig*, because he is the only one who has not spoken ill of a disgraced government minister who had incurred the king's wrath.

*Zadig*, in complete favor with King Moabdar and Queen Astarte, assumes the heavy responsibilities of prime minister. His every act at court demonstrates the subtlety of his genius and the goodness of his soul. Ogled by women and praised by all in the kingdom for his fairness in settling long-standing disputes, *Zadig* appears to enjoy all the good fortune that fate could possibly bestow on him. He even succeeds in arranging a truce between two religious sects that have quarreled for fifteen hundred years over which foot—left or right—one should first use to enter the holy temples.

In spite of all the rewards and praise *Zadig* receives as prime minister, he continues to reflect upon the precariousness of his own good fortune and the tricks that life has played on him in the past. As prime minister, *Zadig* believes the laws of Persia must be applied evenly to protect the innocent. Still, these laws are not able to quell the fanaticism and ridiculous quarrels that seem to presage the fall of Babylon. As if to underscore the validity of *Zadig's* personal and political fears, Voltaire has *Zadig* fall hopelessly in love with the wife of the jealous king, the beautiful and sensuous Queen Astarte. Then, because of war and competing factions within the country, all Persia is thrown into social and economic chaos. The reader of Voltaire's tale cannot miss the striking similarities, first between Voltaire's own romantic adventures and those of *Zadig*, and then between France's dismal political condition and that of Persia. Voltaire, of course, makes little attempt at accurately describing the Middle East; his purpose instead is to explore the human condition, the questions of human freedom and determination, and to attack the

political stupidities and excesses of his own country, France.

The wise and just Zadig is forced to flee for his life from Babylon. He seeks asylum in Egypt. During his flight, he reflects upon humankind: "He pictured men as they really are, insects devouring each other on a little patch of mud." Though he remains a champion of light and reason, he encounters only brutality and prospering scoundrels on his voyage. After rescuing a woman from a savage beating by her husband, he is condemned to be sold as a slave. On another occasion, he persuades the women of Arabia that there is no reason to practice the custom of burning themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres; for this, he incurs the enduring wrath of the priests, who collect the women's jewelry from the ashes. Wherever he travels—from Egypt to Arabia to the Isle of Serendib and back to Persia—Zadig gives wise and excellent counsel and saves women, men, and even kingdoms from disaster. He, however, can neither find personal happiness (he still yearns for the beautiful Astarte) nor understand why dishonest and corrupt people appear to prosper. The ways of Providence remain a deep and disheartening mystery to him.

While spending time with a prosperous brigand chief, Zadig learns that King Moabdar has been killed and that confusion reigns in Babylon. Arbogad, the brigand, repeats to Zadig that he (Arbogad) is the happiest of men, and he exhorts Zadig to follow his example. Zadig declines the offer to associate himself with one of the richest thieves of the East. He leaves the robber's castle, plunged more deeply than ever in his mournful reflections about the sadness of life. He is grief-stricken to think that Astarte may have perished in the riots of Babylon.

On the road back to Babylon, Zadig sees a lady on the bank of a little stream. As he approaches, he notices that she is tracing, with a small stick, a name in the fine sand. To his astonishment, the name he reads is his own: Zadig. The lady is Astarte herself, the woman whom he adores and for whom he has returned to Babylon. Zadig, filled with joy, throws

himself at her feet asking, "Can it be true? Immortal powers that preside over the destinies of frail mortals, do you give me back Astarte?" Chance has reunited the two lovers. Both recount their misadventures, and Zadig tells Astarte by what accident he happened to be walking along the banks of the little stream.

Although together again, Zadig and Astarte must yet undergo a number of trials and adventures before finally becoming the monarchs of Babylon. Zadig is obliged to participate in a medieval joust and to solve a number of riddles proposed by the Magi of the city. Before taking part in the knightly tournament, however, Zadig happens upon a hermit who speaks to him of fate, justice, and ethics and then proceeds to burn a home and murder a young man. The hermit fantastically transforms himself into the angel Jesrad and tells an astonished and angered Zadig that all on earth is meant to be and that events transpire as they must; what appears to be chance is not, and Zadig should go on his way to Babylon.

Voltaire ends his tale in both an ambiguous and a positive fashion: Zadig, as a mere human, cannot hope to understand why Providence acts in certain ways. Zadig could not know that a treasure is buried under the burned home or that the young man, if allowed to live, would kill his aunt in a year's time and Zadig in two. In his story, Voltaire leaves unanswered the recurrent metaphysical questions asked by Zadig, questions about the nature of free will and the existence of evil in a universe created by a supreme Being. In an obvious optimistic conclusion to his tale, however, Voltaire describes the just Zadig and the intelligent and beautiful Astarte presiding over the peaceful and bountiful kingdom of Persia. In his philosophical tale *Candide* (1759), written some twelve years later, both Voltaire's narrative tone (in *Zadig* only mildly satirical for Voltaire) and his views on metaphysical optimism and Providence would change dramatically. From an enlightened kingdom in Persia to the small garden plot of *Candide*, the journey is long and discouraging.

## CANDIDE

**First published:** *Candide: Ou, L'Optimisme*, 1759 (English translation, 1759)

**Type of work:** Philosophical tale

*Through a long series of misadventures and catastrophes, Candide searches for his beloved Cunegonde.*

*Candide: Or, All for the Best* is Voltaire's most widely known work and one of the most widely read pieces of literature written in the French language. Voltaire invented the philosophical tale as a means to convey his own ideas and, at the same time, entertain his readers with satirical wit and ironic innuendo. Candide (the name refers to purity and frankness) is the tale's main character. He embodies the philosophical idea of optimism that Voltaire intends to oppose.

As the story begins, Candide is forced to leave Wespshalia because he has been caught kissing the baron's daughter, the beautiful Cunegonde. Candide is driven from the splendid castle of the Baron Thunder-ten-tronckh, where Doctor Pangloss has been Candide's tutor and has taught him that all is well in this "best of all possible worlds." Little time passes before the naïve Candide finds himself conscripted into the Bulgarian army. As a soldier, he witnesses firsthand the terrible atrocities of war. Escaping to Holland, he miraculously encounters Pangloss, who is himself in a pitiful physical state. From the ever-optimistic philosopher, Candide learns that his former home in Germany has been burned to the ground and that all of those inside have been massacred by the advancing Bulgarian army.

Voltaire continues to narrate his story with a cascade of adventures. He nonetheless keeps close to the principal reason for telling his tale: discrediting the metaphysical idea that all that happens on earth has been determined by Providence and therefore must be judged as being for the good of humankind. Pangloss, who has lost part of his nose and one eye to syphilis, continues to insist that all is going well in spite of overwhelming adversity. Candide and Pangloss travel to Lisbon, where they arrive just in time to experience the famous earthquake of 1755. Not only are they caught in Portugal

during this natural disaster, but they also become embroiled in the Inquisition. Only by the reappearance and intervention of Cunegonde is Candide saved (Pangloss is a presumed victim of the Inquisition). In rescuing Cunegonde, however, Candide must kill an Israelite and the Grand Inquisitor.

Candide, Cunegonde, and an old woman (the daughter of Pope Urban X) flee to South America. Even there, they are tracked by the agents of the Inquisition; Candide and Cunegonde must separate or risk being burned at the stake. Candide takes refuge in Paraguay, the kingdom of the Jesuits, where "Los Padres have everything and the people have nothing." Candide comes upon Cunegonde's brother among the Jesuit leaders. They quarrel because Candide, in spite of his humble origins, insists on marrying the young baron's sister. Candide wounds him, apparently mortally, and again takes flight with his valet and companion Cacambo.

Throughout all the journeys of Candide, who next discovers Eldorado (the city of gold and precious jewels), Voltaire delights in attacking the excesses of humankind—from the brutality of wars to the ignoble institution of the Inquisition. In order to emphasize tolerance and moderation, Voltaire presents characters that are immediately identified as representing extreme philosophical positions: Pangloss (who reappears at the end of the story in Constantinople) holds tenaciously to an absurd optimism, and Martin (Candide's companion on his trip back to Europe and on to Constantinople) affirms with equal stubbornness that there is little virtue and happiness in a world filled with evil.

While in Venice, Candide learns that his once-beautiful Cunegonde is now washing dishes on a riverbank for a prince in Turkey. From Cacambo, he hears that Cunegonde has even grown ugly and ill-tempered. Still, being an honorable man, Candide intends to marry Mlle Cunegonde, and he sets off immediately for the Turkish city. While en route, he finds Pangloss and Cunegonde's brother (resuscitated) among the galley slaves on the Turk-



ish boat. Candide still possesses some of the diamonds that he carried away from Eldorado and is able to buy his friends' freedom. As chance would have it, all the characters of this tale end up living together on a small vegetable farm somewhere on the outskirts of Constantinople. Candide's money is exhausted, Cunegonde grows more unendurable, Cacambo curses his fate as a vegetable seller, Pangloss despairs because he is not teaching in a good German university, and Martin persists in seeing humankind caught in either the throes of distress or the doldrums of lethargy. Candide does not agree, but he no longer asserts anything. Instead of arguing metaphysical and moral questions, he heeds the advice of an old man who tells him, "work keeps at bay three great evils: boredom, vice and need." From this lesson, Candide concludes "that we should cultivate our gardens." In the end, the little farm yields well, and all eat candied citrons and pistachios. Voltaire ends the tale, on a

note of neither pessimism nor optimism, with his characters working and living in peace together.

## SUMMARY

The philosophical tales of Voltaire stand as a tribute to both Voltaire's ability as a writer and storyteller and his genius in summarizing the principal philosophical and political questions of the eighteenth century. After more than two hundred years, *Zadig* and *Candide* remain entertaining pieces of reading because of their author's sardonic intelligence and crystalline prose. In many respects, Voltaire remains today what he was for his own century: a popularizer and disseminator of ideas. The Voltairean spirit, with its quick and bright outbursts of wit, continues to attack the modern scourges of intolerance, fanaticism, and injustice.

James Gaasch

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What were the most important things that Voltaire learned in England?
- Is the happy ending of *Zadig*, based on intellectual sluggishness—the failure to pursue answers to metaphysical questions—an ironical one?
- What was Voltaire's purpose in writing *The Age of Louis XIV*?
- How does Voltaire account for Candide's optimism? Was it primarily a matter of the education he received?
- What does Voltaire signify by Candide's conclusion "that we should cultivate our gardens"?
- Why was Voltaire's thought attacked by followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau?

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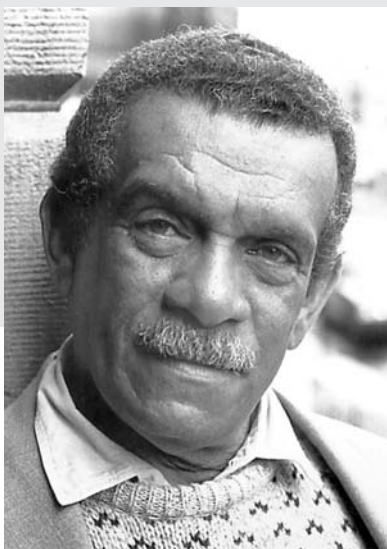
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Virginia Shendler

## DEREK WALCOTT

**Born:** Castries, St. Lucia, West Indies  
January 23, 1930

*Walcott is widely regarded as not only the finest Caribbean poet but also one of the finest English-language poets of his generation.*

### BIOGRAPHY

On January 23, 1930, Derek Alton Walcott and his twin brother, Roderick Alton Walcott, were born to Warwick and Alix Walcott on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, in the West Indies. In addition to his twin brother, he had an older sister, Pamela. Walcott was born into a Methodist family while most of his neighbors were Catholic, the legacy of long French colonial rule. In April, 1931, Walcott's father, clerk of the First District Court, died, leaving Alix Walcott, the headmistress of the Methodist Infant Day School, to rear the children. With two white grandfathers and his family's economic and religious status, Walcott was caught between races and classes.

Four influences shaped his aesthetic growth: his formal English education, his talent as a painter, the life of the island itself, and his religious background. His colonial education was thorough, including Greek and Latin and the essential European masterpieces. Following his father's talents, Walcott was as interested in painting as in literature. His mentor, the local painter Harry Simmons, recognized that Walcott's talents as a writer surpassed his talents as a painter and guided him through the transition from painting to poetry. His poems are replete with the language and actions of fishers and peasants, as well as the acute observations of the natural world. His religious back-

ground also served to train him for the craft of poetry, and, as he asserts in an interview in *Paris Review*, "I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation."

When Walcott was fourteen, his first poem was published in a newspaper. Four years later, in 1948, he sold his privately printed *Twenty-five Poems* (1948) on the streets to repay his mother, who had provided for printing costs. In 1950, his first significant play, *Henri Christophe: A Chronicle* (pr., pb. 1950), was produced by the St. Lucia Arts Guild. The play's subject was Henri Christophe, who, with Toussaint-Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, led the only successful slave revolt in the Caribbean, resulting in the creation of the nation of Haiti. Also in 1950, Walcott, on a British Colonial Development Scholarship, left for the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. In 1951, his collection *Poems* was published. After receiving his B.A. in 1953, he moved to Trinidad, where he worked as a book reviewer, journalist, and art critic while continuing his work as a playwright and poet. In 1954, Walcott's play *The Sea at Dauphin* (pr., pb. 1954) was produced. Also that year, he married Faye Althea Moston; the couple divorced in 1959. In 1957, he received a Rockefeller Fellowship, which took him in 1958 to New York City, where *Drums and Colours* (pr. 1958, pb. 1961) was performed for the First Parliament of the West Indies.

In 1959, Walcott founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, and his play *Malcochon: Or, Six in the Rain* (pr. 1959, pb. 1970) was produced. The year after receiving the Guinness Award for Poetry in 1961, Walcott's collection *In a Green Night: Poems, 1948-1960* (1962) was published, bringing him in-

ternational attention. In 1962, he married Margaret Maillard. The 1960's saw the publication of *Selected Poems* (1964), *The Castaway, and Other Poems* (1965), and *The Gulf, and Other Poems* (1969). In each of these volumes, Walcott's poetry continues to move from the more stilted and conventional language of *In a Green Night* to such distinct lyrics as "Coral," "The Swamp," "The Gulf," and "Crusoe's Journal." These poems show Walcott not controlled by technique but controlling technique to fully express his vision.

By the mid-1960's, Walcott had become a frequent traveler to North America to oversee the production of his plays and to teach. His most important play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (pr. 1967, pb. 1970), premiered in Toronto in 1967; it was awarded an Obie in 1971. Its central character, Makak, is a figure who not only is repressed by a slave society but who also expresses the primal connections between the peasant or folk culture and the landscape.

Walcott's book-length autobiographical poem, *Another Life* (1973, expanded, 2004), demonstrates how he connects his life, his art, and the ocean. Divided into twenty-three chapters, the poem is a retrospective view of his process of becoming an artist, his growing political awareness and disenchantment, the loss of innocence, and the ever presence of the sea. In 1976, *Sea Grapes* was published, followed three years later by *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979). In these volumes of poetry, his understanding of the Caribbean is the most lyrical. With his 1981 collection of poems, *The Fortunate Traveller*, his sense of the division between North America and the Caribbean, of being displaced and unempowered because of his rootlessness, creates an ironic cast to his identity as a "fortunate traveller."

Walcott's training as a painter merges with his 1984 collection of poems, *Midsummer*. In this fifty-four poem sequence, Walcott traces a year from summer to summer. His *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* appeared in 1986, followed in the next year by *The Arkansas Testament* (1987). This collection, like *The Fortunate Traveller*, is divided between the Caribbean and elsewhere; as in that earlier volume, Walcott explores his identity as an outsider, as well as the conditions of a collapsing empire. Walcott's second book-length poem, *Omeros*, was published in 1990. The title, the Greek name for Homer, invokes the web of connections with which Walcott

has worked throughout his career. It overlays a variety of personas and histories, most centrally Achilles, a fisherman who sets out on a quest for self-identity. Through Achilles, various layers of history are enfolded, including classical, Caribbean, and literary; in him also exists the history of the exile, the one who must test boundaries in order to establish identity. Achilles is prefigured in Walcott's earlier work, particularly in the persona of Shabine in "The Schooner *Flight*" (from *The Star-Apple Kingdom*) and the autobiographical voice in *Another Life*.

The death of his twin brother in 2000 caused Walcott to muse on his mortality and specifically his literary legacy in the collection *The Prodigal* (2004). Much like *Midsummer* and *The Fortunate Traveller*, *The Prodigal* records a physical journey across Europe and America colored by the knowledge of these place's history and literature. Walcott insists that it is the poet's task and his privilege to give place to history but remains fearful of that burden.

Some of Walcott's other plays include *The Charlatan* (pr. 1974), *O Babylon!* (pr. 1976, pb. 1978), *Remembrance* (pr. 1977, pb. 1980), *The Isle Is Full of Noises* (pr. 1982), and *Beef, No Chicken* (pr. 1981, pb. 1986). His interest in drama informs his poetry. Many of his poems are constructed in the form of a dramatic monologue, where the poem's voice is a fully conceived dramatic persona. In 1981, Walcott received the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship and in 1988, the Queen's Medal for Poetry. In 1992, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for "a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multi-cultural commitment." In 2008, he continued to divide his time between Boston, teaching at Boston University, St. Lucia, and Trinidad.

## ANALYSIS

The Russian-born poet Joseph Brodsky has written, in regard to Walcott's work, that "Poets' real biographies are like those of birds, almost identical—their real data are in the way they sound. A poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his meters, rhymes and metaphors." If this is true, then Walcott's biography is indeed a rich and varied one, for he is a master of metaphor, image, meter, and rhyme. Walcott's technical abilities are not the source of his power as a poet; rather, his power lies

in the full realization of language in its historic, cathartic, and revelatory condition. Walcott's major themes are time, ocean, and language. Each of these is linked to the others in inextricable ways. Time implies not only history but also the measured beat of poetry. That leads to language, which of course is history, memory, poetry, and creation. The ocean throughout Walcott's work provides life and sustenance; the ocean is also history, for that is what both Shabine of "The Schooner *Flight*" and Achille of *Omeros* discover in their oceanic quests. The ocean holds memory and life; as such, it is also language.

All of these concerns hinge on identity. In "Names," from his collection *Sea Grapes*, Walcott opens with, "My race began as the sea began,/ with no nouns and with no horizon." Walcott consistently investigates his status as not only a colonial but also a colonial of African descent. His race—that hybrid that Shabine defines as, "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,/ and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation"—is new, and thus the poet occupies the position of Adam or Orpheus. The poet's excitement at this "edenic" possibility, what he often calls the "elemental" or the "numinous" power of naming, is tempered by the psychological reverberations certain to afflict humans struggling to establish an identity.

Also in "Names," Walcott alludes to the Middle Passage, that nightmarish journey across the Atlantic Ocean and the culminating dispersal of the slave auctions. This history informs "Names" and much of Walcott's work. One's name and one's family were discarded and new names were imposed. Walcott finds in his contemporary subjects a deep historical sense of exile, where one is driven into the solitariness of the self.

In his early poem "A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott poses the question of how to choose between his African heritage and the language of his poetry, colonial history, and tradition. Furthermore, he asks how he could live if he did turn his back on Africa. These questions reveal the difficult balance that he faces as a poet, who, by circumstance, belongs to differing and exclusive traditions. If the poem "Names" poses the question of self-identity, "A Far Cry from Africa" questions the identity of the historical self. To live in the world, Walcott argues, a poet must address the conditions of his or her history. This mandate is especially true

for the colonial who is defined by so many disparate histories.

Walcott continually attempts this process through his use of metaphors and images of the natural world. This persistent necessity to name and to provide metaphors for phenomena, and therefore extend the process of naming by drawing similarity out of difference, is found throughout Walcott's work. Metaphor attempts to uncover and generate the truth or essence about phenomena. Metaphor works against the force of oblivion. The terms that colonial powers use to describe the people and ecology of their colonies—marginal, unimportant, provisional—indicate the force of oblivion against which Walcott struggles. By persistently drawing his Antillean archipelago into a metaphoric relationship with the Greek archipelago and all the implied foundations of Western culture, Walcott is able to provide a history and importance to the Antillean world. He is, however, distrustful of the postcolonial movement and especially the term *diaspora* often used to describe similar literary efforts. He prefers the more local metaphors specific to the Caribbean.

Walcott's poetry reflects the lushness of his childhood landscapes, as in these lines from *Another Life*, "growths hidden in green darkness, forests/ of history thickening with amnesia." Yet what his profoundly painterly eye realizes is the misunderstanding of this tropic lushness. The northern, metropolitan vision is portrayed by him as creating stereotypes of the Caribbean world and its people: The Caribbean becomes a tourist's Eden, a place filled with joy, where tragedy seems impossible, stereotypes that deny identity to the transplanted natives. Walcott's poetry reflects the cycle that he believes exists between landscape, language, and history. Cultures arise from their settings. As they become civilized, they require priests and poets to name those settings and transform them into religious or metaphorical cultural values. However, a mature civilization, whether for better or worse, will transcend both the setting and the metaphor. Walcott transforms his European tradition and education into that of the reality of his geography, as in the poem's concluding lines, "Then, in the door light: not Nike loosening her sandal,/ but a girl slapping sand from her foot, one hand on the frame." In this Caribbean world of sea and light and extraordinary lushness counterbalanced by



centuries of poverty, Walcott recognizes the potential—or rather, the beginnings—of a new world, aware that his words might one day become obsolete to the people and the land he loves.

### “CODICIL”

**First published:** 1965 (collected in *The Castaway, and Other Poems*, 1965)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Walcott argues that language and life are inextricable; to change one, the other must change.*

“Codicil,” which appeared in his 1965 collection *The Castaway, and Other Poems*, is an autobiographical poem of thirty lines composed in varied stanzaic forms. The poem is a meditation on identity. Its title, referring to an addendum to a will, implies an awareness of mortality; thus, the poet takes account of himself. The poem’s tone is both angry, reflecting some of his earlier work, such as “A Far Cry from Africa,” and exhausted or dispirited, forecasting the mood of many of his poems in *The Fortunate Traveller* and *The Arkansas Testament*. Walcott was a journalist during the early 1960’s, and this poem reflects the sense of frustration that most writers feel when faced with dividing their language into two styles, “one a hack’s hired prose, I earn/ my exile.” The poet’s exile is his exile from poetry. Later, this exile will become a self-imposed exile from the Caribbean.

The poet is weary, exhausted by the world’s cares and demands, as well as his past failures. The poet states in the seventh line that, “To change your language you must change your life.” The most significant line of the poem, this line serves to challenge his position and to reveal the direct relationship between one’s language and the quality of one’s life. The growth of a poet’s voice demands a continual change and self-examination of one’s language and life. The line implies that one constitutes his or her world through language: Language defines reality.

The poem continues with images of inescapability—“Waves tire of horizon and return”—and physical decay. On this moonlit beach in Tobago,

the poet considers that once he thought love for the country was enough. The country is both nation and poetry; in each case, the poet sees nepotism and corruption. Walcott argues that writers, like colonial clerks, “root like dogs/ for scraps of favor” from the masters, particularly the European hierarchy.

The poem shifts from this outwardly directed anger and social critique to a self-critique. Middle-aged and self-critical, the poet literally enacts “Peer Gynt’s riddle,” where, in Henrik Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt* (pb. 1867, pr. 1876; English translation, 1892), Gynt likens the layers of an onion to his own character and finds nothing at the core. The poet scornfully admits that the “hack’s hired prose” has dulled him and that “At heart there’s nothing.” The world’s familiarity has inured the poet to violence. Although the flesh or the body is on fire with anger, the poet no longer fears “that furnace mouth of earth” or “that kiln or ashpit of the sun” or the passage of time, “clouding, unclouding sickle moon.” Although consumed by rage, directed both inwardly and toward the political world, this rage is expressed by indifference. The final line, “All its indifference is a different rage,” suggests nihilism. The only other line that is set apart like this final line, however, formulates the means of change: “To change your language you must change your life.”

### “THE SCHOONER FLIGHT”

**First published:** 1979 (collected in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, 1979)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this long dramatic monologue, Shabine tells of his voyage across the Caribbean and into history, dream, and myth.*

“The Schooner *Flight*” appears in Walcott’s *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979). The poem is perhaps his most celebrated persona poem, as well as one of his most accomplished longer poems. Nearly five hundred lines long, the poem is divided into eleven sections of varying length. The poem’s main speaker and central figure is Shabine, who describes himself in the first section as “just a red nigger who love

the sea, . . . I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,/ and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation." This description fits Walcott, who, although of African descent, is also of English and Dutch ancestry. What Shabine underscores is the complex mix that defines an individual in a colonial society and defines the society itself. Nicknamed by his society, Shabine becomes an Everyman.

In this persona poem, Walcott creates a figure who is compelled to tell his story. In many ways, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a precedent for Walcott's poem. Both are dramatic monologues narrated by one who has ventured into the ocean and has undergone a transforming experience. Coleridge's poem, however, explores the mariner's transgressions against nature, whereas Walcott's Shabine confronts history. Shabine is also an Odysseus. Like the *Odyssey* (c. 725 B.C.E.; English translation, 1614), the poem traces Shabine's journey from island to island in the Caribbean Sea.

The first section, "Adios, Carenage," is rich in image and detail of the island that Shabine leaves. Disgusted with the corrupt postcolonial politics, Shabine leaves on what is a quest of purification. The second section, "Raptures of the Deep," describes Shabine's past as a smuggler double-crossed by his employer, a corrupt official. Shabine then describes in phantasmagorical detail his work as a salvage diver. In the rapturous descriptions of the sea, Shabine reveals the enchantment that the sea has cast over him.

In both sections, Shabine is torn between the sea and his lover, Maria Concepcion. To stay with his lover is to remain confined to the island and not explore the ocean, which is the realm of potentiality and poetic imagination. At the end of the second section, in the throes of the rapture of the deep, Shabine sees God in the form of a harpooned grouper and hears a voice telling him to leave Maria. In the third section, "Shabine Leaves the Republic," Shabine's disgust with the politics of the Caribbean deepens, as does his despair over Maria.

The fourth section, "The *Flight*, Passing Blanchisseuse," is a short but lyrical section describing a beach, "bare of all but light," seen from the schooner; as night approaches, "dark hands start pulling in the seine/ of the dark sea, deep, deep inland." This passage is typical of Walcott's ability to create

metaphors that work on a variety of levels: visual imagery, rhythmic melody, and juxtaposition of disparate phenomena. The image of the night being compared to the work of fishermen pulling in the seine net, itself a metaphor for the sea, creates a brief narrative or myth.

The fifth section, "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage," describes a hallucinatory vision of "a rustling forest of ships/ with sails dry like paper." On the decks of these ghostly ships, he sees all the great admirals and hears the orders shouted to his ghostly counterparts. At the end of this section, he passes the slave ships from a variety of nations and knows that sequestered below their decks are his forebears, who cannot hear his shouts.

The sixth section, "The Sailor Sings Back to the Casuarinas," is an orphic moment in the poem, where Shabine questions the nature of names. That, of course, is a central theme in the poem, beginning with the history of Shabine's own name, the pun on Maria Concepcion's name, and Shabine's rhetorical question upon seeing the slave ships in the fifth section, "Who knows/ who his grandfather is, much less his name?" Looking at the graceful, wind-bent gray pines known variously as cedars, cypresses, and casuarinas, Shabine reflects that "we live like our names and you would have/ to be colonial to know the difference,/ to know the pain of history words contain." Shabine reveals the full irony of such a homily when he quotes, "'if we live like the names our masters please,/ by careful mimicry might become men.'"

"The *Flight* Anchors in Castries Harbor," the seventh section, introduces Shabine as poet. The next section, "Fight with the Crew," depicts the crew mocking Shabine's poetry and his fight to regain possession of his poetry notebook. Again, it is another manifestation of Shabine's struggle to define himself. The ninth section, "Maria Concepcion and the Book of Dreams," continues Shabine's quest; this leg of his journey takes him from St. Lucia to Dominica. The section begins by describing the illusion of progress, which prompts Shabine's historical memories and imagination to fuse in a vision of an escaping Carib running through the tropical forest. The section then turns to a vision of Maria Concepcion's "Book of Dreams," which prophesies an apocalyptic storm. This vision empowers Shabine, who states with almost biblical force, "I shall scatter your lives like a handful of

sand,/ I who have no weapon but poetry and/ the lances of palms and the sea's shining shield!"

The prophesied storm arrives in the tenth section, "Out of the Depths." With the passage of the storm and the ensuing calm comes dispensation. In the eleventh and final section, "After the Storm," Shabine has a vision of Maria marrying the ocean and drifting away. She has been figuratively swept away by the storm. Shabine transforms this loss into a form of spiritual compensation. After that moment, Shabine wants nothing, as he has attained a sense of wholeness or union with nature. The poem asserts a lyrical unity, where voice and creation are one: "Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea."

### "THE FORTUNATE TRAVELLER"

**First published:** 1981 (collected in *The Fortunate Traveller*, 1981)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poem is a meditation on the twentieth century's cataclysmic history.*

"The Fortunate Traveller," the title poem of a volume of Walcott's poetry, is divided into 4 sections and is 208 lines long. Dedicated to the American writer and philosopher Susan Sontag, best known for her analyses of culture, as in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), the poem is in many ways a catalog of the failures of civilization to be humane. The narrator of the poem is indeed the ironic "fortunate traveller," a play on the English satirist Thomas Nashe's picaresque tale, *The Unfortunate Traveller: Or, The Life of Jack Wilton* (1594). Walcott's traveler, like Nashe's, is an emissary between powers. Furthermore, Walcott has created in this persona someone of ambivalence and moral relativity; while able to recognize the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, the narrator is indifferent to the poverty of the Third World. In his indifference, he becomes an immoral fortune seeker and an emissary of famine.

The opening lines of the poem immediately convey the physical and spiritual decay of Europe, which describes Walcott's ambivalence with the industrialized West. The first section describes the

narrator's double-crossing of two officials from an impoverished country. The narrator becomes an incarnation of famine. He carries a briefcase that is likened to "a small coffin." Throughout this section of the poem, images of despoliation occur: A jet is likened to a weevil in a "cloud of flour," and governmental bureaucrats are "roaches/ riddling the state cabinets, entering the dark holes/ of power, carapaced in topcoats." The narrator has no mercy; he goes to Bristol to be paid "Iscariot's salary, patron saint of spies./ I thought, who cares how many million starve?" In the concluding stanza of this section, the narrator sees in the genuflecting officials with whom he has dealt the repetition of previous corrupt orders stretching back historically to the conquest of Florida by Juan Ponce de León and apocalyptically to the locust plagues in the Bible.

In the second section of the poem, the narrator confronts the poverty of a church service in St. Lucia conducted by a frail and disreputable priest. Walcott juxtaposes this image to that of Albert Schweitzer, the medical missionary in Africa, at his harmonium. Walcott then allows the music, beginning with the choristers in St. Lucia and continuing with Schweitzer, to carry "to the pluming chimneys" of the Nazi death camps. The allusion to "lebensraum," or space required for life, refers to the geopolitical theory used by the Nazis to justify their territorial expansion, which implicitly applies to the European and North American control of the Third World. The poem then argues that "the heart of darkness is not Africa" but "the white center of the holocaust." The second section concludes with the argument that, if God is so indifferent to His creation, then one should now write "After Dachau," not *anno Domini*.

The third section continues to develop this morally terrifying character, who argues for keeping the hungry ignorant and deceived by the false promises of religion, so that like lice they will "swarm to the tree of life." The argument concludes that "we cared less for one human face/ than for the scrolls in Alexandria's ashes." That is the "ordinary secret" of inhumanity that the narrator reveals. The narrator sees in European civilization a failure of compassion; he is able to recognize it because of his own moral indifference.

In the final section, the narrator's double-crossing is discovered. The final two stanzas be-

come prophetic and serve to reinforce the poem's epigram from Revelation. The hypocrisy of the industrialized, postcolonial world is inscribed in this prophecy: "the weevil will make a sahara of Kansas,/ the ant shall devour Russia." This poem is one of Walcott's strongest condemnations of the industrialized world powers.

**"I ONCE GAVE MY  
DAUGHTERS, SEPARATELY,  
TWO CONCH SHELLS . . ."**

**First published:** 1984 (collected in  
*Midsummer*; 1984)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This is a lyric meditation on writing,  
continuity, memory, and love.*

This untitled poem is the fiftieth poem in a sequence of fifty-four poems that constitute the midsummer to midsummer movement in the collection *Midsummer* (1984). It invokes Walcott's central themes of language, exile, and art. Yet to these the theme of love must be added. In this poem, as in so many of his other poems, the image of the ocean is primary. In the poem's twenty-three lines, Walcott moves from a memory of two conch shells that he gave to his daughters to the poetry that he wrote when he was the age of his daughter Elizabeth to his mature poetry. The poem then shifts to a memory of his father and the irony of his name. The poem concludes with a layering of movements, each reflecting the others.

As with all the poems in this collection, the poem's lines are long, often containing more than fourteen syllables. Such long lines allow for rumination, the overall tone or mood of this poem. The poet speaks directly to the reader, offering both confession and a sense of thinking aloud. The long lines also suggest an inclusiveness that may approximate prose. Most central, however, is their mnemonic quality.

The poem begins with conch shells "dived from the reef, or sold on the beach": gifts from the sea. In their "wet/ pink palates are the soundless singing of angels." The term "palates" is a homophone

for the painter's palette; thus, Walcott has combined the angelic sound of the sea, part of the mouth that allows for speech and poetry, and painting. He recommences the poem, linking himself with his daughter, not through a gift but through remembering what he did at her age. This memory forces a realization of his distance from youth.

He reflects on his poetry, stating that his poems "aren't linked to any tradition/ like a mossed cairn," but that each poem belongs to the collective memory and unconscious, as well as to the world's collective history. His poems belong to the sea insofar as they are also natural processes. He relinquishes his poems to the sea or the collective memory. Walcott asks of the poems to let him enter them as his "father, who did watercolors,/ entered his work," becoming "one of his shadows,/ wavering and faint in the midsummer sunlight." Walcott asks that his works contain a shadow of his presence, thereby providing a stay against oblivion. He sees his grandfather, who named Walcott's father Warwick, after Warwickshire, inscribing the continuity of the memory of one's origins in a name.

"Ironies are moving," Walcott writes, and then immediately translates that emotion into physical action:

Now, when I rewrite a line,  
or sketch on the fast-drying paper the coconut  
fronds  
that he did so faintly, my daughters' hands move  
in mine.  
Conches move over the sea-floor. I used to move  
my father's grave from the blackened Anglican  
headstones  
in Castries to where I could love both at once—  
the sea and his absence. Youth is stronger than  
fiction.

In these final lines of the poem, Walcott draws together all the strands of the poem's images. Though the poem strikes an elegiac tone, it also seeks an affirmation in the very act of writing. Although the final sentence of the poem suggests *carpe diem*, it should be understood ironically for both youth and youth's sense of immortality passing.

## OMEROS

**First published:** 1990

**Type of work:** Poem

*Through this epic, the poet hopes to heal the wound of history absent a natural remedy for humanity's ambition.*

Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* explores humanity's relationship to history and nature. Both have been corrupted by man's ambition, leaving humanity deeply wounded. The affliction is physical for the St. Lucia fisherman Philoctete, whose ankle has been crippled by a rusty anchor. This is both an allusion to Philoctetes, the title character of Sophocles' play *Philoctētēs* (409 B.C.E.; *Philoctetes*, 1729), and to the shackles worn by African slaves. The wound leaves Philoctete unable to make boats, go fishing, or even cultivate his garden, and so he seeks solace in the white rum of forgetfulness at Ma Kilman's No Pain Café.

The proprietress is described as an African sibyl; that is, a native, tribal medicine woman, as well as the priestess of Apollo who guides Aeneas through the underworld in Vergil's epic poem the *Aeneid* (c. 29-19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553). It is her ability to restore tribal rituals that finally affords Philoctete some relief. That remedy is not available to the British officer Major Plunkett, who retired to the tropical island with his Irish wife Maud. He, too, carries a wound, sustained in the skull during General Bernard Law Montgomery's campaign in Northern Africa, symbolic of his love for the exotic and complicated by imperial guilt and his fear of dying without a legacy. These conflicting emotions lead him to research the island's history rather than celebrate its nature, and so, as his wife dies from cancer, he buries himself in his work.

It is the fate of a blind cripple that the poet fears for the entire modern world. The poet consists of an amalgamation of voices: the blind island native,

Seven Seas; the historical bard Omeros, or Homer; a series of sounds emerging from nature herself; and Derek Walcott. The poet's travels—literary, imagined, and real—to Europe, Africa, and America have left him scarred with the pain of humanity's brutality, a problem he allegorizes in the main plot, which alludes to Homer's epic poem the *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.E.; English translation, 1611). Achille and Hector, former fishermen and partners, are driven mad by their love for the beautiful Helen and their inability to make a decent living at their trade. While Achille dives illegally among the coral reefs, Hector drives a van, work that will prove far more dangerous than the sea. Achille's lingering connection with the ocean permits him to take an imaginary voyage to Africa, much like Dante's sortie through the Inferno in *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802). Achille's new-found tribal identity allows him to mourn Hector's passing, reunite with Helen, and raise the baby that may or may not be his.

The complex numerological divisions of books, chapters, parts, and stanzas allude no less densely to European literary history than the poem's characters, settings, and action, but like the island natives and the passions that drive them, the lush descriptions of flora and fauna and the long, graceful poetic lines are inspired purely by the tropical beauty of St. Lucia and the rhythm of the ocean that cradles her. Thus does Walcott aspire to effect the same healing powers invoked by the natives for a much more diverse but still deeply wounded modern, industrialized, and global audience.

### SUMMARY

Who inherits language and what powers come from that language and the circumstances of its inheritance? Derek Walcott's poetry and drama consistently address and explore this question. His use of image, metaphor, persona, rhyme, and meter are all marked by technical distinction. While the effects may falter in individual poems—metaphors that finally overreach, for example—the demands made upon language to sing are fully present. His themes of exile, language, art, memory, and love necessitate his rigorous brilliance. Finally, his sense of landscape, particularly of the Caribbean and the sea, informs his language.

*James McCorkle; updated by L. Michelle Baker*





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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Derek Walcott often uses the image of a fruit, cut in half, and seamed by its own juices to describe the experience of identity undergone by a Caribbean islander. What elements of this metaphor are so fitting to Caribbean identity? What other metaphors does he employ to a similar effect?
- In what ways does Walcott's poetry seem to be a kind of prayer, as he himself described it?
- What specific images employed by Walcott seem to you to be influenced by his talent as a painter? Which ones seem affected by his playwriting?
- Although Walcott has traveled extensively and lived for long periods of time outside of the Caribbean, he still considers himself a Caribbean poet capable of commenting on the plight of poor Caribbean islanders. Using evidence from his own poetry, decide whether you agree with or oppose his position.
- In what ways do place and identity overlap for specific characters in *Omeros*? In what ways does identity transcend place?
- The fisherman is a common character in Walcott's verse. In what ways is the writing of poetry like the act of fishing? How are they different?

*Derek Walcott*

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## EVELYN WAUGH

**Born:** London, England  
October 28, 1903

**Died:** Combe Florey, near Taunton, Somerset, England  
April 10, 1966

*Waugh, associated early in his career with the “bright young people” of the 1920’s and 1930’s, became the foremost satirist of his day and a principal critic of secular twentieth century society.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Evelyn Arthur St. John Waugh (waw) was born in London, England, on October 28, 1903, the second son of Arthur Waugh, author and managing director of the publishing firm of Chapman and Hall, and Catherine Charlotte Raban. Evelyn Waugh was five years younger than his brother, Alec Raban Waugh, who would also become a professional writer. The boys grew up in the London suburb of Hampstead, with Evelyn feeling very much overshadowed by his gregarious, good-natured, athletic brother. Evelyn’s writings, his correspondence, and anecdotal evidence clearly document a sibling rivalry that existed, on his part, for the rest of his life, while the elder brother appears to have harbored no such feelings whatsoever. After having been acknowledged for many years as a more eminent writer than his brother, Evelyn still bristled when an article suggested that Alec had sold more books than he.

Evelyn’s father and brother had attended Sherborne School, but Alec had been dismissed following a sexual misadventure. He then made matters worse, from the Sherborne point of view, by publishing *The Loom of Youth* (1917), a sensational exposé of public school life. Interestingly, Alec Waugh would go on to write more than forty books but would not duplicate the success of this first novel until the publication of *Island in the Sun*

(1956). At any rate, his explosion onto the literary scene made it impossible for his younger brother to attend Sherborne. Evelyn Waugh attended Lancing College, one of the less fashionable public schools, before going up to the University of Oxford, where he had gained a scholarship to Hertford College.

At Oxford, Waugh became a member of a set of intellectual and aesthetic dandies, several of whom would also have noteworthy literary careers. He dined and drank and enjoyed Oxford society enormously, while reading history in a desultory fashion. As a result, he left the university in 1924 with a modest third-class degree. Waugh tried several vocations before finally turning to the profession of his father and brother. He studied art, to which he was strongly attracted, and cabinetmaking—he would later say that he considered himself a craftsman who made books as another person might make furniture. He taught briefly at two obscure public schools and was profoundly unhappy as a schoolmaster—so unhappy, in fact, that he attempted to drown himself in the ocean. His suicide attempt, however, ended as ludicrously as a scene from one of his novels when he was stung by a jellyfish and forced to return, smarting, to the shore. His ineffective schoolteaching, though, did give him material for his first novel.

In the autumn of 1927, Waugh met and began to court Evelyn Gardner. The two were soon married on the strength of Waugh’s literary prospects. His first two books appeared in 1928. The first, *Rossetti: His Life and Works*, a study of the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter and his circle, was a commercial fail-

ure. The second, *Decline and Fall*, was a madcap novel in the spirit of Voltaire's *Candide: Ou, L'Optimisme* (1759; *Candide: Or, All for the Best*, 1759). It spoofed Oxford, the public schools, and the penal system, which the novel's hero likens to an English public school. The novel pleased both the critics and the public, and Waugh's literary career was launched. His personal life, on the other hand, was in ruins.

After only two years of marriage, She-Evelyn, as his wife was called, left Waugh for another man. *Vile Bodies* (1930), Waugh's second novel, satirized the "bright young things" of London society. He and his wife had been very much a part of that frenetic, irresponsible way of life, and the novel was an ironic commentary on his own psychological devastation. Thereafter, the majority of his novels prominently featured unfaithful wives, indicating that he never really recovered from She-Evelyn's desertion. Waugh's two wildly comic novels had contained little-noticed religious themes, and in September, 1930, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church.

For the next seven years, Waugh traveled compulsively and had no fixed residence. He visited the Mediterranean, Africa, and South America. These wanderings did not grant him peace of mind, but they did give him material for three travel books, *Labels: A Mediterranean Journal* (1930), *Remote People* (1931), and *Ninety-Two Days* (1934), and for his next two novels, *Black Mischief* (1932) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934). In 1935, he returned to Africa as a war correspondent, subsequently publishing *Waugh in Abyssinia* (1936), whose punning title he neither chose nor liked. Out of that experience grew another comic novel, *Scoop* (1938).

In 1937, however, Waugh's personal life had taken a turn for the better. After a long and anxious wait for a papal annulment of his first marriage, he was finally free to marry Laura Herbert. She was Catholic, shy, much younger than Waugh; their marriage of almost thirty years produced six children. Still, within a few years, Waugh was off again, this time as a result of World War II. After much difficulty because of his age, he wangled a commission and served in combat on Crete and later as liaison to communist partisans in Yugoslavia. During the war, he published two novels, *Put Out More Flags* (1942) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945, 1959). The latter has a romantic and nostalgic quality not

found in the earlier novels; it quickly became Waugh's most popular book, especially in the United States. His collection *Work Suspended, and Other Stories Written Before the Second World War* was published after the war in 1948.

Waugh believed that in entering the alliance with the Soviet Union his country had sold her honor to win the war. He found the postwar period just as disillusioning; the ascendancy of the Labour Party, with what he perceived as its pandering to class grievances, convinced him that Britain had become just another crude, secular modern state. His novels from the decade following the war reflect a deep pessimism: *Scott-King's Modern Europe* (1947), *The Loved One* (1948), *Helena* (1950), and *Love Among the Ruins: A Romance of the Near Future* (1953). *The Loved One* is ironically enlivened by a grotesque but hilarious representation of the California funeral industry. *Helena* is of some interest as his only historical novel.

Waugh set himself up as a country squire, first at Piers Court, Stinchcombe, in Gloucestershire, and later at Combe Florey in Somerset. *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold: A Conversation Piece* (1957) is an autobiographical novel based upon a psychotic episode he experienced during this period. In 1959, he published *The Life of the Right Reverend Ronald Knox*, his second biography of a Catholic subject; the first had been the prizewinning *Edmund Campion: Jesuit and Martyr* (1935). His career as a novelist concluded with his war trilogy, *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), and *The End of the Battle* (1961; also known as *Unconditional Surrender*). *Basil Seal Rides Again: Or, The Rake's Regress* (1963) is a slight novella, of interest primarily as Waugh's last work of fiction.

The aging Waugh had become profoundly depressed over the changes in the Roman Catholic Church coming from Vatican Council II. His death at Combe Florey from a massive heart attack occurred on April 10, 1966. Appropriately, he died on Easter Sunday, shortly after returning home from a traditional Latin mass.

## ANALYSIS

From the 1940's until his death, Evelyn Waugh infuriated left-wing critics on both sides of the Atlantic and seemed to delight in doing so. These critics found his religious views superstitious, his social views obsolete, his political views reactionary, and his views on black-white relations racist.

Waugh's early novels were almost universally praised, while critical opinion on the novels of his maturity has been seriously divided. Although much of the adverse criticism since the hostile reception accorded *Black Mischief* was clearly unwarranted, it could not be attributed entirely to a left-wing animus. A number of influential critics, foremost among them Edmund Wilson, lauded the early novels but condemned the later ones as betraying the promise first shown. So great is the division among Waugh's critics that what some describe as growth in the later novels, others call decay. Wilson and others were quite distressed by the contrast between the elegantly witty prose of the early novels and the progressive Catholicism, medievalism, and romanticism of the later works. Waugh's style did change over time, although he showed that he could, at will, recapture the manner of his first novels whenever he chose.

That Waugh's literary reputation has endured is remarkable, considering how greatly at odds he was with most of his fellow writers, leading literary critics, and influential academics. He certainly put an immense strain upon the objectivity of the socially conscious critic when he stated during the Spanish Civil War that if he were a Spaniard, he would be fighting for General Franco; when he expressed an open admiration for the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini; when he made no attempt to disguise his distaste for the working class; when, in one of his novels, he pictured African soldiers eating their new boots and otherwise behaving in a primitive manner, at a time when many felt all humane Britons ought to be asking forgiveness for their colonial behavior; and when he launched Swiftian attacks upon anything that smacked of socialism or progressivism. Some critics (most notably Edmund Wilson and J. B. Priestley) responded by writing, in effect, that no one with such absurd notions could possibly author good books. Wilson had praised the early novels, even to the point of judging Waugh to be the greatest comic writer in the English language since George Bernard Shaw. *Brideshead Revisited*, however, the first of the Catholic novels, dismayed him. The pervasive Roman Catholicism of the novel apparently bothered many other critics of secular persuasion.

Waugh's well-documented snobbery and tendency toward disagreeable behavior must also have taxed the fair-mindedness of his contemporaries.

His diaries, which began appearing in expurgated installments in 1973, give ample evidence of the unattractive, even ugly, aspects of his personality. America and Americans were generally dealt with contemptuously in his work. Waugh's best-known novella, *The Loved One*, is a savage satire on those aspects of Southern California society he found most false, tawdry, and dehumanizing. Little wonder that the arrogant, peremptory, and generally nasty protagonist of Kingsley Amis's *One Fat Englishman* (1963)—a British novelist on an American lecture tour—was immediately labeled a portrait of Evelyn Waugh.

An ambitious effort to denote the characteristic features of Waugh's art and to trace their evolution through the body of his fiction is that of William J. Cook, Jr. Cook attempts to account for Waugh's change in technique by carefully examining the persona of the protagonist in each novel. These altered personas, he argues, are the key to the difference between the "early" and "late" novels. *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* employ the objective point of view. In *A Handful of Dust*, the narrator-persona and the protagonist-persona become more closely identified. Waugh's experimentation with first-person narrative in *Brideshead Revisited* is, therefore, extremely important. Finally, the identification between the narrator-persona and the protagonist-persona is complete in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* and the war trilogy *Sword of Honour* (1965; includes *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen*, and *The End of the Battle*).

Waugh was a writer obsessed with technique. Virtually everyone with whom he discussed his work, in interviews and in correspondence, has testified to the meticulousness with which he chose both the language and the incidents of his books. For such a writer, the movement of the narrative point of view, over a period of some thirty years, from the objective, through the first person, to the limited third person, reveals much about Waugh's development as an artist and about the degree of his engagement with the world he described in his fiction.

Many writers pass through phases or periods of change. Yet few literary careers have a division as pronounced as Waugh's. Was it the Catholicism, medievalism, and romanticism of the postwar novels, or was it the altered personas, the new techniques, and stylistic tendencies that led Edmund



Wilson to believe Waugh had strayed over a precipice? A contrary view is put forward by the perceptive critic James E. Carens, who believes that the “second stage” of Waugh’s career, ushered in by *Brideshead Revisited* and leading inevitably to the war trilogy, produced his most satisfying satire. In the novels dating from 1945 to 1961, he successfully exposes folly while introducing positive values absent from the early books. Are the novels of Waugh’s middle years the blighting of early promise, or are they his crowning achievement? The question poses extreme alternatives, but they are appropriately extreme. Waugh consistently evoked extreme responses, both as an artist and as a man.

## VILE BODIES

**First published;** 1930

**Type of work:** Novel

*The “bright young people” of the postwar generation lead frenetic, chaotic, and absurd lives.*

Adam Fenwick-Symes, the protagonist of *Vile Bodies*, is, in a sense, a man of the world: a novelist, recently returned from Paris, and one of the “bright young people.” Yet he is passive, an anti-hero like so many other Waugh protagonists. Things simply happen to him as he drifts through the novel.

When the young novelist disembarks following a perfectly awful Channel crossing, an overzealous British customs officer leafs through the just-completed manuscript of his autobiography, determines it is too lubricious for native consumption, and seizes it on the spot. His action causes Adam to breach his contract with his publisher. Adam is then forced to sign a new one that commits him to virtual bondage. Because he has no money, he is unable to marry his fiancé, Nina Blount. The remainder of the novel is highly episodic; what plot movement there is emanates from two rather mild conflicts: establishment disapproval of the younger generation and Adam’s desultory quest for the means to marry Nina.

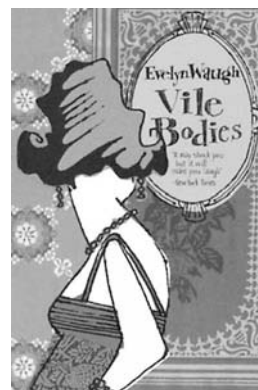
In *Vile Bodies* the narrator frequently becomes a sort of camera’s eye that cuts from scene to scene, revealing dialogue and external behavior only.

Since the narrator, during these montage passages, does not go inside the minds of any of the characters, he appears more distant than does the narrator of Waugh’s first novel, *Decline and Fall*. Two themes that appeared in the first novel—and which would be addressed with increasing seriousness in the novels to follow—are treated in a broadly comic fashion. These are the modern perversion of Christianity and the destruction of the stately homes of England.

The action of the novel occurs largely during the Christmas season (November 10 to Christmas Day) in the “near future,” as the author points out in his foreword. The first cleric to appear is Father Rothschild, S.J. This ubiquitous Jesuit possesses in profusion those qualities that most excite British prejudice: He is a plotter in international affairs; he knows everything about everybody, even the location of the prime minister’s love nest in Shepherd’s Hotel; and he is a member of a wealthy banking family, thus exuding the double menace of wily Jesuit and crafty Jewish financier. Another ecclesiastic, a rector, plays a small comic role as Colonel Blount’s neighbor and reluctant chauffeur. The novel also features the making of a bogus film of the life of John Wesley at Doubting Hall, known to the locals as “Doubting All.”

The embodiment of “modern” religion in the novel is the rum-drinking revivalist, Mrs. Melrose Ape. She is clearly a caricature of Aimee Semple McPherson and is one of the few characters in the novel whose models can be definitely identified.

The lesbian Mrs. Ape is accompanied by a band of angels, who carry their wings in violin cases and sing her famous hymn, “There ain’t no flies on the Lamb of God.” During the revival in Britain, two of her angels, Chastity and Divine Discontent, are ironically proselytized away from the proselytizer by the Latin American Entertainment Company, a white-slavery ring.



A Mr. Isaacs of the Wonderfilm Company of Great Britain demeans Doubting Hall at the behest of the dotty Colonel Blount. In the film made

there, John Wesley is wounded in a duel, is nursed back to health by his lover, Selina, countess of Huntingdon, and later, in America, is rescued from Red Indians by the same Lady Huntingdon disguised as a cowboy.

The degradation of religion and the great house, bulwarks of a once-healthy England, is portrayed against a background of neurotic merry-making. The escapades of the “bright young people” often end in disaster, several times in death. These deaths elicit no sympathy from the reader, not because the reader (or Waugh) is a monster, but because these characters are. They are grotesqueries, to whom cruel and terrible things indeed happen. Yet they are like circus performers called out by the ringmaster, Evelyn Waugh, to run through their paces. Their various acts may contain a latent tragedy, but it is well disguised behind the gaudy costumes and painted faces.

## A HANDFUL OF DUST

**First published:** 1934

**Type of work:** Novel

*A cuckolded husband leaves England to recover his ideal world but meets a terrible fate in the South American jungle.*

Waugh’s “new” style, which is so closely associated with *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), was actually introduced in *A Handful of Dust*. This novel contains familiar elements, the most obvious of these being the victim as hero. The reader’s perception of the tone, or spirit, of the earlier novels is largely determined by a lack of identification with their protagonists. Adam Fenwick-Symes, for example, is a cardboard figure whose passivity is thoroughly appropriate to the world of *Vile Bodies*, a world in which there is a crazy inconsequence to everything, including infidelity, financial ruin, and even violent death. The things that happen to Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust* will not be unfamiliar to the reader of the earlier novels. Yet whereas Adam is a farcical figure, Tony is a tragic one.

Tony Last loves his ancestral home, Hetton. Each bedroom at Hetton features a brass bedstead and a frieze of Gothic text; each is named from Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485). Tony

has slept in Morgan le Fay since leaving the night nursery and his wife, Brenda, sleeps in Guinevere (a fitting bedchamber for the adulteress she is to become). Tony eventually loses Brenda to John Beaver, a despicable nonentity from London. His loss of Brenda is not amusing, as is Adam’s loss of Nina, but poignant. In *A Handful of Dust*, identification exists between the narrator-persona and the protagonist-persona. Thus, Tony engages the reader in a way that Adam never does.

Tony loves churchgoing. Every Sunday he sits in the family pew, and he reads the lessons on Christmas Day and Harvest Thanksgiving. Yet his religious practice, though not a sham, is merely a part of the venerable Hetton tradition, a refuge-within-a-refuge from the modern world. He is humane, but not Christian. Tony is secular man at his best: kindly, loving, selfless. Yet when his wife abandons him and his son, John Andrew, is kicked to death by a horse, Tony’s fine qualities cannot save him (in fact, they make him an easier prey for the predators surrounding him). He has, moreover, no faith by which to save himself.

An amusing representative of this empty Anglicanism is the Reverend Tendril, who adds his own touch of fantasy to divine services. He composed his sermons during his many years in India. They were addressed to the congregation at the garrison chapel, and he has made no attempt to accommodate them to his altered circumstances. They are, therefore, studded with references to the Queen Empress and to home and loved ones far away. These sermons in no way trouble his parishioners, who do not expect the things said in church to have any application to their own lives.

In his misery, Tony is led by the strange Dr. Messinger on a search for a lost city in the Brazilian jungle. The expedition ends disastrously. Dr. Messinger is drowned, and Tony, ravaged by malaria, falls into the hands of Mr. Todd, a mad half-breed. As Tony daily reads Charles Dickens to his illiterate host, he comes to realize with increasing horror that he is a prisoner. Mr. Todd will never let him go. He must spend the rest of his life reading Dickens to a madman in the middle of the jungle.

Now the scene switches to England again, and the narrative is quickly concluded. Tony is declared dead. Brenda, whom Beaver has long since abandoned, marries Jock, Tony’s old friend. Tony’s poor relations inherit Hetton and turn it into a fox

farm. All that remains of Tony Last is his monument, bearing the simple (and ironic) epithet “Explorer” for this least adventurous of Englishmen.

## BRIDESHEAD REVISITED

**First published:** 1945

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young painter falls under the spell of glamorous aristocratic family members and becomes enmeshed in their tragedy.*

*Brideshead Revisited* first appeared in a limited edition in December, 1944 (Waugh often published small, sometimes specially engraved and illustrated limited editions for his friends). The regular edition followed in May of the next year. For fifteen years, Waugh had been acquiring a faithful but not a huge audience. *Brideshead Revisited* made him a best-selling author for the first time. It also alienated a number of critics.

To some, like Edmund Wilson, the richness of the language is the novel’s chief sin, causing it to tend throughout toward romanticism and sentimentalism. For others, the structure of the novel is at fault. James F. Carens argues that too much of the novel is devoted to the Oxford period and too little to Charles Ryder’s love affair with Julia Flyte. For still others, the protagonist himself is the chief problem. Ryder is a snob who seems clearly lacking in generosity of spirit. Moreover, Waugh, so these critics argue, compounds his difficulties by choosing Ryder as his narrator. So strong is the suggestion, even if it be erroneous, that the first-person narrator is a mouthpiece for the author, that for the first time Waugh was personally identified with his unsympathetic hero.

The novel is a framed story. It begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue, both set in wartime England. The flashback, which is the bulk of the novel, constitutes *The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (the subtitle). This flashback is divided into two books: “Et in Arcadia Ego,” which deals largely with Ryder’s Oxford years, and “A Twitch upon the Thread,” which chronicles the working of the divine will upon the Marchmain family and, through them, upon Ryder.

As the novel begins, Ryder, a thirty-nine-year-old

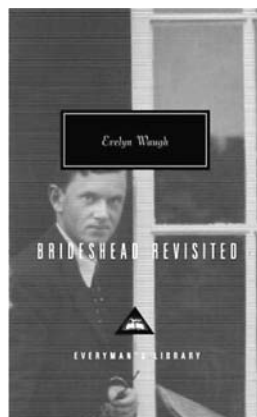
captain of infantry, is transferred, along with his battalion, to a new camp. The troops arrive in the middle of the night, and Ryder does not realize until the next morning that he has returned to Brideshead, once the elegant country home of the Marchmains. As he looks out over the familiar vista, the nostalgic memories that make up the novel proper are triggered.

In book 1, set in the Oxford of the 1920’s, Ryder meets and becomes infatuated with charming, irresponsible Sebastian Flyte, second son of Lord and Lady Marchmain. Lord Marchmain has been separated from his wife for many years and lives with his mistress in Venice. Sebastian takes Ryder to Brideshead to meet the rest of his family: Lady Marchmain, beautiful and enigmatic; Brideshead (Bridey), heir to his father’s title, as stolid as Sebastian is animated; Julia, with whom Ryder will eventually fall in love; and Cordelia, the youngest child, devout in a natural, unaffected way. The Marchmains are a Catholic family, and *Brideshead Revisited* is often called a Catholic novel. Sebastian is attempting to escape the demands of his religion through drink and is rapidly becoming a hopeless alcoholic. Julia is rebelling by marrying

Rex Mottram, a Canadian adventurer and wheeler-dealer. This far-from-ideal family is a curious device if, as some have charged, Waugh’s novel is a Catholic apology.

In book 2, Ryder becomes an architectural artist; he paints the great houses of England, often just ahead of their dismemberment or destruction. Thus, two of Waugh’s recurring motifs, the artist-as-hero and the great

house, come together in the character of the protagonist. Ryder marries Celia Mulcaster, whom very quickly he cannot abide. He is glad to learn that she is unfaithful, for he is then free to dislike her. Ryder and Julia encounter each other on an Atlantic voyage and become lovers. Lady Marchmain has died, and Lord Marchmain returns to Brideshead to die. His deathbed conversion (in a scene roundly condemned by some critics) pro-



foundly affects Julia. The smoldering coals of her Catholicism are fanned into a raging blaze. She breaks off her affair with Ryder and declares that she will remain married to the loathsome Rex.

In the epilogue, Ryder never states but strongly implies that he has become a Catholic. He enters Brideshead's art-nouveau chapel to find a lamp burning before the altar there. Although he has lost most of what he desired in life, for the convert Ryder, the faith, to him both ancient and new, lives on.

## SWORD OF HONOUR

**First published:** 1965; includes *Men at Arms*, 1952; *Officers and Gentlemen*, 1955; *The End of the Battle*, 1961 (also known as *Unconditional Surrender*)

**Type of work:** Novels

*This trilogy recounts the wartime experiences of Guy Crouchback, another of Waugh's maimed romantics.*

*Sword of Honour* is both a general title for Waugh's World War II trilogy and the specific name of a streamlined, one-volume collection of the novels appearing toward the end of the author's career. Waugh did some cutting here and there and eliminated a few minor characters, but none of the three novels are substantially altered in the *Sword of Honour* edition.

The trilogy may or may not be Waugh's best work; certainly it is his most ambitious. His heavily plotted story charts the moral deterioration of the West and the spiritual growth of his hero, ironically concurrent developments. He deftly "modulates" (a favorite term among critics of the trilogy) the tones of irony, satire, farce, and tragedy against a naturalistic background. Furthermore, most of *Sword of Honour* was written during Waugh's fifties when, according to his biographers, his health was failing and he was becoming progressively more disheartened, depressed, and lethargic. To him, Nazi Germany had been defeated at the cost of British honor; his country was rapidly becoming a thoroughly agnostic, materialistic, socialistic state; and, most horrifying of all, the Holy Mother Church that he had embraced in 1930 was, only

twenty-five years later, admitting liberalizations (to Waugh, corruptions) and accommodating itself to the society that it ought to be resisting with all its might.

*Men at Arms* introduces the protagonist, Guy Crouchback, a familiar Waugh character type. Following his divorce, Guy has spent eight empty years at Castello Crouchback in Santa Dulcina, Italy. His wife, Virginia (like so many of her fictional predecessors), is a shallow, amoral woman who left her husband for another man. After the Russian-German alliance, Guy returns to England seeking a commission. In opposing the hateful combination of Nazism and Communism, he feels he is taking up arms against the Modern Age. Before leaving Italy, Guy visits the tomb of Sir Roger of Waybroke, an English knight who was shipwrecked near Santa Dulcina while on his way to the Second Crusade. Guy runs his finger along the sword atop the knight's effigy and swears to take up Sir Roger's unfulfilled quest. Sir Roger's is the first "Sword of Honour." Waugh will introduce, with bitter irony, a second sword in the final novel. Because of his age, thirty-six, Guy experiences difficulty in gaining his commission, but he finally finds a place with the Royal Corps of Halberdiers. Guy loves the army and this venerable unit. His first real shock is the discovery that the British military would welcome the breakup of the Russian-German alliance, thinking only of the diminished odds against them, not of Guy's romantic crusade.

Guy soon meets the two major comic characters of the book. Apthorpe is a slightly absurd junior officer of Guy's age. Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook is a war lover who has lost one eye and most of his right hand during a lifetime of "biffing" whatever enemies he could find. *Men at Arms* is the most comic of the three novels largely because of a protracted conflict over Apthorpe's thunderbox, his personal chemical toilet, acquired during his African days. Ritchie-Hook discovers its existence, covets it, and launches a wildly funny guerrilla campaign designed to secure it for himself. Apthorpe's ludicrous death at the end of *Men at Arms* is reminiscent of several deaths from the early novels. After Apthorpe suffers a recurrence of jungle fever, Guy smuggles a bottle of whisky into his hospital room. Apthorpe later consumes the entire bottle, suffers a violent reaction, and dies.

The tone of *Officers and Gentlemen* darkens mark-



edly, especially in the disastrous battle for Crete (in which Waugh himself fought with distinction). Two more crucial characters are featured: Trimmer, a lazy, incompetent probationary officer, who appears briefly in *Men at Arms*, and Corporal-Major Ludovic, an effete man with disconcerting pink eyes and no documented past.

Trimmer is a man of many names. He was Gustave during his career as a hairdresser on ocean liners. He is the fabricated hero of an inconsequential and totally mismanaged operation called Popgun. As such, he is sent on a morale-boosting tour of Britain in the guise of Captain Alistair McTavish; he occasionally promotes himself to Major McTavish. In Glasgow, he meets Virginia, whose hair he once did on the *Aquitania*. They have a brief affair, and he leaves her carrying his child. The Ministry of Information finally determines there are too many Scots heroes. McTavish becomes Trimmer once more and is returned to active service. He promptly deserts and is never heard from again.

Ludovic has been likened to one of Henry James's evil-minded servants. Beneath his inscrutable facade, he is a hard and crafty man. When, on Crete, the Brigade Major breaks down under fire and becomes a liability to the men of his command, Ludovic kills him. He is the embodiment of the British army's ignoble retreat to the sea, a rout in which the men are killing their officers and taking their uniforms and vehicles. Later, Ludovic murders a sapper captain in order to claim his place in the getaway boat. He mistakenly believes that Guy has knowledge of these murders and, during the balance of the trilogy, he grows increasingly paranoid from fear that Guy will one day expose him.

*Unconditional Surrender* was published under the title *The End of the Battle* in the United States. It covers the last years of the war and the period immediately following. Disillusionment is piled upon disillusionment. Guy, now an intelligence officer, is posted to Yugoslavia, where he recognizes Premier Tito's war effort as primarily a means to defeat the royalists and his other rivals and communize the country. The British blithely hand their former Serbian allies over to the Communists to be shot. Ritchie-Hook turns up in Yugoslavia as an observer but throws his life away in a bogus partisan attack. The happy warrior's death is appropriate since the modern world has no use for those of his ilk.

In London, Sir Ralph Brompton, a sinister politician and Ludovic's former homosexual lover, is loading the British military mission to Yugoslavia with Communists. In terrible contrast to Sir Roger's sword, the Sword of Stalingrad, the loathsome symbol of Britain's alliance with atheism and totalitarianism, is displayed in splendor in Westminster Abbey. In Guy's private life, interesting developments have preceded his departure for Yugoslavia. Virginia, after failing to find a suitable abortionist in war-torn London, decides to have Trimmer's child. Guy, who as a Catholic believes that his marriage to Virginia—now divorced from her most recent husband—has never truly ended, feels obligated to marry her again. She has the baby, legally Guy's, and leaves it in the country. She is later killed by a "doodle" bomb in the final days of the war.

After the war, the tortured and reclusive Ludovic moves to Italy, even masochistically purchasing the Castello Crouchback. He becomes the best-selling author of *The Death Wish*, an extravagantly romantic novel that most critics take to be a satiric version of Waugh's own *Brideshead Revisited*. Guy returns to Broome, his country home, and marries Domenica, the tomboy daughter of friends. Virginia's son is christened Gervase, the noblest name in the Crouchback line, and Guy unselfishly wills the family name and all that goes with it to the son of Trimmer.

Of the two titles, *Unconditional Surrender* and *The End of the Battle*, the first is clearly the more successful artistically. As well as referring to the surrender of the Axis Powers, it hints at Britain's surrender to expediency in order to win the war. Finally, it suggests that Guy's final, selfless act in the trilogy is a surrender to the Divine Will.

## SUMMARY

Evelyn Waugh's earliest novels were received, and praised, as farces and amusing romps. His essential seriousness of purpose was ignored or misunderstood. He was long viewed as a talented entertainer whose language and syntax were flawless and whose plots were delightfully inventive. As the body of his work grew and as he reiterated his theme of the spiritual emptiness of modern life, however, critics were forced to take note. Eventually, to those who shared his view of humanity's fallen nature, who shared his passions and his fears,



he became much more than an entertainer. He became a kind of witty Jeremiah, prophesying the end of grace, both divine and earthly, from behind a mask of scornful laughter.

Patrick Adcock

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Evelyn Waugh seems to have taken his title, *A Handful of Dust*, from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922): "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." Is Tony Last a victim of fear?
- What causes Tony Last to succumb to such a ridiculous figure as Dr. Messinger?
- Is the judgment of some critics that *Brideshead Revisited* is a "Catholic novel" accurate or meaningful?
- Did the prevalence of Waugh's religious convictions detract from his later fiction?
- Is there any reason for believing that the narrators of Waugh's later novels are presenting his own views?

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## H. G. WELLS

**Born:** Bromley, Kent, England  
September 21, 1866

**Died:** London, England  
August 13, 1946

*Still read for his lively, provocative scientific romances, Wells is also recognized for the strength of his best realistic fiction and for a temperament that helped shape and predict modern life.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Herbert George Wells was born in Bromley, Kent, England, on September 21, 1866, the third son of Joseph and Sarah Neal Wells. In rather mean surroundings (Wells later called it “a suburb of the damnedest”), Sarah struggled to rear her son, returning to her employment as a lady’s maid after her unreliable husband (who was first a gardener and then a professional club cricketer) abandoned the family. Giving Wells the rudiments of an education—teaching him the alphabet and borrowing books from the public library—Sarah took employment with the Fetherstonhaugh family at Up Park, Sussex. These circumstances—growing up poor among the wealthy, observing at close hand the disparity between social classes, and striving to acquire independence by dint of his formidable intellect and energy—were to mark Wells for the rest of his life, informing all of his writing and accounting for his drive to dominate the age in which he lived.

At fourteen, Wells was apprenticed to a draper at Windsor, a humiliating, menial occupation for a young man whose imagination had been stimulated by reading works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-1843; *The Mysteries of Paris*, 1843-1846), and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). At a very early age, Wells had developed a mind that transcended his imme-

diate reality and conceived of other worlds on a scale much grander than his position in life permitted.

Soon discharged from the draper’s shop as unfit, Wells became a teacher; he returned to his mother at Up Park, then became a chemist’s (pharmacist’s) assistant before submitting once more to an apprenticeship in a draper’s shop. At seventeen, he broke once and for all with the world of commerce, becoming a teacher at Midhurst, studying Plato, geology, physiology, chemistry, and mathematics, attending London Normal School of Science, and coming under the influence of T. H. Huxley, one of the great champions of Charles Darwin and nineteenth century science.

A desultory student, Wells began writing the sketches that would become his first science-fiction stories and fell in love with his cousin, Isabel, marrying her in 1891. After a brief bout with tuberculosis and the writing of two scientific textbooks, Wells left his first wife for Amy Catherine Robbins (“Jane”), whom he would later marry even while initiating a lifelong series of romantic relationships with women who would figure (slightly disguised) in several of his novels.

Wells’s first major success, *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895), showed that his forte was fantasy: an adventure story that appealed to the late Victorian interest in scientific experiment and in the isolated, lonely heroes of science who challenged their contemporaries’ stodgy ideas about the nature of society and of the universe. Quickly becoming a best-selling author of such works as *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance* (1897) and *The War of*

*the Worlds* (1898), Wells transformed himself into a public figure, taking an interest in radical politics and joining the Fabian socialists for a brief period. He embarked on a series of what he called “discussion novels”—*Marriage* (1912), *The Passionate Friends* (1913), and *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914)—designed to raise the issue of relations between men and women in the light of feminism and the scientific advancements of his age. Wells pursued and attracted powerful and intelligent women—first Amber Reeves, the young daughter of prominent Fabian socialists, and then Rebecca West, the newest and freshest personality among the suffragists.

At the same time, in *Mankind in the Making* (1903), *A Modern Utopia* (1905), and later books and articles, Wells pursued a career as journalist, historian, and philosopher, arguing for a form of international government and recognition of human rights that would transcend the aggressive relationships of nation states. Many of his speculations about world wars, atomic theory, and other developments in the future proved prophetic.

Wells continued to write novels to the end of his career, producing in 1916 perhaps his last great novel, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, a sensitive, moving account of World War I and its aftermath in England. Wells became less interested in fiction, and he increasingly turned his attention to world history, producing *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (1920), and to propagandistic works. Wells’s wife died in 1928, and his later years were beset by an increasing frustration with his flagging physical and imaginative powers. He died on August 13, 1946, in London.

Wells produced more than one hundred volumes in his lifetime. Only a handful of novels are still read today, with his scientific romances winning new generations of readers. Much of his other work is still of interest to social and literary historians, who must take him into account in their appraisals of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

## ANALYSIS

In all of his work, Wells prided himself on his opposition to the status quo. He became attracted to people of science because they proved to be the most capable of thinking beyond their times, of imagining other ages and forms of society. He de-

lighted in twitting the stolid attitudes of the late Victorians and Edwardians, showing a London laid waste by a Martian invasion, a populace agog at the machinations of an invisible man, and a community outraged by the heroine’s seduction of an older man in *Ann Veronica: A Modern Love Story* (1909), a book that hardly concealed the fact that it was based on his scandalous liaison with Amber Reeves.

Powerfully influenced by the ideas of Darwin—as they had been interpreted and disseminated by Wells’s teacher, T. H. Huxley—Wells sought to show the direction in which history was headed. He clearly foresaw that feminism would triumph, in the sense that women would eventually enjoy an equal relationship with men. He anticipated the world of atomic weapons and the mass destruction of cities, of total war that would respect no enclaves of humanity. He was, in many respects, a pessimist, and yet he continued to hope that somehow humanity would see its folly before it was too late.

Through his imagination and reason, Wells indefatigably created fiction and philosophical treatises aimed at stimulating and teaching the world to think ahead. The planet itself, he believed, was threatened—perhaps by invasions of aliens, perhaps by its own blindness to its self-destructive potential.

The Darwinian idea of evolution, however, suggested to Wells that human beings could, in fact, trace the outline of history and encompass it so that something approaching a world government might be possible. His task was to unite the individual with the cosmic, to imbue the culture with a universal consciousness commensurate with the immensity of the world’s maturation.

Thus, the scientific romances and the realistic novels are but different sides of Wells’s comprehensive attack on provinciality and his plea for an enlarged human understanding that would overthrow the conventions of polite society. He found that England wanted to be jarred; it needed to perceive itself as under threat from above and outside itself. In *The Days of the Comet* (1906), for example, he described a Europe very much on the eve of the destruction that it visited upon itself in 1914, the start of World War I. In *The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind* (1914), he prophesied an atomic war in 1958. In *The Shape of Things to Come: The Ultimate Resolution* (1933), he accurately described an air attack on London in 1940.

In *Tono-Bungay* (1908), Wells drew upon his own childhood at Up Park to show how the class structure and capitalistic growth actually abetted each other and produced a world that demeaned individuals even while promising them great wealth and prestige. In *Marriage*, Geoffrey Trafford, a promising scientist, finds himself trapped in his marriage to the forceful Majorie Pope, who gradually draws him into the petty, materialistic middle-class life that derails his once bright career. In *The Passionate Friends*, Lady Mary, the daughter of an earl, forsakes her true love, Stephen Stratton (a commoner), for an arranged marriage that brings her into the world of politics, wealth, and power, only to realize, too late, that she has made a tragedy of their lives.

Wells did not believe, however, that either literature or science provided a panacea. Wells's scientists are often arrogant and authoritarian, so sure of their superiority and of the rightness of their inventions and insights that they run roughshod over humanity, literally mowing down people in the street (as the invisible man does) or sadly recognizing (too late) the limitations of their innovations (as the inventor of the time machine does). By the same token, Wells had little patience with progenitors of literary modernism—novelists such as Henry James, who made of literature a precious institution dangerously separated from the masses. Wells detested the introverted, self-absorbed quality of James's fiction, preferring a view of the world of letters far more extroverted and in closer touch with the reading public.

If Wells opted to appeal to the largest possible audience, in both his fiction and nonfiction, it was because he forthrightly wanted to shape minds, to call attention to evil, and to suggest possible solutions, warning people as a modern prophet who saw no necessary contradiction between art and education and between literature and entertainment. He scorned all forms of snobbery in society and in the literary circles of his time. What he did not realize, however, was that his strenuous efforts to win and influence minds would take a terrible toll on his own prose, so that he gradually settled for quantity over quality, producing masses of words that might overwhelm but not necessarily persuade his readers. He became accustomed to looking for immediate results; consequently, one Wells volume had to be quickly succeeded by another

to sustain the public clamor. In such a torrent of words, faith in the power of the word diminished, the right word, the appropriate word, that Wells ultimately could not find once he had determined to overthrow the fastidious, finicky approach to language favored by James and his modernist successors.

## THE TIME MACHINE

**First published:** 1895

**Type of work:** Novel

*A time traveler gives his account of his visit to the year 802,701 C.E. and then mysteriously disappears on other travels.*

*The Time Machine* begins with a dinner party, in which the inventor of a time machine explains to his disbelieving guests the principles on which his invention is based. This scene is a quintessential one in stories by Wells, in which an original mind finds itself checked by an audience that is taken aback by daring and ingenuity. The time traveler persists, however, gradually making his auditors reconsider their basic premises, even if they do not concede that it is possible to travel through time.

Although Wells rarely bothered to construct elaborate scientific justifications for his romances, the inventor's speech can still seem convincing to the nonmathematician.

Much of the book is cast in the inventor's first-person narration, in which he recounts to his friends the results of his journey through time.

In the far distant future, the time traveler (he is never given a name) lands among a small, delicate, and timid people, the Eloi, who live on fruit. Their environment seems benign, yet they are afraid of the dark, huddling against the appearance of another people, the Morlocks, who the time traveler gradually discovers are the subterranean masters of this future





world. The Morlocks are the meat eaters, feeding on the Eloi but otherwise staying below ground in deep shafts, which the time traveler must explore in pursuit of his time machine, the Morlocks having carried it away.

Much of the novel concerns the time traveler's horrifying discovery of this divided world. It gradually becomes apparent that the novel is more than an adventure story, more than a book about the wonders of scientific speculation; it is also a parable about the oppressed, about the ultimate kind of society stratified by class, by those who have and those who do not. Quite explicitly, near the end of the novel, the time traveler speculates that this is where history is headed: toward this bifurcation of humanity, this division of the powerful and the powerless, in which humanity will literally construct a society that feeds upon itself.

After effecting a narrow escape (the time traveler locates his machine and beats off the Morlocks), he travels to a more distant future, a land where all trace of humanity has disappeared and where the earth is inhabited by large monsters and plants. As in his earlier adventure, the confident scientist is confronted with a future that belies contemporary faith in perfectibility, in the power of science to give humanity control over its environment. He returns to the present a chastened, exhausted man.

The time traveler's tale is greeted with enormous skepticism, except for one of his friends, who conveys the time traveler's story and who witnesses the time traveler's departure for an unknown destination. The novel ends with no sign of the time traveler, no assurance that he will return, and with the cautionary word that human beings must act as if they can still positively affect the future. It is an extraordinarily grim forecast, a foreboding glimpse of both the power and the limitations of science and of Wells's own doubts over whether the new discoveries of science would, in the long run, prove beneficial. Much of the novel's drama comes from the first-person, eyewitness account and from the time traveler's total immersion in another world, making the assumptions of his own present terrifyingly inadequate.

## THE INVISIBLE MAN

**First published:** 1897

**Type of work:** Novel

*An isolated researcher discovers how to make himself invisible and determines to dominate the world, becoming a menace to society who must be destroyed.*

*The Invisible Man* is about a lone researcher, Griffin, whose discovery of invisibility alienates him from other people. At first, Griffin merely wants to be left alone, taking a room in a boardinghouse and secluding himself with his apparatus. In the midst of ignorant, prying people, he is a figure of some sympathy and mystery. As his means of support diminishes, however, he feels no compunction about stealing from others, viewing his crimes as a necessary way of continuing his research for a way of reversing his invisibility.

Growing more and more irritable because of the curious who try to discover the purpose of this strange man swathed in bandages, Griffin arrogantly throws people out of his room, and finally he is forced to leave his room, setting off on a cross-country rampage that leads to injury or death for those who get in his way.

Griffin eventually takes refuge in the home of an acquaintance, Dr. Kemp, and confides to Kemp his plans to establish a reign of terror based on his discovery of invisibility. Having lost all sense of humanity, Griffin does not see the impact of his words on Kemp, who promises not to betray Griffin but who almost immediately decides that he cannot allow Griffin to carry out his plans. Summoning the police, Kemp puts his own life in jeopardy, but he survives and an exhausted, irrational Griffin is eventually subdued and killed.

Obviously a portrait of the amoral scientist, *The Invisible Man* demonstrates Wells's affection for the common individual and his criticism of modern scientists who forget the purpose of their discoveries and believe that they can legislate the quality of existence for others. The early part of the novel, when Griffin's motivations and his invisibility are not yet discovered, is the best, for there is much humor and tension built up around the subsidiary characters who come into contact with him.

Wells is less successful in providing Griffin with a

convincing account of his discovery of invisibility, and it is somewhat improbable that a man of Griffin's intellect should completely ignore the practical consequences of traveling around England in January in the nude—the only way to preserve his invisibility. On the other hand, the invention of invisibility is a powerful metaphor standing for precisely that aspect of science—its inaccessibility to the populace—that makes modern science seem at once so impressive and so potentially malign.

Perhaps only a man as antisocial as Griffin could conceive of a scheme that would put him so at odds with his fellow human beings and present him with the opportunity of totally dominating them. Wells rightly foresees in this novel and in others the way in which science sometimes proves to be the perfect instrument of the totalitarian mind.

## THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

**First published:** 1898

**Type of work:** Novel

*The Martians invade England, immobilizing the society but then succumbing to the bacteria that have long since vanished from their own planet.*

In *The War of the Worlds*, the Martians invade England, landing in ten cylinders at twenty-four-hour intervals, terrorizing the countryside and devastating the heart of London. It is perhaps the most plausible of Wells's romances, for at the time it was thought that Mars might be inhabitable and that it was far older than the earth. It could well serve, then, as the site of beings who antedate humanity.

The Martians are much more highly developed than humans, but as the narrator discovers, they have landed on Earth to use it as a feeding ground. The Martians are wormlike creatures with bulging eyes and sixteen long, sensitive tentacles projecting from their mouths. They suck living blood. They arrive in huge, spiderlike engines, smothering cities with black smoke and defeating the opposition with heat rays not unlike lasers that can disintegrate artillery.

The Martians succeed where the invisible man failed in establishing a reign of terror, and much of the novel concerns their relentless, apparently in-

vincible progress across the country. There is much less characterization in *The War of the Worlds* than in Wells's other science fiction. Rather, the novel is intent on describing the mass hysteria such an invasion would stimulate and on showing how unprepared civilization is for the onslaught of forces from another world.

Wells is particularly hard on a vicar who takes refuge with the unnamed narrator, as if to suggest the usual comforts of religion, especially organized religion, are to little avail in a truly otherworldly event. The vicar is reduced to a state of abject terror, mouthing Christian pieties and proclaiming the day of judgment. In a half-starved, delirious state, he ventures toward the Martians before the narrator can stop him and is killed.

The concrete descriptions of London and of the damage wreaked upon it by the Martians enhance the verisimilitude of the narrative as the narrator struggles to survive and retain his presence of mind. Although he comes across another character who vows to carry on the fight, human expressions of defiance seem more pathetic than encouraging. It is astonishing how quickly civilization seems morally and physically bankrupted by the invasion.

There is little comfort in the denouement of the novel. The Martians succumb to the environment, having no antibodies to cope with bacteria that attack and destroy their nervous systems. Otherwise, they might very well have succeeded in destroying civilization. The narrator gradually comes to realize that the Martians are dying when he hears their awful, moaning shrieks.

Reviews of *The War of the Worlds* noted that the novel had the gripping quality of a firsthand newspaper dispatch, a dramatic presentation of bulletins as the Martians conduct their relentless advance, instilling terror, physically and mentally immobilizing the population. Part of the excitement stems from closely following the narrator's narrow escapes and his piecing together of what has happened in the city.



The Martian invasion provides Wells with a scenario for commenting on the organization of modern life. The mass of humanity is treated as just that: a mass, a mob of largely undifferentiated human beings who trample upon each other and cannot organize a common defense. They are as weak as the Elois who are dominated by the Morlocks, as unconscious of worlds larger than themselves as are the Sussex inhabitants who peer curiously at the invisible man.

The Martians, the time traveler, the invisible man—for all their differences—function as devices for upsetting human complacency. Wells deeply distrusted human self-satisfaction and what he regarded as a typically English contentment with life as it is—as though life had always been that way and would continue to be so. Wells believed the contrary, that modern life would be a series of disruptions and that the twentieth century would see apocalyptic changes, perhaps initiated by science, but probably exacerbated by human ignorance, greed, and smugness. Humanity might, as in *The War of the Worlds*, be able to escape the worst fate Wells could imagine for it, but it could not count on such a conclusion.

## TONO-BUNGAY

**First published:** 1908

**Type of work:** Novel

*Tono-Bungay is one of Wells's most realistic novels, and his use of a first-person narrator and his criticism of contemporary British society align this work with his romances and his journalism.*

In *Tono-Bungay*, George Ponderovo has decided to tell his life history in the form of a novel. He has grown up in Bladesover, a great country estate, which he describes as a metaphor for the state of English society. As a boy, George sees the world of the wealthy through the eyes of the servants, a comic collection of men and women whose stultifying conversation mirrors the rigidity and unimaginativeness of their plight. Drawing on his memories of Up Park, Wells portrays these lower-class characters with affection, although he shows that the clichés they find so comforting are precisely

what prevent them from appreciating life to the fullest.

George's own feelings, as those of a servant's boy, are kept on a tight rein, but he is liberated from the life below the stairs by Beatrice Normandy, a beautiful young lady of the house who demands that George be allowed to play with her. Exhilarated by her attention, George is gradually able to express himself and to develop a strong sense of his own worth, but then he is banished from Bladesover when he gets into a fight with her half brother.

After a series of misadventures resembling Wells's own youth, George finds refuge with his Uncle Edward Ponderovo, an ebullient country chemist who dreams of huge commercial success. Unfortunately, Uncle Edward's first foray in the stock market is a dismal failure, and George discovers that his mother's small but essential fund of savings has also been depleted by his uncle's speculations.

Nursing a grudge against his uncle, George turns to science, studying for a university degree and falling in love with a young woman, Marion, who refuses to marry him until he has a steady, adequate yearly income. Suddenly, George is summoned by his uncle, who has made a smashing success with Tono-Bungay, a patent medicine that promises rejuvenation. At first, George balks at his uncle's plea that he needs George to run the new company, for George knows that the product is bogus, kept afloat by aggressive advertising and not by an inherent positive property. He is troubled by what he sees as modern life's tendency to market goods of no intrinsic value, products that contribute nothing substantial to the economy or to the health of the country. He is smitten with Marion, however, and sees that, by the management of his uncle's affairs, he will have the income that will convince her to marry him.

Accepting his uncle's offer, George turns his mind to business, fashioning a company that becomes one of the leading enterprises of the time, expanding into lines of new products and remedies (extolling the magical properties of various brands of soaps, for example). George marries but is dissatisfied, realizing that his wife is dull and conventional and does not share his romantic, sexual drives. Disgusted with both his marriage and his business, George turns to affairs with other women and to scientific experiments, concentrating on efforts to develop an airplane.

What troubles George is the growing commercialism of society—not only his uncle's blindness to the sham involved in marketing his products but also his wife's mercantile mentality. She wants the comforts of life, but she has no passion. George concludes that he has bought himself a wife, one who would not consent to marriage until he raised his offer, telling her that he would be earning five hundred pounds a year, a two-hundred-pound increase over the amount she said would be necessary for their married life.

At this point, Beatrice Normandy reenters George's life. They have not seen each other since George's banishment from Bladesover. Both of them realize that they have always loved each other, although Beatrice is engaged to an older, wealthy upper-class man. Although they become lovers, Beatrice refuses to marry George (now divorced from his wife), and he supposes it is because of his class origins and his business. He eventually learns to accept the fact that she is (by her own account) a selfish woman whom he would not be able to please in marriage. She has grown accustomed to her imperious, privileged life, and George, who has lost most of his fortune in his uncle's sudden crash, would never be able to satisfy her.

*Tono-Bungay* is one of Wells's finest novels because it contains such rich characters and astute social analysis. George's desire to be distinguished, his craving for money, and his yearning for a place in society epitomize the development of modern life. By writing his autobiography, he is simultaneously showing how the modern self develops, encounters the categories of class and capitalism, and thrives or fails by the canons of a society based on the exploitation of human desire. The products that his Uncle Ponderovo markets as a way to renew the self are simply the material manifestation of George's aspirations. George knows that these as-

pirations are romantic, that they are not rooted in reality, and yet he can fool himself as easily as his uncle fools his customers.

At the same time, there is a reckoning for Tono-Bungay and for Edward and George Ponderovo. A society cannot stand only on self-promotion, Wells implies. Edward never faces this fact. He is always the genial uncle, the innocent who is so at one with the principle of self-aggrandizement that he never suffers George's self-critical doubts. Consequently, he becomes a victim of his own enterprise. On the other hand, George's yearning to fly expresses his realization that society, the status quo, cannot gratify his highest aspirations. He must find a way to transcend his time. As such, he is the archetypal Wells character, attempting to fulfill himself by going beyond himself, traveling through time and space to a greater world that will yield a greater self, an identity that has truly shed the limitations of class and culture.

## SUMMARY

In his fiction and nonfiction, H. G. Wells dreamed of a future that would fundamentally change the conditions of the present. He was fascinated by the scientific and technological developments of his time; he explored politics and business, looking for the roots of self and society. He used his formidable intellect and imagination to lay bare the faults of his age, and he created characters who strove against but often succumbed to the temptations of the emerging capitalist and corporate culture. He often despaired that humanity would find a way to express its highest potential, yet his own prodigious output argued for the value of an inquiring mind, unfazed by obstacles and resolved on accomplishing a revolution in the consciousness of one's contemporaries.

Carl Rollyson

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- To what extent were the early novels of H. G. Wells aimed at undermining the utopian works of such writers as Edward Bellamy and William Morris?
- Does Wells make clear the distinction between the profession of science, which he admired, and its practitioners?
- Is the social analysis in *Tono-Bungay* still effective a century after it was written?
- Is the tone in Wells's novels often unnecessarily pedagogical?
- Wells once wrote that he would rather be considered a journalist than an artist. What aspects of Wells's work seem more journalistic than artistic?



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## IRVINE WELSH

**Born:** Edinburgh, Scotland  
September 27, 1958

*Welsh is both famous and infamous for his unflinching portrayal of the violence-laden drug culture dominant in late twentieth century Edinburgh and Glasgow. He is further renowned for his creation of a realistic modern day Scots dialect, which he conveys phonetically in his novels, and for his pervasive dark humor.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Irvine Welsh was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1958, and spent his childhood in blue-collar Muirhouse, an economically depressed Edinburgh neighborhood. His father was a dockworker and his mother a waitress; finances were tight for the family. At the age of eight, Welsh faced his first arrest for shoplifting. In adolescence he experimented with drugs, which led him to addictive behaviors in his early adulthood.

In 1974, at the age of sixteen, Welsh dropped out of Ainslee Park Secondary School with few skills and little ambition beyond seeking pleasure. He undertook a series of odd jobs to support himself and his drug habit. Dividing his time between Edinburgh and London, he worked variously as a dishwasher and a repairman. By 1978, he was employed as a punk-rock guitarist in London, performing with Stairway 13 and The Public Lice and enjoying the accompanying party scene. As a sideline, Welsh committed burglaries with his friends, spending his ill-gained profits on marijuana, speed, and heroin. Seeing the physical and mental consequences that such a lifestyle wreaked upon his mates, and perhaps tiring of a similar personal toll, Welsh distanced himself from the drug scene and by the mid-1980's was free of his addiction. Later he would draw upon his memories of those experiences when he wrote his debut novel, *Trainspotting* (1993).

Welsh enhanced his educational qualifications by completing a city and guilds certificate in electrical engineering. For the remainder of the 1980's, he renovated houses in a north London neighborhood and then sold them for profit. Ironically, Welsh, often perceived as a radical,

benefited from the conservative leadership of Margaret Thatcher, then prime minister of Great Britain, whose economic policies accounted in large part for the housing boom. In 1984, Welsh married Anne Ansty, a union that lasted twenty years before ending in divorce. Around 1990, the couple returned to Edinburgh, where Welsh took a civil service job in the city's housing department and eventually earned an M.B.A. from Heriot-Watt University. His thesis focused on equal opportunities for women in business.

Established once more on familiar turf, Welsh found himself reunited with former school friends, in whose company he soon enjoyed Edinburgh's rave scene. Spurred by nostalgia and an urge to commemorate his past through writing, Welsh revisited his diaries from earlier, more reckless years and began a draft of what would become *Trainspotting*, published by Secker and Warburg in 1993. Prior to its publication as a novel, sections of the work appeared in the literary magazine *Rebel Inc.* The critical response to the novel was mixed; it drew both praise and derision, but garnered Welsh recognition as a nominee for the Man Booker Prize. Because several judges expressed concerns that the novel was misogynistic in its portrayal of the treatment of women, *Trainspotting* failed to make the short-list for the award. However, the controversy surrounding its withdrawal from consideration gained Welsh and the novel as much, if not more, attention than the year's actual award recipient. The novel was nominated and received the Scottish Arts Council Book Award in 1994.

Welsh continued his career as a writer, expanding his oeuvre to include short fiction, plays, and film scripts. Though critical and commercial suc-

cess ensued, none of his later work received the acclaim and notoriety of his first novel. *Trainspotting* is considered Welsh's masterpiece and the standard against which all his subsequent work is judged, including the well-regarded stories of male bonding, *Glue* (2001) and *Porno* (2002), the sequel to *Trainspotting*.

Welsh reignited much of the controversy surrounding *Trainspotting* with the publication of his second novel, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995), which included graphic scenes of violence against women and minorities even as the novel questioned the very legitimacy of male dominance via its connection to those same acts. *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs* (2006) is a less controversial novel, featuring the unlikely office pairing of a standard Welshian bad boy, marked by his fascination with sex and drugs and a lackadaisical work ethic, with a proverbial boy scout, a character type unfamiliar to Welsh's oeuvre.

In 1996, *Trainspotting* was adapted into a popular film by director Danny Boyle, renewing interest in the novel and increasing its international sales. Other commercial successes by Welsh include *Ecstasy: Three Tales of Chemical Romance* (1996), an exploration of the rave culture of the 1980's, and *Filth* (1998), a detective novel in which the inspector prefers indulging in sex and drugs to actual crime solving. Both paperback editions became number-one best sellers in the United Kingdom. Perhaps because of the success of the film *Trainspotting*, Welsh has increased his connections to that medium. He is a partner in two production companies, Jawbone Films and Fourway Films. As a playwright, Welsh has enjoyed mixed success. Though one of his plays closed after a two-week run, more successful productions include *Headstate* (pr. 1994), *You'll Have Had Your Hole* (pr., pb. 1998), and the musical *Blackpool* (pr. 2002).

In July 2005, Welsh married Beth Quinn, an American student twenty years his junior, whom he met while teaching a creative writing course in Chicago.

## ANALYSIS

Scottish author Irvine Welsh's stark, unsparing depictions of Edinburgh and Glasgow at the end of the twentieth century resemble in certain respects Irish writer James Joyce's presentation of "dear dirty Dublin" in his novels set at the beginning of

the same century, with one notable exception. Irvine Welsh leaves out the "dear." His nihilistic view of modern life for working-class Scots is brutal. The dark humor that characterizes his works offers little comic relief; instead, it serves to magnify the brutality and desolation.

Much of Welsh's fiction is composed of a series of broken first-person passages strung along a framework that frequently shifts between locations, times, and tellers. The structure frequently mimics the split-screen and multiple-level narratives of video and computer games, media formats with which the author and many of his readers are familiar. Welsh also pays homage to film techniques in his use of cutaways, fade outs, and montage. Alternate voices in Welsh's fiction offer competing perspectives on events, as is the case in *Trainspotting*. The multiple narrators, some heavily drugged, others coming down from a high, still others desperate for their next hit, appear unreliable. However, even in their altered states, most of the characters readily admit to their lies and become, in a sense, inverted truth-tellers.

In *Glue*, a further dimension is added—time. The characters narrate life episodes at ten-year intervals, revealing individual personalities, as well as change, if not growth, over the decades. Welsh's use of the Scottish vernacular, in particular his inventive phonetic spellings, is either loved or loathed by critics and occasionally challenges readers, but it captures the authentic street speech of the drug addicts, drop outs, and criminally inclined he depicts in his novels. This combination of inventive structure and original voice are trademarks of an Irvine Welsh novel.

A political conundrum dominates Welsh's works. Ostensibly his plots and themes reveal a rejection of Thatcherism, the conservative social and economic politics associated with Margaret Thatcher, prime Minister of Great Britain from 1979 to 1990. During her tenure, Thatcher argued against devolution, or home rule, for Scotland, fearing the country would be inundated with foreign immigrants and unable to function independently of Great Britain. Portrayals of epidemic drug addiction and rampant human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection among the disaffected youth of Edinburgh in *Trainspotting* and other novels appear an indictment of Thatcher's failed social policies. Ironically, economic progress enabled the

same conservative government to better provide for disenfranchised citizens in the form of social welfare programs and treatment centers. Both services are readily taken advantage of by the characters in Welsh's first novel. Thus, the author presents Britain and its government as enablers, allowing Scotland and its citizens to continue their addictions, both to dependence upon British rule and to drugs. Through their use of aliases and bogus addresses, characters procure additional government aid with no remorse; they relish duping their perceived oppressor in this manner. In contrast, Mark Renton in *Trainspotting* differs from his mates. Though he lives on the dole and barter clinic-issued opium on the street for his drug of choice, heroin, he is more attuned to the irony of his situation, observing that it does little good to blame the British.

Welsh's narratives are marked by intense depictions of aimless lives in bleak circumstances. Characters function (or more appropriately, malfunction) in a social network that revolves around abuse in its myriad forms. Illegal drug use, animal torture, and physical violence against women and men, including mates, abound in his novels. Most stories focus on the lives of men and fall into the category of masculinist fiction. The lives of young male drug addicts in *Trainspotting* are marked by a fascination with drugs, violence, football (soccer), and music. When excessive drug use has not rendered them disinterested in sex or completely impotent, they also obsess about, or engage in, sexual activities with young women, whom they frequently refer to in crude terms. Likewise *Glue*, the chronicle of four lifelong friends, focuses almost exclusively on male behaviors. In such works, Welsh posits the nature versus nurture question. Are the aggressive and violent behaviors of men biologically determined? Can society ever vanquish them? Welsh appears to answer in the affirmative to the first question and leave the second for readers to resolve.

In interviews, Welsh candidly discusses his former heroin addiction, reveals his postnationalist political views, and admits that his fiction portrays contemporary Scottish life as desolate and hopeless for many of its citizens. Responding to accusations from a handful of critics that his works promote a misogynist, racist, violent worldview, Welsh reminds readers not to confuse the author with his

characters. The two characters most frequently cited by critics for their inhumanity are Begbie, who features in *Trainspotting* and *Porno*, and Detective Bruce Robertson of *Filth*. Their vile behaviors, including torture and rape, warrant such derision, but certainly they are the monstrous creations, not the mind-set, of their creator.

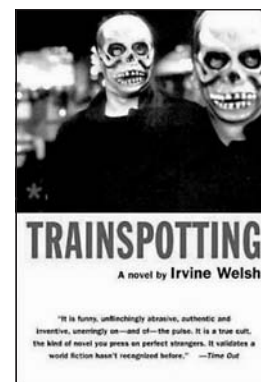
## TRAINSPOTTING

**First published:** 1993

**Type of work:** Novel

*Welsh's first novel follows the lives of five loosely associated acquaintances as they navigate the dangerous, but seductive, counterculture of drugs and sex in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the 1980's.*

*Trainspotting* depicts the adventures of five young men in Edinburgh's violent, drug-infested, and depressed neighborhoods, an image at odds with the city's global reputation as a cultural center. Welsh's Edinburgh does not resemble the tourist destination, with its famed arts festivals, because he scrapes away the romantic veneer to reveal the city's underclass realities: addiction, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), and unemployment. When members of the gang journey to other locales, such as London, the scenery does not improve. The novel's tour guides go by the nicknames Rents, Sick Boy, Spud, Begbie, and Tommy. The majority of the stories are told by Rents, with his mates supplying the remainder in hodgepodge fashion. It is mainly an account of their parties and crimes. Their illegal activities include, among others, heists both major and minor and drug transactions and usage. Clearly the more shocking behaviors recounted in the novel fall under the category of people's inhumanity and their indifference to the suffering of others: a baby's crib death that does not stop a party, but merely relocates it; the arro-





gance of an HIV-positive man who engages in unprotected sex as a form of serial murder; and the premeditated killing of a dog executed as a practical joke.

The novel's title is a reference to the pastime of marking the arrival and departure times of trains in stations. It is also a metaphor for drug usage, a way to pass the hours when there is nothing better to do or hope for. Though dark humor, gritty realism, and cold pessimism prevail in Welsh's *Trainspotting*, the novel does provide a glimmer of hope for the future of its lead character. Though Mark Renton (or Rents) is a drug addict who endures numerous indignities to obtain his fixes, including rescuing opium suppositories from a befouled toilet, he neither glamorizes nor endorses his lifestyle. Throughout the novel, in actions and words, he expresses fatigue with his life's predictability and hopelessness. When finally he flees his mates and Scotland after a double-cross at the novel's end, it is with the intention of using his ill-gained money to go clean in Amsterdam, unlikely, since that city is another drug capital. Though Renton practices a skewed ethics—stealing from his partners in crime in order to save himself—he nonetheless breaks with the moral indifference of his comrades.

Characters in *Trainspotting* appear in other novels by Welsh, either in cameo roles, as in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, or in larger roles, as in *Glue*. The novel *Porno* offers a reunion of sorts for the commiserating gang; the plot picks up where *Trainspotting* leaves off, following Rents's flight.

## GLUE

**First published:** 2001

**Type of work:** Novel

*A multivoiced chronicle of male bonding that follows four friends across three decades, beginning in early childhood and ending at middle age with the suicide of one.*

*Glue* is a novel that tracks male relationships and the maintenance of a group friendship over a thirty-year span of time, beginning in the 1970's and ending early in the twenty-first century. At ten-year intervals, Carl, Gally, Billy, and Terry report on their lives and reveal their changing perceptions of

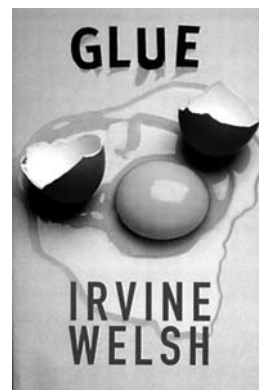
self, each other, and the world. An atypical and postmodern bildungsroman (novel of development), Welsh's work multiplies both the focus and the time frame of that traditional form. Though his characters share similar childhood hardships and adolescent misbehaviors, the adult men they become are quite disparate. Two become career men: Billy, an aspiring boxer entangled in organized crime, and Carl, a disc jockey at a nightclub. Two remain intoxicated free spirits: Terry frequents pubs and pursues women; Gally frequents jail cells and pursues drugs.

In the first segment, moral codes are bequeathed to the four from the previous generation of men, their fathers: Never hit a woman, stand by your friends, and never snitch. These simple directives initially offer the boys a guide for life, but they fail them in the end, when one adult character's self-interest overrides his concern for the good of the group. Unlike *Trainspotting*, where a character's break from the pack was a necessary and even brave act, *Glue* suggests the opposite.

In terms of its style Welsh's fourth novel is reminiscent of *Trainspotting* and its cacophony of narrators, but *Glue* introduces a third-person narrative into the mix of character voices. Though suggestive of inhalant drug usage, the title of the novel actually refers metaphorically to the experiences that cement friendships, the adhesives that bond people for life.

## SUMMARY

Critics rank Irvine Welsh chief among a group of writers known as the Scottish Renaissance, the moniker an acknowledgment of the burgeoning literary scene in Scotland that began in the 1990's and continues into the twenty-first century. The impact of Welsh's fiction upon Scottish literature has been profound. Some critics claim his works have introduced a new structure for the novel itself, one incorporating modes adapted from video game, computer, and film formats. Whether his style has



truly revolutionized the novel, offering an authentic post-postmodern vehicle for storytelling, remains to be seen. Certainly Welsh's presentations of urban Scottish life at the turn of the twenty-first century offer a reactionary response to both Thatcherism and Scottish nationalism.

Dorothy Dodge Robbins

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#### SHORT FICTION:

*The Acid House*, 1994

*Ecstasy: Three Tales of Chemical Romance*, 1996

*If You Liked School, You'll Love Work—*, 2007

#### DRAMA:

*Headstate*, pr. 1994

*You'll Have Had Your Hole*, pr., pb. 1998

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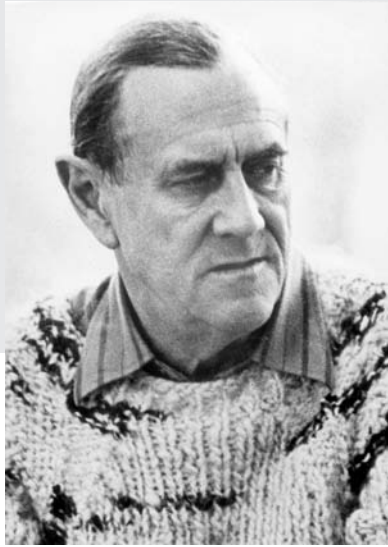
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What positive and negative attributes of male-dominant culture are revealed in Irvine Welsh's fiction?
- Examine how Welsh's *Trainspotting* dispels romanticized images of Scotland, its heritage, and its history.
- Explore how Welsh's dark humor both relieves and reinforces the despair and hopelessness of his characters' lives.
- In the aptly named *Glue*, how do sex, drugs, and rock and roll serve to bond Terry, Billy, Carl, and Gally? What other factors cement their friendship?
- The four mates in *Glue* inherit moral codes from their fathers. How do these codes help direct their behaviors, and under what circumstances do they fail to serve them?
- What is Welsh's attitude toward Scottish nationalism and independence?
- How do Welsh's plot devices, including his use of montage and competing narrators, reflect the disjunction of his characters' circumstances?



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## PATRICK WHITE

**Born:** London, England  
May 28, 1912

**Died:** Sydney, New South Wales, Australia  
September 30, 1990

*Australia's most famous writer, White produced some of the most lasting works of modern literature.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Patrick White was born in London in 1912. He was the son of Victor White, a wealthy Australian farmer, and Ruth Withycombe, whose family had arrived in Australia from England some years before their marriage. White enjoyed a privileged childhood in rural Australia and then spent his adolescent years in boarding school in England. At seventeen, he returned to Australia and worked for some time in his family's sheep-farming business. During the 1930's, he traveled widely in Europe as his literary career began. It was during these years that his distinct personal and artistic identity took shape.

White served in World War II as a member of the Royal Air Force's intelligence division. He was stationed in Egypt and Greece as part of the Near Eastern campaign, in which Australians were extensively involved. During his time in Greece, he made the acquaintance of Manoly Lascaris, who was to become his companion for life. White and Lascaris returned to Australia after the war's conclusion, where they took up residence in the suburbs of Sydney.

As White's fiction became more acclaimed, he reaped the rewards and the burdens of celebrity, becoming the lightning rod of both praise and criticism from an Australian public hungry for a countryman to find a prominent place on the literary

map. White attempted to live a sedate life, surrounded by a close circle of friends. The spotlight of celebrity continued to intrude, however, culminating in 1973 when White won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the citation of which praised him for "bringing a new continent into literature." White, again refraining from excessive publicity, refused to go to Stockholm to claim the prize. (The prize was accepted for him by his close friend, the artist Sidney Nolan.) He did lend his prominence to several social causes as he became more politically active in the later years of his life. White opposed the spread of nuclear weapons, was in favor of land rights for Australian Aborigines, and was a staunch supporter of a controversial prime minister, Gough Whitlam. These interests, and his continued literary production, took up his time until his death on September 30, 1990.

### ANALYSIS

Like most writers, White began his career with what he came to regard as a literary apprenticeship. His first two novels, *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and the Dead* (1941), were intensely disliked by their author, who discouraged publishers from reprinting them. Even after White's death, these novels have been very difficult for literary scholars, much less the general public, to lay their hands upon. White considered his literary career to have fully commenced with *The Aunt's Story* (1948), a judgment in which most of his critics concur. This novel began the series of artistically ambitious works that made White a major name in modern literature. *The Tree of Man* (1955) is a pastoral tale of frontier settlement, characterized by un-

sparing though affectionate portraits of the protagonists. This was followed by *Voss* (1957), generally considered to be White's major work, and then by *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), which is taken up largely with the idea of a few good individuals redeeming the immorality and pointlessness of their fellows. *The Solid Mandala* (1966) is a fascinating tale of twins. It began a more artistically experimental phase, exemplified by *The Vivisector* (1970), and *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). White's interests became more historical in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), which returned to the era of the European colonization of Australia, and *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), which is set amid the tumultuous changes of the early twentieth century. In the 1980's, White produced both a straightforward autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait* (1981), and a fictional distortion of one, *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986). *Memoirs of Many in One* explores his homosexuality more openly than do previous books.

No one has ever accused White of lacking ambition. He excited much critical controversy during his lifetime. White's novels are massive not only in size but also in emotional and artistic scope. Each of his books seems to be trying to make a conclusive statement, in artistic form, about the nature of human experience. In this regard, White emulated such great international modernist writers as James Joyce and Thomas Mann. White's books use setting as the backdrop for the enactment of primal spiritual quests by characters who, though sometimes trapped by the mediocrities of everyday life, are always trying to assert themselves in some sort of higher dimension. This hardly means, though, that White does not delight in sketching individual traits for each of his characters, who are some of the most memorable personages in modern fiction.

Although White was the crucial force in the emergence of modern Australian literature, he never saw himself as an Australian nationalist or as someone whose first aim as a writer was to dedicate himself to recording the full variety of Australian life and society. Opposing the narrowness and anti-intellectualism that he saw as typical of much of the Australian society, White was often at odds with the fundamental values of other Australians. White's novels resonate, however, with the natural beauty and dynamic breadth of the Australian continent.

White was a writer of high seriousness who, al-

though hardly lacking humor, had a very earnest sense of artistic mission. His works possess deep spiritual energy and are open to a tremendous depth of interpretation. By the end of the twentieth century, this very serious attitude toward fiction was somewhat out of style. More ironic attitudes toward art had more currency. Thus White's reputation suffered in the years after his death. Yet it may be argued that White's sense that art mattered, that it could make a difference, is what will endear him most to readers of future generations.

## THE AUNT'S STORY

**First published:** 1948

**Type of work:** Novel

*Theodora Goodman, as her name suggests, is a good person in search of acceptance.*

*The Aunt's Story* tells the tale of Theodora Goodman, an eccentric. One of White's aims in the book is to upend conventional notions of what is and is not normal. Although Theodora is different from most other people, the reader is led to conclude that this difference makes her, if anything, superior to the majority of other human beings, who lack her sensitivity, creativity, and depth. Theodora epitomizes these qualities, which belong to everyone, although the demands of everyday society may often require that they lay dormant.

*The Aunt's Story* is an autobiographical work. In the manner of such classics as George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927; *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1922-1931), the novel attempts to chart the growth and development of a soul. There is a difference, however, in White's novel. The other authors portray their souls as representative, as typical human selves in whose experience the reader can participate with ease. White, on the other hand, focuses deliberately on an eccentric and wayward soul, in order to show the value of personal qualities that are often despised or repressed by society. The tension between the individuality and universality of Theodora's predicament is displayed in her name. Theodora means gift of God in Greek, and her surname clearly alludes to the goodness present in the individual.

Theodora is one of two daughters born to George Goodman, an irresponsible landowner who is an irresistible force in the life of his two daughters. The Goodmans live in a house named Meroë, after an ancient Ethiopian kingdom. As a girl, Theodora lives under the illusion that Meroë contains the entire world. Meroë, to the young Theodora, is a self-sufficient universe where she can withdraw into her own private daydream world, secure in the knowledge that Meroë and her father will protect her from any outside harm. Of the two sisters, Theodora is imaginative, creative, and artistic. Fanny is practical, conventional, and worldly. George Goodman is simultaneously dominating and incompetent. Theodora's childhood takes place under his shadow.

The Goodmans move, under financial pressure, to the urban center of Sydney as Theodora approaches adulthood. This move away from Meroë has the air of an expulsion from Eden to it. Theodora is ejected from the protective cocoon of her childhood and is confronted with the great outside world. Theodora finds that her relationships as an adult are colored by her regret at losing her childhood world of innocence. This affects her romantic relationship with Huntly Clarkson, a young gentleman who is attractive in the eyes of Sydney society. Clarkson is likable and easy mannered, but Theodora nevertheless rejects him because he is too materialistic and too much at home in the world, insufficiently in touch with the unusual states of consciousness that have come to dominate Theodora's psyche. Theodora has a brief relationship with a man who is more artistic, a cello player named Moraitis, but they are unable to build anything permanent.

In the second part of the novel, Theodora goes to Europe. It is the era between the two world wars, a time of brilliance and decadence. Theodora stays at the Hôtel du Midi, which is a microcosm of European culture and society. Among the representative personages Theodora encounters are General Sokolnikov, a garrulous Russian émigré, Mrs. Rapallo, an allegorical figure who assists Theodora in coming to terms with the unresolved legacy of her fantasies, and Katina Pavlou, a young woman who serves as an object of fantasy for Theodora, who attempts to save Katina from the perils of the adult world to which Theodora believes Katina has fallen prey.

These relationships, though, are transient, not providing Theodora with any stabilizing anchor. This transience leads to the pathos of the third part of the novel. Theodora finds herself in the United States. She has an encounter with a man named Holstius, which, though brief, provides her with more of a soul mate than she has ever possessed. After leaving Holstius, Theodora roams aimlessly across the country. She finally reaches her end in the home of a Midwestern farm family, the Johnsons, who, though not understanding her creativity, treat her with the compassion and humanity she has long deserved. They enable Theodora to die with dignity and honor.

## Voss

**First published:** 1957

**Type of work:** Novel

*A major novel, occupying a central position in Australian literature, Voss tells of epic discovery and epic defeat.*

*Voss* is not only considered Patrick White's greatest novel, but is most probably the greatest single work of Australian literature. *Voss* is a story of a German explorer of the Australian outback in the nineteenth century. The title character is often compared to a historical figure, the German-born Australian explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, but the inspiration behind White's character is symbolic, not historical. Johann Ulrich Voss is not pictured simply as an explorer, whose primary aim is the opening up of new geographic territory. He is, equally, an investigator into undiscovered realms of the human spirit, symbolized but not fully expressed by the wild and desolate beauty of remote Australia.

When *Voss* comes to Australia, he is a confident, even arrogant specimen of European masculinity. His mission of exploration is an assertion of mastery, of certainty that Voss has the power to penetrate the unknown and gain the upper hand over whatever secrets that the unknown may possess. When Voss arrives in Australia, he makes the rounds of Sydney's high society, seeking to raise money to finance his expedition. During the course of these fund-raising efforts, Voss encounters Laura Trevelyan, a young, beautiful Sydney so-



cialite. Voss and Laura are immediately attracted to each other, but their attraction is not ever fully realized. Voss and Laura are, superficially, very different. Voss is brawny and action-oriented, and Laura has spent her life amid upper-class frivolity, although she is far less corrupted by her milieu than her cousin, Belle Bonner. Laura achieves a more authentic emotional insight into Voss's mission than do the explorer's other financial backers who are more overtly encouraging.

Voss leaves Sydney and embarks on his great quest. Accompanying him on his expedition are a number of men, most prominent among them the poet Frank Le Mesurier. Le Mesurier represents intellect as compared to the strength of Voss, the internal world as opposed to the external. Le Mesurier also symbolizes aspects of Voss's own character.

The expedition, after journeying to Newcastle by sea, goes through the Hunter Valley to the small town of Rhine Towers, which is depicted as bucolic and idyllic. Then the group goes through the hilly New England region and across the Queensland border to the hamlet of Yildra, which is the last beacon of civilization before their plunge into the outback.

White derived his picture of the outback not as much from literal experience as from the landscape paintings of his friend Sidney Nolan. The final portion of the novel, accordingly, becomes less realistic and narrative and takes on poetic and symbolic overtones. As the heroism of the expedition becomes more impressive and praiseworthy, the sense of its inevitable doom becomes all the more resonant. These men not only fail, but die. Le Mesurier's death begins the expedition's sense of its own failure. His death also foreshadows the death of the protagonist. By the time Voss meets his end, he has lost his confident arrogance and has been made wise by suffering. His material defeat is his spiritual victory.

As Voss is dying, he has a final vision—of Laura Trevelyan, long since left behind. Laura experi-

ences a vision of Voss at the same time, thousands of miles away in her secure Sydney residence. This spiritual communion underscores the main point of the novel: What occurs within the human soul, not within the easily categorized achievements of the outer world, is what is truly significant.

## THE VIVISECTOR

**First published:** 1970

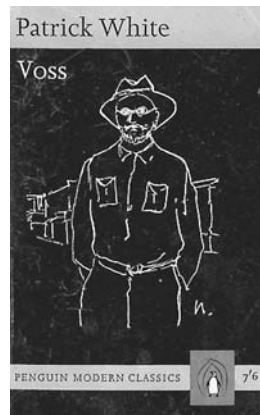
**Type of work:** Novel

*Hurtle Duffield, a painter of humble origins, struggles with his divided, conflicting nature.*

*The Vivisector* is White's most concentrated study of the nature of artistic genius. Like *The Aunt's Story*, it is about an individual marked off from his peers at an early age by an unusual creativity. Unlike Theodora Goodman, however, the protagonist of *The Vivisector*, Hurtle Duffield, is not merely an eccentric victim of society's prejudice. Duffield harnesses his creativity into the production of paintings, channeling his talent into a concrete and socially recognized outlet. His art nevertheless stands as a testimony to his unique, sensitive, and tough-minded soul. In telling the story of the life and fortunes of an artist, White places his novel in the European tradition known as the *Künstlerroman*, or "novel of the artist." Such a novel not only conveys the biography of an artist, it also serves to reflect upon the nature of art and the role of art in life. *The Vivisector* is no exception to this tradition.

Young Hurtle Duffield is early recognized for his artistic potential. Hurtle loves his parents and is appreciated by them, but the Duffield family is mired in poverty and knows Hurtle is fundamentally different. Seeing this situation, Mrs. Courtney, a wealthy patron of the arts who has noticed Hurtle's talent, offers to pay the Duffield family a sum of £500 in order to gain the right to bring him up herself. Even at the age of eight, Hurtle, through his separation from his family, comes to understand that artistic achievement may necessitate sacrifice.

The Courtneys provide Hurtle with comfortable surroundings, but they are shallow and bourgeois, failing to understand his creative temperament. It



is only in adulthood that he is fully free to create for himself. A symbol of this independence is his first romantic relationship, with a woman named Nance Lightfoot. Hurtle's relationship with Nance, however, is not a whole one. He is so preoccupied with his art that the only women with whom he can be involved are those who will not demand the entirety of his soul. Nance, for example, understands none of his paintings.

Hurtle achieves some success as an artist and travels to Europe. In Greece, he encounters another woman, Hero Pavloussis, with whom he has a romantic rendezvous in the island of Perialos. Less stable than Nance, Hero's experiences glide more seamlessly into Hurtle's art. The two lovers, nevertheless, do not achieve a permanent relationship, and Hurtle has a vision of the artist as a great vivisector always cutting open other people's experiences, hurting and damaging in order to create. Far from any conventional view of the artist as celebrant of optimistic creativity, Hurtle's witheringly honest reconciliation with his own artistic conscience epitomizes the dilemmas of an artist in the modern era.

Hurtle returns to Australia and old age. In his last years, he encounters two more women who, in the manner of Nance and Hero, function as gauges of his own personal and artistic development. Hurtle's relationships with these women, however, are not of a sexual nature. Rhoda Courtney is the

daughter of Hurtle's former patron and foster mother. Rhoda is physically and mentally disabled. Far from receiving the special treatment accorded to Hurtle by the admiring Courtneys, Rhoda is abandoned and neglected. Hurtle, though, comes to treasure Rhoda as a friend and companion. Kathy Volkov is a young girl who becomes an artistic protégé of Hurtle. Hurtle sees something of himself in Kathy. He is hopeful that Kathy possesses talent such as his without the psychological burdens Hurtle has had to bear. Perhaps Kathy will be able to create without becoming a vivisector.

Hurtle is feverishly working on a painting when he feels death approaching. Slipping across the border of life, he sees flash before his eyes an ideal of spiritual and artistic wholeness he has failed to achieve in life. This ideal is an indigo-colored vision, verging upon divinity.

## SUMMARY

Patrick White's massive and complex novels stand as monuments to the artistic ambitions of the modern age. With a strangeness and an expansiveness as outsized as the Australian continent from which they emanated, they enact fundamental oppositions of the human spirit. It is hard to decide which is the most impressive facet of White's talent—his artistry or his daring. White's works will be read as long as the craft of fiction is cherished.

Nicholas Birns

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

- What advantages did Patrick White enjoy in having early familiarity with both European and Australian life?
- Does the protagonist of Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story* find success in the United States primarily because of the virtues of the country or because her previous experiences have made her wiser?
- What is the significance of Voss, in the novel named for him, being a German?
- Is Hurtle Duffield's search for the artistic life crowned by success?
- Might White's theory of fiction and his accomplishments in it suggest the likelihood of a rise in his reputation among critics as the twenty-first century progresses?

## RUDY WIEBE

**Born:** Fairholme, Saskatchewan, Canada  
October 4, 1934

*Wiebe has raised the history of the people of the Canadian prairie to the level of modern epic and moral parable.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Rudy Henry Wiebe (WEE-bee) was born in a one-room log cabin near Fairholme, Saskatchewan, Canada, on October 4, 1934, the youngest son of Abram and Tena Knelsen Wiebe, devout Mennonites who had fled Russia in 1930. They had settled as hardy pioneers in the tiny community of Speedwell-Jackpine, a hundred miles northwest of Saskatoon, in the bush and prairie country of northern Saskatchewan.

On many a long winter night, Rudy would listen, entranced, to Mennonite stories of a Russia where czars and Bolsheviks had terrorized villages, wars and religious disputes had torn communities asunder, and much hardship and sometimes starvation had afflicted many. Those stories, told in a Frisian dialect of Low German, made a deep impression on the child. The bleak, empty but forceful presence of the environment outside the home also did. Both would affect his stories that were to come.

When he started school in a one-room schoolhouse, Rudy had to learn English, but he proved an eager student. By the time he was in the fourth grade, he had consumed all the books in the one-shelf library. In 1947, the family moved to Coaldale, Alberta, where Rudy enrolled at the Alberta Mennonite High School, whose warm harmonious spirit affirmed the young adolescent's faith and impressed on him the importance of a community that not only preaches but also practices the good moral life.

Entering the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 1953, Wiebe soon discovered his love for language and literature. Encouraged by his teachers, Wiebe at age twenty-one entered a short story contest and won first prize. A year later he became a published writer when his short story "The Power"

was chosen to appear in *New Voices: Canadian University Writing of 1956*.

After he graduated with a B.A. in 1956, Wiebe put his skills to work as a research writer, but his real ambitions lay in academia. Various fellowships enabled him to study for a year at the University of Tübingen in Germany and then to continue his graduate studies at the University of Alberta. In 1958, he married Tena F. Isaak, with whom he would have two sons and a daughter. Wiebe earned an M.A. in creative writing, added a bachelor's of theology from the Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg in 1961, taught high school English for a year in Selkirk, Manitoba, and then accepted an appointment as editor of *The Mennonite Brethren Herald* in Winnipeg.

It was a short-lived position, for in that same year, 1962, his first novel, written as his master's thesis, was published. The title, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, proved ironically prophetic. The Mennonite community felt attacked by the book, which takes a critical look at religious inconsistency and hypocrisy, and in the waves of controversy that ensued, Wiebe resigned his editorial post and soon joined the English department of Goshen College in Indiana, where he taught from 1963 to 1967.

The stinging rebuke of many of his own people did not silence the author. He continued to pursue his literary ambitions by studying creative writing at the University of Iowa in 1964 and by publishing his second novel, *First and Vital Candle*, in 1966. This novel, a fervent critique of what constitutes a genuine Christianity, was adapted for radio in 1967. Wiebe's alma mater, the University of Alberta in Edmonton, offered him a teaching position in creative writing. For the next twenty-four years, he combined teaching at that university and writing, honing his craft toward the level of major art.

The decade of the 1970's was a highly productive one. *The Blue Mountains of China* was published in 1970, followed by *The Temptations of Big Bear* in 1973, which received the distinguished Governor-General's Literary Award. Encouraged, and with his critical reputation well established, Wiebe went on to publish two volumes of short stories, another novel, and a play within the decade. Other novels and a short story volume followed in the 1980's. In addition to writing and teaching, Wiebe maintained a busy lecture schedule that took him to five continents, while also putting in a two-year stint as chair of the Writers Union of Canada.

After his retirement from the University of Alberta in 1991, Wiebe turned to full-time writing. In 1992, he published *Chinook Christmas*, a children's book illustrated by David More, and in 1994, another major novel appeared, *A Discovery of Strangers*. Wiebe received his second Governor General's Award in 1994 for *A Discovery of Strangers*. He also was awarded the Lorne Pierce Gold Medal of the Society of Canada for his contributions to Canadian literature.

## ANALYSIS

Much of Rudy Wiebe's writing is profoundly informed by his Mennonite background and his moral convictions of how the human community ought to conduct its life. An inherent danger for any author who writes out of a strong ideology is to lapse into didacticism or moralism. Wiebe does not entirely escape that trap, especially in his early novels. Such lapses are usually brief, and in his later fiction the message increasingly is within the art rather than being superimposed upon it.

Basic to Wiebe's moral framework is the belief that the essence of being human is spiritual. When the human link to God is broken or subverted, the consequence is invariably internal and external dissonance. Abe Ross in Wiebe's second novel, *First and Vital Candle*, is one among many of Wiebe's characters who represents that dissonance. Alienated from the faith of his childhood, he feels empty and lost. He searches for meaning in other faiths as a trading company agent among the Ojibway Indians in northern Ontario. When he meets the demoniac Bjornesen, who, without a conscience, exploits and corrupts the Indians, Ross is ready to kill him. The example and words of missionary Josh Bishop persuade Ross, however, of the Christian

truth that evil can only be overcome with good. Sally Howell, teacher of Indian children, breaks down his agnosticism with her love and spirituality. When she dies, Ross is alone but ready to embrace the faith he had lost.

A second basic tenet of Wiebe's religious view is that God means for people's lives to be lived in harmony with and service to others. People are expected to look out for others rather than for themselves. When the link to God is intact and forged by a right understanding, it must follow that the link to one's neighbor is also. When the first link is broken or weakened by misconceptions, the relationship to one's neighbor is necessarily affected. This theme dominates Wiebe's fiction. Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, in particular, dramatically—and sometimes dogmatically—drives home the message that any community (such as the Mennonite town of Wapiti) that lives only to preserve its own peace and well-being, with callous disregard for others, becomes self-destructive. Though Wiebe in his first novels too often manipulates plot and character and allows message to substitute for art, many scenes are rendered with power and promise of greater things to come.

In *The Blue Mountains of China*, that promise is amply fulfilled. Boldly experimental, Wiebe skillfully handles multiple settings, narrators, and points of view as he chronicles almost a century of Mennonite history. For all its complexity and variety, the message is still the same: The human community will succumb to greed, pride, and self-interest if it is not firmly guided by a moral vision of responsibility, integrity, and self-sacrifice.

Wiebe's next novel drew considerable critical attention. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wiebe shifts the focus away from his own ethnic and religious roots, though not from northern Saskatchewan. Wiebe had discovered that Big Bear, the powerful chief of the Plains Cree, had once lived where he did, and the idea intrigued him profoundly and led him to a third thematic interest: the connection between self and the land. In his first novel, Wiebe alludes to the great-granddaughter of Big Bear.

Hearing her tell of Big Bear, Louis Riel, Wandering Spirit, Thom glimpsed the vast past of Canada regarding which he was ignorant as if it had never been: of people that had lived and acted as nobly as they knew and died without fear.



Wiebe wrote *The Temptations of Big Bear* to rectify that ignorance. In *Big Bear* and through Louis Riel, the leader of the Métis in *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), he re-creates historical characters who tried to change the course of history, endowing them with heroic and tragic stature. Both men refused to accept the white man's terms that would take away their land, their way of life, their culture, and their identity. Wiebe's most inspired writing occurs in the voice of Big Bear, a voice whose poignant beauty and poetic eloquence reduce many of the white man's speeches to mere chatter. Big Bear and Riel represent the author's ideal. They are men of great spiritual depth and power, of peace and wisdom, of nobility and vision who suffer on behalf of their people, men who inspire awe and profound respect.

Wiebe's fiction does not make for easy reading. Highly experimental, he often employs a variety of narrative techniques, multiple voices, and radical shifts in point of view and time. The serious reader nearly always is amply rewarded.

*A Discovery of Strangers* reminds readers of the power of Wiebe's art. He deals with the land and the epic events that played themselves out on that land. It is the story of John Franklin's first expedition to the Arctic in 1820. All the characters are based with realistic accuracy on real people, and all the events in the novel actually happened. The beauty of Wiebe's prose and his narrative skill transmute history into a compelling meditation on the human condition.

In all of his fiction, Wiebe celebrates the heroic, both physical and moral. Clearly committed to a moral and spiritual view of the human community, he shows the reader what people can be and what people ought to be, in contrast to what people all too often are. Wiebe has said that his fiction intends "to make us better."

## PEACE SHALL DESTROY MANY

**First published:** 1962

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young man must choose between the peace of an isolated and insulated Mennonite community and the cause of peace in a war-torn world.*

*Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Wiebe's first novel, is about the moral failures and triumphs that define the life of the human community, in this case the small Mennonite community of Wapiti in northern Saskatchewan.

The backdrop for the story is World War II. Military planes fly training missions above the town, disturbing the peace of the community, causing stillbirths among the cattle. Young Thom Wiens, plowing the fields under those planes, resents their intrusion and the violence with which he knows they are connected. The novel traces Thom's growing awareness that pacifism may be self-serving, that the apparent peace of a community may be artificial and mask the violence lurking beneath, and that peace and violence are often inextricably entangled.

Thom's mentor in his moral and intellectual awakening is Joseph Dueck, a teacher, whose penetrating questions and progressive views disturb the community's peace as much as do the planes overhead. Representing the orthodoxy of the community is Deacon Peter Block, the founder of Wapiti, an authoritarian moral watchman, and a forceful preserver of tradition. Thom discovers that this tradition includes a smug superiority that allows the Mennonites to think of and treat the Métis and Indians among them as subhuman. The tradition does not allow for active participation in war but feels free to profit from that war by selling the community's produce to the soldiers. The tradition wields authority but lacks the warmth of a compassionate heart. The tradition has bred hypocrisy, greed, hate, and bigotry.

Thom's education comes to dramatic completion in the last chapter. During the traditional Christmas pageant, he tries to clarify to himself where the star of Bethlehem that the wise men followed had led them: to the war in Europe or to the peace of Wapiti. He discovers the answer when, in a nearby barn, violence explodes, triggered by sex-

ual passion. The appearances of a town and a people, so carefully guarded, are pierced, exposing the failures underneath. Wapiti too has been at war. It too is in need of peace, real peace—the peace of God.

Wiebe found his thematic center in this first novel, but he was still struggling to develop a craft that would make his narrative aesthetically pleasing and a consistent joy to read. Some skills are already well applied in the first novel. The four-season structure of the narrative effectively supports the plot. The characters too are clearly defined and developed. The dialogue is often forced and flat, however, and the preachiness weakens the message. This first novel, a young man's novel, is impressive in its moral seriousness and shows much potential for further artistic growth.

## THE BLUE MOUNTAINS OF CHINA

**First published:** 1970

**Type of work:** Novel

*In their historical struggle to find a homeland, the Mennonites face a choice between isolation or assimilation.*

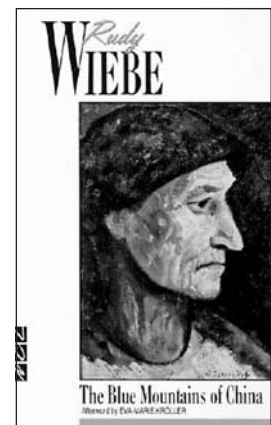
In *The Blue Mountains of China*, Wiebe offers a sweeping, panoramic view of Mennonites as they moved from Russia to Paraguay to China to Canada between the 1920's and the 1960's. A deliberately disjointed narrative tells the story of families who face the terrors of persecution and death, who exhibit acts of cowardice and courage, who confront the temptations of success and unbelief.

Central to this saga is the voice of Frieda Friesen, who at age eighty-four tells of the past. The past includes the hardships of poverty, marriage, the birth and death of many children, migration from Canada to Paraguay, plagues, epidemics, and wars. It is the quiet voice of faith, rock-steady even through intense turmoil and severe trials. Frieda's voice is interspersed with other voices. (In fact, a different point of view informs each chapter, a considerable challenge even to the serious reader.) The voices

include that of Jakob Friesen, a cousin of Frieda who speaks not of faith but of unbelief. Jakob Friesen, who tried to live for self, betrayed his son, was sentenced to ten years in Siberia, and when he was released found he had lost his family as well as his faith in the goodness of God.

There is also the story of David Epp, who, inspired by the moral courage and rectitude of his parents, leads a group of Mennonites to safety across the border to China. Then he returns to their Russian village to take the punishment upon himself. This spiritual legacy is passed on to his son, whom he never sees, but who later becomes a missionary among the Indians in a remote part of Paraguay. The spiritual force of David Epp's example also generates the story of Sam Reimer, who hears God calling him to proclaim for peace in Vietnam. When Sam dies, the inspiration to serve God that passed from father to son passes from Sam to his brother John. John Reimer literally takes up his cross and walks across Canada, a living example that the promised land for Mennonites or any human community will not be found in withdrawal or material success and security. It lies rather in a state of inward peace that comes from doing justice, from showing mercy, and from walking humbly with God.

Wiebe blends many voices in the last chapter, including the lapsed Mennonites who because of materialism, intellectual doubt, or emotional trauma have abandoned the faith, and John Reimer, the man of faith. Their community is splintered, with too many severed from the most vital connections. There is little hope that it will ever be whole again. Though Wiebe's message is similar in his first three novels, his increasing artistic finesse and control are evident in this novel. Stylistic variety and structural inventiveness provide an impressive display of the author's maturing skill.



## “THE NAMING OF ALBERT JOHNSON”

**First published:** 1974 (collected in *Where Is the Voice Coming From?*, 1974)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A fugitive from justice eludes the Mounties for fifty winter days across hundreds of miles of frozen tundra north of the Arctic Circle.*

“The Naming of Albert Johnson” is based on a mysterious, silent, and real person known to millions in the early 1930’s as the Mad Trapper of Rat River. (Wiebe published a novel in 1980, *The Mad Trapper*, that amplifies this story.) After he shoots a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the trapper becomes the object of a relentless chase. He becomes the first man in history to cross the forbidding Richardson Mountains in the dead of winter. No one ever discovered his real name, but he came to be known as Albert Johnson. Johnson is a self-exiled, wordless, solitary figure who shuns any human contact. He survives by his skills as a trapper in the Northwest Territories. When a Mountie, who is investigating thefts from Indian traplines, approaches him, the trapper shoots without hesitation. The pursuit is on.

Wiebe tells this first-rate adventure story from Johnson’s point of view, a clever strategy, for it increases the likelihood of reader sympathy with the lone villain, who might otherwise be without dimension as character. The villain turns out to be no ordinary mortal. Words do not define him, but an indomitable will and force do. He pits himself against a large posse of Mounties with more than forty dogs. They dynamite his cabin, but he escapes.

With superhuman courage and strength he outruns them through mountain passes where no human has ever ventured in winter. With animal cunning he outsmarts the dog teams, the radiomen,

and even the tracking plane overhead. He keeps going with little sleep and food in spite of frozen toes and cheeks. His tenacity and brooding rage are wordless. Those who venture too close he picks off with his unerring rifle. For fifty days he makes fools of the well-fed, well-equipped group of Mounties, with the frozen landscape a mute witness to this unequal chase. A river looping back on itself betrays him. Suddenly the dogs and the men are upon him. Finally there remains only a small crumpled body on a bedroll, a bullet in its spine, and a face frozen into a permanent snarl. All around, there is the immensity of the blasted Yukon, an appropriate symbol for the lonely anonymity of the Mad Trapper.

The story itself does not follow chronological order. Wiebe begins with the end of the hunt, and then unwinds time in reverse. The effect is that the story does not move toward climax, but toward a growing sense of wonder about the antihero, this exile from the human community and from communication. The reader cannot help but feel admiration for the extraordinary survival skills of the nameless man. More importantly, Wiebe elicits the reader’s sympathy for the human condition that can produce an Albert Johnson, disconnected from all sense of human belonging, whose blighted sense of significance can only assert itself destructively.

### SUMMARY

Like Leo Tolstoy, whom he admired, Rudy Wiebe intended for his fiction to make a difference. Though his early fiction suffered from too much moral freight, Wiebe evolved from a regional Mennonite writer to a literary artist of international acclaim and significance. His unconventional technique often puts a strain on readers, but they are engaged by his passionate, eloquent voice, by his vision that exposes threats to the moral fabric of the human community, and by his insistence that history can teach and inspire.

Henry J. Baron

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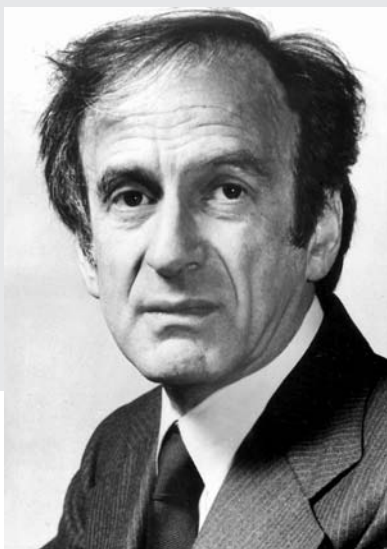
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What are the advantages and disadvantages for a writer of being reared as a Mennonite, as was Rudy Wiebe?
- What was Wiebe's agenda in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* beyond his mastery in a first novel?
- What aspects of Wiebe's background made him a likely writer to deal effectively with a subject like the John Franklin expedition?
- Why was *The Blue Mountains of China* "deliberately distorted narrative"?
- Why, in Wiebe's opinion, do isolated communities fail to achieve peace?

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## ELIE WIESEL

**Born:** Sighet, Transylvania, Romania  
September 30, 1928

*A Jewish survivor of Auschwitz and the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, Wiesel has authored more than forty books—including *Night*, his classic memoir—and is widely acknowledged as one of the most important writers to emerge from the Holocaust.*

### BIOGRAPHY

The journey that took Elie Wiesel (vee-ZEHL) through the Holocaust, the systematic destruction of nearly six million Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II, began in his native Romania, in Sighet, where he was born on September 30, 1928. Reared in a religious home, Wiesel was the third child and only son born to his parents, Shlomo and Sarah Feig Wiesel. Sighet, his hometown, was in the northern area of a region known as Transylvania. Sighet's residents at that time included some ten thousand Jews, about 40 percent of the population, and most of them were religiously Orthodox.

Sighet's Jews were subjected to Hungary's anti-Jewish policies, which included socioeconomic discrimination and deprivation of basic civil rights. Wiesel's father, a shopkeeper in Sighet, was jailed for a time because he helped rescue Polish Jews who had found their way to Hungary. Nevertheless, the young Wiesel's worlds of study, faith, and Jewish tradition remained relatively undisturbed until the Germans occupied the territory of their faltering Hungarian allies in March, 1944. Within a few weeks, the Jews of Sighet were ghettoized and then deported to Auschwitz in four transports between May 16 and May 22. Wiesel survived the shattering experiences of that German death camp and went on to write about them in his classic memoir *Un di Velt hot geshvign* (1956; *Night*, 1960). His older sis-

ters, Hilda and Beatrice, also escaped death during the Holocaust, but Wiesel's mother, father, and little sister, Tzipora, did not.

Liberated from Buchenwald on April 11, 1945, Wiesel was assisted by French relief agencies and eventually established residence in Paris. With French as his adopted language, he plunged into literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne from 1948 to 1951. Unable to complete all of his university study because he had to support himself, Wiesel found employment as a journalist. Writing for Israeli, French, and American newspapers, he took assignments that sent him to Israel and then to New York in 1956 to cover the United Nations. He became a citizen of the United States in 1963.

During the first postwar decade, writing of more than a scholarly or journalistic kind had been on Wiesel's mind. Yet he had vowed to be silent about his Holocaust experiences for ten years, and thus it was only in 1956 that he published his first book. Written in Yiddish, *Un di Velt hot geshvign* was an eight-hundred-page account of his life in Auschwitz. Two years later, he pared the manuscript to little more than one hundred pages, translated the book into French, and published it as *La Nuit* (1958; *Night*, 1960). This memoir is the best-known work of his many writings and certainly the place to begin for any reader unacquainted with them.

More than forty of Wiesel's books have been published since *Night* appeared. None of the others focuses so explicitly on the Holocaust, but that event shadows every word that he writes, and thus all of his subsequent books are built around *Night*'s testimony. Wiesel followed *Night* with two short

novels, *L'Aube* (1960; *Dawn*, 1961) and *Le Jour* (1961; *The Accident*, 1962). His fiction became longer and more complex with *La Ville de la chance* (1962; *The Town Beyond the Wall*, 1964) and *Les Portes de la forêt* (1964; *The Gates of the Forest*, 1966). By 1965, he was winning book awards such as the French Prix Rivarol and the National Jewish Book Council Literary Award.

In the year after he published *Le Mendiant de Jérusalem* (1968; *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, 1970), one of his most brilliant novels, Wiesel married Marion Rose, a native of Vienna and also a survivor of the Holocaust. She began doing the English translations of Wiesel's writing, which were originally written in French. In 1972, Wiesel was appointed distinguished professor in the department of Jewish studies at City College of the City University of New York, a position he held until 1976, when he became Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University.

Also in 1972, Wiesel published one of his best-loved books, *Celebration hassidique* (1972-1981; translated as *Souls on Fire*, 1972, and *Somewhere a Master: Further Hasidic Portraits and Legends*, 1982). In this book and several others that he has written subsequently, Wiesel uses his post-Holocaust perspective to retell the stories of teachers who led a pre-Holocaust tradition of Jewish spirituality known as Hasidism. Especially strong in Eastern Europe, Hasidism influenced Wiesel's town and family. Many followers of this tradition perished in the Holocaust. Wiesel strives to keep the memory of them and their Hasidic tradition alive.

Awarded honorary degrees by Wesleyan University (1979), Brandeis University (1980), and Yale University (1981), to name only a few, plus literary prizes such as France's 1980 Prix Livre-Inter (for *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné*, 1980; *The Testament*, 1981), Wiesel accepted new responsibilities when President Jimmy Carter appointed him to chair the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, which is charged to honor the dead, remember the past, and educate for the future. He served in this position from 1980 to 1986. During this period, his prolific writing continued, as did his long-standing commitment to humanitarian causes.

Wiesel's writings are repeated protests against injustice. Buttressing his words with deeds, Wiesel has spent much of his life protesting on behalf of oppressed people and interceding with world lead-

ers to help those in need. His words and deeds alike were distinctively recognized in ceremonies held in Oslo, Norway, in December, 1986, when he received the Nobel Peace Prize. He used his Nobel Prize to establish The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, which supports educational efforts aimed at reducing hatred and the destructive conflict that it produces. Such themes continue to be dominant in books such as his novels *Le Crépuscule, au loin* (1987; *Twilight*, 1988) and *Les Temps des déracinés* (2003; *The Time of the Uprooted*, 2005), as well in *Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (1991), which is based on lectures that Wiesel has given for many years in New York, and *Wise Men and Their Tales: Portraits of Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Masters* (2003). Important insights about Wiesel and his authorship will also be found in his two-volume autobiography, *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* (1994; *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 1995) and *Et la mer n'est pas remplie* (1996; *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs*, 1999).

## ANALYSIS

"I never intended to be a philosopher," insists Wiesel. "The only role I sought was that of witness. I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life." Many optimistic assumptions about the innate goodness of human nature, humanity's moral progress, and even love itself were incinerated at Auschwitz. Yet Wiesel, the survivor, testifies that despair is not the answer. His writings sustain the plea that death deserves no more victories and that evil should never have the last word.

"The Holocaust," writes Wiesel, "demands interrogation and calls everything into question. Traditional ideas and acquired values, philosophical systems and social theories—all must be revised in the shadow of Birkenau." Birkenau was the killing center at Auschwitz, and Wiesel finds its shadow putting everything to the test. Whatever the traditional ideas and acquired values that have existed, whatever the philosophical systems and social theories that human minds have produced, they were too late or too inadequate to prevent Auschwitz, or, worse, they helped pave the way to that place. The Holocaust, insists Wiesel, shows that people's thoughts and actions must be revised in the face of those facts, unless one wishes to continue the same

blindness that produced the darkness of *Night*. The needed revisions, of course, do not guarantee a better outcome. Yet failure to use the Holocaust to call all of humankind into question diminishes chances to mend the world.

“The questions,” contends Wiesel, “remain questions.” He does not place his greatest confidence in answers. Answers—especially when they take the form of philosophical or theological systems—make him suspicious. No matter how hard people try to resolve the most important issues, questions remain, and rightly so. Typically, however, the human propensity may be to quest for certainty. Wiesel’s urging is to resist that temptation, especially when it aims to settle things that ought to remain unsettled and unsettling. If answers aim to settle things, their ironic, even tragic, outcome is that they often produce disagreement, division, and death. Hence, Wiesel wants questions to be forever fundamental.

Wiesel’s point is not that responses to questions are simply wrong; they have their place and can be essential. Nevertheless, questions deserve lasting priority because they invite continuing inquiry, further dialogue, shared wonder, and openness. Resisting final solutions, these ingredients can create friendship in ways that answers never can.

“And yet—and yet.” This,” says Wiesel, “is the key expression in my work.” Always suspicious of answers but never failing for questions, Wiesel structures problems not simply for their own sake but to inquire, “What is the next step?” Reaching an apparent conclusion, he moves forward. Such forms of thought reject easy paths in favor of hard ones.

Wiesel’s “and yet—and yet” affirms that it is more important to seek than to find, more important to question than to answer, more important to travel than to arrive. The point is that it can be dangerous to believe what one wants to believe, deceptive to find things too clear, just as it is dishonest not to strive to bring them into focus. Even the endings to Wiesel’s stories resist leaving his readers with fixed conclusions. Instead, he wants his readers to feel his “and yet—and yet,” which provides hope that people may keep moving to choose life and not to end it. In short, Wiesel seeks the understanding that lives in friendship—understanding that includes tentativeness and fallibility, comprehension that looks for error and revises judgment when er-

ror is found, and recognition that knowing is not a matter of final conviction but of continuing dialogue.

Wiesel urges his readers not to draw hasty or final conclusions; rather his emphasis is on exploration and inquiry. It might be objected that such an outlook tends to encourage indecision and even indifference. One of Wiesel’s most significant contributions, however, runs in precisely the opposite direction. His perspective on understanding and on morality is of one piece. Thus, his writings emphasize that dialogue leads not to indecision but to an informed decisiveness. Tentativeness becomes protest when unjustified conviction asserts itself. Openness results not in indifference but in the loyalty of which friendship is made and on which it depends.

“[P]assivity and indifference and neutrality,” adds Wiesel, “always favor the killer, not the victim.” He will never fully understand the world’s killers. To do so would be to legitimize them by showing that they were part of a perfectly rational scheme. Although for very different reasons, he will not fully understand their victims, either; the victims’ silent screams call into question every account of their dying that presents itself as a final solution. Yet Wiesel insists that understanding should be no less elusive where indifference prevails. Too often, indifference exists among those who could make a difference, as it can characterize those who stand between killers and victims but aid the former against the latter by doing too little, too late.

## NIGHT

**First published:** *Un di Velt hot geshvign*, 1956;  
*La Nuit*, 1958 (English translation, 1960)

**Type of work:** Memoir

*Wiesel describes his teenage experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, where he endured the Holocaust in 1944 and 1945.*

At the beginning of *Night*, Wiesel introduces someone he met toward the end of 1941. His name was Moshe, and he became one of the boy’s teachers. They discussed religious topics, and one day they talked about prayer. Wiesel asked Moshe why

he prayed, and his teacher replied that he prayed for strength to ask God the right questions. Later, the Hungarian police deported Moshe from Sighet, Wiesel's hometown, because he was a foreigner. His destination was Poland and death at the hands of the Germans, but somehow Moshe escaped and found his way back to Sighet. The Jews of Sighet did not believe his tale of destruction.

Although the Holocaust was raging all around them, the Hungarian Jews were not decimated until 1944. Their lives began to change drastically, however, once the Germans occupied Hungary that March. In a matter of days, Sighet's Jews had to deal with quarantines, expropriations of their property, and the yellow stars that targeted them. Then they were ghettoized and deported. Jammed into train cars, destination unknown, the Jews of Sighet—Elie Wiesel, his little sister, Tzipora, and their parents among them—eventually crossed the Polish frontier and arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Emerging from their train-car prisons into midnight air fouled by burning flesh, the Jews of Sighet were separated by the secret police: men to the left, women to the right. Wiesel lost sight of his mother and little sister, not fully aware that the parting was forever. Father and son stuck together. Spared the fate of Wiesel's mother and sister, they were not “selected” for the gas chambers but for slave labor instead. From late May, 1944, until mid-January, 1945, Wiesel and his father endured Auschwitz's brutal regimen. As the Red Army approached the camp,

the two were evacuated to Germany. Severely weakened by the death march to Buchenwald, Wiesel's father perished there, but the son was liberated on April 11, 1945.

*Night* covers in detail these events, but it is much more than a chronological narrative. The power of this memoir emerges especially from the anguished questions that Wiesel's Holocaust experiences will not put to

rest. Before he entered Auschwitz, Wiesel “believed profoundly.” Yet on that fateful night, and in the days that followed, his world changed forever. Opti-

mism about humankind, trust in the world, confidence in God—Auschwitz radically threatened, if it did not destroy, so many reasons for hope.

This point is illustrated especially well by one of the book's most unforgettable moments. Wiesel describes the hanging of three Auschwitz prisoners—one of them a child. As the prisoners watched the child die, Wiesel heard a man asking: “For God's sake, where is God?” Wiesel writes that “from within me. I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows.’”

Death's reign in the Kingdom of Night was so pervasive that Wiesel ends *Night* by reporting that a corpse stared back at him when he saw his own reflection in a mirror for the first time after liberation. Yet *Night* does not give death—God's or humanity's—the last word. By breaking silence, by telling a story that is full of reasons for despair, Wiesel protests against the wasting of life and testifies for the mending of the world by humankind and God alike.

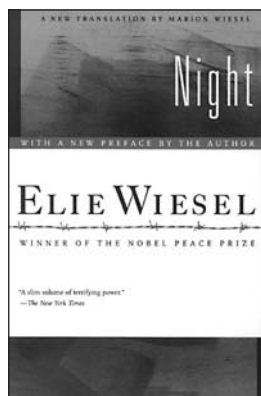
## THE ACCIDENT

**First published:** *Le Jour*, 1961 (English translation, 1962)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Eliezer, a young Holocaust survivor, wrestles with his past in a struggle to decide whether life is worth living.*

*The Accident* is the third part of a trilogy that begins with *Night*. Originally titled *Le Jour* (the day), it comes after *L'Aube* (1960; *Dawn*, 1961), a novel in which Wiesel explores the ambiguous legacy of *Night* by describing how Elisha, another young Holocaust survivor, confronts the uneasy responsibility of killing to help establish a post-Holocaust homeland for Jews in Israel. The setting for *The Accident* is very different, but this novel also probes Holocaust survival and finds its meaning unsettled and unsettling. Both *Night* and *Dawn* reveal that the swords of politics and history cut many ways. Once one has experienced that kind of destruction, *The Accident* asks whether life is worth living at all.





His present and future overwhelmed by what he has witnessed in the past, Eliezer doubts that he can endure his Holocaust survival. The world will not be changed, it seems, and the dead cannot be brought back to life. Nevertheless, they haunt the living too much, creating feelings of guilt, frustration, anger, and rebellion that make joy and happiness all but impossible. In spite of the fact that he has friends and even a woman who loves him, the young man's life is "the tragic fate of those who came back, left over, living-dead." Thus, not only because he feels that "I am my past," but also because he knows that his inability to move beyond makes others suffer, Eliezer senses that life will force him to lie in ways that he has neither the desire nor the strength to sustain.

Not feeling well, exhausted by the heat and a reporting job that seems of no consequence, Eliezer still manages to keep his date with Kathleen. They decide on a film, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Then, crossing a busy New York street, the young man is struck and dragged by a car: *Le Jour*, rendered in English, becomes *The Accident*. "On the fifth day I at last regained consciousness," Eliezer reports. "I felt alone, abandoned. . . . That I was still alive had left me indifferent, or nearly so."

Hope dawns in the "nearly so." Undeniably, the discovery that he can still speak sparks a choice for life, however faint, that cannot be hidden. Then, nurtured by friends, continuing under the care of a doctor who takes death as his personal enemy, life returns to be chosen again, although not without memory of the Holocaust's ashes. Eliezer is alive in the hospital at the end of *The Accident*, and the reader does not know entirely what will become of him. This much, however, is clear: He has decided to tell his story, to share it with others, and in that action a rejection of death and an affirmation of life can be found.

In a 1985 preface to this novel, Wiesel acknowledged that *The Accident's* protagonist "has lived through some of my experiences, but I have not lived through his." To that remark Wiesel added a suggestion: "[I]n the end, all works of literature, even despairing ones, constitute an appeal to life." Thus, it is also noteworthy that this novel is dedicated to Paul Braunstein, the skilled physician who restored Wiesel's health after the accident that nearly took the life that Wiesel finds so important.

## A BEGGAR IN JERUSALEM

**First published:** *Le Mendiant de Jérusalem*, 1968 (English translation, 1970)

**Type of work:** Novel

*This novel, one of Wiesel's most penetrating, philosophical, and mystical, intermingles the joy of victory with the anguish of Holocaust-related recollection and protest about the injustice of the past, which lingers on.*

The year is 1967. The Six-Day War has Israel under threat, but the Jews win. The ancient western temple wall in Jerusalem is recovered. As David, the novel's narrator, tells the story of this struggle, the Jewish triumph reverberates with recollections and questions whose Holocaust-related themes shadow the victory.

A beggar has been in the struggle. He has seen Jerusalem secured by Israeli troops, but the result does not add up to satisfaction, for the beggar cannot forget the prices paid—particularly the loss of his friend, Katriel, and the repeated "destructions of Jerusalem elsewhere than in Jerusalem." In joy and sadness, the beggar finds companionship with kindred spirits who gather at the Wall. They are waiting—some for understanding, some for lost friends, and all in their own ways for God. They also swap stories.

The beggar remembers, for example, Jews being marched into a forest. It is hot. Most of the men, women, and children are permitted to sit on the grass while a few dig pits. The job completed, an officer drives up and finds everything in order. He proposes that the action be carried out in family units and lets the people talk things over. Some of the young try to resist, but they are no match for their German guards. The killing is delayed only for a moment. It goes on for hours, interrupted twice. Tevye the Tailor has ten children. It takes time to line them up along the grave. There is also a young man who sings. Apparently the shooting cannot silence him, even though he has no wish to be a lone survivor, a madman whose tale neither can be fully told nor fully heard and believed.

Is this story literally true? Yes and no. Such scenes were not uncommon during the Holocaust,



when shooting squadrons murdered hundreds of thousands of Jews. Yet Wiesel's primary concern is to recover the speech and silence that such episodes are likely to have contained; it is in this domain that the power of his characters and authorship resides. Thus, as the killers do their work, the novel allows its reader to hear a Jewish teacher talking to his disciples. For reasons that this man does not know, God, he says, "demands our lives in sacrifice." Very well, they shall accept the inevitable in strength, without asking for mercy that will not be. However, the teacher adds, "Know too that the God of Israel is today violating the Law of Israel. The Torah prohibits killing the cow and her calf on the same day; yet this law, which we have faithfully observed, does not apply to us. See that what is granted to animals is refused to the children of Israel."

Another scene: Katriel is married to Malka, an orphan who wants no children for fear of nourishing death. Malka, however, is persuaded by Katriel's father, and Sasha is born. The boy is a delight, but "then came the day when the parents returned home alone and defeated." Katriel and Malka endured, although at times memory could not be tamed. Once while studying Talmud with his father, Katriel had enough: "We love You, God, we fear You, we crown You, we cling to You in spite of You, yet forgive me if I tell you my innermost thoughts, forgive me for telling You that You are cheating! . . . You bless us, and You take back Your blessing. Why are You doing all this, to prove what?" Not long after, Katriel kissed Malka goodbye, and went off to fight for Israel. Malka became an orphan again.

*A Beggar in Jerusalem* ends with David, the narrator, "still here on this haunted square, in this city where nothing is lost and nothing dispersed." However, he knows that he will be moving on, homeward with Malka. There is victory in this novel, a small measure of victory. Its staggering cost, however, is likely to leave Wiesel's readers where they usually find themselves: with more questions than answers and yet more determined to make life as good as it can be.

## THE OATH

**First published:** *Le Serment de Kolvillåg*, 1973  
(English translation, 1973)

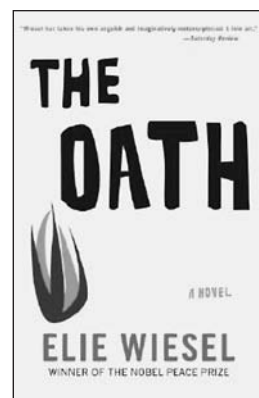
**Type of work:** Novel

*Azriel, yet another of Wiesel's lone survivors of catastrophe, is past-bound in this novel.*

In *The Oath*, Azriel's home has been destroyed in a pre-Holocaust pogrom produced by an anti-Semitic rumor: It claims that the Jews of Kolvillåg have killed a Christian boy in an act of ritual murder. Moshe, eccentric saint of the Jewish community, offers himself as guilty of the nonexistent crime. However, hate will not be satisfied so easily, and the Jews prepare. Abandoned by their Gentile friends, a few arm themselves. Some celebrate life in the darkness. Most follow age-old wisdom: They rally strength quietly to wait and endure.

The captive Moshe is allowed to speak to his people. By neither word nor deed has Jewish example through the centuries been sufficient to alter inhumanity, nor to persuade God to intervene against senseless killing. So Moshe persuades his people to try a different strategy, to accept an oath of silence. No survivor will reveal anything of what is about to befall Kolvillåg. Only the young Azriel survives. He becomes a wanderer, torn between speech and silence, true to his promise.

Years later, Azriel meets a young man who wishes he were dead. This young person is driven to despair because he is the child of Holocaust survivors. He has no past to match that of his parents, and that of his parents is beyond him. They cannot see him for what he is because they see others—now lost—in him. He cannot locate himself within his family or within the tradition of his people. Azriel decides to intervene, but how to make the young man choose life is the question. Azriel answers by breaking his oath. He tells his tale—that cannot be



told, hoping to instill rebellion, responsibility in the place of emptiness, life to counter death.

"Could I have been spared in Kolvilläg so I could help a stranger?" Azriel's question remains without closure, at least without closure that is simply satisfying. The answer of friendship remains as well: "By allowing me to enter his life," the young man says of Azriel, "he gave meaning to mine." Again and again in Wiesel's writings, the importance of friendship shines through. It does not put Azriel's questions to rest entirely, but friendship, as *The Oath* testifies, may make life very much worth living.

### SUMMARY

"It is given to man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion," Elie Wiesel says in *Celebration biblique* (1975; *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, 1976), his recounting of Bible stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and many more. Like Wiesel himself, these biblical messengers understood that thought and action

have abused the freedom to choose that makes life human. They also wrestled with the fact that human existence neither accounts for, nor completely sustains, itself. Their dearly earned reckoning with that reality led them to a profound restiveness. It revealed, in turn, the awesome injunction that God intends for humankind to endure hard, even impossible, moral work until and through death.

One may not see life the way Wiesel's biblical messengers saw it. Whatever one's choices in that regard, it is nevertheless as hard as it is inhuman to deny that injustice too often reigns and that moral work is indeed given to humanity. Wiesel presumes neither to identify that work in detail for everyone nor to insist, in particular, where or how one should do it. Those questions, however, remain the right ones to ask. All of Wiesel's writings urge people to explore them, in friendship, with the care that they deserve.

John K. Roth

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How has the Holocaust affected Elie Wiesel's life and his writing?
- Why does Wiesel value friendship so much?
- How would you describe Wiesel's views about and relationship to God?
- Why does Wiesel think questions are so important? Which questions seem most important to him, and why might that be the case?
- Wiesel has been an important defender of human rights. Which rights do you think are most important to him?
- Wiesel is opposed to indifference and neutrality. Why do you think he holds those positions?
- Why does Wiesel think that the words "and yet . . . and yet" are among the most important in his vocabulary?

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## OSCAR WILDE

**Born:** Dublin, Ireland  
October 15, 1854

**Died:** Paris, France  
November 30, 1900

*A brilliant epigrammist and sparkling social satirist, Wilde was an innovator in art, particularly drama. His single-minded devotion to aestheticism set him apart.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854, into a respected family, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was the second son of Sir William Robert Wills Wilde and his wife, Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde. His father, a noted ear and eye surgeon, wrote some twenty books in his lifetime, including *Practical Observations on Aural Surgery, and the Nature and Treatment of Diseases of the Ear* (1853), a standard textbook. Lady Wilde, under the pseudonym "Speranza," wrote inflammatory articles about Irish nationalism and women's rights. She gained celebrity in 1848 when she admitted writing an article in *Nation* that caused the head of the Young Ireland Party to be tried for high treason. She told the court that she alone was the culprit, thereby becoming the heroine of the movement. She published poems, essays, stories, and folklore.

Wilde was a bright youngster who took prizes in religious and classical studies at Portora Royal School, which he and his older brother Willie (born in 1852) attended. In 1871, Oscar entered Trinity College, Dublin, and gained sufficient recognition in classical studies that, in 1874, he won the Classical Demyship to Magdalen College, Oxford. John Mahaffy, who taught ancient history at Trinity College, greatly influenced Wilde. He supported him for the Oxford scholarship. Wilde spent the summer of 1874 helping Mahaffy, a

uniquely skilled conversationalist, revise his *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (1874). He spent two summers traveling with Mahaffy and others through Italy and Greece.

Wilde blossomed at Oxford, where his witty conversation made him popular. His long poem, *Ravenna* (1878), won him the Newdigate Prize, which included the publication of the poem as a pamphlet. He received his bachelor's degree from Oxford in 1878, but his demyship was extended, enabling him to study further. He was particularly affected by Walter Pater, a fellow at Brasenose College, and John Ruskin, Slade Professor of Art, both of whom promoted aestheticism. Ruskin differed from Pater in believing that art should have a high moral purpose. Pater promoted art for art's sake, a doctrine that became Wilde's credo.

Wilde, sharing rooms in London with Frank Miles in 1879, created an aesthetic environment built around white lilies, objets d'art, and peacock feathers—many peacock feathers. At their digs gathered artists, aesthetes, and people in theater, including Lillie Langtry, who was fast becoming famous through Miles's drawings of her. Wilde and Miles were magnets that attracted the beautiful people with whom they preferred to surround themselves.

By 1880, Wilde's mother came to London and established herself in Chelsea, where she lived with her son, Willie. Lady Wilde entertained some of the most interesting people in London, and Wilde attended her salons, exposing himself further to the people of privilege about whom he was eventually to write. Renowned for his outlandish dress



and for the green carnation or sunflower that he perpetually wore in his lapel, Wilde was best known for his outrageous banter.

The British musical theater team of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan made Wilde a character, Reginald Bunthorne, in *Patience: Or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881), their opera about the aesthetic movement. When the opera completed its successful London run and was scheduled for a September, 1882, opening in New York, followed by an American tour, its promoters decided that Wilde could do an effective job promoting it. In January, 1882, they sent him to the United States for a lecture tour on aestheticism and other topics. He spent a year abroad, giving some 125 lectures throughout the United States and Canada. Wilde's outrageous dress, quick wit, and quotable epigrams attracted large audiences.

Meanwhile, Wilde had published at his own expense a collection, *Poems* (1881), which, despite the refusal of London publishers to accept his manuscript, sold out five editions by 1883. He was also working on a play, *Vera: Or, The Nihilists* (pb. 1880, pr. 1883), taking it abroad with him and hoping to interest someone in an American production. When he returned to England, Wilde went to France for three months; he then returned and began to establish himself as a man of some importance in London. He became engaged to Constance Lloyd, whom he married in 1883. They had two sons, Cyril, born in 1885, and Vyvyan, born in 1886.

By 1887, Wilde was editor of *The Woman's World*, but he became bored and left the magazine in 1889. Needing money for his growing family, Wilde lectured and wrote reviews. He began to publish prolifically after he left *The Woman's World*, producing *The Happy Prince, and Other Tales* (1888), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, serial; 1891, expanded), *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, and Other Stories* (1891), *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), and *Intentions* (1891). The range of this writing, which included a novel, critical essays, short stories, and children's stories, was impressive, but brought little money.

His fiction, however, established him as a serious writer. When he turned to drama, which remunerated him generously, he was already well known and respected. In three years, he wrote four popular plays—*Lady Windermere's Fan* (pr. 1892, pb. 1893), *A Woman of No Importance* (pr. 1893, pb.

1894), *An Ideal Husband* (pr. 1895, pb. 1899), and *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (pr. 1895, pb. 1899)—that spread his fame and made him affluent. Wilde then went to France to write *Salomé* (pb. 1893 in French, pb. 1894 in English, pr. 1896 in English) in French. Sarah Bernhardt agreed to play the lead. Those plans, however, were scuttled by the Office of the Lord Chamberlain, which banned the play. In 1896, *Salomé* was finally produced in Paris. By this time, however, Wilde was in prison.

In 1895, the Marquis of Queensberry left a card at Wilde's club accusing him of sodomy. Wilde had maintained a homosexual relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the marquis. Wilde sued the marquis for libel but ultimately was countersued for his homosexual activities and, after two trials, found guilty and sentenced to two years in prison, where he wrote *De Profundis* (1905), one of his most moving works. Released from prison, ruined financially, socially, and personally, he returned to France, never to see England again. He lived on what his writing now brought him, on a small allowance from Constance, who died in 1898, and on handouts from friends. He died in Paris on November 30, 1900, as a result of syphilitic encephalitis triggered by an ear infection.

## ANALYSIS

It is perhaps ironic that Wilde is best remembered as a dramatist, and particularly that the plays for which he is remembered are those that he called potboilers, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*. Only *The Importance of Being Earnest* really delighted him.

Wilde wrote a total of seven plays and clearly considered *Salomé*, which served as the basis for several operas, including the famous one by Richard Strauss, his best. The play had been in rehearsal in London for two weeks with Sarah Bernhardt as *Salomé* when the licenser of plays banned it, citing a law on the books since the Reformation that prohibited from the British stage plays with biblical characters in them. The reason for this prohibition originally was to prevent Catholic mystery plays from being staged, but the law was the law, and *Salomé* was not performed.

Wilde's nondramatic writing, his critical essays, his children's stories, his short stories, and his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, were, in their au-

thor's eyes, much better works than his social dramas. His poetry, particularly *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), was important but is ignored by most of Wilde's modern readers. *De Profundis*, written while Wilde was in prison, is perhaps his most personal statement. Its posthumous publication in 1905 enhanced Wilde's tarnished reputation considerably.

Wilde liked his less familiar plays better than those that brought him fame and a fleeting period of economic security. *Vera*, written when he was twenty-five, is a flawed play about revolutionary politics in Russia. It is psychologically unconvincing and painfully melodramatic. It had opened in New York in August, 1883, but closed after seven performances that evoked scathing reviews. *The Duchess of Padua* (pb. 1883, pr. 1891), a verse drama, is imitative and tedious. Despite some appealing lines—found to some degree in everything that Wilde wrote—the play is overblown, more suited to the seventeenth century than the nineteenth century stage.

*Salomé*, however, is an artistic triumph. Wilde's dramatization of the well-known biblical story is serious drama well executed. The directions for the staging capitalize on every dramatic possibility. The notable personality differences between Herod and Herodias are extremely well presented by deft use of dialogue. Both are evil, but they are evil in markedly different ways, and Wilde projects both convincingly within their individual spheres of evil. In this play, Wilde is at the height of his remarkable ability to reveal his characters through conversation without letting the dialogue degenerate into tedium. Although Herod is *Salomé*'s main character, Wilde's psychological penetration of *Salomé*'s personality was good enough to make Bernhardt consent to play her.

In his more popular plays, Wilde borrows heavily from the melodrama of his day, but he does so without descending into melodramatic presentation. Rather, his social dramas reflect an art-for-art's-sake attitude. He permits contradictions in his characters' lines and lives because art can accommodate contradictions. Drama is not supposed to be truth in a narrow sense, but, inevitably, like all the other arts, represents Truth in a broader, philosophical sense.

Perhaps to understand some of what Wilde is attempting in his social dramas, one has to consider

what the French Impressionist artists painting around the same time were trying to achieve. In eschewing photographic realism, they invented a new, profound, and honest, if somewhat stylized, realism. One must remember that Wilde, unlike the French Impressionists, was producing satire within the staid confines of Victorian England.

The staging of Wilde's plays, considered quite difficult by modern standards, reflects the busyness and crowdedness of Victorian decoration. The pink shades that Wilde loves obscured nature's cruelties, its harsh realities. The verbal superficialities in plays such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* became the satirical weapons that Wilde used against the falseness and hypocrisy rampant in fin de siècle England.

It was Wilde's whimsical contention, quite in keeping with Walter Pater's aestheticism, of which he had imbibed so heavily at Oxford, that nature imitates art rather than the reverse. In his collection of critical essays, *Intentions*—particularly in its two most important essays, "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying"—Wilde made the case for criticism as an art form and for nature's imitating art.

Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first printed in abbreviated form in the June issue of *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1890, came out in expanded form the following year. In many ways a classic gothic novel, it was regarded by many as the quintessence of Decadence, an effect that Wilde strove strenuously to achieve. In this novel, Wilde distorts the conventional doppelgänger motif in an outrageously bizarre and Faustian way.

Dorian Gray, having had his portrait painted by Basil Hallward, expresses his wish that the portrait age while he remain as he is. Gray gets his wish. The portrait not only ages but also shows the effect of an existence that becomes increasingly depraved and reckless. Gray, no longer able to display the painting, locks it away in the attic, where it gradually turns into a frightening picture of a depraved man made increasingly hideous by the secret activities in his life. Every flaw of Gray's personality is reflected in the picture. Its subject eventually shows the portrait to Basil Hallward, its creator, but then must kill him to protect his dark secret. The portrait evolves into that of a murderer.

In this book, Wilde stands conventional morality on its head, as he often did in his writing

and living. If contemporary critics called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* immoral, as many did, Wilde could respond with impunity that a book is neither moral or immoral; it is merely well written or badly written. Few could deny that this novel is well written.

## LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

**First produced:** 1892 (first published, 1893)

**Type of work:** Play

*Lady Windermere is forced to reconsider her harsh judgments of Mrs. Erlynne (unbeknownst to her, her own mother) when the latter saves Lady Windermere from disgrace.*

*Lady Windermere's Fan*, the first of Wilde's social comedies, opened on February 20, 1892, in London to lukewarm reviews. A four-act play that employs what are often regarded in drama as cheap tricks—mistaken identity, the lost child restored to the rightful parent, the conversation overheard while hidden, and the romantic triangle—this play ultimately succeeds because it twists the clichés with which it is working. The mistaken identity remains mistaken, the lost child (Lady Windermere) never knows that Mrs. Erlynne is her true mother, and the romantic triangle is really not a romantic triangle, but only appears to be.

The play revolves around Lady Windermere's twenty-first birthday. Her husband is giving a ball in honor of the occasion. Lady Windermere, trusting and innocent, receives information that "poor, dear Windermere" has been seeing another woman and has apparently set her up in style. At first, Lady Windermere does not believe the reports, but the seed of suspicion has been sown.

Hoping to prove her husband innocent, she goes to his desk and looks into his checkbook, finding nothing untoward. Her mind is relieved, but then she notices a second checkbook, this one locked. She breaks the lock, opens the checkbook, and, to her horror, finds that Windermere has written large and regular checks to Mrs. Erlynne, a woman with a past.

When she confronts her husband with this information, he is horrified that she has broken into

his checkbook and defends Mrs. Erlynne, who is, as only Windermere knows, Lady Windermere's real mother. Not only does he defend this fallen woman, but he insists that Lady Windermere invite her to the birthday ball to give her a chance to regain some of her squandered social stature. When Lady Windermere refuses, Windermere himself delivers an invitation to Mrs. Erlynne. Lady Windermere threatens to strike Mrs. Erlynne with her fan, a birthday gift from Windermere, if she comes to the ball.

In the next scene, the ball is under way. The butler announces the guests as they enter. He recites a string of names, at the end of which is Mrs. Erlynne's, her isolation heightened by the fact that all the names that he recites are those of pairs of titled people, but Mrs. Erlynne is unaccompanied and untitled. Confronted by this scarlet woman, Lady Windermere drops her fan and bows mechanically. When she overhears Mrs. Erlynne asking Windermere for a large sum of money, she flees from the room.

She writes a letter to her husband announcing that she is going to run away with Lord Darlington, a Beau Brummel type who has rooms nearby. Mrs. Erlynne finds the letter and reads it. She rushes to Lord Darlington's rooms to try to convince her daughter to reconsider, attempting to prevent her from making the sort of mistake that she herself made some years before.

As they talk, they hear voices in the hall, those of Windermere and Lord Darlington. Lady Windermere panics, but the resolute Mrs. Erlynne stashes her behind a curtain so that she will not be discovered. In her haste to hide, Lady Windermere leaves her fan behind. Her husband spots it and demands to know of Darlington what his wife's fan is doing in Darlington's quarters.

Mrs. Erlynne makes her self-sacrifice at this point, coming into the room and saying casually that she took the wrong fan at the party. Lady Windermere's reputation is saved, but at great cost to Mrs. Erlynne. Now it is Lord Windermere's turn to reject Mrs. Erlynne, whom he presumes has left her fan in Darlington's drawing room because they are having a liaison.

The next day, it is Lady Windermere who is charitable toward Mrs. Erlynne; Lord Windermere is condemnatory. Yet the day is saved when Mrs. Erlynne comes by to announce that she is leaving

London, and that she is going to marry an elderly, titled admirer.

This play is clearly about appearances and about the kinds of moral judgments that Victorian standards encouraged. Its epigrams are spirited, memorable, and profuse. Lady Windermere, who has been accepting of these standards, is now forced to reconsider her stand. Mrs. Erlynne makes her realize that one cannot divide humanity into those who are good and those who are bad.

In this play, Wilde pits his art against the philistinism of the materialistic Victorian age, and he does so with sufficient wit that he avoids the pitfall of lapsing into moral diatribe. He makes a great deal in one bit of dialogue of the word “trivial.” Lord Darlington considers it trivial to talk seriously about anything. He contends that to be understood is to be found out.

Obviously, this emphasis is an example of how Wilde frequently sets conventional morality on its head and causes people to rethink their bland acceptance of the status quo. By never revealing to Lady Windermere that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother, Wilde rises above the major cliché that he uses in the play.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

**First produced:** 1895 (first published, 1899)

**Type of work:** Play

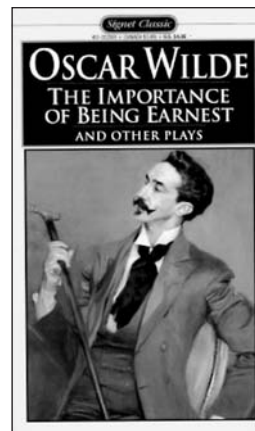
*Jack Worthing discovers that his real name is Ernest, making him acceptable to Gwendolen, his lady love, who cannot love anyone who is not named Ernest.*

In the entire Wilde canon, no play better exemplifies the author’s art-for-art’s-sake stand than *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. The play is completely trivial, revolving around the fact that Jack Worthing, who loves Gwendolen Fairfax, cannot marry her, initially because Algernon Moncrieff, her cousin, refuses to sanction the marriage until Worthing resolves the mystery of Cecily, about whom Algernon knows because of an inscription on Worthing’s cigarette case.

Worthing reveals that Mr. Cardew, who adopted him after he had been found in a handbag in the parcel room at Victoria Station, appointed him guardian of Cardew’s granddaughter, Cecily Cardew, who always knew him as Uncle Jack. For Cecily’s benefit, Jack has maintained an air of moral restraint in her presence. To escape from this atmosphere, he has assumed, during his frequent visits to London, the name and generally reprobate behavior of an imaginary brother named Ernest. Worthing’s love for Gwendolen is complicated by the fact that Gwendolen cannot love any man who is not named Ernest.

In an often bewildering plot, in which identities are often difficult to follow, Lady Bracknell refuses to acknowledge Jack’s engagement to Gwendolen because she learns that Jack was found as an infant in a handbag in Victoria Station. Meanwhile,

both Jack and Algernon are individually consorting with Dr. Chasuble to have their names changed to “Ernest.” Algernon, too, is in love—with Cecily, who has also revealed a desire to love someone named Ernest.



In the course of the play, the name of Cecily’s tutor, Miss Prism, is introduced. Lady Bracknell knows the name and insists that Miss Prism be brought to her. It is revealed that, years before, Miss Prism had been nurse to a family to which Lady Bracknell was connected. One day, Miss Prism, in a state of confusion, thoughtlessly placed the manuscript of a book that she had written in the bassinet of the baby in her care and absent-mindedly placed the baby in the handbag that should have held the manuscript.

She deposited the handbag in the parcel room of Victoria Station, and the baby was never restored to its rightful family. Jack, now thinking that Miss Prism is his mother, embraces her, but Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack’s mother was really her sister, Algernon’s mother, Mrs. Moncrieff. Algernon and Jack are brothers, but better still, Jack’s real name is Ernest. The play ends with Alger-



non and Cecily and Jack/Ernest and Gwendolen poised on the brink of happy lives together, in what is really a mock-Dickensian ending.

The play, which opened in London on St. Valentine's Day, 1895, evoked incessant laughter from the first-night audience and lavish reviews from most critics. A few, such as George Bernard Shaw, found it wanting in meaning and castigated Wilde for the play's triviality. Yet triviality of the sort that Wilde discussed in "Criticism as Art" was precisely what he sought to achieve in this production.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* succeeded, not in spite of its unbelievable characters, its improbable situations, its stilted dialogue, and its trivial ideas, but because of them. In this play, Wilde accomplished par excellence what he interpreted as Walter Pater's credo, denying at the same time that part of John Ruskin's credo that placed upon art a moral responsibility.

This play has been the most enduring of Wilde's dramas, still delighting audiences with the sort of childlike unreality found in the stories that constitute *The Happy Prince, and Other Tales* (1888). There is a real kinship between the two works despite their obvious differences and the differences of their intended audiences.

## THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

**First published:** 1890, serial; 1891, expanded

**Type of work:** Novel

*Dorian Gray, wishing never to age, wants his portrait to age for him and gets his wish.*

Dorian Gray, the title character of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is a decadent dandy of the Victorian era. Concerned with little but appearances, he lives a reckless, nonproductive existence. A crucial event in his life comes when Dorian meets Lord Henry Wotton in the studio of Basil Hallward, an artist, who has painted a portrait of the breathtakingly beautiful Dorian, now in his early twenties. Lord Wotton intrigues Dorian with his talk of the New Hedonism, which is reflected in the novel by Lord Henry's giving Dorian a copy of Joris-Karl

Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884; *Against the Grain*, 1922), a novel that articulates this philosophy, the basis of which is the achievement of a complete realization of one's nature.

Dorian now utters a Faust-like proposition. He expresses a willingness to surrender his soul if he can maintain his youth and physical beauty and have his portrait age in his place. Dorian hardly expects to have his wish granted and thinks little more of it. He is busy courting Sybil Vane, a talented young actress, who falls in love with him.

Ironically, Sybil's being in love with Dorian robs her of her ability to act. In time, the very ability that first drew Dorian to Sybil has disappeared, and he rejects her unfeelingly. Having lost Dorian and her acting ability simultaneously, Sybil kills herself. Lord Henry, Dorian's Mephistopheles, convinces Dorian that, in line with the New Hedonism, Sybil's suicide is an experience that will help him to feel life more intensely and that it can be viewed as nothing but a source of personal growth.

When all of this happens, Dorian notices subtle changes in the portrait, which is still on display in his residence. A hint of cruelty, a line near the mouth, forms, but Dorian thinks little of it. Meanwhile, Lord Henry leads Dorian into all kinds of arcane activities that, in the tradition of the gothic novel, are suggested but never revealed explicitly, making them seem, perhaps, more horrible than they actually are.

By the time Dorian is thirty-eight years old—still looking twenty—the portrait has changed so drastically that it must be hidden under lock and key. Basil, the artist, alarmed at Dorian's dissolute ways, urges him to change, to reform. Dorian shows Basil the portrait, now hideous, reflecting all the corruption of Dorian's past years. Then he turns on Basil and stabs him. To conceal the crime, Dorian forces a chemist whom he has ruined to use his knowledge of chemistry to destroy the body. Finally, weeks later, shaken by what he has become, Dorian tells Lord Henry that he is going to reform. On re-





turning home, he looks at the portrait and, seeing further deterioration in the visage before him, grabs the knife that he has plunged into Basil and sinks it into the grotesque portrait. A cry and a crash are heard. Servants rush to the locked room, forcing open the door. Inside, they find a portrait of an exquisite youth, and on the floor beside it, the body of a hideous, loathsome old man in evening dress, a knife through his heart.

Wilde's novel provoked considerable outrage when it was published. The tenets of the New Hedonism expressed in the book flew in the face of conventional morality to the point that readers were profoundly shocked. Despite these objections, the novel succeeded artistically and attracted many readers.

The book presents Lord Henry's credo within its first few pages, and the rest of the narrative is devoted to Dorian's acting out of that credo. In a sense, Dorian Gray was born with the creation of Basil Hallward's portrait. Readers are not introduced to Dorian Gray, the child. The Dorian that Wilde springs on his readers does not exist until the portrait exists.

According to a letter that Wilde wrote in 1894, he said that he saw in this novel three sides of himself. In Basil Hallward, he creates what he believes is a true perception of himself. In Lord Henry, he projects the person whom the world believes him to be. In Dorian, he presents the self whom he would like to be in some other age. How seriously one can take this assessment remains a matter of scholarly speculation.

The Lord Henry that Wilde projects is, in accordance with Wilde's expressed philosophy, the ultimate artist. He molds raw material (Dorian), shaping it with sure hands into what he wills it to be. In this sense, he is a Pygmalion as much as he is a Mephistopheles.

## THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

**First published:** 1898

**Type of work:** Poem

*This long poem is about the imprisonment and hanging of a young trooper in the Royal Horse Guards who murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy.*

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is the only major work that Wilde produced after his release from prison on May 19, 1897. By mid-October, he had finished this poem, consisting of 654 lines, 109 six-line verses. It was first published the following February. Wilde's name did not appear on the title page. Rather, the number of his prison cell at Reading Gaol—C.3.3.—was the designation by which the book was identified. By writing in six-line stanzas rather than the four-line stanzas typically found in ballads, Wilde was able to add reflective statements to each verse. Using the term that Ezra Pound later made famous, Wilde divided his poem into six "cantos."

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is unique among Wilde's work because it deals with the harsh realities of prison and with the even harsher reality of an execution, the taking of a human life, through legal means, by fellow humans. The world depicted in this poem is light-years away from the affluent drawing rooms in which his social comedies are set. It is equally distant from the fantasy worlds of his other poetry and his fairy tales.

The poem's first canto provides the introduction of the murderer into the prison community and the speculation of the other prisoners about him. The canto reflects a softening as it considers the crimes that all individuals commit, commenting on how all people at times kill with a "bitter look" or in some other covert but socially acceptable way. Finally, the prisoners realize that they all have a connection with the condemned man, that, in their own ways, they are all guilty with him. He becomes a sort of Christ figure expiating the universal sins of humankind.

The second canto relates the condemned man's final moments, but it also emphasizes the identification that the other prisoners feel with him as he faces execution. Canto 3 reflects on the days before

the execution and on how the prisoners develop a kinship with the unfortunate prisoner. The next canto presents the psychological impact of the execution on the other prisoners.

Structurally, the poem ends with the fourth canto. Wilde chose to continue it beyond that because he wanted to propagandize for prison reform, and it is in this forum that he can best do that. He castigates the legal and prison systems of his time, pointing out that all that is good in humans withers in prison. Despite his recent bitter experience with the legal and prison systems, Wilde remains remarkably detached and objective in his presentation.

This poem is not Victorian. It represents a new direction for Wilde, but one that he did not have the vitality to pursue further after the publication of this poem. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is a poem more in the tradition of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), which Wilde had read, than of the Victorian poets, whose work is more like Wilde's earlier poetry.

## SUMMARY

Oscar Wilde's life was an outrageously interesting one that grew wholly sensational toward its close. Wilde lived a philosophy that perhaps was not meant for living, but he appears to have believed in it and to have accepted it fully. Art for art's sake remained his credo even after his imprisonment, although it is not reflected in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which is his maverick work. *De profundis*, written in prison, leaves little doubt about what Wilde really accepted philosophically.

Although the comparisons of Wilde to William Shakespeare abroad when his plays were running in the West End are gross exaggerations, one cannot deny that Wilde was a remarkably able playwright who, by defying social and dramatic conventions simultaneously, created plays that articulated well the aestheticism espoused by Walter Pater. Wilde's often neglected essays on criticism are also significant and deserve further study and consideration. In these essays are articulated the maxims by which Wilde tried to live and write.

R. Baird Shuman

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What was Decadence in late nineteenth century art, and why did Oscar Wilde seek to express it?
- How is Wilde's love of paradox displayed in *Lady Windermere's Fan*?
- Does *The Importance of Being Earnest* deserve the enormous popularity it continues to have?
- Frame an argument to show that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is morally unobjectionable—or that it is objectionable.
- Should *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* be recognized as Wilde's most profound literary composition?
- With the assistance of *De Profundis*, not available to readers in Wilde's lifetime, and the contributions of literary critics, what evaluation of Wilde's work is appropriate today?



Courtesy, D.C. Public Library

## P. G. WODEHOUSE

**Born:** Guildford, Surrey, England  
October 15, 1881

**Died:** Southampton, Long Island, New York  
February 14, 1975

*Regarded as one of the premier humorists in English literature, Wodehouse was a distinctively original comic stylist.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (WOOD-hows) was born October 15, 1881, in Guildford, Surrey, England, the third of four sons of Henry Ernest and Eleanor Deane Wodehouse. His father spent his career in the Hong Kong civil service, rising to a judgeship. Wodehouse lived only one year in Hong Kong, spending the remainder of his childhood in England with friends and relatives, when not in school. This upbringing accounts for the inordinately large number of aunts and uncles in his fiction.

Wodehouse, known lifelong to his friends as “Plum,” followed his brother Armine to school at Dulwich and distinguished himself in Latin and Greek composition, football, and cricket and by writing comic verses for the school magazine, of which he was editor. Wodehouse’s school days were perhaps his happiest, the camaraderie of school being celebrated often in his fiction, where “old boys” never let each other down. Seven of his first dozen books are school novels inspired by his Dulwich experiences, most notably *Mike: A Public School Story* (1909; also known as *Enter Psmith*, *Mike at Wrykyn*, and *Mike and Psmith*), which examines the disadvantages of joining an older brother at school. More important, at Dulwich Wodehouse discovered writers, such as Charles Dickens, W. S. Gilbert, Rudyard Kipling, and Sir Arthur Conan

Doyle, who profoundly influenced his development as a literary artist.

Wodehouse had planned to continue his education at Oxford, but his father’s financial setbacks forced him to join the London office of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. In several Wodehouse novels, the possibility of having to work in a bank seems grim to the protagonists, and the author himself hated the routine of his job and was determined to leave the bank before being sent to a position in the Far East. After two years as a bank clerk, he was hired by the *Globe*, a London newspaper, through a former master at Dulwich, and he soon inherited the master’s column. During this period, he began publishing school novels as serials in boys’ magazines and more sophisticated stories in such magazines as *Strand*. The school serials were also published as books, beginning with *The Pothunters* (1902).

On a trip to the United States in 1909, Wodehouse sold stories to *Cosmopolitan* and *Collier’s* magazines for much more money than he had received in England. He resigned from the *Globe*, settled in Greenwich Village in New York City, and tested the American market further, writing detective stories for pulp magazines and serving as drama critic for *Vanity Fair*. In 1914, the *Saturday Evening Post* bought *Something Fresh* (1915; also known as *Something New*), the first of the series of novels set at Blandings Castle, and went on to publish twenty-one of his novels as serials. Also in 1914, he married Ethel Newton Rowley, a widow. Wodehouse later adopted Ethel’s daughter, Leonora.

Unable to serve in the British army during World War I because of bad eyesight, Wodehouse

spent the war in America and began working in musical comedy in 1915 by collaborating, as lyricist, with composer Jerome Kern and playwright Guy Bolton. At one point, they had five shows running on Broadway and another twelve productions on the road. Wodehouse also wrote lyrics for such composers as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Victor Herbert, and Sigmund Romberg. His best-known song is "Bill," with music by Kern, originally written for *Oh, Lady! Lady!* (1918) and incorporated into *Show Boat* in 1927. Wodehouse also wrote plays with Bolton, adapted foreign plays, and dramatized his novels. His stories and novels, such as *A Damsel in Distress* (1919), often draw upon his theatrical experiences.

The Wodehouses and their numerous pets spent the 1920's traveling between the United States, England, and France. Because of British and American income taxes and British quarantine laws that prevented them from taking their dogs in and out of England, the Wodehouses decided to settle in France. In 1934, they bought a country house in Le Touquet, where they entertained aristocrats, national leaders, and writers such as Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. Wodehouse himself made little impression on these dignitaries. Winston Churchill met him six or seven times and always forgot who he was. Evelyn Waugh, an intense admirer of Wodehouse's fiction, described him as the dullest man he had ever met. Wodehouse apparently lived entirely for his work and was comfortable discussing nothing else. He also struck some as eccentric for leaving his own parties to walk his dogs.

Like most popular writers of his time, Wodehouse was called to Hollywood. He spent 1930 and 1931 at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, which used nothing that he wrote. He returned with better results in 1937, adapting *A Damsel in Distress* into a George and Ira Gershwin musical starring Fred Astaire. Wodehouse did not enjoy writing screenplays, however, because he had too many novels that he was eager to create. The quality and popularity of his fiction resulted in his being awarded, in 1939, a doctorate of letters by the University of Oxford.

Wodehouse's life was relatively uneventful until World War II. The Wodehouses stayed in France despite the threat of German occupation, and the author was arrested in June, 1940, and eventually interned at a camp at Tost in Upper Silesia. The fol-

lowing June, he was transferred to a hotel in Berlin and gave five broadcasts over German radio. British politicians and newspapers branded him a traitor; some British libraries withdrew his books, and, worst of all, his beloved Dulwich removed his name from its rolls. Wodehouse's most damaging comment during these broadcasts was that he did not mind being a prisoner as long as he was given materials with which to write. A minority praised Wodehouse's courage for candidly discussing the way Germany treated its prisoners. With "In Defense of P. G. Wodehouse," George Orwell painted the writer as being merely politically naïve in not recognizing the implications of broadcasting over enemy radio.

Wodehouse returned to France in 1943, only to be arrested by the French shortly before Paris was liberated and charged with collaboration and treason. After questioning by British officials, he was released. The Wodehouses continued living in France until 1947, when they moved permanently to the United States. (Wodehouse never returned to England after 1939.) As the passions of the war dissipated, Wodehouse's critics were felt to have overreacted. Dulwich restored his name to its rolls in 1946, and in 1961 the British Broadcasting Corporation broadcast an apology to Wodehouse, "An Act of Homage and Reparation," by Evelyn Waugh.

The Wodehouses spent their last years in Remsenburg, Long Island, New York, and became American citizens in 1955. Wodehouse continued writing until the end of his long life, devoting little time to anything other than his dogs and cats. He was knighted in January, 1975, but could not go to London for the ceremony because of declining health. He died shortly afterward on Valentine's Day in 1975, in Southampton, Long Island. Lady Wodehouse lived on at Remsenburg until her death in 1984 at ninety-nine.

## ANALYSIS

Between 1902 and 1974, Wodehouse published more than ninety books—novels, collections of stories, and memoirs. His fiction, set mostly in London and the country houses of England with frequent excursions to the United States, bears little resemblance to real life in any place or time. Wodehouse creates a unique comic universe crammed with aristocrats, servants, secretaries, clerks, clergy,



poets, police officers, judges, thieves, and, significantly, musical comedy performers.

With the emphasis on plot and two-dimensional characters, Wodehouse's fiction resembles nothing so much, as the writer himself observed, as musical comedy without the music. The stories and novels concern chiefly romantic and financial difficulties, with all problems resolved by the conclusion.

The only occurrence of anything resembling political commentary is the portrait of Roderick Spode as the founder of a fascist organization ludicrously known as the Black Shorts in *The Code of the Woosters* (1938). Wodehouse ridicules Spode further by making him a secret designer of ladies' underwear. Such episodes seem to place Wodehouse's fiction in a particular time, since foreign and domestic fascism was a threat to Great Britain in the 1930's, but most of Wodehouse's characters and events seem drawn from an England that has changed little since the start of the twentieth century. His characters are slightly modified Edwardians. Anachronisms abound in the later novels and are fitting since they add to the comic absurdity.

More than half of Wodehouse's fiction deals with continuing characters: Uncle Fred, Mr. Mulliner, Ukridge, Psmith, Lord Emsworth, Jeeves, and Bertie Wooster. The most significant of these are the last four. Psmith becomes Wodehouse's first notable adult character. He is rich in *Psmith in the City: A Sequel to "Mike"* (1910) and *Psmith Journalist* (1915), poor in *Leave It to Psmith* (1923), but regardless of his economic circumstances, he is bored by ordinary life and longs to take risks. These chances, from operating a New York newspaper and running into gangsters to posing as a Canadian poet, lead to typically complicated Wodehouse plots. Psmith is a smarter version of Bertie Wooster, a fast-thinking swindler who talks himself both into and out of trouble. Throwing himself rashly into situations with little regard for the consequences, his sole purpose seems to be to start something.

Ronald Eustace Psmith prefigures later characters in frequently quoting poetry and in speaking in characteristic metaphors. Tea is never simply tea but "a cup of the steaming." Rather than resort to a cliché like "in the soup" to indicate trouble, Psmith uses phrases such as "consommé splashing about

the ankles" or "knee-deep in the bouillon." Such verbal silliness is indicative of P. G. Wodehouse's style at its best.

Wodehouse writes about Lord Emsworth and the goings-on at Blandings Castle in ten novels from *Something Fresh* (1915) to *A Pelican at Blandings* (1969; also known as *No Nudes Is Good Nudes*). These farces feature dotty Lord Emsworth devoting as much time as possible to his flowers or pigs, his sister Lady Constance trying to run his life for him, and assorted ninnies such as his brother Galahad Threeepwood. Everything at Blandings Castle appears to be in flux, with numerous characters running down corridors or across terraces in pursuit of or in flight from mischief. Lord Emsworth keeps firing his secretary Rupert Baxter, and Lady Constance constantly rehires him. Baxter longs to impose order on the chaos of Blandings.

Wodehouse's greatest triumph is Jeeves and Bertie Wooster, who appear in eleven novels and more than fifty stories published between 1917 and 1974. The basic plot involves Bertie getting into trouble, making matters worse by trying to extricate himself, and finally relying upon his valet Jeeves to resolve the situation. The problems are often created by Bertie's stern Aunt Agatha or his blustery Aunt Dahlia, by such friends as Bingo Little or Tuppy Glossop, or by someone to whom Bertie is engaged and who is determined to reform him. Through all of these misadventures, Bertie remains cheerfully optimistic.

Having Bertie narrate the stories and novels is a stroke of genius by Wodehouse. Bertie is an ironic narrator who never realizes the ramifications of the events that he is describing. Unusual for a first-person narrator, Bertie is not merely an observer but the central participant, since he influences almost all that happens. Jeeves narrates one Bertie story and one non-Bertie novel, and the effect is not the same. One of the virtues of Bertie as narrator is his use—or misuse—of the language. Combining jargon, slang, clichés, and mangled quotations from literary giants with his absentminded eccentricity, Bertie speaks in a style all his own:

It is pretty generally recognized in the circles in which he moves that Bertram Wooster is not a man who lightly throws in the towel and admits defeat. Beneath the thingummies of what-d'you-call-it, his head, wind and weather permitting, is as a rule

bloody but unbowed, and if the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune want to crush his proud spirit, they have to pull their socks up and make a special effort.

Bertie is Dr. Watson to Jeeves's Sherlock Holmes, for the only rival of this gentleman's gentleman for intellect in fiction is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective. Bertie explains his admiration for Jeeves: "The man's a genius. From the collar upward he stands alone. I gave up trying to run my own affairs within a week of his coming to me." Jeeves is the godlike force who miraculously engineers the denouements of the Bertie stories and novels. Because Bertie has to have a problem to be solved and then compounds matters by attempting to deal with it himself, Jeeves's powers of ingenuity are supremely tested in the best of the fiction, such as the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934), *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934; also known as *Brinkley Manor: A Novel About Jeeves*), *The Code of the Woosters*, and *Joy in the Morning* (1946), and such stories as "The Rummy Affair of Old Biffy," "Jeeves and the Impending Doom," "Jeeves and the Song of Songs," and "Indian Summer of an Uncle." Because numerous obstacles must be placed in Jeeves's way, Wodehouse also tests himself by making the plots as convoluted as possible. The pieces often fit together with almost mathematical precision.

## THE INIMITABLE JEEVES

**First published:** 1923

**Type of work:** Novel

*Bertie Wooster and Jeeves attempt to assist in the love life of Bingo Little with comic consequences.*

Four Bertie and Jeeves stories are included in *My Man Jeeves* (1919), but *The Inimitable Jeeves* is the first book completely about these characters as Wodehouse weaves eleven previously published stories together to create a mostly unified narrative. The first true novel in the series is *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934).

Many of the loose strands of *The Inimitable Jeeves* are held together by the romantic travails of

Bertie's friend Bingo Little. Bingo is forever falling in love, and Bertie, with Jeeves's assistance, either promotes the romance or attempts to prevent it, depending on the suitability of the young woman. At the beginning of the book, Bingo is infatuated with a waitress and wants Bertie to make his uncle, Lord Bittlesham, the source of Bingo's income, receptive to Bingo's marrying someone from the working class. Jeeves suggests having Bingo read the uncle such Rosie M. Banks novels as "Only a Factory Girl," in which marriage to someone of lesser social status is advocated. As a result, Lord Bittlesham marries his cook.

Bingo next falls for Honoria Glossop, but Bertie's domineering Aunt Agatha wants her nephew to marry Honoria. Attempting to resolve the problem without Jeeves's help, Bertie pushes Honoria's young brother into a pond so that Bingo can save the boy and appear heroic, but on his way to the

pond, fickle Bingo discovers someone else. Bertie becomes engaged to Honoria, who says he must get rid of Jeeves. The valet saves his master by creating an elaborate plot to convince Honoria's father, Sir Roderick, a prominent psychiatrist, that Bertie is crazy.

After Jeeves saves Bertie's friend from two more ill-considered ro-

mances, Bingo falls in love with another waitress, who forces him to marry her without his uncle's consent. When presented to Lord Bittlesham, she reveals herself to be Rosie M. Banks, having been working as a waitress to research her next book.

In addition to his superior intelligence, Jeeves must be privy to sources of information denied the other characters, adding ironic distance to Bertie's perception of reality. Jeeves is the all-knowing force manipulating the others as if they were chess pieces. Jeeves even resorts to lying and bribery to achieve his ends. He is everything the naïve Bertie is not.

Though mentally inferior to his servant, Bertie is intelligent enough to rely on Jeeves's judgment in most matters. Bertie also possesses enough self-awareness to recognize his limitations. He is truly



an admirable character whose behavior derives from a strict code of conduct. While this code is that of the privileged late Victorian schoolboy, it allows Bertie to be modest, gracious, and magnanimous. He is always willing to devote time and money to assist his friends. When he hesitates over helping Bingo out of a scrape, all his friend need do is remind him that they were at school together.

*The Inimitable Jeeves* is significant in the Wodehouse canon for introducing numerous stock Bertie/Jeeves elements. These include the pattern of Bertie getting into trouble, Jeeves getting him out, and the young master having to sacrifice an article of clothing that the valet finds offensive: purple socks, loud cummerbund, spats in Old Etonian colors. Others are Aunt Agatha's efforts to have Bertie wed, only for him to escape narrowly, and Sir Roderick Glossop's conviction that Bertie is mad. *The Inimitable Jeeves* also displays Wodehouse's comic style at its best.

## LEAVE IT TO PSMITH

**First published:** 1923

**Type of work:** Novel

*Psmith poses as a Canadian poet to be near the woman he loves and to help steal a diamond necklace in a good cause.*

*Leave It to Psmith* is both a Psmith novel and a Lord Emsworth/Blandings Castle tale. It opens with Rupert Baxter, the overly efficient secretary, completely in charge of Blandings because of Lord Emsworth's obsession with his garden. Lord Emsworth also dares not diminish Baxter's power for fear of annoying Lady Constance, the sister who dominates him. Joseph Keeble, Lady Constance's husband, is also intimidated by her, even allowing her complete control of his money. His beloved stepdaughter Phyllis has recently married the poor Mike Jackson, and he longs to help them get started. Freddie Threepwood, Lord Emsworth's flighty son, suggests that they steal Lady Constance's diamond necklace, give Phyllis the money she needs from what his wife gives Joe to buy a new necklace, and replace it with a reset version of itself.

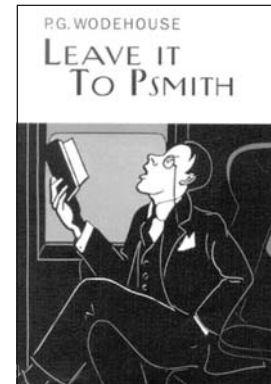
Ronald Eustace Psmith, broke since the death of

his father, has placed an advertisement claiming he will perform any task, legal or illegal, for a fee. Freddie goes to London to attempt to hire Psmith, who is not interested until he discovers that the lovely Eve Halliday is going to Blandings to catalog the library. When Lord Emsworth mistakes Psmith for the Canadian poet Ralston McTodd, whom Lady Constance has invited to Blandings, Psmith is given the means to be near Eve.

Psmith knows nothing about poetry and is not even remotely artistic but is such a charmingly convincing liar that he fools everyone—with the notable exception of the always-suspicious Baxter—at Blandings, even Miss Peavey, another poet. The already complicated plot becomes even more so because Freddie is in love with Eve, because Eve cannot return Psmith/McTodd's affection since the real McTodd is separated from one of her best friends, because Miss Peavey is also a thief after the necklace, and because Eddie Cootes, Miss Peavey's gun-toting former colleague in confidence games, shows up unexpectedly knowing that Psmith is not McTodd. A typically Wodehousian farcical scene results when Baxter, wearing only pajamas, is locked out in the middle of the night and hysterically resorts to throwing flowerpots through Lord Emsworth's bedroom window.

Psmith's prediction to Freddie midway in the novel eventually comes true: "All will doubtless come right in the future." Since Eve agrees to marry Psmith, he becomes, as a married man, disqualified from being a Wodehouse hero and never appears again except in revised versions of earlier novels.

*Leave It to Psmith* is a typical Blandings Castle novel full of the usual eccentric characters one finds in musical comedies, but it is even more typically a tale dominated by Psmith, whose verbal skills are seen at their best as he double-talks his way through discussions of poetry. Psmith's appeal as a fictional character is illustrated by his willingness to let events take their course. He allows Lord Ems-



worth to think that he is the Canadian poet even before he knows of the connection to Eve or the necklace because of “some innate defect in his character. He was essentially a young man who took life as it came, and the more inconsequently it came the better he liked it.” Psmith’s delight in the confusion he creates is infectious.

### SUMMARY

While the books that P. G. Wodehouse produced over his last decade do not match the earlier ones in vitality, his fiction was amazingly consistent in quality over much of his uniquely long career. Working so many variations on the same types of characters and situations is truly a remarkable achievement. Even if such an England as he presents never existed, Wodehouse convinces his readers that it should have. His is the sublimest of escapist literature.

Michael Adams

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why was the essentially English P. G. Wodehouse better appreciated in the United States than in his native country?
- Was the British forgiveness of Wodehouse after World War II justified?
- What does the phrase “musical comedy without the music” mean?
- Characterize Wodehouse’s unusual metaphors.
- How was Wodehouse influenced by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?
- Did elements of early Hollywood films also influence Wodehouse?

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##### LONG FICTION:

*The Pothunters*, 1902

*A Prefect’s Uncle*, 1903

*The Gold Bat*, 1904

*The Head of Kay’s*, 1905

*Love Among the Chickens*, 1906

*Not George Washington*, 1907 (with Herbert Westbrook)

*The White Feather*, 1907

*Mike: A Public School Story*, 1909 (also known as *Enter Psmith*, *Mike at Wrykyn*, and *Mike and Psmith*)

*The Swoop: How Clarence Saved England*, 1909

*Psmith in the City: A Sequel to “Mike,”* 1910

*A Gentleman of Leisure*, 1910 (also known as *The Intrusion of Jimmy*)

*The Prince and Betty*, 1912

*The Little Nugget*, 1913

*Psmith Journalist*, 1915 (revision of *The Prince and Betty*)

*Something Fresh*, 1915 (also known as *Something New*)

*Uneasy Money*, 1916

*Piccadilly Jim*, 1917

*Their Mutual Child*, 1919 (also known as *The Coming of Bill*)

*A Damsel in Distress*, 1919

*The Little Warrior*, 1920 (also known as *Jill the Reckless*)

*Indiscretions of Archie*, 1921

*The Girl on the Boat*, 1922 (also known as *Three Men and a Maid*)

*The Adventures of Sally*, 1922 (also known as *Mostly Sally*)

*Leave It to Psmith*, 1923

*The Inimitable Jeeves*, 1923 (also known as *Jeeves*)  
*Bill the Conqueror: His Invasion of England in the Springtime*, 1924  
*Sam the Sudden*, 1925 (also known as *Sam in the Suburbs*)  
*The Small Bachelor*, 1927  
*Money for Nothing*, 1928  
*Summer Lightning*, 1929 (also known as *Fish Preferred and Fish Deferred*)  
*Very Good, Jeeves*, 1930  
*Big Money*, 1931  
*If I Were You*, 1931  
*Doctor Sally*, 1932  
*Hot Water*, 1932  
*Heavy Weather*, 1933  
*Thank You, Jeeves*, 1934  
*Right Ho, Jeeves*, 1934 (also known as *Brinkley Manor: A Novel About Jeeves*)  
*Trouble down at Tudsleigh*, 1935  
*The Luck of the Bodkins*, 1935  
*Laughing Gas*, 1936  
*Summer Moonshine*, 1937  
*The Code of the Woosters*, 1938  
*Uncle Fred in the Springtime*, 1939  
*Quick Service*, 1940  
*Money in the Bank*, 1942  
*Joy in the Morning*, 1946  
*Full Moon*, 1947  
*Spring Fever*, 1948  
*Uncle Dynamite*, 1948  
*The Mating Season*, 1949  
*The Old Reliable*, 1951  
*Barmy in Wonderland*, 1952 (pb. in U.S. as *Angel Cake*)  
*Pigs Have Wings*, 1952  
*Ring for Jeeves*, 1953 (also known as *The Return of Jeeves*)  
*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, 1954 (also known as *Bertie Wooster Sees It Through*)  
*French Leave*, 1956  
*Something Fishy*, 1957 (also known as *The Butler Did It*)  
*Cocktail Time*, 1958  
*Jeeves in the Offing*, 1960 (also known as *How Right You Are, Jeeves*)  
*Service with a Smile*, 1961  
*Ice in the Bedroom*, 1961  
*Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, 1963  
*Biffen's Millions*, 1964 (also known as *Frozen Assets*)  
*Galahad at Blandings*, 1965 (also known as *The Brinkmanship of Galahad Threepwood: A Blandings Castle Novel*)  
*Company for Henry*, 1967 (also known as *The Purloined Paperweight*)  
*Do Butlers Burgle Banks?*, 1968  
*A Pelican at Blandings*, 1969 (also known as *No Nudes Is Good Nudes*)  
*The Girl in Blue*, 1970  
*Jeeves and the Tie That Binds*, 1971 (also known as *Much Obligated, Jeeves*)  
*Pearls, Girls and Monty Bodkin*, 1972 (also known as *The Plot That Thickened*)  
*Bachelors Anonymous*, 1973  
*The Cat-Nappers: A Jeeves and Bertie Story*, 1974 (also known as *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen*)  
*Sunset at Blandings*, 1977



SHORT FICTION:

*Tales of St. Austin's*, 1903  
*The Man Upstairs, and Other Stories*, 1914  
*The Man with Two Left Feet, and Other Stories*, 1917  
*My Man Jeeves*, 1919  
*The Clicking of Cuthbert*, 1922 (also known as *Golf Without Tears*)  
*Ukridge*, 1924 (also known as *He Rather Enjoyed It*)  
*Carry on, Jeeves!*, 1925  
*The Heart of a Goof*, 1926 (also known as *Divots*)  
*Meet Mr. Mulliner*, 1927  
*Mr. Mulliner Speaking*, 1929  
*Jeeves Omnibus*, 1931 (revised as *The World of Jeeves*, 1967)  
*Mulliner Nights*, 1933  
*Blandings Castle and Elsewhere*, 1935 (also known as *Blandings Castle*)  
*Mulliner Omnibus*, 1935 (revised as *The World of Mr. Mulliner*, 1972)  
*Young Men in Spats*, 1936  
*Lord Emsworth and Others*, 1937 (also known as *The Crime Wave at Blandings*)  
*Dudley Is Back to Normal*, 1940  
*Eggs, Beans, and Crumpets*, 1940  
*Nothing Serious*, 1950  
*Selected Stories*, 1958  
*A Few Quick Ones*, 1959  
*Plum Pie*, 1966  
*The Golf Omnibus: Thirty-one Golfing Short Stories*, 1973  
*The World of Psmith*, 1974

DRAMA:

*A Gentleman of Leisure*, pr. 1911 (with John Stapleton)  
*Oh, Lady! Lady!*, pr. 1918  
*The Play's the Thing*, pr. 1926 (adaptation of Ferenc Molnár)  
*Good Morning, Bill*, pr. 1927 (adaptation of László Fodor)  
*A Damsel in Distress*, pr. 1928 (adaptation of his novel; with Ian Hay)  
*Baa, Baa Black Sheep*, pr. 1929 (with Hay)  
*Candlelight*, pr. 1929 (adaptation of Siegfried Geyer)  
*Leave It to Psmith*, pr. 1930 (adaptation of his novel; with Hay)  
*Anything Goes*, pr. 1934 (with Guy Bolton and others)  
*Carry On, Jeeves*, pb. 1956 (adaptation; with Bolton)

SCREENPLAY:

*A Damsel in Distress*, 1937 (adaptation of his novel; with others)

NONFICTION:

*William Tell Told Again*, 1904 (with additional fictional material)  
*Louder and Funnier*, 1932  
*Bring on the Girls: The Improbable Story of Our Life in Musical Comedy, with Pictures to Prove It*, 1953 (with Guy Bolton)  
*Performing Flea: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 1953 (revised as *Author! Author!*, 1962; W. Townend, editor)  
*America, I Like You*, 1956 (revised as *Over Seventy: An Autobiography with Digressions*, 1957)

EDITED TEXTS:

- A Century of Humour*, 1934  
*The Week-End Book of Humor*, 1952 (with Scott Meredith)  
*The Best of Modern Humor*, 1952 (with Meredith)  
*A Carnival of Modern Humor*, 1967 (with Meredith)

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# CHRISTA WOLF

**Born:** Landsberg an der Warthe, Germany (now Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poland)  
March 18, 1929

*Among the leading writers of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Wolf became a dominant voice in German literature after World War II. As a novelist, she had a strong influence on political, feminist, and aesthetic issues.*

## BIOGRAPHY

Christa Wolf (vawlf) was born on March 18, 1929, in Landsberg on the Warthe (now the Polish town of Gorzów Wielkopolski), the daughter of Hertha Jaekel Ihlenfeld and grocer Otto Ihlenfeld. Wolf and her family fled the approaching Russian troops in 1945 and migrated west to Mecklenburg. After World War II, Wolf was among the first to write about her personal involvement in the war without creating false, antifascist heroes.

She studied German literature in Jena and Leipzig from 1949 to 1953. Wolf later worked as a reader and editor for journals and publishing houses and served on the executive committee of the Writers' Union of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). She married writer, scholar, and publisher Gerhard Wolf in 1951, and the couple's daughters, Annette and Katrin, were born in 1952 and 1956, respectively.

Wolf worked for a time in a factory as a means of involving workers in literary activity, and she also was a member of a working writers' group. She participated in several International Writers' Conferences on Peace in the 1980's, traveled extensively, served as a writer-in-residence at several American universities, and was a fellow at the Getty Institute in Los Angeles.

A dedicated socialist active in both the political and literary world of the GDR, Wolf protested the ills of East Germany while maintaining a firm belief in socialism itself. When East Germany's political system was disintegrating in 1989, she appealed to her fellow citizens to build a new socialist East Germany rather than succumb to the economic allure of the West. Although unheeded, her appeal verifies her commitment to humanistic ideals in a so-

cialist setting. As a feminist, antiwar writer, and independent thinker, Wolf criticizes the patriarchal and military complexes of both East and West.

Wolf became the center of controversy in 1990, after the publication of her novella, *Was Bleibt: Erzählung* (1990; *What Remains*, 1993). Written in the late 1970's, the book records the experiences of a young woman writer placed under surveillance by East Germany's secret police. Critics accused Wolf of being an opportunist who was willing to publish such a piece only when it had become both safe and fashionable to do so. This attack sparked a debate as to whether she and other GDR writers had been collaborators with or true voices of protest against a repressive regime. In a talk in Los Angeles in 1993, Wolf discussed the accusations that she had been an informant for the secret police; she pointed out that while she was accused of providing only a few pages of information to the police, the same police force had gathered several volumes of material about her while she was under surveillance. Many scholars, particularly those in the United States, defended Wolf. They viewed the attack as an attempt to create a scapegoat and to discredit what remained of socialist commitment in Eastern Europe. The best evidence of Wolf's dedication to a humane system of political and economic equality rests in the many works she produced that criticize the dehumanizing tendencies of both the capitalist West and a corrupted Communist East.

Wolf's early works, *Moskauer Novelle*, (1961; Moscow novella) and *Der geteilte Himmel; Erzählung*, (1963; *Divided Heaven: A Novel of Germany Today*, 1965), could be described as socialist realism as it was prescribed by the aesthetic committees of the

GDR. In a later novel, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968; *The Quest for Christa T.*, 1970), Wolf created her own version of realism, which acknowledged the individual's need to develop a stable self even within a socialist society. This text brought her into conflict with GDR cultural functionaries. In *Kindheitsmuster* (1976; *A Model Childhood*, 1980; retitled *Patterns of Childhood*, 1984), Wolf explored the Nazi era and the childhood of those who grew up under Adolf Hitler. In *Kein Ort: Nirgends* (1979; *No Place on Earth*, 1982), Wolf examined the lives of two figures from the German Romantic period; *Kassandra: Erzählung* (1983; *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, 1984) rewrites the life of the famous prophet of Troy. In *Störfall: Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987; *Accident: A Day's News*, 1989), Wolf analyzes the repercussions of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

Always a voice of social conscience, Wolf also became a strong advocate of women's rights. In 1996, she published *Medea: Stimmen* (*Medea: A Modern Retelling*, 1998), in which she reconsiders the classical story of Medea and the murder of her children.

Two collections of Wolf's essays and short stories appeared in the 1990's: *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou: Texte, 1990-1994* (1994; *Parting from Phantoms: Selected Writings, 1990-1994*, 1997) and *Hierzulande andernorts: Erzählungen und andere Texte, 1994-1998* (1999), which look back on the fate of Germany since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Her novel *Leibhaftig* (2002; *In the Flesh*, 2005) recounts, through fevered dreams, a serious personal illness that parallels the deterioration of the East German state. *Ein Tag im Jahr: 1960-2000* (2003; *One Day a Year: 1960-2000*, 2007) is a nonfiction work that documents Wolf's daily life, as well as the political events of four decades in East and West Germany. Originally sparked by a literary contest in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia*, challenging readers to write on the topic "your day of September 27, 1960," the autobiographical book records Wolf's reflections on the events of September 27 in each year from 1960 to 2000. The volume is the culmination of Wolf's developing technique of intertwining the biographical and the historical-political in her work. *Mit anderem Blick* (2005) is a collection of stories and diary entries written between 1992 and 2003; this book displays a lighter, more personal touch than many of Wolf's earlier works.

Wolf has won numerous literary prizes, among

them the Heinrich Mann Prize of the Academy of Arts of the German Democratic Republic (1963), the Georg Büchner Prize of the German Academy of Language and Poetry (1980), and the Austrian Prize for European Literature (1985). In 1991, she was named an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1999 Wolf received both the Elisebeth Langgässer Literature Prize and the Nelly Sachs Prize. In 2002, she was awarded the Deutscher Bücherpreis from the German publishing industry for her lifetime achievements, and in 2005 she received the Hermann Sinsheimer Prize.

## ANALYSIS

Christa Wolf has always resisted labels. When asked in an interview if she was a feminist, she responded that she was not any "ist." She has remained true to her own ideals and social vision despite drastic and traumatic changes in the political structures around her. This attempt to find a self and remain true to it despite social pressures forms a central theme in her novels.

In *The Quest for Christa T.*, Wolf focuses on the difficulty of achieving an individual identity, what she calls "the difficulty of saying 'I'." Christa T. grows up during World War II and later in a developing German Democratic Republic (GDR) that stressed conformity. Christa T., however, is an idealist who does not fit into the highly regimented society. The book's first-person narrator thinks her way back in time to recover an image of her friend Christa T.; in so doing, she is challenged to not falsify the person she is re-creating. In this novel, Wolf values both the individual struggling to realize herself and the idea that people must create a society that cares for all of its members. She realizes the shortcomings of the communist GDR as it developed in the 1950's and 1960's, but she believes in the possibility of a socialist society that cherishes both the group and the individual.

An attempt to create a coherent self and to remain faithful to it despite social pressures is also evident in *No Place on Earth*, in which two poets from the German Romantic movement—one female, Karoline von Günderrode, the other male, Heinrich von Kleist—struggle to realize their poetic genius in a society that rejects them. In *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* the Trojan princess and priestess wages a comparable battle to give voice to a vision that society does not want to see. Locating a

stable individual self in a society that demands conformity remains an important topic throughout Wolf's work. For Wolf, this individualism must always be balanced by a concern for the society as a whole.

Another important issue for Wolf is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coming to grips with the past. In post-World War II Germany, writers were forced to consider the nation's role in the war and the Holocaust. Wolf examines this issue with characteristic honesty and forthrightness. Her most direct examination of the past comes in *Patterns of Childhood*, in which the narrator reexamines her past during the Nazi era and afterward. In this fictional autobiography, she takes an honest and painful look at what war does to a young woman growing up under its propagandistic spell. As Wolf analyzes the ways in which war has deformed her youth into a perverse "model childhood," the narrator in *Patterns of Childhood* also examines her own current historical context of the 1970's.

Wolf's novels up to *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* form a reverse chronological progression. In her early works, *Moskauer Novelle* and *Divided Heaven: A Novel of Germany Today*, Wolf deals with her contemporary environment. In *The Quest for Christa T.*, she traces the past life of a deceased friend. In *Patterns of Childhood*, she examines childhood during World War II; and in *No Place on Earth*, she takes another step back to analyze the lives of two figures of German Romanticism. Her next leap took her back to ancient Troy and the prophet Cassandra. In each of these situations, Wolf searches the historical records to determine why and how humanity has arrived where it was in the late twentieth century. In so doing, she hopes to gain knowledge in order to improve the world. Her explorations of earlier periods and stories also provide a new insight into the issues and problems that occupy Wolf's own time. This impulse in her work is continued in her novel *Medea*.

Wolf's writing is also marked by a strongly anti-war sensibility that is most strongly articulated in *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. As a woman whose warnings about military destruction went unheeded, Wolf was drawn to her ancient counterpart, Cassandra. Her fears are echoed in the threat

of nuclear annihilation contemplated in *Accident: A Day's News*, in which Wolf muses on the ways in which the nuclear cloud of Chernobyl changes the very language people use, as well as the air they fear to breathe.

Finally, Wolf's works are characterized by an ongoing concern for the position of women in society. The historical scope of her investigations allows her to move from a Trojan culture poised between a matriarchy and patriarchy to gender roles prescribed by Nazi propaganda to the communist and socialist determination of women's roles and finally to the place of women in contemporary culture. While Wolf may not want to limit herself by labels such as "feminist," her works clearly describe the constraints women face in a society dominated by men, and often by men at war.

Wolf's novels present a challenging literary style in which chronological order is often disrupted by characters thinking backward or forward in time, thus breaking the linear flow of the narrative. Simple causality is hard to find in Wolf's texts; complex interweavings of forces from different moments in time force character, narrator, and reader to reassess their understanding of the world. Wolf also uses first-, second-, and third-person narration in order to reveal the struggles one experiences in defining an individual self. She sometimes has character and narrator merge in consciousness (at the opening of *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*, for example, or at various moments in *The Quest for Christa T.* or *Patterns of Childhood*) to create a communal consciousness that connects the individual to larger historical or interpersonal forces. Wolf does not hesitate to use personal forms, such as diaries, travel journals, letters, or reminiscences, as materials for her novels. This practice creates a strongly autobiographical underpinning in her works.

Beginning in the late 1980's and particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Wolf more closely examines autobiographical situations, as evident in *In the Flesh*, *One Day a Year*, and her novel *Sommertück* (1989). She questions whether her faith in a viable and just social system can be attained and whether, as a writer, she can help contribute to that goal.



## THE QUEST FOR CHRISTA T.

**First published:** *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, 1968 (English translation, 1970)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A woman writer in the 1960's attempts to reconstruct the life of a dead friend.*

*The Quest for Christa T.* was Wolf's breakthrough as a major writer. In the novel, a first-person female narrator attempts to reconstruct the life of a friend who has recently died in her thirties of leukemia and of an inability to fit into her society. In the process the narrator reflects on her own time and society. She ponders the process of writing and its ability to save or to falsify people by seeing them through biased memories. The book investigates the struggle to define an individual identity in a developing communist society (East Germany) that sees conformity as necessary to its survival.

In a 1968 essay entitled "Selbstinterview" (self-interview), Wolf indicates that she wrote *The Quest for Christa T.* from a subjective impulse because someone very close to her had died, and she could not accept this death. Writing about it was a means of protecting herself. Wolf delves into the early life of her friend and uses documentary material, such as diaries, letters, and sketches of Christa T. Moreover, Wolf discovered that in the process of writing about Christa T., she was forced to confront herself and the relationship between the first-person narrator and Christa T.

The constant interplay between reality and fiction, between self and narrator, breaks down the boundaries between the two. Just as the narrator of *The Quest for Christa T.* is forced to invent certain scenes in order to produce a "true" text, Wolf mixes fiction and reality to produce a realism of "subjective authenticity." By "subjective authenticity" Wolf means writing in which the author is intimately in-



volved with her material, in which she comes to terms with the reality around her, and in which that very process is reflected. This method respects no traditional literary boundaries and does not separate reality and fiction.

*The Quest for Christa T.* challenges a number of tenets of East German society in the 1960's. It values individual difference and creativity over conformity. Wolf acknowledges that the ideal utopian society she and her contemporaries foresaw in the 1950's has not materialized in Eastern Europe. The crushing of the Hungarian revolt by Russian troops in 1956 and the disillusionment it caused is recorded in her text. She depicts the failure of East German society to absorb its most idealistic individuals, to give someone like Christa T. a productive role. This alienation and lack of productive belonging contributes to Christa T.'s death. Wolf is equally critical, however, of West Germany's emphasis on money and the possession of luxury objects. This balanced critique of the abuses of both the communist and the capitalist systems marks all of Wolf's work.

## PATTERNS OF CHILDHOOD

**First published:** *Kindheitsmuster*, 1976  
(English translation, *A Model Childhood*, 1980; retitled 1984)

**Type of work:** Novel

*A female writer in the 1970's looks back at her childhood during the Nazi era and reflects on her current historical situation in the light of that past.*

*Patterns of Childhood* is a fictional autobiography. When the narrator of *Patterns of Childhood* relates her childhood in the third person rather than the traditional first-person voice of an autobiography, she reproduces Wolf's own gesture of displacing her childhood memories into fiction. The novel therefore reflects not only Wolf's life but also the process of her writing.

The narrator has difficulty confronting her childhood participation in the Nazi era. She was not directly involved in military combat or in operating the death camps; however, she led a typically ill-informed, middle-class life in which she believed

in her country and tried to fit into Nazi society. She understands the speed with which East Germany forgot World War II after it was over since, according to East German propaganda, the war was the fault of the capitalist, imperialist West. The narrator knows that the mentality that produced the Holocaust is not limited to West Germany or to the period of World War II. Her reflections recall the past of an entire generation of Germans, East and West, who grew up during the war years. Not old enough to be directly responsible for the war, those born in the mid-to-late 1920's nevertheless shoulder the burden of memory and self-examination after Adolf Hitler's fall.

One of the first writers from the GDR to confront personal involvement in World War II, Wolf breaks the taboo against acknowledging the widespread

fascist sentiment among many of her peers and elders. She undermines the image of socialist heroes bravely resisting the Nazis and depicts many who supported Nazi rule, were indifferent to it, or were cowed into conformity.

The trauma associated with growing up during the Hitler era makes it impossible for the narrator to connect her current self, living in the GDR

of the early 1970's, with the child that was molded during the Nazi period. The narrated self thus becomes the third-person voice of Nelly Jordan, while the narrator meditates on current events in the second person. The rupture of consciousness implicit in this splitting of the self into the second and third person forms the underlying tension of the text. The plot of *Patterns of Childhood* is the reintegration of the narrator's self. The narrator realizes that her story will come to a successful end only when she can unify the community of selves she has created in writing the text, only when she can reconstruct herself as a whole being. This unification is symbolized by the convergence of the third-person passages about the young Nelly and the second-person passages of the narrator's self-address into the unified first-person voice of the final page of the book.



Wolf's closing page is characteristically multi-valent. She does, finally, succeed in using the first-person voice in her text, but it is a first person who must admit uncertainty. The admission of ambivalence from a reintegrated community of selves signals a positive redefinition of the concept of the female subject (rather than object) and the way in which she defines herself.

## NO PLACE ON EARTH

**First published:** *Kein Ort: Nirgends*, 1979  
(English translation, 1982)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Two poets from the German Romantic period meet at a social gathering for literati and discover in their intensifying conversation that they share a feeling of alienation and personal frustration that will lead each to commit suicide within a few short years.*

*No Place on Earth* presents the fictitious gathering of several of Germany's leading Romantic writers and intellectuals at a country estate in June, 1804. Employing a technique of shifting narrative voices, the novel focuses on two writers from the Romantic period, Karoline von Günderrode and Heinrich von Kleist. While Kleist's work would later become famous, Günderrode's poetry would remain largely neglected until Christa Wolf published a collection of Günderrode's writing, *Die Schatten eines Traumes* (1979), with an introductory essay that sheds light on both Günderrode's and Wolf's work. Wolf was working on the collection while writing this novel.

Both Kleist and Günderrode felt their talents went unrecognized and unappreciated in their own times, and both committed suicide shortly after this fictional meeting (Günderrode in 1806, Kleist in 1811). Wolf's novel was also shaped by her frustration at the exile of dissident writer and singer Wolf Biermann from the GDR in 1976 and by her attraction to early German Romantic literature, despite the official GDR condemnation of it as dangerously subjective and irrational. All these factors coalesced in Wolf's depiction of two early Romantic writers whose sensitive and intense

emotions and idealistic beliefs put them at odds with their increasingly rational and materialist surroundings.

In their interior monologues and eventually their intense dialogue, Günderrode and Kleist reveal the conflicts engendered in individuals whose views do not match the culture and politics of the society in which they live. Their suicides are at least partly an indictment of a society which cannot usefully incorporate its own most creative and sensitive individuals. The parallels between this situation and Wolf's own in East Germany in the late 1970's are intensely evident.

The title *No Place on Earth* plays on the Greek word *utopia*, which literally translates to the words "no place." Wolf's "No place, no where" echoes the idea that a utopia is an idealized construction of what life might or should be, which exists in no place in the current world. The idea of utopia runs through many of Wolf's works in which characters seek more just societies that respect individuals.

In this novel, both the male writer Kleist and the female poet Günderrode conceptualize such a utopia in which feeling would be valued as much as reason, and science would not be perverted into arid rationalizing and cold measurements, numbers, and dollars. The two characters can only fantasize about a society in which their value as creative individuals would be accepted and celebrated. The reality, however, is that both are alienated, misunderstood, and brutalized to such an extent that each commits suicide. "Utopia" thus remains literally "no place" for these two characters; they cannot find a society in which they can live.

The novel combines several of Wolf's major themes, including the inability of society to productively incorporate some of its most creative individuals; societal repression, particularly of women; the overvaluing of that which can be measured and counted; and the inability of humankind to unify idealism and reality into a viable social order.

## CASSANDRA: A NOVEL AND FOUR ESSAYS

**First published:** *Kassandra: Erzählung*, 1983  
(English translation, 1984)

**Type of work:** Novel and essays

*Cassandra, princess and prophet of Troy, analyzes the effects of political corruption and war on the Trojans.*

The novel *Cassandra* began when Wolf delivered a series of lectures on poetics at Frankfurt University in 1982. She did not present the expected scholarly analysis of poetics, but instead she delivered a series of four talks, including two "Travel Reports," "A Work Diary," and a "Letter." These lectures explained how Wolf became interested in the figure of Cassandra. Her fifth lecture was the narrative of *Cassandra* itself. Wolf often refused to play by academic rules.

Like Euripides' *Tröiades* (415 B.C.E.; *The Trojan Women*, 1782), *Cassandra* is told from the perspective of the vanquished survivors of the Trojan War, with Wolf describing the obliteration of the people and culture of Troy in 1200 B.C.E. Cassandra's interior monologue as she awaits her death at the gates of Agamemnon's fortress takes her back in memory to Troy. She remembers peaceful scenes of a society balanced between matriarchy and patriarchy, a balance represented by the closeness and mutual counsel of her mother, Hecuba, and her father, Priam. Cassandra recalls how the war destroyed that delicate balance; matriarchal vision and patriarchal political power vied with one another and the patriarchy eventually won.

Wolf's antiwar message is evident in her portrayal of the real reasons for war. Rejecting the Trojan War as a battle caused by the beauty of Helen of Troy, Wolf depicts the war's economic underpinning. The Trojans fight not for Helen, who is not in Troy, but for a bald-faced lie that they sustain. Male egotism and not female beauty breeds the conflict. The epic "heroic tradition" rapidly degenerates into bestial cruelty as Wolf indicts the major heroes of the Trojan War. She reduces the archetypal military hero, Achilles, to "Achilles the beast," a sadistic coward. Cassandra goes to her death partly as a refusal to participate any longer in such a degraded,

“heroic” world. The four essays in the book reinforce Wolf’s antiwar message by discussing twentieth century wars in Vietnam and Latin America, as well as the threat of nuclear annihilation in Europe, while her novel investigates the obliteration of the people and culture of Troy in 1200 B.C.E.

Cassandra also recollects, however, an alternative society of mutually supportive outcasts, composed largely of women, that cuts across class and national boundaries. Aeneas takes this society with him when he flees Troy. Occupying a brief utopian moment in the text, Aeneas’s little band will be entrapped in the bellicose currents of history in the Roman Empire they are about to found.

Wolf’s novel makes use of earlier epics and dramas. She gives voice to the different reality experienced by women. Her novel creates a second narrative tradition, a female one that runs in opposition to the male, “heroic” narrative tradition of the

epic. Wolf is too much a realist to imply that this utopian society will be easily achieved. Such a society can, however, be envisioned by a woman who is willing to question the patriarchal tradition.

#### SUMMARY

Christa Wolf has always been willing to criticize political and social corruption in the capitalist West and the communist East. A supporter of the rights of the individual in a socialist context, she also champions the needs of society as a whole (and particularly its most vulnerable members) in a capitalist context. Her stylistic complexity and her political courage and conviction make her work a compelling record of the shifting historical currents of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Kathleen L. Komar

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What problems does Christa Wolf depict in the relationship of sensitive or creative individuals to their society?
- How does Wolf use earlier myths and historical time periods to investigate issues in her own society?
- In what ways do individuals, particularly women, in Wolf's work have difficulty in finding a stable self, or in coming to say "I"?
- What is Wolf's attitude toward utopias? What utopias are suggested in her writings?
- How does Wolf view the possibility of a socialist society after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the German Democratic Republic?
- How does Wolf use autobiographical situations to illuminate the social and political issues of her day?





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## VIRGINIA WOOLF

**Born:** London, England

January 25, 1882

**Died:** The River Ouse, near Rodmell, Sussex, England

March 28, 1941

*Internationally acclaimed as a major novelist of the twentieth century, Woolf extensively advanced the conception and development of experimental forms in fiction.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Born into a family in which literary concerns and artistic pursuits were enthusiastically encouraged, Virginia Woolf was predisposed as a child for a writing career. She was born in London, England, on January 25, 1882. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, achieved academic fame as the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* between 1882 and his retirement in 1891. Her mother, Julia Duckworth, who died when Virginia was thirteen, came from a family with aristocratic connections and artistic sensibilities that sometimes inclined toward the frivolous. Woolf's parents brought to their union (March 26, 1878) children from previous marriages, besides producing four of their own, of whom Virginia was the third. Vanessa, the eldest, who was later to become an important artist, was extremely close to her younger sister; two boys, Thoby and Adrian, completed this tight-knit family group.

Virginia Woolf matured in an intellectual and artistic milieu stimulating to the spirit. Although she envied her brothers' going away to school and resented the exclusion of women from the then-male province of education to the end of her life, she received instruction hardly to be bettered, studying mathematics, literature, history, and foreign languages (both Latin and Greek) privately with her parents or with selected tutors. By age fif-

teen she enjoyed free access to her father's library and directed her own reading program with a voracious appetite, discussing many works she read with her father.

Her writing career began at the age of nine when she created almost single-handedly a weekly family newspaper, which she continued to produce for more than four years, publishing in this way her own earliest stories. At fifteen she began keeping a diary. Her first professional publication was an unsigned review in *The Guardian* in 1904. *The Voyage Out*, her first novel, begun in 1907 but not completed until 1913 because of illness, was published in 1915. After that, books flowed regularly from her pen in a constant stream, interrupted only by periods of poor health or mental instability. She wrote novels, stories, literary criticism, biographies, and occasional pieces for various periodicals. More than 3,800 of her letters have been preserved and printed, and the five published volumes of her diary (1915-1941) shed much light not only upon her private life and her circle of friends but also upon the troubled years in which she lived.

Virginia and Vanessa became friends with students whom Thoby met at Cambridge—Lyton Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Leonard Woolf, and Clive Bell; they remained lifelong friends, with the latter two eventually marrying Virginia and Vanessa, respectively. Shortly after their father's death, showing an independence rare in 1905, the children gave up the large family home to establish a more modest household of their own, where there was generally much talk of intellectual matters. Virginia's marriage to Leonard Woolf proved

salutary for her; he provided a firm base of emotional stability upon which she could rely and provided a free intellectual atmosphere that fostered the growth of her aesthetic ideas. Through their joint direction of the Hogarth Press, which they founded in 1917, they came into contact with men and women of letters who often became their close personal friends. Vanessa's career as an artist and her marriage to Clive Bell, who was soon to become an important art critic, brought the Woolfs into frequent friendly relations with such artists as Duncan Grant and Roger Fry. These companions, as well as the novelist E. M. Forster and the economist John Maynard Keynes, are often referred to as the Bloomsbury Group since most of them lived near each other in the Bloomsbury neighborhood of London.

Virginia Woolf was an interesting photographic subject; among the photographs of her that are often printed in biographies, there are three that reveal contrasting aspects of her character. The first, taken by Marianne Beck for *Vogue* in 1926, shows her seated at a table, her hands resting together, gazing pleasantly to the side. She is wearing a dress of her mother's, with puffed sleeves and lace cuffs. She radiates the tranquil loveliness of a young and innocent Victorian woman looking wistfully toward adulthood, but she was actually forty-four years old and had already survived the horrors of World War I and several serious mental breakdowns.

Another photograph, taken about a year later by Man Ray, reflects a quite different person. Seated again at a table, wearing a simple dark jacket with a scarf, her hair austere pulled back, she looks into the lens of the camera in an honest and friendly way, inviting sincere and open communication. One wishes to speak to her. Gisèle Freund's 1939 photograph reveals still another facet of her being. Seated before a modern painting, a book in one hand and a cigarette in the other, she gazes, troubled perhaps by thoughts of madness, death, and disaster, into a distant void beyond her. Physical and mental illnesses dogged her steps and another war seemed imminent, but in spite of internal and external threats, she directed her being toward the perfection of her art.

These three different images reveal the complexity that constitutes the totality of Woolf as woman and as artist: the joyful, sweet loveliness

masking anxiety and awful dread; the simple, candid honesty and sincerity with which she faced the world; and the distressed resignation with which she accepted the inevitable arrival of the destruction of all that mattered to her. Overwhelmed by the horrors of war and fearing the onset of yet another serious mental breakdown from which she might not recover, she took her own life on March 28, 1941, in Rodmell, Sussex, England.

## ANALYSIS

Anyone unfamiliar with the work of Woolf will doubtless be perplexed and confused by the apparent incoherence of her novels. She provides little background for the narrative situation, major characters are often difficult to distinguish from minor ones, and there is usually no important romantic interest. Instead of a story with a beginning, middle, and end consisting of events arranged in chronological order with occasional flashbacks and leading to a satisfying climax, Woolf presents instead an exploration of minds that perceive subtle variations among almost insignificant details (which themselves seem to flow at random), occasionally interrupted by essaylike commentaries. Her nine novels include *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931), and *The Years* (1937). Many of her excellent essays are to be found in *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925), *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932), and *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (1942).

Though her aesthetic roots are firmly established in the European literary tradition, her genius lies in exploring the inner world of her characters, leading her to elaborate a psychological complexity without parallel in the literature of the past. She invents new methods that permit her to explore this inner world of her characters by allowing them to express their abstract thoughts and feelings in mental monologues that externalize the hidden and secret by means of metaphors, poetic images, and symbols. Thus her novels fall into the realm of psychological studies rather than the adventure stories written by authors she referred to as "materialist writers." She deals primarily with the spiritual side of humanity, not its activities and adventures, by presenting a synthesis of an individual's total response to life and reality, for these responses, colored by the emotions of the character, are never static. The inner world of her characters

is constantly shifting and changing, for them as well as for the reader, since their inner life approximates the reader's. Moreover, an individual is not the same from one moment to the next—his or her identity is unstable and changes as his or her perceptions change. Reality becomes a series of momentary fragments that ebb and flow; the reader must mentally arrange them into a story. A reader is not a passive spectator of events in Woolf's novels but must become actively involved emotionally in the character's thoughts, feelings, and senses.

Woolf's preoccupation with the representation of this reality made up of fleeting moments (the "incessant shower of innumerable atoms," as she put it) leads her to deal extensively with the passing of time and the changes that measure it, whether that duration is only one day or many years. Since the mind is capable of mingling past, present, and future simultaneously, a few seconds of present experience can include variable patterns of memories and fantasies. For example, a woman simply walking down the street may be thinking primarily about her destination, but thousands of other conflicting and divergent thoughts and sensations may flash through her mind in only a few seconds. This stream of thoughts, sometimes tranquil and sometimes troubled, constitutes the true subject matter of all Woolf's novels.

If thoughts tumble so helter-skelter through the mind, reflecting different atoms of reality moment by moment, then often they will be incomplete, interrupted by others before they can be finished. These fragments of thoughts and feelings are certainly related to one another—one thought or sensation has suggested or inspired another—but the connections are not particularly logical. Or rather, the logic is one of suggestion, or of association of ideas, perceptions, feelings, or emotions. Woolf enters into this process and reveals these fragmentary, interrupted thoughts while they are occurring by developing a kind of "mental speech" with which to express them. Her characters talk to themselves, explain to themselves, question themselves; this technique is generally called interior monologue or stream of consciousness. It requires some effort on the part of the reader to determine what kind of pattern makes a particular sequence logical, what sort of logic it possesses, and the direction of the flow of the stream.

If this complexity of consciousness were ren-

dered literally, Woolf's novels would be extremely difficult to read, but her style is simple and direct, clear and lucid, making few syntactic demands on the reader, who is guided through a story that demands absolute attention and concentration. The vocabulary is simple and words are generally used with their primary meanings. Sentences tend to be rather short and concise, never overwhelming in their volume. The sentence structure is masterly and clear, seldom demanding that the reader ponder the essential meaning. There is nothing flashy or tricky about her writing; the content is highlighted by her invisible style.

To understand and appreciate a novel by Woolf fully, one should be willing to read it several times, first determining the overall design, then later connecting details and linking images into patterns that gradually become clearer and acquire deeper meanings. A reader discovers the world expressed in a novel by Woolf in a way that is similar to comprehending a great symphonic work through repeated hearings: One is always attentive to slight variations in the melodies, changes in harmony and rhythm, contrasts of key and tempo, and instrumental coloring. Like a great composer, Woolf plots the design of her fictional compositions, orchestrating them with words that form complex patterns and images and creating intricate designs. Her works, accessible to the average reader, nonetheless demand attentiveness and patience. The rewards to be gathered enrich a spirit seeking truth.

## MRS. DALLOWAY

**First published:** 1925

**Type of work:** Novel

*A fashionable, middle-aged woman gives an elegant party for a number of social and professional acquaintances.*

*Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's fourth novel, is the first in which she attained the design she would characteristically impose upon her works of fiction. Rejecting an organization centered on conventional story lines, she focuses upon Clarissa Dalloway, a lady of London high society who is planning a party for her husband's acquaintances. The action takes place on a Wednesday in June, 1923, be-

tween 10:00 A.M. and approximately 3:00 A.M. the next day. In the morning, Clarissa goes out to buy flowers and gives final instructions to her staff. In the afternoon, she receives an unexpected visit from a former suitor named Peter Walsh, talks with her husband, who has brought her flowers, and then takes a nap. In the evening, she entertains her guests as a perfect hostess should. The activities and thoughts of Clarissa during the day provide the core of unity in the book. Other characters and their situations appear when they touch or reflect, ever so slightly or symbolically, Clarissa's life and its meaning. The reader observes the behavior of her husband Richard at lunch, watches her teenage daughter Elizabeth with her history tutor Miss Kilman (whom Mrs. Dalloway hates), and accompanies Clarissa on a bus ride through London. The reader catches glimpses of unknown strangers who cross Clarissa's path during the day, among whom figures Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war veteran who is suffering an episode of insanity.

Clarissa Dalloway represents a rational attitude toward life: She functions well on a day-to-day basis, tends to that which requires attention, and meets the demands made upon her in her situation. She regrets somewhat her marriage to Richard (Peter Walsh seemed to suggest a less predictable and more exciting life) and now realizes that she has lost the sense of individuality she possessed as a young woman, for her identity has been absorbed by her husband's. Clarissa is also distressed because Elizabeth seems to be too strongly influenced by Miss Kilman, an unattractive but educated woman who has recently converted to religion and seeks a recruit in Elizabeth. The book contains a scathing denunciation of those who, intolerant of diversity, seek to destroy the intellectual liberty of others. Though saddened by life, Clarissa seeks to maintain an inner core of joyfulness while fulfilling her various obligations. An unhappy person deep within, Clarissa is nonetheless filled with a great love for life, a zest for living, and a capacity for temporary but intense joy in her daily experiences.

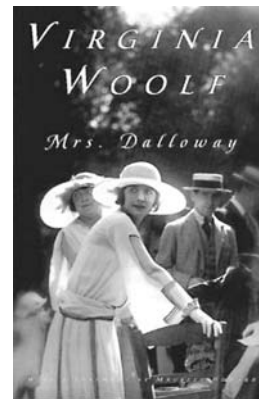
Beginning work on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf noted in her diary (October 14, 1922) that she wanted to show the world as seen by the sane and the insane side by side. If Clarissa reflects the sanity of adjust-

ments to reality, Septimus Smith reflects the rejection of rational compromise with life. Though he married a gentle Italian woman (Lucrezia, or Rezia) immediately after the war, their relationship has done little to rescue him from the abyss of terror that madness creates within him. At noon he consults Sir William Bradshaw, a noted medical authority who believes that mental illness is caused by a lack of a "sense of proportion" that can be restored by solitude, rest, and silence. The fate of Septimus now seems sealed: Diagnosed immedi-

ately as an advanced case of total breakdown, he is to be committed to an institution later that same day. Septimus, however, prefers death to life on someone else's terms and kills himself by jumping from a window. Learning during the party of this stranger's death, Clarissa withdraws to meditate alone. Feeling a kinship with the dead man, she acknowledges that she

herself lives close to death, often feeling the terror, an awful fear of being, and draws courage to continue from the simple presence of her husband. She is recalled from reverie by her social obligations and, putting aside these painful thoughts, returns to her guests.

The conviction that a happy life cannot be lived on another's terms is an important theme of the book. Clarissa lost an important part of herself by marrying Richard and allowing his life to control hers. Peter came to nothing through his failure to choose for himself, longing instead for domination by Clarissa. Mrs. Bradshaw gave her will over in submission to her husband, as did the majority of the doctor's patients who acquiesced to his judgments concerning "proper proportions" in life. Clarissa fears that her daughter will dedicate her will to God through religious conversion promoted by Miss Kilman, who has already abandoned her own will to a force outside herself that she imagines to be superior.



## TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

**First published:** 1927

**Type of work:** Novel

*A vacationing family cancels its projected excursion to a nearby lighthouse because of bad weather. Ten years later, some family members finally visit it together.*

Most critics regard *To the Lighthouse* as Woolf's finest achievement, and she herself shared this view. Woolf perfected her method in this book, developing a highly individual technique in which structure, form, content, and meaning are extremely complex as they are used to develop individual characters, their relationships to one another, to life itself, and to the most profound problems of human existence, love, art, and death. Her method consists in elaborating a multiple point of view presenting both past and present through her characters' eyes as well as through those of an omniscient writer. She thus reveals to the reader in manifold perspective the extraordinary range of emotional and mental processes that make up human experience for her characters.

The structure of the novel resembles that of a two-act play with an interlude between the acts. In the first and by far the longest part, "The Window," Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay (unmistakably based on her own parents) with their eight children are vacationing at their summer home on an island off the coast of Scotland; some friends are spending a weekend with them. Their six-year-old son James wants to visit the nearby lighthouse the next day; his mother agrees, but his father is certain that the weather will not be fine. The guests intermingle; the artist Lily Briscoe works on a painting. In the evening they all enjoy a meal of *boeuf en daube* and experience a sense of unity and happiness in the perfection of this moment that, like an artist, Mrs. Ramsay has created by controlling the elements that united to produce it. Most of these events are narrated through interior monologues with numerous flashbacks and shifting points of view.

In a second, very brief part, "Time Passes," the events of the next decade are poetically related by the omniscient writer or by the house itself. The

house has stood unused for many years and has deteriorated outside and inside; weeds proliferate, and ghostly airs inhabit the empty shell. The reader discovers the destinies of the house and its former residents. Mrs. Ramsay soon died; her oldest son Andrew was killed in the war; her daughter Prue expired during childbirth; a would-be poet became famous. After ten years, two cleaning ladies arrive to restore and prepare the place to receive guests once again. This section of the book constitutes a beautiful prose poem on the devastation time brings to human matters and must be ranked high among the finest pages Woolf ever wrote.

In the third part, "The Lighthouse," Mr. Ramsay returns with his two youngest children, James (age sixteen) and Cam (age fifteen), to make—after ten years and the intrusions of time, change, and death—the promised excursion to the lighthouse. They are joined by several others, including Lily Briscoe, who hopes to complete the painting begun years earlier. The hostility of the children to their father, obvious all along, is transformed into compassion when, upon reaching the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay praises his son for steering the boat skillfully. The young people, alienated from their father since childhood because of his dominating and repressive ways, suddenly see him as a suffering human being, lost without his wife, seeking love and understanding in his awkward and insensitive way. Meanwhile, Lily Briscoe, back on shore, has discovered the stroke necessary to complete her painting perfectly. She says, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, "I have had my vision." It is an ordered vision of successful artistic creation, which Woolf has also fulfilled in this book.

Interpretations of this novel are as numerous as its commentators. Some admire the representation of ideal Victorian family life just before its demise, while others criticize a male-dominated marriage. Mrs. Ramsay may be an all-embracing principle of universal love in her role as wife and mother. The lighthouse can represent masculine power and supremacy, or the conjunction of the lighthouse with the sea (a female symbol) may symbolize ideal marriage, a mutual cooperation between inseparable partners. Mrs. Ramsay had found the light it projects to be a source of serenity and strength. The child James saw it colored by secret joy, but the maturing James sees it merely as a



stark tower on a bare rock. Whatever meaning readers may find, the lighthouse stands as a permanent source of order and light, cutting through the darkness.

## THE WAVES

**First published:** 1931

**Type of work:** Novel

*Six lifelong friends (three men and three women) speak in soliloquies of their childhood, education, and adult experiences of life as they mature and age together.*

After the relaxation of a satiric romp through English literary history in the novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Woolf began the composition of the most intricate and complex of all her fictional constructions, *The Waves*. It could be called an “abstract novel” for, like many modern paintings, it is virtually nonrepresentational. Its mirror does not reflect easily recognizable objects or provide familiar images. Dispensing with conventional story line and fully drawn characters, the novel distills human reality and experience. Its six characters are essences without form. The reader has no idea what they look like, how they dress or move or smile. All that is known are their consciousnesses as they contemplate their passage through various stages of life from youth to old age, experiencing various changes as they grow older.

The six characters, who are about the same age and are given no surnames, have grown up together and have continued to keep track of one another as their lives took them in very different directions. Jinny and Susan balance each other as opposites, for Jinny is an urban woman, proud of her body, sensual and passionate with men, while Susan is from the country, where she eventually returns to marry a farmer and rear a family. Neville and Louis also balance as opposites, for Neville is intellectual, homosexual, and assured in the academic world, while Louis, ashamed of his Australian origin, counteracts feelings of inferiority by forcing his way to success in the business world. Rhoda is always a misfit; feeling ugly and alone, she never belongs anywhere and alienation finally drives her to commit suicide. The others continue

to exhibit the basic personality traits they acquired as young children and never change internally in any significant way. The child of six remains intact in the adult of sixty. Only Bernard, who loves words and longs to be a writer, shows signs of spiritual growth near the end of the book, but this suggestion of change (he eventually abandons his notebook) seems open to question.

The novel is divided into nine unnumbered and untitled sections composed of fragmented interior monologues that cut back and forth between different speakers. The six rarely meet or engage in conversation. Instead, their isolated voices speak (“said” is the only verb of speech or thought used in the entire book) into an empty void to no imagined companion or listener in the universe. The language (vocabulary, syntax, sentence length) does not particularize any individual. They all speak with the same voice as if they were one person—as indeed they may be, for they can be understood as six facets of the same personality.

The nine sections of the book reveal the six as children in nursing school, secondary school, and college (the men) or entering social life (the women). They join together for dinner to send their friend Percival, whom they all admire and love, off to India. They later mourn his accidental death as they continue to pursue their separate lives. As each acknowledges the approach of age, they meet once again for dinner to reaffirm their sense of unity. Bernard summarizes the essence of their lives in a long, final speech, attempting to discover what it has all meant, but he sees only inscrutable shadows in a room flooded with light. Truth and meaning seem ultimately to be unknowable.

Each section of the narrative is introduced by an italicized passage tracing the movement of the sun across the sky from dawn to dark, the first describing the sunrise, the last the sunset. The course of the sun’s journey parallels the maturation of the six characters. Woolf draws attention to the passage of time with descriptions of the changing patterns of light on the surface of the sea as the waves break on the shore, as well as to the effects of light and shadow on the sand and grass, the behavior of the birds, and the appearance of flowers. In creating verbal landscapes not unlike those of the great Impressionist and Postimpressionist painters, Woolf achieves an extraordinarily high level of “word painting.” The language used for the images in-

volving light and water is more intense than that used in the soliloquies, more condensed, compact, and complex. This language of nature seems somehow alien to humankind, however—lofty and remote, inhuman and insensitive to pain, coldly indifferent to human fate.

## A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

**First published:** 1929

**Type of work:** Essay

*The right to earn an adequate living and to enjoy personal privacy is considered essential to the development of the independence of women.*

Woolf's concern about the difficulties women face in a male-dominated world is expressed with force and vigor in her extended essay *A Room of One's Own*. Elaborating on her talks on "Women in Fiction," which she had given at two British women's colleges in 1928, she seeks to present certain facts about the treatment of women through the centuries and to show how patterns established long ago still prevail in modern times. Children, housework, and family obligations have deprived women of privacy and prevented them from earning a living, while social attitudes have approved their continued dependence on men for material necessities and their acceptance of roles as household servants. Though freedom and equality for women have increased considerably since 1929 in both England and America, the ideas Woolf promotes here, fundamental to modern feminist thinking, were radical—even shocking to some—at the time the book was written.

Retaining the tone and style of a casual lecturer, Woolf intends neither to preach nor to scold but to discuss some of her observations, exploring their implications at length. Her position can be stated quite briefly: In order to achieve an adequate sense of personal identity and the fulfillment of her intellectual potential with dignity and joy, a woman must command sufficient financial resources (money) to support herself and adequate privacy (a room with a lock on the door) to permit and promote mental activity. These two keys to spiritual freedom—material security and personal privacy—have been regularly denied to women

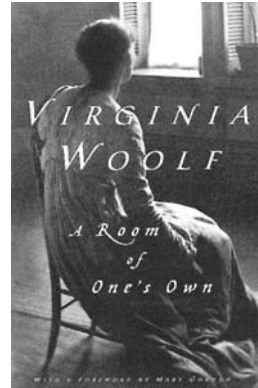
through the ages. In the first chapter of the essay, Woolf imagines the rude treatment a woman receives if she (in contrast to a man) dares to walk on the grass or use the library of a men's college. She contrasts a luncheon served to college men (five elaborate dishes, with elegant dessert and wine) with a dinner in the women's dining hall (simple fare with prunes and custard, water liberally replacing wine). These examples forcefully illustrate how women are regarded as inferior and how they are expected to welcome their lot without protest.

After a bold and humorous elaboration of the implications of this twofold statement, Woolf goes on in the following five chapters to examine the position of women historically and to focus attention upon several writers who struggled, without total success, against their oppressed condition. Though she surveys only authors, her observations relate also to those women seeking any sort of professional career, for the obstacles blocking advancement in one field also obstruct the way in others. To illustrate her point historically, Woolf invents Judith Shakespeare, younger sister to William, a

woman as brilliant and talented as her brother, and speculates about her destiny. The little fiction ends, after episodes of humiliation and failure brought upon Judith by male attitudes and responses, with the young woman's suicide.

Woolf finds the eighteenth century somewhat kinder to women like Jane Austen, willing to stay in her traditional place, writing

casually as a pastime. Nineteenth century writers like the Brontë sisters suffered from a lack of exposure to the world, writing within the confines of a limited perspective on life. Charlotte Brontë, frustrated and angered by restrictions, sometimes turned away from her artistic purpose to vent her bitterness. Woolf believes that artistic creativity cannot be attained when thought is deformed and twisted by anger and frustration; she invokes William Shakespeare as one who, entirely purged of resentments, achieved a state of mental brilliance she calls "incandescence." Artists must rise above



anger to create works unflawed by personal hostilities. Women, she believes, are learning to do this, but many decades will pass before bitterness is replaced by comprehension.

### SUMMARY

Respecting the literary tradition that she inherited, Virginia Woolf nevertheless felt compelled to forsake its influence by inventing fictional techniques to explore even more deeply the minds and hearts of people. Like many modern painters and musicians who were her contemporaries, she sought new ways to render the realities of thought and feeling in her novels. By holding up her mirror of fiction at a different angle, she attempted to help readers see themselves in a more revealing light. Readers, troubled by the reflected images, feel moved to contemplate the meaning of their lives.

*Raymond M. Archer*

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### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What contributions to Virginia Woolf's literary success were made by her husband?
- Woolf was not enthusiastic about James Joyce's works, but there are patterns of resemblance in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). How are the two authors' depictions of one day in the life of the protagonist similar and in what major ways do they differ?
- Does the children's reconciliation with their father in *To the Lighthouse* reflect the course of Woolf's relationship with her own father?
- What is the essence of Mrs. Ramsay's character?
- Does Woolf push her idea of the structure of a novel to its ultimate limit in *The Waves*?
- Did Woolf abandon the notion of plot or merely subordinate it to characterization?
- Why did *A Room of One's Own* have to wait until the 1960's to receive full recognition?

## Virginia Woolf

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## WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

**Born:** Cockermouth, Cumberland, England  
April 7, 1770

**Died:** Rydal Mount, Westmorland, England  
April 23, 1850

*Wordsworth was a revolutionary poet celebrating nature in experimental verse forms. With his theory of lyrical ballads and his social/psychological themes of humble life, he was a founder of the Romantic literary tradition.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth, in Cumberland, England, on April 7, 1770, the son of John and Ann Wordsworth. He had an elder brother, Richard, a younger sister, Dorothy, and two younger brothers, John and Christopher. His mother died when William was eight, and he and his brothers were separated from their sister to be reared by grandparents. William's father died when William was thirteen. William first began writing poetry soon after.

When he was seventeen, Wordsworth entered Cambridge and was graduated in 1791. While at the university, he went with a friend on a walking tour of France during the beginnings of its revolution. After leaving the university, he returned to France, where he found himself in the midst of bloody violence in 1792. He met and planned to marry Annette Vallon, but he was forced to return to England and could not marry her, although the relationship produced a daughter.

Uncertain of his future, distraught over events in France, and heartsick about his separation from Annette, he went on a walking tour of Wales in 1793 and then joyfully reunited with his sister, Dorothy, and made plans to settle with her until he could marry Annette. Meanwhile, he met the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1797 in Dorset. By now, Wordsworth believed that his destiny was to be-

come a poet, and he was encouraged by Dorothy and Coleridge. To finance a trip to Germany, Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote their famous collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, in 1798. One of the poems, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," was composed after a walking trip that Wordsworth took with Dorothy to visit the ruins of a famous abbey on the Welsh border.

In 1798 and 1799, the two poets and Dorothy went to Germany, but Wordsworth and his sister returned shortly afterward to England, leaving Coleridge behind. Wordsworth wrote more poems, which would be included in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, and he composed his prose essay on his theory of poetry as a preface for the collection. He also began to write long sections in blank verse of his autobiographical poem, to be called *The Prelude: Or, The Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1850), which he had probably begun in Germany. When Coleridge returned to England, he often visited William and Dorothy and soon moved to live near them in the Lake District of north England, where Wordsworth was born.

By this time, Wordsworth and Annette were no longer interested in marrying, and he married Mary Hutchinson in 1802. The famous "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" has its origins partly in Wordsworth's feelings immediately before he got married; the poem is also a reaction to Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," lamenting Coleridge's loss of imagination. Wordsworth, however, was increasing his own powers as a poet, and he began to compose many



great sonnets at this time, especially some in response to the Napoleonic wars in Europe. He was also working hard at his long autobiographical poem, completing the first version in 1805.

By then, he had suffered another painful loss in his family because his favorite brother, John, had died in a shipwreck at sea. His beloved daughter, Dora, was born in 1804, however, and he gave increasing attention to his growing family. His relationship with Coleridge began to weaken after Coleridge left to take a diplomatic post in Malta in 1804. One of Wordsworth's most important collections of poetry was published in 1807 as *Poems in Two Volumes*. It contains, among other great poems, the "Ode to Duty," the "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle," and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."

Some believe that Wordsworth's poetry began to decline in quality from about this time, but he continued to write much. Some of this work was very important, such as his revisions and additions to the autobiographical poem, which he did not want to publish yet. Wordsworth believed that he had to complete the poem on his life as a preface for a grand philosophical poem to be called "The Recluse" (published in 1888 as *The Recluse*). This ambitious project was never completed, but one of its parts, *The Excursion*, was published in 1814. It is, like *The Prelude*, a long poem in blank verse, but it is organized in nine books around the dramatic monologues of several characters, including the main ones of a Peddler, a Poet, a Solitary, and a Pastor. While this poem is not, at present, highly praised, it was very much noticed by readers of the time, including John Keats, who thought that it was one of the greatest things ever written in modern poetry.

As Wordsworth's family grew, and as he helped to care for Coleridge's family and other friends, he needed more financial resources than his poetry sales could provide. He was appointed by the government to be a collector of taxes from postage rates, a position that caused some critics, such as young Percy Bysshe Shelley, to attack him as a traitor to libertarian causes. His poetry began to show some of his increasingly conservative themes, such as in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* published in 1822 to describe the history of the Christian church in England. It was not as religious a poem as the subject

and title suggest, and Wordsworth did not entirely abandon his poetry that celebrated nature. His *The River Duddon* in 1820 expresses his mature reflections on childhood scenes of nature, and in many of the poems that he composed during tours of Europe, from 1820 to 1837, he occasionally recovers his enthusiasm for paganlike feelings of nature.

When his friend and neighbor, the poet Robert Southey, died in 1843, Wordsworth succeeded him and became the poet laureate of Great Britain. He had not published *The Prelude*, but he had made many changes and additions to it since starting it years before. In fact, he had produced at least three versions of that great poem. It was never published during his lifetime. He died on April 23, 1850, in Rydal Mount, England, leaving the manuscript of the poem as a part of his estate for his family. It was published in July, 1850, a posthumous memorial to Wordsworth's lifetime of achievements as one of the greatest of English poets.

## ANALYSIS

The styles of Wordsworth's poetry are many, although his most famous experiment in style was to compose "lyrical ballads" in simple language and simple meter to express the universal experience of common people in rural settings. These poems treat common incidents as if they are extraordinary; in other words, the lyrical quality of feeling gives importance to the traditional ballad tale. Sometimes these lyrical ballads are spoken by the poet, as in "Lines Written in Early Spring." At other times, they are spoken by characters of Wordsworth's imagination, as in "The Thorn." Although the emotions of these people are common and universal, the incidents of their experiences are unusual and abnormal or undesirable. Thus, the poems are often treatments of outcasts from society, as in "The Female Vagrant," or psychologically abnormal people, as in "The Idiot Boy."

The first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* contains poems of family affection and warm cordiality, as in "We Are Seven" and "The Last of the Flock." It also contains humorous poems, including "Expostulation and Reply" and its companion, "The Tables Turned." These poems consistently develop a special theme of Wordsworth's enduring interest, that a special bonding occurs in the close relationship of a child reared close to nature. While the bond must be broken when the child has matured, it

should neither be prematurely broken nor denied or repressed by too much emphasis on reason and social formulas. The therapy of recalling childhood's passions in association with familiar landscapes is developed in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," which is included in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. This poem should be recalled as an exception to the rule of those poems, since it is a blank-verse monologue, not a rhyming, narrative "lyrical ballad."

The same notice should be given to the inclusion of the blank-verse narrative of "Michael: A Pastoral Poem" in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. This poem exemplifies a favorite stylistic approach that Wordsworth held throughout his life: to tell a story of rural people, sometimes shepherds, in strong, unrhymed iambic pentameter. It is the style of "Nutting," "The Brothers," and, later, many of the parts of *The Excursion*, the only section of *The Recluse* that Wordsworth finished to his satisfaction. The second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* also contains some poems that are truly lyrical ballads but differ from the tone and subjects of those in the first edition: These are the poems known as the "Lucy" poems, and a group that could be called the "Matthew" poems. The striking feature common to these two groups is a deepening interest in the experience of death, of grieving the deaths of loved ones who can never be replaced in one's affections.

A similar feature appears to mark many of Wordsworth's new poems included in his two volumes published in 1807. The great "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" is a major achievement of style in the treatment of a profoundly important theme, whether it is seen as one of growing old, maturity of vision, psychological development, or philosophical transition. Wordsworth made a permanently admirable use of the irregular ode, and he continued to have interest in the ode form, though without such success. He also sustained an interest in the sonnet, mainly in the English or Miltonic version; throughout his career, Wordsworth wrote sonnets and sometimes put them into sequences, as in *The River Duddon*. While his later poems fail to acquire the force of his earlier ones, Wordsworth's continuing style is to balance simplicity of natural themes with the discipline of sophisticated art.

## "LINES COMPOSED A FEW MILES ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY"

**First published:** 1798 (collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A speaker revisits a scene first observed five years earlier; differences arise from changes in the speaker's own mind more than from the landscape.*

"Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" is a shortened version of the poem's full title, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798." This full title more accurately locates the situation of the poem and anchors the experience of the poem in a particular place and time. In 160 lines of blank verse, the poet describes what he hears and sees again five years after he last visited this scene along the Wye River in Wales, near the ruins of an ancient abbey.

The poet first notices cliffs, trees, hedges, and farmhouses. Then, he imagines that someone might be camping amid the woods. What he cannot see becomes important, and he lets his imagination go. Then, he recalls how he has recently left a city, where he lived during some of the time since visiting the Wye River. He believes that his spirit was sustained by his memories of this natural scenery through a time of difficulty while in the city. The feelings attached to remembered scenes of nature became sources of imaginative power when detached from actual observation of those scenes.

The poet recalls his attention to the immediate scene before him again, and he compares his present feelings with those that he had when first visiting this spot. At that time, he was young and thoughtless, unaware of his differences from other animal life; now, however, he feels more burdened by the responsibilities of being human, of having a heart that sympathizes with the sufferings of other human beings. The feelings of youth have been revived by this revisit, and those feelings have energized his moral imagination to universal proportions.

Suddenly, the poet addresses his sister. She seems to be standing beside him, observing this same scene with him. This visit, however, is her first, and he imagines the future, when her memories of this scene will work for her as his do for him at this time. He utters a prayer that nature will supply his sister with the same restorative power of feeling in the future. In this way, each will be a “worshipper of Nature.”

## PREFACE TO *LYRICAL BALLADS*

**First published:** 1800 (published in *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*, 1800)

**Type of work:** Essay

*Lyrical Ballads experimented in expressing common emotions through the simple language of “humble and rustic” people to please readers of popular ballads.*

The preface to *Lyrical Ballads* was written to explain the theory of poetry guiding Wordsworth’s composition of the poems. Wordsworth defends the unusual style and subjects of the poems (some of which are actually composed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge) as experiments to see how far popular poetry could be used to convey profound feeling.

There are three general reasons guiding the composition of the lyrical ballads. The first is in the choice of subject matter, which is limited to experiences of common life in the country. There, people use a simple language and directly express deep feeling. Their habit of speaking comes from associating feelings with the permanent forms of nature, such as mountains, rivers, and clouds. The challenge for the poet is to make these ordinary experiences interesting to readers; in other words, the poems attempt to take ordinary subjects and treat them in extraordinary ways. Doing so would cause readers to recognize fundamental truths of universal human experience.

The second reason guiding his poems is Wordsworth’s goal of emphasizing the purpose of poetry as art. This purpose is not a moralistic one; indeed, poetry comes from a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but it is disciplined by remembering those feelings in moods of peaceful meditation. The combination of feeling and meditation produces artful poetry with purpose. Specifically, the lyrical ballads have the purposes of enlightening readers’ understanding of basic human feeling, enhancing readers’ emotions, and helping readers to enjoy the common things of life. That is important, Wordsworth believes, because too many people seem to have a difficult time enjoying life. They need to search for the unusual, the strange, and the fantastic; they are missing the beauty of the world around them. People need to have more faith in their own imagination to provide the beauty and emotion that they are overlooking in the environment.

Moreover, Wordsworth believes that the style of the poems is important to capture and keep readers’ attention, or the other two reasons will fail. Wordsworth thought tricks of personification and artistic diction had dulled people’s feelings, and so he wanted to refresh poetry by eliminating ornamentation to return to basics. The strengths of good prose should also be the strengths of good poetry, he writes, and so poetry should be written as the language of a person who speaks directly to other people with the same basic feelings and experiences of all human beings. To this, meter can be added in order to control emotional excitement, as reflection can restrain spontaneous emotion.

Readers are urged to be thoughtful in judging the poems. They should judge with genuine feelings that have been educated by thought and long habits of reading from many good pieces of literature. Wordsworth ends by expressing his faith that such readers will recognize the success of his experiments in the poems that he calls lyrical ballads: poems that express a domination of feeling (lyrical) over form (ballads).

## “ODE: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY”

**First published:** 1807 (collected in *Poems in Two Volumes*, 1807)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Something is missing from adulthood that once was present in childhood's vision of life and nature, but there are compensations of wisdom and moral sensitivity.*

“Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” is a personal poem in a traditionally impersonal, formal verse form of eleven stanzas that vary in length and metrical design. Wordsworth uses the ancient Greek Pindaric ode, which had celebrated the virtues of athletic heroes, to examine the strangely compelling process of growing up from childhood to adult maturity. The hero is a child, but the victory is won by the adult who reflects upon childhood's losses.

The epigraph of the poem states the paradox that childhood experiences provide the background and source of the adult's identity, as if a child could be the parent of the adult who develops from childhood. The poet, recognizing that this is so, wishes therefore to be naturally faithful to his past, to build his maturity upon a continuous line of connections with his youth.

The first four stanzas express the poet's strange experience of feeling wonderful on a lovely spring morning in May, when all nature celebrates a rebirth of vegetable and animal life. The poet sees and hears the signs of this rebirth, and he can even feel a stirring of sympathetic identification with the vitality all around him. Yet he also feels a disturbing emotion that shadows the bright landscape. He feels that there is something missing in his own being, that the natural scene does not have the same glorious promise that it had when he looked at it as a child. The rest of the poem is an attempt to identify what is missing and to recover it if possible.

Stanzas 5 through 8 recall childhood as if it were like the dawn of a new day, when the sun peers upon the earth through glowing clouds. The meaning behind the comparison is that a child comes from darkness and awakens to life with a vision still colored by its origins in eternity. Like the

sun, a child moves from an exciting, hopeful dawn of life, rises toward the common light of midday's adulthood, and casts shadows that, like a prison, seem to surround a person and block the vision of glorious origins. Human life is also compared to a foster child who is under the care of Mother Nature until it is time for the child to leave home and be independent of the fostering environment. Real parents teach their children games of role-playing, which prepare them for adult responsibilities, but those same games (which later concern marrying, working, and dying) drive children further away from their infant experience of immortality and omnipotence. Finally, the process of growing up is compared to putting layer after layer of ice over a glowing, energetic fire.

The last section of the poem, stanzas 9 through 11, turns from the desolation that ends stanza 8, where the poet sinks beneath the frigid thought of a buried vitality. Suddenly, he realizes that there is something still burning beneath the ice of experience and mortality; he feels an ember of energy remaining from childhood's vitality. Ironically, the feeling of something missing from his joy at the opening of the poem has become a feeling of something present beneath his dejection in the middle of the poem. The question that he poses for himself is to wonder what this is that still lives deep inside him, what this is that refuses to die. There is the reason for the title of the poem: a hint of immortality remaining in the adult from his memory of childhood's experiences.

Stanza 9 recalls the things of childhood that cannot be the source of this feeling of immortality. It is not the animal delight or the irresponsibility of childhood; it is not the unreflecting optimism, either. Instead, it is something more alien to ordinary adult experience: The reason to celebrate what remains from childhood is that childhood was a time when the mind refused to accept natural limitations, when the human creature did not yet feel that it was only a natural being. Babies and children have enormous egos, not yet shaped by an environment that makes them retreat from questioning all sensation and asserting subjective idealism as more real than objective nature. Such a defiant subjectivity and faith in oneself is more real than the world into which the child is born. That buried feeling is what rescues the adult from the dejection of maturity into a posture of power over nature.

Maturity is a position from which the adult can look back and recover childhood faith, like a traveler who can look back from an inland mountain to see children playing by the sea and recall that as the place from where he also came.

Thus, the poet celebrates in the last two stanzas his recovery of imaginative power because he pays tribute to the ember of childhood idealism still glowing beneath his mortality. The loveliness of natural life is paradoxically more lovely now because the poet's experience of mortality has taught him the lesson of loss, and that makes nature more precious to the mind of a person who knows that spiritual immortality will survive the natural beauty that fosters human growth.

## THE PRELUDE

**First published:** 1850

**Type of work:** Poem

*The hero of a modern epic explores his memory of events, propelling him to undertake the great mission that nature has assigned to him.*

*The Prelude* is a long, blank-verse poem with a complicated history. It was begun as early as 1798–1799. Then it may have been conceived as a short autobiographical poem, before it was expanded to thirteen books by 1805. The poem was never published during Wordsworth's life, but when it was, soon after his death in 1850, *The Prelude: Or, The Growth of a Poet's Mind* had been revised extensively and expanded to fourteen books. There are significant differences among the three versions of the poem. For convenience, the poem published in 1850 may be assumed for discussion.

The subject of the poem is a review by the poet of his life to explain the growth of his mind as a poet; it examines his past for evidence to account for the growth of his imagination and to justify his calling as a poet. Because Samuel Taylor Coleridge strongly urged Wordsworth to believe in himself as a poet and to use his talent to compose a modern epic poem, Coleridge is given credit for causing Wordsworth to write *The Prelude*. What Coleridge wanted from Wordsworth was not a poem about his own life, however, but rather a poem about the modern state of philosophy and science, as in the

*Aeneid* (c. 29–19 B.C.E.; English translation, 1553), *La divina commedia* (c. 1320; *The Divine Comedy*, 1802), and *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). Wordsworth planned to write such an epic, but he could not make progress on it until after he wrote a poem in which he justified his decision to be a poet of any kind. This self-justification would be a prefatory explanation, appearing as the “prelude” for the main movement that would be called *The Recluse*.

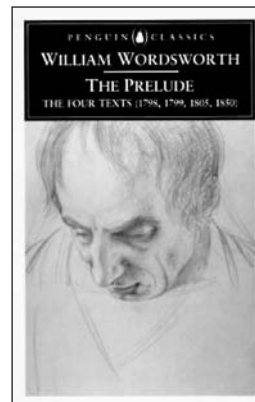
The prefatory poem, however, became so important that it became the main poem itself, and Wordsworth worked at it for most of his long life. *The Prelude* is more important, and nearer to completion, than *The Recluse* (1888), for which it was intended as an introduction. There are many epic features, nevertheless, in the style and structure of *The Prelude* itself. Epic similes appear in various places, allusions to epic stories recur, and the structure of the poem is loosely modeled upon the classical epic design that begins in medias res (in the middle of things).

The first book of *The Prelude* opens with a celebration of freedom, as the poet decides to visit his childhood and leave behind a city and a life of frustration and uncertainty. He composes aloud some verses of happiness as he strides confidently into the countryside, but suddenly he is unable to compose and begins to doubt his ability to continue.

He believes that he is intended by nature to be a poet, but he is beginning to doubt himself and his judgment because he is experiencing “writer’s block.”

In this state of mind, he begins to review his life to see if he has correctly interpreted his vocation. The poem is a search of the poet’s past for evidence that the man is intended by nature to be a poet at all. The remainder

of the first book is a short summary of the poet’s earliest years of boyhood, when he grew up in the Lake District of northern England. In four seasonal episodes, Wordsworth’s poem recalls experiences of seedlike origins for his growth of imagination.





The first is an autumn scene of taking woodcocks from other people's traps and then feeling that the hills pursued him to punish him. The second is a springtime experience of robbing birds' nests and then feeling that the wind accused him of being a violator. The third episode is a summer one of borrowing a boat without permission, rowing out onto a lake alone, and then feeling that the mountains rose in condemnation. The final scene is one of winter ice-skating at night on frozen lakes; he had stayed out later than he ought, and in a guilty state of mind he would skate alone, feeling nature alive with motion.

Such memories are exercises that raise the poet's imaginative energies to feel regeneration and renewed confidence in himself. Book 2 contains memories of his mother's death and his way of dealing with the threat of alienation it caused in his life; he substituted nature for his lost mother, and he nourished his imagination with lonely wanderings through the hills and among the lakes. That continued until he was old enough to be sent to the university in Cambridge, far from home and as threatening as had been the death of his mother.

Book 3 describes how Cambridge was a vast confusion at first, with its swirl of events and temptations. Gradually, it also nourished Wordsworth's active imagination, both with learning and with urban scenery. Book 4 describes the joyful summer vacations when he revisited youthful scenes and revived his depressed spirits. He renewed social contacts and danced until dawn, when nature summoned him home with morning glory of bright sunrise. The next two books describe how the young undergraduate left England for a walking tour of France and the Alps, where he realized again that his imagination is more important than the natural scenery that nourishes it. Book 7 is a return to England, where the poet finished his education at Cambridge and moved to London.

The books on Wordsworth's residence in France describe his introduction to the French patriot Michel Beaupuy in book 9 and the influence that Beaupuy had on the poet's increasing sympathy for the revolutionaries. Book 10, however, narrates the intensifying pressure on Wordsworth to leave

France for safety back in London, where the poet despaired at prospects for a peaceful recovery of freedom in France. Book 11 analyzes the spiritual depression that Wordsworth experienced over his loss of faith that the French Revolution could be conducted in a civilized way, combined with his disgust that Britain should have united to oppose Frenchmen fighting for freedom.

By the end of book 12, Wordsworth is back where the poem began, when he decided to leave London and return to his home in the Lake District. There, he revisited scenes of his childhood and youth, recovered his emotional energies, and realized that his imagination needed to be revived by recovering forgotten experiences. These are the "spots of time" that Wordsworth uses to illustrate his recovery of imaginative power. Book 12 ends with descriptions of two of these spots of time.

The final books are celebrations of restored imagination. Book 13 praises the gifts of nature and childhood for emotion and calm. Book 14 is dominated by a long description of the poet's ascent of Mount Snowdon. On that occasion, the poet realized that his imagination is like the moonlight penetrating the mist that surrounded the mountaintop. The last book then ends with expressions of gratitude to Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, and to Coleridge's friendship. They have inspired the poem by supporting the poet's faith in himself.

## **SUMMARY**

From ballad experiments to innovations of epic, William Wordsworth maintained a total commitment to poetry. He turned his personal experience into public statement, and he modified public genres of writing with personal testimony. He departed from classic ideals of regularity and abstract diction, and he established the Romantic taste for the irregular experience rendered in concrete language.

Life in the solitude of the Lake District provided him with subjects of rustic living, but his education in sophisticated cities added richness of self-reflection and self-discipline. His writing drew from all dimensions of his experience.

*Richard D. McGhee*

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*The Waggoner*, 1819  
*The River Duddon*, 1820  
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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Explain the effects of William Wordsworth's blend of first-person singular and first-person plural pronouns in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey."
- What poetry, or what type of poetry, was Wordsworth rejecting in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*?
- Is Wordsworth's phrase "intimations of immortality" part of a philosophical statement about childhood?
- What are the structural features of the Pindaric ode as exemplified by "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"?
- Did Wordsworth's difficulties with *The Prelude* reflect the differences between his conception of poetry and that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who advised him in this effort?
- *The Prelude* has been called a great religious poem. In what sense is it religious? Would "spiritual" be a better adjective to describe it?



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## WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

**Born:** Sandymount, near Dublin, Ireland  
June 13, 1865

**Died:** Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France  
January 28, 1939

*Yeats is widely regarded as the most important and influential poet writing in English during the twentieth century.*

### BIOGRAPHY

William Butler Pollexfen Yeats (yayts) was born on June 13, 1865, in Sandymount, a middle-class suburb of Dublin, Ireland, the son of the painter and philosopher John Butler Yeats and Susan Pollexfan Yeats. Both parents were members of the Anglo-Irish minority, an important detail of Yeats's later life. The Yeats family settled in Ireland during the seventeenth century. Yeats's mother and her family were from County Sligo, in the western part of Ireland. Yeats's parents had four surviving children, of whom William was the eldest. John Butler Yeats studied law but decided to pursue his natural talent for drawing and painting. This decision led to a great deal of financial hardship for the family.

Because of difficult family circumstances, young William spent extended periods with his mother's family in Sligo. These stays away from the family home, which was by this time in London, were a formative influence. While in Ireland, Yeats derived his interest in Irish folklore, the phenomenon of racial memory, and the love of nature, all of which are to be found in his poetry.

Although Yeats was for the most part unhappy in London, the city had an influence upon him. Through his father, he became acquainted with many of the leading cultural figures of the day, including William Morris and Oscar Wilde. Yeats's

dual allegiance to Ireland and London became one of the many sources of the creative tension that animates his mature poetry. It was in Ireland, however, that Yeats made his initial mark as a writer. The family returned to Dublin in 1880, where the poet's lackluster efforts at school continued. After an abortive attempt to study art, and unable to meet university entrance requirements, Yeats abandoned formal education in 1886 to devote himself to writing.

Two of Yeats's early interests manifested themselves in his work. One was his attachment to the cause of Irish nationality, which enabled him to establish a distinctive cultural identity. The other was the development of his interest in Theosophy and spiritualism, which contributed to the growth of the poet's spiritual self. Both these orientations were idealist and symbolic in character, and they form the aesthetic and metaphysical foundation for Yeats's poetry. Yeats's early verse adapts his cultural and spiritual interests to the main poetic current of the time. This current owed much to French poetry, which relied on mood and color rather than on narrative and event. In 1891, Yeats formed the Rhymers Club with some English practitioners of this style.

In 1893, Yeats produced a volume of Irish folklore called *The Celtic Twilight*. His interest in the Celtic past, combined with his fresh perception of the possibilities of lyric poetry, led to his use of pre-Christian Celtic material as distinctive poetic subject matter. Indeed, Yeats's work at this time led to the formation of a school of Irish literature known as the Celtic Twilight. This movement, with its emphasis on Irish history and identity, contributed

greatly to the growth of Irish literature in subsequent years.

A number of other events took place early in Yeats's career that had lasting effects on his life. One was his meeting Maud Gonne in 1889. He fell in love with Gonne, who steadfastly refused his proposals of marriage. Nonetheless, Yeats drew on Gonne and her beauty and physical energy as subject matter for his poetry. In 1896, Yeats first met Lady Augusta Gregory. She provided his art with financial and moral support and introduced him to the Anglo-Irish aristocratic life. This way of life was to be a major source of Yeats's vision of cultural unity.

Through Lady Gregory, Yeats became committed to the establishment of an Irish national theater, a commitment that culminated in the founding of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904. As a result of his involvement with the theater, Yeats not only developed into a powerful playwright but also enhanced the strong dramatic undertones of his verse. The success of the Abbey and the growing maturity of his own poetry gave Yeats an increasingly prominent profile in the English-speaking world. To some extent, however, events in Ireland made him a marginal figure in his own country. The rebellion of Easter, 1916, which Yeats memorably commemorated in a poem, inspired a more populist conception of Irish destiny than Yeats's art envisaged. The Irish war of independence (1919 to 1921), and the civil war that almost immediately followed it, also gave rise to some of Yeats's greatest verse. At the same time, however, the poet withdrew from public life, establishing residence in Thoor Ballylee, a tower dating from Norman times, in the west of Ireland.

In 1917, Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees, and the couple soon became parents. In 1923, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, thereby securing his international reputation. Other honors followed, notably a doctorate in letters from the University of Oxford in 1931. In 1922, he was nominated to the senate of the Irish Free State, a symbolic political honor, though his record as a senator is one of valuable activity and outspokenness.

In his later years, Yeats's thoughts evolved from a concern with Irish matters to concern with cosmic themes. These themes address the possibility of unity, which had long been one of the poet's ideals. Yet historical developments not merely in Ireland

but also in the West generally seemed determined to frustrate this ideal. Pursuit of his vision of unity led the poet to envision in a mythological light the significant attainments of his generation and to support some of the international political strongmen of the 1930's. He developed a theory of apocalyptic history that posited a long period of unity followed by a long period of fragmentation, a cycle of winding and unwinding that continued infinitely.

Poor health necessitated long periods away from Ireland after the conclusion of his senate term in 1928. He continued to produce poetry of great vitality and deep thought until his death in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, in the south of France, on January 28, 1939. Because of World War II, Yeats's remains were not removed to Ireland until 1948, when he was buried in Drumcliff, in County Sligo.

## ANALYSIS

The major preoccupation of Yeats's imagination was expressed in a statement he made at the beginning of his career: "Hammer your thoughts into unity." These words suggest the various ways in which Yeats perceived the raw materials of his poetry; they also point to the sense of totality that he wished to derive from those materials. Yeats's raw materials include personal history, family history, cultural history, ancient and modern Irish history, friendship, mysticism, and personal and academic philosophy. There is no denying the complexity of some of Yeats's poetry. Some of his poems challenge readers to become better acquainted with Irish history and culture. To a large extent, however, the difficulty of Yeats's poetry resembles the poetry of William Blake, whose work requires readers to hold paradoxical notions of the universe in their minds at the same time. Throughout his work, Yeats struggled with the tensions between the concrete and the abstract, between Irish identity and human commonalities, between things falling apart and things coming together.

The range of Yeats's poetic resources is also comprehensive; his work covers the gamut of possibilities provided by lyric poetry. Beginning with ballads and songs that are almost naïve in their expression of simplicity, Yeats's poetry quickly evolves into nuanced, layered works. The allusive symbolism of his collection, *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), for example, has by the time of *The Green*

*Helmet, and Other Poems* (1910) given way to a more explicit, personal tone, drawing on more obviously autobiographical material. This tone, in turn, becomes more assertive and public in the first collection of major importance, *Responsibilities* (1914). The increasingly distinctive character of Yeats's verse also can be seen in his poetry's progressively more flexible use of verse structure, rhyme, and, particularly, rhythm.

In addition, Yeats's development is also noteworthy for its reinvigorating effect on certain poetic forms. These forms, particularly the elegy and the dramatic lyric, had received extensive attention from both Romantic and Victorian poets. The elegy was a form renewed particularly by Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was an important influence on the youthful Yeats, as was Blake, whose reformulation of lyric in terms of spirit and dream made a deep impression on Yeats's early efforts to establish a poetic identity. Yeats's dramatic lyrics intensify that particular form's possibilities in a manner not envisaged by its chief exponent, Robert Browning. Again from a formal standpoint, Yeats's attempts to reproduce in somewhat condensed form the epic ambitions of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and William Morris reveal his often overlooked interest in form. His use of Irish materials in the elegy and the dramatic lyric is an important example of continuity and change in literary history.

Although Yeats significantly renewed some of the forms of nineteenth century English verse, it would be misleading to consider him an experimental poet. His traditional qualities can be illustrated through a comparison of his work with that of his two most important modernist contemporaries, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Yeats's use of form expresses a sense of radical continuity. This concept reveals the poet's understanding of tradition, an understanding that is a major source of duality in Yeats's thinking. In poetry, however, duality can be hammered into unity by reconciling content to form. In addition, emphasizing the formal aspect of his work draws attention not only to the forms themselves but also to the restlessness that their re-

newal contains. It is this restlessness, this excitation of psychic energy, that is the driving force of Yeats's verse.

This sense of restlessness, of ardor, intensity, longing, and continuity comes to the poet from an awareness of loss. Many of Yeats's most significant experiences are associated with loss. He grew up in a period when loss of faith in organized religion was widespread. The political and economic rule of the landowning class with which Yeats identified was dismantled in the course of his lifetime. As his career evolved, he lost his original audience and adopted a critical posture toward the Ireland that his verse had, in part, inspired. His experience of love is also rendered in verse as one of loss. Moreover, many of his most important poems are elegies. Yet while duly admitting the pain of loss and frequently expressing its effects in terms of violence and apocalypse, Yeats attempts to compensate for its impact. It is from this commitment that his imaginative rage for unity derives.

Yeats usually presents his readers with a creative tension between dual elements. These elements occur in various guises. Vagaries of personality find compensation in the stability of masks. The destructive work of time is offset by the constructive work of art. The force of an individual personality can overcome the energies of the general public. The peasant can be reconciled to the aristocrat. The sting of defeat is healed by contemplating the commitment of the hero. Out of such conflicts, Yeats produces what is essentially a poetry of possibility. This poetry expresses both a desire for unity and peace together with an acknowledgment of the remoteness of those goals. Such a realization is sounded in the note of "tragic joy" for which Yeats's verse is celebrated. Aware of the fragmentary nature of modern experience, conscious of the mortal nature of the human condition, suspicious of his age's increasingly democratic trends, Yeats's poetry attempts to stare down such facts of life, achieving greatness through commitment rather than by argument.



## “ADAM’S CURSE”

**First published:** 1902 (collected in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem is an important early example of Yeats’s use of autobiographical materials for poetic ends.*

“Adam’s Curse” was first published in the *Monthly Review* of December, 1902, and first collected in *In the Seven Woods* (1903). The poem is an important example of Yeats’s mature style in the making. The subject matter of Yeats’s early poetry tended to deal with abstractions, such as love, truth, and beauty. Missing from these early poems is a sense of the poet dealing with actual experiences of the actual world. Even the early verse’s conception of Ireland is extremely romantic.

While in “Adam’s Curse” Yeats continues to acknowledge the power of romance, his attitude toward that power is now considerably changed. First, the poem draws on Yeats’s own direct experience. The three people mentioned in the poem are real. The basis for the poem is a conversation that Yeats had with “that beautiful mild woman” and is addressed to a third person who was also present at the time. This third person, the “you” of the poem, is Maud Gonne; the “mild woman” is her sister, Mrs. Kathleen Pilcher. While “Adam’s Curse” draws on elements of Yeats’s life, the poet had not lost interest in the Irish mythological figures that featured so prominently in his early work; Yeats never abandoned this interest. At the same time, however, the presence of intimate acquaintances in a private setting and the reconstruction of their after-dinner conversation represents a breakthrough in candor and immediacy for Yeats.

Second, “Adam’s Curse” is significant because of the manner in which the poet uses his new materials. His altered attitude to romance is expressed in his critical treatment of the subject. This criticism forms the closing lines of the poem. Yet these lines do not have a dramatic or climactic effect. On the contrary, they reveal the poet’s weariness of romantic love, leaving the reader with a sense of his isolation and lack of fulfillment. This strong suggestion of personal loss comes from the realization

that love will not conquer all. Love, too, is subject to change, and so are lovers. This thought brings the poet depressingly down to earth.

In addition, Yeats’s technique is more sophisticated in “Adam’s Curse” than it is in many of his earlier poems. The decision to open the poem with what appear to be direct quotes from the remembered conversation greatly adds to the reader’s sense of the immediacy, directness, spontaneity, and candor of actual experience. The informal character of conversation is conveyed by letting the lines run into each other. The first part of the poem reads as though it is written in sentences rather than in poetic lines. The poet draws attention to this effect by the poem’s form, which consists of one long stanza and two shorter ones. Because of this arrangement, the poem can be described as having, in effect, two parts, even though Yeats does not number or identify those parts.

There is a deliberate sense of disproportion between the parts, which is intended to suggest the problem of duality, which is the poem’s theme. Seeing the poem in two parts also draws attention to how Yeats has separated speech from silence, exposition from reflection, and the conversational interlude from the larger emotional context. This strategy of separation underlines the variety of ways in which “Adam’s Curse” concentrates on the dual character of human experience. The overall effect of the verbal and technical accomplishments of “Adam’s Curse” is to make the poet’s concerns more accessible. The poem’s theme is still basically abstract, but its abstract nature is brought closer to the reader.

The theme, broadly speaking, addresses the discrepancy between appearance and reality. The poet, says Yeats in the first conversational extract, can slave to perfect a line of poetry yet be considered an idler by the world at large. Similarly, says Mrs. Pilcher, to appear beautiful is the result of hard work. These facts of life are, to the poet, a version of Adam’s curse, a reference to the fact that Adam was not only expelled from the ideal existence of paradise but also condemned to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. Even love requires deliberate effort. Yet that thought reminds the poet that, try as he might, he has failed to perfect his love for Maud Gonne. The reality of life lies in commitment rather than in achievement, though such a realization dampens the spirit of idealism.

## “EASTER 1916”

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A commemoration in verse of the Easter, 1916, Irish rebellion against English rule.*

Although written within a few months of the event that it commemorates, and privately printed later in the year of its composition, “Easter 1916” did not receive general publication until 1920. It was first collected in the volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1920). It is Yeats’s best-known poem. Its title refers to the Irish rebellion of Easter, 1916, when a small group of rebels in Dublin unexpectedly proclaimed the establishment of an Irish Republic. The rebellion was in defiance of the British rule under which Ireland was then governed.

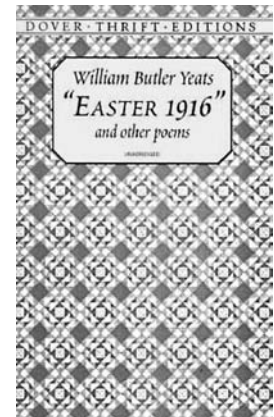
The refrain of “Easter 1916” has frequently been thought to refer to the new political arrangements initiated by the rebels. Yet such a reading is not necessarily what Yeats had in mind, as awareness of the poem’s publication history will confirm. “Easter 1916” is not a political poem in the sense that it takes one side or the other in the rebellion. Nevertheless, the poem’s renown is, to some extent, the result of a narrow, one-sided interpretation of the line “A terrible beauty is born.” It is important to note, however, that Yeats carefully refrains from providing a facile understanding of the momentous event in Irish history that has taken place. On the contrary, the poem is notable for the questioning manner in which it expresses awe and bewilderment at the rebels. The difficulty in reaching an immediate understanding of what “A terrible beauty is born” means crystallizes the poet’s own stunned reaction to the rebellion. Therefore, the most striking feature of “Easter 1916” is its honesty.

The basis for the poet’s reaction is contained in the poem’s opening stanza. The reader is informed that, although the poet and his cronies were aware that republican militants existed, nobody took them seriously. They were unassuming, had little social status, and provided occasions of trivial conversation. In addition, the anonymous “them,” which the poet later names, were considered laughingstocks by their social superiors. The poet

includes himself among those superiors, members of the “club.” Yet social superiority in itself is said to count for nothing, since both the ridiculers and the ridiculed live in a land fit for clowns (“motley” being a reference to the traditional dress of the jester). The suggestion is that the rebel’s subsequent heroism and self-sacrifice were unimaginable.

The second stanza presents some of the rebels in a different light. All but the first of those mentioned were executed for their part in the rebellion. Two of those mentioned were well known to the poet. “That woman” is Constance Markievicz, born Constance Gore-Booth, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat whose involvement with the rebels Yeats views as a fall from grace. The other person with whom Yeats was acquainted is Major John MacBride, “A drunken, vainglorious lout” and the estranged husband of Maud Gonne. Yet even MacBride can no longer be considered simply a clown. Mention of these two personal associations, neither of them particularly attractive, provides a frame within which Yeats portrays two of the rebel leaders. “This man” is Patrick Pearse, a poet and teacher who led the rebellion. “This other” is Thomas MacDonough, poet and academic. Although Yeats was not very well acquainted with either of them, he presents them in a favorable light, which adjusts the force of “motley” in the opening stanza.

The first two stanzas’ emphasis on personality and society is replaced in the third stanza. There, a more fundamental conception of life, the natural order, is considered. According to this conception, life may be compared to a stream: Living things continually change as they grow and mature. The rebels differ from this order in the way that a stone is the opposite of a stream. Not only is a stone the stream’s opposite; it also deflects or “troubles” the stream’s free and direct flow. Similarly, there seems to be something unnatural about those who do not participate spontaneously and naturally in life. Yet by the opening of the fourth



stanza, this view of the rebels is itself challenged, just as the original view of them as clowns was both acknowledged and corrected in the opening two stanzas.

It is impossible, the poem argues, to know how much must be given in the name of a cause. One's human nature, "the heart," may turn to stone, but only a higher power, "Heaven's part," can determine how great a sacrifice is necessary in order to redeem a given situation, in this case the Irish nation. Meanwhile, all that can be done is to ensure that the magnitude of the sacrifice is recognized for what it is. Yeats conveys this sentiment through an appeal to language. Poetic fancy, such as the metaphor of mother and child, is inadequate to register what has taken place, as the stark, "No, no, not night but death" makes clear. Even the fact that "England may keep faith" does not diminish the rebels' impact.

England is mentioned because a version of Irish independence had been passed into law in 1914. Its application was suspended, however, until the end of World War I. According to Yeats, however, one must bear in mind that not only did the rebels take action, but their activism also cost them their lives. This inescapable and shocking fact is the poem's inspiration and the birth of what it calls "a terrible beauty." The rebels' sacrifice is that terrible beauty, an act as awe-inspiring and overwhelming as the greatest art.

## "THE SECOND COMING"

**First published:** 1920 (collected in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This work is Yeats's fullest artistic statement of his apocalyptic theory of history.*

The continual broadening of Yeats's scope as a poet and thinker is demonstrated by "The Second Coming." This poem was first published in what was one of the most important literary magazines of the day, *The Dial*, in November, 1920, and first appeared in book form the same year in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.

Some technical knowledge is required in order

to understand the opening line of the poem. The "widening gyre" (pronounced with a hard "g") describes not only the circular, ever-widening course of the falcon's flight. It also refers to an important aspect of Yeats's theory of history. Influenced by Giambattista Vico and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophies of eternal recurrence, Yeats sees history as a cycle of declines and regenerations. Each historical era is replaced by its opposite. Gyres describe the interacting and conflicting eras.

In "The Second Coming," the end of the Christian era is thought to be at hand. The poem's title is intended, first, to bring to mind the Second Coming of Christ. Yet this association, with its promises of salvation, gives way to the monstrous image of the "rough beast," suggesting barbarism. In the New Testament, the Second Coming rescues the faithful from the dreadful conditions that accompany the end of the world. In the poem, the second coming means being condemned to those dreadful conditions. The fact that the "rough beast" is to be born in Bethlehem underlines the enormous changes that the poet believes to be on the way.

Yeats was not the only early twentieth century poet who believed that the historical events of his day suggested profound and disturbing change. The impact of World War I was still being felt in every aspect of public and cultural life at the time "The Second Coming" was written. In addition, conditions in Ireland were deteriorating at a rapid rate. Old political and social forces in the country were giving way to the will of the people. In addition, the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia came as a shocking reminder of the vulnerability of certain social classes in the rest of Europe. Although none of these conditions is mentioned by name in "The Second Coming," the poem's themes of violence and disruption are reinforced by its historical context.

The opening two lines of the poem provide an image of cultural breakdown. The falcon represents those forces that function productively only when disciplined. By as early as the fourth line of the poem, the consequences of this breakdown are being described in violent terms. The word "mere" in this line is not used in its familiar sense and should be understood in its original meaning of "nothing but." Everything that makes life valuable is being drenched in blood. "The ceremony of innocence" refers not to one particular ceremony

but is intended to suggest the grace and order of civilized society. Moreover, there is nobody to fight “the blood-dimmed tide.”

Such conditions can only mean that the end of the world is imminent. In keeping with the violent imagery of the first stanza, a nightmarish embodiment of what is occurring reveals itself to the poet. The image comes from “Spiritus Mundi.” This phrase refers to a belief that individual minds are connected to a collective mind, and that the images that occur in one’s imagination are reflections of that greater consciousness. One effect of this reference is to show that the poet himself is vulnerable. The admission of this vulnerability gives “The Second Coming” an urgent, dramatic force, which is most clearly felt in the last line. By concluding with a question, Yeats not only crystallizes the sense of doubt and dread that fills “The Second Coming.” He also draws attention to the dangerous and unresolved contemporary historical conditions. Yeats makes a powerful case for the relevance of poetry as a means of addressing pressing public issues and of preserving historical awareness.

### “SAILING TO BYZANTIUM”

**First published:** 1928 (collected in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Yeats opposes youth and age, body and spirit, and art and artifice in this important poem.*

“Sailing to Byzantium” was first published in Yeats’s 1928 collection, *The Tower*. Critics generally acknowledge that Yeats produced some of his best work after he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923; certainly, “Sailing to Byzantium” demonstrates the power of that later work.

The poem is comprised of four stanzas of eight lines each. Both rhyme and meter are regular, following an *abababcc* rhyme scheme and an iambic pentameter metric pattern throughout. In the first stanza, Yeats speaks of a place that is “no country for old men.” In this country, the young, along with “fish, flesh, or fowl” engage in the procreative, generative energy of summer. Caught up in “sensual music,” the inhabitants of this country do not con-

sider intellectual or spiritual concerns. Rather, they are caught up in life itself, not considering that which is eternal. Yeats reminds readers, however, that whatever is “begotten” and “born” ultimately dies. This is the country of fleshly incarnation, the country of life, but also a place where the joy of life opposes the certainty of death. A country such as this is no place for an old man moving inexorably toward death.

Yeats continues his exploration of old age in the second stanza, presenting an image of an old man as a scarecrow, “a tattered coat upon a stick.” This empty vessel is no more than a “paltry thing” without the singing of his soul. Through the soul’s singing, Yeats believes, he can create art, something that will survive physical death. He says, therefore, that he has sailed to Byzantium, a place where he will be able to learn the art of singing. Byzantium, now known as Istanbul, serves an important symbolic function in this poem and in some of Yeats’s other works.

In the third stanza, Yeats requests the “sages” of Byzantium to come and teach his soul to sing. He uses the phrase, “perne in a gyre” to describe the way the sages will come from the “holy fire.” Yeats uses the word “perne,” literally a spool, as a verb here; gyre means a circular course. The sages thus spin in a spiral of holy fire, a fire that will burn away the poet’s heart, allowing Yeats to enter the “artifice of eternity.” The transformation from fleshly incarnation (the “dying animal”) to the eternity of art becomes a kind of eternal life for the poet.

In the final stanza, Yeats asserts that once he escapes nature (the natural world of fleshly creation), he will never again be incarnated into the world of nature. Rather, he will assume an artificial form, that of a golden bird. For Yeats, “artificial” does not carry a negative connotation; rather, he connects the artificial with art and with artifice as an improvement on the natural. With this image, Yeats alludes to both “The Nightingale” (1844) by Hans Christian Andersen, as well as to John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819). Unlike these writers, Yeats finds the artificial bird to be superior in that it offers the singer a form of immortality. The bird can sing of “what is past, or passing, or to come.” For Yeats, the transformation from natural, mortal human being into artificial, immortal singer is a fate to be highly desired.



## “UNDER BEN BULBEN”

**First published:** 1939 (collected in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*Yeats surveys his artistic origins and influences and makes his poetic last will and testament.*

“Under Ben Bulben” was first published in three of Ireland’s national daily newspapers within a week of Yeats’s death and first appeared in book form in *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939). Its newspaper publication was a mark of respect to the dead poet and a call for public recognition of his contribution to Irish life and literature. A similar, less self-centered call is what “Under Ben Bulben” itself communicates. As a result, the poem was long considered to be Yeats’s last will and poetic testament.

The poem’s title refers to the table mountain that overlooks the town of Sligo. If “Under Ben Bulben” may be read as the poet’s will, part of his bequest is that he be interred in the landscape of his childhood. Doing so would achieve a long-sought unity, not only with his ancestors but also with much that inspired his poetry. The location and character of the poet’s final resting place are given a privileged position at the end of the poem. Here, Yeats argues for the significance of being at one with the enduring presences of place and family. It is by its concluding lines, therefore, that “Under Ben Bulben” most resembles a will, since these arrange the terms and conditions of both the poet’s death and his legacy.

Yet these lines constitute a relatively small part of what Yeats wants to hand down. The emphasis on landscape and lineage must be seen as the end product of the poem’s various other significant emphases. “Under Ben Bulben” ranges far and wide over a large number of Yeats’s interests. The poem amounts to a condensed version of the poet’s intellectual autobiography. Yet rather than view the poem as a series of six interlinked episodes, it is more appropriate to note how different the parts are from one another and then to notice what they have in common.

The poem opens, as Yeats’s poetic career began, with allusions to pre-Christian deities and forces

and then interprets what these forces represent. The Witch of Atlas, renowned in mythology for her beauty, and “That pale, long visaged company” of Irish gods and heroes have been identified as agents of vision and passion. These two qualities Yeats then claims as constants that make both individual existence and the history of Western civilization valuable. The connection between intensity of feeling, even violence, and liberating insight is asserted in the third part of the poem. The link between artistic accomplishment and passionate involvement is made in part 4, though Yeats regrets that this connection has not endured since the middle of the nineteenth century, when the last-mentioned artist, Samuel Palmer, lived. Yeats’s message to the Irish poets who follow him is, likewise, a wish that they combine spiritedness and a sense of form. Again, as throughout all of “Under Ben Bulben,” the persistent thought is of the unification of different and opposed elements. As part 5 affirms, “Porter-drinkers’ randy laughter” is as important as “the holiness of monks.”

In form, meter, and language, “Under Ben Bulben” has the flexibility, directness, and verve of Yeats at his best. At the same time, the poem’s range of allusions and complexity of thought also make it typical of Yeats’s intellectual ambition. Yet it is this combination of complex thought and simple method that gives the reader a direct experience of the poet’s struggle for unity. The combination also confirms what the poet himself realized: that art, not life, is the means of attaining this unity.

## “THE CIRCUS ANIMALS’ DESERTION”

**First published:** 1939 (collected in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this retrospective poem, Yeats reflects on his career as a writer.*

Yeats wrote “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” in 1939, shortly before the end of his life. The poem was published first in Dublin and then included in the collection *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939). This poem has grown in reputation and interest within



Yeats's studies, surpassing "Under Ben Bulbin" as the poet's final statement about his artistic life.

The poem has five stanzas of eight lines each. In addition, Yeats divides the poem into three parts: part one comprises stanza one; part two comprises stanzas two through four; and part three comprises the last stanza. Like "Sailing to Byzantium," the poem follows a regular rhyme scheme of *abababcc* and is entirely composed in iambic pentameter.

In this poem, Yeats laments that he has lost his gift for poetry, although, paradoxically, this might be one his finest poems. In the first stanza, he tells the reader that he has unsuccessfully "sought a theme" daily for about six weeks. He calls himself a "broken man" who must be "satisfied with [his] heart." He next refers to his "circus animals," a metaphor for the stylistic tricks and techniques of his early poetry. In other words, Yeats suggests that his earlier work was for show, and that the images, metaphors, and symbols that impress his readers are no more than animals trained to do tricks for people. Now, however, as an old man, all he has left is his heart, without pretense and without masks.

In the next three stanzas, Yeats elaborates on earlier periods of his literary career. Because he has been unable to identify a new theme for himself, he must "enumerate old themes." He first mentions "that sea rider Oisín." The title poem of one of Yeats's earliest collections, published in 1889, was "The Wanderings of Oisín," which recounted the adventures of the mythic and historic Irish hero, Oisín. "The Wanderings of Oisín" can be identified with Yeats's Celtic Twilight period, when he mined pre-Christian Celtic folklore for subject matter.

In stanza three, Yeats turns to his play *The Countess Cathleen* (pb. 1892, pr. 1899). Yeats dedicated this play to Maud Gonne, who also acted in it. His love for her and for her political activism became the "dream" Yeats writes of in the final line of the stanza. Tellingly, Yeats writes that the "dream itself had all my thought and love," implying that it was the dream, rather than reality, that occupied his mind and heart.

Likewise, in stanza four, Yeats refers to his play *On Baile's Strand* (pr. 1904, pb. 1905). He writes in the final two lines of the stanza, "Players and painted stage took all my love,/ and not those things that they were emblem of." Yeats here comes to the realization that figurative language, images, wordplay, and all of the trappings of poetry and literature are what he has loved and created. He has not, however, loved what such language stands in for.

In the final stanza, Yeats reveals himself in the months before his death to be deeply concerned with the concrete reality of life. As he nears death, he understands that all of the "masterful images" have their origins in the sometimes ugly real world. The heart does not exist in isolation from physical reality, nor does poetry spring from abstraction. Rather, the heart exists in the "foul rag-and-bone shop," a metaphor for the fleshly body.

## SUMMARY

There are a number of reasons for considering William Butler Yeats a major poet, if not *the* major poet of the twentieth century. One is his comprehensive growth. Each of his books of poetry represents a development and refinement of his thought. Taken as a whole, therefore, the body of his work not only offers commentary on the culture and history of his time but also traces the course of a poet coming of age.

Yeats's career offers an exceptional glimpse of the transition from Romanticism to modernism. In addition, Yeats's desire to create meaningful relationships between such different phenomena as love and art, history and poetry, Christianity and apocalypse, and passion and vision remains a striking example of his mind's range. As in the poetry of William Blake, Yeats simultaneously provides readers with competing and contradictory visions of reality.

George O'Brien;  
updated by Diane Andrews Henningfeld

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- With what is William Butler Yeats concerned in the writings from his Celtic Twilight period?
- In what ways do the events of Irish history influence and impact Yeats's poetry and drama?
- What are some of Yeats's major themes across the body of his work?
- How does Yeats's love for Maude Gonne influence his writing?
- What does Byzantium come to symbolize for Yeats, and how does he use this in his poetry?
- What is Yeats's understanding of history, and how is this understanding articulated in poems such as "The Second Coming"?
- In what ways does Yeats represent the transition to modernism in literature during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century?
- Why is Yeats considered by critics to be one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century?

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Jean-Claude Bouis

## YEVGENY YEVTUSHENKO

**Born:** Stantsiya Zima, Siberia, Soviet Union (now in Russia)  
July 18, 1933

*Appearing at the height of anti-Stalinist activism, Yevtushenko was one of several young poets whose influence led to a decisive change in Russian poetry, as well as in Soviet politics.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Yevgeny Alexandrovich Yevtushenko (yehv-tew-SHEHNG-koh) was born on July 18, 1933, at Stantsiya Zima, a small Siberian junction near Lake Baikal, in the Soviet Union (now in Russia). Some of his ancestors had been deported to Siberia from Ukraine at the end of the nineteenth century for political activities. Other relatives came from Latvia. “Revolution was the religion in our family,” Yevtushenko says in his autobiography. He spent his childhood amid the serene beauty of Siberian nature but also troubled by political uncertainty: Both of his grandfathers were swept away during the purges ordered by Joseph Stalin in the late 1930’s. His parents studied geology in Moscow, married, and were divorced before World War II. His mother took Yevtushenko to Moscow, but he was evacuated to Zima during the war, where he spent three years.

Back in Moscow, growing up in postwar hardship, he was belligerent and was even thrown out of one school. He surmounted the difficulties, however, and even began to write poetry. For a while, he joined his father in a geological expedition in Kazakhstan and later almost became a professional soccer player. After publishing his first poem in 1949, appropriately in *Soviet Sport*, he concentrated on literature and entered the famous Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. From the beginning of the 1950’s, he published his poems with increasing suc-

cess. The publication of his first book, *Razvedchiki gryadushchego* (1952; prospectors of the future), decided his fate: He devoted his life to poetry and published numerous books with regularity.

The emotional appeal of his poetry and his innate boldness made him a leader among the new Russian poets eager to assert themselves. Together with other rising poets, most notably Andrei Voznesensky, they were known as “the angry young men” of Russian letters. The age-old generational conflict became acute, and even the very notion of revolution, or the purification of it, was brought into question. During the increasing campaign against Stalin, Yevtushenko contributed several fiery poems of protest and rebellion, “Babiy Yar” (“Babii Yar”), “Nasledniki Stalina” (“Stalin’s Heirs”), and “Miotvaia ruka” (“The Dead Hand of the Past”) being the most explosive, making him even more popular with young readers. He was able to publish almost without restriction, including an autobiography in the Russian language, *Primechaniya k avtobiografii*, published in New York in 1963; that same year, a French translation, *Autobiographie précoce*, was published in Paris, and the book also appeared in English as *A Precocious Autobiography*. Yevtushenko was also free to travel abroad and visited the United States many times. His star was rising steadily.

In the changing political climate in the Soviet Union, however, he would soon get into trouble with authorities for his outspoken, inflammatory views. He was chastised, kept in check, even exiled for a short while in the beautiful Caucasus, which he did not find overly punitive. He retreated to Zima for a while, as if to replenish his strength and resolve in his native place, where he wrote a large



number of poems. Somehow, Yevtushenko was able to weather this and many other storms and to regain the good graces of the authorities. After several months of official silence, he was allowed to publish again, toning down his virulent attacks somewhat but remaining unbending in his opposition to the suppression of free speech. The situation continued: Periods of freedom were replaced by periods of restriction, until the Mikhail Gorbachev era.

In the 1980's, in addition to publishing poetry, Yevtushenko branched out into filmmaking. He wrote film scenarios and directed and even acted in films. He also became active in politics. In 1989, he was elected to the Soviet parliament as a member of a prodemocracy group that supported the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev, the general secretary of the Communist Party who later became president of the Soviet Union. In August, 1991, he defended Gorbachev when a group of hardline Communists staged a coup to oust Gorbachev and put an end to his policies of *perestroika*.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yevtushenko became involved in environmental issues and campaigned on behalf of the victims of Joseph Stalin's gulags. Yevtushenko eventually settled in the United States, where he taught courses in Russian and European poetry and the history of world cinema at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma and Queens University of the City University of New York.

## ANALYSIS

The beginnings of Yevtushenko's literary activities passed in the spirit of youthful rebelliousness and of the Russian poetic tradition. That tradition, however, was not so much the classical one of Alexander Pushkin, Aleksandr Blok, or even Boris Pasternak, with their heavily rhymed and regulated poetry; it was, rather, the tradition of modern, free-verse poetry, which was, by and large, absent from Russian poetry until the middle of the twentieth century. The notable exception was Vladimir Mayakovsky, with whom Yevtushenko has much in common, including the powerful, dramatic way of publicly reading one's poetry.

From the very beginning, Yevtushenko believed that he was bringing something new to Russian poetry. It was not so much the dissatisfaction with the existing state and the ensuing rebelliousness as it

was his belief that the torch had been passed and that the new generation should be taking its rightful place. Imbued with the age-old conviction that poets hold a special position in Russian society, he asserted himself forcefully even in his very first poems. In one of his earliest, "Prolog" ("Prologue"), for example, he declares in the very first verse, "I am different," speaking not only for himself but for the entire generation. His early poems also express his love and respect for nature, faith in his people and love for his land, a strong belief in himself, and a confirmation of his faith in the original aims of the revolution, which have been corrupted and are in need of reconstitution. A strong lyrical bent and a desire to experiment with poetic devices, including rhyme, complete the picture of the young Yevtushenko.

As he matured in the course of only a few years during the changes in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, Yevtushenko turned to wider themes and concerns. His political activism became more prominent, as evidenced in poems such as "Stan-tsiya Zima" ("Zima Junction"), "Babii Yar," "Stalin's Heirs," and "Conversations with an American Writer." He displayed a willingness to state his position openly and courageously and to fight for his beliefs. By becoming a fighter for his ideals, he identified with one of the oldest traditions of Russian poets—to speak out as the conscience of the people in the absence of other democratic institutions. This attitude, however, had its price: Yevtushenko has often been labeled a topical poet lending his talent to social causes that came to his attention, as illustrated by a poem that he wrote on the spot upon visiting the bombed office of political activists in New York. It is difficult, therefore, to ignore the fact that his political activism and opposition to Soviet authorities contributed heavily to his popularity at home and abroad. His critics, however, accused him of flirting with the authorities and defending the revolution.

Yevtushenko has expressed his resentment over being labeled primarily a political or topical poet. He has frequently pointed out his faith in poetry as a noble endeavor and in the integrity of poets, who should be interested in social issues but should also express high emotions and pursue lofty aesthetic goals. Indeed, in a great number of his poems, he pursues exactly such goals. He conducts a running dialogue with Russian and foreign poets about the

mission of poetry. He registers his poetic reactions to sights and sounds on his numerous world travels. He writes poems about everyday life, such as about women burdened with life's miseries, as in "Ne ponimaiu" ("I Don't Understand") and "A Tie Salesgirl"; his mother's contribution in shaping his character, as in "Ia pozdravliaiu vas, mamma" ("I Congratulate You, Momma"); the vagaries of love, as in "Zrelost liubvi!" ("Love's Maturity?"); the simple joys of life, in "Berry-Picking"; or an absent-minded old professor whose wife has left him, in "Okno vykhodit v belye derevia" ("Schoolmaster"). His variety of themes is one of Yevtushenko's most appealing characteristics. As he states in "Prologue," "I want art to be/ as diverse as myself."

In another poem ("Poetry"), he says of poets, "They slander him from left/ and right,/ but he looks down on the liars with contempt." His courage has stood him in good stead throughout his career.

### "PROLOGUE"

**First published:** "Prolog," 1957 (collected in *The Poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko 1953-1965*, 1965)

**Type of work:** Poem

*"Prologue" can be seen as an explanation of Yevtushenko's approach to life and literature and is an introduction to his entire poetic career.*

Writing "Prologue" at the very beginning of his poetic career, Yevtushenko felt the need to identify himself. This self-identification, present in many of his poems, voices some of his basic concerns: the need to be different; a realization that somehow he does not fit in; the restrictive nature of his surroundings; and the lack of total freedom to express himself as an artist. As he explains at the end of the poem, he likes to defy the enemy standing in the way of the joy of living. That he sees as the highest purpose of his life.

The difference of which Yevtushenko speaks refers not so much to himself as to each successive generation of poets. The old has ruled Russian poetry for almost four decades; the new, represented best by Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky, has come on the heels of the changes after Joseph Sta-

lin's death. The fact that he feels constrained in his efforts to express himself freely justifies his eagerness to see these changes made as quickly as possible. The best way to effect the change is by boldness and courage. Only then will he and others experience the full joy of life that he believes is their inalienable right.

The autobiographical nature of the poem is somewhat misleading, because, as stated, Yevtushenko does not plead the case for himself alone. In this sense, the poem has a universal meaning transcending the poet's own predicament, and even that of his generation. It can apply to all generations replacing one another. Supporting this argument is the fact that Yevtushenko is somewhat coy in his allusions to the powers that be (perhaps in order to see his poem in print), despite his well-known boldness. Moreover, some of the attitudes described—a defiant statement of being different, the ebullience of youth, a thirst for life and the joy of living, contradictory forces within oneself—can indeed be applied universally.

Yevtushenko also refers to two poets, Sergei Yesenin, a leading Russian poet in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and Walt Whitman. All three poets are known for their closeness to nature, through which they express their yearning for freedom and determination to be free.

"Prologue" is a manifesto poem, setting a course for future sailings, to which Yevtushenko has remained remarkably faithful.

### "BABII YAR"

**First published:** "Babiy Yar," 1961 (collected in *The Poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko 1953-1965*, 1965)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This poem is a powerful castigation of the latent anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, which allowed Nazi crimes against the Jews in the Ukraine to be ignored.*

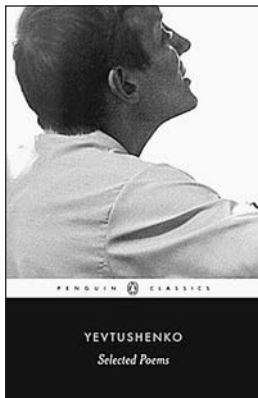
"Babii Yar" is Yevtushenko's best-known poem. The poem is about a ravine in the Ukraine where thousands of Jews were slaughtered by the Nazis, yet there is no monument to honor the dead. It is a poem with a thesis, the thesis being that anti-

Semitism still exists in the Soviet Union as it has for centuries. What intensifies this accusation is the professed internationalism of the Soviets that was supposed to eliminate all injustices, including racial persecution. "Babii Yar" is also one of the most political of Yevtushenko's poems and one of the most enduring, requiring and receiving no retraction.

In a series of metaphors, the poet establishes his references. After stating in the first line that there is no monument at Babii Yar, the poet immediately identifies with Jewish people, going back to ancient Egypt and to the agony of crucifixion on the cross, subtly reminding the reader of the common origin of Christ and the Jews. He refers to Alfred Dreyfus, a celebrated victim of persecution in France; to a boy in the Byelorussian town of Belostok as an illustration of pogroms; and finally to Anne Frank, the ultimate symbol of the suffering of the young and innocent as a result of racial injustice. When he returns to the victims of Babii Yar,

Yevtushenko declares his solidarity with them exactly because he is a Russian, who as he says, are "international to the core." His final statement is that of a defiance and lack of fear that he will be hated by anti-Semites.

"Babii Yar" is more than a political statement. It is an outcry against all the injustices of the world and a warning that it may not be limited to the Soviet Union, thus lending the poem a universal appeal. The skillful use of metaphors and symbols adds to the overall beauty of the poem, making it one of the most eloquent combinations of message and poetic execution.



## "YES' AND 'NO'"

**First published:** "Da' i 'Net,'" 1965  
(collected in *The New Russian Poets, 1953-1968*, 1968)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this work, the poet is shuttling between the cities of "Yes" and "No," symbolizing the basic dichotomy in which he is forced to live.*

Like many of Yevtushenko's poems, "Yes' and 'No'" is in the form of a dramatic monologue. It represents his dilemma in having to shuttle like a train between two cities, "Yes" and "No," causing his nerves to be strained like telegraph wires. The city of No is loveless and without help, inhabited by ghosts and scowling objects. In contrast, the city of Yes is like a bird's song; there are no walls, and even the stars are begging to be friends, the lips offer themselves to be kissed, and the cows provide free milk. At the end, however, the poet tires of this land of plenty, unable to appreciate things given to him gratis. He would rather continue to shuttle between the two cities.

"Yes' and 'No'" is a simple poem on the surface, but it harbors some allegories. The poem is subtitled "From the Verses About Love," and this subtitle offers a possible explanation of the allegory of unrequited love in the city of No and the allure of fulfilled love in the city of Yes. The poet uses apt images to characterize the difference between the two emotional states. The decision not to opt for the logical choice of happiness and bliss and to travel between the two instead corresponds to a choice that is made by the heart and not by reason. Another possible allegory is of a political nature, the city of No representing the bleak state of affairs in the poet's country and the city of Yes the promise of a better life elsewhere. In this connection, the inability to travel abroad is of particular relevance.

The fact that Yevtushenko remained a man of politics, as well as a man of letters, supports this basic dichotomy, allowing for various interpretations of his works. What should not be ignored, however, is that his first love and avocation was always literature and that his poems are, first, works of art.

## SUMMARY

Yevgeny Yevtushenko started his poetic career in a modern idiom, aware that he was helping to bring something new to Russian poetry and that the torch had been passed to a new generation. As he matured, he became increasingly involved in political matters or matters that he believed deserved personal commitment. In this, he played the traditional role of a Russian poet as the conscience of the nation. At the same time, he never compromised his artistic standards to the point of becoming a spokesman for nonliterary causes, of which he has often been accused. It is indeed his artistic qualities that have made him a leading poet in twentieth century Russian literature.

Vasa D. Mihailovich

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How did Yevgeny Yevtushenko make “Babii Yar” a poem of universal significance?
- What influences of Walt Whitman are reflected in Yevtushenko’s poetry?
- Is writing for nonliterary causes a blemish on the record of a poet like Yevtushenko?
- One essay about Yektushenko concerns women in his poetry. What view of women emerges in his work?
- Is Yevtushenko likely to be best remembered as a social-political poet or as a lyrical one?

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Jacques Robert/Editions Gallimard

## MARGUERITE YOURCENAR

**Born:** Brussels, Belgium

June 8, 1903

**Died:** Northeast Harbor, Maine

December 17, 1987

*Yourcenar was not only an important historical novelist and short story writer but also a playwright, translator, essayist, and literary critic.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Marguerite Yourcenar (yewr-suh-NAHR) was one of the most original writers of post-World War II France and the first woman ever elected to the French Academy, whose purpose is to maintain the purity of the French language and whose members are drawn from among the best minds in French letters and science. Born Marguerite de Crayencour in Brussels, Belgium, on June 8, 1903, she was the only child of aristocratic and wealthy parents, Michel and Fernande de Crayencour. Her mother died of fever and other complications shortly after giving birth. Marguerite was reared by a series of nurses and maids as she and her father moved from Belgium to northern France to Paris.

Her father was an adventurous and unconventional man, as she lovingly and admiringly portrayed him in her 1977 autobiographical *Archives du Nord* (*How Many Years*, 1995). He loved the cosmopolitan excitement of European casino and spa towns. Also a student of literature and well read in the classics, he revealed to his daughter the beauty of French, English, Latin, and Greek masterpieces while private tutors taught her the other school subjects. Yourcenar as a result passed the *baccalauréat* examinations in 1919 at the early age of sixteen. Only two years later, she published *Le Jardin des chimères* (1921; the garden of chimeras) at

her father's expense under the pen name Marguerite Yourcenar (an incomplete anagram of her last name, which later became her legal name). This work of poetry was followed the next year by another more ambitious collection of poems, *Les Dieux ne sont pas morts* (1922; the gods are not dead).

The publication in 1929 of the novel *Alexis: Ou, Le Traité du vain combat* (*Alexis*, 1984) not only brought the first favorable reviews but was also followed in quick succession by other works of fiction. These novels and short stories were mostly written in the form of a confessional letter-monologue. *La Nouvelle Eurydice* (1931; the new Eurydice), *Denier du rêve* (1934; *A Coin in Nine Hands*, 1982), *Nouvelles orientales* (1938; *Oriental Tales*, 1985), and especially *Le Coup de grâce* (1939; *Coup de Grâce*, 1957) involve psychological studies of men in conflict with their sexuality, with life and art, and with love.

Yourcenar came to the United States on a lecture tour in 1939, but due to the onset of the war could not return to Nazi-occupied Europe. Thanks to the recommendation of the English poet Stephen Spender, she secured a part-time instructorship in French and art history at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, a position she held until 1950. She also, during this period of strife in her homeland, contributed articles and poems to émigré periodicals. At war's end, she decided to remain in the United States, becoming an American citizen and officially changing her name to Marguerite Yourcenar in 1947. With Grace Frick, her longtime friend and cotranslator, she moved to Mount Desert Island off the coast of Maine in 1950, where

she spent the rest of her life, with frequent travels throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia.

The prizewinning *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951; *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 1954; also translated as *Hadrian's Memoirs*, 1957), a fictional first-person narrative of the great Roman emperor, was Yourcenar's first work to become a critical and popular success. It was the dark and brooding *L'Œuvre au noir* (1968; *The Abyss*, 1976; also translated as *Zeno of Bruges*, 1994), however, written in an altogether different style, that finally brought Yourcenar fame and recognition. Eventually translated into eighteen languages, it won the coveted Prix Femina and was made into a film by André Delvaux in 1988. Between *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss*, Yourcenar penned countless essays, plays, and translations, including an anthology of Negro spirituals entitled *Fleuve profond, sombre rivière: Les Negro Spirituals* (1964; wide, deep, troubled water), and followed in 1984 by *Blues et gospels* (blues and gospels).

Recognized for her literary contributions, Yourcenar received honorary degrees from such prestigious institutions as Harvard University and was elected as well to the Royal Academy of Belgium (1970). The recipient of numerous prizes and awards, she was also decorated with the rank of officer and later promoted to commander in the French Légion d'Honneur. Most notably, on March 6, 1980, by a vote of twenty to twelve, she became an "immortal" member of the French Academy, thereby breaking an all-male tradition dating back to 1635. Yet, above all these honors, she preferred to tend her garden, bake her bread, speak with her Yankee neighbors, fight for environmental and civil rights issues and, of course, write.

Yourcenar continued writing, mostly essays, short stories, translations, and critical studies, despite increasingly severe pulmonary illnesses, until her death in Maine on December 17, 1987.

## ANALYSIS

Despite publications dating back over more than sixty years—two works of poetry appeared as early as 1921 and 1922 when she was in her late teens—public recognition came slowly for Marguerite Yourcenar. This late recognition was mainly the result of her uncompromising stylistic rigor, her complex philosophical and ethical dilemmas, and her reliance on Greek myths and figures. She

deeply believed the past to be the foundation for the present, so she created themes that are both human and universal, using history to convey eternal ideas.

Although she began by writing poetry, she ultimately showed a greater affinity for fiction, since fiction allowed her flexibility in developing character, theme, and plot. Fiction also served as a means of testing established literary canons within what appeared to be a very traditional mode. Many of the ideas found in the novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* exist in preceding works. For instance, the novel examines weakness and failure in a world that admires strength and power, characters rejecting conventional bonds and emotions as they try to assert their individuality, and political intrusions into human affairs.

To illustrate this view of the world, Yourcenar chose a first-person narrative style especially popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Part memoir, part confession, part confidence, this technique, which she called "the portrait of a voice," offers protagonists the greatest opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, and reactions unimpaired by authorial screens and interventions. Her desire was to present the truth as the narrator sees it, without commenting in any way, since a lie can be as self-revealing as a truth. It was also her wish to grant free rein to her characters, without judging their opinions or actions. Either they are free, in which case the readers can draw their own conclusions, or the characters are being manipulated for whatever purpose, in which case they become mere puppets.

The German writer Rainer Maria Rilke influenced her early writings, among them *Alexis*, as revealed both in its tone and in the hesitations of the title character, Alexis, to bare his soul. French novelist André Gide's fiction also had some impact on her book's structure. Gide's successful renewal of the French narrative form and his open treatment of homosexuality guided Yourcenar in selecting her particular style and subject. She decided to write her second novel, *La Nouvelle Eurydice*, using the same literary form and theme, although here the male-male-female triangle takes on a greater importance than it had for *Alexis*, who was concerned solely with the freedom to love whomever he wanted. Unlike *Alexis*, who willingly and neatly assumed control of his existence, Stanislas, the cen-

tral character in the second novel, prefers the blurred monotony of a life endured.

Very different is *A Coin in Nine Hands*. The story, set in 1933 Rome, centers around the activities of a group of Italians plotting to assassinate the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini. Yourcenar describes the lives and dreams of the protagonists, whether they are involved in the conspiracy or not, in the sober manner of a seventeenth century tragedy. Indeed, the novel rigorously observes the classical rule of the three unities in action, place, and time. Through the device of a ten-lire coin passing from hand to hand the reader sees the action occurring in Rome within less than twenty-four hours.

Yourcenar portrays characters who live with the knowledge that they have lost their liberty, their vitality, their reassuring illusions. Too preoccupied to hide their own distress, too proud to act differently, they lock themselves behind solitary walls. The novel is a fascinating psychological puzzle whose pieces—the protagonists—can be considered from so many different angles the whole can never be fully assembled or understood. The characters become obscured by the complexity of their natures. Whether or not each recognizes it, the only true reality, the only permanence in an ephemeral world, is found in the unchanging nature of dreams.

*Coup de Grâce* shows the same purity of narration and the same density of style as *Alexis*. Eric, the first-person narrator, demands from life the ideal, even harsh, purity of love as well as courage and self-sacrifice. Whereas Alexis becomes gay out of veneration for women, Eric's preference is caused much less by a love for men than by his desire to remain alone and uncommitted. Like many of Yourcenar's heroes, he is unwilling to compromise with his emotions, often preferring the darker side of love to the blandness of mediocrity, and he sees in death a fitting end that is both a glorification and a promotion.

Yourcenar's drama has received less acclaim from critics and public than her fictional creations. Her drama uses traditional form, and she revives ancient times without the necessary modernization of characters and response to contemporary sensibility. Her plays, however, offer another dimension to her art and a more immediate, visual presentation of her philosophical concerns and her interpretation of the human condition.

Especially known for her fictional works, Yourcenar has written numerous essays as well, which deal with a range of topics reflecting her broad intellectual curiosity. These essays too show the same incisive mind and ease of style already evident in her creative endeavors and have helped to shape her worldview. Yourcenar's observations on different religious philosophies and her literary commentaries further illuminate understanding of her thought. Many of her essays have been republished in book form in France and are available in English translation.

## MEMOIRS OF HADRIAN

**First published:** *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, 1951  
(English translation, 1954; also as  
*Hadrian's Memoirs*, 1957)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Approaching death, the Roman emperor reminisces about the important events of his public and private life.*

Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* has often been called a historical novel, but strictly speaking it is not, since it rejects the use of local color, period dress, and period customs found, for example, in the works of Sir Walter Scott or Alexandre Dumas, père.

The novel is divided into six parts, with Latin titles taken from Hadrian's poetry, philosophical ideas, or coins minted during his reign, and describes different phases of the emperor's life. The narrative traces a slowly rising curve with its apex reached at the time of Hadrian's greatest happiness, the result of his passionate love and extraordinary successes. This euphoria is followed immediately by a downward slope, at the bottom of which the emperor is overcome with doubt and despair; however, despite this depression, he courageously embarks on a new beginning. The work is addressed to Marcus Aurelius in the form of a letter, which allows for the use of the autobiographical first person favored by Yourcenar as being closest to the human voice. Knowing that his death is near, Hadrian sets down, in his most truthful manner, at risk of shocking or not being understood, the important personal and public events of his sixty-odd

years, along with his meditations on politics, the arts, and the world.

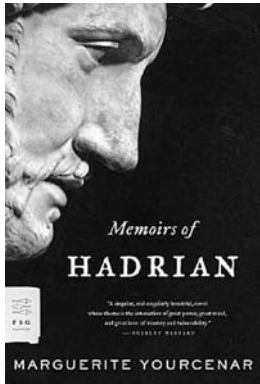
Yourcenar portrays a great historical figure who, thanks to his broad humanist education and inquiring intelligence, dominated his life and times with objectivity and lucidity. Hadrian, an art lover, poet, tireless traveler, general, economist, master builder, and political scientist, is a man who mis-

trusts conventional formulas and is more interested in observing than in judging. His generous nature leads him to improve the status of slaves, although he suspects that slavery will never be abolished, since other, more insidious forms of enslavement, just as inhuman, will simply take its place.

Acknowledging that his role is to impose Greek thought in all human en-

deavors, the emperor seeks to create a universe of perfect harmony and beauty under Rome's might and majesty. Violence and war represent for him the greatest evils, and peace and liberty the requirements necessary for civilization. Furthermore, the collaboration of intelligence and work in such a beneficial environment will bring happiness to all.

Although Yourcenar does not describe the past in the light of the present, she does show that the period of Hadrian's rule was very similar to her own time by portraying a highly sophisticated, complex, and skeptical emperor who reveals all the aspects of his political and emotional life. Hadrian characterizes himself partly through accounts of his actions, more often through analyses of his thoughts and feelings. Yourcenar's character fits so well with the known facts of the actual Hadrian, and is so subtly portrayed, the fictional persona takes on a reality that seems to explain the actual Hadrian. With a talent that gives the novelist precedence over the historian and the moralist, and the philosopher precedence over the novelist, Yourcenar brilliantly revived a conception of a man and a life at the end of a great civilization.



## THE ABYSS

**First published:** *L'Œuvre au noir*, 1968  
(English translation, 1976; also as *Zeno of Bruges*, 1994)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Obsessed with accumulating knowledge and endowed with free will, Zeno fears being entrapped by complacent ways of seeing and thinking.*

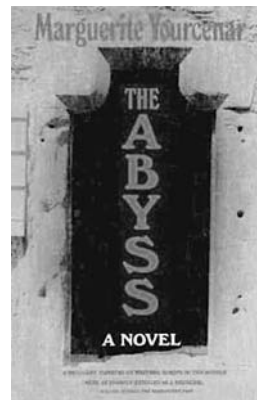
Like Yourcenar's previous works, *The Abyss* recreates an era, with its particular modes of thinking and being. The action occurs between 1510 and 1569 in Europe, mainly in the Belgian city of Bruges, and is divided into three parts, the first two echoing each other ("Wandering Life" and "Immobile Life") and the third ("The Prison") describing the site of the hero's last months and serving as a metaphor for his body and the world.

Zeno, whose name is the same as the Greek philosopher's and whose name is associated with "zero" and "no," learned ancient languages, natural sciences, and alchemy at a young age. He quickly real-

izes, however, that men and books lie. A universal man of the Renaissance, he invents a weaving machine, discusses the atoms of Epicurus and the proofs demonstrating God's existence, and refuses a priori the authority of scholars. He is interested in geology and botany, medicine and surgery, and astronomy and metallurgy.

After some thirty years of wandering under assumed names, one step

ahead of the Inquisition, he returns to Bruges, where he becomes a physician at a hospital run by Franciscans. The good and learned prior of the Franciscans and Zeno have daily conversations about religion and questions of faith as well as about the deteriorating situation in Flanders, repression of the patriots, and the torture and killing of Protestants and Catholics alike. Thus, the





prior's Christian wisdom complements Zeno's secular wisdom.

Arrested for his sympathy to the rebels' cause and for his blasphemous writings, Zeno defends himself before the tribunal, arguing about physiology and physics, rejecting unscientific hypotheses and conclusions. Ultimately, he is condemned because he instinctively knows that there can be no accommodation between those who seek truth and those who want to impose their viewpoints by force of will. Afraid to burn at the stake, Zeno chooses suicide. This suicide is more than a revolt against the Christian prohibition of the deed or the uniquely free act of an existential negator. By sacrificing his life, Zeno attains the supreme freedom offered by eternity.

Despite its French title, the novel is not concerned with the transformation of base metals but with the quest for knowledge devoid of falsehood, superstition, fear, and ignorance. This search for the absolute distinguishes Zeno from other scientists and makes him a universal man, lucid in his thinking and unwilling to accept fanaticism, whether philosophical, scientific, moral, or religious. More interested in negating so as better to reaffirm, he discovers that in addition to ridding himself of all prejudices and preconceptions, he must achieve a broadening of the self and of the understanding by which one becomes integrated into the universe.

In illustrating and analyzing her hero's difficult progress, Yourcenar shows that any seeker of truth defies established values and must be destroyed by defenders of the status quo. It is not surprising, then, that Zeno, when forced to choose, would much prefer death to life in the horror of the human condition.

## "AN OBSCURE MAN"

**First published:** "Un Homme obscur," 1982  
(collected in *Two Lives and a Dream*, 1987)

**Type of work:** Short story

*The protagonist, too sensitive for his time, slowly discovers that humanity is alone in a purposeless universe.*

Based on Yourcenar's earlier story, "D'après Rembrandt" (1934; after Rembrandt), "An Obscure Man," published in the collection *Comme l'eau qui coule* (1982; *Two Lives and a Dream*, 1987), describes the life and travels of Nathanaël. In the process he steepes himself in the classics, medieval tales, and plays by William Shakespeare while living the life dictated by his surroundings, whether in the relative refinement of Europe or the wilderness of the New World. In spite, or perhaps because, of his varied experiences in these settings, he only incompletely understands life, viewing existence in impressionistic fashion, as if his thought barely touches reality. Thus the author's recurrent theme of an absurd world in which human destiny is directed as much by chance as by free will emerges.

In Amsterdam, Nathanaël works in his uncle's print shop, where he continues his self-teaching by reading Greek and Roman texts. He compares the societies of Greece and Rome to his and sees with despair the religious, political, social, and economic injustice of his time. Although he fully embraces the grandeur of Christian principles, he rejects dogma and conventional religion as nonsense. Such conflicts between society's expectations and individual passions resurface repeatedly throughout Yourcenar's work, and they are resolved in large measure as a result of the strength of the protagonist's personality.

Nathanaël falls in love with, marries, and is soon rejected by Sarai, a honky-tonk singer and prostitute. Then, through a series of events, he finds himself as game warden for a wealthy philanthropist, sailing to his employer's island property. When he overhears that his wife has been hanged for stealing, he cries out her name, and then God's, repeatedly, with no answer. All alone, he becomes a thing



among things, merging with the night. Nathanaël now knows, regardless of the old philosopher's wish "to give at least the appearance of order to chaos," that God or the Self or Nothingness is not at the center of the universe, that ultimately all, including humankind, is guided not by design, but by accident, and that he will die soon like the other creatures around him.

Far from being the failure suggested by the title, Nathanaël succeeds, like the majority of Yourcenar's heroes, in imposing his own view of the world, in this case through conscious open-eyed acceptance of the Self. Thanks to his sensitivity, to his love for plants, trees, birds, and animals, to his gentleness, and to his refusal to act according to preconceptions or judgmental ideas, his life can be considered successful because he has evolved the peace of mind and acceptance of cosmic darkness

that others, powerful and weak alike, have been unable or unwilling to acquire.

## SUMMARY

During a 1968 interview with the noted French author Françoise Mallet-Joris, Marguerite Yourcenar declared, "I believe in the nobility of refusal." Indeed, all her protagonists rebel against moral or cultural limits and engage in deviant behavior or radical ideas, but they often find themselves unable to resolve the conflicts between society's demands and their passions as they seek either wisdom or truth. Marguerite Yourcenar is recognized for the loftiness of her thought, the breadth of her culture, and the humanity of her creations. Her works, while traditional in their style, are both elegant and contemporary.

Pierre L. Horn

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*Le Coup de grâce*, 1939 (*Coup de Grâce*, 1957)

*Mémoires d'Hadrien*, 1951 (*Memoirs of Hadrian*, 1954; also known as *Hadrian's Memoirs*, 1957)

*L'Œuvre au noir*, 1968 (*The Abyss*, 1976; also known as *Zeno of Bruges*, 1994)

*Anna, Soror . . .*, 1981

*Comme l'eau qui coule*, 1982 (3 novellas; includes *Anna, Soror . . .*, *Un Homme obscur*, and *Une Belle Matinée*; *Two Lives and a Dream*, 1987)

#### SHORT FICTION:

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*Nouvelles orientales*, 1938 (*Oriental Tales*, 1985)

"Conte bleu," "Le Premier Soir," "Maléfice," 1993 (*A Blue Tale, and Other Stories*, 1995)

#### POETRY:

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*Les Dieux ne sont pas morts*, 1922

*Feux*, 1936 (*Fires*, 1981)

*Les Charités d'Alcippe, et autres poèmes*, 1956 (*The Alms of Alcippe*, 1982)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Marguerite Yourcenar was educated both at home and in school. What evidence suggests that the homeschooling was more important?
- Does Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* intimate the decline of Western influence in the modern world?
- What were the main impediments for truth-seekers in Yourcenar's *The Abyss*?
- In "An Obscure Man" the protagonist learns that life is guided by accident. Can such a discovery be fulfilling or reconciliatory?
- Yourcenar lived more than half her life in the United States. What traces of American influence can be found in her writings?

DRAMA:

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*Rendre à César*, pb. 1961 (*Render unto Caesar*, 1984)  
*Qui n'a pas son Minotaure?*, pb. 1963 (*To Each His Minotaur*, 1984)  
*Le Mystère d'Alceste*, pb. 1963  
*Théâtre*, pb. 1971 (partial translation *Plays*, 1984)

NONFICTION:

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*Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur*, 1983 (*That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, 1988)  
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*Fleuve profond, sombre rivière: Les Negro Spirituals*, 1964 (of spirituals)  
*Présentation critique d'Hortense Flexner*, 1969 (of Flexner's poetry)  
*La Couronne et la lyre*, 1979 (selection of Greek poetry)  
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Library of Congress

## ÉMILE ZOLA

**Born:** Paris, France

April 2, 1840

**Died:** Paris, France

September 28, 1902

*Zola was the most important author of the naturalist school and an influence upon writers in Europe and the Americas.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Émile Zola (ZOH-luh) was born in Paris, France, on April 2, 1840, the son of a French mother, Émilie, and an Italian-born father, Francesco Zola, a civil engineer. When the senior Zola's canal project was approved by the government, he and his family moved in 1843 to Aix-en-Provence in southern France. Four years later, he died of pneumonia, leaving his widow and child in difficult circumstances. After grammar school, Zola entered secondary school in 1852, where, thanks to hard work, he became an excellent student, especially in French literature. It was then that he formed a lifelong friendship with Paul Cézanne, who was to become a great Impressionist painter. Taking long walks in the Provençal hills, the two companions talked of art and Romantic poetry, especially that of Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset.

As the family situation worsened, Mme Zola and her son were forced to return to Paris in the hope of obtaining assistance from her late husband's friends. In 1858, Zola enrolled at the Lycée Saint-Louis. The following year, perhaps because of a long illness, constant worries over the family's livelihood, and homesickness, he failed the qualifying *baccalauréat* examinations. Now living on his own in abject poverty, he began to write poems and stories while looking for a job and rereading the French classics. Hired in 1862 as shipping clerk at

Hachette, a publishing house, Zola ultimately rose to head its advertising department. There, the owner advised him to abandon poetry and devote himself to prose instead.

Outside his working hours, Zola continued to read, from the novelists of his generation (Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, the Goncourt brothers) to the theoretical writings of Hippolyte Taine and Claude Bernard. In 1864, he published his first book, *Contes à Ninon* (*Stories for Ninon*, 1895), a collection that already sketches certain favorite themes and images. At the same time, newspapers published his literary and artistic reviews, many of which were gathered in a volume entitled *Mes haines* (1866; *My Hates*, 1893).

Financially more secure, Zola left Hachette in early 1866 and became a freelance book and art critic for a number of important newspapers. It was in their pages that he eloquently defended the paintings of Édouard Manet and the Impressionists against tradition-bound academicians. He continued to explore human relations in novels such as *Thérèse Raquin* (1867; English translation, 1881) and *Madeleine Féral* (1868; English translation, 1880).

Shortly after the publication of *Madeleine Féral*, Zola signed a contract for *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893; *The Rougon-Macquarts*, 1896-1900), a twenty-volume sequence novel depicting the "natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire." The first novel, *La Fortune des Rougon* (1871; *The Rougon-Macquart Family*, 1879), appeared in 1871 and received a warm accolade from Flaubert. Thereafter, a new volume would appear almost every year until 1893, when *Le Docteur Pascal*

(1893; *Doctor Pascal*, 1893) brought the saga to its conclusion. Zola also wrote political and literary articles, plays, and short stories. In 1870 he married Gabrielle Meley, whom he had known since 1863, and established close friendships with writers such as Ivan Turgenev, Guy de Maupassant, and Joris-Karl Huysmans.

The year 1877 was important in Zola's career, for it brought him the triumph of *L'Assommoir* (English translation, 1879), the money to purchase a country home in Médan, near Paris, and a reputation as one of the great novelists of the nineteenth century. The publication of *L'Assommoir*, however, met with much scandal. The sordid story of one family's steady descent into poverty and alcoholism prompted many critics to call for Zola to be tried as a criminal. The government did pull the novel from book stalls in railroad stations, but such actions only spurred the sales of the novel, which sold 16,000 copies in one month, and secured Zola's reputation. Fellow writers like Gustave Flaubert and Anatole France praised the book as powerful and significant, hailing Zola's work as groundbreaking and truly original. In response to the controversy surrounding the book, Zola added a preface to the novel that defended its subject and announced some of the principles of his naturalistic style.

Three years later, *Nana* (1880; English translation, 1880) was even more successful, in part because of its scandalous subject; it was followed by *Germinal* (1885; English translation, 1885), the thirteenth novel in the series, considered by most critics as his masterpiece. In addition, he exposed his naturalist ideas in nonfictional essays: *Le Roman expérimental* (1880; *The Experimental Novel*, 1893), *Les Romanciers naturalistes* (1881; *The Naturalist Novel*, 1964), and *Le Naturalisme au théâtre* (1881; *Naturalism on the Stage*, 1893). These ideas were being strongly challenged by the summer of 1887, although that same year André Antoine still applied them in his Théâtre Libre productions.

As soon as Zola had completed his magnum opus, he composed *Les Trois Villes* (1894-1898; *The Three Cities*, 1894-1898), a trilogy of lesser merit, while increasingly concerning himself with social and political questions. He became involved in the case of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had been unjustly condemned for treason in 1894 and on whose behalf Zola waged a newspaper campaign,

culminating in the eloquent—even provocative—open letter published in the January 13, 1898, issue of *L'Aurore* under the title “J'accuse . . . !” (“I Accuse . . . !,” 1898).

Sentenced to a heavy fine and a year in prison for this article, Zola fled to England to continue his fight. Returning to Paris in June, 1899, where he saw Dreyfus pardoned by President Émile-François Loubet (full exoneration did not come until 1906), he supervised the publication of the first volume of *Les Quatre Évangiles* (1899-1903; *The Four Evangelists*, 1900-1903). He had planned to write a fourth volume on justice.

On September 28, 1902, Zola died at his Paris apartment of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a defective chimney, leaving behind his wife, a daughter (Denise), and a son (Jacques), both born of his affair with Jeanne Rozerot. Six years after a public funeral attended by some fifty thousand people, his remains were transferred to the Pantheon and placed near those of Victor Hugo, another great defender of the innocent and the downtrodden.

## ANALYSIS

Zola viewed his century as predominantly scientific and saw literature as the best means of observing and studying human forces at work, although he never completely rejected his early Romantic writings. He had been influenced not only by Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (1865; *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, 1927), which dealt with biological determinism and the pathological functioning of the organism, but also by the questionable principles propounded by Prosper Lucas and Jules Michelet regarding hereditary laws. By placing his theory of human conduct in a scientific context, he showed himself to be much more interested in physiology than in character analysis. Indeed, at a congress held in 1866, Zola declared, “The novel is a treatise of moral anatomy, a compilation of human facts, an experimental philosophy of the passions. Its object is . . . to portray mankind and nature as they really are.”

In the plan submitted to his publisher in 1869 concerning the writing of *The Rougon-Macquarts*, Zola expressed his desire to demonstrate the reciprocal effect of the environment on various family members, with their special temperaments and ge-

netic baggage, during a particular and well-delineated historical period. The lives of the descendants of these two families united by marriage are crammed into the almost twenty years that constitute Emperor Napoleon III's reign. All suffer to a greater or lesser extent from the original "lesion" passed to future generations by Adélaïde Rougon, the matriarch. (A complete genealogy was later included.)

Fortunately, by manipulating outside influences, Zola makes it possible to escape one's environment as well as, through innateness, one's heredity. Despair would prevail otherwise, since no redemption could be envisioned. Despite the conclusion reached by the 105-year-old Adélaïde that she has raised a pack of wolves, the last volume (*Doctor Pascal*) reveals a glimpse of hope in an infant's arm lifted "very straight, like a flag summoning life."

In addition, Zola wished to present protagonists in different personal or professional situations, such as the unchecked greed of *La Curée* (1872; *The Rush for the Spoil*, 1886); the ravages of alcoholism in *L'Assommoir*; the world of politics in *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* (1876; *Clorinda: Or, The Rise and Reign of His Excellency Eugène Rougon*, 1880); the world of art in *L'Œuvre* (1886; *His Masterpiece*, 1886); or the field of high finance in *L'Argent* (1891; *Money*, 1891). To achieve his goal, Zola read books and archives on the subjects at hand, consulted experts and practitioners, and even made on-site inspections, as in the case of his tour of the coal district in northern France and his descent into an actual mine pit in preparation for *Germinal*. In his notes, along with general and chapter outlines, he mentioned the cast of characters with their outstanding features and, if belonging to the central family, their hereditary traits.

Such detailed research does not lead, however, to an uninspired, quasi-mechanical presentation of facts and actions that reads like the objective, scientific texts he admired and used; on the contrary, many of the series' novels were defined by Zola himself as "poems," such as "the poem of modern activity" (*Au bonheur des dames*, 1883; *The Ladies' Paradise*, 1883) or "the living poem of the land" (*La*

*Terre*, 1887; *The Soil*, 1888). This means that the accumulated documentation often served to fulfill and corroborate an idea already conceived in his mind or to elaborate it. Besides, he remained fundamentally a poet and an artist. That he proved again and again when he described lush or barren landscapes, gigantic crowds in motion, and singular objects endowed with awesome anthropomorphic, even mythic, qualities, be it a locomotive, a greenhouse, or a still.

Sex, too, is an important, omnipresent theme in Zola. Indeed, his contemporaries constantly criticized him not only for his apparent pandering to humanity's prurient instincts but also for removing all sentimental connotations from the sex act. His response was always that nothing natural or human can be excluded from a naturalistic work, that the dichotomy between nature and morality is an unscientific—hence, unacceptable—premise, and that desire is as much a part of a human being as other physiological drives.

As was already evident in Zola's early fiction, his vision of the world was basically dark, and the more he observed and dissected human behavior the more pessimistic he became. Yet at the same time he was fascinated by his characters' pleasure-seeking selfishness and corruption, perhaps because he considered vice more interesting than virtue (to paraphrase Honoré de Balzac). This fascination explains why so many of his heroes and heroines are, first, embodiments of depravity who may ultimately be punished with death or madness but who remain unrepentant nonetheless. Second, they symbolize the complete rottenness at the core of France in the 1850's and 1860's in general and the very evil of the emperor's regime in particular, on which they are sometimes able to take a sweet revenge (such as in *Nana*). Smartly avoiding the pitfalls of moralistic preaching, Zola conveyed to his readers the warning that capitalism was being undermined by greed and poverty and that the people would, in the end, rise up in just revolt; he was thereby echoing the socialistic doctrines of Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Karl Marx.



## THÉRÈSE RAQUIN

**First published:** 1867 (English translation, 1881)

**Type of work:** Novel

*After murdering her husband, Thérèse and her lover are tormented by their consciences and driven to suicide.*

*Thérèse Raquin* is a gruesome fictional implementation of the scientific theories that influenced Zola. Allying himself with “the group of naturalist writers” (his first mention of the term), he declared in the preface to the second edition (1868) that, much as a surgeon would dissect a corpse, he would attempt the objective study of two different temperaments brought together by circumstances. This novel is also a very good horror story in the vein of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Mme Raquin is aunt to the orphaned Thérèse and has reared her along with her own son, Camille. Even though they are not particularly suited for each other, for the young girl is sensual and vibrant and her cousin frail and weak, they nevertheless marry. The three characters then move to a seedy Parisian neighborhood, where mother and daughter-in-law open a dry goods shop and Camille becomes a railroad clerk. Life is so monotonous and marriage so boring that, when one night Camille brings home a colleague from the office, Thérèse finds herself “thrilled” by the newcomer’s robust physical animality.

The lusty Laurent and the unsatisfied Thérèse are soon involved in a highly charged affair. Wanting to be free of Camille (divorce is impossible) and unable to control their sexual needs, they drown him in an apparent boating accident, but not before he bites Laurent’s neck and leaves an indelible scar not unlike the mark of Cain. That at times Thérèse fantasizes about tearing it off with her teeth, so as to diminish her disgust and reach a new level of erotic pleasure, is indicative of a certain sadistic cruelty. In their increasingly unstable and guilty minds, the family cat seems to glare at the two murderers with a suspicious eye, while the victim’s ghost now lies between them in bed and prohibits their usually passionate sex and their sleep.

Close to a nervous breakdown, horrified by their remorse, and feverish from abstinence, Thérèse and Laurent can consider but one recourse: They take poison and at last find some consolation in their double death, although in Thérèse’s fall her mouth hits Laurent’s stigmatic scar. Paradoxically, this conclusion shows that far from being mere physiological temperaments, the two lovers made concrete moral—if wrong—choices by deciding how they would live in reaction to their nature; moreover, it shows that there is a moral law after all, in spite of Zola’s professed adherence to the axiom of Hippolyte Taine (“Vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar”), which he uses as an epigraph to the novel.

## GERMINAL

**First published:** 1885 (English translation, 1885)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Coal miners strike unsuccessfully for better pay and better working conditions but will someday overcome their harsh situations.*

*Germinal* takes its title, first, from the Revolutionary calendar’s spring event of 12 Germinal 1795, when the starving populace invaded the National Assembly and demanded bread. Similarly, the miners and their womenfolk act accordingly in one of the novel’s most famous and most stirring passages (part 5, chapter 5). Second, by continuing nature’s cycle, spring is also symbolic of rebirth and fecundity after months of sterility and death.

Dismissed from his position as a mechanic because of his socialistic ideas, Étienne Lantier (of the Macquart line) arrives in the bleak March landscape of the coal-mining district to start work in the pits, despite his lack of underground experience. Zola masterfully uses Étienne’s naïveté regarding his new milieu to educate him and the reader about this forsaken world and people. Since their wages are so low, the miners, regardless of age or gender, have traditionally eked out a miserable existence. Now, however, because of overproduction and the subsequent drop in coal prices, the company wants to impose an even lower tonnage fee. Lantier convinces his coworkers to strike rather

than capitulate as they have often done in the past. For its part, the company expects to crush the strike through hunger.

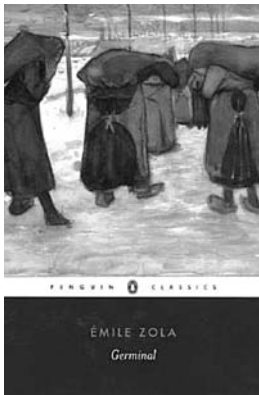
When violence and sabotage occur, the army arrives to restore order, resulting in numerous deaths and acts of revenge. The food provider Maigrat is savagely mutilated, a soldier is murdered by a young boy, and the mine installation is flooded by a Russian anarchist, thus causing additional fatalities. In the end, vanquished by the repressive government forces and by starvation, the miners return to work, while Lantier leaves to militate on behalf of social justice.

Though obviously on the miners' side, Zola does not portray either the miners or their bosses in black-and-white terms. The workers, limited by their environment and devoid of free will, are reduced to the level of animals in their constant search for food. The Grégoires are a local stockholding family who show charitable impulses toward the miners but are ultimately too insensitive to wish to improve their plight; their young daughter, who becomes a symbol of capitalism, will later be cruelly stripped and strangled. Hennebeau, the resident manager, is as much a tool

and prisoner of the company as the workers. Zola mythicizes the mine pit into a voracious monster, aptly named "le Voreux," feeding on human flesh; even when flooded, the mine soon returns to its normal state in expectant ambush for the next cargo of miners.

Failure and death aside, the novel closes optimistically, under the glorious

April sun. Étienne now hears the hammering sounds of his comrades underground and imagines, in a suffusing prophecy of resurrection, that an "avenging army was slowly germinating in the furrows, sprouting for the harvests of the coming century. And soon this germination would sunder the earth." The promise of the title has been fully realized.



## L'ASSOMMOIR

**First published:** 1877 (English translation, 1879; also as *The Dram-Shop*, 1897)

**Type of work:** Novel

*Gervaise Macquart struggles to find happiness in working-class Paris, and for a fleeting moment she finds it, only to have it torn away from her by the greed of her husband and by the unforgiving circumstances of her environment.*

In *L'Assommoir*, Auguste Lantier brings his wife, Gervaise, and two young sons, Claude and Étienne, from the country to a working-class neighborhood in Paris. Almost as soon as they arrive in the city, the couple quarrels, and the indolent Lantier leaves Gervaise for another woman, abandoning them in a squalid hotel with wretched and greasy furniture. With few friends, Gervaise must make her way on the streets of Paris, where she finally takes a low-paying job as a laundress in a neighborhood laundry.

Gervaise's future looks hopeless until she meets and marries Coupeau, a zinc worker with whom she has a daughter, Nana. The lazy and greedy Coupeau turns out to be little better than Lantier, for he gambles constantly, often stealing money from Gervaise to pay his debts.

In spite of these obstacles, Gervaise is able to save enough money to open her own laundry and achieve some measure of prosperity. Neighborhood women begin to look up to her, and suddenly it appears that she and her family will be able to survive with some measure of dignity and wealth in Paris.

Gervaise's momentary happiness comes crashing down around her when Coupeau falls off a roof, injuring himself so badly that he cannot work again. Thus begins his life of idleness and alcoholism. He begins to frequent the bar—*L'Assommoir*—that lends this novel its title. At the center of the bar stands a gigantic still, a powerful and inhuman machine that sucks life from those around it. Coupeau cannot control the attraction the machine has over him, and he succumbs to a life of alcoholism, spending Gervaise's every penny she earns at her laundry.

The family's fall into abject poverty begins when Lantier returns to lodge with them. His and Coupeau's indolence and their inability to control their desire for alcohol destroy the family. Nana becomes a prostitute (and the leading character of her own novel, *Nana*, published in 1880), getting caught up in a web of debauchery on the streets of Paris. Alcohol kills Coupeau, and Gervaise dies of hunger in more desperate and squalid circumstances than when she first arrived in Paris.

Trapped in a bourgeois city that demands that commercial transactions become the center of life, Gervaise and her family are soon caught up in the feverish desire to make money and lead a life of wealth. Their inability to meet such demands leads to their downfall.

In *L'Assommoir*, the packed working-class slums, the pulsing still, and even the greasy, steamy laundries determine the fates of their inhabitants. As hard as Gervaise works to pull herself out of poverty, the labyrinthine streets of her neighborhood trap her in their web, squeezing the life out of her and her family. This environment eventually defeats her will, even though for a short time her physical will seems strong enough to defeat the forces that drain the life from her. The increasing industrialization that creates the alcohol still, the urban slum, and the proletariat poison simple relationships, leading to death, debauchery, and degradation.

*L'Assommoir* was sensational when it was first published because Zola wanted to present a simple moral lesson about the nature of life. No matter how strong and good Gervaise was, she could never overcome the forces of the slums or the evils imposed on workers forced to live in the working-class neighborhoods by the middle classes that kept them in poverty, paying them low wages for simple tasks like doing laundry.

Zola's novel, with its focus on the evils of money, the mechanistic power of the urban landscape, and the determinism of environment, provides the model for many other naturalist novels, most nota-

bly Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900).

## LA BÊTE HUMAINE

**First published:** 1890 (English translation, 1890; also as *The Human Brutes*, 1890, and *The Human Beast*, 1891)

**Type of work:** Novel

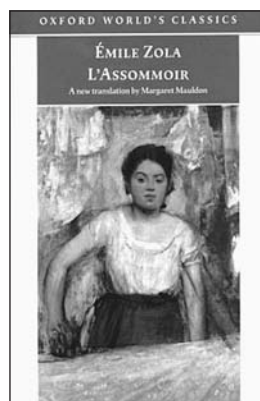
*Greed, selfishness, lust, and jealousy motivate all of the characters in this novel that attacks both the rapid industrialization of France and the country's corrupt legal system.*

In contrast to many of Zola's other novels, *La Bête humaine* focuses on the darkness of the human soul and the evil deeds which proceed from it rather than the determinism of environment. Much like his other novels, though, *La Bête humaine* does center on the energy of an inhuman machine—in this case, a locomotive—that exacerbates the dark desires of the human soul.

When Zola was planning to write this novel, he had two ideas. First, he wanted to write a carefully observed portrait of railroad life. Second, he wanted to write a novel depicting the corruption of the legal and judicial system in late nineteenth century France. These two ideas merged when he began to contemplate the heart of darkness in Jacques Lantier, a railroad employee whose sexual passion borders on lust for killing.

Lantier, whom Zola contrived to make the orphan son of Gervaise Macquart and Auguste Lantier, is an engineer on the Paris-Le Havre line. He is so consumed by his locomotive that he treats it like a lover, tenderly driving her on the difficult portions of his route and being sure she is well taken care of before he leaves his shift. Lantier fears women, however, because the wild beast that lurks within him manifests itself in a desire for murder in the place of a desire for sex. He attributes this murderous desire to hereditary madness, and he literally runs away from possible sexual liaisons before he commits a deadly act.

His fortunes change when he witnesses the murder one evening of Grandmorin, the president of the railroad. Although he does not see clearly the people involved, another railroad employee, Rou-



baud, and his wife, Séverine, become the prime suspects in the case. Roubaud is indeed the killer, having murdered Grandmorin in a fit of jealousy over the president's love affair with Séverine. When Roubaud, Jacques, and Séverine are called into the courts, Jacques and Séverine fall in love, and he does what he can to protect her. They begin an illicit affair, and for the first time Jacques is consumed only with sexual passion and not murderous desire. He believes he is cured until she begins to describe lustfully Grandmorin's murder in great detail. His murderous desire returns, so they plan to kill Roubaud. At the last moment, in a fit of murderous rage, Jacques kills Séverine instead. Although Jacques is called up by lawyers for questioning in the death, he avoids suspicion. However, he cannot escape punishment for long, for he dies a gruesome death as he falls from a speeding locomotive during a fight.

However, Lantier is not the only character with a corrupt soul in the novel. Almost every character in *La Bête humaine* is driven by lust, greed, or jealousy to acts of robbery, murder, or betrayal. Another railway worker, Misard (whose name symbolizes "miserly")—a switchman on Jacques's route—is slowly poisoning Aunt Phasie, Jacques's own foster mother, because Misard believes she has a fortune hidden somewhere in the house. Roubaud kills Grandmorin out of jealousy. All of the lawyers in the novel attempt to pin the murder of Grandmorin on a vagrant, even though all of their

evidence convinces them of Roubaud's guilt. Even Séverine lusts for the death of her husband, Roubaud.

In *La Bête humaine*, Zola demonstrates that the human soul is overwhelmingly consumed with the desire for love and death.

## SUMMARY

Émile Zola is the father of naturalism, a literary style that holds up a mirror to the gritty elements of life, presenting them in great detail. Zola carries the realism of Gustave Flaubert—who challenged Romanticism in his realistic depictions of the detailed depictions of characters' lives—one step further by focusing on the sordid details of the sex lives, the political lives, and the working lives of men and women in late nineteenth century Paris. Zola's novels follow the fortunes of the wretched of the earth, those who have been trodden down by economic and social forces of urban life. The lives of Zola's characters are determined by forces beyond their control, such as heredity and environment, and his novels are tracts condemning the squalor in which these characters live. *The Rougon-Macquart Novels* represent Zola's greatest statement about the nature of humankind and society, as well as his most urgent call for reform of a society consumed with the desire for wealth at the expense of its poorest citizens.

Pierre L. Horn; updated by Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.

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## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Émile Zola is often called the “father of naturalism.” What is naturalism, and what principles can you discern from reading novels such as *Germinal*, *L'Assommoir*, and *Nana*?
- Zola was a good friend of the Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne and was himself an artist. In what ways can Zola's novels be described as “painterly”? That is, are there scenes in the novels that he creates so that you can almost see it on a canvas?
- Discuss the ways in which Karl Marx's theories of economics—such as the conflict between the working classes (proletariat) and the middle classes (bourgeois)—can be seen in Zola's novels. Can any of the principles of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory or Herbert Spencer's “social Darwinism” be found in Zola's novels? Provide some examples of these ideas from *Germinal*, *Nana*, or *The Bonheur des Dames*.
- Some critics have said that Zola's novels prepared the way for French cinema. In what ways are Zola's novels cinematic in nature? How are they like films? What characteristics of his novels lend themselves to the cinematic?
- What can we learn about French history from Zola's novels?
- Can we ever feel sorry for any of Zola's characters? Do we have empathy for them or do we not sympathize with them at all? Is there anything they can do to change their situations?
- Do the societies that Zola depicts make us long for a utopia (a perfect world)?



## Émile Zola

### DRAMA:

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*Thérèse Raquin*, pr., pb. 1873 (adaptation of his novel; English translation, 1947)  
*Les Héritiers Rabourdin*, pr., pb. 1874 (*The Rabourdin Heirs*, 1893)  
*Le Bouton de rose*, pr., pb. 1878  
*Théâtre*, pb. 1878  
*Renée*, pr., pb. 1887 (adaptation of his novel *La Curée*)  
*Lazare*, wr. 1893, pb. 1921 (libretto; music by Alfred Bruneau)  
*Violaïne la chevelue*, wr. 1897, pb. 1921  
*L'Ouragan*, pr., pb. 1901 (libretto; music by Bruneau)  
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# APPENDIXES



## GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

**Aesthetics:** The branch of philosophy that studies the beautiful in nature and art, including how beauty is recognized in a work of art and how people respond to it. In literature, the aesthetic approach can be distinguished from the moral or utilitarian approach; it was most fully embodied in the movement known as aestheticism in the late nineteenth century.

**Alienation:** The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht developed the theory of alienation in his epic theater. Brecht sought to create an audience that was intellectually alert rather than emotionally involved in a play by using alienating techniques such as minimizing the illusion of reality onstage and interrupting the action with songs and visual aids.

**Allegory:** A literary mode in which characters in a narrative personify abstract ideas or qualities and so give a second level of meaning to the work, in addition to the surface narrative. Two famous examples of allegory are Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). For modern examples, see the stories and novels of Franz Kafka.

**Alliteration:** A poetic technique in which consonant repetition is focused at the beginning of syllables, as in "Large mannered motions of his mythy mind." Alliteration is used when the poet wishes to focus on the details of a sequence of words and to show the relationships between words in a line.

**Angry young men:** The term used to describe a group of English novelists and playwrights in the 1950's and 1960's, whose work stridently attacked what it saw as the outmoded political and social structures (particularly the class structure) of post-World War II Britain. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (pr. 1956, pb. 1957) and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) are typical examples.

**Angst:** A pervasive feeling of anxiety and depression often associated with the moral and spiritual uncertainties of the twentieth century, as

expressed in the existentialism of writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

**Antagonist:** A character in fiction who stands in opposition or rivalry to the protagonist. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603), for example, King Claudius is the antagonist of Hamlet.

**Anthropomorphism:** The ascription of human characteristics and feelings to animals, inanimate objects, or gods. The gods of Homer's epics are anthropomorphic, for example. Anthropomorphism occurs in beast fables, such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). The term "pathetic fallacy" carries the same meaning: Natural objects are invested with human feelings. *See also* Pathetic fallacy.

**Antihero:** A modern fictional figure who tries to define himself and establish his or her own codes, or a protagonist who simply lacks traditional heroic qualities, such as Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954).

**Aphorism:** A short, concise statement that states an opinion, precept, or general truth, such as Alexander Pope's "Hope springs eternal in the human breast."

**Apostrophe:** A direct address to a person (usually absent), inanimate entity, or abstract quality.

**Archetype:** The term was used by psychologist Carl Jung to describe what he called "primordial images" that exist in the "collective unconscious" of humankind and are manifested in myths, religion, literature, and dreams. Now used broadly in literary criticism to refer to character types, motifs, images, symbols, and plot patterns recurring in many different literary forms and works. The embodiment of archetypes in a work of literature can make a powerful impression on the reader.

**Aristotelian unities:** A set of rules for proper dramatic construction formulated by Italian and French critics during the Renaissance, purported to be derived from the *De poetica* (c. 334-323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705) of Aristotle. According to the "three unities," a play should have no

scenes irrelevant to the main action, should not cover a period of more than twenty-four hours, and should not occur in more than one place or locale. In fact, Aristotle insists only on unity of action in a tragedy.

**Assonance:** A term for the association of words with identical vowel sounds but different consonants: “stars,” “arms,” and “park,” for example, all contain identical *a* (and *ar*) sounds.

**Auto sacramental:** A Renaissance development of the medieval open-air Corpus Christi pageant in Spain. A dramatic, allegorical depiction of a sinful soul wavering and transgressing until the intervention of Divine Grace restores order. During a period of prohibition of all secular drama in Spain, from 1598 to 1600, even Lope de Vega Carpio adopted this form.

**Autobiography:** A form of nonfiction writing in which the author narrates events of his or her own life. Autobiography differs from memoir in that the latter focuses on prominent people the author has known and great events that he or she has witnessed, rather than on his or her own life.

**Ballad:** Popular ballads are songs or verse that tell dramatic, usually impersonal, tales. Supernatural events, courage, and love are frequent themes, but any experience that appeals to ordinary people is acceptable material. Literary ballads—narrative poems based on the popular ballads—have frequently been in vogue in English literature, particularly during the Romantic period. One of the most famous is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798).

**Baroque:** The term was first used in the eighteenth century to describe an elaborate and grandiose type of architecture. It is now also used to refer to certain stylistic features of Metaphysical poetry, particularly the poetry of Richard Crashaw. The term can also refer to post-Renaissance literature, 1580-1680.

**Bildungsroman:** Sometimes called the “novel of education” or “apprenticeship novel,” the bildungsroman focuses on the growth of a young protagonist who is learning about the world and finding his or her place in life; a typical example is James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (serial, 1914-1915; book, 1916).

**Blank verse:** A term for unrhymed iambic pentameter, blank verse first appeared in drama in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville’s *Gorboduc*, performed in 1561, and later became the standard form of Elizabethan drama. It has also commonly been used in long narrative or philosophical poems, such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674).

**Bourgeois novel:** A novel in which the values, the preoccupations, and the accoutrements of middle-class or bourgeois life are given particular prominence. The heyday of the genre was the nineteenth century, when novelists as varied as Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, and Anthony Trollope both criticized and unreflectingly transmitted the assumptions of the rising middle class.

**Burlesque:** A work that, by imitating attitudes, styles, institutions, and people, aims to amuse. Burlesque differs from satire in that it aims to ridicule simply for the sake of amusement rather than for political or social change.

**Capa y espada:** Spanish for “cloak and sword,” a term referring to the Spanish theater of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dealing with love and intrigue among the aristocracy. The greatest practitioners were Lope de Vega Carpio and Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The term *comedia de ingenio* is also used.

**Catharsis:** A term from Aristotle’s *De poetica* (c. 334-323 B.C.E.; *Poetics*, 1705) referring to the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear in the spectator aroused by the actions of the tragic hero. The meaning and the operation of the concept have been a source of great, and unresolved, critical debate.

**Celtic romance:** Gaelic Celts invaded Ireland in about 350 B.C.E.; their epic stories and romances date from this period until about A.D. 450. The romances are marked by a strong sense of the Otherworld and of supernatural happenings. The Celtic romance tradition influenced the poetry of William Butler Yeats.

**Celtic Twilight:** Sometimes used synonymously with the term Irish Renaissance, which was a movement beginning in the late nineteenth century that attempted to build a national literature by drawing on Ireland’s literary and cultural history. The term, however, which is taken



from a book by William Butler Yeats titled *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), sometimes has a negative connotation. It is used to refer to some early volumes by Yeats, which have been called self-indulgent. The poet Algernon Charles Swinburne said that the Celtic Twilight manner “puts fever and fancy in the place of reason and imagination.”

**Chamber plays:** Refers to four plays written in 1907 by the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg. The plays are modeled on the form of chamber music, consisting of motif and variations, to evoke a mood or atmosphere (in these cases, a very somber one). There is no protagonist but a small group of equally important characters.

**Character:** A personage appearing in any literary or dramatic work. Characters can be presented with the depth and complexity of real people (sometimes called “round” characters) or as stylized functions of the plot (“flat” characters).

**Chorus:** Originally a group of singers and dancers in religious festivals, the chorus evolved into the dramatic element that reflected the opinions of the masses or commented on the action in Greek drama. In its most developed form, the chorus consisted of fifteen members: seven reciting the strophe, seven reciting the antistrophe, and the leader interacting with the actors. The chorus has been used in all periods of drama, including the modern period.

**Classicism:** A literary stance or value system consciously based on the example of classical Greek and Roman literature. While the term is applied to an enormous diversity of artists in many different periods and in many different national literatures, it generally denotes a cluster of values including formal discipline, restrained expression, reverence of tradition, and an objective, rather than subjective, orientation. Often contrasted with Romanticism. *See also* Romanticism.

**Comédie-Française:** The first state theater of France, composed of the company of actors established by Molière in 1658. The company took the name Comédie-Française in 1680. Today, it is officially known as the Théâtre Français (Salle Richelieu).

**Comedy:** Generally, a lighter form of drama (as contrasted with tragedy) that aims chiefly to amuse and ends happily. The comic effect typi-

cally arises from the recognition of some incongruity of speech, action, or character development. The comic range extends from coarse, physical humor (called low comedy) to a more subtle, intellectual humor (called high comedy).

**Comedy of manners:** A form of comedy that arose during the seventeenth century, dealing with the intrigues (particularly the amorous intrigues) of sophisticated, witty members of the upper classes. The appeal of these plays is primarily intellectual, depending on quick-witted dialogue and clever language. For examples, see the plays of Restoration dramatists William Congreve, Sir George Etherege, and William Wycherley. *See also* Restoration comedy/drama.

**Commedia dell'arte:** Dramatic comedy performed by troupes of professional actors that became popular in the mid-sixteenth century in Italy. The troupes were rather small, consisting of perhaps a dozen actors who performed stock roles in mask and improvised on skeletal scenarios. The tradition of the *commedia*, or masked comedy, was influential into the seventeenth century and still exerts some influence.

**Conceit:** A type of metaphor, the conceit is used for comparisons that are highly intellectualized. When T. S. Eliot, for example, says that winding streets are like a tedious argument of insidious intent, there is no clear connection between the two, so the reader must apply abstract logic to fill in the missing links.

**Conversation poem:** Conversation poems are chiefly associated with the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. These poems all display a relaxed, informal style, quiet settings, and a circular structure—the poem returns to where it began, after an intervening meditation has yielded some insight into the speaker’s situation.

**Cubism:** A term borrowed from Cubist painters. In literature, cubism is a style of poetry, such as that of E. E. Cummings, Kenneth Rexroth, and Archibald MacLeish, which first fragments an experience, then rearranges its elements into some new artistic entity.

**Dactyl:** The dactylic foot, or dactyl, is formed of a stress followed by two unstressed syllables, as in the words “Washington” and “manikin.” “After the pangs of a desperate lover” is an example of a dactylic line.

**Dadaism:** Dadaism arose in France during World War I as a radical protest in art and literature against traditional institutions and values. Part of its strategy was the use of infantile, nonsensical language. After World War I, when Dadaism was combined with the ideas of Sigmund Freud, it gave rise to the Surrealist movement.

**Decadence:** The period of decline that heralds the ending of a great age. The period in English dramatic history immediately following William Shakespeare is said to be decadent, and the term “Decadents” is applied to a group of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century writers who searched for new literary and artistic forms as the Victorian Age came to a close.

**Detective story:** The “classic” detective story (or “mystery”) is a highly formalized and logically structured mode of fiction in which the focus is on a crime solved by a detective through interpretation of evidence and clever reasoning. Many modern practitioners of the genre, however, such as Raymond Chandler, Patricia Highsmith, and Ross Macdonald, have placed less emphasis on the puzzlelike qualities of the detective story and have focused instead on characterization, theme, and other elements of mainstream fiction. The form was first developed in short fiction by Edgar Allan Poe; Jorge Luis Borges has also used the convention in short stories.

**Dialectic:** A philosophical term meaning the art of examining opinions or ideas logically. The dialectic method of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx was based on a contradiction of opposites (thesis and antithesis) and their resolution (synthesis). In literary criticism, the term has sometimes been used by Marxist critics to refer to the structure and dynamics of a literary work in its sociological context.

**Dialogue:** Speech exchanged between characters, or even, in a looser sense, the thoughts of a single character. Dialogue serves to characterize, to further the plot, to establish conflict, and to express thematic ideas.

**Doppelgänger:** A double or counterpart of a person, sometimes endowed with ghostly qualities. A fictional doppelgänger often reflects a suppressed side of his or her personality, as in Fyodor Dostoevski’s novella *Dvoynik* (1846; *The Double*, 1917) and the short stories of E. T. A.

Hoffmann. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jorge Luis Borges, among other modern writers, have also employed the doppelgänger with striking effect.

**Drama:** Generally speaking, any work designed to be represented on a stage by actors (Aristotle defined drama as “the imitation of an action”). More specifically, the term has come to signify a play of a serious nature and intent that may end either happily (comedy) or unhappily (tragedy).

**Dramatic irony:** A situation in a play or a narrative in which the audience knows something that the character does not. The irony lies in the different meaning that the character’s words or actions have for himself or herself and for the audience. A common device in classical Greek drama. Sophocles’ *Oidipous Tyrannos* (429 B.C.E.; *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 1715) is an example of extended dramatic irony.

**Dramatic monologue:** In dramatic monologue, the narrator addresses a persona who never speaks but whose presence greatly influences what the narrator tells the reader. The principal reason for writing in dramatic monologue is to control the speech of the major persona by the implied reaction of the silent one. The effect is one of continuing change and often surprise. The technique is especially useful for revealing characters slowly and for involving the reader as another silent participant.

**Dramatic verse:** Poetry that employs dramatic form or technique, such as dialogue or conflict, to achieve its effects. The term is used to refer to dramatic monologue, drama written in verse, and closet dramas.

**Dramatis personae:** The characters in a play. Often, a printed listing defining the characters and specifying their relationships.

**Dream vision:** An allegorical form common in the Middle Ages, in which the narrator or a character falls asleep and dreams a dream that becomes the actual framed story.

**Dystopian/utopian novel:** A dystopian novel takes some existing trend or theory in present-day society and extends it into a fictional world of the future, where the trend has become more fully manifested, with unpleasant results. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) is an example. The utopian novel is the opposite: It presents an ideal society. The first utopian novel was Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516).

**Elegy:** A long, rhymed, formal poem whose subject is meditation upon death or a lamentable theme. The pastoral elegy uses a pastoral scene to express grief at the loss of a friend or important person. *See also* Pastoral.

**Elizabethan Age:** Of or referring to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England, lasting from 1558 to 1603, a period of important developments and achievements in the arts in England, particularly in poetry and drama. The era included such literary figures as Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson. Sometimes referred to as the English Renaissance.

**English novel:** The first fully realized English novel was Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-1741). The genre took firm hold in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the work of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett, and reached its full flowering in the nineteenth century, in which great novelists such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, and George Eliot produced sweeping portraits of the whole range of English life in the period.

**Enlightenment:** A period in Western European cultural history that began in the seventeenth century and culminated in the eighteenth. The chief characteristic of Enlightenment thinkers was their belief in the virtue of human reason, which they believed was banishing former superstitious and ignorant ways and leading to an ideal condition of human life. The Enlightenment coincides with the rise of the scientific method.

**Epic:** Although this term usually refers to a long narrative poem that presents the exploits of a central figure of high position, the term is also used to designate a long novel that has the style or structure usually associated with an epic. In this sense, for example, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) may be called epics.

**Epigram:** Originally meaning an inscription, an epigram is a short, pointed poem, often expressing humor and satire. In English literature, the form flourished from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century in the work of poets such as John Donne, Ben Jonson, and Alexander Pope. The term also refers to a concise and

witty expression in prose, as in the plays of Oscar Wilde.

**Epiphany:** Literally, an epiphany is an appearance of a god or supernatural being. The term is used in literary criticism to signify any moment of heightened awareness, or flash of transcendental insight, when an ordinary object or scene is suddenly transformed into something that possesses eternal significance. Especially noteworthy examples are found in the works of James Joyce.

**Epistle:** The word means "letter," but epistle is used to refer to a literary form rather than a private composition, usually written in dignified style and addressed to a group. The most famous examples are the epistles in the New Testament.

**Epistolary novel:** A work of fiction in which the narrative is carried forward by means of letters written by the characters. Epistolary novels were especially popular in the eighteenth century. Examples include Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-1741) and *Clarissa* (1747-1748).

**Epithet:** An adjective or adjectival phrase that expresses a special characteristic of a person or thing. "Hideous night," "devouring time," and "sweet silent thought" are epithets that appear in William Shakespeare's sonnets.

**Essay:** A brief prose work, usually on a single topic, that expresses the personal point of view of the author. The essay is usually addressed to a general audience and attempts to persuade the reader to accept the author's ideas.

**Everyman:** The central character in the work by the same name, the most famous of the English medieval morality plays. It tells of how Everyman is summoned by Death and of the parts played in his journey by characters named Fellowship, Cousin, Kindred, Goods, Knowledge, Confession, Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits, and Good Deeds. *Everyman* has proved lastingly popular; there have been many productions even in the twentieth century. More generally, the term means the typical, ordinary person.

**Existentialism:** A philosophy or attitude of mind that has gained wide currency in religious and artistic thought since the end of World War II. Typical concerns of existential writers are humankind's estrangement from society, its awareness that the world is meaningless, and its recog-

nition that one must turn from external props to the self. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Kafka provide examples of existentialist beliefs.

**Experimental novel:** The term is associated with novelists such as Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce, who experimented with the form of the novel, using in particular the stream-of-consciousness technique.

**Expressionism:** Beginning in German theater at the start of the twentieth century, expressionism became the dominant movement in the decade following World War I. It abandoned realism and relied on a conscious distortion of external reality in order to portray the world as it is “viewed emotionally.” The movement spread to fiction and poetry. Expressionism influenced the novels of Franz Kafka and James Joyce.

**Fable:** One of the oldest narrative forms, usually taking the form of an analogy in which animals or inanimate objects speak to illustrate a moral lesson. The most famous examples are the fables of Aesop, who used the form orally in 600 B.C.E.

**Fabliau:** A short narrative poem, popular in medieval French literature and during the English Middle Ages. Fabliaux were usually realistic in subject matter and bawdy; they made a point of satirizing the weaknesses and foibles of human beings. Perhaps the most famous are Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale” and “The Reeve’s Tale.”

**Fairy tale:** A form of folktale in which supernatural events or characters are prominent. Fairy tales usually depict a realm of reality beyond that of the natural world in which the laws of the natural world are suspended.

**Fantasy:** A literary form that makes a deliberate break with reality. Fantasy literature may use supernatural or fairy-tale events in which the ordinary commonsense laws of the everyday world do not operate. The setting may be unreal. J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (1955), is one of the best-known examples of the genre.

**Farce:** From the Latin *farcire*, meaning “to stuff.” Originally an insertion into established Church liturgy in the Middle Ages, farce later became the term for specifically comic scenes inserted

into early liturgical drama. The term has come to refer to any play that evokes laughter by such low-comedy devices as physical humor, rough wit, and ridiculous and improbable situations and characters.

**Femme fatale:** The “fatal woman” is an archetype that appears in myth, folklore, religion, and literature. Often she is presented as a temptress or a witch who ensnares, and attempts to destroy, her male victim. A very common figure in Romanticism, the fatal woman often appears in twentieth century American literature.

**Figurative language:** Any use of language that departs from the usual or ordinary meaning to gain a poetic or otherwise special effect. Figurative language embodies various figures of speech, such as irony, metaphor, and simile.

**First person:** A point of view in which the narrator of a story or poem addresses the reader directly, often using the pronoun “I,” thereby allowing the reader direct access to the narrator’s thoughts.

**Folklore:** The traditions, customs, and beliefs of a people expressed in nonliterary form. Folklore includes myths, legends, fairy tales, riddles, proverbs, charms, spells, and ballads and is usually transmitted through word of mouth. Many literary works contain motifs that can be traced to folklore.

**Foreshadowing:** A device used to create suspense or dramatic irony by indicating through suggestion what will take place in the future. The aim is to prepare the reader for the action that follows.

**Frame story:** A story that provides a framework for another story (or stories) told within it. The form is ancient and is used by Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400). In modern literature, the technique has been used by Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (serial, 1899; book, 1902), and John Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968).

**Free verse:** Verse that does not conform to any traditional convention, such as meter, rhyme, or form. All poetry must have some pattern of some kind, however, and there is rhythm in free verse, but it does not follow the strict rules of meter. Often the pattern relies on repetition and parallel construction.

**Genre:** A type or category of literature, such as tragedy, novel, memoir, poem, or essay; a genre has a particular set of conventions and expectations.

**German Romanticism:** Germany was the first European country in which the Romantic movement took firm grip. Poets Novalis and Ludwig Tieck, philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and literary theorists Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel were well established in Jena from about 1797, and they were followed, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, by the Heidelberg group, including novelist and short-story writer E. T. A. Hoffmann and poet Heinrich Heine.

**Gnomic:** Aphoristic poetry, such as the wisdom literature of the Bible, which deals with ethical questions. The term “gnomic poets” is applied to a group of Greek poets of the sixth and seventh centuries B.C.E.

**Gothic novel:** A form of fiction developed in the late eighteenth century that focuses on horror and the supernatural. An example is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). In modern literature, the gothic genre can be found in the fiction of Truman Capote.

**Grand Tour:** Fashionable during the eighteenth century in England, the Grand Tour was a two- to three-year journey through Europe during which the young aristocracy and prosperous, educated middle classes of England deepened their knowledge of the origins and centers of Western civilization. The tour took a standard route; Rome and Naples were usually considered the highlights.

**Grotesque:** Characterized by a breakup of the everyday world by mysterious forces, the form differs from fantasy in that the reader is not sure whether to react with humor or with horror. Examples include the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Franz Kafka.

**Hagiography:** Strictly defined, hagiography refers to the lives of the saints (the Greek word *hagios* means “sacred”), but the term is also used in a more popular sense to describe any biography that grossly overpraises its subject and ignores his or her faults.

**Heroic couplet:** A pair of rhyming iambic pentameter lines traditionally used in epic poetry; a he-

roic couplet often serves as a self-contained witicism or pithy observation.

**Historical fiction:** A novel that depicts past historical events, usually public in nature, and that features real, as well as fictional, people. Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* novels established the basic type, but the relationship between fiction and history in the form varies greatly depending on the practitioner.

**Hubris:** Greek term for “insolence” or “pride,” the characteristic or emotion in the tragic hero of ancient Greek drama that causes the reversal of his fortune, leading him to transgress moral codes or ignore warnings.

**Humanism:** A human-centered, rather than God-centered, view of the universe. In the Renaissance, Humanism devoted itself to the revival of classical culture. A reaction against medieval Scholasticism, Humanism oriented itself toward secular concerns and applied classical ideas to theology, government, literature, and education. In literature, the main virtues were seen to be restraint, form, and imitation of the classics. *See also* Renaissance.

**Iambic pentameter:** A metrical line consisting of five feet, each foot consisting of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see.” Iambic pentameter is one of the commonest forms of English poetry.

**Imagery:** Often defined as the verbal stimulation of sensory perception. Although the word betrays a visual bias, imagery, in fact, calls on all five senses. In its simplest form, imagery re-creates a physical sensation in a clear, literal manner; it becomes more complex when a poet employs metaphor and other figures of speech to re-create experience.

**Impressionism:** A late nineteenth century movement composed of a group of painters including Paul Cézanne, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who aimed in their work to suggest the impression made on the artist by a scene rather than to reproduce it objectively. The term has also been applied to French Symbolist poets such as Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, and to writers who use the stream-of-consciousness technique, such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.



**Irony:** Recognition of the difference between real and apparent meaning. Verbal irony is a rhetorical trope wherein *x* is uttered and “not *x*” is meant. In the New Criticism, irony, the poet’s recognition of incongruities, was thought to be the master trope in that it was essential to the production of paradox, complexity, and ambiguity.

**Jacobean:** Of or pertaining to the reign of James I of England, who ruled from 1603 to 1623, the period immediately following the death of Elizabeth I, which saw tremendous literary activity in poetry and drama. Many writers who achieved fame during the Elizabethan Age, such as William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and John Donne, were still active. Other dramatists, such as John Webster and Cyril Tourneur, achieved success almost entirely during the Jacobean era.

**Jungian psychoanalysis:** Refers to the analytical psychology of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. Jung’s significance for literature is that, through his concept of the collective unconscious, he identified many archetypes and archetypal patterns that recur in myth, fairy tale, and literature and are also experienced in dreams.

**Kafkaesque:** Refers to any grotesque or nightmare world in which an isolated individual, surrounded by an unfeeling and alien world, feels caught up in an endless maze that is dragging him or her down to destruction. The term is a reference to the works of Czech novelist and short-story writer Franz Kafka.

**Leitmotif:** From the German, meaning “leading motif.” Any repetition—of a word, phrase, situation, or idea—that occurs within a single work or group of related works.

**Limerick:** A comic five-line poem employing an anapestic base and rhyming *aabba*, in which the third and fourth lines are shorter (usually five syllables each) than the first, second, and last lines, which are usually eight syllables each.

**Linear plot:** A plot that has unity of action and proceeds from beginning to middle to end without flashbacks or subplots, thus satisfying Aristotle’s criterion that a plot should be a continuous sequence.

**Literary criticism:** The study and evaluation of works of literature. Theoretical criticism sets

forth general principles for interpretation. Practical criticism offers interpretations of particular works or authors.

**Lyric poetry:** Lyric poetry developed when music was accompanied by words. Although the “lyrics” were later separated from the music, the characteristics of lyric poetry have been shaped by the constraints of music. Lyric poems are short, more adaptable to metrical variation, and usually personal compared with the cultural functions of narrative poetry. Lyric poetry sings of the self; it explores deeply personal feelings about life.

**Magical Realism:** Imaginary or fantastic scenes and occurrences presented in a meticulously realistic style. The term has been applied to the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Günter Grass, John Fowles, and Salman Rushdie.

**Masque:** A courtly entertainment popular during the first half of the seventeenth century in England. It was a sumptuous spectacle including music, dance, and lavish costumes and scenery. Masques often dealt with mythological or pastoral subjects, and the dramatic action often took second place to pure spectacle.

**Melodrama:** Originally a drama with music (*melos* is Greek for “song”). By the early nineteenth century, it had come to mean a play in which characters are clearly either virtuous or evil and are pitted against one another in suspenseful, often sensational situations. The term took on a pejorative meaning, which it retains: any dramatic work characterized by stereotyped characters and sensational, improbable situations.

**Metafiction:** Refers to fiction that manifests a reflexive tendency, such as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969). The emphasis is on the loosening of the work’s illusion of reality to expose the reality of its illusion. Such terms as “irrealism,” “postmodernist fiction,” and “antifiction” are also used to refer to this type of fiction. *See also* Postmodernism.

**Metaphor:** A figure of speech in which two dissimilar objects are imaginatively identified (rather than merely compared) on the assumption that they share one or more qualities. The term is often used in modern criticism in a wider sense

to identify analogies of all kinds in literature, painting, and film.

**Metaphysical poetry:** A type of poetry that stresses the intellectual over the emotional; it is marked by irony, paradox, and striking comparisons of dissimilar things, the latter frequently being far-fetched to the point of eccentricity. Usually used to designate a group of seventeenth century English poets, including John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne.

**Meter:** Meter is the pattern of language when it is forced into a line of poetry. All language has rhythm, but when that rhythm is organized and regulated in the line in order to affect the meaning and emotional response to the words, then the rhythm has been refined into meter. The meter is determined by the number of syllables in a line and by the relationship between them.

**Mock epic:** A literary form that burlesques the epic by taking a trivial subject and treating it in a grand style, using all the conventions of epic, such as invocation to the deity, long and boastful speeches of the heroes, and supernatural machinery. Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714) is probably the finest example in English literature. The term is synonymous with "mock heroic." *See also* Mock hero.

**Mock hero:** The hero of a mock epic. *See also* Mock epic.

**Modernism:** A term used to describe the characteristic aspects of literature and art between World War I and World War II. Influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, modernism embodied a lack of faith in Western civilization and culture. In poetry, fragmentation, discontinuity, and irony were common; in fiction, chronological disruption, linguistic innovation, and the stream-of-consciousness technique; in theater, expressionism and Surrealism.

**Morality play:** A dramatic form in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance containing allegorical figures (most often virtues and vices) that are typically involved in the struggle over a person's soul. The anonymously written *Everyman* (1508) is one of the most famous medieval examples of this form.

**Motif:** An incident, situation, or device that occurs frequently in literature. Motif can also refer to particular words, images, and phrases that are

repeated frequently in a single work. In this sense, motif is the same as leitmotif. Motif is similar to theme, although the latter is usually more abstract.

**Myth:** An anonymous traditional story, often involving supernatural beings or the interaction between gods and humans, and dealing with the basic questions of how the world and human society came to be. Myth is an important term in contemporary literary criticism. The critic Northrop Frye, for example, has said that "the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature." He means that the genres of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony (satire) correspond to seasonal myths of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

**Narrative:** An account in prose or verse of an event or series of events, whether real or imagined.

**Narrator:** The character who recounts the narrative. There are many different types of narrator. The first-person narrator is a character in the story and can be recognized by the use of "I"; third-person narrators may be limited or omniscient. In the former, the narrator confines himself or herself to knowledge of the minds and emotions of one or at most a few characters. In the latter, the narrator knows everything, seeing into the minds of all the characters. Rarely, second-person narration may be used (an example can be found in Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place*, published in 1970).

**Naturalism:** The application of the principles of scientific determinism to fiction. Although it usually refers more to the choice of subject matter than to technical conventions, conventions associated with the movement center on the author's attempt to be precise and objective in description and detail, regardless of whether the events described are sordid or shocking. Naturalism flourished in England, France, and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Neoclassicism:** A term used to describe the classicism that dominated English literature from the Restoration to the late eighteenth century. Modeling itself on the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, neoclassicism exalted the virtues of proportion, unity, harmony, grace, decorum, taste, manners, and restraint. It valued

realism and reason over imagination and emotion. *See also* Rationalism, Realism.

**Neorealism:** A movement in modern Italian literature, extending from about 1930 to 1955. Neorealism was shaped by opposition to Fascism, and by World War II and the Resistance. Neo-realist literature therefore exhibited a strong concern with social issues and was marked by pessimism regarding the human condition. Its practitioners sought to overcome the gap between literature and the masses, and its subject matter was frequently drawn from lower-class life. Neo-realism is associated preeminently with the work of Italo Calvino.

**Nonsense literature/verse:** Nonsense verse, such as that written by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, makes use of invented words that have no meaning, portmanteau words, and so-called macaroni verse, in which words from different languages are mingled. The verse holds attention because of its strong rhythms, appealing sounds, and, occasionally, the mysterious atmosphere that it creates.

**Novel of education:** *See* Bildungsroman.

**Novel of ideas:** A novel in which the characters, plot, and dialogue serve to develop some controlling idea or to present the clash of ideas. Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) is a good example.

**Novel of manners:** The classic example of the form might be the novels of Jane Austen, wherein the customs and conventions of a social group of a particular time and place are realistically, and often satirically, portrayed.

**Novella:** An Italian term meaning "a little new thing" that now refers to that form of fiction longer than a short story and shorter than a novel.

**Objective correlative:** A key concept in modern formalist criticism, coined by T. S. Eliot in *The Sacred Wood* (1920). An objective correlative is a situation, an event, or an object that, when presented or described in a literary work, expresses a particular emotion and serves as a precise formula by which the same emotion can be evoked in the reader.

**Ode:** The ode is a lyric poem that treats a unified subject with elevated emotion, usually ending with a satisfactory resolution. There is no set form for the ode, but it must be long enough to build intense emotional response. Often the

ode will address itself to some omnipotent source and will assume a spiritual hue.

**Oxford Movement:** A reform movement in the Church of England that began in 1833, led by John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman. The Oxford Movement aimed to combat liberalism and the decline of the role of faith in the Church and to restore it to its former ideals. It was attacked for advocating what some saw as Catholic doctrines; as a result, Newman left the Church of England and became a Roman Catholic in 1845.

**Panegyric:** A formal speech or writing in praise of a particular person or achievement; a eulogy. The form dates back to classical times; the term is now often used in a derogatory sense.

**Parable:** A short, simple, and usually allegorical story that teaches a moral lesson. In the West, the most famous parables are those told in the Gospels by Christ.

**Parody:** A literary work that imitates or burlesques another work or author, for the purpose of ridicule. Twentieth century parodists include E. B. White and James Thurber.

**Pastoral:** The term derives from the Latin "pastor," meaning "shepherd." Pastoral is a literary mode that depicts the country life in an idealized way; it originated in classical literature and was a popular form in English literature from 1550 to 1750. Notable pastoral poems include John Milton's "Lycidas" (1638) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais* (1821).

**Pathetic fallacy:** The ascribing of human characteristics or feelings to inanimate objects. The term was coined by John Ruskin in 1856, who disapproved of it, but it is now used without any pejorative sense.

**Persona:** *Persona* means literally "mask": It is the self created by the author and through whom the narrative is told. The persona is not to be identified with the author, even when the two may seem to resemble each other. The narrative persona in Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-1824, 1826), for example, may express many sentiments of which Byron would have approved, but he is nonetheless a fictional creation who is distinct from the author.

**Personification:** A figure of speech that ascribes human qualities to abstractions or inanimate objects.

**Petrarchan sonnet:** Named after Petrarch, a fourteenth century Italian poet who perfected the form, which is also known as the Italian sonnet. It is divided into an octave, in which the subject matter, which may be a problem, a doubt, a reflection, or some other issue, is raised and elaborated, and a sestet, in which the problem is resolved. The rhyme scheme is usually *abba abba cde cde*, *cd cdc cdc*, or *cde dce*.

**Philosophical dualism:** A theory that the universe is explicable in terms of two basic, conflicting entities, such as good and evil, mind and matter, or the physical and the spiritual.

**Picaresque:** A form of fiction that revolves around a central rogue figure, or picaro, who usually tells his own story. The plot structure of a picaresque novel is usually episodic, and the episodes usually focus on how the picaro lives by his wits. The classic example is Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749).

**Pindaric ode:** An ode that imitates the form of those composed by the ancient Greek poet Pindar. A Pindaric ode consists of a strophe, followed by an antistrophe of the same structure, followed by an epode. This pattern may be repeated several times in the ode. In English poetry, Thomas Gray's "The Bard" is an example of a Pindaric ode.

**Play:** A literary work that is written to be performed by actors who speak the dialogue, impersonate the characters, and perform the appropriate actions. Usually, a play is performed on a stage, and an audience witnesses it.

**Play-within-the-play:** A play or dramatic fragment performed as a scene or scenes within a larger drama, typically performed or viewed by the characters of the larger drama.

**Plot:** Plot refers to how the author arranges the material not only to create the sequence of events in a play or story but also to suggest how those events are connected in a cause-and-effect relationship. There are a great variety of plot patterns, each of which is designed to create a particular effect.

**Poem:** A unified composition that uses the rhythms and sounds of language, as well as devices such as metaphor, to communicate emotions and experiences to the reader.

**Poet laureate:** In England, the official poet, appointed for life by the English sovereign and ex-

pected to compose poems for various public occasions. The first official laureate was John Dryden in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, the laureateship was given to a succession of mediocrities, but since the appointment of William Wordsworth in 1843, the office has generally been regarded as a substantial honor.

**Polemic:** A work that forcefully argues an opinion, usually on a controversial religious, political, or economic issue, in opposition to other opinions. John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) is one of the best-known examples in English literature.

**Postmodernism:** The term is loosely applied to various artistic movements that have succeeded modernism, particularly since 1965. Postmodernist literature is experimental in form and reflects a fragmented world in which order and meaning are absent.

**Pre-Raphaelitism:** Refers to a group of nineteenth century English painters and writers, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, and William Morris. The Pre-Raphaelites were so called because they rebelled against conventional methods of painting and wanted to revert to what they regarded as the simple spirit of painting that existed before Raphael, particularly in its adherence to nature; they rejected all artificial embellishments. Pre-Raphaelite poetry made much use of symbolism and sensuousness and showed an interest in the medieval and the supernatural.

**Prose poem:** A type of poem ranging in length from a few lines to three or four pages; most occupy a page or less. The distinguishing feature of the prose poem is its typography: It appears on the page like prose, with no line breaks. Many prose poems employ rhythmic repetition and other poetic devices not found in prose, but others do not; there is enormous variety in the genre.

**Protagonist:** Originally, in the Greek drama, the "first actor," who played the leading role. The term has come to signify the most important character in a drama or story. It is not unusual for there to be more than one protagonist in a work.

**Proverb:** A wise and pithy saying, authorship unknown, that reflects some observation about

life. Proverbs are usually passed on through word of mouth, although they may also be written, as for example, the Book of Proverbs in the Bible.

**Psychological novel:** Once described as an interpretation of “the invisible life,” the psychological novel is a form of fiction in which character, especially the inner life of characters, is the primary focus, rather than action. The form has characterized much of the work of Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. *See also* Psychological realism.

**Psychological realism:** A type of realism that tries to reproduce the complex psychological motivations behind human behavior; writers in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were particularly influenced by Sigmund Freud’s theories. *See also* Psychological novel.

**Pun:** A pun occurs when words with similar pronunciations have entirely different meanings. The result may be a surprise recognition of an unusual or striking connection, or, more often, a humorously accidental connection.

**Quest:** An archetypal theme identified by mythologist Joseph Campbell and found in many literary works. Campbell describes the heroic quest in three fundamental stages: departure (leaving the familiar world), initiation (encountering adventures and obstacles), and return (bringing home a boon to transform society).

**Rabelaisian:** The term is a reference to the sixteenth century French satirist and humorist François Rabelais. “Rabelaisian” is now used to refer to any humorous or satirical writing that is bawdy, coarse, or very down-to-earth.

**Rationalism:** A system of thought that seeks truth through the exercise of reason rather than by means of emotional response or revelation, or traditional authority. In literature, rationalism is associated with eighteenth century neoclassicism. *See also* Neoclassicism.

**Realism:** A literary technique in which the primary convention is to render an illusion of fidelity to external reality. Realism is often identified as the primary method of the novel form; the realist movement in the late nineteenth century coincided with the full development of the novel form.

**Renaissance:** The term means “rebirth” and refers to a period in European cultural history from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth century, although dates differ widely from country to country. The Renaissance produced an unprecedented flowering of the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature. The period is often said to mark the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world. The questing, individualistic spirit that characterized the age was stimulated by an increase in classical learning by scholars known as Humanists; by the Protestant Reformation; by the development of printing, which created a wide market for books; by new theories of astronomy; and by the development of other sciences that saw natural laws at work where the Middle Ages had seen occult forces. *See also* Humanism.

**Restoration comedy/drama:** The restoration of the Stuart dynasty brought Charles II to the English throne in 1660. In literature, the Restoration period extends from 1660 to 1700. Restoration comedy is a comedy of manners, which centers around complicated plots full of the amorous intrigues of the fashionable upper classes. The humor is witty, but the view of human nature is cynical. Restoration dramatists include William Congreve, Sir George Etherege, and William Wycherley. In serious, or heroic, drama, the leading playwright was John Dryden. *See also* Comedy of manners.

**Roman à clef:** A fiction wherein actual persons, often celebrities of some sort, are thinly disguised. Lady Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon* (1816), for example, contains a thinly veiled portrait of Lord Byron, and the character Mark Rampion in Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counter Point* (1928) strongly resembles D. H. Lawrence.

**Romance:** Originally, any work written in Old French. In the Middle Ages, romances were about knights and their adventures. In modern times, the term has also been used to describe a type of prose fiction in which, unlike the novel, realism plays little part. Prose romances often give expression to the quest for transcendent truths.

**Romanticism:** A movement of the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century that exalted individualism over collectivism, revolution over conservatism, innovation over tradition,



imagination over reason, and spontaneity over restraint. Romanticism regarded art as self-expression; it strove to heal the cleavage between object and subject and expressed a longing for the infinite in all things. It stressed the innate goodness of human beings and the evils of the institutions that would stultify human creativity. The major English Romantic poets are William Blake, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth.

**Satire:** A form of literature that employs the comedic devices of wit, irony, and exaggeration to expose, ridicule, and condemn human folly, vice, and stupidity. Justifying satire, Alexander Pope wrote that “nothing moves strongly but satire, and those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous.”

**Scene:** A division of action within an act; some plays are divided only into scenes instead of acts. Sometimes, scene division indicates a change of setting or locale; sometimes, it simply indicates the entrances and exits of characters.

**Science fiction:** Fiction in which real or imagined scientific developments or certain givens (such as physical laws, psychological principles, or social conditions) form the basis of an imaginative projection, frequently into the future. Classic examples are the works of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne.

**Sentimental novel:** A form of fiction popular in the eighteenth century in which emotionalism and optimism are the primary characteristics. The best-known examples are Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740-1741) and Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

**Shakespearean sonnet:** So named because William Shakespeare was the greatest of English sonneteers, whose ranks also included the earl of Surrey and Thomas Wyatt. The Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains and a concluding couplet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*. The beginning of the third quatrain marks a turn in the argument.

**Short story:** A concise work of fiction, shorter than a novella, that is usually more concerned with mood, effect, or a single event than with plot or extensive characterization.

**Simile:** A type of metaphor in which two things are compared. It can usually be recognized by

the use of the words “like,” “as,” “appears,” or “seems.”

**Skaz:** A term used in Russian criticism to describe a narrative technique that presents an oral narrative of a lowbrow speaker.

**Soliloquy:** An extended speech delivered by a character alone on stage, unheard by other characters. Soliloquy is a form of monologue, and it typically reveals the intimate thoughts and emotions of the speaker.

**Song:** A lyric poem, usually short, simple, and with rhymed stanzas, set to music.

**Sonnet:** A traditional poetic form that is almost always composed of fourteen lines of rhymed iambic pentameter; a turning point usually divides the poem into two parts, with the first part (octave) presenting a situation and the second part (sestet) reflecting on it. The main sonnet forms are the Petrarchan sonnet and the English (sometimes called Shakespearean) sonnet.

**Stanza:** When lines of poetry are meant to be taken as a unit, and the unit recurs throughout the poem, that unit is called a stanza; a four-line unit, a quatrain, is one common stanza. Others include couplet, *ottava rima*, and the Spenserian stanza.

**Story line:** The story line of a work of fiction differs from the plot. Story is merely the events that happen; plot is how those events are arranged by the author to suggest a cause-and-effect relationship. *See also* Plot.

**Stream of consciousness:** A narrative technique used in modern fiction by which an author tries to embody the total range of consciousness of a character, without any authorial comment or explanation. Sensations, thoughts, memories, and associations pour forth in an uninterrupted, prerational, and prelogical flow. For examples, see James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

**Sturm und Drang:** A dramatic and literary movement in Germany during the late eighteenth century. Translated as “Storm and Stress,” the movement was a reaction against classicism and a forerunner of Romanticism, characterized by extravagantly emotional language and sensational subject matter.

**Surrealism:** A revolutionary approach to artistic and literary creation, Surrealism argued for complete artistic freedom: The artist should re-

linquish all conscious control, responding to the irrational urges of the unconscious mind; hence the bizarre, dreamlike, and nightmarish quality of Surrealistic writing. In the 1920's and 1930's, Surrealism flourished in France, Spain, and Latin America. After World War II, it influenced such American writers as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Nathanael West.

**Symbol:** A literary symbol is an image that stands for something else; it may evoke a cluster of meanings rather than a single specific meaning.

**Symbolism:** A literary movement encompassing the work of a group of French writers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a group that included Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine. According to Symbolism, there is a mystical correspondence between the natural and spiritual worlds.

**Theater of Cruelty:** A term, coined by French playwright Antonin Artaud, which signifies a vision in which theater becomes an arena for shock therapy. The characters undergo such intense physical and psychic extremities that the audience cannot ignore the cathartic effect in which its preconceptions, fears, and hostilities are brought to the surface and, ideally, purged.

**Theater of the Absurd:** Refers to a group of plays that share a basic belief that life is illogical, irrational, formless, and contradictory, and that humanity is without meaning or purpose. Practitioners, who include Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Arthur Kopit, abandoned traditional theatrical forms and coherent dialogue.

**Théâtre d'avant-garde:** A movement in late nineteenth century drama in France that challenged the conventions of realistic drama by using Symbolist poetry and nonobjective scenery.

**Third person:** Third-person narration occurs when the narrator has not been part of the event or affected it and is not probing his or her own relationship to it but is only describing what happened. The narrator does not allow the intrusion of the word "I." Third-person narration establishes a distance between reader and subject, gives credibility to a large expanse of narration that would be impossible for one person to experience, and allows the narrative to include

a number of characters who can comment on one another as well as be the subjects of commentary by the participating narrator.

**Tragedy:** A form of drama that is serious in action and intent and that involves disastrous events and death; classical Greek drama observed specific guidelines for tragedy, but the term is now sometimes applied to a range of dramatic or fictional situations.

**Travel literature:** Writing that emphasizes the author's subjective response to places visited, especially faraway, exotic, and culturally different locales.

**Trilogy:** A novel or play written in three parts, each of which is a self-contained work, such as William Shakespeare's *Henry VI (Part I, pr. 1592; Part II, pr. c. 1590-1591, pb. 1594; Part III, pr. c. 1590-1591, pb. 1594)*. Modern examples include C. S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy* (1938-1945) and William Golding's *Sea Trilogy* (1980-1989).

**Trope:** Literally "turn" or "conversion," a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used in a way that deviates from the normal or literal sense.

**Verismo:** Refers to a type of Italian literature that deals with the lower classes and presents them realistically using language that they would use. Called *verismo* because it is true to life and, from the writer's point of view, impersonal.

**Verse:** Verse is a generic name for poetry. Verse also refers in a narrower sense to poetry that is humorous or merely superficial, as in "greeting-card verse." Finally, English critics sometimes use "verse" to mean "stanza," or, more often, to mean "line."

**Verse drama:** Verse drama was the prevailing form for Western drama throughout most of its history, comprising all the drama of classical Greece and continuing to dominate the stage through the Renaissance, when it was best exemplified by the blank verse of Elizabethan drama. In the seventeenth century, however, prose comedies became popular, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries verse drama became the exception rather than the rule.

**Victorian novel:** Although the Victorian period extended from 1837 to 1901, the term "Victorian novel" does not include works from the later

decades of Queen Victoria's reign. The term loosely refers to the sprawling works of novelists such as Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, which are characterized by a broad social canvas.

**Villanelle:** A French verse form assimilated by English prosody. It is usually composed of nineteen lines divided into five tercets and a quatrain, rhyming *aba, bba, aba, aba, abaa*. The third line is repeated in the ninth and fifteenth lines. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is a modern example of a successful villanelle.

**Well-made play:** From the French term *pièce bien faite*, a type of play constructed according to a "formula" that originated in nineteenth century France. The plot often revolves around a secret

known only to some of the characters, which is revealed at the climax and leads to catastrophe for the villain and vindication or triumph for the hero. The well-made play influenced later dramatists such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw.

**Weltanschauung:** A German term translated as "world-view," by which is meant a comprehensive set of beliefs or assumptions by means of which one interprets what goes on in the world.

**Zeitgeist:** A German term meaning the spirit of the times, the moral or intellectual atmosphere of any age or period. The zeitgeist of the Romantic Age, for example, might be described as revolutionary, restless, individualistic, and innovative.

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Lispector, Clarice  
Lowry, Malcolm  
McCullough, Colleen  
McEwan, Ian  
Machado de Assis, Joaquim Maria  
MacLennan, Hugh  
Mahfouz, Naguib  
Mann, Thomas  
Maugham, W. Somerset  
Mishima, Yukio  
Mistry, Rohinton  
Montgomery, L. M.  
Mortimer, John  
Multatuli  
Murakami, Haruki  
Murasaki Shikibu  
Murdoch, Iris  
Musil, Robert  
Nabokov, Vladimir  
Naipaul, V. S.  
Narayan, R. K.  
Ngugi wa Thiong'o  
O'Brien, Edna  
Ōe, Kenzaburō  
Okri, Ben  
Ondaatje, Michael  
Orwell, George  
Oz, Amos  
Pasternak, Boris  
Paton, Alan  
Pavese, Cesare  
Petronius  
Powell, Anthony  
Priestley, J. B.  
Proust, Marcel  
Puig, Manuel  
Pushkin, Alexander  
Pym, Barbara  
Rabelais, François  
Remarque, Erich Maria  
Renault, Mary  
Rhys, Jean  
Richardson, Samuel  
Richler, Mordecai  
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques  
Rowling, J. K.  
Roy, Arundhati  
Roy Gabrielle  
Rulfo, Juan  
Rushdie, Salman  
Sagan, Françoise  
Saint-Exupéry, Antoine  
Saki

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Sand, George  
Saramago, José  
Sarraute, Nathalie  
Sartre, Jean-Paul  
Sayers, Dorothy L.  
Scott, Sir Walter  
Sebald, W. G.  
Seth, Vikram  
Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft  
Shute, Nevil  
Sienkiewicz, Henryk  
Simenon, Georges  
Singer, Isaac Bashevis  
Smith, Zadie  
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr  
Spark, Muriel  
Stead, Christina  
Stendhal  
Sterne, Laurence  
Stevenson, Robert Louis  
Storey, David  
Swift, Jonathan  
Tagore, Rabindranath  
Thackeray, William Makepeace  
Toer, Pramoedya Ananta  
Tolkien, J. R. R.  
Tolstoy, Leo  
Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe  
Tournier, Michel  
Trollope, Anthony  
Turgenev, Ivan  
Undset, Sigrid  
Vargas Llosa, Mario  
Verne, Jules  
Voinovich, Vladimir  
Voltaire  
Waugh, Evelyn  
Wells, H. G.  
Welsh, Irvine  
White, Patrick  
Wiebe, Rudy  
Wiesel, Elie  
Wilde, Oscar  
Wodehouse, P. G.  
Wolf, Christa  
Woolf, Virginia  
Yourcenar, Marguerite  
Zola, Émile

**PLAYWRIGHTS**

Abe, Kōbō  
Adams, Douglas  
Aeschylus  
Aleichem, Sholom  
Aristophanes  
Beckett, Samuel  
Behan, Brendan  
Behn, Aphra  
Bennett, Arnold  
Brecht, Bertolt  
Bulgakov, Mikhail  
Calderón de la Barca, Pedro  
Césaire, Aimé  
Chekhov, Anton  
Christie, Agatha  
Cocteau, Jean  
Congreve, William  
Corneille, Pierre  
Cruz, Sor Juana Inés de la  
Dryden, John  
Dumas, Alexandre, *père*  
Eliot, T. S.  
Euripides  
Fo, Dario  
Frisch, Max  
Fugard, Athol  
Gao Xingjian  
García Lorca, Federico  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von  
Gogol, Nikolai  
Goldsmith, Oliver  
Handke, Peter  
Havel, Václav  
Hugo, Victor  
Ibsen, Henrik  
Ionesco, Eugène  
Jolley, Elizabeth  
Jonson, Ben  
Kleist, Heinrich von  
Lermontov, Mikhail  
Machiavelli, Niccolò  
MacNeice, Louis  
Marlowe, Christopher  
Milne, A. A.  
Molière  
Mortimer, John  
Ngugi wa Thiong'o  
O'Brien, Edna  
O'Casey, Sean

Osborne, John  
Pinter, Harold  
Pirandello, Luigi  
Priestley, J. B.  
Pushkin, Alexander  
Racine, Jean  
Saramago, José  
Sarraute, Nathalie  
Sartre, Jean-Paul  
Schiller, Friedrich  
Seneca the Younger  
Shaffer, Peter  
Shakespeare, William  
Shaw, George Bernard  
Sophocles  
Soyinka, Wole  
Stoppard, Tom  
Storey, David  
Strindberg, August  
Synge, John Millington  
Tagore, Rabindranath  
Thomas, Dylan  
Vargas Llosa, Mario  
Vega Carpio, Lope de  
Voltaire  
Walcott, Derek  
Wilde, Oscar  
Wodehouse, P. G.

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Achebe, Chinua  
Akhmatova, Anna  
Amichai, Yehuda  
Apollinaire, Guillaume  
Arnold, Matthew  
Atwood, Margaret  
Auden, W. H.  
Baudelaire, Charles  
Betjeman, John  
Blake, William  
Boccacio, Giovanni  
Brontë, Emily  
Brooke, Rupert  
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett  
Browning, Robert  
Burns, Robert  
Byron, Lord  
Camões, Luis de  
Carroll, Lewis  
Catullus

Cavafy, Constantine P.  
Celan, Paul  
Césaire, Aimé  
Chaucer, Geoffrey  
Cocteau, Jean  
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor  
Cruz, Sor Juana Inés de la  
Dante  
Darío, Rubén  
Donne, John  
Dryden, John  
Du Fu  
Eliot, T. S.  
García Lorca, Federico  
Gibran, Kahlil  
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von  
Goldsmith, Oliver  
Grass, Günter  
Graves, Robert  
Gunn, Thom  
Hardy, Thomas  
Heaney, Seamus  
Hébert, Anne  
Heine, Heinrich  
Homer  
Hopkins, Gerard Manley  
Horace  
Housman, A. E.  
Hughes, Ted  
Hugo, Victor  
Johnson, Samuel  
Jonson, Ben  
Keats, John  
Kipling, Rudyard  
Kogawa, Joy  
La Fontaine, Jean de  
Larkin, Philip  
Lawrence, D. H.  
Lermontov, Mikhail  
Li Bo  
Lu Xun  
MacDiarmid, Hugh  
MacNeice, Louis  
Mallarmé, Stéphane  
Mandelstam, Osip  
Marlowe, Christopher  
Marvell, Andrew  
Matsuo Bashō  
Mayakovsky, Vladimir  
Miłosz, Czesław

### *Category List*

Milton, John  
Mistral, Gabriela  
Neruda, Pablo  
Okri, Ben  
Omar Khayyám  
Ondaatje, Michael  
Ovid  
Owen, Wilfred  
Pasternak, Boris  
Pavese, Cesare  
Paz, Octavio  
Pessoa, Fernando  
Petrarch  
Pindar  
Pope, Alexander  
Pushkin, Alexander  
Rilke, Rainer Maria  
Rimbaud, Arthur  
Rossetti, Christina  
Sachs, Nelly  
Sappho  
Schiller, Friedrich  
Seth, Vikram  
Shakespeare, William  
Shelley, Percy Bysshe  
Sidney, Sir Philip  
Soyinka, Wole  
Spender, Stephen  
Spenser, Edmund  
Stevenson, Robert Louis  
Swinburne, Algernon Charles  
Tagore, Rabindranath  
Tennyson, Alfred, Lord  
Thomas, Dylan  
Valéry, Paul  
Vallejo, César  
Vergil  
Verlaine, Paul  
Walcott, Derek  
Wilde, Oscar  
Wordsworth, William  
Yeats, William Butler  
Yevtushenko, Yevgeny

### **SCIENCE-FICTION AND FANTASY WRITERS**

Abe, Kōbō  
Adams, Douglas  
Akutagawa, Ryūnosuke  
Amis, Kingsley  
Atwood, Margaret

Bulgakov, Mikhail  
Burgess, Anthony  
Carroll, Lewis  
Clarke, Arthur C.  
Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan  
Dumas, Alexandre, *père*  
Du Maurier, Daphne  
Gibson, William  
Golding, William  
Graves, Robert  
Hesse, Hermann  
Hoffmann, E. T. A.  
Huxley, Aldous  
Kipling, Rudyard  
Lem, Stanisław  
Lessing, Doris  
Lewis, C. S.  
Okri, Ben  
Orwell, George  
Rowling, J. K.  
Rushdie, Salman  
Ruskin, John  
Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de  
Saki  
Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft  
Shute, Nevil  
Stevenson, Robert Louis  
Swift, Jonathan  
Thackeray, William Makepeace  
Tolkien, J. R. R.  
Verne, Jules  
Wells, H. G.  
Wilde, Oscar  
Woolf, Virginia

### **SCREENWRITERS**

Adams, Douglas  
Babel, Isaac  
Banville, John  
Beckett, Samuel  
Borges, Jorge Luis  
Brecht, Bertolt  
Burgess, Anthony  
Carey, Peter  
Cocteau, Jean  
Dahl, Roald  
Desai, Anita  
Doyle, Roddy  
Drabble, Margaret  
Duras, Marguerite



Esquivel, Laura  
Fielding, Helen  
Flanagan, Richard  
Fuentes, Carlos  
Fugard, Athol  
Gibson, William  
Godden, Rumer  
Greene, Graham  
Handke, Peter  
Hébert, Anne  
Hornby, Nick  
Ishiguro, Kazuo  
Jhabvala, Ruth Praver  
Le Carré, John  
McEwan, Ian  
Maugham, W. Somerset  
Mayakovsky, Vladimir  
Milne, A. A.  
Mortimer, John  
Nabokov, Vladimir  
O'Brien, Edna  
Osborne, John  
Pinter, Harold  
Priestley, J. B.  
Puig, Manuel  
Richler, Mordecai  
Roy, Arundhati  
Rulfo, Juan  
Sagan, Françoise  
Shaffer, Peter  
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr  
Stoppard, Tom  
Storey, David  
Thomas, Dylan  
Welsh, Irvine  
White, Patrick  
Wodehouse, P. G.  
Wolf, Christa

**SHORT-STORY WRITERS**

Agnon, Shmuel Yosef  
Akutagawa, Ryūnosuke  
Aleichem, Sholom  
Andersen, Hans Christian  
Andrić, Ivo  
Babel, Isaac  
Bainbridge, Beryl  
Bennett, Arnold  
Boccacio, Giovanni  
Böll, Heinrich

Borges, Jorge Luis  
Bowen, Elizabeth  
Bulgakov, Mikhail  
Callaghan, Morley  
Calvino, Italo  
Camus, Albert  
Chekhov, Anton  
Christie, Agatha  
Clarke, Arthur C.  
Conrad, Joseph  
Cortázar, Julio  
Dahl, Roald  
Desai, Anita  
Dickens, Charles  
Dinesen, Isak  
Dostoevski, Fyodor  
Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan  
Du Maurier, Daphne  
Duras, Marguerite  
Flaubert, Gustave  
Frame, Janet  
Gallant, Mavis  
Gibson, William  
Gogol, Nikolai  
Gordimer, Nadine  
Grimm, Brothers  
Harris, Wilson  
Head, Bessie  
Hoffmann, E. T. A.  
Jhabvala, Ruth Praver  
Jolley, Elizabeth  
Joyce, James  
Kafka, Franz  
Kawabata, Yasunari  
Kinsella, W. P.  
Kipling, Rudyard  
Lagerkvist, Pär  
Laurence, Margaret  
Lawrence, D. H.  
Leacock, Stephen  
Lem, Stanisław  
Lessing, Doris  
Lispector, Clarice  
Lu Xun  
Mansfield, Katherine  
Maugham, W. Somerset  
Maupassant, Guy de  
Mistry, Rohinton  
Mortimer, John  
Munro, Alice

### *Category List*

Nabokov, Vladimir  
Narayan, R. K.  
O'Brien, Edna  
Ōe, Kenzaburō  
Okri, Ben  
Pavese, Cesare  
Pritchett, V. S.  
Pushkin, Alexander  
Rhys, Jean  
Roy, Gabrielle  
Rulfo, Juan  
Saki  
Sarraute, Nathalie  
Singer, Isaac Bashevis  
Stead, Christina  
Turgenev, Ivan  
Valéry, Paul  
Vargas Llosa, Mario  
Wiebe, Rudy  
Wodehouse, P. G.  
Yourcenar, Marguerite  
Zola, Émile

### **WOMEN**

Akhmatova, Anna  
Allende, Isabel  
Atwood, Margaret  
Austen, Jane  
Bainbridge, Beryl  
Beauvoir, Simone de  
Behn, Aphra  
Blais, Marie-Claire  
Bowen, Elizabeth  
Brontë, Charlotte  
Brontë, Emily  
Brookner, Anita  
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett  
Byatt, A. S.  
Christie, Agatha  
Colette  
Cruz, Sor Juana Inés de la  
Desai, Anita  
Dinesen, Isak  
Drabble, Margaret  
Du Maurier, Daphne  
Duong Thu Huong  
Duras, Marguerite  
Eliot, George  
Emecheta, Buchi  
Esquivel, Laura  
Fielding, Helen  
Frame, Janet  
Frank, Anne  
Franklin, Miles  
Gallant, Mavis  
Godden, Rumer  
Gordimer, Nadine  
Head, Bessie  
Hébert, Anne  
James, P. D.  
Jhabvala, Ruth Praver  
Jolley, Elizabeth  
Kogawa, Joy  
Lagerlöf, Selma  
Laurence, Margaret  
Lessing, Doris  
Lispector, Clarice  
McCullough, Colleen  
Mansfield, Katherine  
Mistral, Gabriela  
Montgomery, L. M.  
Munro, Alice  
Murasaki Shikibu  
Murdoch, Iris  
O'Brien, Edna  
Pym, Barbara  
Renault, Mary  
Rhys, Jean  
Rossetti, Christina  
Rowling, J. K.  
Roy, Arundhati  
Roy, Gabrielle  
Sachs, Nelly  
Sagan, Françoise  
Sand, George  
Sappho  
Sarraute, Nathalie  
Sayers, Dorothy L.  
Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft  
Smith, Zadie  
Spark, Muriel  
Stead, Christina  
Undset, Sigrid  
Wolf, Christa  
Woolf, Virginia  
Yourcenar, Marguerite

## GEOGRAPHICAL LIST

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Australia . . . . .	2873	Indonesia . . . . .	2877	Roman Empire . . . . .	2878
Austria . . . . .	2873	Iran . . . . .	2877	Romania . . . . .	2878
Belgium . . . . .	2873	Ireland. . . . .	2877	Russia . . . . .	2878
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Brazil. . . . .	2874	Japan. . . . .	2877	South Africa . . . . .	2878
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Chile . . . . .	2874	Lebanon . . . . .	2877	Sri Lanka. . . . .	2878
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Denmark. . . . .	2874	Netherlands . . . . .	2877	Ukraine . . . . .	2879
Egypt. . . . .	2874	New Zealand. . . . .	2877	United States . . . . .	2879
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Greece . . . . .	2876	Norway . . . . .	2878		

### ALBANIA

Kadare, Ismail

### ALGERIA

Apuleius, Lucius

Augustine, Saint

Camus, Albert

### ARGENTINA

Borges, Jorge Luis

Cortázar, Julio

Puig, Manuel

### AUSTRALIA

Carey, Peter

Coetzee, J. M.

Flanagan, Richard

Franklin, Miles

Jolley, Elizabeth

Keneally, Thomas

McCullough, Colleen

Shute, Nevil

Stead, Christina

White, Patrick

### AUSTRIA

Bernhard, Thomas

Handke, Peter

Musil, Robert

### BELGIUM

Simenon, Georges

Yourcenar, Marguerite

### BOSNIA

Andrić, Ivo

### BOTSWANA

Head, Bessie

**BRAZIL**

Amado, Jorge  
Lispector, Clarice  
Machada de Assis, Joaquin

**CANADA**

Atwood, Margaret  
Blais, Marie-Claire  
Callaghan, Morley  
Davies, Robertson  
Gallant, Mavis  
Gibson, William  
Hébert, Anne  
Kinsella, W. P.  
Kogawa, Joy  
Laurence, Margaret  
Leacock, Stephen  
MacLennan, Hugh  
Mistry, Rohinton  
Montgomery, L. M.  
Mowat, Farley  
Munro, Alice  
Ondaatje, Michael  
Richler, Mordecai  
Roy, Gabrielle  
Wiebe, Rudy

**CHILE**

Allende, Isabel  
Bolaño, Roberto  
Mistral, Gabriela  
Neruda, Pablo

**CHINA**

Du Fu  
Gao Xingjian  
Li Bo  
Lu Xun

**COLOMBIA**

García Márquez, Gabriel

**CUBA**

Carpentier, Alejo

**CZECH REPUBLIC**

Hašek, Jaroslav  
Havel, Václav  
Kafka, Franz

Kundera, Milan  
Rilke, Rainer Maria  
Stoppard, Tom

**DENMARK**

Andersen, Hans Christian  
Dinesen, Isak  
Kierkegaard, Søren

**EGYPT**

Cavafy, Constantine P.  
Mahfouz, Naguib

**ENGLAND**

Adams, Douglas  
Amis, Kingsley  
Amis, Martin  
Arnold, Matthew  
Auden, W. H.  
Austen, Jane  
Bainbridge, Beryl  
Barnes, Julian  
Behn, Aphra  
Bennett, Arnold  
Betjeman, John  
Blake, William  
Bowen, Elizabeth  
Brontë, Charlotte  
Brontë, Emily  
Brooke, Rupert  
Brookner, Anita  
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett  
Browning, Robert  
Bunyan, John  
Burgess, Anthony  
Byatt, A. S.  
Byron, Lord  
Carroll, Lewis  
Chatwin, Bruce  
Chaucer, Geoffrey  
Christie, Agatha  
Clarke, Arthur C.  
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor  
Congreve, William  
Conrad, Joseph  
Dahl, Roald  
Defoe, Daniel  
Dickens, Charles  
Donne, John  
Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan

Drabble, Margaret	Mortimer, John
Dryden, John	Murdoch, Iris
Du Maurier, Daphne	Naipaul, V. S.
Durrell, Lawrence	Orwell, George
Eliot, George	Osborne, John
Eliot, T. S.	Owen, Wilfred
Fielding, Helen	Pepys, Samuel
Fielding, Henry	Pinter, Harold
Ford, Ford Madox	Pope, Alexander
Forster, E. M.	Powell, Anthony
Fowles, John	Priestley, J. B.
Francis, Dick	Pritchett, V. S.
Godden, Rumer	Pym, Barbara
Golding, William	Renault, Mary
Goldsmith, Oliver	Rhys, Jean
Graves, Robert	Richardson, Samuel
Greene, Graham	Rossetti, Christina
Gunn, Thom	Rowling, J. K.
Haddon, Mark	Rushdie, Salman
Hardy, Thomas	Ruskin, John
Herriot, James	Saki
Hopkins, Gerard Manley	Sayers, Dorothy L.
Hornby, Nick	Sebald, W. G.
Housman, A. E.	Shaffer, Peter
Hughes, Ted	Shakespeare, William
Huxley, Aldous	Shaw, George Bernard
Isherwood, Christopher	Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft
Ishiguro, Kazuo	Shelley, Percy Bysshe
James, P. D.	Sidney, Sir Philip
Jhabvala, Ruth Praver	Smith, Zadie
Johnson, Samuel	Spark, Muriel
Jolley, Elizabeth	Spender, Stephen
Jonson, Ben	Spenser, Edmund
Keats, John	Sterne, Laurence
Kipling, Rudyard	Stoppard, Tom
Larkin, Philip	Storey, David
Lawrence, D. H.	Swift, Jonathan
Le Carré, John	Swinburne, Algernon Charles
Lessing, Doris	Tennyson, Alfred, Lord
Lewis, C. S.	Thackeray, William Makepeace
Lewis, Wyndham	Thomas, Dylan
Lowry, Malcolm	Tolkien, J. R. R.
McEwan, Ian	Trollope, Anthony
MacNeice, Louis	Waugh, Evelyn
Mansfield, Katherine	Wells, H. G.
Marlowe, Christopher	Wilde, Oscar
Marvell, Andrew	Wodehouse, P. G.
Maugham, W. Somerset	Woolf, Virginia
Milne, A. A.	Wordsworth, William
Milton, John	



**FRANCE**

Apollinaire, Guillaume  
Balzac, Honoré de  
Baudelaire, Charles  
Beauvoir, Simone de  
Beckett, Samuel  
Camus, Albert  
Celan, Paul  
Césaire, Aimé  
Cocteau, Jean  
Colette  
Corneille, Pierre  
Diderot, Denis  
Dumas, Alexandre, *père*  
Duras, Marguerite  
Flaubert, Gustave  
Gao Xingjian  
Gide, André  
Hugo, Victor  
Ionesco, Eugène  
Kundera, Milan  
La Fontaine, Jean de  
Mallarmé, Stéphane  
Maupassant, Guy de  
Molière  
Montaigne, Michel de Eyquem  
Proust, Marcel  
Rabelais, François  
Racine, Jean  
Rimbaud, Arthur  
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques  
Sagan, François  
Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de  
Sand, George  
Sarraute, Nathalie  
Sartre, Jean-Paul  
Stendhal  
Tournier, Michel  
Valéry, Paul  
Verlaine, Paul  
Verne, Jules  
Voltaire  
Yourcenar, Marguerite  
Zola, Émile

**GERMANY**

Amichai, Yehuda  
Böll, Heinrich  
Brecht, Bertolt

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von  
Grass, Günter  
Grimm, Brothers  
Heine, Heinrich  
Hesse, Hermann  
Hoffmann, E. T. A.  
Jhabvala, Ruth Prawer  
Kleist, Heinrich von  
Mann, Thomas  
Nietzsche, Friedrich  
Remarque, Erich Maria  
Rilke, Rainer Maria  
Sachs, Nelly  
Sebald, W. G.  
Schiller, Friedrich  
Wolf, Christa

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Aristophanes  
Aristotle  
Cavafy, Constantine P.  
Euripides  
Homer  
Kazantzakis, Nikos  
Pindar  
Plato  
Plutarch  
Sappho  
Sophocles

**GUYANA**

Harris, Wilson

**HUNGARY**

Kertész, Imre

**INDIA**

Desai, Anita  
Durrell, Lawrence  
Godden, Rumer  
Jhabvala, Ruth Prawer  
Kipling, Rudyard  
Mistry, Rohinton  
Narayan, R. K.  
Roy, Arundhati  
Rushdie, Salman  
Seth, Vikram  
Tagore, Rabindranath

**INDONESIA**

Toer, Pramoedya Ananta

**IRAN**

Omar Khayyám

**IRELAND**

Banville, John

Beckett, Samuel

Behan, Brendan

Bowen, Elizabeth

Doyle, Roddy

Goldsmith, Oliver

Joyce, James

Lewis, C. S.

MacNeice, Louis

Murdoch, Iris

O'Brien, Edna

O'Casey, Sean

Shaw, George Bernard

Sterne, Laurence

Swift, Jonathan

Synge, John Millington

Wilde, Oscar

Yeats, William Butler

**ISRAEL**

Agnon, Shmuel Yosef

Amichai, Yehuda

Appelfeld, Aharon

Oz, Amos

**ITALY**

Boccaccio, Giovanni

Calvino, Italo

Dante

Eco, Umberto

Fo, Dario

Levi, Primo

Machiavelli, Niccolò

Pavese, Cesare

Petrarch

Pirandello, Luigi

Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe

**JAPAN**

Abe, Kōbō

Akutagawa, Ryūnosuke

Endō, Shūsaku

Ishiguro, Kazuo

Kawabata, Yasunari

Matsuo Bashō

Mishima, Yukio

Murakami, Haruki

Murasaki Shikibu

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